

Shiree McCarver



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A Holiday to Remember

Shiree McCarver

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A SATYR'S TALE: ZAZA AND SYLUS

A SATYR'S TALE: SELBY AND DARIUS

African Warrior Women Series:

THE LORD AND THE SCORPION

Others:

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

FLAVOR OF LOVE

J-POP LOVE SONG

Obsidian Opus Series:

ETERNALLY I DO

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From Author:

Season's Greetings from my family to yours. Instead of my usual dedication I would like to take the time to point out some important issues to me. In this time when the world is in so much need and no one has much to give we must remember every little bit helps. Each and every one of us has the ability to make a difference in this world. Sometimes it really is the thought that counts; such as making the smart choice to become an organ donor.

There are a growing number of African Americans in need of Organ transplants along with others, but we are the least likely to be donors. Do not be afraid of what you don't understand. I know I was. Now that I'm educated I've decided to make a difference. Educate yourself on how a simple "yes" can save the lives of countless others, including someone you love. For more information about this serious matter and to leave your mark in this world, check out MODEP, Minority Organ Donation Education Program, at <http://modep.buffalo.edu/index.htm>

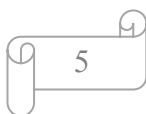
The holidays should be a happy time for one all. It's like a confirmation that we survived another year of life so let's get together and have a party from October 31st through January 1st! Just remember there is a new year of life to look forward to and a new year of parties but the only way to assure you will live to see another one is to be diligent. Don't drink and drive and don't let those you know or don't know do the same. Be a real friend; don't let your pals over drink or participate in foolish drinking games. We are losing many of our budding youths to alcohol poisoning and just because you aren't hearing about it, doesn't mean it's not happening. Drink smart or be like me and say, "No, thank you. I don't drink". It gets easier every time you say it and those who really care about you will not force the issue. You don't need booze to have a good time; being with your friends should be the only high you need to have fun. If it's not, maybe you need new friends. Even if it has never happened to you or someone you love, it could. Don't wait. Others need help now, and you can do your part. With your donations to MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving you can give a gift of life, love, hope and healing, possibility and prevention. With your help, funding is now available for programs that save lives and prevent injuries every day across our country. MADD also provides much-needed Victims Services for those who have experienced the pain and devastation of crashes due to drunk drivers. You can make smart choices. Don't drink and drive and help those who would help you if needed. For more information or if you wish to contribute to the fight against drinking and driving check out the website: <http://www.madd.org/>

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A HOLIDAY TO REMEMBER

By

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CHAPTER ONE

Halloween...

Picking up the pistol he spun the chamber once before pressing the barrel into his temple, his finger resting on the trigger. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Remembering...

Ikuya Yamane with his unshaven chiseled face etched with angles and shadows of grief, regrets, and loneliness sat on the comfortably soft brown leather chair in the music room of the sprawling two story Tudor style stone home with high vaulted wooden beam ceilings, graceful buttresses and authentic stained glass windows built in 1928. He didn't care much for historical homes and antique furnishings, but his wife Mako adored it from the moment they stepped inside. It hadn't mattered to her that it was in a great need of renovations. She loved it, and he loved her.

His black eyes glazed from sleeplessness and his broad shoulders drooped as if the weight of the world stood on his shoulders alone. Ikuya had all the trappings that twenty years of being a successful international composer and conductor afforded him. Still all the success and money in the world couldn't save his wife from the coma that took her from him and never gave her back.

This was the second time he had walked through the doors since her death three years ago when he removed her from life support to honor the court wishes. It had been a battle with her parents to make them understand that he couldn't let her go but when he was forced to turn off the machines after years of legal wrangling he broke all ties with her family once Mako died.

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It was disappointing because he'd never had a family of his own growing up, and he had begun to think of her parents as his own, but he couldn't bear to be around them any longer. He couldn't forgive them for what they done.

Now he was alone again and everything around him once more unbearably bleak. To think, he is a man loved by millions, yet here he sat alone in a house full of rich trappings and no one to share it with.

He should have sold the house right after she died, but he couldn't tolerate to part with the last place they made love. The last place he heard her voice and infectious laughter. The last place his world began to fall apart.

Mako, forgive me. It was his last thought before pulling the trigger.

CLICK!

His heart raced along with a muffled roaring in his ears. Suddenly he felt queasy, winded and lightheaded. With a shaky hand Ikuya reached up to wipe the cold sheen of sweat from his forehead, and smoothed his longish unruly hair behind his ear. With his other hand, he placed the gun on the antique mahogany and marble table beside the chair and poured another cup of rice wine downing it in one gulp slamming it back to the table in disgust. The universe must have decided this wasn't a good day to die.

"Possibly next Halloween you will get the retribution you wanted so badly, Mako."

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CHAPTER TWO

“Miss Payne, we can never thank you enough for donating your time photographing this evening’s charity event. We were in a panic when our original photographer fell ill and canceled on us. When we ask for your help, we never expected you would accept, considering your assistant assured us you were completely booked through next year. I was sure you would be too busy and at such a short notice.”

“Please, call me Julia, and it’s my pleasure.” Julia Payne smiled at the other woman before holding up her baby, a Nikon DSRL camera, getting a flattering shot off with just one click and letting it fall back against her stomach from its leather strap hanging around her neck. “I can’t think of a better cause for donating my services than a benefit concert and banquet for MADD, Mothers against Drunk Driving.”

“Still, it is an honor that you would take the job personally. You could have easily passed the job on to one of your assistance, and we would have been just as grateful, but with you being here personally it allowed us to add you to our advertising roster. You wouldn’t believe the accepted RSVP’s we received from super models after finding out you were going here.”

Julia chuckled and nodded. “Well, I’m glad to hear my reputation precedes me, even though I don’t understand why. I just take pictures of what I see, and I love what I do. It’s a shame that I get paid what I do when I love it so. If I wasn’t making a living from what I do, I would do it for free.”

“Your love for photography shows in your work, Julia and never say “free” around someone like me, for I will take full advantage every time I have a charity function.” The older woman patted at her platinum blond

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upswept hair, laughing along with her.

“Please, at the very least call,” Julia urged. “If I’m available or in town I would love to be a part of a good cause.”

“Truly Julia, I personally want you to know how grateful I am that you are doing this. I hope that you will allow me to plan a dinner party in your honor.”

“That really isn’t necessary, Mrs. Crosby,” Julia said shaking her head.

“Matilda.” She supplied her first name. “Nonsense!” She waved a hand sparkling with frosted pink nail polish and a huge engagement ring with matching wedding band. “I will have my girl call your girl.”

Julia didn’t have a “girl” to handle the personal “stuff” she could do herself. She was sure Matilda was talking about a girl Friday, a worker that had no social life but to cater to her boss. Hopefully, her regular assistant that helped her during normal business hours would suffice. She just smile and nodded, knowing to argue the point that she didn't expect a dinner party for helping with a good cause would be considered an insult to the other woman's kind offer, so she graciously accepted.

“What did you think of Ikuya Yamane’s performance? Was it the first time you experienced his music?”

“I have a few of his CD's, so I am familiar with his works. However, after this evening seeing him live, I have been transformed into a hopelessly devoted fan.” Julia laughed softly. “The concert was...oh my God, I don’t even know how to put into words the emotions I experienced while watching his performance.”

“He’s simply magnificent,” Mrs. Crosby injected.

“I completely agree,” Julia gushed. “The way Conductor Yamane

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maintains control over each minute moment, filling me until I felt as if I was overflowing with...with--”

“Passion?”

“Oh, yes,” she agreed. The awe was evident in her voice. “I cried. He moves with such a flawless grace. I can’t wait to develop the camera shots I have of him. I pray that I managed to capture the masculine beauty of his face.” She paused. Her eyebrows puckered as her mind wondered back to the deep sadness on his face during one of his sweeping ballads. It was at that moment she cried for him. “I don’t know. I never expected him to be...”

“Expected him to what, dear?”

“Yes, I would be interested in hearing the answer to that question also.” A deep melodious voice spoke from behind causing both ladies to turn. “Good evening, Ladies.” Maestro Ikuya Yamane inclined his head and gave a bow from his waist his eyes lowered.

The silvery white at his temples caught her eyes as it seemed to sparkle in the blue black color of the rest of his hair that was neatly smoothed back off his face, the trimmed sideburns emphasizing his remarkable high cheekbones and whiskey brown exotic eyes and thick dark lashes.

She imagined only a man comfortable in his masculinity would be able to appear in public with his hair in a single thick spiral curl down the center of his back, tied with a fancy thick black silk bow wearing a black tuxedo with tails, snow white ruffled shirt and white tie. If she had a word to categorize his appearance, she would have to pull from the days of old and call him debonair, dashing, and dangerous.

“Maestro Yamane, what a delight to have you as our most esteemed

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guess! I was fearful that after such an exceptional performance you would be to weary to grace the banquet with your presence.” The older woman and hostess of the benefit banquet beamed at him placing a gloved hand on his forearm.

Julia thought her foolishly girlish giggle was well warranted. Julia fought back the urge to do some gushing of her own. The man was simply too gorgeous for words this close up, and he was also a little shorter than she had suspected, he probably was only about five-eleven.

His creamy skin appeared flawless. She would have thought it was stage makeup until her eyes fell on endearing beauty marks scattered here and there on his face. Julia wondered how many other places on his body she could discover more moles. She realized now that she was this close it wasn't just the performance that had women swooning over him. The *Maestro* simply oozed sexiness.

“Performing has a reverse effect on me. After an engagement I have energy to spare.” He smiled. It was a wide grin that caused laugh lines to crinkle next to his eyes. She found his mouth extremely kissable. It was a relief to see his bottom teeth were slightly crooked. To her, the imperfection made him more approachable.

She had heard him speak English in several interviews and found his accent sounded European. She surmised it was from his universal education. After all he had been performing since he was a child. She had heard numerous stories about this man, mostly from her father.

It took Julia a moment to realize he was speaking to her. “Pardon me?” Her fingers were itching to lift the camera and snap more pictures of him. “I was a bit distracted.”

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“Forgive my eavesdropping, but I was curious to hear what your thoughts on my performance. It is said that the camera is a mirror for the soul.”

“I saw extreme sadness,” she answered honestly her dark eyes meeting his. I felt an inner torment hard to look at, yet too beautiful to look away from.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “Watching you Maestro Yamane, was painful and exhilarating at the same time.” The tears fell. “I don’t think I’ve been so overwhelmed and entertained at the same time.”

Thankfully, he had the strength to break whatever magic looming about them for she was spilling her thoughts to him like an idiot. Julia’s eyelashes fluttered willing to tears that threatened to continue, at bay. She did not want to embarrass her present company or herself any further.

Her eyes dropped to the crisp white handkerchief he held out to her. She smiled a closed lip smile and accepted the handkerchief.

“You are being too kind I clearly have some reprimanding to do at the next rehearsal.” He dazzled her with a smile; waving away her compliments with an artistic twirl of his beautiful hand. His black gaze was so unblinking and intense it made her feel as if she was the only other person in the room. They also seemed to be very cold regardless of his open smile.

“I grew up around classical music. If there was an error I was too mesmerized by the movement of your hands to hear it.” Julia said, refusing to look away this time. “You are much too hard on yourself, Conductor Ikuya Yamane.”

“*Arigatou.*” He inclined his head. “Mrs.?”

“*Maestro*, there are some major contributors I would like to introduce you to, if you will come this way, please.” The other woman piped in raising

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a hand to wave at another woman across the room.

“Of course, if you can give me a moment please.” Ikuya smiled at bowing his head. “Please.” This time it sounded more forceful.

When she continued to stand there waiting he turned his dead stare on the older woman. Julia’s breath caught in the back of her throat. She cringed when he cocked a thick dark eyebrow at the older woman before saying a bit rudely or so Julia thought. “Mrs. Crosby, you may go. I shall join you in a bit.”

“Huh? Oh...oh, of course. I will be right over here...waiting.” The older petite blond sputtered, her pale cheeks taking on a red hue. Julia thought her open friendly smile appeared to have tightened at the corners of her ruby red lips, but the change had come and gone so quickly, she could have been mistaken.

However, there was no mistaking her open curiosity as her inquisitive blue eyes darted from his face to hers once more before she turned on her heels and made her way across the room towards the ladies she waved at.

“I’m afraid I didn’t get your name,” Ikuya deep voice said.

“*Miss* Julia Payne,” she supplied.

“Please call me Ikuya. I’ve been Maestro so long I rarely hear my name anymore.” She heard the weariness in his voice that went more with her perception of the sad lonely man she saw a few times during her camera.

“Ikuya, I will if you call me Julia.” She paused, looked at his proffered hand then shook it, his flesh met hers in a warm clasp. She noticed he had beautiful hands with long square tipped fingers. The pronounced veins were threading along the back of his hands in a way she always associated with masculine strength and capability. His nails were clean, neatly clipped and

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buffed.

Still holding her hand, he asked, “Have we met before?” He cocked his head to the side in question.

“No, I don’t think so,” Julia said. Hastily, she withdrew her hand folding them together in front of her in a tranquil poise to prevent them from shaking, but she could not stop looking at his handsome face.

“I could swear I’ve met you,” he reached out and to her surprise caressed the crook of his finger down her cheek. “You have very beautiful eyes.”

For one incredible moment, she couldn’t breathe, so intense was the power emanating between them. With her heart beating rapidly in her stomach twisted into knots, Julia took a step back and his hand dropped back to his side. She managed to mumble, a “Thank you,” even though her voice sounded terribly husky to her own ears, she could only imagine what he must think about her, allowing him to touch her with such familiarity, when she just met him.

However, there was some palpable sexual tension between them. It was a wonderfully strange familiarity. She wasn’t sure why he would feel the same way, but she figured her familiarity of him was because his face was on billboards all over New York since his arrival advertising the benefit concert.

His slender but powerful shoulders dropped in a deep sigh. She turned to see where his irritated glare was gaping. “Mrs. Crosby is heading this way, with friends in tow. I do so hate these affairs.”

Julia laughed softly turning to face the approaching chattering women, both were introduced and the sexually charged aura between them shifted to a professional social geniality. She watched in quiet distraction

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while Ikuya turned on the charm for the swooning flock of female investors who took great pleasure in spending their mogul husbands' income. She took advantage of the lovely smiles on the women faces returned to snapping photos.

After she took several shots, she excused herself.

"Excuse me, Miss Payne. If I may, I would like to acquire a business card from you. I would be interested in seeing the pictures you've taken of me; mayhap, to purchase a few of your snapshots to place on my website."

Her eyes came to rest on his face. They stared at each other for what seemed to be an endless moment before looking away. Julia was grateful he didn't address her by her first name in front of the ladies. She didn't want the ladies of the charity board to get the idea that she wasn't a professional, because she took her photography work very seriously and would love to donate more of her time to other charitable events in the future.

"Ms. Payne takes the most extraordinary photos! You will not be disappointed," one of the ladies beside him gushed.

Julia reached into the camera case hanging from her shoulder and removed a business card. "I look forward to hearing from you."

"Tomorrow? May I call you? Or will tomorrow be too soon for you to have them available to see?" He asked. Julia saw how his eyes had dropped to her lips.

Flustered she managed to answer. "I should have the proofs done by then," she licked her lips. For a brief moment, Julia longed to be the woman that had the right to lean over and kiss him goodbye. It took everything within her not to give in to the impulse and embarrass herself if he was to reject her in a public display of outrageousness.

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Yet, there was something in the way he continues to stare at her that made her feel as if wouldn't have minded if she had kissed him. Even so, it was an intimate act that publicly in these circles just wasn't done; especially, by two strangers. She enjoyed being the talk of New York, but only if it was about her photographs. She had no desire to be splattered across the tabloids as the Classical Conductor Ikuya Yamane's latest mistress.

Anyone that picked up a music magazine knew about this man and they also knew that he refused to get serious with women stating he had already had the love of his life and she was gone. But what did it matter to Julia anyway? She was completely career oriented and she had no desire for anything serious or long term. However, she was up to taking him on as her next lover.

Julia lips spread into a secretive smile. She added a little more twist in her hips as she walked away knowing he was watching her ass. A shiver of sensuous awareness crept up her spine.

CHAPTER THREE

Ikuya stood in front of Julia's studio flat. He wasn't even sure if she lived here, or if it was just her business address. He just wanted to see her. There was something warm, and inviting in her beautiful eyes. His gut instincts warned him to run. If he allowed himself to follow up on his immediate attraction to Julia, there would be no turning back and the predictable would happen. He would end up having sex with her; she would think it meant they had a future together and then he would end up breaking her heart like all the others. If she was wise she would see him for what he was, "a dead man walking" and not answer the door.

Many women had tried to "fix" him but how can someone fix what is no longer there. When his wife died, she took his heart with her and left nothing but this shell of a man that used sex to fulfill the damned hollowness inside him. At least for those few satisfying moments between the smooth thighs of a woman buried to the hilt he could forget he was once foolishly happy.

Julia Payne seemed to be a nice woman. He had his assistant to research all the information he could find on her. She was well known for giving back to the community, her photo prints had been hailed from New York to Japan and Paris. All in all she appeared to be a commercial success and every artist or model that had his picture taken by her seemed to have a beamingly successful career. New York Times touted her as "Julia Payne, the woman with the eye for beauty. Through her eyes we saw hope where we thought there were none." That is what the media stated about her after she presented a gallery showing of pictures she had shot of people and the area

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after the 9-11 attack. All the proceeds she accumulated from the showing and photograph sales went into the Victims Fund.

Ikuya had read nothing but good things about her, and he was curious as to what made her so driven to help others? Maybe she could recommend some charitable organization that he could assure would benefit from his death. He had plenty of money to go around. As a result, much so he spent it recklessly. What else was it good for as far as he was concerned. He thought growing up on the poor side of Tokyo with a father deep in debt due to his ailing mother's medical expenses, that money would solve everything that was wrong in his world.

He carried that belief up until the Fates decided to prove him wrong. While his gentle hearted Mako was laying in the hospital with the best healthcare money could buy he realized even with all his money he was as helpless to help his wife, as he was when his father committed suicide in front of his very eyes, by stepping off in front of a subway train.

Ikuya released a loud tired sigh. He hadn't been to sleep, that was nothing new. To sleep was to dream, and to dream was to dream he was with his wife once again only to find out it was a lie, a fantasy of his own desire to see her once more.

"This is a mistake," he murmured. Rotating on his heels he took one, then two steps down before he heard his name.

"Ikuya Yamane? What in the world are you doing standing out here on my stoop in the snow looking like a drowned puppy?"

Every nerve in his body froze instantly. The way she called him by his given name with such comforting familiarity, made him feel as if his decision to come here had been the right thing to do. Instinctively he knew

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she wouldn't be upset or put out by him showing up unshaven in the same tuxedo he'd worn the night before minus the tie, at 6:00AM on her doorstep.

Turning he took in her lovely disheveled appearance. Ikuya swallowed hard his body tensed. He stared at the woman whose warm, compassionate eyes and face had haunted him since he watched her leave the benefit. She gazed into his eyes, and a hard knot of apprehension formed in the pit of his stomach,

Julia was not a classical beauty. Her features weren't delicate. Her big eyes a gentle, sable brown, her full mouth a shade darker than her mocha colored skin, her round cheeks flushed with the glow of sleep, he could still see the line marks left by the material of her pillow.

He also noted that one side of her naturally worn chin length hairstyle was matted on one side; it was most likely the side she preferred to sleep on. He liked the fact that at seeing him it wasn't her first instinct to reach up and touch her hair or face and worry over her appearance. It expressed to him that she was comfortable in her own skin and expected others to take it or leave it.

He was reminded as to why she caught his attention at the banquet. She was an uplifting beauty in a hall filled with artifice, pomp and fanfare. She was also the only Black woman in attendance. That alone made her a diamond in the rough amongst the over decorated artificial rubies. Julia had stuck out like a sore thumb dressed in the fashion of last season with a bulky camera hanging about her neck.

Ikuya found her acceptance of herself sexy and attractive. In his circle women intended to overdo the makeup and expensive garbs. The one way to capture a man's attention when you don't have the media savvy

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commercial features is to exude confidence. At this moment he found Julia Payne very sexy.

She had a solid curvaceous frame with shapely brown legs that was currently on display for his survey. The baby blue silk camisole top with big pink flowers, matching flannel boxer-briefs were exposed beneath an opened blue terrycloth bath robe. While she was bending to pick up the news paper he'd gotten a quick peek of full natural breasts with very dark nipples hardened to firm peaks from the cold morning air.

His hand dropped and brushed discreetly over his hardening penis to camouflage the telling signs of his immediate attraction to her urban appeal. He forced his gaze away from her curvy body, hoping it would make him feel less of an idiot for being here in the first place. He didn't need to add ogling to his improper behavior.

"This is a surprise. You haven't been home yet? Do you want to come in out of the cold" she asked tugging the robe close and tying the sash at her thick waist while she held the newspaper under her arm. "Hey, you're not looking too good. Are you all right?"

"I can't sleep." He confessed. "You really shouldn't invite strange men into your home."

She grinned showing startling white teeth in a lovely smile. "Are you strange?"

"Some say, I'm very strange."

"Ah, well I think you might be more "moody" than strange. Besides, I didn't take pictures abroad of war zones years ago without knowing a little about taking care of myself."

He shifted under her accessing stare.

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“So you want to come in out of the cold or what? You don’t even have on a coat! What do you have a death wish?”

She was teasing him, but she would be surprised at how close she was to the truth. His lack of caring whether he lived or died made him more reckless than he would have dared to be years ago. He never missed a performance, but now his as she said “moodiness” had warranted him the title “Eccentric Maestro”.

“I hardly feel the cold. I was hoping to tire myself out with a walk so that I might return to my hotel and sleep. I touched your card still in my pocket and the next thing I knew I was here on your doorstep.”

“You’re fortune I live where I work or I would have found an Asian Popsicle on my stoop by the time I got here.” She chuckled. “You’re probability hyper from the performance. I used to be like that back when I was working as a photographer for the New York Times. Finally I had to give up all the excitement and take on more boring contracts such as commercial, fashion. “The only war zone I do now is visiting the inner city to get shots for my gallery photos...” her voice trailed off. She gave him a close lip smile and a shook her head. “You really don’t want to hear this do you?”

“It’s okay.” A half grin came to his face. He released a deep tired sigh shoving his clenched fist into his trouser pockets. “And I wish it was my job that kept me from going to sleep. To tell you the truth, I’ve had trouble sleeping for some time now.”

“That’s not healthy. It’s puts a strain on your heart.” A concern frown took away her smile.

“You can’t harm what is already broken.”

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"I'm sorry," Julia murmured. "But I feel as long as a heart is beating, there's hope."

"I have hopes," a grim grin came to his lips. "I have hopes that death will come for me sooner than later."

She gasped in shock.

Ikuya eyes took in her startled face, and he realized he had spoken his thoughts aloud. He was staggered from the realization he had confided such a thing to a woman he just met. "I'm sorry. I really shouldn't be here. You don't know me from Adam and for me to invade your space without calling first at this early morning is--"

"I know you may think I'm feeding you a line of bull when I say this, but since I stared at you through my camera lens during your performance, I've felt this strange acquaintance with you." She interrupted. Lightly shrugging her round shoulders, she added in a softer tone, "I don't know why. It could be because you are a well-known public figure. All I know is...I felt stupidly happy to open my door and find you standing here."

Ikuya mirrored the perplexity he heard in her voice and saw on Julia's face. His elongated eyes nearly closed as they narrowed on her face. What was it about her? What about this woman kept him from accepting the offer for a pleasurable warm bed of one of his regulars just too broodingly walk aimlessly around in the damp coldness thinking about her.

Why had he felt driven to seek *her* out? The urge was real enough that it drove him to seek her out. He hadn't thought enough in advance to figure out what he was going to do once he arrived on her stoop. Ikuya decided he could start by being as honest with her as she had been with him.

"I'm as confused as you are, but I feel it too, Julia." He confessed.

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“It’s crazy, don’t you think?” A car horn blared behind him causing him to glance over his shoulder. It probably was someone that recognized him, and if they had a camera phone he was sure he and Julia would be the news buzz for this evening’s or tomorrow’s gossip columns headline. The only difference is they would make things more sordid than it was.

The media could always make something very innocent into a sordid tale of sex and scandal. Ikuya was use to it and admittedly some of the headlines had been well deserved. He was known for being a generous lover, but a horrible boyfriend.

He blamed the women. He made it clear from the beginning that his intentions wasn’t to have anything serious and that he never had a relationship that lasted any longer than a year. That didn’t stop them from thinking they would be the *one* to *change* him. He found it to be a childish and foolish way of thinking and a sure way of not making it to the year mark.

The more a woman spoke of the future, even if it was something as simple as attending a function with him that may be months away, he’d break things off. His future was too bleak to see anything further than the next day.

Shaking himself from his deep ponderings, Takuya realized Julia was speaking to him. “Pardon?” His dark thick eyebrows lifted in question.

“I said that I don’t think it’s crazy at all,” she answered.

He nodded tugging at his jacket collar to block the wind from his chaffing face.

“Hey, why don’t we go inside and get warm? I can make some hot toddies or chamomile tea. I would offer you coffee, but I don’t have any decaffeinated and *you definitely* don’t need the heavy stuff. You need to get some rest. Chamomile tea usually helps me.”

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She gave him a welcoming smile; a smile that can cause a man's airway to catch in the back of his throat. He peeled his eyes away from her face before he gave into the uncharacteristic urge to kiss her.

