



Diamond

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Prologue

“Come on, Diamond, girl. Let me come over there,” he coaxed.

“No.”

“Stop playing.” He chuckled to cover his confusion at me saying no—to a man. “I’m on my way. And wear that red thing. You know the one with the tassels and the cut out—”

“I said no, Leon!” It was all I could do not to burst out crying right there on the phone. “That’s not me anymore. My body is my own from now on, and you and every other loser out there are not going to treat me like the town whore.”

All went silent. His breathing didn’t even whistle across the lines, but since I hadn’t heard the dial tone, I knew he was still there. Finally, he spoke. “Everybody. And I do mean everybody knows what a slut you are, Diamond. That you put out. So don’t be pretending that you’ve turned over some new leaf or something, because you’re the same whore you always were and always will be. I’ll be over in an hour, and you damn sure better be ready for me!”

Chapter One

I stood there in the shower, watching the water dribble down over my naked body. I'd done it again. Slept with a man I wasn't in a relationship with. Why? Because he asked me. More like demanded. And just like every other instance, I threw up afterward, disgusted with myself and him. But I kept doing it. Over and over.

"Diamond! Diamond, get out here and take care of this hard-on I got." The latest ass, Leon, lay in my bed right then, ten-thirty in the morning, demanded I give him even more of my soul. He didn't care, as long as he got his.

Stepping into the bedroom which was done up in a style so similar to the back room at the club, sometimes I woke wondering where I was. I planted my hands on my hips. This time I meant what I said. I wasn't giving in to him. "I'm not giving you another inch of my body, Leon. Not now, not ever. You can get the hell out and take that hard-on to some hootchie who's impressed by that little—"

He sprung up out of the bed and yanked me up off the floor, holding me tight against his chest. The air whooshed from my lungs so that my head started to spin. His rancid morning breath made me nauseous, but Leon still pressed in closer so I wouldn't miss a word of his threat. "You think you all that?" He leaned back and snatched the top of my towel down so that my breasts popped out. "I can take you any time I want and there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

That scared me more than his actual attacking me would. Maybe it was because of my past, what I'd gone through with my father as a child. I don't know, but the fear of it happening was worse. I began to shake. My eyes grew wide and I fought hard for control. The look of satisfaction in Leon's eyes told me he knew he'd gotten to me. His type resorted to intimidation to get women to sleep with them. With that light of charm in his eyes the girls at the club found to be hot but I thought was weak, he bent his head down to run the tip of his tongue over one of my nipples. Bile rose in my throat. Kicking and struggling against his hold did nothing. The man was built like an ox, which was why he was a bouncer in the first place. Looked like I'd have to use the smart mouth Asia's mother said I was born with.

"Oh, so you're so hard up you have to force yourself on a woman, right?" I forced a laugh in his face. "Wonder what the girls down at the club will say about that."

He frowned, his hold loosening. "Who's going to believe you, Diamond? Everybody knows—"

"That I can have any man I want, and the man I tell no is . . ."

The impact of me hitting the floor was painful, but I'd made my point. Leon would be even more of a loser if it got around that he had to force a woman like me to sleep with him. As I sat nursing my ankle with one hand and yanking on my towel to cover my breasts with the other, he was getting dressed and cussing me out. I'd heard it all before. This was nothing new, just more crap I could share with my psychiatrist.

As soon as my apartment door slammed and I heard Leon's size thirteens stomping down the stairs, I scrambled for my phone. Before I pushed the last button, I was hiccupping from crying so hard.

"Dr. Little, please," I choked out. The man wouldn't be surprised to hear from me. I called on a moment's notice, every week. I danced extra just to pay his bill, if not for the times I called to sob in his ear.

"Diamond?"

"I did it again," I whispered. Waiting for his reply, I stood to climb on my bed, but hesitated. It seemed soiled now that I'd slept with yet another man in it. My inclination was to toss the mattress out in the dumpster and buy a new one. But how long would it be before I ruined that one too? "I slept with another guy. I can't stop. I hate it, and I hate myself. Every time I say I'm not going to do it anymore, I do."

"Your session isn't until next week, but we can push it up."

I sighed, "I don't have all the money yet. Things have been slow. And I wanted to quit the club, get a regular job, but then I couldn't afford to pay you. I don't know what I'm doing here. Maybe I should just accept who I am, and be done with it."

"Is that really what you want?" His voice was forever calm and accepting. Annoying in other words. He answered everything I said with a question. Sometimes I wondered why I would choose a male doctor given my problem with men, but then I figured it was just par for the course. Me and women didn't get along very well. Not for long.

Standing naked in the middle of my bedroom, my towel around my ankles, I just cried while he listened. Dr. Little had never come on to me or let his gaze linger on my breasts, even when I wore blouses or dresses that didn't leave much to the imagination. He was older, but I'd had men gawking who were in their seventies. That fact, kept me going back, kept me hopeful. "No, that's not what I want. I want to walk away from it all. I want to be respected and not jump into bed with guys hoping it will make me feel like I'm worth five cents, but ends up making me vomit. I want my best friend, Asia, to love me again."

"How long has it been?"

"Almost a year." I missed Asia, but I understood her walking away from me after what I did to her. Through her mother, I kept up on all the events in her life, so I knew she was moving in with Colin, her lover. I was happy for her—and jealous. That could never be me.

"Maybe you should reach out to her again, Diamond," Dr. Little encouraged. "She may be glad to hear from you. You told me her mother said she understood why you behaved the way you did."

"Yes."

Dr. Little didn't know, but I had started to dial Asia a million times, only to hang up before the call went through. Facing her rejection all over again would be more than I could handle. We were different as anything, me sleeping with every man I could and Asia being a virgin, but she was still my girl. And I could put on this face for the world like I was so hard, but in reality I felt all alone.

"I gotta go, Dr. Little. I'll speak to you next week." Not giving him a chance to answer and before I could lose my nerve, I punched Flash on my phone and began dialing Asia's cell. After the fight we got in at her mother's house, I had taken her off speed dial, but I still knew the number by heart.

When I heard her voice after so long, there I was crying again. And I just couldn't believe she finally agreed to see me. She even remembered that I usually took off on Thursday. We were going to do lunch.

* * * *

I was tugging on the hem of my dress for like ten minutes while I watched Asia sit there at the table waiting for me. All of my clothes were of the same slut variety they always were. Over and over I'd lectured myself about adding something that wasn't skin tight, hung just past my cootchie and didn't plunge to my navel. Realizing that such a piece didn't exist in my closet, I dragged in a deep breath and walked over in five-inch heels to meet my best friend.

“Hey, Asia, girl. It’s been awhile.” My old garish persona slipped right in place as always. I grinned and held out my arms to her. After a few seconds delay, she hugged me and we sat down.

“Diamond, you’re still the same.” She laughed and I know she didn’t mean it as an insult. “Only ten months, but it seems like longer, doesn’t it?”

I nodded, falling silent as I watched her. She was dressed modestly, as always though she showed just a little daring in allowing the buttons of her blouse to hang open at the cleavage. Not showing too much, but just a hint. I figured it was the confidence of having a man love her. Then again, Asia had always been confident in herself. What I pretended to have, she really did.

At first we chatted awkwardly, still feeling each other out. I think maybe Asia was checking her heart over to see if she still hated me, while I was praying that with the new rock on her finger, there was room for a friend who had screwed her over too many times. As the ice broke between us, and we became more comfortable, I started to get that funny feeling you get when someone’s staring at you.

Fidgeting in my chair and playing with my hair, newly done up with honey highlights, I glanced all around us. No one seemed to be paying us any mind, but the feeling wouldn’t go away. And then as soon as I turned back to Asia, a shadow fell across the table. I froze.

“Hello, Diamond.”

Asia’s monologue about her fiancé, Colin, came screeching to a halt. I didn’t look up or answer. I just sat there like an idiot. And then Asia was on her feet screaming, “Oh my gosh, Kanji!” In two seconds she was hanging around her cousin’s neck and kissing him like she hadn’t seen him in years. Which was true I guess since I myself hadn’t seen him since high school and Asia and I had lived in each other’s pocket up until our fallout.

While he talked to Asia, I took in his muscled six foot four height, the jeans hugging his narrow hips and the netted shirt that hung loose on a chest too damn hard. Kanji did not take after his half-Chinese mother, Asia’s aunt, in the least. He was the spitting image of his white father, except for the coal black eyes. Those eyes had always, from the first day I met him, looked too deeply inside my soul. I had never liked him. Especially not after the day he marched up to me just before homeroom and stated flatly, “You’re a fake, Diamond Williams, from those dumb braids and fake nails to your mother’s slutty clothes you stupidly decided to wear.”

He embarrassed me in front of everyone, made them take me for a joke. And I never forgave him or forgot. The funny thing was, he was probably one of the few boys who spoke to me in high school that I didn’t actually sleep with. As I sat there now, knowing he was probably still judging me, I held my head up high and reminded myself that I had changed. Such a resolve would have worked out better if I didn’t have to yank down my dress to keep from showing the world my ass.

To cover, I finally stood up and faced him. “Hey, Kanji.” I rolled my eyes. “What are you doing back?” I knew he’d gone into the service with Asia’s brother.

“Injury,” he muttered.

Letting my gaze flow down over his warm tan, I couldn’t spot a flaw on him. Maybe he had a mental problem and they decided they didn’t want him. I could only hope. “Oh.” I let my eyes focus on his, which was a serious mistake. My knees buckled, and I grabbed on to the table behind me.

Worse, he grinned, flashing that blinding white smile of his. “You okay?” An eyebrow flicked skyward. “Still wearing ridiculously high heels, I see. You should learn to accept yourself as you are, Diamond. Tiny.”

