

The Player



Rida
Allen



 Bandmates

Ebooks are copyrighted books.

Your purchase allows only you to read and/or print the ebook you have bought. You may not share, in electronic or print version, any ebook that you purchase from us. Sharing ebooks with friends, family, coworkers, strangers, etc., and/or anyone on the internet is **ILLEGAL** and we will pursue and prosecute offenders. If you know someone or have seen someone sharing, selling or redistributing our ebooks, please contact us immediately.

*Please note, ebooks are not currently available for sale to the following countries: Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria, due to restrictions of U.S. law.

The Player

The Player

Rida Allen

Draumr Publishing, LLC
Maryland

The Player

Copyright © 2009 by Rida Allen.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publishers, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a newspaper, magazine, or journal.

Any resemblance to actual people and events is purely coincidental. This is a work of fiction.

Character art by Doug Sirois.

Background art from iStockphoto.

Book jacket design by Rida Allen.

There is no ISBN associated with the electronic version of this book.

PUBLISHED BY DRAUMR PUBLISHING, LLC

www.draumrpublishing.com

Columbia, Maryland

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

To my husband, Rob, for loving me no matter how crazy I act or how much I ask of him.

To my parents, Judy and Ted, for helping me no matter what help is required. And for allowing us to live the dream with them.

To Misty, for participating in the Bandmates series. I look forward to seeing Chris in your upcoming release of *Strings Attached*.

And without a doubt, to the ladies who cared for my Nana in her later years: Mimi Kebe, Yvonne Barrett, and Umu Jah. There is no way we could have survived without you. Thank you so much for being a part of our family. You are forever in my heart.

Chapter One



Brage Connell sauntered into the dimly lit, nearly empty bar, surveying the room in one glance. It was a dive, off the beaten track, and perfect for what he wanted. The opportunity to have a drink, flirt with a woman, and just *hang*, had been stifled severely over the past several weeks. With a pause, he realized if he really counted back, it was closer to two months that he'd been under surveillance. That it was by people he considered to be family gave him no relief. Being watched was being watched, period.

Throwing off the thought—and feeling a bit like an escaped convict—he crossed from the door to the long, black lacquered bar. Settling on a matching tall wooden stool, he easily spotted the blonde with the pixie-like hairdo standing at the far end of the bar, on the opposite side. She was wearing the standard waitress apron, in black, covering a short but curvy body packed into tight, dark blue jeans and a ribbed, dark green tank top. She looked at ease as she strode away, carrying two full beer glasses.

A napkin was slammed onto the bar, then pushed in front of him.

Moving his eyes, Brage came face to face with a grizzled bartender, the graying hair at his temples and mixed into his beard and mustache clearly showing his veteran status in the employment world.

“If yer gonna sit, you gotta drink,” he demanded, his gravelly voice matching his image.

Brage’s eyes slid to the side when the nicely rounded pixie stepped around the back side of the bar again. He had just a quick opportunity to see that her jeans were painted onto her lower body, and her shirt hugged the abundant curves on the top half of her body.

“Hey, boy!” The bartender pounded a fist onto the bar, making the pretzel bowls jump off the surface. “Order, or get the hell out.”

The pixie slipped up next to him, placing a hand on his tattooed forearm as if to soothe him with her touch. “Henry,” she chided, “that’s no way to treat a customer.” She gave him a little shove, but he only crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at Brage. “What can I get you?”

Focusing on her again, Brage spoke in a calm and well-modulated voice, showing his indifference to the older bartender’s threatening pose. “Got any craft beer?”

She narrowed her eyes, suggesting the request was an unusual one. “We carry a couple of Victory beers.”

His mouth watered at the thought of one of his favorite local beers. “Happen to have HopDevil?”

“Happen to, yes.” Turning, she nearly bumped into the male bartender as if she’d forgotten he was there. “Henry,” she hissed, “quit it.”

“Where’s the cash?” Ignoring her, he spoke to Brage directly.

Still watching the woman, who scurried away to collect his order, Brage yanked his wallet from his back pocket. His eyes flicked downward momentarily to retrieve a bill, which he set carefully on the lacquered bar top. With one finger, he pushed it across to where Henry stood.

“We can’t change no hundred!” he snapped, not touching the money.

“Keep it as a tab-up-front kind of thing,” Brage muttered,

his gaze now glued to the woman. In a moment of unadulterated panic, he called out to her, "Can you bring me the unopened bottle, doll?" He prayed his voice didn't give away his concern.

