

## CHAPTER 1

A large window behind Monica revealed panoramic views of the city of Hong Kong and though I tried to appreciate the beauty before me, it didn't work. *Nothing worked!* I was in the grips of an anxiety attack brought on by desperation and all I could think about was Jeffrey, with his de facto partner, Moira—the ball and chain, as I called her—living in a loveless relationship until the end of time. And as far as I was concerned, the end of time was a long way away.

“Sarah, let me get this straight,” Monica exclaimed in disbelief, taking a deep drag from her cigarette. “You want me to help you find a boyfriend for your lover’s partner?”

I smiled weakly at my best friend. I couldn't blame her incredulity at what I was proposing. I hardly believed it myself, so how could I expect someone else who was obviously sane, unlike me, to believe it?

Monica took another drag from her cigarette and expelled a cloud of smoke that momentarily obscured my view of her face. Perhaps this was best. I squirmed at the thought of what she made of all this as I reached for the red wine she had offered earlier and gulped it down, almost choking in the process. Meanwhile, my mind was filled with agonizing thoughts about the uncertain future of my relationship with my lover, and I hoped against hope that somehow a miracle would bring us together for good.

Jeffrey had told me repeatedly that he didn't want to hurt Moira's feelings by dumping her after fifteen years of being together, but staying with her for the sake of pity was just crazy. I fumed every time I thought about it. It was unbearable. Jeffrey should be with me by now. I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed momentarily for that elusive miracle.

“Mike!” I was brought out of my reverie by Monica's excited cry.

“What?” I asked, somewhat confused, briefly entertaining the idea that she had lost her mind. Perhaps, the heavy smoking had finally taken its toll on her and she couldn't think straight anymore. *What is this about a mike?*

Monica crushed the cigarette butt into a large crystal ashtray that was already overflowing with the remnants of other cigarette butts, which had met the same fate.

“Mike!” she exclaimed in exasperation, frowning at me.

*Like I'm supposed to know what she's talking about.* But I hoped against hope that she wasn't thinking of a karaoke microphone. *Heaven forbid.* This is what happened to people when they lived in Asian countries for too long.

Another large gulp from my refilled wine glass and I was ready to focus on what she was trying to say. “Who or what is ‘mike’?” I asked, trying to hide my impatience. As she lit up another one of those little deadly cylinders I hated so much, the thought crossed my already tired mind that I was going to have to wash my hair in order to get rid of the horrible, clinging smell of smoke. I sighed.

Monica rolled her eyes at me. “Honestly, Sarah, you really don't remember?”

*No, I don't remember.* In fact, I had no idea what she was going on about. But it was obvious that some diabolical scheme was forming in her fag-fogged brain because whenever she was excited about something, her British accent became more pronounced.

The view of the busy harbour faded in and out before my eyes as Monica puffed away furiously. I waited, hoping this was just a weird dream I was having, and if luck was on my side I would soon wake up and things would be normal once more. Or worse still, I suddenly thought in alarm, I really was drunk in some karaoke bar and it was my turn to sing. *Ugh! God help me.*

“Mike’s the man for the job,” Monica announced between puffs, much to my relief. I now paid full attention. “You know him,” she went on. “He’s been living here for five years— investment banker from London. You met him at my last Christmas party.”

I had a vague recollection of Monica’s Christmas party, all of it through an alcoholic haze. My blank stare must have registered through the smoky lounge room because she sighed and said, “Never mind,” and dismissed my look of ignorance. “The thing is Mike’s always up for a challenge, and I know he’ll love this.” She threw me a mysterious smile.

“And how do you know?” This piqued my curiosity, despite the fact that I had convinced myself that her cigarettes must be impregnated with some sort of hallucinogen.

“Because he’s gorgeous and he’s never had to chase a single female in his life. Women fall all over him,” she explained, as if I was too slow to understand her meaning.

*Poor Mike*, I rolled my eyes. Life was sooooo tough for some people. But if women really did fall all over him, as Monica suggested, this might just work. So for the first time since my arrival in Hong Kong, I felt the stirrings of hope. “Okay,” I found myself saying, as if we were simply planning an outing rather than changing a person’s entire life. “This so called ‘lady killer’ sounds perfect. But how do you know he’ll do it?”

Monica crushed her cigarette butt into the ashtray. “Because he’s transferring to Taipei next month and he’ll be bored to tears unless he’s got something like this to occupy him.”

*Charming!* I couldn’t wait to meet this male version of the femme fatale. And yet, Monica seemed so sure about him that I almost believed this man could turn out to be the solution to my problem. “So how do we know he’s going to find Moira attractive?” I didn’t want to give way to my rising excitement just yet, not to mention the fact that Moira might find the guy totally repulsive.

“That isn’t the point, dummy. If Mike says he’ll do it, then he’ll do it,” Monica replied full of confidence.

“But if he’s not attracted to her, why would he waste his time charming the woman in order to help someone he doesn’t even know? Besides,” I thought out loud, “Moira might hate the sight of him.” Doubt and reality set in and I saw my dream of a free Jeffrey fading quickly away.

