

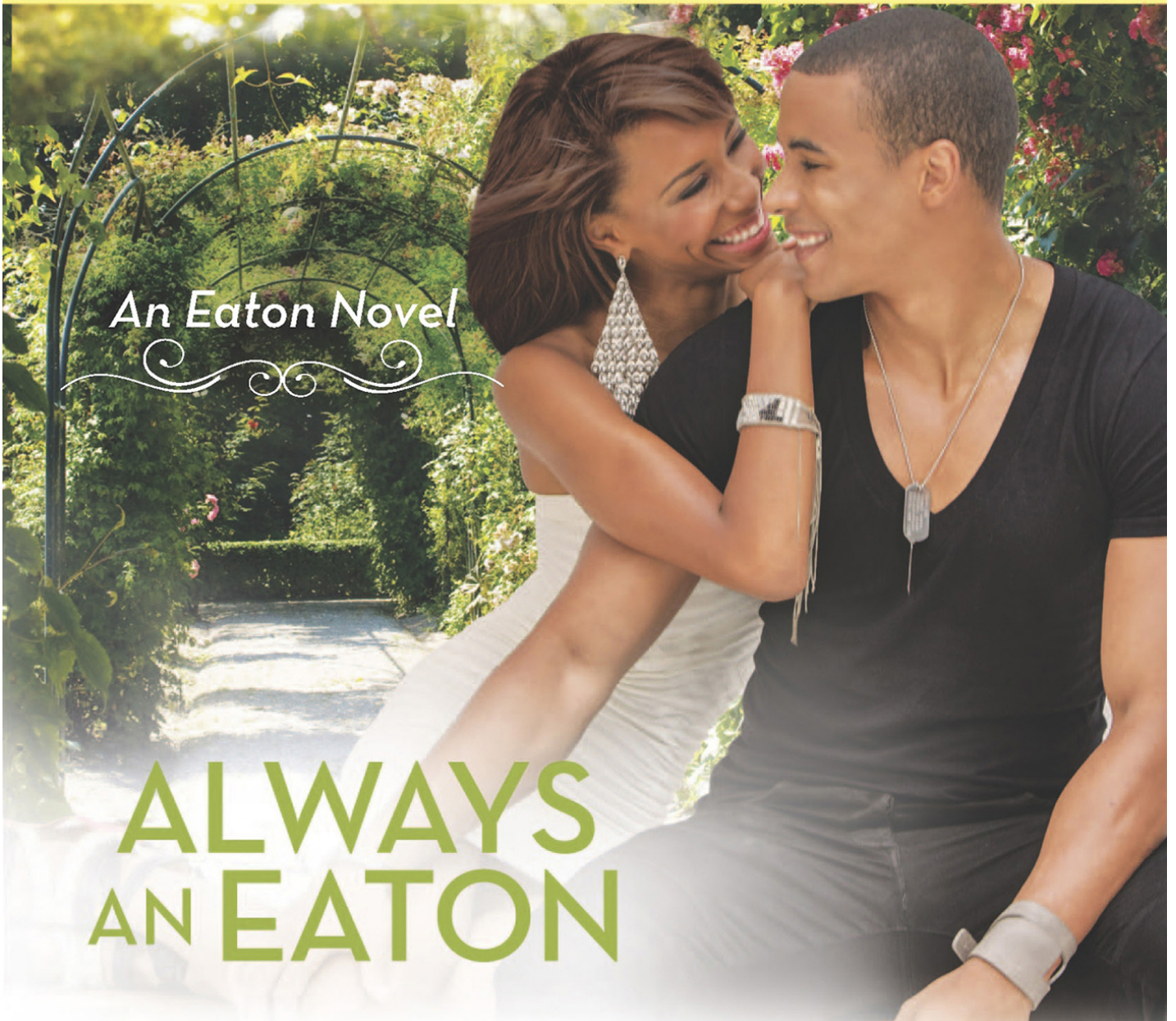


NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROCHELLE ALERS

An Eaton Novel

ALWAYS
AN EATON



Rochelle Alers

Always an Eaton: Sweet Dreams

«HarperCollins»

Alers R.

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Two classic Eaton family novels from national bestselling author ROCHELLE ALERS SWEET DREAMS Chandra Eaton can't believe she left her journals—containing very private, very erotic dreams she's been having for the past two years—in a Philly taxicab. Her embarrassment turns to intrigue when Preston Tucker finds and returns them. The soulful playwright fires up Chandra's body and her mind. It's an irresistible combination, until she starts to suspect that he's just using her for creative inspiration. Preston has spent years running from relationships. Chandra's journals captivate his imagination, for sure, but it's the intelligent, sensual woman behind them who really fascinates him. Now he has to find a way to win back her trust before she brings the curtain down on their affair for good. TWICE THE TEMPTATION Denise Eaton is proud of the day-care business she built from scratch. But now the scion of this Philadelphia family dynasty could lose everything. The man who holds the key to her future? None other than Rhett Ferrell, the man she passionately loved in college...and who broke her heart. Rhett has waited six years to take his sweet revenge. Now the legendary corporate raider is about to have Denise right where he wants her—at his mercy and in his bed. He's never forgiven her for walking out and taking up with his most hated enemy. But he's also never forgotten the desire that still burns so hotly, so irresistibly between them. That's when Rhett plots one final conquest: to take over Denise's heart. And he's a man who plays to win....

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Always an Eaton
Sweet Dreams
Twice the Temptation
Rochelle Alers



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Dear Reader,

Welcome back for yet another Eaton family reunion. This time it is Chandra Eaton and her cousin Denise Eaton who will take center stage in Always an Eaton.

First let me warn you that the title Sweet Dreams may be a bit misleading, as Chandra's dreams are anything but sweet. In fact, they are downright erotic. They are so vivid that she records them in a journal. Then the unthinkable happens. She leaves her journal in a taxi and Preston Tucker, Philadelphia's prize-winning playwright, finds it. But before returning Chandra's property, he reads each and every detailed account. Though, once he meets the sexy author, he is unable to differentiate between reality and fantasy, as he and Chandra become actors in a sensual journey to bring her dreams to life.

In Twice the Temptation, Denise is given a second chance at love when she is reunited with the man she'd given her heart to in college. She never stopped loving Rhett Fennell, but what she fears most is his inability to be faithful to her. What she doesn't know is that Rhett never forgave her walking out on him, so he decides to turn the tables. He plans to seduce her and then leave her without a word as she'd done to him years ago. But even as an astute businessman, Rhett couldn't

have predicted the outcome of his carefully crafted scheme when he loses his heart a second time to the Eaton woman he's loved forever.

Here's to hoping you'll enjoy the Eatons as much I did creating these characters that remind us of our very own family.

Happy reading,

Rochelle Alers

www.RochelleAlers.org

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Sweet Dreams

Rochelle Alers

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth;

for thy love is better than wine.

—The Song of Solomon 1:2

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Prologue

The sound of labored breathing competed with the incessant whirring of the blades of the ceiling fan overhead. The crescendo of gasps and moans overlapped with the rhythmic thrum of the fan as it circulated the humid tropical night air coming through the screened-in jalousie windows.

It was a scene that had played out nightly countless times since Chandra Eaton had come to Belize to teach. Her right hand cupped her breast while the other fondled her mound, as she surrendered to the surging contractions rippling through her thighs. Arching her back, she exhaled as the last of the orgasm that had held her in the throes of an explosive climax left her feeling as if she'd been shattered into a million pieces.

She lay motionless, savoring the aftermath that made it almost impossible to move or draw a normal breath. When she did move, it was to reach over and turn on the lamp on the bedside table. The soft golden glow cast shadows over the sparsely decorated bedroom.

Biting her lip, Chandra sat upright and picked up the pen lying atop her cloth-covered journal. Unscrewing the top, she closed her eyes for several seconds. The tip of the pen was poised over a clean page before she sighed and collected her thoughts.

Dream #139—October 2

I could smell him, feel him, taste him, but as usual he wouldn't let me touch his face.

His hand feathered over my leg, moving up slowly until it rested along my inner thigh. My breathing quickened, filling the bedroom with hiccuping sounds. I was so aroused that I hadn't wanted prolonged foreplay. I'd screamed and pleaded for him to make it quick. His response was to place one hand over my mouth, while he used his free hand to guide his engorged erection inside me. The heat from his body, the rigid flesh moving in and out of my body made my heart stop beating for several seconds.

He was relentless, pushing and receding. And then, slowing just before I climaxed, I'd pleaded with him to make love to me and then I begged him to stop. I felt faint. But he didn't stop. And I let go, abandoning myself to the pleasure of a sweet, explosive orgasm. Instead of lying beside me on the mattress, he got up and left. It was as if he knew it would be our last time together.

Chandra reread what she'd written, and then smiled. It was uncanny the way she was able to remember her dreams with vivid clarity. They'd begun the first week she arrived in Belize, and had continued for more than two years. They didn't come every night. But when they did, they served to assuage the sexual tension that came from not sharing her body with a man in nearly three years.

The dreams came without warning. She had begun to see them as a release for her stress and frustration. She didn't know who the man was who came to her when she least expected it, and she didn't care as long as he provided the stimulation needed to give her the physical release so necessary for her sexual well-being.

Smiling, Chandra closed the journal, capped the pen, turned off the lamp and slid under the covers, lying on the pillow that cradled her head. Minutes later she closed her eyes. This time when she fell asleep, there were no erotic dreams to disturb her slumber.

Chapter 1

Chandra Eaton slumped against the rear seat in the taxi as the driver maneuvered away from the curb at the Philadelphia International Airport. She felt as if she'd been traveling for days. Her flight from Belize to Miami was a little more than two hours. But it was the layover in Atlanta that had lasted more than eight hours because of violent thunderstorms that left her out of sorts. All she wanted was a hot shower, a firm bed and a soft, fluffy pillow.

As a Peace Corps volunteer, she'd spent more than two years teaching in Belize. She'd returned to Philadelphia twice: once to attend the funeral of her eldest sister and brother-in-law, and three months ago to be a bridesmaid in the wedding of her surviving sister, Belinda. Now, at the age of thirty, she'd come home again. But this time it was to stay.

Her father called her his gypsy, and her mother said she was a vagabond, to which she had no comeback. What no one in her family knew, her parents in particular, was that she'd been running away from the tragedy that had befallen one of her students, followed by her own broken engagement.

Thankfully, her previous homecoming and this one would be more joyful occasions. Belinda had married Griffin Rice in June and two months ago her brother Myles had exchanged vows with Zabrina Mixon-Cooper after a ten-year separation. She also looked forward to meeting her nephew for the first time.

“What the...”

She opened her eyes and sat up straighter, her heart slamming against her ribs. The cabbie had swerved to avoid hitting another vehicle drifting into their lane. Her purse and leather tote slid off the seat and onto the floor with the violent motion, spilling their contents. Bending over, she retrieved her cell phone, wallet, passport and a pack of mints. Then she checked the tote to make certain her laptop was still there.

“Are you all right back there, miss?” the driver asked over his shoulder.

Chandra exhaled audibly. “I'm good,” she lied smoothly.

She wasn't good. If she'd been a cat, she would've used up at least one of her nine lives. It was going to be some time before she would be able to adjust to the fast pace of a large urban city. Living in Philadelphia, even in one of its suburbs, was very different from living and teaching in a small town in Northern Belize.

The cabdriver took a quick glance in the rearview mirror. "Let me try and get around this clown before I end up in his trunk."

Settling back again, Chandra closed her eyes. When she'd called her mother to tell her that her flight had been delayed, Roberta Eaton had offered to drive to the airport to pick her up. But she'd told her mother she would take a taxi to the subdivision where her parents had purchased a two-bedroom, two-bath town house. Aside from her purse and tote bag, she had checked only one piece of luggage. The trunk with most of her clothes was scheduled to arrive in the States at the end of the month.

It appeared as if she'd just fallen asleep when the motion stopped, and she opened her eyes. Chandra missed the six-bedroom, four-bath farmhouse where she'd grown up with her sisters and brother. She understood her parents' need to downsize now that they were in their sixties. They didn't want to concern themselves with having someone shovel snow or mow the lawn, or deal with the exorbitant expense of maintaining a large house.

What she'd missed most was opening the door leading from the main house and into the connecting space that had been Dr. Dwight Eaton's medical practice. Her father didn't schedule patients between the hours of twelve and one; the exception was in an emergency. It had been her time to have her father all to herself. Gathering her purse and tote, she paid the fare, opened the rear door and stepped out of the taxi as the driver came around to retrieve her luggage from the trunk, setting it on the front steps.

* * *

Roberta Eaton stood in the entryway. The smile that parted her lips caused the skin around her eyes to crinkle. She prayed that this homecoming would be Chandra's last. She thought she knew all there was to know about her youngest child, but Chandra's mercurial moods kept her guessing as to what she would do or where she would go next.

What she'd found so off-putting was that there was usually no warning. It was if her daughter went to sleep, then woke with a new agenda, shocking everyone with her announcements. First it was her decision not to attend the University of Pennsylvania, but Columbia University in New York City. Then she'd declined an offer to teach at a Philadelphia elementary school and instead taught at a private all-girls' school in Northern Virginia. The most shocking, and what Roberta thought most devastating, was when Chandra announced she'd joined the Peace Corps and decided to teach in Belize. Although she'd become accustomed to her daughter's independent nature, it was her husband, Dwight Eaton, who said his youngest daughter had caused him many sleepless nights.

Roberta approached Chandra with outstretched arms, the tears she'd tried vainly to hold back overflowed. "Welcome home, baby."

Her mother calling her baby was Chandra's undoing. She could deal with any and everything except her mother's tears. Roberta was openly weeping—deep, heart-wrenching sobs that made Chandra unleash her own flood of tears.

Pressed closer to Roberta's ample bosom, she tightened her hold around her mother's neck, savoring the warmth of the protective embrace. "Mama, please don't cry."

Roberta's tears stopped as if she'd turned off a spigot. "Don't tell me not to cry when I've had too many sleepless nights and worn out my knees praying that you'd make it home safely."

Easing back, Chandra stared at her mother. Roberta Eaton hadn't changed much over the years. Her body was fuller and rounder, and there was more salt than pepper in her short natural hairstyle. Her face had remained virtually unchanged. Her dark brown complexion was clear, her skin smooth.

"I'm home, Mama."

“You’re home, but for how long, Chandra Eaton? I was talking to your father last night, and we have a wager that you won’t hang around for more than three to six months before you start getting itchy feet again.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m home to stay.”

Roberta gave her a look that said I don’t believe you, but Chandra was too tired to get into an argument with her mother. She’d been up since two that morning for a 5:00 a.m. flight to Miami, with a connecting flight to Atlanta. Sitting in Hartsdale for hours had tried her patience, and that meant she had no intention of engaging in a conversation where she had to defend herself or convince her mother that she didn’t plan to leave home again. Once she’d completed her tour with the Peace Corps she’d promised herself that she would stop running away, that she would come home, face her fears and reconcile her past.

“May I please go into the house and shower before going to bed?”

As if she’d come out of a trance, Roberta leaned forward and kissed Chandra’s cheek. Within seconds she’d morphed into maternal mode. “I’m sorry, baby. You have to be exhausted. Did you eat?” she asked over her shoulder as she stepped into the spacious entryway.

“I ate something at the airport.”

Picking up her luggage, Chandra walked into the house and made her way toward the staircase to the second floor guest bedroom. Methodically, she stripped off her clothes, leaving them on the bathroom floor, and stepped into the shower stall. Her eyelids were drooping by the time she’d dried off. She searched through her luggage for a nightgown and crawled into bed. It was just after six. And even though the sun hadn’t set, within minutes of her head touching the pillow she was asleep.

