

# FOREVER

*The Zeke and Sage Story*  
*A Cut n' Shoot Bite*

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## ***Sometime in the early 90s***

Tucked in the corner of slumville, USA stood a hundred thousand square foot factory. Facing due north, in the dead center of the squarish building was a thousand square foot office.

Darkly tinted glass enclosed an office of sleek decor, scifi-esque metallic grays and blacks.

Two desks.

Two multi-line cordless phones.

Three filing cabinets.

Shelving, three rows high, each stretching the length of the four glass walls.

All made with darkly tinted glass.

Even the round door handle sparkled with a crystal-like, finely etched, paisley pattern.

Inside the darkly tinted enclosure was a man and a woman.

# Chapter One

Sage Moreau sat in a black leather chair.

While Zeke sat relaxed, his posture slumped comfortably within the luxury chair's bosom. He clasped his hands across his narrow midsection. "You'll start right away then."

Sage hiccuped her laughter. A knee-jerk reaction to the absurdity of his question. She faked a clearing of her throat. "I beg your pardon?"

Zeke Chase snapped his fingers. "Right. Right. I need to interview you."

Was this the same man she had read about it in the Los Angeles Times? The same man that the city awarded Entrepreneur of the Year.

The man was supposed to be a genius.

No. Really!

An, in-the-flesh, authentic, contemporary Einstein.

Black slacks. A Fields of Nephilim concert tee.

And black cowboy ankle boots.

Not what she expected.

Which was fine. She rather enjoyed when people surprised her, which happened much too infrequently.

And him being a fan of Fields of Nephilim . . . well, that was just frosting.

She straightened and smiled. "Yes, Mr. Chase. You should interview me before offering me the job."

Zeke nodded.

Smiled.

Sighed.

Sage leaned forward, her eyes wide in question. "This is the part where you ask me questions."

Zeke mimicked her posture, rolling his office chair closer. One leather boot at a time.

Heel. Toe.

Heel. Toe.

He stopped before her and leaned forward, his crossed arms planted on his thighs.

"What kind of questions should I ask?"

"Have you never interviewed someone before?"

"Of course I have." He leaned back in his chair.

"Well, what kind of questions do you usually ask? We could start there."

"Right. Right. Okay. First question."

"Yes, Mr. Chase. What would you like to ask me?"

"When can you start?"

## Chapter Two

### *Last night...*

The Cellar Club

THE DJ HAD played a mix of Peter Murphy, Fields of Nephilim, Sisters of Mercy and the like all night long. The music played loud, making comfortable conversation difficult. In Sage's three years at the Cellar, she'd perfected the art of silent conversation.

But silent conversation wasn't always possible.

Dressed in ripped jeans, sneakers, a white tee beneath a flannel shirt, was a guy heading straight for her. He shouldered himself through the crowd and up to the bar.

His ratty attire combined with his unkempt, shoulder-length blond hair made him a dead ringer for the grunge look. Sage wasn't a big fan of this look, but she had to admit the guy rocked it fairly well.

Loudly, so as to be heard over the music and crowd, he yelled, "What's your name!"

"Sage!"

"Cool. One of the pole dancers?"

Sage gave him a sideways smirk, glancing up and down the shellacked counter. "Bartender!" *Dumbass*, she silently added.

"Nice! Can I get a beer?"

"I.D."

He reached in the back pocket of his jeans. From a worn leather wallet, he pulled out a driver's license.

She held it up to the overhead pendant lamp. Looked back at him. "This is fake."

"No! It's not."

"Your name is Billy Midol?"

"Yes."

She smiled sweetly. "Alright, beat it."

Geoffe, the bouncer, waded through the crowd of lace-and-leather-and-PVC dancers. She'd given him the signal. The sweet smile was for Geoffe, not for Billy Midol.

The wonderful art of silent conversation.

What Geoffe lacked in height, he more than made up for in girth. The guy was all muscle, a fact his sleeveless leather jacket helped to showcase very well.

As Geoffe took Billy Midol by the upper arm, he looked back at her.

"Cunt!"

Daven Skorts, the owner of The Cellar, ran his new wave/goth enterprise sharp as a razor blade. It was his livelihood after all and helped fund his dream of opening a pub in London. That's where the real hardcore scene was

for any leather-clad hellbender--the real heartblood of the drugs, sex 'n' rock'n'roll revolution.

She flashed a smile at one of her regulars, Simon McGraw as she poured his scotch. Unlike the smirk signaling the bouncer, this was an authentic gesture. Well, as real as Sage could muster, considering her locale at the moment.

Sage was careful not to get too close to her patrons or even her coworkers. She'd recently gotten out of a . . . scary 'relationship'. And wasn't looking for any more trouble, not any time soon.

Simon leaned forward, so as not to have to yell so much.

"How much you wantin' for the leather loveseat?"

"The what?"

"The loveseat. The ad, the one--"

"Oh! Jeezus-Lucy, man. I'd forgotten all about it." Sage turned, scooped ice into a bucket. "One sec." She moved down the bar. Filled two more glasses with ice. Topped them with Wild Turkey and Sprite then moved back to Simon. "Turkey and Sprite, right?"

"Right. But only one tonight."

Sage sipped from the other drink. "You want my loveseat?"

"You still got it?"

"Yeah. Nobody's called in weeks. Where'd you see the ad?"

"Corkboard in Hall C, right outside Chem Lab 5."

"I figured you chemmies would've hit me up by now. But you're actually the first."

"What made you bet on us chemmies?"

"Half of you are sporting Daddy's Visa to cover . . ." She made air quotes.

"Necessary expenses."

A twenty-something woman waved from down the bar.

Sage tended to the new arrival.

*Miller.*

*Easy fix.*

She returned to Simon. "And the other half of you finance your . . ." She made air quotes. ". . . necessary expenses with selling pills." She crossed her arms over the counter and leaned closer. "At \$10 bucks a pop, you must be banking. I know I'm not your only client. Finals are a bitch."

"Well, people must be getting better at cramming it clean or somethin' because I'm broke as shit."

"I'm still asking \$500."

"Will you take two-fifty?"

"Five."

"Fine. Can I pick it up tomorrow? Kind of in a bind. My ferret ate through my old sofa last week."

"My roommate will be home between three and six. Drop by then. And don't be late, 'cause she's gotta be to work by seven."

"Not a problem. My last class is out at two."

"I didn't know you had a ferret. Where was he when me and Julia were over?"

"He's not technically *my* ferret. Belongs to my new roommate."

"New roommate?"

"Leslie Yates."

Sage shrugged. "A lady roommate, huh?"

"Pretty sure she's batting for the other team."

"Bummer. Guess that puts a serious cramp in any thoughts of on-tap friend with benefits."

"Pretty much. But she's working as a curator at this anthropology museum. Makes good money, so at least she can pay the rent. That's helluva lot more than I can say 'bout my last roomie."

"Didja hear that Fields of Nephilim is coming in November?"

"Fuck yeah, I did. You get me a deal on some tickets?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Work your magic, Sage."

"I don't do magic. What you see is what you get."

Simon snickered. "Why you getting rid of the loveseat anyway?"

"That's complicated."

"I got time and nowhere to be."

"I'm hoping to get the hell outta here in a couple months." Sage had graduated last semester. And not a moment too soon. Because fucking her Computer Graphics professor was not the wisest of decisions.

How was she to know he was a control freak with some seriously dark kinks. He freaked her out, she could easily admit.

And that was saying something, because she shared an appreciation for kinks. Intimate touching in public places like restaurants, movie theaters and department stores. Mirror sex too.

"You're leaving Pasadena?"

"The plan is to leave California. Maybe go to New York."

"When you graduating?"

"Graduated last semester."

"Sweet. What'd you do your dissertation on?"

"The future socio-economical implications of online computing in relation to the tech industry."

"What's your angle?"

"A boom of online commerce that's going to revolutionize the social and economical landscape. But that's just the beginning. Someday advanced computing will skate past commerce and revolutionize the medical industry. Organ transplants. Maybe even organ manufacturing."

"Real Star Trek type stuff, huh?"

"It's gonna happen."

## Chapter Three

*Chase Industries*

*The next morning . . . .*

*"Well, what kind of questions do you usually ask? We could start there."*

"Right," Zeke said. "Okay. First question."

Sage nodded. "Yes, Mr. Chase. What would you like to ask me?"

"When can you start?"

"I wasn't aware I had accepted the job."

"Well, do you? Accept the job, that is?"

"Pardon me, Mr. Chase but--"

"Zeke."

"Pardon?"

"Call me Zeke."

When she saw this position posted at Stanford—more specifically-on the cork board outside Hall C, Sage immediately applied.

Zeke Chase wasn't well known to the general public but inside their circle (nerd techies), he was a celebrity.

