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Mélange ...a rich variety of life & love

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# Mélange ...a rich variety of life & love

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### Stir Fried Love by Nancy Pirri

"Bulgogi! More bulgogi!"

Hayley Sook Park glared at her Uncle Lee as he stood in the kitchen doorway of Mandarin House, his short, wiry body taut with tension, gray hair sticking up around his head. "Excellent food cannot be rushed," she sniffed.

"Stop daydreaming, Sookie. We got customers waiting, and most of them are on their lunch breaks."

"Those customers are mostly family and work their own businesses. They can take as long a lunch as they want." Rolling her eyes, she added, "And when will you stop calling me Sookie? You know mama wants you to call me Hayley."

"Hayley," he spat. "My sister and her silly American name. There is nothing wrong with Sookie," he said in Korean.

"We're in America, Uncle. English, speak English!" she chided.

A long spate of Korean words erupted from his mouth.

Hayley sighed. "It's done now."

Uncle Lee waited at her elbow while she used a pair of tongs to lift several slices of the lean, spicy marinated beef off the grill and slip them into a heated bowl. He took the bowl from her and rushed from the kitchen.

She blew a long puff of air from between her lips, lifting the wisps of hair from her forehead. As soon as she stopped they floated back down. Agitated, she swiped back the strands; her hand came away slick and wet with sweat and she groaned audibly. She decided tomorrow she'd wear a sundress to work.

She lifted the remainder of the thinly sliced sirloin from the grill, layered the slices in a covered pan and shoved them into a warm oven.

Mandarin House was located on University Avenue in St. Paul in an exclusively Korean neighborhood. Raucous laughter and lively Korean chatter from patrons didn't lift her spirits. She released the tongs and they clattered to the stainless steel counter top.

Hayley was twenty-one years old, single with no boyfriend and making her living cooking for long, grueling hours in her uncle's hot, stuffy restaurant. Even though he'd installed air-conditioning last year, it helped little to ease the humidity of the mid-summer July day.

Her cousin, Hee Youn, (yes, auntie had given her children traditional Korean names) rushed into the kitchen, skidding to an abrupt halt beside Hayley, empty platter in hand. She didn't say a word, just held up the platter with a sheepish expression on her face.

"More bulgogi I suppose?" Hayley rolled her eyes.

Hee Youn nodded and smiled as Hayley opened the oven, pulled out the rack and heaped the platter high. Her cousin tore out of the kitchen, double doors swinging wildly behind her. Even though Hee Youn was ten years older than Hayley and had lived in America for years, she still knew little English. Attending an exclusively Korean school where the native Korean language, and not English, was spoken hadn't helped Hee Youn. Her cousin had learned basic phrases in order to take orders from customers, but that was the extent of her English. But then, very few English-speaking customers patronized Mandarin House.

Hayley conversed little with her cousin, mostly because she refused to speak Korean. She was an American, having left Korea behind at the age of five. She'd been lucky to receive an excellent public school education, and had made many friends during her childhood—was, in fact, still friends with several of them. But she'd never been able to break away from the family business. She enjoyed cooking the food of her native country but didn't want to make a career out of it.

She became aware of the fact that something had changed in the restaurant; it was quiet—too quiet. Half of the guests were family members, including her parents and two older brothers. The other patrons were locals in her neighborhood—all Korean—consequently conversation was generally incessant. Now, very abruptly, it had stopped.

Hayley slipped toward the swinging set of doors that lead into the kitchen. Standing on tiptoe, she peered out the window. In the entrance stood a tall, blonde-haired man with piercing blue eyes, a look of consternation on his face as he spoke to her uncle. After a few moments of speaking slowly and clearly in English, then more loudly

to Uncle Lee, he realized he was getting nowhere and he pantomimed his request.

She laughed. Why was it people believed, when communicating to a foreigner, that speaking louder and using body gestures would make them more easily understood? She looked at Uncle Lee, whom she knew enjoyed himself immensely at the young man's expense. Her uncle knew enough English that he likely could understand the man. Should she help the poor guy? He'd caused quite a stir at Mandarin House.

As she perused his body from head to toe, she deemed him extraordinarily handsome, his eyes appearing keen and intelligent. His button-down long sleeve shirt, navy blue tie and khaki slacks were neat and clean. He appeared cool despite the ninety degree heat, which felt hot and humid; but she noted his ever-growing agitation as he tried to communicate with her uncle.

Feeling sorry for the stranger, she swung out of the kitchen and headed toward him, wiping her hands on her chef's apron. Pausing in front of him, in deference to her own culture and family, several members of which now watched her with curiosity and amazement because of her boldness, she bowed from the waist, held the position a moment before straightening and smiling up at him.

"You need help, mister?"

His irritable scowl disappeared and a slow grin slid across his lips. Performing an awkward little bow in return, he cleared his throat and straightened his tie. "My car broke down out front and I need a telephone." He jammed his hand inside his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. "Mine died."

She looked at her uncle and murmured in Korean, "I'll take care of him." Then she turned to the man and said, "Come straight this way." She turned on her heel and headed into the kitchen.

Hayley felt him behind her, though his gait was quiet. More heat, if that were possible, tore through her body as she felt his eyes on her. She felt self-conscious in her typical cook's uniform—black knit, narrow-legged pants, black short-sleeved t-shirt and big white apron covering her from shoulder to knee—and wished she wore something more attractive.

Inside the kitchen she directed him to a telephone at a corner desk. While she chopped bok choy, she watched him dig inside his billfold and pull out a business card. He looked up, as though he'd sensed her watching him, pinning her with his eyes.

That devastating grin of his appeared again. After he gave her a thorough, appreciative look—one that could cook eggs on a sunbaked sidewalk on a hot Minnesota summer day—he returned to the phone. As he punched in a number from the card he sank down in the chair behind the desk.

Hayley turned her attention to the rice on the stove, giving it a brisk stir then covering it once more. Her uncle returned and she filled several more plates with food. Lord, the way her family ate one would think they all required a diet, but each and every one of them was reed thin. She was the tallest and heaviest in her family, likely because she ate American food in addition to traditional Korean dishes. She enjoyed the variety of foods and her curves besides. They gave her more of an American appearance, and clothes fit better.

As she chopped an onion she heard the man talking on the phone, his deep baritone voice filled with exasperation. A moment later she grimaced when he slammed the phone down in its cradle.

"Sorry," he said, arriving at her side, "Triple A can't get here for about an hour."

Hayley stopped chopping and shrugged. "Then you have time to eat."

"No, thanks. I stopped for a burger after work."

She gazed covertly around and said, "Don't say that in front of my uncle. He would consider your words blasphemous. Besides, it's not polite in our ways to turn down an offer of a meal."

"Even if I'm not hungry?"

"Absolutely." Setting down the knife, she said, "So, tell me why a nice white boy like you is slumming in Korean territory?"

"I'm here on business."

"What sort of work do you do?" she asked.

"I'm an attorney."

"Ah, I see."

"I'm Mark Arcand. Any chance I could get a cup of coffee?"

She didn't give him her name in return but offered him an apologetic smile. "Sorry, no coffee, just hot tea."

He grimaced. "Okay."

Obviously, the man hadn't drunk her uncle's tea or he wouldn't have made a face. Uncle Lee blended his own teas and they were marvelous—the talk of the neighborhood. But then, the neighborhood was composed entirely of Koreans who enjoyed tea.

"Come, I'll show you to a table."

Once again, as they entered the seating area of Mandarin House, conversation quieted. Within moments, she returned to his table with a silver pot of hot tea and a tiny cup. "Let me know if you reconsider and would like something to eat." She turned away, took a step but couldn't take another. Her apron string must have gotten snagged on something. Looking over her shoulder she frowned when she saw he held onto the strings, a mischievous look on his face. "I've changed my mind," he drawled.

Hayley raised her brow. "That was quick."

He released the strings, picked up his cup of tea and breathed in deeply. "If anyone can brew a cup of tea this heavenly, I can imagine how wonderful the food must taste."

She nodded in approval. "I'll get a menu."

"Whatever you enjoy is fine. Join me?"

Her cheeks heated up beneath his intent perusal as he swept her body from head to toe. How long had it been since a good-looking man, or any man for that matter, had made a pass at her? Not that she'd ever been intimate with a man, but a girl could dream. She imagined sliding into bed beside his big, naked, golden form and sighed.

"What's your name?" he asked gently.

"Hayley."

He laughed aloud. "Why, that's an English name."

Seeing how her family and friends all watched them with growing interest, she begged him in a hushed whisper, "Please! Stop laughing. They'll think..."

"Don't stop now." Sinking comfortably back in his chair, he added, "What will they think?"

She shook her head and bit her lower lip.

"Will they think I'm attracted to you?"

Hayley couldn't meet his eyes.

"They're right, you know?" he said softly. "From the moment I set eyes on you."

"Stop it," she scolded. "I'll be right back with your food." Darting away from him, she heard his soft chuckle in her wake. What did he think was so funny, anyway? She was attracted to him and, it seemed, he was just as attracted to her. But she didn't trust him. She didn't know him.

Maybe it was time she loosened her hair—loosened up her life and had a good time without having to worry about what mama and papa thought. Twenty-one years old and never been bedded—good grief—never been kissed! What a crime.

Thinking about Mark again, she wondered if he was like *some* handsome men. Would he think nothing of enticing a woman into his bed, screwing her until she was cross-eyed and then go off to the next woman? Would this man be like that? She would only find out if she opened her heart and soul and did not worry so much about being the good girl. She no longer wished to act the role of the obedient daughter with no life to call her own.

Hayley loaded up a plate of Bulgogi, rice and a few bites of kimchi, guessing the 'white boy' wouldn't be able to tolerate the spicy cabbage. When she set the plate in front of him he inhaled and exhaled on a sigh. He looked up and gave her a warm, teasing glance. "I thought I wasn't hungry when I arrived, but you've changed my mind."

She smiled as she watched him dig into the food, amazed when he ate the kimchi and asked for more. As she moved toward the kitchen, she noticed her family and friends watching him, some with mere curiosity, others with surprised approval, a few with disdain. Of those who approved of him, she understood why; he'd eaten the kimchi. Only a man of fortitude would eat Mandarin House's kimchi. The few non-natives who frequented the restaurant sometimes broke out into a sweat and swallowed gallons of cold water after eating her uncle's special recipe of the spicy cabbage, but not *this* man.

On a large tray, she carried out several pots of hot tea, depositing them on the tables. She heard the murmured words 'kamsa hamnida' from the customers, Korean for 'thank-you.' She left a new pot on Mark's table and had reached for the empty one when his big hand closed over her wrist.

"I hate eating alone. Won't you join me?"

Her eyes went wide and she shook her head. "Oh, I couldn't possibly. I'm working right now." She tried to pull her arm away but he wouldn't release her.

"Then have coffee with me when you're through working."

Giving a covert glance around the restaurant as excitement flared through her body, she whispered, "I work until ten."

"I'll wait for you. Do you have a newspaper around?"

Hayley looked up at the big clock on the wall. "But it's only six."

His intent look, and his words, caused her entire body to tingle in anticipation. "I'd wait even longer for a chance to enjoy a cup of coffee with you, Hayley."

Mark realized, even as he said the words, that they were true. He would wait even more than four hours for a chance to get to know the Asian beauty with an English name. She was lovely, unlike any woman he'd ever met. Her quiet manner gave her a dignity he'd yet to see in other women. Her eyes were inky and exotically slanted, her lips held a permanent pout. She was a unique pearl, blessed with flawless creamy skin, the glistening blue-black hair worn haphazardly atop her head. He imagined it trailing to her waist when loosed, imagined winding his fist around a hank of it as they made love.

Whoa! Now where in the hell had that thought come from! Damn. He'd been without a woman too long.

Hayley returned with the newspaper he'd requested. He sank back in his chair and proceeded to read it cover to cover—a luxury for him. He couldn't recall the last time he'd read anything start to finish. As an attorney hoping to make partner soon, his work schedule left him with little free time, and virtually no time for dating. He had planned on working at his office this evening, but meeting Hayley changed his mind.

He finished the paper, glanced at his watch and saw it was just seven o'clock. He saw a tow truck arrive, and it took him a moment to realize it was the truck that would tow his car—which left him in a dilemma. How in the hell would he take Hayley on a date with no wheels?

Outside, Mark settled up with the towing company, then returned to the restaurant and made his way to the kitchen. He paused just inside the doorway. Hayley was bending over from the waist, whisk broom and dustpan in hand, sweeping up the floor. Her sweetly curved bottom seemed to beckon his hand's touch but he folded his arms and cleared his throat. "Uh, can I use your phone again, Hayley?"

She shot straight up and whirled to face him. He caught the reddening of her complexion as she murmured, "Of course."

Mark made a call to his boss, but there was no answer. He stood awkwardly, hands in his pockets. Hayley was busy at the stove, cooking more of the delicious beef he'd eaten earlier. The steam curled up and around her face, leaving a film of sweat. She looked beautiful, dripping sweat, hair messy. He imagined waking up beside her in the morning—after a night of lovemaking. He was getting ahead of himself—way ahead.

He moved to her side, watched her stir the meat. She gave him a sidewise look, a small smile on her lips. "You don't have to wait for me. We could do this another time."

"We may have to. I forgot about my car. As it is I'll have to take a taxi home." He looked around the kitchen and spotted a pad of paper and a pen on the corner desk. He carried it over to her. "Write down your name and phone number. I'll call you."

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"My family would object."

He frowned. "How old are you, anyway?" He slammed his hand against his forehead. "Don't tell me you're a minor."

"I'm not," she said softly. "I'm twenty-one."

Relief flooded him. "Good. So...why the second thoughts? You're old enough to make your own decisions. Your family doesn't even know me, so why would they object?"

"That's the point. They don't know you and, quite frankly, they don't want me dating men other than Korean ones whom they've preapproved."

"That's archaic, not to mention prejudiced."

She shrugged, "I know it is, but it's their way."

"Why don't you introduce me to them so they can get to know me?"

Dryly, she asked, "And how will you do that? They would never invite you into their home."

"I'll stop here every day after work and eat supper. They'll get to know me. Then they shouldn't object to you seeing me, right?"

"I don't know..." she began.

He forged ahead, taking her indecisiveness as a possible 'yes.' "I'll be back tomorrow for supper." He turned to leave but stopped when she spoke.

"Did you call for a cab?"

"No. I've decided to walk."

Her eyes widened. "How far?"

"Highland Park area."

"But that's several miles away!"

He shrugged. "I *need* the walk." He grinned. "If I get tired I'll catch a cab. Until tomorrow, Hayley."

Hayley watched him saunter outside then sank against the doorjamb. She was day-dreaming about the blasted attractive man, which made her realize she was in big trouble. Big, like with a capital

'B.' This was not good. She had a feeling Mark was the persistent type. And she knew her family wouldn't want her to date him. He came from a different world; he would take her away from her family—a family that would never accept him because of the cultural differences between them. Then, just imagining his family's reaction to her made her sad; she guessed they'd never accept her into their son's life, either.

"Daydreaming again, sis?"

Hayley glanced up at her older brother Matsu and gave him a wistful smile. "There's no crime in that, is there?"

"Nope, but it's a waste of time to want something you can't have."

She frowned. "But why can't I?"

He scoffed, "Do you think for a minute his lily-white family would accept you? Think again. The two of you are too different. It would never work."

His words cut worse than what she imagined knife-inflicted wounds would, and her eyes filled with tears as she turned away and stumbled into the kitchen. She picked up a knife and started chopping onions with a vengeance, until tears flooded her eyes and slid down her cheeks in rivulets. The more she thought about her brother's words the angrier she got until she pulled her arm back and threw the knife. The tip cut into the drywall, and hung there a moment before dropping to the floor.

As she stir-fried vegetables and chicken in a large wok, she thought about the virtual impossibility of their blending successfully. She'd serve Mark his supper tomorrow; she'd be cool and polite but would have to decline his offer of another date. As much as she hated admitting it, she knew her brother's sentiments were exactly the same as her parents. Her parents were Koreans, through and through, and hadn't assimilated into American life the way she had. It was strange that, of her four siblings, she was the only one who had become 'Americanized.'

Little did she know that in the very near future, she'd have reason to hate Mark Arcand.

\* \* \* \*

Mark appeared the next evening for supper. He sat down at the same table while Hayley served a variety of dishes to him. She smiled courteously, treating him the exact same way she treated all the other customers. Something had changed from yesterday to today.

He didn't like it.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked after he shoved himself back from the table. He'd eaten too much, more than usual—mostly because Hayley kept arriving with more food, as if she wanted to distract him from the possibility of any conversation.

She gave him a startled, wide-eyed look. "No, why do you think that?"

"Sit down, please. We need to talk."

"I can't." She shoved a hank of hair back from her forehead. "I'm working."

"What time are you done?"

"The usual—ten."

"I'll wait."

"No!" She glanced around then met his eyes. "Please, my parents wouldn't like it."

"Here we go again," he sighed. "Which of these people are your parents?"

She just glared at him.

Grinning, he urged, "Introduce us. I guarantee they'll fall in love with me."

Hayley groaned, "Introduce you? I hardly know you."

"Give me three minutes and I'll tell you a condensed version of my life story."

"No, I have customers."

"Then I'll wait."

He did, but this time he was prepared. He'd brought the latest Grisham book with him and proceeded to drink several pots of tea and read three-quarters of the novel before Hayley finished work. He could have finished the book in three hours if he hadn't caught himself following her movements around the restaurant. She wore the same uniform again; white shirt, black pants and big white apron. But she also wore a pair of pretty jade earrings and a dash of lipstick. Had she done so for him, knowing he would come by this night? A streak of jealousy shot through him then; was it possible she had a date with another man and didn't quite know how to tell him? Somehow, as he eyed her, he didn't think so.

Gut instinct told him she'd worn the items of vanity for him. So, why was she avoiding him?

A few moments before ten o'clock, a small Asian man in his mid-twenties sank into the chair opposite Mark. Mark nodded. The man just narrowed his eyes and tapped the table with his fingernails.

Annoyed, Mark tilted his head casually. "Have we met before?"

The man's eyes narrowed further. Finally, he leaned toward Mark and said in perfect English, "Stay away from Hayley. Stay away from Mandarin House. We don't need your kind around here."

"My kind?" Mark said between gritted teeth. "What kind would that be?"

"Leave my sister alone." The man rose to his feet, hatred in his eyes.

Mark kept eye contact with the man until he left the restaurant. Rolling his shoulders, he exhaled and then looked over his shoulder, scanning the faces of the patrons. Their eyes focused on him, every pair in Mandarin House. He was not getting off to a good start. One by one people stood and left the restaurant, looking at him—some with curiosity, a few with sympathy, but most with distrust in their eyes.

Hayley suddenly appeared. She proceeded to check the windows in the restaurant, closing and locking them. The last person left and it was just the two of them. Alone at last, Mark thought.

"Come out the back way," she nodded toward the kitchen.

Following Hayley's lead through the double swinging doors, they soon arrived at the back door. Outside she locked it and, in the moonlight streaming down on them, he saw her eyes glittering, saw the small smile on her lips.

"You waited for me," she whispered.

"I keep my promises, princess," he drawled.

Her smile widened and he leaned closer. Towering over her, his protective nature took over. Gently, he slid an arm around her waist, keeping some distance between them, giving her time to make up her own mind about him. Her lips parted with a gasp and she leaned her head back. He couldn't resist the sweet invitation of her lips; he dipped his head and kissed her.

Her hand slid up around his back, lay gently at the nape of his neck as she sank into his arms. He swept her up against his chest and kissed her deeply. His breathing grew ragged with her sweet acquiescence, her response exquisite, her scent and the feel of her against him draining him of all sense of time and place. Immediately, he felt his groin tighten in anticipation of mating with this woman. He wanted her. Excitement flooded him as he knew, from her response, that she wanted him every bit as much.

He felt her hand slip away from his nape and then both of her palms pressed against his chest. Turning her head to the side she whispered, "We must stop, Mark." He cupped her chin in his hand. "Why must we?"

"Because you are going too fast. We hardly know each other."

He loosed his grip on her, but kept her in his arms as he looked up at the stars in the sky. "True, but for some strange reason it feels right to move this fast."

She gave him an amazed look but didn't say a word.

"I know," he chuckled dryly, "I'm not making sense."

Her laughter surprised him. "Oh, you make perfect sense. I feel the same way."

"You do?"

She nodded and looked down, her forehead butting against his chest.

"Let's skip the coffee," he whispered.

"No, we'll go for coffee, but I've a chore to complete first."

"I'll help you."

She smiled. "You've no idea what it is."

"Doesn't matter. The sooner we're done, the sooner we can get to know each other better."

\* \* \* \*

Half an hour later, Mark found himself grasping a leash tightly in each hand, being pulled down the sidewalk by two sleek, long-legged dogs. He called out to Hayley who ran several feet ahead of him, also with a leash in each hand as two smaller dogs tore up the sidewalk in front of her.

The streets were well lit by the old-fashioned streetlights that the city had installed a year ago. The night was as sticky and humid as the day that preceded it. No breeze blew to relieve the humidity, and now, as the dogs pulled them along the sidewalk, Mark felt sweat on his back and brow.

Somehow, he found it difficult to imagine the fragile Hayley walking four dogs every night for her aunts and uncles, but she'd told him the job gave her additional income, which led him to his next question. Why would she need extra money besides what she earned at Mandarin House? He'd ask her once he got to know her better, but he had a suspicion she did this 'dog-walking' to ease the burden on her elderly aunts and uncles, not for the money.

Hayley lifted her hand and waved at a couple sitting on their front stoop, the porch light shining down on them. Likely they hoped to catch a breeze to relieve their misery from the heat.

"Good night, Mr. and Mrs. Park!"

They returned her greeting in Korean, he assumed, and he smiled.

Her lyrical voice made the words sound romantic.

A sharp tug on the leash brought his attention back to the dogs. "What did you call these mutts?" he yelled.

Laughing, she turned around and walked backwards, facing him. The ironic thing was that the dogs managed to keep up with her about face and continued forging ahead.

"I have the mutts. You have the salukis."

"Uh, what kind of dog is that?"

"They're native to Iran and believed to be the oldest pure-bred dog in the world."

"They sort of look like greyhounds."

"They do, don't they?" she replied, facing forward again.

He heard her humming a song, a familiar one, and he asked, "That song you're humming, what's the name of it?"

"Eye of the Hurricane by David Wilcox," she said. "It's one of my favorite songs."

Mark hurried after her since she seemed to be picking up the pace. How in the hell did a woman with shorter legs than his move so fast? He had to be a foot taller; even so, he found it difficult to keep up.

"What do you like about it?" he asked curiously.

"The lyrics are poignant."

"Yes, I've heard it before. The woman dies in a motorcycle accident—right?"

"Yes." She yanked on one dog's leash. "Slow down, Poppy, we're almost home."

Mark followed close on her heels but bumped into her when she stopped abruptly. "What's the matter?" He leaned over her shoulder, one hand on her narrow waist.

She held up her finger against her lips. "Shh!"

He followed the direction of her focus and groaned. There, on the corner under a streetlamp, stood a man—a short man—the same man, in fact, who sat down at Mark's table at Mandarin House and warned him off Hayley—her brother. Damn. Amazingly, the man hadn't noticed them, but he was preoccupied with the call on his cell phone, arguing with someone. Suddenly, a police car came to a screeching stop in front of him.

Hayley reached for his hand and stepped back slowly. He mimicked her movements until they reached an alley and ducked into it.

"Wasn't that your brother?"

"One of them," she said shortly. "I have three." She looked at him. "Did you happen to notice if the police put him in the car?"

"No. You pulled me into the alley before I had a chance to see. Is he in some sort of trouble? Maybe I could help."

"I don't know if he's in trouble or not. He leads a secret life. None of us in the family know what he does, though to my knowledge he's never been arrested."

"Obviously you didn't want him seeing me with you."

"That's right, not because of me, mind you, but because of you."

The salukis pulled madly now at the leashes the closer they moved to home. Mark grimaced. "You don't have to protect me from him. I can take care of myself."

"Oh, I don't doubt that, but I'd rather he didn't know about you just yet." She stopped his reply when she added, "In my own time I will tell my family, but not now, not until I'm—"

She looked straight ahead and didn't finish her sentence; so he finished for her.

"Not until you're sure about me, is that it?"

Her slow, quick nod told him everything; she didn't trust him. Could he blame her? They were strangers.

Silently, they made their way through the alley and around the block, arriving at her relatives' homes, four identical two-story houses in a row that appeared ancient but lovingly cared for.

After dropping the dogs off between the four households, they strolled down the street to Mark's car. Hayley paused beside his brilliant blue BMW M3, shiny and new beneath the street lamp's amber glow. Her small hand caressed the passenger door.

"This is a wonderful vehicle," she sighed.

He grinned as he opened her door. "It is, isn't it?"

She settled into the comfortable black leather seats, buckled her seatbelt, and Mark closed the door. Behind the wheel, he started the car and revved the engine. "Where to, lovely lady? Your choice."

"There's a Caribou coffeehouse downtown that's open until midnight."

\* \* \* \*

The drive down University Avenue to the heart of St. Paul was peaceful and quiet. Hayley had never been chatty; she hoped Mark didn't think her overly shy, or that she didn't like him. She did.

They entered the coffeehouse, moved to the counter and ordered coffees—a French roast for Hayley and a caramel-turtle mocha latte for Mark. She looked at him curiously.

"What?"

She smiled. "Somehow, I didn't guess you for a latte sort of guy."

"I'm not."

Confused now, she asked, "Then why did you order it?"

"It's for you."

Holding up her cup as she settled into a cozy booth in a corner, she shrugged, "But I ordered this."

"Yes, you did," he sat down opposite her. "But I guarantee once you take a sip of mine you'll want to switch."

She shrugged again. "I'm a tea connoisseur, not a coffee one."

"Then it's time to educate you. Here."

He held out his latte.

She took the cup, took a sip then groaned. "Oh, my, this is delicious."

"It's yours."

They switched coffees. "How did you get so smart?" she asked.

"A lot of studying." Mark ducked his head modestly.

They laughed companionably.

"Seriously, though," he said. "I've been told I've got great intuition—for a man."

"Then you are an unusual man."

Leaning toward her, he took her free hand. "People have referred to me as a Renaissance man."

"I've heard that term before. What does it mean?"

"It generally refers to a man with broad interests and knowledge in several fields of study. The Renaissance man exhibits proficiency and accomplishments in many of these areas. I could very well have been a mathematician, or a musician."

"Really? What instrument?"

"Any one I pick up."

"Seriously?" At his nod, she added, "Then you must have an excellent ear."

"Not to mention thirteen years of piano lessons," he nodded. "With the solid piano base I'm able to plunk or pluck away at just about any instrument."

He wasn't bragging, merely stating facts, Hayley decided. She guessed he must come from a privileged home, too. Music lessons were not cheap.

"Enough about me," he gestured broadly in her direction. "I want to hear about you."

She grinned. "Uh-uh. Now that you've shanghaied me into having coffee with you, you tell me *your* story before I tell you mine."

"Boring," he replied. "You know that your brother told me to get lost?"

She frowned. "Which brother? When did he talk to you?"

"Not sure which one, but I'm pretty sure he was the one we just saw on the street. He spoke to me this evening in the restaurant, while you were closing down. He basically told me to 'buzz off.'"

"Hmm, sounds like my eldest brother, Matsu. And what did you say?"

"Not much. He took me by surprise, and I didn't want to antagonize him." His smile slipped and he added, "You're a beautiful, wonderful woman, Hayley. I certainly don't want to jeopardize my chances with you by being nasty toward your family. While his cocky arrogance bothered me, I well understood his feelings. I have a sister, too."

"Have you?" she asked with interest. "How old is she?"

"Lindsay is eighteen—going on eighty. She is wise and wonderful—like you. But she's also incredibly spoiled." Tilting his head to one side, he perused her with a long, steady look. "Somehow I'm guessing you are not the pampered type."

She laughed. "You guessed that right. And I'm not at all wise."

Mark smiled. "Oh, yes, you are. You just don't realize it. Anyway, I got the feeling that there's more than a protective streak in your brother."

"My family would never accept you because you aren't Korean."

"Why not?"

"Women have their place in life; my family considers my place to be chief cook and dishwasher at Mandarin House. They also expect me to marry a suitable Korean boy and have several children."

"I don't see anything wrong with the latter part of that sentiment, do you?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "Of course not, but I'm not ready to be in love with any man at this point in my life."

"At what point would you be ready?"

She gave a covert glance around her, then said in a hushed voice, "I'm going to college in the fall. Can you believe it?"

Mark grinned. "Why wouldn't I?"

She scoffed, "Oh, it may be usual for American women to attend college, but not for a Korean woman like me."

"Weren't you born in America?"

"No. I lived in Korea until the age of five. My parents have very old-fashioned, old-country ways."

"What do you plan on studying?"

"Literature and writing."

Three years ago, upon graduating from high school, Hayley had wanted to pursue a college education but met with severe opposition from her parents. She'd backed down then, but no more. Her parents had no idea she'd passed the entrance exam at the University of Minnesota, had qualified for a first year partial scholarship and had registered for three classes in the fall. She could hardly wait to delve into the works of Shakespeare, and also eagerly anticipated her first level college writing class, and even the dreaded required math class. She wanted to live on campus but her savings wouldn't cover the cost, so she'd continue living at home with her parents and five siblings and commute by bus each day.

Uncle Lee was supportive and said nothing to her parents about it. As long as she continued to work three week nights and weekends at Mandarin House, he didn't mind her attending school.

Mark's next question drew her attention.

"Will this be your first year?"

"Yes. It took me a while to save enough money."

He raised his brow. "What about applying for grants and scholarships?"

"The possibility of attending college hadn't seemed a realistic possibility for me until last year. I'm waiting to hear back from several places where I've applied for grants. After meeting with a counselor at the university, I realized I can also apply for student loans once my money runs out."

"How do your parents feel about this?"

"They don't know yet."

"How come?"

Hayley sighed. "They have no time for the idea of women attending college. None of my aunties or cousins did, but I plan on breaking the mold and changing that."

"Good for you," he applauded her. "What school?"

"The University of Minnesota."

Mark's brows lifted. "You're jumping in with both feet. Some people opt to attend junior college first."

"I've always wanted to attend the university. Have you ever visited the campus? It has a pulse—a life of its own—very exciting."

Mark tilted his head to one side and stared at her. "I earned my

undergraduate degree from the university and am well aware of the excitement of campus life. Is that what you're looking for—excitement?"

"A little, I guess."

Hayley's heart bumped inside her chest at the brilliant, devilish smile crossing Mark's lips. "I've been told I'm an exciting guy. I'd be happy to oblige your every desire."

"Would you?"

He nodded, his gaze riveted on her.

After a moment, she looked away and sighed. "Unfortunately, you are of the wrong ethnic persuasion, so I'm afraid I must decline."

"You're embarking on a new adventure and attending the big university—don't you think adding me to your life will further the adventure?"

She laughed. "You have no problem with your ego, have you?"

"Attorneys usually don't. But I'm speaking the truth. I do want to get to know you, Hayley, and that in itself is something unusual for me."

"Why so?"

"Because I don't usually take the time and effort to meet women."

Hayley's eyes narrowed on him. "Likely because they're busily pursuing you, I'd imagine. You don't need to do the looking."

Casually, he said, "How old did you say you were?"

She laughed. "I like you Mark Arcand, but only as a friend. I'm afraid that's all there can be between us." She rose from the booth and settled the strap of her purse over her shoulder. "I'd better get home."

He eased out of his seat. "Of course you do."

Hayley stilled when he cupped her chin in his hand, leaned down and brushed her lips gently. His blue eyes delved deeply into hers as he said, "I want you to think about me in a more serious vein—not merely as a friend."

"Perhaps," she felt heat flood her cheeks.

Hayley wanted to see much more of Mark, she decided as he drove her home. But, she wasn't ready to tell her parents about him. They would be so disappointed in her. They truly weren't prejudiced people, but they feared the unknown. And Mark, a 'white man,' was an unknown, for certain. Perhaps if she did bring him around to the house—slowly at first, more so with time—they'd learn to like him. But then her suspicions arose; why was he so interested in her? They were so different! She couldn't imagine herself, a simple young girl

working in a restaurant, blending into his corporate *worldly* world. But then she knew of stranger things that had happened in life to people.

"I'll walk you to your door."

She stepped back and shook her head. "No. That wouldn't be a good idea."

Disappointment showed on his handsome face and she found herself wanting to give in, but held firm. She watched him shove his hands into his back pockets and nod down the street.

"Go ahead. I'll watch you to be sure you get inside okay."

"Thank you." She turned and swiftly moved down the block. At her door she faced him, gave a fleeting wave then disappeared inside.

Mark stared for a long time at the two-story house before leaving. On the way home, amazement filled him the more he thought about Hayley.

He'd found the woman of his dreams and no one would prevent him from having her for his own.

\* \* \* \*

Hayley snapped her front door shut as quietly as she could, turned and tiptoed across the hall, until she reached the foot of the stairs leading to the second floor. She gasped when the light suddenly went on. Looking up she found her mother in her pajamas and robe, her graying hair up in curlers. Her arms were crossed over her chest, her brow furrowed in a combination of anger and worry.

"Where have you been? Do you know it's midnight?" her mother said in Korean as she descended the stairs.

"I'm sorry," Hayley murmured. "I should have called to let you know I was having coffee with a friend."

"Matsu is out looking for you."

"Why," she groaned. "I'm old enough to be out as late as I want."

Her mother sighed. "I know, and I told him that, but you know how your brothers worry about you."

"No, they don't worry. They enjoy spying on me, and making my life miserable."

Suddenly, the realization that her mother had spoken in perfect English, prompted her to say, "Mom? Do you know you just spoke in English to me?"

"Do you think you are the only one in this family who knows the language?"

"Papa does, but I had no idea you knew English so well. Why do you always speak to me in Korean?"

Hee Youn Park gave her daughter an impatient look. "I wanted you to learn and remember forever the Korean ways." She took Hayley's arm and guided her into the living room. "Come. We must talk. We are on the verge of a family crisis and it's time I told you about it."

"Crisis? What's happened?"

"Your uncle, and the rest of the business owners on our block, received a letter from an attorney's office instructing everyone to sell out their businesses or face the consequences."

"This letter sounds more like a threat than a business offer."

Hee Youn nodded. "This is the second letter that's come in a month. The first one was basically an offer but this one, well, as your uncle said, it's intimidating. By the way, Matsu has been investigating that young man who came into Mandarin House the last two days. Remember, the one who used our phone?"

"Yes," Hayley said cautiously.

"He's a lawyer, and he's the one who delivered this last letter to everyone. Obviously, he's working for the corporation that wants to buy out this block," her mother threw in some Korean profanities as she spoke.

Hayley cocked her head curiously. "Uncle Lee will tell them 'no,' won't he?"

"I don't know. While the offer was offensive in nature, monetarily, it tempted him. He might accept it."

"Oh, no! He can't do that," Hayley gestured worriedly. "What would I, or my cousins, do for a job? Has he any idea how difficult it is to find work these days?"

"Yes, well, he's not getting any younger, Hayley. And none of your cousins want the responsibility of running Mandarin House. Besides, we heard two businesses on the block have already decided to sell. Mandarin House won't be able to stand by itself on this block so Uncle Lee must sell, too. He'll have no choice."

"I'll talk to the cousins and see if we can help Uncle Lee a bit more. Maybe Matsu would even consider assisting me in running Mandarin House."

Hayley sat on the sofa in the living room once her mother returned to bed, disappointment setting in. Was Mark interested in her only because of his client's plan to buy the entire block, including Mandarin House? Of course, she thought, whatever made her think he'd be interested in her? Tears filled her eyes as she leaned back against the sofa then looked up at the ceiling. A tear slid down her

cheek and she came to a decision. She'd never see or speak to Mark Arcand again. She didn't trust him.

\* \* \* \*

Mark knew that a partnership in the firm would be his in a matter of time; but he had just learned the price he'd have to pay to obtain it. The question was, would he pay that price?

"Threats?" The letter Mark just read still in his hand, he scowled in disgust at his firm's head partner, Edward Ramsey. "Now we're resorting to underhanded tactics for our clients?"

Edward puffed out his thick chest and settled back in his leather chair. "Underhanded means we're not being upfront when we are, as you can see from that letter. Just a bit of persuasion by way of more money, that's all I suggested in the letter. We've made every business on that block an excellent offer they won't be able to refuse."

His boss was right, of course. The letter wasn't threatening but held a certain 'tone' that advised selling out, or the next offer wouldn't be as lucrative.

"It's a generous offer and they'd be foolish not to sign on the dotted line."

"And if some of them don't?"

"It's all or nothing. Have no doubts that Corcoran Corporation intends to build office spaces on that block. They expect to begin building in the spring."

Mark shook his head. "Those people won't sell out, even if you offer them a small fortune."

"They will—eventually," Edward snapped. "Everyone's price can be met. If they're smart they'll take the money and open up new businesses in another location. I've a proposition for you; I get the feeling you've learned a lot about the people on that block. Get to know them a bit better. See if you can do some sweet-talking to assist this deal, and that partnership will be yours."

"No." Mark rose from his seat, shoved his hands into his pockets and headed out the door. Behind him, he heard Edward Ramsey swearing. In his office, he settled into the chair behind his desk, seething inside. It had taken all of his willpower to hold in his fury, but he had managed to get in the last word. Likely he'd be looking for a new job soon, but he didn't care. His integrity would be intact.

He should have asked to see the letter before delivering it, but then, he'd never had cause to distrust the firm. Corcoran Corporation's interest in buying the properties on Hayley's block, he guessed, would be considered a slap in the face to the Korean business owners. Hayley and her family and friends were proud people; the bakery, grocery store, shoe repair shop, Laundromat, and, of course, Mandarin House provided their livelihood. Sure, they could relocate, but it would be a hardship for them, especially the families who lived in apartments above the businesses.

True, the offer of a partnership was an excellent financial deal, but some things were more important than money. He hoped Hayley would believe him when he told her he had nothing to do with the letter, and with brokering the deal between his firm and Corcoran Corporation.

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With his refusal to help Edward Ramsey, Mark suddenly found himself without a job. He concentrated his full efforts on finding another law firm to hire him. Once he was secure in a new position he'd pursue Hayley once more—that is, if she gave him a chance. Guilt still plagued him over that damned letter.

Within a month he found work he'd often thought about pursuing, but hadn't—until now. He'd interviewed, been offered and accepted a position with a non-profit firm called Lawyers for Women.

The small but renowned law firm assisted women suffering various hardships in life who lacked the money to pay for legal services if needed. Some of these women had been battered and left homeless. Lawyers for Women offered these women representation in court against abusive partners and spouses to finalize divorces and to secure homes for them.

Mark's new line of work could put him in some jeopardy, though, of which he'd been informed. But he didn't care about that; he would be performing worthwhile work.

Now that he'd found new employment, Mark set out to see Hayley again, with hopes of convincing her to marry him.

\* \* \* \*

The summer had nearly ended and Hayley's Uncle Lee, as well as the other business owners on the block, had decided to sell out to Corcoran Corporation. Hayley had to admit the settlement added up to much more than what the restaurant was worth, so her uncle had money enough to purchase a lot and build a new establishment, ironically, just six blocks away from its current location.

She hadn't seen Mark in all that time. The old saying 'Parting makes the heart grow fonder' was true in her case. Sadness filled her as she came to the conclusion he'd written her off. She had just been too difficult—too shy—and unavailable to him. Simply put, she had

no experience with men. Her family made it a point to tell her what a jerk Mark was, though, and that she'd been wise in her decision to not see him again, even though she wanted to. How could she even think to betray her family with thoughts of seeing him? Turning to her current problem, she put aside her sadness.

Building on the new Mandarin House would begin soon and in four months Hayley would have a larger restaurant in which to work, including a bigger kitchen to manage. She and her uncle also anticipated more business due to the additional seating space, and she'd need extra workers. Also, she was uncertain about carrying her full school load and the work at the restaurant simultaneously, and had decided to work a day a week less—much to her uncle's dismay.

She'd been trying to think of a way to keep her elder brother off the streets and now sat with him in Mandarin House. "Please, Matsu, won't you reconsider uncle's offer?"

Her brother sank lower in the booth at Mandarin House, his eyes half-closed, a smirk on his lips.

Matsu scoffed, "Me? Work in the kitchen with you? No way. I don't need to work so hard, sis. You can run the kitchen at the new Mandarin House just fine on your own. You have a love for it—more than anyone else in the family, aside from Uncle Lee."

"I can't do it on my own and you know it," she snapped.

"Ask other family and friends to work with you, though I don't believe you'll succeed."

Hayley frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"None of the younger generation, aside from you, wants a part of the business. Everyone is going their own way in life—except for you. You surprise me."

"Why?"

"You're a throwback to the old ways—more than you want to admit."

"That's not true! I'm more American than anyone in this family, and you know it."

He smiled. "Other than your American-type name, you're old school." Leaning forward, he pinned her with a questioning glance, "Don't you have dreams—dreams of being something or someone important?"

"I have dreams of pursuing an education, and I *am* important—to me and my family—and that's all that matters."

"Your dreams sound like a hell of a lot of work to me."

Narrowing her eyes, Hayley took in her brother's longish, slicked

back hair, black leather jacket and jeans and sighed, thinking he wore the rebellious youth look all too well. "You criticize my dreams when yours are nothing to brag about, big brother."

His upper lip curled. "You know nothing about me and my dreams."

"I know enough. I don't like what I've heard about you in the neighborhood."

"Don't believe everything you hear."

Hayley rose from her seat and sighed. "I try not to, Matsu, I do."

She returned to the kitchen, her break ended. Gently, she moved Uncle Lee away from the cooking area and took his place, smiling when he hustled away. As she lifted covers and stirred various pots of food she inhaled the spicy, exotic aroma of the various dishes. Relief flooded her, and excitement too, when she'd learned of her uncle's decision to sell, then build a new restaurant. Hayley couldn't even begin to imagine what her life would be like without Mandarin House.

She started worrying again about Matsu. Was he pursuing, as local gossip claimed, the illegal sale of drugs as a way to make a living? She'd never seen him high, but he could be a seller and not a user. It seemed he knew lots of people living in the fast lane. Her parents worried too, but what could they do? Thankfully he hadn't been caught doing anything illegal. Still, she wondered how he always managed to have money and never seemed to work at any viable employment.

"Hayley?"

She whirled around and looked up at Mark Arcand. He stood in the kitchen entrance, looking heartbreakingly handsome in his khaki slacks, white shirt, navy suit jacket and tie, worry lines creasing his face.

"I'm here to apologize—about the letter. God, but I've missed you."

With his heartfelt words her anger fled, and joy surged through her body. Still she maintained her composure and offered a nonchalant shrug. "It wasn't so bad. It was short and to the point. Corcoran wants to buy out the block. Their offer is a generous one."

"You hate me, don't you?"

"Not hate—disappointed and distrustful, perhaps."

Frowning, he took a few steps forward. "You don't trust me?"

She wondered at his scowling expression. Apparently, her distrust hurt him more than if she hated him? "What am I to think,

Mark? You suddenly arrive at Mandarin House with the excuse that your car broke down and you need to use a phone. But before then you dropped off letters to the businesses on the block, including this one, about selling out to Corcoran House—or else. It just seems more than coincidental."

"But I did deliver the letter and my car did in fact break down. Meeting you was happenstance."

"True, but seeing me a second time wasn't, was it? You wanted to get close to me to get to my uncle."

"Now, that's not true. I came back to see you for my own selfish reasons."

She held her palm up. "Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not blaming you for delivering that letter. You were doing your job."

"I had no idea what was in the letter. I was just the delivery boy."

Hayley smiled. "A delivery boy? And here I thought you were an attorney."

He walked toward her. "I'm hoping you'll forgive me. I quit the firm and have found a position with another law firm."

She tossed down her cooking spoon and met him halfway. The letter had affected him more than she'd ever dreamed it would. Somehow, she believed him when he said he'd had no idea about the letter's contents. So, what was his reason for returning to Mandarin House? Was there a possibility he was falling in love with her? She prayed it was true, because she faced the real possibility that *she* was falling in love with him.

