

A man with short dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark grey suit jacket over a light blue button-down shirt, is looking down with a serious expression. The background is dark and moody.

MFH
MEN FOR HIRE

Boyfriend
FOR HIRE

DELANEY DIAMOND

BOYFRIEND FOR HIRE

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GARDEN AVENUE PRESS

Boyfriend for Hire by Delaney Diamond

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Blurb

A one-night stand leads to much more...

Montez Ross's family owns At Your Service, a unique company that provides clients with men for both dating and handyman tasks. When the woman who left him after a one-night stand seeks their services, Montez, unaccustomed to being left, is annoyed but agrees to help her out.

Desiree Hagan is on track to make senior vice president of marketing at her firm but faces an obstacle: her terrible ex is her direct competition for the promotion. So she hires Montez to be her pretend boyfriend for an important company dinner which she doesn't want to attend alone. Now she has a new problem: unexpected feelings for Montez that she can't ignore.

Tonight was a bust. He should head home.

Montez Ross leaned his back against the bar and skimmed the crowd, his eyes landing on woman after woman. He had left work late this evening and stopped by Kizzie's Diner to unwind and relax and hopefully get female companionship for the night, but none of the women captured his attention.

Kizzie's wasn't much of a diner, at least not anymore. It used to be a cool hangout back in the day. A place where people from his parents' generation came to eat a meat and two vegetables swimming in bacon fat. He remembered being at the table with his mother and father while they discussed deals, kids, and adult topics with their friends, sitting across from each other on the torn seats of the booths while Motown classics serenaded them on the jukebox.

When business slowed, the owner revamped, removing the jukebox and giving the interior an update. The changes attracted a younger crowd—people in Montez's age group. During the day, the restaurant still served comfort food, but bacon had been switched out for turkey. There was a plethora of low-fat and low-calorie options and as many vegan entrees as there were meat-based ones.

Montez shook his head, taking a sip of his beer and wishing things hadn't changed as much as they did. The place definitely needed an update, but he missed the food and the jukebox.

So why am I here? he asked himself.

He'd come by hoping to hook up. That was another thing about Kizzie's.

It had become known for people who wanted no-strings relationships. Perfect, since a relationship was the last thing he wanted. He was too busy partying and going clubbing on the weekend with the many women he met who wanted the same—no-strings sex.

He had no desire to get his feelings tangled up in a woman. All he cared about was having a good time, but there was not a good time to be had here tonight. Not one woman had piqued his interest, and he wasn't that picky. Something was wrong. *He* was off. He'd noticed the change recently and could only assume it was related to hitting thirty-five earlier this year.

Lately, random bedroom romps had been lackluster and missing... something. He couldn't quite put his finger on the problem, but something had changed.

"Man, I hope I'm not turning into Stacy," he muttered.

His older sister had jumped into marriage at a young age. At thirty-seven, she'd already been married fifteen years, and though as the COO she ran the operations of their family business, she always made time for her kids and husband. Whether it was supporting her spouse when he received an award at work or attending her kids' recitals or their soccer games. Stacy had settled into married life and wore it like a coat that had become more comfortable through repeated wear.

He turned around and called over the bartender.

"Another one?" the guy asked. He wore a black vest and no shirt, showing off his muscular build.

"Nah, Ima head out. How much do I owe you?"

The bartender disappeared and returned with a slip of paper showing the full amount. Montez dropped a twenty on the bar and slid it across the glossy black surface. "Keep the change," he said, pocketing his wallet.

"Hey man, thanks."

He drained the last of his beer, and with one final look at the young and sexy crowd bobbing their heads and swaying their hips to the music, he headed toward the exit.

Outside, the heat hit him in the face, and he wrinkled his nose against the typical humid Georgia weather. As he strolled toward his car in the parking lot, a woman dressed in black, wide-legged pants and an electric blue sleeveless top walked toward the entrance. Her long hair was brushed back from her face and left to fall down her back in a straight line. She wore minimal makeup, but her smooth, cocoa-dark skin didn't need it.

Dark eyes slid toward him, and she smiled briefly as they passed each other. “How is it in there?”

Damn. Her voice gave him chills. Husky and smooth, the kind of voice that introduced the top R&B hits during late-night shows on the radio.

“Not bad,” he said, pausing and turning to look at her.

She glanced over her shoulder, also pausing. Her black hair shimmered under the parking lot lights. Cut blunt at the ends, as if she’d recently been to the salon, it fell between her shoulder blades. Her eyes—man, her eyes were mesmerizing. Dark brown with long, thick lashes and very inviting.

Nice figure too. She had meat on her bones, with shapely hips and a nice-looking ass in those pants. Surprisingly, his body stirred for the first time that night.

“Are you leaving?” she asked.

“Yes,” Montez replied.

She pouted, lips covered in dark chocolate lipstick that made them look sexy and moist. Her gaze swept him from head to toe, and she murmured something. Had he heard her correctly? It sounded like she said, “That’s too bad.”

The stranger continued her stride toward the diner, her shapely hips doing that swinging pendulum thing women did that made his knees weak.

Montez didn’t move, even after she’d entered the building and the door closed behind her. Female attention wasn’t unusual for him, but most women didn’t shoot their shot so openly. They tended to be more subtle, but there was nothing subtle about that exchange.

He walked slowly toward his SUV near the back of the lot, his mind centered on the woman he just passed. She was his type. Tall, thick, sexy, and not a lick of shyness in her.

Montez popped the locks on his dark gray Lincoln Navigator. Instead of getting in, he cast a glance at Kizzie’s door. He’d bet last month’s salary that she smelled great too.

A slow smile crossed his face. Only one way to find out.

Montez hit the key fob and locked his vehicle. Then he followed her inside.

Desiree let her eyes adjust to the dark interior. She had worked late at one of the Carolina's Closet stores down the street, and since she wasn't used to being on this side of town, she had asked about a place that served good food where she could purchase a late-night meal. The sales clerk recommended Kizzie's Diner, but this wasn't what she'd expected at all. She was getting more of a club vibe from the small place.

She marched up to the bar, and the attractive bartender immediately came over with a smile.

"What can I get for you, pretty lady?" he asked.

Her eyes drifted appreciatively over his exposed muscles in the vest. *Your number*, she thought. *No*. Food. That's what she came here for.

"I'll take a menu and a Long Island iced tea. Don't skimp on the liquor."

"It's been that kind of week?" he asked, his eyes sparkling with humor.

"You have no idea," Desiree responded.

They both laughed.

"I got you," he said with a wink. He handed over a menu and then went to fix her drink.

Before she could peruse the choices, her eye caught movement at the door, and she saw the man from the parking lot enter. Huh. He'd said he was leaving. She watched with interest as he scanned the interior.

He was quite good-looking, with short hair, coppery brown skin, and a sexy beard that wasn't too thick or bushy. It was low cut, the way she preferred, and circled his mouth, bringing attention to his lips. What was it about a beard on a man that made her long to toss aside good sense and open

her arms—and her legs?

Her gaze traveled down his torso. He wore a dark jacket and Tiffany-blue shirt underneath. The outfit emphasized his physique. If a man's tailor did a good job with his suit, it was hard to tell what kind of physique he had, but based on this man's strong jaw and the way he moved, she knew that beneath those clothes was a sexy body she wouldn't mind exploring.

He finally saw her, and their eyes locked on each other. Even in the dark interior, she caught the faint smile on his lips. He sauntered over, and her blood pressure rose at the way he moved. Slow and confident. Yeah, he knew he was the shit.

As he reached her side, the bartender placed the drink in front of her.

He looked at the stranger, and his eyebrows lifted. "You're back."

Mr. Confident flashed a smile, this time showing a little bit of teeth. Wow. She thought he was good-looking before, but now he was freaking gorgeous. The smile transformed his face, and her heart took off in her chest, beating rapidly with excitement.

"What can I get for you?" the bartender asked.

The stranger kept his eyes on her the entire time. "Nothing right now."

His voice was silky smooth and sinfully dark, with a hint of playfulness around the edges.

When the bartender left, Desiree turned her body toward him and inhaled the pleasing sandalwood notes of his cologne.

"Well, hello again," she said.

"You knew I would come in here," he said.

Eyes widened, she laughed. "Honestly, I didn't."

"After you said 'that's too bad,' what choice did I have?"

"I was making an observation," she said with a one-shoulder shrug.

A man bumped her from behind, and she stumbled into Mr. Confident's chest.

"Excuse me," the man muttered.

Desiree had brought her hands up to lessen the impact of the bump, and her actions brought her palms into full contact with Mr. Confident's hard chest. Oh yeah, he had a great body.

His left hand grabbed her bare arm to hold her steady, and goosebumps sprouted on her skin from his warm touch.

"Sorry about that," she whispered, darn near breathless as she gazed up at him.

“Not your fault.”

They continued staring into each other’s eyes. She couldn’t remember having such a strong attraction to a man before. Sure, she’d met men she was attracted to, but this—this was achingly powerful. She felt transfixed and was almost afraid to blink because she didn’t want to break the spell between them.

When his hand slipped away, disappointment thrummed through her, and she released the breath she had unconsciously held while gazing into his eyes.

His attention shifted to the menu, and he frowned. “You’re going to get something to eat?”

“I was thinking about it, but with that look on your face, now I’m not so sure.”

“Full disclosure, the food here is a’ight.”

“Wow,” she laughed.

His gaze rested on her for a minute, as if her laughter was some new and unusual sound he was not familiar with.

“How hungry are you?”

“Very hungry. I’ve had a long day and the last time I ate was at twelve-thirty.”

He scanned the menu. “Stay away from the oxtails, mac and cheese, and the collard greens. The fried chicken is decent—crunchy skin but a little bland. The jalapeño poppers are good. If you like fish, go with the fried catfish, fried okra, and rice. The food used to be better, but they changed the menu, and it hasn’t been the same since.”

“Then why are *you* here?”

“The drinks are excellent, and...” He tilted his head a little to the right. “I came here to meet someone. I guess that someone is you.”

Heat blossomed in her cheeks. Smooth. Real smooth. She was starting to really like this guy.

“I’m going to take your advice and order the catfish.”

“You staying in or doing takeout?”

She hesitated for a moment. She’d planned to order her food to go, sipping her Long Island tea while she waited. Not anymore. “I was going to eat here.”

“Care for some company?”

“I wouldn’t mind some company when he looks like you.”

He laughed, his voice husky and his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down.

“That’s what I like to hear. Don’t move. Let me see if I can find us a table.”

He stepped away from her, but with his height, he remained visible as he moved through the crowded diner. After a few minutes, he returned to her side. “Found one in a corner in the back.”

“One sec.”

She reached for her purse to pay the tab, and he shot her an incredulous look. “Come on now, you trying to make me look bad?”

“No,” Desiree said with a laugh. “I can pay for my own drinks.”

“Not while I’m standing here.” He pulled out his wallet and placed a twenty on the counter, then waved over the bartender. “For her drink.”

The guy looked between them and smirked. “Cool. I got you.”

Desiree scooped up the glass. “Thank you. Where to?”

“This way.”

He placed a hand on the small of her back, and she got a little thrill from his touch as he guided her with gentle pressure, winding through the mass of people laughing, talking, and eating.

They were truly in a corner, like he said, tucked away at a little table pushed against the wall with two chairs facing each other. She sat with her back to the window and gazed across the table at him.

Suddenly, she realized she didn’t know his name. “My name is Desiree. What’s yours?”

“I’m Montez.” He took her hand and kissed the back of it. His lips were warm and soft and made her inner thighs tingle. “Nice to meet you, Desiree.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

A server came over, a pretty woman with goddess braids and a nose ring. “What can I get for you two this evening?” she asked, pen poised above the notepad.

Desiree placed her order and added water with lemon.

“And for you?” the server asked Montez.

“No dinner for me, but I’ll take an order of the jalapeno poppers, a glass of water, and a Full Moon beer, the lager.”

“Got it. I’ll put your orders in right now and be back with your drinks in a sec.” The young woman disappeared.

“Those poppers must be good,” Desiree teased.

“They are, and I want you to try them.”

“I love spicy food.”

“Yeah? Me too. The spicier the better.”

“Same.” A warm feeling spread through her chest at their common interest.

Montez folded his arms on the wooden table top. “So, what do you do?”

“I work in the marketing department for a clothing store that has locations all over the country. Have you ever heard of Carolina’s Closet?”

His brow briefly furrowed. “I think so. Sounds like a place where my mom shops.”

“Probably. For years they focused on women in their late thirties and older, but in the past year, we’ve been focusing on a younger demographic.”

“Did you have something to do with that?”

“Technically, yes, but actually, no.”

“You know you have to explain that, right?”

She tried not to let bitterness overcome her. “It was my idea to expand into a younger demographic, but a co-worker stole my idea—including the mockup of the marketing materials I created—and took the credit. I fondly call him Ass-Face.” She had almost killed him and to this day wished she hadn’t taken murder off the table.

“Damn.”

“Yeah, it sucked, but I learned my lesson. I have never again shared my ideas, and I keep my computer locked when I’m not sitting in front of it. What about you? What do you do?” Desiree took a sip of her tea.

Montez seemed to hesitate and then said, “Well, I don’t have to worry about anyone stealing my ideas. I’m in marketing, too, for my family’s business.”

She found it interesting that he was also a marketer, but he didn’t provide any more information. He seemed cautious about what he shared with her, and she probably should be the same way.

“What do you do when you’re not working?” Montez asked.

“I like hiking. I got away from it for a while, but I’ve started enjoying it again. We didn’t have a lot of money when I was growing up, so my younger sister and I made our own fun. There was a creek near our house, and we would go hang out down there. On weekends, we went fishing with my dad.” She smiled at the memories.

“I like hiking too,” Montez said, sounding surprised. “You ever go up to Kennesaw?”

“All the time. This is getting scary. We’re too much alike.”

“Scary good,” he said with an engaging smile.

As they continued to chat, she learned he had five siblings and also played golf. She mentioned her love for photography and showed him the photos she'd taken on her last hike.

Soon, the food arrived.

"Careful, it's hot," the server warned.

"This looks good," Desiree said.

"Can I bring you anything else?"

"I'm good, thanks." Montez looked at Desiree.

"I'm fine too," she replied. When they were alone again, she took stock of the large platter of jalapeno poppers and the huge catfish filet. "I'm going to try the poppers first. They better be good."

"I promise you won't be disappointed."

He waited while she picked one up and bit into it. It was filled with cream cheese blanketed by a crispy breadcrumb topping. The flavors of chives and garlic burst on her tongue with a little bit of heat.

Placing her fingers over her mouth, she said, "Oh my goodness, this is so good."

"Told you." Montez chuckled, picking up a popper.

"You have good taste."

"Yeah, I know," he said in a slow, low voice.

She didn't miss the double meaning in that statement.

Taking another bite, Desiree mused on the direction of the evening. She'd only planned to get something to eat, but she might end up leaving with more than a full belly.

