

SIREN ADULT FAIRY TALE



# Nine Inches of SNOW and the Ebony Princess

Gracie C. McKeever

# **NINE INCHES OF SNOW AND THE EBONY PRINCESS**

**A Siren Adult Fairy Tale**

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**EROTICA ROMANCE**



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**NINE INCHES OF SNOW AND THE EBONY PRINCESS**

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# **NINE INCHES OF SNOW AND THE EBONY PRINCESS**

**GRACIE C. MCKEEVER**  
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## **Chapter 1**

*Healey Pavilion, St. Frances Hospital, Winter Fundraiser*

From the moment the guest of honor arrived, Aziza Lopez had to keep telling herself tonight was all about business, her job to keep the elite full and happy with hors d'oeuvres and champagne, and otherwise stay scarce.

Her stepmother would certainly never let her forget her place.

Homegirl needed to take a chill pill and get a life, if anyone asked Aziza, but, she was just the hired help, and no one was asking her.

She gave her hair one last pat, took a deep breath, and prepared to rejoin the party when the door swung inward, and the man of the hour stepped through.

Aziza's pussy muscles instantly contracted at the sight of David Healey standing just inside the door. She'd never had so

carnal and instant a reaction to a man before, had been told by her father she would only feel this way when she found her soul mate.

But if this were so, that would mean that David Healey was—

“So here’s where you’re hiding.”

He was way more gorgeous up-close and personal, his countless pictures in the society pages of the city’s various newspapers not doing homeboy a bit of justice. He was also a lot taller than she remembered from the dining hall, wide-shouldered and towering over her 5’8 by at least six inches.

He stepped into her path when she tried to leave and made her temperature go skyward.

Overwhelmed, she held the tray of hors d’oeuvres up between them, tried to maintain some distance, but it didn’t do much good. His essence surrounded her.

Aziza had been trying to keep her distance all evening, knew homeboy could be her downfall if she allowed him in her personal space. But she refused to allow him in, despite craving his touch from the first moment she’d seen him, awareness a sharp knife edge to all her female senses.

“I’m not hiding. I’m doing my job.” She flicked her gaze up and down the long length of him, taking in the black formal evening wear that sensuously melded to his physique and made her feel like a ragamuffin in her waitress uniform. “What are *you* doing back here?”

“Looking for you.” He stepped closer.

The scent of his cologne washed over her in one engulfing wave, and her pussy moistened at the piquant smell. Subtle, yet intoxicating, it reminded her of the woods after a hard rain, fresh and musky. Totally masculine.

“You’ve been avoiding me since I arrived.”

She would have wondered how he knew, but Aziza had felt him watching her all evening, his azure gaze hot and tactile like a touch. “Didn’t you get the memo? I’m not supposed to fraternize

with the bigwigs, and the bigwigs aren't supposed to fraternize with the help."

He plucked a caviar-laden cracker from her tray and popped it into his mouth, chewing slowly and licking his lips with relish when he was done. "I'm no bigwig. And you're certainly more than the help to me."

Despite his nonchalant manner, making him seem approachable and efficiently closing the gap in status between them, Aziza said, "I'm nothing special."

"See, now that's where you're wrong." He reached out a hand to caress her face. "You're more than special."

Aziza's heart stuttered at his persuasiveness, something in him touching the core of her in a way nothing ever had, something about him speaking to her even when he didn't open his mouth.

She closed her eyes and reveled in his touch, had to stop herself from leaning into his palm and falling any more under his spell than she had already. "What is it you want?"

"One dance."

"Here? Now? You must be tripping."

He chuckled, took the tray out of her hands, and placed it on the table to his right. "I assure you I'm not...tripping."

Oh, but she was, heartbeat doing a happy dance in her chest already. If she stepped anywhere near his outstretched arms, she was sure she would implode.

Everything about him tempted her. His straight white smile beckoned like a lighthouse beam on a foggy night. His arms looked inviting and full of warmth and security.

She knew he wouldn't hurt her or do anything to her that she didn't want, and for the first time since her father's untimely death, Aziza felt like someone really cared about her for her and not for the fortune she was worth.

Scratch that. She used to be worth, before Philomena weaseled her way into Daddy's good graces and trust.

Her stepmother had had dollar signs glowing out of her eyes from the moment she met Aziza's father until he'd died a few months ago. And now, the woman was on the hunt for another rich husband.

What made David Healey any different, any less mercenary? He had money of his own, loads of it, so what did he want from her? True, the Healey fortune made Donald Trump seem like a pauper and could buy her self-made father's small fortune a million times over, but everyone was out for something.

Aziza hated to be such a cynic, and up until a few years ago, before her father married Philomena, she hadn't been. "What do you really want?"

"One dance," he repeated, his rich, butter-melting voice seeping into her bones, simultaneously liquefying them and hardening her nipples.

One dance. What harm would it do? Except maybe wet her panties even more than they were already?

Her feet closed the small distance between them of their own accord, and before she knew it, she was swept into his strong arms and against his hard-muscle chest.

He felt like she'd thought he would—firm in all the right places, solid, and so damn sexy, he made her mouth water and her pussy throb with anticipation.

"I've thought about holding you like this from the first moment I saw you tonight. Thought about making you mine."

She tilted back her head to stare at him, momentarily hypnotized by the intensity shining out of his blue eyes before she found her voice. "Making me yours? Let's get one thing straight, homeboy. I'm not looking to get hooked up or *belong* to anyone." It was a weak attempt at defiance, but the best she could muster under the circumstances. She needed to assert herself now before he took total control, the way she sensed he was capable of doing. Bad enough Philomena acted like she owned her free and clear.

Aziza let her think it, because as long as she herself knew the truth, Philomena didn't need to know how little attention Aziza really paid her.

He was chuckling again, the sound not insulting or mocking at all, just self-assured. "But you will."

She knew without asking, but did, anyway. "Will what?"

"Belong to me," he murmured and bent his head.

Aziza had an instant to close her eyes and suck in a breath before his lips made contact with hers, reminding herself not to like it too much, not to feel too much for him, that her stepmother had already claimed and dug her claws into him.

Resistance and logic, however, were impossible once his lips touched hers.

They were at once demanding and firm, even fuller than she'd expected when he slowly slid his mouth across hers, as if searching for the right entry point. Finding it, he thrust in his tongue, brushing against hers with a low growl before completely foraging inside her mouth.

This wasn't exactly the dance she had imagined, but it would do, the wild beat of her heart the perfect accompaniment to his darting tongue.

He slowly rocked against her, and Aziza didn't know if it was to some music in his head or the slow song playing outside the doors in the ballroom. She no longer cared when his erection pushed against her abdomen and sent hot tingles surging to her core.

Warm moisture flooded her pussy, vaginal muscles contracting at the idea of his hard cock sliding inside her, to the hilt, his naked body pressed against her as she squeezed his well-muscled ass cheeks in her hands to motivate deeper penetration.

Aziza arched her neck and moaned, one leg automatically curving up around his hip.

She rubbed her slit against the large, rigid bulge in his pants, and he bent his knees to accommodate her desperate need to fill the emptiness and ease the sudden ache inside.

She burrowed her fingers in his longish chestnut hair, reveling in the waves and surprising silkiness, but when she pushed out her tongue to deepen the kiss, he pulled back, catching her around the shoulders as she stumbled forward.

Aziza wasn't sure if he was trying to steady himself or her, and the look in his vivid eyes told her he wasn't sure, either.

He leaned forward, panting and pressing his forehead against hers. "Damn, you are hot."

*Only for you*, she wanted to say, but just mutely gawked at him, wondering why he had stopped and why she had lost control so easily. She'd never lost herself like that before, had never been so instantly turned on.

*But let's face it, sister-girl, your self-control was compromised the minute he walked into the room earlier in the evening.*

"You want me," he murmured.

She avoided gaping with a monumental effort. "You're pretty sure of yourself."

"I'm sure of us because I want you, too." He reached down a hand to cup her pussy, stroking her engorged clit with his thumb as he grinned. "Don't you believe in lust at first sight?"

Inflamed by his touch and all-knowing smile, she closed her eyes and gritted her teeth to keep from whimpering. She was relieved he hadn't asked if she believed in *love* at first sight. That would have been too much to resist, with his seductive tandem assault on her senses. She was already too close to caving, wanting to believe in him and romantic platitudes, even though she had lost all sense of romanticism the minute her father said 'I do' to Philomena.

"I believe in lust and desire more than love," Aziza whispered.

"At least we have something to work with."

She almost asked him what he was doing with her stepmother, but didn't want to let him know she cared already, or that she was jealous so early in the game. Instead, she asked, "Why'd you stop?"

"Because if I didn't..." He took a deep breath and shook his head, looking impossibly sly like a fox and innocent as a boy when he murmured, "Let's just say I don't want our first time to be rushed in a hospital kitchen."

He said it like they were a done deal, and she couldn't dispute him. She felt like she already belonged with him, to him, from the first moment he stepped into the ballroom.

How could that be when he was with Philomena?

"I want to see you again."

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

He frowned and tilted his head, like he was unaccustomed to having his wishes questioned.

Aziza silently stared at him, reaching out with her mind to feel the echoes of her own ecstasy and confusion from their kiss, trying to slip further below the surface to read him more thoroughly, but her consciousness slammed against a barrier. It was unlike anything she had ever encountered and couldn't have been more substantial had he erected a physical wall against her.

She read people's feelings on the regular, naturally and easily. Reading their thoughts was admittedly much more difficult and involved a lot more effort, depending on an individual's will and resistance, but was still doable.

Was David Healey consciously blocking her, or did he have some sort of natural barrier?

He brushed her cheek with his fingers. "I think you think too much."

This was eerie. She wasn't sure if he was addressing her last spoken words or her most recent thoughts.

"Tell me your name," he murmured.

Aziza had a feeling he didn't need to ask, that he could easily get it if he tried, either by conventional or unconventional means. It was the unconventional means that had her ready to bolt, despite her own gifts. "I have to go." Aziza turned to pick up her tray and stepped around him to leave when the kitchen door swung open again.

"There you are! I've been looking all over for you." Philomena gaped when she noticed David standing just behind Aziza. "Has this young woman been harassing you, David?"

"Quite the contrary. I couldn't wait for her hors d'oeuvres and followed her in here to filch a couple." He reached for another caviar cracker and winked at Aziza when he brought it to his mouth.

"Oh...well, I suppose that's fine." Philomena caught Aziza around the arm and led her towards the doors. "Don't make me regret doing you a favor in hiring you for the night. Socialize less, and do your job more. You have guests to tend to," she said through her teeth.

Aziza grinned, stopped just short of blurting "I told you so" to David over her shoulder when Philomena shooed and ushered her out of the kitchen. Her heartbeat kicked up another notch when she caught David's answering wink before the doors closed behind her.

\* \* \* \*

David watched Philomena's fingers dig into his kissing-buddy's upper arm, wincing as he just barely held his anger at bay.

He hated cruelty in any form, and if he hadn't already made his decision to let Philomena go, he would have after that display.

He had gotten glimpses of her malice before, especially in the way she treated her staff and those she thought beneath her. Her elitism was the major reason he kept his distance with her emotionally. Physically was another story. He was a man, after all,

at least for the most part, and unabashed when it came to his appetites.

But even a stunning blonde ice queen like Philomena VanWizer couldn't hold his attention indefinitely, especially not when he just found the woman he intended to make his mate.

The couple of weeks he and Philomena had been seeing each other so far was unprecedented for him, and her clinging possessiveness made it seem even longer. He couldn't imagine Philomena boldly declaring her independence as his kissing-buddy had. She was too eager to please, too afraid of risking a fat payday.

David wasn't about to be husband number two, despite what Philomena thought.

"Are you sure she wasn't harassing you?" she asked and hooked an arm through his. "I can have her disciplined for insubordination."

David just barely bit back a curse. "That won't be necessary." If there was anyone who would be doling out discipline and pleasure to that lush chocolate body he'd just held in his arms, it would be him. The sooner, the better.

He closed his eyes at the memory of her face—the prominent, high cheekbones, those intoxicating onyx eyes and the seductive, smoky voice—as a sudden wave of need washed over him. He just barely held a shiver at bay, took everything in his power not to make Philomena aware of his reaction to the girl. "What's her name?"

She looked at him askance. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious." He'd tried getting it himself, but came up against a psychic barrier almost equal to his own. Reading someone and maintaining his shields wasn't the easiest thing to do. It was something only his grandfather did with complete effortlessness. He'd gotten just a glimmer before the girl had shut him down, something with an A.

“You are so sweet, wanting to be friendly with the help, but it’s really not a good idea. In fact, I think it’s much more preferable to keep up formal barriers between myself and my employees. Less chance of any emotional attachments or misunderstandings.”

He understood the tenets of good business better than most, thanks to his tycoon father and grandfather, and the rules of good manners thanks to his mother. There was no question Philomena would have benefited from the lessons he’d learned under his parents’ tutelage. “I’m well aware of business etiquette, Philomena.”

“You’re not still upset at the way I talked to that waiter earlier, are you?”

“It’s your party.”

“David, he was dreadfully incompetent. He had to be firmly put in his place.”

He removed her hand from his arm and held it. “We need to talk.”

“Certainly, honey. What is it?” She turned to him with a confident expression, and David had a feeling she was expecting something from him he would never be able to give, at least not to her: commitment.

“We’ve had a nice couple of weeks together, but this isn’t something that can go any further.”

She blinked. “What is it you’re trying to tell me, darling?”

He gritted his teeth at her term of endearment. It made him uneasy. Always had, as it presumed a love affair that did not exist, never could. “I’m telling you it’s over.”

“That’s simply not possible.”

“I’m sorry, but it is.”

“But I was expecting you to pro—”

He stared at Philomena as she cut herself off, realization dawning.

Jesus, she was expecting him to marry her after two weeks? They barely knew each other—not that brevity of courtship would stop him from pursuing his kissing buddy. He knew her as well as he knew himself. He knew her *soul*—but what he knew of Philomena, he wasn't too enamored with.

David should have cut this off a lot sooner, but decided dragging it out any longer to soothe her wounded psyche would be even crueler than she.

"It's my stepdaughter, isn't it?"

He blinked and looked at her. Surely he hadn't heard her right. "Your stepdaughter? I've never met—"

"The waitress who just left!"

"She's your *stepdaughter*?"

"Are you scandalized because she's my stepdaughter, or because I know what's going on between the two of you?"

He was still dealing with the shock of discovering who his kissing buddy was when he met Philomena's glare with his own. "I'm scandalized because you're a cold and uncaring witch who doesn't deserve to have a young woman like her in your life."

"I see she has you fooled, too." Philomena sneered. "Don't you know you should never trust a big butt and a smile?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about." Her stepdaughter, and she never said anything, not one word. Didn't even introduce them. She'd treated the girl worse than an employee or servant. She'd treated her like a stranger off the street.

"She'll only use you. But you would know about that, wouldn't you? Being a user?"

David grinned and silently shook his head.

Another man would have been chastened at the tacit indictment, but David had never been one to worry about what other people thought of him, had never let barbs get to him. Years of growing up the youngest of five brothers and beneath the glare of family success and the public spotlight had inured him.

David made allowances for Philomena's hurt feelings, knew they were behind her insult, but he had no doubts about the nature of her character, or that he was doing the right thing in breaking things off now.

"So you have nothing to say for yourself?"

"This may surprise you, but despite my sharing your bed on occasion the last couple of weeks, I don't answer to you."

Her reaction was instantaneous, but so were David's reflexes. He would have had a nasty red handprint across his cheek had he not caught her hand mid-strike, the force behind her blow was that potent.

"How dare you!"

"Stop being so melodramatic." He held her wrist fast when she tried to jerk out of his grip. "If you'll calm down, I'll release you, but not before."

"Let me go," she said through her teeth.

"Can I count on your cooperation?"

"Who do you think you are to order me around?"

If she really knew him the way she thought she did, she wouldn't ask the question. And she would never have dared to strike him. "It's up to you." David tightened his grip just enough to get his message across, but not enough to cause any real pain, and just barely holding in a growl.

Philomena grew still beneath his grip, seemed to sense he was on the edge. "Fine. You have my cooperation."

Once he released her, she whirled on him, pointing her forefinger like a weapon. "I'll make you sorry you ever crossed me, David Healey. That's a promise."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to live up to my earlier name-calling by putting a curse on me."

"Mock me if you wish." Philomena turned on her heels and pushed the doors open before tossing a glower over her shoulder.

“But you and your precious ebony princess will never be. I will see to this.”

## Chapter 2

Philomena decided she wouldn't cry. She had spent the better part of her life shedding tears over one slight or another, over one man or another. She would not spend her time or energy so unproductively. There were better ways to let David know he had irrevocably hurt her: revenge.

She glanced at her face in the rearview mirror—the flawless ivory complexion, the green eyes, the long, blonde hair framing her finely sculpted face—searching for one flaw that could have caused David's sudden defection, searching for something that certainly wasn't there.

Philomena caught movement out the corner of her eyes and followed when David exited the hospital through the emergency exit, most assuredly in search of her hussy of a stepdaughter.

Always proactive, she had quickly taken steps to ensure the little lovebirds didn't see each other again tonight, immediately dismissing her stepdaughter and sending her home. That took care of the immediate problem, but there was still the matter of Philomena's wounded pride.

She swallowed against the bitter taste in her mouth while she watched David, so handsome and regal in his evening wear and long wool overcoat, the epitome of class and money, born with a silver spoon in his mouth and a symbol of everything she had ever come to covet and loathe over the years.

Why would he choose that wretch of a girl over her?

*She* was perfect, far prettier and with much more class than any Aziza Lopez. She had done everything in her power to ensure her

irresistibility to the male species as soon as she could afford to leave her old life as Phyllis Lipinski behind and become Philomena VanWizer.

Philomena frowned at the memory of her own wretched past, but quickly changed her expression to neutral, if not quite happy. She did not want to get wrinkles, after all. She spent entirely too much money to maintain a standard of physical perfection deserving her station and would not lose everything she'd worked so hard for now.

Most of her life, Philomena had been a misfit, rejected by the mainstream, the popular kids, because she didn't have the right clothes, the right shape, the right *look*.

She'd buried herself in her studies, wallowing in her geekiness, convinced smarts would get her what she wanted until she realized that brains and personality would only get her so far with a man. If she really wanted to catch a man's eye, wanted to snag her prince charming, she needed to act *and* look the part. She needed to be the entire package.

With the help of a boob job (an eighteenth birthday present to herself), liposuction (a twenty-first birthday present to herself), contacts, and a dye job, she'd become ultimate trophy-wife material and was ripe for the picking when Aziza's father came along.

She had gone through all that work and all that money, and for what? For David to dump her for a buxom and overly curvaceous younger woman at the first sign of go? Dumped for her stepdaughter?

Philomena would not have it.

She watched now when David crossed the street, sauntering in the general direction of Aziza's apartment building, a confident and determined bounce to his step. She had a sudden bad feeling about where he was going.

Was it possible he knew where the girl lived? That one of those meddling guests or hospital staff members told him? She knew how those nurses and orderlies all stuck together, and Aziza had ingratiated herself with each and every one of them, even the egomaniacal doctors, with that bubbly personality and easy smile of hers.

Was that all it took to lure a man like David Healey nowadays?

No matter. Aziza would only have him over Philomena's dead body. Or David's.

She started her Benz and slowly followed him, trailing at a good distance and waiting as he got several blocks from the hospital for the right moment to strike, until she was sure of his destination.

She would repay him for his insult.

When David stepped off the snow-encrusted curb onto the damp blacktop, Philomena revved her engine and careened towards him.

She saw the look of shock on his face, emphasized by her headlights and instantly replaced with a look of recognition.

No matter. He would not live to tell.

Philomena's heart pounded with excitement when she plowed her car into him. She heard the satisfying thud of his body when it flew into the air, skidded across her hood, up and over the roof, bouncing off the trunk and onto the pavement behind her as she sped away.

That would show him she was not to be toyed with.

\* \* \* \*

"Someone call 911!"

"Did you see that? The car just ran right over him and didn't even slow down!"

"Is he dead? He has to be after that."

“Did anyone get the license plate?”

David saw and heard everything clearly—the people hovering over his body, their words of concern and cries for help. He just could not respond.

He was trying to figure out whether or not this was a bad thing when he realized he was in wolf form and outside of his body.

*Oh, fuck.*

Something had gone wrong, something he’d never encountered or heard of before.

He’d started to shift when he saw the car coming at him and recognized Philomena behind the wheel. It was a natural reaction, his body instinctively changing to another form to avoid maximum damage, or at least trying to change. She’d come at him so fast, it was a wonder he’d had time to react at all. It was a wonder, too, that he’d seen her face. But he had. There’d been no mistaking that long, platinum blonde hair or hateful green-eyed glare.

She’d meant to kill him.

David trotted over to his body to see if she’d succeeded, nuzzling his neck and releasing a howl at the non-response. He gaped up at the spectators and realized when none of them reacted to his presence that they couldn’t see or hear him.

*Double fuck.*

Either he was dead, or he wasn’t. Either he was wolf, or he was man. He couldn’t be both, could he? David had never heard of a split or bilocation of this nature. He needed to get to his father or grandfather to find out what was going on.

Would either of them be able to hear or see him any better than the spectators could?

He glanced up at the nearby apartment building, drawn to his original destination, the question momentarily moot. Something beckoned him. *Someone.*

Aziza was close. He could feel her.

David stepped back when an ambulance sped to a stop outside the circle of spectators and parked. The surrounding crowd opened their ranks to make room for the two EMS technicians who rushed to his body with a stretcher and other equipment. He stayed with his body for the several minutes it took them to stabilize and prepare him for transport and watched them head back to the hospital, sirens wailing and red lights flashing in the night.

David eyed the back of the departing ambulance longingly, torn between following or going to his new mate.

He chose his mate.

\* \* \* \*

Aziza jerked awake in her favorite corner of the sofa. The textbook she'd buried her nose in when she drifted asleep fell to the floor with a thwack. She wondered what had startled her out of her sleep until she spotted the large timber wolf standing on the threshold of her living room, staring at her.

He had azure eyes! Not that she was an expert in such things, but she had never heard of this in a wolf before, especially not so human a shade, so human an expression.

She wasn't sure how she knew the animal was a wolf and not a big dog or a coyote. There was just something too majestic and extraordinary about him to be either of those.

Where had he come from, and how in God's name had he gotten into her apartment?

Aziza shook herself, wondering whether she had conjured him from her subconscious and not that she was still asleep and dreaming or going crazy.

She had a second to question the vision and release a small yelp when the animal slowly advanced, paws surprisingly silent against her polished wood floor.

*Don't be afraid. I'm not here to hurt you.*

She froze and gaped at the animal.

*I came to warn you. Watch your back. Your stepmother is on the warpath.*

“No shit.”

She immediately heard a familiar deep chuckle at this and peered when the wolf came closer.

Aziza assured herself none of this was real—the wolf was just a manifestation of her longings, an animalistic symbol of her wildest desires—even as she reached out a hand to touch him, strangely unafraid.

She expected to encounter the softness of his dense-looking pelt, palm tingling right before her hand went straight through the animal.

Aziza wondered whether she was surprised or relieved.

*It's all right to be both.*

“Reading my mind now?” *And why should that be so shocking, since you're talking to an imaginary wolf and expecting an answer!*

*I only catch what you project.*

“So if I don't project, you won't know what I'm thinking?”

*Correct.*

It would be tricky, but she could do it. For self-preservation, she had learned how to close off her mind and feelings a long time ago. She would have never made it out of her childhood sane had she not learned to control her empathy, rather than letting it control her.

Helping the staff at the hospice with her mother as a teen had been her first true test, teaching her how to soothe and send healing vibes instead of just receiving indiscriminate and unwanted signals of pain and grief from strangers.

She hadn't been able to save her mother, but she had at least been able to ease her suffering towards the end.

*I'm sorry she's gone.*

At the wolf's thoughts, Aziza realized she was crying and angrily swiped at the tears on her face with the back of her hand.

*It's all right to miss her. It doesn't make you weak.*

She knew this. She just hadn't cried, and certainly not in front of anyone, in a long time. It had been her job to be the strong one, to take care of her father. And she had been doing a good job of it before Philomena came along.

*There was nothing more you could have done.*

He was wrong, despite his mythical, all-knowing tone. She could have been there for him more instead of focusing so hard on going away to study and giving him his space. She'd left the door wide open for the rift once Philomena married her father. At that point, he had been susceptible to believing anything his young, loving wife told him. Even that his daughter wanted and needed to get away and be on her own, financially and socially independent of her father.

Aziza felt moistness on the back of her hand and glanced down to see the wolf licking the back of her hand from wrist to knuckles. Her eyes widened.

*Good. You felt that. That means I...I'm real.*

"Apparently more real than I gave you credit for."

*You don't fear me.*

She smiled at the wonder in his tone, knew how he felt. "No," she admitted. She had been afraid initially, but not anymore. He was a part of her, her subconscious come to life. She could no more fear him than she could fear herself.

*I'm not just your subconscious.*

He turned to leave before Aziza could question him. She leaped from the sofa to follow him, sliding to a stop several feet from the front door when he pivoted and aimed those haunting blue eyes at her.

*We'll see each other again soon, Aziza. I promise.*

She nodded, body tingling with anticipation at the prospect, like she had just agreed to a date...a date with a figment of her imagination that claimed he wasn't!

## Chapter 3

She was more beautiful than he remembered, even sleep-tousled and clad in ripped, faded blue jeans and a white midriff-baring T-shirt. She was, in fact, more alluring and regal in worn clothes or a waitress uniform than all the rich and powerful matrons had looked at the fundraiser draped in designer gowns and dripping in priceless jewels.

Aziza had courage and understated nobility the likes of which the fake-boobed, heartless Philomena VanWizer and her ilk could never realize, no matter how hard they strove or how much money they acquired.

David had wanted to hold Aziza so bad, feel her soft and pliant in his arms, the sensation was a physical ache in his front legs. Even now, when he made his way down the stairs and out of her apartment building, his tongue throbbed with a memory of her taste. He wondered what it would be like to fully sample her, bury his face between her legs, feast on her pussy, and sate them both as he brought her to orgasm with his tongue.

Christ, he was horny!

What he really needed to concern himself with was in what kind of condition he had survived the collision.

David jogged in the direction of St. Frances, anxious now to see how he was faring.

Once he made it back to the hospital and didn't see any doctors frantically working on him in any of the treatment areas in the emergency room, he assumed he had already been transferred up to intensive care. Either that, or he was already dead.

