

An
UNGUARDED MOMENT

Family Reunion—In The Wisdom of the Ancestors Series

Ann Jeffries

Copyright © 2013 by Ann Jeffries
annjeffries@newviewliterature.com

All rights reserved.

Printed and Bound in the United States of America

Published and Distributed By
New View Literature
820 67th Avenue N, #7603
Myrtle Beach, South Carolina 29572
www.newviewliterature.com

Cover and Interior Design By
TWA Solutions
www.twasolutions.com

ISBN: 978-0-9915003-3-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014907677

First printing May 2014

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher—except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a newspaper, magazine or journal.

For inquires, contact the publisher.

I bow in humble gratitude to:

The Creator

The Ancestors

*Authors Evelyn Palfrey and Janice Sims
(My taliswomen)*

Editor Chandra Sparks Taylor

Literary Agent Richard Curtis

Attorneys Abraham Leib and Stephen Ross

*Khari and Yasemin Washington Brown
(You know why? Because you rock!)*

*Friends and mentors Brenda Irons LeCesne and
Rosezella Canty Letsome, Esqs.
(When I grow up, I want to be just like you)*

and

a deep-knee bend to the truly amazing men I have known

“If loving you is wrong, I don’t want to do right.”

Otis Redding

“Me and Mrs. Jones, we’ve got a thing going on.”

Billy Paul

Prologue

JaiHonnah fitfully tossed and turned in her sleep. In her dreams the hawk's eyes glowed meanly. Her fear increased exponentially. The ground beneath her feet shook, cracked like an earthquake before a gulf began to grow, widen, separating her from the man before her. The divide drew him away from her beyond her reach. She called to him, reached out toward him. He remained immobile, silent. Stone-like in his demeanor. *Didn't he see what was happening to them? Couldn't he feel the earth move, shudder, breaking apart? Breaking them apart.* She screamed his name over and over. She had to get him back into her arms, warn him of the danger. The hawk's curly talons dug into his flesh. She screamed his name again, imploring him to reach out to her, to take her hands into his, but still no response came from him. He remained immobile. The chasm continued to widen. She became frantic, fighting to breach the gulf, screaming for him to be careful of the hawk. Then something clamped around her, holding her still and pulling on her. Engulfing her in warmth, safety, pleasure.

Tugging her from her nightmare, he whispered, *"Let yourself go, baby. Relax. I'm here with you. No one but us, Jai. No one in the universe, but you and me."*

Wake up, JaiHonnah.

JaiHonnah pulled her eyes open as the man embraced her, enfolded her in his tenderness, and laved her from her neck to her ear. She held him tightly and cried.

Chapter 1

What the hell . . . ?

JaiHonnah Reise Chapman woke with a start and looked around wildly, confused when the bright interior lights of the transatlantic jumbo jet flickered on and the lead flight attendant's voice pealed through the fuselage. She was pitifully grateful, again, that the nightmare had ended. She hadn't had much rest in the last week while planning for her return to the United States. Still a little disoriented, she batted and then briskly rubbed her eyes. *Had she been dreaming or had the attendant said something about being on the ground at Dulles International Airport in thirty minutes?* JaiHonnah looked at her watch through still bleary eyes, but it was still set to the time in Italy. Then she remembered. *The dream.* Her brow beetled. *It was so real each and every time. But, who was the man? Who had held her?* Her palms covered her face, blocking out the light. Momentarily closing her eyes in concentration, she tried to see his face, remember his name, his smell, his taste, his physique, something, *anything.* Try as she might, nothing came to her, no vision, no smell or taste. Only the drone of the aircraft engines and the sounds of the slowly waking cabin passengers surrounded her.

Snatching her hands away from her face in frustration and opening her eyes, she spotted an attendant who was distributing warm, damp, peppermint-scented hand towels to the weary travelers in the first-class cabin. "What time is it?"

"It's six A.M. Eastern Time," the attendant replied as she handed a towel to JaiHonnah and the man seated next to her before quickly moving on to serve the people across the aisle.

"Thank you," JaiHonnah said, stifling a yawn. She placed the warm towel to her face and inhaled. Then something dawned on her; her brow

bunched. Removing the towel, she turned to her seatmate. “Did the flight attendant say that it would be another thirty minutes before we land?”

“*Si, Bella,*” the man, who looked to be an Antonio Bandaris clone or of Spanish descent, answered. “We are late, no?”

“We are very late, yes,” JaiHonnah answered with some concern as she once again held the towel to her face. She sensed that the man was still watching her, but she did not turn to confirm her suspicion. Instead, she stood, excused herself and went to the rest room.

Her seatmate was certainly handsome and charming, as on-camera personalities with major television networks located in Madrid, Spain, tended to be. She enjoyed talking with him about his career in European broadcasting until his conversation became more of an inquisition into her personal life, and she noticed him surreptitiously slipping his wedding band from his finger. Sure that he recognized her, he tried to make conversation from the moment they boarded the aircraft in Milan, Italy. JaiHonnah was skillful in diverting his questions away from her—for a while at least. She didn’t want to be rude, but as with most men with whom she came in contact, especially reporters, it wasn’t her views on world issues that stirred their interest.

She hoped that her new life and career would let people look beyond the façade, she thought, looking critically at her face and sighing into the mirror. She longed for the day when men didn’t want to paw her on sight and women didn’t hate her instantly for something that she had absolutely no control over. Silently she hoped that her new boss would find her worthy of employment because of her brains, not her body. Inwardly, she sighed again. She wouldn’t be able to convince her potential employer of anything if she didn’t get to the meeting on time. She left the rest room and returned to her seat.

The flight was supposed to arrive at five-thirty. That arrival time would have allowed her to be prompt for her interview. Now she realized that she would be really late. She frowned. Maybe she was wrong about the time for the meeting. She reached into her briefcase and pulled out

her iPhone to check the text message that she received from one of her college friends, Vivian Alexander Jackson.

Jai—

Everything is all set. Meeting with J. Roderick Baylor at seven A.M. on Friday, September 3, confirmed at his office. Address: 1255 Water Street, South West, Washington, D.C. Phone: 202-555-3414. Sorry I can't meet you at the airport, but I'll see you when I get back from Chicago. The keys to the condo are at the Watergate Complex front desk. Good luck!

Love ya,

Viv

Well, she wasn't wrong about the time for her appointment, JaiHonnah thought and sighed. She put the iPhone back into her briefcase and leaned back into the seat, looking below at the dimly lit, checkerboard landscape of the Northern Virginia countryside. She regretted not taking an earlier flight out of Milan or she could have ordered one of her father's jets to bring her to the states at any time. If she had she would have had plenty of time to prepare for her interview. Instead she ended up on this red-eye. As it was, she barely had time to change Euro into American currency before her flight departed. Just getting through customs was going to be at least thirty minutes. *Who held a job interview at seven in the morning anyway?* she silently questioned. Being late was certainly not the first impression that she wanted to make with a potential employer. This scenario was not looking good. Not good at all.

She really *wanted* this job, not that she *needed* it actually. She was, in fact, a very wealthy woman. She really didn't have to work for a living. However, she had never traded on her wealth, her beauty or her family name. No, she needed this job because it was in her character to work—and work hard. She had something to prove to herself; that despite her appearance, family connection or wealth, she had a craft and self-

reliance. She recognized that not too many companies were willing to take a chance on a new architect, even one with a lot of initials, including a Ph.D. after her name, and certainly not on a woman of mixed heritage without any real practical experience. Those who were willing weren't looking for her architectural or engineering skill and ability, she knew. Too often, they were more interested in her connection to her family's empire. She was determined to make a name for herself, to build a career despite her illustrious family background.

No matter what it took, J. Roderick Baylor, president of Baylor Construction Company, was going to hire her -- whether he knew it or not. Not for what she could do for him in her father's boardroom, and certainly not for what he might think that she could do for him in the bedroom. No, what she was offering Baylor Construction was her years of training, creativity and determination to do excellent work, to make her mark on the world's landscape. She already wasted too much of her life and, with the big three-zero staring her in the face, it was time to get busy. One failed marriage wasn't going to stop her and neither was her father, Jake Hawkins.

It was Big Jake who talked her into marrying Calvin B. Chapman III in the first place and wasting nearly two years of her life. Back then she was too young and too inexperienced to fight her father on his level. It was just another merger he and the Chapmans wanted anyway. Well, Big Jake got Chapman Forest Industries, bought Calvin and his father out for far less than its actual worth, and her divorce was thrown in for good measure. Her older brothers, Jacob, Jr. and Adam, were both heading major divisions of BlackHawk Industries under Big Jake's careful tutelage. Her father was after her to take over and run the part of his empire that acquired Chapman Forest Products.

At their father's instigation, her brothers both visited her in Italy on a couple of occasions to convince her to take a position in the family business, but being under her daddy's thumb was not for her. Nope, this time Big Jake wasn't going to interfere in her life. During her teen years he had groomed her as someone's hood ornament, and she hated every

minute of it. Entering the Miss San Antonio Beauty Contest wasn't her idea either. Maybe, if she had lost the contest, things would have been different. Even before she won the Miss Texas Beauty Pageant and was first runner-up in the Miss America Pageant, she had about had it with Jake Hawkins pushing her around.

It was demeaning to be paraded around barely clothed in front of thousands of people who had a "body by Fischer, brain by Mattel" view of her, just like the man seated next to her now on the aircraft. The propositions she received were often lewd, obscene, indecent or vulgar. She hadn't tolerated that kind of behavior in her private life and she wouldn't in her professional life. She easily rejected offers to model for some of the top fashion designers, screen-test for movie roles and commercials from advertising agencies. Rather, she had opted for continuing her education toward making a respectable career for herself as an architect and civil engineer.

