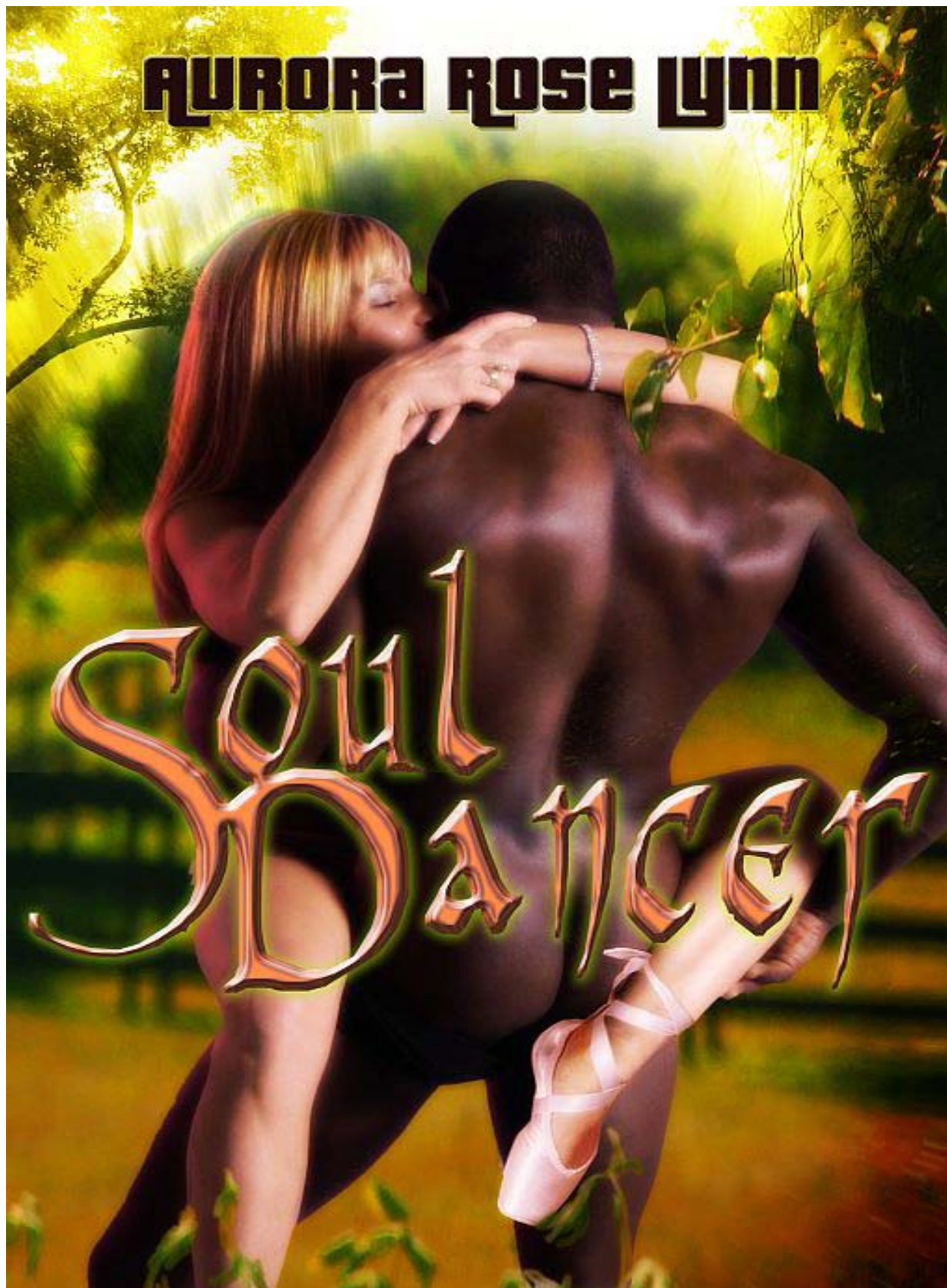


AURORA ROSE LYNN

**Soul
Dancer**



Soul Dancer

By Aurora Rose Lynn

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Resplendence Publishing, LLC
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Table of Contents

<i>Chapter One</i>	5
<i>Chapter Two</i>	13
<i>Chapter Three</i>	24
<i>Chapter Four</i>	30
<i>Chapter Five</i>	35
<i>Chapter Six</i>	42
<i>Epilogue</i>	48
<i>About the Author</i>	49

Chapter One

Planet of Manitee-a, Becutan Villa

2975 Common Era

“Dance with me like we used to.”

Clenching her hands into tight fists, Kierra Vonne searched the room behind Jamar. Was there anything that appeared out of place or was anyone eavesdropping where they shouldn't? The antechamber was empty.

Returning her haunted gaze to him, she whispered urgently, “Please. You know we can't be seen together.” They could if he were ordering her to perform some lowly task but treating her as an equal was forbidden on Becutan land.

He took a decisive, graceful step toward her. With her heart pounding, she backed away. He was the most devastatingly handsome man she'd ever known with his black skin in sharp contrast to the whiteness of her own.

“Lord Jamar,” she said, stating his formal name with the hope of distancing him from her, “my station is far below yours. If you would like a cup a caya tea, please don't hesitate to tell me.” The soft-spoken, meaningful reminder should deter him until she found a way to flee, but the antechamber's sliding doors were behind him and impossibly out of reach.

Jamar faced her, as rooted to the polished floor as a thirty-foot caya tree with its stately fronds undulating in the still, humid air. Except caya trees didn't have sizeable hard-ons. “Kierra,” he said, breaking the tense, expectant silence, “the music is empty and meaningless without you.”

"Don't," she pleaded, her voice breathless and hoarse to her own ears. She moistened her lips, unwilling to run past the handsome man who'd once been her best childhood friend. Age and the dictates of society had placed a sharp, divisive line between them that neither could cross. If her heart could bleed dry, this would be a good time while Jamar observed her from heavy-lidded, gold eyes. Every time he came within a few feet of her, her heart danced in imitation of an erotic and fast-paced samba.

He moved forward several inches. "We can dance again," he murmured, his hot gaze never leaving hers. "We can drive the butterflies into a frenzy and the birds to sing in our honor."

Like we used to.

Emphatically, Kierra shook her head. "Those days are over," she said quietly, her heart shattering into a million pieces. If only he was white like she was, not so devastatingly sexy with black skin and short, onyx hair she'd tenderly run her fingers through countless times.

The small room that served as an antechamber to his bedroom was closing in on her, sending her into a panic that left every muscle in her body quivering. He'd come a step closer and towered above her with his magnetic and charming presence.

"You know you'll give in and dance with me," he warned, his eyes flashing with sensuous heat.

Kierra sensed her world slipping away. She knew better than to allow him closer, and yet he'd cornered her as if he'd known she'd be here dusting and vacuuming. Had he arranged this meeting? She hadn't seen him in almost three years. No, that was an outright lie. Without his knowledge, she'd watched him several times as he bathed in the cool blue waters in the enclosed courtyard.

He was the most attractive man she'd ever seen. His arms rippled with muscles, as did his thighs. She'd even allowed herself to wonder what would happen if she'd lain between his thighs, his hot shaft pulsing with fierce longing and her wet pussy spasming with need.

She gave a shuddering breath. She shouldn't have looked, but the sight of his nude, virile body left her weak and helpless. Kierra could never have him. Sex with a Jaquill was punishable by death.

With a jolt, she brought herself back to the present. "No, I won't give in. All we've done together belongs in the past." The distant past when they were barely more than children, growing up in a world filled with strict rules where the ruling class, the Jaquill, weren't allowed to associate with the kattanee, their slaves.

"No one needs to know, Kierra," Jamar muttered, his gaze locked with hers.

She shook her head, swift words of rebuke poured from her lips. "Let's face it, Jamar. This is your world." She waved a hand toward his bedroom, then in a sweeping arc. "If they find you in bed with a white girl, you'll go unpunished. I'll face the penalty of death. So what do you have to lose?" Her words sounded harsh and bitter.

"You've never spoken to me like that before." He pressed his lips together, and his gaze told her how incredulous he was.

"Because we're grown up. We're not children anymore. You can never recapture those days. Not ever."

He closed the distance between them so quickly that Kierra took a reflexive step back. The wall behind her stopped her dead in her tracks.

"I'm not talking about the things we did when we were children," he said, his tone languid and filled with meaning.

A tingling tremor ran down her spine. Was he hinting there could be more between them, like sex?

"No." Kierra pushed at his chest with the flat of her hands.

Jamar seized her wrists in his large hands, black skin against white. "No what? Am I not your lord and master?"

He'd never before hinted at the distance their society placed between them.

"You can't force me to do something I don't want to," she said softly, hoping her eyes didn't betray her. She longed for Jamar in every way a woman longed for a man. At times, Kierra had awoken with her nightclothes drenched with sweat and her skin damp with perspiration from the erotic dreams she'd had, always with Jamar, his dark skin a blinding contrast to her light skin. Now, she sensed he was reaching into himself to retrieve the music that had haunted her since she'd first met him fifteen years earlier.

Jamar was the only one she knew on the whole plantation who was so gifted. He could align himself with the harmonics of the universe, the music the ungifted seldom, if ever, heard.

"Don't, Jamar," she whispered, as she choked back the tears welling in her throat. "Don't do this to me." Was he hedging on the truth? Did he want more than a simple dance?

"We'll just dance, Kierra, nothing more. Who would find anything wrong with that?"

If anyone chanced upon them, they'd more than likely call the authorities and have her hauled to jail where she would languish until the day she was forced to drink the poison that

would kill her. Yet to be in Jamar's strong arms, to feel his hard chest pressed against her soft breasts and his rigid cock thrust against her stomach, wasn't that bliss?

Was it worth death?

Jamar shifted one hand to the small of her back. With his toes, he gently kicked open the door to his bedroom. Every part of her body trembled with curiosity and anticipation. Dancing with Jamar was a thrilling experience that bound together their souls and their bodies. Resistance, in any form, was futile. It was as if his heart reached out to hers, regardless of the color of their skin.

"No, Jamar!" Kierra tensed and her eyes darted nervously from his face to the front entrance to the antechamber.

"Shh... No one will see us, and I promise I'll play the music quietly."

She knew he kept his promises. One gaze into his golden eyes was all it took to lose her flagging willpower. When the music began, coming from his mind into hers, a slow tempo to which passionate lovers could gradually dance, she heaved a sigh.

"Just this once, Jamar," she whispered, running from him all but forgotten.

He nodded, causing her to wonder if he would keep his promise and if they'd only have this one dance. Pressing her body against his, he took slow steps with her, his full lips close to her ear and his warm breath fanning her flushed cheek. She felt safe and protected in his arms. If only they could be together until everlasting death took them, but that wasn't ever to be. His skin was black and hers white; she Kattaneé and he Jaquill. Nothing would ever change that.

