



SINGAPORE SIZZLE

KS AUGUSTIN

A Total-E-Bound Publication



www.total-e-bound.com

Singapore Sizzle

ISBN #978-0-85715-453-8

©Copyright K.S. Augustin 2011

Cover Art by Natalie Winters ©Copyright January 2011

Edited by Elizabeth Delisi

Total-E-Bound Publishing

This is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, events or places is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form, whether by printing, photocopying, scanning or otherwise without the written permission of the publisher, Total-E-Bound Publishing.

Applications should be addressed in the first instance, in writing, to Total-E-Bound Publishing. Unauthorised or restricted acts in relation to this publication may result in civil proceedings and/or criminal prosecution.

The author and illustrator have asserted their respective rights under the Copyright Designs and Patents Acts 1988 (as amended) to be identified as the author of this book and illustrator of the artwork.

Published in 2011 by Total-E-Bound Publishing, Think Tank, Ruston Way, Lincoln, LN6 7FL, United Kingdom.

Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

SINGAPORE SIZZLE

KS Augustin

Chapter One

The invitation taunted Sophie when she got home. She had left it on the side table just inside the main door and, every evening, had to walk past its heavy cream card, embossed with the logo of one of Singapore's most famous charities. Maybe she should have turned it upside down, so the heavy black letters couldn't be seen, but she hadn't thought of that when she'd first ripped open the thick envelope.

Your presence is requested...

The plastic shopping bags knocked against her shins as she walked the short distance to the kitchen. Lifting, she put them on the counter and patiently began unpacking the contents, moving each item to its designated place—fresh vegetables to the crisper, that brand of frozen *wonton* that she now considered her personal addiction to the freezer, various tinned goods to the overhead cupboard she'd designated as her mini-pantry.

Washing her hands afterwards, she pulled out a frypan and set it to heat on one of the stove's gas rings.

It hadn't always been like this. At one time, the most difficult decision to make was which restaurant to eat at. But that was when Tim was around. Ambitious, astute Tim. When he was playing at being an investment banker, he could charm the birds from the trees.

"You have to play the part, Sophie love," he'd say in his deep baritone. "There's nothing like success to attract success."

And he was right. It had paid for a large black-and-white colonial house they'd rented in one of Singapore's most exclusive eastern suburbs. It had also paid for a driver, and credit cards with unlimited spending. It had paid for photos in glossy social magazines, where she could always be seen in the latest fashion, direct from the catwalks in Paris or Milan. But what it hadn't paid for was the prescience to know that it was all going to crumble into the ground when the economic crisis engulfed the small island-state like a paper tsunami, decimating careers with one broad stroke of red ink.

Even now, two years later, she still couldn't believe how their lives, which had taken years—decades even—to build up, could be obliterated in the space of a few days.

...at the third annual Masked & Masquerade Ball...

With steady hands, Sophie quickly brought together an assortment of ingredients—the all-important garlic, chopped spring onions and greens, juicy prawns—and set them to fry. The aroma of food hitting the hot oil filled the small kitchen. Even after years of living in Asia, she loved the salivating, savoury smell of it. In quick succession, she added noodles, then an oyster-based sauce, mixed it together and slid the whole thing into a shallow, white porcelain bowl. There was a brief scramble while she tried to find a matching pair of chopsticks in the cutlery drawer, then she settled at the dining table.

When the economic crisis hit, more than Tim's job was affected. It was as if their entire lives had been steamrolled, then held up to the light to see what had survived. Not much did. Not even their marriage.

...to be held at the Singleton...

The bowl clinked on the glass-topped table. Sophie knew she should've retrieved a placemat to put her dinner on, but with only one person living in the apartment, how much damage could she do? She deliberately didn't switch on the television set, with its usual choices of a news programme or eternal reruns of a popular—now tedious through constant repetition—comedy. She liked silence when she walked through the front door. It helped calm her after the sometimes frenetic days at the business academy. Later on, she might spend some time watching an American medical drama. Or she might spend it reading. That was entirely her choice.

A little over two years ago, she wouldn't have had such choices. It would have been dinner here, a few drinks there, and turning up for one important event or another almost every weekend.

When it all fell apart, Sophie had been forced to look across the dining table at her husband, night after night, and admit to herself that there was nothing holding them together any more. From being something that Tim felt he had to do, the constant entertaining had—in the last decade of their lives together—become the focus of his life. Sophie didn't go so far as to think that Tim had ever cheated on her, but she couldn't help the thought that it hadn't really mattered who stood by his side in the latest designer gown, as long as it was someone with poise who dressed well and knew when to keep her mouth shut.

...on the first of December...

She finished her meal and took the dish back to the kitchen, washing it carefully and putting it on the rack to dry. Then she walked to the fridge to pour herself a glass of wine from the half-opened bottle rattling in one of the door shelves.

On the way to the living room, she deliberately didn't glance at the front door, or at the side table, but could feel the weight of the heavy cream card pressing on her mind, almost a physical presence. She settled into an armchair, sipping at her drink while she looked out the window. Her two-bedroom home was ten stories above the ground, which afforded her a nice view across to the public housing in the middle distance – towers of flats, looking serene in the glow of their lights.

She owned the apartment outright – it was part of the settlement with Tim – and was content with her life. But the card on the side table asked whether that was enough. Was this all she was? A middle-aged woman teaching English business courses, sharing her home with nobody? The truth was, when Tim told her that he was moving back to the United Kingdom, pursuing opportunities with well-placed friends, she was tempted to follow suit. Their son, Harry, lived in Jersey with his wife and two kids. Sophie wasn't considering anything as extreme as moving in with them, even as a temporary measure, but it might have been nice settling nearby, so she could spend her time playing the indulgent grandmother.

So what had made her stay, rootless, in Southeast Asia instead? Maybe it was the latent wanderlust, the feeling that she wanted to achieve *something* in life. And what better than to spend some years living in an exotic locale, with opportunities to go travelling through the region, to be fascinated by food she had never tasted before, and languages she had never heard before? And, while she was mulling her options, Tim had left, she had bought the apartment and now she was settled in a life that was pleasant and somewhat rewarding, but a little...empty.

"Come over here," the card seemed to say into the silence. "Pick me up. Read me again."

Not that she needed to. She knew exactly what was written on the heavy invitation, every word burnt into her neurons.

...RSVP...

It had come from George, of course. Jolly George Chua, fellow instructor at the business academy. A friendly sort, who thought his mission in life was to interfere in everyone else's

lives with the excuse of making them happier. Well-meaning, interfering Georgie. She didn't know if he contributed to charities, but a person didn't have to be in Singapore for very long to get to know everyone and, with his affable manner, she was sure George had met everyone of importance in the city-state years ago.

The problem was, as irritated as she was with George inveigling an invitation for her, Sophie had to admit the entire event was rather tempting. What did she have to show for her life over the past couple of years except satisfied students, glowing performance reviews and a spotless flat? She was sure Tim hadn't descended to the depths of isolationism, at least not from the snippets of news Harry relayed to her during their regular phone calls. So, really, was there any excuse for the living mausoleum she'd constructed for herself over the past two years?

"Oh, that's not fair," she murmured, arguing with herself.

After all, didn't she have a group of friends she regularly went out with? Outdoor movies at the Botanical Gardens, book readings at the mega-stores, retail therapy during the annual extended sale period? Yet, she somehow felt that the cream card invitation mocked all of this, daring her to take a step out of her comfort zone, though why that should be, she didn't know.

...RSVP...

She shouldn't reply. After all, it wasn't that she had anything to prove. It was just George interfering in her life, as he often did with everyone else who worked with him. And she didn't know the charity ball organisers. Chances were she'd end up standing, alone and forlorn, at the event, a glass of wine warming alarmingly in her hand. Still, there was the chance to meet new people.

To find a lover, perhaps?

Sophie snorted, but couldn't quash the errant thought. In all truth, the past two years had been barren in that regard. She had gone down to the sole sex shop along Orchard Road and purchased a vibrator, but it wasn't the same. The shallow release it gave her couldn't compare to the touch of a man on her body. The wide, rough hands caressing her curves, and resting on her taut nipples. The strong fingers invading her, increasing her wetness.

Just the thought of it made Sophie wet and she shifted in her chair. It wouldn't really hurt, would it? After all, the nearest block of flats looked to be more than half a kilometre away. And the thought of what she wanted to do, sitting there in the chair, made her wetter.

After carefully putting her glass down on the floor beside her, Sophie peeled off her panties and let them drop to the cool tiles. Then, hoisting up her knee-length skirt, she spread her legs until the underside of each knee rested on a thickly upholstered chair arm. If anybody looked through the window now, they would be able to see her, laid bare from the waist down, her arse shimmied forward on the seat while her head was thrown back, thatched shadows between two legs stretched akimbo.

They wouldn't be able to see the moistness that gathered in her brown curls, just the fingers of one hand plunging into a receptive hole, while the fingers of the other rubbed vigorously just above it. Sophie hadn't had a shower when she got home—she had put away the groceries, then cooked herself dinner. As a result, she felt a bit...dirty. Slovenly. Slutty. As if the dust of the day had somehow sullied her reputation as much as it sullied her clothes. As if she couldn't expect any courtesy or consideration, and that the fingers sweetly torturing her were trying to punish her by pushing her to an orgasm she didn't really want. She parted her knees even more, imagining soft rope and weights attached to them, forcing her to expose herself to the rising tide of illicit pleasure that began to overwhelm her. She imagined her fingers as the stiff rod of someone pumping in and out of her, the energy from his thrusts blowing air against the sensitive skin of her inner thighs.

With a muffled shout, sooner than she wanted but still too slow for her body's demands, she orgasmed, her body trembling with shudders of delight, her bare buttocks skipping across the embossed fabric, and her cream spilling over her fingers, slick and sticky. She had enough presence of mind to cup her hand so she didn't stain the fabric, but could only sit there for many minutes afterwards, breathing heavily, curved fingers around her groin, feeling as limp as a soaked rag.

It had been too long. Sophie knew she had tried to ignore her baser instincts, but her gasping breaths, and the lingering pleasure coursing through her system, told her that she'd been ignoring a very pleasurable part of her being for almost two years. She thought again of

the invitation. A masquerade ball. People with their faces covered. Strangers. Attractive strangers? Her fingers twitched at the thought. Might she? *Could* she?