Refusing to believe the latter, David headed up to ICU where, relieved, he found his family milling around en masse.

His father had an arm around his mother in a consoling gesture. Grampa stood nearby, assuring them both that David was a fighter and would pull through this just fine. All four of his older brothers—Richard, Thomas, Peter, and Matthew—sat or stood by in varying stages of dress, formal bow ties either undone or completely off, and tuxedo jackets flung over shoulders or across the back of the waiting room's available chairs.

David didn't know how long he had been at Aziza's, time so meaningless on this plane, but he thought it had to have been long enough for him to be stabilized in the emergency room, then brought up to surgery and ICU.

*Was* he stable, or were the doctors delaying the inevitable in informing his family he had not made it?

Wouldn't he know one way or the other? Even if he was a ghost in animal form, wouldn't he *feel* it if his human body had slipped away?

David barked two times in quick succession, trying to get someone's attention, but no one flinched—not even his brother Matthew, whom out of all his brothers, he had the closest bond.

How was he supposed to find out how to get back into his body and wake up if he couldn't communicate?

David refused to feel sorry for himself. First, it was behavior too unbecoming of a Healey, and second, he would never hear the end of it from his Grampa. He couldn't help, however, feeling regret at being snatched away from Aziza and deprived of spending quality time with her when he had only just met her.

He glanced up at his Grampa and loudly howled.

His grandfather glanced in his direction, frowning at the same time that Peter sneezed and pulled a handkerchief from his jacket pocket to blow his nose.

"Did anyone hear that?" Grampa asked.

"I think the entire floor heard that sneeze," Richard grumbled.

Matthew finally woke from his doze and asked, "Hear what? Did the doctor come out with word about David yet?"

"Between, grumpy, sneezy and sleepy..." Thomas chuckled and shook his head at his younger brothers.

"And who does that make you?" Richard asked and Thomas playfully brandished a fist.

"It makes me the oldest brother with rights to clobber you accordingly." He arched a brow at his still-drowsy brother Matthew. "Another late night?"

"I can't help it if I'm popular." Matthew gave him a wolfish grin and shrugged.

Thomas pointed his chin at Peter. "What about you? I don't see any furry creatures or vegetation in the vicinity."

"It's the damndest thing. My sinuses all of a sudden feel like they're under attack."

"I think you're allergic to yourself, Pete. Have been since you were a pup," Richard muttered, and his brothers laughed, even Peter.

"This is different. I know it sounds weird, but there's an animal nearby. A big one."

David's heart sped at his family's reactions. It was obvious they sensed him on some level. The problem was to up the level and make them clearly hear and see him, not just vaguely sense him.

"Shh. The doctor's coming," his mother said, and though no one appeared in the room for several long seconds, David didn't doubt someone was on the way.

A minute later, a doctor came in from the hall, pausing on the threshold as he took in the Healey clan one at a time before making his way to David's parents. "Mr. and Mrs. Healey?"

"Yes," they chorused.

His mother pulled out of his father's arms to confront the doctor as David's brothers and Grampa converged and presented a united front.

"How is he?" Dad asked.

David almost zoned out at the litany of ailments the doctor outlined...compound broken bones...internal bleeding...torn spleen...bruised liver.... yadda, yadda, yadda.

He had faith that his unique anatomy was healing and taking care of the physical problems well enough. What concerned him more was mention of a deep coma and ventilator.

"There was brain swelling and intracranial pressure that we alleviated in surg—"

Mom gasped. "He's not brain-dead, is he?"

"There is brain activity, so no; he's not brain-dead, but—"

"Thank God."

"*But*, I'm not going to lie to you, Mr. and Mrs. Healey. Your son's condition is critical, and the next twenty-four hours are going to be crucial in telling whether or not he'll recover."

"*Oh, horse pucky.*"

"I'm sorry?" The doctor turned to Grampa, who pointed an accusatory finger at the medical man.

"You youngins with your highfalutin education and degrees and jet age medical breakthroughs think you're God and know so much. Well, you don't know my grandson."

*You tell 'em, Gramps.*

Mom threw Grampa a chastising look.

The old man returned it with a wide-eyed, what-did-I-do-wrong expression and said, "Well, it's true."

"I know this is a difficult time for you all, but I'm only telling you the facts. The longer David stays in a coma, the less likely his chances are of coming out of it."

“We understand.” Mom, ever the mediator in the family, grabbed the man’s hands in hers, gently squeezed, and held them. “Thanks for your time and patience.”

“No problem.”

“Can we go in to see him?”

“He’s being moved into a room from recovery as we speak. Once he’s settled, a nurse will come out to get you, but only two of you at a time, and only for ten minutes a visit.”

Mom thanked him again and shook the doctor’s hands before finally releasing him.

He gave her a sympathetic smile, then left.

David paced about his family, weaving between them like a human obstacle course before finally standing still to stare up at all of them in turn.

He had to reach them somehow, either in this form or human form.

That was it! He’d just shift back and merge with his body. Non-responsive, his ass!

He trotted away to follow the doctor down the hall, where he soon found his body lying peaceful, still and on a ventilator.

Oh hell, this was bad.

He’d never once been sick or injured in his thirty-two years of life, aside from that one rebellious incident as a pup when he was determined to forage in the woods and see if he could survive on his own in wolf form.

He has been brought down by a hunter’s bullet, and had it not been for the superior healing abilities naturally built into his DNA, and the doctor the Healey family had on retainer to discreetly take care of such matters, his previous injury could have been much more disastrous—both personally and professionally.

David went closer, heart pumping, as if he had just done several wind sprints.

Seeing himself flat on his back, unresponsive and in such serious shape, shook him more than he was willing to admit.

He leaped into the chair beside the bed, noticed the wave patterns accelerate on the monitors and wondered if his human self was reacting to the proximity of his wolf form.

David watched himself for several long moments, wondered if he should try to shift. He hadn't since the accident—accident, ha, that was a laugh!—and it would definitely be a test on this plane.

Only one way to find out.

He leaped out of the chair back onto the floor and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes, mentally blocked all distractions, concentrated on his own heartbeat and the change.

He'd done this a thousand times, natural and often as blinking, and didn't think he should have a problem, until he suddenly felt woozy and stumbled back onto his haunches.

Okay, he'd just have to try a little harder. He was used to challenges.

As the youngest, he'd learned at an early age to fight for everything he got, especially his clan position. He still wasn't where he wanted to be and knew the only way to achieve breeding status was to disperse, leaving his natal pack to find his mate and start his own pack. As much as he loved his family, biding his time had never been his strong suit. He was a prime at heart, too impatient to work his way up the dominance hierarchy, especially not when he had four older brothers ahead of him, with more rank and so far biding their time, too.

David stood now, started the process over again, meeting with some success.

His comatose self hadn't changed however. He'd thought with all the energy he'd expended to change back to human form, it would have affected his corporeal self. Not the case.

David got into the bed to join with his body and for an instant, felt like he was falling into a bottomless pit. His body surrounded his recently shifted spirit like an empty shell.

This wasn't merging. This was just filling a void, unable to affect change in it, unable to make his body respond to his commands. Not even the simplest one of wiggling a toe or finger, much more moving a limb.

Damn, he wasn't comfortable with this situation at all, felt too vulnerable like this, especially considering who had been behind his injury: a woman dumped and scorned.

What if Philomena managed to bypass hospital protocol or security and was left alone with him for any length of time? He'd have no way to defend himself against her. He would have to rely on the attentiveness of the staff and his family.

His family he trusted implicitly, but even they couldn't stay by his side twenty-four-seven, even in shifts. And he was well aware of the nursing situation—overworked, underpaid, short-staffed—all conditions he and his foundation were working diligently to correct with aggressive recruitment and volunteering.

David remained, still hoping for some sort of miracle, some instantaneous symbiosis, but after several minutes with no tangible difference in his anatomy, he left his body to stand beside the bed.

He needed time and space to think, and he thought a whole lot better on his feet than not. At least he felt less vulnerable when he was up and around with the illusion of activity and life.

Several minutes later, his parents finally made an appearance, practically tip-toeing across the threshold of his room over to the bed like he was a baby sleeping in a crib and they were afraid of waking him.

*Wake me! Scream, shout, stomp on the floor and jostle me! Just don't treat me like I'm already dead.*

His mother went to his bedside, didn't hesitate to gently plow her fingers through his hair, murmuring maternal words of encouragement.

David felt her touch, heart strumming at the tender caress of her fingers against his scalp.

Excellent! He wasn't lost. He *would* come out of this.

And he would make sure Philomena paid for trying to kill him.

\* \* \* \*

He was alive!

Philomena almost spewed her late morning coffee across the dining room table in shock and disbelief. But there it was, splashed across the front of her morning paper in black and white, a headline about David Healey lying in a coma after the hit-and-run the evening before.

Philomena swallowed the mouthful of coffee with distaste, and not just at the unlikely news. The coffee wasn't fit for human consumption.

She yelled for Marisol.

"*Si, Senora?*" The maid, some immigrant from Guatemala or Mexico or one of those poor South American countries with water that gave tourists the bends, appeared at her shoulder almost instantly. Like a ghost.

Philomena had never liked Marisol. The girl gave her the creeps. But Aziza's father had insisted Marisol was a stellar employee with an impeccable work ethic and excellent skills.

The man had just been too kind. It was his fatal flaw. That, and his blindness to the flaws of those he loved, all the more better for Philomena to pull off her plans to climb the social ladder in less than half the time it would have taken her to do on her own.

"This coffee is atrocious. Take this away, and make another pot."

"*Si, Senora.*" Marisol picked up the sterling silver pot and took it back to the kitchen.

One just couldn't find good help nowadays. Philomena was seriously considering getting rid of the girl, except she didn't want to jump from the frying pan to the fire and wind up with someone ten times worse.

Philomena went back to the article she was reading, doubt about how well she had covered her tracks the night before mounting.

This was twice now she had underestimated David, the first time with her belief he would fall for her charms easily and irrevocably as had Aziza's father. But such was not the case, especially if David's cool brush-off last night was any indication.

Seems she had unfinished business to tend to at the hospital, and quickly, before the police found a reason to talk to her.

She'd taken advantage of a pre- and extra-marital affair to get her car disposed of at an all-night chop shop.

Johnny Lemeaux, the owner, and a friend-with-benefits, wasn't aware of the hit-and-run when she asked him to make the repairs. He wasn't curious, didn't ask any questions, basically didn't care how Philomena smashed her car. In fact, he was the perfect combination of ignorance and apathy, and this suited her needs perfectly.

Philomena doubted Johnny would have made a fuss even if he had known how her car got damaged. Johnny had very few scruples, even less if a nice piece of ass like hers —was thrown into the mix as incentive.

In addition to his many dubious attributes, Johnny was better than average looking, handsome in a rough-hewn sort of way. He fucked pretty well, too. At least she had attained the prerequisite orgasms during their sundry times together.

Philomena might have considered Johnny her perfect foil except for several serious drawbacks. He wasn't the sharpest tack in the box as far as IQ went, and personality-wise, he was a pretty dull boy. He could never touch David Healey in the witty banner

or intelligent conversation department, and he certainly wasn't sophisticated or rich like David.

Pity.

Johnny did have his uses, but playing sugar daddy to an already rich and pampered socialite wasn't one of them. He was good for sex and grunt work in Philomena's book. It was for the latter reason she might have enlisted his help in taking care of her little problem at St. Frances, but she didn't think Johnny was clever enough to pull it off.

Philomena wouldn't totally discount using him if the need arose, however. She just preferred finishing what she'd started wherever possible.

Besides, she wanted the pleasure of being there when David took his last breath.

## Chapter 4

When Aziza reported to work on the ICU the next evening, the nurses' station was abuzz.

In addition to three sets of nurses present during the shift change jawing about the club scene the evening before, or the amazing thing their two-year-old did, or the silly thing their significant other did that morning, the main topic of discussion was the hit-and-run that had occurred several blocks away and the esteemed patient now in their midst as a result.

Aziza punched in at the nurses' station and checked the roster, surprised David Healey was one of her two patient assignments for the evening shift.

She would just have to switch with one of the other nurses, plead a conflict of interest, even though she barely knew him. Well, if one didn't count a little tonsil hockey and dry humping in the hospital kitchen as knowing each other.

Normally, she wouldn't have been so doubtful of her ability to care for a patient and competently carry out her duty, but David Healey was too much of a distraction. She was sure a coma would have little effect on the power of his aura, or his ability to unnerve and turn her on in equal measures.

And what did that say about her morals, lusting after a comatose man? Maybe that she was just one sick sister?

Gloria Goodwich, the supervising nurse and something of a maternal figure to all the nurses in the ICU and under her direction, caught Aziza's eye from the center of the gathering at the nurses' station and waved her to the side.

"I'm sure you're already aware of what's happened and who our most recent patient is."

"I heard about the hit-and-run on the news, yeah."

"I don't have to tell you that Mr. Healey is to receive the utmost VIP treatment during his stay at St. Frances, like all our patients." Nurse Goodwich went on to brief her on the basics of David Healey's condition. She stressed his unresponsiveness since the ambulance brought him in last night and the doctor's bleak prognosis for improvement. Though the patient's body seemed to be undergoing a miraculous recovery, he yet remained in a coma.

"Nurse Goodwich..."

She arched a brow. "Yes, child?"

Aziza swallowed, took a deep breath. "Surely there have to be other nurses more qualified and experienced to take care of Mr. Healey while he's here than me?"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" Nurse Goodwich waved a dismissive hand. "There's no one more qualified for this job than you." She put the same hand on Aziza's shoulder and squeezed. "You'll do fine. Just go in there and do what you were trained to do."

"Is there anything else I need to know?"

"His family's here and has been since last night. But they're a wonderful group of people and shouldn't give you any trouble. A little eccentric, especially that grandfather. Oh, he's a pill, by the way. But like I said, they're all nice folk."

Now, she was doubly worried. She not only had to deal with David, but his eccentric family? Talk about a trial by fire. "They must be very close."

Nurse Goodwich nodded. "And very protective."

"Does anyone have any idea who struck him?"

"Not to my knowledge, no. Despite several witnesses to the event, I'm afraid they don't have any idea who was behind the wheel. It all happened so fast."

That was putting it mildly. One minute, he was kissing Aziza in the hospital kitchen, and no more than a half an hour later, he was mowed down crossing the street outside.

“The family is already offering a *substantial* reward though for any information, so I’m certain that should bring some helpful and knowledgeable bystander forward.”

“I’m sure it will.”

Nurse Goodwich finished briefing Aziza, and with a wink and a twinkling smile, finally left Aziza to her own devices. Aziza reviewed the patient assessment notes, cringing at the laundry list of injuries David sustained at the mercy of that mysterious car.

Recently, this sort of occurrence had been all too commonplace. Aziza had treated three victims at the hospital last month alone who had been mowed down on the aptly nick-named ‘Boulevard of Death.’

She headed towards David’s room, suitably fortified and wondering at the type of man, or woman, who had been behind the wheel. What sort of human being could leave another to suffer like that? Had they been callous, or just drunk? To Aziza’s mind, that was just as bad.

She took a deep breath now before pushing open the door, came up short on the threshold when she saw an old man sitting at David’s bedside.

“It’s about time. We’ve been waiting for you, missy.” He stood, had to be at least six-five and imposing in his robustness.

He smiled, as if he realized how intimidating he was and wanted to soften his look.

Aziza instantly noticed his resemblance to David. Especially the deep dimples, bushy white eyebrows and hair notwithstanding.

He crossed the room and offered his hand.

Aziza experienced an instance of being surrounded and swallowed by his spirit when she put her hand in his, and he firmly shook it. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“You know my grandboy, and he knows you, and that’s enough for me.”

Evidently, since he hadn’t blinked at her appearance or ethnicity.

He closed his eyes now and nodded before releasing her hand. “Yep. You’re the one.”

“The one?”

He smiled and opened his eyes to stare at her. “You’re much prettier than I expected. My grandboy’s memories didn’t do you justice.”

David’s memories? Was he saying what Aziza thought he was saying? “You never clarified what you meant by me being the one.”

“Why, the one who’s going to bring my grandboy out of his coma.”

“Mr. Healey, I—”

“No need for formalities here. Call me Grandpa. Or Gramps works, too. That’s what my grandboys call me. You’re practically part of the family, a part we’re sorely missing. Don’t have any females in the clan, except for the boys’ mother. She’s a great asset and all, but we need new blood. And none of my other grandboys seem to want to cooperate, at least not until now. All of ‘em want to be the alpha, but none of them want to mate and settle down.”

Nurse Goodwich had understated! The man talked a mile a minute, and Aziza was finding him difficult to follow.

“You don’t have to worry about following me, missy. You just concentrate on leading our David out of the darkness. We’ll work on getting the son-of-a-bitch who did this to him.”

“I’m not sure I can guaran—” Aziza cut herself off when she realized what he said.

Was he reading her mind like the wolf last night? But the wolf hadn’t been reading her mind because he was part of her mind, her subconscious. Right?

“Oh, he wasn’t just your subconscious.”

If she weren’t herself an empath with some telepathic abilities, Aziza might have been shocked by the old man’s apparent mind-reading abilities.

Before she could respond, Aziza caught movement from the corner of her eyes. Someone who hadn’t been there before was sitting in the chair the old man had vacated.

It was David!

Aziza blinked. Okay, maybe it wasn’t David, but it was at least a damn good facsimile. She tried not to stare and let on to his grandfather that there was more than one David in the room.

Or did the old man see him, too?

Ghost-David raised a finger to his lips and shook his head.

“Is everything all right?” his grandfather asked, following her gaze before turning back to her with a question in his eyes.

Aziza was pretty sure the old man couldn’t see David. “Everything’s fine. It’s just that I need to take your grandson’s vitals, and it would be better if you weren’t here when I did that.” A lie, of course. She had taken patients’ vitals hundreds of times with their relatives present. It was just less stressful to everyone involved if the relative wasn’t present during an exam, especially now and under the circumstances.

“I understand perfectly. It’s like I told my grandson before you got here. I’m going to talk to my son and his wife and my other grandboys and make sure you two have the privacy you need.” He put a hand on her arm and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “So, I’ll leave you two alone now.”

“That would be perfect, Mr. Healey.” Aziza escorted him to the door, and he stopped at the threshold, leaned in, and kissed her on the cheek.

“Call me Grampa.” He opened the door and stepped into the hall, but before the door closed all the way, he popped his head back in. “Don’t forget to lock it.” Then, he was gone.

What did the old man think she was going to do with his grandson?

Oh yeah, he could read her mind and knew exactly what she was going to do. Or at least what she *wanted* to do. Now whether or not her conscience and good sense would let her follow the call of her loins was another matter altogether.

“You can’t molest a man who asks for it.”

She shook herself, turned, and marched back to the chair where Ghost-David was now standing. “What is going on with you?”

“I’m not sure yet. I just know that I’m here, and I’m there.” He jutted his chin at his still body in the bed.

How jarring was this for him, able to communicate and move around in one form, but incapacitated and helpless in another? “Can’t you just get back inside your body and, you know, bring yourself out of this?”

“I tried that already.”

“Oh.”

“I’m open to other suggestions, though.” He looked at her with an expectant expression that about broke her heart. After all, he was heir to a fortune and a rich, powerful businessman in his own right, accustomed to being in control and having people jump to attention when he entered a room. She couldn’t imagine it was easy for him to ask her, ask anyone, for help.

Aziza approached the bed, re-read the assessment notes to see if she had missed anything. When nothing jumped out at her after several minutes, she went to David’s bedside to take his vitals, heart pounding totally out of proportion to what it should at the prospect of sticking a thermometer in a grown man’s rectum.

She was unnerved, to say the least, knowing David was behind her and watching every move she made with his unconscious body.

When Aziza reached for his wrist to take his pulse, she heard a sharp gasp behind her and turned to see him gaping. “What’s wrong?”

“I...I’m not sure.”

“Do me a favor and turn around.”

The dazed expression turned to an Oscar the Grouch scowl.  
“Why?”

Aziza automatically plopped a hand on her hip. “Look, homeboy, you may be the master of your domain out in the real world, but you’re in my world now. In here, I’m the boss, and you need to do what I say.” It took everything in her to get that out without her voice shaking, since David had the unerring ability to intimidate her and make a question sound like a command she should follow without back talk.

Arms folded across his hard-muscled chest, David reluctantly turned his back to her.

Aziza took a deep breath before placing her stethoscope against his bare chest to listen to his heartbeat and heard him gasp again.  
“You felt that.” She watched him nod.

“One day, I’ll get you to tell me how you keep your stethoscope so warm.” He turned, smiling at her when he approached.

“That’s for me to know...” She smiled, too, until her gaze locked with his. Something was eerily familiar about his eyes, something that shouldn’t have been. She had seen him the night before and gotten the full effect of their azure color at the fundraiser, but there was something more about his eyes, about him, that called to her like that of the wild.

A memory flickered to life about her soul mate. Her father had insisted he would be psychic. But what else would he be? “Did you have anything to do with my...visitor last night?”

David extended his hand. “Come here.”

She did, despite his dodgy answer, wanted to touch him, feel him against her, inside her, throbbing and hot. Filling her.

Aziza put her hand in his, rewarded with surprising warmth. She realized it wasn't his flesh and bone that heated her skin. Their hands weren't touching, their energy was.

She gaped when he twined his fingers with hers and drew her forward, his intensity and strength like a magnet, his spiritual energy pulling her rather than his muscles.

Once she was in his space, Aziza tilted back her head to stare up at him. "What now?"

"Let's see."

She had a moment to yelp before he tugged her towards the bed, and leaped into his body dragging Aziza with him.

## Chapter 5

David had always been a risk-taker, taking calculated gambles most of his personal and professional life. He'd never been reckless, at least not the way he'd been with Aziza just now, pulling her in with him when he wasn't at least ninety-nine percent sure what would happen to her.

He'd let his eagerness get in the way of his judgment. He wanted her, had never been so hungry, so desperate to take a woman before now.

David held tight as they finally lurched to a stop.

Aziza didn't scream or panic. In fact, she hadn't made a sound the entire way in, except for that initial gasp of surprise when they'd first started to descend.

David pulled away to stare at her when the darkness around them gradually lightened. "Are you okay?"

She blinked, glanced around her, then back at him. "Not exactly a hospital kitchen."

"Not even close."

She nodded. "It's cozy. Your bachelor pad?"

He laughed at her accuracy. He'd recreated the exact décor of his bedroom at home, down to the four-poster bed and matching burgundy and blue accents in the room.

David pulled her towards the king-sized bed in the middle of the space.

"How did you do this?"

"I wished for it."

"Like magic, huh?"

“Exactly.” He imagined explaining his heritage to her—how he’d taken a little knowledge from all his psychic and shapeshifting relatives and his own personal experience manipulating his anatomy to bring her into his mind—and wondered if she’d reject him.

David couldn’t see her fearing his gifts, not when he remembered her reaction to his wolf form. She hadn’t screamed or run when any other woman would have. Not Aziza.

But then, she had gifts of her own, gifts and mysteries she wasn’t even aware of.

David couldn’t wait to experience every luscious one of them from the inside out. “Sit with me.” He patted the firm mattress with one hand.

She sat down, but when he sat beside her and tried to lay her back on the bed, she resisted. “Did you see who hit you?”

“You plan on going after her for me?” He sensed she would, saw the protective and possessive alpha female gleaming out of her onyx gaze.

“*Her?* You saw the driver.”

“I don’t want you involved, Aziza.”

“I’m already *involved*, and I’m not turning back.” She peered at him for emphasis.

David suddenly felt her tooling around in his head. He tried to block her like before, but she was a lot stronger than he surmised. Or was it that she was more dogged now than the last time she’d tried to read him?

She gawked at what she’d gleaned. “Why wouldn’t you tell me? Are you protecting her?”

“Hardly, but I can’t do anything about it from in here. Yet.”

“Yet?”

“Philomena will get her just desserts. I promise you that.” David cupped her face with both hands and kissed her hard,

pushing his tongue into her mouth and teasing hers until she sighed and melted against him.

When he pulled away, her eyes were closed and her lips parted. She looked so fuckable and tempting, it took everything in him not to just throw her down, rip off her clothes, and take her fast and hard.

David traced her lips with his thumb, and when she stuck out her tongue to lick it, he shuddered, imagined her licking his throbbing cock, instead.

How was it possible that a ghost could feel so intensely?

*Take your clothes off.*

David wasn't sure if the thought came from her or him until he felt Aziza's fingers at the buttons of his shirt.

He closed his eyes and helped her along, willing the shirt off and leaving the pants for her deft touch, wanting to feel her divest him.

She unzipped his pants, dipped her hand inside and eagerly plucked out his cock, grasping it in both hands. When she bent her head to lap at the pre-come already gathered in the slit David saw fireworks.

Oh fuck, her mouth felt good! Too good.

Could a ghost-man-in-a-coma prematurely ejaculate?

David wasn't sure, and he didn't want to find out, sliding his hips out of her range and listening to his dick pop out of her mouth with a resounding slurp.

"What—"

"I want to taste you first."

She smirked. "And you always get what you want."

He flipped her beneath him on the bed in answer, closed his eyes again, and willed her wrists bound to the head posts.

His magic was more powerful in here than out in the real world when he was corporeal, almost reaching his grandfather's capacity.

How could he accomplish what he had so far and not be capable of pulling himself out of a coma?

Aziza didn't have a problem with his powers or audacious behavior, staring up at him with those dark cat eyes and testing the silk restraints on her wrist with a bold smile of her own. "You like being in charge."

"It's the only way I know."

"Works for me. For now."

That she alluded to a point in time his presumption wouldn't work for her turned him on like her voluptuous curves. He couldn't wait to tussle with this woman, craved a female equal to the task of stirring his soul and his mind the way he knew Aziza could.

David straddled her hips, slowly pulling her scrubs and panties down her gently rounded hips and long sleek legs as he sat back on his haunches. He admired his and God's handiwork before bending his head to follow the path of her scrubs with his mouth, kissing and licking every inch of exposed dark-chocolate flesh from her bellybutton to her painted toenails.

Aziza writhed beneath him, neck and back arched when she closed her eyes. "You're torturing me."

"I haven't even begun." He chuckled, stopped his teasing long enough to remove her top and bra, haphazardly discarding them before he feasted on her ample breasts.

She moaned as he tongued each nipple in turn, alternately nibbling and licking the hard, erect nubs until they shone like polished ebony.

He lifted his head to see her struggling against her bounds, hands clenched into fists. He could only imagine what she would do with those hands if they were free, could almost feel the score of her fingernails on his back when he'd drive into her.

