

# *Choices*

A CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

RAVEN REDE



THE PYNK SPHYNX

*Choices*

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The Pynk Sphynx

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Nicole Lee looks out of the small circular window as the plane flew across the country. Beside her, with his nose buried in the finance and business sections of the national newspaper, sits her boss, Jason Harvey. Attractive, rich, powerful, and totally out of her league. The man has his own fan club on Facebook with desperate twenty-somethings and single mothers all wanting a piece of news about the billionaire businessman who had been on the cover of GQ several times.

He'd had a few supermodel girlfriends and a couple of actresses sniffing around his tail, but when they realized that he was more interested in maintaining his business success, they found another man to pluck. He was one of Cosmo magazine's most eligible bachelors, two years running. And Nicole was fortunate enough to be his personal assistant.

The conference they're attending is being hosted by one of the new up-and-coming hotels on the west coast. Jason is keen to attend several seminars and so, of course, Nicole must go with him.

Nicole's thoughts on the business world are that it is simply too cutthroat to get involved in personally. She's happy to leave the tough decision making to him and to just make sure everything is organized

to his liking, from his coffee in the morning, to the following day's 'To Do' list.

She turns and looks at the flight attendant who, with a flirty smile, hands both her and Jason a glass of sparkling wine. A twinge of jealousy prickles her, surprises her. She'd never thought of Jason in that way. She'd always been very cautious when it came to inter-office relationships. She'd previously left a job when her relationship with a senior manager ended badly. Broken-hearted, she'd given her notice and applied for a position at Harvey Industries where she was unexpectedly hired on the spot. Not wanting to jeopardize this new position, she vowed to never get involved in an office romance again.

"I hope the hotel has given us two rooms this time, Nicole..." Jason smirks beside her. She can't help but chuckle. The last time they travelled together, the hotel had been overbooked, and they were forced to share a room. Jason had gallantly taken the couch.

Despite his net worth of over twenty-five billion dollars, Jason Harvey is a down-to-earth kind of guy. Sure, he has his mansion and a nice expensive luxury car, but that's it. No private jet, no penthouse suites in luxury hotels; he's more than happy just to have a comfortable bed, a hot shower, and meal at the end of the day. When he takes Nicole with him, however, it seems he likes to give her a taste of luxury.

This trip, he's ordered two suites in the Golden Flower hotel, one of the newest luxury resort hotels in the city, conveniently located right across the street from the convention center. There's a twinkle in his eyes as he smiles at her. Nicole smiles and sips her wine, uncertain what to make of his radiant gaze.

An hour later, she wakes when Jason's gravelly voice coaxes her from her slumber. "Nicole, it's time to wake up. We're about to start our descent." Nicole stretches as she blinks her eyes. They've become a little

dry due to the cabin's recycled air. She realizes Jason's hand is on her knee.

"Hmm. That was a nice little catnap," she murmurs sleepily. "How long was I out?"

"About twenty minutes," Jason says, folding up his newspaper. "You made the cutest little snoring noises," he says with a smirk.

Nicole glares at him. "I do not snore!" she says indignantly.

"You most certainly do," he smirks. "Now, hurry up and stop pouting that pretty mouth of yours. And buckle your safety belt, or I'll do it for you."

Nicole narrows her eyes in thought as Jason puts his newspaper away in his briefcase and stands up to put it back in the overhead compartment. Was he just flirting with her? It certainly seems that way. Bewildered, she straightens her skirt over her knees and settles back into her seat, adjusting her seatbelt before securing it over her hips and locking it into place.

Beside her, Jason settles back down and grins. It's going to be a long and interesting conference if his behavior continues.



A short time later, Nicole and Jason check into their hotel and follow the porter as he guides them to their rooms. "The first conference is at eleven-thirty," Jason says when they reach her suite. "In the meantime, why don't you go and enjoy the pool?"

Nicole smiles. "I think I will."

Jason grins and winks as he heads for his own room.

Nicole shuts the door. A swim sounds just right for her mood. The weather is gorgeous, and she brought along a stunning blue one-piece swimsuit that she's been dying to try out all summer but hasn't been

able to due to work commitments. She slips into the figure-loving swimsuit and admires her body in the mirror. She was fit without looking like a stick figure and curved in what one of her ex-boyfriend had dubbed 'all the right places'. She pulls her long dark hair back in a ponytail, ties on a sarong, then grabs a towel and heads for the pool.

The eyes of a few businessmen, who are obviously there for the conference, are glued to Nicole as they pass her in the hall. Suddenly, she hears a thud and then a muffled apology. One of the poor souls obviously hadn't been watching where he was going and had bumped into someone.