Living and studying abroad for the last four years since the divorce gave her the type of independence and self-reliance she needed. She did miss her family; her father and brothers, and especially her grandmother, Kiavi Ramose Littlefeather. JaiHonnah vowed that she would make time to visit her grandmother on the Navajo reservation in Shiprock, New Mexico. They also had business to discuss concerning her RAMOSE blind-trust account. JaiHonnah had not exercised her options in her portfolio since before she married Calvin. She gave her grandmother power-of-attorney to handle her financial affairs and to vote her proxy with her shares in her father's empire any way Kiavi Littlefeather saw fit. Her grandmother was a skillful businesswoman and JaiHonnah trusted her implicitly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the pilot has turned on the fasten seat belt sign. Please put your trays and seats in the upright position in preparation for landing."

The announcement dragged JaiHonnah from her reverie. She was now ready to put thoughts of her old frivolous life behind her. This was the first day of the rest of her new, professional life, and she was

determined to take control of it and to live it to her advantage. As she felt the landing gear lock into place and saw the flaps lowering, a new excitement tickled her spine. *Look out, J. Roderick Baylor, here I come!* The plane slowed and felt as if it had nearly stopped in midair, but the ground was coming up fast beneath them as the jumbo craft lost altitude. The wheels of the plane touched down and briefly bounced up again before heading smoothly down the runway. The pilot put on the brakes and the engines roared loudly.

As the plane taxied to the gate, the pilot said, “Welcome to the nation’s capitol. The ground temperature is seventy-five degrees. Sorry for the delay, but thank you for flying the friendly skies of United Airlines. Hope to see you again on another United Airlines flight.”

Not likely anytime soon, JaiHonnah mused as she hustled in preparation for deplaning. Before the plane came to a full stop, passengers leaped to their feet, aisles flooded and overhead compartments flew open. After eight hours in the air, she was going to be late for her first real job interview, and all United said was “*sorry about the delay!*”

JaiHonnah was the first person off the aircraft. *There were advantages to flying first class,* she thought as she grabbed a luggage carrier and positioned herself at the head of the carousel, impatiently waiting for her luggage and looking at her watch. As the carousel started to move she saw her luggage come out first. *Hub, maybe United isn’t that bad after all.* She grabbed the two oversized bags, laid her exhibit case and briefcase on top and sprinted to a customs officer.

“Welcome home, Ms. Chapman. Seems you’ve been away a long time,” the tall, darkly handsome officer said with all thirty-two showing, as he reviewed her passport flipping through the document to find an empty page.

“Thanks, but that’s Mrs. Chapman, and I have nothing to declare,” she said, clearly anxious to be on her way.

The smile closed in on the thirty-two. “I’ll have to check your luggage anyway.”

JaiHonnah huffed. “Look, I’m late already, couldn’t we dispense with the—.”

“Open up, *Mrs. Chapman.*” The man glared with a raised eyebrow.

This is not good, she thought. She wondered whether she put that expensive bottle of French perfume in her luggage or whether she packed it in one of her trunks, which were to be shipped later. Struggling to lift each piece of luggage, she glared at the man. As the customs officer examined each item in her luggage she caught the scent of the *Oui* perfume and so did he. His large hand wrapped around the exquisitely designed bottle. Fortunately, it was a half-full bottle. No tariffs. She smiled.

“Are we finished?” she anxiously queried with a big, Texas-size smile.

“Have a very good day, *Mrs. Chapman.*” He grinned, all thirty-two again present and accounted for.

JaiHonnah whizzed through the airport, dodging others as if she were on an escape mission. Fortunately, taxicabs were plentiful and she was third in line. The oppressive heat and humidity began to sap her energy while she waited. Finally, she hopped into the gray Washington Flyer taxi while the driver loaded her luggage and they were off. As soon as the driver was underway she leaned forward.

“There’s an extra fifty in it for you if you get me to 1255 Water Street, South West, in thirty minutes or less.”

“Lady, this is Washington, D.C.,” he said in a raspy, but amused voice. “You couldn’t get Congress to move for fifty billion, but I’ll do the best I can. It should be pretty clear sailing on the Dulles Access Road, but government gridlock is going to get us once we’re inside the Capitol Beltway,” he said, laughing. “You must not be from around here.”

“No, I’ve been out of the country for several years.”

“Well, welcome back stateside. You here on business or pleasure?”

“Both. I have a job interview this morning and I’m visiting a college friend.”

“Thinking of moving back to the states, are you?”

“Yes, sir, I think I am.”

“Where you from, lady?”

“Originally, Hawkinstown, Texas. It’s outside of San Antonio.”

“Never heard of Hawkinstown, but I heard of San Antonio.”

“I’m not surprised. It only has a population of one,” she deadpanned.

The cabby laughed and they chatted all the way into Washington, D.C., as she constantly urged him to hurry. Traffic was horrendous as they came across the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge and hit a backup so slow that it resembled a parking lot. She was ready to get out and walk to make better time, but then she didn’t know exactly where she was going. Washington streets were very confusing, but she was determined to learn all about the city that Benjamin Banneker designed and that she intended to call her home. She looked at her watch again. Time was passing too quickly.

A group of tourists passed slowly at an intersection on their way to the Lincoln Memorial. The Viêt Nam Veterans Memorial was already jammed and tour buses blocked the intersection leading to the Washington Monument. Finally the traffic signal changed, and they were able to crawl another block east on Constitution Avenue. JaiHonnah made a mental note to visit the Museum of Natural History as they passed the historic building with its gothic architecture. The city was pregnant with such solid monuments of architectural wonders. Directly ahead of her was the United States Capitol with its gleaming white dome and both houses of Congress ensconced in white-pillared replicas of historical European architecture.

JaiHonnah glanced again at her watch, nervously biting her lower lip. She would have time to see it all after she locked down this position. She checked her makeup again and brushed her hair into a French twist, piling the rest into a ball on the top of her head. Thank goodness for bobby pins. Maybe it was time for a new look, she ruminated while checking her appearance in her compact mirror. She could get her hair cut shorter instead of the nearly yard-long, heavy strands inherited from her Navajo and Spanish ancestry, which flowed over her shoulders and midway down her back. Long hair was fine for beauty pageants and even while studying in Europe, but that was then, the past. This was now, the future.

As they sat stymied in another long traffic light beside the colorful new Native American Museum, her grandmother came to mind. When she was a little girl, JaiHonnah remembered sitting for long, lazy afternoons brushing her grandmother's hair while her grandmother spun such wonderful Navajo princess stories. Her grandmother's hair was so long, silky, and thick that she could sit on it. Kiavi Littlefeather was now a world renowned author of children's fiction.

JaiHonnah's mother had worn her hair long, too, until the day she died more than fifteen years ago. JaiHonnah still missed Skai Hawkins so much, but so did everyone. Her mother, a registered nurse, was beautiful inside and out, her skin so clear, fresh and supple. Her beautiful, flawless complexion from her mestizaje heritage and her soft-spoken Navajo and Mexican accent even brought Big Jake to his knees.

Her father first saw her when he opened his eyes in the hospital. She was standing by his bed sponging his body after his injury at an oil rig. He was only eighteen at the time and she was twenty three, but he was in love at first sight. They were married and expecting their first child, Jacob Junior, eight months later. Eighteen months after that, their second child, a girl they named LaiLoni Skai, was kidnapped from the birthing clinic and never found. Next, her brother, Adam, was born and then JaiHonnah, the baby of the Hawkins family.

JaiHonnah knew that Jake missed Skai most of all though. She was his heart and soul. Such a pair they were with his big, six-foot-five, two-hundred-forty pounds, her mother's five-foot-five frame, and her body, which weighed one hundred twenty pounds soaking wet. God, how Skai used to laugh at her children's antics, JaiHonnah mused, smiling. Skai always had a Navajo or Mexican parable to fit each situation that JaiHonnah and her brothers got themselves into. Skai may have been small in stature, but she was a skyscraper in her family's eyes.

When the cabby laid on his horn, JaiHonnah snapped back to the present. "Are we there yet?" she nervously queried, checking her watch for the umpteenth time.

"Yeah, lady, just a few more blocks. Just across Maine Avenue and we will be there."

JaiHonnah again sat back in the taxicab, trying as best she could to be patient and control her anxiety. She wondered what this Baylor was like. Vivian hadn't told her much about him; only that he owned a young company that was climbing quickly up the business ladder. Even if it was a relatively new company, perhaps the owner was one of those bosses who would be reluctant to hire a woman as his sole architect or someone who only knew one part of the business—the money end—and only focused on that. Mentally, she went over her accomplishments: her undergraduate training at Spelman, her master's from Texas A&M University and now her double doctorates in architecture and structural engineering from Arcadia Laboratories, Politecnico di Milano. She had studied with some of the world's leading architects, those on the cutting edge of design. Of course she could talk about the awards and commendations she received, but even those accomplishments bored her to tears. No, she decided, her portfolio would speak louder than anything she could verbalize about her academic background. She had selected her best, prize-winning works in a cross section of all of the architectural treatments she created or designed. Perhaps Mr. Baylor wouldn't appreciate those studies in African architecture that she chose to include. Maybe she should have picked more pieces with the gothic approach. After all, this was Washington, D.C., and the home of European architectural clones.

She wished that she knew more about J. Roderick Baylor, but she didn't even have time to Google him. Perhaps, then she'd know how best to approach the interview.