David moved from her breasts to her mouth, sampling his own earthy taste on her lips before thrusting his tongue in deep to plunder.

Aziza groaned low in her throat, meeting his tongue with equal fervor and pulling back to nip his lower lip. “You’re playing with me like a cat with a mouse.”

He planted his palms against the mattress on either side of her head and stared down at her. “I like enjoying my food.”

“Sadist.”

He shook his head and leaned in. “Hedonist,” he murmured against her throat, firmly sank his teeth into the soft skin connecting her shoulder to her neck before gentling his stroke, nipping and licking his mark.

Aziza shuddered beneath him. “When I’m free, I’ll—”

“What, sweet Aziza?”

She growled. “Don’t start no trouble and there won’t be none.”

He laughed at her barely veiled threat, nibbling a trail from her shoulders to her hips before pausing at her core, need barely contained when her musky-sweet scent wafted to him.

He nuzzled her pussy and inhaled deep as she moaned. “I’ve waited all my life for you. Aren’t you willing to wait a little for me?”

“Don’t make me...” She gasped and pitched her hips, offering herself. “Please, David.”

She was too much to resist, even for someone like him, who prided his self-control. She made his mouth water with want, and the only way to stop it was to satiate himself—in her body, in her essence.

David nudged her engorged clit with just the tip of his tongue, garnering a tremor that rocked through him before she bent her knees to brace her feet against his ass.

He slowly opened her with his thumbs, tracing her vulva before plunging his tongue inside her like a rapier.

“Ahhh, yes, yes...” She dug her heels into the small of his back while he alternately sucked and licked her cunt.

He stopped after several minutes, only long enough to come up for air. He tongued and nibbled her clit, maintaining the internal pressure when he slid two fingers inside her and rhythmically stroked her G-spot.

Aziza stopped just short of squeezing his head between her knees, brutally pushing herself against his mouth, begging and calling his name until he curved one finger around the soft sex gland and massaged it with abandon.

“Oh man...oh God...David!” She stiffened beneath him, her juices hot and copious when they gushed and coated his fingers.

He pumped his fingers and sucked her in concert, bringing her to a frenzied orgasm that shook her entire body before he slid his fingers out of her to lick them with relish. The idea of prolonging their encounter flew out the window the minute he enjoyed the intense taste and whiff of hot female in heat. His female.

David instantly willed his pants and boxer briefs away, rising up between Aziza’s legs and spreading her thighs wide with his knee. He poised at her entrance for just a second, the tip of his dick moist with pre-come and mingling with her cream as he experimentally circled his hips and teased her opening.

Impatient, Aziza wrapped her legs around his waist and drew him forward, wiggling beneath him in an irresistible sensual rhythm that had his heart pounding in his ears and fired his entire body from the inside out.

He bent his head to nip her earlobe, pulling it into his mouth and sucking hard before drawing back to lick the tender spot. He circled the shell of her ear with his tongue and murmured, “I’m going to have to teach you the virtue of restraint.”

“Not before I teach you the virtue of wild abandon,” Aziza purred, nestling her face close to his chest and biting a flat male nipple.

The low sound that escaped his lips was a hybrid of a grunt and gasp, emphasizing his approval and surprise at her intense

instruction. He thrust into her on a roar, scorching a path through her hot, wet canal, stretching her slow and deep.

She welcomed him inside her with a long moan, tightening her legs and pitching her hips to meet his steady thrusts.

David lowered his head to kiss her, alternately drawing her voluptuous lower lip between his teeth and plunging his tongue to the rhythm of his hips.

Aziza pulled back long enough to whisper against his mouth, “Make me come again, David. Make me come hard and fast.”

She had a point. Fuck restraint!

David pumped harder, speeding his thrusts and nipping her shoulder in his excitement.

Aziza whimpered and bucked her hips in response, sinking her teeth into his chest right above one nipple when he sank into her one last time and ground his pelvis against her so fiercely, he no longer knew where he began and she ended.

For one infinite moment, their world balanced on a knife edge of ecstasy and pain while David staved off coming only through sheer force of will and wanting to see Aziza come again before he allowed his release.

He eased away from her just enough to allow his hand to squeeze between them, thumbed her clit and circled his pelvis until Aziza cried out and vibrated beneath him.

She pulled against her bindings so roughly, David half-worried about her bruising her wrists. The other half of his brain was occupied with the climax that suddenly crashed down on him and shattered his remaining senses.

Wordlessly, David gathered her close and held her the length of his shuddering and release.

## Chapter 6

“Untie me, baby,” Aziza panted, nuzzling his ear and moving suggestively against him.

His cock was semi-erect inside her, showing signs of life when she squeezed her pussy muscles around his hot flesh, still hungry for him. She wondered if there would ever come a time when she wouldn’t be.

Chiding her nosiness and jealousy beforehand, she wondered too if David had tried half the stuff with Philomena that he had done with her, especially the rough sex and bondage. She couldn’t imagine it. Despite the other woman’s cruelty and calculation, Philomena had low self-esteem, was just a damaged and fragile little girl deep down.

Not that she didn’t want to see her stepmother punished, and good, for what she did to David, but Aziza felt sorry for the woman.

David lifted his head and frowned. “Why?”

“Why what?” She played dumb, hoping he hadn’t caught her last thought. She’d been working hard to keep him out of her head, the same way she worked to get into his.

“Why do you want me to untie you?”

“You’ll see.” She wanted to taste him, the need so urgent, she licked her lips in anticipation.

David leered. “You don’t need your hands to taste me.”

“I want to touch you, too, smart-ass.”

He chuckled, closing his eyes and lifting up to move away from her.

It took Aziza a second to realize he had done her bidding before he took her hands in his and gently kissed each wrist.

“Wild woman,” he murmured.

“I’ll show you wild.” She sat up and flipped him beneath her, full knowing he had let her, especially when he laughed and pulled her down on top of him with one powerful arm.

“Now what?”

Aziza straddled him, bent her head to kiss a path from his chest to his hard, sectioned abdomen, swirling and zigzagging her tongue around his navel before moving further down. She glanced up at him once before she lost her nerve, watched him lift an eyebrow and fold his hands behind his head, looking supremely relaxed and satisfied.

She lowered her head again, determined to knock him off his haughty little throne.

His erection jutted straight up, a big tasty treat, beckoning her. Aziza couldn’t resist.

She began at his balls, sucking them into her mouth before licking a path from them up his enormous, hard shaft. She circled the head of his penis with the tip of her tongue before finally licking the pearl of liquid from the tip, closing her mouth over him and sucking hard.

David shifted and moaned beneath her, hands automatically burrowing in her hair.

She descended further, reached the base of his cock, and licked his balls. Then, she sucked her way back up to the purple mushroom head, loving the moist surface with her tongue before starting over and repeating the process again and again.

For several minutes, she worked up a steady rhythm that had David writhing before a hoarse shout ripped from his throat. His fingers tightened against her scalp.

Needlessly, he held her in place, and Aziza coaxed every drop of come she could out of him, savoring the down-to-earth taste of him when she swallowed.

"Damn." He caught her around the shoulders and pulled her up against his chest.

"Don't get too comfortable."

"Why not?"

"I have to go."

"My gramps will keep the rest of my family out."

"It's not your family I'm worried about." She had shirked her duty long enough and didn't want to give Nurse Goodwich any reason to doubt her reliability.

Reluctantly, he released her and sighed. "If you insist."

He sounded like a little boy who'd just had his favorite toy taken away from him, and Aziza giggled at the picture before jerking up on her haunches, eyes wide.

"What is it?"

"Someone's in the room. We have to get out of here, David. Now!" She jumped from the bed, and David instantly willed her scrubs back on before she bumped into his solid chest on the way to where she thought a door should be.

"Calm down. I'll get us out."

"Um, your clothes?" Not that she wanted him to cover up that gorgeous naked body.

"Don't need them."

"Wha—"

"C'mon." He grabbed her hand, and darkness instantly enveloped them when he dragged her forward.

She thought she was prepared, but the trip out was a little rougher than in.

One minute, Aziza was standing in David's mental bachelor pad. The next, she was sitting in a chair and blinking her eyes open back in his hospital room.

The moment she glanced around and spotted Philomena with her back to Aziza on the other side of the bed, she knew her earlier alarm had been warranted.

Silently, she stood and peered around Philomena to confirm what she was doing: trying to pull out the plug to David's life support systems.

The woman didn't know it wasn't that easy.

"Trying to finish the job?"

Philomena yelped and turned to Aziza with a start. "Where did you come from?"

"I think the question should be, what are *you* doing here, Philomena?" Aziza came around the bed to confront her.

"I have more right to be here than you do."

"Even if you were still his girlfriend, you're not his family."

"What do you mean, 'if'? Has he said some—" Philomena snapped her mouth shut when she realized her mistake.

Aziza approached, grabbed Philomena around the arm. "I work here, and I have every right to be in here. You, on the other hand, are impersonating hospital staff." Aziza gave Philomena's white coat and stethoscope the once-over. "I'm sure security will have some questions regarding your attire."

"You can't prove anything."

Aziza didn't need to. She had David's memories and would bluff a confession out of her stepmother if she had to. "I saw what you did, Philomena. I know your car."

"Even if what you say was true, it's your word against mine. Who would believe *you*, anyway?" Philomena sneered. "And as for this little visit, I'm just a concerned girlfriend desperate to see her injured boyfriend. Now let me go!" She tried to jerk her arm out of Aziza's grip, but Aziza held fast.

Philomena brought up her hand to strike when a low growl rose up from the opposite corner of the room near the door.

Both women turned at the same time.

Aziza smiled when she saw her furry friend from the night before. Now she knew who and what he was—a manifestation of her desires, but so much more than her father could have ever predicted.

“That...that’s a wolf.”

“You can see him?”

“Of course I can! What kind of hospital is this?” Philomena pulled her arm again, and this time, Aziza let her go.

She didn’t know how, but David would stop her stepmother.

Philomena ran for the door, but not before the wolf leaped through the air and landed on her back with a resounding thud.

Philomena crashed to the floor beneath the animal’s weight, turning on her back to ward off his attack and screaming for help when the wolf stood on all fours on top of her, baring his teeth.

When David’s grandfather burst into the room trailing two police officers and another man Aziza didn’t recognize, Philomena was wildly flailing her arms and screaming for help.

To everyone else in the room she looked like a woman suffering from delirium tremens, but Aziza knew the wolf was still on top of Philomena. Only now, he was lapping at her face like a domesticated dog.

It took everything in her to keep from laughing and giving herself away.

“Get this wild beast away from me! Get it away before he kills me!”

The two policemen stepped forward, one on each side of Philomena. They each took an arm and dragged her to her feet. “Is this the woman who dropped off the damaged Benz at your shop, Mr. Lemeaux?”

Philomena glared at the man standing behind the two uniformed policemen and spat, “You treacherous bastard!”

He just smiled while the two police officers dragged her out of the room past him.

One of the officers stopped in the door as his partner waited for him in the lobby. “We’ll need you to come down to the precinct to finish giving your statement, Mr. Lemeaux.”

David’s grandfather spoke up, grabbing one of the younger man’s hands in both of his and vigorously shaking. “I can’t thank you enough for contacting the authorities with your information.” He handed the man a business card and slapped him on the back. “Call me when you’re ready to receive your payment.”

“I’d have done it for free, just to see the look on that uppity bitch’s face when they took her away.” Lemeaux took the card, jerked a thumb at the door and smiled before bidding David’s grandfather good-bye and heading out in the hallway behind the two policemen.

Before the door could close, Nurse Goodwich popped her head in, a wide grin on her face. “Coast clear?”

“All clear.” David’s grandfather smiled, went to the door, and pulled her into a one-armed embrace. “I’ll be out with you in a minute.”

Aziza noticed the proprietary way he held Nurse Goodwich before guiding her out the door, felt a tingle between her legs at the memory of David handling her the same way and wondered just what was going on between the two older people. Whatever it was, she thought they were two of a kind that made a perfect couple, both protective decision-makers.

David’s grandfather came back to the bed, where she was standing beside David. “I gave the rest of the family instructions to stay out in the waiting room. You won’t have any interruptions from them. And that fine Nurse Goodwich has taken care of things on her end.”

“Her end? Interruptions?”

He put an arm around her, the same way he had done with her supervisor. “To keep you from doing what you need to do.”

“Oh yeah. That.” Whatever *that* was.

*Lead our David out of the darkness...* How was she supposed to do that?

David's grandfather gave her arm a squeeze before releasing her. "Just follow your heart," he whispered, then left.

Aziza stood at David's bedside, looking down at him. After a long moment, she reached out a hand and ran her fingers through his silken waves.

He looked so serene, she almost didn't want to wake him. Like his grandfather seemed to think she could.

*Follow your heart...*

Right. God, if she was wrong about this...

Aziza disengaged the ventilator and waited a beat as she watched his chest. No movement. No spontaneous respirations.

She didn't panic, simply bent over the side rails, closed her eyes, and sent up a quick prayer to forgive her folly when she pressed her lips to his.

She opened her eyes to stare at him. Nothing. Not a blink.

She'd just try it again and again and again until it worked.

Aziza pressed her lips to his, firmer this time. After an endless moment, she felt his tongue thrust into her mouth, stroking hers. She jerked up her head with a gasp, stumbling back and almost falling into the chair behind her. "David!"

"Who else were you kissing?"

She lowered her face for another kiss, this one deeper and longer, and when she came up for air, she whispered, "You scared me."

"Didn't mean to."

"Were you...you know, outside your body watching me when I disconnected your ventilator?"

He nodded.

"And you weren't worried?"

"I knew you wouldn't let anything happen to me."

She wished he had said something, because she hadn't been half as sure as he sounded. "Between you and your grandfather..."

"He's a smart man, and I'm learning more from him every day." David cupped her face and drew her closer. "Kiss me again so I know I'm really alive and that you're mine."

Aziza kissed him, becoming more alive beneath his lips when he claimed hers. She wondered what it would be like to make love to him after they both shifted.

She felt him smile against her lips once she completed the thought and pulled back to ask, "What's so amusing?"

"You won't have to wait long to find out what it would be like."

"What—" She snapped her mouth shut, almost afraid to ask.

He took her hand and held it. "Your father told you what you needed to know about your soul mate. He didn't tell you what you needed to know about yourself."

"You mean—"

"Once we consummate our relationship in the real world, your first shift will occur."

She gaped, too stunned to speak.

He laced his fingers through hers, held her wide-eyed gaze. "Don't ever be frightened of me, Aziza. Don't be frightened of what you are."

"No. Never."

"Tell me you want this."

"I want this. I want *you*."

"Good." He nodded. "Rest assured, if Philomena ever gets out of prison—and knowing my Dad and Gramps, that's a remote possibility, but if she does—we'll both have something waiting for her. She'll never hurt you again."

Aziza liked the sound of that.

**NINE INCHES OF SNOW  
AND THE EBONY PRINCESS**

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**THE END**

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## AUTHOR'S BIO



Gracie McKeever is an author from the Bronx, and aside from several side trips along the way, has lived and worked her entire life in the New York City area. She has been writing since the ripe old age of seven when two younger brothers were among her earliest, captive audience for various short story readings and performances.

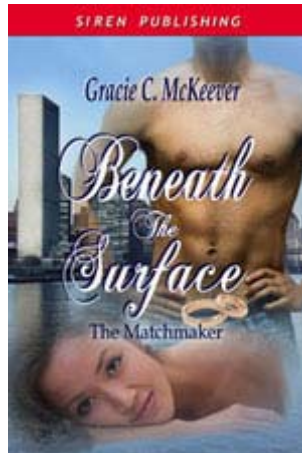
An eclectic and voracious reader whose audience has grown outside of the supportive family members, she's had the great fortune of being able to incorporate two of her favorite passions and talents—reading and writing—as a book reviewer for several online e-zines, both as a regular staff member and freelancer.

Her short stories, novellas and poetry have seen exposure in various lit and art magazines and other venues—online and in print. Of particular note, heard over the airwaves on KFJC's morning show, *Dancing In The Fast Lane With Ann Arbor* (Unbedtime Stories) out of Los Altos Hills, CA (*New Life Incognita* was the story of the month for March 2000). She's also proud to be a member of the ("Worlds' Oldest Active Homeless Paper") Street News family and has seen numerous articles, poems and novel excerpts published within its pages as well as having had a poetry reading on Pseudo On-line Network (Street News Review).

In 2001, Gracie caught the erotica bug, sinking her teeth into her first erotic e-book for a review, and hasn't looked back since, an instant affinity for the genre spawning her first erotica title, *Beneath The Surface*, published in 2006 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

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### *The Matchmaker, Book 1*

#### **Beneath the Surface : Terms of Surrender : Manifest Destiny**

Angela Calminetti, mother of five, New Age practitioner and gifted psychic and telepath, is proud of her family ties and does everything she can to make sure that all of her younger siblings are as happy in love and marriage as she is...whether they want her to or not.

*Note: Each book is written to stand alone.*

## **Beneath the Surface**

Former Madison Avenue ad exec EJ Vega just landed a seven-figure advance from Renegade Publishing. Older sister Evelyn convinces him he needs a fashion makeover before he goes on his first national book tour and has just the person in mind to turn his

wardrobe inside out. EJ, too late, recognizes the handiwork of his oldest, matchmaking sister Angela, and by the time he realizes what he's gotten himself into, a very hot and uptight personal shopper has invaded more than just his wardrobe; she's invaded his soul.

From a broken home and driven by past demons, Tabitha Lyons is the proprietor of flourishing *Lyons Style, Inc.* and knows success when she sees it. In EJ she sees not just success, but sexy and sin with a capital "S." She doesn't want to turn his wardrobe inside out as much as she knows EJ will turn her world upside down...

**Sensuality Rating:** Scorching

**Genre:** Contemporary Paranormal/Psychic/Interracial

**STORY EXCERPT**  
**BENEATH THE SURFACE**

*The Matchmaker, Book 1*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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“I have your two o’clock here, Tabitha. Mr. Vega?”

“Send him in.” Tabitha sat behind her desk and hit Escape on her keyboard.

Eric strolled in just as his dossier reappeared on her screen, and Tabitha swallowed at the sight of him, suddenly wishing she had stuck with her usual formality when they’d been on the phone and kept their relationship on a strictly last name basis. She didn’t want him to get the wrong idea, especially since her own treacherous hormones already had the wrong idea and had her pussy muscles clenching in response to his tall height and broad shoulders filling the doorway as he paused on the threshold.

Instant attraction. Not only was it not good, it was unprecedented.

Tabitha stood up behind her desk and proffered a hand across the glass top as he approached, thinking Evelyn had somehow bamboozled her and that her brother’s profile did not do him a bit of justice. There was nothing about the man that needed to be “made over.”

He was inhumanly gorgeous, the black hair he had mentioned in his profile was sleek and wavy, worn in a longish but masculine and neat style combed back off his forehead and glistening beneath the fluorescent lights of her office.

Tabitha slowly moved her gaze down, taking in the aquiline nose, angular jaw, and cleft chin—the cleft he had neglected to mention in his profile as he had mentioned his dimples—immediately drawn back up to his indigo eyes, ridiculously long-lashed, so dark and intense they almost looked black.

She almost smiled when he grinned and she noticed the big dimples to which he had previously alluded, mentally taking his measurements and surprised he had been so accurate with his description. Most men—most people—boasted, overcompensated for some shortcoming or were too humble with their self-assessment. Rarely had she met anyone who'd been so accurate. Accurate and modest. *God, the man can't be this perfect!*

Tabitha slid her gaze down further to take in his outfit and amended her last thought. Today was not Friday, but he was definitely dressed down.

Okay, he *wasn't* perfect. Thank God for small favors.

His sense of fashion seemed to come straight from a discount store. Actually, a discount store would have been a step up. She could easily see the man perusing the aisles of a neighborhood thrift shop. Not that there was anything wrong with that. She frequented some of the better thrift shops herself when she was on the hunt for that perfect item for a client and not that his clothes were ill fitting, quite the contrary.

He had the kind of body on which clothes hung well, any clothes, pulled off the casual ragged, torn-up look with sensual style rather than coming off as a slob.

Tabitha glanced at her clock as he caught her smaller hand in his big one and gently squeezed. The resultant energy tingled all the way up her arm until she thought he had one of those practical joke buzzers in his palm, but there was nothing touching her palm except his smooth, warm skin.

He noticed the direction of her glance and grinned, showcasing those dimples to their fullest effect. “Come on now, you have to admit I’m on time.”

Tabitha arched a brow. “Just,” she said coolly.

“Let me guess, you’re the type who turns up to all her appointments at least a half-an-hour early, am I right?”

“Why don’t you have a seat and we can get started,” she said, ignoring his quip. That he was so on target about her was totally beside the point.

He released her hand slowly, his body heat and intensity overwhelming and invading her comfort zone so much, it made her think twice about walking across the room to close the door before she finally did just that.

When she got back behind her desk and sat down, Eric was still standing and running a hand over the glass top admiringly, glanced up at her with a knowing look.

“I knew you’d be a glass and chrome type.”

Tabitha glanced at him with a start, entranced by his long fingertips stroking her desk, imagined him caressing her skin instead of the smooth cold glass, her body wantonly arched beneath his manipulations. “Excuse me?”

“I got a definite vibe from your voice on the phone the other day.” He glanced around her uncluttered office and nodded. “Cool, Spartan, functional.”

His matter of fact appraisal made her feel as if her character had just been attacked, that maybe she should defend herself, but he spoke up again before she had a chance.

“Don’t get me wrong. I like the look. It suits you.”

“Not quite an apology.”

He arched a lush brow. “Do I owe you one?”

“No, I suppose you don’t. You were just making an observation after all.” She leaned her elbows on the desk, folded her hands and leaned her chin on her clenched fingers as she looked at him. Two could play the intuitive game. “What type are you?”

“Eclectic, whatever feels good at the moment.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Just like she thought. A free spirit. He probably would have been right at home at Woodstock.

“Is this part of the interview process?”

“Everything you say to me here is basically part of the interview process. I get to know what you like, your general style, it helps me when I finally have to go and pick things out for you. That is, if you’re not with me at the time I make the purchases.”

“You mean I have that option?”

“If you have the time, of course you do. Most of my clients don’t use the option. Time constraints are one of the main reasons people hire me in the first place. Your time is valuable, so why not let me do what I do best while you’re using your time to do what you do best?”

“I like that philosophy.”

Most men did. Most of her clients of the male, no-time-or-desire-for-frivolous-nonsense persuasion where shopping was concerned, did. Must have been something in the Y chromosome, some anti-shopping gene.

Tabitha looked at her monitor and hit the Enter key twice to make room for additional information. “Now, you mentioned eclectic...” Tabitha paused to glimpse his outfit. Not quite as out there as some of the Woodstock fashions she had seen, but definitely unconventional for the business world in which she moved. The white T-shirt tucked into a pair of blue wash-and-wear Levi’s hinted at firm well-muscled abs that tapered down to a slim waist, would have been more suitable attire for a *Grease* revival. Same went for the black distressed leather blazer that clung to his broad shoulders and had Tabitha’s fingers itching to divest him and see if his physique was as hard as it looked.

He had the anarchistic artist look down to a science, and she wasn’t sure yet whether or not it was a façade, or a well-honed image he’d perfected just for their meeting today, because Eric seemed like the type to go out of his way to shock.

Eric finally took the seat across from Tabitha’s desk, resting his right ankle on his left knee and giving her a good view of a comfortable, well-worn black desert boot.

“So, let’s get back to your sty—”

“I don’t like suits and ties. I did the whole corporate dress for success deal years ago, and I’m not interested in reimmersing myself. What you see here is as dressy as I usually get.”

True, the customer was always right, but Tabitha took offense at his tone, as if he was too good for a suit and she wasn’t; as if he were attacking her tastes without even knowing what she might have planned for him.

“There are a lot of things we can do with slacks and a suit jacket that don’t involve a tie.”

“There are a lot of things I could do with a tie that don’t involve clothes at all.”

If she’d had liquid in her mouth, she might have spewed it across the desk in his face. As it was she had to tamp down a strong urge to laugh, and instead frowned to show her displeasure.

Her look didn’t go a long way to putting him in his place, however.

He simply grinned at her, a smug boy who had just put his second grade teacher on the spot with his risqué comment in front of the class.

“Other than the suit and tie aversion—”

“I’m fairly easy.”

She just bet. “That helps a bit.” Although she didn’t consider the subject closed by any stretch of the imagination.

He’d insulted her and Tabitha did not take well to insults. Rather than dwell on it though, she typed in “easy and casual” on his profile, then peered at him. “Would it be safe to say blue or black are your favorite colors?”

“Today they are. Tomorrow it might be something that’s at my fingertips when I reach into my closet.”

Tabitha shifted in her chair, crossed her legs to stem the sudden flow of wetness in her panties. She’d never found wise-asses a turn-on, but there was something intrinsically sexy and inviting about his grin, something raw and challenging in the depths of those indigo eyes.

She highlighted and underlined “easy and casual,” already envisioning him in a charcoal single breasted suit and vest to

highlight those beautiful dark eyes, and a black T-shirt underneath. There, no tie! “Any colors or materials you don’t like?”

He shrugged, but rather than give off uncertainty, the motion emitted his indifference.

Tabitha stopped herself from flinging her mouse over the pad, and stared at him across the desk as he merely arched a thick brow. “This is not the best way to build rapport, Eric. I need cooperation from you to make this work. This relationship has to be a two-way street, give and ta—”

“Okay, okay.” He chuckled, put up his hands as if in surrender. “You’re absolutely right. I have to apologize for dragging you into this.”

That was more than she expected, but less than she deserved, and Tabitha waited for the other shoe to drop. She was sure he had something up his sleeve, especially when she realized what he had said. “Dragging me into what?”

“Vega vendettas and power struggles.”

“I’m not following.”

“I have to be honest, my sister damn near twisted my arm to sell me on the idea of a makeover and personal shopper.”

“You don’t have to feel obliga—”

“*But*, now that I’m here I’m getting used to the idea of having a fashion consultant.”

“Let’s get something straight, I can’t work miracles.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

“And I won’t do anything to your wardrobe you don’t want me to do.”

“I leave myself and my wardrobe at your total discretion, Tabitha.”

She stopped herself from sputtering at his silky warm murmur, the sound of her name on his lips, still waiting for that big size twelve desert boot to drop.

At the thought, he did lower his right foot to the polished parquet floor, rolled his chair closer before leaning his elbows on her desk.