"I doubt tea or toddies will help me to sleep," he murmured. "Nothing helps, but prescribed medication, and I prefer to avoid them because it affects my timing during rehearsals. I've taken up walking until I'm exhausted, the only thing is getting back home without passing out seems to be a problem when you can't find a taxi on duty at 4 AM."

"You still miss your wife very much, don't you?" Julia reached out and touched his arm.

His head snapped back as if she had hit him. He was surprised. Only his friends knew that he continuously struggled with his loss even after three years. Actually, it had been longer if you count the duration in the hospital on life support.

"How did you--"

"I wasn't sure, I just know from experience once you've shared your bed with someone it's difficult to adjust to sleeping alone again."

Her warm brown eyes dropped to his feet for a moment before returning to gaze into his face.

"You've been married?"

"No, but I was engaged. We decided to move in together so that we could save up for our wedding and a new home. We wanted lots of rooms so that we could start working on our family soon afterwards."

"It's not the same as being married and losing the person you love more than life. Your engagement fell through obviously, so it's easier when you mutually agree to let go of each other."

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When Ikuya saw her brow pucker in a frown, he realized he most likely had said too much too bluntly. His lips compressed tightly as he mentally chastised himself.

“Ikuya, I have read your autobiography and if it is true, then I know that you and your wife, Mako had a fairytale romance. I remember how much I envied your happiness at the time I was reading it.”

“Maybe that explains why you feel as if you already know me.” Ikuya injected, his lips pursed in reflection.

“Yet, it doesn't explain why you feel as if you know me also.” She pointed out.

“True.”

“Did you come here because you're interested in *me* in particular, or are you just passing through and decided to stop in this morning for lack of anything better to do?”

“Julia, I don't only miss my wife, I still love her.” His voice was deep with emotions. It was easier to say the words he had said many times before to other women, then to seriously address her question and answer it.

He stared at her, and wondered how she could look so blazingly different from Mako, yet she managed to arouse a similar emotional connection he had when he first met his wife years before. How was it possible that such a thing could happen to him twice in a lifetime?

“I didn't question your love for your wife. I already know you love her and I'm sure you always will. What I want to know is if you came here this morning because you wanted to be with me? Have you been thinking about me as much as I've been thinking about you since we were introduced last night?”

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She moved her hand from his arm and caressed the stressed the wet strands of hair that clung to his cheek behind his ear while allowing her fingers to linger and caresses the indenture at the back of his lobe. It was something that Mako would do all the time.

“Don’t.” He said a bit more gruffly than he intended flinching from her touch. She dropped her hand to her side. “Julia, how can I answer you when I don’t even understand why I came here?”

“Do you truly believe you are the only one that continues to suffer a great loss?” She responded sharply. “Do you think you’re the only one in this world that has known the pain of finding a great love only to lose it?”

“I’m sure I haven’t, but even you admitted I had a love to be envied. Therefore you can’t possibly begin to compare whatever happened to break up you and your fiancé to what I’ve lost!”

“And you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” Julia spoke calmly enough, but he could see by the steady tapping of the newspaper against the side of her leg he had agitated her.

“Let’s say we drop the subject,” he suggested. “I’ll let you get back to enjoying your Sunday morning.” He saw her dark brown eyes sparkling with unshed tears. “Julia---”

“It wasn’t just some silly lover’s spat that ended my dreams. I lost my fiancé after the 9-11 attacks. He was a firefighter. So I know pain also and I dare you tell me I don’t know what you’re going through.” She sniffled and wiping her face with the back of her hand. “No one can ever take their love from us, but I do believe we aren’t put in this world to love only one person! I also don’t think neither one of them would want us to wallow in self pity spending our lives being unproductive. He gave up his life trying to

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save others, so I will not shame his memory by not living for the both of us.”

“I’m sorry, Julia, I didn’t know.”

“How could you? Ikuya, I told you this because I want you to know I do understand your pain. The loneliness still gets to me from time to time.” He heard her release a long sigh of frustration.

“I think I should be going,” he heard himself saying. He didn’t want to go. He just knew it would be the wisest thing to do because he would end up hurting her, like the countless others that came after his wife’s death. She had been through enough and he couldn’t add to her pain.

“Yeah, I guess you should. I have your card. I will call you when the pictures are ready,” she said coldly.

Not knowing what to say he watched in numb silence as she walked back inside and shut the door behind her.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Ikuya went to the door bracing his hand on each side of the doorway he leaned his forehead against the unforgiving hardness of the cold wood. He could hear her sobbing on the other side and it wrenched at his heart.

Dear God, how he longed to hold her in his arm, kiss those full lips and hear her say his name in that deeply sinuous voice. He could sense her need for comfort. He really should walk away from her. She made him nervous. Ikuya found that realization oddly comforting. From the question she had asked him, he obviously wasn't the only one experiencing this unbalanced, unwanted attraction. Julia Payne had an effect on him. He was torn between his need to protect her from the disappointment he would bring her later and the desire to have her.

Heaven help them both if he couldn't find the strength to walk away right now. He didn't know if she could still feel him outside the door, or if she was just curious to know if he left, or if she had peeped through the peep-hole in the door, but he was relieved when it opened once more and there she stood. Julia stared at him an agonizing moment before she leaned into him and eased her arms around his waist. Her tear stained face pressed into his chest.

Ikuya leaned back enough to cup her tear stained face in both of his hands and became lost in the familiarity of her beautiful eyes.

"What?" She asked her bottom lip trembling.

"I'd like to kiss you."

He felt her hold tightened around his waist. Her eyelids fluttered.

"I want you to kiss me."

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His heartbeat thrummed in his ears and a heady delicious ache weighed heavily in his balls as he lowered his head. Ikuya lips made brush strokes over hers and she melted into him. The hills and soft curves of her body molded against his empty spaces. He surrendered to her lips as they opened for him encouraging him to give her the full expertise of his mouth and tongue.

As the kiss progress he started to wonder who was teaching who what. She was a wonderful, sexy, and generous kisser. He closed his eyes and took in the full experience. Never had he kissed such luscious full lips. They were soft, cushiony, unfamiliar, yet so right.

His kisses became needy and greedy, all-consuming and frightening but he couldn't stop even though he knew he should. He liked her too much to end up disappoint and hurting her when he had to move on. He was only in New York through the holiday season and he would be returning to Japan to finish the last of his tour. He tried to withdraw but she held on.

With a moan inside her mouth his passion became feverish causing him to push forward guiding her back inside the house. He kicked the door closed behind him. Ikuya hand slid over the contours of her bottom filling each hand with firm flesh he gripped lifting her up and into him until she was balancing vicariously on her tiptoes. Her fingers gripped his shoulders as he shifted her body so that his erection pulsated against her feminine core.

He felt the moment she gave herself over to his care completely. Her body lost its tense urgency and her returned kisses became tender thrusts and probing of her tongue. Her hands bury themselves into his hair and held his scalp turning his head about to reach another sensitive spot inside his mouth. It was obvious Julia was very experienced in kissing and Ikuya knew in a

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matter of minutes he would be beyond thinking rationally.

Like a thump of a finger to his forehead, reality hit him. He would not, could not, take advantage of her. Other women that had come to his bed always understood perfectly the arrangements of the relationship before hand, even if they had secrets hope that he would change his mind, they knew being with him had its limitation. If Julia was to take him to her bed, it would not last no longer then Christmas and the New Year. He couldn't allow himself to become careless now.

Breaking the kiss Ikuya scowled. "Julia, if we are to do this I can't offer you no more than the next seven weeks and I must return to Japan."

She placed more kisses to his lips, his chin and his throat that she had exposed with a careless tug causing buttons to scatter.

"I don't care. I want to be with you, now."

"You deserve better, than me," he warned her once more. "You deserve someone that can give you the love you lost."

"Don't you deserve the same?"

"That is impossible." His frown deepened. "If you had any good judgment you would throw me out of your home right now."

"If I had any good judgment I never would have opened the door and threw myself into your arms." She pointed out with a closed lip smile he found irresistible and earned her another kiss.

Opening her mouth on a sigh she accepted the gentle kiss causing him to grin against her mouth. He looked down into her face, heated and aroused. Her lips were swollen, damp, and reddish-purple from his enthusiasm.

"Julia, tell me to go," he urged.

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“Spend the holiday with me, Ikuya.” She reached out and touched his face. He turned his head to press a kiss into the flat of her palm. “Unless you already have other plans.”

“I have a midnight candle lighting Christmas Eve event and my final performance will be New Year’s Day.”

“Then let’s enjoyed the next few weeks together.”

Shaking his head he added, “I really shouldn’t,” he protested.

“However, you will because you want me as much as I want you.” She gave him another breath stealing smile.

“You will regret it.”

“I think we both will regret it more if we don’t act upon this crazy chemistry between us.” She nuzzled his nose with her forehead. “Look...neither one of us is looking for commitment at this time in our lives.”

“I will never look for commitment, Julia.”

She eased from his arms and untied the sash at her waist to allow the robe to open. He watched as she shrugged the material off her shoulders and allowed the piece to drop to the floor.

She held out her hand to him and he stared at it. Brown, soft, capable. Bidding him to come with her. He hesitated.

“I’m offering you an uncommitted few weeks of mutually satisfying sex.”

“Julia, I haven’t known you very long but I can tell you are in many ways like my wife, Mako. You make a man want to possess you and take care of you. To love you.”

“That’s because I deserve a man that *can* love *me*,” she tilted her chin

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up. Dropping her hand back to her side she spoke softly. “You’ve already made it clear. I understood. Are you frightened you might want something more between us?”

“Of course not.” His voice held a tremor.

“Last offer.” She held out her hand to him once more. “Accepted it or leave here now without any regrets between us.”

Ikuya grabbed her hand tugging her towards him. Taking her face in his hands, he looked at her directly. “Seven weeks and no more.”

“No more,” she said.

The assuredness he saw on her face made him feel more at ease. He nodded and allowed her to lead the way.

CHAPTER FIVE

In the soft light of her bedroom he surveyed her near nakedness from head to toe. He could feel her trembled in anticipation. She didn't even flinch as his dark eyes assessed her with the same appraising look she was giving him as she unbuttoned his tuxedo shirt.

"You are so beautiful." Ikuya whispered.

He moved closer until she had to arch her neck to look at him. Reaching out, both their hands joined lacing fingers together. She remained still as he leaned down to kiss her. Her lips felt pliant, thick and wonderful beneath his. They were still warm from when he had teased and sucked on them.

"Ikuya," Julia breathed in a rush opening her mouth to his pillaging.

When he lifted his head once more his dark brows slashed down over his eyes. "Are you sure about this, Julia? This isn't something you've done before, is it?"

A short laugh escaped her and his left eyebrow arched high in query.

"I've had sex before, so I hope you aren't disappointed that I'm not as perfect as you're trying to make me out to be."

Ikuya grinned. "I was not talking about being virginal; I'm talking about you being in a temporary love affair for the sake of pleasure only."

She waved that away. "You're right, I haven't done anything like this before, but I also don't do anything that I imagine I will be regretting later." Her brown eyes met his gaze. "Are you sure you're not having second thoughts about doing this with *me* in particular?"

He wasn't sure he understood her implications. "What do you

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mean?”

“I don’t know too many Japanese men dating or sleeping around with Black women? I don’t know why. Is it a culture thing or do you not find Black women attractive in general?”

Ikuya rubbed the back of his neck feeling uncomfortable with the turn of conversation. “I can’t speak for every Japanese man, Julia. But I can say that I have never been that thoughtful about the women I dated before or after my wife. Have any of them been a Black woman? No.”

“I thought not,” she stepped away, turning her back on him as she walked over to the window and pulled back the curtains, staring out at the snow. “I don’t mind an unconditional holiday romance. The thought of it seemed very romantic.”

“Julia...”

“However it feels different knowing I would be your first, and possibly your only Black woman.” She released the curtains and they shut out the gloomy cold day. “It makes me feel as if I’m just a curiosity for you.”

“I’m not a racist if that is what you’re implying,” he said with an affronted stare.

“No. I’m not implying that, but as I said, I’ve read and seen your autobiography on the news. Most of your affairs seemed to have an expiration date of no more than a year.”

Not sure where she was going with this he waited patiently for her to get to the point even though he was beginning to dislike where she was going with this. “That is true and some haven’t made it the full year. I’ve made no secret that I’m not searching for a woman to replace my deceased wife.”

“I understand. I’m just wondering if you came here in search of me

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because you know your time here was very limited. I'm wondering if you would have come here if we had met at the beginning of your season here in the states back in the spring. Would you still want this to happen between us?"

Understanding came to Ikuya and he closed the space between them. She blinked at him as he approached. The corner fireplace in her bedroom illuminated the room from the dankness of the closed curtains and overcast New York morning. The eerie silence from outside was so unusual for the city, but it expressed the seriousness of the storm blowing in threatening to cancel Thanksgiving and the upcoming biggest shopping day of the year.

Yet the thought of being snowed in with Julia wasn't an unappealing one. It surprised him, because after he had sex with his paramours he usually preferred to be alone, arranging for a car to take them home.

How could he reason an explanation to her, when he wasn't sure himself as to why the fascination he had developed with her so quickly was different from the others he'd been with since Mako? He did find the way the warmth of the firelight played off the beautiful brown hue of her skin, appealing. He also could admit to himself he was curious as to what it would be like to sleep with her, but it was *her* that he was curious about, not the fact that he was contemplating sleeping with a Black woman.

He considered her racial makeup no more than he considered it when he slept with a Korean woman for the first time or a Caucasian woman for the first time. It was irrelevant to the sexual satisfaction he hoped to gain from the union.

The only difference now is those women never questioned his intentions on choosing them as his current lover or one night stand. So why

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did she? Was this something that all Black women assumed when approached by men of another nationality or was this an issue for Julia in particular?

“Julia, it’s hard to answer that question since we didn’t meet earlier, but now that we have I am attracted to you. As to why,” he shrugged. “I have no idea. I do know it’s not the color of your skin that drew me to you. Even though there wasn’t many of you accounted for at the banquet I saw a supermodel or two.”

She quirked her eyebrow at him, but still allowed him to continue. “Julia, it was the laughter I saw in your eyes. The polite way you handle the people about you, and the easiness of your smile made you approachable. When I heard the way you were speaking about me and my music, well I thought the attraction was mutual so I made myself known.”

“Ikuya?”

“Let me finish.” He interjected. “You brought this up. I assume it’s because this is a concern of yours and I don’t want you to have regrets once it’s too late.”

She silently nodded.

“Has it never occurred to you that the reason I’ve never dated Black women in the past is because none showed any interest in me?” He watched her, her big brown eyes consuming him, drawing him in even though it was his intent to maintain an emotional distance.

“I...” she licked her lips. His eyes followed the movement. “I never really thought about it that way, I suppose.”

“From my understanding, Black women have stereotypical idea about Asian men that may or may not be true of all men of Asian descent.”

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He could see from the way she was biting down on the inside of her bottom lip to keep from laughing in his face that she knew exactly what he was hinting at.

“I’m sorry,” she managed to say with only a grin. “You’re right, I have never dated an Asian man and you could draw the same conclusions.”

“Honestly, Julia, it hadn’t crossed my mind. After you made it clear that you were interested in me as I was you, I thought the rest was understood,” Ikuya reasoned. “If this was going to be more than out intent, then I agree we should be discussing it further because our families and friends would have to be considered.”

She nodded and shrugged. “No. I understand what you’re saying. It’s just sex, right.”

His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He wanted to confirm what she said, but he couldn’t quite discern his feelings from desire. This was unusual for him. He always knew what he wanted from the moment he made his attraction known. But, he had no intentions of coming here when he left out of the banquet and held a cab. He had every intention of going to his hotel suite and was surprised when he found himself standing on the corner a block from her place.

He was stunned again by the fact he didn’t retreat and go home when she said her farewells. Maybe this attraction he held for her would be purged once he satisfied his baser needs.

“What are you thinking?” He found her asking when he relinquished his deep thoughts.

“I’m thinking if you had any sense you would send me away while you still can,” he found himself admitting aloud.

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Her eyes darkened, and she gazed at his mouth. “I’m thinking you’re right. I guess we both must be crazy to be considering a short time affair. What if at the end of eight weeks one of us want more from the other?”

“I won’t,” he retorted briskly. *Too quickly*, he thought while silently wondering if he had said it for her sake or to confirm to his growing doubts that his feeling about love and the future hadn’t changed. He was contented with his life being the way it was. *Am I really?*

“Okay,” she murmured at him. Her smile was a bit distracted. “Since I know how you feel, if by the end I am the one to weaken I will remember to keep my feelings to myself.”

Ikuya frowned at her, wondering why she would even risk it, if there was the least bit chance she could get her heart broken.

“Julia?”

“Ikuya, no matter what you’re about to say, I’m not going to change my mind. The one thing I’m sure of is I want you right here and right now. For all we know we may not be compatible and if that is the case, there will be no reason for things to progress past today, will it?”

Ikuya bristled. He hadn’t thought about it that way. He didn’t consider that after their first romp she wouldn’t want to spend the rest of the holiday season with him while he was in the States. He quietly surmised there was always the possibility that they weren’t sexually compatible.

“Unless, you just like my company,” he teased.

“Even if I do, it would feel too awkward. Every time I look at you afterwards I would know.”

“Know what?”

“If all the rumors about your bedroom prowess were true or if you

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really sucked and it was all hype.” She lifted her chin with teasing bravado.

He chuckled. “I assure you before we go any further, it’s all hype.”

“*Awe...really?*”

His grin widened. “Let’s just say if you don’t go into it expecting much it may be more than you expected.”

She dazzled him with a wide white display of teeth as she laughed.

Ikuya broad shoulders tensed. Black eyes narrowed. His stare was intent and probing, he rasped, “Come here Julia.”

She licked her lips and he throbbed. He heard her indrawn breath, felt the warmth of her curvaceous body as she closed in on him. Grabbing her neck with one hand, he pulled her flushed against his hard lean frame, and then smashed his mouth over hers and sparks of familiarity imploded behind his closed eyelids.

In his minds eyes he could feel taste and touch Mako, but even when the mental vision wavered back into Julia, the warm connected feeling that threatened to overwhelm him felt the same. Two completely different women, yet there was no discerning one woman from the other. Has his memory grown so vague? No, it wasn’t possible, for none of his other lovers had made him feel this way.

It should have freaked him out but it didn’t; instead, Ikuya had an intoxicating feeling that he once again held in his arms a *rightness* he had only felt once before in his entire adult life.

CHAPTER SIX

Julia moaned.

She felt the fingers of his right hand in her hair, then his left was at her hip and he said in a low, rough hewn voice, “You taste absolutely wonderful.”

Julia’s eyes opened surprised that he would be so outspoken. Usually, once a man realized he had a sure thing in his arms, he didn’t bother with the sweet words that made her feel motivated to drive him wild. She found with Ikuya she didn’t need much motivation, she already wanted him desperately. She didn’t know what it was about him that made her throw all cautions to the wind. Perhaps it was watching his performance the evening before that had brought forth this neediness she had for him or maybe it was because in an unexplainable way he reminded her of her fiancé.

His reserved nature, the way his stance emphasized the strength of his thighs and the slimness of his hips. He had a chiseled beardless appealing face. Even the quiet way he spoke, and the way his eyes took in everything in one swoop. He was about the same height in her arms, causing her body to form perfectly to her frame.

She traveled up the length of his arms with her fingers she grasp fists of material and guided the damp snow white shirt off his shoulders. He released her long enough to allow her to remove the shirt completely letting it drop to the ground where her discarded robe rested.

He remained perfect still, actually tense as she tugged his undershirt from the waistband of his trousers. Julia’s moment halted as he placed his hands on top of hers.

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“I usually leave my t-shirt on. It seems to be easier on the women I’m with,” he muttered.

Julia looked up into his face noticing he couldn’t even look her in the eyes.

“Ikuya, I hope I don’t have to say this again. I’m not one of your other women and if you can’t be respectful with me about this situation we should stop right now.”

“It’s not that Julia.”

“Well, honey, I don’t intend to spend my holiday season in the bed with a man that I haven’t even seen completely naked,” she argued. “Look. I don’t mind you only wanting to not be alone for the Holidays. However, I don’t intend for me to be a body to use to dump your stress. Either for the next eight weeks we are completely honest with each other or you put back on your shirt and jacket while I call you a taxi and we call this a mistake.”

“No. I need to spend the Holiday with you.”

She frowned at his choice of words. “*Need?*”

“Yes. I *need* you. I want to know why I was drawn to you at the banquet and why I found myself standing on *your* walkway this morning,” he confessed.

“I would like to know why also,” she said. “Let me see you.”

He nodded. “If afterwards you change your mind and want me to leave, I will understand.”

She nodded grasping the tail of his undershirt with both hands. He held his arms up and bent over at the waist as she peeled it from to his damp skin to pull it over his head. As he stood straight once more a gasp escaped her lips. “What happened?” Julia touched the long smoothed scar going

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down the center of his hairless chest.

“In the car accident that placed my wife in a coma I suffered blunt trauma to my chest causing heart blockage and life threatening damage that couldn’t be repaired. The doctors told me it was a miracle that they had a matching donor heart readily available.”

“It is a miracle and a blessing,” she agreed. “But why do I feel as if you don’t think so.”

He shrugged releasing a long weighted sigh. “I’m just confused as to why I survived the ordeal, but my wife never woke up. She was a beautiful person inside and out. She had so much to offer the world.

“And you believe you don’t?” Her eyes grew wide in disbelief. “Look at all the contributions you have given over the years; not to mention, every year you donate your artistic abilities and spend your Holiday season in New York doing this benefit concert and banquet on your own dime.”

“I will never forgive her for leaving me.” She cringed from the bitterness that crept into his tone. “Months turned into years, and she just laid there. Not once did she give me a sign that I was doing the right thing by keeping her at my side. Her family...made me *feel* as if I was somehow abusing her because I didn’t want to give up on her as easily as they seemed to give up.”

“Nothing about letting go of a loved one is easy for anyone, Ikuya.” Julia defended their actions based on the memories of her own pain. “It just has to be done. It’s a part of life, just like falling in love, marrying, and having children.”

“I can’t believe that,” he barked smoothing the damp hair back off his broad brow. She saw his fingers were shaking.

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Giving him a moment to calm down before she made her point, Julia disappeared into the adjoining bathroom and retrieved a bath towel from the linen closet. Bringing it to him she steered him to an overstuffed chair beside the fireplace and came up behind him with the towel. She proceeded to rub strands of his hair between the folds to dry it.

“I know that it’s hard to believe that life can be so cruel. I believe that’s why when you are at your most happiest, you become fearful, waiting for that other shoe to drop.”

She paused to let what she said digest before she continued.

“The reason your wife could let go of her life is because she was at peace knowing you were alive to move on without her. If I haven’t learned anything else through my losses, I’ve learned you’re not supposed to give up on living when you lose someone you love.”

Leaning over she cradled his head to her chest. He released a tired sigh and closed his eyes. She could see the moisture glistening from the gas fireplace on his long thick lashes.

“It still hurts so much,” he croaked thickly.

His inner torment gnawed at her insides. “Hun, I know it hurts like hell but it’s also natural to allow time to do what it’s supposed to do. It’s also natural for you to become stronger and more determined to live a beautiful life for you and the deceased loved one that is living vicariously through your happiness. If you don’t let go of some of this pain and guilt, it’s going to eat you up inside.”

Julia fingers absently traced the scar down his chest leaning her head against his she pressed a kiss to his cheek and turned to stare into the fire with him, while continuing to nuzzle his face with hers. For the longest no

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words passed between them.

When he held her hand and guided her around the chair to draw her onto his lap she went quietly. Nestling into his lap Julia relaxed against him for however long he needed her to.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Freshly showered Julia rubbed her body down in shimmering mango body lotion and ran a wide tooth comb through her hair. After their deep conversation she could see the pockets of fatigue weighing heavily beneath his Asian eyes. She was reminded that he had yet to sleep and urged him to lie down in her bed while she threw the ingredients into the crock pot so they could have a hot bowl of beef stew and slices of freshly baked sour dough bread she picked up the afternoon before at the deli down the way.

When a couple of hours turned into five she eased back into the bedroom to see him sprawled across the bed, the sheet and comforter had been kicked off leaving his naked pale muscular body lying on his stomach beckoning her to touch him. Obviously, he generated a lot of heat in his sleep. She surmised it was that natural furnace that kept him so thin.

With a grin she made her way over to the fireplace and cut the gas down easing the flame to a low burn. She lifted the sheet and comforter back onto the bed arranging it over his sleeping form.

As she straightened and turned to walk away she was halted by the hand wrapped around her wrist.

“Don’t go.” Still holding her wrist he sat up on the side of the bed.

His voice was raspy she didn’t know if it was from sleep, or because he was thirsty. Just in case, she handed him the glass of orange juice she had poured for him and left beside the bed. He accepted it with his free hand. Downing the contents he thanked her and placed the glass on the bedside table where it had been sitting.

Turning his head, he glanced around the bedroom. “What time is

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it?”

“It’s almost sundown. Your cell phone rang a few times while you were asleep but I didn’t think it would be appropriate to answer it.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry. I never intended to sleep this long.”

“That’s okay. You were exhausted when you arrived here this morning. I think sleep was exactly what you needed.” She ran her fingers through his hair. It was now a gorgeous and sexy mess about his face and naked shoulders.

“Could you hand me my phone please.” He released her wrist.