Nicole takes the lift down to the pool area. On the pool deck she claims a sun-lounger, pulls her hair free from its band, unties her sarong, and walks to the edge of the pool. She takes a deep breath, then dives gracefully into the crystal-clear water. Small waves form in her wake as she swims underneath the surface for a few yards before breaking the surface with a gasp.

"Nicely done, Miss Montrose," Jason says from a sun-lounger nearby.

"Did you dive in high school?" he says with a grin.

"Two years of high diving and endless swimming carnivals," she says, leaning on the edge of the pool.

"You certainly have the body for it," Jason says earnestly.

Nicole feels her face flush at the compliment. Then she pushes off from the side and backstrokes her way across to the other side of the pool. She knows Jason is watching her as she works her arms and legs propelling her to the edge of the pool where she left her sarong and towel.

As she hauls herself up, the water dribbles tantalizingly down her body. She twists her hair and lets it rain upon the sunbaked terracotta tiles to splash at her feet. Some of the blonde, overly done women who



flaunt their surgically enhanced warelike trophies glare at her as she wraps herself in her towel, gathers her gear, and walks on over to sit beside Jason.

“So, I heard that Kelly Singleton will be here. Are you going to make another offer on his company?” she asked Jason as she settled in beside him.

A waiter comes by with a fresh glass of Scotch for Jason.

“Maybe,” Jason says. “It depends on how things go with this conference.” He sips the Scotch with a hum of appreciation for the flavor. “He was your old boss, wasn’t he?” Jason asks with an air of indifference.

“Yes, he was,” Nicole says, carefully.

“Nothing else?” Jason asks, eyeing her knowingly.

“Kel and I...” She takes a deep breath. “We were involved... It didn’t end well, so I decided to leave the company and find my way to something better. And I found it,” she says, making a show of picking up her phone and checking the time. “I’d better go shower,” she says. “Get ready for the conference.” It’s a lame excuse; they’ve got two hours before the conference starts, but airing her ‘dirty laundry’ to her boss has suddenly made her uncomfortable. Before Jason can say anything, she picks up her sarong, ties it securely around her middle, wraps her hair in her towel, and walks, briskly, back inside the hotel.

Part of her wonders where she’d gone so wrong with the charismatic, handsome, and oh-so-desirable Kelly Singleton. Perhaps neither of them was ready for the commitment necessary to make a relationship work. Kelly was scared about losing his partying lifestyle, whereas Nicole was exactly where she wanted to be in her career and was ready to start a family.

They’d had a massive argument about their future, and in a fit of anger, Kelly had gone out with the boys to a nightclub. One of her

friends, who worked as a bartender at that very club, had sent her a picture of Kelly in the arms of an unknown blonde woman.

Nicole forwarded the picture to Kel with the message: We're done. Goodbye & good luck. Then she'd gone to his place and grabbed her clothes and other belongings. She'd also left the key to his apartment, as well as the necklace he had given her, on the table in the kitchen so he'd find it when he finally staggered home at three in the morning.

It had taken her a year and a lot of girl time, margaritas, and tissues to get over him. The Monday after the incident, she gave her notice and began scouring the job section of the newspaper. Thankfully, she found the position where she now worked for Jason Harvey.

As she strips and steps into the shower, Nicole wonders what her life might have been like with Kelly on her arm. She sighs and washes the chlorine and salt from the pool out of her hair and off her body. She will never know.



The conference is long and boring, but there is an upside – the organizers are hosting a lavish dinner.

Nicole hurries up to her suite to change into something formal, a full-length green dress with a plunging back, scooped neck, and no sleeves. She completes the outfit with a matching clutch purse and a gorgeous pair of kitten heels. She's styled her hair into long, flowing waves, put on her make-up, and is finally ready.

Jason knocks on her door promptly at seven p.m. His eyes behold her, in her figure-loving dress and with her stylish makeup and hair. "You look amazing," he says, with genuine surprise.

"And you need to learn to dress yourself," she says, reaching up to adjust his tie.

“Then I’d have noexcuse to come and see you, would I?” he grins.

Nicole blushes and looks away until he lifts her chin with his fingers and bids her eyes to meet his. She would never tell him this, but the sight of him in a dinner suit makes her heart race a little bit faster than it should. A soft smile parts Jason’s lips when he tells her, “You really are beautiful.”

Nicole takes a deep breath and grabs her purse. “We should go,” she says.

“Yeah,” Jason agrees, “we should.” Then he offers her his arm and escorts her down the hall.