"We're here, lady," the cabby said. "It's only 7:50. We made pretty good time considering the traffic and all."

"Oh?" JaiHonnah said, snapping the door open. "Not if I've already lost the job, we didn't."

The cabby chuckled. "Lady, as beautiful as you are, nobody in his right mind would turn you down for anything, including a job."

She gave him a smile. "From your lips, sir, to Mr. Baylor's ears."

The four-story red brick building in a warehouse district looked deserted until a convoy of trucks with a *BCC* insignia peeled out from

the parking lot adjacent to the building. A small gold plaque at the door read: Baylor Construction Company. When no one answered the door JaiHonnah turned, stepped off the curb and hailed the passing vehicles. Finally one of them stopped. She stepped up to the passenger door as the driver rolled down the window.

“I’m looking for Mr. Baylor, a Mr. J. Roderick Baylor,” she said to a disgruntled driver.

“Oh, you mean JRock. He’s gone, lady. He was here until about seven-fifteen. Pissed off though ‘cause he was waiting to have a meeting, but the bastard didn’t show. Now there’s gonna be hell to pay. JRock he don’t like to be late doing nothin’, and he was spittin’ nails when he left.”

JaiHonnah sighed. “Oh, no.”

“You one’na JRock’s women?” the driver asked, grinning at her. “You certainly are pretty enough.”

“His woman?” she indignantly flashed. “No, I’m the person who he was waiting for!”

The drive ruefully shook his head. “Lady, if I was you, I’d leave Dodge City now on the first thing smokin’. JRock, he don’t...”

“I know, I know,” she interrupted hastily, impatient. “Do you know where I can find him?”

The man scratched his head, apparently in thought. “Lady, I know where he was goin’, but...”

“Please, this is very important,” she begged. “Could you take me to him?”

The man looked at his watch and then at her contemplatively. “Ah-ite, lady. Get in. I’ll take you to where he was heading, but ain’t no telling whether he’s gonna be there now and if he is, he’s gonna kick my butt for not being on the job he sent me on.”

JaiHonnah sucked up her grit and quickly paid the cabby who put her luggage in the back of the truck. She climbed into the dusty cab with the Baylor employee. She was very nervous now, looking at her watch, wringing her hands, and worrying her bottom lip.

“Tough man, huh?” she asked the driver as they rode through the traffic-clogged city.

“Lady, steel is softer than him,” the driver lamented, shaking his head thoughtfully. “Hope you got a hard hat.”

“No, just a hard head,” she mumbled, summoning her courage.

Finally they arrived at the job site at Pennsylvania Avenue and 21st Street, North West. A fourteen-story building that took up the entire city block was growing up out of the ground. A big sign at the site read: BAYLOR CONSTRUCTION. DOTHAN ELECTRICAL. AVERY PLUMBING. Cement trucks were lined up around the site with their motors running and barrows rolling. Men in hard hats were everywhere on every floor of the open-frame, concrete structure. A huge crane swung its long arm over the edifice and lifted tons of wet cement up the skeletal structure while a convoy of backhoes churned up a blizzard of dust and dirt as they backfilled around the base of the structure.

“C’mon, lady, let’s see if he’s still here,” the driver tentatively grumbled.

JaiHonnah didn’t have to be invited, but when she exited the truck cab a dry dust cloud coated her from head to foot. She cupped her hands over her face, coughing and looking around for anyone who might be the tough-as-nails Baylor.

“Hey! JRock!” the man escorting her yelled and then, with fingers between his teeth, whistled loudly.

Other men at the work site stopped and turned in their direction. They began whistling, too, but not for Baylor, she noticed. The dry, dusty wind was lifting her above-the-knee linen skirt and tugging at her criss-crossed blouse as she fought through the blizzard. The catcalls were for her, but she was too anxious to find her potential new employer to care what was going on around her.

“JRock! Hey, JRock!” her escort called again. “Over here!”

JaiHonnah covered her eyes against the blowing dust and tried to see who was approaching.

Out of the storm of noise, dirt, dust and lewd comments, JaiHonnah saw a mountain of a man bearing down on them. Suddenly the earth seemed to shift, tremble from under her feet and the sun was born. Moving toward her was the brawniest man ever created. The white

hardhat on his head didn't mask much, including the scowl on his all-too-handsome face. The dust parted for him like Moses opening the Red Sea. All six feet, eight inches, two-hundred-thirty pounds of molten masculinity was bearing down on her with a vengeance. Sharp, piercing, black eyes like those of a hunter seeking his game surrounded by thick lashes and eyebrows furrowed to the bridge of his flaring nostrils, neatly trimmed mustache, and full, luscious mouth. JaiHonnah saw muscle mania from the neck down under a Million Man March T-shirt that must have been painted on by one of the master artists. A black Adonis with a narrow waist, a pronounced six pack and long, sculptured thighs under the low-riding jeans, Baylor's tall, powerful torso moved relatively swiftly in the ruthlessly laced brogans on his feet. He was intimidating with his imposing size and, as he cast his eyes around at the melee, the noisy catcalls immediately ceased. JaiHonnah involuntarily caught her breath.

"Murray, what the hell are you doing here?" he bellowed. "You were supposed to be over at McKinley High School thirty minutes ago!"

"Boss, this lady is looking for you. Said she—."

"Move it, Murray!" the mountain rumbled with malice.

"Sure thing, JRock. Color me gone!" Murray said. "I'll put your luggage in his truck, lady," the driver whispered to JaiHonnah before he scurried away.

Then Baylor swung his laser-beam gaze to her. JaiHonnah had forgotten to breathe. She felt like she had been moving at the speed of light and suddenly hit the proverbial brick wall, J. Roderick Baylor. She choked as his eyes seized her.

"Well?" he asked none too politely.

"*You're* J. Roderick Baylor?" she asked in disbelief.

His brow furrowed, lips thinned to a straight line, and his fists punched his hips. "Is that a trick question?" he clipped sarcastically.

"Uh-uh, I've come about the job. I mean, I'm sorry I was late, but, you see, my flight got in—."

“Job? What job? I already filled the secretarial positions. Didn’t your agency tell you? Damn! You called me all the way down here... Look, lady, this is no place for a woman . . .” he rapidly spat, clearly frustrated.

“Secretary? No, I’m not a secretary, Mr. Baylor. I’ve come about the—.”

“You’re the baby-sitter then, Mrs. Betterman? Oh, okay. I’ve read your qualifications, but somehow I thought that you’d be older. Never mind. I can deal with... Look, my girls are still away, but your credentials and references are acceptable, so I’ll try you out on a temporary basis. I want you to start in two weeks when they return—.”

“Baby-sitter?” she interrupted, her confusion began to clear like the dust. “I’m no baby-sitter!” Her ire rose, then settled when JaiHonnah reminded herself that she wanted this job. “I’m, uh, uh...”

“Speak up, woman! I don’t have all day. Who the hell are you?”

“I’m your new architect and civil engineer,” she said confidently, squaring her shoulders, and extending her hand. “I’m J. Reise Chapman.”

The look on his face was priceless; sold for about two cents with expectations for five cents change JaiHonnah thought, but she noticed his fists tighten on his hips.

“Damn! I’m going to kill Vivian!” He scowled, turning his back to her in apparent frustration and issuing a string of imaginative expletives.

JaiHonnah was left with her outstretched hand hanging in midair as Baylor communicated with the heaven above. She had enough of his arrogant, chauvinistic tantrum though. She could feel the hair standing up on the back of her neck, her temper peaking. She didn’t have to take this kind of behavior from this Neanderthal. He acted just as arrogantly as Big Jake, and JaiHonnah wasn’t having it. Job or no job.

She grabbed a thick arm muscle in a failed attempt to turn him around. He lifted his eyes from her hand and looked over his shoulder at her. Her voice rose in direct proportion to her ire. “Look, Mr. Baylor, I’ve had years of training, and I’m qualified to do the job. If you think you can do better with that paltry little sum you’re offering, go ahead and try

it, but you'll be missing out on the best architect and civil engineer in the western world!"

"Oh, really?" he said then snorted derisively. He turned toward her, his arms akimbo.

"And another thing..." she continued.

Roderick's eyes flashed over the sensuous curves of the lady architect and engineer as she read him the riot act for his behavior. *She has spunk*, he'd give her that. She'd need it in this male-dominated business. What could Vivian have been thinking by recommending this woman to him with her distracting beauty? Her tall, leggy, statuesque form was clearly aerobicized into a soft, tight package and stood out ahead of any woman he had ever seen. Even his former wife hadn't sent sensuous shock waves through him like this golden-bronze beauty. Although covered with dust, she was still an exotically voluptuous woman; far too beautiful for a job in a construction industry that was predominately male dominated. That thought annoyed him. Thick, raven hair was piled on top of her head with baby-fine wisps caressing her perfect oval-shaped face and high cheekbones. He was hard-pressed not to gaze at her pearl-white teeth and expressive mouth as she talked. She had wide, round whiskey-brown eyes which sparkled against a golden-bronze complexion that had to have been manufactured. No one's skin could look that smooth, that clear, that clean, but she was wearing very little makeup, he noticed.

Her full bosom rose and fell, cutting his breath. No hourglass could possibly be more perfectly shaped, and the legs attached to that shape would make Beyonce envious. The hands were delicate and expressive, captivating him with their grace even as she wangled a finger in front of his face. Ordinarily, he resented the way men at construction sites behaved when attractive women passed by, and his men knew he wouldn't tolerate it, but this time, they were right. She was spectacular. Then he noticed that she was wearing wedding rings. That brought him up short. No matter how attracted to her he was, she would be safe from him and any one of the men who worked for him. She was a married woman and that suited him just fine.

