

EXOTIKA

ELLORA'S CAVE

Eight Days
Ablaze

ANGELIA
SPARROW

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Eight Days Ablaze

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EIGHT DAYS ABLAZE

Angelia Sparrow

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Chapter One

2045

Adina barJonas loved Hanukkah. December was nothing but cold weather, ice storms and chilly rain, but she loved the holidays with the lights, presents and comfort food. She didn't even mind that Christmas dominated the stores. Any holiday in any religion was just an excuse to see family, overeat and spend too much.

The UPS box she balanced on her hip as she opened the apartment door only emphasized the last point. She set her briefcase down—the Linzer inheritance case could wait a while—and placed the box on the teak coffee table while she decompressed from work.

She brushed aside the beaded curtain that separated her bedroom from the rest of the apartment. She'd done the place in the style of an opium den or vintage hippie pad from the middle twentieth century, full of gold-tassled red velvet furniture and floor cushions around low tables. Candles and incense burners filled the apartment with fragrant smoke when it suited her. There were no black-light posters. They didn't fit the more upscale image she projected as a junior partner in Brinkley, Samudrala, Wallace and Nguyen.

Adina moved slowly, drawing out the anticipation. She stepped out of her heels and hung them in their place on the shoe rack before peeling off the silk stockings and rinsing them. She itched to open the box.

"Delayed gratification is the hallmark of a mature personality," she heard her father say in her head. She continued her evening ritual, trying very hard to be mature.

Her dark designer suit and silk blouse went into the closet, replaced by soft cotton. The current Indian fashion made the yoke of the tunic sparkle with beads and little

mirrors. She dug her bare toes into the thick Persian carpet her father had given her when she graduated from law school.

She scooted back into the front room and stopped herself just as she reached for the letter-opener. Now she had to make herself wait even longer for the present because she'd been too eager. Although she was in regular contact with her father and uncle, she had little enough other social life that even a present and not just a call felt like an event. She sat a minute with her hands in her lap, then went to the kitchen for her usual cup of coffee.

The same disquiet that had been growing within her for the last six months seized her as she made coffee. She did her best not to hurry as she got the beans from the freezer, ground them twice and made a single cup. She sat on the sofa and sipped her coffee, staring at the box, her fingers twitching now and then toward the letter opener. There was no name and the return address on the box was a post office box in New York. It could be from no one but her father. Papa's gifts were always expensive, always too much. She loved it.

Adina sipped more coffee, drawing out the suspense. Since making junior partner at the firm, she no longer worked the ninety to hundred-twenty hour weeks that had consumed her since high school. She had turned thirty last month. The thought occurred to her more and more frequently of late that she had no friends outside the office and no life beyond work. There were too many hours now that she had no idea how to fill. Bars and clubs bored her.

She wanted a lover or a husband, someone to come home to, tell about the cases and just be a warm presence in her little flat. She didn't know where to start looking.

Her eyes drifted back to the gift. Papa had very set ideas on who would be an appropriate husband. While Adina could recite the list from memory, her priorities weren't her father's. She wasn't sure what hers were. She loved her Papa dearly, even if he did have a tendency to be very overwhelming, presence and presents alike. She took the coffee cup to the kitchen and washed it slowly.

Of course, Papa could afford expensive presents. He had once been the highest-paid sex worker in the world. Even middle aged, he still remained in the top five. He traveled in style from Rome to London to New York at the behest of wealthy women and men. He had always supplemented his income with thievery, more as the years wore on and his long jet curls began to show the first gray. He had money to burn and never hesitated to lavish it on his only child, regardless of her determination to make it on her own.

Unable to stand any more anticipation, Adina slit the tape with the tiny, jewel-hilted dagger that he'd sent her from Turkey. Carefully, she opened the flaps and shoved the packing aside. The card was blue and white and showed a menorah done in the ancient style. She opened the card before digging further into the packing.

Her father's beautiful handwriting, almost more calligraphy than script, read, *Happy Hanukkah, Princess. I thought the best lawyer in the family could use this to argue down the best lawyers ever. Love, Papa.*

She swept the packing away and pulled out a simple black cardboard box. *VirtualClone*, the white block letters proclaimed. *A completely integrated sensory experience.* No endorsements, no hyperbole, no exclamation marks marred the box, just the clean, simple lettering.

Adina felt her stomach lurch. She'd coveted one of these since she'd seen the first advertisement. Her father, with his usual sense of occasion, had placed a "Do not open until Hanukkah" sticker on the flap, right over the factory seal.

The holiday itself was five days away. Adina slit the sticker with one short, impeccable scarlet thumbnail and opened the box anyway.

She took out the *VirtualClone* generator, a hard plastic case the size of two personal data readers and as tall as her palm, then set it on the table. The instruction manual was small and simple.

VirtualClone offers the first totally integrated sensory experience and is a breakthrough in personal holographic entertainment technology. Before using, please consult your medical

provider. To begin use, simply activate the power switch, place the wireless contact sensors on your temples and think of the experience you wish to have.

There was more, all about how VirtualClone created the experience by drawing on its programming, the internet, planetary databanks and the subject's own memories. She skimmed, noting only the failsafe feature. VirtualClone reset itself after three hours. It would cease all programming and take an hour to recharge.

She activated the power switch and attached the sensors to her temples. There was no discomfort, but reality seemed to shimmer for a minute and then Mr. Wallace stood in front of her, scowling.

"Jonas!" he snapped, deliberately truncating her surname. "Why isn't the Linzer case done? I want it on my desk in ten minutes!"

Adina scrambled for the electrodes. No, there would be no arguing with the crusty old senior partner. She breathed hard, her adrenaline rushing almost as if she'd actually been called into Wallace's office. She tucked the VirtualClone back in its box and started the rest of her evening routine of dinner, bath and more work.

She felt a warm streak of pain on one temple and saw blood on her face in the mirror above the mantle. She must have scratched herself in her haste to remove the electrodes. It was barely enough to make a few drops of blood well up. She wiped them away and thought no more of it.

In Adina's bloodstream, the first of the nanobots uncurled and sent the activation signal to the others.

The next day, she locked her door carefully and flopped on the couch without the usual changing ritual. She'd come home in high dudgeon, vowing to research harassment policies. She flipped her computer open and growled. That arrogant sexist...brat! It was the only word for the clerk she shared with two of the other junior partners. He was cute and he knew it. He seemed to consider all the female members of

the firm – at least those below the rank of Ms. Brinkley herself – to be part of his private hunting preserve.

That afternoon, he'd delivered Adina's files, then sat on her desk, invading her personal space, and flirted until she had thrown him out of the office. She'd warned him half a dozen times before about flirting and teasing. His behavior was inappropriate and she knew he wouldn't act so if she were male. The scene had been an ugly coda to an otherwise pleasant Thursday. It left her forehead burning and her teeth gritted. She found the policies and began printing the forms.

She closed the computer and her eye fell on the clone box. An attitude adjustment for nasty little Sean would be the perfect tonic to soothe her temper so she could fill out the paperwork dispassionately. She attached the sensors to her temples and thought of Sean.

"What do you need, doll?" He stood in front of her, his tie still knotted impeccably, in a suit she knew he couldn't actually afford. His green eyes held mischief and his perpetual half-smirk taunted her.

She looked him over and laughed. Sean checked himself for stains or an unzipped fly. Just like the real one, down to hating to be laughed at and the archaic use of *doll*. No man had called a real woman that for decades.

"Start by cleaning my shoes. All of them." She imagined up an old-fashioned shoeshine kit for him.

