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An Itsy Bitsy Spider Tale

Alexis Ke

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

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Chapter One

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

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

She walked into her bedroom, pulled her sweatpants and tee shirt off and dropped them in the dirty clothes basket. Nicole strolled to the bathroom, turned the faucet and let the hot water begin to fill her bath. She stepped back and admired her tub. When she was apartment hunting, it was the bathroom that sold her.

The apartment was priced a little steeper than she wanted, but when the agent opened the doors to the bathroom she couldn't do anything but say, "Where do I sign?"

The room was huge. It had a skylight encrusted with cut stained glass, and on bright sunny days the room was bathed in a kaleidoscope of rainbow colors. On rainy nights, the water cascading down the glass lulled her to sleep, only to awaken with pruned skin and thankfulness she hadn't drowned.

The toilet was separated in a small room and the shower stood in the corner, surrounded by glass bricks from floor to ceiling with the exception of the entrance, closed off by a simple white curtain. There were also two shower heads, one of which, if she positioned it just right, was not only a shower but also gave one of the best orgasms a spray of water could offer.

However, the *piece de la resistance* remained the bathtub. It stood in the middle of the floor, surrounded by plush foot-deep carpet. From afar, it looked like an antique tiger pawed bath, but once she stepped up to it the small Jacuzzi jets made her salivate. She would no longer have to go to the gym just to get in the hot tub and sooth her aching muscles.

Nicole stepped over to the wall cabinet and pulled out a bottle of bath oils. After pouring a generous amount into the raging water, she dipped her hands into the canister of bath crystals, scooping some up and dropping that, too, into the water. It was just enough to give the water a frothy appearance.

She would turn the jets on before she got in and too much would have the bubbles touching the ceiling. She found out after she moved in, Jacuzzis and bubble bath did not mix well. After two major catastrophes in the tub and having to get the carpet cleaned she set out on a mission to find the right concoction.

It only took her a week before she wandered into a bath and body type store and found foaming bath crystals. Not bubble bath. Elated with her find, she made it a point to go to the store almost every week.

Swishing her hand in the water and finding it suitable, she wrapped her hair in a small towel, took her glasses off, sat them on the small table she'd placed next to the tub and slowly stepped over into the bath. The hot water stung her toes and tickled up her calf. Nicole paused and waited for her body to adjust to the heat and then continued her ascent.

The frothy aqua slid up her body like a warm hand. Caressing, teasing, soothing. Her mouth parted into the perfect 'oh' when it reached her womanhood and sent a shiver up her spine. This was one of the reasons why she favored a long, hot, soak in the tub. *Who needs a man when you have a Jacuzzi?*

A soft chuckle escaped her throat at the thought that floated through her mind. Deep down, Nicole knew a man couldn't be substituted by a bubble bath. But when that's all you've got, you have to make it good. Her body relaxed back against the

warmed porcelain and she almost moaned when the steam rose to her nose and wafted up to her brain. Lavender and cinnamon and something else attacked her senses and stilled her heart. The salesperson was right when she said this oil was to die for.

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

She didn't know how long she'd been under, but the wrinkles in her fingers and toes told her it must have been at least forty-five minutes. The water was cooling and the steam that fogged the room like a curtain was gone. Nicole opened her eyes and scanned the surroundings.

Something caught her attention. She closed her eyes and reopened them. The large black—no, brown—spot floating in the air confused her. She blinked, ran her hand across her face and stared at it until it came into focus. It wasn't floating but crawling down the wall. No, it wasn't crawling. It was just there. Not moving. Not doing anything. A large brown spot the size of her fist. What was it? Nicole brought her hand up and fumbled for her glasses on the table without taking her gaze off the brown object.

Her hand trembled when she brought them to her face and she dropped them into the water. Her heartbeat sped and a large lump lodged in her throat.

She fanned around in the water, grabbed her specks and brought them to her face. Staring through water-streaked glass, Nicole's body stiffened when the realization of what it was came into focus.

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

Every nerve ending in her body screamed for help. She hated spiders. She hated little creepy crawling bugs, anything that could slide up a pant leg and bite or snuggle under the blanket when you weren't paying attention and poison you in your sleep.

Nicole would rather have been face to face with a lion, tiger or bear than a spider. And this was no normal spider. She closed her fist and placed it between her line of vision with the mutated spider on the wall. She could still see part of its legs. Yup, this was the spider from out of space, for sure. She stared at it and when it didn't move decided it was asleep. *Do spiders sleep?*

She began to stand and it spasmed and crawled three inches toward the floor. Nicole screamed and almost leaped backwards from the tub. Water sloshed over the ledge and saturated the floor, but

she didn't care. The spider jumped and landed a mere four feet from her and then scurried in her direction.

Nicole didn't know where she was going or how loud she screamed, but the soreness in her throat from straining was evidence of her dilemma. She ran from the bathroom through the living room and to the front door, the screams still careening from her throat.

Not thinking about anything but escaping from the spider, she swung the front door open and slammed full force into the man walking past her door. She hit him so hard he toppled backward and fell to the floor. The packages he was carrying flew in the air and crashed to the ground. His arms came up and around her in a tight grasp as he tried to stop her and calm her.

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

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

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

Terry Slade didn't know what he was going to find in the bathroom of this hysterical female but he

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

His hand tightened on the narrow end of the bat as he slowly crept toward the bathroom door. It was wide open and he saw no movement within the confines of the room.

Whoever was in there might have run out or was hiding in a closet or behind another door, waiting for him to pass before he jumped out and attacked. He heard the slightest of noises from behind him and swung around, ready to hit. Nicole screamed again and drew her hands up in front of her.

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

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

He stepped out and walked across the hall to her bedroom. A quick glance under the bed and in the closet and again he turned up empty. Turning, he walked back to his apartment. Stepping in to the front room, he found Nicole exactly where he'd sent

her. Standing perfectly still, almost in shock in the middle of the floor.

His eyes popped wide open when the realization she was naked hit his consciousness. As naked as a brand new baby, but she was no baby. Her soft-bronzed skin resembling hot milk chocolate glistened with the water still dripping down her skin. Her breasts, ample and perky with nipples the size of grapes, sent a twitch straight to his groin.

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

“It’s got to be in there.” Nicole sucked in a breath and her breast rose and fell.

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

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

“The spider was huge.” She shook her head when the memory of it chasing her came back to her mind. “How could you not see it?” Nicole stared up into his eyes and for the first time realized how

gorgeous they were. They stared back at her like emeralds. Bright, yet dark and mystical all at the same time. “It was as large as your head.”

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

Nicole nodded her head.

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

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

“Okay. Wait here.”