Desiree was almost finished with her meal, and they'd spent most of the time asking each other questions and chatting about all kinds of topics, like their favorite television shows and the fact they both sometimes worked harder than they should and forgot to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

They had quite a few similarities, but there were differences too. She mentioned a couple of times that her family wasn't well-off, but Montez had grown up with parents who had good-paying jobs and eventually started a successful business together.

"When was the last time you went golfing?" she asked.

"Last week. I have a membership at the Stone Mountain Golf Club." He picked a fried okra off her plate. She'd offered him some earlier, and eating off her plate didn't seem odd or unnatural, as if he'd done the same thing dozens of times before.

"Must be nice. It's an expensive hobby."

"Yeah, but it's worth it. I like to get out on the links with my father or my friends."

"One of these days, I'm going to take lessons. Until then, I'll stick to hiking and photography."

"What do you do with the photos you take?"

"Most of the time, I keep them for myself. I have a couple of blown-up shots that are hanging on my wall, but I've sold some too—to magazines and blogs."

"That's damn cool," Montez said, impressed.

She shrugged, as if it was no big deal.

Montez glanced at her empty plate. The night was winding down. “What are you doing when you get out of here?”

She dabbed the corners of her mouth. “Probably go home. What about you?”

“Same. Of course, we could go home together.”

She laughed as if she had a private joke. “Could we now?”

“Just a suggestion.” Montez shrugged.

Women usually knew before a date ended if they were going to sleep with you or not, and he’d give anything to know what her thoughts were. As for him, he wanted her badly. The entire night he’d watched her eyes brighten with amusement and her full lips curl up with laughter. He wanted to know what those lips tasted like and what they felt like on his skin. He liked talking to her too—finding out what they had in common and listening to her take on different issues. The largest sex organ is the brain, and this woman was stimulating the hell out of his.

She pushed her now empty plate to the side of the table and glanced at her watch. “It’s pretty late already, and I have a work meeting tomorrow morning at nine.”

“It’s Saturday,” he said in disbelief.

“That’s life when you work for someone else and not your family business,” she teased.

Montez decided to cut to the chase before she slipped away. “Can I be honest? You’re a very sexy woman, and all night I’ve been thinking about what I’d like to do to you. How about we head over to my place right now? I promise to get you home well before nine so you can make your meeting.”

“You’re probably not a serial killer, but I’m not going to your place alone, and I’m not taking you to my apartment.”

He laughed. “Understood. There’s a hotel less than a mile away, where there are witnesses and cameras.”

“You know the area really well.”

“I know a lot of things.”

“Do you now?”

“Yes.” He leaned across the table and made direct eye contact, which had worked for him many times over the years. “For instance, I know dozens of ways to make a woman scream.”

They both laughed.

Desiree bit her lip and slightly narrowed her eyes. “That’s quite a

declaration,” she said, sounding a little breathless.

“It’s true though.”

“You don’t waste time.”

“Why waste time when we both know what we want? In the morning, I’ll take you to a nice breakfast spot that has the best pancakes.”

“And where is that?” Desiree asked.

He got the impression she was stalling, maybe trying to decide if she wanted to take him up on his offer or not. He wouldn’t push. He wanted her to make the decision with a clear mind so there’d be no regrets.

“Pancake Shack.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Pancake Shack? That sounds sketchy.”

“They have great food.”

“Well... based on your other recommendations tonight, I trust you on that.”

The server came to the table. “How was everything?” she asked with a bright smile.

“Delicious,” they both said at the same time.

“Good. I’ll be right back with the check.” She took the plate and silverware when she walked away.

“Don’t go trying to grab the check when it comes, either. Dinner’s on me,” Montez said.

Desiree’s eyes widened. “No, I couldn’t—”

“I insist.”

“You’re being too nice.”

“No such thing.”

The server returned, and he handed over a credit card this time. When she came back, he signed the receipt, and moments later, they exited the diner.

Montez escorted Desiree to the driver’s side of her vehicle, a white RAV-4 hybrid she said she bought a couple of years ago with a bonus from work.

“Is this goodbye?” Montez asked. “I’m not trying to talk you into anything, but you’re feeling me, and I’m feeling you. The attraction is unmistakable.”

“Do you think because you’re fine as hell you can say anything to a woman?” she asked.

“You think I’m fine as hell?”

She rolled her eyes, but she was smiling.

Montez couldn’t resist smiling too. “If I’m way off base, and you’re not

interested, I'll go home with my tail between my legs and lick my wounds, devastated that I missed out on spending more time with you."

Her eyes narrowed. "Something tells me you haven't licked your wounds probably ever. I think you're used to women falling into your arms."

That wasn't quite true, but he didn't contradict her.

Stepping closer, Montez tilted his head to get a better look at her in the limited light of the parking lot. She really was a stunning woman. Her cocoa-dark skin was smooth and even save for a single beauty mark above her lip that he longed to kiss.

"And I think you're used to men chasing you."

"Maybe," she said with a coy smile.

She reached for a button on his jacket, and though she hadn't touched him directly, all the muscles in his body reacted by going tense. Her energy was dangerously intoxicating. He had to be careful with this one.

"I think you're full of shit, but I have to admit, I'd like to find out if you're half as good as you say you are." She lifted her gaze and looked at him from beneath her lashes.

Yeah, he really liked this woman.

"Give me a chance, and I'll give you the best dick of your life."

She smirked. "I'll be the judge of that."



MONTEZ FOLLOWED Desiree into the hotel room and watched as she placed her purse on a table and removed her shoes. She slowly turned to face him, and he took her in. Smooth, dark skin, curves everywhere, and an unmistakable glint in her eyes that said she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

He slowly walked to where she stood, and when they were within inches of each other, he bent his head and brushed his lips across hers. Their mouths touched in a faint, feathery caress that tightened his stomach muscles and made him emit a low groan. He was already overwhelmed with that little amount of contact.

He grabbed the waistband of her trousers and pulled her closer. "I've been dying to know what your lips taste like," he whispered.

"What are you waiting for, Mr. Montez?"

He didn't need any further prompting and pulled her closer, taking possession of her mouth and immediately opening his to let their tongues clash and tangle as their lips clung together in a greedy, succulent kiss. She tasted better than expected, like the perfect combination of heaven and sin. His throbbing, aching loins pressed against hers, seeking closer contact as desire stormed through him. His arms folded around her and drew her soft body tighter to his so he could devour her even more.

Desiree kissed him back with the same heat and hunger, pushing her fingers up his chest until her arms were wrapped around his neck. He smoothed his palms over her hips and ass, taking pleasure in her excited squeak when he filled his hands with her cheeks and squeezed.

One hand edged higher, and he cupped her full breast, kneading the flesh as his tongue delved deeper into her mouth and licked the interior. He was so goddamn hard right now, he wasn't sure how long he'd last. This kiss was intense. This woman had him losing his mind—almost feral with a need to possess her.

He backed her toward the bed and released her lips to lower them both onto the mattress. He didn't stop kissing her though, and dragged his lips down the length of her neck, tasting her floral-scented skin and aching to do the same between her thighs.

Montez tugged off her slacks and her top and then removed his own clothing. When he rejoined her on the bed, they were both completely naked, both fully aroused. He was hard as stone, and her rigid chocolate nipples beckoned him to suck, while between her thighs was wet and slick with arousal.

Using his fingers, he teased between her legs and then replaced his hand with his face. He never went down on a woman the first time they had sex, but he felt compelled to taste every inch of Desiree. He licked and sucked until her thighs trembled around his ears, and she clawed at his head.

"I can't. I can't..." she whispered in a hoarse voice, her fingers gripping him like talons.

Man, how he loved that shit. Loved making a woman lose control, loved hearing her beg and plead for him to stop when she actually meant the opposite. Loved how she caressed the back of his head and made chills run up and down his spine.

By the time he put on a condom, their movements were feverish and out of control. He kissed her hard, and she clung to him as he pushed into her

body, groaning at the exquisite torture of being inside something so warm, wet, and tight.

Goddamn.

With measured thrusts, Montez brought them both to the heights of ecstasy. Her cries bounced off the walls, and her legs and arms curled tight around him as if she'd never let him go.

One month later

“**W**hat’s up?” Montez asked.
“I need your help,” his younger brother, Devonte, replied through the speakerphone.

Montez heard wind in the background like he was driving.

“What do you need help with?” He leaned back in his office chair, aimed, and fired a foam ball at the net attached to the far wall. It went straight through.

“I have an appointment with a client at two, but I’m on the other side of town, and there’s no way I’m going to make it back on time. Ms. Hagan needs to hire someone to escort her to a company event on Friday night. I told her I’d look into the options and let her know if we had anyone who fit the profile she was looking for, but she insisted on coming in and having a sit-down. To be honest, she sounded a little desperate. Unfortunately, we don’t have anyone available for Friday, but we can at least set her up in the system in case she wants to use us for future events.”

“I can do that. Do you have information I can look at before I meet with her?”

“Genevieve has everything,” Devonte answered, referring to the office manager. “Ms. Hagan is looking for a professional, someone who can carry on a good conversation. You know the type. She needs to impress her boss.”

Their family business, At Your Service, allowed clients to hire men who escorted them to corporate functions, weddings, and other events where a companion might be necessary. They also hired out men who completed honey-do lists and did other types of work like landscaping.

Devonte was in charge of intake, which mostly consisted of screening the women and scheduling them with one of the men. Their older sister, Stacy, was the COO and had worked closely with their parents since she was in high school.

It took some time for Montez to decide he wanted to work in the family business, but when he did, marketing seemed the best use of his talents. Despite being in charge of advertising and publicity, in his personal life, he was much more careful about mentioning the services offered by At Your Service. They could often be misconstrued as more than simply escorting and manual labor. Never mind they had a strict policy against sleeping with clients, but that didn't stop some of the women from trying to seduce the workers—or vice versa. Over the years, they'd had to ban a few customers and cut loose several men for not following the guidelines.

The kind of man this client needed was in high demand since so many women were moving up the corporate ladder but were often single and unable to enjoy the same networking benefits as their married male co-workers.

“I got you.” Montez shot a second ball, and it also went cleanly through the net.

“Thanks. Now I can breathe easier.”

“I'll see you later.”

“Later.”

After his brother hung up, Montez pushed out of the chair and picked up the five small balls scattered on the floor. He dumped them into a basket and then went in search of Genevieve because two o'clock was around the corner.

He found her in her office. She was pushing fifty and fine as hell. He used to have the biggest crush on her as a kid. When she got married a few years ago, he'd been happy for her, but couldn't help but hate the lucky son of a bitch a little bit.

She stood gazing down at a folder on her desk, one hand on her hip and wearing a white blouse and black pencil skirt that hugged her shapely frame. Her natural hair was cut short, and she wore gold cat-eye glasses.

Damn, she was fine.

He rapped on the doorframe to get her attention, and her face broke into a smile.

“Hi, Montez. How can I help you?”

“Devonte called and needs me to meet with a client because he can’t make it back on time for his appointment. The client is Ms. Hagan, and the appointment is at two.”

Her eyes lit up in acknowledgment. “I know who that is. One minute.”

She went to the file cabinet and pulled out a yellow folder, the color indicating a potential client. “Here you go. All her information is in there. She’s not in the system yet, so you can have her fill out the forms in this folder or online, and we’ll get her set up. She can take her picture today if she’s ready. Too bad we don’t have someone for her right now, but we should be able to get an escort for her if she needs our help in the future.”

“I’ll be sure to tell her that. Thanks,” Montez said, flipping open the folder.

He took two steps toward the door and then came to an abrupt halt when he saw the customer’s name. Desiree Hagan. *Desiree*. Seeing that name after what happened a month ago caused a maelstrom of emotions to whirl through his body.

“Is something wrong?” Genevieve asked.

“No, I noticed the name and thought...”

She frowned. “Do you know her?”

“The first name reminds me of someone I know, but I doubt this is the same woman. There must be thousands of Desirees in Atlanta.”

Genevieve placed a hand on her hip. “You only got her first name?” she asked with meaning.

He laughed and closed the folder. “There you go, starting shit again.”

“I know you, Montez. You’re a heartbreaker.”

“Not me. I’m the one who used to get my heart broken, remember? Now I know the rules of the game, that doesn’t happen anymore.”

“I can’t wait to meet the woman who knocks you on your ass,” she said, with pursed lips.

“Never gonna happen,” he responded with a laugh while backing out of her office.

Walking down the hall to the conference room, he reflected on how he’d screwed up in the past. Women didn’t want men who cared and were attentive. They said they did, but were attracted to the exact opposite.

He got the message loud and clear in high school when girls called him “too nice.” Didn’t help that he looked like a Goonies reject. So he became the opposite in college. He didn’t call when he said he would and pretended to forget important dates though he remembered. Women then blew up his phone and showed up at his apartment unannounced, which resulted in some of the best angry sex of his life. They couldn’t leave him alone.

He strolled down the hallway to the empty office they used to meet privately with potential customers. Small and simply designed, it contained one large window that looked out over the city, a guest chair, and an L-shaped desk that he sat behind as he perused the paperwork.

There wasn’t much to read since Desiree wasn’t officially a client yet, but he did experience an uneasy feeling during the review. She was a vice president of marketing, single, and thirty-five.

His Desiree had worked in marketing and was about thirty-five. Could it be her?

The phone rang on the desk. “Hello?”

“Hi, Montez. Ms. Hagan is here.”

“Bring her back to the interview office.”

After he hung up, the unease in his gut deepened, and he caught himself holding his breath, body tense and on the alert.

“Calm down,” he muttered.

He heard laughter coming down the hall and immediately got to his feet. Was it her? He couldn’t decide if he wanted Desiree Hagan to be the woman he slept with or not, but he’d soon have his answer.

Two figures stopped outside the frosted glass door, and after a quick knock, it was pushed open. Desiree stepped in, and immediately her eyes widened, the smile on her face freezing and then faltering as the reality of the situation set in.

“Do you need anything, Montez?” the receptionist asked, her blonde hair in a tight updo and a pleasant expression on her face.

“No, we’re good.”

She closed the door and left them alone.

In the silence, Montez stared at Desiree with nothing but pure hostility, barely restraining himself from grabbing and shaking her. For a whole month, he’d wondered what he’d done wrong, having flashbacks to his high school days when girls dissed him because he didn’t look right or have any game. No date to the prom. No date ever. Rejection after rejection until he no longer

asked because his self-esteem couldn't take another beating. Then she had the nerve to waltz into this office and try to hire a man at *his* company.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Desiree love-'em-and-leave-'em Hagan. Good to see you again."

"Look, I didn't—"

"Please, have a seat." Montez gestured to the chair on the opposite side of the table.

She snapped her mouth shut and walked her sexy ass over to the chair in a tailored blue dress that popped against her dark skin. A simple and sophisticated design with a skinny belt around her waist. She wore her hair in the same style as the night she danced on his dick, moaning and panting as if he'd delivered on his promise to give her the best she'd ever had—before she slipped away the next morning without a word.