Tabitha purposely held her ground, though she was tempted to roll her chair back an inch or two, his clean musky scent riding the wind to her nostrils and making her light-headed.

It should have been illegal for a man to smell as good as he looked.

“Well, ah, that’s good to hear.”

“And I promise to cooperate and be a good boy for the rest of our meeting.”

She didn’t think he could or would keep that particular promise, not even if he tried, not a “good” bone in that big well-built body.

“Scout’s honor.” He raised his hand and grinned at her silence.

“Were you?”

“Was I what?”

“A Boy Scout.”

“Even better. I was an Eagle.”

She wasn’t that up on what the qualifications for an Eagle Scout were, but she was sure they were pretty extensive and doubted that Eric’s footloose and fancy-free mien had held him in good stead with the fraternity.

“I could show you my merit badges,” he said at her doubtful look.

“I bet you could.” *What did they give merit badges out for?* She was certain he’d excelled in totally different areas of achievement and socialization than had the rest of his troop. And despite his aversion to suits and ties, she could imagine him in the little green shorts uniform, politely helping an old lady across the street and shamelessly flirting with her all the way.

Tabitha bet he had nice legs too, to go with the rest of that hard body she’d been secretly ogling since he’d arrived.

“What about you?”

“Me?” She raised a brow.

“I can see you in a little Brownie’s uniform selling cookies door to door.”

The double entendre didn't escape her—she knew he'd meant it not to—his smile slow and seductive as he sat back in his seat waiting for her response.

"I was entirely too busy with more important activities to indulge in that particular whimsy." Too busy surviving, she thought.

Tabitha had never had to sell cookies door to door, but she'd had to barter, borrow and steal for a meal more times than she liked to count.

She especially remembered a period when her mother had neglected to come home for several days after Tabitha's father had left them. Everyday for a week she had come home to an empty house, and an even emptier refrigerator before going out to the neighbors to play "Whimpy from Popeye" with promises that her mother would gladly pay them Tuesday for a meal today.

No, hawking hundreds of boxes of overpriced cookies for top-selling honors and a cheesy overrated prize had not been high on her list of eight-year-old priorities.

"So, back to least favorite colors and materials?"

"I'm not too fond of orange and pink, unless they're on a woman. As for materials, I like anything that's washable."

She wanted to ask him if that jacket he was wearing was washable since it looked like it had been through the ringier. Distressed leather had been a trend back in the 90's, which looked to be about when he had bought the jacket. Of course, leather and blazers were pretty timeless...

"Before you ask, yes, it is."

"I'm sorry? Yes, what is?"

"The jacket's washable."

Her jaw dropped but she quickly coughed into a fist to cover her shock. "What are you, a mind reader?" she asked and watched as he fidgeted in his seat, for the first time since he'd come into her office looking uneasy, as if she had hit a nerve.

**ADULT EXCERPT**  
**BENEATH THE SURFACE**

*The Matchmaker, Book 1*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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He closed the space between them, reached for her, cupping a breast.

She gasped, not realizing he'd undone the top several buttons of her blouse and unlatched her bra until she glanced down and saw his hand against her naked copper tone flesh. "You're fast," she blurted.

"You have no idea." He pressed her against the wall, lightly pinching and rolling an already hardened nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

Tabitha moaned and Eric covered her mouth in a scorching kiss that sent her stomach spiraling in a pool of molten liquid draining straight out of her vagina.

"Is everything all right in there, sir?"

Eric dragged his mouth away from hers long enough to say, "Everything's fine!" He stared down at her, licking his lips like a hungry predator. "More than fine," he murmured, making slow sensual circles with a forefinger around her right nipple.

Tabitha moved away and slapped at his hand. "You're absolutely incorrigible."

"Guilty as charged."

She stopped herself from smiling. She didn't want to encourage him, not that he needed much encouragement to be the total scoundrel that he was.

God, when he looked at her like that—indigo eyes smoky and heavy-lidded, plainly proclaiming exactly what he wanted to do to her—Tabitha wanted to give in, give him anything he wanted, do anything to please him.

She had to get away from him before she fell any deeper under his spell.

Tabitha moved to the opposite side of the cramped room—not nearly far enough—warily watching him, didn’t realize she was panting until she saw her breasts heaving from the corner of her eyes. She reached up to latch her bra and button her blouse with shaky hands under Eric’s glittering watchful gaze, couldn’t drag her eyes away from his. “You messed up my clothes.”

“I was actually trying to get them off.”

“You don’t stop, and you’ll mess up those clothes.” She pointed her chin at his outfit.

“If I’m going to buy them anyway, will it make a difference?”

“Yes, it will. They’ll know what we were doing in here.”

He took a couple of steps towards her and before she knew it, he had her pinned against the wall again. “They already do,” Eric whispered.

“Eric...” Her next words died on a groan as he lifted her skirt and palmed her sex.

He caressed her through the crotch of her pantyhose for several long torturous moments before he slid his hands up to the waistband and pulled down her panties and hose in one rough swift motion.

“Eric, please do—”

He got to his knees, buried his head beneath her skirt and in an instant, Tabitha felt his mouth on her.

Unconsciously, she gyrated her hips, grinding her pelvis against his mouth, felt him open and explore her with his fingers before his tongue penetrated her.

Tabitha gasped and would have tipped over had he not held her steady, gripping and spreading her ass cheeks as he pushed his tongue into her pussy as deep as it would go, burrowing and

circling like some piece of earth moving equipment—how freaking appropriate!

She felt his fingers again, thumb and forefinger rhythmically stimulating her clit, zinging hot flashes of sensation straight to kitty town.

God...she was...going to...explode!

Tabitha bit her bottom lip hard to keep from crying out, tasted blood in her mouth as an orgasm crashed down on her sudden as an epileptic seizure. She stiffened, then convulsed as Eric got to his feet and held her close.

She lay her head against his chest—just resting, just catching her breath, she told herself—listened to his speeding heartbeat echoing the pattern of hers, slowly opened her eyes and stepped out of his arms to see him smiling down at her.

“C’mere, I’ll kiss the hurt and make it better,” he said and leaned close, smelling of her juices, tasting of her essence, caressing her lips with his, sliding his tongue into her mouth.

## ***REVIEWS for Beneath the Surface, The Matchmaker 1***

"Until this month, I had not read any of Gracie C. McKeever's work, but I quickly devoured both of her books I received for review this month. After reading the other book first, I immediately turned to *The Matchmaker, Book 1: Beneath the Surface*. As much as I loved the other story, I adored *Beneath the Surface*!

I have to say, I wasn't sure quite what to expect after reading the blurb for this one, but it just knocked my socks off. The paranormal element is ever present, and a key part of the plot, but it never feels like a paranormal story. It feels very realistic, with the familiarity of a story that is strictly contemporary, lending the psychic talents wielded by EJ and his sister more credibility.

EJ Vega is the perfect love interest for the withdrawn Tabitha. Simultaneously steady and patient while also powerful and dynamic, he is just what the doctor ordered to draw her out of her self-imposed social exile and into a passionate romance.

The large Vega clan promises several entertaining sequels in this series, and I know there is already one released, which I will be working to get in my hot little hands just as soon as possible! **5 Klovers" —Jennifer, CK2S Kwips and Kritiques**

"Ms McKeever has created a tight family group around psychic telepath Angela, whose words of wisdom and guidance help all around her. There's a strong sense of realism and locale in this book that really drew me in, and the attraction between EJ and Tabitha just grabs you. Even their banter is sexy, so you know that when they finally go to bed it's not just sex, it's something else, something amazing. The supporting cast is just as great, from bitchy Jade to lovable Frankie, the fast-talking sisters and the rest of Eric's family. With plenty of romantic twists and entanglements, this will keep you reading to the very last page. You're sure to love it—and there's more to come in this fantastic series. Keep a look out for the next book! **5 Magic Wands" —Autiotalo, Enchanted Ramblings**

"*Beneath the Surface* is Book 1 in The Matchmaker series. The story is a phenomenal start to the matchmaking talents of Angela Calminetti, EJ's sister. Angela wants all her siblings and family happy and in love. She uses her telepathic abilities to make sure that this happens.

EJ and Tabitha, they have to struggle to make it to happiness, the two are stubborn and try to best each other. But they are miserable without one another. EJ knows Tabitha is the one because she reminds him of his first love Sinclair. Sinclair committed suicide when EJ was much younger and he has never really trusted his heart to another woman. Tabitha is different, for the first time in years EJ wants to tell her the truth about his telepathic abilities. Tabitha has had a rough life and is not very trusting of anyone but Eric James seems like he is worthy of her trust. Gracie C. McKeever shows that the bond between EJ and Tabitha will be long-lived and everlasting. And that the two are each others pretty match. *Beneath the Surface* is an outstanding book that is captivating. I definitely recommend this for readers.

**4.5 Stars" —Chantay, *Euro Reviews***

"*Beneath the Surface* is the first book in The Matchmaker series and a wonderful beginning. Tabitha is a great heroine with plenty of backbone to stand up to whom and whatever. This makes reading about her a pure joy. EJ is not your typical author and it doesn't take much to transform him into incredibly sexy and totally hot. This couple has a fiery relationship both in and out of the bedroom and readers won't be able to get through the pages fast enough. The love scenes are full of desire and fraught with sensuality. Gracie McKeever has penned a book that will have readers desperately seeking the next volumes in the series. **4.5**

**Blue Ribbons" —Angel, *Romance Junkies***

"Gracie C. McKeever has compiled one wonderfully enjoyable read full of rich, full characters. This story will make you laugh, shed a few tears and make you wish the next tale was available. The witty banter and complex characters make *Beneath The Surface* an engrossing read. Gracie C. McKeever has a new fan in this reviewer and I eagerly await her next tale. **4.5 Roses" —**  
**Noemi, *A Romance Review***

"*Beneath the Surface* is the first stand-alone entry in Ms. McKeever's Matchmaker Series featuring psychic matchmaker Angela Calminetti. Angela and EJ are understandably close as they share a psychic as well as a familial bond, so naturally Angie turns her talents toward her brother first. Prickly Tabitha is a wonderful character whose appeal grows as each layer is pulled back and another facet of her character is revealed. This is really a feel-good love story with slight paranormal elements and with graphic language and spicy sex scenes. This reviewer became immediately engrossed with this tale and slurped it right up in one marathon session. Once again, Ms. McKeever has shown a deft touch with her prose and characterizations and produced a wonderful tale. This reviewer looks forward to the future installments in this series and will enjoy visiting the zany Vega family again and again! **4.5 Hearts**" —Leah, *LoveRomancesandMore.com*

"Ms. McKeever captures intense love scenes loaded with earthshaking passion and desire. Eric and Tabitha burn up the pages of this book every time they give into the uncontrollable longing inside of them. At times, I felt like a voyeur watching the steamy embraces. Their passion is only the backdrop for an intense connection that bonds these two souls into one. The feelings and link they share [are] very special and unique. It is what we are all searching for out of life.

I will read *Beneath the Surface: The Matchmaker* many more times through the years to remember the beautiful love story of Eric and Tabitha. I look forward to the next installment of the series. **4 Hot Tattoos**" —Ophelia, *Erotic-Escapades*

"Ms. McKeever has succeeded in taking an often-used story line and breathed new life into it. Both Tabitha and Eric are full of such life and anguish that you laugh and suffer right along with them. This author has the talent to draw you into her story and you can really feel the sexual chemistry between the hero and the heroine. The author also sets things up so there will be more books in the series, something I will look forward to. I highly recommend this book. **4 Flowers/Excellent**" —Char, *May Reviews*

"EJ and Tabitha are a wonderful couple, and throughout the book, I enjoyed the interaction between them, especially how their past makes them closer. Stubborn isn't strong enough to describe these two, but their resistance to taking a chance at love never gets to the irritating stage. Their chemistry is excellent and the desire they feel never fades as the super hot sex gets better with each encounter. Definitely have a significant other available when this book is done. The interaction with the sisters was good and brought a break from the intensity of EJ and Tabitha's developing relationship...The paranormal link is very well-done, and was not only a selling part of the book but completely plausible. *Beneath the Surface* is an entertaining book and I look forward to reading the rest of the Vega siblings' stories when they come out. **4 Stars/Orgasmic**" —**Anya Khan, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews***

"I really enjoyed this story. Gracie has a very nice voice and a terrific sense of pacing and story momentum. I loved the prickliness and baggage of both the main characters and the way they struggled against each other and against their own baggage. Eric's sense of responsibility and purpose made him instantly likeable. Tabitha's complex character and the way she strives for logic and reason in emotions and things inherently irrational made her a heroine to eagerly follow and root for.

One of the most interesting things about this book was that, unlike many paranormals, it was more contemporary than paranormal. The characters live in the real world and their issues and growth is easy to comprehend and sympathize with. The paranormal aspect of this story was masterful. It didn't beat me over the head and it didn't hide in the background until the very last moment.

This is the first book I've read by Gracie McKeever but it won't be the last. **4 Hearts**" —**Maura, *The Romance Studio***

"*Beneath the Surface - The Matchmaker* has a wonderful flow and was a joy to read from start to finish. The loves that the Vega family had for each other could easily be felt throughout the story. I absolutely enjoyed following E.J. and Tabitha as they navigated the rocky road of their relationship. They are both strong and independent and it was fun watching them struggle as they tried to

build a relationship without giving up control. This book is full of suspense, surprises, laughs and really heated sex scenes. I got such a feeling of comfort and joy when the story ended. **4 Angels**" —  
**Lisa, *Fallen Angel Reviews***

'*Beneath The Surface* written by Gracie C. McKeever has something for everyone; a strong willed, love-shy career woman, a gorgeous, successful hunk with a large, meddling Italian family, characters with psychic abilities and last but not least, lots of hot, steamy, explicit sex.

When E.J. Vega and Tabitha Lyons are fixed up by his sister, the matchmaker, sparks fly. This entertaining read takes you through the ups and downs of a modern day relationship between two people who are carting around a lot of baggage. Will they be able to overcome past traumas and live happily ever after with each other or will they call it quits? It's a roller coaster ride to the end.

For a great escape, pick up *Beneath The Surface*. It's a well written, entertaining book, but be forewarned, the sex scenes are sizzling. **4 Cats**" —**Sue Gold, *Wild Child Publishing***

"What do you get when you take a man and a woman with very different personalities, add an impossible to resist sexual attraction, and some meddling family members? You get Gracie C. McKeever's *Beneath the Surface*, one heck of an enjoyable read. Not only does it turn up the heat, it will make you laugh and cry and look forward to the next tale in Ms. McKeever's The Matchmaker series. With interesting secondary characters to move the plot along and add some spice of their own, *Beneath the Surface* flies by at a quick pace.

Witty banter and complex characters make *Beneath the Surface* a delightful, engrossing read. Gracie C. McKeever has certainly caught my interest and I will be eagerly awaiting her next tale. Don't miss out on this wonderful new series." —**Vicki Turner, *Romance Reviews Today***



### *The Matchmaker, Book 2*

#### **Beneath the Surface : Terms of Surrender : Manifest Destiny**

Angela Calminetti, mother of five, New Age practitioner and gifted psychic and telepath, is proud of her family ties and does everything she can to make sure that all of her younger siblings are as happy in love and marriage as she is...whether they want her to or not.

*Note: Each book is written to stand alone.*

## **Terms of Surrender**

Slany Breeze has been in control, of herself and her family, since she was an early teen when her mother was killed in a tragic accident and her father retreated into himself, a broken and lost spirit.

But Slany's tired of being the strong and responsible daughter and the dependable and inspirational big sister. Just once, she'd like to give over the reins of control and let someone else take care of her every need and want. Wanting, however, and admitting her secret

longings to the one man willing and capable of satisfying them, are two different things.

Nick Vega has come a long way from his bad boy, rebellious childhood when a learning disability was the bane of his disappointed father's existence.

Once he discovers Slany's submissive nature and the stalker from his past that threatens her, he will do whatever it takes to protect his new claim and woman.

**Sensuality Rating:** Scorching

**Genre:** Contemporary Paranormal/ BDSM/ Interracial/ Suspense

**Length:** Plus Novel (~94,000 words)

# STORY EXCERPT

## TERMS OF SURRENDER

*The Matchmaker, Book 2*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Slany's spicy-sweet woman's musk sent his salivary glands into overdrive, and his cock stood at attention under his desk.

"Are you listening to me, Nick?"

"Of course I am."

"Then what did I just say?"

"Something about your ad beating the jocks off of mine in the split run."

"Lucky guess." She smirked.

Nick chuckled. "If it's any consolation, they're both great copy, each playing on basic semiotics." He waited for her retort, remembered how she'd reacted to his "Everwell...our name says it all," compared to her "Quality and longevity is in our name." They'd argued the merits of each catch phrase through most of that first day working together. Slany thought his slogan oversimplified, that it sacrificed clarity in the name of cleverness. Nick insisted it was clear and clever enough, despite its simplicity. They'd finally settled on a split run, competitive to the bitter end, and may the best director win.

"It isn't," Slany murmured.

Nick arched a brow. "Isn't what?"

"Isn't any consolation."

"Don't like bones, huh?"

"Bones are for dogs."

"Care to make it interesting?"

She stared at him long and hard, then finally asked, "What do you have in mind?"

"A little wager. Loser takes the winner out to dinner." He figured even if he lost, he still won. The luxury of Slany's company was enough assuagement for any man's wounded ego. He could see Slany figured the same as he did, that she resented his manipulation.

She stood up straight, hands on her hips in what was becoming an achingly familiar pose of defiance that made his cock throb in his pants with longing.

Loose-fit designer chinos had never been as uncomfortable on him.

He glanced up at her from his seat and goaded, "Don't have any faith in your text?"

She marched from behind his desk at this and planted herself in front of it, putting a nice slab of hard wood between them as she seethed.

Smart girl, because he'd been about to do something that probably would have warranted a slap, or arrest for lewd and lascivious behavior by the laws of at least several states.

Nick was sure there actually were some archaic regulations on the books that outlawed several of his favorite activities to do in bed, two of which he could see doing with Slany in his office this minute if he could get away with it.

Slany stared at him for a long moment, finally sighed, and dropped her arms to her sides, as if in resignation. "I don't even know why I let you stress me out."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Stressed out."

"I'm slowly getting there."

Nick laughed as he stood and came from behind his desk, aware of the bulge in his pants and not caring if she noticed, especially since she was the one who'd put it there.

Slany eyed him warily, but didn't retreat as he approached, stopping a foot in front of her.

"You know what they say is the best stress reliever?"

Her eyes widened ever so slightly, but she remained silent as she stared up at him, plainly anticipating his next move.

He had news for her, because the ball was in her court.

*Your move, Breeze.*

She didn't disappoint him, slowly ran the tip of her tongue over her luscious lips, igniting his imagination and making him wonder what that organ of taste would feel like wrapped around and stroking his hard cock.

"No. Why don't you tell me?"

If he picked up the gauntlet she'd just thrown down, he knew there would be no turning back for either of them, and no longer cared about the consequences. Hell, he barely remembered they were at their job, in his office, the door unlocked.

Nick took a step closer, paused as he stared at her, giving her a chance to fall back.

She didn't, simply looked up at him with a curious heated expression.

*Good girl. Stay with me.*

He tilted his head to one side as he leaned in to take her mouth, closed his eyes and saw skyrockets blasting off when their lips converged.

He pulled back for the second it took him to murmur, "Open for me, Slany," surprised when she did. He thrust his tongue against hers before sweeping past it altogether and into the hot depths of her eager mouth to thoroughly devour.

In that instant, he knew. Slany was a submissive!

**ADULT EXCERPT**  
**TERMS OF SURRENDER**

*The Matchmaker, Book 2*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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He reached between her legs and gently opened her folds with his thumbs, bent his head to lick her wanting clit, slowly sucked and nibbled the engorged flesh to vibrant life. The flesh bloomed like a berry on the vine, ready to burst in his mouth.

She moaned, arching her hips to bring his mouth closer, and when he plunged his tongue inside her, deeply, hungrily, she screamed, struggling against her shackles.

She needed to touch him, hold him!

Slany bucked her hips to meet his thrusts, mindless of whether she was hurting him, would bruise or smother him.

He caught her hips and held her in place against the firm mattress as he worked in earnest, lapping at her as if she were his first and last meal.

Her uterus contracted and expanded, heat flaring in her center, rising up and through her body, simultaneously bathing her limbs and nerves in cold heat, every sensation intensified by her restraints, by his masculinity and superior strength.

She felt perspiration beading her forehead and upper lip, climax overtaking her like a masked bank robber, sudden and violent, body spasming inside and out.

Slany opened her eyes several seconds after her body finally stilled and watched Nick sitting beside her, gaze drifting over her body with stimulating intent as he caressed her with one hand from head to foot.

She licked her lips, tongue sluggish like her eyes she could barely keep open, like her body paradoxically heavy with satisfaction and need. "Please, I want to see you."

"You want to see me, what?"

"Master." It shocked her that the word left her mouth so effortlessly, almost automatic, as if she had been saying it, addressing him thus, for years.

Nick silently reached for the buttons of his designer shirt, slowly unbuttoning each one before drawing his arms out of the sleeves.

Slany squirmed on the bed, his movements taunting her with the view of his well-muscled torso, abdomen hard and sectioned like a swimmer's, and almost as smooth but for a small sprinkling of dark hair between his pectorals, light trail arrowing down beneath the waistband of his slacks. The sight made her more anxious to feel him, made her want to follow that trail of hair with her tongue.

God this was so unfair! She'd never felt so helpless, so needy and vulnerable before, and she wasn't sure how much she liked it.

Her fingers automatically flexed with the need to run up and down his body, feel his velvety skin and hard muscles beneath her palms. Slany watched him stand, slowly unzip his slacks and drop them to the floor. She was finally gifted with a banquet of long, lean legs, his calves and thighs athletic, tightly corded like a runner's, but not overly bulky like a weight lifter's.

She had a brief second to glimpse his round, masculine ass covered in a pair of navy boxer briefs and swallowed hard at the idea of cupping each firm cheek in her hands.

Nick stepped out of his pants, leisurely strutted back to the bed. His movements were unruffled and nonchalant, as if he were unaware of her focus or didn't care about it one way or the other.

He sat beside her, gaze heated and attention rapt as he ran the back of a hand down one arm, from shoulder to wrist.

It killed her to just lie there unmoving, unable to reciprocate and only watch him. Her legs itched to wrap around his waist, eager to feel him between her thighs as he rode her hard.

She peeked at his lap, where the cotton material of his boxer briefs hugged his hard penis, barely able to contain his large size.

"I can tell you're not used to this, not being in control."

She licked her lips, vagina wet and weeping with wanting him.

No, she wasn't used to it, but she could get used to it very quickly.

"Every muscle is tight. Relax, Slany. I'm only going to make you feel good. Nothing you have to brace yourself for, no reason to be tense."

The hell there wasn't. There was every reason to feel tight and tense and on edge. She was at a disadvantage. She was at his mercy. "I want to see you," she whispered.

He spread his arms. "This isn't enough?"

"To tease me, maybe."

"Tease and please and torment." He leaned in to suckle her throat, making her shiver beneath him as he dragged his mouth along the column of her neck up to her chin. He licked the cleft in the middle, taking his time moving up to her lips. He nibbled the bottom one before lazily dipping his tongue into her mouth, reacquainting himself with her taste, as if he hadn't just taken the most intimate sample of all with his previous kiss below.

Slany writhed beneath him, turned on by her piquant taste on his mouth. She held in a moan, didn't want to lose control too early, didn't want to lose it at all in front of this man who prided himself in keeping control. But she knew control was no longer hers, something she could not claim in Nick's presence.

"Now, Slany," he murmured against her ear, "tell me how you want me to fuck you. Slow and easy," he said, running a palm up her leg, tickling the edges of her vagina with his fingers, light butterfly caresses setting fire to her clit and labia, "or hard and rough?"

She didn't *care*. Any way he wanted, she would take it. Take him, his cock. She would take him beneath her, on top of her, inside her—oh, God.

She swallowed, gasping for breath, unable to form the words, unable to form a comprehensive thought as she stared into his honey eyes.

She'd waited most of her life for this moment, this man, and couldn't find a more intelligent way to express it than shamelessly bucking her hips at thin air, out of her mind with desperate need and want. Hunger. No man had ever done this to her before, ever made her feel so wild and wanton and reckless, so strong at the height of her subjection.

"Let go, baby, just let go." He circled the shell of her left ear with his tongue before plunging it in, simultaneously stroking her sides with both hands before moving to her breasts, where he slowly rotated her nipples with his thumbs.

Slany bit her bottom lip, vibrating beneath him as she closed her eyes tight.

Nick lowered his head to her breasts, the nipples already puckered and hard from his previous manipulations, standing at attention now, begging for more, begging for his mouth, his tongue, his teeth.

He straddled her, then suddenly sat back on his haunches to stare down at her.

Slany's eyes flew open, and she looked at him taking her in, like a diner at a mouth-watering buffet. All-you-can-eat, and from the looks of it, Nick intended not to leave a crumb.

"Take me, Nick. Please..."

"Are you sure?"

She frowned, stared at him. "Of course I am."

"Any way I please?"

She pitched her hips up, and her pubic bone collided with his balls. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she thought she should think twice before answering him, but no longer cared about appearances and boundaries and roles, despite the tiny warning bells going off at the mysterious tone of his voice. She just wanted him inside her, whatever terms. "Yes. Any way you please. Just take me now...please..."

## ***REVIEWS for Terms of Surrender, The Matchmaker*** **2**

"Gracie McKeever as always delivers heartwarming, empathetic characters, coupled here with an intriguing mystery and a plot line throbbing with both sensuality and danger. Her character delineations are excellent, and few readers won't simultaneously be enraptured with both Nick and Slany and their personality conflicts disguising their true attraction. Angela is a winning personality of her own and any reader would be thankful to have a big sister with love for the extended family, such as her. *Terms of Surrender* is a story well worth reading, and works as a stand-alone novel, but reader, don't do yourself the disservice of missing the entire The Matchmaker Series. **4.5 Kisses**" —**Frost, *TwoLipsReviews***

"*Terms of Surrender* has a heavy focus on the danger surrounding the main female character Slany Breeze. Her life is in jeopardy from a madman with his own agenda and a personal vendetta against Nick Vega, the new man in Slany's life. With a stalker on the loose, these two are in an unknown race for time.

The beauty of this novel is its depth. There are so many aspects of this story that it easily entices any number of readers from across genres. The suspense is an alluring draw to keep people reading from beginning to end in one sitting. The romance is amazingly open and honest. We get a chance to explore a dominate/submissive relationship as it develops between Slany and Nick from the very beginning.

