



## Vows (Hideaway (Kimani))

By Rochelle Alers

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Unbeknownst to Vanessa, Joshua Kirkland hasn't abandoned the woman he branded with his passion. His mission began as a game of seduction fueled by suspicion, but it has now turned into a daring race to confront the deadly danger that threatens the love of a lifetime...and the woman he cherishes.

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Hailed by readers and booksellers alike as one of today's most popular African-American authors of women's fiction, Ms. Alers is a regular on bestsellers list, and has been a recipient of numerous awards, including the Vivian Stephens Award for Excellence in Romance Writing and a Zora Neale Hurston Literary Award. Visit her Web site [www.rochellealers.com](http://www.rochellealers.com)

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Vanessa noticed him immediately as he made his way down the aisle of the AeroMexico jet, his darting gaze searching the numbers and letters over each seat.

He was tall and slender, and what riveted her attention was his deeply tanned skin contrasting with his startling, close-cut silver hair. But it wasn't until he came closer to where she sat that she noticed his eyes. They were a cold, pale green.

At first glance she thought he was older, because of his silvered hair, but with his approach she doubted whether he was forty. There were a few lines around his shimmering eyes, and she surmised that he had earned those from squinting in the sun. His impassive expression did not lend itself to a softening of his firm mouth or the crinkling of the lines around his eyes in an open smile.

He was impeccably dressed, unlike her and most of the other casually attired passengers on the Santa Fe flight to Mexico City, via a ninety-minute layover in El Paso, Texas.

His wheat-colored linen jacket, reminiscent of a field of sundappled, waving particles of grain, was an exact match for his pale, coarse hair. His pristine white shirt set off the deep, rich color of his face, his silk tie in varying shades of brown and gold, the expertly tailored, double-pleated, dark brown slacks falling from his slim waist to the tops of his imported Italian loafers, and a legal-size leather portfolio with a distinctive world-renowned leather crafter's logo that silently announced *European*.

Vanessa averted her gaze as he stood beside her seat. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him remove his jacket, fold it carefully, then store it in the overhead bin.

She turned her attention to the activity outside the large aircraft, watching as the ground crew transferred luggage from rolling carts to the cargo area of the plane.

"Excuse me, please."

Her head came around quickly and she stared up at the silver-haired man. His voice was deeper than she

would have expected it to be, and his accent was definitely *American*. Realization dawned, and she knew he had been assigned the window seat next to her.

He took several steps backward as she stood up and slipped out of her seat. Standing beside him made Vanessa aware of how tall he was. She stood five-nine in her bare feet, and as an adolescent she had towered over most of the boys in her classes until her last year of high school. Her fellow passenger had to be several inches above the six-foot mark.

She registered the warmth of his body and the clean, citrus-based fragrance of his cologne as he moved past her and sat down. Retaking her seat, she secured her seatbelt and picked up the magazine she had bought at a gift shop in the airport.

She soon found herself deeply engrossed in an article on aging and the advantages and disadvantages of cosmetic surgery, shutting out the clamor going on around her as passengers searched for their seats, stored carry-on luggage under seats, or made room in the crowded overhead bins. Flight attendants worked quickly and efficiently to seat everyone before the cockpit crew was cleared for takeoff.

Vanessa had waited more than six months for this long-planned, well-deserved trip to Mexico. As an accountant with a Santa Fe based military defense manufacturing firm, she was responsible for contracts, and Grenville-Edwards had been the winner of a Pentagon bid for the so-called Joint Strike Fighter. The company was expected to build at least 2,800 of the planes, guaranteeing Grenville-Edwards's prosperity well into the next century and the expansion of their work force by thousands of employees.

She had agreed with the *Wall Street Journal* analyst who reported that over the life of the project the fighter could generate sales of more than 750 billion, including spare parts and foreign sales.

Her work at Grenville-Edwards occupied so much of her waking time that a social life had become almost nonexistent for her. She hadn't had a serious relationship in more than four years—not since she had left her native Los Angeles after a broken engagement. At the urging of her sister, she took a leave of absence from the small private college where she taught accounting, and stayed with Connie and her family. The three month leave was extended to six. After securing a position with Grenville-Edwards she relocated to Santa Fe. She lived in her sister's guest house for a year before she purchased her townhouse in a newly constructed private community in a Santa Fe suburb.