He turned and walked back to her apartment, wondering when she was going to notice she wore no clothes. He’d wanted to point it out to her but figured it could wait until he found the notorious spider. Probably a tiny garden-variety kind the size of a pin top. He stepped up to the bathroom door and stood perfectly still. His gaze traveled across all of the surfaces, the walls. Nothing.

He took another step into the room. This time he looked behind the tub, the shower curtain and where the toilet hid. Still nothing. Getting down on his knees, he fanned his hand under the tub. The swift tickle of something big and hairy running across his arm sent a shiver straight to his stomach. His arm tensed.

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey. It’s okay. They don’t bite.”

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

“Kill it! You’ve got to kill it or it will come back.”

“They don’t bite.” He repeated.

“Don’t care. I hate spiders. Kill it.”

Slade laughed loudly and boisterously. He shook his head, peeked through his tightly cupped fingers and stared at the spider. It hadn’t moved since he picked it up. Probably scared to death. He walked

through the parking lot toward the wooded area to the side of their building.

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

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

“Where is it?”

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

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

“I don’t know how to repay you.”

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

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

Nicole glanced over her shoulder and in the direction he was looking, wondering what he saw.

She hunched her shoulders and figured he was just shy or thought her sublimely stupid for being afraid of spiders. A cool breeze brushed over her body and she looked down. Stark shock covered her face.

“Oh!”

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

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

* * * *

Nicole opened her eyes and scanned her surroundings. Her bedroom came into focus. She sighed, relieved it was all a dream. What a horrible dream. She pushed up to sit and *he* walked in.

Nicole closed her eyes, wished him away and reopened them. He was still there. She opened her mouth to speak and nothing came out. Tears burned her lids and threatened to pour out. She'd never been so embarrassed in her life. To run stark naked into a man she didn't know.

What next? Was a camera going to come out of the wall and show her a picture of some smarmy emcee who would say, “Congratulations, Ms.

Baylor, you're on *The World's Funniest Video Show*?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a silence in the room Nicole didn’t like and then a shuffling noise. All she heard was Slade’s heavy breathing and then the quiet sound of a zipper being pulled down.

She dared a peek from under the sanctity of the blanket. Her eyes popped wide open. Slade stood in the middle of the floor, his chest bare of the tee shirt he’d had on a moment ago. His fingers stilled on the zipper of his jeans when she screamed.

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

“Just helping you not be embarrassed by a naked body, that’s all.”

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

“Not the last time I checked.” Slade took a step toward her. “You sure you don’t want to see.” He

freed another tooth of the zipper, smiled when Nicole shook her head rapidly from side to side and then re-zipped his pants. “See, now that’s better.”

He brought his hand up, touched the bottom of her chin and tilted her face up to see his face. “My name is Terry Slade. My friends call me Slade. You can call me anything or anytime you like.” His hand slid down her arm and rested on her knee. “Call me if you need anything. And I do mean anything. I’m great at catching spiders and any other intruders.” He leaned in and touched the corner of her mouth with his in a gentle kiss. Pushing up from the bed he walked over to the door, paused and turned back toward Nicole.

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two

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

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

But now he had to think of another way to get her to talk to him. Terry knew when someone—especially a woman—crowded his mind the way he knew Nikki was going to, nothing would satisfy the need to get to know her, be with her, touch her, taste her.

Just the thought of her body next to him, writhing under him as he slid his cock in and out of

her moist folds made his dick spasm. He looked down at the erection that had begun to tent his trousers and prayed she hadn't noticed it. That's all he needed, for her to think he's a perv on top of everything else. He patted his hand along the length of his growing manhood.

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

He licked his lips and wished he'd met Nicole in better circumstances. A lighter situation would have helped him get her into his bed, or her bed—or any bed. He walked over to the refrigerator, opened it and grabbed a soda. He downed the entire contents in one long gulp.

Sitting the empty can on the counter, he moved toward the sofa, sat down and turned on the television. He needed something to get his mind off Nicole and the tightening in his pants. A cold shower within the next hour was definite. Nothing on television was going to be good enough to get her out of his head. Both heads.

Thirty minutes later, Slade clicked the TV off and stormed to the bedroom, undressing as he went. He didn't stop until he was standing under the shower spray and the icy cold water pummeled across his body.

He swiveled on the ball of his feet and allowed the stream to hit him directly in the face, chest and lower. Nothing helped. Slade looked down and stared at his cock standing at attention. Every time Nikki jumped into his mind, it twitched.

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

Unconsciously, he cupped his balls and squeezed them, then slid his hand up and down the length of his cock, imagining Nikki’s lips caressing, tasting and taking all of him into that gorgeous mouth of hers. Instantly, his legs spasmed and he almost went down on his knees as he shot out his load and watched it slide down the wall of the shower.

He shook his head in disgust. He wanted nothing more than to release some of the sexual tension his body was experiencing these past months, but not in the shower alone; that was not how he envisioned his big ‘O.’

He stepped out of the shower, walked over to the bed and flopped face down and buried his face in the pillow. Praying his mind would be free of dreams of Nicole, naked, so beautiful, *Nicole, my friends call me Nikki*. He closed his eyes and wished for sleep. It didn’t come easy. Slade closed his eyes and there she was...again.

Her body trembling from fear—or was it because of the way Slade looked at her. Her long neck begging to be nuzzled. Her dark areolas surrounding those giant nipples, hardened to peaks from the brush of cool air and his tongue. His gaze traveled

down her body, following the line of water dripping from her skin. Her body curved in all the right places. Hunger pains surged through him and settled in his groin when he caught sight of her neatly trimmed thatch of black curly hair at her 'V.' Nicole looked up, captured his gaze, smiled at him behind his closed eyes and his cock reacted in kind. *Damn.*

* * * *

Nicole paced around her apartment searching for more creepy crawly creatures. Deep down she knew that was not the reason she roamed from room to room. She was trying to cool the heat raging through her body. Everything ached and throbbed. She hadn't realized just how great looking Slade was until she peeked at him through the blanket covering her head. He was a Greek god. His tee shirt pulled tight across his rippling muscles.

If she looked hard enough she could count each ridge of his six-pack abs. She liked his face clean-shaven with just a tiny bit of five o'clock shadow and his hair, thick, wavy, jet black and shoulder length. Immediately she wanted to tangle her fingers in it and feel its silkiness. Slade's complexion, the color of sun kissed bronze, made her wonder if there was a mix of something else. Mediterranean or Indian maybe. Had he spent the morning in the tanning bed or at Jackson Beach?