Monica laughed, as if the thought of someone finding her precious Mike unattractive was unheard of. “In answer to your question, Mike owes me for a past favour and I know he’ll do it if I ask him. As for Moira, the minute she lays eyes on him she’s toast,” she reassured me, reaching out and absently patting my arm.

I decided to keep an open mind about Moira’s reaction to God’s gift to women. And I did not need to ask Monica what kind of *favour* she had done for him in the past. Monica had always had a way with men. One look at her luscious blonde hair and attractive features that matched an equally luscious figure said it all.

“All right,” I replied before I changed my mind. “So what happens next?” And whatever it was, I fervently hoped I wouldn’t come to regret it.

## CHAPTER 2

On the flight back to Taipei that evening, I thought about my visit with Monica and how lucky I was to have her as a friend. She was the only person who could help in the strange situation in which I found myself, and I trusted her completely. I had always idolized her, and deep down I acknowledged that if I were more like Monica I wouldn't feel quite so inadequate when it came to relationships or life in general, for that matter. Since my teens, I had seemed to lack confidence in certain areas of my life, and over time Monica had become a kind of crutch to support my sometimes flagging self-esteem.

Monica and I had known each other since our university days in London. From that time, which seemed so long ago now, she had always managed to come to the rescue whenever I had relationship problems. She had been the one who had picked up and helped put together the thousands of pieces of my broken heart when the love of my life called off our engagement due to getting cold feet, only to marry his secretary a few months later. *So much for the love of my life and his cold feet.*

After that traumatic experience, Monica had gone on to see me through many disastrous years of dates with commitment-phobic men who were only interested in one-night stands—definitely not my scene. In the end, she had even agreed with me that my vibrator made a better partner during the barren years, although I knew she would have handled things differently if this had been the case with her own love life, which of course was always a varied and busy one.

But Monica never judged me or my choices. She simply let me be, as any good friend would have done. Despite her support, however, the passage of time caught up with me and became my enemy. Each year that went by without a promising relationship became a year closer to the end of my child bearing age. By this time, I was in my late thirties and inevitably found myself thinking thus: if I meet a man by age thirty nine, it would take at least one year for me to find out whether he's commitment-phobic and at the same time rule out the possibility of him being a sex pervert, a pedophile, an axe murderer, or something worse. By then, I'd be turning forty, and with any luck we might just start thinking about living together. Another year goes by while we get used to living with each other, and suddenly I'm forty one. Then, let's assume the man is more understanding than the Dalai Lama and can see the urgency of my situation; namely, that of wanting to start a family. He sweeps me off my feet and marries me so we don't end up having a bastard child. After this, we spend another year trying to get me pregnant. After all, the chances of conceiving and carrying a child to term after age thirty five drops by about sixty five percent. By this time, I am forty two. *Yikes!*

Finally, God decides to grant me another miracle—yes, another one: the man being more understanding than the Dalai Lama was the first—and I fall pregnant. Nine months go by. I'm forty three and heading into perimenopause by the time my child arrives. By then, I'd be having hot flashes and a chronic backache—very common in women entering their menopausal years. So every time I bend down to pick up my baby I'm putting even more strain on that back of mine, only to live out the rest of my days with a walking stick.

Therefore, it's easy to understand why by my late thirties I gave up on the idea of finding love altogether. But it was always nice to know that through all my disappointments, Monica had never abandoned me. She truly was my idol and I really wanted to be like her, except for the smoking part. Unlike me, she was strong, courageous and confident; all wonderful qualities I admired. In fact, I was amazed that no one had ever managed to whisk her off her feet to marry

her. God knows she never had any problems attracting men who wanted a commitment. But Monica was smart and didn't give her heart as easily as I did. She made men work for it, even though in the end she was the one who ended up doing the dumping. Yes, I should have been more like her—the “*love 'em and leave 'em*” type. Then at least, I could have watched gleefully as my vibrator gathered dust and became entangled in spider webs.

Sadly, my problems didn't end with the scarcity of relationships. My lack of self-confidence had stopped me from making some of my dreams come true; namely, in the world of work. Once more, I found myself thinking yet again of my dear friend and comparing myself to her because, not only was Monica popular with the opposite sex, but she was also a dynamic career woman. Being the head of an investment bank in Hong Kong was her trophy after many years spent hard at work. This was something she had not been prepared to throw away for any man—hence, her desire to remain single. So finally, when her company managed to get past her supermodel looks, they realized that she had a sharp brain coupled with strong business acumen, and her next transfer reflected the pinnacle of her achievement. Now she lived the life of a successful expatriate, with a gorgeous apartment, maid service and a chauffeur thrown in. Not bad at the ripe young age of thirty nine.

Of course, when I compared myself to my idol, my life didn't look quite so glamorous even though it turned out to be somewhat exciting, if you could call it that. I did end up meeting someone in my late thirties. However, all was not as it seemed; and now, I was struggling in Taipei to grow a network of people involved in a franchise company that manufactured nutritional products just so I could be near him. Plus, in contrast to Monica's lifestyle, I lived in a poky one bedroom flat on the top floor of a rickety building that was full of rats. Luckily, the neighbour's cat was doing a wonderful job of killing the little buggers.