Stopping in front of her, his arms went around her waist and he lifted her against him. Hayley found herself eye level with him. The blazing look of desire filling his eyes gave her the courage to give in to her own passionate feelings for him.

His lips swept across hers, gently at first, then firmly. Her arms came up of their own volition and wound around his neck. He crushed her against him and she gasped at the pin prickles of desire sweeping through her. After a long while he stopped kissing her, much to her disappointment.

As he lowered her to the floor he murmured, "Are you done at ten?"

She nodded.

"Come home with me."

Hayley's eyes filled with tears, unable to deny her feelings for him any longer. She gave a quick nod.

"I'll wait for you," he added.

"Yes." It seemed she'd waited forever to hear a man say those words to her. She had no idea what lay ahead in her future with this man, but she didn't care. For now, their passion for each other would be enough.

\* \* \* \*

Hayley was silent as she rode in the passenger seat of Mark's car. Apprehension filled her body—heart and soul. She wasn't fearful of making love with Mark; she wanted this as much as he did. But she'd never been with a man before and she wondered if she shouldn't confess the fact to Mark. Would he care? Would he stop? No! She couldn't tell him, guessing he would indeed stop.

The ride to Mark's condo took half an hour and, once inside his spacious, ultra-modern home, there was no turning back for Hayley. Nerves set in when she heard Mark lock the door, but then she sighed when she felt him brush up against her back, then surround her with his long, muscular arms, his palms flat against her abdomen.

Standing in Mark's living room before floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the city, she marveled at the spectacular view. Streetlights formed perfect rows in several directions, stopping and starting with intersections of lights between. Mark distracted her then when his lips brushed the vein running up her neck from her collarbone—first on one side of her neck, then the other.

Hayley sighed when he pressed his palms firmly against her body, the heat from his hands penetrating her thin cotton blouse. Oh, his hands felt warm and big and strong, and she couldn't help but imagine how well and gently he'd touch her—handle her. Strange choice of words she decided, but handle her he would. She'd give herself fully to him with no hesitation, no reservations. She wanted him.

She felt herself being turned to face him. He wound his arms around her, clasping his hands at the small of her back. She pressed against his shoulders as she stared up at him with a womanly expression, praying none of her naivety showed on her face.

"I want you, baby, but I don't want to rush you," his blue eyes glittered down at her. "I'll be right back."

Her gaze followed his tall, muscular frame as he left her side, then he disappeared down a hallway. She stayed at the windows, staring outside, her arms crossed, deep in thought.

Within moments he returned. She noticed he'd changed into a pair of faded blue jeans and a black polo shirt. As he moved toward her, she saw the desire in his eyes—desire mixed with longing. That

longing look gave her the courage, after he took her in his arms, to step away. She took his hand, pulled him from the living room and down the hallway in the direction from which he'd just come.

He stopped in the hallway and opened a door, his eyes showing the way. Looking inside the room, she decided this must be his bedroom. Flickering flames from candles of various sizes, shapes and colors welcomed her. Candles were perched on every available surface. Every one of them he'd lit, setting the stage for romance—and making love. She stopped in the open doorway, unable to move as she viewed a king-sized bed covered in taupe colored satin, strewn with fluffy pillows.

He stepped around her, faced her as he took both her hands and gently pulled her into the room. Reaching around her again he closed the door, surprising her when he bent and swept her into his arms in one smooth motion.

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Mark forced himself to slow down as he crossed the room, Hayley's delicate body in his arms. *Lord, she weighs less than my family's ten year old golden retriever*. He stopped beside his bed.

Feeling her gaze on him, he continued staring out over the city—over the same view that had caught her attention upon entering his home. He enjoyed nothing better than opening his eyes to the dawning of a new day and seeing the sun rising above the horizon over the city. But he also loved an evening view as well—only this one was better than any other for he held his future wife in his arms.

They were so different, and he knew it would be difficult for both their families to mesh—to join and become one.. But they would. He and Hayley would leave them no choice.

She remained still and silent in his arms as he gazed out at the lights. He felt her eyes on him. He wouldn't meet her gaze yet, guessing her anticipation of the night ahead would grow the longer he held her in his arms. He'd planned this evening carefully, having set the stage with every thought of Hayley in mind. The candles, the erotic scent of incense burning, and the treats on the bedside table he'd planned for her.

"Mark?"

He glanced down and saw her anticipation had turned to worry. Squeezing her, he said, "I'm here, darling."

"Aren't you going to put me down?"

"Never."

She gasped and he laughed at the surprised look on her face.

Settling down on the side of the bed, he held her on his lap, focused on her flawless skin and on her hair drawn up high in a bun atop her head.

"Never?" A small smile formed on her lips and she snuggled close against him.

He sucked in his breath, aware of her tempting little movements, and squeezed her tighter. "Never, ever."

She leaned back and he saw how her breasts pressed against the thin fabric of her shirt. He made out the outline of her bra and his fingers itched to unbutton each and every button down its front. His gaze followed her right arm when she reached up slowly and pulled two pins from her hair, which tumbled down well below her shoulders, brushing his forearm.

He gasped, for this was the first time he'd seen her with her hair down. She shook her head and the blue-black tresses pulled free from the twisted rope she'd made earlier, settling in exquisite disarray around her shoulders. Mesmerized by the sight, he reached out and combed his fingers through the tresses several times before winding one hank around his fist, finally turning sideways and taking her down to his bed.

They faced each other, Mark's fist still wound in her hair. His other hand traced the smooth skin of her forehead, nose and cheeks, stopping at the v-neckline on her blouse. His eyes asked permission and she nodded. He unbuttoned her blouse and pulled the tails from the waistband of her black slacks. He pulled back to stare down at the sight of her small but perfectly formed breasts concealed behind nude-colored lace.

"You are beautiful, baby—so, so beautiful," he murmured.

Heat seeped into her cheeks at his words. She wanted to see him without his shirt. Pulling at the knit fabric, she managed to shove it up above his navel, then higher. He pulled it the rest of the way off, lay back on the bed, pulling her down on top of him. When he started palming her breasts, one in each hand, she sighed and closed her eyes.

"That feels...wonderful."

"It sure does," he said softly.

Hayley opened her eyes, saw the smile on his lips and found herself smiling back.

"You know what I'd like?" he said, lifting his eyebrows.

Blushing again, she couldn't reply, but ducked her head and nipped at one nipple.

"Yeah, oh yeah," he growled, one hand cupping the back of her

head as he pressed her closer.

She loved raising his passion higher as she lapped at each nipple until they formed into hardened nubs. When she felt him hardening against her stomach she knew he was ready.

He rolled them over so she was beneath him. Raising himself off her body, he chucked his clothes before removing hers. They both breathed quickly, Hayley noticed, as he settled down at her side once more. Long and lovingly they stared at each other. He was beautifully formed with his broad golden chest, narrow waist and hips and burgeoning maleness.

Then he set upon her body with his lips, head to toe, leaving her laughing and sobbing for more. His loving made her forget she was innocent, and she gave herself to him fully, kiss for kiss.

His tongue worked its magic over her body. When he reached her clit, he drove her mad with desire, culminating in a climax that left her shattered. She was aware of him swinging his body over hers. Then slowly, gently, he inserted himself inside her. His eyes met hers at the same moment he felt a slight barrier.

"Hayley—" he began.

"Don't ask, not now," she begged him, squeezing her arms around his neck and drawing him down to her lips.

He said no more, but took her lips, crushing them with his own, driving himself deeper inside her. She experienced just a momentary pang of pain, and then it was gone. She rode the waves of passion with him, finding her release twice more before he found his own.

Afterwards, he sank down beside her, held her still in his arms. Feeling his breathing against her hair, she heard his murmured, "Why?"

She sighed. "Because I've never found another to love like I love you, I guess." Pulling back from him she frowned and added, "Tell me you weren't disappointed."

His eyebrows came up again and an incredulous look crossed his face. "Are you kidding? I thank you for your most precious gift, sweetheart, but I'm afraid there's only one thing I can do when all is said and done."

Hayley looked at him in confusion. "What's that?"

"Marry you, of course."

"Because I gave you my virginity?"

He shook his head. "No. Because I'm in love with you."

"I'm finding that difficult to believe since we've just met."

"How can I convince you?"

She gave him a thoughtful look before an idea came to mind. "I challenge you to spend a day in Mandarin House's kitchen with me, working your fingers to the bone chopping bok choy and onions."

"Is that all?" he snorted drolly "Remind me to bring my food processor then, and I'll be happy to prove my love for you."

"What!"

"Gotcha."

"You are a devil, do you know that?"

"Do you know you're the first woman to ever tell me that?"

"And the last," she replied. She gave him a long look, caught the lingering twinkle in his eyes. "I love you, too, Mark."

"Of course you do."

"You're not going to let me have the last word, are you?"

"Nope."

Her eyes went to his lips and she grinned. "Make love to me again."

"You won't have to twist my arm," he smiled into her eyes. Then he trapped her beneath him and his smile disappeared.

Hayley saw his eyes darken with desire even as he dipped his head and kissed her.

It was only later, after they'd made love again, that she realized he'd gotten his way and had the last word. It wasn't important.

Culturally, they were so different and she knew they'd endure many challenges through the years. Yet, in their stir-fried marriage, they'd blend together well, time after time, coming together—loving each other.

And that—not any last words—was all that mattered.

The End

## An Itsy Bitsy Spider Tale by Alexis Ke

Breaking her rules of not getting involved with non-brothas, Nicole Baylor finds out passion and love have rules all of their own.

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# An Itsy Bitsy Spider Tale by Alexis Ke

#### Chapter One

Nicole only wanted a nice quiet evening to herself. She'd just put in four twelve-hour shifts at the hospital and her body and mind screamed for a break. She finished folding the last of the laundry and sat the basket in the corner of the laundry room.

Nicole planned on soaking in the tub for an hour while reading one of those hot, steamy books she'd picked up at the local bookstore last payday and hadn't had a chance to open yet. A glass of wine and a few aromatic candles would also relax her.

She walked into her bedroom, pulled her sweatpants and tee shirt off and dropped them in the dirty clothes basket. Nicole strolled to the bathroom, turned the faucet and let the hot water begin to fill her bath. She stepped back and admired her tub. When she was apartment hunting, it was the bathroom that sold her. The apartment was priced a little steeper than she wanted, but when the agent opened the doors to the bathroom she couldn't do anything but say, "Where do I sign?"

The room was huge. It had a skylight encrusted with cut stained glass, and on bright sunny days the room was bathed in a kaleidoscope of rainbow colors. On rainy nights, the water cascading down the glass lulled her to sleep, only to awaken with pruned skin and thankfulness she hadn't drowned. The toilet was separated in a small room and the shower stood in the corner, surrounded by glass bricks from floor to ceiling with the exception of the entrance, closed off by a simple white curtain. There were also two shower heads, one of which, if she positioned it just right, was not only a shower but also gave one of the best orgasms a spray of water could offer. However, the *piece de la resistance* remained the bathtub. It stood in the middle of the floor, surrounded by plush foot-deep carpet. From afar, it looked like an antique tiger pawed bath, but once she stepped up to it the small Jacuzzi jets made her salivate. She would no longer have to go to the gym just to get in the hot tub and sooth her aching muscles.

Nicole stepped over to the wall cabinet and pulled out a bottle of bath oils. After pouring a generous amount into the raging water, she dipped her hands into the canister of bath crystals, scooping some up and dropping that, too, into the water. It was just enough to give the water a frothy appearance. She would turn the jets on before she got in and too much would have the bubbles touching the ceiling. She found out after she moved in, Jacuzzis and bubble bath did not mix well. After two major catastrophes in the tub and having to get the carpet cleaned she set out on a mission to find the right concoction. It only took her a week before she wandered into a bath and body type store and found foaming bath crystals. Not bubble bath. Elated with her find, she made it a point to go to the store almost every week.

Swishing her hand in the water and finding it suitable, she wrapped her hair in a small towel, took her glasses off, sat them on the small table she'd placed next to the tub and slowly stepped over into the bath. The hot water stung her toes and tickled up her calf. Nicole paused and waited for her body to adjust to the heat and then continued her assent. The frothy aqua slid up her body like a warm hand. Caressing, teasing, soothing. Her mouth parted into the perfect 'oh' when it reached her womanhood and sent a shiver up her spine. This was one of the reasons why she favored a long, hot, soak in the tub. Who needs a man when you have a Jacuzzi?

A soft chuckle escaped her throat at the thought that floated through her mind. Deep down, Nicole knew a man couldn't be substituted by a bubble bath. But when that's all you've got, you have to make it good. Her body relaxed back against the warmed porcelain and she almost moaned when the steam rose to her nose and wafted up to her brain. Lavender and cinnamon and something else attacked her senses and stilled her heart. The salesperson was right when she said this oil was to die for.

Nicole reached over, turned the jets to lull and closed her eyes. Before she could resist, her eyes slid shut. Soft foamy bubbles caressed her body and rocked her to sleep.

She didn't know how long she'd been under, but the wrinkles in her fingers and toes told her it must have been at least forty-five minutes. The water was cooling and the steam that fogged the room like a curtain was gone. Nicole opened her eyes and scanned the surroundings. Something caught her attention. She closed her eyes and reopened them. The large black—no, brown—spot floating in the air confused her. She blinked, ran her hand across her face and stared at it until it came into focus. It wasn't floating but crawling down the

wall. No, it wasn't crawling. It was just there. Not moving. Not doing anything. A large brown spot the size of her fist. What was it? Nicole brought her hand up and fumbled for her glasses on the table without taking her gaze off the brown object. Her hand trembled when she brought them to her face and she dropped them into the water. Her heartbeat sped and a large lump lodged in her throat. She fanned around in the water, grabbed her specks and brought them to her face. Staring through water-streaked glass, Nicole's body stiffened when the realization of what it was came into focus.

When she moved to Florida everyone at work told her about these monsters, but she didn't believe them. She hadn't seen any and she was never one to believe what she couldn't see with the naked eye. But she could see this perfectly clear. It was the largest, ugliest, hairiest spider she'd ever seen. Her back went ramrod straight. Her gaze flew from the spider to the door.

Every nerve ending in her body screamed for help. She hated spiders. She hated little creepy crawling bugs, anything that could slide up a pant leg and bite or snuggle under the blanket when you weren't paying attention and poison you in your sleep. Nicole would rather have been face to face with a lion, tiger or bear than a spider. And this was no normal spider. She closed her fist and placed it between her line of vision with the mutated spider on the wall. She could still see part of its legs. Yup, this was the spider from out of space, for sure. She stared at it and when it didn't move decided it was asleep. *Do spiders sleep?* She began to stand and it spasmed and crawled three inches toward the floor. Nicole screamed and almost leaped backwards from the tub. Water sloshed over the ledge and saturated the floor, but she didn't care. The spider jumped and landed a mere four feet from her and then scurried in her direction.

Nicole didn't know where she was going or how loud she screamed, but the soreness in her throat from straining was evidence of her dilemma. She ran from the bathroom through the living room and to the front door, the screams still careening from her throat. Not thinking about anything but escaping from the spider, she swung the front door open and slammed full force into the man walking past her door. She hit him so hard he toppled backward and fell to the floor. The packages he was carrying flew in the air and crashed to the ground. His arms came up and around her in a tight grasp as he tried to stop her and calm her.

"What's the matter?" His voice sounded hurried, concerned.

"B...b...bathroom!" Nicole gasped for air. "Gun! I need a gunnnn!" Her head was spinning. Her chest tight from how hard her heart pounded against her rib cage.

His body sprang up, he grabbed the baseball bat he'd just propped at his door and ran into her apartment. He stopped outside the door, turned and said, "Go inside my place. Stay there until I come back."

Terry Slade didn't know what he was going to find in the bathroom of this hysterical female but he figured it was an intruder. When he researched the area for housing, he was pleased this one proved to be in a safe neighborhood, but there were pervs all over the world. They found their way into the quietest, safest places and he was sure this apartment didn't corner the market on a total absence of crime.

His hand tightened on the narrow end of the bat as he slowly crept toward the bathroom door. It was wide open and he saw no movement within the confines of the room. Whoever was in there might have run out or was hiding in a closet or behind another door; waiting for him to pass before he jumped out and attacked. He heard the slightest of noises from behind him and swung around, ready to hit. Nicole screamed again and drew her hands up in front of her.

Slade placed a finger against his mouth to silence her. She nodded, swallowed and stepped up behind him. He shook his head and she stopped. "Go back to my apartment." His voice was a mere whisper.

He took another step toward the bathroom and jumped in while swinging the bat. He hit nothing but air. Slade stopped, moved his gaze around the room and searched for the intruder. Nothing.

He stepped out and walked across the hall to her bedroom. A quick glance under the bed and in the closet and again he turned up empty. Turning, he walked back to his apartment. Stepping in to the front room, he found Nicole exactly where he'd sent her. Standing perfectly still, almost in shock in the middle of the floor. His eyes popped wide open when the realization she was naked hit his consciousness. As naked as a brand new baby, but she was no baby. Her soft-bronzed skin resembling hot milk chocolate glistened with the water still dripping down her skin. Her breasts, ample and perky with nipples the size of grapes, sent a twitch straight to his groin.

"I um... I um..." Slade swallowed the lump in his throat and tried to speak again after diverting his gaze to the floor. "I didn't find anyone, miss."

"It's got to be in there." Nicole sucked in a breath and her breast rose and fell.

Slade drew in a breath and let it out slow, trying to stave the heat rising in his body. "Who was it? What did he look like?" He grabbed the phone off the small side table. "I'm going to call the police."

"Police?" She took a step toward him and he backed up. *Geez, what is he, nuts? Who calls the police for a spider?* Nicole stared at him, wondering what was wrong. He had to have seen the spider. If it got away she would never be able to sleep in that apartment again. She'd have to move. Break her lease, anything, but she'd have to find someplace else.

"The spider was huge." She shook her head when the memory of it chasing her came back to her mind. "How could you not see it?" Nicole stared up into his eyes and for the first time realized how gorgeous they were. They stared back at her like emeralds. Bright, yet dark and mystical all at the same time. "It was as large as your head."

"Spider...spider?" Slade ran his hand through his hair and shook his head. "It was a *spider*?"

Nicole nodded her head.

"You want to show it to me?" Slade held his hand out for her to grab.

Nicole took a step back, her head shaking widely from side to side.

"Okay. Wait here."

He turned and walked back to her apartment, wondering when she was going to notice she wore no clothes. He'd wanted to point it out to her but figured it could wait until he found the notorious spider. Probably a tiny garden-variety kind the size of a pin top. He stepped up to the bathroom door and stood perfectly still. His gaze traveled across all of the surfaces, the walls. Nothing. He took another step into the room. This time he looked behind the tub, the shower curtain and where the toilet hid. Still nothing. Getting down on his knees, he fanned his hand under the tub. The swift tickle of something big and hairy running across his arm sent a shiver straight to his stomach. His arm tensed.

The gigantic brown spider skidded across the floor and ran into the corner. Slade fell back and butt-walked to the far wall.

"Shit!" He yelped when his eyes focused on the scary beast. "Well, I'll be damned." He started laughing at himself as he pushed up from the floor. "Damn thing scared me too. No wonder she panicked."

He tiptoed closer. The poor spider hovered in the corner perfectly still. It was probably more afraid of them than they were of it. He kneeled down, swooped it up in one hand and cupped it with the other. Once outside, he tapped his door with his foot and waited for Nicole to open the door.

"Was this the intruder?" The smile that curved his mouth tilted the corners just enough to mock her.

Nicole's gaze slid down to his hands and when she realized what he hid in his grasp she screamed, slammed the door and locked it.

"Hey. It's okay. They don't bite."

Slade heard Nicole's breathing through the door. Was she crying? Her respirations sounded ragged. Her voice broke into fractured syllables when she spoke.

"Kill it! You've got to kill it or it will come back."

"They don't bite." He repeated.

"Don't care. I hate spiders. Kill it."

Slade laughed loudly and boisterously. He shook his head, peeked through his tightly cupped fingers and stared at the spider. It hadn't moved since he picked it up. Probably scared to death. He walked through the parking lot toward the wooded area to the side of their building.

He bent down and opened his hands. "All right, little fella." He shooed it with his finger. "I wouldn't advise you to come back. Can't guarantee your life next time." He straightened and returned to the apartment.

His fist rapped on his door. He knew she was peeping out of the security hole.

"Where is it?"

He held up his hands and turned them in front of the little hole so she could see they were empty. "It's gone. May I come into my apartment?"

The door slid open and Nicole stood there, a look of disbelief on her face. Her eyes jetted from right to left looking for the spider. She let out a loud sigh and smiled. It reached all the way to her eyes.

"I don't know how to repay you."

Slade stood in the doorway, not wanting to get too close to her and her nakedness. Damn she looked good. The water had begun to dry. There were streaks where bubbles slid down her body toward areas he'd like to taste firsthand. His gaze slid from her face down the length of her body. He sucked in a breath.

"Miss... Um...um..." He again looked over her head to the far wall. If he didn't, he was going to embarrass himself.

Nicole glanced over her shoulder and in the direction he was looking, wondering what he saw. She hunched her shoulders and figured he was just shy or thought her sublimely stupid for being afraid of spiders. A cool breeze brushed over her body and she looked down. Stark shock covered her face.

"Oh!"

Slade settled his gaze on her face and smiled. He tried for comfort but knew that running to a stranger totally naked would hardly make her feel better.

Nicole didn't know what to cover with her hands. Her face, her breast or her crotch. Heat rushed to her face. Her chest constricted and she couldn't breath. The room began to spin around her head. She thought she heard him curse right before her eyes rolled to the back of her head, the room went dark and she passed out.

\* \* \* \*

Nicole opened her eyes and scanned her surroundings. Her bedroom came into focus. She sighed, relieved it was all a dream. What a horrible dream. She pushed up to sit and *he* walked in. Nicole closed her eyes, wished him away and reopened them. He was still there. She opened her mouth to speak and nothing came out. Tears burned her lids and threatened to pour out. She'd never been so embarrassed in her life. To run stark naked into a man she didn't know. What next? Was a camera going to come out of the wall and show her a picture of some smarmy emcee who would say, "Congratulations, Ms. Baylor, you're on *The World's Funniest Video Show?*"

"Hi there." His voice was smooth like butter. Slid over her body like raw silk and warmed her in places she didn't want to think about. "I thought I was going to have to call an ambulance. You've been out for over five minutes." He walked over to the bed and sat on the side. "Here." He handed Nicole a glass of water.

Nicole couldn't look at him. What was he going to say to make it better? There was nothing he could say. She reached for the glass, brought it to her mouth and took a tiny sip. She coughed and closed her eyes, not wanting to look at him.

"Hey, don't be so embarrassed." He stroked his hand down the length of her arm.

His hand was warm, with long strong fingers she knew could probably drive a woman crazy if used correctly.

"Easy for you to say." Nicole pulled the blanket up over her head. "Can you leave now? Please?" Her voice cracked. "I think you've seen enough of me today." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Thanks for taking care of the spider."

"By the way." Slade tied to tug the blanket down but she refused to let go. "My name is Slade, Terry Slade, but everyone calls me Slade."

"Nice to meet you, Slade," Nicole said from behind the blanket. "My name's Nicole. Naked Nicole Baylor. My friends call me Nikki."

"Look, there's nothing to be embarrassed about and I do mean nothing. You have a beautiful body." He drawled out the word beautiful and it slid across her body and settled at the junction of her thighs.

"That's easy for you to say. You didn't come running over here in the buff." Nicole chuckled to the thought. What she remembered of him, he wasn't bad looking.

"Would that make you feel better?" He pushed up from the bed. "I mean, for you to see me naked. Okay then."

There was a silence in the room Nicole didn't like and then a shuffling noise. All she heard was Slade's heavy breathing and then the quiet sound of a zipper being pulled down. She dared a peek from under the sanctity of the blanket. Her eyes popped wide open. Slade stood in the middle of the floor, his chest bare of the tee shirt he'd had on a moment ago. His fingers stilled on the zipper of his jeans when she screamed.

"Stop!" Nicole covered her face with her hands and let the blanket fall just above her breasts. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Just helping you not be embarrassed by a naked body, that's all."

"I don't think that will be necessary. Thanks anyway." She let the loud laugh burst from her throat. "What are you, crazy?"

"Not the last time I checked." Slade took a step toward her. "You sure you don't want to see." He freed another tooth of the zipper, smiled when Nicole shook her head rapidly from side to side and then re-zipped his pants. "See, now that's better."

He brought his hand up, touched the bottom of her chin and tilted her face up to see his face. "My name is Terry Slade. My friends call me Slade. You can call me anything or anytime you like." His hand slid down her arm and rested on her knee. "Call me if you need anything. And I do mean anything. I'm great at catching spiders and any other intruders." He leaned in and touched the corner of her

mouth with his in a gentle kiss. Pushing up from the bed he walked over to the door, paused and turned back toward Nicole.

"Call me later if you like." He pulled a business card from his front pocket and placed it on top of the dresser. Then he disappeared from the room.

Nicole sat on the bed and listened to his retreating footsteps. Her door opened and then closed before she blew out a breath. She closed her eyes, opened them and stared up at the ceiling.

"I will have to move." She shook her head. Warmth rushed her face from the thought of seeing him again. How could she possibly face *Slade*, *Terry Slade*, again after how they first met? Sopping wet, naked as a jaybird and hysterical.

She pulled the covers back over her head and tried to erase the last hour's events from her memory.

## Chapter Two

Slade paced his living room in a tight circle. "Wow." When Nicole slammed into him he was too focused on finding out what had frightened her, but, once the excitement subsided, seeing her standing there, naked, wet, soft, sent sensations through his body he hadn't felt in months. It had been a long time since a woman did that to him.

It wasn't just the damsel in distress aspect that pleased him. It was the way her body looked, moved, glowed. She reminded him of hot chocolate on a cold winter night. Sweet, sensuous and steamy. Something he didn't know he craved until he saw her eyes staring up at him with the look of total shock in them. He almost wished he'd left her in the bed and gone back home. Maybe she would have awakened and thought it was a dream.

But now he had to think of another way to get her to talk to him. Terry knew when someone—especially a woman—crowded his mind the way he knew Nikki was going to, nothing would satisfy the need to get to know her, be with her, touch her, taste her. Just the thought of her body next to him, writhing under him as he slid his cock in and out of her moist folds made his dick spasm. He looked down at the erection that had begun to tent his trousers and prayed she hadn't noticed it. That's all he needed, for her to think he's a perv on top of everything else. He patted his hand along the length of his growing manhood.

"Down, boy." Terry shook his head. "In time."

He licked his lips and wished he'd met Nicole in better circumstances. A lighter situation would have helped him get her into his bed, or her bed—or any bed. He walked over to the refrigerator, opened it and grabbed a soda. He downed the entire contents in one long gulp. Sitting the empty can on the counter, he moved toward the sofa, sat down and turned on the television. He needed something to get his mind off Nicole and the tightening in his pants. A cold shower within the next hour was definite. Nothing on television was going to be good enough to get her out of his head. Both heads.

Thirty minutes later, Slade clicked the TV off and stormed to the bedroom, undressing as he went. He didn't stop until he was standing under the shower spray and the icy cold water pummeled across his body. He swiveled on the ball of his feet and allowed the stream to hit him directly in the face, chest and lower. Nothing helped. Slade looked down and stared at his cock standing at attention. Every time Nikki jumped into his mind, it twitched.

"Damn." He shook his head. "You might as well forget it, man. There's no way that woman was going to let you get close to her." He lifted his head and stood directly under the water. "She's an African queen. Probably already attached and anyway, you are definitely not her type."

Unconsciously, he cupped his balls and squeezed them, then slid his hand up and down the length of his cock, imagining Nikki's lips caressing, tasting and taking all of him into that gorgeous mouth of hers. Instantly, his legs spasmed and he almost went down on his knees as he shot out his load and watched it slide down the wall of the shower. He shook his head in disgust. He wanted nothing more than to release some of the sexual tension his body was experiencing these past months, but not in the shower alone; that was not how he envisioned his big 'O.'

He stepped out of the shower, walked over to the bed and flopped face down and buried his face in the pillow. Praying his mind would be free of dreams of Nicole, naked, so beautiful, *Nicole, my friends call me Nikki*. He closed his eyes and wished for sleep. It didn't come easy. Slade closed his eyes and there she was...again. Her body trembling from fear—or was it because of the way Slade looked at her. Her long neck begging to be nuzzled. Her dark areolas surrounding those giant nipples, hardened to peaks from the brush of cool air and his tongue. His gaze traveled down her body, following the line of water dripping from her skin. Her body curved in all the right places. Hunger pains surged through him and settled in his groin when he caught sight of her neatly trimmed thatch of black curly hair at her 'V.' Nicole looked up, captured his gaze, smiled at him behind his closed eyes and his cock reacted in kind. *Damn*.

\* \* \* \*

Nicole paced around her apartment searching for more creepy crawly creatures. Deep down she knew that was not the reason she roamed from room to room. She was trying to cool the heat raging through her body. Everything ached and throbbed. She hadn't realized just how great looking Slade was until she peeked at him through the blanket covering her head. He was a Greek god. His tee shirt pulled tight across his rippling muscles. If she looked hard enough she could count each ridge of his six-pack abs. His face clean-shaven with just a tiny bit of five o'clock shadow and his hair, thick, wavy, jet black and shoulder length. Immediately she wanted to tangle her fingers in it and feel its silkiness. Slade's complexion, the color of sun kissed bronze. She wondered if there was a mix of something else. Mediterranean or Indian maybe. Had he spent the morning in the tanning bed or at Jackson Beach?

Nicole walked back to the bedroom and stared at the towel that had once covered her head and nothing else. Heat again rushed to her face. She'd never thought a black woman could blush, but now she guessed anything was possible. Her mind wandered back to Slade. Immediately, her nipples hardened to stiff pebbles and moist warmth flooded to the junction between her thighs.

Who was she kidding? No way would Slade be interested in her. Not the way they met. Her running around naked and screaming like a demented schoolmarm. But he was so gorgeous. A soft chuckle floated through her throat and fractured the silence surrounding her. He looked so innocent when he offered to disrobe and allow her to see him naked. She should have taken him up on the offer instead of stopping him. Seeing what was under the jeans would have topped off her day. Now she really wanted to know. Nicole shivered at the thought and brought her hand up to stroke her right nipple, sending a surge of want straight to her pussy. Her clit throbbed steadily at the thought of Slade sliding in and out of her until she cried out with release.

Nicole shook her head in disgust. Regardless of what her desires begged her to do, one thing stopped her. The one rule she never reneged on.

She didn't do white men.

#### Chapter Three

Three days passed and Slade hadn't seen hide nor hair of Nikki. He wondered if she'd really done what she threatened the last time he saw her. Packed up and moved away. Far away. He laughed and inwardly hoped his thoughts were bogus. She was in his head from the time he woke till he went back to sleep. No one, and he meant it when he said no one, had ever done that.

Slade pulled into the vacant slot in front of the apartment. Unfolding himself from the car, he walked around to the back and grabbed the two bags out of the trunk. Balancing his groceries in his arms, he strolled toward his front door. As he moved past her door it swung open and Nicole backed out carrying a basket of clothes as she headed to the laundry room. His sight impeded by the grocery bags, her sight obscured by the laundry, they rammed into each other. Nicole's basket went airborne, his groceries spilled to the floor. Cans rolled everywhere and mixed with her unmentionables.

"Oh snap, sorry." Slade bent to pick up the basket, not realizing he'd run into Nicole. Straightening his body he came face to face with his dilemma.

"Hi." Nicole's voice came out in a rush. She bent down and started picking her clothes up off of the floor. "How've you been?" Did she really want to know?

"Fine." Slade's voice was thick, dry. He coughed and cleared his throat. "How about yourself?" *Now aren't we being cordial*. He grabbed the can of baked beans she handed him and dropped it back into the bag.

Nicole handed him another can; as he reached out to take it, his hand brushed across the back of hers. She sucked in a breath of air and paused, reveling in the sensation his touch sent up her arm. It swirled around her head, slid down her back and settled in her clit, making it throb with need and want of things forbidden.

"Hey, look." Slade stared into eyes that hadn't moved from his face. Or was it his mouth she was so intent on. "What are you doing

later?" She didn't answer. "I was thinking about going to the *Landing* and wondered..." His voice trailed off.

"No, I don't think so." Nicole finished his thoughts.

She turned, opened the door to her apartment and stepped inside. The sound of the locks sliding into place echoed off the walls. Slade stood outside for another minute before hunching his shoulders, twisting his mouth to the side and stepping over to his door.

Once inside his apartment, he sat his bags on the counter and began unpacking his food. His mouth widened into an, 'I ate the canary' smile when his finger wrapped around an object that was not edible. Well, not in the sense of nutritional value. He brought the black thong up to his nose and inhaled, trying to capture some of her scent. His heart immediately pounded in his chest and sweat began to drip down his back. What was this woman doing to him? That was the question. Slade walked to the front door, his pace almost a run, and headed toward Nicole's.

Three loud raps on the door and it opened. He knew she was hiding on the opposite side, staring through the peephole, wondering what he wanted...now.

"Sorry to disturb you." His voice had a lilt to it she didn't understand. "This got tangled in with my groceries." He held up his hand and let the panty slide through his fingers, so it was exposed to anyone who might be watching.

Nicole gasped, reached out and snatched it from Slade. She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"You know." Slade reached out and grabbed her hand before she could pull it away. "We keep meeting in the most unusual situations. I bet a nice glass of wine and some wings would break the ice, or whatever ideas you might be having." He touched her chin with his hand and tilted her face up to meet his eyes. "I'm just asking for a glass of wine and something to eat. Nothing more." Yeah right. I want to fuck you so good the only thing you'll ever think about again is my cock buried deep inside your hot pussy. "How about it." He gave her the most innocent smile he could muster.

Nicole didn't answer for a long minute. Then she looked up into his eyes as if studying his thoughts.

"Just one glass?"
Slade nodded. "And some wings."
"Okay."

\* \* \* \*

It only took Slade fifteen minutes to drive from their apartment building to Jacksonville's famous *Landing*. Their conversation light, he pulled into a slot and shifted the car into park before jumping out. His heart raced, and feelings of giddiness slid through his body like a sixteen year old who'd stolen his dad's *Playboy*.

He reached out his hand for Nicole to grab as she exited the vehicle. She hesitated, stared at him for a brief second then wrapped her fingers around his hand. The sensation of warmth moved up her arm to her face. The smile she let free tugged at her mouth and strained her cheeks.

"What brought you to Florida?" Slade squeezed her hand and tugged her behind him. "It's okay to tell me, Nikki," he said when she didn't answer.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking about something else. What did you say?"

Slade stopped at the curb and waited for a car to speed by, then turned and monitored her face for a heartbeat. "What are you thinking about?" *Me, I hope. Wanting me to slide my cock into your dripping pussy and make you scream my name, I hope.* 

"Um..." Wondering how big your dick is and how it would feel in my mouth. "Nothing really," she lied. "Just wondering why you moved here?"

"As opposed to someplace else?" Slade laughed and tightened his grip as they trotted across the street. "I've lived in Jack for years. Stayed after college. I moved to the apartment because it was closer to the beach."

Nicole nodded her head and smiled.

"And you?"

"I took a travel assignment at the medical center and liked it so much I stayed."

Slade's mouth parted into a broad smile. "So you are a Registered Nurse

"Yup. Ten years now."

"Hum, ten years. So that would make you—"

"Hey!" Nikki screeched. "Don't even try it."

Five minutes later they were seated in the small pub facing the river. Hot wings had been ordered, drinks delivered and their non-threatening conversation continued. An hour had passed and the twitching in Slade's pants was about to drive him crazy. Each time Nicole laughed, batted her eyes or touched his hand, his body hummed with the need to kiss her. Grab her around the head, pull her

close to his body and capture her mouth. He wanted to suck her lips into his mouth until they swelled double their size.

Something about her made his heart sing, and it wasn't how she devoured the wings either. That, he liked. It showed she was warming to his company. Slade wasn't sure if Nicole noticed it, but they were on their third glass of wine. Realizing he'd never felt this way about any woman, Slade decided to take a chance. All she could do was say no, right?

"You said earlier, you stayed here after college." Nicole leaned her elbows on the table and steepled her hand under her chin. "What do you do?"

Slade settled his gaze on her mouth and watched it move. It seemed like her lips parted just for him. Calling him. Begging him to take them into his mouth and taste them. He leaned forward and with one quick motion slid his hand around the back of her neck and crushed his mouth to hers. He waited for her to push away, slap him and demand that he take her home, but she didn't. She moved in, exhaled a long slow breath and parted her lips. Slade slid his tongue between Nicole's teeth, across her gums and danced with her tongue. She tasted like the nectar of the gods. Sweet from the essence of lingering wine, spicy from the chicken and something else. Mystical, magical. Her essence pulled him in like a moth to a light.

His hand unconsciously stroked the length of her arm from her shoulder to her fingers. Bringing his hand back up, he lightly brushed it across the side of her breast where it curved to meet her body. She moaned and his cock grew an inch. He cupped her breast and caressed it between his fingers.

The heat flooding her body was unmistakable. What was Slade doing to her? Her body came alive with electrical impulses. Nicole's blood coursed through her veins and settled in her clit, making it tight with want. Her body moved closer to him and she couldn't stop it. Why? She'd never have given this man another thought at another time in her life. What is he doing to me?

Nicole wanted him to touch her. She wanted him to touch her face, her arms, her breast and her core. She grasped his hand and stilled it on her breast. His mouth continued its assault on her. Tasting, kissing, finding a spot and lingering there until he tore a moan from her throat. She moved his hand down to her thigh and placed her hand atop his. Immediately, Slade got the message. His fingers trailed a line from the outermost portion of her hip to the innermost area of her thigh. She opened her legs a fraction to allow

him room to roam. His hand slid to her crotch, cupped her mound and massaged her heat through her jeans. The sensation was unbelievable. Moist heat flooded her core and saturated her panties. She wondered if it wet through her clothes. She wouldn't be surprised. If she didn't stop him she was going to cum right there at the pub, at the little table facing the river. Nicole grabbed Slade's wrist, stopped him. He sucked in a breath, broke free from the kiss and bowed his head until his forehead touched hers.

"I'm so sorry, Nikki." He sucked in another breath. "I didn't—"

"I need you to take me home. Now." Nicole's hand remained on his, holding it in place on her knee. "I want...need you." She glanced up at him and quickly diverted her gaze to the floor. "In me."

Slade's eyes popped wide open. He didn't dare speak for fear his words would be nothing but blubbering gibberish. He swallowed the lump forming in his throat, nodded his head, reached into his back pocket and retrieved his billfold. Pulling two twenties out, he slapped them on the table, grabbed Nicole's hand and practically ran for the door and the car.

## Chapter Four

Exceeding all speed limits, Slade broke to a halt in under fifteen minutes. He jumped out of the car, ran to the passenger side and snatched Nicole's door open. She reached up, grabbed his hand and allowed him to pull her to the apartment building. He stopped outside the doors, his head moving from right to left and then to her face.

"My place or yours."

"M...mine." Her voice stammered. It was breathy, deep. Nicole fumbled with the keys while Slade nibbled on her neck. Her legs wobbled and she almost collapsed to the floor. "You'll make me drop the keys."

"I'll just kick the door in." He mumbled against her skin.

The door popped open and they tumbled in. Nicole was tearing Slade's shirt off. He groped for her zipper. He crushed his mouth to her again, captured her lips and sucked them into his mouth. Nicole moaned, grabbed Slade around the waist and pulled his body to hers. She ground her pelvis into him, feeling his solid magnificence against her abdomen. If she didn't get him in her soon her heart would burst in her chest and she'd die.

She lifted her arms and flung her blouse from her body, tossing it to the floor. Her pants were being tugged down her hips. Nicole stepped out of them and kicked them to the side. She pivoted on her feet and slammed Slade against the wall. Her mouth was on him, tasting, searching, finding. Her fingers grabbed a handful of clothing, yanked it over his head and tossed it behind her. She tugged at his pants, groaned with frustration when they wouldn't go down. Slade, chuckled, swatted her hand away. She nodded and dropped her head to his chest and sucked a nipple into her mouth.

Slade's body shook. "I'll do it." He slid the zipper down in one quick tug. Nicole's hands came up and pushed his trousers and briefs down his legs. She gasped when his rock hard shaft sprung free.

I guess what they say about black men isn't restricted just to them.

His dick was thick, long and the biggest she'd ever seen. For a split second she wondered...prayed they would fit. Nicole reached out to touch him. Before she could, Slade grabbed her around the waist, picked her up and sat her on the counter. His face immediately went to the junction between her thighs.

"I've got to taste you."

He bent down and slid his tongue slowly up and down her clit. Nicole's body bucked to the sensation. Slade grabbed her hips and held her still and close to his face. His tongue lapped and laved across her heat, drinking her juices. Her cream, sweet to his tongue, warm to his heart. Slade dipped his tongue into her slit, jetted it in and out while his thumb flicked her clit. When he felt the beginnings of the first spasm, he replaced his tongue with his finger, sliding one in and then another. Swirling it around until he knew she couldn't stand it. His mouth again came down on her clef, sucked, licked and blew warm breaths across her skin all the while his fingers pumped in and out.

Nicole's screams started low and quickly rose high enough to shatter the windows. She was coming and he wanted to taste every drop of her orgasm. Lap up her cum like warm milk to a kitten. He clamped his mouth to her clit, sucked it into his mouth and hummed a tune he didn't know then flicked his tongue up and down rapidly until every muscle in her body retracted, spasmed, quivered. Slade captured her pussy in his mouth and drank every drop of her. Nicole's nails dug into his shoulders as she held onto him like a lifeline. Her back arched, her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

Slade thought he heard her call out to the almighty but wasn't sure. His head was spinning. His body aching to burst. If he didn't put his dick into her heat soon his heart would stop beating. Slade straightened his body, grabbed Nicole around the hips and lifted her off of the counter. Her legs wrapped tight around his waist, torturing his swollen dick pressed between them. Staggering to the bedroom, he shouldered the door open and all but leaped on the bed.

He placed Nicole on top and climbed in beside her. His hands touching her in places already steaming from the previous release.

"I've got to have you, Nikki." He sat up on his knees. "Now." He grabbed her around the waist, pulled her up onto her knees and placed his pelvis snug to her butt. Nicole ground back and rubbed against his shaft.

"Damn, you are so hot." He reached around and stroked her clit. Dipped his finger in and swirled it around again. "I've wanted you since the first time I saw you."

"Slade." Nicole's breath hitched. "Slade...wait." Nicole lowered her head and tried to slow her breathing.

His hand stroked across her again, sending a spine-tingling shiver through her body. "What's the matter? Don't you like it?"

Nicole nodded her head. "Con...condom. We need protection."

"Shit!" Slade's body stilled. He was just about to slide home. His cock pressed against her opening from behind, throbbed. "Please tell me you have some."

Nicole shook her head, groaned when the presence of his cock sent another wave through her. "No." She whimpered.

Slade pulled back, rocked back on his heels. He sucked in a breath and blew it out just as hard. "Don't move." He went to stand and caught her gaze. "Don't move." He jumped off of the bed, ran from the room. His gait was wobbly. No doubt pained from the hard on tormenting him.

Nicole heard her front door open, then Slade's. A moment later she heard his slam shut and then hers. Slade trotted back to the room, stopped suddenly when he turned the corner and saw her. Nicole was lying on her back, her legs bent at the knees and spread apart. Her breaths ragged puffs of air. Her fingers slowly slid in and out of her pussy. Her mouth was parted in the perfect 'O.' Her closed eyes fluttered open when Slade sucked in a breath.

"I thought I told you not to move." A devilish smile parted his lips. "But I'm glad you did." He moved over to the bed.

"I was getting cold." Nicole slid her finger out, brought it to her mouth and licked her juices off.

Slade climbed onto the bed. "Let me do that."

He took her hand in his, brought it to his mouth and one at a time sucked her fingers into his mouth and removed any remaining essence of Nicole. His manhood jerked and shot straight up at attention. He used his free hand to tear a foil wrapper with his teeth and rolled the condom over his dick.