And he was located five hours outside the city, which was perfect, because she really needed to get away.

Ended a fling with one of her professors and well, he wasn't taking it well. He kept bumping into her everywhere.

Albert's, a local neighborhood grocer.

Exxon, the station located fifteen miles from campus.

Pheabee's Veggie Delight, a great cafe four blocks from campus. And he wasn't a vegetarian.

So yeah, she really needed to get the hell out of this town.

And Chase Industries being over five hours away was her best shot. Seeing that her father was ill, recovering from a stroke, location was key.

Far enough away to escape Stoney and his coincidental run-ins. But close enough for family to visit or for her to visit family.

But Chase never called. She waited two months before sending out more resumes.

And in just a couple weeks, Sage had received four job offers.

Kosmos, a well-known cosmetic company, had offered her a position as a Software Engineer, \$250,000 annual salary.

Most of her classmates would have pissed themselves to get such an offer. Money was the driving motivator for many of her classmates.

But Sage wasn't impressed.

She didn't need money. Her family owned the national chain of Hotel Moreaus.

She didn't want money or fame. Already had too much of both.

Sage wanted to change the world, which wasn't an uncommon notion, she could admit.

Many people wanted to change the world.

Many had changed the world.

Might seem like an admirable goal, but she was no saint.

Road rage was an infliction she'd struggled with since the day she got her license. No patience for the very old. Or the very young.

And especially the very unintelligent.

Ironically, she harbored a deep compassion for the general human population.

Poverty.

Violence.

War.

Racism.

Status quo.

Well, it all just plain sucked.

As a species, the human race could do better.

She could do better . . . better than auctioning her amateurish and much-too-simplistic art for charity. Highest bid went to a painting she called *Forever*. Nothing more than a depiction of a barren landscape, on a distant horizon. In the forefront, amidst a sky of cloud and thunder, was an eagle soaring toward that distant horizon with a rabbit in its claws.

Fetched \$75,000 for the Los Angeles Children's Research Center.

Which was great . . . really great . . . but fractionally significant when considering the vast scope of humanity's afflictions, like disease, war and utter poverty.

She may never change the world—not monumentally, anyway—but, if possible, she wanted to be a part of . . . something . . . something not motivated by the potential for wealth.

Working for Kosmos was not going to get her where she wanted to be.

Which was why she hadn't accepted their offer or any of the other offers.

Besides its ideal location, Chase could give her the chance to be a big fish in a little pond. Being a Moreau, Sage had lived her life amongst the elite of the elite. She was insignificant. Unseen. Unheard. Too many big fish trying to eat other big fish.

Dog eat dog . . .

A society built from narcissism and greed.

Not for Sage.

She wanted out.

Out of this town.

Out of this lifestyle.

She was looking for potential.

A glimmer of hope . . . for something bigger and better.

And that's why she'd had her heart set on a position with Chase Industries.

Location, size and potential.

And . . . well . . . there's the matter of her crush . . . no, not crush. Sounded too immature and moronic.

So happened, she found Zeke Chase, founder and CEO, significantly attractive.

Long black hair.

Lean and tall.

Angular jawline.

Boyish complexion.

And best of all, a prominent adam's apple.

Three years ago, she'd crossed paths with Zeke Chase while attending a fundraiser for the homeless. They'd never spoken. Never met. She just watched him from afar.

By the time she worked up the courage to approach him, he had already left.

Curious to know more about the man who had so dramatically stirred her hormones, she did some research.

She learned Chase Industries manufactured state-of-the-art dashboard panels for large, industrial equipment and vehicles.

Just last week, the NY Times reported that Chase Industries was awarded a government contract for 500 lightweight, Airbus helicopters.

Although not a proponent of war or violence, Sage found more meaning in building aircraft controls that helped American soldiers do their job, as opposed to building a graphics platform to mimic skin tones, all in an effort to help women mask their natural beauty.

Sage had nothing against cosmetics. In fact, she spent more money than she'd like to admit on her fair share of foundation, eyeliner, eye shadow and mascara.

But Cosmetics wasn't her passion.

She wanted something more.

Something significant.

Something great.

Something really really great.

Chase Industries wasn't ideal, especially seeing that she detested war, all wars, any wars, but it was the best option at the moment. At any rate, better than Kosmos.

But weeks had gone by and she hadn't heard a word.

Then four days ago, out of the blue, she got a call.

And here she was, in Zeke Chase's office.

His black long hair hung loose over his shoulders. A beard of--what looked to be--three days of neatly trimmed stubble covered his lower face.

"Zeke?"

"Yes, Sage?"

"May I be so bold as to ask what salary this position allows?"

"Right. Right. What salary do you require?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Money. How much do you need?"

"I don't 'need' anything . . . in particular. I just think . . ."

"How much?"

Okay. This was weird. Good. But weird. Was he really offering her a job? Already? Without an interview? Or was he mind fucking her? This was some

kind of test. If she didn't play it right . . . If she asked for too little, she'd seem desperate. Or insecure. Gotta be confident. Sure.

"\$150,000." She straightened her posture, crossed one mauve-nyloned leg over the other, her matching mauve pencil skirt rising slightly above her knees. "Not a penny less."

"Done."

*Damn.* She should've asked for more.

What!

What was she thinking?

Zeke Chase just offered her a job! And a truck load of money to go with that job.

Zeke smirked. "You don't seem much better than I at this interviewing thing."

"I beg your pardon."

"I've only asked one question and you have yet to answer it."

"Question? Oh! You mean when can I start?"

Zeke smiled, a warm and sincere gesture that made her blood hot and her pulse race.

"Would you like a tour?"



## Chapter Four

### *Last night...*

It was about 2:30 am before Sage pulled in the driveway of her modest two-bedroom rented home. She parked beside Julie's black Jaguar.

They'd been friends for years -- what? Since undergrad? Julie's wave didn't go all the way up Jacob's Ladder but . . . she was still a great roommate. She kept her room neat and clean, never left a dirty dish in the sink and never missed trash day.

Julie did like to bring home her boyfriend all too often. And typically wasn't quiet about her nightly erotic fun with her flavor of the month.

But since Sage was barely home, what with her busy work and school schedule, Julie's escapades were easily avoided.

Mostly.

On those rare moments when Sage came home to moans and slaps sounding from behind Julie's closed door, Sage would go for a drive. There was something calming and romantic about a nocturnal cityscape.

Sage shifted to park but left the engine idling. She leaned back and turned up the radio. Sighing, she closed her eyes and listened while Love Will Tear Us Apart by Joy Division finished playing on the radio.

Which was stupid since she owned the cassette. She knew exactly where it was. Right there in her bedroom on the shelf right next to her fancy stereo

with the disc-player. She didn't own very many discs. Not yet anyway. But there was a stack of cassettes:

*Dawnrazor.*

*The Nephilim.*

*Elizum.*

*Love Will Tear Us Apart.*

*Don't Break The Oath.*

She reminded herself to grab a couple of those tapes for the road -- it would, after all, be a long drive.

Sage got out of the car and started the walk along the matte gray stones that dotted the edge of the yard near the cacti garden. At the front stoop, a motion-sensor light mounted on the awnings left corner post started blinking frantically.

It was supposed to serve as a security system--burglars and other uninvited sorts would think someone was inside flashing the front porch light at them. Yeah, cause a helpless girl all alone at night rapidly flipping a lightswitch would make any home invader quake in his boots, running back to the curve leaving in a fit of screeching tires.

If anything, the light was like a doorman, greeting her with flashing eyes, saying 'come on inside, take a load off, and by the way--there's a bottle of wine in the fridge just for you.'

Inside the house, purse hung on a hook on the foyer wall, she quickly discovered another guest was still up. Dane Westcott, one of Julia's regular on-off-boy-flings sat on the infamous leather loveseat---jeeze, how much 'love' had that seat seen in its three years being here?

Dane wasn't too bad a guy. Julia had done a lot worse.

He sat, slouched into the loveseat, baggy shorts dropping off his narrow hips. He wore a black satin dress shirt splayed open to expose his full-chest tattoo of an eagle with skeletal wings and a skull head.

Once, Dane had explained the meaning of the ink---something about death being freedom and freedom being death and the inherent conflict in the duality of human conscious desires.

Or something. The guy smoked so much pot that even looking at him for too long would give you a contact high.

"Sage," he said. "Lookin' good, yeah?"

"Always. Where's Julie?"

"Out. Cold. Cold as a lightbulb. Can't handle her smoke, y'know? Ya wanna hit?"

"Would, but I'm not here long, leaving tonight--hmm---guess this morning, rather."

"Bummer." Dane said. "I'm all by myself. Nothing but me and the . . . . hey . . . what's happen' in . . . .where you goin'?"

"L.A. Job interview. New up-and-coming technology manufacturing business."

"Ain't that like three hours from here?"

