

Chapter 1

It wasn't unusual for young girls to arrive from the outer islands of St. Clare to work in the big hotels on Grand Island. Only Nara was unusual, as was the manner in which she arrived.

Two young boys out collecting shells and coconuts on the beach early one morning were astonished to see a young woman, whose boyish figure made her appear not much older than they were, step out of the surf, shaking seaweed from her long, dark hair. They had seen her swimming, and thought at first that her dark head was a coconut bobbing on the waves until she swam close enough for them to see that she had a face. She swam with strong, practiced strokes, even though she had a tightly wrapped bundle strapped to her shoulders.

When she stepped out of the ocean, the boys assumed she had swum all the way from East Island, which was twenty miles away. They had been intent on throwing rocks and chasing crabs on the beach, and had ignored the barking of their two dogs when the seaplane had landed briefly in the blue-green sea about two hundred meters off shore.

Perhaps they could be forgiven for their lack of attention, since the waves were deafening that morning as they crashed against the offshore rocks, but a seaplane was still a rare enough sight that the boys were teased unmercifully by their friends and scolded by their elders, when they reported that a mermaid had swum out of the sea that Sunday morning. Tommy Sanders, the older of the two boys, was especially reprimanded by his mother, the head housekeeper at the Hotel St. Clare. Tommy had inherited his father's tendency to make up stories, and his mother was determined to quash the tendency in her son, especially now that his father had abandoned his family for grander opportunities in the United States. Even so, Nara was nicknamed "the mermaid" from the minute she appeared on the island.

Nara paid no attention to the two boys or their dogs, and did not see the two racing back toward the village to announce her arrival, their brown legs pumping and sand flying up from their bare feet. She had been promised a job as hostess in the restaurant of the St. Clare, the largest and most exclusive hotel on Grand Island, which was the principal island in the St. Clare island group, and now she set her steps toward the strip of high rise hotels that had sprung up like overgrown sand castles along the northeastern coast. Once she had convinced her father that this was the logical next step in her life, he contacted a friend of a friend from his days at Oxford who was eager to hire an intelligent young woman to greet guests at the hotel's restaurant.

As a native of the islands, Nara had grown up in two worlds. One was the world of the wealthy, as her father's daughter. She never lacked for anything and was sent away to boarding school at fourteen. But her sense of self was firmly grounded in the soil of the island people. She could switch her speech to the native dialect at a moment's notice, find her way through hidden paths in the jungle, and sit comfortably drinking tea out of chipped cups in the simple tin-roofed homes of the maids and cleaning women who worked for her father. She trusted them and they trusted her. Her father was aware that she visited these women, the women who had raised her after the death of her mother, and considered it a childish, sentimental habit she would outgrow. It was something that gave her comfort, as a child will hold on to a familiar old blanket long after it serves any useful purpose. He had no idea how deeply the island touched her, held her. It was the one aspect of Nara's mother that had disturbed him, and in a sense he blamed the island for her death. But that is going ahead of, or behind, our story.

Nara attended university in Miami and returned to the islands well-educated, well-read, poised and self-confident, but totally unable to find a job in which she could use her academic skills. She was hired as an second grade teacher at the same school where she had studied as a child, but was frustrated by the children's lack of attentiveness, and the overbearing manner of the principal and other teachers, many of whom had taught her and still considered her to be little more than a child herself.

One morning she arrived early at the school, just as the sun was rising over the point, and let herself into her classroom. She was followed by one of the local beach dogs, who after breeding only with each other for generations, all looked alike. They were all medium -- medium size, a medium brown color to their coats and eyes, fur neither long nor short, and with docile, even-tempered personalities.

“Out!” she shouted at the dog, who obeyed her only after urinating on the doorjamb. The doorway was a popular place for the local dogs, where they often received hand-outs from children who were too busy playing or too careless to eat the ample lunches packed for them by loving mothers and grandmothers.

