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KAVLA

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Chapter One

'They left their offering at the door and knelt at the oracle; pleading for an answer. There was a long pause and then a voice spoke soft and low.'

Sorrel drove slowly down the well-lit street, squinting at the shiny brass numbers fastened to the garage doors of each house. There was an open spot at the curb in front of # 201 and she manoeuvred her red jeep into position, reached for her purse on the passenger seat and climbed out. Locking the door, she paused on the sidewalk and perused the nicely landscaped lot with its beautiful ornamental cherry tree in full bloom and well-kept bed of flowering shrubs.

The house had an aura of repose emanating from its chocolate-brown door, which was lovingly embraced by huge, black ceramic pots filled to overflowing with purple petunias. Yes! I could definitely live here, she affirmed to herself. It was the fourth house she had been to that day, the last one on her list and the only one that felt it could be home.

The ad in the Vancouver Sun for a professional woman to share a house and expenses had caught her eye immediately and although she had immediately made an appointment to view it, she requested an evening meeting, in hopes of saving the best for last.

Her search for a place to live had taken a bit longer than she had anticipated. One solid week spent driving around and meeting potential roommates had culminated in six immediate dismissals, along with two maybes. One of the places she looked at yesterday seemed very promising until the owner asked her how she felt about sharing a bedroom with his mother. Even her rather interesting upbringing in the Kootenays had not prepared her for that one, she

had thought wryly as she reviewed her reasons for sharing rather than looking for a place of her own.

Firstly, her new job at St. Paul's Hospital was a temporary position and it made sense that by moving into an established home, she could avoid investing her resources in furnishings she wouldn't need in the long run. As well, with real estate being at such a premium in this trendy, ocean-side area of Vancouver, the chances of finding something within her price range were slim. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, the length of commute to the hospital was relatively minimal and she knew she would be deeply appreciative for that the very first time the 'on-call' pager woke her up at 3 am.

This lovely home in Kitsilano looked perfect and she crossed her fingers as she rang the doorbell. The sharp barking that ensued ceased immediately upon command from the firm voice behind the door, which opened to reveal what was possibly the most glorious looking man Sorrel had ever seen. Not much taller than she was, with a slim, muscular physique and shiny eyes that crinkled at the corners as his smile revealed perfect, white teeth.

'I'm Jordan and you must be Sorrel,' he stated simply and his shiny eyes disconcertingly connected with her soul.

'Come on in,' he said, holding the door open for her to enter. 'Never mind our fearless watchdog; she's really a pushover with a bark much sharper than her bite.' Sure enough, the lovely golden retriever curled up on a thick, black cushion beside the front door was now thumping her tail gently against the floor in the hope of any encouragement to mingle. 'I'm expecting my wife, Lily, to come home any minute now,' said Jordan, leading the way down the hall, which opened into a beautifully decorated room.

Numerous vivid abstracts graced the walls and Sorrel couldn't help noticing the life-sized bronze sculpture depicting two young men; their perfectly matched bodies intimately entwined as they kissed.

'What can I get you to drink?' he asked as he gestured toward a brown

leather sofa located in front of the floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking the ocean. 'Tea, coffee, wine?'

'Tea would be great, thanks,' responded Sorrel, placing her purse down before sinking into the luxurious leather. The four or five minutes he was away was just enough for her to take in the inviting room with its contemporary décor and she felt a sense of belonging that she hoped would be reciprocated by Jordan and his wife.

He placed a tray with two mugs of green tea on the wrought-iron table in front of Sorrel just as the golden sentinel by the door sounded the arrival of her mistress. Even the audible warning, though, did not prepare Sorrel for the force of nature that swept into the room on five-inch Christian Louboutins. A halo of platinum blonde hair framed a beautiful face just a shade too determined for saintliness and the slender body wrapped in a chic, black Chanel suit could easily grace a cover of *Vogue*. As she rose to shake hands with Lily, Sorrel somehow felt gauche even though she was wearing a new toffee-brown trench coat from Burberry and sleek custom-made Poppy Barley boots. Self-consciously smoothing down her rebellious red-gold curls, she sank back down onto the sofa and took a sip of her tea.