He grabbed a pillow, pulled it under her hips and rested his pelvis between her legs. His mouth came down on her breast, grabbed a nipple and tugged it between his teeth. His tongue licked a circle around her areola and then across her hardened peak. "Pleaseeee, Terry." Nicole reached down and grabbed his shaft. Squeezed and stroked it until his breathing hitched. "Stop teasing me." She settled the head of his cock at her opening, lifted her hips and allowed the tip to slide in. She gasped at the sensation that shot through her body. "Pleaseee." She bit back a whimper.

"Do you really want me, Nicole, like I want you?" She nodded her head.

"Then look at me." He slid in another inch. "I want to see your eyes when you cum and I want you to see what you do to me."

Nicole looked at him with dark, mystical eyes that seared straight to his heart. He lifted her leg and brought it up to his shoulder. She nodded again and with one swift slam of his hips he sheathed his cock to the hilt into her pussy. Nicole gasped, sucked in a breath and stared up into his face. A single tear cascaded from the corner of her eye.

"Okay?" He asked her as he kissed the moisture away from her face.

Nicole smiled, letting him know what she felt was wonderful. Not hurtful. The pleasure pain of his cock, stretching, molding her canal was not like anything she'd ever felt before. He filled her to completion. Immediately her pussy lips quivered at the invasion. Slade paused, waited for her body to adjust to his girth and length, waited for his body to settle, and then started a slow glide in and out of her core.

He knew how to make her body hum. Every vessel filled with blood and sent electrical impulses to each and every nerve ending in her body. Slade ground his pelvis against her clit with each down stroke. Sucked her nipple into his mouth and twirled his tongue around it with each up stroke. Nicole watched Slade's face. His eyes had glazed over. His breathing grew rapid. Sweat dripped from his chest. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh entangled with the moans singing from their throats.

The muscles in Slade's thighs and back twitched. He sucked in a breath and held it. His cock jerked and massaged the inside of her womanhood. Nicole's hand grabbed the sheets and pulled them from the bed. Orgasm was imminent.

"Come with me." Slade's voice groaned out right before he slammed his pelvis into Nicole one last hard pump.

"I'm already there."

His body imploded and tossed Nicole over the cliff with him. The warmth of his seed bathing his cock brought a crooked smile to his face. His eruption was so forceful he hoped the condom withstood the pressure.

They jerked, spasmed and fell to the bed. Limbs intertwined with other limbs. They didn't know where one body began and the other ended. Slade fell on top of Nicole and buried his face between her breasts. They lay there for long moments, basking in the sensations, the delight of each other. Sated. Satisfied. Exhausted.

He wrapped his arms around Nicole's body, pulled her to him and slid into sleep. His softening dick still slightly imbedded in her wet pussy.

\* \* \* \*

When the sun fractured the dark, Nicole's bedroom was a disheveled mess. The mattress lay half on the bed, half off. The blanket and sheets tangled with limbs. Water trailed from the bathroom to the bed. They'd done it in the tub with her body bent over the side as he pummeled her from the rear and the jet from the Jacuzzi pummeled her clit. They did it in the shower. No, they did each other in the shower. They did it against the dresser and again on the bed.

Nicole couldn't count the times Slade's cock was in her. Nor how many times she'd had him in her mouth and her pussy in his. He'd even gone up her ass. First with his finger, then his tongue, then his cock breached her and brought her to orgasm immediately after one pump of his hip and a single tickle of his finger across her clit. All she could say was, "Wow!"

Nicole's eyes fluttered open; she stared out into the room and lazily slid her gaze to the sleeping figure lying beside her. Her heartbeat sped up and she closed her eyes tight, drew in a breath and let it out. She reopened her eyes. Slade was still there.

What have I done? What did we do? Her gaze traveled around the room. She shook her head and tried to push back the sudden feelings of dread that rolled in her stomach. She pushed up to sit and pulled the blanket around her body. She waited a beat and started to slide out of the bed.

Slade turned his head and stared at her, right before reaching out and stroking his hand down the length of her back. She stiffened and he let his hand drop.

"What's the matter, Nikki?" He sat up as well, swung his legs over the side of the bed and pulled the blanket across his lap. "Why'd you get up?" His voice slid across her like melted butter. Soft, smooth, silky, yet husky with sleep.

She didn't look at him. "We need to talk." Nicole stood up, grabbed her robe from the floor and tugged it on. Her movements stiff from the tingles of pleasurable pain shooting through her muscles. Her body hadn't felt this alive in months...years. She wanted to smile, but refused to. "What happened last night?" She turned and settled her gaze on his face.

"I'm not sure what you mean." Slade stood, let the blanket drop to the floor and walked over to her. His hands cupped Nicole around the shoulders. "We made love." He looked around the room. "Several times, if that's what you mean."

Nicole shook her head. "No. Yes. No. I mean, how did we go from a glass of wine to this?" She waved her hand around the room. "There's something I should have told you last night, before—"

Slade backed up. "Please don't tell me you're involved with someone else."

He sat on the bed and rubbed his hand across his mouth. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear her answer. If last night was just that, one night to place in his memory forever, to remind him of the one that got away, then so be it. But he never played some other man's woman. He glanced up at her and waited for her to answer.

"No, I'm not involved with anyone. I just... I've made it a practice..." Nicole tilted her head back and blew out a breath. "God, how do I say this?" She looked back at him with intent eyes that had gone dark. "I don't...do white men. I mean I don't get involved with non-brothas."

Slade's brow furrowed. His mouth opened and closed for the lack of anything intelligent to say. After a minute of silence and her words pounding in his mind, he said, "Are you for real?" His words came out harder than he wanted. Nicole's back stiffened again. "I'm sorry. What I meant is—are you hearing yourself?" He walked over to her and touched her chin with his hand and turned it up to see his eyes. "That's not what you said last night after your..." He counted his fingers. "Fifth orgasm."

"Maybe we were drunk and didn't know what we were doing?" Nicole attempted to turn; he stopped her and brought her back to face him.

"I made deep passionate love to you last night. The color of our skin shouldn't make a difference in how we feel about each other." He leaned in and placed a butterfly kiss on her lips. "For God's sake, Nicole. It's the twenty-first century. Haven't you heard of the browning of America?"

Her eyebrows arched in question.

"Look it up. What we did to each other was not a fluke. A happenstance. I've never felt this alive with anyone and I know you feel the same. I heard it when you screamed my name." He walked over to the bed, grabbed his pants off the floor and started to put them on. "When I bathed my mouth in your cum and drank down every single drop you would give me, that was not the wine talking." He zipped his pants. "I don't go to bed with women on a whim, Nicole, and I haven't done it while drunk since I was twenty. Unlike some people, I take making love seriously and I'm very selective in who I give my heart to." He drew in a deep breath and tried to relax his jaw, which seemed to pull his mouth into a tight frown. "I can't believe you feel this way after—" He paused and held his breath to stave the anger trying to bubble up. "Nicole—" He stared down into her eyes for a heartbeat and tried to read her face. It told him nothing. Slade grabbed his shirt, "I don't play games, but I guess you do." He stormed out of the room.

He got to the front door, opened it and slammed it back shut. Placing his palm on the door, he bowed his head and touched his forehead to the cool wood. He couldn't believe he'd gotten so angry after such a wonderful night. One moment he thought he might finally have found *his* one, and the next she's ripping his heart out of his chest and stomping on it.

What was this? A game?

Slade closed his eyes and blew out a breath. He couldn't just leave it like this. He had to say something to make her see how he felt. What they felt for one another was not a joke. It was real, and he planned on keeping it that way.

Nicole's arms slid up and around his chest. Her head pressed hard against his back. Her breathing rushed in and out in sync with his.

"Don't leave. I'm sorry." Nicole slid her hand up his chest, back down to his stomach. Tightened the grip when she felt his abdomen muscles contract under her touch. "This is all new. Everything. The way you make me feel. The way my body responds to your touch." She placed a kiss between his shoulder blades. "I've never known anyone who did what you did to me last night and made me cry for more."

"What about the color of my skin, Nikki? It's not going to change."

"I wouldn't want it to. I know about the browning of America. With the mingling of cultures, soon there will be only one color, brown."

Slade chuckled and it rippled the muscles in his body.

Nicole's laugh joined him. "You see, I'm not as stupid as I thought I was a minute ago."

Slade turned and stared down into her face. He grasped her hands in his and brought them to his mouth. He placed delicate kisses to her fingers, her palm and all the way up her arm to her cheek. Nicole tilted her face back, allowed him to nuzzle her neck, her mouth.

"In one day you've given me new life." Nicole turned and pulled Slade back toward the bedroom.

He kicked the door open. "Why don't we see what tomorrow will bring." He slammed it shut with the heel of his foot.

## Chapter Five

Terry lowered his body into the steaming hot bubble bath. He couldn't remember ever indulging in such luxury, but the last month with Nicole had opened his mind to a lot of things. He closed his eyes and sucked in a breath when the water slid up his body and stung every nerve ending to life.

"You are such a baby." Nicole's voice cascaded over him like the multitude of bubbles enveloping him.

Slade opened one eye. "I'm a shower kind of guy." He cupped a handful of water, brought it up and dripped it back into the bath. "I told you that."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Nicole slid her foot up the length of Slade's legs and tapped it against the soft flesh of his shaft. "But this is so much fun." She curved her lips up into a sensuous half smile.

Slade looked down the bath to her. There were still things he wanted to do with her, to her and he was happy she was up to anything he suggested or desired. He licked his lips and stared at her for one long, humming minute. There were a few things she'd asked of him, also, that had his eyebrows rising. Her wishes were his command.

"Why are you sitting so far away from me anyway?" He grabbed her foot and brought it up to his mouth.

Capturing her big toe between his lips, he slid his tongue around the tip and dipped the entire toe into his mouth. He then kissed a line across her instep. Her breath hitched and Nicole grabbed the side of the bath to prevent herself from sliding under the water.

Slade placed butterfly kisses across each toe before guiding her foot back under the water.

"I like this end of the tub. Better view from here." She parted her lips in a broad smile.

Slade glanced around the bathroom and then settled his gaze on her face. "Remember the first time we met?" Slade arched his eyebrows twice. "Stop." Nicole rubbed her hand around her neck. "You promised to never bring that up again."

"I know, but..." He cut his gaze to the wall behind her. "How many friends do you think he had?"

Nicole sucked in a ragged breath and held it as her body went ramrod straight. Her hand gripped the side for purchase and her eyes darted from right to left in rapid succession.

"Slade." Her voice cracked. "What are you saying?"

"Nothing, just—" Slade held both hands up and out to her.

In one quick move, Nicole pivoted in the tub and was wrapped in Slade's embrace.

"It's okay, you can breathe." He slid his hand around her waist and rubbed it against her stomach. "I'll always protect you."

Nicole's eyes searched the walls and floor for the spider. Her hand wrapped around her waist and grabbed Slade's hands.

"Where'd it go?" Her eyes continued to move from right to left.

"Where'd what go?" He nibbled the nape of her neck. "Oh, you thought there was another spider." He slid his tongue across her ear. "I was just asking hypothetically."

Nicole tried to turn and his arms wrapped around her body, stilling her movement.

"That was so unfair." Her voice raised an octave. "Just plain mean."

"Sorry, but you should have seen your face."

"You're going to see a face and you're not going to like it." She attempted to move again.

"Uh un. If I let you up you might hit me."

"Damn straight."

"I guess I'm going to have to make it up to you." He cupped her breast and massaged it.

"I'm not in the mood, Slade." Nicole swatted his hand away. "Don't even think about it. I'm mad at you now."

"Oh really." Slade slid his hand between her legs and up to the junction of her thighs. "Not if I do this." He flicked his thumb across her clit and slid a finger into her slit.

Nicole's breath hitched and then purred out in a long moan just as her body squirmed back against him.

"You are so unfair. Ohhh—"

Slade stroked his finger in and out of her, pulling another moan from her throat. His mouth nibbled on the side of her neck just above the curve where it connected with her shoulder. Her body relaxed against his touch. Her heartbeat thrummed against his lips.

"What can I say," his voice was hot against her skin. "A man's got to do what a man's got to do to keep his woman close."

Nicole closed her eyes and let those words caress her mind. *His woman. His woman.* Was she Slade's woman? When did it happen? They'd spent so much time together the last few weeks she'd gotten used to having him on her arm. But hearing him claim her as his, out loud, shook her and she didn't know why. Nicole had to remind herself it was the twenty-first century. He'd already told her he knew he was falling in love with her. Somewhere deep in her body, at the core of her existence, she felt the same thing. But she hadn't told him, yet. Hadn't had the courage to say the words burning the back of her throat.

Her body arched when his hand cupped her mound, massaged her heated womanhood and pulled another stifled moan out of her.

"That'll teach you to sit on the other side of the tub when I call you."

"Um, hum." Her voice was throaty, deep.

Nicole reached behind her, grasped his thickening rod and stroked her hand up and down the length. Slade's cock twitched in her hands and hardened to her touch.

"Oh, yeah." Nicole turned her head and captured his mouth. "Two can play this game." She squeezed him again, released him when he groaned and then stoked him until he was solid, long and needy.

"Sit on my lap, Nicole. Sit on my lap, now." His voice came out in a muffled cry.

Nicole turned her body, shifted up on her knees and straddled his lap. Slade's cock, standing at attention, pressed at her stomach. Nicole wrapped her arms around his neck and captured his mouth in hers. The kiss was like nothing she'd felt before. The heat from the steamy bath, coupled with his body pressed so tight against her, sent sensations to her core that begged for release. She needed him like no other. Her heart ached when they were apart, yearned when they were together. Nicole lifted her hips, allowed Slade to grab his cock and place it at her slit, and she slowly lowered herself down onto him.

He gasped at the sensation. Nicole's body clenched and relaxed as she began her slow glide up and down, up and down. Slade's hand caressed her back, cupping water and cascading it across her shoulders to tickle nipples that had grown to stiff peaks. Slade brought his other hand around her body, cupped her breast and kneaded, pulled, tweaked her other nipple. Ripples of electricity began to flood her body. Nicole's heart pounded in her chest and thrummed in her pussy. With each slide of her pussy down the length of Slade's cock he met her pump for pump, beat for beat. His free hand came around her and stroked a rhythm that met his cock. Her body felt on fire.

"Slade—" Nicole's voice stammered out between breaths of ecstasy. "I can't stand it. Ohh!"

"Then let go." Slade cupped her breast, nuzzled her neck and flicked her clit. "Let go."

Nicole imploded. Every muscle in her body erupted. Every muscle spasmed. Every muscle quivered. One last clench of her pussy lips and Slade was tossed across the ledge with her. Long moments passed before they relaxed their grips on each other. Nicole slid down in the tub and off Slade's softening cock and relaxed back against his chest. His arms came up and around her and his hands caressed her throbbing breast.

"I love you too, Terry." Her voice was a mere whisper against his skin, only for her ears.

A soft smile curved the corners of Slade's mouth. He'd heard it.

\* \* \* \*

"You've got to work tomorrow, right?" Slade asked Nicole twenty minutes later as they dried off.

"Don't remind me." Nicole tugged a tee shirt over her head and then grabbed the gray sweat pants folded on the chair. "Why?"

"Some of my friends are getting together after work and I was wondering..." He walked over to her, touched her chin with his hand and tilted her face up to his. "I was hoping you'd like to meet some of them?"

Nicole tipped up on her toes, brushed her lips across his. "I'd like that." She blew out a low breath and tried to ignore the shiver rushing her body when Slade mentioned his friends. They'd done a lot of going out, but it was usually with only each other. Her mind wondered at the impending outing. Would his friends accept her as he had? Or would they snicker and shun her. Only time would tell.

Shaking off the feelings running through her, Nicole smiled and said, "I get off at seven. Where are you guys going to be?"

"I can pick you up."

Slade slid his finger down her jaw line and touched her bottom lip. Nicole tilted her head into his touch. He always had a way of making her feel safe.

"That won't be necessary. This way, if I'm running late I won't hold you up."

#### Chapter Six

Nicole moved through work the next day as if on a cloud. Everybody and everything went by her in slow motion. The emergency room's state of disturbing quiet was a blessing. No mass casualties to contend with. No hoards of people with complaints. She glanced up and six o'clock illuminated the digital wall screen. She glanced at her watch and decided time had ticked away. Nervous jitters crawled across her skin, standing the hairs on her arms each time she thought about 'the gathering.'

"Nicole!"

She turned in the direction of the sound and wondered how many times the other nurse had called her before she heard it.

"Phone." The woman held the receiver up in the air and shook it.

"Oh, okay." Nicole walked up to the desk, grabbed the phone and hit the hold button. Smiling, she brought the receiver to her head thinking it was Terry.

"Hello." She tried to make her voice sound as sexy as it could be from behind the nurse's desk.

"Hello, dear." Her mother's voice chirped over the line. "I know you'll be busy, but I haven't heard from you."

Nicole cringed. Not Terry. *Definitely, not Terry*. "Hi, mom. How you been?"

"I'm fine. You haven't called in a couple of weeks and I was worried."

"Mom. You don't have to get worried when I don't call. I'm a big girl."

Her mother blew out an audible breath. "I know you're grown. I birthed you, remember."

Oh-oh. Mom was getting upset. That was the last thing Nicole needed. Mom has a way of making you pay dearly for getting her upset. It took guilt, sorrow and a whole lot of home visits to make sure her nerves settled. If she didn't get off the phone, who knows what could happen.

"Um, mom. I've really got to go."

"I know, patients and doctors and everyone else except your family. I just called to tell you your cousin Alberta is getting married."

Well, here it comes.

"She's what, three years younger than you, right?"

Nicole's hand tightened on the receiver. She closed her eyes and tried to say the words that wouldn't hurt her mother's feelings but would let her know she didn't give a rat's ass what Alberta did or how old she was when she did it.

"Mom, we've got an ambulance pulling into the bay right now. I've really got to go," she lied.

"Yes, dear. Patients. Alberta met a really nice real estate guy. He has his own home and he drives a Lexus and they're planning on three children and blah, blah, blah..."

*Yeah, and my man drives a Pathfinder and lives in an apartment.* BFD. Nicole shut her mother's voice off in her head.

"I am sooooo pleased that Alberta finally snagged an unsuspecting victim in her web. She should make you very, very, happy."

"Nicole Annamarie Parker, you watch your tone with me." Her mother all but yelled it over the phone.

"I'm sorry mother. Really I am. I've been kind of stressed lately and—" Nicole paused and blew out a breath. "If you'd stop knocking me upside the head with your wishes for me to find a husband and bring forth a multitude of grands then maybe I wouldn't get so upset when you call."

"I'm not pushing you toward anything, but you have to realize your clock is ticking and—"

"Oops, gotta go, patients here." Nicole hung up the phone. "I'm going to pay for that later, I know." Nicole snickered to herself. If she'd given me a chance, I might have told her about Terry. Not.

She'd called him *my man*. That was a first. Her heart fluttered when the words filtered back in. "My man... My man." She liked the way the phrase sounded as it rolled off her tongue. Nicole mumbled it and didn't even choke.

Nicole trotted into the locker room, grabbed the faded jeans and shirt out of the locker and pulled them onto her body.

Fifteen minutes and she'd be pulling into the parking lot of *The Tavern*. Terry called at five to check on her and to make sure she hadn't chickened out. She had, probably twenty times over the last twelve hours, come up with more than a handful of stupid reasons

why she shouldn't go out and why she should ignore the flutters she got every time he looked at her, but the closer she got to kick off time, the more intrigued she became. Until now.

\* \* \* \*

Slade paced around the pub in a wide line, one that ran from the door to the bar to the table where his friends gathered.

"She'll be here. Stop bugging." Terry's friend Jay patted him on the back as he walked up beside him.

"Yeah, she probably got caught in traffic." He looked back toward Jay. "Don't you think?"

"I've never seen you so...so whacked out over a woman before. How'd you meet her?"

Terry laughed, remembering the exact moment their lives collided. "I'll let Nikki tell you." Terry blew out a breath, sucked one in and held it. "Can I tell you something?" He turned to face Jay. "But you got to promise to keep it a secret."

"Hey, you know me." Jay made a locking motion with his fingers in front of his mouth. "Spill it."

"She's the one."

"The one what?" Jay grabbed Terry around the arm and pulled him back a step. "Whoa. Are you telling me you are going to pop the question?"

Terry nodded and let the broad smile part into a wide grin.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. You know how when something is gnawing at your gut and you can't seem to figure out what it is?"

Jay nodded this time.

"Well. I love Nikki like..." He rubbed his hand through his hair. "Damn, man. I can't even tell you what this woman means to me."

Jay cupped Terry's shoulder, squeezed it. "I don't want to put a damper on your feelings, so don't take me wrong, but—"

"You don't have to say it. I've heard it all. And yes, it's real. As real as it ever will be. And, yes, I know Nikki feels the same way." He glanced back out the window and then at his watch. "I decided there was only one way to find out."

"Well, all I can say is congratulations. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, man." Terry pulled Jay into a brotherly hug and released him just as quickly when the door swung open and Nikki strolled in.

He swung around, grabbed her around the waist and lifted her two feet off the floor. His mouth captured hers before she could object. Her arms came up and returned the embrace.

"Terry, put me down." Nikki touched his mouth with her hand and stroked away the smudge of lipstick she'd put there. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Far from it." He smiled, grabbed her hand, kissed it and introduced her to Jay. "This is Nicole."

"Nikki." She threw in and offered a hand for Jay to shake. Jay in turn grabbed her and pulled her into a tight embrace and then kissed her on the cheek.

"It is a great pleasure to meet you, Nikki." Jay's jovial voice calmed the last of the reserve she felt while driving over to the tavern.

Jay grabbed her and pulled Nicole toward the table where five other people sat. Two men and three women. Everyone stood, walked over to Nikki and hugged her. The men left butterfly kisses on her cheeks. The women did the royal kiss on each cheek.

Okay. This is going to be just fine.

"Okay, Nikki." The woman Jay introduced as Persia asked. "Terry's been very hush-hush on how and where you met. What gives?" Persia glanced from Nikki to Terry then back to Nikki. "It's all right if you met him on the Internet or newspaper want ads."

"I know that's all right." Bailey added. "I met Jay on the singles line." She reached over and patted Jay's face. "I paid twenty dollars for my husband." Everyone laughed.

"Sooo. Where'd you meet?" Jay leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table and clasped his fingers together under his chin. "I've been trying to get it out of him for weeks and he said to ask you."

Nikki shot a glance toward Terry. "You will pay for this."

"Humm. Can I pick my punishment?" Terry groaned when Nikki jabbed her elbow into his rib.

"Well, tell them." Nikki closed her eyes and waited for the story to unfold.

Terry grasped Nikki's hand, rubbed his fingers across the top. "Let's just say, she had an intruder and I rescued her. Probably saved her life."

She chuckled and opened her eyes. "Yeah, something like that."

"How come I didn't hear about this at the station? Something like that would have been reported."

"Well... You want me to tell them, or will you?"

"The intruder was a spider!" Nikki covered her eyes and burst out into loud boisterous laughter. Everyone joined in.

"Like I always say, love is where you find it." Jay patted Terry on the back and curved his lips into the widest 'I ate the canary' smile Nikki had ever seen.

Immediately, she wondered what they were talking about. Something was up between the two men, and the women at the table were not privy to their little secret.

A moment later, Nikki and the other women engaged in normal girl talk. Clothes, sales, work, money and men. She almost missed it when Jay nudged Terry on the arm and tilted his head toward the far side of the room. The tavern was crowded so Nikki couldn't see who or what they were looking at but she did see the scowl that slid across Terry's face for a split second; an expression that disappeared when he noticed Nikki looking at him. He smiled that smile that made her heart sink and made warmth settle in places unspoken of in public. She smiled back and returned her attention to Persia, who'd asked her a question she didn't hear.

"I've got to go to the potty." Nikki pushed up from the table. "Save my seat."

"You bet."

Nikki pushed her way through the crowded establishment and into the ladies' room. As soon as she was out of earshot, the questions began. Each person threw words at Terry so fast he had to put his hands over his ears to stop them.

"One at a time, please."

"Sorry, Terry. She's just wonderful."

"Oh, man. You sure got a winner."

"When are you going to pop the question?" Jay closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. His statement brought on a whole new round of questions.

"Thanks, Jay. Please—" Terry looked at each person's face. "Don't say anything."

"Shit, here she comes."

"Not a word."

Everyone smiled and turned to welcome Nikki's return.

She stopped, shot Terry an ice-cold glare full of anger and hurt, turned and walked to the door. Terry jumped up and ran after her.

Bailey grabbed Persia and Jay's arms, pointed toward the women's room entrance and shook her head. The tall anorexic woman leaned against the bar. A glass of wine in her hand. She brought her

hand up in a toast to the ones still sitting at the table, curved her lips in a smirk and took a sip of the gold liquid.

\* \* \* \*

Nikki was standing at the sink washing her hands when the woman entered. Nikki lifted her head, nodded and smiled. The woman walked over to stand beside Nikki. Her arms folded tight across her chest. After a quick second of moving her gaze up and down Nikki's frame, she opened her pocket book, pulled out a lipstick and touched her mouth.

"So, you're the culture of the month?" Her voice was laced with anger. Anger Nikki didn't understand.

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?" Nikki tossed the paper towel into the trash reciprocal and tried to not be annoyed by this person's uncalled for comments.

"I see Slade has moved to the African American line. Last week it was Asian. So many ethnic groups have gotten in his pants I lose count."

Nicole's back bristled when the woman spoke of Terry. She blew out a breath and turned toward the door.

The woman grabbed her arm, pulled her back to her. "Don't think it'll last. They never do."

Nicole didn't know if she should laugh or cry. What was this all about? Who was this woman who said such horrible things about Terry? And was she telling the truth? Nikki shoved her way back through the crowd and stopped just short of the table. Look at them. All huddled in a circle, laughing, joking. Probably at her expense. She glanced back toward the bathroom and the woman who'd literally accosted her. The stranger smiled, nodded and waved as if to say 'bye-bye.' Nikki turned and ran for the front door. Nausea rolled in her gut and up to her throat. Her chest tightened and if she didn't get some air very soon, the fear of losing it right in the middle of the tavern wasn't far from her mind.

She shoved the door open, practically ran over to the parking lot and leaned against her car. She didn't look up when Terry approached.

"What's the matter?" His voice was full of concern. Worry.

"I don't feel so good, that's all," she lied. "I need to go home." Nikki couldn't look at him. The tears threatening to leak out were evident in her voice.

Terry grabbed her hands, pulled them down from her face. He opened his mouth, closed it. He waited a heartbeat and asked, "Please tell me what's wrong."

Nikki shook her head, "I'm just tired that's all." She turned and opened the car door, folded her body into the front seat and, after fumbling for the right key, slid it in the ignition and started the car. "Just tired." She brought her hand up and quickly swiped at the single tear cascading down her cheek.

Nikki shifted the car into gear, turned out of the parking spot and drove off. She didn't look back, couldn't. Terry stood dumbstruck at the curb, massaging the knot at the back of his throat. What happened? Did someone say something inappropriate to her? Maybe she was just tired. Everything tumbled through Terry's mind as he tried to relive the past few hours. Everything was going great. They were laughing, talking. What happened when she went to the bathroom? That was the question.

Terry turned and stormed back into the tavern.

"Is she all right?" Jay asked as soon as Terry moved over to the table.

"No, she's not. What the hell happened?"

Persia grabbed Terry's arm, turned him toward the bar. "Christa was in the bathroom with her." Her voice cracked.

Terry broke free from her grasp and stormed over to the bar.

"Terry, wait." This came from Jay. Terry ignored him.

His pace hurried, he sidled up next to Christa, grabbed her wrist when she tried to touch his face. "What the hell did you say to Nikki?" His words came out in one harsh rush of air.

"And, hello to you, too." Christa picked up her glass and took a sip. "I just said hi, that's all. Why? Are you serious about her?"

"One day, Christa. One day."

Terry rushed back to the table. "I've got to go."

"What did she do to Nikki?" Persia, Jay and Bailey asked in unison.

Terry didn't answer as he pushed his way to the front door.

His hand fisted the steering wheel as he sped to Nikki's apartment. How could this woman interrupt his life like this? What was wrong with her? On more than one occasion Christa had interfered in his and other people's lives. A woman, an African American woman, came between her and her husband, ending her marriage, and she had objected to anything interracial ever since. But not this time. He was not going to allow it. He loved Nikki, and he

knew deep down in his heart the feelings, emotions, attraction was mutual.

Fifteen minutes later, he slammed his car to a halt in front of their apartment building. Jumping out, he ran to Nikki's door and rapped his fist against it. She didn't answer. He knew she was in there. He's seen her car parked askew in her slot.

"Nikki. Please open the door." His fist pounded the door another five times. "What did Christa say to you?"

"So you *do* know her." Her voice startled him. She'd been crying and she was angry.

Terry blew out a breath. "Please open the door. I'm not leaving until you do."

A long humming minute passed and her door slid open, only so she could insult him more. The security chain was in place. Her body shielded by the door, but he saw her face. Her eyes dark, shadowed. Tear stained.

"Please, Nikki. I can't stand to see you like this. Please open the door so I can come in."

"No, Slade." She didn't dare. One touch of his hand and she would break. She didn't want him near her until she could decipher the details told to her. Get some understanding of her feelings. She loved this man standing on the other side of her door. But, did she love him truly, or was it just lust?

"Am I just your flavor of the week, Terry? Is that all I am to you?"

"Jesus!" Terry slid his hand into the narrow opening, as if he could magically make the door open. "Nikki. I wasn't telling you I loved you as a joke. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Not just for a minute." Nikki sniffled. Wiped her hand under her nose.

"Nikki!" His voice hardened for a second before calming. "Before you start believing anything Christa said to you, you need to know who she is. She's a pariah." He paused a breath. "Christa and a friend of mine had an African woman come between them and she's objected to anything that didn't rate 'good ole boy approval' ever since."

"Why would she say those horrible things to me?"

"Like I said, Nikki. She's a pariah. Christa hates any woman who's sensual, loving, wanted by men she can't have."

Nikki peeped through the crack in the door. "I'm so tired, Terry. Can we talk about this in the morning? Please." She pushed the door closed and the clicking of the locks into place assaulted Terry's ears.

He stood outside the door for another moment before turning and retreating to his apartment.

\* \* \* \*

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Nikki rolled over and glanced at the clock on the bedside table. One o'clock.

Is he crazy?

She sat up, grabbed her robe from the foot of the bed and tugged it on. Nikki peeked through the peephole. Her mouth dropped open. Not Terry. Persia, Bailey and the other woman whose name she couldn't remember at first stood on the other side of the door.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

She cracked the door. "Terry shouldn't have gotten you involved."

"He didn't." Persia said. "Open the door, sista. We need to talk."

"We'll not leave until you do." Bailey announced, loud enough to wake the whole neighborhood.

"I can stand out here all night. How about you?" Janet asked.

Nikki paused for a moment before pulling the door all the way open. She fanned them in with her hand.

"I really don't need you to run interference for Terry. I told him I would talk to him in the morning."

"Well, goodie for you. Now sit and listen to us." Persia walked over to the sofa and propped her hip on the end.

"This won't take long." Bailey grabbed Nikki's hand and pulled her to the chair.

"Did Terry tell you who Christa was?"

"No. Sort of. I don't know." Nikki glanced from each woman to the floor. "I don't know what to believe. Why would this stranger say the things she did?"

"Because she's evil. Nasty and a snot."

Persia and Bailey glanced at Janet and nodded their heads.

"Why would she hate me because her man had an affair with a black woman? I had nothing to do with that."

Each woman stared at each other for a brief second before turning their gaze to Nikki.

"Is that what you think?" Persia laughed. "Christa was the one who had the affair. Not Dex."

"Ever since, she's been on some mission to keep the races separate. It didn't matter to her a year ago." Persia rubbed her hand down the length of Nikki's arm. "Does it bother you that Terry's white?"

Nikki diverted her gaze to the floor. "It shouldn't, but sometimes it frightens me." She looked into Persia's eyes.

"I know you just met us, but do you believe me when I tell you, you can trust us?"

Nikki nodded. Smiled.

Persia looked over at Bailey, then Janet. She stood up. "Come with me." She reached out and grasped Nikki's hand.

Pulling her toward the bedroom the other two women followed.

"What's going on?"

"Trust me and just listen."

"Listen to your heart." Janet added.

Janet walked over to the bed, told Nikki to lie down. She hesitated at first but then listened to the beating in her chest and decided whatever was about to happen they wouldn't hurt her. She crawled onto the bed, laid on her back.

"Do you have any scarves?" Bailey asked.

Nikki looked over toward the dresser. "Top drawer."

"I want to do a little experiment and show you something. I don't want you to be afraid. But I promise you, when we are finished you will have no doubt in your mind about your man."

Nikki watched as Bailey moved to the side of the bed with five scarves.

"I want you to close you eyes and if at any time you want us to stop, say it and we will. Okay?"

Nikki nodded. Bailey tossed two of the silk scarves to Persia and two to Janet.

"Close you eyes and go with the feelings."

Bailey gently tied the material around Nicole's eyes. The others tied her wrist and ankles to the ends of the bed.

"For the next few minutes or so, we're going to do things to you. Pleasant things. I want you to try and figure out who's doing it. Me, the new white chick, Persia, the sista, or Janet.

Everyone chuckled, as did Nikki.

"Are you okay with this?"

Nikki parted her mouth into the perfect 'oh' when she realized exactly what Bailey said. After a brief second she smiled.

"Why do I have to be tied up?"

"We tied your hands because we don't want you to touch us. Touch is a marvelous sensation and you'll be able to tell." Janet proclaimed.

For the next few minutes Nikki heard shuffling in the room. People moving about. Things being adjusted. The bed depressing. The sash to her gown sliding away and her robe opening. A light brush of someone's lips across her abdomen made her body jerk.

Soft lips captured her nipple, sucked it until it was swollen, then a warm tongue swirled around her hardened peak. Different sensations flooded her body, mind. A moan rose in her throat and fractured the air. The ministrations stopped. A soft chuckle circled her head but she couldn't tell whom it was from. Hands and mouths touched her, heating her to something new. She knew these were women caressing her, but the heat that began to churn at her core was not unlike the heat that stirred when Terry's mouth touched her.

Nikki's body squirmed when a finger lightly stroked across her clit. Her breath hitched and her heart began to pound in her chest. She wanted to touch the person touching her. Feel their skin and see if it was as hot as hers. A hand cupped each of her breasts. Kneaded, caressed, tweaked her nipples and pulled another moan from her throat. A mouth touched her swollen globes, trailing soft, butterfly kisses along the sides, around the curve across her nipple. Another hand kneaded the other and then it happened. One slow stroke of a hot, moist, steamy tongue across her clef. Her hips bucked off of the bed at the sensations tumbling through her body. Her soul.

"Ohh..." Her muffled moan shocked her. She'd never thought a woman could do this to her. A woman's mouth.

The tongue twirled around her clit, up and down her pussy lips leaving them to quiver when the mysterious woman stopped. A hand slid under each knee and bent her leg up. The mouth captured her mound, sucked, laved. Blew warm breaths across her heated core. The tongue jetted in and out, then stopped and caressed her clef. Nikki couldn't stand it. She was going to come, right then and there. Every muscle in her body screamed for release. And then everything stopped. The sex to her pussy. The sex to her breast. The sex to her body. Immediately a coolness undesired began to wash over her.

The ties around her wrist and ankles loosened. Subtle movements throughout the room fractured the silence.

"Open your eyes, Nikki."

Nikki reached up and pulled the blindfold from her face. Persia, Bailey and Janet stood at the end of the bed. Each face expressionless, telling her nothing.

"Do you know who was doing what?" Bailey smiled.

Nikki shook her head. She really didn't.

"So you see." Janet broke in, "When the lights are out and you are lying with the one you love, it won't make a difference. Will it?"

"I guess not. I've been such a fool."

"Yeah, you're right. But that's okay too. We've all been there." Persia said.

Nikki closed the robe as she sat up on the side of the bed. "One question though." She glanced at each woman. "I'm not a lesbian or anything like that."

"Damn, neither are we, but sometimes sistas got to do what sistas got to do."

"Why didn't you make me cum?"

"Oh, I could have. Trust me." Bailey stepped over to the bed and held out her hand. "But that's something that is reserved only for Terry."

"So it was you?" Nikki stared into Bailey's eyes.

"You'll never know. I bet you never had a woman eat you before."

Nikki shook her head and tried to hide the blush rising to her face.

"I guess you could say, rules are meant to be broken. Now go and get your man."

Nikki jumped off of the bed, tied the sash around her waist and ran for the front door. She banged on Terry's door and kicked it with her foot. He opened it with one quick jerk.

"What's the matter?" He grasped her shoulders, stilled her movements.

He was still dressed. Probably hadn't been to bed. He looked worried, tired. Her fault. She would make it better. Let him know he was the one. The one who could make her world spin on its axis. The one she loved. The only one.

"There's a spider in my apartment. An itsy bitsy one." She captured his mouth before he could say anything. Swallowed his moan when she pressed against his body and pushed him next to the doorjamb.

Nikki jumped up into his arms, wrapped her legs around his pelvis and her hips around his hard on. She draped her arms around Terry's shoulders. Kissed him again. "I won't be able to sleep over there now. Will you save me?"

"In more ways than you know."

Terry captured her mouth once more, turned and walked back into his apartment, slamming the door behind them. He would swear later he thought he heard females laughing in the distance.

The End

# Nailed by J.J. Massa

Terry Lee Derby is a builder, a simple man with simple plans, until one small, hard working woman, Sida Zhou, nailed him down, permanently.

### www.jjmassa.com

## www.myspace.com/jjmassa

Dedication: To Sida Pan, future marine biologist, and my inspiration, along with all of those fine, hardworking construction workers out there.

Thank you, Tracey, for all you do.

## Nailed by J.J. Massa

#### Chapter One

Sida Zhou sipped at her wine; occasionally throwing disgruntled looks at the construction site easily seen from the shaded outdoor table where she was seated. Normally, she was a happy person, always a ready smile. Today, not so much.

Not only was she annoyed, she felt guilty about it. Double whammies sucked!

All she wanted was to become a marine biologist. That was her dream, her goal. Having achieved her undergraduate degree in biology, with a concentration both in marine sciences and human biology, would have, should have made that possible. But no, she was a giant weenie. Instead, she'd enrolled in the Modular Medical Program—Pre Med.

And on the other side of the street, there it was—the culmination of all her angst: her parents' offices. The construction being done on the trendy medical offices was visible. They'd bought the tiny boutique next door to put in rooms for her. An office of her own, right off the Marketplace, to see patients, as a reward for her continuing achievements.

Sida sighed loud and long, the sound at odds with her sunny personality and with the cheerful people sightseeing and sitting around her at the popular Boston bar. Cheers. She wasn't at all cheerful.

Glancing over again, she caught sight of him, her heart's desire. Terry Lee Darby, or was it Derby? Who cared? Okay, Sida did care, but anyway, the guy was hot, too hot! And apparently he agreed, mopping his face with a limp kerchief. He was hot and aggravated, in fact. She saw him jerk his hard hat off, tossing it away angrily, and scrape his fingers through his short, brownish-blonde hair.

He stood still for a second and she couldn't look away. He must've been listening to someone she couldn't see. Suddenly he kicked a board at his feet, but that didn't seem to assuage his anger.

As she watched, he jerked his shirt over his head and threw it at the ground, turning away. Her breath caught in her throat.

His back, for the few seconds she'd seen it, had been tanned and sculpted, but his front was a sight to behold. One look at that tight, muscular derriere and all she wanted was to grab with both hands and hold on. Turning, his lightly furred chest shone like gold with the sun shining on the light hair dusting his pecs. His biceps rippled as he stretched and turned, locking eyes with her.

Sida felt her face flush, and she dipped her head. She couldn't believe that beautiful piece of eye candy had caught her looking. And he had, she was sure of it.

It had been bound to happen. She'd been looking at him enough over the last few days—weeks, really. He was...he was a hunk, to put a fine point on it. He was the only thing about her parents' 'gift' to her that she was enjoying.

At first, those snapping, caramel-colored eyes appeared angry; she could see it from where she sat. His chiseled jaw was clenched tight. Those full, sensuous lips, pressed in a hard, flat line. And then, she saw him relax.

But suddenly, their eyes locked. Damn! She was sure of it... He was laughing at her! She wanted to growl at him. She saw his lips twitch and knew, if she were closer, she'd see that knowing glint in those so very sexy golden eyes, like warm butterscotch over ice cream—yum. She could happily drown in them.

As if her life wasn't complicated enough right now, the last thing she needed to deal with was an excruciating crush on the man hired to add an office she didn't want to her parents' building. And to say she had a crush on him was putting it mildly.

The sound of that sexy voice, steeped in the Deep South, was enough to make her forget everything around her. The sight of that gold hair, his tanned, well-muscled body—her pulse rocketed into jackhammer mode just thinking about him.

She looked down into her wine glass and then up again at the waiter who stopped in front of her table. He'd finally remembered that she wanted a glass of water, holding it out as if to put it down in front of her. But he didn't.

"'preciate it," a deep, smooth, southern-sounding purr came from slightly behind her left shoulder.

She felt the heat pool in the pit of her stomach. She looked at the waiter. The young man blushed scarlet as he extended her water,

placing it in the hand attached to the long, slightly tanned arm reaching over her shoulder, little gold hairs glinting in the sunlight.

Sida could smell his musk, hard work, sawdust, pure male. Her eyes were riveted on the waiter, who was blushing and smiling like a shy schoolgirl.

"Anything else, sir?" the young man asked shyly, dipping his head.

The poor little waiter, she grinned to herself. He was so cute and sweet, and she could so identify with him. It seemed the man belonging to that oh-so-sexy scent and the arm that went with it required nothing more from the adorable young waiter.

The chair adjacent to hers backed up and she nervously glanced over. Well, now she knew for sure why the poor little waiter was stammering. It had to be illegal to look like that in public! He could have put his shirt back on, but, oh man, she certainly wouldn't complain about the view.

That smile—that knowing smile went right through her. She felt her blush burn hotter.

"Hi," his rumbling purr washed over her as he sat down. "So, you gonna eat?"

"What?" she gasped. "Um, no. No, I just needed a break."

"Me too," he grinned.

Sida shook her head, fighting the urge to throw herself at his feet. She wondered if he knew how lethal his smile was to the average man-hungry twenty-three year old woman.

"Um, you looked angry before..." she began hesitantly. As conversational gambits went, it wasn't much. But it was better than 'take me now' she decided.

His intent stare had her fidgeting in her seat. It was as if he were trying to read her soul. Those decadent brown eyes were warming her from the inside out, and she could feel moisture gathering between her legs. It was worse when he chuckled warmly, fanning her left ear.

"It's hot," he smiled. "Nothing's going my way today...or it wasn't until I noticed someone watching me," he wrinkled his nose and winked.

She knew her face was red, and she lowered her head, trying to look away, knowing he was coming on to her, not knowing what to do about it. Her breath caught in her chest when she felt a hand under her chin.

"Hey," his whiskey purr caressed every one of her nerve endings. "I've gotta see those pretty dark eyes. You're the best thing that's happened to me all day..."

Her breath whooshed out, leaving her stunned. "Uhhhmmm," she croaked, "I, ummmm..." *Okay, what happened to my mental faculties...?* 

A golden blonde eyebrow arched up, answering that question conclusively.

"You okay, sugar?" he rumbled at her, a twinkle in those wicked eyes.

She cleared her throat, trying to be irritated at his familiarity, trying to ignore the moisture gathering down below.

"You know, you're just deadly. You know that, right?" she snapped. *Oh man. Did I say that out loud?* 

A rich chuckle vibrated from his chest, answering her question, and he pulled her sideways into a quick hug. She could forgive him his overwhelming arrogance if he would just keep that up. Her brain was frozen, but her body was one twitch away from rubbing all over him like a happy feline.

"You are too much, honey," he laughed, his voice deep and whiskey rich as it stroked her nerve endings. He released her and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "I'm glad I caught you here. We need to talk. In fact," he dropped his arms and rose to his feet in one sexy surge, "Why don't we take a little walk?" He stood, his hand extended to her.

Sida knew her eyes must have taken over her face. She wasn't sure if she was shocked more by his hug or that he believed they needed to talk. Or was it that she was actually scooting her chair back and reaching for his hand?