"Five. Hence, its appeal."

"Sweet. Man, they like . . . gonna make some Terminators and some H-Ks? It's called Skynet, is it? Man, that'd be--"

"No. It's not Skynet." She waved him off. "I gotta get ready. Tell Julie I said 'hi' and---"

"Bitch is out cold. Cold as a..."

"And remind her to be home tomorrow between three and six."

"What's between three and six?"

"She knows. And tell her to blow out the candles before she leaves."

"No prob."

Sage rolled her eyes. Julie was way too good for this moron. Must be some really great sex.

She sighed.

Thinking . . .

When was the last time she saw a man naked?

Four freakin' months, the last time she was intimate with Stoney.

Sage stepped into her bedroom. She'd already packed an overnight bag. The bag was on the floor near the foot of the bed.

She knelt and opened the bottom drawer. Beneath several strips of clothing--scarves, tank tops, a dozen old t-shirts she never wore anymore but didn't want to throw out and too many plastic balls of hosiery--she found a flat metal container with the ace of spades on the top.

With a groan, she plucked the tin from the drawer. Popped it open. Six cigarettes left.

She'd bought the pack months ago, smoked two on the nights before major testing, then she'd tossed eleven into the toilet and sealed six more in case of an emergency.

She wouldn't smoke them, she told herself. But this interview was huge. A life changer if it worked out. God, she needed to get out of here.

Quick.

Now.

If this interview bombed then she would have to . . .

She couldn't think like that.

Maybe she'd smoke one on the drive there. Only half of it.

Better, she'd take the one out then bury the case in her bag to toss into the trunk.

Which was exactly what she did. She slid the one smoke behind her ear and snapped the case shut.

*If you had half a brain, you'd flush the cancer sticks down the toilet.*

But she didn't do that. She might not be a genius but she sure in the hell wasn't impractical.

Sage hurried out of the room and past Dane who was still plastered to the loveseat.

"Don't get too attached. Going to a new home tomorrow."

"Bummer."

Sage shot a glance at the answering machine on the end table next to Dane.

"Any message?"

"Shit. Yeah, y'know, I was 'pose to tell you that . . . ah, man, umm . . . It was . . . that Professor dude -- the one you were boning, I think?"

"Ugh."

"No sweat! I deleted it for ya."

"You did, didja? What did he say?"

"I'onno . . . somethin' bout call me . . . ya know my number . . . we need to speak . . . or somethin'."

"Damn."

"You okay?" Dane asked.

"Yeah. Fine. Hey, if anyone else calls, don't answer."

"Got it. I can do that. Not do that. No answering of the phone."

Frowning, she reached behind the loveseat, unplugged the phone line.

"There. Makes it easier."

"Genius, man. Pure genius."

## Chapter Five

Night driving, one of Sage's favorite recreational activities.

And after hearing that message on the machine she needed it. It'd taken all her resolve not to light up the cigarette before even pulling the car out of her driveway. At least she'd managed to wait until she'd hit the exit ramp onto the interstate. Then it was burn time.

No matter how loud she cranked up the radio, no matter how loud Black Planet got, no matter how fast and hard she puffed on the cigarette, nothing could remove that voice from ringing inside her skull.

It'd been four months. Four months since she'd last spoken to Dr. Jameson. Sure, she'd caught glimpses of him on campus, even in Bellsings, the computer lab, that's where his office was.

His private office. The office she'd visited twice, not for any academic tutoring or disciplinary reasons.

Jesus. Dumbest girl in the universe. They'll name an award after her one day, a ceremonial plaque of a donkey to be given at the Darwin Awards.

Miracles weren't something that typically fell into Sage's personal ethos, but it was a real miracle, a blessing really, that she'd not gotten expelled for . . .

That's it! Fuck it.

Abruptly she swerved into the breakdown lane--how apt.

From behind the wheel, looking to the rear view, she waited for the owner of the high beams to catch up and roll on by. A sturdy Jeep, rust-orange rugged paint job.

Ensuring no other vehicles were coming, popped the trunk and hurried to the back of the car. There she quickly located the cigarettes.

Her body trembled. Fumbled with the lighter.

The cool California night must have took pity on her poor wretched soul because the breeze suddenly melted away, leaving her in a peaceful, dark quietness but with a slice of moonlight about her car.

"Thanks," she said aloud around the end of the cigarette.

Later, before she went to the interview, she'd fish the body spray from her bag to douse herself.

A new set of high beams mounted the hill behind her. The beams slimmed as the car grew closer. A dark sedan--wasn't burnt copper was it?

Please God, no! Sage huddled down behind the back passenger wheel. The car slowed as it grew closer.

She thought she could hear the smooth jazz coming from the radio inside.

The car whooshed by.

Brown. No burnt copper.

Clutching her chest, Sage wished she could reach inside her ribs to manually soothe her thudding heart. Only a third of the smoke left, she puffed, quick and hard.

"I better land this fucking job."

She stubbed out the cigarette with the heel of her designer boot and got back in the car.

Sage adjusted the cruise control, turned on the radio. Scanned channels for something obscure and simple, but had to settle on a local country station.

Started when she was just a teenager. A true passion, a vision for the future, a future that did not fear death, a future where death was no more, a future where death was quite literally cured.

Even as a teenager, she could admit this was an ambitious goal, not to mention idealistic.

Too much for most guys, but especially teenage guys, whose biggest concerns stemmed from food or sex.

How to get the best and most out of both.

A girl with dreams of changing the world by eliminating death could, understandably, be a tad overwhelming.

Which made finding and keeping a lover somewhat difficult.

Some time during her senior year in high school, Sage's libido dipped. Actually, it died.

She started staying in on Saturday nights, instead of clubbing with her friends. A bottle of expensive red wine, a hot bath and two double AA batteries was much preferable to a fling with the frat boy of the week.

Early on, in her freshman year of college, Sage began missing sex.

The act of lovemaking.

The human, intimate, skin-on-skin contact.

That tingly feeling of excitement right before she'd fuck somebody new, who she was sure would rock her world.

But she couldn't make herself sleep with a guy. Any guy.

So she fooled around a bit with a woman, a classmate from her world history class.

The newness wore off quick and Sage found herself celibate once more.

Panic set in.

Was she frigid, a frightening journey of frostbite of the loins?

After a few short months, Sage's forced celibacy became not so unbearable. She might even say she found it refreshing.

Batteries never disappoint.

And so, Sage embraced her dry spell. Shortly before grad school, she swore off sex . . . temporarily, and concentrated all her passion on her studies.

Then she met Professor Stoney Jameson.

Something electric about his enthusiasm for the growing hi-tech industry of computing. Although his interest centered around entertainment, mainly gaming, while her passion regarded the humanitarian possibilities to be gained by sophisticated technology.

Specifically, Sage was fascinated by the advances made in the medical industry as of late.

The first vaccine for Hepatitis A.

A vaccine for Lyme disease next.

And most amazingly were the speculations in popular scientific journals about the potential reality of cloning a sheep alongside the critical findings within the Human Genome Project and revolutionary new understandings of DNA and genetic manipulations.

We are truly living on the cusp of a Brand New World, she'd written in her dissertation. Not only can we stand upon the shoulders of giants we may soon be able to clone those giants.

The unimaginable potential therein . . . a powerful new age not fueled by mere speculation belonging strictly in science-fiction but credible theories and notions found within the pages of accredited science and medical journals.

Intellectually, Sage and Stoney shared an appreciation for the possible future.

Stoney stimulated her . . . intellectually, which had never happened before. Though a gifted computer programmer and computer graphics artist Stoney also harbored a deep appreciation for ancient history, especially the Aztec civilization and his office showcased several painted depictions of the Aztec sun and other related symbols. The winged serpent was her favorite.

Sage considered herself a sexual being. Confidence and creativity were two traits she favored in the bedroom yet oftentimes found both quite lacking in her lovers.

But Stoney worked both with ease. Not only could he stimulate her brain with equal parts practicality and far-fetched visions of the future brought to life by advancements in technology . . . but he could also arouse her body with the slightest touch, sometimes even the slightest whisper of his stern voice. Stoney commanded both intelligence and imagination with absolute mastery.

She began to see Stoney as not just another guy. But as one of the potential giants of the future.

Almost old enough to be her father but she had no 'daddy' issues and therefore chalked up her attraction for Stoney to a simple melding of two intellectual and sexual creatures exploring the fundamentals of human existence -- mind and body.

As a professor behind the podium, he brimmed with zeal, not unlike that of a cult preacher. He lectured on the science of SVGA which allotted for a 800x600 pixel resolution. He raved about the introduction of 64 bit processors. His latest lectures centered around up and coming games.

Command & Conquer for one.

Descent for another.