Overall, I couldn't complain about my present situation. I was traveling for business between the UK, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and living the life of a truly free entrepreneur, minus the income. Well, we can't all be perfect like Monica. I didn't have maid service, but the landlady's mother let herself into my flat every morning to water a bunch of herbs she kept on the rooftop terrace, and sometimes she wiped down my kitchen counter. And who needs a chauffeur in busy Taipei, anyway? The subway was fast and efficient. *Well done, Sarah.* And to think I achieved all of this by the ripe old age of forty.

Let's be honest. If there is one thing to be said about aging, it's that a person is young until they reach the last year of their third decade and then over the period of one day—their birthday—they suddenly enter the age of decline. Well, perhaps I was exaggerating just a little, but to reach the big four-o and still be single was definitely not what I had planned for my life. I glumly reminded myself that the years were now really catching up with me and I wasn't yet in the “living together” phase with my perfect man. Life just wasn't fair!

Having always been a modern woman, who wanted both family and career, I had made a promise to myself that by the time I reached thirty not only would I be happily married and on my way to having a baby, but I would be running my own business empire. Sadly, in the harsh reality of modern day society, life rarely turned out as one planned. So I ended up in the singles world where internet dating was all the rage and casual sex was the norm for most people. Whatever happened to romance and true love? *He ran away with his secretary, that's what!* I frowned as I felt the pain of my disillusionment all over again, even after twelve years had elapsed. God, had it really been that long since I'd been in a real relationship?

Thankfully, at this precise moment, the plane hit a small air pocket and my thoughts came back to the present. I had been rescued from spiraling into total depression and told myself

that it was time to focus on positive things, like the future and my love for Jeffrey. He had promised he'd meet me at the airport and my heart did a double somersault in anticipation, while my stomach fluttered with butterflies.

The captain announced that we were commencing our descent into Taipei. The excitement of seeing Jeffrey kept mounting even as I lined up with hundreds of people at the immigration counter in Chiang Kai Shek airport a short while later. The Taiwanese authorities were slow in processing the incoming travelers, so I switched on my mobile to check for messages and while away the time. But in reality, I was hoping that Jeffrey would ring to see whether I had landed safely. No messages and no missed calls. *Drats.*

Once through immigration, I rushed to baggage claim and picked up my small suitcase, now packed with new clothes I had purchased in Hong Kong—clothes I couldn't afford, but a worthwhile buy if Jeffrey saw me in them. Through the arrivals gate my heart was thumping so violently that I thought it was going to leap out of my chest any minute and people would wonder whether I had a small animal hidden inside my coat.

A sea of Asian faces greeted me as the doors to the arrivals lounge slid open and the noise of loudly spoken Mandarin was everywhere around me. I looked desperately through the crowd as friends and relatives greeted one another and struggled with their luggage trolleys, but I couldn't find that familiar face smiling a welcome, as it had in my imagination only minutes earlier. Surely he was here to meet me.

My mobile decided to vibrate at that moment, making me jump. "Hello," I spoke into it with the sinking feeling that this was going to be news of an unpleasant nature, and sure enough, as with all self-fulfilling prophecies, it was.

"It's me," Jeffrey's voice whispered at the other end of the line. I knew he was calling from somebody's bathroom because I could hear that unmistakable echo that sounds as if a person is inside a fish bowl. My heart sank to my feet.

"Where are you?" I failed miserably at keeping the disappointment out of my voice.

"Kaohsiung," he explained sheepishly. "Moira had a few appointments she wanted me to go to and I couldn't say no."

Kaohsiung was around five hours by bus from Taipei. This meant that I wouldn't be seeing him tonight. So much for the sexy lingerie and clothes I'd purchased.

"Why didn't you make something up?" I was annoyed, disappointed, and wanted to cry, all at the same time. "You knew I was coming back tonight and was looking forward to seeing you. It's been a long two weeks without you."

The sound of Jeffrey flushing the toilet greeted me in response, and suddenly he was speaking in Mandarin. Oh, God! This can only mean one thing. Moira must be standing outside the bathroom door listening to his telephone conversation. "She's there, right? Listening!" I wanted to scream with frustration, but kept tight control over my voice.

"Correct," Jeffrey replied in Mandarin.

At least I knew enough of the language to understand this much. "So when are you coming back?" The tone in my voice was tinged with desperation, but there was no reply from the other end. Obviously, Moira was still hanging around, and I was left suddenly listening to dead silence. Jeffrey must've hung up on me.

I wanted to throw the mobile across the airport, but was fearful I might hit someone on the head, so I stuffed it into my coat pocket and found a seat to support my jelly legs. To my dismay, I felt tears running down my face, but I quickly faked a sneezing fit and made a big show of blowing my nose into a hankie. It worked all the time.

How could he do this to me, I asked myself, feeling distraught. He should have told Moira by now that it was over between them. He'd promised he was going to do it by the time I returned from Hong Kong. Whatever happened to my wish that he'd turn out to be more understanding than the Dalai Lama?