If only she could rid herself of her morbid thoughts, but her mother, although her intention had been kind, had warned Kierra when she was ten not to become attached to Jamar or anyone else with black skin. It was the Manitee-an way. She'd looked around their small, cramped house and told her she'd have to work hard all her life just for a pittance and that she should never expect to live in the same luxury as the ruling class.

Kierra turned her face up to Jamar's at the same time he moved his head to gaze into her eyes. Her breath stalled, and she felt his heart racing in his chest. He said nothing as he lowered his soft lips to her mouth and gave her a lingering kiss fraught with subdued but rising tension, arousal and deep hunger. She closed her eyes against the blast of furious longing that rattled her to her very core. She parted her lips and, trembling, allowed him to ravish her mouth as she secretly longed for him to ravage her body.

The soles of her shoes swept the floor in tight circles moving in rhythm with Jamar's bare feet. She longed to tell him she loved him, but deep within her heart, she knew he'd instantly rebuff her. There was no such thing as forever love between a black man and a white woman. Love as in friendship, yes, but without commitment.

Jamar lifted his head and gave her an earnest appraisal that made her suddenly shy. "I've never kissed you before," he said in a breathy whisper. The music continued in the background. His eyes sparkled.

Kierra couldn't match his frank gaze any longer. "Jamar," she began, watching the rise and fall of his chest. "You can't ever kiss me again, and this dance, it's all wrong." Although it felt so wonderfully right.

He slid his thumb under her chin and tipped up her head. "I don't believe you."

"Don't." She averted her eyes, wondering how she could stop this madness. Words weren't working. Maybe if she just kissed him one more time, his insistent questions and the pleading expression would vanish in a puff of misty air.

"I want you in my bed, Kierra. I know you want the same thing." His feet moved slowly, back and forth, as if laying down a foundation of blind trust allied with magic.

Jamar wants me? That isn't possible.

"No."

Yes, I do, but I don't want to pay the frightening price after you're finished with me.

"You know I can order you to take your clothes off, don't you?"

"Stop!" she told him, irritated, jarring to an abrupt stop. She huffed a breath and stepped away from him, feeling vulnerable and alone. Still, intense longing coursed through her. "When they haul me away to prison for sleeping with you, what are you going to do? Will you even care?"

Abruptly, the fine strains of music stopped. Jamar released her. Pain etched his features. "I'd come with you." He spoke softly, as if he were amazed she'd question him.

"To jail? To death? You're messing with my head, aren't you?" She'd had enough. If she didn't save herself from this insanity, no one, including Jamar, would bother. She took a few steps forward and lifted her hands to push him out of her way. In less than a heartbeat, he propelled her against the wall. Her spine touched the brutally cold stone.

"We grew up together, Kierra. Did you think that after we were adults, I'd simply turn my back on you as if we'd never had anything between us?"

She cringed at his terse words.

“We were children. We didn’t know any better,” she burst out, her heart racing with fear and, oddly, elation. Niggling suspicion began to erode the joy. What did he really want? A fling in bed then leaving her to take the consequences alone?

His thickset eyebrows arched upward.

“We didn’t know any better,” he repeated on the threshold of her hearing. Setting his hands on the wall to either side of her head, he blinked several times. “I don’t think you understand. I want to make love to you. I want you lying naked on my bed, your nipples puckered into tiny pleasure spots and your thighs open for me so I can lick your clit and fuck you. That’s what I want.”

In an edgy whisper, she said, “But you never asked me what I want.”

Had Jamar changed into a monster she no longer knew? Had he been blinded by his power over the kattane?

His lips curled in a thin smile. “We’ve always wanted the same thing. Always.”

As if that explained everything.

She opened her mouth to retort. Nothing but a moan came as his lips claimed the soft curve of her throat. Her hands rose of their own accord, and her fingers twined in the short strands of his onyx hair.

Her panties under her uniform dampened and her heart beat faster than pounding rain. He tilted back his head and gave her a wicked grin. “I know you want me as much as I want you.”

Jamar acknowledged they were much too alike not to share the same desires. Kierra knew each small detail about him as he knew all about her—how her dark eyes flashed when she was upset. How she became irritated or troubled but never angry.

Now Kierra was in his room and very close to being in his bed. If only he could show her how much he loved her. If only his parents and Kierra’s could look the other way and forget the division that existed on Becutan. He could hope, but it was a foolhardy hope that everyone would continue to look the other way. Jamar considered telling Kierra about his thoughts, but she’d changed in the last few years. She’d become more distant and inexplicably afraid of what she couldn’t directly relate to. Not that he’d seen too much of her, but he’d missed her more than he cared to admit. The few times he’d encountered her in the villa, she’d been frightened and fled as fast as she could.

As she toyed with the fine hairs at his nape, he shuddered with the thrill of her tender touch. *I want to make you my wife, Kierra Vonne, and make you Mrs. Q'ellan. We won't care as heads turn and gossip and rumors swirl around us. No matter what happens, we'll have each other. Nothing can come between us.*

He couldn't voice his thoughts to her, the woman he couldn't stop thinking about, the woman who tormented him in his wet, erotic dreams.

"I want you," she whispered suddenly, breaking the hushed silence.

"I hear a 'but' in there somewhere," he murmured, unfastening the button at her throat. The bland, white uniform did nothing to enhance her natural beauty. Her face was startlingly pale.

She nodded and slapped his hand from her collar. "But we can't. I know the luxurious, privileged world you come from protects you from everything bad, but my world," she said emphasizing the last two words. "My world is bad. Period. You don't belong in mine, and I don't belong in yours."

Her melancholy expression told Jamar just how much she hurt.

"Maybe you and I should start a revolution," he said half-jokingly. "We need to get married and show our world how happy a Jaquill and a kattanee can be. That it's not unethical."

"No! Marrying you won't make me Jaquill, will it?" she thrust at him.

This time she didn't run or push him away. Was he making progress and getting through to her? Did she understand he wanted her but not just for a brief fling. Forever and damn the consequences?

"No?" he demanded. "But it will make you mine."

"You can't do that. You can't marry me. Manitee-a might never be ready for the kind of wedding you're proposing. And I refuse to be a seshan pig you can test your theories out on."

She ducked around him and turned her back on him to flee, but he wouldn't have her running away on him. He caught her around the waist and spun her around. "Kierra. I've always loved you. From the moment we met. I love the way the sun glints on your blonde hair. I love the way you laugh when I make a joke. I love the wonder on your face when I show you a hidden lake or a night sky filled with stars that glitter like a million jewels. I love you."

Her hands came up in tight fists, and she pummeled his chest. "No, Jamar! You can't say that! You can't even think it! It will never, never happen." Her cobalt eyes were bathed in fear. And tears.

Seizing her wrists, he pulled her to him. “Maybe not at a macro level, but we’ll change the world at a micro level. Ours,” he told her, willing the hurt and pain to disappear from the eyes he loved so much.

“Let me go. You can’t do this to me.”

They’d gone full circle. If he couldn’t reason with her then he’d take her to bed and show her how much love he had for her. Releasing her hands, he scooped her up in his arms and strode toward the bed. He didn’t give a rat’s ass about the brocade bedspread and tossed Kierra on it, coming down on top of her with a vengeance.

She lay facing him as if she were formed of ice, but he refused to look into her expressive eyes, afraid of what he’d find there. More pain, more frustration, more desperation. He could only hope that once his cock lay deep inside her cunt that she’d realize his deep love for her, that she’d change her mind.

Chapter Two

Kierra squirmed under his deft, experienced hand as his warm palm trailed up the outside of her thigh, sending delicious shivers into her pussy. Need spiraled into sharp-pointed arousal, and despite her misgivings, she relaxed into the pleasure that he offered.

“You’re hot for me.” His statement was matter-of-fact and filled with awe.

This time his earnest, slumberous eyes met hers. His long fingers burned a trail of fire along her skin under the well-worn cotton of her uniform. She marveled at the tenderness with which he not only spoke but also caressed her. She moaned as her pussy clenched in a short, powerful spasm.

“When we were younger, I’d get so horny just thinking about you naked under me, even as we lay under the stars looking up at heaven.” He chuckled lightheartedly. “All I knew, heaven was right beside me and her name was Kierra.”

She couldn’t help herself and smiled. They’d never made love before. “You sound as if you’re a lovesick fool.” His fingers edged between the elastic of her panties and her burning skin. Kierra shifted, longing for him to move faster, to ease the desperate yearning swirling through her body. Her nipples beaded into tight buds and her channel was wet with her juices.

“Don’t put words into my mouth,” he kidded, his eyes lighting up. He jerked aside the elastic. His thumb searched and expertly found her weeping channel. “And you said you didn’t want me.”

Kierra snorted self-derisively, sensing their relationship had taken a major turn. They were no longer children. He was twenty-four to her nineteen, and although they’d never been afraid to touch each other, they were at this moment exploring each other at an intimate level. Her mind urged her to escape the sexual madness in which they were embroiled, but her heart demanded more and her body even more yet.

Her fingers strayed to his nape and to the fine hairs there. As a child, he'd worn his hair shoulder-length, but had acquiesced to society's pressure that Jaquill men sported it short. She never wore her long hair down anymore, not even to sleep at night. Instead, she twisted it into a braid, then into a tight bun to make herself as featureless as possible as all the other white women did. Kattanee women were not allowed to flaunt any part of their body. It was considered shameful and a punishable offense to wear short-hemmed uniforms or make-up. It was a capital offense to sleep with a Jaquill male.

Kierra groaned as Jamar's thumb rubbed her clit in tight circles. She could still get up, pull her uniform down to her knees and walk away, couldn't she?

His chest rose and fell with his ragged breathing. "I've wanted you like this for such a long time. It was making me crazy." His voice was as gentle as a welcome breeze on a humid summer's day.

She didn't say anything to spoil the moment, one she'd never have again. After they finished making love and satisfying the demands of their bodies, she'd go out of her way never to see him again. That is, if she wasn't found with him in his bed and put to death before that. Her heart drummed loudly as he pressed his wrist against the slight curve of her mons.

"Oh," she murmured, as her muscles tensed and the whole length of her body quivered. She closed her eyes tightly as an orgasm ripped her apart.

Jamar laughed softly. "That's my girl. Just keep it coming."

She tried to squeeze her thighs together to deter him from rubbing her hard clit. He edged her legs apart wider with his knee. His rigid cock nestled against her lower thigh, pulsing, aroused and insistent with its own need.

Another orgasm rent through her, mocking her determination never to allow Jamar near her again. As if she'd been able to resist being with him, she admonished herself.