He waggled his eyebrows. "Lovable, humble shoeshine boy at your service." He dropped to his knees and lifted her foot to the pedestal of the shoeshine kit, taking the opportunity to run his fingers over her ankle.

Adina sat back to watch. Sean rubbed the red leather boot with a soft cloth then took out the red polish from the kit. He got some on the cloth, dipped it in a small cup of water and began making little circles on the toe of the boot.

As he made swirls of polish and the shine started coming through, Sean licked her ankle, glancing up her skirt as he did. His cloth followed his tongue, getting the gloss to show there.

She smirked, knowing he would do exactly that and spread her thighs so he could get a good look at the black silk thong she wore. He licked her boots again, more lingering this time, and polished absently, his breathing deeper. She wondered briefly if the polish was good for him, then reminded herself he was just a hologram.

When he nuzzled her knees, she shivered a little. Getting control of herself, Adina planted her foot in his chest and shoved him away lightly.

“Just the shoes, clerk.”

He licked once behind her knees and then resumed his unique spit-shining of her boots. She breathed shallowly, enjoying his humiliation more than she had expected. Every so often, he nuzzled her knees. She parted her legs a little more so he could have a better look.

It was not meant as an invitation, but he took it as one. He leaned in and ran his tongue in a long warm stripe up her inner thigh. His hands never stilled with the polishing cloth.

She pushed him back down with her boot again. “Just the shoes.”

Sean gave her his crooked smile. “You’re no fun.” He kissed her knees again. “Bet I could warm you up.”

Adina pointed to the closet. “There are forty-seven pairs of shoes in there. Get away from me and get to work.”

“Like hell.”

“Fuck them if you want to, but not me.” She sat back to watch, crossing her legs to make her skirt ride up.

“I’m no pervert. Shoes.” He screwed up his face in revulsion.

“Says the boy who got hard licking my boots.” She planted her foot on his very obvious erection and pressed it back against his pelvic bone. He moaned and thrust against her foot. She laughed and shoved him away, taking care to dig her heel into his balls.

“Got hard licking you, darlin’,” he said as he picked up the first pair, black four-inch pumps. He polished them fast and well and moved on to the next pair of black shoes in the line.

“Do a good job or you’ll do them all again. With your tongue, the second time.” She laughed again when he made a disgusted face. He kept working. Adina just watched, enjoying herself.

It took him two hours to finish. Adina knew he wouldn’t do all forty-seven pairs. She had several pairs of satin and brocade shoes and some suede. But she watched him through it all as he worked and grumbled and swore.

Sean looked up, an oddly endearing smudge of polish on his cheek. “So now what?”

Adina, still feeling a little out of her element with her new toy, looked him over again. “Make me dinner?”

Sean went down on his knees between her legs. He licked all the way from her calves to the lace edge of her underwear. His tongue sent shimmering sparks through Adina. He took a deep breath as he reached the top, taking in her scent.

“Rather eat you instead, doll.”

Her hands twitched toward the contacts, but then he licked her again. She took her hands away. His tongue stroked her through the silk of her thong, drawing a soft gasp from her. He sucked at her, small sighs of pleasure coming from him. She moaned when he drew her clit into his mouth.

Sean slid the narrow crotch of the panties aside and ran one light finger over her folds. Adina’s breath hitched. Then it was warm, wet tongue on hot, wet skin. Adina

shuddered and pushed him away, unprepared for the lightning bolts of desire that sparked through her.

“No,” she gasped, yanking the contacts off her temples. Sean vanished. Adina sat and shivered for five minutes before getting up, changing and having dinner. She argued with herself clear through the meal. It had been wrong to clone someone she knew. She’d never be able to face him tomorrow.

She spent Friday evening at the temple and then puttered away the weekend, trying to avoid the box yet being constantly drawn back to it. “Not until Hanukkah,” she whispered every time she found her hand on the case.

On Sunday evening, when the first stars appeared, she lit the first candle in the small menorah, mumbling her way through the Hebrew prayers that accompanied the evening and the ones that blessed the candles. After the light had burned the required half an hour, she extinguished it and went on about her evening.

First a simple dinner, then a bath. Then she found herself back on the sofa, staring at the VirtualClone and wondering if she was up for another “fully integrated sensory experience”. After ducking Sean twice Friday morning, she’d already decided that she wouldn’t use any more real people whom she had to work with. By Friday afternoon, she’d just faced him. When he did the usual undressing-her-with-his-eyes routine, she simply put her nose in the air and looked smug, remembering how the cloned Sean had licked her boots.

No, perhaps someone long dead. Sensual, yes, but not someone she’d have to see at work. She set the contacts and thought.

The woman in front of her made her smile. Long, slightly frizzy brown hair escaped the colorful scarf to tangle in the multitude of beads. The bracelets and big glasses were simply iconic above the trademark smile. Janis Joplin set the bottle of Jack Daniel’s on the table and looked around.

She smiled as she saw Adina. “Nice pad.” Her unmistakable rasp sent chills over the lawyer as she added, “And aren’t you cute?”

Adina got up and grabbed a couple of glasses from the bar to pour them both shots of the whiskey. She'd had the famous nude poster of Joplin in nothing but her hair and beads and spent many pleasurable nights as an undergrad unwinding beneath it.

She turned back to find Janis sprawled on the sofa. Her velvet pants stopped just short of the bare feet she'd propped on the coffee table. "You're amazing," Adina responded.

"Nice to know someone thinks so. My manager's on my ass about how much I drink, the roadies are about to revolt because he never pays them." She straight-armed the shot and took a second straight from the bottle.

Adina sipped at hers and curled up with her feet under her. Her dark eyes were full of mischief. "Can I ask you a lot of questions?" she asked.

Janis grinned back. "Baby, you can do anything you want."

Adina took another drink. There were a million things she wanted to ask this woman, this icon that she had been enthralled with since her adolescence, despite Joplin having died fifty years before she was born. Slowly the words came, and then more questions, a seemingly endless stream. Janis gave easy answers and drank and smoked and smiled at Adina, leaving her flushed from more than the booze.

"Whiskey?" Adina noticed that Janis' bottle was empty.

Janis grinned. "Thought you'd never offer." She drank off about a third of the contents of the bottle Adina handed her.

They lay together at opposite ends of the red velvet sofa. Adina's fingers yearned to twine in Janis's frizzy hair. Janis' voice, rough and sweet, resonated on Adina's skin. Janis told her of touring with Big Brother and the Holding Company, of the pricks at Columbia. She told about the time the Full Tilt Boogie Band had gotten stranded. Adina heard the stories and decided she could lie here forever, listening to Janis's raspy voice, sung to tatters in smoky blues clubs. Sometimes, she wasn't sure if the stories were even being told so much as being pumped directly into her dreams.

Adina shook herself awake and blinked as the slow drone stopped. She found herself alone on the sofa. Almost regretfully, she removed the sensors. She wandered back to her bedroom, and promised herself she'd find that old poster. As she did, she wished she had taken at least one kiss.

The nanobots that David barJonas had programmed at his brother's request continued their work among Adina's blood cells and organs.

Chapter Two

The next night, she lit the candles and found herself staring at the box again. What now? Surely Papa hadn't sent it as a mere toy. But after a hard twelve-hour day of case law and subpoenas, she certainly didn't feel like arguing with Clarence Darrow or even Portia. All she wanted was to relax, have a glass of wine and maybe a couple of orgasms and enjoy herself.

What she most certainly didn't feel like doing was a repeat of last night. Joplin had been amazing and she didn't want to tarnish the memory. She finished her dinner of salad and kelp-protein. Maybe just watching tonight. Yes, that would be perfect.