Jeffrey knew I didn't like the subterfuge and lies that went with our relationship for though I had no real sympathy for Moira, because she was manipulative and clingy, I always prided myself on being honest as far as relationships went. The game I was now forced to play for Jeffrey's sake was taking its toll on me. Sometimes, I simply felt like giving up altogether. But I was forty years old and this was my last chance.

The mobile vibrated again and I jumped, my nerves in shreds. God, I was heading for a major anxiety attack. "Yes!" I barked into the phone, for I knew it would be him; and the echo from the bathroom at the other end confirmed it.

"Me again." He was no longer whispering. It was obvious Moira was out of earshot. "Look, I'm really sorry about this. It was a last minute thing. You know the business is important and I couldn't put it off."

I was suddenly fed up with his excuses. "So why doesn't Moira do the appointments by herself?" The threat of tears was evident in my voice. "You always tell me you stay with her because it's all too complicated and you've been with her for so long, and she's part of the business, blah, blah, blah," I rambled on carelessly. "Well, if she really is part of the business, why didn't she go to Kaohsiung on her own? She knew I was coming back today, right? I know she talks to my team members behind my back and tries to find out my movements. Why doesn't she stop doing this? And if she knows we're involved, why haven't you told her it's over?"

Jeffrey ignored my tirade of questions and I had to bite my tongue in order not to blow up and have a major fit. "I'm back tomorrow," he said. "I'll come round in the afternoon. We'll talk then, I promise. You know I want to see you, and I've missed you." His sweet voice had the tranquilizing effect of a 10 milligram tablet of Valium, and suddenly I knew everything was going to be all right. Jeffrey still loved me. My heart sang. He missed me. He wanted me.

"Okay," I said softly, my heart melting. "I'll see you tomorrow. I love you."

"Until tomorrow." He rang off.

\*\*\*

Jeffrey was running late, which was nothing new. He was always late, and though I pointed this out to him repeatedly he simply shrugged his shoulders and inevitably said, "Business comes first."

It was a cold afternoon in Taipei and I waited in my room, wearing one of the sexy teddies I had purchased. It was a red slinky satin thing that accentuated the curves of my body, though it was a bit summery for the cooling weather. Still, I wanted to look just right for him. I checked my appearance in the full length mirror of the sparsely furnished Japanese-style bedroom for what seemed to be the twentieth time, or perhaps it was the twenty first—but who was counting—and I was happy to note that the multitude of vitamins I consumed every day were really doing their job. I didn't look a day over thirty. Combined with the fact that I possessed a petite, feminine figure and generous breasts, I was pleased to note that though I wasn't the supermodel type like Monica, I was doing pretty well in the looks department despite my pixie-like demeanour. Most importantly, my breasts hadn't even begun to re-route south, as they usually did at this time in a woman's life. *Yay!*

A buzzing sound broke through my self-contemplation and I flew to the security phone. “Yes?” I queried, as if I wasn’t expecting any visitors.

“It’s me,” Jeffrey’s voice came over the line.

I buzzed him up and ran to the front door to wait for him. A few minutes later, we were back in my room embracing passionately as we fell onto the bed, a rather hard Japanese futon. But, I thought fleetingly, this wasn’t the time to care about such things. I had my heart’s desire, at least for now.

“You look delicious,” Jeffrey whispered as he nibbled at my neck and squeezed one of my breasts with his hand.

*Oh, yesssss!* I felt wild currents of excitement course through my body in anticipation of what was about to happen, and for a moment the thought crossed my mind that the scheme with Monica didn’t seem to be so crazy after all. I just had to get Jeffrey away from Moira so he and I could finally be together and ...

Brrrr brrrr. Jeffrey’s mobile started to ring.

“Leave it,” I whispered through a haze of mounting passion, all other thoughts forgotten as he explored my body with smooth fingers.

Brrrr brrrr. The evil little noise continued to intrude through his erotic touch, but despite this I felt the tension in my body start to build toward “the magic moment.”

Brrrr brrrr. *No! Oh, no!* Oh God, he was going to answer it. *Please, please don’t!* My brain cried desperately as my body arched with pleasure over the delicious sensation of his body against mine. And just as I was going to reach that wonderful, sublime moment that I had missed for so long, Jeffrey stopped cold and, with one swift movement, rolled away from me, swept up the ringing phone and barked “Hello” into it.

What followed was a tirade of unintelligible Mandarin and I buried my head under a pillow in order to stop myself from screaming out in rage as Jeffrey spoke with Moira. Oh, yes, I knew it was Moira. Who else had the ability to detect a clandestine meeting with such accuracy? The woman was psychic when it came to knowing what Jeffrey was up to.

The tone in the conversation slowed down to a normal pace and I sneaked a look at him. I wondered if he was trying to pacify her, let her down gently. Poor Jeffrey. He was probably trying to break it off with her; and though the length of time this was taking frustrated me to no end, I consoled myself with the thought that the man I loved was not a complete bastard. Any other guy would have dumped the woman a long time ago.