She rose in one swift movement, letting the skirt fall over her bare skin to swish against her calves, and walked to the bathroom. Her expression was curious and measured as she showered. Hadn't she shut herself away enough? How long was she going to be in mourning for her marriage? Maybe that's not how she regarded her life since Tim, but that was the upshot. Tim had left to go back to the United Kingdom and she had remained in Singapore, only half a woman—all intellect, experience and skill. She was sociable and went out with friends, but she had buried the womanly part of her, the female sexual animal, deep inside, and it was about time she let it out to play.

Yes, she decided as she dried herself and prepared for a relaxing evening. She'd say yes. She'd go to the masquerade ball, and any attractive men there had better watch out!

* * * *

"It was you, wasn't it, George?" she asked the following day.

The morning had been exhausting—Thursdays were always the high-activity day for her—and it was only in the late afternoon that she managed to catch George Chua in the staff room. Like her, he had his own low-rise cubicle, but was situated closer to the door so she could easily tell if he was at his desk. He was a slightly chubby Chinese of tall build, with a round face, flyaway hair that always fell over his eyes, and a wide, engaging grin. George had been born and raised in Singapore, and there didn't seem to be anybody in the city-state he didn't know. But, at her question, he looked up from his desk and frowned.

"Me, what?" he asked, all innocence. Sophie didn't think he knew what she was talking about. Georgie always had his fingers in several prank pies, and she was sure he never knew, from moment to moment, exactly what he was protesting his innocence about. Still, because of him, the energy level at the academy remained high and light, and she didn't know how she would've survived the first six months in Singapore by herself if it hadn't been for him.

"The invitation," she offered, deciding to help him out.

George frowned. "Are you sure you have the right person?"

"For the masquerade ball," she said, a touch of asperity in her voice.

George jumped out of his seat and took a quick look around, alarm on his face. He grabbed her arm and hurried her out the door. "Come, come," he said. "Let's talk outside." He looked nervous.

The staff room was at the end of a breezeway that separated it from the rest of the buildings. George stepped off onto the springy, tough grass, beckoning to Sophie to follow him. He stopped at a concrete bench under a tall tree, facing the academy. Behind him, the ever-present traffic streamed past along immaculately marked roads.

"Don't tell anybody about that," he told her, his voice still low and conspiratorial. "Do you know how difficult it is to get invited to that ball? Tickets are sometimes pre-ordered two *years* in advance!"

"So it was you," she remarked with satisfaction.

George made a tch'ing sound with his tongue. "Of course it was me, *lah*. Who else could it be?"

Sophie thought of the director of the academy, Bertand Stokes. And she thought that a few members of the board might have enough clout to gain access to this much-vaunted event but, on the other hand, George knew *everyone*. Maybe he was right after all. She knew all about the high-gloss, high-fashion events at the Singleton Hotel, and was in no doubt that all the tickets for the ball would have been snapped up months ago. Which again begged the question of exactly how George had managed to get his hands on an invitation.

"You think I don't see you, spending weekend after weekend on your own," he said.

She opened her mouth to object, but he spoke over any forthcoming objections.

"Yes, yes, I know you have friends," he countered, "but what you need is a man. Preferably, a rich man."

Sophie felt a bit dizzy for a moment. She should've been used to this, the stark, unsubtle niceness of the locals. They meant well, even though they sometimes lacked the...restraint she was used to, growing up in England.

"So I thought to myself," George continued, "what can we do for Sophie?" He lifted a finger, as if directing a class at the start of an assignment, and shook it several times. "Where can we find Sophie a man? Someone with some manners, lots of money and who isn't in a walking frame yet." He paused. "And Evelyn came up with the idea."

Sophie's face flamed, although she hoped George didn't notice the difference between the reaction from standing outside in the tropical heat, and embarrassment. Evelyn was George's wife's sister. Sophie only had to close her eyes momentarily to see the four of them—George and his wife, Joanne, and Evelyn and her boyfriend, Tony—sitting around the dining table, steaming bowls in front of them, chopsticks flying like juggling sticks as they dipped into one dish, then another, and all the time discussing...*her!*

"She suggested the masquerade ball, and Joanne agreed. Tony said he knew one of the organisers and would see what he could do."

The smile on Sophie's face started to feel strained. Was George going to involve the entire island in her love life, or lack of it?

He beamed at her, obviously delighted with what he'd accomplished.

"And Tony did it. He's a man with contacts," George concluded, obviously gifting Evelyn's boyfriend with the highest accolade he could think of. And that was *that* question answered.

"Will, ah, you and Joanne be attending as well?" Sophie asked, her voice faint. She hoped George would assume it was because of the hot afternoon or, better yet, not even notice.

"No, no, we'll be staying at home," he replied jovially. "No need for me to go gallivanting about looking for a piece of action. Unlike you." He gazed at her with a look of fond exasperation. "We all agree, you really need a man."

"Thanks, George."

"No problem," he beamed, slapping her on the shoulder. "No problem at all."

Chapter Two

Sophie looked up to the top of the stairs and took a breath. Behind her, the taxi door slammed shut and the car tooled away, replacing its previous, air-conditioned chill for the scent and heat of diesel fumes.

The steps, hard and expensive, loomed above her. There was no earthly reason for any anxiety, she told herself silently. She had visited this particular five-star hotel many times in the past—for cocktail parties, product launches and banquets.

With Tim.

Ah yes, that was the difference. On all previous occasions, she'd been here as Tim's wife. Mrs. Woodward. Now, she was here by herself. Miss Sophie.

A couple brushed past her, laughing softly, and that brought her back to her senses. Sophie squared her shoulders. It was only a social event. For charity, no less. And, besides, she couldn't really see herself as a shrinking violet.

She started up the stairs, her heels clicking sharply on the polished stone, and smiled at the uniformed doorman as he welcomed her into the lush foyer with a small bow.

After all, wasn't she on a hunting expedition of her own? She had thought about it long and hard, first while reclining, exposed, in her armchair a few weeks ago, her slick folds open to the air. It had been a long time since she'd experienced any male-directed pleasure. And George's unsubtle bantering had only sharpened her hunger, her desire to feel another's hands on her flesh. Just the idea of it was enough to make her feel damp. Sophie squeezed her legs together while she contemplated which direction she should take—up the stairs to the elegant conference rooms (how many people were going to be at this thing anyway?), or down to the giant banquet hall?

A small procession of people, dressed even more outrageously than herself, were tripping down the shallow, richly veined steps and she followed suit, lifting the mask she held and slipping it over her head.

In the end, after two weeks of lip-biting indecision, Sophie had decided to go retro. Really retro, as in historical. After all, if she considered herself old next to the silken-haired,

slim young things that happily pranced around her—and she did—she thought, with a perverse sense of humour, she might as well dress as one.

The costume party shop owners, she recalled, had been more than happy to hire out the Regency-style gown.

“Young people no like,” the older man had told her after bringing out the dress for her to look at. It had been shoved up tight in between a couple of harlequin costumes, and it was only a flash of the fabric’s deep ruby tones that had caught Sophie’s eye, prompting her to ask for a closer look at the plastic-bagged frock.

His wife, the co-owner of the small shop along North Bridge Road, had tutted in sympathy from her perch on a tall wooden bar-stool behind the cash register.

“Too little,” she had said, a little opaquely. “Too little. Show not enough leg, not enough thigh.” She mimicked pulling a skirt up to her hip. “Young people want to show firm skin.”

That might have been the case but the gown, whose hem tickled the tops of her feet, was very daring in other ways. The sleeves, for example, threatened to fall off her shoulders, and gave the distinct impression of remaining in place only through sheer will. And nothing else. Sophie immediately realised that she couldn’t wear any of her regular bras with the dress. She would have to go shopping for a new strapless. And not just any strapless bra. The neckline, wide and shaped in a vee, dipped down to a point alarmingly close to her waist, exposing the curves of two full globes of shadowed flesh along the way.

She had always been proud of her breasts. They weren’t too large, but seemed that way when compared to her tidy waist. Of course, in the years since her twenties, Sophie’s waist had expanded a little but so then, it had seemed, had the rest of her. All in all, she might be a bit thicker all around, but she was sure she was still in proportion. A proportion that men seemed to like. But that, of course, was two decades ago. Sophie wondered if she really had a chance of snagging a man at this fancy function, or if she were only fooling herself.

Her mask was a matching feathery concoction of gold sequins, long upright feathers in red and black, and fine threads of gold paint, expertly decorating a curved mask that covered the top of her face and her nose, leaving only her lips uncovered.

The costume shop owners had given her the choice of a mask that she could hold with a slim rod, much like the ones she saw in French historical movies, or the type that fastened around her head with thick, cloth-covered elastic. No matter how much Sophie regarded her attendance at the masquerade ball as an event of fantasy, she was still too practical to insist on the hand-held version. What if she wanted to have a drink *and* something to nibble? Besides, she didn't really want anyone to instantly recognise her, a distinct possibility if she held the mask's support in her anxious and sweaty fingers.

She forced herself not to look down at the creamy expanse of flesh just below her throat as she followed a small party of ball attendees to the giant banquet room. One of the two women was dressed in a black and white catsuit so tight that Sophie couldn't be sure it wasn't painted on. Only her hair, it seemed, was unadorned, a dark waterfall of silk cascading to her waist. Her female companion was dressed in the fashion of the Roaring Twenties, in a flowing dress with spaghetti straps that exposed her creamy shoulders, and a hem that ended high up on her hips, exposing creamy thighs.

My God, Sophie thought to herself in horror, how can I compete with *that*?

Their male partners had taken a more frivolous approach to the evening, one dressed as a clown and another, from the back and one side at least, dressed as a waiter. Somehow, she was sure he'd regret that choice of costume by the end of the evening.

The four of them stopped at the back of a line that snaked its way to a pair of giant doors, and Sophie stared. There must be hundreds of people attending the ball, and she looked to be one of the very few that had attended by herself. Part of her wanted to back out, turn tail and run—had wanted to do that even as she waited for the taxi at the front door of her condo complex—but her sense of practicality kicked in once more. She had spent too much money, from new shoes, to lingerie, to the costume hire and a makeup session a few hours ago, to turn coward now. As much as she wanted to.