Online gaming. It was the way of the future. And violence and sex was its chosen mode of transportation. He preached this taboo ideology with the passion of a brimstone and fire, southern baptist minister on Easter Sunday morning.

Sage wasn't much of a gamer, and she wasn't a proponent of violence, in any manner.

But she respected his enthusiasm.

Everybody did.

Professor Jameson worked a special kind of magnetism that few could escape. He had a way of making you feel special, one of a kind.

Ironically, he had this effect on everybody, which makes everybody not so special anymore.

But nobody cared.

They couldn't help but feel motivated and inspired by Professor Jameson's in-your-face and sometimes dark passion.

Picture Robin Williams in Dead Poet Society. Now replace poetry with technology and well, you have a highly revered professor.

Only the most gifted students were chosen for his class. Sage counted herself fortunate to be one of those chosen.

He was a celebrity of academia, known all over campus as the hip and cool professor.

A graphic arts student hacked a cover of Rolling Stone Magazine to supplant Stoney's head onto the body of James Hetfield which Stoney subsequently posted on the wall inside of his classroom.

From then on, Professor Jameson became known as Professor Rolling Stone.

Stoney planned to pioneer a new and edgy and graphic genre of gaming that he said would blow the world away. It would make *Neverwinter Nights* and especially the X Window system games obsolete. It would be the closest thing to virtual reality and support thousands and thousands of players worldwide to co-exist in the same virtual environment. And while Sage wasn't a big gamer herself, having only dabbled here and there with Super Mario Bros. and a cute little game called Bubble Bobble that her roommate owned, she could appreciate Stoney's ambitious efforts in the tech world.

But as hip and devilishly charming as Stoney could be, he was also brutally dedicated to achieving great success in all aspects of his life and only settled for absolute perfection in each undertaking he committed himself to.

This was a trait that many students found aspiring, so much so that for several semesters a battlecry heard by many students before a test day was: Gimme the power of the Stone so that I may achieve ultimate greatness! Even Sage had quietly whispered the words before her biotech final in her last semester.

One night, Stoney came into The Cellar Club while Sage was bartending. He shot the shit with her for two hours until she got off the clock.

They both had too much to drink that night.

Combine a bottle of whiskey and an extended dry spell and you have one big, fat mistake.

Sage was not unfamiliar with bondage, albeit her experiences stayed to the light and jovial side of dark eroticism. But after that night Sage learned what it truly meant to be submissive to a lover. By the second time they hooked up he was no longer Professor Stoney but Sir.

The sexual encounter was a mix of twisted surrealism crossed with a dreamlike escapism, on a cosmic level and she hadn't even taken any XTC -- Stoney wouldn't allow any form of sexual enhancement drugs, not even alcohol, aside from their first night together.

He'd explained that the way he did it she wouldn't need any drugs. And he'd been absolutely right.

Even his method of denying her an orgasm until he gave her permission had proved to be some of the most intense orgasms she'd ever experienced.

He took her out to expensive dinners but always picked out every article of clothing she was to wear, oftentimes new dresses and lingerie he'd bought for her specifically for that evening. While they dined he'd lavishly lay out the plans of what was to happen once they were done eating.

The 'plans' were more like detailed instructions of how Sage was to perform, what she was to do and what she was not to do. It didn't take Sage long to realize Stoney Jameson was an enormous control freak. On a clinical level.

They would always check into the Hotel Moreau, her family's legacy and chain of five star hotels. Fortunately none of her family worked at the one they used as their playhouse but she always knew that Stoney chose the hotel on purpose as a form of humiliation and to remind her that even though she might be the heir of a multi-billion dollar hotel chain that she was powerless beneath his control.

He'd give her commands in a low harsh but civil tone. And she'd obey without hesitation. At first it was out of respect for Sir but quickly it became out of fear.

In her personal life and academic life she took pride in being an independent woman who'd left the comfort of her family, even given up a trust fund, all in the name of making it on her own. But Stoney had so easily broken her, made her bend over and crawl and beg on command.

And it frightened her.

So after five weeks and countless sexual encounters, she decided to break it off and leave their little game.

She sighed . . . heavily.

Problem was, Stoney wasn't willing to stop the game.

Whereas he'd once given her mindblowing orgasms all he could give her now was the creeps. Part of his creepiness stemmed from his drastic dual personas. By day, he was a gentle, caring and charming soul and friend to all. Hip Professor Rolling Stone.

But by night, behind closed doors, he was callous, demeaning and—worst of all: psychologically controlling.

In their brief five week affair, he had demanded she grow her hair long; picked out every article of clothing and jewelry she was permitted to wear; taught her to talk only when she had requested permission and gave other explicit rules to govern nearly every facet of her life.

. . . to switch brands of perfume

. . . wear less makeup

. . . wear less leather.

It was clear that he wanted a lady by day and a whore by night.

Sage just wasn't wired that way.

She was who she was and whether by sunlight or moonlight, Sage was still Sage.

So what if she preferred lace over cotton.

So what if she preferred leather over silk.

And heels spiked at least two inches could be and were mostly comfortable. The fact that they were sexy as hell was just frosting on a very fun cake.

Sage didn't consider herself a lady or a whore.

And she absolutely DETESTED labels.

But that's a whole other soapbox rant.

Where were we?

Oh, right.

Stoney . . . and his creepiness.

Twisted by moonlight and straight as north to south by sunlight.

Most recently, she'd stumbled across an academic paper regarding the topic of sociopaths in correlation with power and politics.

The traits matched Stoney quite accurately.

It was most frightening.

With the help of the Diagnostic Statistics Manual, Sage did some further research into the label of sociopath.

And as much as Sage hated the concept of labels—boxing human beings into categories—she had to admit that Stoney was—in fact—a sociopath.

And so Sage became alarmingly aware of the fact that she'd let a sociopath abuse and fuck her.

It wasn't that Sage hadn't enjoyed sexual relationships that pushed the boundaries of 'normal'—hate that label the most—and hadn't dabbled into the kinkier, sometimes darker side of eroticism.

But Stoney pushed that boundary way past dark and kinky. And slid most purposefully into sick and twisted.

At any moment and at any locale, somebody was breaking somebody else's heart.

Happened all the damn time.

So why was she so anxious about this particular break up?

Was it even a 'break up', being that there was no relationship to begin with. Can't have a break up if there was nothing significant to break up.

It was two people hooking up. Now they are not hooking up.

Simple.

The next night he came to see her at the bar. She explained as gently as she could, that they'd be better as friends and he seemed to accept her rejection with grace.

After her shift, she remembered walking to her car.

Then everything went blank.

Don't remember much about that night.

Because he had drugged her.

And what she does remember was better left undisturbed . . . somewhere deep in her subconscious.

That was four months ago.

## Chapter Six

The row and row of vehicles wound further than she could see. She definitely couldn't tell the source of the jam.

Irritated. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. She craved a cigarette. Goddamnit. She'd never really, really craved a cigarette.

If she wasn't careful--if this fucking trip didn't start going smoother--she'd be a chain smoker like her mother by the time she got back to Pasadena.

All her veganism and detoxing teas and yoga exercises wouldn't mean a donkey's dick if she started smoking.

Going on her mother and her younger sister Simone's nasty pack-a-day habit, she'd complete the unholy cancer-bound trinity.

It was shortly after six when she finally arrived just outside LA.

The morning rush hour traffic wasn't much of an improvement from the traffic jam on the freeway. Sage had clicked the radio off when all she could hear were traffic reports and morning show DJs who thought they were A-list comedians.

Right off the freeway she saw the Moreau-Marionette Victorian Hotel--one of the many hotels that her family owned. The hotel parking lot was crammed, not a free spot to be had.

A large brownstone museum on the right, a row of gift shops forming a major tourist trap on the other side. There were also restaurants all along the way.

The crisp reek of city scents, exotic filth and sweet spoilage and a collision of local foodstuff, a parade of aromas right up the nostrils.

From the stoop of a high rise building, a long-haired blonde guy in an unbuttoned shirt, torn jeans and bare feet strummed a guitar, a silver bucket next to him with red, white and blue paper wrapped around it. Sounded like the man was playing an off-key cover of A Horse With No Name.

At a busy intersection the traffic waited while a horse-drawn trolley trotted by; a love-struck couple sat inside.

When the couple started a serious make-out session Sage suspected it was for the benefit of the traffic crowd--'look how much we love each other!'

"I hate this city already," she muttered. Another attempt to locate a tolerable radio station ended in misery.

She spotted the next street she was to take, and after a left, two miles and three more rights, she found herself on a straight road that seemed to lead her away from the city.

But it didn't lead her from the city; it led her to Chase Industries.

There was a row of crumbling red brick buildings, some had boards over the windows and it looked like many of the places hadn't been occupied since Nixon was impeached.

