

*WHAT YOU WISH FOR*

*by*

*DK WARD*

*PART I*

Whenever she spoke about it, Rani Noir's emerald eyes would shine and her cheeks would flush pink—a blush that would initiate at her chest, just beyond the rise of her voluptuous breasts. "I want that all consuming love like in the movies. You know the kind that's full of devotion, but especially a loving lust."

Her best friend Addison Caruthers snorted, looking down at Rani's inverted face hanging over the edge of the sofa. "Yeah right! Try and get it in this day and age."

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

Addison smiled at her upside down friend and leaned across the space between them to pat her jean-clad knee. "You've slumped into no such thing, Rani. But what you want isn't realistic."

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

Addison shrugged. "He may as well be." She had a lover and a cat. That was enough for her. "Listen sweetie, there is no Prince Charming out there. 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.

She loved Rani and she didn't want to see her release herself completely to castles in the sky even though she knew no matter what her argument was, Rani wouldn't renounce the fantasies; she was a devotee of love and romance in all its forms. For Rani's sake, she had to try and keep her tethered to the 'here and now' every so often.

"You've been watching *Pretty Woman* again, haven't you?" Addison gave her friend a leveled stare.

Rani rolled her eyes. "Talking to you about this is a hopeless endeavor; I'm starting to realize that now." She casually lobbed her balled eggroll wrapper into the same wastebasket and spun her small frame around, once again throwing 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 a delicately pink, 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 and brushed squared hands down her permanently pressed black skirt and adjusted her matching blazer after; glanced down to see if she had soiled her pink silk blouse—nothing—and finally ran her fingers through a wealth of auburn hair. She was tall, had a slim build and tanned throughout the year.

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 that word ever so strongly—romantic, and I'm a cold-hearted bitch." She grinned when a laugh gurgled from Rani and the smaller woman's twinkling eyes met Addison's amusing browns.

Even though it was Saturday, and an absolutely gorgeous September day outside, being a successful realtor sometimes didn't allow her the pleasures of a weekend off. Nine years ago she had shown Rani the cabin and Rani had fallen in love. The day the papers were signed, they celebrated Rani's new home and their budding friendship with an all day trip to Six Flags in New Jersey. Addison smiled at the memory, glancing down at her watch.

"It's almost one, I have to get going, we're closing a deal today; I finally sold that large Victorian in New Paltz to a nice couple from the city."

She started away, then remembered, "Are we still on for racquet ball 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. "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 her shoulder, her high heels clacking on the polished wood floor. She whooshed through the double front doors of Rani's cabin and 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 co-account executive/creative director of operations; assuming partial budget and execution responsibilities, generating concepts, pitching them to clients and was the first and last voice in creative decisions for the accounts assigned to her at a small advertising agency in New York City. She lived alone in the three bedroom, one bath, two-story cabin on eight acres of land with her own lake; an hour away from the city. The commute in the mornings gave her time to think and prepare to deal with working under the intense pressure that was unavoidable when schedules changed and problems arose, but deadlines and goals must still be met. No matter how stressful it became, she loved it; the world of advertising was in her blood. It was a passion that found her five years later in the same profession and growing company. She especially liked dealing with their diverse clientele and overseeing the different departments.

She had no family other than an aging father living out his waning years in a retirement community upstate. While growing up, the two had been nearly inseparable; however, as she aged, she moved farther – literally but never emotionally – from her only surviving parent. Her mother had died when she was very young, leaving Rani to grow up watching many women drift in and out of their lives. There had been no Cinderella for her father, and Rani vowed in her latter teens that when she was older, she would not share the same lifestyle as him.

She distracted herself with last minute thoughts for their newest commercial shooting in a week until nine, and then she settled onto the sofa. Clicking through the many movie channels, she spotted something of interest finally. "Oh, Somewhere in Time; that's a good one." Content that there was something she could lose herself 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. Sniffing, she flipped the TV off and went about the rest of her nightly routine. She brushed her teeth, walked the house checking doors and windows, and went to bed.

Uncharacteristically, this evening she couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned, and then tried to read. After a while, she flung the book on to a chair across the room. Sitting up in bed, she stared at the emptiness surrounding her. She ran over a mental image of herself: she was thirty-one, kept her hourglass figure fit and toned; wasn't unobtrusive looking, but didn't think she could be described as a stunning beauty either. She considered herself 'cute' since she certainly didn't want for dates on a Saturday night, yet here was a Saturday night, so what was she doing alone?

This wasn't the life she had envisioned. She should have already been married, had a bushel of children running around; squeezing their ballet and soccer practice in her forty hour work week, exhausted at the end of the day from her job, motherly duties, and a passionate session of lovemaking each night with her husband. Nevertheless there 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 amazing 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 she led. She couldn't fathom, really, the notion of flitting from man to man and having the empty, emotionless relationships her friend seemed to enjoy. Rani wondered how Addison could be happy with her life. Who would? Her father certainly hadn't benefited from existing on that shallow lifestyle; looking for a true love to replace the one that had died on him, always settling for something less, something temporary.

No, she wouldn't accept that. She wouldn't accept anything less than True Love. It was out there, waiting, just like she was. All she had to do was find it.

Sighing contentedly with her renewed conviction, she snuggled back into her comfortable, but oh so lonely bed, and managed to fall asleep.

"What do you mean we have to scrap the proposal?" Rani had been at work since eight that morning. Her friend, and art director, Bill Brown—the only male friend she hadn't dated—stood inside the doorframe of her office. He looked ready to run at any moment. He knew when Rani's green eyes sparkled with a deepened gold that everyone had better clear the way.

"Avery had an impromptu phone conference with Sam last night. She seems to have a new direction for their commercials, and what we have 'may not fit with her new ideas'." He adjusted his geometrically patterned silk tie; his large Adams apple throbbing up and down as he tried to swallow back the tension.

Rani was business savvy, but also prided herself on her creativity: exposed to all facets of advertising, from the no-nonsense application of copywriting and layout design, to strategy development and account relations, the process was seamless. After a considerable amount of research and countless creative sessions, they had come up with three different but very rough concepts; and speaking with their client, Catherine Bowman of Bowman & Avery Sporting Equipment, they narrowed it down to one concept. There was a proposal package already generated to be pitched to her at the end of the week.

Rani was confused and picking up her phone, poking Samantha Esposito's private line. "Get Avery on the phone, please, Bill."

Samantha Esposito, the agencies second in command, picked up before the phone had time to finish ringing. "Yez, Rani?"

Rani smiled at the drawled out greeting. "You spoke with Kendall Avery?"

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

"Uh..." As she was quickly doing just that, the compact Hispanic woman strode into her office, looking and smelling as if she had just stepped from an Abercrombie & Fitch catalogue in her white Cameron pants and Paige sweater. She had short, spiky black hair and dazzling black eyes; her complexion was a deep mocha. She beamed her sexy smile at Rani as she clicked off her cordless phone; Samantha knew her partner in crime well.

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

"Pobrecita." Samantha offered her a sympathetic smile and leaned her short frame over Rani's desk, affording Rani a closer whiff of her spicy floral fragrance, and poked a finger at the monitor. "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*." She'd had her fill of Kendall Avery the last time she worked with her. "Besides, a client waits." She winked and left as quickly as she had appeared. Rani read over the memo and wondered what was taking Bill so long.

"Hi, Jerri, it's Bill from Harvest... Oh I'm fine, and yourself?" He barely listened while the receptionist droned on about her humdrum life and the newest emotional pains her son had inflicted upon 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; there had been no major meetings scheduled that day, he really wasn't needed at the office. He imagined himself at the beach with a tall, cool one beside him. And a drink. He decided after the call, if Rani didn't tear his head from his neck, he would phone Addison.

"I hate to cut you short, Jerri, but Ms Noir would like to speak with Kendall. Sure, I'll wait." Perspiration was beading on his neck. He whipped out a handkerchief and wiped at the wetness.

"Avery, how can 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?"

Okay then. "Miss Noir would like a word with you about the account."

"Sure, patch me through."

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

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've been informed there was a conference last evening?"

"I tried to get in touch with you, Ms Noir, to no avail..." There was a pause, and then, "Catherine's updated me on the progress made so far, and I think you're doing a fabulous job, but I have some new idea's I'd like to throw at you. I hope it's not a problem."

Of course not... After all, they were shooting for the same goal - helping sell their product and improving their image; Rani just hated all those hours spent on the proposal were now wasted. Perhaps not, maybe she could salvage something. "How about we get together today and you can update me?"

Kendall glanced down at her daily planner. She could fit Rani in at twelve. "Lunch sound good to you? I'm free for an hour at noon."

"That's fine; I'll be in the area for a dentist'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 back at her a mental image of Kendall Avery. The woman was tall and muscular, but not overtly so. Rani picked at her brain, recalling the little facts she had overheard during office gossip about Kendall. She had been an athlete all of her life, mostly basketball growing up, then later, gymnastics—which seemed odd to Rani, since most people took up gymnastics first. There had been no gossip about her personal life; Rani had no idea if she were married, divorced or widowed. Did she have any children? Kendall Avery's business partner Catherine Bowman had dropped no clues to Kendall's life out of the office either.

Kendall Avery was a striking woman; dark coloring and hair, yet her eyes were the most intense grayish, sky-blue, Rani remembered from their short meeting. The company had first approached them a year ago to relaunch their brand, reinvigorate how it was perceived by the public.

Samantha had initially handled the account, yet Rani clearly recalled the woman was a bit enigmatic; but to the point about what she wanted, when she wanted it, and how she wanted it.