"I want to see all of you," he said reverently. "Your breasts, your cunt, everything," he whispered, lifting his thumb from her clit.

"No," she protested, opening her eyes wide. She couldn't let him see her naked. Without her clothes, she was much too vulnerable.

His eyebrows shot up in question. "Are you changing your mind?" he asked in a husky baritone.

"You've never given me a choice to begin with," she murmured, fully meeting his hot gaze. Choices for kattanee were strongly discouraged.

He pursed his lips into a thin line. "How inconsiderate of me."

His hands traveled to her throat. He didn't bother with buttons, grasped the fabric of her collar and tore the material down her front in half.

"Jamar," Kierra chided softly, "look what you've done." Without any effort, they were back to the easy camaraderie they'd shared when they were young.

His adoring smile twisted her heart. "Well, I'll be," but there was no contrition in his tone. His gaze focused on her barely covered breasts. With a tender finger, he tossed the cotton toward her arm where it fluttered then he did the same with the other side, exposing each soft globe to his admiring eyes.

She beheld his face, his full lips slightly parted, his concentration intense, and his nostrils flaring. She realized he'd all but shut her out emotionally, which was new to her and terrifying. He'd never done that before. Sadly, they had changed, even though they were still perfectly suited to each other in the same way night and day were perfect complements but never meant to meld. Night and day, Jaquill and kattanee, there was no mixing the two.

Tears blurred Kierra's eyes and rather than let Jamar see her cloying fear, she closed them.

* * * *

Jamar watched as her nipples puckered into even tighter pebbles. His heart roared in his ears as he'd heard the waves pounding furiously at the side of the jagged cliff on the far side of Becutan near the ocean. His groan reverberated around them.

He'd waited for Kierra for so long. He'd sought the right opportunity and persuaded his mother, the house overseer, to assign Kierra to clean his rooms. Like an awestruck teenager, he didn't know what to do now that Kierra was in his arms. He could only stare as his balls hardened painfully. Swallowing hard, he lowered his head and slipped a tiny bud into his mouth to savor it with his hot tongue.

She moaned. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, flexing and un-flexing with turbulent passion. Blinded by his need, he shakily unbuckled his belt and tugged his pants down his legs. His breathing was raspy and his pulse was tattooed.

"Kierra," he ground out with great effort, his mind momentarily drawing a blank to any other thought than that she was here with him.

Her hair! He'd loosen her golden tresses and rake his fingers through the silken strands. When his hand touched the tight knot on top of her head, she batted her eyes open, her gaze inquiring.

“Your beautiful hair,” he said softly. “You never wear it down like you used to.”

She did nothing to stop him as he twisted the elastic of her hair band and the lustrous strands unraveled and fell across the pillow. He combed through the tangles and when her hair flowed on the stark white of the pillow, he said, “Why don’t you wear your hair down when you’re with me?”

She was so very beautiful. Why did society have to make such stupid rules about keeping Jaquill and kattanee Manitee-ans apart?

“I can’t be with you again,” she murmured before averting her gaze.

The gaping chasm between them, not through any fault of their own, was still there. He would attempt to rectify that though as soon as his father passed away. Jamar wanted far-reaching change whereas his father wouldn’t even think of them. The kattanee would have more freedom, and the Jaquill would have fewer powers over them.

“I will have power over the villa kattanee,” he whispered against her ear. “I’ll change their circumstances. None will have to wear white, and everyone can make friends with those who appeal to them. And I’ll do away with the death penalty.”

She shook her head. “Becutan are resistant to change of any type, especially the black-skinned ones,” she whispered.

He turned her chin toward him and forced her to look at the determination etched on his face. “When we were children, we never had to think twice about running outside and playing with each other. Everything came easily to us. I want it to be the same always, for everyone, no matter what age they are.”

“You’re a dreamer. You can’t change those things.” She moistened her bottom lip and the small action drove him wild.

“You’ve said that before, too many times to count. I may not be able to change them all at once, but gradually I can. We’ll worry about that later. Right now, I’ve got more important things to do. Like fuck you out of your mind.”

“Hmm?”

He didn’t think she expected a reply and gave her none. His cock was about to explode in a burst of heat and arcing fireworks. He lifted his knee and settled between her thighs. Cool air washed over his damp, perspiring back. Her fingers, exerting pressure, silently urged him on.

His own joy knew no bounds. The tip of his rock-hard shaft nuzzled her slick entrance. Very slowly, he slid into her channel. She was so wet and ready for him. Sucking her other nipple,

he began to thrust with long, even strokes. Her vagina convulsed around his cock, and once more, he heard her groan as her tension heightened then dissipated as she climbed another mountain on her way to an orgasm.

Jamar had wanted this first time with Kierra to be special, to savor their joining, but he couldn't hold on any longer.

"Kierra!" he cried out and lost himself in a flurry of bliss and exuberant whirlwinds that picked him up and tossed him in every direction.

* * * *

Jamar's arm lay across the flat of her stomach as he slept, his breathing light and even. Their lovemaking had been explosive, but the ever-present fear reared its rotting head again. Dreading she'd be discovered, Kierra had to get up without disturbing him.

She watched his long lashes flutter and, for a brief moment, thought her chance to escape was gone. But maybe he was dreaming. He continued to sleep.

What goes on in your beautiful head, Jamar? Is it fanciful dreams of changing the way things are? Of making promises you simply can't keep because most on this plantation and elsewhere are resistant to change, those stuffy ones who won't let you? You must know the danger you put me in, but as ever, you think you can whisk a magic wand and make everything all better, don't you? You are a dreamer, Jamar Q'ellan. I knew that the first time I set eyes on you as you paddled a makeshift raft that couldn't possibly stay afloat. And even though I was ten years old, I fell inexplicably and madly in love with you. But I'm kattanee and you're not, sweet Jamar. There is a deep division between us that can't be forded no matter how we try or what we do.

She remembered the time they'd strolled into an ice cream shop to cool themselves with a sweet treat. The kattanee would not serve her but he was only too happy to serve Jamar, whose skin was black and which made him better than her.

She was very nearly ready to walk out when Jamar had called her back, offered her the strawberry ice cream he'd just bought and turned to the slave behind the counter and purchased one for himself. Tongues had wagged for days after that. *Jamar has the hots for Kierra Vonne, a lowly kattanee.* Ha! She didn't even know what the 'hots' were, to tell the truth.

She never did tell him that her father had whipped her for that while her poor mother had watched with a horrified expression. After her father had finished and he'd gone, her mother rubbed salve on Kierra's bruised back and told her that black and white had no place together. None at all. Hadn't anyone ever taught Jamar that lesson, too?

No, I suppose not. He was black, he was Jaquill and they were never taught to abase themselves. Why would they be? But the kattanee continually had reinforced for them that they were nobody, that they couldn't do the same things or own the same type of luxurious possessions as the Jaquill did. Soon they wouldn't be able to breathe the same air.

Tears streamed down Kierra's cheeks. Why was she so fatalistic? She swallowed hard on a ball of sheer, rising terror. He was the man of her dreams, but they were too far apart to share the same bed repeatedly as man and wife. A marriage between black and slave was unheard of.

"What are you thinking?" Jamar asked in a trace of a whisper.

He startled her so badly she began shaking and, unable to speak, rested her palm over her thumping heart.

"Nothing good, I imagine." He sighed heavily and tenderly caressed the cheek nearest him.

She didn't dare meet his eyes and pursed her lips, wondering what she should tell him. However, no matter how her mind raged, silence was best and didn't get her into trouble.

"I know of a man who knows a captain of a spaceship. He could find us a way out of here," Jamar told her quietly.

She turned to him, her lips trembling, her mind rushing from one thought to another at a mile a minute.

"We might get caught." Then she'd face death without flinching, knowing she'd had no choice but to accept her fate because she loved Jamar.

His thumb feathered up to her lower lip and trailed across the dry skin. "But then, we might not. Do you still read?" he continued in a voice that caressed her whole body with its soft timbre.

Speechless, she nodded. Kierra didn't have much time after cleaning the villa from morning 'til night and only read when she wasn't exhausted, which wasn't often.

"Have you read about the scientific experiments on Praadar?"

She shook her head. The kattanee didn't have much access to information from other worlds. Jamar, however, was well read, and he could use his galaxy communication device, a GCD, that fit in his pocket for information he wanted. Kattanee were forbidden to own them.

"Men and women on Praadar are changing their skin color the same way they change their hair color. It's fascinating." Jamar continued to caress her cheek, but with the back of his knuckles.

"How do they do it? Do they paint themselves?" Kierra ventured to ask. They probably had to take a pill, and the transformation had to have some lasting effect, maybe an irreversible one.

She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of his soothing hand on her face.

"Nothing like that. They do it with a self-administered injection."

"On Praadar they don't have much in the line of restrictions?" The Pradaarians were a free people, as free as the soaring eagle, she thought as the walls of Jamar's room began to close in on her. On Praadar, there were no kattanee, no Jaquill and each person was free to choose how they lived. Such a contrast to Manitee-a and Becutan.

"Not many that I know of. Men and women change their skin color to make a statement or for fun. I've seen it."

"To make a statement? But why?"

"Principally the teenagers are doing that, to show their parents they can be different. It's the latest rage there to change the color of your skin." He paused and heaved a deep sigh. "Here," he waved his hand at the room and beyond, "we're stuck in the dark ages, and the war between Jaquill and kattanee continues."

"It's not a war," Kierra interjected, her voice sounding strained. "It's the way things are. The past is finished. There's no going back to undo what our forbearers began."

"But that's my point," he said, his voice suddenly laced with excitement.

She instantly missed his gentle touch.

"Skin color doesn't matter. After all, the same red blood runs through our veins. We have the same illnesses, the same joys, the same sorrows. We are born and die exactly the same way. Do you see what I mean?"

She did see. Only too clearly but she wouldn't admit that to her friend, now her one-time lover.

"No." Abrupt fear overrode her curiosity. It was much safer not to know, to pretend that being a kattanee was all right because she'd been born to it, just as Jamar had been born Jaquill.

His sexy mouth turned down. His gaze pleaded with her.

She gave him a disapproving frown.

"You have to see," he protested. "You're my soul mate."

Her heart broke in two. She began to roll over to the other side of the bed to get up. "I've got work to do, Jamar. I'm a kattanee."

He reached out and seized her upper arm in an unrelenting grip. "Stay with me. Please."

She turned her head and let her gaze rest on him as she pondered his statement. Too bad he was naked. His cock was no longer flaccid but rigid and long. There was no mistaking he wanted her again.

Tugging on her arm, she said, "No. You treat me as your equal when it suits you, but when you want something from me, then you look down your nose at me."

His gaze followed hers before he eyed her face. "Kierra, I love you. There is no other woman in this world or any other who's quite like you or ever will be. Don't you understand?" With lightning speed, he sat up and pushed her sideways across the bed.