Nara surveyed the room, uncharacteristically quiet in the early morning. The walls were stained with mildew and dampness, and the paint was beginning to peel in several places. Lizards scampered across the ceiling, and her footsteps crunched a coating of sand underfoot. No matter how often the room was swept, sand still worked its way in through the poorly sealed windows, and was tracked in on the shoes of both students and teacher. A moth-eaten flag hung on the wall next to mildewed photographs of former presidents of the island republic, as well as one of Queen Elizabeth II from British colonial days. On the wall behind the teacher's desk hung educational charts showing the letters of the alphabet and multiplication tables, along with a map of the world. Nara had to reattach the alphabet charts almost every morning, because the dampness refused to allow the tape to stick to the wall for more than a day. Today the ”ijkl” section was hanging by one corner. Nara reached automatically for the tape, but then stopped herself. She pulled the offending section from the wall, removed the rebellious strips of tape from the back, and stood the poster neatly on the chalk ledge. The alphabet was no longer her problem.

Nara piled the graded student papers on her desk and placed her grade book, meticulously filled out and up to date, on top of them. She straightened the items on her desk, throwing a few old notes and scraps of paper in the trash. She placed her few personal items in the plastic grocery bag she had brought from home and then checked the desk drawers, convincing herself of their orderliness and the absence of anything personal. She did not want to leave any traces of herself in this room. Finally she placed dead center on the desk a pristine sheet of paper on which she had typed, ” I am afraid I can no longer offer my services as a teacher at this school. I have every confidence that you will find someone much more suited to the task. Sincerely, Nara Blake.”

She weighted the paper with a large conch shell that had been on the desk when she had been a student and walked out the door with her plastic bag swinging from her arm. Nara went home and went back to bed.

Her father, Jack Blake, was eating his breakfast sometime later when there was a pounding at the front door. Clara, their maid, hurried to answer it, since Nara's step-mother Kelly liked to sleep late and would make everyone's lives miserable for days if she were awakened by such a violent noise.

“Where is Nara?” The voice at the door was not much less loud or violent than her pounding had been. Mrs. Wolff was a large woman with graying dark hair that sprung from its bun when she was excited, which was most of the time. She was wearing a black flowered dress with buttons down the front, several of which had escaped their buttonholes on the strenuous walk up from the school, and her large chest was heaving with exertion.

“Nara has gone to the school,” Clara answered innocently.

“Nara is not at the school, and will not be at the school,” the woman answered.

By this time, Nara's father had come to the door. Jack Blake found Aurelia Wolff amusing and never missed an opportunity to torment and tease her when she was angry, and especially when she was angry with Nara, whom he considered to be a girl after his own heart. In his mind, he and his daughter were always right.

“Aurelia, Aurelia, why all the racket so early in the morning?” he drawled. “I was just sitting here enjoying my coffee, watching the birds flying around, offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the beauty around me, when I heard this banging and shouting. This is most unpleasant. Please come in and tell me what's wrong. Perhaps I can help, even though I don't usually assist people this early in the morning.” His voice had risen and developed an edge as he finished.

Mrs. Wolff sputtered. She was always disconcerted by Jack Blake, and thought that only she knew that she had considered him attractive since he had first returned to the island after his education in England was completed. She waved the incriminating paper in his face. “She has left the school, and who knows where she is now. I knew this would happen. She has left us without a teacher and the children are running wild.”

Jack Blake took a sip of coffee from the mug he held in his hand. “Come in, please, Aurelia. Let me get you some coffee, perhaps with a little brandy in it to calm your nerves. This isn't good for your heart.” He took her elbow firmly in his hand, an action that sent sensations other than anger coursing through her body. She stopped talking and allowed herself to be guided to the patio where Clara was ready with the coffee pot and a bottle of brandy. The patio had the

advantage of being on the opposite side of the house from Kelly's bedroom, although it was directly below Nara's room.

Jack had no doubt Nara had left the school because she was fed up with everything about it. It had surprised him when she had taken the job. Aurelia Wolff had always been overbearing and self-important. The school was underfunded by the government, understaffed, and falling apart. It was only a matter of time before the ministry closed the place. If Nara had left -- good for her. The girl had spirit.

