

WHAT YOU WISH FOR

by
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Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.
~Aristotle~

Chapter One

Whenever she spoke about it, Rani's emerald eyes would shine, "I want an all-consuming love like in the movies. You know the kind, full of devotion, but especially a loving lust."

Addison snorted, looking down at her friend's inverted face hanging over the edge of the sofa. "Yeah, right. Try and get that nowadays."

"Then wake me from this pathetic dream I've slumped into, Addison."

Addison leaned over to pat Rani's jean-clad knee. "You've slumped into no such dream, but what you want doesn't conform to today's reality."

Lifting her legs off the back of the sofa, Rani spun around to sit up. She straightened her tattered T-shirt and stared at Addison. "And why not? That's the problem with today's society, no one believes in true love anymore, or the nuances of it. Whatever happened to 'Love at first sight'? To hear you speak, you'd think Cupid was dead."

"He may as well be." Addison shrugged. "Listen, sweetie, there is no Prince Charming, and there won't be a knight in shining armor riding up to carry you off into the sunset, either." She dropped her chopsticks in the empty cardboard container—the last of her Chinese lunch—and made a two-pointer into a nearby wastebasket. Addison loved Rani. She didn't want to see her get lost in castles in the sky, even though she knew no matter what her argument, Rani wouldn't renounce the fantasies; she was a devotee of love and romance in all its forms. Still, Addison tried to keep her tethered to the 'here and now' every so often. "You've been watching *Pretty Woman* again, haven't you?" Addison gave her a leveled stare.

Rani rolled her eyes. "I'm starting to realize that talking to you about this is hopeless." She casually lobbed her balled egg roll wrapper into the same wastebasket and twisted her small frame around, to once again throw her legs over the back of the sofa. Her long, golden tresses hung down, nearly brushing the floor. "Soon as I bring up this topic, you turn into The Nothing, like in that movie I rented for your niece—what was it called again?" She chewed on her full bottom lip, thinking.

"*The Never Ending Story*, you nit." The caring expression on Addison's attractive face belied the jab at the end. She stood, brushed her hands down her permanently pressed black skirt, and adjusted her matching blazer. She looked down to see if she had soiled her pink silk blouse—nothing—and finally ran her fingers through a wealth of auburn hair. Hers was a slim, leggy build that she kept fit with frequent visits to the gym and games of racquetball or tennis matches Rani goaded her into. Her lips pursed as her concentrated gaze came to rest on the top of Rani's head. "I am what I am, Rani, and so are you. That's why we've remained such good friends. We take each other at face value. I realize you're a *hopeless*—and I stress the word ever so strongly—romantic, and I'm a coldhearted bitch." She grinned when a melodic laugh bubbled from Rani.

Even though it was Saturday, and a gorgeous day, being a successful realtor didn't allow Addison the pleasures of a weekend off. Four years ago--to the day--she had shown Rani this cabin and Rani had fallen in love with it. The day the papers were signed, they celebrated Rani's

new home and their budding friendship with an all-day trip to Six Flags. Addison's features reflected the happy memory as her mind returned to the present. She checked her watch. "It's almost one, I have to get going. I'm showing that large Victorian again, to the same couple. I think I have a sale." She took a step towards the front door, and then remembered, "Are we still on for racquetball Tuesday, or will you be deeply in love by then?"

"I'll be there." Rani rolled off the sofa and gave Addison's shoulder a playful punch. "My true love is out there, and I'm going to find him. You just watch."

"Have fun on your trip from reality." The tease came from over Addison's shoulder, her high heels clacking on the polished wood floor. She whooshed through the double front doors of Rani's cabin and strode to her BMW parked askew in the driveway.

Rani stood just beyond the glass, watching her. "Ha! I'll show you, Miss Smarty-pants."

That evening, Rani unplugged the phone so she could concentrate and busied herself with work. She was one of two Creative Directors at Keating Advertising and Design, a small, but rapidly growing advertising agency. She lived alone in the two-story cabin on six acres of lakefront property an hour away from her job in the city. So far, her life was routine: sleep by 12 a.m., up at five, out of bed at six after contemplating it for an hour, then a groggy walk to the bathroom. Finally, she'd dress, grab a quick cup of coffee, and head out the door to work. An hour later, traffic permitting, she could be found in her office, sitting in an overstuffed recliner with notebook in hand, steadily chewing a pencil.

At nine p.m., Rani decided she'd done enough work and settled onto the sofa. After flipping through the multitude of movie channels, she finally decided on *Somewhere in Time*. Content to find a romance she could get lost in, she sank lower into the comforter and cuddled with a cup of cocoa. By the end of the movie, she had gone through an entire package of Kleenex. She flipped the TV off, walked the house to check doors and windows, and prepared for bed. Uncharacteristically, she couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned, and then tried to read. After a while, she flung the *Collected Works of Lord Byron* onto a chair across the room. She sat up in bed and surveyed the emptiness surrounding her while mulling over a mental image of herself: she was thirty-one, not unobtrusive looking, but she wouldn't describe herself as a stunning beauty either. She considered herself cute, since she didn't want for dates on a Saturday night, yet here was a Saturday night, so what was she doing alone and in bed?

She had no family other than an aging father living out his waning years upstate and a mother who'd run out on them when she was still a baby. Rani had grown up watching a multitude of women drift in and out of their lives. There had been no Cinderella for her father.

This wasn't the life she had imagined. She should have been married with a bushel of children running around, squeezing their ballet and soccer practice into her sixty hour workweek. Exhausted from her job, motherly duties, and a passionate session of lovemaking each night with her husband, she'd fall blissfully asleep. Yet, here she was, wired up, unable to sleep, and no one to talk to. Something was about to happen; she just knew it. Why this lull if not? Everyone goes through these lulls, and then something wonderful happens to them and they're forever changed because of it. That must be it. Soon, her life would turn around. Some handsome man would sweep her off her feet like in *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

Rani couldn't believe what Addison had said earlier nor understand the butterfly lifestyle Addison led. She couldn't fathom the notion of flitting from one man to the next or the empty,

emotionless affairs her friend enjoyed. Rani wondered how she could be happy with her life. Who would? Her father hadn't benefited from existing on such a shallow lifestyle: looking for a true love, but always settling for less, something temporary. No, Rani wouldn't accept that. She wouldn't accept anything other than true love. It was out there, somewhere. All she had to do was patiently wait for it. Contented with her renewed conviction, she snuggled back into her comfortable, but oh so lonely bed, and managed to fall asleep.

The following Monday morning, Rani was enjoying a cup of coffee when the company's art director, Bill Brown, stepped inside the doorframe of her office to fill her in on what happened over the weekend. "Avery had an impromptu phone conference with Sam Saturday night. She has a new direction for their ads." He adjusted his geometrically patterned silk tie as his large Adam's apple bobbed.

Rani was business savvy, but also prided herself on her creativity. She was involved in all facets of advertising, from the no-nonsense application of copywriting and layout design, to strategy development and account relations. With the Bowman/Avery account, there had been a substantial amount of research and countless creative sessions, and her team had come up with three rough concepts. After speaking with their client, Catherine Bowman of Bowman & Avery Sporting Equipment, they narrowed it down to one idea that would be pitched to her at the end of the week. Confused, Rani picked up her phone, poking Samantha Esposito's private line. "Get Avery on the phone, please, Bill."

Samantha answered before the phone had time to finish ringing. "Yez, Rani?"

The corners of Rani's lips turned up at the drawled greeting. "You spoke with Kendall Avery?"

"Sí, I sure did. I left you a memo in your e-mail. You haven't checked it yet, huh, Chica?"

"Uh..." As Rani was quickly doing that, Samantha strode into the office, looking and smelling as if she had just stepped from a clothing magazine in her white pants and pullover sweater. She had spiky black hair, dark, dazzling eyes, and a deep mocha complexion. She beamed her sexy smile at Rani as she clicked off her cordless phone.

Busted, Rani chuckled and dropped the receiver back in its cradle. "I was getting to it..." She offered Samantha a charm-fuelled grin of her own that quickly turned into a grimace when she glanced back at the screen and saw the number of e-mails downloading. She pointed at them and looked at Samantha. "This is why I hate opening the darn thing."

Samantha offered her a sympathetic "Pobrecita" and leaned her compact frame over Rani's desk, affording Rani a closer whiff of her spicy floral fragrance. She poked a finger at the monitor and looked at Rani. "Allí esta, that one."

"Well you're here. You may as well catch me up."

"Sorry, mi amor, the account is yours this time, you deal with that...*woman*. I had my fill of Kendall Avery the last time I worked with her. Besides, a client waits." She winked and left as quickly as she had appeared. Rani read over the memo as she waited to speak with Kendall.

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"Hi, Jerri, it's Bill. Oh, I'm fine, and you?" He barely listened while the receptionist droned on about her humdrum life and the newest emotional pain her son had inflicted on her.

He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between the forefinger and thumb of his right hand. He should have taken the day off like he had wanted to. No major meetings had been scheduled, and he wasn't needed at the office. He imagined himself at home in his favorite chair with a tall, cool one beside him. And a drink. He decided if Rani didn't tear his head from his neck after she spoke with Avery, he would phone Addison. "I hate to cut you short, Jerri, but Ms. Noir would like to speak with Kendall. Sure, I'll wait." He whipped out a handkerchief and wiped at the perspiration beading on his neck.

"Avery. How may I help you?" The voice was smooth and deep.

Bill poured all his charm into the greeting, "Hi, Kendall, this is—"

"I know. Hi, Bill. What's up?"

Alrighty. "Ms. Noir would like a word with you about the account."

"Sure, patch me through."

Bill hastily said, "Good-bye, good to hear your voice," and punched Rani's line.

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Rani watched the flashing light for a moment, getting the words straight in her mind. She didn't want to fumble. "Hello, Ms. Avery. I was informed there had been a conference this weekend?"

"Hey there! Yes, about that. I tried to get in touch with you, Ms. Noir, to no avail. Catherine's updated me on the progress made so far, and I think you're doing a great job, but I have some new ideas I'd like to throw at you. I hope it's not a problem."

Of course not, Rani thought. After all, they were shooting for the same goals—selling Bowman & Avery's products and improving their image. Rani just hated that all those hours already spent hashing out ideas were now wasted. She should have been used to it by now. That was the only part of her job she didn't like, when a client rejected an idea. Well, Avery hadn't specifically stated they were rejecting the ideas. Perhaps not all was lost. Maybe she could salvage something. "How about we get together today, and you can update me?"

Kendall's voice came a moment later. "Lunch sound good to you? I'm free for an hour at noon."

"That's fine. I'll be in the area for a doctor's appointment anyway. I'll just drop by your office when I'm through."

"Good, I'll see you then."

They hung up at the same time. Rani blew out a long breath, staring through her 30th floor window at the city below. The mirrored metal of one building reflected not the image of the buildings around it, but Rani's mental image of Kendall Avery. Rani definitely remembered her from their one short meeting. Avery was a tall, strikingly beautiful woman with dark coloring and just-past-the-shoulder wavy black hair, and her eyes were an intense grayish, sky-blue. Rani picked at her brain, recalling the little facts she had overheard during office gossip about Kendall Avery. She was thirty-one-years old, very wealthy, and had been an athlete all of her life, mostly basketball growing up, then later, gymnastics—to which Rani attributed her athletic form. There had been no gossip about her romantic life. Rani had no idea if she was married, divorced, or widowed. Did she have any children? Avery's business partner, Catherine Bowman, had dropped no clues to Kendall's life out of the office either.

The company had first approached them a year ago in an attempt to develop a new perception of their products. Samantha had initially handled the account, but Rani clearly

recalled Kendall had been to the point about what she wanted, when she wanted it, and how she wanted it. Rani remembered Bill's many complaints over the abrupt design changes and was glad she'd had no part in it. This time when Avery's company contacted them, Rani had only dealt with Catherine Bowman. A total opposite to Kendall's dark beauty, she had light hair, a fair complexion, and always dressed in pastel colors. Catherine was a small woman, a few inches shorter than Rani, and appreciated a good joke. At least, she was amused by Rani's sense of humor. Rani enjoyed working with her. Catherine hadn't disputed any idea thus far. She seemed confident of their abilities. She provided the newest information about Bowman & Avery and left Rani to do what she was hired for. "And here Kendall Avery is, sticking her cog into the works," Rani muttered aloud. Her mind went back to Kendall's remarkable eyes, and she found herself sighing.

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Kendall Avery had her high-backed leather chair turned to face the wall of windows behind her large wooden desk. Her attention was focused, her gaze staring through the glass, but she saw nothing of the bustling city sprawled out below. A gentle knock pulled her thoughts from her phone conversation, and she swiveled the chair back around. She smiled at the older Leonardo DeCaprio look-a-like standing there eyeing her. "Ah, Peter, come on in." He hurried across the room and set a long file atop her desk.

"Here's that file you requested."

"Thanks." A flash of memory raced around her mind. Hadn't Peter dated Ms. Noir a month back? She believed so. He was almost to the door when she stopped him. "Ah, Peter? Wait a sec."

"Yes?"

"I have a meeting with Rani Noir at noon." She waited. His face lit up for a few moments, and she could even detect a slight blush to his smooth-shaven skin. Kendall raised an eyebrow, hoping he would supply answers to her unspoken questions.

"Nice woman, but she can be...*spunky*, to put it nicely." He nodded with the admission. "I guess you would know we dated—the whole office knew." He stuffed his hands into the front pockets of his tan pants, and lifted his shoulders. "We're no longer seeing one another."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

He waved off her sympathetic glance and words, grinning. "That's all right. We came to a mutual agreement finally. Apparently my Aquafresh wasn't compatible with her Colgate." He laughed. "She's a bit anal about those things..."

Avery let him talk as the words easily tumbled from him, nodding and mentally taking notes. She wondered if he was even aware of how much he had revealed by the time he was through recanting his short affair with Rani Noir.

"If there isn't anything else, I need to get back to records. Don't want the *boss* to think I'm slacking." He chuckled, winked and was on his way out the door.

"Well now, that had certainly been easier than getting information from anyone about Sam." Kendall hopped up and headed from her office to her business partner's. Catherine was on the phone. She beckoned Kendall in with a pen while still schmoozing whoever was on the other end of the line. Kendall's sometimes too easygoing friend was much better at that game than she was. Something she was happy to let her do. Unlike Kendall's tailored corner of the building, Catherine's office was the epitome of the company's name. Sporting apparatus sat

everywhere, even underfoot. Kendall made her way through the obstacle course from door to desk as though walking a minefield. She sat on the corner of the desk and amused herself with tossing a softball hand-to-hand while she waited.

"Finally!" Catherine released a breath after setting the phone back in its cradle. "That man could test the patience of a saint. But we got the Ardsley Country Club account."

"Good deal. You might have combusted if you had to suffer through another round of golf." Kendall laughed and set the ball neatly on the big desk next to Catherine's newest lava lamp, a present from Kendall, her 'secret Santa' that past Christmas. "I spoke with Noir this morning."

"She wasn't too upset over us switching, I hope? I truly enjoyed working with her. Great sense of humor, and very smart."

"I haven't told her yet that I'm taking over. I think she was already a bit razzed with the change of ideas. She was nice about it, but I could tell from her tone her feathers were a little ruffled."

"Just don't drive her nutty like you did Samantha. Let her do her job. She's very good at it. I haven't had one complaint."

Kendall's face tried a look of innocence, unfamiliar with the emotion. "Yes, I praised her for the work she's already done. But you know me, constant change day-to-day. In the end, I'm sure all of us will be pleased with the result."