The line moved forward at a fair pace and before too long, Sophie was at the front, presenting her invitation and giving the female organiser behind the desk a sunny smile. She was ushered into the banquet room with a nod, flanked by the doors and two waiters, each bearing a tray on which sat dozens of flutes containing bubbly, sparkling wine. Sophie knew

she needed all the help she could get, so she grabbed a glass and took a sip, and allowed herself to take a leisurely look around.

It was lavish. Thick swatches of cream, black and gold material were draped in folds from the ceiling to various points on the walls. Small round tables were decorated in a similar colour scheme, with a miniature ornate golden candelabra set in each centre, filled with slight, white, waxy pillars, their small flames flickering in the air currents that moved through the room. The wine glasses and pearly tidbit plates that rested on some of the tables caught reflections of the subdued lighting, lending an air of mystery to the event. It all looked incredibly romantic, yet lushly sinful at the same time.

Sophie squared her shoulders and started walking around. She was here tonight not as the middle-aged divorced partner of an investment banker, nor as a highly-regarded instructor at a prestigious business academy. She was here as a woman, scouting the talent with a view to breaking a two-year drought. It would bolster her courage if she could keep that in mind.

Her gaze was caught briefly by spotting the two couples who had been in front of her in the line watching a group of musicians at the other end of the banquet hall. The string quartet members also wore masks, but much more utilitarian than the frothy fantasy she was wearing. She stood and admired their skill for a while before moving on. Occasionally, a waiter would stop at her side and offer a canapé—a curl of thickly-cut pink salmon on a feather-light cracker, topped with sour cream and a sprinkling of caviar; a dainty sandwich filled with transparent rings of cucumber, accented by peppery watercress; or a silky slice of rich pâté sitting atop exquisite slices of freshly-baked bread.

She was comfortable in this environment. Years of accompanying Tim had honed her skills of light conversation and artless smiling. She nibbled and sipped and eyed the men who attended. In a way, it was a lot less distracting this way. She could let her gaze wander over tight, shapely buttocks encased in dark trousers, breadth of shoulders tapering down to narrow waists, and the kind of long, elegant masculine fingers she preferred. The face could always deceive, and besides, the masks didn't hide someone's eyes.

Sophie licked her forefinger absently, sucking the remnants of subtly curried egg from her fingers, just as a low voice whispered into her left ear.

“Do you always like to watch?”

She spun around, startled and feeling more than a little guilty. Her hand moved instinctively to her chest and a dark gaze followed its path. Sophie felt as if something tangible had stroked her bare skin and her nipples puckered. It took two breaths before she could gather her self-control around her once again, her habitual armour of restraint.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice a little husky, “but you startled me.”

The man behind the mask bowed slightly. “In that case, my most profound apologies, but you see,” he paused, “I like to watch, too.”

Sophie’s eyes widened. Oh dear. The man in front of her—dark and delectable as chocolate—was as smooth as finely-woven silk. The old Sophie would have been a little apprehensive around such a character, but the new on-the-prowl Sophie was beginning to think that this man might be exactly what she was looking for. At that moment, she itched to have a lace fan in her hand instead of a flute of wine, just so she could wave it languidly in front of her. No matter, the mask would do just as well.

Coyly, she stared at the floor, then lifted her gaze to him. “Then we seem to make an excellent pair.”

And they did. He was half a head taller than her in her heels, which made him very tall for this part of the world. And his voice was low and cultured, yet with a lilt to it that reminded her faintly of an Irish brogue. He was dressed conservatively in a tailored suit, but wore a mask of black and white checks. It didn’t cover as much of his face as Sophie’s did hers, but it still made him look mysterious. He smiled and she noticed that the bottom edge of his mask wasn’t low enough to hide an appealing dimple in his right cheek, and suddenly her pulse began to race.

He had used that smile before, she could tell. And to good effect as well. Oh my.

“I don’t think I’ve noticed you at the previous masquerade balls,” he commented.

Sophie laughed. “And how would you know? We are behind masks, after all.”

He paused, his lips quirking again, and made sure she knew he was taking his time observing every inch of her from the top of her burnished blonde hair, over the mask, lingering for a moment on her lips, before moving down to rest on her chest. Sophie had the

wild urge to throw her glass to one side, push him to the floor and have her wicked way with him.

“Believe me, if you had attended any of the others, I would have noticed.”

And confident, too.

“So you come to these things often?” she asked, turning to face in the same direction he was looking. She beckoned over a hovering waiter and took a canapé, although she could have not said afterwards what type it was, or even what it tasted like. Next to her, the handsome stranger did the same, popping the small snack into his mouth with a practiced move.

“More than I’d like,” he replied and there was a hint of something in his voice. Tiredness? Maybe some resignation? Did he have to attend social events on a frequent basis and didn’t like it? Suddenly, her curiosity, as well as her libido, was piqued.

“And up till now,” he added, “there hasn’t been anything of interest to see.”

Sophie’s grin this time was unfeigned. “Now, *that* is something I don’t believe.”

His answering bark of laughter sounded surprised, as if he hadn’t expected such a comment, and his next words confirmed the supposition.

“You’re a very straightforward person, aren’t you?”

“I try to be,” Sophie said.

He took her right hand—the one that wasn’t holding a wine glass, the one that had, only seconds ago, been covered with the various dollops of canapé toppings she’d been sampling—and kissed the tips of her fingers.

Sophie wasn’t sure whether to faint from delight or embarrassment. The gesture itself was as light as the flutter of a butterfly’s wings, but she felt the warmth of his hand beneath hers, a rock-solid support holding her while his lips grazed her skin with a fleeting caress, and a zinging that started somewhere in her abdomen shot up to her nipples, hardening them instantly. She wanted this man so badly, her mouth was actually watering! She swallowed and returned his smile a little tremulously when he straightened.

“And did my straightforward lady from the past,” he said, alluding to her costume, “come to the ball with a partner?”

“No.” Her voice was husky. “What about you?”

"The same." And she heard it again, that tug of reluctance, of exhaustion, in his voice.

"Then why did you come?" she asked, curiosity driving her boldness.

"The organiser is a good friend of mine," he replied quickly. "And it's for charity. I could ask the same question. Why did *you* come?"

It was the moment of truth for Sophie. Dare she tell this dashing stranger why she had attended? She wavered, caught between playing it safe and risking it all.

"I," she hesitated, "I came to look for some fun," she finished in a rush, then held her breath.

What would he think? Would he be the one to have some "fun" with her, or would he walk away with an apologetic, yet utterly charming, gesture?

When he looked to one side and scanned the rest of the partygoers—the noise level of the surrounding conversations had risen but, to Sophie's disgust, she hadn't even noticed until her mystery man had broken eye contact—she felt a deep stab of disappointment.

He's going to walk away. I should go home.

"Is this the first ball you've attended?"

Sophie wasn't sure where his question was leading, but she nodded. "Yes."

"Arnold outdoes himself every year," he commented, speaking softly, almost to himself. Despite that, Sophie knew there were other thoughts whizzing through the brain behind that simple mask. It was obvious from the stillness of his stance. Her conversation partner was obviously adept at handling several trains of thought at any one time, although his body gave him away. He seemed to come to a decision, because he locked gazes with her again.

"It's all very impressive, isn't it?"

"Yes," she replied, unable to look away, willing him to give her some kind of positive response to her earlier, serious-flippant comment.

"And are you enjoying yourself?"

"For the time being."

His lips quirked again. "It would be irresponsible of me to whisk you away from all this, wouldn't it?"

Sophie's heart skipped a beat.

"The evening will only get better, if I know Arnold," he continued.

Was he really offering what she thought he was? Buck up, old stick, she told herself. You have a wonderful opportunity here. Don't mess it all up now.

"There's always next year," she added in a breathy tone. "And I'm sure Arnold will manage to come up with some way to top this event."

The sexy stranger chuckled. "You're right. He will. In which case, could I tempt you away by offering you a quiet drink? Champagne?"

Sparkling wine of all stripes was dreadfully expensive in the city-state, and nobody mentioned it without meaning it...or without having scads of money. Sophie briefly wondered what her mysterious partner did, but the thought was gone as soon as it came. She was going to enjoy the night, regardless of the consequences.

She smiled at him. "Why not?"

Chapter Three

Sophie thought she would be led to a quiet corner of the hotel. Instead, her male companion led her to the lifts. Sophie's steps faltered briefly as revelation hit, but his hand was warm and firm at her elbow and it had been so long since somebody, anybody, had touched her with even a speck of regard.

She watched him draw a plastic card from his jacket pocket and insert it into a discreetly placed slot just above the bank of floor buttons. Then, he pressed a button. There were no other numbers above it, which meant...the penthouse suite.

She turned to stare at him, mute, but he said nothing, and the rest of the journey was made in silence.

When the doors slid open, they stepped into an opulent foyer. Sophie couldn't help it. She froze. She couldn't move a muscle if her life depended on it. Beyond the bevelled-edge glass frames of the foyer carried on an expanse of creamy swirled, highly polished granite. Intricately-carved wooden furniture gleamed beneath crystal-clad lights. At the far end of the floor, the lights from Singapore's high-rise landscape twinkled white, yellow and red dots through the floor-to-ceiling windows. If Sophie could somehow conjure a fantasy version of her condo unit, it wouldn't even approach the grandeur in front of her eyes. What exactly did her masked companion *do* for a living?

He started to walk into the huge living room, then stopped and turned when he realised that she hadn't followed him.

"Is there a problem?"

"I," she swept her arm in an expansive gesture and stepped forward. "This is all a bit overwhelming."

He cocked his head to one side, considering her words.

"Yes, I imagine it is. Although, if it's any consolation, I normally don't operate like this."

He hesitated slightly, then removed his mask, putting it down with a small click on a polished, glossy-topped sofa table.

He was classically beautiful, with his high cheekbones, full lips and dark, heavy-lidded eyes. A lean Greek statue brought to life and washed with a tincture of brewed, exotic tea leaves.

"Perhaps we're getting ahead of ourselves a bit," he offered. "My name is —"

Sophie moved then, stepping quickly up to him and lifting a finger to lay it across his lips. His breath blew over the tip of her finger, warming its sudden chill.

"No, no names," she told him. "Or maybe only our first names. Nothing more."

"Are you sure?" he asked in disbelief after she removed her finger.