Nicole walked back to the bedroom and stared at the towel that had once covered her head and nothing else. Heat again rushed to her face. She'd

never thought a black woman could blush, but now she guessed anything was possible. Her mind wandered back to Slade. Immediately, her nipples hardened to stiff pebbles and moist warmth flooded to the junction between her thighs.

Who was she kidding? No way would Slade be interested in her. Not the way they met. Her running around naked and screaming like a demented schoolmarm. But he was so gorgeous. A soft chuckle floated through her throat and fractured the silence surrounding her. He looked so innocent when he offered to disrobe and allow her to see him naked. She should have taken him up on the offer instead of stopping him.

Seeing what was under the jeans would have topped off her day. Now she really wanted to know. Nicole shivered at the thought and brought her hand up to stroke her right nipple, sending a surge of want straight to her pussy. Her clit throbbed steadily at the thought of Slade sliding in and out of her until she cried out with release.

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

She didn't do white men.

Chapter Three

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

Slade pulled into the vacant slot in front of the apartment. Unfolding himself from the car, he walked around to the back and grabbed the two bags out of the trunk. Balancing his groceries in his arms, he strolled toward his front door.

As he moved past her door it swung open and Nicole backed out carrying a basket of clothes as she headed to the laundry room. His sight impeded by the grocery bags, her sight obscured by the laundry, they rammed into each other. Nicole's basket went airborne, his groceries spilled to the floor. Cans rolled everywhere and mixed with her unmentionables.

"Oh snap, sorry." Slade bent to pick up the basket, not realizing he'd run into Nicole.

Straightening his body he came face to face with his dilemma.

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

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

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

“Hey, look.” Slade stared into eyes that hadn’t moved from his face. Or was it his mouth she was so intent on. “What are you doing later?” She didn’t answer. “I was thinking about going to the *Landing* and wondered...” His voice trailed off.

“No, I don’t think so.” Nicole finished his thoughts.

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

twisting his mouth to the side and stepping over to his door.

Once inside his apartment, he sat his bags on the counter and began unpacking his food. His mouth widened into an, ‘I ate the canary’ smile when his finger wrapped around an object that was not edible. Well, not in the sense of nutritional value. He brought the black thong up to his nose and inhaled, trying to capture some of her scent.

His heart immediately pounded in his chest and sweat began to drip down his back. What was this woman doing to him? That was the question. Slade walked to the front door, his pace almost a run, and headed toward Nicole’s.

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

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

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

“You know.” Slade reached out and grabbed her hand before she could pull it away. “We keep meeting in the most unusual situations. I bet a nice glass of wine and some wings would break the ice, or whatever ideas you might be having.” He touched

her chin with his hand and tilted her face up to meet his eyes. “I’m just asking for a glass of wine and something to eat. Nothing more.” *Yeah right. I want to fuck you so good the only thing you’ll ever think about again is my cock buried deep inside your hot pussy.* “How about it.” He gave her the most innocent smile he could muster.

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

“Just one glass?”

Slade nodded. “And some wings.”

“Okay.”

* * * *

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

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

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

“I’m sorry. I was thinking about something else. What did you say?”

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

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

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

Nicole nodded her head and smiled.

“And you?”

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

Slade’s mouth parted into a broad smile. “So you are a Registered Nurse

“Yup. Ten years now.”

“Hum, ten years. So that would make you—”

“Hey!” Nikki screeched. “Don’t even try it.”

Five minutes later they were seated in the small pub facing the river. Hot wings had been ordered, drinks delivered and their non-threatening conversation continued. An hour had passed and the twitching in Slade’s pants was about to drive him

crazy. Each time Nicole laughed, batted her eyes or touched his hand, his body hummed with the need to kiss her. Grab her around the head, pull her close to his body and capture her mouth. He wanted to suck her lips into his mouth until they swelled double their size.

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

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

Slade settled his gaze on her mouth and watched it move. It seemed like her lips parted just for him. Calling him. Begging him to take them into his mouth and taste them. He leaned forward and with one quick motion slid his hand around the back of her neck and crushed his mouth to hers.

He waited for her to push away, slap him and demand that he take her home, but she didn't. She moved in, exhaled a long slow breath and parted her lips. Slade slid his tongue between Nicole's teeth, across her gums and danced with her tongue. She tasted like the nectar of the gods. Sweet from the essence of lingering wine, spicy from the chicken

and something else. Mystical, magical. Her essence pulled him in like a moth to a light.

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

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

Nicole wanted him to touch her. She wanted him to touch her face, her arms, her breast and her core. She grasped his hand and stilled it on her breast. His mouth continued its assault on her. Tasting, kissing, finding a spot and lingering there until he tore a moan from her throat. She moved his hand down to her thigh and placed her hand atop his.

Immediately, Slade got the message. His fingers trailed a line from the outermost portion of her hip to the innermost area of her thigh. She opened her legs a fraction to allow him room to roam. His hand slid to her crotch, cupped her mound and massaged her heat through her jeans. The sensation was unbelievable.

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

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

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

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

Chapter Four

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

"My place or yours."

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

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

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

She lifted her arms and flung her blouse from her body, tossing it to the floor. Her pants were being tugged down her hips. Nicole stepped out of them and kicked them to the side. She pivoted on her feet and slammed Slade against the wall. Her mouth was on him, tasting, searching, finding.

Her fingers grabbed a handful of clothing, yanked it over his head and tossed it behind her. She tugged at his pants, groaned with frustration when they wouldn't go down. Slade, chuckled, swatted her hand away. She nodded and dropped her head to his chest and sucked a nipple into her mouth.

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

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

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

"I've got to taste you."

He bent down and slid his tongue slowly up and down her clit. Nicole's body bucked to the sensation. Slade grabbed her hips and held her still and close to his face. His tongue lapped and laved

across her heat, drinking her juices. Her cream, sweet to his tongue, warm to his heart. Slade dipped his tongue into her slit, jetted it in and out while his thumb flicked her clit.

When he felt the beginnings of the first spasm, he replaced his tongue with his finger, sliding one in and then another. Swirling it around until he knew she couldn't stand it. His mouth again came down on her cleft, sucked, licked and blew warm breaths across her skin all the while his fingers pumped in and out.

Nicole's screams started low and quickly rose high enough to shatter the windows. She was coming and he wanted to taste every drop of her orgasm. Lap up her cum like warm milk to a kitten. He clamped his mouth to her clit, sucked it into his mouth and hummed a tune he didn't know then flicked his tongue up and down rapidly until every muscle in her body retracted, spasmed, quivered.

Slade captured her pussy in his mouth and drank every drop of her. Nicole's nails dug into his shoulders as she held onto him like a lifeline. Her back arched, her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

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

dick pressed between them. Staggering to the bedroom, he shouldered the door open and all but leaped on the bed.

