

professionally, and for your prayer support and friendship. Bless you, my friend!

And of course, all praise, honor, and glory goes to Jesus for any good report that comes as a result of this story being written. I write for Him, and pray that somewhere along the way at least one life will be touched as a result.

CHAPTER 1

Jeena Gregory chewed on her lip as she stared at the red silk dress hanging in the closet. Would it be enough? She wiped her sweaty palms down the legs of her jeans, trying to vanquish the knot in her stomach. The same feeling she'd experienced as a ten-year-old hit her. She'd walked into her new school and tried to ignore the snickers as some of the students eyed her worn-out sneakers and hand-me-down clothes.

She refused to let fear or insecurity take control. Fear couldn't hurt her—only men could do that. And Sean loved her.

No way would she believe the rumor she'd heard from Connie, the biggest gossip in her small group of friends. Sean couldn't be seeing someone else. He was close to proposing; she'd sensed it more than once. Jeena shook her head, trying to dislodge the disquieting thoughts. He'd have a good explanation.

Her confidence level soared after applying makeup and slipping into the dress. It had cost her two days' salary, but it was worth every cent. Hugging her in all the right places, the dark red silk accented her long black hair and green eyes. Working out at the club kept her figure where she wanted it.

Sean's car flashed past Jeena's window and halted in front of her small condo. Jeena ran a hand over her trim hips. She'd be thirty later this year, and her body still looked like that of a twenty-year-old—she'd maintain it if she had to work out every day.

The doorbell chimed, but this time Jeena didn't rush to answer. Sean Matthews needn't think her life revolved around his arrival, even if it did. Playing a little hard to get might work in her favor.

The bell chimed a second time, and Jeena imagined its tone changed to one of impatience. Better not overdo it. She opened

the door and stepped back into the glow of the entry light to give him the full effect.

A small frown turned down the corners of Sean's mouth, giving a serious aspect to his rugged face. His tapping toe stilled, but his lowered brows didn't lift until he stepped across the threshold.

The smile Jeena expected didn't appear. Apprehension flickered through her mind. "Something wrong, Sean?" She touched his arm.

He ran his fingers through his dark blond hair, giving a slightly rumpled look to a man who prided himself on his appearance. "Our reservation is in fifteen minutes. We're going to be late."

He hadn't seemed to notice the gown or the accentuated curves. "I had a bit of a struggle zipping up this dress."

"You might need a jacket. That looks a little skimpy for a chilly evening."

The small wisp of fear grew, fanned by the coolness of his impatience.

"Skimpy? That's it?" She stepped back, folding her arms.

He shot a quick, cool look at the dress. "You look great. Is it new?"

She pursed her lips. Something was up. "Yes, it's new." She swung toward the closet. "Fine. I'll get a jacket." She yanked open the door and pulled a black cape off the rack. *Great start to our evening.*

He helped her into his silver Lexus, then slipped into his seat and turned the key. "You really do look stunning." Sean paused. "It's been a crazy day, and I've had a lot on my mind." He gave her a soft smile before turning his attention back to the road.

They pulled out into the street and headed through the residential area toward the edge of town. Silhouetted against the skyline, tall fir trees flanked the elegant homes along the way. Kids still played in front yards, and a couple of eager homeowners mowed their yards. Jeena sighed. She missed having a yard and flowerbeds. The new townhouse she'd put a deposit on boasted a small backyard and window boxes in the front, so she could indulge her gardening hobby on her days off.

She sank deeper in the seat and released a small breath. Peaceful silence enveloped her as the quiet car snaked around the curves and the sun glinted off the nearby Columbia River. Sean loved her. Losing sight of that was foolish. Sure, he'd neglected to kiss her when he'd arrived, but she understood the stress generated by work. His job as a financial consultant to a large corporation in Portland often kept him distracted.

Connie was being catty and nothing more.

Jeena gave a low laugh. "You had me worried. I thought aliens had taken over your body when you didn't react to this dress."

He pulled away from a stop sign and glanced in his mirror, then reached over and took her hand. "Never fear. If aliens attempt a takeover, I'll shoot 'em dead." His quick smile flashed. "Hungry?"

"Very." She'd been foolish to listen to Connie. An hour earlier, she couldn't have eaten a thing, but now she was ravenous.



Sean had chosen a small, rather exclusive restaurant, a rarity in River City, Oregon. They could have driven an hour up I-84 to Portland, but the recent growth of tourism in the Columbia River Gorge had birthed new hot spots, popular with locals and tourists alike.

They were seated by a window that afforded a breathtaking view of the river, and Jeena could see the colorful sails of windsurfers kiting along in the evening breeze, the soft glow of the late April sunset bronzing the multi-colored sails. Candles glowed against the damask tablecloth, giving off a subtle air of luxury. Strains of low music added to the ambiance, creating a soothing background for the trickle of diners still drifting in.

