

CHAPTER ONE

As Miles Alexander leisurely walked from his Jeep to the office his thoughts were, *“What was God thinking when He created women? ‘I’m going to whip up a creature men won’t be able to resist for more reasons than one. One that will tantalize, mesmerize, and make them experience a kaleidoscope of mind-numbing pleasures. A being so alluring men will say things they really don’t mean, and if that doesn’t work, he will gladly swear to even more. Smiling, sumptuous creatures capable of convincing man he had meant it all.’*

“To feed the fragile male ego, God made women smaller, weaker and softer, weaving the original thread of illusion . . . that being, she needs him to provide and protect. Men ran with that ball for about four thousand, five hundred and fifty years. Now, women have taken it and they’re jamming it down our throats!

“Men even made up stupid slogans to support and bolster their mythological superiority. Things like, ‘Only the strong survive. Man is the king of his castle.’ The truth is, if women ever decided to eradicate us it would be easy. After all, they feed us . . . sleep with us . . . and, in some cultures walk behind us. Poison, daggers and one genuinely concerted effort, could wipe testosterone from the planet forever. The man who doesn’t think it can be done, or the thought has never crossed his mind is the real fool.”

Miles’s thoughts were momentarily interrupted by a particularly attractive, dark chocolate young lady. Her masculine-tailored, navy blue business suit fell intimately on every curve. There was a subtle, yet distinct sway in her gloriously rounded hips, and the jacket cooperated with it . . .

flowing this way, and then the other. If she thought that suit would help her masquerade in some male environment as one of the guys, she was wrong. Any man with two reasonably good eyes could not refer to her as one of the boys with a straight face.

Miles could not help smiling as he thought, *“She’s got everything working for her and a man can’t get along with her, not even if he agrees with the point she’s trying to make. She swears she wants an intelligent, sensitive and communicative man. Then, she argues for days over his choice of words. Making more out of the difference between warm and tepid than any man wants to know.”*

Another woman snatched those thoughts from Miles. She was a petite, malted piece of perfection dressed in a form-fitting, mid-thigh length, orange dress; and every secret she thought she was keeping lay exposed in it. As she approached and passed, Miles saw the outline of brief bikini panties . . . lace front, solid back, an under-wire push-up bra—solid bottom, lace top, and most likely designed by Bali. The sashay of her shapely, firm backside gave real meaning to the phrase, “I am woman, hear me roar!” There was nothing left to be imagined.

Miles thought of her, *“She thinks she can keep a man by pleasing him in bed. Oh, she can keep him for a while. Judging from the looks of her, she might do it for quite a while. Then, there will come the day he wants to bounce a serious subject off of her head. She’ll give him that cute, sexy, dimpled smile. He’ll pretend not to notice there was no bounce in her head and they’ll be back in bed.”*

Back on his original train of thought, *“I know why women think we’re only interested in sex. For the most part, they’re right. We are attracted by beauty and sensuality. Some of us like a little grey matter with our curves though; enough for a conversation, or two, anyway. Not so much that we’re grilled on vacuous subjects such as the color of stockings. How would we know if stockings were too tawny? What does that mean?”*

“Our unenthusiastic responses to some questions are interpreted as disinterest. Nothing could be farther from the truth. There are just things we don’t know. Hell, we’re only obligated to act like we know everything.

“Women confuse us—me, anyway. We don’t know what they want and if we ask, they say things like, ‘If you loved me, or cared, you would know.’ Most of the time, I don’t know what I want. It’s as if they think loving and caring endows a man with psychic abilities; able to answer one trick question after another correctly.

“How are we supposed to maneuver our way through the multitude of problems we have now, when we have never solved the original puzzle? To hell with Black and White, religious differences, political, property and power squabbles, and what to do with our children. The real question is, ‘How does one visual creature co-exist with one emotional creature successfully?’ Answer that old wise ones, and all of the other pieces will fall into place.”

Miles arrived at his smoked glass and chrome tower, and as he opened the door, a breathtaking long, lean, sleek-haired beauty whisked past him. Obviously, she was running late. The intimate scent of her perfume caressed Miles’s nose and locked his mind. If anyone else was in the lobby he never noticed them.

Miles’s eyes followed the beautiful, aromatic woman as her eyes feverishly scanned the large office directory. Without hesitation, she headed for the elevators, forcing Miles to speed up to ensure getting there with her. Inside, he smiled warmly and inspected her more closely. She smiled back, dropped her eyes demurely and stared straight ahead.