“There you go.” Julia smiled handing off the phone. “I’m sure everyone is looking for you about now. I will go fix you a bowl of stew so you can have a hot meal before you leave...”

She trailed off realizing she was rattling off words even though he seemed to be completely immersed in either searching the numbers or a text message he had on his fancy high tech phone. Looking at the screen he clicked a few buttons.

“I’m not hungry for food,” he murmured. Snaking out an arm he encircled her waist and drew her between his spread knees. With the free hand he pressed another button it beeped twice and he hit another button and she heard a musical chime. He turned the cell phone off and placed it by the empty glass on the nightstand.

“Don’t you have a concert this evening?” She asked. Her eyebrows arched high as she stared down at his long fingers releasing the knot of the sash at her waist. Her robe fell open revealing her naked beneath.

“Hmmm, you smell wonderful.” He said in a husky deep voice that caused a sweet rumble in the pit of her belly.

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She could see his eyes dropped down between her legs and knew he was seeing her large clitoris still swollen and its tiny head protruded from the slit of her vaginal lips. She used to be embarrassed by its size, being made fun of by her first couple of lovers, but Frank, her fiancé had made her feel exceptional.

He started by making her comfortable with her body by showing her on the internet sites dedicated to the different clitoris that women possess. She realized at that time she wasn't strange or abnormal. Once she overcame her insecurities she gloried in the wonderful and sometimes painful sensitivity she discovered.

The look she saw in Ikuya's eyes was similar to those she had seen in Frank's eyes. He was very pleased with what he was seeing. He nuzzled his hands slid over her hips and his fingers dug into her flesh as he drew her exposed belly into his face. Her hands buried themselves deeply into the wealth of his black hair.

Julia head fell back and her eyelashes flutter closed as his tongue darted around and in the dip of her navel. She felt him shift and felt her legs being nudged apart with one knee then the other until she was straddle his thighs. He could control how opened her pussy was to him with the spreading of his knees. She was completely at his mercy and she was dying for him to touch her between her legs.

She didn't have long to wait. He smoothed the palm of his hand that wasn't holding her to him along her inner thigh. Her tongue stole over her dry lips in anticipation and she felt the need to nervously laugh. She bit sucked in on her bottom lip to quell the desire.

A shiver escaped her as she felt his fingers touch her soften blood

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engorged labia. Julia arched her back and moaned in response. His knees spread sending her thighs wider causing her pussy to drop even lower against his hand. His fingers were slipping and sliding until he managed to grab one side of her outer lips and tugged. She cried out and gushed, two fingers slipped inside her easily.

Ikuya continued to kiss her belly his tongue lapping and fucking at her navel as he fingered fucked her pussy causing her to bounce and squirm her sensitive clit against his hand.

“Oh...damn,” she breathed. Her nipples were hard and his soft hair brushed against them and beneath her breast like feathers. His knees widened and she staggered reaching out to clutch his shoulders. Her thighs completely spread until she was sat complete astride his powerful legs, her feet completely off the floor except for her tiptoes.

Before she could miss his hand his finger moved to rub and tug on her clitoris she felt as if she was getting so close, but she needed more. As she increased the movement of her hips, he increased the rubbing of her clitoris. Her nails dug into his shoulders in agitation. She saw the intensity of his face, his cock hard with the head weaving swollen and dark just above his navel.

She saw that he caught her eyes and her intent. Unexpectedly a pinched her clit hard and she cried out as painful pleased slammed against her. Her pussy juices flowed over his hand and she fell forward. He tried to ease her orgasm with his fingers but she was too sensitive. She pulled his hair until he got the message to not touch her.

Instead he cradled her in his arms. Her arms wrapped tightly around his neck, his damp hand leaving moist streaks of her juices on her back

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beneath the robe as she continued to jerk and shiver against him.

It took her awhile before she managed to find her voice again and when it did it came out in a foolish girlish giggle. As he tried to pull back to look at her she buried her face against his neck and shoulders, embarrassed by her reaction.

“Meccha-meccha suki,” he chuckled deeply.

She pulled back and chanced a look at him. A closed lip serene smile still on her lips. “What did you say?”

“I love it,” he repeated in English. “I love your face as you were coming. It was so sexy.”

Julia groaned. “That shit hurt like hell, but damn I don’t think I’ve ever come like that before.” She couldn’t believe it her spread thighs were still involuntarily quivering. “I’ll get up in a minute, but I don’t think I can stand at the moment.”

“You don’t have to stand,” he kissed her mouth and shoved the robe off her shoulders. She held down her arms and allowed it to slide to the floor at his feet.

“No, it still too soon to touch me again. I need a little distraction.”

“Distraction?” He cocked an eyebrow in curiosity. “Such as?”

Julia released a long hiss as tiny needle sensations went through her limbs as she removed one leg then the other from his spread legs. She dropped to her knees.

A smile on her lips she smelled his arousal. A pearl drop of semen already glistening on his dark blood swollen sex. She eyed his flat muscular abs and small darkened nipples against smoothed pale skin. She loved the surprisingly softness of his skin beneath her fingers.

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Closing her eyes she nuzzled her nose against his warmth glorying in feeling and the smell of him. She missed sharing her bed, her life. Waking up to find someone you loved within your reach to touch and smell them.

She mentally warned herself not to grow accustomed to having Ikuya in her home, in her bed. It was only temporary. She was sure long after he was gone she would be another woman for him to forget, while he returned to his life as an elusive fantasy. A reminder that he would never be hers. Not as long as he wanted to cling to the past.

The heart that beat in his chest was no longer his own. Maybe the one the heart had belonged to wasn't as happy, loving and carefree as the happy man that seemed to smile in every picture she had seen of him with the exception of his conductor face.

She had read that when it came to his profession he could be a stern task master. But none held it against him, because he brought out the exceptional in every musician he ever worked with. When he was on the podium before a hundred or so musicians', the same arms that held her she seen lifted high in expectation and bated breath. With an arched swoop of his baton and elegant fingers he would lead the musicians and audience into an emotional spiral of musical dreams.

Julia placed a tender kiss over his heart making a early pre-Christmas wish that it would open up to her and allow her inside. But for now she would be content to let her body say things she didn't dare speak aloud.

Seductively she kissed, licked, and nibbled her way to his balls while clutching his cock in hers fist. She swirled her tongue teasingly about them before drawing the one that hung longer than the other in between her lips and sucking.

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She heard his swift intake of breath. His fingers buried themselves in her hair. She released his nut sac with a moist smack and looked up into his smoldering eyes smiling. Julia continued to eye him as she licked her way up the pulsating vein along the length of his penis. It jerked in her hands causing her to moan how beautiful she found him to be before she took him in her mouth.

Eagerly and skillfully she worked him with her tongue, lips and hands being urged and aroused more by his thrust, grunts and hands bunching in one of his hands while the he fisted the top bed sheet with the other.

“Julia,” he called her name in a constraint gravelly tone. “I don’t think I can hold on much longer. My last woman I was with was four months ago. I could blow at any minute.”

She was engrossed in giving him pleasure and it wasn’t until his left hand cupping the back of her head and yanked at her hair until he received her attention and her wet full lips parted and released him in a surprised gasp.

He painfully grasped her shoulders and drew her his feet as he stood and until the bed was at her back he pushed her back onto the mattress heatedly falling on top of her nudging open her legs with his knee. She could see the passionate all consuming lust and something akin to anger mar his handsome features.

“Ikuya...”

Before she could get the thought out into words he easily slid his thick hardness into her snatch and she cried out his name quivering in his arms as she came again. He pumped and she sucked him in deeper holding him to her. All functioning reasoning as to what she wanted to say going out of her mind. It was reckless and foolish but she couldn’t tell him to stop,

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because she didn't want him to. Her nails raked down his shoulders and back.

If the pain hindered him she didn't know it by his movements and he didn't complain. He just placed a hand on each side of his face and kissed her like she'd never been kissed before. Tears squeezed out of the corners of her eyes.

As his heated movements became a slow motion of entering her deep, rocking against her and withdrawing until his head reached the opening before plunging and going through the motion again, Julia's eyes open in surprise. They fluttered close again as a different wave of tender raw emotions and sensations built up inside her as sudden as his urge to go from savage fucking to love making.

In her ears moist from the tears that slid down the sides of her face, he murmured foreign words in her ears. She longed to know what he was saying and decided it was best to imagine they were words of love. Even if it wasn't so, for a moment she could pretend that he wasn't there to ease a need or to appease his curiosity to the strange attraction they had for each other, but because they were two lovers longing to consummate their affections.

He rolled onto his back until she was comfortable on his chest her legs wide to accommodate his thighs and hips. Their hurried movements had stilled and they just held each other. His hold was so tight her sensitive breasts were flattened against the hardness of his chest. Her pelvis cradled his and his erection jerked and pulsed. His scar reminded her of his heart and for a moment she wondered if the exertion was too much on him.

"I'm sorry," he swallowed. "I don't want to rush this. I just needed

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to take the edge off. I'm sorry if I was abusive."

She rubbed herself against him and gently placed her lips to his. He released a groan and his kiss deepened.

The heated kiss broke. "You weren't being abusive, but you also didn't give me the chance to say much either."

She could see he was trying to quell a grin and smiled when he failed revealing a sheepish smile.

"I'm sorry." He grunted and shivered. His eyes rolled closed as she rippled her inner muscles over him.

When he regained control she received a well deserved slap and rub to her bottom. It should have been painful but at that moment with her skin feeling as if it was on the brink of hardening and shattering, it felt wonderfully wicked, especially with him still inside her.

Julia smiled in contentment, smelling the appealing citrus scent of his aftershave mixed with the muskiness of their sexual play.

He exchanged another kiss and a big grin with her. A questioning frown puckered his eyebrow and he shook his head. "*Anshin shita*. I'm relieved to hear that I didn't hurt you. I know you were about to say something but all I could think about was being inside you. I thought I was about to go mad. For a moment after I regain my sense I thought maybe you were trying to stop me."

"Well in a way I was."

Ikuya swore softly. She felt him tense all over and could tell he was about to withdraw from her. Her inner walls clamped down and held him. His mouth opened and he bucked against her. If she had been a smaller woman he might have moved her from her perch upon his sex, but instead

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his movement caused her to ripple along his penis once more.

“Are you trying to kill me?” He said. Or at least that is what she thought he said it kind of came out garbled; his accent that was normally not notable was evident in his current clipped speech.

“I didn’t want to stop you. I was just trying to be responsible and discuss the fact that unless you had a condom, I didn’t. I haven’t been with anyone for awhile, so I had no need.”

“I didn’t come here to do this, so I too am unprepared, but in my wallet I do carry the card of my last STD test results which I am tested for insurance reason every three months.” He assured her.

Julia, now with her cleared thinking brain she was relieved but there was also a matter of pregnancy. But she never used birth control, she couldn’t find anything compatible. Being with Frank she never became pregnant, it was doubtful that she could if she hadn’t done so in her thirty-five years. Still, for the rest of their time together they had to use condoms.

“You’re worried about pregnancy?” He asked as if he was reading her thoughts. “Mako and I tried since the beginning of our marriage and it never happened. She is the only other person besides you tonight that I was foolishly careless with our first time and came unprepared. Once we married we stopped using them and still...nothing.”

She could feel him softening inside her and she rippled over him once again reminding him that at the moment he was hers...only hers. She wasn’t going to allow the ghostly memory of his wife to steal this moment from her.

She wiped the moisture from his face. “I suppose I shouldn’t keep holding you here like this. It can’t be good for your heart.” She slowly

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began to move her hips once more in a circular grind.

His face had a grim studious expression. “I don’t think I’ve been with anyone who can do this.” He grimaced and groan as she sat up bring her knees forward. “But to calm your fears, my new heart is as healthy has my old one has been.”

She took him around the world with her hips grinning wickedly at his blank closed-eyed expression. “That’s good to know. I would hate for a world renowned Japanese music conductor to be found dead in my bed because I screwed him to death.”

“*Abh...abh...*I’m not complaining. Oh yeah, Julia, do that move...ah, yeah that one....” He opened his eyes to stare at her. “Again, please.”

His eyeballs rolled until only the whites showed and closed again as she lifted up of the length of his penis before he slipped out and descended down again gripping her vaginal muscles like a glove around him and grinded her hips in a full slow circle.

Julia could feel the sexual intensity of her own body building again. She released a shuddering sigh. “You were saying?”

“I was saying something?”

“Something about your heart, I believe.”

“*Soka...right. As I...oomph!*” He reached out and grasped her hips to still her for a moment. “As I was saying...the...uh...donor must have taken great care of himself. My understanding was he was younger then I.”

His fingers bit into her hips and he rolled her onto her back again. He suckled on each of her nipples in turn until she was squirming. He moved against her drawing one of her legs over his shoulders their pace

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growing frenzied.

Ikuya stiffened above her. Gutturally his deep voice repeated her name. She could tell by his uncontrollable shuddering of his entire body against her that he didn't just ejaculate, he had an orgasm. She groaned loudly drawing his ear between her teeth and suckle splintered into beautiful erotic little pieces of pleasurable sensations. Holding him tightly to her she prayed this moment would last forever.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Thanksgiving Day,

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Julia asked him for the second time as she rolled the truck to a halt at the bottom of the walkway leading up to the cozy two story cottage styled home

Ikuya grin and winked at her. “You need to relax. I’m looking forward to meeting your parents.”

“Why?” He chuckled as she rolled her eyes and stopped herself.

“Are you sure you’re not embarrassed to be bringing a Japanese man to a family dinner?” He asked in a teasing tone.

“No, if that was the problem I would have said so before we made the trip to the Catskills.”

“What I’m trying to say is the last and only man I brought home to a Thanksgiving dinner I was engaged to him. They may assume that we are in a serious relationship and I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

“Tell them the truth,” Ikuya suggested. Opening the passenger door he unfolded himself from the car and walked around to the passenger side to open the driver’s side door and took her hand as she scooted off the seat. She continued the conversation where he left off.

“The truth,” she croaked. “How does one go about telling their parents they are having a sex *friend* for the Holidays?”

“I don’t mean *that* truth, Julia.” He shook his head at her giving her a reprimanding stare. “I meant the truth that we’re friends and I’m homesick. So you felt sorry for me and invited me to join you for the holiday.”

“Yeah, that will work but if you really want to be convincing I think

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you better let go of my hand just in case they are peeping outside the window at us.”

Ikuya knew she was right but he liked the feel of her hand in his. The warmth of her palm felt reassuring in the brisk coldness of the mountain air.

He reluctantly honored her request. He didn’t want her to be left explaining their relationship once it was time for him to return to his own country and the holidays were over. Well, he would have to conduct for a Christmas Eve midnight mass and again Christmas Day, so he wouldn’t be able to invade her personal time with her family. Maybe it will be enough to keep her parents from believing it was more than a friendship.

“Julia, before we go inside, can we take a short stroll around the property?”

“You’re sure you aren’t the one getting the cold feet now?”

“No,” he grinned. “It’s just really beautiful here, with all the snow cover trees and the lake as a backdrop. It reminds me of a place I love to frequent when I find myself at home during the winter season, which isn’t as often as I’d like.”

“Really? If it’s like here, then it must be beautiful.”

“If you liked living here, you would love *Tsurunoyu*, Julia. It’s a mountain hot springs resort. The springs are known for healing the body and the spirit.”

“Is it near Tokyo?”

“It’s located in Akita prefecture, about three hours on train and another hour from the station. Julia,” his dark eyes lit up. “There is no place like it. It’s perfect for those times when you need to get away from the noise

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and activeness of Tokyo. Whenever I'm there I feel very close to my ancestors." His voice deepened with pride.

"How so?"

He shrugged and they continued walking side by side. "I don't know. Perhaps it is the old dark wooden buildings with their sliding doors and tatami mat floorings or maybe it's the lack of being spoiled by the laziness that wealth can provide."

Ikuya could see by her quiet contemplation and attending nod, that she was truly listening to him speak of his homeland, and not just pretending to give a damn like so many other women he had dated over the years. Most by now would be complaining about the cold, nor would they had the sense to wear sensible clothing like the black jeans, read turtleneck sweater and snow boots like Julia wore beneath the well-worn hooded wool coat.

Nor has he ever dated a woman that could drive a four-wheel drive truck and have the foresight or the ability to put snow chains on the wheels. He had to admit after the shock of seeing the valet driver pull up with her car, a worse for wear old seventy-six Chevy Blazer four-by-four in front of his five star hotel he was hesitant. Not because of the look of the truck, but because he feared it wouldn't make it to the end of the hotel drive much less to the Catskills.

Julia had assured him that they didn't make a more reliable truck than her "Bessie". A name given to the vehicle from its previous and only other owner, her deceased grandmother. She didn't know why the truck was called *Bessie* after his assumption that it was her grandmother's name was incorrect. Her grandmother was name Mabel born and raised in Virginia. She assumed it was a "southern" thing to name a truck Bessie. Ikuya didn't question what

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other things were considered a “southern thing”, nor did he ask if only the American’s of Virginia have this thing.

In the end the ride up had been a pleasurable one and no matter how stressful this dinner with her parents may turn out to be. He enjoyed this opportunity to spend time with her. There last few joining had been pure sexual gratification and she did satisfy him in bed. These times with her had also made him curious about this woman that pleased him and intrigued him at the same time.

Ikuya believed he had met anyone that had such found so much joy in the simple things. She felt each little nuance of life was a blessing. He wondered after losing someone she obviously had loved dearly, how she could continue to be so optimistic?

She said to him, “Since I was a child my parents raised me to believe that if one didn’t have faith in *God*, then why be angry at that in which you never believed in when things go wrong. Unfailing loyalty is the only thing I believe God asks of us. I believe we are given enough pain in our lives to either build or destroy our fate and it’s our reaction to these heartaches that let Christ know if we have what it takes to choose the side of life we wish to live in. One with faith or one without. I chose the one with it.”

When she had asked him what side of faith did he walk on? He couldn’t answer the question because he wasn’t sure if he believed in anything more than what is in his face and it his outlook was grim.

It was then he decided to do something he hadn’t done with any of his other temporary bedmates, meet her parents. Family was very important in Japan and each child represented and reflected this in how they looked at life and treated others. Ikuya being raised in a country orphanage longed for

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such a balance that only belonging could bring. He had looked forward to building such a unit with Mako, only to have been it with the first blow of her not being able to conceive, and the final blows of the accident and her death.

“Why have you grown so quiet? You were telling me about the hot springs and suddenly I seemed to have lost you to your own thoughts?”

Ikuya blinked several times to clear out the melancholy that was threatening to set in upon his shoulders. “*Sumimasen*, excuse me, I was thinking about the conversation we had about faith.”

“I know you were raised in an orphanage and I know that you lost the love of your life,” Julia began. “So far is that the two most painful events in your life that causes you to feel the way you do about life?”

He continued to walk slowly. The sound of snow crunching beneath his booted feet was oddly soothing. His hands crossed behind his back. With pursed lips he contemplated her question before asking, “Isn’t that enough reasons?”

“Taking in consideration all your blessings?” He saw her shrug. She easily kept in step with his stroll. The mist of her breath blew from her mouth and nose as she spoke. “Maybe if you throw in the wars of the world, starvation, global warming, and everything else that is going on, then yes it would be enough to sway a person’s faith.”

“Is that all?” Ikuya snorted derisively.

“You got to admit it, Ikuya, you are wealthy when so many others are doing without just to feed their children or warm their homes. You have a career you obviously love and more talent in your little finger than I could ever hope to possess.”

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“You make me feel ashamed of my grief, Julia,” he said in an accusing voice.

“Ikuya, you have had the *purest blessing* of experiencing true and unconditional love at least once in your life, even if that particular love is lost to you now, could you imagine never having loved her for that short time? I can’t imagine not loving Frank. You and I have been fortunate to have one of the most beautiful and painful feelings that life could offer. You probably would have never composed all those beautiful songs if it hadn’t been for your love and later for your loss.”

She reached out and linked his fingers in hers. Once again she became his warm place in the midst of all the coldness that surrounded them.

“So you feel my hand in yours?” Julia asked him. “That’s life, the way we touch each other, the way you feel when you’re hard inside me. The way your eyes roll back in your head when I grip you tightly...”

He grinned.

“Yeah, you know what I’m talking about,” she continued teasingly. “That’s life. You think if you were as dead inside as you tell yourself from the guilt of being alive while the person you love is dead, you wouldn’t be able to feel such pleasures. But from your sexual history over the years since your wife died, it’s obvious that sex is how you feel alive.”

“I feel as if I should be paying you.”

“Thank me for what; the fantastic sex or the psychological profiling?” She laughed softly.

Amazed that she wasn’t offended by either insinuation, he playfully said, “Both! Tell me sexy Dr. Payne, how do I cure what ails me?”

“First you have to stop being afraid to be happy again.”

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“I don’t think I like you using the word “afraid” in reference to me, Julia.”

“Oh, top being such a man.”

He caught her peering at him from beneath long lashes and his heart thudded rapidly in his chest. “Really? You didn’t say that when you were squeezing my ears with your thighs this morning.”

He thought the blush creeping over her face was priceless and laughed as she slapped at him with her free hand. Releasing his hand she stooped and picked up a handful of snow working it into a hard ball.

“I can’t believe you would bring that up!”

Ikuya dodged the snowball and it hit him in the shoulder. “You left that big wet spot in the bed and had the nerve to blame--.” Before he could finish the snow ball hit him in the face. He laughed and sputtered out the snow that seeped into his mouth.

“You’re real cocky aren’t you? You had me begging and crying for it, I admit it.” Julia laughingly nailed him with another snowball.

Damn she was good at throwing and quick too. Ikuya decided to get to her before she had the chance to work up another snowball. Seeing him coming for her she released a girlish scream and giggle and set off in a run across the unblemished ground of snow. He couldn’t keep from laughing as she slid and nearly landed face first in the snow before regaining her footing dashing inside the large wooden structure situated behind the house.

He managed to capture her around the waist and they went tumbling into a pile of hay. The sweet melodic sounds of her laughter warmed him from the inside out.

“I can’t believe you attacked me,” he chastised. “Crazy woman! I

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suppose you leave me no option but to retaliate.”

“What are you going to do? There is no snow in here and if I scream my dad will be out here ready to jack you up.”

Ikuya love the twinkling in her dirty brown eyes and the way the laugh line deepened at the corners. “I’m afraid the type of screaming I have planned for you, you won’t want your parents to know about.” He growled before grasping handful of her coat and dragging her up against him. He slanted his head and pressed his mouth to her open laughing mouth.

Humor turned into serious business as she returned his kiss. Immediately his dick grew hard pressing against the seams of his blue jeans. The zipper on his parka gave way and opened. He allowed enough space between them for her to work at his belt buckle as he worked at the snap and zipper on her jeans.

“I never fucked outside in the cold before,” he murmured. “I’m surprise I can even keep an erection it’s so damn cold out here.”

The sound of her warm laughter heated him up a little bit more. So much he had to take advantage of her open smile. She was the first to break the kiss. Her fingers trailed along his nose and mouth as if she was memorizing every nuance of his features. He wondered about the sadness he saw in her eyes, but was too much of a coward to ask because he was afraid he was the reason behind it.

“I would have thought you would have sex while being up that snow deep hot spring hideaway of yours?”

“It’s not as private as you may think. Besides,” he shook his head. “It’s a place where I usually went alone when I needed to think. There is nothing remotely sexual about the visits.”

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“Oh there would be something sexual if I were to go there with you,” she murmured heatedly against his chin. She brought his face close to hers once again. A sharp intake of breath followed by a long moan came from her throat as he slipped his hand inside her panties and delved into her moist heat while kissing and probing her deeply with his searching tongue.

She bucked against his hand. He felt her icy fingers on his erection and his ass cheeks clutched from the discomfort. It was like an ice cube running down its length. He warmed up quickly as her hand began moving the loose skin along his shaft in a pumping motion.

Ikuya wanted desperately to be inside her feeling the rippling sensation she knew how to do so well, but it was impossible in the coldness of the barn, the itchiness of the hay, and trying to remove her boots to get her jeans off would ruin the mood entirely. Unfortunately for the both of them this mutual form of masturbation would have to suffice until they were alone tonight.

“Ikuya...Ikuya...,” she murmured his name in her deeply seductive voice. He paused. “Don’t stop!”

Chuckling he palmed her mound and his middle finger found her clit. She arched up to meet his touch. He rubbed and made circling motions with his finger applying the pressure he knew it would take to make her come quickly. He could tell she was getting closer because Julia’s grip would tighten around his cock and move the foreskin faster in up and down twisting motion with each peak.

He leaned over her using his lips to place tender kisses on her face. She turned her face to capture his mouth to help stifle her moans. Julia’s arms wrapped around his shoulders and her fingers twisted into the material

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of his parka; for a moment his needs were forgotten as she clawed and mewled to gain relief.

Ikuya was beginning to know her expressions well. He knew the moment her orgasm slammed into her and devoured her loud cries with his mouth as she yanked at his hair and convulse in his arms. After awhile she stilled, her eyes were closed tightly and he found the serene smile on her lips an affirmation of his manhood.

Ikuya admittedly found watching Julia in the glow of the aftermath to be one of the best things about making love to her. She didn't hide or hold back how wonderful sex made her feel. She didn't feel the need to pretend to be coy afterwards or ask for forgiveness when she pushed to get her pleasure before seeing to his. She also was very generous and through with her affections in the return once she was sated. He believed it was her pleased that gave him so much pleasure.

