



moriah jovan

Stay

VIGNETTES & OUTTAKES

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*Bad boy Eric lands in a religious university
and good girl Vanessa discovers her sexuality:
Two entirely different courses of study.*

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Oh My Heck

August 1995

h, yeah.

The cute little brunette sat toward the front of the lecture hall, so Eric wasn't quite sure he wanted to sacrifice professorial invisibility for a chance at that, but at this point, he couldn't afford to be picky. He was an obvious foreigner in the Land of Gorgeous Girls. This may be as close as he got to one of them.

Eric slid into the seat beside her, jostling her a little to make sure she noticed him, but she was bent over her Book of Mormon with a red pencil.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she replied vaguely as she underlined something. Her book was her own, not the cheap little hardback he'd picked up at the bookstore, as evidenced by the fact that it was leatherbound, dog-eared.

Dirk, do these girls just take one look at me and know I'm not a Mormon?

Yes.

Shit.

"What's your name?"

"Heather," she murmured, still underlining shit.

It'd only taken him two days after moving into Deseret Towers, touring campus, buying books, exploring Provo before school started for Eric to understand he was far more than a fish out of water. He was a whale beached in the middle of the Sahara.

Knox, these girls are looking at me like I'm trash, but they're looking at you like you're lunch.

This isn't Chouteau High, Eric. The James Dean schtick doesn't play well here.

You're dressed the same way I am. Got my fucking hair cut, too.

Suck it up, princess. Fact of life: A good quarter of these girls come from southern California, they're rich, and they're used to good-looking assholes.

Oh, gee, thanks.

I said you were smart, not that you weren't an asshole.

Hilliard—

Not another word, Eric. There's a reason I'm leaving you here and if you have an ounce of common sense, you'll figure it out before you graduate and exploit it to its limit. And for what it's worth, I couldn't get a date in SoCal to save my life.

Why the hell not?

My roommate. He was crawling in girls and I kind of blended in.

Oh, great, so Dirk—

Dirk's black. You'll see what that means for him.

Fuck. Racist much?

No, it's not racist. It's reality. Give him a week, he'll be a fucking rock star.

Does he know that?

Hell, yeah, he knows it. Shit, Eric, that's why he's here. It doesn't hurt he's got the pedigree, either. Born in the church, returned missionary, looking for a nice girl to take to the temple, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

I don't even know what that means, "take to the temple."

You'll find out soon enough. Let's go get your books. Shit, I love being back here. It's like coming home.

Even after . . . ?

Even after. Nobody here knows. I'm just a nice, regular Mormon guy here.

But you're not Mormon.

You're never not Mormon once you have been.

Yeah, so first day of classes, second class. American history. He'd gotten about as close to a pretty girl as he could and she didn't seem interested in the most rudimentary conversation.

Three years of this bullshit. Eric almost groaned.

Stay for graduate school.

Oh, okay. Six years.

BYU's on a trimester system. What you do is, you go year-round and shave a year off your undergrad.

Eric sighed and slid down in his seat, crossed his arms over his chest, and glared down at his books, trying not to feel so very . . . alone. A different alone than at home, where he was alone but known. Known and wanted. Known and feared.

This was . . . alone and unknown. If he disappeared, no one would know. No one would care. Likely only Dirk would think to notify Knox and even then . . .

"What's your name?"

Eric's head snapped left to see her looking at him with a sweet curiosity. "Eric," he said gruffly.

"What tribe are you from?"

He blinked, astonished that she'd picked him out so fast. He wasn't used to looking *Indian* in short hair. His mother had certainly disapproved when she'd seen his haircut. *You look Italian*, she'd said flatly. *Just like your father*.

"Osage," he replied warily. "How'd you know I'm Indian?"

"I'm from Arizona." She said that like it should mean something to him. "Where are you from?"

"Kansas City."

"Oh, I didn't know there were reservations in Kansas."

He stared at her, unbelieving. "You just said the three most ignorant things I've ever heard," he said, his astonishment growing when she flushed hotly and looked down at her books. He might have arisen to go find another seat toward the back, but the lecture started and he was still unsure enough that he didn't want to risk it.

The professor, a woman not much older than Eric and possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, spoke passionately about . . . something . . . which he couldn't be bothered to care about since she had a nice ass and nicer tits. In his previous life, he was pretty sure he could've had a piece of that. It wasn't as if he hadn't fucked a hot young teacher or two in his life. At the same time.

Then she was talking to him.

". . . your name?"

"Eric," he said, cocking his eyebrow at her, but she didn't seem to get it.

"Am I mistaken in thinking you're a Lamanite?"

He stared at her, his mind suddenly blank. What the fuck? A lame what?

"Yes, he is," said the girl next to him. "Osage."

"Serious?" said the professor, tilting her head at him. "Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas. Tribe headquartered in Oklahoma. There's a Fort Osage in Independence."

"Yeah," Eric drawled warily.

"The Osage were a brilliant people who had a sophisticated alphabet and grammar . . ."

She moved away from him as she lectured to the hall about the Osage. Eric forgot about her tits and ass as he grew enraptured by her monologue, the respect in her voice as she spoke of his people and for the first time ever in his life felt pride in his heritage—

—because someone else did.

He'd never known that before.

"A Lamanite," whispered Heather in his ear, startling him, "is a Native American. That's what we call them."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you later."

His eyes narrowed at her.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? I don't know what I said that was ignorant, but I'm sorry I hurt your feelings."