"For tonight," she said, "I'd prefer it that way."

His frown cleared but Sophie saw lingering doubt.

"Only first names?" he confirmed.

She nodded.

"And do we exchange them now?"

"Maybe later," she told him after he remained silent and still under her regard.

He smiled and she could see it in its entirety this time—the way the expression lit his dark eyes, the flash of white teeth, and the cute dimple in his right cheek.

"Usually women are falling over themselves to know me," he remarked a little ruefully.

"That's not the way I operate." Not tonight, at least.

"So I see. In that case, could a suitably chastened evening partner offer you a glass of champagne while we relax?"

Evening partner. Sophie liked the sound of that. She looked around and spied a low, wide armchair that was almost broad enough to take two people. She walked over to it and settled herself into its upholstery with a sigh.

"Why not?"

He was amused by her, she could tell by the sideways glances he threw her while he opened a bottle of vintage bubbly in the sleek black open-plan kitchenette and poured part of its contents into two narrow flutes. Resting the unfinished bottle in a silver ice bucket, he loaded all the items onto a tray and brought them into the living room.

"So," he said, after offering her a glass and sitting himself in an opposite chair, "this is the first of Arnold's balls you've attended, and you don't want to know my last name. In my

experience, that's highly unusual. Combine that with a candour that I find refreshing, and it's a combination I wouldn't have believed possible in Singapore."

"Too used to getting your own way, are you?" Sophie asked, sipping at her ice-cold drink. The bubbles danced on her tongue and all the way down her throat as she swallowed.

He chuckled, and the warmth of the sound seemed to envelop her in a cocoon of softness. She was trying to be her acerbic best—the contrarian in her—but it was becoming increasingly difficult in the presence of this charming and good-humoured man.

"I think," he said, "sometimes I am."

And that made her want to take back her earlier statement and ask what it was he actually did for a living. He certainly had the polish of a corporate high-flyer, but there was a vein of modesty running through his words that was unusual. What did he *do*?

"But," he said with a humorous tilt of his eyebrows, "enough about me. What about you? Have you lived in Singapore for long?"

Sophie remembered the years with Tim in the hot, muggy city-state. The struggle to draw a cool breath in the outside air until acclimatisation kicked in. Her dismay at having her makeup evaporate off her face within minutes of stepping out of a taxi, until she had mollified herself with the barest hint of blusher and eyeliner. She thought of the past two years, filled with friends and the wide vistas of retail therapy that Singapore offered...and yet strangely empty.

"I've been here for a number of years," she finally told him. "I work at a business academy."

"And do you like your job?"

It was nice that the first question out of his mouth wasn't whether it paid well, but whether she enjoyed it. It gave her an insight into his own personality as well.

"I do," she said and couldn't avoid the smile that accompanied the statement. She still had her mask on and was happy to hide behind it for the time being. It made her feel...naughty.

He drained the rest of his glass in one swallow, stood up and walked over to her. Sophie's heart began pounding and she thought she could hear its hurried echoes reverberating behind her disguise.

When he eased himself onto the edge of the wide chair next to her, she had time to notice the fine weave of his suit and the spicy, faintly floral scent of his cologne, before he dipped his head and kissed her.

It must have been a difficult position for him—one part of her thought—trying to negotiate under the lip of her rigid mask, but that didn't stop him. His lips, when they met hers, were firm and warm. And, suddenly, Sophie couldn't get enough. His masculine heat called to something deep within her, something that had been dormant for years, and her body couldn't help but respond.

She pulled back from him and ripped the mask from her face. There was a slight burn along her cheekbones from the friction of the hard material against her skin but she didn't care. All she wanted to do was get closer to this magnificent, exotic stranger and spend the night exploring every inch of his body.

With frantic hands, she grabbed his face and kissed him.

* * * *

Adrian fell back against the chair, surprised by the ardour being shown by the woman in his arms. Beneath his fingers, her shoulders felt cool and firm.

From the second he had spied her from the far corner of the ballroom, he'd known she was something special. Even hidden behind the sequined disguise of her mask. There was something about her that instantly attracted him. And so he had watched her for a little while before wending his way to where she stood.

She was alone, but she was still serene and poised. Majestic, Adrian thought, as if she could withstand any force of nature. Or man. That attitude in itself was such a change from the coy helplessness that usually confronted him that Adrian felt himself instantly intrigued by her.

And yet, there was also a hint of vulnerability. Even from a distance, he had followed several of her gazes towards other small groups of revellers. Was that wistfulness he read in her slight hesitations? Did she wish she looked like the young, sleek women attending with their beaus? He would've been happy to tell her that youth and a contagious giggle weren't

everything. That there was great attraction in silent strength, a trait she appeared to have in abundance.

Adrian parted his mystery woman's mouth and plunged his tongue deep into her moist cavern. She moaned against his lips and, moving swiftly yet still with their mouths attached, straddled him. For a moment, her fingers pressed against his heated cheeks before they began tearing away at his clothing. Suddenly, that seemed to be the best idea either of them had had all evening. He joined in the fun, pulling at the ridiculous sleeves of her costume until they rested in burgundy puffs at her waist. He pulled back only long enough to admire the wisp of black lace that barely covered two globes of creamy flesh, then bent his head and kissed one, leaving a trail of light touches – mouth against breast – as he moved lower. Opening his mouth wider, he sucked in a puckered pink nipple and tried not to grin as he heard a throaty female groan fill the air.

She was alive under his touch, a writhing handful – no, make that two! – of feminine flesh that, even as he was tasting and suckling, was intent on pursuing her own initiatives. Hands tugged at his trousers, undoing his belt and zipper with delicious haste, and he levered himself up for a second so she could slip them off. He did his best to help things along by kicking off his shoes, but then it occurred to him that they weren't in the most comfortable of positions. Metres away, a gigantic master bedroom beckoned. Comfort, luxury, and here they were, like teenagers caught in a parents' living room, scrabbling at each other like there was no tomorrow.

With reluctance, Adrian let the hot nub of flesh slip from his mouth. *I'll be getting back to you later*, he promised, then started rising from the chair. A pair of searing lips caught his and he froze, unable to resist a quick delve into her heat and the carnal promise contained within it.

He was panting when he finally managed to pull away.

"The bedroom," he gasped.

She grunted, but seemed to understand. Still, the path to that room was strewn with various articles of clothing. By the time they reached the doorway, both of them were naked.

His mysterious lover pushed him against the door jamb, and Adrian's back felt the chill of the painted wood. Her gaze roamed up and down his body, from the tip of his hair down

to his toes. He tried to keep himself in shape, inwardly cursing now for every day he managed to find an excuse to avoid the gym, and hoped she liked what she saw. He might be in his thirties, but he still looked buffed and virile. Didn't he? He tried hard not to suck in his stomach as she raked his figure a second time.

On his side, he had to admit he was doing the same thing. In the subdued lighting, her pale skin glowed. Her breasts, large and round, moved with each breath she took. Her body nicked in at her waist before expanding into luscious curves that made him want to do nothing more than bury himself in its fullness. There was something so voluptuous, so intrinsically female about her, that Adrian felt his hardened dick bob against his abdomen in agreement.

"You're gorgeous," she told him with a husky purr, running a finger down his chest.

"So are you," he replied. And meant it. Then, with a quick grin, he picked her up and carried her to the bed. "Let's enjoy ourselves."

* * * *

Sophie had been hoping for some fun from the evening. If she were honest with herself, even though she had attended the ball with the ultimate fantasy of leaving with someone, she had really only expected some mild flirting, perhaps leading to a date within the next week or so.

What she had *not* expected to find was a pair of rougish chocolate eyes, a voice that could melt the coldest ice, and a trim, taut, *younger* body, as eager to get as close to her as she was to get close to it.

There was a moment of exhilarating weightlessness as she was carried to the bed—when was the last time that had happened? Had Tim ever held her with such care?—and lowered onto cool sheets on a mattress that seemed to be the size of a tennis court.

Naked and close-up, he was as delectable as when he was sheathed in a tailor-made suit. His broad shoulders suited his solid build, the skin shadowing from milky coffee to burnt sugar in the subdued lighting from the two bedside lamps, as the illumination played over his muscled form. It remained relatively flat over his hairless chest, then shadowed again as it licked against a small line of dark down that began at his belly button and led her

gaze down. She caught her breath at the proudly erect cock that seemed to stare back at her, its head tight and purple as if straining to get closer. My God, but she had never wanted a dick inside her as much as she wanted this one!

She even said the words out loud. "I want..." and groaned when he dipped his head to take a nipple into his mouth. She grasped at his head, his hair like hot silk parting under her trembling fingers. She felt moisture pool in her sex, her pussy throbbing as it demanded something fill her slick receptacle. Her breasts seemed instantly, intimately connected to every nerve ending in her body and every lick from his broad tongue, every nip from his sharp, white teeth sent shockwaves of pure delight through her, jolting her according to its own chaotic and erotic rhythm.

He started pinching her other nipple with his long, capable fingers and Sophie groaned again.

"Yes," she gasped, "harder. I like it harder."

She closed her eyes and arched her neck so the muscles in her throat were taut, her chest pushing forward so he could continue defiling them with that sinfully skilful mouth of his, and those clever, torturing fingers. He kneaded her flesh, squeezing one breast in a strong hand, pinching and pulling at her while biting and sucking voraciously on the other, until she was sure her upper torso was pink from the friction. And the arousal.

Just as she took a breath, he pulled away and, a second later, Sophie felt something soft shoved under her backside.

"I want to ravish you," a dark voice told her. "I want to hear you shout with delight and fill this room with the screams of your orgasm when I make you come."

Sophie didn't doubt for a moment that he could do it. Just hearing him utter those words was enough to start her along the spiral of a climax. If ever there was a voice that, alone, could send a woman to the peak of pleasure, it was his. She felt both his hands hold and squeeze her breasts, then they were raking down the side of her body, clutching her buttocks, and there wasn't anything she wanted to do more than lift her hips and offer herself, knees bent, legs open wide, to his mouth. To his cock. To himself.

Chapter Four

Now that he was obviously aware that she didn't like the gentle and too-sensitive approach to sex, Sophie wondered how her mysterious, exotic lover would react. Would he be put off by her brazenness? After all, sometimes she felt that Tim had been a bit anxious in the bedroom, as if afraid she would rip a gobbet of flesh from his body in the throes of passion.