With Jeffrey still on the phone, my mind wandered and I suddenly wished I’d taken the time to learn Mandarin so I could figure out what in the blazes he was saying. It had taken him five years to master the language fully, and that was because he had moved to Singapore as a teenager to join his parents, who were working over there at the time. Though Jeffrey lived among the expat community, he nevertheless made lots of local friends, which accounted for his command of the language and how he’d met Moira, a “Singapore Girl,” as they used to say in the airline commercial.

A “Singapore Hag” was more like it, I thought venomously, seeing that she was almost ten years his senior. Well, perhaps only eight. Of course, it didn’t really matter that she was beautiful and petite. What mattered was that as an older woman she had taken advantage of the shy young man Jeffrey used to be. Then, when she finally had him in her clutches, wham! She snapped the trap shut. And it stayed shut despite the disintegration of their relationship over the years.

Everybody knows that some Asian women put up with the infidelity of their men as long as they remain in a position of power, namely that of Wife No 1. Except that in Moira's case Jeffrey didn't end up marrying her, so she was really classified as de facto Wife No 1; but now living with him as though she were his sister. There was no longer anything physical in their relationship, and there hadn't been for years. But to my chagrin, the trap remained firmly in place. The thought made me grind my teeth in frustration and anger.

After what seemed an interminable length of time, Jeffrey finally came off the phone and regarded me with his baby blues. "That was Moira." He sighed and leaned back on the bed, looking exhausted.

"I kind of gathered that." I failed to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "So what's wrong with her this time? Is she lying on the side of the road bleeding to death or committing hara-kiri for the tenth time?" *Oops!* The baby blues flashed a warning at me. "Okay, okay. I can't help it," I protested. "But don't you think these fake suicide attempts of hers are a bit much?"

Another look from those piercing eyes and I stopped talking. What was the point of bringing up a repeatedly painful subject when he wasn't ready to make changes yet? I would just have to practice patience a little longer, and pray like crazy that this Mike fellow could help me out. I was sure that if Moira latched onto another man she wouldn't find it quite so painful to let go of Jeffrey.

"So how was your trip?" Jeffrey rolled onto his side and drew me to him.

*Mmm!* The last thing I wanted to talk about was business. "Productive," I whispered seductively against his mouth and started to wrap my leg around his in order to bring him closer to me, when his mobile rang once again.

Yes, it was Moira. This time, she wanted Jeffrey to come home because she had suddenly developed abdominal pains and was convinced she had to be hospitalized.

I could have reminded him that she had used the same excuse on the day before I left for my trip, but Jeffrey was already up and adjusting his clothes back in place while I foolishly admired his slim, athletic body and wished he didn't have to go.

"I'll take her to the doctor and come back later," he said by way of apology.

"Don't bother. I don't think I could handle her committing suicide tonight." *Oops, again.* That was definitely acid dripping from my voice, but I didn't care.

Jeffrey ignored my comment and checked his appearance in the mirror. He seemed satisfied at the absence of tell tale marks, and even his shiny black hair was magically in place.

It was at times like this that I wished I was a smoker like Monica, so I could throw an ashtray at his head in the hope that it would unscramble his brain and spur him into action so he could free himself of the ball and chain. But all I could do was throw evil looks his way, and this did not stop him from making a hasty departure.

The moment he left, I rushed to the phone and dialed my good friend in Hong Kong. It was time to work out a strategy.

## CHAPTER 3

The monthly cocktail function for Taipei's expat community was in full swing when I arrived at the luxurious Far Eastern Hotel. Normally, I hated going to these do's where everyone tried to outshine or outtalk one another. This was a tight knit group and to sparkle was to be considered a success. It really didn't matter how full of crap you were as long as you were popular.

I cringed at the thought of having to make small talk with some fat Frenchman reeking of smoke or a half-drunk, middle-aged Aussie trying to make a grab for my boobs. But this was where Monica had arranged for me to meet the formidable Mike, the man who would supposedly rescue me by sweeping Moira off her feet.

Moira. Just the thought of her gave me the creeps. For the last three weeks, since my return from Hong Kong, she had haunted me by calling constantly on the mobile every time I was with Jeffrey or by turning up at appointments that we were attending together, and pretending it was a big coincidence that we had bumped into each other. Then, Jeffrey was forced to let her hang out with us. After all, she was part of the business and had every right to be there, as he put it.

*Grrrr*. The woman was impossible and relentless in her pursuit of Jeffrey. Talk about flogging a dead horse. Didn't she get it? He wasn't running after her anymore. *Grrrr*.

"If you keep grinding your teeth like that you're going to get a headache." A deep and smooth male voice cut through my image of Moira beating Jeffrey with a horsewhip, and I looked up to meet a pair of sea green eyes regarding me with amusement.

"Do you mind," I said, annoyed. "I'm waiting for someone."

"I know," replied the overconfident stranger. At least, I thought he sounded overconfident or more like smug. *Grrrr*.

"You're doing it again," he said.

