

City traffic was heavier than usual but it didn't irritate him today. Noel turned up the radio and sang along. He smiled at the bright blue sky and fluffy white clouds overhead. It was a perfect day to meet at the park. A light breeze shook dark green leaves of hundred-year-old oaks along St. Charles Ave. As expected there were no close parking spaces. Still humming, Noel parked along a side street. Nothing seemed to touch his good mood.

"Hmm, wonder why?"

Noel smiled as he walked down the sidewalk. The answer to his question was only minutes away. It was the thrill of the chase, he said to himself. Never before had a woman resisted him with such determination. Lyrissa was not playing hard to get. She really didn't want him to get close. He should be content. Still he kept thinking of reasons for them to get together.

The entrance to City Park was marked by a huge stone arch with ornate carvings. Lyrissa had agreed to meet him here. A set of figurines from the family collection was on display in the art gallery located in the park.

Lyrissa was sitting on a stone bench in the shade of a large magnolia tree. She stared across the park deep in thought. Her thick hair was pulled back into a ponytail. The black frames of her dark sunglasses gave her a look of casual elegance. Light glinted from her silver hoop earrings. Noel stopped to admire her from afar. She wore a crisp white cotton shirt tucked into a dark red skirt. The short sleeves left her bare arms exposed. A short crop red jacket was neatly folded across her lap. Sunlight gave her brown skin a golden glow.

"Wow," he mumbled to himself. He'd been with beautiful women before, but none as delectable as Lyrissa Rideau.

A tall man seemed to come from nowhere. He held a basset hound on a leash. He started to walk by but doubled back. Lyrissa seemed to notice him about the same time. She shielded her eyes from the sun as she smiled up at him. Their laughter drifted on the breeze as they talked. Noel strode forward to drive out the intruder.

"Hi, Lyrissa," he said with forced cheer. "Sorry I'm a little late."

Lyrissa looked at him through the opaque dark lenses. "Only about ten minutes. No problem."

"I'm Noel St. Denis." He stuck out his hand.

"Tony Tate," the man said as he shook hands with him.

"So..." Noel looked at Lyrissa with a questioning expression.

"Tony's an old pal from college." She smiled at Tony

fondly.

"Nice to meet you. We should go," Noel said.

Tony stood. "Yeah, same here. Root beer is ready to move on anyway." He held on to the leash that strained as the dog tried to wander off.

"Bye, Root beer. You're still a cutie," Lyrissa called out.

"I'll give you a call," Tony said in a low tone and kissed her cheek. "Nice meeting you."

"Same here," Noel lied. He watched the man stroll away then turned his attention to Lyrissa. "I brought a delicious lunch."

She watched the man walked away. "Thanks."

Noel sat next to her with an unpleasant, and unfamiliar, knot of jealousy in his gut. "Seems like a nice guy."

"He is. You want to eat first and then go into the museum gallery?" Lyrissa nodded toward the gray stone building nearby.

"Yes. Uh, you take classes with him?" Noel said in a casual tone.

"Tony is a high powered businessman. He's in the MBA program at Tulane. He's not into the artsy stuff as he calls it." Lyrissa laughed and shook her head. She gazed in the direction the man had gone.

"Kind of short-sighted, I'd say." Noel didn't like the man. Tony had made Lyrissa laugh the way she'd never laughed with him.

"Takes all kinds as they say. Tony is a real success story. You know, came out of the most notorious housing project and excelled in school. He's going places. I really admire him." Lyrissa accepted the sandwich wrapped in wax paper he handed her.

"Impressive," Noel said, his throat tight. "Not like me you mean, born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Had everything handed to me?"

"I didn't mean that at all."

"Right," he replied shortly. "Here's a Barq's Cream Soda."

"Thanks. It's just that Tony gives back to the community. He could have just made his escape and not looked back."

"Unlike spoiled rich kids who spend their time and money with expensive toys?" Noel said.

"You seem kinda irritable. Having a bad day or something?" Lyrissa glanced at him sideways.

"I'm fine. Just wonderful."

"Okay." Lyrissa shrugged.