She barely knew him, but she did know that she'd go anywhere with him. He could be a killer, but she told herself that as long as that body was the last thing she ever saw she wouldn't care.

She knew she'd lost her mind over this man. He threw her a pleased smile and took her hand, giving it a little squeeze. To her very great surprise, he dug into his pocket and handed a bill to the cute little waiter.

"No, really," the sweet young man stammered, refusing the money.

"Take it," Terry Lee murmured with a sharp nod and a smile, tugging on her hand as he turned to lead her from the enclosure.

"Oh, gawd," the waiter breathed into her ear, squeezing her

shoulder as she passed him.

"Mmm hmm," she squeaked in answer, stumbling along gracelessly behind him.

#### Chapter Two

Terry Lee was a little surprised at his audacity, though it didn't slow him down. He'd had his eye on Sida Zhou well before her father had introduced them.

The older man had proudly announced that a small suite of offices would be added to their exclusive medical practice in honor of their daughter, a talented medical student at Boston University.

She'd smiled shyly under her father's pride and largess, but it had been obvious then that something wasn't right. Terry Lee had seen her several times since then. Each time, she'd smile at him if she saw him, and glare at his handiwork when she thought he wasn't looking. To his mind, it was high time take action—to do something about both things—his feelings for her, and her feelings about the suite of offices he was building for her.

He pulled her hand up so that she was almost pressed against his back. And then he kissed it. She was so sweet, so petite. He couldn't resist a little taste, licking and nipping at the knuckle of her thumb, and then glancing over his right shoulder and winking at her.

She attempted to glare at him, but failed miserably. The fact that he affected her as deeply as she did him, well, that just turned him on all the more.

"Don't worry, sugar," he murmured, pulling her up next to him as they crossed the street, sliding an arm around her waist. "I promise I don't bite too hard..." he grinned slyly at her, sliding his hand along the back of her waist and letting it drop to caress her rear end.

"Um, what?" she stammered as he pulled her a little closer.

"Hot out here today, isn't it?" he chuckled.

She narrowed her velvet dark eyes at him as he turned her toward the half-finished offices.

"This way," he purred, guiding her into the deserted, roped-off area, and then inside the little addition.

"What... Where is everyone? What are we doing here?" she asked, sounding confused and uneasy.

"Everyone has gone home for the afternoon," he explained. "There didn't seem any point in going forward..." he let that statement trail off, watching her face.

"My parents don't have office hours today," she murmured, looking down at her feet.

"It isn't your parents that I need to talk to about this office," he countered, his voice low, almost gentle. "This is your space. And so far, you don't like it."

Her gaze shot to his face, eyes wider than ever. "I haven't...I didn't say that. You're doing a fine job, really!" She seemed genuinely distressed. He had no doubt that she was.

"I know, sugar. I know you haven't said you don't like my work." He kept his gaze locked with hers. "You haven't said a single thing about it. But you don't like it, do you?" When she would have looked down again, he caught her chin in his hand, tilting her face up to his. "Do you?" he asked again.

Moisture filled her eyes and she blinked it away. "It just seems so ungrateful," she sighed.

Terry Lee couldn't help it. He could no more resist pulling her into his arms than cashing in a winning lottery ticket. He didn't understand it, but she had become important to him. With no more than a few shy glances and a few covert glares, she'd captured his heart. He intended to capture hers right back. First, though, he had to get to the bottom of whatever was bothering her about this job, this suite of offices he was building for her.

She gave in with only the merest struggle, her head fitting perfectly between his throat and bare shoulder. "My parents worked really hard to be doctors, and they've worked hard for me all their lives. They're so proud of me. So proud."

"Okay, I'll buy that," he murmured, stroking her silky, black shoulder-length hair. He had to keep her talking. Thus far, she'd said nothing that could explain her distress. "You'll make a fine doctor one day," he assured her, rubbing her back with one hand.

To his deep and utter horror, she burst into tears, heart-rending sobs wracking her five foot, three inch frame. Terry Lee felt like a deer in headlights, not sure which direction to run. But standing still was not an option, so he pulled his kerchief from his back pocket, easing them both to the floor to rest his back against a sturdy beam, mopping her face as he situated her onto his lap.

After a time, the hysterical sobs lessened and he began to make out words, "Don't want to be a doctor," she choked. "I tried, really tried." Her distress ripped at his soul as she tearfully pleaded her case with him. "I could do it... I just want to be a marine biologist. But I'll break their hearts! It would be awful. I have to be a doctor or I'll devastate them..."

Rocking and soothing and rubbing and cooing, he finally calmed her enough to get a few words in. "Honey, there is no shame in being a marine biologist. There's no parent alive who'd be ashamed to have a marine biologist for a daughter. You have to talk to them about this..."

"No!" she yelped. "No," she went on in a slightly calmer voice. "You don't understand. Since I was a baby, they planned for me to be a doctor. Little baby scrubs and toy stethoscopes, summer internships to experience different specialties...they paid for my medical school tuition as a gift for graduating middle school."

"I know what you mean, darlin', I really do," he squeezed her, hoping he was reassuring her somewhat. "My family is all construction one way or another. Between me and my cousins and our daddies, we're either building something or knocking it down. I remember standing beside my granddaddy and hammering nails into boards before I could really even walk. I guess it's just that I want to do this. I like what I do for a livin'."

She snuggled against him with a heavy sigh. "Maybe if I get a double doctorate..."

"Oh, god, sugar," he shifted, amazed at her willingness to attend ten more years of school just to appease her parents, and not at all surprised at the affect her rounded derriere was having on his lap.

"Oh!" she jerked, turning on his lap and exacerbating the problem. "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm—um..." Obviously, the hard ridge of his erection had made itself known to her.

Her blush was precious, and her squirming movements were driving him out of his mind. He couldn't solve the doctor versus marine biologist problem right then, but there were other things that needed addressing.

"Its okay, honey," he grinned. "It may be hard, but it's not gonna break off." She blushed crimson and he chuckled. "I apologize, that was a little crude, I know."

Sida giggled at him nervously. "That was a lot crude."

He leaned back against the unfinished beam and situated her more comfortably. Still stroking her hair, he took a chance.

"I like you. I've liked you since before I took this job," Terry Lee confessed, staring directly into her face.

"You do? Really? How?" She must've understood his confusion because she went on. "I mean, I saw you there, at the bar...Cheers. I've seen you there with some other guys before."

"My cousins," he supplied. "Crusher—his real name is Shane, he's the demolitions man, and Liam is like me, a builder. We hang out over there sometimes."

"And you noticed me?" She sounded surprised, and delighted.

"Of course I noticed you, sugar." He leaned down and kissed her nose. "You're very noticeable." He took a deep breath. Time to take the plunge. "You move me, honey...what can I say?"

"Wow..." Sida whispered reverently. "Wow...I don't know what to say. I mean..." she reached up, stroking the plane of one bronzed cheek. "I never even thought you'd noticed me. I figured I was too much an egghead for someone like you."

Terry Lee arched a glittering brow. "Someone like me?" His eyes were unreadable and she hoped he didn't have the wrong impression.

"Yeah," she felt her face flame once again and ducked her head, hiding behind the curtain of her ebony hair. "Someone so strong, so sure of himself, so at ease in your own skin." She looked up, letting her hair fall back. "I'm not afraid to try new things or anything. It's just that I always feel like I need to be doing more. You know?" Would he understand what she meant? She didn't even know for sure.

"Sugar, everyone has moments of uncertainty. Like how I thought you didn't like what I've done here," he explained, inclining his head vaguely toward the half-finished room.

"But you knew it wasn't because of you!" she was alarmed. Had he really thought she disapproved of his handiwork?

Terry Lee leaned down, resting his forehead against hers. "I wasn't completely sure," he admitted. "I want to be in your life. I want you to be in mine. You think you can put up with a plain ole hammer and nail man like me?"

"You think you could put up with a flighty Chinese egghead who sells Mary Kay Cosmetics and sings in the shower like me?" she whispered her counterpoint, a plea and a confession all in one.

As an answer, he reached down, framing her face with his hands. His lips moved over her temples and then drifted across her eyelids and down to her mouth. His tongue traced her lips and his teeth tugged and nipped, demanding entrance. When she opened to him, his tongue found hers, stroking and probing.

His hungry mouth traveled down her chin and beyond, finding her soft, vulnerable throat. He cupped a rounded breast through layers of silk and satin. Finding a tight nipple with his fingertips, he pinched lightly.

Slowly, he trailed his hand back up her shoulders and combed his fingers through her hair. With apparent difficulty, he pulled away from her, planting light kisses across her face as he did so.

Her breathing was ragged as she rested against his chest and shoulder. "I should go," she mumbled.

"You should stay," he countered, kissing her again until she was breathless. Before she could answer, he slid out from under her, leaving her sitting on the floor, stunned. "Just gonna lock up," he explained. Standing, he turned, disappearing through the half-finished doorway.

#### Chapter Three

Sida felt bereft and boneless when his heat moved away. Expelling a heavy breath, she leaned back, arms out behind her, propping her up. Her befuddled brain was warning her to jump and run. She knew she was going to make a fool of herself, she just knew it. Everything was quiet in the building and she sat up straight, vaguely thinking she would leave.

She had just pushed herself to a full sitting position, starting to get up.

"Going somewhere?" Terry Lee asked, his voice as rough as a cat's tongue.

She opened her mouth to speak but couldn't force the words out. Her throat had suddenly gone dry. Too dry to swallow, she realized when he dropped to his hands and knees and began to stalk toward her in a predator's prowl. She felt like an armadillo on the highway, frozen in place.

Before she could do more than lean back, he moved over her, a hungry wolf claiming his territory in more ways than one. His mouth attacked her throat as he nibbled his way from her clavicle up to her jaw and around behind her ear.

If that wasn't enough, he began lowering his body, his pelvis, onto hers. "Um, hi?" she croaked, looking into his rich, honey brown eyes.

"Hi, yourself," his deep rumbling purr echoed through her entire body, stopping just south of her bellybutton.

She felt herself falling, her arms turning to spaghetti at the sound. Before she could collapse to the floor, a long, strong arm slid under her and pulled her hard against a naked and furry chest.

His feather soft lips caressed hers and his tongue traced her lower lip until she opened her mouth. She groaned aloud when he nipped her bottom lip, and then his tongue was in her mouth and her hands were buried in that so soft pelt of hair on his chest.

"Mmm," she moaned in return, feeling a peaked and hard little male nipple under her fingertips. Groaning again as he traced delicate patterns on the roof of her mouth. She'd worn a thin silk sleeveless today and she knew it couldn't hold up under the strain. She felt a warm and callused hand push the light material aside and she no longer cared it ripped. In fact, she hated it right then.

Soon, his mobile fingers were skimming her stomach while his other hand began rubbing her neck and upper back. The thin material slid delicately off her shoulder along with her bra-strap and his thumb moved to take its place. Before she could even register the feel of cool air on her skin, she found herself arching into the palm of his hand wantonly.

He pushed the material at her clavicle out of the way with his lips as his hand crept up her rib cage. She fought the urge to wriggle into his hand, though he seemed to be reading her mind.

His callused fingers traveled under the material to her hard and pointed nipple. She heard herself moan as if from far away.

"Yeah, sugar, oh yeah," he murmured, his hard length pressing into her thigh.

His mobile mouth was wet and warm, nibbling and sucking its way down her throat, transporting her into another world. Like an affectionate kitten, she rubbed against him, hip-to-hip, thigh-to-thigh, her hands seeking more of his warm bronzed skin.

His hand moved to cover hers, guiding it through the silky mat on his chest and down the arrowing softness pointing to his belly button and the snap on his jeans. All she wanted was more of him, more closeness, more skin, more.

What a flat stomach, and those abs! A six-pack, definitely! She hooked a leg across his thigh and bit down on his shoulder, her hand still traveling south.

"Hey, sugar baby," he purred, lacing his fingers through the hand traveling down his furred tummy. "We've got time. I'm hungry, too. Let's just eat together..."

His mouth moved to cover hers again and she groaned into it. "I've never wanted anything so much," she panted, "More," she moaned into his mouth as his free hand traveled to pinch her other turgid nipple. "Yes," she sighed.

"Yeah," he agreed, sucking behind her ear as he massaged the sensitive flesh around her hard peak.

Sida moved their entwined hands down to the waist of his pants and unsnapped the fastener. He rolled them both over so that she was resting on top of him. With a flex of his hips he let her know how much more he really did have to offer. Straddling him, she let her knees fall to the floor on either side of his waist. Holding her tight, he thrust his rigid erection up between her legs.

His hands eased under her shirt and began to slide it off, his thumbs hooking the lacy material of her bra and pushing it, along with the flimsy blouse, up and over her head.

Cupping both bare mounds of flesh, his mouth traveled from her throat to her shoulder to suck in a nipple only recently left alone. His roving hand, fingers splayed wide, slowly made its way down her ribs.

"Yess," she hissed, arching up into his mouth when he bit at one hard nipple and then sucked it into his mouth.

Belatedly, she realized that both of her hands were completely free. She let one play with the soft arrow of hair heading toward the fly of his jeans. Before long her attention was evenly divided between the soft pelt of hair on his chest and the softer hair disappearing under his waistband.

"Oh, sugar, you've gotta stop or this'll be over before it gets really good," he moaned, one of his own hands traveling south now.

Sida tried working his zipper down, but his distended girth pulled the metal teeth tight. Before she could solve the problem, his magic fingers had had their way with the fasteners on her pants. Hmmm, she thought, a squirm here, a squirm there... Yeah! Right where she wanted those callused fingers.

She opened her legs just a little further. "Let's both get a little more comfortable," he rumbled, and she heard the rasp of his zipper.

Her hands followed the noise and ...

Oh my! What big... "For me?" she gasped, reaching into his boxers.

"Oh yeah, sugar, that's all for you," he murmured, sounding a little short of breath.

"So big," she groaned, letting her fingers do the walking.

Smooth and silky, hard as a steel girder and she felt the slick liquid at his slit with the tip of an exploring finger. She swiped at the sticky pre-cum and carried it to her mouth, closing her eyes to savor the taste.

"Oh, God, sugar, I think I'm in love," he groaned, and she felt a bit of a breeze as he pushed the confining fabric off her hips and down her thighs. With a kick and another squirm, she spread her legs wide. His long fingers rubbing right there. He certainly knew how to work with his hands. And those calluses in all in the right places.

Sida had never felt so down, dirty and wanton in her whole life as she spread her legs and arched her back, letting him push those workingman fingers deep inside her.

"Yeah, sugar, you like that, huh?" he murmured, and she opened her eyes a crack. He's got that proud, king of the mountain look about him. Taking him down a peg should be fun—in more ways than one.

Giving his hard erection a pull and a squeeze, she purred, "Mmm hmm," reaching down with her free hand to cup his fuzzy, round sacs.

One sexy shimmy and a slide freed him of his jeans, leaving him as bare as she was. His long, hard erection parted her weeping lips and she wrapped one leg around his. She wanted him in her, not on her.

"Easy, sugar," Terry Lee groaned, his voice raspy and tight. "How 'bout you reach over there and snag my pants? I think I've got an emergency condom tucked away."

"Emergency condom?" Yes, she was all heated up, but come on! She stretched as far as she could without losing bodily contact. "What? You were afraid you'd trip and fuck something?"

She just barely touched the wad of jeans when he began to shake, and then guffaw. Gathering her tight against his chest, he covered her mouth with his. He was a keeper, Sida decided, kissing, laughing and rolling over, all at one time. Somehow, in the tumble, she managed to fit the slippery rubber over his straining erection.

The last roll over put her on top. She pushed herself into a kneeling position, breaking their kiss and positioning herself directly above his leaking rod.

Never taking her eyes off of his, she lowered herself just barely onto the tip. Her eyes slitting, she reached between her legs to massage herself, just feeling the wide head of his shaft in her opening.

Smiling seductively as his eyes opened wide, she idly brought her free hand up to fondle a breast.

"Oh good god, sugar," he choked; his hips were straining to rise.

"I like this," she murmured, smiling sweetly.

"Sida, sugar, please," he begged, "Don't tease..."

"Tease? Don't tease?" she gave that some thought—about a second and a half's worth. "Okay."

With a smile, she opened her legs wide and settled onto his hard erection.

"Oh, darlin'," he groaned.

Slowly she rose, feeling his strong grip tighten on her hips. He held her in place and flexed. All she could do was gasp as, filling her completely, his hard length surged into her.

"Like that, sugar?" his voice sounding like a husky, painful whisper.

"Yeah," she choked, leaning back, gripping his thighs, riding him.

Still holding her in place, he pumped his hips up, once, twice, a third time, hard, pulling almost out every time.

"Yeah, yeah," she urged, leaning forward, her chest rubbing his as his hands slid around to cup her derriere.

Every upward heave caused his fingers to slip between her nether cheeks, caressing that so sensitive flesh there. Sida couldn't help moaning, not bothering to thrust back, just letting him do all the work.

She wanted more from him, more contact, more something. Not able to get any words out, she bit down on the ball of his muscular shoulder.

That had the desired effect. With a grunt and a roll, Terry Lee was back on top with her legs wrapped around his waist. His big, wide palms cupping her cheeks and plunging for all he was worth.

#### Chapter Four

"What do you think of this one?" Sida asked, holding an acid green halter top up for approval.

"You have never looked good in that color, Sida," declared her best friend Shirl, shaking her head. "Why are you even looking at that?"

Replacing the top on the rack, Sida sifted through the offerings, sliding one hanger after another around the circular metal bar. "I just want to catch Terry Lee's eye, that's all," she murmured, lifting a bright orange halter and holding it against her chest.

"You've caught his eye, girlfriend," Shirl planted both hands on her hips and aimed a glare at her friend. "You wear that, you'll blind him...and not in a good way, either!"

"There's a good way to blind somebody?" Sida giggled, putting the orange scrap of fabric back where it came from.

"You know what I mean!" Shirl growled, turning her back on her friend and flouncing over to a clearance rack. "We hit some good sales today. Is every store in the mall having a sale?"

"I really don't know what you mean," Sida snorted, skimming through the offerings in front of her. "And yeah, it's a special end of season thing, I think."

Shirl huffed impatiently. "I mean that poor Terry Lee is already blind to everybody but you, hon. But if you show up wearing something that tacky, he'll be just plain blind."

"Don't you have these in a size nine?" Sida demanded loudly of a nearby sales girl. She smiled, softening her imperious tone somewhat.

"I'll go see, but I don't think so," the young woman offered, disappearing quickly into a back room behind the register.

Shirl snickered at her friend, earning herself an elbow to the ribs. "It's just your world and we're all living in it, huh?" she joked.

"Works for me," Sida agreed, grinning at her friend. "So, do you think Terry Lee is really serious about me?" she asked, her tone bland, trying to minimize how important the answer was to her. She glanced over at the other woman, looking to catch her reaction.

"Serious? Come on, Sida!" Shirl rolled her eyes dramatically. "That boy has got it baaaad!" She nudged Sida with her hip. "Almost as bad as you!" she snickered.

Sida felt her face heat up. She couldn't deny it. She did have it bad. Very bad.

"He wants me to tell my parents that I don't really want to be a doctor." She let that hang in the air, knowing well how her friend felt about that.

"Good. You should tell them that, girl. It's almost like lying to 'em, not telling them...especially with them building you those offices," Shirl insisted.

"He didn't put it quite that way," Sida mumbled, holding up a bottle green top for Shirl's approval. A nod of approval and she turned just as the sales clerk appeared.

"One pair left," she smiled, offering the garment to Sida.

"Perfect," Sida grinned in praise, beaming at the pleased young woman. Turning back to Shirl, she went on, "I don't think they could handle me telling them both things at once," she informed her friend. At Shirl's blank look, she explained, "You know, if I told them I'm in love with a carpenter and I don't want to do what they've always dreamed for me. It just seems like a bit much..."

"I guess..." Shirl shrugged. "So, you still want to get your legs waxed?" she asked, leading the way to the check out counter.

"Maybe my pits," Sida murmured, looking at the strappy green tank top.

Shirl shuddered dramatically, a look of horror on her face. "You are a tougher woman than I am. I can't see how coming clean to your folks could possibly be worse then letting someone rip the hair out of your armpits."

"The hair thing will hurt for a day or so, and it'll grow in lighter next time. Telling my folks...that lasts forever," Sida sighed, saying nothing more as she led the way out of the clothing store.

\* \* \* \*

Terry Lee lifted his full frosty mug, heavily tapping the two other sloshing mugs aimed his way in a genial salute. Nothing was said for long minutes as his cousins downed several swallows. All three men sighed simultaneously in appreciation.

"So, you still seeing that little girl?" his oldest cousin, Crusher, asked after he'd downed most of the amber liquid in his mug.

Terry Lee grinned, taking another swallow of beer.

"I'd say so, if that goofy look on his face is anything to go by," his cousin Liam ribbed.

"Goofy? You're a fine one to talk, chicken boy," Terry Lee attacked back good-naturedly. After another swallow of beer, he went on, "And yeah, I'm seeing her, hell yeah. So keep your eyes on your own women," he growled.

"Ohhh, listen to that," Crusher chortled. "I think the South has been conquered, boys and girls."

"Sounds like it to me," Liam agreed with a snicker. "So, what's the problem?" he asked, serious now.

"Who said there was a problem?" Terry Lee asked carefully, cutting his eyes over at his cousin.

"Come on, something's wrong. What's up?" Crusher joined in the pressure. "I could tell by your eyes. Hey, we're your family, 'fess up."

Terry Lee looked at Liam and then at Crusher. He shrugged. They were his family. And he was a very long way from home, but for them. Anyway, he couldn't deny it. He was very concerned about Sida's reluctance to come clean with her parents about her career desires. That sort of denial could cause nothing but long-term problems.

He sighed. "Yeah, you're my family." He nodded gratefully at each man. Taking a deep breath, he explained, "She's the daughter of those doctors up the street," he angled his head toward the Zhou family's medical practice.

"The one where you're adding on an office?" Liam asked.

"Yeah," Terry Lee agreed. "It's for her, for Sida. The problem is she doesn't want to be a doctor. So...I just can't, in good conscience, finish the office."

"Wait a minute," Crusher interrupted. "I really don't get the problem."

"Me neither," Liam chimed in. "They ordered the office, so build it. She can use it for whatever she wants. She's either a doctor or she isn't, right?"

"Uh, no. See, here's the deal," Terry Lee leaned forward. It did feel good to talk to his cousins about all this. "She's in medical school, but she doesn't really want to be a doctor. She really wants to be a marine biologist. But her parents have been planning for her to be a doctor her entire life. She doesn't want to hurt them—she thinks they'll be devastated if she tells 'em. So..." he expelled a heavy sigh and finished his beer. "So, she's just going to go through however

many years of medical school, be a doctor, and study marine biology on the side."

"Another round," Crusher ordered, holding up his hand so the bartender could see them. "Amazing," he breathed, shaking his head.

"I know, man," Terry Lee agreed, slumping back in his chair. "And I know I'm in love with her. I hate to see her go through all that. Add to that, I can't finish the office. Like I said, it just wouldn't be right."

"That's a lot to go through for your parents," Liam drummed his fingers on the table. "I wish I knew what to tell ya, buddy," he reached over to squeeze Terry Lee's arm.

"I'm pretty sure she feels the same way about me that I do about her. I'm pretty sure," he repeated. "Thing is," he paused while the bartender slid three more mugs in front of the men. With a nod, he thanked the man and went on. "Thing is, I don't know how her parents are gonna feel about their little doctor hooking up with a blue-collar boy like me." With a heavy breath, Terry Lee looked around at his cousins.

He at least felt better, having it all out in the open. With somebody...

#### Chapter Five

Parking his truck, Terry Lee groaned, covertly adjusting himself as he remembered making love with Sida the night before. The finish had been spectacular. So much so that he had nearly blacked out. So had she, in fact.

Neither of them had been able to move for long minutes, and only minimally after that. He had collapsed half on, half off her, pulling her against him and into his arms the second he managed to catch his breath.

Now, even though he'd spent almost every day with her over the last two weeks, she was still all he could think about. That first time, they'd lain in the half-finished office for hours afterward, just talking.

Sida had confessed her obsession with lighthouses and declared herself a 'diva'—he still wasn't sure what that was, but whatever, he was falling harder and harder for her with every second.

The only thing he had any reservations about at all was this thing with her parents. He just hated that she felt she had to adopt a career that she didn't want, just because they'd planned it for her.

Terry Lee was sure that, over time, Sida would see that it was a mistake to force herself into such an involved profession when her heart wasn't in it. A thrill of unease snaked up his spine as he saw the animated silhouettes of two people beyond the curtains of her father's office.

Opening the lobby door, he was glad that no patients were present. Mr. Zhou was certainly agitated, from the sound of things. Terry Lee wanted to go and comfort Sida, whose voice could be heard in conflict with that of her father's.

"What? Now you don't like carpenters?" She said angrily. Terry Lee stopped and waited. Was she telling her father about their budding relationship?

"I have nothing against carpenters," Mr. Zhou objected. Terry Lee exhaled. He hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath. "It is an honorable profession, Sida. I simply think that you will be happiest with someone who understands you, who shares more with you." "Terry Lee understands me fine," she all but growled, the door opening into the waiting room where he stood. "And anyway, if you love someone, you understand plenty!"

She turned and was standing in front of him.

"You love me?" he grinned at her.

Mr. Zhou made a sound of disgust and rolled his eyes heavenward. "You!" he snapped. "You were not hired to defile my daughter, but to do a job of work for me! The office remains unfinished!"

"Um, about that, Mr. Zhou..." Terry Lee began.

"No!" the older man spat. "I have no patience for you now," he declared, holding out one fine-boned hand. Before Terry Lee could respond, Sida's father had retreated back into his office, slamming the door hard enough to rattle the pictures hung on a nearby wall.

"I like fish," Terry Lee smiled down at Sida, pulling her against him.

"So?" she rolled her eyes at him, much like her father had, though she was obviously trying not to grin back.

"Marine biologist? Fish?" he clarified, somewhat unhelpfully, he could see by her face. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

"I never said I would," she snuggled against him, hiding her warm cheeks against his chest.

"Sugar, this is...I can't believe you told him about me but didn't say a word about not wanting to be a doctor." He stroked her cheek, his fingers cupping her chin and urging her to look up at him. "I love you, too," he leaned down, kissing her nose, and then her lips, but lightly. "What you do with your life is at least as important as who you do it with, darlin'. I really want you to be happy. I hope we can be happy together, of course. You know that, right?"

She graced him with a sunny smile. "Yeah," she sighed. Straightening up, she added stoutly, "I want to be with you, and vice versa. I mean...you heard me. I love you. But my parents are my business. And I'm going to do what I think I need to do there."

Terry Lee leaned back carefully, ignoring the challenge in her voice and her eyes. He could practically see the boundary lines she was drawing. He had to tread lightly here.

"I don't want to get in the middle of your relationship with your parents here, honey. I'm not going to," he promised. "But a life built on lies and omissions is no life at all." She opened her mouth to speak and he laid a finger across her lips. "I'd rather be with you than without you, anytime and anyplace. This is important, though. It's as

important as your happiness and the rest of our lives. Just think about it, okay?"

Sida turned her light brown eyes up at him, filled with tears, and Terry Lee felt like he'd kicked a puppy.

"I'll think about it," Sida sniffed.

"Let's go be in love...want to?" he scooped an arm around her, gathering her up against his chest.

"Yeah," she breathed huskily, "I want to."

Terry Lee turned her toward the door, leading her out and away from the source of their disagreement. Neither one noticed the figure of Sida's father, framed in the slightly ajar door to his office.

### Chapter Six

Sida was a nervous wreck. Her mother had called her and insisted she come to their offices at six-thirty that evening. The older woman refused to tell her anything more than to be there and be on time.

She hadn't seen her father for three days, even though she'd tried to visit him. Sida wanted to make things right. While she didn't feel good about coming clean regarding her career choice, she was working on it—trying to work things out in her mind. In the meantime, she didn't want to be at odds with her parents. She loved them very much.

Rounding the corner in front of her parents' offices, she was even more distraught to see Terry Lee coming from the other direction, a confused look on his face. She knew he'd more or less halted work on the office her parents had commissioned him to do.

In fact, that office, the very thing that had brought them together, was agonizingly close to tearing them apart. Terry Lee had basically refused to work on it at all, saying that he couldn't do the job under false pretenses. Sida insisted that she would use the office suite and that he should finish it. They were currently at an impasse.

"Sugar, maybe you shouldn't be here right now," he told her gently, cupping her face for a kiss, as soon as he was close enough.

"My mother insisted," she croaked, very nervous indeed.

"Your father called me in to meet with him. I think he's going to fire me," Terry Lee looked away, uncomfortable.

"No, I won't let him do that," she cried, throwing her arms around him. Obviously, he felt ashamed at the thought of being fired.

"Honey, it's his money, if he wants to fire me, there's nothing we can do about it," he countered.

"I'm going to tell him," she declared, straightening up, determined now. "I'm going to tell him that I don't want to be a doctor. Then he can't fire you!"

"Oh, honey," he wrapped both arms around her, pressing her full-length against him. "Being fired isn't the worse thing that can happen to me. You tell him when you're ready, and not one minute before."

Squirming a little, Sida slid out of his arms, turning to march into her father's office. She didn't care what he did to her. But Terry Lee? That was something else all together.

"You lied to me!" her father barked just as soon as she crossed the threshold.

"Now just a minute!" Terry Lee objected from so close behind her that she could feel his chest vibrate.

"Papa," she protested, laying a calming hand on Terry Lee's arm.

"And I..." her father halted, joined by her mother.

"We," the dainty woman insisted.

"We," her father nodded, "we bullied you."

"What?" Sida gasped, looking from one parent to the other. "Bullied?"

"It's true, daughter," the older man hung his head.

"Mom?" Sida turned to her mother, incredulous.

"Your father and I are very happy in our chosen profession," her mother began to explain, stepping forward. "We are most fortunate that we each found love with someone who is happy in the same career. Since we are so truly happy with each other and with what we do for our life's work..."

"We wanted that happiness for you, whom we love very much," her father finished his wife's statement.

Terry Lee gave Sida a little nudge. She looked over her shoulder at him, tears streaming down her face.

"Go on," he whispered, feeling a little choked up, too.

Sida rushed forward, wrapping both arms around her parents, murmuring, "I love you guys, too, so much."

"We would love you no matter what you do," Mrs. Zhou assured her daughter. "We'll always be proud of you. There is no shame in becoming a marine biologist," she said, repeating almost exactly what Terry Lee had told Sida only a couple two weeks prior.

Terry Lee began to back out of the room, his hand on the door behind him. "Oh no you don't, young man!" Mr. Zhou stopped him before he could turn the knob. "You still have some work to finish!"

He wasn't sure what to do, and Sida's father appeared to be very put out with him. She was no help at all, clinging to her mother as the two women chattered like little magpies.

"I really didn't want to..." he started, not quite sure how to pacify the older man.

"Come this way!" Mr. Zhou ordered brusquely.

Terry Lee shrugged his shoulders, glancing over at Sida. She shrugged back and took his hand, following her father down the hall toward the offices that were to be hers.

Opening the door to the unfinished office, Sida's father stepped back, a wide flourish indicating that the couple should precede him.

No sooner had Terry Lee crossed the threshold than a deep booming voice began to sing, "Don't worry, be happy!"

Sida's mouth dropped open, doing a fair imitation of Terry Lee's as two pairs of eyes landed on a plaque nailed to a bare wall. "Don't worry, be happy!" sang the undulating mock bass a second time.

Terry Lee's glanced over at Mrs. Zhou who was shaking her head, though she had a hand over her mouth, snickering.

"Welcome to the family, marine biologist and hillbilly carpenter!" crowed the older man, laughing gleefully.

"Well I'll be go to hell," breathed Terry Lee.

"Papa?" Sida's eyes were wide with shock. He couldn't stop himself, and began to laugh out loud.

"You can catch them, she can cut them up, and we'll eat them!" Mr. Zhou chortled.

Before long, both couples were laughing too hard to stop.

#### Chapter Seven

"You know that's not what marine biologists do, right?" Sida grumped as Terry Lee slid her tank top over her head.

"What's that, sugar?" he asked absently, bending down to show his appreciation for the built-in support of the otherwise flimsy garment. He'd already removed his shoes and shirt, only too happy to help her out of her clothes.

"We don't just cut up fish," she grumped.

"Course not," he agreed, lathing a peaked breast with his tongue as he helped her out of the hip-hugger Capri pants she wore, his hands wandering back up to cup her rounded buttocks.

"You're not listening to me," she playfully pouted, her own hands dipping into the opening of his jeans.

"Every word, I swear," he promised, throwing his head back and breathing heavily as her fingers wrapped around his hard cock. "By the way..." Terry Lee began, lowering his lips to hers as he walked her backward to his bed.

"Yes?" she breathed against his mouth, crawling backward across the comforter.

"I was goin' to ask you to marry me today," he murmured, his hands skimming lightly over her breasts, down to her ribs, coming to rest on her hips.

"What?" she choked, eyes wide in the dim room.

"I mean, today I planned to ask you if, one day soon, you want to get married," he clarified.

"Me?" she squeaked, her voice a shrill squeal.

"Uh, yeah," he nodded, sitting back on his heels, showing her the ring he'd had hidden in his palm. "Seein' as how I already got welcomed to the family, it seems a little anti-climactic, doesn't it?" Before she could answer, he slid it onto her ring finger, enjoying her stunned silence.

That, of course, didn't last long.

"No! I mean yes!" Sida threw both arms around him. "I mean I'll marry you!"

"Now that's what I wanna hear," Terry Lee growled as he leaned forward, one hand on either side of her, his mouth came down on top of hers, his tongue dipping between her lips, tasting her.

Moving down her body, he gently rolled an erect nipple with his tongue, alternately sucking and nipping it before sliding his hand feather light along her ribs and over her belly. She arched her back, groaning as his wayward hand moved between her legs.

Kissing and licking a trail to the top of her tight dark curls, his hands parted her thighs, two fingers finding her moist center. Warm breath blew across her, causing an involuntary shudder as she strained toward him. Her body begged him for more as her fingers entwined in his hair, alternately pushing, pulling, grasping and seeking to guide him as she tried to force the contact she craved.

Slowly, torturously, his fingers slipped through the soft velvet moisture, touching, tormenting and fueling her burning desire. Leisurely, he slid lower, spreading moist open kisses along her inner thighs, nibbling, sucking and licking a path to where his fingers gently opened her to him.

She cried out softly as he tasted her, broad strokes lapping the sweet salty juices, gradually swirling his tongue toward her aching bundle of nerves. Darting and teasing, she gasped, writhing beneath his delicious assault as he brought her to the edge only to ease her down again and again until she cried out, needing to cum.

Again the tip of his tongue traveled teasingly over the length of her, lathing and stroking before returning to flick at her center. Three fingers entered her as warm moist lips enclosed her, thrusting, sucking and licking, while she bucked against him until she screamed her release.

Terry Lee could still feel the fine tremors of her climax as his body covered her, thrusting into her, burying himself balls-deep inside her wet heat. Her pussy clenched around him, tight, hungry. She shuddered beneath him, coming nearly instantly.

Pumping into her, he couldn't stop, feeling her wrap her legs around his waist. Together they established a frenzied rhythm. His one hand stroked just above their joining while the other gripped her hip.

She frantically ground her body into his, moaning as she threw her head back, her body clamping hard on his cock as her inner muscles gripped him. He held on tight to her hips, slamming into her once, twice, then shouting her name as his own climax ripped through him.

Panting heavily, he rolled off of her, exhausted.

- "Good thing you're so fit," she managed after a few minutes.
- "Hard work and clean livin'," he grunted.
  "Makes for a good, hard body," she mumbled, curling against him.

Reaching down for the comforter, he grinned. "Makes for a lot of hard things. Good thing I've got a hammer."

The End

# Tasty Temptations by Mae Powers

Earthwoman Thela meets two special men, Jarik and Adaren. Both find her earthly beauty appealing to their alien male passions. All discover surprising, out-of-this-world temptations.

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## Tasty Temptations by Mae Powers

#### Chapter One

Like a coruscating beacon, the igloo-shaped, three-tiered building—made of a pearly material—shone brightly in the night sky. A glittering neon sign blaring the establishment's name, Throttles, complemented the sparkling, ruby-trimmed, triangular-shaped glass windows. The blinking lights and sporadic beats of music permeated from the nightclub's interior and rattled the mosaic windows intermittently. The gaiety and wonder tempted Thela Montgomery inside its walls.

Thela stepped through the circular doorway, opened by a tall, thin doorman slash bouncer. She entered a long, tubular tunnel, which led into an enormous area filled with a throng of liveliness. What looked like a three-story building on the outside turned into three semi-opened floors of people, bars and tables occupying them. Spiral stairs led to all three floors, as did glassed-in elevators. In the midst of the huge area lay a big circular dance floor with twirling lights flickering from the radiant flooring.

Above the dance floor, on two air levels, disc-dancers stomped and swayed rhythmically to various tempos on hover platings. To her near left, just a few feet away, stood the club's main bar, semicircular in shape and teaming with life from sound-masters to various alien clienteles.

Thela glanced around the area hoping to spy her college friend, whom she was to meet here for a short while before she left to go visit her other friend Reema. Reema's birthday party was set for later that night. Preterra wasn't really a friend, more like a friendly business acquaintance. When Preterra learned that Thela wanted to take a vacation, the alien female told her to come here. A large distance between herself and her ex-lover Jake Harris was great by Thela. Jake had wanted her to take him back, but that was not what she really wanted. So, taking an extensive vacation from both her jobs to get her

life back in order and just have some fun became a strong incentive for Thela.

Thoughts of her ex slipped from her mind as she nearly got pushed aside when a couple getting on dance discs rushed past her. They were tall and thin, nearly identical in their looks, with long stringy blue hair, sparkling pink eyes and wearing similar sky-blue party tunics and pants. The female's breasts jutted heavily forward beneath her clothing and her braided blue hair had streaks of gold in the plaits. Thela grinned, and quickly moved out of the way, as the couple jumped on their discs and floated upwards to the top level.

She'd dealt with a few people of the Nalean race, like the two dancers who nearly toppled her over. They were a constantly on the move people, and evidently, by their twists flying above, they liked to dance modern dances. She shook her head, not letting their unintentional rudeness get to her. She glanced to see other couples and groups in various areas around the huge entertainment club, in different stances of enjoying themselves. It amazed her that plenty of caressing and playful meanderings went on, when her friend Reema told her that public displays like holding hands were against the law. Perhaps inside a place like this one affections weren't considered unlawful.

She shrugged her shoulders and then, carefully watching where she stepped, went through the crowd to sit at the long, main bar. She glanced at herself in the mirror behind the bar for a few seconds while she decided what she wanted to drink. Her face earlier looked a little like she suffered from jet lag and time zone horrors. She smiled at herself, appreciating her slight humor. Thankfully, her nap and a cool bath had helped to put a gleam in her amber eyes and a renewed touch on her chocolate-toned skin. Her moon-blonde locks felt comfortable pinned up in a silver clip adorned with bright purple jewels, which matched her amethyst colored business-evening uni-suit, trimmed in black and gray.

After getting her ordered drink, she scoped the large establishment again. She still saw no sign of the woman she came to visit with. She noted a few human couples from Earth there, among them a mixture of African, English and other spicy varieties from her world. She didn't completely feel alone at the moment. Aliens with a variety of distinctions filled the rest of the club, with barely any room to spare for walking, dancing, or mingling of any kind. Much less breathing space. She recognized a few species like the Nalean, as well as the group of Zabbits with their long smoke-gray ears and furry

humanoid, apish bodies that were hop-dancing on the main floor of the club. With the language translator she wore in her left temple, she didn't have a problem understanding what went on around her; although she could have figured out people were having fun even with out the miniature device.

As others danced and talked around her, she kept her eyes opened for Preterra, thinking at the same time about her own current situation. After taking time off from her positions as a media consultant and part-time chef, she came here upon Reema's and Preterra's insistence, and because of her need to get away from the everyday human ratrace of working too many hours.

After arriving on Lyndara, she'd met Preterra at the customs check-in and they'd taken an air taxi to the place she'd rented from her real-estate friend, Reema. After she'd dropped off her bags in the restaurant with the living suite on top of it, Preterra had shown her some of Caleeb's sites. Though Caleeb purported to be one of the planet's largest cities, Preterra mostly took her to spots where she knew young single men hung out. They had decided after the quick, uneventful tour to meet up at Throttles nightclub the following day.

Thela knew Preterra wanted to help her get over her ex and find a more interesting night of pleasure. Thela wasn't sure that she wanted to do the nightclub singles scene and find a fling for the night or adventures like that. Preterra scoffed at her when she told the Lyndaran beauty about her feelings. It made Thela uneasy to see a side of the woman's personality that didn't set well with her. She tried to take Preterra at face value and was sure the short scenic tour was just the woman's alien way of making Thela feel more comfortable.

Preterra said that if Thela did want a fling or a hot-blooded man or two, Throttles nightclub was the place to go. Though there definitely was a singles scene around the town, she'd learned that Lyndarans were very passionate people in whatever endeavors they took on. Her business acquaintances also told her that on Lyndara endogamy was the norm for most of the Lyndaran population. Still, glancing at the activities going on around her, they could put an Earth pub to shame with so much revelry going on in Throttles.

Hopefully, Reema's birthday gathering wasn't this hyperactive. She finished her drink and before she could even order again, the nearest bartender plopped another down before her. She shrugged and sipped on it, again looking for her hostess. Still, she saw no sight of Preterra.

Thela knew she should get up and mingle; perhaps the woman

would show up soon if she wasn't lost or caught up in this throng of people. She tried to take in the culture of Lyndara. She'd even read the tourist planet guide of this world. Some things surprised her; some were a novelty, while others were somewhat similar to Earth goings-on. Lyndarans, like Earth people in the twenty-fourth century, enjoyed going out to restaurants and nightclubs, as well as theaters and other physical or mental tasty temptations.

The fun life for single people of free lifestyles hadn't changed drastically. Yet, here, it had a different meaning. Doing a single mating was actually considered a bit odd here, because of the dual couplings being the norm. However, men and women still met at bars trying to score or find that one special person or two, which he or she could connect with and perhaps make a more lasting relationship.

She picked up her half-filled glass and decided to move around the outer edge of the dance floor. She took in a few details of people here and there, with the different aliens and regulars of this planet, male or female, ogling her and others. One big husky humanoid with brown hair and dressed in a garish green slick pantsuit kept leering at her as she circled the dance floor. His black eyes looked like poisonous orbs waiting to strike out at her, while the ridges on either side of his big head glowed a dull red with jerky flickering movements. She went to one of the emptied booths to get away from him. She noticed the one behind her was empty, but the one in front of her held two incredibly handsome aliens. The light ash-brown haired man's antennae twitched and glowed slightly as he stared intensely at her.

Her perusal of him became interrupted as the garish looking man came up to her table. He garbled something in a language she didn't understand. However, his leer and hand suggestions were easy enough to understand. She flipped him off, telling him to get lost, and hoped his intergalactic translator device worked. She tried to look angry enough to ward him off. Instead, he let out a guffaw and started to sit down opposite her. Thela rose in her seat just as he reached out for her.

#### Chapter Two

Jarik sat down in the bar booth across from his bond-partner, Adaren. He hoped the drinks were not too watered down. It had taken him some moments to get through the throng of people and the wide spaced lounge. His companion glanced from the lively crowd of disc dancers and floor dancers to him.

His best friend seemed more serene now. Perhaps the Galxian Ale was making him relax or perhaps he had come to terms with the fact that their prior union-partner no longer cared for them. Jarik had been hurt by Preterra's infidelity and downing remarks, but more so Adaren, Jarik believed. The woman blamed them for the mating union not working. They lavished her with attention, and yet she left them for two other bond-partners whose chemistry she said matched hers better than his and Adaren's. Jarik knew it was more than that, and his male love, sitting across from him, had picked up her lies with his empathy. It had crushed Adaren emotionally at the time, months back.

They had searched for years for the right person, the right female to join with. They had single intercourse with Preterra to make her happy, but in the long run, she had ridiculed their entwining, saying the two of them did not mesh comfortably inside of her.