She returned to Los Angeles twice a year to visit her parents, and not once did they ever mention the name of the man she had once promised to spend her life with. Kenneth Richmond lived part of the year in L.A. and the remainder in Washington, D.C. He had won a congressional seat from their district, and was now Congressman Richmond.

Thinking of Kenneth wrung a smile from Vanessa. Kenneth Richmond—handsome, brilliant, charming and a consummate womanizer. He would do very well in Washington, where women outnumbered men at least five to one.

The flight attendants walked up and down the aisle, making certain the cabin was secured for takeoff. Vanessa glanced over to her right and noticed a stack of printed sheets resting atop the man's leather portfolio. A company's letterhead indicated a Dus-seldorf address, and even though she could not read the language she knew the printed words were German.

Her gaze moved up, studying the clean-cut lines of his profile. His sharp features were perfect and

symmetrical, and if it hadn't been for his reserved expression his handsome face would have been almost as delicate as a woman's. High cheekbones blended into a lean jaw and a strong chin. His mouth was firm without being too full or too thin.

Vanessa stared at his long lashes resting on his cheekbones; their soft, charcoal gray color set off the paleness of his penetrating eyes.

Without warning he glanced at her, and she felt heat flare in her face. He had caught her staring. His expression remained impassive as his gaze slowly examined her face, lingering on her mouth, before shifting back to the sheaf of papers on his lap.

The heat in her face increased. She was annoyed at herself for being embarrassed. She was thirty-three years old, and a man she'd found attractive had caught her staring at him.

When, she thought, had she become so involved in her career that she had neglected her own needs? As a normal woman, her physical needs had at one time been strong and passionate.

She couldn't blame Kenneth for her wariness with men. It had been *her* decision not to marry him, and *her* decision to not become involved with some of the men she occasionally dated.

There was one man in particular—her boss. Retired army colonel Warren McDonald, a confirmed bachelor, was pursued by every single woman at Grenville-Edwards regardless of her age. In the six years since he had come to head the company, though, he'd never shown an interest in any woman, except Vanessa.

She did not make promises, because she wasn't certain whether she could maintain them. But she *was* able to keep her promise of not becoming involved with any man she worked with.

Shrugging her shoulders, she pressed her head against the headrest and closed her eyes. She shut out the image of the man sitting beside her and everything else going on in the aircraft as the jet taxied down the runway in preparation for a takeoff.

Gasps of fear echoed throughout the cabin, and Vanessa opened her eyes as her stomach made a flip-flop motion. The Fasten Seat Belt light came on, along with the familiar beeping sound as the aircraft fell several hundred feet before leveling off.

Swallowing back the rush of bile from her empty stomach, she grimaced at the sound of retching from someone seated behind her. Her fingers gripped the arms of her seat in a deathlike grip, the veins showing prominently through the flesh on her slender hands. She glanced to her right. She couldn't see out the window. It was apparent that the man sitting beside her had lowered the shade. He had put away the report he'd been reading and sat with his eyes closed, while his hands rested atop the leather case. How could he sleep, when they had flown into something which threatened to break the jet into tiny pieces?

The pilot's voice came through the speakers. "We'll be experiencing some turbulence until we fly over Alamogordo. After that we'll have smooth flying and clear skies, and we expect to touch down in El Paso on time." Vanessa did not care if they landed in El Paso "on time." All she wanted was to step foot on a solid surface, and in one piece.

Fifteen minutes later, the storm left behind, a collective sigh of relief went through the jetliner.

The AeroMexico plane touched down in El Paso and Vanessa unsnapped her seatbelt and readied herself to deplane. She would use every second of the ninety-minute layover to calm her frayed nerves. Gathering her handbag, she made her way down the aisle and out to the terminal.

She noticed that most of the passengers were subdued as they filed out into the terminal. Most were probably remembering the frightening moment of free fall when they flew into the thunderstorm.

She detected the heat of a body pressed close to hers, and the familiar scent of clean, citrusy cologne. Turning slightly, she glanced over her shoulder and encountered the pale gaze of the tall man. He had retrieved his jacket and it hung elegantly from his broad shoulders.

"I think you could use a cup of coffee," he stated without preamble. "You didn't look very well while we rode out the storm," he added when she arched a questioning eyebrow.

How would he know how she looked? Vanessa thought. He'd sat, eyes closed, totally relaxed. And it wasn't as if she'd cried out or retched, like the man behind her.