"No," she groaned. "I don't understand."

He canted his head to one side, evidently thinking. His eyes glazed over, and the sweet strains of a classical piece began. The emotion evident in the music haunted Kierra. It was as if Jamar could change her mind with its ethereal beauty.

"Remember how we used to dance, our thighs close, my head bent to your cheek? Do you remember how the stars would bless us and twinkle? Even the waterfall would slow to a trickle as if in awe."

Not wanting to be reminded of the only good times she'd known in her life, she shoved at him to catch him off balance then she'd run. He straddled her thighs and lifted his ass over her stomach, imprisoning her in one quick movement. His shaft bobbed toward her.

"You can make love to me, Jamar Q'ellan," Kierra vowed, "and you can own me, but I won't let you toy with my life. I won't let you touch that." She had no idea how she could enforce her warning, but she'd do everything in her power to try.

"I want to make love to you every day for the rest of our lives, star shine," he said, using an old nickname he'd made up for her one night when they'd been dancing under the night sky filled with a canopy of winking, glittering diamonds.

"No!" Kierra's eyes widened and she continued to shove at him ineffectually.

"Why are you struggling? Don't you know I'll protect you from every harm that might come our way?" He grinned. "Do you remember when we used to read together about a planet called Earth and a chivalrous period of black knights who would ride to the rescue of their fair maiden?"

He turned the music up louder. The struggled seemed to go out of her. She fell back on the bed and blinked several times but said nothing.

"I know what you're thinking. That I'm a dreamer." Jamar edged her thighs apart with his knee and settled his bulk and his painfully throbbing penis near her pussy. "I admit to that." His thoughts came faster than he could put them into words for Kierra's sake. "I have an idea. Why don't we create a new kind of dance? One of pure lust, of sweating bodies, one where we can dance as furiously and madly as we want?"

"Jamar," she said quietly. "You're dreaming again." Her fingers rested on his relaxed shoulders.

His cock probed the slick entrance of her pussy, and he slid into her. She gave a small cry and turned her face away.

"Kierra?" he asked, concerned that he'd hurt her. "What's wrong? Talk to me."

When she turned her gaze back to him, her cheeks were strewn with tears and her beautiful, blue eyes held such a depth of misery he could only guess what was going on in her head.

"Please," he whispered thinly. "Tell me."

She sniffled as she spoke. "You talk to me as if I were Jaquill. I'm not black-skinned like you, Jamar. I never will be." She hauled in a breath and slowly expelled it. "So you can stop dreaming up our future. We don't have one."

He didn't know what to say. Cold, hard reality hit him full force. He stopped thrusting. His heart pounded in his chest erratically, and his breaths were ragged gasps of agony. Images of the happy, blonde girl he'd played with flashed through his mind. How her thin, cotton dress would flutter in a sudden, hot breeze. How her upturned face looked to him for guidance. How her hand grasped his, white against black, yet they cared little about the subtle intrigues that swirled around them.

He jerked himself back from the past. He had Kierra now, in his bed. Her eyes stared at him unblinkingly. He had to hold onto hope for both of them, until the time came when they could be openly together.

Losing himself in his swift thrusts, he set aside the questions that plagued him. He'd find the solution and keep Kierra always at his side. He couldn't fail because his well-being and his very life depended on it.

Kierra waited for Jamar to say something, anything at all. But nothing came. Her sheath widened to accommodate his large penis, and her back slid against the white silk sheets as if he were bringing her closer, then pushing her away.

He lowered his head and, one by one, kissed her nipples reverently. When he was done with the token of affection, he bathed the turgid tips with his tongue, wetting the cinnamon-colored aureoles, and bringing them to tighter, more painful peaks. Her body tensed, and she willed herself not to sheer off into a blissful, mind-numbing orgasm. She'd give anything to be with Jamar for the rest of their lives, but she chastised herself, she could never have what she wanted.

Her uneasiness was interrupted by his quiet voice. "Turn on your stomach."

Heat from her throat rushed up her cheeks. Was he thinking of taking her from behind? "Why?"

"I want to slip my cock into your cunt from behind," he replied, his earnest gaze meeting hers. He withdrew his penis from her wetness.

Kierra could have cried. She missed the closeness of their joined bodies, the magical contact between them that transcended the color and social barrier. Hesitantly, she rolled over.

"Up on your hands and knees," Jamar coaxed kindly from behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Is this the dance you mentioned?"

His erotic grin tore at her heartstrings again.

"Our bodies, when they're joined, are creating a harmonic frequency that is so very pleasing," he said, his husky voice as soft as silk. "And yes, it's a dance unlike you've ever experienced."

Hefting herself up on her hands and knees, she didn't have long to wait before Jamar tipped the creamy edge of his cock to her entrance. He drove in as far as her vagina would allow, and kissed the knobby ridges of her spine. "Kierra, I love you. I always have, always will."

She lowered her head to her clasped hands and shook her head from side to side. She loved Jamar too, but she could never tell him that to his face. If anyone found out, it would mean her life and she wasn't ready to give it up yet.

Amazed at her unblemished, white complexion, Jamar trailed kisses along her spine and to the small of her back. Lifting his lips from her smooth skin, he could do nothing but admire how their bodies were joined. His black skin merged into the pale alabaster, and the sight of his

hands, large and black against her waist, drove him wild. He'd never known sex with any woman to be so all consuming, a fire burning in his churning gut and hardening his testicles. He watched with a fascination he found incredible. He'd had white woman on Praadar, but every time, he'd imagined it was his lovely Kierra. He hadn't been able to stop dreaming about her.

His balls rhythmically slapped the inside of her thighs. "I remember—it seems as if it was long ago—telling you I wanted to be a musician and you would be the dancer who interpreted the music." He kept his voice low. Her fingers clutched the brocade coverlet. "Your body would sway to the tempo and in essence, you would be the instrument while I was the music."

Kierra grunted something unintelligible.

Lost in the persistent, happy memories, Jamar continued, "You're the only one who fully hears my music. Sometimes, I'm saddened by the fact no one can hear the perfect harmonics. Other times, I'm elated that you not only hear, but you make the music your own, with your body, with your footsteps."

The orgasm was almost on him. His whole body, from his throbbing forehead to his toes, was bathed in damp perspiration. He wanted to tip his head and shout to the ceiling and beyond, "I love Kierra!" but restrained himself. Instead, the music went on all around them, and he released all his pent up energy into her pussy. Over and over again, he gave himself in great bursts of shuddering spasms.

Kierra quivered, and her vagina clenched around his drained shaft, milking him of the last of his cum. Probably exhausted, she collapsed to the coverlet, forcing him to withdraw quickly. She gave a long drawn out moan.

Lying down beside her, his heart fluttering and his breathing shallow and ragged, he whispered, "Are you all right?"

He couldn't see her face from his position. The room smelled of musky sex. He saw the crown of her head bob up and down.

"Fine, just fine," she croaked.

Jamar had the sinking feeling she wasn't fine, that perhaps by making love to her, instead of drawing her closer physically, he'd driven her further away.

Chapter Three

"I tore it. Let me find something for you to wear."

As naked as she'd been while Jamar was fucking her, Kierra folded her arms over her breasts and tapped her foot impatiently. "I was supposed to be cleaning your room, not cleaning the master." Her tone was quiet and careful. After their lovemaking, Jamar had become reserved and distant, as if he wanted to be with anyone else but her.

He swallowed and shook his head. "I couldn't resist, Kierra. I had to know how soft you were."

How soft she was? She'd better ignore that or else she'd end up under him again. "How am I supposed to get home naked?" Home for her family, six kattanee, was a one-bedroom cabin with inadequate heating in the winter and no privacy. In the summer, the mosquitoes swarmed over the swamp nearby.

"I'll take you home on my magic carpet," he said half-heartedly, dragging the wrinkled coverlet from the bed.

"How do you propose to do that?" Once, ages ago, they'd tried flying on a pretend magic carpet, an old, ratty blanket. They'd laughed and had fun, but they'd never left the ground.

"I'll roll you up." Quiet music played around them. His somber eyes lit up. "Or I could whirl you away as you dance to my music."

Kierra heaved a heavy sigh of frustration. "Great! Then everyone will see us."

Jamar crossed the short distance to her. "If I wrap my arms around you, no one will even notice."

She uncrossed her arms and jabbed an index finger into his hard chest. "We're still children in your mind, aren't we?" She didn't wait for a response. Irrational anger ate away at her.

"We are not children anymore. We're grown. Adults. We'll—" Who was she kidding? He wouldn't pay the consequences. She would. Alone. "*I'll* be responsible for our mistakes."

His gold eyes lost their brilliance. "Mistakes?"

"This..." She couldn't decide what to call their lying in bed together sweaty and naked, but it hadn't been making love. " This sex was a mistake. You're Jaquill. I'm kattanee. There's no mixing the two, Jamar. None at all."

Had she made her point clearly enough? His eyebrows were set in a frown and a deep sadness crept into his eyes. Naked, Kierra turned around and fled.

* * * *

Struck dumb, Jamar collapsed into an armchair near one window, hung his head and stared at the carpet. Kierra and he were a mistake? He raked his fingers through his hair. Tears stung his eyes. They were a mistake? How could she think that when he loved her with every part of his being, when he'd shared his music, and they shared the gift of dancing?

Dejected, he continued to fasten his unseeing gaze on the plush carpet. Images of Kierra slowly wove their way through his tortured mind. When they had been children—

Abruptly, he cut off that train of thought. Hadn't Kierra just told him he was stuck in the past? That he was a mistake?

"I refuse to accept that," he muttered, hunching his shoulders, praying the ground would open up and swallow him whole. He couldn't live without her. He'd damned well tried, but he couldn't. Praadar had been his home for three years as he'd studied and learned about what freedom meant. Every night when he retired, he'd thought of Kierra and making love to her. His guts had twisted horribly when he'd realized how much he missed her. She was as much a part of him as their shared childhood was.

The music began to play again, this time in his head, slow, torturous, sweet. "I'm a mistake," he repeated in a hushed whisper over and over again. Misery flooded through him and twisted his heart in a gut-wrenching knot. Kierra wasn't a mistake. He had to show her. Somehow. They could run off to Praadar and live together. They'd have six children, each treasured and loved for who they were no matter what their skin color was.

Jamar wasn't used to inaction. He brightened at the thought that after he found a spaceship to take them to Praadar, he'd kidnap her. Wouldn't she love it there, among the carefree people, among the flowers that seemed to be blooming everywhere? Then they could do

what they'd intended when they were children. He would become a well-known musician and Kierra would dance, barefoot, to the music that made both their hearts sing.