"Thank you, dearus."

Jarik would have slugged another male for uttering such an intimacy. Adaren, slender of body but part of Jarik's heart, was the only person allowed to call him that. He smiled warmly at the taller man. Though he was more robust, Adaren towered over him by nearly four inches, yet they meshed wonderfully. He'd only had two other bond-partners, but none beside Adaren was his close friend or like a second self to Jarik.

"You are kind to me, and it is my deepest pleasure to see you happy, Adaren."

"Now if both of us could just be completed, it would make me even happier."

"She wasn't right for us. Preterra was unkind in her stinging words, my friend."

Adaren reached over and placed a hand over Jarik's. "It took me

a while to see that, and I thank you for bearing with me these long months while I've recovered from her deceit. I'm not good at picking union-partners for us. It has to be hard on you too, yet you've been a strength through all of this."

He patted the younger man's hand. "As have you. You have more strength of soul than I do."

His bond-partner smiled again. Adaren's elegant finger twined a long ash-brown lock. "Thanks, Jarik, for not leaving me."

Jarik harrumphed. "As if I would. You are second to me in nature. I could not live without you since the first day we met. We will find the right one to entwine with soon. I refuse to give up hope."

Adaren's smile deepened. "I do agree."

Jarik squeezed his friend's hand then released it as he leaned against the thick padding of the oval booth seat. Though not as long as Adaren's, he tucked his layered hair behind his ears. His heart had been a little crushed by Preterra, but not as much as Adaren's had been.

Jarik felt that his friend must have thought himself truly in love this time. They'd both had separate encounters. Though he never truly, deeply loved a female, he felt perhaps Adaren might have been right and Preterra could be the one they sought. She came from their world, so their culture and intermarriage ways would not offend anyone. Yet, like some Temptron female, she merely toyed with their affections. He should have known better than to let his friend get involved with the flirty bitch.

He shook off the frustrations and anger, determined to help his friend get through his sorrow. "One day, my dearus, the one we seek might even fall into our laps, or sit down near us."

Adaren chuckled. Jarik was pleased he could make his friend laugh. It had been several months since Adaren laughed so openly. That's why he made him come out tonight with him to one of the city of Caleeb's hottest nightspots. Jarik twitched his antennae together, eliciting another laugh from Adaren.

Adaren's thick lips opened to take a sip of the steaming, icy liquid. Ice-n-Heat was the man's favorite drink, and no one but the bartender here made it better. "Stop that or you'll send out signals that we're available."

Jarik's shoulders shook mirthfully. "We are available. Why not, my friend? What better way to get over an old lover than with at least a new flinger? It has been a while and I itch like crazy to fill someone. I need to feel you entwined with me again soon, Adaren. Self is not

too bad, but when we are fused in heat I feel more complete."

His bonder studied him intently with those lustrous black eyes; they were one of the many things that had first attracted Jarik to Adaren in the first place. They were brightly seductive compared to his own midnight-blue ones. Yet, Adaren said he found them one of Jarik's most intriguing qualities. That and the fact that he'd never entwined with a bond-partner who had antennae. Only about half the men of their world, Lyndara, bore antennae. Those who did not were sometimes empathic, like Adaren.

Perhaps also, it was because they were both extra sensitive, albeit in different ways, that they connected on a higher level than most male partners of an endogamous group did. It felt natural, them coming together in their search. Then so much more exploded between them. They had several entwinings together, and although satisfying, Jarik could feel almost as empathically as Adaren that they needed more. Soon, his antennae itched with a "knowing" sense. They would find her.

"I too feel the same, Jarik. We've had good entwinings together with a few of our partners. I agree with you, we will find the right heat combination one day. However, let's check out the willings and see if for at least tonight we can find a woman to bring us satisfaction. I'm ready for a night of fun."

Jarik rubbed his hands together in glee. "Starrific, pal. Let's sip these and scout the floor and disc dancers up above."

Adaren nodded to him, and they both began to leisurely sip on their drinks as they kicked back and glanced over the multi-dimensional dance floorings. Jarik's ridged, long antennae twitched back and forth with his emotions. Somewhere up there or on the floor he could sense an interested party. He swore this would only be for tonight though. He was not going to let another woman cause havoc for him and Adaren. Affirming this, he quietly sat back, intending to enjoy the evening with his closest bond-partner.

That's when he noticed the unusual alien beauty and the devious-looking scum, a male Lyndaran, bothering her at the booth behind them.

#### Chapter Three

"Get away from her, you jerk."

Thela looked up to see that the light-haired man from the next booth had come over to the table as he said a few more words in the same language as the jerk.

"Fregg off and leave her alone."

The alien thug stood about the same height as the light-haired alien, but did not look as fit and able. She thought for sure the jerk was going to start a lot of trouble when the coppery-haired guy from the next booth rose and joined his friend. The garish alien looked from her to both men and snarled. Yet, he didn't seem foolish enough to stand around too long and quickly left.

With but a nod and glance in her direction, the two handsome, sexy men started to leave. She quickly called out to them. They stopped and turned her way almost expectantly. "Wait! Thank you both." She motioned to her booth. "Please join me and let me at least buy you a drink for helping me."

They looked at each other then back at her and nodded. The the lighter-haired one sat across from her and asked, "You are okay now?".

She smiled at him. For some reason, she felt quite comfortable with him. Dealing with the public most of her life, she learned to listen to her instincts when it involved people, no matter where they came from. The other man sitting across from her hailed a passing waitress that had antennae just like him. She took their orders, and Thela had a second to study them.

They both had slight ridges on the left side of their heads, which she noted most Lyndaran males bore. Lyndaran females bore a curved-in, small set of ridges on the lower right sides of their jaws. All the race had varying shades of either silver-blonde, brown, yellow-red, or degrees of black and sable hair; while, their skin tones ranged from a soft toasty color like the elegant brunette in front of her, to intoxicating colors of dark brown to a warm creamy beige like the copper-haired Adonis next to her.

However, her feminine libido appreciated both. Though her

physical awareness grew with each passing moment in their tempting company, she still felt a bit awkward with them. Perhaps because she wasn't sure what to say to them, this being her visit to another world in which she was actually trying to let a man pick her up.

The sudden smile from the more robust alien made her feel more at ease. It also made her lower regions tingle with awakening desire.

"I'm Adaren Ven and this is my bond-partner Jarik."

She rolled their names silently on her tongue. Jarik nearly made her jaw drop when she first viewed him moments ago, even with a sprouting long antennae from the back of his high pointed ears. His slender but powerful build, adorned by a navy blue tunic suit, which made his soft toasty skin appear even warmer, made her body heat up instantly. His silvery streaked, ash-brown hair flowed around his head in long, tight waves, making an alluring frame for his thin face. Yet, his midnight-blue eyes made her melt even more.

"Thank you both for rescuing me from that jerk."

"I don't think he will bother you again," Jarik commented.

"We'll sit with you long enough to make sure of that." Adaren Ven's obsidian eyes sparkled with flecks of silver as they roved over her appreciatively.

She had to keep from preening at his deep interest, and make sure she didn't drool in their presence. As much as Jarik made her cream between her thighs, so did Adaren. His coppery mix of red-brown-blonde hair framed a chiseled face, and he wore it in layers trailing over a broad back and wide sloped shoulders. Its rich coloring highlighted the golden-bronze hue of a sleeveless, collared kneelength tunic. Matching pants, hung low over his wide hips and tight buttocks, completing his sexy ensemble.

Her lips tilted upwards, she had the feeling that in those few minutes before they sat down, they'd taken in as much of her looks as she had theirs.

"My name is Thela. I'm from Earth, vacationing here for the next few weeks. Do you both come here regularly?"

Jarik nodded. "Adaren and I frequent it a least twice a week some months."

"It's one of the most enjoyable night spots in town," Adaren added. "Are you here alone?"

"Looks like I am now. I came to join a friend but can't seem to find her." She didn't think that much would be too informative. She was glad when the waitress brought over their drinks.

For a few seconds the three of them sipped on tall,

mouthwatering drinks, from which dry ice of some kind kept their once flaming drinks steaming. It was a different kind of liqueur, and its potency made her feel more confident than she did early in their company. She couldn't help but feel flattered by their appreciative stares and smiles.

"Well then, that is to our benefit. I do have a cell-vid if you need to call her."

"Like a dummy, I forgot to get her cellular number. Thank you though, Jarik."

"This is your first visit to Lyndara?" Adaren asked, his exotic eyes raking over her. His smile widened when she realized he noted her shiver of interest.

"Yes, Adaren, it is. From the brief pieces I've seen of Lyndara, well Caleeb so far, I find your culture very intriguing. Just like its inhabitants."

Jarik raised his oblong glass to her. "I'm glad you ran into us. Should you need a guide, Adaren or I could show you around. We've been all over Lyndara."

"For pleasure or for business?" For some reason, she couldn't help but ask.

"I'm an antennae therapist. When any Lyndaran has problems adjusting empathic transmittal from their antennae or they've developed an antennae disorder of some nature, I help them to adjust through their emotional and physical recovery. Since it's a specialty profession, I have clients all over Lyndara."

"I am in the media industry," Adaren said. She hadn't missed the deliberate nearness of their arms on the table when Adaren shifted his drink to hold it in his other hand. "What about yourself?"

She glanced first at Adaren. Even light-headed, she found him elegant and handsome, as much as she did Jarik. The thought that these two might not only be potential lovers, but that they were lovers themselves intrigued her further. She felt her groin ache with growing need. Would she dare take it a step further?

Well, it looked like Preterra stood her up, so she would just relax and see what the night would bring. Maybe it couldn't hurt to have an evening of sensual fun, at least for a few hours until she had to leave for Reema's bash.

"Besides being a part-time pastry chef, I'm also a media consultant myself. It's not that interesting, but it does pay for relaxing vacations like this one." She gave them both what she thought was a seductive smile and swayed automatically to the soft tempo of music just starting up into a new song. It slowly crept through her body, adding to the enticing evening.

"Would you care to dance?" Jarik asked.

She looked into Jarik's midnight-blue eyes and nodded. "I was hoping one of you would ask."

"This is a three-partner dance-song playing now. Will that be okay with you?"

She didn't miss the sexual inflection in Adaren's silky voice. Thela licked her bottom lip in anticipation. Whatever that meant sounded deliciously tempting to her. "Sure thing, Adaren."

Jarik stood and held out his large hand to her. "Shall we then?"

She winked at Adaren as she rose from her seat. "I'm looking forward to this. It will be a new experience for me."

"You won't regret it then, Thela." Adaren promised.

Jarik led her out onto the dance floor before them. "It is not as hard as it looks. Just follow my lead."

"I'll give it a try," she said, appreciating his muscular, alien length. She couldn't but be pleased how his well-toned thighs filled out the tight suit he wore.

"Hold your hands in the air, and move to my lead. It's similar to the last dance you saw on the dance floor a few moments ago."

She nodded, holding her palms outward toward Jarik. Then, like other couples on the floor, she quickly clapped her hands up against his. He captured them in his own warm ones then took a small, slow stomp-step toward the right; she did the same in tempo. The front of their right hips pressed against each other. He moved his left hip upwards, and she did likewise. Their groins pressed together in a rocking burning motion. The easygoing rhythm lifted through her system and she relaxed into him. He then stomp-stepped backwards, his hands urging her to move forward.

She felt her front lower torso pressed even deeper into his after the second step. Then he swiftly turned with her under their arms. When they came back around to face each other, his hands grabbed her wrists and he brought her hands up behind him to rest under his, just over his hips. For a split second, the world seemed to stand still. A strange but inviting heat arose between them. Then she felt someone slide up behind her. Arms came around to embrace hers and Jarik's hips.

She felt Adaren's body behind her and his long arms imprisoned her between his and Jarik's bodies. Though they were both a few inches taller than she was, their bodies fit perfectly and naturally against hers. The heat within her swelled. She swayed automatically to the music and their deliciously hot bodies. The men pressed as closely as possible into her hips, one from the back the other from the front. Their shafts were pushed into her buttocks and crotch. If this delicious feeling tempted her palate this much, she wanted the sandwich to continue.

They pressed into her as hard and fully as they could with clothing on. Her hips swayed in heated rhythm with their own. Adaren's hands tightened over hers and he moved them slowly, grasping Jarik's buttocks. With her hands beneath his, Adaren pressed them over Jarik's high-rounded cheeks and began fondling the man in circular kneading motions. When the tempo increased a bit in this sinfully erotic dance, she found each had then taken one of her hands, and her body felt bereft as they slowly broke apart from her. The two gently held her hands as they turned under her arms, before twirling her between them.

Then she was pulled into an opposite position, with Jarik behind her and Adaren in the front. They all moved beautifully together, in a sensual harmony that had the three of them perspiring from sexual heat. Their bodies moved two steps to the right then two steps back to the left. Then the men's arms were entwining around her and their hips were both pressing up against her once more. She could feel the outline of their hard-ons through the thin material of her uni-suit. Their heat came close to being liquid sex for her. Thela nearly orgasmed right there and then.

Then she heard and felt the music winding down. Jarik leaned down to kiss her cheek and Adaren her mouth. Each kiss nearly pushed her over the edge. When the music died out, she had a hard time breathing or moving. Time stood still as Jarik lavished her with a lip lock and Adaren caressed her backside and ran his long tongue down her neck. She felt the heat trickle between her thighs. She knew if she didn't get off the dance floor soon, the wetness would drastically show on the front of her suit or be seen rolling slowly down her legs.

Thankfully the lights dimmed and they all broke apart, albeit reluctantly. She walked behind Jarik, who led them back to the booth. She was glad the suit was dark enough to hide most of the liquid fire permeating between her thighs. She knew she wasn't empathic, but she could damn well feel the heat of the man in front of her and the man trailing behind her. Thela was very thankful when the two sat across from her this time. Adaren ordered them another set of drinks

from the same waitress making her rounds again. They all sat quietly for some moments, gathering their breaths. She knew they didn't have to talk. They too felt it, the intense desire surrounding them.

Damn, but she wished now she hadn't promised to make an appearance at Reema's place tonight!

Was she then considering a threesome with these two alien hunks? She'd never contemplated that before, not even when her ex kept insisting. At this point, she realized she was completely over that episode in her life. Especially after the wondrous heat she'd just experienced with these two incredible men.

She was glad for the time to cool down, to ponder. She hadn't read their interest wrong. The two wanted her. She'd never gone to bed with a complete stranger, much less two. Yet, she knew she wanted them both. The thought inflamed her libido near the boiling point once more. She wanted each of their hot, hard shafts in her. Yet, not the threesome. She liked her buttocks rubbed and fondled, but still she couldn't contemplate entrance between them.

If they could deal with that, she had no problems and not a lot of other inhibitions. Perhaps she should clear that up first. They didn't seem like the type to force anything on a girl, but still, one had to be careful, even on another planet. A waiter brought their second set of drinks to their table before she spoke to them.

### Chapter Four

Adaren could sense the heat within Thela's fluctuating emotions. He took a deep breath, glancing at his bond-partner. Jarik's dark eyes glittered with sparkling interest. Damn if they didn't have to go to Reema's place tonight, he could tell that Jarik wanted to take her home with them just as much as he did.

"I really enjoyed that dance. It's quite different from other dances I've tried. Thank you both." Adaren had the feeling she wanted to say more, but didn't coerce her as he still felt some hesitancy in her. "I think we were meant to meet tonight."

"I feel the same," Jarik said before Adaren could speak up, but it confirmed the hunch he had about his lover wanting the woman too. "I know Adaren and I would like to get to know you better, Thela."

She softly sucked in her luscious bottom lip, making Adaren want to suckle it also. "I should like to meet up with you again, but perhaps tomorrow. I've got another friend here that I promised I'd make her party tonight. I'm tempted to say no, but I can't do that to her, as I've been stood up already by my other friend."

"We can identify with that," Adaren agreed. She definitely wanted to be with them, but he admired her wanting to keep her promise to her friend.

"Then take our cell-vid number and call us with a meeting place tomorrow. We both have a few days off arranged, so it would be our delight to show you around more of Caleeb or another part of Lyndara."

"I second that, Thela. Or we could share a taxi with you to your other friend's destination, as we have one we have to drop in on also, to be truthful."

"She's a distant cousin of mine, but I feel the same as you. I'd like the evening to continue further in other ways." Adaren nearly groaned at his own promise to make his cousin's gathering. Neither could Jarik back out, as all of them had been close friends for several years.

She seemed relieved, but Adaren was sure she'd wanted to talk over a few things with them. Perhaps her people's mating or bedding customs were a bit different. He and Jarik once watched a film about Earth people's sexual pastimes, but this was not the right time to tell Thela he occasionally watched alien erotic films with Jarik.

Jarik handed her a card he'd pulled out from his suit pocket. Adaren smiled, he loved the way his friend always came prepared for any kind of situation or emergency. "Here, take this and call us when you are free. Or you can share a ride with us."

Adaren really wanted to reach over and pull her onto his lap when that long pink tongue of hers ran slowly and deliciously over that full top lip. The woman should be outlawed for being so damn sexy. He empathically sensed his bond-partner's excessive heat over what the woman did to both their cocks.

"Perhaps we could talk further in the taxi then. I've got the address with me, but I'm still not sure of the direction to go. I, um, do feel safe with both of you. And more..." Her deliciously sultry-sweet voice trailed off, making Adaren know that he hadn't been wrong. She wanted them as much as they did her.

He paid their bill quickly, and both he and Jarik escorted her out of the crowded lounge. Thankfully, it didn't take them long to procure a hover-cab to take them all to their destinations. Jarik got in first, and then Adaran followed after she got in comfortably. He gave the Lyndaran driver their destination while she fumbled in her suit pocket for hers.

"Oh dear," she looked from him to Jarik and back again, "if I understood the directions you gave the driver correctly," she showed Adaren the slip of paper she had, "then we are headed to the same place. You two know Reema Zentair?"

\* \* \* \*

Jarik couldn't believe he heard right. Thela knew Adaren's cousin Reema. Indeed, he believed the fates meant them to meet this incredibly sexy, dark-skinned beauty tonight. He smiled down at her, positive his eyes reflected the giddy feeling he experienced right now. She glanced from him to Adaren.

"She, I and our other acquaintance Preterra went to the same academy of arts and communications on the planet Dorlon the last two years we were there."

Adaren's thick brows drew together in a frown. "Preterra was the woman you were waiting for tonight?"

She nodded. "If you two tell me you know her as well, this is

indeed a strange occurrence."

Jarik leaned back in the plush seat, ignoring the driver's curious looks. "We use to, um, date a woman name Preterra. Here on Lyndara that is an uncommon name, so it must be the same person you were waiting on. Yellow-orange hair, short, a little round?"

Thela gulped and bit into her bottom lip. "Yeah, that's her. Insensitive too."

Adaren cupped his hands together. "That describes her completely. We broke up with her several months ago. But I have a feeling you're nothing like her, Thela."

She beamed at Adaren then warily looked at Jarik as if she sensed his sudden withdrawal and lowered interest in her physically.

Jarik had to admit that at the mention of her knowing Preterra something disturbing shadowed his evening. Still, she seemed nothing like his and Adaren's ex union partner. He didn't have time to comment further, as they arrived at Reema's apartment building. After taking care of the cab fee, they all entered together, things quiet between them until they went inside their mutual friend's apartment. A large party was already underway inside the plush, ultra modern, two-story condo. A slender Lyndaran woman with braided red-blonde hair and dressed in a halter-top evening gown of soft mauve, greeted them upon their arrival.

Adaren and Jarik hugged their close friend, then moved away as the woman greeted Thela. "How on Lyndara did you three meet? This is so delightful, and I'd hoped to introduce you all tonight."

Thela smiled and gave a half-hug as was custom amongst the females on Lyndara. Jarik liked that she knew some of their customs. "I was to meet our old school acquaintance Preterra at Throttles tonight before your party. She never showed. Jarik and Adaren came to my aid when some jerk tried to make a pass at me."

"That's just like her. And I'm glad they were there to help you. Well, you two," she shook a finger at Jarik and Adaren, "don't let it spoil your evening just because Thela knows your ex hussy. Come, Thela, let me introduce you to some of my other friends."

As Reema led Thela away from them, Jarik felt a great loss. For a few moments, he stayed quiet, watching Thela's lovely body move around the room.

He'd only known her a few hours, but it felt longer. And his body ached for her greatly. He felt Adaren lay a hand tentatively on his shoulder. Jarik turned towards him, seeing the concern in his beloved's face.

"I read her emotional vibes, Jarik. Thela was really surprised we knew and were involved with Preterra. We can't hold that against her."

He nodded. "I don't intend to. Thanks."

"Good. Let's go get some refreshments and see if we can't get the lovely Thela to join us later on tonight if she's not too tired."

Jarik chuckled, no longer feeling disturbed that Thela knew Preterra. The bitch was nowhere near the Earthwoman's classy, alluring level. From the moment his eyes met hers, something inexplicable washed over him. Jarik sensed that his bond-partner also felt the overwhelming sensation. Adaren looked like he couldn't get enough of the Earthwoman's appealing company. He and Adaren mingled for some time around the room, before Reema allowed them near their main interest that night.

\* \* \* \*

Thela didn't feel as crushed here at Reema's gala. There were not as many people here as there had been at the nightclub. She couldn't remember all the names of the people her friend introduced her to, but didn't let it bother her. Finally, she and Reema got a few minutes to themselves out on the large walk around patio off to one side of the apartment's main room. Glad no one else stood out on the moonlit balcony, she let out a long breath, thankful for a few minutes of quiet.

"I'm glad you came to my pre-bash, Thela."

"Pre-bash. On Earth we celebrate our birthday in one day." Thela chuckled, remembering now that the Lyndaran's took three days to celebrate their birthdays in various ways. "Oh yeah, and I guess that's good, because I left your present back at the restaurant studio complex you rented me for my duration here."

"Have you had a chance to glean over it yet?" Reema leaned back against the steel railing surrounding the patio.

"Yes, yesterday and most of today. I'm somewhat settled in now and have had fun looking over the kitchens and the eating area below the top living area. It is exactly what I was looking for. I can't thank you enough for the chance to use it. I might be tempted to stay here."

"I am glad it is what you hoped for. My company owns it, and with a little sweet talk, the partners were more than glad to have it draw some income while we have it on the market. Although it is a terrific spot for a small restaurant, we haven't gotten the asking price we want."

"Well it is great for the cooking practice I want to do here while I'm on vacation. I didn't get to do as much as I would have liked back

home at my second job. Thanks for renting it to me."

"Glad I could help. Well, I better get back in to my guests, I suppose. Glad you could come by. And I expect you to cook up something scrumptious for me soon." Reema laughed then pointed to the room inside where they could see the guests through the veranda door. "So do they, I believe."

Thela turned her head to view what she spoke of, seeing Jarik and Adaren waiting inside for her. "That's something I'd like to get cooking, Reema."

"Then you're very taken with them?" she asked. "Adaren and Jarik are good men."

"I have no doubts, Reema, in many ways."

"Perhaps they'd like a tour of the restaurant you are considering buying."

"Good pitch on both." Thela chuckled. "But I'm definitely going to give them a very personal tour. Good night, my friend."

Thela smiled slyly at her friend, then arm-in-arm went down with her into the crowd of people. Jarik and Adaren didn't take long to get close to her again. She smiled up at them, determined to take Reema's suggestion.

"Perhaps now we can continue that conversation that we never got to start. Reema thought you two might like a tour of the place I've rented from her company. It would please me to show it to both of you tonight."

Adaren leaned down to her right ear and whispered, "There's nothing more I'd like to do than please you tonight, Thela."

Jarik leaned towards her. "I would like very much to take that tour and finish more than just a conversation."

It wasn't long before they left the party with her.

#### Chapter Five

Arms as wide as her slender thighs embraced her from behind. She felt Adaren pulling her into his web of lust. Slowly Jarik stepped in front of her, reaching out with a single talented touch to run gently, meaningfully over her breasts. Thela shivered from the sinful look she saw in Jarik's dark blue eyes, and felt deliciously overwhelmed with the suggestive grinding of Adaren's crotch pressing against her bottom.

"Soft and slow," Jarik whispered into her left ear. "We'll take you deliciously slow. We want to please you and see you pleased."

"I want to lick you all over." Adaren leaned his mouth close to her other ear. "I want to know what it's like to tease your luscious Earth body and see if you taste as exotic and delicious as I've dreamt about all night. Neither of us has done that before." His warm breath tantalized her cheek as his hands did her buttocks. "You want me to please you, don't you?

Her throat constricted. She could barely speak. "Yesss...oh so much."

"Then I want to touch your breasts, knead their thickness between my hands." Adaren said huskily. "I want to see your face light up with the desire he brings you from licking you even lower down your sexy body."

Heat pooled down into her cunt. Oh, she wanted this too. Thela could only nod as his hands came around to cup her underneath her aching breasts. His big hands slowly kneaded the underside of them for long agonizing moments as Jarik's hands traced the length of her mid torso stroking her up and down from her ribs to her hips and back up again.

"Yes, so lovely," he said between hissed breaths. "I've been wanting to do this all night. To know what you feel like with my hands stroking you up and down."

She gulped. She was in for a long delicious evening and didn't want it to end in a hurry. Reema said she would be in good hands, and Thela had no doubts now. The short talk they had on the brief ride to her rented abode didn't compare to what they were doing to her at this

precise and scorchingly passionate moment.

Their hands moved over her slowly from front and back. Even still clothed, her cunt was already on fire and she hadn't even been touched there. They had to have known she was a bit timid, and oh so nervous. She wasn't sure of all their sexual practices but wanted to find out. They said they had never gone down on a female before. She became excited—heatedly thrilled and filled with a delicious anxiousness to have them taste her. Soon.

To be their first in some way, besides being their first time with a woman from another planet, gave her thrills of fiery pleasure. She could tell by their own body heat, they felt similarly. From the onset, she'd felt some kind of unusual attraction for the two Lyndaran males. Something tugged not only at her body, but also in her heart. Still, right now all she could think about was how fantastic they felt against her.

And, oh, she couldn't wait to touch the hard cocks that were pressing against her. Alien or not, they responded like the males they were, even half-humanoid ones. She loved every moment of their attention. She wanted it to continue, to go on forever. By their suggestive and agonizingly slow touches, so did they.

She would let them take delight in her, show her, and tell her what they wanted to do to her. It turned her on to hear them whisper seductively what they wanted of her and do to her body. Yet, she wanted more. She wanted to please them too.

She wanted to show them just what delectable desires she could cook up. Then an idea struck her. It would feel even better—no, be even better—than here in the bedroom of the living abode above the small restaurant she temporary had use of for her personal endeavors. She stroked them both, as best she could, and then made her suggestions.

"We never got to fully explore the kitchens together. I've got some supplies there, as well as some Earth delicacies. I'd like us to go down there now, and show you two just what other kind of cooking I could do tonight."

Jarik pulled his head back, his face lit up with wonder, and his delicious mouth widened. "There's more you have in mind?"

"I don't think that one vid we saw encompassed everything, Jarik." Adaren chuckled. "You've already got me near to bursting, woman. What more could you desire, or show us?"

She licked her lips. "Let's go and I'll show you."

Thela slowly poured the silky warm mixture over Adaren's long, lean body. Just a tiny drizzle, so she could slowly tease him with her wanton tongue. Then the topping of whipped cream in twists of temptation to lick leisurely off him until she reached his sensitive nipples and went for those sparkling cherry bits her mouth watered for. His body trembled beneath her touch as she twirled the tip of her tongue on his glittering nipples. First the left one then the right. Each she suckled with slow movements to softly slurp the creamy whipped concoction off his sensitive nubs.

From a glimpse at the restaurant's shiny silver refrigerator, she saw Jarik watching in total amazed pleasure from the other long table she'd had him lay on. The minute they'd gotten downstairs to her restaurant, she'd led them straight to the kitchens. The two had watched in amused surprise as she pulled items from the silvery cabinets and refrigerator. She liked the modern, yet zagged, look of the alien kitchen. After tonight, she knew she'd buy it from Reema.

They were strong alpha males, but she'd been delighted when they'd done as she suggested, undressed and laid upon the two long, wheeled serving tables in the kitchen, without a qualm. She'd put a tablecloth on each table to keep them from shivering from the cold surface. Thela intended to heat them up soon enough.

\* \* \* \*

Jarik's body lay aflame with anticipation that soon she would do something like that to him. Heavens, he'd never seen or felt anything this erotic in his entire thirty-one seasons of life. Thela was so totally different from the women of his world, and not just with her exotic loveliness. He knew, like himself, Adaren also got turned on by her curvy, dark beauty. Yet, the blonde temptress showed them more pleasure than they'd ever experienced with other women, such as a new way to kiss.

Sure, they kissed, but never with their tongues. Nor had women he knew before taken such delight in caressing and loving every iota of a man's body. He felt tempted to reach over and take her satiny, sweet-looking chocolaty body now. However, what she was doing to Adaren had Jarik wanting to see more.

Would Adaren feel and look this exited when she did that, in turn, to his own body? The thought both excited and pleased him. Soon Adaren could, in turn, watch. Thereby, getting all hot and flustered over what Thela would do to Jarik's body. She said she'd do something special to each of them. Hell, if his were anything like the tasty temptations she was doing to Adaren, he'd invest in her

restaurant venture with no questions asked.

He'd never seen his friend's nipples glow so heatedly. Being an antennae sensitive, he could mentally reach out and sense that Adaren's nipples were erect and painfully pleasured. He could almost feel her warm breaths caressing his own chest as she blew softly over Adaren's hard chest. The man moaned, and Jarik's eyes darted to Adaren's groins. Hell, Adaren was growing nicely...nice hell, the man enlarged fully. He grinned with devilish delight.

Adaren hadn't hardened like that for him in a long time, and instead of being upset, Jarik just found it that much more arousing. His own cock wavered up and down, wanting some of that agonizing attention Thela gave his bond-partner. Damn, she was talented with that pink tongue of hers. What the hell else were Earth women capable of?

\* \* \* \*

The brush of silken bristles moved slowly across the length of his rock-hard body. Delicately, the Earth beauty made tiny swirls with the edible chocolate paint onto him. Droplets danced like teasing hands as they rolled down the side of Jarik's tapered hip. Gently she traced the path of the tempting drizzle with one finger. Then, like a soft, hot whisper, her tongue followed its lead.

Jarik finally found out where more of her skilled talents lay. It was one thing to see her do this tongue dance of exploration on Adaren, quite another to feel that hot tongue of hers gliding all over his trembling body. Crud, he wanted to be inside of her now, but not before she finished licking him with her hot tongue. Damn, if this was anything like the inferno that Adaren felt, Jarik was sure he'd burst before she got even lower. Moans escaped him as her mouth trailed and circled down his body. Then she slowly suckled the tip of his cock where she'd painted him with that delectable edible stuff she'd called chocolate syrup. Oh, he was damn well going to invest in whatever company she intended to own or make or anything she wanted.

Hell yes, woman, do more...

\* \* \* \*

Adaren slowly rubbed himself, as she'd told him to do, while he watched her suckle and lick his male lover all the way from his honeyed lips to his shaft. Damn, this was better than a single night with any other lover he'd had before meeting Jarik. He could empathically sense that Jarik felt the same way. What else did this alien beauty have in store for them? Oh, he couldn't wait to feel

himself inside of her. He smiled, watching her tight, plump derriere move in soft swaying movements as she did her magic on Jarik's hardened shaft. Her mouth going down over his chocolate-painted cock nearly made him explode right there and then.

He knew he couldn't wait much longer to finally posses her. Her cunt, he licked his lips at the thought, would probably taste like the sweetest ambrosia his world produced. Sure, they touched and caressed other women, but never had he or Jarik licked a woman between her thighs before. Thela delighted them with her Earthy, tasty temptations. He wanted more of her, and to taste her hot dark depths.

He got up from the rolling table and moved over behind her. The minute he leaned over and kissed her luscious rumps, she gasped. He grinned down at Jarik. Jarik knew what he was thinking. His friend eased the startled Earth woman off of him, and he and Jarik laid her down on the table. She was surprised by their actions, but looked totally delighted. She laid her hands behind her head, and he was glad that she stayed there to see what they would do to her. Adaren didn't intend to make her wait long.

Adaren took the soft brush she'd painted Jarik with and slowly drizzled some of the leftover syrup over one half of her body from her large right breast down to her right thigh, then passed the small bucket and brush over her to Jarik. Jarik in turned did the same. They then put the bucket to one side and the two bent towards her, to do to her as she had done to both of them.

Adaren knew his friend ached with need. He could also tell Jarik wanted this. It was only fair to taste this succulent alien dish and to share her with his bond-partner.

#### Chapter Six

Thela thought their brief time dancing in the nightclub was fantastic, but the moment they drizzled her body with the chocolate sweet she wanted to explode like a white-hot nova. Simultaneously, they started licking and caressing her from her breasts with those long, sizzling tongues of theirs. They did not leave any piece of her chocolate-covered body untouched as the two made their way down to her thighs. There they tasted each other. It was such a scorching turn-on to watch them French kiss as she'd shown them. Then they lowered their heads and each took turns sucking the outside of her pussy.

First Jarik used his palm to open one of her labia lips then Adaren did likewise. Both their long, thick tongues darted down to suckle the drizzled chocolate. Thela trembled beneath their heated, sexual onslaught. She panted in pleasure at having both these men solely and completely focused on her body. Inside, she was on fire with need for them. Jarik's tongue seem to intermingle with Adaren's as the two opened her pussy lips further and thrust their tongues in and out of her heated, wet cunt. She creamed sporadically against their fantastic invasions. They placed a hand on her thighs, preventing her from writhing too much.

When they both stuck a finger in her and started thrusting it in and out, she exploded. Their garbled moans of pleasure sent her nearly over the edge again. She glanced at them before looking at a side mirror in the room, her eyes widened to see one long tongue and several fingers thrusting inside her. Their alien tongues had indeed meshed slightly, and she was having one of the most fantastic mouth fucks she'd ever had. Frig no, she was having the best tonguing orgasm of her life.

She writhed as they continued for what seemed like hours to fuck her with their talented hands, mouths, and fingers. She came again, and then they moved back, before each one in turn started to lap her up until none of the chocolate or her creamy desires were flowing between her thighs and over her pussy. Slowly they licked back up her body until they came to her breasts. They each took one of her nipples in their mouths, lathed and suckled it. Their mouths took in as much as they could before they pulled back.

She glanced at their fully erect cocks and was pleased she could make them so filled with desire. They took her hands and pulled her up into a sitting position. Adaren motioned her to stay there as the two of them moved slightly away from the table. Curious, she cocked her head to one side as the two touched hands then stepped back a few feet from her.

"Now let us pleasure you a bit more our way," they said in unison.

The two men stepped closer to the table and she watched with growing interest as each of their cocks started growing longer, slightly thinner, and tilted upwards. Then to her surprise, their hands clasped their cocks together. Thela's eyes widened as they removed their hands and their hard cocks glowed like their glittering eyes, which were filled with intense desire. Soon, their shafts were a whole cock, yet nowhere did she see that it hurt them.

There was plenty of room around their bases for movement, and their balls were slightly bouncing and embracing each other's. It was the most incredible thing she'd ever seen. Curiously, she got off the table to move around them and saw that they were indeed meshed into one long, hard erection. Her pussy drenched with anticipation. She wanted them inside her more than anything.

"Our desires await you, lovely Thela." Adaren reached out for her hand.

Jarik took the other and said, "Now mesh with us and know the full pleasures we can all bring each other."

Then the two brought her hands over their cock. She instinctively knew they wanted her to caress and lick it. She bent over and sucked the large head into her mouth as far as she could. Their cock adjusted to her mouth and she was able to get the head of it partly down her throat. Her head bobbed up and down over them as her hands caressed and stroked the thick alien shaft.

Their wild guttural groans only impeded her to do more. Two sets of male hands came around her, fondling and caressing her buttocks and cunt. Fingers thrust in and out of her drenched vagina. Her whole body became aflame with need again. She wanted this alien cock of theirs in her pussy. As if sensing what she wanted, they pulled her away from them and slowly unmeshed. She felt saddened for a

moment, but they soon made her feel better.

They pulled her in between their bodies and Jarik told her to move her legs wide apart. She did so, and the two bent their knees and widened their stance. Then they put the heads of their penises in between her legs and rubbed her clit, pussy, and buttocks. They came up under her cunt, and soon she could feel the heat from both cocks starting to mesh again. Jarik and Adaren took her by the waist and slowly lifted her up and over their unified shaft. She opened her legs as wide as she could for them.

The two slid her slowly over them, filling her with their incredible alien meshed erection. Her cunt burst with juices as they filled her to the hilt. Adaren kept hold of her by her waist as Jarik kept his arms around her holding her by her hips. She tiptoed up between them, and moved as best she could up and down, over their cock. Their rhythm increased and soon they were pumping her furiously. Like practiced artisans of a strange dance, they thrust into her hard and strong, sending strange vibrations of shocking heated desires up through her soaked cunt and into the rest of her enflamed body.

Both men shook violently against her. Their cock jolted rapidly in and out of her until she could feel them reaching their inferno. The two rolled their heads backwards and screamed out like wild animals in heat as they exploded in her. She cried out with agonized pleasure as she hit her own peak.

Slowly they melted down into a kneeling position on the floor. As their cock started sliding out of her, it softly unmeshed and they each bent to kiss her neck. Their hands fondled her body gently and softly.

Jarik parted her pussy lips and slid a few fingers in and out of her. Adaren kissed her deeply and fondled her breasts. She shook violently as one last orgasm shot wildly through her and she collapsed against their sweating bodies. Their hands and arms moved to embrace her and enfold her within their arms.

\* \* \* \*

Upstairs moments later, they bathed in a large whirlpool tub. They sat with their legs over one another's, their male sacs bouncing in the water against each other's. Thela stood up slightly in the water. Their hands reached up and caressed her thighs. They fondled her labia and deep within her inner recesses. Jarik and Adaren took turns sliding fingers in and out of her slick channel, along with taking turns teasing and licking her clit.

#### Mélange

She shuddered with a quick orgasm. Moments later, she put a leg on either side of their hips and lowered herself over their hardened, entwined cocks. Their meshed shafts felt whole inside of her as they filled her, stretching her womanhood until she could not be filled anymore. This time as they caressed her and kissed her, she moved over them. Her breath escaped in gasps as she thrust up and down over their unified shaft. The water splashed against their bodies and in between them. They all screamed out in ecstasy as the waves of desire reached higher than the splashing water. The men enfolded her in their arms and all three sat kneeled together in the deep bathing pool for long moments.

Then Jarik and Adaren slowly pulled out of her and they gently washed her, and then each other. They got out of the tub with her, dried her off lovingly, and took her over to the huge bed within the sleeping area. This time they pleasured her, only more thoroughly, exploring every ounce of her body with their fingers, tongues and lips. She orgasmed several times more, and felt complete as she had never felt before.

In fact, these two wonderful men touched her mind, body and heart in ways she'd never experienced before. And when their hands and arms moved around to embrace her, she knew they felt the same as she did.

"Thela, you are one unique and fantastic woman. I'm hoping you are intending to make this an extended business and pleasure trip."

She kissed Jarik for his wonderful words.

"I could get used to being enthralled by your tasty temptations for the rest of my life." Adaren put in, squeezing her.

She kissed Adaren's trembling lips, and then smiled. "Now that's an offer I can't refuse from such delightfully scrumptious sweethearts as you two. I think there's more in store for all of us."

Gently, both men entwined her within the heat of their bodies, and the three of them fell into a satisfyingly blissful sleep, with dreams of tempting sweet sensations to come.

The End

# Callin' The Shots By Karen Rose

Vin desires Lanier; but will this hardcore baller follow his heart and call the shots that will bring him love?

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/designingwritersblues/

http://theqspot.blogspot.com/

### Callin' The Shots By Karen Rose

"Are you kidding me?" Lanier Lange stood in her editor's office, hands on hips. "He's an athlete, for God's sake!" She said 'athlete' the way Paris Hilton would say 'Wal-Mart.' Taking another step into the room, she rubbed at her temples, hoping to tamp down the migraine that she could feel building. Maybe she'd pulled her hair back into its trademark bun too tightly that morning. Or maybe her editor was a full-blown idiot. "I won't do it."

But he just gave her a bemused smile and shook his head the way a condescending parent might. "Come on, Lanier. You know you aren't in any position to make ultimatums. Now get your sweet ass out there and go do your damn job."

Lanier clenched her fists, her heart pounding with fury. The bastard was right, she didn't have a choice. Once a rising star in the world of journalism, she'd nearly tanked her career by giving in to her then fiancé's request that she 'stay at home and learn to be a real wife.' Six months later, her engagement ring was fish bait and she was trying to reclaim her spot in the newsroom, not an easy thing to accomplish, especially for a woman. Reporting the news was still very much a man's game, and, while she had the talent and the drive, she'd never really been able to play with the big boys.

Take Hyde, her editor, for instance. Oh, what she wouldn't give to tell him off for all the times he'd humiliated her with his benign style of sexual harassment. But no, years of being raised as a lady forced her to suffer in silence, a permanent smile pasted firmly on her lips. 'Don't make a fuss, Lanier. It's unseemly for a lady to raise her voice.' Her mother's firm tone still echoed in her ears, even after all this time. So, instead of telling Hyde to take a flying leap, she simply nodded. "I'll get right on it."

"Good." His eyes roved over her body, clad in an expensively tailored pale blue suit from Nordstrom. His beady-eyed gaze stopped

at her middle. "Looks like you've put on a few, anyway. Do you some good to get out in the field again, after all those days at home with nothing but Oprah for company, huh?"

Her cheeks flamed red, but the smile remained in place. Lanier lifted her chin and walked out of the office, feeling his eyes on her behind the entire way. Doubtless he noticed the extra padding back there, too. She'd always been thin as a rail, but ever since her engagement had gone south, she'd used comfort food as anesthesia. As soon as this assignment was in the can, she'd renew her gym membership and commence with her usual workout regime.

Making her way back to her tiny desk in the bullpen, she took a few deep breaths until her body temperature went back to normal. Once in her seat, she moved the mouse to wake up her computer. Hyde's secretary had emailed her the contact information for her next assignment, and she jotted down the number of Vincent Payton's agent on a piece of paper. Lanier didn't know squat about basketball, but a person would have to be living under a rock not to have heard about the NBA's newest bad boy. On the court, they called him 'The Hypnotizer' and off the court, well, his scrapes with both the law and the ladies were legendary. Although she wasn't sure that the kind of women he associated with could technically be called ladies.

She found more than two thousand hits associated with his name on Google. She clicked on the first link, which took her to a site called Jumpman23, where she discovered that Payton was a protégé of Michael Jordan's. Apparently, he'd been a member in good standing of something called 'The Breakfast Club'—a group of rising stars that Jordan had taken under his wing. Well. Anyone associated with His Airness couldn't be all bad. She clicked on the photos section and her face immediately reddened, although this time it wasn't from anger. She saw Vin Payton, in his famous ad for men's underwear, his long, lean body corded with ropy muscles. He wore a pair of boxer briefs, and they fit him like a second skin, allowing her to see the massive bulge underneath. No way is that all him. There's got to be a sock or two stuffed in there. His skin was the color of rich milk chocolate and a variety of tattoos fought for dominance on his arms, chest, and even the side of his neck. "Oh my," she breathed, leaning closer to the screen to take in his cleanly-shaven head, penetrating dark eyes and full lips twisted into his trademark scowl.

A strand of blonde hair fell from her bun and she impatiently brushed it away. She was a reporter, not a groupie, for God's sake! Why, it bordered on unprofessional, leering at the man like this! Lanier straightened up to her usual ramrod position and clicked the button that took her back to the Google homepage. This was just another assignment, and a fluff piece at that. Vin's management team was attempting to spin his image into something a bit more family friendly. Lanier had been all but ordered to write a piece that showed his softer side. She snorted softly, thinking that if those muscles were any indication, the man didn't have one. Giving herself an admonishing shake, she picked up the phone to call his agent. Against her better judgment, she would take the assignment and do her best. In her heart, she knew she didn't have a choice.