When the two of them were seated at the table, and Aurelia Wolff had taken a sip of her laced coffee, Jack took the letter from her, smudged now with the woman's fingerprints.

He read it twice and chuckled. "She doesn't seem to leave any room for doubt, does she?"

This set off a fresh tirade from the woman. "This just shows her lack of responsibility. I should never have hired her. She has no control over the students. Playing games with them all the time, that's all she does. They are running wild now, no discipline. And I will have to teach the class; there is no one else." She paused for breath; her chest heaving only slightly less violently. Jack made a supreme effort to keep his eyes focused anywhere but her breasts.

"She is too much like her mother," Mrs. Wolff continued. "She will never grow up. I thought there would be more of your influence, Jack. That's why I agreed to hire her."

Jack Blake was a tranquil man, who would give in to a woman in order to preserve peace in his life, but there were some things he would not tolerate -- ever. And an insult to his first wife, Nara's mother, was one of them. Kelly, his second wife, with all her self-centeredness, knew this. Aurelia Wolff knew it, too, but Aurelia was too hot-headed to know when to stop once she warmed to a tirade.

He stood calmly and turned his back to her, staring out at the ocean until she wondered if he remembered she was there. She knew she had gone too far, but did not know what else to do but wait. It was out of her range of experience or character to apologize.

When Jack turned around, his dark eyes were pin points and his lips set tightly. "You will leave this house, Aurelia, and begin to seek new employment. I do not take insults to my family lightly. It's time that school was closed, and I will contact the ministry today. Take the beach path," he added. "I don't want you walking through my house." He inclined his head to the wet sandy path that wound through the trees down to the beach, the path the dogs used on their forays around the neighborhood.

Aurelia knew better than to argue. She had seen Jack's anger before, but being a stupid person, she generally forgot until the next time. She stood up, and with what was left of her dignity, headed down the slippery path to the beach, leaving Nara's letter of resignation on the table. Jack picked it up and smiled; then movement above caught his eye. The shutter on Nara's bedroom window had shifted ever so slightly.

“Nara,” he called softly. The window opened and a dark head with his own dark eyes twinkling with amusement, looked down at him. Jack jerked his head indicating that she join him on the patio. It wasn't an order. Jack Blake never ordered his daughter to do anything; they were too much alike. In seconds she appeared on the patio, dressed in an ankle-length flowing dressing gown, her long hair cascading down her back, her feet bare. His eyes took in every aspect of her appearance, her slim figure, her small childish feet, her wide awake eyes.

“Coffee?” He poured her a cup without waiting for her answer, adding hot milk from a small china pitcher just the way she liked it.

“Thanks, Dad.” She took a sip and then looked at him questioningly.

“Congratulations. You have taken a wise step, and forced Aurelia Wolff to do some work for a change. What are you going to do now?”

Nara looked steadily at her father. “Leave the island.”

Jack Blake was silent for a long moment, while both he and his daughter sipped their coffee. “I'll make some calls this morning. A change of scene would be good for you.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Her eyes twinkled above her coffee cup, and Jack knew he could never deny her anything.

Chapter 2

St. Clare had been home to Jack Blake's family since his father moved there from England after the Second World War. Their importing business had waxed and waned with the economy, but had provided a good living for the family, since nearly everything but food had to be imported to the islands. And as wealthy Europeans and Americans began to build luxurious beach houses, either as vacation homes or primary residences to use for tax purposes, the Blake importing business had grown.

Jack's only offspring was Nara, and while he hated to see the demise of a business that his father had worked hard to establish, or see it sold to someone outside the family, he doted on Nara too much to insist she stay and learn the business if her interests lay elsewhere. If she wanted to learn the ropes later on -- fine. But she reminded him too much of her mother for him to set limits on her. His second wife Kelly was already forty, and the idea of waiting for their child, if there ever was one, to grow up, was too much for Jack to fathom. It would be Nara's business if she wanted it, or it would be sold.