He didn't need to interview her or review her credentials. He implicitly trusted Vivian's judgment.

"When can you start?" Roderick asked, shifting his weight.

JaiHonnah stopped her tirade in mid-syllable. He had caught her off guard with that question. She was just getting ready to shift into second gear.

"Immediately," she quipped, quickly regaining a professional demeanor.

Confident, he thought, as he stifled the grin that inched toward his lips. "I'll give you a try, but only because Vivian seems to have a lot of confidence in you and your ability. She's my lawyer and I trust her judgment. However, I expect you to be on time for appointments."

"And you won't be disappointed," she said, bravely, her chin defiantly upraised.

"We'll see," he said, smirking, and then excused himself to step a few feet away to answer his phone. Turning his back to her, Roderick pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and thumbed it on. Looking at her was entirely too distracting so he listened to his sister until he could get his hormones back in sync. "Kelley, by the way, J. Reise Chapman goes on the payroll as of today. Get her contract and insurance papers processed through administration. I'll bring her in when I come...Yes, she's a woman. I'm going over to the D.C. Office of Licenses and Inspections to check on some of the other job sites and then I'll be in...No, nothing's wrong. Any other calls?...What did she want? Never mind. I'll check with you when I come in. I'm out."

He ended his call and turned back toward her with a scowl, JaiHonnah noticed. She figured that this time his foul mood had nothing to do with her and, for that, she was supremely grateful.

"All right, let's go. I've got things to do today, and you might as well tag along," he growled, taking her elbow and leading her to his truck.

JaiHonnah didn't know that *'tag along'* meant an all-day affair, being carted around like so much extra baggage with less sensitivity than porters treat airline luggage. Roderick went about his business as if she weren't even there. He drove his big, black, extended-cab pickup to and

from at least eleven of his construction sites never stopping once to eat a real meal. Her tan, linen business suit and French silk blouse were ruined and her Italian shoes were a mess. She was dirty, tired and starving by six o'clock that evening when he finally parked in his office building garage on Water Street.

"You'll have to come into the office with me now and sign some papers before you leave, Mrs. Chapman. Just some routine forms for our employee records, benefits package, and your employment contract. Vivian's law firm also does the company's accounting and taxes. She's hell to deal with if I don't keep everything intact for the IRS and the insurance carrier."

"Oh," was all that JaiHonnah could manage as she peeled her tired, aching body out of the truck cab. Although the day was intriguing and she learned a great deal about some of Baylor Construction's ongoing projects, her shoes were killing her feet. The September moist heat matted her underclothes to her body. Her legs ached from trying to keep up with Roderick Baylor's long, quick strides around and through each job site. Her hair looked like it could have been the prototype for Medusa. All she wanted was solid food, a bath and a bed before the jet lag completely shut her down. Thank goodness it was Friday. She would have the weekend to decipher all of the notes that she took and to prep for her first day in the office on Monday.

They entered a spacious and nicely decorated reception area on the ground floor of his office building. An attractive woman, casually dressed, sat on the edge of a desk talking on the telephone. She motioned silence as they entered.

"No, Monique, I don't know what time Roderick will be in. He's been on the road all day, but I'll be sure to tell him that you called again... Yes, kiss the girls for me..." She held the telephone away from her ear and they could all hear the venom and the loud bang as Monique slammed down the receiver.

"Hey, JRock," the woman said softly. Then she turned to greet her brother's companion.

“J. Reise Chapman, this is Kelley Baylor, my sister and my best friend.” He said and smiled. “Kelley is also the Vice President of Baylor Construction, Chief of Staff of the Baylor corporate structure, and she keeps me on a short chain.”

“Hello, Kelley,” JaiHonnah said wearily with a half-hearted smile, extending her hand. “You can call me Jai or JaiHonnah. I’m pleased to meet you.”

“JaiHonnah, welcome aboard. You certainly are a surprise,” she said, chuckling. “When Vivian recommended you, we thought that J. Reise Chapman was a man. It will be nice to have another professional woman in the office. You’re tall too. You wouldn’t happen to play a little round ball, would you? We have a company team—.”

JaiHonnah interrupted, smiled, and held up both hands. “If you mean basketball, it’s not my game.”

“With your height, I’m surprised you don’t play,” Kelley said.

“Everyone makes the same mistake because I’m tall, but I do play handball, racquetball, tennis, and a decent game of golf when I’m awake.” She smiled wryly indicating her fatigue. She turned her attention to Roderick. “Mr. Baylor, you said something about papers?”

“Uh, yes, Kelley, did you...”

Kelley pulled a folder from the desk behind her and handed it to JaiHonnah. “Yes, right here. Why don’t you have a seat and look over these papers? I’ve indicated where you should sign.” When JaiHonnah moved away to take a seat at an empty desk, Kelley turned back to her brother and guided him away for a little privacy.

“What is it this time?” he asked solemnly.

“You’re not going to like this, but...”

“If that was Monique on the telephone, I already know I’m not going to like it. Don’t candy coat it, Kelley. What’s the problem?”

“JRock, don’t get angry, but Monique is putting the girls on a flight back to D.C. tomorrow morning and—.”

“What the hell—?”

“C’mon, JRock,” she said, sighing. “You know how Monique can be. She wasn’t cut out for motherhood. She says that Shelly and Shelby are

driving her crazy, and it's not convenient for them to be with her right now. She has a screen test for a feature-length film or something in two or three weeks and she says that her nerves are shot."

"Damn. They're only four years old. She's the adult. They haven't seen her for a year. Can't she cope for a month?"

"We're talking about Monique, JRock, not Mother Teresa. Don't let it get to you. The girls want to come home. They said they missed their daddy."

Roderick's shoulders slumped, and he raked a hand over his close-cut hair. "God knows that I miss them, too. I can't wait for them to get home."

"I knew you'd be happy about that part of it at least..."

Roderick looked at her suspiciously. "What's the other part that I'm *not* going to be happy about?" he asked cautiously.

Kelley sucked in her breath and said in a rush, "Monique is coming with them."

Roderick rolled his head away from her in disgust. "Damn," he said softly.

"There's more, JRock," Kelley said quietly. "Not about Monique. BlackHawk has been nosing around our operation."

Roderick's head snapped toward Kelley. "BlackHawk?"

"Yes. I smell trouble big time," Kelley asserted.

"I expected as much, but not this soon," he said thoughtfully.

"You've been doing too well to go unnoticed by the conglomerates. That last article in the *Wall Street Journal* about you taking Baylor Construction public under the new parent company, Baylor Design and Development, has a lot of people sitting up and taking notice, uh, and now this," she said hesitantly showing Roderick a new issue of *Black Enterprise* with his picture on the cover. "Apparently you've shot up the charts of the top 100 Black-owned and operated businesses. The publisher called to congratulate you. He was the one who told me about BlackHawk International. He said that he had lunch with the old man who owns BlackHawk. He also said that it was BlackHawk's CEO who

brought up your name specifically. Your friend Nick Collins, the one who owns NICO Communications, called too. He wants to feature you in an interview on his cable television and radio networks. Nick also confirmed that BlackHawk might be positioning itself to acquire your company in a hostile takeover attempt when you take it public. He suggested that you reconsider your decision.”

“I’ve considered all of the possible ramifications. I’m not going to change my business plan because BlackHawk is flapping its wings.”

“Honey, they might be circling overhead waiting for you to announce the new Baylor Design and Developers, then dive in and scoop up the restructured company.”

“Predatory birds, like BlackHawk, don’t attack until the prey is dead. The carcass is still moving.” He grinned and kissed his sister on the forehead.

She ruefully shook her head and smiled. Then she eyed JaiHonnah over Roderick’s shoulder. “Uh, JRock, I think we’re being rude to JaiHonnah.”

Roderick had almost forgotten that J. Reise Chapman was in the room during his tirade. Monique always had a deleterious effect on him. She particularly drew his evil side out when it came to their girls. His argument with Monique the previous evening had him out of sorts all day. She knew exactly what buttons to push, and she pushed them with precision, and often. It was always about their daughters. The twin girls were his heart and soul. He never wanted to let them go to visit their mother in the first place, but unfortunately Monique, with her egocentric way, was their mother and his girls had a right to know her and to love her. God knows there was so little love in Monique to begin with. How he could have let himself love and marry a woman like her, he would never understand, but he would never let it happen again. Women with marriage on their minds were out of his life for good! It was him and his girls. That’s all he needed or wanted.

“You’re right, Kelley, I have been rude.”

They moved back toward JaiHonnah.

“After you co-sign the papers, you’ve got to put a move on it, JRock. You’re due at the Congressional Black Caucus dinner at eight o’clock. Cocktails start at seven.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. What time will Vivian be here?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. Vivian was called out of town. One of her client’s cases is going before the federal appellate court in Chicago.”

“I don’t like going to these grip-and-grin things!” he fussed then glanced hopefully at his sister. “Why don’t you go instead of me, Kelley?”

“Oh no, little brother.” She held up both hands and shook her head in protest. “I’ve got other plans for tonight and they don’t include being your substitute or your date...again.” Then, with a twinkle in her eye and a sly grin on her lips, Kelley said. “Why don’t you take JaiHonnah with you? It certainly would be an opportune way for her to quickly get into the mix.”

JaiHonnah was penning her signature to the last of six documents when she heard Kelley mention her name. Startled, she looked up at them, her eyes wide.