She froze, one hand on the bottle, the other clutching a bottle opener. Slowly, without responding, she turned and carried the bottle to the bar, setting it and the opener in front of Brage.

Henry wrapped beefy fingers around the bottle before Brage could. "I toldja, we can't change no hundred."

Sighing, the waitress removed the beer from Henry's grasp, setting it closer to Brage. "Henry, go take care of your customers," she ordered, slipping the hundred dollar bill off the bar. Once the bartender had stomped off, she sent Brage an apologetic smile. After folding the money into a small rectangle, she slipped it into the front pocket of her jeans, beneath her apron. "We'll settle up when you're ready to leave."

He nodded, popping open the cap on his beer. He hadn't had a mixed drink or ordered a beer on tap in over a month. The offending incident slid into his mind, making his shoulders stiffen. With great effort, he pushed the memory away, refocusing on the woman across from him. She was watching him with a curious look as he handed back the bottle opener. He flashed her a smile, holding his hand out across the bar top. "I'm Brage."

Something like resignation slipped over her features, and she hesitated before placing her hand in his. "I know who you are."

Not entirely surprised, he released her, reaching for his cold beer.

"Glass," she offered belatedly.

He winked. "Naw, I'm good."

After wiping down the bar top with a rag she'd retrieved from below, she stepped back as if to walk away.

"You haven't told me your name," he reminded her, noting that the bar didn't seem to require nametags for their staff, such as it was.

Her forehead wrinkled. "Jo."

"Nice to know you, Jo. Is that short for Josephine?"

"No," she answered simply. "Excuse me." With that, she hurried off, heading for a table with two men whose beer mugs looked to be empty.

Brage turned casually on his stool to watch her, noting the way her jeans cupped her lush ass below the apron ties. He felt sure his big hands could cover that rear nicely.

“You can just quit thinking about it right this damn minute,” Henry ordered from behind him.

Without turning around, Brage asked mildly, “What’re you, her daddy?”

“As far as you’re concerned, I damn well am.”

Swiveling back, Brage took another pull on his beer, appreciating the rich, German malt flavor on his tongue. “She looks like a grown woman. I don’t suspect she needs your permission to do anything. Or anyone.”

Henry’s face turned red, his hands fisting in front of him. “What are you doing hanging around here anyway? We’re not exactly a popular hotspot for bar hopping.”

“That’s precisely why I’m here.”

Harrumphing, Henry made it clear that wasn’t a good answer. “Great. Whatever shit you’re running from, don’t bring it here. We don’t need no trouble; we’re a quiet neighborhood bar.”

“I don’t bring trouble,” Brage muttered crossly, hearing a female voice in his head say, *No, you just always seem to find trouble.*

Henry stomped off when Jo returned and threw him a dirty look.

Relaxing, Brage dragged a finger through the condensation along the side of his beer bottle. “So, *Jo*, are you a Lexical Diffusion fan?” He’d been a member of the rock band since shortly after its inception, playing bass guitar in the five person group.

She tucked her hands into her apron pocket, her face neutral. “A friend is.”

“Oh.” He tried not to look disappointed. He wasn’t an egomaniac, but he was incredibly passionate about his work and the band. Mustering some enthusiasm despite her disinterest, he offered, “I’d be happy to sign an autograph for your friend.”

Her eyes lit up for an instant before a curtain fell over them again. “Sure, why not.”

“Got any paper?”

She whipped out a napkin, pushing it across the bar top to

him.

It was a clean, white napkin, devoid of any design or imprint. Accepting the pen she handed him, he asked, "Who should I make it out to?"

"J-o-e-l," she spelled out, leaning one arm on the bar.

He scribbled out an inscription, then his name below, along with the band's name. "Here you go."

Carefully, she accepted the napkin, sliding it first into a ziplock bag, then under the cash drawer in the cash register behind her. When she turned back to him, he knew his eyebrows were raised high onto his forehead. Shrugging, she rocked back on her heels. "The bar is a messy place."

"So, is Joel your boyfriend? Because Jo dating Joel is a little too corny, isn't it?"

"No, but we're very close." She nodded to his now empty beer bottle. "Another?"

"No, thanks. Got any pub grub?" He wasn't sure if they even offered food, but he had a taste for a burger, or maybe some spicy hot wings.

"Our kitchen closes at midnight. Seeing as how it's now," she checked the slim gold watch on her wrist, "one fifteen, I have to answer in the negative."

He frowned. How had it gotten so late? "Well, I'd better head out then." Pushing to his feet, he smacked a hand on the bar top. "Thanks for the beer."