Noel tore bit into the pita sandwich even though his appetite was gone. What the hell did Tony Tate have that was so magical? Neither of them spoke for several minutes. Birds sang, people passing by talked, but the only sound between them was the rustle of paper as they unwrapped the food. Noel swallowed hard to move the lump in his throat. What had just happened? He didn't like this new set of feelings at all.

"Pretty good," Lyrissa said.

"What?" He blinked at her. It was not good at all, he thought.

"Aladdin's has the best Lebanese food around." She patted her mouth with a paper napkin.

"Oh yeah, the food." Noel put his half-eaten sandwich in the bag.

Lyrissa craned her neck to peek at his food. "You didn't eat much."

"I'm not really hungry," Noel mumbled.

"Well if you don't want those chips, give 'em to me." She took the yellow bag without waiting for an answer.

"Oh please, don't worry about me. I'll be fine." He frowned at her.

She munched on a crunchy chip for several seconds. "I know you will. You're Noel St. Denis."

"Which means?" He used aggressive swipes to wipe his hands with a napkin.

"You're rich, part of a powerful family and some would say handsome." Lyrissa glanced at him and shrugged.

"Matter of opinion, huh?" Noel had never been insecure but her attitude was disconcerting.

The game wasn't going according to plan. Her words stung him like dozens of tiny wasps. In the past he would have merely brushed them off and changed tactics. This time his emotions seemed to be involved. Bad sign.

"Sorry, but you do have a certain rep you know."

"I accept that moving apology," he retorted.

"No, I really mean it. I'm sorry." Lyrissa put a hand out. "Truce?"

He took it and the warmth from her satin soft skin made his body hum. "Truce." They ate in silence for a while longer before Noel cleared his throat. "So you're dating this guy?"

"We dated for a while. Then he moved to Atlanta and the long distance thing didn't work. Not that it's any of your business."

Noel ignored the swipe. "So you're not dating now."

"Not for a while. But we might," Lyrissa added quickly with a look at him.

Noel's sour mood began to lift. She wasn't telling the truth, he could hear it in her tone. The sunshine that had dimmed was now bright again. They were back on familiar ground now. She was playing his game, pretending an old boyfriend meant more than he did. He tried to ignore just how happy that thought made him feel. His joy was deeper than he wanted to examine at the moment.

"I got ya." He beamed at her. "You ready to go inside?" He nodded toward the gallery."

Lyrissa eyed him with suspicion but gave him an answering nod. "Sure."

They threw away their litter in a nearby trashcan then entered the cool interior of the building. Large paintings were arranged along the wall in the main gallery. A few art lovers milled around. Some were seated on cushioned benches.

"The figurines are this way." Noel led her to another room with glass display cases arranged around the floor.

Lyrissa drew in her breath as they approached the first one. "It's fabulous."

"Yes, it is."

The first figurine was of a Black woman and child. They were dressed in Sunday finery. The little boy wore a blue suit with short pants. The woman wore a pale pink and a wide brimmed hat. The hand painted clay had been glazed to make it look like fine china.

"The artist seems to have breathed life into them." Lyrissa circled the case. "Look at the expression on the mother's face. So tender."

Noel had seen pictures of them before, but he'd never really looked at them. Her excitement was contagious. Lyrissa wandered from case to case.

"Jean Claude Atier is the artist. He was the son of a wealthy white planter and a placage, his mulatto mistress. Their father was said to have doted on them all, especially Jean Claude." Lyrissa lectured as she walked.

"He was obviously very talented." Noel followed her, content to let her lead. He enjoyed seeing the gleam in her eyes.

"Look at the detail, the warmth in these figures."

Noel laughed. "You sound like he was an old friend of yours."

"I feel like I know him. He put so much of himself into his creations."

Noel's heart turned over. "I see what you mean," he

mumbled in a thick voice. Cold air rushed in when she went to another display case. He followed eager to recapture her warmth.

"This figure is actually as much a political statement." She admired a sculpture of a small Black boy dress in ragged clothes.

"I don't see anything more than a kid playing in the dirt."