Without a doubt Ms. McKeever has written a must read for everyone. *Terms of Surrender* is the best of multiple genres and should appeal to those who enjoy books with conflict and strong story lines. **4 Stars**" —**Kimberley Spinney, *Ecataromance***

"*Terms of Surrender* is not for the faint of heart and readers will find themselves melting in their seats from the heat of the love scenes. Dominant does not even begin to describe Nick and his powerful passion will leave you breathless. Slany has a time giving in to Nick, but when she does, it really pays off. Nick's past comes

back to haunt them when his stalker returns and wants to hurt Slany. Gracie McKeever is sensational author and her stories are always full of explosive plots and mesmerizing characters. I can't wait to see what the next book will bring. **4 Blue Ribbons**" —  
**Angel, Romance Junkies**

"*Terms of Surrender* is a mystery that has more threats to the main characters than that of a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Ms. McKeever has written a very well thought mystery that has lots of guessing as to who is the bad guy ... The author does a good job of building the relationship between Slany and Nick. She also has put a lot of thought into Nick's family and Slany's friends. Finally, she has written some of the hottest sex scenes that I have read in a long time. You are definitely going to need the ice water and the toys for this one. **4 Stars/Orgasmic**" —**Oleta M. Blaylock, Just Erotic Romance Reviews**

"*Terms of Surrender* is the stand alone second book in Ms. McKeever's Matchmakers series featuring psychic Angela Calminetti and the her siblings the Vegas. Ms. McKeever does an excellent job in providing just enough backstory from the first book *Beneath the Surface* to make this story flow well and enjoyable to readers who may not have read that story. Nick and Slany are very appealing characters, and Ms. McKeever does a wonderful job revealing experiences in their childhood to early adulthood that have shaped them into the individuals they are today, most notably why Nick and Slany would need to be in a highly regulated relationship such as a dominant/submissive one. Readers must be cautioned that this story does feature a D/s relationship, but it is non-violent and Ms. McKeever provides great details of how that type of relationship should function and makes it a vital part of the plot...The sex scenes are well written and extremely hot...Once again, Ms. McKeever has written a great tale that all readers of erotic romance should love. Highly recommended! **4 Hearts**" —**Leah, Love Romances and More**

"I found this tantalizing tome to be utterly enthralling. Usually, when a plot involves a mysterious killer, I can pick out the murderer long before the secret is revealed. *Terms of Surrender* is

so well written that I had no idea who the culprit was until the moment it was meant to be known. The hero's dyslexia adds a realistic sense of poignancy to this enchanting tale. I hope Ms. McKeever gives us more stories like this one really soon. I know that I, for one, really want to read more. **4 Cups**" —**Susan, *Coffee Time Romance***

**Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at  
[www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com](http://www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com)**

**Sisters of Emsharra  
Collection**

***by Gracie C. McKeever***

Even though both are Inanna, Genesis Enki and LaMia Enlil have varying views on how best to serve Emsharra.

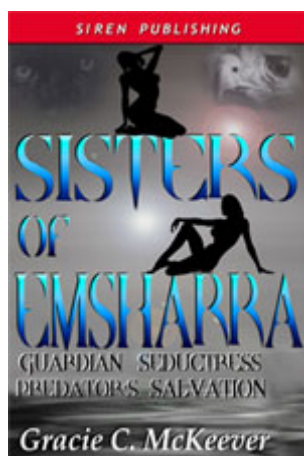
When Kalika Enlil entrusts Genesis with the safekeeping of her outlawed child Alex Ryan before her death, Genesis' way is set to take up the New Regime's torch. Only one woman, the leader of the insurgents and Kalika's nemesis and cousin, stands in Genesis's way to protecting Alex from assassination: LaMia.

LaMia does not believe in the New Regime or its doctrines and is willing to do what she must to see it and the alliance between Emsharra and Gaiam fail. She will even go as far as kidnapping and enslaving Mateo Diaz who has already suffered at her hands in the past more times than a human should endure. It's Mateo's misfortune, however, that Genesis and Alex wish to recruit him in Emsharra's Harvesting Program....and Genesis and Alex are LaMia's mortal enemies.

### In Electronic Format



### In Trade Paperback



# STORY EXCERPT

## GUARDIAN SEDUCTRESS

*Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1*

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Alex stirred beneath the covers, yawned and stretched his arms over his head. He froze when he opened his eyes and saw her standing over his bed.

"You are awake."

"You have a funny habit of stating the obvious." He pushed himself up to sit against the pillows and headboard of his bed, stared at her. "Where is she?"

"Kate is gone."

Alex's eyes widened. "You killed her?"

"Of course not. I released her."

"Where?"

Genesis gritted her teeth, the green-eyed monster holding her tongue. Why was he so concerned about where and how Kate Summer was? The woman had tried to kill him! True, she had been bedazzled and under the influence of Inanna or Sebitu enchantment at the time, but that was beside the point.

Finally, Genesis sighed then said, "She is home, asleep in her bed. When she awakes, she will have no memory of what happened."

"Lucky her. I wish I didn't remember what happened. Starting with my father's death."

Alex closed his eyes, the sooty lashes so long and thick they brushed his high cheekbones in a sensual stroke that made her

heart somersault in her chest at how vulnerable he looked. Vulnerable, totally sexy, and very fuckable.

Genesis' pussy muscles clenched as if applauding in agreement. She saw his rich bronze complexion redden as if he had heard her thoughts and was blushing in response.

Had she slipped? Was she broadcasting? Lilith! Genesis felt heat rising to her face, signaling her own unusual blush. Where was this modesty coming from? She had had thousands of men in her lifetime, had killed at least that many. Shame and embarrassment did not customarily figure into her mentality.

True, she was worldly-wise and experienced, but never had she been around a man who could read her thoughts as well as she could read his. Never had she been so exposed, so naked when not in the act of feeding and sex.

*Vulnerable.*

Was this why being around Alex made her bashful as a turkey at Thanksgiving? His ability to so effortlessly strip her when she least wanted to be stripped? His ability to make her feel...powerless?

As if to anchor herself, regain some control, she reached out a hand to grab one of his and squeezed. "You will be fine."

"That remains to be seen." Alex opened his eyes to glance at her. "How long was I unconscious?"

"Several hours."

"Several hours!"

"You lost a lot of blood. More than you realized."

"She hit a vein then?"

Genesis fidgeted, did not like where the conversation was going; was not ready to answer his questions. He might get curious about how he had healed so quickly, about... "I believe so."

Alex held up his arm, inspecting the bandage, stark white against his darker skin.

Since she had rescued him from Kate Summer, she was able to read him much more clearly than before, as if saving him had bonded them in some way. Consequently, she felt his surprise at the lack of blood and pain, though his face remained neutral.

Genesis realized that this situation went both ways. If she could read him, then that meant he *could* probably read her too, hence that earlier blush.

"Want to tell me who and what you are?"

Genesis started as if coming out of a trance. "What I am?"

"I already know you're not quite human. But I'm wondering if there's an alien abduction or anal probe in my future."

She smiled at his ironic tone, except that probing his anus sounded like a delicious idea about now, more attractive than the inquest she knew he intended to conduct. She definitely would not mind more closely inspecting his butt, ready to admire it more up close and personal, feel the steely power of his ass cheeks in the palm of her hands when he pumped into her.

Genesis glanced at him, and noticed him blushing again.

"I don't know whether to be flattered or frightened."

"Perhaps a little bit of both," she blurted, sure now that he was reading her, and decided she had to be more careful with her shields around him.

"So, uh...what do I call you?"

"My name is Genesis. I am Inanna."

Alex frowned. "What is an Inanna exactly?"

How could she tell him hers was a race of predators and his species was the prey? Genesis quickly blanked her mind to stop him receiving any of that. She could have taken the easy way out, she supposed, and let him see for himself, see the pictures of her past inveiglements and victims. But she would not be a coward, at least no more than she had been already in deserting Kalika when she had. She had come this far, had promised to tell him that his mother loved him.

*And Genesis always kept her promises.*

"You will not believe me."

"Lady, you disappeared before my eyes and turned into a hawk at my father's funeral. Then hours later you subdued my psycho ex in a blue ball of light. I think I'm more than open to any explanation you have to throw at me."

Genesis went to the foot of his bed and paced before it, pausing to stare at him and say, "It is difficult to explain."

Lilith, she would rather be doing anything in the world right now than this. Like stripping him of his briefs and slowly ravaging his body. She would start at his head, sliding her tongue into his unresisting mouth, tangling it with his, tasting his spicy flavor. Then she would move down his chin, plant her lips against the pulsing vein in his neck...

"You're doing it again, Genesis."

She jerked her eyes to his, saw the small grin, his slow murmur touching her core and teasing her clit with its sensuality. "I am sorry." She hurried to the overstuffed chair adjacent the bed, sat down and crossed her legs as if to strangle her misbehaving pussy into submission, stop it from throbbing with heat, so wet she thought she would float away on the tide of her cream. Genesis did not think she had ever wanted a man so much.

"I knew your mother," she blurted as if bringing up Kalika could stop her rampant desire. Not likely, but it had been worth a try for her to steer the conversation in another direction.

"In what capacity?" Alex asked now. "You can't be more than twenty-five."

"I am...a bit more than that."

He tried to scan her, she felt him probing around the edges of her mind, pushing for entry, and backing off in frustration when he could not glean her thoughts.

Impatient, was he not?

"How much is a bit?"

"I am the equivalent of two-hundred human years."

Alex arched a brow. "Two-hundred?"

Genesis nodded, scratching the surface of his mind where his thoughts were clambering to make sense of her statement, how he instantly discounted her claim as preposterous. She heard all this, felt his frustration at his perception of being lied to. He was a man who dealt with logic after all, facts. Abstraction was not something he could deal with, not something he wanted to deal with despite his own illogical "gifts."

"Inanna have been around for centuries. We...subsist on the uh...energy of others."

"Energy that you obtain how?"

Lilith, he was going to make her say it out loud? "We extract it from humans during sex."

"Okay." Alex nodded, got out of bed, and took her by an arm to lead her to the bedroom door. "I think it's time for you to go back to the mental ward where you came from, lady."

**ADULT EXCERPT**  
**GUARDIAN SEDUCTRESS**

*Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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Genesis lost patience with manually removing her clothes, instead used enchantment to make her pants and boots disappear. She went to him on the sofa in just a pair of burgundy lace thongs.

Alex sat on the edge of the sofa as she approached. She paused, standing astride one of his legs before she bent and planted a knee against his erection. He moaned, pulled her closer and ran a palm from her crotch up to her plump breasts, pinching each hardened nipple in turn before he lowered his face to her center and took a deep breath. "You smell like sex," he whispered before burying his face in her satin-covered folds.

She pushed him back, the thong mysteriously disappearing as had her clothes before it. "Eat me, Alex. I want to feel your tongue in my cunt." She thrust her hips at his face.

He groaned and drew his arms around her, cupped her ass cheeks and pulled her flush against his mouth to do her bidding.

The first touch of his tongue sent heat spiraling down from her chest to gather in her pussy in a pool of liquid fire. Feminine juices trickled down her thighs as he sucked her engorged clit into his mouth. Genesis arched her neck and buried her fingers in his close-cropped waves, reveling in the silken caress of curls against her palms as she fisted his hair.

He spread her with his thumbs, nibbled and sucked her labia, then closed his mouth over her, and buried his tongue deep before pulling out to stroke her soaked folds like a painter. Tremors

violently rocked her body and when he replaced his tongue with two thrusting fingers and went back to sucking her clit in the rhythm of his plunges, Genesis flung back her head and softly keened. Alex reached up a hand too late to cover her mouth.

The taste of herself on his hand drove her wild, and before either of them knew it, she had him on his back straddling his hips, the blue light of her spirit ignited and encircling them both in a wavering glow. Genesis caught his hard shaft in one hand and guided it to her pussy, rubbing the mushroom head of his cock up and down her slit until it was thoroughly coated in her cream.

"I need you inside me, Alex. Now."

He circled her waist with both hands, and pitched his hips up as Genesis impaled herself on his shaft.

They moaned, began moving together. Genesis rode his dick, and Alex thrust inside her and rolled his hips for several long silent moments.

"Shit," he hissed. "I don't want to come yet."

It was the only provocation Genesis needed to squeeze her vaginal muscles tight, and milk his cock.

"I want you to," she whispered and leaned down to cradle her mouth against his throat. "Come for me, Alex. Come now."

She sank her fangs into his neck, felt his blood spurt into her mouth at the same instant that he shuddered and spurted his semen deep inside her cunt. Her spirit light shimmered around them before Alex's, bright and deep red, rose from his body to fuse with hers and form one purple light that surrounded them.

"Oh, God...Oh...God!"

"Yes. That is it, Alex. Give me all. Give yourself to me. Yessss..." Genesis mindlessly arched her back, fingernails digging deep into Alex's shoulder blades as she planted the heels of her hands into his collarbone for balance when his *kundalini* blasted into her body. She rode the wave of her climax for several long minutes, Alex panting and thrashing beneath her before she realized what she was doing.

Lilith, no!

Genesis immediately stopped moving, felt Alex convulsing between her legs, his fingernails driving deep into her hipbones where he held her fast.

*It is not too late, cannot be too late. He is alive. He is not a dry empty husk...*

She glanced down at him as his shudders subsided, shocked when she saw his face changing from feline to human to feline and finally back to human again. She looked further to see fine, shiny black fur receding back into his upper body, the hair on his head withdrawing back to its original close cropped length.

Genesis put her hands on his shoulders and shook him when her shock subsided. "Alex!"

He opened his eyes, a beatific expression shining out of their amber depths as he stared at her and rasped, "More, Gen. I want more of you. I need more."

## ***REVIEWS for Guardian Seductress (Book 1)***

"*Guardian Seductress* is the first book in a series about the sexy Sisters of Emsharra and it is a winner! Gracie C. McKeever has done an exceptional job of world building as the reader is immediately drawn into Genesis and Alex's plight. Their romance is both sweet and spicy and readers will cheer Genesis for being willing to break the social taboos of her culture that amount to nothing more than a form of racism against humans. The sex scenes are tasteful but steamy and sure to heat up anyone's warm night!

Gracie C. McKeever does a wonderful job of explaining the intricate details of the world of the Inanna and Sebitu. Explanations for concepts such as kundalini, the life force necessary for survival, are all provided in the context of the story as well as in a very useful glossary at the end. The idea of the conservation of humans was an interesting twist and one this reviewer had never seen before. Kalika had high hopes for Alex as she envisioned him as solving both the problem of a shrinking food supply as well as ending the war on the borders between the Inanna and the Sebitu.

Readers of urban fantasy and erotica would do well to take a peek at *Guardian Seductress: Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1*. The story is both highly enjoyable as well as thought provoking. Gracie C. McKeever is obviously a gifted writer and it is well worth adventuring into her fantasy realm to explore the world of the Sisters of Emsharra. **4.5 Klovers**" —Anne, *CK2SKwipsandKritiques.com*

"I was surprised at how much I enjoyed *Sisters of Emsharra 1: Guardian Seductress*. It was loaded with action, titillating sexual encounters, and most of all, a good romantic plot line. No matter what was happening around Alex and Genesis, they never stopped eyeing each other as if they were a double scoop of Moose Tracks ice cream...I really liked the characters and the story. Both Alex and Genesis seemed so lonely that I could not help but hope they would find something in the other that could cure their solitary existence. In one way or another, they were always on the outside

looking in. That was what made them perfect for each other. I was hooked on these characters and the world they lived in. This was my first time reading Gracie C. McKeever and I'm betting it will not be the last time. I found *Sisters of Emsharra 1: Guardian Seductress* thoroughly enjoyable. **4.5 Stars**" —**Suni Farrar, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews***

"This is the first in an exciting new series by a prolific writer of erotica. I look forward to the continuing installments. Particularly enjoyable was the interweaving of the paranormal, erotic, and romance elements with the backdrop of mythological Sumerian spirituality. Ms. McKeever demonstrates her remarkable talent for world-building. **4.5 Flags**" —**Annie, *Euro Reviews***

"Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1, *Guardian Seductress* was a great book. It was fun to read and kept me entertained throughout the entire story. Gracie C. McKeever not only paints the picture of a wonderfully creative world but keeps the characters reactions to outrageous circumstances true to life. I couldn't put this one down. The attraction and love that blossoms between Genesis and Alex was hot enough to feed a volcano and was strong enough to stand the tests of time. They came up against many walls during their adventures together that just couldn't stop their combined efforts. I highly recommend this book to anyone who likes a little political intrigue and otherworldly beings with their erotica. **4 Kisses**" —**Tara, *Two Lips Reviews***

"*Guardian Seductress* is a chill-tingling fantastic read. Genesis has strong characteristics throughout as she keeps Alex in her care at all costs, and Alex is interesting as he tries to come to terms with the crisis landed in his lap. Ms. McKeever pens a fabulous tale. When Alex was confronted with the woman with hazel eyes, I think I was just as frightened as he was. I kept looking for claw like fingers to jump from the pages. Ms. McKeever fashions a gripping story that this reader enjoyed very much and look for the others in the series. **4 Cups**" —**Cherokee, *Coffee Time Romance***

"*Guardian Seductress* is a shape-shifting, paranormal, fantasy thrill ride that will keep readers on the edge of their seats. Genesis is

different in so many ways and all the things she can do will shock and amaze you. She is attracted to Alex and tries to fight it, but as usual that never lasts long. Alex can't believe what Genesis tells him and thinks she's nuts, until he experiences first hand just what she can do. He has no clue about his past or what happened with his mother and Genesis is there to make sure he finds out. I have read several books by Gracie McKeever and each one has its own appeal. Her writing is creative and readers will love her flair for intrigue. **4 Blue Ribbons**" —Angel, *Romance Junkies*

"Welcome to the world of Emsharra, a world set in a parallel universe where the warring Inanna and Sebitu races, both of whom live off of human energy, have formed an uneasy truce due to the depletion of their human food supply. Ms. McKeever has created a vividly imaginative world, complete with its own language and culture, and *Guardian Seductress* is an impressive introduction into that new world. This story truly provokes the thought of what if there was life out there besides us and we were the prey rather than the hunter. While this reviewer would have liked to see certain portions of the book developed a little further, especially the back story surrounding Alex's conception and the somewhat contrived instantaneous acceptance of Alex by his royal grandmother, this brief but powerful tale took this reviewer on a wild ride through a fantastical tale that will resonate long after the last page is turned. Genesis is strength personified and Alex proves to be her match in all ways. This story is hot, hot, hot and any reader that likes fantasy and doesn't mind explicit language and sex will absolutely love this tale as much as this reviewer did! **4 Hearts**" —Leah, *LoveRomancesandMore.com*

# STORY EXCERPT

## PREDATOR'S SALVATION

*Sisters of Emsharra, Book 2*

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Mateo couldn't help feeling as if he was being led down a dark and lonely path he really didn't want to pursue or explore.

He paused at the passenger side door of Alex's car and waited for Alex to disengage the power locks. His heartbeat sped when he caught the sudden, spicy-sweet scent of cinnamon on the air, as if someone were baking a cake nearby with the ingredient generously sprinkled in. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and an icy-hot liquid sensation of lust settled in his groin in response to the enticing aroma.

Mateo sniffed the air more thoroughly, looked at Alex to confirm that he had smelled the scent too and saw Alex frown as if confused.

Mateo had an instant to glance up right before something swooped down towards them from the indigo, star-dappled sky, something large enough to be a person, but with wings spanning five feet across from either side of its back.

*Definitely not human, but definitely a female.*

Mateo thought it right before the woman dive-bombed towards him, arms outstretched in front of her as if she were some sort of super-heroine.

He had a moment to step away from the car and hear Alex's warning cry of "Look out, Matt! Duck!" before the woman hooked her arms beneath his armpits, scooped him up, and took off for the sky again.

“Oh, shit...Mateo! Matt!”

Okay, this could *not* be happening! He wasn't soaring a hundred yards off the ground with Alex yelling through cupped hands and chasing after him from the parking lot of McDougall's. A woman with humongous wings had not just swooped out of the sky and grabbed him. No, siree!

Mateo glanced up at his abductor, but she didn't look at him, just kept her eyes straight ahead as she flapped those big bat-like wings and acted as if he wasn't suspended below her.

“Hey! Hey...you!” What exactly was he going to say? ‘Put me down’ didn't seem like such a good idea when she was soaring over rooftops as if she had a hang glider attached to her back.

“Silence, human. We will be at our destination shortly.”

What the hell was that? A line out of a Shakespearean play he hadn't read? She certainly spoke in the same stilted accent.

Christ, he hated heights!

*Here's a hint, Matt. Don't look down.*

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth to try to make the sick feeling in his stomach go away.

Mateo opened his eyes, couldn't help himself, as they glided over a deserted area of the city in Lower Manhattan. From what he could make out by the light of the moon, it looked like some place in TriBeCa with converted lofts and narrow streets dominating the immediate area.

She aimed for the roof of one of the warehouses and smoothly landed.

As soon as his feet touched the rooftop pavement, Mateo tried to make a run for it but was stopped in his tracks by a green force field that completely encircled him after he'd taken only two steps forward.

He scowled at his kidnapper through the bubble prison as she circled him, hands clasped behind her back. He thought there was something oddly familiar about her, about the way she looked at him.

He pummeled the capsule with his fists, and she smiled at him like an indulgent parent watching her baby throw a fit of temper in his crib.

“Let me out of here!”

She raised a fist in front of her as if in a Black Panther salute and twisted it back and forth a couple of times, her movements unhurried and strangely erotic. “You will sleep now,” she murmured.

They were the last words Mateo heard before he passed out.

**ADULT EXCERPT**  
**PREDATOR'S SALVATION**

*Sisters of Emsharra, Book 2*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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Mateo stared at her back as she walked away from him to the stainless steel kitchen in the distance. He tried to see if he could spot the wings she had used to fly away with him, but there was nothing except the mahogany smoothness of her well-muscled back.

His fingers itched with the memory of how that smooth skin felt beneath them, as if he had been with her before, inside her, too many times to count, and craved to do it all again.

He let his gaze lazily drift down her six-foot tall, hour-glass figure from the gentle slope of her bare back to the slim curve of her waist and finally to her endless legs encased in painted-on burgundy leather pants and matching knee-high boots.

Despite his precarious state, Mateo felt his cock hardening in his boxer briefs, fantasized about putting his dick in her slick, hot cunt. What was *wrong* with him?

She turned back to him then, hazel eyes glinting with insight, leering as she stalked across the burnished parquet floor.

She sat at his bedside. "I am LaMia Enlil, and there is nothing at all wrong with you except that you are a healthy, red-blooded male."

What was this? Formal introductions before she killed him? And damn, he wished she would stop dipping inside his head like that!

He used to think it was cute as well as advantageous to know other people's feelings, especially girls he was involved with as a late teen. He had, however, gotten over his psychic voyeurism years ago when, at twenty, he'd experienced his then girlfriend's severe menstrual cramps. He'd snooped because they'd argued earlier in the day and he had thought she was just using her period as an excuse to get out of having sex with him. He had been sorry for his mistrust ever since.

LaMia was more outright and rude with her snooping than he had ever been though, and he didn't like it one bit. He didn't like someone like her tooling around in his brain and knowing every little thing he was thinking.

"Contrary to your assumptions, I am not rude. I am merely availing myself of any and all opportunities to get to know my submissive better. And you will call me Mistress or Mistress LaMia, by the way," she said then firmly placed her hand on his forehead.

Mateo grimaced.

*Who the hell is this woman?*

He closed his eyes and braced himself as her subtle, yet heady, cinnamon-and-female scent washed over him. He felt the tug on his brain as if she had reached inside his head to gently peel back the layers of his past.

Mateo's heart pounded a vicious beat in his chest, obliterating all miniscule sounds in the loft as he wondered if his heart would explode.

She held her palm against his forehead for several long moments, ransacking his mind, melding with his memories until she became a part of them.

He knew this woman! Knew her too intimately to deny her or forget what he had been doing with her for the last several months—but more importantly, he knew her too intimately to deny what she had done to his family so many years ago.

One woman he implicitly trusted with his body and soul. The other had taken too much from him for Mateo to trust her at all.

How could they be one in the same?

Her touch was insidious, seductive, seeping into him like the mist in his dreams, and then he realized she *was* the mist in his dreams.

He could see how his brother and father had succumb to her allure, how his father had allowed her to come between him and Mom and how his brother had allowed her to drain the life right out of him. The promise of the ultimate climax and release was too powerful to resist.

But resist he would...this time.

Suddenly, LaMia jerked back her hand and gasped.

Good! He wasn't the only one so overwhelmed by what she'd just done.

"It *is* you! At first I was not certain, did not believe it was possible that fate would actually send you to me..." She reached for a corner of the tape and viciously stripped it off his mouth.

"*Shit!*"

"Do not make me regret doing that."

Like he wasn't regretting it already, Mateo thought as he flexed his jaws in concert with his fists clenching and unclenching in the cuffs above his head.

"Speak!"

"I'm not a dog!" Mateo shot back and silently gauged her reaction. He noticed the slight upward tilt of her lips, an expression of admiration and amusement that just barely reached her hazel eyes.

So, she was enjoying this, enjoying him. Hell, he'd give her something to really admire and smile about once he was free. "What do you want me to say, Mia?" he asked, thinking two could play the game as he let the moniker slide off his tongue and saw her blink at his audacity. "You accuse me as if I tried to defraud you. *You* abducted *me*. I thought you knew who I w—"

"Silence!" She slashed the air with her hand as she leaped from the bed.

Mateo had a flash of her in Julian's bedroom the last time he had seen his brother alive.

He saw the woman's glowing yellow gaze when she glared at him over a shoulder, bared her teeth and hissed.

Mateo had a second to react as she finished draining Julian of his life-force—or whatever the phosphorescent red light that was arcing from his brother's body into the woman's was called—before she turned on him.

He charged across the threshold and hurled his body through the air, intending to knock her off Julian. He got within a couple of feet of the bed before she raised her arms in front of her and rasped, "*Kundalini*" right before zapping him with a green bolt of lightning from her fingers.

His body heated now with the memory. Lust raged through him, making his cock jut upward like a repugnant invitation.

*Get a grip, Matt. Forget how much you want to drive your dick into her and make her scream like she made your brother scream. Just concentrate on now. Here and now.*

"You killed him."

"Julian's death was an unfortunate consequence of our coupling."

He reacted without thinking, violently kicking out with his shackled legs.