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

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

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

“Slade.” Nicole’s breath hitched. “Slade...wait.” Nicole lowered her head and tried to slow her breathing.

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

Nicole nodded her head. “Con...con...condom. We need protection.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Slade climbed onto the bed. “Let me do that.”

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

He grabbed a pillow, pulled it under her hips and rested his pelvis between her legs. His mouth came down on her breast, grabbed a nipple and tugged it

between his teeth. His tongue licked a circle around her areola and then across her hardened peak.

“Pleaseeeee, Terry.” Nicole reached down and grabbed his shaft. Squeezed and stroked it until his breathing hitched. “Stop teasing me.” She settled the head of his cock at her opening, lifted her hips and allowed the tip to slide in. She gasped at the sensation that shot through her body. “Pleaseeee.” She bit back a whimper.

“Do you really want me, Nicole, like I want you?”

She nodded her head.

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

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

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

Nicole smiled, letting him know what she felt was wonderful. Not hurtful. The pleasure pain of his cock, stretching, molding her canal was not like anything she’d ever felt before. He filled her to completion. Immediately her pussy lips quivered at the invasion. Slade paused, waited for her body to

adjust to his girth and length, waited for his body to settle, and then started a slow glide in and out of her core.

He knew how to make her body hum. Every vessel filled with blood and sent electrical impulses to each and every nerve ending in her body. Slade ground his pelvis against her clit with each down stroke. Sucked her nipple into his mouth and twirled his tongue around it with each up stroke.

Nicole watched Slade's face. His eyes had glazed over. His breathing grew rapid. Sweat dripped from his chest. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh entangled with the moans singing from their throats.

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

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

"I'm already there."

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

They jerked, spasmed and fell to the bed. Limbs intertwined with other limbs. They didn't know

where one body began and the other ended. Slade fell on top of Nicole and buried his face between her breasts. They lay there for long moments, basking in the sensations, the delight of each other. Sated. Satisfied. Exhausted.

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

* * * *

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

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

Nicole's eyes fluttered open; she stared out into the room and lazily slid her gaze to the sleeping figure lying beside her. Her heartbeat sped up and

she closed her eyes tight, drew in a breath and let it out. She reopened her eyes. Slade was still there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Slade backed up. “Please don’t tell me you’re involved with someone else.”

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

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

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

after your...” He counted his fingers. “Fifth orgasm.”

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

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

Her eyebrows arched in question.

“Look it up. What we did to each other was not a fluke. A happenstance. I’ve never felt this alive with anyone and I know you feel the same. I heard it when you screamed my name.” He walked over to the bed, grabbed his pants off the floor and started to put them on. “When I bathed my mouth in your cum and drank down every single drop you would give me, that was not the wine talking.” He zipped his pants. “I don’t go to bed with women on a whim, Nicole, and I haven’t done it while drunk since I was twenty. Unlike some people, I take making love seriously and I’m very selective in who I give my heart to.” He drew in a deep breath and tried to relax his jaw, which seemed to pull his mouth into a tight frown. “I can’t believe you feel this way after—” He paused and held his breath to stave the anger trying to bubble up. “Nicole—” He stared down into her eyes for a heartbeat and tried to read her face. It told

him nothing. Slade grabbed his shirt, “I don’t play games, but I guess you do.” He stormed out of the room.

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

What was this? A game?

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

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

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

“What about the color of my skin, Nikki? It’s not going to change.”

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

Slade chuckled and it rippled the muscles in his body.

Nicole’s laugh joined him. “You see, I’m not as stupid as I thought I was a minute ago.”

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

“In one day you’ve given me new life.” Nicole turned and pulled Slade back toward the bedroom.

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

Chapter Five

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

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

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

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

Slade looked down the bath to her. There were still things he wanted to do with her, to her and he was happy she was up to anything he suggested or desired. He licked his lips and stared at her for one long, humming minute.

There were a few things she'd asked of him, also, that had his eyebrows rising. Her wishes were his command.

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

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

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

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

Slade glanced around the bathroom and then settled his gaze on her face. "Remember the first time we met?" Slade arched his eyebrows twice.

"Stop." Nicole rubbed her hand around her neck. "You promised to never bring that up again."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where’d it go?” Her eyes continued to move from right to left.

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

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

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

“Sorry, but you should have seen your face.”

“You’re going to see a face and you’re not going to like it.” She attempted to move again.

“Uh un. If I let you up you might hit me.”

“Damn straight.”

“I guess I’m going to have to make it up to you.” He cupped her breast and massaged it.

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

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

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

“You are so unfair. Ohhh—”

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

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

Nicole closed her eyes and let those words caress her mind. *His woman. His woman.* Was she Slade’s woman? When did it happen?

They’d spent so much time together the last few weeks she’d gotten used to having him on her arm. But hearing him claim her as his, out loud, shook her and she didn’t know why. Nicole had to remind herself it was the twenty-first century.

He’d already told her he knew he was falling in love with her. Somewhere deep in her body, at the core of her existence, she felt the same thing. But she hadn’t told him, yet. Hadn’t had the courage to say the words burning the back of her throat.

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

“That’ll teach you to sit on the other side of the tub when I call you.”

“Um, hum.” Her voice was throaty, deep.

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

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

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

Nicole turned her body, shifted up on her knees and straddled his lap. Slade’s cock, standing at attention, pressed at her stomach. Nicole wrapped her arms around his neck and captured his mouth in hers.

The kiss was like nothing she’d felt before. The heat from the steamy bath, coupled with his body pressed so tight against her, sent sensations to her core that begged for release.

She needed him like no other. Her heart ached when they were apart, yearned when they were together. Nicole lifted her hips, allowed Slade to grab his cock and place it at her slit, and she slowly lowered herself down onto him.

He gasped at the sensation. Nicole's body clenched and relaxed as she began her slow glide up and down, up and down. Slade's hand caressed her back, cupping water and cascading it across her shoulders to tickle nipples that had grown to stiff peaks. Slade brought his other hand around her body, cupped her breast and kneaded, pulled, tweaked her other nipple.

Ripples of electricity began to flood her body. Nicole's heart pounded in her chest and thrummed in her pussy. With each slide of her pussy down the length of Slade's cock he met her pump for pump, beat for beat. His free hand came around her and stroked a rhythm that met his cock. Her body felt on fire.

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

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

Nicole imploded. Every muscle in her body erupted. Every muscle spasmed. Every muscle quivered. One last clench of her pussy lips and Slade was tossed across the ledge with her. Long moments passed before they relaxed their grips on each other.

