

Chapter 1

Bliss Sinclair walked in from the rain, brushing sparkling raindrops from the sleeve of her gray suit. She stopped and shook herself like a cat. More droplets scattered, flying from her large haloing Afro to the carpet that lined the main lobby of the Volk Publishing building. People walked around her, some watching her display with something like amusement. Others were too focused on the clock, already beginning to chime nine a.m., to pay her any attention. She shrugged again, to better settle the jacket on her back and shoulders, and headed for the bank of elevators at the rear of the lobby. The gray carpet muffled the sound of her footsteps as she stepped into the chrome elevator and pressed the button for the twenty-third floor.

Just as the door began to close, a woman slid quickly between them. She brought with her the light, mossy scent of Chanel # 19 and nodded briefly at Sinclair before staring ahead at the mirrored wall of the elevator.

Despite her coolness, the woman immediately drew Sinclair's attention. She was a clever mixture of elements. Her hair was tamed Africa, thick and permed to tumble to her shoulders in shiny waves that framed her square jawed, Anglo-Saxon face. Freckles sprinkled like brown sugar over her nose and cheeks. As Sinclair watched, a hint of a smile pulled at the woman's full mouth. She was beautiful, Sinclair decided. And her creamy milk and coffee skin looked delicious in silk.

"Hello." The woman's voice was a velvety southern drawl. Sinclair slid her gaze to the elevator doors, embarrassed to be caught staring. "Hi." The woman took Sinclair's reply as an invitation and looked fully at her travel companion, her mouth still curled in that almost-smile. "Do you work here?" she asked. Realizing that the woman wasn't offended by her blatant ogling, Sinclair relaxed. "Yes, on the twenty-third floor."

"You must do some pretty expensive work for Volk to be that high up in the building." "Not really, just a little accounting." Sinclair turned to look at the woman. "What are you doing here?"

A real smile captured her mouth. "I don't look like I work here?" Sinclair figured that honesty was best in this case. "Not really." "Then I must be a writer. Coming to meet with my editor." "Ah. You've been published by us before?"

"A couple of books. Essays." "Hmm." Sinclair sized the woman up again. She didn't seem at all like the intellectual type. Rather like a one of those hard-edged business women, in her tailored silk pants suit. "I don't read much non-fiction, although I've been meaning to start."

"That's funny that you say that. I could never really get into fiction." The woman's mouth twitched. "I'm Regina, by the way." "Sinclair."

Regina nodded just as the elevator door slid open. "I guess I'll see you around."
"Sure." Sinclair watched the woman walk toward an unfamiliar cloister of offices. She blinked when the gunmetal gray doors closed, cutting off her view of the silk clad backside gliding down the hallway.

"Baby got back." Sinclair coughed when she realized she'd said that out loud. Still, she chuckled to herself as she stepped out onto the twenty-third floor and down the carpeted hall to her office.

Shelly Romero, her secretary, was already at her desk when Sinclair walked in. Shelly looked like a child who'd come in for 'bring your daughter to work' day and just stayed. Dark hair in two pony tails, glitter eye shadow from the kids section and barely-business attire. She was a liberal arts college graduate still safely ensconced in her twenties and with ambitions of being a published poet. That ambition was what drew her to Volk Publishing three years ago and the belief that as long as she had some link with the publishing house she had a chance of having her first book published by them. As far as Sinclair knew, Shelly was still unpublished.

"Good morning, Shelly."

"Don't you look cheerful this morning?" Shelly grinned and handed over a large stack of mail. "Did you get lucky?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" A smile shadowed Sinclair's mouth.

"Only if it involved more than one girl. Otherwise save it for the boys in the break room."

Sinclair rolled her eyes then stepped away as Shelly's phone rang and the secretary turned to answer it. Ever since Sinclair had "accidentally" walked into a lesbian bar uptown and ran into the younger woman over a year ago, they'd become more open with each other. Shelly was the closest thing she had to a friend in this city.

In her office she put her briefcase and purse away, humming a light tune under her breath. When she found herself tapping her feet to the same song as she opened the mail, Sinclair laughed softly, wondering at her sudden good mood. An image of the woman in the elevator immediately came to her. So what? Regina was an attractive woman. It wasn't like anything was likely to happen between them. Though a girl could dream...

That night, Sinclair's boyfriend, Yuen, coaxed Sinclair out for a book release party, an event that she had off-handedly mentioned to him weeks ago and where his favorite author was launching her latest book. When they walked into the hotel ballroom it was chaos of flashbulbs, megawatt smiles, towering displays of food, and free-flowing alcohol.

"This is great," he whispered, tilting his head to kiss her cheek. "If I'd known you were this well connected I'd have asked you out years ago." His thick black hair fell over his eyes. He seemed nothing like the thirty-five year old lawyer he was. His full lips were more prone to smile than not and his slim youthful body could have easily belonged to a

teenaged underwear model. There were days when Sinclair wondered what he was doing with her.

She lightly pinched his wrist. "It wasn't that big of a deal. Everybody in the office gets an invitation."

When they walked through a mirrored archway, Sinclair gave her hair a discreet fluff and threaded her arm through Yuen's. Today, like most days, she wore her hair in a large Afro to rival Angela Davis'. The makeup she'd brushed on thankfully didn't look out of place. It was just enough to emphasize her full mouth and wide, slightly tilted eyes. Yuen once said that she looked like a hungry fox, beautiful but inclined to bite a hand off and swallow it whole if someone was stupid enough to try and get too close. It didn't help that there was a reddish cast to her skin. Sinclair acknowledged that she looked a bit too thin, but could think of no immediate remedy for the situation. She often just didn't feel like eating.

"Linnet's over there." Yuen drew Sinclair's attention to the author and her entourage who had set up a display on a large dais at the front of the room. The walls of the ballroom were lit with artfully done track lighting that brought the eye straight to the life-sized mock up of Linnet Costa's book cover. Naughty nubile angels were her latest obsession. Apparently they photographed well.

"And the best part is that the food and drinks are on the house," Sinclair teased.

"Nice." He sounded like a college kid let out for his first spring break.

The guest of honor was working the room well, looking wicked in head to toe fire-engine red. The latex and metal dress sparked as much conversation as her book. But she wore it well. Sinclair hoped that she looked half as good when she turned fifty.

"Go on and introduce yourself, Yuen. I'll be back here getting a bite to eat." He looked at Sinclair like he thought she was joking. "Go ahead," she said. "I won't leave without you."

"Funny. Since I drove."

Her smile faded as he walked away. She glanced at her watch. Two hours should be a reasonable amount of time to stay, she thought.