

AVA'S OBSESSION

by

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WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Published by
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

Whiskey Creek Press
PO Box 51052
Casper, WY 82605-1052
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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ISBN 978-1-60313-283-1

Credits

Cover Artist: Nancy Donahue
Editor: Sue Vetter

Printed in the United States of America

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *INCUBUS NIGHTS*

“*Incubus Nights* is a lusty tale full of hot erotic sex. Baal and Kelly were exactly what the other needed. I had to keep a fan close by for this one.”

Joyfully Reviewed

Dedication

To all those looking for something a little different.

Chapter 1

It was midday and it was dark.

Ming Han rode through the village gates without even a glance at the posted guards. There was no need. They all knew who he was. They watched him with a restrained kind of dread, as if he might turn on them at any moment. A gust of wind brushed across his skin, dredging up the heavy scent of blood and death. The stench of carnage filled his cock with heat and lust. He'd need to visit the tavern tonight to work off all his dark energy.

The air was moist and smelled like rain. His horse pranced beneath him, eager to get back home to the quiet peace of its stall.

He rode up to the governor's palace and handed his mount to the groom. Opening his saddlebag, he grabbed the soiled black hair of Gornoth's severed head and pulled it out. The groom gasped and stepped back.

Ming ignored him. Taking the palace steps two at a time, he made his way inside. A thunderous rumble from an approaching storm rolled through the palace, making the lights flicker. He took his time as he made his way to Governor Silver's office. There was no need to rush. This was a glorious moment, a moment to savor—his enemy's blood coating his battle armor, his enemy's head in his hand.

Two guards were posted on either side of the office door and, upon seeing Ming, they blocked his entry with their spears. Ming advanced on them slowly, letting them study the filth and gore that covered his armor. When he was within five feet of them, he lifted Gornoth's head so they could see it more clearly.

Ming continued to hold the head up and remained silent.

The elder of the two guards studied the head, then Ming. "Where is Captain Po Yang?" he asked.

Ming lowered the head. "He died in battle."

The guards hesitated, unsure if they should let him in or not.

"The governor is waiting for my report," Ming said. "I think it would be unwise to detain me."

Both men stood at attention, lifting their weapons from the doorway.

Ming entered and advanced on the governor's desk. The man looked more worn than Ming remembered from their first meeting last spring. His hair had gone white-gray and there were a number of small worry lines around his eyes and mouth.

Governor Silver looked up as he approached, sighed and placed his pen on the desk. Ming took two steps forward and dropped the head on the desk facing the governor.

The governor stared at it for a few seconds, then said, "Where is the captain?"

"He's dead," Ming replied.

Silver took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Thunder rumbled in the distance and it began to rain. "That's too bad," he said. "He was an excellent soldier."

Ming said nothing. He couldn't think about Po's death yet, it was too fresh and raw.

Silver gestured to the severed head. "This your kill, Ming?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"Captain Yang said many complimentary things about you and your military talents. He thought very highly of you. He even told me he considered you his equal on the battlefield," Silver said, getting out of his chair to pace. He stopped by the window and stared out.

Ming felt the sorrowful weight of Po's death fill the void in his heart. "Captain Yang was a very kind man. He thought highly of all the men who served under him."

"He will be a hard man to replace," Silver said, thoughtfully. He turned around to study Ming. "How long have you been a mercenary?"

"All my adult life, Excellency."

"I understand you grew up an orphan. You never knew your parents?"

Ming shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, Excellency, that is true."

"Who trained you to fight?"

"I trained myself, sir."

Silver folded his arms across his chest and fell into a short brooding silence. "Can you suggest anyone to replace Captain Yang?" he asked.

"May I humbly suggest myself, Excellency?"

"Are you sure you can do this, Ming?" the governor asked. "Are you sure you can keep the men in line? You're kind of young for such an important position."

Ming met the governor's nervous gaze. "Yes, sir," Ming said. "I am sure I can handle the men."

The governor fell silent for a long time, watching him. "I need you to be absolutely ruthless to our enemies, Ming. Can you do that?"

"I know of no other way to be, Excellency."

"Good. Then I hereby appoint you to the rank of captain. From now on, you only answer to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Excellency," Ming said. "I understand you completely."

* * * *

The tavern was stuffy and smelled of the damp from outside. Ming came in, shook the rain off his cloak and made his way to the table in the back. All his fellow mercenaries were seated there, and fell silent as he approached. They nervously moved aside and made a place for him to sit.

He sat down and was offered a drink from the serving maid. He took it, nodded to her in gratitude, and pulled a long sip. He placed the glass on the table and leaned back in his chair trying to will the ache from his muscles.

His men glanced from one to the other. Finally, Lou spoke up, "With all due respect, lord, may we ask what the governor said?"

Ming looked up. "He congratulated us on our victory and appointed me captain."

A tense hush fell over the group. Lou looked as if he'd been struck in the face. "But..." he stammered. "You are one of the youngest men in the group. Why wouldn't the governor choose someone with more experience?"

"I have a lifetime of experience," Ming said and sipped his drink.

“Yes, lord, but—”

Ming stood up and pulled his katana from its scabbard. The noisy tavern grew quiet as patrons cast wary looks at the mercenary table. He placed the blade against Lou’s cheek and glared at him. “But what?”

Lou glanced around at the other mercenaries. Finding no support, he held his hands up in surrender. “Nothing, nothing. I am very pleased for you, lord.”

Ming met each warrior’s gaze one by one until he was satisfied that no one else wanted to challenge him. He replaced his weapon and took his seat. Everyone relaxed a little.

“How many of Gornoth’s men are still hiding in the mountains?” Ming asked.

Jinn, a short Asian warrior with a wide pale scar across the bridge of his nose, said, “About eleven, lord.”

Ming frowned. “What are the chances they will regroup and find another leader?”

All the mercenaries looked at one another. Lou swirled the remainder of his drink around in his glass. “The chances of that are good.”

Ming watched the tavern patrons laughing and drinking. No one seemed to have a care in the world. “Then we must hunt them down and kill them before they get the chance.”

“When do we start, lord?” Jinn asked.

Ming stood up, ignoring the fatigue in his muscles. “We start tonight.”

Chapter 2

Ava Snow trudged through the overgrown path until she came to the small clearing of fruit trees. She moved quickly, plucking the ripest apples and plums from the trees and putting them in her basket. If she didn't have breakfast ready by the time her father was dressed, he'd be a bear to her all day.

For the tenth time that morning, she sighed and wished David hadn't died so soon after their marriage. It had been two years already since jaundice fever had taken him, and not a day had passed that she didn't wonder what their life would have been like together. She could scarcely believe so much time had passed. *I'm still young. I'm only thirty-one. I could still find another husband.* But the moment she thought it, she knew she still wasn't ready. She needed more time to heal. Besides, none of the men in the village did anything for her.

Reaching up, she grabbed another fruit and was about to pluck it off the tree when she froze. She heard male voices nearby.

Crouching down, she followed the sound until she came upon a group of Asian men bathing by a waterfall. Their armor and weapons were covered in blood, and most were busy washing gore off their equipment. A canvas sack lay near the water's edge. It was filled with severed heads. Ava shuddered.

Although she didn't know their names, she knew who they were by reputation.

The villagers called them 'The Orientals'. They were a mix of Asian mercenaries employed by Governor Silver to protect the people from local criminals and thugs. They were renowned for their military prowess and greatly feared by everyone. They were also infamously ruthless, and like most women in the village, Ava made it a point to avoid them.

She was about to sneak away when she caught sight of one that appeared younger than the rest. He looked to be about six foot tall and was stripped to the waist. Even from this distance, Ava could see the heavy muscles in his chest and back. His long black hair hung down past his shoulders and his olive skin was perfect, except for a scattering of nasty battle scars on his arms and chest. His almond-shaped eyes were mesmerizing, black and mysterious. They were intelligent, cunning eyes that gave him a diabolical look.

Ava felt a sudden rush of heat in her cheeks. She tried to will herself to look away, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't. He was the most striking man she'd ever laid eyes on. Sinful thoughts raced through her mind unchecked. She imagined him coming to her by night, his beautiful body covering hers in a heated claiming that left her breathless.

Ava closed her eyes and tried to control her breathing. She had to get out of there before they discovered her. Creeping back into the clearing, she struggled to get the vision of the young mercenary out of her head. She gathered up her apples and plums and made her way down the trail, angrily pushing branches out of her way.

What on earth had come over her? She never experienced feelings like that before, not even with David. What if she'd

been caught watching them? What could have possessed her to be so careless?

All the way home, visions of the mercenary filled her mind and made her body throb. She felt sexually charged like never before, and it was driving her crazy. Try as she might, she couldn't force him from her thoughts. With every attempt, the fantasies grew stronger and more detailed. She imagined she hadn't gotten out of there undetected and he'd captured her. The fantasy became so powerful, she had to stop walking and sit down on a nearby rock. He was forcing her to the ground now, his mouth claiming hers in a wild, carnal kiss, his hands roaming over her body, savoring and awakening her. She imagined she could feel his strong, hard body covering hers as he savagely took her over and over again. She could almost feel the ecstasy of him inside her. A devastating rush of desire flowed over her and Ava placed her head in her hands to keep herself grounded. *What is wrong with me? I feel as if I've been bewitched.*

* * * *

By the time Ava came through the front door of her home, her father was impatiently sitting at the breakfast table, dressed and waiting for her. His frown deepened as she set the basket of fruit on the table.

"I have appointments this morning, you know," he said.

She bit her tongue against a sarcastic remark. "Yes, Papa, I know. I'm hurrying."

He tapped his fingers on the table and stared out the window as she prepared a plate of bread, cheese and fruit for him. "What the devil took you so long?"

"I..." Eva stammered, trying to think of a lie he'd believe. "I wasn't feeling well." She set his plate down and sat opposite him.