She sat before the box and thought of legendary lovers. Romeo and Juliet were children, unlikely to be terribly entertaining. Lancelot and Guinevere, but no, they were adulterers. That same flaw haunted so many famous couples like Caesar and Cleopatra, Tristan and Isolde, David and Bathsheba. Finally she thought of Cupid and Psyche. Yes, that would be perfect. A happy ending and wings to boot. She loved winged men.

She settled the sensors on her temples and thought of the ancient myth. Cupid, his white wings drooping, his blond curls dull, sat brooding in the sunlit garden, myrtle trees sacred to his mother all around him. The lovely dark-haired woman—her chiton bedraggled, her face careworn and tired, her brown hair in greasy tendrils around her face—entered the scene.

Cupid turned to face Psyche and glowed. His smile spread into a golden aura that enveloped his whole body. When he reached out one perfect finger, the glow spread over Psyche, mending her clothing, washing away the pain and exhaustion in her face and returning her to the radiance of her wedding day.

Adina watched, her heart yearning for someone to love her so much.

Cupid drew his long-lost wife to him. Psyche tipped her face up and welcomed his kiss, clinging to his neck and opening for his tongue as the embrace grew tighter and the glow became more intense. With a slow stroke of his wings, Cupid lifted them off the ground. They hovered, rotating slowly in mid air as his tunic and her chiton fell away. Their bodies were marble in the sunlight, perfect classical statues, as they kissed. One of his thighs slid between hers, supporting her and giving her something to rub against.

Cupid's strong hand ran over the curves of Psyche's back, her shoulder blades, her waist, her buttocks, and then up the curve of her belly to caress her breast. He lowered his mouth to the pale pink tip and flicked his tongue over it to her gasps of pleasure. Her fingers tangled in his blond curls and she rode his leg, climaxing with a shudder.

He returned to her mouth for a kiss, and tipped her hips forward to meet his divine cock. She sighed as he took her, draping one shapely leg over his hip to draw him in deeper.

Adina watched the love-god and his wife, making love in mid air. Her own fingers slipped under the silk of her sodden panties. A single light stroke had her arching and crying soundlessly to the ceiling. Then, she simply watched, her fingers mimicking Cupid's shaft as he thrust into his wife. The couple made love with many moans and sweet words.

After Adina's third orgasm, they changed position. Psyche lay on her back on a silk-covered bed and Cupid hovered above her, touching her with the barest graze of wing-tip or lips or fingers. She writhed under this, begging for more. Adina followed them, her fingers touching where Cupid's did. She wanted the wings or the lips of such a lover on her body.

Finally, Psyche rolled onto her hands and knees, in the way the Greeks had favored. Cupid took her from behind, his hands on her delicate waist. Exhausted, Adina pulled off the sensors and returned the couple to mists of mythology.

She took a long, warm shower, smiling. So sweet. She wanted a man like Cupid. She wondered if she could turn the simulacrum of Sean into that. But, no, she wanted the real thing, a real man and not a hologram. She had no idea how to find one like that. She smiled up at the poster of Joplin on her ceiling and blew the Blues Lady a kiss, before drifting off in the arms of Morpheus. Papa's presents were always wonderful.

Tuesday, Adina came home late. She'd been out for drinks and dinner with a client and the senior partners. She hated eating out. More, she hated eating in front of people. Papa had been an excruciating perfectionist about table manners and she was still terribly self-conscious. Drinks were no fun when she could only have one well-diluted vodka tonic to keep herself professional and alert.

She kicked off her shoes, peeled out of her suit and blouse, dropping them over the chair to go to the cleaners. She slipped out of her silk thigh-high stockings, the silk thong and the satin bra, zipping them into the lingerie bag that hung on the back of the bathroom door.

She skipped the candles tonight and plugged straight into the box. Her chosen lover was the Italian bouncer she'd seen that night, tall, dark and absolutely gorgeous, with black hair that rippled and curled down his back. She'd wanted him the second she saw him, but sex with a stranger was too risky. The room shimmered a little and he stood in front of her with a sexy grin, wearing only a pair of very tight leather pants.

Goy, she thought as she glanced at his package, which bulged ominously large. Then there was no time for thought. Full hot lips pressed hers, and his tongue demanded entrance. She opened to him, and he took her, the ravishing of her mouth a promise for her body.

His large, strong hands groped over her with no finesse, their very roughness arousing. She pressed into them when he squeezed her breasts and then gripped her ass. Two fingers rubbed along her cleft before plunging into her.

She cried out a little at the thickness of his fingers and then rocked against the broad palm of his hand. "More," she demanded.

He laughed, a low rumble that was almost menacing, and added a third finger. "Slut," he said. "You like my hand in your cunt so much, you'll love my cock."

She gave a small gasp as he vacated her and yanked open his leather pants. She stared at the monster he'd unleashed for long seconds, then she felt his hand on her shoulder, pressing her down. It was gentle now, but she had no doubt he'd shove her to her knees if she hesitated too long.

She sank to her knees and felt the thick fingers, still damp with her own juices, dig into her hair and muss her tight chignon. The hairpins made little "plinks" on the hardwood floor. She licked the head of his cock, unable to believe she'd get it in her mouth.

"Suck it, slut. Little whore that takes strange bouncers home." He pulled her forward and she opened for his cock. The head made it past her teeth, and then part of the length. She gagged on it and wrapped both hands around his shaft.

She slurped and licked, sucking just at the head. She remembered the Kama Sutra calling this "sucking the mango fruit." It was all she could manage, deep-throating being out of the question since she was not a professional sword-swallower. She got two fingers wet with her spit and let go of him with that hand. Adina weighed his large balls in her hand and stroked his perineum as she moved back. She pressed the wet fingers to his opening, feeling the way it clenched.

He pulled her up by her hair and kissed her hard again. She almost whimpered under the harsh mouth and brutal hands. She brought her own hands up, buried them in his hair and yanked him to her for another kiss. She took control of this one, biting at his lips, thrusting hard with her own tongue, invading him for a change.

"Yeah," he grinned, shoving her toward the bedroom with a swat on her bottom. "Gonna fuck you so deep you'll taste it when I come."

"Ride you like my personal pony. Grind you raw and then fuck your ass with a strap-on," she growled back.

He laughed again and spread out obligingly on her bed. Adina swung one leg over him and knelt over the enormous cock, letting her nether-lips just barely kiss the head. He grabbed her hips and tried to shove her onto his cock, but she retaliated by kneeling straight up.

When he let go of her, she tipped his cock up to the vertical from where it lay along his stomach and slowly slid down it, squeezing at every inch and letting him feel each contraction of the strong muscles.

“So good,” she gasped. “So big. Fuck me with your big cock.” The last was snarled as she plunged down to bite at his throat as she came, hard enough to force him from her body.

“Little fucking slut,” he moaned, and flipped her onto her back beneath him. She rose to meet him as he slammed in, the size of him taking her breath away. He pounded until she wasn’t sure if the sparks were outside her eyes or inside her head. She screamed with each orgasm until she could do no more than lie limp beneath him and moan as he sparked another peak.

She found her voice again when his thick fingers slipped between their bodies and closed on her clit. He rolled the over-sensitive bit of flesh between hard digits and drew another scream of climax from her. He grinned, nipped her throat and resumed pounding.

She’d drenched the bedspread and him and herself to her knees. He didn’t stop as she gasped for air, the violence of the encounter making her forget to breathe. Finally, he yanked out and held his cock over her face. She licked the underside of the head and then sucked it in when she saw his balls tighten against his body.