* * *

Preston Tucker ducked his head as he got into the taxi and gave the driver the address to his duplex in downtown Philadelphia. He’d spent the past twenty-four hours flying to Los Angeles for a meeting that lasted all of ten minutes before returning to Philadelphia after flying standby from LAX.

He’d told his agent that he had reservations about meeting with studio executives who wanted to turn one of his plays into a movie with several A-list actors. But all Clifford Jessup could see were dollar signs. Preston knew if he sold the movie rights to his play he would have to relinquish literary control. But he was unwilling to do so at the expense of not being able to recognize his play, something he’d spent more than two years writing and perfecting, breathing life into the characters.

He was aware of Hollywood’s reputation for taking literary license once they’d optioned a work, but the suits he’d spoken to wanted to eviscerate his play. If he’d been a struggling playwright he probably would’ve accepted their offer. But fortunately for him, his days of waiting for a check so that he could pay back rent were behind him. What made the play even more personal is that it was the first play he’d written as a college student.

Slumping in the rear seat, he tried to stretch his long legs out to a more comfortable position under the seat in front of him. His right foot hit something. Reaching under the passenger seat, he pulled out a slim black ostrich-skin portfolio with the initials CE stamped on the front in gold lettering. Looking at the driver’s hack license, he noticed the man’s first and last names began with an M, so he concluded a passenger had left it in the taxi.

Preston debated whether to open it or give it to the taxi driver, who most likely would turn it in to Lost and Found or discard the contents and keep the expensive-looking portfolio for himself. He decided to unzip it and found a cloth-bound journal. Judging from the mauve color of the book, he knew it belonged to a woman.

His suspicions were confirmed when he saw the neat cursive writing on the inside front cover: “If found, please return to Chandra Eaton.” What followed was a telephone number with a Philadelphia area code and an e-mail address. Reaching into the breast pocket of his suit jacket, he took out his cell phone to dial the number, but the first sentence on the first page caused him to go completely still.

Dream #9—March 3

I opened my eyes when I heard the soft creaking sound that told me someone had opened my bedroom door. Usually he came in through the window. I held my breath because I wasn't certain if it was him. But who else would it be? I didn't know whether to scream or reach under the bed for the flashlight I kept there in the event of a power failure. I decided not to move, hoping whoever had come would realize they were in the wrong room and then leave.

The seconds ticked off and I found myself counting slowly, beginning with one. By the time I'd counted to forty-three, there was no sound, no movement. I reached under the bed for the flashlight and flicked it on. I was alone in the bedroom, the sound of the runaway beating of my heart echoing in my ears and the lingering scent of a man's cologne wafting in the humid tropical air coming in through the open windows. I recognized the scent. It was the same as the one I'd given Laurence for our first Christmas together. But, he's gone, exorcised, so why did I conjure him up?

Preston slipped the cell phone back into his pocket as he continued to read. He was so engrossed in what Chandra Eaton had written that he hadn't realized the taxi had stopped and his building doorman had opened the rear door.

"Welcome home, Mr. Tucker."

His head popped up and he smiled. "Thank you, Reynaldo."

Preston returned the journal to the leather case, paid the driver and then reached for his leather weekender on the seat next to him. He'd managed to read four of Chandra Eaton's journal entries, each one more sensual and erotic than the one before it. As a writer, he saw scenes in his head before putting them down on paper, and he was not only intrigued but fascinated by what Chandra Eaton had written.

Clutching his weekender, he entered the lobby of the luxury high-rise, which had replaced many of the grand Victorian-style mansions that once surrounded Rittenhouse Square. He'd purchased the top two floors in the newly constructed building on the advice of his financial planner, using it as a business write-off. His office, a media room, gourmet kitchen, formal living and dining rooms were set up for work and entertaining. The three bedrooms with en suite bathrooms on the upper floor were for out-of-town guests.

There had been a time when he'd entertained at his Brandywine Valley home, but as he matured he'd come to covet his privacy. Lately, he'd become somewhat of a recluse. If an event wasn't work-related, then he usually declined the invitation. His mother claimed he was getting old and crotchety, to which he replied that thirty-eight was hardly old and he wasn't crotchety, just particular as to how he spent his time and more importantly with whom.

Preston was exhausted and sleep-deprived from flying more than six thousand miles in twenty-four hours. His original plan was to shower and go directly to bed, but Chandra Eaton's erotic prose had revived him. He would finish reading the journal, then e-mail the owner to let her know he'd found it.

He didn't bother to stop at the concierge to retrieve his mail, and instead walked into the elevator and pressed the button for his floor. The elevator doors glided closed. The car rose smoothly and swiftly, stopping at the eighteenth floor. The doors opened again and he made his way down a carpeted hallway to his condo.

It was good to be home. If he'd completely trusted Cliff Jessup to represent his interests, he never would've flown to L.A. What bothered him about his agent was that they'd practically grown up together. Both had attended Princeton, pledged the same fraternity, and he'd been best man at Cliff's wedding. Something had changed. Preston wasn't certain whether he'd changed, or if Cliff had changed, or if they were just growing apart.

Inserting the cardkey into the slot to his duplex, Preston pushed open the door and was greeted with a rush of cool air. He'd adjusted the air-conditioning before he left, but apparently the drop in the temperature outside made it feel uncomfortably chilly. It was mid-October, and the forecasts predicted a colder and snowier than usual winter.

He dropped his bag on the floor near a table his interior decorator had purchased at an estate sale. It was made in India during the nineteenth century for wealthy Indians and Europeans. It was transported from India to Jamaica at the behest of a British colonist who'd owned one of the largest sugarcane plantations in the Caribbean. Not only was it the most extravagant piece of furniture in the condo, but Preston's favorite.

Emptying his pockets of loose change, he put the coins in a crystal dish on the table along with his credit card case and cardkey. Floor lamps illuminated the living room and the chandelier over the dining room table sparkled like tiny stars bathing the pale walls with a golden glow. Preston worked well in bright natural sunlight, so he'd had all of the lamps and light fixtures programmed to come on at different times of the day and night.

There was a time when he'd thought he had writer's block, since he found it very difficult to complete a project during the winter months. It was only when he'd reexamined his high school and college grades that he realized they were much higher in the spring semester than the fall. When he mentioned it to a friend who was a psychologist, she said he probably suffered from SAD, or seasonal affective disorder. Knowing this, he developed a habit of beginning work on a new script in early spring.

Walking past the staircase leading to the upper level, he entered the bathroom that led directly into his office. He undressed, brushed his teeth, leaving his clothes on a covered bench before stepping into the shower stall. The sharp spray of icy-cold water revived him before he adjusted the water temperature to lukewarm. Despite his jet lag, Preston was determined to stay awake long enough to read more of the journal.

He didn't know why, but he felt like a voyeur. But instead of peeking into Chandra Eaton's bedroom, he had read her most intimate thoughts. He smiled. Either she had a very fertile imagination, or an incredibly active sex life.

After wiping the moisture from his body with a thick, thirsty towel, he slipped into a pair of lounging pants and a white tee from a supply on a shelf in an alcove in the bathroom suite. Fifteen minutes later, Preston settled onto a chaise lounge in his office with a large mug of steaming black coffee and the cloth-covered journal. It was after two in the morning when he finally finished reading. His eyes were burning, but what he'd read had been too arousing for him to go to sleep.

Turning on the computer, he waited for it to boot up. He e-mailed Chandra Eaton to inform her that he'd found her portfolio in a taxi and where she could contact him to retrieve it.

Chapter 2

Chandra opened one eye, then the other, peeking at the clock on the bedside table. It was after nine. She couldn't believe she'd been asleep for more than twelve hours. It was apparent she was more exhausted than she'd originally thought. And there was no doubt her body's time clock was off. If she were still in Belize she would've been in the classroom with her young students.

Stretching her arms above her head, she exhaled a lungful of air. Chandra was glad to be home and looked forward to reuniting with her family. Sitting up, she swung her legs over the side of the twin bed and walked into the bathroom. She had a laundry list of things to do before the weekend: get a complete beauty makeover—including a haircut, mani/pedi and a hydrating facial. Despite using the strongest sunblock and wearing a hat to protect her face, the rays of the Caribbean sun had dried out her skin. She also had to go online to search for public schools in the Philadelphia area. It was too late to be assigned a full-time teaching job, but she could find work as a substitute teacher. Her sister, Belinda, who'd moved to Paoli after she married Griffin Rice, still taught American history in one of the city's most challenging high schools.

After a leisurely shower, Chandra left the bathroom to prepare for her day. It felt good not to have to shower within the mandatory three-minute time limit, to avoid using up the hot water for the next person. She'd gotten used to taking short, and sometimes cold, showers. But it wasn't just soaking in a bathtub that made her aware of what she'd had to sacrifice when she'd signed up for the Peace Corps.

Her cousin Denise had offered to sublet her co-op to Chandra after she relocated to Washington, D.C. to accept a position as executive director of a child care center. Purchasing furniture for the co-op was another item on Chandra's to-do list. But her list and everything on it would have to wait until she had something to eat. She knew she wouldn't get to see her father, who had patients booked, until later that evening. Her mother divided her time between volunteering several days a week at a senior facility and quilting with several of her friends. The quartet of quilters had completed many projects for homebound and chronically ill children.

It was after eleven when Chandra returned to the bedroom to make the bed and clean up the bathroom. Bright autumn sunlight came in through the blinds when she sat down at the corner desk and opened her laptop. When she went online she saw e-mails from her sister, brother and her cousin Denise. Without reading them, she knew they were welcoming her home. There was another e-mail with an unfamiliar address and the subject: Lost and Found, that piqued her interest. She clicked on it:

Ms. Eaton,

I found your portfolio in a taxi. Please contact me at the following number to arrange for its return.

P. J. Tucker

Chandra stared at the e-mail, thinking it was either a hoax or spam. But how would the person know her name? And what portfolio was he referring to? She picked up her tote bag, searching through it thoroughly. The leather case her brother had given her as a gift for her college graduation wasn't there.

"No!" she hissed.

P. J. Tucker must have found her journal. It had to have fallen out when the taxi driver swerved to avoid hitting another vehicle. The journal was the first volume of three others she'd filled with accounts of her dreams. She was certain she'd packed all of them in the trunk until she found one in a drawer under her lingerie. Mister or Miss P. J. Tucker had to open the journal to find out where to contact her. Chandra prayed that was all he or she had looked at. The reason she'd put the journals in the trunk, which was stowed on a ship several days before she left Belize, was that she hadn't wanted custom agents to read it when they went through her luggage.

Reaching for her cell, she dialed the number in the e-mail. "May I please speak to Mister or Miss P. J. Tucker," she said when a deep male voice answered.

"This is P. J. Tucker."

Please don't tell me you read my journal, she prayed. "I'm Chandra Eaton."

"Ms. Eaton. No doubt you read my e-mail."

"Yes, and I'd like to thank you for finding my portfolio."

"It's a very nice case, Ms. Eaton. Is it ostrich skin?"

Chandra chewed her lip. It was apparent P. J. Tucker wanted to talk about something other than the material her portfolio was made from. She wanted to set up a time and place, so that she could retrieve her journal.

"Yes, Mr. Tucker, it is. I'd like to pick up my portfolio from you. But of course, whenever it's convenient for you."

"I'm free now if you'd like to come and pick it up."

“Where are you?” Reaching for a pen, Chandra wrote down the address. “How long are you going to be there?”

“All day and all night.”

She smiled. “Well, I don’t have all day or all night. What if I come by before noon?”

“I’ll be here.”

Her smile grew wider. “Goodbye.”

“Later.”

Chandra ended the call. She punched speed dial for a taxi, then quickly changed out of her shorts and T-shirt and into a pair of jeans that she paired with a white men’s-tailored shirt, navy blazer and imported slip-ons. There wasn’t much she could do with her hair, so she brushed it off her face, braided it and secured the end with an elastic band. She heard the taxi horn as she descended the staircase. Racing into the kitchen, she took the extra set of keys off a hook, leaving through the side door.

* * *

The address P. J. Tucker had given Chandra was a modern luxury condominium in the historic Rittenhouse neighborhood. One of her favorite things to do as a young girl was to accompany her siblings when their parents took them on Sunday-afternoon walking tours of Philadelphia neighborhoods, of which Rittenhouse was her personal favorite. It had been an enclave of upper-crust, Main Line, well-to-do families.

Dwight and Roberta Eaton always made extra time when they walked through Rittenhouse, lingering at the square honoring the colonial clockmaker, David Rittenhouse. Her father knew he had to be up on his history whenever Belinda asked questions about who’d designed the Victorian mansions, the names of the wealthy families who lived there and their contribution to the growth of the City of Brotherly Love.

Unlike her history-buff sister, Chandra never concerned herself with the past but with the here and now. She was too impulsive to worry about where she’d come from. It was where she was going that was her focus.

She paid the fare, stepped out of the taxi and walked into the lobby with Tiffany-style lamps and a quartet of cordovan-brown leather love seats. Although the noonday temperature registered sixty-two degrees, Chandra felt a slight chill. In Belize she awoke to a spectacular natural setting, eighty-degree temperatures, the sounds of colorful birds calling out to one another and the sweet aroma of blooming flowers, which made the hardships tolerable.

The liveried doorman touched the brim of his shiny cap. “Good afternoon.”

Chandra smiled at the tall, slender man with translucent skin and pale blue eyes that reminded her of images she’d seen of vampires. The name tag pinned to his charcoal-gray greatcoat read Michael.

“Good afternoon. Mr. Tucker is expecting me.”

“I’ll ring Mr. Tucker to see whether he’s in. Your name?”

“It’s Miss Eaton.”

Michael typed her name into the telephone console on a shelf behind a podium. Then he tapped in Preston Tucker’s apartment number. Seconds later ACCEPT appeared on the display. His head came up. “Mr. Tucker will see you, Miss Eaton. He’s in 1801. The elevators are on the left.”

Chandra walked past the concierge desk to a bank of elevators, entered one and pushed the button for the eighteenth floor. The doors closed as the elevator car rose smoothly, silently to the designated floor. When the doors opened she found herself staring up at a man with skin reminiscent of gold-brown toffee. There was something about his face that seemed very familiar, and she searched her memory to figure out where she’d seen him before.

A hint of a smile played at the corners of his generous mouth. “Miss Eaton?”

She stepped out of the car, smiling. “Yes,” she answered, staring at the proffered hand.

“Preston Tucker.”

Chandra’s jaw dropped. She stared dumbfounded, looking at the award-winning playwright whose critically acclaimed dramas were mentioned in the same breath as those of August Wilson, Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams. She’d just graduated from college when he had been honored by the mayor of New York and earned the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best play of the year. At the time, he’d just celebrated his thirtieth birthday and it was his first Broadway production.

Preston Tucker wasn’t handsome in the traditional way, although she found him quite attractive. He towered over her five-four height by at least ten inches and the short-sleeved white shirt, open at the collar, and faded jeans failed to conceal the power in his lean, muscular physique. Her gaze moved up, lingering on a pair of slanting, heavy-lidded, sensual dark brown eyes. There was a bump on the bridge of his nose, indicating that it had been broken. It was his mouth, with a little tuft of hair under his lower lip, and cropped salt-and-pepper hair that drew her rapt attention. She doubted he was forty, despite the abundance of gray hair.

She blinked as if coming out of a trance and shook his hand. “Chandra Eaton.”

Preston applied the slightest pressure on her delicate hand before releasing her fingers. Chandra Eaton was as sensual as her writings. She possessed an understated sexiness that most women had to work most of their lives to perfect. He stared at her almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones, pert nose and lush mouth. Flyaway wisps had escaped the single plait to frame her sun-browned round face.