Between two of the dilapidated buildings stood three men wrapped in what appeared to be burlap sacks, black trash bags, tattered long coats and they were standing around a rusted dumpster with smoke coming out of it.

The street could've doubled as a set for one of the Mad Max movies. One building looked like the entrance to the boiler room from Nightmare On Elm Street. A young girl stood outside, leaning against the concrete wall, glass pipe in hand. Come-Fuck-Me boots crawled up her calves.

One building had three beat-up cars in the lot. A rickety sign nailed to the wood awning read: PORTER'S TAX SERVICE & PAYDAY LOANS.

Fat pigeons scooted up and down the sidewalks as if they served as this street's very own flock of hustlers.

At the very end of the street, to the left of the circular parking lot, stood a long rectangular tin building that looked like it had been cut from a batch of concrete. There were several vehicles in the lot, including half a dozen pickup trucks.

A signpost jutted from the asphalt near the front of the building: CHASE INDUSTRIES.

Two of the chubby pigeons patrolled the base of the post while another perched atop the sign groomed itself.

She parked her Venturi at the far end of the row of vehicles right next to a brown Chevrolet.

Sage exhaled deeply. Hopefully she wouldn't get mugged during the brief walk to the front door.

Sitting in the passenger seat was her small purse. She dug through it to confirm her can of mace was inside.

Unlike her sister Simone, Sage didn't have any real self-defense skills nor a permit to carry a firearm.

A man in a black twill sweater and dark camo pants came from around the corner of the building. A tight little tuft of white hair was all that covered his bald scalp.

Slowly, she cracked open her door and stepped out.

"Hi, Missy, can I help you?"

"Do you work here? At Chase?"

"I do. I'm the night watchman. Mickey Burns."

"Night watchman? It's nine in the morning."

"No rest for the wicked, missy. So what can I do ya for?"

"My name is Sage. Not Missy."

"Of course, yes, ma'am. How can I help ya?"

"I've got an interview with Zeke Chase."

"Ah. Yep. Well, you won't be able to get in from that front door over there. They keep it locked at all times because of me. I told them that it helps throw off intruders. If you rattle that doorknob it's going to set off a helluva siren. One time a guy tried to open it and that alarm sounded and I swear on my brother's grave I saw one of them pigeons shit itself. Poor fellow was shittin' in mid-flight."

"Ah huh. Fascinating. So how do I get inside?"

"Well, what you'll have to do is walk around that side of the building and go around to the backdoor, the side near the dumpster. Knock on that door and Craig should open it up for you. Might have to give him a second. He's about half-deaf and might not hear you knock the first few times--and with all that equipment running in the background, who can blame him."

"Okay. Thanks." Sage followed his instructions and circled around the building.

She knocked several times and waited. Knocked a few more times.

The dumpster next to the backdoor was overflowing with splintered lumber, wads of twisted plastic wrapping, globs of machine oil splattering almost everything.

The knob rattled. The door opened.

A beer-bellied man in a yellow hard hat and utility suspenders stood in the doorway. "Yes?"

"I'm Sage Moreau. Mr. Chase is expecting me."

"Yeah? Alright. I'll get you to him. Come on in."

Wooden pallets with what-looked-to-be unopened equipment and parts were stacked floor to ceiling.

"Straight down that hall, last door on the left."

## Chapter Seven

*20 minutes later*

Zeke smiled, a warm and sincere gesture that made her blood hot and her pulse race. "I've only asked one question and you have yet to answer it."

"Question? Oh! You mean when can I start?"

"Would you like a tour?"

Smiling, she nodded and stood.

"Great." Zeke pushed past her and opened the door.

The hum of large machinery echoed off the three-story ceiling. And it seemed as if they were all singing along to the same tune.

They walked along, keeping in between the yellow lines. The safe zone.

Very much like Zeke's office, the place was clean. Immaculate really.

All but one of the personnel waved as she and Zeke passed.

"I don't like what you're wearing." He spoke with an eerie casualness.

Wildly barbaric, not to mention sexist. That should've been her first reaction.

But it wasn't.

Sage was offended. And that ugly emotion blinded her momentarily to the obvious inappropriateness of the statement.

She glanced down at her outfit to remind herself what she was wearing.

A white silk blouse beneath a mauve blazer that matched her mauve pencil skirt and nylons.

*Conservative.*

*Classy.*

"I beg your pardon?"

"Makes me uncomfortable."

Sage stopped walking, the final step of her two-inch boot-heels still echoing off the vast and far-between walls. "I make you uncomfortable?"

"Not you. Your attire."

Anger broiled.

Good.

And.

Deep.

"I'll have you know *this* outfit was designed by the world renown Frederick Lawson. It's a \$5000 suit. Knock-offs are sold in department stores all over the country."

"Your point?"

Hands went to her hips. "Business women from all over the world are wearing fashion similar to this." Sage ran her hands over her body. "This is the norm."

"I'm not hiring other women from around the world."

"I don't see what's wrong with dressing fashionable for a job interview."

"As I said, makes me uncomfortable."

"And what do you suggest as an alternative?" *This should be good.*

"Anything but . . ." His face contorted with distaste. "*That.*" He gestured with a lift of his chin.

Zeke continued walking.

Sage hurried to keep in stride.

Cue uncomfortable silence.

Well, as silent as a heavy equipment factory could be.

More echoed steps.

Zeke from his ankle boots.

And Sage with her designer boots.

Well. Well.

Never had she imagined Zeke could be so high-minded. . . he just seemed so . . . nice?

She groaned. How the hell would she know how he should 'seem'? This was the first time she'd met him.

A sixty-something grizzly and somewhat round man waved from behind some kind of machine that looked like a giant ironing board.

Zeke waved. "Hey Frank. Good morning."

"Mornin' bossman."

More steps.

Turned a corner into another large room. An industrial paint booth could be seen to the far left.

"I do like the shoes."

*Well, that was . . . something*, she supposed.

"Not a big proponent of equal rights?"

Zeke let out a huff. "To the contrary. I'd much prefer you wear jeans and tennis shoes."

More awkward silence while their steps continued to echo.

"It's not a sexist thing," he added.

"Phew, what a relief."

"It's not . . . not . . ."

"Yes?"

"It's not who you are. Not really."

"How do you know what's me and what's not me? You couldn't even be bothered to interview me. Not one question."

"This bothers you why? And I did ask you a question. I asked when you could start."

A groan. "I should think you'd want to know something more about your employee. It only seems normal."

"That's the second time you've mentioned 'normal'. Big fan, are you of 'normal'?"

"Actually, no. It's just that--"

"I don't like labels. Most notably, 'normal'."

Sage's breath hitched. *Marry me!*

Being not normal had always been a mainstay for Sage. Much more freeing. Once you stop caring what others think, it's a very liberating feeling.

A euphoria really.

Nothing great ever came from any semblance of normalcy.

More echoing steps.

...

...

Zeke sighed. "I was out of line. I should not have commented on your looks."

"Then why did you?"

"I can fake societal norms, be civil in situations that don't really allow for civility, etc... but only when it comes to business. You working for me isn't business. It's personal. So I'm having a difficult time keeping my socially awkward self in check."

"Personal?"

He smiled. "Please don't misunderstand. Yes, our relationship will be born of professionalism."

Sage forced a smile.

"But as my assistant your passion and drive should rival my own. These are personal traits, thereby making our relationship personal."

*A bit of a stretch, but she'd go with it.* "I suppose."

"And we will be working closely together. There will be many long nights. I, of course, will cover dinner expenses. I hope you like sushi."

Sage resisted the urge to 'yip' like a school-girl. She smiled, simply nodded.

He continued. "Good. I keep the refrigerator stocked with maki, temaki, uramaki, sashimi, and nigiri. There's also baked tofu crisps and seaweed wraps."

Sage straightened, shifted her weight. She turned her head and hid a smile.  
"To drink?"

"Soy vanilla milk and assorted organic juices. Pomegranate Blueberry is especially flavorful."

"What? No wine?" A teasing smile.

Zeke's head tilted slightly, his expression stoic.

"I'm kidding, of course. I would never drink on the . . ."

"Tenuta Elderberry." His flat line of a smile twitched. "Back in the office I have a refrigerator. Fifteen bottles. Second shelf, stacked three high."

She breathed. Blinked. "Tenuta Hills?"

It was her drink.

Her only drink . . . when the situation allowed; which wasn't very often. The winery was situated in the hills of northern Italy. A remote town called Tenuta Hills. Only five hundred bottles a year were produced. Sage, even with her father's connections, never managed to score more than three of those five hundred bottles.

"You have fifteen bottles of Tenuta?"

Zeke nodded. "I do."

She swallowed. Heat flushed her face. A special kind of jitters vibrated to her core.

Swooning?

Yes, she was literally swooning.

Suddenly, she felt nervous . . . on the spot. She glanced around, looking to see if factory workers were staring at them . . . but nobody was . . . staring.