"What! What am I doing exactly?" For some reason, I found myself lashing out at this ... *mmmm* ... completely and devastatingly handsome man whom I didn't even know. Even through my mounting anger, I couldn't help appreciating that he was absolutely gorgeous in a typical Harlequin-hero kind of way—tall, dark, handsome, a strong jaw and a shock of brown hair falling over those very startling green eyes ... *mmmm*.

*Oh my, what the hell am I doing, drooling like a fool?* I snapped out of my trance-like state and asked myself if the flutter in my heart and the sudden weakening of my treacherous limbs had something to do with Jeffrey, rather than the complete stranger standing before me. I didn't like the answer that popped into my head, so I ignored it and realized I must have been staring. But this didn't seem to phase the breathtaking vision standing in front of me, and he simply treated me to such a sexy smile that I almost dropped my wine glass.

"You must be Sarah Jamison," Mr. Romance said, and shook my limp hand. "I'm Mike Connor, Monica's friend."

*Knock me over with a feather!* Monica certainly hadn't been exaggerating when she said women fell all over this guy. No wonder he was so smug. So what was I doing standing here like a speechless debutante?

"Oh." It was all I managed to say as I buried my face in the wine glass, only to swallow the wrong way and break into a coughing fit that brought tears to my eyes. Mike grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the throng of onlookers.

Yes, they were all looking at me; even the half-drunk, middle-aged Aussie who I'm sure would have tried to make a grab for my boobs given half the chance.

Without knowing how it happened, I found myself seated in a quiet corner of the bar as a glass of cold water was pressed into my hand. "Take a few sips," Mike instructed. "It'll make you feel better."

I did as told, like a good girl, and to my relief found the cool water did the trick. A handkerchief was thrust at me. "For the tears." Mike tried to keep the laughter out of his voice; and instead of becoming annoyed, I found myself laughing with him.

"I'm sorry." To my relief, I almost sounded normal again. "Thanks for this." I handed back the handkerchief.

"Can I get you another drink?" he offered, noticing my glass was empty.

"I'll have a cognac, thank you." I felt I needed to fortify myself to deal with the devastating Mike. Meanwhile, I observed in a curious and detached kind of way that when he raised a finger, a young waitress literally ran to him through the crowd to take the drinks order. Yes, the man had charm. Dangerous charm.

"So," Mike turned to me once the order had been placed and the waitress reluctantly walked away. "I hope you are Sarah Jamison, after all."

I smiled nervously. "Yes. Yes, I am." Why was I suddenly conscious of the silky black top I was wearing, that showed off my slim figure to its best advantage?

"Monica told me you had a project I couldn't refuse, so I said I'd meet you to find out all about it."

This time, I spat out the water in my mouth and saturated the front of my blouse. "You mean ..." No, it couldn't be! "You mean ..." I tried again. "You mean Monica didn't give you the details?"

"That's right," Mike replied with that smile of his, totally unaware of the chaos he was causing while I frantically tried to keep a cool head as I dabbed madly at my chest with a paper napkin. "She just said I would find it difficult to resist, and being a stranger to Taipei I thought it an excellent opportunity to make new contacts. Are you in investment banking?"

*O-H, M-Y G-O-D! I'll kill you, Monica!* I screamed in silent rage as I kept wiping at my blouse. How could she do this to me? She'd told me not to worry about a thing. She would set everything up. And this was her idea of setting things up? This was typical Monica, with her sick sense of humour. She was trying to set me up with Mike, the-wonder-femme-fatale-only-he-was-male. After all, she'd told me to forget Jeffrey. "He's bad news," she'd said. "Why are you waiting for somebody who doesn't want to be free?"

"What do you mean?" I'd asked, while my heart was breaking to bits.

"He's got the best of both worlds—you in one corner, all sexy and ready to romp, and Moira in the other, the mother figure and his security blanket."

Monica could be brutally honest at times, and this had been one of them. So when she'd suggested Mike for the job, it was obvious that she hadn't had any intention of him charming Moira off her feet. All along, she had been secretly matchmaking me with the man! I fumed as I finally came to the realization that the cigarettes had definitely taken their toll on her brain and that she had truly lost her mind.

"Sarah, are you okay?" Mike sounded concerned. "Your face is flushed. Would you like to get out of here? It's rather hot in this place."

"No. No, it's okay, really," I reassured him, and drank more water to buy some time and try to calm myself. I had to think fast. How was I going to get out of this one? I really couldn't

tell him the truth. He'd think me childish and stupid. In fact, the whole scheme was stupid and I didn't know why I'd ever thought of it in the first place.

The waitress arrived with our drinks and this gave me a few more precious moments in which to think. I would have to tell him that there had been some sort of mistake, that Monica had misunderstood the whole situation; that I thought I had a great contact for him, but it fell through. Just tell him anything other than the truth!

Rule number one: when in trouble, lie. And just as I was about to open my mouth to deliver one of my better lies, I was shocked into total silence when my eyes fixed on the two people suddenly standing before our table.

"Hello there. What a coincidence running into you," said a high pitched voice that grated on my nerves.