Funny. He didn't know he had feelings or that they could be hurt, but she seemed so distressed that she had he didn't know if he were more flattered or confused. He couldn't decide whether to stay mad or not.

No one had ever cared enough about his anger to be distressed, just afraid.

"What's your tribal name?" asked the professor, shaking his attention from Heather and back to the lecture.

"I don't have one," he said slowly, for the first time regretting that. "My name is Eric Niccolò Cipriani."

His professor stared at him. Heather stared at him. The class was silent. "That's . . . interesting," she said.

"I'm half'n'half," he muttered, all of a suddenly wanting that invisibility that now seemed as much friend as foe. "Osage and Italian."

"And what a *nice* combination it is," came a husky female voice from the back, which set the class to laughing. Eric's mouth twitched. Embarrassed, pleased, he glanced at Heather, but she stared down at her notes. The professor went on with her lecture as a drop of water splashed onto Heather's notes and smeared the ink. He gulped.

"Hey," he whispered and nudged her with his shoulder. "It's okay. I'm not mad. Wanna have lunch? My treat."

She smiled at him shakily. "Okay."

Suddenly he wanted to kiss her. Right then, in the middle of the class, to make her tears go away. It wasn't the same type of tears he'd confronted before. Those were tears of girls who wanted to manipulate him or girls who hadn't understood beforehand that he was only interested in one thing. These were tears of remorse for "hurting his feelings" with a careless remark she still didn't understand why it was careless. He wanted to kiss her to let her know he meant it when he said he wasn't mad at her.

It was then he made a startling discovery.

He was talking to a genuinely nice girl.

And he liked it.

After class, they started out toward "the Wilk"—

"Student union," Knox had told him on his tour, explaining what college life was about because Eric had no frame of reference for college whatsoever, except what happened in a frat house on the weekends.

"Okay, so what did I say wrong?" she asked after a tense silence.

"Well," Eric replied, trying to make his voice as nice as possible, because she would probably cry if he used his normal level of sarcasm. "First you assumed I come from a reservation. I don't. I come from a trailer park on the wrong side of the tracks, yeah, but not a reservation."

She took a deep breath.

"Second, you assumed Kansas City's in Kansas. Which it is, but the Kansas City in Missouri's four times bigger."

She looked at him sharply. "There's a Kansas City in Missouri?"

"Yeah. Third, you assumed there weren't any American Indians east of the Rockies. And I don't know what being from Arizona has to do with anything."

"Lots of Native Americans where I live. Navajo. Apache."

Oh. Right.

"You're not . . . all that interested in your people, are you?" she asked hesitantly.

"No. I'm just a non-Mormon punk kid way out of my league here," he said bluntly, more confused by the fact that that had come out of his mouth than concerned that he might have revealed more than he wanted to to this girl he didn't know. "I didn't even know what Mormons were until last year."

"Then how did you get here?"

He shrugged. "Long story. Don't wanna tell it. I just . . . need a little help." Admitting that killed him for sure.

"I'll help you," she said, a new brightness in her voice he liked. It wasn't like the cheerleader/rodeo queen brightness Annie faked when she was "on." It was sincere. Genuinely happy for no reason he could ascertain.

"Okay," he finally said. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to help me?"

She shrugged. "I think you're nice."

Nice. That was a new one. Annie would laugh her ass off. "I'm not a nice guy," he said flatly. "Really."

It occurred to him he probably should've told Annie where he was going before he

took off. He made a note to write her a nice letter. If he could remember her address.

"I don't believe that."

"Why? You don't know what I've done."

"In Kansas City."

"Yeah. So?"

"You're here so that means you're wanting to make a new start. Do something different, right?"

"I'm here 'cause if I wanted to go to college, this was my only option."

She stopped. He stopped. "That makes no sense." She looked up at him, awaiting an explanation, and he thought he could lose himself in those clear brown eyes of hers. He looked at her full lips and licked his lower lip. He bent and—
—missed.

She ducked out from under him and said, "I don't think so."

Eric stared at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"It doesn't work that way here," she murmured, walking backward, tugging him with nothing but the power of her potential companionship.

"I thought you said I was nice."

"I believe you to be. Somewhere in there."

Oh, so she *did* get it. He wondered how long it would take to break down her walls. A week. Maybe two.

"I want to be your friend."

He felt his face contorting in utter confusion. "*My friend?*" he echoed. "What the hell does *that* mean?"

"Please don't swear at me."

"I didn't—"

"You said h-e-double toothpicks."

His mouth dropped open.

"We don't swear."

What the fuck? Hilliard swore like a sailor and he was a Mormon. Or almost. If they hadn't kicked him out.

"Okay, I don't swear and I don't want to hear it."

Eric sucked up a deep breath, but how could he refuse this girl anything? She was unlike any girl he'd ever met, ever known. "Okay," he said on a breath.

So they got their food and Eric flipped out the credit card Knox had given him—
Your room and board is paid. Two-fifty a month ought to keep you in fun money and anything you might need for school if you're careful. Call me if you need more.

This was his first purchase with it and he felt guilty about it. He'd already determined to be as frugal as possible, but buying a nice girl lunch didn't seem like such a stretch.

"Thanks," she said, and led the way to a table out of the way. He carried their shared tray and sat across from her. "So . . . how did a guy like you get here?"

Strangely, he wasn't eager to share anything about his life east of here, didn't want to bring it here and taint his environment with it. It was bad enough his roommate knew, but he'd keep his mouth shut. However annoying Dirk got, Eric trusted him implicitly. With Dirk he could sound off without explaining crap he didn't want to explain. Dirk knew the history and understood the nuances.

