

Mall by Pattie Palmer Baker

Chapter One

“I want to be clear, Natalie: are you saying that you’re having sex with this man more often than the Code dictates unless pair-bonded?” Nona asked, fidgeting slightly.

Natalie nodded, red curls bobbing. “Sometimes. The sex is good, but that’s not why I seek out his company. I can’t find the words to ...”

Puzzled, Nona stopped listening. Was Natalie trying to say the sex was not good enough to pair-bond? If that were the case, any Mental Health Practitioner would know how to remedy it. If Natalie’s actions weren’t against Mall’s Code, Nona would interrupt and tell her. Surprisingly, this restriction pressed on her in an unfamiliar manner, a physical pressure in the area just above her stomach, like the sting she sometimes felt when she adminned a dart. But relief would have to wait.

Natalie’s voice dropped again to almost a whisper. “You won’t tell, will you? That we have sex secretly? Or that we meet to talk in one of our quarters?”

Nona’s interest quickened. “No, anything you say in here is protected by client/patient confidentiality. May I ask why you meet in your rooms when that also is expressly forbidden?”

“Are you sure you won’t reveal anything I say to you?”

“Yes. Please know, Natalie, that even if I wanted to, Mental Health Practitioners cannot.”

“We meet, well, to talk about what he believes is wrong with Mall.” She paused to search Nona’s face. “Okay, I’ll tell you the part that you can never tell: he’s a Junker.”

The confession stunned Nona into silence. Never before had any of her clients divulged such a shocking fact. Before she could speak, as suddenly as it had been happening so often in the last few weeks, the lights went out. “I do apologize. You probably have also experienced this annoying event too many times. Usually the lights go...” Light flooded the room at that moment. “See, no harm done, and I will add two extra minutes to your session.” Nona inched up in her chair to look more closely at Natalie. “I confess that I am taken aback by your admission that you’ve been meeting with a Junker. Of course, I will not reveal this, but I can’t understand why. We all know

that Junkers are causing the disturbances occurring throughout Mall. How do you feel about pursuing this strange relationship with someone who belongs to this group?”

“I admit I find it troubling. But not so much that ... Oh I don't know what to do!” She wrung her hands and lowered her head.

Nona was at a loss. Most of her clients wanted to revitalize all kinds of things, from virtual reality rock climbing to interactive story creation and, most often, sexual experiences. Except for Natalie, the complaint was the same for everyone: the experience lacked novelty, and the client wanted to rekindle the thrill. And strange, wasn't it, that the boredom Nona felt when she listened to the repetitive and stale grievances was for her a symptom of the same problem? The only subject she did find interesting was clients' fear of death, but most refused to discuss it in much detail. All she had to go on was body language—those subtle, involuntary physiological effects revealing intense discomfort. If only she could persuade them to go into detail, but that, too, would be against the Code. *Never insist that someone talk about a subject that would make the speaker uncomfortable*, and that even included Mental Health Practitioners.

She certainly did not feel bored with Natalie. Excited and, yes, a little scared. Not only did she know a Junker, she had a relationship with him. What should she do? She wished she could discuss with her colleague and former pair-bond, Royce.

Suddenly, the entry gong sounded, startling her out of her train of thoughts. Natalie gasped, rising from her chair. “God of Reincarnation, am I in trouble?” She fell back into her chair when the door slid open and a black-and-silver uniformed man strode in.

“Pardon me, may I ask why you are here?” Nona asked, stepping back. She seldom encountered a Finance Policeman.

“Your presence is required soon at a Mall Management meeting,” he announced in a deep, authoritarian voice.

“Please excuse me. I am confused—why me? Mental Health Practitioners never attend those meetings.”

“They do not inform me about the subject of their meetings. Even if I did know, I would not divulge it.”

“Yes, of course,” she hastened to reassure him. “I have never been to Level 100, so please, can you tell me when and where to go?”

“Not necessary. I will return and accompany you at the appointed time.” He spun around and out the door.

Natalie sighed audibly. “Oh, God of Reincarnation, I thought somehow you had alerted the Finance Police about my code violation.”

“No, as I said, I would not and cannot. Please continue.”

“I wonder what the meeting will be about.” Natalie looked over at the door. “I’m afraid for my friend ...”

Nona interrupted. “Please excuse me for cutting in. You said *friend*. Do you have a heart-friend contract with him?”

“No—I would, but he refuses because...I don’t think I want to talk about this anymore.”

Nona quashed the desire to try to persuade her. “Do you have anything else to discuss? Our meeting is drawing to a close.”

“Sort of. At work, Delta stole one of my ideas. I planned on letting Stan know because I earned the extra credit ...”

Again Nona’s attention veered away. What *was* this meeting she was summoned to? Was it about the disturbances? Just the other day her office went dark twice, both times during sessions, and one of the blackouts lasted a half hour. The next words out of Natalie’s mouth snagged her attention.

“Delta must have heard or seen him enter my quarters. She red-mailed me into keeping silent about her creative theft in trade for her not revealing that Code violation. To make it worse, she overheard him tell me before entering my room the date for the Junker’s next meeting. He wanted me to attend.”

Nona shifted in her seat. What should she do? How could she help her? “I, as your Mental Health Practitioner, would not want you to take such a risk. If you are experiencing curiosity I can prescribe something that will eliminate that undesirable feeling—have you heard of the new pharm, Freedomfrum?” Before she could stop herself, Nona asked, “Did your friend tell you where the meeting would be?”

“Thank you for the offer of the pharm prescription. I really don’t need it. It’s not exactly curiosity. I just can’t explain it. I do have an idea where they’ll meet: somewhere on one of the lower Levels.” She raised her head abruptly. “Why do you want to know?”

Why was a good question. Was it because she wanted to be a proper Mallite and report this meeting? No, that wasn't it. She couldn't, anyway. Did she want to meet a Junker? Was that what she really wanted? No one knew who they were or where they met. What was this unusual tenseness she was feeling? Strangely, it was not unpleasant. The chance to talk with a Junker excited her—that was it—a feeling she had not experienced for a very long time.

Before Nona could answer, an alert gong sounded, followed by a loud voice announcing, “Mall Emergency! You are the MHP on call. Guards will contact you in thirty seconds.” Nona stood abruptly and said, “Please excuse me, Natalie; it would be best if you left at once. We can schedule another appointment later.”

“Oh, God of Reincarnation, a Mall Emergency! I'll leave immediately,” Natalie said, voice shaking. She scurried to the opening door and hurried out.

Nona's communicator beeped. “Yes?” she whispered after she pulled her tiny mouthpiece to her mouth. A neutral voice spelled out basic facts:

“Info on emergency: Subject is a female who ran amok in the Jewelry Section in the Ready-Made Division. Fought with the guards. Appearance unusual, dressed in shabby clothes, no cosmetic alteration, heavy—probably 145 pounds at around 5'5”. No ID, no Consumer Card. Taken to holding area, but questioning failed due to holdee's emotional state. Sedation dart administered. You are expected to stabilize her for questioning. Guard will arrive with her in one minute.”