There was a sharp rap on the door. Jamar didn't move a muscle. His brother, who knew little about privacy, strolled in. "Hey bro. You've been banging one of the kattanee again?"

Jamar glanced up at him. Fury flared in his chest. How dared Absar demean Kierra by calling her a kattanee and saying the word 'banging'?

"Watch your mouth," he warned sullenly.

"Maybe you should get dressed and make yourself useful." Absar cut the distance between them.

Jamar felt the younger man's dark eyes searching, analyzing, twisting the truth. "It's not what you think."

Absar, a taller, thinner version of Jamar, punched him in the flat of his shoulder. "Banging a slave isn't what it seems? Since when?" He hauled Jamar to his feet.

Jamar leaped forward, shoved his brother away and strode toward the bathroom. "She is none of your business. She is no one's business but my own," he threw over his shoulder and slammed the door shut.

Absar, who'd never given up easy, followed Jamar as he pulled on a pair of briefs. "Mother would be shocked, and Father, well, you do know what he'd do if he found out, right?"

"You're going to tell him?" Jamar flashed back, catching Kierra's musky woman's scent in the still air.

"No, I'm not that callous. Father would have her punished then put to death. You want a piece of advice?"

"Not particularly." Jamar resented his brother's intrusion into his private life, but that was nothing new. Absar had always known about Kierra, but as they'd matured into adults, Absar couldn't understand Jamar's fascination with the white woman.

"Take her to Praadar, do her to your heart's content then leave her there." Absar lifted his palms in the air at shoulder level. "No repercussions to either of you. You get her out of your system, and she gets a few trinkets for lying on her back to accommodate you."

"You're so fuckin' callous," Jamar told him. He'd never leave Kierra alone on a strange world. He was a gentleman, not a pirate of seduction. "You make us sound as if we're robots without feelings."

"The kattanee don't have feelings," Absar reminded him. "The kattanee are slaves. They serve without question. No feelings."

"You're a heartless bastard." Rather than physically confronting his brother who was merely spewing the same crap Manitee-ans had for centuries, Jamar turned away. He felt no need to justify his love for Kierra or to explain that kattanee and Jaquill had the same red blood.

"Give it some thought, bro, before someone finds out." Absar left without a backward glance and left the door ajar.

Live on Praadar with Kierra? That had been his idea since she'd told him he was a mistake, but would she accept that world as her home? Would she miss her family and friends? Did Jamar even need to worry about that? The one solid fact he held onto was that if he didn't do something, not only Kierra but he himself would pay dearly.

* * * *

Kierra's mother found her in the early morning hours sitting on a tree stump under the full moon. Turning to her with tears in her eyes, Kierra gave her a wan smile, hoping to hide the turmoil in mind.

Eden sat down beside her on a shorter stump. She shared her daughter's alabaster skin and vivid blonde hair. "He decided to take you, didn't he?"

Kierra nodded, slumping deeper against the old caya tree.

"By force?"

Kierra shook her head. In a whisper that barely carried to her mother's ear, she said, "No. I wanted him as much as he wanted me. He loves me, mother."

Deep in thought, Eden nodded again.

Kierra decided to tell her the truth. "He's stuck in our childhood, and there's no way to tell him we're not kids anymore, that we've grown up." She paused, her heart tearing in two again. "I told him we're a mistake, but he can't seem to stop this nonsense."

This thing, this love, is far from nonsense. I've never felt so complete, so desired, so feminine before.

"Kierra, I know it's hard, but you have to tell him no the next time he comes to you for sex." Eden was not always kindly, but she gave good counsel. "You know very well what will happen if they find you."

Death. Kierra inclined her head. Yes, she knew very well.

"I can spirit you away from Becutan to another villa," Eden volunteered, smoothing her cotton dress over her knees nervously. "You'll be safe in some other place, away from him, and blend in with the rest of the kattanee."

As if it were some forbidden sound, Eden never said Jamar's name. Kierra understood the reason. Her mother was in just as much fear as her daughter. A whipping was one thing, but death was wholly another. "I want to stay, but I don't want to work in his rooms any longer."

"You don't have a choice about what part of the villa you work in, Kierra. You know that."

"I know." *No choices.* Kierra disliked that her choices, if she'd ever had any, were being taken away from her. If the bossman, who took orders from Jamar's mother, required her to work in a specific part of the villa, she had no choice. If she worked elsewhere, even if she were out in the fields picking nattak and working harder than inside the villa, she'd be whipped. She had no choice.

The night air smelled of swamp water but was also fragranced by blooming, wild roses. The blossoms, in shades of pink and peach, were pretty, seemingly fragile, yet Kierra knew them to be sturdy—like the kattanee.

Eden got to her feet. The wind blew at stray strands of hair that had escaped the tight knot at the top of her head. "When you're ready to leave Becutan, say the word and I'll make the arrangements."

"Okay." *But that time will never come. I'd miss watching Jamar from a distance. I'd miss not seeing him when I have the rare chance.*

Eden walked away, her steps as silent as the moonlight filtering around her. Kierra sank back against the caya tree, recalling Jamar's tender expression as he caressed her cheek with his knuckles, remembering how his throbbing shaft had slid into her pussy. He'd fit her perfectly. In fact, she could still feel the ache between her legs where he'd made love to her.

"Jamar," she whispered into the stillness of the night. "You're my best dream come true. And the worst nightmare. I love you, and I'll never stop, but we're worlds apart, and we must keep it that way. We have no choice."

* * * *

Well after midnight, Jamar watched from behind a distant tree as mother and daughter hugged each other. The moon danced in the fronds of the caya above him, and the lingering scent of wild roses drifted around him.

Eden had hawk-like eyes. She saw him before he stepped from behind the tree. She was as tall and beautiful as her daughter, though her eyes were careworn and not as bright as they had been.

She paused beside him and touched his upper arm with elegant grace. "She loves you," she said softly, meeting his eyes squarely. "You can do for her what she can't do for herself." With that sage counsel, that said much but left more unsaid, she walked away.

Jamar watched as she blended into the darkness, her footsteps as quiet as the night air around them. Creeping shadow met creeping shadow. He'd have never known Eden was near if he hadn't kept an eye on her. In the villa, he knew it was the way of the kattanee to tread softly, but out here in the swamp, he'd have thought they walked louder.

For several minutes, he observed Kierra. She did nothing more than sit quietly, her back resting against the caya tree. The moonlight slivered through the tree fronds and lit her hair. If this had been the first time he'd seen her, he'd have said she wore a halo, that she was an angel come to soothe his mind and touch his heart. Maybe, in a strange way, she was in his life for that very reason, yet what was he to make of it that he was a mistake, as she claimed?

Creeping quietly from the swamp and the towering caya trees, Jamar shook his head in denial. He and Kierra were no mistake. Not together. Despite their different skin colors, they'd been intended for each other, which only confirmed for him that he'd made the right decision earlier that evening.

Chapter Four

The next morning after a sleepless night, Kierra tiptoed into Jamar's rooms, hoping he wasn't there. The antechamber was quiet, and after the perfunctory knock on his bedroom door, she walked in. Her heart was in her throat as she scanned the living area then the bed.

Relief flooded through her on realizing he was nowhere in sight. Setting the vacuum cleaner and her plastic box filled with cleaning supplies on the floor, she dared to look at the big bed where just yesterday, Jamar had made love to her. Did she detect the scent of musky sex in the air? Had Jamar brought another woman into his suite last night?

Her heart plummeted. He'd told her he loved her, yet he could bring another woman, probably a Jaquill, into his bed. She yanked a duster from her box. It wasn't any of her business what he did. It never had been. She was a kattanee and was supposed to know her place. Then why did she hurt so much just thinking about Jamar being with another woman?

Because she loved him, that's why. She ran the duster along one corner of a sunlit window with such vengeance she startled a spider in its web and it raced away. If only she could flee as freely as it had. That she had no choices bothered her more than it usually did. She worked from before morning light until the sun disappeared behind what the kattanee called Dead End Mountain. If any tried to flee servitude, they were usually found there, climbing its craggy rocks like mountain goats.

She didn't hear Jamar silently walk up behind her. "I'd give a duke's ransom to know what you're thinking."

Kierra jumped and dropped the duster. It fell with a soft thud at her feet. "Jamar," she whispered, wondering how she must look to him. Her eyes must have been wild and her ragged dress was worn where her neck met the fabric at the collar and her hem was crooked.

On the other hand, he towered over her, and despite herself, his magnificent presence comforted her. His white shirt was open at the collar, revealing the dark skin underneath. His trousers hugged his thighs in a warm caress as she suddenly longed to do.

He threw his keys on the coffee table. The pair jingled as they hit the wood. He faced her, his expression, for once, unfathomable. "What were you thinking?"

This was an unfamiliar side of Jamar Reserved, coolly assessing her, unblinking. She licked her dry lips slowly, struggling to find the correct words and buy her some time. She could hardly tell him he looked different this morning. The sun angled across his body as if it were placing him on display for her eyes only. Broad shoulders, muscled chest, small waist, and lean thighs and oh goodness, but his engorged penis strained against the seam of his pants.

"I—" Lost in the pleasure of simply looking at him, she didn't know what to say.

"Go on," he said, crossing his arms over his chest, and accentuating his lower body and the massive bulge below his belt.

"You've changed," she said, disbelieving her own ears. How could she talk to him like this when she'd promised herself she'd keep her place?

"To what?" he demanded, his husky voice low and authoritative.

She averted her gaze from his erection. He wouldn't have to say much more to her and she'd run to him and beg him to make love to her with every ounce of her being.

"I don't know," she replied, shaken by her thought.

"I see." He uncrossed his arms and sat in one of the armchairs by the window. "Take your clothes off."

The order frightened her. Jamar rarely commanded her to do anything. He'd always treated her more as an equal. "Why?"

"That's not your place to ask why. Just do it." His golden eyes were cold, almost hostile.

Kierra decided to disobey, a risky choice at best until she could size him up. What had changed him? "No, not until I know what you want."

He shook his head from side to side, as his lips drew together in a thin and frightening, line. "Kierra Vonne, I'm not in the habit of repeating myself. Take your clothes off."

So she wouldn't get a straightforward reply. Overnight, he'd distanced himself from her and become a true Jaquill who didn't hesitate to order a kattanee to do his bidding without regard to their feelings. Not only had Jamar become the type of man the kattanee hated, but he'd left

her without choices. There was no sense in arguing. She could do nothing less than obey, but she wouldn't go down quietly.

Though she kept her gaze downcast, she knew her eyes would have flashed angry, spurious fire if she'd allowed herself the luxury of looking at him. Not caring anymore what happened to her, even the bossman beating her, she yanked apart the fabric at her breasts and rent it down to her hem. Disheartened and raging at the fates that had stacked the cards against her, she pulled out of her sleeves and stepped out of the dress before she jerked out of her bra and her panties. Her clothes lay on the floor in a small heap. Pressing her lips together and preparing for the worst, she slowly straightened to her full height. Yet she didn't look at Jamar, afraid of the coolness she'd find in those gold eyes she'd once cared for so much.