The elevator doors closed silently. Either her perfume was intoxicating Miles, or she was without a doubt the most flawless creature he had ever seen. She stood like a model; erect, with a slight bend in her knees. Without make-up, her face glowed with color. Perfectly arched eyebrows floated over natural, soft shades of brown and her long, black eyelashes batted slowly, halving the big, brown eyes men

wrote songs about. Simple, small, golden buttons adorned her ears. Her nose was neither too broad nor too narrow, it didn't point up or down, it pointed straight ahead with a slightly arrogant tilt. There was a sensual pout to her full lips, distinctly outlined by God, Himself, to drive men crazy. Miles wanted desperately to take the two steps and kiss them.

In the stillness, Miles scanned her long, smooth neck and broad shoulders, softened by the flow of her incredible hips. Miles lost himself in the shapeliest legs he had ever seen. They seemed to go on and on forever, finally coming to rest in sensibly heeled, navy shoes with golden buttons.

The elevator slowed and stopped. She took a step toward the doors and just before they opened she turned to Miles; her smile warm and inviting, revealing a beautiful set of even, white teeth. Miles waited anxiously to hear her speak. But, before doing so, she moistened already moist lips with her tongue and asked in a sexy, straight forward manner, "Well, did I pass muster?"

Totally unprepared for that question, stunned Miles asked, "Excuse me?"

"It's my first day. I wanted to know if I looked okay. Since you gave me a complete once over, I thought I'd ask your opinion. Will I do?"

Normally a smooth, eloquent speaker, Miles stammered, "You . . . you . . . you'll do. Oh, yes. You'll do."

Still smiling, she extended a perfectly manicured, almond colored hand and said, "Thank you. My name is Patrice Mays."

After staring dumbly at her hand for a fleeting second, Miles took it and said, "You're more than welcome, Patrice. My name is Miles Alexander. If you want my opinion on anything else, I'm listed on the directory in the lobby."

With small talk and introductions out of the way, the elevator door whisked open silently and Patrice stepped into her first day at the law firm of Tymes, McNeil and Lowell, leaving a completely dumbstruck Miles Patrick Alexander on

an elevator going back to the lobby. He was so preoccupied with her; he had forgotten to press the button for his floor.

CHAPTER TWO

Miles glided into his office with Patrice's heavenly lilac perfume still coating his nostrils, haunting and exciting him. He certainly hoped it stayed that way for the remainder of the day. Miles's first appointment was forty-five minutes away, and he was in such a wonderfully reflective mood he did not even notice his secretary, Carmelita, was not at her desk.

The moment he put down his briefcase, Miles picked up the telephone and dialed his favorite florist. Over the years, Miles had practically kept him in business with his romantic endeavors. Craig Johnson knew that Miles's mother loved tulips, his sisters were partial to wild flowers and his late grandmother hated all flowers. If it was not something she could keep alive she did not want it.

Knowing Miles always placed his orders with him personally Craig's assistant answered, and handed the telephone to him. In his usual jovial manner, Craig said, "Good morning, Mr. Alexander. Do you know what time it is?"

Glancing at the grandfather clock in the far corner of his office, Miles said, "Sure. It's nine-twenty-two."

"Right. We don't open until ten. What kind of trouble are you in that couldn't wait?"

"I'm not in trouble, Craig."

"That's not what I heard, but shoot."

Sidetracked by Craig's comment, Miles asked, "What did you hear?"

“Crystal left you in Hanover’s. She didn’t even finish dinner.”

Laughing, Miles asked, “Did they tell you that Crystal was sitting in my driveway when I got there at two o’clock that morning?”

“No. But the consensus is; she would have eaten that meal before she left if we had paid for it. What makes a woman storm out of the most expensive restaurant in town, Miles? I can’t get one to leave a bowl of soup and crackers.”

Without answering Craig’s question, Miles asked, “Soup and crackers? Who have you been feeding soup and crackers? They can’t leave. That’s not enough to give them the strength to get to the door. I hope it’s an appetizer.”

“No. I’m not springing for anything more than soup and crackers until the tenth date anymore. Try to be nice with real food and they get fat and sassy on you. Not me. I heard Crystal walked out on filet mignon. I would have hit her in the back of the head with it. In Hanover’s, that piece of meat alone runs what? Sixty-five bucks? Definitely eat it, or wear it prices. What did she leave for?”

“You know what a flirt Crystal is, Craig. I just asked her a few questions about Mark Gleason. Not because of anything I had heard; I saw how she acted with him. His parting kiss encompassed half lips, half cheek; indicted her, and her fury convicted her. She insisted I was unjustly accusing her. I hadn’t accused her of anything. I merely gave her an opportunity to explain. The best I can tell you is guilt made Crystal leave.”