"I'll be surprised if they even let you in the building. You did leave a lasting impression with their art department."

Kendall laughed. "Aw, Bill adores me. I'm sure he appreciated the challenge."

"Hmm, yes, 'challenging' is what I would call your obnoxious side."

"Tsk-tsk." Kendall wagged a finger at her. "Watch the claws, Cat. Mine are longer." There was a teasing tone in her voice.

"Oh, that reminds me, will you be attending our little party Wednesday?"

"How does 'claws' remind you of parties, and no, not if you're going to try to fix me up again."

"It's been a year, Kendall. You need to get back out there, find a nice woman that can put up with you--" She chuckled when Kendall scowled. "Okay. I promise no matchmaking." Catherine showed Kendall both hands, and that no fingers were crossed. "Now Pam, however..." She sighed in mock frustration. "I'm not making any promises for my love. She wants you happy just as much as I do."

"I'm happy. I'm very content with my life."

"Not all aspects of it. I've seen you moping around, checking the chicks. You've got that look, my friend. You need to get out there and fall in love for heaven's sake. We both know all that casual sex isn't going to satisfy you for long."

"Whatever." Kendall waved off her words and headed to the door. With a hand on the knob she added, "The right woman hasn't come along yet, but when she does, I'll know it."

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Kendall was shrugging into a leather biker jacket when her secretary buzzed Rani's arrival. "Nice and prompt." Kendall liked her already. She grabbed her keys and stuffed them into her jeans pocket. When she opened the door, the subtle, sweet scent of Rani's perfume wafted over her. Kendall recognized the refreshing floral fragrance. Anais Anais.

Kendall caught herself holding her breath as Rani stood there staring up at her with shining jade eyes. She released it slowly, and with a deepening smile, extended a hand toward Rani while openly studying her. Rani was just shy of medium height: five-foot-five, Kendall guessed, reaffirming her impression from their first meeting. She had a healthy, unmarked complexion and a fit womanly frame. She wore a dark gray pantsuit with a white silk blouse underneath, unbuttoned enough to allow a glimpse of her full breasts. A small gold locket on a thin golden chain rested in the exposed 'V' of smooth, lightly tanned flesh. She had no other jewelry on that Kendall saw, not even a watch. Kendall's appreciative gaze wandered back to her eyes. "Good to see you again, Ms. Noir. I trust everything went well at your appointment?"

Rani blinked in bafflement at the thrill that raced through her upon hearing Kendall's voice and feeling her strong, warm handshake. The phone did that voice absolutely no justice, she mused, watching Kendall make her own presumptions as Kendall's gaze circled her face and form with apparent interest. Rani hoped her expression didn't display her confusion as she tried to register what had just happened inside her.

"Yes, a bit of indigestion, I'll be snacking on antacids for a few days." Rani noticed the amused twinkle in Kendall's eyes as she led Rani towards the elevator.

They stood side-by-side quietly as the lift descended to the ground floor. Despite Rani having had her insides all jumbled a minute ago, and feeling a bit frazzled about the impending changes to the ad campaign, she was beginning to feel at ease standing beside Kendall. Stealing sidelong glances, Rani noticed her nose came just under Kendall's broad shoulder. She also noted the pleasant fragrance coming off Kendall's stately form and Rani nudged closer as she unconsciously drew in a deep breath of Kendall's scent.

When the elevator stopped, Kendall placed a hand along the rubber track to keep the door open and let Rani pass through into the garage.

Rani was keenly aware of the tall figure that caught up beside her and felt that calming energy emanating off Kendall again, and a feeling of easy security from being near Kendall settled over her. Rani wondered how she was able to keep her rambling at bay. She had tons of things to talk over with Kendall, and was by nature a friendly, talkative person, yet her thoughts stayed away from her mouth. Maybe it was Kendall's warm, soothing, and quiet presence? Kendall made no small talk as they walked the length of the garage. Rani knew that even though those long legs of Kendall's could have taken her down the blacktop a lot faster, she had shortened her stride to match Rani's.

Rani's thoughts and steps stopped abruptly as they drew up beside a candy gold motorcycle. The word Suzuki was stenciled in blue on a metallic flake background.

When Kendall saw the growing concern on Rani's face, she arched a perfectly shaped black eyebrow. "What's wrong?"

Rani gestured down at her expensive suit and looked back to Kendall's inquisitive eyes. "Surely you didn't think we'd—"

"Why not?" Kendall, dressed casually in black jeans and a thin sweater, obviously didn't see the problem. "The restaurant isn't far. This way we can get there quickly, and back, without too much hassle." Her eyes twinkled kindly at Rani, and she added, "I'll even let you wear my helmet," and offered it to Rani in her outstretched hand.

"But my car's right out front."

"It'll be fun, I promise." Kendall stepped closer, encompassing Rani in the shadow and warmth of her form.

Feeling the heat, Rani hoped Kendall couldn't see her obvious blush in the dim light. She shivered, stepped around Kendall, and lifted the helmet from her grasp. "I'm placing my life in your hands, Ms. Avery."

"You won't find a better pair of hands, Ms. Noir." Kendall winked and threw a sculptured leg over the bike.

Rani made a pathetic attempt to climb on and could hear the amusement in Kendall's tone when she suggested, "Lean on me. It'll make it that much easier." With her heart starting a nervous dance in her chest, Rani slung the strap of her purse over her head. Hesitantly, she placed a slim hand on the leather-clad shoulder, applying just the slightest pressure, and tried again to get on. She was exceedingly glad she'd elected to leave her portfolio behind and just hear Avery out this first meeting.

Kendall looked back and watched Rani's lack of progress with a gleam in her eyes. "The good news is, we'll be able to beat the dinner rush."

Irritated as much by her own timidity as by the motorcycle's owner, Rani grabbed those strong, wide shoulders firmly and pulled herself up behind Kendall. After a few seconds, she had to admit it wasn't too frightening. She dropped her hands down between her thighs and wondered what else besides Kendall Avery she could hold on to for dear life.

"Put your arms around me." Kendall twisted her torso to take one of Rani's hands and slip it about her waist. "Now the other one." She released Rani's hand slowly as Rani quickly wrapped her other arm around Kendall's side. "Hold me tight." The engine roared and they were on their way.

Chapter Two

Kendall rested her hand on Rani's shoulder and opened the heavy wooden door to the restaurant. An elegantly dressed, slender redhead in her mid-forties appeared from the shadows. "Kendall Avery. I knew that old door still had some magic in it." The woman put out both hands to draw Kendall's free hand into her greeting. She appraised Rani with a curious glance and grin. "And who's this?"

"Rani Noir, this is Megan Dannials."

"This way, ladies. You're early enough for your pick, but I think you'll like The Den best." They walked through the moderately lit main dining room, dark mahogany covered walls absorbing most of the illumination, and came to an open doorway on the far wall of the room. One step down and under an arched alcove, Megan flicked three switches and the room came alive. She stepped aside with a proud smile at the restaurant's newly constructed attraction. Kendall took Rani's elbow and led them into The Den.

Rani's gaze went to the fireplace first, certain it was a fake because of the cool even temperature of the elaborate room. The hearth was an arch of beige and terracotta inlaid brick with a beautiful lattice mesh covering that depicted two forms in silhouette. The flame behind them made them seem to dance. Aaron Neville's *Tell It Like It Is* was whispering in from unseen speakers. A dim candelabrum hung from the ceiling, casting a yellow glow. To the left of the flickering hearth was one rounded booth, its semicircle bench thickly cushioned in a deep hunter green. The table was clad only with a floor-length, peach tablecloth. A huge candle made up the centerpiece.

"Beautiful, Meg." Kendall gave her a charming smile. "You always know what I need." Megan leaned close. "If that were true, I wouldn't have to cater to your dates."

Kendall was indifferent to Megan's dark eyes on Rani's back and the mischievous sparkle of envy in them; her main focus was Rani.

Rani's gaze swept up to the second floor, a complete look of awe spreading across her face. Enthralled with what her eyes were taking in, Rani nearly banged into a hurrying waitress that passed by her. She went to gingerly perch on the hearth step, fixated on the glow of paper flames.

"Hold up." Kendall followed her.

Rani took the hand held out to her and was pulled to her feet before she could work her own muscles into standing. Kendall led her to the booth and nudged her far into the seat, all the while staring intently down at Rani.

Rani was completely unnerved by Kendall studying her with those piercing, steel eyes, looming almost a full foot over her. "You're a—how tall are you?" she asked, with the curiosity of a child.

"I'm six foot one. Do you like it here?"

Kendall's silky-smooth words reverberated in Rani's mind, turning the simple question multidimensional. She decided to take the question at face value. "I'd like to live here, Ms. Avery."

"No more formalities, Rani." She sat across from Rani and waited until the hostess placed the menus in front of each of them and moved back to her station at the door. "We're going to be working together, so let's drop the official procedures, okay?"

"Okay...*Kendall*." The word settled on her tongue comfortably. Fresh and sweet, like a chocolate covered strawberry. Rani felt her face heat with a blush and a chill run through her body. What the heck is happening here?

"Good." Kendall didn't take her eyes from Rani when their waitress stopped at her right side, a wide welcoming smile covering her features. "Pina Colada, mixed extra fine, whipped cream and two cherries for Rani here. I'll have an unsweetened iced tea." When the waitress left to get their drinks, Kendall answered Rani's questioning glance. "I make it a point to know the people I do business with."

"I wouldn't think that would include such a personal thing as what I like to drink."

"I even know what brand of toothpaste you use."

Rani lifted a brow. Now that was a bit too much information. "Hmmm..."

"You doubt my sincerity?" Kendall leaned both elbows on the table and templed her hands under her chin, white teeth flashing at Rani. "Colgate. And you don't floss as often as you should, which I must say is very bad for you."

"I don't know whether to be insulted or concerned."

"Neither." Kendall sat back. "This is a nice album."

Rani had noted the switch in songs. "Yes, unusual to play a whole album. Variety isn't a factor here, I presume."

"On the contrary, you'll be amazed at this menu. There are dishes from nearly every continent." She lifted Rani's menu for her, holding onto it until Rani took it from her lax grasp. "If you need to know what any of that is, just ask. I've eaten here a lot."

While they were deciding from the vast selection of dishes, their drinks came. Kendall smiled when she saw Rani's delighted expression after her first sip.

"Perfect." Rani set the goblet back down after a healthy gulp.

Without really knowing what possessed her to, Kendall leaned over and swiped one of the two cherries. She popped it into Rani's gaping mouth and nearly laughed at the stunned look that crossed Rani's face at her impulsive act. With her other hand, she brought the second cherry to her own mouth. She held it between her teeth and tugged the stem off with one pull, then set it down beside her glass and sat back. "When I was younger, I would tie the stem with only my tongue."

"That's humanly possible?"

Kendall was totally delighted by her expression. "You and me, Rani, we're going to get along great."

"Oh really?"

"Do you have any doubt?"

"When you say it like that I don't. I'm sure much later, out of this atmosphere, I'll think differently."

"Why is that?"

"Do you have a degree in charm or bamboozlement?"

"Call it what you will." Kendall shrugged, slipping her leather jacket off and setting it down beside her on the bench.

Rani sucked on the cherry and copied Kendall's relaxed posture, leaning back into the supple cushion, extending her legs before her. She couldn't see, but she knew her legs were between Kendall's, and for some reason that made another shiver course through her. She watched Kendall's hands as Kendall tapped a packet of Equal into her tea. Careful and precise, strong hands she knew—yet Rani detected a gentle flair. Her gaze crawled upward when Kendall pushed her sleeves up over toned forearms. She wore a silver Rolex on her right wrist, emphasizing her golden skin. Rani's gaze went back to Kendall's hands.

Fingers lazily caressing her silverware now after twirling the contents around her glass with a spoon, Kendall watched Rani, who, she noticed, seemed fixated with her hands. She mulled over her own behavior, her mind pleasurably busy with the memory of Rani's quiet presence in the elevator as they stood together just a short while ago: her fragrance, the gentle touch of her slim hand on Kendall's shoulder, then after, her much firmer grip. This wasn't like Kendall at all. She never felt an immediate attraction to anyone much less a woman who considered herself straight--

That made her pause. Why would she even think Rani wasn't straight? Rani had a long history of dating men. Kendall didn't quite know what it was, yet, she couldn't imagine Rani with a man, or maybe the truth of it was she didn't want to. What she could imagine was the two of them together. Rani fit right into Kendall's idea of her perfect companion: Rani's shorter frame to Kendall's taller one, her lighter coloring to Kendall's dark, and her reserved character to Kendall's accentuated playfulness. She was beginning to understand what was happening to her and came to the quick conclusion that she wanted to know more about this appealing young woman. Her tone was extra soft when she said, "So, tell me more about you."

Rani looked up and their eyes met and held. "What, you don't already know everything about me?"

Amusement danced around and in Kendall's eyes, and they sparkled, as if lit from within. A slow grin spread over her lips. "I don't know nearly enough."

Did Kendall really want to know more about her, or was she just being polite? Rani hesitated. Should she talk about her personal life? That wouldn't be very professional, and she supposed it could be inappropriate since this was a business lunch. She figured she'd bounce the question back to Kendall and leave it up to her. "What do you want to know about me?"

"Anything you wish to share with me." Kendall's intense eyes never left Rani's. "Like, are you seeing anyone special?"

"No, I'm single." What exactly did that have to do with their business lunch? Rani wondered.

"And that locket?"

Startled at being asked another personal question, Rani lifted her hand to touch the small locket lying just above her breasts. She'd been wearing it so long sometimes she forgot about it. "My dad gave it to me when I was younger." She opened it to show Kendall the pictures of her and her father.

Kendall scooted around the table to see. She circled her fingers over Rani's, and they both held the locket. "Ah, so that's where you got those striking eyes." She took a moment or three to stare into Rani's eyes. "I can't see them in this light, but you do have a few gold flecks."

Rani's stomach fluttered at the words, amplified by the fact Kendall was still holding her hand. She adjusted her position on the cushion, accidentally brushing her leg up against

Kendall's. Was it her imagination that she felt Kendall press her leg into her own for a brief second? "My mother had hazel eyes. I never knew her though. She left my father when I was a baby."

"That must have been hard." Kendall slowly released Rani's hand and settled back to her side of the table.

"Not especially. My father's a wonderful man. He filled both roles easily. I hardly noticed her absence."

"He never remarried?"

"No, but he's pretty popular with the ladies."

"He's a good-looking man. You bear a strong resemblance to him, in a more feminine way."

"Thank you." Rani idly played with her locket. There was an intangible something about Kendall that puzzled Rani. It was almost as if Kendall was...was what? She didn't know, so she sat there quietly, trying to work it out.

Intrigued, Kendall deliberately studied Rani's expression. She could tell Rani had gone off somewhere again, and she took the break in conversation and Rani's distraction to think a bit more. Maybe that was Rani's subtle way of avoiding more personal talk? After all, they were there for a business meeting; it wasn't a date. When she felt Rani's leg touch hers under the table again, her body stiffened with tension a second time. Perhaps if she talked business, she could get her brain to where it was supposed to be and ignore her growing attraction to Rani. Her inclinations were highly improper, she reluctantly admitted to herself, considering they were going to be working together.

Hearing Kendall's voice brought Rani from her musings, and she blinked. "I'm sorry, I missed part of that."

"Online advertising," Kendall repeated.