Nara thought about this as she walked confidently from the beach to the Hotel St. Clare on that sunny morning after she had emerged barefoot from the sea, sarong around her waist and pack on her back.

She strolled confidently across the lobby to the desk clerk and asked for Mr. Todd Hamilton, the owner.

“Do you have an appointment?” the clerk asked haughtily, looking Nara up and down.

“Of course,” she answered. “Tell him Nara Blake is here.”

Todd Hamilton was expecting Nara that morning, and he was looking forward to meeting her. He had not seen her since she was in high school, and he remembered her as a tiny, childish

girl, quiet and bookish. He wondered if she had changed. He would find something for her to do. Although he did not know Jack well, the Blakes were an established name on the islands.

The young woman who emerged from the elevator on the eighth floor was physically the best of both Jack Blake and his dead wife Antoinette. Nara had taken the opportunity to slip into the ladies' room and change into one of her signature long dresses and a pair of sandals. Her hair was brushed back from her face but still hung loose, while just a hint of makeup brightened her face. She did not look at all like the serious young girl he remembered.

“Mr. Hamilton?” She held out her hand.

“You must be Nara.” He accepted her outstretched hand and held it a moment longer than was appropriate. “Come on into my office.” He barked at two employees who were staring at the two of them, “Get back to work. I don't pay you to stand around. Cora, I want that report from John ASAP.”

Nara was grateful for her training in composure when she entered Todd Hamilton's office. The view was spectacular. Floor to ceiling windows faced out on the ocean, and the southern view looked out at the cove used by the hotel as a bathing beach, which was rimmed with palm trees. Today had dawned sunny, but waves pounded the shore and heavy clouds could be seen moving in from the mountainous center of the island to the west. The inside of the room was even more startling. Mr. Hamilton had purchased paintings and sculptures from around the world, showing the most erotic poses possible between men and women and couples of the same sex. It was impossible to ignore them or pretend not to see them. Even his huge mahogany desk was decorated with tiny brass and wooden figures in every imaginable acrobatic position.

Nara glanced around at them, holding her facial expression impassive.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I think you have extraordinary taste. Not my taste, but still extraordinary.”

“You've turned into an extraordinary young woman, Nara,” Mr. Hamilton said, looking her up and down.

“How do you know that?” she asked. “You've only just met me.” Her eyes held his gaze evenly.

“You are beautiful like your mother, and outspoken like your father.”

“You have the advantage there, Mr. Hamilton. You remember my mother. I don't. I was three years old when she died.” He had not invited her to sit, and Nara hesitated. She did not want to be craning her neck to look up at him anymore than she was already.

As if he read her thoughts, Todd Hamilton indicated the wooden chair that faced his polished desk. Mahogany? “Yes, I remember you then. A tiny, shy little thing. You screamed when you had to be separated from your father.” He moved behind his desk and leaned back in a chair that could almost function as a bed.

Nara sat, feeling rather prim. She crossed one ankle over the other and uncrossed them, leaving her feet flat on the floor. *Easier to run if I have to*, she thought. “I was a little girl who had just lost my mother. What would you expect me to do?”

“And the fire in your eyes is just like your mother's.” He pulled his eyes away from hers and looked out at the sea. “But you are here for a job. What can you do?”

“I have a degree in history. What would you like me to do?”

“I'll be blunt. Most of my employees are lucky if they finish high school. The hostess for the Jacaranda Dining Room just quit. You would make a wonderful impression on the tourists with your education and your looks. Go in to town to Anna's Boutique and buy yourself some appropriate clothes. I'll call Anna and tell her to put everything on my bill.” He turned to some papers on his desk as if that were her dismissal.

“Mr. Hamilton?”

“Please. Call me Todd.” He smiled at her, and Nara felt a shiver run down her spine.

“I need some place to stay. At least until I find a place for myself.” Nara's heart pounded, but she had to ask the question. She had no place to stay, and her father had told her this would be part of the arrangement.