Grinning down in her face smugly he watched quietly as her thick lashes fluttered open. Her eyes were nearly as black as his her pupils were so dilated. When she slowly grinned up at him and he felt her hands release his coat, one still between them to stroke him once more, but his erection had eased to a comfortable semi-hard. He put his hand over hers and shook his head.

"You don't want me to?" Julia eyebrows arched in question.

"I like it when you keep me on a slow boil." He drew her fingers up to his lips and placed a kiss on the back of them. "You're good at keeping me tense. I never know what you are going to do or say next."

She brushed her kiss swollen lips against his before offering him her tongue.

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Pulling away he rolled onto his feet holding his pants to adjust himself and zip up his jeans. Winking at her as she stared up at him he laughingly said, “Don’t look at me like that, beautiful and get your clothes together. If your father or mother were to walk in here and catch us I probably will be forced to wed you and we both know that *isn’t* going to happen.”

“No, *we* wouldn’t want *that* to happen,” Julia murmured.

Ikuya halted. His smile faded as he saw the look on her face. It disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, but he saw it none the less. She was disappointed. Ikuya repeated his words in his head. The impact hit him in the face like a mental hard slap. Inwardly he groaned. He had been accused at being insensitive at time, but never cruel and what he had said was cruel.

He held out his hand and was relieved when she didn’t ignore his offer to help her up. He wouldn’t have been surprised if she had refused him and cart him back to New York.

“How can I say this?” He searched his thoughts for the proper English words. “Uh...*gonka shinai-de*...that came out wrong. I didn’t mean--”

“Ikuya, it’s okay,” she interjected. “There is no need for explanations. We’ve already had this conversation. All the rules and expectations were put into their proper places before this affair started. Why would I think it would change even if my parents had caught us?”

She was avoiding his eyes by making busy with straightening out her clothing and swiping at the hay on her jeans. The heavy silence yawned between them. Even though she spoke the truth Ikuya felt the need to

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explain, apologize...say something. It was not his intentions to make her holiday miserable. Looking at her lovely face still flush from their playing in the snow, teenage petting session and the cold brisk air he could imagine himself waking up to her every morning anticipating what another day in her company would bring.

Ikuya didn't want to end their holiday together with either one of them feeling that their meeting had been more of a burden than a pleasure. It was important to him that his Julia's holiday be filled with good memories of him. He also didn't want to make this weekend stay with her parents awkward for her.

"Julia, if you wish me to leave..."

"Don't, even think about it." She placed her fingers over his lips. "This is a short-term arrangement between two consenting adults. Regardless, I want you to be comfortable enough to tease me and laugh with me. So what if I'm just another roll in the...*hay*...for you?" She wiggled her eyebrows.

He laughed at her pun feeling a little more at ease. He plucked the remaining pieces of said "hay" from her unruly hair. Once finished she walked over to the swinging barn doors.

"Hey you," Ikuya called out.

She turned with a questioning gaze.

"Come here," he ordered.

She strolled back to him, her hands tucked into the back pockets of her tight jeans and he allowed his eyes to feast on her sexy curves, stopping on the zipper of her jeans.

He tucked his finger in the belt loop on her jeans and pulled her until

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the toes of their boots touched. His hand grasped the seam of her jeans right above her mound while his free hand grabbed the metal pull on the zipper and eased it up.

She grinned in realization and he couldn't resist leaning down once more to capture her inviting full mouth in a kiss. After their breathing became heavy and cold air misted in puffs between them from the heat generating from their bodies, the kiss broke.

Neither ready to let go of the other in anticipation that this may be the last time they could have such a moment for the moment they entered the house. They would be no longer lovers, but business acquaintances that had become friends.

Nose to nose, he relished the way she nuzzled him and continued placing soft and tender kisses to the upturn corner of his closed mouth. Her tender hands held and caressed his face while she held his hungry stare. He liked the way she touched him, it was bold and she touched him all the time. It was as if she was letting him know she felt she had the right to do as she pleased to his body while he was in her possession.

Julia had a way about her and he didn't know what it was but he could feel it gripping tightly on his heart strings and tug.

"We really should go in before they come looking for us," she murmured against his lips. "I promise it will be worth the wait."

"I have no doubt about that, Julia." He knew that she would keep her promise and for now it was enough knowing he had pleased her with their late morning romp.

"I will walk ahead of you." She pulled away from his loose hold. "I wouldn't want you to miss the opportunity to watch my ass as I'm leaving."

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I'll leave my coat off until I get to the barn door."

Ikuya shook his head and he couldn't wipe the big smile on his face. She was beginning to know him really well. He did indeed watch her ass every time she left a room and what a nice bottom.

The two of them left the barn in a more civil manner than when they entered. Heading up to the back entrance of the main house both of their steps faltered as they spotted an older version of Julia staring and waving at them through the window. There was a huge smile on her face.

"Do you think she saw us?" Ikuya asked smiling back and waving with a polite bow of his dark head.

"They way she is smiling..." Bonnie began, releasing a loud groan. "I'm thinking she saw...*something*."

"How are we going to handle this?"

"The same way I always handle things when my mom is being nosy about my sex life." Julia replied as if she thought it should be obvious to him. It wasn't.

"*Donoyouni?* How is that?"

"I tell her as little as possible and quickly change the subject."

Ikuya groaned. "What if that doesn't work?"

"I run to my dad." She chuckled. "*He's* the only one that can get her off my back once she starts grilling me or before I know it I'm confessing all my sins."

CHAPTER NINE

Julia was relieved once they entered the house. She realized her mother's huge smile was because she recognized "Maestro Yamane" and not because she had witnessed something she shouldn't have.

During the introductions if Ikuya was surprised by the fact her "dad" was Caucasian, he didn't let on. Julia received her usual kisses and hugs before laughingly standing aside as her father took hold of Ikuya's hand in an enthusiastic handshake. She didn't believe she'd ever seen her father's twinkling blue eyes sparkle so brightly. He was so excited you would think Ikuya was the Prime Minister of Japan.

"Maestro, it's an honor to have you here! This is a most excellent surprise! Richard patted the younger man's shoulder. "I'm sure Julia must have told you what a big fan I am of your works. I have everyone of your CDs'."

"Actually, I don't believe Julia mention that you were a fan. However I'm pleased. *Arigatou*, thank you for your support," Ikuya replied inclining his head in appreciation.

"How do you and my daughter know each other, Maestro?" Caroline Payne asked looking from one to the other in open curiosity.

Ikuya looked at Julia obviously deciding he was going to let her do the answering.

"Honey," Richard looked at Caroline. "Can't you see you making our girl nervous?"

"It's okay, dad." Julia was prepared. "Ikuya and I met at the benefit banquet I told you about, mom." She walked over to the stove top. "It sure

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smells good over here.”

Her mother grunted.

“It’s a small world huh, Maestro? Can’t you see the family resemblance?”

“Dad, must you do that joke every time?” Julia shook her head.

Richard laughed in that jovial contagious way that made everyone else laugh with him.

“If you hadn’t figured out yet, Ikuya. Richard isn’t my biological father. He married my mom and adopted me when I was four. He’s the only father I’ve ever known and I’m lucky to have him.” Julia gave her dad a big squeeze.

“It’s because of me Julia became smitten with you.” Richard boasted. “I would find her hidden away in my study curled up with your biography. I personally think she was just looking at the pictures and mooning over you.”

Julia could feel her face burning. “Dad...”

“Don’t be embarrassed, princess. I’m all for the two of you dating.”

“No, you have it all wrong,” Julia retorted. “Ikuya was interested in purchasing some of my photos and we’re becoming fast friends. I didn’t think he should. That is all.”

“*Gomen nasai*, excuse me,” Ikuya intervened. “I am the one that took advantage of Julia’s kindness by intruding on her holiday weekend. I couldn’t sit through one more formal dinner party; it is too much like work. It’s wonderful to be out of the city even if it’s only for a long weekend.”

“I understand.” Richard nodded. The disappointment was evident on his face, but it quickly disappeared with his smile. “I apologize for misunderstanding the situation. With our youngest daughter and her family

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unable to be here because she is due to give birth to our second grandchild any day this seems empty this year. Caroline and I have always said the more the merrier.”

“I agree with my husband, Maestro Yamane. We are delighted to have you here with us for the holiday. We are seasonal ticket holders and look forward to your visits to New York. We hope this won’t be your last visit to our home.”

“I’m truly flattered and deeply grateful to all of you for accepting my intrusion on your family.”

Julia stood by quietly as Ikuya, and her parent’s conversation safely moved from personal questions about them to matters of his upcoming engagements once he left New York. Her dad had been correct. It was in the quietness of his study that she discovered Ikuya’s biography, his music. The fact that her father had met him once briefly when he was a teenager and kept pictures of him around the house, she couldn’t help but be interested. His attractive features, heart wrenching smile, and unbelievable talent had her fantasizing about him. One of the fantasies was a day like this where he would come to her house to meet her parents. Only in her foolish teenage fantasies Ikuya was here to ask for her hand in marriage.

Julia couldn’t stop the sadness that overwhelmed her when she thought about the day their affair would come to an end. This perfect picture she was witnessing would most likely be the first and a last time Ikuya would spend a holiday with her and her family for a holiday. Even though she had laughed off his remark in the barn the truth was it had hurt her that she would only be remembered as a temporary distraction in his hectic life.

Ikuya had no idea how hard this arrangement was for her. She wasn’t

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the type of woman that took men and sex casually. She was all about the love that transpires from the act. This once she was foregoing everything her mother raised her to believe in. Julia knew she risked everything for this one moment in time that she could carry in her heart forever.

Was she *in love* with him? She decided she'd probably been in love with Ikuya in some small way all of her life. After all he was her first experience with unrequited love.

Julia took Ikuya's discarded coat from the stool at the kitchen bar. Taking one last look at the cozy picture of Ikuya with her parents she shook her head and laughed softly as her mother placed another one of her infamous potent fruitcake cookies into her lover's hand encouraging him to have another.

Easing her way out of the kitchen Julia walked down the hall into the foyer. She hung their damp coats on the coat rack in the foyer to dry. Leaning against the entrance between the hall and the family room she looked over the many framed family photos on the table and along the fireplace mantel.

Her eyes landed on the one of Ikuya sitting in a tuxedo at a grand piano. He was seventeen when the photo was taken during a symposium in Tokyo. Her dad had purchased the picture and had him to autograph it to her. He had put love and kisses and back then being young and foolish she thought he meant it.

Julia dreamed that now that he knew she existed in this big world, he would someday come for her. Of course her picture was probably one of hundreds he had signed that day, but at thirteen it had been a fanciful thought.

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She begged her mother to let her put it with the family photos. Visitors would always ask if they had an Asian foster son. After the first photo, Julia took the initiative to add a couple of more over time. There was a picture she copied off the internet from his childhood she put with her and her sister's childhood photos, another with his first Grammy in hand. The one that she could never bring herself to put with her parent's and sister's wedding photos were the wedding photo of him and Mako.

She hadn't added anything else since. After the automobile accident all the passion and life seemed to have gone out of him. He rarely smiled for the photographers anymore and most of the photos were of him holding his hand up to ward off the photographers. In her camera bag she had brought copies of the pictures she'd taken at the benefit concert and banquet for her parents and she had picked the once she wanted to frame and display in memory of their first meeting and the time they've shared.

"You fit in so perfectly." Julia voiced her thoughts softly.

"Julie-bug, are you feeling all right?"

Julia blinked to ward off the tears at the sound of her mother's. She turned to see her strolling along the hall towards her. Today her mother wore a blushing peach boat-neck mid-sleeve sweater with brown tweed trousers, from her ears small pearls dangled. There was also a matching pearl necklace. She removed the frameless glasses from her Nubian nose and allowed them to hang from the gold chain around her neck and rest against her small breast.

Her mom hadn't known she was bringing company; yet, one would think she dressed for the occasion. One didn't have to know Caroline Payne to recognize she was a fashionable and classy woman. For a woman that

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didn't own a pair of jeans, she called would call this her casual look.

Julia didn't think she could have asked God for a better mother. Not only was she a mother that made sure Julia had a well-rounded education and associated with people from every lifestyle, she was a very active member in charity events in the New York and Catskill community. There was a time some had tried to convince her to run for mayor but she felt she could serve more effectively out of official restrictions. Caroline believed and raised her daughters to believe that you have to put back into life all the blessings you would get of it and coming from a poor southern background, she never took her good fortune for granted.

Her mother was still an attractive woman in her sixties. Thanks to weekly visits to her beautician, her stylishly tapered bobbed style haircut didn't have a gray strand of hair in it. She inherited her mother's nose and brown sugared skin tone the biggest difference was Julia had a full pouty mouth and her mother had thinner lips along with a longer face.

She smiled and went lovingly into her mother's hug. She leaned rested her cheek on her shoulder and soaked in her floral powdery smell.

"I'm okay." Julia finally answered. "It seems quiet without Emily's brood here. It doesn't feel like Thanksgiving when there aren't any children running wild through the house. You can always depend on her to bring at least two or three of her husband's many relatives into the mix." Julia answered.

"Maybe you should think about bringing a few kids of your own into the mix." Caroline suggested in that not so subtle way of hers.

Julia moved from her mother's arms with a heavy sigh. "It feels like that's never going to happen. I'm six years older than Emily is and she is

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about to drop baby number two. I don't even have a husband in mind, much less thinking of having a child."

"As much as I would love for you to find someone to love you like your sister and I have found I don't know if there is a man that can make you as happy as Frank did. He couldn't have been more perfect for you even if I had picked him out myself."

"You did pick him out, yourself." Julia grinned.

"Oh yeah," Caroline nudged her shoulder against her daughter's teasingly. "It was bad that the community center burned, but meeting that young man on that day had been a good thing."

"I thought so," Julia agreed. "Then on 9-11, everyone lost and everyone's life changed in one way or the other. Frank died because he was doing something he loved. He took such joy out of saving lives. I just wish he had chosen to do so as a doctor instead of a firefighter."

"You know, you don't need a husband or a man in your life these days to have a child."

Incredulous Julia turned her gaze on her mother. "This coming from you."

"Hey, I was raising you fine on my own until Richard came into our lives. Yes, I would prefer it if you found love and a happy marriage..."

"What else were you going to say?"

"You know the history for the women in our family. We suffer from ovarian cysts. The older you are the higher the risk. I know that a child is something you've always wanted and since you already lost someone you loved very dearly, I don't want you to risk losing the chance to have the child you wanted."

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“I know it’s something I need to consider sooner than later,” Julia admitted. Actually, motherhood is something she’d been thinking about a lot the past year.

“How are your eyes? Did the doctor say there was a problem?”

“No mom. I need to rest my eyes more. Between the time I’ve spent on the camera and the computer, I’ve delegated some of my workload again in hopes that it will help. Still, there are no signs of rejections so don’t start worrying. He doesn’t expect there to be any after all this time. He just hopes the *Keratoconus disease* doesn’t occur again with the donor corneas.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t wear the contacts so much. How about when we go shopping tomorrow, I take you to my eye care center and treat you to new glasses for Christmas since your father and I won’t be in town.”

“Mom, I don’t want Ikuya to see me in glasses.”

“I thought you two were just friends.” Caroline crossed her arms over her breast. “*Friends*, don’t try to be cute for friends.”

Julia laughed nervously. “You know Ikuya’s story. He swore to never be serious about another woman after the ordeal with his wife.”

“What a man says and what he does is two different things. A man can’t stop himself from falling in love no more than a woman can,” Caroline argued.

“Yeah, well he seemed to be doing a good job of it all these years. Besides, it’s hard to fall in love when you put an expiration date on your relationships.”

“Is that so? Tell me how long did it take you to fall in love with Frank?”

“My *attraction* was immediate, but it took longer to realize I loved

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him.”

“Julia, love can happen in an instant and having an attraction to someone just means you’re already a *little* in love. It’s what you do about that love that can take longer to nurture and even after you’re married you still have to nurture it like a plant so it will continue to grow.”

“It’s not possible with Ikuya,” Julia said.

“You can’t tell me he’s not attracted to you. I saw you throwing snowballs at each other outside before running into the barn and shutting the door behind you. I also know you’ve had a crush on the boy since you were old enough to read. Before he became a conductor he was a pianist and when I couldn’t get you to sleep Richard would put Ikuya Yamane’s debut release into the cassette player by the bed and you would fall asleep in no time.”

Julia placed a kiss on her powdered cheek. “I love you mom. But Ikuya and I are...*friends*.”

“I’m not going to argue because it’s not every year we get to dine with your father’s favorite classical artist for Thanksgiving dinner. Do you think he will mind if you take some pictures? You did bring your camera didn’t you?”

“Don’t I always?”

Julia, could see by her mother’s thoughtful frown as she stared at her she was about to ask her something personal.

“Something’s changed in you. Now that you have the man in the pictures in the flesh you’re falling in love with him aren’t you?”

“Mom, come on! I’m not falling in love with Ikuya.” Julia feigned amusement but she couldn’t bring herself to look her mother in the eye when

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she said it.

“Don’t “mom come on” me. I like him. I know Richard would like nothing more than for you two to become serious and date. Now as your mother, it is my duty to make sure you don’t get your heart broken.” Caroline reasoned.

“Mom, I’m a grown woman and I’m enjoying myself. If my heart gets broken then I’m the fool, because Ikuya has made it very clear that there could be another to replace his wife. I’m not trying to go *there* with him.”

“It still doesn’t mean *you* are not falling in love with him. As a matter of fact I think Ikuya is falling in love with you too.”

“Mother, *please...*”

“Did I hear someone mention my name?”

Both women jumped. Guilt showed on their faces.

“Oh mercy, Maestro Ikuya, I didn’t hear you come up.” Caroline fanned at her blushing face with a puckish smile.

“I apologize. I was told by my students I had a very light step.” He grinned awkwardly looking at them from beneath his heavy lidded eyes. Julia suspected he heard more than he was letting on. “I suspect it’s true.”

“We were wondering if it’s okay to take some pictures of you while you’re here.” Julia imparted.

Ikuya grinned and nodded. “Sure as long as you promise me that we will take some together so that I can post them in travel journey. I promise to give you full credit.”

“It’s a deal.” Their eyes caught and held.

Her mother walked further into the family room to stoke the fire and Julia saw signs of agitation in Ikuya’s eyes. She read his lips as he mouthed,

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“Did you tell her?” He nodded his head to the side and his eyes elongated Asian eyes narrowed on her face so much she thought they had closed.

She scowled at him, pissed that he would think she would tell her mother she was sleeping with him. What girl like talking to their mother about such things especially when it was just sex! Julia shook her head and tried to mouth a warning to let him know her mother was fishing.

The opportunity was missed as her father strode out of the kitchen towards the small gathering in the foyer Julia covered her erratic her movements by finger her damp hair and turning away with a cough.

Her sweet oblivious father came didn’t catch a thing. He was still tickled to have Ikuya as a guest for the weekend. From the sounds of things, she and Ikuya would not have any time to themselves. Her father had basically pushed her off to go out shopping tomorrow, while he had some people he just knew it would benefit Ikuya to meet.

“Dad, Ikuya came to rest, remember. You know keep things low-key,” Julia reminded.

“Just me and the boy watching football and shooting bull, Julie-bug. That way Ikuya can see what Thanksgiving is all about.”

“Richard Allen Payne that is *not* what Thanksgiving is all about and you know better.”

“Yes dear. You are right. It’s about thanking God for all the blessing we have and for making man smart enough to discover the game of *football*!” Richard’s let out a booming laugh.

Julia and Ikuya laughed with him, but her mother just grinned and shook her head.

“Still, dad...”

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“Sweetie, I’ll even let you use *my* credit card.” He winked at her.
“How about that.”

“You wouldn’t give up the chance to spend the day watching football with *me*, would you?” Ikuya sent her a quelling glance.

“You *bet-cha*.” Julia barely bit back a smile. “You’re on your own with the other guys tomorrow. I mean, *really*. Do you think any daughter in her right mind would miss spending her daddy’s money on the biggest bargain shopping day of the year to watch football with a bunch of men?”

“I was hoping that you were the exception,” he kidded.

“We’ll be home early because I will be there to make sure she keeps it within reason.” Caroline’s stern motherly voice interjected from the bar.

“Of course, mother.” Julia said obediently while exchanging a scheming look with her dad who was silently mouthing for her to “go wild”. He gave her a playful wink and she snorted on a soft laugh.

“Richard, stop encouraging her,” Caroline voiced without raising her head from the under counter wine refrigerator.

“How does she do that without looking?” Richard laughed and shook his head.

“When you become a mother you have the ability to see everything; including husbands that act like children.” Caroline glanced up from the cooler. “Any of you have a particular wine preference for dinner? Maestro Ikuya?”

“No wine for me, thank you,” Ikuya answered.

“You hear how she treats me, Ikuya?” Richard slapped Ikuya on the back with a booming laugh. “I swear I would marry her all over again!” His white smile broadened.

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“Excuse me. You’re assuming I would make the same mistake a second time around,” Caroline murmured.

“She married me because she thought I look like Robert Redford.” Richard imparted in hushed tones. “I still do, so trust me she would marry me again.”

“He’s aging better than you, so don’t bank on it.”

“That sounds like I need to remind you why I’m worth keeping around,” Richard said, and went over to stand behind Caroline at the bar. His arms encircled her waist and he drugged her against him. He nuzzled against the side of her neck and murmured something in her ear that brought out a girlish giggle.

When the older couple shared a kiss Julia and Ikuya turned their eyes away. Their gaze met and locked. They were silently envious of the scene before them.

Julia eyes dropped from Ikuya’s searching stare. It took everything in her not to lean into him and kiss him. She once again reminded herself that intimacy and love had no place in their sexual relationship. Her parents behaved this way all of the time and her mother was fortunate to have found a man that loved touching and laughing as much as Richard did.

“Ikuya, I really would like it if you can join me and my friends tomorrow but I would understand if you prefer to stay here in a more quiet setting,” Richard said.

“Well actually, I was hoping to go shopping with Julia tomorrow.” A smile found its way through the mask of uncertainty. “I--”

“No!” Julia interrupted. She bit the inside of her cheek when all eyes turned on her. She felt on edge. The desire to have him openly by her side

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was strong, but she just couldn't risk an intimate touch, or stare passing between them triggering off suspicion. Suspicions lead to the tabloids camping out on her stoop.

She and Ikuya hadn't left the privacy of her home the few times they'd been together since meeting. Unfortunately, for the women he was dating or sleeping with they remained news long after he was through with them. Every time a his name was brought up during his return season there would be a gambit flashes of faces across the screen of his wife first, then all the women that came after them. She didn't want to be one of those faces. She only got two months of his time, she didn't deserved to be haunted for it the rest of her life.

"Julie-bug," Richard came to join them. "If the maestro wants to spend the day with you instead I don't see why that will be a problem."

"Richard," Caroline moved next to her husband. Putting a hand on his forearm she said, "Maybe, our daughter doesn't want anyone to come to the wrong conclusion as we did earlier. No offense to Ikuya but it's not only his reputation to be considered but that of our daughter."

Julia could see the disappointment on Ikuya's face, his shoulders dropped and he shoved his hands in his pocket. She realized he actually was looking forward to going shopping.

"I do understand why it promotes a problem for everyone having me around. I hoped that if it was all of us out together for the day it wouldn't be seen as a romantic liaison." Ikuya bowed his head in apology and straightened. "Forgive me for interrupting your holiday plans. It's probably a tradition for you to do it this way. If the offer is still available Richard, I will watch the game with you."

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“Ikuya,” Julia said his name softly.

With an apologetic grin, Caroline reached out and touched his hand.

“I know matters like this must be frustrating for you. I’m sorry.”

“I just something I’ve always wanted to do each year I am here. This is the first time I’ve had a Thanksgiving weekend to myself to do whatever I wanted to do while visiting and I’ve heard so much about the electronic bargains you can get on days like this one.”

“Dad, you can record it and watch it later can’t you?” Julia leaned against her Richards other arm with pleading eyes.

“It would be a nice change to have you and Ikuya along,” Caroline agreed.

“Since when have you ever wanted me to go shopping with you?”

“Since things have gotten so dangerous around the holidays, besides we need some strong arms to carry all our packages don’t we Julia.”

“You know I think it’s time we have a new tradition,” Julia said. She broke into a wide, open smile at seeing the sudden gleam in Ikuya’s eyes. He had the look of an excited child.

“Well, how can I be the one to run on our guest joy?” Richard laughed. “Ikuya I hope you can still grin like that tomorrow when the ladies run us to death!”

“*Arigato*, I’m sure I will enjoy that too.” He inclined his drying blue-black hair.

“I’m sure you two would like to get dried off and change before dinner. Ikuya I think I will put you in the last guestroom down the hall so that you can have a bathroom of your own. Otherwise, the only other bathroom on the second floor is adjoined to Julie-bug’s room and that girl

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takes forever in the mornings.”

“Mom,” Julia groaned as Ikuya looked at her with a wide toothy smile.

“Jew-lee-bug,” Ikuya repeated and his grin widened even more. “I think I like that, it’s cute.”

“Don’t even *think* about it. It’s a nickname Richard gave me when *I* was as cute as *it* sounds, but being in your thirties and called a bug doesn’t have the same effect. I’m warning you, it better not go outside this house.”

“Play nice Julia.” Her mother gently chastised.

“*Hai*, yes, place nice with *me* Jew-lee-bug.” Ikuya said smugly.

“Okay, say it one more time, and I’m calling you a taxi, Bud and you can spend the Thanksgiving eating hotel stuffing and no shopping trip tomorrow.” Julia huffed.

