



FRAN LEE

A Brief Moment of Pleasure

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Chapter One

"I am sorry, but I do not need another female instructor. The classes that require an instructor are male classes. I need a male instructor." The guttural, heavily accented English was clipped and bitten off.

I drew a deep breath, and bowed respectfully. "I assure you, Shihan Hirokawa that I have taught men before, and I have been highly successful." Using his title was courtesy on my part. And courtesy was of the utmost importance in traditional dojos. "My students are outstanding, as my instructor has stated in his letter."

He frowned magnificently. I could see why his students had such a great respect and fear of him. "I have a female instructor for the children's classes. She also teaches the female students. Men learn from men. I do not have an opening for you, Miss Hampton. I am sorry that you have wasted your time." *Like hell you are.*

He was through talking. He wasted no more of his own time with being polite. He bowed and turned his back on me, and I stood there feeling like a fool for even bothering. I put my papers away and clicked my briefcase closed. *Oo-kay. That went well.*

I smiled ruefully as I thought of what my own instructor would have to say to this hard-boiled traditionalist. Knowing Matasi Kanegawa, it most likely would not be stated gently. I made a point of thanking the man for his consideration, forcing him to turn unwillingly and acknowledge me one last time before I turned and walked out of the dojo. I went back to my car, at the far edge the parking lot, deep in thought.

Why the hell had I come here, anyway? I should have known better. My career as a traditional martial artist had been greatly narrowed by the unseen fetters of martial arts gender-bias. Why should I have expected Shihan Hirokawa to be any different?

It had been so long since I'd even worn my gi, I wondered if it would still fit. I had grown soft. I sorely missed being involved in the one thing that I had loved more than anything for almost as long as I could remember. I sighed and swallowed the tightness that caught at my throat. Shaking off the urge to throw a very unladylike tantrum in the parking lot, I fumbled blindly in my bag for my car keys. I managed to find them in the bottom of my cluttered bag, and I sank into the driver's side seat and drew another deep sigh. The old frustration began to well in me once more. I had come a long way in the past fourteen years, and yet it seemed as if I hadn't advanced one damned step in the male-dominated world of the traditional Japanese martial arts.

I had begun karate lessons in a class at the New Haven Community Adult School, and I had very quickly learned that I enjoyed the hard work and focused exercise almost more than I enjoyed breathing. I felt completely free, despite the hard discipline.

I had been in prison (or so it felt) for the past months of my young life, for when my father had died, I was the only one who could take care of my totally helpless female stepparent.

Karate had been like a sudden release, a fresh, moisture-laden breeze blowing across my parched existence.

I'd soon learned that taking community school classes led nowhere, and so I'd decided to take the plunge after school ended that summer. I had the summer free (if you didn't count that afternoon job at Daniels' Quik Mart). I'd taken a good chunk of my hard-earned savings from the prior summer's job, and I'd walked into the only martial arts school in New Haven that didn't cost the earth, and asked to speak with the instructor.

Shihan Kanegawa had been a small, energetic man in his mid seventies or early eighties (he would never admit his true age to anyone). He was two inches shorter than I was, but the way he carried himself and the way he met my eyes squarely and honestly as he spoke to me gave the odd impression that he was ten feet tall. I had asked him if he would teach me how to fight—how to do all those great things I had seen on TV and in the movies, and he had told me quietly to go away, turning his back on me and walking away.

I had been thunderstruck. I'd stared after him as he'd turned to walk away, and then anger had risen in me, and I had followed him back to the curtains at the rear of the dojo and had stormed through, demanding to know why he wouldn't teach me. Was it because I was a girl? Did he think I was soft? I will never forget the way he smiled at me, or the words he'd spoken so quietly.

"I teach my students not only how to fight, but how to avoid a fight. I teach them not how to maim and kill, but rather to avoid being maimed or killed. I teach them to have respect for their elders, and those who know more than they do." He had shrugged and sized me up thoughtfully with those amused black eyes. "If you wish to learn all that other crap, you will have to go find somebody else to teach you."

I was hooked. I'd taken my first class that afternoon, and I'd paid in advance for classes for the rest of that summer. I'd gone home to my step-mom and had gotten it with both barrels for wasting money when our finances were so bad after Dad's death.

In case you couldn't tell, we had a rather poor working relationship, she and I. Geraldine (Geri to her friends, but Geraldine to me) was a fluttery clotheshorse with no concept whatever of how to earn a living or how to manage a checkbook without running ten digits in the red. Dad had earned and managed the money, and she had simply used it.

I'd been closing on ten and was already a terrible tomboy. Dad had raised me alone from the time my mother had died, and he wasn't exactly the best mother figure a six-year-old girl could have. He was a great dad, but he really was handicapped in the female stuff department.

I'd had a very special relationship with Dad, but it had sort of deteriorated when Geraldine had stepped into the picture. He'd married her with the idea that a girl of almost ten, soon to become a young lady, needed a woman around the house. Bad idea. Very bad.

Dad had no idea of how much she detested me, thank God. He thought we were the best of pals. Talk about obtuse. I'd become an expert actress. When it had gotten very bad, I went to work weekends, after school, and summers just to have my own spending money.

Then Dad had died in a freak accident. Fortunately for me, Geraldine hadn't ever had the business acumen to have him give her a power of attorney so she could get access to what was left of the insurance trust fund my mother had left for my future. There was still a good amount left. Unfortunately, in his misguided generosity my father had given her control of everything else he possessed in the world.

She ran through his insurance in less than a year, and I truly believe that the only reason she kept me around after his death was to have the regular monthly income from my dad's Social Security survivor's checks to pay the bills with. Of course, it was barely enough to meet her needs, and barely supplemented her new husband's income. Geraldine had recovered from her state of mourning almost instantly upon meeting husband number four at a church-sponsored singles group six months after the funeral.

To make a long story short, I'd turned eighteen, the checks had stopped coming to her, and she'd booted me out of the house, which she now legally owned as his widow, and she told me to go live off my insurance trust fund. Naturally, being job oriented, and already possessing a formidable resume of fast food employment experience, I found myself a job, and I managed to survive, thanks to my insightful and generous instructor, who just happened to have an extra room over his dojo, and a fortuitous opening for a part time secretary and night janitor.

I managed quite well, in fact, paying for my lessons and my room with odd jobs and secretarial work for Shiha Kanegawa, and paying for my college tuition and my groceries with a part time bookkeeping job at the local supermarket. By the time I was twenty-two, I'd graduated with a BS degree and the remainder of my mom's insurance trust fund still intact.

The L.A. job offer had come as a complete surprise. I'd never expected to be sent to Los Angeles at company expense to take over the accounting department of Central California Foods. It had meant a hefty salary raise, and, of course, a lot more responsibility. 'A true challenge,' Matasi had called it. I hadn't wanted to take it, at first, but he'd insisted that I spread my wings and do what must be done. I shouldn't worry about an old man. I should live my own life.

To be completely honest, Matasi Kanegawa was the only thing that had kept me from leaving New Haven after college. He was my dearest friend, and he'd become a surrogate father of sorts. And I would miss him terribly.

I smiled as I thought back to the gossip that had run rampant about the shameless relationship between the 80-year-old karate teacher and his extremely young live-in assistant. Small minds had seen an illicit and scandalous affair in our close and unusual relationship. Only Matasi and I knew that I was the daughter he had never had; the child his wife had never been able to give him.

When I first started classes, he had been understandably skeptical. *Girls had no feel for the martial arts.* Women were afraid of being hit. Females got bored and dropped out as soon as they tired of the novelty, or when it got tough. And, of course, that good old machismo sex-bias

thingy. He had been grudgingly impressed by my stubbornness and my will to stick it out. And after I had stuck it out long enough to outlast several of his newer male students, he had grudgingly admitted to me that I was a complete surprise to him. My strength and my tenacity had impressed him. He seemed to understand my desire to do something that was not considered "feminine." He accepted me as I was.

It was after I'd moved into his spare room that he began to treat me differently from his other students. He was not nicer. On the contrary, he was demanding and tyrannical, often to the point of making me want to cry. He'd demanded that I keep up my school grades, my part time work, and the jobs he gave me, on top of daily practice sessions and lessons of not less than three hours. He was a totally different person toward me.

I'd taken it in silence as long as I could. Finally, I'd stopped him after class one night, and I'd asked him point blank why he was being so harsh with me. Was it because I wasn't good enough? Was I slipping in my lessons? Was he angry with me for some reason? Was it the fact that he was beginning to think me unfit for the next rank I was to achieve: my black belt? He'd gazed at me thoughtfully for some time before he spoke, and when he did; his words had floored me.

"I would not treat my daughter as I would just any other student. It is only right for me to expect my daughter to be better, stronger, and wiser than my other students. After all, it is to her that I will eventually pass on all the knowledge my teacher gave to me. I have great expectations of you, my child. You are to be the bearer of my legacy. You must be fit to pass it along."

I bit my lip as I thought of his words to me when I'd left for Los Angeles. He hadn't gone with me to the airport. He hated partings. He'd put his hands on my shoulders, and he'd whispered huskily, "Take care, Daughter. Do your best work no matter what the job is, and do not forget a cantankerous old man."

I'd ignored his protest and had hugged him, my tears soaking his shirt as I'd told him how very much he'd meant to me. I'd never done anything like that before, and I'd expected him to be angry, to tell me not to make a fuss. But instead, he'd smiled at me brilliantly, and he'd said softly, "You have learned at last, my daughter, to show that you are as softly human and gentle as you are strong and focused. Remember that life is not all the dojo and the workplace. Leave some room in your mind and heart for someone to share. Somewhere there is a man who will earn your love and respect. He is coming soon, Daughter. You must not shut him out. Without the joys of true love, there can be no true happiness."

He'd smiled at me, and had handed me the letter of recommendation, *just in case* I decided that I wanted to teach again. "Just as a hobby," he'd said quietly, knowing that the job I'd accepted would be highly taxing and demanding of my time and energies. I'd taken it and had kissed his papery cheek, and left for the airport. I hadn't seen him since that afternoon.

I called him from time to time to give him updates on my job and my situation. He had recently begun to sound a little older each time I called, a little less energetic, but then, he was going on ninety. I couldn't exactly expect him to be bouncing around and acting frisky. He'd closed the school in September, being too "busy" to teach any longer. He didn't wish to burden

me with his health, so he simply told me he'd decided it was time to retire and enjoy his bonsai garden. Of course, wanting him to be indestructible, I chose to believe him.

The ad in the classifieds had made me realize just how desperately I'd missed it all. My job was extremely well paid, but demanded an average of sixty hours a week of my time. I was burning out. So, recalling the lesson Matasi had taught me about saving energy for things that I thought were important, I'd delegated some of my workload, and had decided to try for this part time job. I shrugged and laughed at myself. I fought off the disappointment. There would be other opportunities. I just had to keep looking.

I was about to turn the key in the ignition, when a quietly husky voice made me nearly jump out of my skin.

"Miss Hampton, please wait a moment."

Chapter Two

I turned, glancing up at the man standing beside my car, leaning down to speak to me through the open window. I thought that he was Japanese at first, but from the size of him, I decided on second thought that he was more than likely Korean. A closer look at his face as he removed his reflective dark glasses confirmed my second impression. He smiled politely at me as I rolled my window down the rest of the way and said, "Yes?"

I never usually pay more than scant attention to men ... it's safer not to. But I couldn't help but pay attention to this one. He was tall for an Asian man. Judging by the way he was bending down to talk to me, he stood over six feet tall. I inhaled slowly as I lifted my wide eyes up the long length of that incredibly ripped body, and noted the way he had been assessing me, as well. My gut clenched as he returned his dark eyes to my face, and his smile curved wickedly as if he damn well knew the effect he was having on me.

He dropped down onto his haunches beside the car, and his eyes were almost level with mine as he said quietly, "I would like to see your letter of recommendation, if you don't mind."

I frowned. How had he...? I hadn't noticed him inside when I had shown it to Hirokawa. So how the hell had he known my name? My wary hesitation made him grin, and my thoughts went a trifle haywire. And so did parts lower down my anatomy.

Holy shit! The man was absolutely the most intense, dangerously sensual male I'd ever laid eyes on.

I swallowed the dryness in my throat and fought to control a sudden glandular reaction that I'd never experienced before. Total and consuming lust. Oh, yeah. This man was dangerous. I hesitated, unable to frame a reply.

"I'm sorry. You have no idea who I am, of course." He extended his hand and I reached out of the car to take it as he said in quiet amusement, "I'm James Rhee. I'm Shihan Hirokawa's business partner." His hand was calloused, hard, and warm. A shot of something akin to 100 gigawatts of rampant electricity zapped up my arm to my heart, curled around my chest, and then zoomed unerringly straight to my suddenly wet, clenched pussy.

"Oh." My physical reaction must have been visible, because he laughed softly. I felt oddly breathless and uncertain beneath that intense dark stare, and I tugged my hand free. "Um—of course you may see my letter." I opened my case with trembling hands and drew it out, handing it to him through the open window.

As he stood up and looked at it, I opened my car door and shimmied out, feeling that it was awfully rude to be sitting in my car while he was trying to talk with me. As I rose to my full height, I realized how big he truly was. At 5' 7" I was used to looking down on most Asian men. I was craning my neck up to read his expression. *And the man had absolutely no concept of personal space.*

Instead of stepping back and giving me room to take a deep breath, he remained planted like an oak right where he stood, making it impossible for me to not feel the throbbing heat sifting off that Greek-God body and enveloping my senses in the heady scent of sandalwood and hot male. He glanced at me, and I noted his gaze taking another slow detour down my businesslike slack suit before returning to my face. My woman-senses went to full red alert status. *Dear God. What a hunk.*

"I'm afraid my Japanese is pretty rusty. Can you translate?" he shifted slightly, his hard, mouth-watering chest brushing my shoulder as he handed me back the letter, and I chewed the corner of my lower lip as I ended up being the one to take a cautious step backward to sanity and safety. I avoided his eyes, opening the letter again and glancing at it, flushing warmly at the praise Matasi had heaped on me in the letter.

I felt uncomfortable translating the letter as written, so I edited out the more effusive compliments and the part about my being his finest student. I gave him only the facts about my rank and my years of study, and the part about my capabilities as a teacher. I refolded the letter, but he reached for it again, nodding with a slow smile as he opened it and his eyes ran over it again. I had the sneaky feeling that he could read the damned letter as well as I could, and I blushed again as he glanced back up to meet my eyes. *His eyes were sooo damned sexy.*

"You left a few things out," he murmured as he handed me the letter back. "When can you start?"

I must have looked comic, with my mouth sagging open and my eyes shocked, but he was polite enough not to tell me so. "Start? You ... you mean I have the job? Without even showing you anything?"

His eyes were glittering black as he said softly, "I've seen everything I need to see, and the recommendation of a man as highly respected as Matasi Kanegawa is good enough for me."

"But ... *I'm a woman!*" I blurted, totally confused now.

His eyes detoured down my tailored suit again, and he nodded as they returned to my face. "I can see that." I felt as if he had physically touched me with those incredibly unnerving black eyes. My chest was about to implode.

I blushed hotly, and shook myself back to sanity. "Um—I'm just a trifle confused. Shihan Hirokawa just told me he wasn't hiring any female instructors."

"He isn't. I am. I have a school of my own in Hollywood. Are you interested?" *Sweet Jesus—was I interested? Was he frigging joking?*

I recall nodding numbly, unable to tear my eyes away from his. For just that moment, I thought that I was drowning, unable to catch my breath, and then he broke my breathless trance by handing me a card and saying in a suddenly businesslike tone, "Excellent. This is the address. You don't need to bring your own equipment, and I furnish the gi. You wear what? A size four?" His eyes moved over me again, and I swallowed.

"I wear a five. My legs are too long for a four. I just take the waist in." *I was babbling.*

"I have someone who'll make you one to order. Come in early and she'll measure you."

Ooooh—the man had a voice like melted butter.

Then I realized that he'd just said "early." I quickly asked, "This is part time, right?"

He lifted one dark winged brow and said quietly, "That all depends on you doesn't it?"

"What time is 'early'?"

"The school opens at 7:30 a.m. I'd say coming in at 6:30 would give Maria time to cut and sew your gi."

I blinked, my eyes opening like saucers. "Um—I have a regular job I start at 8:00."

"How much does it pay?" he asked offhandedly.

"Well—very well." I replied.

"Then you'd better keep it. Good jobs are hard to find." He let his eyes move slowly over me, leaving a trail of shivers and heat in their wake. "If you decide to show up, I'll see you tomorrow at 6:30. If you don't..." he shrugged eloquently.

I watched him stride back across the parking lot, my eyes glued to his lean back and those long muscular legs encased in jeans and boots, and I drew a deep, shaky breath. Oh. My. God. He had such a walk! What would that body look like naked in my bed? Forget the bed—naked anywhere.

I found my brain, switched it back on, and chewed my lower lip. I couldn't possibly take a full time job that paid what a martial arts instructor made. Most made only a small hourly amount or a commission on the lessons they taught, if lucky. Part time would make it more of a badly needed hobby—but I got the definite feeling he would expect me to be there full time.

I watched until he stepped back inside the dojo, and I shook my head, calming my leaping pulses. I found myself wanting this job very badly. Yet, I would be a complete fool to give up \$70,000.00 a year for this.

I stood for several minutes like I was shell-shocked, wondering whether it was the prospect of getting a job doing something I loved, or if it'd been the way my vitals had jumped through the roof that made the offer so deliciously attractive. Probably both. And then I found myself trying desperately to figure a way to do both—at least temporarily. My mind worked madly on every angle.

I had ten weeks of annual leave coming. I hadn't taken a vacation since I'd come to California. I'd somehow never managed to find time. I exhaled slowly. I supposed I could have

Marie cover for me for a couple of weeks. I could get a couple of temps in to take over her books for a couple of weeks.

I didn't want to lose this opportunity, for some unfathomable reason. I wanted it badly. I was the boss of my department. I could do as I pleased, as long as the job got done. *I could do this.*

* * * *

I called Matasi that night. He answered after half a dozen rings, and he sounded half-asleep. "I'm sorry if I woke you up." I chewed the corner of my lower lip. "I forget there's a four-hour time difference. Shall I call back tomorrow?"

"Of course not, Daughter. If you called, it must be important." His quiet assertion that it was important enough to wake up for made me smile.

"I got a teaching job. I'll start tomorrow in Hollywood. Do you know a guy called James Rhee?" I asked, gazing at the card he had given me.

A moment of intense silence followed. "I might know a man by that name. Describe him."

"Well, he's about 6' 1", weighs about 180-190, I think. Small scar across his jaw. Very ... um ... solidly built. Looks like he's in his mid 30's. Very good-looking man. Has a nice voice. He seems to know you."

The voice on the other end of the line chuckled softly. "I believe we may have met."

"Well, I'll be working for him for the next few weeks, while I'm on vacation from CCF. I don't think I'll keep the job, though. It'd mean I'd have to leave Central, and that's an awfully good paying position. I'd have to be nutty to give up my current salary to work teaching karate. I'll never make much doing that." I seemed to be trying to convince myself instead of him.

"True, Daughter, but what is money without the joy of knowing that you are doing something you truly love?"

I lifted my brows. He always had that nasty little habit of shredding my excuses. "Paying bills is pretty important, too."

"What bills have you that cannot be paid on half of your present salary?"

"Rent," I quipped dryly. "Utilities are through the roof. This is California, not New Haven."

"Thank you for reminding me. The decision is yours, my child, but do not eliminate the possibilities before they present themselves, eh?"

I drew a shaking breath. "I won't."

"You will. You always do."

"I won't, honest." *He was right. I always did.*

"Very well. Please tell James that I wish him well, and hope that he can convince you to stop killing yourself in a dry, thankless job, and take one which will give you far more personal satisfaction."

I was about to hang up, then I blurted quickly, "Does James Rhee read Japanese?"

He hesitated and then laughed again. "Of course."

I hung up slowly, drawing in a deep breath. So Rhee had been able to read my letter. That meant that he'd been testing me, seeing if I added things that weren't there to make myself look better than I was. I shook my head. The man was smart. Many people might pad the truth, thinking that the other party couldn't understand what they were reading. Lucky I hadn't. I went into my bathroom and brushed my teeth, and washed my face again, before padding back to bed. 6:30 came early. I hoped that my jumbled thoughts would allow me to sleep.

* * * *

Dark eyes were staring at me. Wanting. Lean hands circled my waist, pulling me close against a body that sent shudders of hedonistic delight through me as he bent to capture my lips with his own, his kiss hot, deep, hungry. He pressed his tongue between my lips, seeking compliance and pleasure. My lips opened. Suddenly ravenous to touch him, I tugged his T-shirt up from the waist of his tight jeans, and he allowed me to drag it off over his head, leaving his chest and shoulders bare to my hungry eyes—sleek, rippling, and powerful with hard muscle.

Tantalizing—the hot scent of sandalwood and man curled through my senses and left me simmering with sweet, delicious need.

His body was bare to my seeking hand, so delicious and smooth. Amazingly beautiful for a man's body, and hot! So damned hot. Decadent and wicked beneath my questing fingertips.

His mouth moved slowly to my throat as I ran my palms over his ribs and hard-muscled back, wanting, needing, seeking—my breath catching with each slow, delicious touch of his mouth on my hot skin. He knew how to make a woman hot, needy. Hungry for him.

He devoured my throat, his tongue laving my skin, drinking in the sheen of sweat that his searing heat was generating on me. I was clinging to his body, straining my hips against his bulging jeans. Murmuring pleas against his thick black hair as he kissed the hollow between my breasts, licked the swell above my bra as he breathed words of need, desire, and encouragement.

Needing his mouth on my bare skin, I arched as he dragged off my top, his fingers then seeking the front closure of my bra. Oh, yeah. How marvelous his mouth felt on my breast, taking in the puffy nipple, tugging hungrily as his hands cupped and lifted my breasts, his hot tongue swirling, tasting—demanding—and I begged him for more.

I wrapped my legs around his lean hips, pressing my wet, throbbing sex against his bulging fly. Denim against hot, damp linen—need pressed against raging need, and I wanted, desperately needed, ached for him. I felt his hands on my ass as he pulled me against his body with a deep growl of need.

Orgasmic pleasure, throbbing pleasure, mind-bending pleasure, was at my fingertips as I reached for his belt buckle, tearing at it wildly to get to him. And when I freed him from the denim, he was huge. Rigidly full with his throbbing blood as I circled him with my hands, squeezed, milked, begged incoherently against his mouth as he reclaimed my lips with a searing, hungry kiss. So close—so damned close, the feel of his cock rubbing against my thin linen slacks, his wet mouth nibbling my shoulder. Oh, why the hell were my pants still on?

Throbbing, rising, wanting, needing. Rubbing madly against his hardness, wishing, crying out in need.

* * * *

My alarm brought me up from my marvelous dream panting as if I'd run a mile. I glared blearily at the clock, cursing it to hell as I slammed my hand down on the button to stop the raucous noise. I flopped back against my pillows, waiting for my amazingly aroused body to cease and desist.

Holy hell. That man had certainly made an impression on my libido.

Chapter Three

I'd expected to be the only person there at that ungodly hour, but when I arrived, I saw two men sitting on a car outside in the parking lot, conversing quietly as I pulled in and parked. I glanced at my watch. I was a few minutes early. I got out of my car, and their eyes swiveled toward me curiously. I was almost to the door when one of the men, who appeared to be about twenty or twenty-one, hopped off the fender of his car and came sauntering toward me, his dark eyes slipping up and down my tailored slack suit. "Helloooo, baby. You lookin' for me?"

I glanced at him coolly, and my smile was perfunctory and polite. "I'm looking for Shihan Rhee."

He lifted his dark brows and cocked his head to one side. "Well, now, the boss isn't down yet, but maybe I can help you with somethin'. I'm his right hand man. Name's Jose." I managed to look suitably impressed, as "Jose" crossed his powerful arms across his amazingly well muscled chest and walked around me as I stood on the sidewalk, his eyes moving over me assessingly. "You wantin' lessons, honey? I'm the best. I can teach you."

I pursed my lips and calmed my urge to whomp him on the head with my bag. "Tempting, but no thank you. I'm here to work."

His eyes widened. "I didn't know the boss had hired a new secretary. I can see why. You've got great qualifications." Those dark eyes slipped over my suit, and he ran his tongue over his lower lip.

I managed not to choke with laughter as I said quietly, "I'm supposed to see Maria at 6:30. Can you please tell me where the employee's entrance is?"

He glanced at his watch, and I noted that the other man was now shifting off his car, and gravitating across to stand beside me, too. "Ain't any employee entrance, sweet thing."

The other man leaned his muscular arm across Jose's shoulder and grinned lecherously down at me. "If you wanna learn karate, we'll teach you everything we know, right, *mi amigo*?" He grinned as his friend said something in Spanish, and they laughed. I knew just enough Spanish to know that what he was offering to teach me had nothing at all to do with karate.

I was saved from having to form a fitting reply as a car pulled into the lot. Maria had arrived just just in time. The woman struggled from the car and waddled to the door. She was almost as broad as she was tall, and she looked very unhappy with something. Her dark eyes swept me critically as she inserted the key in the door, and she said, "You must be Lisa Hampton. The boss won't be down 'til 7:00. You come with me."

She opened the door, and I followed her into the darkened building. She flicked some switches on the wall, and I glanced about at one of the best-equipped martial arts schoolrooms I'd

ever seen. I felt a slow, masculine hand on my rear, and I didn't even have to look to know which one it was.

Maria shot me a strange look as she relocked the front door, and gestured me to follow her to the back of the dojo, and down a long hallway. She talked as she waddled, and I had to hurry to keep up despite her short legs and large body.

"I can't believe he hired a woman to work alongside those piranhas. Hope you know how to keep your feet on the floor and your head out of the clouds, honey, 'cause those guys will take you for one hell of a ride. Don't believe a word they say to you. They eat little girls for breakfast and spit out the bones."

"Thanks for the warning, but I'm not exactly a little girl."

She rolled her eyes and gave a bark of laughter. "That's even worse. Be careful. They're like a bunch of horny tom cats," she grinned good-naturedly. She opened the door to a sewing room, and I watched her bustle around, find a tape measure, some pins, and a few odds and ends. She came back to plop a small stool in front of me. I stepped onto it at her gesture, and she waddled around me like a mother hen.

"Okay, arms out." She measured me from top to bottom, and made notes. In a surprisingly short time she said, "I'll need you for a final fitting in about an hour. There's a coffee room down the hall. Make a pot, will you?" I nodded, leaving her to her work as she pulled a couple of rolls of suede-soft canvas material from a shelf and began to cut.

* * * *

I found the coffee room without any problems. It was a mess, so I spent a few minutes cleaning it up. I was just pouring some cold water into the coffee maker when my nostrils caught the tangy scent of recently showered man. My skin tingled oddly, as if sensitized to his eyes moving over me.

"You're here." It was a statement rather than a question. "You've seen Maria?" He opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of orange juice, and poured a glass.

I drew a deep breath. He was wearing a second-skin T-shirt that left no rippling muscle unseen, and I tried *so* very hard not to stare. He was even better built than Jose. "Yes." My reply was strangled.

He put the orange juice away and drained the glass he'd just poured. "You've met the guys?"

I pursed my lips. "Just two of them."

He laughed. "There are six instructors in all—now seven, with you. All very young and very eager. You'll get to meet the rest later." He rinsed the glass out and put it upside down in the drainer. "I see you did KP this morning. Thanks. The guys are supposed to take turns."

"How'd you know it was me?"

"The glass was clean," he replied. "You've seen the place?"

"No. Maria took me into her sewing room, and I just got away to make some coffee."

"Okay, I'll give you the fifty-cent tour."

"You have a fantastic setup here. How many students?" I was desperately trying to get my thoughts off his body and onto business. It was not easy.

"We have two hundred and fifty students, most of them a small but select clientele of people who either want to improve their chances of landing a role in this film or that, or to improve the quality of their own art. We cater to clients who want to learn specifics fast, or who want to pick up the extras without delay. They pay us well to give them just what it takes to look impressive. You think you can handle such a commercial concept?"

"You keep this place running and pay six instructors, having just 250 students?" I lifted my brows.

He grinned at my disbelief. "Our rates are \$800.00 a month for up to eight hours a week of group instruction. Private lessons are extra." His tone was matter of fact and quiet. "Needless to say, my partner shudders at my practices, but he certainly likes the money."

I nearly swallowed my tongue. "\$800.00? *A month?*"

He nodded. "An instructor receives a base salary, plus commissions on private lessons. Private lessons are \$180.00 an hour. The instructor keeps half. We try to schedule at least three private lessons daily and one group per day for each instructor. To earn your base salary, you'll be asked to teach four group classes a week in the big classroom."

I stared at him. "Your students must be made of money to pay such rates."

"We're the best. We give our customers exactly what they need and want. We make stars here. We tutor actors and actresses in the martial arts. People pay high prices to get the best." He let his dark gaze move down my suit. "I can guarantee you'll make one hell of a lot more than just basic salary. There's a market for what we sell here." His dark eyes traveled slowly over my flushed face. "We sell results. We sell our skills, and despite their youth and their lack of good manners, my instructors are the best. Each one of them is a world class champion competitor or fighter." His smile was quietly enigmatic.

I lifted my brows, feeling oddly like a fish out of water. "Then what am I doing here? I haven't been in a competition anywhere. I have no world championship titles, and I certainly have never taught the way you do. I don't know if I *can* teach that way." My stomach was still tight. I felt like I was babbling again.

"Our students don't come for a full training course. Most come asking for specifics. Only a very few are beginners." He shrugged, and I nearly swallowed my tongue as those massive shoulders rippled under that incredibly tight shirt. "Many of them already have advanced rank. We tutor according to each student's ability. About half of our students have brown belts or higher in some style or other. And in answer to your first question, you are here because you have the look my students expect in my teachers."

I blinked, my cheeks red. "Look? What look is that?"

He smiled. "You walk like a tigress and look like an angel. You have that aura of extreme danger lurking just below the calm surface, deceptively sweet and beautiful, yet fully capable of inflicting extreme damage when necessary."

I flushed a deep crimson. "Well. No one ever told me that before." I drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "So you hired me more for what I look like than for what I can teach?" My stomach was still trying to launch itself through my throat. Damn it. Why was I so affected by every look and smile from him?

He laughed. "Of course not, but only one woman in ten thousand has your combination of looks and abilities, and I have the feeling that you could make a great deal of money working here, if you wanted to."

Shaking away the teenybopper infatuation, I gazed at him quietly. "I've never taught this way before. I don't think I can do it."

"You'll never know until you've tried." His dark eyes measured my expression quietly.

"I genuinely don't think I can teach that way."

"I think you can."

I shook my head adamantly. "I teach traditional values and techniques. I teach from the ground up, and I don't feel comfortable showing advanced techniques to people who simply wish to impress a director with their karate skills." *Oh, God, don't look at me like that.* My scintillating dream rose to haunt me.

He gazed at me for a long moment, before saying quietly, "If I came to you and asked you to show me the right way to hold a spear, would you do it?" he asked.

I frowned. "That's different. You have control and skill, and I would know that you wouldn't hurt yourself or another person with what I taught you." He was too damned persuasive. I was losing ground, and I hadn't even tried to climb.

"It's no different. Our students are learning a skill to use in their work." He ran a lean hand through his thick black hair. "Like the ballet instructor who teaches balance and poise at a modeling school. Those women will never become ballerinas, but those skills will enhance their chances of looking good in their chosen profession."

I gazed at him quietly. "I never really thought about it like that." I ran my hand through my own hair. "You've made your point." My voice told him I wasn't conceding gracefully.

He grinned in a manner that left me breathless, and he said quietly, "A woman who can concede a point—that's refreshing."

I watched numbly as his strong back retreated down the hallway toward the coffee room again, and I was left to find the sewing room and Maria. I thought I had been abandoned, but moments after I reached the sewing room, he reappeared with two cups of steaming black coffee.

Chapter Four

Maria took a few whipstitches in the hem of my pant leg, and then cut the thread. "There. How does that feel?" she asked as she picked up her sewing box and put it on the counter.

"It feels like it was made for me." I laughed, shaking my head.

She glanced at Rhee. "Does it pass inspection?"

He eyed it for a minute, then nodded. "Okay, did you bring your own belt?"

"Of course," I said, reaching into my bag and drawing out my well-worn old belt with its four embroidered red stripes.

He nodded, his dark eyes moving over me. "You'll do just fine"

I swept my hair back into a knot at the nape of my neck, and deftly fastened it with a long Japanese ivory pin (actually, an antique ivory chopstick that I'd commandeered from Matasi). "I'm ready. What next?"

He swept me with his gaze, and his lips curved in a devastatingly sexy manner. "Stay away from Jose. He has a weakness for beautiful blondes."

I followed him out of the sewing room and into his office, where he handed me a schedule with three names on it. "Private lessons. Jose was overbooked today, and they couldn't reschedule. Just play it by ear."

"They won't be upset they drew a female instructor?" The names on the list were all male.

"I have the feeling they'll be more than delighted," he replied with a drawl. He opened the door to one of the private studios, and said, "These rooms are all equipped with one way mirrors. See it over there?" he pointed out the wall-sized mirror across the room, and I lifted my brows. "There is a catwalk between them so that I can look in on lessons from time to time. It keeps the boys on their toes, and I can make sure that they don't get into hot water with their female students. And I can keep an eye out for you, in case one of your students decides he wants more than a karate lesson."

I stared drolly at him. "I think I could handle it myself if the eventuality ever arose, but thanks anyway." His chauvinistic attitude had managed to rid me of my girlish flutters.

He smiled at me quietly, and I knew exactly what he was thinking—*until he spoke*.

"I know you're strong, and tough, and intelligent. And I realize that you're quite capable of stopping someone from taking advantage of you, but if you don't mind me at least attempting to spare you the need to do so, I think I will feel much better about it."

"Thank you. I appreciate that." My complete lack of gratitude told him I didn't.

"You're welcome." His smile was almost the undoing of my brand new self-control. I forced my thoughts back into line, and managed to nod as he turned to go. And I stared at his stunning, tight ass as he walked away. *Oh, my.*

* * * *

My first lesson was at 8:00, and once my student got over his shock at being greeted by yours truly instead of Jose, he seemed to be quite willing to accept the fact that I was a qualified instructor. He grinned at me. "Where's Jose?"

"He's overbooked, I understand. I hope you don't mind the last minute replacement." I gave his crisp white gi the once-over, noting his fairly recent black belt. Solid looking. Overly confident. Very good looking. Well aware of it.

"I don't mind at all." His eyes slipped over me, and I drew a deep breath as I counted to ten. "I'll bet you could teach me one hell of a lot more than he could." His voice had dropped to a husky breath.

"I'll bet so, too, but not the way you're thinking," I smiled, as I bowed him in. "I understand you want to work on some fighting moves today."

"With you?"

"With me."

He shook his head, and held up his hands. "I don't want to hurt a woman."

"You won't," I replied. "I hear you have excellent kicks. Let's see you hit me with one."

He laughed a little nervously. "You're kidding, right?"

I lifted one brow and waited.

He licked his lips and took a fighting stance, but before he could even move, I gave him a quick shove, and he staggered sideways, catching his balance. "Whoa. What was that for?" His frown was almost enough to make me smile.

"Your stance sucks. Anyone could knock you off balance, even a hundred and thirty-five pound *woman*."

"Oh, really? Let's see you shove me around now." He settled into a typical strong fighting T, and I swept his front foot just enough to throw his balance off, and before he could recover, I dropped into a scissors and spread his legs like a wishbone, then snapped a kick into his chest, and he came crashing to the mat.

"Holy shit. That was fantastic. Show me how to do that." He was on his feet in one bound, and I shook my head.

"Anyone can learn that. What I want you to learn is to be light—to move quickly—to avoid being swept, tripped, knocked off balance. Got that? If you can't be taken by surprise, and you can't be knocked off balance, you can manage to stay alive, and even in the movies, you can recognize a real martial artist as opposed to a trained monkey."

He nodded, and said, "I think I get it, but you have to show me that stuff. It's good shit."

At the end of the hour, he wasn't ready to go. I told him his lesson was over, and he said, "I'll be right back."

I was wiping the sweat off my face with a soft towel when he came back into the room and said, "I just told Jimmy to set me up for another hour."

* * * *

An hour later, I went out to the office, and found my employer on the phone. He held up his hand to let me know he would be with me in a minute, he finished his conversation, then he turned to glance up at me. "You're off to a good start. You had Lance eating out of your hand."

"I can't believe any one paying a fortune to learn how to do a take down and how to avoid a take down. Is he a millionaire or something?" I hung the towel about my neck, and sank into the thickly upholstered chair opposite his desk.

He lifted his brows. "You don't know who he is? Don't you watch TV?"

I shrugged. "I watch the news and ESPN, sometimes."

"You don't watch soaps." He grinned. "Lance Stevens is the heartthrob of daytime. He makes enough money from what he does to pay for one hell of a lot more than two hours. He was ready to spring for another hour, but his manager got him on the horn and told him he had a script to review."

"Daytime? Oh. No. I suppose I don't watch much TV." I breathed, swabbing the perspiration from my nose with the tip of the towel. "I think the last daytime TV show I watched was in 1995."

"Well, you made a hell of an impression on him. Around here, word of mouth is important. If you could impress him, you'll be in demand."

I glanced at my watch. "At \$80.00 an hour, I wouldn't mind that too much."

"Good, because you have another student waiting, a walk in. She'll tell you all about what she needs."

"She?"

* * * *

"She" was the mother of a fifteen-year-old girl. She began to tell me that her daughter needed to learn how to stop a certain contrary young classmate from harassing her, and how to defend herself from people who stole her coat and money at school. I gazed at the girl for a moment and sensed that she was embarrassed to be here and unwilling to cooperate, but Mom wasn't paying attention. I nodded and smiled, and then I said quietly to the woman, "I teach without audiences. There is a lounge down the hall. Could you wait in there for Hilary?"

The moment Hilary and I were alone she glared at me and said haughtily, "I don't need you to teach me anything. I gave my friggin' coat away. And my lunch money. You can try to teach me, but I won't pay any attention."

"Did the person need it more than you did?"

She eyed me warily. "Is that a trick question?"

"Not at all. Did the person need the coat more than you needed it?"

"Yes."

"Then good for you, but you should have told your mother the truth."

"She wouldn't understand." She crossed her arms across her thin chest and stomped away from me.

"Sometimes people surprise you." I shrugged at our reflections in the mirror.

She shrugged back. "I don't tell her much of what goes on at school. I let her jump to her own conclusions, and she always does. She's good at that."

"Maybe you need to talk to her and make her understand," I said quietly. "Try telling me. It'll be good practice."

She shrugged again, and I walked around so that I was again in front of her. As I met her blue gaze, she drew a deep breath and said, "It's none of your business."

"That's right, it isn't but I think you're very upset about something, and I would like to try to help."

I saw tears welling in her eyes, and she turned away again. "Nobody can help."

"Does your mother beat you?"

She looked at me in surprise. "*Of course not.*"

"Are you pregnant?"

She turned and stared at me. "*No.*"

"Are you dying of some rare disease?"

Her brows knitted. "*Not.*"

"Let me see, if I keep guessing, I might get warm." I sank onto the mat and sat cross-legged, gazing up at her quietly.

"Why do you care?" she snapped.

"Because I can see you're in pain, and I have been taught to care."

"You sound like my mother's shrink," she huffed, blowing a stray strand of hair out of her eyes. "Adults are all alike. You all try to get inside of my head and tell me I'm all screwed up. I hate that."

"I don't believe you're all screwed up. Just a little upset. It usually always helps to talk to someone who doesn't know you from Adam, and who won't try to judge you."

She crossed her arms over her thin chest once again, and she said shakily, "It won't do any good. Nothing will change."

"Yes it will. *You'll* change. You can't change anything or anybody but you. If you change the way you go at something, maybe it'll work out better." I shrugged, lying back and clasping my hands under my head and gazing at the ceiling.

She frowned at me. "Aren't you getting paid to teach me something?"

"Yep, but you don't want to learn."

"What's your name?" she asked, sinking down onto the mat beside me and crossing her legs.

"Lisa." I said as I started to do crunches.

"Why are you exercising?" she frowned in irritation.

"To keep my muscles in shape. I've been pretty lazy lately. Been lying around a lot."

"What does that do?" she asked as she watched me do them.

"Tightens my abs and belly up so I can take a punch without getting hurt."

"You get *punched*?" she eyed me dubiously.

"Sometimes, when I'm not fast enough to avoid it."

"Doesn't it hurt?"

"Sure it does, but that's life. If you teach karate, you get punched," I shrugged, as I finished a set of fifty crunches, and lay back to take a deep breath.

"You really *are* a karate teacher? You don't look like one," she shrugged.

I smiled wryly. "Oh? What does one look like?" I started another set of fifty crunches.

She shrugged, and twirled her hair around her fingertips absently. "I figured a woman who teaches karate would be—you know—sort of macho?"

"Some are, some aren't," I grinned. I finished the second set and did a reverse shoulder roll to get to my feet, moving a couple of steps away to kick the heavy bag with some solid roundhouses. The bag resounded with deep thuds, and the chain shook like the bag was going to drop.

"Wow. How'd you learn to do stuff like that?" she was standing close beside me when I glanced at her, and I shrugged.

"Anyone can learn this, but it takes hard work. Most people start this when they're little."

"When did you start?"

"When I was about your age."

"How old are you?" she asked, and I knew she was going to open up in a few more minutes.

"I turn twenty-seven next Saturday. Getting up there, huh?"

She watched me as I threw a few punches, and then I heard her ask softly, "Do you think I'm ugly?"

I glanced at her, my eyes moving over her face and body critically. "Nope. Just a little out of shape," I shrugged. I decided to take the bull by the horns here. I wiped sweat from my forehead with the back of one wrist, and I said, "Since we're not really doing a lesson here, would you mind if I dumped this canvas jacket? I feel like I'm melting." I pulled the gi top out of my belt and shrugged out of it, dropping it nonchalantly onto the mat beside the heavy bag. Her eyes widened, and I tried not to grin as I did a few combinations on the bag.

"*God, but you are ripped,*" she said with her eyes wide. "I wish I looked like that."

I made a wry face. "Actually, I sort of think I'm too skinny. I don't keep much fat anymore. I used to have a pretty good shape until I started working out a lot. You lose all those nice curves."

She laughed. "You think you don't have a good shape? My God. I'd kill to have your shape. You look great." she shook her head.

"Oh, I don't know. Nobody ever thinks they look very good. Have you noticed that?" I did a light leaping change kick. "I guess you could get into shape if you worked out a little, but I don't know—karate is sort of risky. It's rough, and most girls can't handle it. They wimp out. Guys don't believe we can do it as well as they can."

She looked like she really wanted to try something, and I gave her the opportunity by saying, "I guess I could show you a few things—see if you can really do it, if you want. It's your dime."

"Well—" she shrugged, "I guess it might be sort of fun."

The rest of the hour flew. She found out she liked exercise, and she was sweating, too, by the time her mother came and popped her head back into the room. I noted the shuttered expression that came down over her face when her mother appeared, and she said in a drawling tone, "I told you I didn't want to learn anything."