Rani remembered many times Sam's complaints over the abrupt design changes and was glad she'd had no part in it. This time when Avery's company contracted them, Rani had only dealt with Catherine Bowman. She was a total opposite to Kendall's tall, dark beauty. She was light: hair, complexion, and always dressed in pale colors. Bowman was a small woman, a few inches taller than Rani, and appreciated a good joke – or at least, she was amused with Rani's sense of humor. Rani enjoyed working with her. Bowman hadn't disputed any idea thus far; she was that sure with their abilities. She provided newer information about their company and left Rani to do what she was hired for.

"And now here Kendall Avery is, sticking her cog into the works."

Her mind went back to Kendall's eyes. She found herself sighing. "Lucky man who scoops her up and tames her." She dropped the account folder on to her desk.

Kendall Avery turned her tall leather chair to face the wall of windows behind her. Her attention was focused, staring through the glass, yet seeing nothing of the bustling city sprawled out below.

A gentle, but firm knock pulled her thoughts from her very brief memories of Rani Noir and she spun the chair back around. She smiled at the older Leonardo DeCaprio look-a-like standing there eyeing her. "Ah, Peter, come on in." She watched him hurry across the room, setting 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 few months 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, hoping. His face lit up for a few moments, and she could even detect a slight blush to his smooth shaven skin. Kendall inwardly smiled.

"Nice woman, but she can be... *spunky*, to put it nicely." He nodded with the thought. "I guess you would know we dated too—the whole office knew." He stuffed his hands into the front pockets of his tan pants, rocking up on the toes of his leather loafers then back on the heels. "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 was laughing at the end. "She's a bit anal about those things..." Memories took him back, and before he knew it, the words were tumbling from him.

Avery let him talk, nodding and smiling; 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.

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

Well, that was certainly easier than getting information about Samantha Esposito. She hopped up and headed from her office to her partner's.

Catherine was on the phone. She smiled at Kendall and beckoned her in with a pen while still schmoozing whoever was on the other end of the line. Her sometimes too easygoing partner was much better at that game than she was. Something Kendall 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. There was sporting apparatus everywhere, even underfoot. Kendall made her way through the obstacle course from door to desk as if walking a minefield. She amused herself with a softball 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." Laughing, Kendall set the ball neatly on the big desk next to Catherine's new laptop; a present from her partner last Christmas. "I spoke with Noir this morning."

"She wasn't too upset over the switch, I hope. I truly enjoyed working with her; great sense of humor, and very smart."

"Well, I haven't told her I was taking over yet." She beamed across at Catherine. "I think she was already a bit razzed with the change of ideas. She was nice about it, but I could tell 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. She was very aware of her partner's easygoing ways. The agency had done some good stuff for them and she wasn't complaining, but there were a few things that Catherine had let them get away with that she never would have bought off on. Now that she had returned from her whirlwind trips to their outlets and factories and she was taking the job back, she needed her hands on the pulse of the company once again. Her trips had given her new insights and she planned to capitalize on them. If Rani Noir could satisfy her then she would stay with her company. If not, there were plenty of other agencies out there.

"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 both 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 released a laugh. "Aww, Sam adores me, I'm sure she appreciated the challenge."

"Hmm, yes, *challenging* is what I would call that obnoxious side of you."

"Tsk-tsk." Kendall wagged a finger at her. "Watch the claws, Cat, mine are longer." There was a teasing glint to her eyes.

"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 and 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 at Kendall's scowl. "Okay! I promise no matchmaking." She 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 hungry look, my friend; you need to get laid."

"Well, whatever. When the right woman comes along, I'll know it. You can even be my wedding planner."

"Count on it, my friend."

At exactly twelve pm, Rani opened the door on the 11th floor of Bowman & Avery Sporting Equipment's main receptionist area. She was immediately led to Avery's office.

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 pocket.

When she opened the door, the subtle, sweet scent of Rani's perfume wafted over her. Anais Anais, Kendall recognized the refreshing, floral fragrance.

Rani stood there grinning up at Kendall, mouth full of even white teeth, and no trace of makeup. She had a unique beauty, shining jade eyes and a healthy, unmarked complexion.

Kendall caught herself holding her breath. She released it slowly; a smile spreading over her own mouth, and extended a hand toward the smaller woman, openly studying her. Rani was short: five-foot-four, Kendall guessed, reaffirming her impression from their first meeting. She had a womanly frame, but fit—undoubtedly an exercise enthusiast. 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 eyes leaped back to her face and she noticed the slight puffiness protruding from the left side of Rani's lip.

"Good to see you again, Ms. Noir." Oh, yes, very good indeed. "I trust everything went well at your appointment?"

Kendall's low voice and strong warm handshake sent a thrill through Rani who blinked with bafflement as she tried to register what just happened inside her. She watched Kendall make her own presumptions as

Kendall's eyes circled her face and form with interest. She hoped her expression didn't display her confusion.

"No peanuts for me for a few days."

Kendall released an amused breath and led Rani toward her personal elevator. They stood side-by-side quietly as the lift descended to the ground floor; their silence not the discomfort of strangers, but a reflection of absolute comfort in one another's presence.

Kendall noted the top of Rani's head came just below her shoulder. As the elevator set down, she placed a hand along the rubber track to keep the door open and let Rani pass through into the garage. She was afforded another whiff of Rani's perfume and a satisfying view of a straight, slender back. Kendall unconsciously drew in a deep breath of the perfume, knowing if it were wine, she would already be intoxicated.

Rani was keenly aware of the tall figure that caught up to her and was walking beside her. There was a calming energy emanating off Kendall, a feeling of easy security being near 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 noted that even though those long legs of hers could have taken her down the blacktop a lot faster, she restrained herself to an easy stride, matching Rani's much shorter steps. She stopped short as they drew up beside a large motorcycle.

"What's wrong?" Kendall arched a perfectly shaped black eyebrow, watching the growing concern on the blonde's face.

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

"Why not?" Kendall—dressed casually—didn't see the problem. "You won't get mussed up, and driving around in a car will be murder at this time of day. This way we can get there, and back, without much hassle." She smiled kindly at Rani and undid the clasp that held the helmets. "I even have an extra helmet." She offered one to Rani.

Rani made a last ditch effort, "But my car's right out front--"

"It'll be fun, I promise." Kendall stepped closer, her height seemingly closing around Rani, surrounding Rani in the shadow of her form.

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

"As we've placed our business in yours, Ms Noir." Kendall winked and threw a sculptured leg over the bike. She shifted her hips and kicked up the stand, then waited while Rani made a pathetic attempt to climb on.

Kendall couldn't help the amusement in her tone. "Lean on me, it'll make it that much easier."

Hesitantly—heart starting a slamming dance in her chest—Rani placed a slim hand on the leather shoulder, applying just the slightest pressure, and tried to get on again.

Kendall glanced back to watch her. "We'll be able to beat the dinner rush at this rate..."

Irritated by her timidity as by the motorcycle's owner; Rani grabbed those strong, wide shoulders firmly and pulled herself up behind Kendall. She had to admit, it wasn't too frightening sitting behind the taller woman. She dropped her hands down between her legs 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 her hand slowly.

The faster I do this, the faster it's over. Rani quickly wrapped her other arm around Kendall's side. She clasped her fingers together, bumping her nose in between Kendall's shoulder blades when she abruptly leaned back. The engine roared and they were on their way.

"You can open your eyes now; we've arrived safe and sound."

Rani could clearly hear the mirth in the other woman's voice again and opened her eyes finally. Okay, I won't be a stick in the mud about this whole ordeal. I want to keep this account, and keeping Kendall Avery amused couldn't hurt.

Kendall rested her hand on Rani's shoulder and opened the heavy wooden door to the restaurant. A tall, elegantly dressed slender redhead in her mid-forties appeared from a deep shadow.

"Kendall Avery. I knew that old door had some magic in it." The woman put out both hands to draw Kendall's free hand into her greeting. "And who's this?" She appraised Rani with a flirtatious grin.

"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 dining room, dark mahogany covered walls absorbing most of the illumination and came to an open doorway off 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. Kendall took Rani's elbow and led them into The Den.

Rani's eyes went to the fireplace first, certain it was a fake only by the cool even temperature of the elaborate room. The hearth was an arch of beige and terracotta inlaid brick, with a beautiful lattice mesh sculpted covering that depicted two forms in silhouette; the flame behind them made them seem to dance. Rani couldn't decide if they were man and woman, or two women. 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 on deep, forest green walls. To the left of the flickering hearth was one rounded booth, its semi-circle bench was thickly cushioned in the same green as the walls. The table was clad only with a floor length, peach tablecloth and huge sand covered, mint candle.

"Beautiful, Meg." Kendall gave her a charming smile. "You always knew what I needed."

Megan leaned close. "If that were true, I wouldn't be catering to other ladies' dates."

Rani, preoccupied with the dancing forms, was unaware of Megan's dark eyes on her back and the mischievous sparkle of envy that shone from them.

Kendall was indifferent; her main focus was Rani. She watched Rani as her gaze swept up to the second floor, a complete look of awe spreading across her face.

Rani nearly banged into a hurrying waitress so enthralled with what her eyes were taking in. She went to gingerly perch on the hearth step; fixated on the glow of paper flames again.

"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.

Staring intently down into Rani's doe and plaintive eyes, Kendall nudged her far into the booth. 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?" Her expression mirrored one of child-like wonder.