"This piece was done in 1839, during slavery. He's got a tiny book hidden under his shirt. Jean Claude protested laws preventing blacks from receiving a decent education."

He leaned closer to peer at the child. "Hey, you're right."

"In fact, a lot of Jean Claude's figures make a statement about his values and beliefs. Take this figure of a blacksmith..."

Lyrissa went through each one of the twenty-six figures. She examined them with an eye toward history as well as aesthetics. Noel was content to trail after her as a willing student. Illogical as it seemed, he was happy to be an indirect source of her enjoyment. It occurred to him that he could spend hours watching her eyes light up with discovery.

Lyrissa sighed with satisfaction after they'd finished their tour. They took a seat on a bench in the gallery. Their vantage point gave them a view of the entire room.

"Congratulations, Mr. Denis. Every one of these is a wonderful example of Jean Claude's best work."

"I can't take credit. I just happen to be born into the right family." Noel grinned. "The truth is I've never appreciated it all, until you came along."

"Oh the privileges of the rich and famous." Lyrissa lifted her nose in the air and imitated an upper-class snooty tone. "So many treasures, how can one take it seriously?"

"Cut it out. I don't walk around like that."

"I was thinking of Julie. 'Noel, pick me up in the Lexus 400 next time. The Mercedes is so out of style.'" Lyrissa pitched her voice in a whiny tone.

"Meow, your claws are showing!"

She batted her eyelashes in the same way Julie did. Noel laughed at her antics. Then his expression softened. The skin on her face looked like creamy caramel. He caressed her cheek with his forefinger. Surprise then fascination flitted across her face as she stared back at him. Lyrissa leaned forward in a clear invitation. At least he took it as one. Noel met her halfway and brushed his

lips against hers. It was a delicious appetizer that sharpened his hunger for more. Their surroundings faded into the background. Her mouth was like a warm marshmallow, sweet and pliant. Lyrissa rested both hands on his chest. Noel pulled her into his arms completely. The tender kiss became urgent as need pounded him like a hammer. He planted small kisses along her jaw-line then moved to her neck.

Noel wanted to get out of his clothes. Better yet, he wanted to get into hers. One kiss had sent him right over the edge. Hard as a rock, he shook like a hormone crazed teenage boy. Desire twirled him up into whirlwind that took his breath away.

"Ah-ah-hem!"

"Young folks grope each other anywhere these days, Mabel!"

Noel and Lyrissa jumped apart and looked around. Two elderly women stood in the doorway. Lyrissa put a hand over her eyes. Noel forced a weak smile. The women shook their heads in unison and walked around the display cases. Yet they glanced over their shoulders at Lyrissa and Noel.

"I think we've made their day." Noel whispered close to Lyrissa's ear.

Lyrissa sprang from the bench like a pretty bird taking flight. Noel almost had to run to catch her. He tried to pull her against him again.

"No, let me go." Lyrissa seemed frantic to escape.

"Those two ladies got a cheap thrill. So what?" Noel smiled softly. Still she struggled to get away.

"Cheap is exactly how I feel." Lyrissa yanked free and strode out of the museum.

Noel went after her. Lyrissa stood underneath an oak tree with her back to him. He approached but did not try to touch her again, much as he wanted to.

"What are you talking about, Lyrissa?" he said quietly.

She closed her eyes. "I know about you and I still fell for it."

"What do you think you know about me?"

"This city is littered with women you've dumped."

"That's an exaggeration." .

"Is it?" Lyrissa wore a hard expression as she stared at him.

Noel had never thought of his romantic life as a whole. It seemed to flash before his eyes in an instant. Women's faces whizzed by at high speed. He'd done his share of dating over the years. Yet he hadn't thought of himself as callous. Noel considered himself honest, straight up.

There were no whispered declarations of love or promises made in the dark to haunt him.

"Yes, I've broken up with women before. Sometimes it was mutual." Noel shoved both hands in his pants pockets. "Stop looking at me like that."

"Pleading guilty, huh?" Lyrissa folded her arms.

"You didn't seem to mind that kiss," Noel said.

She visibly relaxed. "Well, I— you caught me off guard."