She pulled the sensors before he came. She’d had her orgasms. There was no reason to swallow anything she didn’t want just to make a hologram happy. She curled up on her side, smiling and a little sore, her entire body limp. Now that had been a fully integrated sensory experience worthy of the name. She was asleep between one ragged breath and the next.

Chapter Three

Throughout the workday on Wednesday, Adina kept stealing glances at Sean, noticing how he moved, what his nervous tics were. She even listened to how he laughed when Alicia the secretary told him a joke. He was really very cute, she realized.

That night, after the candles and dinner, she changed into a satin robe, then sat and eyed the box. This was stupid. She knew it was stupid. But she also knew what she wanted. That was the point of VirtualClone, after all, experience without guilt.

She attached the sensors and Sean stood in front of her. He seemed more relaxed. He wore black cotton drawstring pants that tapered at the ankle and a green Indian-style tunic with gold couching. The color matched his eyes. He smiled at her.

“Hey, doll.”

“Sean. Get us some wine,” she said, stretching out to make herself comfortable.

He flashed her a quick grin and poured two glasses of red, slightly sweet wine. He brought one to where she reclined on the sofa. He sank down onto the floor beside it, in easy reach of her face, her hands, her breasts.

“You’re so gorgeous,” he said, stealing a quick kiss.

She smiled. “How many woman a day do you say that to?”

Sean laughed. “Yeah, but to you I mean it.” He swirled his finger in the wineglass and licked it clean Adina's breath caught as she imagined the same flick of his tongue over her nipple. She watched, amused at his blatant sensuality.

“Oh yes, and I am so much more likely to believe that,” she teased back. She broke off as he ran a wine-wet finger over her lips too. She flicked her own tongue out just enough to lick the wine from him.

"I mean it," he repeated. Sean's face was earnest enough she could almost believe him. "Your hair's like a patch of midnight somebody stole from the sky." He reached up and just barely grazed a few strands. She smiled and he caught one black wave of it and wrapped it around his finger, using it to tug her closer for a quick brush of his tongue over her lips. He let go.

He dipped his finger in the wine again, traced it over her lips and followed it with his tongue, more slowly this time. She opened for the kiss, letting him take the lead. He was skilled, if a little pushy, just as she wanted him to be. His style was not the fierce ravishing of the bouncer, but sensual and hot and, well, cocky, just as she thought he should be. His desire for her overwhelmed her.

He finished it with a few brief kisses, a sucking of her lower lip and then a sprinkling of kisses over her cheek. "Beautiful," he whispered. "Lips like fire and honey, nose like a tower of Lebanon."

She rolled her eyes at the quote from the Song of Solomon, annoyed that her synagogue lessons were intruding because of her tiredness. Sean kissed her ear.

"That's kinda cheesy, isn't it?" Sean asked. "I read it somewhere."

"It's not cheesy," she said with a soft laugh.

"It is, you know. Your nose, I mean. Gorgeous." He ran a finger down her nose then kissed the tip. "So long and straight, not like my big ol' Irish honker." He put fingers on each side of his moderately wide nostrils.

She touched the tip of his nose, a gentle, playful tap. Sean kissed her fingertips. Then he dipped his own fingertips in the wine again and traced it over her lip. Again, he followed with his tongue. She licked at his tongue, but did not try to kiss him.

With a look of concentration, he dipped his fingers again and painted her neck with the wine. His tongue followed and she purred. More damp fingers went into the hollow of her throat, leaving wine to be licked clean. He striped her collarbone with wine and licked them. Adina loved it. This sweet, slow seduction was just what she needed tonight after the wild passions of last night.

Sean gave her a wink and poured just a few drops of wine down the neck of her robe. He spread the satin and licked the trail down to her breasts. Adina shrugged out of the robe.

He took a mouthful of the wine and drew one nipple into his mouth to join it. She ran her fingers through his hair and arched into his mouth.

“So good,” she whispered.

He swallowed and moved to suck the other, leaving a thin, rapidly cooling glaze of wine that peaked her nipple. She gasped at this refinement. He used his teeth, just lightly, sending shivers all over her body and leaving her begging for more.

Sean was eager to oblige. His touch was firm but not rough. He handled her as if she was something precious and wonderful. Adina shuddered as an orgasm shivered through her, a small one, but she’d never climaxed just from having her nipples sucked.

“I think I’ll keep you,” she said, tipping Sean’s face up for another kiss.

“Good.” He took the kiss slow and sweet, his tongue slipping into her mouth, tasting of wine and Sean. She let him kiss her, enjoying the way he savored each stroke of her tongue or lips.

He dribbled a trickle of the wine into the hollow of her throat, letting it slide down the valley of her breasts like a river in a new channel. He chased it with his tongue, lingering in places that made her squirm, licking the wine out of her navel where it pooled at last.

Sean dipped his fingers in his wine again and ran them between her thighs in a very light arc between her outer and inner lips. He blew over it and laughed when she shivered. Then he kissed her, tongue between both sets of lips, flicking and teasing, his mouth covering the whole of her wet softness.

Adina whimpered, kitten-like, her hips lifting to the talented mouth, apparently good for so much more than excuses and unwanted flirting. She opened her legs a little wider.

Sean painted her clit with the wine and then slipped the still-damp fingers into her. His lips closed on her clit and she cried out, shuddering around his fingers. She subsided to panting and inarticulate noises as he sucked and flicked at her clit, his fingers barely moving, stroking forward.

She yelled as he caressed her G-spot, his fingers and mouth driving her to ecstasy again. She came down just enough to understand what he was saying.

“Oh yeah, that’s what I wanted to hear.”

“More,” she gasped. “Please, more. Don’t stop.”

Sean licked her with long, lazy strokes of his tongue, his fingers moving in the same way, slow and deep. Adina rocked on him, dignity lost to desire. Her next orgasm left his hand soaking wet.

“More,” she insisted.

Sean pulled his fingers out and licked them, one by one. “More?” he asked between licks. “More fingers?” He sucked his index finger clear to the palm and drew it out slowly. “More tongue?” He swiped it across his palm, curling it to lick the cupid’s bow of his upper lip. “Or do you want my cock?” He stroked the bulge in the front of his pants.

She grabbed his hair and pulled him down for a kiss. As he kissed her, she peeled the sensors from her temples. Sean no longer loomed over her. Adina lay on the couch, her robe open, trying to find the energy to walk back to her room. Sean had been wonderful. Much better than her own fingers. Maybe next time, she’d fuck him.

She finally made it back to her bedroom and set the alarm. She just might have extra work for a certain mouthy clerk tomorrow, she decided as she fell asleep, still smiling. And maybe, just maybe, even a little more.

The nanobots were almost finished. They had found the missing hormonal key and used it. The first few were already deactivated and washing out of her bloodstream in her kidneys. The last ones toiled on with their labors.

On Thursday, Adina came home a little early, six instead of eight. She dropped her dry cleaning off and spent the extra time tidying her apartment. She'd been neglectful while she played with her new toy. She slipped into her ratty laundry-day outfit and ran the rest of her clothes through the washer and dryer. Even supper was heavier than she'd planned. The notion of jelly doughnuts had seized her on the way home from work and she'd bought one for dessert.

Finally, she lit the candles, said the prayers and, for good measure, gave her decorative dreidel a spin. The dreidel landed with the character shin facing upward. If she were playing with others, she would have to put something into the pot before her next turn. Not bad advice even though she was alone, she decided.

She hooked up to the VirtualClone, not quite sure what she wanted tonight. The boy before her was a bit of a surprise. He was dressed in early Victorian country style, trousers held with suspenders, a hand-sewn shirt, heavy leather shoes up over his ankles and a straw hat. She recognized him instantly as Tom Sawyer. The room had changed too. A cave entrance loomed where her fireplace had been and her opium den decor had been replaced with a meadow. Fully integrated, she reminded herself.