Nicole slid down in the tub and off Slade's softening cock and relaxed back against his chest. His arms came up and around her and his hands caressed her throbbing breast.

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

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

* * * *

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

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

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

Nicole tipped up on her toes, brushed her lips across his. “I’d like that.” She blew out a low breath and tried to ignore the shiver rushing her body when Slade mentioned his friends.

They’d done a lot of going out, but it was usually with only each other. Her mind wondered at the impending outing. Would his friends accept her as he had? Or would they snicker and shun her. Only time would tell.

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

“I can pick you up.”

Slade slid his finger down her jaw line and touched her bottom lip. Nicole tilted her head into

his touch. He always had a way of making her feel safe.

“That won’t be necessary. This way, if I’m running late I won’t hold you up.”

Chapter Six

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

"Nicole!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m fine. You haven’t called in a couple of weeks and I was worried.”

“Mom. You don’t have to get worried when I don’t call. I’m a big girl.”

Her mother blew out an audible breath. “I know you’re grown. I birthed you, remember.”

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

“Um, mom. I’ve really got to go.”

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

Well, here it comes.

“She’s what, three years younger than you, right?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m not pushing you toward anything, but you have to realize your clock is ticking and—”

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

She’d called him *my man*. That was a first. Her heart fluttered when the words filtered back in. “My man... My man.” She liked the way the phrase

sounded as it rolled off her tongue. Nicole mumbled it and didn't even choke.

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

Fifteen minutes and she'd be pulling into the parking lot of *The Tavern*. Terry called at five to check on her and to make sure she hadn't chickened out. She had, probably twenty times over the last twelve hours, come up with more than a handful of stupid reasons why she shouldn't go out and why she should ignore the flutters she got every time he looked at her, but the closer she got to kick off time, the more intrigued she became. Until now.

* * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

“She’s the one.”

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

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

“You sure?”

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

Jay nodded this time.

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

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

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

“Well, all I can say is congratulations. I’m happy for you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Okay. This is going to be just fine.

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

“I know that’s all right.” Bailey added. “I met Jay on the singles line.” She reached over and patted

Jay's face. "I paid twenty dollars for my husband." Everyone laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Immediately, she wondered what they were talking about. Something was up between the two

men, and the women at the table were not privy to their little secret.

A moment later, Nikki and the other women engaged in normal girl talk. Clothes, sales, work, money and men. She almost missed it when Jay nudged Terry on the arm and tilted his head toward the far side of the room.

The tavern was crowded so Nikki couldn't see who or what they were looking at, but she did see the scowl that slid across Terry's face for a split second; an expression that disappeared when he noticed Nikki looking at him. He smiled that smile that made her heart sink and made warmth settle in places unspoken of in public. She smiled back and returned her attention to Persia, who'd asked her a question she didn't hear.

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

"You bet."

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

"One at a time, please."

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

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

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

“Thanks, Jay. Please—” Terry looked at each person’s face. “Don’t say anything.”

“Shit, here she comes.”

“Not a word.”

Everyone smiled and turned to welcome Nikki’s return.

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

Bailey grabbed Persia and Jay’s arms, pointed toward the women’s room entrance and shook her head. The tall anorexic woman leaned against the bar. A glass of wine in her hand. She brought her hand up in a toast to the ones still sitting at the table, curved her lips in a smirk and took a sip of the gold liquid.

* * * *

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

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

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

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

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

The woman grabbed her arm, pulled her back to her. “Don’t think it’ll last. They never do.”

Nicole didn’t know if she should laugh or cry. What was this all about? Who was this woman who said such horrible things about Terry? And was she telling the truth? Nikki shoved her way back through the crowd and stopped just short of the table. Look at them. All huddled in a circle, laughing, joking. Probably at her expense.

She glanced back toward the bathroom and the woman who’d literally accosted her. The stranger smiled, nodded and waved as if to say ‘bye-bye.’ Nikki turned and ran for the front door. Nausea rolled in her gut and up to her throat. Her chest tightened and if she didn’t get some air very soon, the fear of losing it right in the middle of the tavern wasn’t far from her mind.

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

“What’s the matter?” His voice was full of concern. Worry.

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

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

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

Nikki shifted the car into gear, turned out of the parking spot and drove off. She didn’t look back, couldn’t. Terry stood dumbstruck at the curb, massaging the knot at the back of his throat. What happened? Did someone say something inappropriate to her? Maybe she was just tired.

Everything tumbled through Terry’s mind as he tried to relive the past few hours. Everything was going great. They were laughing, talking. What happened when she went to the bathroom? That was the question.

Terry turned and stormed back into the tavern.

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

“No, she’s not. What the hell happened?”

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

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

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

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

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

"One day, Christa. One day."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why would she say those horrible things to me?”

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

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

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

* * * *

Bam! Bam! Bam!

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

Is he crazy?

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

Bam! Bam! Bam!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did Terry tell you who Christa was?"

"No. Sort of. I don't know." Nikki glanced from each woman to the floor. "I don't know what to

believe. Why would this stranger say the things she did?”

“Because she’s evil. Nasty and a snot.”

Persia and Bailey glanced at Janet and nodded their heads.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nikki nodded. Smiled.

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

Pulling her toward the bedroom the other two women followed.

“What’s going on?”

“Trust me and just listen.”

“Listen to your heart.” Janet added.

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

“Do you have any scarves?” Bailey asked.

Nikki looked over toward the dresser. “Top drawer.”

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

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

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

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

“Close you eyes and go with the feelings.”

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

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

Everyone chuckled, as did Nikki.

“Are you okay with this?”

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

“Why do I have to be tied up?”

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

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

Soft lips captured her nipple, sucked it until it was swollen, then a warm tongue swirled around her hardened peak. Different sensations flooded her body, mind. A moan rose in her throat and fractured the air. The ministrations stopped.

A soft chuckle circled her head but she couldn’t tell whom it was from. Hands and mouths touched her, heating her to something new. She knew these were women caressing her, but the heat that began to churn at her core was not unlike the heat that stirred when Terry’s mouth touched her.

Nikki’s body squirmed when a finger lightly stroked across her clit. Her breath hitched and her heart began to pound in her chest. She wanted to touch the person touching her. Feel their skin and see if it was as hot as hers. A hand cupped each of

her breasts. Kneaded, caressed, tweaked her nipples and pulled another moan from her throat.

A mouth touched her swollen globes, trailing soft, butterfly kisses along the sides, around the curve across her nipple. Another hand kneaded the other and then it happened. One slow stroke of a hot, moist, steamy tongue across her clef. Her hips bucked off of the bed at the sensations tumbling through her body. Her soul.