Insignificant. Nothing. My mind supplied synonyms to his description, though if I weren't feeling so down or so hateful toward him, I might have realized he was referring to my short stature. I could only think the worst.

Asia slapped his shoulder. "Leave her alone, Kanji. And what are you doing here? You should be visiting your mom and dad in New York. I know they missed you more than I did."

He had never taken his intense gaze off me. "I'm here on a mission."

My friend frowned. "What mission? Oh never mind. Come to dinner tonight and meet Colin."

"Diamond coming?" he queried.

Not if your ass is there, I thought.

Asia linked her arm with mine and kissed my cheek. I felt tears coming on, but blinked them away. "Yeah, she'll be there. We're just getting back in touch too. This night is going to be wonderful. Two people I love most in the world."

How could I say no?

Chapter Two

“Asia and I once looked up your name. Kanji is the name of the Chinese symbols for writing.” I was looking to get back at him and felt I had the perfect insult. “It’s like being named ‘alphabet’.”

Kanji only laughed as he chalked his pool stick. In the kitchen, I could hear Colin and Asia giggling. They were like two teenagers in love. I was still jealous. When my eyes focused on Kanji again, he was inches away. He slipped a finger beneath my chin and tipped it upward. “As you’ve heard, I am the image of my father. And what he wanted, my mother gave him. When she pulled out names to select, he saw the word Kanji and wanted that, no matter the meaning. She had never been able to resist him, just as many women aren’t able to resist me.”

His warm breath was scented with a fruity gum I’d seen him pop in his mouth earlier. Totally unromantic, but then I wasn’t trying to get it on with Asia’s cousin. “You’re an arrogant son of a b—”

Silenced with a kiss. That was no surprise, and really I was used to men stealing kisses right off the bat, like I was supposed to be impressed. Right while he had me up against the wall with the pool stick somewhere forgotten and him rubbing his fingers roughly along the thong between my legs, I told myself I wasn’t feeling like my body was going to explode. And when a cry of pleasure tore from my lips—the real thing and not what I had faked a thousand times—he jumped back away from me like I was poison.

He turned his back, bent to pick up the stick and walked over to arrange the balls on the table. With a hand that shook way too much, I straightened out my hair and pulled down the dress I’d bought after lunch to prove to Kanji and everyone else that I wasn’t a slut anymore.

I wanted to be my usual sassy self and demand what the hell that was, and maybe he had come back cause he realized he missed his chance years ago when he insulted me. But I couldn’t push the words past my lips. Not once in all my experience did I ever enjoy sex. Not for an instant did the touch of a man give me anything but a sense of disgust. So why did Kanji with his tongue down my throat and his fingers making me wet, have me up on an orgasm, in like a millisecond?

I knew an orgasm, not because I had had one in my life—I hadn’t—but because I had been taught to give the experience until I was an expert at doling out that level of pleasure. But it had never occurred to me that it could be earth-shifting to even come close. A vision of myself pressed against Kanji’s back, pleading for him to bring me to orgasm flashed through my mind, leaving me even weaker.

“Diamond, are you okay?” Colin entered the room carrying a tray of cheese and crackers in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.

I offered a thin smile. “Yes. Fine, thanks.”

Cheese, crackers, wine and laughter led us to the dinner table for more. I pointedly ignored Kanji and he did me for the most part, except for the times I felt his stare. Asia and Colin either didn’t notice or pretended not to as he shared with them about his experiences overseas. He was just getting to the injury that allowed him to return home early when my cell interrupted.

Seeing that it was Ice down at Steppes, I excused myself from the table before answering. When I found the way quickly back to the game room, I pressed the symbol to answer the call. “Hello?”

“Diamond, I need you here in an hour. One of the girls called in.” No greeting, just business with Ice.

“No, I told you yesterday before I left, Ice. I quit. I’m not coming back there.” Thinking I heard a sound in the hall behind me, I peeked out but there was no one. “I’m different now.” How many times was I going to say that until it was true? Somehow, I didn’t believe it any more than the people I was trying to convince. Ice wasn’t going for it either.

“Look, I don’t have time for this bull, girl. Get your ass down here. You need a ride, say so and I’ll send Leon.”

“No!” I yelled it and then struggled to calm myself. “No, I don’t need a ride. I’m not coming.” By this point, my resolve was weakening. Who was I kidding? I had bills, no other job lined up and I still didn’t have Dr. Little’s fee together. To quit him now before I had my stuff in order would be a mistake. If I didn’t know anything else, I knew that.

Ice wasn’t above laying on the pressure. “Oh, so you forgot where you came from, huh? Who paid for your apartment when you didn’t have the money? Who got you this gig?” I could just picture his poppy eyes blinking rapidly when he was angry, him sucking on his thick bottom lip as he thought of another reminder to how much I owed him for not sleeping in the gutter.

“You were paid,” I whispered, tears in my eyes. “You were more than paid and you know it.” Ice didn’t sniff around me anymore, had what he claimed was a classier girl. At least one that was faithful. He’d told me many times that men liked to try girls like me, but we were not permanent because there’d always be someone to fight off to keep us. Especially Diamond Williams. Why was I such a gem?

Even as he rolled off the familiar words that always managed to bring me down, and make me cave, tears dripped down my face because I knew there was no breaking away. I would give my excuses to Asia and just go.

“Have someone, not Leon, pick me up here. I have to go home first.” I gave him Colin’s address and then disconnected. Maybe whichever person he sent would take long enough for me to finish dinner, even though I knew I could not choke down a bite.

When I turned to face the door, Kanji filled it, a look of disapproval in his eyes. “You’re not still dancing, taking off your clothes for money?”

I wasn’t giving him the time of day. Marching up to the door, I stood waiting for him to move so I could pass. He didn’t budge. “Move.”

“Make me.”

Did I dare touch him? No way. I had convinced myself it was a fluke that he made me feel like he did earlier. There would be no instant replay. Not now, not ever. Still I couldn’t help but glance down at the bulge in his pants. It had not been that big a moment before. Me stepping closer to him had done it. If there was one thing I was always aware of, it was a man’s state of arousal. Kanji wanted me even if he didn’t like wanting me.

“I don’t have time for this, Kanji. Get out of my way.”

“Why don’t you look in my eyes, Diamond?” his voice taunted. “Are you scared of me?”

I blew out a sharp breath. “Scared of you? Don’t be stupid. I’m not scared of any man, least of all you. You’re nobody.” This time I put out an arm to brush him aside. He caught me by the wrist in a gentle but firm hold. With a flick of his thumb and forefinger, he rotated my arm so that he could plant a kiss on the palm of my hand. A shudder went through me, nearly landing me in a heap at his feet.

“You know what I want?” For a moment he rested his cheek in my palm and closed his eyes. It terrified me that he seemed to bask in my nearness. I tried pulling from him, but he held on. “I want to see you naked standing in front of me. I want to taste every inch of your sweet caramel body and run my fingers through your long silky hair.”

By then I was shaking hard, like he was already making love to me with just his words. I wanted him to stop speaking, but thought I'd scream in agony if he did.

"And just before I enter you to seal us as one, I will hear the words that I have dreamed will come tumbling from your ripe lips. You know what those words are, Diamond?"

"I-No-I—" I was stuttering like a fool.

He continued as if I hadn't spoken at all, or maybe he didn't require me to answer. "You know why I want to hear those words? Because I dream of you every night, have dreamed of you . . . since high school when I first saw that sexy pout. Because I love you."

I yanked out of his hold and punched him with all the strength I could muster, right in his jaw. He didn't even flinch.

"You have a nerve." I planted my hands on my hips. "You think I'm falling for that load of crap? I've been told 'I love you' by better men than you. Lots of men. And just like you now, it wasn't true. They just lusted after my body, thought it would make me give it up faster if I thought they cared."

I rolled my eyes and started to storm by him again. When I moved just past, he caught me around the waist and whipped me around and up so that my rear was wedged against his erection. My pulse was pounding when he pressed his lips against it at the side of my throat. He kissed me lightly and I moaned.

"Don't worry," he muttered into my hair though I heard him clear enough. "I'm not going to make love to you until I know you will say the words and mean them."

"Well I guess you'll never get what you want." I wriggled in his hold, sending us both nearly over the top. He tightened his grasp. "Let me go, Kanji."

"Tell me you want me," he demanded.

"No."

He turned me in his arms so that I faced him, pressing one of his legs between mine and hiking up my dress so that his arousal pressed directly against my panties. I was so wet, we should both be concerned that I didn't dampen the front of his jeans. Yet, I didn't fight to get away when my feet left the ground.

Kanji tangled his hands in my hair and tugged until my head went back and my mouth flew open. He covered it sucking at my bottom lip until I nearly sobbed with desire. He drew back to whisper, "Tell me."

"I . . ."

He stared down at me. "Sweet Diamond. I knew you, baby." His words were a cry seemingly from his heart. "In school, when I saw you. I knew how you dressed, how you behaved was a front. It wasn't the real you. When I was able to, I promised myself that I would come back and show you the way to—"

"Show me the way! What am I am some damn lost soul?" I fought like an animal but he was too strong. I wasn't getting free until he was ready to let me go, but somehow I knew he wouldn't hurt me. "I'm not some charity project, Kanji. Get your hands off me. You haven't been sent to save me from myself, you self-righteous dick!"

Red suffused his face and he let go but caught me when I almost fell to the floor. "Why can't you behave like a lady sometimes?" he demanded.

"Because I'm not a lady. Haven't you figured that out?" Somehow one of my shoes had come off and I bent down to slip it on again while he watched. "Okay, so you dreamed of coming back to save me. That's fine. But now you know." I stood up straight and held out my arms to the side. "This is me, Diamond, all grown up. Still a slut."