"Um . . . Well, the, uh, prosecutor in my county. Back home," he said, wondering how much he wanted to tell her so she'd have some frame of reference for his foreignness. "He made me a deal. Said he'd put me through school if I went here."

"Why?"

Why? Well, he didn't know, really. Hilliard had no sexual interest in him, but Dirk said Knox had paid for half his mission.

"My roommate says he collects people," Eric said. "Like projects. I don't . . . get it."

"Oh! Like Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle."

"I have no idea who that is."

"*My Fair Lady*?"

He stared at her.

"Never mind. That's awfully nice of him. The, uh, prosecutor?"

"Yeah, I got a record," he muttered, bending down to dig into his enormous salad. Salad bars. That's what he'd really love about being here. Every day in his dorm cafeteria, a salad bar. "Possession. Intent to sell. Larceny. I've boosted everything from cigarettes to cars. You name it, I've probably done it."

He stared at his food, awaiting her condemnation, but instead, she picked up his tightly clenched fist in both of her hands and began to unclench it, finger by finger.

"If the prosecutor sent you here and is paying your way," she said softly, "then he must believe in you."

Don't let what that girl did for you be in vain.

"Um . . ." Shit. What was *this* in his throat? Little Vanessa Whittaker's hurt-filled turquoise eyes flashed across his mind. "Yeah," he whispered. "I guess he does."

"And you got in, so you must have done something right. Do you know how hard it is to get into BYU?"

"Knox— Uh, the prosecutor— Knox said it was because I'm Osage."

She tsked. "You have to have really good grades to get in here and if you didn't, it wouldn't matter."

He looked up at her. "Really?"

"Didn't he tell you that part?"

"Yeah," Eric said slowly. "I guess he did. I just kind of forgot."

"Did it offend you?"

Well, yeah. It had, but he was grateful enough that he'd kept his mouth shut, especially since Knox hadn't mentioned it again and had instead stressed his grades. He'd even taken the time out to tutor him in his suddenly vastly accelerated curriculum when and where he could—usually at the feed store after hours.

He shrugged. "Kind of."

"So what do you have next?"

"Political science," he answered immediately, so glad to get out of that conversational quagmire.

"Really? Me too."

They sat and chatted amiably for the next hour while they ate and for the first time, Eric felt relaxed in a girl's presence. He wasn't sure why, but at the moment, he didn't care. He was enjoying himself.

"Okay. Time to go," Heather said after looking at her watch. She led him through the "the Wilk," the basement of which housed a bowling alley, a billiards room, and—the most foreign thing of all here—a ski shop.

Yo, Knox, what the fuck is that on top of all the cars?

Ski racks.

What?

My advice? Take a PE class or two and learn how to ski. Almost as fun as surfing. Go up the canyon to Sundance after the first good powder falls.

All the opportunities, the horizon that had suddenly opened up to him and poured down life's possibilities on him—it was overwhelming and frightening and thrilling, all at the same time.

Across the street to the Clark building . . . "The law school," Heather said.

Law school, where Knox had said he'd spent most of three years, and Dirk intended to spend three of his years.

A tiny grain of a hope took shape as he held the door open for Heather, but Eric shook it off.

No way.

Not possible, not for a loser like him.

But he sat in a lecture hall as staid as the courtroom in which Hilliard had arraigned, tried, and dismissed the charges against him and listened to the lecture.

" . . . theory, *anybody* can be the president of the United States, natural-born US citizen over the age of thirty-five . . . "

Eric looked down at the open book in front of him, the syllabus, and the tidy collection of highlighters nesting in the crease, wondering just how theoretical that was.

Here he wasn't a loser.

He was a blank slate.

He could have told Heather any lie he wanted about who he was and she would've believed him; he'd told her the truth simply because she'd caught him off guard and he never thought about fabricating a new identity.

She laid a gentle hand on his arm and he looked sharply to his right to find her staring at him intently. "You can be anything you want," she whispered intently, as if trying to impart some great wisdom.

As if she'd read his mind.

Eric gulped, stared at her, not really wanting to believe it.

"I'll help you."

At this point, he could do nothing but go along for the ride and trust this girl knew what she was letting herself in for, because he sure as shit didn't. "Okay." He paused. "Thank you."

Freight Train

May 2002

Vanessa preceded Knox and Leah into the very odd-looking house and she stopped, looking around with some trepidation. She knew who Sebastian Taight was; he was all anybody could talk about in her finance classes at school. She had never dared volunteer that she had any connection to him whatsoever, no matter how remote, particularly as she'd never met him.

"Get a move on, Vanessa," Knox drawled. Leah chuckled and nudged her a bit when she still couldn't seem to move.

"C'mon, sweetie," she murmured. "Sebastian doesn't bite."

Vanessa moved then and found the four steps that led up to a platform where stood an immense conference room table. To her left was a smallish kitchen and directly in front of her, beyond the table, was a massive living room. There was a man and a woman with their backs to her, sitting on a couch playing very primitive video games on an enormous television, yelling at and pushing each other.

"Oh so mature," Knox muttered as he nudged her along and into the living room. "Hey. Giselle. Sebastian. Could you please attempt to act a little more refined when we

have company? There are impressionable twenty-year-olds present.”

Vanessa snorted and looked around. This place was beautiful. Eclectic. Interesting. Textured in style, design, color, and time periods.

“Vanessa!”