"Are you all right? Did anyone bother you while you were out?"

"No, Papa. Nothing like that. I'm fine, really."

Her father's brow wrinkled. "You do look a little flushed. I trust you'll be okay, today? We can't afford to close the dress shop, Ava. Not even for one day."

"I know, Papa. Don't worry about me. It was nothing. Just a headache."

"Good," he said, finishing off the last of his breakfast. He came over and kissed her on the forehead. "Be careful on the way to the shop," he chided. "Those blasted mercenaries are always about and I don't trust a one of them. They're nothing more than salaried murderers."

"I'll be fine."

"I'll see you tonight," her father said, walking out the door.

Ava nodded and picked up his plate. She placed it in the sink. "Until tonight."

* * * *

The busy workday was merciful to Ava, dragging her thoughts away from the Asian warlord, often to worry over this problem or that. It was at night, alone in her bed, when her desire became unbearable.

Ava tossed and turned, desperate to quiet her racing mind. But every time she closed her eyes, vivid images of the warlord appeared. Opening her eyes, she hissed a breath out through her teeth. Her body was now aching to be touched,

so she placed her hands on the generous swell of her breasts and massaged them. The pleasure soothed her a little.

Without warning, her thoughts immediately rushed to the warlord, naked and bloody from battle. The images were vivid and powerful, causing her to bite her lip so she wouldn't utter a sound. She envisioned him ravishing her here in her bed, his mouth consuming her with passionate kisses. His cock was deep inside her, pumping his desire into her hungry channel with hard, commanding thrusts. Hunger roared through her flesh until she thought she might go mad. Driven by her lust, she ran her hand down to her swollen, wet pussy and pushed her fingers inside.

The pleasure was sudden and immediate. Ava gasped with delight.

Her fingers, slick with her private yearning, explored her hungry cunt and clit. Every touch increased her passion. In her mind's eye, the warlord was inside her pussy then her ass, hammering himself into her as the growl of his moans filled her ears.

Panting, she rolled in the sheets sweating out her lust and burying her cries in the pillow. Then, just as she thought she couldn't take another minute of her ecstasy, the climax seized her. The pleasure was explosive, flooding her body with shuddering spasms. It left Ava drained and panting for breath.

She sat up on the edge of her bed and ran her fingers through her hair. She was confused and frustrated, and annoyingly enough, still aroused. *How is it I've never felt anything like this before? Why does this man have such a powerful effect on me?*

Even now, as her body cooled in the quiet darkness of her room, her desire stalked her like a hungry lioness. The images of the warlord were still fresh in her mind, so clear she could

almost smell the sweat on his skin. The thought of him in her bed quickened her blood again and she groaned in protest.

In that desperate moment, a new idea was born. It was a feverish idea, a madwoman's obsession that would surely cause her complete disgrace and ruin. The more she fought it, the more it took hold until she couldn't think of anything else. Her blood turned to fire in her veins at the thought of her desire being finally quenched. She had to find a way to sleep with that Asian warlord for real. No matter what she had to do or what she had to pay. She had to have him and she wouldn't be free of this obsession until she did.

Chapter 3

The next night, after a quiet dinner with her father, Ava snuck out.

Covered in a black hood and cloak, she made her way through the village streets until she found a deserted courtyard overlooking the tavern. She knew they'd be there; the mercenaries were notorious for going to the tavern every night. As she settled behind a stone wall hoping for a chance to see the warlord again, she reflected upon the madness of all this creeping around. *What am I doing, anyway? Even if I ran into him in a dark alley, stark naked, he'd never dream of touching me.*

Village women weren't allowed to associate with foreigners of any kind. He would certainly know that. The fact that these Asian men were mercenaries made them even more untouchable. Not because of their race, but because of their profession. Mercenaries were considered little more than societal parasites, taking, but contributing little to the village. Even though they were respected and feared, the only women allowed to consort with them were the brothel whores.

If the warlord were to lie with her and anyone were to find out about it, they could both face exile or worse. If she was smart, she'd go home now and stop this foolishness. But just as she was getting up to leave, she spotted the warlord and his fellow mercenaries exiting the tavern.

Like a toxic fever in her blood, her body grew hot with longing. Seeing him now was even more bewitching than the first time. He walked along with his men, exuding a cool confident grace like a jungle cat. He was heavily armed, wearing ornate black battle armor with a katana at his side. He was intoxicatingly handsome, with smooth pleasing features and a sensuous mouth. His long black hair was pulled back into a ponytail that ran down the length of his powerful back. Even after hours of drinking, he maintained an air of alert lethality. He was a man who could kill in a minute without as much as elevating his heart rate.

Ava pulled her cloak tighter around her and followed them as close as she dared. She dodged in and out of doorways and alleys until she'd tracked them to the brothel. Hoping for a better view, she climbed a narrow stairway and nestled up on the roof. She could see everything on the street below from here and no one was likely to spot her. Then they all disappeared inside. She leaned against the wall and waited.

Damn. Now what do I do? She wondered what exactly it was she was hoping to see.

"Hiding from someone?" came a voice from nearby.

Ava whirled around. The brothel's madam, Sherry Starr, was to her left taking some whiskey bottles from a small wooden storehouse. Ava opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. She felt very foolish.

Sherry was dressed in a black and crimson gown that had a scandalous slit up the right side. Her ample bosom bulged from the dress's low neckline. Her thick brunette mane hung down her back in ringlets and framed a lovely, but jaded face. She came over and grinned, drawing attention to her dark red lips. "What are you doing, spying on my patrons?"

"I'm not spying on all of them," Ava managed. "Just one."

"Really? Let me guess. Captain Ming Han? Did I guess right?"

"Is that the young one's name?" she asked.

The madam's eyes sparkled with amusement.

Ava blushed. "I'd better go," she said, rising to leave.

"You shouldn't be ashamed," Sherry said, smiling. "A lot of women find him attractive. Surely you didn't think you were the only one?"

Ava nodded, feeling awkward. She knew she should get out of there. The madam already knew too much about her obsession. She didn't want to become the subject of local gossip. She rushed to the stairs leading to the alley.

"Would you like to watch him make love?" Sherry asked. "He's a fantastic and adventurous lover. You're sure to get your money's worth."

Ava froze. She turned around slowly. "I don't understand."

"Of course you do," Sherry said. "I can arrange for you to watch Ming and one of our ladies. Don't worry, honey. He'll never even know you're there."

"How much?"

"Two gold sovereigns."

Ava squeezed the metal railing leading down to the street below. *You should go, you should go.* She bit her lip and reached into her pocket. She only had one. A crushing wave of disappointment moved over her. She held up the coin. "I only have one sovereign," she said.

The madam snatched it from her. "That'll do."

"You promise he won't know?"

Sherry nodded and smirked. "Your secret will be safe with me. You sure you want this? There are no refunds, so I don't want to hear any whining."

Ava closed her eyes and tried to will herself to say no, but a different word came out. It was softly spoken, like a sinful confession. "Yes."

"I can't hear you," Sherry said. "Are you interested or not?"

"Yes," Ava whispered. A stinging shame filled her heart. "Yes," she said. "I'm interested."

Chapter 4

The hidden passage between the guest rooms was narrow and stuffy. Ava had to turn sideways just to make it through most of it. All the while, Ava tried to convince herself to go home. Sherry led the way, guiding Ava through all sorts of twists and turns, until they reached the room where Ming was being entertained. The lusty sounds of sex filled the space between the walls. The sounds were so passionate, it fired Ava's desire to new heights.

Sherry looked through a small peephole and smiled. She stepped back to allow Ava to look. The room was dimly lit with red lens lanterns, but Ava could make out two naked bodies on the bed. The woman was on top of her partner, straddling the man's hips, her fleshy buttocks rippling with the force of her lover's thrusts. She moaned and rolled her head back and forth, her long hair sweeping the lower part of her back. She leaned forward and kissed the man. Ava felt a moment of jealousy.

From her vantage point, she could clearly see the man's thick cock pumping in and out of the woman's pussy.

The man snarled an order at the woman and she rolled off of him. He got up and Ava could see Ming's striking face clearly. Her desire for him was so strong and overwhelming, she was forced to look away. When she peeked into the hole

again, the woman was lying on the bed on her belly as Ming took her anus with fiendish delight.

The woman moaned, twisted, and seemed to be enjoying his savagery very much. As Ava watched them together, she was awed by the beauty of Ming's body. He was completely hairless, with large sculptured muscles and an enormous cock with a thick base. He moved with an alluring power that she found irresistible. As she watched him make love to the woman, she found her body reacting in ways she'd never felt before. Her pussy, unbearably wet, ached and throbbed, desperate to be filled. She wanted him to take and use her, just as he was doing to this woman. She wanted him to violate and take possession of her, and she didn't care about the consequences. She'd do anything for one night, one hour with this sexy man. The only thing she had to figure out was a way to do it.

A wave of shame burned her cheeks and she pushed back from the peephole. "I've seen enough," she said to Sherry. "Please take me out of here so I can go home."

"Isn't he beautiful?" the madam purred. "Perhaps you'd like to experience a night with him yourself?"

Ava shook her head and pushed past the woman. "No," she said, rushing off. "No, I can't. I need to go."

Chapter 5

For Ava, the next few days were misery. There was no escaping her lust for Ming, no matter how hard she worked or how much she masturbated, her mind returned to her torturous desire again and again. It was even beginning to interfere with her sleep.

On this day, she had gone to work earlier than usual to put some new dresses on display. She had to do something to occupy her mind other than obsess over her Asian mercenary.

Her father was delighted with her new work ethic, even going so far as to give her a tiny raise. If he knew the truth why she was working so hard, he'd probably threaten to kill her.

The shop was quiet as Ava unpacked several new dresses that morning. They were stunning colorful things, made by a local seamstress who had a breathtaking talent for style and design. Ava wished she could buy one with her salary, but she was saving her money for a more important purpose. She was saving her money to move out of her father's house and be on her own. That had become her dream, the only thing that kept her going some days.