"Don't."

"Don't what? I said it's me, damn it. Get that through your head, Kanji."

“It’s not who you want to be.”

“You mean it’s not who *you* want me to be.” I started to walk up on him to get right up in his face, but changed my mind. That was dangerous with my weird and uncalled for attraction to him. I stayed well away while I read him. “Your problem is you don’t know how to separate love from lust. And you can’t accept that a man like you could lust after a woman like me. So you have to fix me to make it acceptable.”

He grunted. “Where’d you get that psychobabble from, a TV psychiatrist?”

“No, Dr. Little. As far as I know, he’s never been on TV.” I grinned. Now that was strange. It was the first time I’d felt a real smile in a long time. I had to give it to my friend’s sexy cousin, he did help me feel better even if for a moment. As was my normal reaction when grateful to a man, I rushed up to him, stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the lips.

When I drew back, he groaned. “Diamond, baby. You drive me insane.”

I was back in style, offering a confident wink and a stroke of his shaft before I darted past and ran down the hall to the dining room. As wild as that whole scene with Kanji was, just thinking about it would get me through the rest of the night at the club.

Chapter Three

One hand on the pole, the other reaching for the floor between my legs, as I did a slow dip. The wolf calls told me I'd done it right, so that my boobs were squished together and my shaved snatch was only barely hidden behind the scrap of material I wore. Even when I rocked to the music and dropped my head back as if overcome by my lover, it was all automatic. My mind was smack dab in the third row, two tables to the right where Kanji had been sitting every night I worked for the last two weeks.

At first I thought it would be fun to tease him, bending over in his direction while I danced or teasing my nipples during my routine, while watching to catch his reaction. But that proved too much for me because it ended up getting me hot, knowing he was starting to twitch with a hard-on in his chair. And if I looked too much at one guy, the bouncers tossed them out. I didn't want Kanji there, distracting me from my job and surely judging me, but I didn't want stupid Leon to go anywhere near him.

So I knocked off the seduction, which was bad because strange enough, it was Kanji who made it tolerable. I still wanted to quit, to be respectable. Guys still hit on me after the show, stuffing their cards or slips of paper into my hands for me to call them. Worse, there was me wanting to do my old routine 'cause that's what was natural.

Except with Asia's cousin watching, I couldn't take a guy home. I had to act like this was all temporary, that I had no interest in calling those guys. So I dumped their numbers and cards in the trash. Maybe he was good for me after all.

After my last number was up for the night, I stepped down from the stage on sore muscles. As usual, men who worked for Ice surrounded the area, holding back the more eager of the customers who wanted to talk to the dancers. They called out the girls' names like a cackle of chickens, but the noise no longer bothered me. I knew right when I heard Kanji call me above the rest, and felt gratified that he was just as hungry as the rest. I didn't turn around but headed straight for the back where we all changed our clothes.

As soon as I got in the door, my cell rang. I didn't recognize the number. "Yeah?"

"Diamond."

"How did you get my number, Kanji? No, don't tell me. Asia, right?"

He didn't waste time on small talk and I could hear Leon demanding he and the other men hit the street. The club was closing. "Have dinner with me."

"Boy, it's four a.m. I'm sleepy. The only thing I'm planning on doing is going to bed as soon as I hit my apartment. I might not even get undressed."

The line went dead like he was imagining me getting undressed. I probably had too much sex on the brain all the time myself, but that was my lifestyle. I didn't know anything else. "Hey, are you there?"

His voice was deeper when he spoke, "I'm here. It doesn't have to be tonight. Maybe tomorrow night. You're off right?"

Now he was watching my schedule. I had to admit to myself that I wanted to talk to him, see him up close in brighter light than they had at the club. And if I was really honest with myself, I wanted to hear him say he loved me even if I knew it was a lie. "Fine. Whatever. Pick me up at eight tomorrow night and don't be late." I disconnected and tossed my phone on top my purse.

Glancing up in the mirror, I wondered what I should wear on our date and where Kanji would take me. A date wasn't new, but normally the location was just one more club so the guy whose arm I was on could rub it in the other men's face that he was with me. Not that I

was the only girl being used as a trophy. Steppes was proud of the sexy bitches they had in there. I was just one in the crowd, mostly.

* * * *

The next night, when I might have been wrestling with my new outlook about not getting done up like a hootchie, instead I was going all out—from the bracelet sized hoops in my ears to the dress that might as well be a blouse to the spiked sling backs on my feet displaying my french manicured toes. With my nipples outlined clearly through the hot pink hugging them, I knew Kanji would either be too embarrassed to go out with me or he'd get up on his high horse and demand I change. Either way, I maintained a level of control over him. And that's the way I liked it.

"Coming," I yelled when I heard the doorbell give a flat dink. I'd been on the landlord to fix it for months, but *she* couldn't be bothered with doing much for me. I flung the door wide with a sassy grin on my face only to have it fall flat at Kanji dressed in a dark grey suit and holding red roses.

His hair straight and slate black hung across his forehead making him look younger than his twenty-eight years, two older than me, but he wasn't any less sexy with a body to make a girl want to eat him for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

To his credit, Kanji's smile didn't waver when he saw how I was dressed. He simply stepped forward, planted a kiss on my lips and moved past me into my apartment. Snatching a deep breath, I slammed the door and ran around him to cut him off from going much further. "Stay there. I'll put these roses in water and we can go."

He was still chuckling when I slid into the kitchen to find a vase. Jewelry, money, even clothes were what I received more often. Having no vase, I stuffed the flowers in an old coffee can, ran some water over them and plunked them down in the middle of the stove.

The phone rang before I could get back to Kanji. "Hello?"

"Diamond, hi. This is Tammy from Dr. Little's office, just calling to confirm your appointment for tomorrow."

Defeat slapped me in the face. "Oh, um, I don't have all the money this time." I gave a nervous laugh. "What else is new, right? But, Tammy, I really need to talk to Dr. Little about something. Can you ask him if we could cut the time down a little so I can still see him?"

"I'm afraid he's already gone for the night, but, well, how much are you short?"

I did a quick mental calculation, knowing these people had better things to do than to deal with some screwed up girl who couldn't keep her legs closed. Every week I was trying to make a new deal. And crazy as it was, I had been rolling in the money not long ago. So why was I having such a hard time now?

"About a hundred," I croaked.

While I listened to her tell me all the reasons why she couldn't cut the time anymore, that they had already made special arrangements for me countless times, a crisp hundred dollar bill waggled in front of me. I looked up to find Kanji holding it. I burst out crying. "Tammy, just tell Dr. Little I won't be there this week."

I hung up the phone and ran down the hall to my room, slamming the door behind me. Flinging myself on my bed and stuffing a pillow over my head, all I could hear was my father yelling "you ain't nothing but a whore just like your whoring mother. And ain't no man gonna see you any different either."

That was it, that did it. Seeing Kanji offer me money meant he saw me just like all the others saw me. And I knew it was true, I just didn't really accept it.

“Diamond.”

“Get out. Just get out, Kanji,” I muttered in the pillow. I’m not going.”

He pulled my pillow from my hands and threw it across the room before flipping me over on my back. I pressed my hands into my eyes, but I knew he must be looking around at my little den of sin, taking in the tones of red and black. The place nearly reeked of sex.

“I wanted to help, but I went about it wrong.”

Ignoring him, I didn’t answer or open my eyes but I became aware that my clothes were all twisted with my dress hiked up round my hips. My big boobs were practically choking me and it was likely my nipples were half exposed.

My suspicions were confirmed when Kanji’s hands moved to my hips and one of his knees was planted between my legs. When my body burst into flames, I opened my eyes to stare up at him. I was scared out of my mind, but I wanted him to kiss me so bad it was painful.

His mouth descended fast, his tongue slipping into my mouth for a kiss that had me grabbing at the lapels of his suit so he wouldn’t end it. As I sucked his tongue, he moved his hands higher to grasp my panties and yank them downward. When he stroked me, I was practically howling with need, but he hesitated.

“What is it?” I groaned against his mouth. “I have condoms.”

He broke off the kiss and leaned back panting. “This isn’t what I want.”

“Could have fooled me.” I grinned as I glanced down to find I was right, my nipples were showing. I tucked them away and adjusted the dress before flipping to sit up. “Do you think you’re somehow different from all the others, Kanji? You want me, big deal. We can do it and you can get it out of your system.”

“That’s not all you want from life, Diamond.” He jumped to his feet and moved away as if he was afraid I’d seduce him just sitting next to him. “There’s more to life than just sex. There’s more to us.”

“Us!” He was pissing me off again. I slid to my feet nearly twisting my ankle in the process. “There’s no us. We haven’t seen each other in eight years, Kanji. I haven’t heard from you and you haven’t heard from me. I know your sister used to come down here regularly to visit Asia, but that’s it. You went off across the world. For that matter, there was nothing before you left. You made it crystal clear what you thought of me then. So why did you suddenly show up in town like we’ve been lovers or like we’re in a relationship?”

“You’re right. I’m wrong.”

“What?”

“You’re right, Diamond.” He turned to face me, then crossed to hold his hands suspended above my breasts. “Every fiber of my being wants you so much. I ache for you. And how can I convince you that it’s love I’ve felt all these years? How can I convince myself?”

The trouble in his eyes got to me. I pulled his hands down to me, guided him in stroking my nipples. My head went back and I breathed through my mouth. It felt incredible. Where had this feeling been all my life? “Make it easy on us both, Kanji,” I encouraged. “Just have sex with me. Get it over with.”

“The problem is,” his own breathing was ragged, “that I want to make love to you, not have sex. I want to cherish you, and let you know there’s someone here for you, always.”