She needn't have worried. The hands that gripped her and kept her legs apart were confident and sure. And they were still there, indicating that she hadn't frightened him off. Sophie would've let out a sigh of relief, except he wasn't giving her the chance.

His cocksure fingers were exploring again, parting her outer lips with a casual roughness that had stabs of sensation zinging through her. A fingertip flicked against her clitoris and she felt it swell and harden at his touch, knew the slippery feeling was her own juices coating her sex and heightening her pleasure. She wanted to bury her hands into the silk of his hair again, but didn't want to hamper his movements. Tonight was all about losing herself in sensation, losing herself to the moment, and she didn't want anything interfering with that. So she opened her legs as far as they could go and clutched at the snowy-white bed sheets with eager hands. Waiting for his attack.

And he didn't disappoint. She felt his tongue licking at the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs, leaving trails of saliva, then blowing on them, sending shivers of cold warring with hot, carnal anticipation. She shifted, trying to tell him with her body that she was ready for more, but he seemed content taking his time.

Then, just when Sophie thought she would burst from frustration, he parted her labia and began nibbling on her swollen and erect clitoris. He used his lips, his tongue, his *teeth*. He grazed at her tender, arousal-drenched flesh with sharp nips, and shudders racked her body with each draw of that hardness against her sheathed nub.

She wanted to draw it out, to teeter on the precipice of orgasm, feeling the coils of pleasure build within her and yet deny them in the build-up to an even bigger climax.

She couldn't. It had been too long since she'd felt another's hands, lips and body on hers. Sophie took a deep, quivering breath and cried out into the bedroom as the convulsions of a climax possessed her. Her fingers spasmed against the bunched-up sheets as her body shook and, amid the waves of delicious pleasure that coursed through her, she felt his hands against her hips, holding her steady, as his mouth continued to ravage her.

"No," she finally gasped, as the feelings that convulsed her began turning to pain. Her hands fluttered close to where his head should be and encountered the silkiness of his hair. She pushed. "It's too much. Please!"

Slowly, she felt his head lift and the onslaught of sensation tamped down to a bearable throb. Sophie felt wrung out...and completely alive. She lifted her own head and smiled at him.

"That was," she told him with a raised eyebrow and with a small gasp, "wonderful."

He chuckled and moved swiftly up the bed so he could see her close-up, face to face. Still not saying a word, he kissed her as hard and as deep as he had kissed her sex. The aroma of her arousal spun in the air between them and Sophie breathed in deeply, the thought of her own intimate scent on his man's skin exciting her for a second time.

"I like responsive women," he whispered, "and you are very responsive."

She smiled. "I aim to please." And wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I want you to fuck me," she told him, looking directly into his dark eyes. "Hard and fast. That's just what I'm in the mood for."

Without breaking her embrace, he reached across to the bedside table and coaxed open a drawer. Sophie didn't need to hear the characteristic rustle of plastic foil to know what he was doing. With a wicked smile, she ground her hips against his, closing her legs on his erection, cupping it between her soft thighs.

Her mystery lover groaned before lifting himself free and expertly rolling the condom onto his cock. Then he was back, landing with an enthusiastic thump right next to her. Resting on his left elbow, he stroked his right hand down her body, cupping her buttock and squeezing it as he lifted it slightly into position. Sophie felt a bit of resistance at the entrance to her sex, then he thrust himself inside her and she almost purred with delight.

She hadn't realised how much she missed the feel of a man inside her until now. Of course she had some toys, but it wasn't the same. Playing with a vibrator, while it filled her emptiness with pleasant vibration, was like waltzing in front of a mirror. The action was still guided by only one person—herself. Having sex with someone else, however, was like a wonderful, exhausting tango, both partners moving, tugging, and pushing at each other. Both of them trying to anticipate the wishes of their partner while pleasing themselves in the process. It was the most primal, pleasurable and selfish of all human interactions.

Sophie felt his hard cock slide in and out of her, each plunge rubbing against her, forcing a reaction from her body. She closed her eyes as he pistoned his body, and felt the firm resilience of his moving flesh as her fingernails dug into his buttocks. As she felt the racheting tension in his body, she moved a hand between them, opening the outer lips of her sex so her clitoris could rub against his wiry pubic hair. When he came, with a loud shout of surprised bliss, she wasn't far behind, continuing to rock and chafe against him until an orgasm gripped her as well and she spasmed around his ejecting stiffness.

A drop of sweat, hot and salty, landed near her lips and she darted out her tongue to taste it before opening her eyes again. Her lover looked sated and satisfied.

"We never did get around to exchanging first names," he said with an impish tilt to his lips.

Sophie grinned. "Sophie."

He nodded, turning it into a quick and thorough kiss on the downward swoop. "Adrian. Thank you," he said, that devilish light still in his eyes, "for coming."

She dimpled. "Thank you for having me."

* * * *

Sometime during the long and adventurous night, Adrian had risen to pull together the curtains in the bedroom, but he hadn't fully succeeded. A thin shaft of light illuminated Sophie's face as she lay facing the foot of the bed, rousing her from sleep. She lifted her head, her lids still heavy from the night's exertions and blinked her eyes several times, trying to focus on the ultra-modern cube that masqueraded as an alarm clock on one of the bedside tables.

6:40.

That meant morning. With the light streaming in from outside, and the early tropical sunset hours, it had to be morning, although Sophie wouldn't have been surprised if she'd managed to sleep through an entire day. She moved and had to stifle a groan. Oh my, she had aches where she didn't even know aches could exist!

Levering herself up on one arm, she looked over to the opposite side of the bed, where a shadowed form told her Adrian slept. The white sheet was draped over his hips, but one long, brown leg emerged from the rumpled heap. He looked like a slumbering angel. The face of an angel, but the mind and enthusiasm of a devil.

With only a slither of the mattress betraying her, Sophie slid to the edge of the bed and got to her feet. She tiptoed to the doorway and picked up her pair of discarded knickers, getting into them as quickly as she could and grimacing as a couple of her bones clicked. She didn't want Adrian to find her skulking like an errant child, but she couldn't help but look around as she retrieved articles of her clothing.

The previous evening, her mind had correctly registered that Adrian had led her to a suite, but she still hadn't taken in the extent of luxury that confronted her. Too nervous at first, she admitted, then way too horny!

Now, as she stepped into her dress and did up the zipper, she looked around. It must be the penthouse suite, or close to it, judging by the amount of space she was walking through. In fact, she was sure that his hotel room was bigger than her entire apartment. The curtains hadn't been drawn in the expansive living room area, and she looked past an elaborate dining room set to the floor-to-ceiling windows and out onto a newly sparkling day dawning on the island capital.

Which reminded her, it was time to get moving. Conflicting emotions stampeded through Sophie's mind, but she remained unwavering.

She had attended the ball to try to have some fun for a change, and had succeeded beyond her wildest imaginings. Adrian, as young and vibrant as he was, was obviously someone very successful, judging by the kind of accommodation he booked, and would probably regret falling for an older woman when there were so many taut young bodies around.

As she picked up her shoes and headed for the lift, Sophie admitted to herself that part of what she felt was shame. She had enjoyed herself thoroughly, and hoped he didn't hold her brazenness against her. Surely he enjoyed their time together as well? He'd certainly appeared to. Every time.

A blush sent arrows of heat slashing across Sophie's cheekbones, and then the elevator pinged. Hurriedly, she entered, punching the button for the ground floor and slipping into her heels. With trembling fingers, she tried to finger-comb her hair into some semblance of order.

He hadn't heard the lift bell, had he? Would the car go back up if he rushed to the foyer and pressed repeatedly on the button? How many people would see her as she traversed the hotel's gigantic lobby and pass some comment about mutton dressed up as lamb? Sophie pulled at her sleeves, wondering if the costume that had seemed so perfect for her in the weeks leading up to the ball now looked tawdry and a little desperate. Maybe she was showing too much cleavage?

When the lift doors slid open, she kept her eyes down and hurried to the front doors, hastily muttering a thank-you as the doorman ushered her through with a polite greeting. She was relieved to see that there was already a line of taxis waiting off to one side of the semi-circular driveway. Without looking left or right, she opened the door of the nearest vehicle and got into the back, only letting a breath out when the hotel was far behind her.

Chapter Five

Sophie looked down at the file in front of her. She had to blink several times before the words swam into view. The magical night at the ball was already history, two weeks past, and she still couldn't concentrate on her work. She was due to deliver a new course on business communication the following semester, had gathered together some initial notes, but nothing seemed to make any sense.

The bald fact was, she missed Adrian. Was that natural for a woman her age? Shouldn't she be beyond teenage infatuations? Because that's what it felt like. There was a bone-deep yearning to feel his touch again, and not just because he was a skilful lover. Behind his obvious experience and youthful energy was a sharp intelligence and an engaging sense of humour. The fact that he looked like a god was just a bonus.

For the hundredth time, she wondered if she should've stayed in the hotel suite that morning, instead of fleeing. But she had been so afraid. In the cold light of day, over a convivial cup of tea, she doubted Adrian would miss the laughter lines that had etched their light permanence next to her eyes. Or the breasts that had seen perkier times...two decades ago. And she always thought her voice was strong and melodious, but had it picked up an old woman's wobble?

Sophie groaned and dropped her head into her hand. And what else was there for a young, rich, ambitious, personable, downright sexy man to find fault with? Perhaps if she started alphabetically, she could put together a comprehensive list?

"You didn't get much sleep last night?" George's jovial voice assaulted her from the other side of her low cubicle wall. She looked up and plastered a smile on her face.

"Hi, George." She kept the groan at being discovered by him in such a position to herself. "Something like that."

He wagged his finger at her. "You're like me. You've been thinking too hard about the latest talent show on TV. Who should continue to the next round? That lovely young woman singing Chinese opera, or the young man with the hips?"

Sophie closed her eyes for a moment. The last thing she wanted to do was think about a young man's gyrating hips.

"And I have a bit of a headache," she added with an apologetic smile. "It's...it's been rather hot these past few days, hasn't it?"

He threw his hands up. "*Aiyo!* My wife is constantly complaining. We have air-conditioning, but she says the minute she steps out of our condo, her face melts off. She wants to know how she can stay beautiful in such heat."