Sean had requested a quiet spot in the corner, giving a sense of privacy that still allowed a good view. While he ordered, Jeena glanced around the room, wondering if any of their friends might be here tonight. No familiar faces appeared within her line of sight. Good. She wanted this evening to be theirs alone.

Maybe they could sort out the nasty rumor starting to circulate and kill it before it morphed into something worse.

Sean leaned back in his seat and sighed, stretching his legs out from under the heavy brocade cloth.

“Long day?” Jeena reached across to stroke the side of his face. He didn’t pull away, but he didn’t wrap his long fingers around hers as she’d expected. A small alarm went off in the back of her mind.

He gave a small shake of his head, dislodging her hand. “Not really. It feels good to sit across the table from a beautiful woman, instead of looking at bored businessmen all day.”

She sat back in her chair and relaxed. “Something going on at work that’s bothering you?”

“Very little. How about you? When does your lease start on the new townhouse?”

“In ten days, so I’m boxing everything up now. I’ve got my final interview a week from Monday with Browning and Thayer.”

“It’s too bad it’s only a temporary job, but with your expertise in design, they can’t go wrong contracting you.” He straightened in his chair and leaned toward her, an affectionate smile flickering across his lips.

She flashed him a grateful look. “Thanks. I hope they feel the same. But being a private contractor has its advantages, and the project is big—it should last at least a year.”

The waiter arrived, placing steaming plates of fragrant pasta in front of them and gathering the empty salad dishes. A few minutes passed in comfortable silence, and Jeena’s misgivings evaporated in the relaxed intimacy.

Candlelight cast a warm light across Sean’s face, accentuating his masculine good looks. Jeena smiled and settled deeper into her chair. “So tell me about your family. Last time we talked, you were concerned about your mom living alone, now that your dad’s gone. How’s she doing?”

“Great, from what I gather when I have time to call.” He wound the last strand of pasta onto his fork and took a bite, then wiped his mouth with a napkin. “I’m sorry—I see a client I need to speak to.

I’ll only be a minute. Do you mind?” He nodded across the room to a silver-haired man sitting with an elegantly dressed woman.

“Not at all.” She smiled, then watched him make his way through the tables.

She’d first spotted him at a party a little over a year ago. Tall, mid-thirties, dressed in an Italian three-piece suit, and built like a model, he stood out in the crowd of older businessmen. An air of sophistication clung to him, enhanced by vivid blue eyes set in a deeply tanned face. A striking blonde who’d had too much to drink was hanging on his arm. He looked slightly disgusted and appeared to be searching for an escape.

Setting aside her drink, Jeena strolled across the room, knowing she’d captured his attention even before she approached.

She extended her hand and smiled when he held it longer than necessary. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced. I’m Jeena Gregory, a friend of our hostess.”

“Sean Matthews. This is . . . I’m sorry, what’s your name again?” His bored gaze turned to the blonde.

The woman released her grip on his arm and glared at Jeena. “Angie.”

Sean cocked his head toward the woman. “Right. Sorry. This is Angie.”

Angie’s lips turned down in a pout. “I’m getting something to drink. I’ll find someone more interesting to take me home.” Angie flounced across the room without looking back.

Sean’s blue eyes shone with something more than amusement. “I didn’t bring her, but she’s had too much to drink and must have forgotten. She latched onto me when I arrived. Thanks for the rescue.”

Jeena spent the rest of the evening in his company—and many evenings after that. Within a few weeks, she knew she wanted to spend the rest of her life with this man. Intelligent, witty, generous, and advancing up the corporate ladder at a fast pace, he possessed much that she found attractive.

Sean, however, remained an enigma. While engaging and attentive, he had yet to commit to a permanent relationship. Jeena

sensed his frustration at her adamant refusal to move in together. She enjoyed the party life and didn't judge others for their lifestyle choices, but she drew the line at moving in with a man before marriage. She deserved more. Besides, too many of her crowd had gone that direction, and she'd seen disaster strike more than once.

"Jeena? I'm sorry I took so long. I hope you weren't bored." Sean's deep voice woke her from the memories.

She brushed the hair from her eyes. "Not at all. Just remembering our first meeting."

"Ah, yes. The party."

Jeena tried to suppress a smile but failed. "And poor Angie."

Sean laughed outright. "Poor Angie, nothing. That woman clung like a leech with no encouragement from me. You came along just in time."

She leaned toward him and stroked the back of his hand. "Did I?"

He slowly pulled back, and the smile disappeared.

"What's wrong?" Her heart rate accelerated.

He cleared his throat and picked up a napkin. "There's something I want to tell you."

Tell. Not ask. Jeena leaned back and crossed her arms. "Yes?"

"I've been offered a new job. It means a huge increase in pay and could lead to a partnership."

"That sounds wonderful. I didn't realize you were looking."