It was Craig’s turn to laugh when he asked, “Yeah? What made her made her come back? Hunger?”

They laughed together at the unspoken response to Craig’s question; then, Miles asked, “Are you ready to take my order?”

“As long as it’s not going to Crystal Lewis.”

“It’s not. I want a magnificent lilac, navy blue and gold arrangement sent to Patrice Mays, in the office of Tymes, McNeil and Lowell. The message is, *I’ll never again smell*

lilacs or see navy blue, without thinking of you. Hoping your first day is all you hoped it would be. Miles'."

Still writing, Craig asked, "Magnificent? Who is she?"

"Just the best thing to blow into my life in a very long time."

"The best," Craig asked incredulously.

"Wait and see."

Miles knew Craig would not wait and see. He would deliver the flowers, insisting they allow him to give them to her personally. The moment he got back to his shop he would call Miles and tell him exactly what he thought.

The large calendar on Miles's desk said he would be arbitrating five cases today. Preferring his role as arbitrator over his legal practice, Miles seldom handled anything else. He was assigned to relieving the court system of some of its frivolous lawsuits. Some days, the petty bickering of civilian and insurance company attorneys made Miles feel more like an overpaid babysitter. If the first two cases of the day pissed him off, the rest caught hell.

Miles's lunch schedule held his attention for a few minutes. Today he had promised to meet Skip, Roland, and Desmond at the sports lounge. He and Crystal had a standing lunch date on Tuesdays. Wednesday was always left open for important emergencies. There was a business luncheon with Willis and Moore on Friday. Somehow, Miles had to persuade Patrice to have lunch with him on Thursday.

Carmelita's buzz on the intercom interrupted Miles, "Yes."

Hearing his voice, she dove into an immediate apology. "Good morning, Miles. I'm sorry I'm late. I promise to be on time the rest of the week. Did I miss anything?"

Absentmindedly, Miles responded, "Good morning, Carmelita. No, you didn't miss a thing. Did you schedule Lois for Friday?"

"I did that last week. I also finished those depositions you asked for. Do you want them now or later?"

“Later will be fine. Is there any coffee made?”

“Did you make it?”

“It’s your turn, Carmelita. I made it every day last week.”

“You make it better than me, Miles. But, if we’re running a tit for tat office, I’ll make it this week.”

“If this were a tit for tat office, you would have been fired a long time ago. You never pick up Danish, never bring me lunch, pretend you can’t hear the telephone while transcribing dictation, and you only clean out the refrigerator when you can’t get anything else in it.”

In a mock huff, Carmelita said, “Well, we are in a mood today, aren’t we? Did Miss Crystal leave you in the restaurant again? You should leave her alone. I told you she wasn’t to be taken seriously. You’ve been hard to work with ever since she came into the picture.”

“If I’m not mistaken, Carmelita, you introduced me to her.”

“An introduction is not a stamp of approval, Miles. Find somebody who makes you feel good. It will help you and me.”

Smiling smugly, Miles said, “I think I’ve done just that, Carmelita.”

“When? I thought you said I hadn’t missed anything.”

“You didn’t. I met her on the elevator this morning.”

“Please, Miles. You’ve dated every available woman in this building at least once already.”

“She’s brand spanking new and drop dead gorgeous. Works for Tymes. Her name is Patrice Mays. See what you can find out about her. I want a report by the end of the day.”

“That’s why I don’t do Danish, lunch, or the refrigerator. I’m always scouting game.”

The loud click told Miles their conversation was over. Carmelita Harris and Monica Bell had been two of Miles’s best friends since they were babies. Miles had fought many battles for their honor over the years and they pampered him for it. While Miles attended college, Carmelita started dating

some thug down in the city. That guy turned Carmelita into his very own mindless heroin-addicted, love slave.

No one they knew ever saw Carmelita anymore. Carmelita's parents had thrown in the towel the year before Miles returned from school. Carmelita only came to Mr. and Mrs. Harris to get all she could beg, borrow or steal to get high on. Fully intending to kill him, Mr. Harris looked for the guy who had done this to his daughter. Mr. Harris had shown Miles the gun he carried to do it with, too.

Knowing murder would not help Carmelita, Miles hunted her down. He found her staggering the street all alone in the roughest part of town. She was in such bad shape, Miles could not speak at the sight of her, and the ache in his chest ripped at the fiber of his being. Miles wrapped his arms around his old friend and wept in broad daylight right there on the sidewalk. With his mother nagging her disapproval every step of the way, Miles brought Carmelita home, cleaned her up and sent her off to rehab. And, as recommended, Carmelita stayed with the program for one year.