As she placed the last one on a display rack, she heard the bell over the door chime. Ava glanced in the mirror, straightened herself out and went to greet her new customer.

The woman who entered was an attractive blonde with pronounced frown lines on the sides of her mouth. She carried herself with a haughty air, as if she were much better than anyone around her. Ava disliked her immediately.

"Can I help you?" Ava asked.

The woman looked around, her frown lines deepening. "Yes," she replied. "I'm looking for a light blue dress for a very special occasion. I need something exceptional, you understand, and money is no object."

Ava led her to the back where some of the new dresses were on display. The woman, who asked to be called Grace, picked through them, pulling a few out to try on.

For next two hours, she had Ava running and fetching, even telling her to ignore other customers until Ava finished with her. Finally, Ava had had enough.

"Perhaps you should come back next month when we get our new inventory in," Ava offered as Grace threw another expensive dress onto the floor. "My father is expecting a new shipment on the first. I'm sure there'll be something in that batch you'll like."

Grace tucked a few stray hairs back into her tight bun. She turned on Ava and glared at her. "You're a very annoying young lady," she said. "Are you trying to get me to leave?"

Ava gestured at the discarded dresses on the floor helplessly. "Well, madam, it's just that you've seen everything we have to offer and you still haven't found what you want. Perhaps if you came back..."

"You insolent little peasant!" Grace roared. "If my father had any idea that you were trying to *dismiss* me, he'd have your head! My father isn't just anyone you know, he's *important*. In any event, you'll be happy to know I'm quite finished

here," she snarled. "And don't trouble yourself to apologize, because I'm never coming back!"

Ava tried to say something, anything that might quiet Grace's rage, but it was hopeless. A moment later, Grace stormed out the door, slamming it so hard the small brass bell fell off.

Chapter 6

“My eldest daughter, Grace is in a fury! She hasn’t given me a moment’s peace since she returned from that blasted dress shop!” Governor Silver roared, as he folded up his morning paper. “Something must be done!”

Ming stared past the governor, through the large picture window behind him, and admired the blooming spring garden. What he wouldn’t give to be out there, under a shady tree, rather than in here listening to this crap. Ming turned his attention back on the governor and placed his hands behind his back. “What type of thing would satisfy her, Excellency? A beating or a beheading perhaps?” he asked.

The governor squinted at him. He looked like he’d just sat on a tack. “Are you trying to be funny? Because if you are, I’d be very annoyed.”

“No,” Ming replied, keeping his tone even. “You’re right. Something must be done to avenge this insult. I’m simply trying to decide on an appropriate punishment.”

The governor was thoughtful. Then he said, “Just pay the dressmaker a visit and scare them a little. You know, break some things here and there, and make a few threats. I’m sure you can handle something easy like that.”

Ming stared at the governor with his most neutral expression. He could feel his anger prowling around his gut, looking

for a place to go. He hoped his pause would convey his disapproval. Bullying the local merchants was a complete waste of his men's time. They were soldiers, not gangsters.

The governor seemed oblivious to his silence, however. Opening his desk drawer, Governor Silver pulled out a piece of paper with the name and address of the dress merchant to be targeted. He handed it to Ming, the governor's hand trembling ever so slightly.

"Nothing too destructive, please," the governor said. "We're just trying to make a point."

Ming glanced at the paper, then placed it in his pocket. He knew the place, nice little shop. He stifled a sigh. "No arrests?"

The governor settled back into his chair and sipped his tea. "No," he said. "Nothing that drastic. Just scare them so they *understand* who they've insulted. Hopefully they'll apologize to Grace and we'll be done with it."

Ming grunted his understanding and stalked out.

Chapter 7

Ava was taking inventory in the back when the front bell she'd just repaired rang, letting her know someone had come in. She heard it fall to the floor and fall silent. Annoyed at the destruction of the bell and the interruption, she swore under her breath and hurried to the front. As she emerged, she suddenly stopped and stared at her new customers.

Unfortunately, they weren't customers. They were the village mercenaries.

Standing in the middle of the shop was Ming and two of his men. They were prowling around, peering into glass cases and touching dress fabric with the backs of their hands. From what she caught of their conversations, the quality of the fabrics seemed to impress them, everyone that is, except Ming. He stood in the middle of the shop, one hand resting on his katana waiting for someone to show up.

A panicked wave of paranoia rolled over her. What if Ming found out she'd been watching him at the brothel? What if he *knew*? *He can't possibly know*. Collecting herself, she thought he probably wouldn't have come here to talk to her with his men in tow if he knew about her spying. That would be kind of weird.

Swallowing, she decided to play it cool.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" Ava asked, smiling.

Ming fixed her with a penetrating gaze and she thought she saw a grin soften his mouth. Her cheeks grew hot but she couldn't take her eyes off him. Then, as suddenly as his grin appeared, it was gone.

One of Ming's men knocked a glass vase onto the floor. It hit the ground with a thunderous crash. Ming glanced back at the man who gave him a slight shrug.

"Hey, watch it!" she said to the offending mercenary. A rush of nervous energy filled Ava. *They're here to punish me for not bowing down to that cow, Grace. Well, they'll not get any satisfaction from me!*

Ava folded her arms and glared at Ming. "I take it you're not here to buy a dress."

Ming slowly shook his head, never taking his eyes off her. "No," he replied, "I am not here to buy a dress."

"Then what do you want?" she said, already knowing what he was going to say.

Ming walked forward until he was only a few inches from her. "I'm here to collect a written apology."

The energy that came from him was electric. What she wouldn't give to kiss that fabulous mouth and touch that olive skin. But another feeling was lurking too, her newfound hatred for him. "Do you think a written apology will satisfy *Grace?*"

His men chuckled.

Ming raised an eyebrow. "I don't know. But it will satisfy me."

Ava took a slow, deep breath. She couldn't take her eyes off his lips. A furious jealousy burned in her. She couldn't believe he was here to defend *her*. "Who is Grace anyway that

you'd be so interested in her happiness? Some favorite whore at the brothel, perhaps?"

Ming laughed. "No. Grace is Governor Silver's daughter."

Ava's neck and ears grew hot. How could she have known that? The women never mentioned who her father was. "Whoever she is, she's obnoxious," Ava said. "What if I refuse to write one?"

Ming shifted his weight to his other foot. It was an innocent gesture that seemed to convey a hidden threat. "Then I'll have to persuade you."

Ava's conversation with Ming was interrupted by the sound of ripping fabric. She looked over at one of his thugs to see he had torn one dress from top to bottom. He tossed it onto the floor. She pushed past Ming to retrieve the damaged item, but Ming grabbed her around the waist and held her back.

Unholy fire burned through her body at his touch. "Let me go!" she cried.

"How many dresses must we destroy to get that apology?" he asked.

"Okay! Fine! I'll write it for you, just please don't destroy any more stuff!"

Ming took her by the arm and led her behind the counter. There he grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and slammed them down in front of her.

Ava glared darkly at him. "You're a swine," she said.

He ignored her insult and tapped the paper.

She wrote a quick note and handed it to him. He glanced at it then placed it in his pocket. He and his men headed for the door.

"Hey!" Ava called after him.

His men continued on, but Ming stopped and turned around. "Yes?"

"Who's going to pay for that dress? If someone doesn't pay, it'll come out of my salary."

He stalked toward her and to Ava's amazement, took out a roll of bills. Leafing a few off, he tossed them on the counter and left.

When Ava counted it, she was stunned. Not only had he paid her for the dress, but he'd actually paid her double what it was worth.

Ava put the money for the dress in the register and pocketed the rest. That money would come in handy when she finally had enough to move out of her father's house. But it didn't make her like that bastard any better, even if she did still want to jump him.

Chapter 8

It was a night at the tavern like so many others. Loud card games filled the tiny space with noise. It mixed with the melancholy voices singing songs of long ago battles won and lost. Ming sat in a corner by himself, thinking about the shop girl he'd been forced to bully earlier today. He wondered what her name was, and then played a game trying to find names that fit her. He wondered if she was married or widowed, or passed over for marriage entirely because of some small town crime. He wondered if she had any children. Annoyed at himself, he shook his thoughts off. There was no point in getting too interested in her, she would never go out with a mercenary, and certainly not one who'd terrorized her in her dress shop.

But there was something about this woman that made him think of things he'd hadn't entertained in years. Like a real relationship with a woman and a permanent home. Thinking back on his time at the orphanage, he remembered as a child wishing for such things. He'd envisioned himself being married with children, and even now, the thought still warmed his soul.

There had been a time when he'd thought that life was a possibility for him, but not anymore. He had walled off that part of his dreams. He was a mercenary, considered by many

to be the lowest of the low, and someday he'd die one. The only women for him would forever be whores, hard businesswomen who only slept with him for a profit. No respectable woman would have anything to do with him.

"Mind if I join you?" Sherry said, sliding into the seat across from him.

He sipped his drink and grinned. "You know you're always welcome at my table."

She smiled at him. "Are you coming by The Scarlet House tonight?"

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe I'll just head home and call it a night."

Sherry pouted playfully. "You can't do that. You're going to hurt my feelings, Ming. You're one of my best customers. What's the matter? Are the girls not adventurous enough for you?"

He laughed. "No, the girls are fine. I'm just getting tired of a different bed partner every night."

"Why don't you take a mistress, like some of the other men do? Then you'd have only one bed partner every night. Just think of it, a woman dedicated to your pleasure and enjoyment."

Ming finished his drink and signaled the barmaid for another. He offered Sherry one, but she held up a hand and shook her head. She wasn't much of a drinker.

"No offense to you, Sherry, but I haven't found anyone at Scarlet House I like enough to be with every night."