“Right. The place above Anna's shop is empty. I own the building. I'll have her give you the key.” He waved his hand as she started to open her mouth. “We'll work out the rent later.”

Thick clouds had all but blotted out the earlier sunshine when Nara left the hotel. She had insisted on walking the short distance into the village, even though Todd Hamilton had offered to have someone drive her. She slipped off her sandals and tied up her long skirt. She was an island girl. She knew how to get around. And she was independent, a fact Todd Hamilton was only beginning to realize. His manipulations would lead to his downfall, but that was all in the future.

Twenty minutes later, Nara arrived at Anna's Boutique. The shopping area of Jamesville was small, the few elegant shops designed to appeal to the tourists and wealthy residents. Grocery stores sold everything from fresh bananas and coconuts to batteries of all kinds, and bottled gas for cooking. Long loaves of bread sat waiting on the counter, stacked like cord wood. Imported items like canned tuna and soft drinks were available, too, at exorbitant prices.

Anna was expecting her. She had pulled out a selection of short, low-cut dresses designed to show off Nara's figure, knowing the way hostesses at the Hotel St. Clare usually dressed. "Those aren't my style."

"And what is your style?" Anna answered imperiously.

Their eyes locked. "We can be friends or enemies," Nara said. "What difference does it make to you what I wear?"

"It makes no difference," the older woman replied. "Mr. Hamilton said you were to be the new hostess and to give you something sexy to wear."

"I'm twenty-two years old, single and reasonably good looking. I don't need to wear sexy dresses. Give me elegant and sexy will take care of itself."

The short dresses disappeared in Anna's arms, and after a few minutes, an array of long, sleek dresses appeared. Some were solid colors, everything from white to bright jewel tones, while others were patterned with tropical floral designs that mimicked the profusion of bright flowers on the islands. Nara smiled. "Much better, don't you agree? Men just don't understand style," she said sweetly. She hadn't yet figured out the relationship between Anna and Todd Hamilton. Better to be diplomatic for the time being. "I'll take a few of them upstairs to try on."

Anna rubbed her arms as she watched Nara go off upstairs. What kind of a father would send his daughter alone to work for Todd Hamilton? Anna had been much like Nara many years ago. But no -- she had already had a child by the time she became involved with Todd. She should have known better. She should have known what men were like.

Anna ran her fingers through her short dark hair, still thick but flecked with gray. She had put on a few extra pounds over the years, but not as much as many island women did. She had known love in her life, but none of it had turned out as she expected. She became a businesswoman, not a wife. She owned the boutique now; Todd had been quite generous with the terms when she wanted to buy it, and she was well off financially. But the love of her life was her son Davis, whose father, thank God, was not Todd Hamilton.

As if thoughts of her intelligent, handsome son had called him to her, Anna heard footsteps at the back door of the shop. Davis opened the door, smiling broadly.

“I thought you might be ready for a break.” Davis carried a large green coconut in each hand with a drinking straw protruding from each one. He handed one to his mother and glanced around the shop. “No customers?”

“Just the new hostess Mr. Hamilton sent over from the hotel. She's upstairs trying things on.” She indicated the apartment above with her eyes.

Davis took a long pull on his coconut juice. “What's she like?”

“Looks like she's got a mind of her own,” she answered. “We'll see how long she lasts.” Anna toyed with her straw.

“Drink your coconut, Mom. It will keep you from getting dehydrated.”

She smiled and took a sip. “Yes, Dr. Davis.” The fact that Davis had attended medical school, and had now returned to the island to complete his residency in pediatrics, was the greatest source of joy and pride in Anna's life. Now if he could just find the right woman, her life would be complete. But his response to her prodding was always, “I'm not ready yet.”