Frowning, Rani wondered if she had put Kendall off when she'd got lost in thought for a few minutes. She hadn't meant to wander, but she couldn't seem to stop it. She willed her mind to quiet itself and pay attention to what Kendall was saying.

"We've been considering incorporating it into our own marketing plan. I'd like to explore its benefits and advantages." Kendall paused when their waitress stopped to refill her tea. "I know your agency prefers traditional advertising campaigns while specializing in a particular market niche, and I'm well aware of your effectiveness with that so far. But the Internet is where the profit is." Kendall artificially sweetened her tea as she spoke. "It's growing, and soon it'll have a life of its own and there won't be a corporation without a dot com. Take cellular phones for example." She dug her own phone from her back pocket and showed it to Rani. "Just a few years ago they were a rarity. Now, most professionals have one."

Rani stared at her, finding herself enthralled by the deep tone of Kendall's voice. "Catherine was pretty clear in her ideas about market focus and your target customer."

"I know," Kendall said, "and I understand you've spent a considerable amount of time on us. However, I don't foresee any issues with including online ads into what you have already. I've been crunching the numbers, and I'm happy to say, we can expand on the budget."

"That's always good to know, but our agency hasn't really begun considering online advertising. The Internet is fairly new."

"Not really. The Internet isn't a recent innovation, although most people can't even agree on exactly what it is, let alone who created it. Some folks like to joke about Al Gore saying he 'took the initiative in creating the Internet', but he did sponsor legislation that helped launch its

expansion. One of the main forces behind it actually started back in '57, when the Soviet Union launched the first satellite, Sputnik, into space, alarming the powers-that-be behind our military."

"I don't see the connection."

"If the Soviet Union could launch a satellite, they could, in theory, launch bombs into space. That fear was the origin of ARPA, the Advanced Research Projects Agency—an independent research branch of the U.S. Department of Defense. It's now known as DARPA. But I digress. You don't want to hear about this." Kendall chuckled at herself and reaching over, she laid her fingers on Rani's hand. "We're here to talk about us—about us working together that is—and the ad campaign."

Rani's face colored when Kendall touched her, causing Rani to take another huge swig of her drink. "No, go on."

"I don't want to bore you."

"You're hardly doing that." Rani spent the next ten minutes sitting there quietly as Kendall went into further details, expanding on her ideas. She was impressed that Kendall was so knowledgeable, and not just in advertising and the birth of the Internet. She repeatedly blushed each time Kendall touched her or frequently slipped into unexpected flatteries over Rani's thorough work on the account, her outfit, the way she styled her hair, her cute laugh, and captivating green eyes.

A light bulb went off in her head as that 'intangible something' about Kendall finally dawned on her. Kendall was *flirting* with her! Well, she wasn't naive, she knew about lesbians. Who didn't in this day and age? And so what if Kendall was flirting with her? She wasn't closed-minded. She had never had a lesbian affair before, but—Rani inwardly shook herself. Why was she even thinking these things? And who said Kendall was even a lesbian? A few moments passed before Rani recognized the real reason behind this confusion. Kendall Avery, that's what. The woman radiated sexuality, an exhilarating charm Rani wasn't familiar with. Kendall's words, her posture, even her gaze were full of passion. When Kendall looked at her, Rani felt like Kendall was caressing all of her in those liquid silver depths. The feeling wasn't unpleasant. Actually, she was beginning to like it. She finally decided she wouldn't let apprehension spoil the feelings. For once, she wouldn't make herself nuts pondering the imponderable. She would enjoy the hour with Kendall and not continue to dissect it.

"Hey," Kendall said softly. "Where did you go off to?"

Rani became fully aware of her surroundings and remembered where she was and what she was doing, or rather, was supposed to be doing.

Kendall picked up her drink and finished it in one swallow. "It's okay. I do tend to drone on sometimes."

"No," Rani said quickly, "I love your voi—ideas." She stopped herself before she blurted out just how much she enjoyed everything about Kendall so far. "I'm sorry. I'm finding it a bit hard to concentrate today."

Their food arrived, and Rani was glad for the distraction. The meal was delicious, and Rani forgot she'd had her stomach poked and prodded earlier that morning. She did notice Kendall pushing her own food around the plate. Apparently she wasn't all that interested in eating.

"Is there something wrong with your food?" Rani looked up and found Kendall was staring at her, but not really seeing her.

"I'm not hungry. How's yours? It's not upsetting your stomach is it?"

Rani was touched by her concern. "I'm fine, thanks for asking. And this dish is fantastic."

Kendall gave her a smile. She again pictured the sun sparkling in Rani's eyes just before they entered the restaurant and giving her skin a warm glow. She had tried to keep their lunch professional, but it seemed impossible. She couldn't deny it was going to her satisfaction, though. Rani seemed receptive to her flirting, and Kendall totally adored it when her cheeks kept going pink.

"Now who has the wandering mind?"

The soft voice penetrated Kendall's absorbed reverie, and her eyes finally focused on Rani. With fervid enthusiasm, her gaze fell to the creamy expanse of Rani's neck, and then slid slowly and seductively downward. "I'm ready for coffee, you?"

Rani's reaction to Kendall's bold appraisal was a mixture of embarrassment and arousal, the effect causing havoc in her system. "Coffee sounds great."

When they were enjoying their coffee upstairs in a smaller room, Rani noted, with a trace of irritation, that she didn't want this time spent with Kendall to end. Kendall sat in a Queen Ann chair adjacent to Rani, nursing a cappuccino. Her long, so very long legs were thrust out before her and crossed at the ankles. That one time Rani had seen her a year ago, Kendall was wearing a silver pantsuit. She had looked exceptionally professional. Today, Kendall was more relaxed in her loose-fitting jeans, beige pullover sweater with a T-shirt underneath, and of course the black biker boots and jacket. The look worked for her; that was for sure.

Rani's gaze moved up to Kendall's face, to her eyes, and she blushed to find Kendall was watching her. Hastily, Rani moved her gaze down and away. She'd been giving Kendall's sexy body a once-over and had not even realized it. What must Kendall think? What *could* she think but the obvious? On the other hand, Rani had never felt uncomfortable sizing Sam or Addison up, so why should it matter now? Not completely sure of the *why*, she knew only that it *did* matter this time, with this particular woman. And then she remembered Kendall had been giving her flirtatious glances all through their lunch. Maybe it was time to reciprocate. When her eyes met Kendall's again, Rani was unwilling to let her usual shyness win out. Boldly, she stared at Kendall, her chin subtly lifting in a courageous gesture of defiance.

Ever so slowly Kendall's lips widened and she beamed an infectiously beautiful smile at Rani. "It's about time we headed out."

Rani wondered if she should take that slight detection of sadness in Kendall's voice to mean she was just as disappointed that their time together was almost over. Attraction aside, Rani truly did enjoy her time with Kendall. "I have to admit, I had a wonderful time with you this afternoon."

Looking pleased, Kendall took her elbow as they walked back out into the harsh daylight. "I'm glad. Maybe we can do it again soon."

"Just offer and I'm there." Rani was excruciatingly aware of the warmth of the hand on her arm, not even noticing what she'd just said. The ride back was a relief. The cool air on Rani's face felt good and she did find herself holding Kendall a bit tighter than on the first ride. She wasn't quite sure whether her grasp was born of nervousness that she'd topple off the machine on a hairpin turn or she liked the feel of Kendall in her embrace. *No analyzing*, she reminded herself, and she kept to that.

They pulled into a vacant space and sat on the bike for a minute or two longer after it was turned off. Without thinking, Rani dropped her hands from Kendall's waist to Kendall's thighs. The muscles were taut against her palms, the denim stretched tight. She weighed the options

available to her. She could discreetly remove her hands as if she were getting off the bike, which she really didn't want to do just yet, or she could jerk away from Kendall and look like a total fool. Undecided, she left them there, stunned by her bravery.

Kendall covered Rani's hands with her own. They were hot, but soothing, and Rani swayed forward slightly. She caught herself before her body touched Kendall's again and knew she must get up before...she didn't know what would happen, and she wasn't so sure she wanted to find out.

Kendall let Rani's hands slide from under hers and waited until Rani was off the bike before she pulled her own leg over and stood. After she helped Rani remove the helmet, Kendall gently brushed a few stray hairs back into place and they stood there facing each other for what seemed like an eternity.

Finally, Kendall broke the spell. "Call me after you meet with your team."

Rani gave her a perplexed look. "About what?" She caught herself and giggled, running a hand over her face. "I'm sorry. You meant your new ideas, of course. I knew that."

"Don't sweat it." Kendall placed the helmet on the seat and walked Rani to her car out front. She shook her hand, Rani's one clasped between both of hers. She held it for a while, gazing at Rani intently. "You drive safe. Remember, you've been drinking." Kendall hesitated. "On second thought..."

Rani's eyes widened when Kendall reached for her purse.

"Give me your keys. I'll drive you back."

"I can manage."

"Just the same, I couldn't bear the worry until I heard from you again."

* * *

Kendall stood inside the lobby doors making sure Rani was safe and sound before catching a cab to her office.

Rani was backing down the foyer, her stare locked on Kendall's, her lips curved in a silly grin. She banged into the corner of the receptionist's desk and spun around in a complete circle. When she finally oriented herself, it was in time to see the doors slowly closing. Rani caught a glimpse of a smiling Kendall striding purposefully along the sidewalk before she disappeared into the crowd and beyond the glass front of the building.

"God." Rani rolled her eyes, mentally shaking herself, and headed towards the busy elevators.

Chapter Three

Kendall roamed the dark rooms of her apartment in the city, not even noticing what she was doing. Their lunch had lingered with her for the remainder of her workday. After thinking about it, she found she wasn't even concerned about the ads anymore. Why make Rani's job any more difficult? She didn't want that and knew she'd comply with whatever Rani desired to do. Kendall based her decision on the simple fact that she didn't want Rani to agonize over this whole thing; she wanted to please Rani, in any way she could. That admission surprised her. Whatever happened to what Catherine had called her "obnoxious side?"

"Rani Noir." The words echoed around the room and in her mind. She couldn't get Rani's name from her thoughts.

"Now be realistic, Kendall, you can't get the *woman* out of your head, it has nothing to do with the name."

She recalled their first, less than memorable, meeting. It was shortly after Kendall was introduced to several of the Keating staff, her attention focused mainly on her assigned contact, Samantha Esposito. She really hadn't taken much notice of the diminutive blonde who had bustled in for the introductions to Kendall's crew, and then excused herself. Kendall's lover had just left her, and Kendall wasn't interested in anyone, let alone that little beauty. Now, twelve months later, she was fully over the disappointment she felt after yet another breakup. She was allowing herself to trust there was a woman out there she could fall in love with, and who would want her just for the sake of love, not for her looks, her wealth, or her status.

Catherine was right, it was time she got back out there. It had been a very lonely year. She'd had numerous flings, but none that caught her attention, or made her feel anything other than lust. But she'd had straight women come out with her before, and the end had not been what she planned. Most of them were curious and willing to experiment. Some of them went back to men, unable to handle the emotional impact or the reaction in a biased society. A few thanked her for showing them the way and had gone on their own. The failure of the relationships saddened her, but she learned something from each encounter and that evened things out. At least that's what she told herself. They had almost always parted friends, but still, they had always parted.

Rani Noir seemed to be a different story. Kendall could easily envision falling in love with her. Something indefinable attracted her to the woman, made it impossible for her to get Rani out of her mind. She was sure Rani would call with any news from the agency; however, that wasn't good enough for Kendall, not even close. She wanted to let Rani know she'd changed her mind about this whole ad campaign business, before Rani started pulling her hair out. She also wanted—no, *needed*—to hear her voice; to see her smaller but nearly perfect form, her fair complexion; to delight in the flush on Rani's face from her flirtations.

Kendall resisted the urge for several hours, aware that she could be setting herself up for another failure, another fall, if she hadn't guessed right. Rani might reject her lifestyle, possibly after a little experimenting, making it all the harder for her.

The longer she waited, the more she was willing to risk the gamble. After a good portion of the evening had gone by with Rani in her thoughts, she gave in and poked at Rani's home number on her phone's speed dial. *Crazy fool*, she berated herself, but the budding possibility of a relationship won out. Won't know if you don't try. It's not like you've never been let down before. You can handle it.

Could she? It was getting harder after each unsuccessful relationship to keep a positive outlook about love, keep believing that she'd ever find it with the right woman.

"I live to feel love finally," she said aloud, trying to convince herself. The hands of time aren't going any slower these days. What does Rani Noir live for?

* * *

That evening after dinner, Rani snuggled up under a comforter in her recliner upstairs trying without success to read the poetry she had been thoroughly involved in just two days ago. The phone rang, and instinctively, she knew who was calling. *One lunch and now you have 'spidey sense'?* She lifted the receiver, humor tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Hey there, Rani."

The voice on the other end was indeed Kendall's. The deep, sensual sound spread an unfamiliar, but wonderful just the same, tingling warmth through Rani's body. Her heart and stomach did a little somersault. Just what she needed: all day she had been unable to get Kendall off her mind, and now she calls. A small part of her mind complained, but she knew she was glad to hear from Kendall.

Rani's throat constricted, making the greeting squeak from her. "Hi." She cleared it and tried again. "Hello, Kendall."

"How's your date book looking for tomorrow?"

"Huh?" Rani sat up straight, not caring that her book slid off her lap and fell to the floor. The unexpected question brought a surge of anticipation.

"Do you have any free time tomorrow? After work that is."

Rani put her hand over the phone, sure Kendall could hear her heart pounding. Her glance skipped around the room, unable to remember where her planner might be, or what she could possibly have in it. Quickly, she put the phone back to her ear. "I'm pretty free all evening." She winced, sounding way too anxious to her own ears.

"Good, I'll pick you up at work. I'll just head over there from my office. Is five thirty on the dot, okay?"

She wanted to ask Kendall where she was taking her, and furthermore, why she was even doing this, but all she could manage to get out was, "Okay."

"And don't expect us to talk about the account. I've decided to go with whatever you feel is best for my company."

Rani was surprised by Kendall's sudden change of attitude. After the buildup over this whole conflict of ideas, and remembering Sam and Bill's aggravation when they'd worked with Kendall, she fully expected Kendall to be breathing down her neck every minute. Yet, there she was, sounding like she hadn't a care in the world about how Rani's company represented hers. "Are you sure? I really did like that whole Internet concept, and we've already started working on it. Nancy Keating is actually thrilled with the idea. She even called up some clients to discuss it with them. I think you have something here."

"I have faith in you, Rani, so I'll leave all of that up to you."

The rest of the conversation passed in a haze and when Kendall hung up, Rani found herself sitting there a half-hour later, still holding the phone on her lap. Well, that was certainly something Rani hadn't expected. What could have made Kendall change her mind so quickly? At lunch she seemed totally into her pitch, quickly convincing Rani the Internet was the way to go. Rani remembered the energy between them at lunch with a recurring shiver. Could that be why Kendall had a change of heart? Kendall was attracted to her, too? Rani hoped it wasn't her imagination merely playing tricks on her. *Hoped?* Rani frowned.

"Okay, let's dissect this." She knew Kendall's sensual intensity had a strong effect on her. Kendall captivated her—that was glaringly obvious. *You're practically obsessing over her.* All right, her attraction to Kendall was definite, but what about Kendall? Could that be why she had been so flirty and...intimate?

"So, let's presume the attraction is mutual," she said to the small waterfall beside her. Their budding relationship had another aspect, but she didn't think she was afraid of the lesbian part of it. What Kendall was really feeling about their all too brief meeting, and why Rani was suddenly attracted to a woman, were of much more immediate concern.