'What an interesting name,' started Lily, smiling quizzically at Sorrel. 'I don't think I've ever heard it before.'

Sorrel smiled back at the frequently-made observation.

'You aren't the first to say that,' she said. 'Horses of the same colour as my hair are known as sorrels and were my mother's favourites. Many people from the Kootenays, as I am, have equally unusual names. Heaven forbid giving your child anything but the most unique descriptive possible,' she laughed.

'Can I pour you some wine?' asked Jordan, touching Lily's arm and at her grateful smile, left the room briefly, returning with a glass of cabernet.

'Thanks, babe,' said Lily, blowing a kiss to her husband and taking an appreciative sip before turning her attention back to their guest. 'Sorrel, let's get

to know each other a little,' she said. 'In case he hasn't mentioned it already, Jordan teaches Ancient Greek Mythology at the University of British Columbia and I'm one half of Swift and Vickers, an advertising agency here in town. We purchased this house a couple of years ago and our last tenant moved out a few months ago, so we thought we'd again look for someone to share the space with us. Of course, they would have to share with Rosie as well,' she said, glancing toward the front door with a fond look. 'Are you a dog lover?'

Sorrel responded warmly, 'Actually, my family raised golden retrievers in Nelson,' she said. 'We always had at least one or two lolling around the house and to be perfectly honest, I thought that moving to Vancouver would mean giving them up, so being with Rosie would make me really happy.'

'What else makes you happy, Sorrel?' asked Jordan, leaning forward and focusing the full warmth of his brown eyes on her.

'Hmmm,' said Sorrel, a bit taken aback by his directness. 'I wasn't really expecting that question, but I'd have to say that most things in my life bring me some form of joy. I love my work as a gastroenterologist, but I'm equally as passionate about teaching and taking yoga classes and walking in the wild, preferably with a dog just like your Rosie.'

Meeting Lily's azure gaze with her own long-lashed, jade-green eyes, she took a deep breath and spoke with an appealing candour. 'I've looked at quite a few places this week, but in just the short while I've been here, I already love so many aspects of your home. Aside from the fact it's absolutely beautiful; the location is perfect for my job and its proximity to those great little coffee shops on West 4th Avenue satisfies my deepest daily yearning.' She paused to take a sip of her tea before continuing, 'I'm fairly quiet and I think that most people would agree that I'm easy to get along with. I like cooking and baking my own bread and as I have yoga class most nights after work, I'm seldom around enough to make myself a nuisance. Really, I like to live a pretty simple life and my needs are relatively few, well, aside from that coffee I was referring to,' she laughed.

‘How long do you plan to stay in the city?’ inquired Jordan.

‘Actually, I’ve just been hired to do an extended locum St. Paul’s hospital in their endoscopy department and I have a couple of weeks to settle in before I’m scheduled to start. The position I’ve accepted is for a doctor on maternity leave, so although in theory it’s just for eleven months, she may decide to stay away even longer, which would be great for me. I fell in love with Vancouver when I did my fellowship here a few years ago and have been angling for a reason to return ever since.’

‘Well, how about if we show you the extra bedroom?’ suggested Lily and led the way down the hall.

The little ‘Ohhh’ of pleasure that escaped Sorrel’s lips caused Jordan to laugh as they entered the room.

‘You like?’ he asked rhetorically.

‘No, I love!’ she exclaimed. The room was perhaps the most attractive place she had ever thought of calling her own. It was an unusual shape, with two of its walls meeting at massive windows that overlooked the ocean. The four-poster bed faced in the same direction and she could already envision what it would be like to wake up to the stunning view. The walls were the colour of rich butter and the luxurious red quilt spread across the queen-sized bed promised nights of supreme rest and relaxation. Many years of living on loans and grants during med school had instilled in her a profound appreciation for any and all creature comforts and she instantly felt a potent pull.