Giselle jumped up and over the back of the couch to grab her in a bear hug, and she returned it wholeheartedly. She hadn’t seen her mentor since she’d sent her off to Notre Dame with a wardrobe to die for. She hadn’t realized how much she missed Giselle, who had been the one to take her to the doctor when she was sick, for Pap smears, for her dentist and orthodontist appointments; who had taught her about reproduction, sex, taking care of the details of managing a period; who had taken her to Young Women’s and enlisted the church’s help in taking care of her when Giselle or Knox couldn’t.

Giselle had guided her into womanhood, something Knox could never have done even if he’d been inclined to try—and he’d grown decidedly squeamish as Vanessa’s needs turned more and more “girly.”

Vanessa pushed her away from her a moment and looked her up and down. Where before had been a pudgy-cum-fat woman now stood one with the faintest hint of a six-pack partially hidden by her denim shorts, below which was an old, large gash in her thigh, and above, perky C-cup breasts barely covered by a sunny yellow bikini top—which was not a push-up model.

“What *happened* to you?”

Giselle grinned. “Dr. Atkins and Gold’s Gym.”

“Oh, my God,” she whispered, awed at the change in Giselle’s body. “You’re *hot*.”

“Thank Leah for that,” Giselle replied dryly. “She gave me the book and kicked my ass.”

So happy to see Giselle, so shocked over the transformation, Vanessa didn’t pay attention to Mr. Taight until—

Knox was speaking. “. . . Sebastian. Sebastian, Vanessa Whittaker.”

She looked up. Stared. Sebastian Taight, the man she’d heard about from Knox and Giselle for years, whose genius was dissected and studied in every business class she’d ever taken, was the most gorgeous man she’d ever seen. She hoped no one else noticed her reaction to him, and she managed to shake his hand as if nothing had happened, as if she hadn’t just laid eyes on a Playgirl centerfold.

He had apparently noticed her reaction, though, and suddenly, she wished she had enough experience with men to know what it meant when he raised his eyebrow like that.

The five of them spent the evening together at the conference table eating and chatting. Vanessa didn’t have a whole lot to say except that she was leaving for New York in

the fall to attend culinary school. Knox bragged on her grades at Notre Dame. Leah pulled the pictures of her graduation out of her purse and passed them around. After dinner, Knox, Leah, and Giselle wandered off to the library in Sebastian's living room once they all got involved in a heated discussion over some Shakespearean concept that Sebastian had asked about—

—and once they were thoroughly distracted, Sebastian looked across the table at Vanessa and murmured, "Come downstairs with me."

Well. She would no more say no to that than she'd say no to a full-ride scholarship and it wasn't because he was Sebastian Taight, financier.

"Hey, you three!" he called out over his shoulder. "Vanessa wants to see the house."

So involved in their discussion, Knox waved a hand absently and Sebastian rose, expecting her to follow him. And she did. Down the stairs and into a room that looked like a painter's studio.

"Take off your clothes," he said gruffly.

That shocked her. "What?"

"Take off your clothes. I want to see what's under the leather."

"Why?"

He gestured to the room they were standing in. "I'm an artist. I paint. I think I want to paint you."

"Nobody at school said anything about you being an artist. Neither did Knox."

"Sebastian Taight *isn't* an artist. Ford is." Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. A wicked grin stretched his face. "Surprise. Now take off your clothes."

She did, though shyly. Ford. Her breath caught in her throat. Her artist roommate had taken her to a Ford exhibit and Vanessa had been bowled over. "It's said," her roommate had murmured to her in the darkness on a night neither of them could sleep and just talked, the way girls do, "that Ford seduces all his models. Oh, what I wouldn't give to be painted by him. I don't care if he's a fat, balding old man. He's got something good going on down there."

Sebastian Taight. God of the business department at Notre Dame.

Ford. God of the art department at Notre Dame.

And beautiful, to boot.

One and the same, and here, with her, demanding that she strip for him. How could she not?

Once she was out of her clothes, she stood and watched him inspect her, his gaze running up and down her body. He walked around and around her, looking at her as if she were already a work of art. He didn't touch her, except to lift her hair away from her body, which made her shiver with . . . something. She felt more than a little deprived when he took his hand away.

Finally, he spoke. "What's your schedule like?"

"I'm here all summer," she whispered, watching him warily. "I'm working as a short-order cook at Nichols for the breakfast crowd. Monday through Friday three to noon."

"Where are you staying?"

"In an apartment in Valentine, with a friend. It's a dump, but it's cheap and we split the bills."

"Most of Valentine's a dump," he muttered absently. He still studied her naked body, and the way he looked at her made her insides all gooey. Suddenly, he took a deep breath through his nose and he grinned crookedly, chuckling. "Tomorrow's Saturday. Whatever you have planned, cancel it and be on my doorstep at nine."

"But—"

"No buts. I'm about to make you famous."



Vanessa showed up on Sebastian's doorstep at nine; he hadn't told her not to tell anyone, but it was a warm and cozy thing to have an actual secret worth keeping—and from Knox, no less. Her roommate had been disappointed that she was canceling on going to a Ford exhibit at the Nelson, but Vanessa didn't dare tell her she was going to become a Ford exhibit.

That was frighteningly arousing.

What was even more arousing was how he was dressed when she arrived. His big body was mostly bare except for a short pair of cutoff jeans, the fly of which he hadn't bothered to button. Oh, and was he built. Muscular, cut, six-pack, rock-hard quads—an undiscovered male model. The myriad criss-crossings of thin scars all over his body only enhanced his beauty. Not a fat, balding old man to be found in this house. And she couldn't catch her breath.