A goofy grin spread over his face. "I say, I love you, face or no face. And as long as your husband loves you, why do you need to put on so much makeup for other men? Yes or not?"

Sophie smiled. "Yes, George, you're completely correct." And, despite the fact that he wasn't really talking about her, Sophie felt her heart lift a little.

Their conversation moved on to more neutral topics after that. Of course, the week after the ball, George had quizzed her mercilessly about whether she'd managed to find a suitable love interest at the event, and she thought she'd managed to sidestep the entire issue quite nicely. Now, they had settled back to their usual banter, and it was relaxing—if a little depressing—sinking back into her usual routine.

"You don't work too hard," he admonished her when parting. "And go find some fun!"

She laughed and waved at his back, but sobered quickly once he disappeared into the corridor.

Fun. She had had a lot of fun. With Adrian. Now, the question was: the connection she thought she felt when she was with him...was that connection real? Or was it the result of her fevered imagination? Like masturbating to memories of them together every night since she'd snuck out of his hotel room? Like holding her breath whenever she spied a tall, well-built, exotic-looking man? The problem was, there were so many of them in Singapore that she felt as if she were practicing for some free-diving event every time she stepped out into the street.

Sophie sighed and turned her attention back to the folders on her desk. She should stop this pointless daydreaming. After all, she had a course in business communication to write. She bent down to open the small filing drawer at her desk. She was sure she had notes from a previous course she could use as a starting point.

The phone on her desk rang and, with a frown, Sophie picked up the receiver, noting from the display that the call was coming from the academy's reception area. Had George forgotten something from his desk?

"Hi, it's Sophie."

Rozalina's soft accented voice filled her ear. "Sophie, you have a delivery at the front desk."

"A delivery? A package?" She racked her brains, wondering what it could be, but nothing came to mind. She hadn't ordered anything recently, at least not anything that she could easily recall.

"It's," Roz giggled, piquing Sophie's curiosity, "well, I think you'd better come and have a look."

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

Sophie replaced the receiver in its cradle and stared at it for several long moments. Why did the normally unflappable receptionist sound so unlike herself? Pushing back her chair, Sophie stood and headed for the institute's main entry, passing classes in business, computer skills and communication. Twice, she smiled at the instructors she saw through the half-glassed room doors. She had joined the academy not long after Tim had left for Britain, and had made good friends at work. A pity none of them were built like Adrian.

"Stop it," Sophie muttered to herself, then clamped down on any further errant thoughts as she entered the main entry area. As she walked to the front counter, she noticed a huge basket of arranged flowers sitting on the sleek surface. Sprays of long, elegant orchids in a myriad of colours spilt out of the wicker container in all directions, interspersed with red-flecked carnations and sprigs of intricate fern leaves.

"How lovely," she said to Roz as she neared the desk. "Is it somebody's birthday?"

"Yours, perhaps?" Roz asked, curiosity lighting her face.

"Mine? No."

"Well, they're for you," Roz prompted, with a lift of her eyebrows.

Sophie stared at her. "I don't think so, Roz. Nobody I know would send me flowers."

More's the pity, she thought, but kept that to herself.

"It comes with a card. Addressed to you."

And she was right. There was a small white envelope just in front of a cuddly miniature teddy bear that was nestled in amongst the flowers, as if the toy were holding onto it. The name on it said "Sophie Woodward."

Sophie didn't want to open the card in front of the small crowd that seemed to magically appear around her. Did news in the office travel via telepathy? She wanted to take the card and run some place secluded or, barring that (this was crowded Singapore, after all), some place completely brash and anonymous. Instead, she stayed where she was and undid the white flap with a soft rip.

"What does it say?" Roz asked, agog.

Sophie read the sparse words written with black ink in a decisive hand, mouthing each syllable silently, a frown marring her brow.

How about we do a bit of exploring together? Saturday?

Adrian

A mobile phone number followed below the name.

Adrian! He had found her! But how? She was positive she hadn't mentioned anything more than her first name during their glorious night together. She frowned in recollection. Had she told him something about the school? Even if she had, there were dozens of such institutions on the island. Was he some kind of magician?

She looked up at Roz, trying to ignore the other interested faces at the periphery of her vision. "It's," she swallowed, "an old friend. Wanting to surprise me. Wanting to know if we can meet up on the weekend."

Roz looked crestfallen. It didn't take much imagination to know what she had been thinking. "Oh. Well, it's a very pretty bouquet, Miss Sophie."

Sophie looked at the elaborate floral arrangement and smiled. "Yes, it is, isn't it?"

She picked up the basket and walked back to her desk, pretending that this was a run-of-the-mill occurrence for her, hoping she was effectively concealing the uneven tattoo of her heart against her chest.

Adrian! He had found her and he wanted to see her.

It was late afternoon, and Sophie was never so happy to see an empty office in her life. Gently, she put the gift on her desk and stared at it. It was obvious what she *wanted* to do. She wanted to call Adrian immediately and say yes, yes, yes! But what *should* she do? The

gift, the effort that must have been involved in finding her, showed that he was interested in her. Didn't it?

Sophie nibbled at her bottom lip. Where had the confident, demanding business instructor gone? She seemed to have skipped the country entirely, leaving behind a wary and insecure woman with the neuroses of a teenager.

But what was there to really worry about? Hadn't she and Adrian already established their basic compatibility? What more, she thought, could they possibly do that would top tumbling into bed together within hours of first meeting? Just the idea of it made Sophie grin, and she still had the smile on her face as she picked up her phone and dialled the number on the small card.

Her courage deserted her as the ring tone kicked in, but it was answered before she had time to disconnect the call.

"Adrian Pereira."

So now she knew his last name as well, although her fleeting sense of triumph was swamped by a jolt of arousal at the sound of his voice.

"Adrian? It's Sophie."

The voice at the other end of the line warmed considerably. "Sophie. I've been waiting for your call."

She wouldn't act desperate and ask about that, she decided. Licking her lips, she said instead, "Your flowers arrived only twenty minutes ago. They're lovely. Thank you."

"I'm glad you like them. I wanted something a bit more unique than the usual dozen roses."

"Well, you certainly achieved that." She looked at the arrangement as she spoke. "I don't think anyone here will forget such a spectacular bouquet in a hurry."

She opened her mouth again to ask how he knew where to find her, but he interrupted her.

"So? Are you free on Saturday?"

"Saturday night? For dinner?" Her heart skipped a beat.

His voice lowered to a husky drawl. "I was thinking more of Saturday morning. For the whole day."

Oh my.

She tried to get her breathing under control. "I think I should be able to manage that."

"Good. Because I have a few ideas."

Chapter Six

Sophie scoured through her wardrobe multiple times, looking for the perfect outfit to wear. Something casual, yet attractive. Something that didn't look like she'd been dragged through an African safari without an ironing board, but something that alluded to it. Not too girly, she decided, but not too butch – feminine yet capable. Something she would look good in, whether it was lunch at a restaurant or a hike through the Sungei Buloh wetlands at the island's northern end.

By the time she had settled on a pair of khaki trousers, a red singlet and white linen long-hemmed shirt to go over the combination, her bed was piled high with the entire contents of her wardrobe. She glared balefully at the unkempt mountain – she'd get to tidy that when she got back – before hurrying to her kitchen for a quick cup of coffee.

Adrian had told her to meet him at the Bugis MRT station at nine-thirty. In all honesty, that was a relatively early hour. People got going later in the tropics, but then again they shopped and partied late, too. It had taken a little while, but Sophie was now well used to the closing hours of around ten o'clock.

She exited the cool of the subway station and ascended to the heat of the Singapore morning, wondering what Adrian had in mind. Close by was Bugis Junction, a restored boulevard of three-storey shop-houses completely encased under glass and cooled by air-conditioning. Long corridors ran the length from the first shop-house to the last, connecting to the parallel row by suspended walkways that looked down on the shoppers strolling at ground level. It was an enjoyable place to spend a morning, but Sophie wondered if that was what Adrian had in mind. Not knowing what else to do, she sauntered over to the fountain near the Junction's entrance. Already, a couple of toddlers, watched fondly by their grandparents, were laughing and stomping across the paving that delineated a shallow pool and was drilled with holes. Jets of water spurted out of the holes in a synchronised pattern, splashing the youngsters and sending them into fits of giggles.

She was watching them when a voice said in her ear, "Why is it called Bugis?"

Sophie spun around. She had been wondering whether seeing Adrian in the flesh again would disappoint her. Whether the images she held of him, handsome and urbane at the ball, then later brown and sculpted in bed, could be met by the reality. She was glad to see they could. He, too, was dressed in a pair of khaki trousers, but topped with a short-sleeved shirt in burnt orange. Like her, his feet were shod in a pair of casual canvas shoes.

"Disappointed?" he asked with a smile while she stood there drinking him in.

"Not at all." Unsure of whether it would be too crass to kiss him in public, she turned to look at the fountain again.

"Why is it called Bugis?" she repeated. "They were the pirates, weren't they?"

Adrian laughed and linked his arm through hers, turning her around and heading away from the Junction.

"They wouldn't like it if they heard that from you. Actually, they were a very proud people. Warriors, traders and sailors." He paused at a street junction as they waited for the lights to turn red. "I'm sure a fair few of them did some pirating, but they began as traders, maybe even trading exactly where we're standing."

Sophie looked down at the bitumen beneath her feet. "Here?"

"There used to be a canal around here. And a trading post."

"Oh." There seemed little more she could say. Somehow, Sophie had always equated the history in Singapore with the British governor, Sir Stamford Raffles, but of course such a strategic point of land would have had a longer history, equally as rich as anything from the 1800s.

Adrian tugged her along as the lights changed.

"Where are we going?" she asked, keeping up with his fast pace.

"When was the last time," he asked, "you were in Arab Street?"

Sophie blinked, and not just due to the hot sun beating down on their heads. She knew her answer was going to be embarrassing.

They stopped at another street junction. "You've never been to Arab Street, have you?"

She grimaced. "I've been meaning to, but..." She shook her head. "No, I haven't been to Arab Street." She tried to look as contrite as she felt.

He laughed and kissed the tip of her nose. It was a brief contact, but enough to send a bolt of awareness zinging through her body. Her eyes widened, but Adrian wasn't waiting. The car traffic stopped and they were off again.

