

LATER, I WOULD recall that when I walked into Criollo that night, I felt strangely as if I were attending a debutante ball and, for some inexplicable reason, I was the diamond. I would also know why.

As the hostess escorted me to my table, eyes followed me, and I was gratified to see many of the men watching me were the type I found attractive.

I never had time to date. The loss of my virginity was a dreadful, awkward affair I preferred not to think about, but it hadn't dissuaded me from trying again. Rather, it refined my selection process. No more boys. I liked men, even then. I'd never had bad sex again. I'd decided then and there that in the future, I would make sex all about me, what *I* wanted it to be.

I had no time for a relationship, but there were nights I needed something for myself, something that was all my own and only about me, and I'd hungered for it so badly, I was nearly wild with it.

Sex had proved a viable petcock for a system about to blow.

I hadn't needed it often. Sometimes I'd make it six, seven, even eight months before the pressure built again and I hungered to feel seen, caressed, cherished for a time, if only my body and only an illusion. On those nights, I'd prowl, tense

and volatile, searching for the right man, one that made lust burn in my veins, was willing to exchange first names only, no personal talk, no strings attached, and most definitely, no tomorrow.

They weren't easy to find. I have a type; I like self-possessed, strong, magnetic men, and I like them to have a bit of an edge, a hint of wildness. Hidden depths, layers, an indefinable quality of . . . *more*. I also like them tall, dark, and muscular. On the rare occasions I indulge, I shoot for the stars.

Sometimes, it took me days to find the elusive fruit for which I hungered, but tonight I marveled as I glanced around the restaurant; I seemed to have fallen in the berry patch. Either that, or men just came darker, hotter, and more to my liking in the Deep South.

Ever vigilant of wasting time, I'd perfected a siren's call that never failed me. Once I made my decision, I gave the man what I thought of as the Look, and we'd end up in his bed, or up against a wall, in a bathroom stall, anywhere that wasn't home with my mother.

I don't think I'm all that, but men seem to appreciate my tangle of long coppery chestnut hair and unusual golden eyes. I have clear, healthy skin, and I've always been mostly happy with how I'm built. My body is strong from hard work, lean and proportionate for my five-foot-eight frame. However, I don't think my success rate has much to do with how I look. Men are kind of . . . well, easy. We women know, for the most part, if we want to get laid, we can. Men don't have that assurance, and a lot of them seem to have figured out that hitting on a woman too aggressively can get them in loads of trouble these days. So I take the risk out of it for them by making the first move. I like doing it. It makes me feel strong, a woman making her own choices, in control.

It's a simple look, really, easy to put into my eyes, perhaps because by the time I get around to doing it, I'm a gasket about to blow. I'm surprised more people don't do it. Especially women. I once tried to explain it to a coworker, who'd stared at me, baffled; said nobody could read a look and eyes didn't talk.

Yes, they do. Saying too much, too often. I rarely meet a person's gaze, preferring to focus on noses, blurring the irises and pupils. On the rare occasions I do lock gazes with a person, I tend to get hit with a messy tangle of emotions, sometimes images, rarely pleasant.

If a man ever gave me such a blatant, sexually loaded, I-want-to-devour-you look, I'd be lost. None ever has. Yet, I hope.

Over an appetizer of shrimp, blue crab, and avocado, I studied the room, gaze drifting from table to booth, peering into the smaller, more private dining rooms on the sides, never lingering overlong. For a change, the dragon in my belly seemed . . . placid, content, even, as if rumbling soft approval of my plans. Probably just grateful I was finally about to do something besides cry. If so, it was a sentiment we shared.

I had a luxury suite upstairs, a king-size bed, a Jacuzzi bath large enough for two, plus an enormous walk-in shower. I wasn't about to waste it all. Mom herself had encouraged me to seize my opportunities, and Criollo was certainly teeming with them. I was finding it difficult to narrow down my decision, and I'd never had that problem before. If Frankfort was famine, New Orleans was feast.

There was an older man, forty or so (age doesn't matter to me; it's what they exude), thick dark hair touched with silver at the temples, wearing an elegant suit, yet I could tell his body was strong and rugged beneath it. The dichotomy intrigued me, made me think all civility might fall away with the shedding of

that suit and he'd be pure animal in bed. Plus, I could count on him to be experienced.

Then there was the man seated near the bar, in his late twenties, who I decided was Mediterranean, wearing a muted scarf with a collared chambray and jeans. He had a lean, athletic build, and I knew he'd be pretty much the perfect casual sex but not necessarily the best sex. Still, the waitresses were lingering nearby, vying to bring him his next drink. He, too, had presence. I was surprised to realize most of the men in the restaurant did. I'd never been in a room with so much palpable masculine energy before.

At a table near the door was a man, probably thirty-five, with short black hair, the shadow of a beard framing his wide jaw, and a mouth I could kiss for hours before unbuttoning that crisp white shirt to drag my tongue across his beautiful dark brown skin. There was something watchful and refined about him that intrigued me. His gestures were fluid and precise, he was kind to the staff (always a big hit with me), and I got the sense he was a man who concealed his strengths, played his cards close to the cuff in public, which made me insatiably curious to know what he was like in private.

Then there was a man unlike any I'd chosen in the past, perhaps thirty, blond with ocean-blue eyes, leaning back, legs outstretched in a booth in one of those side rooms with the dimmed lights. He intrigued me, despite my preference for dark men, because of something in his eyes and the way he moved, with power and grace. He wore faded jeans, a blue T-shirt, and boots. As I stole another glance at him, he stood and stretched over the table, accepting a bottle being passed from booth to booth in that private area, and his shirt slid up, affording me a glimpse of his cut stomach. My gaze lingered appreciatively on the leanness

of his hips, the muscular ass, the broad shoulders. He threw his head back and laughed and, before drinking, shouted out a toast with a sexy Irish accent. I wasn't entirely sure what he'd said, but I liked the sound of it and decided perhaps it was time for something different.