When Carmelita returned, Miles hired her as his assistant, but she could not do anything he needed. So, Miles had to hire someone to teach her. He sent Carmelita to secretarial and paralegal classes and seminars all over the country, and she loved it. Today, Carmelita is one of the best overall legal assistants in the city and Miles would not trade her for anything. Besides, she was more than an employee to him; Carmelita was his best friend and confidante.

As Miles sat at his desk leafing through the pre-hearing propositions for the first case, Carmelita made coffee and prepared the conference room. Most lawyers requested Miles as their arbitrator because he had an intrinsic sense of fairness. Sometimes, the law did not encompass common sense. Miles would split the difference if both sides were negligent. He never gave anyone exactly what they asked for, but nearly everyone was grateful for his final decision. They all left his office thinking about what they had done.

Carmelita brought in his cup of coffee at nine-thirty-five, and their first clients of the day began arriving at nine-forty-five. At exactly ten o'clock, Miles walked into the conference room and the proceedings began. Because the conference room consisted of glass walls, Carmelita could see everything going on inside. If anything got out of hand, as it sometimes did, she would call security. Carmelita could also be summoned by the wave of Miles's hand. More often than not, she was requested to type and notarize an Agreement between the parties.

The morning schedule ran like clockwork because Miles did not tolerate tardiness. If attorneys or litigants were more than five minutes late; without asking, Carmelita informed them of their new arbitration date and time. If they were late twice, they were told they would receive their schedule by certified mail, and the rules would be clearly explained in that package.

In between his first and second appointments, Miles looked over his telephone messages. There was nothing there of interest. His mother and father had called five minutes apart. Miles had not gone to their home for dinner the past two Sundays. That is where his behavior was scrutinized and complaints were lodged. If Miles had to hear his mother's disappointment at his choice of being an arbitrator instead of a practicing attorney with his eye on becoming a judge one more time, he would borrow Carmelita's father's gun, and if he had to hear how disappointed his long dead grandfather would be, he would shoot himself. All Miles wanted to know was when did parental rights really expire?

Frederick Alexander, Miles's father, was a senior partner in a long established and flourishing firm. He fully expected to be an appointed judge, and there was no reason he should not be. After all, Frederick had more credentials than any sitting judge in the state. There are no doubts that if he were not Black, he would have been appointed. Of course, this small defect in the city and state legislature would be corrected any minute now, according to his wife.

Ilana Alexander, Miles's mother, had tried every trick in the book to control her only son's life. Her daughters could stand in traffic all day long, and she would not ask them to get out of it. Miles's sisters; Carly, Tamla, and Yvette were educationally accomplished, happily married and had families of their own. For these things, the most they got were non-committed shrugs from their mother. They would have gotten the same response if they had chosen to drop out of high school; collect trash and all marry Charles Manson.

Ilana was an investment advisor. Her clients included all of the who's who in the state. Miles called them that because it greatly irritated his mother when she dropped an influential name and he asked, "Who?"

Ilana had forced Miles to endure years of the most boring dinner parties anyone could imagine. She insisted he take golf, tennis, and ski lessons. She bought him tickets for Frank Sinatra and Neil Diamond concerts. Miles wanted to take a behavioral science class in college, but Ilana demanded he take an art appreciation class instead. Ilana wanted Miles to be something he was never going to be . . . a snob.

Like Miles, Carmelita and Monica had been born and raised in the exclusive Shawmont community. However, their families were not as successful as the Alexanders, and Ilana made sure Miles knew it, too. Ilana condescendingly referred to Carmelita and Monica as his, "little friends." Miles did not care what she called them, they were his. In high school Monica got several tattoos. Ilana insisted Miles keep his distance from her until he was sure Monica had not contracted some deadly contagious disease from the needles. And, after Carmelita's brief stay in the Alexander home, Ilana inventoried every possession.

Miles had learned to dismiss his mother a long time ago; others were not so inclined. None of his friends were received with open arms by Ilana. God knows no woman had ever filtered through his mother's net of perfection. There were always lumps in her character or background that made it

impossible. Miles hated admitting it, but his mother was a snob; and his father had allowed and accepted it.

Between Miles's second and third hearings of the day, Carmelita quickly inspected the conference room and brought juice and shortbread cookies into Miles's office. She sat in the comfortable wing chair and crossed her legs. Nibbling on a cookie, Miles pushed the rough draft of his Decision and the folder on the case he had just listened to toward Carmelita. She eyed them nonchalantly and made no move.