He painted for hours. She loved that he loved looking at her nude body, but she wasn't thrilled about the rest of the world seeing it. He ordered Chinese and once it had been delivered and eaten, he hustled her back down the stairs, stopping on the way to do something to the security system.

"Knox can come and go as he pleases," he explained once they got back downstairs, "except when I'm about to seduce his twenty-year-old ward."

She gasped, her mouth open, and he took the opportunity to pin her against his big, hard body and kiss her, long, deep, with . . . a something . . . that had never been present in any other kiss she'd ever shared with boy or man.

Experience.

Knowledge.

Certainty.

He broke the kiss, bent, and hooked one arm under the backs of her legs. He carried her into the alcove she hadn't been allowed to explore, and then she knew why. She gasped yet again.

"Welcome to the Den of Iniquity, Vanessa," he said, and dropped her on the bed, then walked away. She knew this was wrong—oh, not that she was a prude—but she didn't know this man or his proclivities.

Don't be stupid.

At Young Women's Vanessa had learned about chastity, though Giselle had stopped just shy of telling her to save herself for marriage no matter what. She had, however, warned Vanessa about strangers, about the emotional tricks men used, about getting drunk to lose her inhibitions, about disease and abuse and coercion and rape and drugs designed to enable rape. She'd taken her to the doctor to get her on birth control.

Frat boys are pricks. Just don't be stupid. If you want to have sex, wait and be very careful about who you choose. Do it sober, while you have your head on straight. Whatever you do, don't have sex without a condom and don't forget to take your pill. Ever. And whatever else you do, don't lie about your age. That should be enough to put most men off until you're eighteen, and it's not like you don't know what happens to men who fuck underage girls, right?

Of course, Sebastian wasn't a stranger, was he? And he certainly was no college boy, frat or otherwise. And Vanessa wasn't sixteen anymore; she was a college graduate at twenty. Nothing Giselle had told her really applied in this instance, did it? Sebastian was her and Knox's cousin and they loved him, but Vanessa was pretty sure they wouldn't know every single thing about him—and especially not what his sexual appetites were.

He was almost three years older than Knox and she had never thought . . . A man that age . . . Thirty-six . . .

She trembled.

Sebastian turned up some lights, turned down others, lit candles, and somehow, magically, started music playing. Classical music, sensual, lush.

He looked at her then, from across the room as he stripped off his shorts. Her mouth dropped open when she saw his hard, long, erect penis—and she was afraid.

But not. Excited.

But nervous. Did he know—?

He said, "Normally, I'd take another couple of hours to seduce you, but I could tell you were aroused last night and I know you've been aroused all day."

"I'm a virgin," she whispered as he came nearer, a Celt warrior bent on claiming what was his.

"And I'm about to relieve you of that burden," he purred as he climbed into bed with her, alongside her, his bare body touching hers, his erection skimming along the top of

her thigh. His attention was caught by one of her nipples, which had hardened and he pounced, nipping it, drawing it into his mouth and Vanessa shrieked with shock and sensation, her back arching. Sebastian's mouth sucked at it; his tongue licked; his teeth nibbled.

And Vanessa died, her head back, her eyes closed, her mouth open and gasping in great gasps of air. She found her hand wandering through Sebastian's hair, holding him to her, and she felt his smile against her breast.

Sebastian's body pressed against hers until she was lying on her back, Sebastian's mouth still torturing her nipple and his arousal still pressed against her leg. He swept his hand down her body until he found her most sensitive spot and the entrance she hadn't exactly been guarding, but hadn't felt the need to let anyone in, either.

Now she felt a need.

His fingers, slicked with her juices, tickled her from back to front before they explored more fully up inside her and she was panting.

"No, no, no," he whispered, letting go of her nipple and sliding up her body until his mouth was at her ear. "No coming until I'm inside you. Not for your first time. Nothing beats coming together."

He rolled away from her for a moment. She heard the tinny whisper of foil and knew what he was doing. *Thank God.*

"Ah, yes," he whispered as he rose above her, kneeling between her legs and nudging them wider than she thought they could go. "No glove, no love."

He slowly lowered himself over her and kissed her then, hard, hot, urgent. "Ah, Vanessa. Do you know how beautiful you are?"

And with one thrust, she became Sebastian Taight's lover for an entire summer. She moved in with him. Every weekend, every afternoon and evening, he made love to her, seduced her again and again with things she wasn't sure any mortal man knew about. He taught her things she didn't know existed. He taught her how to drink absinthe—something she'd never heard of. He taught her that food wasn't only for eating, or at least, that eating it wasn't its primary purpose for its existence.

Knox was stymied why his security code wouldn't work but Giselle's did.

"Giselle lives here," Sebastian murmured into her ear very late one night when Vanessa was startled out of her languor by the sound of footsteps overhead. Then she heard Knox's voice, Leah's voice, and she gasped. "Not to worry," he soothed as he snuggled her deeper into his arms and into the feather mattress. "Giselle knows you're here and she knows what to do."

Oh, no! She . . . knew?

"I don't want to Giselle to know," she whispered.

"Too late for that. Why do you care?"

"She'll be disappointed in me. She took me to Young Women's and . . . She said it was important to save it until marriage."

"Which is unfortunate for *her*, but she's under no delusion that you had a choice in the matter."

That made no sense. "I could've said no."

"You could've. It would've made no difference. Trust me. I always get what I want."

Her eyes widened and she gulped. "You would've—"

"Goddess, no. I wouldn't have had to." He cocked that eyebrow at her again. "Would I?"