The apartment upstairs was simple and typical of the tropics. The jalousie windows could be opened for the air or closed tightly against the rain. A long balcony ran along one side, where one could sit with something icy in a glass and watch the world go by in the street below. A ceiling fan creaked slowly overhead in the living room, whose furniture was covered with tropical prints that had seen some wear. In the tiny bedroom, the four poster bed was draped with mosquito netting. Nara loved it. It might belong to Todd Hamilton, but it was the perfect apartment. The spirits in the apartment were still for the day, and Nara had no inkling of their presence, although it would not have surprised her to know they were there.

She arrived at the hotel for her first shift as hostess in the Jacaranda restaurant in time to wipe the sand off her bare feet and slip into dressy sandals, also courtesy of Anna's shop. She had left the apartment early and walked through the side streets to avoid any transportation Hamilton might have sent. Her friendly smiles and greetings effectively ended the stares of the townspeople before they started. She was one of them.

Nara took her place at the entrance to the hotel dining room. She possessed an easy friendliness along with a sense of order and a good memory – all worthwhile skills for a dining room hostess. Todd Hamilton hovered around for the first few minutes, hoping to assist her, to be there for her in some way, and make her grateful to him. She ignored him, and he soon left. He would bide his time.

Chapter 3

It was not the first time that an attractive young female employee had been hired personally by Todd Hamilton, and the kitchen and wait staff tacitly agreed to offer what protection they could. Somehow there was always a group of young people walking into town when Nara was ready to leave at night. Or, if she stayed late in the kitchen, helping to balance the day's receipts with John, the head chef, he would walk her home through the sleeping streets. They told her stories about her predecessor, Leah, who had been hostess before her, and had not been as aware or as smart as Nara was. Todd Hamilton had promised her a more important job at another hotel. Their late night trysts in his office had led to her pregnancy. As soon her condition became obvious, he fired her. She disappeared after a crying, screaming scene in which he accused her of sleeping with every man in the hotel. A week later, her body washed up on the beach. The villagers disagreed as to whether she had killed herself or if Hamilton had her killed. She was from one of the small islands, a half-native girl. The hotel owner paid to have her swollen body sent home to be buried in her family's cemetery.

More and more Nara stayed late at the hotel, helping John with the business end of the kitchen. She was doing hotel work, she told herself, and John was good company. He took his job seriously. He used local seafood, fruits and vegetables, importing as little as possible. He prided himself on serving fresh, high quality food, delicately seasoned. He wasted little. Nara loved watching him work, wasting no motion, with his white T-shirt sleeves rolled up, exhibiting a tattoo of a rose on his upper left arm. He turned quickly from chopping station to the grill as he prepared his special shrimp and peppers with island sauce. A lock of his blond hair fell onto his forehead. Nara could be attracted to him if he were interested, or if she were. But he was all business, and she knew she had to get her life on course before she could even think of romance.

When John walked her home as the sun was just rising over the ocean, Nara knew without looking behind them that Todd Hamilton had them followed, and was happy for that reason that John never so much as touched her when they said “Goodnight.” Probably John knew it, too. Nara knew Hamilton would try to seduce her. It was only a matter of time, but maybe her work was too valuable to him right now, so he let her continue as she was.

She was right. It was only a matter of time. Nara had been at the hotel about two months, and it was the middle of the rainy season, when she received a message to report to his office when she arrived for work in the evening. She stopped in at the kitchen to let John know she had been summoned. She shook her umbrella and ran her fingers through her wet hair. “If I’m not back in an hour, send someone for me,” she said, attempting to make it sound like a joke.

“I will,” John answered soberly, checking his watch.

Nara took the elevator to Hamilton's eighth floor office. The wind was picking up in force, and she worried that the power might go out and she would be stuck in the elevator, but she didn't want to climb eight flights and arrive out of breath. She needed her wits about her. She knocked quietly at Todd Hamilton's office door. “Come in,” he called.

She opened the door and stepped inside, deliberately leaving the door open. “Close the door, dear.”

She bristled at the “dear,” but closed the door.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing toward the sofa this time. The pale blue cushions matched the sea, and their softness looked inviting, exactly as Todd Hamilton planned it, Nara had no doubt.