“Me?” she squeaked. “Oh, no, I, uh, caught the redevye in from Milan. I need a bath and some food and a bed. I couldn’t possibly go to a...” She noticed that her protests seemed to be falling on deaf ears as she looked from Kelley into Roderick’s engaging eyes.

Roderick acquiesced. “You’re right. You’ve had a long day and so have I. I’ll have to pass this one up. Give me a few minutes to freshen up, and I’ll give you a ride home. Where are you staying?” Roderick asked. He didn’t like the disappointment that he felt. Was he actually hoping that he could spend more time with her?

“JRock, you’ve got to go to this gala,” Kelley insisted. “Remember you’re making an important presentation? You’re on the dais representing the United Black Contractors and Construction Industry. You can’t just not go. Besides, it means more exposure for Baylor Construction and Baylor Developers.”

“If I show up without a date, I’ll never get out of there. C’mon, change your plans, Kelley,” Roderick entreated.

“No way! I haven’t had a real date in a month of Sundays, and I don’t intend to spend the evening protecting you from the female sharks,” she said, laughing. “Besides, everyone knows that I’m your sister. I wouldn’t be any protection at all. If JaiHonnah won’t be your date tonight, Michael Jordan, Dr. J, or David Robinson might consider it. They called earlier to make sure that you were coming tonight. You can hang out with your boyz the way you used to.”

JaiHonnah tried not to listen to the conversation, but Roderick seemed to really need moral support. *Well, what the hell*, she thought. Being a hood ornament, just one more time might not be that distasteful. Besides, she had always been a sucker for a hard-luck story. Moreover, it wouldn’t be a *real* date, she rationalized. Business associates, even if they were employer and employee, attended business functions simultaneously, didn’t they? Well, so what if Roderick just happened to be the most handsome boss ever created? So what if he was wearing a wedding band? She was wearing wedding rings too. Sitting next to him at a purely business function for purely platonic reasons was no admission that she was being forced to slip back into a frivolous social life that she detested. She sucked in her resolve. She could do this for a few hours.

“Okay, okay, I’ll go,” JaiHonnah relented, “but I have to have a bath, wash my hair and—.”

“I’ll get your luggage and be right back,” Roderick said, striding out of the door.

“But where am I supposed to get ready?” JaiHonnah asked to Roderick’s retreating back.

“Upstairs,” Kelley said. “JRock lives on the third and fourth floors of this building. He converted it into a 4000 sq. ft. condo. It’s convenient for him to live and work in the same place. It also means that his daughters have access to him all day. It makes for a very convenient arrangement for all concerned.” Then she shifted gears. “Thanks, JaiHonnah. I hope that you understand that you’re not expected to do this type of double duty as a part of your regular responsibilities, but this really does help the

company. Let me assure you that JRock is a gentleman to a fault. He's a master when it comes to playing basketball or handling this company, but social affairs make him edgy. He hates the pettiness and posturing that goes on, but in Washington, fifty percent of the business gets done at these affairs."

A number of questions buzzed in Jai's mind. Basketball? Did Roderick Baylor play basketball and run a construction company? Daughters? If he had daughters, where was the mother of his children or a wife? She had no time to ask those questions and wondered whether she really wanted to know the answers.

"Yes, I know, and another fifty percent gets done on the golf course," JaiHonnah lamented. "What's the attire?"

"Sharp and shiny," Kelley said gaily. "After all, we are talking about the premier Black social event of the year. Black Caucus week started last weekend. The President of the United States opened the confab. It's been going strong all week. Everyone who is anyone in Black society nationwide will be at the closing gala ceremony tonight, including representatives of every sorority, fraternity and social organization; business leaders, church leaders and the press and news media. It is rumored that maybe the President and First Lady will attend tonight, too. A popular Black Republican is the keynote speaker tonight. It should be interesting considering that the speaker will be addressing a group that has, in the past, sworn allegiance to the Democratic flag."

"Yeah, I'll bet." JaiHonnah sighed. "I'd forgotten what living in the states entailed."

Roderick returned with her luggage and escorted her into the elevator. When they exited on the third floor, she marveled at the beautifully converted warehouse. The natural red-brick walls and partitions were lacquered and showed a deep grooved texture. Two large, red leather lounge chairs sat before a fireplace with a fluffy rug at their feet on wide-planked, gleaming Brazilian cherry hardwood floors. Sparsely decorated with large, hand-painted oils in vibrant colors by Black artists she recognized, large green plants, and rich brown micro

fiber upholstered furniture, it was decidedly a man's abode. Large, wide windows offered a panoramic view of the Washington skyline. No frills, with a combination of efficient office/living space. A giant flat-screen, digital, high-definition television surrounded by high-end, surround-sound, studio-quality stereo equipment was the only entertainment in the room. She noticed the open-concept kitchen with pots and pans hanging from hooks in the huge ceiling beams, a large center-post prep area. The dining area contained a round, butcher-block table with two chairs and two booster chairs. All in all the space was huge, yet very comfortable and homey looking.

"This way," Roderick said as he led her through a large playroom and then into a bedroom of particularly beautiful yet functional furniture. Definitely a room for his daughters with all the frills. It was gaily decorated in peach and cream colors with big stuffed animals everywhere. A bathroom with a corner shower stall and an old-fashioned, claw-foot tub sat amid cream porcelain fixtures low enough to the floor that his girls could reach them with ease. A reading area in an alcove housed books, video equipment and a desk with a computer. It was the kind of room every little girl dreamed about, JaiHonnah mused while eyeing the double beds with canopies. She could bury herself in the deep pillows that adorned them.

"Is this alright?" Roderick asked.

She smiled, looking around in awe. "It's wonderful."

"Good. I'll leave you now. My room is through those double doors," he said, motioning with a nod, although he didn't know why he told her that. It wasn't as if she would need to seek him out. "I'll be ready in thirty minutes, and I'll meet you back downstairs in the reception area." With a lively step, he left the room.

JaiHonnah watched him go and wondered where Roderick got all his energy. She had followed him around all day. He seemed as fresh and energetic as the Energizer bunny. He just kept going and going... She shook her head. "Oh, well," she said aloud, "once more into the breach." She headed for the shower.

Roderick was pleased that JaiHonnah agreed to accompany him, he decided as he stepped into his wide open, glass block shower stall. Under ordinary circumstances he'd rather do anything than have to go to one of these affairs, but if he was going to get the new company, Baylor Design and Developers, off the ground, this was part of the wind that would lift its sails.

His image as a former professional basketball player could get him in the door, but initially people rarely took him seriously as a businessman. Especially not one who grew up on the wrong side of the Anacostia River on Bad Ass Place. Hell's Kitchen, Cabrini Green, Bedford Stuyvesant, East L.A., all of them combined were not as tough as his old neighborhood. For every dilapidated, rundown project house there was a sad story of untimely death, despair or degradation. He carried the memory of the desolation in his heart no matter where he was. Too many of the young brothers he grew up with just weren't around anymore. He could have just as easily been among the missing in action in that urban war zone. Only a strong woman, his mother, Sarah Baylor, stood between him and life on the streets after his father, John Baylor, died of prostate cancer. Sarah lived long enough to see all of her five children finish college before she succumbed to a stroke brought on by high blood pressure. Roderick was the youngest of three boys and two girls. He was nearly nineteen years old when his father died, but he still remembered him.

John Thomas Baylor served his turn in Vietnam when it was still considered a minor skirmish. When he returned, he worked two jobs—one fulltime during the day at the Post Office on East Capitol Street, near their home, and the other part time as a night watchman at Washington Gas and Electric on Benning Road. Roderick still remembered his father talking about giving back to the community. No matter how bad the neighborhood got, John Baylor refused to be moved. He said that if he could survive the Việt Nam jungle, nothing in his neighborhood could scare him away. He worked with Rap Incorporated when Marion Barry, who later became the mayor of the city, headed that organization

back in the sixties. His father had been there during the 1966 March on Washington, and helped to organize the Postal Workers Union as did his mother who also worked at the Post Office until her death. They were gone now, but Roderick's dream for Baylor Plaza Park in his old neighborhood in honor of his parents was one step closer now with J. Reise Chapman on board. She, and the presentation he would make at the gala, would help to bring that dream to life and the neighborhood around it would again live.

JaiHonnah, he contemplated as he lingered in the shower distractedly lathering himself. Her name rumbled through his thoughts like the thunderstorm that he could see brewing through the large glass skylight above his head. In the distance, the continuous faint flashes of lightning spectacularly creased the darkness. Her scent was like a hot summer breeze. She took the air from his lungs and made him sweat. "JaiHonnah," he whispered, almost as a prayer as he lathered the soap over his face. Then he tried to shake off the thought of her, burying his face in the hot, pulsating spray. What could he possibly be thinking? She was an employee, just like any one of the others he had on staff. She was wearing wedding rings for crissake! However, even if she weren't, Monique was living proof of the prophecy, once burned, twice shy. JaiHonnah...correction, Mrs. JaiHonnah Reise Chapman was off limits. Out of his reach. Out of bounds. He looked down at his growing phallus. "You hear that, buddy?"

JaiHonnah lotioned the fragrant cream over her now rejuvenated torso before she slipped into her black French nylons with a patterned rose at the ankle and lace at the top. She let her mind wander as she continued dressing in the little girls' bedroom. She had a room much like this when she was growing up, she reflected as she looked around. It seemed so long ago, but the good memories of her own childhood were still fresh.

