

BEFORE I MET STEPHEN, I knew absolutely nothing about immortals. How would I? They're as elusive as sasquatches or other mythological creatures, and very difficult to spot by looks alone. Nor do they go around talking about themselves. They blend in well that way. That guy who sat next to you on the train or slid on the stool beside yours at the crowded, neighborhood bar—you'd never guess his condition. You could pass a dozen people on the street and not a single one would give off the impression that they lived forever. Not unless they told you, and not many will. I found out about Stephen's condition the first day we met because he implied as much. I convinced myself that he was honest to a fault. It wasn't until much later, after we married, that I discovered just how good he was at telling lies and sins of omissions. He was a very artful practitioner, that man.

I met Stephen at an exhibition on twentieth-century black artists that was held at a local gallery. I was sitting on a bench with my ink pen and journal when he sat down next to me and watched me sketch a portrait of a woman in a straw hat. I ignored him for as long as I could, before he leaned toward me and tried to peer at my sketch. Annoyed, I shut the journal with a thump.

"Do you mind?"

He smiled. "I'm sorry. Am I bothering you?"

"Yes, you are. And I'd appreciate it if you'd stop."

"If you wish," he said. "I didn't mean any harm by it, by the way. It's just that the artist—I knew him ages ago. I was surprised to see his work curated here and even more surprised to see people still appreciate it. He was painfully shy about his talents, and he died far too young, you know."

The artist in question, a portraiture who got his start during the Harlem Renaissance working in oils and watercolors, was born in 1902 and died in 1930. His work had only recently been discovered, after decades of obscurity hidden away in the attic of a distant relative, and brought to public attention. The man sitting next to me looked to be in his mid-thirties, and had sharp-boned, angular features, smooth skin, dark eyes and a warm smile. He dressed elegantly in a black suit and white shirt opened at the collar and finely buffed Italian shoes. He could have been joking, but his serious expression made me doubt that.

"Are you an immortal?" I asked.

He nodded. "Does that bother you?"

"Why would it bother me?"

He shrugged. "It bothers a lot of people."

"Then that's their problem, ain't it?" He smiled again. He had a warm and incredibly sexy smile. He asked if I was an artist. "Hardly," I snorted.

"You seem to have a good eye for it."

This time I smiled. I was an amateur, but I had a deep-rooted interest. I majored in art history, with an emphasis on becoming a buyer, but once I graduated I realized finding work in the galleries or major museums when you were black and struggling and not rich and white was

harder than I realized. Being pragmatic, I eventually settled on working as a customer service rep at a black-owned wholesaler in Oakland, but I still followed news on the latest artists, gallery openings and museum exhibitions of interest.

"I'll always have one foot in the art world," I said.

"You should open your own gallery."

"Sure, lemme ask my rich Aunt Fannie to drop a couple mil," I said sarcastically, then laughed. He laughed with me, naturally casual, at ease.

Looking back on it, I was surprised how quickly I had confided in him. But there was something about him that put me at ease. Even his voice had a soothing cadence.

Eager to change the subject, I asked if he knew a lot of artists in the exhibition. "Would you like me to introduce you to some of them?" he asked, and I smiled and took his hand. "I'd be honored." We toured the exhibition together while he told me stories about the men and women whose artwork hung on the walls. It was all fascinating, including his own history. He had lived since the dawn of ancient Egypt, born in the area now known as Sudan. He was a Nubian, he said, though that didn't mean much of anything to him now. He was American, having arrived during the eighteenth century, but not on a slave ship. He established himself in Philadelphia, where he apprenticed with an ironmonger until he was able to start his own business. He still ran the business, though it was now established in the countryside, far away from the bustle of city life.

"Are you here on business?" I asked.

"I'm on a vacation. I've never been to the Bay Area before, to be honest, so I don't know that much about it."

Intrigued, I raised my eyebrows. "Would you like a tour of the city? I'd be more than happy to be your guide."

He smiled warmly. "I'd be honored."

He was on the West coast for two weeks and we spent much of it together, attending art galleries and museums, the theater, dining at the finest restaurants, and walking barefoot on the beach. We held each other's hand as the wind blew strong off the Pacific, silently watching the waves crash against the shore and the seagulls wheel above us, their cries echoing shrilly in the chilly air. Stephen stopped to pick up a periwinkle shell buried beneath the foamy turf and smiled. "Amazing," he said, gazing distantly across the ocean. "All of it, so amazing." I hugged his arm. There was something childlike in his discoveries, as though he was experiencing the world for the first time, though he had experienced more of this world than I could ever imagine.

"It must be sad," I said later that evening while we dined at a restaurant on Telegraph. "To live as long as you've had, to have seen everything you've seen."

He gazed at me across the table, the soft candlelight in between us glistening in his melancholy eyes, and reached over and touched my hand. "You can't even begin to know how lonely it can be."

That night, Stephen and I went back to his hotel room and made love. What is it like to

make love to an immortal? It is constant and intense. His energy was ceaseless. He slowed down long enough to let me catch up with him. I was breathless, eager, and hungry to match his endless rhythms, rhythms which seemed to be honed from centuries, a rhythm that matched the flow of time, but he prolonged himself so that by the end, when we had both reached our climaxes, I was exhausted. My whole body was warm and satiated, but tired. I fell asleep instantly in his arms.

When I woke up the next morning with the sunlight shining in my eyes, he was still holding me tight against his chest. I felt his heart beating in my ear. How many centuries had that heart beat and for how many? I asked him if there were others. Yes, he said thickly. But when I asked how many, he looked me squarely in the eyes and explained that he didn't think about the past or the future. It would drive him crazy if he did. All that mattered was the present.

His answer was satisfying in so many ways.