The gorgeous couple exchanged glances and Lily spoke up.

‘Sorrel, we’ve interviewed quite a few people who have been interested in sharing our space, but I think I can speak for both of us when I say that you seem perfect. We aren’t just looking for a housemate; rather we need someone who fits in with our lifestyle in terms of values and sensibilities. It’s imperative that we’re able to cohabit cohesively and enjoy spending some time together while still respecting each other’s privacy. Is that something you’re interested in as well?’

Smiling widely, Sorrel nodded, 'That would be perfect for me, too,' she said. 'I feel exactly the same way. Not knowing many people here; it would be great to have someone to spend a little time with on occasion.'

'Then that's that,' said Lily decisively. 'When would you be able to move in?'

Sorrel considered.

'I don't have many things and they're all at the hotel I've been staying at this week. When would it be convenient for me to bring them over?'

'How about tomorrow?' asked Jordan. 'I have classes in the morning, but am free after lunch. Does that work for you?'

'That would be great!' said Sorrel. 'I'm so glad to have met you both and I'm really excited about making my home here and getting to know you better.'

'Me too,' said Lily, gliding toward the front door. 'Jordan can help you with your things and I'll look forward to seeing you tomorrow evening after work.' Squeezing Sorrel's arm, she smiled warmly, 'I have a feeling we'll all be great friends.' Then sinking her fingers into Jordan's thick, black hair, she kissed his lips. 'You feel it too, don't you, honey?'

Sorrel backed out from the curb and drove away, glancing back in her mirror as Jordan and Lily waved from their doorstep. Wow, she thought, this really was a great evening. Strange how she already felt connected to these beautiful people. She was so glad that she'd waited to meet them before formalizing an arrangement with any of the other homeowners she had met with before.

She woke early the next morning and lay in bed for a few minutes planning her day. Thinking back over her meeting with Lily and Jordan created a little thrill of anticipation in her belly. It just felt so perfect. The demise of a long relationship she had been in had resulted in her decision to move to Vancouver and now acquiring both the position at St. Paul's as well as a wonderful place to live within one short week seemed like confirmation that her instincts had been right.

Her ex-boyfriend, Quinn had been such a great partner and they'd been together for almost four years, but were starting to feel more like brother and sister than lovers and had mutually agreed that it was time to say goodbye while they still cared deeply for each other. Not wanting to make any hasty, irreparable changes, she had spent a few months travelling in South America with a friend from med school and then returned to Nelson to tie up her loose ends before heading to the coast. And now here I am, she thought with excitement; new job, new home, new friends, new start. Always a believer in availing herself of life's opportunities had led her down some interesting paths and the one curling enticingly before her promised to be the most intriguing yet.

She checked out of the hotel and arranged to store her suitcases there until the afternoon, then spent a lazy hour with a large latte and blueberry muffin while reading the paper at an outdoor table of a quaint coffee shop. The busy street was perfect for people-watching and she enjoyed playing a funny old game of 'guess who; guess what?' as she sipped the last of her creamy drink and affixed a persona to each pedestrian as they passed in front of her table.

The rest of her morning was spent popping in and out of funky little shops filled with bohemian-chic garments in earth-mother hues alternating with trendy spaces laid with barn wood floors, glistening industrial-looking lamps and shelves stacked with just the type of home wares she loved. The thought of decorating her new bedroom made her examine everything with a frank enjoyment and she resolved to return for a few of her favourites once she had settled in.

By mid-afternoon, she was again parking in front of # 201 and was thrilled to note that it was even more appealing in the daylight. After a brief, now-familiar welcome from Rosie, Jordan opened the door and again she was struck by how amazingly attractive he was. He was dressed in a white T-shirt and soft denim jeans, which sat low on his hips and emphasized his perfect proportions. His tousled black hair evoked the disturbing thought that he had

just left his bed and the mental vision sent a tiny electrical current scurrying throughout Sorrel's body. Flashing his super-model smile at her as she stood between the petunia pots, he extended the door in welcome, helped unload the suitcases and with her happily in tow, wheeled one down the hallway to her new room.