Laughing, she responded, "You paid for it!"

He liked the way she laughed, and how it lit her up like a little torch. "So I did." He winked again. "Keep the change, okay?"

Her mouth dropped open. "I can't do that! Your beer was less than ten dollars."

He looked behind her at the bottles lining the shelves, then back at her. "Keep it anyway. I'm sure the bar can use it."

She frowned at him, her mouth drawing into a tight line. "That's rather presumptuous of you."

"It's obvious, doll, that the bar isn't so well patronized."

"It's after one in the morning, on a weeknight! Of course it's quiet," she said defensively, her shoulders creeping up toward her ears.

“It’s not the day or the time,” he corrected her. “It’s the dust.”

“Dust?”

He pointed to the bottles behind her. “There’s dust on those bottles. And not only the high-priced stuff.” He’d seen the layer of dust covering the rot-gut vodka, the low-end whiskey, and the low-priced tequila. If they were really a busy establishment, those bottles would be on and off the shelves half a dozen times a night, even on a weeknight.

She didn’t even turn to look at the bottles. “We get beer drinkers most nights.”

No skin off his nose if she didn’t want to admit to problems at the bar. Besides, as a waitress, she might not even *know* how the bar was doing. Then again, waitresses often knew and understood more than management did. “Okay. Then consider the money as pre-payment to hold a few Victory beers in stock for me. Besides the HopDevil, I’m partial to the Storm King Imperial Stout.” Holding out a hand, palm toward her, he said his goodbye. “See ya again soon, Jo.”

Joel Malone watched Brage go, his black jeans and plain black tee shirt tight enough to give her heart a little extra beat or two. But she pushed away the lingering desire, instead welcoming a simmering anger at his outright arrogance. Who did he think he was making comments about how the bar was or wasn’t doing? He was a patron in on a weeknight, less than an hour before closing time. What he saw at the moment wasn’t necessarily a good indicator of a bar’s success, nor did his ridiculous commentary on the dust on her liquor bottles mean anything. Beer was their main staple, not cutesy or designer drinks. And why the hell did he think he had the right to pass judgment on anyone else’s establishment? As far as she knew, Brage had no stake in a bar business.

And she knew a *lot* about him. She’d read everything she could ever find on the hot-as-hell bass player for Lexical Diffusion after buying her first CD of theirs over four years ago. Then, after seeing them in concert the first time, she had gone out and bought every CD she could find on the market, including a few imports. Along with the CD collection had come a collection of articles

about the band, and most specifically about Brage.

After reading all the media reports about Brage, she would never have guessed he would be so self-effacing. She had expected he would be charismatic, but it had been way more laid back and light-hearted. Not that he hadn't been charming...in a player kind of way. And he'd come and gone without any fights, reporters, or police. Based on recent press, that seemed almost unheard of.

The media had not been kind to Brage, seeking out his every indiscretion and making it a public flogging of his reputation. Like the one time about a year ago, some photographer had caught Brage taking a swing at an ex-wrestler in a bar. The wrestler had claimed innocence in the whole escapade, saying Brage had gone crazy for no reason. Witnesses—including the wrestler's drinking buddies—later told reporters the “ex-wrestler” was actually a wrestler-wannabe, who had told his friends all evening that he was going to “prove himself” by taking down someone bigger than himself that night. Of course, Brage wasn't innocent in the evening's events as he, too, had been drinking for several hours before responding to the wrestler-wannabe's goading. Both men had been arrested and charged with drunk and disorderly, as well as destruction of property. The media had a field day with the encounter, pasting the picture all over the internet, calling the incident “Brage's alcoholic rampage.”

But she knew personally of another bashing by the media where Brage had been completely misunderstood. After one of the several concerts she had attended, all the members of Lexical Diffusion had been signing autographs outside of the venue. She'd been toward the back of the line waiting to get her tee shirt signed, her eyes glued to Brage. It was that intent focus that had allowed her to see his eyes narrow and his body go stiff, even as he finished autographing a CD case. She tried to follow his gaze, seeing two guys carrying equipment from the club out to the band's tour bus. She'd seen them come and go several times while she'd been waiting in line, moving equipment without incident. However, this time there was apparently an incident happening, because Brage had barely tossed the CD toward its owner before he launched out of his chair. He had barreled through the crowd with the speed and agility of a linebacker, grabbing a guy around