Was Kendall awakening in her a long dormant desire she had sensed but couldn't identify, or at least, had never admitted to herself? She didn't know. What she did know was that she felt compelled to investigate what Kendall had to offer—if anything—and the thought of the long hours till their "date" wound Rani into a tight knot of impatience.

"I've got to talk with Addison." Her words came back at her loud in the quiet room, and then she remembered she had a date with Addison to play racquetball tomorrow after work.

* * *

"Do we always have to have Chinese?"

Addison looked up at Rani. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sick of Chinese is what's wrong." Rani dropped the paper carton onto the table and slumped back in the wooden booth. She had called Addison the following morning, and they'd met for an early lunch at their favorite haunt, Panda Restaurant. Usually Rani enjoyed their lunch dates, but today, she felt irritable.

"Come on, tell me."

Rani sighed deeply. "I've met someone—well, no, I've known *of* them for a while now." She watched Addison stop chewing, her stare intently directed in Rani's direction, her interest piqued.

Addison gestured with a chopstick. "Go on."

"Well, this person is perfect—at least to me they are, or what I know of them so far is perfect, and I think I'm attracted to them."

"So, what's the matter? Wasn't it you, just this past weekend, who told me she was going on a find true love mission?"

Rani decided to blurt it out and get it over with. "It's a woman."

Addison was just about to shove the last load of rice into her face when her hand paused in midair. "Cool!" She beamed at Rani and finished off the remainder of her meal. After a minute, Addison noted Rani's shocked expression. "What did you expect me to say?"

"Anything but *that*."

"Why? If you're so hell-bent on finding your true love, what's the difference if they're male or female?" She washed down the rice with the rest of her tea.

"I really didn't expect that reply."

"Good, I'd hate for us to get so used to each other that I'd feel the heartburn and you'd burp."

Rani giggled. "Now you're being silly." She chewed on a straw, while searching Addison's face for any signs of a lie. Addison's eyes looked as honest as ever. It blew her mind. She fully expected to be chastised for such foolish notions and even more unrealistic ideals.

"It's not silly. You want that kind of relationship. That's what real love is, you know—the small and personal intimacies, when you itch and the other person scratches." Addison tapped her temple. "I may not appear knowledgeable about this, but let me tell you, I know from which I speak. It's all those little things that matter to you in the grand scheme of life. Everyone else looks for the brass ring, you look for who caps the toothpaste."

Rani cut into her speech, "She knew which brand I used."

"That's scary."

"Yeah at first I was surprised, but after thinking about it, doesn't it make her character better for that? She took the time to learn about me just for our meeting. That's more consideration than I've ever taken over anyone, that's for sure. It makes me think she'd take extra care in the loving."

Addison pondered it a moment. "Maybe you're right, but it is rather odd. Why toothpaste?"

"She knew what I drank, too."

Addison sat back. "Who is this mystery woman?"

"Kendall Avery."

"It's bad business to get into that kind of situation with a client, Rani. Do you even know if the attraction is mutual?"

"I think so. At our lunch she was all fired up on convincing me of her new plans for her ads, and then by the evening, she practically told me to do whatever I wanted. The last time we handled her account, she was a bit headstrong that her ideas and concepts were being followed precisely. It just seems strange that all of a sudden she's giving me full control over everything." Rani lowered her voice. "And she made me feel good. I don't know what the heck she was doing to my insides, I just know she turned me on...a lot."

Addison scrutinized her. "Can you see yourself having sex with her?"

"God, Addison!" Rani nervously glanced around the half-empty restaurant, partially relieved they had the farthest booth at the back, near the kitchen. The closest people were six tables away. Rani turned back to Addison and drilled her with a perturbed glare.

Addison was still waiting for an answer. "Well, can you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I haven't really thought about it yet." She felt her whole face flame. "I did like it when she flirted with me the entire time during our lunch date. And I liked the way she looked at me. I've always been turned off when men do that, but with her it was exciting."

"Kendall Avery is a lot of things, but a man she isn't."

How Addison knew information about Kendall passed right over Rani's head at first. "She's absolutely gorgeous, isn't she? Her eyes are so light they nearly glow, and she smelled so damn good, leather mixed with Eternity. It was heaven."

Addison was grinning wide. "I do believe you're swooning, my friend." Rani blushed deeper, for she knew it was true. "So, can you see yourself in that type of relationship?"

"What relationship? For all I know, I've got this wrong and Kendall's just a lonely woman who wants company."

"I highly doubt Kendall Avery is a lonely woman, Rani."

Rani stared at her for a minute, finally catching on to what Addison was hinting at. "And how do you know that?"

"Not all of my friends are straight, Rani."

Rani could only gape at her, tongue-tied.

"Shocking, I know. I'm really a rather...eclectic kind of gal."

Did eclectic mean bisexual? "You sleep with women, too?"

Addison fidgeted with the chopsticks for a moment, then stopped. "I have, on occasion."

Rani began to slowly massage her temple with the tips of her fingers. "So all this time you haven't told me was because...?"

"Well, don't spaz out on me or anything, but I didn't want you to think I was your friend to get you into bed." She laughed. "Sounds absurd now that I've said it aloud. But we're good friends, Rani, the closest any two friends could be without actually, you know, fucking each other. I value your friendship above all the others. Hell, I spend more time with you than I do with any of my partners, male or female, and I thought that if I told you I was into women, too, things would have gotten all messy and confused, you know?"

Rani was chewing on her bottom lip, trying to digest what she'd just heard. The last time Addison had been this serious with her was two years back when Rani had that pregnancy scare. She had an urge to hug Addison for her honesty, but instead she grasped her hand and squeezed it fondly. "I understand. I like us just the way we are, too." They shared a shy, relieved moment, and Rani added playfully, "But if you slept with Kendall, I'll have to disavow all association with you."

"No," Addison said through a laugh. "We haven't formerly met, but she's pretty visible in the lesbian community."

Addison started piling their empty containers and plastic plates onto a tray. "No matter what I say, Rani, you're going to do what you want, but I just want to tell you something and you can heed it or forget it."

Rani was staring up at her intently, not sure she could take any more bombs today. "Which is?"

"I knew you weren't straight. Maybe now that you've had your calling to women, you'll finally find your true love, if such a thing exists."

Rani's mouth dropped open. "What are you talking about? I'm not gay."

"Hey, don't be so quick to deny it." Addison dumped their trash in the closest receptacle bin and sat down again. "Maybe that's why every relationship you've had with a man has never worked out, hm?"

"No, it's because 'there's no such thing as true love,' remember?"

"That has nothing to do with sexuality. We're talking gender preference here, not fantasy."

"So how does my not finding the right man mean I'm gay?"

"You've said yourself, you didn't really like sex with men, you're never satisfied in bed. And I think you let those movies of yours convince you that it could be blissful with the right man, but you'll never find the right one because you keep picking at their little faults. Truthfully? I think you do that so you can break up with them. And now here you are, attracted to a woman finally. I haven't heard one negative thing out of you concerning Kendall."

Rani's brows crinkled up as she thought about it. "I haven't known her long enough—"

"Oh no you don't." Addison pointed a finger at her. "What about those blind dates you used to go on? Within twenty minutes, you found fault in each one. They chewed their food oddly, they held their utensils awkwardly. They talked during the movies. They didn't talk enough. They were too macho, too insecure, too tall, too short, always too something. Please, you're only fooling yourself here, Rani."

Rani didn't want to face reality, didn't want to consider that Addison might be right. Her sudden attraction to a woman was already unraveling her safe world, string by string. She worried that pretty soon, there wouldn't be any of her old self left to grasp. "I'm still not convinced I'm a lesbian. Do I put out some signal or something I'm not aware of?"

Addison got a good laugh out of that. "It's called gaydar. And you're no different than the many women who go through their whole lives not realizing they're gay. Some even have families and don't understand until they're grandmothers that they've always been gay."

"Why haven't you brought this up before now?"

"I haven't told you till now because you weren't ready to hear it. Maybe you still aren't, but I don't really believe that's so." She shrugged. "There was also that whole not mixing sex and friendship adage of mine. Had I told you about me, and then what I thought about you..."

"Is that why you did befriend me? You thought I was gay from the start?"

"Not at all. I think we gravitated toward one another because we needed a woman in our lives that we simply enjoyed being friends with." She put her hand on Rani's. "Listen, if you spend any time denying it or fighting me on this, you'll lose time that could be spent meeting your Ms. Right."

"I think I've already met her." Rani flushed with the admission. "Okay, for the sake of argument, let's presume you're right." She was too drained to debate the subject further at the moment. "Regardless if I was or wasn't before, I'm obviously interested in Kendall Avery enough to entertain the notion of a lesbian relationship now." What's more, Kendall might not even be available. She wondered about Kendall's business partner, Catherine Bowman. Were they lovers? Was that why Catherine had never talked about Kendall? She didn't want to slip up and reveal their *real* relationship? Rani felt her stomach churning. She didn't want to think all that happened between her and Kendall was nothing but flirting. No, she preferred her version of things: they were equally attracted to one another, and Kendall couldn't get Rani off her mind either. Come to think of it, what *was* Kendall doing now? Rani glanced at the clock on the wall. Twelve-thirty. Was Kendall somewhere nearby eating lunch, too? Did she work through her lunch? Did she workout in that hour? Kendall kept that sexy body in shape somehow. Rani had a compelling need to know everything about Kendall Avery.

"Okay, what do you know about Kendall? She isn't with someone, is she?"

"No. She's had a few relationships, lots of flings. Her last relationship ended a year ago."

Rani mulled that over for a time. So far, so good. "What type of woman does she go for?"

Addison had a teasing gleam in her eyes when she replied. "Attractive women shorter than herself with great big green eyes and even bigger ideals about love and relationships. You know the type. Gets teary at a sappy movie, likes to hold hands while sitting on the sofa during a rainy day just cuddling."

"All right, quit joking. I'm serious."

"I am serious. You're her type, no lie."

"Okay, now bust my bubble. What's wrong with her?"

Addison frowned. "Nothing's wrong with her. She's perfect. Hell she's fucking hot. I mean..." She kicked Rani's foot under the table. "See what you do."

A chuckle bubbled from Rani. Addison was actually blushing. "I fail to believe I can force any words out of you."

"Fo...cus." Addison waited for Rani's giggles to subside. "Regardless of her well-put-togetherness," she said and held up a hand to thwart further laughter from Rani, "I think you'd do better to wait until after your business with her is finished before you jump into her with eyes closed."

"I assure you, my eyes are wide open. I've done a lot of thinking about her—uh, this whole situation—last night and this morning." She twirled a straw around her cup of cola. "She called last night, late. She wants to meet today after work."

"Today? So I take it our game is off?"

"Would you be terribly heartbroken?"

"I'll commit suicide right after lunch." Addison grew serious again. "Why not take a trial run first? Go out, see how you feel in that scene. Pick someone up and have a night of uninhibited—but safe—sex, and in the morning reevaluate your feelings. Do that a few times, then see your Ms. Avery."

Rani shook her head. "Somehow that just doesn't feel right to me. I think I'm going to follow this road and see where it leads. I wanted the perfect partner, and I could very well have found them, why mess it up by bringing other people into it?"

"There's an old saying, Rani, *be careful what you wish for.*"

Rani's face fell. "You said yourself she was perfect. Now why are you trying to ruin this for me?"

Addison squeezed her hand. "Oh, honey, I'm not. I just think if you set your standards *too* high, no one will ever be able to meet them, regardless of their gender. While you're focused on finding one perfect person, you're passing by a lot of people who are truly worthy of being in your life.

"You have a lot going on here now. You have something totally unexplored to deal with, and on top of that, I know you'll pile on all of your fantasies. Suppose Kendall doesn't like sitting on the porch while it rains? Will you still want her?"

"That's silly."

"On the contrary, it's not so silly to me, knowing you as I do. You want the total package, and that person doesn't exist, even in the female form."

Rani was willing to give Addison's idea about seeing how she fit into a lesbian role some thought. She wasn't so sure she could go beyond that to actually having sex with other women. So far, her only desire had been for Kendall and she didn't want to explore anyone else.

"Let's just deal with one thing at a time, okay?" she said.

"Sure."

"I'll give what you've advised some consideration. But that's all I'm promising."

"Good enough. Come on, you'll be late getting back if we don't get our asses out of here."

When they passed through the open doors leading back outside, Addison stopped Rani with a hand on her elbow. "Still going out with her today?"

"Yes. Sorry, can we reschedule our game?"

"Sure. Just take it slow, and think before you act, okay?"

"I promise."

"Good." She gave Rani's arm a squeeze and started backing up in the other direction. "By the way, Sam's a lesbian, too." She laughed at the look of shock covering Rani's face.

Just what kind of cave have I been living in, anyway? Rani shook her head, numb, and headed back to work. When she arrived at her office, she saw a small package on her desk. She turned in the doorway to her secretary and pointed to it. "Where'd that come from?"

"A delivery boy dropped it off about ten minutes ago. Did you want me to—"

"No, it's okay." She closed her door and leaned against the thick wood, staring at the box. Wrapped in silver paper, it reminded her of someone's dashing eyes. She ambled closer to her desk and stood there a few minutes staring down at the box. She reached out, pulled the attached card free of its ribbon tie, and opened the small envelope. She withdrew the inner card and turned it over to read the hand-scribed words.

Rani,

I trust you're feeling better today? If not, I hope this will help.

K

Rani's mouth danced with a quirky little smile. She lifted the box and opened it. Inside was a roll of cherry-flavored Tums. The smile spread like fire over her face, lighting up her eyes.

She had no sooner put Kendall's gift in her pocket than Bill's arrival was announced. It was nearly one-thirty when he left. In that time, Rani had signed off on three proposals for their newest ad campaign, vetoed two more for the same line, and fielded at least half a dozen phone calls from an assortment of clients and associates. Through it all, her thoughts continued to drift back to Kendall and the bombshells Addison had dropped on her.

By one forty-five, Rani could take the anticipation no longer. She popped her head into Samantha's office, watching her work at her computer.

Apparently feeling the stare, Samantha glanced over her shoulder. "Hey, Bebé, how'd it go with Avery yesterday?"

How could she not have known Sam was a lesbian? The manly hairstyle, the masculine way she dressed, the flirty looks and winks and names she had for Rani. Rani flushed down to her toes.

"If your expression is any indication, it went well, huh, Chica?"

Rani closed the door behind her and leaned against it. "Why didn't you tell me you were gay?"

There was a loaded pause and then Samantha asked, "Kendall Avery told you that? That seems extremely atypical of her."

"No, Addison kind of made an indirect reference to it at our lunch today."

Samantha laughed. "I should have known. That puta! Wait'll I see her again." She pointed to a chair in front of her desk and waited while Rani sat herself down. "I don't mind really. I expected Addison would tell you sooner or later, and frankly, I'm more surprised that

she's kept her mouth shut for so long." She rested her hands on the desk and gave Rani a serious look. "My sexual preference has no bearing on our work relationship, correct?"

"It would have been nice if I knew."

"Did you ask?"

"No, but you still should have told me."

"Why? So you would watch what you said and did around me? Always conscious to not step over any lines. Weigh every word I said or action—"

"That wouldn't have mattered to me, Sam."

"Ah, you say that, but I know you, Chica. Your head is spinning with...things."

"My head's spinning with lots of things, and not just this."

"I'm not closeted, Rani, but my business skills aren't a product of my lifestyle so why should it be of concern? Had you and I been friends out of the office, I would have told you immediately."