He leaned against the door as she ran her hand over the red silkiness covering the bed and then joined her as she crossed to the window. They stood side-by-side in silence, gazing upon the smoky grey waves as they curled and crashed on the shore. The subtle scent of his skin was disturbingly appealing and again she felt acutely aware of his physicality.

'Well, unless you need more help, I'll leave you to unpack now,' he said. 'I need to do some review for my lessons tomorrow, so I'll just be down in the study. When you're ready, why don't you come and find me and I'll give you a tour of the rest of the house, okay?'

'Sure, that would be great,' said Sorrel, turning back to her bags. 'I travel pretty light and don't have all that many things, so it won't take too long for me to put them away.'

The rest of the house was beautifully coordinated with the rooms she had already seen; coloured in warm shades that complimented dark hardwood floors draped with exotic Persian rugs. It was very obvious that Jordan and Lily not only had great taste, but also had spared little expense in making this lovely house their haven.

Jordan looked up from his work when she tapped tentatively on the open door of the study.

'Ready?' he queried. 'Let's start off with the kitchen, which we both think is one of the nicest rooms in the whole house.'

'I'm excited,' responded Sorrel happily. 'As I mentioned last night, I really do love to cook and I hope that you and Lily won't mind if I spend most of my free time in the kitchen.'

He laughed.

‘Are you kidding? With our schedules, it’s often easier to order in, so we’ll be the grateful recipients of anything you whip up. Just to let you know though, we’re both vegetarians.’

‘Me too!’ exclaimed Sorrel, laughing as well. ‘I knew there was a reason I was drawn to you and Lily. It must have been our matching pheromones!’

‘Well, this arrangement really does seem meant to be,’ murmured Jordan, casting the full wattage of his smile in her direction.

She could see why the kitchen was their favourite room. Ribbons of grey granite counters provided the perfect canvas for a gourmet and the gleaming, stainless-steel appliances were all top-of-the-line. It was supremely functional and yet sophisticated at the same time. Sorrel could not wait to purchase the ingredients necessary for her first batch of bread.

‘Well, despite the fact that you usually order in your food, where do you like to shop for groceries?’ she asked Jordan as he sat on one of the four leather bar stools nestled beside a huge island.

‘We like to eat organically whenever possible and one of the great things about our neighbourhood is that there are at least three really decent shops within a few blocks. If you like, Lily and I can show you all of our favourite haunts this weekend.’

‘That would be so great!’ exclaimed Sorrel. ‘I grew up in the Kootenays, where eating organically is practically legislated. We had our own fruit trees and a large garden. Each year I helped my mom to preserve the harvest and there was nothing nicer than her delicious canned cherries and pears in the middle of winter.’

‘Was?’ Jordan inquired observantly.

Sorrel lowered her eyes and with a quiet, husky voice revealed that a drunk driver had killed her mother just over one year ago.

‘My mom and I were really close and honestly, I still miss her terribly,’ she

said slowly.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Jordan gently. ‘Lily’s mom also passed away fairly recently and she’s also grieving deeply. Does your dad still live in Nelson?’

Sorrel shook her head slowly, ‘No, actually, I’ve never known my father. My mother became pregnant when she was still a teenager and he decided he wasn’t all that interested in being a father, so my grandparents supported her until she finished college. When I was five, she adopted my brother, Sandon and although she had a few very discreet relationships while we were growing up, she never remarried. Now it’s just the two of us.’

She looked quizzically at Jordan, ‘I know I was just joking earlier, but don’t you think it’s a little odd that we keep finding these similarities between you, Lily and me? Of course, it may be completely coincidental, but I truly believe that many people subconsciously seek out others with the same energy their own.’

Jordan nodded in agreement.