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

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

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

“Open your eyes, Nikki.”

Nikki reached up and pulled the blindfold from her face. Persia, Bailey and Janet stood at the end of

the bed. Each face expressionless, telling her nothing.

“Do you know who was doing what?” Bailey smiled.

Nikki shook her head. She really didn’t.

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

“I guess not. I’ve been such a fool.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But that’s okay too. We’ve all been there.” Persia said.

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

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

“Why didn’t you make me cum?”

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

“So it was you?” Nikki stared into Bailey’s eyes.

“You’ll never know. I bet you never had a woman eat you before.”

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

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

Nikki jumped off of the bed, tied the sash around her waist and ran for the front door. She banged on

Terry's door and kicked it with her foot. He opened it with one quick jerk.

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

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

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

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

"In more ways than you know."

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

The End

Also from the original digest...

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Ayprial's Desire, Violet Heart

Dr. Peter Bastian didn't know what he was in for when he pulled a mermaid from a commercial fishing net. Neither did she.

Enchanted, Nancy O'Berry

Revenge a deadly sin on land and beneath the waves off coastal Virginia . When two of Neptune 's daughters fight, there can be only one winner.

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Kaliphia was determined to capture a sea-dragon and use a wish to find her lost love; only meeting Zandel became the wish she never expected to be granted.

Maiden of the Mist, Alexis Ke

Lia refuses to believe merfolk have but one true love. One mate. If that were true then she wouldn't have had a man fall to her from the sky.

Ayprial's Desire

By

Violet Heart

Chapter One

Ayprial's tail twitched with irritation. Planting a hand on the fin to still it, she asked her mentor, "Why don't you know? You're my teacher. If you can't tell me, how am I supposed to learn?"

Rysha sliced an angry arm through the water. "It doesn't matter! To survive, we don't need to know about outside things." She flipped her long white braid over a shoulder and looked away.

Ayprial crossed her arms, trying not to glare at her stubborn teacher. "Aren't we past mere survival? I mean, look around." She swung her arm in a wide arc, taking in the elaborate city with its glowing coral and harvested neon fish casting light everywhere. "Our society is sophisticated. Intelligent. We have a complex communications network with the other cities along the drop-off zone. There's no reason we should be closed-minded. So why aren't we making an effort to better understand our world?"

"I don't have time for this," said Rysha, packing shells into her sack. Her seafoam gray eyes reflected metallic flecks in the light streaming down from a glow worm lantern.

“Then you won’t mind if I do some exploring on my own.”

Her mentor turned on her, hands fisted on hips where the skin of her torso met her tail. “I most certainly do. It’s not safe outside the city walls. You’ve been sheltered and don’t know what’s out there.”

Frustration made Ayprial’s gills flutter, sending tiny pearlescent bubbles into her hair. She pushed the billowing mass of black tendrils behind her. “It’s not my fault I don’t have a family to lead me into the outlands. I’ve been asking *you* to show me for years.”

Rysha trembled. At first, Ayprial thought her teacher shook with anger, but a flash of fear transformed the older mermaid’s features a moment before she lowered the veil of indifference back into place. “Of course, it’s not your fault you lost your parents at such a young age. But I’m not the one to take you out of the city.”

“Well, I’m an adult now—”

“And time for you to put aside your childish interest in creatures and plants that will play no part in your life as wife and mother. You should concentrate on finding your lifemate.”

Oh! Ayprial wanted to scream. Her teacher toted the sack and began to swim toward the orphanage, and she followed. “It’s not childish. And it’s not just about creatures and plants. I want to know about currents and tides, why it’s so bright near the

surface and what makes the coral glow. Why some days it glows brighter than others— Oof!” Her pet triggerfish, Pentri, rammed her in the stomach, halting her.

Rysha didn’t turn. She merely shook her head and lifted a dismissing hand as she continued on her way.

She doesn’t care, thought Ayprial, stroking Pentri’s snout to calm him. Tomorrow, she would turn twenty-two and reach her majority. The orphanage would no longer offer her a place to stay. And Rysha would say goodbye.

No doubt with great relief.

Ayprial had no intension of sticking around for them to kick her out. She’d go to another city. One where nobody knew her. Where she could begin anew, as a person of worth. She couldn’t be the only merperson who wanted to learn about their world. Perhaps she would meet someone who would teach her. Explore with her. Share her curiosity.

Yes. She had no reason to stay.

“I’m leaving,” she told her pet. “Where should I go? Krypta or Stryka?”

Pentri studied her a moment then turned to face the orphanage.

“No. I don’t care that the day is coming to an end. I’m not staying.” She picked up a shell. “Ridges side—Krypta. Smooth side—Stryka.”

The fish spun around to watch.

Ayprial flipped the shell, which toppled end over

end to land silently on the silt of the ocean floor. Smooth side up.

“Stryka it is.” Joyful anticipation mingled with fear of the unknown. Rysha had seemed terrified at the idea of leaving the boundaries of their home city of Entra. Ayprial couldn’t ignore that. But she couldn’t stay, either. To give in to fear meant living the rest of her life with regrets.

She looked one last time toward the orphanage. She had arrived there with nothing; she would leave with nothing. No friends. No possessions. Not even fond memories.

Turning her back on the place, she nodded to Pentri. “I’ll understand if you want to stay.”

Her pet darted, bouncing off her chest then snuggling under her arm.

She chuckled. “Let’s go.”

With her heart sad from a disappointing past, but her eyes on a bright and hopeful future, Ayprial swam for the enormous arching columns that formed the city’s gateway.

Enchanted
By
Nancy O'Berry

Chapter One

Serena swished her flukes, ignoring the situation evolving in her father's room as her sister cried out her rage. She kept her hands busy by braiding and unbraiding her long flaxen hair while paying no heed to the cries of her younger sibling.

"How could you not have known he belonged to your sister?" her father's voice roared over the rising lament at his feet.

She shrugged her shoulders and looked in another direction. She needed to show penance then her father's anger would cease to exist. It always did. Besides, her sister was young. She could practice on another mortal. His voice rose again catching her attention.

"This behavior will not be tolerated." He turned toward the child at his fins. "Nadine, we shall find you another one. One who won't so easily be seduced." He scowled at his other daughter across the room.

She lowered her head so her father wouldn't see the blatant roll of her eyes.

“They are all alike, those mortals,” she spoke up in her own defense.

Her comment only inflamed her sister’s angst, making her cry harder.

“He was mine, Father. I was going to seduce him, my first. She butted in just like she always does,” Nadine lamented. “She sang for him, Father, after she told me you wanted me. She sent me away on a fool’s errand and took my cull!”