She took Tom's hand and let him lead her into McDougal's cave, their candles sputtering. It was all there, from their initials in smoke, to the rock features of Aladdin's Palace and the Drawing Room. Remembering the story, she thrilled to the swooping bats, the river deep in the cave, the cake in his pocket stolen from the picnic he and Becky had been at and even the clutching fear when she realized they were lost. Her heart pounded in her throat. Adrenaline flooded her and she gripped Tom's hand until he complained. The twisty passages and guttering candles, the kite string that they tried marking their path with, the hunger that was only whetted and not assuaged by the cake, all of these only made her more excited. The excitement was childlike and thrilling, without the urgency of sex.

As they stepped out of the cave, smeared with clay, spattered with tallow, she watched a curious thing happen. Adina, appearing adolescent herself, had entered the cave with a boy of twelve. As the morning sun on the meadow struck him, she saw a handsome man of about twenty, dressed rather foppishly in the style of the late 1850s. Like Tom, she transformed as well, looking as she had in graduate school, except for the corset and hoop skirt.

“Miss Jonas,” he said, formally. “It cannot have escaped your attention that the feelings I have always borne you have, of late blossomed and grown into something deeper than mere childhood affection.”

Adina cut off what she knew would be a proposal. All Victorian proposals sounded the same. She kissed him. Tom drew back, taken by surprise. She repeated it, pressing close to him and teasing with her tongue. He accepted this kiss and held her tightly as the sun streamed around them and the meadow whirled.

There was the blur of a wedding, of dancing, and at last they stood in the main bedroom of the two-story clapboard house on the main street of St. Petersburg. Adina didn’t laugh at her high-necked, lace-trimmed nightgown. She simply slipped beneath the double wedding ring patchwork quilt, made by the nimble fingers of Tom’s Aunt Polly and his cousin Mary, and waited.

This was different, she thought to herself. Less an encounter than a full-fledged drama. She didn’t laugh at Tom’s knee-length nightshirt either. He looked frightened as he approached the bed, and she knew not many things scared the young Pinkerton agent, not after Injun Joe, seeing murder done and being lost in McDougal’s cave.

“Tom, it’s all right.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and then crawled under the covers. “Kinda hard to feature I can have what all the books say only bad men want.”

She laughed. “Darling Tom. There’s nothing bad about it. Doesn’t the Bible itself say to delight in the wife of your youth and let her breasts satisfy you?”

“Does it?” He gave her the cocky little grin she associated with the boy. “Never did memorize too much of it. I got my prize Bible by swapping Sunday school tickets around.” He reached out a gentle hand to open the neck of her nightdress. “Well, if the Bible says so.” He kissed her neck.

“It does. And there is no wickedness or anything else, not when we’re married.” She almost bit her tongue, but knew the words were the right ones for this scene. She shut up and leaned over to kiss him.

He was still sweet and timid, not the seducer that Sean was. They moved together in the dim glow of the oil-lamp, the old fashioned room close and dark. He was hesitant to enter her. He never removed her gown, only opened the neck to see her breasts. Tom finally did penetrate, and they rocked together in the pleasant Missouri night. Adina smiled in his arms, a small climax making her shiver. He shuddered as his took him.

Afterward, he opened a window and came back to bed. She lay in his arms, listening to the sound of crickets and the steamboat horn from the river. The honeysuckle was sweet over the scent of grass. Tom snored in her ear.

Adina pulled the sensors. She was lying in her own bed, with a fluffy eyelash yarn coverlet in place of the patchwork quilt and the scarlet-shaded lamp instead of Aunt Polly’s oil lamp. Joplin stared down from the ceiling, all hair and beads.

The sex had not been earth-shattering but the play time had been enjoyable. The adrenaline rush in the cave had made up for the rest. But the restlessness within her had only deepened. She wanted a wedding night similar to that. Someday, she promised herself, someone would love her enough to overcome his social conditioning.

Friday night was Shabbos. Adina lit the Hanukkah candles and the Sabbath ones. She said the prayers that went with each, her Hebrew more confident after a week’s steady use. A fruit salad and a glass of sweet wine finished the evening.

She looked at the box, wondering if she wanted it, whether it counted as work. Finally, she decided it was considered daydreaming, not work, and put the contacts on.

She'd seen Merchant of Venice done in modern dress during the summer Shakespeare in the Park festival. It was not her favorite play, and the period-appropriate anti-Semitism, like Twain's unconscious racism, had always gnawed at her. She had seen both sides, both the loathing of the community and Shylock's brilliance and anger in the face of it, foiled by Portia's wisdom. And Papa *had* said something about arguing law with the greats.

The tea was already made and the young woman, looking very like a young man in the lawyer's robes, proved fine company. They argued far into the night, mercy and justice, the nature of God as perceived by the late twenty-first century Jew and the mid-sixteenth century Christian, the necessity of nitpicking and cleverness. Mostly, Portia spoke of being forced into male clothing for her part and seemed intrigued by Adina being able to practice as a woman.

At length, Adina said her goodbyes and pulled the sensors. It had been too much like work. She smiled at the irony. Papa would have called her previous four encounters too much like work and this one pure intellectual pleasure.

She checked the clock and did the time conversion. It would be Saturday morning where Papa was. She picked up the phone and pressed his private line. It would be safe to call. Papa never worked on the Sabbath, for all his unorthodox choice of career.

"Mishael barJonas," he answered, his voice clear but with a faintness that hinted at the distance. His face looked vaguely sleepy on the phone's screen. He was in a room she did not recognize.

"Shabbat shalom, Abba." She slipped automatically into the child's form of address.

"Adina! Shabbat shalom u'mevorakh!" He beamed at her. "Did your present get there all right?" She saw him grab a robe, then had an impression of a half-finished breakfast tray and a sleeping man's shoulder before he moved into another room.

"Just fine, Papa. It was exactly what I wanted. Thank you so much. I'm quite enjoying it. How's London?" she teased.

“Dull as always.” He lowered his voice, “Lord Carmichael is still the most unimaginative of men. Only the excellent tea compensates.”

She giggled. Papa had never liked England, preferring the warmer shores of Italy, Greece and his native Israel. She, on the other hand, adored London, the theater, the shopping, the museums. Papa hated museums, calling them full of “dead trash from dead people.” She suspected it was sour grapes, since he couldn’t steal and fence the electronically tracked treasures.

He told her of walks in Pall Mall and Kensington, of a hiking holiday in Kent. “I am far too old to be sleeping—or doing anything else—on the ground,” he grumbled. “Lord Carmichael fancies himself an outdoorsman.”

She laughed, then talked a little of the Linzer case and how it was getting on her nerves. He listened to her tales of Portia and Tom Sawyer. She mentioned Sean in passing, but not in the context of the VirtualClone.

“No mere clerks for you, Princess. Nothing lower than a junior partner. No sense marrying down.”

“Oh Papa, he’s just a pest.” She tried to sound breezy about it.

“So you say.” His face was grave. “Pests have a way of becoming friends and then lovers.”

They chatted of things of no consequence for a while, then Mishael grew serious. He told her of her early holidays, when her American mother was still alive. He told her of High Holy Days at the historic Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, of Sukkots spent in the Adirondacks. She didn’t remember the Passover when they had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, having been very small. But she had loved Hanukkahs with his brother in Washington. She listened and was silent for a few moments after the reminiscences, then thanked him for them.