I shrugged and glanced at her mom. "She's a tough nut to crack. I'm afraid you wasted your money. Maybe later on she'll want to try karate." I pulled my gi top back on, and said to the girl, "Well, I enjoyed your company. Come back and see me sometime."

I shook her hand, and smiled at her. She wiped a drop of perspiration from her forehead, and then said too softly for her mother to hear, "I'll be back next week, but I'm not telling her that."

I shrugged, and said in a very soft voice, "If you want to do this, you can't do it once a week. Tell you what. I go to the spa every other day. O'Mally's on Sepulveda. You show up about 7:00 tomorrow, and I'll really give you a workout."

"Really?" she blinked.

"Really."

* * * *

When she was gone, I glanced at my watch. I had another hour before my noon lesson, and I was hungry. I untied my belt and hung it around my neck, and headed for the bathroom. I was just stepping back out of the ladies' loo when James Rhee's voice made me jump, and I turned to frown at him.

"You have got to stop sneaking up on me like that. You could get hurt."

"You have a regular—every Wednesday at 10:00," he smiled.

"The kid?"

"The kid. You seem to have the golden touch."

"No. I just listen well," I shrugged. "I don't think she'll be learning karate as much as she'll be learning to deal with that mother of hers."

"I take it you don't know who *that mother of hers* is, do you?" he shook his head at my hopeless lack of knowledge of the elite clientele he served.

"You're right. I haven't the foggiest."

"Ella Wainwright has had two academy award nominations, and three Emmys. She's one hell of a high powered lady," he said as we walked along the hall toward the coffee room. "She seemed to be favorably impressed that you managed to get through to Hilary."

"If she used less of that high power on her own kid, *she* might get through to her," I breathed.

"I see we have a crusader here," he smiled as we stepped into the coffee room, and I grinned at him. I was almost able to conceal my drool at this point.

"Yep," I replied, as I reached for the coffee pot and a clean cup.

"Pour me one, too," he said as he picked up the phone on the wall and dialed a number. "Chun, this is Jim. Send over some Chinese—the usual—yeah—enough for two."

Ignoring the feeling that I was his waitress, I poured two cups, and handed him his as I went over to sit at the well polished Formica topped table. He sat opposite me, and he let his eyes move over the opening of my gi top as I stirred a teaspoon of sugar into my cup. I met his gaze, trying not to swallow my tongue at the sudden acceleration of my heart rate, and he smiled. "You're quite a surprise, Lisa," he said quietly.

"Oh? How so?" My voice was almost normal.

"You are good with people. You are good at what you do. And, you are a good teacher."

"Why is that a surprise?" Frustration must have shown in my eyes.

"It is a surprise because most women with your looks are far too much like Ella Wainwright, self centered and basically uncaring." His words made me blink and stare at him.

"*My looks*? Pardon me, but I do possess a mirror, and I don't exactly find my looks all that wonderful." I sipped my coffee.

"So you told Hilary," he smiled.

I lifted my brows. My mouth went dry. "*You were spying...*"

"I was *observing*. You did well with the girl, and you *will* succeed in teaching her karate as well as self-respect. I thought that your method of getting her interested in trying was—*exceptional*," his lips curved, and I blushed.

"I'm glad you approve." How much had he seen and heard? I didn't like to work out in front of an audience, especially a male audience, in anything quite that brief. I had done it mainly to show the girl that karate was a good way to stay fit, and I knew that I had a well-muscled body. *I hadn't figured I was giving a strip tease show.*

He took a swallow of coffee, and he said quietly, "I'd keep my gi top on around Jose, though, if I were you. I seriously doubt he could keep his hands to himself if he ever saw you in your skivvies."

My face went bright red, and I glared at him. "I'll try to remember that you spy. I only did that to show Hilary that exercise can keep a female body strong, too."

"I tried not to look, really." He chuckled softly, and I wanted to give him a finger poke to the eyes.

Just as I was finishing my cup, Jose walked into the coffee room, and his eyes widened at the sight of me in my working clothes. "Whoo-ee—and I thought she was your new laptop," he grinned at his boss, who eyed him thoughtfully.

"Miss Hampton is our newest instructor, Jose. Lisa, this is Jose Hernandez. He is harmless enough if you don't turn your back on him."

I smiled grimly. "I found that out already."

Jose looked genuinely hurt, and I laughed at his expression. "It wasn't me. It was Vince. I would never insult a fellow black belt."

"Unless you thought she was a laptop," I shook my head at him. He grinned slowly, and I felt a deep tingling at the look in those dark eyes. *He was dangerous*. He was about to say something else, but the door opened, and a man came in carrying an armful of bags, and I caught the heavenly aroma of Szechwan.

"You spring for lunch, boss?" Jose looked at the bags hopefully as Rhee signed the tab.

"For Lisa, yes. For you, no."

"I guess that means 'get the hell out and leave me alone with the gorgeous blonde'," Jose sighed, and he vanished from the room, closing the door behind him.

I felt warm color rise in my cheeks, and I tried not to laugh as Rhee smiled and said softly, "He got that one right."

Chapter Five

At four o'clock, I was ready to crash and burn. Every body part I owned was sore or aching. The last thing I needed or wanted was to have that man see me this sweaty and bedraggled. No such luck. I was headed for the showers when James Rhee leaned out of his office and said, "See me before you leave."

I showered and changed, and headed for the office. I drew a reinforcing breath. Was I going to get fired over spending half of a class period laughing and talking with the student who suffered from ADHD? As I stepped inside, he handed me a sheaf of papers and nodded for me to sit. I obeyed and glanced at the papers. There were tax withholding forms, insurance papers, and some other odds and ends. I wasn't going to get reamed. "Does this mean I'm officially hired?"

"It means you are officially hired, unless you still want to hang onto that accounting job." He was all business, which helped me manage to remain calm in the presence of all that marvelous muscle.

"Let's see how I do the rest of this week. You may want to get rid of me by Friday." *Oh, please don't stare at me with those sexy dark eyes again.*

"Here's tomorrow's schedule." He handed me the sheet, and I lifted my brows.

"Lance wants *another* two hour lesson?" I lifted my brows.

"He seems to have taken a real shine to you for some reason," he replied cryptically as he sank back into his chair and turned to his computer screen. "Chang wants a couple of days off, so you'll be getting his students tomorrow and Friday. He has three private lessons a day. You'll also take his group lesson tomorrow at two. See you at half past six."

Dismissed again. Why the hell was I panting over a man who had absolutely no manners, and made me feel like wallpaper?

* * * *

I drove home slowly, and realized that we had actually gotten through that last conversation without my vivid imagination slowly stripping the clothes off the man. Maybe I was actually getting past that instant glandular thing. I sure hoped so, because he was about as friendly as a cactus when he finished talking.

Too dead tired to eat much more than a cup of soup, I fell into my bed wearily, and I tossed restlessly, awakening once or twice—and when I finally dropped into deep sleep, I dreamed—

I felt his hands on my waist. I turned into his kiss as he dragged my blouse from my waistband and left his lips only long enough to let him drag my blouse off over my head. His mouth

was narcotic. His tongue was driving me wild to feel other parts of his amazing body moving in and out so seductively, and his hands—oh, dear God—his hands! Calloused, hot, knowing. On my breasts, my waist, my waistband as he tore my linen slacks off and tossed them over his shoulder.

Shivering—shuddering, gasping as skin to skin he consumed my mouth. My throat. My shoulders. My breasts. His mouth moved over my tightly budded nipples, one at a time, as I choked on a whimper of need and clung to him.

His hot, delicious scent of sandalwood and warm male skin was deep and arousing, and his voice was like warm butter and honey pouring over my senses.

My hands were tearing at his shirt, tugging open his belt, pulling open the fly of his jeans until he was in my hands again ... hot, thick, hard ... satin over steel. His smooth, rippling muscles pressed to my heated skin, slid over my body with overwhelming sensuality as he moved his mouth to my breasts again, moved his hands to the wet cleft of my body as he found ... ah, God. So good! So amazing—so erotic. Those marvelous lean fingers inside me, moving in and out. Long hard fingers that found every erogenous zone I possessed, every secret place that drove me wild to finish this dream.

His mouth was moving down my ribs and over my belly—dear heaven. His tongue was swirling around my throbbing, swollen knot of nerves. Bringing my hips upward as his hands cupped my ass and dragged me to him. Tasting, suckling, dipping deep and hot into me as I clutched his dark hair and arched upward, seeking ... needing ... wanting! Oh, God.

I rose into a shredding, mind-shattering, throbbing, shuddering orgasm—my mind exploding with my body as I surged upward from my bed and—

I woke up clutching my pillow to my chest, breathing like a freight train chugging up a low grade, and I shuddered with reaction as I realized that I had just had my very first, real, totally orgasmic feminine wet dream. *Oh. My. God.*

It took me some time before I could get my heart rate back to normal so that I could go back to sleep, as I forced the subject of my errant dreams back into his jeans and out of my head.

* * * *

The moment I stepped into the dojo, I was greeted by a chorus of wolf whistles and cat calls, and a huge cardboard cake—which a magnificently muscled Jose burst out of, wearing nothing but a scanty G string bikini, holding a sign that said, “Welcome Lisa.”

Hot color suffused my face, but I somehow managed to contrive a remarkably unembarrassed laugh.

“So this is what it feels like to work with half a dozen nut cases.” I shook my head. “Thank you very much for this wonderful welcome, and I sincerely hope it never happens again.”

James Rhee stepped out of his office and said, "Lisa, can I see you for a minute?" His eyes slid over Jose, and he shook his head. "Get your clothes on before your student arrives. She'll have a coronary."

"I do my very best work like this," Jose grinned at me as he began to do a very well executed, steamy bump and grind routine toward me, his dark eyes holding mine. Then he shot the boss a wry glance and he said, "All in fun, boss. She's gotta get used to it sometime."

I started to walk toward the office, and Jose murmured softly, "Wanna go out this Saturday night? I dance at The Maxx until 2 a.m., but we can have a good time after I get off."

"I don't date co-workers." I shrugged with an apologetic smile.

"*Huh?*" He seemed shocked by my refusal.

"Sorry," I smiled. I thanked the rest for their kind gesture and headed around the edge of the mat to see what James wanted.

He was sitting on the corner of his desk, one long leg swinging idly as he read the day's schedule. He glanced up as I came in, and lifted his black brows. "I see you got the red carpet welcome this morning."

"I hope they don't do that every morning." I laughed, fanning my red cheeks with one hand. But even seeing a magnificent Jose virtually naked wasn't affecting me like seeing HIM sitting there in a painted-on T-shirt and sporting morning stubble. It was a damn good look on him.

"Only when they think they can get a reaction. You didn't give them one, I hope." His dark brows lifted questioningly.

"I think I managed not to swallow my tongue," I shrugged. "What's up?" Good thing he didn't know that I was wishing it had been HIM coming out of that damned cake.

He laughed softly, and I realized that I really, really liked the sound of his laugh. Husky and more than a little wicked. "I have another student for you this afternoon. Can you handle that much, with the group?"

"That makes five private and one group. That's about an eight-hour day. No problem. Who is it? Anyone famous?" I asked, glancing at the paper in his hands. I shivered a little as our shoulders brushed. *Get a grip, girl.*

"Just another kid whose mother wants him to learn karate. Ella Wainwright is passing your name around."

"Another movie star's kid?"

"No. State Senator's son. Joshua Logan. Keep this up, and I'll have you booked solid on private lessons." He smiled at me as I took the revised schedule from him and glanced at it.

I turned to leave the office and paused as he said, "I hope you aren't considering dating Jose."

I turned, my eyes wide. "How'd you know he asked?"

"Just call it intuition."

"If it makes you feel less apprehensive, I told him I don't date co-workers."

He nodded, and turned back to his schedule.

Dismissed again.

* * * *

It was nearly five when I changed into a pair of sweats and folded my gi up into my bag. I was going to go straight to the spa. If Hilary showed up, I didn't want to miss her. I stepped into the office to drop my time sheet on the desk and found James on the phone, as usual. He held up his hand for me to wait, so I sank into the chair opposite him as he finished the call. When he hung up, he reached for the following day's schedule and he said, "Mrs. Logan has scheduled four classes a week for the next six weeks. Two for Josh and two for herself. She was impressed with you and wants to try it for herself. They'll be back to back on Thursdays and Mondays. Good work. You are totally full."

He tossed aside the schedule, and he stretched and groaned. I bit my lip to keep from groaning at the sight of that body flexing like some giant cat. "I'm about ready to haul out of here. You open for dinner?"

I blinked. I couldn't form a response as I drew a deep breath. Was he working around to asking me to go to dinner with him? *Not*.

"There's a good Italian place that's not too fussy about the dress code pretty close to here. You like Italian?" *He was*.

Stunned, I nodded. "I love it, but don't have time for dinner tonight. I'm expecting Hilary to meet me for a workout at seven. I promised I'd make her sweat," I grinned.

He rose from behind the desk, shutting off the computer. "Then we'd better get moving. We can get it to go."

Huh? I stared at him as he switched off the desk light, and reached for his gym bag. "Get what to go where?"

"We can eat on the way to O'Malley's. I work out there several nights a month." He glanced at his watch, and picked up the phone. He dialed and said, "Get Leo."

Oh, God, no. I wouldn't be able to eat a bite with him sitting opposite me in that damn sinful T-shirt and those frigging skin-tight jeans. He ordered linguine and salad for two, to go. As he hung up, I shook my head. "Am I gonna have to get used to you making *all* of my decisions for me."

He lifted one brow and asked, "You don't like linguine and salad?"

"I like it, but you could have at least asked me if I did," I replied with irritation.

He smiled. "I'll try to remember—the strong independent type."

"You must be pretty used to having women around who don't mind deferring to the wishes of strong, aggressive males," I said softly as he took my arm and practically pushed me out the door.

"Roughly translated, that would mean, 'obnoxious and pushy.' Are you telling me I am one of those?" he asked, amused.

"Yep." My response was so low, I was shocked he heard me.

"Does that bother you?"

"Only when I think about it. If I don't think about it, it's sort of flattering." *Oh, you are totally pathetic, woman.*

He chuckled, and I felt a finger of a shiver run along my nerves. "I'll try to be less 'strong and aggressive' with you."

"Thanks."

* * * *

We took his van, picked up the food at Leopold's Italian Eatery, and ate once again out of cardboard containers as he drove the twelve miles to the spa. He found a parking place in the rear lot, and we ate the rest of our food at a more leisurely pace. I asked, out of curiosity, how he had come to be the partner of such a dyed in the wool traditionalist as Hirokawa. It kept my mind off reaching across the console to grope him.

"He was my teacher for five years. I came to him straight out of Master Kim Sung's school. Making the shift from Tae Kwon Do to a Japanese style wasn't too hard. The styles were fairly similar in the basics. It was harder on him than it was on me," he grinned, taking another huge bite as I took a bite of the delicious romaine salad.

I nodded as I finished my mouthful. "I can imagine. He is rather formidable." *And a total asshole.*

"He did his best to wipe out all traces of my past training. I have to give him credit for being thorough, but I wasn't about to give up my kicking specialties to go for the knees." His grin was infectious. "Anyway, I bought a rundown school in Culver and started teaching his style, but after a few good tournaments, I was asked if I would teach specialties, and I realized there could be excellent money in that." Another huge bite.

"I made a decent name for myself about ten years back doing some high-bucks, low-acting-talent action films, and then I found I was suddenly in demand." I raised my brows as if I was impressed. "When I asked Nobu if he would help me finance the Hollywood school, he took another look at the capitalistic methods I was using, and decided he wouldn't mind being generous with me. I've almost got him paid off. In about another year, this one is all mine. We're still partners in the Culver school."

I licked my lips as I put away the empty container. "How long has it taken to pay him off?"

"Six years, but he put half a million into my place." His eyes moved over my face in the waning afternoon light, and I felt oddly disconnected again.

"You've paid off half a million dollar loan in *six years*?" I squeaked. Talk about single-minded.

I was boggled by the fact that he had managed to pay out that kind of money, and still pay his instructors as much as he did. He must not be taking any profit from the place for himself, at all. I said as much, and he shrugged. "I was used to living cheaply. And when the place is mine, I can make up for it."

"How can you take no money out of the business, and manage to live? How do you pay rent?" I asked.

"I have an apartment over the dojo. I'm an easy keeper."

"You don't even have a tenth as much income, then, as you pay Jose and the others. Why not pay them less?" The business-manager-cum-accounting specialist was showing her face here.

"Because it keeps them loyal. If you pay well, you keep staff. I've had all six for the past four years."

"I don't doubt it. They take home about \$50,000.00 a year. And you—you maybe draw \$500.00 a month. That isn't at all fair," I frowned.

He lifted his brows and gazed at me quietly. "Would you take a pay cut just to let me keep more money for myself?"

I frowned. "If I knew that eventually I would get the \$50,000.00 again, of course. That's called sharing the wealth, instead of hogging it. You should be hogging just a little more of it." I gazed at him. "Tell me—how were you planning to pay my salary? By cutting back somewhere else?"

"No. With a seventh instructor, I can keep the students happy and let my people have some time off occasionally." His smile was maddeningly smug.

"I can understand you putting every dime you can squeeze onto that loan, but to live in poverty just to keep your employees happy is a bit much." I had a head of steam up now. I was on a roll.

"The little crusader," he breathed, shaking his head. "You don't seem to understand that in another year, I will own the place. I can wait for my share. But thanks for your concern." His voice was a husky, sexy purr.

I hadn't noticed him move, but suddenly he was *waaay* too close. He reached across the console and caught the back of my neck, and dragged me halfway across to catch my mouth with his own. Food containers flew. *Holy shit*. I yelped, startled, and my hands came up to push at those magnificent shoulders, and then, oddly enough, they just sort of slipped up around his neck without conscious thought, and I found myself kissing him back.

My heart pounded wildly as his tongue swept against my lips. I opened to him as his mouth moved on mine with heated, delicious insistence. It was one of those Hollywood kisses you usually only see between Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie ... devouring, wet, and oh, so damned sensuous! Decadent and mind-blowing.

I was halfway climbing over the console, my hands clenching his soft cotton shirt—my little whimpers of pathetic enjoyment absorbed by his hot mouth. Oh, the man smelled so damned good—earthy and musky. Sandalwood and his own unique, hot fragrance that left me aching and breathless.

After what seemed like an eternity, he lifted his lips from mine and growled roughly, "If I were you, I would open my door and get the hell out of this van before I decide to forego the spa entirely and spend the next couple of hours getting my exercise right here." When I didn't instantly respond, he rasped, "*Move, Lisa.*"

I swallowed hard, and nodded jerkily. "Yeah. Sure. Right. I think Hilary might already be inside waiting." My voice sounded like it came from somebody else.

Move, before you decide to take him up on that offer.

He was my boss. For chrissake, you don't fool around with your boss. I released his crushed, wrinkled shirt, mindlessly smoothing it over his heaving chest, and then I reached blindly for the door handle. I couldn't look him in the eye as I found my bag and slipped from the front seat of the van. I walked around to join him as he stepped out and locked the doors.

I didn't trust my voice, and so I said nothing as we went into the bustling building, and he left me at the door to go change into workout clothes. As I glanced back at him, my thoughts were wildly out of control.

What would have happened if I had just slid my palms down that marvelous chest, over those stunning abs, and—and I nearly ran headlong into another body exiting the dressing room. With a mumbled apology, I swallowed and decided not to let my mind go that direction. Coward. Get a spine, girl.

* * * *

I walked Hilary to her limo and waved her off. I went back inside and found a weight bench that wasn't in use, and I set up a bar with sixty pounds of weights on it. I settled onto the bench, got a good grip on the bar, and lifted it off the braces carefully, pressing it for ten reps before setting it back on the braces. Wow. Was I out of shape, or what?

I rubbed my palms on the rosin bag, found another good grip, and was in the middle of another set of ten reps when James Rhee said quietly, "That's one hell of a lot of weight for someone your size."

He straddled the head of the weight bench, his powerful thighs brushing the hair that had fallen out of my ivory pin. He removed ten pounds from each end of the bar. "Never start out heavy. Start out lighter and work up. You know that," he said quietly as he tightened the lugs again. I stared at him. Even upside-down he looked good enough to eat.

Ignoring the fact that his thighs rested on either side of my head, I got another grip, and lifted the bar from the braces, this time finding it far easier to manage my ten reps, and when I finished, I sat up and rubbed my shoulders and wrists. "Thanks."

He shifted and straddled the bench facing me and draped his towel around the back of his neck. I swallowed hard as I tried to ignore his sculpted eight-pack and massive pecs in the brief top and shorts he wore.

"I think we should call it a night." He seemed to be oblivious to me in my sweat-stained workout gear. At least *one* of us wasn't drooling.

I nodded wearily. "I'm beat. I haven't been doing very much over the past several months, and it's killing me now."

He rose from the bench and extended his hand to me, and I took it, letting him pull me up from my seat. "Come on. You can shower at my place."

I hesitated. Shower at his place? *Was he kidding?* Did I have "stupid and naive" written across my forehead? I was about to say no, when he said quietly, "Unless you're worried I might take advantage of you."

I frowned at him, and I said, "Of course I'm not. I just don't want to be a nuisance."

As we split up at the locker room doors, I glanced into the steamy mirror looking for that sign on my forehead, as I wondered if I was born stupid, or if being around karate people for a couple of days had turned my brain to mush. As I unlocked my locker and took out my bag, I drew a reinforcing breath.

I would figure out a way to get out of it as we drove.

Chapter Six

I had no idea on earth why the hell I was standing in the middle of his small apartment. I had planned to tell him it was too late. That I didn't feel comfortable showering anywhere but home. But here I stood, wondering if that sign reading "Stupid" was still plastered across my forehead.

As he made a pot of fresh coffee, I poked about the small living room, and looked at his photos and his trophies. The place was neat and clean, and miniscule. He hadn't been kidding when he had said it was just big enough for one.

"Cream and sugar, right?" he called out from the tiny kitchen.

"Yes, thanks," I replied, as I put down a photograph of him as a young boy. I glanced at him as he walked out of the kitchen carrying two cups.

"Thanks," I murmured as I took mine and sank down onto one end of the sofa. He took the chair opposite me.

"You're welcome."

"Nice place—small, but nice." I fumbled for words that didn't make me sound like an idiot.

"I put a couple of fresh towels on the rack for you," he said quietly.

I was trying to think of any excuse possible to avoid taking a shower here, but his next words cut me off at the pass. "I'll understand if you don't feel comfortable showering here. You don't know me very well, and I could just be trying to get you naked."

I laughed and said, "You're joking, of course."

His dark eyes moved over my face thoughtfully, and he sipped his coffee. "Actually, I'm not."

I swallowed my coffee too fast and choked. I coughed and steadied my cup to avoid spilling all over his carpet. I carefully set my own cup down, and stared at him. "I beg your pardon?" *Get a grip, girl.*

"I think you heard me just fine," he breathed, not elaborating.

I licked my lips and wiped away the drops of coffee I'd just slopped down the front of my chin. "Oo-kay," I managed. "I should be heading on home." *Stupid, stupid, stupid. Stay.*

"If that's what you want to do," he lifted that damned sexy brow again.

I inhaled carefully and said, "Look, nothing personal, but I try my best never to get involved with co-workers. It complicates things too much." *Liar. I wanted sooo damned much to get involved.*

He smiled quietly, and I could see that he was not buying my carefully worded statement. He stretched and took another swallow of his coffee, and he said in that devastatingly sexy voice of his, "I'm not a co-worker."

"That's right. You're my boss. That's even worse." I wondered if he could see the wild pulse hammering in my throat.

"What if I fired you?" his eyes danced wickedly.

I drew a deep, calming breath. "I guess I'll go on being executive accounting officer for Central California Foods." I met his gaze squarely. I didn't realize that I was holding my breath until my face went purple, and I was forced to exhale.

"Mmmm. A beautiful woman with ethics," he mused, sipping again. "That's unusual." His voice was a deep purr.

I frowned at him in confusion. "You don't have a very high opinion of females, do you?" I blurted with utterly no tact. I tried not to notice where his eyes went as I heaved a deep breath. "What happened to give you such a low opinion?" I frowned, desperate to distract him.

He laughed softly. "Playing shrink, are you?" He set down his cup and rose, walking slowly over to the sofa. I yelped as he flopped down and turned, reclining back and laying his head in my lap and folding his hands over his chest.

"Okay, if you're my shrink, I guess I should get comfortable. Mmm, that's nice," he breathed as he adjusted his dark head against my trembling belly, snuggling against my ultra sensitive pubic mound. "Let's see. Where could I possibly begin?"

I frowned down into his face, and said unsteadily, "I didn't mean to pry into your personal life." *Dear lord. He felt so good where he rested.* I fought to keep my damned hands out of that thick hair.

"Yes, you did. But since I'm trying to get into your pants, you can try to get into my head. All's fair in psychiatry and sex." *Oh, My, God. Was that ever laying it right on the table or what?*

I felt hot color flood my cheeks, and I drew a deep, shuddering breath. "Shihan Rhee, I..."

"My name is James. Jimmy would be even better. We aren't in the school right now." He caught my hand and ran his lean fingers over the skin of my palm, sending waves of pure erotic pleasure through me. I had to bite my lip to keep from whimpering aloud.

"James," I breathed, "I'm really not very good at games. You're moving way too fast for me here." *And I'm so frigging far in over my head I'm drowning.*

"Then I'll slow down a little," he murmured, closing his eyes and rubbing his forehead with one hand. "You asked me why I have such a poor opinion of beautiful women."

"Of all women," I corrected him. I drew several deep breaths. *Control. Get control. Don't grab him and attack him.*

"Is it so obvious?"

"Extremely." *But I can, and will, forgive you.*

He rubbed his temple slowly, but I pushed his hand away, and began to massage his forehead and temples with my fingertips, as I'd always done for my father to ease his tension headaches. I tugged my captured hand free to use it, too. That should keep my hands busy and off the rest of him.

He sighed and shifted to make himself more comfortable. I held my breath. I kept slowly massaging his scalp, and I drew a deep, calming breath. "I get the feeling someone has really hurt you, and you don't ever want to get close again." I smoothed his forehead gently with my fingertips, and went on quietly. I was on a roll here.

"I think that extremely attractive people have too many hang-ups about being liked for themselves. They never really know if the other person sees them as a wonderful soul, or just a hot body." I frowned down at him. "I think that men have the same problems women have trying to deal with the expectations the opposite sex has of them."

He didn't reply, so I kept babbling inanelly. "Women see a guy like you, and they start to drool, and they can really give you the impression that they expect you to be some hot stud. Same goes for really beautiful women. Guys never seem to want to get close for anything except sex. It's really sort of a shame, because lots of really gorgeous people are really beautiful inside, too, and no one ever looks that far." *God! I was babbling again.*

I stopped talking, wondering if I had bored him to sleep. I kept running my fingertips over his temples and scalp, and across his forehead with a slow, constant circle of pressure. I didn't say any more. I was just thinking that he had fallen asleep when he said quietly, "So, *you* think I'm an 'extremely attractive' man?"

"Um, yeah," I murmured, my pulses racing at the softly sexy timbre of his tone. *Shut your mouth, Lisa Hampton, and pull that size eight shoe out.*

"But you don't think that you are a really attractive woman?" he breathed.

I gave a bark of derisive laughter. "I do possess a mirror. I'm pretty realistic about stuff like that."

He nodded and stretched like a giant cat, sending my heart into overload mode. "So do I, although I prefer to avoid looking into it as much as possible," and he rolled onto his side, facing

me, as he propped his head on his right palm, his elbow resting across my lap. I thought I was gonna swallow my tongue.

"So. If I'm attractive to you, and you're attractive to me, maybe that means something." He lifted one winged brow quizzically. "Maybe we're attracted to each other for a reason?" His fingertips dragged gently over the damp material covering my right breast. My skin felt as if he had burned his brand into it.

I swallowed hard, staring into those black eyes, as he ran his left forefinger along the line of my jaw, and down the throbbing vein in my throat. *He found me attractive?* I cleared my throat with difficulty and shifted to get my circulation back.

"Maybe it just means you need to stop working so hard, and find yourself a regular girlfriend. You sound like a man who needs someone to come home to, instead of a one night stand here and there when the libido calls." *Oh, God! Had I really just said that? Honest, Lisa—you really need to control that mouth.*

His eyes glowed with laughter. "What makes you think I don't have a regular girlfriend?"

I glared at him. He was making fun of me. "Call it intuition. No sane woman would stick with a man who never has a moment to spare, stays at work fourteen hours a day, and spends every dime he has on his business." I fidgeted, feeling like I was about to drown in those eyes.

"So, does this mean you are volunteering for the position?" he murmured quietly.

He had totally lost me here. "What position?" My brows drew together.

"Regular girlfriend. Insane woman. Someone to come home to," he grinned, his fingertips trailing slowly, maddeningly over my lips and down the front of my sweatshirt to drag gently over the agitated rise and fall of my breasts once again. I felt like I was going to spontaneously combust if he didn't stop.

I calmed myself with difficulty. "I didn't know you had an ad out for one," I replied flippantly. I wasn't *totally* naïve. All he wanted at this moment was a quick hop into the sack, and I was available. Too damned available.

"You're the one who told me I needed one, and you aren't offering to fill the gap in my miserable, lonely life? That's cold." His weight was cutting off circulation in my thighs, but I didn't want him to move away. I wanted to keep hearing him saying all those outrageously seductive things, despite my common sense. Of course, I knew that if I said yes tonight, I would never receive a repeat offer. Like most dynamic, sexy males, James Rhee was a spur of the moment kind of guy, *and I was the current spur of the moment.*

"I'm not sure I'm looking for a temporary position at this time." I said in a carefully controlled, lightly amused voice.

"What makes you think it'd be temporary?" he focused on my mouth.

"With you, I don't think it could be anything else," I breathed tightly.

"There's only one sure way to find out." His eyes held mine, and I swallowed hard, unable to breathe. Those damn eyes were enough to drive any common sense I had managed to retain right out the window.

He reached up and caught the back of my neck, and pulled my face down to his, his lips tracing mine slowly as I decided that he was about the most potently sexy thing I'd ever laid eyes (or hands) on in my entire life. His lips gently coaxed mine open, and his tongue slipped inside my mouth to stroke slowly and erotically.

Oh. My. God.

With one fluid movement, he had switched positions with me. I was lying on my back on the sofa, and he was pressing my body down into the worn cushions, his mouth molding mine with a slow, hungry insistence that was causing all hell to break loose in my body. I felt his hands dragging my sweatshirt up and over my head, and I whispered shakily against his mouth as he ran his lean hands over my bare skin, "I think I should go home." My panicky words died in my throat as his calloused palms slipped up over my breasts, caressing my nipples through my bra as I arched into his touch.

"Okay," he whispered as he unhooked my bra and I felt his hands slip up to cup my breasts gently. "But not right now."

I closed my eyes as a flood of hot, trembling sensations overwhelmed me, and a flood of warm wetness dampened my panties. I clamped my arms around him and kissed him back with savage enthusiasm. *It'd been such a long time.* I hadn't been in a man's arms like this since college, and despite my full understanding that he was just using me for a brief moment of pleasure, I knew with a fierce determination that I wanted to let him do just that.

I shoved away a couple of inches and I whispered huskily, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I think you talk too much," he growled, as he kissed me almost savagely. "God, but you are beautiful," he rasped as he stood up and peeled off his jacket and his T-shirt. I stared like a fool as he removed his shoes, his socks, and his workout shorts, and I swallowed hard. *He was—amazing.* Like some Greek god, except he wasn't Greek. I tried not to ogle his muscular, stunningly naked, magnificently aroused body ... and failed miserably. I almost swallowed my tongue when he grabbed his jacket and slid a hand into the pocket, coming up with a small foil packet. I blushed as he ripped it open and quickly rolled a thin latex condom over that astonishing cock. Oh, my. He was *damn* sure! My pussy ached just looking at him.

"So are you," I whispered, totally awe-stricken by the hot, hard, beautifully sculpted body that was about to become extremely familiar to my hands in every way. My palms slid up that marvelous flesh as he moved back to my side. *Oh, my.*

He laughed as he lowered himself back to the sofa, and dragged his mouth slowly over my jaw and lips again. I inhaled sharply as he quickly tugged my remaining clothes off me, and I felt his rippling, beautifully sculpted body pressed against my fevered skin. He dipped his dark head to lave my breast, and draw the nipple into his mouth slowly, and I whispered hoarsely, "I've only done this one time before now, so don't expect too much."

His lips traced my collarbone, moving down to my tightly budding nipple, his tongue warm and wet, dragging it slowly, erotically into his mouth. I whimpered again and bit my lip to keep from crying out.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when his lean hand cupped my embarrassingly wet pussy, and I thought I would die of humiliation as he felt how totally hot I was. But when his eyes darkened, and his voice rasped, "My God, you're so ready for me," I almost splintered into an orgasm against his palm. My hips pumped up to meet his lean, talented fingers as they slid over my clit, and he breathed roughly, "I want you to enjoy this as much as I'm going to."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem." I yelped as I arched against his kneading palm, fighting the sweeping, trembling climax that threatened to end this moment far too quickly.

Oh, dear Lord. Too late. I exploded into a ravening, shuddering, mind-blowing orgasm that brought my hips up off the sofa and made me into a writhing, humping, whimpering, mad wild thing. He let me ride the explosion, never stopping his sweet, hot assault on my body with mouth and hands.

I'm damned sure I left claw marks in his back as he let me enjoy it until I gasped, "*Oh, stop. I think I'm dying.*"

For just a moment, I blushed like a fool as his eyes slipped over my face, and down my body, and then he whispered huskily, "You'll live."

I wondered what he meant to do—and I didn't have but a moment to wonder as his body settled between my cream-slicked thighs, and he slowly drove his cock into my wet pussy, as he lifted my hips and bit his lip to keep from ramming deep and hard, waiting to see how much of his shaft I could take before I winced with pain. I arched into his slow, amazingly controlled stroke, and gasped, and he stopped dead, until I whispered shakily, "Please don't stop. You aren't hurting me."

His lips curved wickedly, and he finished the stroke with a groan, burying himself in me with a hoarse growl of pleasure. "You feel like hot, sweet silk."

I opened hungrily to his devouring kiss, his tongue tangling hot and wet with mine as he made me forget who and where I was. I whimpered as he nibbled my lips, and sucked my tongue into his mouth, and his hands worshipped my breasts as his hips drove against me in hot, measured strokes that felt like sheer heaven to my hungry, sex-starved body.

His mouth moved to my throat as I arched and panted with need. Moved down my skin to taste and devour each swollen, pearled nipple in turn. I clutched his dark head to my breast, begging, arching helplessly beneath his expert onslaught. *He had such a talented mouth.*

His hands slipped under me, his palms lifting my ass as he found his rhythm, and with every deep, driving movement of his hips between my thighs, I desperately wanted to pull him deeper—harder. He was utterly magnificent—thick and hard—steel encased in hot satin—and I arched and sobbed with sheer heady pleasure as he filled me to perfection, his smooth, expert thrusts deep and slick, sliding over my clit and G spot with every perfectly placed penetration. *I just knew I was going to wake up and find out this was just another marvelous dream.*

I could barely breathe. I was against that amazingly glorious body, those deep rippling muscles, his hungry mouth savoring my nipples as I arched and begged him not to stop—not to leave—not to end this rapture. I spiraled upward, straining, throbbing, gasping, screaming out in shocked pleasure as I was torn apart by an earth-shattering orgasm, and as I clung to his hot, perspiring body, I felt him stiffen and explode, heard his gasping cry of release, and we tumbled breathlessly together over a chasm so deep, and so hot, I thought I would never survive the fall.

Onto the floor.

He rose from the carpet with me still wrapped tightly around his powerful body, and then I was on my back on a mattress. He eased me up the mattress to where my head rested on a pillow, and he ran his hands slowly over my body as I wriggled beneath him.

I clung to him shakily, my trembling legs still wrapped tight about those lean, hard hips, as we subsided and panted on his narrow bed. He didn't roll away and leave me to die of utter embarrassment by what we had just done, like I expected. He was still buried deep inside me. He was still holding me, kissing my shoulder, and dragging his hot mouth over my throat as if he couldn't get enough of me. *Like my dream.*

I lay in the afterglow of my mind-bending orgasm, and waited for him to slip away. And waited. And then he shifted his hips as he started to rock slowly once more. I swallowed hard and licked my lips at the heady, delicious feel of his still-solid cock driving deep, sliding slowly out almost to the tip, before driving deep once again. I was mindless with the pleasure, and he whispered softly against my throat, "Am I hurting you?"

"*Hell, no,*" I gasped, and he laughed softly. He wrapped his arms tighter around me, and I was forced to unlock my ankles and move my legs as he rolled onto his back, carefully rearranging our bodies on the mattress. I found myself astride his hips, looking down into his wickedly grinning face.

His hands slid up my ribs to cup my breasts, his thumbs thrumming across my tight, sensitive nipples as he dug his heels into the mattress and drove his hips upward, impaling me with a hiss of pleasure. I lifted upward, and surged down as his next thrust plunged deep, making me whimper in delirious enjoyment. I placed my palms on his sweat-damp chest, and licked my lips as I ran my nails over his flat nipples, watching his face contort with pleasure as his eyes rolled back.

Surging, gasping for breath as he rose to fill me, stretch me—hot—hard—so amazingly thick, I felt like I couldn't breathe. I rocked forward and he half-rose to suck a tight nipple deep into his mouth, his arms wrapping around my body to hold me captive as he drove upward with each downward surge of my body over his. Oh, dear God. He was magnificent. I felt the climax building—surging through me—shattering my mind and body into millions of shards of sensation as I convulsed, my body clamping tight around his in the throes of pleasure, and he gave a shout of release and came hot and hard.

And as I fell onto his shuddering body, too spent and weary to move, he caught my mouth hungrily, sweeping his hot tongue against mine for a moment, before he growled between gasping breaths, "Sweet Jesus. That. Was. Amazing."

Chapter Seven

I came awake at my usual time, and reached automatically for the non-existent alarm, and instead, my hand encountered a solidly warm, bare shoulder. I opened my eyes in confusion, and blinked at the strange room. It took me a minute to realize that I was in his bed. The same bed he'd carried me to last night, where we had made love for hours. Warm color flooded my face as I turned to see his adorably whiskery face on the pillow beside me, as he slept with his arm draped across my bare waist.

I drew a careful breath, and gently attempted to slip out from under that arm, only to have him shift and drag me back against his body, as he nuzzled his lips into the back of my shoulder. I closed my eyes and swallowed hard. I had never awakened in a man's bed before.

I lifted my wrist to look at my watch in the dimness of the room, and almost screamed. *In half an hour, the dojo would be open.* The guys were all downstairs right now, and they had surely seen my car in the lot. I shoved aside the covers and sat up, and he came awake as I scrambled from the bed. "What's the matter?" he yawned as I ran into the little living room and snatched up my underwear and bag. I clutched my things to my bare body in belated embarrassment, as I sidled into the bathroom and said a trifle breathlessly, "It's almost seven!"

"So?" he scratched his head and stretched. He sat up in bed and the covers dropped away from his body. At seven in the morning, he was sporting a mouth-watering erection. I nearly swallowed my tongue.

"They'll know I stayed. What the hell are they all going to think?" I panicked as I closed the bathroom door and stared at my red face in the mirror.

The door opened, and I yelped indignantly as he stepped into the miniscule space with me and lifted the toilet lid nonchalantly using the toilet. "They'll probably think we slept together. Why?" His voice was sleepy and rich.

He flushed the toilet and turned to face me. I was stepping into my panties, and I rasped, "That's all well and good for you, but it'll look like I only got this job because you got laid."

"You know that's not true. I didn't get laid 'til the third day," he grinned at my red face as he reached out and dragged me into his arms, kissing me slowly and hungrily. I sagged against his body, feeling the slow but steady rise of pure, white-hot lust as he deepened the kiss, and his hands slid up and down my back. His steel-hard cock was pulsing against my lace panties, and it took every ounce of willpower I could dredge up to keep from reaching to touch it, to caress it back to raging life.

"Stop it," I gasped as I shoved at his chest. "We have to be downstairs in half an hour."

"It only takes a couple of minutes, unless you *want* it slow," he breathed.

"James!" I squeaked as he started to shove my panties off me. "Last night was last night. This isn't the time."

He lifted his head and frowned at me questioningly. "Does that mean you only wanted what happened last night and nothing more? Just a one night stand?"

I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn't that kind of girl, and then my mind turned to mush and I dragged his head down and kissed him with enough savage enthusiasm to make him draw a deep breath. He swung me off the floor to carry me back to bed.

What on earth was I doing? I should be using my head here, and insisting he stop this assault on my senses. But instead, I was reaching down his body to clutch at his hard cock and guide it into my weeping, clenching pussy once more. "Hey, easy there," he breathed as he dragged a condom packet out of his bedside drawer and I tore it out of his fingers and bit my lower lip as I managed to fumble it open and roll the delicate latex over that huge, glorious shaft.

He kissed and nibbled along the edge of my chin as he drove his full, strident length into my eagerly needy pussy. I moaned and dug my heels into the mattress and strained upward to take in every inch of him. The lush feel of his thick, hard cock inside me was enough to rock my very limited world, and I clung to him and bit his shoulder as an explosive orgasm rocketed through me. I barely managed to keep from screaming out his name.

A little circumspection here. People downstairs.

I dug my nails into his back as he laughed softly and whispered, "I can't hold back much longer." He reached under my ass to run his lean fingers over the wetness where he was buried in me, and I whimpered. He nibbled my collarbone, sucked a nipple deep, and urged me heatedly to another climax by gently pinching my throbbing clit.

Reeling, I spiraled once more into the million tingling starbursts of a second, even more shattering orgasm, and felt him stiffen over me as he shoved his cock hard and deep and threw his head back. "Oh ... fuck!" he gasped as he joined me, and continued to thrust gently until both of us were so shaky that neither of us could move at all.

His body rested on mine as he ran his lips over my perspiring face and he breathed raggedly, "You are utterly incredible."

I fought for breath, and my hands moved hungrily over all those utterly magnificent muscles. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Twilight Zone, episode 1,000,000. Lisa Hampton has gotten laid by the world's sexiest hunk.

* * * *

James had come down before me. I tried to slip down the narrow stairs from the apartment unobserved, but Maria was coming out of the sewing room as I reached the hallway, and she lifted her brows as she saw me smoothing my wrinkled gi top.

"You don't let any grass grow under your feet, do you, girl?" she asked with a wicked grin. She shook her head. "I guess maybe I should have warned you about the boss, too, huh? Good lookin' man, he is. Women just can't keep their brains in straight around him."

I flushed darker, and managed a shaky smile. "Speaking from experience, Maria?"

She laughed and shook her head. "I'm not that lucky. Or that skinny. If I was ten years younger, and eighty pounds lighter, I might have a go at him." She sighed and walked off toward the coffee room. "The guys were drawin' straws to see which one got the first shot, but this mornin' they realized they didn't have a prayer."

I stared after her, my mouth dry. *They all knew*. I wondered how I was going to face them. I knew what I had always thought of females who went to bed with the boss.