“Julia Grace,” Caroline eyebrows arched. “Have you forgotten all of your manners?”

“Mom, he started it.”

“Daughter how can you go from declaring you’re too old to be called Julie-bug to sounding like you’re five-years-old?” Caroline reached out and squeezed her chin with a soft chuckle.

Julia pulled a face at a laughing Ikuya. She knew she was being childish, but he always seemed either too serious or his face would look so sad it broke her heart. She would be silly if it would make him laugh more.

Her eyes dropped to his crotch and gave him a secret little smile.

As if he could sense where her train of thoughts Ikuya’s eyes narrowed in on her face and his nostrils flared. She saw his fist tighten by his sides. Their eyes met and held.

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“Don’t you think we need to go see to things in the kitchen, darling,” Richard slipped his arm around his wife’s shoulders and affectionately rubbed her arm placing a kiss to her temple. “Ikuya wanted no formalities, so he will be treated like family from this moment on. That means Julie-bug can torture him like she does the rest of us.”

Ikuya groaned.

“I’m going to torture you really good. By the time you leave the States in January you will be an honorary member of the Payne family,” Julia warned him.

Ikuya’s eyebrows lifted inquiringly before a secretive smile appeared on his face. She was sure he knew what type of torture she had planned for him.

He bent closer. “Let the induction into the Payne family begin.”

“Nonsense,” Caroline looked pointedly at her daughter. “The young man may not know this, but he became family the moment I allowed my daughter here to put his pictures on the piano and fireplace mantel with the rest of the family.”

“Huh?” Ikuya’s dark thick eyebrows shot up nearly to his hairline. “You have pictures of *me* on display with your *family* photos?”

Julia heard the squeak of surprise in his voice and released another long groan. He hadn’t noticed and she was hoping he wouldn’t

“Thanks, mother, he’s probably thinking I’m a stalker right about now.” Julia murmured.

He turned his questioning stare on her.

“I suppose some of this obsession with you and your career is my fault Ikuya. I’ve had a personal interest in your outcome since I saw you for

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the first time on a special about child protégés and heard you were an orphan. My first wife and I inquired into adopting you and were denied because we weren't Japanese citizens."

"*Honto?* Really?" Ikuya made his way over to the mantel where at least three picture of him in various stages of his career displayed with the rest of the Payne family. "I thought no one wanted me because I was too old. Most people that came into the orphanage were looking for infants."

"I'm sorry to hear this, son." Richard moved to stand beside Ikuya. He reached out and touched his shoulder in a reassuring gesture. "Because of your talent they wanted reassurance that you would remain a citizen of Japan, that your birth country would remain your home."

"I couldn't give them that assurance. At the time, I was the Japanese liaison officer for my family's financial corporation. I knew it wasn't a permanent arrangement. Once my father retired I'd have to return to New York to take over his position so we had to withdraw are petition. But I never forgot you."

Ikuya frowned at Richard's confession. His dark eyes lifted and he stared out the window to the right of the fireplace. Gentle swirls of snowflakes fell upon the blanket of white making the twilight even more serene.

"I was placed with a musically gifted couple who through governmental means made sure that I continued my studies so that I could represent my country to the best of my potential." His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "But, it never really felt like a home."

Richard nodded and lapsed into fluent Japanese. Julia and Caroline gave the two men the time to converse.

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During their easy exchange of words, Julia gathered her father had already spoken freely to Ikuya in his native language while in the kitchen because he wasn't surprised by her father's skills in his language. Unfortunately, she had chosen to learn Spanish and French in school. Which came in handy mostly everywhere during her travels. Still, it wouldn't have hurt to learn a thing or two from her father since he loved the country, having spent years there for business.

"Sorry, my sweethearts, it was just easier for me to say how sorry I was to hear that he hadn't had a warmer upbringing in his language. It would have been too *sappy* a thing to say to another man, if I had tried to express it in English." He chuckled and everyone laughed with him breaking the somber moment.

"That would explain why you have that picture of me on the mantel. I was what about twelve or thirteen?"

"Actually, fourteen," Richard supplied. "It was the day of your birthday."

"Ah, I remember. The American that owned the corporation that I was requested to play for surprised me by rolling out a cake and everyone sang happy birthday to me. It was the first time I had a real birthday celebration!" Ikuya nodded. "*Arigato!* Thank you!" The younger man said his eyes misted. He bowed low and held it a moment before rising again to look at Richard.

"I didn't get the chance to speak with you except for those few words of thanks for coming to perform for us and to present the cake to you. When I saw they had whisked you away, my wife and I worried all evening if you had even got the chance to eat a piece of your cake."

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Ikuya grinned fondly. “I refused to leave for my next engagement until they boxed up two pieces for me to carry with me. You see, I was a teenager and I was ascending into my rebellious years.”

“Yes. I had hoped when I had read in your biography that you had been raised in a loving home it was true,” Richard voiced.

“It was true. The family was very good to me considering, no one knew of my origins. Not even if I am entirely Japanese. They know my mother was listed as such on the birth records and she hadn’t listed a father, or when she died after my birth they could have send me to my father. No one ever came forward when I was an infant, so he may not have been a resident of Japan. I couldn’t find any leads and when I became a man wanting children of my own, I searched to see where I belonged.”

“Well, son, as you see by the mantel and you will see more pictures of yourself in my study. I never forgot about you and as far as I’m concern, you have a family right here.”

Julia could see the muscle ticking in his jaw from where she was standing. She moved closer to his side. “Are you okay?”

“*Hai*, yes.” He smiled and reached out to touch her face. “I’m okay.” His deep voice softened and their eyes locked.

Both of them realized they were being studied by two sets of eyes. Julia groaned and Ikuya’s hand snapped back as if he’d been burned. A ruddy tint spread across Ikuya’s face and he dropped his eyes. The only thing that could have made him look guiltier was if he was holding a neon light over his head flashing, “I’m fucking your daughter”. Julia moved away and scratched the back of her head.

“So, it’s too bad baby sis can’t make it this year; are they still wanting

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to induce labor in a couple of weeks?” Julia asked.

She cleared her throat realizing her voice was louder than necessary with everyone standing across from one another.

“Uh, yes, we will be flying there is the weather is permissible and from there we will be taking our anniversary cruise for the year.” Caroline answered even though she stared at one and then the other.

Julia had used that control look he gets when he’s about to perform, causing her mother to turn her knowing stare on Julia. Her shoulders dropped, she knew that she had a readable face. She never could lie to her parents, so she prayed that even if they suspected there was something more than acquaintanceship or friendship between her and Ikuya they would have the decency to pretend otherwise.

She released her breath when her mother spoke. Thankful it was the latter.

“Rich, darlin’, why don’t you start putting the food in the truck,” Caroline said cocking a well arched eyebrow at her husband.

Richard stood grinning from ear to ear at the two of them. “I think that will be a good idea.”

Julia bit on her bottom lip looking down at the toe of her boots.

“Stop worrying on your lip, dear. I told you that’s why you look like you’re pouting all the time.” Her mother addressed her.

Julia heard a smirking laugh come from where Ikuya was still standing with his hands dutifully behind his back.

“But I’ve heard some men like that *pouty* look.” Caroline stated, pointedly turning her gaze on Ikuya who shifted from one foot to the other. “Dinner won’t be served until six. There is a plate of ham sandwiches made

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if you get hungry before we get back. You don't have to check on nothing in the kitchen, it's under control. We will be back after we make the delivery to the shelter." Caroline said.

"Need any help," Ikuya offered.

"Thank you, but this is routine for us since we retired." She chuckled and winked at them. "I suggest you two take a nap. We're going to the midnight lighting of the trees at the Christmas tree farm down the way."

"Do they also sell the trees?" Ikuya asked.

"Yes, but we decided to buy one and donate it to a family in need since we won't be home for Christmas this year. Unless you two might be interested in using the house...?"

"Mom, Ikuya has to work through New Year's and I don't really care to be in this big house alone on Christmas," Julia answered.

"Why don't you come with me and your father to visit your sister? It's not too late to get online and order an extra ticket."

"I already made plans since I knew everyone wasn't going to be here this year."

"Plans huh?" Caroline nodded her dark brown eyes trailing from one to the other. "Okay kids, dress warm for when we go out tonight."

Julia and Ikuya both released a long sigh of relief as Caroline made her way towards to kitchen.

"Oh yes," Caroline turned on her heels at the kitchen entrance to look at them.

They both groaned.

"Julie-bug, I'm thinking Ikuya will be more comfortable in the bedroom with the adjoining bathroom. Just remember, your bedrooms are

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over ours.” Grinning and turning on her heels she disappeared into the kitchen.

Ikuya glanced at Julia and they snickered like silly children. She scurried for the staircase with him on her heels. Halfway up his fingers delved into back pockets of her jeans and tugged.

“Hey you?”

“Who *me*?”

“*Hai!* Yes you.” Ikuya laughed quietly.

She beamed loving the sound of his laugh. “What?”

“Why they call you Jew-lee-bug?” Ikuya asked her.

She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s a family secret.”

“My pictures is with your. I’m family.”

I wish that was true. I’d have hopes of seeing you again.

“Darn, now you will be eligible to your share of the family jewels.”

“If I already have the diamond of the family why would I need anything else?”

Her stomach flip flopped. Lightheartedly she said, “You keep talking to me like that I’m going to fall in love with you.”

“Don’t,” Ikuya said abruptly.

Too late. She thought.

“I will end up disappointing you as I did Mako.”

Her step faltered on the step and she gripped the handrail even though he removed his fingers from his pocket to steady her. His voice had barely been above a whisper but it was a loud and clear reminder that nothing had changed. The clock was still ticking on her happiness. Instead of acknowledging she had heard him she chose to answer his question

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instead. Pausing she turned to the side and lean against the wall to look down at him.

“I’m not Mako,” Julia reminded. “I probably don’t have the same expectations she had because we come from different backgrounds. You can’t group us together like that. I won’t let you.”

“I’m sorry; it was not my intentions to insult you in any way.” He sincerely apologized.

“

“How did your parents meet?” I never knew anything about my father. I remembered how I felt the first time I saw my birth record. They had stamped “unknown” as if I was of another species.

“She was an Advertising Executive in his Georgia bank branch office. They were more business acquaintances and friends. Mom said it became serious after she took another position at another company and moved to Chicago. I suppose now that she no longer worked for him he felt he could ask her out.”

“Were they attracted to each other even as friends?”

“Mom had never dated outside her race. She said she would look occasionally but she didn’t care much for the Robert Redford type. This of course is Richard. He had the dirty blond haired, blue eyes, and a killer wattage smile.”

“Mom of course didn’t want to date him. She said he belonged to the country clubs that she wouldn’t be allowed memberships to and he socialized with some people that would tell her to go around to the back door and he was the youngest son of a family that owned own banks an prime property all over the world. To his parents he was born to carry the

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baggage of high hopes and expectations while they would expect her to simply carry his baggage.”

“Did his entire family object to the marriage?”

“Emily and I have met our Caucasian grandparents, once. Each neighborhood we moved to there were problems and we felt like we didn’t belong anywhere for awhile.”

“I can relate,” Ikuya muttered.

“We were constantly moving because of my school issues. At first mom insisted on public schools and all would be well until the moment my dad would show up at one of my plays, or pick me up from school I would have a hard time of it afterwards,” Julia confided. “Private schools were a somewhat better, but most of them had a stereotypical view of Black people and like a trained monkey I tried to live up to the hype. Then I went through the “snob” stage, the “rebellious” phase, and the “I wish I was White” phase. Did you have phases?”

“I didn’t have time. Between music training, engagements and classes, the only phase I remember going through was the “I wish I could be a normal kid” phase.” Ikuya rolled his shoulders as if the weight of expectation still road heavily on his slender shoulders. “How did you get through all your phases or are you still going through them?”

She saw the humor in his eyes causing her to jokingly say what was on her mind. “Maybe, you should stick around to find out. I’m not going to give you a rundown on me, every girl need a little mystery.” Julia waited to see if he would remind her once again that their time was limited, but to her surprise he didn’t say anything.

Julia continued. “I thought I was having issues until I realized my

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baby sister was having a harder time of it because she was the product of an interracial marriage. She would come home in tears over things I never even thought about.”

“What things?” Ikuya asked.

“One day she came home in tears with a piece of paper crumpled in her hands. Mom was at work and so I was the only one there and I never felt so helpless. They had to fill out census sheets in school and where it said race there wasn’t all the options there are now. So Emily “checked” the box for Black and the box for White. Well, the teacher gave it back to her and said she had to choose one or the other and refused to take it until she changed it.”

“Why was she crying?”

“She couldn’t choose and the teacher used whiteout on the White check box and left it marked Black. When Emily asked why? She said, “Anytime you have Black blood you’re considered Black” and of course my sister became more confused asking why wasn’t it both?”

“I think it’s a legitimate question.” Ikuya agreed.

Julia nodded her head. “When I opened that crumpled piece of paper she had balled up in her fist I couldn’t explain why the teacher had drawn her own little box and put the word “Mutt” beside it. All I could do was sit there and cry with her. I felt utterly helpless.”

“People can be cruel to one another. I see it every day, Julia.”

She noted how quiet and pensive. Lifting one hand, she lightly fingered a tendril of hair on his cheek. He reached up, lacing her fingers with his own and pulled her palm to his lips where he pressed a kiss and ran his moist tongue along the life line causing her to quiver in response.

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“What are you thinking,” she asked him.

He moved her hand to rest above his heart and held it there. “I think children can be the cruelest of them all.” Ikuya imparted.

“Is that the voice of experience talking?”

“I didn’t have any friends as a child until I was moved to a special school with other children with the same abilities. I didn’t have the money those children had and I felt just as much an outcast.”

“You must think of the blessings, Ikuya. Being gifted has opened many opportunities that you may have never had otherwise.” She caught his eyes with her. “One being I’d never met you.”

“I suppose you’re right. Still I feel as if the odds are always against me. So much so, I can’t seem to enjoy all that I have.” The bitterness was evident in his voice.

The sadness she saw on his face tug at her heart.

Julia said in a more light tone, “I didn’t finish telling you why Richard gave me my nickname.”

“Your big round eyes,” Ikuya teased.

She return his smile her heart thudding in her chest, for there was times his attractiveness left her breathless.

Her eyes narrowed on his face. “Did my dad tell you this story already?”

He shook his head and laughed out. “I was teasing. *Honto?* Really? It was because of your eyes? There like that actress...what’s her name? *Betty Davis?*”

“I don’t think so.” She laughed. “Anyway, the first time I met Richard. He was so tall and his voice booming. My mom said I was scared

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to death of him at first. My eyes get as “round as saucers” is how she put it and I’d cry every time he touched her. It wasn’t until this giant of a man came down on his knees in front of me and bent down until we were face to face, that things changed.”

“Why did he do that?”

“I suppose he finally figured out his size intimidated me and wanted to get down on my level. I was told he tugged my pigtails drawing me close until we were nose to nose until his blue eyes crossed and I started to giggle.”

“He said to me, “You should laugh more often because princesses don’t cry and because of your big beautiful eyes, from this day forward I King Richard Payne crowns thee *Princess Julie-bug!*” and out of his pocket came a tiny crystal tiara which he placed on my head. He’s spoiled me every since.”

Julia turned and finished climbing the last few steps until she reached the landing and turned once again to face him forcing him to stop one step below.

“Ikuya, I’m glad you wanted to spend Thanksgiving with me,” she spoke softly.

He easily placed both hands on her hips and tugged her towards him. His beautiful agile fingers grip the hemline and eased up her sweater. His cookie-sweet smelling breath blew hotly against the top of her stomach, his nose brushing against her before he pressed his blushing pink lips to her brown skin. She trembled from his slow tenderness and buried her fingers into his damp hair to cradle him to her.

Her lashes lowered to shadow over the roundness of her high cheekbones and a tear fell, she didn’t want to cry but she couldn’t stop it.

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The ache and joy of falling in love weighed heavily in her chest. How could she stop from tumbling into all that was Ikuya even though she knew she would end up being hurt?

He took her nipple in his mouth with transparent nylon bra cup and all. He pulled and tugged. Julia sucked on her bottom lip to keep from moaning out the pleasures that tugged at her vagina. She could feel the rush of hot moist heat coating the walls. Her clit pulsed with the racing *tromp thumps* of her heart.

He released her breast and looked up at her. “I *need* you, Julia,” he spoke softly. His eyes were beseeching and shined so bright gazing up at her she wondered if he too was feeling what she was feeling.

Swallowing the lump in her throat before it build into a full sob. Julia simply took his hand and turn to lead him to her room.

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CHAPTER TEN

It is the night before Christmas...

After a show Ikuya felt exhilarated and drained at the same time. He loved his career but he was thankful when it was over and he could go to his dressing room and find Julia waiting for him and they go to her place together.

They have seven more days together. Afterwards he would return to Japan for the spring tour and it would be Europe for the summer tour. He wanted more time with Julia but he couldn't ask her to come with him and travel the world as his mistress until October when he would make a trip back to that house and see if fate gives him another year. Julia deserved much better. She was kind, loving, considerate, honest and sexy as hell.

He removed the black tuxedo tail coat and laid it over his arm. Running a tired hand over his sweaty face, Ikuya stifled a yawn. It suddenly dawned on him that it was unusually quiet in the backstage dressing rooms area. He glanced at his watch and realized it had been two hours since the performance ended. With only two more performances to go, it was tradition to stop in and socialize with the director and board members of the Lincoln Center; yet another social function that Julia hadn't wanted to attend with him.

He had enjoyed Thanksgiving when they went to the tree farm and the next day they went out shopping. He felt normal. He wasn't even recognized while walking on the street with Julia, Richard and Caroline. It wouldn't have been a possibility if they had been in Tokyo. The paparazzi would have their faces posted all over the place causing his agency to jump

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on it with a press release that he would be forced to read at a press conference explaining the situation and apologizing to his fan for any distress it may have caused them.

Placing his hand on the doorknob to his dressing room he opened the door and his thick dark eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Shut and lock the door *Maestro Ikuya*. Did you bring your baton with you? I may need a little direction as to how I may please you this evening.” Julia gave him a devastating smile and blew him a kiss.

His stomach did a somersault as he devoured her brown beauty dressed up in a sexy costume in honor of the holiday. *This is something I could get use to.* He thought.

From the disc player on the desk, Vanessa Williams’ rendition of “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” resounded through the large dressing room suite speakers. Ikuya eased the door closed leaning back against it as he fumbled to turn the lock on the knob.

Candles flickered from every corner and surface in the room casting about a warm lovely glow. As he moved forward into the room he could see the candles were the flameless sort. Grinning he realized that was Julia’s way. Even though she was being romantic she was the type of woman that was also practical in her thinking.

This was the first none-serious relationship he’d experienced where he didn’t feel as if the woman he was with was playing games or plotting ways to keep him longer than the time frame he offering. He knew he should be relieved that everything between them was progressing so smoothly. She never nagged, complained, or repeatedly hinted her interest to continue the relationship after he leaves New York.

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For some reason it bothered him that she hasn't ask him to spend his off season time with her. He'd mentioned it twice that he didn't have another performance until he had to show up for rehearsals for a Valentine's Day performance in Osaka Japan. Had she grown tired of their affair and was ready for him to be on his way?

"I can't believe you did all of this for me." A grin tipped the edges of his mouth as he wondered what other surprises she had waiting for him this evening.

"I made a stop by *Sushi Yasuda* and got your favorite dish of *unagi*, eel sushi and rolls." As she reached to uncover each dish, the white fur hem on her red velvet miniskirt hiked up higher, revealing white translucent laced panties beneath.

Ikuya's breath came out in a rush as he admired brown butt cheeks. He swallowed deep. Food became the last thing on his mind as he feasted upon her with his eyes. Sex with Julia was quickly becoming a need for him. It had been three days since he last saw her. His schedule was becoming hectic since the season was winding down. Not once had she called him even though his phone was off during rehearsals and interviews but still there were no voice mails or missed call from her. He wondered if she was really that damned understanding, or was she playing a mind games with him in hopes that he wouldn't be able to walk away in the end?

Instead of saying aloud what he was thinking he decided to let her know he was pleased by her putting surprise. "*Kirei-dayo*, you look beautiful." He looked at her as she came over to him. The black knee high leather boots emphasized the sexiness of her round thighs. His eyes lingered at her breasts encased in a lace white push up bra. He could make out the width of her

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dark chocolate nipples. He reached out and lightly squeezed one breast and she shoved a piece of sushi in his mouth.

“Thank you. I hope you don’t mind my doing this here,” she murmured. Chewing on her bottom lip her expression closed to his scrutiny. He tried to gauge her mood because she seemed somewhat pensive.

“I’m sorry I haven’t called, but I assume since you didn’t call me you have been busy with work?”

“Yes, this is my busy season.” She smiled at him.

He noticed the smile didn’t reach her eyes. “I’m glad you are here, Julia.”

“I came here because I didn’t want to bring in Christmas without you,” she admitted.

He dropped onto the black leather sofa. “Come here. I want to hold you.”

She closed the space between them and straddled his lap. Once she was settled he cupped her bottom in his hands and kneaded. He was a bit taken aback by the sadness he saw in her brown eyes. Could it be she was dreading their pending parting of ways but resist the urge to tell him?

“*Naʻe?* Why do I feel as if you want to tell me something, but for some reason don’t feel comfortable doing so.” Ikuya decided to inquire.

He saw her searching for a reply. Her tongue darted across her lips in a nervous gesture. “I suppose it’s because I do have something to say; but I need you to answer a question first.”

His brows rose in surprise. Julia was blunt and honest. Another thing he found pleasing about her. “You know you can ask me anything. What is it?”

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“Are you going to always be the way you are about relationships or is there a remote possibility that you will open up your heart to someone?”

“Julia, I thought we already had an understanding.” Ikuya leaned back against the couch. He folded his arms across his chest and glanced everywhere except in her eyes. He needed a moment before he looked into her eyes and saw the disappointment. “The most I can offer you is another six weeks unless you are willing to travel discreetly with me. If you are...then we can have until October to spend together. It has to end before I go to New Hampshire.”

She silently nodded.

“You will?” Ikuya stifled a smile. “You would consider joining me on the next leg of the tour?”

“No.” Julia said. “That’s not going to be possible for me.”

“I can hire you if it’s about work.” His smile faltered at her reserved expression. “But you nodded.”

“I nodded because I understand that your wife died in October. I also know you had a home built for her in New Hampshire because it’s the city where her parents still reside. What I don’t know is why you feel it necessary to *plan* in advance breaking things off when you can’t possibly know what feelings you may have for me ten months from now.”

He looked away once more. “It’s a promise I made to my wife.”

“I made a promise to Frank that I would live happily and fully for the both of us. What did you promise your wife, to live alone in misery until the day you die?”

“Julia--”

“No need.” She placed her fingers over his mouth. Her hand fell

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away.

He raked over her face with his eyes and held her gaze. She was a closed book to him and he was unable to gauge what she was thinking. “So where does that leave us?”

“Where does it leave us?” She repeated. With a shrug of her shoulders she surmised, “I suppose it leaves us where we’ve always been.”

“And that is?” He pushed hoping she would tell him what was bothering her.

“Two people who got together to make it a holiday to remember.” She scooted forward on his lap. Her thighs were forced wider by the width of his knees. Crotch to crotch she leaned in touching her mouth to his.

Ikuya tore his mouth away. He held her by the shoulders to keep her at bay until he could finish their conversation.

“Julia, before I allow you to distract me in your usual way.”

“I don’t...”

“You do when it’s something you don’t wish to talk about. You use sex to change the subject.” Ikuya gave her a wry grin. “I’m a man so it works in my favor, but I am also an attentive lover and completely devoted to my chosen partner’s needs for the time we are together.”

“Then when you’re *finished* with me I’ll no longer be your concern, right? Isn’t that kind of you?” Julia snapped. “Maybe in that confidentiality contract you had me to sign you should have added that falling in love wasn’t allowed either!”

Ikuya grinned. “Well, it’s good to know you aren’t *completely* understanding and *utterly* perfect.”

“You sound awfully pleased.” Her brows puckered in a frown and

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he found the way her lovely full lips puckered in a pout, completely adorable. “Aren’t you in the least a bit upset that as the end draws near I’ve become a besotted fool?”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “It’s to be expected.”

“I suppose you’re use to women behaving badly at this point in the relationship, huh? I thought I could be adult about this, but I’ve probably disappointed you with my moodiness when our final week should be our most memorable.”

His fingertips brushed her back from her face and around her ear. In that calm exterior manner that gave him the ability to wield an orchestra of over a hundred temperamental musicians he calmly spoke. “I think I would have been disappointed if you *hadn’t* expected more from me, Julia.”

She shifted on his lap to accommodate him as he adjusted her legs from being straddled uncomfortably over his spread knees to having her sitting across his lap while he cradled her in his arm, her temple resting against his chin.

“You’ve made your intentions very clear, several times over,” she answered. “It’s just I never expected that I could get so emotionally vested in such a short time.”

“Women are known to lead with their hearts. You were most likely already emotionally invested in me in some way or knowing you like I do now, I know you would never have agreed to this affair otherwise.”

“I don’t understand.”

“After spending time with your parents, seeing the home and they type of love you grew up seeing everyday of your life I realized you weren’t they type of woman that do anything casual. Especially, in your choice to

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take on a lover without a commitment,” Ikuya reasoned.