“I don’t like you spending all your time alone, just work and an empty apartment.”

“Papa.” Adina was well aware she was about to start whining like a child. “If I don’t establish myself now, I never will.”

“Ah, the old race between ambition and age. Child, don’t let the line end with you. I could father more, even now, but you only have—”

“A few scant precious years,” she finished, hating the mockery in her tone and the scowl on her face. “Papa, if you give me this lecture every Hanukkah, Purim, Passover and Sukkot, I may have to convert to something else just to avoid the holidays.”

He laughed. “Ah, then I would have two sets of holidays to pester you.” She laughed with him, knowing he would do just that. Mishael sighed. “I do love you, Adina. And I’ve only ever wanted the best for you.”

“I know, Papa. I love you too.” She knew she was the only person who ever heard those words from him. They wished each other a Happy Hanukkah and hung up.

She soaked in the hot bubble bath before going to bed. There, she lay in the dark for a long time, hugging herself, missing her Papa’s arms around her. He had held her often when she was a little girl. It always made her feel as if the world was a safe place after all.

The last nanobot deactivated and let itself be filtered out of her bloodstream.

Chapter Four

Saturday, she rose early and went to temple. The holidays were the only time she really made a point of it, and, even then, she preferred to skip some of the more solemn ones. She wasn't part of any of the ladies' circles and sometimes she couldn't even remember the rabbi's name.

She didn't clean the apartment. She ate roasted deli chickfu for lunch, noticing that the shaped, flavored soybean curd was not as tasty as usual. She made a note to quit stopping at the deli on Waterford and stick with the one on Cleveland.

Adina cast a longing look at her briefcase, wanting to be finished with the Linzer casework. After her upbringing, Adina could no more work between sunset Friday and sunset Saturday than she could lick her own pussy. She'd tried working once or twice since she'd been on her own, but she'd never done good work because of the guilt she felt. Now she just knew better. Besides, it was December. Sunset came early. She'd have plenty of time to finish.

Instead, she placed the VirtualClone sensors on her temples.

Sean was in front of her again, this time in little more than a loincloth. He was smooth, his chest hairless and hard with muscle over bone. He did not bulge as body-builders did, but he was nicely defined. Adina looked him over, altering him a little. A heavy line of kohl around his eyes complimented the now-shaved head. She made sure the loincloth was Egyptian style and gave him a gold snake bracelet on his upper arm. Just for her own amusement, she added oil and glitter. Finally satisfied, she relaxed on the sofa, her own usual at-home robe having become sheer, pleated cotton that hid nothing.

"Mistress Adina," her new Egyptian slave boy said, bowing low. "I am at your service."

“Wine,” she ordered and he brought the round alabaster goblet filled with thick, sweet red wine to her. He knelt to offer it. She used his raised hands as a serving tray, wondering why she was not actually enjoying this as much as expected.

After a few minutes, she altered him again, putting his cockiness back, letting the sweetly submissive persona vanish back into the 'net-ether. Sean looked himself over and felt his bald head.

“All right,” he grinned. “Cleopatra and high priest? I can play that game.” He knelt beside the sofa again, no submission in him, the position simply being the easiest way to get near Adina. He winked at her and started, “Beautiful princess, jewel of the Nile, about whom all the glories of the desert congregate—”

Adina, laughing, kissed him to shut him up. This was making her feel quite silly, truth be told, even if she was enjoying the look of him. “Just stop. I had enough talk last night.”

“As my princess commands,” he said and kissed her hard, invading her mouth with his tongue. She sucked at it eagerly, her moans of pleasure loud in her ears. “Slut princess,” he whispered. “You’ll have to make plenty of sacrifices to get in good with the gods for this.” Sean tugged aside a few pleats of her dress. “Or maybe just bribe a priest. Quid or quim, it’s all the same to me.” He gave her a lecherous, greedy wink. His hands were not gentle on her breasts, but she pressed into them. He shoved them together and licked her nipples, first one and then the other until she squirmed.

Adina moaned again when he sucked on them and twisted her hips. The flicker of his tongue, the light scrape of his teeth and the persistent suction were all perfect. She jumped a little when one hand moved down her belly and stroked between her legs. Her soft cry was followed with a small orgasm.

Sean laughed. “The Nile Princess floods for me.” He pushed the skirt of her dress out of the way and licked her, pressing his tongue deep into the furrow.

She moved around a little and he took advantage of what was offered. His style did not change, even with the change of costume. He still devoured her pussy as if starving

for her, eager to taste every bit of skin she would allow him, licking her as if dying of thirst and her juices were the only thing that could quench it. Adina smiled and gave herself to his eager kisses.

She climaxed when he sucked at her clit and then gasped when he slid two fingers into her. She rode them, her hips undulating like a temple dancer's, while he kept working at her clit, rolling the hard little nub between his lips. She came again, more noisily this time.

After a moment to recover, she pulled him away and kissed him again. "Do it," she whispered. "All of it this time. Fuck me."

Sean rose and offered a hand down to her. He led her to a bed that was little more than a silken pallet on the marble floor of the priests' quarters. He held her for a long kiss, one that left her mouth burning, her skin tingling and her hips thrusting against him. The cotton dress was gone at a touch and she lifted away his loincloth as well, wrapping one hand around his cock.

He dropped to his knees and pulled her down to join him, kissing her again, leaving a trail of lightly bitten skin down her throat and over her breasts. Adina gave no resistance as Sean pushed her back onto the pallet. She was past ready, the slickness of her thighs almost chafing.

She drew him down for another kiss as he spread her legs and slipped inside. She sighed happily as he rested there, letting her feel him. She savored his perfection, not too long, not too short, nice width and not slamming at her or making her do all the work.

Sean moved slowly, making each thrust something of an event. He propped himself only on his elbows so he could continue kissing Adina. She wrapped one arm around his neck, drawing him down for more kisses, and ran the other down his body, feeling his strong back, his side, his tight little ass.

Adina luxuriated under his touch, enjoying him through three of her own orgasms and then let him finish. They lay together on the pallet of the priests' quarters, saying

nothing, the incense smoke curling around them. Her fingers explored him, tracing his skin lightly, as she lay with her head pillowed on one glittery shoulder.

After a while, he kissed the top of her head. She tipped her face up to him for more. His lips were warm and sweet. The VirtualClone box's fail-safe clicked, making Sean and the Egyptian temple vanish.

Adina peeled the sensors off and looked out the window, taking in the still, gray afternoon. It was almost a disappointment after the warm golden pleasure of holographic Egypt. She sat, aroused and smiling on the sofa, trying to decide if more time in that particular fantasy would be overkill. The phone rang. It was her Uncle David in Washington, wishing her Shabbat and Hanukkah.

They chatted for a while. Papa and Uncle David were all the family she had and Adina loved both men deeply. After her mother's death, David had helped his twin raise her. She sent her love and hung up, still a little uncomfortable talking to family while she was aroused. Seeing it was sunset, she lit the Hanukkah candles, said the prayers and then settled in to work on the Linzer case.

Sunday was lost in a haze of work. A cup of coffee for breakfast, then a couple slices of nutribread around midmorning provided her with most of the nutrition she needed for a day's work. She dove back in, researching and altering her arguments in what was proving to be one of the most challenging cases of inheritance law she'd ever encountered.

Not only had Old Mr. Linzer's four children quarreled over his estate, his very young mistress was pregnant and three more people had turned up as his biological children. Eight others had claimed the estate, but DNA testing showed no relation. His wife was still technically alive but had been a vegetable kept breathing by machines for the last two decades.