When the waiter returned to take my entrée order, I declined to place it and requested my bill. I'd order room service later. My appetites had changed.

I waited until the blond sat back down and let my gaze rest on him. The moment he turned my way, my chin would notch down, I'd glance up from beneath my brows with a sheen of challenge, the promise of a wild side. I would put all I felt into my eyes, let it gather intensity and radiate toward him. The hunger, the frustrated energy that desperately needed an outlet, the pain, the grief, the passion, the loneliness born not of weakness but from the appetite of a strong young woman seeking an equal in sensuality, intellect, and competence. I wouldn't send it to him wending gently around guests, delicate and inquiring.

I'd slam it into him.

I'd say with flat ferocity, *I want you. Come to my bed. No apology, no ego, no games. Only hunger and lust and the burn of my passion, and I will be kind though not necessarily gentle, and you will never forget this night.*

The blond man's head began to turn toward me, and tensing with delicious anticipation, I notched my chin down.

As his gaze was about to collide with mine, abruptly another man slid into the booth next to him, obliterating my view of the blond with his dark, powerful frame. He said something to the man, punched him on the shoulder, as if in consolation, then turned his head and locked gazes with me.

And I do mean *locked*.

I was caught, trapped, ensorcelled, spellbound, powerless to look away. I stared helplessly into eyes dark as a raven's wings, into a face more formidable than handsome, and the instant he knew he had me bound, he caught the tip of his tongue between his teeth in a smile that dripped challenge, and flung his words across the room at me, sharp as knives.

He said, *I want you. Come to my bed. I know how wild you hunger to be. I'll meet you in those untamed lands, and I'll be kind but not gentle, because gentle isn't what you want. You want to feel intensely, dangerously alive, to recover dreams you've been forced to abandon, faith you've lost, power that's been stripped from you by the incessant, mundane demands of the world. Fuck me, woman. I'll give you all that and more, and you will never forget this night.*

The breath whooshed from my lungs in an incoherent sound, and for a moment, I couldn't form a thought.

Then, as my brain cleared, my first thought was incensed: how dare he interfere with my strong, aggressive woman-in-charge-of-her-own-life moment? I was as offended as I was—

Oh, God, he was rising, collecting his drink, and heading toward me, and I had no idea how I'd failed to see him while scanning the restaurant. The presence he exuded was staggering, more than the other four men combined.

Dozens of heads swiveled to follow him as he strode my way, and I got the sudden impression that something was going on in Criollo tonight that I didn't understand. As if threads of cohesiveness stitched together each moment that had passed since I'd entered the restaurant, with each person in that room, and everyone else could clearly see the fabric of this night but me.

Then he was at my table, staring down at me, and the fanciful thought burned off, mist in the sun.

I said before that I have a type. This man typified the type.

This man was the mold for it, and they'd broken it after they'd made him, and every other man I'd chosen in the past had been only a shadow of him. The kind of edge I looked for—this man had in spades. His edges had edges. There was a kind of . . . were I fanciful, I'd say an aura that surrounded him, silvery and seductive and stitched somehow of both luminosity and utter absence of light, as if he wore a full moon's brilliance purled to midnight as a cloak.

"I'm Kellan."

"Stop," I said hastily, before he could say more. "No last names."

"I had no intention of offering you one."

I scowled, both pleased (he knew the rules) and irritated (he seemed to be the one making them). I'd always thought I would savor it, absolutely lose my mind, if ever a man gave me the kind of look I used.

I thoroughly resented it.

Would I have chosen him, anyway, if I'd seen him? Yes. That wasn't the point. The point was, *he chose me*; it chafed, and now there was no way I was going to have sex with him, despite the fact that the blond was currently gathering his coat to leave and the Mediterranean man was already gone.

Then there was the fact that the bastard's look had been so much more polished than mine.

"They always come when you summon, don't they?" Irish accent, like the blond. Sexy as hell. When he twisted a chair around and dropped into it, it creaked beneath his weight. Maybe six foot five, two hundred and forty pounds. I like big men; they make me feel like I can go crazy on them in bed and not worry about hurting them. My mouth went dry.

"I didn't ask you to join me," I said flatly.

"Nor have you told me to leave."

“Leave.”

He stood instantly.

“Sit down,” I snarled.

Amusement glittered in his dark gaze. The chair creaked again. My mouth was absolutely parched.

“You prefer to choose,” he murmured. “It makes you feel strong.”

That was it exactly. I’d been in control of so little in my life, I needed this one thing. And I hadn’t fully understood it until this moment, when the man made the choice for me.

“Losing control because the world has taken it from you in infinitesimal degrees, without warning and without your consent, in demeaning ways, is one thing. Losing control because you choose to, because you’ve met someone you can let go with, break free, obey no rules, tithe to neither god nor demon, that’s entirely another.”

“And I suppose you think you’re that someone.”

“I was watching you from the moment you walked in and knew exactly what you were looking for. Ian, the blond you’d settled on, is a good man, without question. I’d want him at my side in a fight, and I trust him running several of my companies. But he’d leave you just as unsatisfied as they always do. My guess is that’s how you prefer it. Playing it safe. You never choose anyone you might want to see again. How’s choking down that same bland appetizer, over and over, working out for you? Ready for a meal yet?”