As I came around the corner and headed for the break area, I heard Jose's voice saying, "Now I know why she didn't want to go out Saturday. I guess she wanted to fork the top stud instead of one of the work horses." I heard a muted reply, then soft laughter, but couldn't tell who was speaking. I was standing there, in the middle of the hall, not wanting to go into the room, when I felt James' hand on the small of my back. I blushed hotly. Had he heard, too?

I braced myself as he propelled me forward, but he was a lot stronger than I was. We stepped through the door almost side by side, and Jose jerked his head to stare at us as Vince cleared his throat and rinsed his cup out, heading for the door with a quiet "Excuse me. I have a student waiting."

Jose's dark complexion couldn't hide his red face as he cleared his own throat and finished his coffee. I met his embarrassed look, and I swallowed convulsively. For the first time, I pitied the man. Maria was making a fresh pot, and James said quietly, "I thought you had an 8:00, too, Jose."

The man nodded and glanced at his watch. "Yeah. Gotta go."

"Just a minute," James said softly, and I winced. Jose turned to face us, and he looked somehow far less cocky and sure of himself. James laid his arm across the back of my shoulders, and he said softly, "I think you owe Lisa an apology."

"Oh, that's not necessary..." I began, but James squeezed my shoulder to stop me.

Jose turned an even darker red, and he cleared his throat. Without hesitation, he said quietly, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said, really. I was just blowing steam. I guess I don't take rejection well." His hand slid around the back of his neck, and he looked at me wryly.

I nodded, shocked that he had actually sounded sincere. "No offense taken."

He glanced at James, and nodded quietly. "Okay for me to go, sir?"

His tone was humble and respectful, and I blinked as James said quietly, "Yes." I watched the man walk quickly from the room, and I heard Maria's soft laugh as she washed out the used cups.

I glanced at her as James squeezed my shoulder and left me there, walking after Jose, and she grinned at me.

"What's so funny? I can't really believe he backed down so fast. Jose is a tough-looking guy." I breathed.

"Not as tough as the boss. Not one of these guys could take him, honey. Not one of them would want to even try."

I stared at her as she put the cups into the drainer, and wiped her hands on a tea towel. "Why do you say that?" I asked.

She grinned. "Jimmy Rhee was the number one full contact heavy weight fighter in the world for seven years running. He could take all of them with no problem."

"Oh."

I watched her waddle out of the coffee room, and glanced at my watch. I had hourly classes beginning at 8:30, all the way to noon. I had another ten minutes. I waited for the coffee to brew, and grabbed a half-cup. I carried it with me into the private lesson room I had been given, and I found my student already stretching out. "Good morning," I smiled.

"Good morning, Sensei Hampton," the young man smiled, leaping to his feet and bowing respectfully. I put my coffee on the floor in the corner, and turned to bow him in. The next few hours went rather slowly.

* * * *

I was stepping out of my classroom after finishing my final lesson of the day when James leaned out of the office and said, "Can I see you for a minute, Lisa?"

"Sure." I walked along the hallway toward him. I noted where his eyes went, and I flushed. Damn. Even after having hot, wild monkey sex with the man, I wasn't any closer to being unselfconscious around him. "Here's my time sheet." I stepped into the office, and I lifted my brows as he closed the door behind me, something he rarely did. I turned to face him, not knowing exactly what to expect.

He glanced at the sheet, and he set it on his desk. When his eyes returned to my pink face, he said quietly, "I'm sorry you heard that this morning."

I swallowed and shrugged. "I expected it."

He shook his head, his eyes angry. "There was no excuse for that. It was insulting."

I shrugged and sighed. "You're their boss. It's easier to poke fun at the newcomer. I might have said something similar if something like this had happened in my old office."

He shook his head, a crooked smile on his firm lips. "Not everyone would be quite so magnanimous. But it won't happen again." *I certainly hoped it would happen again—and again.*

I bit my lower lip and drew a deep breath. "You can't blame them. And they shouldn't be in trouble for thinking the obvious. I'd rather endure a little embarrassment than have you maybe lose one of your best instructors because he said something raunchy."

"I'll keep that in mind in the future," he breathed. "In the meantime, what are you doing tonight?"

I shrugged. "I was going to go shopping. I'm almost out of some things. I figured I'd kick back at home and put my feet up and watch educational TV."

"Not."

* * * *

I turned into the lot of my apartment building and parked in the covered spot reserved for me, and we went on into the side entrance, taking the stairs to the third floor. I unlocked my apartment and let us in. I felt oddly disconnected as he stepped inside my small but comfy home.

I went into my bedroom to change out of my gi, and pulled on some jeans and a T-shirt. When I stepped back out, he was poking through the photographs on top of my mantle. I wasn't the only one who was curious about people's pasts. He turned as I came into the living room, and his eyes slipped over my comfortable clothes, and he said softly, "What's for dinner?"

"How about some chowder and fresh rolls?"

"Sounds great."

"You're easy."

"Careful. You're about to find out how easy I am," he breathed, a wicked smile on his lips. He waved a silvery condom packet in the air, and I gave a bark of laughter.

"Before supper?" I teased as he moved slowly across the room toward me.

"Before supper," he breathed huskily.

He slid his arms around me and bent to kiss me slowly, and I found my arms locking around his neck as I kissed him back. I was trembling when he lifted his mouth from mine and whispered, "Any preference as to where?"

I laughed shakily and shook my head.

He grinned and started to unbutton the top of my jeans, and I yelped with a laugh, "Do you mind if I pull the shades? My neighbor across the court will love this."

He ignored my words, and I allowed him to tug my T-shirt up and over my head. When he had finished undressing me, he said softly, "Go ahead and pull the shades."

He had already donned the bright neon yellow condom when I turned from the window, and I didn't have even a moment to prepare as he lifted me and wrapped my legs about his hips, fitting his steel-hard cock into my already wet sheath. I gasped as I felt him enter me with a quick thrust, and I tensed, wondering if he meant to be excessively rough. But he heard my gasp, and he held me tight to his body, kissing my throat and running his strong tongue over my skin. "Did I hurt you?" His voice was a rasp of need. "I don't want to hurt you."

I shook my head and whispered huskily, "Quick and hot is good. But slow and gentle will get me hotter. Which do you prefer?"

He slowly lifted me up and then lowered me over his slick, hot cock again and again, as I arched to give him access to my breasts. He bent to drag one nipple into his mouth, tugging and teasing as he sucked and licked until I thought I would die of pleasure. He pressed me back into the wall against the curtains I had just closed, and he growled as he drove himself deep over and over again. His hands cupped and lifted my ass, and his mouth was hot against my breast. I was sure he felt me coming, my body clenching tight around his cock, and as I reveled in the heady explosion, he drove deep one last time and came hard, panting and groaning against my throat.

I rocked my pelvis slowly as he lost the ability to move, and I tightened my muscles to milk his body as he leaned into the wall, his shoulder against the hard surface to keep me from being squashed. "That was incredible," he whispered roughly against my mouth as he returned to kiss me again.

"Oh yeah," I nodded jerkily, unable to form another coherent sentence as I clung to him, subsiding slowly.

* * * *

I had pulled on a wrapper of paisley silk while he was in my shower, and I pulled the chowder I'd made on Sunday out of the freezer and put it into the microwave to thaw. I wondered dully what the hell I was going to do when this breathlessly sensual interlude was over and he lost interest. Of course he would lose interest. Men like James always lost interest.

As I made the dough for the rolls, I wondered how long it would take him to get bored and bolt. I had been surprised that he had wanted to be with me tonight. Usually men like him vanished the moment the conquest was made.

I smiled as I thought of his breathlessly eager lovemaking, and the way he had held me for so long afterward, his lips buried in my tumbled hair as we had both calmed down. We had not spoken or moved. He had just leaned us against the wall, wrapped in each other's arms for a long while, while I enjoyed the feel of his solid, warm flesh pressed to mine.

I had wanted to stay in his arms forever. Of course, I realized that the call of nature would occur sooner or later and had stoically accepted the fact that he was only human as he had padded into the bathroom to use the toilet, leaving me feeling desolate and alone.

I had slipped into my wrapper. I heard him ask through the open bathroom door if I minded him taking a shower. I told him I didn't mind at all, and as I heard the water come on, I padded into the kitchen and started our dinner.

I was setting the dough to rise over the oven vent (it would take about twenty minutes) when I heard him say quietly, "That smells delicious," and his arms slipped about me as he bent to kiss my shoulder.

"Fresh potato rolls," I breathed shakily.

"I'm talking about your skin. You smell like a woman who just had great sex," he murmured as he ran his tongue along the side of my neck, and I shivered.

"Or a woman who desperately needs a shower," I laughed, as I shimmied out of his embrace and wiped my hands on a towel. "Did you leave any hot water?"

"Of course not," he replied.

"Then it'll have to be lukewarm. When the buzzer goes off on the microwave, would you take out the chowder and put it into the big pan on the stove? Just stir it a little and put the burner on low. I should be back to finish up in about fifteen minutes."

"Sure you can trust me not to screw it up?"

"I'm sure. If you screw it up, you still have to eat it."

"Right," he breathed, stretching and almost losing the damp towel that was his only garment.

"There's a big terry robe in my closet. You're welcome to it," I called over my shoulder as I headed for the bathroom. *Or, you can run around naked, and I won't mind that, either.*

I pulled fresh underwear out of my drawer, retrieved my jeans and T-shirt, and went into the bathroom. I shook my head at the water all over my tiled floor, and I wiped it up with his discarded second towel, laying my own towel over the bar. "You are a terrible slob, boss," I breathed softly as I turned to close the door, and I nearly jumped out of my skin when he spoke quietly from the doorway.

"A true male chauvinist never cleans up after himself when there's a woman around."

I glared at him. "Quit sneaking up on me like that. You are gonna give me a damned coronary." I reached into the shower and turned on the water, and frowned at him, expecting him to leave. "I prefer to shower in private."

"You're embarrassed to shower in front of a man you just spent two hours having hot sex with? I've seen one hell of a lot more of you than just your bare ass, Lisa," he laughed.

I blushed warmly, and he smiled wickedly as he reached out and untied my wrapper. "I told you, I'm not used to having a man looking at me when I'm naked."

"With a body like yours, there's no need in the world to be embarrassed. Unless you're afraid I won't be able to manage my lust if you take off your robe in front of me."

"You guessed," I smiled brilliantly, shoving at his chest and backing him out of the room, closing the door firmly in his face. "Watch the chowder." I called through the closed door. I heard him laugh as I dropped my wrapper and stepped into the shower, closing the glass enclosure door behind me.

* * * *

I emerged from the bathroom, and I noted with a smile that the towel was in the hamper, and the bed was made up neatly. I padded into the kitchen, and found him fully dressed, stirring the pan of chowder. I uncovered the pan of rolls and put them into the oven. "Is it burnt yet?" I asked, sniffing the chowder appreciatively.

"Not yet. You arrived in the nick of time." He handed me the spoon ceremoniously, and I grinned at that heart-stopping smile as he lifted one brow devilishly.

"What would you like for dessert?" I asked as I set the spoon down and looked into the fridge again.

I felt his hands on my waist, and he pulled my ass back against the stiff ridge straining inside his jeans. There was no mistaking what I felt pressing against me, and he murmured wickedly, "You."

"You are one horny man," I breathed, shaking my head.

"Amen."

"Well, I'm starving. It's nearly nine, and I haven't had a bite to eat since noon," I grumped, shoving his hands away and reaching for the gallon of milk and some vegetables from the crisper.

"I'm starving too," he whispered as he pulled me back against him and slid his palms up over my breasts as he kissed the side of my neck again.

I closed my eyes and shivered at the overwhelming surge of lust that threatened to lead right back to my damn bed, and I said weakly, "Well, you'll just have to control yourself until after supper. I work better on a full stomach."

I drew away from him and swallowed convulsively, calming my body and my thoughts. *He was poison.* Any sane woman would be running like hell from him at this point, but I wasn't

sane. I wondered vaguely if my body and mind could handle another steamy, wild lovemaking session with this man. *Dear God, I certainly hoped so.*

As I washed the tomatoes and the celery, he took a paring knife and cut them up neatly, and I was glad that he had found something else to do with his wandering, wicked hands.

I was surprised after dinner when he got up and started to wash the dishes. I handed him my bowl and my spoon, and I asked softly, "What happened to the 'dyed in the wool male chauvinist' I was talking to before supper?"

His dark eyes were wicked as he whispered, "The quicker we clean up this mess, the quicker I can get you naked again."

"Oh. And here I thought you were turning over a new leaf. How silly of me." I shrugged, pulling a tea towel out of the drawer to dry with.

I had never enjoyed a man's company as much as I did his. I felt sexy, and excited, and totally at ease all at the same time. I knew that he wanted nothing but a pleasurable respite from his self-imposed regimen of hard work and self-denial, but I didn't mind. I wanted this feeling. I wanted to feel wanted. The fact that he seemed to find me extremely attractive, even if just for this moment, was enough to make me forget all the things I had taught myself over the past years. I felt his thigh against mine, and his arm brushing my shoulder, and I smiled. So this was what lust felt like. I rather enjoyed the feeling. It was not at all unpleasant, knowing that a very sexy, very attractive man wanted to take me to bed.

I was grinning like an idiot when he asked quietly, "What's on your mind?"

I shook my head. "Can't tell you."

"Sure you can."

"I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you," I closed the cupboard and hung the towel over the rack to dry.

He smiled crookedly at me as I wiped the last drops off the countertop, and folded the dishcloth. "Are you thinking about what I'm thinking about?"

"Are you willing to risk your life to find out?" I asked quietly.

"If it means you mean to kill me in bed, damn right."

I gave a squeal of laughter as he made a grab for me, and I dodged, putting more than an arm's length of space between us as I backed away toward the living room door. "The least you could do is try to be a trifle more romantic about it," I huffed.

"*Darling ... sweetie ... I want you.* How's that?" he followed slowly, his movements reminding me of a jungle cat as it paced, hungry. Hunting.

"You can do better than that."

"I'm lousy at romantic stuff. Coach me a little," he shook his head.

I swallowed, and gazed into his dark eyes quietly as he sensuously closed the distance between us. I realized with a sense of shock that I was very close—dangerously close—to falling crazily in love with a man I'd only known seventy-two hours. I shrugged to hide my sudden realization. "Okay," I breathed.

He stopped where he stood, waiting. I walked slowly across the carpet, and slid my hands up his chest, over his taut muscles, and I saw the dark fire in his eyes as I whispered, "I need you. I've never known anyone like you. I can't think straight when you touch me, and I can't breathe right when you kiss me." I ran my palms over his shoulders and pulled his head slowly down to mine as I murmured in a shaking voice, "I want you to make love to me until neither of us can think straight, neither of us can move, or feel anything more." I caressed his mouth with mine, and felt a tremor go through him, but he made no move to touch me.

I opened my mouth and kissed him slowly, my hands slipping down over his chest again, and around his body to pull him into my arms. I planted my palms on his deliciously taut ass, and dragged him closer. I slanted my head to make it easier to kiss him the way I wanted to, and when I lifted my mouth from his, I whispered shakily, "You are the sexiest man I have ever seen, and after you, no other man will ever be able to make me feel like this."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "I can see how a little romance definitely adds something," he murmured, and I noted the tremor in his voice.

I swallowed, blushing warmly. I was afraid he would realize that I had meant every word I'd just said and he would laugh at me. "Okay, you try it."

He gazed down at me for a long moment, his eyes moving over my face as if he were trying to see what was inside of my mind. I was afraid he wouldn't speak, and then he said in a softly husky voice that made me shiver, "I've never known a woman as completely sweet as you. I never felt like I wanted to totally devour anyone before, the way I want to devour you." His eyes moved over my face and hair, and rested on my mouth. His hands slipped over my hips and down my thighs, and back up over my rear and back, and he smiled slowly at the blush that rose again in my cheeks.

"I want to feel you naked against me. I want to be buried deep inside you. I want to kiss every inch of that gorgeous body, and I want to make passionate love to you all night." He lifted my chin with one fingertip, and bent to kiss my lips slowly, deepening the kiss as I sagged a little against him, having trouble thinking straight. I inhaled slowly to stay calm as he murmured softly against my lips, "I want to carry you to bed and spend hours and hours making love to you, and then begin all over again."

Then he lifted his mouth from mine, and he asked, "Was that more like it?"

I blushed, realizing he was just doing what he had thought I was doing—making an effort to be romantic.

"You'll do—in a pinch." I tried to shove him away, but failed.

He laughed, and I shoved at him again. "You just spoiled the whole damned effect," I growled.

His eyes darkened, and he pulled me back, kissing me hungrily, his hands roving over my back and hips seductively as he backed me across the living room floor toward my open bedroom door. "Let's see if we can regain the effect—hmmm?"

He wasted little time getting both of us naked, and this time, he lowered me to my bed gently. His lips curved into a wicked smile as I realized he was sliding down my body purposefully. A shudder of eager realization coursed through me, and I couldn't suppress a whimper as he slowly spread my thighs and ran his fingers teasingly through the triangle of suddenly wet curls that were his target.

"James!" I managed a strangled cry as he spread my swollen, wet folds with his lean fingers, and he bent to give me a long, slow, wicked lick, his eyes on my flushed face and bright eyes.

"What?" he smiled wickedly up at me as I waited breathlessly for him to continue.

"What in Hell are you waiting for?" I gasped, biting my lower lip and glaring at him.

He gave a soft laugh and dipped his head to take my throbbing clit into his hot mouth. His tongue swirled wickedly around the swollen nub as I clutched his dark hair and whimpered, my head thrown back in ecstasy as he mercilessly tortured me with pleasure so intense, I thought I would die. Orgasm after shattering orgasm ripped through me until I thought I could take no more, and I shoved his head away, rolling to the side and curling into a ball.

"Wimp," he whispered softly into the back of my hair as he slipped up to wrap his arms around me and cradle my shuddering body against his.

I struggled to recover. My thoughts were shredded. My nerves were shot. And I wanted nothing more than to turn the tables on him and make him regret calling me a wimp.

I rolled over to face him and shoved him onto his back, glaring at his grinning face. "Wimp, huh?"

He started to reach for me, but I evaded his hands and lunged for him, pinning him easily (he wasn't fighting very hard).

"What are you doing?" he asked, his brows lifting.

"I didn't get quite enough to eat at supper," I growled, intent on checking him out as thoroughly as he had me. I ran my hands experimentally down his ripped belly and sank my fingers into the nest of black hair that surrounded his semi-solid cock. He hissed in a deep breath as I cupped his sac in one hand and squeezed gently, while I circled his shaft with my other, lifting his rapidly lengthening cock away from his belly.

"Sweet Jesus, Lisa," he hissed and arched as I licked the drop of wetness from his emerging crown. I hadn't actually gotten a real good look at his penis until now, and it gave me a whole new respect for uncircumcised men. In all his raging glory, he stared wordlessly down at me as I laved his soft, sensitive glans, while my hand moved up and down his distended, steel hard shaft, his satiny skin sliding smoothly up and down with my palm like a piece of velvet that cushioned and cradled and teased his cock, almost as much as my tongue did as I licked and surrounded the pink, throbbing head with my hot mouth.

He placed his shaking hands gently on either side of my face, and I looked up at his flushed face as he panted and clenched his teeth. "Oh, God, that feels so fucking good!" he grated between clenched teeth. I sucked harder and tightened my grip. He gave a deep cry of pleasure and dragged my head away quickly, as he came hot and hard, his explosion of hot semen wetting my cheek and chest as I continued to stroke until he gave a groan and fell back against the pillows, his chest heaving.

I ran a fingertip through the slick, pearly wetness on his abdomen, and I smiled happily. That was totally *amazing*. And now I knew a lot more about male physiology.

* * * *

I drove him back to the school just after midnight, and as he opened his door, he smiled across the console at me and asked softly, "Want to come up for a while?"

"Not if I want to be able to walk in the morning," I frowned at him.

"I love it when you talk dirty," he breathed, leaning across the console and pulling me to him for a slow, extremely satisfying kiss. "See you at half past six."

I watched him as he closed the car door and walked to the glass doors, unlocked them, and stepped inside. I felt as if part of me was walking away with him, and I sighed. I locked my car doors, and swung out of the parking lot, feeling a weird combination of euphoria and disappointment. *How could anyone possibly feel both?*

I shook off the feeling of utter desolation and wondered if I were going totally nuts, throwing myself at the man as I was. What must be running through his head as he climbed that narrow staircase to his little apartment right now? 'Wow, what a fantastic lay?' I flushed and shoved my hair out of my face. So what? I was enjoying the hell out of him, too. Even if it meant nothing but good sex to him, I intended to make the most of the moment and put a few pages into my memory book before I was too damned old and wrinkled to manage to attract a man like James Rhee again.

Chapter Eight

I awoke with a groan, my eyes unwilling to open to the sound of my alarm. I crawled out of bed and into the shower, managing to come awake enough to get myself a light breakfast and some coffee and be on my way by 6:00. I had to start going to bed earlier, or at least, going to sleep earlier. I hadn't had a bit of trouble getting to bed. It was the other thingy I was having trouble with.

As I parked next to the building in that same blissfully shady spot, I found myself looking forward to seeing him again, despite the looks I knew I would get from the others. I supposed I could endure that much embarrassment to be able to lay my eyes on the man for a few minutes a couple of times during the day. And lay my hands on his body all night.

I glanced at my watch as I headed for the bathroom to change into my gi. I had half an hour before my first student arrived. Just enough time to check on my schedule and to get another cup of strong coffee to help me stay awake. I wanted to see next week's schedule as well, to see what my hours were. I hoped he would schedule me a little later than 7:00 every morning.

I was fairly certain I had the weekend free. He didn't schedule classes on Saturdays or Sundays. That would be nice for a change. Working for Central California Foods, I had spent more weekends balancing accounts than I cared to recall. When the ledgers and books were out of sync, it was the salaried ones who stayed to work on them. No overtime. Of course, the salary had looked pretty good when they had first offered it to me, but after a few months it appeared that being on that great salary entailed spending twice the time on the job for only 25% more money.

I knew that I wouldn't mind leaving that job. My only real concern was how much longer would he keep me on this one? Would he keep me here even after he grew tired of me as a bedroom buddy? Would he decide my services weren't necessary after he realized that I was not quite as uncommonly attractive as he seemed to think at the moment, after the newness wore off? I shrugged. Why fret about it? I could always find another job.

Matasi had been right. If you couldn't love what you were doing, the job just wasn't right. I found myself smiling. Unfortunately for me, I loved everything I was doing, not just the work. Would I find it as enjoyable after he stopped taking me to bed? Oh, well. What the heck? If I could just keep my head screwed on straight and never let on how much I needed him, how damned much I wanted the man, maybe he would not feel uncomfortable keeping me on as an instructor after the flame fizzled out. I was doing a good job. He would be silly not to keep me on.

I stepped into the office to find everyone's schedules taped to the computer screen, along with a note that read, "I'll be back around 5:00. Maria has your paychecks." I drew a sighing breath and took mine, reading it in a desultory fashion as I walked to the coffee room. Vince was pouring himself a cup of coffee, and Chang was back. Both men glanced up, then excused themselves and left as I got my cup out of the drainer rack.

I could feel the chill in the air. Of course, they would assume that I had gotten Jose into hot water by complaining to the boss. How could they possibly know that I had not even wanted him to mention it? I poured a cup, and sank into one of the chairs at the large table, stirring sugar and cream into it slowly.

"Oh, here you are," Maria frowned as she came past the door and detoured in to hand me my paycheck. "The boss said to make sure you didn't leave before he gets back."

"Why? Is he planning to fire me so soon?" I asked dully, gazing at the check in my hand. It paid me through yesterday. Was the honeymoon officially over?

She lifted her brows and gazed at me questioningly. "What makes you ask that?"

"I seem to have made some enemies since yesterday, and I have no idea how to make them realize I didn't want that to happen." I sipped my coffee, and she sank onto the chair opposite mine, shuffling the remaining paychecks absently as she shook her head.

"Jose deserved exactly what he got. He's damned lucky the boss didn't tear a few large strips off him yesterday. Jimmy doesn't tolerate disrespect of any kind between his instructors. Give them time. They'll all get over it."

"I don't think they will." I shrugged. "I think they see me as just another trouble-making groupie hanging out around their boss, looking to get laid. I don't think they'll ever get over it."

"Well, they'd better. He wouldn't have hired you just to get you into bed, honey. He doesn't have any problems in that department. I've never known the man to have to hire a woman to take her to bed." I blushed, turning bright red, and she grinned at me. "If the man likes you enough to want to be with you after he gets off the job, you must be pretty damn special. He doesn't waste his time on the kind of women you're talking about. If he did, he would be getting laid every night, and twice on Sunday."

"Thanks for the morale boost, Maria." I smiled, folding up my check and tucking it into my bra. I rose from the chair, took my cup, and headed for the private lesson room.

By 4:30, I was ready to hit the shower. The school was air conditioned, but not well enough to keep me from feeling the results of eight hours of hard action. Having been used to sitting at a desk all day for the past several months, I was feeling the effects of just three full days of hard work. My body ached, my legs ached, and my feet hurt. I'd finished my last class, and I wanted to change out of my sweaty canvas gi. I leaned in the sewing room door to tell Maria that I was going to go take a shower in the weight room before the boss got back, and to tell him when he arrived that I hadn't left.

"He leaves the upstairs apartment unlocked, honey. The guys will be using the shower down here. Why don't you go up and use the one in the apartment? He said he wouldn't be back until after 5:00. You should have plenty of time to clean up."

"Thanks, Maria. I feel like a pile of wet laundry." I went back to the office for my bag, and climbed the stairs to the apartment wearily. A hot shower would feel wonderful. I wasted no time in climbing into the shower, and I stood with my head under the steaming spray, groaning with enjoyment. I soaped my body and used his shampoo to wash the perspiration out of my hair, and after a few minutes, I felt like a new person.

As I shut off the water and slid the glass door open to reach out for a towel, I heard the outer door open and I heard voices. The sound of a female voice made my face go bright red as I realized that he had brought a woman here, and here I stood, dripping and naked in his shower. I wrapped the towel about myself with trembling hands.

He was twenty minutes early! I stepped out of the shower and quietly turned the lock on the bathroom door, and dried off as quickly as I could. I was in the middle of zipping my slacks when I heard the bathroom door jiggle as someone tried to open it. I gasped and quickly dragged my T-shirt on over my head as a woman's voice called out, "It's locked." My heart stuck in my throat, and I wondered if I would die on the spot of total mortification.

"It shouldn't be," James' husky tones made me wince as I dragged on my Nikes, and tossed the wet towel into the little wicker hamper under the freestanding sink. I heard the door rattle, and I smoothed my wet hair back and reached for the lock. I twisted it, and opened the door.

The woman standing there with James was incredibly beautiful. I swallowed hard, blushing like a fool and feeling like a wet frump as I stepped out of the bathroom with an apologetic shrug and said to him, "Sorry, Shihan Rhee. Maria told me I could use your bathroom since the guys were hogging the one in the weight room. I didn't realize you'd be back so soon. Sorry to leave it a mess for you."

His eyes were unreadable as his lips twitched in suppressed amusement at the red color staining my cheeks, and I wanted to kick him in the groin with all my heart at that moment. I smiled at the woman, apologized again, and sidled past them both, clutching my bag containing my gi and my underwear to my chest. I was halfway through his bedroom when I heard her ask, "What's wrong, Jimmy?"

I didn't hear his reply because I'd picked up speed. I had managed to get out the door and was flying down the narrow stairs three at a hop before he replied. I heard the door open behind me, but I was running full tilt by the time he called after me, and I made it to my car before he could possibly have reached the bottom of the stairs. I saw him come out the door into the parking lot as I peeled out of the lot and onto the street, and I didn't bother to look into the rear view mirror. Whatever he'd wanted to talk to me about could wait until Monday.

I felt utterly deflated. The woman he had brought home was the most exquisitely gorgeous thing I'd ever laid eyes on. Thick, gleaming black hair swinging in a sweeping pageboy around slim shoulders. Definitely not the athletic type. She had delicate hands with nails two inches long and a dress that exposed all but the top third of long, sexy legs. I hated her. And she had been tiny compared to me. Maybe he liked tiny, delicate, un-athletic females. I still hated her. Oh, well. He could bring home anyone he wanted. He had brought me home, hadn't he? I couldn't help but feel depressed and a little hurt. No. A LOT hurt. I supposed I shouldn't have

had any real expectations, but I hadn't expected it to be just a two-night stand. I drove home wanting to cry.

The phone was ringing when I stepped into the apartment, but I didn't want to talk to anyone. I let the answering machine pick it up as I went into the bedroom and found the blow dryer. I sank onto the edge of my bed and plugged the dryer into the outlet beside the little bedside table. I bent forward and dried my hair, my thoughts on the last two nights, and how silly I had been, wanting more than just what he had to offer. I'd known it might not last more than a short time, so why the hell was I so upset?

I thought I heard the phone again, but I wasn't sure. I turned off the dryer and went into the bathroom to brush out my hair. While I was in the bathroom, the phone rang again. I heaved a weary sigh, and walked back into the living room to pick up the phone. Maybe it was Matasi.

The person had hung up by the time I got to it, so I sat down, dialed Matasi's number in New Haven, and waited for ten rings for him to pick up. "Hi—this is me. Did you just call here?"

"No, my child. I was just getting into bed. You really must learn to call at decent hours. You know I go to bed with the hens."

"The chickens," I corrected him with a smile, feeling suddenly ready to burst into tears. "Sorry. I just got home."

"And how is your new job going?" his voice sounded crackly and dry, like paper.

"Fine."

"Which translates roughly as 'terrible'. What is it, Lisa? What is upsetting you, child?"

"Am I so damned transparent to you?" I laughed shakily, wiping the tears from my cheeks as I sniffed.

"Only because I hear tears in your voice, child. Tell me, please, what has upset you?"

"Oh, Matasi, I'm so damned confused," I sighed, closing my eyes and leaning my head on my hand as I drew a shaking breath. "I feel like a high school kid again."

"What has he done to upset you, child?" his voice was crisp. He assumed it had to be James. And he was right on target.

"Nothing at all. He's been great. Polite—concerned—a perfect gentleman."

"Is this the same James Rhee I am acquainted with?" he asked quietly, and I grinned, sniffing back my tears.

"Sure, but he hasn't done anything to upset me. I'm just terribly tired and a little depressed right now. I miss you."

"And I miss you, little one." I smiled as I considered that I was two inches taller than he was, and he still called me "little one." "Are you going to celebrate your birthday well tomorrow?"

I blinked. I'd almost forgotten. "I figured I'd clean my bathroom and maybe go out to a movie," I laughed.

"A lousy way to spend your birthday, but perhaps the package I have mailed will arrive tomorrow, and you will have your present on time," his voice sounded a trifle more tired.

"How are you doing?" I asked softly. "You sound tired."

"I am ninety next month. I have every right to be tired, dear child. And now, though I have enjoyed speaking with you, I must go to bed. I will call you to see if your package arrives tomorrow night. Sleep well, child."

I hung up slowly, feeling even more depressed. Here I was, out on the west end of creation, while my oldest and dearest friend was alone and turning ninety at the other end of the known world. I drew a long breath and decided that I was going to fly back and see him for his birthday. In fact, the prospects of being able to stay there, and maybe reopen the school looked better and better every time I thought about it. In the past three days, I'd discovered that I'd desperately missed teaching, and I missed Matasi terribly.

The door buzzer made me look at my watch with a frown. It was nearly 6:30. Who could be at my damn door at this hour? The buzzer sounded again. And again. I frowned and tromped irritably through the living room to the door, and flung it open. "You only had to buzz once..." my voice caught in my throat as I met the angry dark eyes of James Rhee, and I swallowed. "Oh." My words died off as he stalked straight past me into the apartment, and as I turned to face him, I closed the door slowly, feeling oddly disconnected. "Come in." My sarcasm was wasted on him.

His eyes were unreadable, but the way his lips were compressed, I could tell he was very angry. When he finally spoke, his words were so low I barely caught them. "You didn't stop when I came after you. And I called here six times. Do you ever pick up your damn phone?"

I flushed and stared at him. "I didn't realize it might be you. I'm sorry." I folded my arms across my chest defensively.

"Who else would be calling half a dozen times in half an hour? And why the hell did you run off like that?" he asked with a frown.

He'd called six times? I swallowed and shrugged again. "I felt like an idiot. You had company, and I shouldn't have been there. I didn't want to embarrass you. So I left."

"I'll say you left. You left so fast I couldn't have caught you without running."

"I figured you might not want me around. You appeared to be pretty busy. It doesn't take a ton of bricks falling on me to realize I'm the third wheel on a bike."

He frowned at me. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

Was the man completely obtuse? I drew a deep breath and calmed myself. "Your girlfriend might have been a trifle upset by another woman hanging around your apartment like she owned the place, okay?"

His dark eyes looked confused. I was ready to smack him upside the head with a roundhouse punch, but after a moment, his face changed, and he grinned wickedly. "You were jealous?"

I glared at him malevolently. "I don't think it's so damn funny. Maybe it seems hilarious to you that you have two women at once in your damn apartment, but I assure you I was not at all amused. I doubt she was, either."

He shook his head and laughed softly. "I assure you she wouldn't have minded another woman being in my apartment. In fact, she was upset that you ran off so quickly and she couldn't meet you."

"Well, maybe she doesn't mind sharing, but some people do," I flashed back, turning to walk past him. He reached out to pull me against his warm, solid body before I could evade his move.

"I doubt seriously that my sister was in the least upset to find you there."

I felt hot color flood my face. *His sister?* I tried not to look elated as I stared up into his smiling eyes. "Oh." *Duh.* His mouth came down hard on mine, taking my breath away.

He bent, swung me off the floor, and carried me into my bedroom, still kissing me. When he set me on my feet, he lifted his lips from mine and said in a hoarse voice, "You didn't give me much time to make introductions. However, I'm rather glad it happened that way, because now we're completely alone."

I inhaled sharply as he dragged my T-shirt up and over my head to toss it aside. This was getting to be habit of his. His mouth held mine as he unzipped my slacks, and in seconds, I was on my bed, and he was lying on top of my naked body, fully dressed. His denim-clad hips pressed into my wet curls and his mouth dragged over my throat.

I shoved him away to stare up into his face. "Not fair. You are going to do it fully dressed? Is this going to be a quickie, and then you disappear?"

"Hardly—we have all night." He ran his palm seductively over my bare breast. I bit my lip as his hand dipped lower, and he drew a ragged breath. His lips closed hungrily over a puffy nipple as his hand slid down to part my wet, throbbing folds. Dear God. The first touch of those lean fingers sent me through the roof. I jerked my hips up to meet his hand as I screamed and clutched his arms, unable to stop myself. His lips curved against my breast, and he whispered huskily, "You are one horny woman."

Frowning into his grinning face, I started to shove him away, but he ignored my attempt to shimmy out from under him, and he switched his erotic attention to my other nipple, effectively stopping my struggle, and causing my hands to fist into his thick black hair.

"You are so awful," I gasped, relishing the way his strong tongue was moving over my breasts, and then moving slowly down my torso to deliver a sweet, tender, gently seeking kiss to my tautly swollen clit that made me forget I was angry with him. *Made me forget my own damn name.*

"Shut up and enjoy this while you can. I fully intend to be paid back in spades for this." His mouth took me hungrily, his tongue swirling and dipping and sucking to the music of my whimpers and gasps as I dug my heels into the mattress lifted my hips up as I cried out shamelessly, and clutched his hair in my fists. I was writhing in a soul shaking, continuous climax that lasted until I weakly shoved him aside and begged him to stop.

I lay there for a few moments, fighting to regain my breath, and felt him shift slightly. I blinked down at him as he stripped off his own clothes, and I couldn't help it—I reached for his cock the moment it erupted from his jeans. His eyes darkened, and he inhaled sharply as I wasted no time shoving him over onto his back and tasting his velvet skin with my own tongue. He watched me with glazed eyes as I caressed every inch of muscle I could reach, until I settled over him and slowly kissed his raging erection, running my lips and tongue up the side to lick the throbbing crown. His deep groan of enjoyment spurred me on.

"Are you ready for paybacks?" My voice was husky. I hardly recognized it.

"Christ, yes."

I turned so that he could see what I was doing, knowing that it would be a bigger turn-on for him than just feeling it. I wet the copper head with my tongue, and then slid my lips over him, taking as much as I possibly could into my mouth, as my hands caressed and moved up and down the thick, engorged shaft slowly. I sucked deeply, and felt the tremor go through his trembling body. His fingers threaded themselves into my hair, and he seemed to be fighting the need to arch upward with every downward stroke of my mouth. Sweat sheened on his chest and forehead and I met his stunned gaze.

"Damn—don't stop now," he rasped through clenched teeth.

He struggled to hold back and enjoy it as long as he could, and then he caught my face and pulled my mouth from him, dragging me up his trembling body to kiss me hungrily, his mouth drinking in the taste of his pre-cum on my tongue. I felt hot fluid jet out between us, then dribble warmly down the sides of his body to wet the comforter.

When he had drained himself, and his shaft grew softer, I whispered huskily, "How was that?"

His lips curled into a stunningly wicked grin as he reached down beside the bed to retrieve my T-shirt and clean us off with it. *Couldn't he have used his own?* "Come here." He

reached out and dragged me across his chest, and kissed me as if he meant to swallow me whole, and I shivered with reaction as he pulled my legs astride his hips and growled against my mouth, "That was great—but this is even better."

He kissed me hungrily—his mouth seemingly drawing my soul out of my body as he ran his lean, calloused hands over every inch of bare skin he could reach. I sucked his hot tongue into my mouth, meeting every parry and thrust passionately. I ran my palms down from his shoulders, over his flat copper nipples, then pinched them lightly and felt him shudder with enjoyment. I bent to lick his throat—nibble on his rough chin—felt his cock begin to distend—lengthen—stiffen into velvet steel once again. The condom was already in his hand, and he was rolling it with sensual skill onto himself. Oh, yeah.

He eased me upward, angling me for a better meshing of our heated, sweat-damp bodies, fitting his cock expertly into the entrance to my wet, needy pussy, whispering that he loved the feel of me taking him in as he drove himself into me with a groan of enjoyment. I sank down over his full, swollen length, moaning softly as I closed my eyes. His hands were on my breasts, his thumbs strumming the nipples as he lifted his hips with each downward surge of my body.

"You feel so fucking good!" His voice was a rasp of throbbing pleasure as I rocked on him like a demented nympho, and I gave a little cry of delight as one hand left my breast and his talented fingers found my clit. I lost it right there. He caught my lower lip in his teeth gently as he stiffened beneath me and joined me in my gasping, throbbing orgasm. When I shuddered to a stop, unable to think or move, he simply placed his big hands on my hips and continued to rock my body for me, until neither of us could manage to move.

* * * *

I lay awake for a long time, listening to his quiet, deep breathing, enjoying the feel of his possessive, strong arms around me and his powerful, deeply muscled body pressed to my back. I had never before known what it was like to have someone who made me feel totally female—totally desirable. The one rather inept experience I'd had was nothing like this. As I slowly ran my fingertips over his wrist and forearm, I knew without a doubt that I was head over heels crazy about this man, but he would never know it. If I let him know how I felt, he would quietly decide to head for the hills.

Men like James Rhee did not settle down and thrill to the joys of a close-knit relationship. I had seen too many of them move from woman to woman, affair to affair. Men who looked like him did not stay true for very long. There were too many other women out there, eager and willing, and just as pathetically available as I was. I decided not to think too hard about the future. I preferred my warm little bubble of fantasy where he was everything I could hope for in a man. It was far more pleasant than the eventual reality.

I shifted and drew a deep breath, and closed my eyes, enjoying the feel of his arm tightening and drawing me back to him as he shifted and sighed. I smiled in the darkness, and drifted off to sleep. I felt him kiss the back of my shoulder as I drifted off, and I thought I heard him murmur sleepily, "Go to sleep, love."

* * * *

I rolled over and threw my arm out, only to feel an empty space beside me in my bed, and I opened my eyes with a little sigh of regret. He was gone. I suppose it was silly of me to expect him to still be there. I glanced at the bedside clock, and yawned. It was nearly 8:00. I'd slept in.

I didn't want to get up. It was my damned birthday, and I wanted to be lazy. Of course, the call of nature made it totally impossible for me to lie there, and in a few minutes I rose and padded into the bathroom, yawning and scratching my head with both hands.

I washed my hands and face, brushed my teeth, and decided that I would sneak another hour in my bed. I crawled back under the covers and pulled them up over my head to keep out the morning light peeping in through the curtains, and I drifted back to sleep.

I was in the middle of a delicious dream when the smell of freshly brewed coffee drifted through the haze, and I came up from under the covers with a jerk to see James setting a tray on the bedside table. He was wearing only his half-unbuttoned Levi's, and I drew a deep breath at the sight of him, half-naked, pouring me a cup of coffee. He glanced at me as I sat up, forgetting the fact that I was not wearing a stitch as the sheet fell away. "Morning," he said softly, as he poured another cup. I was eyeing the toast and bacon and eggs, my stomach growling. He was eyeing me.

"Breakfast in bed? You can sleep over anytime you like," I sighed happily, yawning and scooting to the edge of the bed, belatedly dragging the sheet over me for modesty's sake.

"Thanks. I just might," he breathed. "Here. Put something on so I can eat without distraction, otherwise, I don't think either of us is going to eat breakfast for another hour." He handed me my silk wrapper, and I pulled it on, tying it deftly.

"I thought you were gone."

"Nope. I'm not that easy to get rid of."

"Thanks."

"For breakfast? Or for last night?" he murmured.

"For both." I flushed, taking the cup of coffee from him and sipping. "I'm beginning to feel like you won't respect me anymore, the way I keep falling into bed with you."

We ate in companionable silence, and then he licked his lips and asked me if I wanted more. I shook my head, and handed him my plate as he rose from the edge of my bed. He lifted one brow and said with a grin, "Oh, so now I'm the waitress, too? I cook and now I wash dishes?"

I nodded as I rose from the edge of the bed. "I have to shower and get dressed."

"Watch it, or I'll flush the toilet while you're in the shower," he threatened as he piled the empty dishes and cups on the tray with the coffeepot, and picked it up.

"If you hurry, you can shower next," I headed for my dresser and pulled out fresh underwear and a clean T-shirt, and grabbed my jeans off the back of a chair. I didn't wait to hear his answer. I went into the bathroom and closed the door, turning on the shower as I piled my clean clothes on the clotheshorse by the side of the shower enclosure.

I dropped my wrapper and stepped into the shower, and was in the middle of shampooing my hair when the shower door slid open, and I gasped, jerking around to find him stepping into the cubicle with me, his marvelous body towering over mine in the small space.

"I'll wash the dishes later," he murmured as he closed the glass door, and reached for the soap. I swiped the shampoo from my face with a wet hand and stared at him as he took the soap and rubbed it between his hands to get a good lather, and then he reached for me and began to run his hands over my skin. I trembled with reaction as his large palms cupped and lathered my breasts. Holy shit—that felt marvelous.

I inhaled deeply and a shiver of enjoyment trickled through me as he said softly, "We can scrub each other's back this way," as he slid his arms about me and lathered my back and thighs and buttocks with his soapy hands, his wet, slick body plastered to mine, front to front. I felt my knees go wobbly as his cock grew against my belly.