"Come on, Lyrissa. Tell the truth." Noel leaned closer to her.

"It shouldn't have happened." She moved away from him. "This is strictly business."

"Not anymore," he said promptly.

"Yes, it is." She put more space between them.

"Okay, okay. It was my fault for giving in to temptation. I apologize." Noel ignored a raging need to taste her again.

"We're not going there again? Got that?"

"Listen, Lyrissa—"

"No." Lyrissa shook her head.

"Why?"

"Because." Lyrissa wore a stubborn expression.

"Can you be a bit more specific?" Noel tilted his head to one side.

"There are a lot of reasons."

"Name one." Noel smiled at her.

"We're too different. That kiss was a mistake, a silly impulse." Her lovely eyes narrowed. "You set the whole thing up when you asked me to meet you here. I should have known."

"No I didn't. Honestly," he added when she gave skeptical snort. "I was just as surprised as you."

"Planned or not, it won't happen again."

"We're not that different." Noel gazed at her.

"Tell your family that," she tossed back.

"My family doesn't have anything to do with it, okay?" Noel said quietly. "Have dinner with me." The words were the second time he'd surprised himself today.

Lyrissa returned his gaze. "That would be another mistake," she replied just as softly.

Noel sighed with pleasure at the enticing sound of her voice. She hadn't said no outright. He got up and walked to her until there were inches apart. "I'll pick you up tonight around seven. I've got a late meeting. Please?"

"I don't think—"

"We'll talk about art if that makes you feel better,"

he teased with a half-smile. Noel touched her hand lightly. "What's your address?"

She did not look away from his eyes. For what seemed forever they stared at each other. Noel held his breath. All sounds around them seemed muffled as he waited for her answer.

"667 Erato Avenue," Lyrissa murmured.

Noel started to steal another kiss, but the anxiety in her eyes stopped him. "Okay," he said.

They parted and he walked back to his car. Noel wanted to believe his happiness came from the thrill of victory. He'd melted her resistance. Still he had never experienced such intense anticipation of a first date. The shadow of her alluring smile followed him for the rest of the afternoon.

Noel walked in and a blush started at the base of Lyrissa's spine and spread up. Her face felt hot. He was magnificent in a navy pin striped Brooks Brothers suit. His broad shoulders filled out the fabric. He had the sleek grace of a powerful athlete and the polish of an old fashioned Creole gentleman. The memory of being close to him brought back that now familiar tingle.

"Good morning, Lyrissa," Noel said, his voice sounding low and intimate.

She took a deep breath and let it out. "Good morning."

"Are you okay?"

Lyrissa sat ramrod straight and assumed a cool expression. "Of course."

"Oh, guess I shouldn't assume." Noel tilted his head to one side.

"Assume what?"

"That you felt the same rush I did when I saw you just now." Noel walked across the room and stood in front of the desk where she sat.

"Sorry I didn't melt into a puddle. I'm sure women do every time you bat those thick eyelashes." Lyrissa picked up her ink pen and started writing.

"So you like my eyelashes, huh?" Noel grinned at her.

"You've got a lot of confidence in your charm I see." Lyrissa didn't look at him.

"Not with you, lady. You have a delicate way of shooting me right down." He picked up a crystal paperweight

on the desk.

"Let me guess. You've never met anyone like me before. I make you feel like you've never felt before with a woman. Blah-blah-blah." Lyrissa waved a hand in the air.

Noel laughed softly. He didn't seem the least bit insulted. "Something like that. Of course I wouldn't have made it sound so phony."

"I'm sure you've got it down just right. I told you it's not necessary to play the game."

"I'm not playing a game, Lyrissa," he said in a quiet, firm tone. "I think you know it, too."

Lyrissa couldn't resist looking up at him. His dark eyes drew her in. She cleared her throat and looked away sharply. "No, I don't. But it doesn't matter."

"Yes it does. I can show you better than I can tell you."

Lyrissa shivered when she looked at him again. She had to ask. "How?"

Mrs. St. Denis marched in before he could answer. "Good morning, Ms. Rideau. Sorry I kept you waiting."