She drew back and stared at him as if he were a dangerous animal that had to be watched carefully.

Her reaction was instant and infinitesimal, just enough to let him know that he wasn't the only one affected by their encounter.

Mateo closed his eyes, tuned into her body's responses, felt the shimmering fire inside her, felt her vaginal muscles spasming and...was that regret hovering just on the outside of her consciousness? Regret for what had happened to his brother?

Good, he would take these and run with them.

He opened his eyes and smiled. "Why did you take me?"

"I took you for the same reasons I took your brother. I took you because..." She slashed the air with her hand again and sat back down on the bed, a tightly wound ball of energy.

Mateo's body immediately reacted to her closeness, that energy. If he had been free, there were all sorts of ways he could

have helped her unleash that energy but she wasn't giving him a choice. Not yet. "Why?" he demanded.

"It matters not why I did it, and beginning now you will learn it is unwise to question my actions or my motives. As of this moment, you are a human with no rights and no say over what I do to you here."

The hell he was. Human, yeah, but with no rights and no say? Where the hell did she come off? This was still America, wasn't it?

"The quicker you learn to deal with that, Mateo, the better."

He didn't know what angered him more, the familiarity with which she addressed him or the fact that hearing his Christian name flow from her lips made him hotter than had she put her hand on his cock and caressed him. In fact, the more she spoke, the angrier and hotter he got.

He had time and energy to indulge his desires. He was, as she had just put it, a healthy red-blooded male, after all. He didn't, however, like to waste his time or energy on anger and a past he could not change. Life was too short. For Ms. Arrogant Nubian Queen though, he thought he might make an exception. "I'm not afraid of you," he said and as he peered at her, she returned his glare tenfold. He didn't flinch, would die before letting this woman intimidate him.

"Oh, you are a spirited one, so worth the effort of taking you. I am going to enjoy breaking you in, Mateo."

He just bet she would enjoy breaking him in if he allowed her to, but he had no intentions on allowing her to break him in.

All this time he had thought she was a figment of his traumatized, juvenile imagination, something he had conjured up to help him deal with the bizarre nature of his brother's death. He thought she was something he had created to help him deal with the horrendous circumstances surrounding his parents' murder/suicide.

She was real, however, and before him now, the woman at the root of all three losses, a being he had grown to despise.

Mateo pulled against his manacles. "Undo these cuffs," he commanded, sudden rage fueling his bravado. He knew very well

what she was capable of, how powerful and lethal she could be. He didn't care.

“You are giving me, LaMia Enlil, an order?”

“I'm giving you an order, yes,” he bit out.

She laughed, reached out a hand to smooth a stray lock of light-brown hair from his face, and his dick twitched in his boxer briefs at the unexpected gentleness of the contact. “You are absolutely precious,” she murmured.

She said it like he was a cute poodle or kitten who had just done a neat trick.

Mateo snarled and jerked his wrists against the cuffs again. “Bitch. Let me out of here, now!”

## ***REVIEWS for Predator's Salvation (Book 2)***

"Ms. McKeever has a sharp, sexy book with *Predator's Salvation*...Mateo is a complex character. He reeks of heartbreak and seems fragile but my first impression of him was that he is an aggressive alpha male waiting to break out of a civilized form. LaMia appears to be, quite frankly, the bitch from hell. At first I was appalled at what she intended to do to Mateo and how she went about it. Yet, through Mateo and his connection to her I began to understand her heartbreak and vulnerability. Their passionate, boiling sex made my toes curl and I was panting. The switch from each of them taking dominant and submissive roles had me running for my significant other and even then a cold shower. I was particularly impressed with LaMia's physical dominance of Mateo and the heat that poured off of both of them from the pages. The plot moved at a very good pace but I felt Mara's appearance was unnecessary. Whereas, the reappearance of Genesis and Alex will make those fans of Ms. McKeever's first book in this series very happy. Overall, I loved the world Ms. McKeever and look forward to going back to read *Guardian Seductress* and any future works involving this world. **4.5 Stars/Orgasmic**" —**Julie Esparza, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews***

"The Sisters of Emsharra, Book 2, *Predator's Salvation* was exceptional. I loved this book. There was not only love, life, explosive sexual tension, friendship, political intrigue, mystery, forgiveness and a plot that will keep you involved from the start to the finish. I recommend you read The Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1, *Guardian Seductress*, so as to fully understand everything going on in this book and why the characters are where they are, but this book does stand alone just fine. Gracie C. McKeever creates an interesting world with characters that must work hard to find the balance that will let them co-exist together. I highly recommend this book to anyone. **4.5 Kisses**" —**Tara, *Two Lips Reviews***

"This is one hot tamale of a good story! At first, I thought it would not be realistic, for how could he love the murderess of his family, but I was pleasantly surprised. The author did an excellent job of

portraying Mia in a realistic fashion so that the reader is able to understand and even relate to her motives. The love scenes are scorching, yet sensual and loving at the same time. The world building is creative and easy to grasp, which made the book that much more enjoyable. This is the first book of Ms. McKeever's I've had the pleasure to read; it will certainly not be the last! **4 Cups**" —**Regina, *Coffee Time Romance***

'Ms. McKeever's triumphant return, *Predator's Salvation*, features the main protagonists in the first story, Alex and Genesis, as well as their enemy Mia, whose story this is...This reviewer found this story to be a fascinating look into the life of LaMia Enlil, who truly seemed to be unredeemable in Book 1. Ms. McKeever has done a marvelous job of humanizing Mia and making her sympathetic. Mateo is a remarkable man whose empathic abilities make this story work as well. Their sex scenes are inflammatory they are so hot! The exciting conclusion to this story was noteworthy as well. For those readers of erotic fantasy, Ms. McKeever's tales of Emsharra are not to be missed! Highly recommended! **4 Hearts**" —**Leah, *Love Romances***



## Spells Cast in Shadows

Driven by recurrent dreams to take an ill-advised predawn ride around her ranch, Montana Freeborn stumbles across something in the road from those wildest dreams: a real live centaur. At least she thinks so. By the time she reaches the supine figure trampled beneath the hooves of her prize Appaloosa, she begins to wonder if her eyes deceived her, since before them now is a man, a magnificent, unconscious and very naked man.

Cast out from his tribe as a punishment for causing the death of a fellow Sapphiran, Seth Phoenix is an arrogant young centaur of royal heritage infatuated with the human race, and now, after a twist of fate, forced to count on one of its ranks for his survival.

His one chance at redemption—brokered with the Black Elf by his desperate mother, Thyra Phoenix—could be the key to his mother's freedom, or his own downfall...

**Sensuality Rating:** Sizzling

**Genre:** African-American/Paranormal/Psychic/Shape-shifter/Urban Fantasy

# STORY EXCERPT

## SPELLS CAST IN SHADOWS

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Nearing the edge of the grove where the forest began and the ranch ended, Montana raised her face to the dimly lit sky, reveling in spring's airy fingers gently lifting her hair and lightly brushing her face. She hadn't closed her eyes or taken them from the road for more than a second before the shadow appeared out of the darkness without warning.

Sunny instantly reared up, blowing rollers as he tried to avoid colliding with—*Pony-man*.

"Whoa, Sunny, whoa, boy!" Montana gripped the horse's reins, squeezing her thighs tight against his flanks as she tried to calm the animal. Good thing she wasn't having one of her clumsier moments, or she'd have taken a header off the horse right to the hard ground!

She looked on in horror, heart pounding in her ears as Sunspot's front hooves came down, knocking the creature over and pounding his torso into the ground.

She watched him roll from his side to his back. As he moved, his lower half transformed, changing into two human legs before her eyes.

She couldn't believe it. Had she really seen a half-horse, half-man?

Sunspot grew quiet beneath her, prancing and walking a wide berth around the figure on the ground. Montana leaned forward and rubbed his glistening neck, gently murmuring to the horse. "It's all right boy. Everything's going to be just fine." When she was

sure he was okay and hadn't hurt himself, she carefully dismounted and crept to the stranger's side.

What struck her first wasn't that he was indeed a man and not the centaur she had initially seen—and she *knew* that she had—but that he was naked, just completely and totally *na-ked*.

Montana pulled in a deep breath as she crouched beside him to check for injuries. Her fingers glided over the hard, smooth curves of his chest and abdomen, all the while trying to avoid that sizable area of his anatomy several inches lower and resting peacefully against one thigh.

God, he was magnificent!

Not that she'd been exposed to that many naked men before, except maybe when she indulged in her guilty pleasure, watching hunk-inhabited soaps every once in awhile. Or when she'd splurge on one of those novelty beefcake calendars embellished with pictures for every month of shirtless cowboys clad in snug jeans that hugged all the right curves.

As far as beefcake and shirtless went, her unconscious stranger was beautifully formed from head to toe. Long, lean-muscled flanks curved up into a slim waist accented by a sectioned abdomen and well-defined pectorals. He had a swimmer's body, elegant, poised, and powerful, even in repose.

Her clit swelled beneath her jeans, and Montana simultaneously squeezed her eyes and her legs shut as if this could stop her tsunami-force lust.

She bit her bottom lip, contemplating. Heart speeding, palms moist, she itched to touch him, feeling like she was about to do something intrinsically illicit as her hand drifted of its own accord, closer and closer until her fingertips caressed one male nipple.

She brushed her hand across his chest, acquainting herself with his smooth pecs, then drifted further down to his abdomen...lower, lower until she made contact with the hair around his cock. She froze.

Montana's eyes shot open when she realized what she was doing.

Shit, she was horny! How else could she explain this instant hot attraction? Why did she have a sudden uncontrollable urge to molest an unconscious man as he lay injured?

Montana stopped gaping long enough to scold herself for her unconscionable act as she berated her foolishness in not heeding Jason's warnings about riding around the ranch in the dim light. She could just hear the I-told-you-so's now, which gave her some pause.

She needed to get her injured stranger some help, but how to do that without going back to the ranch and submitting to an interrogation or righteous censure?

She certainly couldn't lift him herself. True, she was made of sturdy stock at five-nine, one-fifty, and was in pretty good physical condition having worked hard all her life on the ranch and at various positions with the Forestry Service, but this man had to be six-four and two-hundred pounds of solid muscle. Dead-weight muscle at that. Not to mention he was naked.

Montana realized she had more qualms about the latter than the idea of actually trying to lift and carry an unconscious and injured man to the house by her lonesome.

She pivoted and marched back to Sunspot to retrieve the heavy blanket from beneath her saddle, returned, and crouched beside the stranger before gently covering him with the coarse material.

The stranger.

*Her* stranger, she thought, feeling connected to him and oddly possessive, as if he belonged to her and she to him.

Montana pulled the cell phone from her belt, flipped it open without much hope of getting a signal. She had to walk several yards away toward the ranch until she was out of a dead zone and able to get an open line. She dialed 911, glancing over her shoulder to make sure Sunspot and her stranger were okay. He'd disappeared.

**ADULT EXCERPT**  
**SPELLS CAST IN SHADOWS**

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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He pulled back to peer at her for a long moment before he bent his head to tease her slightly parted lips. Montana opened her mouth to him on a long moan and flung her arms around him, almost throwing him off-balance.

Seth planted one palm against the wall adjacent them and lowered her to the carpeted steps with his free arm. He pushed her legs apart with his knee as she wantonly sprawled across the several bottom steps, then he cupped her moist pussy with a palm. “Shall I please you before you take your leave?”

“Yes, Seth. Please...” She grasped his soft ‘locks with both hands and held on as he lifted her T-shirt up past her breasts. She writhed beneath him anticipating the feel of his lips on her a second before he wrapped his hot mouth around one nipple. “More, Seth. I want more of you...”

His hair was like cotton balls in her hands, and she reveled in the soft feel against her palms, reveled in the musky clean scent that wafted up to her from his skin and hair as she inhaled deep and held him tight.

Seth slid a hand into her panties, slowly eased two fingers into her wet pussy, and Montana immediately clamped down on the two digits with her inner muscles, desperate for more.

He laved, nipped, and sucked both nipples until they stood at attention, then found her engorged clit with his thumb and flicked it. He scissored his fingers inside her, working them in concert with his thumb and making Montana shudder.

She gripped his hair so tight her knuckles hurt, and still he tortured her. “If you want me to beg, Seth...” She gasped as he hit a particularly sensitive area deep inside her. “I will. Please...”

“I only want you to feel.” Seth slowly licked his way down from her breasts, to her stomach until his mouth was poised over her hot center.

Montana felt his heated breath against her even through the satin of her panties. She pumped her hips in rhythm to his manipulations right before he ripped her panties off and buried his face between her legs.

“Oh, God...” She didn’t know whether it was the sound of her panties shredding beneath his hands or the insistent way he caressed her pussy with his tongue, but she almost came on the spot at his gentle brutality.

He covered her pussy with his mouth, teasing her sensitive nub with his tongue before pushing it deep inside her and stroking her wet folds.

## ***REVIEWS for Spells Cast in Shadows***

"*Spells Cast in Shadows* is quite a befitting title. It really sets the mold for the theme of the story. Because of the magic that has occurred in the darkness of shadows, Montana and Seth are thrown obstacle after obstacle but their attraction to each other is strong. And they both are determined not to be without each other. Within this book, readers will see that the forces of evil will do anything to try and prevail over that which is good. But some times it takes a higher force to maintain the goodness. This is the second book that I've read by Gracie McKeever. She does wonderfully when describing scenes in her stories and those scenes make for incredible visuals. Gracie McKeever is a talented author and you will want to read her work! This book is a definite must read. So, what are you waiting for? Go and buy the book! **5 Stars**" —  
**Chantay, Euro Reviews**

"*Spells Cast In Shadows* is the first book by Gracie C. McKeever I had the good fortune to read, and it will not be the last! With its powerful characters and an intense plot, it is easy to see why this book was the October Top Seller for Siren Publishing.

I can wholeheartedly recommend *Spells Cast In Shadows* to any readers who love a good erotic fantasy with a beautiful romance and a suspenseful plot promising several twists! **4.5 Klovers**" —  
**Jennifer, CK2S Kwips and Kritiques**

"Gracie McKeever's imagination may well be unbounded, and once again she renders a richly tapestried contemporary fantasy, with vividly illustrated characters, a romance to-die-for, and sizzling sensual peaks. One story of Ms. McKeever's will readily convince any reader to keep reading her books, and *Spells Cast in Shadows* is certainly no exception. **4.5 Kisses**" —**Frost, Two Lips Reviews**

"*Spells Cast in Shadow* is a well-written book with captivating characters. This book includes the use of dark magic to manipulate lives, murder, intrigue and an amazing love story within a love story. The hero and heroine face many obstacles in discovering

their love for one another. There are several plot lines developed within the story, some of which could have been expanded to add even more depth to this book. I hope Ms. McKeever will pick up the threads to tell the stories of Montana's friend, Jason's and that of Seth's brother Endre to make this a series. The possibilities make my imagination soar! Seth and Montana struggle mightily to resist the lure of each other. Their resistance raises the heat level at every encounter until they surrender to the needs of their bodies, even if not acknowledging the desires of their hearts. Seeking to please themselves and each other physically, they please this reader with the passion they ignite. This book is one I'll read again and again. **4 Stars/Hot**" —**Ginger, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews***

"Gracie McKeever has written a marvelous modern-day fairy tale, complete with a classic good vs. evil struggle of epic proportions. Because of her clever use of foreshadowing, the relationship between a human and a centaur is immediately believable. Montana is as sympathetic a heroine as this reviewer has read about in recent memory, one who has overcome all of the obstacles life has placed in her path with strength and grace, and without becoming bitter and withdrawn. Seth possesses a great combination of arrogance, wisdom and vulnerability, and is a true alpha male hero figure. The sexual tension between Seth and Montana is so palpable that steam fairly rises from the computer screen. Ms. McKeever's language is somewhat graphic but not offensively so and is definitely part of the plot rather than gratuitous cursing and use of common slang for sexual terminology. Her excellent prose brings both her characters and her settings to life in the reader's imagination. While billed as erotic in nature, the erotic elements occur naturally in the flow of the story and are not extreme or overly explicit. This reviewer enjoyed this tale and looks forward to more from Ms. McKeever. Highly recommended! **4 Hearts**" —**Leah, *LoveRomancesandMore.com***



## In Plain Sight

When Samantha Taylor dropped out of her senior year of college to marry gorgeous and almost ten years her senior Dawson Foster, she never knew what she was getting into. But Sam is a quick study, and a year into her marriage, she prepares to remove her unborn baby and herself from a bad situation before it's too late. A headlong tumble down some stairs, however, violently nips her plans in the bud. But someone upstairs has other plans for Sam in the form of rough-and-ready, newly-expired bounty hunter, Dara Kelly.

Twice-divorced, Dara Kelly doesn't want to get married again, not even to luscious, Cuban-Irish Caution Foster. An African-American woman, she thrives in a profession where men set the rules, garnering respect and a tough reputation to match. But along with respect comes envy and enemies who will stop at nothing to gain a bounty...not even murdering a fellow skip tracer.

**Genre:** Contemporary Paranormal:  
Angels/Ghost/Interracial/Reincarnation/Suspense

# STORY EXCERPT IN PLAIN SIGHT

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Samantha Foster drifted, memory fading in the wind as she tumbled head over heels down the stairs, surrounded by pitch-black silence before a burst of blinding white light greeted her several yards away, gently vibrating.

She slowed. She didn't know how far she'd traveled, or to where, and didn't know if she was in control or had totally lost it. She just wanted the crazy ride to end. She'd had enough, and was tired of hoping for a different ending to her life than the pitiful reality.

Sam lowered her palms to her stomach, cupped her abdomen in a protective gesture to shelter a life that had already been lost. She'd failed before she ever had a chance to try, failed despite her best intentions to remove her baby from a bad situation while she still had a chance.

"Why?" One word, encompassing, and the omnipotent voice understood.

*We have plans for you.*

"Plans? Why did you let me die then? Why not after I had my baby? At least you could have let me have my baby!" Sam sobbed. She wondered if she would have done a better job as a mother than she had as a wife. She wondered how good she would have been at protecting her baby once it was born. Then she remembered her dream, the one where she made a clean getaway from her ranting husband, their newborn son alive and well behind her in his infant seat. Well, almost a clean getaway. If memory served her, she'd

crashed on the highway as Dawson gave chase in his car, screaming about her not taking his son anywhere.

*Not a dream.*

Sam sniffled, heart skipping with hope. "You mean it was real?"

*One reality. An alternate reality.*

"Then you can send me back? I can have my baby, my life—"

*Not in the way you expect.*

What was that supposed to mean? *It means, we have plans for you.*

Sam wasn't so sure she liked the sound of that, but something told her she didn't have much say in the matter.

They had plans for her.

\* \* \* \*

Dara Kelly reached for her gun too late.

The shadow stepped across the threshold, gun drawn. He took aim at her chest, fired, hitting her dead center.

Dara flew back, realization dawning as the bullet pierced her vest.

*Cop killers. Oh hell, oh damn...*

Her old rival noiselessly, unhurriedly strode across the carpeted floor past the skip cowering behind the bureau. He smiled down at Dara as she crawled backwards, towards the window, on her elbows and heels.

She reached behind her, pulled herself up on the windowsill, blood seeping through skin, bone, and Kevlar, numbing her limbs. She leaned a shoulder against the jamb as her assailant leisurely switched guns, leering at her once more when he raised the new weapon.

"I told you I'd pay you back no matter how long it took. No one takes a skip away from me and gets away with it. Especially not some lezzy cunt."

Dara wheezed, gurgling her next words. "Tarrent, think about what you're doing."

"Oh, I have. Long and hard." He smiled, moving so close to stare her in the eyes she thought for a moment he might have changed his mind. Then he reached out to snatch the small gold hoop from her left earlobe.

Dara gasped, then regretted it immediately.

"I'll keep this as a souvenir of our time together." He graced her with sharp white canines as he pocketed the earring. "Be glad it's not your ear. Not that you'll have much use for either in a few seconds." He stepped back, taking aim at her chest.

*Barbarian, cannibal, man-eater...* Dara closed her eyes, knew she was a dead woman, but tried to get through to him one more time. "Tarrent, ple—"

"Bye-bye, bitch."

His next shot sent her crashing through the glass and tumbling out the window.

\* \* \* \*

Dara landed on the hard pavement, surprised that she wasn't dead and wishing she was.

Excruciating pain lit up every nerve ending in her body. She was sure she had broken her back, among other major and minor bones, in the fall, but her insides, they were the real problem, on fire like someone had shoved a grenade packed with razor blades inside her abdomen and detonated it. She'd heard about talon slugs before, breaking onto the street in the nineties, but had never come across anyone who'd used them, or lived to tell about being shot with one. Leave it to that mean-spirited bastard to use outlawed ammo.

The pain was unreal, unbearable, inhuman, and just when Dara thought she couldn't take another minute of suffering, she felt herself drifting—up, up, up, and away. Her body, however, remained on the rain-slicked pavement, still and bleeding.

Someone brushed by her on Dara's way out. Someone on her way in. Into Dara's body!

Dara sampled the other's soul as they crossed paths—her first impressions raising her hackles—rich, spoiled, suburban American princess. Bourgeoisie. Everything Caution's grandfather loved, everything Dara loathed. Her next impressions weren't much better—wheat-gold hair, sky-blue eyes, young, petite, beautiful...and very dead.

*Oh God! I'm gone, dead, kaput...*

Was He punishing her? Teaching her a lesson?

No, punishing would have meant leaving her soul in her body writhing in agony as her internal organs bled out. He had done her a *favor* by pulling her out of her body when He had.

But, Mighty Isis, what had homegirl done to deserve the fate Dara had just escaped?

Dara didn't have time to think much more on it. She hadn't stopped drifting; her journey was just beginning. She was mildly amused and mightily shocked that her trip seemed to be going in an upward direction.

\* \* \* \*

Sam slammed into her new destination with such force, the trauma left her breathless for several long moments. Awareness – painful, corporeal awareness – forced her to finally take a breath. She immediately regretted it, cursing Their plans and wishing for sweet oblivion again. The broken neck was nothing compared to what she was feeling now. Fire inside and out. Heck, even her left earlobe throbbed! This new body must have been thrown down *several* flights of stairs, if not the roof of a tall building. How it still possessed the ability to breathe and feel anything was beyond her. But not beyond Them, evidently. Why?

*All in time, Samantha.*

*Yeah, sure, You say. That's what They all say.*

Might as well have been talking to the backward-talking creature in Star Wars since the answers she'd gotten about her predicament so far made about as much sense as Yoda's brain-twisting phraseology, and were about as satisfying.

"Dare! *Dios mio, que paso?*"

Sam opened her eyes as someone rushed over to her in the rain. The dimly lit side street where she lay afforded little opportunity to see her rescuer clearly. Or maybe he was her attacker, for all she knew, coming back to make sure he'd done the job right.

God, what had They gotten her into?

*Take care, child. All will be well.*

*You're leaving me?*

"No, *chica*! I wouldn't leave you for the world. And I'm so sorry I was late."

Sam hadn't realized she'd spoken out loud until she saw the horrified look on her rescuer's face and something else she could just barely make out: guilt.

She tried to sit up and gasped as the stranger pushed her back. He placed his rolled up leather jacket beneath her head and opened her jacket to probe her rib cage with gentle fingers. When one of his hands brushed the outer edge of a breast, she slapped it away before she realized he was searching for wounds, wounds inflicted despite a bulletproof vest.

She felt the weight of the contraption against her chest and abdomen, and the blood, wet and sticky against her skin, and almost became sick with the implications.

Just how badly had this body been injured? And whose body was it? Who was this Dare?

Gradually, pain faded as if fleeing in response to her questions, or perhaps the stranger's touch. Sam didn't care which, just that alleviation was at hand.

*"Dios, I am so sorry, Dare. I...I was detained. I don't know what else to say."*

Sam didn't know what to say either, deciding not to say anything at all for the time being, and just tried to take everything in.

She was in a cold, wet, dark alley and some strange man, obviously concerned, obviously her friend, needlessly ministered to her already healing body.

"I'm ready to get up now."

He frowned. "I really think you should wait for an ambulance."

"No!" Sam sprang to a sitting position, surprised that it didn't hurt, almost not at all. She seemed to be completely healed. She knew she had Them to thank for her miraculous recovery. The least They could do. And for some reason, she didn't think a trip to the hospital was in Their plans for her.

"All right, *chica*. Don't have a cow." He grinned grimly as he helped her to her feet.

Sam glanced at him from the corner of an eye, wishing she knew who he was, what his name was, and what her connection to him was.

"Did the skip do this to you? I didn't peg him for this rough a customer."

"Skip?"

"*Dios*, you must have gotten knocked on the head pretty good, huh?"

"Guess so," Sam mumbled. "You're, uh...?"

"Diego." He grimaced at her incomprehension, shook his head. "Your partner?"

As in? Sam wondered but didn't say it out loud. Partner in crime? Partner in business? Life partner? Exactly how close a relationship did they share?

"C'mon, I'm taking you home."

That was an answer she hadn't expected, and raised more questions than it answered.

Where was home? Their home? His home? Her home?

She let Diego grasp her under an elbow and lead her out of the alley, having no idea where they were going, but strangely trusting him. She didn't see how she had a choice.

# **ADULT EXCERPT IN PLAIN SIGHT**

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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**[Scene note:** Sam, who is in Dara Kelly's body, realizes that the man she thought is her abusive husband Dawson turns out to be Dawson's identical twin brother Caution.]

Shaken, Sam turned back to Dawson just in time to see he'd unlocked the cuffs.

He stood in front of her, grinning, restraints dangling from the pointer of his right hand as he whistled a nameless tune, looking entirely too self-satisfied.

How the heck had he gotten out of the cuffs? Sam couldn't remember being married to Harry Houdini!

Her heart hammered not just from the fact that she was in the room with a dangerous escaped felon, the man responsible for her death, but from the wicked butter-melting grin spreading across her husband's face and reaching his eyes. She couldn't tell whether he was enraged or just a little peeved, and didn't want to find out, but he reached out and caught her wrist with both hands, wrestling the Glock from her grip before she could squeak.

Dumbfounded, Sam watched as he ejected the chambered round, emptied the clip and pocketed it before placing the empty gun atop the marble center island.

He stalked her around the kitchen as she tried to gain the door. She dodged to her left, didn't fool him as he caught her by an arm. Sam threw one leg behind his, but just as she was about to flip him over a hip to the floor, Caution reversed position in time to take her

with him, cushioning her fall with his body as they both went crashing to the linoleum.

She struggled as he flipped her beneath him, straddled her hips, pulled her arms up over her head and grasped her wrists.