“I thought I could do it as long as I got the chance to be with you this one time,” Julia confessed honestly. “I thought it would be better to have you in my life for two months, then to not have you at all. I realize I probably made things harder on myself in the end. As my mother reminded me during our visit, I have always had a place just for you in my heart since Richard brought your music into our home.”

“*Pfff!*” He sounded and smugly said, “If you had just wanted me for my music you would have been contented with the CD’s. You know you wanted me for my face and body.”

His fingers smoothed a path up and down her exposed thigh. She laughed placing an open mouth kiss to his closed lips. He had to take advantage. Ikuya deepened the kiss with single-minded intent on giving to her all that he was able to give, even though he knew she deserved so much more than what he was offering.

He savored the passion of her kiss and chocolate-flavored tongue. She’d obviously sampled his gift box of Godiva chocolates complimentary of the Lincoln Center executive producer.

Ikuya cupped the back of her head in his hand and held her head in place as he went into a slow burn from her sexual essence and sensual heat. Her hands gripped his biceps as his tongue caressed and rolled against her tongue.

A soft satisfied whimper escaped her and he swallowed the arousing sound in his mouth. He continued raping her mouth with a heady exploration, making his intent well known so that there was no mistaking or denying the truth that he had missed being with her the last few days he was

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conducting business.

Ikuya could feel Julia's hands trembling as she tugs and released his white bow tie and began to unbutton the white tuxedo shirt. The kiss broke and he helped her to tug his shirt from his black tuxedo trousers. He couldn't do nothing but lay back and enjoyed the feel of her mouth on throat, chest. His long fingers buried themselves into the spiraled thickness of her coarse sable brown hair and massaged her scalp.

Releasing a deep grunt and a long sigh he flinched from the growing sensitivity of his inflamed skin as she found his tiny erect nipple and grazed it with her teeth before drawing it between her lips and rolling the wet roughness of her tongue against it.

Sliding off his lap to gain better access she kissed and rubbed her lips lovingly down the long incision scar running down the center of his chest stopping at the bottom of the second set of his six-pack abs. She went

After she unfasten his pants and unzipped his pants Ikuya tugged at her hair to draw her attention away from the head of his erection jutting readily against the waist of his briefs. The wet spot a sure sign he was ready without any further encouragement from her. Spreading is knees wide he guided her between his lean muscular thighs. With trembling finger he inched down the zipper located conveniently at the side of the velvet and fur skirt she wore. He worked it over her well-rounded hips until it plummet to the ground in a heap around her feet.

Julia stepped out of the skirt and swept it aside with her boot. His eyes feasted on her brown skin barely clothed in snippets of a transparent white laced bra and matching bikini panties with tie strings on both sides.

"Julia, leave on the boots." He ordered moving long enough to draw

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a wooden foot stool over to the leather sofa they were occupying.

“Don’t you want to eat some of the food I picked up before we get carried away?”

“I’m already carried away.” He murmured while drawing his fingers lazily over parts of her exposed flesh in silent admiration of her dark skin bathed in candle lighting.

“I thought you were usually starving after a concert because your sugar drops from all the energy you exert,” she reminded. Her full top lip curled up in laughter as his fingers caressed over a ticklish spot.

“If I pass out, call 119.” Ikuya reached out and took her hand in his to aid her as he instructed, “Stand up on this foot stool.”

“Wrong country,” she chuckled following instructions.

He paused and stared up at her. “Huh?”

“The United States is 911.”

“Huh?” He repeated. Ikuya was clearly distracted as he pulled at one of the tied string at her hip and it fell away, than the other. She separated her feet to spread her legs and the panties pulled away with ease. He threw them on top of her discarded skirt.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes at him. Another smile tugged at the corners of her sexy mouth and she placed her hands on her hips; waiting.

Ikuya took a seat before her on the sofa. His eyes fell to the bikini trimmed landing strip of dark pubic hair over her mound. He could see the hair at the nether lips was straighter wisps glistening with the moisture of her desire. The head of her large clit peeped from the blood engorged vaginal lips as if pleading to him. His nostrils flared and the muscle in his jaw ticked.

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He wrapped an arm around each leg and leaned forward putting him at face level *Perfect*. He thought with a slow grin.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

She enjoyed the seductive way his deep voice rumbled against her abdomen as he spoke words in Japanese that she wished she could understand. Still it wasn't necessary to know her body pleased him very much.

Regardless of the many flaws she imagined every time she looked in the mirror. It always helped to have a man that adored you to make you feel like you were perfect regardless. It was funny how you could doubt yourself but a man that you loved could make you feel like perfection with a minimum amount of words. When it came to pleasuring women, it was apparent every time they made love Ikuya knew much about the feminine body. Add that with all the right words spoken in several languages she would be so hot for him she would do anything in any position to please him.

Ikuya always made her feel like she was the most beautifully proportioned woman in the world. It didn't seem to matter to him that her hips were a bit too wide considering the smallness of her waist or that cellulite was evident in her thighs, though she didn't think they were too large, nor did he seem to mind that her breast was just a mouth full and no more.

He also made her forget for sweet sensual moments that his very attentive and all-consuming way of dating and making love came with a heavy demise. His love came with a time watch and it didn't seem to matter

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how much he obviously was enjoying spending time with her, with each passing hour her time was almost up.

Her eyes opened when she felt Ikuya stop. She frowned looking down at him between her legs. His right eyebrow cocked high in question.

“Why...why did you stop?” Her words came in a rush. “I was about to come.”

“You beautiful liar,” he chuckled. “I know your body as well as I know your own and you were not even close.”

He was right. And as sexually needy as she was feeling at this moment she now had something bigger to worry about; something that she couldn't even share with him. Not as long as he was determined to ignore what was staring him in the face.

Julia reached down and combed back his raven colored hair off his eyebrows with unsteady fingers. It didn't help; the hair tumbled down again into his eyes. A sheen of sweat glistened on his handsome face. *Poor baby had been really working hard at it. Damn! Nothing was worse than getting caught going through the motions and being called on it.* There she goes thinking too much again.

The thing about a woman was sex had to be a mental and a physical fuck it gave birth to award winning fake orgasm that could go down in the porn hall of fame. Now, any man worth their grain of salt as a lover knew the difference without having to ask. *As if we'd tell them the truth.* This man knew the difference and the way he was looking at her now, he wanted her to know he knew the difference.

Julia gifted him with a wide smile.

He wasn't buying it.

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“Julia, do you know what I hate more than women who are clinging and annoying?” He asked his concerned expression deepened. “I hate women who *pretend* to enjoy having sex with me when they aren’t.”

Julia released a contrite sigh. “My mind is on something else, I’m sorry.”

“I love it that as a lover you are selfish and take what you need and if I’m not giving it to you the way you want it you don’t pretend. You demand and take it from me draining me dry. Why are you changing now when we only have a few days left to enjoy one another?”

“I’ve already said I’m sorry,” she snapped.

Ikuya released the leg he had his arm wrapped around and ease the other one from his shoulder. “Don’t apologize. I’m curious as to why you set up this little seduction if you weren’t in the mood. As much as I enjoy it, I don’t expect us to have sex every time we get together. I also enjoy are talks and walks, that is when you will go out with me in public.”

“Well, no one has suspected we are more than business associates have they? They believe you hired me to take publicity photos of your tour.”

“As I said, as long as I’m in the states, my reputation isn’t scrutinized like I am in Asia. Mainly because classical music isn’t as popular here except in certain social circles.”

“I know, but all it takes is the one international tabloid getting hold of the story and not only will it bring problems for you once you return they most likely will come here to get pictures and hound me for confirmation. I don’t wish to lose my privacy over a *short lived affair*.” She spoke in clipped tones.

Julia saw him cringe at her words. She wasn’t doing a good job at

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hiding her frustration and irritation that *he* was the only one standing between their happiness.

“I’ve respected your decision, haven’t I?” Ikuya voiced. “Is this why you are distracted this evening? You’ve changed your mind about being my escort for the New Years Eve after party? Didn’t I agree that you can wear that camera of yours around your neck if it makes you feel better?”

He grabbed her around the waist with both hands and lifted her down from the stool. Julia put her hands on his shoulders until her feet were settled on the ground. When her booted feet touch the ground his hands fell from her waist and he handed her the cream colored cashmere throw that rested on the back of the sofa. She gripped it in front of her looking down at the toe of his fashionable polished leather shoes.

“For a man of extreme intelligence you can be dense to what’s right in front of you.” She looked up into his eyes. “I’m...” Julia caught herself. What was she doing? Nothing has changed. He had once again made it clear of where she stood.

“Don’t stop. What were you going to say?” He asked leaning away to get a better look at her face.

She looked away from his searching eyes. “It’s nothing that you will have to worry about. You will get to return to life as you knew it in a few days.”

“Julia, I don’t understand where all this anger is coming from all of a sudden?” Ikuya voice grew louder. “You act as if my return to Japan is some big surprise.”

“Stupid me.” She released a brisk chuckle shaking her head. “I heard you, I agreed to be in it for the “fun of it” and still I came here tonight

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hoping it would matter to you that I'm falling in love with you."

"Didn't I warn you it would not be wise?"

"As I said, why bother telling you when you'll be leaving soon anyway."

"Tell me what? 'That you love me?'" He scowled. "So what if I'm in love with you, it doesn't change the fact that I like my life the way it is."

"You said you envy what my parents have and I know that wasn't a lie," she cried.

"Julia, there was a time I wanted it all: a career, a loyal loving wife to welcome me home and send me off every day. I wanted children."

"It's not too late to have all those things...with me."

Ikuya blew released a heavy sigh. He shook his head. "A life such as that belongs to others, not me. It's too late. That young gullible boy that fell in love with Mako no longer exists. Is it so hard for you to believe I enjoy my life the way it is? Everyone is not looking for that *ONE person* to share their life with Julia. Music is my life and the women in my life are just a...*necessity*."

He made her heart spill over with love and break all within the same breath. Sadly she shook her head at him tears welled up in her eyes. "That's all this was for you? *A necessity*? If that is true then why have we *both* been *so happy* these past two months?"

"I don't deserve happiness, Julia!" He shouted. "What happened that night was my fault. Mako would still be alive if I had just..." His words dropped off. Wearily he rubbed his fingers up the center of his forehead, closing his eyes.

"If you'd what?" Julia's eyebrows arched in question.

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She could see that this conversation was hard on him, but before she allowed him to walk out of her life she had to have the peace of mind knowing she tried. His eyes opened and she shivered at the raw pain she saw. Why wouldn't he open up to her?

"It's not important." He waved away her question. "Just know by this time next year there is you will find a love deserving of you sweet beautiful nature and I will be just another hopefully pleasant, memory for you."

"I've had enough *memories* of what it's like to be in love. I want to *feel* that security again." Julia's voice ended softly. She stepped closer placing a hand on his forearm. "Ikuya, I feel I belong with you; that is until you remind me that you don't want me."

"Julia, it's not that I don't want you. Please, don't--"

"I can see you're struggling between what you want now and feelings of remorse about the past. My question is what are you paying penitence for?"

"I thought we agreed that we wouldn't make this difficult, Julia." His voice was ominously calm.

"That was before...before..."

"Before?"

"Uh...before...I realized there is must be more to the story."

"You're lying?"

"Huh?"

"As your mother pointed out, you have a habit of sucking on your bottom lip when you're lying. What are you hiding?"

"We're not talking about me. It's you that are avoiding anything that

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has to do with the future.” She said defensively. “What happened the night your wife died?”

“*Yamete-yo!* Stop it, Julia!” He bellowed. His jaw clenched and his Asian eyes narrowed into mere slits. It should have been her warning but Julia was never good at hints.

“No. I want to know, your deep dark secret,” she argued. “In the news article it is reported that the other driver had been intoxicated. What about you? You were the one driving that night weren’t you?” Julia paused at the look on his face. “Oh my God...”

“E? What?” Ikuya asked. His hand massaging the back of his neck stilled.

“You weren’t the one driving the car. Mako was.”

“You have no right--”

“Damn you, don’t you dare finish that statement. I have every right! The moment you became a part of my life, no matter how short the time is, you took a risk that I would care about you. Don’t you see? If you didn’t want to move forward into the future, if you didn’t want to ever love again you would have left my breezeway when I closed the door.”

“I told you it was because I *desired* you. However, now the curiosity is over. The excitement has waned, Julia and by the time I’m back in Tokyo I will be planning my next conquest.” He said cruelly.

Julia cringed. He might as well have hit her. It probably would have been less painful. Momentarily, she couldn’t speak. She cleared her throat of the emotional lump lodged in the back of her throat. It felt strange to be arguing with the happy melodies of Christmas music was playing in the background.

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Squaring her shoulders, she looked him in the eyes and said, “Fine. I’ve served my purpose and once you get rid of me you won’t ever have to worry about me interfering in your life again.” She drew in a long shuddering breath and let it out slowly. “I have one more question Ikuya.”

“*Mō ii-yo!*” He punched at the air and turned away in frustration. “I have had enough of this. I’m going to take a shower.”

Hands resting on his lean hips. Julia felt saddened by his stance. Usually a proudly erect man whose head was always high with pride, especially during his performances; his shoulders were now slumped as if they carried a burden he couldn’t or wouldn’t share with anyone. Apparently, not even her.

“Ikuya was it really a drunk driver in the other car that caused the accident or were you responsible for the accident? Was it you that was driving drunk that night and your management team covered your ass?”

“*Baka ittenna-yo,*” he yelled and flipped over the coffee table that held the items she had meticulously picked up to make this evening special in hopes that he would change his mind and they would be together for the rest of their lives.

Julia imagined he wouldn’t be interested in her wonderful news. Not now. She decided at that moment it was best to not tell him. The last thing she wanted to do is add to the burden he was carrying.

Why should she expect he would soften to the idea of them being a permanent couple? She supposes it was because they were so natural together. Loving him had come easy. His getting along with her parents had come easy. Making love to him was earth shattering. Still here they stood so close yet they couldn’t be further apart in their thinking.

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Julia had no regrets. She took a chance and he came through as he promised, it had been a holiday she would always remember.

She looked down at the mess at her feet. The Japanese sushi, along with a box of expensive and delicious chocolates she sampled while awaiting his arrival, the special brewed tea that she could only find online that he loved and the candles; thank God she had the forethought to get flameless candles were all on the ground in on big mess. She definitely had hit a nerve to make the usually cool and quiet Maestro Ikuya Yamane this visibly emotional.

Wrapping the cashmere throw around her waist and tucking it in toga style she righted the coffee table and squatted to start picking up the mess.

“Leave it!” He barked. “That was the cleaning service gets paid for.”

She recognized that voice. A closed lip smile came to her face. It was the tone usually reserved for the musicians he directed. A deep superior quality that left no room for argument causing him to be one of the most sought after Master Musical Directors’ in the world. And he was only the tender age of forty and currently the youngest that was so accomplished in his field of expertise.

“I suppose you’re right.” Julia released a resigned sigh. “I will leave the rest but I’m definitely rescuing the chocolates.”

She heard him chuckle. It wasn’t loud just a blowing sound through his nose. At least it was a start to them somehow salvaging what was left of the night.

“Julia...the night of the accident I...” His voice trailed off.

Slowly she stood placing what the box and salvageable chocolate that didn’t hit the carpet on the table. “You what?” She urged. Turning she

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stared at him in round eyed anticipation.

“I wasn’t driving drunk.” His eyes raked over her body and she saw that even though he was angry at her, he still desired her.

“Can’t you tell me exactly what happened,” she beseeched with outspread hands. “I love you and there isn’t anything you can’t tell me. Nothing will change how I feel about you, Ikuya.”

“I know you say this, but I’ve kept this matter to myself for a long time. There is no reason to rehash what was buried with Mako.”

He turned slowly easing his way to the adjoining bathing room.

“*Ikuya--*” She called out softly.

He paused in his movements and turned his head to look over at her. A muscle quivered at his jaw and his lips were compressed thin with restraint. When she didn’t speak quick enough she saw his right eyebrow arch in question.

“I love you.”

He stared at her for what seem like a long time in deafening silence. Feeling uncomfortable in the stillness of the room except for the background Christmas music she looked away from his unreadable face.

“*Aishiteru-kedo kekkon-wa dekinai,*” he said quietly.

“Meaning?”

“I love you too but I can’t marry you.”

Her eyes flew to his face. “Ikuya,” she breathed his name. “I didn’t expect marriage. I just wanted more time to explore the possibility that we have been given a second chance at happiness.”

“You mean enough time for you to grow to hate me because I’m too busy with my career to be attentive enough?” He shook his head. “This way

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it remains a perfect memory,” Ikuya reasoned.

“A perfect memory for who you? Ikuya, knowing that we love each other and the only thing that is stopping us is your stubbornness only breaks my heart.”

“*Nevertheless*, it doesn’t change how I feel Julia.” He added, to her regret. “It also doesn’t change the fact that you were warned prior to our getting involved. Yet here you are behaving childishly.

“I don’t think I’m the one acting like a child in the room.”

“I’m going to go and take a shower. I will escort you home.”

In silent frustration she watched Ikuya do an about face and stride to the wardrobe closet. He tugged a red turtle neck sweater from a wooden hanger and draped it over a pair of neatly pressed jeans resting over a cedar trouser trolley. She wondered if his fans suspected his meticulous nature.

He usually wore boxer briefs, but she did realize from the clothing he had brought to leave at her place that he owned boxers too and they were ironed. She imagined a man that had his own fashion coordinator and shopper could afford to be meticulous.

She also noticed he had a new and very modern styled haircut. They had left the top long and had razor edged the bangs into feathered wisps to come down over his brow and the sides of his face. She would have thought he would have considered the style to youthful at his age, but to look at him, he easily could have passed for an Asian man in his late twenties. Julia wondered if she had the opportunity to spend her life with him, would she ever tire of watching him.

She loved to watch him perform, eat, work studiously without distraction on a musical composition. The way he walk across the room as if

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he had great purpose or sometimes he would stroll slowly purposely making others wait on his entrance into a room. Even to watch him sleep was a beautiful thing. Or a comical time like now when she watched him continuously brushing back the bang of hair with his fingers to keep it out of his gorgeous eyes.

Julia decided he must have sweated out the hairspray that controlled his hair during the first hour into the performance, by the second hour it was flopping and blowing all over the place by his passionate movement with the baton high in his hand.

Her mouth twitched when he let out a string of curses this time it was in English. He marched over to the makeup station and picked up a butterfly hairclip to clip his bangs back off his eyebrows. He suddenly seemed younger.

Julia laughed behind her hand and savored every moment in case she missed something that she would like to be able to remember later, after he was gone back overseas. She never saw him angry until today and she even found that frightening side of him to be incredibly sexy.

She could honestly say she'd never met a man that would be caught dead with a pink hairclip in his hair. That alone made this man completely unforgettable in her thoughts. He probably hadn't even given thought to the color of the hair clip, as much as it being a means of convenience.

This crazy ass man is making me love him more without even trying. She thought. Her smoldering gaze raking him over from head to toe and her body responded. She wasn't distracted now. Ikuya definitely had her undivided attention.

His unfastened black dress pants hung low on his hips while his

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unbuttoned shirt billowed behind him as he raced about the room throwing vanity items off in a carry-on bag from the revealing his naked chest and torso.

Julia's body began to respond to the visual stimulation before her. She allowed herself to fantasize that Ikuya permanently belonged to her and this was just another night of many they had to look forward to.

Reaching behind her back she unhooked the white bra and removed it piling it on top of her other belongings. Bending over she eased down the zipper on her boots and kicked them off. Ikuya went into the bathroom pushing the door up but not closed. Hearing the water from the shower Julia released the makeshift toga from her waist and threw it back on the sofa.

With a smile on her lips she padded across the luxurious high-piled carpeting and pushed open the bathroom door.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ikuya sensed Julia's entrance before she opened the glass partition and stepped inside. He didn't know if she would actually join him but he hoped she would.

Her arms snaked around his waist. He took pleasure in the way her breast and hard nipples pressed against his back under the soothing spray of water. He turned in her arms and placed his hands on her waist. His penis stretched in length and thickened, until it brushed against stomach as she leaned into his embrace.

She nuzzled her cheek against his chest, and then found his nipple with her teeth and tongue. She licked and circled his taunt nipple before sucking on it. He felt tugging sensation all the way down to his curling toes.

As Julia went from nipple to nipple she ran her hands over his torso, manipulating his nuts, across his back ending in the cupping and squeezing of his hardened ass cheeks.

"Ahhh." The cry and hiss came out in a rush of air when she dropped to her knees and leaned over to lick the length of him. Ikuya tightened his hold on her shoulders to keep from buckling under the sensation of her mouth on his sensitive cock.

As she palmed and stroked him while sucking and swirling and tickling him with her tongue around his penis head, the fingers of her other hand dug into his buttock. He moaned and whimpered as she dipped lower and took the nut that hung the longest into her mouth and applied pressure in a sucking motion. It was painfully intense. She had the most magnificent mouth.

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Releasing his testicle she made her way back along the shaft opening wide to accommodate his girth. She took him deeper, her mouth compressing and stroking his hardness until her cheeks cave in.

His hand moved to tangle in the wet mass of her hair, his fingertips grazed her scalp each time her head bobbed. With his other hand he reached down until he found her breast. He tugged and pinched her nipple drawing a throaty moan from her that vibrated sensations along his erection.

Ikuya knew if Julia kept up the pace he would lose it entirely and after their heated argument he felt desperate in his need to show her how much she meant to him in the only way he knew how. He hoped within time she would come to see he was unworthy of her love.

He reached for her and eased his erection from between her lips. She licked her lips. Streams of water dribbled down her face from the overhead shower and she washed a hand over her face before dazzling him with one of her beautiful wide smiles. Her warm round eyes and her huge white smile was the first thing he'd noticed about her from a far at the banquet.

Ikuya hauled her against him and turned so that she was facing the heavy spray of water. He reached up and adjusted the shower head downward before sinking to sit with his back to the large shower stall wall bringing Julia down with him. Settling her between his spread legs. Ikuya encouraged her to lean back against him. He draped her right leg over his right thigh and the left leg over the left leg leaving her open and exposed.

He slid down a little further and stopped the moment he heard her cry out and moan. Just as he had anticipated, the jet stream of water hit her directly between the legs. Her hips circle and thrust against the water

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pressure. He palmed her breast and tweaked her nipples. Her body slipped and slid against him. He could see by the tense expression on her face she was about to come.

He wait for the moment and when it hit her, her body went into spasms. Seizing the opportunity, Ikuya adjusted her on his lap and entered her from behind, pushing his way deep.

Feeling her orgasmic muscles rippling and squeezing like fingers he looked forward to making her do it all over again. With cock buried deep and the water continuously beating on her clit Ikuya closed his eyes and concentrated on the feeling of being inside Julia. He wanted to remember this moment and everything about her.

Her muscles gripped and squeezed his dick. She took his full length then clamped down hard as he guided her by holding her hips and aiding upward. Before his cock could ease out of her vagina she'd locked down on him again and milked him for all he was worth.

"*Fakku!* Fuck!" He panted hotly against Julia's ear. His vocal pleasure obviously pleased her because she clamped tightly onto him and held while she went into a squatting *unching* style.

Ikuya loved the scenery from his position. It afforded him a view of her shapely buttock and blood gorged vaginal lips. She knew it drove him wild to be able to see her opened *ke manju*, pussy clinging to his *chin-chin*, penis as she rode him.

Ikuya grasped the back of her neck forcing her forward his hand slid across her wet back and slapped opened wet palms to her ass. Happily he squeezed the rounded shape. It reminded him of a perfect peach. As she continued to undulate over him he spread and held open her cheeks to see

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the dark puckered sphere winking at him. With the padding of his thumb he pressed and massaged the hole sending her spiraling over the edge.

His fast reflexes were the only thing that kept Julia from tumbling head first into the tiled shower stall wall. He could fill her legs trembling from the orgasm that brought for sexy mewling noises from her throat. With her resting against his chest once more he slowly pumped his hips once more savoring the *manzuri*, twat massage she gave him.

“Whew!” She laughed out. “That was...*when!*”

He saw her swallow deeply several times, her chest lifted and fell rapidly. Managing to compress the turn off button on the shower as the water started to cool. He stilled against her as she hissed from his movement.

“*Koibito*, beloved, are you okay?”

She leaned to the side to stare up at him. “I’m really sensitive down there. Give me a moment to recover.”

“*Kirei-na hitomi-dane. Kirei-na karada-dane. Itsumo kimi-o omotteru-yo.*”

“Hmm?” Her eyebrows lifted in question.

“When you are satisfied you have the most beautiful and expressive look in your eyes and your magnificent body drives me wild. I will carry the memory of you until I draw my last breath.”

Ikuya could see she wanted to say something in return but whatever it was she must have changed her mind.

“How about we move this into the other room where it’s more comfortable?”

“You seem to be very comfortable a few moments ago.” He said playfully and received a laughing poke to his ribs.

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“For that, I’m going to keep your cock hard until we get to my place.” Julia licked her tongue at him

“*Teme!* You’re very *rude* to leave me like this.” He caught the white oversized towel she threw at him.

“I thought you of all people admire selfishness.” She smile but he could see it didn’t reach her eyes. “Isn’t that what you said to me earlier? You like how when having sex I take mine no matter what or something to that effect? Well, I got *mine* and I’ve made a big enough fool of myself for one day. I’ll get dressed so you can take me home as you planned. Then you can go back to your life and it will be as if I never existed.”

“You know that’s not possible, Julia.”