And she had no clue as to why she expected them to.

"I . . . I don't know what to say. I mean, did you know that was a favorite of mine?"

Zeke nodded. "I do."

Okay. A little unnerving.

Considering they'd never met before today.

He was a stranger.

Or so she'd thought.

"H-h-how . . . how did you know?"

Zeke put a hand to the small of her back. Gently, he ushered her forward.

"Let's talk and walk."

She wasn't even aware she had stopped walking.

His subtle touch felt so natural . . . so comfortable . . . a warming sensation that made her feel safe. A pure and innocent essence, like that of a beloved childhood, a crackling fireplace, a dimly lit Christmas tree and the perfume of dozens of poinsettias.

"Just wanted to know who you were, who you really were, before offering you the position. So I did a little digging into your background."

"My personal background?"

"Yes." Firmly unapologetic.

"I should be--"

"--furious." Zeke sighed. "Probably."

"But I'm not."

A hand lifted, coming to rest on her collarbone. Long, warm fingers slid around to the front, downward, stopping shy of the low-cut vee of her silk blouse.

Sage swallowed.

Oh my god, he was . . . flirting!

Breathe.

Breathe.

No!

Hell no!

She couldn't do this. Not again. Sleeping with her professor had turned disastrous.

Sleeping with her boss . . . rather potential boss . . . ah fuck it. Mind as well admit it. She was taking the job and she knew it.

She might even fuck him.

And she knew it.

As if he'd sensed her thoughts, his prominent adam's apple bobbed with his dry swallow.

"What's wrong with the way I'm dressed?" The question blurted from somewhere unknown and definitely unexpected.

A small shake of his head. "I don't trust people who dress in costume."

Anger rose.

And the intense sexual tension of the moment splintered.

Replaced with disappointment and scorn. A harsh whisper. "It's not a costume." She breathed, trying to collect herself. "It is a widely accepted and preferred style of dress for the modern business woman."

A dismissive groan. "I've heard the outfit's resume. Quite impressive. But it doesn't change the fact that it masks who you really are. I don't trust people who hide their true self. It's a form of deception. Paramount to lying."

Sage's stomach growled so loud, she wondered if he heard it. She ignored the gnawing in her belly. "You think I'm being deceptive?" The question should've been accusatory and snide, but it was soft and pathetic.

His stoic, slightly angered expression softened. "Why did you apply for this position?"

"Why did you offer me the job?"

"You're qualified."

"That simple?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure lots of people would qualify for the job. Why me?"

"Because there's a lot more to you than I expected."

Zeke reached into the breast pocket of his shirt. He slid a stack of 3x5 photographs out, fanned them out for her to view.

The photos were of Sage!

Last year, she spent three months in the Dominican Republic handing out treated bednets to help reduce outbreaks of Malaria.

She snatched the photos from Zeke. Flipped through them.

More photos of her, this time she was in Ethiopia helping to rebuild a village which had been ravaged by a wildfire, spawned by an eight-day heat wave.

All of her volunteering had been kept secret, or so she'd thought.

But, seeing that she was a Moreau, and a celebrity of sorts, she probably was naive to think she could keep her life private.

Zeke pointed to her in one of the photographs. "You were wearing a tee and jeans."

"Which was appropriate attire for the situation. Jeans and tee are not appropriate now, here, for a job interview." She flipped through more photos.

Sage at work, behind the bar, pouring drinks, making change and wiping down a sticky gin bottle.

"A more preferred look of style. " He pointed to a particular photo. "Black fishnet shirt, spiked-heel thigh high boots, leather mini skirt, black mascara, black eyeliner and black lipstick."

"Again. Appropriate attire considering the locale and situation."

Zeke smiled. "So what does Sage wear when she's not . . ." He made air quotes. ". . . dressing for the locale and situation?"

She scoffed. "You tell me. Seems you already know who I am."

"That upsets you?"

"Hello? Monica Seles? Rebecca Schaeffer?" A famous athlete and actress that had recently been attacked by a crazed admirer.

"You think I'm stalking you?" Zeke asked.

"Are you?"

"Do you know what we do here?"

Sighed. "Of course."

"Government requires me to run background checks on all our employees."

Hands went to her hips. "I'm not your employee . . . yet. And researching my favorite wine is hardly warranted . . . "

Right there, smack dead in the center of an active and loud factory, Zeke put his lips to hers.

Slow.

At first.

Frustratingly tender.

Sage's breath hitched. A rush of breath . . . from somewhere deep. A hiccup of emotion, of lust.

Nose to nose.

Lips a breath apart.

A whisper. "Why are you here?"

Damnit. Shit. What was the question? Sage blinked. A twisting ache in her heart. "Because . . . well . . ."

"Why do you want this job?"

"I . . . I don't know."

His tone was stoic. "Lie."

Sage straightened, putting distance between them. "So I'm deceptive and a liar." She sighed, fast and loud.

"Your specialty is medical devices. We make gauges and dashboards. What the hell are you doing here?"

A seesaw of lust and anger.

Just moments ago, sexual tension cradled them like a silken wind.

Now.

No cradling.

No silk.

No wind.

No movement.

No . . . nothing.

Head spinning, the ache in her heart grinding. Pain. Confusion. Looking down, unable to make eye contact, Sage removed her hard hat. She offered it to Zeke. "Good luck in finding an adequate candidate for the job."

Furious!

Sage turned away, without looking up, never letting her gaze meet his.

An overwhelming feeling of . . . what?

Whatever this was . . . this feeling of uneasiness . . . of awkward, hot-as-hell desire, shook her . . . body, mind and soul.

Nothing like this had ever happened to her before.

Get a grip.

Jesus!

As she walked on shaky legs, back the way they'd come, the sound of her heels echoing off the walls of the vast concrete room pricked her already jumping nerves.

She didn't want to leave. Sage wanted the job. She wanted to work with him.

Turn around idiot!

Take the damn job!

Then fuck him.

She glanced over her shoulder and found him staring at her.

Intense, searching eyes pinned her in place.

"Why!" he bellowed.

"I don't know!"

"Lie!"

Couldn't tell him the truth, could she?

Yes she could.

"Location! Size! Potential!" Her voice boomed across the factory and amidst two onlookers standing idly by quietly humming machinery.

Then it hit her.

His family had as much money--if not more--as her family. People who'd been fortunate enough to be born into wealth, either turned out pompous or they turned out . . . contemplative.

If money wasn't a motivator, then . . . what?

"Why!" he sharply echoed.

"Fuck you!" Richly immature. Her hands jolted upward, an exaggerated gesture of what-the-fuck. "I want to change the world!"

He launched into a sprint. His long, black hair fluttered haphazardly with each harsh step.

She debated running the opposite direction but couldn't make her feet move. For that matter, she couldn't tear her gaze from his.

He was . . . beautiful. No other way to put it.

Complexion smooth yet pale. A boyish charm. And a sexy as hell demeanor; rebel-esque slash eccentric-artist.

And then there was his prominent Adam's apple, which was anything but boyish. Always been a weakness for her.

He stopped inches before her. "How are you going to change the world?"

Hesitated. "Artificial organs."

"A science that was born almost 100 years ago. Not exactly revolutionary."

"And how have we progressed in the last century?"

"Baby steps," he admitted.

"Exactly."

"I'll say again, we make gadgets for dashboards. How exactly does Chase Industries fit into this highly ambitious and somewhat unrealistic, not to mention, impractical life goal?"

She sighed. "It doesn't."

"Then what are we doing here, Sage?"

Nothing to lose, not at this point. "I was in a bad relationship. Things got . . . scary. He didn't want it to end. And I did."

Zeke's posture relaxed. "Truth."

"Days after our break up, I ran into him at the grocery store, then at the movies, then at the dry cleaners. Well, you get the point. Probably overreacting, but I had to get out of town. Put some distance between us."

"And what about your dreams of changing the world, one artificial organ at a time? How does Chase Industries fit?"

Before her crush on Zeke, before her affair with her professor, before her dad had a stroke, she'd had a whole other plan. "Stasis Biotech is one of the top engineering companies for medical devices. I've always wanted to work for them."

Zeke's head tilted, a smirk. "They're in New York."

"Yes, they are. But I can't leave right now. My dad had a stroke about six months ago. Got some paralysis. Not dealing well."

On a quiet exhale. "Truth."

A softness in his voice made her sigh. She found herself staring at his mouth. Her gaze moved to his eyes.

Zeke's hand lifted. A thumb brushed across the apple of her cheek. An intimate touch. Almost more intimate than his torturing, lingering kiss.

Almost.

"So Chase Industries is just a pit stop?" He spoke softly, almost a whisper. "A woman's shelter of sorts?"