In her usual blunt manner, Carmelita asked, "If this Patrice person is all you hope she is, what do you plan on doing with Crystal? You do know she's not going to walk without making a fuss, don't you? You've treated her better than any man she's ever known. She told me so herself."

"While that may be true, Carmelita, there is no emotional attachment between us. Our relationship is purely physical. Crystal knows that."

Examining her nails, Carmelita said, "In today's market, a competent sex partner is hard to find. According to Crystal, you're the best."

"If that were true, why would she bother interviewing Mark for the position?"

Carmelita sat at attention and asked, "Mark Who?"

"Gleason."

Rocking her head from side-to-side for emphasis, Carmelita sang, "Mark Gleason is without a doubt, the lousiest lay between the Atlantic and Pacific. He can't even leave a woman frustrated. He leaves them wondering."

A crown of confusion covered Miles's brow when he asked, "Leaves them wondering what?"

Without embarrassment or hesitation, Carmelita answered, "If you had just had sex with an enthusiastic woman. Talk about coming up short, Miles. If it came up at all, it was the shortest I ever want to come across again. Afterwards, I wanted to organize a torch-bearing search party. Mark Gleason can make a real woman want to whip his no-dicked ass. Let Crystal have him."

Wincing, as if in pain, Miles said, "That was brutal, Carmelita."

"Sometimes the truth is brutal, Miles. That's why so many people duck it. Anyway, when Crystal realizes she has a neut and comes back, what are you going to do?"

"I'm not going to do anything. I shouldn't have to break off a relationship that never existed."

"It may not exist for you, Miles, but it definitely exists for Crystal."

"Perhaps she should have thought about that before she brought Mark into the picture. It doesn't matter. As long as I'm free, I'll continue seeing Crystal. She's pretty and tolerable, as long as she's quiet. Why did it take six months for me to realize the woman whined from sunrise to sunset?"

Tilting her head, Carmelita asked, "Do you really want me to answer that?"

"No, I don't. Why are we discussing this now? Patrice may not be interested. She gave me the impression that her standards were pretty high. They should be if they're not."

"She must be some looker, Miles. The building's buzzing about her already. You're not the only one asking questions."

Quickly, Miles asked, "Who else is?"

"Relax. There's no stiff competition in the arena yet."

"Good. I saw her first."

Carmelita glanced at the clock. It was five minutes before Miles's next appointment and she knew he would want to look over his notes. Just as Carmelita rose to leave, the outer office door opened and closed. She hurried to see who it was. The high-pitched squeal of delight told Miles that it was Monica. Those two always greeted each other that way.

The parade of lawyers and clients filed in. Carmelita buzzed Miles at exactly eleven-thirty. She and Monica eyed the group politely. Miles emerged from his office and gave Monica their customary warm hug, cheek peck greeting and joined the solemn-faced entourage.

The telephone rang several times while Miles was busy. One call was Craig. He asked for a call back. One was Skip reminding Miles to meet them at one. The other was Patrice Mays. She left a thank you for the flowers message and her home telephone number. She did not think it appropriate for her to receive personal calls at the office on her first day.

After hanging up with Patrice, Carmelita said to Monica, "At least she sounds like she's in order."

"Who sounds like she's in order?"

"Miles's latest love interest."

Monica smiled wryly and said, "She'll come and go just like all of the others. Miles is incapable of being serious about any woman."

"I don't know about this one, Monica. He is really taken with her. Sent flowers already."

"If I had a dollar for every floral arrangement Miles sent out, I could retire today, Carm."

"Say what you will about his old habits, I saw something in his eyes I've never seen before when he talked about her. He's actually worried about not being good enough for her."

Monica threw her head back and laughed. "If he's not good enough for her, who is she waiting for? Miles is handsome as hell, successful, nice, generous to a fault, romantic and pliable."

Carmelita said smoothly, "Monica, you and I look at Miles entirely different than other women. We've always known him. At least, I can't ever remember not knowing him."

"Miles can be selfish and demanding at times. He's used to listening, making a decision and that being that. Can you imagine having a man who will only decide about something once, and absolutely refuses to listen to any further argument? He's a flaw counter, too—throws them all at you at once. When he draws a line in the sand, you don't have to cross it to get to Miles. Just move toward it and he'll cut you

off at the knees. Believe me, there's more to Miles Alexander than meets the eye."

"Miles is a big, old teddy bear and you know that, Carmelita. Any woman should be happy as hell to have him."

"Monica, I owe Miles my life. There's nothing I wouldn't do for him. I'd slap the shit out of Godzilla for Miles, but you need to accept the fact that our big, old teddy bear has fangs and claws, and he knows how to use them. He's not carnivorous, but he's definitely a danger to the unsuspecting."