\* \* \* \*

"Vincent. Would you mind turning down that incessant noise and listening a moment? I would think that matters concerning your career would be of interest to you."

Vincent 'Vin' Payton heaved a sigh; people were in his ear 24/7, all wantin' a piece of him. Without taking his eyes from the XBox 360 game, he said, "Why you so pressed, G? I already told you, I'll do the damn thing." His agent meant well, but damn! Couldn't a brother get a hot minute to himself? He turned the volume down a couple of notches on the Dirty South tracks that played as a backdrop to *And 1 Streetball*, a game so fresh it hadn't even come out in the stores yet. Even so, he could still feel the impatience rolling off G in waves. "What?" he growled out, his fingers furiously working the controls.

Graham Hudson, or 'G', as Vin always called him, moved his bulk between his client and the plasma screen television. A man of extreme proportions, he all but obliterated the game's high-tech graphics. "The interview is all set. I spoke with the editor myself, and he's assured me that the reporter is willing to play ball, so to speak." He allowed himself a small smile at the play on words, but Vin just sucked his teeth in annoyance. Typical. For someone who commanded a salary in the high seven digits, he could be as stubborn as a four-year-old. The real Vincent Payton lay carefully hidden beneath layers of attitude and posturing.

"Whatever. Move yo' big ass on out the way, Supersize. I'm tryna get my game on, here."

"Please assure me that you will be on your best behavior, Vincent. You don't want to lose your endorsements. The public needs to see the softer side of the Hypnotizer." Graham folded his arms across his chest, hoping that this would be the one time when Vincent would listen. "McDonald's has expressed concern over using you in their new campaign."

Vin looked up. "Say what? All over my ass for months, and now they want to pull the rug out from under a brother. Fuck!" He threw down the game controller and rose, crossing the large room in two long strides. A full array of exercise equipment stood in the corner and he picked up two heavy dumbbells, curling them up and down effortlessly. "You better handle that, G. Ain't that what I pay you for?"

"Indeed it is. However, what you don't seem to understand is that I need to be able to sell you to these companies. In light of your continuous negative publicity, this is not an easy task." The agent picked up a glossy magazine from the desk. "The latest issue of *Vibe* has you quoted as saying, 'I get more pussy than any other athlete, including Wilt the Stilt. His dick ain't got shit on mine.' Then it says that you pulled down your pants and showed your...equipment to everyone in the room."

"Hey, that reporter was on her knees 'fore I even got my pants all the way down. Bitch could suck the chrome straight off the rims, for real. Had her some big ass titties too," he grinned, using his hands to demonstrate the size of the breasts in question. "Sides, I didn't say nothin' that ain't the truth, so why you trippin'?"

Graham threw up his hands in despair. "You simply refuse to understand. These corporations are run by rich white men. They do not like to hear that the face of their product likes to..." he frowned down at the magazine, "...get his freak on with as many different bitches as possible." His pudgy face twisted with disapproval, and he dropped the magazine hastily, as though touching it would infect him. "If you could just drop the façade for a moment, and be yourself, we wouldn't have these problems."

"Bunch a old-school Gumps, what they are," Vin replied, switching to hammer curls. "All married to blue-haired biddies who don't never give it up." He barked out a laugh, shaking his head. "Maybe once a year, on they birthdays, but that's it. I like to fuck, what's wrong wit' that?" He'd be damned if he'd let the press see past all the hype. Once you let those vultures get a peek into your private life, you were screwed.

Graham did not argue with that logic. He had tried too many times before. "All I ask is that you behave yourself around this reporter. Keep your pants on, and try to use some of that devastating charm all your fans seem to see. God knows I never have."

"That's 'cause I ain't tryna fuck you, G," laughed Vin, throwing the weights down. They fell with a solid thud on the heavily carpeted floor. He pulled off the black Nike tank he was wearing and dropped to the floor for push-ups. "Can I help it if the females throw themselves at me? I'm a charismatic motherfucker, dog." As he spoke, he counted off push-ups under his breath, stopping when he reached fifty. "Look, I got company comin' in a minute. Make yourself scarce. I'll holla at you in a few." Jumping to his feet, he grabbed another set of weights.

"Just make sure your 'company' is gone before the reporter gets here." Graham picked up his briefcase and walked to the door. "And try not to trash the suite too badly. It's getting more and more difficult to book you into hotels." He gave his client a final, pleading look. "Don't fuck this up, Vincent. Please." He wanted to say more, but he knew Vincent wouldn't listen. It was a shame, because the man that lived underneath the hype was far different from the trash-talking ghetto boy whose face his client wore for the masses.

The weights clacked together over his head. "You worry too much, G. It's all gravy. Go on, get yourself something to eat. I know you hungry." Vin laughed as his agent heaved a long-suffering sigh before walking out of the suite, slamming the door with a shade more force than necessary.

Alone in the spacious room, he stripped off the rest of his clothes and grabbed a protein shake out of the mini-fridge. So the McDonald's people were trying to pull out of the deal, huh? That worried him more than he let on to G. Probably be smart to play ball with this reporter, tone down the attitude and all that, just for the sake of protecting his money. But that shit rankled him; he'd been raised to stay true to himself, keep it real, as they said. Putting on a minstrel show for the public equaled selling out in his book. Besides, it was nobody's damn business how he really lived his life. Past experience had taught him the hard way. Showing any sort of vulnerability to the public was a sure way to bury a burgeoning career.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. Probably that girl from the bar in the hotel lobby. When he'd come back from the game last night, she'd been waiting in the elevator, wearing nothing but a bottle of Hpnotiq and a smile. He'd fucked her standing up against the glass wall of the elevator, made her come twice before they even

reached the penthouse floor. Peering out the peephole, all he saw was a blonde head. Had she been a blonde? Hell, he couldn't remember if she'd had hair, let alone what color it was. Still naked, he pulled open the door. "Yo, I got another bitch coming in a hot second, but you can suck me off while I wait." It was amazing, even after all this time, what women would put up with for a chance to be with a star baller. The nastier he acted, the more they seemed to like it. Sometimes he wondered whether there were any women out there who valued themselves enough to tell him to go fuck himself. In the meantime, he figured he ought to have as much fun as possible. He grabbed his dick and started stroking, stepping to the side so she could come in.

Her fancy blue suit must be some kind of costume, he decided. With her hair all pulled back like that, she looked like a librarian or one of those ladies who gave tours in museums. Whatever the reason for her straight-laced gear, it made his dick hard. "Go on, get on your knees," he prompted, pressing down gently on her shoulders.

Still standing in the doorway, the woman's face turned bright red. Her mouth worked like a fish on a line, and her wide-set gray eyes nearly popped out of her head. "You...you...you!" she sputtered, little flecks of saliva spraying the air. "Take your filthy hands off me! How dare you treat me like I'm some kind of...prostitute!" The last word came out in a high-pitched squeak. She backed out of the room into the hallway, glaring at him as though he were a serial killer.

"Slow your roll, baby," he laughed. What kind of game was this ho playing? Must be some kind of freaky role-play shit like they did on HBO late-night. He could get with that. "Damn, you a nasty little freak, huh? I'ma bang your phat ass out but good, you hear?"

"Oh my God! Did you just call me *fat*?! You...you *bastard*!" Turning on her heel, she ran down the hall toward the bank of elevators.

What the hell? Without thinking, he stepped out into the hallway, causing the heavy door of the suite to immediately slam shut behind him. "Shit!" He jiggled the door handle, but it was locked tight. "Shit!" he swore again. The hallway was cold, especially for a black man, and a bare-assed one at that. Didn't a couple of his teammates have rooms on this floor? He frowned, trying to recall the room number. Finally, he just strode down the hall and chose a door at random. After a flurry of muffled giggles, the door swung open.

"Oh. My. God!" A redhead with extremely generous curves stood gaping at him. Clad in a pair of tiny terrycloth shorts and an infant-

sized tank top that read, 'Juicy' on it, she all but quivered in shock. "You're Vin Payton!" she gasped, her eyes glazing slightly at his muscular, naked form, roaming over him until stopping at his cock, which was semi-hard from the frigid air.

"Can I borrow your phone for a hot second?" he checked out her tits in the tiny shirt. They were big and round, just like the rest of her. She was what the brothers back home would call a redbone. He watched in fascination as her nipples hardened, poking firmly out of the thin material of her shirt.

She giggled, her eyes still on his dick, which now felt hard as a rock. "That depends. Do I get to borrow that?" she asked, pointing south. A little pink tongue circled full, glossy lips.

Vin grinned. *The things I do for my fans*. He followed the redhead inside. Never in his life had he met a redhead that wasn't a full-on superfreak. *Must be somethin' in their DNA*. He concentrated on her tits, trying to distract himself from the nagging feeling in the back of his head, the one that told him he'd fucked up royally.

Once inside the room, he bent her over the bed and fucked her from behind. She was wet as a river, juices leaking out of her pussy down her thick thighs. The big girls were always like that, he'd found. Pussies like tsunamis. He pumped hard, gripping her hips tightly as she squealed and panted. Shit, it was a lucky thing that she had condoms. He had a hard and fast rule about protection. There were too many women out there, looking for the golden ticket. After she came once, he pulled out. "Turn over," he commanded, giving her a sharp smack on the ass. She complied immediately, spreading her legs wide for him.

Taking a leg in each hand, he held them up in the air before shoving himself back inside her and thrusting so hard he nearly lifted her big ass off the bed. It only took about ten strokes before he pulled out, took off the condom, and jerked off onto her belly. His seed sprayed over her like a fire hose. "That's some good shit." Grabbing a shirt from the pile on the floor, he wiped himself off and picked up the phone. Someone down at the front desk said they'd be up in less than five minutes to unlock his door. "Thanks, baby. Write down your name for me, I'll leave you a pair of tickets for tonight's game."

The redhead squealed delightedly and used a tube of pink lipstick to scrawl her name down on the hotel stationary. "Here!" she thrust it at him.

"Later." He folded the paper in half and gave her a wink "Thanks for the phone."

She giggled and let her legs fall open, her body still glistening with his come. "Anytime."

Vin smiled and went to the door. He stuck his head out in the hallway and saw that a uniformed dude stood outside his suite. "Appreciate it, man," he strode out into the hallway.

The man didn't blink so much as an eye at Vin's nakedness. "No problem at all, sir." He slid a magnetic card into the slot and the light beeped green. Opening the door, he stepped aside officiously. "Will that be all?"

It was amazing how money could make a white man bow and scrape. "Naw, I'm straight." He went inside, grabbed a fifty from his billfold and handed it to the guy. "Thanks."

He pocketed the money and held out a folded slip of paper. "A message for you, sir." With a tip of his cap, he nodded and left.

Closing the door behind him, Vin read the message, which came from G. Apparently, the crazy blonde hadn't been the chick he'd fucked in the elevator the night before. Her outfit hadn't been a costume, either. "Shit!" he said, for the third time in thirty minutes. The blonde had been the reporter, the one he was supposed to charm into helping him clean up his image. "Well, ain't that a bitch!" He shook his head, knowing this was gonna come back and bite him right on the ass.

\* \* \* \*

Unable to face the newsroom after her utter humiliation, Lanier called her friend Tara and begged her to meet for coffee. Tara was one of her oldest friends, as different from Lanier as night from day. She worked as a sales manager for a nearby hotel, so only about ten minutes passed before she arrived at Starbuck's.

She burst out laughing when Lanier related the events of the botched interview. "Laney! He didn't call you fat. Don't you watch B.E.T?" Tara sipped from her venti caramel latte, amusement all over her perfect features.

"No, I do not, and he did too call me fat. I heard him!" With an indignant scowl, Lanier emptied another packet of Splenda into her black coffee. She dearly wanted a café mocha, but with all the attention her expanding waistline had been getting lately, she decided against it. "Not only fat, but a," she leaned in closer, lowering her voice, "a whore, too! It was awful!"

Strands of Tara's professionally straightened ebony hair dipped forward onto the table as she bent double in laughter. "Honey, he said 'phat' not 'fat," she explained. "His kind of phat means he liked your ass."

"He was naked," she hissed angrily. "And his...thing...was hard."

"How big was it? They say he's huge." Tara grinned wickedly. "That man is hot as hell. I don't know what you're all in a twist about. I would love to go a round or three with him." She licked her lips and made a growling noise. "That body of his? And you got to see him in the buff? You should be one happy woman, not looking like someone stepped on your birthday cake."

The theme song from *Ice Castles* sounded, cutting off Tara's machine-gun style questioning. Lanier reached for her cell phone, cutting the song short when she flipped it open. "Lanier Lange?" she said in her most professional voice. "Oh, it's you."

"Is that him? Vin Payton?" Tara stage-whispered, practically knocking over her coffee. Lanier waved at her to hush, her hand covering her other ear to drown out her friend.

"Well, I'm sure you are sorry, but that doesn't make up for the fact that you treated me disgracefully. And that you were, well, naked." She listened, her cheeks growing pink. "I see." She put a hand over the mouthpiece of her phone. "He thought I was a groupie," she murmured to Tara. The nerve of that man. Did women of ill repute go around in five hundred dollar suits? Really. She listened some more, enjoying the sound of his rough voice in spite of herself. "I'm afraid that is quite impossible."

"What? What?" Tara scooted her chair over to Lanier's side of the table, trying to hear the conversation.

Covering the phone again, she hissed, "He wants me to meet him at a club. For the interview. Tonight." Making a disgusted face, she rolled her eyes at his arrogance.

Tara grabbed the phone out of her hand. "She'll be there," she yelled into the phone. "When and where?" She yanked the tiny phone away from Lanier's grasping hand. "Oh, I'd love to! How sweet of you!" She did a little dance in her seat and whispered, "I'm coming with you!"

"But I hate clubs! They're noisy and crowded and filled with smoke!" she wailed, knowing her complaints fell on deaf ears. Tara's mind was made up. "Give me the phone!"

With a smirk, Tara handed it over. All Lanier heard was a dial tone. "Did he hang up already? Gee, I'm sorry."

"I despise you. Have I ever told you that?" Lanier shook her head. How would she possibly be able to interview Vin Payton in a club? This was a terrible idea. "I'm going home to soak in a hot bath. I feel a migraine coming on."

"Don't you dare try to back out of this, Lanier Lange," Tara warned. "This is one of the hottest clubs in town and I've been dying to get in there. You are going to do this for me."

"I don't have anything to wear," she grumbled, giving in to Tara like she always did. "And I can't stay out too late. I have to work tomorrow."

"This *is* work," Tara reminded her, getting up and dumping her empty cup in the trash. "Besides, we aren't even meeting him there until after the game. Eleven-thirty or so."

Following her friend out the door, she groaned, "At night?" Lanier couldn't remember the last time she'd stayed up past midnight. "This is a terrible idea." Tara just grinned.

\* \* \* \*

They walked into Tara's cramped, one-room apartment; she had convinced Lanier to forego her bath in favor of finding 'something hot to wear.' Lanier wasn't at all sure about that, but she knew her own closet was woefully inadequate when it came to what Tara referred to as 'clubwear.' "You know, if you didn't spend so much money on designer clothes, you could have a much bigger apartment. A single-family home, even," she mused, looking around the tiny space. Tara wasn't much of a housekeeper on her best day, and it appeared as though a bomb had exploded in what passed for her bedroom. Lanier assumed it was where she slept, although she didn't see evidence of a bed anywhere. Probably buried under the mountains of clothes strewn all over the room.

Tara didn't hear her constructive criticism, as she stood deep within the bowels of her closet. "It's all about candy colors this season," she pronounced, bringing forth a hot pink shirtdress with a hemline so high that Lanier blushed just looking at it.

"That looks like something a streetwalker would wear." She eyed the garment with distaste, shaking her head firmly when Tara held it out to her. "No way."

With a roll of her eyes, Tara tossed the dress on top of the pile. "It's Louis Vuitton, for God's sake, and besides, I was thinking of

wearing it myself. You'd probably put a cardigan over it and hide in the corner all night, worrying that someone might notice you have legs. That dress is meant to be seen." She gave her hair a toss and returned to the closet.

Lanier rubbed her temples for what had to be the fifth time in as many minutes. Gingerly, she cleared a space on the bed and sat down, perching primly on the corner. "Why can't I just wear what I have on?" she raised her voice so her friend could hear her.

A burst of laughter came from the recesses of the closet. After a moment, Tara popped out, fistfuls of clothing in her hands. "That? Are you kidding me? OK, let me put this in terms that you can understand." She sighed, and thought for a moment. "Wearing that suit to this club would be the same as not wearing stockings to a business meeting with your publisher." The horrified look on Lanier's face made her laugh again. "So you get it."

"I get it. I just don't like it. How am I supposed to get an interview in this type of setting? I'm not like you, Tara. It's not easy for me to go with the flow." She bit her lip, recalling Hyde's comment earlier that morning. "Besides, I probably won't fit into any of your clothes anyway. Look at me, I'm a whale," she cried, rising to show Tara how her skirt was pulling at the top.

"That is your mother talking, Lanier Lange, and you know it. Christ, what are you, a six? That's positively skeletal by most men's standards, well, except for white men. They're the only ones who want women who look like prepubescent boys with breasts. You've got a great figure, but those severely tailored suits you wear are meant for women who don't have curves. You know, six o' clock type women."

"What is a six o'clock woman?" she asked, knowing her confusion showed on her face. Sometimes Tara spoke a completely different language, one that belied her strict Episcopalian upbringing.

"Straight up and down, like the hands on a clock." She demonstrated with a giggle. "Now hush up and go try this on while I make us something to drink."

She knew it was useless to argue with Tara. Taking the clothing from her outstretched hand, she went into the bathroom to do as she was told.

\* \* \* \*

The roar of the crowd made it difficult to hear the reporter's question. Vin leaned down and covered one ear, sweat still streaming

down his face. He just wanted to get his ass back to the locker room and shower, but everybody needed their pound of flesh. "Say again, man?" he asked the ESPN guy.

"How does it feel to be one of the highest-scoring players in the NBA?"

He turned on the full wattage grin. "It feels great. I'm just proud to be a part of this team. Tonight was a tough one but we came out on top. It's a great feeling." It was a stock reply, one that he spoke nearly every game night, but it was what the fans wanted to hear.

"Thanks, Vin. Back to you, Kenny." The reporter shook Vin's hand and disappeared into the throng. Another one took his place, and Vin repeated the process three times before he was finished. Wiping off his face with a towel, he went back to the bench to put on his warm-ups. Ten girls awaited him. *Must be a slow night*. Usually there were at least twenty.

"Great game, Vin," purred a brown-skinned sister in a dress so tight he wondered how she was breathing.

A second woman scowled at the first and pushed forward. "I just had my breasts done," she squeezed them together with her hands. "Will you sign them for me?" As nonchalantly as removing a shoe, she pulled up her tank top, exposing a pair of very upright double D's. The other ladies muttered angrily behind her as they jockeyed for position.

"Get those fake ass titties out of here, this ain't *Dr. 90210*," said a girl with pink braids, her thin lips twisted in a scowl. "My shit is all real, Vin, you can see for yourself." She unzipped her rhinestone covered hoodie to prove it. "34 D's and all me," she added, bouncing up and down to make them jiggle. "All jelly, no jam."

"Somebody tell this ho to put her tired saggy dugs away." The first girl elbowed Ms. 34D out of the way. "Ain't nobody tryin' to see them." She turned to Vin, pressing her body up against his. "I'll do anything you want, baby, anything. Take me back to the locker room, I'll show you what I'm working with." Her tongue darted out, allowing him to see the silver ball in the center. "I'll suck you off so good, you won't know what hit you."

"Sorry, ladies, but Vincent has a previous engagement." Graham cut in smoothly.

"Huh? He getting married?" Confusion showed on all the girls' faces.

"Can he just sign me first?" The girl with the new breasts shoved a permanent marker at Vin. "Please?"

Graham exhaled loudly, but Vin took the pen and scrawled his name on her right breast. "Come by the hotel later on, we'll party." The girls all squealed with delight. "Later," he called over his shoulder, following Graham off the court. "I ain't spendin' all night with this uptight reporter broad, just so you know."

"God forbid you do something that's good for your career," Graham muttered. "You have exactly thirty minutes before you're due to meet Ms. Lange at Butter. I put her and her friend, a Ms. Tara Sedgwick, on the list. I hope it goes without saying that you'll treat her better than you would your own mother."

"Ain't nobody I treat better than my mother," Vin retorted. "Don't worry, G, it's all—"

"Gravy. Yes, I've heard you say that a time or two before." Graham shook his head and left his client at the entrance to the locker room. The place was outfitted better than Bill Gates' summer home. Athletes reigned as the new superstars of today's society and team owners bent over backward to make certain that they had a comfortable place in which to recharge before and after games. Last time he'd been inside, there had been a bevy of willing beauties to 'massage' the players in several private rooms stocked with Frette linens and other adult entertainment items. This was in addition to the leather club chairs that surrounded four plasma screen televisions, each with three different game systems and its own surround sound stereo. But that was really just for show, as every player had his own personal television and game system of his choice in his locker, as well as a personalized chair. A small army of chefs manned a state-ofthe-art kitchen, bringing the players anything they asked for, and they asked for everything. The team's power forward was on a raw-food diet, and Graham had heard that he had his own personal chef to attend to his specially prepared meals.

One of the hard-and-fast rules of the locker room was that nothing said or done within its confines would leave the room. It was the sacred domain of these highly paid men, and as such, there was an unwritten code of honor. Owners paid massive amounts of money to make the facility a place where the athletes wanted to be, a sort of personal club where membership was limited to the team members. Vin spent a great deal of time there; it was the only place where he

truly felt comfortable. Graham watched him disappear behind the doors and hoped that he knew how much was at stake.

\* \* \* \*

Vin entered the club through a private entrance that led directly up to the VIP room. Several of his teammates were already there, flanked by women and sycophants. He scanned the room, looking for the reporter broad and her friend. As he was looking, a waitress appeared at his right, dressed in an outfit literally painted on her skin. Wasn't everyday you saw shit like that. She handed him a crystal glass. "Grey Goose and tonic. Two limes. Can I do anything else for you tonight?" Her smile told him that there wasn't much she wouldn't do.

"I'm straight for now." He took the glass and smiled at her. All his favorite things were kept on file so he wasn't surprised that she knew exactly what to bring him. "Nice canvas," he nodded down at her breasts, which were painted silver, blue, and black, his team's colors.

"It's really hard to wash it all off by myself. Sometimes I need an extra hand." She gave him a bold wink, raising her eyebrows in question.

Taking a sip of his drink, he shrugged. "Holla at me later on, then. Maybe I can help you out with that." A blonde head caught his attention; she was there, huddled in the corner with her friend, an exotic-looking brunette. Vin waded through the crowd, pausing several times to talk to his teammates before taking a seat opposite her on the plush velvet sofa. "Sorry I'm late." He gave her and the friend the mega-watt smile.

"I almost didn't recognize you with your clothes on," she replied dryly.

"And I almost didn't recognize you, period." It was true, she looked completely different than the buttoned-up woman who'd run from him in the hotel hallway. For one thing, her hair was down, falling in soft waves to just past her shoulders. It was the color of the honey butter his mom used to make for him when he was little. Instead of the prissy blue suit, she wore a cobalt blue dress with some kind of print all over it; it dipped slightly in front and hugged her curves nicely. And she did have some curves on her, he noticed with a grin. "You looking fierce for real, Lois Lane."

Her cheeks turned pink at the compliment. "This is my friend Tara," she waved a flustered hand in her direction.

He shook her hand, checking her out as he did. She looked like the Disney version of Pocahontas; somewhere in her family history, one of her peoples had gotten down with an Indian, that was for damn sure. "Nice to meet you, Tara. You like basketball?"

"I like basketball *players*," she clarified with a flirtatious grin. "Why don't you introduce me to one so you and Lanier can do your interview uninterrupted?"

"Tara!" Lanier protested, widening her eyes at the other girl. She muttered something under her breath that Vin couldn't hear. He swung around and, after a moment, caught the attention of Antwuan Holmes, who played point guard. While the girls whispered in a heated debate, he cut his eyes at the friend, Tara, then raised his eyebrows at his teammate. Antwuan gave her a quick once-over, said something to the three ladies on his arm, and then walked over. He sat down next to Vin, knocking back the rest of his drink in one quick swallow. Another one appeared at his side immediately, brought by another painted waitress.

Vin broke in on the girls' conversation. "Ant, this is Tara. Tara, meet Antwuan Holmes. He plays point guard for us. Badly," he added with a grin.

"You always comin' out your mouth with some bullshit, man. Every bucket you scored was 'cause I passed you the rock. Wasn't for me, you'd be on the bench, crying like a girl." He waved a giant hand at Vin before turning to Tara. "Why don't you and I go get to know each other so I don't knock this fool out?" Without hesitating, Tara took his hand and they were gone.

Lanier watched her friend go with an anxious expression that reminded Vin of a kid who couldn't find his mother in the grocery store. "You need another drink?" He rattled the ice in his glass, an action which brought his painted lady over double time.

"I don't really drink," she replied, turning a pair of slate gray eyes on him. They were wide set and lined in a dark color that made them look slightly slanted. He stared for a moment too long, finding it difficult to look away. "Maybe something with caffeine. I'm not really used to staying out this late." A nervous giggle punctuated her remark, making her cheeks turn pink again. He liked to see her blush, he realized. It had been a long time since he'd been around any females innocent enough to blush.

"Bring her a Red Bull," he said to the waitress. "And I need some grub—have the chef make me up an appetizer plate. Nothing with

swine in it, just crab cakes, wings, and that grilled shrimp with the pink sauce."

"The remoulade. Yes, sir, coming right up." She swung her painted breasts around so that they bounced directly in his eye level, giving Lanier her back at the same time. Women were some catty bitches. He was interested to see how Lois Lane would handle herself, and sure enough, she didn't let him down.

She cleared her throat. "Excuse me, but would you mind moving your rear end out of my face? I do appreciate art, but in this case the canvas leaves something to be desired." Vin coughed into his hand to muffle his laughter. Something about her precise, pristine way of speaking made her words sound nastier than if she'd said, "Bitch, move your fat ass out my way." He dug it.

The waitress gave her a disdainful look, but said nothing. With a swish of her painted hips, she headed back out into the throng. "You burned her pretty good, Lois."

A frown creased her brow. "I'm sorry?" Before he could explain the comment, a well-dressed foursome walked over and thrust out papers for him to sign. Then the waitress came back with their drinks and food, followed by some girls who wanted him to sign other things, and a few of his teammates talking the usual trash. It was a good thirty minutes before they were alone again.

"Sorry about that." He scooped up a handful of the shrimp and popped them in his mouth. After chewing and swallowing, he said, "You about ready to do this or what?"

"Oh! Yes, of course." She pulled a small recorder from her purse and placed it on the glass table that separated them. Before turning it on, she looked up at him with those fathomless gray eyes. "How do you do it?"

Pausing with his glass halfway to his lips, he cocked his head to the side. "Huh? What you mean?"

Her hands fluttered in the air. "I mean, how do you do it? How do you live this way, all the time? People approaching you constantly, always wanting something from you. I don't know how you stand it. Nobody's real!" Her voice rose slightly on the last words and she flushed instantly. "I'm sorry. Why don't we just get on with the interview?" Blonde hair fell in a curtain around her face as she bent forward to fiddle with the recorder.

Vin covered her small hands with one of his, stopping her movements. When she looked up, he traced the line of her face gently,

inwardly marveling at the smoothness of her skin. "Ever since I first put my hands on a basketball, people been wantin' somethin' from me. It is what it is. Matter of fact, the thing that keeps me up at night is that one day they might stop wantin'. Then what?" He could scarcely believe he'd said those words aloud, the ones that he'd never shared with anyone, not even his own mother. What was it about this woman that made him confide his deepest fears? Vin took his hands off her and sat back, feeling rattled. It wasn't an emotion that he was used to feeling and he didn't much care for it. Picking up his glass, he drained it quickly, the liquor burning down his throat to settle in a warm glow in his belly. Grey Goose was the shit.

"Then what? Then you'd get to live your life for you." She spoke so softly that for a moment he thought he was dreaming.

"Baby, I'm already living the life." He gestured around them at the opulent VIP room. "What could be better than this?"

The look she gave him seemed to go right through him. He didn't like it. It was as though she could see straight into his soul. Her lips moved as though she wanted to speak, but she shook her head, obviously thinking better of it. Finally, she pressed a button on the recorder. "Let's get down to business, shall we?"

It was as though a mask dropped over her, instantly turning her back into Ms. Priss Reporter. Vin swore he could see icicles forming over the warm gray color of her eyes. *Probably got frost on her pussy, too*. Slouching down in his seat, he wondered for a moment what she was wearing under that cute little dress. She didn't look like a thong girl, maybe those things that looked like shorts. They were pretty fly, and on that ass of hers, he bet they would look bangin'.

"Mr. Payton? Do you need a moment?" The cool, cultured tones of her voice brought him back. She sat slightly forward, a position that made her breasts push against the thin material of her dress.

His eyes on the round swells of her breasts, he drawled, "Naw, it's all good. Go on, Lois Lane, ask me your questions."

\* \* \* \*

What she wanted to ask him was would he mind taking his eyes off her chest. It made her uncomfortable, and she already felt nervous as a cat in his presence. She'd never had a man look at her the way Vin Payton did, as though she were already naked and he was about to ravish her. Combine that with his low, rough way of speaking and it was a wonder she hadn't fled the club already. But something kept her rooted in her seat, and it wasn't his bad boy good looks or his

incredible physique. No, it was the rare moment of vulnerability he'd shown her; she could tell he was the type of man who played things close to the vest. Lanier realized he had inadvertently allowed her to see a piece of him that not many people saw. The swaggering superstar image he showed to the public was very different than the introspective man she had a caught a fleeting glimpse of.

During the interview, she asked him the type of open-ended questions that she hated—reporters called them 'softballs' because they were so easy to hit out of the park. Usually, she avoided them like the plague; if you wanted to get an in-depth view of a subject, you had to hit hard and dig deep. But Hyde had been clear. She was not to ask Vincent Payton anything that wouldn't make him look as though he had a set of angel wings on back order. With a sigh, she paused for another sip of Red Bull. It had a tart flavor that she wasn't certain she liked, but it was definitely keeping her awake. Every time she finished her glass, that nasty painted woman brought her another. Really, that had to be a health code violation, walking around naked and serving food. At the very least, it was unsanitary. She wrinkled her nose. The photographer that the newspaper sent spent half his roll of film shooting the wait staff. Lanier was sure that Hyde and the rest of the boys wouldn't mind in the least. She shifted in her seat, turning her attention back to Vin. He was talking to yet another autographseeker, so she scanned the crowd, hoping to catch sight of Tara. In her hot-pink dress, she would be hard to miss, even in this gathering of the scantily dressed Beautiful People. Lanier craned her neck to see over the redwood-like stature of the basketball players that dotted the group. Nothing.

"If you wanna meet Kobe, just say the word," Vin noticed her eyes wandering around the room.

"Oh, no, I was just looking for Tara. I just have one or two more questions to ask you and then we're finished."

His eyes captured hers, their ebony color pinning her in place. "Are we finished, Lanier?" he asked in a rough whisper, using her name for the first time. She swallowed hard; his nearness was disconcerting, like being surprised in the jungle by a panther. A beautiful, graceful animal that was capable of both great speed and savage violence. It wasn't that she thought he was going to hurt her, in fact, he had been almost gentlemanly the entire evening. No, it was just that his size and strength intimidated her, their heady combination making her feel slightly intoxicated just from sitting across from him.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she responded, unable to look away from the intensity of his gaze. The man was like a snake charmer; she felt powerless under the force of his stare. A warm glow began to spread from low in her stomach, making her feel tingly and uncomfortably aware of her body in the form-fitting dress. A slow smile spread over his face and he leaned forward, closing the distance between them. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, two women bounded over, their gazelle-like limbs exposed nearly to their crotches in the tiny skirts they wore.

"Oh my God, Shannon, I told you it was him!" The first one bounced up and down, nearly landing right on Vin's lap in her excitement.

"We come to all your games, even the away ones," the second one confided, bending down to shove her full breasts in his face. *Did she think they were microphones?* Lanier was disgusted. Both women ignored her completely; it was as though she weren't even sitting right there.

Vin smiled, but Lanier noticed it seemed a bit strained. For about the zillionth time that evening, she wondered how he dealt with the pressure of being 'on' every day, all the time. Everybody wanted a piece of the superstar, but how much did he have left to give? It was too bad she couldn't write her article depicting him the way he really was, stripped free of the layers of bad boy charm he covered himself in. "Always nice to meet some fans," he nodded. "But if you don't mind, ladies, I'm in the middle of somethin' right now." He gestured to Lanier.

Both girls' expressions immediately soured. "We thought she was like your manager or something," the first one said. "Sorry." She tossed the word at Lanier with supreme disinterest, her eyes flicking over her dismissively.

"Whatever. We don't mind sharing, as long as we all get a turn." The second one shrugged. "I get to fuck you first, though. We flipped for it," she reminded her friend, who nodded obligingly.

Horrified, Lanier's jaw nearly hit the floor at their aggressiveness. Before she could refute their assumption, Vin spoke up. "Ladies, I'm handlin' some business right now. Whyn't you all go wait in the hotel lobby and maybe we can hook up later on, a'ight?"

"Oh, we get it," the first one said, smirking at Lanier. "Come on, Shannon, let's go. He's staying at the W. I saw it on TV this morning. Later, Vin," she purred, pulling her friend by the arm.

Shannon flicked her blonde curls over her shoulder and called out, "Remember, I get to go first!"

Lanier's face felt burning hot; she was certain her cheeks were the color of bricks. "Does that happen often?" she finally stammered out, unable to look him in the face. She busied herself with putting away the recorder and her notes.

"There's probably about forty of 'em waitin' in the lobby," he replied evenly. "I get so much pussy thrown at me, I don' even notice it no more."

She blinked at his crudeness. "I see." Clearing her throat to regain her professional composure, she rose, her legs shaky from the Red Bull and the lateness of the hour. "Well, thank you for your time, Mr. Payton. I'll be in touch for the follow-up." She held out her hand, but he didn't take it.

"How you plan on getting home, Lois Lane? Superman gonna swing by and pick you up?" An amused smile played on his lips; he was enjoying her obvious consternation, she realized.

"I came with Tara," she offered weakly.

"Pocahontas lit outta here 'bout an hour ago with my boy. I don't think she'll be comin' back to scoop you up."

Damn Tara. Lanier scowled. It was so like her to think of herself first. "I see. Well, it's no trouble, I'll just phone for a taxi." She had about five dollars in her purse, but he didn't need to know that.

He laughed. "In this neighborhood? I don' think so. Snow bunny like you wouldn't last ten minutes out here. Where you stay at?"

Was he speaking English? Lanier's mind raced as she tried to decipher his strange way of speaking. Flustered, she frowned up at him, biting her lip nervously. "I, um..."

"Where do you live?" he asked slowly, as though she were a child. "I'll run you home." Over her protestations, he took her by the arm and led her from the room, stopping several times to exchange a series of complicated handshakes with other men who were obviously athletes of some sort.

She trailed behind him like a lost lamb, feeling extremely out of her element. *Like Alice down the rabbit hole*. "Don't you have to get back to your hotel?" They were in an elevator now, an opulent one that he unlocked with a special key. It opened onto a parking garage and they stepped out, the door sliding soundlessly shut behind them. "All those women, they'll be waiting for you." Nearly out of breath

from keeping pace with his long strides, she stumbled when he stopped abruptly and turned to her.

"Those ho's ain't goin' nowhere," he told her with a snort. "Besides, I can't leave Superman's best girl out here in the 'hood to fend for herself. Not even Lex Luthor's that much of an asshole."

Her throat grew dry as he looped his long arms around her shoulders, pulling her closer. "You got a man, snow bunny?"

"I...I, well, I used to, but he, um, it didn't work out," she said breathlessly. My goodness, she was a professional reporter, used to interviewing political pundits and important people on a daily basis. Why was this overgrown mammoth of a man making her so tonguetied? "He said that my career was silly, that I should stay home and take care of the house. That didn't exactly thrill me." This time, her voice sounded clear and firm.

"Word? He musta been a white dude, 'cause ain't a brotha alive gonna discourage his girl from workin'," he shook his head with a short laugh. His hands trailed down her back, causing heated sparks all through her. She shivered involuntarily when her breasts brushed his chest. "Cold?" His voice was a low rumble. "I can fix that." He slouched back against the nearest vehicle, pulling her with him so her body was between his long legs. Pressed up against him like this, she could smell his scent, like toasted almonds and clean laundry. The combination was more masculine than anything she'd ever smelled before. "Don't trip, snow bunny, I ain't gonna hurt you," he murmured against the top of her head. "I jus' wanna taste you a little."

He put one finger under her chin, tipping her face up. Without warning, his mouth came down to cover hers, kissing her with a gentleness she'd never guessed him to be capable of. Things speeded up when his tongue plunged inside to tangle with hers. With a low growl, he pulled her closer, his hands sweeping down her back to cup her butt. Into her mouth, he hissed, "Damn, you got a nice ass on you, showty."

Should she say thank you? Lanier wasn't certain of the etiquette in a situation such as this. Then his hands moved up to capture her breasts and she stopped thinking altogether. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she stood on tiptoe to deepen the kiss. When his thick fingers rubbed against her nipples, she moaned out loud at the sensation. She felt his rough chuckle and heat spread through her. Easily, he lifted her against him so that her legs were on either side of him, pressed up against the car. From this position, she could feel

him, hard and insistent, pressing against her core. It was the most erotic thing she'd ever experienced. Lanier felt wild, uninhibited, locked in passion with this man right here in a public place where anyone could happen upon them. From deep in her conscience, an alarm bell sounded at that thought. What was she doing? Vincent Payton had probably bedded more women than ten normal men put together. And here she was, bucking against him like a common slut, just begging to be one of the many.

She felt his hands on her thighs, pushing up the skirt of her dress. Surely he didn't mean to make love to her right here in the parking lot? In her entire life, Lanier had never made love anywhere but in a bed, and only twice with the lights on. She gasped as his tongue circled a nipple, laving it roughly as his erection pressed into her belly. His fingers hooked into her panties and began tugging them to the side. "Wait!" she cried, pressing her palms flat against his hard chest. She squirmed in his arms like a fish on a line, suddenly desperate to stop him.

"What's the matter, babydoll? You don' want this?" His hooded gaze bore into her while he pressed her hand against his rock-hard shaft. Keeping a tight grip, he guided her hand up and down its length. "All you need to do is say the word. I ain't tryna force nothin' on you."

He let go of her hand and leaned back against the car, his watchful eyes revealing nothing. Using his chest as leverage, she put both legs back down on solid ground. Lanier wasn't sure she had breath enough to speak. Her lips felt swollen and bruised and she knew that her borrowed outfit was missing at least one button. Holding the two halves of the dress together with one hand, she took a deep breath. "I just can't do this, not here." She gestured around the brightly lit parking complex.

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Vin was torn as he watched the emotions play across her aristocratic features. On the one hand, he didn't recall the last time a woman had turned him down, which intrigued him. On the other, his dick was hard and he wanted to get off. If she'd been any other kind of broad, he'd have turned on the charm, snowing her with enough honeyed words to get her to give it up. This was a hell of a fucking time for him to develop a conscience. "Whatever. I got to get back to the crib, anyways."

"Oh? I didn't know you had children. How many do you have?" She smoothed down the front of her dress and did something to her hair that made it stay in a knot at the back of her head. He'd always wondered how women did that shit. "That'd be something good for the article, I suppose. Although, if they're all from different women, that could backfire."

"Say what?" His lips twisted in a scowl. "Look, lady, I ain't got no kids, and if I did? Best believe they'd be from one woman, not a whole grip of 'em. I ain't no stupid ass nigga, fresh off the block, if that's what you thinkin'. I know how to protect myself." He was on a roll now, and judging from the frightened look on her face, he made his point. Vin knew he should stop, just take the lady home and forget about her, but he couldn't. "Let me tell you something about black men. Not all of us are like what they show on TV and in movies, runnin' around without any education, livin' off females and leavin' a trail of smart-mouthed youngsters wherever we go. Some of us are tryna make a livin', workin' our asses off. But we ain't get no respect, naw, 'cause y'all people gotta label us, lump us all together in one backwards ass group. Damn!"

She blinked rapidly, and for a moment, he thought she would cry. Then her chin jerked up and a stubborn look came into her gray eyes. "I apologize if I misconstrued what you said. But really, half the time I can't understand what you're saying, Vincent. You said you were going to the crib, so I thought, well, you know what I thought." A strand of honey blonde hair fell from her loose knot and she pushed it back impatiently. "Sometimes I tend to go into reporter mode, and disconnect myself in order to do what's best for the story. When that happens, I don't always think of the emotions involved, just whether or not it will sell."

He could tell the admission wasn't easy for her. Softening his tone, he pulled her back in her arms. She stiffened up, but didn't move. "A'ight, it's all gravy, baby. Don't get yourself all in a twist. Look, whyn't I just run you home and we'll forget all about this."

Damn, she felt good in his arms, all small and soft. She wasn't like the other females he dealt with; he had no illusions as to why they pushed up on him so hard. The day he stopped being Vin Payton, the Hypnotizer, they would all disappear. Everyone wanted something from him, and most of the time he could tell straight from jump what that something was. But this little blonde in his arms was different.

He could feel the wheels in her mind turning as she studied him. "What you thinkin' 'bout, snow bunny?"

"I'm thinking that I don't necessarily want to go home." Color bloomed in her cheeks as she spoke, making him smile.

"I like when you blush, babydoll. I ain't used to seeing that in a female." He reached around to the back of her head and freed her hair from its knot. "That's better. Come on, I'll take you back to my spot. You know what I mean when I say that, right?" His teasing remark was rewarded with a wide smile. Taking her hand, he led her over to his ride, which was parked in a reserved spot.

Vin couldn't remember the last time, or even if there was a last time, that he'd opened the door for a woman. But he did it naturally, almost without thinking about it. She hesitated, looking up at him with that wide-eyed gaze that told him she was thinking. "You got somethin' on the brain?"

"If we go back to your...spot," she stumbled over the unfamiliar term, "will we have to go through the lobby?"

Understanding dawned. She didn't want to have to walk the freak gauntlet, and he couldn't say he blamed her. Those women rolled hard, and she was nothing like them. "You got somewhere better in mind?"

"We could go to my house," she ventured shyly. "I'm sure it's not as nice as your suite at the W, but no one will bother us there."

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"You got yourself a sweet place here," he looked around the tidy, nice-sized home. A pretty woman who paid her own bills *and* knew how to keep house. Now there was a rare animal. "You gonna show me the bedroom?"

The little flush of color on her cheeks made his dick harden. "It's upstairs," her tone softened, the blush deepening at the obvious statement.

"Lead the way."

Her room looked exactly the way he had expected. Feminine colors, a Queen-sized bed with a white duvet cover, and a bunch of those tiny pillows that women loved. Vin prowled around, checking out all the little touches that told him about her. A worn teddy bear sat in the center of two large pillows, a volume of Shakespeare as big as a doorstop on its own shelf, an array of ornate perfume bottles and lotions. She had obviously put a lot of work into making this space feel like home. He had his own house, several, in fact, but not one of

them seemed like a real home to him. Not the way this place was to her.

"You marking your territory?" she asked with a small smile. "I don't have any pets, but I've seen it done on the Discovery Channel."

In the dim light of the room, her blonde hair shone like an angel's halo. Placing the teddy bear back on the bed, he moved to where she was standing. "Funny, I would have figured you for a cat owner." His arms went around her easily, pulling her closer. Resting his chin on the top of her head, he breathed in her scent of sugar and heat. "Damn, you smell good." He felt her smile as he stroked his hands through her silky hair.

"I don't like cats, and my mother would never let me have a dog." She nuzzled against him, tentatively exploring his body with her hands.

"Poor little snow bunny," he murmured as his hands dropped down to work the buttons on her dress. "I bet you had a pony, though, huh?" She looked like the type of girl who rode horses.

The tiny buttons on her dress proved too much of a challenge for his fingers. "Let me finish," she stepped back with a shy smile. The dress fell to the floor when she finished, leaving her in a simple white lace bra and matching bikini panties. After a moment, she took those off too, using her foot to move them to the side. She started to move back into his arms, but he held up a hand to stop her.