"I've been a bad friend." That realization didn't make Rani feel good at all.

"You've been a terrific business partner, and that's what matters."

"Well, I'd like to change that. I want us to be friendlier."

"Although you would have been a temptation two years ago, Rani, I now have a partner I love very much."

Rani's face infused with heat. "Not that friendly, Sam."

Samantha's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Ah, I see. Good. That will make things a lot less complicated around here."

Rani idly polished the chair arm with her sleeve, finally getting up the nerve. "Have you ever suspected that I was, umm, that I could be..."

"That you were gay?"

"That's the word I was looking for." Rani chuckled uneasily and finally met Samantha's gaze.

"You and Addison must have had some lunch." Samantha leaned back in her chair and put her hands behind her head.

"It was...revealing." Rani nervously fidgeted. "Something odd happened to me during my meeting with Avery."

"She turned you on, huh, Chica?" Samantha nodded in understanding. "Avery has that effect. Too bad she's loco." The comment metamorphosed into a light laugh.

Rani recalled the cherry incident, and Kendall's boisterous personality, with fondness. A little tingle went through her nether region. "She wasn't bad, just a bit...full of exuberance."

"Trust me; she's as loco as they make them, Rani."

"Well, that's neither here nor there. The attraction wasn't just sexual, although I will admit that's a major factor. I felt different with her than I've felt with anyone before. Her presence was so calming, and we seemed to connect on some level I can't clearly vocalize without sounding like a love-struck teenager."

Samantha smiled warmly at her. "I see where you're coming from." She paused a moment, expression concentrated. "I imagine you have tons of things to analyze about yourself and your new feelings, so I'll make the task less daunting for you." She scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to Rani. "A bookstore not far from here caters to the lifestyle. Perhaps you should invest some time there."

Chapter Four

Rani cleared her schedule after her three o'clock meeting that afternoon, wanting to explore this new world as soon as possible and still make it back in time for her date with Kendall. She glanced at the paper again to be sure she was at the right address. She nearly overlooked the shop on her first pass, but noticed the rainbow colored flag hanging outside the ancient brick building nestled almost out of sight. She pulled into a free spot down the block.

Once inside the cozy bookstore, she passed by a stout man at the register who had a friendly face and welcoming nod for her. Rani nodded in return. She was a bit overwhelmed at the vast selections lining every available nook and cranny. *A person could get lost in here.*

She decided to start with a few romance novels and make her way around the store, back to the cashier. She plucked out a few selections, read the jacket backs and held them in her hands as if they were her own creations. She even put one book to her nose to smell the newness of the print. She held them to her chest like they were her children and moved around the store. When she found the poetry section, she was beyond euphoric.

With her arms filled, and tilting forward from the overabundance of weight, she determined she had enough books for now and started towards the register. A display of magazines caught her eye, and with her thumb and forefinger, she grabbed the latest copy of *Girlfriends*. She quickly grasped it between her teeth as she caught her falling stack just in time.

Something or someone, very tall and very hard, bumped into Rani, sending her pitching forward and the books she had so carefully kept balanced toppled to the floor.

Rani turned so she could see the obstruction she'd backed into, or that had run into her, she wasn't sure which. Blue-gray eyes, like the sky over Arizona during the monsoon season, so filled with energy, energy that seemed to come from within, crinkled with humor. A perfect face, almost poetic, and the surreal voice when the creature of wonders spoke...

"Hi there, Rani."

Just those few words and Rani blushed redder than a ripened tomato. "Oh. Um. Hiya, Kendall." She plucked the Tums from her pocket and held it up in a shaky hand. "I got your gift, thanks." *Good start, Rani, reel her in with your seductive wit.*

Kendall's lips widened. "You've dropped your books." She knelt and Rani heard the leather jacket creaking, a reminder of what she'd told Addison earlier. Her gaze moved leisurely over the rest of Kendall's body. Today she wore tight black jeans and a crisp, white, button-down shirt tucked neatly into her waistband.

While Rani was feasting on her form, Kendall noted the names of several lesbian authors and the genre assortment Rani had selected. The five poetry books especially caught her eye. Kendall couldn't resist a sudden impulse to recite from her heart.

"I dream of emeralds.../ Of the Isle or in the eyes / Full of light and faith and sighs
"I dream of gold.../ Of the sun or in the strands / Full of hope and wishes and plans
"I dream of rose.../ Of the bud or on the skin / Full of blush and promise and sin."

"That's lovely." Eyes wide and transfixed, Rani stared down at Kendall. "Who—whose work is it?" The question came out a half-breathless murmur. She had never read or heard that poem before. She would have remembered.

"Mine." A smile graced Kendall's full lips. "I've been known to wax poetic, when properly inspired."

Rani swayed forward, but was able to stop before she tumbled against Kendall's stooped frame.

Kendall turned her concentration to retrieving Rani's books, which were still scattered across the shop's floor. After she had the stack in a neat pile, she stood. She went to hand them to Rani, but saw she was having trouble keeping herself upright. Kendall gently took Rani's arm and, carrying her books, led her back to the counter.

The corpulent man started to ring up the order, sneaking curious glances at the two women. "Will that be cash or charge?"

Rani stumbled. "What? Oh. Cash. Charge. Yes..." Her expression conveyed her confusion; her mind was moving in a thick fog.

"Which, hon?"

"Better make it charge," Kendall said. She rifled through her wallet, pulled out a gold card, and slipped it to him.

"Oh, no, you can't. I mean—I couldn't." Rani wanted to crawl into the nearest hole. The images of a Saturday morning cartoon popped into her head, where she had seen just such a hole. All one had to do was pull the disk from one's pocket and poof, they'd be gone...she'd be gone, safe from this embarrassment.

"That's all right. You can pay me back later or add it to the company's account if that would make you feel more comfortable." Kendall placed a hand on her shoulder, sending Rani's stomach jumping.

Rani knew if Kendall touched her once more, she'd simply die. She smiled quickly, wondering if it looked too false, and she felt the blush already heating her face and neck grow deeper. What the hell was this woman doing to her?

Finally, Rani looked up and met those incredible mercurial eyes. She couldn't decide if that was amusement or some other emotion in Kendall's stare as she regarded Rani with intense scrutiny. Rani shivered. Looking at Kendall was too much, but not looking was even worse. She had begun to sweat, regardless of the steady flow of a cool breeze from the open door at her back.

She had to get some command over herself. "What brings you across town so early? It's not five-thirty yet."

"I stopped by the agency, and Sam told me I could find you here. I thought it would be fun to surprise you."

Rani wondered what other information Sam had provided. She watched in a daze as the clerk pushed the two bags toward Kendall.

Kendall pocketed the receipt and credit card. "I'll carry these for you."

"My car's just down a few spots. I can manage."

"Rani." Kendall put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't be so nervous okay? I'm harmless."

Rani wondered to which lifetime Kendall was referring, certainly not the present one. "I'm not nervous." She was just going to explode if Kendall kept touching her.

Kendall picked up the bags and headed through the door. After a quick glance up and down the sidewalk, she spotted Rani's car and started walking towards it. "Are you with me or not?" she called over her shoulder, smiling when she saw Rani hurrying to catch up to her.

When they reached Rani's car, Kendall leaned against it, staring at Rani with a gaze that was full of meaning and warmth.

Wasn't Kendall even remotely interested in why she had bought all those lesbian books? Rani fidgeted nervously, finally leaning her weight on one hip.

As if reading her mind, Kendall said, "You must like to read a lot." With a bump of her knee, she indicated the two bags she held against her legs. "Anything of interest?"

Rani grabbed for the bags, but Kendall raised her arms and held them out of reach. "Hmm, let's see what we have here." She set the bags on the car hood and opened one of them.

"Kendall!" Rani made another grab for the bags, but Kendall blocked her. She didn't know why she was suddenly afraid of Kendall knowing what the books were about. Obviously she had resigned herself into accepting that she might be a lesbian. Perhaps it was because she wasn't yet comfortable in the role?

"*Curious Wine*, hmm, I didn't know you were a—"

"I'm not!" *Not officially anyway.*

"Not a Katharine V. Forrest fan?"

Confused, Rani shook her head in hopes to clear it. "What are you talking about?"

Kendall held up the green-jacketed book. "The author. Why would you purchase a bunch of books by an author you didn't like?"

"I don't know if I like her or not, I haven't even read—" Her face again flushed a deep scarlet. "I mean—this is my first time. Shoot, you've messed me all up, Kendall."

Kendall turned from the bags and moved closer to Rani. "Hey now, calm down. There's nothing to be worried or confused about. I was only having a little fun with you, just teasing, that's all." She took Rani's hand and walked her to the driver's side.

Before Kendall had her seated and belted, Rani held one hand on the doorframe. She braced the other against Kendall's strong shoulder and wouldn't let Kendall make her sit. "I'm fine. Really."

A thunder clap sounded, and the sky had darkened to a deep bluish gray. Kendall glanced up, then down at Rani. "It looks like rain. Maybe we should postpone the date?"

Rani's spirits sank. "I could make us dinner at my place." She waited anxiously while Kendall debated the alternatives: Home alone, with Rani on her mind, or in a warm snuggly cabin with Rani, getting a home-cooked meal for the first time in what must have been months? "Okay." She gave Rani a big, goofy smile. "I'll meet you there."

Rani spontaneously hugged her. A little shyly at first, but once her body connected to Kendall's, it came easily. She wrapped her arms around Kendall's back and waist under her jacket, pulling her closer. After a long minute standing together, they moved apart.

Kendall backed down the pavement, her gaze still trained on Rani, a pleased look on her face.

Rani knew if she lived to be one hundred and two, she would never forget those eyes.

* * *

"John Denver. Finally, a woman with some taste." Kendall fingered through Rani's CD case that sat on the end table. She had seated herself on the sofa earlier, taken off her boots and jacket, and—surprising Rani—made herself at home.

Kendall liked Rani's place. A sectional sofa, two beige easy chairs, and a round wooden coffee table were neatly angled to face both the fireplace and the huge entertainment system adjacent to it that dominated the entire wall. The kitchen was off the adjoining hallway, and Rani said the door past that led to a bathroom. At the start of the hall, a set of stairs rose to the

second floor. Aspen paneling covered what Kendall could see of the first floor, with open beamed ceilings. The gleaming hardwood floor stretched the eye to a neighboring room that Rani told her she used as an office because of the picturesque view of the lake behind the cabin.

"Play it if you'd like," Rani called from the kitchen. "The stereo's third door to the left of the TV."

Kendall strolled over to the entertainment center. Within a few moments, she had the CD spinning and playing one of her favorites, *Annie's Song*. She leaned a shoulder into the edge of the solid wooden structure, stuffed her thumbs into her front pockets, and watched the doorway to the hall, expecting to see Rani any moment. She didn't have to wait long. Rani came from the kitchen talking about the meal they would feast on. When she rounded the corner into the living room, she stopped in her tracks and stared back at Kendall.

Kendall murmured a phrase from the song, then her eyes honed in on Rani's and her lips stilled. Rani flushed brightly, her pulse racing with a hard, startling skip.

"Come here."

Regardless of the confusion she felt within, Rani went to her, stopping just a foot away, waiting. She forced her gaze up to meet Kendall's.

Kendall moved closer, took Rani's hands and placed them on her shoulders. Then she put her own hands to Rani's waist, pulling her until their whole fronts touched and settled comfortably.

As they moved to the music, a rush of heat overcame Rani, and a completely unfamiliar sense of desire coursed through her. She let the feelings crowd around her. Although new and confusing, the emotions filled her with pure pleasure. She focused solely on the sensations of Kendall's hands encompassing her waist and yearned for more of her strong touch.

"Perfect fit," Kendall said, seeming to study her.

"Yes," was all Rani could think to say. She glanced away, then back up. She grew bolder, sliding her shaky hands along Kendall's shoulders and pressing gently into the shirt. The muscles underneath grew taut, and when she touched the flesh at the back of Kendall's neck, it was burning hot. Rani closed her eyes, luxuriating in the heat and the soft, sleek graze of Kendall's thick hair on the backs of her hands. She circled her arms completely around Kendall's neck, and let her cheek fall against Kendall's chest. Kendall's heart was thumping hard against her face. She drew in a deep breath of Kendall's warm sandalwood scent and a soft sigh escaped her. Her skin began to burn with a blush and for once, Rani didn't care.

They swayed for a chorus or two before Kendall abruptly broke the embrace, her eyes blank. "I always like dancing to this song, sorry."

Rani wondered if she was apologizing for the dance, or for stopping it. Disappointment was heavy in her heart either way. "No problem, I should check the food. Feel free to look around while you wait." With that, she went back to the kitchen to hide.

Kendall stood still, immersed in the pleasurable imprint of Rani pressed to her front. She hadn't meant to break away so unexpectedly. But she didn't want to rush into what was happening between them before Rani had a handle on it and fully understood what she was getting herself into. Kendall let out a forceful sigh. Being patient was hard.

She decided to follow Rani's suggestion and busy herself with touring the rest of Rani's home. Rani's office was dark, clouded by the storm outside. Kendall spotted a computer on the desk beside the sliding glass doors and saw it was on. She ran the tips of her fingers over the keys, and then she touched the mouse; the screen changed from floating fish to Rani's e-mail program. It was a different address than her work e-mail. She made a note of it for later and

fingered the other trinkets on Rani's desk. There was a photograph of Rani and a woman Kendall knew to be Addison Caruthers. They had a few mutual friends, but had never been introduced. The photo was taken at the beach and both women looked rather soggy, but bright, happy smiles covered their faces. *They looked like they had a good time that day*, Kendall mused, slowly trailing her index finger along the lines of Rani's scantily clad form, outlining her beautiful curves. Abruptly, she placed the photo back on the desk where she'd found it and turned on her heel.

Her footsteps made no sound on the carpeted stairs as she climbed to the second floor. There were three rooms upstairs, one of which was used for an exercise room. Another had boxes piled here and there, but no furniture. The last, Rani's bedroom, was a light and open space, the beige wood of the walls and rich brown linens adding a romantic warmth. A bed, dresser, and end tables, all of the same height, gave the room a larger appearance. Floor to ceiling gold and brown window treatments completed the look. The recliner in the corner seating area looked comfortable, with a blanket strewn over it and a small meditation waterfall beside it. Kendall instinctively knew that's where Rani spent her time when she was at home.

She remained in there a while and just stood in the center, absorbing Rani's lingering presence. Rani had taken a shower earlier; dew still clung to the bathroom mirror that faced the open door; and the towel she'd used was lying on the bottom of her king size bed. The clothes she had worn that afternoon were dumped carelessly into a pile outside the bathroom door. Kendall could smell the perfume Rani had dabbed on, and the light scent of hair shampoo and soap. She restrained herself from going to the bed and lifting the pillow and pressing it to her face. Instead, she took a peek at the master bath, an extension off the bedroom. Nice and cozy, it displayed more of a fall color palette. A huge, clear-glass shower dominated the space with a simple commode and sink across from it.

She was just coming downstairs again when the doorbell rang. Rani called from the kitchen, "Please answer it?"

"Oh!" Addison was mildly surprised to see it was Kendall answering the door, and in bare feet no less. "Hello, Kendall Avery."

"It's good to finally meet you, Addison."

Addison beamed and quickly moved around Kendall's splendid frame into the house before she was informed she'd interrupted a private evening and could she come back some other time?

Kendall closed the door. "Come in."

"Who is it?"