"You shouldn't do that."

Sam frowned. "Do what?"

"Thrust and plunge that way. I might get the wrong idea."

She struggled harder at his words and it only made him laugh.

"Let me go."

"You came into my house, Ms. Big Bad Bounty Hunter, pointing a *gun* at me as if I was some dangerous felon, and now you want me to let you go?"

"I was perfectly within my rights."

"And so am I, Ms. Kelly." He leaned in, lips a hair's breadth from hers, and paused as he stared into her eyes. "Is this what you wanted? Does this turn you on?"

Sam bucked. "Don't flatter yourself!"

"Actually, I'm flattering you." He leaned further, stirring her hair with his breath as he brushed her cheek with his lips, then murmured, "If I'd known you were into the kinky bondage scene, we could have tried this a long time ago."

Sam squirmed, gasped when she met Dawson's hard erection with her slit, and instantly felt moist heat between her legs as her pussy gushed. "I'm not," she said.

He arched a brow. "Not flattered?"

"Not into the kinky bondage scene." *Tell that to your dripping wet cunt.*

"Pity," he whispered. "Now, about this Dawson jazz..." He slid his mouth up, ran his tongue over her full lower lip. "You've never been fooled by my brother before. Besides my mother and Grampa Brody, you're just about the only one in the world who *can* tell us apart."

Foiled? Brother? Grampa Brody? What did he mean by *brother*?

Sam frowned, light slowly dawning before she saw red. She should have known something was off-kilter when the man had addressed Dara so familiarly.

*That evil, deceptive witch!*

Sam remembered the last thing Dara had said to her before directing her to the townhouse: *"I'm going to give you a lead to the skip."* Not *lead* Sam to the skip, but *give* her a lead. Very subtle wording but it made all the difference.

If the woman weren't already dead, Sam would make sure the deed was done right the next time and kill Dara Kelly herself.

And Dawson! Talk about deceptive. He never once mentioned a sibling, much more an identical twin. But then again, Sam had never shown any overt interest, thus she only knew that he was estranged from his family, and she stupidly had not pried for the low down. She'd loved him, she'd married him, and the rest hadn't concerned her blind sensibilities, not to mention her overactive, twenty-two-year-old libido.

*Fool.*

She'd married a stranger. A stranger with a twin. An identical twin. Deliciously, erotically, lusciously identical.

*Calm down, kiddo, that's what got you into this mess in the first place. A fool and horny.*

"Cat got your tongue?"

"Pardon?" She really wanted to tell him that *he'd* have her tongue in a few seconds if he didn't back off. His mouth was so close, breath warm and enticing, if she reached out to lick her lips, she'd touch his.

"This is a first. I've never seen you at a loss for words before."

Sam could well imagine. Dara Kelly didn't seem the type to hold her tongue for anyone or anything, quite the opposite.

"I'm not at a loss. I've said what I need to say. And I want you to let me go and get off."

"Anyone ever tell you you're a bossy cuss?" Dawson—or whatever his name was—grinned, and Sam realized a total stranger held her captive. She didn't even know his name, despite knowing every angle of his gorgeous face.

How could she not tell the difference! He was so much more intense than Dawson was, serious and somber, a very solid and trustworthy vibe about him.

She wondered if the brothers were as alike as they were different. They both seemed to have the same spicy sense of humor; both had the same smooth, bronze skin, the lean-like-a-runner's build; both instantly kicked her female hormones into overdrive, but beyond these, Sam was almost in the dark as to demeanor and mood.

Where was help when she needed it and why did ghosts only pop up at the most inopportune times? Not that she had had much experience with the latter, but couldn't Dara see that she was in trouble? Or did she see and just not care?

Sam was tempted to call for Dara, but held back because of the strange man astride her.

*His name is Caution.*

The words came out as if said through clenched teeth, and Sam had to stop herself from searching the room for their source. Instead, she caught movement on the island behind Caution's hand, and peered as a cup and saucer violently rattled then levitated from the marble surface.

She gawked, and blurted, "Look out!" right before the ceramic-ware flew off the island towards the back of her captor's head as if flung.

Caution didn't hesitate and ducked without blinking or releasing her, and the cup and saucer hurtled past his left ear, missing his head by centimeters before crashing into the refrigerator and breaking into so many pieces.

Sam didn't know whether she was happy or disappointed the man had such quick reflexes, thwarting an opportunity for her escape.

Caution glanced behind him, eyebrows knitting as he turned back to her with a twinkle in his eyes. "Neat trick."

Sam bit her tongue in denial, but decided to turn the tables instead. "You too."

He frowned.

"The handcuffs. How'd you get out of them?"

"Trade secret."

"You're an escape artist?"

"Not quite."

His enigmatic smile only emphasized the fact that he had her where he wanted her, and that she was at a distinct disadvantage.

She should have been more nervous, more afraid, but once she realized it wasn't Dawson imprisoning her, her fear had evaporated. For the moment. Who knew what other sort of threat this Caution represented, besides the assault he was currently waging on her senses of course?

"So, what are we going to do about this impasse?" he asked

"You could try letting me go and getting off of me," Sam repeated, but noticed he didn't seem in any particular hurry to do either.

"I like it where I am."

"But I don't."

"You've made that abundantly clear the last couple of months."

Sam did *not* want to get into a debate about Caution and Dara's relationship. "I'd rather not talk about that right now."

"Running away from our problems isn't going to solve anything."

What problems?

"You never gave me an answer to my proposal."

Proposal? Now this was getting just a little too sticky for her. Sam decided she wanted not only to kill Dara the next time she saw her, but also to make the woman sorry she'd ever been born! "My hands are turning numb," she mumbled.

He smiled as he sat up straight, taking her with him and holding her hands close to his chest. He slipped one cuff around her left wrist and locked it so fast she didn't have a chance to protest.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"You wanted me?" Caution slipped the other cuff around his right wrist and locked it. "You got me."

"You're coming with me?"

"Hardly." He stood, pulling her with him. "You're coming with me."

Sam got to her feet too, but stopped when he headed for the entryway. "Where?"

"Upstairs to bed."

She arched a brow, heart drumming, and tried not to betray how much his words affected her, tried not to betray how much *he* affected her and that the thought of being alone with him in a bedroom totally unnerved her; totally turned her on.

Who knew she had this kinky, naughty streak, that the thought of him handcuffing her to his bed and having his way with her would zap her pussy with fire and speed her heart to near bursting? "You're kidding," was all she could manage in protest.

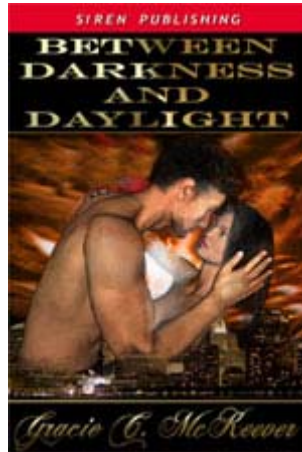
"I kid you not, and I don't have the energy to argue with you about it."

Like a two-year-old, she wanted to ask him a thousand questions—Where was Dawson? Did Caution know his brother's whereabouts, and/or was he harboring him? Why was Caution so bone tired? Early day doing what?—among her top choices. Instead, she quietly followed him into the large master suite and swallowed hard as he closed the door behind them.

## ***REVIEWS for In Plain Sight***

"Gracie C. McKeever possesses an incredible imaginative ability and the gift to make any type of paranormal element, no matter how unusual, appear perfectly realistic and [acceptable]. With any of her stories, there is never a question of the reader's suspension of disbelief, it occurs immediately, naturally, and very smoothly. Her action is fast-paced, and her characters are well-delineated. We come to know them as well as we understand our own friends and family, if not better. Any book by Ms. McKeever is well worth a first read and subsequent rereads, but in the opinion of this reviewer *In Plain Sight* is one of her best! **5 Kisses**" —**Frost, Two Lips Reviews**

"I thoroughly enjoyed this book and couldn't put it down until the last page was done. The triangle between Samantha, Dara and Caution is engrossing. You find yourself pulled into the story and go through the emotional roller coaster with Dara and Samantha. Through it all there is still the fact that Samantha's killer is still on the loose which opens up a whole new aspect because it is all connected. To tell anymore would ruin the story. The love scenes are magnificent and full of erotic pleasure that never ends. Gracie McKeever is an author who has gone to the top of my auto buy list and after reading this tale readers will understand why. **4.5 Blue Ribbons**" —**Angel, Romance Junkies**



## Between Darkness and Daylight

Over-achieving and skeptical securities and commodities sales agent, Nova Foxx, is dragged kicking and screaming into believing the supernatural when an almost-fatal mountain climbing accident results in a near-death experience that kick-starts her inherent psychic abilities into overdrive. Nova soon discovers with her newfound "gifts" comes great responsibility and is forced to relocate to another city in search of the subject of her clairvoyance with the hopes of ending her visions and saving a stranger's life. But first, she must convince him that his life is in jeopardy without revealing who she is and how she knows.

Zane Youngblood is a high school social worker who wants to save the world one child at a time. An impossible order to fill, but this doesn't stop him from trying, especially when he's raising a young troubled teen of his own looking for acceptance and a savior wherever he can find them.

**Genre:** Contemporary Paranormal/Psychic/Interracial

**SUPER EXCERPT**  
**BETWEEN DARKNESS**  
**AND DAYLIGHT**

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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**Prologue**

*Los Angeles, California*

Nova Foxx sighed as she folded her last piece of clothing and packed it in her carry-on. She'd made enough errors in judgment in the past year to last her a lifetime. Time to rectify.

"I can't let you go like this."

She started; she hadn't heard him come into the room. Nova didn't turn as he neared but soon felt strong arms slide around her waist, pulling her back against his chest.

No one could ever accuse Matthew Dalton of being a quitter.

"Please, Matt. Don't."

Rather than release her, he turned her to face him, pulled her closer, and she let him—inhalating his warm tangy scent, snuggling in his firm embrace—for the moment too tired to fight anymore.

"We can work this out."

Silently, she shook her head.

"How can you walk away from us, Nove?"

"I have to do this."

"You realize this is total insanity, what you're planning."

"I have to do this," she repeated, frowning. "I can't explain it any more than I have."

Matt shook his head and released her. He took several steps away, staring at her from the other side of the room as he forked a hand through rich honey-blond waves. Disbelief and frustration etched his face. "What do you expect me to do while you're gallivanting across the States? This is the worst time in the world to be traveling anywhere by air, especially to New York."

She bit her tongue. Since when was he daunted by air travel to New York? He made business trips there almost monthly, despite the threat of terrorist attacks.

Besides, she had so many other fish to gut and scale, terrorism fell pretty low on her list of worries. The visions terrified her and had for a while, more every day and night. Maybe she was being a little self-centered, but she was only concerned with what she could do to stop them, to ease her own personal conflict.

Nova would have repeated all this to him, but didn't feel like wasting the effort on something more futile than trying to ride a stone camel. She settled for closing her eyes and shaking her head. "I don't expect you to do anything, Matt," she finally whispered.

He stalked back to her, caught her arms, leaned in and kissed her hard on the mouth.

She felt his tongue briefly caress her lips and before she could object or withdraw, he pulled back to glare down at her as if he sensed that he had stepped over the line, felt her anger boiling and wanted to beat her to the finish line.

"You should expect everything and more from me because I love you."

"Matt—"

"I thought you loved me, too."

For the first time since getting up that morning, finally ready to do something about this problem—the proverbial elephant sitting in the middle of their living room for the last year—Nova felt

uncertain. She was abandoning her fiancé, a man she loved, who clearly loved her and with whom she had been sharing a pretty decent life until a year ago—before the accident and the resulting visions that had precipitated this urgent need to act. To leave.

*What am I doing? Why?*

When she stated her reasons out loud, she could well understand Matt's incredulity and concern. He feared for her sanity. Nova knew this, because she feared for it herself. It was surprising she had been able to relate her plans when he'd pressed her for a logical explanation of her departure. She was acting irrational, impetuous, impractical—she could go on down the line—all attributes not normally found in the makeup of a successful, levelheaded stockbroker.

But this was a battle she'd been waging since she was a girl—her undisciplined fey side facing off against her disciplined pragmatic side—a battle she'd seen played out time and time again between her spiritualist medium mother and Marine sergeant-major father. Although her mother accepted and fully embraced reincarnation and the continuous existence of the human soul, Nova didn't think even she would go this far. Traveling thousands of miles, transplanting to a strange city to look for a man who may or may not exist, who more than likely would think her a kook if she were lucky enough to find him—and all this based on a transcendental meeting in a rarefied tunnel with a woman who'd probably only been a figment of her imagination.

Hmm, maybe even dear old Mom would think this all a little crazy.

"Nova, you're willing to risk so much, risk us, on something that probably isn't—"

"Real?" She pulled out of his arms. "I knew you wouldn't understand."

"You know what I mean, hon." Matt immediately turned conciliatory. "It's all a little...far-fetched."

"Far-fetched or not, it's real to me."

He pulled her close again, nuzzling her hair with his chin. "Can't you just take some time off, a vacation? I really think that's all you need."

Nova let the irony of his suggestion wash over her as she smiled. A vacation wouldn't cure what ailed her, and it was what had gotten her into her current straits in the first place.

Matt must have read her thoughts, for she saw the look of guilt flash in his slate eyes when he pulled back to stare at her.

"I never meant for anything to happen to you, Nova. Surely you know that."

"I know, Matt." She returned his hug, wrapped her arms around his waist. "I made an amateur's mistake. Don't blame yourself."

"How can I not? You were my responsibility."

"So you're no Stipe Bozic," Nova teased, trying to lighten his mood but immediately realizing her mistake when Matt frowned.

"Stipe may be the best, but I had more at stake than breaking a mounting climbing record." He kissed her forehead before sliding his face down, cheek-to-cheek, and whispering against her hair, "I feel like I've already lost you."

Nova swallowed, unable to speak. She didn't want to confirm or deny the truth of his words. She didn't want to tell him he was right, that he had lost her to that mountain. She had come out of the experience a changed woman; almost dying did that to a person.

"You know how this sounds? Me, letting you run off to another city to look for some stranger you've seen in a vision?"

"I hate to break it to you, pardner, but you're not *letting* me do anything." Nova grinned, tried to take the edge off her statement, inject a little levity. But she didn't want Matt making any mistake about her intentions; she was leaving come hell or high water.

"Nova—"

"He's in danger, Matt."

"*If* that's the case, I don't see how it's your concern."

"I don't expect you to understand."

"I want to."

That was what made this so difficult. She knew he did, and wanted to make him understand but didn't know how or where to start. How could she tell him she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't make this trip and at least try to find him?

Matt diverted her thoughts when he caught her against him, palms sliding up, firm on her shoulder blades, as he leaned in for a kiss. He coaxed her lips open, his mouth tempting and insistent. She let his tongue in, more out of duty and curiosity than lust and desire. She felt nothing but basic affection, almost like kissing her brother. Nothing like when *he* kissed her in her dreams; nothing like the hot and insistent way *his* lips claimed hers; nothing like the way *his* tongue thrust and stroked inside her mouth, and had her eager for his long, eloquent fingers caressing between her thighs...

Nova just barely stopped the whimper rising in her throat when she pulled out of Matt's arms, and rather than feeling as if she were being unfaithful to him, she felt like she was being unfaithful to the other—a man she hadn't yet met, whose face she'd only seen in visions. And all she could recall of him were the somber set of his jaw, the sensual tilt of his full lips, and the soulful, tea-colored eyes gazing from his painfully handsome face. Not to mention her other dreams of the man, the ones she didn't want to think about or mention to Matt; the ones that woke her up next to her fiancé in a sinful state of arousal that had her entire body hot with a furious blush and her pussy clenching and wet with need...need of a total stranger.

Matt scowled. "It's him, isn't it? I'm losing you to a specter?"

"I'm sorry, Matt." She could have told him the choice was no longer his or hers to make, but the resolute gleam in his eyes said it wouldn't have made any difference, that he would not give up easily. His next words confirmed this.

"Don't be sorry, Nova, just be prepared."

She frowned and Matt smiled.

"I'll give you one year. Then I'm coming out there to bring you back."

## Chapter 1

*New York City - One Year Later*

Nova anticipated a hectic day of highs and lows as she scrutinized the quote boards, following the prices of several securities in which she had invested for numerous clients.

For the last half hour, she had been on the phone with one of her most important customers, the president of a large technology company, trying to calm his frayed nerves, and was now desperate to get the gentleman off the line.

Her stranger came to her rescue before she came to his. Heat suddenly flared through her limbs, kaleidoscopic images bursting in front of her sight before she closed her eyes tight against double vision. Great, an excuse. Not exactly the one she was looking for, but she'd take what she could get.

Nova interrupted Mr. Nelson's droning in her ear about his fluctuating stock. "I understand your concerns, sir, but I'm going to have to finish this later. An emergency's just come up."

"I don't think you do understand my concerns, Ms. Foxx..."

Nova blocked him out as the warmth seeped up her legs into her abdomen, crashing into her gut like a wave of fire. She sucked in a breath as a vision struck her between the eyes, and she was suddenly at a police station surrounded by uniformed officers, no longer in the confines of her executive office. Then she saw her

stranger, her clearest, sharpest vision of him yet, standing across the station floor, engaged in conversation with a tall auburn-haired man dressed in plain clothes. Nova assumed the redhead was a detective.

Was her stranger the victim of a crime, or had he committed a crime?

She guessed she should be glad he seemed alive and well and wasn't in the hospital instead of a police station. Still, police station did not bode well, meant trouble in her book.

"Ms. Foxx, I'd appreciate your full attention, and I don't think you've heard a word I've had to say in the last five min—"

"I've heard you, Mr. Nelson, but I really must go. I'll call you back as soon as I'm free." She didn't waste time explaining further, already resigned to kissing major butt when next she contacted Mr. Nervous Nelson.

How had the man managed to make millions in the technology industry when he was so afraid of taking risks?

Nova opened her eyes to stare at her computer screen and found it hard to concentrate on reading e-mail when her stranger's face still hovered on the edge of her memory.

She closed her eyes to bring herself closer to the vision, closer to him, her body thrumming with anticipation of his heated touch, the musky-clean smell of him, the heavy solidity of his erection sliding against her slit and taunting her already moistened folds.

God, she hadn't had one of these dreams in so long!

She preferred these erotic fantasy interludes over the Danger-Will-Robinson nightmares which, of course, was why she had more of the latter than the former. The sexy dreams just got in the way and muddled her reasons for leaving Matt and coming to New York.

Despite this, Nova took a deep breath and gave into the vision this time, stepped into the room in her mind, the room marked

forbidden and X-rated, the room where *he* stood, clad in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs and a sexy smile, patiently waiting.

Usually, he was clad in a little more, jeans and a T-shirt, something she could strip off of him, teasing herself lingering over each button before she undid it, slowly drawing the soft denim down his long lean legs until she was kneeling before him and eye-level with that hard part of him that had her vaginal muscles periodically spasming hours after an encounter.

But now, it was as if he was as impatient as Nova to be close, skin to skin, feverish pussy to hard cock, firm-muscle chest to aching full breasts.

“I thought you’d never come, Nova.”

Come...not a good word when she was at the edge of orgasm just being in his presence again, just looking at his broad-shouldered, tall physique. “I...I don’t have much time. I’m at work and—”

“Whatever you can give me. I just want to be close to you.” He closed the space between them and Nova’s breath hitched in her chest as he wrapped his arms around her and she realized she was already naked. His bare warm chest pressed flush against her painfully erect nipples.

He nuzzled her throat, made her shudder in his arms. “Be with me, Nova. Just for a few minutes. I need you,” he murmured.

He sounded so desperate, more desperate than she felt when she had these dreams.

Did that mean something bad was about to happen to him at the precinct? Something she needed to be there for and stop?

She slid her hands up to his head, tunneling her fingers through his gloriously silken waves, and closed her eyes. “I need you, too...” His name...Christ, she wanted him so badly and she didn’t even know his name, realized she didn’t care. She just wanted him inside her. Now.

His cock nudged her abdomen, a constant obvious reflection of her need, and Nova got up on her tiptoes as he bent his knees to bring the tip of his cock even with her slit. He grasped her ass and pulled her closer at the same instant she reached for his generous lips, teasing the seam with the tip of her tongue. He opened for Nova, readily let her in, thrusting his tongue out to meet and tangle with hers.

Jesus, his mouth set her off like a bottle rocket, kaleidoscope stars bursting bright in front of her eyes as she squeezed them tight, bells ringing in her head so loud she thought she would go deaf with the sound of it.

Ring...bells...so loud in her head...

Nova woke with a violent jerk, glance bewilderedly darting around her office before finally landing on the phone on her desk.

She took a shaky breath as if to test her lungs and reached for the receiver with some trepidation. The "Private Number" readout on her phone made her wish she had some of her mother's ESP.

"Bornstein and Connor, Nova Foxx speaking."

"Hey, Yankee."

"Why, as I live and breathe—Ms. Dakota." Nova grinned against the mouthpiece, re-read what was on her screen, tried to get out of fantasizing-about-hot-sex-with-a-total-stranger mode, and back into work mode. She punched in a series of numbers on her keyboard before hitting "Enter" and sending a response to one of the firm's financial analysts. She liked his latest report and wanted to get together with him later to discuss his research and recommendations.

"Why so formal? We're not *compadres* anymore?"

"We're always going to be *compadres*, K.D."

"Oh, good. For a minute there I thought y'all had gotten up north and turned hotsy-ditty on a body."

"Maybe a little hotsy, but never ditty."

"Shucks, it's good to know you ain't lost your sense of humor."

With Kaylee Dakota, personal trainer extraordinaire, that was hardly likely.

"I miss you, Nova."

"The feeling's mutual, K."

"You know, someone else misses you just as much."

Nova braced herself for the scuttlebutt. She couldn't imagine Matthew Dalton pining for anyone, not even her. But according to Kaylee, that was exactly what he'd been doing for the last few months, since she'd refused to come back to L.A. with him. He'd tried everything within his considerable powers of persuasion to get her on a plane to California, but he'd failed. And short of carrying her to the airport caveman-style, as he'd threatened, there was really nothing he could have done to take her away from New York and *him*.

"K.D., you promised..."

"What? I said I wouldn't mention his name, and I haven't."

"Like we both don't know who you're talking about," Nova grumbled.

"Can I help it if you're so extra-perceptive?"

Nova giggled against her will. She could never stay angry with the woman for, as Kaylee was fond of saying, "longer than it took shit to go through a tinhorn."

She loved Kaylee, outspoken busybody or not. The woman had been a great friend to her since their first meeting at the Rock Groove climbing gyms. She'd been a real godsend after the accident, helping Nova get back on track, once she was ready to try out her rehabilitated legs.

"You should give him a call, Nove."

"And get his hopes up?"

"What hopes up? You're still friends, aren't you?"

"The connotation doesn't translate as well for him as it does for you. Besides, he doesn't want 'just friends'; he made that perfectly clear the last time we spoke."

"What he says and what he feels are two different things."

Nova sighed, but almost immediately brightened when she heard the coffee cart coming down the hall with young Josh at its helm. Her mouth watered, anticipating a soothing jolt of java and an excuse to get off the phone—besides the other thousand-and-one things she had to do today, not the least of which was tracking down that police station in her vision.

She needed to cut Kaylee short. She knew what was coming.

Nova had settled down in New York for the long haul, had purchased a house upstate, and was firmly entrenched and advancing in a new brokerage firm on Wall Street. But Kaylee had never failed to bring Matt up, not in all the time Nova had been out east. She'd also never failed to remind her of everything she'd left behind and that it was still waiting for her whenever she was ready to end her wild goose chase.

It was the only aspect of her life idling in neutral, that "wild goose chase." Kaylee would never know how close Nova had come in the past year to ending her "wild goose chase" as all her loved ones in L.A. wanted her to. She'd had no luck with the personals, want ads or the police, having gone so far as doing a rough sketch from her visions and posting it where and when she could.

All she had was a place and a face, each general at that. With so many people going missing and murdered around the city—around the *country*—it was easy enough for her guy to get lost in the shuffle. As small as the world was getting, New York was still a big piece of real estate and pretty ambiguous territory for one person to canvass, especially when searching for the face of a stranger in the crowd.

*Not just a face. So much more. It had to be, to make you come all this way with nothing but a hunch.*

Before her episode minutes ago, she'd begun to think her trip to the east coast a year too late, that her stranger had already met an untimely end, was perhaps even one of the thousands of World

Trade Center bombing victims. But her visions had increased, not decreased, since she'd been in New York, and now Nova *knew* he was close, could almost taste him.

How could she explain all this to Kaylee Dakota, a Texas farm girl more practical and down-to-earth than Nova's own disciplined father?

Josh, bearer of liquid heaven, parked his cart outside her door and pantomimed a question—did she want him to come in? Nova frantically motioned him forward.

"K, I have to go. The coffee cart's here."

"Haven't I taught you anything about putting that poison in your body?"

"I'll control my coffee addiction when you stop your Godiva addiction, guru."

"Okay, touché"

"Besides, I'm down to one-and-a-half cups a day. I'm being good."

"All right then," Kaylee said. "But I'll remember exactly where we left off. Count on it."

"Don't you have to be down at the Groove opening up?"

"I'll think of you while I'm ascending the granite, smartass."

"Rub it in." What she wouldn't do to be right there beside Kaylee, scaling boulders, swinging from crack to crack, feeling the adrenaline rush of weightlessness. Next to her morning runs and hot sex, it was the only other time she ever really felt free and at peace.

Nova thought twice about asking Kaylee to tell Matt hello, but in the end, she simply signed off with an "I love you." She hung up to Kaylee's "Ditto" and chuckles.

Rolling her chair from behind the desk, Nova stood to meet her savior. She smiled as Josh made his way across the thick wine-toned carpeting of her office. His obvious nervousness and crush were endearing. She couldn't count the times since she'd been at

Bornstein and Connor that she had gotten a lap full of half-and-half, milk, or cream cheese. She could tell the kid she didn't bite, tell him to calm down and think of her as one of the guys, but that would probably cause more trouble than it would cure.

"How ya doin', Ms. Foxx?"

"Hey, Josh." She watched with bated breath as he moved steadily towards her, careful of each step. Nova met him halfway hoping to avoid one of his famous calamities, but it wasn't to be.

He gave her her coffee—black no sugar—and she gave him his money. But then he mentioned the great weather and Nova responded with a crack about going to the beach or taking a long walk and having an ice cream cone.