“Please come with me, Miss Eaton, and I’ll get your portfolio.” Turning on his heels, he walked the short distance to his apartment, leaving her to follow.

Chandra found herself staring for the second time within a matter of minutes when she walked into the duplex with sixteen-foot ceilings and a winding staircase leading to a second floor. Floor-to-ceiling windows brought in sunlight, offering panoramic views of the city. The soft strains of classical music floated around her from concealed speakers.

Her gaze shifted to the magnificent table in the foyer. “Oh, my word,” she whispered.

Preston stopped and turned around. “What’s the matter?”

Reaching out, Chandra ran her fingertips over the surface of the table. “This table. It’s beautiful.”

“I like it.”

“You like it?”

“Yes, I do,” he confirmed.

“I’d thought you’d say that you love it, and because you didn’t I’m going to ask if you’re willing to sell it, Mr. Tucker?”

“Preston,” he corrected. “Please call me Preston.”

“I’ll call you Preston, but only if you stop referring to me as Miss Eaton.”

His eyebrows lifted. “What if I call you Chandra?”

She smiled. “That’ll do. Now, back to my question, Preston. Are you willing to sell the table?”

He smiled, the gesture transforming his expression from solemn to sensual. “Chandra,” he repeated. “Did you know that your name is Sanskrit for of the moon?”

“No, I didn’t.” A slight frown marred her face. “Why do I get the feeling you’re avoiding my question?”

Preston reached for her hand, leading her into the living room and settling her on a sand-colored suede love seat. He sat opposite her on a matching sofa.

“I’d thought you’d get the hint that I don’t want to sell it.”

Her frown deepened. “I don’t do well with hints, Preston. All you had to say was no.”

“No is not a particularly nice word, Chandra.”

She wrinkled her nose, unaware of the charming quality of the gesture. “I’m a big girl, and that means I can deal with rejection.”

Resting his elbows on his knees, Preston leaned in closer. “If that’s the case, then the answer is no, no and no.”

Chandra winked at him. “I get your point.” She angled her head while listening to the music filling the room. “Isn’t that *Cavalleria Rusticana—Intermezzo* from *Godfather III*?”

An expression of complete shock froze Preston’s face. He hadn’t spent more than five minutes with Chandra Eaton and she’d surprised him not once but twice. She’d recognized the exquisite quality of the Anglo-Indian table and correctly identified a classical composition.

“Yes, it is. Are you familiar with Pietro Mascagni’s work?”

“He’s one of my favorites.”

Preston gestured to the gleaming black concert piano several feet away. “Do you play?”

“I haven’t in a while,” Chandra admitted half-truthfully. She had played nursery rhymes and other childish ditties for her young students on an out-of-tune piano that had been donated to the school by a local church in Belize. Some of the keys didn’t work, but the children didn’t seem to notice when they sang along and sometimes danced whenever she played an upbeat, lively tune.

“Do you have any other favorites?” Preston asked.

“Liszt, Vivaldi and Dvorak, to name a few.”

“Ah, the Romantics.”

“What’s wrong with being a Romantic?” Chandra knew she came off sounding defensive, yet she was past caring. As soon as she retrieved her things, she would be on her way.

“Nothing.”

“If it’s nothing, then why did you make it sound like a bad thing?” she asked.

“It’s not a bad thing, Chandra. It’s just that I’m not a romantic kind of guy,” Preston countered with a wink.

She felt a shiver of annoyance snake its way up her spine. “Anyone can tell that if they’ve read or seen your plays. They’re all dark, brooding and filled with pathos.”

Preston realized Chandra Eaton had him at a disadvantage. She knew about him and he knew nothing about her, except what she’d written in her journal. And, he wasn’t certain whether she’d actually experienced what she’d written or if it was simply a fantasy.

“That’s because I’m dark and brooding.”

“Being sexy and brooding works if you’re a vampire,” Chandra shot back.

“You like vampires?”

“Yes. But only if they are sexy.”

“I thought all vampires were sexy, given their cinematic popularity nowadays.”

“Not all of them,” she said.

“What would make a vampire sexy, Chandra?”

“He would have to be...” Her words trailed off. She threw up a hand. “What am I doing? Why am I telling you things you probably already know?”

“You’re wrong, Chandra. I don’t know. Perhaps you can explain what the big fuss is all about.”

She stared, speechless. “Are you blowing smoke, or do you really want to know?”

Quickly rising from the sofa and going down on one knee, Preston grasped her hand, tightening his grip when she tried to pull free. “I’m begging you, Chandra Eaton. I need your help.” He was hard-pressed not to laugh when Chandra stared at him with genuine concern in her eyes. He didn’t need her help with character development as much as he wanted to know what motivated her to write about her dreams.

“You’re serious about this, Preston?”

“Of course I’m serious.”

“Get up, Preston.”

“What?”

“Get up off your knees. You look ridiculous.”

“I thought I was being noble.”

“Get up!”

“Yes, ma’am.” Preston came to his feet and sat down again.

Chandra rolled her eyes at him. “I’m not old enough to be a ma’am.”

“How old do you have to be?”

“At least forty,” she said.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask your age.”

“It’s not a deep, dark secret,” she said, smiling. “I’m thirty.”

“You’re still a kid.”

“I stopped being a kid a long time ago. Now, back to my helping you develop a sexy character. What are you going to do with the information?”

“Maybe I’ll write a play about two star-crossed lovers.”

“That’s already been done. Romeo and Juliet, Love Story and West Side Story.”

“Has it been done on stage as a musical with vampires and mortals?”

Unexpected warmth surged through Chandra as her gaze met and fused with Preston Tucker’s. She didn’t want to believe she was sitting in his living room, talking to the brilliant playwright.

“But you don’t write musicals.”

“There’s always a first time. It could be like Phantom of the Opera, or Evita.”

“Where would it be set?”

Closing his eyes, Preston stroked the hair under his lower lip. “New Orleans.” When he opened his eyes they were shimmering with excitement. “The early nineteenth-century French Quarter rife with voodoo, prostitution, gambling and opium dens and beautiful quadroons with dreams of becoming *placées* in marriages de la main gauche.”

Chandra pressed her palms together at the same time she compressed her lips. How, she thought, had he come up with a story line so quickly? Now she knew why he’d been awarded a MacArthur genius grant. The plot was dark, but with a cast of sexy characters and the mysterious lush locale, there was no doubt the play would become a sensation.

“Would you also write the music?” she asked Preston.

“No. I know someone who would come up with what I want for the music and lyrics.”

“What about costumes?”

“What about them, Chandra?”

“Women’s attire changed from antebellum-era ball gowns to the flowing diaphanous dresses of the Regency period. Are your characters going to be demure, or will they favor scandalous décolletage?”

Staring at the toes of his slip-ons, Preston pondered her question. “I’d like to believe the folks in the French Quarter didn’t always conform to the societal customs of the day. Remember, we’re talking about naughty Nawlins.”

“It sounds as if it’s going to be just a tad bit wicked.” When she smiled, an elusive dimple in her left cheek winked at him.

“Just a tad,” he confirmed. “When do you think we can get together to talk about developing a sexy vampire story?”

Chandra narrowed her eyes at Preston. Was he, she thought, blowing smoke, or was he actually serious about needing her input? “I’ll be in touch.” She wasn’t going to commit until she gave his suggestion more thought.

“You’ll be in touch,” Preston repeated. “When? How?” Chandra stood up, as did Preston.

“I have your e-mail address, so whenever I clear my calendar I’ll e-mail you.”

The seconds ticked as they stared at each other. “Okay. Let me go and get your portfolio.”

Walking over to the window, Chandra stood and stared down at the street. She couldn’t wait to tell her cousin Denise that she’d met Preston Tucker. After graduating from college, she and Denise

had regularly traveled to New York to see Broadway plays. Every third trip they would check into a New York City hotel and spend the night. A few times they were able to convince their dates to accompany them, which worked out well since the guys always wanted to hang out at jazz clubs in and around Manhattan.

She turned when she heard footsteps. Preston had returned with her portfolio and handed it to her. Myles had given it to her along with a lesson plan book for her college graduation, and she had continued to use it while in Belize.

“Thank you for taking care of this for me,” she said. Chandra valued Myles’s gift as much as she did the contents of her journal.

Preston cupped her elbow and escorted her to the door. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

She gave him a sidelong glance. “I think I can make it downstairs all right.”

“I’ll still go down with you, because I need to pick up my mail.”

Chandra and Preston rode the elevator in silence, parting in the lobby. She felt the heat from his gaze boring into her as she walked out into the bright autumn sunlight. She strolled along a street until she found a café with outdoor seating.

She ordered a salad Nicoise and a glass of white zinfandel and then called her cousin at the child care center. It rang three times before her voice mail switched on. “Denise, Chandra. Call me back tonight when you get home. I just met your idol. Later.”

She ended the call, smiling. If anyone knew anything at all about Preston Tucker, it was Denise Eaton. Chandra decided she would wait until she heard from her cousin before she agreed to meet Preston again.

Chapter 3

Preston silently chastised himself for forgetting his manners. He hadn’t offered Chandra Eaton anything to eat or drink. It was apparent that his annoyance with his agent sending him on a six-thousand-mile wild-goose chase had affected him more than he wanted to admit. If Clifford had been in the room with him during the negotiations, there was no doubt he would’ve fired the man on the spot. Wanting to avoid a fight, he decided to wait, wait until Clifford contacted him.

He retrieved his mail and then returned to the apartment. A smile tilted the corners of his mouth when he recalled his conversation with the young woman who’d recorded dreams so erotic, so sensual that he felt as if he’d actually entered the dream and it was he who’d made love to Chandra. He’d taken one shower, then hours later he was forced to take another one. Standing under the spray of ice-cold water was the antidote to an erection that had him thinking of doing what he hadn’t done since adolescence.

Preston hadn’t lied to Chandra when he told her he wasn’t romantic in the true sense of the word. Yet he’d never mistreated or cheated on any woman he was seeing. He’d grown up witnessing his father passively and aggressively abuse his mother until she’d become an emotional cripple. Craig Tucker had never raised his voice or hit him or his sister, Yolanda. But whenever he drank to an excess, he blamed his wife for his failures, of which there were a few. A two-pack-a-day cigarette habit and heavy drinking took its toll, and Craig suffered a massive coronary at forty.

Walking into his home office, Preston put the pile of letters and magazines on his desk. The idea of writing a dramatic musical was scary and exciting. And, although he’d mentioned using a vampire as a leading character, the truth was he knew nothing about them. Sitting in a leather chair, he reached for a pencil and a legal pad and began jotting down key words.

The sun had slipped lower in the sky, and long and short shadows filled the room when he finally glanced up at the clock on a side table. It was after five. He’d spent more than four hours outlining scenes for his untitled musical drama. What kept creeping into his head were the accounts of the dreams he’d read the night before.

A knowing smile softened the angles in his face. He suddenly had an idea for a plot.

* * *

Chandra spied her father's car when the taxi driver maneuvered into the driveway. She hadn't expected her father to come home so early. She paid the fare, and clutching the case to her chest, got out and walked to the door. It opened before she could insert her key into the lock.

She didn't have time to react before her father held her in a bear hug, lifting her off her feet. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed his cheek. "Daddy, stop! You're crushing my ribs."

Dwight set his daughter on her feet. "I'm sorry about that, baby girl."

Chandra smiled at the man against whom she measured every man she'd met in her life. Her father was soft-spoken, patient and benevolent—and that was with his patients. He was all that and then some to his children. He'd always been supportive, telling them they could do or be anything they wanted to be.

It was her father she'd gone to when she contemplated going into the Peace Corps. He encouraged her to follow her dream and her heart, while Roberta had taken to her bed, all the while complaining that her youngest was going to be the death of her.

She smiled at her father. He looked the same at sixty-three as he had at fifty-three. His dark face was virtually wrinkle-free and his deep-set brown eyes behind a pair of rimless glasses reminded her of chocolate chips. His thinning cropped hair was now completely gray.

"What are you doing home so early, Daddy?"

Dwight tugged at the thick braid falling midway down his daughter's back. "My last two patients canceled, so I thought I'd come home early and take my favorite girls out to dinner."

"Do you mind if we postpone it to another time?"

Eyes narrowing, Dwight led Chandra into the entryway. He cradled her face between his palms. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm well. It's just that I stopped to eat a little while ago. I'm certain Mama would appreciate you taking her to a restaurant with dining and dancing."

"You know your mother was quite the dancer in her day."

"She still is," Chandra said. Roberta had danced nonstop at Belinda and Griffin's wedding. She kissed her father's cheek. "I have to go online and look for a job."

"I thought you were going to take some time off before you go back to teaching."

"I'd really like to, Daddy, but I have to buy some furniture before I move into Denise's co-op."

"You should talk to Belinda before you buy anything. She told your mother that she has a buyer for her house, and expects to close on it before Halloween."

Myles had stayed in Belinda's house during the summer, and then returned to Pittsburgh where he taught constitutional law at Duquesne University School of Law. Despite the uncertainty in the real estate market, Belinda was fortunate enough to find a buyer for her house.

Chandra couldn't see herself purchasing property at this time in her life. Although she'd told her parents she hadn't planned to live overseas again, she still wasn't certain of her future.

"I'll call her later," she said to her father. "You and Mama have fun, and if you two can't be good, then be careful," she teased.

He chuckled and was still chuckling as she climbed the staircase. She walked into her bedroom, slipped out of her shoes and blazer and then sat down at the desk. Turning on her laptop, Chandra searched the Philadelphia public schools Web site for openings. Surprisingly, she found ten—eight of which were in less-than-desirable neighborhoods. Her heart rate kicked into high gear. Instead of substituting she would apply for a full-time position. The one school that advertised for a Pre-K, third and fifth grade teacher was about a mile from Denise's co-op and close to Penn's Landing and to public transportation.

Chandra was so engrossed in copying down the names of the schools, their addresses and principals that she almost didn't hear her cell phone. She retrieved it from her handbag, glancing at the display. "Hello, cousin."

"Hello, yourself. When did you get back?"

“Yesterday. I called you because I had the pleasure of meeting Preston Tucker today.” She held the phone away from her ear when a piercing scream came through the earpiece. “Denise! Calm down.”

“You’ve got to tell me everything, and I do mean everything, Chandra.”

Settling down on the bed, she told her cousin about leaving her portfolio in the taxi and Preston e-mailing her to let her know he’d found it. She was forthcoming, leaving nothing out when she related the conversation between her and the playwright, including that he wanted her to work with him to develop a vampirelike character for a new play.

“Are you going to do it?” Denise asked, her sultry contralto dropping an octave.

“That’s why I called you. What do you know about him?”

“He’s brilliant, but you probably know that. And he’s never been married. There were rumors a little while back that he was engaged to marry an actress. But the tabloids said she ended it. He rarely gives interviews and manages to stay out of the spotlight. I’ve seen every one of his plays, and if I were given the chance to work with him, I’d jump at it.”

“I’m flattered that he asked for my help, but why, Denise? Why me?”

“Maybe he likes you.”

Chandra shook her head.

“I don’t think so.”

“What did you say to him?”

“What are you talking about, Denise?”

“You had to say something to Preston for him to ask you to develop a character for his next play.”

A beat passed. “I told him that all his plays were dark and brooding, and he admitted that he was dark and brooding. I suppose when I said brooding works if he were a vampire, he took it as a challenge.”

“There you go, Chandra. You just said the operative word—challenge. Preston Tucker’s bound to have an ego as large as the Liberty Bell, so he expects you to put your money where your mouth is.”

“It’s either that or...”

“Or what?” Denise asked when she didn’t finish her statement.

“Nothing.”