Now, however, she thought as she slipped into the black, form-fitting Vera Wang original with plunging décolleté both back and front, she

was no one's little girl anymore. Now it was the latest in haute couture Parisian fashion for her. Her outfit didn't allow for a bra. Thank goodness everything on her hadn't gone South, yet, but now that she had a job she was going to have to take full advantage of the Watergate's exercise facilities to keep her body toned and to keep up with the demanding pace of her new duties. Thanks to J. Roderick Baylor, her life was beginning.

"JRock," she whispered with a small smile edging the corner of her mouth. That's what everyone called him. It should be Rock of Gibraltar, she mused. That's what he seemed to be she recalled as her mind wandered over the events of the day. He had apparently been some kind of basketball icon. She hadn't followed sports much when she lived in the states and rarely paid attention to sports in Europe except soccer. So his celebrity was lost on her. She watched him as he deftly handled his business. He was impressive. Women in the D.C. government's Licenses and Inspections Office openly swooned when she and Roderick came in to arrange for and schedule inspections of his job sites. He seemed impervious to the flirtatious glances. JaiHonnah was certain that one woman kept him longer than necessary at the scheduling desk as she batted her mascara-caked eyelashes at him and moved her tongue over her lips while twisting her hawk-claw faux nails between a string of faux pearls. *Ugh!* How disgusting, JaiHonnah shuddered as she smoothed her dress into place, but, she recalled the Rock of Gibraltar never took his eyes off his list of inspection dates and standards.

Other men and women flocked to him for an autograph or to induce him to have dinner or drinks with them. He was courteous and kind to people who approached him and his engaging smile never dimmed no matter how often he was intercepted. She liked his openness and generous nature.

"Enough already, Jai," she muttered, chastising herself aloud when her nipples plumped. *Her new life did not include getting it on with her boss! If it did, her career could begin and end with one fell swoop. Plus, he's married, and you're obligated to play the part of a married woman.* Yet the thought of him still sent strange sensations coursing through her body. "Be still my heart."

In Italy playing the role of a married woman hadn't kept the wolves away as successfully as she had hoped, but here in the states, a woman wearing wedding rings used to mean something. She hoped that it still did, even though her former husband had proven her wrong on that score many times. A chastity belt wouldn't stop Calvin Chapman, though, she reflected. Rather, it just made the hunt and conquest that much more exciting for him. He was a charmer alright. Not as tall, masculine or as ruggedly handsome as the Rock of Gibraltar by any stretch of the imagination. Calvin was more of a pretty boy with European charm, and the women fed his ego. Just once she would have liked for him to just say no to any of the women who openly pursued him right in front of her face. Her self-esteem took a beating, but she was still ticking. She pulled herself up by her own Manolas after her divorce and now, again thanks to the Rock of Gibraltar, she was stepping a little livelier. She checked herself in a full-length mirror. Her appearance was chic, sophisticated, yet she had the air of a professional businesswoman. She liked the look. Better yet, she liked who she would become: an employed, independent woman. "Well world, ready or not, here I come!"

Roderick was leaning against the high reception desk chatting with Kelley. It was a good thing that he had something to hold on to when JaiHonnah Reise Chapman walked off the elevator. She was breathtaking. *Breathe, man. Breathe.* His heart, his loins, his blood accelerated.

"Sorry I took so...long...uh, but I couldn't get...uh, my hair dryer to..." *God, he's gorgeous!* She sighed inwardly -- "uh, work in the socket, I mean plug, I mean, uh..." *Shut up, Jai. You're making a fool out of yourself. But he's so fine! Adonis, eat your heart out. Please don't smile. Oh, God, forgive me.* He smiled and the lightning struck. *I don't know about the Rock of Gibraltar, but the Walls of Jericho must be crumbling.*

"Uh, no, you're not late. These things rarely start on time anyway," Roderick said, smiling around a large lump in his throat. *That's right, breathe slowly, but God Almighty, why me? You had to send an angel to tempt me? Alright, I'll go to High Mass and confession for what I'm thinking. Satisfied? I'll repent, but let me sin tonight! At least let me lust in my heart!*

“JaiHonnah, you look like new money!” Kelley exclaimed.

“Thanks, Kelley. I hope that my attire is alright. I haven’t been keeping up with the fashion in the states. Most of my things are being shipped, so I had very little to choose from.”

“You just set a new standard,” Roderick said, swallowing with difficulty.

JaiHonnah didn’t know or understand why Roderick’s appreciative gaze warmed her and pleased her in intimate places while at the same time excited her beyond belief.

“Uh, little brother, close your mouth, you’re drooling,” Kelley whispered for her brother’s ears only. “G’Night, you two,” she sang louder as she left the office.

Roderick and JaiHonnah stood gazing at each other, barely aware of Kelley’s departure. The air was full of electricity, but it wasn’t coming from the storm raging outside.

Roderick cleared his throat. “Uh, should we go?”

“That’s what we’re all dressed up to do, isn’t it?” JaiHonnah smiled up at him. “What would we do instead?”

Please don’t ask me that question at this particular moment, he thought. Lusting in his heart would only be the beginning of one sacrilegious, decadent, and heat-filled night.

“Of course, I meant to say that we should be going,” *to bed, together, now,* he mentally added.

Roderick led JaiHonnah to the garage. He opened the door of his custom black Mercedes Benz for her, helped her in and then got in on the other side. He could barely breathe as she crossed her long, silky legs at the knee and the split on her left thigh rode up. Her intoxicating, fresh scent filled the space as his nostrils flared, savoring the aroma. The garage door crawled up, and they drove out into the torrential rainfall, but another storm was brewing inside them.

One Gentleman cologne was doing everything but cooling JaiHonnah’s senses, she thought. When Roderick rested one large,

strong hand with long fingers on the floor-mounted stick shift, she nearly lost it. Recalling the old adage about the size of a man's hands in proportion to other more intimate parts of a man's unique anatomy had her shifting subtly in her seat. Or was it the size of his feet? Which she noticed were long too. He stood at least six foot seven. She was sitting next to this God's Gift to Womankind and having erotic thoughts about them being together, naked. He had entirely too much charisma and animal magnetism to think about. *He's your boss*, she reminded herself. *He's married. Remember?* She inhaled and exhaled slowly. She cleared her head of thoughts of him and busied herself looking at the beautiful Washington skyline.

Things had certainly changed considerably along Pennsylvania Avenue, she noted. It had been a long time since she had been in Washington. Roderick pointed out some of the buildings that Baylor Construction had worked on. The company was the contractor for the interior of the new downtown convention center and the new baseball stadium. Tonight would go a long way toward making many other major projects happen. All of the city council members and the mayor would be there.

* * *

The gala was no small-town affair. JaiHonnah and Roderick both noticed as they fell in line behind a row of limousines waiting to drive under the portico to unload their passengers. There were top executives from some of the most prestigious and influential companies in the country in attendance. A valet opened JaiHonnah's car door and helped her to the curb while a second valet whisked the car away. Roderick put her floor-length matching coat around her shoulders and offered her his arm as they entered the wide marble foyer that led to the Atrium Ballroom.

The mayor, his wife and their entourage formed a receiving line as the official hosts of the gala, greeting the guests as they arrived. Huge

ice sculptures placed strategically around the anteroom, adorned in bright, late summer foliage and greenery, glistened and melted in tiny spotlights. An army of young waitstaff moved skillfully among the throngs of people offering trays of hot and cold hors d'oeuvres. Other waiters carried champagne glasses precariously perched on trays. A jazz combo played up-tempo selections on the open mezzanine level overlooking the rapidly burgeoning crowd.

Women clad in beautiful and expensive evening regalia glided around the expansive salon, accompanied by male companions who looked quite dashing and prosperous in their couture tuxedos and black or white ties. None looked more elegant than Roderick Baylor and JaiHonnah Chapman as they entered the reception area outside the ballroom. Heads turned as they advanced through the crowd. They were met every step of the way by people who approached and greeted them warmly. Photographers seemed to capture them with each word that they uttered. Both Roderick and JaiHonnah were impervious to the flash of cameras.

Roderick furtively glanced at JaiHonnah as he talked with members of the South African delegation and she spoke in fluid French with a noted Afro-French sculptor. He prayed that she would not look more lovely and stunning than any other woman in the room. His prayers were not answered. Her dress lay softly on every perfect curve of her hourglass figure. A matching black, sequined, choker graced her long, slender neck and the diamond-stud earrings sparkled brilliantly in the ambient lighting. Her shimmering, black-tinted nylons accentuated her long, shapely legs, and her shoes had a diamond-studded strap at the ankle and one across her perfectly pedicured toes. The bodice of the dress defied the laws of gravity with its ability to remain in place, cupping her full breasts, Roderick thought. Her thick, heavy black hair was mounted gracefully atop her head in an old-fashion Georgian style reminiscent of the 18th century with wisps of hair dangling around her lovely face and onto her neck and bare back. She was an absolute vision, he thought, but he wasn't the only one who noticed her. She garnered appreciative stares

from popular actors and other entertainment moguls. She certainly was no stranger to so many who hugged her warmly and laughed with her over what he assumed was some shared memory.

JaiHonnah couldn't stifle the smile that brightened her face when she noticed Roderick's glances. His black Perry Ellis tuxedo with shawl lapels and white shirt with a band collar and onyx studs did justice to his tall, sleek frame. A Gucci watch, gold nugget ring and Lorenzo Banfi shoes completed the ensemble, and she wasn't the only one who noticed. Women flocked to him in droves.

"Your date this evening, I've seen him before somewhere," Geneva Simpson, a former Ms. Louisiana, now owner of Geneva Cosmetics International, said casting her eyes shamelessly over Roderick's torso as she sipped champagne.