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

Kendall's silky 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 need for formalities here, 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, and then looked deeply into her luncheon companion's green eyes. "Let's leave the official procedure to the offices, 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. What the heck is happening here?

Pleased, Kendall smiled. "Good." She looked up when their waitress stopped at her left side, a wide smile covering her features. "Pina-Colada, mixed extra fine, whip cream and two cherries for Rani here; I'll have an iced tea." Kendall felt her stare and, when the waitress left to get their drinks, she lifted her gaze to Rani's surprised stare. "I make it a point to know who I do business with, Rani."

Daunted, but containing it, Rani rebutted, "I wouldn't think that would include such a personal thing as what I like to drink."

Kendall laughed lightly. "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?" She leaned both forearms on the table and templed her hands under her chin, white teeth flashing at Rani. "Colgate. And you don't floss often, which I must say is very bad for you."

Rani stared at her, mouth agape. "I don't know whether to be insulted or concerned."

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

Rani had noted the switch in songs, and conversation again. "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 took their time deciding from the vast selection of dishes, their drinks came. Kendall winked when she saw Rani's smirk after her first sip.

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

Kendall leaned over and swiped one of the two cherries. She popped it into Rani's gaping mouth, grinning at the rumpled look that crossed Rani's face at her impulsive act. With the other tanned 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, and brasher, I would tie the stem with only my tongue."

Rani's eyes rounded. "That's humanly possible?"

Kendall was totally delighted by the expression. "You and I, 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, you question my words, so it's only natural I reply in kind." She shrugged.

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 a shiver race along her spine.

Kendall took a sip of her tea, twirling the contents around slowly in the glass. Her eyes never left Rani's. In that light, Rani noticed they resembled liquid silver. Must be heaven to be a man and fall so hard into

those eyes. She wondered what they looked like when filled with love, or just desire. She imagined they absolutely shown, like a beacon to a ship lost at sea.

She returned from her musings slowly and took another huge swig of her drink. There was *something*... she couldn't put her finger on it, but it felt like she was out with a man. Of course, she knew that was impossible, for the person across from her was very much a woman. It was almost as if Kendall was... was what? Kendall was *flirting* with her. Well, she wasn't naive, she knew all about lesbians. Who didn't in today's day and age?

So what if Kendall *was* flirting with her? She wasn't so closed-minded that she didn't appreciate a little flirting, whether man or woman. She never had a lesbian affair before, and didn't rule one out; but it wasn't an odd curiosity to her or a curiosity at all.

She inwardly shook herself. Why are you even thinking these thoughts? Who said Kendall was a lesbian? She reminded herself just two days ago she had confirmed to Addison that her true love was male.

It was Kendall, that's what it was. The woman radiated sexuality. In her words, her posture, even her gaze. When Kendall looked at her, she felt like Kendall was caressing her — all of her in those bluish-silver depths.

It wasn't an unpleasant feeling after all — it was rather nice actually, and she wouldn't let a little apprehension spoil it. She decided not to make herself nuts pondering the imponderable; she would enjoy the hour with Kendall and not dissect it. Maybe later, but for now, she met Kendall's gaze and hoped to have returned the same warm feeling Kendall's look was bestowing.

The waitress came for their orders and they spent a few minutes each deciding as the woman took everything down on a small wooden pad with a pencil attached by a twine string.

The food was delicious, and Rani didn't even notice she'd had a tooth worked on earlier that morning. She couldn't figure out if it was the food or the company. She did know when they were sipping coffee upstairs in a smaller den like room, that she didn't want the hour to end.

Kendall sat in a Queen Ann chair adjacent to Rani, nursing a cappuccino. Her legs were thrust out before her; long, so very *long*, and crossed at the ankles. Rani found it a bit unusual that she was wearing biker boots; but the look worked for her, that was for sure.

The first time she'd seen Kendall, she was wearing a silver pantsuit. She looked extremely professional. Today, she was more relaxed in her loose fitting jeans, beige pullover sweater with a T-shirt underneath, and of course the boots and jacket. When her gaze moved up to Kendall's face, to her eyes, Rani blushed to find Kendall was staring back at her; lids lowered a bit. Hastily, Rani moved her gaze down and away. She had 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? Wasn't it she, Kendall, that had been overtly flirting with *her* for the past forty minutes – but, what was so bad about admiring another woman's look? She appreciated how Sam dressed, never feeling uncomfortable sizing the woman up. Rani swung her eyes back to Kendall's, unwilling to let embarrassment win out. Boldly, she stared at Kendall, her chin subtly lifting in a courageous gesture of defiance.

Ever so slowly, the corners of Kendall's mouth lifted, beaming an infectious beautiful smile at Rani. "It's about time we headed out."

Can I take that slight detection of sadness in her voice to mean she's just as disappointed that our time together is almost over? They had discussed Kendall's new ideas, and Rani had to admit, it wouldn't pose that much of a problem incorporating them into the current proposal. Face it, the woman's a genius – well, maybe that was over complimenting her, she hardly knew Kendall.

"I have to admit, I had a wonderful time this afternoon, Kendall."

Pleased, Kendall took her elbow as they walked back out into the harsh sunlight. "I'm glad; maybe we can do it again tomorrow."

Just offer and I'm there. Rani was excruciatingly aware of the warmth of the hand on her arm. One Pina-Colada and I'm attracted to a woman. Oh, you must drink more often, Rani. She failed to remind herself the attraction had started before her drink.

The ride back was a relief; the cool air on Rani's face sobered her up somewhat. When Kendall pulled into the underground garage, Rani felt more like her old self. She did find herself holding Kendall a bit tighter than on the first ride, only she wasn't quite sure if it was born of her nervousness that she'd topple off the machine on a hairpin turn or whether she liked the feel of Kendall in her embrace. No analyzing, she remembered telling herself, and kept to that.

They pulled into the vacant space left by the bike and sat on the machine for a minute or two longer when it was turned off.

Rani noticed her hands had dropped from Kendall's waist to her thighs. Okay, I can discreetly remove them as if I'm getting off the bike or jerk away from her and look like a total fool. Undecided, she left them there, stunned by her bravery.

Kendall covered Rani's hands with her own. The palms were hot, but soothing and Rani swayed forward slightly. She caught herself before her body touched Kendall's 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 out from under hers and she waited until Rani was off the bike before she pulled her own leg over and off. After Kendall helped Rani remove the helmet, and gently brushed a few stray hairs back into place, they stood there for what seemed like an eternity facing each other.

"Call me after you meet with your team."

"About what?" Rani 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 smiled, placed the helmets 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 a few seconds, gazing down into Rani's eyes intently. "You drive safe, Rani." Then she decided she didn't want Rani driving inebriated, as it appeared she was somewhat. 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 at the lobby door's making sure Rani was inside safe and sound before catching a cab back to her office.

Rani was backing down the hall, eyes locked to Kendall's, lips curved into a small smile; both women feeling a powerful... attraction... fascination... interest, in the other.

She banged into the corner of the receptionist's desk at the far end of the large foyer and spun around in a complete circle, suddenly aware that she had been completely oblivious of her immediate surroundings.

When Rani finally oriented herself, she was in time to see the doors where Kendall had been standing, closing slowly, Kendall already having gone through them. Rani caught a glimpse of her tall figure 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.

Kendall roamed the dark rooms of her home, not even noticing what she was doing. "Rani Noir..." The words echoed around the room and in her mind; she was unable to get the woman'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 had been brief; Kendall having been introduced to several of the staff at the same time, her attention focused mainly on her assigned contact. She really hadn't taken much notice of the diminutive blonde that had bustled in for the introductions to Kendall's crew, and then excused herself for a pressing meeting. Kendall had just broken up with her lover and wasn't interested in anyone, let alone that little beauty. Now, twelve months later, and somewhat over the turmoil that had gone on in her life, she was finally feeling again.

Catherine had been right; it was time she got back out there—but... Rani considered herself straight, and that posed a small problem for her. She'd had straight women come out with her before, and the end had not been what she planned. Most of them were at least curious and willing to experiment. Some of them went back to men, unable to handle the emotional impact or the reaction of a biased society. Then there were those few that thanked her for showing them the way, and had gone on their own. All in all, she wasn't saddened by the failure of the relationships; she learned something from each encounter and that evened things out, at least that's what she told herself. No matter the outcome, they had almost always parted friends, but they had always parted.

She could tell Rani Noir was a different story all together, at least as far as she was concerned. There was something there, and it 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 her firm, she was, after all the customer and a rather lucrative one; however, that wasn't good enough

for Kendall, not even close. She wanted – no, *needed* to hear her voice, and see her smaller but nearly perfect form, her fair complexion; to delight in the flush on her face if she flirted with her again like she had at lunch.

She resisted the urge for several hours, aware that she was potentially setting herself up for another failure, another fall if she hadn't guessed right, when the small woman rejected 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 day had gone by with Rani always in her thoughts, she gave in. *Crazy fool*, she acknowledged, 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 disappointed before, Kendall. You can handle it. Could she? It was getting harder to take the rejections, mostly friendly, but rejection nevertheless.

"I live for love." The hands of time aren't going any slower these days. What does Rani Noir live for? Well, why don't you call her and start finding out?

That evening after dinner, while she was snuggled up under a comforter by the fire trying – and not having any success – to read a love story she had been thoroughly involved in just two days ago, the phone rang. Rani looked down at it, instinctively knowing who was calling. "One lunch and now you have 'spidey sense'?" She lifted the receiver, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Hey there, Rani."