Long seconds ticked by. She'd had no choice she kept telling herself, but as she repeated her mantra, something strange happened. She began to want Jamar with an intensity that defied logic and bordered on obsessive insanity. Kierra couldn't hide the physical evidence of her arousal. Her nipples tightened into rigid pebbles, her skin broke out in vivid goose bumps, and if Jamar had been inclined to check, he'd have seen the juices weeping from her pussy.

"Come here and kneel at my feet."

The preemptory order made her skin tingle and her face flame, but she couldn't find the words to argue with him. Why did he want her so close? To torment her? To appease some sense of twisted humor?

With leaden feet, she trudged toward him. When she saw his polished shoes in her blurred vision, she sank to her knees, waiting, her heart thrumming.

She sensed him lean forward in his seat and held her breath. She'd have done anything for him once upon a time. Why had he changed so abruptly? Would she ever find out?

Jamar set his hands on Kierra's tense shoulders. She was trembling violently from head to foot.

Slowly, gently, he edged his hands around to her back. Her pale skin was as smooth as lustrous satin. She still didn't look at him and her chest rose and fell with the tiniest of breaths. Angered with himself at playing with her just to see how much she hated Becutan, he slipped out the elastic that held her hair in a tight constricting knot at the top of her head. He yearned to see her hair down, cascading over her shoulders and partially covering her aureoles.

He sucked in a shaky breath as her hair fell in silky waves around her shoulders and to her waist. "Your mother and Absar are right," he whispered, willing himself to warm up from the devastating hell he'd found himself in. "If I want to save your soul, I need to take you far away from here."

Finally, she raised her head, her mouth caught in a small 'O' shape, her cobalt eyes evaluating him. "You can't save my soul," she muttered.

"I can save both yours and mine," he said without hesitation. Lifting her onto his lap and noting her shocked surprise, he bent his head and took one nipple into his mouth.

He was gratified that she arched her back and thrust her breasts closer to his face. The scent of her fresh-washed skin drove him wilder with high-pitched longing. She moaned from deep within her throat. His erection throbbed so painfully, he almost melted into her arms to beg for sweet mercy, but he knew none would be forthcoming. His mind buzzed with the realization that by ordering her to undress for him, he'd gone too far.

Lifting his head, he examined her face. Her eyelids were closed tightly, and her long lashes fluttered against her cheeks. A single tear squeezed from the corner of her right eye. Jamar yearned to wipe it away with his finger and raised his hand.

Kierra blinked, and her gaze pierced him accusingly. Her lips visibly trembled and her cheeks were so pale he thought she'd faint in his arms. "Why did you treat me like your enemy?"

"I wanted you to make a choice," he replied laboriously, picking his words with care. He'd frightened her enough and didn't want to chase her away again. Before this, he hadn't recognized that Kierra was so fragile emotionally.

Her eyebrows arched upward in question.

Jamar ran his tongue around the inside of his cheeks. Was he doing the right thing by explaining to her why he'd asked her to strip? In the end, would it matter if she understood?

Yes, it mattered a lot, he decided quickly. He didn't want her to be afraid of him. "I wanted you to fight me, not to give in." His vision blurred as tears stung his eyes. "As I hoped you would, you did fight me." He gave her a thin smile. "By angrily ripping your clothes off."

She shook her head.

"I love you so much; I can't leave you here when I go." Should he say more, or would he endanger her life if he did?

"Go where?" Her hand strayed to his shaft straining at his trousers. She seemed more interested in his penis than in her situation.

"I'm taking you to Praadar," he said, announced with a tinge of relief.

Bewildered, her eyes shifted to his, although her warm fingers rested on the tip of his cock. "You can't," she murmured, her voice wooden.

Jamar waved away her objection. "I understand what will happen if we're caught." He didn't dare say she'd die and he'd end up in prison for aiding and abetting a kattanee. "But I have several guarantees we won't be, so you can rest assured we'll get to Praadar safely."

Her eyelids shuttered her gaze. When she looked at him again, all she said was, "Make love to me, Jamar. Make love to me."

Chapter Five

“Why are you so surprised?” Kierra’s hand wandered from Jamar’s cock to his belt. She loved him, even though he was a dreamer and believed he could change first Manitee-a then the Becutan people.

He hugged her, resting his head against her breasts. “After what I just did, I didn’t think you’d want me again.”

“You’re simply trying to find out who you really are in the crazy world.” She unbuckled his belt and unzipped his fly. The metal teeth rasped against each other. His cock sprang free, proud and erect. The mushroom-tipped cap glistened with a few drops of pre-cum. The sunlight caused them to sparkle, as if they were an omen, but Kierra couldn’t tell whether it was of bad or good.

Jamar continued to press his head against her breasts but took one tight nipple in his mouth. “I’m a dreamer, remember?”

That was the moment that Kierra clued in. “Oh, I get it! You were playing a game when you were being hostile and told me to take my clothes off.” The short episode hadn’t been much of a game to her, but she’d learned something valuable. Her world wasn’t quite as restrictive as she’d thought it to be, not with Jamar in it. Fully cognizant of the fact that he was doing so, he made choices for her, which at first, seemed like a rope knotted around her neck, but then she realized that he was daring her to extend her horizons.

Jamar chuckled. “I love you, Kierra, but sometimes it takes you a while to understand.” He sucked on her other nipple.

“You never meant me any harm,” she murmured in wonder. He was still her best friend, although that would soon have to end. If they were caught—

She didn't want to think about death and dying. Instead, she wanted to think about life and passion and the possibility of real love, although it could never be with Jamar. Their differences were too great.

"Stop sucking on my nipples." She shoved him away, hopped off his lap and onto her knees.

Consternation swept his features. "What are you doing? I don't want you kneeling in front of me." He reached for her to haul her to her feet.

Kierra began to laugh, a choking sound at first than raucous, stomach wrenching laughter. Jamar slid off the chair, to his knees and began to echo her.

Through the noise, she tried to explain, "Do you know how incongruous we look?"

With his lips in a wide grin, he gave a slight hiccup. "Like a black guy and a white woman trying to make out."

The laughter went on and on until they exhausted themselves. With a sigh and tears of joy streaking their cheeks, they fell into each other's arms.

Tenderly, Jamar stroked the back of her head with gentle fingers. "Why did you get on your knees?" he asked quietly. "Although I suspect I know why."

Kierra nuzzled her head against his shoulder, relaxed and, for a few moments, happy. "I want to suck your cock and taste you as you come in my mouth."

"Right now?" he asked incredulously. "Even after what I did?"

She tilted her head and gazed into his wide eyes and the churning regret so evident within them. "Jamar, stop beating yourself up about everything. That's what I'm supposed to do, obey your orders."

She sensed his shoulders tense, and she heard him grind his teeth together, an action with which she was unfamiliar.

"Jamar?" she whispered, suddenly frightened. "What's happening?"

In words that seemed far away in her terrified haze, she heard him say, "You are not and will never be kattanee for me, Kierra. You were my friend and you *are* my friend and I don't give a damn that our stupid society says we can't be what we want to be to each other."

Marginally, she relaxed. "I've never heard you grind your teeth before. I thought you were so angry with me that you'd—"

Distressed, she couldn't finish and covered her eyes with her palms, willing the tears not to come rushing forth.

"That I'd hit you?" Jamar demanded in a husky tone.

She nodded, ashamed of herself, scared of what he'd become since they were able to spend time together, away from the turmoil that public censure caused.

"How could you think that? Have I ever hit you, even pretended to?" His voice rose vehemently, grasping her wrists and drawing her hands from her heated face.

"You've changed," she told him frankly. "You're not the friend I used to associate with. You're edgy and angry now where you once were sweet and laid back."

He pursed his lips as she spoke. The anger simmered under the surface again. "I'm not the only one who's changed," he ground out. "You're terrified of everything, and I don't think you want anything to do with me anymore."

She didn't dare tell him his suspicions were true. Jaquill and Kattaneé didn't mix unless one was lording it over the other. Did he understand that or was he stuck in his dream world where everyone got along just fine without recriminations?

"Kierra?" he prompted for a reply. He swallowed hard, and the sound was overwhelming in the disturbing silence.

How could she answer that she wouldn't hurt him? She'd leave soon. Eden would know where Kierra could go, away from Jamar and his wild dreams of love, and marriage and equality between them.

"We've both changed," she admitted in a hushed tone.

"We can help each other."

She was overwhelmed by his humble words. In her heart, she sensed he still planned to marry her somehow, to spirit her away from Becutan. How could she tell him about her decision, one that didn't include him? She couldn't take the risk of seeing the pain etched in his eyes, knowing she'd betrayed him and his trust in her.

"Yes," she lied. "We can."

There was no stopping Jamar. She couldn't prevent him from being a dreamer, but she could run as far as she could from him.

"Good. Let's start by getting that taste you wanted."

She chuckled low in her throat. "You won't give up, will you?"

Shifting his legs and easing onto his back, he pulled her down onto his chest. "Why would I give up on the woman who's to become my wife?"

Kierra shrugged nonchalantly as the guilt ate away at her. Their lips were a mere inch apart. They were never destined to marry, not a Jaquill with a kattanee. "I have several theories, but you've heard them all."

He took her face between both hands and kissed her with a fierce possessiveness that astounded her. Her lips parted against the onslaught. She couldn't get enough of him. The realization struck fear in her. She'd heard of kattanee women who'd been ravished by a Jaquill man and paid the ultimate price. Would she end up dead if she couldn't tell Jamar 'no'? They were no longer young playmates looked upon fondly by both kattanee and Jaquill. They were grown adults and she'd given Jamar her body, although she couldn't give him what he wanted the most—belief and trust in his dream.

She rocked with the intensity of his kiss and stored away the pleasurable sensation of his lips against her own, his hands exploring and straying down the sides of her neck and to her swollen breasts. "I promised," she told him softly.

He chuckled. "Taste me then, Kierra."

She slid down his body, admiring every flat, black inch of him, the cords of muscle in his neck, the mat of dark hair below his throat. She paused to lave his taut nipples. Reluctantly, she moved on, down to his stomach and the thick V shape of hair arrowing down to his waist. If only time would slow down and give her a chance to explore every sensitive inch of him, but there was little time. She had to get back to work.

Jamar's thighs quivered. She looked up the length of his body and gave him a questioning glance. Was he afraid, too? How could that be? Jaquill were never afraid of anything.

"I enjoy being with you," he replied easily. "You're my whole life, Kierra. Everything."