She waited for him to lower his hand from her face before responding. "I'm not hiding, if that's what you're insinuating."

He stepped back, straightening, collecting himself. An obvious effort for a pinch of professionalism. Offered his hand. "Congratulations. The job is yours."

She looked at his hand.

Looked at his face.

And realized . . . she had just been interviewed.

She bit out a nervous laugh. Short and clipped.

Dammit.

Head swimming in a thick cloud of lust and euphoria, she absently reached to shake his offered hand.

A professional gesture meant as an acceptance of the position.

But it felt nothing close to professional.

A firm but gentle grasp of her hand.

A slow tightening.

He nodded. "Ready to continue the tour?"

"Yes. I. Am."

He smiled. "Truth."

## Chapter Seven

Natural as the heat of a flame, Zeke's arm slipped behind and around her waist. Her body tucked subtly against his.

Inside of mere minutes, they're relationship had escalated from one of almost professionalism and rocketed to somewhere . . . foreign . . . unknown . . . intense, so damn intense.

So wildly inappropriate.

But she didn't give a damn.

Something about him.

His regal confidence.

His ability to push the boundaries of the constricting box known as the real world. And launch himself outside that box, see the world with the innocence and wonder of a school-aged child.

Abruptly, she stopped walking. Glanced about the factory floor, where some of the employees watched them, seemingly unapologetically, while others went about their business, seemingly unaware of their presence.

Zeke turned to her. "Problem?"

"Yes. I mean, no. Well, maybe."

"That clears it up."

"You . . . and . . . me."

"Yes?"

Shrugged. "I'm just not sure it's appropriate for us to become . . . involved . . . yeah know . . . if we're gonna be working together, that is."

"I see." A look of understanding. "I'm terribly sorry. It won't happen again."

Disappointed.

She was terrifically disappointed.

Why didn't he argue with her, profess his attraction, demand she reconsider?

"Why . . . I mean, do you . . ."

"I'm attracted to you. Thought the feeling was mutual. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking. But now that I know--"

"Know what?"

"That you're not attracted to me."

"I never said that."

Shook his head. "So you are attracted to me?"

"Yes, but that's not the point."

Head cocked. "I see."

She frowned. "See what?"

"You're dressing for the part again."

"I beg your pardon."

"You're a big fan of appropriateness. And fucking your boss doesn't fall into that category of appropriate."

His words seemed to echo off the factory walls. Sage glanced about the vast open area.

Machinery.

People working the machinery.

"Perhaps we should talk somewhere more private."

He waved her along. "This way."

They walked deeper into the factory, past the paint booth. Turned another corner.

A woman of obvious Asian descent with long black hair, safety goggles and an oversized white lab coat, typed on a keyboard that extended from a large box-like next level machine slash supercomputer.

"Good morning, Lauren."

She turned to Zeke. "Where's the specs for the FH1?"

"I'll get that to you this afternoon."

"You said that yesterday."

"Yes, but I didn't mean it yesterday. I mean it today,"

She laughed. "I guess you didn't mean it when you promised it the day before yesterday either?"

"On it, Lauren. I promise."

When they reached his office, he opened the door and waited for her to enter before following her inside.

Sage sat in the same chair she'd begun this 'interview' in.

He sat across from her.

"So." She smiled.

"So." He smiled. "One question."

"Yes?"

"When can you start?"

Guess they weren't going to discuss their mutual attraction. Keep it professional. She could do this. "Well, I have some things to wrap up at home."

"Need you to start right away."

"Today?"

"Preferably."

"Well, I just can't. I mean I need time to--"

"To what?"

"Find a place to live for starters. It's much too far to commute."

"I'll set you up in a room. Temporary, of course, until you can find something more permanent. A motel not far from here. Take a left out of the parking lot and it's a straight shot. About three miles. Can't miss it."

She narrowed her eyes in confusion. "I'm Sage Moreau."

"So I read on your resume."

"As in Moreau Hotels."

"Oh, right." Frowned. "Gawd awful place. No offense."

*No offense????* "You're kidding, right?" Her brows arched. "You don't pull off facetiousness very well."

"Facetious? No. Not at all. Those places make me uncomfortable."

First her attire and now her family's legacy, both making him uncomfortable. Just couldn't wrap her head around it. Almost like he was intentionally trying to goad her, give her a hard time.

She smirked. "I do admit, you've got a great poker face. But I'm not so gullible. My father showed me how to spot a player; he was a Texas Hold'em champion."

"Your father taught you to spot bullshit and mine taught to never spout bullshit."

Her shoulders slumped. "You really don't like my family's chain of hotels?"

"Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Because . . . I mean . . . it's like saying you don't like taking a cruise to the Caribbean."

"Never been on a cruise. Don't like to travel. Don't like cramped spaces."

"I'll have you know that Moreau Hotel rooms are very spacious. Travel America did a piece on us. The magazine rated the Moreau chain of hotels as one of the best in the country."

A sideways look. "Is this where I get the resume for your family's hotel?"

"Well . . .no." Sage folded her arms across her chest. "It's just . . . I don't get it."

"It's quite simple," Zeke said on a sigh. "Five-star' anything makes me uncomfortable. The very concept behind the ideology is superficial politeness. An act of civility should be derived from respect. But respect earned from superficial means is an ugly truth I refuse to acknowledge." Took a breath. "Sorry. I'm rambling."

Sage smiled.

He smiled in return. "Anyway, I'd rather stay at the Strange Daze. People there keep it real."

Sage thought for a moment.

Keep it real, huh?

She could be as real as the next guy. "Strange Daze you say?"

"It's a little . . . unusual . . . but I think you'll enjoy it."

He looked at her, as if pondering whether or not to say whatever he was thinking about saying. Until finally, he spoke.

"Do you party?"

"Party?"

"Weed. Do you smoke pot?"

"Oh. Do you need me to take a drug test before I start?"

He laughed. "Errr. No. I'm only asking because I do . . . smoke weed that is and I was hoping we could smoke together." He shrugged. "Break the ice."

Break the ice? Sage blinked. They had just made out in the middle of the factory floor. The breaking-the-ice ship had already lifted anchor and was set adrift.

A moment of intimacy she was sure most of the workers witnessed. Slut. Good first impression. Oh, damn. He had asked a question. "I beg your pardon?"

"Do you want to smoke with me?"

"Yes. I. Would."

## Chapter Eight

*Two hours later . . .*

Sage turned from her PC. "I finished reviewing the specs for the FH1."

Zeke turned on his chair, pinched the end of his joint, extinguishing it. "Find anything amiss?"

"No. Pretty standard stuff."

"Great. Now start on the FG1."

This was amateur bullshit. Any dweeb in their freshman year could rock this out.

He sighed. "Not challenging enough?"

"Am I that transparent?"

Zeke went to the compact refrigerator, pulled out a tray of sushi and set it on the corner of her desk.

"Just easing you into the job. It's only day one."

Sage smiled. "Yes, I guess you have a point."

"I've thought this through."

"That is quite clear."

He laughed.

"Why don't you call it a day? Check into the Strange Daze and get settled in. We'll start fresh and new tomorrow and I promise to have more challenging work."

She slid the strap of her purse off the back of the chair. "I'll be staying at the Moreau."

"Of course."

"Thank you . . . for the position."

Zeke lowered his head, one slow nod. "You're welcome."

Smiled, reached for the handle.

"Sage?" Zeke handed her a spec sheet. "Could you drop that off to Lauren on your way out?"

"Of course."

He handed her a "Strange Daze" business card.

"In case you change your mind."

## Chapter Nine

It was always either a marble fountain with crystal clear water or a lavish indoor garden but every Moreau Hotel showcased one of the two inside the lobby. The true mainstay was the glass -- glass everything. Some black glass, some frosted and some infused with colored air bubbles. Gave the glass an almost enchanted look; somewhere between futuristic and religiously-inspired stained glass.

If her family hadn't gone into hospitality by way of a five-star hotel chain, they might've made a plunge into the manufacturing of glass. The decorative glass had been at her mother's behest, an idea Layla Moreau had gotten while she'd been lying in the hospital after giving birth to a healthy baby girl named Sage.

Sage stood inside the lobby listening to the water run through the fountain and the steady tap-tap tap-tap tap of shoes, heels and boots from various walks of life, many in a hurry, some not so much.

Business men and business women in three piece suits and designer dresses and luxurious luggage all moved in and out of the grand hotel in systematic precision. Sage had not traveled much during her college years since she'd taken classes all year round in her typical high-achiever fashion, but when she'd been younger she'd toured the country every summer with her family and they'd go from coast to coast staying at every Moreau from here to Hampton Beach to Daytona.

As a child she'd felt an immediate rush of pride as she stepped inside one of her family's hotels.

No one was supposed to play in the fountains. Risk of injury and lawsuits and such.