Sherry ran her long red fingernails through her hair. "I get new prospects coming in all the time. Perhaps you just haven't found the right woman yet. Don't worry, you will." She stood up and ran her hands down her dress to smooth the fa-

bric. "Why don't you come over tomorrow night, I'll see if I can't find you someone special."

Ming leaned back in his chair and ran an admiring gaze down her body. "I'm not making any promises, but I'll try."

Chapter 9

"Gods, look at this!" Ava's father cried when she showed him the torn dress. He held it up and examined the damage, gently touching the frayed edges. His eyes watered.

"I know, Papa, I know. But they did pay for it," she offered.

This seemed to calm him a little. "Still, this time they've gone too far! I told the governor that having those Orientals around is bad for the town and this proves it! Blasted mercenaries have no respect for anything! What reason could they have to do such a thing? Don't they realize how long it takes to make one of these?"

Ava held her breath, then blew it out slowly. "Um, it was kind of my fault."

"*What?*" he said. He wiggled a finger at her. "What are you not telling me, Ava?"

She collapsed into a chair and slumped. She seemed to always disappoint her father in some way. Why should this be any different? "A woman came in being very difficult and I was kind of short with her. Turns out she was the governor's daughter."

Her father's mouth set in a grim line. A vein bulged in his neck and his face turned red. "You insulted Governor Silver's daughter?"

Ava shrugged. "It was an accident. And I didn't exactly insult her. I just suggested she come back when we got another shipment in."

Her father threw his hands into the air. "Every screw-up is an accident with you! Did you apologize?"

"Yes, I did."

"Is she coming back?"

Ava played with a thread on the chair arm and avoided looking her father in the eye. "I don't think so."

"You don't *think* so!" he roared. "Well, you'd better think of a way to get her back. The governor is a very wealthy man and if he and his family don't shop here, we'll go out of business. We have to eat you know, Ava."

Ava felt as though she'd swallowed a rock. "Yes, I know, Papa."

"So what are you going to do about it?" he asked.

"I guess I'll go and see her and apologize again. Maybe I'll take her a gift."

Her father stomped over to a rack full of expensive dresses and pulled out a stunning one in periwinkle blue with white lace. He tossed it at her and she flailed to catch it before it fell on the floor. "You can take this one. It can come out of your pay."

Ava hugged the dress to her chest and forced herself not to cry. There went the extra money Ming had given her. Now she'd just break even. "Okay," she managed.

Her father opened the shop door and gestured to the street. "What are you waiting for? You go now. I'll watch the shop till you get back."

Hiding her face from her father, Ava gathered up the dress and rushed out into the street.

Chapter 10

By the time Ava got back from delivering the dress to Grace, it was already late and time to close up shop. She returned home to her father wordlessly and quickly retreated to her room to get away from him.

She began to undress for bed, then hesitated. Her mind raced to thoughts of Ming. She knew what would make her feel better—a night out spying on the mercenaries. At least if she didn't have a life, she could watch them live theirs. She almost laughed out loud at how silly that sounded.

With a rush of excitement, Ava dressed, climbed out her window and headed for the village.

* * * *

Instead of following Ming and his men from the tavern, Ava decided to wait for them on the roof near the brothel. Keeping her face covered with a hood, she made her way up the steep staircase that led to her new spying place. She reached the top winded, pulled her hood from her face and started.

Sherry Starr was there waiting for her. She was dressed in a long, low-cut black dress that Ava decided was too severe for her face. Black made Sherry look old and worn. Ava stood awkwardly not know what to do with her hands.

"I thought you'd be entertaining your guests," Ava said.

The madam gave her an engaging smile. "Not right now," she said. "First I wanted to talk to you."

Ava frowned. "If you're going to blackmail me, don't bother. I don't have any money."

Sherry laughed. "I don't want to blackmail you. I have a proposition for you, one I think you'll like."

"What is it?"

"First I must ask you something," Sherry said. "Have you ever been with a man?"

Ava was insulted. "Of course, I was married a few years ago."

"But didn't I hear that your husband died young?"

"Yes," Ava conceded. "He died in the first six months of our marriage. But we were married long enough to have sex. Unfortunately though, I haven't been with a man since him."

Sherry nodded. "Do you want to be with Ming?"

Ava shook her head confused. "I don't see how..."

Sherry waved her hands impatiently and sighed. "Just answer the question. Do you or don't you?"

Ava sank down and sat on the steps. "You know I do."

"I can make it happen for you. But before you tell me you want this, be aware that he may demand certain," Sherry paused and grinned, "unnatural acts from you and you'll have to do them or he'll suspect something is wrong."

Ava's heart sped up. "Are you suggesting I pose as a *whore*?"

"It's perfect, don't you see?" Sherry said, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "I can dress you and make you up so he'll never recognize you. He's used to us having different women here, so it's perfect. The lighting is so dim in the rooms. He'll never get a good look at your face."

Ava's hands trembled. She wanted Ming more than any man she'd ever laid eyes on. This was madness. But as much as she wanted to turn around and go home, she wanted that much more to stay. *If I do this, my fever will go away and I'll finally have some peace. What harm could it do as long as I'm back by morning?*

Ava took a deep breath and stood up. "Okay," she said. "I'll do it."

Sherry rushed over and took Ava's arm. "Wonderful," she purred. "Then come quickly, he'll be here soon and I want you to be ready for him."

Chapter 11

Ava sat in the makeup chair staring into the mirror and wondering if she had completely lost her mind. Her anxiety was so high, she didn't even feel the discomfort of the madam as she hurriedly combed and curled her hair. A million irrational thoughts flew through her head; what if her father came into her room and noticed she was missing? That one she knew was unlikely because in all her thirty-one years he had never once done that. He'd never even knocked and asked to talk to her, so that one was out.

What if Ming recognized her right away and laughed her out of the room? That one too was unlikely because, just as Sherry had promised, she was being transformed into a woman she'd didn't know. It was amazing what a change in hair and makeup could do.

Ava took a deep breath and tried to stay calm. Part of her wanted to call the whole thing off and run home, but a deeper part of her made her stay. Staying wasn't as hard as she thought it would be, because a primal part of her being wanted to stay, and it had a will of iron. Her body wanted Ming with a ferocity she simply couldn't fight. She would let him take her in any way he wanted, no matter what the cost or risk. Realizing that, an icy calm overtook her. She felt like a condemned prisoner being given her last meal.

"There," Sherry said, taking a step back. "What do you think?"

Ava stared at her reflection in the mirror and didn't know the woman staring back at her. She was a smoky temptress with dark red hair and bedroom eyes. The red satin corset set off the highlights in her hair and the bustier showcased her ample bosom. Ava hated to admit it, but she loved the way she looked.

Sherry handed her a sheer black robe and smiled at her handiwork. "No one would recognize you in that outfit," she beamed. "Not even your own mother!" At that last comment, Sherry burst into wild, cackling laughter.

She grabbed Ava's hand and led her down the hall to one of the bedrooms. She opened the door and thrust her inside. "Remember," she said, giving Ava a stern look, "you must give him anything he wants from you, or he'll know you're a fake. Got it?"

Ava glanced around the room, her mouth dry. "Yeah," she said nervously. "I got it. When will he be here?"

Sherry gave her a devilish smile. "He's coming up now."

Ava licked her crimson lips. "Great."

* * * *

When Ming came into the room, he took her breath away. He looked sexy, hungry, and a little bit drunk. She wanted him so much it hurt. The longer she gazed at him, the wetter she got. His eyes sparkled as he ran them down the length of her body.

"Very nice," he said in a husky whisper.

Ava backed up to the bed and sat down. It occurred to her she had no idea what to do or say. Finally, she settled for, "Thank you."

Ming took his weapons and armor off, and placed them on a corner chair. He unbuttoned his uniform and stalked over to her, a lusty grin curving the sides of his mouth. When he reached her, he leaned down and gave her a scorching kiss.

Ava kissed him back, trying to relax. Slipping her arms around his neck, she let herself go and returned his kiss with a smoking one of her own. He groaned his pleasure into her mouth and climbed up over her. Ava laid back and hoped he wouldn't feel the frantic beating of her heart.

His big, calloused hands ran down her, sliding over her breasts and belly until they reached the border of her panties. His fingers played with the waistband as he kissed her again. It took all of Ava's will not to stop him. *You're a whore. Act like one. Don't get nervous and start acting like a virgin.*

Ming plunged his hand into her underwear as he dragged wild, hungry kisses along her neck. Pleasure rushed along her skin, stiffening her nipples as a soft gasp escaped her lips. This was everything she had wanted and more.

He petted the tender mound of her sex and she opened her legs for him. His bold fingers opened her labia and stroked the swollen nub of her clit.

Ava's body came alive as he touched her. She was beyond desire, beyond reason, all she wanted was his cock inside her. "Please, Ming," she begged. "I want you so badly. Please put your cock in me and fuck me hard."

He chuckled evilly and dragged his mouth down to her aching pussy. Pushing her legs open, he tickled his tongue over her sex, teasing and taunting her as she squirmed. Then he was on top of her, his mouth claiming hers in a sensuous demanding kiss. Ava arched her back and thrust her hips up, blindly reaching for his stone-hard cock.

Seizing her hips, he plunged into her, filling her pussy with mind-blowing pleasure. Ava cried out and wrapped her legs around him. Her hands took on a life of their own, caressing his back and savoring the thick-knotted muscles of his shoulders. Her orgasm took her in an unexpected rush of passion, smashing her fear and filling her with a joy she had never known. When it finally subsided, she was left dazed and gasping for breath.

With a gentle but firm grip, Ming guided her up on all fours. His tongue caressed the tender flesh of her anus as his fingers toyed with her tender and throbbing clit. Ava thought of protesting, but what could she say? She was supposed to be a woman accustomed to all kinds of sex, how could she refuse him anything?