"You know, this could get to be a pleasant habit," he rasped as he kissed my nose. His hands took the lovely lather between my thighs, and I gasped and groaned as he gently lathered my sex with those oh, so delicious fingertips. I widened my stance a little to give him access, and he growled against my skin.

We were standing in the shower with hot water streaming over us, and he was making me forget my own name. I felt limp and tingly and extremely willing as he bent to kiss my mouth, and my hands slid around his wet body as he backed me under the spray to rinse me off. I gasped as the water cut off my breath, and I spluttered and shook my head as the shampoo rinsed down over me.

He slid to his knees in the shower and slowly ran his strong tongue over that most sensitive, teeniest part of my throbbing anatomy, almost sending me through the shower roof as I very nearly tore the showerhead off the pipe. Oh—yeah!

Lifting my right leg up to drape it over his powerful shoulder, then my left, he angled my hips with his hands as he drove me wild. I closed my eyes as he slowly licked and swirled, sucking slowly and wickedly, laving my slit with his hot tongue as I whimpered and clung to his hair. With my shoulders braced against the cool wet tile and my legs over his shoulders, I wildly jerked my hips up to allow full access to my throbbing pussy as he dipped his tongue into my slick folds and I exploded into millions of earth-shattering sparkles, making enough noise to wake the dead.

When he lowered my feet to the shower floor and rose to kiss me roughly, I whispered raggedly, "You wicked, wicked man—I could just eat you up."

His lips curved against mine, and he breathed, "Promises, promises..."

* * * *

I rubbed my hair dry with the towel as I stood in the bathroom, and he said quietly, "What are your plans for the day?" *Besides molesting my boss?*

I shrugged. "I need to do some laundry, and, of course, I have dishes to wash. I also have to do some shopping." I tossed the wet towel into my hamper, which was overflowing. I was standing there with nothing on, but then, he'd seen everything I had to show, so I wasn't too terribly self-conscious at that moment. The fact that he was also wearing nothing probably made me feel less conspicuous. He ran his towel over his delicious body to dry off, and then he tossed his towel on top of mine.

"You're going to spend today doing menial labor?" he grinned as he reached for his own underwear, and pulled them on nonchalantly.

I eyed him questioningly. "Why not? It has to be done sometime. Today seemed open." *Unless you offer something more exciting.*

"You can do all that stuff tomorrow. You only turn twenty-seven once in your lifetime."

I blinked. "How'd you know...?" I began, and then I remembered that he had been spying when I'd told Hilary that Saturday was my birthday. "Spy."

He shrugged as he pulled his jeans on and zipped them up. "How about taking the day off and coming with me?"

"Where to?" I asked, brushing my teeth slowly.

"To Santa Monica."

"What's in Santa Monica?" I asked.

"Someone I promised I'd pay a visit to. It shouldn't take long, and then we can hit the beach for a while, or maybe have dinner. How about it?" He pulled his shirt on over his head, and tucked it into his jeans. I tried not to stare. He had the kind of hot body a woman only dreamed about. I couldn't believe this man was with me. His dark eyes moved over me as I stood in front of the sink, and he smiled quietly. "Of course, if you want me to stay here with you all day, in bed, just stay like you are—who am I to argue?"

"I thought you wanted to visit someone in Santa Monica."

"Later," he murmured as he slipped his hands over and around my ribs to caress my bare back.

"How much later?" I whispered as he kissed me slowly.

"Much later."

Chapter Nine

The drive to Santa Monica was pleasant. He drove down a well-kept little street, pulled into a neatly bordered driveway, and shut off the engine. I looked at him questioningly as he slid out of the van. "Come on," he said. I followed him, closing my door as I waited for him to come around. As we walked toward the pristine white door of the neat little house, a smiling older man emerged, walking to greet us. I lagged and felt his hand pressing me forward, resting on the small of my back.

As the man approached I noted the way he was smiling at me, and I flushed. He spoke in Korean, and James responded in the same language, bowing as the old man stopped in front of us. I saw the man's eyes move from James back to me again, and he said in excellent English, "So, my son tells me that I have you to thank for this visit." He bowed politely. "He visits far too seldom, and it does my heart good to see him every now and then. Since his mother died, it has been rather lonely here."

James said something in Korean, and his father responded with a frown, speaking rapidly in the same language. Then his face softened again and he said, "James is reminding me that he has offered me a place with him, but he knows that this is my home, and I will live here until I, too, die." He extended his hand, I took it, and he said with a wonderful smile, "My son forgets that I am an old man and cannot leave the old ways for the new. It is a great honor and pleasure to meet you, Miss Hampton. James has told me that you have brought him out of his self-imposed exile. For this, I am grateful. Would you care to come in for some tea?"

I flushed slightly, and said, "Thank you, Mr. Rhee, you're very kind." How had he known my name? I smiled as he linked his arm through mine, nudging his son aside as he led me into the house.

"It is seldom that these old eyes see such fresh beauty. I can see why he is so taken with you, my dear," he said quietly. "I am happy to see that he has finally decided to find a young woman and settle down."

I blinked, not saying what popped instantly into my mind. I glanced at his son over his head, and James simply gazed back quietly, giving no indication that he had heard his father's words, thank God. I said something noncommittal and sank down onto the comfortable old sofa as he said, "I will get the tea. Please sit."

I glanced at James as he sat next to me on the wide sofa, leaving me only the space I occupied as he leaned back and threw his arms out along the back of it. "Why didn't you tell me it was your father you were visiting?" I growled.

"Because I didn't want you to be nervous," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Nervous? He seems to think that I'm the one who's going to hogtie you. What the hell am I supposed to say? What the hell have you told him? You could have given me a little advance notice here," I snapped.

"Be yourself. I'll handle the embarrassing questions that may come up," he replied quietly.

"But he thinks..."

"I'm sorry. He simply jumped to conclusions. I didn't want to upset him by telling him the truth, and such a slight deception won't do any harm, will it?"

I stared at him, realizing that he had probably brought me here just to let his father think he was involved. I drew a deep breath. The poor man was probably beside himself, wondering if he was ever going to get to be a grandfather before he died.

"How could you do that to him?" I breathed, but his father came back into the room with a tea tray, and I stopped, saving my tirade for when we were alone. I smiled up at the older man as he set the tray on the coffee table before us, and he smiled brilliantly as his eyes skimmed over his son. I felt James' arm resting across my shoulders, and I refrained from shrugging it off.

"This is a most happy occasion. May I be the first to congratulate you?" he said warmly. He patted his son's shoulder, and I flushed hotly. "You have dallied long enough."

I nearly swallowed my tongue as James smiled and pulled me against him, and he squeezed my shoulder to shut me up. He spoke in Korean, and his father laughed softly, his dark eyes lighting up. I frowned as he responded in the same language, and he smiled at me warmly. "It is very rude of us to converse in a language you do not speak or understand. We must remember to speak English."

I had the feeling that what they had said wasn't something I would want to hear, but I said nothing. I merely smiled at him. I felt James' body against mine, and his hand gently squeezed my shoulder again. His father poured us some tea and sank onto a straight-backed chair of lacquered wood, speaking pleasantly of the weather and of the school. And then he asked me quietly, "How is my old friend, Matasi?"

I lifted my brows. "He is as well as can be expected. I expect he lies about his health so he won't worry me. His goth birthday is next month, you know."

Mr. Rhee nodded slowly. "It has been some time since I last saw him, nearly three years. Please tell him that I wish him well on his birthday." He bowed slightly as he spoke, and I nodded.

"Of course I will. I'm sure he will appreciate your kind wishes. I feel terrible that he is out in New Haven all alone. I have been out here for several months, and I haven't seen him. He will call tonight. I'll let him know you spoke highly of him."

"Perhaps he would consider flying out here for the wedding." Mr. Rhee smiled.

I stiffened, but James said smoothly, "We'll ask him."

I glared at him, but he just smiled. He was pushing this charade a bit too far, even suggesting that we tell Matasi that there was going to be a marriage. How could James let his father get his hopes up like this? I wanted to say something, anything, to tell him that things were not as he thought, but I couldn't bring myself to be the source of disappointment for this wonderful old man. Like James said—it was just a little deception.

We drank our tea, and James discussed the business with his father, and then an upcoming tournament. Mr. Rhee seemed to be extremely well versed in his son's business, and I slowly realized from what I was hearing that he, too, was a teacher, like Matasi. I spoke little, listening a bit absently. I was simmering slowly below the boiling point as I thought of how James was allowing his poor old father to hope. Wait 'til I got him alone. But when the subject turned to James' upcoming nuptials, I put my foot down firmly. "We are not..." I began, but James finished smoothly for me.

"We aren't planning to marry for some time. She hardly knows me well enough yet. I have to give her time to understand what she is taking on in marrying me." His eyes told me to shut up and play along, and I bit back my angry retort and glared at him.

"Of course, forgive an impatient old man who wishes to see his son's children before he dies." The man smiled at my red cheeks.

James spoke to him in Korean, and he laughed softly.

I glared at James, and said tightly, "I don't think this is funny."

Mr. Rhee shook his head and said quietly, "Please, do not be angry with my son. He is as impatient as I am, but he understands that he must give you time. It is in a man's nature to be less than patient in matters of this kind."

I swallowed, wanting to tell him that his damn son was a lying, conniving creep, but I couldn't hurt the man like that. I drew a calming breath and said tightly, "I promise you, Mr. Rhee that your son and I will discuss this matter the moment we are in private."

I shot a malevolent look at his son, and he smiled wickedly. I think he was anticipating my outburst the moment I was alone with him, and that thought gave me pause. I didn't like the way his eyes glowed as he seemed to be considering my threat. My mouth went dry. I was way out of my league here. I did not have the weapons in my meager arsenal to deal with a high powered, dynamic, pushy, and sneaky man of this caliber. I knew that if I tried to take him on, I would more than likely end up in bed with him, begging him to make love to me, instead of taking him down a notch, as I wanted so desperately to do. I glared at him defiantly.

Then I did exactly what I figured would upset him the most.

"To be truthful, Mr. Rhee, it's your son who doesn't want to commit. I, myself, would like to be married as soon as possible, but he just keeps on telling me that he wants to be sure." I

threw my hands out helplessly. "I told him I'm sure now, but he won't listen. He's a typical black belt type male, always wanting to be in full control."

I saw James' dark eyes flicker, and I felt a flash of triumph at the wrench I'd just tossed into his careful machination. The ball was back in his court. Let him shimmy his way out of this one, if he could.

His father glanced expectantly at him, and I watched his face as he met my gaze quietly for a long moment as his father said in genuine delight, "There. You see, son? She is as eager as you are. There is no reason to delay longer. Your sister will be most happy to help with the planning, and I am certain that Matasi will gladly help with the plans."

I lifted my brows expectantly, waiting for James to panic and admit to his father that the whole thing was a sham, that he had only wanted him to think he was interested in someone, but as I waited, I felt panic well up in me. He wasn't denying it. Surely the man wasn't going to let his father go on thinking he was seriously looking to get hitched, was he? I swallowed hard, and tried not to look like I was going to choke. When he finally did speak, I heard him say softly, "Well, then, that's settled, isn't it? We will allow you the honor of setting the date of our marriage, father. You and Shihan Kanegawa, of course."

I stared at him in shock, my mouth falling open as he met my startled eyes. "James..." I started shakily, ready to tear strips off him.

But his father stopped me by standing and pulling me up from the sofa, and saying happily, "Come with me, Daughter. I wish to show you the dress James' mother wore for our wedding, 45 years ago, as my grandmother wore it before her. I am certain that she would be thrilled to know that her son's bride will at last wear it."

I opened my mouth to tell him that this was all a terrible mistake, but James rose smoothly to touch my arm, and he said quietly, "I would like to speak with Lisa alone before you do so, Father. I wish to explain to her about our family customs."

His father nodded with a broad smile and left us without questioning his son's motives. I barely gave him time to get out the door when I turned and hissed furiously, "How can you do this to him? How in God's name can you hurt him like this? You have no more intention of marrying than the man in the moon. Don't you realize what it'll do to him when he finds out you lied to him?"

I realized in my anger that his hands were on my waist, moving slowly around to pull me into his arms. I shoved at him furiously. "That is not going to work this time, dammit. I don't care how goddamn sexy you can be, I'm not going to let your father believe that there is going to be a real marriage. I refuse to allow him to be hurt with this." His mouth cut off my tirade, and I pounded his back with both fists. He never even flinched. I was dizzy with the man's touch, trembling like a leaf from his complete control over my senses, and when he stopped kissing me long enough to look down into my flushed face, I was unable to think straight.

"He isn't going to be hurt, Lisa. I fully intend to do exactly as I said. And since you have so kindly volunteered to fill the position my father has been seeking an applicant for, I'm afraid that you will have to stand by your offer, unless, of course, *you* wish to hurt him."

I stared at his serious face, unable to believe what I was hearing. "You can't be seriously considering marriage just to please your father. You don't just get married to make someone else happy. You have to love someone before you get married. All you have to do is tell him the truth, that we're just friends, and the whole thing was just a mistake. There's no need on this earth to get trapped into marriage just to please your father." I must have looked as panicky as I felt, for his eyes searched my face quietly, a frown on his face.

"You'd hurt him just to avoid becoming tied down to someone you didn't love? Maybe love is an overrated emotion. The important thing might be friendship, and enjoying the other person. You like me at least a little, don't you?" his eyes slipped over my face slowly.

I swallowed hard. "Of course I do."

"And sex won't be a problem. You seem to like me that way, too," he breathed softly.

I blushed warmly. "I don't think I have to answer that."

He smiled. "And I know that I enjoy sex with you," his hands slid over my body, and he kissed my forehead softly. "So what is there to be upset about? We'll manage to get along rather well. We have common interests. We share the same love for the martial arts. And you did express an interest in helping me to live decently instead of—how did you put it—'in poverty'?"

I stared at him incredulously. Was I hearing him say that he really was planning to marry me? I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but not a sound emerged. I was drowning in the completely amazing idea of actually being married to this man. I couldn't believe it. I'd heard of marriages of convenience before, but I'd never dreamed a man like James Rhee would be forced to sink to that level. He could have his choice of any number of beautiful females. He didn't have to settle for me.

I closed my eyes as he bent to kiss me again, and I moaned softly as he deepened the kiss slowly. I pulled back and stared at him, pink cheeked, and asked breathlessly, "But what if someone comes along you fall in love with? What happens then?"

He lifted one dark brow, and he seemed to be considering this possibility. "I suppose we could reevaluate the situation, when and if that ever occurred." He was bending to kiss me again when his father stepped back into the room, and he cleared his throat to let us know we were not alone. I blushed and hid my flaming face against James' shoulder as he said to his father in a husky voice, "I think we need another moment, if you don't mind terribly."

* * * *

I sat in the far corner of the front seat as we drove back, feeling as if I'd just been picked up by a whirlwind and deposited on the far side of the globe. I had spent the better part of the

last two hours looking at the gifts James' father had been saving to give his son's bride, and feeling like a terrible fraud for having allowed this to happen. The wedding dress that James' father had saved so carefully was a magnificent wonsam of glowing red silk embroidered with every possible color of the rainbow, with birds, flowers, and gold braid, which boggled the mind. It was very old, and had been worn by all the brides of the family since 1740. It was kept packed in cedar, with shavings of fragrant wood tucked into its folds to keep moths from attacking and destroying it. I'd stared at it, feeling hot tears welling behind my eyes to think that James was going to let it be worn by a woman he didn't even love. I simply could not understand Asian males. Or non-Asian males for that matter.

Matasi would be delighted, of course. He would have no way of knowing this was a fraud. But then, for me it wasn't. I knew deep inside that I wanted nothing better in life than to be married to this man, but the knowledge that he wasn't at all involved beyond the delightful physical relationship we had been sharing was enough to make me dread the future.

What would happen when he wanted another woman? Would he expect me to look the other way and allow it the way I knew many Korean wives did? Fat chance of that. He would find himself wearing a size 8 shoe in his jock. We were going to have to have a serious talk sometime soon, but right now, I wasn't quite up to it.

As he pulled into the parking area of the school and stopped, I drew a sighing breath. He glanced at me and asked softly, "Would you like to spend the night here, or at your place?"

I avoided his gaze as I shrugged. "I think I would like to go home for the night."

"Okay. I'll go get a few things."

I shook my head. "Alone, if you don't mind. I need space to think."

He gazed at me for a long moment, as if wondering what I was thinking, but then he nodded and said, "Sure, I'll take you there now," as he restarted the van's engine.

* * * *

When we arrived at my apartment building, the package Matasi had sent was waiting in the manager's apartment. I saw the note on my door, and went down to retrieve it. James had to carry it. It was quite large and ungainly. He carried it into the living room, set it on the sofa, and stood for a few minutes, his hands on his lean hips as he waited for me to change my mind and ask him to stay.

I pulled the tape off the package slowly, my eyes stinging as I thought of Matasi, so far away, when I desperately needed him here. James helped me to wad up the paper, and as I opened the large, reinforced box, I swallowed hard.

"Oh, my God," I whispered shakily as I lifted out a painting of my mother and father. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I realized that it had been painted by one of the most noted

portrait artists in the country, and it must have cost Matasi an arm and a leg. How on earth had he gotten it painted?

Of course, I had several photographs of my parents, but none of them together. The artist must have worked very carefully from several to get the feel that made the oil look totally real. It was life-sized, from the mid-chest up, and I sank onto the sofa with a sob. James carefully set the portrait against the chair opposite me, and he slowly sank onto the sofa beside me, his arm slipping about my body as I stared at the warmly real rendering.

"Your parents?" his voice was quiet.

"Yes," I whispered. "I'd almost forgotten how beautiful she was, and how handsome he was."

"They are both dead?"

"Mom, when I was six. Dad went when I was thirteen. Matasi must have had this painted from some old photographs," I breathed shakily.

"Is there a letter or card?" he asked, reaching into the box. "Yes, here's something."

I took the envelopes from him, and I opened the lighter one with trembling hands. I read it through my tears, sniffing and swallowing. *"My dearest Lisa, I have nothing special of my own to give you on this wonderful occasion, so I am giving you something of yours. May you treasure their memory always, as I have treasured your loving friendship these past years. Please try to believe in yourself and others. I know this is difficult. I believe in you. Matasi."*

There was a heavy envelope besides the letter, and I opened it slowly, staring at the thick sheaf of legal documents that appeared to mean that I was the sole owner of the school in New Haven. I looked at James, who took the document and read it. "Does that mean what I think it means?" I asked shakily.

"It appears to mean that he's given you full title to a piece of property in New Haven."

I nodded slowly. "I had no idea he owned it. I thought he was renting the space all this time."

"Not just a space. An entire building, complete with parking lot and space to expand. From the description, you own about one half block of prime real estate in beautiful downtown New Haven."

I glanced anxiously at my watch. It was early enough to call. I reached for the phone. James still hadn't made a move to go. I dialed Matasi's number and waited. It rang a dozen times without an answer, and I frowned. I redialed with the same results. I hung up and dialed Mrs. Balfour's number. She lived across the street from Matasi, and had been kind enough to ensure that he was eating properly. "Hi, Nettie, it's Lisa Hampton. Have you seen Matasi today? I called twice but there's no answer." I breathed nervously.

"No, dear. I haven't seen him. Did you want me to go over and see if he's okay?" she sounded a million miles away.

"Oh, would you please?" I breathed. "It worries me when he doesn't answer. He's been sounding terribly tired lately."

"I'll go over right away, dear. I'll give you a call if there's a problem."

"Thanks, Nettie, you're a doll."

I hung up slowly, and realized numbly that James was still with me. I turned to smile at him, and I inhaled deeply at the look in his eyes. My mouth went dry, my heart began to hammer madly in my chest as he reached out across the sofa and pulled me into his arms, and his mouth slid over mine with an intensity that drained me of all rational thought. His hands moved to my buttons, and I found myself forgetting that I'd asked him to leave me alone for the night.

I kissed him hungrily—breathlessly. My emotional state was too heightened to manage to keep my head screwed on right, and as he made me completely forget that I was angry with him, I clung to him with a fierce abandon that seemed to encourage him all the more.

"In front of my parents?" I whispered shakily as he bent to trap my nipple with his warm lips and tug deliciously.

"They won't mind. I can turn them around if you're shy," his voice was a rough murmur of desire.

He pulled me onto his lap, gently unzipping my slacks and easing them off me with whispered promises and wonderful hands. I was beyond noticing the loss of my panties. I did, however, notice when he unbuttoned the fly of his jeans and shifted to roll on a bright neon green condom. I gave a sobbing giggle as he lifted me to sit astride his lap, impaling me so deliciously with his silk-over steel erection, filling me—stretching me—whispering wicked encouragement into my ringing ears as he flexed his hips with each downward stroke of my body on him. I tugged his shirt over his head, tossing it onto the growing pile on the carpet. I needed my hands on his bare flesh—teasing his flat nipples—raking my nails over his back as he quickened the pace of our strokes.

He wrapped his arms around my body, lifting—lowering, then lifting again—until I gave a cry of climactic delight and my body clenched his cock tight—held him deep—savored the feel of him filling me to bursting. He kissed the side of my jaw, licked my throat, sucked one taut nipple deep, then the other. And then he resumed his mesmerizing lifting—lowering—lifting again. I wanted more. I wanted him deeper—harder. I whispered raggedly against his ear, my breathing rapid. I took his tongue into my mouth, sucking it deep and he groaned deep in his chest, panting with the building release we stretched for once more. Oh, how beautiful he was—wicked—hot. He was devastating in his intensity. He didn't slow his movements. He didn't relax his hold. He was utterly amazing—utterly tireless.

I gave a little whimpering cry against his mouth, and then shoved upward with my feet to stand astride his lap, his wet, stiff cock barely inside my folds, before I sank down hard, the force of our joining enough to send me into a shuddering, screaming climax. I felt him touch my very soul with his silken tip, felt his body swell, then explode as he gave a deep shout of release and buried his lips against my throat.

As I lay against his sweat-slick body, bare skin pressed to bare skin, I wondered how I was going to manage to survive when he decided he wanted another woman. True, we would be married, but that was no deterrent to many men.

I was lying against his chest, my eyes closed as I listened to his strong heart beating beneath my cheek, when the phone rang. I jerked and sat up quickly, reaching for the phone. James' lean hand was still caressing my waist and hip, and he shifted as I lifted my body away from his, letting his wet, sated cock slip from me. "Hello?"

"Lisa? This is Nettie Balfour," her voice sounded strange, and I drew a deep breath.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't want to alarm you, but Mr. Kanegawa is gone."

"Gone?" My mind jumped to all the wrong conclusions.

"Gone. I couldn't get an answer at the door, so I went around to peep in his windows, and the place is totally empty. Not a stick of furniture left. I didn't see him move out. I can't believe he's gone."

I felt James standing beside me, and I put a hand on his chest to steady myself. "What is it?" he breathed softly, his eyes concerned.

I shook my head jerkily and asked shakily, "Has he left a note? Did anyone else in the neighborhood see him?"

"Not a soul. I think maybe he's been selling off his things for the past several months. One of the neighbors on the next block said he sold them his lacquered Chinese table last month. They paid him \$1,500.00 for it."

I swallowed, feeling sick inside. "Oh, Nettie, could you call around and see if he's sold anything to other neighbors? I can't believe he did that. That table meant a lot to him."

"I'll check, dear. I simply cannot understand. How could he have simply packed up and moved out?"

I hung up after assuring myself that she was doing everything possible to find him. I looked into James' frowning face. "Matasi's gone. He's completely moved out of his house. He didn't say a word about moving when I spoke to him last night."

James saw my stricken look and drew me slowly back into his arms, holding me and kissing the side of my cheek as I shivered. "He's probably fine, Lisa. Nothing has happened to him. He probably moved to a smaller place and has the same phone number. People do that quite often when they retire."

"Oh, do you think that's what's happened?" I hadn't thought of that. But why on earth had no one noticed him move out? I looked at the terribly expensive painting again, and realized with a sense of shock that he'd probably sold his things to have that painting done. I knew how horrendously costly Merrick Damien's paintings were. The woman had lived in New Haven for years, and most of the bigwigs in town had portraits by her. She'd made a killing for herself there, but she was the best, I had to admit.

Her portraits were in demand all over the world. Once, the royal family of Greece had asked her to paint a portrait of the old king from photographs. She had charged them enough to pay my year's salary at Central Foods. If Matasi had her paint this one, he might have had to sell every piece of furniture he owned to buy it.

James reached for his shirt, and I reached for my strewn clothing with shaking hands. As he pulled his shirt back over his head and tugged it down, he said softly "I'll give a couple of friends of mine in New Haven a call—see what they can find out for me."

I nodded, dragging my own clothes back on. I was just stepping into my jeans when the door buzzer rang, and I zipped up as I headed for the door. James had picked up the phone, and was dialing New Haven as I reached the door and swung it open.

"Matasi!" I shrieked, flinging my arms about the small, elderly man standing in my open doorway. "Damn it! You scared the hell out of me. What are you doing here? Nettie just told me you had completely moved out. Gone. What on earth has been going on?"

He patiently allowed me to squeeze the life out of him and kiss his papery cheek exuberantly, and then he said quietly, "Don't you think we could speak more comfortably inside your apartment?"

I practically dragged him inside, closing the door behind him, and then I realized that he was looking at James, an expression of mild surprise on his face. "Did I arrive at a bad time? Am I interrupting anything?" he eyed me quizzically, and my blush told him exactly what he had already guessed.

"No, we were just trying to locate a runaway old man at the other end of the known universe," I frowned. I saw James rise from the sofa, and bow respectfully. "I think you two already know each other." I took the two suitcases from Matasi's hands as James crossed the room to help. "You could have called," I said irritably, perversely angry that he hadn't bothered to tell me he was coming.

"And spoil your birthday surprise?" he asked quietly, a wry smile on his face. I handed James the bags and hugged Matasi again, as he coughed and gave a grunt of disgust for my overt need to hug. James set the bags aside and extended his hand to take Matasi's, and as the two men

greeted each other like old friends, I made a dash for my bra, which was dangling over the back of the sofa. I snagged it and jammed it down between the cushions, pretending to straighten the place up a little.

Then I made a beeline for my lace panties, which had been flung across the floor as he had undressed me in such a frenzy just an hour before. I shoved them into my pocket, and quickly searched the place for more evidence of our untrammelled orgy, as Matasi and James carried his bags into my guest bedroom. I retrieved my bra and took it into my own bedroom, dumping it into the hamper. I quickly ran a brush through my mussed hair, and stepped back out into the hallway as they emerged from the guest bedroom, and when I saw Matasi's face, I realized with a sense of surrealism that James had dropped the news of our "wedding" on him.

As he smiled at me brilliantly, he said, "I should have realized when you called last night that you were in love. I am an old fool to have been so worried about you." I flushed a hot pink as James eyed me over Matasi's head. "I have arrived in plenty of time for the wedding, according to James."

I cleared my throat, and I clasped my hands in front of me nervously. "We—only just discussed marriage today, or I would've told you last night."

"I am very happy for you—both of you. To have found each other in a place of this size was fate. It was meant to be."

I looked helplessly at James as Matasi began to talk about the planning of the wedding, which, of course, he and my father-in-law to be would take care of completely. James grinned slowly at my look of utter frustration, and I wanted to slap him. I shot him a glare that could kill a moose, and I followed Matasi back into the living room. As he continued to extol the virtues of my new in-laws, he told me how proud they must be to have me joining their family.

As we sank back onto the sofa, he told me of his trip. I frowned. "Why on earth didn't you call? We would have picked you up at the airport."

"I did call. You were out. So I took a cab. The driver, unfortunately, got lost. It took me almost two hours to arrive here. The poor misdirected man asked me for \$100.00. I gave him \$25.00, and told him that I have been here before, and I was well aware that he was driving in circles for two hours. He will not repeat that ruse again for awhile, I think."

I excused myself to go into the kitchen to get him something to eat, and James stayed to talk with him for a while. I was making the tea when James came in behind me and kissed the side of my neck, his hands slipping about my waist and caressing me as he whispered, "I had no choice but to tell him. He was demanding to know what my intentions were. He didn't miss the underwear you were trying so hard to hide from him."

I leaned my head back against him and closed my eyes as his hands moved over me, and I swallowed hard. "Please stop doing that. I have the will power of a flea when you start doing stuff like that to me. He might come in here." I had to smile at the thought of tiny Matasi facing this big man, demanding to know if he meant to marry me, or disgrace me.

"I'm glad to know I turn you on," he whispered against my ear as he pressed his body to mine "Because you sure as hell turn *me* on." I could feel exactly how much I turned him on, and I laughed and turned around to kiss him, enjoying the feeling of being able to get him as excited as he got me. We were enjoying a very satisfying kiss when Matasi said dryly from the doorway, "Perhaps I should go on to bed without supper—then you two can continue on where you left off."

We jerked apart, and I glared at James as he broke into a snort of laughter and moved away. "Matasi, I'm a grown woman. Stop acting like I'm still thirteen."

"To me, Daughter, you will never be grown up, even when you are a grandmother." he replied wryly as he slapped James on the shoulder and sank into one of the chairs ringing my table. "And now must I starve, or will you feed me?"

Chapter Ten

After supper, James left for a short time while Matasi and I hung the portrait, and when James returned bearing a birthday cake and some ice cream, Matasi insisted on singing Happy Birthday to me in Japanese. I was laughing so hard when he finished, I was doubled over, and James decided that the outdated custom of the birthday spanking was in order. I straightened in panic, but not soon enough. He was on the sofa, with me lying face down across his lap, and as I demanded to be allowed to get up, he gave me a light swat. I gasped and threatened to kill him with my bare hands, and received another. I swore at him foully, and the next one was a bit harder.

"Have a little more respect for the man you are going to marry, my love," he murmured. "In a traditional Korean household, a husband may beat his wife for any transgression, even such a minor one as swearing at him."

Matasi laughed as I swore at him again, and received a fourth swat. "Damn it. This is ridiculous. I'm not a child." I felt his hands slowly caress the rear of my jeans, and I winced, waiting for the next one, but it never came. Matasi chuckled, as James seemed to be thinking about whether he wanted to finish the spanking, or carry me off to bed. I was lifted upright, and set on his lap as if I weighed ounces rather than a solid 135 pounds, and I glared at him as he smiled devilishly into my eyes.

"I wouldn't want to alienate my wife before we're even married, no matter how much fun it would be," he breathed softly, and he kissed me soundly. I could feel him becoming thoroughly excited as I sat on his lap, leaning against him weakly.

"I think it is time for me to go to sleep now," Matasi said quietly, and I shoved away from James, flushed and mussed. Matasi slowly rose from the table and shook his head with a grin. "You two can keep talking. I know my way. Goodnight."

I struggled up from James' lap and shoved my hair back from my hot face. "Our 'talk' can wait," I breathed shakily, smiling at him. "We have all the time in the world to talk."

As I walked down the hall with him, my arm linked with his, I said softly, "I was so worried when Nettie said you were gone. I imagined all sorts of awful things happening. What did you do with all your things? She said the place was empty."

He patted my hand and said, "I liquidated it all. I will have no use for it soon, and there were more important things to be done."

"But you loved those things."

"Not so much as I love you, child, and I wished to see you again before I die."

I stopped outside the bedroom, and shook my head as I bit my lip to keep from crying. "All you had to do was tell me you wanted to come out. I would have bought you a ticket in a heartbeat. You know that."

He smiled at me gently. "I am not a pauper, child. I simply did not need furniture of my own when I am marrying a woman who has a houseful."

I stared at him numbly. *Getting married?* Matasi? "Who—who is she?"

He laughed softly. "You did not think this old man could catch a woman, did you? Well, child, not only did I catch one, but a young one. She is only sixty, and I know that I am putting my life on the line in marrying a woman so young, especially since I have been celibate so many years, but I could not resist her. She is ebullient, delightful, and very good in bed."

I stared at him in shock. "Matasi! I didn't think a ninety-year-old man thought about stuff like that."

He grinned widely. "For a good many years I didn't, child, until I met her. I am not quite dead, I have discovered."

I shook my head and laughed. "You old dog. Who is this lucky lady? Do I know her?"

He smiled as he reached for the doorknob. "Not personally, but she did a very nice job on the portrait of your parents, didn't she?"

I stared at him in amazement. "Merrick Damien?"

He smiled, and stepped into the guest room. "Of course, child. Now, go and talk to your lover, and I will go to sleep. Good night."

* * * *

James grinned wickedly as I told him about Matasi's upcoming nuptials, and he shook his head. "I think you don't give the man enough credit, Lisa. He's a black belt male, after all, and we always get what we want—remember?"

I frowned. "He's ninety. Men his age don't have sex. Anyway, that's what I heard."

"I certainly hope I will be having it at ninety," he smiled slowly, gazing at me thoughtfully. "I hope you aren't planning to give it up at an early age."

I flushed warmly. "Of course not. I got a late start. I plan to be fooling around until I drop dead."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," he breathed softly as he kissed me searchingly, his hands moving slowly, delightfully over my back and hips. My knees started to turn to water again, and I drew back slowly, shaking my head.

"No way, not again. I'm not having Matasi walk in on us."

He smiled down into my eyes, and kissed the tip of my nose. "Okay. Walk me to the car?"

I walked down the hallway with him and as we stepped into the elevator, he kissed my forehead and pressed the button for the foyer. "You know, I think it's time my father started living again. He's been holed up in that damned house since Mom died. Maybe seeing Matasi will bring him back to life. He's only seventy-three."

I smiled as we stepped out of the elevator and walked slowly toward the covered parking area behind the building. His arm was flung casually across the top of my shoulders, and mine was wrapped about his lean waist. We stopped beside the driver's side door, he pulled me into his arms and kissed me hungrily, and I allowed myself to kiss him back as eagerly. I felt his hands running slowly over my body, and I laughed shakily up into his eyes, "You are incorrigible, even when you're leaving, you try."

"Who said anything about me leaving? I figured Matasi wouldn't come out to the van looking for you, and there's a queen-sized bed in the back. All I have to do is push a button," he breathed as he unlocked the door and flicked the lock button for the rest of the doors. He chuckled at my startled look, and swung me off my feet. "No phones—no interruptions—why are you still in those clothes?"

* * * *

Clothing removal must have been his major in school. But I wasn't complaining. I adored the feel of all that lush, smooth skin beneath my palms—all that hot, rippling muscle. I lay on my side, running my palm slowly over his body, watching his face in the dim light from the parking lot lamp above the van that leaked in between the dark curtains that covered the windows. "You amaze me," I breathed as he grabbed my slowly moving hand and lifted it to his lips, licking my fingers slowly.

"In what way?" he breathed huskily as he reached over and pulled the inevitable condom from his jeans and handed it to me to do the honors. I giggled at the sight of the neon pink condom. He growled and dragged me bodily over him, easing my knees apart to straddle his hips, his burgeoning erection pressing into my belly as I sheathed it gently in hot pink. He cupped, caressed, and gently worshipped my breasts with calloused hands, his breathing growing more ragged.

"Your capacity for repeated sex. I thought men couldn't get it up more than once or twice in a twenty-four hour period." I ran one palm slowly over his cock, feeling his shudder of appreciation.

"Depends on the man, I suppose," he inhaled sharply as I squeezed his shaft gently. "And on the object of his desire."

"Oh?"

"If the object of a man's desire is exciting," he groaned as I stroked slowly, applying a gentle squeeze to his taut sac "—and willing—" he hissed in through clenched teeth as I ran my fingernails lightly over the wet drop of pearly fluid at the soft tip of his cock under the screaming pink condom "—a man can keep going indefinitely—"

I slid down his legs to bend and take him into my mouth, hearing his helpless groan of pleasure and feeling his cock jerk. I suckled and swirled my tongue around him, enjoying the feel of the hot pink latex against my tongue, wanting to drive him mad with enjoyment. He reached for me, and sat up, holding my head between his palms as he panted, whispering words in Korean that I couldn't possibly understand. And then his hands slid down my back, cupped my ass, and I gasped aloud as he scooted me up his body to plant me over his eager cock with a murmur of approval.

"I love your mouth on me, Lisa, but I love feeling my cock buried in you even more. I can get my hands—and mouth—on these," he rasped as he sat up to devour my breasts and nipples.

I clung to his dark head as he sucked a puffy nipple deep, and I pumped my hips as he filled me with his hot length. Oh, he felt so good buried inside me like this. He waited until I gave a cry of orgasmic delight before he rolled me beneath his sweating body and began to drive deep and hard, his mouth open on mine, his tongue diving—tangling with mine—matching each powerful thrust of his hips. I was trembling so hard when I splintered into another orgasm, I thought I might never survive much more, but he didn't stop. He gentled slightly at my whispered plea for mercy, but he continued his measured thrusts, keeping up a perfect rhythm as his marvelously full shaft slid rapidly in and out over my throbbing clit and G spot, teasing—tantalizing—pleasuring—until I arched again and bit his shoulder—hard.

He hissed softly and released. I felt the hot pulsing of his shaft, and I climaxed again, unable to contain the shudders of delirious pleasure I felt each time he came. I decided at that moment that I was going to have to get back on pills so that I could feel that marvelous cock inside me *au natural*, feel the hot bursts of cum fill me as he shot. Condoms were okay, but I desperately wanted the feel of man, and not latex, inside my pussy!

* * * *

I rolled over and groaned. I'd done it again. Instead of going to bed, I'd allowed that damn man to seduce me again, and it had been past two when I'd fallen into my own bed, after he'd walked me back into the building. I hoped he felt as sore and as weary as I felt right now. It'd serve him right.

I slipped from the bed and pulled on my robe. It was well past eight, and I knew Matasi would be up and fixing breakfast. I padded into the kitchen and sank onto the nearest chair, and he smiled at me thoughtfully as he set a fresh cup of coffee before me. "Good morning, Daughter. I see you had a very late night."

I smiled and yawned. "No later than most of my nights this past week," I breathed as I sipped gratefully at the hot coffee.

He laughed softly and dished up some pancakes for me. "Love is wonderful, is it not?"

"Yeah—great!" I yawned again, and scratched my head. "But sleep is also great."

"You have years and years to sleep, child. Enjoy your love while it is fresh and young."

I smiled as he sat opposite me and bowed his head in silent thanksgiving as he always did before eating. I had once asked him why a Buddhist said grace before meals, and he had replied quietly, "I am merely expressing my thanks for having teeth so that I may be able to chew my food for a few more years."

He amazed me. He had been seventy-eight when I had first met him, and he'd looked fifty. Now, at nearly ninety, he looked no older than James' father did, and James' father looked far younger than seventy-three. I wondered vaguely what James would look like at seventy-three, and then I shrugged mentally.

Of course, I probably wouldn't be around to know. I didn't expect this marriage of convenience to last more than a few months at best, until he realized it wouldn't work. Sex wouldn't keep us together for long. I must've sighed aloud, for Matasi asked quietly, "What is upsetting you, child? This should be the happiest time of your young life."

I smiled and toyed with my food. "I really don't think this marriage is going to work out, Matasi," I breathed truthfully.

"And why wouldn't it? You don't love him?"

I shrugged. "I think I do. No. I know I do."

"Then why will it not work out?"

"Because he doesn't love me," I breathed with a sad little smile.

He gazed at me for a long time before he spoke, and when he did, I was surprised to hear what he said. "Seldom is a man in love when he marries, Daughter. Love, for a man, comes slowly. First, it is the sex, the excitement of the chase and the capture. It begins with the intrigue he feels, the desire he feels. If a woman is wise, and knows how to keep her husband enthralled, he will learn to love, and when he does, she will not regret having waited for it."

I stared at him numbly. "Then you think it's okay for a man to marry just to satisfy his father? To keep the family line going?" I grimaced.

He smiled. "I married for convenience, Daughter. I married a woman who did not love me, nor did I love her. When we grew to know one another, I stayed with her because I came to adore her. But over the years, we drifted apart because she felt she had cheated me, and I felt I had been cheated. I wanted a child, and Yoshiki could not give me what I desired. She begged me to leave her and remarry. I could not do that. And when she died, I decided that I would never love again."

"And then you came along, fresh and pushy and a trifle gangly, and you dared to want to learn from the greatest chauvinist of them all. I thought that you were arrogant. You were a mere girl, and yet you were better than the others were. You were as strong. You were as tenacious. And when I realized that I had begun to feel things I had not felt in many years, you frightened me a little." His voice was quiet, and I swallowed.

What was he saying to me? I drew a shaky breath and bit my lip. I wondered whether I should be horrified, or honored.

He smiled and went on. "I was an old man, and you were a mere child. I found myself falling under your spell. I found myself experiencing the foolishness of desire." I flushed warmly, and he laughed softly, shaking his head. "Oh, I remembered that I was your teacher, and you were my best student, and that relationship was far greater than any other baser relationship could ever be. I had begun to feel that you belonged to me, not because you were an exceptionally lovely and talented young woman, but because you were an exceptionally devoted and loving person. I began to love you as a father would love a child."

His eyes slid over my red face, and he smiled quietly. "I had never really loved anyone before Yoshiki, or after, until you. You became the child I had never had. I poured all of my teaching into your empty, thirsty cup, and you never once complained."

I drew a shuddering breath, and I said shakily, "You never told me this before."

"If I had, you would have been mortified. Because you did not see me in that way, you would have been shocked—repulsed. But now you are in love with a special man, and you know what it is like to want that person in your life forever. You have experienced physical love, and you understand how wonderful it can be. You can now understand the feelings of a rather lonely, foolish old man. And now I know that I can love again."

I couldn't believe it. I felt oddly disconnected to think that my teacher had actually fallen in love with me. And then I recalled how the gossips had had a field day, talking about the elderly karate teacher and his young student, and I realized that they had seen what I hadn't. I swallowed hard, and managed a tremulous smile. "Thanks for telling me. I feel very much honored."

He smiled and bowed slightly. "And I feel much honored, my daughter, to have loved as well as I have, and to have been loved well in return."

As we ate our meal, he described his future wife to me, and I smiled as I listened to him tell me how well endowed she was. "And here, I thought you preferred slim, svelte females," I quipped as he sighed over her ample proportions.

"Ah, Merrick is—shall we say—more than enough woman for any man to be happy with."

"In other words, she's fat," I grinned.

"Not at all. Merely generously proportioned."

"Right. Generously proportioned," I nodded with a grin. "And is she as tall as I am?"

He laughed. "She is perfect. She is exactly my height."

"Short and fat," I chuckled.

"Petite and generously proportioned," he corrected curtly.

"I stand corrected," I grinned. "And when do I get to inspect her?"

"She will be arriving in three days. I told her to give me enough time to break the news."

"Oh, so now I get to listen to the bedsprings squeak in my guest room?" I made a wry face as I eyed him.

"Hopefully, yes."

I laughed and finished my pancakes and sausage, and I rose from the table to take our plates to the sink. "All right. I'll be nice to her. But only because you like her so much."

"Thank you."

I washed the dishes, and Matasi dried them. As I set them back in the cupboard, I said softly, "Are you going to continue to teach?"

He smiled. "I only have one student now. You. And I only have one thing more to teach you, child."

I looked at him questioningly. "What is that?"

"In time, child. All in good time."

* * * *

I stepped out of the shower and reached for the cordless phone. "Hello," I breathed, as I towed my hair vigorously.

"Just out of the shower, I see," James' husky voice made me smile.

"How'd you know?"