The voice on the other end was indeed Kendall's; the deep, sensual sound spreading an unfamiliar – but wonderful just the same – tingling warmth through her body. Rani's heart and stomach did a little summersault. Just what she needed, all night 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 her.

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 noticing her book as it slid off her lap and fell to the floor; the unexpected question bringing 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 slamming. She darted her eyes around, 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; five thirty on the dot. I'll just head over there from my office."

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."

The rest of the conversation passed in a haze and when Kendall hung up after a few minutes, Rani was sure she must have been put off by the lack of conversation on her part. She found herself sitting there a half-hour later, still holding the complaining phone on her lap, her mind drifting everywhere and nowhere, but mostly drifting over every detail of her brief knowledge of Kendall.

She knew Kendall's sensual intensity had a strong affect on her, and she remembered the energy between them at lunch with a recurring shiver. She hoped it wasn't her imagination that Kendall had felt it too. *Hoped?* Rani shook herself, frowning. Okay, let's dissect this.

Kendall enticed her – that was glaringly obvious. She was practically obsessing over Kendall, she admitted. There was also a new aspect to this budding relationship, but she realized that she wasn't afraid of the lesbian part of it; it was becoming rapidly apparent to her. The notion was way down the list of concerns, with thoughts of Kendall and what she was feeling about their all to brief meeting, and what she should wear tomorrow, 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 did not know. What she did know was, 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 anticipation.

"I have 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.

You fool. You've let this woman totally consume your brain—but, did she really mind? The realization that she was thinking about canceling with Addison and not Kendall only made her eagerness that much more exciting.

"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 sat back in the booth. She had called Addison and they'd met for lunch at their favorite haunt, Panda Restaurant. Usually she enjoyed their lunch dates, but today, Rani 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 that just last weekend told me she was going on a 'find true love mission'?"

"It's a woman."

Addison was just about to shove another 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. She noted Rani's shocked expression. "What did you expect me to say?"

"Anything but *that*."

"Why? I'm not homophobic, you know. If you're so hell-bent on finding your true love, what's the difference if it's male or female? Long as it's real." 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 too comfortable with one another, and 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, searching Addison's face for any signs of a lie. Her friend's eyes looked as

honest as ever. Wow, 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 nodded her head. "I may not appear knowledgeable in these things, 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 things. Everyone else looks for the brass ring; you look for who caps the toothpaste."

"She knew which brand I used."

"That's scary."

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

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

"She knew what I drank too."

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

"Kendall Avery."

Addison knew the name immediately. She ran a mental image of Kendall, and then remembered something else. "Bad business to get into that kind of situation with a client, Rani." She started shaking her head.

"She makes me feel nice." Rani just realized it as she said it.

Addison scrutinized her friend. "Can you see yourself having sex with her?" She was on to something, but wouldn't voice it yet.

"*Gawd*, Addison!"

"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 yesterday; and the way she looked at me, I've only seen men do that, but with her it was exciting."

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

"She's absolutely gorgeous, isn't she? And she smelled marvelous; leather mixed with Eternity... It was heavenly."

Addison was smiling. "I do believe you're swooning, my friend." Rani blushed, for she knew it was true. "So, can you see yourself in that

type of relationship? You know it'll be hard if the agency found out, not to mention any future jobs you may need to look into if you're laid off because of this decision."

"I haven't made any decision yet, for all I know she's just a lonely woman who wants company."

"Kendall Avery isn't a lonely woman, Rani."

"And how do you know that?"

Okay, here goes. "Not all of my friends are *straight*, Rani." Rani could only gape at her, getting the hint fully. "Shocking, I know. I'm really a rather eclectic kinda gal."

So, Kendall *was* a lesbian, her assumptions were laid to rest finally. She wondered about Kendall's business partner, Catherine Bowman. Were they lovers? Rani felt a compelling need to know everything about Kendall suddenly.

"Okay, what do you know about her?"

"She broke up a two-year relationship with a woman a year ago, before that she was um, well, she was an open kinda gal. She's had a few relationships, some flings. She's a settle down and marry type now. Despite her looks and wealth, she's not a love 'em and leave 'em type, rather it's the other way around. She's always the one with the broken heart."

Rani felt a terrible sadness thinking about that. To have someone love you, and she was sure Kendall Avery could love a person to insanity most likely, and then turn around and break that heart, not to mention let that kind of love go.

"So... what type of women does she go for?"

Addison chuckled. "Smaller women 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."

"Okay, quit joking. I'm serious. What have the women been like that she's gone all mushy inside over?"

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

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

Addison looked at her, frowning. "Wrong with her? Nothing's wrong with her. You said it earlier, she's perfect—my god, did I just say that aloud? See what you do, already inflicting your—"

"I fail to believe I can coerce any words out of you."

"Well, putting aside your feelings, I think you'd do better to wait until after your business with her is finished before you go jumping into her with eyes closed."

"My eyes are wide open, I assure you. I've done a lot of thinking about her—*uh*, this whole situation last night and this morning." She twirled her straw around the glass of cola thinking. "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 started clearing their trash, thinking. Well, she had to bring it up at some point, and now seemed as good a time as any. "No matter what I say, you're going to do what you want, Rani, you always have; but I just want to give one piece of advice and you can heed it or forget it."

Rani was staring up at her intently. "That is?"

"You were never 'straight'. Maybe now that you've had your calling, you'll finally find *your* true love; if such a thing exists."

Rani's mouth dropped open. She vehemently denied it in a hushed tone, "What are you talking about? I'm not a lesbian!" even though she had questioned herself all evening over the very same presumption.

"Sure you are." Addison sat down again, glancing around the room to see whose ears were glued to their conversation. Surprisingly no one seemed all that interested. The room was mostly filled with Asian people, along with a scattering of suits. She turned back to Rani. "Maybe that's why you're still single, hm?"

"I'm single because 'there's no such thing as true love', remember?"

"That has nothing to do with being gay or straight. We're talking gender preference here, not fantasy." She put her hand on Rani's. "Listen, if you spend any time denying this, you'll be losing time that could be spent meeting your Ms. Right."

Rani flushed with the admission, "I think I've already met her."

"Take a trial run first, eh? 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 re-evaluate your feelings again. Do that a few times, and 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 that up by bringing other people into it?"

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

"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. While you're focused on 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, you're piling on all these 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 perfect mate, Rani, and that person doesn't exist. They'll have some flaws, are you prepared to accept them as they are?"

She 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, she didn't want to explore anyone else.

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

"Sure."

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

"That's 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 her with a hand on her elbow. "Still going out with her today?"

Rani nodded. "Sorry, can we reschedule our game?"

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

"I promise."

"Good." She gave Rani's cheek a kiss and started backing up in the other direction. "By the way, Sam's one too." She laughed at the look of shock swallowing Rani's face.

Just what kind of cave had she been living in anyway? Rani shook head, numb, and headed back to work. When she arrived at her office, there was a package on her desk. She turned in the doorway to her secretary Shawn 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, that's ok." She closed her door and leaned against it, staring across at the box. It was wrapped in silver paper, reminding her of someone's dashing eyes. Slowly, she moved closer to her desk. She stood there a few minutes staring down at it. There was a card attached. She reached out, pulled it free of its ribbon tie and opened the small envelope, withdrawing the inner card and turning it over to read the words hand scribed there.

*Rani*

*I hope you're feeling better today.*

*K*

Rani's mouth danced with a quirky little smile. She lifted the box and started opening it. Inside was a glass jar of Planters Peanuts. The smile spread like fire over her face, lighting up her eyes.

By one forty-five, Rani could take the anticipation no longer. She popped her head into Sam's office and smiled, watching her typing something on her computer.

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 short hair, 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, leaning against it. "Why didn't you tell me you were gay?"

There was a loaded pause and then Samantha smirked. "Avery told you that?" That seemed extremely atypical of Kendall Avery.

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

Samantha laughed; she should have known. "That wench! Wait'll I see her again." She didn't mind really, Addison knew she was open about her sexuality—when appropriate. She pointed to a chair in front of her desk and waited while Rani sat herself down. "My sexual preference has no bearing on our work relationship, correct?"

Rani supposed it didn't. "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 I prefer the freedom of choice whether I disclose my personal life out of the office with anyone in the office. I live one life here, and another totally different when I'm not working. The two don't need to coexist; my skills aren't 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." The 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, I have a partner I love very much now, Rani." She figured she'd come right out and clear the air about that.

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

Samantha's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Ah, I see." Good. That would make things a lot less uncomfortable and complicated.

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

Samantha decided to help her floundering friend. "That you were... *gay*?"

"That's the word I was looking for." She chuckled uneasily and finally looked at Samantha.

"You and Addison must have had some lunch..." She leaned back in her chair.

Rani nervously fidgeted in her own chair. "Well, something odd happened during my meeting with Kendall Avery."

"She turned ya on, huh Chica?" Samantha smiled in understanding. "Avery has that affect, too bad she's loco." The smile metamorphosed into a light giggle.

"She wasn't that bad, just a bit... full of zest." To put it mildly.

"Trust me, she's as loco as they make them, Rani; but I can see where you're coming from." She paused to collect her thoughts. "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 took a moment and scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to Rani. "There's a bookstore on Christopher Street that caters to the lifestyle; perhaps you should invest some time there."

Rani decided after her three o'clock meeting that afternoon, she would 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, nearly overlooking 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 further down the block.