She sucked in a deep breath, but said nothing. He grinned that wolfish grin again that made her heart speed up.

"But Knox— My car—"

"In the garage, which I've also locked him out of."

"Won't he figure it out?"

"Knox doesn't pay attention to a whole lot of things, so no."

Vanessa smiled, but it faded when Knox and Giselle began to argue, their voices floating down through the vents. Sebastian covered Vanessa's mouth with his and she ran her fingers through his hair.

"Knox would kill me if he knew you were in my bed," Sebastian murmured as he kissed her and what he said, the fact of it, aroused her. "And I like that. I like fucking you right under his nose. I like that you've moved in with me and he has no clue."

Vanessa murmured, "I don't believe you've actually fucked me at all, Sebastian Taight."

He drew away from her then and looked at her. "Oh? What does that mean?"

"Knox told me fucking was different from making love, but he wouldn't say how."

Sebastian laughed. "Oh, he gave you the speech, did he? And you've automatically assumed that everything we've done is making love?"

"Yes."

"Ah, good for you. That is, in fact, true. Now I'll show you what fucking is."

And he did and oh, she liked that just as much as making love, especially up against a wall. Or on her knees. Or over a chair.

Knox never did find out. She'd paid her roommate in Valentine very, very well to keep her affair a secret from him—though she never told her roommate with whom she was having an affair.

She left him on her twenty-first birthday and he'd sent her with a bottle of absinthe, a set of antique bowl glasses and antique silver drip spoons.

"We will never speak of this again," he whispered as he kissed her for the last time in the heat and sunlight of an August day at noon. His ice blue eyes sparkled.

"Yes," she whispered back. "Thank you, Sebastian."

"No, thank *you*, Vanessa."

How Business Gets Done

May 2005

*V*anessa smoothed her cocktail dress, the one her roommates had badgered her into:

Hot pink, with a knee-length bell skirt poofed out with too many crinolines. The bodice squished her boobs and the halter tied behind her neck. Of course, many people would see her naked backside tonight, so she wasn't sure where this attack of modesty had come from.

Not only that, but the man who would be escorting her tonight had seen her naked from every conceivable angle.

There was a sharp rap at the door of her apartment and her similarly clad roommates buzzed with excitement. "He's here! He's here! Vanessa!"

Yes, yes, *King Midas* was here to escort her—all four of them—to the Metropolitan Museum of Art tonight. No, not *Ford*, not her lover. King Midas.

She didn't know King Midas, so she was nervous on many fronts.

The door swung open and there he was, looking dour—Vanessa had never seen him without a smile or an expression filled with passion—his hands stuck in the pockets of his tuxedo, his back hunched a bit.

Was it possible he was as nervous as she?

"Ready?" he grumbled.

Her roommates squealed behind her, and someone shoved her wrap and clutch in her hands. They surged around her, surrounded Sebastian and peppered him with questions. His smile came out, albeit reluctantly, and Vanessa watched him attempt to interact with the roommates who didn't know she had spent one glorious summer in this man's arms.

She knew what was under all those fine clothes and his naked self was far more delicious than his clothed self.

He looked at Vanessa over the top of her roommates heads and her nostrils flared at the intense look on his face that she knew so well. He'd asked her to accompany him tonight, to get her used to the fame and the attention, to teach her what to do as a semi-celebrity and how to cope.

He knew the owner of Chez Fricassee, where she wanted to cook, and had invited the man to the opening tonight to introduce her and suggest that Vanessa had extraordinary culinary talents and a work ethic to go along with her beauty.

But then Sebastian had asked her for a week alone, in his suite at the Waldorf. Breathless, she'd said yes and now she'd rather just ditch the grand unveiling of her painting and get straight to bed. She hadn't had sex since she left him. Not because she hadn't wanted to, but because she didn't find anyone as fascinating as he.

Sixteen years her senior, wealthy, powerful, a celebrity in his own right, and he wanted her.

After that, who could compete?

All five of them sat in the limo on the way to the Met. Her three roommates vied for Sebastian's attention, which he granted as graciously as he could, considering he had declared them all a bunch of rowdy kittens. He'd slid a glance at Vanessa, who kept herself apart from him, and said low, "And one very sleek cat."

They didn't get it.

Two of her roommates flanked Sebastian and the third sat on the other side of the second. Vanessa sat across from them, watching, secure and increasingly arrogant about her place in his life.

And his bed.

"Ladies," Sebastian finally said, exasperated with, Vanessa supposed, their chattering. "Please. When we get there, mingle. Don't hang all over us. This is supposed to be Vanessa's night, not mine, not yours. Okay?"

They were happy to comply, just to make him happy, but Vanessa knew: Once they arrived, they'd act appropriately and go hunting amongst the other wealthy men who would be there. She could bet that at least two of them wouldn't come home that night.

Vanessa would be the third.

With any luck, their apartment would be empty all weekend.

The limo came to a stop in front of the Met. A red carpet was rolled out like it was the Oscars and Vanessa's heart thudded in her chest. She couldn't hide the panic in the look she cast Sebastian, and his mouth twitched. "You'll be fine."

Her roommates piled out enthusiastically, Sebastian apparently having been forgotten.

"I want to rip that pretty little dress off of you right now," Sebastian growled low across the expanse. That made Vanessa smile, and some of her jitters disappeared. "Let's go."

Sebastian alit from the limousine, then held his hand out to Vanessa. His rock-hard forearm under her hand strengthened her when he pulled her close. "Steady," he murmured. They stood for a moment for the two or three photographers who meant to capture the unveiling of another Ford painting.