"I can smell the delicious fragrance of wet woman," he murmured, and I grinned.

"Through the phone line?"

"Through the bathroom door." His voice was amused, and I blinked, turning to frown at the door.

"Where are you?" I asked warily.

"On my cell phone. Open the bathroom door."

"Damn you," I gasped with a giggle, feeling silly and excited. "You stay out there."

"You have one minute to be out here, or I'll be in there with you."

"My clothes are out there on the bed."

"Then I suppose you'll have to come out here and get them," he sounded like he was grinning.

"If I open the door, will you promise to stay out there and just hand them to me?" I laughed.

"I can't promise I'll be able to control myself that well."

"Matasi..."

"Went out for a walk. I met him as he was headed for the park."

I unlocked the door, and opened it slowly, holding my towel to my wet body. I drew a deep breath at the look in his eyes, and I said huskily, "He'll only be gone a short time."

"He assured me he would take at least an hour," he growled as he reached for the towel and flicked it out of my hands. "Come here."

He stared down at my wet skin, and his hands moved slowly down from my shoulders to my elbows. "You are a beautiful woman, Lisa," he growled gruffly, before lowering his head to capture my lips in a questing, gently searching kiss. I caught my breath and leaned in to him, my palms stroking down his T-shirt slowly, feeling the hard steel of muscles beneath the soft cotton.

As he drew back for a moment, I managed to catch my breath once more. "And you are such a marvelous liar," I whispered, as I shoved his T-shirt up over his head and tossed it. My hands went to his belt, and in moments, his hard, rippling chest was pressed against my tender, swollen breasts. I glanced down and bit back a laugh as my eager fingers slid inside his zipper to find him already encased in a screaming blue condom ... he was the most amazingly resourceful man! I freed him from his jeans as he lifted me easily off my feet, allowing me to wrap my legs around him to take in every stridently beautiful blue inch of him.

Mindless—shuddering—gasping pleasure engulfed me as he wrapped his arms around me and moved me to pleasure both of us. I was amazed that a man could hold my solid 135-pound frame in mid air as if it weighed only a few ounces. He made me feel positively delicate as he suspended my body a few inches from his and repeatedly drove his cock into me with throbbing, breathtaking power, filling—stretching—making me wild with pleasure as he murmured rough words in Korean against my mouth.

My body hovered for a breathtaking moment on the edge of eternity as I felt the rising pleasure winding through me—overtaking me—exploding inside me—splintering me into a million shards of sparkling glass as I burst. I pressed my mouth into his shoulder and muffled my scream of pleasure as he lowered me to my rumpled bed and drove himself deep, using the leverage of my mattress to go deeper—harder than before. He hissed in sharp, gasping pleasure as he came hard, closing his eyes as he drove to his root and held, emptying with heaving breaths as he fought to keep from yelling at the top of his voice. And then he rolled over with me held tight to his body, fighting for breath.

I lay with my cheek pressed over his heart, and my arms wrapped about his body, and I calmed my agitated breathing. “How long can we keep this up?” I breathed as he pushed the wet hair back from my face.

“I’d like to say, forever,” he whispered, his hands moving slowly over my bare skin. “But we only have another ten minutes.”

I laughed and slapped him, and sat up slowly, staring down into his face. “Do you realize that you’ve created a monster?”

“I have?”

I nodded, running my fingertips over his taut belly, and watching his face as he drew a deep breath. “Mm-hm.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because even though I know we only have ten minutes, I want to make love to you again.”

He reached up and dragged me down into his embrace, and he whispered huskily, “Then why waste precious time talking about it?”

* * * *

When Matasi returned from his walk, we were dressed and I was fixing tea. He looked from James to me, and he quipped, “I timed that perfectly, I believe.”

I grinned and told him to sit down and shut up, and have some tea. James chuckled and joined him at the table. As we sipped our tea, Matasi said softly, “I wish to tell you of my plans, Lisa.”

I lifted my brows. “You already told me.”

“I have decided to declare you my legitimate successor. As the head of my system,” he said quietly. James’ brows lifted, and I stared, my jaw dropping. He had told me this before, but somehow I hadn’t really believed it. I had thought it was just to make me feel good.

"But, I've only achieved my fourth degree."

"You have learned everything I have to teach you. You have absorbed all of the information my father gave to me, and his father gave to him. The number of stripes on your belt means nothing, child. Time is the only thing you lack. You must prepare for a test. If James will kindly assist me, and Kim Sung Rhee will sit with us at your test, I will acknowledge your status before I return to New Haven."

I blinked. *Master Kim Sung Rhee* was James' father? I swallowed hard. I stared at James, and then at Matasi. "Um—but—"

"No buts. It is my desire to do this while I am still in control. Of all my black belts, only you have the complete knowledge. There are a few with more stripes." he made a wry face, "but none has more knowledge than you. What we shall do is unprecedented, child. You will be the only female who has ever held such an honor in the past 250 years."

"Your other black belts will not agree with it—you know that. You should choose one of them." My mind was in turmoil. "This usually follows family line or the highest ranking black belt in the system. I know that Yamada Osuka will protest this. He has had hopes for years..."

"I have already thought of this, child, and I want you to sign this." He drew a sheaf of legal papers from his inside breast pocket, and I blinked as he handed them to me. I read them in a daze, my thoughts disjointed. James read along with me, and I said slowly, "This is an adoption paper."

"It is."

"You are adopting a twenty-seven-year-old woman?" I stared at him numbly. "Bad habits and all?"

He smiled. "I would have done so years ago, child, but I knew that your stepmother would not allow me to do so. As an adult, you can simply agree to the adoption. It would please me beyond anything to have you as my true daughter, and not just as my make believe one."

Tears slid down my cheeks, and I bit my lower lip to keep from breaking down totally. "You don't have to do this. As far as I am concerned, you are my father, and have been since Dad died."

He nodded. "I have already discussed this with Merrick. She understands that I wish to leave you my worldly goods, and that this adoption must take place before we marry. She is filthy rich, and couldn't care less." He smiled and shrugged.

"What worldly goods? You sold everything off, and you already deeded me the school." I glared at him irritably. "You don't have to go this far, Matasi."

He shook his head slowly. "As my surviving child, you will inherit my house, as well as my money. You will also be the legal successor to my system."

James touched my shoulder and said quietly, "What he is offering you is the honor of becoming his daughter—unless you don't want that."

I stared at both of them numbly. "I do want that, but you can keep the rest."

Matasi laughed softly. "Just sign the damn paper."

I swallowed hard, and signed it quickly, handing it back to him. He glanced at the signature, and he smiled. "Thank you. My attorney will process this the moment I return to New Haven. And now, I am hungry."

* * * *

We spent Sunday afternoon with James' father, listening to the two of them planning our lives for us. I tried not to look alarmed when Mr. Rhee told me that I would be married in a traditional Korean ceremony, and James lifted his brows and looked away. Matasi laughed and said, "I would not fret too greatly, child. It will be a Christian ceremony. Catholic to be exact. You look as if we were planning to have you sacrificed in some pagan ritual."

I swallowed, staring at James. "Catholic?"

He grinned. "Does that thought scare you?"

I laughed and said, "I had no idea. I thought most Koreans were Buddhist or something Asian."

"French missionary influence," he replied. "There were a lot of Catholics in South Korea. Most of them ran when the communists invaded. I guess I should have warned you."

I smiled at him. "And here, I thought I was getting something exotic."

"I am exotic, or hadn't you noticed?" his lips curved wickedly, and I drew a deep breath.

"So. All those years of Catholic school weren't wasted," I mused, shrugging. James laughed aloud and kissed me warmly, much to Matasi's delight, and his father's amusement. I shoved at his chest and said in embarrassment, "Would you stop? They'll think we like each other or something."

"Sorry," he grinned, his eyes promising me a rain check. "Maybe later."

"Children, we have decided on the date for your marriage."

Both of us swiveled around simultaneously, and Matasi smiled broadly at me.

"When?" I asked in a strangled tone.

James' father replied, "We have decided that your wedding shall be held on September 20. It will give us enough time to publish the banns and to notify relatives and friends. Can the two of you wait that long?" his eyes slid over our faces, and I glanced nervously at James. How do you tell an elderly man you didn't bother to wait?

James tilted his head and asked quietly, "No sooner?"

I flushed. It was less than six weeks away. He was going to have them thinking he was actually eager to marry. Mr. Rhee smiled at his son. "My old friend has asked us to delay the marriage until after certain formalities have taken place. We will first see to the formalities of passing my old friend's art into the hands of his daughter."

I blanched. "A test?"

"*The* test." Matasi nodded. "You must prepare yourself. James will assist you."

I looked into James' eyes, and he shrugged. "They recruited me. Sorry."

"Have you any idea what they mean to put me through?" I hissed.

"I have a fairly good idea, and we don't have much time to get ready, do we?"

I swallowed, and bowed to Matasi respectfully. "If you will excuse me, I think I'll go throw up now."

"You can do it, child, but you must be ready in four weeks. I will stay here with you and we will work every day, very hard." Matasi rose from his chair and bowed to me formally, and I felt terror sweep through me at such a prospect. I managed to bow in return, and then I bowed to Mr. Rhee, who smiled at me quietly.

I allowed James to drag me away, and as we stepped out of the living room into the kitchen, I whirled and said in a shaking voice, "I don't think I can do this."

"I believe you can," he smiled at me. "You already know everything you need to know, but if I know Matasi, he means to put you through some hellish physical tests, and that's what you need to be ready for, and I can help you with that."

I reached out and wrapped my arms about him, and he drew me close, holding me quietly as I whispered, "I'm scared—scared that I'll let him down. You know how Japanese systems are. A woman taking over one would be a total scandal. Every one of his other black belts will be waiting for me to blow it. Hoping I fall flat on my face."

"Then you'll have to be ready. There's no other answer here, Lisa. He wants you to do this."

"But I have to be at work every day. I can't just dump the job at the school. You have me fully scheduled."

"I'll have to reschedule some of the classes. Of course, there are those who may not want other instructors, so we might lose them." He smiled and kissed my nose.

"I don't want you to reschedule Joshua or Hilary. I'll take them. But if you could reschedule the ones you picked up from the over-bookings, I might manage."

"There are a few others who won't want to switch, but we can take care of them."

I shook my head. "If it might mean losing them, I'll take them, but you'll have to give my group sessions to someone else. See if you can schedule them all in one day."

He smiled at me quietly and his eyes moved over my face thoughtfully. "I can see why he thinks so highly of you. I don't think he's misplaced his trust, Lisa."

Warm color suffused my cheeks, and I wished to hell that I could control my damn blushes. "Wait 'til you see whether or not I pass that damn test before you say that."

Chapter Eleven

Matasi woke me at 4:30 and told me to jog two miles before breakfast. When I returned, I showered and had a light breakfast of steamed rice and vegetables with some fish. No more bacon and eggs. I was in training now. Thank God I hadn't let James stay last night. I would never have been able to manage crawling out of bed at that ungodly hour. Besides, having Matasi there had been a deterrent. James had kissed me goodbye as he had dropped us off, and I had realized with a sense of loss that as long as Matasi was here, I would not be free to spend so much time with the man.

Matasi had mapped my days out for me for the next five weeks. I was to be in bed by 9:30. Up at 4:30. Run at least one mile before breakfast. After my work was over, I would be his until 7:30, when I would eat supper. I would have about one free hour each day to unwind before falling into bed and dying.

I was going to have to see James at the school, because there wouldn't be a spare moment during the week. But then, James had said he planned to help me prepare for the test. How was he going to do that if Matasi had me running in circles?

I arrived at work and found James working on my schedule. He glanced up as I stepped into his office, and he asked quietly, "Did you sleep well?"

"No. I was a bundle of jangled nerves. But I have the feeling I'm gonna die tonight. What have you been able to do with my schedule?" I sat on the corner of his desk as he gazed at his computer screen.

"I'm giving your groups back to the guys. Chang will take one, and Jose will take the other. I'm leaving you only five students. Three on Mondays and Thursdays, and two on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. You'll be keeping Joshua and his mother, Hilary, Harry, and your very favorite fan from the daytime soaps." He leaned back and stretched, his arm brushing my thigh, and his hand falling negligently on my knee. He looked up into my face and said softly, "I'm certainly going to miss sleeping with you."

I blushed warmly and frowned at him. "Don't start looking at me like that, because I have no will power at all when you look at me like that. Matasi has given me strict orders to have absolutely no sex for the next five weeks. I'm gonna be hell to be around, so be prepared."

He laughed softly. "I'll try to remember that. But then, I'm in the same boat, aren't I?"

I shot back acidly. "No, you're not. You can have sex anytime you want in the next five weeks. It's just me who's gonna be wearing the iron girdle."

His eyes glowed as he whispered huskily, "What, exactly are you offering me, Lisa?"

I blinked. "Offering? What do you mean?"

"You just told me that I can have all the sex I want. Does this mean you will take care of my needs, even while you can't indulge your own?"

I stared at him, my face bright pink. "I—I meant that my test won't keep you from going to bed with someone else."

He gazed at me quietly. "I can see that you have the impression that I would want to do so."

I looked at the wall to avoid his eyes. "I—just thought—well—you seem to enjoy sex so much..." my voice died off at the look in his dark eyes.

"That I would be totally unable to manage my urges for a period of five weeks?" his voice was dangerously soft.

I glared at him. "You're making fun of me. I have no idea what a man does when he gets horny and wants sex. From what I've seen of most men, he goes out and gets laid."

He grabbed me as I made to get up and leave. He dragged me over the desk, causing pens, papers, and sundries to fly as he pulled me into his lap in his large leather chair, and he quelled my struggles by kissing me with enough steamy passion to curl my toes for the next five weeks. When he lifted his face from mine, his eyes were dark and angry, and my heart was hammering crazily.

"Never compare me to others, Lisa. I'm me. My standards are far removed from what you expect of other men. Never doubt me again."

He rose from the chair and set me on my feet. "You have a class in half an hour. You should be finished by noon. Meet me in the weight room as soon as you're finished." His clipped tone made me inhale deeply. He was very angry. I swallowed hard, and turned to leave.

Before I reached the door, he breathed, "And if you think you're gonna be touchy these next five weeks, you can imagine how fucking nasty I'm gonna be."

I didn't look back. I had the feeling he hadn't expected any reply to that. I hurried to the coffee room, desperately needing a cup of hot coffee. I was torn between elation at his statement that he intended to abstain from sex as I had to, and depression because he was angry with me. Soon the elation won, and I stepped into the coffee room with a smile on my face.

Chang glanced up from his schedule, and he excused himself politely, making for the door. I decided that there was no better time than the present to take the bull by the horns, and I said softly, "Thanks for taking on one of my groups. It will only be for a while. I really appreciate your help."

He stopped and looked at me as if trying to determine how to respond. When he finally did speak, he said "No big deal."

"Yes, it is a big deal, and I appreciate it. You guys are working all of yours, and now, mine too." I poured a cup of coffee and sank onto the nearest chair to stir in cream and sugar.

He shrugged his broad shoulders and rested his hands on his lean hips. "I had this group before, Miss Hampton. It's really no big deal."

"I think it is, and my name is Lisa."

He eyed me warily for a moment, and then he said, "I don't think the boss would like us calling you that."

I smiled at him disarmingly. "Well, it's my name, and I'm the one who counts here. Please call me Lisa."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose thoughtfully, and then grinned. "Okay, Lisa." He nodded, and left the room. I sipped my coffee and prayed that Jose would be that easy. I didn't want these guys to be angry. It wasn't good for the relationship between them and James. He needed them to be loyal and certain of their positions here, and my appearance on the scene had endangered that. I had to rectify the problem, since I had inadvertently caused it.

I glanced at my watch and rose from the chair with a sigh, finishing the coffee quickly and rinsing my cup. I dreaded the next five weeks.

* * * *

At noon, I'd finished my final lesson, and I changed into workout clothes before heading for the coffee room. I'd brought a light lunch with me so that I wouldn't have to go out, and as I reached into the fridge to retrieve it, Chang and Vince came into the room. Vince stiffened, seeming almost ready to turn and leave. Chang grinned at me and said, "You finished for the day? You're back in civvies."

I smiled at him as I set my lunch on the table, and poured a cup of fresh coffee. "I'm finished with the students, but my day is just getting started, I'm afraid."

Vince glanced at me, then at Chang, as if the fact that he was speaking with me was amazing. I smiled at him. Chang poured himself a cup, and sank onto the chair opposite mine. "So, what's up? Why are you cutting back hours? You got a second job?"

I shook my head and smiled as I unwrapped my avocado and sprout sandwich, and took a hungry bite. I swallowed and replied, "No. I have to get ready to test, and I'm way out of shape for it. A desk job kills you."

"Test? You are going for your fifth? That's great," Chang grinned as he blew the hot coffee gently and took a sip. Vince poured a cup, staring at his friend as if he'd lost his mind. I took another bite and chewed happily, enjoying every morsel of my food. When he sank onto the chair beside mine, he glanced from me to Chang, and I knew he was dying to say something, but he seemed to be nervous.

"I was telling Chang how much I appreciate you guys carrying some of my load while I'm carrying shorter scheduled hours. It'll only be for a few weeks, and then I'll be picking them back up."

Vince shrugged. "I don't mind a couple more private students a week. I can always use the dough."

"I know, but the whole idea of a seventh instructor was to take some of the pressure off you guys," I replied. "The money is good, but everyone needs a break."

"So, you're testing next month? What system?" Vince asked, beginning to emerge from his shell of defensiveness. I started to reply, but the sound of Matasi's voice from the doorway behind us made all of us turn to look at him.

"So. This is where you are hiding. James is expecting you in the weight room. This is not the time for rest." His dark eyes slipped over the three of us, and both men sprang from their chairs to bow, recognizing him instantly. He bowed in acknowledgment as I took the last bite of my sandwich and rose to go with him. He excused us, and practically dragged me away, scolding me for wasting time eating when there was so much work to be done. I caught the look on Vince's face as I hurried out of the coffee room, and hid a laugh.

James was setting up a weight bench for me, and I noted the smaller weights. He was going to be my personal trainer. I wiped the crumbs from my sandwich off my mouth with my fingertips, and I said to Matasi, "If I don't eat, I faint. Just because you don't need food, doesn't mean the rest of the world can handle one small meal a day."

"And if you eat just before a workout, you are weaker," he retorted.

"Well, you're going to have to let me eat sometime, or I won't even be walking."

James twisted the clamps on the weight bar and stood waiting for me, hands on hips. I noted the way his eyes slipped over my baggy sweats, and I smiled at him grimly. "Okay, let the torture begin, boss."

* * * *

My legs ached. My arms ached. My entire body was one huge ache. I fell into my bed wishing for death to take me away from all of this, but knowing that tomorrow it would get a little easier. I had rubbed liniment into a couple of bruises I'd gotten when James had started me sparring again.

He was mean. He pulled no punches, and I'd been hard pressed to keep him from knocking me down a couple of times. I'd been forced to use my best speed to avoid his attacks. I knew that he was going easy, but he wasn't going to do so for very long. Part of my test would be a match between myself and two different fighters of Matasi's choosing, and I had the feeling one of them would be James. I'd have to score at least three points on him to pass. I realized that I

was going to have one hell of a time doing that. He wasn't going to give me those three points. I would have to work damned hard for them.

I recalled Maria's words. World champion for how many years? Full contact? I hoped that Matasi would select another person, but I had the feeling he wouldn't. James was the best. How the hell was I going to get three points on a man that damned great at fighting? It had been a year since I'd fought, and I'd gotten a cracked rib, in spite of the heavy urethane pad I wore to protect my ribs.

Female bodies weren't built to take that kind of blow. It had been a massive roundhouse kick that had taken me down. I'd been three points up on my opponent, but that had finished it. I couldn't finish the fight and had forfeited. I knew that I couldn't beat James in a head on match, even if he wasn't as great as Maria had said. I could only try to use strategy against him. Let him think I was only capable of doing certain things, and then try to catch him off guard with a totally different technique.

There was no other way to do it. I was going to have to let him think I didn't know how to fight properly. Lull him into thinking I was afraid to get in close and use hands as well as feet. Then when I did, I could get a point and get back out without getting killed, *maybe*.

* * * *

I had no trouble at all sleeping. I was asleep before my head even hit the pillow. But 4:30 seemed to come within short moments of my falling asleep, and Matasi was shaking me awake briskly. "Get up, child. You have another busy day ahead."

Another two-mile jog, another Spartan breakfast designed to clean the "poisons" out of me. Another shower and another quick drive to the school. I was wondering how I was going to survive this next month when I stepped into James' office to pick up my time sheet. He glanced up and I noted that he was in his gi today. I lifted my brows. "What's up? You're dressed for work."

"Jose is out—had an accident last night after work. He's going to be laid up awhile." His voice was quietly matter-of-fact. A trifle cool. I swallowed.

"Is he gonna be okay? What happened?"

"Some drunk ran a light and took out his car and his right shoulder," he breathed as he handed me my schedule.

"Broken, or worse?" I gasped in horror.

"It'll be a couple of months before he can use it again. Doctor says it will be a lot longer before he can return to work."

"So you're taking his students?"

"Yep."

I drew a shaky breath. "I'll take some of them. But if I do, you have to pay him for them, okay? Just like he was teaching them."

James stared at me. "I'd planned on paying him while he's off."

"Give me a couple of his students each day. I can just work out later."

"You don't have the time for it. You're stretched to your limit already."

"So are you. Give me a couple of them, and I'll manage."

He gazed at me quietly. I was in no damned mood to quibble, and my eyes told him as much. "You think you can handle the extra work and still be ready to test in a month?"

"Just let me worry about that." I snapped irritably, turning to leave the office. He was being unusually cool today. Maybe he was having second thoughts about getting married to someone after all.

I walked to the break room and got coffee, then went directly into my classroom. I didn't emerge until after my second student, and only to use the bathroom and grab a bite of my lunch. James was in the large classroom, teaching Jose's group, and I saw Jose's 10:00 waiting in the lounge. I stepped in and smiled at her, and I said quietly, "Jose has been hurt in an accident. I will be taking you today, if that's all right with you."

She shrugged. "I suppose. I didn't know Jimmy had a woman teaching here," she rose from the sofa and dropped the magazine she had been reading onto the end table. "What happened to Jose?"

* * * *

By noon, Matasi had arrived, as I was taking Jose's noon appointment. James would be busy until about two with the remaining private classes, and so I joined Matasi in the weight room after I finished the class, and he had me doing deep meditation when James finally stepped into the room shortly after two. I was totally relaxed and feeling much better.

He told me that it was time to run another two miles. But this time, he ran with me. We didn't speak. If he wanted to treat me coolly, I could manage to handle it. I ran silently and without looking at him. I didn't feel as depressed now. I supposed that, one way or another, things would work out. If he'd changed his mind about marrying me, I could handle it. At least I was getting the benefit of his expertise as I worked out, and that would help me to pass my test more easily. I would deal with the rest of the emotional stuff later.

After our run, I went into the ring with him again, and I noticed that he was giving me some clear shots at his body, which I refused to take, knowing that he was doing so to see if I recognized the openings.

Matasi watched us without comment for a while, and after the first two rounds, after I had not scored any points and James had scored six, he said quietly, "What are you doing, child? Just dancing about the ring will not win the fight."

I smiled grimly as I re-strapped my gloves. "I'm letting him show me what he's got."

"I would like to see you get at least one point on him."

"You will, when it counts."

Matasi gazed at me quietly, and smiled slowly, understanding exactly what my strategy was. "Very well, Daughter. Do as you must."

I bowed and stepped back into the center of the mat to begin the last round. This time, James didn't wait to bow. He stepped into me with a heavy blow that threw me backward. I tucked and rolled, and came up a couple of yards away in a fighting stance, and I evaded his next three attempts to hit me. I knew that I was going to have one hell of a bruise on my chest, but I didn't let my anger take over.

I remained calm, and I watched his every move carefully. He was damn good. And damn strong. He wasn't going to wear out in a couple of rounds. I was going to have to move fast, hit hard, and get the hell out of there when I scored points. He was no longer taking it easy on me, as I'd guessed he wouldn't.

When the round ended, he bowed to me, and I bowed back, and I turned away to remove my gloves and arm pads. He came up behind me and said quietly, "What are you waiting for in there, Lisa? Why didn't you take any shots?"

I shrugged. "I didn't think I could successfully land any of them. You aren't exactly slow, and you aren't exactly dumb enough to leave an opening you can't close to my detriment."

His dark eyes slipped over my perspiring face, and he breathed softly, "You have to start trying sometime. He won't pass you if you don't get points on your opponent."

"I know."

I didn't look at him. I wiped the sweat off my gloves and carefully wrapped the straps about them and hooked them. I knelt to tuck them back into my bag, and he sank onto the mat beside me, unfolding his hands. I noted that he wrapped his hands before fighting. I thought about trying that on my ribs. It seemed to protect the bones better than padding.

Matasi clapped his hands together and said, "It is time for stretches, and then you can warm down. You have had a long day."

* * * *

I noted James' eyes following me as I made supper. He'd come back to my apartment with us, and Matasi was telling him about the test, but his attention was more on me than on my teacher. I was limping a little, because of a large bruise on my hip where he'd leg blocked me as I'd tried to move closer. I ached all over, and I wasn't as hungry as I was tired tonight.

When we sat down at my table just before 9:00, Matasi said quietly, "Merrick is arriving tomorrow at noon. If you would be so kind as to allow me to drive your car, Lisa, perhaps I can drop you at the school and go to the airport myself."

James spoke up quietly. "I'll stay here on the sofa and take you in the morning, Lisa. I have some things in my gym bag in the van. We can run together in the morning after getting to the school."

Matasi glanced from James to me quietly, and he noted the way I avoided James' eyes. I shrugged. "That's fine. Anything you two decide."

I ate everything on my plate, but didn't take seconds. I had about five pounds to drop. It wouldn't take me long, at this rate. Of course, I expected to gain a couple pounds of muscle in place of the flab. I rose from the table and cleared away the dishes as Matasi took James back into the living room and spoke with him quietly. I didn't bother to say good night. I slipped out of the kitchen and got into my pajamas, and climbed wearily into my bed, groaning as I relaxed. I was getting too damned old for this stuff.

I awoke with a jerk as I heard my door open and close, and I glanced at the clock beside my bed. Was it 4:30 already? No. It was just past midnight. I sat up in bed, and said wearily, "What is it now, Matasi?"

"I couldn't sleep." James' voice made my skin tingle, and my throat went dry. Oh, God. How the hell was I supposed to stay celibate with him in my bed? I swallowed hard as I felt his weight sink onto my bed, and I felt his body stretch out alongside mine.

"I have to be up at 4:30." I whispered. "Matasi comes in here and throws me out of bed."

"I won't stay long," he breathed softly, and I felt his hands moving over my body so delightfully.

"I can't do this," I rasped shakily, my body coming alive beneath his touch.

"I need you," he kissed my throat. "And it is very apparent that you need me."

I closed my eyes and tears squeezed from between my lashes to roll down my cheeks. I felt him pulling me into the curve of his lean body, and I ran my hands over his chest as he kissed my forehead and settled in to hold me close for a while. When he made no move to do more than just hold me, I closed my eyes and heaved a deep sigh, and wrapped my arms about his solid body, burying my face in his shoulder. And I fell asleep wrapped about him once again, feeling far better than I had last night.

* * * *

I came awake long before Matasi would come to wake me. James was still in my bed, spooned around my body deliciously. I wriggled and sighed, and felt the instant response against my bottom as he shifted and growled softly, "Stop wiggling. I don't want to end up breaking your training by taking gross advantage."

His breath was warm against my nape. His words made my heart pound and my thoughts turn to the way he always responded to my hands and mouth. Why should he have to suffer just because I couldn't indulge? I rolled over and shoved him onto his back, and bent to kiss his lips gently. I heard his hissing intake of breath, and I whispered very softly, "Why do you still have your clothes on? Indulge me—I love to see you naked."

He caught my hands as I unbuckled his belt. "You can't break training..."

"Who said I planned to?" I murmured, kissing the line of his scratchy jaw.

"You don't have to..." he began, and stopped with a whimper as I slipped my palm under the open fly of his jeans to circle him.

"I know," I whispered as I shoved his jeans down to his knees and shoved his T-shirt up to his ribs. "But I want to." And as I slowly stroked his silken shaft to full attention, waiting for the shiny pink glans to appear from the stretching folds of his foreskin, he stroked my cheek and arched up to meet my slow, hot lick. I heard his hiss of pleasure as I cupped his sac and took him into my mouth, continuing to squeeze and stroke, as his satin-over steel erection grew so thick and long, I felt my belly clench from want of it.

I laved it hungrily, swirling my tongue around the glistening tip as he closed his eyes and bit his lip to keep quiet—his body shuddered with reaction as I ran my tongue down the side and back to the tip once more, before sucking him deep into my mouth again. His fingers fisted into my hair as he whispered huskily—heated words I could not understand—whispered encouragement that I could—and then he hissed, "Move!" and I ignored him, remaining where I was as he came hard and hot, filling my mouth with salty, pearly liquid as he groaned and thrust upward with amazed delight.

His eyes were glazed as he stared at me. "You are a wicked woman, Lisa..."

* * * *

There had to be some kind of medicinal thing about sleeping wrapped in someone's arms. Matasi hadn't even blinked when he had come into my bedroom to find James stretched out on my bed, and he had said crisply, "Wake up, you two. You have a long day ahead."

After he left the room, I'd yawned and stretched, and had been further awakened with a lingering kiss that had gotten my blood started extremely efficiently. James had given me a leg massage, and a back rub, and I'd arisen feeling like a million bucks. We ran two miles side by side,

and this time, I felt like exploding. I had far more energy than I had the prior two mornings, and my body ached far less. Definitely medicinal!

Matasi kept my car, and James took us to the school in his van. He didn't say much, but I knew that things had changed between us, in some indefinable way. Maybe it had been last night, sleeping in each other's arms without making love. Maybe it had been the way he'd simply known what I needed, and had been there for me. I wasn't certain, but I felt warmly comfortable with him, and I didn't need to say anything. And his quiet gratitude for the gentle easing of his hunger this morning made me feel marvelous. I wondered quietly if this was what it felt like to trust. Did he feel the same way I was feeling?

It was well past noon when I saw Matasi again. James was helping me with some stationary weights when he came into the school, but there was no Merrick with him. I sat up and wiped my face with my towel, and I gazed at him questioningly. "Did she come? Where is she?"

He smiled quietly. "She is at the apartment, child. You did not expect her to show up here after an eight hour flight, did you?"

"You did."

"Ah, but I am not a delicate flower of femininity," he breathed with a thoughtful smile.

James turned away to hide his laugh, and I frowned. "I seriously doubt that Merrick is going to wilt away any more than you would. Women aren't the delicate creatures you seem to think."

He laughed. "I dropped her there so that she could fix supper for us. She wanted to surprise you with her specialty. She wants very much to make a good impression, Daughter. Please humor her."

"Of course I will. If you think she's special, she must be." I frowned. "Don't tell me she's one of those delicate flowers of femininity who worries about what other women think."

Matasi laughed aloud, and shook his head. "Only what you think, child. Other women, no."

I grinned and lay back to begin working with the bar again. James spotted for me as I carefully got a good grip and began to press once more. "A woman after my own heart," I grunted as I set the bar back on the braces after ten reps.

* * * *

Merrick met us at the door of my apartment, wearing a flowing caftan of azure silk that made her silver hair and her gray eyes seem soft and luminous. I saw a smiling woman who appeared to be in her early fifties, but who was, in actuality, far older. She smiled at me with a sweet curve to those fine lips, and I knew instantly what Matasi found so adorable in the woman.

She seemed to be concerned for everyone's comfort. She put me instantly at ease, and I hugged her warmly, kissing her smooth cheek. "So, this is the person who did such a wonderful portrait of my parents," I smiled.

"Oh, I certainly hoped you would find it acceptable. Matasi has told me so much about them. I felt I might not be able to do them justice," she replied quietly.

"It was perfect—thank you," I whispered. "So, someone finally roped the old dog. I hope you know what's in store for you."

She dimpled beautifully, and said with a laugh, "It took some doing. Do you realize how far I had to go to get the man to notice I was even alive?"

"Did you run naked in front of him with a rose in your teeth?" I grinned wickedly, too softly for the men to hear.

"Hmmm. I never thought of that," she pursed her lips. "It might have saved a great deal of time and effort."

I gave a laugh of delight, and hugged her again. "I think I'm going to like you very much."

"I do hope so. He speaks of nothing but you, did you know that?" she smiled. "At first I was jealous, and I think, now that I've seen you, that I still am," she breathed with a smile.

I flushed and glanced at James. "Matasi was my first love, but I don't think *he* means to share." Her gaze followed mine, and she smiled appreciatively.

"Mmm—very nice," she nodded. "What is it these Asian males seem to have that drives us women wild?"

"They're chauvinists—a complete challenge." I said, linking my arm through hers and taking her off to the kitchen so we could talk in private.

"I think you're right."

"I know I'm right. We feel obligated to teach them manners."

"That sounds right."

* * * *

Merrick's specialty was a wonderful Bouillabaisse and fresh French bread, and I allowed myself to eat my fill. She pressed me to take seconds, but Matasi reminded her that I was in training, and she made a wry face and said softly, "I'll set some aside for tomorrow for you."

While the men had coffee in the living room, Merrick and I cleaned the kitchen and had a long talk, and by bedtime, I felt as if I'd known her all of my life.

I excused myself early to hit the sack, and James glanced at his watch. "I suppose I'd better be hitting the road, too. It was wonderful meeting you, Ms. Damien, and the meal was fantastic. Thank you."

I smiled at Merrick and Matasi and took James' hand. "You aren't going anywhere for a while. Come with me," I said as I dragged him down the hallway, as Merrick giggled and Matasi shook his head and muttered something about young people. He followed me into my room, and as I shut the door and turned the lock, he asked huskily, "Exactly what are we going to do?"

"We aren't going to do anything. I am going to do it," I breathed, shoving him back toward my bed.

"And exactly what are you going to do?" He smiled as I unbuttoned his shirt, and pulled it out of his jeans. He sank down onto my mattress.

"Shut up and kiss me," I murmured as I unbuckled his belt. He obliged me without hesitation, a look of bemused enjoyment on his face as I shoved his shirt off his shoulders and ran my hands over his lean body slowly. He inhaled sharply and closed his eyes as my hands circled him, and I slid my mouth from his lips, down to his throbbing shaft before I settled in to torment and thrill him.

"You're completely spoiling me, you know," he whispered raggedly as he brushed my hair back from my face to better see what I was doing to him. He drew one of my hands to his flat nipples, and he clenched his teeth. "That—feels—so fucking—good..."

I sucked him deep, using my other hand to stroke in time with my tugging mouth, and he ran his hands over my back and hair as I once again brought him to a throbbing, gasping climax, before settling down beside him to rest my cheek over his pounding heart.

"Are you purposely trying to give me weak knees so you can beat the living shit out of me in the ring?" he laughed shakily, kissing my hair hard.

"How'd you guess?" I sighed. God, I adored this man.

* * * *

I awoke with a sigh, lifting my head from his chest as Matasi knocked vigorously on my door. "Keep your shirt on. I'm up." James stirred, and stretched luxuriantly, and as I started to rise from the bed, yawning and rubbing my eyes, he reached out and pulled me back down across his body, kissing me with slow, smoldering enjoyment.

I smiled down into his dark eyes as I lifted my lips from his several minutes later, and he breathed softly, "Did I thank you last night?"

"Nope." I shook my head.

"Thank you," he breathed, pushing a stray strand of hair from my cheek, back behind my ear.

"You're entirely welcome," I smiled back, kissing his nose as he sometimes did mine. "But now it's time to get up and run. You ready?"

"Sure. I feel like I could run ten miles this morning."

I grinned, and shrugged, and flopped back onto the bed, fluffing my pillow. "Okay, you run two miles for both of us."

He laughed and slapped my ass smartly, bringing me back up from the pillow with a gasp. "Come on, you only have four and a half weeks to go."

"You're no fun at all," I grumbled as I slipped out of bed and padded into the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth.

"Give it four and a half weeks, and say that again." His eyes promised me things my body was eagerly anticipating.

Chapter Twelve

James took four of Jose's students, and gave me two. He left just before lunch and didn't return until nearly three, and Matasi and I were working on techniques when he arrived back at the school. I could tell from his expression that something wasn't right. "What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"Jose will probably be out for at least three months." He shook his head.

"So now what?"

He met my gaze, and I could see the frustration there. "We'll have to work around his schedule. I'll take more of his classes."

I suppose it was the look in his eyes that made me act. I reached out, slipped my arms tightly around his body, and pressed my cheek to his chest, and I said softly, "He'll be okay."

Matasi cleared his throat and said gently, "I suppose that you have worked hard enough for one day. Your training can wait until tomorrow, child. I feel a bit weary, myself." He left us alone.

James' long arms pulled me close, and I felt his lips press to my forehead. I felt the wetness of tears against my cheek, and I whispered shakily, "He reminds you of yourself at that age," I murmured softly.

He drew back and met my gaze. "Yes, he does."

He slid his calloused, hard hand behind my neck and bent to kiss me slowly. I closed my eyes as I lost myself in his kiss for the next several minutes. When he lifted his lips from mine, I found myself just staring at him. How I had managed to find this man, and end up engaged to marry him, I had no idea. Maybe there was something, after all, to the fate that Matasi always had such faith in. I wondered how long I could keep him.

* * * *

Merrick and Matasi were gone when we arrived at the apartment, and so was my car. A note on the fridge told us that they had gone for a drive, and not to expect them until very late. James glanced at the note and said quietly, "You want to come to my place?"

"I have to do some laundry, and I have to get to sleep early," I sighed. I didn't want to go anywhere, because if I did, I would end up in his bed. And right now, I felt like I wanted to be in his bed more than anything else in the world. "I think it's best that we just say goodnight."

He nodded, glancing at his watch. "Yeah. I should be getting on home. I have things I need to get done, too."

I clasped my hands in front of me and smiled up into his face. "Well. It's been an interesting day. Guess I'll see you about six?"

He nodded, his eyes moving over my face slowly. "If you keep looking at me like that, I won't be able to go."

"Looking at you like what?" I frowned.

"Like you want to go to bed with me."

"It wouldn't matter if I did. I have to stop sleeping with you until this test is over, because if I don't, I'm not gonna be able to keep my hands off you."

His eyes darkened. "That's supposed to be my line."

I shrugged. "I guess that's why my stepmother always thought I was too masculine. I always say what I think, even if it's not ladylike."

"Masculine?" his brows lifted and his gaze moved over my breasts and down my body slowly. "Was the woman blind?"

"Go away." I breathed tightly, shoving him toward the door. "Go away now."

He allowed me to shove him to the door, and he reached for the knob slowly. "Come with me."

I shook my head violently, my hands clasped tightly. "If I so much as touch you tonight, I'm not going to be able to stop."

His lips curved slowly into a devastating smile that made my toes curl with anticipation. "You are the most fantastically sexy woman I've ever known, did you know that?" His voice was a warm rasp.

"Out. Go now." I reached past him to pull the door open, and my breast brushed his arm. I swallowed hard as I stood there.

"What if I said I needed you—said some real romantic stuff," he said in a soft undertone.

"I can't handle doing what I did the last two nights. I'd end up raping you." I scowled.

"Hot sex is great for the lungs and heart, aerobically, did you know that?" he asked huskily, not moving. "Call it part of your training."

"Oh, please. Get the hell out of here before Matasi and Merrick get back." I crossed my arms over my chest and looked at him pleadingly. But instead of stepping out into the hall, he closed the door slowly, and pressed the lock button. His eyes never left my face as he began to unbutton his shirt. I shook my head. "I can't break training."

"You don't have to do a thing. I'll take care of everything."

"James..."

"You wouldn't say no to a starving man, would you?"

"No."

"You aren't getting undressed."

"And I'm not going to."

"You want to do this fully clothed? That'll be kinky."

"Stop it."

"Un-Unh—can't—I'm started now, and once I get started, nothing can stop me."

"They'll be here any minute. What're you doing?"

"Just what it looks like—relax—this won't hurt a bit."

He tugged my shirt over my head and then unhooked my bra, then peeled off my sweatpants and panties before he took me in his arms and laid me on the sofa, tugging my hips up onto the cushioned armrest, while he knelt between my spread thighs. I tried to right myself, but he pinned me right where he wanted me, and destroyed my resistance with a slow lick to my wet folds.

"Dear God. Oh, sweet Lord!" I whimpered as he slipped two long fingers into my body and began to gently massage my G spot as he sucked slowly on my clit. I closed my eyes and whimpered with each delicious swirl of his wicked, hot tongue—every nibble of his strong white teeth—every marvelous stroke of those talented fingers. He growled with pleasure as he tasted—laved—devoured. I clutched his hair with my fists, panting and straining to allow him more access.

"That feel good?" he whispered as he stroked again with his fingers.

"Oh, my God—yes!" I panted as I arched up to meet his mouth again. He drove his strong tongue deep into me, replacing his fingers, then dipped his fingers deep once again. I shuddered and arched—clenching—needing—wanting—then splintering into a million sparkling embers as I went up in smoke.

He kissed my inner thigh gently, and then gave me one last wicked lick, before he lifted me from the sofa and helped me pull my clothes on shakily before Matasi and Merrick returned. He kissed my lips gently, and left me standing in the doorway, my knees wobbling and my breathing erratic. And as I made my way to bed, I ran over the entire moment a hundred times in my shivering mind before dropping off to sleep.

* * * *

I woke up feeling pleasantly drained, and wonderfully refreshed, and as I showered and dressed, I was glad he had ignored my demand to be left alone last night. I closed my eyes and sighed.

I ran my hands over my body slowly, wondering what he saw that he thought was so damn sexy. I was okay but nothing to crow about. I had excellent muscle tone, and my body was proportioned well enough, but after seeing some of the females that came into the school day after day, I couldn't believe he thought I was special. They made me look like an undernourished rag doll.

There was no way of telling what men thought was beautiful. All these years, I'd been ignored and treated as if I hardly existed by most of the men of my acquaintance, and now, I had three men telling me they saw me as an attractive female. It'd been a shock when Matasi had told me he'd found me attractive, but it was mind boggling to have someone like James act as if he wanted me more than anything else in creation. And then, there was Jose. Jose seemed to be more upset by the fact that James had taken me to bed first, than by the fact that his arm was smashed. I found myself more confused than thrilled. This was getting damn complicated.

I dressed and went into the kitchen, expecting Matasi to be up and getting breakfast, as usual, but neither he nor Merrick seemed to be up yet. I guessed I wasn't the only one to get lucky last night. I made a pot of coffee, and glanced at my watch. It was well past five, and Matasi was always up with the first rays. I decided to be obnoxious. I walked down the hall and listened at the guest room door, and then I knocked firmly. "Okay, no dawdling. Wake up. Training time."

I heard the bedsprings squeak, and a moment later, the door opened, and Matasi glared out at me, his hair standing on end and his frown magnificent. I tried not to laugh as he said, "It was a very late night. I am allowing Merrick to rest."

"I can imagine," I grinned, as I walked back along the hall. "I'm fixing some breakfast for me. You can fix for her when she's awake. I have to leave in half an hour."