Once inside the cozy book store, she passed by a stout man at the register who was grinning widely at her and smiled shyly in return. She was a bit overwhelmed standing there, gazing around at the vast selections lining every single 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. Grasping them to her chest like they were her children, she moved around the store and started plucking here and there until her arms were filled and she was tilting forward from the over abundance of weight. Deciding she had enough for now, she started towards the register.

A display of magazines caught her eye, and with her thumb and forefinger, she grabbed the latest copy of *Girlfriends*, grasping it between her teeth quickly as she caught her falling stack just in time. Something... someone, very tall and very hard, bumped into Rani, sending her pitching forward and all of 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 had run into her, she was not sure which the case was. Blue-gray eyes, like the sky over Arizona, so filled with energy, energy that seemed to come

from within, stared back at her humorously. A perfect face, almost poetic, and the surreal voice when the creature of wonders spoke...

"Hi there, Rani."

Just those few words and Rani proceeded to blush redder than a 57' Chevy. "Oh. Um. Hiya, Kendall. Uh... what are you doing here?" Good start, reel her in with your seductive wit.

"You've dropped your books." Kendall's smile widened, showing Rani her startling display of even, white teeth. She squatted and Rani heard the leather creaking, reminding her of what she told Addison earlier.

Kendall collected her books into a stack and stood. She went to hand them to her, but saw Rani was having trouble keeping herself upright. Kendall took Rani's arm, leading her and carrying her books to the counter.

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

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

"Which, Hun?"

"Better make it charge." Kendall rifled through her own wallet, pulling out a gold card and slipping it to him.

"Oh, no, you can't. I mean—I couldn't." Rani wanted to crawl into the nearest hole. The image 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 may pay me back or add it to the account if that would make you feel more comfortable." Kendall placed a hand on her shoulder, sending Rani's stomach jumping.

If she smiles or touches me once more, I'll simply die. Rani smiled quickly, wondering if it looked too false and felt the blush already heating her face and neck grow deeper. What the hell is this woman doing to me? She dimmed the smile, her mind whirling.

Finally, Rani looked up and was met by those incredible mercurial orbs. She wondered if that was amusement in Kendall's stare as she regarded Rani with intense scrutiny. Rani shivered, looking 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 opened door at her back.

Noticing something over Rani's shoulder, Kendall ran her hand from Rani's shoulder to her forearm. "Don't go anywhere, I'll be right back." She stepped around Rani and headed for the door.

"What are you doing?" Kendall eyed the Traffic Enforcement Agent that was writing out what appeared to be a ticket.

The man gestured to a black horse roped to the meter with his pen. "This yours?"

"Yes."

"Can't park it here, 'fraid I'll have to write you up."

"For what?"

"I've already said 'for what'."

"Because I've roped my horse to the meter?"

"And you didn't put change in it either."

"I was only in the store a moment."

"Sorry. You parked it here, you pay for it."

"Fine, here." Kendall took out a quarter, put it in the slot and turned the dial. "That should be ample time."

He stopped her when she began to walk away. "Just a second, Miss."

"Yes?"

"I'm still going to write you a ticket."

"For what?"

"You can't park a horse here, Ma'am."

Kendall put a hand on her hip, eyeing him with a raised brow, but there was a devilish gleam floating in her blue gaze. "Let me get this straight, I just put in a quarter to pay for the space I was occupying with a horse I can't park here?"

"Correct."

Kendall began unwinding the reins, curling them around her hand instead. "Okay, I'll move her; may I have my quarter back?"

"I'm not at liberty to do that Miss, you'll have to go to the TVB office and explain the problem to them."

"So you'd like me to waste three hours, too?"

"That's the way these things work Miss."

"Three of my hours and my quarter because you won't give it back to me?"

"Yes."

"And what license plate number will you put on your ticket?"

"Is there a problem?" Rani was beside her, hands full with two bags of books, receipt and credit card. The man glanced down at them, noting the name on the bags and then back at Rani.

"No, no problem." Kendall took her ticket graciously and stuffed it into her pocket. The Agent tipped his hat and was on his way.

"What is *that*?" Rani nodded at the mare, handing over Kendall's credit card.

"A horse—" Kendall laughed at Rani's expression. She tied the mare back up and leaned down to take the bags from Rani. "Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

"Uh, no... I came in my car." She looked at the animal with a weary eye; she was still getting over her motorcycle ride, no need to push it.

"Hmm, okay. Where's it parked? I'll carry these for you."

"It's just down a few spots, I can manage."

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

Not in this lifetime. "I'm not nervous."

Kendall picked up the bags, spotted Rani's car down the block and started walking towards it. "Coming or staying?" She smiled when she heard Rani's footsteps hurrying to catch up to her. When they reached Rani's car Kendall leaned against it, staring at Rani. Her smile was full of meaning and warmth.

Rani wondered why Kendall had made no comment about the books she'd purchased. Wasn't she even remotely interested in why I was buying all those lesbian books?

"You must like to read a lot." Kendall indicated the two bags she held against her legs with the bump of her knee. "Anything interesting?"

Rani grabbed for the bags, but Kendall moved them out of reach. She was still in a devilish mood from her play with the Traffic Agent. "Hmm, let's see what we have here."

"Kendall!" Rani made another grab for the bags. She didn't know why she was so suddenly afraid of Kendall knowing what the books were about.

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

"I'm not!"

"Not a Katharine V. Forrest fan?"

Confused, Rani shook her head 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 the first time... Shoot, you've messed me all up, Kendall."

Kendall opened the back door and set the bags inside. Then she 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 you, that's all." She turned Rani and walked her to the passenger side.

Before Kendall had her seated and belted, Rani held one hand on the doorframe; the other braced against Kendall's shoulder and wouldn't let Kendall make her sit. "I'm fine. Go get your umm... horse, before that guy comes back and gives you another ticket."

The sky was darkening to a deep bluish gray. Kendall glanced up then down at Rani. "Looks like rain. Maybe we should postpone the date?"

Rani's spirits sank. That was the last thing she wanted. "I could make dinner..." 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 since she'd had one last?

"Okay." She beamed a big one at Rani. "I'll meet you there."

Impulsively, Rani hugged her. A little shyly at first, but once her body connected to Kendall's, it came easy, and she comfortably wrapped her arms around Kendall's back and waist, pulling her closer. It was as intimate a touch as she could have handled at that moment, and after a minute standing together like that, they moved apart.

Rani noticed in Kendall's expression a hint of confirmation of some unknown thought, but it passed quickly and she was smiling again. Then she was backing down the pavement, eyes still trained on Rani. If she lived to be one hundred and two, Rani would never forget those eyes.

"John Denver. Finally, a woman with some taste." Kendall was fingering through Rani's CD case sitting on the end table. She had seated herself on the sofa, took off her shoes and jacket earlier – surprising Rani – and made herself at home.

"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 large entertainment center. It took her only a few moments to get the CD spinning and playing one of her favorites. She leaned against the wooden cabinet, hands hanging from her back pockets and she watched the hallway, 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, she stopped in her tracks and stared back at Kendall.

"Like a walk in the rain..." Kendall's eyes honed in on Rani's and her lips stilled. Rani flushed brightly, her pulse racing with a hard, frightening skip.

"Come here."

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

Kendall moved even closer, taking a hold of Rani's hands and she placed them around her shoulders, and then put her own hands to Rani's waist, pulling her until their whole fronts touched and settled comfortably.

Rani was overcome with a burning and longing feeling coursing through her body with which she was unfamiliar. She let the thoughts and feelings crowd around her. Although the emotions were new and confusing, they were pure pleasure. Her mind was beginning to focus

solely on the sensations of Kendall's hands encompassing her waist. She knew she wanted to know more of her strong touch.

A slight smile danced at Kendall's lips as she watched Rani's intelligent eyes grow slack upon hers. "Perfect fit."

"Yes," was all Rani could think to say. She glanced away, then up quickly as Kendall studied her reactions. She grew bolder, sliding her shaky hands over Kendall's shoulders, pressing into the shirt gently, feeling muscles underneath grow taut at her touch. The flesh at the back of Kendall's neck was burning hot. Rani closed her eyes, luxuriating in the feelings; the heat, and the soft, silky touch of Kendall's 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 her warm sandalwood scent. A soft sigh escaped her before she could stop it and she felt her skin begin to burn with a blush.

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

Disappointment was heavy in Rani's heart. "No problem, I should check the food." She took the first opportunity to hide back in the kitchen.

Kendall stood there thinking, still feeling the pleasurable imprint of Rani pressed to her front. She decided to busy herself with touring Rani's home. There was a studio-office she found on her exploration of the lower floor. It was a dark room, clouded by the storm outside.

She spotted a computer on the desk beside the sliding glass doors, and saw it was on. Kendall took it upon herself to go check it out. 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 email program. She made a note of her address for later, smiling, 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 formerly introduced to one another. The photo was taken at the beach, both women looking rather soggy, but bright happy smiles covering their faces. They must have 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 stairs as she climbed them to the second floor. There were three rooms upstairs, one of which was used for an exercise room, the other had boxes piled here and there. The last room was Rani's bedroom. She remained in there a while, just standing in the center of Rani's things, absorbing Rani's lingering presence.

Rani had taken a quick shower earlier; dew still clung to the bathroom mirror that faced the open door; the towel she'd used was lying forgotten 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. There was a comfortable looking chair with a blanket strewn over it in the corner near a small waterfall. Kendall could smell the perfume she had dabbed on, and the light scent of hair shampoo and soap. She stopped herself from going to the bed and lifting the pillow and pressing it to her face by checking out the master bath. It was a nice and cozy looking room, but didn't hold her interest long. She was just coming downstairs again to see what Rani was up to when the doorbell rang. Rani called from the kitchen for her to "please answer it?"