Desiree sat in the chair, and he sat too, purposely not saying another word until she spoke.

She cleared her throat. "I didn't know you worked here."

"This is my family business. The one I told you about."

"Devonte..."

"Is my brother. He couldn't make this meeting and arranged for me to take his place." Montez snapped open the yellow folder with more force than necessary. "He explained your situation, and unfortunately, we're all booked up at the moment and don't have anyone available to escort you on Friday. Maybe if you hadn't waited until the last second..." He let the accusation trail off.

"Now wait a damn minute, I—"

"Tell me what you're looking for, and we can get you entered in the system should you need an escort for future events."

"You don't have *anyone* available?" she asked, sounding distraught.

"No one."

Her brow puckered in consternation, and she took a deep breath as if reining in her temper. "Well... I don't know that I'll need anyone after Friday, but if I do, he needs to have a good sense of humor, be a good dresser, and it would be great if he knows a little about golf because that topic comes up quite a bit. My boss loves the sport and is constantly trying to improve his game. He has to be comfortable in social situations and able to discuss a myriad of topics."

"Anything else?" Montez stared at her.

She glanced at the pen that remained on the desk. “Shouldn’t you be taking notes?”

“I have a good memory. Proceed.” He wasn’t writing a single word because no way was he letting her hire someone at their company. He crossed his arms over his chest.

She dipped her gaze and paused for a moment as if distracted by the movement. Then she continued. “Well, handsome would be a plus, but it’s not necessary. That’s really all.”

“You know what, on second thought, I don’t think we’ll have anyone who fits what you’re looking for. My advice is to go elsewhere. I’m sorry you wasted your time coming here.”

Her nostrils flared, and her eyes flashed with anger. Excitement sparked in his blood at the flare of emotion.

Desiree fixed a tight smile on her face and took a deep breath, her lovely breasts rising and falling beneath the tailored dress.

“There has to be a solution,” she said, speaking slowly and at an even level. “Your company comes highly recommended.”

“Because we provide a great service and make sure all our clients are happy. I wish we could satisfy everyone, but that’s just not possible.” He stood.

Desiree gazed up at him. “That’s it?”

“I’m afraid so. I’ll escort you out.”

Montez walked around the desk, and she hopped to her feet.

“I came here because I need help. You don’t have any backup men anywhere?”

It was his turn to offer a tight smile. “Sorry. This way please.”

She didn’t move, and he turned back to face her.

“Did you hear me?”

Her lips tightened with determination. “What about you?”

Montez blinked. “Excuse me?”

Desiree couldn’t believe she had made the suggestion either, but desperation made her willing to do anything—including pay the man who had given her the best sex of her life, though he obviously despised her because she slipped away without saying goodbye.

“You work here, you know the routine. Let me hire you, and you can pretend to be my boyfriend.”

“Why would I do that?” he scoffed.

“Because you’re a decent guy?” she said hopefully.

“I’m the vice president of marketing. I don’t take clients on dates.”

“I’m desperate,” she blurted.

He didn’t respond right away, but instead eyed her with suspicion. “What’s really going on here?”

Desiree hated to share more information than she intended to when she walked in, but partial openness might make him change his mind.

“Look, I’m up for a promotion at Carolina’s Closet—Senior VP of Marketing. In a couple of months, the owner will make a final decision about who he wants to give the position to. Until then, we have to jump through some hoops, and one of those hoops is attending a dinner at the owner’s house so he can get to know us better. A lazy liar who steals ideas and doesn’t deserve to even be in the running will be there.”

“Ass-Face?”

“Yes,” she answered, pleasantly surprised that he remembered. “Our company is very family-oriented, and he has a wife and baby on the way, and

of course, his wife will be there to support him. Everyone else in attendance will be married, and then there's me—single. I don't want to show up alone. It'll look bad. So, what do you think?"

"That's quite an impassioned speech."

His tone sounded dry, and she couldn't tell if she had made any headway in convincing him to help her. "It's the truth."

Montez stuffed his hands into his pants pockets. "Why don't we address the elephant in the room?"

"Okay. Let's do that." She took a breath and braced for impact.

"Do you have a habit of screwing men and leaving them in hotel rooms like their feelings don't matter?"

She flinched. "Wow, you're not one to mince words, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

"I'm not in the habit of doing that, no. I had a good time that night."

An incredible time. The *best* time. She still thought about their limbs tangled in the sheets of the queen bed. His deep kisses, his deep strokes. And his body—good heavens. It was a thing of beauty. Tight but not too muscular, with a nice bottom she enjoyed gripping.

She didn't know where she got the stamina from. After the third time, they were both exhausted and lay splayed across the bed, panting and laughing.

She'd had one-night stands before, but never like that. The first time having sex with someone—particularly a stranger—could be awkward because you didn't know their likes and dislikes. There was no such awkwardness between her and Montez. They were so in sync they could have been lovers transported from a different era.

"You never intended for me to take you to breakfast, did you? That wasn't part of the game," Montez said.

"I don't play games."

He folded his arms over his chest. "Oh, really? How did I misunderstand?"

"Look, I had a great time. We both did, but I wasn't looking for anything serious. I thought we were hooking up for the night."

"Hooking up for the night means you can't have breakfast? That means you can't say goodbye?"

She didn't want to explain why she slipped away without saying goodbye. Then he'd know the truth—that what she experienced in his arms

had scared her. She'd been down the road of falling in love before and always ended up with the short end of the stick.

In her last serious relationship, she allowed the man she was with to convince her that he would take care of her. She moved in with him and shamefully kicked some of her friends to the curb—all because she wanted to please him.

In the end, it wasn't enough. When he broke up with her because he considered her ambitions too masculine and didn't allow him to be a man, she crawled back to her friends and apologized. Humiliated, she vowed never to put all her time and energy into a man again. She would put all her time and energy into work and reap the financial rewards.

“Were you looking for something serious?” Desiree asked.

“No.”

“So what's the problem?”

His face tightened. “No problem. I think we're done here, right?”

“What about my proposition? I need a date for Friday night. It's a simple dinner, about ten people including my boss, his wife, the other candidate, and his significant other. I'll pay your fee, whatever it is.”

“Not interested.”

“You're punishing me for what happened though you said you weren't looking for anything serious either,” she accused.

“Just because I wasn't looking for anything serious doesn't mean you can treat me like—” His mouth tightened.

“Like what?”

“Never mind. You should go.” Montez walked toward the door and hauled it open.

Desiree didn't move. “Like what? What are you accusing me of?” She had to know so she could fix this.

With an exasperated sigh, he slammed the door closed again and stalked over to face her with a glower. Looking up at him, she should be intimidated. He was definitely upset, but all she saw were deep-set eyes, a bearded jawline sharp enough to cut marble, and lips that she ached to kiss again.

“You treated me like I was nothing. A reject. A piece of shit at the bottom of your shoe,” he said between tight lips.

Taken aback, her mouth fell open. “That wasn't my intention. I'm sorry if I made you feel that way.”

“Forget it.”

“No, really, I am sorry. I left because I didn’t want to have an awkward conversation with you in the morning. I see now that it wasn’t the best way to handle the situation, and I’m truly sorry.”

He watched her with suspicion, but at least she didn’t see the same level of animosity as before.

“I can’t be your date on Friday night.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve never been hired out before,” he said.

“You’ll be fine. Be your normal charming self, the same guy who…” Desiree paused, and his eyes darkened, the air crackling between them. She swallowed. “The same guy who convinced me to go to a hotel with him.”

“It didn’t take much convincing,” he said.

She shrugged. “But you were charming.”

He seemed to be thinking about it but was still hesitant.

“Do you have a girlfriend you’re worried about upsetting?” Desiree asked, confused by how much she wanted the answer to be No.

“No.”

She released a silent breath of relief. “Then, what’s stopping you? You’re the head of marketing, which means you’re responsible for advertising, promotion, all of that for your family’s business?”

“Yes,” he said slowly, suspicion weaving through his voice.

“How about if you do this for me, in addition to paying the fee, I’ll share your company’s name and services with my Women in Marketing group. You help me, I’ll help you.” Desiree held her breath as she waited.

“How many women are we talking about?”

“Over 900 in Georgia and thousands around the country.”

“Nine hundred in Georgia alone?” Montez stroked his jaw. “You really think having someone attend the dinner with your boss will make a difference in your chances to get the senior VP position?”

That wasn’t the only reason, but he didn’t need to know that. “I know it will.”

“If I do this, it will be completely out of the ordinary,” he said.

“I understand, but it’s only one night. One dinner.”

He let out a resigned sigh. “All right, I’ll do it.”

“Thank you!”

She had a sudden urge to hug him, but instead, she closed her eyes in relief. When she opened them, the corners of his mouth twitched a little.

Maybe he didn't completely hate her.

"We can work on getting our story straight later."

She nodded. "Okay."

"I have some forms for you to fill out."

"Okay," she said again, ready to move forward.

"Do you want to fill them out here or online?"

"Online would be great."

"We can't move forward until we get those forms."

"Got it. I'll submit them tonight after work," Desiree promised.

"Just so you know, we have a no fucking policy in our contract."

Oh. Nothing could happen between them. Not that she'd wanted a repeat, but if she did, it was clearly off the table now.

Desiree smiled. "That shouldn't be a problem."

"Sure about that?"

"You worried about me or yourself?"

Montez smirked, which reminded her of a specific point in their night together. He'd hit the spot extra good, and she cried out, gripping his firm ass. He had smiled in a similar fashion, as if he were giving himself a mental high five.

He took a few sheets from the folder on the desk and clipped a card to the top sheet.

"Go to the website, set up your account, and enter your information. You'll need to submit a photo, as well. We require that for the safety of our men. Put my name in the field that asks if you have a preferred companion you'd like to work with."

Desiree tucked the card in her purse. "Got it. And... thank you. I'll be in touch soon."

Montez walked her to the front door, and they said goodbye. With brisk steps, she entered her vehicle parked out front and sat for a moment reviewing what had taken place.

How the heck had she ended up going to the company owned by her last one-night stand? Desiree groaned and slumped in her seat.

"I can't catch a break," she muttered.

Of course, he looked amazing and smelled delicious, reminding her of his manly scent imprinted on her skin after their sex marathon. Friday night was going to be tough, but she could control her hormones. There was a lot riding on this.

She sighed and started the car. "It's one night. That's all."

The dinner at Ethel and Mark Stumpton's home was an important part of the vetting process for anyone considered for executive-level promotions. The two finalists for the senior VP position were Desiree and Royce Brayden, the standoffish jerk who'd stolen her idea, and her toughest competition.

After looking both ways, Desiree slowly drove out of the lot and into traffic.

"Call Nina," she said aloud, and the Bluetooth dialed her friend Nina Winthrop.

She met Nina years ago when they volunteered at a local soup kitchen during the holidays. Desiree volunteered because she knew what it was like to go without. Nina, however, was rich and could easily donate money to various causes. She did that but also donated her time, completely unspoiled by her riches, and was the most kind-hearted, generous person Desiree knew.

"Hi, Desiree, what's up?" Nina greeted her.

"Hey, girl, I'm on my way to the office. Are you free to meet up later for dinner or drinks? I need to talk."

"Bad day?" Nina asked, sounding sympathetic.

"Let's just say it's a day of surprises."

Her friend laughed. "Oh boy. How about we meet for dinner at the restaurant in my hotel?"

"That sounds perfect. Seven okay?"

"Works for me. I'll see you then."

At seven on the dot, Desiree left her car with the valet at The Winthrop Hotel and marched into the cavernous foyer. She made her way to the restaurant and after a quick scan of the diners, saw Nina seated in a booth along one wall.

Her natural hair was styled in full, bouncy curls, and when she stood in greeting, Desiree saw she wore an adorable shirt dress that flowed around her ankles. The Indian block print contained orange, blue, and yellow, all striking against her brown skin.

“You make me sick. You always look amazing,” Desiree said, giving her a big hug.

Nina laughed. “Please, you’re one to talk. Your makeup is always immaculate and you’re always dressed to impress.” No one would ever guess Nina was the sole heir to a multi-million-dollar hotel empire because she was so kindhearted and down-to-earth.

Desiree slid into the booth and placed her purse on the seat beside her. “That’s because of my great discount at Carolina’s Closet.”

“I have a feeling you were dressing pretty sharp before you started working there.”

“Well, I do love a cute outfit,” Desiree admitted.

Her closet overflowed with clothes and accessories, prompting an ex-boyfriend to teasingly call her a hoarder. She owned a mountain of clothes because as a kid she had to wear hand-me-downs and thrift store specials, but working at a clothing store meant access to the latest fashions, all at a great discount.

“Okay, this is your hotel restaurant. What should I get?” Desiree scanned the menu.

“How hungry are you?”

“I could eat a horse.”

Nina tapped her chin. “Get the lamb and mashed potatoes with Gouda. Pick any vegetable you want to go with it. I told the server to bring us a glass of wine when she saw you sit down, so that should arrive shortly.”

“Perfect, and lamb sounds good.” Desiree closed the menu.

Within seconds the server arrived with two glasses of red wine and placed them on the table.

“How is married life?” Desiree asked, taking a sip of her wine. “Mmm, this is good.”

“Still in the newlywed stage, so I’m very happy,” Nina answered with a dreamy expression on her face.

Nina was married to Reese Brooks, son of billionaire entrepreneur and philanthropist, Sylvie Johnson. She had planned to marry someone else, but she and Reese could not fight their feelings for each other and ended up getting married after running off to Las Vegas together.

“We’re not here to talk about me and Reese. What’s going on with you? You sounded distressed on the phone.” Nina’s concerned eyes met Desiree’s.

She let out a deep breath. “Remember I told you I was going to At Your Service because I was desperate?”

“Yes, because Geoffrey’s married now, and he can’t be your escort anywhere.”

Geoffrey was a friend who she used to be able to count on when she needed a date to an event, but ever since he got married a while back, she’d been going solo to events when she wasn’t in a relationship.

“I miss him!” Desiree exclaimed.

“I wish I knew a single male I could recommend.”

Desiree waved off her comment. “This is my problem. Anyway, I had my meeting at the company—At Your Service—and I ran into a familiar face.”

“Who?”

“Remember that guy, Montez, that I told you about?”

Nina nodded, then her eyes widened. “No. Don’t tell me he works there.”

“His family owns the company.”

Nina gasped. “Get out of here.”

Desiree launched into an explanation of what happened, right down to the

part where she'd been so desperate, she offered to hire him since there was no one else available.

"If I hadn't lied and said I was bringing a guest to that dinner on Friday, I wouldn't be in this mess. Why did I lie?" She shook her head.

"You lied because you thought it would increase your chances of getting the job, and that might be true. Also, Royce will be there with his wife."

Desiree growled in her throat. "I can't believe we used to be a couple."