I was sitting down to the table when he came plodding into the kitchen, yawning and scratching his head. If his hair had looked odd before, it now looked utterly comical. "Inconsiderate child," he said with a smile. "And things were just beginning to go well again..."

"Sorry to have broken up the fun. You can always go back to bed," I shrugged.

"At my age, it is not easy to get the motor started. Once it's off, it's off."

"Bet you could get it revved up again in no time, as soon as I'm out the door, whatdya think?" I laughed as I ate my plate of food.

He chuckled and poured a cup of coffee. "Maybe so—maybe so."

* * * *

James took the classes I'd scheduled for the morning, and Hilary was not at all upset that she was going to have the "Body Beautiful" teach her. That was the way she referred to James.

But Josh's mother was petrified, so I told her I would take her after I was finished with my morning workout. As we worked on stances and punches, she was watching me quietly, and I smiled at her encouragingly. "What?"

She shrugged and hesitated, then said confidentially, "It's terribly plain to see that you are crazy about James Rhee, and I wouldn't want to discourage you, or anything, but..." she hesitated, as if worried about saying whatever it was.

I finished the set we were doing, and took a short break as I wiped my face with a towel. "But?" I prompted.

She flushed, and shrugged again. "Oh, it's probably nothing, but someone told me that he's—well—*married*."

I felt a stab of shock go through me, but I kept it out of my expression. "So?" I prompted quietly.

She lifted her brows and drew a deep breath, and she wiped her own face. "So, this person said that he has a wife in Korea, and I thought maybe you should know."

"Why should I?" I asked nonchalantly, drying my neck.

She shrugged. "I thought you two were—well—Hilary said he pays an awful lot of attention to you."

"He does. But he pays an awful lot of attention to his other instructors, too." I sank onto the mat to warm down.

She sank down beside me and said quickly, "Oh, don't mind me. I just didn't want the same thing happening to you that happened to her."

"Who are you talking about?" I asked quietly.

"Ella Wainwright. Didn't you know that she and he had a hot thing going a couple of years ago? Everyone knows that," she blinked, probably thinking I was some sort of dunce. "I thought you knew."

I shrugged. "Hilary said something about them striking it off once, but I pay little attention to gossip," I hinted quietly, doing waist twists from a sitting position.

"Striking it off?" she shook her head. "It was a little more than that. Ella tried to commit suicide over the man."

I stopped exercising and gazed at her quietly. "Obviously she didn't try very hard."

She blushed. "Well, the way she talks about it, you'd think he and she had made all sorts of plans to get married, and then he sprang this wife on her, and it nearly killed her. Oh, she seems hard-boiled, but it really got to her when he dropped that bombshell on her, I'll tell you. I've never seen anyone cry so in my life."

I somehow managed to get through the rest of the class, but I felt utterly violated. Totally stunned. When it came time to go to the weight room for my workout, I told Maria that I was suffering from a violent headache, and that I needed to go home and lie down. I slipped away and drove home in a shroud of numb anger. Married. *He was married?* Not divorced—married. The rotten bastard!

Chapter Thirteen

Matasi had called the school and had told me that he would be gone shopping with Merrick for some things, and that he would not be in to help with my training, so I didn't expect to see them when I stepped into my apartment. The place was quiet, and I locked the door behind me and went into my bedroom. I noted that the phone had messages to be picked up, but I figured it might be James, and I didn't want to talk to him just now. I was feeling slightly nauseated.

I calmed my rolling stomach and washed my hot face with icy water. I could hear the phone in the bedroom, but I ignored it. I went into the kitchen to fix myself something to ease the sick feeling in the pit of my belly and decided that the old bottle of scotch on the top shelf looked like it might help. I poured a small dollop into my coffee and drank with a shudder. How on earth anyone could enjoy this stuff was beyond me. I had kept it for some time because it had been a gift from someone at the office. It did seem to ease my upset stomach, though, so I had another swallow.

I heard the phone ringing again and walked into the living room with my coffee. I heard James' voice asking me to pick up if I was home, and after a while, it rang again and then again. Didn't the creep have anything better to do than call up women? After the fifth time I picked up the receiver and hung it up, then took it off the hook entirely.

I went into the bedroom and kicked off my shoes. To hell with all men. Except maybe Matasi. I crawled on top of my quilt, sank into the soft bed with a groan of self-pity, and began to sob softly. I was in love with him, damn it. I hated him.

* * * *

I heard the door buzzer, and I lifted my head groggily from my pillow. I had latched the door chain. Maybe Matasi and Merrick were locked out. I rose from the bed and managed to walk a semi-straight line into the living room, and I opened the chain-latched door a crack. "Oh—it's you!" I said dully, and I closed the door in his face, re-locking it. I started to walk away, and was startled as he pounded the door with his fist.

"Lisa, dammit. Open this door," he called out.

"Go away and leave me alone."

"I'll break the goddamn thing in if you don't open it right now," he said angrily.

"You wouldn't dare." I rasped, frowning.

"You have until I count to three to open it—one..."

I glared at the door, and I called out, "I said, go away."

"—two..."

I swallowed hard. He was actually thinking about smashing my door in! That would be just peachy. I reached for the knob and let it come open to the extent of the chain. "Can't you take a hint? I don't want to see you. In fact, I don't ever want to see you as long as I live. Now just go away and leave me be."

I started to close the door again, but the door shoved inward with a cracking sound as the chain and its anchor came flying off the doorjamb. I gasped and swallowed hard as he closed the door behind him, and stood staring at me, hands on lean hips, his face red.

"Okay, what have I done this time?" he asked when his breathing had calmed a little.

I didn't want to look at him. "You *need* me?" I whispered scathingly, anger overflowing. "Well, next time you need a woman, go call your wife."

He seemed stunned by my statement, and I glared across the space between us. "Wife?"

"Yes. The one you keep safely tucked away in the mother country. I know all about her," I rasped, crossing my arms over my chest defensively.

He eyed me oddly. "You've had something to drink."

"I didn't think it would matter if I had a little drink. After all, I was celebrating your wedding—the other one," I hiccupped.

But instead of being angry and yelling at me or admitting he was married, his expression changed slightly, and he smiled slowly. "You're jealous."

I exploded. I swung at his face, but the alcohol had dulled my reflexes, and he saw it before it struck. He ducked and caught my wrist, and so I snapped the other one even faster, catching him in the jaw. He swore under his breath, and before I could even think, I was flat on my back on the floor, with his considerable weight pinning me to the carpet. He was astride my hips, holding my wrists against the floor, and his eyes were oddly aglow as he laughed softly. "That was a lucky one. Good thing one of us is in control."

I struggled furiously but couldn't get my hands free. I couldn't kick. I couldn't break his hold. He held me down until I was sobbing and worn out, and I rolled my face away so that I wouldn't have to look at him. "Just go away," I whispered shakily. He rose from my body and pulled me from the floor. I shoved him away as he tried to pull me into his embrace. "Don't touch me. Don't ever touch me again."

He forced my face up to make me look into his eyes, and I stared into his handsome face. "I don't have a wife," his words were whisper-soft.

"You told Ella you had one," I glared at him.

He shook his head slowly. "No. Ella made that up to cover for a messy problem she created for herself with that big mouth of hers. I just never corrected the assumption. It was all a big lie."

"But you aren't lying to me right now?" I drew a shuddering breath. "How convenient."

His eyes were unreadable as he breathed quietly, "I have no wife. I never told anyone I had one. I told Ella Wainwright I didn't want to pick up where she had left off. She isn't an easy woman to say no to."

I stared at him numbly. "And she tried to kill herself."

His face went darker red. "I have an idea of where you're hearing all of this crap, and I don't tolerate idle gossip in my school. You didn't have to hear this from someone else. I wanted to tell you about Ella."

"You should have," I whispered huskily, feeling like I wasn't even sure of my own name anymore.

"Are you willing to listen? Or have you made up your mind before you hear what happened?"

I shrugged. "It's no business of mine. What happened between you and a previous lover is no one else's business."

I gasped as he jerked me into his arms and said angrily, "It is your business since you are the woman who I'm going to be marrying."

I winced at the pain his powerful grip was inflicting. "That can be easily remedied." I grimaced, trying to pull away.

He stared down into my face. "You'll listen, and then I'll be out of your life." I swallowed hard. He practically dragged me to the sofa, and he shoved me down onto it unceremoniously.

"I met Ella before Hilary was born. She and I were—very close. I thought I was in love with her. I was just a kid, fresh out of school and stupid, and I didn't realize all she wanted was a little excitement. I fell for her big time, but all I was to her was a part time bed partner. She used me for sex and married a man of sixty-seven with lots of money.

"When she was pregnant with Hilary, she told me it was my child. I begged her to divorce him and marry me, but she told me to shove off." His eyes were bleak. "After Hilary was born I could see she wasn't mine, but she sure as hell wasn't his, either. Ella never could stick with just one man for long. When he died, she decided to take up acting. She was damned good at it. She'd had one hell of a lot of practice on me and a dozen other guys." He ran his hand through his hair and paced back and forth as he continued.

"About three years ago she was on the loose after hubby number four, and she looked me up again. I was comfortably into my own niche and wasn't interested in what she had to offer, so she decided the only way to get to me was to announce to the world that she was my fiancée. The press ate it up—her agent jumped on it." His voice was tired.

"She figured I couldn't afford to go public and tell the world I wasn't her lover. After all, she's famous. But I wasn't about to buy it. I told her to get the hell out of my life and tell the goddamn press anything she had to in order to break off our phony engagement. So she took a few sleeping pills and announced to the shocked and outraged world that I had lied to her—led her on. She told the press that I was a married man—had a little woman tucked away in the backwoods of Korea. The fact that I've never been there meant nothing. The tabloids had a real field day with me and even managed to come up with half a dozen women who claimed they were my long lost wife. Interviewed them and everything," His lips twisted in disgust. "But then they lost interest in me. A big juicy murder trial came up, and I was yesterday's news."

I stared at him as he finished, and my stomach began to roll again. How the hell had I fallen into this one?

I watched his face as he met my eyes, and he said quietly, "Well. I guess I should get back. I have a couple of students waiting."

He turned and walked to the door, and I said with a muffled sob, "James—"

He paused, not looking back. "I told you once never to doubt me again."

"I'm—sorry..."

He nodded, and was gone. I stared numbly at the broken chain lock, feeling more desolate than I had ever felt in my entire life.

* * * *

I knew I must return to Central Foods. I glanced over my time card for the school and decided that I would tell James tomorrow that I was not going to be staying after the end of the week. I was certain he could get another competent instructor. And then I would go on with my life. After all, it had been too good to be true, hadn't it? And I had never really expected to be able to keep him. But it had been so wonderful. I drew a shuddering breath and wiped my eyes as I heard the front door open and Matasi's voice exclaiming over the broken chain lock.

I ran the back of my wrist across my face to wipe the tears off, and I sniffed. I wondered if my nose was all red. I stepped out of the bedroom and walked down the little hall to the living room. "Hi. Have a good shopping trip?" I smiled at them, and Merrick gazed at me with a little frown, seeing the swollen eyes and the mussed hair.

She said nothing, but smiled at me gently. I smiled back, and Matasi began to question me on how the door had been broken. "What happened? Was there a break-in?"

"No, a slight difference of opinion. James' shoulder won." I shrugged as I headed for the kitchen.

"James? James broke the lock? What on earth happened, Daughter?" Matasi followed me, and I poured myself a cup of coffee as I tried to prepare an answer.

"We had a fight—it's over. There isn't going to be any wedding. I'll be returning to my regular job on Monday. I'll have someone in maintenance fix the lock."

He stared at me, thunderstruck. "Over? How can it be over? You love him."

I smiled. "Not enough. I did the unthinkable. I questioned his veracity."

He frowned, trying to assimilate what I was telling him. "Does Kim Sung know this?"

I shook my head. "Probably not. But I'm pretty sure James will tell him in good time."

* * * *

I fell into my bed wearily, unable to see out of my blurry eyes. I had cried for so many hours, my vision was messed up. I had blown it. I had accused him without even asking his side of it, all based on gossip. I couldn't blame him for walking away just like that. He had only considered marrying me for convenience sake. He was not emotionally involved here. Why go through with a marriage to someone who spoke to you the way I had spoken to him, and all because of something I'd *heard*?

I tossed around in my bed before getting up and pacing my floor for another hour. I went into the bathroom for the hundredth time and blew my nose. I was going to look like Rudolph tomorrow morning. I rinsed my face with cool water and lay back down, and after another hour of staring at the ceiling, I managed to fall into a troubled sleep.

Matasi didn't wake me at 4:30. When I finally opened my eyes and sat up with a groan, I saw that it was 7:30. I swore at myself for sleeping in, and I reached for the bedside phone to dial the school. Maria answered. "Hi, Maria. Sorry. I slept in. Are my students waiting?"

"No, Lisa. Jimmy had Chang and Vince take them, and he's taking your afternoon classes. He told me to tell you to stay home." Her voice sounded a bit cool.

I shrugged. "Thanks, Maria."

Matasi was gone and so was my car, but Merrick was in the kitchen cleaning up the breakfast dishes. When she saw me come through the door, she smiled and poured me a cup of coffee. I thanked her, sinking gratefully onto the chair that she pulled out. I felt like I was ready to burst into tears again, and she carefully avoided saying anything that would trigger them.

She kept up a pleasant, bright stream of conversation that made it easy to avoid thinking about what I was hurting over, and I inwardly thanked her for her blessed intuition. "Well. I

spoke with Mat this morning, and he thinks I should do a portrait of you. I think it will be sensational. You have such lovely bone structure."

I flushed and laughed shakily. "Me? That would be a terrible waste of canvas and good paint."

"I think I should do a full length one. I have a beautiful antique gown you would look exquisite in, a period piece. Yes. I think I would like to do that. Would you consider sitting for me to do some sketches this afternoon? We both appear to be free."

I shrugged. "If you want. You're the artist. I'm more than certain you can make me look great."

"I want," she smiled. "I want to do it for Mat." She called him by a short version of his name, slightly less Asian sounding, and I smiled. "He really would love a portrait of you."

"I have the rest of the week free. Looks like I won't be returning to work until next Monday," I sighed.

"Great. I sent Mat to the art supply to pick up some things for me. He should be back in a couple of hours." Her smile was wonderful. I felt warmly calm beneath her sweet spell, and I knew why Matasi adored her. Then she said something that totally blew me away. "I really would like you to show me some karate. Would you?"

I blinked. "Matasi is the master, here. Did you ask him to teach you?"

"I did, but the MCP thinks it's not for women my age. Have you ever heard anything that ridiculous? I'm only sixty-three."

"MCP?" I smiled.

"Chauvinist Pig—Male variety," she replied tartly. "I'm going to have to reeducate the dear man, after all. What would he say if someone told him a ninety-year-old shouldn't indulge in sex?"

"I have, and he laughed at me," I smiled.

"You see? He has a terrible double standard. I'm surprised he considers you capable to take over his system, with you being a very attractive, extremely female type person," she frowned.

I flushed. "He knew me before I was a full grown female type. He's seen the tomboy brat in me."

"I think he's seen exactly what the rest of these ridiculous males see in you, and maybe that's why I was so damned jealous when he first told me all about his beloved Lisa." She sighed, sinking into the chair next to mine. "I wondered if I stood the chance of an icicle in Hades of

attracting a man whose protégée happened to be one of the most astonishingly lovely young women I'd ever in my life seen," she smiled quietly. I blushed warmly at such praise, coming from an artist of her repute. "I got sick of hearing about Lisa did this, and Lisa did that, and Lisa thinks this..."

"I'm so sorry," I murmured.

She laughed. "Oh, no need to be sorry. I simply had to wait for him to notice I was female and available. It took me nearly two years to net the man, and I'm glad he had you around to keep him from being snapped up by some other older woman before I could set my hook."

I laughed in surprise. "You've known him for two years? Where was I during this courtship?"

"The courtship began when you moved out here. He was lonely and looking. I saw my chance and made myself available. It took me five times with the man before he realized I was a warm blooded, real woman, but once I got him into the sack, he was a goner."

I laughed, and she grinned with me. "But doesn't the fact that he's twenty-seven years older than you bother you?" I asked.

"It certainly doesn't bother him that I'm 27 years younger than him."

"I guessed that much. He's a dirty old man," I chuckled.

"I know, but for 90 he's certainly got a lot of steam left, and I mean to keep him puffing as long as I can," she smiled.

I sighed and sipped my coffee. "Chalk it up to clean living and no smoking."

"If he could bottle and sell it, he'd be rich as Croesus," she smiled. "He's more of a man than most of the 50-year-olds I've dated."

"I really am glad he found you, Merrick," I smiled sadly. "He needs someone."

"I'm glad he found you," she murmured, hugging me gently. "He told me how you kept him alive, how you made him believe in life again after his wife died. You were the daughter he wanted so terribly."

"More than likely the default son he wanted," I grinned.

She nodded and sipped her own coffee, and then, after a moment's silence, she asked gently, "Are you on any kind of birth control, dear?"

I blinked. "What?"

"I realize I sound like a mother hen, but the way James and you were going..."

I stared at her numbly. The idea hadn't even entered my messed up mind. "Um—I have a prescription of BC pills, and he's been using condoms."

She nodded. "Good."

I stared at her. "Why?"

"I—somehow felt that you might be—pregnant." She shrugged delicately.

I stared at her. I couldn't even get a word out. "That's—impossible!" I repeated numbly.

She smiled. "I'm probably wrong, dear. Forget I said anything."

I frowned at her thoughtfully. "How would you get that feeling?"

She laughed softly and blushed. "I'm a bit—psychic."

I lifted my brows. "Psychic? You mean you read minds?" *Dear God—I certainly hoped not.*

She shook her head with a smile, and I sighed with relief. "No—I just—sense things about people—feel things. Like someone staring at you across a room? That tingly feeling you get at the base of your neck?" I nodded. "Well, I actually feel them staring. And I feel their moods. And their needs."

"Oh," I nodded. "That could be uncomfortable for you at times."

"Sometimes," she nodded, her eyes slipping over my pink face. "But usually it gives me a better picture of people's personalities—and helps me understand more."

Great—on top of just having been stupid and losing my husband prospect, I had another thing to worry about. No. I was pretty certain she had to be wrong. I was not pregnant. *I couldn't possibly be...*

I drew a deep breath. Merrick's words had brought James instantly to my pathetic mind—naked—hot—stunning. How on earth could I stay in LA now? I would be so close to the man; I would make myself a nuisance to him—and I had no desire to become some pathetic, needy woman hanging out hoping for a crumb of his affection. Living within five miles of him would mentally be unhealthy. I would go nuts.

I thought about moving back to New Haven. I could fix up the apartment over the studio. I wouldn't have any problems at all finding work no matter where I went. I had highly marketable skills as a CPA. And I would be safely 2,000 miles from James Rhee.

* * * *

I jotted down my ideas, and as I was finishing up, I heard Matasi come in the door. I could hear Merrick's voice and his, and I sighed. Maybe I could move into his house in New Haven

after he was married. Merrick wanted them to live in hers. That was a thought. He had mentioned that he planned to rent it out, but I could very easily rent it from him. I set aside my writing materials, went into the living room, and stopped as I abruptly came face to face with James Rhee.

I stiffened and swallowed convulsively. Matasi excused himself and Merrick and took her off to the guest room while I stared at James, waiting for him to explain what he wanted.

He shoved his hands deep into his pockets, and he said quietly, "I knew you wouldn't want to come in today, so I cleared your schedule, but I need to know what you want me to do about the schedules for next week." His voice was carefully cool and distant. His eyes were unreadable.

I shrugged. "I was expecting to go back to Central on Monday."

He nodded. "Are you certain that's what you want? You don't have to quit because we don't see eye to eye. The job is still there for you. Full benefits."

I inhaled deeply, not trusting myself to remain calm like him. "I loved teaching, James, but I have to be realistic."

He nodded. "I understand. But the job is still there."

I wanted to scream at him, to claw his face off for being like this. How could he simply stop acting the way he had and become so terribly distant and cool toward me? I felt hot tears stinging the back of my eyes, and I swallowed hard to control my voice.

"I don't think it will work. We've been too—intimate." I shook my head. "It would be too difficult for us to be in the same place, feeling as we do about each other." I noted that his jaw tensed.

He nodded quietly, hands on his hips. "Well, I wish you all the best in your life. I'm sorry it worked out this way. We would have been good as a team," he said quietly, and I wanted to hit him. Claw his damned eyes out.

"You too," I nodded. "Please let Hilary and Joshua know that I'll miss them."

"I will."

"You can put this last week's pay on Jose's check, if you don't mind. Call that my contribution to the family."

James lifted his eyes to mine, and I looked in vain for some sign of the feelings I was going through. He felt nothing at all. I turned away and went into my bedroom, and I heard him leave, closing the door behind him.

* * * *

I sat again that afternoon in the chair by the window as Merrick did some more "mood sketches," and then she asked me to put on a sheet and stand for about half an hour while she sketched "draperies." She asked me to move the sheet here and there and turn a certain way. I grinned as I thought about it.

A portrait of me in an antique gown? I hadn't worn a dress in years, much less any gowns. My standard work outfit was a tailored slacks suit with low classic pumps. I had learned that pantyhose and/or garters were against the laws of God and nature the very first time out, and I hated discomfort.

She smiled at me quietly as she worked, and she said, "I think Matasi has wanted to see you in a nice dress for a very long time. He believes females should dress in a proper manner. Silly, really, because dresses are hardly functional anymore. Especially in a stiff breeze."

I eyed her then laughed after a minute, "You really are psychic, aren't you?"

She laughed with me. "Just remember that you project a great deal of what you are feeling. It is not a defect, dear. It's an asset, especially when you think positive things. You project your positive thoughts to others, and they pick them up. This is why so very many people gravitate to you. It is a gift. Use it wisely and use it well."

* * * *

I cooked for us that evening, allowing Merrick to sit and cuddle with Matasi in the living room as I flitted about the kitchen, humming to myself and making a tasty stir-fry. To avoid thinking about James, I concentrated on the food I was fixing and calmed myself as I tossed some mushroom caps into the wok and flipped the mixture quickly and efficiently before turning it out into a large bowl of rice. I carried it out to the table, and said, "Grub's ready." I went back in for the cellophane noodles, and when I returned, they were seating themselves.

I noted with a pang of regret how solicitous Matasi was of her as he drew her chair out for her as she sat. I could be feeling that kind of sweet enjoyment, if I hadn't been so damned willing to believe a load of idle gossip. Oh, well. Let that be a bitter lesson to me. I sank into my own chair, put my napkin onto my lap, and dug in.

I told Matasi I was turning in early, and I went to my room, but instead of turning in, I changed into workout clothes and went for a long run. It was getting close to dark when I returned to the apartment, and I tried to slip in unnoticed.

Chapter Fourteen

When I stepped into the apartment, Merrick was in the hallway. I swiped the back of my hand over my eyes, and she gazed at me in concern. Without saying a word, she opened her arms and hugged me while I wept and clung to her. Matasi was out for a walk, thank God. I didn't have to say a thing. She whispered quietly, "You go wash your face with cold water, dear, and I'll make us some tea. I think we need to have a long woman to woman talk."

I obeyed nervously, and when I reappeared in the kitchen, she was pouring a cup of fragrant, steaming tea for us. "You look much better. Sit down, dear."

I nodded, not trusting myself to maintain composure if I spoke. I sank onto the chair and gazed numbly into my cup, as if hoping to divine the future from the tealeaves in the bottom. Maybe Merrick could tell me the future, being psychic. I blew the steam gently away and sipped.

"You don't have to feel this way, dear. You are putting yourself through hell for nothing." Her words made me blink. I glanced up into her smooth face and met a gaze that was calm and serene.

"I made the grave mistake of falling in love with a man who can't feel the same thing for me." I whispered carefully, not wanting to start crying again.

"How do you know he feels nothing? Has he told you what he feels?"

I shook my head. "He never said a word either way. He needed someone to fill a gap in his life, and I seemed comfortable in the gap. Even Matasi told me men never really love until they grow into it. I just didn't have enough time for him to grow into loving me."

Merrick laughed softly, and I frowned. "Matasi is speaking generally, and about himself, dear. Men are so analytical about such things; they don't go by feelings alone. They dissect. They contemplate. They try to explain why they feel what they feel. Women are far simpler. We feel things, and we accept what we feel as natural. When a woman feels comfortable and warm with a man, she calls it love. When a man feels comfortable and warm with a woman, he calls it convenience. It's a simple matter of semantics."

I sniffed and sipped more of the calming tea. "He never really told me anything he was feeling."

"But he told you by doing. He made love to you; he didn't simply take you to bed. He was gentle. He was kind to you. He was very comfortable with you. There was warmth between you that anyone could feel standing within a hundred yards of the two of you. You think he doesn't love you? I think he does."

I stared at her. "I hurt him. I insulted him. He walked away from me when I did, and there was no love there. He walked away without anger or recrimination. When a person who

loves is hurt, there is always anger. Love and hate are closer than we think. A person can walk away from a person they don't love. If he loved me, why didn't he yell at me—slap me? Why didn't he let me know?"

She sighed and shrugged. "Those are the things you feel. You cannot expect everyone to feel the same way about things. Perhaps his idea of love is far different from yours, but I will tell you this—I could feel the love that man felt for you every time he was in my presence, and I think that if you really feel the same way, you will give him a chance to forgive you and let him decide he does love you still. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I blinked. "How can you say these things? How do you know what a man thinks when you're a woman?"

She laughed and sipped her tea. "Sadly, men and women think in entirely opposite channels. I can feel a great deal of what the difference is, and I have learned to cope with it. When a man says he wants sex, he really wants someone to be close to him, to fill his needs, to make him feel wanted and needed. But he dissembles. He tells himself that he doesn't really want ties. He doesn't really need anyone—just sex." She shrugged eloquently. "It's up to the woman to know what he really means and needs. Most of the success women have in dealing with men is to know how to read between the lines—to feel what is there and not expect it to be spelled out. Most men have no idea how to tell a woman she is important to them, to tell her that she is a part of them. Women, being the superior beings, are expected to just know."

"That's unfair. If they expect us to tell them how we feel, but they won't tell us, that's a double standard." I sipped more tea. My frown made her smile.

"And it always will be. Men have to be carefully trained and cultivated to be able to tell a woman what they truly feel, and most can't quite bring themselves to that point. Most aren't taught to be that way. It doesn't come naturally. They muddle around in feelings of manliness until they lose sight of their goals.

"Women do the same things many times, but we tend to overdevelop feelings and emotions and to create a fantasy world in which to function. Men try to be totally realistic and to rid themselves of the need to feel. The two worlds rarely collide."

I shook my head. I couldn't believe that James might genuinely have felt any kind of real love for me. Yet it had been so easy to believe that I was in love with him. There was something to what Merrick was saying. I smiled sadly. "So, you're suggesting that I stop running away, and make James have to deal with whatever it is he feels for me—if he feels anything at all?"

"Precisely. If you let him walk away, you may lose the one man you were meant to be with. If you allow him to intimidate you, you will undoubtedly miss out on whatever he has to offer you. Don't run away anymore. If you feel he's worth fighting for, walk right back into that damned school of his and make him see you every day, look at you every day, and talk to you every day. Act normally. Let him know you still are open to suggestion, but don't act like you're pining away. Be yourself." I stared at Merrick numbly. Wow. She was amazing.

I sighed. "I don't know if I can handle seeing him every day without falling apart like an idiot."

"Of course you can. If you really love him, you'll manage."

"If I saw him kissing another woman, I'd want to kill them both."

"Jealousy is a healthy, normal human emotion. It does wonders for the libido." Her smile was quiet, and I recalled James smiling at me when I blew up at him about being married. He had simply said with a smile, "You're jealous," as if that were a good thing. I knitted my brows thoughtfully.

"I don't know, Merrick. I just don't know."

"Well, think about it. I think he deserves an opportunity to rethink his position. But it's your move now." She rose from the table and said bracingly, "Why don't I get some more drapery sketches onto the boards before you go back to work tomorrow?"

I lifted my brows. She was pretty certain I was going to do exactly what she was suggesting. I smiled wryly and shrugged. "Okay."

I glanced at my watch. Maria would still be closing up. I called her to tell her I'd be in first thing in the morning, ready to work. "Tell him I will be there, and if he wants me to teach, he should have me a schedule lined up for the day."

She sounded a bit less cool as she replied, "I'll let him know, and Lisa..."

"Yes?"

"Welcome back."

"Thanks, Maria. See you at 6:00."

"Are you certain you wish to go back?" Matasi's voice brought me around with a jerk as I hung up the phone. Damn! I hadn't heard him come in.

I nodded. "I'll be fine. I promised I'd help until Jose is back on board, and I suppose I should keep my word."

He smiled. "I am proud of you." I glanced at Merrick, and she smiled at me. Was this some sort of conspiracy? "You have great courage and consideration for the needs of others. I am happy to see you taking a grip on your emotions and returning to the school."

I smiled crookedly. "Don't say that until you see what happens."

* * * *

I drove to the school and arrived shortly before 6:00, finding Maria in the sewing room. The office was empty. "Did you give him my message?" I asked.

She stared at me for a moment, and grimaced. "Oh, damn. I knew I forgot something."

I drew a deep breath. "So, I don't even know for sure he wants me here. Great." I grinned at her and shook my head. "Maybe I should just come back in half an hour and talk with him."

"Why? Just go on up. I'm pretty sure he won't be upset if you just go up there."

I frowned. "I think I'll wait."

She eyed me quietly for a moment and then asked, "What happened, girl? For a few days there, he was acting as he was on top of the world, then bang. He came crashing down. Wouldn't have anything to do with you vanishing for three days, would it?"

I shrugged. "I doubt it. He might just be upset about Jose."

She made a wry face and lifted her brows. "What the man is feeling has nothing to do with another man. I'd say the man is having woman trouble. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

I inhaled slowly. "Me? Why should I?"

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "No one around here is blind. The man went ape over you the minute you showed up. He went out of his way to get you here, and he made it pretty clear you were his private property when the guys started flexing their muscles. I'd say you should know at least something about his sudden mood swing. The man nearly bit my head off when I asked him where you were the first day you didn't show up."

I blinked. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

She eyed me in disbelief. "You can say that if you want, Lisa, but the man hasn't been himself since you took off. He's been like a damned tiger with a sore paw, and nobody's been able to talk to him or get close to him since that first day you weren't here." Her voice was soft, and I figured she didn't want to be overheard.

"The way the two of you hit it right off, I was pretty sure he'd come up with a winner. I've never seen him so damned happy before, and I've known the man for a lot of years. But then, bang. You're gone, and he's a basket case. That's one hell of a man you're playing games with, girl. I wouldn't blow it off if I had a chance at him."

I knew what she was thinking, and I shook my head slowly. "I already blew it, Maria. Let's just let it drop, okay? It's water under the bridge, and if I could take it back, I would, but what's done is done."

She stared at me, her eyes concerned. "That man is crazy about you. All you have to do is tell him you feel the same way, and he'll forget whatever happened."

I sighed. "Let it go, Maria. A man like James Rhee doesn't forget something like that."

She stared at me. "You didn't get stupid and go to bed with Jose, did you?"

I laughed, and my face went bright red. "Good, Lord, no. It was nothing at all to do with another man. It's just something I did that was dumb, and I hurt him. It won't do any good to rehash all of this, so let's drop it."

She pursed her lips and shrugged. "Just don't go running off again. I don't want to have him chew my head off again, thank you very much." Then her face changed and she turned away, and I realized that we weren't alone.

I turned around slowly and met his dark gaze. I guessed that he was trying to decide what to say to me. I took the pressure off by saying, "Well, I'm here to work, if you can use me. I called yesterday, but Maria must have forgotten to give you my message."

She turned and said, "Sorry, Boss. She did call yesterday, and I spaced the call off completely."

"If I'd have known yesterday, I'd have put you into the schedule," he replied quietly.

I noted that he was in his gi, and I shrugged. "I could take some of the ones you were planning to take today. That way you'll be free to handle the office and get your other business taken care of."

He shook his head, glancing at Maria as if not wishing to talk in front of her. "Let's go on into the office."

I followed him, and Maria gave me a thumbs-up sign. Once we were inside the office, he gestured for me to sit down, and then he closed the door. I swallowed hard. I steeled myself for a blistering set down, but it never came. He sank onto the corner of his desk and seemed to be debating what to say to me.

I shifted uncomfortably in the chair and said, "I owe you an apology. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have listened to gossip. I never have before. I can't imagine why I did now." I couldn't look at him. I stared at my hands as I twisted my belt in my fingers. I drew a deep, reinforcing breath.

"Anyway, I just want to say that, if you'll have me back, I'd like to continue to work for you." He didn't say anything at all for a minute or so, and I glanced up into his face to see if he was angry. His dark gaze was enough to make me swallow my tongue. I managed to keep from choking. Then he said softly, "I thought you had decided to go back to Central Foods."

I shrugged. "It's a good job, and a secure one, but I found out that I love teaching, and I'd like to continue, if you'll let me."

He nodded slowly, his dark eyes moving over my flushed face. "You're an excellent instructor. Your students didn't like me substituting for you."

I swallowed hard. "Hilary didn't mind too much. In fact, I think she'll want to keep you. You're her idol."

He crossed his arms over his chest, and he gazed at me thoughtfully. Then his next question nearly blew me over. "Who is the lucky man?"

I jerked my eyes up to his face and my expression must have been absurd when I said, "Pardon me?"

"You are in love with someone," he breathed quietly. I wished I could do what Merrick could and feel what was going on in his head.

I gazed at him quietly. "That's none of your business."

"*Are* you in love with someone?" Boy, was he persistent, or what?

I gazed at him numbly. I wanted to tell him to go to hell. Was the man so goddamn blind he hadn't seen who I was in love with? I fought down my urge to claw his face off, and I breathed, "Yes." *You, stupid!*

He nodded slowly, his face unchanging. "Be here at six in the morning." He rose from the edge of the desk, and he opened the door. "I already have the schedule set up for today. I'll rearrange it for the rest of this week, and set you into the schedule permanently after that."

I wanted to hit him. He had just heard me say I was in love with someone else, and he hadn't batted an eye. Merrick and Maria had been wrong. He didn't really care at all. I rose from the chair and looped my belt about my neck. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Lisa..."

I glanced at him, trying not to show how I felt. "What?"

"Welcome back."

I nodded at him. "See you in the morning."

He rose from the corner of his desk and walked around to his chair. He was finished with me. I turned and walked from the office, trying very hard not to show the hurt. I headed for the door. I wasn't really certain I even wanted to come back tomorrow. But before I got to the door, Vince saw me, and he grinned. "*Hola*. Where you been?"

I smiled. "On vacation. I'll be here tomorrow. See you." I waved. I was stepping out the door when I saw James standing in the door of the office watching me. I waved as if I were

totally unconcerned and walked briskly to my car. Damn him. If he was trying to rub my mistake in my face, he was doing a bang up job of it.

I felt sick inside, and I felt foolish for having believed that James felt anything at all for me. I had just wanted it to be true so desperately that I had gone back, hoping. Of course, now that I knew the truth, I planned to conceal my own feelings and simply do what I did best—teach.

I'd manage somehow to get over him. Sort of like a hangover—hair of the dog. If I were around him every day, I wouldn't be able to idealize him. I'd see him as he was—a macho, sexy creep.

* * * *

When I arrived back at the apartment so early, Matasi was just carrying the dishes from their breakfast out of the guest room. He nodded with a grunt and headed into the kitchen. I followed. "How come you are home so early?"

"Maria forgot to tell him I was coming in today. He didn't need me." I reached for the milk and poured a glass.

He seemed like he was debating something, and then he said quietly, "I have had a talk with Kim Sung Rhee."

I stared at him in dismay. "You didn't!"

"I did. He is very upset about this situation. He is going to have a talk with James."

"No. I don't believe this. How could you?"

He frowned. "I have to protect your interests, child."

I set the glass down and sank onto a chair. "I don't believe this. You call him back right now, and tell him I am going to handle this in my own way."

"It is too late for that. He plans to see James tonight, and I am to bring you, as well."

I stared at him. "I can't believe this is happening. I just can't believe it. If anything, this will only alienate James more."

"I am your father, now. It is my responsibility to settle this affair and see that your expectations are not dashed."

I closed my eyes and sighed. He was only doing what he thought was right, but how could I tell him that he was fighting a losing battle? I decided that I would go and see Kim Sung Rhee before he got hold of his son, and stop this ridiculous "meeting" from occurring. I smiled at Matasi and said, "I need to get some things from the store. Did you need anything while I'm there?"

I changed into a decent pair of dress slacks and a silk blouse, and I brushed my hair into a twist. I wanted to look totally mature today. I needed all the psychological armor I could manage to get through what I was about to do.

* * * *

As I drove to Kim Sung Rhee's house, I rehearsed what I was going to say, and how I was going to handle this. I decided that the very best way to handle it was to use the direct approach, then I sighed. How did one use a direct approach on something like this?

As I pulled into the driveway, I could see Mr. Rhee working in his garden behind the house. He looked up with a frown, then recognized me, and came forward with a smile, wiping his hands on his pant legs. I stepped out of the car and smiled back.

"Lisa. What a wonderful surprise. I was just talking to Matasi a short while ago, and I am going to have a long talk with my son," he frowned. "Come into the house, please."

As I followed him inside and he excused himself to go clean up, I walked to the front window and gazed out at the neat little yard. I drew a calming breath, and as I was about to plant myself on the sofa, a woman's voice said quietly, "So, you are Lisa. The only time I've seen you is when you were running away from James' apartment."

I whirled and saw the same exquisitely attractive young woman that I'd seen in James' place the day I had showered there. My face went red, and she laughed, walking across the room with her hands outstretched to take mine. "I wanted to meet you then, but you apparently thought that I was one of his other girlfriends." I took her delicate hand and smiled in embarrassment. "My name is Mae Lin. I already know yours."

I laughed shakily. "You live here with your father?"

"No, I'm just here for a couple of weeks. I live in San Francisco. Dad wasn't feeling too well, so I thought I'd trek in and make sure he's eating properly—you know."

I smiled. "I know. I've had to get after mine a lot. He never seems to do the right thing for himself."

She sank onto the sofa and said brightly, "So. When Jimmy told me he'd found the one for him, I was totally floored. We figured he'd be single 'til doomsday. Dad had completely given up on him. As good looking as my brother is, you'd think he'd have scads of females in his little black book, but he kept telling us he has no time for that."

She chattered away, oblivious to my pink face and the look of distress in my eyes. I sank down beside her and drew a deep breath as she went on brightly. "He's nearly 38 and he's never even had a near miss as far as getting married. I've been married since I was 17, and Monty and I have four kids. Dad's been so upset that Jimmy hasn't seemed to be interested in marriage. He was ecstatic when Jimmy told us he found someone. Dad was a little upset that you were Anglo, but then, so's my husband. You can't have everything perfect, right?"

I managed to keep from giggling at her way of gushing on without even taking a breath. If ever a brother and sister were as different as night and day, these two topped the list. Mae Lin was tiny and delicately built, ultra feminine, and flighty. A nonstop talker. I shrugged at her last statement and was saved from having to make any reply when her father entered the room. I rose automatically and bowed in respect, and Mae Lin giggled. "Look. Jimmy's got her trained better than any nice little Korean girl you could have picked out for him."

Mr. Rhee frowned at her reprovably as he bowed slightly in return. "She is showing her respect for me, much as my own daughter should."

She gave a peal of laughter and shook her head. "I gave up bowing to men when I left the dojang, Dad. You two have a talk." She glanced at me and smiled. "I'll see you before you leave, and we can talk some more, okay?" She addressed the last part to me, and I smiled as she got up and walked out of the room.

He smiled warmly at me, and gestured for me to sit again. "My daughter has become far too brash. It was all her mother's fault. There is no respect anymore toward men," he sighed.

I sank back down and licked my lips. I had just seized on the right tack in this conversation. "I came to speak with you, sir, about the change in our marriage plans."

He frowned magnificently. "James will not be changing the plans. I will see that he follows through. I have already told this to your father. I will see that he keeps his promise."

I smiled gently and shook my head. "Please don't talk to him. It is far better this way. It isn't James' fault—it's mine. I came to explain so that you won't be angry with your son."

He stared at me. "*You* wish to call off the marriage?"

I swallowed, and my flush told him a great deal more than my quick nod. "I insulted James. I accused him of things he hadn't done, and I didn't ask him if those things were true or not before I did so. I questioned his honor. He did exactly what any honorable man would do. He told me the truth and released me from our agreement. That's acceptable to me. I'd greatly appreciate it if you wouldn't try to pressure him into continuing with the agreement, since I'm not expecting him to marry me." There. I'd done it.

He gazed at me quietly, thoughtfully. I swallowed hard, and as he seemed to be assimilating this information, I said softly, "I ask your forgiveness for any distress I've caused you, sir, but I beg of you not to discuss this with your son. He's done nothing at all to dishonor me or you. He's a good man. I regret the lapse on my part which caused this to happen, but I will not marry James if you insist that he continue with our agreement against his wishes." There. That should finish it.

He nodded slowly, and he seemed to be considering what I'd said. Then he murmured softly, "You are very much like his mother. And although I will say nothing to him, at your request, I must tell you that I feel my son is a complete fool to let you go. It is not often a man finds a woman who loves him enough to do what you have just done."

My face went red, and I swallowed hard. He rose from his chair, and I rose with him. Then he did something that shocked me. He stepped forward, reached out to pull me into his arms, and he hugged me. I closed my eyes and pressed my cheek against his shoulder, and when he drew away, his eyes were watery.

"I will regret not having you for my daughter-in-law. But I will not give you up as my friend. You will be welcome here anytime, child. Come into the kitchen. I believe Mae Lin has prepared us some lunch. Will you join us?"

* * * *

On my way home, I stopped at the store so that Matasi would not be suspicious, and I picked up several items I had needed. I gave Matasi his bottle of Sake and put the rest of the things I'd bought away in the cupboard. Merrick came in and said with a smile, "How did your excursion go?" as she got a glass of orange juice from the fridge.

I smiled back. "It went well. Would you do me a really big favor?"

"I haven't told Mat anything about our conversations," she smiled quietly and put the pitcher back.

I laughed. "You sure cut out the need for long conversations, don't you?"

"Some people don't appreciate that."

"It's okay. I don't mind so much now that I know you better. My mom would've adored you."

She sighed. "And I'm sure I would have loved her, too. She did a good job on her child."

"Mr. Rhee won't be talking to James." I breathed.

"And Matasi will not be talking to him, either. I explained that this was between you and James, and he should trust you in this."

I gazed at her quietly. "Thanks."

"My pleasure. Men sometimes get bent out of shape where their daughters are concerned. So do women, about their sons."

"Did this happen with your son?"

"Of course. I was the most obnoxious mother on the face of the earth, nosy, inquisitive, pushy. Of course, Maxine liked me, so my son backed off when he saw how well we got along. Being a mother in law is not so bad, once you get the feel of it."

"How could she not like you?" I laughed.

"Bless you," she laughed with me. "I think we should see if we can catch the light before we lose it for the day, hmmmm?"

Chapter Fifteen

I visited Jose at the hospital to let him know that everyone sent him their wishes. I kept the conversation light and airy, but he seemed to sense that I was holding back some important news.