"I didn't mention it until I knew something would come of it. I didn't want to worry you."

"Why would I care?" Her palms grew clammy, but she refused to give in to fear.

His lips set in a firm line; then he took a deep breath and plunged forward. "It's taking me out of the States. A large construction conglomerate wants me in the Middle East."

A small shiver of fear traveled up her back. "But that's dangerous. Tell me you're not going to take it."

"I've said yes. I'll be living in Kuwait and going across the border occasionally, and then only to areas that are deemed safe. I leave in two weeks."

"Two weeks," she whispered. "What about us?"

He shifted in his chair and looked at his hands, then raised his eyes. "I'm sorry, Jeena."

"What do you mean, you're sorry? You're not asking me to come with you or wait? How long will you be gone?" She tried to keep the pain out of her voice, but her words rose in tone and volume.

An irritated look flashed across his face. The small, secluded spot he'd chosen closed in around her. No longer did the flickering candles on the table give off an aura of romance—instead, they gleamed with an ominous light.

"I'll be gone at least a year, maybe two. You didn't want to live with me here in the States, so I didn't think you'd be willing to move to Kuwait." Sean leaned back in his chair, holding her gaze.

She'd probably hold onto him if she gave in, but something inside protested. Her parents' marriage had been lousy, no doubt about that. But her mother had saved herself for the man she married and had often urged Jeena to do the same. Besides, Grammie would be horrified if Jeena made that decision. A deep love for both her mother and grandmother had prompted Jeena to walk the same path.

"But if we were married . . ." She could have bitten off her tongue for letting the words slip.

Sean's lips twisted in a wry smile. "I have no desire to get married."

"So all of this has been what . . . a game? You aren't in love with me? Never have been?"

He shrugged. "I think a lot of you. But marriage isn't part of my plan. I thought we'd have a good time. Frankly, I hung around hoping you'd change your mind."

"You knew how I felt about living together. It's not something I'm comfortable with."

Sean smirked. "You told me your dad was a religious Jekyll and Hyde and you had no use for God. I never expected you'd stick with your decision and be such a prude."

His words brought the chaos in her mind to a halt. An icy calm washed over her. "Prude. I see. So, who is she?"

His face flamed red, then faded to a dirty white. “Who?”

She rose quickly, her chair sliding into the waiter who was walking behind her. Pride stiffened her spine and held her head high. “I nailed that one. Never mind. I’m sure you’ll be very happy together, and my prudish life will be better off without *you*.”

She slipped around the table and started to walk past him, but he reached out and grasped her wrist. “Jeena. Don’t be that way. I’ll drive you home. I’m sorry.”

Shaking off his hand, she stepped out of his reach and lowered her voice, conscious of the curious looks from the tables nearby. “I’ll get a taxi. Have a great life, Sean.”

Somehow she managed to exit the restaurant without calling more attention to herself. Humiliation at making a scene while leaving the table forced her to increase her pace and not look back. The poor waiter—she’d nearly bowled him over while rushing from the table. But no way could she allow Sean to see her cry. She needed to get home and face this. The tears would come later, and no telling when they’d stop.

Men. Anger bubbled inside, momentarily pushing aside the sting of tears. Her father had proven men couldn’t be trusted—he hadn’t loved her, either. Why had she forgotten? Never again would a man suck her in with promises and lies. From now on, her career would come first. She’d show them all. The only person in the world who mattered was her grandmother. She’d neglected her recently, but tomorrow was a new day. Grammie would be happy to see her, and Sean was no longer important.

CHAPTER 2

Jeena spent the evening in a wash of tears, unable to shut off the flow once it started. Nightmares plagued the early hours after sleep claimed her, causing her to awaken with a pounding heart. She felt like she’d been run over by a train, and she hadn’t even been drinking. *Good thing it’s Saturday and I don’t have to work.*

How would she go on without Sean? She’d been so sure he would propose, so sure this man was the right one. How had she missed the truth all these months—that he was willing to live with her but not willing to marry her? Because she loved him, and love truly *was* blind. At least, it had blinded her to Sean’s personal agenda.

“I hate him.” The words spoken aloud made her wince, but it might be the only way she would get through this. Love must turn to hate if her sanity was to survive.

She needed an aspirin. Fumbling out from under the blankets and slipping into her robe, she belted it and stumbled to the bathroom.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror. Red-rimmed, puffy eyes stared out of a pale face surrounded by disheveled, dark hair. Coffee might help. She popped two aspirin, washed them down with water, and headed for her kitchen.

One day at a time. Right now, toast and coffee would create a small, bright spot in her morning. She pushed a button on the stereo, and the room filled with soothing music. Her mouth watered at the fragrance of the coffee beans as they ran through the grinder.

How could Sean dump her? Maybe she needed to rethink her decision. Jeena reached for the coffee pot. No way. She loved