"Me, sweetie." Addison followed Rani's voice to the kitchen. "You have a half naked woman in your home, did you know that?" She grabbed a cherry tomato from the provolone and tomato salad Rani was pouring dressing over.

"Stop that." Rani swatted her hand away. "And she's not half naked. She took her boots off."

"That's usually how it starts." Addison slid up onto the counter and eyed Rani. She looked cute, if slightly red cheeked, in her mauve shirt, corduroy jacket, and blue jeans. "Nice outfit, but you're all a flush. What happened?"

Rani silenced her with an impatient hand-hushing gesture and went to the kitchen door to listen. Satisfied, she came back and grabbed Addison's knees, squeezing them hard in her excitement. "We danced." She sounded breathless.

Addison didn't see the thrill. "So?"

"So? Sheesh, Addison, you *are* void of emotion, aren't you?"

Addison released an unexpected laugh. "Not entirely. Okay, so you danced and what else? Did you kiss yet?"

"No, but we did have a pretty intimate handshake yesterday," Kendall said from the doorway.

Addison's mouth twisted with amusement and Rani jolted, more from the ripple of heat Kendall's sexy voice elicited than being surprised by the sudden intrusion. Finally, she acknowledged Kendall must have heard their conversation and she felt a compelling need to melt into the floor. "Get out, the both of you." Rani couldn't look at either of them, and only when the prickling left the back of her neck was she sure she was alone again.

How had she slipped so easily from a basically normal, straight woman into this outrageous lesbian? She remembered Sam's motto, 'go with the flow,' and tried to apply it to her present situation. But it felt as if she were the flow and had absolutely no idea, or control over, where her destiny lay. What happened to the picture perfect vision of the family she had always wanted? The one that included a decidedly male husband?

A month after her last disastrous relationship with Peter Salmon had ended, her emotions had settled and life resumed its daily movements. She was out—no pun intended—and about in society again. She'd spent too long sequestered alone, with only her much-loved movies and books to keep her company at night. Once again, she'd come to terms with the reality that she'd placed all of her hopes and dreams in a man, only to be disappointed.

She understood there would be highs and lows in any relationship, but she had never envisioned the eventual start overs she repeatedly endured. Well, here she was at the gate of another start over, only this time it was on a different horse altogether. She didn't know whether she could deal with these changes, with all of these new emotions.

However, the emotions weren't really so new. Loving someone, she presumed, no matter what the race, or gender, was all the same in the end. The intensity of her reactions was what left her shaken and scared and excited this time around.

If Kendall hurt her heart, would it not break? Would she not remain lost in a cocoon of grief if Kendall didn't return her love? Of course she would.

Rani caught herself. Could she be in love with Kendall already? Was it possible to love someone so quickly? Wasn't that what true love was all about, love at first sight? But this wasn't 'first sight.' She'd seen Kendall a year ago. So? Maybe a year ago she hadn't been open to suggestion, or maybe it was whom she was dating at the time. Who knew what prevented the feelings? All she knew was, she *was* feeling this time. Whether it was love or not, she didn't know.

* * *

Addison plopped down on the sofa and watched Kendall change CDs. "Rani's a bit high-strung these days."

"I'll say." When Kendall was finished, she selected an easy chair next to the sofa and let her body sink into its comfort.

Addison's gaze traversed over Kendall's relaxed form. She still wore those tight black jeans and a white, button-down shirt. The outfit emphasized her well-built body, and Addison quickly glanced away. *No one woman should exude that much sexuality just by her mere existence.*

They had a nice little talk about Rani, or rather, Addison yammered on and on about her friend to curtail her nervousness and get her brain back on track. Kendall paid close attention until Rani called from the kitchen announcing that dinner was ready.

"You go back where you came from." Rani glared at Addison.

"Actually, that's why I'm here. I need a place to crash for a few weeks. I'm having the condo redecorated, and I have been politely informed that my presence would be best appreciated elsewhere."

"I can relate," Rani said with a snicker. "Sure, crash here. That's okay with me." She gave Addison a look that begged her to start the crashing sometime later, or better still, tomorrow.

Addison got the hint and explained she would go get some things and be back later. "Way later," Rani ordered at the door before she closed it on her.

Rani hoped dinner was good, but for all she knew, she was eating cardboard. All evening, she had prayed that Kendall had forgotten Addison's "kiss" comment.

"So tell me about her." Rani broached the subject when they settled down on the sofa with coffee later.

"Who?"

"The woman you were seeing until a year ago."

"Oh, her." Kendall wondered how she knew, but decided not to ask. She shifted position on the sofa, drew up a knee, and faced Rani as she stretched her arm out along the back.

Rani noted her eyes had an odd look in them, almost painfully sad.

"We tried to keep it going, but it died maybe a few months after we started dating seriously. I tend to try everything to make a relationship work, but that one was doomed almost from the beginning."

"How can you tell something like that?"

Kendall adjusted one of the pillows behind her back. "Mostly it's a feeling, and sometimes there's physical evidence supporting my suspicions. I have this hug theory—" She laughed at herself, not believing she was saying aloud something she had never wanted to share with anyone else, not even Cat.

Rani played with a ghost string at her seam, her hands unable to remain idle. "Tell me?"

Kendall glanced up at her. What the hell, she had started it; she may as well tell her. "It's the way my potential partners hug me. I've noticed the differences over the years with some women. I divide hugs into three key versions: meaningful, tentative, and the worst, platonic. When I'm confronted with the platonic hug, I know the relationship hasn't a hope in hell. The other two have something of a future. It's silly, I know, to judge a relationship on something so basic, but it hasn't failed me yet."

"Was your Hug-O-Meter on this afternoon?"

Kendall stared at Rani a moment. "Maybe."

"Hey, don't cop out on me now." Where her bravado was coming from she didn't know, but she wasn't complaining about it. She wanted to unravel this unusual enigma of a woman, and she would.

Kendall nodded. "Yes, in fact, it was."

"And you're here, so I guess we're not doomed?" Did she just admit to both of them there was an "us" happening between them?

A smile overcame Kendall's whole face. "I was wondering when you'd pick that up."

Rani heated about the face and neck area. Yes, it was out there. Now what? "And?"

"Even if we were doomed, I would still be here. I'm a sucker for romance, no matter what the outcome. I'd try to make it work, like I normally do, even if I knew the opposite would inevitably happen."

"Well, that answer isn't too promising." Rani was fishing and they both knew it.

"Do I really have to tell you?"

Rani guessed not. She'd felt it, too. "More coffee?"

* * *

Agreeing to call Rani in a couple days, Kendall bid her goodnight. As an afterthought, she turned back just before Rani could shut the door and grabbed her hand in a slow shake. Her meaning behind it became all too clear to Rani, and her face was pink in a matter of seconds.

Kendall whistled and jogged down the stairs. The door was closed when she turned back to check, but she could tell Rani was standing just behind the smoky glass. "True love." She reached her car and sank into the front seat. "Interesting."

Chapter Five

Kendall honored her commitment, arriving at Catherine's party well after it was underway. Automobiles of every economic standing crowded the long driveway and along both sides of the street as far as the eye could see. Over the years, word had spread of these parties Cat and her partner hosted. They had coalesced into a culturally elaborate affair.

After grabbing a drink from the kitchen, Kendall wandered around the house, musing on Catherine's stylistic skills, which seemed limited to that of her wardrobe. Hers was a past desperately trying to catch up to the present, combining period style with modern tech (not in a good way either); interior decorating was definitely not her calling much to the chagrin of her partner.

Pam was a stickler for the current trend. Kendall could spot her individuality detailed throughout the home. In some parts, Pam's and Cat's personalities mixed incongruously, but for the most part curiously complemented one another. Catherine leaned toward a more functional home, while Pam preferred mood and harmony. "We're adhering to the three elements of style. It's what matters most," Catherine said in their defense.

Designed for comfort, the living room still retained a slightly formal atmosphere. Guests could sit upon any chair in the room and still be facing each other over a central coffee table, and other tables were available where they could rest their drinks or plates of hors d'oeuvres. The deep beige of the ceiling matched the yellow background of the material on the chairs, the table, and the curtains. Flowers and plants scattered about added a nice counterpoint to the printed flowers on the fabric. The off-white carpet sank under Kendall's boots as she made her way to the patio door where her business partner stood laughing next to a slender brunette.

As she'd suspected, Catherine had "a friend" who was dying to meet Kendall. The woman was nice looking, and friendly, but Kendall felt nothing while chatting with her. Meeting the woman only emphasized the immediate attraction and instant rapport between herself and Rani from the second she opened her office door.

It required a monumental effort for Kendall to stand there and pretend to concentrate on the conversation. All she could think of was Rani, wondering what she was up to at that very moment in time. She pictured Rani seated in that chair in her bedroom. She could imagine the low light, the sound of that small waterfall beside her. Was she deeply involved in one of those books she'd recently purchased, or was she like Kendall, unable to get the other off her mind? Was she working on the account? Sitting there at her desk, hands idling over the keyboard, remembering their dance?

Kendall couldn't stand it anymore. She managed to break away when the first opportune moment presented itself. She cornered her devious partner in the kitchen. "You promised." She wasn't pleased.

Catherine was the picture of innocence, but Kendall wasn't falling for it. She beamed up at Kendall and admitted, "I had my toes crossed." She laughed when Kendall snarled at her. "Aw, hon, I'm just trying to help. You need to get off the stick."

"I have. I met someone."

Catherine's eyebrows shot up her forehead. "Who?"

"Well..." Now that she thought about it, maybe she shouldn't have mentioned it. "Promise me you won't like, scream or anything?"

"Why would I scream, Kendall?"

Kendall braced for impact. She hunched her shoulders, winced, and squeaked out, "It's Rani."

Catherine's eyes and mouth rounded to saucers. "She's straight. Are you insane?"

"Now wait. She's a little bent, or can be."

"A little bent? Kendall, you don't want a little bent, you need all out twisted. She just dumped Peter, for heaven's sake. How do you suppose she's going to go from Mr. Perfect to you?"

"Hey."

"You know I meant no harm. You're a great catch, in *our* community. Heck, if I had met you before Pam back in the eighth grade—well, never mind. You're lost in the meat department, hon. Come back to the vegetable aisle."

Kendall rolled her eyes to the lavender-painted ceiling. "No one can dictate what their hearts feel, Cat. Certainly I can't, and neither could you when you met Pam. Suppose she had been a guy? All the same qualities you love in Pam but in the male form. Would you not have fallen?"

"Realistically? No, I don't think I would have. I happen to prefer the female form."

"Well, I do, too. I happen to prefer Rani's form to be exact. I'm going to follow this road where it leads. So please lay off the fixing up. I'm not interested in exploring anyone else."

Catherine could see in her eyes that there was no changing her mind about it. "Okay, I promise. But you promise me you'll take it slow? And keep reminding yourself she likes men."

"She likes me now. She knows very well what she's getting herself into. You said yourself she was smart, and she is, very much so. It may be unknown territory, but she's willing to investigate and that's good enough for me."

Kendall took Catherine's advice and waited, but after a full day, she could restrain herself no longer and finally called Rani on Friday. They made plans to get together the next day.

Chapter Six

Rani purposely slept late Saturday morning, trying to shorten the wait until she and Kendall met. All day, she brimmed with nervous energy. Exercising just made her sweat and think of Kendall even more, so she tried to read. Impatiently, she laid the book aside when she found herself re-reading the same sentence over and over. She didn't even have the benefit of Addison's company; she was off with some man or another at the firing range again. Shaking her head, Rani thought of Kendall, and how safe she felt with her. Maybe what Addison really needed wasn't a gun but a woman like Kendall...

Sighing, Rani wondered if there was anything to get her mind off Kendall. She turned on the big screen TV and flipped through the channels, seeing nothing, but relaxed by the quick distractions. She continued to flick the channels in a steady rhythm, playing over Kendall's voice on the phone, and as if on cue, the electrical effect she felt warmed her everywhere.

Was she jumping into this too fast? Would she feel this drawn to any other woman, or was Kendall playing her for an easy fool? What could Kendall have seen in her? Most people presumed she was straight, because that's all she'd known her whole life. Was she really a lesbian as Addison had said, and hiding it from the world? Hiding it mostly from herself? Had Kendall seen it in her, too? Rani felt her safe, familiar ground slipping away again. She understood Addison detecting it in her, but she wasn't certain she liked a perfect stranger seeing into her so quickly when she'd been oblivious for...she didn't know how long she might have had these secret desires.

She was one hundred percent sure this wasn't just curiosity, or a straight girl's walk through the unknown for the hell of it. She truly wanted to walk that unknown, sensing something great at the end of the journey. Maybe Addison was right; she had been seeking what she needed from the wrong gender and that was why she was still alone.

She brought to mind the men she had dated, even envisioned the sex she'd had with them. Thoughts of those times left her as flat and emotionless as they had when she was living the experiences. Her mind went to the books she'd purchased Tuesday. She had read one book so far, and the sex was hot and steamy, but tender and passionate. She got the gist of what women did with one another. That really wasn't so different from any man who had gone down there exploring. But with women, there was a huge difference: no penis, no flat or hairy chest. She pictured Kendall's body. From what she had experienced during their dance, and observed of Kendall so far in secret glances and all out ogling that day at the restaurant, she knew she was very attracted to Kendall's beauty: her skin, smooth and firm; the muscular contours, soft and warm. She found her thoughts straying to what Kendall looked like under her clothing.

Rani put her hands to her own breasts. The nipples rose slowly, and she explored herself in a new way, imagining it was a woman's hands on her—Kendall's hands on her to be perfectly honest. Her breasts felt wonderful, and the nipples tingled as she brushed her thumbs over them through the fabric of her shirt.

So, this was what lesbians felt when they touched one another, and how it would feel when—if—she touched Kendall's breasts. She imagined Kendall's mouth on her nipples, and her

whole body responded to the thought with a sharp charge that had her quickly clamping her thighs together. "Okay, enough of that."

She clicked off the television and, with a frustrated sigh, decided not to make herself crazy contemplating what she and Kendall might do. It was too soon to consider sex anyway.

She went to her closet and surveyed its contents. What mood did she want to set? Not too sexy; she didn't want to look easy. "I'm being too critical. It's only a date. I don't have to make it life or death. People do these things all the time, straight or gay. Stop overanalyzing."

Rani parted every hanger as she chided herself. Since Kendall had said "dress casual," she finally decided on pale blue jeans, a cream crew-neck T, and her favorite soft flannel shirt that had a mixture of brown earth tones. Hoping they wouldn't go anywhere upscale, she pulled out her dark hiking boots. Not wanting to fumble around for something else to kill the time, she took a shower, blotted on some perfume, filed her already short nails until her hair was air-dried and full of waves and curls, and then she heard Kendall's car pulling up outside.

* * *

"I don't know if I want to go into a dark park with you."

"I've got something special to show you."

"Should I be worried at this point?"

"Not in the least." Kendall reached for Rani's hand, linked their fingers together, and pulled her a little closer.

"Well," Rani said, "it's not exactly Central Park, and as much as I'd like it to be a safe place, this park isn't. I avoid it at night, but I do come here a lot on the weekends to think."

"You're safe with me." Kendall stopped walking, and their linked hands held Rani back. "Or is it, you're really worried about *me*? You don't have to be afraid. The last thing I want to do is hurt you in any way, either emotionally or physically. That's not my game."

"I'm not worried about you. I feel very comfortable with you." She paused. "What *is* your game, Kendall?"

"To sweep you off your feet. How am I doing so far?"