His eyes darkened. "Chang told me you're testing for your fifth. I hope you'll wait until I'm out of here before you do. I'd like to be there," he said softly.

"I'm testing in a little less than a month. I think you'll be out of here long before then."

"I didn't know Matasi Kanegawa was your instructor. He's tough," he said, his eyes moving over me thoughtfully. "I hear you're also his adopted kid."

I flushed. "Too much gossip going on, but yes, it's true. That won't make him any easier on me, though. I dread this one."

He nodded. "Jimmy must be thrilled all to hell that he's getting you."

I tried not to let on how I felt. "I have no idea. He doesn't say much about it." I was being truthful.

"I met Shihan Kanegawa about five years ago, when Jimmy and me flew back East for a tournament. I never saw you though. I never would have forgotten you."

"I never compete. Matasi would go out of respect for the promoters. They're all good friends."

"Why don't you compete?"

I shrugged. "I guess I wasn't into that kind of thing. I loved learning and teaching, but I wasn't much for getting up in front of a lot of people and performing or fighting. I fought in a lot of interschool competitions, just on a friendly basis."

"I'll bet. Vince says you can move like greased lightning. He watched you sparring Jimmy."

I laughed. "I wouldn't call what I was doing sparring. It was more like running for my life. He hit me a few times, and I didn't want to get hit again."

He grinned. "You've got guts to get into the ring with him in the first place. He's the best."

"So I've heard, and so I've seen." I tried not to sound or look wistful. "I have to get three points on him to pass my test. That's going to be a real test in itself. So far, I haven't connected once."

He nodded. "Want a few pointers?"

I smiled. "Sure."

"He gives you openings. Don't take 'em. You've gotta make your own and catch him when he isn't expecting it. You won't get many chances. He remembers everything you do."

I nodded. "I guessed that. I'll try to be sneaky."

Perhaps there was hope for me yet.

* * * *

It was Merrick who woke me at 5:30 the next morning with a cup of tea in her hand and a sweet smile on her face. I sat up with a capacious yawn and scratched my head before I took the cup and thanked her. She sank onto the edge of my bed companionably.

"I am concerned about you testing in spite of the fact that you may be pregnant, Lisa. Are you certain you won't damage yourself or your baby?"

I frowned. "I'm not pregnant." *Sheesh.*

She nodded quietly. "I was just concerned. I would hate to see anything happen to you. You are rather like my own daughter, you know."

I smiled at her. Better to humor her than to make her worry. "I'll be very careful. I won't overdo. And I'll be certain that I cover up well when I spar. Is that better?"

"I suppose I'll have to settle for that," she nodded, sipping her own tea.

To change the subject, I breathed, "I did what you said—he doesn't love me."

She lifted her brows. "How do you know? Did he say something?"

"No—but if he loves me, he sure as hell knows how to hide it." I sighed and stared into nothing for a long moment.

"Give him a little more time. He might surprise you."

I smiled. "I doubt that anything could surprise me anymore, Merrick."

"I've lived sixty three years, my dear, and I have yet to find a day I am not surprised by something or other," she smiled, finishing her tea.

* * * *

James had filled my schedule to the top, and I had five private students and a group class. I didn't see him. Maria gave me my schedule when I came in, telling me he was gone out for the day. I had no breaks in my schedule at all until one, and I squeezed in a short lunch before teaching the group class. I finished my classes at 5:30 and spent a half hour doing weights in the weight room before Maria came in and said, "You still here? That's a twelve hour day."

I grunted as I set the weight bar back on the braces and sat up to wipe my face. "I figured I'd work out a little while I had access to the weights. I'll be leaving before James gets back."

She lifted her brows. "He got back at 4:30."

I nodded. "Oh. I'm glad. I need to talk to him about my schedule."

"He changed his clothes and left again. Looked like he was dressed to go to dinner somewhere," she shook her head. "I think he had a business meeting."

I drew a deep breath. A business meeting? I swallowed my disappointment and nodded. "Oh, well, maybe I'll catch him in the morning."

She eyed me quietly. "You two fighting?"

"Of course not. He's just busy, and I'm trying to get ready for a test. Our time is sort of short."

"Sure," she replied, eyeing me doubtfully. "I'll bet."

I smiled, rose from the bench, and dried my neck and hands with the towel. "Look, Maria, we aren't fighting. We are friends, nothing more. The other relationship has gone with the wind." I tried hard not to look pathetic.

"He needs a good kick in the ass."

"Well, don't look at me to give it to him," I grinned.

"Well, somebody needs to!" She frowned and then waddled away. I could hear the phone ringing in the office.

I smiled as I watched her go. She was a sweetheart, but I wasn't about to tell her any more about the problem between James and me. Too many people were involved as it was, and I didn't want the gossip. I frowned as I thought about Mrs. Logan, and I decided that I would have to be very careful around her. I expected half the world to know about our affair soon enough, the way we had gone about our hot and heavy activities. I blushed to think of how many others might already know about James and me.

I packed up my gym bag and was ready to leave when Maria came back into the room. "The boss just called. He wants you to come over to the Hollywood Westmore and bring his laptop and the CD pack in his top drawer with you."

I stared at her. "Like this?" I had not showered, and I was a mess.

"I just told him I'd give you the message. Here's a phone number to call back on." She handed me a sheet of notepad paper and left again.

I frowned at it. Now I was his gofer? I went on into the office and dialed the number, noticing that it was his cell phone number. He picked up in two rings, and I swallowed as he said, "Rhee here."

"Maria just gave me your message. Are you going to be waiting outside for your laptop? Because I'm in no shape to go running around a posh hotel looking for you."

"Then go shower and get into something else, because you are going to have to bring it in. I'm in the middle of something."

"Why can't Vince or Chang bring it?"

"Because they're gone. You're it, I'm afraid. Maria can't leave until closing, and the others all have classes. I'll be in the main ballroom. Be here by eight." The line went dead.

I frowned at the receiver and then hung up slowly. I glanced at my watch. I dialed him back, and he sounded exasperated when he answered. "What now?"

"What kind of affair is this? Can I get away with slacks and a blouse?"

"Don't you own a dress?"

"Actually, no."

"Then buy one. I'll see that you are reimbursed from school funds. Buy a dinner dress. You know what one is, I hope." He sounded irritated.

"I can ask the salesgirl." I retorted acidly, hanging up with a resounding click. I drew a deep breath. Then I dialed the apartment, hoping Merrick was there. She answered, and I said a trifle breathlessly, "Help. I'm supposed to go to some shindig at the Westmore Hotel in less than two hours, and I have to have a dinner dress."

"Mmm. I think I can help you out on that one. What size are you, dear, a three? Maybe a five?"

"Thanks, but I'm a seven. I haven't the foggiest idea what a dinner dress is. What am I gonna do?"

"Just get home as quickly as you can, and I'll take care of the rest. My, this is going to be fun." She hung up, and I swore under my breath at James. I grabbed the computer and the CDs and made a dash for the door.

Chapter Sixteen

I showered, got into clean underwear in record time, and was blowing my hair dry when Merrick came in carrying three large boxes bearing the name of an exclusive Beverly Hills shop. I watched her open them and dump the contents unceremoniously onto the bed, and as she sorted out lace-topped thigh-high hose and shoes and a few other things, I drew a deep breath. "The shop manager was extremely helpful. I told her where you were going, and she seemed to know exactly what the event was. She sent these straight out. Now let's see—oh, yes—very nice."

I finished drying my hair and said, "How should I put it? Up or loose?"

"Up—definitely up. Let's show off that lovely neck of yours."

I frowned. "I haven't worn a dress in ages." I brushed my hair deftly up into a smooth twist and pinned it, and she finished the do for me by working on the top, not allowing me to simply brush it back smooth this time. I had to admit that she did a good job. I didn't quite recognize myself when I looked into the mirror. How on earth could brushing your hair differently make that much of a difference?

I smiled and thanked her. She dragged me up from the edge of my bed and said, "Get those old things off and put these on," as she handed me new underwear that made me blush. Instead of pantyhose, I donned those ultra sexy thigh-highs and clipped them to the sinfully lacy garter belt. I dressed quickly, glancing at my bedside clock. It was just past 7:00.

I stared at myself in the mirror and swallowed as I realized that sexy underwear sure did something for a woman's body. The soft lace of the rather décolleté bra did wonders for my shape, and the panties were sinful. The hose were wispy and sheer, and I could hardly tell they were there. Then there was the silky half-slip that felt like a sexy nightgown. She was busy unpacking the dress, and when she held it up and open for me to slip into, I stared at myself numbly. I drew a shaky breath, and I said softly, "Holy shit. Is that me?"

She smiled as she fastened the back, zipped me in, and smoothed the skirt. She gazed at me thoughtfully and said, "With that lovely skin, you don't need a drop of makeup, but the eyes could use just a tiny bit of drama." I sat carefully on the vanity seat, and she worked on my face with her own makeup palette for about five minutes before she said, "That is perfect."

When I looked into the mirror, I couldn't see any makeup, but my eyes looked larger, bluer. My lips weren't red, but they looked fuller and softer. I frowned. It looked completely natural, yet I seemed to have a different face. *She certainly was an artist.* Then she fastened a gleaming gold chain about my neck and a matching bracelet as she took my plain leather watch away. "Ask for the time," she breathed when I protested. "Pick any man you see, and he'll fall all over himself to give you the time."

As I rose from the chair and looked into my mirror one last time, I murmured, "Well, at least nobody's gonna recognize me, so if I make a fool of myself, no one's gonna know, right?"

She laughed softly, took a small bag out of the box, and handed me the shoes. I slipped them on, and found that I hadn't *quite* forgotten how to walk in heels. I put my keys and my wallet into the small bag, and she giggled, "I feel like the fairy godmother in Cinderella."

"And I feel like the frigging horse that became the coachman."

She laughed. "You look absolutely marvelous. You had better go, though, if you're to be there by eight."

I passed Matasi in the hallway, and his mouth dropped open. I planted a kiss on his cheek, and said, "Not one word. See you later."

* * * *

I handed my keys to the parking attendant, and he handed me a claim ticket. I tucked it into my absurdly tiny handbag and got a better grip on the laptop handle. I walked into the lobby of the hotel, saw a number of signs directing visitors to various places to hear various speakers, spied the main ballroom, and I headed for it.

As I entered the crowded room, I was very glad Merrick had helped me. The men were wearing dinner jackets, and the women were wearing everything from formal gowns to cocktail dresses. It looked like the gala dinner dance at the Hunt Club back in New Haven.

I glanced around to see if I could find James. Finally I stepped over to one elderly gentleman who was conversing with a small knot of people, and I said softly, "Pardon me, but can you please tell me where I might find James Rhee?"

The man smiled at me, his dark eyes moving down my body and back before he replied quietly, "Of course, Miss Kanegawa, he is right there." He bowed slightly, and I smiled, nodding my head as everyone else in the group smiled and greeted me pleasantly.

I was shocked that they knew who I was, and even my adopted father's name.

I excused myself from the group, glanced in the direction he had pointed, and saw James. My heart skipped a couple dozen beats as I stared at him. I'd never seen him in dinner clothes, and he was breathtakingly attractive. He was standing on a raised dais, beside a speaker's podium, conversing with another man who also looked Korean. I thanked the man again, and made my way carefully through the crowd toward him, trying to keep the laptop from being jostled too much.

I stepped carefully around laughing, conversing groups of people, and I noticed that there was a preponderance of Asian faces here tonight. I hadn't bothered to look at the event on the billboard outside the ballroom. I wished I had. I smiled and begged a couple dozen pardons, and as I was almost to the edge of the dais, I glanced up to find James watching my approach.

I swallowed hard, feeling oddly out of place in the expensive, figure hugging dress and Merrick's jewelry. I saw his friend turn to look, as well, and James excused himself to cross the

dais and stand on the edge as I managed to get past the final human barrier to stand just below him. I handed him up the laptop, and I said, "I hope I brought the right package of disks."

He took the small, briefcase sized computer from me with one hand, and then caught my hand with his other. He walked along the dais to a set of three steps that led up to where he stood, forcing me to come with him.

I climbed the steps self consciously, seeing eyes turn toward me. "What are you doing?" I hissed. "I thought all I had to do was bring you the damn computer." He handed the laptop to the other Korean man, who bowed to me and smiled broadly.

"Well, now that you're here, you might as well stay awhile. I need a partner for dinner," he replied in an irritated undertone that told me not to quibble.

I opened my mouth to protest, but a very distinguished looking man in his late fifties or early sixties was climbing the steps, his eyes on me, and I swallowed my words as James turned to greet him, still holding my hand firmly in his. I recognized him instantly, and I held my breath as he greeted James warmly and then turned to me.

"Miss Kanegawa, forgive me for staring like an old fool, but James' description of you hardly prepared me for the reality." He took my hand from James, and he bowed to me formally, touching his forehead to my fingertips. "He merely told me that his fiancée was an extremely lovely young woman from New Haven." I blinked, my cheeks going bright pink as he smiled into my eyes warmly. "He should have told me that his fiancée was an exquisitely beautiful and captivating creature with eyes the color of the morning skies and hair the color of a midsummer's sun."

I couldn't help it. I was so startled by his description of me, I laughed, and he smiled even more broadly. "Master Park, you are not only a wonderful teacher, you are an exemplary politician. You could get all the way to the White House with a line like that. But thank you." I bowed back politely, and he laughed, his dark eyes sparkling with amusement.

"I like your choice, James. It's about time you settled down." He smiled at James, and I flushed again. He patted my cheek, laughed, and moved on, stepping across the dais to another group of people.

I stared after him, until James said softly, "I know what you want to say, but please don't spoil the evening by telling them that you and I are no longer an item. These are my friends, and it would be extremely embarrassing if you made it known that you have decided not to marry me."

I stared at him. "How the hell did they find out about the marriage plans in the first place?"

"My father was so delighted; he called everyone and told them. I hope you can bear with me just for tonight. I arrived to find that everyone had expected to meet you here tonight. I'm sorry about having to use the computer as a ruse to get you here." His dark eyes held mine for a

moment, and I found myself slowly falling under his sensual spell once more. NO. NO—*no*—NO.

"You mean..." I glared at him, fighting the urge to smack his handsome face off.

"If you continue to glare at me, my friends will get the impression that you don't like me much," he smiled silkily.

I swallowed. "How am I supposed to look at you?" I hissed irritably.

"Like a woman in love would look at her fiancé. Would that be so terribly difficult? Just for a few hours?" His dark eyes were unreadable.

I swallowed and shrugged. "I'm not very good at acting."

"You did it very well the night you showed me how to be a little romantic, or have you forgotten?"

My cheeks were hot as I drew a deep breath. How in the hell could I forget? I shook my head, and I said softly, "I feel like a fraud."

"Pretend I'm your lover..." he breathed softly, and I stiffened. His eyes were very dark, and I wondered exactly what he thought I should act like.

I lifted my chin, and I said in a tight voice, "I'll do my best." He could stuff what he thought. It served him right if he got the wrong idea.

I felt his hand on my waist as I turned to greet another person coming to congratulate us on our impending nuptials, and I reached down to draw his hand about me further, to rest on my ribs. I leaned against him a little as I accepted a kiss on the cheek from one man, and handshakes from several others, and I slipped my arm about his body as well. *Play it, girl.*

It was so easy to slip back into the manner I had used with him when I had felt he at least liked me—knew that he wanted me. I smiled and laughed, and after the group moved on, I looked up into his face and I said softly, "How am I doing now?" as I allowed my breasts to press against his side. I lifted my mouth to ask for a kiss, and he bent to give me one, much to the delight of several people watching us. He kissed me lightly, and I laughed softly up into his face as he drew back. "You can do better than that." I was playing with fire, teasing like that.

He inhaled slowly, and I saw his eyes darken a little. He bent to kiss me again, but this time, his mouth opened mine slowly, and I felt my body melt beneath his marvelously sensuous kiss as he pulled me close enough to let me feel very plainly that he had not forgotten our days and nights of mad lovemaking. His tongue swept into my mouth, his lips teased mine—he sucked my tongue into his mouth and nipped it gently with his teeth. My body was aflame.

When he lifted his mouth from mine, I felt dazed, and extremely vulnerable, and my eyes were wide with all the pathetic longing I couldn't hide at that moment. I was unable to catch my

breath for a moment, my heart was hammering madly against my ribs, and then he smiled and whispered, "Was that better?"

I inhaled slowly and forced a shaky smile. "Much better." I almost managed to speak normally.

He seemed to be about to say something more, but another friend stepped up, and he looked up with a quick smile as the man clapped him on the back and said, "You can do that later. Stop keeping this lovely creature to yourself. My wife is eager to meet her."

The next few minutes went by quickly as I was passed from group to group, and James introduced me to at least fifty different people whose names I would never remember in a million years. And then someone said, "They're ready James. It's time."

I found myself being drawn back to the dais, James' arm firmly guiding me as we went up the steps, and then he seated me at a place on the head table, a few chairs away from the podium. People were gravitating toward the horseshoe shaped table, and others were moving toward dining tables that had been moved into place. Soon, the entire assemblage had been seated, and Master Park rose from his place beside James and walked to the podium, smiling as applause burst from the tables.

"Good evening, my friends, James..." he acknowledged James with a nod and a smile, and then his eyes rested on me. "Miss Kanegawa..." he smiled, and then he addressed the rest of the people there.

"It is my great honor and privilege tonight to participate in paying our respects to someone all of us has come to know and respect as one of the truly great benefactors of the Asian Arts in this country."

He went on, but my thoughts were definitely not on his speech as I felt James' hand resting lightly on my right thigh, his fingertips trailing slowly over the silken material of my skirt. I drew a shuddering breath and tried not to feel the sensuous caress. I bit the side of my tongue to keep from hyperventilating. Damn him. He was doing his level best to shake me.

I tried not to look nervous. I tried not to appear frustrated. Finally, I reached covertly beneath the table, picked up his hand, and moved it back to his own leg, shifting my own leg further away. He glanced sideways at me and smiled, probably for the benefit of the people at the huge table, and I forced a sappy smile as I gazed back into his eyes, focusing on projecting the fact that I was going to kill him later. His mouth twitched slightly, and he returned his gaze to Master Park, who was apparently finishing his speech.

"And now I wish to turn the podium over to a young man we all know well, and who, despite his preoccupation with his lovely young companion, will introduce our honored guest. James..." he extended his hand to James, who rose from his seat amidst another burst of applause, as my face went bright red with mortification.

James increased my discomfort by bending and catching my mouth with his in front of everyone, and kissing me with a certain amount of slow enjoyment, which was rewarded with another burst of good-natured laughter and applause. I managed a self-conscious smile at Master Park, who grinned widely and clapped James on the back, then moved to take the seat one chair from mine, his eyes amused as he reached over to pat my hand.

I bit my lower lip as I watched James take the podium, and I couldn't help wishing he really did want to marry me—that this wasn't just a pretend thing. He smiled and glanced at the various faces lined along the tables, and he said in that wonderfully sensuous, husky voice of his, “Welcome, my friends. I apologize for missing our last meeting, but as you can see, my mind has not been on business lately.” I blushed hotly as laughter and applause burst out again, and I glared at him as he smiled wickedly at me, his dark eyes aglow with amusement. “As Master Park has told you, we are here today to honor our good friend and benefactor, Hee Sung Pak, who has been a passionate supporter of the Asian Arts in this country for many years.”

I swallowed as he went on, and I found myself mesmerized by his way of addressing this group. He was as much at home at a podium as he was in front of a large class of five year olds.

When he had finished introducing the guest of honor, the elderly man I had asked help from when I had first stepped into the ballroom rose from his seat, and I instantly blushed. I smiled back as the man acknowledged me with a quiet nod and stepped up to the podium, waving and smiling. James shook his hand and came back to sit beside me, and I felt his hand on my thigh again.

I didn't move it this time. I simply put my hand on his and ran my fingertips slowly up along the hard muscles of his wrist and forearm, and with a deft movement, I applied a pressure hold to his radial nerve. His hand jerked upward, and I heard his sharp intake of breath. I smiled innocently into his dark eyes as he looked at me and pursed his lips.

I batted my lashes at him for a moment, turned my attention back to the old man speaking, and heard James murmur in a soft undertone, “Very effective.”

“Thank you,” I replied in as soft a voice. “Anytime.”

Master Park glanced at us, a smile lurking in his dark eyes, although his lips were set in a reproving frown. I smiled apologetically at him and sat gazing at the speaker with rapt attention. I tried to pay attention to what he was saying, but the feel of James' hard thigh brushing mine made that impossible. I crossed my leg over my left knee to move it away from him, and he maddeningly leaned back in his chair and laid his left arm along the back of mine.

I leaned forward as if terribly interested in what the speaker had to say and felt lean fingertips moving slowly, sensuously over my bare skin above the low backed dress. I ignored him as best I could, and when the elderly man finished his speech, and everyone applauded, I applauded as well. He turned and smiled directly at me, and all of a sudden, I realized that they were expecting me to stand up.

I glanced in panic at James, who lifted his dark brows and shrugged, and gestured for me to go over to the man. When I hesitated, Master Park rose and extended his hand to me, forcing me to rise to avoid being rude. I took the proffered hand and walked around behind James' seat, allowing the firm hand to lead me toward the podium. My heart was hammering madly as Master Park gave my hand to Mr. Pak and stepped back to his own seat.

I flushed warmly as the elderly gentleman touched both of my cheeks with a papery kiss, and then turned back to the podium with a broad smile as he said, "Not only are we here to celebrate the anniversary of my 30 years as head of the Asian Arts Foundation, but to celebrate the forthcoming marriage of our friend James Rhee to this young woman, who, I have just learned, is the daughter of my dear friend, Matasi Kanegawa." Applause and vocal exclamations. I blushed warmly and managed a smile of acknowledgment. Mr. Pak smiled at me encouragingly and said softly, "Will you please speak for a moment, child?"

My stomach instantly tied into a knot, and my mouth went as dry as cotton. "What do I say?" I whispered nervously.

He smiled. "Introduce yourself to them. They are all your friends." He stepped back and applauded lightly as I turned to stare in panic stricken horror at the several hundred people all waiting for my next words.

I couldn't manage to focus a single thought for a moment, and I was on the verge of tears when I felt a blessedly familiar hand slip gently about my waist, and a lean body standing close enough for me to draw strength from. I drew a gasping breath of relief and wrapped my arm tightly about his body for support. I smiled at the people with a great deal more confidence than I felt. Glancing into James' quiet smiling face, I said softly, "Thanks."

"Anytime," he breathed. "They're expecting a speech."

I looked back at the sea of faces, and my eyes moved over them as I calmed myself.

"Excuse me for my stage fright. I've never been asked to address such a highly distinguished group before." I laughed self-consciously and was rewarded with gentle laughter and light applause. I smiled. "In fact the only audiences I've faced before are a classroom of students, and there, *I'm* in control." I felt James gently squeeze me, and I gained more confidence as I spoke.

"I know a few of the faces here tonight, and I have the feeling that most of you here tonight have met and are friends of my adopted father, Matasi Kanegawa." I waited as the applause died down and went on with a quiet sense of security. "So I feel like I'm among family and friends. Matasi could not come tonight because of other commitments, but he asked me to send his best wishes, and to convey his congratulations to you, Mr. Pak, on your many years of dedicated service to your friends and community." I turned and joined the applause as Mr. Pak smiled his approval. Matasi wouldn't mind such a small lie, even if he hadn't been aware there was such a gathering.

James gave my waist a gentle squeeze, and I met his dark gaze nervously. He was smiling oddly, and I drew a calming breath. "Don't stop now, you're on a roll," he breathed softly. I swallowed and returned my gaze to the people seated around us.

"Mr. Pak has asked me to introduce myself to you. I fear there is little more to know about me. I am certain that James has told you my name is Lisa, and I am Shihan Kanegawa's adopted daughter. So instead I will tell how I feel right now." I drew a calming breath and went on.

"For a good number of years, I had no family. My mother died when I was six—my father when I was a little older. I had no one to care about, or who cared about me, until Matasi Kanegawa allowed me to begin training with him in New Haven. He became my surrogate father, my mentor, and my teacher. I became a whole person once more. I loved him very much, and I never hoped in my life to find another person I could feel so deeply about, until now."

I smiled and looked up into James' dark eyes. Applause burst out, and James gazed at me thoughtfully as I smiled angelically into his eyes. He needn't know I had spoken the truth. Let him think I was simply putting on a show for the benefit of his friends. I turned and smiled at Mr. Pak, who kissed my cheek and applauded me as I walked back to my chair on trembling legs and sank down on it as James pulled it out for me in a solicitous manner.

The rest of the evening seems a blur when I think back on it. Dinner was served, and voices laughed and spoke around me, but I heard little and tasted less. I was aware of nothing except James' quiet conversation with Master Park, or with Mr. Pak, and when he would turn to me and speak in a conversational manner of trivial things to make it appear that he was interested in what I thought.

After the meal had ended everyone clustered into groups, laughing and conversing and sipping cocktails and wine. I wished I had my watch. I glanced surreptitiously at my bare wrist and wondered how much longer I would be forced to endure this situation.

I had paid my dues. I had made everyone believe that James was a wonderful, loving fiancé. Now all I wanted was to go home and cry. James excused himself for a few minutes at one point, probably to go use the bathroom, and when he returned, he seemed a trifle more distant, as if his mind were elsewhere. He made no attempt at all to include me in the conversation.

After another few minutes, he glanced at his watch and said quietly to Master Park, "If you will excuse us, Lisa and I have another engagement. It has been a great honor to participate in this evening's activities." He bowed formally, and I received a kiss on the cheek from the man, then James was guiding me through the crowd toward the cluster of people about Mr. Pak.

That gentleman turned to greet us as James said quietly, "I regret that Lisa and I have another engagement, and we beg to be excused. It has been an honor, sir."

I smiled and accepted another pair of kisses from the man, and as we wound our way through the laughing, talking crowd, nodding and hugging and kissing as we went, I began to feel dreadfully weary. When we reached the lobby, James wasted little time with amenities. He

moved me through the people milling about the lobby. In a moment we stopped at the concierge desk, and James said, "Rhee—1800, please."

I blinked as the man smiled, handed him a card key, and asked, "Luggage?"

"None." James' smile made me blush bright red, and I didn't have a moment to protest as I was moved rapidly through the lobby to the elevators and into one that had just emptied out. He closed the door, and I turned to glare at him.

"What are we doing?" My voice sounded a bit hysterical.

"You and I need to have a talk, in private," he replied in a matter of fact manner.

"You can talk to me as we walk to my car." I tried to reach the stop button, but he moved between the control panel and me.

"I can talk to you more privately upstairs."

"I would prefer not to, thanks." Macho jerk.

"You would prefer not to—what?" his eyes were enough to make me break into a cold sweat.

"Not to be alone with you." *Liar—liar.*

His eyes moved down the low-cut neckline of my dress, and he said softly, "You look very good in a dress."

"We aren't here to discuss my dress," I retorted waspishly.

"The dress makes your eyes look even bluer."

I frowned. "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"The romance crap. It isn't necessary. We aren't in front of your friends any longer."

"Thank God," he breathed, and before I could evade him, I was in his arms, and he was kissing me in a way that left every cell in my body a crumbling wreck. I felt his hands moving over my back and hips, and he deepened the kiss with a little groan of need that left me breathless with anticipation. Hands molded my ass as he dragged my hips against his. His tongue delved hungrily into my mouth, and he pressed me back against the wood paneling of the elevator. I was unable to retreat—unable to move—as if I wanted to.

His lean, hard body wrapped around mine as he kissed me senseless, his lips caressing—his teeth gently nipping—his tongue flicking over the sensitive edge of my upper lip. I was unable to think—or breathe...

I had the feeling that I was about to make a complete fool of myself, but at the moment, I didn't give a damn. I barely heard the door slide open, and as he bent and swept me up and carried me out of the elevator, I gasped, "James. What are you doing? Put me down." *Ignore that last remark—please.*

He set me down, and I looked quickly around, expecting to see people grinning at us, but there was only one door on this level, and it read "1800". "Where are we?"

"The bridal suite," he replied as he slid the card key through the slot and shoved the door open. I protested as he swung me off my feet once again and strode into the room, kicking the door shut with one foot as he flipped on the light switch to illuminate the most gorgeous place I'd ever in my life seen. My look of shock and my gasp made him smile, and he set me on my feet, walking across the room to check a bottle of champagne that stood in a cooler with a towel wrapped around it. I made a full turn, staring in awe at the luxury about us, and I returned my stare to him as he began to ease his dinner jacket off his broad shoulders.

"I'm not going to bed with you," I stated flatly. *Unless you talk fast and smooth—please?*

"I didn't expect you to," he replied as he tugged his bow tie loose and draped it over the back of the sofa. He began to remove his gold cuff links, and I swallowed hard, glaring at him. His eyes moved over my dress, and he said quietly, "Kick off your shoes and get comfy. We aren't going anywhere for awhile."

I folded my arms over my close fitting bodice and said acidly, "I'm perfectly comfortable like this, thanks. So? Talk." *Talk me out of being mad. Talk me into going to bed.*

He shrugged as he dropped his cuff links into the empty oak tray atop the crystal-topped coffee table, and he sat and untied his shoes, kicking them off with a sigh of relief. "God, I hate monkey suits," he breathed, rolling his head on his powerful neck as if his neck ached. He massaged the back of his neck and sank onto the sofa with a sigh, reaching for the bottle of champagne and shoving the towel aside to read the label. "Mmm—*Dom Perignon*, 1989. They really do roll out the red carpet here," he breathed, reaching for the corkscrew.

I was walking slowly across the carpet to stand in front of the glowing fireplace, where a gas log crackled romantically behind a glass screen. I eyed him warily as he set two glasses on the crystal tabletop and uncorked the champagne expertly, without losing a precious drop. As he filled both glasses, he said wearily, "Sorry about kissing you in the elevator. You just looked so damned good, I couldn't help it." He smiled and lifted one of the glasses in salute. "It must be in the male chauvinist genes." He took a slow sip, savoring the wine before letting it run down his throat.

I frowned at him. "How much is this setting you back for the evening?"

"Plenty, but I wanted it quiet and secluded, and it was well worth the price, I'd say." He lifted his glass and gazed at the pale liquid before taking another sip.

"What did you want to talk about?" I asked, perching warily on the arm of one of the three satin brocade upholstered armchairs that graced the room. I eyed the second glass longingly. I loved champagne, but I didn't want to get tipsy here. Who was I kidding?

He saw where my eyes went, and he reached for the glass and rose, leaning forward to hand it to me before sinking back onto the cushion. "Enjoy—it's paid for."

I looked into the glass and shrugged, taking a tiny sip. It was decidedly dry and totally delicious, and I wrinkled my nose in enjoyment as I sipped a touch more. "It's wonderful."

"I spoke with my father today," he breathed softly, his dark eyes lifting to mine over the rim of his glass. I inhaled slowly, waiting for the explosion. "He told me that you had paid him a visit."

I took another swallow of the champagne, and I flushed hotly. "Matasi was upset about us calling off the wedding, and he called Mr. Rhee. They were going to try to force you to reconsider," I breathed tightly. "I didn't want your father to think..."

He lifted his hand to stop me and said softly, "I know what my father thinks. He made his opinions quite clear to me." He drank another swallow and refilled his glass. I finished mine and started to set it down, but he refilled it expertly, and I drew a deep breath. *Get drunk. Easier to get naked.*

"I told your father that it was all my fault, and that I would refuse to go through with it if they tried to force you into following through." I took a rather larger swallow than I should have and felt the warmth of the festive wine begin to calm me. "He promised me he wouldn't say anything to you."

His smile was crooked as he laughed and shook his head. "He didn't. Mae Lin did." He gazed into his crystal wineglass, and I held my breath. "My sister, bless her, has very definite opinions about marriage and my single status." He lifted his glass to salute me and drank another swallow. "She appears to have taken a great liking to you and defended your cause fiercely."

I felt my face go hotter still, and I drank the rest of my glass quickly. "I assure you I did not tell her anything at all about..." I began, and he smiled, stopping me with the look he had in his eyes. *Ooooh—yeah!*

"I know. I gather my father and she had a discussion about the 'problem' after you left, and she drew her own conclusions." He refilled my glass again and topped his own off. "All in all, both my father and my sister believe that I am a complete fool for allowing such a marvelous marital prize to slip through my fingers."

True...

I drank down my glass without thinking how much I'd already had, and I rose to my feet, leaning forward to set my empty glass on the table. I saw his eyes sweep my low-cut neckline and realized that I was in grave danger of falling out of the dress right in front of him. I put my hand over the deep vee of my cleavage and stood up quickly—too quickly.

The champagne was making me exceptionally dizzy, and I reached out to steady myself on the mantle. He was on his feet, and I took the hand he held out to let him help me back to my chair, but instead of the chair, I found myself seated on the sofa, and James was removing my shoes and dropping them onto the carpet beside his own. "I don't want to..." I began, and he shook his head.

"Nothing is going to happen," he replied quietly, "that you don't want to happen," as he sank back down beside me. I watched as he poured the last glass from the bottle and handed it to me. *I want it to. Please.*

I didn't like the way he had said that last bit, because I wanted a lot to happen. I wanted him to forget his pride and kiss me. I wanted him to make love to me until I couldn't think anymore. I swallowed and calmed myself. "I didn't go to see your father to make it difficult for you. I went for the opposite reason."

"So he told me."

I felt hot tears scalding the back of my throat, and I looked away, not wanting him to see the pain I felt. "I'm sorry that you had to go through all of this, and tonight I'll do whatever I can to make it look like the fault was entirely mine when you tell them we have called the wedding off."

"You told me the other day that you were in love," he said quietly, bringing my eyes back to his face. "You said you loved someone else." I swallowed, biting the inside of my lip. I stared at him. "Who is the man you are in love with?" Duh.

I couldn't believe how completely obtuse this man was. I found my tears changing to anger. "You don't know, do you?" I breathed tightly. Jerk.

"I wouldn't ask if I knew."

"What difference does it make?" *If you don't know by now, shove it.*

He set his glass on the crystal tabletop and took mine from me, swallowing the rest of my champagne and setting mine down, as well. I inhaled sharply as he slid his hand behind my neck and he breathed huskily, "Not much, except that he is going to have a long wait. I have absolutely no intention of releasing you from our agreement, Lisa. You *will* marry me. And you will not see this man anymore, is that clear?"

I tried to turn away, and he dragged me back, catching my mouth hungrily with his, as he pulled me against him almost angrily. His mouth punished—tormented—devastated. I shoved at

his shoulders, shocked by the violence of his kiss, and I twisted my face aside, angry at his lack of brainpower.

He was serious.

He had no idea at all that it was him. He kissed my throat with slowly building passion, and I twisted to get free, gasping for breath and whispering shakily, "James—stop it." *Please don't stop!*

He drew away, his face set, and I was frightened a little by this new side of him I'd never seen before. "I won't let you go. I have too much invested in you now, Lisa, and no other man is going to take you away." His voice was husky—possessive—deep. I shivered involuntarily.

I struggled free of his embrace and got to my feet, wavering a little as I stared down at him. "You don't love me. Why do you want to marry someone you don't love?" *Shut up, girl—let him be stupid.*

He seemed to be struggling with himself, and he rose to face me, his hands running through his thick black hair as he drew a deep breath. His eyes were almost totally black as he breathed raggedly, "What does love matter? We're good together—you enjoy what I do for you, and I definitely enjoy what you do for me. You seem to like me, or at least you did once, and I need you—more than any man should need a woman." His words left my thoughts in a mess. I began to burn with something I didn't want to feel at this moment. I wanted to remain angry. Pissed off.

I saw that he was moving minutely closer, and I held up my palm to hold him back as I shook my head jerkily. I was too damned emotionally involved here to think right. "James, this is no good." *You are a dunce, Lisa Hampton. Shut the hell up.*

His chest was against my palm, and I felt a burning sensation travel through my palm and up my arm. I swallowed hard and backed a step away. He began to unbutton his dress shirt, and my body began to enter terminal meltdown. I stared at his face numbly as he moved another step closer, and I backed another step away. His shirt slid off his wide shoulders and dropped to the carpet. His hands moved to his belt buckle, and I felt as if my chest were going to explode. "I need you," he murmured huskily as I felt his bare flesh beneath my hand. "Please don't say no." *As if I could.*

I backed another step and came up against the armchair, and as I gasped and tried to maintain my balance, he picked me up and carried me as easily as if I weighed ounces toward the sumptuous bedroom a few paces away. I felt ridiculously helpless as he put me on my feet, backed a step away, and finished taking off his clothes. His eyes moved hungrily over me, and he whispered roughly, "I might ruin that if I take it off you. Maybe you should do it yourself?"

I stared breathlessly at him, unable to resist the heat in his eyes. My hands shook as I reached for the zipper and unhooked the back of the dress, letting it slip off me and into a shimmering heap at my feet on the bedroom carpet. His eyes moved over me as I slipped out of

the bra and thong. He exhaled explosively as I reached for one of the garters, and he said in a voice that was a bare rasp of sound, "Leave that on. Come here, Lisa."

I shivered as I stepped over the dress and walked the two paces to slip into his arms, and as I felt his lips on mine, I wondered if love really mattered at all. He needed me. And I desperately needed him.

I brushed my mouth across his collarbone and heard the rasping intake of breath as his hands slowly slipped over my bare skin to caress and crush my breasts gently, his own mouth moving achingly over my throat. My mind went mushy as he bent to draw a turgid nipple into his mouth and savor it slowly. His tongue swirling, sucking, teeth nibbling. I grabbed his head and held him to me with a whimper of need. Dear God—I was sooo pathetic!

His body pressed hard and hot against mine as he pressed me backward a step—then another—until I flopped back onto the huge bed, his body following me down as he rolled onto his back and tugged me with him to rest astride his hips. His lean hands slipped over the satin and lace of the tiny garter belt, then down over my silk-clad thighs. "God, but I've missed you," he hissed against my mouth, ravening—devouring—tasting—invading. I whimpered weakly as he slowly pressed his stridently aroused cock against my sensitized mons with a lift of his hips.

My body ached to feel him—taste him—ride him. My hands moved feverishly over his back—his ribs—his abs—down to circle his satiny, steel hard erection. He was fully aroused. His gleaming pink tip was wet from his excitement as my hands stroked the velvety ridges that my hot body ached to feel buried deep. I felt his shudder—heard his deep-throated groan of need. Sweet heaven, but I wanted to have him in every way imaginable.

"I want to be inside you," he hissed as my hands cupped—squeezed—stroked. He dragged me higher up the mattress to the pillows, and then he rolled me under him, the springy thatch of hair surrounding his stiff shaft tickling the inside of my thighs. I opened to him like a flower seeking spring rain.

"Please ... yes..." I couldn't recognize my own voice as I clawed—clung—arched to give him what he wanted—to take what I needed. Wet—so hot and wet—I felt his fingers enter me as he panted against my temple.

"So fucking wet—so ready—I hope to hell I can last long enough to do you justice," his voice was a growl deep in his chest, and then I felt him drive deep, and I gave a cry of joy as he buried himself in me—felt him filling—stretching me—gloriously hard—thick—long—and oh, so delicious.

"I want to be—inside you—all night!" he hissed between explosive breaths. His hips pumped hard, fast, driving deep—driving me wild. I struggled for breath as he took me and devoured me, his body like a powerful engine, driving, plundering, plunging to a rhythm only he could hear as he cupped my ass cheeks and pulled me into every wild thrust.

Oh, but I never wanted this to end. I clamped my legs tight about his hips and pulled his mouth to mine hungrily, sweeping my tongue deep into his mouth and sucking his tongue into

mine with throaty, growling whimpers. He surged hot and hard—lifting me higher and higher toward oblivion—toward the marvelous orgasmic explosion I craved so desperately.

"Oh, James! Oh, God. Yes. Don't stop. My God!" I screamed through a gurgle of release as he pounded his rigid, slick, incredibly thick shaft into my clenched body, his ragged whispers of husky encouragement reverberating in my mind as he slowed just enough to keep from joining me—easing back to be able to go on, and as I subsided from my gasping, tumultuous climax, he rolled onto his back and pulled my hands to his sweat-sheathed chest to his hard flat nipples.

He was fighting his own release. "Touch me, Lisa. I want to feel your hands on me. Kiss me," he hissed, and I obliged. He groaned as I pinched his nipples and dragged my nails down his belly to tease him where we were joined so deliciously. I reached under him to cup and gently squeeze his sac and felt the shudder of pleasure run through his body. I bent to capture his panting mouth, driving my tongue in hungrily. I rocked rapidly on his cock and listened to the sounds of delight that issued from his sweat-beaded chest.

He whispered into my ear that he wanted me to lie on my back, with my legs over his body—and when I complied, he rolled onto his side and re-entered me, thrusting hard and deep while he ran his hands over every inch of bare skin they could reach—his fingers dipping into the hot, wet triangle between my legs as he massaged and teased my clit, while my body soared into yet another earth-shattering orgasm.

He watched my face as he drove himself in deep, again and again. He was tireless, amazing, hot and hard. He shifted me once again onto my hands and knees, and he knelt behind me, driving with feverish intensity—reaching deeper than he had ever reached before. I gave a cry of orgasmic surrender and convulsed in a shuddering heap as he sank his cock deep and hard into me and came with a guttural cry, buried to his root inside my body. My God, but he felt so good inside me without a condom. I just thanked God I'd started my prescription!

Chapter Seventeen

I lay with my eyes closed, feeling the wonderful strength of his body wrapped about mine as I hugged my pillow. I didn't care anymore about what he felt or what I needed. If this was all he could give, then I would take it gladly. He had made my body sing, and he had whispered things to me in Korean that I couldn't understand, but I didn't care. He could be telling me the formula for a quadrangle for all I knew, but the sound of his husky voice was like the feel of silk as he had made love to me slowly, deliciously, for hours and hours. Sleep eluded us until just before the dawn.

I awoke by habit at six. As I lay there luxuriating in the feel of his arm holding me firmly against him and feeling the warmth of his breath on my cheek as he slept, I sighed and shifted into a more comfortable position and felt him pull me close again. I stretched and rolled over in his arms, wrapping mine about his body as he drew a deep breath and murmured sleepily against my hair. "Don't do anything you'll regret. I'm not completely asleep."

"Mmm," I murmured as I ran my hands over his hard muscled back and trailed my fingertips over the taut flesh of his thigh.

"Too late," he whispered as he sought my mouth and kissed me deeply, pulling me over onto his chest. He rearranged the silken sheet about us and said in a husky murmur, "I'm worn out—your turn on top."

I gasped and slugged his chest, and he laughed and held my hands behind my back, kissing me sweetly. When I lifted my face and gazed down at him in the dim flicker of the firelight, I whispered softly, "Whatever you want," as I slowly rose over him to guide him into my body once again. "I'm just using you for the sex, you know." My lips ran over his throat as he arched beneath me.

"That's fine with me—I'll take whatever I can get." His voice was a purr of delight. He released my hands to wander.

He drove his hips upward to fill me as I surged up and down on his powerful body, taking him deep with each downward stroke. He hissed with pleasure as I squeezed my muscles about his cock, and my hands teased and cupped his sac and his nipples. He seemed to enjoy having his nipples touched as much as I enjoyed his mouth and teeth and tongue on mine. He clenched his teeth, waiting for me to orgasm. When my body tightened and arched and my mind spun into space with the power of my climax, he clamped his hands on my hips and helped me to ride him for several minutes longer, until he arched upward with a cry and emptied, his body stiffening and shuddering with his ejaculation.