Ava forced herself to relax as he placed the head of his penis against her tight little anus. He worked slowly, pushing into her with a persistent pressure. Ava felt him breach her and drive deep inside. Pleasure surged through her hips. She moaned and thrust back to meet him, murmuring encouragements.

The night melted into an orgy of forbidden pleasures, as she did everything she could to please him. Ming awoke sensations and emotions in her she never would have believed possible. Then, when he had finally fallen into a deep, heavy sleep, she slipped out and rushed home.

She made it back into her room just as dawn was breaking, feeling truly alive for the first time in her life.

Chapter 12

Ming woke up tired and achy from his long night of lovemaking. He stretched out and reached for the woman, but he could already sense she was gone. He stroked the sheets next to him and wished he could feel her warm sleeping body there. A haunting feeling of loss moved over him but he quickly pushed it aside.

He wondered why she hadn't stayed. Had he imagined her passion or was it all for show? Whores were good at making him feel wanted, as long as they got their money. *No. It was real.* She couldn't have faked her body's obvious arousal.

Easing himself out of bed, he glanced out the window and was surprised how late it was. Normally an early riser, he'd slept long into the morning and now was finding it hard to get moving. He wondered why Sherry hadn't woken him, but then she tended to be extra nice to her paying regulars.

He dressed and came down the stairs looking for Sherry. He found her in the cramped back kitchen brewing a pot of tea. She beamed when she saw him. "Would you like a cup?" she asked, gesturing to the pot.

He nodded and sat down at the table.

"I'd offer you breakfast, but we don't keep much food around here," she said, giving him his tea. She picked up her own and sat across from him, sipping it.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"The woman you were with last night?" Sherry asked in a strange high-pitched tone. "She went out shopping."

A sudden twinge of jealousy fired his gut. "Did she take another customer after me?"

Sherry laughed. "Oh no," she said. "She's a new girl. You were quite enough for her for one night."

Ming finished his tea and stood up. "I want her again tonight."

Sherry grew pale. "She's booked."

He dug into his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. He tossed a few on the table and watched Sherry's eyes widen.

"Then unbook her," he said.

She picked up the money with trembling hands, her eyes aglow with greed. "You're a hard man to say no to, Ming. Well, I guess she'll be free tonight after all."

* * * *

Ava's father came to wake her up only minutes after she'd climbed back in her window. Exhausted and sore from Ming's vigorous seduction, she'd dragged around the shop all morning, catching catnaps at the counter whenever there was a lull in customers.

Then to her horror, Sherry sauntered in just before lunchtime. She was dressed in a low-cut, tight-fitting dress that practically advertised her profession. Ava stared at her in disbelief, then rushed past her to lock the door. She couldn't have anyone see her talking to this woman. She'd be the subject of local gossip for months.

Ava leaned against the door as if it could keep prying eyes out. "What are you *doing* here?"

The madam studied her coolly. "I came to discuss business."

"What business? What are you talking about?"

"Ming wants you again tonight."

A carnal longing tore through Ava's body. He was like a drug she couldn't get away from. She wanted him too, but it was much too risky.

Ava shook her head. "I can't," she said. "I almost got caught the last time. I don't dare risk it."

Sherry shrugged. "Well, that's your problem. You just make sure you're at the Scarlet House early tonight so I can get you done up for him."

"Didn't you hear what I *said*?" Ava protested. "I can't do it. I won't."

The madam glared at her. "Oh, yes you can, and you will. You'll do it because if you don't, your father and I are going to have a little chat about what you've been doing at night and with whom."

Ava stared at her in disbelief. *What have I done? This woman is a viper!*

Sherry sashayed toward the door and pushed Ava out of the way. She unlocked it and winked at Ava. "You better get some rest. From the look in Ming's eyes, you're gonna need it. See you tonight, darling."

Chapter 13

Ming snarled and charged at Lou. Their katanas met in a metallic kiss of steel. Lou blocked the blow and, dipping his knee, sliced across Ming's lower abdomen. Ming stepped back from the attack just in time to avoid being cut.

Lou shook his head and lowered his weapon, laughing good-naturedly. "You seem distracted today, my lord," he said. "Spending too much time with the ladies of Scarlet House?"

Ming sheathed his weapon and went to his horse. He pulled a canteen off his saddle, took a long drink and replaced it. "Perhaps," he replied. "Perhaps I'm not spending enough time with them."

All the men laughed. Two more combatants took their place in the center of the clearing to practice and Ming sat down on the ground to watch them. He was distracted, it was true. His thoughts returned to the mysterious woman he'd spent the night with. His body responded to the very thought of her, his cock stiffening painfully in his pants. He could hardly wait to be with her tonight.

Still, as he thought about her, something kept nagging at him. The woman was familiar to him and he just couldn't place her. True, he could have seen her in the marketplace half a dozen times, but he found it hard to believe that he

wouldn't have remembered such an enchanting beauty. Glancing at the sky, he judged the time at late afternoon. Soon, soon he'd be able to be with her again. This time though, he wouldn't stop at the tavern first. This time he wanted to be sober so he could fully enjoy her.

Ming got up and dusted his pants off. "I'm going," he announced. "I have a few things to do."

* * * *

For the first time in a long time, Ming walked the streets of the village and took in the sights. This place that had become his home only a few short years ago never seemed like a home to him. It had always been alien; a foreign place that barely tolerated his presence. But everything suddenly felt different. He realized he hadn't been living his life all this time, but existing, a phantom in his own reality.

His friends were right; he should take a mistress. It wasn't good for him to spend all his time drinking and fucking. He needed to settle down and enjoy the pleasure of a stable home life. Perhaps this new woman was exactly what he needed.

Looking up at the street sign, he realized his wanderings had brought him to Scarlet House. Taking the steps two at a time, he knocked and waited for Sherry to answer. Even though it was early, she usually didn't mind entertaining guests before business hours.

Sherry opened the door and peered out at him. Her eyes darted up and down the street. "Yes, Ming?" she said.

Now he was suspicious. *What the hell is going on with her, lately?* He wasn't some door-to-door salesman. She knew why he was here, why was she acting like something was terribly wrong?

He folded his arms across his chest. "What do you think I'm here for?"

"Oh," she said, her forehead creasing. "That girl isn't here yet...I mean...she's not ready yet. She's very vain. She takes forever to get ready for a client."

Now he was very suspicious. Her explanation made no sense. "Tell her I'll pay her double to meet me early."

"Let me see what I can do," she said. "Why don't you go to the tavern and I'll send for you when she's ready."

A jealous rage seized his heart. Pushing against the door, he forced Sherry back and made his way into the foyer. "Is she with another client?" he snarled.

"No, Ming!" the madam said breathlessly. "I swear to you, it's nothing like that! She's new and inexperienced. I swear to you she'll be ready soon, just give me half an hour!"

He stared at Sherry and knew in his gut it wasn't another man. There was some other trickery, some other deception. But he'd play along for now. "I'll be back in thirty minutes," he said icily. "And she'd better be ready then."

Chapter 14

Ming returned to the Scarlet House exactly half an hour later. Sherry greeted him with a dazzling smile. She escorted him up the staircase, trying to ease his suspicion with small talk.

“Thank you for being so understanding about the delay,” she said. “New girls are so difficult for me. I seem to spend all my time chasing them around, getting them ready.”

Ming frowned. He was in no mood to be patronized. “Save it.”

The madam glanced over her shoulder at him nervously. He could smell the scent of her perspiring.

Finally, they reached the bedroom. Sherry lifted her hand to knock, but he pushed her aside and went in.

His lover was sitting on the bed dressed as she had been last night. Her long auburn hair was loose over her shoulders, her skin flawless and pale with a light pink hue. His distrustful anger faded as his dick grew rock-hard. He heard the madam behind him begin to say something and he pushed the door closed in her face.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

The woman’s eyes widened as if she’d been caught off-guard. *It was always lies with these two, why.* Her mouth opened and closed a few times, and then she finally said, “Ava.”

“Is that a lie to please me?”

Her long dark eyelashes swept her cheeks. “No,” she replied. “That is my real name.”

He stalked toward her and studied her face. The last few minutes of daylight were fading from the sky. Looking at her now in this better light, he was sure he knew her. *Where have I met her before?* Her demeanor was curious, too. She looked at the wall, the floor, anywhere but in his eyes.

He sat next to her on the bed and unzipped his pants. He pulled his erection out, stroked it a few times, then said, “Suck me.”

Ava seemed to be at a total loss. She hesitated for a moment. Then she leaned down and took his cock into her mouth. She was awkward and unsure, sucking him way too hard and scraping him with her teeth. He knew immediately she wasn't the seasoned whore she was playing herself to be. Placing his hand on the back of her head, he signaled her to stop.

Lying back on the bed, he pulled her up to straddle his hips and found her slick pussy with his fingers. Opening the thick outer lips, he touched the swollen nub of her clit and tickled. He used a light, gentle touch, petting and teasing her until she was thrusting her body against his hand for more. Then he pulled her down onto his pulsing dick and impaled her.

She rode him hard, pumping her hips up and down in complete surrender to the pleasure that consumed her. A few moments later, she cried out and her quivering pussy milked him dry. He'd never had an orgasm that intense.

She collapsed next to him, breathing heavily.

Ming licked his lips and studied the ceiling. When his breathing had slowed, he said, "You're not a whore. What are you doing here?"

"I...my husband died...I lost everything and then moved here penniless...I needed the money," she stammered.

"Oh really? What village did you live in?" he pressed. "What town?"

Ava sat up, her pupils growing large and dark. She looked like a trapped animal. A long silence filled the room.

"What village did you come from?" he repeated louder. "What town?"

Ava launched from the bed and grabbed her robe. She wrapped it around her and rushed for the door, but Ming was faster still. He grabbed her before she could open it and escorted her back to the bed.

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Please," she whispered, trying to pry his hand off her arm. "I have to go."