Walking down Arab Street was like stepping back in time. The shop-houses lining the street looked like they'd been there forever. Or at least, Adrian told her, since the 1820s. Up close, though, their architecture was swallowed by the colourful merchandise on display. Sophie passed thick, hand-woven Persian rugs hung up on walls to display their exquisite designs, racks of brightly-coloured rolls of batik and other textiles, and sparsely furnished, white-tiled restaurants. She dodged teetering heaps of woven baskets of all shapes and sizes and ducked her head below handbags. The scents of incense, tobacco, leather, food and spices filled the air.

Before she had time to comment that she was thirsty and getting hungry, he led her back to one of the restaurants they had passed earlier and ordered a plate of appetisers and tall glasses of hot mint tea. When the tea arrived, filled to the brim with fat leaves of green mint, he also had a whispered conversation with the young serving boy and sat back, obviously satisfied with himself.

It had been a hot and chaotic handful of hours, and Sophie had enjoyed every minute of it. She had ooh-ed over the leather handwork like a newly-landed tourist and lovingly stroked the pelt-like weave of the rugs. Adrian had said very little, enabling her to drink in the atmosphere of the street as she saw fit, but as unobtrusive as he made himself, Sophie couldn't help but be constantly aware of his presence. It was the hand at her elbow that helped negotiate the traffic, and the scent of him that assailed her nostrils occasionally as a tuft of air blew across him. Each second of awareness plunged her back to the evening at the ball, to the crisp sheets they had both rumped and the passion they had both assuaged.

A large plate full of Arabian appetisers was set on their table, followed soon after by the serving boy holding a tall, pipe-like instrument. With practiced movements, he set the contraption on the floor and began spooning a thick, clumpy dark mix into a ceramic dish that he then covered with aluminium foil, poking a few holes in it with a short skewer he held.

"Is that," Sophie paused while she watched small blocks of glowing red charcoal being placed on top of the foil, "a hookah?"

It was like something out of a Lewis Carroll book, and she was frowning at the same time as a disbelieving smile tried to curve her lips. She supposed she must have looked like a complete idiot as the young waiter put a flexible, multi-coloured hose into her hand, before bowing slightly and leaving them.

"A waterpipe," Adrian agreed. "*Hookah* in Hindi, '*shisha*' in Arabic, but it's the same thing. Have you ever tried one?"

"Er, no."

"I ordered apple-flavoured tobacco."

She stared at the hose, then at him. "Apple? In tobacco?" Thus proving, she thought to herself, what a neophyte she was when it came to anything associated with smoking.

"The *shisha* tobacco consists of tobacco, molasses and usually some fruit flavouring." Adrian took a puff from his pipe and Sophie heard the burble of water from the waterpipe's glass container, situated near her feet. "The tobacco smoke gets pulled into the water bowl at the bottom—I told them to add some ice to the water, since I didn't think you'd had a *shisha* before—and gets drawn up into the hose."

"And the ice is supposed to cool the smoke down?" she surmised.

He grinned. "Exactly. I'm not a smoker by nature, but I do like indulging in a *shisha* two or three times a year. It's a nice way to relax."

To relax. Okay, that was definitely a good idea, because all Sophie could think about, with Adrian sitting opposite her, was when she'd be able to rip his clothes off and do the things she'd fantasised about for the past two weeks. But this was something new, and it might take her mind away from her carnal thoughts.

"So I take a deep breath?" she asked.

"Maybe not too deep," he cautioned, taking a puff himself. The scent of sweet green apples drifted across to her. "Especially as this is your first time."

Right. First time sleeping with a younger man. First time smoking fruit-infused tobacco. Sophie lifted the hose to her mouth and breathed in.

There was a bit of resistance as the smoke moved through the cold water. It flew over her tongue and down into her throat, where she felt something crisp and fruity, then the roughness of the tobacco. No matter how cool the temperature of the smoke was, it clawed at

the inside of her with sharp little skewers. She coughed up all the smoke and bent over, her body spasming.

"Oh, no," she gasped, in between coughs. "I'm," cough, "not used," cough, "to this."

With frantic fingers, she grasped at her drink and downed a large gulp of tea. Gradually, her coughing subsided, but her eyes still watered. She stared at his laughing face accusingly. "How could you do this to me?"

He continued laughing, completely unrepentant. "I thought it would be fun, Sophie." He sobered, but there was still a glint in his eyes. "It occurred to me that maybe you haven't had much fun in your life recently."

She put the hose down and reached for a piece of seasoned, tender lamb mince. The grilled morsel of meat melted in her mouth, taking away some of the friction left behind from the *shisha* smoke. "And how would you know what I've had in my life?" she asked archly. "In fact, how did you even find out where I worked?"

He refused to be cowed by either her expression or her tone of voice.

"It took a bit of doing, but it was mostly legwork. I mentioned that the organiser of this event is a friend of mine?"

She nodded, remembering the name. Arnold.

"I asked him to find out how many foreign women were invited to the event. It ended up being a little more difficult in your case because your invitation came via a third party, rather than in person, as I found out later."

That would be George Chua's cheerful interference. She nodded again.

"But I finally got it narrowed down to three companies. From there, it was an easy task to find out if there were any women by the name of Sophie working at any of them. Bingo! Your business academy. My only regret was that it took almost two weeks to get that far."

She tried to imagine the amount of "legwork" involved, so trivially summarised by him. "Just like that?"

He smiled. "My assistants are very good at what they do."

And what was that, she wondered, besides tracking down women who slipped out of their employer's bed at the crack of dawn? Did it happen that often? She looked at his chiselled features, smooth skin and high cheekbones. At the perfect arch of his eyebrows and

the deep, melting chocolate of his eyes. Of course women would fall over themselves for the opportunity to crawl into his bed. A thick skewer of bitter jealousy stabbed Sophie's heart.

"Where to now?" she asked, this time choosing a wedge of grilled, marinated eggplant from the platter.

Was she asking what they were going to do next, or where this whole...*relationship* seemed too strong a word, considering the small amount of time they'd spent together...was leading? Sophie wasn't quite sure herself which interpretation she meant.

"I thought I'd take you to see my house," he said carefully, watching her face.

"But I thought... Weren't you just visiting Singapore?"

After all, wasn't that why he had taken a hotel room?

"No, I live here. But I had some renovation work finishing up and I didn't want to be in the house with all that noise and dust around."

"Oh."

"Would you like to see my place?"

It only required a simple one-syllable answer, yet Sophie had the strangest feeling that she was about to take a far bigger step into something a lot deeper than that one word warranted. Adrian looked relaxed, but there was something watchful and alert about him, as if he half-dreaded her answer. Sophie almost laughed at the thought. Why a vibrant, handsome, and obviously successful man, such as himself, would exhibit any kind of nervousness in her presence was beyond her.

"I'd love to," she told him. And she meant it.

Chapter Seven

Sophie was expecting to see a house that was sleek and modern, and she wasn't disappointed. At the end of a short curved driveway, behind a tall iron fence hedged with green shrubs, a two-storey, flat-roofed house dominated the space on top of a small hill.

She and Adrian walked up the shallow stone steps running parallel to a water feature that ended at the front door. The quiet sound of water tripping over large pebbles embedded in the watercourse was soothing and surprising loud, considering they were less than a five-minute drive from the shopping epicentre of Singapore, Orchard Road.

"Welcome to my home," Adrian said, beckoning her in.

It was a lovely house – airy, white, spacious. From the foyer, Sophie stepped down into an expansive living room, encased on two sides with clear glass that ran from the ground up to the roofline. Yet, for all its simple majesty, it looked...empty.

"It's very beautiful," she finally said.

"Unfortunately, I haven't been able to spend as much time here as I've wanted. Work," he explained.

Sophie licked her lips. She didn't want to ask what he did for a living. For some reason, she felt that uttering the question would mean a further step along a path she felt reluctant to take. Wasn't she just after some fun? Some mindless sex? Why did Adrian seem to infuse every statement with significance, as if there were something *more* going on? She didn't want that, and especially not with a younger man.

"You must be very successful in whatever you're doing."

Adrian laughed and led her to the kitchen, which was another minimalist work of art painted with stainless steel and glossy dark countertops.

"Do you know why I'm so attracted to you?" he asked, after pouring them two glasses of mango juice. It was the tropical equivalent of orange juice, and a substitute Sophie had eagerly embraced. Then, his words penetrated. He actually said he was attracted to her!

She took a sip of the thick, quenching liquid. "Why?"

“Because you approach things so differently.” He leant back against the counter and, crossing one ankle over another, regarded her with a tilted head, his expression quizzical. “Have you asked me what I do for a living? No. How much I earn? No. Asked me to buy you something?” He shook his head. “And yet, didn’t we also have some of the most mind-blowing sex I’ve had in my life?”

He put his glass down and walked over to her, taking the glass from her nerveless fingers as well and putting it down on the counter beside her.

“At least, that’s how it was for me.” He nuzzled her ear. “How was it for you?”

Sophie tried dragging air into her lungs, but it was a difficult task. “The same,” she gasped.

“I’m wondering if a repeat performance can live up to the initial act.”

“Let’s give it a try.”

She had tried to be good, had tried to concentrate on merely enjoying the company of a man and of exploring a part of the city she hadn’t visited before. Tried not to harbour any unrealistic expectations. But the moment Adrian’s lips met hers again, her best intentions flew straight out of her mind. She ran her fevered hands over his body, skimming the hardness under the soft cloth of his shirt, and the pleasing roughness of his trousers. He had a firm and pert backside, and she dug her fingers into them, pushing him against her groin and moaning as his erection heated her belly.

They twirled inexpertly out of the kitchen—Sophie thought she heard some bangs and crashes, but that was happening in another universe, another reality—and fell into the living room.

Adrian broke contact with her lips briefly as he scanned the room, then guided them, pushing his body against hers, towards the sofa. Before they took the handful of steps to reach it, however, Sophie already had his shirt off and was running her hands over his chest, revelling in the delicious contrast of stiff masculine hair and smooth caramel skin.

“You feel amazing,” she murmured against his mouth, moaning as he cupped her breasts under her red singlet. Her white shirt had somehow disappeared, she didn’t know where or when and, what’s more, she didn’t care.