Royce Brayden was more than her competition. He was the man who'd dumped her after he claimed she was living too much in her masculinity. He explained that he wanted a woman who was more feminine, not someone who competed against him. She should have never gotten involved with a man she worked with, but at the time she'd been blinded by his good looks and drive for success. She saw that positive attribute as something they had in common. He viewed her as competition.

When he stole her marketing idea, she vowed never to forgive him. Her only regret was that she didn't speak up and let anyone know what he'd done, and was forced to watch in misery as he took all the accolades that should have belonged to her.

"Now you have a problem because you ran into Montez," Nina continued.

"I can't decide if this is awkward or sexy."

"Sexy. Definitely sexy."

"You're a romantic," Desiree said with a smile. Then she sobered. "I'm not so sure meeting him is a sexy coincidence. He was *not* happy to see me."

Despite their original chemistry, there was now friction between them since she dipped on him without saying a word—despite thoroughly enjoying herself in his arms. She would never forget how he removed her clothes with a mischievous spark in his eyes. She thought about it often and from time to time regretted her decision to slip out without keeping in touch. But why would she? She was not interested in a serious relationship and had been fairly certain he wasn't either, which he confirmed.

Besides, the timing wasn't right. If she had met him a year—or even six months from now, it would be better. Right now, however, she had to concentrate on getting the promotion, and if she achieved it, she had to bring her A-game to demonstrate she deserved the position. She simply couldn't spare time for a man.

"I've got to make this work. I need this promotion."

"So, what's the plan?" Nina asked.

“I have to fill out the online profile, and then Montez and I will iron out the details of our fake relationship. I had sex with the man but barely know anything about him. The good news is he meets some of my requirements already. He’s good-looking, presentable, and the night we hooked up he proved himself to be a great conversationalist.”

“That’s a plus.”

“Definitely. I don’t have any doubt he’ll do well at the dinner, but I need to make sure the tension between us isn’t obvious.”

“You’re going to have to turn into a great actress, and he’s going to have to be a great actor.” Nina lifted her wine glass to her lips.

“Agreed. Let’s hope we can pull it off.”

“You can, and who knows, maybe the two of you might hook up again.” A slight smile touched her friend’s lips.

Desiree grimaced. “I doubt it. I get the distinct impression that he doesn’t like me because I left without a word.”

“Why *did* you do that? When you talk about him, it’s obvious you liked the guy.”

“I did, but... at this point in my life, the last thing I need is a relationship. I learned my lesson with Royce, and now it’s all about me. I’m going to achieve my goals and not worry about a man. Maybe later I can look for a husband and find me a hot billionaire like you did.”

Nina laughed, but then a thoughtful frown puckered her brow. “What if Montez is nothing like Royce? He could be a good guy, and you might be missing out.”

Desiree shook her head vehemently. “Doesn’t matter. At this stage of my life, I could run into Mr. Perfect and I’d still pass because I don’t want to be distracted. Eye on the prize.”

Her friend nodded. “I understand. In that case, I hope he does a good job convincing your boss that the relationship is real so you can get this promotion. When is he making a final decision?”

“The final decision will be made in August.”

“You don’t have to fake date Montez for that long, do you?”

“No, thank goodness! I need him for this event and that’s it. Then we’re done.”

Despite speaking with relief in her voice, a tiny part of her hated that after this weekend, she would never see Montez again.

Montez entered carrying a box of pizza from one of the restaurants within walking distance of his condo at Atlantic Station, a commercial and residential neighborhood in Midtown Atlanta. He dropped his satchel on the sofa and put the food on the counter in the kitchen.

In his bedroom, he stripped out of his clothes and donned a plain white T-shirt and knee-length shorts. Going back to the kitchen, he grabbed the pizza and a beer and sauntered into the living room where he propped his feet on the coffee table and settled down to eat.

Four slices and the start of a movie later, his doorbell rang, and a quick check of the app on his phone showed Desiree standing outside the door. He released a groan because he hadn't realized it was so late and time for them to have their conversation. How had he gotten himself into this mess?

He wiped his hands and mouth with a napkin and went to open the door. He hadn't seen her since she came into the At Your Service office a couple of days ago, and while she looked the same, she also looked different. Her hair was in a sleek ponytail, and she wore a designer leisure suit with tennis shoes. She wore less makeup than he'd seen her in before—only tinted lip gloss this time—and her skin glowed in a way it didn't when they last saw each other.

“Hi,” he said without enthusiasm.

“Hi. Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

He opened the door and watched her walk away, her fine behind swaying though she wore tennis shoes. She obviously moved that way naturally.

Montez shut the door.

“You don’t seem happy to see me,” she remarked.

Montez shot her his fakest smile. “How’s this? This is my happy face. Better?”

She eyed him with narrowed eyes. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

“Have a seat.” He waved her into an armchair before reclaiming his seat on the sofa.

Desiree sat down and crossed her legs. “Looks like I interrupted your dinner.”

“You want some?” He opened the pizza box and showed her the inside. Four slices left.

She crossed her legs and whipped out a notepad and pen. “No, thanks. I already ate. Tonight I’m covering a lot of ground. I want to make sure we know as much about each other as possible before we go to my boss’s house, where the dinner will take place. I was thinking we could say we’ve been a couple for six months?”

Montez shrugged. “Works for me.”

“Perfect. Maybe we met through mutual friends? My friend, Nina—”

“Whoa, time out.” He used his hands to indicate the universal sign for time out. “We need to stick as close to the facts as possible. The fewer lies we have to remember, the better.”

“Good point. So, we met at Kizzie’s Diner and hit it off.”

“Sounds good to me. Might want to leave out the one-night stand part.”

She shot daggers at him. “I wasn’t planning to mention that. Hobbies... you mentioned golf and hiking before.”

“That’s right,” Montez said around a mouthful of pizza.

“You know I like hiking too. I read a lot and swim laps a couple of times a week at the gym near my house. I haven’t done much photography lately, but I showed you some pictures at Kizzie’s, so you’re familiar with my work. Next, you need to know the names of the people you’ll be meeting. They’re Ethel and Mark Stumpton, and Mark is a second-generation owner of Carolina’s Closet. It was founded by his mother, Carolina, and after she passed, he took over.”

“Got it.”

The rest of the conversation consisted of them discussing their jobs. Montez learned she took a marketing manager job at Carolina’s Closet because they offered a better benefits package and opportunity for

advancement than the job she had before, and she eventually became one of the vice presidents of marketing. He gave background information on his family's business, which was the brainchild of his mother, the CEO. His father worked there as the CFO.

"Any other family members work there?" Desiree asked, scribbling fast.

"My older sister, Stacy, and my brother, Devonte, who you talked to before. Stacy is our COO, and Devonte is in charge of intake and scheduling. My younger sisters and brother aren't interested in the company. My brother's in grad school, one sister is abroad, and my other sister is in med school."

She finished writing. "Got it.

"What about you?"

"I have..." Desiree paused. "I haven't seen you write a single note the entire time I've been here."

"I don't need to. I have a good memory." He sipped his beer.

"Montez."

"Relax and trust me. Go ahead."

She pursed her lips but continued. "I have a younger sister who's a social worker. She got married a few years ago and moved to Alabama, where her husband is from. Her name is Monica."

They continued the conversation, covering details about each other's family that they should know if they had really been in a relationship for six months. Montez listened to her talk as he went to the kitchen and dumped the empty beer bottle and pizza box.

"Number one pet peeve?" she asked, looking up at him.

He idly tossed a foam basketball in the air as he paced in front of the windows facing the parking lot. "People who are habitually late."

"Ohmigod, that's the worst. I hate it too."

"It's rude as hell. My time is just as valuable as yours."

"Exactly! I have a friend who's like that. We stopped inviting her to go out with us."

"That sucks." Montez tossed the ball in the air and caught it.

"We didn't have a choice. Some places won't seat you until your entire party has arrived. It was annoying, and her explanations were always lame."

"I hate going to the doctor's office and having to wait. And don't call me to the back if you're not ready for me. Now I'm stuck in your sterile room scrolling through my phone so I'll have something to do. At least if I'm in the

waiting room I can watch the TV or people watch.”

“I know.” She laughed out loud, shaking her head. Did she have any idea how pretty she was when she laughed? Her whole face lit up, and the sound of her laughter was magical.

“What’s your biggest pet peeve?” Montez asked.

“Negativity.”

“Come on.”

“I’m serious. Negative people get on my nerves.” She smoothed her hair, though there wasn’t a strand out of place. “People who always see the glass as half empty instead of half full. There are a lot of terrible things in the world, but sometimes it’s just not that serious. They’re the kind of people who... let’s say we found a cure for cancer, they’d still find a way to complain!”

He chuckled. “I have the feeling you’re thinking of someone in particular.”

“I’ll never tell.” She pretended to zip her lips.

“Okay, let’s continue. What’s next on your list?”

They covered a few more topics, including mentioning the names of friends and discussing more of their backgrounds.

After more than an hour had passed, Montez set aside the ball and sat in the armchair across from Desiree. “What about your competition for the promotion? Do I need to know anything about him?”

She slowly closed her notebook and a serious expression came over her face.

“I need to tell you something about him. His name is Royce Brayden, and he’s my ex.”

Montez cocked his ear toward her as if to hear better. “Your *ex* is the competition for your promotion?” He couldn’t believe it. This was messy.

“Yes.”

“Hold up. What happened between the two of you, because the way you talked about him the other day, I thought the devil himself was the person you were competing against.”

“I practically am competing against the devil, and I’d rather not go into the details,” she said.

“Wait a minute, now I understand what’s going on. You don’t just need an escort to this dinner—you need to show your ex that you’re no longer alone, right?”

She dodged his gaze and started writing again. “The importance of this dinner cannot be stressed enough. My promotion is on the line.”

Montez leaned forward. “Answer the question.”

She refused to look at him, and he didn’t say a word, determined to wait her out.

Finally, she let out a sigh that seemed to come from deep inside and raised her eyes. “Fine! I admit it. I didn’t want to attend the dinner alone because Ass-Face will be there. We split up several years ago, and he’s a real piece of work. Sexist and a jerk but knows how to hide his true nature in front of our boss. Most of the staff can’t stand him, but he’s good at his job.”

“Better than you?” Montez asked.

“No.” She spoke with vehemence and conviction. “He’s also married with a baby on the way.”

“And you’re not.”

“I don’t care about that. All I care about is the promotion. *I want this job.*”

“Why do you want it so much?”

She reared back, as if the question startled her. “Why does anyone want more money and greater responsibility?”

Montez braced his arms on the chair. “Now that I know this man is your ex, I know exactly how to play this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was planning to bring my A-game anyway, but now... I’m bringing my A-plus game.”

“What exactly does that mean, and should I be worried?”

Montez smiled. “You have nothing to worry about. You’re in good hands.”

“Does this mean you’re not mad at me anymore?” Desiree asked with a hopeful lilt to her voice.

He should let her think he was still pissed, but what was the point? They had to work together. “I’m letting you off the hook, for now. Deliver on that Women in Marketing connection, and all is forgiven.”

A broad grin spread across her luscious lips. “Do a good job on Friday night, and I’ll have the list to you by Saturday morning.”

“Perfect.”

Montez parked outside Desiree's apartment building and walked toward the front door.

They had talked a few hours ago, during which time she suggested they meet at the Stumptions' home. He nixed the idea and pointed out that a boyfriend would pick up his girlfriend, especially for such an important occasion.

She came out when he was halfway to the door, and he couldn't believe how incredible she looked. Damn near speechless, he stopped to observe her sexy figure in a black dress that hugged her curves all the way to her ankles. The sweetheart neckline showed off the soft rise of her breasts, and his mouth went dry recalling how much he had enjoyed kissing them and sucking her nipples. She wore her hair piled on top of her head, and the spaghetti strapped top exposed arms adorned with silver jewelry.

Shaking off his stupor, Montez swallowed hard, unable to draw his eyes away from her shapely form coming toward him. "You look incredible," he said thickly and immediately cleared his throat.

"Thank you," she said, with a demure downward cast of her eyes. She swept a stray strand of hair from her eyelash. "You look nice too."

Nice? This woman was really bad for his ego.

He'd gone to Rooster's—a men's grooming center—and gotten a haircut, shave, and facial. He had changed his socks and shoes three times and cursed loudly and profusely when he couldn't find his favorite pair of cufflinks. He still didn't know where they were and settled on a pair that didn't quite satisfy him but would have to do since he didn't want to be late picking her

up, especially after saying tardiness was his biggest pet peeve.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Your tie’s a little crooked.”

She reached up, and the scent of her perfume wafted into his nostrils. The same one she’d worn the night they hooked up. He knew it well. Baccarat Rouge 540, a pricy perfume that had gone viral online. The complex fragrance signature was sweet but spicy, with keynotes that included jasmine, amber wood, and cedar wood. He was close to salivating because of the memories it evoked.

“There.” Desiree stepped back.

“Thank you. Ready to go?”

“Yes.”

Montez extended his arm, and after a quick arch of her left eyebrow, she looped her arm through his. Walking side by side with her made him feel as if he had hit the lottery.

There was something about Desiree—something he couldn’t quite put a finger on—that made him not only very aware of her but also conscious of *his* reactions to her. He couldn’t simply chill in her presence and go through the motions. He was present, alert, and noticed everything she did and said. He also noticed the way his body responded to hers. He had held his breath when she stepped in close, and with their arms looped around each other, his muscles were tense. What he felt was more than physical attraction, and it—whatever “it” was—was going to be a problem.

He helped her into his Lincoln Navigator.

“Thank you,” she said, crossing one leg over the other.

He shut the door and walked around the front of the vehicle, using those few seconds to take a deep breath and calm down. Damn, this chick was fucking was his head. She made him feel gauche, like the nineteen-year-old kid he used to be who finally went on his first real date and desperately wanted to impress the pretty girl in the passenger seat of his car.

When he was behind the wheel, he pulled away from the curb and out into the street.

“I was thinking about tonight, and I should probably do most of the talking and answer the relationship questions if any arise,” Desiree announced.

Montez briefly diverted his eyes from the road and frowned at her. “How can I demonstrate I’m a good conversationalist if I’m not talking?”

“You can talk, but leave the relationship questions to me, unless they ask you something directly.”

“Stop overthinking this. It’s going to be fine. I won’t embarrass you in front of your boss, and I’ll make sure your ex knows you aren’t pining for him.”

“He knows I’m not pining for him,” she said, straightening her spine.

“The way you described him, I’m not so sure.”

“He knows because I told him in no uncertain terms what a piece of shit he was after he stole my idea for the campaign.”

“I forgot he stole your campaign idea. Damn, woman, what did you ever see in this man?”

She released a sigh. “Good question. I’m beginning to wonder about that myself, but I’m ready to fight fire with fire. I deserve that promotion as much as Royce does, probably more, and I intend to get it.”