She lowered her head so he couldn't see the guilt raging in her eyes. *I love you, too, Jamar. More than you'll ever know, but we can't ever be together, not as man and wife.*

His cock was full and bobbing toward her. Her hair covered her face as she bent and flicked her tongue over the tip of his moist glans. He tasted sweet as a sugared berry. Kierra heard him groan, and his thighs went rigid. He was very close to an orgasm. Her heart throbbed with an intense ache for what could have been if they hadn't been born Manitee-an. They would have married, had children and grown old together.

She shook herself. That was never to be. Not ever. This was the last time she'd make love to Jamar. She'd tell him he was a dreamer and walk away. All she would have were the memories of these special two days and their childhood as playmates.

His hands played with strands of her silken hair. "I have an idea," he whispered, breaking the silence. "That way you don't have to go without some loving."

Filled with inquiry, her gaze met his. Her pulse picked up. She didn't know much about sex. She'd only learned from what her mother had told her men liked.

"Keep licking my cock but turn so your ass is in my face."

Kierra shook her head in disbelief. "What?"

"You heard me. That way I can lick you."

She became so aroused at the idea that her juices escaped her pussy. Immediately, she swung around, placing her feet well above his head and felt his fingers widen the lips of her labia. Then his hot tongue laved her hard clit.

Crying out with delicious, tingling pleasure, she glanced over her shoulder. "How can I focus on your dick if you're doing that?"

His reply was muffled. "You'll just have to try."

Her thighs tensed, and she sheered off into a powerful orgasm. She barely remembered in time to swallow her scream of ecstasy so that a grunt slipped from her lips instead. Jamar continued to lick her clit then his tongue darted into her slick cunt.

"No," she managed, trying to stop him, even as his stiff penis waved back and forth beckoning to her.

His tongue darted from her pussy, leaving cold air in its wake. Kierra shuddered. How could she think of a life separate from Jamar? She loved the sight of his black skin against hers, of his sculpted body near hers.

"Did you change your mind?" he asked huskily.

"No, just stop that until I'm finished with you," she threw over her shoulder.

"Oh, okay, but I'd still like to look at your ass as you do me," he said lightheartedly. "It's the prettiest ass on Manatee-a."

She couldn't help but smile. Prettiest ass indeed. A kattanee ass nonetheless. Bending her head to her self-imposed task, she kissed the tip of his cock and heard a heavy groan from under her. Ignoring his sign of pleasure, she took the girth of his penis into her mouth and sucked him hard like a sweet, sticky candy.

His thighs and abdomen clenched and quivered. A moment later, his cum spurted into her mouth. Kierra milked every drop from him she could before she rolled off him and stared at the ceiling. Her time was up.

Jamar closed his eyes and gasped for air. His skin was clammy and perspiration dampened his forehead. Kierra did things to him no other woman could. He'd known that since they were children, but now, with the sex so phenomenal, he couldn't even think of living without her.

He raised himself up on one elbow and tickled the underside of her baby toe, knowing she was ticklish and would either push him away or laugh with delight.

She rolled away and scrambled to her knees, but there was no smile on her lips. Puzzled, Jamar blinked. "Kierra, what's going on?"

"I can't do this anymore." She raked her fingers through the top of her hair. "This was the last time."

His heart sank. No way would he let her go. He'd try reasoning with her although a fat lot of good that had done. "I'm going to take you away. The spaceship captain agreed to take us both without papers."

Kierra interrupted. "For more money, I suppose."

He nodded. "But the money doesn't matter. We'll go to Praadar, we'll get married and we'll have no worries." He'd forgotten the message was on is GCD. He labored to his feet as he fought back the dizziness as a result of his orgasm and his excitement that he and Kierra no longer needed to worry.

Scrolling to the message, he held out the GCD for her to examine. She read it, her lips silently moving. When she'd finished, her gaze turned melancholy and caught his. "You know we can't go, Jamar. Maybe you can, but the bossman would order me found and brought home."

Disheartened, he noted she used the name the kattanee gave his father. He said nothing as his gaze shifted to the GCD, which he then set on the chair. When he turned back to Kierra, she was watching him with narrowed eyes.

"I can hire bodyguards." Yes, that was a good idea. The guards wouldn't let anything happen to her.

She shook her head in disagreement. "I'm kattanee, Jamar. There is nothing on Manitee-a or in the whole galaxy that will change that. If I run, I'll be hunted until the day I die."

"Praadar doesn't cling to these antiquated ways," Jamar explained. "There is no extradition except for criminals, and you're not one of them." He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "I promise, with everything I am, that if you come with me, I'll make sure nothing happens to you that you don't want."

She moved away toward the windows shaded by early afternoon shadows. He loved the elegant grace she walked with. He strolled up behind her and circled his arms around her slim waist, taking in her female scent. "I won't go without you, Kierra. We're meant to be together. Maybe," he said on a small sigh, "we were on some other plane of existence before we came here and we made a pact."

Kierra shook her head. "I don't believe in your dreams, Jamar. I'm not as free as you are."

"Do you sometimes sense the possibility of freedom, like the night you were talking to your mother and the moonlight was shining on you?" Could he persuade her to his way of thinking—that she no longer needed to think of herself as a slave, as a kattanee?

Slowly, she turned to him, but her expression was unreadable. "You watched me with my mother last night?"

Shamefaced, he nodded. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"You were spying on me," she accused him.

"If it helps make you feel better, I didn't hear what you two said."

Her eyelashes feathered her cheeks before she gave him a look of forgiveness but said nothing.

He went on. "Kierra, I promise. I swear by everything holy, I won't let the bossman come for you."

She toyed with a button at the top of his collar. Her full concentration seemed to be on the circle. When she lifted her gaze to his, he knew she'd made a decision, but what had she chosen? To go with him or force him to find some way to take her with him?

"Okay. I'll go."

His heart sank. The crestfallen manner in which she'd spoken warned him she really didn't believe she could leave, that she really didn't believe in him. And that fact hurt.

Chapter Six

In the silvery moonlight, Kierra danced, swaying back and forth, her hands held in elegant positions as Jamar had taught her when they were young. She heard the measured music in her head, played with instruments that set her heart singing. Violins, the slow beat of a drum, castanets, and the haunting sound of a flute in the background. Her feet, encased in the best shoes she owned, stepped lightly from one patch of ground bordering the swamp to the other, but the music and the sinuous rhythm of her body's weaving was the primary tone in her head.

For the first time in her life, she wore a dress constructed of silver cloth, a going away gift from her mother. The fragrance of the wild roses wafted upward, joining in her joyous dance. The dress' hem fluttered in the mild breeze.

Jamar had promised to meet her here, to spirit her onto the spaceship that would fly them away to Praadar and a new life. But he was late. The moon had begun its downward trek toward Dead End Mountain and would soon be lost behind it.

Kierra continued to dance, moving her arms and legs gently from side to side, her eyes half-closed. Jamar's heavy-handed persuasion had worked to transform her mind. She wanted to be free, not to be looked down upon and mistreated for being a kattanee, although that was all she'd known in her life.

Exhausted from lack of sleep, worry and excitement, she finally sank to the tree stump. She had to accept the fact Jamar wasn't coming. He'd never been late, not even once.

Tears began to stream down her cheeks. She'd made a choice, so where was Jamar? Why hadn't he come to take her away from Becutan? Had he played a cruel joke on her or had he simply decided he wouldn't risk his life for a kattanee? That had to be it. Friendship on the Becutan lands went only so far. Everyone was the enemy, and no one could be trusted.

Backhanding the stream of tears away, she stood, straightened her shoulders and walked toward the cabin she shared with her family. This one time Jamar wasn't going to keep his promise.

* * * *

The room was still warm from the sun even though darkness had fallen. A cold chill ran down Jamar's spine. With his heart crying but the lines of his face set in stoic lines, he faced his father who had burst into his rooms several minutes earlier and angrily demanded quick answers. Jamar wasn't willing to give them. He had to protect Kierra, and if it meant with his life, he'd give it for her, he realized grimly. She might accuse him of being a dreamer, but his heart was in the right place.

Bara held Jamar's GCD against his palm. "Didn't you think you'd have to pay the consequences if you took this kattanee to Praadar?" His hair was thin and gray, his shoulders permanently stooped and his belly rotund as a result of living a luxurious life.

"You're monitoring my communications," Jamar said quietly, unable to fathom why his father would do such a thing. Didn't Bara trust him?

"I had hopes you'd turn away from the kattanee girl as you got older and, I was thinking, wiser. Now you've had sex with her, and that goes beyond forgivable."

Jamar wished he could get to Kierra and warn her she needed to flee Becutan. Maybe her mother would help her escape when they discovered her life was in jeopardy. If they found out in time. Bara always acted quickly and decisively.

"You are confined to your room until I figure out what to do with you." Bara turned on his heel and stalked out. Behind him, four guards took up their positions in front of the door.

So they would watch his every movement. Fine. Standing erect with his head canted to one side, he wondered how in the hell he would get out and take Kierra away.

* * * *

As Kierra changed from the lovely silver dress to her ragged cotton one, Eden edged around the makeshift beds on the floor. "Kierra," she said softly, furtively. "He's been locked in his room by his father. The bossman will come for you next."

Kierra's eyes widened in surprise. Her head spun with the news. "How did bossman find out?" Her heart did a quick somersault. Jamar hadn't been able to come for her. He hadn't broken his promise. He couldn't leave his suite!

Eden lifted her shoulders in a half shrug. "I don't know, but my offer to find another place for you elsewhere is still open."

"No, not without Jamar." Kierra's mind raced. What would Bara do to Jamar since he'd so obviously discovered Jamar was sleeping with Kierra? Would he beat him? Would he kill him? "A man wouldn't kill his own son, would he?"

She didn't realize she'd been talking aloud until Eden shook her head. "I don't know. Anything can happen when you've been defiled by a kattanee."

"Defiled?" Jamar's love for her had defiled him? "I refuse to accept that," she said stubbornly, pulling the cold, cotton uniform over her head. The fabric fell over her like a shroud and instantly chilled her to the bone. She trembled from head to foot.

Eden pressed her lips together in a tight line, her signal she didn't want to talk about that any longer.

Kierra tugged on her sleeve. "Have you heard of the injections to change skin color on Praadar?"

Warily, Eden inclined her head. "I have."

"Is it here on Manitee-a? How can I get my hands on some?" Kierra feared she was jumbling her words together and her mother wouldn't understand.

"I pulled a favor, and can get you one injection's worth, Kierra, but no more. That means you'll be able to change to black skin only one time." She ran her tongue over her lower lip. "So think carefully before you act." Eden turned her back.

Kierra thought she'd heard the slightest of admonishments but chose to ignore it.