But those rules hadn't applied to Sage. She'd eagerly scurry off to the fountain to splish and splash. If she fell in and cracked open her head then it'd be her own damn fault and she wouldn't do it again. That's what her Daddy had said.

If the family had happened to stay at one of the hotels that showcased an exotic indoor garden then Sage would pout and she'd beg her parents to get rid of the garden and put in a fountain instead.

Something wet and cold pressed against her ankle. Sage yelped in surprise. Looking down she saw what she believed was the ugliest dog in the world.

"Ophelia! You come here right this instant! Don't you bother that nice lady." A woman in a fur coat and obviously bleached blonde hair hurried toward Sage.

"Ophelia! Come this instant!" She bent and swooped the dog into her arms. "I don't know what's got into her."

"It's quite alright," Sage said. It was alright but that dog was still the ugliest she'd ever seen.

"She's a Scottish Highland terrier," said the woman as if she'd read Sage's thoughts or maybe she'd seen the way Sage grimaced at the dog. "She needs a haircut," the woman said to the dog's face then proceeded to devolve into a gibberish of baby talk which was Sage's cue to depart.

As she heard the woman's embarrassing murmurs to the dog she actually started to feel bad for the dog. That poor, poor creature.

Sage approached the counter. A man in a black suit was ahead of her. His brows were furrowed and cheeks red.

"The company always provides me a room with a minbar and within one floor of the gym. That's been my standing here for the last two years."

"I'm sorry sir," said the front desk attendant. "There is only one suite with a minibar but it is located on the ninth floor."

"Yes. And the gym is on the third floor."

"Correct sir. But there are no--"

"I heard you. Fine. Fine. But I'll be wanting to speak to Mr. Bourk before I depart tomorrow evening so please make a note to him."

"Of course sir."

When the man spun he nearly bowled over Sage, brushing past her in a frenzied stride.

"Good evenin', ma'am." The desk clerk greeted Sage with what had to be a forced smile.

"Can I get you a room for the evening?"

Sage smiled. "Yes. I'll take room 346 with the minbar."

"That room is reserved for Moreau guests only."

Sage was already holding up her personal Moreau guest card with her photo and signature emblazoned on the card.

"Oh, of course. I'll get the key, Miss Moreau and have Tony take your bags to your room."

"It's fine. I didn't bring any bags. I'll be checking out first thing in the morning."

The glass elevator had always made Sage feel queasy. And for some strange reason her father had insisted all the elevators play classic guitar with a southwestern flair. As the elevator ascended she felt like she was heading for a showdown in the middle of the dusty streets.

At least there would be a minibar.

But as the elevator door opened to the fourth floor with its lustrous royal blue carpet and original oil paintings framed in black walnut, Sage felt alienated.

Perhaps she'd had so much of this lavish life in her youth that she'd grown jaded, soured, with the richness of it all.

One oil painting was that of Waylon Moreau, her grandfather, who looked like he was the president of the world sitting at his fancy desk, glass of brandy in his hand.

Sage opened the door to room 346. She flipped on the lights and dropped her purse on the glossy black table closest to the door. Then she emptied her pockets. That's when she noticed the crumpled business card Zeke had given her right before she'd left.

On the back of the Strange Daze business card were two words scribbled in black ink.

*Ask for room 420.*



## Chapter Ten

Only a few vehicles were parked in the Strange Daze lot.

A couple run-down pick-up trucks and one sedan that looked like it'd recently wobbled out of a junkyard. One sore-thumb of a lime-green station wagon with a full-length Peace symbol plastered across the back window and tie-dye ribbons with beads strung around the antenna.

Aside from cracks in the cement, the parking lot was quaint and clean of litter and broken bottles, unlike many of the other businesses in the surrounding area. The motel was smallish, maybe fifty rooms. The building was quaint, a Swedish cottage kind of look.

As she approached the Strange Daze motel, a special kind of excitement tingled. When was the last time she'd stayed anywhere but a Hotel Moreau?

Maybe never.

On the inside of the front glass door was a large oval decal depicting Shaggy and Scooby-doo lounging on a couch with overly exaggerated red eyes and big silly grins. Caption read: **Would You Do It For A Scooby Snack?**

Soon as she entered the front parlor-sized lobby, she couldn't help but smile as the many strings of multi-colored lights--draping the walls, chairs and check-in counter--all winked at her.

A fountain was centered in the lobby. It was in the shape of a marijuana leaf with water spraying softly from the tips of its leaves.

A sign on the wall read: Sorry, we're stoned.



The smell of Mary Jane danced with shamanic calmness amidst a subtle breeze of air-conditioning.

Antiquish wall lights lined the halls that led toward the rooms. But these weren't normal lights.

They were black lights.

As if stepping into the mouth of a cave, Sage approached the significantly recessed check-in counter. A lop-sided yellow sign on a green-trimmed red door read: STRANGE DAZE EMPLOYEES.

To the left of that door was a felt portrait of Jim Morrison with an acid-green-yellow overlay. On the right side of that same door was a hand-painted mural of the Psychedelic Sounds Of The 13th Elevators.

A somewhat young but plump woman emerged from a side-entrance to the cavernous front desk. That same acid-green-yellow showed up once more on

the bandanna around her short-cropped hair. Long gypsy-like earrings dangled from her lobes.

Was she in a hotel or an opium den?

The clerk handed Sage a key.

"You are Sage Moreau, correct?"

"How did you know that?"

"Zeke called and said you might be stopping by. He said I'd know you when I saw you. And he was right. You have that Moreau look about you."

"I'm not sure if I should be offended or not."

"Oh, not at all. You're just . . . a little more sophisticated than most of our other guests."

"Right, well . . ." Sage lifted the key. "Guess I got what I need. Thank you."

"Room 420," the woman called after her.

Sage shook her head, snickering. "No doubt."

Like an airport runway, green rope lights stretched along the tops of the walls, leading toward her room . . . room 420.

This motel was most unexpected. Humble yet distinguished.

Between the dim-lighting and the sweet scent of cannabis hovering like a romantic fog, Sage found herself--once again--swooning.

With much anticipation, she opened the door to room 420.

The room was decorated in shades of dark red and burnt orange. Simply furnished with a full-size bed, a smallish desk and chair and a tiny closet. No television.

However, it did have a very large whirlpool tub. Big enough for four, at least.

Sage set her purse and suitcase against the wall, beneath the light switch.

On the vanity were several clear plastic boxes, each about the size of a deck of cards. Beside the boxes was a pipe and a box of matches.

She opened the first box. A plume of sweet and slightly bitter fragrance billowed from the marijuana flowers and tingled about her senses.

She opened another. This one was more sweet and not really bitter at all.

The last box smelled more woody, rather than sweet or bitter.

Surely not all the guests were gifted with illegal substances. Which could only mean that the flowers and paraphernalia were a gift from Zeke.

A knock startled her. Probably just the clerk. Maybe she'd left her car keys in the lobby.

Sage crossed the shaggy brown carpet and opened the door.

In the threshold stood Zeke Chase. He held a tray of crisp seaweed wraps. Under his arm was a bottle of Tenuta Hills wine. Between two fingers he held two upside down wine glasses by the stem.

"May I come in?"



## Chapter Eleven

Sage nodded at the man standing in the threshold of her motel room.

Zeke walked past her and she closed the door. He set two glasses on a small round table set in the corner of the room. Slipped a corkscrew from the front pocket of his black slacks.

Why was Zeke here? Was this business or pleasure? Did she even care?

Zeke popped open the bottle. Filled each glass two-thirds full. He slid a chair from the table and sat.

"What I'm about to tell you doesn't leave this room."

Sage sat on the other chair. She set her wine glass on the table. "Of course."

"Two years ago, I began R&D on a new endeavor."

"Something to do with the military contract you were awarded?"

Shook his head. "What do you know about 3D printing?"

"Based on a vat photopolymerization technique called 'stereolithography'."

Sage sipped her wine. "Invented about a decade ago by Charles Hull. Initially used for industrial parts but more recently has been used for medical purposes. Dental implants. Prosthetics."

"Do you have any idea of the potential for this technology? The impact on humanity?"

"Seeing that it's being researched as a means to create artificial organs, well, of course." Hesitated. "This new R&D project has to do with . . . 3D printing?"

"And artificial organs."

"Wow." Sage sipped more wine. "When you said you'd have more challenging stuff, you weren't kidding." Hesitated. "What does 3D printing and artificial organs have to do with dashboards for industrial equipment?"

"Nothing, really, except as a means to finance my research."

"And how are you progressing?"

"Long build times and low precision. Our two biggest obstacles right now. But we're optimistic."

"And that's where I fit in?"

"Indeed. A toast." He lifted his glass. "To living long enough to see an incredible future."

Sage lifted her glass. "To living . . . well . . . forever."

"To Forever."