His eyes left the road again, and he noted the determined set of her jaw. “We should probably have some kind of pet name for each other, don’t you think?”

“Like what?”

“Babe, honey, sweetie. Something like that.”

“That’s fine, but I think it’s more important to make sure we have the facts right. Do you remember what I told you about the guests that will be there?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Tell me something about them.”

Slightly annoyed but understanding that she wanted the night to be perfect, Montez decided to humor her. “James is a classic car fanatic, so any conversation about classic cars would be welcomed by him. Your boss, Mark, is a golfer, and his wife used to work for Carolina’s Closet up until five years ago, when she quit to spend more time with their grandchildren. His sister, Gertrude, is the receptionist and has worked at the company for years—mostly to keep busy since her husband is wealthy in his own right. Everyone believes she’s the eyes and ears of the company and feeds information to Mark. She travels every chance she gets and shares her photos when she returns from her trips.”

“Good. Do you remember my sister’s name?”

“Monica. She has one child and is a social worker living in Alabama, where her husband is from.”

“Right. How long have I been working at Carolina’s Closet?”

“Next March will make seven years.”

“Do you—”

“Enough! I’m not going to screw this up, but you probably will if you don’t chill.”

“Okay, okay, but you’re the one who started with your *babe* and *sweetie* talk. But you’re right, it’s one night.” She shifted in the seat.

“Exactly. We can get through one night, and then hopefully you’ll get your job.”

She rubbed her hands up and down her thighs. “It’s not that simple. There might be other events, and of course, there are the evaluations and a final interview I have to do.”

“You’ll do fine with all of that.”

He wasn’t just saying that. She struck him as capable and knowledgeable. Like women often did, she probably underestimated her own gifts. Instinctively, he took one of her hands in his and squeezed. Her skin was so soft. “Relax.”

Their gazes met in the dark interior of the car, and appreciation filled hers. “Thanks. I can do that.”

He reluctantly released her. “I’ve been meaning to ask what you did to your face last time we saw each other.”

“Um, that’s an odd thing to say. What was wrong with my face?”

Montez laughed. “That came out wrong. There was nothing wrong with your face, but you were... glowing.”

“Oh.” She smiled a little, and he was certain if her skin were lighter there would have been a red tint on her cheeks. “I went to get a facial. They do a good job.”

He nodded. “I noticed.”

They both fell silent and didn’t pick up talking again until they neared their destination.

The Stumptions lived in a swanky part of town, in a gated community filled with sprawling two-story homes with three- and four-car garages. After they gave their names at the gate, the guard waved them through, and Montez followed the road around to their home.

“Nice neighborhood,” he murmured.

“Business is doing well and only getting better,” Desiree said.

When they arrived at the Stumptions’ home, he parked in the driveway

next to a Mercedes. As they walked to the front door, he took her hand.

She shot him a startled glance.

“You’re my girlfriend, remember? In new relationships, people are usually kinda touchy-feely.” He might be taking advantage a little bit, but who could blame him? Her hands were soft, and he liked touching her.

“Right.” She cleared her throat and walked beside him to the front door.

A member of the Stumptons’ household staff let them in and escorted them to a room where several people sat. A slim man with salt and pepper hair was the first to stand. Montez immediately scoped out the excellent tailoring on his navy-blue suit.

“Desiree, how are you?”

“Wonderful, Mark. How are you?”

“Starving,” he said with a laugh. Then his gaze settled on Montez.

“This is Montez Ross. Montez, this is Mark Stumpton.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Mark said, shaking his hand.

A woman with a full head of gray hair and a string of pearls around her neck approached them. “Hello, Desiree, it’s good to see you again.” She gave Desiree an air kiss on the right cheek and then narrowed her eyes on Montez. “I don’t believe we’ve met before, have we? I’m very good with names and faces. I’m Ethel Stumpton.” She extended a thin, manicured hand with a single opal ring on one finger.

“No, we haven’t. This is my first time coming to a company function. I’m Montez Ross.” He shook her hand.

“Why haven’t you joined us before?” Ethel asked in a teasing voice.

Montez opened his mouth to respond, but Desiree answered for him.

“He’s very, very busy, aren’t you?” She smiled at him and took his hand again.

“That’s right,” Montez agreed.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, and I hope to see you at more events. Excuse me while I go to check on dinner. My husband is about to starve to death.”

Mark chuckled as she floated away. “Can I fix you a drink?” he asked.

“Water for me,” Desiree said.

“I’ll take the same,” Montez said, following her lead.

“You two are easy. Two waters coming up.”

As Mark went toward the bar in the corner, Montez spoke to Desiree out the side of his mouth. “Was it necessary for you to jump in like that? Ethel didn’t ask a relationship question.”

Pretending to fix his tie, Desiree responded as she smiled at him. "I know, but I wasn't sure what answer you'd give, so I thought I'd interject. Don't take it personally. I'm a perfectionist." She patted his chest as if finished. "Hello, James!"

She led him over to James, the head of international relations and an old college buddy of Mark's. The stocky-built man had a large nose and animated eyes. He looked like he was laughing even when he wasn't. Montez suspected he had a booming voice before he opened his mouth, and sure enough, he did.

"Nice to meet you, Montez," he said with a vigorous handshake.

He then introduced his wife, a petite woman who looked extra small next to her large husband.

Gertrude and her spouse arrived soon after. Gertrude had blonde hair flipped up at the ends and greeted Desiree with an enthusiastic hug, which surprised Montez. Gertrude seemed to have a closer relationship with Desiree than anyone else there.

"I'm so glad you're back. The new temp is trying her best, but she's not you," Desiree said with a conspiratorial wink.

Gertrude laughed, clearly pleased by the compliment. "I had a marvelous trip. I'll call you first when I bring in the photos on Monday."

"I can't wait," Desiree said.

The last ones to arrive were Royce and his wife, Calandra. Montez didn't need to be introduced to know who he was the moment he strode into the room. He walked in with his head held high, as if he owned the place, and Desiree's body tensed.

Mark introduced them. "Royce and Calandra, this is Montez Ross, Desiree's guest."

Royce had medium brown skin and wore his dreadlocked hair in a twist style pulled back from his face. As if surprised, his eyes skipped from Montez to Desiree and back.

"Nice to meet you." He extended a hand.

Montez shook it. "Likewise." After everything Desiree told him about this guy, he itched to say something smart but refrained.

Calandra kept her eyes on Desiree, and he couldn't blame her. Desiree was stunning tonight. Calandra, on the other hand, appeared as if she wished to be anywhere else but there. Her face seemed worn and tired, probably as a result of all the extra weight she carried in her midsection from being

pregnant. She was so distracted by Desiree, Royce had to nudge her with his elbow because she missed Montez's extended hand.

"I'm sorry. I'm a bit scatterbrained. Nice to meet you."

They shook hands.

A female member of the staff came to the open doorway and rang a crystal bell. "Dinner is ready. Please follow me."

The entire group trailed her out the door.

In the Stumpton's dining room, an elaborate chrome and crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling above a long dinner table that accommodated twelve. Two members of the staff stood off to the side as they filed in.

Mark and Ethel sat at either end, and Desiree sat next to Mark, with Montez on her right. She groaned inwardly when Royce and his wife sat opposite them and fumed when she caught Royce's smirk. Jerk.

For a man who accused her of being too focused on her career, his constant need to compete against her was pathetic. At the end of the day, she knew she was the better candidate for the job but had to make Mark and James see that. Ethel, too, since she helped Mark with major business decisions though she no longer worked at the company.

Why couldn't she find a man like that? Someone who appreciated her mind and drive, and instead of trying to stifle those characteristics, encouraged her.

Once everyone was seated, Mark spoke to the group. "Thank you for coming tonight. We all know why we're here—so we can get to better know our candidates for the senior vice president of marketing position. Usually when people hear company heads say that we're like a family, they want to run for the hills."

Everyone politely laughed.

"*But*, I genuinely mean that. We are like family at Carolina's Closet. My mother emptied her savings to start a clothing company that is now a multi-million dollar business. She built loyalty among her staff by not only treating people fairly, but by creating a workplace where everyone felt welcomed,

like a family. I've continued much of what she put in place from the beginning. We've kept the bonuses because when the company does well, everyone should share in the excess. We continue to pay competitive wages in the industry and have a friendly work environment. The executive team wants new members of the team to be hard workers, yes, but also to fit in with us. We hope to discern some of that from this social setting—away from the hustle and bustle of the office. With that said, relax, be yourself, and let's have a nice evening. All right?"

"All right," the group murmured.

The staff, which consisted of two women—one older and the other in her thirties—brought in the first course, which was a salad with a vinaigrette dressing.

"Gertrude, you took a trip recently, didn't you?" Royce asked, before placing a piece of lettuce in his mouth.

As if he didn't know. Every time Gertrude took a trip, the entire company knew because it was announced that a temp would be filling in for her. The fact that she was at the dinner meant she was most certainly back from her trip.

The older woman dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "I did. Earlier I told Desiree that I'll bring in the photos on Monday. We went to a resort in Mexico and had a lovely time, didn't we, dear?"

Her husband, a redhead with gray hairs at the temple, nodded in agreement. "Fantastic time. Friendly staff, delicious food, and everything was simply top-notch. No complaints from me. Even the sightseeing excursions they arranged were informative and enjoyable. We brought back some lovely souvenirs."

"I'll have to get the name of that resort before we leave tonight. Callie and I have been trying to decide where we want to go for our third wedding anniversary next year, and that sounds like the perfect getaway. After the baby's born, of course."

Desiree lifted her wine glass to her lips. Were they really about to celebrate their third wedding anniversary? She couldn't believe it. That would make almost five years since she and Royce split. She hated that he called his wife Callie because she had an unusual but pretty name. Was that her nickname, or did he force it on her? He loved shortening people's names, and she was certain it was done on purpose as an act of aggression.

"Is this your first baby?" Gertrude asked.

“Yes, it is.”

“When are you due, Calandra?”

Calandra opened her mouth to speak, but Royce answered. “In a couple of months. We’re nervous and excited.”

Looking at Calandra’s crestfallen face, it was obvious Royce hadn’t changed. No matter what, he had to be the center of attention. Desiree used to find his assertive behavior sexy, and sadly took too long to realize that he wasn’t simply assertive, he was a jerk incapable of loving anyone else—at least nowhere near as much as he loved himself.

“The first baby is always the most stressful,” Ethel said. “You’re trying to learn what being a good parent means while protecting this innocent, fragile human at the same time. I wish you all the best and hope you have plenty of support. Royce, I assume you’ll be taking leave once your newborn is here?”

He smiled. “Yes, but not for long. I don’t want to get too behind with my work.”

“That’s not something you should worry about, and thanks to Desiree, our paternal leave program is up and running.” Mark smiled at her.

“I didn’t do anything except make a suggestion,” Desiree said.

Montez glanced at her. “She’s so modest.”

His comment took her by surprise, but it was exactly the kind of thing a boyfriend would say. “Montez, don’t embarrass me,” she said, playing along.

“You have to learn to take a compliment, sweetie.” He shot her an amused glance.

Desiree almost busted out laughing. *Sweetie?* That’s what he’d decided on for her?

“You’re right, *babe*. You’re always getting on to me about that.”

Montez’s eyes danced with amusement.

“Do you have a nickname, Montez?” Royce asked, interrupting their playful moment.

“No, it’s just Montez.”

“Not Monty...?”

“Montez, like I said.” His voice was quiet. Too quiet, and there was no doubt the energy around the table changed.

To distract from the awkwardness, Desiree spoke up. “There are studies that show with more time off, employees are actually more productive. The Europeans take plenty of time off, and it doesn’t seem to hurt their businesses. For the idea to work in the U.S., though, we’d have to change the

entire culture.”

“You know all about that, don’t you?” Royce asked.

“What do you mean?”

The younger member of the household staff reached over Desiree’s shoulder and removed her empty plate with a fluid motion.

“Because you never take vacations. You’re a workaholic and barely want to leave the office at the end of the day.”

“I enjoy what I do.” Desiree struggled to rein in her temper, refusing to let this fool make her act up in front of her boss.

“Don’t get mad. It’s just an observation, but there’s more to life than spreadsheets and reports,” Royce said with a laugh.

Soft laughter erupted around the table, and Desiree’s cheeks burned with embarrassment. She needed to remain calm. *Don’t let him get to you. Don’t let him get to you.*

After the laughter died down, Montez said, “One thing about Desiree, when she sets her mind on something, she’s dedicated and loyal.” He gazed at her with admiration, as if he meant the words. “She’s a force to be reckoned with, but she knows how to have a good time too. We took a weekend trip to the mountains not too long ago. We hiked quite a bit, and she took some amazing photos. I keep telling her she could fall back on a career in photography if this marketing thing doesn’t work out.”

They all laughed.

“Desiree doesn’t go hiking,” Royce said.

“She does. Maybe she didn’t want to go with you—just kidding,” Montez said with a laugh.

There were a few snickers around the table. Royce shot an annoyed look at his wife, and she stopped laughing.

“What exactly do you do?” he asked, a challenge in his voice.

Montez sliced a cherry tomato as he talked. “I’m a vice president of marketing, so Desiree and I have that in common. I like talking shop with her because she always has great ideas. Like the paternal leave idea, which you should probably be thanking her for.” He sounded friendly and kept a gregarious smile on his face, but there was no doubt he took a jab at Royce.

“What kind of business are you in?” Mark placed a piece of lettuce in his mouth.

“It’s a family business. We provide handyman services,” Montez replied.

“Oh, we can always use a good handyman, can’t we, Mark?” Ethel said.

“We sure he can,” he agreed.

“You *must* leave a card with me before you go,” Ethel continued.

“I will.”

“Okay, everybody, that’s enough business talk,” Mark said. “We should move on to more interesting topics, like golf.”

“Nice segue, darling,” Ethel said dryly.

The small group laughed again.

While the staff brought out the main course—prime rib, potatoes, and green beans—Mark continued talking. “I’ve been practicing my swing.”

“He hired a coach so he could improve,” Ethel interjected.

“Where do you play?” Montez asked.

“At the Atlanta Country Club. Don’t tell me you play?” Interest sparked in Mark’s voice.

“I’ve been known to hit the ball a time or two.”

“Desiree, why have you been hiding him? We’ll have to go out on the green sometime. How about tomorrow?”

“I’m free.”

What was he doing? Desiree kicked Montez under the table, and he flinched. To play it off, he hit his head with his palm.

“What was I thinking? I’m busy. Got a million things to do. Sorry.”

“Next Saturday then, or whenever you’re free,” Mark suggested.

Ethel picked up her glass of water. “You might as well say yes because he won’t accept any other answer. He’ll keep trying until he wears you down.”

Montez laughed and shot a quick look at Desiree in a clear attempt to figure out how she wanted him to handle the invitation.

“Oh, I see what’s happening. You need Desiree to give her okay. Let’s ask her. Is it okay with you if Montez and I hit the links next week?” Mark asked.