A shudder went through me. “I know but . . . oh . . .” I couldn’t believe it. That earth-shifting was radiating through my being just from him rubbing my nipples. He flicked my tight little nubs with his thumbs, and the sensation made a beeline straight to my wet box. It

rippled and rolled. Then when he pinched gently, tugging over and over, I screamed his name with tears running fresh down my cheeks.

“Diamond,” he muttered against my mouth as he kissed me once. Too short a kiss. I opened my eyes, ready to please him in return, but he moved away, tucking his hands behind his back, much like I’d seen his grandfather do years ago. “Honey, with everything in me I love you, just as I always have. And if it takes me keeping my hands to myself to prove that to you, then so be it. From now on, I will treat you like the respectable lady you are.”

I stared at him like he’d lost his mind. He had just brought me to a shattering orgasm just rubbing my breasts, and he was saying he would treat me like a lady? The man had to have sustained a head injury while he was away.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

With a shrug, I spun toward my bathroom. “I guess. Just let me clean up a little.” After I’d washed quickly and changed my panties, we were out the door for an experience that was already off to a wild start.

Chapter Four

“So what’s up with you and Kanji?” Asia’s tone was light enough, but I sensed she was digging.

Not deeming to look up from my salad, I chased an olive around with my fork. “Nothing. Just went out a few times.”

“Not what I heard.”

With a sigh, I laid down my fork and played with the buttons of the blouse I wore. The thing didn’t bear describing, but for the umpteenth time, I fought the urge to show more cleavage. I’d picked up the dark blue eyesore trying again to be a good girl, but I hated it so much I wanted to throw up on it. To think I missed my nipples nearly tumbling over the top of my blouse at that moment. “What are you getting at, Asia? If you want to ask me something, just do it.”

She looked me in the eye when I glanced up. “Okay, I will. I want to know what you think you’re doing by dating Kanji. You’re not the type. You sleep with them and drop them. Sometimes you hang out, but you definitely don’t date. So what’s going on? I don’t want my favorite cousin hurt.”

I sat back in my chair. “So that’s it, huh? Why do you talk to me, Asia? Why the lunches out, the dinners at Colin’s? You want to rub my nose in the fact that I couldn’t get him like all the rest? Is that it? You want to punish me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Surging to my feet, I was getting loud. She looked uncomfortable which was fine by me. “You don’t want to be my friend anymore. You just want to get rid of your guilt because I gave myself to my father to keep him from hurting you. That’s it isn’t it?”

Her eyes were wet. “Don’t talk like that.”

“It’s true,” I screamed. A waiter was headed our way, but I held up my hand. “Don’t bother, I’m getting the hell out of here.” Snatching open my purse, I rummaged around for some money and noticed a hundred dollars that wasn’t there before. I rolled my eyes, deciding that second I was going to take Kanji’s money. If nobody believed in me, well that was nothing new. I’d survive.

* * * *

While I was made at Asia for thinking I wasn’t good enough for Kanji, I was also so attracted to the man, I couldn’t resist him. And he didn’t make it any easier with his chasing behind me like I was what was on the menu. What was I supposed to do? I started seeing him, on a whim.

“So where are you hurt?” I questioned Kanji as we walked along the street eating ice cream. I couldn’t remember a time when I had ever done such a thing, except with Asia when we were much younger. Never with a man. “You said you were discharged from the service, but you look healthy to me.”

He grinned and winked, a look that put me in mind of times I did the same to a guy to throw him off balance. I was wobbling, let me tell you. “Thanks, I try.”

I rolled my eyes. “Will you be serious?”

“If you must know,” he flipped up his t-shirt and swung away from me, “I was shot in the back. The bullet’s lodged near my spine.”

Gasping at the harsh scar marring his beautifully tanned skin, I ran my fingers over the healed wound. "That's terrible, I'm sorry. It's all healed. I thought you said you came right back here. And Asia asked about you visiting your parents."

"You really are nosy aren't you?" he chuckled. Kanji dropped his shirt then reached out to hold me but drew back. He did that a lot, began to touch me but didn't. I knew it was more of his vow to show me he loved me by not touching me. And in support of his promise, I was sure to wear the most revealing of my clothes and to brush against his hard body as often as possible. The poor man had been reduced to snapping at me on more than one of our dates.

"I went through an extended period of rehabilitation," he explained. "My parents actually did visit me often while I was in the veteran's hospital, but I asked them to keep it quiet that I had been injured, just until I had a chance to come down here myself. I wasn't in any immediate danger."

I longed to ask him why he would want to keep what he was going through a secret, but I kind of knew. He wouldn't have known Asia and I had a falling out, that we hadn't talked for ten months. Kanji figured she'd tell me, and I could guess that as a man he wouldn't want to appear weak in the eyes of the woman he was interested in.

When his ice cream was finished, Kanji stuffed his hands in his jean pockets and strolled over to a bench to sit down. He offered me one of his gentle smiles that had my insides doing flips. The man was born to make my life more complicated than it needed to be. "So, what's your story," he asked. "Why did you and Asia stop talking?"

His question made me jump. I turned away not wanting him to see my expression. Asia had never known my past before last year, so I know he didn't know back in high school when he accused me of being a fake. "Why ask? I'm sure Asia's explained it all to you."

"She didn't betray your trust." When I looked his way, he patted the bench beside him. "Come here, honey, sit down and talk to me."

I closed my eyes. It got to me when he called me honey. Others had done it, but not with affection like that. I steeled myself against it, choosing instead to fall back on brash comments. "Nothing to talk about. Dirty slut steals best friend's men. End of story. End of friendship."

"There has to be more than that."

"Nope." I stared at the sky.

"If you're hurting, there must be something deeper."

Suddenly, I screamed and stomped like a child. Gratified to see Kanji's eyes widen at my reaction to his probe, I threw my hands up in the air dramatically. "Why do you do that? You act like you care, but then you turn around and act no different from Dr. Little, this cold and clinical persona, like you're analyzing what makes a girl give away her body to the highest bidder, to any bidder. Why don't you just leave me alone?"

I spun on my heel and stomped away. Immediately, I heard him following me.

"Okay, doctor, my mother walked out on us when I was five. Is that what you wanted to hear? She gave it away more than I ever could, or at least that's what my dad never let me forget every day he was comparing me to her. Said I'd end up like her, a nobody." With a grin plastered to my face, I glanced back at him and offered a little curtsy. "That's okay too because I was happy after he went to jail and I moved out on my own. Or I was happy pretending to be happy. At least I had Asia. She was real. But then I screwed that up last year like I said before."

He seemed about to speak having strolled up alongside me, but I cut him off.

“And if you think this is a pity-party I’m having, you’re wrong. I’m just stating the facts since you wanted to know.”

Kanji reached out to stroke my hair, but I knocked his hand away. That seemed to jog his memory on not touching me, and his hand fell to his side. “I understand.”

“You don’t.”

“For a few days, I’m going to visit my parents. Then I need to meet with a guy in Pennsylvania, a reconnection. He and I are talking about a business venture together. Computers. We’ll flush out the details over the weekend for a start.” His voice died away, but somehow I had the feeling there was more he wanted to share. “Diamond, I want you to be faithful to me while I’m gone.”

Faithful? I had not said I would be Kanji’s girlfriend, having never been any man’s. And what Ice had said about me and my kind was true. We were not faithful. It wasn’t in our vocabulary. I’d not tried it, and him mentioning such a thing left me feeling resentful.

When I didn’t speak, Kanji continued. “I’ll give you whatever you want, do anything for you. The money my grandfather left me is still in the bank. I plan to invest a good portion of it in getting my business off the ground, but there will still be enough to keep you.”

“Keep me?” I whispered.

He sighed, “I didn’t mean it like that. Just wait for me, okay? I’ll figure out the right words to say that don’t make me sound like everybody else. I’m used to speaking plain, not wooing.”

Knowing Kanji’s family all these years meant I knew the type of people they were. They certainly weren’t prejudiced, but Kanji ended up sounding like he wanted to decorate his arm with a black woman. He might be one-fourth Chinese, but he was still a white man, and he spoke like one.

I made no guarantees and Kanji didn’t insist on it. I think he was scared I’d flat out refuse or go running out to find a guy to take to bed just to spite him. I thought about it but I wanted to see where he and I could go. Kanji made me mad, but he made me happier too. That alone made me wait, at first.

Chapter Five

I had big intensions that week while Kanji was gone. Having bought some sensible shoes—cringe—I was hoofing it around to different stores, trying to line up a job. Somebody had told me the drug store was hiring, but they wanted experience. Shaking my behind on stage didn't impress the manager. For like a minute I wondered if me telling her, her husband was down there drooling over the girls every week would sway her decision. I'd been in her husband's wallet and recognized her face. Enough said.

Finally, my feet were hurting and my pride had burned out. I broke down and went to a fast food place. There I was at the counter trying not to be loud, for once in my life, telling the manager that I wanted an application when somebody called my name.

"Diamond? Oh my goodness, Keisha. It's Diamond." Kim's voice lit the whole restaurant up. I rolled my eyes, plastered on a smile and turned around.

"What's up, Kim, girl? It's been a while."

"Ain't it though?"

We eyed each other's outfits like usual, trying to gauge who was the hotter double D. I had always won out easily and she made up for it by being a wilder ho than I was, which was just as hard to do.

"What are you doing slumming in here, Diamond?" She laughed, a spiteful sound. Kim hadn't forgiven me since she found me sniffing around her man, which was right about the same time Asia found out I had come on to Colin. Nothing had been right since then.

I played it off. "Well you know, I'm out here shopping and everything. Got hungry. I just broke down and came in here to get something to eat." With that I spun around and placed an order for something they didn't even have on the menu. The manager gave me a dirty look and pointed her chin to the board over her head. I chose a number seven and hoped I had some cash in my purse. Ever since Kanji had left, I hadn't worked and instead paid up on my bills so I would have time to find a new job. Nothing was going as planned.