"No problem," Lyrissa said. She shook off the hypnotic spell he'd put on her.

Noel leaned forward while his grandmother was still on the other side of the large room. "We'll talk later," he whispered. He faced Mrs. St. Denis. "I'll take Lyrissa around to the relatives. We'll start soon as you suggested."

"Running a large company requires most of your attention," Mrs. St. Denis replied.

"The collection is part of the business equation now and needs my attention." Noel smiled at Lyrissa.

"I'll take Ms. Rideau myself." His grandmother's voice held an edge.

"Don't tire yourself. You've got all kinds of social obligations. The doctor told you not to overdo," Noel said.

Lyrissa felt tension in the air. Mrs. St. Denis wore a stiff expression. She glanced from Noel to Lyrissa. Noel seemed not to notice. He sat down in one of the heavy chairs facing the desk, totally at ease.

"He's so thoughtful. But I'm fine. We can start this week." Mrs. St. Denis put on a tight smile that didn't include her eyes.

"I need to know as much about the collection as possible," Noel replied firmly. "I'll take care of it."

They looked at each other for several moments. Lyrissa held her breath at the silent battle of strong wills. Finally Mrs. St. Denis gave a slight nod and cleared her

throat.

"Of course you do," she said.

Noel stood. He walked over to his grandmother and kissed her cheek. "I'm on my way, sweet. Lyrissa, I'll call you at your office this afternoon. Okay?"

"Sure. I mean, that's fine," Lyrissa stammered when Mrs. St. Denis turned a stony gaze her way.

"In fact, I think we could start tonight. I'm sure Cousin Augustin won't mind. I talked to him a few days ago," Noel said without looking at his grandmother. "I hope you're available."

"I think so." Lyrissa fidgeted with her ink pen.

"Why don't you check your day planner right now?" Noel persisted.

Lyrissa wanted to strangle him for pushing the issue. She took her planner out of her briefcase. "I'm tied up until three o'clock. I could go alone if you're busy. Just call Mr. St. Denis."

"I'll make time. This collection is too important. I'll pick you up around five. You should be through by then, right?"

"I could meet you there," Lyrissa said in a strained voice. She looked at him trying to send a silent message.

"No sense in taking two cars. I'll pick you up at your house. I'll treat you to dinner since I'm making you work late." Noel rubbed his hand together as though the matter was settled.

Lyrissa stood. She put her planner back into her briefcase along with the list of art and addresses. "Then I'll see you later. I've finished up here." No way was she going to be left alone with Mrs. St. Denis.

"I thought you needed to examine the pieces in the attic." Mrs. St. Denis stared at her steadily.

"I did. It didn't take long since I'd examined them before. I just needed one more look after finding information on them in an art book." Lyrissa talked as she tossed more of her work tools into the briefcase. She snapped it shut and picked up her small purse.

"I see," Mrs. St. Denis said. "Goodbye then."

"Goodbye." Lyrissa forced a thin smile.

Noel put a hand under her elbow and walked beside her. Lyrissa glared at him. He smiled back at her serenely. Rosalie came down the hall as they left the library. Her eyes sparkled with mischief as she noted Noel's hand on Lyrissa's arm.

"Bye, Rosie," Noel called out.

"Bye you rascal," Rosalie called back with a grin.

"Rascal is right," Lyrissa muttered.

Noel only laughed at her comment. They went to the circular driveway where his Infiniti I30 was parked behind her Honda Accord.

"Goodbye, Lyrissa. I look forward to seeing you this evening. Two nights in a row." He stood close to her.

Lyrissa wanted to swipe the smug look of victory from his face. At the same time she wanted to kiss him. The conflicting emotions left her feeling dazed. "Goodbye," was all she could say.

He walked with her to her car. He opened the door once she unlocked it. "Don't look so worried. We're going to have fun." Noel winked at her then strolled to his car and got in.

Lyrissa gripped the steering wheel as she drove to her morning class. There was no denying the pleasant tickle of anticipation in her body.

"I think you owe me an explanation," Noel said after getting in behind the wheel.