She gave him one more pointed look at her naked body covering her nakedness with a bath towel about her breast tucking in the corner. “Sure, it is.” She gave him a half smile. “What was the hair color of the woman you escorted around town during your last holiday season in New York?”

“What?”

“Exactly. Give me ten minutes to dry off and get dressed.”

Ikuya’s studious gaze followed her departing figure. Damned if he didn’t find this disinterested miffed side of her even more desirous.

“*Wakamakashii.* How childish,” he muttered. A defeated smile came to his lips and he looked up at the ceiling shaking his head. “*Kimi-ni muchü-nanda.* I’m completely crazy about her.”

With a wolfish grin Ikuya gave chase. Easily he caught her by the waist and grappled the bath towel from her clutched fist as she tried to hold it in front of her. But he managed to get it away from her.

“Hey! Stop playing Ikuya, I’m not in the mood.” She reached for

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the towel. He moved it out of her reach. “*Annnnn*, come on! You ruined the meal and I’m ready to go home and find something to eat. I was really looking forward to eating those noodles.”

He saw her eyes trail to the mess on the floor. Her shoulders drooped. “I will buy you the restaurant that makes the noodles if that is what you want.” He said it in a teasing way, but he meant it if it would make her smile again. “But before we leave this room...” The corners of his mouth twitched. “You are going to help me get rid of this erection. It’s so big I won’t be able to zip up my pants.”

She looked down at his crotch and back up at his face with arched eyebrows. He didn’t know whether to be insulted or laugh at her expression. He chose the latter. “Okay, I was exaggerating *a bit*, but it will be very uncomfortable.”

This time he got a smile out of her and it warmed his heart.

“Take me home and I will feed you, fuck you and in the morning you can pack up the stuff you have there and leave.” He inwardly cringed from her bluntness.

“Are you going back on our deal?” Ikuya asked. “We still have seven more days.”

“Seven days isn’t going to change anything. You’ve said so yourself,” she reminded.

“Are you saying that after today I can’t have any contact with you or your family anymore?” His eyes narrowed on her face.

“I know that I said that you were welcomed to Holiday with me and my family at any time. But that was before...before this situation became more complicated.” She tugged in on her bottom lip. “Knowing how I feel

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and knowing that you love me to, yet I still can't have you. It will be unbearable enough. I don't want to waste time sitting by the phone waiting for your calls and hoping you will remember to email. Seeing another women replace me."

"You aren't that easily replaceable Julia." He washed his hand over his face. "I was counting on being able to still see you from time to time Julia. I had hoped to keep in touch and to talk with you like we do when we are together. I *need* you."

"And I need the one thing you aren't willing to give me." Her voice was heavy with sadness. "I deserve everything I ever dreamed of. You said so yourself, remember? I want it all, or nothing, Ikuya."

Ikuya nodded in understanding. He released a long sigh and changed the subject. "*Chotto kite*, come here and allow me to dry you off," he directed.

Julia hesitated long enough to confirm what Ikuya already realized. He had hurt her really bad or there was no way she would be breaking all future ties with him.

He could barely breathe at the thought of no Julia, no family, and no more holidays in the Payne's household. He wished he could take all his words back and be honest with her about what happened to him that night was sure anything he said now, she would mistake it him trying to seduce her.

He wasn't accustomed to a lover like Julia. She couldn't easily be appeased with money or fame. Up until this moment his money had successful got him everything he wanted including his wife. If he had approached her family as an hourly man they wouldn't have ever given in to his request for her hand in marriage and Mako refused to marry him without

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her father's blessing.

Her father refused to meet him when he first started dating Mako because he claimed loyalty to promises he'd made to her ex-fiancé who he found more suitable and his prestigious family. Once Mako convinced her father he was the one she wanted to marry, he had pointed out that due to Ikuya's lack of family, he couldn't give his approval with an open heart, but if his daughter was happy he would approve.

After finally striking a monetary deal with her father to save his flailing business Mako was his. He thought Mako loved him as much as he loved her. It was why he worked so hard to have her. On the night of the car wreck he found out the extent of her feelings for him. She had made him believe they had longed the same things out of their marriage. He hadn't realized how important it was to Mako to please her father.

"What are you thinking?" Julia's question broke through his thoughts.

"I was wondering if you were going to come to me before my arm dropped off." He gifted her with a smile.

Again she went silent and contemplative on him.

Julia. He thought her name with an inward sigh. *What can I do to appease you?* He had promised her great unforgettable holiday and he was failing miserably at it.

When Ikuya thought back over the past weeks, he felt it was he that had been given the gift of a memorable holiday.

She'd given him her trust by allowing him into her home and introducing him to her parents. They had welcomed him with open arms, not caring that he didn't know his anything about his bloodline. Julia also

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gave him the greatest sex he'd ever known. No, it was more than good sex. Being with her was intimate. It did more than fulfill his baser needs. He cared what she thought about him, he cared that she was now hurting because of something he had done. But could he give her the one thing she wanted from him for Christmas?

One again Julia pulled him from his thoughts, but this time it was because she finally moved to stand in front of the open towel he was holding up for her.

No further words passed between them. He blotted and toweled her hair first until it stopped dripping from the ends and it became a fluff of spirals, waves, and frizzed wildness.

His hands traveled down the lent of her arms sweeping across the brown curves of her shoulders, the gentle sway in her lower back and over the global orbs of her breast. Ikuya noticed how quickly her nipples were hardening in response to his administrations. He moved behind her wiping over buttocks and moving lower he travelled between her legs rubbing her with the towel gently. He place a kiss to the beauty marks discovered on her ass cheeks; another at the small of her and on her hip.

Straightening, from behind, he embraced her and she sank luxuriously into his arms. Ikuya kissed the exposed nape of her neck, his hand came up and caressed he side of her face and she turned her face into his, turning her body in the process she slid her arms around his neck and came up on her tiptoes to reach his mouth with her lips.

Ikuya kissed Julia unhurriedly with all the tender emotions she evoked inside him. He kissed her forehead, the eyes, the cheeks, the throat, and the bosoms, beneath her arms, the inside of her elbow and the pulse

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point of her wrist before drawing her forefinger into his mouth.

Releasing her finger Ikuya gathered her face in both hands cupping it he pulls her up to meet his lips kissing her mouth all over. She smoothed her hands down his back sinking to her knees. To follow the lengthy kiss Ikuya bends at the waist and sinks to his knees also with his hands still cupping her face.

His hands kneaded the flesh of her naked back before cradling her in his arms and unhurriedly eased her down until she was lying on her back.

Ikuya was encouraged to continue by the sound of Julia gasping and whimpering as his tongue lapped leisurely along her body. He stopped at her breasts, sucked one nipple and then the other.

He moved lower and nuzzled her belly burying his finger in the nest of curls between her thighs. Slick moisture drenched his fingers. Her *ke manju*, pussy pulsed in rhythmic contractions around his fingers. Julia moaned a deep rasping sound and lifted her hips causing his two fingers to forge deeper.

Ikuya grinned, then lowered his head and licked her *mammae*, clitoris. She bucked her hips against his face as he French kissed her cunt. He smacked and hummed when he butterfly fluttered her blood engorged bud. He knew the louder the sex noises the more turned on Julia would become. What she like the most were the sounds of flesh hitting flesh when he took her from the back slapping her ass in the process.

Quiet and reserved on the outside one would never suspect the passionate highly sexual nature of the woman that came alive in his bed. He had been surprised and delighted at her unrestrained response every time he took her.

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He dipped his tongue deep within her weeping hole, curling the tip of his tongue upward before withdrawing to slurp and suckle the walls of her delicate folds of skin. His fingers started pumping inside her once more while his tongue worked around her dark puckered orb.

“Ikuya! Oh, God...shit. Oh, shit.” Julia cried out in a garbled voice.

Her hands tightened in the thickness of his hair and he rested her legs over his shoulders to give him open access to lick from one end to the other. It was when her heels dug into his back he knew she was lost to his will.

He felt her orgasm. Her vagina contracted repeatedly around his fingers he could see her asshole winking at him in rapid pulses of appreciation. He held her legs in place while she continued to tense convulse. When she went still he relaxed his hold and her legs hung limply over his arms.

Not giving her a chance to recover, Ikuya came up on his knees grasping her hips with his hand he drew her to him and scooted closer until his penis pressed against her swollen glistening labia. His lean hips surged forward slowly, causing his dick to disappear into the folds of heated flesh coating him with her fluids.

He grunted and groaned moving carefully and slowly. He wanted to be tender in his handling of her and wait for her to recover from the orgasm, but she urged him on with faster undulation of her hip and he couldn't hold back any longer. He had been building up to this release for over three hours and it he considered it well earned.

The weight of his balls slapped against her bottom as she sat the pace until he was sure they looked like a couple of rabbits fucking. She was so wet he slipped out a couple of times nearly going into the wrong hole, until she

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tensed and reached between them to guide him back inside her vagina.

He panted, thrusting from slick deep to cock sensitive shallow. His strong hands bit into her waist as she brought him closer to his peak. Ikuya's breath came out in short puffs. He was so close. His jaw clenched. Another thrust and another! The intensity was almost unbearable.

"*Iki sou!* I'm going to come! *Arrgh...*" Ikuya threw back his head and shouted his release before collapsing on top of her. He welcomed the way her legs and arms clung to him until the spasms stopped.

"I'm exhausted," Julia yawned. "Can we lay here awhile before we dress and leave?"

A smug grin came to his face. That was rare. Julia was usually the chatty energetic one trying to work him up for another round right afterwards. But he supposed she'd had a long day getting things together for this special evening and he ruined it. He wondered what she wanted to tell him.

She had obviously changed her mind once he told her everything still had to end and now that he realized this was to be their last night together he almost felt a desperation to turn back the hands of time. Why didn't he just tell her about that night with Mako and allow her to decide for herself if he was worthy of her love? Hadn't she warned him before not to compare her reactions to that of his deceased wife because they weren't one and the same?

He left her side long enough to retrieve the throw she wore around her hips earlier and threw it over her before sliding in beside her. Ikuya placed his arm under her head to give her an instant pillow and nuzzled his limped penis against her soft roundness. This was one of the times he enjoyed the most; the feeling of her in his arms, the lingering smell of her on

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his upper lips, and the moment he could pretend that it would always be this way between them.

Ikuya's mind began to race in the quietness. The Christmas CD had ended a long time ago and now he was left to ponder all that Julia had said to him. Realizing that the turn of events and her unhappiness was his fault was a rude awaking.

"Honto-ni ikitakunai," he muttered. He really didn't want to leave her.

How could she just end things like this before their agreed upon time. How could she turn him away at Christmas? He told her how much he hated spending the holidays alone.

In the orphanage it felt like a family unit around the holidays. To his disappointment when he thought he would have a real mother and father in the couple that took them into his home it was worse. They never considered him as a son. They saw him as employer to employee. They were paid to take him in and assure his talents were cultivated, not to nurture him. Once he started performing he couldn't remember the last time he had a holiday where he wasn't in some strange city in some hotel alone waiting to perform.

"How can you leave me alone? What about New Years Eve?" He grumbled to the back of her head as she slept. It was too late for him to find another date or at least a date with anyone he wanted to be with.

Besides, he gave his word to Richard and Caroline that they would return to the farmhouse for football on New Year's Day. Caroline had a tradition of fried pork chops and black eyed peas he was interested in being a part of. The Payne's also said they would have pictures of Julia's sister's new baby upon their return after Christmas. Was he expected to miss all this,

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because she was upset with him? They had a deal. They even pinky swore on it.

Ikuya felt a horrible sense of desperation the moment Julia told him this would be their last day together. He had mentally prepared himself to address her earlier questions, to apologize, to make-up with mind blowing sex like couples do after a disagreement. But he barely recognized the calm resigned woman before him, nor did he expect her to be the one to end things and earlier than planned.

How after telling him they would remain friends could she just end it like this? What gave her the right to resend his standing invitation for Thanksgiving with the family in the future? His pictures were on the piano and mantel, for God's sake! She did all this without any warning. Didn't she know that he'd only told one other woman in his entire life he loved her?

She should be happy this Christmas Eve, instead she was acting like a wounded bird and saying her goodbyes. Didn't she realize that from this holiday on she had a standing engagement with him every season he was in New York?

That gave Ikuya pause. How could he truly even make that promise to her? Wasn't it him who came up with the ritual of going to Mako and his New Hampshire home to end it all on the anniversary of her death? He never made any personal plans until after October just in case his luck ran out.

He released a long sigh closing his eyes at his own stupidity. What had he been thinking all these years? Actually, he hadn't been thinking. He'd only been trying to survive another day feeling as if he deserved to never be happy again.

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“*Do-shi-te?* Why?”

He remembered. It was because Mako’s parents blamed him for what happened and he let them promising to protect the memory of his wife at all cost. It was the last thing he could do for her. Somewhere in his grief, he had started to believe the things her parents had accused him of and wished to end the pain of losing the family he hoped he’d found.

It was because of Julia he realized he had been completely clueless as to what being part of a family unit really meant. He had been considered a part of her family because of his music alone. Richard had sounded as proud as any father when running down all he knew of his career. Julia’s parents hadn’t found him unworthy for their daughter because of his lack of parentage.

The threat of her ending things tonight made him realize he couldn’t imagine his life without her. He definitely couldn’t imagine it returning to what it was before meeting her.

Julia had taken a chance on him. She had entrusted her heart to him for a holiday and he would be a complete *baka*, idiot to not accept the gift of her love and the welcoming arms of her family.

Ikuya’s hold tightened about her and he kissed her temple. She smiled at him in her sleep and his heart soared. *His heart*. Ikuya ran a finger along the scar. He should have been grateful to have been given another chance when a matching donor came available. The doctor had stressed the miracle of such a thing happening. The man that this heard had come from probably would have sold his soul to have been given a second chance. Ikuya couldn’t believe how self-serving he had become over the years.

“*Kowai. Demo, kimi-nashi-ja ikirare-nai.* I’m scared. But, it would terrify

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me more to live life without you.”

Tomorrow I will tell you everything and make it a Christmas to remember.

With that thought in his head, Ikuya gathered Julia close to him. He smiled. He wore her out for a change; usually he was the first to go to sleep afterwards. He imagined the happiness he would see on her face.

He was too excited to sleep. He just wanted to look at her a little while longer. He laughed and shook his head when he heard her stomach growl. Easing his arm from beneath her head, Ikuya walked over to his coat pocket and removed his cell phone.

His personal assistant picked up on the third ring.

He paused for all the politeness. “*Merry Christmas to you too.* I need you to work on something for me. *Hai.* Yes, I would like a packing and moving service to box up the New Hampshire home, except for Mako’s personal items I will box up her things and send them to her parents. Send everything to charity.”

He suspected all the questions but he hadn’t expected the excitement and happiness he heard in his assistant’s voice.

“I think it is about time too. Why? Well, we will discuss everything when I see you. I do? I suppose I sound different because I am different. It’s been awhile since I’ve felt this way,” he grinned into the phone.

Ikuya’s dark eyes glanced at the sleeping beauty on the floor curled on her side. His stomach growled. The two of them had to get something to eat tonight even if he had to check into a five star hotel and order room service where they didn’t care if it was a holiday or not. He hated to have Julia go home and throw something together just because he had destroyed the meal she brought. If he was home he could go to the corner

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convenience and get bento boxes or rice balls and noodles.

“I promise I will clear everything up for you after Christmas.”

Ikuya smoothed his damp hair off his brow.

“*Hai...hai...yes. Mako’s house.* What other homes do I own in the United States?” He chuckled and shook his head at his assistance flustered stumbling of words. “I want it on the market as soon as possible. I don’t need it anymore.”

He listened for a moment and added. “Uh, do you know the owner of any jewelry stores? Do you think he could meet me there in the morning? I know its Christmas; otherwise I wouldn’t be asking if you know someone. Get back with me as soon as possible. It’s very important to me. If you can make this happen I will make it worth your while.”

Ikuya clicked his phone shut and strolled back over to Julia. Easing down beside her he nibbled at the corners of her mouth and kissed her until she wrapped her arms around his neck.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Christmas Day...

“Say that again.” Ikuya swatted away the makeup artist hands and tugged the protective napkins from his starched white tuxedo shirt collar. The makeup artist eased away to the other side of the room. Spinning around in the chair he occupied with his toe he impaled the driver with his stare.

“I went to pick Miss Payne up as you instructed. I went to the door and called the number and received no response. I checked with a neighbor and one told me she saw her putting luggage into the back of a taxi cab.”

His breathing quickened. Laying his hand on his chest, he folded over. Ikuya drew in a deep breath, the pain inside him dizzying in its intensity.

“Maestro! Are you all right?”

The driver put his hand on his shoulder. He shrugged it off. Sitting back up as the pain subsided. “Don’t worry about me. I need to find Julia.” He released a loud curse. He knew he should have went ahead and spoke to her but he had to leave at sunrise and she was finally sleeping peacefully after several trips to the bathroom.

They had finally found a Chinese restaurant opened and still delivering when they got to her place after leaving the Lincoln Center. He ate the same thing, but something she had eaten must not have agreed with her because he heard her in the bathroom at least twice in the middle of the night vomiting the contents of her stomach.

If it wasn’t for the fact a neighbor had seen her leave, he would have

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been worried that she was still sick. “Could you call and check the hospitals and see if they will tell you anything?”

“What about you? You really aren’t looking to well, sir.”

There was a knock on the open door. “Maestro Yamane. Ten minutes to curtain.”

He nodded and moved to stand but eased back down. His knees and hands were shaking so bad he wondered how he was going to pull it off. He had to calm down. She could have had a family emergency. They were supposed to induce her sister’s labor tomorrow if she hadn’t started by the end today. Maybe she went to be with her family. But after getting his note wouldn’t she have called him?

No, maybe not. He hadn’t said anything in the letter to give her hope that today would be any different than yesterday. He wanted his proposal to be a surprise so he made a simple request that she keep her promise to spend Christmas with him and he’d already bought her a gift. He left the time her driver would be arriving to pick her up and he told her tonight performance was formal wear.

Now he was realizing how foolish it was not to have spoken to her over dinner last night when he had the chance. He should have but she looked so tired and strained around the eyes, he figured they’d already had an emotional evening.

Ikuya had it all planned out except for the possibility she wouldn’t come to his concert. First thing he did upon waking was met up with the jeweler and purchased matching platinum and diamond “commitment” rings. They were similar to wedding bands, but it was a beginning token to show his love and devotion only to her from that day forward. Once they made

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their engagement official they would go together to pick out an engagement ring.

He had arranged for her to be seated in his private concert box where the spot light would appear upon her during his dedication of a special musical presentation he had prepared just for her. It would be their official public “outing”.

Pushing up from the seat once more Ikuya stood with arms outstretched behind him for his wardrobe assistant to assist him with his tuxedo jacket.

“Hitori-ni shite, I need a moment alone please.” Ikuya called out and the people in the dressing room cleared.

Before putting on his white gloves he picked up his cell phone and called Julia’s home phone number. Her cheerful voice spoke from the answering machine and he felt the ache in his chest and stomach again. He called Richard’s cell number and it went straight to voice mail. He left a message. There was no answer at the Catskills residence either. His concerns increased.

Ikuya heard his intro queuing him to proceed to the stage and released a weary sigh. He dropped his head and said a quiet prayer before picking up his conductor’s baton. Shoulders erect he sauntered out of the dressing room.

Julia wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand as she listened to her father’s voice over the phone. Her heart was breaking. Ikuya was calling everywhere leaving messages for her and she desperately wanted to return his call but she just couldn’t go through another goodbye with him.

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“I know it hard for you too dad not to answer his calls. But I just can’t speak with him again. If I do I know I will tell him...” Her voice faded into hushed stillness as she listened to her father’s soothing voice.

How could she bear another emotional rollercoaster like yesterday? For what; another week of pretending like they were a couple? She couldn’t understand why he was being so persistent. If it was because HE needed to be the one to walk away first, then he was crueler than she’d imagined.

It was bad enough that he held the power to her happiness in his hands. She couldn’t understand why he stubbornly refuses to let go of his past and live in the presence with her. The only conclusion she could come was he obviously loves the memory of Mako more then he loves her and she deserved better than being a runner up to a *dead* woman.

Tears slowly found their way down her cheeks. She swallowed hard biting her lips to control the sobs.

“I’m at the airport now waiting for them to call my flight,” she sniffled. “I will call you at the next stop and let you know if the flight is on time. How’s baby sis coming along? Thanks dad. Tell mom I love her too. See you soon.”

Julia turned off her phone and placed back in her coat pocket. She used the balled up tissue in her hand to wipe her eyes and blow her nose. Wondering into the airport lounge she sat at the bar.

“What can I get for you?” The bartender asked tapping the bar with a finger.

“Uh...can I get a ginger ale with no ice, and if you have it...some salted pretzels.” Julia forced a smile. “Thanks.”

Her hand stole to her stomach. After yesterday, with Ikuya telling

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her that their love changed nothing there was no way she could tell him her secret. It would pain her more knowing he would choose her for their baby's sake, and pain her just as much if he were to know about the baby and walk away wanting nothing to do with either of them. By avoiding telling him she could put off ever knowing how he would have reacted. This was a choice she was willing to live with.

The bartender put down a napkin and placed a tall glass of ginger ale on it. Beside her glass a small empty bowl sat and the woman filled it with some pre-packaged salted pretzels sticks for her.

"Thank you." Julia took a few of the pretzels and ate them using the ginger ale to force the dryness down her throat without gagging. "It's sucks that you have to work on Christmas."

The younger girl shrugged her shoulders. "No big deal for me. I'm Jewish. Besides, I get double time for today."

"How's the weather holding up?"

"I haven't heard the weather yet because of this special report."

"Special report?"

The bartender nodded to the side at the muted television in the corner above the bar.

Julia followed her nod. Her heart skipped a beat and she dropped back in her chair. The memory of what happened on 9-11 and the days that followed. Her thoughts drifted to Frank. She had gone through hell after she received a phone call from the hospital.

With all Frank's family living on the west coast he had designated her as his next of kin in his employment file. They both had agreed to become donors and had discussed what they wanted if something should happen to

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the other. That was an easy conversation to have when you're foolishly young and hopelessly in love thinking it would be years before you were faced with the decision. Then 9-11 happened and for a moment the world stopped and when it started up again her life had been changed forever. She hated *special report* interruptions on television.

"Yeah, it seems some Japanese musical diplomat dropped like a ton of bricks while performing--."

"Turn that up, please!" Julia slid off the stool and moved closer to the TV at the other end of the bar. Ikuya's name came up in bold letters on the news channel. She jumped when sound suddenly appeared. Fear, stark and vivid, glittered in her eyes. "*Oh...my...God...NO!*"

"What? Is he someone you know?" The bartender asked.

"He's someone I love," she breathed. Julia began to shake as the fearful images built in her mind. "I'm sorry. I got to go." She fumbled with shaky fingers in her billfold until she got her hand on the first amount of money she could get her hands on. Withdrawing a twenty dollar bill she practically threw it at the woman before her footsteps thundered down the airport corridor towards the nearest exit.

Her phone! She had to check her phone. She had cut it off after speaking with her parents. Reaching in her pocket she removed her cell phone and turned it back on. It chimed indicating she had a message. She practically jogged and listened to her voicemail at the same time. She recognized Ikuya's driver's voice.

Rushing out the airport exit Julia jumped into the first available taxi in line waiting for passengers. "Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center!" She barked.

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“I hope it’s not an emergency lady, the Christmas traffic is awful.”

“A hundred dollars if you get me there quickly!”

“Buckle up! I know a shortcut!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Three hours has passed before the doctors came out and told them Ikuya was doing fine. Julia's hand immediately went protectively to her stomach and she sunk down into the nearest chair before her legs gave out on her. She had been in this position before and she thought it was happening all over again, but her fears were premature. Her fingers gripped the armrests. Tears welled up within her eyes; she bit on her bottom lip to stifle the sob. Ikuya was going to be all right.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Nuthi. You must be Maestro Yamane's "Julia". My not so patient patient keeps demanding to see." The doctor came to stand by her chair.

Immediately Julia stood. She looked around the waiting room. There were three other women: Black, Caucasian, and Asian. Julia realized if it she had walked in this waiting room she would have approached the Asian woman first, but the doctor had come to her without hesitation.

A shy smile came to her mouth and she had the urge to touch her hair and see if it was all over the place because of the way the doctor was inspecting her face. She wondered what Ikuya told him exactly.

"I suppose that means he's back to being the Maestro." She laughed softly, relieved to do so again after the scare she had. "Julia Payne." She accepted the hand he held out to her and gave it a brief shake. "How did you know it was me?"

"He told me to look for the Black woman with Betty Davis eyes." The doctor chuckled. She could in his soft gray eyes a mischievous nature in spite of his serious exterior.

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“I keep telling him I do not have eyes like Betty Davis.”

“I found you, didn’t I?” The doctor grinned. “Come this way. We can talk as we walk. I’ve already had him moved out of intensive care into a private suite.”

“Thank you, Dr. Nuthi.” Julie fell into step beside him.

“Hmm, Miss Payne you look vaguely familiar to me. Have we possibly met before? Any of your parents have a heart condition I might have cared for?”

“No,” Julia shook her head with a light frown. “I’m a professional photographer and I also freelance for the New York Times. Maybe I was working at a function you attended.”

“Maybe.” He contemplated through pursed lips and shrugged. “I’m usually pretty good at such things, so I’m sure it will come back to me in time.”

“So, is the transplanted heart giving him problems?” Julia chanced asking not sure how much the doctor would be able to discuss to her seeing how she wasn’t Ikuya’s family.