CHAPTER THREE

As directed by Miles, Craig designed a magnificent lilac basket. He artfully decorated it with tiny, navy blue, silk rosebuds and golden cherubs. He placed Miles's card in one of the cherub's hands. Craig wrapped navy and golden ribbon around the base, creating a billowing bow, braided the overflow and placed golden caps on the tips. With his masterpiece heavily veiled in blue cellophane, Craig set out to hand-deliver it to Miss Patrice Mays.

The receptionist at Tymes, McNeil and Lowell made Craig wait ten minutes before allowing him to take it back to Patrice's office. Everyone he passed stared at the elaborate package in Craig's hands; no doubt, hoping it was for them.

Craig knocked on the door with Patrice Mays's name on it. He noted that beneath that was her title—Office Manager. Thinking Patrice would be some pasty-faced, mannequin acting sister, Craig waited for permission to enter. He was truly surprised by the ravishingly beautiful warm, down-to-earth creature who opened the door.

Patrice smiled pleasantly and said, "Good morning. How can I help you, Mr. Johnson?"

Wanting to take his delivery back to the shop and make it bigger and even more spectacular, Craig said, "Good morning, Miss Mays. I have a delivery for you."

Surprised and elated, Patrice held her hands out to take it. Not ready to end his visit just yet, Craig said, "It's a little heavy. Maybe I should set it down for you."

Patrice stepped aside and directed Craig to her desk. She was in the process of stocking her office. Craig was

pleased to see there were no other plants to compete with his. Patrice could not help noticing he had no intentions of leaving the delivery alone with her. Thinking a tip was in order, Patrice retrieved her purse. Craig waved his hand and shook his head.

Finally, she asked, "Is there something else I can do for you, Mr. Johnson?"

Patrice's soft, clear voice wafted over, kissed and tickled Craig's eardrums. He instantly fell in love with the sound of her. Taking a slow, deep breath, he replied, "I'd like to know how you feel about your plant. If there's anything I can do to make it more pleasing, I'd be more than happy to do it."

"I'm sure it will be fine, Mr. Johnson. I wasn't expecting the firm to send me a plant."

Pointing at his delivery, Craig said, "The firm? The firm didn't send that. Oh, by the way, my name is Craig. I own Illusions. It's two blocks down."

Extending her hand, Patrice said, "Pleased to meet you, Craig. If the firm didn't send this, who did? I don't know a soul who would send me flowers."

Firmly grasping Patrice's delicate hand and grinning from ear-to-ear, Craig said, "Surely you jest, Miss Mays. As I stand here, I can't believe I've never delivered anything to you before. I take it you're new in town."

"Actually, I am. My parents retired here. I moved here to be close to them."

"Well, put me on the list of those who are glad to have you here. Now, are you going to open your package? Maybe your husband or a boyfriend sent them."

"If opening it is the only way I can find out who sent them, I guess so. I don't have a husband or a boyfriend, Craig."

Craig stood next to her holding his breath. If she was not impressed, his disappointment would be so great he would break down and cry. Like most women, Patrice opened it carefully, and it seemed to take an eternity. Craig utilized the

time with getting a really good look at Patrice. He was sure his eyes were playing tricks on him. She could not possibly be as gorgeous as he thought she was.

Looking through his most critical eyes, Craig could not find one thing wrong with her. Her feet were not even big. She smelled like heaven and sounded like a harp. She was warm and gracious, and being made Office Manager of this snooty conglomerate meant she was not stupid either. There had to be a man somewhere. Miles had to be barking up someone else's tree.

Patrice's delighted gasp pleased Craig. She exclaimed, "Sweet Jesus, this is beautiful! Look at the colors. Oh, I love it."

Taking the card from the cherub's hand, Patrice read it with a confused frown, followed by a bashful grin. Her hand came up to her mouth. Craig thought she needed it to hold it shut.

In a nervous whisper, she said, "This is the man in the elevator. His last name's not on here. Do you know what it is? For the life of me, I can't remember. How can I thank him if I don't know his last name?"

"His name is Miles Alexander. I'd be happy to write his telephone number down, if you'd like."

"You know it? You know him?"

"Yes, to both."

Patrice scrambled for a pen and pad. She said, "Write down your telephone number too, Craig. When I get settled in, perhaps we could have lunch. You can tell me more about Miles Alexander. That is, if you don't mind."

Sarcastically, Craig said, "Oh, sure. I love telling beautiful women about Miles Alexander."

Lightly touching Craig's shoulder, Patrice said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be offensive. I just don't know who he is. We've held the longest conversation I've had since I arrived two days ago. That makes you my oldest friend here, Craig."