Adina worked at what she thought was an equitable solution. The perfect compromise, it would leave everyone with something and nobody happy. Except the firm, of course, once she showed them their slice of the estate.

It was very late afternoon when she came up for air, the weak wintry sunlight from the west window making a trapezoid on the dining table as the sun slipped down behind the buildings of the city. She made a cup of tea and found the end of the chick-fu. She tidied up and when the sun set, she lit the last of the candles.

The evening stretched before her, without work or commitments. She watched an old movie on her computer but turned it off halfway through. Movies were much less interesting now that she had the VirtualClone. Instead of watching adventures, she could have them.

Janis had been amazing and she needed a break from Sean. It probably said something about her own psyche that she kept re-imagining the pesky clerk. She decided she just liked the control. Maybe it was time for the big one. Adina plugged into the VirtualClone.

"Hello, darlin'," drawled the handsome young man with the d.a. haircut. Elvis Aron Presley – direct from 1957 Memphis, Tennessee, his features unblunted by drugs, his body unbloated by garbage food – leaned over and kissed her.

She traced the line of his full, sensual mouth with one finger. He dropped a wink before giving her a sultry stare with his deceptively sleepy eyes. She kissed that gorgeous mouth, and he let her go as deep as she wanted.

"Ain't you the sweetest?" He brushed her loose black hair out of her face and looked around. "Never had a beatnik chick before."

She smiled at him. "I'm a lawyer."

He laughed. "Prettier'n any lawyer I ever knew." He kissed her again.

She pulled him to sit on the sofa. He had no finesse, no grace, not even the feral lust of the bouncer. He grabbed her and pawed at her blouse. She could not believe he was twenty-five and still such a klutz. Because of who he was, she slowed him down a little, giving him a second chance. It didn't take.

She took one last kiss of the sullenly sensual mouth and yanked the sensors. "Elvis has left the building," she sighed. She put her clothes back in order, stepped into her

walking shoes and headed out for the evening. She had seen a flier for an art gallery opening tonight. "And so have I." She locked the door behind her.

The return to the office Monday was a relief. She presented her Linzer solution at the early meeting. The senior partners looked thoughtful and she suspected one of them would take the credit for it. She worked through the day, growing angrier. She would wait and see and get revenge as needed.

She slammed the apartment door and locked it. Taking four deep breaths, she went and had a long, hot bath. She'd eaten on the way home, just a chalupa from a sidewalk stand. There were no more candles to light. The holiday was over.

More relaxed, she carried the VirtualClone box to her room, shed her robe and activated it. Sean appeared, wearing nothing but a smile, a golden glow and a pair of great white-feathered wings.

He sculled one around to have a look, then grinned cheekily at her. "Your very own Christmas Angel? Hate to tell you this, but my name's not Harold and I don't want a tree up my butt."

She looked at him, wincing at the pun. "I'm Jewish. Our miracles are seldom so flashy as to need angels to announce them."

He gave an experimental flap. She came to him, as tall as he was. Sean was average for a man and Adina was tall. Their eyes met, hers dark and his green. He took her in his arms and flapped again.

Adina smiled as they lifted from the floor. Sean laughed softly and kissed her. She melted against him, molding to his body, opening to him. His tongue slipped over her lips, into her mouth, stroking hers, tasting her as he had the wine. Like the wine, his glow seeming to suffuse her, warming her from the chest out.

"I've never done it with an angel," she whispered.

"S okay. Nobody else ever thought I was." Sean nuzzled at her neck, sending little shivers over her skin.

“Here, in the air.”

Sean obliged. He pulled Adina closer and wrapped her legs around his waist. He tipped her hips just a little and slid into her, using his cock to help support her.

She clung close and glanced at the floor so far below. He moved a little within her and flapped. She kissed him and climaxed, more from the thought of what they were doing than any actual stimulation.

“Down, please,” she said, sucking his earlobe.

He laid her gently on the bed without vacating her body. They moved together, her hands running through the feathers and his hair. The glow embraced them, enfolded them, and all sense of time was lost in the rocking. There was no rush to completion, just the sweet sensation of touch and a pleasure that built and grew, without explosion.

His hands were gentle. She’d seen them a thousand times, bringing her everything from coffee to briefs, but now she looked at them, lacing her fingers with his, kissing his palms, and feeling them all over her.

Finally, the glow intensified. Together, they exploded into orgasm, him buried deep within her, the glow shattering into thousands of firework stars that shimmered away. He lay quietly on his stomach afterward, letting her stroke and explore the wings.

“Amazing,” she said, kissing him between the shoulder blades.

He fanned them just a little. “Pretty amazing yourself, Adina.” He tipped back and kissed her just as the VirtualClone’s failsafe kicked in.

She stared at the very solid pinfeather still caught between her fingers.

Chapter Five

Hanukkah was long over. New Years had come and gone. She had, surprisingly, gotten full credit for the Linzer case as well as a private word from Ms. Brinkley that the senior partner had her eye on Adina as a possible replacement when she retired.

Sean had seen her looking and, on Martin Luther King Day, he asked her out for coffee. Adina just stared in amazement as he held doors, hailed cabs and then ordered for her without consulting her. The coffee was perfect—since Sean had been making her coffee for three years now and knew what she liked—but the fact he had just assumed and taken over turned it to burnt brake fluid in her mouth.

He could talk of nothing except work and his motorcycle. It appeared he had less of a life than she did. He was several years younger and had no ambition. Clerking suited him, or so he said. But Adina had the unpleasant suspicion he'd heard rumors of her possible full partnership and was angling for a job as her private clerk.

She didn't accept his offer of dinner.

On Valentine's, Adina took the day off. She sat on the red velvet sofa, absently shredding one of its gold tassels, and stared at the VirtualClone box and the pinfeather beside it. She hadn't opened it for a couple weeks now. Not since her last regular bioscan on the sixth of the month. She looked at the printed results again. Their complete impossibility continued to stare back at her.

Slowly, she hooked the sensors to her temples and shut her eyes. When she opened them, her father stood in front of her, looking as she always remembered him, in a black silk robe and pajama bottoms, his feet bare, his longish hair swept off his face, and caught back into a small pouf of black curls at the nape of his neck. His dark eyes glinted with a secret joke for just the two of them and his sensual mouth curved in a perpetual smirk under the neatly clipped black beard.

She remembered again why her beloved father was one of the highest paid sex workers in the world with a file at Interpol as thick as her wrist for his other activities. He held a glass of his ever-present scotch, his Cartier watch on the right wrist instead of the left. She looked at his hands. She'd always loved his hands—so long, the manicured fingers tapered just so—but then most women did. Most women didn't matter. Despite their numbers, she knew she was the only one who'd ever held his heart since her mother's death.

"Papa," she started, a very shy smile on her lips. He stepped toward her and smiled back. His smile was a rare thing that sent women swooning and made men check where their wives had been for the last six weeks.

"Princess," he said, cupping her face in his large, elegant hands and kissing her forehead. "What can Papa do for you?"

She took a deep breath. "Papa," she blurted, "I think I'm pregnant."

Her father's full mouth curved into his most enigmatic smile. "I know," the simulacrum whispered and kissed her forehead again.

Adina startled at the knock on her door. She yanked the contacts and the image of her father vanished. She was barely off the sofa when her door swung open. Only three people had the entry code—both numeric and DNA—for her apartment. She hurled herself into her Uncle David's arms.

David and Mishael were identical twins, but David's appearance was far more conservative than his brother's. He wore suits instead of silk and a stern haircut instead of his twin's unruly curls. Adina kissed him hello and he held her at arm's length.

"You are beautiful. The image of your mother."