Chandra had said nothing, although there was the possibility that Preston had read her journal. He hadn’t mentioned that he’d read it, and she didn’t want to ask because she didn’t want to know if he had. The only way she would be able to find out was to work with him.

“I’m going to do it, Denise. I’m going to help the very talented P. J. Tucker develop a vampire character for his next play.”

“Hot damn! My cousin’s going to be famous.”

“Yeah, right,” Chandra drawled. “I’ll let you know how it turns out.”

“You better,” Denise threatened. “I’d love to chat longer, but I have a board meeting in ten minutes.”

“Are you coming up to Paoli this weekend?”

“I plan on being there. I’ll see you in a couple of days. Later.”

“Later,” Chandra repeated before she ended the call.

She sat, staring at the sheers billowing in the cool breeze coming through the open windows. To say she was intrigued by Preston Tucker was an understatement. Something told her that he didn’t need her or anyone’s help with character development. Did he, as Denise claimed, like her?

Chandra shook her head as if to banish the notion. She knew she hadn’t given off vibes that said she was interested in him. After her yearlong liaison with Laurence Breslin she had sworn off men. Whenever she affected what could best be described as a “screw face” most men kept their distance. The persistent ones were greeted with, “I’m not interested in men,” leaving them to ponder whether

she didn't like them or she was only interested in a same-sex liaison. She liked men—a lot. It was just that she wasn't willing to set herself up for more heartbreak.

She went back to the task of researching schools. All she had to do was update her résumé and submit the applications online. Flicking on the desk lamp, she scrolled through her old e-mails until she found the one from Preston, her fingers racing over the keys:

Hi Preston,

I'm available to meet with you Friday. Please call or e-mail to confirm.—CE

She didn't have to wait for a response when his AIM popped up on the upper left corner of the screen.

PJT: Hi CE. Friday is good with me. What time should I pick you up?

CE: You don't have to pick me up. I'll take a taxi to your place.

PJT: No, CE. You tend to lose things in taxis.

CE: You didn't have to go there.

PJT: Sorry.

CE: Apology accepted.

PJT: Will call tomorrow to let you know when driver will pick you up.

CE: O.K. I'll see you Friday. Meanwhile, think of a name for your vampire.

PJT: He's not my vampire, but yours. So, you do the honor.

CE: O.K. Good night.

PJT: Good night.

Chandra logged off. She mentally checked off what she had to do before meeting with Preston. She still had to unpack, call her sister Belinda and update her résumé. During lunch she'd called the salon and was given an appointment for Thursday at eleven. The Eatons had planned a get-together at Belinda and Griffin's for Saturday to celebrate Sabrina's and Layla's thirteenth birthday. She wasn't certain what her nieces wanted or needed, but decided to give them gift cards. Then, there was her ten-year-old nephew whom she would meet for the first time. Aunt Chandra would have to buy him something, too.

* * *

Chandra waited for the driver to come around and open the rear door for her. As promised, Preston had arranged for a driver to bring her to his apartment building. He'd also arranged for them to have brunch.

She gave the doorman her name and three minutes later she came face-to-face with Preston Tucker for the second time when the doors to the elevator opened.

Preston stared, completely surprised. He almost didn't recognize Chandra. She'd changed her hair. The braid was gone, replaced by a sleek style that framed her face and floated over her shoulders. It made her look older, more sophisticated.

"You look very nice."

Chandra couldn't stop the pinpoints of heat pricking her face. She'd lightly applied a little makeup and changed outfits twice before deciding on a tailored charcoal-gray pantsuit, white silk blouse and black patent leather pumps.

"Thank you."

Preston not only looked good, she thought, but he also smelled good. He wore a pair of black slacks and matching shirt and the stubble on his chin gave him a slightly roguish look. He'd admitted to being dark and brooding and his somber attire affirmed that. She didn't have to go very far to find the inspiration for her vampire. Preston Tucker was the perfect character.

"Have you come up with a name for your vampire?" Preston asked as he led Chandra down the hallway and into his apartment.

"I have," she admitted.

He closed the door and turned to stare at her. "What is it?"

"Pascual."

Preston angled his head. "Pascual or Paschal?"

"Pascual. It's Spanish and Hebrew for Passover. The name is somewhat exotic and implies that he's passed through a portal from another world to ours."

"If the setting is New Orleans, shouldn't you give him a French name?"

Chandra drew in a breath, held it and then let it out slowly. They hadn't even begun to work together and already he was questioning her. "I thought you said Pascual is my vampire."

"He is, Chandra."

"Then, please let me develop him the way I want, Preston. And that includes giving him a name that's Spanish. Remember, France lost control of New Orleans to Spain, then regained it before it was sold to the U.S."

Preston looked sheepish. "Unfortunately, history and languages weren't my best subjects."

"I have you at a disadvantage because my sister teaches American history to high school students."

"What do you teach?"

"How do you know I'm a teacher?"

Reaching for her hand, he gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. "Today you look and sound like a teacher. Besides, you didn't deny it. By the way, are you on sabbatical or are you playing hooky?"

Chandra's lips twitched as she tried not to smile. She knew she had to remain alert with Preston. He probably processed everything she said within seconds. "I'm in between jobs."

"Come with me to the kitchen. We can talk while I cook."

Her eyebrows lifted. "You write, direct and cook. I'm impressed. What other talents are you hiding?"

Throwing back his head, Preston let loose genuine laughter. He'd found Chandra Eaton cute and very talented. What he hadn't counted on was that she could make him laugh.

"I don't know. You'll have to tell me."

"Maybe I should ask your girlfriend."

Preston's expression changed suddenly. He glared at her under hooded lids. "I don't have a girlfriend."

"What about a wife?" Chandra asked. Denise had said Preston was a bachelor, but she needed him to confirm his marital status.

"I also don't have a wife."

“Is it because you’re not romantic?” Chandra asked, knowing she was treading into dangerous territory. She really didn’t want to know any more about Preston than what Denise had told her. Whatever she would share with him was to be strictly business.

“Not being romantic has nothing to do with whether I’m married or involved with a woman.”

“Are you a misogynist?”

“Of course not.”

“Don’t look so put out, Preston. I’ve read about a lot of high-profile men who date women, but detest them behind closed doors.”

“Well, I’m not one of those down-low brothers.” He hadn’t lied to Chandra. It had taken many years and countless therapy sessions for him to let go of the enmity between he and his father. “Women should be loved and protected, not physically or emotionally abused.”

“Spoken like a true romantic hero.”

“Give it up, Chandra. It’s not going to work.”

“What’s not going to work?”

“You’re not going to turn me into a romantic hero.”

She wrinkled her nose in a gesture Preston had come to appreciate. “You think not, Preston?”

“I know not, Chandra.”

“We’ll see,” she drawled.

His eyes narrowed. “What are you hatching in that very cute head of yours?”

Chandra ignored his referring to her being cute. “Wait until I develop Pascual’s character and you’re forced to breathe life into what will become a vampire who’s not only sexy but very romantic. You’ll be the one who has to come up with the dialogue whenever he interacts with his romantic lead.”

“We’ll see,” Preston said.

“Have you thought of a name for your new play?”

Taking a step, he dropped Chandra’s hand, pulling her to his chest. Lowering his head and fastening his mouth to the column of her scented neck, Preston pressed a kiss there. He increased the pressure, baring his teeth and stopping short of nipping the delicate flesh.

“Death’s Kiss,” he whispered in her ear.

Chandra turned her head, her mouth inches from Preston’s, breathing in his warm, moist breath. “You can’t kill your heroine, Preston.” Her gaze caressed the outline of his mouth seconds before he kissed her cheek.

“We’ll see, won’t we?” he said, smiling.

“What would I have to do to convince you to include a happy ending?”

“I’ll think of something.”

Bracing her hands against Preston’s chest, Chandra sought to put some distance between them. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Preston winked at her. “Not to worry, Chandra. You’re safe with me.”

Chandra recoiled when his words hit her like a stinging slap. “The last man I was involved with said the very same words to me. But in the end I was left to fend for myself. Thanks, but no thanks, Preston. I can take care of myself.”

“Was he your husband?”

“No. Thank goodness we didn’t get that far. But we were engaged.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. Not because I don’t want to. It’s just that I can’t.”

Preston dropped a kiss on her fragrant hair. “Then you don’t have to. Are you ready to eat?” he asked, changing the subject.

“What’s on the menu for brunch?”

Resting a hand at the small of her back, he escorted Chandra toward the kitchen. “You have a choice of fresh fruit, pancakes, waffles, an omelet or bacon, sausage, ham and grits. To drink, there’s

herbal tea, regular and hazelnut coffee, orange, grapefruit or cranberry juice. As for cocktails you have a choice between a Bloody Mary and a mimosa.”

“I prefer a mimosa.” Chandra flashed an attractive pout. “I’m really impressed with you, Preston. I’ve never hung out with a guy who could cook.”

Preston gave Chandra a sidelong glance, his gaze lingering on the tumble of hair falling around her face. “I’m no Bobby Flay or Chef Jeff, but I can promise you won’t come down with ptomaine poisoning.”

“I think I’m going to enjoy working with you.”

And I promise not to like you too much, she added silently.

It was what Chandra told herself every time she met a man to whom she felt herself attracted. It’d worked in the past and she was certain it would work with Preston Tucker.

Chapter 4

Chandra followed Preston into an expansive state-of-the-art stainless-steel-and-black gourmet kitchen outfitted with Gaggenau appliances. “Very nice,” she crooned.

“Should I take that to mean you like my kitchen?” There was a note of pride in Preston’s voice, as if he were talking about one of his children who’d aced an exam.

She met his questioning gaze with a wide smile. “Did you think I was talking about you?”

“I was hoping you’d think I’m nice.”

Chandra sobered. “Does it matter what I think of you, Preston?”

“Of course it does. After all, we’re going to be collaborating.”

“Hold up, dark and brooding. First you want me to develop a paranormal character, and now you’re talking about collaboration.”

“Pascual is yours, beautiful, and that means we’ll have to collaborate to make him a powerful and memorable character. I need for him to mesmerize the audience the second he walks on stage. Even before he opens his mouth, he must pull them in and not let them go until the final curtain.”

“Are you going to include him in every scene?” Chandra asked.

“No. It would make it too intense. Whenever he’s offstage I want to build enough tension for the audience to look forward to his reappearance. Enough shoptalk. I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to eat.”

Chandra was also ready to eat. Aside from the salad she’d eaten the day before, her only intake of food was a cup of coffee earlier that morning. “It looks as if you do some serious cooking in here.”

“It works whenever I host a dinner party. There’s more than enough room for a caterer and his staff to work without them bumping into one another.”

Preston’s kitchen was almost as large as the apartment she was renting from her cousin. It was furnished with top-of-the-line cookware and miscellaneous culinary gadgets suspended on hooks from an overhead rack.

“How often do you have dinner parties?” she asked, recalling Denise telling her that Preston usually kept a low profile.

“I always host one before the debut of a new play. I invite the entire cast and production staff.”

She watched as Preston rolled back his shirt cuffs, exposing muscular forearms before washing his hands in one of the double sinks. “How long does it usually take for you to write a play?”

He dried his hands on a towel. “It depends on the subject matter and my state of mind. My first one took several years because I’d reworked it half a dozen times. However, there was one I completed in four weeks, but it took its toll on my health because I’d averaged about three hours of sleep each night. I took a couple of months off, checked into a resort and did nothing more strenuous than eat and laze around.”

Removing her suit jacket, Chandra hung it on a high-back stool pushed over to the slate-gray granite countertop. “You probably were burned out.”

“Probably? I was. It was another year before I was able to focus and write again.”

“How long do you project it will take for you to complete *Death’s Kiss*?” she asked.

Preston, resting his elbows on the countertop, gave her a long, penetrating stare. “That all depends on my collaborator’s availability.”

“And that depends on whether I can find a teaching position. I’ve applied to several schools with vacancies for Pre-K to 6. I’ll be available to you until I’m hired.”

The schools Chandra had applied to were in designated hard-to-staff districts. Belinda taught at a high school in those districts. Earlier that year one of Belinda’s students was arrested and expelled for discharging a handgun in her classroom. Fortunately the incident ended with no casualties.

Teaching in the public school system would be vastly different from what she’d experienced in the exclusive private school in Northern Virginia where the yearly tuition was comparable to private colleges. The most profound difference between the children who attended Cambridge Valley Prep, Philadelphia public schools and her former students in Belize was that the prep school students were the children of elected officials and foreign dignitaries.

Preston stood up straighter. “Where did you teach before?”

“The Peace Corps, and before that I taught at a private school in Virginia.”

“You really were in the Peace Corps?” There was a note of incredulity in his query.

“Yes,” Chandra confirmed.

“Where were you stationed?” he asked, continuing with his questioning.

“Belize.”

Preston never imagined that she had been a Peace Corps volunteer. There was something about Chandra Eaton that projected an air of being cosseted. Now that she’d revealed that she spent two years working in Central America he saw her in a whole new light.

“After you let me know what you want to eat, I want you to tell me about Belize, and if it is as beautiful as the photographs in travel brochures?”

Propping her elbow on the cool surface of the countertop, Chandra supported her chin on her heel of her hand. “I’d like an omelet.”

“Would you like a Western, Spanish or spinach?”

“Spinach.”

“Blue or goat cheese?”

“I prefer blue cheese.” Pushing back from the countertop, Chandra slipped off the stool. “Do you mind if I help you?”

Preston held up a hand. “No. Sit down and relax.”

She affected a frown. “I’m not used to sitting and doing nothing.”

Preston stared at the slender woman in business attire, realizing they were more alike than dissimilar. Even when he was in between writing projects he always found something to do. He usually retreated to his Brandywine Valley home to catch up on his reading and watching movies from his extensive DVD collection. He also chopped enough wood to feed two gluttonous fireplaces throughout the winter months. And whenever he heard the stress in his sister’s voice from having to deal with her four sons—both sets of twins—he drove down to South Carolina to give her and his probation officer brother-in-law a mini vacation. He took his rambunctious nephews on camping excursions and deep-sea fishing. Last year they’d begun touring the many Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia, Florida and their home state.

Preston enjoyed spending time with the seven-and ten-year-olds, becoming the indulgent uncle, yet oddly had never felt the pull of fatherhood. He wasn’t certain if it was because of his own father or because he hadn’t met that special woman who would make him reexamine his life and bachelorhood status.

Chandra had thought him a misogynist when he was anything but. He liked women. He liked everything about a woman: her soft skin, the curves of her body and her smell. It was the smell of

her skin and hair that was usually imprinted on his brain. Whenever he dated a woman, he was able to pick her out in a darkened room because of her scent.

He preferred working in the kitchen without assistance or interference but decided to relent and let Chandra help him. “Let me get you something to cover your clothes. If you want, you can cut up the fruit.”

Chandra flashed a dimpled smile. She needed to do more than sit and watch Preston. She wanted to discover what it was like to actually cook in a gourmet kitchen. “Where’s your bathroom?”

Preston pointed to a door at the opposite end of the kitchen. “It’s the door on the right,” he said as Chandra headed toward the bathroom.

He stared at the roundness of her shapely hips until she disappeared from his line of vision. I like her. Preston liked everything there was to like about Chandra Eaton: her blatant femininity, natural beauty and the intelligence she made no attempt to hide.

When she’d mentioned the idea of writing a play using a vampire as the central character, it had started a flurry of ideas like a trickle of water that flowed into a stream, then into rapids and finally into a fast-flowing river. It reminded him of the Colorado River rushing through the Grand Canyon.