I immediately pasted a smile to my face. "Moira, how are you? And Jeffrey." *If looks could kill!*

Mike was on his feet in an instant, shaking Jeffrey's hand and settling Moira into a seat. "Hello, I'm Mike Connor. Just got in from Hong Kong and getting to know the local population." He motioned for the eager waitress and asked what the others wanted to drink.

This gave me time to throw a furious look at Jeffrey, but he had the good sense to avoid my eyes. Otherwise, he would have seen the murderous intent in them. Moira, on the other hand, seemed to be totally entranced with Mike and my frazzled brain did an about-face. I knew at once that my stupid scheme wasn't so stupid after all. It was brilliant. It would work. All I had to do now was tell Mike the truth. Well, as soon as was practicably possible.

Jeffrey made the introductions. "I'm Jeffrey Williams, and this is my girlfriend, Moira Sun."

I searched for an ashtray to throw at his head, but sadly we were in a non-smoking area. Girlfriend indeed. Why not introduce her as his mother-figure-security-blanket-totally-paranoid-with-suicidal-tendencies-ball-and-chain? I fumed inwardly.

"Sun, as in sunshine?" Mike treated Moira to one of his sexy smiles and I tried to keep myself from being sick.

Moira was all giggles. "You are so kind."

"Not at all. Praise is always due where beauty's present," Mike replied.

*Oh, puleeeze!* I rolled my eyes and took a big swig of cognac.

Jeffrey seemed totally unconcerned at Mike's flirty remark. "So, Mike, what is it that you do?"

"I'm in investment banking, and Sarah was kind enough to come up with a wonderful project for me." His eyes shot a look in my direction and if I was not mistaken there was mischief written all over them, as if he knew something underhand was going on inside my head. But of course, he knew! He wasn't born yesterday. My face must have gone bright red because I suddenly felt as if I was on fire. I knew I was in real trouble.

Jeffrey saw my discomfort, but his interest got the better of him. "Really, and what project is that?"

Mike grinned in my direction and waited for me to reply.

It was at this moment, that I realized I hated all men, no matter how good looking they were. All men were bastards. And bastards always hung out with other bastards. Let's face it, Jeffrey was a bastard, cheating on paranoid Moira and keeping me at a distance. And Mike was a smug bastard, who should have been born in the Middle East so he could keep a harem.

The cognac hit the spot nicely, and I was finally able to face them with dignity and rule number one firmly imprinted in my brain. "It's just someone I met not long ago who's in investment banking over here. I thought Mike should meet him, seeing as he's new to Taipei and all that." Another swig of cognac and I was totally in my element. Well, almost.

"I didn't know you knew people in investment banking," Jeffrey remarked with curiosity.

"Well," and this time it was me who was smug, "you don't need to know everything, Jeffrey." Big smile. That took care of him and his one thousand and one questions. Meanwhile, Mike was smirking behind his drink and Moira was looking rather confused and for once had nothing to say. Luckily, my mobile rang and I was saved from further explanation. "Excuse me," I said, and walked off to take the call. I reached the ladies toilet before I hit the answer button. "Thanks a lot, Monica!"

"How did you know it was me? Caller ID doesn't show from overseas calls."

"Who else is going to call around the time when I'm supposed to be meeting Mr. Wonderful?" It was a shame Monica was all the way in Hong Kong, I thought, otherwise my fingers would be wrapping themselves around her neck right about now.

"Are you very mad at me?" Monica had a way of sounding like a little girl when all else failed.

"Mad isn't even close," I replied. "But I forgive you," I added magnanimously. "I know you meant well."

"Really?" She sounded truly surprised, and then a little suspicious. "What's going on?"

"Things turned out for the best, after all," I explained. "Jeffrey and Moira made a coincidental appearance and she went all goggle-eyed when she met Mike." I couldn't help the glee in my voice.

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed," I remarked. "And if you were trying to fix me up with Mr. Green Eyes, you failed miserably! I mean, the guy really loves himself."

"That's not true!" Monica protested on Mike's behalf. "You don't know him. Deep down inside he's a really nice guy."

I replied with sarcasm dripping from my voice. "You mean there's a deep down? Frankly, I thought he was all superficiality."

"Since when are you an authority on first impressions?" Monica sounded annoyed.

"Since I met Mike Connor," I replied tartly.

"Fine. Think what you like, but Mike is a lot more decent than Jeffrey. At least he doesn't cheat on his women." Monica persisted in standing up for the guy.

"That's probably because he hasn't been with one long enough to cheat on her," I said smugly.

"You're impossible sometimes, Sarah. So go ahead with your plan, and if you really end up with Jeffrey don't ask me to feel sorry for you later." Monica seemed really upset and suddenly I felt guilty. Her heart was in the right place, and she was my best friend.

"Okay. Look, I'm sorry. Really I am." I sighed into the phone. "I've just had a very taxing evening and the alcohol is making me say things I don't mean."

"All right, don't worry. Go home and rest. And if you decide to tell Mike about the scheme, believe me he will help you. He's that kind of guy."

"I'll call you tomorrow." I wished her goodnight and rang off as I caught my image in the mirror. I looked like a normal person again and was pleased to see that I was no longer flushing. I flicked a stray strand of hair off my face and went back out.