"I don't know. We've only just started the evening. You'll have to wait for an answer until I'm at my door."

Kendall started them walking again. "I love that perfume. It smells so good on you. If you didn't already have that big bottle of it, I would have gotten you more."

"Bet you say that to all your victims," she teased and swayed closer to Kendall, elated with the thought Kendall must have explored her bedroom that night to know about her perfume.

"Not at all, I saved that line just for you." She laughed and pulled Rani down another path, deeper into the park. They walked in silence for a few minutes. "Here we are."

"Where?" Rani looked around, seeing nothing other than three statues of giant fish circling them.

Kendall glanced at her watch to check the time. "Two more minutes. Come sit with me." Kendall draped an arm over Rani's shoulders, pulling her really close, almost swamping Rani with her heat. She led her to the nearest bench. Her gaze dropped down Rani's body—jeans molding to the curve of her sensuous hips, shirt revealing hardened nipples.

Feeling herself being scrutinized, Rani slowly lifted her gaze. Kendall's eyes were heavy with an emotion Rani couldn't yet decipher.

Kendall reached out her hand and gently smoothed back the hair from Rani's ear, caressing her cheek as she passed, stopping the movement with her thumb to stroke the baby-soft down of her pink lobe.

Rani felt her legs weaken and a jolt pulsed hard between her thighs. She abruptly sat. As Kendall stood before her, she had a compelling urge to touch Kendall's muscular thighs, put her face to Kendall's stomach and feel her breathing.

Deciding she wanted Rani closer, Kendall pulled her back up, turned her, and then wrapped her arms around Rani's waist. Finally, she rested her chin on the top of Rani's head, her soft hair a comfy cushion.

Rani tilted her head sideways to look up at her. "What are you doing?"

"Pay attention."

"To wha—"

Just then, all three statues lit up and spouted a colorful display of water in an arc from their mouths. Rani gasped and pressed back into Kendall, her eyes alight at the beautiful scene and Kendall's thoughtfulness. Her love for water fountains had started when Rani was very young, along with a passion to have her very own fountain when she was much older. She'd accomplished that goal when she had the cabin redesigned a couple years ago. Nothing as elaborate as this spectacle, hers was a mere trickle of water down two horizontal poles. Pieces of wood tacked to them disrupted the flow to create the soothing atmosphere she required. She didn't even have fancy colored lights, just a simple white bulb that softly illuminated the small contraption.

"I knew you'd like it." Kendall's lips brushed Rani's ear briefly, before she dropped her chin on Rani's shoulder. Somewhere, music began to play.

"I've never been this far into the park, even at the safest part of the day." Intensely aware of hot breath on her neck, Rani felt tingles of excitement spread from her center. Her own breath came out as tiny quivers, and she turned her head, lifting her gaze to Kendall's face. She was surprised to find Kendall regarding her with bemused but patient tenderness. Despite her earlier musings about no sex yet, she was struck by a driving need to kiss and be kissed by Kendall's sexy mouth. She sighed and her stare deepened as she watched Kendall's lips inches from hers.

Kendall brushed an unhurried hand over Rani's jaw, her knuckles barely touching. She leaned closer and kissed Rani, parting Rani's lips with her tongue. As she slipped herself deeper inside, Kendall cupped her hand to Rani's cheek, to hold her face. She stroked the palm of her other hand across Rani's tight nipples, eliciting a sharp intake of air.

Rani was a bit overwhelmed by the feel of Kendall pressing herself into her back. She became acutely aware of Kendall's fingers caressing her jaw, the other hand playing naughtily at her chest. The pulling on her mouth was growing stronger and stronger as the minutes passed, and Rani felt faint all of a sudden. She broke away, feeling confused, deeply aroused, and dazed. She was scared by the suddenness in which they had connected to one another. Never had she reacted in such a deeply intense, sexual way to a man.

"I'm sorry." Kendall held her arms open, palms facing out. She looked at Rani tenderly, showing no harm was intended. "It just happened. I really hadn't planned it."

When she was sure she could speak again, Rani said, "I think we'd better go."

"I know this is your first time, and it's too soon. I'm sorry. I got carried away."

"I'd like to leave now." Rani wouldn't look at Kendall.

"Okay, but can we talk about it?" Silence hung heavy between them as they walked back to the car. When they reached it, Kendall opened Rani's door for her, releasing her hand only after she was in her seat. "Do you want me to take you home, Rani?"

Rani stared through the windshield. That was the last thing she wanted. "No—" She was about to add more, but Kendall closed the door and went around to the other side. She flushed when Kendall turned the key in the ignition and the CD player came on. The music she heard was "Annie's Song."

She sat in silence as Kendall began humming to the words, occasionally singing a line here or there.

Kendall glanced over at Rani. There was a hint of amusement playing hide and seek around the corners of Rani's lips and eyes. Kendall looked back at the road. A moment later, she was surprised when Rani clasped the hand Kendall had resting on her thigh. She dropped her gaze down then looked at Rani again.

"Don't get excited. My hands are freezing." Rani slid a little closer.

Kendall intertwined their fingers, gave her hand a meaningful squeeze, and pressed it into her thigh. "You came to the right person to warm them up."

"I'm sorry I freaked out on you. It's just—" How could she best explain what had happened to her back there without coming off as immature, or worse, inexperienced? Granted, it was her first kiss with a woman, she reasoned; however, she was an adult. Adults had a better grasp of these things, didn't they? "It was a very intense, exhilarating feeling that I'm not quite used to having." That's the best she could do. Her best, at that moment, however, seemed far from good enough.

"I understand, Rani."

An unexpected shock of anger ran through Rani. She turned in the seat to face Kendall. "Do you? Do you really understand, Kendall? Because I don't. I don't understand how I could want to get married and have two point three kids and a two-story house, one minute, and be kissing a woman in front of a fish fountain in the park, the next. So, if you understand what's happening to me, I really wish you'd explain it." Rani's voice had gone from a near whisper to just shy of yelling in the time she had spoken. She was irritated but didn't know why. Was it because her entire self-identity turned out to be wrong?

She squeezed her eyes shut when she felt tears form behind her lids. She was not going to cry in front of Kendall, who must have already thought she was a raving lunatic, running from hot to cold to crazy. Kendall clutched her hand tightly, in an unspoken show of support. The response was so much more than Rani expected and just enough to destroy her control. Tears rolled down her cheeks and a sob broke free from her throat.

She was thrown lightly against the car door when Kendall stepped hard on the brakes and pulled onto the shoulder of the road. The next thing Rani knew, she was being pulled onto Kendall's lap and held in a way she had only before ever dreamed about.

"Loving women instead of men doesn't make you a different person at heart. It's only your perceptions that have changed, nothing more." Kendall spoke against Rani's golden hair, nuzzling her nose in her neck, still holding Rani clasped in her arms.

She repositioned Rani after a while so she could see her face. Carefully, with just her thumbs, she outlined each brow, along Rani's cheekbones and over her lips, and finally down either side of her jaw. "You're so smart and capable and beautiful, Rani. You undo me just by looking at you."

Desperately wanting to kiss Rani, but afraid she would freak her out again, Kendall slid Rani back into her own seat. "Let's go get something to eat. How about that little diner we first went to?"

Rani tried to talk her out of it. She cited her disheveled and distraught figure as reasons, but Kendall refused to budge. In the end, Rani was glad. Megan met them in the entryway and showed them to a private dining room. They continued to talk; Kendall even shared her own coming-out story with Rani.

"My parents are so wonderful, you'd never guess I was adopted. They made it very easy to tell them anything. They had always accepted my choices without question, no matter what I wanted to do. So, in the eighth grade, I finally decided to come out totally to my family and friends. It was then that Catherine and her partner Pam and I began to really bond. I don't believe there's anything I can't share with those two." The thought put a fond look in her eyes. "Have you and Addison been friends long?"

"It seems like I've known her forever. But actually I met her when I was looking for a cabin four years ago. We became friends almost immediately. We're closer now than ever before. A few days ago she finally admitted to me that she was bisexual."

Kendall lifted a questioning brow. "Oh? How did that go?"

Rani squirmed in her seat slightly. "Well, like I said, we're close, and I pretty much tell her everything that goes on in my life. We had a long, revealing talk the day after I met you." She knew she couldn't repeat the full conversation they had that day. It was way too soon.

Kendall reached across the table for Rani's hands. "I hear she's brutally frank, but gives good advice most of the time. I'm glad she's there for you."

By the end of dinner, Rani was ready to go home. Even though the meal was delicious, Rani feared it might make its reappearance before the night was over. All she could think about was a comfortable pair of pajamas, a roll of cherry-flavored Tums, and the security of her own bed. Her earlier outburst had left her mentally drained, emotionally numb, and physically exhausted.

Kendall drove Rani home without question. She saw her to the door, kissed her gently on each eyelid, and left after Rani was safely inside her cabin.

Chapter Seven

Rani dropped her racket into the backseat of Addison's car and hurriedly slipped inside the passenger seat, hoping a speeding cab didn't clip the door.

"Kiss me."

Addison gave Rani a strange look. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Just do it, Addison, before I lose my nerve." Rani closed her eyes, gripped the edge of her car seat with sweaty fingers, and waited a full minute. She opened her eyes and stared through the windshield. "A real friend would have kissed me."

"No, a real friend would tell you to see a therapist." Addison paused. "Rani, see a therapist."

"Can you just do this one thing for me?" Rani's tone implored understanding from Addison.

"You're making me feel really uncomfortable here, Rani. I thought you understood what I was talking about the other day regarding my issues. Me plus you plus friendship equals no touchy feely."

"I did, I *do*, and I'm sorry, but that's why I need it to be you. I'll explain after."

The bustling sounds of the city crowded around them, but the silence within the car was deafening. Addison cursed under her breath. Reluctantly, she stretched over towards Rani, gave her a quick peck on the mouth, and sat back.

"Like an adult, Addison, not a pre-teen."

"Look, you didn't specify the type—"

Rani grabbed Addison's face and leaned forward. She held her steady and tried to recreate the kiss she and Kendall shared the evening before. She could taste the coffee Addison had earlier, feel the soothing beat of Addison's hot, uneven breath on her cheek. Her lips were soft to the touch of her tongue tip, but nothing terribly exciting was happening. That was until Addison pushed against her for a long second, putting the whole of her mouth against Rani's. Then she kissed Rani back, a full-blown, opened-lipped, sucking-on-her-tongue kiss. Rani immediately felt a buzz of pleasure. She couldn't deny the experience was arousing, but it came nowhere near what happened to her with Kendall. The thought gave her a feeling of joy. She released Addison and slowly sat back. "Thank you."

"Didn't feel a thing, huh?"

"No, I did. It was a very nice kiss, not too wet—"

"Okay, you don't have to go into detail. I was here, too."

Rani blushed and moved her gaze from Addison's. She scanned the sidewalk instead and saw a ticket agent standing there eyeballing her and Addison. She hunched down uneasily in her seat and quickly skipped her glance away from the man.

"Let's go."

Addison started the engine and checked the rearview mirrors. She pulled from the parking spot with a lurch, mumbling to herself, "The things I won't do for the sake of friendship."

Rani turned towards the window. "Something weird happened when Kendall kissed me on our date."

"I see, and you wondered if that would happen with every woman you kissed or was it just with her?"

"Yes, exactly."

Addison patted her knee and flashed a smile at her. "It's a good thing you didn't experience the same with me as you did with Kendall. That would negate what you're feeling for her."

"I'm glad you understand." Rani didn't want to hurt Addison's feelings in the least. "Kissing you also told me it felt very right to kiss a woman, and I don't want to hear 'I told you so.'"

Addison gave her a blunt look. "I draw the line on a night of uninhibited sex, though."

Rani laughed and swatted her arm. "You silly. All I needed was a kiss. I'm perfectly happy with that short experiment."

After a couple of minutes, Addison said, "So are you going to spill, or do I have to resort to drastic measures."

"What are you going on about?" Rani turned her face away so Addison couldn't see the knowing look on her.

"Your date. What happened on your date with Kendall? I'm dying of curiosity here."

"Well that's better than dying of embarrassment, like I was last night."

"Oh, no. Wait, you had to kiss me to make sure what you felt with Kendall was special, so things couldn't have gone that badly."

"Not bad exactly." Rani blew at a stray curl that swung in front of her left eye. "In fact, it started off very good, and then I freaked completely out and almost ruined everything."

"Whoa, back the truck up. Start from the beginning and tell me exactly what happened."

Rani told Addison about the kiss and explained about her anxiety over said kiss and what that meant for her lifelong plans and dreams. She melted against the seat when she described how Kendall had held her and whispered words of comfort and support in her ear.

"We had dinner after and that was it. Well, except for the e-mail Kendall sent me this morning."

Rani knew she had a goofy expression on her face, and of course, Addison picked right up on it. "I wonder, what did she say in her e-mail? Just dropped a note to say 'Hi'? I bet she asked how her account was coming along. Or, I know, she wanted to borrow that mauve cashmere pashmina I bought you for your birthday a couple of years ago."

Rani slapped the top of Addison's bare thigh. "Smart-ass."

After their game, when Addison was dropping Rani at her cabin, she reminded her, "Don't forget the anniversary party this afternoon. I'll meet you outside Shay's after I pick up my grandparents."

* * *

Catherine balanced a 21-ounce and a 19-ounce cue stick with the tips of her fingers of each hand, gauging their weight and feel. Deciding on the 21-ounce, she set the other in the rack. "*Slow*: characterized by lack of speed: a slow pace. Taking or requiring a comparatively

long time for completion." She'd memorized the definition from an Internet dictionary and now recited it to Kendall who was leaning against the back wall of the bar, one arm extended and balanced on a cue stick, one finger tapping to the beat of the song the juke was spinning out.

"All right, Cat, don't rub it in." Kendall pushed away from the wall and bent over the pool table to break. With a wistful smile she said, "Is it a felony to want to spend time with someone you find terribly sexy and have so much in common with?"

Before Catherine could reply, her partner Pam joined them, juggling two Miller Lites, a cup of soda, and a platter of nachos. She looked like the lawyer she was: tall, slender, and wiry, with an attractive, angular face. She radiated authority even when she wasn't wearing one of her sharply cut suits, grilling a witness on the stand. Today, she had dressed in white, loose-fitting Jersey lounge pants and a rainbow flag tank top. Her multicolored blonde hair spilled in waves and layers around her head and over her bare shoulders. When she looked at Catherine, as she was doing now, her sharp gray eyes warmed and became a bit hazy.

"Why thank you, Ms. Hempstead." Catherine gave her a kiss and relieved her of the two beers. Pam was their designated driver that day, so the cola was for her. Catherine held a bottle out to Kendall. "So, are you seeing her again today?"

Kendall leaned on the edge of the table and balanced the beer on her thigh. "No. Contrary to what you believe, I don't spend every minute with her." Although she would have liked nothing more.

"Her?" Pam threw Kendall a teasing glance. "That advertising chick you're all hot and bothered over?"

Kendall gave her a disgruntled glare. "Are you going to start on me now?" Her aggravation went up a notch when she scratched on her next shot.

"I was just asking to which *her* you were referring. No need to bite my head off, hot stuff." She sat in Kendall's vacant seat. "And," she added, "it's been a year since you've shown even a modicum of romantic interest in anyone. Of course I'm curious, and I want all the details."

Kendall slid onto the seat next to her. "Sorry, you know I don't kiss and tell."

Catherine was all over that comment. "You kissed her? Already? You've just met her."