As I shifted the contents of my purse around looking for any green, Kim was standing there tapping her funky silver espadrilles to see if I would make a fool of myself. But as usually happens to me, this guy stepped up who wasn't all that cute with his too thick mustache hanging over his lip, to pay for my food. "Uhn, uhn, uhn." He looked straight down my blouse. "Baby, let me get that for you."

"Thanks, you're sweet," I told him, stroking his chest. I gave Kim a look that said it all and she rolled her eyes and spun on her heel to walk away.

And just as the man was pushing up on me, getting a free feel of my behind, like paying for my food entitled him to something, my cell phone rang. It was Kanji. My heart jumped into my throat.

"H-hello?"

"Honey," he breathed into the phone. "I miss you."

"Oh." I bit my lip and held up a hand to the guy following behind me like an aroused dog. Picking up my stroll so that I was quickly out of earshot, I purred into the phone. "Of course you do, Kanji. You didn't get any before you left. And when are you coming back?" I hoped I didn't sound desperate.

When he chuckled, I knew I had. "Soon. My mom kept me an extra couple of days, so I'm late leaving for Philly. I'll try to wrap things up quickly so I can get back to you."

Leaning a hip against the side of the table while I dropped my food there, I almost felt loved. "Good. Well tell your mom I said hi okay?"

He went silent.

“Kanji. Are you there?” I called.

“I haven’t told my mom I’m seeing you. None of them knows except Asia,” he said bluntly. “Diamond, you have to understand that—”

“Oh, I understand. Don’t worry about it.” Suddenly, I was blinking like something was in my eyes. Asia’s mom had been the only one to accept me and care about me, but she and her husband were now retired and traveling. The rest of her family thought I was a bad influence on Asia, and now Asia was back to ignoring my existence after we had had that fight. I guessed she felt justified since she had made an effort to patch things up with me. It was fine. “Look, Kanji. I have someone waiting for me. I have to go. I’ll talk to you later, okay?” Before he could say anymore, I disconnected.

You probably think I started feeling sorry for myself. I didn’t. Taking it all in stride as the Days of My Life, I tossed the guy who bought my food a come hither look and flopped down into the chair to chew those disgusting fast food fries. At the same time, my mind was working on what man I should call to get me out of my financial fix.

I wasn’t holding it against Kanji for not telling his family about me. He seemed like the kind of guy who would do what he pleased no matter who liked it. But that didn’t change the fact that I was pissed off that his high-sadity family probably wasn’t going to accept me anyway.

After getting the phone number of the guy I had lunch with and promising to call, I went home to find my black book. It wasn’t one of those tiny items, three by five inches, but a planner chock full of men and some women. A couple years ago, I had the bright idea of hitting the women up for money. But they weren’t gullible like the men, and those who were interested in helping me out with my expensive tastes wanted something to show for it. I hadn’t gone down that road and wasn’t planning on it.

Flipping through the pages, I found Teddy, this fine brother who had bought me steak dinners for a week followed by a trip to Cancun a month later. He had a huge appetite for sex, and I didn’t figure I could get out of that part of the deal. But I was getting desperate. Not just for money, but for attention, the touch of a man.

As I said, I didn’t like sex. Even with Teddy, I vomited after. Keeping that a secret when men had the notion that you always wanted them joining you in the shower afterward was hard. Men could be romantic when they wanted to be. Maybe it was Kanji’s telling me he hadn’t told his family about us dating. Maybe I was just a no good woman who’d never amount to anything just like my father said. Either way, any time I didn’t have a man telling me how beautiful I am, touching me, showering me with gifts, I felt like I was nothing and didn’t matter. And so usually, I sought it out. That wasn’t hard working at the club. Men were in abundance and many I’d already been with were seeking to get back with me.

For once, I just thought I could hold out. I could do the right thing. Be faithful to Kanji. Who was I kidding? This was Diamond.

“Hey, Teddy,” I purred into the phone. “What’s up, playa?”

He sounded groggy like he’d been up all night partying and was just trying to sleep it off. Probably had been. Some things never change. “Diamond?”

“Who’s that?” I heard another woman’s voice in the background. He was already with somebody. Moving on.

“Sorry, you got somebody in your bed. Never mind.” I started to hang up.

“Hold on, girl. Damn.” I heard him muttering something in the background. The next thing I know, I was trying not to laugh because the girl was yelling calling him all kinds of names. Teddy had still wanted me when I found somebody new. “Diamond, I’m going to

get myself together and come over there tonight around eight, okay? You need some money, baby?”

I smiled. “Yeah. Thanks.”

* * * *

Was I ashamed? Yes! I couldn’t stop thinking about Kanji. I did stop taking his calls and pretended I wasn’t home when Asia banged on my door yelling that he was trying to get in touch with me. I knew he’d gone through a lot to get her to come by. But what was I going to say? He knew what he was getting into, and I’d been a fool to think I’d be good with a man like him. While all those arguments went through my mind, I still couldn’t stop fantasizing about what it would be like to be in his arms and not dizzy with disgust every time Teddy plowed into me.

A few days after I’d picked up with Teddy, I called Ice and told him I was coming back again to the club, because I still hadn’t found a job. Next, I contacted Tammy at Dr. Little’s office and told her too. I was done. No sense pretending anymore. This was who I was, and the sooner I accepted it just like everybody else in my life did, the better.

After that I took the money Teddy gave me and went buck wild shopping. My lover drove me all over the place, patiently waiting while I tried on the whole store of merchandise. Finally, we ended up back at my place and Teddy was all over me. I couldn’t even get the door shut before he had his tongue in my mouth and his hands in my panties.

There we were in the middle of the living room on the floor with me getting ready to stuff my mouth with his thing, when I heard the door slam against the wall. I screamed and turned around to find Kanji standing there with his eyes red as hell.

I rolled to the side and yanked my miniskirt down over my naked behind. “Kanji, I—”

“Get up!” He ignored me, but was looking at Teddy who was leaning back on his elbows like he owned the place. Kanji wasn’t impressed. He strode over to Teddy and yanked him up from the floor, gripping the collar of his shirt so tight it seemed to be cutting off the man’s breath.

Teddy choked, struggling to pull in some air. He made some unintelligent noises, I interpreted as “get your hands off me.”

I pulled at Kanji’s arm which suddenly seemed like it was made of steel and bigger than my head. I couldn’t remember him being so pumped, though I knew he had a hot body. But what did I expect, the man was straight from the military. “Let him go, Kanji. Please.”

Still Kanji ignored me. “You have two seconds to get your ass out of here and never come back before I start beating you. One . . .”

I screamed, “Kanji, he can’t go if you’re still choking him to death. Kanji!”

Teddy was turning blue, I was practically hanging from Kanji’s arm trying to get him to let go and that’s when the police walked in. Soon as Teddy saw them, the terror that gripped his face transformed to relief, though he was still looked like he was dying from lack of air.

One of the officers walked over and tapped Kanji on the shoulder, which was weird. In my experience, they issued commands, you obeyed or suffered the consequences. The officer was calm, even seemed friendly toward Kanji. I started thinking it was because he was white.

“Let him go now,” came the too gentle command.

Kanji looked back over his shoulder at the officer and then complied. Teddy dropped on the floor gasping and sobbing. I thought about trying to comfort him, but I was too scared to move. Part of me thought maybe Kanji would turn that anger on me and part that the

police would arrest him. The thought of that hurt. Impossibly, I still had feelings for him after all I'd done.

"While I speak with the officers and get rid of him," Kanji said without looking at me, "you get packed."

My eyes widened. "What?"

He didn't repeat himself. The officers greeted Kanji by name, and I started getting the suspicion that they had come together, that he knew them personally. While I thought about that, the officer by the door who I hadn't looked at closely greeted me. "Aren't you going to speak, Diamond?"

"Lei!" I gasped. It was Asia's brother, apparently also back in town. Nobody told me anything. "What are you doing here, as a cop? I thought you were still in the army too."

"Nope, I did my duty. Here doing the right thing, helping to raise my son." He shrugged. "What about you?"

I started to answer, but Kanji interrupted by grabbing me by the arm and taking me down the hall to my bedroom. He shoved me inside and slammed the door behind us. I was hot, ready to tell him off, but I still couldn't bring myself to say a word. Watching while he rummaged around my messy room, digging in the closet and glancing under the bed. He finally located my suitcase and slapped it open near the dresser.

"You can fill it yourself or I will. Five minutes." He walked out the door before I could ask where he thought I was going.

Then deciding it was better to just play along for now, I started packing. And while I was still scared of his reaction to seeing me about to get busy with another man, something I had been doing all week anyway, there was a warm feeling inside me knowing he wasn't walking out on me. Kanji was still interested even after all I put him through. He was either weak or the perfect lover for a person like me. That latter didn't seem likely so I was going to have to convince the stubborn man that we wouldn't work out, one way or another.

Chapter Six

“Where in the hell do you think you’re taking me, Kanji?” I demanded as he sped down the highway.

“Away.” He gripped the steering wheel tight, probably wishing it was my neck so he could choke the life out of me. No doubt he was still pissed, and I didn’t blame him. The sooner he realized me and him didn’t have a future, the better. I could scrub my mind clean of those frilly fantasies of having a decent man who loved me for me. And he could axe visions of me becoming Suzie homemaker. Now was as good a time as any to give it a try.

“Kanji, I’m glad you walked in on me and Teddy,” I began. His hands twisted on the steering wheel, giving off a squeak of the leather. I swallowed and continued. “Now you see that you and me trying to be together is a joke. I am what I am.”