The fact that King Midas had attended—art hound that he was—had not gone unnoticed. He very rarely attended art gallery functions (preferring instead to purchase his art at auction, through an agent), and he had never, to anyone's knowledge, attended a Ford unveiling.

Why not?

I need to keep my lives separate. A corporate raider who's an artist wouldn't be seen as credible. An artist who's a corporate raider would be seen as a hack.

But you're well established in both.

That's true, but I'm used to the anonymity and I like it. I don't like celebrity, Vanessa. I'm eccentric, a hermit.

King Midas is as famous as Ford.

Infamous. There's a difference. I can keep people away from me with infamy. I can't with fame.

Why don't you like people, then?

They get in the way of my creativity and problem solving. I live in my head, Vanessa. And in bed with beautiful women. I don't live in the real world and most days I don't want to.

But you're escorting me to this opening.

To give you an extra boost. Think about it. King Midas, speculator of art who snubs Ford, who never laughs in public—if he's seen at all—and terrifies half of New York society, has deigned to attend a Ford opening with Ford's model. That boosts the value of the painting, too. It'll be a nice nest egg for you if you need it.

What do you mean, nest egg?

I'm giving you the painting, Vanessa. I don't care to profit from the time I spent with you. I don't know if you know this, but that's the longest I've ever been with a woman and you were as novel for me as I was for you.

Uh...

Teaching you, watching you learn and unfold, knowing that your only sexual experience was with me and that everything you gave me was what I taught you . . . Incredible. And I haven't been with anyone since you left. Three years ago.

Vanessa had never been so shocked in her life.

A great many people looked askance at her once they had entered the gallery, and she hesitated, wanting to flee from this man she didn't know, to take shelter in Ford's arms and bed.

"If I go out, I never have a woman on my arm," he murmured to her in between introductions he made somewhat awkwardly. She had never seen this side of him, and it shocked her, how insecure he was, camouflaged as an aloof contempt for the whole affair.

"Why not?"

"Women are scared of me. I don't know why."

Vanessa would be afraid of him, too, if she hadn't spent so much time with him alone. Naked. Making love.

He didn't relax as the evening wore on, though she did, emboldened by the alcohol though wise enough to stop when she had lost just enough of her inhibitions to allow her to be comfortably chatty and gracious.

She met the owner of Chez Fricassee, and though it bothered her a little that she had this step up on her classmates because of her sexual relationship with a powerful man, she and Sebastian both knew it was more than that.

Sebastian took her back to his suite and undressed her slowly, did what he had done so many times with the same magic. She knew it would take an extraordinary man to take his place in her bed, much less her heart.

He surprised her the next morning over breakfast in the sitting room. "Knox tells me you've got some pretty grand plans once you get some time in a New York kitchen."

His casual tone didn't fool her. "Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to presume," she murmured, looking down at her plate, thinking about all the arguments she'd had with herself about approaching him as a venture capitalist supplicant like so many others. "Did he show you?"

"Yes," he said shortly. He was not happy. "What you don't realize is that if you'd come to me as an unknown, I'd have offered to invest. It's good. I like it. I'm not certain about the location, but with the right ad campaign, it'll work."

She shrugged defensively, conditioned by the fact that she'd been forced to take a full grade lower on her senior presentation because she wouldn't budge on that point. "That's nonnegotiable," she muttered.

He grunted. "You'll have to make it part of your marketing."

"I know that," she replied testily. She'd pointed that out to her advisors to no avail, and Knox wasn't any more impressed than they had been.

"Vanessa." She lifted her head to look at him, his expression soft and calm. "I'd like to help you. If you'll let me. I know—" He waved a hand and looked out the window. "I know this bugs you, but . . . I don't know how else to express how much you mean to me."

"Oh," she breathed.

"The building— What you want. It can be done, but it won't be cheap and it won't be easy. Knox took the liberty of talking to our cousin, Étienne. He's an engineer, an inventor. He says he can do most of what you'll need, but it'll take an architect who can work with him. Problem is, Étienne's impossible to work with."

"So . . ."

"I have someone in mind. She's young, like you. Just starting out. She's talented, but more importantly, she's got the balls to take Étienne's bullshit and hit him over the head with it. But," he said brusquely, wiping his mouth as if he were troubled. "I need to know that you aren't going to have issues with me being your lover and your financier."

Vanessa took a deep breath. "I've been thinking about it," she murmured. "That's not it. I can separate the money and the sex. It's just that . . ."

"You're not obliged to sleep with me to get this done. I hope you know that. So if that's your problem—"

She shook her head. "I wouldn't sleep with you if I didn't want to. I— It's—"

"What other people think."

She nodded.

"Vanessa, what you want to do— Building it is the easy part. After the money's spent and the building's up, it'll be up to you to keep it and grow it, because I won't throw good money after bad. Not even for you."

She gulped. It wasn't as if that reality hadn't run that through her head a million times already. Failure was not an option once that building got built.

"So what I would suggest you do," he continued, "is flaunt our affair. You're a beautiful woman. Use it. Turn it to your advantage. Do some photo shoots. Nobody who matters will think it's about our affair once they see you work. What you do is exploit people's fascination with you, with our relationship, the ones who have the money to indulge their curiosity."

He waited silently for her to think, but she'd already calculated the costs and the risks and though she had dithered about asking Sebastian to finance her, she wasn't stupid enough to refuse when he offered out of the blue.

She nodded. "All right."

"Good," he said briskly, throwing down his napkin. "Knox can draft the contracts, since he has an interest in protecting both of us."

