

## LOVELY WHITE LIES

(Excerpt from Chapter Twenty-Four)

She watched as the misty dusk was transformed into another luminous night. Below was the Star Ferry Terminal, across the harbor Kowloon Peninsula—and China. She remembered her feeling on the yacht last night, of being in the middle of a giant treasure chest. The world outside glittered seductively, beckoning.

Leaving the cool, black-onyx lobby, Julie was struck by a wave of sultry air. She considered taking a ferry ride, but decided instead to walk. Nodding at the shoeshine man, she turned left, then onto Ice House Street. Pewter clouds hung puffy and low; the air was still. The moist heaviness enclosed her. She moved slowly, savoring the unknown.

The night was alive with jackhammers, taxis and scooters, stands selling steamed prawns, newspapers, cigarettes and joss sticks. Julie noticed racing tip sheets in both English and Cantonese, and thought of Pierre and Andalusia at Happy Valley—imagine, a horse sleeping in a racetrack highrise! But mostly, she thought of nothing. Sensation washed over her and she felt strangely disconnected from real life. As always, Mark's presence hovered inside, but now it encouraged her to wander; impelled by this energy, she floated through the vibrant Hong Kong streets.

When the first drops hit, she smiled. Delicious...like the hot breeze now rising. Light-headed, she watched people scurry for cover. A newspaper slammed into her. Then the sky lit up and rocked with thunder. Water poured down, tossed in every direction by tropical winds that lashed her body and stripped leaves from the trees. There was a damp, heady scent of fertility and decay.

Julie glanced at the gleaming shopping gallery. In its dark, mirror-glass surface, she saw her image, distorted by wavy trickles—hair plastered to her head, silk clinging to her body. She ducked inside, shuddering from the air-conditioned chill.

The place was packed with shoppers, everyone looking, haggling, buying. She heard harsh snatches of Cantonese, wispy Chinese lovesongs. And then a familiar orchestral melody wafting from a music store, drawing her in.

She saw him... there in the back, in the classical section, thumbing through the bins, a stack of CDs cradled in his arm. He wore jeans and a brown leather jacket, and looked incredibly sexy. That dark hair tickling the nape of his neck, the long legs.

She walked toward him. "Hi."

The conductor looked up blankly.

She felt suddenly tentative. "Julie Reilly. We met on the boat after your concert last night?" How could a Russian be so gorgeous? And why should a recent widow even care?

He smiled. "Oh yes, Mrs. Reilly. It was a pleasure then—and a pleasure now."

"Julie, please." She smiled and felt him telling her something with his eyes. He had a power about him that was drawing her in.

"Alexei. Borodin." He brushed back some hair that had fallen over his forehead.

She nodded. In a manner that had nothing to do with the energy flowing between them, they chatted awkwardly...the humidity, the storm. As Julie searched for something to add, the richly colored music swelled around her. "That sounds like an old Broadway show tune, 'Stranger in Paradise.' Do you know it?"

He seemed amused. "I do indeed. It is originally from an opera by my great-great grandfather, Alexander Borodin. This melody is from the 'Polotsvian Dances,' the scene where the slaves entertain Prince Igor, a captive of the mighty Khan. Romantic, isn't it?"

*Very*, Julie thought, nodding mutely. She became aware of the way he was staring at her—and remembered how she looked, silk dress plastered to her body. A flush came over her, followed by a shiver brought on by a blast of icy air.

He set down the CDs, removed his jacket and placed it over her shoulders.

"Oh no, please don't. I'm fine."

"But I insist," he said, moving his palm side to side. "And my *mamochka* would be angry if I did not offer you a hot glass of tea."

"*Mamochka*?" She stared at his long, honey-colored fingers.

"Russian for mama."

“Your *mamochka* should be proud. She raised a kind, as well as wonderfully talented son. Some hot tea is probably just what I need. But no, I—perhaps some other time.”

“Perhaps.”

“Nice seeing you, Alexei.” As she returned his jacket, their hands brushed. His skin was very warm. Jolted by his touch, she backed off, too quickly. Julie forced herself to walk away, but felt his pull. She had to turn and look in those midnight blue eyes once more. “I enjoyed your concert—very much.”

“Thank you. I will be traveling to Seattle next month. If you wish to hear more.” She nodded, then moved away, feeling his gaze scalding her back.