“Bull.”

“What?”

“I’m not stupid, Diamond. And I damn sure am not the pushover you seem to think I am.” He glanced at me and then focused on the heavy traffic leaving the city. “Yes, I love you, with all my heart. But that doesn’t make me weak. I’m not afraid to express myself, to be honest though back in high school I was.”

Okay, so what, he had feelings for me. I had them for him too. Nothing changed. “This is a mistake, Kanji. You can’t just kidnap me and force me to be faithful to you. I am who I am.”

“You don’t get it.” He reached across the space separating us and stroked my cheek. Comfort and security flowed over me like honey. I pulled away, nearly crying out at his gentleness. “It hurt to see you with another guy, but it was unfair of me to ask you to be faithful.”

“What?” I gasped. “That’s just stupid. What guy feels like he shouldn’t ask his girlfriend not to cheat? No one should even have to ask.”

He laughed. “It was wrong of me because you didn’t yet believe in us. You hadn’t accepted that we can work out, just as you haven’t now. We act on what we believe, and you believed you couldn’t be faithful to me or that I could love you as much as I do.”

I twisted in my seat and stared out the window. “Now who’s doling out the psychobabble? You’re wasting both our time, Kanji. I’m no good, won’t ever be any good. I’m not getting down on myself, just facing the facts.”

“Facts are changeable.”

“Get out of la-la land, damn it,” I screamed.

He chuckled. “I’m not giving up on you. If we have to spend the next year out here, so be it. You’re mine, Diamond. And I’m not letting you go.”

* * * *

‘Out here’ turned out to be a cabin in the middle of nowhere, owned by Kanji’s friend. When my kidnapper had learned from Lei what I was up to while he was gone, he had made arrangements with his friend to use the place as long as he needed. Now, Kanji thought I was going to become some ideal woman he had always dreamed of. As soon as I caught sight of all the greenery fit to make me sick, I decided I was going to seduce him. There was no way he was going hold to his plan of not making love to me until I told him I loved him. If he gave in to me, then maybe he would just be happy with the experience and let it go.

Then again, watching him strip off his shirt to reveal a chest that made my mouth water, maybe we could go a few rounds for a little while. Couldn't hurt.

I strolled calmly into the bedroom where he'd set down a suitcase that must be his own. "So is this the room we're sharing?" I climbed up on the bed, knowing my skirt was short enough to show off my bare snatch. I hadn't put my panties back on from earlier. Satisfied to hear his gasp, I grinned as I climbed up the bed.

Kanji's arm came around my waist and he lifted me from the bed, my body brushing against his. "No," he said roughly, "this is my room. You're staying next door."

With a twist, I was facing him and ran my hand down over his shaft. Just like I expected, it hardened beneath my fingertips. Exploring, I was impressed with his thickness and length. Kanji's breathing quickened as he pushed me firmly away from him.

"Aw, come on, Kanji. You know you want it."

"I've never denied wanting you. Diamond, your body can easily be an addiction for any man."

I shrugged.

"But I'm not going to make love to you just yet. Not until—"

"Yes, I know." With a grin, I began to undress, unbuttoning my skirt I slid it slowly down over my hips until it fell to the floor. Then I lifted my top over my head until I was standing naked in front of him wearing only platform flip-flops.

His gaze dropped to my nipples and the tiny points hardened with just his look. I could already feel myself getting wet, a fact that scared me. But I pushed aside the fear to step closer to him and lift his hands to rub my breasts.

"Diamond, don't. Please."

"Don't you want me?" A kiss on his bare chest had him shuddering.

He gasped, "You know I do."

Pressing my advantage, I moved to unbutton his pants and uncover his erection. He was so hard and long, my mouth watered. I was good at sucking men, bringing them to their knees, but never did I crave the taste of a man like I did Kanji.

"Diamond . . ."

I dropped to my knees and slid my tongue along his shaft, teasing the tip. A groan tore from his throat. He pushed me away, or he would have if he had the strength. I took him into my mouth, sucking hard. When he fell back on the bed, I knew he was mine. Kanji's plan went flying out the window.

Crawling up on the bed to place a leg on either side of his hips, I watched his face. The struggle to resist me was apparent in the emotions rippling over his features. I had no mercy. It wasn't possible. My body was just as much on fire as his was. I couldn't believe how much I wanted Kanji inside me, touching me, kissing me. Not the same way I'd craved the attention from other men. With them, when I got what I demanded, there was nothing satisfying even from the first touch. But with Kanji, I ached for him, from my lips, to my breasts to my throbbing cootchie.

When I yanked his pants down further and rubbed myself against his shaft as it stood at attention, a tremor had me nearly collapsing on top of him. Without looking, I eased back against the head of his shaft, feeling it inch into me. Kanji gripped my hips and shouted my name in desperation.

"Diamond . . ."

"Just once, Kanji," I gasped as pure pleasure took hold of my body. "Just this once, please. I've never felt anything like this. It's so good." Another inch slid inside my wet box. I

was bent over my lover's chest panting, wanting nothing more than to let my body fall so that he filled me hard and fast. But I hesitated.

"Diamond, don't do this." He was putting it all on me, but I didn't see him pushing me off. His hands at my waist gripped me, seeming to hold me in place rather than pushing me off. "This is not how I want it to be."

I began to cry. "I can't stay here with you and not have sex. That's who I am."

"No."

"It is!" I punched his chest, causing him to shift between my legs. Still he was only a third of the way inside me. "You don't understand anything about it. You have this picture of me in your mind and it's just that—a picture." My tears plopped down on his chest as I sniffled.

Somehow it seemed to give him greater strength seeing me cry. He smiled, a gentle, almost caressing expression in his eyes. Without a word, he lifted me so that I felt empty once again, but then he brought me down to lay flat on top of him. Wrapping his arms around me, he clicked his tongue. "Shh, honey. It's okay. I'll give you anything you ask of me. Anything at all. But not that. Not yet."

"I want to take care of myself," I mumbled, now feeling defeated that he had resisted me. No man had ever resisted me when I seduced him, not that I had encountered any who put up a fight. But tears usually made them give in, not grow stronger to resist. Kanji was a confusing person, to say the least.

He rolled us over, then positioned me so that his body curved against my backside. Wrapping his arms about me again, he held me tight and ran a hand down over my stomach. "I know you do, and I don't want to take that from you. But in reality you've never been independent. You didn't pay your own way."

I felt irritated at his words. "You don't know me."

"Do you deny it?"

A sigh escaped me. So what? All of my life, someone had given me what I wanted. I danced, but got the position because I slept to get it, having no natural talent. When I mentioned being taught to please, the dancing was a part of that whole nightmare. Barely legal, knowing nothing else. Accepting gifts became my life. "How do you know about what I've gone through? You weren't there. Asia told me you joined the army as soon as you graduated."

"Checking up on me?" he chuckled. "Asia and I grew closer when my older sister died."

"Older sister? I know practically your whole family. I don't remember an older sister." I searched my memory for someone other than his sister who was three years younger than Asia and I. No face or name popped into my mind. As far as I had ever known, his mother had two kids just like Asia's.

"I did. She ran away from home at sixteen. Wild, she got into drugs and prostituting." When I stiffened in his arms, he stroked my belly and crooned in my ear a few minutes before he began speaking again. "My father hired a guy to go find her, bring her back. And he did, but she ran again. I guess you didn't know her because first we lived in New York, but also half her teenage years were spent with an aunt further upstate and then because she wouldn't stay. She kept running. I don't know what drove her. I can only imagine what hurts made her feel like we didn't love her. But I loved her."

Turning my head, I saw the tears in his eyes, but he blinked them away and hardened his jaw. I nuzzled closer, kissing his chin which was as far as I could reach with him holding me so tight. "What happened to her?"

“Some guy picked her up one night. When she didn’t want to give him all he wanted sexually, he took it anyway. And then killed her.” For a moment, he nearly crushed my ribs. I held on knowing he needed to work past the pain. Finally, his hold eased again and he rubbed my stomach, an apology for his roughness. “At the funeral, Asia and I became friends. She’s kept me up to date on you all these years, but not about the breakup and why it happened. She loves you, you know.”

“Yeah right.”

He continued without reaffirming his words. “I came down to go to school here with her. My parents were ready to give us whatever we wanted I guess, and I told them I needed to get away from our town, our home. My first day at your school and I saw right into you. I knew without being told that you were hurting just like my sister. I didn’t have the right words to say to you. I just wanted to break through.”

Wriggling to get out of his hold, I grunted. “So I am just a charity case. Kanji, you can’t replace your sister with me. We’re not the same. I don’t know what she was going through and I guess you’ll never know, but I’m not her.”

“Do you deny there is something between us?” he questioned, determination in his voice.

“I guess not.” With a sigh, I gave in to being held against my will. Well, partly against my will. “But you’re still in la-la land if you think we’ll live here and not make love.”

He laughed, “We’ll see.”

Chapter Seven

By day four at the cabin, I was going stir crazy. There was nothing to do beyond watching over Kanji's shoulder while he attempted to get his business going communicating with his friend on the Internet and phone. When I wasn't doing that, I was swimming in the lake or reading one of the many detective novels his friend had on a shelf in the living room. I wasn't even a reader for goodness sake.

Then to get back some of my own and to punish Kanji in the process, I would come out of the bathroom butt naked and walk around, finding reasons to bend over or shake my boobs. He was mesmerized let me tell you. But still he resisted me, and it was getting on my nerves. Especially since my box was so hot I could do it to broomstick just to get the edge off.

"This is not fair, Kanji!" I screamed at him for the fiftieth time. "You don't care about me. How am I supposed to love you when all you do is work on that damn computer or talk on the phone?"