“Of course. He doesn’t need my permission,” she responded with a laugh that she hoped didn’t sound forced.

“Good. Why don’t you come too? And you, Royce, assuming you’re both free?” Mark lifted his eyebrows higher.

“I am,” Desiree replied.

Royce challenged her with his eyes. “Me too.”

“Then it’s a date, assuming *you’re* free?”

All eyes turned to Montez.

“I sure am.”

“Excellent! I hope you’re halfway decent. I prefer a challenge.”

“You won’t be disappointed. I’ll make you wish you hadn’t invited me.”

Mark chuckled. “That’s what I like to hear.”

Ethel shook her head, but her faint smile indicated she secretly liked her husband’s behavior. “I guess we’ll see if those lessons paid off.”

Once in the car, Desiree turned in the seat to face Montez.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe he asked you to go golfing with him! I’m sorry about that.” Mark had damn near fallen in love with Montez, drawing him into conversation several times. She had *not* seen that coming. Not that she could blame the man.

“The invitation surprised me too.” He started the SUV.

“You do know this isn’t simply a golf game. It’s another way for him to determine who he wants to put in the role of senior vice president of marketing. That’s why he also invited me and Royce.”

“I know.” He backed out of the driveway.

“Which means you’ll have to pretend to be my boyfriend again, and we only agreed to one time—tonight.”

“Well, plans have changed.” He shrugged.

“You’re not upset?”

“Why should I be? If anyone should be upset, it’s you. You’re the one paying.”

True enough, she’d have to shell out more money, but that was the least of her worries. “I don’t care about the money.”

“Okay, Big Dollar.”

She let out a little laugh. “What I mean is, I’m more worried about whether you can play golf. Can you really play?”

“Can I really play?” Montez snorted and made a hard left around a corner. “I play almost every weekend. I’ll whoop his ass.”

“You cannot whoop his ass! This is my boss you’re talking about. You

need to throw the game.”

“What?” He shot an incredulous glance in her direction.

“I’m serious, Montez. You can’t beat him. He’s a sore loser, and that would only hurt *me* if my boyfriend ends up beating my boss. Think about it.”

“Come on now, I’ve never thrown a game of anything, much less golf. Frankly, no real man wants to win that way because it’s not really winning.”

She tried not to sound panicked and spoke to him in a calm voice. “Whatever ideas you have about real men, please toss them out the window and remember this isn’t one of your boys. This is the head of a multi-million dollar clothing company, and I’m trying to impress him so he’ll give me a promotion. Please set your pride aside, and if he sucks, let him win.”

“What if he’s really bad though?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Montez growled low in his throat, and she bit back a laugh at how much he struggled with the idea of throwing the game.

“Fine,” he muttered through his teeth. “I’ll throw the damn game if I need to, but I won’t like it.”

Desiree released a breath.

“Under one condition.”

Oh boy. “What’s that?”

“You let me take you to dinner.” His eyes found hers in the dark interior.

Her face became hot, and it was her turn to look at him askance. “Why would I do that?”

“Because I’m doing you a favor. Our agreement was one night, one dinner. Now I have to spend Saturday morning with a bunch of boring suits and throw a game of golf. You’re lucky all I’m asking for is dinner.”

“Oh really?”

“That’s not what I meant—unless you’re willing to do more?” His voice lowered.

“No.” A bit flustered, Desiree uncrossed and crossed her legs. Why did he get under her skin so easily?

He shrugged. “Can’t blame a brother for trying.”

“You’re getting paid for the Saturday you play golf.”

“Saturday wasn’t part of the deal, gorgeous. It’s an add-on, and remember, this isn’t my job. My job is to direct the marketing of my parents’ company, not go on dates with the clients.”

Desiree rolled her shoulders. He had a point. And she liked that he called her gorgeous. The word rolled off his tongue so easily and effortlessly.

“What’s the matter, you can let me put your ankles behind your ears, but going on a date with me is too much?”

“Don’t be nasty.” She cut her eyes at him and folded her arms over her chest. “I don’t have a problem with going out with you, per se. I’m just wondering about your expectations.”

“I don’t expect anything except a nice night out with a beautiful woman who ditched me after she fucked me in a hotel.”

“You make it sound way worse than it was.”

“Oh, really? If the roles were reversed, and I’d dipped the morning after sex, without a word, mind you, would you be totally fine with that?” He shot her a look from the corner of his eyes.

“No,” she muttered in a low voice.

He cupped a hand behind his ear. “Excuse me, I can’t hear you.”

“I said no!” Desiree snapped.

“Oh, interesting.”

“If you think I’m such a terrible person, why do you want to go out with me?”

“I don’t want to. I have to.”

“What do you mean you have to?”

He drove for a bit without answering, clearly looking for the right words to say. “I’m about to be real honest. For some reason, I can’t get you out of my head. You’ve been on my mind the past month, and it’s driving me insane. I don’t know what it is because I don’t usually like high-maintenance bougie women, but you got me.”

“Is there a compliment in there somewhere?”

He flashed a grin, his smile illuminating his face in a maddening way that made her catch her breath, like that night at Kizzie’s Diner. Montez’s smile was as dangerous as his dick—maybe more so because his smile could be whipped out at any time under any circumstances. How many unsuspecting women had fallen prey to that smile? Probably too many to count.

“In case you missed it, you’re uppermost in my mind. I can’t stop thinking about you. And I can’t lie, I wouldn’t mind a repeat of our night at the hotel. What about you?” He looked at her again.

“I-I’m not looking for a relationship, Montez.”

“Who said anything about a relationship? I want to eat some good food

and then eat you—if you’ll let me.” He said the last part so nonchalantly, at first she didn’t catch what he said. Her core clenched and became damp with lust. His tongue game was off-the-charts good. Recalling how he’d made her holler forced her toes into a tight curl.

“Okay... I, um... don’t mind sex. Obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“But... are you okay with there being nothing more between us?”

“Nothing more than sex?” he asked.

“Yes.”

His unwavering gaze met hers. “I’ll take it.”

Goodness, he sure made it hard to say no.

“Okay. Dinner, after you successfully complete your golf day with my boss. Anything after dinner is optional.”

“I can live with that. You better not back out.”

“I won’t.”

The ride back to the apartment ended way too quickly in Desiree’s opinion. When Montez walked around to her side of the vehicle and helped her down, she experienced an odd tightening in her chest. She didn’t want the night to end. She wanted to remain in his company.

They walked to the door. “So with all that talk about golf, can you even play?” Montez asked.

“Um...”

He came to a full stop. “You don’t know how to play?”

“Does miniature golf count?”

“No, miniature golf doesn’t count,” he replied, sounding disgusted.

“We’re going to have to do something about that.”

“I was thinking about taking a class.”

“I could show you, if you’re up to it.” He started walking again.

“Really? You won’t mind?”

“Nah, I don’t mind. We could go to the driving range tomorrow, and we’ll cover the fundamentals to prepare you for next Saturday.” He stopped at the door of her building, and they faced each other.

Unable to contain her excitement, Desiree bounced on her toes. “That would be wonderful. Thank you so much.”

“Not a problem.” He looked at her with amusement in his eyes.

“Thanks for picking up for me at dinner. You know, when Royce made fun of my work habits.”

“That guy’s an asshole. Hopefully, if your boss didn’t notice before, he picked up on it tonight. I wanted to say more, but I didn’t want to make a scene and jeopardize your chances for the promotion.”

“I appreciate you holding back. He knows how to bring out the worst in people, and... I guess I should tell you that overall you did a good job tonight.”

“Was there ever any doubt that I would?”

She rolled her eyes. “That reaction is the reason why I considered not paying you a compliment because I knew you’d get a big head.”

“A big head? I’m too humble for that.”

“Riiiiight.”

Montez clutched his chest and grimaced in fake pain. “That hurt.”

She smiled. He was such fun to be around. If she were looking for a man, he’d be perfect.

When he eased closer, she edged backward.

“Why are you moving away?” Montez asked.

“Why are you coming all up in my personal space?”

“Because I want to do this.”

He caught her chin and dipped his head before she could pull back. He gave her a firm kiss. No tongue, just their lips pressed together. Her core quivered, and when he lifted his head, her lips fell apart, wanting more.

Montez gazed down at her with heavy-lidded eyes. “You want me as much as I want you,” he said in a husky voice.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” she whispered, mesmerized by his eyes.

“Not maybe. Definitely.” He licked his lips, and her mind traveled back to that night and his tongue between her thighs. She closed her eyes and shivered.

His thumb stroked her jawline, and she opened her eyes.

“I’ll text you with the details later. See you tomorrow, Desiree.”

He walked away, and she almost stamped her foot in frustration. That kiss had been nothing more than an annoying appetizer, but she wanted the whole meal. She wished he’d dragged another kiss from her lips. Anything but leave. But that’s what he did.

Only after she was staring at his car’s departing lights did she realize she hadn’t moved from her spot since he walked away.

What the heck am I doing here?

Except for playing miniature golf on dates in the past, Desiree knew very little about the sport. All this for a promotion. It better work.

Montez lifted one of the clubs from the bag, and she stood on the dewy-damp grass of the driving range with her fingers curled around the handle of a 9-iron, which he claimed was easier to start with but which felt like a foreign object in her hands.

Excited and nervous at the same time, she waited as Montez came toward her with a confident stride in a white polo shirt and comfortable-looking slacks that showed off his toned arms and fine physique.

Lawd, this man is fine.

He stopped a few feet away, but it wasn't far enough. The charge in the air zapped her as surely as if she'd been struck by lightning.

He gave her an encouraging smile. "Ready?"

Desiree nodded. "I'll do my best."

"That's all you can do. Remember, you're not going to be perfect, but this isn't about perfection. We want you to become comfortable enough with the clubs that you won't look bad when compared to Ass-Face."

She snorted her laughter, pleased he continued to call Royce the not-so-nice moniker she had given him.

"We're going to start with the fundamentals. Did you already stretch like I told you?"

"Yes, sir."

He smirked, and her cheeks burned with heat. He had such a dirty mind, and apparently so did she.

“Good. Now we need to start with your grip. The grip is important because it makes for a more powerful swing and increases your accuracy. What you want to do is hold on tight to the club. Kinda like the way you were gripping my ass the night we had sex.”

“Wow, really?”

He shrugged, all innocent. “I couldn’t think of a better comparison.”

“I’m pretty sure there are better ones, but okay.”

She tightened her hands around the padded leather top of the club. “Like this?”

Montez stepped closer and heat radiated from his body to hers as he placed his hand over her fingers. “More like this,” he said, adjusting her grip.

The contact sent a bolt of electricity shooting under her skin, which reminded her of how he’d pinned both her hands together on the mattress, his big hand forceful and strong as he held her down.

“Next, we need to make sure you have the right stance.” Using his club, Montez demonstrated the right posture and how to align the club with the ball. Then he showed her how to do a proper swing with a smooth follow-through, biceps flexing with the movement.

“Want to give it a try?” he asked.

“Show me one more time,” she said.

She watched him again, listening to the explanation of how she should position her body. This time he hit the ball, and it soared in the air, a thing of beauty.

“Okay, I’m ready.” Desiree took a deep breath and copied his stance as best she could remember.

Montez placed his hands on her hips and shifted her body ever so slightly. His touch made her pulse jump to life, and she swallowed to stay calm.

“Try to swing now,” he instructed.

How was she supposed to concentrate on proper positions and hitting the ball with him behind her? Which of course reminded her of the second time they had sex, and he was... *behind* her.

“Concentrate, girl. This is important,” she quietly chided.

“What did you say, I didn’t hear you?”

“Nothing. Giving myself a pep talk, that’s all.” Taking a deep breath, Desiree swung the club—and missed. “Shit.”

“That’s okay. Focus and try again.”

Focus.

She shifted her body into position.

“Tighten your grip and straighten that spine a little,” Montez coached.

She did as he asked and then swung. This time she made contact, and the blow vibrated up her arm. The ball shot off the tee and landed a short distance down the green with a soft thump.

She turned startled eyes at him. “Ohmigod, did you see that?” she squealed.

He grinned and applauded. “Well done. Pretty good for a beginner. But can you do it again?”

“Hell, yeah. At least, I want to try.” Confidence bolstered, Desiree squared her shoulders. She positioned her body according to his instructions, swung the club at the tee, and sent the ball in a soaring arc over the green.

“Yes!” She pumped her fist and turned to him for approval.

“Well done.”

“I had a good teacher,” she said in a quiet voice.

Montez spent the next hour explaining the rules of the game and walked through the basics of play, offering corrections and words of encouragement in a soothing tone. Every time he shifted her position or brushed her with his fingers, sparks of heat blistered her skin and remained long after they no longer touched.

As the lesson continued, the sun descended and the lights at the range came on and bathed them in an amber glow. Desiree’s confidence increased with every swing, and from time to time her laughter mingled with Montez’s as they shared light-hearted banter.

By the time they finished, she felt much more confident than when they arrived and ready to match up against Royce.

“I have to say, you did a helluva good job,” Montez praised her as they packed up.

“All thanks to you, I’m ready for the big day.”

His eyes locked on hers with smoldering intensity that made her catch her breath. He brushed a stray strand of hair from the side of her face, and the intimate gesture left her trembling and aching for more than his featherlight touch. Her hormones were out of control.

“You’re something else, you know that,” he said in a husky whisper. Letting his fingers drag down her bare arm, he lit her skin ablaze with heat.

The tension between them crackled.

“I think we should cancel the contract,” Montez said.

“Why?”

“It’s against company policy to mix business and pleasure. No blurring of the lines allowed.”

“Oh, right.” He had told her that at the first meeting. “If you cancel the contract, you won’t get paid,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, but then it wouldn’t be a problem when I did this.” He stepped closer and dipped his head. Their lips touched in an achingly sweet kiss that dragged a whimper from her throat. She swayed into him while his mouth moved over hers with gentle strokes, tugging a little but also applying the right amount of pressure. The man knew how to kiss, that was for sure, and his mouth was deliciously soft and moved with skill. No doubt he’d kissed a lot in his time.

When he pulled back, she drew a sharp breath and felt the tug of desire in the lower part of her abdomen. She wanted him again. She longed for another opportunity to be tangled in the sheets with her body wrapped around his.

“I think you should do what you know is best.” Was that her voice, sounding low and husky as if she’d spent the afternoon yelling? “Although I’d hate for you to work for free.”

“Spending time with you is not work, gorgeous,” he said.

“Don’t you mean, sweetie, *babe*?”

“That’s exactly what I meant.” He brushed the back of his fingers along her jaw. “We better go.”

“Right. Go.”

“Hey.”

She gazed up at him, and he pulled her in for another kiss. She hummed her pleasure.

“You’ll do fine,” he said.

“Fingers crossed,” Desiree said, holding up crossed fingers.

Reluctantly, they pulled apart and walked side by side off the range.