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

"Nice to finally meet you, Addison."

Addison beamed and quickly moved around Kendall's tall 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 the voice to the kitchen. "You have a half naked woman in your home, did you know that?" She grabbed a cherry tomato from the salad Rani was making.

"Stop that!" Rani swatted her hand away. "And she's not half naked, she took her shoes off."

"That's usually how it starts." She slid up onto the counter and eyed her friend. "You're all a flush, what happened?"

Rani hushed 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 was breathless.

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

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

Addison laughed at the insult. "Not entirely. Okay, so you danced and what else? Did you kiss yet?"

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

Addison smirked and Rani jolted, just slightly; more from the ripple of heat Kendall's gravelly voice elicited than being surprised by the sudden intrusion. Finally, she acknowledged Kendall must have had heard their conversation and 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 have I slipped so easily from a basically "normal" straight woman into this outrageous lesbian? She knew the expression 'go with the flow'. It felt as if she was the flow and had absolutely no idea, or control, over where her destiny lay.

Following her last disastrous relationship with Peter Salmon, her emotions had settled into each other, life resuming its daily movements three months after it ended. She was coming out and joining society again. She'd spent too long sequestered, alone, and she'd come to terms once again, with knowing and understanding the inevitable highs, and eventual start over she would repeatedly endure. Here was that start over, only this time it was a different horse all together. She didn't know if she could deal with these new emotions.

However, they weren't so new. Loving someone, she presumed, no matter what the race, or gender, was all the same in the end. If Kendall hurt her heart, would it not break? Would she not remain lost in a cocoon of grief as she had all the other times if Kendall didn't love her? Of course she would.

Rani caught herself. *Am I in love with her already?* Is 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 knows what prevented these feelings. All she knew was, she *was* feeling; whether it was love or not, she did not know.

Addison plopped down on the sofa, watching Kendall changing CD's. "She'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. They had a nice little talk about Rani, or rather, Addison yammered on and on about her friend while 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 smirked at her friend. "Sure, crash here, that's okay with me." She gave her 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 told her at the door before she closed it on her.

Dinner was good; at least Rani hoped it was. She didn't notice. For all she knew, she was eating cardboard. All evening, she had prayed that Kendall had forgotten Addison's "kiss" comment earlier.

"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, drawing up a knee, facing Rani as she stretched her arm out along the back. Rani noted her eyes had a look in them, almost painfully sad. "We tried to keep it going, but it had 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 shrugged. "Mostly it's a feeling, and then there are times when 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.

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

Kendall glanced up at her fixedly. What the hell, she had started it; she may as well tell her. "It's the way people hug one another. I've noticed the differences over the years with some lovers. There are three key versions of hugs: 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 base love and relationships on something so basic, but it hasn't failed me yet."

Rani had to know. "Was your Hug-O-Meter on this afternoon?"

Kendall studied her a moment. "Maybe..."

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

"Truthfully," Kendall nodded. "Yes, it in fact, 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?

Kendall smiled. "I was wondering when you'd pick that up, Rani."

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, and like I normally do, I try to make it work; even knowing the opposite will inevitably happen."

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

"Do I really have to tell you, Rani?"

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 to her car. 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 sank into the front seat. "Interesting."

Kendall went to Catherine's party the following day, and as she suspected, Catherine had "a friend" that was dying to meet Kendall. The woman was nice looking, and friendly, but Kendall felt nothing while chatting with her. Unlike the immediate attraction between them almost from the minute she opened her office door to Rani.

Kendall managed to sneak away from Dana the first moment she got and she cornered her devious partner in the kitchen. "You promised!" She was not 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 Hun, I'm just trying to help. You need to get off the stick."

Kendall knew she meant well. "I have. I met someone."

Catherine's eyes rounded and glee lit up her features. "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, hunching her shoulders, wincing, 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!"

"Now you know I mean no harm, we all know you're a great catch, in OUR community – heck if I had met you before Pam... Well never mind.

You're lost in the meat department, Hun. Come back to the vegetable aisle."

Kendall rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "No one can dictate what their hearts do, 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 female 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." There was no changing her mind about it; Catherine could see it in her gaze.

"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.

Rani purposefully slept late Saturday morning, trying to shorten the wait until they met. She moved around her cabin all day, full of nervous energy. She exercised, but it just made her sweat and think of Kendall even more so she tried to read. She laid the book aside impatiently when she found herself re-reading the same sentence over and over. Was there nothing to get her mind off Kendall? A thought hit her – Television – and she turned on the big screen TV, flipping 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.

Am I jumping into this too fast? Would I feel this drawn to any other woman, or is Kendall playing me 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. She understood Addison detecting it in her, but she wasn't certain she liked a perfect stranger seeing into her so quickly and perfectly 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 a curiosity—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. 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 than any man that had gone down there exploring; but there was a huge difference—this time there would be no penis, no flat chest or hairy chest. She pictured Kendall's body, wondering what she looked like under her clothing. From what she had observed of her so far in secret glances and all out ogling that day at the restaurant, she knew Kendall would be beautiful: smooth skin, muscular contours, silky and firm, yet soft and warm; a woman's body.

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 in her hands, and the nipples tingled as she brushed thumbs over them through the fabric of her shirt.

So, this is what lesbian's feel when they touch one another, and how it'll feel when—if she were to touch 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*.

Clicking off the television with a frustrated sigh, she decided not to make herself crazy contemplating it. It was too soon to consider sex

anyway. She went to her closet and surveyed its contents. What mood do I want to set? Not too sexy; don'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.

She parted through every hanger as she chided herself. She finally decided pale blue jeans, a cream crew-neck tee, and her favorite soft flannel shirt; 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 something special to show you."

"Should I be worried at this point?"

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

"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 to think on the weekends."

"You're safe with me."

"Sure about that?"

Kendall stopped walking, their linked hands holding Rani back. "Why wouldn't you be? You don't have to be afraid, Rani. The last thing I want to do is hurt you, in any way, either emotionally or physically. That's not my game."

"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 safely 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 was pleased nonetheless, and swayed closer to Kendall, wondering how she knew about that bottle of Anais Anais on her dresser.

"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."

"I'm getting nervous."

"Don't, I'm harmless." Upon releasing her hand, Kendall noticed Rani was shivering. "Are you cold?"

"Yes, a little."

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.

Feeling herself being scrutinized, Rani slowly lifted her gaze. Kendall's eyes were heavy. With desire?

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 her muscular thighs, put her face to Kendall's stomach and feel her breathing.

Deciding she wanted her closer, Kendall pulled Rani back up, turned her, and then wrapped her arms around Rani's waist. Finally, she rest 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?"

"Enveloping you and keeping you warm. Now, pay attention."

"To wha-"

Just then, all three statues lit up, and sprouted a colorful display of water out in an arc from their mouths. Rani gasped, pressing back into Kendall, eyes alight, reflecting the beautiful scene. How did Kendall know? Her love for water fountains had started when Rani was very young, along with a passion to own her very own fountain when she was much older, a goal she'd accomplished when she had the cabin redesigned a couple years ago. It was nothing as elaborate as this spectacle; hers was a mere trickle of water down two horizontal poles with pieces of wood tacked to them, disrupting 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 playing.

"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 the tingles of excitement spreading from her center. Her breath came out as tiny quivers, and she turned her head, lifting her eyes 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 her, and to be kissed by Kendall's sexy mouth. She sighed, her stare growing deep watching Kendall's lips inches from hers.

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

The feel of Kendall pressing herself into her back-those fingers caressing her jaw- the other hand playing naughtily at her chest, and the pulling on her mouth that was growing stronger and stronger as the minutes passed, were overwhelming Rani. All too soon, Rani broke away, looking 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 think we'd better go, Kendall."

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

"Let's just go."

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

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

"Okay, but instead of thinking, can you talk to me?" Silence hung heavy between them as they walked back to the car.

"Still cold?" Kendall took her hand.

"Not as much now." Rani smiled to herself, feeling cared for, for once without it being Addison or her father.

They reached the car and 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, knowing 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.

Kendall drove to the beach, and Rani wondered what they could do at the beach, at the end of September, at night. They strolled down the boardwalk, found an unlocked gate and slipped unnoticed through it. Kendall took Rani's hand again, to steady her on the uneven sand, and for the touch. She pointed to the shore in the east a short distance away. The lights were beautiful and Rani moved closer.

They sat and talked. Rani even rested against Kendall, letting Kendall wrap her arms around her. They talked for hours about Rani's past experiences with men. It was around three when Rani first started drifting off, and five minutes later she was asleep in Kendall's arms. When the sun rose, Rani woke with a start and a cramped neck. She'd slept propped up against Kendall, with Kendall's arms holding her the entire time.

They'd found a large boulder to sit up against earlier and Kendall was sleeping against it, her hold on Rani still tight. Rani managed to unlock her fingers and sit up; cracking her neck this way and that. Finally, she sat, turned slightly in the circle of Kendall's legs, just staring at her.

Kendall must have felt it Rani surmised, because she woke up, eyes shocking gray in the dark of her face. Rani loved how her eye color shifted between subtle shades of blues and grays.

"Hungry?"

"Famished."

In the car, on the way from the beach, Rani flushed when Kendall turned on the radio and the first song she heard was "Annie's Song".