With his creative imagination going full throttle, he was able to outline the production, design the lighting, costumes and props. He could hear the slow drawling Southern cadence and Creole inflections that were as much a part of New Orleans as its cuisine. *Death’s Kiss* had come alive in his mind. All that remained was writing it once Chandra developed Pascual.

Preston had taken a package of frozen spinach, four eggs and a plastic container of blue cheese from the refrigerator/freezer as Chandra returned to the kitchen. She was barefoot and had twisted her hair in a loose chignon at the nape of her neck. He smiled when he saw the bright red color on her toes.

Reaching into a drawer under the countertop, he pulled out a bibbed apron. “Come here,” he ordered.

Chandra approached Preston, turning so he could slip the apron over her head. He adjusted the length until it reached her knees, then looped the ties twice around her waist.

Shifting, she smiled up at him. “I’m ready, chef.”

Lowering his head, Preston kissed the end of her nose. “Never have I had a more delicious-looking sous chef. If you look in the right side of the refrigerator, you’ll find fruit in the lower drawer.”

He left Chandra to take care of the fruit salad while he began the task of thawing the spinach in the microwave, placing it in a colander to drain before removing the remaining moisture by squeezing the chopped leaves in cheesecloth. Pausing, he opened an overhead closet and pushed a button on a stereo unit. The beautifully haunting sound of a trumpet filled the duplex.

Chandra shared a smile with Preston as she glanced up from peeling the fuzzy skin of a kiwi, revealing its vibrant green flesh. She found it ironic they had a similar taste in music. Before leaving for Belize, she’d loaded her iPod with music from every genre. Chris Botti’s *Night Sessions* had become a favorite.

“You have to have at least one romantic bone in your body if you like Chris Botti,” she said teasingly.

Preston stopped mincing garlic on the chopping board. “Okay. I’ll admit to having one,” he said, conceding.

He didn’t know what Chandra meant by being romantic. If it was about sending flowers, telling a woman she looked nice or buying her a gift for her birthday or Christmas, then he would have to say he was. But if a woman expected him to declare his undying love for her then she was out of luck.

He’d asked Elaine to marry him because they’d dated exclusively for three years. It just seemed like the right thing to do. But Elaine wanted more than the flowers, gifts and sex. She wanted his undivided attention whenever she didn’t have an acting role. It hadn’t mattered if he was working

on a new play or directing one slated to go into production. She wanted what she wanted whenever she wanted it.

Preston opened the refrigerator, took out a carafe of freshly squeezed orange juice and a bottle of chilled champagne from a wine storage unit and then returned to the cooking island. There was a soft popping sound when he removed the cork from the bubbly wine. Reaching for two flutes on a rack, he half filled the glasses with orange juice, topping it off with champagne before gently stirring the mixture.

Chandra arranged the fruit in glass dessert bowls. She started with melon balls, adding sliced kiwi, and topped them off with orange sections. The contrasting colors were soft, the fresh fruit inviting.

“Do you want me to set the table?” she asked Preston.

“That can wait until after we toast each other.” He handed her a flute, touching his glass to hers. “Here’s to a successful collaboration.” Their gazes met as they sipped the orange-infused champagne cocktail. She smiled over the rim of the flute.

Chandra let the sweet, tart liquid slide slowly down the back of her throat. “It’s delicious.”

Preston nodded.

Chandra set down her glass. She didn’t want to drink too much before she had a chance to eat. “Where are your dishes?”

“They’re in the cabinet over the sink.”

“What about coffee or tea?”

“I’ll have whatever you have,” he said.

“What about juice, chef?”

“I’m not a chef, Chandra.”

Preston turned and glared at Chandra, but he couldn’t stay angry with her when he saw the humor in her eyes. He was going to enjoy working with her. There was no doubt she was a free spirit if she’d left the States to teach in Belize.

His gaze softened when Chandra swayed to the Latin-infused baseline beats of “All Would Envy” written by Sting and sung by Shawn Colvin.

He took three long strides and pulled her into a close embrace. She fit perfectly within the arc of his arms. They danced as if they’d performed the action countless times. Preston closed his eyes, listening to the words about a wealthy older man who was the envy of other men, old and young, because he’d convinced a beautiful young woman to marry him.

Everything about the woman in his arms seeped into him. She was becoming the heroine in *Death’s Kiss*. Chandra was right. The play had to have a happy ending. He knew very little about vampires, but he remembered stories about mortals who were bitten by vampires and needed to feed on human blood in order to stay alive.

“Pascual has to be an incredible dancer,” Chandra said softly.

“In other words, he must waltz.”

Leaning back, she smiled up at Preston. “Yes, but his dance of choice is the tango.”

“Where did he learn to tango?” Preston asked.

“In Argentina, of course.”

Inky-black eyebrows lifted a fraction. “So, your vampire is from South America?”

“Yes. He’s lived there for two centuries, hence his name. He’s the son of a noble Spanish landowner and an African slave. Although the tango did not become popular outside of the Argentine ghettos until the early years of the twentieth century, Pascual time travels from one century to another, establishing his reputation as a professional dancer.”

Preston angled his head. “I like that you made him mixed race.”

“Why’s that?” Chandra asked.

“Because Josette is also mixed race, and, like her mother, is a free woman of color. I’ve decided to make her a quadroon, because the character will be easier to cast when I begin auditions. Josette’s mother will present her at one of the balls the year she turns sixteen.”

“Isn’t she rather young?”

Preston twirled Chandra around and around in an intricate dance step. “Not at all. Josette’s mother, who is also *plaçée*, made certain her daughter was educated in France, so once she completes her education Josette will be ready to marry and set up her own household.”

“Will she meet Pascual at the ball?”

He pondered her question. “No. That would be too contrived. She’ll see him for the first time two weeks before the ball when she goes to her dressmaker for a final fitting of her gown. He’s there with another woman, who is also a vampire, whom Josette believes is his mistress. Then, she sees him again when she goes to the market with her maid to pick up flowers to decorate the house because her father is coming to share dinner with her mother.”

“What happens next, Preston?”

Dipping her low, Preston kissed the end of her nose and then straightened. “No more questions. You will see the play once I begin rehearsals.”

Chandra pouted the way she’d done as a child when she hadn’t gotten her way. “That’s not fair.”

He stared at her lush lips. What wasn’t fair was that he wanted so much to make love to her, but didn’t, because he didn’t want to send the wrong message. He’d asked Chandra to work, not sleep with him.

“What’s not fair is that you’re asking me questions I can’t answer because you haven’t given me enough information to breathe life into Pascual. You’ve told me he’s an Argentinian of mixed blood and an expert dancer.”

Tilting her chin and closing her eyes, Chandra thought of the fantasy man from her erotic dreams. He could’ve easily become Pascual, coming to her in the dark of the night to make the most exquisite love she’d ever experienced or imagined.

“What are you thinking about?” Preston asked in her ear.

Her eyes opened. “I was trying to imagine Pascual making love to Josette for the first time.”

“Before or after she becomes *plaçée*?”

A beat passed. “Would it add to the conflict if she offers him her virginity?” Chandra asked.

Preston gave Chandra a conspiratorial wink. “It would. But how is she going to convince her white Creole gentleman that she’s a virgin?”

“She will confide in her maid, who in turn will ask a voodoo priestess for help. Perhaps you can show a scene with Josette meeting with the voodoo woman. She has great disdain for the woman, but is forced to give up the priceless necklace she’s wearing in exchange for a potion that will cause one to fall asleep, and upon waking not remember anything.”

He was impressed. Chandra had come up with a credible rationalization for Josette to protect her reputation. After all, the play was to be set in New Orleans.

“Do you want Josette to continue to sleep with Pascual after she becomes *plaçée*, Chandra?” Preston asked.

Chandra scrunched up her nose. “I see where you’re going with this. I think I want Pascual to become her only lover.”

“What about her benefactor? Do you think the man will continue to consort with his *plaçée*? There’s no way he would be respected in his social circle if word got out that he’d been cuckolded by a woman of color.”

“A couple of drops of the potion in a glass of wine each time he comes to visit Josette will eventually take its toll on the poor man when he becomes an amnesiac.”

Preston stared at Chandra, and then burst out laughing. He didn't give her a chance to react when he swept her up off the floor, fastening his mouth to hers in an explosive kiss that robbed her of her breath. Her arms went around his neck, she melting against his length when he deepened the kiss.

Chandra's lips parted as she struggled to breathe, giving Preston the slight advantage he needed when the tip of his tongue grazed her palate, the inside of her cheek and curled around her tongue as he made slow, exquisite love to her mouth. The dreams that had plagued her within days of arriving in Belize came to life; she was unable to differentiate between her fantasy lover and Preston Tucker. The familiar flutters that began in her belly moved lower. If he didn't stop, then she knew she would beg him to make love to her.

"Please! No more, Preston."

Preston heard the strident cry that penetrated the sensual fog pulling him under with the force of a riptide. His head popped up, he stared down at Chandra as if seeing her for the first time. The sweep hand on a wall clock made a full revolution before he lowered her until her feet touched the floor.

"I'm sorry, baby."

The skin around Chandra's eyes crinkled when she smiled. "I'm not."

Preston froze. "You're not?"

Going on tiptoe, she kissed his cheek. "You have a very sexy mouth, P.J., and I'd wondered if you knew what to do with it."

A shiver of annoyance snaked its way up his body. Chandra was the first woman who'd let it be known that she was testing his sexual skills.

"Did I pass?"

"Just barely."

Preston's mouth opened and closed several times, and nothing came out. "What did you say?" he asked after he'd collected his wits.

"I said you barely passed." Chandra turned so he wouldn't see her grin. She tried but was unsuccessful when her shoulders shook with laughter. "No!" she screamed when Preston lifted her again, this time holding her above his head as if she were a small child.

"Apologize, Chandra."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she chanted until he lowered her bare feet to the cool tiles.

Still smarting from her teasing, Preston's expression was a mask of stone. "One of these days I'm going to show you exactly what my mouth can do."

"Is that a threat, Preston?"

A smile found its way through his stern-faced demeanor. "No, baby. It was a warning that if you tease me again, then I'm going to expect you to bring it."

His arms fell away and Chandra took a backward step. She didn't know what had gotten into her. She'd known girls who had teased boys they liked, but she hadn't been one of them.

Why now?

And why Preston Tucker?

The questions nagged at her until she dropped her gaze. It'd taken only two encounters with the temperamental playwright to know that he didn't like to be teased or challenged. That meant she had to tread softly and very carefully around him.

"Warning acknowledged."

Chapter 5

Chandra sat across the table from Preston in the kitchen's dining area, enjoying an expertly prepared spinach and blue cheese omelet. Sautéed garlic, olive oil and butter enhanced the subtle flavor of the mild blue cheese, eggs and spinach. Preston had warmed a loaf of French bread to accompany the omelet.

She took a bite of the bread topped off with sweet basil butter. "You missed your calling, P.J.," she said after swallowing. "You should've been a chef."

Preston smiled, staring at Chandra under half-lowered heavy lids. His former annoyance with her teasing him was gone. There was something about her that wouldn't permit him to remain angry. Perhaps it was her lighthearted personality that appealed to his darker, more subdued persona. He was serious, as were his plays which seemed to appeal to the critics. But for the first time since he'd begun writing he was considering one that was fantasy-driven and a musical. Since when, he'd asked himself, had he thought of himself as an Andrew Lloyd Webber?

"I'd seriously thought about becoming a chef," he admitted.

"Before you decided to become a playwright?" Chandra asked.

"No. I always wanted to write. I'd like it to be a second or backup career when I decide to give up playwriting."

"Do you think you'll ever stop writing?"

Preston traced the design on the handle of the knife at his place setting with a forefinger. Chandra had asked what he'd been asking himself for years. He loved the process of coming up with a plot and character development. It was sitting through casting calls, ongoing meetings with directors and producers and daily rehearsals before opening night that usually set his teeth on edge. He'd written, directed and produced his last play, thereby alleviating the angst that accompanied a new production.

"That's a question I can't answer, Chandra. I suppose there will become a time when the creative well will dry up."

"Let's hope it's not for a very long time."

"That all depends on my collaborator."

He'd told himself that he would take the next year off and not write—but that was before he found Chandra Eaton's journal in the taxi, and definitely before he met her.

Chandra studied the man sitting opposite her, recognizing an open invitation in his enigmatic dark eyes. "Are you referring to me?"

Preston leaned over the table. "Who else do you think I'm talking about?"

"Did you go to culinary school?" she asked, deftly shifting gears to steer the topic of conversation away from them as a couple.

What she and Preston shared was too new to predict beyond their current collaborative project. She'd returned to the States to teach, reestablish her independence and reconnect with her family, not become involved with a man, and especially if that man was celebrity playwright Preston Tucker.

"Why didn't you answer my question, Chandra?"

"I've chosen not to answer it because I don't have an answer," she countered with a slight edge to her tone. "Did you go to culinary school?" she asked again.

Preston fumed inwardly. The stubborn little minx, he mused. She'd chosen not to answer his query not because she didn't have an answer, but because she hadn't wanted to answer it. He'd never collaborated with another person only because he hadn't had to. *Death's Kiss* was her idea, derived from her suggestion to use a vampire as a central character and from her erotic dreams. There was no doubt the play would cause a stir, not only because of the pervasive popularity of vampires in popular fiction, but also because it would be the first time his play would include a musical score.

He would write the play, produce and direct it, which would give him complete control. And if Hollywood wanted to option the work for the big screen then he would make certain his next literary agent would negotiate the terms on his behalf and adhere to his need for creative control.

"I didn't attend culinary school in the traditional sense," he said, answering Chandra's query. "However, I've taken lots of cooking courses. I spent a summer in Italy learning to prepare some of their regional dishes."

Chandra touched a linen napkin to the corners of her mouth. "Do you speak Italian?"

Preston shook his head. "The classes were conducted in English. How about you? Do you speak another language?"

“I’m fluent in Spanish.”

“Did you learn it in Belize?”

“No. I took it in high school and college, and then signed up for a crash course before going abroad. English remains Belize’s official language, but Kriol, a Belizean Creole, is the language that all Belizeans speak.”

Preston took a sip of herbal tea, enjoying its natural subtle, sweet flavor. He’d enjoyed cooking for Chandra as much as he enjoyed her company. She appeared totally unaffected by his so-called celebrity status. What he’d come to detest were insecure, needy women who wanted him to entertain them, and the woman sitting across from him appeared to be just the opposite.

“What does Kriol sound like?”

“It’s a language that borrows words from English, several African languages, a smattering of Spanish and Maya and the Mosquito Indian indigenous to the region. Good morning in Spanish is buenas dias. Creole would be gud mawnin. And African-based Garifuna is buiti binafi. If you visit the country you’ll also hear German and Mandarin.”

“It sounds like a real melting pot.”

“It is.” While staring at Preston, Chandra went completely still. The distinctive voice of Josh Groban filled the kitchen. “He sings beautifully in Spanish.”

Preston realized Chandra was listening to the song’s lyrics. “What is he saying?”

“Si volvieras a mi, means if you returned to me.”

“Why do songs always sound so much better when sung in a foreign language?” Preston asked.

“Most songs sound better when you don’t understand the words. The love theme from the Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon sound track is more romantic sung in Chinese than English.”

“What are you trying to say?”

Chandra’s mind was churning with ideas. “Have your lyricist write at least one song for the play that will be sung in English and Spanish with only a guitar as an accompaniment.”

“Should it be a love song?”

She smiled. “But of course.”

Preston realized he’d hit the jackpot when he found the journal containing Chandra’s erotic dreams. Death’s Kiss would be a departure from his plays about dysfunctional families and societal woes. He’d won a Tony for the depiction of a psychotic killer who morphs into a sympathetic, repentant character but is denied a stay of execution before the curtain comes down for the final act. Theater critics praised the acting and minimal set decoration, but took the playwright to task for his insinuation of political propaganda in the drama.