"Answer my question."

"Why?" she said, growing angry. "What difference does it make?"

Ming glared at her. He shook her by the arm and forced her to look him in the eye. "Enough with all this lying. Who are you *really*?"

Ava suddenly exploded into violence. She struggled with him so hard he let her go out of fear she might hurt herself. "I have to go!" she yelled, her face swollen and red from crying. "I hate you and I hope I never see you again!"

She bolted for the door, flung it open, and disappeared weeping into the hallway.

Chapter 15

It had been two months since Ava had seen Ming and every moment of it was agony. Sherry had tried to get her to come back to the Scarlet House, claiming Ming wanted very much to see her again, but Ava refused. Sherry tried messengers, bribes and threats, but Ava had ignored them all. She had other things to worry about, much worse things.

Her father's shop, once such a fun place to work had now become a prison. She felt confined and limited here, her secret burning in her soul like a deadly sin. But that wasn't even the worst of it. No, the worst thing was that she could no longer deny she was pregnant.

The admission to herself alone sent waves of unbridled panic all through her. What was she going to do *now*? It's not like she'd be able to hide the fact from everyone. Sooner or later, it would become obvious. And, as if being with child wasn't bad enough, it wouldn't take anyone long to see in the babe whom she'd been sleeping with. *Mercenaries!* She could be exiled or worse! At the very least, her father would definitely throw her out.

"Ava!" her father shouted. She blinked and looked at him standing by the register holding a stack of bills.

"Yes, Papa?" she said.

"I asked you a question."

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. What did you say?"

He sighed. "I *said* did you make any sales yesterday?"

Ava held her annoyance in check. She could care less about his blasted dress sales. "Yeah," she said, distracted. "A few."

"A few? How many exactly? You're off balance here. I have too much money in the till and..."

"I don't remember, okay?" she shouted.

Her father froze and stared at her. She'd never shouted at him before. His heavy brows knitted. "Are you all right?"

Ava shook her head trying to clear it. "I'm sorry. I'm tired. I haven't been sleeping well lately."

"Perhaps you're coming down with something," he said, looking worried.

She rubbed the back of her neck and nodded.

"Why don't you go home and rest?" he offered. "I can watch the shop today."

Ava didn't say another word. She grabbed her cloak and wandered out the door hoping she'd get run over by a runaway coach.

* * * *

The idea to run off came to her on the way home. Maybe she could get a job in a neighboring village and start a new life with her baby. She had shop experience after all. The one big obstacle was money. She'd need something to live off until she could get settled. She hated the thought of stealing from her father, but she didn't have any other option. If she asked him for the money, he'd want to know why she was leaving, and she'd have to tell him. Then he'd probably send her packing without a dime.

No, she'd just have to steal the money and his horse, and make a run for it. She'd pay him back when she got settled. Running was her only hope.

Chapter 16

Ming came into the dress shop late in the evening. He was surprised the door was open, but then he'd heard the shopkeeper had been despondent since his daughter had run away. *Peasants and their drama*, he scoffed.

He made his way into the back room and spotted the shopkeeper on the floor, sipping a bottle of scotch. "You sent a note asking to see me?" Ming said.

The shopkeeper nodded and struggled to get up. "Yes, yes," he said, slurring his speech. "I need you to find my daughter. She's run off and I'm worried sick about her. Governor Silver said you do things like this for a fee."

Ming folded his arms and leaned against the wall. The old man fished into his wallet and pulled out a few large bills. He held them out with a trembling hand.

Ming took them and stuffed them into his pocket. "How long has she been gone?"

The shopkeeper broke into a loud sob. "Just since yesterday. She took my horse and fled without a word," he said, in a voice like broken glass. "I don't understand it. It's not like Ava. She's normally such a good girl." He placed his hand over his eyes as if he could stop the flow of tears that way.

Ming felt the cold hand of dread grip his heart. *Ava. His daughter's name is Ava. What's the likelihood of that? It's not the*

same girl as the Scarlet House. It's just can't be. Why would a shopkeeper's daughter moonlight as a whore? It doesn't make any sense. He shrugged the coincidence off and studied the old man. "Did you two have a fight? Does she have a new boyfriend? Sometimes young women get involved with someone and get confused."

"No, I'm sure it's nothing like that."

"Don't worry," Ming said. "She couldn't have gotten far, even on horseback. I'll find her and bring her home."

The shopkeeper grabbed Ming's hand and pumped it hard. "Thank you for this. I can't tell you how grateful I am for your help."

Ming pulled his hand away, uncomfortable with the contact. He nodded stiffly and quickly left. He had to find out the truth, no matter what it turned out to be.

Chapter 17

The more Ming thought about it, the more uneasy he became. If it were true, if this girl was the same one at the Scarlet House, it would explain everything. Everything except *why*.

He reined in his horse and glanced at the ground. Fresh tracks marked the soil, crossing over themselves in some places. He was closing in on her. She was tired and had been riding in circles for the past few hours. He was bound to catch up with her soon.

Then after another few minutes, he came upon her by a clearing in the woods. She was so confused and frightened that she didn't even hear him riding up on her. As he approached, he was overcome by emotion. *It's her. It's the same Ava.*

He felt so many things at once, he could scarcely understand them. Part of him wanted to slap the life out of her and the rest wanted to seize her and never let go.

When he was only a few feet from her, Ava looked up at him, startled. Her face was puffy and red from crying. He swung one leg over the horse's withers and dropped to the ground. She got up and rushed to her mount to escape.

"Don't do that," Ming commanded. "I'll catch you."

Her shoulders slumped and she sat back down on the log, resigned to her fate.

Glancing up at the sky, he judged it too late for them to make it back before nightfall. Besides, she had a lot of explaining to do. Moving around the clearing, he collected some rocks and firewood and built them a small fire.

Ming made them a camp, laying blankets on the ground and setting a kettle up to heat water for tea. He took some bread and dried cheese out of his saddlebag, cut off a few pieces and gestured for her to join him.

Ava tied up her horse next to his and made her way over, looking miserable.

They ate in silence. After she was done, he poured them each a cup of tea and leaned back against his saddle. The fire crackled and filled the air with the warm and inviting scent of burning wood.

"What's going on, Ava?" he finally said.

Ava stared into the fire and sniffled. "It's a long story."

"We have time. And no more lies this time."

"I was out one morning getting fruit for the breakfast table, when I saw you and your men by the waterfall. From that moment on, I've been bewitched by you. I have never felt anything like this desire, and I hope I never do again. It has been the ruin of me, driving me to deceive you and steal from my father. I can't tell you how ashamed I am." She hung her head. "I'm very sorry about all the lying, Ming."

"Why did you run away?" he asked.

Ava placed her hand over her mouth. She took a deep, trembling breath and said, "Because I'm pregnant."

Ming fell into a numbing, silent shock. He couldn't believe what she'd just said to him. This entire thing was insanity. Didn't she realize they could be *killed* for this?

"Ava," he said, trying to keep his calm. "Are you sure?"

"Yes! Why do you think I ran away?"

He stood up, clenching his fists. "Have you gone *completely* insane? Don't you realize they could kill all of us for this? Ava, what were you *thinking*?"

Ava covered her ears with her hands as if she could block his words out. "I know, I know! Don't you think I know what could happen?" She hugged her knees to her chest. She started weeping again, rocking her body back and forth like a small child. "I'm sorry," she whispered in a small voice. "I'm so, so sorry."

Ming paced and calmed himself. This was no time for blame. He had to find a way to protect her and their child, no matter what the cost to himself.

"We'll have to tell your father I raped you," he said.

Ava shook her head vigorously. "No, I won't let you do that. I'll just have to tell him the truth. No one could blame you, you didn't do anything wrong."

Ming crouched down by her. Placing his hand under her chin, he made her meet his gaze. "Ava, do you love me or was this just about sex?"

Fresh tears filled her eyes. "I don't know...I'm so confused."

Sitting down next to her, he pulled her in his arms. Holding her again had a calming effect on him. "I am too," he said. "But I know one thing. I'm not going to let anything happen to you and our baby. I can at least promise you that."

Chapter 18

“Kiss me,” Ming said, gently pushing her down on a blanket.

Ava lay back and relaxed as he moved over her on his hands and knees. She leaned her head forward and bumped her forehead against his and he grinned. Closing her eyes, she nuzzled his cheek and dragged her lips down his face until she reached his inviting lips. Inhaling deeply through her nose, she enjoyed the clean scent of his skin. She touched her lips to his and reveled in how wonderful he tasted.

He kissed her back, a lusty wild kiss that set her body on fire. Breaking the kiss, he clawed at his armor, struggling to get it off as quickly as he could. She helped him, peeling his clothes off with as much enthusiasm as she did her own.

Ming ran his hand down her naked flesh, pausing to pinch and pull her taut nipples. His tongue traced wet, lazy circles around her areolas and his long black hair hung down, caressing the flesh of her chest and belly. He slipped his fingers into her moist, plump pussy and rubbed his thumb around her aching clit, laughing as she arched her back in pleasure.

His mouth roamed down her until he reached her belly and hips where he paused and mauled kisses along her abdomen. Ava gasped, twisting under his tender kisses as her lips silently mouthed his name. Reaching down, she ran her fin-

gers through his silky hair. Then she lost contact with him as he nestled between her legs and buried his tongue into her. Her body bucked up to his mouth with longing.

Ming tortured her with his lips and tongue, dancing them over her clit again and again in an agonizing tickle that sent her mind reeling. Every time she panted and neared release, he would pause and wait for her to calm before beginning again. Her orgasm stayed just on the border of her senses, never venturing too close.

Finally, Ava glanced down at him. "Ming!" she shouted in frustration.

He laughed sadistically. "You deserve to suffer for lying to me."

Ava reached down and pulled him up on top of her. She stared into those mysterious dark eyes and felt a sudden calming peace. "But you're not going to make me suffer, are you?"