"There's a restaurant at the far end of the terminal that serves excellent coffee," he continued. "Perhaps you'd like to join me?" He said the words tentatively, as if testing her reaction and his own for extending the offer. His gaze burned into hers while a muscle barely tensed in his lean jaw.

She was piqued by his cool, detached manner. He hadn't exchanged a word with her during the flight, preferring instead to read or feign sleep, yet he now wanted to engage her in conversation and share a cup of coffee.

"Mr—"

"Kirkland," he supplied quickly. "Joshua Kirkland."

Tilting her chin, Vanessa flashed an artificial smile. "I don't think so, Mr. Kirkland."

Joshua merely inclined his head at her refusal. "Then I'll see you back on the plane, Miss—"

"Vanessa Blanchard." The two words were layered with ice.

"Miss Blanchard," he repeated, watching as she turned and walked away. He stared at the curling mass of heavy black hair falling around the nape of her slender, swanlike neck. Her long, flared, cotton jersey tailored dress moved softly on her tall frame, its soft coral color flattering the intense vibrancy of her deep brown skin. Joshua stared at her departing figure until she disappeared from his field of vision, then walked over to a wall with a bank of telephones; he picked up the receiver of one designated for calling cards calls only.

Dialing a series of numbers, he waited for a break in the connection. The caller on the other end of the wire identified himself.

"I've made contact," Joshua said tersely.

"How is she?"

"She'll do."

A low chuckle came through the receiver. "I knew you'd say that."

His solemn expression did not change. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes, there is. I thought I'd tell you before you hear it in the field."

"What is it?"

"The odds are fifteen-to-one—in her favor."

"All of you are sick," Joshua said softly before hanging up.

He had expected more from the people he worked with, but then, why would he? Most of them were serious-minded people who were entrusted with extremely dangerous assignments, and a bit of joviality was a welcome respite in the shadowy world of military intelligence.

It had become an inside joke that one day a woman was going to get him to commit, though at thirty-eight it hadn't happened. He had come close with Sable St. Clair, *and* he was certain it would not be Vanessa Blanchard. She was his target, and in no way would he become *that involved* with a woman he'd been assigned to investigate.

He would use every available means necessary to get the information he needed from Vanessa Blanchard. Then, as quietly as he would walk into her life, he would walk out.

Vanessa sat in a small booth in the airport coffee shop sipping a cup of excellently brewed coffee while flipping through the pages of her magazine. The coffee's warmth eased down the back of her throat and settled in her chest. Within seconds her anxiousness eased, and she temporarily forgot the fearful moments of the flight from Santa Fe to El Paso.

She felt a slight tug on her hair. She turned on the leather seat and stared at a small child who stood on the seat of the adjoining booth. Her large dark eyes sparkled as she smiled at the little boy.

"Hello," she crooned softly. His brilliant hazel eyes, framed by long dark lashes, widened with her greeting.

"Billy, sit down and leave that lady alone," admonished the boy's mother.

Billy quickly reached out and pulled at another curl falling over her forehead. Vanessa reached up, trying to extract his tiny hand, but he tightened his grip and pulled harder.

She could not believe she was being assaulted by a child who could not be more than three years old.

"Billy! Billy!" The child's mother screamed hysterically while he laughed and pulled harder.

One by one, Vanessa eased each of his fingers from her hair, her scalp tingling where she was certain she had lost more than a few strands.

Her face flushed a deep red from anger and embarrassment, apologizing profusely, Billy's mother scooped

up her child and fled the coffee shop.

Vanessa stood up and massaged her scalp, watching the two as they disappeared into the throng passing through the terminal. Her gaze shifted and she saw Joshua Kirkland standing near the entrance. A slight smile ruffled his mobile mouth. It was apparent that he had witnessed the entire scene.

Reaching into her handbag, she pulled out several bills and left them on the table. She managed a tight smile for the waitress who had served her. Then, tilting her chin, she walked toward the entrance.

Joshua did not move as she neared him and her bare arm brushed the sleeve of his jacket. Lowering his head slightly, he whispered softly, "You don't look the type to beat up on little kids."

She took a quick, sharp breath. "In case you didn't notice, it was Pee Wee Hulk Hogan who was trying to make me a candidate for Rogaine!"

## Users Review

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