Serena could not help it, a chuckle slipped out. “Fool’s errand did you call it, dear sister,” her red lips lifted in a sneer. “He was no match for you. Your voice has not yet developed its tone. He would have floundered and died a horrible death, realizing you were not strong enough to pull him in for coupling.”

Her tone, derogatory, making her younger sister howl in agony.

“Enough!” King Neptune bellowed. His deep voice shook the very stool she sat upon.

Serena looked skyward through the crystal dome to see the sky grow dark and the sea churn into a tempest at her father’s will. Drawing her eyes back to the throne, she could see the anger in the dark purple of his eyes.

“It’s bad enough a mermaid steals another’s cull, but to do it to your own sister, Serena,” he said and shook his head. “Somehow I thought better of you.”

“You will punish her, Father, please, for me,” Nadine begged. Her earnest tears cascaded down her

cheeks to pool at her father's fins, turning to tiny pearls.

Serena took a deep breath and thought of how to calm the stormy waters. "Father, I did nothing more than sun myself on a rock."

"Did you smile at him, daughter?" The King leveled his angry glare at her.

"I...I suppose I did," she began fluttering her eyes, hoping to appear demure. "It's a natural habit," she opened her mouth to defend herself further when he roared.

"Silence, speak no more to me about this, child," his voice edged with fury. "You are no more a daughter of mine. Your actions shame our family and our people. You have brought disgrace upon our name." His fist beat against the sky as his resentment swirled. Lightning flashed above him rattling the chamber causing the other royals to shrink against the stones.

"Father," Serena rose to her fins, for she had never seen such anger in his face before.

His raised hand stopped her. "I have allowed you to do as you please all these years, but no more. You have taken advantage of my good nature, and now you must pay the consequences."

Stunned she floated down to the chair.

"Do you know what the penalty is for embezzling a mortal?"

She nodded, a knot formed near her heart, causing it to forget a beat.

“My daughter, it is death,” Neptune rose, pacing in front of his throne. His head moved slowly to and fro as if he were having trouble coming to deal with this disaster.

Death! No, he could not sentence his own daughter to death she thought to herself. *Banishment. Yes, banishment would be the likely course of action.* She could live with banishment

“Guards,” he called out and suddenly two larger mermen appeared from the shadows.

“Father,” she whispered in a shaky voice. “Father, you don’t mean this.”

Neptune held out his hand and turned away from his beloved child. “My daughter has broken the law. We are not above the edicts of the sea.” He struggled with the next words that issued from his mouth. His voice shook as he spoke, “Take her to the chamber below while I debate her fate.”

“Father,” Serena shrieked as the guards grabbed her arms. “Father, no!”

The last thing she saw as she was pulled against the current was her father’s hunched shoulders as he bent over to comfort her younger sister.

The Sea-Dragon's Wish

By

Mae Powers

Chapter One

Kaliphia inhaled the sweet waters of the Western Sea as she held the chains tightly. Stormy sweetness, that's what it felt like in these strange parts. But it had all been worth it, the long quest she'd undertaken to find her true heart's desire. And here and now, with the huge sea dragon as her captive, she'd finally gotten her wish; what she'd been sent for all along.

Hadn't the old sea hag Valprah told her that when she searched the ends of the Great Oceans and found the last Sea Dragon then she'd get her heart's wish and find her destiny? Well, she held him now, in her magical chains. He would not be released until he granted her wish.

She studied the sleeping, floating sea-dragon, entangled in her mer-chains.

His body was half male-human, a bit of real dragon and still as beautiful as a merman's or a merloid's, she thought. His stretched limbs ended with feet, slightly webbed and yet with toes, like a humanoid or a merloid like herself, would have.

From its shoulders down its naked back a wide-set of frilly wings graced him, giving him an unearthly, ethereal appeal to a person viewing him for the first time. He had a long, elegant body with semi-thick scales of yellow and deep blue-green. Threaded through the pliant, but hard surface of them, his scales were inlaid with shimmering bronze. His ears were neither tiny or overly large, but elegant with lacy-like frills on the edges of his ears, which swayed in the water like his drowsy body.

Although he had long claws and sharp teeth like a land or sea dragon, he wasn't knobby all over like some of those creatures were. Dragons, she had learned, were wise creatures, and she didn't doubt that the outer-water ones were as well. But Sea Dragons were the oldest and wisest of all dragon-kind. That's why the sea hag had sent her to find this dragon or one of his kind. She'd heard rumors that few of them were left, perhaps only one. Their numbers had dwindled, and no one knew quite why that was. Surely something could be done for them.

This mysterious creature before her, slumbering beneath the dark and brewing seas, was magnificent to behold. She'd searched long and hard for him, to seek the answer to her own heart's quest, her destiny. And her search had ended here, in the dark waters of the Western Sea. He'd been dozing when she came across him.

A magical creature in some mystical sea-arts herself, she took the magical lasso her father had left

her and captured the dragon with it. None could gainsay her anything with it and a siren's song. Half mermaid, part witch and part human, she had a variety of powers, but none were very strong. None as ancient as this sea-dragon's were, which was why she needed him to help her.

The hag said the only way to get a sea-dragon to give someone what he or she wanted was by taking him prisoner, and then he'd exchange a wish for his freedom. Sea-dragons hated to be confined and unable to roam the seas. Her father, a human male witch and a fisherman by trade, showed her how to lasso with the magical net and ropes he'd left her. Using them was how he'd caught her mother. In their romantic tale though, he'd let her go. But she came back, and the two fell in love and lived as happily ever after as they could.

Her father was given the gift of living in the ocean and happily went there to live with her mother and their kind, beings called merloids, who were a mixture of merperson and something else. Kaliphia remembered her earliest childhood of living on the shore of these dark waters in the Western Sea before her parents took her into the wonders of the Great Oceans to be with others of her kind. They'd all been happy until she'd begun to look for a mate.

She'd tried to love a few men and mermen. Merloid men were few since most hybrid sea creatures were female. She always had a fascination with humans, and when she rescued one from a

shipwreck, she'd fallen in love with the man. She took him to shore and healed him. Then she found treasures for him and promised him a good life. He had disappeared though...

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The Maiden of the Mist

**By
Alexis Ke**

Chapter One

Paul strolled along the sidewalk adjacent the waterfall. He used to come out here when he needed, wanted some time alone. It had been a long time since he'd visited this spot. The mist from the fog coated his face and clothing, sending a cool shiver across his body. He should have worn a jacket, but his mind was preoccupied. He hadn't been able to keep anything on track for the last few months.