Ming reached down, took his cock and guided it into her. "No," he said in a harsh whisper. He pushed deep into her until his body was completely inside, then he stopped. Ava bit her lip, her pussy contracting around this new intrusion.

He buried his face in her neck, his breath coming hard and fast on her skin. Ava wrapped her legs around his hips, surprised at how very wet she was. Then Ming pulled out and thrust in. He worked slowly at first, quickly building it into a hard, angry coupling that tore a scream of ecstasy from her lungs.

Ming's body locked up, every muscle bulging with the intensity of his pleasure. He collapsed next to her, sweaty and panting.

Ava rolled over and kissed his chest as he slipped into a deep sleep. *What are we going to do, Ming? I couldn't bear it if anything happed to you because of me. What are we going to do?*

Chapter 19

As they rode back to the village, Ava was seized by a million fears. They could tell her father the truth, but he'd never forgive her for playing the whore. One thing was certain, they couldn't say Ming raped her because he'd be thrown in prison or killed. No, that wasn't the answer. But how were they going to explain her pregnancy?

Ava watched Ming. He looked so serene and handsome, even under this hardship. She wished she'd never acted on her passion. She hated the danger he was now facing. "What are we going to tell them about me?" she asked.

Ming glanced at her. "I thought we were going to tell them I raped you."

"No, we can't do that, they'll kill you. Besides, it's not true."

"Nothing we tell them will be the truth," he said. "Besides, I doubt they'll kill me. They'd probably exile me for something like this. I can find work somewhere else."

Ava stopped her horse and stared at him. "Is that what you want, to find work somewhere else? Do you want to leave and be free of all this? I can't say that I'd blame you if you did."

He stopped and looked back at her. "No, Ava, that's not what I want. I want to be with you and the baby. But you

must admit this is a difficult situation. If we tell them I raped you, you won't be blamed for anything. If we tell them we were secret lovers, you'll be treated like an outcast and a whore.

"And what about the baby? He's got to grow up here, imagine what his life will be like growing up the illegitimate child of a mercenary."

Ava's gut wrenched. "What about growing up without a father, wouldn't that be difficult as well?"

Ming shrugged. "You can't miss what you never knew. I grew up without both parents and I don't think I turned out so bad."

Ava studied his face and saw the hidden pain there. She knew so very little about him. "There's got to be another way," she said. "And you can forget about the rape story. I won't go along with it."

She nudged her horse forward and they rode on.

Ming was quiet for a long time, then said, "I've been thinking. Maybe we can leave together. There are plenty of other places that won't care about my profession."

"I'd like that."

"They'll be some hardship," he warned. "Are you sure you want to leave your father and your home for an uncertain future with me?"

Ava stopped her horse again and gave him a gentle smile. "You asked me if I loved you, and now I know the answer is yes. I would go with you anywhere, no matter what the hardship. You are the warmest, kindest man I've ever known, and I'm glad I'm going to have your baby."

Ming stared at her, looking uncomfortable. He glanced at the sky, then tossed his head down the trail. "We'd better

hurry up and get back. It'll be dark soon and your father will be worried."

Chapter 20

"You're what!" her father roared.

Ava watched her father's face turn an alarming shade of red. She looked back at Ming leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. He nodded to her. "I'm pregnant, Papa," she repeated.

Her father sank into a chair and placed his hands over his head as if he were trying to keep it on his shoulders. "I don't understand. How can this be, you've never been out of my sight."

"You're wrong. I've been sneaking out at night to meet Ming."

"*What?* But he's...he's a mercenary! Surely, I've raised you better than that. There are a dozen good, hard-working men in this village that would make you a wonderful husband. Why this social parasite? What could he possibly offer you?"

"I love him, Papa."

Her father scowled and glared at Ming. "For God's sake, Ava, he's a killer! Not to mention a drunkard and a whore-chaser!"

Ming pushed himself off the wall and came dangerously close to her father. "When you're finished screaming and insulting me," he said calmly, "we can discuss this."

"I don't want to discuss anything with you! Isn't it bad enough you ruined my daughter? Now you want to drag her off to a life of wandering and poverty? Why don't you leave and let her go?" her father said, tears rolling freely down his plump cheeks. "I know your kind. You'll grow bored with her in a week and leave her and her child to starve in the streets."

Ming's features grew deadly. He placed his hand on his katana, but Ava moved in between them. She'd had enough of all this bickering.

"Stop it, both of you!" she said. "I'm a grown woman and I know what I want." She turned to her father. "I love you, Papa, but I can't stay with you forever. I'm going with Ming and we're going to build a life together. You can either give us your blessing, or we can part company here and now and never see each other again."

Her father wiped his tears off on his sleeve. "Ava, I'm just trying to protect you. Can't you see what he is? He's not the kind of man good women marry!"

Ava looked at Ming and her heart leapt for joy. How could she ever explain how she felt to her father? He'd never understand. "He's my lover and the father of my child. I love him and I'll go wherever we need to go to be together. I wish you could understand that, Papa."

Her father's face grew grey and drawn. "I know exactly how you feel," he said, his voice dripping with venom. "I've heard this speech before, a very long time ago. Your mother told it to me just before she ran off and left us. You don't surprise me. After all, you are your mother's daughter."

Ava was shocked into silence. She'd never heard this story before. A cold, icy feeling filled her veins. "You told me she died when I was a baby."

Her father coughed out a bitter laugh. "She didn't. I never told you the truth because I didn't want you to have false hope she'd come back."

Ming studied the old man, his face unreadable. "How do you know she'll never come back?"

Her father glanced at Ming and tossed his hands in the air. "She's not coming back because she has a new profession as the town whore. I'm sure you've met her before, Ava. She's even bought dresses from us. She's the madam of Scarlet House, Sherry Starr."

The name rang in Ava's ears like a death keel. *Oh my God! This is impossible!* "Does she know who I am, Papa?"

The old man got up off the chair and lumbered over to pour himself a glass of water. He sipped, then nodded. "She knows. She could care less."

"Has she ever come by to see me?" Ava asked.

"A few times, when you were very little, but I never let her in. You were better off not knowing her. She loves nothing."

Ming placed his hand on her back. "Are you all right, Ava?"

She nodded. "I just need a moment to digest this."

Her father fixed Ming with a hateful stare. "So here I am all over again, losing someone I love to a bad decision. You'll forgive me if I can't be happy for you."

"I've had enough," Ming said. He placed the back of his hand against Ava's cheek. She looked up at him and smiled sadly. "Come on, let's go."

Ava walked toward her father. He scowled and looked away from her. She leaned forward and gently kissed him on the chin. "I wish you had told me about my mother before,

but it makes no difference. I love you, Papa, and I hope you'll choose to be part of our family. Ming's not the man you think he is, you'll see."

Her father's features softened. He brushed a wisp of hair from her face. "I hope you're right, Ava," he said. "I certainly hope you're right."

Chapter 21

The governor's palace was decorated with the colorful banners of spring. The grounds were neat and well cared for. The grass was a lush, vivid green and colorful flowers were planted in manicured flowerbeds. The decorated landscape matched the banners in varying shades of yellow and red. Ming walked along the stone patio and took a seat next to Governor Silver.

The governor opened one eye and looked at him. "I hear you have a girlfriend," he said, choosing his words carefully.

Ming put his boots up on a nearby chair. "It's more serious than that."

Silver closed his eyes again, soaking in the sun. "Is it love?"

"Yes."

"What about being the leader of your fellow mercenaries?"

"I was going to suggest you have Lou take over for me," Ming said. "He's a good man and trustworthy."

Governor Silver nodded grimly. "He's not as good a fighter as you."

Ming adjusted his katana. "He's good enough for what you need."

"Have you given any thought to staying?"

"You know we can't. We'd never be accepted here. I don't want my child growing up having to deal with what I did."

Silver opened his eyes and stared at Ming. "It must have been difficult for you. I understand your feelings," he said. "Where will you go?"

Ming rubbed the back of his neck, fighting off a tension headache. "The Forbidden City. They're holding tournaments there for military positions. Perhaps I can impress them."

The governor grinned. "I know you will. I'll send word to the generals to keep an eye out for you. Once they see you fight, they're sure to offer you something lucrative."

"Thank you, Excellency," Ming said, standing up. "Thank you for everything."

Silver shielded his eyes from the sun and smiled. "I'm happy for you, Ming," he said. "Love is a difficult thing to find in this life. You're a good man and you deserve this."

* * * *

As Ming made his way back to the inn he and Ava were staying at, he reached deep into his soul and explored his feelings for her. They were so intense and overwhelming, he didn't dare speak them for fear they might overcome him. Ever since he'd first touched her skin, he'd wanted her more than anything else in the world. She was sanctuary to him; she was home.

He came into their room moving quietly as she napped on the bed. Her long auburn hair formed a halo around her head and he longed to touch her. Easing himself down next to her, he kissed the exposed flesh of her neck.

She smiled, her eyes fluttered open. "How did it go?"

"Fine," he whispered, touching his fingertips to her lips.
"Everything went fine. How are you feeling?"

"Never better," she said, draping his hair behind his ears.
"I have a little nausea, but nothing too exciting. I sleep a lot."

"I've never told you how I felt about you, Ava," he said.

"It doesn't matter. I know you care for me."

"Yes," he said, "It does matter. I want you to know, but I can't put it into words. I guess I'll just have to show you."

Chapter 22

Ming let his heart go. He rained delicate kisses onto her forehead, cheeks and lips. His hands slid under the soft fabric of her shirt and caressed her breasts. They were round and slightly swollen from her pregnancy and he found himself intensely aroused. Lifting her shirt off, he stroked her tiny potbelly, imagined it very large, and round with his child. Blood rushed into his cock and it pressed stiffly against his pants. He was so hard it hurt.