"No I don't. I'm hired help. As long as I do my job, I don't owe you anything."

"Take the chip off your shoulder, Lyrissa. Stop putting up barriers between us." Noel did not start the engine.

"The barriers were up generations ago." Lyrissa rubbed her forehead. "It's been a long day and I've said too much already."

"Noel took her hand. "Let's find a quiet place to talk. Please."

They didn't speak during short drive. Noel stole glances at her at each stoplight. He turned on the compact disc player. Luther Vandross sang standards, love ballads that he hoped would ease the tension. Lyrissa did not bend at all. She sat rigid as though determined not to acknowledge him. Noel sighed inwardly. They finally reached Celestin's. He parked on the paved lot but neither of them moved.

Lyrissa peered at the building. They got out and went inside. Dark stained wood, soft music and dim lights made the atmosphere was intimate. A tall waiter led them to a table. He took their drink orders and left. They looked at each other for several seconds.

"Well?" Lyrissa prompted.

"Well," Noel replied with a smile.

"You wanted to talk, so talk."

Noel tilted his head to one side and looked at her profile. "You had some kind of plan and I wrecked it. Good."

Lyrissa blinked rapidly as though trying to think of a comeback. "What?"

"You had me all figured out, right? You were going to put me in my place and stay away from me."

"Oh, right." Lyrissa glanced away from him.

"You're special to me. What can I do to prove it?"

Noel had never felt such a strong need to be believed. Everything else became insignificant. All his concentration was on her. Lyrissa must have felt the vibrations coming from his body. When she turned to look into his eyes, there was no anger or skepticism. What he saw was a raw need to believe. He kissed her hard. She froze but only for a moment. Then she relaxed in his arms and returned his kiss hungrily. Noel pulled away only to kiss her forehead, her eyes, her nose and her chin.

"I want make love to you right now," he whispered.

"Noel, we..."

He smothered her words by kissing her again. He drew away and smiled. "No pressure."

Lyrissa touched the tips of her fingers to his mouth.

"Oh no, you're being very subtle. We really should—"

"Take time and get to know each other," Noel finished for her.

"Yes," she said softly.

"I like football, the Saints disappoint me every year but I'm still loyal. Blue is my favorite color. I like fishing but don't get to do it very often. What else?" Noel rubbed his cheek against hers.

"You keep avoiding the real issue." Lyrissa pulled away. "I'm not going to play your game."

Noel swallowed hard at the chill left when she moved from him. Still he resisted the strong urge to reclaim her warmth. "Tell me what's on your mind."

"I don't care what your society friends think of me." She put more distance between them as she spoke.

"Sounds good," Noel answered cautiously. He knew there was more.

"Your family is no problem. I mean we're only dating." Lyrissa spoke in practical tone.

"Okay," Noel said slowly. He didn't like the temporary way she made it sound but let her go on.

"So like I said, we don't need to generate drama. Let's date, talk, and..." Lyrissa shrugged.

"And?" Noel rubbed his fingers along her left arm. He watched goose bumps appear on her skin and wanted to kiss each one.

"And," she murmured as she looked at his fingers.

"Can't wait to fill in the blank," Noel whispered close to her ear.

"Stop that." She took a deep breath.

"No," he said simply.

She seemed to teeter on the brink of surrender but pulled back at the last moment. "Why are you doing this?"

"For once I'm not being practical."

"Maybe we should be," Lyrissa said with a solemn expression.

"Do we want to be practical or happy?"

Noel was stunned by how deep that question reached into all his assumptions. His plan to have the 'right' wife to fit into a neat picture of the 'right' life suddenly seemed empty. Neither of them spoke for a time.

"I don't know what to say." She wore a bewildered expression.

Noel touched his temple to hers. "Say yes, we'll be together."

"It's not going to be as easy as you make it seem."

"Maybe not. Right now what matters is we're together. Let's go to my apartment," Noel whispered.

Lyrissa picked up his hand and moved it. "We're going to just talk tonight."

"I love the sound of your voice." Noel was not going to play fair.

"You've got a devious streak, you know that?" She gazed at him.

"Is it working?"