* * * *

James called Maria and told her to have Chang and Vince take our seven o'clock students, since their first classes didn't start until eight. I heard him chuckle as she said something to him,

and he said quietly, "All right, everything's okay. Just tell them we'll be a bit late. No further explanations."

He grinned at me and yawned, stretching and scratching his chest. I rolled over, burying my face in the pillow, and mumbled sleepily, "I have got to get some sleep. This is killing me."

I felt his weight on the edge of the bed, and I curled into a ball, closing my eyes and enjoying the moment. "There are times to sleep and times to make love," he whispered, running his hand over my bare back and causing goose bumps to rise on my skin.

I lifted my head from my pillow and glared at him. "Are you horny again?"

He smiled crookedly and replied, "Unless you get very ugly very quickly, I'm afraid you're gonna just have to deal with it."

I frowned and glowered at him. "You want to see me get real ugly real fast, just keep me awake all hours of the night again just to satisfy your manly needs." He bent and kissed my shoulder, and his mouth trailed across my collarbone to the deep vee between my breasts. I closed my eyes and whispered, "On second thought..."

* * * *

Merrick smiled at me quietly as I hung the lovely dinner dress in my closet, and she asked softly, "Well? You didn't come home last night. Did you two make up your differences?"

I smiled and closed the closet door. "As well as I can expect. We've decided to go through with the wedding." I sighed, sinking onto the edge of my bed. "The dress was a sizzling success." I grinned wryly at her.

"I'm very happy you two decided to use good sense. He may not feel the way you hoped right now, dear, but he will, once he realizes that his feelings are really love and not just lust." She sighed. "I told Mat that you two were likely together and not to call out the troops."

"Sorry I didn't call. It got too involved." I shrugged.

She grinned wickedly. "I can imagine."

I laughed and hugged her. "Well, I have to rush. We're supposed to be at the school to take our 10:00 classes, and we'll be cutting it close as it is."

Matasi was conversing quietly with James when we stepped back out of the bedroom, and from the look on James' face, Matasi was giving him an earful. I gave a little groan of exasperation and said, "I hope you aren't lecturing him. I'm a big enough girl to be out all night with my own fiancé."

Matasi turned to stare at me, and James laughed softly, shaking his head. "Saved by the only person on earth he'll listen to," he breathed in relief. "He was about to tear my head off and feed it to me."

"You have mended your disagreement?" Matasi asked, his brows drawn together.

I slipped into James' arms and nodded. "Yep. I would have told you if I'd have seen you when we came in."

Matasi drew a deep breath and nodded. "Good. Does Kim Sung know?"

James glanced at me, then back at Matasi, and he said, "He knows. I told him yesterday morning."

I blinked, turning to stare at him. "You told him before you even talked to me?"

He kissed the tip of my nose. "Of course. That made it even a bigger challenge to get you off that high horse you've been riding the past few days."

I jabbed him in the ribs, and I shook my head. "Just wait, you're going to regret all this someday."

Matasi smiled broadly and said, "Go on, you two, you have work, and I will see you at noon to begin your training again."

* * * *

I fell back into a routine of sorts for the next few days. I was to test in nine days. I climbed the steps from the parking area, thinking about the fittings and photography sessions Merrick had taken me to for the traditional white gown. There were also photographs of me in the traditional Korean wedding dress that I would wear for the actual ceremony. I had felt decidedly odd in the elegant sweep of heavy satin, and I told her that I didn't think all this was really necessary, since it was all for show in the first place. She had simply smiled and had told me that it was very important. It gave bride and groom alike the feeling that something momentous and wonderful was taking place.

"Never underestimate the power of ceremony," she had breathed as she had helped the seamstress to take up a bit here and let down a bit there. "It can be a very powerful aid to the future. Do you think that your test with Mat is just a worthless bit of frivolity?" I had gazed at her quietly and had seen her point. There was something to the idea of a ceremony after all.

I sat for the last time that afternoon for Merrick, for she had begun to block in the painting and only needed a couple of sketches of me wearing the gown. She had told me she could finish it without further sittings as she arranged the skirts of the wonderful Victorian gown about my body and had quickly drawn several sketches to get the best angles and the best drapery. "From here on in, I can just use my sketches and my memory, plus that photo I had

Matasi get of you for coloring. You'll have no more afternoons wasted sitting in front of a window." Her smile had made me sigh.

"The time hasn't been wasted, Merrick. I've enjoyed having you to myself for a couple of hours a day, a couple of times a week," I had replied.

She had hugged me. "Bless you child."

I gazed out the window thoughtfully, wondering what the future held for me and for James. Would we be happy? Would he someday find someone he could love and ask me for a divorce? I wouldn't worry about that until it happened. That it would, I was certain, but right now, I was not going to let it destroy what happiness I could glean from his need of me. We were lovers, even if he didn't love me. That was enough for now. It would have to be.

I must have been projecting again, because Merrick said quietly, "Love comes in many forms, dear. The man adores you."

I smiled. I didn't respond because I knew she didn't expect a response. I sighed, leaned my chin on my arms, and said softly, "How much longer will you and Matasi stay here?"

She turned another page in her sketchbook, and she said absently, "Until a couple of days after the wedding, then we have to go. Of course, I'll finish the painting at home. You and James are scheduled for a visit in November for our wedding."

I shrugged. "I know, but it won't be quite the same. It's been wonderful having you here. I'm going to miss both of you dreadfully."

I didn't have to see her smile. I could sense it, and I smiled back. We had become so close; I seemed to know her thoughts as easily as she knew mine. We both spoke at the same time.

"You know..."

"I think we..."

And we laughed. I shook my head, and she grinned at me. "Now I know how you feel."

I yawned suddenly and laughed. "I am so tired. I'm afraid burning the candle at both ends is killing me."

She lifted her brows and said softly, "You're feeding two of you, and you're doing things most pregnant women wouldn't dream of doing. Of course you're tired."

I frowned. "I am not..." I began, and she sighed.

"I know—you *are not pregnant*."

She closed her sketchpad and said, "Well, that's that. You're free to take a nap if you want. Mat won't be back until late tonight. He's with Mr. Rhee, ironing out the plans for the wedding. Unless you had planned to go out with James."

I yawned again and shook my head. "He's in the kitchen working on the books, which is something I can take over for him once we're married. I guess a nap would be nice."

* * * *

I stepped inside my dim room, kicked off my shoes and tugged my shirt off over my head wearily, and almost jumped out of my skin when I heard James' husky voice breathe close behind me, "God, but I adore the smell of your bare skin..."

"I thought you were working..." I moaned as he turned me into his arms. His naked body pressed to me as he bent to suck a nipple into his mouth hungrily.

"Couldn't keep my mind on the books..." he growled, his hands working my jeans button and zipper.

I kicked out of my jeans and panties and wrapped my legs around his hips as he lifted me onto his already hard, delicious shaft, sighing as I felt all that steel-hard, satin-smooth flesh nudging into my drenched, needy center.

He growled deep in his throat as he sank onto the edge of my bed and settled me onto his powerful thighs as I took in every delicious inch of him—both of us choked on our moans of pleasure as I sank down over him, and I wrapped my arms around his head and clung to him weakly as he kissed and sucked my nipples so expertly. I threw back my head as I climaxed nearly instantly and then settled in for the delicious, throbbing rise to the second one.

I adored James' lovemaking. I knew that I would be well sated and weary after he finished with me, and I was amazed by his stamina and consideration for my needs. I whimpered as he rolled me under him, scooting our bodies higher onto my mattress, before he began his marvelous, untiring rhythm—his thick, driving shaft pounding into my aching, welcoming pussy as he breathed tender words of encouragement against my lips. My body had a mind of its own as another mind-blowing orgasm shattered me into a billion shards of pleasure. And then I was astride him as he dug his heels into my mattress and lifted with each downward surge of my body over his cock, until he gave a shuddering groan and came hot and hard, holding his pulsing cock deep until he subsided, and I fell across his body, panting and regaining my sanity.

Oh, yes—I'll most definitely keep you.

Chapter Eighteen

I spent the next week gearing up to a fever pitch, and the morning of the test, Matasi said to me quietly, "Are you ready, child?"

I drew a deep breath and bit my lower lip nervously. "As ready as I'll ever be. Let's go." I was about as ready for that test as I was ready to jump into boiling oil.

The test was to take place at the school, and James had cleared the appointments for the day. Kim Sung Rhee and James were to be waiting when we arrived. I saw several other cars in the parking lot and wondered who else had been invited.

As I stepped into the large room and bowed, I noted the others who were to sit on my panel, and I drew a deep breath. Master Park was there, as was Qi Xiang, a 10th degree master in Chinese Kempo. There were two more I didn't know by sight, but I was more than certain that each was a 10th degree master in his own style.

Of course, Matasi would be the one to pronounce the rank, but he wanted the signatures of at least four others with as much clout as he carried.

I was utterly terrified. I knew my stuff, and I knew it like the back of my own hand, but I was afraid that I would blow it and embarrass my instructor.

I saw Chang and Vince, and Jose. The panel wore business suits. James and the others, except for Jose, were in uniform. I bowed to the panel, then to the others. I approached the panel after Matasi had seated himself, and I introduced myself. When I had finished, Matasi nodded, and I assumed an at ease stance, feet a foot apart, hands clasped behind my back.

Matasi rose from his seat and said quietly, "I have asked that you come here today to witness this test, which is also significant of my formal retirement from teaching. The person before us today is my daughter, and the new head of the Kanegawa system. Her current rank is 4th degree.

"Although she has had the full knowledge of my teachings, she has rejected her right to increase her rank significantly by yearly tests, and has been humble, and unassuming, feeling that my system should pass into the hands of a male of high rank." I gazed into his eyes as he spoke, and I noted the nods of the others on the panel.

"Today, I will have her fully demonstrate her skills and her knowledge, and I will extend her the honor of a 9th degree." I swallowed as the others all lifted their brows and murmured quietly to each other.

He went on softly, "This is, I realize, an unprecedented action, but I am certain of her abilities. I am certain of her strengths. I am certain of her sense of duty and honor, and I am certain of her loyalty. It has been the tradition of my family for 250 years to pass this honor from

father to son. I have no sons. But my daughter has demonstrated in her fourteen years of study that she will never dishonor this tradition. Upon my death she will become the master of my system."

I didn't have to glance at James to see the look on his face. No one but me had expected what Matasi had just said to the world. I realized in that moment that I had the necessary capabilities to do this for Matasi, and now, I had the will. I bowed to him as he stepped back and bowed, and as he sat, I stepped back a few paces and waited. "Begin," he said quietly.

The forms and techniques were the simple part. Because Matasi's system was simple, straightforward, and highly traditional, I completed the required examination in less than three hours. I was sweating but not winded, and I knew that the rest would go smoothly, as long as I didn't lose sight of one thing. Matasi was counting on me. I knew that I could manage this part, as well.

Here, I was to demonstrate the various techniques on a partner. I would explain each technique thoroughly and walk through it so that the panel would understand exactly what the technique was for, and then I would demonstrate at full speed, controlling my blows, of course, to prevent injury to my partner. I had a few minutes to speak with the men about what was needed.

I smiled at them quietly and asked in an undertone, "Are you all wearing groin cups and pads?" When they all nodded, I went on. "I will tell you what you need to do during the walkthrough. You'll pick up enough information to avoid getting hurt. Just don't try to pull your punches or grabs. They'll see it, and it will count against me. I'll try not to hurt anyone, but if I accidentally do, stop the action immediately. No pride stuff here, guys, this isn't choreographed self defense."

James nodded quietly, his eyes oddly alive. Vince and Chang nodded, drawing deep breaths. "So now we get to see you in action," Vince smiled. "Don't hurt me too bad."

"I'll try not to."

* * * *

By three o'clock, I was getting tired. I still had the kumite to get through, but I had a ten-minute rest period. I flopped onto the mat and drew deep breaths, feeling the strain badly. I had managed to avoid any heavy contact to my body, but I was a bit worried about the upcoming matches. I had to get three points on Chang, and finally, three on James. If either of them was able to get three on me before I got them three times, the test was over.

Of course, while I was fighting Chang, James was going to get a better look at what I had been carefully concealing from him. I had purposely not done my best during our sparring rounds to lull him into a false sense of security. I rested for several minutes, and then I went to put on my gear.

I could see in Chang's eyes that he was not going to give me anything simply because I was a woman. I was going to have to take any points I got. As we faced off and bowed to the center referee, who happened to be Master Park, then to each other, I calmed myself and told myself that I could do this.

When his hand dropped between us, I wasted no time. I had more speed than power, and I used it. I darted in and got a point within half a second, and as the point was called, Chang smiled and nodded. "Good shot."

It took me two minutes to finish the fight, and I was careful to allow Chang to get a couple of points on me by dropping my guard just enough to take a hit, but I made certain that the hits were coming in areas I wouldn't feel too much. I saw Matasi's eyes, and I nodded to him, to reassure him I knew what I was doing. I hugged Chang, and he shook his head. "Damn, Lisa, you're like greased lightning in there. I was surprised you stood still long enough for me to tag you twice."

"Gettin' old—gettin' tired," I puffed, as I removed my mouthpiece and caught my breath. I had three minutes to regain my momentum before the next round, and I avoided James' eyes as I paced slowly back and forth, hands on hips, calming myself and concentrating.

When the moment came and I was facing him, ready to dodge his first quick attempt to take me, I found myself feeling oddly quiet. When that hand dropped between us, I knew what was coming. I waited until the series of well-executed moves hesitated, as he always did when I didn't return any shots, and I snapped a solid roundhouse in under his arm as he started to return to a fighting stance again. I felt it connect and heard his little 'oomph' as the air left his lungs, and he leaped back, but it was too late. The point was called, and I noted his grim little smile as he nodded to me. I nodded back, my expression unchanged as I toed my mark and waited again.

He wasn't quite so obliging the next time. I had my work cut out for me as I dodged a flurry of expert shots, and took a well-placed roundhouse in the ribs. I winced as I rubbed my side, and the point was called. Thank God I'd wrapped my ribs with tape! That was the rib that had been broken before. Lucky he hadn't used a more powerful kick.

As we faced off again I avoided every shot, as I did in practice. He began to allow me those same old openings, waiting for me to take them, knowing I wouldn't fall for them, except that, this time, I took it. Not really expecting me to do it, he was caught off guard just enough for me to almost land a quick snapping sidekick which he blocked with his glove, but instead of moving back into a fighting stance as he expected me to, I came around with a second shot in the form of a leaping spinning back kick, which planted firmly into his ribs as he stepped in to retaliate.

I knew he had taken it solid, and I saw him go back, reeling from the glancing blow. He went down and executed an expert reverse roll, coming up into a stance and catching his breath with a grimace.

I drew a deep breath as I regained my composure and moved back to the line. He nodded to me, acknowledging the point as it was called, but I could see that he was dead serious now. I

was not going to trick him again. If I wanted that all-important third point, I was going to have to take it, over his dead body.

As I anticipated, James wasted no time in taking his second point. He seemed to know exactly what I was going to do next. He met me before I got there, and I gasped and bit the inside of my lip to ease the pain as I caught my breath from another well-placed roundhouse.

I knew he wasn't trying to hurt me. If he'd wanted to do that, he'd have let me have a sidekick or an axe. But he sure as hell was strong. I acknowledged his point and toed the line again, and I realized with a bit of concern that I was experiencing a tingling of pain in my abdomen that didn't feel like the normal pain one felt after taking a blow. I had to keep from getting hit again, and there was only one way to do it. I didn't like doing it, especially to James, but I had no choice at this point.

When that hand dropped, I acted as if I meant to dodge back, leading him into a forward movement. I ducked and made a movement that made him think I was going to faint out to the side, and when he opened his stance to meet me, I dropped and slid between his feet, my right heel slamming upward into his cup with a resounding thump that made even me wince. I didn't stop there, I couldn't. A groin shot was not a point in traditional kumite. I had used it to stop him, and it did. Just long enough for me to execute a leg throw and come over the top with a roundhouse to his ribs as I rolled out and away and scrambled to my feet. He was back on his feet within a split second, but the deed was done, and I maintained a fighting stance, waiting to see if he was angry.

Master Park held up his hand and said solemnly, "There has been a foul. Since this is not a competition, but rather a test, do you wish to concede the point taken, Shihan Rhee, or will you return to kumite?"

James' eyes were unreadable, and I knew that he was the one to make this call. I knew that, in any other case, he would most assuredly return to kumite, and very likely destroy his opponent, but I prayed silently that he would understand why I'd had to do it. My eyes held his for a long moment, and as he turned to the referee, I held my breath. He bowed respectfully, and he said quietly, "Miss Kanegawa has nothing more to prove to me, sir. I accept defeat."

I exhaled slowly and bowed to James, and as I bowed to Master Park, I thought I was going to fall on the floor right there. I needed to sit down, but I couldn't. I removed my gear and took out my mouthpiece, gasping for air. I dropped my gear onto the corner of the mat, and straightened my gi, and then I walked to the center of the floor again to face Matasi, who was again seated in the center chair of the panel, with the rest lined up on either side. I stood at attention as he nodded at me. "Turn around and kneel, please."

I obeyed shakily, wincing as my body shook with the pain in my side and chest. I decided as the throbbing began in earnest that I might have re-broken my damned rib. I could barely draw a breath. I heard Matasi's voice as if from a mile away saying, "Does anyone present have an objection to the proposed rank increase for this black belt?"

I felt as if wind rushed past me as I knelt there, head forward, eyes closed. My ears were buzzing, and my stomach was rolling. I hadn't eaten a thing since breakfast. That could make me dizzy. I heard him say a moment later, "Turn around, please."

* * * *

I remember obeying. I recall bowing over my new belt, touching my forehead to it as I drew a gasping breath to calm my insides. I recall turning away to remove my old one and tie on the new one graced by a wide band and four narrow stripes of red, and I recall shaking hands with each of the members of my panel, accepting their congratulations.

I remember turning to accept the hearty handshakes of Chang and Vince, and a hug of congratulations from Jose, but from that point on, it's a blank, until I woke up in the sterile white of a hospital room, with an IV tube running into my arm, and a nurse checking my vitals.

I blinked and rolled my head with a groan, and she patted my shoulder gently to reassure me, before she left the room, and a few minutes later, Matasi stepped into the room. I sighed as he grabbed my free hand and squeezed it, his eyes wet with tears. I smiled and asked in a croaking voice, "What happened?"

He drew a shaking breath, and he said quietly, "You passed out after the test. When we couldn't revive you, James brought you to the hospital. They've had you on glucose and Ringer's since early this afternoon. You were suffering from depleted blood sugar and dehydration." His eyes were watery.

I swallowed hard. "Did I break that rib again?"

He shook his head. "Bruises—nothing more. I was very proud of you. You did well."

I closed my eyes and sighed. "Was James very angry? I did use some dirty tricks on him, didn't I?"

I opened my eyes as he chuckled softly. "He is waiting outside. Do you wish to see him?"

"I guess, as long as he isn't mad at me." I smiled ruefully. "I guess I must have given all of your friends a great show, fainting dead away like a pansy."

He chuckled. "They were concerned, of course, but they were most gratifyingly impressed with you, Daughter. They have all been waiting for a call as to your condition."

I sighed and shrugged. "Tell them I'm still alive, by all means," I breathed wearily. "At least now I'll be able to sleep."

He bent and kissed my cheek gently. "Merrick is also waiting for a call. I will send James to you."

I nodded, and he left me alone for a moment. I closed my eyes, and a tear squeezed out from under my lashes and slid down my cheek. I was probably suffering from reaction. I had been working so hard; I must have overdone. I bit the inside of my lip, and was about to wipe the tear away before James came in, but a gentle fingertip moved across my cheek, and I opened my eyes with a little sniff of surprise to find James smiling down at me, leaning over my bed.

"Hi." I breathed shakily, sniffing again.

"Tears?" he asked quietly. "Are you in pain?"

I shook my head. "Only my pride. Fainting dead away like that in front of everyone. I can't believe I did that."

He sank down onto the side of the bed, taking care not to pull on my IV tube. He brushed my hair from my eyes in an oddly gentle way that made me want to cry even more. "You made him very proud today. I was pretty impressed, myself. Where the hell did you pick up that little trick?"

"Sorry. I hated to do that to you, of all people, but I knew you'd get the third point without much trouble at all, and I had to play dirty to beat you. You're too damned good."

He smiled, his dark eyes slipping slowly over my face. "You gave Chang those two points. Why?"

I flushed. "What makes you say that?"

"You're one hell of a lot faster than him. He couldn't have caught you at all if you hadn't let him."

I laughed. "I didn't want to let you know that I was better than you thought from practice."

He grinned slowly. "It worked, until I realized I'd been had."

I smiled and closed my eyes. "I knew you had me figured out after I got the second point. That's why I got desperate." I opened my eyes and sighed. "Did I damage you?"

His slow smile was wicked, and I swallowed as he breathed, "Only my pride, and you can kiss that better later."

I laughed shakily. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For conceding the point. I couldn't have taken you. I'm sure you knew that."

He smiled. "You might have. It could have gone either way. You had a lot of surprises for me."

I gazed at him for a long moment, and I realized that I was projecting my needs again, but I didn't care.

"Kiss me?" I whispered.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because if I kissed you, I couldn't stop, and there would be some pretty shocked nurses and doctors if anyone walked in on us."

"Kiss me —*please*?"

He bent and caught my lips softly, and I closed my eyes with a sigh. I slid my free hand up around the back of his neck and pulled him down to me, and I felt his delicious lips open slowly to deepen the kiss, his tongue sweeping into my mouth and demanding more—devouring me in a manner that left my heart hammering madly. I wanted to get out of bed and go home with him right then and there, and I think he knew what I wanted, because he lifted his head and drew a shuddery breath and whispered, "I think I'd better go so you can rest."

I shook my head and ran my fingertips over his mouth and cheek slowly, seeing the shiver of reaction that went through him. "I don't want to stay here. I want to go home."

"Your doctor wants you overnight. I think you should do what she says."

I nodded slowly. "Did she say why?"

He gazed at me quietly. "She is concerned that you don't miscarry."

I stared open-mouthed. "*What?*" I managed to garble.

He nodded. "She assumed I was the father."

I was about to protest that I couldn't possibly be pregnant—until I realized what he had just said. I stared at him numbly. He couldn't seriously be thinking that anyone else might be my baby's father if I were miraculously pregnant—*PREGNANT???*

I was—*pregnant? Impossible. I had been on the pill for weeks! He'd even used condoms!* I swallowed convulsively. *The bastard!* He thought I had—of all the—I wanted to yell at him. I wanted to scream at him. But I simply closed my eyes and whispered wearily, "So, what do you want to do now?" Disgust welled up inside me.

"About what?" he breathed quietly.

"About the wedding." I crossed my arms defensively over my aching chest.

"I have no intention of changing my plans. All I want to know is have you stopped seeing him?"

I opened my eyes and stared at him. "Who?"

He drew a deep breath. "The man you said you love." His voice shook a little as he spoke.

"No. I see him every day." *Duh. He-llo.*

His face went gray, and he drew a deep breath. "If I see you with him, I'll kill him, do you understand?"

I gazed at him quietly. "Why would you want to kill him?"

His eyes were dangerous as he breathed raggedly, "What the hell do you want from me, Lisa? Do you want me to beg?"

Please do! I shook my head slowly. "No. All I want is to know why you are so upset."

He bent down and caught my mouth hungrily, and I clung to him with a wild delight I would have never believed possible. When he lifted his lips from mine, he was shaking. "I need you. I want you enough to take your lover's child and raise it as my own, but I refuse to share you."

I felt hot tears slip down my cheeks as I shook my head in disgust. "You know, if you had a frigging brain in that thick skull of yours, you'd be dangerous." He stared at me as if I'd just slapped him, and I laughed shakily.

"I mean it, Lisa—he'll be dead..." His voice was a rasp of anger.

I drew a shivery breath and shook my head slowly. The man was unbelievably dense. "I only have one lover, and if you want to kill him, then I will be a damned widow before I even marry him."

He seemed to be unable to register what he had heard, and so I just reached up and slid my hand behind his neck, pulling him down and kissing him slowly, deepening the kiss hungrily. I sensed the change in him after a moment. He lifted his mouth from mine, and his eyes were positively dangerous.

"What are you saying to me?" his voice broke.

I gave a groan of despair and glared at him. "I knew karate-men were obtuse, but does something have to fall on your frigging head before you notice it?"

His breathing was ragged. "There has been no one else?"

"My God, the light has finally dawned," I whispered huskily, rolling my eyes.

His hand slipped slowly over my body, resting gently on my flat, bruised belly. I flushed. "This—is my child?" His eyes were glittering. I sighed. I guessed so; if some doctor had figured out that I was pregnant. I sure as hell hadn't known. And then my thoughts went instantly to Merrick. Merrick—had—known.

Before I did?

I shrugged. "Has to be. I didn't know I was pregnant until you just told me. This is just as big a shock to me as it is to you, you know," and he bent slowly, startling me by pressing a kiss to my taut belly, and I swallowed convulsively. He seemed to be about to say something more when Dr. Weatherby came into the room, and he rose from the side of my bed, his eyes telling me things his lips had never spoken.

"Good evening, Ms. Kanegawa, how are you feeling?" she asked with a smile.

"A bit sore, a touch bruised, but otherwise, perfect. Can I go home now?"

She smiled at James and said quietly, "Will you please excuse us for a few minutes, Mr. Rhee? If you'll just wait outside while I examine her, it will only take a few minutes."

He bent and kissed my lips gently, then said softly, "I'll be right outside."

When he was gone, she closed the door and walked back over to my side, her eyes concerned. "I'm afraid you're going to have to cut your karate career back until after your baby is born, Ms. Kanegawa. I want you in bed for the next week. I want you at complete rest for the next month. If you choose to ignore this, you may still miscarry. Do you understand?"

"I understand." I frowned. "But it's impossible for me to be pregnant. Are you sure?"

The doctor stared at me and then wrote some more. "You are most definitely pregnant, Ms. Kanegawa—trust me—I specialize in OB-GYN. You must have missed a period by now?"

I shook my head numbly. "I have very irregular periods. I work out a lot—and sometimes I don't have them at all." I shook my head and blurted, "But I have been on the pill! And we used condoms! How the hell did this happen?"

A wry smile curved her lips. "Pills have to be used for 30 days before they reach maximum efficacy. Condoms are only 85% reliable. And as for how *this* happened...?" she waved a casual hand at my body.

I met her amused smile with a laugh. "Never mind."

She wrote some more, then she said in a business-like tone, "Restricted activity for a month. In bed until next week. No exertion. No excitement. And most certainly, no more sparring with big strong men."

I winced as I pressed on my bruised ribs. "Does 'no excitement' mean 'no sex'?"

She nodded her head. "It means no excitement, and I would prefer no exertion of any kind."

I sighed in disappointment. "Damn."

She smiled. "I understand you are to be married in a week. I will allow you out of bed to do that, but I will let Mr. Rhee know that I expect you to be back in here for another exam in ten days. He has been told that sparring and other such activities are strictly out until after this child is born."

I nodded and said, "I understand, but can't I even have a wedding night?" I tried not to sound totally disgusted.

She smiled broadly as she lifted my gown to check my bruised ribs and to gently press on my bruised abdomen. "It was very smart of you to have wrapped your ribs. Your fiancé told me you did a bang up job on your test."

I winced. "Thank you."

"Congratulations, and as my fee, you can teach me karate as soon as you're out of danger."

I grinned at her. "Really?"

"Really." She rearranged my gown and asked me to lean forward so she could listen to my lungs from the back. She listened to my heart and checked my chart, and she said quietly, "I'll tell him he is welcome to come back in now."

I flushed and smiled at her, and as she stepped out, she said to James, "You can go back in now, but she needs rest. I'll very likely release her in the morning."

James came back into the room, and I could see in his eyes that he wanted to close that door and lock it. But instead he merely sat on the edge of my bed and held my hand, and for the next half hour, until the nurse came in and asked him to leave, he told me how impressed his father had been with my fighting, and how Chang had been thrilled that he had managed to get a couple of points on me, and how Master Park had commented on how worthy I was of the honor Matasi had bestowed on me.

I wanted to keep my eyes on his handsome face, but I could barely manage to keep them open, and I slowly drifted off to sleep with James gently running his fingertips across my forehead and whispering quietly of inconsequential things, when all I really wanted to hear was those three wonderful little words he seemed incapable of saying to me...

I love you'.

* * * *

Matasi's birthday was three days before the wedding, and James and his father insisted on a grand celebration at the Westmore. There were over 500 guests and a cake so large, it had to be pushed into the room on a rolling table. There had been speeches by Mister Pak, Master Park, Master Kim Sung Rhee, and James, and even I got up to speak, offering a toast to Matasi's health and his new bride-to-be. It was not nearly so difficult this time.

The party lasted into the wee hours, and Matasi seemed to be thrilled that so many of his old friends had been kind enough to come. James had reserved the bridal suite once more, but this time, Matasi and Merrick spent the night there, while James and I went back to my apartment, and slept in blissful peace wrapped in each other's arms, too weary to care that we couldn't make love. It just felt wonderful to hold him. I fell asleep wishing fervently that someday he would learn to love me, just a little.

Chapter Nineteen

I can only remember snatches of the trip to that altar. My brain was in severe com-lock, and my legs would barely carry me. I saw a sea of hazy faces through the sheer silk of my red veil and James standing at the other end, and so I made myself move forward. As I moved closer and I stepped forward to start the journey down that long, ribbon bedecked aisle, I could see the look on his face, and my stomach was suddenly filled with rampaging butterflies.

In a few minutes, this would be over, and I would be Mrs. James Rhee, and that thought suddenly made me terribly nervous. I was marrying a man whose basic instincts were possessive and chauvinistic, and I utterly adored him. I had never even liked men like him before. I had respected them, tolerated them, but did I really love one of them? Was I completely insane? And then I was on Matasi's arm, and he must have noticed the death grip I had on him, but he seemed to be oblivious to my nervousness and my panic.

I reached the foot of the steps leading up to the altar. Matasi placed my shaking hand in James' lean steady one, and I felt the electric tingle of his touch go up my arm as he turned with me to face the priest, who smiled at us benignly and began the ceremony.

I felt as if I were in a dream as the priest blessed us and the rings, and I placed the heavy gold band on James' lean, muscular hand. And then he slipped the slim band onto mine, saying the words I had heard so many times in movies, but had never dreamed I would be hearing.

"With this ring, I thee wed..."

Even when I had repeated those words, it had not sunk in as deeply as when I felt James slip that ring over my finger, and I felt his hand trembling as he lifted mine to his lips to kiss the ring he had placed there.

When James lifted the silk veil from my face and bent to kiss my lips sweetly, I had to fight to keep my hands from him, and as we turned to walk back down the aisle as man and wife, I couldn't feel my legs at all. Someone had very inconsiderately replaced them with strands of jelly.

Somehow, I got through the line and the reception, and somehow I managed to speak coherently to people who congratulated us. I went to take off the old dress, carefully putting it back into its cedar case, and Merrick said to me quietly, "You look pale. I think we need to get you home and into bed again."

I shook my head and said, "I don't want to end the party, and if the bride vanished, it would definitely end."

But Merrick spoke to James, and he came in shortly afterward and said in a concerned voice, "It's time we left. Matasi and Merrick will keep the party going. They will simply explain to our guests that you and I decided to slip away for a few private hours. They'll understand."

"But what about tossing the bouquet, and all that wedding stuff?" I frowned.

He grinned and said, "Okay, that will be the finale for you, and when that's done, we're out of here."

* * * *

I felt totally asinine when he insisted on carrying me up the stairs to his apartment. Merrick had wanted to rent the bridal suite again, but we had decided that this was where we were going to spend the rest of the day, since it was far more private than my place, and I was under orders to rest. No big honeymoon. Merrick and Matasi would stay at the reception as hosts.

As he carried me slowly up the stairs, he smiled at my protests. "I'm perfectly capable of walking, James. I'm too heavy for you to carry up these damned stairs."

"Shut up or I'll have to beat you, and since you're under doctor's orders to not engage in kumite for the next seven or eight months, I could probably get away with it."

I laughed as he opened the apartment door and carried me inside, setting me gently onto my feet as he turned to close the door behind us.

"Now that we're married, you're gonna all of a sudden get bossy?" I lifted one brow.

He smiled slowly at me as he began to unbutton my new linen suit that Merrick had bought for me to wear when I changed out of the gown. "Yes. And my first order as your new husband is for you to get undressed and make breathtaking, passionate love to me," he breathed. "Can you handle that?"

"As long as there's absolutely no excitement..." I nodded slowly as he gently shoved my jacket off and reached for the buttons of my silk blouse. I unbuttoned his shirt and very slowly, we dropped our clothes into a pile beside the door.

"Is it to be the sofa, the floor, or the bed?" he asked softly.

"It can be the damned kitchen table for all I care," I whispered as I kissed his throat and felt the tremor of desire shudder through his body.

"Watch what you ask for. I'm in the mood to experiment," he breathed as he kissed the lobe of my left ear and ran his mouth along the sensitive vein at the side of my neck.

I closed my eyes, shivered, and whispered hoarsely, "There is only one thing I want from you, and someday maybe you'll have it to give me."

He dropped my last article of clothing onto the pile, and he bent to kiss, lick, and then suck my sensitive tip into his mouth, feasting hungrily on my breast, as I inhaled shakily and pulled his head to me. He kissed and licked my healing bruises, and as he lifted me into his arms, and carried me slowly into his tiny bedroom, he caught my mouth and kissed me so sweetly, I felt

my body melting into a puddle. Heavenly—hot—hungry kisses that left my heart pounding and my belly clenched with heat. “No excitement,” I murmured against his hot mouth.

He slid onto his bed with me still in his arms, and he looked down into my flushed face as he brushed my hair from my cheek with gentle fingertips.

"Say it!" His voice was a rasp of desire.

I stared into his face, and I breathed, "Say what?"

"That you want me. That you need me." His eyes commanded.

"I want you, and I need you." I whispered softly, as I touched his face with shaking hands. I kissed his lips, a warm, open-mouthed, tongue delving, swirling, wanting kiss. "And although you may not want to hear it, I love you."

He froze for a moment, then kissed me back, and I clung to him like a limpet, until he lifted his head and stared down into my face with a look in his dark eyes that left me breathless as he whispered hoarsely, "Not want it? That's all I ever wanted—for you to love me." His mouth dragged across my jaw and his hot breath in my ear made me shudder with pleasure. "I thought that you didn't, so I settled for what you could give me," he inhaled slowly, and his eyes moved over my face and body as if he was committing every line to memory, and then he whispered huskily, "By the way, have I told you?"

"Told me what?" I whispered shakily.

He grazed my lower lip with his teeth, and I felt my heart hammering in my chest as he murmured, "How terribly much I adore you?" He bent to lick my nipple, and I came up from the bed with a whimper as his fingers dipped wickedly into my weeping pussy. "Like that?" he whispered.

"Don't stop," I panted, giving him my full permission to disobey doctor's orders.

He laughed softly and slipped down my body to tease and torment, his tongue swirling around and laving my swollen clit—his fingers dipping sweet and hot—teasing, seducing. I arched upward to his talented mouth with a little whimper of orgasmic delight, and I whispered huskily, "I want you..."

He slid up my body, letting me feel his hard, eager cock rubbing over my thigh and belly. Nudging wickedly into the wet heat of my soo ready pussy. I caught his lips wantonly—drinking in his heat and his desire as I reached for him, touching, squeezing, stroking until he was breathing raggedly and shoving my hands aside—and then he was inside me with a growl of pleasure.

I arched wildly and gasped as he filled me, my body thrilling to the size of him—the length—the fullness—and I whimpered as he knelt between my legs, lifting my hips onto his hard thighs as he angled for a sweeter thrust. He took me—impaled me—rode me and savored me as he braced his hands on the bed on either side of my shoulders. I ran my hands over his

sweat-slicked muscles—his sensitive nipples—over the ripples of his taut abs—reaching down to touch him where he was joined to me. He was breathtaking, powerful and utterly magnificent.

I stared up into his flushed face as he kissed the hand I lifted to his lips, wet with our creamy slickness. He drew my fingertips into his mouth and sucked, and I splintered into a wild, writhing orgasm as he continued to drive deep and hard. He shifted his weight and bent to kiss me hungrily, pressing deep with a measured rhythm that made me dizzy with pleasure—milking my orgasm until I was panting with yet another. I watched as he stiffened, gave a deep cry of release, and came hard, filling me with heat and sweet pleasure as I shattered into a billion sparkles of sensation again, clamping my thighs tight around his body until we sank into oblivion, unable to move at all.

And his voice rasped roughly, "I love you so damn much..."

God, how I adored this man...

About the Author

I started writing horror and sci-fi stories at age eight (if you want to call a 25-page attempt a book!) At age fourteen, I became aware that Romance was the breath of life—lovely, subtle and delicious. So I began to write in earnest, putting each book or short story away carefully—hoping that someday I would find my books on the best-seller lists, along with Barbara Cartland and E. M. Hull. But life has a way of setting back dreams and plans, and for many years, I found myself engulfed in living life. School—marriage—three beautiful kids—and a career helping people in a job I loved.

But I never gave up on my books, and I decided that it was finally time to toss my hat over the windmill! What was there to lose? I looked through my collected works and spruced one up for the 21st Century, and I somehow found the courage to try. I swallowed my insecurity and fear. I found a great publisher, submitted my novel—and—here I go!

Just goes to show that you should never give up on your dreams! Sometimes the Magic truly works!

You can find Fran Lee on the web at: *www.franleeromance.com*

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***Two Plus One* by Brynn Paulin**

College math teacher, Briony Swift, lives life on the straight and narrow. After all, one plus one always equals two. But when two of her adult male students visit her office one afternoon, she soon discovers that one plus two might be a new and better equation to explore...

***Body of Art* by Bronwyn Green**

Art professor Seth Granger has two problems—an absentee life drawing models and a case of unrequited lust. Luckily his troubles have the same answer—his colleague, Dr. Callie Sullivan.

The trick will be getting her out of her clothes and into his studio ... and hopefully into his bed. However, she's intent on keeping her mind on her art and ignoring him. Now he just needs to convince her she should be his body of art.

***Sense and Sensuality* by Cara Hart**

Eleanor McLaren leads a subdued life. She hates parties, avoids social interactions, and she cannot talk to men. But within the shell of her timidity lies the heart of a siren. Afraid of her own boldness, she hides her desires. Especially from the man who stars in her dreams of passionate encounters and works in her department.

Eddie Harrington has never lacked for partners in his pleasure games. But for some reason, Eleanor is the one woman he can't get out of his head. She is definitely not the type he usually pursues. Then he sees her at a bar, looking like his wildest fantasy. And one night with her is not going to be enough. The man who never commits just might have met his match—until a mistake from his past forces her to choose between trusting him or walking away.

***Sex Ed* by Mia Watts**

Mina Lasky has a pesky crush on Biology professor, Derek Link. They've worked in tandem in the same University facility long enough that even the sound of his voice makes her hot. It's time to put the fantasy to an end. Mina signs up to be his guinea pig in a female sexuality lab for those on the doctorate track. She hopes to work Derek out of her system while enjoying some much needed sexual stimulation.

Dr. Derek Link has been itching to get his hands on the quiet, sexy Chemistry professor. He can't believe his luck when she signs up to be his lab. But one night isn't enough and Mina won't admit they can have something a lot more long term.

And when one of the students recognizes Mina, her heart isn't the only thing on the line. With her career in the hands of a blackmailer, and her heart begging to trust Derek, she's beginning to think the lab was a very bad idea.

Also available from Resplendence Publishing

***Heart of Ice* by Brynn Paulin**

Kai is perfectly unhappy with his life. Cast into a role as shop boy and forced into marriage to save his family, he sees nothing good in his future. In fact, his betrothed, Gerda, seems to hate everything he enjoys. Especially winter and his attraction to dominating his partners. His prospects look grim ... until the Snow Queen arrives.

Wyn has spent her life alone, living vicariously through those who love winter. When she learns of Kai's predicament, she knows she must save him. If only she could save herself. She craves his dominance, but there's one tiny thing standing in their way. No human can touch her without experiencing chilly agony. And that might bring any relationship to an icy death.

***Red Ribbons and Blue Balls* by Tia Fanning**

After Nicolas punishes her for being naughty, the usually nice but now sexually frustrated Winter arrives at their secluded mountain cabin bearing gifts—special gifts that will ensure his submission and her revenge.

With only seven days left until Christmas, Nicolas expects to spend the night decorating the house for the approaching holiday, but Winter has other plans ... Christmas might be coming, but if Winter gets her way, Nicolas won't be.

***Transparent Illusions* by Melinda Barron**

Freelance writer Saffron Tyler needs work. When she offers her journalistic skills to Steele Publications, they suggest that she spend two weeks as a submissive at Fingertip Fantasies, an exclusive BDSM resort that caters to the ultimate fantasies of any customer willing to pay for the high-end service. She's been tasked to come back with a titillating exposé guaranteed to enthrall the readers of Steele's underground magazine, *Salacious*.

But when Saffron arrives at the resort, she realizes nothing is as it seems, from the fact she doesn't know where the resort is located, or anything about the man she is submitting to—except she's to call him Master, with a capital M.

What starts out as an undercover assignment soon becomes so much more. Immersed in the lifestyle, Saffron finds herself no longer acting the role of the submissive, but actually wanting to be the perfect sub her Master believes she can be. When all is said and done, will Saffron take her experience and her story and never look back? Or will she choose to stay with the man who commands her mind, body, and soul.

***Primed Suspect* by Ann Cory**

Cassidy Valance is one part woman, one part Kitsune—a rare shape-shifting fox. She finds solace inside an estate, away from the hunters who have invaded her home in the forest. As a woman,

she finds the nights unsatisfying with her insatiable appetite for sex. Tired of prowling for men to slake her relentless desires, Cassidy yearns for one man who can tame her wild ways, and love her despite what she is.

Officer Ian Valenti is assigned to investigate an abandoned estate after reports of unusual activity are called into the station. Since the death of his wife, he has fully devoted himself to his job. When he goes to inspect the house, he finds the suspect inside, naked and alluring.

Ian's instincts and years serving on the force tell him to cuff Cassidy and haul her in for breaking and entering. But she would rather he cuff her and treat her like the submissive she longs to be. With her restrained and primed, Ian brings Cassidy's fantasies of a Master to life. And willingly lets down the guard around his heart.

***Chance Encounters* by Mia Jae**

Seven short, erotic stories to whet your appetite, packaged in one collection. Whether the couples meet on a glance, make a split second decision or take a chance to be together, the encounters change their lives, for a minute, or for a lifetime.

You'll find a plumber who gets into more than a little hot water, a housewife tangled up in a cyber relationship, a cowboy trio attempting to brand a bartender for their very own, and a woman experimenting with a same-sex relationship. Then, there is naughty Rose, who dances naked in front of her bedroom window, a chance sexual encounter in a taxi that turns the tables, and a woman who finds herself doing exactly what she thinks she shouldn't ... and liking it.

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