"Lemme look at you a minute." His gaze traveled the length of her body, from her long, well-shaped legs, to the sweet curve of her hips, and then across the flat expanse of her stomach. Damn, she was beautiful, lookin' like one of those silent statues he'd seen in a museum once. All smooth and marble white. Her breasts were fuller than they'd looked under the dress, with rosy-tipped peaks that hardened under the intensity of his stare. "Turn around for me." He twirled a finger in the air, his gaze never leaving her.

Her lashes fluttered and her lips parted slightly. "Why?"

Vin stepped closer, tipping her face up to his. "Because I wanna look at your ass, Lanier." Her eyes widened at his rough, almost commanding tone.

"I hate my...ass," she whispered, her cheeks coloring at the use of the expletive.

Just like a white girl. He tried not to laugh. "How you gonna hate on a part of yourself, girl?" He slid his hands down to grip the round cheeks of her ass. "Be proud of that sweet ass, babydoll. You lucky

you ain't got one of them bony, flat ones like your friend got." He gave it another squeeze to illustrate his point. What he really wanted to do was smack it, but he had a feeling she wasn't quite ready for that.

"Tara? But her body is perfect! She weighs like 112 pounds!"

Vin burst out laughing. He could tell she still didn't understand, and the last thing he wanted was to embarrass her. So he took her hand and guided it down to his shaft. "Feel that?" He moved her hand up and down its length, watching her face change like it did in the parking lot. He was under no illusions about his equipment; it was big, it was thick, it was all that and a bag of chips. "That's my dick getting hard like shit over your ass, babydoll. Believe that." The slight frown on her face told him that the wheels were turning in her mind again so he took the opportunity to move his hands between her legs. Using his knee, he nudged them farther apart.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd taken the long route to sex, taking the time to explore a woman's body and make her beg for him. Lanier's entire body felt flushed with heat, her head lolled backward as he stroked the soft hairs of her pussy. Vin bent down to kiss her, tasting her sweet mouth as he stuck one finger up into her wet heat. She gasped into his mouth and he stroked harder, making her writhe against him. Damn, he couldn't wait to get inside her, her pussy felt so tight and hot. "You ready for me, baby?" His whisper resounded as more of a growl, but he was getting edgy with need now, and the time for gentleness was over.

"Wait!" she cried out as he began to lift her up onto the bed.

Shit. Not again. "What?" He tried to keep the impatience out of his tone, but damn. She better not be playing games with him.

"Protection. We need protection." She scrambled up, reaching into a drawer on the bedside table. "Here." She thrust the small package at him, her gray eyes glazed with passion.

Realizing that she wanted it just as much as him, he looked down at the condom wrapper. Damn. "Baby, this ain't gonna work for me."

"But I thought you wanted to," she broke off, biting her lip in confusion.

"Naw, naw, I want to, believe that," he assured her. "But this mini-me size thing ain't gonna work for what I got." He tossed the condom back onto the bed. "Lemme go see if I got somethin' in my ride. My car," he clarified after seeing the look on her face.

Hastily, he pulled on his pants and double-timed it down the stairs. He found a package of condoms in his glove compartment, so he grabbed a fistful and went back upstairs. "A'ight, now we ready to get this party started."

Drinking in the sight of her naked body splayed out on the bed, he stripped off his clothes and joined her. Gently, he rolled her onto her back while he lay on his side, his hands already moving between her legs. She was still wet, but not wet enough, so he pushed a finger inside her, probing her tight heat. "Damn, your pussy feels like silk, girl," he murmured over her mouth. In the dark, he couldn't see her face, but he knew she was blushing. "You don' like it when I talk like that?"

"I like it," she admitted softly, pulling his head down to meet hers. He kissed her roughly, taking her hand and wrapping it around his dick. She stroked him cautiously at first, but when he added another finger to the one already inside her, she began pumping harder, matching his rhythm.

"You ready for me, baby?" he growled. Raising up so he could see directly into her eyes, he saw the answer there. Vin sat up, pulling his fingers out of her pussy, to rip open the foil package. He rolled the latex sheath over his cock and rolled on top of her in one smooth movement. "You all right?" *Damn, where had that come from?* He shook his head, wondering why, out of all the women he'd fucked, why this one felt different. She nodded her assent, her arms snaking around his back.

She tilted her pelvis up, bucking against him. He could smell her arousal, that spicy, pungent scent that was all female. Some men didn't care for it, but it drove him wild, made his cock harder than iron. It took supreme effort on his part not to drive into her and pound the shit out of her. Gently, he rubbed the tip of his dick against her slick entrance. "Please, Vin," she cried, pushing up to meet him.

"Tell me you want this dick, Lanier. Tell me you want *my* dick." As he spoke, he began thrusting inside her, slowly, one inch at a time. It was hard, because he wanted to bury himself to the hilt—she was soaking wet and her pussy felt hot as a furnace. But, for once, he checked his passion; he was a big man and he knew he would hurt her if he didn't take it slow.

"Vin..." Her fingernails pressed into his back to convey her need. But he wasn't letting her off that easy. "Tell me, Lanier. Tell me you want this dick." Another inch, oh, fuck, she was so damn tight! Vin wondered what kind of men she'd had before him, and whether or not they'd been able to satisfy her. It didn't matter, because tonight she would find out what satisfaction really meant. He gave her another inch and she gasped, her breath coming in little huffs.

"I want it, Vin," she cried. "I want your dick in me, now! Please!" Her nails scored down his back.

Unable to hold back anymore, he complied, shoving himself in her as far as he could go. She screamed, holding on for dear life as his hips moved like pistons, ramming in and out. Her legs came up and hooked around his back, allowing him to go deeper. Vin slid his hands underneath her, cupping the cheeks of her ass to lift her higher. In this position, it was easy to hit her spot, and he could tell as soon as he did because she went wild, thrusting up to meet him, trying to increase the speed of his rhythm.

She was close now, her head lolling from side to side as she struggled to reach her release. Vin opened his eyes to watch her; it was mad hot to see a woman in the throes, especially one who wasn't used to getting it on the reg. He knew without being told that she was that kind of woman. "You gonna come now, snow bunny? I want it all over my cock," he growled softly, tickling her ear with his explicit command.

Another couple of thrusts and she reached her peak, her eyes opening wide as she cried out his name, as well as a few others. "I'm not God, baby, but go on and call me that if you want." Her soft cries became gasps of laughter which he quickly muffled with his mouth. Damn, he wanted to turn her over and hit it from the back, watch that nice, round ass while he pumped in and out. But her pussy was already starting to tighten back up and he knew she wouldn't be able to take all of him that way. Instead, he sat back on his haunches, pulling her with him so she rested on his thighs. She felt so light in his arms; he gripped her firmly by her hips and bounced her up and down, letting her ride his cock. Her breasts were right up in his face, their nipples brushing against his lips. He captured one and sucked it into his mouth, grazing it slightly with his teeth. She cried out again, the cheeks of her ass slapping against the hard surface of his thighs. Her pussy grew slick against his shaft and he groaned, feeling his balls tighten up. "I'm gonna come, baby," he hissed, his head buried between her breasts.

She grabbed onto his shoulders and bucked hard against him. The bedsprings squealed in protest; hopefully she didn't have nosy neighbors. A second orgasm took her and she screamed again, sending him over the edge. For the first time in his life, he wished there was nothing between them, wished he could shoot deep inside her, marking her as his. After a moment, she eased off him and curled up in a heap, exhausted. "That was incredible," she said slowly, still trying to catch her breath.

"It was a'ight," he teased, sliding the rubber off. Holding it gingerly, he went into the bathroom to take a piss and flush the thing down. When he returned, she was huddled under the covers, her eyes closed. "You 'sleep?"

"Mmmmm, not yet," she mumbled. Vin stood there, watching her. He didn't spend the night with females; he had the 'hit it and quit it' act down to a science. So why was he still there? "Come to bed," she whispered, and before he could think better of it, he slid in beside her. It was just one night. He could go back to being the Hypnotizer tomorrow.

In the early hours of the morning, he woke to find his hand cupped around her breast and her ass pressed up against him. Instantly hard, he rolled on another condom and eased on top of her. Her lashes fluttered and a slow smile spread across her face. Vin pushed inside her wet, silky heat and fucked her with a gentleness that would shock him if he took the time to think about it. Several hours later, when he was more awake, he wondered if it hadn't been a dream. He reached out for her, but she was gone, her side of the bed cold.

He found her downstairs, in the kitchen of all places. "Shit! You cook, too? I musta hit the jackpot, for real," he teased, taking the cup of coffee she handed him. "Now if there's grits in that pot, I'ma be real impressed."

"Yuck," she shuddered. "I don't think so. But I have scrambled eggs with cheese and whole wheat toast. Good enough?"

He took his head out of her fridge long enough to agree. "What's this?" he asked, bringing forth a glass pitcher.

"Kool-Aid." She grinned at his expression, made up two plates and brought them to the table. "What? I like it."

Pouring himself a glass, he took a sip. "Uh! This ain't Kool-Aid! What'd you make it with, Sweet N' Low?"

"Of course. Sugar's bad for you." She added a packet of Splenda to her coffee, giggling at his horrified face.

Vin shook his head. "Baby, I'ma have to school you on the procedure involved in makin' Kool-Aid for a black man."

\* \* \* \*

"You had sex!" Tara proclaimed loudly, smacking her hand against the kitchen table. She had shown up, unannounced, shortly after Vin departed. "Bout time, too." She helped herself to a cup of coffee, added generous amounts of whole milk and sugar, then sat back down. Not for the first time, Lanier envied her friend's metabolism.

"If I put all that garbage into my coffee every morning, my butt would be big as a house." She flushed, thinking of Vin's reaction to her butt last night. Lanier had always thought it was too big, but he hadn't been able to keep his hands off it. In fact, she wouldn't be surprised if two giant-sized handprints were emblazoned on her cheeks. A giggle escaped her, causing Tara to look at her suspiciously.

Speaking around a mouthful of Krispy Kreme, she said, "I want details. How big was he, how many times did you do it, and does his cock really have a Celtic tribal tattoo on it? Everything, girl, spill it."

Lanier used a knife to methodically slice off a sliver of the glazed pastry before answering. "It was amazing," she finally revealed. Popping the donut in her mouth, she chewed slowly to avoid further questions.

"Well, of course it was," Tara rolled her eyes impatiently. "Everyone knows that Vin Payton can fuck like a champion. What I want are details. Explicit, horny details." She folded her arms across her chest and waited. When her friend remained silent, she rolled her eyes. "Come on, I'll tell you if you'll tell me. Antwuan was a freakin' stallion! I'm surprised I can walk this morning." She reached for another donut and took a large bite.

"It wasn't just...sex." Lanier's mouth twisted with distaste. "We have a connection, Tara. I mean, he's totally different than I expected, you know? Sure, he's got that swaggering façade, but in private, he's gentle and sweet. What?" She broke off at the look on Tara's face.

Looking down at her plate, Tara blew out a long breath. "Please don't tell me that you're falling for Vin Payton, Lanier."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because he's not the kind of guy you fall for, okay? For God's sakes, Lanier, he's fucked more girls than Wilt Chamberlain. What do you think, the two of you are going to ride off

into the sunset?" Her green eyes regarded Lanier with a mixture of exasperation and pity. In a softer tone, she urged, "Use your head, honey. You graduated summa cum laude from Cornell, didn't you?" Lanier nodded. "Well, you may know books, but I know men. Trust me. You aren't going to hear from Vincent Payton again, unless it's to finish up your interview."

Tears leaked out of Lanier's eyes, falling into her coffee cup. Try as she might, she couldn't stop them streaming down her face. "You're wrong, Tara." She spoke with as much dignity as she could muster.

Her friend got up and came around to hug her. "I hope I am, sweetie. And you know that I love you and I want the best for you. I just want to make sure you're going into this with your eyes wide open." She pulled off a larger piece of the donut on Lanier's plate and held it out to her. "You aren't mad at me, are you?"

After a moment of hesitation, she accepted the donut and popped it in her mouth. "Uh uh," she mumbled. "It just hurts to think that I'm nothing but another link in the chain to him." Wiping her eyes, she glanced at her watch. "Ugh, I have to get to work. Better late than never, I suppose." Her heart ached at the thought that she might never hear from Vin again, but her pride didn't allow her to admit that to Tara. She has to be wrong. Their night together had been special, not just two people casually bumping hips in the night. Lanier turned off the coffeemaker and put the plates in the sink. Time to play reporter.

\* \* \* \*

A week passed with no word from Vin. Lanier did her best to concentrate on her work, a successful tactic during the daytime hours, but at night, her body ached for him. She lay awake in the darkness, thinking of the way his lips felt on her skin, the way he'd touched her with such uncharacteristic gentleness. The fire in his eyes when she'd first stood naked before him. The idea of him touching another woman that way was almost unbearable.

At least today, she would see him. They had a follow-up interview scheduled for that afternoon, and she'd spent half her salary preparing for it. Haircut, highlights, manicure, pedicure, even a bikini wax. A new outfit that Tara had helped her shop for. Still, in spite of all the embellishments, when she looked in the mirror, all she saw was an exhausted woman who pinned all her hopes on fool's gold.

When three o'clock came and went with no sign of him, only a supreme effort of will kept her from dissolving into tears. This feeling was quickly replaced by anger. Who did he think he was? She was a professional journalist with an excellent reputation. How dare he stand her up like she was one of his groupies? Picking up the phone, she dialed his agent, Graham Hudson. "Mr. Hudson? This is Lanier Lange, from *The Star*. Were you aware that your client missed an appointment with me today?"

She listened to the agent's smooth baritone for a moment. "No, no one told me. Is he okay?" Apparently, Vin had been injured in last night's game. The doctors had just released him that morning. "I see." Her heart broke for Vin when she heard that he might be out for the season. "Where is he? I mean, for the interview, of course."

"I don't think he'll be up to it, Ms. Lange. His state of mind is not exactly family-friendly right now. Besides, we were told that your editor has pulled the story until the reports are back from the lab. Nobody cares about a player who isn't playing."

Infuriated, she glared in the direction of Hyde's office. Nice of him to tell her that. "I've never not finished an assignment, Mr. Hudson, and I'm certainly not going to start now. Please tell me where he is."

It turned out that Vin was still in the hotel suite at the W. Lanier grabbed her notes, tossed the recorder in her purse and headed out.

The lobby was mostly empty. There was no sign of the Freak Parade that Vin had spoken of just one week earlier. She rode the elevator to the top floor and got out, her confident stride carrying her only as far as the door. What if he didn't want to see her? She wasn't sure she could stand an outright rejection. *You're not here to see him, you're here to do a job.* 

A large man in a superbly tailored suit answered the door. "You must be Ms. Lange." He held out a beefy hand for her to shake. "I'm Graham Hudson. Won't you come in? The patient is resting," he said with the barest edge of sarcasm in his polished voice.

"Who's there, G? I fucking told you, I don't wanna see nobody, damn it."

Lanier blinked at the anger in Vin's tone, but the agent didn't bat an eye. "I'll be downstairs. Call the front desk if you need me." Moving silently for such a large man, he slipped out the door and closed it softly behind him.

"It's me, Vincent." She walked into the bedroom area of the suite to find him lying in the center of the King-sized bed. His knee was elevated on some sort of computerized contraption, and bottles of prescription pills stood lined up on a small table.

He scowled at her. "What you doin' here? Thought your big-deal paper pulled my story."

"I came to see you," she said quietly. It was clear to her that he felt terrified, as well as vulnerable for the first time in his life. How else would he feel? Something beyond his control threatened to take away the golden ticket, the elevated status he'd worked all his life for.

"Why?" The single word burst from his lips like a gunshot.

It was now or never. "Because I care about you."

His snort sounded almost obscene. "You care about me? Baby, we fucked. Twice. That was it."

"We didn't," she grimaced before using the word, "fuck. We made love. Don't you dare try to call it anything else."

"I got news for you, snow bunny. Wasn't nothin' to do with love. Just my hard dick wanting to get someplace hot and wet." He shrugged, avoiding her eyes. "It is what it is."

Anger made her bold. "The hell you say, Vincent Payton! I will not let you lie up in that bed and say hurtful things to me because you're scared!"

"Scared?" He sat straight up, his glower like a living thing. "I ain't scared a nothin', you got that? Come up in a man's hotel room, trippin' over some bullshit like that."

"You can't admit it, can you? For all your talk about keeping it real, you're just a phony." Lanier shook her head sadly, feeling dangerously close to tears. "For God's sake, when are you going to drop the façade and let someone in?"

"Someone? Don't you mean *you*, Lois Lane? And you don't need to school me on keepin' it real, lady. I been doin' that all my life. Something a fancy lady like you don't know nothin' about."

"This is not you talking, Vincent. It's the fear. One day you'll see that. You know where to find me when you do." She lifted her chin, praying that the tears wouldn't fall until she was well out of his eyesight.

"Don't hold your breath," he sneered, but his eyes were downcast. She wondered what he would do if she went to him, just hopped up on the bed and held him in her arms. Before she could decide whether or not to act, she heard voices outside the door. Female voices. Bile rose in her stomach when she heard the door swing open. Apparently, one of them had her very own key. Lanier

stood frozen in place, unable to move. For the first time since she'd arrived, he spoke softly. "Lanier. Go." His deep voice was like a caress, but it couldn't break through her paralyzed state.

Three girls burst into the room, all dressed up in slutty versions of nurse uniforms. They pulled up short when they saw Lanier standing there. "Oh, is this one of your doctors, Vin? We thought you were up here all by your lonesome."

The one redhead in the trio moved to the side of the bed, laying a proprietary hand on his uninjured leg. "You ready for your checkup, baby?" Her giggle sounded like nails on a chalkboard to Lanier.

"She was just leavin'," Vin said firmly. "Weren't you, Lanier?"

"Yes," she whispered to the thickly carpeted floor. Before she could make a fool of herself by bawling like a baby, she turned and fled the room. Coming here had been a huge mistake. Tara had been right. Men like Vincent Payton only cared about themselves.

\* \* \* \*

Vin closed his eyes as the door slammed shut behind her. It was for the best, he told himself. He was no good to anyone right now, and he wouldn't drag her down with him. Lying here like a fucking invalid was doing a number on him, but she didn't have to call him out like that. He was the Hypnotizer, damn it, what the fuck did he have to be scared of? Shit, he could barely go to the corner store without being mobbed by everyone and their damn uncle. Scared? He didn't even know what the word meant, and he sure as hell didn't need her to tell him.

"Vin?" The girls spoke in unison, and one of them snapped their fingers to get his attention. He looked up to see that they had stripped off their nurse's costumes and now stood naked beside him.

"Well, now, look at y'all just sitting there lookin' like Charlie's Angels," he said. Actually they looked used up and worn out, like a trio of over-the-hill ho's. Why couldn't they carry themselves with a little more class? *Like Lanier?* "No!" he snapped aloud, startling the girls. "Sorry 'bout that, I must be trippin' off this pain medication they gave me."

The brunette stepped forward with a sultry smile. "Long as your dick can still get hard, it's all good." She cupped her breasts in her hands and shook them at him. "You ready to get some of this, superstar?"

He could see the jagged scar from her enhancement surgery crawling along the side of her breast like a pale pink worm. She edged closer, her gum popping loudly with each step. Vin winced at the sound, suddenly just wanting them to get the fuck out and leave him be. "We gonna have to get a rain check on this party here, ladies. I'm seeing six of you, must be the meds makin' a brother lunch the fuck out."

The girls looked at each other, then back at him. "Say what?" the redhead snarled, obviously the speaker for the group. "We been waitin' all week to fuck you and now you want us to go? What, you gay or somethin'? One of them down low brothas that Oprah be talkin' 'bout?"

"Don't trip, Wanda," the brunette shot Vin a disparaging look. "We'll just go down the hall to Allen Iverson's room. *He* ain't gay."

"I ain't gay neither, you nasty ass ho's!" Vin shouted, making sharp fingers of pain sting his bandaged knee. "Get the fuck outta here with that bullshit!"

He lay back and closed his eyes, ignoring the sounds of heels clacking and teeth sucking until the door finally slammed shut. It took a while for his heartbeat to return to normal and the pain to recede from his knee. Wasn't this some shit? Mr. Superstar Vin Payton, the Hypnotizer, all alone in his high-dollar hotel suite. If it didn't hurt so bad, he would laugh his ass off at the irony. Vin hoped to God that this wasn't the beginning of the rest of his life. Without basketball, who was he? Just another nigga on the corner, hustlin' and talkin' that same trash. If his knee injury kept him out for the season, his endorsements would dry up along with his career, making him just another has-been in the annals of sports history.

"Jesus, God, please don't let that happen," he prayed aloud, wondering if that tight feeling in his chest was fear. For the first time in his life, he faced something he couldn't fight. Lanier was right, it scared the hell out of him. The question was, what would he do about it? Vin fumbled for the bottle of pills on the bedside table. Shaking out a handful, he swallowed them dry and waited for the relief that only sleep could bring.

\* \* \* \*

Lanier rubbed her tired eyes and took another sip of lukewarm coffee. It had the consistency of oily sludge, but she needed it to stay awake. Ever since the incident in Vin's hotel room three weeks ago, sleep had been fleeting at best. At work, she pushed herself to the limit, often staying holed up in her cubicle until long after the cleaning crews finished their duties. Burning the candle at both ends

like this wasn't healthy; if she didn't get any rest tonight, she would take Tara up on her offer to procure her some sleeping pills.

A jaw-cracking yawn was quickly followed by a second before her head dropped down onto her arms. *Just for a minute*. Everyone was at lunch, anyway. It wasn't as though they would fire her for taking a catnap instead of eating, something else she wasn't doing enough of lately, either. Her Ann Taylor suit hung off her frame and she'd had to use a safety pin to take in the waist of the skirt. Screw Atkins and South Beach, the best diet was a broken heart.

She must have dozed for longer than she'd planned, for the next sound she heard was the abrasive voice of her boss in her ear. "Christ, Lange, what the hell is the matter with you?" he yelled, scaring her half to death. "What are you, drunk or something?"

Blinking rapidly to clear the heavy fog from her eyes, she replied, "No, I just have a lot on my mind, that's all. It won't happen again."

"Damn right, it won't. Not unless you want to sleep your sweet ass right out of a job." His lips curled in a nasty smirk as he bawled her out in front of the entire newsroom. "You're hanging on by a slim thread as it is."

"I work my ass off for this paper!" she cried, returning his angry glare with one of her own. Lanier rose to her feet, her knees watery from too much caffeine.

"From where I sit, it could use some more work," he retorted, with a pointed look at her ass. Suddenly, Hyde's smirk vanished and his mouth gaped open. Lanier paid him no mind; she was still fuming from his comment and her mind raced with possible comebacks, most of which would definitely get her fired.

"I were you, I'd check my tone," came a deep, even-toned voice. "That's a lady you're talkin' to." It was the same voice she had been hearing in her dreams for the past three weeks. A muffled cry escaped her as she swung around to see Vin standing there. His black eyes blazed fire at her hapless boss who looked as though he wished the earth would open up and swallow him. Vin leaned casually against the wall, but tension thrummed in the air around him. It was like watching a sated predator lazily regard future prey. He may not feel like chasing it down right now, but dinnertime was imminent.

Hyde's laughter was strained and she could see beads of sweat forming on his brow. "Dude! I was just teasing her a little, no harm, no foul. Really. Listen, while you're here, why don't we discuss how we're going to spin your piece? Now that you've been cleared to play, it's all good, right?"

His attempt at slang made Vin's face twist in disgust. "Naw, I'm just here to take my girl to lunch. You can spare her, can't you?" It was a statement, not a question. Without waiting for a reply, he held out his arm to Lanier. "Let's go."

Wordlessly, she took his arm, still somewhat shell-shocked from his sudden appearance. Allowing him to lead her from the office, she waited until they stood in the elevator to give his upper arm a soft pinch.

"What was that for?" he asked, smiling down at her.

She blushed. "I just can't believe you're here. I thought...after what happened...and those girls," she broke off with a shudder. Did she even want to know what he'd done with those sluts? It made her sick to think about it, but if anything was going to happen between them, she had to know. "Vin?"

"I kicked those bitches out just as soon as you left," he replied, reading her mind. "Didn't want nothin' to do with them. All I want is you, babydoll. That a'ight with you?" Pulling her to him, he bent down and kissed the top of her head.

"So where are we going?" Lanier asked, although she didn't care in the least. If he'd said they were going to live in a trailer next to the J.C. Penney, she'd have packed her bags in a heartbeat.

"We're going to the court. I'ma teach you the pick and roll." He mimed dribbling around her as they stepped out of the elevator.

"I don't want to learn how to play basketball," she replied with a mock pout.

"Who said anything about basketball? You sure do ask a lot of questions, girl. Didn't nobody ever tell you that the man is the shot caller in a relationship?"

"A relationship? Is that what this is?"

"Huh. I don't know. Whyn't you learn how to mix my Kool-Aid up right and then we'll talk."

She slugged him on the arm, which felt somewhat like hitting a cement block. "Why don't you stop posturing and speak actual English? Then we can *really* talk."

"Hush up, Lois Lane before I regret comin' over here and goin' Superman on that 'bama you got for a boss."

"Why did you come over here? And what's a 'bama, anyway?"

## Mélange

"I got to spell it out for you? Come on, let's go get something to eat. You look like you could use a good meal, fatten you up some. Don't want you losin' that ass." He slapped her gently on her behind, laughing when she shrieked.

Lanier opened her mouth to reply, but when she saw the smile on his face, she decided to stay quiet and let him call the shots. For now.

The End

## Courting the Mountain-God by Olivia Lorenz

Syrenen, a thief-catcher, pursues a criminal into the dreaded Qaxtin mountains. A place of demons and ghosts, it's ruled over by the god of the highest peak, Changbei Shan. As the mist comes down to block his path, Syrenen meets the mountain-god, now a lonely scholar exiled from Heaven for arrogance in his former life. Syrenen sets out to prove to him that forgiveness – and love – is still possible, regardless of what went before. Can a mountain be moved by passion, or is Changbei's heart fated to remain a stone forever?

http://www.triqueta.net/olivialorenz

## Courting the Mountain-God by Olivia Lorenz

Syrenen was not a particularly superstitious man, but he reckoned that anyone in his line of work needed all the help he could get.

Ever since he'd begun his ascent into the mountains, his backpack had started to weigh heavily upon him. He muttered a curse at it and shook the bamboo frame to settle it more easily on his back. The action was accompanied by the delicate tinkling sound of a dozen polished copper mirrors that hung suspended from the backpack: amulets against the demons and ghosts said to haunt these mountains.

It was said that, if a demon approached a lone traveller and caught sight of its true reflection in a mirror, it would flee and bother the traveller no more.

Syrenen wasn't sure he believed such nonsense, but to disregard it might prove fatal—especially as he was venturing into the Qaxtin Mountains, a place that stirred rumours even as far away as the barren steppes of his northern homeland.

Back then he'd dismissed the talk as exaggeration. After all, according to the same rumours, the north-men all rode horses that were so fleet, they could fly. He'd never seen a flying horse, and he'd never been able to sit on a saddle without falling off, and so, for all that he listened to it as avidly as the next man, Syrenen had a healthy disrespect for rumour.

Now, as he neared the end of the gentle foothills to begin the climb up the rugged slopes of the mountains, he wondered why he'd allowed himself even a flicker of anxiety about this journey.

Yesterday morning, the people of the village he'd passed through had urged him not to go into the mountains. Their expressions had registered fear, and they could scarcely bring themselves to look in the direction of the Qaxtin. From the plain below, the range seemed vast and awe-inspiring, and none more so than Changbei Shan, the tallest and most deadly of the mountains. So tall its summit was wreathed in clouds, its upper slopes dressed in the pure white of

frozen snow even during the spring thaw, Changbei Shan brooded over the Qaxtin Mountains like a lord overseeing his armies.

"A god dwells on the mountain," the village headman had said, low-voiced. "If the criminal you pursue has gone into his domain, you will never see him again."

Syrenen had nodded. "Perhaps, but Lei Ku is dangerous, and it is my duty as a thief-catcher to take him back to the provincial capital, dead or alive. And he has committed more crimes since he went on the run—the theft of a mule that died a day later on the road, numerous other thefts of food, clothing and money, and here, in your own village, he battered a man half to death to steal more food and a warm winter cloak! I must catch him so he may stand trial for his crimes."

"You will not catch him in the mountains," the headman said. "If he has set foot on Changbei Shan, he will have signed his own deathwarrant."

Syrenen had smiled at that. Perhaps the headman spoke truly. Townsfolk, unprepared for the rigours of the mountains, often came to grief on desolate slopes—especially when the weather was so changeable. Although spring had arrived, dark clouds still roiled around the peaks and the mountains looked bleak and unwelcoming.

"I will find him," Syrenen had said, more a promise to himself than to the headman, "and I will bring him out of the Qaxtin, god or no god."

It was the villagers who'd tied the mirrors onto his backpack. Heedless of his protests that he'd travelled through more difficult terrain, they came with him to the village boundary, heaping blessings upon him. Then, by the graves of their ancestors, they'd halted and waved farewell in a strange, sympathetic silence. When he'd glanced back, he'd seen them still standing there, as if watching his spirit depart.

He looked at the mountainside around him. A stream bubbled past, its way carved through huge boulders sprigged with jewel-bright moss. Caught in a cleft in a rock high above him, a plum tree flowered. Grass grew, flowers opened to the sun, and a blue bird with a curled black tail sat on top of a pine tree and trilled at him.

Far from being a place of desolation, Changbei Shan seemed a slice of paradise. Syrenen felt his spirits lift. He took a deep breath of the fresh spring air and strode forward, the mirrors tinkling and crashing like tiny cymbals in his wake.

Before long, the path became more difficult. The rush of the stream faded, replaced by the hiss of the wind and his own laboured breathing as he climbed. After another hour's ascent, the grass grew only in short, tufted clumps from rock-fissures, and there were no more flowers, no more trees.

A little further, and Syrenen forgot how pretty the lower slopes had looked. The mountain that met him now was all dark granite, riven into tortuous shapes, blasted by the elements. The path wended its way up and around sheer cliffs, tiptoed along blade-sharp ridges and crept around black ravines.

It was a mountain that demanded respect. Syrenen quickly came to appreciate that fact, abandoning the idea of tracking the criminal in favour of staying alive as he negotiated his way higher towards the summit. He comforted himself with the thought that, if Lei Ku had come this way, he'd not be much further ahead—for if Syrenen, with all his outdoor skills, found the going difficult, surely it must be impossible for an inexperienced townsman.

Another hour passed. Syrenen pushed back his hat of woven bamboo and ran a hand across his forehead. Wisps of hair escaped his scruffy topknot and clung wetly to his face. He scraped them back, feeling the heat of sweat at his nape as he lifted the long twist of his hair free of his collar. The breeze chilled his neck, a delicious sensation that made him shiver.

He fumbled in the backpack for a flask of water and took a swig. The first gulp was cold, the second, refreshing. Syrenen capped the flask and stowed it away safely. Only then did he realise how silent the world was around him.

A mist had gathered without him noticing it. Thick, white clouds rolled down, obscuring the distant summit with its snowfields, and then veiling the path little by little until soft, silent cold blanketed him.

Syrenen felt behind him for the rock-face. The stone was wet and chilled, and his fingers slipped. He lurched sideways, dislodging a pebble. It skittered across the path and disappeared without a sound. He knew there was a sheer drop on that side of the path, but he listened in vain for the noise of the pebble falling into oblivion. The mist swallowed everything—sound, colour, light, warmth.

Pressing back against the cold mountain, Syrenen considered his next move. He could see only a few feet in front of him. Further ascent would be foolhardy, but he could not easily go back, either.

One false move in this treacherous mist and he would die. He considered staying put, but this exposed cliff-edge was not ideal for setting up camp for the rest of the day. Besides, he had no way of knowing when the mist would clear. He could be here a matter of hours... or perhaps it would be days.

It would be better to continue onwards. Moving carefully away from the rock-face, Syrenen concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other as the path revealed itself. His focus narrowed, and he looked inward, continually aware of his balance, his breathing and the beat of his heart. He kept his footsteps small and light, feeling the path beneath his boots, trying to attune himself to the mountain. Sweat broke out at his hairline, turning cold almost immediately. The mist seemed to caress his face and limbs. His face burned with effort, his head pounding as his field of vision slowly shrank yet further.

He knew he should stop. It was madness to continue, and yet Syrenen knew if he stopped, he would die. For the first time in his life, he felt terror snap at him. With a groan of defeat, he sank to his knees on the wet, slippery path and hung his head, breathing deeply to control his fear.

The backpack seemed heavier than ever. Perhaps he should abandon it. He rejected the idea before it took root. The pack contained food, clothing, blankets and basic medical supplies as well as official documents. He needed it to survive.

Syrenen shrugged the pack into a more comfortable position. As he did so, one of the mirrors came loose and fell onto the path in front of him. He crawled forward to retrieve it, curling his hand around it and looking at his reflection.

Through the eerie mist, he almost didn't recognise himself. With his hair half-down and tangled around his face, he looked like a wild thing and not the charming, urbane thief-catcher who'd worked so hard to appear at home amongst a nation that was not his own. His dark slanted brows were drawn together in a frown of concentration, and his mouth worked around a curse at his weakness.

Then he saw something else in the mirror: a gleam, a suggestion of something taking shape through the mist—a figure... a man.

Syrenen clasped the mirror tight as he rose to his feet. His pulse quickened as he remembered the stories of demons showing their true faces in mirrors, but his reason argued that it was merely another human being who stood before him. Tucking the mirror into his waist-sash, he dropped his hand to the hilt of his sword.

"Lei Ku," he said loudly at the man still swathed in mist, "I have come to arrest you on charges of murder, battery and theft. Do not attempt to run. You cannot escape me."

He took a step forward, hand still on his sword, pretending more confidence than he felt. As he moved, the mist swirled away, showing him the path ahead and revealing the man who stood waiting for him.

Syrenen stared. It was not Lei Ku's ugly dark visage that loomed out of the mist but one altogether more refined. In fact, he realised, as he looked his fill, the man on the path was beautiful. Tall and slender, dressed in white silk with black edgings and a dark grey sash, half of his hair was caught up in a topknot dressed with an elaborate silver hairpin, while the rest hung down his back. Apart from a wide, white stripe that began above the left temple, the stranger's hair was as black as midnight.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?" Syrenen asked. He edged closer, still wary, flexing his fingers over his sword-hilt. "Are you lost on this benighted mountain, too? This is foul weather in which to be taking a walk."

The stranger looked at him in silence. He seemed coated in mist, sparkles of dew caught in his clothes and on his hair, giving him a look of liveliness even though he remained as still as a statue. But his eyes gleamed with interest as he gazed at him, and Syrenen fancied he caught the barest hint of a smile on those perfect, sculpted lips before the stranger turned away.

"Wait!"

The stranger paused, looking back over one shoulder. His eyebrows arched in question and, perhaps, in challenge.

Syrenen took another step closer. If he reached out, he'd be able to touch the stranger's hair. He imagined the feel of it, warm over his skin despite those glittering dewdrops. He wanted to get close enough to catch the scent of it. Lured on by the elegant drape of black hair with its single white stripe, he stretched out a hand and moved forward.

The path disappeared beneath his feet, and Syrenen dropped like a stone.

\* \* \* \*

He saved himself purely by instinct, grabbing onto the rock-face with his hands. It was not as sheer as it looked, but he still fell several feet before his fingers clawed into a solid handhold. The breath gasped out of his body at his sudden halt, and his shoulders burned at the wrench to his arms. But he clung on, feeling a shower of dislodged pebbles and dirt cascade over his face. He spluttered, shaking his head and then looked down, blinking, to free his vision.

Immediately, he wished he hadn't. Below him, the mist cleared, giving an unimpeded view of the drop to the bottom of the ravine. Biting back an exclamation of dismay, Syrenen looked up.

Above him, safely on the path, the stranger stood watching. He made no move to come to his assistance and spoke not a word.

Syrenen stared up at him. Confusion gave way to anger, and with an effort, he started to climb back up the cliff. He'd never asked for help in anything, and he'd be damned if he'd start now. He wouldn't ask for the help of the beautiful, haughty stranger even if his life depended on it...

He slipped, setting the mirrors tinkling. Syrenen scrabbled to regain his grip and reminded himself that his life did depend on this. When he glanced up again, he was certain he saw a fleeting smile on the stranger's face.

"So glad my predicament amuses you," he muttered beneath his breath. The sound of his own voice made the situation seem less dangerous, and so he edged a little further up the rock-face, inching hand-over-hand towards the path.

Another slip and Syrenen yelped as his handhold collapsed. He clung on, trying to align himself against the rock. His backpack weighed him down, its contents shifting as he moved. He worried that the pack would unbalance him and send him flailing into the abyss—but he couldn't just dump it. The backpack contained his entire life.

The delicate chiming sound of the mirrors increased. If only he could rip them off the frame, he'd be able to get some peace. The mirrors were supposed to protect him, but so far they'd done nothing but irritate him. With a snarl, Syrenen swiped at one of them as it swung into view. Its string broke, and it fell, bouncing from the cliff below him, turning and winking in the pale light until it disappeared.

"Bad idea. Don't look down. Don't look..."

The straps of the pack slid from his shoulders, trapping one arm. Syrenen swore at it and turned his head, trying to right the strap with his teeth. The mirrors jangled. He went still and hung motionless for a moment, waiting for their gentle music to cease.

The stranger still watched him, crouching down this time so that his hair fell around his shoulders, framing his face. His eyes seemed to glow, their gaze raking Syrenen with such intensity that his palms began to sweat, and he slipped again.

"Oh no, you don't," Syrenen said, more to himself than the stranger. "You will not die on this godforsaken mountain. You will not. Come on!"

He heaved himself up, jamming an elbow into a crevice. It hurt, the rock biting into his flesh. Blood streaked through the tear in his sleeve. Syrenen ignored it, gritting his teeth as he sought a foothold and then a handhold above him. He yanked his elbow free, grunting as the action made his body jerk. The backpack slammed against his spine, and the mirrors tinkled and clashed.

He realised he couldn't continue the climb while he still wore his backpack. Even if he managed to get close to the path, the weight of his pack would drag him down when he tried to swing himself to safety.

With a sigh, Syrenen closed his eyes and resigned himself to the loss of his possessions. Moving carefully, he slipped first one arm and then the other free of the shoulder straps, and then he dropped the backpack.

He watched it fall. The pack burst open as soon as it struck the side of the cliff below. His clothes tumbled out, sensible linen robes dyed blue and brown. Foodstuffs and medicines in twists of paper scattered in the breeze, and Syrenen groaned at his stupidity in losing his water-flask. Finally, from the very bottom of the backpack, a sheaf of imperial documents fluttered free, spiralling into oblivion like doves with damaged wings.

The mirrors jangled in desperate, metallic warning all the way down. As soon as they vanished from sight, Syrenen wished he'd kept hold of one of them. He might need it when he regained the path and faced the stranger. He risked a look above him and was startled to see nothing but mist. His stranger had disappeared.

Grumbling beneath his breath, he began to haul himself up to safety. Curiously, it seemed much easier than before, as if hand and footholds materialised from the solid rock. He assumed it was because his pack wasn't weighing him down any more, and then he dismissed the thought from his mind as he finally heaved his body onto the path.

Syrenen lay on the wet stone. Now he'd reached safety, he couldn't stop shaking. He forced himself up onto his feet. Without extra clothes, he was in danger of succumbing to exposure. He had to keep moving.

The mist eddied, parting to let him see the footpath. Taking hold of his sword-hilt with one hand, he ventured on, his progress slow. The further he walked, the more the mist retreated. When he glanced behind, he saw that the clouds had swallowed the path. With no way back, he had no choice but to keep going forward.

Despite the cover of the lingering mist, Syrenen knew the day was fading. He had to find shelter by nightfall. Just as he considered curling up by the side of the next boulder he came to, the mist lifted enough for him to see straight across the chasm.

A wooden bridge, as delicate as a spider-web, spanned the gap, joining the two sections of the path. Syrenen stopped and stared at it, certain that the bridge would break as soon as he set foot upon it. The ropes that held it together seemed aged and rotten, and the wooden planks forming the bridge itself seemed flimsy, incapable of bearing his weight.

But on the other side, across a distance of only a few dozen feet, he could see not just the path but also a cave. If he could only make it safely across the bridge, he could take shelter there and wait for morning.

He hesitated, his gaze going from the bridge to the cave and back again. His knees weakened when he remembered how it had felt to fall from the path. If the bridge broke beneath him, there'd be no way he could save himself this time.

"If the gods will it..." he muttered and started forward.

He put his hands on the guide ropes and carefully stepped out onto the first of the wooden planks. The bridge swayed gently. Another step and then another. The bridge lurched to one side, and he wrestled with the ropes, pulling and pushing against them to right himself. He bent his knees to reduce his height, trying to centre himself and shuffled forward another few steps.

Syrenen realised he was in the middle of the bridge. The mist thinned around him into wisps. Trying not to look down, he fixed his gaze on the cave. Twenty-five more steps to go. He lifted his foot and set it down, biting back a yelp of shock as the plank snapped beneath him.

He gripped the ropes and moved faster, forgetting to walk carefully and to tread lightly. A few more planks shattered beneath his weight, but he kept going, heedless of the dipping, swaying motion of the bridge, of the creak of the ropes and the splinter of wood. He had to make it across the chasm, he had to reach the cave—he would do it, he knew he would, he wasn't going to die out here...

Syrenen stumbled from the bridge onto the path with a sigh of relief. An ominous snapping sound made him turn, just in time to see one side of the bridge collapse, leaving a succession of dangling planks and unravelling rope to sway across the chasm.

He stared at it. No pack, no bridge... what else did fate have in store for him? Syrenen shook his head. His life was in the hands of the gods now. There was no point in worrying unduly about it. With a final glance at the broken bridge, he ventured into the cave.

Beyond the entrance, tumbled with rocks and dripping water from its roof, the cave narrowed and then opened out into a cosy hollow. A smokeless fire burned against one side of the cavern, and dozens of red-shaded lanterns chased away the flickering shadows. Bright coloured cushions were scattered around a simple wooden table. Scrolls and books inhabited a series of niches cut into the wall.

Syrenen stood and gazed around in open-mouthed astonishment. This was not a cave, but someone's home—and that someone now looked up from his scroll, flicking his long midnight hair over one shoulder.

The stranger from the mountainside rose to his feet in a single graceful move. "So," he said, sounding neither surprised nor displeased, "you survived."

\* \* \* \*

"I did," Syrenen agreed amiably as he strolled further into the cave to take up position by the fire, "and with no thanks to you."

The stranger tilted his head to one side. "You could have asked for help."

"I prefer to do things myself."

"Ah." A wealth of meaning went into that short sound.

Syrenen eyed him, half amused and half puzzled by the stranger's complete lack of manners. Even from someone living apart from society, he'd expect a warmer welcome than this—an invitation to sit at the fire, to have something to eat and drink, perhaps a few words of pleasant conversation. Instead he got a prickly, indifferent little mystery. He grinned at the thought.

"You seem remarkably cheerful for a man who almost died," the stranger said.

"I'm cheerful because I'm alive. Wouldn't you be?"

His answer silenced the stranger, who looked frowningly confused. Syrenen smiled again and warmed his hands by the fire. As the last of the mountain-cold left him, a thought came to mind. Perhaps the stranger wasn't a hermit but something more sinister.

He regretted again the loss of his backpack, and then he remembered the mirror that had fallen onto the path. Syrenen felt at his waist-sash and found the polished disk still tucked within its folds. Quickly, he brought it out and held it up, angling the mirror so that the stranger would look full into its face.

The stranger smiled slightly but did not flinch. "You think I am a demon."

"Aren't you?"

"Do I look like a demon?"

"I don't know." Syrenen lowered the mirror and slipped it into his sleeve. "I thought demons were ugly. You're beautiful."

The stranger looked startled. "I am?" He lifted a hand to the white stripe in his hair, seemingly troubled by the awkward compliment. "I am not a demon. I am Shan Changbei, the god of this mountain."