He looked up and snapped closed his laptop. "You're right. What would you like to do today?"

I didn't have to be asked twice. Jumping wildly into his lap, I tugged up the front of my mini-dress and pressed against him. "Have sex now!"

Had I sunk so low that I was begging for sex? Who was I kidding? I'd sunk that low plenty of times. This was humiliating and it pissed me off so much, for a minute all I wanted to do was smack the crap out of him. Kanji kissed me, tracing the edge of my lips with his tongue. I shifted so that I was facing him, with one leg slung over each armrest on his chair. But Kanji gripped my hips to slide me back toward the desk.

"Not yet."

I screeched, squeezing my eyes closed to keep from crying in frustration. How could he not be tormented, or weak? Maybe he didn't love me at all, or had some plan to beat me down for what I'd done to Asia. After all, he did say she told him about me. Maybe she shared the extent of my attempts when it came to her boyfriend.

"I see that the wheels are turning in your head," he laughed. "So I'll tell you what I'll do." Before he could explain further, his cell rang. I rolled my eyes and snatched it up to answer without looking at the caller ID.

"Yeah?" I barked.

"Oh. Is Kanji there?" The startled voice was female. I tossed him a look and then examined the ID. Ben, his partner's name was on the display, so who was this woman? A distinct feeling of jealousy came over me.

"Who are you?" I wanted to add the word "bitch" to my question, but thought I'd rein it in until I knew what was up. Kanji just looked at me like I was crazy. Funny enough, he didn't reach to take the phone from me before I was ready to give it up. Was it more of his plan?

She jumped on her high horse. I could tell by her tone, she was one of those stuck up girls who thought she was all that. Maybe even the kind with money, making her think she was above the rest of us nobodies. I liked to snatch people like her back down to earth.

"If you must know, I'm helping Kanji with his website. Now put him on," she snapped.

She wasn't fooling me with the website bit. Sure, she may have been helping him, but that first low-pitched sexy voice was set to charm a man. She wanted Kanji just as much as I wanted him. And I was ready to put her in her place.

"I'm sorry," I grinned as I watched for Kanji's reaction to my next words, "Kanji can't speak right now. His mouth is full sucking on my nipples." Disconnecting, I tossed the phone on the desk.

Kanji's face reddened. "Diamond."

I shrugged and gave him an innocent look. "You said you were ready to spend time with me. I was ensuring that we were uninterrupted."

He burst out laughing. "Okay, get your bathing suit on. We're going swimming."

* * * *

I liked to think I was making progress. Kanji and I spent every waking moment together. Even when he worked, I sat near him or on his lap while he explained the workings of his company. Tech support of some kind. I didn't get it, but just listening to the timber of his voice was enough. When he wasn't working, we swam or visited the tiny town nearby. He bought me clothes that were sexy but not whorish. I found that I liked them, and enjoyed time with him more and more. Was I falling in love? Maybe. I was still too scared to accept it. Being in the woods in the middle of nowhere was easy. What would happen when we went back to civilization? Would I be faithful? What about when we did make love? To tell Kanji I loved him, and then to go back to the city falling into my old lifestyle would be worse than anything I've ever done. That thought alone kept me from admitting to him how I was beginning to feel.

To break up the monotony of our lives and because I was threatening to rip his hair out strand by strand, Kanji arranged for us to visit his friend in Philly. I looked forward to meeting Ben, since learning he was indeed a man and not the snot I'd spoken to on the phone.

We arrived at Ben's brownstone in time for lunch. And it was a good thing since I hadn't eaten anything that morning. I wasn't surprised to find the girl I'd spoken to standing at his side, with a look of hungry desire for Kanji in her eyes. Noticing her interest, I moved closer so that my body was pressed into his side, and I skimmed my fingers across his chest. A shiver rippled over his body.

Kanji cleared his throat. "Ben, Jill, this is Diamond."

I grinned, "His girlfriend. Nice to meet you." Not missing the scowl on Jill's face and the determined press of her rose pink lips, I laughed as I moved past them into the house.

We settled in a comfortable but moderately decorated living room to sit down. Jill offered me a tray with finger foods on it, while Ben offered wine. I filled a paper dessert plate with the snacks and declined the wine.

"So, Jill," I began my interrogation, "are you Ben's wife or girlfriend?"

The woman, who had been sure to place her willowy frame on the arm of Kanji's chair, flipped long blonde hair back over her shoulder. She barely spared me a look, busy as she was trying to accidentally allow her short skirt to rise even more than it already had. "Girlfriend. Ben and I have been seeing each other for about two years."

That was a shocker. She was practically in Kanji's lap and she was dating Ben? I glanced over at the guy who was clearly nerd material all the way. He even wore horn-rimmed glasses and his dirty blond hair didn't look like it had been combed that month. What was he doing with a woman like Jill, skinny and beautiful enough to grace the cover of a fashion magazine?

The two men fell into conversation about work, quickly boring me to tears. Jill, after not getting the attention she wanted from Kanji, stood and half-assed invited me to help with

preparing lunch. I agreed with the intention of setting her straight. No man had ever been stolen from me, and that wasn't starting now.

We strolled together into the kitchen, but before I could begin to read her, she rounded on me the moment the swinging door closed. "Let's get one thing straight right now," she began.

"Yes, let's."

She continued as if I hadn't spoken. "A man like Kanji is too good for the likes of you. Just looking at that outfit," she allowed her gaze to run down over my faux leather dress, mocha colored and form-fitting, "tells me what kind of woman you are. Do you really think you can hold on to him? Kanji's going places, and you'd be an embarrassment if he ever took you with him to meet clients."

I placed my hands on my hips and rolled my eyes. "Why, because I'm black?"

She laughed, a sour sound. "No, because you don't have any class."

I gasped.

"Just like that comment you made on the phone about your nipples. You didn't even know who I was, and I'll bet you anything Kanji was embarrassed by what you said."

"You don't know me," I muttered but really I was feeling low. Normally, I gave as good as I got, never letting any woman beat me down with her words. Shoot, I'd sent plenty home crying, but I remembered how red Kanji's face got when I said what I did to Jill.

The look on her face told me she knew she was getting to me. "Last time Kanji was up here, all he talked about was you. I don't deny that he thinks he loves you, would probably ruin his life just to give you anything you want. But have you ever considered his needs above your own?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh don't you?" She stepped up closer to me. "Did he tell you he lost his inheritance?"

My eyes widened. "What? He couldn't. His grandfather left him that money. He's using it to build the business with Ben. He said he would even have some left over for—"

"For what? You? His selfish girlfriend? All you'll do is bleed him dry, Diamond. And you don't have to believe me. Ask him for yourself. See if he doesn't tell you that there were stipulations to his grandfather's will." At my look of surprise, she grinned. She was enjoying knowing all about my man when I knew nothing. How could it be driven home more that no one shared anything of substance with me. She continued, "Kanji's grandfather stipulated that he was to have the money only if he married someone his parent's approved of by twenty-five. He hit that and passed it. Know why? Because he knew all along he was coming back for you."

That should have given me the warm fuzzies, but it didn't. Kanji had given up a lot of money, and lied to me about not getting it. So how was he funding this business venture? Was Ben footing all of the expenses?

Jill didn't want me to be misinformed. A grin spread so wide over her face, I knew she was about to offer me the grand finale, the part where I was reduced to a pile of tears on the floor. I'd delivered my share of insults many times, knew just how to drop the bomb so a girl would know who the superior bitch was.

But Jill didn't need any words at all. She strolled over to a bag on the counter and rummaged inside. I peered over her shoulder trying to get a look, and wondering what she was up to. When she pulled out a glossy magazine and began flipping through it. With a flourish and a slap of the paper against the table she pointed. "There!"

On the page was an ad for men's underwear—sexy men's underwear. And the luscious man looking so hot a girl could lick the tree pulp he was printed on, was my man. Kanji!

I sank down in the nearest chair, my hunger forgotten. “How did you know about this? You subscribe to this magazine?”

She shook her head. “No, I was out at his parent’s house when he told us. They weren’t happy, but they know the company is a respectable one. Kanji told us he signed a contract to do several shoots. The money he makes will pay for the start up of his company.”

My mind was numb at that point. I couldn’t even begin to process what she was telling me. “You were there? He told you?”

Jill’s whole attitude changed. She was suddenly this sweet person, who was so concerned about how I was feeling. Yeah right. She sank down beside me and wrapped an arm about my shoulders. “I’m sorry. You already know that Kanji and Asia’s family is conservative. In a way it’s strange that they’ve been so open about interracial marriage. But the one thing they don’t go for is loose women. They’re extremely close knit, and after losing Kanji’s sister to that lifestyle, they’re even more so. Don’t you think they’ll make Kanji’s life a living hell if he stays with you? Don’t you want him happy?”

I clenched my fist in my lap, anger surging through me. “I want him happy alright. But he lied to me, telling me to keep my clothes on. Don’t use my body to make money. And then he goes and does that same thing.”

She snorted. “You can’t honestly be saying what you do—stripping off your clothes while men howl at you and then what you do afterwards—can be compared to a tasteful commercial ad?”

I shrugged her arm off me and stood. “Maybe not, but he obviously doesn’t have too much confidence in me since he lied. I was beginning to think he was different. Silly of me.” Snapping open my purse, I rummaged for money this time I knew I had. When I found it, I looked up. “Thanks for telling me, although I’m sure you didn’t do it for me. I hope you’ll be very happy with Kanji.”

On that note, my voice broke and I hurried out of the kitchen with tears running down my face. Sneaking past the living room where the men still chatted, I found my way out to the street. Thanks to Kanji’s posing in men’s underwear, I had enough money to catch a bus all the way back home. Once there I would figure out what to do to stand on my own two feet. And Kanji could live his life with a woman who didn’t shame his family or embarrass him anymore.