‘After you left the other night, Lily and I talked about how comfortable we felt with you even after a few minutes. Frankly, we think we’re really lucky to have found you.’

Sorrel smiled.

‘No, I think that I’m the lucky one. Thanks so much for opening your amazing home to me. I can already tell that living here will make me very, very happy.’

Cup of tea in hand, she spent the next hour wandering around the beautifully landscaped garden. Mature rhododendron bushes stationed along the street front provided a brilliant screen from passers-by and the grey-green waves crashing on the pebbled shore provided a natural boundary at the other end of the property. Eyes closed on a bleached-out, washed-up log, she basked in the warmth of the sun until an exuberant Rosie almost knocked her from her perch. Instantly she was transported to the countless days spent beach walking on the glacier-fed Kootenay Lake, always with a dog or two scouting out the way.

Looking up, she saw Lily running toward her, dressed in form-fitting yoga pants and matching Lululemon jacket. Sorrel was amazed to note that she looked even more beautiful in her casual sports clothes, which clung to her impossibly slim body.

‘Sorry!’ she shouted. ‘She’s a bit of a juggernaut once she smells the salty air. Are you okay, Sorrel?’

‘No problem,’ answered Sorrel with a smile. ‘Takes more than a bouncy dog to ruffle my feathers. How was your day?’

Lily sat down beside her on the log.

‘It was great, thanks, but I knocked off a bit early in order to celebrate your first day with us.’

‘Wow, how nice!’ Sorrel exclaimed. ‘What shall we do to mark the occasion?’

‘Well, although I know you enjoy cooking, I thought we could spare you the kitchen duties on your first night and so I asked Jordan to pick up some sushi from a great little place not too far from here. Maybe we could have some wine and just spend time getting to know each other. Sound okay?’

‘That sounds perfect,’ said Sorrel, smiling at her new roommate.

With the dancing Rosie leading the way and the setting sun anointing their heads of copper and gold, the two women chatted animatedly as they slowly made their way back to the house.

Jordan had cleared the table in the same room they had all met in the night before and set it with Asian-inspired black plates and chopsticks. The sushi looked delicious on a red serving platter and a bottle of crisp sauvignon blanc was waiting to be poured. Big cushions were spread invitingly on the floor and all three made themselves comfortable while Lily did the honours with the wine.

‘Mmmm, nice music,’ murmured Sorrel, listening intently to the piano concerto playing softly in the background.

Lily raised her glass.

‘To new and lasting friendships,’ she toasted and the others lifted their glasses in acknowledgement.

Two bottles of wine, much conversation and many laughs later, the threesome shifted their cushions in front of the windows overlooking the ocean. Jordan had dimmed the lights and placed aromatic candles on the table. Lily was leaning back against her husband and Sorrel watched in fascination as his fingers moved concentrically, gently twisting her blond hair into little curls.

Smoothly, Lily reached out and languidly began running her beautifully manicured nails ever so lightly up and down the inside of Sorrel’s arm. Startled, Sorrel’s green eyes locked onto Lily’s lovely face, which tilted toward her with a tiny, questioning smile. It was the most exquisitely erotic feeling imaginable and somehow felt completely natural despite the newness of their relationship.

Sorrel instinctively relaxed her body, lay back on her cushion and closed her eyes. All three rested silently, enjoying their tactile connection until the candles burned low and the piano keys grew still, at which point, Sorrel sleepily bid the other two a good night and made her slightly tipsy way down the hallway to her room. Perfunctorily washing her face and brushing her teeth, she wiggled out of her jeans and t-shirt before climbing in between the crisp sheets.

It was pitch black in her room when she stirred and still in a somnolent state, she realized that she’d been dreaming of a time when she was fifteen and had been invited to camp with her best friend, Julie.

Julie’s parents had invited Sorrel to spend a month with them at a gorgeous, remote beach with a rustic cabin and tiny outhouse. Almost without fail, these Kootenay summers were comprised of endless incomparable days spent swimming, canoeing and water-skiing on the lake, punctuated by starry nights turned deliciously cool as soon as the sun slid down behind the mountains.