"Not satisfied with sleeping with my husband anymore, Geneva?" JaiHonnah quipped with a smug smile.

Geneva slowly turned her soft, green-eyed gaze and sly grin toward JaiHonnah and took a lazy sip of her drink. She was a stunning beauty of Cajun heritage. "But, Jai, darling," she said, grinning, "you know that was only for sport. Calvin is great for a few rolls in the hay, but I didn't want to buy the farm. You are entirely too sensitive about your husband. No one takes marriage as seriously as you do. I should think that by now you would have put all of that fidelity and monogamy silliness behind you. I certainly have, along with your husband."

"I have, too, but, of course, you always did favor my leftovers."

A perfect eyebrow arched. "Well, well. The sleeper has awakened," Geneva said, and then breathed salaciously. "Living on the continent has put a little steel in your britches, has it?" She again leveled her sultry eyes on Roderick. "It will be a real challenge this time ferreting that long, tall sip of chocolate soda away from you."

"*Laissez les bon temps rouler*, Geneva. He doesn't belong to me, but as you said, I've learned a few things over the years. I'm no southern belle

anymore and as far as your affair with my husband is concerned – *Et trois.*”

“Mrs. Chapman,” Roderick gently interrupted, “I believe we should take our places on the dais.” Then taking JaiHonnah’s arm and turning to Geneva, he said. “If you’ll pardon us, please—.”

“Roderick Baylor,” Geneva recalled. “You played some type of sports, didn’t you?”

“Yes, many years ago, but—.”

“Mr. Baylor, this is Geneva Simpson, CEO of Geneva Cosmetics in—.”

Geneva interrupted JaiHonnah’s introduction and moved well within Roderick’s private space. “You’re Monique Baylor’s husband, aren’t you? I haven’t seen her here tonight,” Geneva said, looking around the room casually, sipping her champagne lazily, and eyeing him suggestively. “She’s here, isn’t she? I hear that she’s doing some movie or something in Hollywood. She usually doesn’t miss one of these soirees, but she doesn’t seem to be with you tonight.”

“What was your first clue?” he asked, abating his anger at the mention of Monique’s name, but not waiting for Geneva’s response as he guided JaiHonnah swiftly away. “Friend of yours?” he asked as they wound through the crowd.

“Just someone I used to know,” she answered, dodging one guest after another.

“And your husband’s, too, apparently,” he mumbled to himself.

JaiHonnah stopped in her tracks. She hadn’t realized that Roderick had overheard her conversation with Geneva. This was a real breach of her privacy, she thought as she narrowed her eyes, knitted her brow, and glared up at him.

Roderick hadn’t realized that he’d spoken his thoughts loud enough for her to hear him, but the look on JaiHonnah’s face said otherwise. “I’m sorry. That just slipped out. I overheard parts of your conversation.”

“My private life is—,” she started.

“None of my business,” he finished for her. “You’re right. I won’t let that happen—.”

“JRock,” Lionel Porter, President of Porter, Dare and Silver Construction in Atlanta, interrupted, extending his hand and broadening his already too large smile to encompass JaiHonnah. “It’s good to see you, and who is this lovely lady?” He stroked JaiHonnah with his eyes.

“Good evening, Lionel. This is Mrs. J. Reise Chapman,” Roderick said through a set jaw. “She’s recently joined our staff. Mrs. Chapman, this is—.”

“Mr. Porter needs no introduction, Mr. Baylor,” JaiHonnah said, smoothly, extending her hand. “I’m very familiar with the work your company did in designing some of the Atlanta Olympic village. In fact, I submitted some of my concepts to your company.”

Porter gave JaiHonnah another long perusal as he clasped her hand warmly in both of his. “I recall them vividly,” he said, leaning too close. “Look, I’m going to be in town for a week or two going over some details with members of the Olympic Committee about refurbishing the structures and chatting about the next Olympic site. Perhaps we could arrange to sit down over dinner and discuss your designs.”

JaiHonnah sensed the tightening in Roderick’s demeanor. Obviously, Baylor and Porter were competitors, but there was uneasiness between the two men she also noticed that seemed to go beyond business, but couldn’t quite discern what.

“Well, only with Mr. Baylor’s approval, of course. I design exclusively for Baylor Construction now.”

“Loyalty. I like that in a person,” Lionel said, still gazing at her. Without breaking eye contact with JaiHonnah, he said to Roderick. “You’re fortunate to have such a talented associate on board, JRock, and so beautiful too.”

Roderick sensed what Lionel was up to. He had a great deal of recent, painful history with the man. Loyalty, ha! The man didn’t know the meaning of the word, nor integrity or honor.

“Mrs. Chapman’s time is very limited, Lionel. She has more than enough to keep her busy with Baylor Construction projects.”

“Well, I see,” Lionel said with a raised eyebrow and sly grin poised around his thin lips. “But I should mention that unlike your company, our

firm is in a position to offer partnership options to talented architects—after serving an appropriate apprenticeship period and a relatively nominal buy-in, of course.”

JaiHonnah’s interest increased, but her sense of Roderick’s discomfort with Porter caused her to hold back any further query about the partnership potential.

“I’m at the Mayflower. Why don’t we—,” Porter began, directing his statement to JaiHonnah to the exclusion of Roderick.

“Excuse us, Lionel, but we have to be seated,” Roderick said abruptly, gently placing his hand at JaiHonnah’s back and continuing their journey to the ballroom door.

Once inside, they were greeted by gala organizers who led them to the multi-tiered dais and seated them. For several minutes they were alone on their long row of opulently decorated tables that sat above the floor of the ballroom. Neither spoke as they reviewed the leather-bound program that had been given to them when they were seated.

Focusing on the program was difficult for Roderick. Emotions that he could not identify or understand streaked through his mind. Even though Lionel was openly making a play for his new architect, Roderick sensed that he had been too overbearing intervening in Lionel’s discussion with JaiHonnah. Of course she had a right to speak with anyone she chose, even Lionel Porter. Roderick had felt justified in his actions at that moment, but now a cooler head prevailed. However, the thought of someone making a better offer to JaiHonnah Chapman for her services annoyed him. Companies raided other companies for talented employees all the time. It was a cost of doing business. That’s what many of these gatherings were about—an opportunity to network and move on or up in one’s chosen career field. If JaiHonnah’s work was half as competent as Vivian had boasted, in time J. Reise Chapman would certainly be looking for greater and more rewarding career opportunities. Although he recognized that he could not stop her from leaving his company, for some reason unclear at the moment, he wanted to try. Markedly, however, he knew that his feelings had less to do with

his need for her professional skill, and more to do with some innate desire to protect her from something.

The nerve of this man to raise any issue related to her private life, JaiHonnah fumed silently sitting next to Roderick. His comment had no place in a strictly business relationship. And the way he ramroded over her potential opportunity for greater career advancement, a partnership with a world class firm, no less, was shameful. His incredibly selfish and chauvinistic behavior was infuriating and demeaning. Certainly she was capable of speaking for herself. She was, after all, an independent woman, wasn't she? Although the idea of a partnership was intriguing, she could have and would have declined the opportunity. After all, she had just signed a one-year contract with Baylor Construction. Now, because of Roderick's high-handed behavior, she felt bound and determined to pursue it. She would contact Lionel Parker at her earliest opportunity.

The dais began to quickly fill around them. They rose from their seats frequently to meet and greet others seated above and below them. Later, the orchestra began to play, the doors to the ballroom were opened and the other guests flowed in, finding their seats at the reserved tables throughout the room. Once seated, the lights dimmed, a spotlight shone on the Chairman of the U S Senate's Banking and Financial Services Oversight and Investigations Committee, with a superstar actress at his side, opened the evening's festivities. Reverend Justice from the largest congregation in Chicago and who happened to be the grandfather of one of her close friends, Constantina "Tina" Justice, gave the prayer. Once the prayer ended, wait staff surged over the room and the seven-course meal commenced amid murmurs and whispers in the crowd. Roderick and JaiHonnah still had not spoken to each other as they dined on pheasant under glass. JaiHonnah did chat with a congressman from Maryland, while Roderick talked with a noted black female publisher on his left.

When the endless speeches and presentations began, JaiHonnah, now very weary, listened half-heartedly. J. Roderick Baylor was briefly

introduced as he rose from the table and strode to the podium amid appreciative applause in recognition of his years as a professional athlete. He thanked the audience and set about his task without delay.

When Roderick finished his remarks the audience was spellbound by his words. Roderick's voice was confident, clear and stalwart, muting the audience for moments after he finished. Then, as if it all finally sunk in, thunderous applause broke out. People leaped to their feet. Clamorous roars went up with great fervor. Even the dais, the wait staff and the orchestra rose in enthusiastic adulation. Roderick seemed unaffected by it all as cameras flashed in his face and the adulation heaped on him. He had only spoken for ten minutes just as the others before him had, but what he put into his presentation packed more of a wallop than a youthful Muhammad Ali punch.

JaiHonnah was still standing and applauding with others as Roderick retook his seat beside her. Her eyes sparkling, speechless, adoration flared in the pit of her stomach. What a waste tonight would have been, she thought, if she had gone to bed and missed this blueprint for the future. She glanced around at the boisterous crowd still standing and applauding enthusiastically. Clearly Roderick had struck a chord in his audience and in her. How selfless he is, she contemplated as the din quieted. Despite her best efforts, JaiHonnah found it impossible to concentrate on the official keynote address. She had already heard the unofficial version from J. Roderick Baylor. She could not stop thinking about him. She wanted desperately to touch him in ways that were inappropriate between an employer and employee. He had managed to thoroughly impress her in less than twenty-four hours.