“Where are they?” I asked Mike when I returned to the table and found him alone.

“They had an appointment to go to.”

I sat down, prepared to finally tell him the truth, when he put up a hand to stop me from talking. “You’re in love with that guy, and you want me to charm his girlfriend away from him, right?” My mouth must have dropped wide open. “I see you’re no longer grinding your teeth,” he added with a gleam in his eye.

He was such a smartass. But I had no time to reflect on his bad qualities right now. “How did you know?” I asked, totally dumbfounded.

“God, Sarah, it was obvious by the way you were looking at him,” he replied.

I just didn’t believe it. Could it be that Mike Connor was intuitive underneath that veneer of egotistical vanity? I searched his face for a moment and instead of seeing the sneer I had expected there, I saw a flash of kindness. But it quickly disappeared and the gleam was back.

“You’re right,” I plunged into the truth with relief. “You’re absolutely right.”

“So tell me all,” he urged.

I was surprised he even wanted to know. I thought he would have laughed and made a snide remark of some sort, but instead he seemed genuinely interested in hearing what I had to say. So I told him. I gave him the background on Jeffrey and his platonic relationship with Moira, his inability to make “the break” due partly to Moira’s manipulative ways and his feelings of guilt. And I was astonished when I found myself confessing my undying love for Jeffrey and my dream that soon he would be free to be with me.

“I’ve been involved with him for just over a year and I’m not about to give up now.” I avoided looking into Mike’s eyes as I finished speaking, and peered into my cognac instead.

“And this guy loves you back?” Mike went straight to the heart of the matter.

“Yes,” I replied with strong conviction, but my voice sounded phony somehow, and I fleetingly wondered whether he picked up on it.

Mike made no judgment. He gazed pensively at me while he finished his drink. “Okay,” he said finally, “I’ll help you.”

“You will?” I was astounded at how quickly he made his decision. Perhaps, the guy was not as bad as I’d thought.

“There is one condition, however,” Mike added.

Here we go, always jumping to conclusions straight away. Of course the guy was bad. After all, who would agree to romance a strange woman, only to dump her once he was through with her? A lot of very sick guys ... guys like Mike Connor. “What’s the condition?” I ignored my thoughts and the guilt I felt at setting up Moira for a fall.

“We play this both ways,” Mike explained. “I charm Moira away from Jeffrey, and you make Jeffrey jealous.”

“Jealous? Why would I need to make him jealous?” I was puzzled.

“Don’t you know anything about men, Sarah?”

Even if I didn’t, I certainly wasn’t going to admit it to Mr. High and Mighty. And to think that moments earlier I’d thought he wasn’t half bad. “What are you talking about?” I felt affronted.

“Men don’t want to have it handed to them on a silver platter, you know. They still like the hunt. So let him fight for you.” He threw me a confident smile.

Of all the conceited, arrogant, condescending things to say! “Listen, Mike, I don’t know what kind of women you’re used to, but I love Jeffrey and I’m not about to play silly ‘come and get me’ games with him. So let’s stick to doing this my way, and that is to charm Moira.” The

man was insufferable and I felt like wiping that amused glint from his eyes, but I was rapidly running out of imaginary ashtrays.

“Okay,” he agreed readily, too readily. This aroused my suspicion.

“What now?” he asked, noticing the look I gave him.

“Nothing,” I said innocently. I would have to keep an eye on Mike Connor until I found out if he could be trusted. What if he went and told Moira about the scheme? The doubt reared its ugly head and I couldn’t put it completely from my mind.

“We need to draw up a plan of action,” Mike said, ignoring the flitting expressions that I was sure must have been crossing my face.

“Yes, a plan of action,” I repeated, and paid attention.

“It can’t be too obvious that I’m after her,” he explained. “I’m going to need your help with her schedule so I can arrange to bump into her and take it from there.”

“Okay,” I agreed. This shouldn’t be too hard.

“Fine.” He nodded resolutely. “Give me a call when you have the information.”

I took this as a hint that the evening was over and he was eager to go home. “Here’s my business card.” I fished one out of my bag and handed it to him.

Mike wrote out his number on a paper napkin. “Sorry, I’m still waiting for mine.”

I reached for the napkin and stuffed it in my bag as I stood up. “I’ll be in touch then,” I said, all businesslike, and shook his hand.

Mike looked at me with what I now thought of as his famous “glint of amusement” and I pursed my lips to stop myself from saying something I would later regret. The guy had just agreed to help me out and I couldn’t afford to give offence. *Unfortunately.*

“Goodnight,” Mike said, as if he could read my thoughts. “It was very refreshing meeting you ... again.”

What was that supposed to mean? “Goodnight,” I replied, and left the bar with the feel of those green eyes burning into my back. Only then did I realize, much to my mortification, that I was supposed to have met him at Monica’s Christmas party. But due to the amount of alcohol I had consumed at the time, I could not remember him at all. What must he think of me? *Well, I don’t care.* I hurried out of the hotel, my thoughts in turmoil.