“Not at all.” The doctor shook his head. “Maestro Yamane and that donor’s heart has been the most perfect matching I’ve ever seen. The young man that was the donor had taken very good care of himself and so had the Maestro before his accident. I don’t foresee any problems in the future. That is, unless he continues stressing as he did today.”

“I’m surprised to hear Ikuya was under stress. He thrives on the madness of performance nights and no matter how chaotic it seems to me it never fails to come together like well oiled machinery.”

“He explained that today in particular had been a little more than he

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was accustomed to during a day he has to perform considering he hadn't gotten much sleep the night before." Dr. Nuthi said cutting a side glance at her. "You wouldn't know anything about that would you, Miss Payne?"

Immediately her thoughts went back to the phone calls she had refused to return and she felt the heat on her face remembering how they made love several times. She wasn't quite sure when they actually went to sleep. Had he been awake when she was in the bathroom those few times sick? Guilt weighed heavily in her chest.

Julia cleared her throat and stepped first into the elevator as her companion requested. They both turned and stared straight ahead as the elevator when up to their chosen floor.

"I suppose this is my fault," Julia murmured. "We've sort of had a disagreement."

"I see. Well that explains the anxiety attack that caused the heart palpitations. As I said he should be fine with proper rest and less stress of course. So maybe you two should kiss and make up before his final New Year's Eve performance."

"At the very least, I have to face it that running away isn't the answer."

"Not at all." The doctor agreed stopping at a large closed door. "Here we are. I will leave you two alone for a bit. I have another patient to check on. Go on in, he's expecting you."

Julia nodded. Taking a deep breath she pulled the door open and walked inside allowing it to swing close behind her quietly. Walking forward into the hospital suite Julia felt like she was in a luxurious five-star hotel suite with a glorious East River view. There was a brown leather sofa in a sitting

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area with a huge flat screen television in a wall unit along with DVD player and VCR. She saw everything a person could want accept for a mini-bar and PPV porn. She was sure from all the buttons on the full size bed it had the ability to vibrate.

Speaking of porn, the object of all her porn fantasy was standing by the window looking out at the skyline view looking very healthy and sexy. If she hadn't seen him pass out in the news footage she would have sworn this was a set up to smoke her out of hiding.

“Ikuya?”

He turned to stare at her and the relief he saw on his face made her feel guilty for making him worry. She thought he would be relieved that it was over.

“I--”

Before she could get another word out Ikuya rushed to her, throwing his arms around her holding her head to his chest. She could hear his heart beating sure and strong. She was so relieved it hadn't been his heart. He lifted her hand, brought it to his lips and kissed each finger. Squeezing her hand, he interlaced his fingers with hers.

“God, I thought I lost you for good.” Ikuya deep voice vibrated with emotions.

With a tearful laugh she said, “That was going to be my line.”

He pulled back to look at her but didn't let go of her hand. “Didn't you get my messages? Why didn't you come to my show? I had made plans for us, Julia. I wanted to tell you everything about that night with Mako. I even arranged a musical compilation for you before I asked you to spend the rest of your life with me. Why? Why did you ignore my calls? Where you

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really going to leave me without saying anything?

“I--”

“I thought after last night...after the way we made love...I thought you understood that I want to make us work if you would have me.” He interrupted once again.

Julia was stunned and pleased. He wanted her. “I didn’t know what last night was about. You didn’t say anything. You didn’t even hint that you had changed your mind.”

“*Hajimete ata tokikara sukidata*, I’ve loved you from the moment I first laid eyes on you.” Ikuya confessed. “I’ve wanted to purge my soul to you, but I was afraid that if I were to tell you it would ruin whatever time we had left together and wouldn’t be able at the very least spend my New York seasons with you and your family. Then you left me anyway. I started thinking I had nothing to lose if I were to tell you the truth.”

“And now?” Julia questioned. Her darks eyes searched his face. “Do you still want to tell me or have I ruined everything by cowardly trying to run away?”

“I think before we talk about the future we need to discuss the past. If afterwards you want to still leave me, I will not stop you.” Ikuya said. “I’ve learned the hard way that only disaster can come from a woman being with you for all the wrong reasons.”

“Why don’t we sit over here on the sofa, you still look a little pale to me.” Julie suggested tugging him along with her as she made her way to the sofa. She gently pushed him down and when she went to pull her hand away his hold tightened and he pulled her down right next to him.

She supposed people have been leaving him all his life. Spending his

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formative years in an orphanage had to have some residual effects on how he perceived relationships. He was bound to have abandonment issues. It probably was one of the reasons he always walked away from a relationship first. If he knew when it would come to an end he wouldn't end up being hurt by the rejection.

"Julia, my marriage to Mako wasn't the storybook romantic love of a life time we allowed the public to believe, but in Japan we don't really discuss such things for it is not uncommon for couples to marry for other reasons than love," Ikuya began.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Julia squeezed his hand with hers.

"I suppose I felt everything that happened in my marriage I deserved it because I only cared about my own needs. Like when I saw you, I fell in love with Mako when I first saw her during a seminar at a local college. She was engaged to another she has known for five years."

"I couldn't imagine her wanting him over me. I was already successful, and I had to means to provide her the lifestyle she was accustomed to and beyond."

Ikuya closed his eyes momentarily, blew out his breath, then opened his eyes and looked directly at her. "Even though she refused me I went beyond her and try to speak to her parents to get them to see reason. Her mother was all for it but her father refused to even speak to me. He said there were two reasons he would' approve the marriage between Mako and I. One, he had already made a promise to this other family and two, I was an orphan and there was no telling what my blood was mixed with that would affect his grandchildren someday."

"*Affect his grand children?*" Julia repeated her eyes growing round.

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“What the hell? You are a musical genius! It seems he is the one that should have been grateful to have your abilities running through the veins of his grandchildren.”

“Have I told you I loved you?” He gave her a sad half smile.

“Yes, but I don’t get tired of hearing it.” She brought the back of his hand up to her mouth and pressed her lips to it. “What did you do next?”

“I gave her gifts. I thought I could sway her to love me I could get her to defy her father,” he answered. “This was the first time I ever loved a woman and I look back now and see how naive I was about how a woman’s heart works.”

“It must have worked eventually.”

“No. She continued to refuse me.”

“Then how--.”

“The one thing Mako couldn’t resist was her father’s will. If he wished for her to be my wife, then no matter how she felt about the other man she would marry me.”

“Her father changed his mind?”

“Not because he liked me or wanted me to be a part of his family. He was forced to change his mind.

“Force how? You didn’t--?”

“No...I had nothing to do with what happened to Mako’s father.”

“What happened to him?” Julia couldn’t help but be intrigued. None of this information had been published in Ikuya’s autobiography.

“He had been embezzling from the company he worked for. He came to me and begged me to use my connections with a few officials that are acquaintances due to my notoriety of course to make sure he didn’t go to

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prison and in return he would approve of my marriage to Mako. With the addition of a bridal price paid to the family of course.”

“That sounds ancient,” Julia breathed. “What about the other family?”

“I suppose when it came to saving himself. Mako and the other family were both *expendable*.”

“I did as he asked and Mako became mine. However it was still my intent to win her heart even though she came to me willingly.” Ikuya stated. His free hand resting on his knee balled into a fist.

Julia noted the tenseness in him. “Was it really willingly if she was only doing it out of loyalty to her family?”

“Apparently not, but I didn’t realize that until it was too late,” his voice grew quiet.

“Would you like to lie down and relax?” Her free hand reached up and smoothed his hair with her hand. “We have time now.”

For the first time since she entered room, she saw his smile reach his sexy exotic eyes. “We do, don’t we?” He shook his head releasing a long sigh. “But no, I want this to be behind us so we can start our new life with no more questions between us.”

She nodded in agreement. Mako marries you even though she doesn’t love you; then what?”

“The first two years she was a dutiful wife. I actually believed she had finally fallen in love with me, but it wasn’t true. She wasn’t doing it for me.”

“Her father?”

Ikuya nodded. “Not being able to find substantial work in Japan

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anymore her father took a position in New Hampshire in the USA. Once they left Japan, I hardly saw my wife. She no longer agreed to accompany me on trips anymore and when I was home, she was in London, Paris, Hong Kong...anywhere I wasn't," he confessed sadly.

"What did you do?"

"I built her a home in New Hampshire close to her parents and moved her there. I had to buy out several contracts in order to have my concert schedules rerouted allowing me more engagements in the States. It's how I ended up with my holiday seasons always being in New York. I wanted to spend my holidays with Mako. She started acting more attentive again now that she was back with her parents. I thought it would be a perfect time to start a family."

She saw his eyes take on a vacant look. His voice had grown monotone.

"Ikuya?" She touched his arm to gain his attention from whatever painful memory that had taken hold of him. "After Mako died why did you keep spending your Holidays in New York?" Julia asked.

"Because I return to the house I built for Mako house every year on Halloween, the date her parents finally court ordered her to be removed from the machines so they could collect the insurance money they had on her." His tone grew more ominous.

"You don't have to answer this but *why did you* keep her on life support all those years? You still couldn't bear to part with her because you loved her that much?"

"Any love I had for Mako died on 9-11, the day of the accident. The day that I should have been the one to die because that is what she wanted."

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“Excuse me?” Julia said wondering if she misunderstood.

“After all those years thinking I couldn’t produce children that day find out during a heated argument, that Mako had been pregnant at least two times that she admitted too. She aborted them because her father told her that he wanted no part of any children that we would produce.”

“Oh, my God.” Julia eyes burned with tears. She placed her hand on her stomach protectively. “What was she thinking? If she was so miserable why didn’t she just leave you?”

“She was fearful that I would have the same men that helped her father out of the trouble he was to expose his guilt and have him arrested,” Ikuya said.

“You wouldn’t do that,” Julia protested.

“No, I wouldn’t have and you know this about me in such a short time.” He laughed bitterly. “Why didn’t she know this about me after years of marriage?”

Her eyes locked with his. “She didn’t love you and she never tried to. I imagine she spent all those years wanting to be with the man she did love as I would have you if we were to have parted as plan.”

He leaned over bumped his forehead with hers and cupped her face to place several lingering kisses to her lips.

“*Hana no youni kirei*, you are as beautiful as a flower. I have wanted to do that since you walked into the room,” he confessed.

“I was wondering what was taking you so long.” She wiggled her eyebrows at him.

“It was too early in the conversation for a distraction. We would have lost another day like yesterday, making love until you passed out.”

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“That had nothing to do with you...*exactly*.” She countered against his teasing. “I’ve been more tired than usual.”

“Yeah, because I’m tearing that *pussy* up every night. You should be tired.”

She made a face at him. “How crude.”

His smile turned into a frown. His eyes bore into her as if he had something to say and wasn’t sure how to say it. “We’ve made love almost every day since we got together except for the times it wasn’t convenient in your family home, Julia.”

Julia looked away from his searching eyes. She knew where this was going.

“When was the last time you had a period?”

“You know they have birth control that makes you not have a period for a long time,” Julia supplied. “Besides we’ve used condoms, just in case.”

“You aren’t on that kind of birth control.”

“How do you know?”

“You would have said so and with us both on top of our STD testing if you were on birth control I wouldn’t have bothered with the condoms. Not with you.”

“Oh,” she mouthed knowing on her bottom lips. His eyes zoned in on her mouth and she abruptly stopped. She was going to have to kill her mother for giving away that little secret about her bottom lip.

“Uhm...Julia? There was something you were going to tell me yesterday before we got into an argument. Do you wish to tell me now?”

“You haven’t finished telling me about the accident.”

“Julia,” he called out her name in a voice of warning.

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“You finish first, Ikuya. I deserve to know why you have been so devoted to Mako, who obviously didn’t give a *shit* about you.” Julia asked sternly. “I feel as if I’ve been fighting against this woman since I met you. I made her out to be a saint and you didn’t stop me. Don’t think I missed that.”

“You’re right.” He released a resigned sigh. “But once I finish telling you my secrets, I think you should tell me yours.” He returned just as sternly.

She smiled and nodded.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“On 9-11 after the attacks everything was crazy. All I and anyone else could think about during that time was getting home to the ones we loved and hold on to them tightly and never let go.” Ikuya’s eyes misted. “I wasn’t any different. I managed to get home. Mako wasn’t there but she showed up not to long after I arrived but not in time to erase the messaged on the machine confirming her doctor’s appointment.”

“I called to find out what type of doctor it was. It was an abortion clinic. I had no idea that she had done it before. I thought this was our first pregnancy until we began to argue and in anger she told me she hate me, and she wasn’t giving a child to man that bought her away from the only man she love. She said I got what I paid for. She was going to spend the rest of her life making me miserable.”

“How did the accident happen?”

“I jumped in the car as she was trying to leave hoping I could stop her.”

“Mako was driving.”

“Yes.”

“I...I tried threatening and begging. I told her I would give her a divorce if she would give me the baby. She refused and I...”

“What?” Julia asked feeling somewhat breathless in anticipation.

“Even though I didn’t mean it. I told her that I would make sure her father paid for his past crime unless she had the child,” Ikuya confessed softly.

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“She went crazy. Suddenly, she pressed in on the gas and moved into oncoming traffic. She was screaming that she would die before she gave me what I wanted more than anything.”

“A family?”

He nodded. “That driver just happened to have been drinking. There was no way he could have avoided us. I grabbed the steering wheel and managed to turn it just in time, only the truck clipped our tail end sending us spinning and the car flipped...” His voice was thick with unshed tears.

Julia put her arms around him and held him closely. “I’m so sorry.”

“The next thing I knew it was six weeks later and after two days in intensive care I had blunt trauma to my chest which caused a heart blockage and I would have died if it hadn’t been for someone that was associated in the 9-11 recovery being brought in.”

“The doctor said he couldn’t have asked for a more perfect match.”

“I was very fortunate.” Ikuya agreed. “Mako had extensive head injuries. At first I was keeping her on life support because the fetus was unharmed and the doctors said the longer the baby could remain in his mother, the better chances of survival outside the wound.”

She pulled back to look into his face. Tears rolled unchecked. She could hear that he still had a lot of left over resentment.

“Her family was furious of course. I was holding up everything. I suppose while I was waiting for my son to grow and be delivered I was listing to her parents blaming me for everything. Eventually I began to believe it too.”

“I don’t what to say,” Julia kissed his cheek and smoothed back his

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hair. “I wish I had met you when you were going through this. It sounds like you could have used someone in your corner.”

“I wish you had been too; especially when my son died after an emergency delivery due to fetal complications. He just didn’t get enough time. He was so tiny he fit in the palm of my hand.” Ikuya held out his palm. “With all my money, connections and talent I couldn’t save my son. I couldn’t save the two I didn’t even know about. Maybe if I had been home more, I would have known she was pregnant.”

“You can’t go on thinking that way. If you had tried to stop her what she did probably would have happened earlier and that time you would have died because no miracle hear would have been available to save you,” Julia tried to reason with him. “If we are to have a happy life ahead of us, you must forgive yourself and you must let go of the anger.”

“How am I to do that, Julia?” His voice was full of bitterness. “I wanted her father to suffer the pain of seeing his daughter lying there every day of what was left of his life. He lived off Mako when she was a life. I couldn’t allow him to profit from her death also.”

Julia nodded her understanding.

“The minute I cut off my financial support to that bastard. He took me to court to get the right to remove Mako from life support. He didn’t want to remove her because he was pained by seeing her that way. He wanted her dead because suddenly she was worth more to him dead. He wanted to cash in on her insurance policy.” Ikuya roared.

“I dug my heels in deeper. I knew the longer I could hold out the poorer they would become. I wanted them to lose everything because of his greed. But in the end they won and all I was left with was the guilt over the

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fact that I had kept my wife alive not because I loved her but for revenge.”

“Ikuya, sweetheart, you were grief stricken. You lost the woman you loved and the baby you always wanted. The family you longed for slipping through your hands had to be maddening. How do you know by some miracle? Just like your heart Mako could have gotten her miracle if it was meant to be.”

“Julia...”

“My love, in the end it was Mako’s decision to try and kill herself, you and the baby that day?”

“But--”

“No buts,” she interrupted. “Father or not, Mako could have walked away from you at any time with enough money to take care of herself and her family unless you had a pre-nuptial agreement...”

He shook his head.

Julia continued. “She also could have done something to prevent getting pregnant. It must have given her some form of morbid satisfaction to take your children from you. All those decisions are on her.”

“The only thing you did was give her a higher chance at survival. The longer you kept her alive the better her chances became of getting better.”

“*Honto-ni?* You really don’t blame me?”

“For what; trying to save your son’s life by keeping his mother alive?”

Ikuya cupped her face in both hands and drew so close to his face his breath fanned her face. Staring deeply into her eyes he asked, “Julia, *Kekkon shite-kureru?*”

“Heh?”

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“Will you marry me?”

“Ikuya...”

“I promise I will ask your parents properly but I want to know if you would be interested in sharing my life, having my children and allowing me to be a participating member of your family.”

“How do you say “I love you” in Japanese?”

“*Aishiteru* or *Daisuki dayo*, depending on the extent of love for the person you are saying it to.”

“Yeah well, since I’m not sure which. Then, I would say both to you.”

He laughed. “I love you too, but you didn’t say yes or no to my proposal.”

“Do I need to say it?” She grabbed him by the ears. “Of course I will!”

A knock sounded briefly at the door and they broke apart. Dr. Nuthi came inside the room and he wasn’t alone. “Sorry to bother you Maestro Yamane, but I but I just remembered where I have met Miss. Payne.”

“Please, *nyu*, enter Dr, Nuthi,” Ikuya beamed. He stood and pulled Julia up to stand at his side. “I just asked Julia to marry me and she said yes!”

“That’s wonderful!” Dr. Nuthi grinned and shook Ikuya’s hand vigorously. “Congratulations to the both of you.”

“You were saying you remembered where we met before?” Julia asked. Julia looked from the doctor to Ikuya.

“You know Julia?” From the look on Ikuya’s face he was equally confused.

“No, I only know that she is a very kind and generous woman.” Dr.

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Nuthi grinned with a nod. “Did you two find each other through an online Donors–Recipients program?”

“I’m lost,” Ikuya voiced.

“So am I,” Julia agreed. “Were do you remember me from Dr. Nuthi?”

“Julia we met briefly on September 13, 2001. It was brief. I came to you to discuss the fact that your fiancé was a donor. I asked you to make the decision to keep him on life support for a few more days--”

“I didn’t do anything doctor but respect Frank’s wishes. We had discussed it and he was very clear about what he wanted.” Julia interrupted. She wiped at the tears on her face. “I’m so sorry. That helpless feeling just hit me again. It was the same way I felt then, and the same way I felt today when I heard about Ikuya.”

Ikuya reached over and brushed away the fresh tears. “It’s okay. Cry on my shoulder if you need to, *Julie-bug*.”

She gave him a stern look and grinned when he placed a kiss to her lips. Surprised by his public display of affection, but then again *she* was the one who wanted to stay out of the public eye for the sake of her privacy.

Her marriage to him may not big news in the States, but she was sure it was going to cause a stir and a lot of other issues from his public following in Japan. She might as well get ready for it.

“I will let you slide because you’re in the hospital recovering.”

Ikuya laughed.

“I couldn’t be more please,” Dr. Nuthi boasted. “I’ve heard of this happening but I’ve never witnessed it. “I suppose the heart of a man can find its way to the one he loves no matter what?”

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Realization of exactly what the doctor was saying immersed on Julia's face and a fresh round of tears appeared. "Oh, my God are you saying what I think you're saying, Dr. Nuthi. It's Frank's heart?" Julia gasped in stunned disbelief. Julia looked at Ikuya placing a hand in the opening of his kimono robe and touching the scar. "Ikuya has Frank's heart?"

"I do?" Ikuya managed. His face showing the same disbelief at what he was hearing. He placed his hand over Julia's resting on his chest. "This can't be happening," he murmured. "How is such a thing possible?"

"In my profession you learn not to ask." Dr. Nuthi stated. His pager went off at his waist. "I will leave you two newly-engaged alone. If you want me to break you from this place you're free to go Maestro. Just say the word."

"Before everything goes crazy with the reporters once I leave the hospital I want it just to be me and Julia for at least tonight. Could you please keep our engagement to yourself for now?"

"Of course," he nodded.

"Also, I will need to call upon you when I meet the press upon my leaving here; I'm sure after my very public entrance into here it would help to have a Dr. confirm it was just "fatigue".

"Of course," he agreed once more. "How about you two stay here for the remainder of the night? I will see to it you are not to be the disturbed but I would lock this door just in case."

"*Arigatou*," Ikuya inclined his head briefly. "Thank you."

"Yes, thank you." Julia added. "For...*everything*."

"Again congratulations to the both of you." The pager went off again and he scurried out of the room. The stern serious face was back in

place.

Ikuya released Julia long enough to lock the door behind him.

She couldn't take her eyes off of him. In one twist of fate she had both loves of her life had become one. It was frightening, unbelievable, amazing and overwhelming all at the same time. Frank always wanted to be happy and to assure it his loving unselfish heart was placed in the one man she wouldn't be able to refuse. Though Frank had never been threatened by a fantasy, he knew what Ikuya even though he was an entertainer, was in many ways Julia first crush...first love.

"Merry Christmas, Julia," Ikuya said.

"Merry Christmas," she repeated.

"I got you a present, but its back at the Presidential Suite at the St. Regis."

"Well, I'm afraid there is no way for me to leave your gift behind."

"Eh?"

"I wanted to tell you." She held her hands together in front of her. "But I more than anything I wanted you to *want me* because you love me. When you told me my love changed nothing--"

"*Gomen nasai*. I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Afterwards, there was no way I could tell you I was pregnant because if you had wanted me after finding out, a piece of me would always wonder if I had trapped you into being with me. Her dark earnest eyes sought his. "I couldn't bear to live that way and eventually it would destroy the beauty of what we have together."

He looked at her intently as he strolled slowly towards her. His black hair gleamed in the lights. He halted mere inches from her. His fingers

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curved under her chin. His thumb smoothed over her full bottom lip.

Julia swallowed hard against the lump of emotions lodged in the back of her throat, her heart raced as she saw tears slowly slipping down his cheeks. His throat worked in rapid concessions as if he wanted to say something but physically he couldn't speak yet.

But Julia didn't need any words. She saw the heart rending tenderness of his gaze and she knew that for the both everything was finally as it should be. Their child would be the reminder of their love and of how difficult it was to get here. A reminder of how miracles can happen and blessings are forthcoming if you believe.

They would have many holidays together, but this would be the Holiday to always remember.

May you have a Holiday to Remember!

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EPILOGUE

Valentine's Day...

They married in a small intimate ceremony at Julia's family church in the Catskills. Ikuya was amazingly handsome in a traditional formal kimono of black with five *kamon*, his being a family crest on the chest, shoulders and back. Not knowing his father the groom's lawyer and good friend stood up for him to represent his family and offered up his family's crest. It was an honor that touched Ikuya deeply.

Julia breathtaking lovely in a satin and laced Regency wedding gown of ivory designed with her expanding waistline in mind was surrounded by friends and a family. It was difficult convincing her to leave the camera at home and leave it up to the "other" professional photographer to get all the pictures she needed.

They honeymooned at a secluded hot springs in Japan. It was undisclosed to the ever prying public. Six months later, daughter Aubrey Tenkei (*heaven blessing*) Yamane came howling into the world, after making her parents endure together twelve hours of labor. But as soon as they held baby Aubrey in their arms they promised to try for baby number two once she started walking.

Julia and Ikuya chose to make their home in the Catskills. They loved easily and live life to the fullest. With Julia's profession she and their four children, three girls and a boy, Toru Franklin toured with Ikuya. He became known as the "the Maestro and his lovely family" to the media.

What in the beginning was considered career suicide soon became a selling point making him the poster child for interracial marriages. Ikuya never took his happiness for granted. When he laughed, held his wife and

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put his children to bed he silently thanked his donor; firefighter Franklin J. Robertson for the opportunity to have a second chance at living.



SHIREE MCCARVER

Interracial relationships with action, romance, humor and emotions rolled into one memorable tale have become a trademark of Alabama native, Shiree McCarver's novels. She learned a long time ago that laughter and dreams is necessary for daily survival. Ms. McCarver loves hearing from her readers. She can be reached at:

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September 11th Education Trust

WTC United Families Group Programs

<http://www.wtcufg.org/>

WTC United peer support programs promote healing by uniting affected individuals through shared experience. Healing after tragedy is a life long process, one in which victims adopt a new life. They have learned that uniting people who have had similar experiences and channeling that grief into helping others in need and protecting the memory of murdered loved ones can validate individual grief and advance the healing process.

Their [board of directors and staff](#) have many years of combined professional and academic experience in management, program services and development. Their leadership continues to play a vital role in ensuring the memory and legacy of the 9/11 victims is protected and our collective national history is properly preserved. With the Coalition of 9/11 Families, our leadership successfully led a campaign to identify and protect the World Trade Center historic artifacts including the remains of the twin tower [footprints at bedrock](#) and continues to serve as a consulting party in the World Trade Center federal historic preservation review processes.

The process to redevelop the WTC and build the 9/11 national memorial is “evolving” and we must remain vigilant in our efforts to protect the site and the memorial for current and future generations. To that end, their leadership has met with elected officials since inception, serving on the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC—agency charged with leading the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site) Family Advisory Council and the National September 11th Memorial Museum Advisory Committee.

Visit their site to for more information on how you can make a difference.