His gaze lingered on Chandra, roving lazily over her soft, shining hair to the sweetest lips he’d ever tasted. Her conservative attire artfully disguised a curvy body and a passion he longed to ignite. And there was no doubt Chandra Eaton was a passionate woman as gleaned from the accounts of her dreams. She’d numbered and dated each one, leaving him to ponder how many others she’d had and he hadn’t read.

He’d admitted to her that he wasn’t a romantic only because he wasn’t certain how she’d interpret the word. However, he’d read more than six months of dreams that he could draw upon to make Chandra’s vampire a passionate lover.

“How difficult is it to write a play?”

Chandra’s query pulled Preston from his reverie. “I thought we were talking about Belize.”

She waved a hand. “We can talk about Belize some other time. I want to know about scriptwriting.”

“Why? Do you plan on writing one?” he teased with a wide grin.

“Maybe one of these days I’ll try my hand at either writing a novel or a play—whichever is easier.”

Leaning back in his chair, Preston angled his head. “Anyone can be taught the mechanics of writing, but no one can give an aspiring writer an imagination.” He tapped his head with his forefinger. “You have to conjure up plots and characters in your head before you’re able to bring them to life on paper.”

Chandra thought she detected a hint of censure in Preston’s words. Had he believed she wanted to compete with him? “I am not your competition, Preston.” She’d spoken her thoughts aloud.

A shadow of annoyance hardened his features. “Do you actually believe I’d think of you as a competitor?”

“If not, then why all the secrecy about not telling me how to write a script?”

“There’s no secrecy. And as to competition, the only person I compete with is Preston Japheth Tucker, so don’t get ahead of yourself, Miss Eaton.”

Chandra sucked her teeth. “Don’t start with the bully attitude, P. J. Tucker, because I don’t scare easily. Now, are you going to tell me or not?”

Preston stared, unable to form the words to come back at Chandra. She was the complete opposite of any woman he’d ever interacted with. She was as strong and confident as she was beautiful.

“Well, if you put it that way, then I suppose I’d better tell you. There’s no way I’d be able to explain to my mother that I’d allowed a little slip of a woman to jack me up.”

A wave of heat stole its way across Chandra’s cheeks. “I wouldn’t hit you. In fact, I’ve never hit anyone in my life.” The seconds ticked, and her heart beat a rapid tattoo against her ribs as Preston glared at her.

A slow smile parted Preston’s lips, he pointed at her. “Gotcha!”

Pushing back her chair, Chandra came around the table, launching herself at him. He caught her in a split-second motion too quick for the eye to follow. She was sprawled over his knees when his head came down. Covering her mouth with his, Preston robbed her of her breath. The passionate, explosive kiss ended quickly, as quickly as it’d begun.

“Either you have a problem with your short-term memory or you want me to take you upstairs and show you just how romantic I can be. I’m not making an idle threat when I tell you that when I’m finished with you it won’t be today, tomorrow or even the next day. I will...” His words trailed off when the telephone rang.

“Excuse me,” Preston said as if nothing had passed between him and the woman in his arms.

He stood up, bringing Chandra with him. Instead of releasing her, he held on to her upper arm as he walked over to the wall phone; he tightened his grip when she attempted to extricate herself. Chandra wasn’t going anywhere until he settled something with her.

He picked up the receiver. “Hello.”

“What’s up with you, P.J.?”

Preston took a deep breath, holding it until he felt a band of constriction across his chest. It had taken his agent four days to contact him. “That’s what I should be asking you, Cliff. Why the hell did you send me three thousand miles across the country when you knew I wouldn’t agree to what the studio heads were proposing? Stop wiggling,” he hissed at Chandra.

“Who are you talking to?” Clifford Jessup asked.

“None of your damn business. Now, answer my question, Clifford.”

There came a pause. “I thought you would change your mind when you heard what they were offering.”

“I thought I told you that the deal wasn’t about money, but creative control,” Preston said through clenched teeth. “I don’t have the time or the inclination to fly to the West Coast for BS. I pay you twenty-five instead of the prevailing fifteen and twenty percent as my literary agent to protect my interests. But apparently you haven’t this time. And if I were completely honest, then I’d have to say you haven’t looked after my interests in some time.”

“What the hell are you trying to say, P.J.?”

“I’m firing you as my literary agent, effective immediately. You’ll receive a letter in a few days confirming this. Good luck, Clifford.” He replaced the receiver in its cradle with a resounding slam. “What?” he asked Chandra when she stared him. Her mouth had formed a perfect O, and her breasts rose and fell heavily under the silk blouse.

“Are you always so diplomatic?”

“Don’t comment on something you know nothing about.”

“You’re pissed off with me, so you take it out on someone else.”

Preston exhaled a breath. “I’m not pissed off with you, Chandra.”

Her gaze shifted from his face to his hand clamped around her arm. “No? Then why the caveman grip on my arm, Preston?” He loosened his hold, but not enough for her to escape him.

“I don’t want to know anything about the men you’re used to dealing with,” Preston said in a soft voice that belied his annoyance, “but at thirty-eight I’m a little too old to play games. Especially head games.” He leaned in closer. “I like you, Chandra. And it’s not about you collaborating with me. You’re pretty and you’re smart—a trait I admire in a woman, and you’re sexy. Probably a lot more sexy than you give yourself credit for. I want to work with you and date you.”

Chandra couldn’t stop the smile stealing its way over her delicate features. “You don’t mince words, do you, P.J.?”

“Nope. Too old for that, too, C.E.”

Chandra didn’t know how to deal with the talented man whose moods ran hot and cold within nanoseconds. “Why should I date you, Preston?”

“Why?” he asked, seemingly shocked by her question. “Didn’t I tell you that I’m a nice guy?”

“So you say,” she drawled, deciding not to make it easy for him. She wanted to go out with Preston Tucker. In fact, she’d be a fool to reject him. It’d been a long time, entirely too long since she’d found a man with whom she could have an intelligent conversation without watching every word that came out of her mouth. Chandra knew she’d shocked Preston with her off-the-cuff remarks, but she had to know how far she could push him before he pushed back.

It hadn’t been that way with Laurence Breslin. They’d dated for a year before he asked her to marry him. However, when she met his parents for the first time they were forthcoming when they expressed their disapproval. They’d always hoped that Laurence would eventually marry the daughter of a couple within their exclusive social circle. To add insult to injury, they’d demanded she return the heirloom engagement ring that had belonged to Laurence’s maternal grandmother. Laurence compounded the insult when he forcibly removed the ring from her finger.

“Okay, Preston,” she said, smiling, “I’ll go out with you.”

His eyebrows lifted a fraction. “Why does it sound as if you’re doing me a favor?”

“Don’t let your ego get the best of you, P.J.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re probably not used to women turning you down.”

“Whatever,” he drawled.

“Yes or no, Preston?”

“I’m not going to answer that.”

Standing on tiptoe, Chandra touched her lips to Preston’s. “You don’t have to,” she whispered, “but there’s one question I do expect you to answer for me.”

“What’s that?” Preston asked, as his lips seared a sensual path along the column of her neck.

Baring her throat, she closed her eyes, reveling in the warmth of his mouth on her skin. “Can I trust you?”

Preston froze as if someone had unexpectedly doused him with cold water. His arms fell to his sides as he glared at Chandra. “You think I’m going to be with you and another woman at the same time?”

“I’m not talking about infidelity.”

“What are you talking about?”

She stared at a spot over his broad shoulder before her gaze returned to meet his questioning one. “It’s about you not lying to me.”

“I’d never—”

“Don’t say what you won’t do,” she interrupted. “Just don’t do it, Preston.”

A beat passed. Preston knew without asking that something had occurred between Chandra and her former fiancé that caused her not to trust him and probably all men. He hadn’t slept with so many women that he couldn’t remember their names, but whenever they parted it was never because they didn’t trust him, and it wouldn’t be any different with Chandra.

A sensual smile tilted the corners of his mouth upward. “Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, I’d like to take you out to Le Bec-Fin tomorrow night.”

Chandra lashes fluttered as she tried to bring her fragile emotions under control. Maybe he likes you. Denise’s words came back with vivid clarity. Maybe Preston did like her, and not because she was collaborating with him. And despite his literary brilliance and celebrity status she wasn’t ready to completely trust him.

Dating Preston Tucker openly would no doubt thrust her into the spotlight for newshounds and the paparazzi, and she had to prepare herself for that. Denise had also revealed that Preston tended to keep a low profile, yet he wanted to take her to a restaurant long considered the best in fine dining. Being seen with him at a fancy, four-star Philadelphia restaurant was hardly what she would consider maintaining a low profile.

“Would you mind if we go another time?”

“Of course I don’t mind,” he said. “We’ll go whenever it’s convenient for you.”

Chandra decided to flip the script. “How would you like to go out with me tomorrow?”

Preston’s eyes narrowed. “I thought you weren’t available?”

“I can’t have dinner with you because I have a prior engagement. I’m going to Paoli to join my family in celebrating my twin nieces’, Sabrina’s and Layla’s, thirteenth birthday.”

“You want me to go to a teenage birthday party?”

“No, Preston. You just fired your literary agent, which means you’re going to have to replace him. I just thought if you talk to my brother-in-law, perhaps he’ll consider representing you.”

The impact of his firing his friend and agent weighed heavily on Preston. He hadn’t wanted to do it, but Cliff had left him no alternative. If his friend was having personal problems, then he should’ve confided in him. After all, there were few or no secrets Preston kept from his agent.

But, on the other hand, business was business, and he’d entrusted Clifford to handle his career without questioning his every word or move. Unfortunately, the man had screwed up—big-time and with dire consequences.

“Who is your brother-in-law?”

Chandra flashed a sexy moue, bringing Preston’s gaze to linger on her lips. “You’ll see tomorrow.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You expect me to go with you on a whim?”

“Is that how you see me, Preston?” she spat out. “Now I’m a whim?”

“No, no, no! I didn’t mean for it to come out like that.”

Crossing her arms under her breasts, Chandra pretended to pout. “Well, it did.”

“I’m sorry, Chandra.”

She bit back a smile. “Say it like you mean it, Preston.”

Preston took a step and pulled her into the circle of his embrace. “I’m sorry, baby.” His mellifluous voice had dropped an octave.

Why, Chandra asked herself, hadn’t she noticed the rich, honeyed quality of his voice before? It was the timbre of someone trained for the stage.

“Apology accepted. I don’t want to tell you my brother-in-law’s name because I want you to trust me.”

“So, we’re back to the trust thing?”

She smiled. “It will always be the trust thing, Preston.”

“I thought most women concerned themselves about the love thang,” he said, teasingly.

“Not with you, P.J. Why would I take up with a man who professes not to be romantic? Women don’t need sex from a man as much as they want romance and courtship.”

“Maybe I’m going to need a few lessons in that department.”

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?” Chandra asked. “You’re thirty-eight years old and you don’t know how to romance a woman?”

“What I’m not is romantic,” he retorted.

Lowering her arms, she rested her hands on his chest. “Porbrecito.”

“Which means?”

“You poor thing,” she translated.

Preston winked at her. “Now, don’t you feel sorry for me?”

“Only a little. However, I’m willing to bet if you follow Pascual’s lead you’ll do quite well with the ladies.”

He wanted to tell Chandra that he was only interested in one lady: her. Not only had she intrigued him but also bewitched him in a way no other woman had. “What time do we leave for Paoli tomorrow?”

“Everyone’s expected to arrive around three.”

“What time do you want me to pick you up?”

“I’ll pick you up at two,” Chandra said. Her father would drive her mother in his car, and she would take her mother’s car.

“Okay. I want you to relax while I clean up the kitchen. Then we’ll go to the office and talk about the play.”

“Wouldn’t it go faster if I help you?”

Preston glared at Chandra. He’d learned quickly that she wanted to control situations. Well, she was in for a rude awakening. When it came to control of his work he’d unquestionably become an expert.

“Sit down and relax.”

She held up her hands. “Okay. You didn’t have to go mad hard,” she whispered under her breath.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing,” Chandra mumbled.

She walked around Preston and sat down at the table. She knew working with him wasn’t going to be easy, especially if, without warning, his moods vacillated from hot to cold. What she didn’t intend to become was a punching bag for his domineering and controlling personality.

Chandra Eaton was not the same woman who’d left her home and everything familiar and comfortable to work with young children in a region where running water was a priceless commodity.

She’d promised Preston she would help him with his latest play, and she would follow through on her promise—that is until he pushed her to a point where she would be forced to walk away and not look back. It’d happened with a man she’d loved without question, and it could happen again with a man she had no intention of loving.

Chapter 6

Chandra sat between Preston’s outstretched legs on a soft leather chaise in a soft butter-yellow shade, wishing she’d worn something a lot more casual. He’d changed into his work clothes: jeans, T-shirt and sandals.

When he’d led her into the home/office Chandra was taken aback with the soft colors, thinking Preston would’ve preferred a darker, more masculine appeal. Instead of the ubiquitous black, brown

or burgundy, the leather sofa, love seats and chaise were fashioned in tones of pale yellow and orange, reminiscent of rainbow sherbet. The citrus shades blended with an L-shaped workstation in a soft vanilla hue with gleaming cherrywood surfaces.

Two walls of floor-to-ceiling built-in bookcases in the same vanilla bean hue were stacked with novels, plays, pamphlets and biographies. Several shelves were dedicated to the many statuettes and awards honoring Preston's theatrical achievements. She smiled when she saw two Tony awards.

The third wall, covered with bamboolike fabric, was filled with framed citations, diplomas and academic degrees. The last wall was made of glass, bringing in the natural light and panoramic views of the Philadelphia skyline.

Reclining against Preston's chest seemed the most natural thing to do as he explained the notations he'd put down on a legal pad. Chandra squinted, attempting to read his illegible scrawl.

She pointed. "What is that word?"

Preston pressed a kiss to the hair grazing his chin. "You got jokes, C.E.?"

Tilting her chin, Chandra smiled at him over her shoulder. "I'm serious, Preston. I can't decipher it."

He made a face. "She can't decipher conflict," he said sarcastically.

"Hel-lo, P.J. It looks like confluent to me."

"I can assure you it is conflict. Writing a play is no different from writing a novel or a script for a film or television. It all begins with an idea or premise, a sequence of events, characters and conflict. As the writer I must touch upon all of these elements not only to entice theatergoers to come to see the stage production, but keep them in their seats until the final curtain."

"What's the difference between writing a script for the screen and one for the stage?" Chandra asked.

"Stage plays are much more limited when it comes to the size of the cast, number of settings and the introduction of characters. Whereas with films there can be many, many characters and locales. I try and keep the page count on my plays around one hundred."

"Have you ever exceeded that number?"

"Yes," Preston replied. "But it should never go beyond one hundred twenty pages. The story should concentrate on a few major characters who reveal themselves through dialogue, unlike a film actor who will utilize dialogue and physical action."

Shifting slightly, Chandra met Preston's eyes. "When do you know if your premise is a play or a film?"

"The key word is physical action. If I imagine a story and I see it as frames of images, then it's a play. But, if the images are filled with physical action, then it's a film script."

"So, you see *Death's Kiss* as a play?"

"It can go either way. As a film it probably would be darker, more haunting, the characters of Pascual and Josette more complex, and there would be more physical action than on the stage."

"What would the rating be if you wrote the screenplay?"

"Probably a PG-13," he said.

His response surprised Chandra. "Why not an R rating?"

"An R rating would be at the studio's discretion. I always believe you can sell more tickets with a PG-13 rating than one that's rated R or NC-17."

"Is that why you insist on literary control?" she asked, continuing with her questioning.