She sat primly at the end, sitting with a straight spine. Lightning flashed over the ocean and the windows vibrated with the force.

“Are you afraid of storms?” he asked, seating himself next to her on the sofa -- too close. Nara could smell the heady cologne he wore, as well as the masculine scent of him. She felt sick.

“No,” she said, trying to inch away from him, but there was nowhere to go. If she had to choose a fear, it would be that of the man who sat too close to her and whose nefarious intentions were clear. But the spirits whose presence she had begun to sense in her tiny apartment surrounded her and she straightened her shoulders.

“Relax,” he laughed. “I’m not going to fire you.”

“I’m not worried about that.”

“Good,” he answered. “You do a great job. The guests compliment you all the time, and probably leave you extra tips, too. Right?”

“Sometimes,” she answered. He was sitting too close for her to risk meeting his eyes. If she looked down at her hands, she would appear ill at ease. Fortunately, the gathering intensity of the storm offered a distraction, and she kept her gaze out the window, where palm trees bent in the wind.

“Have you slept with any of them?”

Nara was startled, but kept her composure. She glanced at his face and then back out at the storm. “No.”

“Are you sleeping with John?” She felt the cushions shift as he moved closer, and he caressed her thigh, moving his hand from her knee up to her hip.

“No.” She felt frozen into stone.

“It wouldn't matter to me if you were, you know. You are both attractive, intelligent young people. It would be perfectly understandable if you wanted to have sex.”

Nara stood suddenly and walked toward the window, but the darkness and the howling storm pushed her back. She stood facing the man, her back to his desk. “We aren't.” She nearly said, *You must know. You have us followed every night.* But she thought better of it.

He studied her for a moment in the gathering twilight, as the storm worsened, and rain pounded against the office windows. The point at the end of the hotel beach had disappeared from view. “I have a promotion in mind for you.” This was not the offer Nara expected.

“I see from your work with John in the kitchen that you are good with numbers and organization. I can easily hire another pretty face to be hostess. I want you to be my liaison between the restaurant and myself. Prepare a report every week on the kitchen's expenditures, etc. A real report, not the greasy files John sends over every week. I will also have you do the same for the gift shop during the day. I will give you a raise of course.” He smiled; he had offered her a gift, which would surely come with strings attached.

“Thank you.” Nara said. Her mind was whirling. In any other situation she would consider this an amazing offer, but coming from Todd Hamilton, she wondered. Still, she could not say “No.” It would look like a rejection, which it would be. The new job would put her in closer contact with the hotel owner, but she had to trust her own intuition and fortitude, and the watchful eyes of her friends.

“Come in about three tomorrow afternoon.” He rose from his seat and instantly towered above her in the evening gloom. “Will that give you enough time for sleep, and whatever else you need to do to look so beautiful?”

He pulled her toward him. His hands moved down her back to the base of her spine as he pressed her body against his. She could feel his breath against her face; the heat from his body was suffocating her. He kept one hand firmly on her back as he used the other to raise her face to his. Gripping her jaw firmly, he kissed her, probing her mouth with his tongue. His hand moved down to her breast and squeezed gently. Nara tried to pull away but could not escape his grasp. “Please,” she began. She thought of the spirits that surrounded her in her bedroom above Anna's store, and silently called on them for protection.

At that moment the rain outside took on renewed strength, and the wind blew harder. Something rattled the windows and then struck with force. The third time they rattled, the window directly behind the desk shattered, and the office door blew open.

“Damn.” he exclaimed.

Nara moved toward the doorway. “I need to get to work. Shall I send someone up to take care of the window?” She knew her voice was shaking, although she struggled for calm.

“No thanks. I have a phone,” he grumbled.

Nara ran down the eight flights of stairs to the restaurant, her heart pounding. She was going to have to be very careful in this new position. Maybe it wasn't worth it. She wondered how well her father knew Todd Hamilton. Did he know what kind of a man he had sent her to?