"Of course you are." Syrenen decided to humour him. It seemed the best thing to do if he wanted to stay overnight in this cave. "But don't you have another name?"

"Shan Changbei will suffice. After all, what is a name but a description?"

"There are nicer names," Syrenen said with a shrug, "but if you want to name yourself after the mountain, who am I to stop you?"

"The mountain is named for me," Changbei said, sounding a little irritated.

Syrenen held up his hands in a peaceable gesture. "This is your cave, and while I stay here, I'll call you whatever you want. Shan Changbei it is." As an afterthought, he added, "My name is Syrenen."

Changbei nodded, pleased. He resumed his seat but appeared to have forgotten to invite his guest to do likewise. "You are from the north," he observed.

"I am." Syrenen hesitated and then chose a rock covered with a rose-coloured cushion. With the fire's heat at his back, he settled comfortably to examine his host. Up close in the dimly lit confines of the cave, Changbei looked even more alluring. Outside, he'd seemed like a creature carved of ice and stone. In here, the firelight warmed his features, thawing even the odd intensity of his dark gaze.

"Why did you leave the north country?"

"Because I'm not much of a horseman." Syrenen looked at the rock-table in front of him. Apart from Changbei's book, it was empty. No wine-jar, no dish of snacks. His stomach knotted with hunger. Obviously, his brush with death had an effect after all. The only way to avoid thinking about food was to talk, and so he continued, "Also, because I argued with my brother, and my father banished me. I am a disgrace to my family, and so I thought to make a new life for myself elsewhere."

Changbei's inquisitive glance sharpened. "What did you argue about—a woman?"

Syrenen shrugged. He'd never hidden his tastes before and didn't see why he should start now. "Actually, it was about a man," he said, keeping his gaze fixed on Changbei's expression. "I like men in my bed rather than women. My brother is the youngest son. He prefers women—he's got two wives and a concubine. He thought he should have all of our inheritance since he had heirs, and I would never have any. He was greedy, and I told him so. We fought. My father tried to settle it by demanding that I marry and produce an heir of my own. I refused, and so... here I am."

Changbei frowned delicately. "You ran away?"

"Not exactly." Syrenen couldn't believe his host's lack of manners. And then he realised it was more than that: Changbei seemed to struggle with basic human empathy, as if such a consideration was beneath him or even alien to him.

He'd met plenty of aloof officials since he'd become a thiefcatcher, but none of them could compare with Shan Changbei. And yet he had the impression that it was not deliberate. Rather, it seemed that Changbei had been raised in total seclusion, educated in the ways of men through his books but without any contact to teach him what it was like to be human.

His naivety was almost as stunning as his beauty. Syrenen didn't know which would be the first to get under his skin. Taking a deep breath, he returned to their previous conversation. "Actually, you're right. I ran away. I wouldn't call it that myself—maybe more of a tactical withdrawal. I love my brother. I just don't agree with his prejudices. Call me a coward, but I'll do anything to avoid family discord."

"I know how that feels."

Silence fell. They looked at one another, Syrenen hopeful and Changbei impassive. At length, Syrenen prompted, "So, you're a hermit, right?"

Changbei stared at him silently.

"Right." Syrenen shuffled on his rock and tried again. "Look at all these books! You must be quite the scholar. You know, somewhere in one of those books there must be a line or two about how to behave in society..."

"I live on a mountain," Changbei said, his tone flat. "What need have I for social niceties?"

"Manners separate men from beasts."

"What are you suggesting, Syrenen the thief-catcher?"

"Nothing." He paused, wondering how Changbei had known his occupation, and then he remembered challenging him on the path. He leaned forward. "Even if you're not the most sociable person alive, you must have some contact with the people who pass through these mountains. There's a man who came here about a day before me—ugly, dark, broad..."

"Lei Ku is dead to you." Changbei's expression was as calm as if they were discussing the weather. "This mountain is harsh, and I am an unforgiving god."

Syrenen looked at him in exasperation. "But of course you are."

He sighed and stood up, realising it was no use to sit there in the hope of refreshments. Perhaps he'd find something edible further back in the cave. He felt Changbei's gaze upon him as he investigated, a tiny prickling awareness on the back of his neck, and then he put his host forcibly from his mind.

Picking up a lantern, he moved deeper into the cave. Away from the comfortable living area, the cavern bellied out. The light he held cast only a faint glow in the vast darkness, and when he whistled, the sound echoed both up and down, spiralling endlessly.

Stalagmites crowded ahead of him, jostling for space with dripping stalactites. A few had fused together into pale, melted pillars. Phosphorus limned gentle outlines beyond tumbled boulders, and from deeper still came odd flashes of light, winking in and out of oblivion.

"Don't go too far."

Changbei's voice sounded as intimate as if he stood beside him in the darkness, but when Syrenen looked around, he saw his host crouched by the fire. He raised his eyebrows, impressed by the cave's acoustics and made his way to rejoin Changbei.

"There is nothing of interest back there," Changbei said. He swept aside his wide sleeves and withdrew a pot from the fire. Carrying it to the table, he poured hot water into two cups. The spicy scent of ginger warmed with honey suffused the air between them.

"You will get lost in the dark," he continued when Syrenen made no reply. "The cave goes deep beneath the mountain. If you wander, you might never see daylight again." He handed him a cup of the tea.

Syrenen took it, inhaling the scent greedily. "You're cheerful, aren't you?"

"Do you even know what 'Changbei Shan' means?"

"Mountain of Perpetual Sorrow". Syrenen sipped at the tea. "Doesn't mean you have to live up to its reputation."

"I am here as an exile." Changbei sat down but did not touch his own drink.

"There are worse places," Syrenen said carelessly. "Lingnan, for example. I've heard it's always hot there. No seasons, except for a constant wet, humid summer. And the natives are cannibals, since the only other living thing on the island is a type of monkey. Or at least, that's what they say."

"And do you always listen to what they say?"

Syrenen shrugged. "In my line of work, patience is a virtue. Listening to tall stories passes the time, and often they have a kernel of truth about them."

"Your work. Tell me about it."

"What's to know? I'm an imperial thief-catcher. The magistrates pay me to track down and bring back criminals. I prefer to return them to the authorities alive rather than dead." He set down his cup and fixed Changbei with a serious, commanding stare. "That's why it's your duty, if you know anything about the whereabouts of Lei Ku, to tell me immediately."

"My duty?" Changbei seemed amused. "Tell me what this Lei Ku did, to make you pursue him so assiduously."

Syrenen warmed his hands around the cup as he told a pareddown version of events. Lei Ku: a thief who escaped by murdering a prison guard, who then compounded his crimes by further robberies and a brutal attack on an elderly couple which left the husband dead and the wife ailing. "It's important that I catch him," Syrenen said in conclusion. "He's dangerous. One of those who, once they find it easy to kill, will do it again without thought if they're cornered. If you've seen him..."

Changbei picked up his cup and took a few calm sips. "I have."

"Where? When?" Syrenen jumped to his feet. "Tell me! If you don't, who knows what he'll do? He may even try to harm you."

"I doubt it." Changbei remained calm. "I told you, he is dead to you."

"Did you kill him?"

"The mountain took him."

Syrenen snorted at this. "You mean he fell—like I nearly did..."

Changbei said nothing, and so after a small silence, Syrenen said, "Out there on the mountain... why didn't you help me?"

"It was a test. You passed it. Not many mortals do."

"What kind of test?"

"One that guarantees your survival."

Syrenen smiled. "So you were trying to kill me."

"It's nothing personal." Changbei put down his cup and leaned across the table to touch Syrenen's face. "Handsome," he murmured. "You look strong. Dependable." His fingers trailed over his jaw and down his throat, and his voice sounded dreamy. "You are a proper man, not like those runts who keep trying to hide in my foothills or think they can flee safely through the mountains by following the stream to its source. They come here for their own selfish ends. But you... you came here for duty."

"So did you," Syrenen said boldly. "Exile is duty, is it not?"

Changbei's eyes flashed. "It is not the same. You had a choice."

He tried to withdraw his hand, but Syrenen caught hold of his wrist and held it. Changbei took a quick breath and cast down his gaze, smiling slightly. A faint flush of colour touched his high cheekbones.

For someone who lived in seclusion, Changbei was a very good flirt. Syrenen let go, amused by the change in his host. He wondered now if Changbei hadn't lured him here with some sort of seduction in mind. Not that he was averse to it—Changbei was very beautiful, after all—but he didn't want to seem too keen.

Changbei lifted his head to meet his gaze. He looked oddly expressionless, yet with an inner intensity that still burned beneath that lovely, glacial exterior. He sat forward and ran the backs of his fingers down Syrenen's cheek.

"You don't like me touching you?"

Syrenen smiled lazily. "I like it well enough, but are you sure you want to keep on doing that? I told you where my preferences lie."

Changbei stilled his hand. "I am a god," he said softly. "My tastes are not fixed like a human's. I love male and female equally."

"Love?" Syrenen snorted. "I don't think you know the meaning of the word." He tried to pull away, but Changbei held him back.

"Teach me, then. Since you profess to know so much about it, teach me about love."

"You might be beautiful, but you're cold. I like men who enjoy a joke, men I can have a drink with, men who don't get serious. Men who are the complete opposite of you."

Changbei recoiled. "You prefer mortals."

He sounded so wounded that Syrenen struggled not to laugh. "Yeah. Guess I do."

"I can learn." Changbei moved to stand in front of him. A note of uncertainty in his voice softened his arrogant expression. "Teach me how to love."

Syrenen rose to his feet. They were almost the same height, he realised, and yet he felt bigger, stronger. In the dim light of the flickering red lanterns, Changbei's form seemed to blur at the edges, to become softer, more tempting. An illusion—but one so realistic that Syrenen reached out to touch him.

He ran a hand through Changbei's hair, his fingers combing through the white stripe. He thought of asking how it got there, but instead he concentrated on the feel of it—rougher, more like a horse's mane, the contrast with the soft black hair around it both unexpected and exciting.

Taking a handful of hair, Syrenen tugged him closer and kissed him, experimentally, almost respectfully.

Changbei groaned, looping his arms around Syrenen's waist. When they parted, he traced his lips over Syrenen's face, lingering at his cheekbones, the corners of his eyes and the soft, taut skin of his temples.

"Or perhaps I should teach you, since you seem so shy."

"Whatever you want," Syrenen told him simply. "Whatever you need."

Changbei smiled. "Worship," he said softly. "I need worship." "I can do that."

The second time was a kiss of exploration. Changbei tasted of honey, sweet and sticky. Syrenen had expected the heat of the ginger tea. The honey surprised and pleased him, and he deepened the embrace.

He let go of Changbei's hair and held him. When they broke apart, they leaned against one another. The soft-harsh weight of Changbei's hair tickled around their faces. Changbei bowed his head, his breath warm against the curve of Syrenen's neck.

Syrenen brushed his lips over his forehead before he buried his face in Changbei's hair. He licked at a strand of the white stripe, his tongue wetting and softening the roughness.

"Why do you like that?" Changbei asked; his voice muffled.

"Because it makes you look vulnerable." Syrenen half-turned him in his arms and nuzzled through the black warmth of his hair to lick at the nape of his neck. "It makes me think I stand a chance with you."

Changbei raised his head and twisted in his grasp. His colour high, his eyes stormy, he demanded, "Kiss me again."

Syrenen chuckled and did as he was told. Changbei shuddered in his arms, tilting back his head so that he could kiss the column of his throat. Syrenen tore at the collar of his robe and undid the waist-sash. He could feel the quivering leap of Changbei's pulse, could taste the fresh sheen of sweat rising from his skin.

The waist-sash unravelled and fell to the ground. Syrenen touched Changbei through the layers of silk still between them. Pulling impatiently on the clothes, he said, "Take it off. I want to see you."

With a smile, Changbei stepped away, sliding the robe from his shoulders. He sank down as the last of his clothes dropped to join his waist-sash on the cushions and held out a hand.

Syrenen sprawled across him to kiss his chest. Changbei's skin felt like the silk he'd just discarded: pale and fragile, so absolutely perfect. Syrenen licked him, moving across to his nipple. He felt it stiffen beneath his tongue. Closing his mouth around it, he began to suck.

Changbei bucked restlessly under his weight. In rebuke, Syrenen brought his hand up to circle his other nipple before tweaking it, hard. Changbei whimpered, pushing Syrenen's head down toward his cock. He obeyed, wanting to taste him. He buried his face between Changbei's thighs, feeling the heat of his erection brush against his cheek.

Syrenen kissed the inside of his thigh and then nuzzled at his balls. Teasing him, he nipped gently at them before running his tongue over and around their vulnerable weight.

Changbei gasped, his thighs parting so he could explore lower. The scent of his body overwhelmed Syrenen, honey and ginger and winter-cold. He raised his head to lick at his cock, the taste of him on his tongue sharp and urgent. Syrenen shifted position, placing his hands on Changbei's hips to hold him down. Then he opened his mouth and began to take him in.

"Oh, Syrenen..." Changbei's voice trailed off into incoherent little breaths as he slowly worked his cock. He thrust upwards, forcing Syrenen to accept his full length, whimpering as Syrenen set his teeth to graze his shaft.

Changbei's hands closed around his head as he started to fuck his mouth in earnest. Syrenen shut his eyes in concentration, feeling Changbei's body rise and fight against him. He took him in deep, holding him there as he tickled the taut skin in the cradle of his hips, making him moan.

Slowly, with great showmanship, Syrenen let Changbei's cock slide from his lips, wet and glistening. He opened his eyes as he reached the tip, looking directly into Changbei's wide black gaze.

"Syrenen," he whispered desperately. He shuddered as Syrenen wrapped his fingers around his wet cock and stroked him. "Harder. Do it harder," he growled.

Syrenen complied, watching Changbei drop back onto the cushions. He increased the pressure, feeling his cock pulse hotly in his hand. Lowering his head again, he licked at it between his fingers. Then he sat back and grinned wickedly when Changbei whined in frustration.

"Come here," Syrenen said, and pulled him down on top of him. The dirty, damp thief-catcher's robes restricted his movements and so, impatiently, he dragged them off. They kissed again, and then Syrenen rolled them both over.

Holding Changbei facedown on the cushions and silk, he kissed the back of his neck until he stretched out and rocked up toward him. Syrenen ran his hand down his back, over the sweep of his buttocks, and then licked at the base of his spine. Changbei groaned, frantic for more. Syrenen nudged his legs apart and moved to kneel between them. He kissed his coccyx and then swept his tongue lower, into the cleft between his buttocks, chasing the tiny salt-droplets of sweat down into musky darkness.

Changbei cried out, his body rising from the crumpled layers of silk. Syrenen slid both hands around his waist, one settling flat against his stomach and the other curling about his cock. He simply held him, allowing Changbei to shift helplessly back and forth as he squeezed his erection.

Syrenen's tongue dipped lower, seeking out the entrance to his body. Changbei gasped and stiffened beneath him, his breathing harsh, and his hands clawed into the trails of silken cloth surrounding them. Syrenen held him still, his tongue circling the sensitive flesh and then venturing to thrust the point of his tongue inside. Changbei went wild, his body unbearably aroused and damp with sweat.

He trailed his tongue around his anus again, rimming him until he was delirious with desperate pleasure. Only then did Syrenen begin to masturbate him as he continued to fuck him with his tongue.

Changbei shook his head, his body snaking up and down as Syrenen forced him closer to orgasm. "Syrenen—please," he begged.

Syrenen kissed his sweat-slicked spine as he wriggled over him. Changbei moaned, welcoming his weight and raising his buttocks up as Syrenen guided his cock between them.

"Now. Do it now," he gasped, and Syrenen found him, sank inside him slowly, feeling him hot and tight. He slid up to the hilt, pressing against him and rocking back and forth gently, groaning as Changbei clutched at him.

Syrenen felt blindly for his hands and curled his own on top of Changbei's, his fingers splaying out across his clenched knuckles as he gripped the cushions.

Changbei turned his head then, eyes shut tight, his midnightblack hair with its single white stripe falling in a tangle over his face. "Please. I need this. Worship me..."

"Worship? Yes," Syrenen growled. "If that's what you want..." He withdrew and thrust back inside him, watching his face go blank with pleasure.

"More," he begged. "Please."

Syrenen buried his head against Changbei's nape, responding to his desperate, urgent cries as he slammed back to meet him. They fought for a moment, at odds with one another then they caught a rhythm and moved together, the simple act of fucking turning easily into lovemaking. Syrenen pushed down against his hands, palms slippery as he increased the tempo; and Changbei howled, shaking and helpless.

He twisted his wrists free of Syrenen's grip and tangled their fingers together, holding tight as he hit orgasm in a blinding, glorious rush.

Syrenen felt him go, his entire body closed tight on pleasure. He kissed Changbei's neck, brushing aside the heavy sweep of his hair and licking the sweat from the nape as he moved faster, deeper. Changbei murmured encouragement, his fingers squeezing tight, his eyes half-opening.

"My perfect mortal, my most worthy trespasser," he whispered, his voice husky and satisfied.

Syrenen sobbed, bowing his head as he chased orgasm. Changbei's skin was hot and wet, delicious against his cheek as he rode him with steeper and steeper thrusts. Syrenen opened his mouth in a silent shout, so close, so close—and then he snapped back his head and gasped as climax roared over him.

He sank down over Changbei, releasing the vicious grip on his fingers as the tremors faded into the warm wash of sated pleasure.

Changbei stirred, easing away so he could turn and gather Syrenen in his arms. His beautiful face was flushed with exertion; his eyes gleaming like starlight and his lips bruised where he'd bitten them. "Was that not better than with a mortal man?"

Syrenen chuckled and pulled him closer, nuzzling into the warmth of his hair. "Much better. I should go to bed with mountaingods more often."

"I would prefer it if you took only me to your bed," Changbei said.

He sounded so serious that Syrenen laughed. "All right. I promise. Only you."

Changbei lay quiet for a moment, and then he said, "Good. It will be so."

Half asleep, Syrenen mumbled a noncommittal response. He settled more comfortably alongside Changbei and drifted off to sleep, safe and content.

He woke only once in the night, roused by a strange sibilant hissing. Through layers of sleep, he struggled to place the sound, but it was too quiet, pitched too low for him to hear it precisely. Whatever it was, it didn't disturb Changbei.

Syrenen yawned and burrowed closer to his lover. He dismissed the whispers as nothing more than the rising of the wind outside their cave. For the second time that night, he slept.

\* \* \* \*

He awoke to a thick, blanketing silence. The light in the cave seemed strange and contradictory: a dull brightness. Syrenen stirred and stretched, combing his fingers through the tangle of his hair. He knew he was alone: Changbei was no longer curled beside him, although the cushions nested around him still bore the scent of their coupling.

The fire had burned down low, its embers aglow, giving off a comfortable heat. Syrenen got up and wandered around the cave, calling Changbei's name a few times as he pulled his clothes back on. Only his echo answered, and so he went to the entrance to look outside.

Snow had fallen overnight. It lay in drifts, blocking the cave entrance—cool, silent beauty barring his way. Syrenen stared at it and then up at the sky. The fog had lifted, but in its place were heavybellied clouds thick with more snow.

"Looks like I'm stuck here for a few days," Syrenen said aloud. He wrapped his arms around his body and shivered at the cold, creeping breeze that rolled in from the drifts.

He was about to retreat to the fireside when he noticed a small tumble of snow at one side of the cave entrance. Investigating it more closely, he saw half a footprint and the whisk-soft marks a silken robe might make if dragged across the snow.

"Changbei?" Syrenen peered outside the cave, but all he could see was the pristine white of the snow and the grey and black of the mountain. There were no other footprints.

He shrugged. Perhaps Changbei had gone out early and then fresh snow had fallen, covering his tracks. Syrenen wondered why anyone would need to go out on a day like this, forgetting for the moment that he should be out there hunting down a dangerous criminal.

The lure of the fire and the possibility of breakfast drew him back inside the cave. An hour passed, in which he found food, made a pot of tea, banked the fire and re-lit the lanterns against the gathering gloom. When he peeked outside again, it was to see flurries of snow dancing past the cave entrance.

Syrenen rearranged the cushions by kicking them into position, and then he picked up a scroll and tried to read it. After a while, he huffed, bored. His attention wandered to Changbei's disappearance. Surely by now he had completed whatever business had taken him outside. Syrenen hoped he would return soon. He missed him.

He forced himself to read a little more, and then he put the scroll aside. Lounging on the cushions, he stared at the cavern ceiling and listened to the hiss and pop of the fire. The sound had a soothing, almost hypnotic quality, and Syrenen yawned. His eyes closed, and sleep tugged at his senses.

Then he heard it—a whisper, a tiny thread of sound.

Syrenen sat up, looking around for its source. It could not come from outside, so it must be from deep within the cave... from the darker recesses where Changbei had warned him not to venture.

But Changbei wasn't there to stop him this time. Syrenen stood and collected a lantern, taking the light from its paper shade to give him more illumination. Holding it aloft, he picked his way through the fallen rocks at the back of the cave and spied a black staircase leading down.

As soon as he set foot on the staircase, he heard the whisper again. It came from the inky blackness below him. Curious, Syrenen began to descend, one careful step at a time.

He gripped his sword-hilt with his free hand as the whisper split into two, and then three, and soon the black pit around him was full of voices. Their words ran together into a babble of sound, but their tones were the same, rich with despair and horror. The deeper he descended, the louder came the voices. Soon he was able to distinguish individuals, to pick out those who wailed and those who merely sobbed in between their whispering cries.

Syrenen's trepidation grew. What manner of place had he found here? Perhaps it was a prison of some sort, and Changbei was its warden. And yet, even though he reached the bottom of the staircase and shone his light around this new, darker cavern, he could see no prisoners.

Now the whispers and cries were loud enough, desperate enough, to make Syrenen's skin crawl. Still with one hand on his sword, he walked forward and then stopped, astonished by the forest of stone around him.

Smooth-sheened, calcified pillars grew from the floor and ceiling of the cavern. Stone dribbled, frozen in silence. An army of pillars, some tall, others short, flickered into brief animation when the light touched them. Syrenen caught his breath at the weird shadows cast over the twisted stalagmites and stalactites. It looked like an abode of demons and the noise—the whispers and wails and cries...

With a sudden shock, Syrenen realised that the sounds came from the stone pillars. He held up the light to the nearest stalagmite and then backed away as he saw what he hadn't seen before—a vague resemblance, the suggestion of a human shape beneath the chilly veneer of wet stone.

Horrified, he put down the light and drew his sword. If a man were trapped under layers of rock, he had to get him out. Syrenen swung his blade at the stalagmite, cursing when the sword bounced off the stone with a dull thud. The whispering seemed to increase in intensity and volume, and so he tried again.

This time he took up a proper fighting stance and struck the pillar hard. A whimpering cry rang out as a chunk of rock broke free and bounced onto the ground. Heartened by this, Syrenen hacked at the pillar again and again, cleaving off runnels of petrified water and lumps of limestone. He only stopped when the edge of his sword blunted too much for him to continue.

As he stepped back, breathing heavily, he noticed dark water running from the stone where he'd chopped at it. He moved closer, reaching out to touch it, and then jerked back his hand in disbelief. Blood—he had blood on his fingers! Syrenen looked again at the stalagmite. There was no flesh, only stone—and yet blood continued to drip from the wounds he'd dealt.

Syrenen poked at the pillar with his sword-point. A keening sigh filled the air, the sound increasing to a howl of pain when he jabbed the sword hard into the stone.

"Do that much longer, and you will kill him," said Changbei from the darkness behind him.

Syrenen whirled around, his sword raised. "What sorcery is this?"

"No sorcery, merely retribution." In the faint light of the lantern, Changbei's expression was the same inhuman impassivity of the day before on the mountain path.

"These... stones," Syrenen began carefully, "they are men?"

Changbei inclined his head. "Men transformed into living rock. I told you I was the god of this mountain. This is the fate of those who trespass upon me."

"I have done more than trespass." Syrenen spoke boldly, holding Changbei's gaze. "Will you also turn me to stone?"

"No. You are different. You passed the test."

Syrenen lowered his sword but did not sheathe it. Curiously, he asked, "Did you want these men for your lovers, too?"

"No! They were not worthy. Only you survived. Only you were good enough to be my companion." Changbei smiled at him, an unearthly beauty in this dark place. The white stripe in his hair gleamed like phosphorus, and his robes, when they moved, carried the scent of winter—mountain pine, a breath of cold, wet rock, sorrow.

Changbei flicked his fingers at the bleeding stalagmite. Syrenen stared as the pillar grew fresh layers of stone, the drips of blood turning white and freezing into immobility. He no longer doubted Changbei's claim to be a god. Now his only concern was what this meant for both of them.

If Changbei noticed anything amiss, he made no mention of it. Instead, he tilted his head almost coquettishly and gazed upon him with a glow of possession in his eyes. "Last night," he said softly, "you promised that you would stay with me and be my lover."

"I did?" Syrenen stared at him. "You know, you really shouldn't believe anything a man tells you after he's had sex."

"You don't remember it?"

"Yeah, I do. It's just that..." and Syrenen gestured around the cavern, "this changes things. I didn't know you were a god."

Changbei looked confused. "I told you."

"Hearing something and believing it are two different things."

"You are not stupid. I would not choose a stupid human as my companion." Changbei raised himself up to his full, chilly height. "So why is it so hard to accept that I am a god?"

Syrenen tried to think of an answer, but gave up. "I need some fresh air."

\* \* \* \*

The snow still fell. Syrenen stood with his hands tucked into his sleeves and looked out at the silent drift of white flakes. The cloud had lowered, clinging in wisps to the mountain to obscure his view, so all he saw was a vista of white and grey in varying shades.

He took a deep breath and then expelled it in a sigh. He'd got himself into some scrapes before—it was the nature of his job—but this was way beyond anything he'd ever experienced, and he had no idea how to handle it.

A faint prickle of awareness warned him that Changbei stood nearby. Syrenen turned around and gave him a weary smile.

Changbei made minute adjustments to the fall of his robes. He did not look up when he asked, "Don't you like me?"

Syrenen swallowed a laugh of hysteria. "You turn men to stone. Of course I like you."

Now Changbei raised his head and met his gaze. "I wouldn't do that to you. I have chosen you. From this day, you are under Heaven's protection. Until our relationship is dissolved, you are safe from harm. As my lover, you are as immortal as I am."

Syrenen blinked. He didn't feel immortal, and he certainly didn't want to jump into the ravine to find out if Changbei spoke the truth. He decided to concentrate on more practical matters. "How do we dissolve the relationship?"

Changbei hesitated. Clearly, he did not want to tell him, but then he sighed. "If you truly do not want me then you must go to the temple of Yuanshi Tianzong, ruler of all gods. As you make an offering, bow nine times and announce to him the severance of your ties with me."

"It's that easy?"

"Yes." He seemed smaller, suddenly. "If you have no desire for me then it is best that you leave."

"I do desire you."

Changbei's smile was radiant with relief. "Then you will stay?"

"I don't know. This isn't what I expected. I came here looking for Lei Ku..." Syrenen tailed off, suddenly suspicious. "Is Lei Ku one of those stone pillars down there?"

"Of course." Changbei clasped his hands together. "But forget about him. You need not concern yourself with petty human squabbles any longer. You are mine."

"I'm still human," Syrenen said. "Changbei, I'm not a toy. Not a possession to be played with. I have thoughts... feelings. If you want us to be together, you should allow me some leeway."

"Feelings." Changbei stood very still, and then he made a dismissive sound. "In time, you will lose your human emotions. Gods do not suffer such things."

Syrenen raised his eyebrows. "So, no capriciousness, no flirting, no anger, no desire, no love..."

"No mistakes," Changbei said firmly.

"Ah." Syrenen waited. When it became clear that his lover would say no more, he said, "You made a mistake, didn't you? That's why you were exiled here."

Changbei turned away and walked to the mouth of the cave. Snow flurries tumbled toward him as if drawn by his presence; the clouds lowered, mist creeping in to gather around his body as if he were swathed in furs.

"I have not spoken of it in centuries," he said quietly. "Certainly I did not expect to tell a human of my errors."

"But I'm not just any human, am I?" Syrenen moved closer. "I'm your companion. Your lover. If you want this to work between us, you have to trust me."

"Trust." Changbei repeated the word as if he did not know its meaning. He nodded decisively. "I will trust you. You are worthy."

"It's not about being worthy." Syrenen sighed and slipped one arm around Changbei's waist, tugging him back into his embrace. He let his cheek rest against the white stripe in his hair and inhaled his scent: so cold, so clean, so inhuman. He smiled and kissed Changbei's hair. "It's about caring for someone."

"It's about worship," Changbei corrected. He stood a little straighter but did not move away. His voice distant, he said, "A long time ago, this mountain was worshipped by the people who lived on the plains below it. They made me a god, offering their crops, their treasures, sometimes even their lives to please me. I could bring the rain they needed to survive, or I could withhold it. I gave them water, fresh and pure. I gave them animals to hunt. Those people feared me, and they loved me. They would look upon me and smile. I was their home. I loved them all, took an interest in their funny little human ways, tried to help them, and they were grateful. They brought me more offerings, sent blessings and prayers..."

Syrenen heard sadness and regret. He stroked his hair and asked, "What happened to change all that?"

Changbei shuddered. "New religions. Foreign gods. They crept across the land like thieves, insinuating themselves into every village, every home. Suddenly, all the nature-gods were subservient to upstart deities who took the credit for our powers. And then my people built a temple to one of these new gods." His breath caught in a sob of anger. "They built it on my slopes."

Syrenen winced. Similar things had happened to him, of course—imperial officials were notoriously desperate for advancement, and

occasionally, if he made an important arrest, a townsman would claim it for himself in the hope of being noticed by the magistrate and promoted.

It didn't particularly bother him. As long as he got paid, he was happy to serve the Emperor in his current capacity. In his opinion, the higher a man climbed, the more trouble he made for himself. Syrenen supposed it must be the same for a god. Tenderness filled him. He wanted to hold Changbei and tell him that it didn't matter, but he doubted he would listen.

Instead he said, "We like building temples on mountains. Our prayers reach Heaven faster that way, or so we believe. Don't be angry with us for that."

Changbei trembled. "But I was," he said in a whisper. "I was furious. They built the temple to their new god, and they forgot about me. Everything I did for them, they thanked the new god as if he were their benefactor. They gave him their worship when he had done nothing to earn it. And I was so angry..."

He stopped. Syrenen became aware of the rising cold outside. Changbei was almost frozen in his embrace, his skin so white he looked like the mist surrounding them. Concerned, he tried to lead him back inside the cave to the fire.

Changbei turned in his arms but would move no further. Meeting Syrenen's gaze, he said, "I was so angry, I destroyed the temple and killed my people. I made it rain until the earth turned to mud. I made the rocks split and fall. I caused a landslide so terrible that it crushed the temple and buried the village. The day I killed my people, I killed their new god."

"Gods can't die," Syrenen said, shaken.

"Yes, we can. Slowly, over millennia—but we can die." Changbei stepped away from him, putting distance between them. "Mostly we die of neglect. Gods need worship if they are to survive. That's how I killed my rival—by ensuring he had no worshippers. Heaven decreed that my actions were arrogant and selfish. And so I was ordered to stay on my mountain and watch the people return to the plain, in the knowledge that they would fear me but never offer me worship. It is the cruellest of punishments."

He sighed and gestured at the snow outside. "When the people came back, they built me a temple higher up this ridge—an offering to placate my anger. They consecrated it, but it has no priests, no monks. It is a beautiful little hall, and yet it receives no worshippers."

Syrenen shook his head. "Because you kill all those who would pass through your kingdom."

"They are all thieves and murderers. I would not want their worship, even if they were to offer it. Besides," Changbei added with a sniff of distaste, "they all failed the test. They were not worthy."

"Then you have learned nothing!" Syrenen exclaimed. "You are still as arrogant as you were when you were exiled. You may be a god, but you cannot sit in judgement on men's souls—it is not your place to do so. Lei Ku and the others—if they are all the criminals you claim them to be then why not use your powers to send them back to true justice, proper justice..."

"Imperial justice," Changbei said with a sneer.

"The Emperor holds the Mandate of Heaven. What he decrees, the gods decree. Their will is one and the same. Your interference unbalances this heavenly equation."

"You are a barbarian, and yet you believe this?"

Syrenen blinked, startled by the question. He'd never considered it before. The day he'd crossed into Chinese territory was the day he'd accepted Chinese law, even if some of it ran contrary to the things he'd been raised to believe. Dispossessed and without a family of his own, order and a sense of belonging were important to him.

"Yes," he said. "I believe it."

Changbei stared at him. "You put me to shame. A human who has more faith than a god."

"I have faith in myself. That is the difference between us." Syrenen laughed, the sound so infectious that Changbei smiled in puzzled response.

"Why do you laugh?"

"You need to ask?" Syrenen wiped his eyes with the back of his hands. "We're a sorry pair! Faith in myself means I won't ask for help, and you won't ask for worship because you don't have faith in yourself. And yet men need help, and gods need worship. Really, we'd be perfect for one another if only we could admit it."

Changbei frowned, looking genuinely uncertain as he asked, "Why would I wish to admit to feeling anything for you?"

He knew Changbei didn't mean it, that he didn't understand what was at stake with such a question. Syrenen knew his lover had no idea what was being offered—what he had just trampled on so effortlessly with a single sentence.

"To keep me," he said, the words sticking in his throat. "I could show you so much more, if only you'll let yourself be moved by passion. By desire."

"Those things rule humans. Gods cannot be swayed by them."

"You want to be a stone forever, as cold as your mountain? Trapped in this polite despair, like the men you've imprisoned? Or do you want to change?"

Changbei looked away. "I will change when I receive worship."

"You will receive worship only when you're worthy!"

"But I am worthy," Changbei said, perplexed. "I am a god."

"No," said Syrenen. "You are a fool."

\* \* \* \*

They did not speak again for the rest of the day, but when night fell, they instinctively turned to one another and had no need of words to express their emotions. Common sense told Syrenen to flee this fledgling relationship before he got too deeply involved, but his rationality seemed to have disappeared along with his backpack.

Syrenen stayed awake half the night while Changbei slept in his arms. Not even the whispers from the lower cavern disturbed him. His mind raced as he pondered on what to do. He had obligations to the people of this province, to the magistrate who employed him and ultimately, to the Emperor. Fate had guided him from his home into the empire, and now Heaven had given him another obligation: Changbei.

He wanted to protect him. The thought made him grin—a mortal protecting a god! He wanted to thaw him, show him that worship didn't have to come from the burning of incense and offering of prayers. It could be much more subtle, more intimate and playful—and it could suffice to come from only one person, rather than a whole village... if only Changbei would allow it.

Syrenen knew he could fall in love with his mountain-god. He just needed to find a way of proving it to them both—and for Changbei to accept his love on faith.

\* \* \* \*

By the following morning, the snow had stopped. When Syrenen looked out onto the mountainside, he saw the tentative sparkle of sunlight reflected back from the tiny ice crystals. A patch of blue sky showed between grey clouds, and the air smelled hopeful.

He ventured outside the cave, clambering up the drifts to look around. The mountain seemed different today, no longer slumbering beneath its blanket of white and a haze of mist.

Syrenen took a few steps, laughing as his feet sank deep into the snow. He lost his balance and flopped into a drift. As he sat up and wiped the snow from his face, he noticed something glinting in the light.

Curious, he crawled toward it and picked it up. He recognised it immediately as Changbei's silver hairpin. But what was it doing here? He remembered taking it out last night, tossing it aside without interest, his attention wholly on the fall of Changbei's hair. There was no way it could have got out here, unless Changbei had dropped it.

Just as before, Syrenen had woken up alone, his lover nowhere in sight. Yesterday, it hadn't bothered him that much. Today, it did—especially with the hairpin lying abandoned in the snow. He didn't want to sit inside waiting for him to come back. Today, he would find out where it was that Changbei went each morning.

Syrenen thought he had a fair idea already. Folding back his sleeves so they wouldn't drag in the snow, he set off along what he hoped was the path up the mountainside.

The snow troughed and peaked, and he stumbled through it, keeping as close to the rock-face as possible. At times, he had to scoop out handfuls of snow to clear his way; at other times, the path was clear, the mountain stone showing wet and dark.

It was hard going. Syrenen paused by a clutch of boulders to catch his breath. His pulse beat a steady tattoo as he leaned on the largest of the rocks. From where he stood, he could see the long slope of the mountain as it fell away beneath him. If he had the strength and inclination, he could push the boulder down that slope.

He could imagine it: the boulder gathering pace, dislodging smaller rocks, collecting trees and loosening mud from lower down, until it created a landslide.

Syrenen jerked his hands from the boulder and took a deep breath. He didn't want Changbei roused to that sort of anger again, not when nature itself was so finely balanced. If any other disasters occurred up here, he would not let Changbei take the blame upon himself. The only thing that could overrule the mountain-god was Heaven itself.

Instinctively, Syrenen raised his gaze to the sky. He shaded his eyes with his hand as he glimpsed the face of the sun. The clouds

were scattering, and more blue showed overhead. Heartened by this sign of favour, he continued onward.

The path twisted around a gully before it led up onto the top of the ridge. As he turned the corner and negotiated his way across a frozen, slippery rivulet cutting through the snow, Syrenen saw a temple ahead of him.

Nestled in a natural hollow in the mountainside, it looked severe: all black wood and grey tiles, grey walls, surrounded by the virgin white of the snow. And yet there were snatches of colour, too—the sparkle of iced copper on a row of prayer wheels, a trailing red banner snaking down the roof, the distant gleam of sunlight upon a spine of bronze cladding.

He floundered through the snow towards it, admiration and hope flaring within him. Although he could see no footprints—did gods even leave footprints, he wondered—Syrenen was certain he would find Changbei within the temple.

Inside the sacred space, the central hall, flanked by two smaller buildings, overlooked a tiny courtyard. An empty brazier stood, filled with snow, waiting for offerings of incense. At the top of a dais, the prayer wheels rested.

Syrenen hurried up the steps and touched the wheels, feeling the resistance before they broke free of the ice that held them immobile. He passed along the dais, spinning each wheel into motion. They squeaked as they turned, the words of their prayers flashing like silver, like gold, to shine around the mountaintop.

Leaving the prayer wheels still spinning, Syrenen stepped over the high threshold and entered the central hall.

Inside, a sad, silent calm prevailed. A faint scent of damp wood lingered in the air. The light was muted, filtered through carved screens and stretched, oiled paper. No offerings were placed upon the altar; no sticks of incense or bowls of fruit, no coppers, no flowers: only tall red candles, their wicks untouched. The temple was, as Changbei had said, beautiful but empty, devoid of any trace of worship.

Sadness settled around him as the squeak of the prayer wheels faded into silence. Syrenen approached the statue standing haughty and proud and all alone, and looked upon it.

Truly, it was an exquisite work of art, almost as beautiful as the god himself. Syrenen gazed upon Shan Changbei rendered in white

jade and gilt and felt his heart squeeze tight. He'd thought to find him here, but there was no one and nothing—only emptiness and sorrow.

Syrenen took the silver hairpin from his sleeve and set it upon the altar. Taking a step back, he lifted his hands and bowed, formally, three times. Then he sank to his knees and gazed up at the statue of his lover.

"You wanted someone worthy," he began. "In truth, no human is worthy. Even those amongst us who are good and decent still make mistakes. Perhaps it is part of the human condition, for our mistakes come from our feelings."

He leaned forward to emphasise his words. "I have made mistakes, too, Changbei. The fight with my brother. The argument with my father. I let anger rule me, and then I let pride take me away from my home. And yet I do not regret it, because my humanity, my emotions, have brought me here—to you."

Outside, he heard a squeak as a prayer wheel turned. Syrenen paid it no heed.

"From all you said, it seems to me that gods are like humans. We cannot all be worthy all the time. But we can try. We may stumble and fall along the way, but with faith, with belief, with love... we will succeed."

He held out his hands to the statue, gesturing to the altar. "If you want only perfection, then I give you this—your silver hairpin. It is beautiful, valuable, worthy of you—and yet it cannot give you worship, because it does not live."

Syrenen took a deep breath and fixed his gaze on the pale stone face of his lover.

"You said I was worthy. I am also imperfect—a human, with human desires and weaknesses. If you can choose me as your companion then perhaps it is time you opened your wintering heart again to the rest of mankind—to the villagers of the plain below. To your people. Forgive yourself, Shan Changbei, and come down from your mountaintop. It must be lonely up there. Come down and bask in the sunshine. Those who kneel at your feet are not as unworthy as you think."

He waited. The prayer wheel fell silent again, and then, with a burst of light, the tall red candles flamed into life.

Syrenen jerked back from the altar, rising to his feet. He stared at the steady flames and then looked up as Changbei, his hair loose over his shoulders, stepped out from the shadow of his statue. In the gentle glow of candlelight, his mountain-god looked warm, almost human, next to the cold perfection of the jade, but to Syrenen, he was more beautiful than any work of art.

Changbei came toward him, passing the altar and the silver hairpin without giving them a second glance. He stopped before Syrenen and took his hands, smiling up at him.

"I accept your offer," he said. "You are right. I may be a mountain-god, but I do not have to be made of stone. Your faith—"

"My love," Syrenen corrected with a grin.

Changbei blushed and continued, "I want to reward you for your belief in me, to prove my faith to you and to humankind in return. Ask of me anything, and if it is within my power, I will grant it."

Syrenen thought for a moment. Tightening his fingers around Changbei's, he said, "I want you to restore Lei Ku to his human form. I promised I would capture him and return him to the town, so he may stand trial according to Imperial law." Syrenen squeezed Changbei's hands. "I keep my promises."

Changbei gazed at him. "But to take him to the town, you must leave me."

"For a short while. No more than two weeks." Syrenen touched Changbei's cheek, brushing back his hair. He felt so warm, so vital. It would be hard to leave him. "I will come back."

"You keep you promises," Changbei said softly, lowering his gaze.

"I do." Syrenen pulled him close and kissed him. "Trust me, Changbei. I will prove myself worthy of you. Let me go, so I may return to you of my own free will."

Changbei nodded. "Then I release you and the criminal, and I will wait here for your return."

\* \* \* \*

Syrenen was not a particularly superstitious man, but when he next began the ascent of Changbei Shan two weeks later, he made certain that his backpack was filled with offerings fit for a mountaingod.

This time, the villagers hadn't tied mirrors onto his pack, and neither had they warned him of demons. They had simply wished him a pleasant day in the mountains.

The sun shone, sparking light from the stream and encouraging the spring flowers to unfurl. The plum trees were in full blossom. Birds sang. A lizard, dull from its long winter sleep, lay basking upon a rock. Further up the slope, a hare started from cover and raced away.

Syrenen breathed in the scent of the fresh mountain air. A smile spread across his face as he looked around. Spring had come to Changbei Shan, and all but the very peak of the mountain was free of snow.

He hadn't gone far when he saw Changbei standing beside the stream, waiting for him. Syrenen's smile became a grin, and he quickened his pace.

Changbei's robes were still as white as snow, but now his sash was leaf-green, and he wore an over-robe of gold lace gauze that trapped the sunlight and gleamed when he moved. His hair was tied back at his nape, the white stripe seeming softer against the black.

Syrenen dropped his pack at Changbei's feet and crouched to open it.

"I brought things to please you," he said, pulling out a sheaf of incense sticks, a string of coppers, a dragon-fruit and several fine pieces of jade.

Changbei smiled down at him. "Syrenen..."

"Look—there's more in here," he continued, still emptying his pack of its treasures. "And I asked the village headman to arrange a feast in your honour, in thanks for giving up the criminal Lei Ku. The celebration will be held in three days' time, in your temple, and..."

"Syrenen." Changbei silenced him, holding out a hand to raise him to his feet. His eyes were shining. "You didn't need to do this for me."

Syrenen shuffled and shrugged. "I wanted to. You're a god. You need worship."

Changbei's smile deepened, and he stepped into his arms. "I need your worship," he whispered. "Thank you for coming back. I missed you."

Syrenen chuckled. "I find I like the mountains very much indeed," he said playfully. "In fact, they've quite captured my heart. I doubt I shall ever leave them again."

He leant down and kissed Changbei, gathering him close, both of them heedless of the scatter of offerings at their feet.

It was spring, and the mountain had thawed at last.

The End