Adina laughed. "Hello, Uncle. What brings you here from Washington?"

He smiled, Papa's enigmatic smile without the charm. David opened his briefcase and took out a file folder. "I have a baby license for you." Adina stared at the papers that would give her permission to actually continue the pregnancy. Only those with good contacts or extraordinary skills got such licenses nowadays. Then again, recent

sterilization bounties encouraged most families to make sure most of their children could not reproduce in the first place.

“Oh yes,” David added, “and a present.” A shy-looking young man in a yarmulke stepped into the apartment behind him.

“Your father sends his greetings, Miss Adina, and me.” He smiled, a bit sheepishly, she thought. “I’m Benjamin Lerner, your uncle’s intern. I’ve recently been promoted to my own posting here in New York.”

Adina stared. Yes, he looked exactly like the sort of young man her father would find appropriate. At least he didn’t wear the side curls and there was no visible fringe under the vest of his three-piece suit.

“He’s a linguist, dear,” David supplied. “He’s been sent to work as a translator.”

Adina finally found her manners. “Come in. I’ll get some tea. Uncle David, I need to talk to you.” The men sat down in the living room and in short order Adina appeared with the heirloom silver tea service. She poured and sat down.

“I’m sure you have many questions about your impending daughter,” David began with the same unconscious arrogance as his brother.

“Why. How. And how do you know are the first that spring to mind,” Adina snapped. “How dare you is a close second.”

Benjamin flinched, but David only smiled. “You have worked very hard, child. Your papa and I are very proud of you. You deserve a reward and some rest. We knew you would be at loose ends now that you’re in line for a partnership, so we decided to help out. Mishael has had me looking for a suitable young man for some time. Benjamin was right in my office. The simple answer to the hows of your condition is ovum fusion via nanobot, giving you a daughter that is pure barJonas.” He sipped his tea. “But of course, we can’t have an unwed mother in the family.”

Adina glared at him. “You bottom in every leather club in Washington. Papa fucks anyone who meets his price. But I’m the scandal? Uncle David, please!”

Benjamin flinched harder and his teacup rattled in the saucer.

“Adina, child,” David began, but Adina had gone from mild amusement at her father’s presumption to cold fury. The sharp tongue that had summed hundreds of cases, demolished thousands of witnesses, now unleashed itself on the handsome man.

“How many welts are under your fine Savile Row suit, Uncle? Or is that where you found this pretty morsel? Was he bent over a horse to be beaten? Or did he wield the whip so well that you told Papa he’d be perfect to tame your headstrong girl?”

Benjamin snorted tea through his nose in shock, but Adina continued, relentless and uncaring. “And I suppose Papa already tested him out for me. I must be a virgin bride, even if I am pregnant, but there is no law against lying with your son-in-law?”

David sipped his tea calmly. “Adina, you’re already betrothed. He’s paid the bride-price.”

“This isn’t the Promised Land in the time of the patriarchs! Papa picks the damnedest times to be an orthodox hypocrite!”

“I do?” Mishael’s sensual voice came from the doorway. Adina looked up and saw him leaning in the frame. Like the thief he was, he had entered soundlessly and Adina had no idea how long he’s been standing and listening to her rant.

In contrast to David and Benjamin’s suits, he wore an expensive cashmere sweater over tailored dark slacks. The perpetual smirk was on his face, infuriating Adina.

“Papa, how dare you!”

Mishael’s smirk broadened. “I take it my Valentine gift was not so great a success as my Hanukkah one? Adina, child, you were always a dreadful chess player.” He strolled in and dropped his suede shearling coat, which Adina knew was from Iceland, the most expensive sort, on the dining chair. “Hello, Benjamin, David.” He bent and kissed his brother’s cheek. “I remain five steps ahead of the rest of the world, including you, daughter.”

Adina gritted her teeth. There wasn't anything in her vocabulary—not in five languages—that suited the situation.

“Benjamin has paid your bride price. You are betrothed for a year and a day. If you refuse him in that time, I will compensate him.”

Adina rounded on Benjamin. “How much? What did you pay him for the freshness seal on my pussy? I'll repay you, here and now.” She snarled at Mishael. “I am no slave to sell. And you are no patriarch to be taking goats and sheep for your daughter's virtue.”

Benjamin looked very uncomfortable and tried to hide behind his teacup. He finally looked at the floor and mumbled, unable to face the explosion of fury that washed over him.

“He paid me in years of service. I believe you said something about patriarchs?” Mishael smirked even more.

“You are worth the seven years Jacob served for Rachel,” Benjamin managed with a weak smile.

Adina softened. He was very pretty and seven years of his life was no small investment.

Mishael rose. “David, let's go get the children some dinner. Real food, not that kelp and soy stuff you eat, daughter.” David rose and followed his twin out the door.

Benjamin looked even younger without them there. “I'm sorry. I really thought you'd be all right with this. Your Uncle David kept telling me all these stories of his gorgeous, brilliant and very lonely niece who needed a husband so badly.” He gave a wry smile. “I figured you for forty, fat and very boring. But I let him show me pictures and live feeds.” Benjamin gave a little laugh. “He forgot to mention you have a mind of your own. And quite a temper.”

Adina looked embarrassed. “I don't often lose it. I'm sorry you had to see that. I love my father but Papa believes the world is his for the taking.” She started clearing up the tea. “The problem is, he's usually right.”

Benjamin rose and helped her. "I like it. The temper, I mean." He followed her to the kitchen and ran water into the sink to mask their voices. Adina had long suspected her uncle had her apartment bugged. "I like strong women, especially smart ones." He put the cream away and saw the Chinese takeout. "Mu Shu Kelpork?"

Adina ignored his criticism of her food choices. Kelpork contained no pig products and was kosher. "Benjamin, you're a total stranger and you flinch too much. I can't marry you."

He turned off the water. "All I ask, Adina, is that you give me the year and today. If next February fifteenth, you say go away, I will. I have an apartment here in the city. We can take the time to get acquainted. Even Rachel had refusal rights."

Adina nodded. It seemed logical enough. And she had wanted someone who would step outside the boundaries of convention for her. "A year and a day," she said.

They sat on the sofa for a minute, not talking. Benjamin looked at the décor, the bookshelf. Adina saw him reading the spines and smiled.

"I like Bradbury myself," he said. "And Shakespeare."

"I'm just having time to rediscover them," Adina said. "And movies too, sometimes." She glanced guiltily at the clone box. It was gone from the end table. She could have sworn her father was never within six feet of that table. Mishael never left tools around after a job, she knew.

Benjamin smiled, a soft genuine one. "A year and a day, then, Adina." He touched her hand.

She smiled back. "One thing I have to know." She closed the distance and kissed him, very suddenly. He startled at first, then relaxed into it, letting her taste him. She probed him with her tongue, feeling his response and the way he seemed to open for her. He met her tongue with his and explored her mouth as eagerly.

After a moment, she broke from him with a second small brush of her lips. "Yes, perfect. You taste just fine." Seeing his confusion, she smiled. "It's all about chemistry."

Outside, Mishael watched the hidden camera capture Adina kissing Benjamin. He smirked. David returned it. Mission accomplished, they set off for the deli down the street, the VirtualClone tucked under Mishael's arm.

About the Author

Angelia Sparrow has been telling stories for almost forty years, and writing for almost that long. She traded a library paraprofessional position for ten in the wind and the hum of the highway. She drives a semi and writes during her loading and unloading times.

Her home time is spent refereeing four kids, two cats and a husband. She crochets and knits to get past writer's block.

She has been publishing professionally since 2004, mostly paranormal romance, and has been nominated for several awards.

Angelia welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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