She sat in silence as Kendall began humming to the words, occasionally singing a line here or there. "Let me die in your arms..." Kendall glanced over at her. There was a hint of a smile around the corners of Rani's lips. Kendall looked back at the road. A moment later, she was surprised when the hand she had resting on her thigh was clasped in Rani's. She dropped her gaze down to their hands then at Rani again.

"Don't get excited, my hands are freezing." Rani smirked her way, sliding a little closer. Kendall intertwined their fingers and gave her hand a little squeeze, pressing it into her thigh.

"You came to the right person to warm them up."

Rani dropped her racket into the backseat of Addison's BMW, hurriedly slipping inside the passenger side, hoping a speeding cab didn't clip the door.

"Kiss me."

Addison looked over at Rani as if she'd lost her mind. "Have you lost your mind?"

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

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

"Can you just do this one thing for me?" Her eyes implored understanding from Addison.

"You're making me feel really uncomfortable here, Rani. Just because I have a circle of lesbian friends doesn't mean I participate in the lifestyle."

"I know; 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 watched the hustle and bustle, people walking to and fro, people leading their normal lives, unaware of this pressure Rani had placed upon her. She cursed under breath and reluctantly stretched over towards Rani, giving 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 her face and leaned forward, holding her steady, trying 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 noting terribly exciting was happening. That was until Addison

pushed against her for a long second, feeling the whole of Rani's mouth against her own; then she kissed Rani back, a full-blown, opened lipped, sucking on her tongue kiss. Rani was immediately aware of the buzz of pleasure she felt. The experience was arousing, she couldn't deny that, but nowhere near what happened to her with Kendall. The thought gave her a perverse joy. She released Addison and sat back slowly.

"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 dropped her gaze from Addison's. She scanned the sidewalk instead and saw the same Agent that had given Kendall a ticket standing there eyeballing the two women. She hunched down uneasily in her seat, quickly skipping her eyes away from the man.

"Let's go."

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

Rani smiled at 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 Avery?"

"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." She didn't want to hurt her friend'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 frank look. "I draw the line on sleeping together though."

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

At lunchtime the following Monday, Kendall surprised Rani with a spontaneous and unannounced visit, carting 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 taking her. As they approached the curb, Kendall's arm stiffened, blocking Rani from stepping down. The WALK signal flashed, her taut arm relaxed and pulled Rani slightly as Kendall started across the street, still holding Rani's hand. Feeling embarrassed, yet profoundly touched by the forceful care, Rani felt her confusion draining 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 tight smile. She ignored Rani, without 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 Connie. Let's go back." Connie regarded Rani with hollow eyes, her smile frozen, but lacking sentiment. 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.

Two walls were bare of bookcases, and covering them instead were double rows of matted sketches. Connie was chattering and pointing, 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.

We'll talk more later." With that, she moved away from Connie, bringing Rani to the far wall where the first of the pictures was hung.

Bending toward her, Kendall's smooth voice cooed 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 into the books.

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 rising and receding. Women made of nothing but shadow and light, alternating deep and shallow. Each grouping was of a different woman than the last. Each group was done in variations of only one color. The 'blue' woman was stark and penetrating with all her facial features, deep blue hollows, and the abyss of her 'mouth' a perpetual wail depicting unfathomable agonies. It made Rani want to sob.

Only color and its corresponding number named each group: 'Blue, 1', etcetera. Each drawing was signed in the right corner with a modest but bold 'K A' and a sign 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 was incomplete, with only one 'Orange' woman hanging. She stared hard at the wispy edges of the dancing figure, unable to focus completely on the form of her. She finally decided that was appropriate, with the inference of fire and shimmering heat waves distorting the woman's shape. It was beautiful; a passion so searing it danced and refused control.

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

"Like them?"

"A lot." Once she heard her own response, Rani looked up shyly, then quickly away. "What's NFS?"

"Not for sale."

Duh, Rani. "I didn't know you were an artist," Rani mumbled to the floor.

Kendall's entrancing eyes gathered Rani in. Her long, blonde wavy hair brushed back from her face, sensitive green eyes, told Kendall

everything, and she wanted to reach in and pull Rani up from herself, turn her around to see the woman she was; supple curves and tender eyes hiding untold passions. She wanted to be the one to help introduce Rani to her real self.

"Which of these women would you like to have?" Kendall gestured to the wall of art with her chin, prepared to take down whichever drawing Rani wanted and give it to her.

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.

A smile 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, making her face the drawings, holding her in place with a hand on each shoulder.

"The orange one," Rani finally decided. She watched with surprised eyes 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 from the store. She was beaming as she led Rani a few blocks down to a small pizza shop.

Rani was staring 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 Connie has 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?"

The office was bustling with activity, people moving about daily routines that were so automatic hardly anyone made a mistake in the process. Porter Wayne scanned Bill's newest design into the computer as Jasper Lester worked nearby. Rani sat in her comfortable chair trying to work on a statistical report. Jovan Barika was fixing the copier; again, as Tempest stood next to her waiting to get the checks copied so they could be deposited. She looked very patient and at ease, and didn't mind if Jovan was cursing to herself and stabbing a finger here or there while smudging ink along her forearms.

Rani found it hard to concentrate, even though she'd come looking for the distractions. Her mind was filled with Kendall Avery; Kendall the lean engine, ready and fired up for anything. She had called earlier, surprising Rani, telling her she'd stop by to see how things were progressing later in the day. Now, all Rani could think about was what a lovely deep phone voice she had. Sensual. Sexual.

Rani envisioned Kendall whispering in her ear when they were together and not just through a telephone line. The mere thought turned her into a puddle of melted butter.

"Coming through," Kendall called, riding her mare into the thirty story building's lobby. The woman holding the door gasped when Kendall rode by her and to the elevator. Kendall smiled a dazzler at a Chinese woman. "Would you get the button for me, love?" The woman nearly fell on the call button.

The elevator was wide, and tall, perfect for Kendall and her prized horse. The woman—the call button woman—got on and looked to Kendall expectantly.

"Thirty please."

The woman jabbed at the button, forgetting her own floor and stood staring at Kendall all the way up until the heavy doors slid open. It was the reception area. Kendall saw an open door and headed for it. Riding through another open and deserted area, she wondered where the hell everybody was, until she came across the main "thinking" room. Halting her steed as she approached, she saw Porter and Bill, and then that green-eyed beauty that had occupied Kendall's every waking thought.

Rani dropped the pad and the pen she was holding on her lap. Porter stood, frowning. Bill got a great big kick out of the whole scene.

"Dear Lord..." Rani mumbled to herself as Kendall dismounted.

"Rani?" Jovan went to her, standing at her elbow.

Kendall narrowed her eyes, who the hell was this? "Sorry to interrupt." She added Bill in on her smiling greeting. "I was wondering, Rani, might I have a word alone with you?"

"No, you may not. And what the hell is that," she pointed to Kendall's horse, "doing in here?"

"Well, considering the trouble I had at the bookstore, I figured it best I take her along with me this time."

"Gonna have a wee bit of a problem in the restroom, aren't you?"

"Rani..." Porter gave her a look. Kendall did not need encouragement for conversation.

Spunkie, Addison's well loved black tabby, which they were using in a shoot later that day, came out of hiding to inspect the new arrivals. Upon seeing the tall, four-legged beast, she hissed loudly, sending the horse rearing, pulling Kendall's arm up as it went.

Into the chaos, Samantha walked and stalled in her tracks. Her eyes quickly scanned the scene, landing on Rani finally. "Dios Mi."

"Control that damn thing!" Jasper jumped to action, grabbing equipment and moving it away from the excited horse. She snatched the other side of its reins, and she and Kendall pulled the mare's head down. Everything was under control until the cat hissed at it again, spooking it. The horse lifted Jasper bodily off the floor, swinging its head wildly. Porter

was nearly catapulted into her new computer, but Jasper hung on, and Kendall tugged as hard as she could to regain control.

Samantha moved out of the way, stepping up beside Rani. "I told you she was loco."

Jasper released the rein, dropping to the floor without injury, and with a fierce glare at Kendall, she ordered, "That's it, you and your beast had better leave."

"It'll only take but a moment of your time, please, we can talk out in the hall."

Kendall holding out her hand to Rani is what cinched it, Samantha thought, watching Rani give in.

"Well, you certainly know how to make an entrance." They walked down the hall; the horse safely tied to the railing behind them.

"I apologize for any inconvenience."

They finally stopped and stood in the open courtyard to the floor below, a huge art sculpture directly in the center.

"I think Spunkie was more put out than any of us."

Kendall knew she meant the cat, but it was better not to comment on it. She took Rani's elbow, turning her, pulling her a little closer. "If you'll come out to dinner with me tonight, I'll give you a surprise."

"Oh, I think you've given me enough already."

"You're beautiful." Kendall reached up, touching Rani's chin.

Rani almost fell for it; quickly, she grabbed Kendall's hand. "Oh no you don't, I know how you really are."

"Do you?"

Unsteadily, "Yes."

"I don't think so."

"You're a charming swine."

"Ouch."

Rani smiled, looking at the floor. "Well, I better get back to work."

"You don't want to leave me." Kendall touched Rani's chin again, lifting her head to look in her eyes.

"I have to go."

"What about dinner with me?"

"If you were normal, I'd say yes in a minute, but unfortunately, you're not." She turned from the railing and started slowly back down the corridor with Kendall hovering beside her.

"You're just full of insults today." Kendall's eyes twinkled, not really bothered by it. "Say yes and I promise to show you a fabulous time."

"And the hard time? Would that come before or after dinner?"

Eyes still flashing amusement, Kendall smiled. "Whichever you'd prefer."