Not wanting to have to tell her about Miles, Craig had to admit he liked being considered her oldest friend. If talking about Miles would get him closer to Patrice, he would do just that.

He wrote down the information she asked for and said, "Call me when you're ready for lunch."

Patrice smiled and thanked him again. The moment Craig left, she dialed Miles's number. Patrice was disappointed when his secretary said he was unavailable. She sat at her desk and admired the lilacs. They seemed so out of place in her bare, colorless office.

Patrice remembered Miles vividly. He reminded her of old photographs of wealthy Black men. On Patrice's first glance at Miles, a box of caramel filled chocolates came to mind. He was six-foot-four-inches tall and well built. His black hair was short with deep, glossy waves and a natural part in front that was slightly off center. His thin, pitch-black mustache was cut to perfection. His chin and jaw-line were strong, giving the immediate impression of a stern man who tolerated very little foolishness.

While impressed with Miles Alexander's opening moves, Patrice shook the fog of excitement and spent the remainder of her day getting to know the staff at Tymes, McNeil and Lowell; acquainting herself with the expectations of the lawyers and paralegals. Patrice acknowledged immediately that two of the lawyers were uncomfortable with her race, but not her looks. Accustomed to every form of prejudice and bigotry there is, Patrice made a mental note to stay out of their way. She smiled and moved on. For the most part, her day was pleasant and informative.

At six o'clock that evening, Patrice's parents sat in their car waiting for her outside of her apartment building. They hated knowing Patrice had insisted on living in this neighborhood. It consisted of three-storied brownstones in a

sea of abandoned automobiles and graffiti, empty lots and shattered glass. There were angry looking young men lounging on corners, and older men playing cards and chess at folding tables on the sidewalks.

No matter what Albert and Sierra Mays said, Patrice refused to move in with them until she got on her feet; insisting that public transportation was so convenient and economical, she would not even drive to work. Pictures of someone snatching her off the street swam in her mother's mind. Pictures of someone crawling through those rickety windows and doing God only knew what swam through her father's mind. This was just no place for an attractive woman, like Patrice, to live alone.

Albert Mays felt that Patrice had been acting strange ever since she left home to attend Vassar. Four years there had rendered his beloved daughter completely brain-damaged, if you asked him. Patrice thought she could live anyplace she wanted and do anything she wanted, too. The world was not ready for new women, like Patrice.

Her father held his breath as he watched Patrice walk up the street that evening. Every eye scanned her body from head-to-toe and followed her. If any one of them made a move in her direction, they would have one big, tough as leather, retired Marine Drill Sergeant breathing down their neck. Albert Mays did not take kindly to anyone pestering his daughter. More than a few spoke to her. Patrice nodded with polite confidence and kept moving.

Albert and Sierra Mays got out of their car when Patrice was a few feet away. She smiled and hugged them both. Albert gripped Patrice's briefcase in one giant fist, her arm in the other and pushed her up the white marble steps of her pitiful, red brick building. Their only solace lay in the fact that she lived on the third floor. Hopefully, nothing short of a fire would go up that far to get her.

Inside, Patrice and her mother, Sierra, headed for the kitchen. It was a mess. They could only hope that once the grease and grime were scrubbed away it would look better. It

did. They were pleasantly surprised to find there were bright yellow daisies on the wallpaper.

Continuing to wipe, Patrice turned to her mother and said, "I met a very handsome lawyer on the elevator this morning. He sent me a beautiful basket of lilacs with a note welcoming me to the building. Wasn't that nice of him?"

Sierra peered over her glasses at the daughter who was a splitting image of herself and said, "A lawyer? Yes, that was very nice of him. What's his name?"

"Miles Alexander. He's an independent. Does arbitration. He comes from one of those fancy, highbrowed Black families on the hill."

"What hill?"

"Shawmont."

"There aren't any Black people in Shawmont, Patrice."

"Hey, Mom. I'm just relaying what I heard about the man. He didn't tell me that."

"Well, somebody's lying to you. There are no Black people in Shawmont."

"Have you ever been up there, Mom?"

"Never stopped in for a visit, but I drove through it a few times."

"If you only drove through, how do you know no Black people live there?"

"You take a drive through, Miss Smarty Pants, come back and tell me if you think any Black people live there. They have gazebos and fancy fountains sitting on more property than our house."

Albert's huge shadow on the wall told Patrice her father was behind her. She asked, "Daddy, do any Black people live in Shawmont?"

"Sure. Black people who look at me and you like we're cat piss on the carpet."