The reception room is filled with sounds of chatter and clinking glassware, as well as the scent of a thousand colognes and perfumes. Nicole looks over at the parquet dance floor. Several couples dance to the soft jazz played by the four-piece band. Waiters serve drinks and hors d’oeuvres to the guests. Jason takes a glass of sparkling wine for Nicole and a glass of Scotch for himself. Suddenly, Nicole spots Kelly Singleton chatting with some of the other guests. He’s spotted her too and is on his way over to see her! In a panic, Nicole excuses herself to Jason. She tells him that she thinks she recognizes an old friend from college and that she’s going over to speak with her. Without a second glance, Nicole walks straight past Kelly as she heads for the other side of the room. Kelly stops and watches her, totally stunned.

A short time later, Nicole is speaking with the very pregnant wife of one of the guests when dinner is served. Looking at the woman’s belly, her happy smile and radiant glow, Nicole becomes painfully aware of her own desire to become a mother. She makes her way back to the dining table but skids to a stop when she sees where she’ll be sitting. On one side of her is Jason, her very handsome current boss. And on the other side of her is Kelly, her very handsome former boss and ‘Mr. Wrong’ himself. What’s she going to do? She can’t abandon dinner.

She can't embarrass Jason. There's nothing she can do but deal with it. So, she steps up to the empty seat between Jason and Kelly. Both men stand up in a sweet, gentlemanly fashion.

"Good evening, Nicole. Lovely to see you; you are looking gorgeous as always," Kelly says. His voice showing no animosity toward her at all, despite the apprehension she felt at seeing him again.

For Jason's sake, and for the sake of the possible business acquisition he is about to make, Nicole smiles and returns the pleasantries. "It's good to see you too, Mr. Singleton," she says, taking his hand.

Kelly lifts her knuckles to his mouth and presses a soft and gentle kiss against her skin. Nicole can't help the shiver that runs down her spine as she feels his lips against her skin. Memories come, unbidden, of their time together, sweet lovemaking, delicious kisses, and warm hands-on sensitive flesh, all making her face flush. She sits down and picks up a glass of water, taking a long sip before putting the glass down again.

Nicole is tense and nervous as the two men talk about business. Two handsome men, one on either side of her, one whom she has known, and the other whom she would like to know. She eats in silence, allowing them to discuss their plans without distraction. Until she feels a gentle hand on her shoulder. Nicole turns to Kelly. "Nicole," he says, with a smile on his beautiful lips, "would you honor me with this dance?"

Nicole looks up at him and nods. Then he takes her hand and leads her out to the dance floor.

Jason keeps an eye on them the whole time.

Nicole feels Kelly's hands secure around her body, a hand on her waist, his fingers slowly spreading over the curve at the top of her behind. "Come a little closer," he says, as he pulls her in flush against his body. "There, that's much better." The music begins, and they step

in precise time together. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to be this close to you?" he says softly, leaning his head in to whisper against her ear. "I couldn't believe it when I saw you here." He spins her around, then pulls her in tight again. "I wanted to explain what happened that night, but you blocked my number and changed your own. I feared I'd never see you again."

Nicole's heart races. "It's over, Kelly. Just let it go."

"Please," he says, "hear me out."

Against her better judgment, Nicole relents.

"The woman in the picture was Robbie's fiancée. He'd just proposed to her, and then he'd asked me to be his best man at the wedding. That's why she was kissing me."

"And her hand?" Nicole says bitterly. "Was that her way of thanking you too?"

"We'd all had far too much to drink. It was harmless fun, nothing more. Samantha took the photo and sent it to you before I could stop her. "I never meant to hurt," he says sadly. "I loved you... I still do." He pulls back, as his face becomes deadly serious. "I want to try again," Nicole. "I want us to work this time."

Nicole pauses and looks up at him.

"But what about my job?" she asks.

"You'll never have to work again," he says. "I can give you everything you desire, even a family. If you say yes, I'll give it all up, sell the business to your boss, and we can go and live wherever you want. But I'll only sell it if I get you." Nicole opens her mouth to speak, she isn't sure about any of this. She doesn't want him to sell his business just to get her. She would be more than happy to pick up where they left off; however, she doesn't get the chance to tell him that.

Jason's voice breaks through the music. "Mind if I cut in?"

“Not at all...” Kelly says, pulling away to let Jason take over. Jason gazes at Nicole with a strange look in his eye.

“Everything alright?” he asks. Nicole nods. “You look a bit flushed. Kelly didn’t say anything to upset you, did he?”

Nicole sighs. “He wants me back. He said he’d sell the company to you if I left and went to him.”