"Oh, you're really good at this aren't you?"

"I try."

"I'll think about it."

"Have you ever done anything without thinking about it first, Rani?"

"No. That's your problem, Kendall, you don't think, you just act; that's why you're the menace that you are."

"Maybe that's your problem. Why must you think about it before doing it? That must get awfully boring."

"Not at all, I don't like chaos, while you on the other hand, are the mother of it."

"For someone so passive you sure do pack a punch."

"My bark's pretty nasty too."

"Come out with me now, don't think, don't tell anyone, and don't even wonder where."

"You must be crazy."

"Not at all. Being spontaneous is not insanity, unless it's reckless spontaneity."

"I was helping come up with a catchy phrase by three o'clock."

"You can do that in ten minutes."

"I've been here three hours and haven't."

"That's because you were busy thinking of me."

"You are severely pushing your luck."

"Just get your purse and I'll show you the city my way."

"What, on that beast over there?"

"Ever ridden through the city on a horse before?"

"No."

"Then chock it up to experience."

"Why am I still talking to you?"

Kendall leaned close to her face. "Because I excite you, you'd like to turn it off, but you can't... fortunately for me." She brushed her lips over Rani's, touching them with the same feathery tenderness with her thumb afterward. "I can be gentle too; you'd like more of that, yes?"

Rani found herself replying, "Yes."

"You've been a closed flower too long, Rani; let me open your bud." Rani's face heated and she turned to walk away, but not to get away, to get her purse. Kendall leaned against the railing waiting for her.

Rani began talking as soon as she came back into the hall, "You want spontaneity, you got it buster, but just lunch."

"And dinner?"

"That depends on how lunch goes..."

Kendall laughed and hopped up into the saddle. She leaned down and grabbed Rani's arm along her own and lifted her up behind her. At the elevator, she tapped the call button with the tip of her boot.

At home later that evening, Rani was sitting at her desk without really seeing anything around her. The computer telling her she had an email finally interrupted Rani's thoughts of Kendall. She grasped the pencil she had been holding between her teeth and clicked on the little icon to bring up her mail client. It was from Kendall. Rani's whole face smiled.

*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 and then I'll eat you, brown and buttery – melt you on my tongue and come with you down any road if you'll only hold my hand as you've held my heart and I'll give you all I feel for you and haven't said...*

*K*

"Jesus..." Rani collapsed fully against the back of her chair, placing a hand over her thumping heart. Everything was pulling inside her. Never had any one ever caused this much turmoil in her life, mind, body or her heart.

After opening her eyes, Rani riveted her startled gaze on Kendall's face. She was thrilled and terrified all at the same time. Here she was, in her bed, sleeping deep, her mouth merely inches away, in kissable reach.

Rani was too dazed to even lean such a short distance and kiss her baby soft lips in greeting.

Her body was liquefied fire in Kendall's embrace. So this is it, she mused, all you basically have to do is lie here sleeping with me pressed close to you and I'm warm honey – your honey.

What are you doing in my bed? She almost spoke the question aloud, but was able to stifle it. Kendall was a living doll. She watched her sleep, those full lips opening for the occasional snore. Rani wanted to, and then did, reach out and caressed Kendall's beautiful face. She moved her hand to Kendall's shoulder; let it rest in the crook of her neck.

Her pupils contracted as she further studied Kendall's face – beyond, to the bits and pieces that made up the beauty. There was a small scar on the left side of her jaw, close to her ear. Rani wondered what unpleasant incident had found Kendall that awarded her the mark for life. She would ask her later. She lifted her hand again, an attentive index finger and stroked the one-inch indent. It was aged, slightly lighter than the brown pigment of Kendall's skin. Continuing the movement, her finger followed lightly along Kendall's jawbone, up over her chin. Luscious lips awaited her caress. She traced their outline, her finger following the ridge along her upper lip unhurriedly.

She pressed the tip of her finger into the bottom lip, pulling it down gently and could see Kendall's glistening tongue tip resting against her lower teeth. Her breath smelled like cinnamon; hot and wet cinnamon. Smiling, she released the lip, watching it leisurely settle back in place.

"I could creep right into your sweet mouth. Slither my way into your heart – flow with your pulse to your mind; probe and learn you and love every inch of you from inside." She gasped, realizing she had spoken the intense stew of emotion brewing in her head aloud.

She tried to shift onto her back, Kendall's arm tightened. Surrendering to the embrace, Rani's body went limp. Kendall's warm breath tickled her lips and nose. Rani pulled the scented air into her, filling her lungs, recycling it back against Kendall's mouth through her own.

Laying there, breathing Kendall's breath, feeling a tingling in her lower stomach from the experience, exploring the new sensations with her mind, other thoughts popped into her head: How do you see life? How do you see me? Why are you here? Those words didn't want to come out.

Maybe it was enough that Kendall was there. Did she have to ruin it by waking her? But why?

They had had such a wonderful day together that Rani hadn't gone back to her job after lunch. Parting at seven that evening after dinner, Kendall had promised to call her. Then the e-mail, and now here Kendall was, in her bed, partially pressing the breath from Rani as she held her closely arched into her muscular form. Her back would yell at her later, but for now, Rani enjoyed the pain, even welcomed it, if she could wake up every time in Kendall's arms and breathe with her.

She heard the front door slam and looked nervously at the clock. 2:30 AM. What the hell was Addison doing there? Hadn't she left a message saying she was spending the night with Bill? She hoped Addison didn't pop her head in to say "hi" like usual if she saw the light under Rani's door. After all the years they'd known one another, Addison knew Rani's routine well. Sleep by 12 am, up at five, out of bed at six—after contemplating it for an hour—then a groggily walk to the bathroom for a pee and a shower. After which, she'd finally dress, grab a quick cup of coffee and head out the door to the office. Forty minutes later—traffic permitting—she could be found sitting in her overstuffed recliner with notebook in hand, steadily chewing a pencil.

Rani glanced up at her door, expecting Addison to pop in at any moment. She stifled a giggle at the thought. You like this, that's why you're not waking her. Rani agreed with herself and stroked Kendall's arm absentmindedly with the tips of her fingers. Light touches, her favorite, soft and gentle, just like Kendall, big, soft, and gentle; but, she would be fire in between the sheets, Rani knew.

She finally felt the awareness and darted her gaze to Kendall's. As she suspected, Kendall's eyes were open and she was staring at Rani quietly. Her face masked of all emotion.

"So sexy, what can I do for ya?" Her question was a deliberate attempt at hiding her embarrassment.

Kendall laughed and Rani covered her mouth with a trembling hand. She whispered that Addison was there and Kendall's giggles stopped quickly. She grabbed Rani's hand when she went to take it away and gave it a kiss before she relinquished it back to Rani's custody.

Oh Goodness, I'll wet myself if she does that once more; or have a heart attack. She wasn't too particular. Finally, she got up the nerve. "Why are you here, Kendall?"

Kendall replied simply, "I missed you." In one sure motion, she slid her hand behind Rani's delicate neck, tipping her head up. The other hand gently pulled Rani into her, comfortably cupped at her soft, narrow waist. Kendall's eyes radiated a fierce gleam into Rani's, and she lowered her lips onto Rani's waiting mouth, kissing her with a slow, delicate slide.

Rani's breath caught, her mouth slack from the force of sensation rippling through her. All thought was forgotten with the unexpected tender want in Kendall's kiss. Her arms came to her, encircling Kendall's back and neck, pulling her into a deep, suckling kiss. Her tongue and upper lip drew Kendall's tongue in, holding it in its own warm embrace. A whining moan began deep in her throat as her body started expressing her long dormant need.

The knock startled them and their lips pulled apart with an almost silent groan from each of them.

"I locked it," Kendall whispered, staring down at Rani despite Addison's second knock. Her blue gaze warmed Rani's whole face, and its tenderness tightened Rani's stomach muscles until she closed her eyes, unable to take it anymore.

"You're so beautiful." The words carried a soft breath, close to Rani's lips.

Rani remembered how wild her hair could get after a restless sleep. Oh goodness, what must I look like, and isn't she so kind to lie like that?

"I mean it." Kendall saw the look of doubt cross Rani's face. "You're hair's rather fetching all wild like that." She ran steady fingers through Rani's hair and Rani almost purred. "So achingly beautiful to sleep next to, and wake up to and see first thing," her words were said slowly, her tone deep as she bent closer to Rani's face again to kiss her. She moved her body on top of Rani's, sliding over her for a comfortable position. Rani held her tightly, releasing everything into the kiss, and her embrace.

"Rani, open this door, I have something important to tell you." Addison's tone told Rani she wouldn't go away no matter how long she ignored her.

Kendall growled and slid off of Rani, lying on her side, facing Rani. She put a gentle hand on her stomach, smiling at her profile.

"Rani! I know you're in there, and who's with you, I heard the moans... unless you're in the midst of orgasm, open this door."

Kendall burst out laughing at the audacity of the woman. Rani blushed hotly, making a mental note to murder Addison the first chance she got.

"Okay-okay! Wait a minute!" She lay breathing heavily, body tingling all over, staring at the ceiling. She feared looking at Kendall, knowing she would molest her right then and there, Addison or no Addison.

All right, get up now, Rani. She inhaled deeply as Kendall's hand stayed on her body, feeling Rani's stomach, side and back as Rani rolled out of bed and stood on shaky legs. The moment she opened the door, she noticed the painful look on Addison's face.

Addison pulled Rani into the hall. "I think I'm pregnant."