Eden swiveled around, her expression one of consternation. "I don't know how you'll react to the injection or how long it will last. The effects are proving to be unpredictable in some cases. It might kill you. Do you still want it?"

Kierra's throat swelled with emotion. "Jamar's in trouble. I have to take that risk." She'd become Jaquill by virtue of her skin color and be able to spirit Jamar away. Once she got him out of his room, he'd know where to go to catch the spaceship he'd been talking about. If it was still there and waiting.

Eden didn't have far to go, Kierra mused. She walked across the semi-dark room, drew out one of the drawers from a badly scuffed chest and rummaged until she found a small needle and vial.

As Eden neared her, Kierra said, "You knew I might choose this, didn't you?"

Her mother simply nodded. "If and when the time came, I wanted to be able to help you." She hugged Kierra. "You're my daughter, and I always knew you would end up with Jamar, even though he's not one of us."

Kierra swallowed hard and felt a deep ache in her throat. Eden loved her and had always supported the decisions she'd made. With the largest one of her life looming above her, Kierra gave Eden a big hug and squeezed her tight. Then she stepped back and extended her arm. "Will here be okay?"

Her mother simply smiled as she raised the needle.

* * * *

Kierra couldn't allow herself to be nervous. According to her skin color, she was Jaquill and had to act with self-assurance. As she made her way to Jamar's suite, she'd decided her name, as Jaquill, was Areka, she was from Praadar and had come to visit poor, lonely Jamar. The first thing she had to do was get past the guards, but that shouldn't be a problem, should it?

She paused at a floor-length mirror in the hallway outside his room and examined herself. Creamy rose lipstick. Checkmark.

Clinging silver dress that conformed to her curves. Checkmark.

High heels. Checkmark.

Black skin. Checkmark.

She was all set to go and hoped Jamar would like the effect. Absar, at Eden's humble request, had even made a pic of her on his GCD and sent it to Jamar's device as if it had come two months ago but hadn't until now reached its destination. Curvaceous, bodacious Areka from Praadar was on her way.

Kierra knocked on Jamar's door sharply. "Jamar, are you in there?" she called out as if nothing was amiss on the other side.

She heard shuffling from beyond the door before Jamar opened it a fraction of an inch. Kierra got the impression the guards were nearby. All she could see of him was his worried face.

"What do you want?" he whispered, just a moment he must have realized who she was. His eyes widened and a small smile played on his lips. A slim gold chain that was merely a deterrent to intruders ran from the door to the frame.

"Ah Jamar," Kierra said loudly, enjoying her new role, "don't you remember me, Areka from Praadar? Don't you remember fucking me several nights in a row?" Was she overdoing the acting a little bit?

“Oh yeah,” he replied in a sultry voice. “I didn’t recognize you with your clothes on.”

One of the guards near him broke out in a fit of coughing used to mask snickering. Too bad for him.

“Can I come in?” she inquired. “To keep you company. I’m sure you know how to take my clothes off. All of them.”

“Are you going to dance for me? Naked?” Now he was into the act too.

“Well, big boy, you’ve got to let me in for that. I’m certainly not going to strip out here in the hallway.”

The chain dropped off the door. Jamar grabbed her arm and unceremoniously hauled her into the room. Three burly kattanees guards stood to one side watching intently.

“Oh,” she said, pretending to be suddenly shy. “I didn’t realize you already had company.”

“Maybe once father realizes you’re here, they’ll do their disappearing act,” he muttered, turning hostile eyes in their direction. He turned his back and seated her in the same armchair where she’d sat in his lap naked the night before.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said to me when you were on Praadar,” she continued in a conversational tone. Her voice was loud enough for the guards to hear easily.

His eyebrows furrowed together. “About marriage?” he asked, with a blatant wink the guards couldn’t see.

“Well, yes.” She laced her fingers together. “I’ve given some thought to your proposal.” She paused, as Jamar and the guards waited expectantly. She moistened her suddenly dry lips. “Yes.”

Jamar swallowed hard. The guards clapped and cheered and hooted. Then the room quieted. “I’m glad you did. Now my father can get this ridiculous idea out of his head that I was—” He shook himself as if restraining himself from saying what he had on his mind. Holding out his hand, he whispered, “Dance with me.”

The music began, slow, sensuous and peaceful. Perfect for twining her arms around his neck, pressing her thighs against his and dancing with their hearts close to one another.

* * * *

Bara interrupted them as they slowly danced to the music that was never played on any instrument. The melody’s sweet strains could hardly be imitated to any degree of accuracy. Kierra and Jamar had given up trying. The music died away. Kierra stood at Jamar’s side, and he felt her pulse racing in the wrist he held.

“Jamar,” Bara said pleasantly. “Why didn’t you tell me about Areka?” He beamed at Kierra and nodded his approval.

“You were too fixated on...” Jamar didn’t want his father to think about Kierra, the kattanee but about Areka, the Jaquill.

Bara held up his hand, palm forward. “No need to explain. You two are getting married?”

Kierra’s pulse tattooed. Jamar nodded. “We’ll live here part of the year. The rest of the year, we’ll live on Praadar.”

“How soon will you tie the knot?”

“Within the next couple of days.” Jamar turned to Kierra. “That is, with your approval. I know weddings can be a lot of preparation and worry for you women.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage,” Kierra volunteered, keeping her lovely gaze fixed on his face.

Jamar was proud of her. She didn’t flinch nor did she back away from his father.

Bara clapped his hands together, startling Jamar. He jumped. To her credit, Kierra didn’t move a muscle. “Here or on Praadar?”

“Praadar,” Jamar responded. The faster Kierra and he were away from here, the better he’d feel, and he bet, she’d feel the same way, too.

Epilogue

Kierra Vonne, aka Areka, and Jamar Q'ellan became man and wife the next day on the beautiful planet of Praadar. They had been unwilling to take the chance that Bara or the authorities would find Kierra missing and figure out she was with her Jaquill lover.

Jamar's ear-to-ear smile demonstrated he was the proudest man alive. The music was performed on no instrument the gray-haired minister, who was the sole witness, could see. Kierra held a bouquet of fresh white roses in her trembling hands, and her gown was made of white satin, trimmed with a multitude of glittering diamonds. Her skin was still black.

After the wedding, they danced alone for hours alone in the room Jamar had reserved for them. When Kierra stumbled, he knew she was tiring and chuckled. "So how does it feel, my beautiful Jaquilla, to be Mrs. Jamar Q'ellan?"

She rose on tiptoes and kissed him full on the mouth. "I feel just like myself but with black skin."

Jamar embraced her. His heart was flooded with love for her. She'd risked everything for him, and she continued to do so. "What about your skin? When will the injection wear off?"

She shrugged. "Does it matter? Here we can be anything we want, especially madly in love and no one will think twice to question us."

He noted the sadness in her eyes and held onto her with a tight grip. "I know you miss your family and you want to help them. We'll change our world. I promise. One step at a time."

The lovely strains of music started to play again. Entwined in each other's arms, they danced as the sun set.

About the Author

Aurora Rose lives in the Pacific Northwest and lives with her real life hero. She is owned by a conure who is permanently stuck in the 'terrible twos'. Aurora loves to write romance, especially paranormal, contemporary, and historical. When she isn't writing under her pen name, she hobnobs with her comic fantasy and young adult book characters.

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But what Wren doesn't know is that things in her hometown are about to heat up even more, and it will have nothing to do with her grandmother. It seems that Bryan Stockard is still around, he wants to get back into Wren's life—by any means necessary, and now he has just the tools to do it: a police uniform, handcuffs, and the authority to make Wren *assume the position*.

***Stripped* by Celia Kyle**

Sometimes life just required tequila...and vodka...and a shot or two of whiskey for good measure. Jasmine Wright, Jazz to her friends, has reached that point. And now all that liquor is making her clothes fall off—in the middle of the street. Good thing a friendly neighborhood police officer stops to help.

Sheriff Ian Blackwell has loved Jazz since high school and then some. When their relationship burned out so many years ago, he wasn't sure he would recover. Now he's getting a second chance, and he won't Jazz slip away from him this time. He has her naked and at his mercy, and he's going to keep her that way. Forever.

***Going Commando* by Catherine Chernow**

Bounty hunter Shyra Lawrence listens to her favorite radio station one morning where the DJ's are discussing "going commando" —*a.k.a.* wearing no undies. Captivated by their conversation, she decides to shed her panties in favor of the freedom that wearing no underwear brings.

Enthusiastic, Shyra sends an email to her best friend, Donna, detailing the delights of panty-freedom, but unbeknownst to Shyra, she's hit the send key...to the wrong email addy!

When Derek Grayson opens his emails that morning, he discovers that his #1 employee and top bounty hunter has sent him an erotic, enticing message about going commando. Derek has always been polite, professional, and so damned attracted to Shyra, it's almost painful. Working day in and day out with voluptuous woman has sent Derek's hormones into overdrive on more than one occasion.

Now, Shyra's shed her panties and Derek's got all he can do to contain his lust when she announces that she's... GOING COMMANDO.

***Ticket Me More* by Tia Fanning**

Hailed by the bridal flower world as an artistic genius, Meli works long nights making bouquets for women lucky enough to find love, while she herself lives a life of solitude. She yearns to share her heart and body with someone other than Bob, her *Battery Operated Boyfriend*, but acute shyness keeps her from engaging the "living" world.

However, Meli's quiet and predictable existence takes an unexpected turn when she is pulled over and ticketed by the most gorgeous cop she has ever encountered—Officer Michael Johnson. Though he doesn't seem to notice her as anything more than a traffic violation, Meli makes plans to overcome her timid nature and seize the police officer's attention...using any speed necessary.

***Handcuffs and Lies* by Bronwyn Green**

Sometimes promises to friends are the hardest to keep. Undercover police officer, Michael Tanner, promised his dying partner that he'd take care of the man's little sister. Trouble is, after her brother's death, Doctor Tori Spinelli wants nothing to do with Michael—or any other cop for that matter.

Tori has always fought against overprotective men and deception. Forced into protective custody with Michael, she's now faced with both in the same package. Despite their differences, Tori falls in love with him, but how can she trust a man who lies for a living?

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***Sexy Lexy* by Aurora Rose Lynn**

Amber Wyeth returns to her hometown of Cedar Ridge aiming to take revenge on an old high school flame who jilted her on prom night, only to discover the sexy sheriff might haul her off to jail for being naughty. When one erotic game leads to another, will Amber's quest for revenge leave her wanting more?

Sheriff Joey Hansen's fantasies are about to come true in a way he never expected when he meets the owner of a red Porsche with SXY LXY license plates on a deserted highway. She has car trouble but the driver's spicy games and scanty clothing are revving his engine up. How can he quench his longing for the beautiful woman? He decides turnaround is fair play.

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