He kissed her breasts, gently at first, then more eagerly. Ava gasped and cradled his head against her. She arched her back and whispered his name in a voice that was all seduction.

Guiding her up on all fours, he licked and toyed with her sex until she was pink, slick and eager. "It feels so good, Ming," she said in a panting whisper. "Please make me come."

Moving over her back, he leaned down to her ear. "You're ass is so beautiful, Ava. Let me put my dick in your ass. Let me make you come that way."

"Yes," she said in a breathy whisper. "Do whatever pleases you. I love it all."

His carnal hunger became a savage animal. Spitting on his palm, he lubricated his cock and pushed it into her tight anal canal. Ava groaned with delight.

Ming was engulfed with pleasure and heat. He pushed himself all the way home and paused, savoring the feeling. Finding Ava's clit with his fingers, he played with her, lightly teasing the button. Ava grew frantic with lust. Bucking back against his cock, she squirmed and rotated her hips, her sphincter tightened around him.

Ming leaned his head back and roared out his orgasm.

Pulling out of her, he could see Ava hadn't yet climaxed. Fastening his mouth onto her glistening clit, he sucked the little nub as she gasped out his name. When he knew she was close to release, he thrust his tongue deep into her pussy, his fingers tickling her clit until she cried out her pleasure to the sky.

Chapter 23

The Forbidden City was much larger than Ava imagined. It was a vast city, surrounded by a massive stone wall with watchtowers every mile or so. It was also a predominantly Oriental city, so Ming fit right in. Ava, however, attracted more than a few curious looks.

The iron city gates remained open during the day to allow the huge crowds of warriors, peddlers, and craftsmen to come and go freely. Everywhere she looked, people rushed here and there in a seeming endless bustle of activity. Ava stayed close to Ming as he made his way to the tournament announcements posted on a wall by the large central arena. Jostling his way to the front of the crowd, he read the day's matches. Ava squeezed up next to him.

"Do you recognize any of the fighters?" she asked, trying to hide her worry.

"One or two," he said. "The trick is to find someone close to your skill level. Nothing looks worse than beating up on an opponent less skilled than you." Grabbing a pen hanging nearby, he scribbled his name next to someone else's near the top of the list.

Ava knew the warriors toward the top of the list must be some of the best because they had few challengers next to

their names. "Doesn't fighting someone good make it more dangerous?" she asked.

Ming took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It certainly does." He placed his hand behind her elbow. "We have a few hours before the match. Let's find you a place to rest."

He led her over to a small tavern with tables set up outside. They took a seat and ordered some tea and a noodle dish to share.

"Ming," Ava said, placing her hand over his, "what happened to your parents?"

"Honestly, I don't know. As I grew up, I heard rumors, of course. Rumors that I was a foundling, that my father left my mother and she killed herself, stuff like that. But they were just rumors with no truth behind them. After a while, I just stopped looking. Like you, I decided to leave the past in the past. According to all the information I gathered about them in my life, they're both dead."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be. If I hadn't grown up in an orphanage, I wouldn't be the fighter I am today. I have no regrets." He placed her hand against his mouth and kissed it. "No regrets about anything."

Ava blushed. Then she said, "I'm scared. What if something happens to you?"

The server brought their tea and food. Ming picked up his chopsticks and grabbed some noodles. He placed his hand under them and held the mouthful out for her. She frowned. She wasn't very hungry, but ate the serving he offered.

He sipped his tea and leaned back in his chair studying the crowd. "I have some money set aside for you in case something happens to me. It's not much but it should be enough to

get you a small place of your own and feed you until the baby comes.”

“Then let’s use it *now*. You don’t have to fight.”

Ming smiled at her. “Ava,” he said soothingly. “I have to do this for *us*. This is our chance to build a life here. If I’m successful, I’ll be offered a permanent military commission with a good salary. Isn’t that what you wanted? Isn’t that what we *both* wanted for us and the baby?”

Ava leaned back in her chair, deflated. He was right, of course. It was what they’d both wanted. A rebel tear fell from her eye. She wiped it away, annoyed. “I love you, Ming,” she said softly. “I’m just so scared of losing you.”

He got up and moved his chair next to hers. Tilting her face up to his, he kissed her gently. “Don’t worry about me, Ava. I’ve been fighting all my life. If I had any doubt I wasn’t going to win this, I’d try something else. I don’t want our baby growing up without a father, either. Okay?”

All Ava could do was nod. And worry.

Chapter 24

Ming stepped out into the arena to the deafening roar of the crowd. The afternoon was hot and he felt a trickle of sweat roll down his chest beneath his armor. Pulling his katana out, he sliced the air, then held it up in the ready position for an attack. The arena was a dirt floored circular space with graduated seating all the way around. Ming spotted fresh blood on the ground. He allowed himself only a moment to glance up and search for Ava. He spotted her sitting near the exit, looking pale.

Focusing on the fight at hand, he advanced to the center of the arena and took in his opponent.

His opponent was also Asian, but a few inches shorter than Ming's six foot frame. Ming recognized him from a few brief skirmishes along the village border. He too was a mercenary and his name was Chul. Ming knew him as a seasoned warrior with more than a few kills under his belt. He was dressed in bronze scale armor with an elaborate helmet decorated with dragons. He too held his katana at the ready as he circled Ming looking for an opening.

Ming took the advantage and lunged at Chul. Slicing at his enemy's face, he watched Chul duck back and almost lose his footing. The battle was a good one, with both men well matched in strength and skill. Chul was a whirlwind of speed

and energy, launching surprise attacks at every opportunity. But Ming had a more restrained fighting style, letting his opponent exhaust himself before going in for the kill.

Ming's victory came when Chul made a clumsy slice that knocked him slightly off balance. With a high kick to the chest, Ming knocked his enemy to the ground and held his blade to Chul's throat. The crowd was on their feet, chanting for him to finish off his rival.

Ming looked up into the throng and saw Ava's face. She was so fragile and lovely, he almost forgot where he was. He looked down at Chul.

"What are you waiting for?" Chul said. "I am prepared to die."

"But I'm not prepared to kill," Ming said. "You're a fine warrior, Chul. I'd find it a shame to kill you, but the decision is yours. Do you surrender?"

Chul's eyes widened in surprise. "Yes, Ming. I surrender."

Ming held his hand down to help the other man up. "Then today, Chul, you may live."

Chapter 25

The infirmary was a small side room with little more than a wooden table and a deep sink. Ava bought some stitching from the attendant and set to mending Ming's wounds.

For all the pain he was obviously in, he didn't complain. He sat up on the table quietly and watched her work. She was amazed at his self-control. She would have been screaming.

"That's good stitch work," he said.

Ava smiled. "I worked in a dress shop. I've had lots of practice." She glanced up at him. "Don't these hurt?"

He looked off toward the door, looking bored. "I've been hurt before, lots of times."

She grimaced. She didn't like to think of all the times he'd been injured in battle. Just as Ava was finishing up, someone came in behind her. She turned around to see one of the generals approaching. She stepped back so he could talk to Ming.

He was a handsome man, much older than Ming, with long grey-black hair pulled into a ponytail in the back. He was dressed in simple robes of red and gold, but he carried a power and authority about him that made it clear he was a man to be respected.

He approached Ming and grinned. "You are a very impressive fighter. Chul was a good match for you, but you

seemed to have little trouble besting him. I'm glad to see you're as good as the rumors say you are."

Ming bowed his head. "Thank you, sir."

The general creased his brow. "Most men would have jumped at the chance to kill before a bloodthirsty crowd. But you chose restraint. I can't help but wonder why you didn't kill your rival, Chul?"

Ming glanced at Ava. "I have a great deal of respect for Chul, sir. He fought with skill and bravery. I could have killed him, but why? He's still young and has a lot to learn, why waste all that potential?"

"That is kind of you to say, Ming, and your mercy will not be forgotten. For you see, Chul is not just any fighter. He in fact, is my son." The general was silent for a few minutes, and then he said, "What was your mercenary rank when you left your village?"

"I was a captain," Ming said.

"Will you accept that rank in our army as well? I can assure you, a man who proves himself a capable leader will rise fast."

"I'm honored to accept, sir. Thank you again."

The general nodded to Ava, then left them alone. Ming squeezed her hand, and then lifted it to kiss her palm. He looked happier than she'd ever seen him.

She smiled and kissed him on the lips. "I'm so happy, Ming," she said. "I never thought this day would come."

He jumped down from the table and gingerly put his tunic on. "Now that we have some security, I think it would be wise if we got married."

Ava laughed. "Wow, that was romantic!"

Grinning, he got down on his knees and held her hands in his. Ava felt her cheeks grow hot. "I'm sorry. Ava," he said. "Will you marry me?"

Ava shook her head. "You're more trouble than you're worth, but yes I will."

Ming stood up and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "What about your father? Perhaps you should invite him and try and mend some bridges."

Ava nodded. "I will. I think he'll come to the wedding. Despite our differences, I know he loves me."

"And your mother?" Ming asked, raising his eyebrows.

Ava considered his question carefully. "No, I think I'll leave her where she is, in the past. She could have been a part of my life in many different ways, but she chose not to. She also used me to make a profit when she found out my feelings for you. I think my father is right about her. She doesn't love anyone."

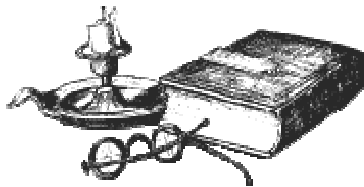
A muffled roar from the crowd filled the room as another tournament began. Ming took her hand and led her outside into the dazzling warmth of the afternoon sun.

He hailed a coach and helped her in. "Now," he said, settling into his seat. "Let's go find a house to raise our family in."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle is a huge fan of romantic erotica and has written several books for both Whiskey Creek Torrid and other on-line publishers. For more about her and her writings, please visit her website at www.michelle-oneill.com

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