the neck in a choke hold. As Joel watched with her mouth hanging open, arms were stretched over the crowd of heads and flashes went off on camera phones. Brage dragged the guy back toward the club, followed quickly by the rest of the band and the two roadies who'd been carrying equipment. Employees from the club had come out, urging fans to disperse from the area, apologizing and saying the band would not return for autographs that night. Reports abounded saying Brage had gone crazy and attacked a bystander who was waiting outside the club for a friend. Multiple pictures surfaced of Brage holding the guy in a headlock seemed to support those claims. Later, Joel read on the band's blog that the guy Brage had snagged had been attempting to steal Brage's bass guitar from the club, hoping to hide under the cover of the large gathering of fans and the locally hired roadies. Brage had apparently seen his guitar outside of its case and realized the person carrying it should not have been doing so. But the damage in the public eye had been done, due to the repeated pictures and media reports of the "crazed and unprovoked attack."

Despite having read every available article over the last four years—almost to the point of memorization—she couldn't believe the man she was so infatuated with could be the monster the press had made him out to be. Tall, with shoulders as wide as a Mack truck, his dark brown-almost-black hair had shined under the dim bar lights. On anyone else, his average hairstyle would have looked like the boy next door's, but Brage made it look dangerous as sin. Everything about him made her think of sinning.

Turning back to the cash register, she opened it to take a second look at the plastic-encased napkin. He'd written, *Keep rockin' Joel. Thanks for being a fan. Brage – Lexical Diffusion*. She wanted to hug the plastic to her chest, but she didn't. Instead, she slid it, and his hundred dollar bill, back into the register. She would retrieve them both later, when she tallied the till for the night.

"I'm glad to see that troublemaker is gone."

Rolling her eyes, Joel turned to her longtime friend and employee, and gave him a dirty look. "A paying customer is a paying customer. Next time, no matter how much you dislike someone—for no apparent reason, I might add—take their money, *dammit*."

Once again, he folded his muscled arms across his equally muscled chest. “Jo-elle, he was watching you like a hawk sighting a mouse.”

“He didn’t threaten me, or assault me, or even show any interest in me at all. You think every man who wanders in off the street is after me.” Giving him a rueful grin, she gestured to her overly voluptuous body packed into a small, 5’4” frame. “I’m not exactly Paris Hilton here. Most men prefer the slinky look, and I haven’t been in that category since I was...well, never.”

Henry Fawster’s mouth tightened, his eyes narrowing. “You’re a beautiful, available, *naïve* woman that any man would be lucky to have in his life. And that man was looking at you like he could eat you up with a spoon. But he’s not the right kind of man for you. You need someone stable and upstanding.”

“You’re sweet, Henry, but biased. And I’m a long way away from naïve.” Patting his arm, she thought briefly about Brage possibly being attracted to her. But it was a fleeting fantasy, best left for those lonely nights after the bar had closed and she was tucked into her twin-size bed. “Let’s get cleaned up so we can close for the night.”

With an exasperated noise, he went to bus the two dirty tables at the far end of the bar.

She blew out a breath, then began wiping down the bar with her rag and spray cleaner. Few of their regulars ever sat at the bar, so there weren’t any plates to clean up, only a few snack bowls.

Despite Henry’s cranky demeanor, he was a nice guy and an excellent bartender. In a pinch, he could even fill in in the kitchen, as long as their menu was reduced to hamburgers and fries. The regular crew knew as much when Mal’s car wasn’t in the parking lot.

A smile stretched her lips as she thought about Mallory “Mal” Johns, the sixty-something poker-hound who could kick any man’s ass almost at the same time as she cooked a gourmet meal. Luckily, she was equally as efficient at being a short-order cook and backup waitress. And despite denial from both parties, Joel was pretty sure that Henry and Mal had been “dating” for as long as Henry had been around. In a month or two, that would be three years.

Three years since Joel had taken over the bar.

Three years since her father had died suddenly from a heart attack.

“You sound like a teenager.”

Brage shuffled past his roommate and bandmate to head for his bedroom in the shared hotel suite. “Shut up, Chris.”

“*It’s not fair,*” Chris Niles whined, mimicking Brage’s earlier statement. “This was for your own good. And for the good of the band!”

Brage whirled around, anger zinging through his veins. Holding both arms straight out from his sides, he asked, “Am I here? Did I get arrested? Were there any fights?” He turned in a complete circle for inspection. “See? I went out, I had a drink, I even spoke to a woman. And yet, here I am, back home, safe and sound.”

“For once.”