That morning he was working shoulder to shoulder with his men; something that, as the head of a large company, he really didn't have to do. By noon he was troubleshooting at multiple job sites; another task that was usually performed by lower level staff. This evening he was the businessman extraordinaire and the consummate orator; truly a man for all seasons.

Under ordinary circumstances, Roderick shied from adulation. He had nodded his head to the crowd hoping the din would be quelled, but while it continued unabated, he had felt twenty feet tall when he looked into JaiHonnah's eyes. Her smile lifted him, warmed him. Spontaneously, his heart pounded hard against his chest.

Soon after the dinner and speeches concluded, the entertainment and dancing began. This was the time that Roderick would usually make his excuses and head for the exit, but not this time. Tonight he wanted to dance. Fortunately a down-tempo piece played as he pried himself away from another group who had monopolized his time. He spotted JaiHonnah across the ballroom talking with a famous young golf pro and an entertainment mogul and headed in her direction.

"Mrs. Chapman, may I have this dance?" he asked, extending his hand to her.

Wordlessly she left the group, took his hand, and accompanied him to the dance floor. When he took her into his arms, her nipples hardened and stood on end against the soft outline of her dress. Too much caffeine, jet lag and too little rest, she assured herself as Roderick moved against her needful body. Then when he pulled her closer and rested his cheek against her brow, her eyes closed and she was lost in the magic of the moment.

Roderick felt he could not conceal his emotions with the soft scent of her hair playing havoc with his senses. Her statuesque form fit so perfectly in his arms, against his body. Her velvet-soft hand in his palm and the rhythm of the famous male vocalist caused a warm, peaceful sensation to filter up his spine. He relaxed, his breathing became quiet and his nature began to rise effortlessly. His eyes began to close, blocking out everything around him except her. When he stifled a moan, something snapped him back to reality. *What did he think that he was doing?* This was not the prelude to an evening that would end with JaiHonnah Chapman in his bed. This woman was married and an employee, damn it!

"Uh, I think we ought to be going," he said, his voice husky and low. He cleared his throat. "It's late and you must be tired."

“Yes, uh, yes, I am very tired,” she said, struggling to regain her composure.

“I’ll get your wrap and have the valet bring the car,” he said stiffly.

“That will be fine, Mr. Baylor,” she answered, clearing her throat and stiffening her stance. “I’ll just get my purse and meet you in the lobby.”

Roderick strode away from her as she watched him disappear across the crowded dance floor.

“I’ll finish what he started,” an all-too-familiar voice said behind her.

She felt the hand on her arm. The hair stood up on the back of her neck. She didn’t have to turn around to know who it was.

“No, thank you,” she huffed as she began to thread her way through the dancers.

“Jai,” the voice said still behind her and again clutching at her arm, stopping her in her tracks. “You don’t really want me to make a scene, now do you?” the voice harshly whispered.

The man pulled her back against his body, and she tensed, gritting her teeth.

“Take your hands off me,” she answered through clenched teeth.

“No,” he whispered, still holding her against his body. “Not until you dance with me.”

JaiHonnah let out a long, labored breath then turned to look into Calvin Chapman’s light, brownish-green eyes and sun-tanned complexion. When he leaned forward to kiss her, she turned her face away and made her way to the dais to retrieve her purse with Calvin following in her wake.

“What do you want, Calvin?” she asked, checking her purse to avoid looking at him.

He eyed her suggestively. “Is that anyway to treat your husband?” he asked, grinning.

She looked at him and whispered, “You’re *not* my husband.”

“Oh, then you’re not still calling yourself Mrs. Chapman and wearing the rings I gave you on our wedding day?” he asked, taking her left hand in his and holding it up displaying the rings. “Maybe I’m mistaken.” He kissed her fingers.

She eased her hand away. "It's jewelry, Calvin. What's your point?"

"A man ought to be able to dance with his wife..."

Her chuckle was derisive. "What, tired of doing the horizontal mambo with someone else's wife? As I recall, that's always been your forte."

"Our contract only stipulated that we would not disclose our divorce publicly or privately. A man needs a little variety..."

"This gala is like Baskin and Robbins for you. They have thirty-one flavors of your favorite women here tonight, including one of your favorite flavors, Geneva Simpson. *Bon appétit*," she said as she turned away as coolly as she could. Calvin put his hand on her arm to delay her again. When her chilly gaze went from his hand to his eyes, she registered the surprise in his face. He hadn't expected her to stand up to him. For tense moments they glared at each other.

"I think that we need to talk, Jai."

"Calvin, I don't give a damn what you think."

Roderick watched the quietly animated exchange between JaiHonnah and a man whom he did not recognize. The experience seemed to be causing her stress, he realized as he threw her coat over his arm and closed the distance toward her.

With eyes lowered and moving at a rapid pace, JaiHonnah didn't see the Rock of Gibraltar before her until she smashed into his chest.

"Are you alright?" he asked, leering at the man following her and locking his jaw.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. Please, can we leave now?" she asked with annoyance.

The man stopped his pursuit as Roderick enveloped JaiHonnah in her coat. Roderick and the man momentarily glared at each other and then the man melted into the crowd. Roderick put his arm around JaiHonnah's shoulders and led her to where his car waited. The valet seated her and Roderick generously tipped the valet before he got in behind the wheel. He noticed JaiHonnah's silence as she looked out of the passenger side window.

JaiHonnah's temples were pounding. She closed her eyes against the pain and leaned her head back against the soft, glove-leather seat. She was weary and her nerves were shot. Seeing Calvin was totally unexpected, but she had survived the encounter. It pleased her that she could look at him without the least twinge of feeling except disgust.

"I'm sure that you're going to bite my head off for this, but what was that all about back there?"

"It doesn't deserve discussion."

Case closed, he thought as he drove down Connecticut Avenue. A flagman stopped them while a road crew cleared a large tree limb from the street. Waiting patiently for the road to clear, he turned on the XM Radio to the soothing voice of Anita Baker. Whatever was going on, JaiHonnah clearly was not willing to discuss it with him, and he already apologized for interfering in her private life once tonight. He wasn't going to let that misstep happen again. Not now, not ever, but he still felt drawn to her defense against whatever or whomever was bothering her. She seemed strong and resilient, yet she had a quality that made him want to protect her, to take her in his arms and comfort her. While they danced it had taken every fiber of his being to keep from lowering his mouth to her earlobe, her neck, and her bare shoulders and rewarding his tongue with her taste. He glanced at the time, 1:45 A.M.

The flagman finally waved him through and a short time later he backed into his garage. Opening her car door, he noticed that her eyes were closed and her breathing was slow and light.

"Mrs. Chapman?" he said just above a whisper, stooping down by her side. She did not answer. "JaiHonnah?" he said again, but still no answer. "Some exciting date I am," he mused.

Roderick smiled to himself and lifted the sleeping lady in his arms. He quietly kicked the car door closed. She shifted her head against his cheek, still sound asleep. The elevator opened and as it rose he gazed at her exotically angelic face. Wisps of baby-fine hair outlined her hairline. Perfectly matched and shaped eyebrows over long lustrous lashes feathered her closed eyes. A small, barely visible mole was to the left of

her sumptuous mouth. He tried to take his gaze away from her beautiful and perfect countenance, but had no real inclination to do so.

The elevator doors opened, and he carried her into his daughters' bedroom. He quickly realized the short double beds would not comfortably hold JaiHonnah. He pushed open the double doors and moved from his private sitting room into his bedroom. His oversized sleigh bed was the only option. Slowly he lowered her into his bed, and then removed her shoes and coat. He unsnapped the choker around her neck and stopped. No bra. This was a real dilemma. He took a clean shirt from his closet and threaded her into it before removing her dress. God, if she were his he wouldn't want another man gazing at her, let alone undressing her. He pulled the shirt down around her and slowly peeled her dress from her body. She shifted and the shirt rode up over her hips revealing a strawberry-shaped birthmark high on her thigh below V-shaped French lace thong. "Give me strength," he whispered as he continued to undress her. Covering her against the air-conditioned chill with a sheet and comforter, he hung up her clothes, and left the room.

Roderick lay awake in his den on a sofa bed recalling the events of the day and especially those involving his new employee. She was certainly magnificent, a beauty beyond belief, but he was confused. Vivian Alexander Jackson, an enigma in and of herself, must have recommended JaiHonnah to him for some reason other than friendship. What confused him was what that reason entailed. He could rarely figure Vivian out, and he was too exhausted to try it tonight. He trusted her and admitted to himself that because of that trust he hadn't reviewed JaiHonnah's résumé.

His focus then turned to JaiHonnah. She was certainly no stranger to this level of elite society. He had expected her to be talented in her field, but he found it awe-inspiring that she was multilingual and adept at the social graces. However, on a personal level, how could she have a casual conversation with Geneva Simpson, a woman who apparently had an affair with JaiHonnah's husband? Well, hell, hadn't he conversed with Lionel Porter, a man who had an affair with Monique?

Moreover, who was the man from whom she was escaping at the gala? Less than twenty-four hours had elapsed since he first met JaiHonnah Reise Chapman and already his interest in her had grown beyond a purely professional relationship. She was keeping him awake thinking about her and wondering about the mysteries that lay behind her beautiful eyes. She moved like a gazelle, gracefully and fluidly. All that day his every thought had been about her; dangerous thoughts that his body was hard pressed to conceal and her sensual scent controlled him. That was why he kept on the move. For the first time in a very long while he felt vulnerable to a woman.