He shook his head slowly, using the movement to plant small kisses on her cheeks before capturing her lips once more in a long, drugging kiss.

Sophie closed her eyes, using her other senses to guide her. She felt the rough texture of upholstery at her back, the thick springiness of the rug beneath her feet, and the fevered insistence of hands against her body, shifting her trousers off her legs and working her arms out of the thin straps of her top even as his tongue roamed the inside of her mouth in intimate and erotic discovery.

When he paused again, to lift the singlet from her so she'd be completely exposed to his view, she pressed her advantage by pushing him to the floor and straddling him.

"You're a beautiful man," she said, running fingers and an appreciative gaze over his shoulders and chest, his dark nipples erect and awaiting some attention from her, then down his abdomen where the soft arrow of hair led. His cock was luscious brown with a velvet-folded sheath surrounding a tight purple helmet. She licked her lips slowly as she felt its satin hardness and stroked its length, moving the foreskin so it almost engulfed the engorged head before pulling it back. Beneath her hips, Adrian's body bucked and a small bead of clear lubrication blossomed at the tip of his dick, poised perfectly above his slit.

It was an invitation and a promise, and one that Sophie wasn't about to ignore. Shifting back and bending down, she took him into her mouth, letting the thick, salty drop slide along the roof of her mouth, its slickness mixing with her saliva. She breathed in the scent of his sex, earthy and enveloping, and felt herself get wet, his aroma bypassing her rational brain and zapping straight into the female animal part of her.

Holding the base of his cock with one hand, putting tension on his skin, she sucked on the head. His hands, strong yet slightly trembling, gripped her hair, guiding her rhythm as he groaned his increasing pleasure and lifted his hips in a complementary, shuddering dance. Sophie felt a bolt of power course through her as she registered how much power she held. She could decide whether to slow things down or speed them up. She could suck harder or withdraw completely, and just lick him from stem to head. She could even decide whether to push him to a quaking orgasm or keep him on the edge, enveloping, then withdrawing at will.

A groan from deep inside his body emerged, male carnal surrender, and Sophie couldn't hold herself back any longer. Moving her free hand to her own groin, she felt her own aroused wetness and, after a long suck on his organ, she straddled his hips again and lowered herself onto him.

It was daylight and Sophie couldn't hide herself from his sight, but she didn't care. A wild ardour had her in its grip and she wanted to ride it to satiation.

He held her breasts in his hands, warm and supportive, running his thumbs over her engorged nipples and she reacted by clenching against him, so he closed his eyes again as the spasm gripped him. Then she rode him, starting slow and deep, quickening with him as she heard the tenor of his breathing change. His hands locked onto her hips as she leant forward and moved faster, rubbing her sex against the crinkly hair of his groin and feeling the friction engorge and stimulate her clitoris.

When he came, it was with a surprised shout, but Sophie was merciless. She kept bucking atop him until she too was engulfed in the sweet waves of climax, throwing her head back while primal exhilaration shook her body. She could have ridden this way forever, feeding off the orgasmic crests that drowned her in sensation. Finally, perspiration anointing her body, she laboured to an exhausted rest, slanting a tired smile at her supine lover.

"That was wonderful," she said.

"*You* were wonderful," he told her, taking deep breaths himself.

Happy, she collapsed against him.

* * * *

Later, as they nestled against the sofa, legs stretched out atop what looked to be an atrociously expensive Persian rug, he kissed her lightly on her head.

"We've done everything wrong, haven't we? We fell into bed together before even exchanging names. We haven't compared reading or music tastes. We had our first meal together two weeks *after* sex."

Put like that, it sounded more than a little shameless. Sophie shifted uncomfortably, but didn't pull out of his arms. She was too comfortable, felt too cherished, to do that.

Adrian sighed. "If my parents knew how I've treated you, they'd skin me alive."

She pushed at his chest, looking into his eyes. "It was a mutual decision, you know," she argued.

He kissed her. "I know. And that's something else I like about you. You don't let yourself get pushed around. You're stronger than you think, Sophie Woodward." His voice lowered to a whisper. "In fact, you're exactly the kind of woman I've been looking for."

Sophie should have been thrilled, but the shiver dancing up her spine was more fear than delight.

"I don't understand."

His tone became more business-like. "What are you doing for Christmas?"

While she was still trying to think of an answer—in truth, she hadn't been planning anything, and didn't that sound more than a little desperate?—he continued.

"How about going away with me for the break? Would you like to spend Christmas and the New Year in Hong Kong? It's a bit of a business trip," he warned, "but there'll be plenty of free time for us as well."

She'd never been to Hong Kong. That had been one trip Tim and she had often spoken of, but never done anything about.

He stroked her bare shoulder, sending trembles of anticipation through her body. "We could stop for a couple of days in Bangkok on the way back."

And, suddenly, it was all so overwhelming. She had only gone to that stupid masquerade ball for fun. Fun! She hadn't been looking for a romance or a relationship. What was he doing, making these kinds of suggestions to her?

Now that the power of their sexual coupling had diminished, doubts began to overcome her. Didn't he know how much *older* she was than him? Did he really expect to exhibit them both, as a couple, in public? Surely, his friends would laugh if they saw them together. Was he toying with her? Saying the sweetest, most wonderful things because of some practical joke? Once more, there didn't seem to be enough air in the room, but this time it was suffocating rather than invigorating.

She slipped out of his embrace and rose to her feet, heedless of her nakedness, and started searching frantically for her clothes. This had started well, but was turning into a big mistake. If she was a responsible person, and she was, she should do the right thing by the two of them and nip this whole fantasy of his right in the bud. What was he thinking? And where the hell was her shirt?

"I'm sorry," she said, deliberately not looking at him. "I think maybe you got the wrong idea."

She spotted the white cotton garment on the floor at the entrance to the kitchen and blushed again as she picked it up.

"Wrong idea?" She didn't need to see him to know he felt hurt. It was there in his voice. "Sophie, what's the matter? Did I say something to offend you?"

She struggled into her underwear, then her pants and singlet, bunching her shirt in her hands. "I'm sorry," she repeated, finally meeting his eyes. "I don't think this is such a good idea."

He opened his mouth to say something, but she ran right over him with her own hurried words.

"Don't worry about anything. I...I really had a wonderful time. I'll let myself out."
And she fled.

* * * *

Christmas season was well and truly in swing at the equator in the week that followed. Thongs of tourists swamped the boulevards along Orchard Road, the streets of the city centre were alight with festive lights, and strands of white illumination covered the overarching trees, turning them into glittering, night-time sculptures.

Sophie was miserable. She was on her annual vacation—the business academy only opened its doors again in mid-January—and didn't even have work to distract her thoughts. Instead, she had entered one of the many food courts along the pedestrian-choked street and ordered a local coffee, sitting down to stir the cup absently as she watched the crowds stream past.

Over and over again, she replayed everything in her head. The afternoon at Adrian's. Their bout of love-making. Him inviting her to spend the holiday season with him... And her running off screaming into the distance.

Why?

Was it because he was handsome? Accomplished? Intelligent?

Young? an insidious little voice in her head inserted.

Sophie groaned. That was it, wasn't it? He was young. And she was a decade older. What would people think?

She took a sip of her sweet, dark coffee.

On the other hand, why should she care? After all, her gaze sharpened on several couples who strolled along the boulevard, weren't there a lot of older men with younger women? Why shouldn't the reverse also hold true? She genuinely liked Adrian and had the distinct impression he liked her, too. He didn't patronise her or put her down. In fact, looking back on it, he had treated her as a true equal, and wasn't that what every woman wanted?

But he's so young!

Sophie narrowed her eyes at the foot traffic. Was that it? Was that the best excuse her subconscious could come up with? Adrian is young.

Think of what people will say.

But Adrian didn't seem to be bothered by it and, in truth, she hadn't felt this alive for years. Was she willing to risk a chance at happiness on the possibility of strangers making pointed remarks at her? Was the chance of censure enough to keep her from betting on her future happiness?

Were the careless words of people she barely knew all that was needed to destroy the determination and wishes of two people?

Sophie knew there were no magic passes in life—this spark between her and Adrian might blossom into something strong and lasting...or it might fizzle out. But wasn't she being a coward by not even seeing which it might turn out to be?

With growing conviction, she drank her coffee, then got up and grabbed her things, heading for the nearest taxi rank.

She kept up a good head of steam all the way to Adrian's house, and didn't even falter when she pressed the intercom button at his gate and an accented female voice answered, asking who she was. She answered. The iron bars rolled aside after a moment's hesitation and she walked inside, along the lit driveway.

The front door opened as she got to the steps, the warm light spilling out into the night. It was Adrian. Barefoot. With dark pants on and his white shirt undone. He looked tired and

she yearned to wipe the lines from his face, but stood her ground, still on the wrong side of the threshold, facing him.

"I was shopping," she began, as the bags from various shopping centres knocked against her knees, "and I was wondering..." She licked her lips. "I was wondering if your offer to go away to Hong Kong was still on the table."

"It depends," he said, after a charged silence. "Why did you run away?"

She had to be honest, she knew that. She owed him – she owed their future – no less. "I was afraid."

"And now?"

A smile quirked her lips. "And now, I'm feeling adventurous again."

"No more hurried escapes?"

She took a deep breath. "For me? Or you?"

Adrian laughed, and it was the brightest sound she'd heard in a week. He held out his hand.

"Come on then. Let's see if we can find a decent hotel together."

And he tugged her inside and closed the door.

About the Author

KS Augustin is a Malaysian-born writer of science-fiction, romance, and permutations of the two. She also dabbles in fantasy and contemporary action romances from time to time. She has visited, lived or worked in the UK, North America, Australia, and has now settled back in southeast Asia so she and her husband can draw breath and the kids can manage to get some education in.

Also travelling with them, with species-appropriate passports, are their two fur-shedding cats, Fluff and Squeak, and their irrepressible miniature bull terrier, Sausage.

E-mail: ks@ksaugustin.com

KS loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

Also by KS Augustin

Guarding His Body
A Pirate's Passion
Prime Suspect
On Bliss
Cougars and Cubs: Singapore Sizzle

Total-E-Bound Publishing



www.total-e-bound.com

Take a look at our exciting range of literagasmic™
erotic romance titles and discover pure quality
at Total-E-Bound.