Patrice sucked her teeth, pouted and said, "He didn't look at me like cat piss on the carpet this morning."

"Who?"

“The lawyer I was telling Mom about. Miles Alexander. His family lives there. He sent me flowers today. Wasn’t that nice, Daddy?”

Albert growled, “Lovely. You’d better keep your head on around those fancy folks downtown. Don’t forget who you are. They like playing with plain people and discarding them. I’d hate to have to kill a rich kid from the hill. It would be so inappropriate.”

Patrice laughed at her father’s choice of words. She knew he was mocking her. She asked, “Do I have a real bed now, Dad?”

“Yes. And, I moved everything where you asked me to in the bedroom. I’m not moving anything else until I get something to eat. What are we having anyway?”

Patrice said miserably, “Cold cuts.”

“Cold cuts?!”

“Look around you, Daddy. What else could we have in here?”

The ringing telephone ended the cold cut discussion. Albert went to find it. It was under a stack of books in the living room. In true military fashion, Albert snapped into the telephone, “Hello.”

The voice on the other end seemed startled to hear him. He finally said, “Hello. May I speak to Patrice Mays, please?”

“Sure. Can I tell her who’s calling?”

“Miles Alexander.”

As if he were asking for a glass of water, Albert asked, “The Black guy from the hill?”

Unsettled by the question, Miles asked, “Excuse me?”

Thinking that perhaps the man was hard of hearing, Albert spoke louder, “Are you the Black guy from Shawmont?”

Suspiciously hesitant, Miles answered, “Yes, I grew up in Shawmont.”

Albert barked, “Right! This is Albert Mays. Patrice’s father. If you’re planning on playing games with my daughter and throwing her away, forget it!”

Albert never heard Miles's reply because Patrice wrenched the telephone out of his hand. Frowning and out of breath from the battle, Patrice said, "Hello."

A little taken back, Miles said, "Hello. Patrice?"

"Yes. Miles?"

"Yes."

"Please excuse my father. He's having a bad day."

Albert yelled, "No, I'm not! He'll have one if he plays with my daughter though! He won't be living in the hills; they'll be coming up on his head!"

"Excuse me a moment, Miles." Turning to her father, Patrice hissed sternly, "Daddy, please."

"Please, what?"

Yelling for her mother, Patrice said, "Mom, could you make Dad a sandwich or something?"

Sierra took her time sauntering out to collect her hulk of a husband. He could be such a pain, bellowing threats and demands at the top of his lungs. She dragged him into the little cluttered kitchen.

Patrice sighed heavily and returned to the telephone saying, "Okay. He's gone."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. He gets so excited about me mixing with men. Anyway, thank you for the lovely flowers, Miles. I appreciated the gesture."

Relaxing a little, Miles said, "Good. How was your first day?"

"Good. I see a few potential problems, but I think I'll be able to handle them."

"I'm sure you will."

Pausing briefly, to brace himself for possible rejection, Miles asked, "By any chance would you be free for lunch on Thursday? Please, say yes. It's the only free day I have this week."

Patrice smiled slowly and said, "Sure, what time?"

As if he had just scored a touchdown, Miles pumped his fist and said casually, "I usually go between one and two."

“I should be able to do that.”

Enthusiastically, Miles said, “Great. I’ll call you.” Stopping in his tracks, Miles asked, “Is it all right for me to call you at home? I mean, I don’t want to upset your father anymore than I already have.”

Laughing, Patrice said, “Daddy doesn’t live here. He’s helping me unpack and organize. I’ve only been in town two days.”

Interested, Miles asked, “Where did you come in from?”

“Poughkeepsie.”

“What the hell is in Poughkeepsie? If you don’t mind my asking?”

“Vassar.”

“Oh. Excuse me. I knew it wasn’t an American hotspot for any other reason. You didn’t bring a husband, or a boyfriend you’re deeply in love with, did you?”

“No, I didn’t. You’re the second person to ask me that today.”

A little excited, Miles asked, “Who asked first?”

“Craig Johnson. The florist you sent to my office.”

“Oh. He’s a friend of mine. He didn’t ask anything else, did he?”

“No. I asked him to join me for lunch one day soon though.”

Obviously agitated, Miles asked in rapid succession, “You did what? Why? When are you supposed to be going?”

“You sure are full of questions for a man I only met on an elevator.”

Getting a grip on himself and sounding like a spoiled, petulant child, Miles said, “I’m sorry. You run along and have lunch with Craig. Just remember we have a date on Thursday.”

“I will. Thanks for giving me permission.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll call you tomorrow evening, if you’re free.”

“I’ll be right here, Mr. Alexander. This place is a mess.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”