Jason twirls her around the dance floor, his grip tightening around her waist as they dance.

“What if I don’t want to let you go...” he says, pulling her so close against him that she could feel his heartbeat in his chest. She looks up at him, sees the look of desire and hope in his eyes. Can he really feel that way about her? Jason reaches up and brushes her bottom lip with his thumb, the touch sending sparks of electricity through her body.

Now this... This is a dilemma. Both Kelly and Jason want her. Her body wants them both. Her heart has been shattered by one over a simple misunderstanding, and she is yet to explore the possibilities of a romance with the other.

Jason’s lips brush against the soft skin of her earlobe as he leans in and whispers against her ear, “I want you, Nicole.”

Nicole bites at her bottom lip, holding back tears of shock and surprise at this sudden revelation. She looked for Kelly, who is standing at the bar, talking to a man and his wife. A young woman stands nearby, vying for his attention. However, he only has eyes for Nicole. He smiles and raises his glass to her before turning back to the conversation with the couple.

Nicole looks back at Jason. He holds her tightly, and her body reacts to his closeness. She wants him, but she wants Kelly just as much. She pulls away, her mind a tumultuous maelstrom of emotions, and flees the dance floor, running into the night on her kitten heels, ignoring calls from both men to stop and wait.

Nicole's mind is a whirlwind of confusion. What does she want? Who does she want?

She can't decide; she wants them both, but she knows neither man would accept that.

Tears trickle down her cheeks, hot against the cooling breeze from the ocean, as she runs across the road from the convention center to the beach, where her heels sink into the cool sand. She takes them off and sits and watches the rising tide as it washes seaweed and translucent jellyfish ashore.

The soft crunching of fine sand against expensive shoes rises over the crashing of the breakers, echoing across the beach. A warm jacket covers her shoulders, chasing away the night chill, and the scent of the cologne that Jason favors envelopes her senses. She feels warm, but not because of his residual body heat.

She wipes the tears and mascara from her face.

"I'm sorry if I upset you," Jason says as he plonks himself down in the sand beside her.

"I've been trying to tell you for a while now, but I've been too much of a coward until tonight." He sighs, looking out over the ocean as she sniffles beside him. Jason reaches into his pocket and pulls out a handkerchief. He shifts, turning to face her. He carefully wipes her face. "I've felt something for you since the day you came to your interview," he admits. "And each day it grew stronger and stronger until... I want to take care of you, Nicole. I want to make you happy," he says, his voice soft and slightly constricted with a level of emotion that he rarely showed.

Nicole sniffles and dabs at her dripping nose with the finely made handkerchief.

Jason lifts her chin, raises her eyes to look into his.

“I know you’ve had problems with office romances before, and I understand if you don’t want to take a chance on me, on us, but...” Nicole stops him with a kiss.

Soft lips meet, and warmth from their bodies mingles as Jason draws her against him, his breath warm against her cheek.

Nicole pulls away, panting slightly as Jason holds her in his arms. “I don’t want anything to change at work, Jason. If we do this, that’s my one condition.”

“Absolutely,” he says with a smile in his voice. “But once you clock off from work, you’ll remind me.”

“Agreed,” she says, leaning against his chest and listening to his heartbeat.

“Well, I take it that you’ve made your mind up then?” Kelly’s voice drifts across the sands. Nicole sits up and looks at him.

He stands in the crisp moonlight, a smile on his face. “As long as you are happy, Nic. You deserve it.” He looks at Jason. “I’ll be in touch about the merger.” Then he turns and walks back toward the bright lights of the hotel.

“Merger?” Nicole asks, looking from Kelly to Jason.

“Kelly and I came to an agreement,” he says. “We’re going to merge our companies. He’ll operate the company on the west coast, while we continue to operate on the east coast.”

“Is that going to work?” Nicole says?

“Yeah, it is,” he says, taking her hand and helping her to her feet.

“Now, I think we have a dance to finish.” He wraps his arms around her and holds her close as they sway together on the sand and slow dance to the sounds of the ocean. Nicole looks into his eyes. He smiles at her and parts his lips as he leans in and meets hers in a heart-stopping moment.



Nicole has made her choice, and she knows she's not going to regret it.

## *About the Author*

The daughter of a landscape gardener and an aged care nurse, Raven Rede and her two brothers grew up in Brisbane, Australia. Shortly after Raven married her corporate manager husband, they moved to Melbourne, where they continue to live today. They have two cats, Felix and Oscar.

# *Also by*

Simon's Way

Spellbound

The Little Book of Romantic Cocktails

The Little Book of Romance Spells

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