"He said he wanted to invest. It's just the location's a problem for him."

"He'll get over it. Let's go back to bed."

Dead Man Fucking

March 2007

*V*anessa knocked lightly on the heavy walnut door.
“Mr. Thompson?”

Mr. Thompson, her ass. Nash Piper, or Vanessa didn’t know her country music—and he was a lot hotter up close and personal than in pictures, brand new Jesus hippie look notwithstanding. She wasn’t sure if it was his dark good looks or the pinging of all that caged energy in a big body still too small to hold his personality in.

The door opened and she saw him stride back into the suite. She followed, rolling in the service trolley.

“Close the door, doll.”

Vanessa, her hands on the trolley, simply bumped it closed with her hip and continued on into the room to serve her latest guest.

It wasn’t even as if she hadn’t considered flirting with him just enough to get the message that she might be up for a little fun, but the jumble of items on her to-do list coupled with his arrogant demand for food pushed the idea out of her mind.

Now, she was here in his suite, serving him food the way she did the rest of her

guests when they requested it, and didn't give much thought to the fact that he wandered about in one of Whittaker House's complimentary bathrobes.

"I like your paintin'," he muttered, touching a skunk pelt blanket.

Vanessa made her usual sound of acknowledgment, her mind on the food and its presentation. Her painting was another of her gimmicks, which was why she'd hung it where she had.

"What would it take to let me have a gander at that body without all those clothes?"

She chuckled. That was a once-a-week proposition, but since she'd already thought about it, it took on a different meaning for her.

"I'm a *food* whore, Mr. Piper."

He barked a laugh. "I saw how you looked at me, doll, so don't think I don't know it crossed your mind."

"Guilty as charged," Vanessa said as she finished laying out the food.

She straightened, turned, and looked square at him. He returned her look second for second. She glanced pointedly at his midsection, but couldn't tell if he had a hard-on or not through the robe.

He smirked at her.

"You've gone to a lot of trouble to make sure the world thinks you're dead, letting people make shrines and hold candlelight vigils. Why?"

"That ain' none o' your business, Ms. Whittaker."

"It is if you expect me to hide you." He blinked, and she chuckled. "I see. I can do that better with a little more information."

He said nothing for a moment, then said, low, "I got some things I gotta take care of an' I gotta do it alone. Can't, with people yellin' in my ear an' holdin' their hand out."

"How long are you staying?"

He shrugged. "One, two years, tops. Be mighty nice if I had a little comfort food to help me pass the time."

"You didn't come here for my food."

"Well, yeah, I *did*," he said. "That's just not all I was fixin' to eat while I was here."

"And you think being a guest here gets you the chief executive chef on a platter?"

He folded his arms over his chest and rocked back on a bare heel to study her, inspecting her slowly up and down, back up again. Vanessa's body responded. "If I didn't think I'd get the chief executive chef on a platter, I'd'a gone somewhere else," he murmured, his tone dangerous.

Vanessa remained poised in spite of her arousal. "A lot of powerful and famous people come here thinking that, Mr. Piper. What makes you think you're special?"

He inclined his head. "I was willin' to be wrong, but turns out I wasn't wrong. Was I?" He jerked his chin at her. "Get nekkid."

Vanessa almost laughed. What did it say about her that she found such imperious men arousing? Screw pleasantries and skillful seduction. Nash approached her the way she liked, and it hadn't occurred to her until now that she had any preference. But she *did* have one inviolable rule—

"Are you married?"

"Ain't been for a while now."

"Then let's get something straight right up front," Vanessa said, as she began to unbutton her blouse. Nash's smirk turned into a predatory smile. "*Nobody* finds out about this. Ever. I have a lot of credibility here as a professional. No nonsense."

"Oh, like you ain't splashed your affair with Ford all over creation."

"Do you believe all of the rumors you hear?"

"Who do you want me to believe? You or my lyin' eyes?"

"Take it or leave it."

"You think you'd lose somethin' if people thought you and I were lovers?"

"They'd question my judgment, possibly my sanity. If any one of my staff—or the co-owner—figures this out," she said, dropping her blouse and kicking off her shoes, "I'll have the paparazzi down here so fast you won't have time to pack up and leave."

"Deal." He dropped his robe and her breath caught.

"Condoms?"

"I never go bareback."

She tilted her head as he fell on the bed and locked his fingers behind his head to watch her. Then she laughed and dropped her skirt. Shimmied out of her expensive panties, locked the door and dimmed the lights.

"I want you to know," she murmured as she put one knee on the bed and then crawled toward his bare, muscular body, "that I don't do this for just anyone."

"I wouldn't'a thought different," he murmured once she pulled even with him, running his hand through her hair and drawing him to her. "I hear Ford's no slouch in bed, an' that paintin's a few years old, so I expect he trained you and you got spoilt."

"He did and I did," she whispered, kissing him. Long, slow. "And you're right. He was my first. You're my second. You're welcome."

"Mmmm, yeah, doll. Where's my manners? I'll send Taight a thank-you note tomorrow." She stilled and he began to chuckle. "No secrets amongst celebrities, doll. He's my money man an' he knows where I am."

"That's disturbing," she whispered right before she deepened the kiss. "And oh, that paparazzi thing? Sebastian doesn't find out, either. Got it?"

"Wouldn't think of it." He handed her a condom and said, "Why'n't you do the honors, doll?"

"Glad to. Your food's going to get cold."

He slipped a hand between her legs and she whimpered. "Don't think so. *That's* plenty hot."

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