"That, my dear, would be none of your business." Kendall drained half her beer, sat it down, and grabbed a couple of nachos.

"Oh screw that. You can't make comments like that and hold out on us." Catherine pointed the cue stick at Kendall. "Start talking."

Kendall knew she didn't have a hope in hell of getting out of it, not with those two on her ass. "Fine, yes, I kissed her. Happy?"

"Not even remotely. I'm not about to let you go until you tell us everything."

"Is your life so boring you need these details of mine?" Amused, Kendall arched a brow at her friend.

Pam poked Kendall in the shoulder, provoking a chuckle from her. "What the hell, you've never had a problem sharing before. Spill it."

Kendall grabbed her beer and finished it. "Maybe this time's different."

"Oh?" It was Pam's turn to raise a brow. "Sounds serious." She looked at Catherine. "I think our Kendall is falling in love."

Kendall turned her head away, trying to hide her face, unable to conceal the truth.

"Holy shit," Catherine said. "You are, aren't you? You've only known her a week."

"So?" Pam interjected. "We knew we were it the moment we laid eyes on one another, and it was only a day and we were already fucking in the locker room, under the bleachers, in the detention room—"

Kendall roared with laughter at the look that came over Catherine. "Really? You told me you didn't sleep together for two weeks. What a fibber you are."

Catherine gave Pam a look. "I'll deal with you later." Then she moved her glance to Kendall. "I didn't know you well enough then, but now there's no reason for you to hold back on us. We've been friends for eons. It's not like we're going to run to the Post afterward."

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Rani entered the same bar. Fanning her neck with a napkin, she caught the eye of the barkeep. "Nice out there, huh?"

Rani blew an exasperated breath. "If you like breathing hot water. I think I need a coke. I'll take any size you have." She felt drawn, exhausted.

"Does my size suit you?" A velvet voice breathed at her ear. Rani flushed, her pulse racing. She turned, slightly above eye level with medium-sized breasts outlined under a tie-dyed T-shirt. Her searing stare moved up to meet Kendall's.

The bartender placed a mug of soda down with a clunk, gaining Rani's attention. She fumbled quickly for her money.

"I've got it." Kendall stilled her movements with one hand clasping both of Rani's wrists. With the other, she gave the woman a five. "Feeling better today?" She directed the question at Rani.

"Yes," Rani mumbled, her eyes magnetized to the slight smile that danced at Kendall's lips. Kendall's hand moved to her shoulder, and smooth fingers stroked the back of her neck. "Do you come here often?" Rani realized how that sounded, and she laughed. "I didn't mean—sheesh that sounded like a pick up, didn't it?"

Kendall took Rani's hand, gently kneading her strong fingers into Rani's palm. "I'm here with Catherine and Pam. We come here once or twice a month to hang out." Then she leaned close to Rani and whispered, "But you're all I've been thinking about today."

Someone slipped a dollar into the juke, and an upbeat country tune filled the bar. Kendall pressed her hip into Rani's side. "Come join us?"

"I can't." Rani's disappointment was evident. "I just stepped in to get out of that awful humid weather outside. I'm meeting Addison at the restaurant next door. It's her grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary." Her hand had moved to Kendall's hip as she was speaking. She slid one finger into the belt loop of Kendall's blue jeans, molding her palm comfortably to Kendall's narrow waist.

"Oh..." Kendall's joy at seeing Rani faded at her words, and the sparkle in her eyes dulled to a lower wattage.

Her expression nearly broke Rani's heart. She hated to be the one making Kendall sad. "If it's any consolation, I've been thinking about you all day, too." She slid her palm midway up Kendall's long back and a flame of scarlet crept across her cheeks at her uncharacteristic boldness.

Kendall twirled Rani's stool to face her, and then she bent to her before the intimate moment passed. "Will you be upset if I kiss you again?"

Rani mutely shook her head, and her eyes focused on Kendall's lips. She studied their sensual shape. She felt them when they left their impression on hers: soft and firm, warm and inviting. She focused on the wet feel of Kendall's tongue gliding along her top lip, and then the bottom. She opened her lips so Kendall's tongue could slide inside. Rani was ready for this kiss, and her lips and tongue explored Kendall's mouth passionately. Her hands instinctively moved to Kendall's face, fingers sliding up, burying in Kendall's hair. She closed herself to the outside world. Her upper body pushed up hard against Kendall's, and a din began deep in her chest, a release of pleasure in the simple act of kissing Kendall Avery.

"You taste so good," Kendall said over Rani's parted lips. When she reluctantly pulled back from Rani, she gave her a mixed look of desire, curiosity, and mischief. "Still going to leave me?"

Rani moaned, having lost all ability to think, to speak, to do anything other than to feel, to burn, to crave.

"You two keep that up, and they'll have to turn this place into a brothel." Addison plopped down on a stool beside Rani. "So, this is where you disappeared to. I almost put out an all-points bulletin."

Rani tried to get her bearings. She gripped Kendall's side with one hand, the bar with the other. Without a doubt, there was no relief in the near future for the desires Kendall's kiss had stirred. And just how the hell was she supposed to walk now?

A small butch stepped up to Kendall's side. "Your turn at the table," she said and strode away.

Addison slid off the stool, cupping one arm under Rani's. "We need to get going, too. Good luck with your game, Kendall."

Kendall's stare begged Rani to stay, but she made no physical attempt to detain her.

Rani mouthed, "I'm sorry," right before the door closed on Kendall, standing there, looking dejected.

Shifting away from the bar, Kendall studied the other women, seeing if any sparked her attention as much as Rani did, but when a pretty brunette caught her eye and smiled, Kendall looked away impatiently. The bar and its occupants had lost her interest the minute Rani had entered. "Hey, guys, I'm going to head out."

"What?" Catherine looked surprised. She and Pam hadn't seen that impassioned display minutes before at the bar. "How are you going to get home? We drove you here." She stood blocking Kendall's path. "I'm sorry if I nagged too much. Stay and play some more pool. I still haven't beaten you yet."

"I'm perfectly capable of walking, Cat." She gently moved Catherine out of her way. "I'll see you at work tomorrow. Maybe next weekend I'll give you the opportunity of beating me." She waved to Pam and continued to the door.

The wind was moderately strong as Kendall walked down Seventh Avenue. She had eighty-six blocks to cover before she reached home. As she crossed the third street, she was already overheated and her shirt stuck to her body like a second skin. When she was in the air-conditioned bar, she had forgotten the merciless humid weather outside. She considered walking over to Fifth to take a taxi to Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village. She frequently enjoyed the hub of community activity. The park attracted the usual eclectic mix of New Yorkers: performance artists, NYU students, skateboarders, chess players, and pet-lovers. The plentiful entertainment would distract her for a while and get her mind off Rani.

However, fate or some other unknown force, wouldn't permit Kendall any relief. While she stood there, a nearby billboard caught her eye. In big bold letters, the words "Keating Advertising & Design" preyed on her resolve. She mumbled under her breath and turned back the way she came.

Rani was having difficulty accepting how she let Addison easily lead her away when all she really wanted was to be with Kendall in that darkened bar. While her party of eight was led to the rear of the restaurant, Rani ducked out of sight and backtracked to the door. She spotted a familiar figure just crossing the street, and her nerve endings surged with excitement.

Kendall saw Rani at the same moment and narrowly missed being clipped by a bus that was pulling away from the curb. She stepped out of its path just in time.

They met on the sidewalk, and Rani attempted to give narrative shape to the jumbled profusion of thoughts and feelings that rushed at her. "This day was planned weeks ago. I didn't know I'd see you today. I'm so sorry, Kendall. If I could, I would have spent more time with you. Back at the bar, that was—"

"No, don't apologize, Rani." Kendall pulled her into the foyer of the restaurant, out of the noise of the busy city street. "I don't know what I was thinking, making you feel guilty. You have a prior commitment. I respect that, or I do now. It was wrong of me to expect you to just up and shrug off your plans because we ran into each other. I'm not usually so thoughtless." She waited until a couple of men moved around them and into the restaurant. "Will you have lunch with me tomorrow? We can talk more then."

"Anything you want." Rani was floating on air. "I'm really glad to see you today. It was a pleasant surprise. And thank you for that e-mail earlier. It was just what I needed."

Addison was heading towards them, and Kendall leaned to Rani for a quick kiss. "Have fun today, okay? I'll see you tomorrow." She gave Rani's shoulder a squeeze and backed out the door.

The rest of Kendall's day was uneventful. She watered her three small plants and ate a plain bagel as her dinner. She never cared to cook, and without her ex around to occasionally prepare their shared meals, Kendall had almost completely stopped shopping for groceries. Most of her daily eating was at lunch with Catherine—and now, with Rani.

Oh darn, lunch. Tomorrow!

Tomorrow had to be special. She couldn't just take Rani to lunch. She had to make up for her foolishness. As she was undressing for bed, an idea persisted in the back of her mind where she kept certain thoughts on ice and she smiled to herself when it finally thawed and gleamed warmly.

Chapter Eight

At lunchtime the following day, Kendall surprised Rani by leading her out of the bathroom, where she was drying her hands, and down to the street below before Rani could catch a breath and ask where she was being taken. As they approached the curb, Kendall's arm stiffened, blocking Rani from stepping down. The "Walk" signal flashed, and her taut arm relaxed and pulled Rani slightly as Kendall started across the street, still holding Rani's hand.

Profoundly touched by the forceful care, Rani felt her confusion drain away, an unwanted encumbrance to the situation.

"Here it is." Kendall ushered Rani inside the bright bookshop. The second the door closed, a thin, effervescent woman walked from behind the counter, straining her thin lips with a wide smile.

"I didn't expect you so early. I'm almost done hanging them. Want to see?" The woman was nearly bursting with enthusiasm, her cheeks growing hot pink from her smile. She ignored Rani completely, sparing her not so much as a glance.

"Sure. This is Rani Noir." Kendall raised their still clasped hands, tucking Rani's arm under her own.

"Yes. I'm Carol. Let's go back." Carol regarded Rani with hollow eyes, her grin frozen. Rani didn't care at all. They walked around some table displays and along the edge of the last aisle, until the store opened into a living room set-up of several sofas and easy chairs.

Double rows of matted sketches covered two walls. Carol chattered and pointed, but Rani tuned her out. She heard Kendall's perfunctory responses, and then her eventual dismissal with, "They're fine. I just came by for a minute." With that, Kendall moved away from Carol, bringing Rani to the far wall where the first of the pictures hung.

Bending toward her, Kendall whispered into Rani's ear, "Take your time. I won't be far." She released Rani's arm and moved into the aisles. Rani watched her broad, tapered back shift as she walked. She was perfectly sculpted. Rani turned her gaze to the wall only when Kendall vanished among the bookshelves.

She stepped close to the drawings, wanting to see every line. The style was the same in each group of four pictures: subtle shadowed planes, curves that rose and receded. Women made of nothing but shadow and light, alternated deep and shallow. Each grouping featured a different woman than the last and was done in various shades of only one color. The 'blue' woman was stark and penetrating with her facial features depicted as deep blue hollows, and the abyss of her 'mouth' a perpetual wail depicting unfathomable agonies. It made Rani want to sob.

Color and its corresponding number named each group: "Blue, 1", et cetera. Each drawing was signed in the right corner with a modest but bold "KWA" and a sign affixed that read "NFS." Rani moved methodically, transposed into each mood by the corresponding color and suggested forms. It made her poignantly aware of her ability to be manipulated by her senses, and their ability to manipulate her emotions. The last group, incomplete, held only one "Orange" woman. Rani stared hard at the wispy edges of the dancing figure, unable to focus

completely on the form. She finally decided that was appropriate, with the inference of fire and shimmering heat waves distorting the woman's shape. The rendition was beautiful, displaying a passion so searing it danced and refused control.

Once her mind was free from the visual stimulation, she prodded her knowledge of Kendall the woman. She wanted to touch the part of her that could build an image on paper real enough to touch someone else.

"Like them?"

"A lot." Once she heard her own response, Rani looked up at her. "What's the W stand for, is that your middle name?"

"Yes, Kendall Wynn Avery."

"I didn't know you were an artist, too." Rani wondered what other talents Kendall possessed she had yet to discover.

"Which of these women would you like to have?" Kendall gestured to the wall of art with her chin.

Rani took a moment to study the forms again, and then she faced Kendall. She let her gaze move down and back up Kendall's body slowly, hoping that, and the serious nervousness in her eyes, were enough of a reply.

The warm feeling engulfing her heart worked its magic over Kendall's lips and right up to her eyes. "There are several comfortable places to have me perched in your home, Rani; however, hanging me on your walls is not among them." She chuckled and squeezed Rani's shoulder. "Pick one." She turned Rani and made her face the drawings, a hand on each shoulder held her in place.

"The orange one," Rani finally said. She watched in surprise as Kendall plucked it off the wall, holding it out to her after. "Are you sure?"

"Never more sure." Kendall took Rani's hand and snuck her out of the store. She was beaming as she led Rani a few blocks down to a small pizza shop.

Rani stared at her with knitted brows. "Were you allowed to do that, Kendall?"

"Yup."

"Liar." Rani was beginning to know each of Kendall's expressions, and that answer was a bald faced lie if she ever heard one. "Let's go sneak it back before Carol bursts an aneurism."

Kendall laughed at the thought of that. "It's okay, really. I'll smooth things over later."

"I bet you will."

"So, what'll you be having on your pizza?"

* * *

Rani returned to work after her impromptu art show and lunch with Kendall. She sat the "Woman in Orange," as she now called it, on top of her desk and stared at it in wonder. No one had ever done anything so wildly romantic like that for her before. She caught herself sighing dramatically and laughed. "You have it bad, Rani girl."

As she chastised her own behavior out loud, her computer chimed an alert of incoming new mail. The business world wasn't going to grind to a halt and wait for Rani to figure out her love life; time to get back to work. She swiveled her chair toward the monitor and opened her e-mail. The message at the top of the long list was from Kendall. Rani's hand shook as she moved the mouse and clicked it open.

Rani,

*You have a way of wetting me,
Even my eyes water—
My mouth,
And I am thoroughly drenched
Inside and out—
My mind drowning in you.*

*Whisper to me until I'm deaf and dumb
And take me from this nest I've built
And join me in our own.*

*I want to fold you up,
Warm you till you're toast,
Melt you on my tongue,
And then I'll eat you—
Brown and buttery—
Come with you down any road
If you'll only hold my heart
As you've held my hand
And I'll give you all I feel for you
But haven't said...*

K

Rani's breath hitched. The woman was going to be the death of her. She reread the words. Kendall had passion to spare. It showed in her art work, in her words, in her look, in her touch. Rani shivered and opened her briefcase to gently place the sketch inside, then she snatched up a file on top of her desk in order to prepare for her 2:15 meeting.

At 7:00 p.m., she finally walked through her front door. The phone was ringing and she rushed over to answer it. "Hello."

"You sound breathless. I hope it's because of me."

"Oh, Kendall. Hi. I just stepped through the door..." Rani rolled her eyes at her own inanity. Would she ever not be nervous around Kendall Avery?

"Do you need to go? I can call back later."

Rani thought she heard disappointment in Kendall's voice. "No. No, don't hang up. Just let me kick my shoes off and sit down." She dropped her briefcase into the nearest chair, slipped off her pumps and curled up on the sofa. "There, all comfy. Was there something you needed?"

"Just you."

Rani closed her eyes and leaned back. "I love your voice. It makes me feel... It makes me feel. Just talk for a while, please." Rani heard Kendall take a deep, but shaky breath.