“I ’m in trouble.”

Earbuds in her ear, Desiree pumped her legs fast on the stationary bike. Wired when she got home from a late-night run to the supermarket, she put on a T-shirt and leggings and went down to the apartment gym. There was one other person in there, and he was running very fast on the treadmill, sweating profusely, and looked like he might fall off at any minute. She was genuinely concerned.

“What’s the problem?” Nina asked.

“I’m starting to like him a lot. He’s funny, sexy, and good-looking. Not to mention he held his own in conversation with Mark and Royce. He defended me, and I can’t lie, that made him sexier. I need help.” With a groan of disgust, she rode faster and harder.

Nina laughed. “You don’t need help. After all this time since your relationship crashed and burned with Royce, you’ve found someone that you enjoy. That’s a good thing.”

“It would be a good thing if I wasn’t the kind of woman who easily gets distracted by her relationships. I need to stay focused. This promotion means everything to me, and I can’t screw it up.”

“You won’t, and you need to get out and play too, and Montez sounds like the perfect playmate. You deserve a man who puts the same energy into a relationship that you do.”

“We’re not in a relationship.”

“Sounds like you should be. You at least admitted you want to hook up with him again. What are you afraid of?”

“Losing myself,” Desiree answered honestly. “Montez is the kind of man I could easily see losing myself to, and...” Even the way he called her “gorgeous” made her melt with happiness inside. She shook off her concern. “Forget it. I will not jinx myself with negative talk. Montez is very confident—borderline arrogant. My new normal is soft men, the kind who ask about your day and call because they’re thinking about you. If I were dating again, that’s what I would want. I don’t want a man who makes me lose my head. Montez spells trouble and has me all discombobulated.”

“Hmm... maybe you should give in,” Nina suggested.

Desiree hopped off the bike and dabbed her damp face with a towel. “No way. He will be a distraction of the worst kind and keep me from my goal.”

“Or not.”

“You’re no help.”

“I don’t want you to miss out on a good man because you’re overthinking the situation. He’s not Royce.”

Desiree’s shoulders slumped, and she sat on a bench near the weights. “I know, and to be honest I regret leaving him in that hotel room. But I have to be realistic and concentrate on my career. That’s the promise I made to myself, and I intend to keep it. After he and I go to dinner, there’s no more Montez in my future.”

“If you say so,” Nina said, sounding one hundred percent like she didn’t believe a word that left Desiree’s mouth.



MONTEZ WALKED into the lakefront building that contained the clubhouse and restaurant of the Stone Mountain Golf Club, home to two championship-level courses.

He was meeting his cousin Drevon Ross and their buddy, Jet, before their tee time. He walked through the doors and immediately saw Drevon seated in an armchair. He was his cousin on his father’s side and a multi-hyphenate—model-actor-producer—currently searching for investors for his next film project. He looked like the rapper Drake but without the braids.

Montez walked over and gave him some dap. “Hey man, how’s it going? You’re here early.”

“I had extra time on my hands, so I thought I’d come early and chill for a

bit.”

“Did you talk to Jet?”

“He’s on his way.”

Montez sat in the armchair beside him. He and Drevon played golf regularly, though Drevon’s membership was at the Atlanta Athletic Club in Johns Creek. Jet was more of a baller than a golfer, so they always got him a guest pass whenever he played with them.

“How are things going with your new film project?”

His eyes lit up. “Everything is coming together nicely. The screenplay is done, and I have investors lined up. I’ll be meeting with them while I’m in New York in a couple of weeks. Then I’ll head to Cali to talk to Ryan Coogler. I’m hoping to get him to direct the film. If everything comes together the way I’m planning, I know this film will be a blockbuster.”

“Of course it will be. Go big or go home, right?”

“That’s right. What about you—how’s work?”

“Just finished wrapping up a social media campaign with Monica Connor. You know who she is?”

“Yeah, I know who she is. She’s a local influencer, right?”

“That’s the one. Anyway, the campaign brought in a ton of new female clients, and we were so busy that when we received a request for an escort to a business function, I ended up stepping in.”

Drevon’s eyebrows shot toward the ceiling. “That’s never happened before, has it?”

“No. Here’s the interesting part—I know the woman I went on the date with. Do you remember the woman I told you guys about a while back? Desiree?”

“Hell no! The one-night stand who disappeared the next morning?”

Montez winced. “That’s the one.”

“What kind of coincidence is that?”

“The craziest kind. We went to dinner at her boss’s house. It was supposed to be a one-time thing, but the guy loves golf and invited me to play with him. So, I’m playing golf with her, her boss, and her competition for the promotion on Saturday.”

Drevon chuckled. “You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was. I don’t know how long this thing is going to drag out, but I guess I’m going to be her boyfriend for a little longer.”

“Are you excited or...?”

Before Montez could respond, their good friend John Edward Thomas, aka Jet, strolled in. A talented landscaper, At Your Service often hired him out to women who needed that type of work. He was a big guy with golden-brown skin, a full beard, and a diamond in each ear.

“What’s up? Sorry I’m late.” He fell into the third chair and completed the semi-circle around the small table. “What did I miss?”

“Montez was about to tell me how he felt about the work he had to do for a recent client, considering they’d already hooked up. His one-night stand from over a month ago.”

Jet’s eyes widened. “No way.”

Montez caught up Jet on the conversation and ended with, “I’m supposed to go golfing with her boss, her, and her nemesis from work.”

“At least you’re getting paid for it,” Jet said with a smirk.

“That’s not the point. The more time I spend with this woman, the more I like her, and... I’m thinking about canceling the contract because I don’t want a conflict. You know how strict my mother is about that kind of thing.”

“Whoa. Do you know how she feels about you?” Jet asked.

“Usually I can tell when a woman is into me, but she’s a hard read. If it was all about sex, I’d say she’s into it. Anything more than that, I’m not sure. Doesn’t help that she told me herself she wasn’t looking for a serious relationship.”

“What are you complaining about? You found the perfect woman who only wants to have sex. It’s the holy grail. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is...” Montez hesitated and shifted in the chair. The last thing he wanted to do was sound lovesick.

“If I may interject for a minute, if she told you she’s interested in sex only, that’s bullshit,” Drevon said. “I know you prefer women like that, but don’t do it. It’s a bad idea, which you already know.”

True enough, he’d had a bad experience with a sex-only relationship with one of his sister’s friends. But at this point, he almost didn’t care about the consequences. He wanted Desiree again, and if she was down, he intended to take full advantage.

“Cut your losses,” Drevon continued. “Regularly hooking up, friends with benefits, whatever you want to call it, never works for one simple reason: someone always catches feelings.”

Montez slouched in the chair and dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling. “You’re probably right, but maybe it’ll have to be enough to get her

out of my system.” He couldn’t explain what he was feeling, only that impressing and winning over Desiree occupied way too much of his thoughts.

Jet chuckled and stroked his beard.

“What’s so funny?” Montez demanded.

“You’ve found a woman who’s exactly like you. She’s focused on her career, upwardly mobile, and doesn’t get attached when she hooks up. One-night stand? No problem. Like Drevon said, you usually prefer women like her.”

“A really wild idea crossed my mind. Is it possible, and I’m just throwing this out—that you might have deeper feelings than you’re willing to admit?” Drevon asked.

Jet let out an exaggerated gasp.

Montez shot him a dark look. “Both of you are nuts. No. Way.”

“Listen, cuz, far be it from me to judge anyone, but—”

“But you’re going to.”

Drevon chuckled. “All I’m saying is, we’ve been here for thirty minutes, and you’ve spent about twenty-nine of them talking about Desiree.”

Had he really spent that much time talking about her? Even fifteen minutes was too much.

Montez sat up and scrubbed his knuckles down his bearded jaw. These were his closest confidants, and though he hadn’t been willing to admit to himself that his feelings for Desiree were deeper than surface level, he couldn’t deny it when they shoved the evidence in his face.

“You’re right,” he said in a defeated voice. “I keep talking about her. I keep thinking about her. I wonder what she’s doing.” *I wonder if she’s screwing someone else.* He kept that thought to himself and muttered a curse in frustration. “This woman is a problem. You know what it is? She left me in that hotel room, and it threw me completely off. If I could hook up with her again, all this shit will go away.”

“You sure that’s all it is?” Skepticism laced Jet’s voice.

“I’m sure.”

Actually, he wasn’t sure. He’d been attracted to Desiree from the beginning, no doubt, but the time they spent together at Kizzie’s and then in the hotel room had left him wanting more. Spending more time with her cemented his attraction. She had a sense of humor and was goal-oriented. That was one of the sexiest things about her. She was driven and determined, and though he didn’t fully understand why she was so insistent she needed to

get the promotion, he suspected the reason was more than simply because she wanted more money.

He liked everything about her, including the way she smelled and the way she dressed. That black outfit Friday night at the dinner had him salivating and paying attention to her every movement. It fit her sexy body in such a way he couldn't take his eyes off her. He liked the way she cut her eyes at him, as if upset but not really. He liked the way she felt beneath him—her body soft and supple, taking his thrusts like a champ, no matter the position. She was down for whatever.

Damn, he was in trouble.

He might actually be falling for Desiree, and *that* was a big problem.

Montez had been playing golf since the age of twelve. It started when he was on punishment and not allowed to go to the ice cream parlor with his siblings. He couldn't remember what he had done, but he remembered leaving the house with his father and having to sit in the back seat while Barry Ross and his best friend laughed and talked up front.

By the time they arrived at the course, Montez was in a foul mood, which became fouler when his father made him caddie for him and his friends. That all changed when he was handed a 9-iron and taught to swing. His natural ability at the sport turned the day into a friendly competition—Montez and his father against the two other men.

He and his dad lost, but the match lit a fire under him, and from then on, he took golf seriously and wanted to improve. Over time, he did, playing golf regularly with his father and his friends.

What he didn't divulge to Desiree was how good he was. Golf had earned him a scholarship, and he played on his college team, winning several trophies that his parents proudly displayed in a lit cabinet in the den. He considered trying to go pro and making the sport a career, but his heart wasn't in it. He had love for the game, but not enough to handle the rigorous hours of training required for a pro career, which he might not achieve after all that work.

Besides, his parents' business took off around that time, and they wanted their kids to eventually take over *At Your Service*, so after college, he concentrated his efforts on expanding the business.

He and Desiree arrived at the course at the same time, and he paused to

look at her—chic in a pair of khakis and a light-colored sleeveless shirt. His appreciative gaze swept her from head to toe.

“You don’t have to do that, you know,” she said.

“Do what?”

“Look at me like that. No one’s around right now, so you don’t have to pretend.”

He laughed softly. “I’m not pretending, gorgeous, so you might as well get used to it.”

She dragged a hand along her ponytail and lowered her gaze demurely. “You remember what to do, right?”

“Lose the game,” he said in a sour voice.

“Yes, and take that disappointed look off your face.”

He grinned. “All right, let’s do this.”

They were like co-conspirators in a con with shared secrets, and he enjoyed the sense of camaraderie that emerged between them. They walked toward the front of the clubhouse together, and when they entered, they spotted Mark in a chair in front of the unlit fireplace. He hopped to his feet the minute he saw them.

“Mark, how’s it going?” Montez gave him a firm handshake.

“Excellent. I’m ready to get out there. Royce ran to the restroom, but he should be—oh, there he is.”

Royce approached, and Montez caught the quick look he cast at Desiree. Without thinking, Montez slipped an arm around her shoulders. She looked up at him with curiosity in her eyes but didn’t move away.

“Montez, good to see you again,” Royce said, giving him a tight smile.

“Royce.” That was the best he could do. He wasn’t about to lie.

“Since everyone is here, it’s time for us to hit the links,” Mark said.

Montez gave Desiree a reassuring wink before they followed behind the other two men.



THESE GUYS ARE TERRIBLE, Montez thought, watching in disbelief as Mark took another awkward swing. No way this man paid for professional lessons. If he did, they ran game on him.

Losing to Mark would be an insult, but then he remembered what was at

stake—Desiree’s promotion. And a date with her. Not a hook-up, but an actual date. Which technically he shouldn’t be doing since he was working for her, and At Your Service had that pesky no-getting-involved-with-the-clients rule.

When the ball went wide of the hole, Montez repeated the same sentence over and over in his head: *Failing will be worth it. Failing will be worth it.* He missed his shot on purpose, though it would have been very easy for him to sink the putt.

“Better luck next time,” Mark said with a sympathetic smile and pat on the arm.

Montez nodded his head and groaned on the inside. He caught Desiree’s eye, and he clearly saw her stifle a laugh by biting her upper lip. Oh, she thought this was funny, huh?

They piled into the golf cart and traveled over the green. Desiree sat up front with Mark, and Royce sat in the back with Montez, both of them careful not to touch. At the next stop, he eyed Royce’s stance and itched to correct his posture but remained silent. Royce swung and hit the ball a solid blow, and it bounced over the grass.

“Good one,” Mark complimented him.

Royce grinned. “Thank you. I don’t play golf very often, so it takes me awhile to warm up.”

Behind them, Montez rolled his eyes heavenward, praying for the strength to hold his tongue in check.

“I can see the improvement,” Mark said.

Then it was Desiree’s turn. She shifted her cute butt in his direction, and he silently directed her into the right position. As if she heard him through telepathy, she straightened her spine and lined up the club with the ball.

With a graceful swing, she sent the ball in a low arc over the green.

“Great job, babe.” The endearment slipped from his lips, sounding more natural than the forced “sweetie” he had used as an inside joke at the dinner party. She tossed a smile over her shoulder at him. “Thanks, sweetie.”

He smirked and then caught Royce’s peeved expression. What was this fool’s problem? He was married but acted as if he still had feelings for Desiree. *Did he?*

Standing at the back, Montez took a good look at Royce. He knew guys like him. They didn’t appreciate what they had until it was gone, but he couldn’t blame the guy. No shade to his wife, but Desiree was quite a catch.

Poised, smart, beautiful. Losing her had been a major fumble on Royce's part.

Hours later, Mark sank the ball into the eighteenth hole and won. He pumped his fist and turned to face them with an excited expression on his face.

"That's it! Look at that! I won!" He acted as if he had won The Masters.

"Incredible," Montez said.

"Congratulations," Desiree and Royce said at the same time.

"Time to see who comes in next." Mark stepped aside.

Royce walked up to the tee. Grasping his club, he paused to concentrate. After several seconds, he tapped the ball... and missed. He swore in a low but audible voice.

"You've got this. Just relax," Mark coached.

He don't have shit, Montez thought, watching his form. He could give him pointers, but he didn't like the guy and suspected he wouldn't take advice from him anyway.

It took two more strokes for Royce to sink the putt.

"Finally!" he said with a relieved laugh. He turned to Desiree. "Your turn."

She moved into place.

"You got this," Montez said.

She cast an appreciative look over her shoulder and then shifted twice on her feet.