Preston nodded. "That's part of it. What you and I have to decide on is the backstory for *Death's Kiss*."

"Would I need a backstory for a mythical character?"

"Do you want Pascual to feed on blood in order to survive? If not, then what are his family background, education, social and political beliefs? Is he in favor or opposed to slavery?"

A look of distress came over Chandra's face. "I don't want the play to focus on slavery, because it's a too-painful part of our country's history."

"It will not focus on slavery, but a peculiar practice germane but not limited to New Orleans and the descendants of gens de couleur. I've done some research," Preston continued, "uncovering that it was acceptable behavior for a white man to take a slave as young as twelve as his lover. It would prove beneficial to the woman if she produced children. She would be emancipated along with their offspring. Josette's mother is a free woman of color, thereby making her free."

"Where does Josette's father live?"

"Etienne Fouché has a plantation twenty miles outside of New Orleans where he lives with his white family, and he also has an apartment within the city where he entertains his friends. Then, there's a Creole cottage he'd purchased for his *plaçée* and Josette only blocks from his apartment. He will spend a few months with his legitimate wife, but most of his time will be spent within the city.

"France has declared its independence and the Louisiana territory has been ceded to the United States. The first act will open with Josette returning to the States from France and her mother telling her she must prepare for the upcoming ball. However, the Josette who returns at sixteen isn't the same naive and cosseted girl who'd cried incessantly when she boarded a ship to take her to Paris four years before. She is also educated, while it was illegal to teach blacks to read and write in the States. She doesn't believe in *plaçage*, wants to choose her own husband, and her opposition results in conflict because her mother has promised her to the son of one of the largest landowners in the region. Within minutes of the opening act..."

Preston's words trailed off when he saw that Chandra had closed her eyes, while her chest rose and fell in an even rhythm. "Chandra," he said softly, "did you fall asleep on me?"

"No. I was listening to you. Champagne always makes me drowsy."

"We can stop now if you want to."

Chandra smiled, but didn't open her eyes. "Do you mind if we don't move?"

Shifting slightly, he settled her into a more comfortable position. "We can stay here all night if you want."

She opened her eyes. "No, Preston. I'm not ready to sleep with you."

Preston twirled several strands of her hair around his finger. "I wasn't suggesting we sleep together. The bedrooms on the second floor are for my guests."

"Where do you sleep?" Chandra asked quickly, hoping to cover up her *faux pas*. Preston had kissed her twice and she'd assumed that he wanted to sleep with her. If she could have, at that moment she would've willed herself totally invisible.

"Here on the chaise. The sofa converts into a bed, but half the time I end up sleeping on it instead of in it."

"I hope you have a chiropractor." Preston's height exceeded the length of the sofa by several inches.

"I happen to have one on speed dial. Sitting for hours in front of a computer takes a toll on the neck, back and shoulders."

"You should practice yoga or tai chi," Chandra suggested. "I find it works wonders whenever I have trouble sleeping."

Preston was hard-pressed not to smile. Chandra had just given him the opening he needed to delve into her dreams without letting her know he'd read and committed to memory what she'd written in the journal he'd found.

"What would keep you from sleeping?" he asked.

"It's usually anxiety or a very overactive imagination."

"What do you have to be anxious about, Chandra?"

She exhaled an audible sigh. "A couple of weeks before I was scheduled to leave for Belize, I discovered I couldn't sleep. I'd go to bed totally exhausted, but couldn't sleep more than one or two

hours. My dad, who is a doctor, offered to write a scrip for a sedative, but I refused because I didn't want to rely on a controlled substance that could possibly lead to dependency.

"I was losing weight and when I ran into a friend from college I told her about my problem. She was on her way to a yoga class so I went along just to observe. I joined the class the following day, and also signed up for tai chi."

"How long did it take for you to get rid of your insomnia?"

Chandra stared at the vivid color on her toes. "It took about two weeks. By the time I'd arrived in Belize I was sleeping soundly, but then something else happened."

Lowering his head, Preston pressed his nose to her hair, inhaling the sweet fragrance. "What happened?"

The seconds ticked, bringing with them a comfortable silence. "I began dreaming."

The admission came from a place Chandra hadn't known existed. Her dreams were a secret—a secret she never planned to divulge to anyone. She'd recorded her dreams in journals, believing she would one day reread them. She'd thought about publishing them under a pseudonym, because some of them were more than sensual. They were downright erotic.

"Were they dreams or nightmares?"

"Oh, they were dreams."

Preston smiled. Her dreams had become his nightmares because they'd kept him from a restful night's sleep. "How often did you dream?"

"I had them on average of two to three a week."

"Whenever I dream I usually don't remember what they were," Preston admitted.

"It's different with me," Chandra said. "Not only do I remember, but they were so vivid that I was able to write them down."

"What do you think triggered your dreams?"

"I don't know, Preston."

"Are your dreams different, or all along the same train of thought?"

Chandra didn't know how much more she could divulge about her dreams before Preston realized that she was sexually frustrated, that it had been years since she'd slept with a man. And she didn't need a therapist to tell her that she'd used her dreams to act out her sexual fantasies.

"They were the same," she finally admitted.

"That sounds boring, C.E."

She rolled her eyes. "My dreams were hardly boring, P.J."

"Do you want to tell me about them?" Preston whispered in her ear.

"No!"

Preston fastened his mouth to the side of her neck. "Why not?"

Chandra shivered slightly when Preston increased the pressure along the column of her neck. A slight gasp escaped her parted lips with the growing hardness pressing against her hips. It took Herculean strength not to move back to experience the full impact of Preston's erection.

"What are you doing, Preston?" Chandra questioned, not recognizing the strangled voice as her own.

Closing his eyes while swallowing a groan, Preston tried to think about any and everything except the soft crush of Chandra's buttocks pressed intimately to his groin.

"I'm committing your scent to memory."

Chandra closed her eyes. "I'm not talking about you nibbling on my neck."

"What are you talking about?"

"Pascual would never hump Josette."

"I'm not humping you, baby. This is humping." Preston gyrated back and forth, pushing his erection against her hips.

Waves of desire swept over Chandra like a desert sirocco, stealing the breath from her lungs and stopping her heart for several seconds. The sensations holding her in an erotic grip were similar to what she'd experienced in her dreams. Her breasts were heavy, the area between her thighs moist and throbbing with a need that screamed silently to be assuaged.

The man who came to her in her dreams was a fantasy, a nameless, faceless specter she'd conjured up from the recesses of her overactive imagination, but Preston Tucker was real, as real as his heat and arousal.

"Please don't move." Chandra was pleading with him, but she was past caring, because if he didn't stop then she would beg him to make love to her. It was one thing to fantasize about making love with a faceless specter and another to have an actual live, red-blooded man simulating making love to her.

Preston went still, but there was little he could do to still the pulsing sensations in his groin. He didn't know what it was about Chandra Eaton that had him so lacking in self-control. He'd wanted to rationalize and tell himself it was because of her erotic dreams, but he would be lying to himself. He'd told Chandra that he liked her. The truth was he liked her and wanted her in his bed; however the notion of sleeping with Chandra was shocking and totally unexpected.

"What were we talking about before you decided to hump me, Preston?"

The soft, dulcet voice broke into his reverie. "We were talking about your dreams."

"Even before that," Chandra said in an attempt to change the topic. Preston had asked what she'd dreamed about, and how could she tell him that her dreams were all about sex, that they were continuous frames of R-and X-rated films with her in the leading role.

"We were discussing Josette's father."

"Will he have legitimate children?"

Wrapping an arm around Chandra's waist, Preston shifted her to a more comfortable position. His erection had gone down and her body was more relaxed, pliant. "No. His wife gave him a daughter, but she died from a fever before she turned two. Since then she has had several miscarriages, thereby leaving him without a legitimate heir."

"Is Etienne Fouché wealthy?"

"Very," Preston confirmed. "He'd bought out a neighboring planter and is now the owner of the largest sugarcane plantation in St. Bernard parish."

"How is Etienne's relationship with his wife?" Chandra asked.

"They're cordial. Theirs is a marriage of convenience. Madame Fouché is what one could call homely, so her father offered Etienne a sizable dowry to marry his daughter. Madame Fouché, who has an aversion to sex, is overjoyed when her doctor tells her that her husband must not share her bed again. She spends most of her free time entertaining the wives of other planters and/or spending the summers in Europe to escape the heat and fevers that claim thousands of lives each year."

Sitting up straighter, Chandra turned to stare up at Preston. "You've made Etienne a gentleman farmer who derives his wealth from slaves who grow and process white gold."

"The geographic location and family background are key elements of the backstory. I could've easily made him a professional gambler, but how would that work for Josette and her mother? A gambler who could win or lose a fortune with the turn of a single card. And if he found himself without funds, then he would use their home as collateral. I know you don't want to touch on the slavery issue, but remember we're dealing with free people of color."

"As the writer I'm totally absorbed in the lives of the characters until the play is completed. Then it becomes the director's responsibility to get his actors to bring them to life on stage."

Chandra swiveled enough so that she was practically facing Preston. "Do you know who you want to direct *Death's Kiss*?" A smile softened his mouth, bringing her gaze to linger on the outline of his sensual lower lip. "What are you smiling about?"

"I'm going to write, direct and produce *Death's Kiss*."

“Total control,” she whispered under her breath.

Preston’s eyebrows lifted. “Do you have a problem with my decision, C.E.?”

Silence filled the room as Chandra boldly met his eyes. Missing was the warmth that lurked there only moments before. “It’s your play, Preston, so you can do whatever you want with it.”

“It’s not only my play, Chandra.”

“Who else does it belong to, if not you, Preston.”

“Pascual is your character.”

“And Death’s Kiss is your play,” she countered. Chandra pushed to her feet. “I’m going to head home now. Based on what you’ve told me about Etienne and Josette, I’m going to have to revise my first impression of Pascual.”

Preston knew Chandra was smarting about his decision to write, direct and produce the play. What she didn’t understand was that he knew his characters better than anyone, and he hadn’t wanted to explain their motivation to a tyrannical director who insisted on having his way. He’d lost count of the number of times he’d had to bite his tongue so as not to lose his financial backing.

He moved off the chaise. “Don’t stress yourself too much. It will probably be another month before we flesh out the entire cast of characters.”

Nodding, Chandra turned and walked out of the office. “I’ll see you tomorrow at two.”

“I’ll be downstairs.”

She entered the kitchen, pushing her feet into her shoes before reaching for her suit jacket. “Dress is casual.”

Resting his hands on her shoulders, Preston turned Chandra around to face him. “Thank you for coming. I really enjoyed your company.”

Chandra was momentarily shocked into speechlessness. Preston thanking her for her company spoke volumes. Despite his brilliance, fame, awards and financial success, Preston J. Tucker was a private and a lonely man.

A hint of a smile parted her lips when she stared into his fathomless dark eyes. “Thank you for inviting me.”

Preston didn’t want Chandra to leave, but he didn’t want to embarrass himself and communicate that to her. “I’ll call the driver and have him bring the car around.”

Going on tiptoe, Chandra touched her lips to his. “Thank you.”

They shared a smile as she slipped her hand into his. They were still holding hands during the elevator ride to the building lobby and out onto the sidewalk where the driver stood with the rear door open.

She slid onto the rear seat and waved to Preston. He returned her wave before the driver closed the door and rounded the Town Car to take his place behind the wheel.

Chandra turned to stare over her shoulder out the back window to find Preston standing on the sidewalk. His image grew smaller and smaller then disappeared from view when the driver turned the corner.

A knowing smile softened her mouth when she shifted again. I like him. “I like him,” she repeated under her breath, as if saying it aloud would make it more real.

Chapter 7

Chandra maneuvered her car to the curb of the high-rise, tapping lightly on the horn to garner Preston’s attention. He was dressed in a lightweight, navy blue suit, white shirt and black slip-ons. Her eyebrows lifted slightly when she spied the two small colorful shopping bags he held in his left hand.

He rounded the car to the driver’s side and dipped his head to peer through the open window. “I’ll drive. I do know how to get to Paoli,” Preston added when Chandra gave him a quizzical look. Reaching in, he unlocked the door, opened it and helped her out. Three inches of heels put the top of her head at eye level. His penetrating gaze took in everything about her in a single glance: lightly

made-up face, luxurious dark brown hair secured in a ponytail, black stretch tank top, matching stretch cropped pants and high-heeled mules. He brushed a kiss over her cheek. “You look very cute.”

Heat feathered across her face with his unexpected compliment. She’d changed her outfits twice. When she’d gotten up earlier that morning, the mercury was already sixty-eight, and meteorologists were predicting temperatures to peak in the mid-eighties. Chandra much preferred the Indian summer weather to the near-freezing temperatures because she knew it would take her a while to adjust to the climate change.

Her eyes met Preston’s as the skin around his penetrating gaze lingered briefly on her face before slipping lower to her breasts. “Thank you.”

Preston’s lips parted in a smile as he reached over with his free hand and tugged gently on her ponytail. “You’re quite welcome.” He led her around the Volvo, seated her and then retraced his steps once she’d fastened her seat belt.

He took off his suit jacket, placing it and the shopping bags on the rear seat. Sitting behind the wheel, he adjusted the seat to accommodate his longer legs, noting that Chandra had already programmed her trip into the GPS.

“What’s in the shopping bags?” Chandra asked when Preston maneuvered into the flow of traffic.

“It’s just a little something for your nieces.”

She frowned. “You didn’t have to bring anything.”

Preston’s frown matched hers. “I couldn’t show up empty-handed.”

“Yes, you could, Preston. You’re my guest.”

“That may be true, but I feel better bringing something. After all, it’s not every day someone turns thirteen. Your nieces are no longer tweens, but bona fide teenagers. And I’m willing to bet they’ll be quick to remind everyone of that fact.”

Chandra’s frown disappeared. “You’re right. When I spoke to my sister earlier this morning, she told me that was the first thing they said.”

“Do you remember being thirteen?” Preston asked.

She shook her head. “No. Every year was a blur until I turned eighteen.”

“What happened that year?”

“I left home for college.”

“Where did you go?”

“Columbia University.”

“Was Columbia your first choice?”

Chandra stared through the windshield. “No. I was seriously considering going to the University of Pennsylvania, then decided an out-of-state school was a better choice if I wanted to stretch my wings.”

Preston gave Chandra a sidelong glance before returning his gaze to the road. “Mom and Dad didn’t want their baby to leave the nest? Yes or no?” he asked when she glared at him.

“No,” she said after a prolonged pause. “I decided to go away because my brother and sisters went to in-state colleges. I wanted to be the one to break the tradition.”

“Where did—” The chiming of the cell phone attached to his belt preempted what he intended to say. Preston removed the phone, taking a furtive look at the display. “Excuse me, Chandra, but I need to take this call.”

She nodded, smiling. “It’s okay.”

He pressed a button, activating the speaker feature. “Hey, Ray. Thanks for getting back to me.”

“What’s up, P.J.?” asked a raspy voice.

“How’s your schedule?” Preston asked.

A sensual chuckle filled the car. “What do you need, P.J.?”

“I need a score for a new play with an early nineteenth-century New Orleans setting.” He shared a smile with Chandra when she winked at him. “It’s a dramatic musical.”

A pregnant silence filled the interior of the vehicle. “Did you say musical?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Hold up, prince of darkness,” Ray teased, laughing. “Don’t tell me you’re going soft.”

“It’s nothing like that, Ray.”

“What happened?”

“I’m collaborating with someone who convinced me to leave the dark side for my next project.”

“Good for her.”

“How do you know it’s a she?” Preston asked.