The combination of imagining her in a bikini or licking the sweet cold confection must have short-circuited his muscles because Josh expectedly overturned several cups of coffee as he reached for his cart. When Nova automatically bent to help him retrieve and sop up the mess, they bumped heads.

At least it was a good excuse to hurry him out of her office so that she could plan her escape for an early and long lunch. She needed a break now more than ever, if not to clear her aching head, then to start making sense of her earlier vision and re-energize her search.

\* \* \* \*

"It'll be a cinch. Just snatch and run."

Ransom could barely hear the dare over his pounding heart, the prospect of doing something inherently antisocial, not to mention illegal, pumping him full of adrenaline.

He was really going to do it this time. Had to, no way not to and still save face. He thought the snatch part should be easy, the running part even easier. He was one of the fastest kids in his ninth

grade fitness class; the track coach wanted him to try out for the team.

"You up for it, Ran? Do this and you're officially in," Eddie said.

He liked the sounds of that. He wanted to be in.

Eddie was one of the cool kids, part of the "in" crew at school. Ran still couldn't believe they'd been willing to take him, the new and really young kid from the suburbs, under their wing. They weren't a gang—Uncle Zane would never have gone for that—but the kids in the clique were all at least two or three years older than he was, not much better in his uncle's book.

Not that Uncle Zane was happy about any of the kids he hung out with anyway. He was never too happy about much of anything that Ran did. Like now. This stunt would severely piss the guy off, which was probably part of the reason he was doing it. He kinda liked the idea of pissing off his uncle, except for the wrath-of-Zane part. He didn't know any kid who wanted to stand around and listen to an hour-long lecture about his choice of friends, or his taste in gear, or the messiness of his room, or how irresponsible he was, going through a generous allowance every week like water.

But all that stuff was small potatoes compared to some of the other stuff he'd been doing lately, to what they wanted him to do now. He had to do it though, no two ways. A dare was a dare, and he'd chickened out too many times before. Pretty soon, his friends would be thinking he was soft and wouldn't let him hang around with them anymore. Ransom couldn't have that.

His reputation was on the line.

"He won't do it. He's gonna punk out, just like last time."

Darryl always had something negative to say. He didn't think Ransom was worth the time or energy to even hang around with.

"No, he won't," Eddie said.

Ransom stopped himself short of hugging his homeboy. Eddie was cool like that, always standing up for him. He wasn't such a

bad guy, once you got past the hard rock, Mr. Cool exterior to know him. Out of all the crew—Darryl, Hector, and Jamie—Eddie was the one who could have been Ransom's friend in another place and time, the most like Kevin, his best friend since kindergarten. He didn't even want to think about Kevin now. After his mom had died, Ran had had to leave his friend behind when he moved from Newburgh to the city to live with his uncle.

"Sides, we got your back, Ran. No worries."

"Bet." Ran rubbed his hands together, searching the streets for a mark.

Broad daylight, lots of people out enjoying the warm weather. This wasn't going to be easy, but then that was the point.

He spotted her. Hot-looking shorty, all business in an above-the-knee charcoal skirt and matching jacket. Silky nude stockings encased shapely legs that curved up to round hips and a slim waist before finally exploding into nice, palm-size breasts.

Ran got hard—scary, and it had been happening a lot lately, and for no particular reason—but he didn't know if it was because the honey looked so hot or because of what he was planning to do to her.

He got to her eyes and thought wow, she looked like Tia Carrere in anime!

Darryl elbowed him in the ribs. "Yo, I see you scoping the business suit. Go for it. That's a nice bag. Should be a good payoff."

He guessed it was nice, didn't really know as much about these things as Darryl seemed to, just that the bag reminded him of one his mom had saved up for a really long time to treat herself one Christmas.

He needed to do this before he thought too much more on it. He really shouldn't have looked into her eyes—the windows of the soul, his mother always used to tell him—because they showed

him things, even at a brief glance, he was sure he didn't want to know.

"Get ready man, she's comin' closer," Darryl said. "We'll back you up."

Ransom drifted towards the honey on automatic pilot.

She had pep to her step, walking with a purpose as she talked into the mouthpiece of her headset. She slashed the air with her handheld, excitement and animation punctuating every gesture. Someone on the other end was getting an earful.

When she was a couple of yards away, Ran veered towards her, right hand out to swipe the bag, but she had the strap diagonally across her body—the dangerous, New York City way—and it caught around her neck.

Her Palm Pilot hit the concrete as she snared his wrist. "Why you *little...*"

Ransom tried to yank away his arm and the cone she had in her other hand went flying as she struggled with him. Rainbow sprinkles and vanilla ice cream splattered, showering them both as they scuffled.

Ransom heard his friends whooping behind him, cheering him on as he tried to jerk out of her grasp, and several onlookers gasped in horror.

Damn, she was strong and she wasn't giving up the bag. Freakin' Amazon. He jerked his arm again as hard as he could and his elbow struck her under the eye and caught in the wire of her headset. He pulled and the headset went flying off her head, crashing to the pavement like her handheld. His other hand was still wrapped tight around the purse strap.

"Just give up the bag, shorty!" His heart thundered in his ears. He hadn't realized it would be this hard. It always looked so smooth and easy in the movies.

Honey was mumbling and ranting about no-manners-having, baggy-clothes-wearing thugs violating people in broad daylight.

Sheesh, she was lecturing him before his uncle Zane could even get to him.

Ran grabbed the strap with both hands. One mighty yank, and she ducked her head to slide out of it. He thought she was giving it up, but she caught him by an arm as he tried to make a run for it, did some funky martial arts spin on him. Before he knew it, she had his arm twisted behind his back and his palm bent towards his elbow and was steering him to the cement facedown.

A crowd of passers-by gathered around them. Ran could no longer hear his friends whooping over the cheers of support and triumphant applauding.

And that was when the cops showed up, two alighting from a squad car at the nearest curb.

"Need any help, ma'am?"

He could hear the laughter in one of the cops' voices. He hadn't even noticed their approach, he'd been so intent on getting the hottie's bag. And obviously his friends *had* noticed, because they were all gone, scattered to the wind, nowhere to be found. They'd left him alone.

He should have been used to desertion by now.

## Chapter 2

"Thanks for meeting with me on such short notice, Mr. Youngblood."

"No problem." Zane stood and reached across his desk, shaking the young woman's outstretched hand. "I'll see you for next week's session?"

"Be there or be square."

Zane smiled as Manuela left, amazed by the child's resilience and sunny attitude. And despite being with child, she *was* just a child, a young girl who'd made some mistakes and had a lot of other baggage to deal with. Domestic violence, homelessness, and sexual abuse all ran rampant through her troubled history.

It had been a good session, productive, but Zane wasn't fooling himself. He still had a long way to go with Manuela. He felt positive about the outcome, however, knew deep down that he could help this girl. Maybe because she wanted so much to be helped. That was half the battle. It was a battle he wished he could wage at home half as successfully, but no matter what he said or did, it always seemed to be the wrong thing, always drove the wedge between Ransom and him deeper, pushing them apart rather than drawing them together.

He was a competent professional, clinically trained, experienced in substance and child abuse and other mental health issues, with all sorts of degrees and certificates under his belt to prove it. But when it came to dealing with his own flesh and blood, he was a complete novice. Why did he find it so easy to deal with other people's children and not his own nephew?

He didn't believe for a minute it was because he had no emotional investment at stake. Even after the years with Child and Adult Protective Services, when his recommendations routinely ripped a child from its mother's embrace or split up siblings, he still got choked up. He'd been a social worker with the New York City public school system for a couple of years now and he hadn't left behind the emotional roller coaster, or the pain of that other life. He was still bombarded daily with children in trouble—teen pregnancies, misbehavior in class, truancy, and child and substance abuse.

It unnerved him to know that his own nephew fell right into some of the same categories as Manuela and so many of the other high-risk teens he dealt with every day, and he was finding it

harder and harder to communicate with the kid. Shouting, of course, didn't work; it only made things worse. No matter the decibel level of his messages, everything he said seemed to go in one ear and out the other, so he tried to stay away from that route as much as possible. Time-out didn't work, and corporal punishment wasn't an option, not for Zane. He'd decided early on he'd never raise a hand to the boy—the kid had had enough of that from his father before Sage found the courage to give the no-good bastard the boot.

He'd tried everything to make the kid's adjustment a little smoother, everything short of conducting a séance and channeling Sage so that the boy could have one more moment with his dead mother. If he could have done that, though, he would have, and not just for Ransom's sake.

More than a year later, he still missed his sister; she'd been his other half, his better half. She'd saved his life. He couldn't have paid her back if he'd tried, but the mess he was making with Ran's life was a piss-poor effort if he'd ever seen one.

Zane took a deep breath and collapsed into his swivel chair. He pressed a thumb and finger to his burning eyes, knowing they were bloodshot from another sleepless night spent worrying about his next move with Ran. It was as if he were in a chess match with a master against whom he had no hopes of winning.

A shiver went up his spine when he leaned back and the chair squeaked under his 190-pound frame. He jerked up as if he'd sat on a tack someone had placed in the seat.

Zane felt it right away—rainbow colors of emotion bursting bright behind his eyes—fear, frustration, indignation, and fight-or-flight adrenaline spiking through his veins. Ever since Ransom was born, he'd had this link to the kid, had known when he was hurt, sick, tired, or in trouble. He didn't know if this was because he and the boy's mother were twins, with all the intimate connections this entailed, or if it was because he had been Sage's coach and one of

the first to hold Ran in the delivery room, forging his own bond with him. But he knew the connection existed.

Lately, however, it hadn't given him any insight into the teenager's troubled psyche.

And...it wasn't all Ran who Zane was feeling right now. There was another, her emotions red-hot and seething, merging with and overwhelming his nephew's until they were almost one.

*What the hell was happening to him?*

Zane leapt to his feet, breaking the connection. He staggered to his office's open window, leaned a forearm against the jamb and pulled in the warm Indian summer air.

He'd never been sucked into a link that strongly before. It was as if he was in Ransom's skin—feeling the boy's confusion and tension, grappling with a woman over something—not just an observer feeling some of his nephew's emotions.

And what was the boy doing outside the school at this time of day unless he was cutting classes...again?

*Damn it!*

Zane turned back to his office as the phone rang and reached for it with a heavy heart. After the recent spate of prank calls he'd been receiving at the school and at home—phantoms from his past position with CAPS resurfacing to haunt him—Zane didn't have a positive feeling about what or who was on the other end.

\* \* \* \*

Ransom sat alone in a musty room that was just this side of municipal-dreary, *NYPD Blue*-interrogation-room scary. Time-bitten wood furniture abounded—the table he sat at, the chairs surrounding it—all complemented by a soldierly row of scratched, dented, and mismatched metal filing cabinets.

The place could have been mistaken for a large storage room but for the five-by-five cell that dominated a corner of the decrepit wood floor.

Ran swallowed hard as he glanced at the steel monstrosity then looked away.

He'd done his dirt before, especially since his mom had passed and he'd moved to the city—five-finger discounts here, graffiti and other vandalism there, a little pot with his friends behind the school before first period. Nothing violent though, and definitely never a breach of conduct as bad as assault and battery.

It suddenly hit Ran that he was in serious trouble, more serious than he'd ever gotten into before. He'd never been arrested, never been "taken downtown." But of course, he'd never gotten caught at anything before today. He didn't know whether to resent or admire the Kung Fu Mama, whose resistance and skill had landed him in his current predicament. Snatch and run, that was all he had to do, and he'd messed that up as badly as his mother had messed up his life when she'd left him.

He missed his mom, was angry at her, too, for getting sick and checking out on him. Sometimes both emotions ran through him concurrently, so strong that he didn't know whether he was coming or going, so confusing that he didn't how he felt about her death.

Ran tried to take his example from Uncle Zane. Man had been strong about everything. Ransom didn't think he had seen his uncle shed a tear or heard him utter a complaint—not during the wake, the funeral, or the burial. Through it all, he'd been cool, going about the business of the day, selling their house, moving Ran down to the city and enrolling him in the school where he now worked. Everything was done with clockwork precision, so fast and easy it made Ransom's head spin now to think how much his life had changed in the last 365-plus days.

He wanted to be cool and unaffected like his uncle, but then again, not, because if he didn't cry for his mother, then who was he

supposed to cry for? Ransom wondered if anyone would miss him as much when he died. It wasn't like he was old and grown like his uncle, or had more than thirty years on earth, with so many friends and connections. It wasn't like he had a wife, or even a girlfriend.

Maybe his Uncle Zane would miss him, but Ransom seriously doubted it. Even his uncle wouldn't miss him, with the atrocious way he'd been behaving the last year.

Who would?

Ran put his head on the table, inhaled the moth-eaten smell of old wood, and cried for the first time since his mom died.

\* \* \* \*

A little more than a year in New York and Nova had become complacent, desensitized to all the dangers that living and working around the city entailed.

She hadn't noticed any of the things she usually did, oblivious to strangers who might have been watching her. She hadn't realized she'd been marked, dismissed, and followed several times over from the moment she'd crossed the street from her office building to walk the narrow caverns and cobblestone streets of lower Manhattan.

She'd been so positive and energetic leaving for lunch, too.

After the calamity with Josh and his cart, she'd gotten back to Mr. Nelson and smoothed his ruffled feathers before heading out of the office to her much-deserved ice cream treat. On the go, she'd taken her phone and headset to stay in touch with the office. She'd reached out to and counseled a couple of clients, then called the office and consulted with the financial analyst, assuring him she'd be back for her meeting no later than two-thirty that afternoon.

Her mind had been going a mile a minute, touching on different deals she needed to make and people she needed to see.

She'd been mildly aware of her surroundings and that she had strayed many blocks away from her office. She usually only had time to run downstairs to the cafeteria to grab a bite, if she wasn't out with a client on a business lunch.

Nova had only vaguely noticed the band of boys several yards away, leaning against the wall of a nearby building. She hadn't given them much thought, other than "typical urban teens," before that one kid broke from the pack and made his way over to her.

She'd experienced a flash of recognition when his fingers brushed her shoulder, the psychedelic images from the brief contact assaulting her vision so powerfully that she'd had to close her eyes against the overwhelming onslaught of memories and sensations.

A lifetime of her father's insistent military physical training and self-defense classes had kicked into gear and she'd pinned the boy to the pavement without conscious intent; it was only after the struggle was over that she considered the danger she'd put herself in. Jeesh, she could have gotten killed. She realized that now, when the small bruise beneath her eye spasmed as if to remind her of her stupidity.

Thing was, she didn't think the kid meant to hurt her. She'd felt his panic when she resisted, knew he'd expected her to be an easier target. He wouldn't have picked her otherwise.

That didn't excuse his uncouth behavior, and she couldn't wait to have a word with his parents, just to give them a piece of her mind. Nova doubted that it would do much good, doubted that his spending the last hour at the police station had taught him a lesson.

The time she'd spent here, however, had taught her more than she ever wanted to know about this cog in the criminal justice wheel. Big-city chaos reigned, with phones ringing off the hook, officers bustling in and out with perpetrators, and typewriters whirring a mile a minute. She would have been more unnerved if she weren't used to all the excitement. On a good day, her job

rivalled this precinct decibel for decibel, especially when sales activity increased and the pace got very hectic.

Nova wondered how her perp was faring. It was difficult to think of him that way when she knew that, despite his height topping her five-eight by at least an inch, that he probably wasn't much more than thirteen. There was something so lanky and awkward about his movements, as if he wasn't comfortable in his own skin or was still adjusting to the growth spurts typical of early adolescence. He looked like he would break things with his childlike ungainliness.

*And one of those things was almost you!*

His youth certainly didn't negate the seriousness of his transgression, and she had a serious bone to pick with him about her PDA and headset. The cell and headset alone ran a little more than half a grand, and either he or his parents *were* going to reimburse her for them. Not that monetary compensation could, in any way, shape or form, salve the wound to her person, which was minimal when compared to that of her ego.

She gingerly rubbed the cheekbone under her left eye, still smarting more from the fact that she'd let her guard down, something she didn't do often, than from actual pain.

"Here ya go, ma'am."

Nova looked up at the uniformed officer as he held out a plastic baggie packed with several ice cubes.

"It'll help," he said when she didn't respond.

"Thank you." She took his offering and immediately plopped the baggie on her cheekbone. The cold did help, soothing the pain and slowing the throb to a dull tingle. Nova caught one of the officer's hands before he could leave, prepared to ask if the kid's parents had arrived, but was electrified with a sudden flash of familiarity at the brief contact.

She'd seen him before, and in this very police station!

"Ma'am?" He frowned down at her.

Nova stopped gaping long enough to return his look. She swallowed hard, tried to hide her confusion. She'd almost blurted out her realization, and that would never have done. She couldn't let the men in white coats take her away now, when she was so close to meeting *him*.

Curious, she moved the homemade ice pack away from her face and searched the floor for the auburn-haired detective. When she found him shaking hands with someone near the entrance, the ice pack slid from her grasp and dropped to the floor.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, officer." She was more than fine now, for making his way across the crowded floor, right behind the auburn-haired detective, was the stranger from her visions.

**ADULT EXCERPT**  
**BETWEEN DARKNESS**  
**AND DAYLIGHT**

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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Zane gasped as she encircled his semi-erect penis and thumbed the pearl of pre-come gathered at the head. He caught her around the shoulders and set her back a little before she could sink to her knees. “Not this time.”

She frowned at him as he guided her back against the tile wall and sank to *his* knees in front of her.

Nova held up the condom she had in her hand. “But I brought this.”

“That’s good. We’ll use it in a few. But right now, I’ve got some unfinished business to take care of with you, Ms. Foxx...” He took a deep breath to appreciate the musky-sweet scent of her, spicy vanilla and woman mixed together to create a refreshing concoction. He lowered his face to her cunt. “Spread your legs for me, baby.”

She did, bracing herself against the wall as he opened her with his thumbs and licked her slit slowly, experimentally, finally savoring the taste of her, finally savoring the texture of her moist folds before he slid a finger inside her.

“Oh, yesss,” she hissed, fisting her hands in his damp hair and hooking a leg over his shoulder to give him better access.

Zane took full advantage, pumping his finger before he joined it with another and scissored them, brushing and teasing her inner

walls. He closed his mouth over her swollen clit and sucked, matching the furious rhythm he set with his fingers to the one Nova set with her bucking hips.

She moaned, gyrating and writhing against his mouth until Zane plunged his tongue into her pussy and stroked inside her, fully intending to find out just how many licks it would take to get to the center of her.

Nova suddenly stiffened, then trembled and came apart around him, curving her leg around his neck to bring him closer. Her hot juices gushed into his mouth as she keened and he caught her hips and held her close, absorbing her pleasure and holding on until her vibrations subsided.

Zane stood and pressed himself against her, taunting her opening with the head of his stiff, aching cock. He bent his head to nibble her earlobe, licked his way down the side of her throat then back again to circle the outer shell of her ear. "Last time I didn't get to enjoy you like I should have. Like I wanted to."

Quivering in his embrace, she opened her eyes, her expression dazed and drugged as she watched him "You didn't?"

"Nowhere near." He slid the condom out of her listless fingers, tore into the packet with his teeth and one hand, staring at her the entire time. His dick jerked and throbbed when Nova slowly licked her lips and returned his look with a heated one of her own.

She reached for his hand. "Let me." She took the condom and proceeded to roll it down over his jutting shaft to the base, holding him a moment longer than was necessary, loving him with her hand, pumping up and down before massaging the head of his cock with her thumb again. "I don't think I enjoyed you the way I should have either."

"It was too fast."

"Way too fast. We'll take it slow this time."

He nodded his agreement, and he had every intention of keeping that unspoken promise until he slid halfway into her and

felt her vaginal muscles tighten around him. It took everything in him not to move, to just enjoy the sensation of her clutching him, gloving his shaft in her warm woman's sheath. He pressed his forehead against hers and took a deep breath. "Don't move."

"I won't." But her hands came up behind him anyway to grip his shoulders, her fingers digging into him, expressing desperate need that mirrored his.

"God, Nova, you make me so hot and wild. I just want to take you hard and fast whenever I'm inside you. It isn't like me."

"It isn't like me either. I've been like this since I first saw y— since I met you."

He pulled back to look at her, searching her face and finding the truth, that they were irrevocably linked, afraid of where this was taking them but willing to go with the flow anyway.

She cupped his face with one hand. "I'll take hard and fast. I'll take slow and easy. I'll take you any way I can get you."

Hearing his own reckless thoughts said out loud made his heart throb in concert with his cock, reminded him of how deep he wanted to bury himself inside her.

Zane circled his hips, caressing just inside her opening with several quick, shallow thrusts, taunting them both before he drove deep and held still again.

She hooked a leg around his hip as her canal opened to accommodate his length and width and panted when he lifted her, pinning her to the slippery tile wall.

Nova moved first, bucking her hips against him and urging him to reciprocate. He followed her lead, twisting his hips, alternating between slow deep plunges and fast slight caresses, balls contracting right before he pistoned his hips in earnest.

She pulled his head forward for a kiss and he slipped his tongue into her mouth, tangling it with hers as he lowered his hands to her ass and pressed her flush against him. The shudders started again, inside and out, her pussy muscles squeezing tight

around him, the increasing pressure signaling her approaching orgasm. She cried out as she nuzzled his neck and gently sunk her teeth into the skin bridging his shoulder and neck.

Zane shivered, her bite and climax inciting his release. He came inside her, rasping her name over and over again until the torrent abated. Breathless, they clung to each other beneath the shower's warm spray, their tremors slowly fading as they exchanged gratitude and sorrow through touches and looks.

"What did I do to deserve you in my life, Nova?"

"Nothing at all, except be." She smiled, drawing away from him with a resounding sucking sound as his flaccid penis slid out of her. She pulled the curtain back, as if her work with him was done.

"I'm going to get dressed and meet you in the living room. I don't want Ransom to come in and catch us both in the shower if I can help it."

"Okay."

Zane watched her go; he was bereft and satiated, lost and found, and until he held her in his arms again, he didn't think he'd ever be whole.

He lathered up with the soap again and rinsed off as fast as he could, eager to be with her again but trying to take his time and let her get dressed. Turning off the shower, he stepped out and wrapped a towel low on his hips, then drew up short in the master bedroom when he noticed Nova standing at his bureau. He smiled. "Hey you."

She started, turning quickly, hands behind her back. "Don't mind me. I just forgot something from my portfolio."

Zane smiled at the term. The thing was more like a bible and she carried it with her everywhere. "What are you hiding behind your back, lady?" he teased, meaning it as a joke, but he totally lost his levity when he saw the nervous look in Nova's eyes. Like she'd been caught with her hand in the cashbox. He crossed the room as

lightly as possible, stopping short an inch away from her, and smiled down at her. "Show me what you've got there."

"It's nothing."

"I don't believe you."

"C'mon, Zane. You're making me nervous."

"That makes two of us." *You and she aren't out of the woods yet.*

Playfully covering her body with his, he reached behind her with both hands. He was truly surprised when she resisted strongly and balled up a piece of paper in her hands. "Something, you don't want me to see?" He slipped a finger into her fist and managed to get a hold of the paper with two fingers.

"Zane, don't..."

He slid the paper out of her hands, realizing she'd let him when it didn't rip in his fingers. "Now, let's see what we have here."

He felt her staring, standing anxiously in front of him as he sat on the foot of his bed and unfolded the paper. The thing that struck him first was his own features staring back at him. Next he noticed the well-worn creases, as if the paper had been folded and unfolded, taken out to display and then put away for safekeeping too many times to count, like a favorite photograph of a baby in a wallet. Then there was the scariest part of all, the date, carefully engraved on the bottom of the sketch, the impossibility of it striking Zane at the same instant he realized Nova had captured his likeness before she'd ever met him.

The sketch was so accurate it was uncanny, as if he'd posed for it but had forgotten. He could have been staring into a mirror, one that showed him as he looked a few years ago—slightly longer hair, light beard and mustache—instead of the fairly clean-cut guy he was now.

Zane glanced up and saw Nova wringing her hands, and her anxiety and confusion began to suffuse him.

"I was going to tell you."

"Tell me what?" He still didn't understand what the picture meant. Or maybe he didn't want to understand. That she was what, a stalker? That she had known about him for years, examining him and his life from afar when he wasn't aware, lying in wait before making contact? Or that Leary's suspicions had been on point and Nova was some sort of serial killer?

He didn't know which scenario was scarier. He swallowed hard before whispering, "Why?"

## ***REVIEWS for Between Darkness and Daylight***

**4 Hearts:** “After a near fatal climbing accident Nova Foxx begins having visions. Following these visions she relocates her home and job to another city in hopes of saving a man’s life. The man in her visions is Zane Youngblood a high school social worker who is has also been left in charge of raising his teenage nephew. It is because of an altercation with Zane’s nephew that Nova and Zane meet. There is instant chemistry between the two. The two soon hook up and become intimate. Nova is afraid to tell Zane about the visions for fear of his reaction. In the meantime she tries to protect him from the evil that stalks him.

*Between Darkness and Daylight* is an exciting and highly suspenseful romance. Three very compelling characters draw the readers into their lives as they meet and fall in love. A frighteningly insane stalker bent on evil wants to end their happiness. Readers will be glued to their chairs waiting the time when he makes his move. The tension is constantly building as the readers are allowed inside the mind of the stalker and see what he does and how he manipulates those around him. Readers will not be able to put this one down until they know how it will all end.

Nova is a woman that is manipulated by her visions into giving up everything she has to save a man’s life. For someone that hates the supernatural she embraces what she must to protect him. She wins readers admirations with her many strengths and courage.

Zane is a man that has suffered much heartache in life. He has a lot of responsibilities that he tries the best he can to fulfill. This includes raising his troubled nephew. He needs someone he can rely on and a break from the stress in is life. Nova can provide this for him if he gives her a chance. He is very hard headed and has difficulty trusting for very good reasons. He makes the readers care

for him and pray that there is a happy ending in the future for these three characters.

The romance from the very beginning is steaming. Nova has spent time imagining what Zane would be like before she ever meets him. She is already in lust before they ever meet. The two characters almost combust from the heat of desire when they do meet. Readers will find that when these two finally come together it is with a desperation that leaves the hearts racing.

*Between Darkness and Daylight* is a wonderfully creative paranormal suspense. Readers that enjoy the supernatural including psychics will be fascinated by this story of a psychic on a mission. They will love the surprises in the end. I encourage readers to look for this story for its frightening suspense and its passionate romance. *Between Darkness and Daylight* by Gracie C. McKeever is a love story that offers something for everyone's enjoyment." —  
**Anita, *The Romance Studio***



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