Stalking into his bedroom, Brage slammed the door behind him. Much as he hated to admit it, Chris and his bandmates were right. Especially in the past couple of years, he always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. In addition, his sense of right and wrong tended to get him into trouble. He couldn’t stand it when people acted like jerks, and when he tried to step in to calm things down, the jerks always took offense. They, in fact, took one look at him and his wrestler’s build, and they jumped to fight. When police are called, they tend to haul away both parties first, then ask questions later.

That usually left Brage cooling his heels at the police station, sometimes caught in the web of assault or public nuisance or destruction of property charges, and sometimes free of any charges at all. Like the time about eight months ago, when an incident occurred without any instigation on his part.

“*Brage.*”

After setting his half-full beer glass on the tall table in front of him, Brage whipped around, not recognizing the person whose hand gripped his bicep with hard fingers. Was this someone he’d met once? A fan? A reporter? Nothing about the man was familiar, but often people thought he should know them after having met them

once. It was a drawback to being in the public eye as a musician. Brage always tried to be relaxed and friendly with people, but often he wished strangers would have a little more courtesy about how they approached him. Like, say, not touching him or invading his personal space. "Hey there, guy, how are ya?"

"I'd like to say I'm doing real good, but I'm not."

Narrowing his eyes, Brage studied the man a little more closely. He had light brown hair, and ice blue eyes that were frosty with rage. He was close to Brage's age and height, but seemed to carry less muscle. "Sorry to hear that, pal." Crossing his arms over his chest, he set his legs apart in a defensive posture, his movements effectively removing the other man's hands from his arm. Clearly the guy had something to say or some bone to pick, so Brage felt it necessary to be prepared. Men tended to take one look at him and his muscular build, and immediately get their hackles up.

"You should be." The stranger's words came out in a growl, his hands now fisted at his sides.

Brage flexed his muscles, knowing the ripples along his arms and shoulders would show with the movement. "How's that?"

From a gaggle of people behind him, the guy dragged a woman forward into view. She was cute, with a little pert nose and long, straight, yellow-blond hair. Leggy with large breasts, both barely covered by a tiny skirt and almost tinier shirt respectively, he felt no hint of recognition. "How's this?"

Granted, she was definitely the type he normally went after, but she didn't seem familiar. "Sorry, pal, no clue what you're talking about."

"You bought my girlfriend a bunch of drinks, then took advantage of her," the man accused, his face red.

Brage laughed in astonishment. "Are you kidding me? I don't have to get a woman drunk to get her to sleep with me. Besides, I don't know this woman...never seen her before in my life."

The woman gasped, setting her hands on her narrow hips. "Liar!" But there was something in her eyes that didn't jibe with the situation, and her hissed word seemed to lack a little heat.

If it was possible, her companion grew angrier, his chest expanding with his own intake of air. "You son-of-a-bitch!" Then

he drew his arm back to hit Brage.

Quick as a snake, Brage struck first, aiming lower and landing his fist in the guy's stomach. He watched in satisfaction as the other man doubled over before making any impact on Brage.

By now a small crowd had gathered, closing in the corner of the bar they were standing in. Probably no one near the front of the establishment had any clue what was going on because they were pretty sequestered away from the main area and music blared out from multiple speakers set around the large room.

The man straightened, took a step back, then launched himself at Brage.

The two men engaged, throwing—and landing—multiple punches.

But Brage had experience, stamina, and muscle on his side. After much grunting and scuffling, he was able to subdue the other man by bending him over a table and mashing his cheek against the wood top. "I don't know what the hell is going on here," he gritted out, "but your girl isn't telling you the truth. I've never seen her, never touched her, and I certainly never took advantage of her."

"What's going on here?"

Brage stiffened at the authoritative voice, but didn't remove his hands from his attacker. "This guy felt the need to assault me without provocation," Brage said loudly.

"Yeah? Seems to me you're the one holding him down."

"He hit my boyfriend!" a woman's voice shrieked.

Rolling his eyes, Brage eased away from the guy, watching him carefully before addressing what was obviously the manager of the bar, who was backed up by a large man who could only be considered security. "I was drinking a beer over there, minding my own business, when he," Brage hooked a thumb at the man who was now being consoled by his blonde cheerleader girlfriend, "came out of nowhere and accused me of having taken advantage of his girlfriend."

"I want to press charges," the guy whined, clearly acting the victim. "I was only looking for him to apologize to my girlfriend, and he punched me!"

"I've already called the police," the manager said, arms

crossed, face a mask of disgust. He motioned to his security to escort both men out of the club. "You can wait for them outside."