Chapter Eight

I finally did it. I found a cheesy little job that barely paid me enough to live on and was getting counseling under a state program where I didn't have to pay anything at all. Giving up my apartment had been tough but necessary. Kanji hadn't been willing to let me go and neither were the other men who thought they owned my body. Not that Kanji thought he owned me. The hardest decision I had had to make was walking away from him. I clearly saw the hurt on his face, and I knew he was worried about me. But unless I broke all ties, he wouldn't move on and I wouldn't learn to be strong enough to take care of myself.

The worst part of it all was discovering I loved Kanji. I cried almost every night missing him, but I was determined to do something with myself, to learn that I did have value. My group therapy on Tuesday nights was good for drilling that in. Those crazy girls, and even some guys had been through some stuff worse than I had. Some of them even coming down off drugs. That made me grateful for small blessings and helped me keep pushing on.

Six months on my own, and I was thinking about writing a book. Everybody was doing it these days, and I figured I had something to share with other young women who found themselves giving their body away to every man who asked. I went to the library to read up on it every chance I got. I didn't want to sound ignorant. Probably too late for that, but I was going to give it a try.

One evening after work, I was walking down to the library when I heard somebody call my name. "Hey Diamond."

I stiffened. Not living on the same side of town, I didn't see as many people I used to know down at the club, but the city was only so big. I was praying this guy calling me wasn't one I'd slept with. Turned out, it was a guy from my therapy group. I couldn't remember what his issues were nor his name.

"Hey," I called.

He jogged up beside me. "Whew, girl I've been calling you for like a block and a half."

I frowned. "And you couldn't catch up in all that time. I do have these platforms on." I pointed one foot to show him. He laughed, and I saw desire in his eyes at my bare legs. My dress did extend down to my knee and no cleavage was hanging out, yet still they looked. At least I was changing, even if men weren't.

"Okay, I was exaggerating." He reached a hand out to touch my arm, but I pretended to reach up and scratch my cheek at the same time. "I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with me tonight."

My eyebrows rose. "Tonight? I'm—"

"Don't say no, please. Just as friends. I promise," he begged, turning me off. "And I'll pay. I actually have a decent job, pays well."

I still was not attracted to men. The thought of being intimate with them disgusted me, except when I had erotic dreams of Kanji. It still hurt like hell when his face rose in my mind.

With a deep sigh and with satisfaction, I told him the truth. "I'm sorry. I don't remember your name. And while it may have come out in our sessions about my past, it's just that. My past. I don't need a man to make me feel like I'm worth something, because I am. I want to think you are a nice guy and you're not here hoping to get a piece of ass from me later." At that, he looked embarrassed, and I smiled. "I'm who I am. Just Diamond."

On that note, I spun away and ran out to the street just in time to flag down a cab. I gave the driver my destination and sat back to wait impatiently. When the car pulled up to the

neat little house, my heart began to pound, and I hurried to the sidewalk before I lost my nerve.

Stepping up to the door, I drug in a trembling breath and laid on the bell a few times. The echo of feet coming down the hall sounded within, and then the lock turned. He stood there finer than he had been six months ago.

“Hi Kanji,” I whispered.

Doubts attacked my mind while he stood staring at me. I didn’t know if he was going to reject me or not. Or if he had moved on. Still, I waited.

“Diamond.”

A woman’s voice called to him from within. I recognized it immediately as Jill’s. My heart cracked, and I turned to go. “Sorry,” I mumbled.

Kanji grabbed me, whipped his arms around my waist and crushed me to his body. His tongue invaded my mouth and he was moaning so loud I thought she must hear. But I didn’t care because I was just as loud as I wrapped my legs around him. I guess the slutty ways never completely disappear.

Without a word, Kanji turned and carried me along the hall and up the stairs. Vaguely, I heard Jill ask what was going on, but both of us ignored her. Soon Kanji was laying me on his bed and staring down at me.

“Um, she might think . . .” I began.

He shook his head. “I don’t care what she thinks. I didn’t ask her to come here.”

“Oh.” My heart soared. They weren’t dating.

Kanji leaned back, his gaze going down over my body. He frowned. “What is that rag you’re wearing?”

I laughed. “It’s modest.”

“It’s hideous. Take it off,” he demanded.

“You’ll be tempted,” I told him.

“Good.”

In seconds, I stripped, then gloried in the desire lighting his eyes. He was no longer holding himself back from me. Evidenced by his reaching for my breasts and kneading my nipples until I cried out with longing.

“Kanji, you should stop now,” I gasped, “before it’s too late.” My hips arched up off the bed as he slid his hand down over my belly to the fluff between my legs. I willed him to go lower and put out the fire that was consuming me.

“It’s already too late, Diamond.” He followed his hand with feather kisses, the tip of his tongue teasing my skin. “I’m going to make love to you all night long.”

“But your vow,” I reminded him.

“I don’t care anymore.” He positioned himself above me and yanked off each of my shoes to toss them across the floor. “I’ll wait for you, just as I did these last six months, praying that you would come to know what you mean to me.”

“No one has ever loved me so completely,” I choked out, tears clinging to my lashes. “Even when I fucked . . . I mean messed up.” When I put my hand to my mouth, he pulled it away and kissed my palm.

“Diamond, I love you just the way you are. You don’t have to be some refined woman, or even be good enough in the eyes of my family. I don’t care about that. If you embarrass me in front of clients a hundred times a day, so what.”

“You know about that?”

He nodded with a grin. “I tried to shake the life out of Jill, insisting she tell me everything she said to you.”

For a moment I lay watching him, taking in his sincerity. Then I sat up to push him down on the bed. Straddling his hard body, I lifted his hands so that I could place them on my breasts. With satisfaction, I saw the shudder go through him. "As sweet as your words are, baby, they are unnecessary." I kissed his lips then began undressing him. When he was naked, I stroked his big thick shaft while he pinched my nipples. Hunger had me squirming. After this would be the test as to whether I could enjoy making love or if I would throw up like all the other times. Miraculously, I hadn't been in bed with a man for months, and I was sorely looking forward to intimacy with Kanji.

Easing forward, I reached between my legs to guide the tip of his rod to my opening. When I stroked myself, spreading my juices around, he growled low in his throat, his eyes lowered to slits.

"Kanji?"

"Yes, honey?" he said drunkenly.

"I love you." And I plunged him deep inside me. Immediately, he came to life and grabbed my hips to grind in and out of me. I threw back my head, gasping at the amazing feeling. This is what I had been missing for so long? "Yes!" I was instantly addicted to his stiff piece.

Too soon I felt my orgasm coming, and stupidly I began to cry because of it. I wanted this feeling to go on. Kanji and I were one. He knew what I was feeling, what I was thinking. "Don't worry, honey. I'm going to give it to you over and over."

Flipping me around so that I faced the wall with him behind, he guided one of my hands to press against the cool surface while he shoved deep inside me. Arching back to give him as much access as he needed, I ran my fingernails along his thigh. My climax was on me fast and hard, I screamed. "Yes, Kanji. Please."

I don't know what I was begging for but my lover was willing to give it to me. All I needed was to be with him to be inside him and him inside me. How I loved him. And finally knew without a doubt he loved me. I knew I would be faithful because I had proven it to myself, to settle my own mind.

We came together the first time and then my expert man brought me repeatedly to heights I had only dreamed about. When I was sore and exhausted—a real feat for me—Kanji lifted me and carried me to the bathroom. This was the test.

"I want to take a shower alone," I told him nervously.

He seemed disappointed but agreed. When I was standing under the warm spray, I waited for my stomach to become unsettled. Nothing happened. Instead, an exhilaration washed over me. This was different.

"Kanji," I screamed.

My lover nearly broke down the door. "What's wrong?"

I grinned. "I want you with me."

He seemed frozen as he stood watching me. "Always."

Epilogue

“Damn, girl. How many are you going to pop out?”

I laughed and rubbed my bulging belly, as I winked at Asia. We were finally back together again. I guess no matter what happened, we’d find our friendship. Kanji and I had made her godmother of the twins, and now I was trying to convince her to take on the role for my little girl growing in my belly. Who would have thought a woman like me would absolutely love having babies and being a mother. “As many as Kanji can afford.”

Asia kissed my cheek and patted my belly. “Don’t even try it. Your book is doing great. You’re helping thousands of young women learn to love themselves and respect their bodies.”

“Yeah and the money doesn’t hurt either.” I let out a happy whoop just as my husband strolled into the kitchen. Immediately, his handsome face was transformed to worry, the norm.

“Honey, what are you doing on your feet? Sit down, you need your rest.”

As he helped me to a chair, I rolled my eyes at Asia. She laughed and left the room, leaving us alone. “Kanji, you worry about me too much.”

“Not possible.”

“And if I would like to have three more children?”

He kissed me lightly on my lips and stared down into my eyes. “As always, honey, I offer you all of me. If you want more babies, so be it. Besides, the making of them can’t be beat.” He winked.

“So true.”

I could not imagine that my life could be so wonderful, so different. As Asia had mentioned, I wrote that book. But not in fancy words or pretending I was something I wasn’t. It was in my way—loud and wild, even a little sluttish. With a dedication to Kanji’s older sister, I knew I reached girls out there who needed someone to believe in them even when they weren’t strong enough to believe in themselves. Finally, I had found my way.

THE END

About the Author

Tressie Lockwood has always loved books, and she enjoys writing about heroines who are overcoming the trials of life. She writes straight from her heart, reaching out to those who find it hard to be completely themselves no matter what anyone else thinks. She hopes her readers will enjoy her short stories. Visit Tressie on the web at www.freewebs.com/tresslock.