It was a typically hot and humid afternoon when the girls were alone in the little bedroom that they shared with Julie’s younger sister, Helena. She and their parents had packed a light lunch and paddled off parallel to the shore in

search of a new picnic spot. After a long swim in the bracingly cool water, followed by an hour of restorative sunning on the dock, Sorrel and Julie made their way up to the cabin for their own lunch.

After peeling off her damp one-piece bathing suit, Julie was smoothing out her tangled hair while Sorrel sprawled in a chair, inspecting a small scrape on her elbow caused by a rough plank at the end of the dock. Moving in behind the chair, Julie began stroking the brush through Sorrel's burnished curls. Watching in the large mirror on the wall in front of them, the girls laughed at the contrast between Julie's tanned skin and the rest of her body, which had been shielded from the sun by her swimsuit. As Julie continued working the brush on either side of Sorrel's head, she felt for the tie holding Sorrel's tiny bathing suit up and gently pulled the loose end, releasing the blue nylon and exposing Sorrel's full, firm breasts. Instantly, her rose-coloured nipples puckered and hardened with the sudden exposure to air.

In the mirror, Sorrel's eyes met Julie's and sustained their connection as Julie laid down the brush and slowly ran her hands down Sorrel's golden shoulders before leaning forward slightly to cup her breasts, still cool from the wet suit. As she gently pinched the coral tips between her thumbs and fingers, Sorrel gasped softly, covering Julie's hands with her own. Without dropping her gaze, Julie lifted one breast up to Sorrel's mouth, pressing the hardened nipple between her lips. Sorrel instinctively closed her teeth and felt a sudden dampness between her legs in response to the sharp sensation.

Slowly she stood and turned to face Julie. Without speaking, the two girls came together with softly parted lips, which opened further as their tongues met to explore each other's mouth. Leaning with her body, Julie moved Sorrel back until her legs felt the edge of the bed and she sank onto the soft blankets while Julie lowered herself down beside her.

'I want to touch you, Sorrel,' Julie whispered.

'I want that too, Jules,' she whispered back.

Gently, they caressed each other's breasts; Julie's, small and immature with golden nipples and Sorrel's, soft and voluptuous. Julie moved her head downward and squeezed Sorrel's breasts together, licking and sucking the touching tips.

Sorrel moaned and moved her hand down Julie's back and over her firm buttocks, reaching inside the cleft between her long legs. Julie caught her breath as they parted reflexively and Sorrel again captured her mouth with her own, sucking on her lower lip and clenching it between her teeth. She began sliding her fingers up and around Julie's clit before pushing them deeply inside over and over and Julie reached down to do the same to her friend. With their tongues still entwined and their breath growing harsh with excitement, their slender bodies tensed as they rode wave after wave of exquisite pleasure.

The two girls continued to explore their sensuality and each other's bodies for the remainder of the summer. Any time they were alone during the heat of the day, or skinny-dipping by the light of the stars was an opportunity to satisfy one other. However, as summer drew to a close, Julie's father was transferred to another city and their family moved away. Sorrel and Julie cried as they parted; vowing to stay in touch forever, but as the new school year started, their relationship died a sweet and natural death.

Naked between her red sheets and recalling those steamy summer afternoons as though they had happened yesterday, Sorrel slid her hand down between her legs, feeling the wetness that was already present. Using the fingers of her left hand to spread herself open, she dipped the index finger of her right hand deep inside before circling it around and around on the tip of her clit. Rubbing herself faster and faster, Sorrel pictured how that evening, Jordan had dropped his hands from Lily's hair and casually slid it inside her sports-bra, fondling her small, firm breasts even as she continued to stroke Sorrel's arm. Picturing their taut, beautiful bodies making love made her even wetter and she came quickly and violently, twisting on her side and biting her bottom lip to stop from moaning aloud.