The girlfriend trailed behind them, screeching that she was going to tell the police "everything," including how Brage had supposedly assaulted her after getting her drunk several days earlier.

Fortunately for Brage, they were also followed by multiple witnesses, who gave statements corroborating his story of being verbally assaulted first. Even so, the police took both men involved to the station, booking them on assault and disorderly conduct charges. By the time Brage was released, local media was waiting outside the police station, probably having been alerted by a fan in the bar. It was a local joint Brage frequented, so he was a pretty well-known commodity there.

A short time later, all the charges were dropped after the girl admitted to having used Brage merely to make her boyfriend jealous. His response had gotten out of hand, and she hadn't been able to talk him out of confronting Brage. Unfortunately, by then the incident and ensuing arrest had been reported on multiple times, though the withdrawal of charges was never publicized, except on the band's website.

But it never seemed to matter to his bandmates what the outcome was, it was the bad publicity that always followed the trips to the police station that was the problem.

In the bathroom, he stripped and stepped into the floor-to-ceiling tiled steam shower. Turning the water to its hottest setting—hot enough that it would leave burn marks on his skin later—he reached for the soap.

On one hand, Brage understood the band wanted to maintain a clean reputation. On the other hand, Brage felt any publicity was good publicity. Getting his name—and Lexical Diffusion's—on the news was a way to keep them hot on the market.

The band and their tour manager disagreed vehemently with his beliefs. For the last several weeks they'd been secretly following him every time he left his hotel room, with the exception of rehearsals and concerts, when they pretty much all traveled together. It had taken Brage a couple of weeks to realize what was happening, with Chris generally hanging around as well as hitting

the bars with Brage more often than he had in the past.

Brage had been both humiliated and infuriated, and had immediately wanted to confront the entire group. Fortunately, he had calmed down and given the situation some thought before reacting. And instead of alerting them to his knowledge of their plans, he'd begun sneaking out after claiming to have turned in. Getting out of his room was easy...every hotel room had an individual door to the hallway in addition to the doors to the suite. All he had to do was wait for Chris to turn in or cloister himself in his own bedroom—often on the computer until all hours of the night—then Brage could slip unnoticed out of his room.

Luckily, bars were often open until one or two in the morning, giving him plenty of time to get out and enjoy himself. And for the most part, things had gone fine.

Until he ran into two blondes who'd been looking for fun. Brage was always up for fun, especially with a couple of blondes.

Unfortunately, the blondes had been up to no good, and had been setting him up for a fall—in a big way. Or so he'd been told. He remembered little from that night, due to a carefully placed roofie. What he did know was that he'd woken up the next morning with an excruciating headache and a blank spot in his memory. The court case was still pending.

Embarrassed, he had refused to speak of the incident, and hadn't had a drink outside his suite that didn't come from a sealed bottle. Lucky for him, lots of drinks—including his favored craft beers—were available in bottles.

Thinking about that brought back his visit to a bar—a dive really—just an hour before. And it brought sweet and delightful Jo back to mind. Another blonde who caught his eye in a bar. As stupid as it sounded, he was hesitant to get involved with anyone who spent the majority of their daily hours—as waitresses do—in a bar. But something about Jo-not-Josephine captivated him. He didn't know if her small stature pinged his white-knight syndrome, or if it was her smokin' body packed into that short frame. Though some might say she wasn't classically beautiful like the majority of the women he'd dated in the past—mostly minor starlets and professional cheerleaders—she had an engaging beauty all her own. The moment he'd spotted her, he'd wanted to haul her into

his arms and kiss her senseless. That she had a smart little mouth to go along with her spunky hairdo made the package all the more attractive.

Finished with his shower, he toweled dry and headed for his king-size bed. Stretching out on the mattress, he pulled the sheet over him but left the blanket pushed aside. With thoughts of the sassy Jo swirling around in his head, heat that had nothing to do with his shower washed over him. Elbows bent and hands under his head, he felt his body respond by tenting the sheet covering him. The feel of the cool material sliding along his length and over the head of his penis brought to mind a specific set of soft female hands gliding over his sensitive skin. He closed his eyes, wrapped one hand over his sheet-covered erection and stroked upward slowly. But even with the Egyptian cotton masking his hand, it wasn't near as satisfying as it could have been with Jo in his bed next to him. That didn't stop him from completing his task, but that thought did linger for quite some time afterward.

Well it was a no-brainer. Tomorrow night he was headed back to that bar to work his way through his ninety dollar credit.