It was bad enough to come home one night to find his girl friend had left him. Okay, things happened. But why did she have to run off with his business partner? And why, he glanced up at the sky as if asking the heavens, did they have to run off with money? He'd worked hard the past ten years saving and providing. He guessed he provided too much. As each day went by, he realized how vivid the signs had been, and he'd missed them all. The late night trips to the market. The over-zealousness of his partner to drive her home when they were working late or he had to go out of town. "Don't worry, man. I'll watch over her and make sure she's safe." Yeah, sure, right. Apparently his partner, *that*

son of a bitch, had been doing more than keeping her safe.

Paul shook his head in disgust. How could he have been so blind? Everywhere he went he felt people were laughing at him behind his back.

“Look at the poor schmoo.”

“Look at the man who couldn’t keep a woman or business partner.”

“Look at the man who didn’t see the fire until all of his skin was burned off.”

Paul swallowed hard in an attempt to push the bile that suddenly rose to the back of his throat, back to his gut. Stopping along the railing, he stared down into the raging, swirling water below. Thoughts of ending it all skidded across his mind. What did he have to live for anyway? Everything he loved, or thought he loved, was gone. After all, who would miss him? He had no family to speak of. The few friends left would just think he’d moved away or gone into hiding. Before they figured it out, it would be too late. He closed his eyes and sucked in a breath, held it for a long moment and let it out in one quick rush. He sucked in another.

A soft whimper fractured the quietness circling his head. Paul opened his eyes and looked from side to side. Nothing.

“I must be hearing things.”

He glanced down into the water and let the mystical hypnotic affect grab hold of him. Again

came the same crying sound, except this time it was louder, clearer.

“Why, oh mighty one. Why am I so alone?”

First he thought it was a child, but the more he listened, the more distinct the voice became. It was a woman’s voice. A young woman to be exact. Paul glanced around again, up and down the sidewalk and over the railing. He chuckled at that. What would someone be doing in the water? In the rapid current of the waterfall? But the sounds were coming from below him. He leaned over the railing and craned his neck to see. There it was again.

“I’m so alone. I don’t want to do this anymore.” The voice wrapped around him and squeezed his heart. It was soft, delicate and tortured. He knew what tortured was. He’d been that way for months.

Maybe it was one of those shows, a reality show to make you act a fool on television only to find out later it was a punked-up scenario.

The whimper grew louder, cutting through the sounds of the waterfall.

Was that a person? He looked harder, squinting to make out what was down there. Almost one hundred yards away under the cascading water of the falls sat a woman. Her body was draped across the large rock formation as if she was searching for something under the water. *Absolutely beautiful*. Her hair, long flowing down past her hip, blanketed her body like a shawl. Her skin glowed in colors of

blue and green and turquoise, most likely from the lights reflecting off of the water.

Paul sucked in a breath when his gaze traveled the length of her body and stopped at her legs and feet. There was something roping her feet together.

“Don’t move!” Paul yelled in hopes she would hear him. He took off in a dead run up the walk to get closer to where she was...

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A Wizard For Hire

By

Barbara Donlon Bradley

Stephanie? A legend? Wizards? For real? When she flees down a corridor and finds herself in another world, Stephanie finds all her beliefs in question.

A Wizard For Hire
By
Barbara Donlon Bradley

Chapter One

“Stop glancing at your watch,” Stephanie said. “It isn’t doing to make this graduation move any faster.”

Mia jerked her arm behind her and gave her boss a forced smile. “You know how much I hate these things.”

Stephanie patted her on the back. She found attending the graduations of her “students” had started to bore her too, but she did this for the client. “Let them have their night, Mia. It’s only a few hours.”

“So who do you think will be the first one to leave?” Mia snagged a glass of champagne from a waiter’s tray.

“I’d bet money on Bill and his wife. They’re normally the first to arrive and to leave.” Stephanie Powers, CEO of Power Imaging, gave her assistant a smile. “Then you can be second.”

“Boss, if it weren’t for your presence, I bet most would have hightailed it out of here a while ago.”

Stephanie elbowed Mia as one of their clients approached them. Time to focus. The man coming

toward her made her skin crawl, but she smiled and showed her best business face.

“Miss Powers, thank you so much for inviting us here tonight.”

“Mr. Tryst. I’m glad you were able to make it.” He looked the part she created for him, wearing the classic design suit she had recommended. His hair, cut short and feathered back, looked much better than the greasy ponytail he sported when he approached her to make him over. Yet he still looked, well, slimy.

“I would like you to meet my associate, Mr. Jolly. He’s also interested in hiring you.”

Stephanie wanted to scream and run the other way. She didn’t want to go through the process again with another creepy man. Especially if he was friends with the first.

“Call the office in the morning, and we’ll see what we can do.” She kept her smile pasted on and excused herself.

Mia was hot on her heels. “Are you crazy?” she whispered. “Mr. Tryst nearly cost us the entire staff.”

“I couldn’t be rude.” Stephanie gave her assistant a sidelong glance. “But you could make sure we’re booked for months.”

“You hoping he will get tired of waiting and go somewhere else?”

“Yes.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“We’ll deal with that tomorrow. Tonight, we smile, tell our graduates they look great and enjoy the party as best we can.” Stephanie excused herself from Mia. She needed a little time alone.

One of the secluded love seats caught her eye. Far enough away from the rest of her clients, it would give her time to regain the composure she came close to losing a few moments ago.

“Are you sure this will work?”

Stephanie barely heard the voices. Her mind focused on the calming techniques she used, but the voices continued to intrude. She hoped they moved out of earshot quickly so she could try to relax.

“Yes. Miss Powers recreated me, didn’t she?”

She frowned. Drat it, they weren’t leaving, and they were talking about her.

“You do look like a proper businessman.”

Stephanie felt a cold finger of dread snake its way up her spine as she recognized the voices.

“Yet you and I know the truth, eh?”

The other man laughed.

She started to get up, knowing she shouldn’t eavesdrop on someone’s private conversation. Before she could move, the two men moved closer, making it impossible for her to leave without being seen.

“Once we create the illusion of the men we are replacing no one will be wiser. We will infiltrate the right companies and gain what we need.”

“There is a danger.”

“My brother, there is always a danger when dealing with weapons of mass destruction.”

“He will pay us well if we can complete our mission.”

“And we will gain the respect we deserve.”

What had she stumbled onto? Weapons of mass destruction? Who were these guys?

“Mr. Tryst?”

Oh dear. Mia had to be looking for her.

“Yes.”

“Have you seen Miss Powers? I saw her heading this way a few moments ago.”

Damn Mia for being so observant. If they knew she had overheard their conversation she might be in trouble.

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