“I know you too well, P.J. If she was a he, and if it’s a musical, then it wouldn’t have been about nineteenth, but twenty-first-century New Orleans.” His New Orleans sounded like Nawlins.

Preston wanted to tell Ray that he didn’t know him that well. It had been the same with Clifford Jessup. Cliff had felt so comfortable managing his business affairs that he’d found himself with one less client.

“Can you spare some time where we can get together to talk about what I want?” he asked instead.

“I’m free tomorrow. I’d rather get together at your house. Beth isn’t due for another two weeks, but she’s been complaining about contractions. I don’t want to be too far away if and when she does go into labor.”

The reason Preston had moved into the city was not to conduct business out of his home, but with Ray’s wife’s condition he would make an exception. “That’s not a problem. Better yet, bring Beth with you. If the warm weather holds, we can cook and eat outdoors.”

The lyricist met his artist wife when they were involved in a summer stock production written by a Bucks County playwright. Ray had written the songs, while Beth designed the set decorations. It was love at first sight, and they married two months later. They’d recently celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary, and now were expecting their first child.

“It would do Beth good to get out of the house,” Ray remarked.

“How does one o’clock sound to you?” Preston asked.

“One is good. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Preston smiled. “One it is.” He ended the call, placing the phone on the console between the seats. Following the images on the GPS, he made a left turn on the road leading to Paoli. “Will you join me tomorrow?”

Preston’s query was so unexpected that Chandra replayed it in her head. She stared at his distinctive profile for a full minute. “You want me to join you where?”

“I have a house in Kennett Square, and I’d like you to be present when I meet with Ray Hardy.”

She sat up straighter, all of her senses on full alert. “Are you talking about the Raymond Hardy?”

“Yes. Since you suggested a musical, then I’ll leave the music portion of the play up to you.”

Chandra felt her pulse quicken. Raymond Hardy had been compared to British lyricist Sir Tim Rice, whose collaboration with composer Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber had earned them countless awards and honors in the States and across the pond.

She gave Preston a skeptical look. “You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

“No. My task will be to write the dialogue, while the music will be at your discretion.”

“But...but I can’t write music or lyrics,” she spluttered.

“That will be Ray’s responsibility. What I want you to do is tell him what you want. Ray is amazing. Give him an idea of what you want, and within a couple of hours he will have a song written in its entirety.”

Chandra chewed her lower lip. She was being thrust into a situation where there was no doubt she would be in over her head. And it had all begun with her leaving her journal in a taxi where

Preston Tucker had found it. If she'd retrieved her journal and not remarked about Preston's work, then she wouldn't be faced with the quandary of whether she wanted to become inexorably entwined in the lives of an award-winning dramatist and lyricist.

"You're going to have to let me know a little more about the plot," she said, stalling for time.

"We'll either discuss it tonight or tomorrow morning."

"When are we going to have time tonight, Preston? We probably won't leave my sister's house until at least eight or nine. And, remember it's at least an hour's drive between Philly and Paoli."

Reaching over, Preston rested his right arm over the back of Chandra's seat. "Don't stress yourself, baby. You can spend the night with me, which means we can stay up late."

Chandra looked at him as if he'd taken leave of his senses. "I can't spend the night with you."

A soft chuckle began in Preston's chest before it filled the interior of the Volvo. "Don't tell me you're worried about your virtue, Miss Independent. Didn't I tell you that you're safe with me, Chandra?"

His teasing her made Chandra feel like a hapless ingenue instead of a thirty-year-old woman who'd left home at eighteen to attend college in New York. When she returned it wasn't to put down roots in her home state, but in Virginia. Then she'd left the States to teach in a Central American country for a couple of years. She was currently living with her parents but that, too, was temporary; she was estimating she would move into her cousin's co-op before the end of the month.

She rolled her eyes at Preston. "Nothing's going to happen that I don't want to happen."

"There you go," he drawled. "After we leave Paoli I'll drive back to my place to pick up my car, then I'll follow you back home, so you can get what you need for a couple of days."

"A couple of days, Preston! When did overnight become a couple of days?"

"There's no need to throw a hissy fit, Chandra." His voice was low, calm, much calmer than he actually felt. "I need as much of your input as possible before you go back to work."

He didn't want to tell her that he wanted to begin working on the play before the onset of winter—his least productive season when there were days when his creative juices literally dried up.

"Okay," Chandra agreed after a comfortable silence. She was committed to helping Preston with the play, and she planned to hold up her end of the agreement. "But I'm going to have to use your computer to check my e-mail."

"That's not going to present a problem. I have both a laptop and desktop at the house. Do you have to ask your parents if you can stay out overnight?"

Chandra rolled her eyes, then stuck out her tongue at Preston. "Very funny," she drawled sarcastically.

He smothered a grin. "You better watch what you do with that tongue."

"What are you talking about?"

"I have the perfect remedy for girls who offer me their tongues."

She rolled her eyes again. "I ain't scared of you, P. J. Tucker."

"I don't want you to be, C.E., because I intend for us to have a lot fun working together."

"I hope we can."

Preston gave her a quick sidelong glance. "Why do you sound so skeptical?"

"You're controlling, Preston."

"And you're not?" he countered.

"A little," Chandra admitted.

"Only a little, C.E.? You're in denial, beautiful. You are very, very controlling. If it can't be your way, then it's no way."

Resting a hand on her hip, Chandra shifted, as far as her seat belt would permit her, to face Preston. Her eyes narrowed. "Do you really think you know me that well?"

Preston longed to tell Chandra that he knew more about her than she realized, that he knew she was a passionate woman with a very healthy libido.

“I only know what you’ve shown me,” he stated solemnly. “There’s nothing wrong with being independent or in control as long as you let a man be a man.”

“In other words, you expect me to grovel because you’re the celebrated Preston Tucker.”

Preston shook his head. “No.”

“Then, what is it you want?”

“I want us to get along, Chandra. We may not agree on everything, but what I expect is compromise. I grew up hearing my parents argue every day, and I vowed that I would never deal with a woman I had to fight with. It’s too emotionally draining. I began writing to escape from what I had to go through whenever my father came home.

“He would start with complaining about his boss and coworkers, and then it escalated to his nervous stomach and why he didn’t want to eat what my mother had cooked for dinner. Most times she didn’t say anything. She’d take his plate and empty it in the garbage before walking out of the kitchen. My sister and I would stare at our plates and finish our dinner. Then we would clear the table, clean up the kitchen and go to our respective bedrooms for the night. I always finished my homework before dinner, so that left time for me to write.”

“Did your father have a high-stress job?”

“He was an accountant, who’d had his own practice but couldn’t keep any employees.”

Chandra couldn’t remember her parents arguing, and if they did then it was never in front of their children. Between his office hours, house visits and working at the local municipal hospital, Dwight Eaton coveted the time he spent with his family.

“Did he verbally abuse his employees?”

A beat passed. “Craig Tucker was what psychologists call passive-aggressive. Most people said he was sarcastic. I thought of him as cynical and mocking.”

Now Chandra understood why Preston sought to avoid acerbic verbal exchanges. “Are your parents still together?”

Another beat passed as a muscle twitched in Preston’s lean jaw. “No. My dad died twenty-two years ago. He’d just celebrated his fortieth birthday when he passed away from lung cancer. He’d had a two-pack-a-day cigarette habit. My mother may have given in to my father’s demands in order to keep the peace, but put her foot down when she wouldn’t let him smoke in the house or car. He would sit on a bench behind the house smoking whether it was ninety-five degrees or twenty-five degrees. I found it odd that my mother didn’t cry at his funeral, but it was years later that I came to realize Craig Tucker was probably suffering from depression.”

Preston’s grim expression vanished like pinpoints of sun piercing an overcast sky. “He did in death what he wouldn’t do in life. He gave my mother a weekly allowance to buy food, while he paid all the bills. If she ran out of money, then she had to wait for Friday night when he placed an envelope with the money on the kitchen table. He was such a penny-pincher that my sister called him Scrooge behind his back. Well, Scrooge had invested heavily and wisely, leaving my mother very well off financially. He’d also set aside monies for me and my sister’s college fund. Yolanda went to Brown, while I went to Princeton.

“After I graduated, my mother sold the house and moved back to her hometown of Charleston, South Carolina, enrolled in the College of Charleston and earned a degree in Historic Preservation and Community Planning. Then, she applied to and was accepted into a joint MS degree in Historic Preservation with Clemson. With her education behind her, she opened a small shop selling antiques and reproductions of Gullah artifacts. Her basket-weaving courses have a six-month waiting list.”

Chandra’s mouth curved into an unconscious smile. Preston’s mother had to wait to become a widow to come into her own. Her adage was always Better Late Than Never.

“I remember my parents driving down to Florida one year, and when we went through South Carolina I saw old women sitting on the side of the road weaving straw baskets. I’m sorry we didn’t stop to buy at least one.”

“That’s too bad,” Preston remarked, “because the art of weaving baskets has been threatened with the advance of coastal development. Those living in gated subdivisions wouldn’t let the weavers come through to pluck the sweetgrass they coil with pine needles, bulrushes and palmetto fronds used to make the baskets. Thankfully the true center of sweetgrass basket weaving is flourishing in Mount Pleasant, a sea island near the Cooper River.”

“It sounds as if your mother has found her niche,” Chandra said in a soft voice, filled with a mysterious longing.

“If not her niche, then her passion. Last year she met a man who teaches historical architecture and sits on the Charleston Historic Preservation and Community Planning board. I’ve never known my mother to laugh so much as when she’s with him. She moved in with him at the beginning of the year.”

“Good for her.”

A wide grin creased Preston’s face. “If you’re talking about a romance novel, then Rose Tucker is truly a heroine.”

“Is she going to marry her hero?”

“I don’t know. I think she’s still a little skittish about marriage, because she hasn’t sold her condo. They divide their time living at his house during the week, and come into the city to stay at her condo on the weekend. It doesn’t bother me or Yolanda if they never marry, as long as they’re happy.”

“Where does your sister live?” Chandra knew she was asking Preston a lot of questions, but she’d come to appreciate the sound of his sonorous baritone voice.

Settling back against the leather seat, she closed her eyes when he talked about his older sister, his brother-in-law and two sets of identical twin nephews. Again, she wondered why he hadn’t married and fathered children when he told of the outings with his nephews. She opened her eyes when he patted her knee.

“Tell me about your family so I know what to expect.”

Chandra recognized landmarks that indicated they were only blocks from her sister’s house. “Too late. We’re almost there.”

Preston groaned aloud when the voice coming from the GPS directed him to turn right at the next street. He’d wanted Chandra to brief him as to her relatives. “Did you tell your folks you were bringing a guest?”

“Nope.”

Decelerating, he maneuvered into a parking space across the street from a three-story Colonial. “Did they expect you to bring a guest?”

Chandra unbuckled her seat belt. “If you’re asking whether I normally attend family functions with a man, then the answer is no. It’s been more than three years since I’ve had a serious boyfriend.”

Smiling, Preston rested his right arm over the back of her seat. “So, I’m your boyfriend?”

She flashed an attractive moue. “No, P.J., you’re a friend.”

He leaned closer. “Do you think I’ll ever be your boyfriend?”

Chandra leaned closer until she was inhaling the moist warmth of Preston’s breath. “You can if...”

“If what?” he whispered.

“You can if I can trust you.”

Preston froze. “What’s with you and the trust thing?”

“It’s very important to me, Preston. Without trust there can be no boyfriend, girlfriend, no relationship.”

He smiled. “Are you amenable to something that goes beyond platonic?”

Chandra blinked. “I am, but only—”

“If you can trust me,” he said, completing her sentence.

“Yes.”

Preston angled his head, pressing his mouth to Chandra's, reveling in the velvety warmth of her parted lips. It had been years since he'd sat in a car kissing a woman but there was something about Chandra Eaton that made him feel like an adolescent boy. First it was the unexpected erection after reading her erotic dreams and now it was having her close.

"You have my solemn vow that I will never give you cause to mistrust me."

Chandra quivered at the gentle tenderness of the kiss, and in that instant she wanted to trust Preston not because she wanted to but needed to. Every man she'd met after Laurence had become a victim of her acerbic tongue and negative attitude whenever they'd expressed an interest in her.

She'd loved Laurence, expecting to spend the rest of her life with him, but when he caved under pressure from his family, her faith in the opposite sex was shattered—almost beyond repair. However, Preston Tucker was offering a second chance. She didn't expect marriage, not because he was a confirmed bachelor, but because it didn't figure into her short-term plans.

Chandra wanted to secure a teaching position, settle into her new residence, and dating Preston would become an added bonus. "I believe you," she whispered, succumbing to the forceful, drugging possession of his lips. It was with supreme reluctance that she ended the kiss. "Let's stop before one of the kids see us. I don't want to send my nieces the wrong message, that it's okay to make out in a car."

Preston's lids lowered, he successfully concealed his innermost feelings from the woman he wanted to make love to with a need that bordered on desperation. He knew it was her beauty, poise, intelligence and sensuality that fueled his obsession.

"The curtain just came down on the first act."

Chandra smiled up at him through her lashes. "When do we begin act two?"

"Tonight."

Chapter 8

Tonight. The single word reverberated in Chandra's head as she led the way toward the rear of the house where her sister lived with her husband and their nieces. The sound of voices raised in laughter greeted her and Preston when they walked into an expansive patio overlooking an inground pool. Her parents were holding court with their granddaughters and grandson, Myles and Zabrina lay together on a webbed lounge by the pool and Griffin stood at the stove in the outdoor kitchen with an arm around Belinda's waist. A long rectangular table with seating for twelve and a smaller table with half that amount were set up under a white tent.

Chandra stopped short, causing Preston to plow into her back; she saw someone she hadn't expected to see. Sitting under an umbrella with Denise was Xavier Eaton. The last time she'd seen her cousin was days before he was to begin his tour of duty in Afghanistan.

"I'll introduce you to everyone after I talk to someone," she whispered to Preston.

Arms outstretched and grinning from ear to ear, she walked into Xavier's embrace when he stood up. She found herself crushed against a rock-hard chest. "Welcome home, Captain Eaton."

"It's now Major Eaton. I'd pick you up, but I have a bum leg."

Pulling back, Chandra saw that he was supporting himself with a cane. She hadn't realized her cousin, dressed in civilian clothes and looking more like a male model than a professional soldier, had sustained an injury. She'd lost count of the number of women who'd asked her to introduce them to Xavier. He was always polite to them, while smoothly rejecting further advances. He had also earned the reputation of remaining friends with his former girlfriends.

What they didn't know was that he had a mistress. Xavier Phillip Eaton ate, breathed and slept military. He'd attended military prep school, graduated and then enrolled at The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina. He continued his military education when he was accepted into the Marine Corps War College. After 9/11 he was deployed to Iraq. He completed one tour of duty before he was sent to Afghanistan.

"Is it serious?"

"It will heal."

“That’s not what I asked, Xavier.”

Xavier leaned in closer. “If you’re asking if I’m going to be a cripple, then the answer is no.”

Narrowing her gaze, Chandra decided to drop the subject. Tiptoeing, she kissed his smooth cheek. “We’ll talk later.” Shifting slightly, Chandra beckoned Preston closer, reaching for his hand as he approached. “Preston, I’d like for you to meet my cousin, Xavier Eaton. Xavier, Preston Tucker.”

Xavier offered his hand. “Why does your name sound so familiar?”

Denise Eaton stood up, looping her arm around her brother’s waist. “That’s because he’s Preston Tucker, the playwright.”

Xavier pumped Preston’s hand vigorously. “I’m honored to meet you.” He gave him a rough embrace, while slapping him on the back with his free hand.

Chandra caught Denise’s look of expectation. “Preston, this is Xavier’s sister, Denise.”

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