She took the shot, and it couldn't have been more perfect if he'd done it. The ball rolled slowly across the green and dropped into the cup.

"Oh my goodness! I did it!" She ran over to Montez and flung her arms around his neck.

Laughing, he lifted her off the ground. "Good job, babe."

Gazing down at her smiling face, his heart tightened, as if a mighty fist had closed around it. They gazed into each other's eyes, and during those brief seconds, it was as if they were the only two people in the world. Everyone and everything receded into the background, and all he saw were lovely lips that he enjoyed kissing and beautiful dark eyes. All he felt was the softness of her breasts against his chest.

"Your turn, Montel." Royce's harsh voice broke the moment, and Montez reluctantly released Desiree.

"It's Montez," he said.

“Oh, right.”

Jerk. Montez had considered ending the game in last place, but after that little display of jealousy or whatever that was, no way he was giving Royce the satisfaction of beating him. If anyone left there in last place, it was not going to be Montez.

After getting in place beside the tee, he visually lined up the ball. He hadn't made a shot from this distance during the hours they played, but he was about to give them a taste of his skills.

Using a smooth swing, he tapped the ball with the right amount of force and watched it roll its way across the green... right into the cup.

The smirk on Royce's face fell away when he realized that he'd come in last place.

“Great shot! That was incredible,” Mark said.

“I don't know how I managed to do that,” Montez said with a shrug. “Guess that means I came in third, and you, Royce... you're last, right?”

Desiree did her lip-biting thing again while Royce shot a death glare so lethal toward Montez, he half expected Royce to bore a hole in his forehead.

“What a way to spend a Saturday morning. I can't thank you all enough for joining me. Maybe next time one of you will actually provide some real competition,” Mark said.

This man really had no idea he sucked, and Montez had been a party to his delusion.

They rode back to the clubhouse. Up front, Desiree and Mark chatted away while Montez received the freezer treatment from Royce in the back.

“I'll see you all on Monday,” Mark said, with a wave as they walked out of the building.

Royce didn't say a word and marched toward his vehicle on the far side of the lot.

“Somebody's a sore loser,” Montez murmured as he escorted Desiree to her Rav-4.

She covered her mouth and laughed. “Serves him right.”

She was so beautiful when she smiled or laughed. Her joy hit him in the gut.

She faced him. “Thank you so much for today. I know that it was difficult for you to throw the game the way you did.”

“You have no idea.”

“I have an idea.” She giggled and then placed a hand on his chest.

He experienced a warm sensation where she touched, and time stood still again the way it had out on the golf course.

“Since I held up my end of the bargain, you’re going to hold up yours, right?”

“Yes. Dinner.”

“Right.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Montez kissed her cheek, though he desperately wanted to kiss her lips again. A soft sigh left her lips, and when he withdrew, she gazed up at him expectantly.

“I’m looking forward to it too,” he said. “I’ll be in touch.”

He backed away and watched her climb into her SUV. Then he ambled over to his and settled behind the steering wheel.

The whole time he wore a smile on his face.

“Are you sure it’s not too much?” Desiree asked, turning this way and that in the mirror while holding up her phone as she FaceTimed with Nina.

“You look fabulous. His jaw is going to drop when he sees you.”

“I want to look great, but I don’t want to give him the wrong idea.”

“What exactly would be the wrong idea?” Nina asked innocently.

“All right, all right, yes I would love to have sex with him again. But I don’t want it to be obvious. This seems obvious.”

She wore a coral two-piece, sleeveless with a split in the skirt. The entire outfit hugged her curves and displayed a bit of midriff, which she accented with a gold belly chain.

To be honest, she felt proud of herself. Months in the gym and regular crunches had paid off.

“The point is to look fabulous and approachable. You managed to cover both those points, and the way you dress does not mean you don’t control the direction of the date.”

“Is it really a date if that’s against company rules, and I’m doing this because I owe him?” Desiree asked, setting the phone upright on her dresser.

“Yes. Have fun and call me tomorrow with the details. I have a feeling I won’t hear from you tonight.”

“I’m not sure I’m going to sleep with him.”

“I never said you were. Have fun!”

Shaking her head, Desiree hung up the call. She checked her appearance one more time, resting her hands on her hips. Well, if she wanted to change

her mind, it was already too late. Montez would be there in less than five minutes, and despite two closets filled with clothes, she didn't have any idea what else she could wear.

Her phone vibrated on the counter with a text from Montez.

Pulling up to your building now.

Time to go. She slipped on a pair of heels and left the apartment. Exiting the building, her footsteps slowed when she saw his appearance. Very unlike him, he only wore jeans and a pullover shirt with tennis shoes, as if he were on the way to watch basketball at a sports bar with his boys. Her excitement dwindled, but she fixed a smile on her face.

“Hi.”

His appreciative gaze swept her from head to toe, warming her skin and making her heart flutter. She really needed to calm down.

“As usual, you look... amazing,” he said.

“Thank you.” *Wish I could say the same about you,* she thought.

She gave him credit for the gentlemanly behavior of leaving the SUV to meet her. She watched as he opened the door, and with a hand below her elbow, helped her into the vehicle.

“Where are we going?” Desiree asked, crossing one leg over the other.

His eyes darted in her direction and caught the movement. “It’s a new spot named Joe’s Original BBQ. They have tender, delicious briskets, and instead of plain old white bread like other barbecue joints, they make their own buttery biscuits. I can taste them now.”

Desiree couldn't believe her ears. *Did he say barbecue joint?*

She didn't let on that she was disappointed about wasting this outfit at such a place. No wonder he was dressed so casually. She should've found out earlier where they were headed, but she had made an assumption.

When they pulled up to the restaurant, the parking lot was full, and there were wooden picnic tables outside. Inside the brightly lit restaurant, diners chatted and consumed the food with gusto. Montez opened the door for her, and she slipped in ahead of him.

Unable to remain quiet anymore, Desiree said, “I wish you had told me we were coming here. I feel very overdressed.”

He looked at her in an assessing way and then placed a hand at the lower part of her back, his fingertips touching the thin strip of exposed skin. “Maybe everyone else is *underdressed*. You look incredible, sexy, and you stand out. I'd be willing to bet most of these women wished they looked as

good as you, and most of the men wish they were me.”

He walked ahead of her toward the counter, and for a full five seconds Desiree didn't move because his words triggered something inside of her—a memory she had suppressed. Blinking back tears, she followed behind him.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

“I meant every word.” He pointed at the menu. “The ribs are delicious. You don't need sauce, but if you want some they have two kinds...”

He went into a spiel about the choices, and she listened attentively, soaking up the sound of his voice and the enticing way he smelled. She did catch a few people looking at her, but instead of feeling self-conscious, she straightened her shoulders.

He was right. She looked damn good, and she was going to own it.

Lucky for them, there was an empty table outside, which is where they sat with an assortment of dishes. Brisket, ribs, chicken, sausage, sides, and an extra order of the biscuits.

“This is a lot of food,” Desiree said, her eyes wide when she took a good look at the spread.

“You weren't shy about ordering, so don't be shy about eating,” he said.

She laughed. “I admit to having a hearty appetite, but that doesn't mean I can eat all this food.”

“We should at least try to put a dent in it. I'm willing to try if you are.”

“You have a deal.”

They started eating, and she sampled the different meats. Each one carried a smoky flavor, and as he promised, the ribs were so tender, they practically fell off the bone. They were well seasoned, and he was right—they didn't need the barbecue sauce.

Desiree covered her mouth so she could talk with her mouth full. “This food is freaking delicious.”

Montez nodded vigorously as he finished chewing. “I came here when they first opened and couldn't believe how good everything was. Inviting you was an excuse to come back.”

“I don't get the impression that you're the kind of person who's concerned about sitting down and eating by himself.”

“I'm not. Are you the kind of person who is?”

Desiree tore off a piece of chicken with her fingers and paused. “I used to be, but as time wore on, I became more confident and started going to movies alone, sitting at restaurants alone—and sometimes I don't bring a book.”

He let out an exaggerated gasp, and she laughed.

“You mean you sit there by yourself and don’t read anything?”

“Just me and my thoughts and delicious food,” she confirmed.

“That’s cool.”

They fell silent as they continued digging in. There was no way they were going to finish all these plates, but she enjoyed the process of trying.

“I need to tell you something.” Desiree wiped her hands on a napkin.

“Shoot.” He gave her his undivided attention.

“I need to explain why I got so dressed up.”

“I already know. I should’ve told you where we were going. That’s my bad.”

“It is your bad, but I also could have asked, but that’s not why I dressed up.” She paused. What she was about to tell him hadn’t been shared with a lot of people. “Like I told you before, when we were growing up, my parents didn’t have a lot of money. We never took vacations, and going out to dinner became a big event. We got dressed up in our best clothes, which we didn’t have much of, either. That’s probably why I ended up working for a retail clothing store. I can buy my clothes at a discount, and now I have way more than I need. Much different from when I was growing up—wearing out-of-fashion pieces and being made fun of because of what I wore.”

“Kids can be cruel. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

She shrugged. “It’s in the past, but when you said we were going out to dinner, I got excited—my usual response—which meant I needed to dress up. It’s kind of silly, but going out at night for a nice dinner was a big deal for me and my family, and in some ways... in a lot of ways... it still is for me.”

“Now I feel like shit. I should have chosen a different restaurant.”

“No, you’re fine! I just wanted to share that with you. I haven’t told a lot of people about my childhood.”

“Did you ever talk to Royce about your childhood?”

“A little, but... he was kind of like you. His family was well-off, so he couldn’t relate to what I told him. To be honest, I don’t know that he cared very much. Anyway, I told you that because I didn’t want you to think I was being pretentious.”

“I never once thought you were being pretentious.”

Their eyes locked on each other across the table.

“I’m starting to think you’re not such a bad guy, Montez.”

His lips curled up in a smile. “Then my plan is working.”

When they left the restaurant, both Montez and Desiree carried a Styrofoam container with leftovers.

“So, what did you think?” he asked.

“Did you not see me stuffing my face?” she asked.

He couldn’t help but laugh. Over the course of the meal, she made him laugh out loud several times with stories about her job. He considered her sense of humor one of her best attributes.

As they strolled to the Navigator, he realized that he didn’t want their time together to end and racked his brain for a good reason to extend the date.

He popped the locks on the SUV but didn’t open the door. “Are you ready to go home?”

She looked at him with questioning eyes. “Did you have something else in mind?”

“It’s kinda early, so I thought we could go somewhere and talk for a while. There’s a park not far from here, and we could go there.”

She arched an eyebrow, her lips sliding into a curve of amusement. “Do you enjoy spending time with me?”

He chuckled and gazed down at her with narrowed eyes. “You already know the answer to that question. Now I need to hear your answer to mine.”

“Hmm, well, it’s Saturday night. There are a million other things I could be doing—like laundry, washing my hair, binge-watching the next few episodes of my favorite series, *but*, I guess I’ll set aside my exciting plans and spend more time with you.”

Perfect.

“I’m so happy you decided to spend time with me instead of having the pleasure of doing all that other stuff.”

She shrugged. “I’m willing to make the sacrifice.”

“Get your ass in the car.”

While she laughed, he opened the door and let her in. He then placed their food in the back seat, and soon they were on their way. The park was located in an industrial park around a lake, man-made, but the perfect spot to chill and get to know each other better.

He hadn’t been looking for a girlfriend when they met, but he wanted more from her. More than just hot sex—though he wouldn’t mind that too.

The drive to the property took less than twenty minutes. On site, he took the winding road past the multi-story buildings to the lake surrounded by trees. Once he killed the lights, they climbed out of the vehicle. The property owner had installed lamp posts and stone benches at varying points around the water’s edge, and there was a walking path that encircled the manmade lake where employees went for walks to exercise during the work day.

Desiree surveyed their surroundings. “Is it okay for us to be out here? Even more important, is it safe?”

“Completely safe, and no one’s going to bother us. There’s a security guard who circles the property every thirty minutes or so. There he is now.” Montez pointed at the guard riding along in the golf cart.

The man waved at them, and they waved back.

They walked to the edge of the lake, and Desiree removed her heels and placed them on a stone bench nearby.

“You’re going to walk barefoot?” Montez asked.

“I sure am. I ran around barefoot all the time growing up. The bottoms of my feet are hard as hell, and if I end up getting something stuck in my sole, it won’t be the first time. I can handle it.”

Not to be outdone, Montez removed his shoes.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Joining you in your crazy decision. I hope I don’t regret it. Come on.” He led the way along the paved walking path.

They walked closely together, their arms brushing every so often. Her skin was soft, and a couple of times he bumped into her on purpose.

Montez broke the silence. “So the reason you ran around barefoot was because of your parents’ financial situation?” He hoped she would answer and didn’t consider the question to be too prying. He simply wanted to know

more about her.

“Yes and no,” Desiree replied. “My parents didn’t have a lot of money to buy the latest clothes and shoes like my friends’ parents did. Not that I minded much. I liked being barefoot, and their financial situation wasn’t their fault. They invested a lot of money—their entire savings, including pulling equity out of the house—into a fraudulent scheme. I found out all this once I became older. Turns out the guy who scammed my parents scammed a lot of people and ended up killing himself.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, it was crazy. Anyway, they lost everything, and from then on took hit after hit. My dad worked in a factory and got downsized. The new job he found didn’t pay nearly as well. My mother, who hadn’t worked most of their marriage, had to find employment. She didn’t have much experience because she hadn’t worked in years, so the money she brought in wasn’t enough to make up for the loss in income. The crazy thing is, growing up I didn’t feel as if I missed much, but now that I’m grown, I recognize the signs that they were struggling.”

“What were some of the signs?”

“I remember one time, they took me out for my birthday. Thinking back, only me and my sister ate dinner. My dad had a Coke, and my mom drank water. Am I boring you?”

“Not at all. Keep going. I want to be all up in your business.”

She giggled. “Okay. So, the house had been paid for when they pulled out the equity. My grandfather had left it for my dad, and I really believe he would rather cut off his right arm than lose that house. Their biggest struggle has been making those payments because they took out the equity. My plan is to make sure they keep it and no longer have to struggle. If I can get the senior VP of marketing promotion, my quarterly bonus will increase, and after two bonuses I should be able to pay off the balance of their mortgage.”

Montez stopped walking. “*That’s* the reason you want the promotion so badly?”

“Well, I deserve and want more money. Who doesn’t? But my main motivation is to pay off my parents’ mortgage so they don’t have to live with that worry anymore. I want them to have the life they would have had if they hadn’t made that bad investment. Even with the bad investment, they made sure I had everything I needed when I went off to college. I can’t imagine the additional financial strain that put on them.”

Beautiful and thoughtful.

“I figured there was more to the story. That’s really nice.”

She shrugged, her expression turning bashful.

Montez started walking again. They were nearing the bench where they’d first arrived. “If there’s anything I can do to help you get that promotion, I’d gladly do it.”

She slanted a sideways glance at him. “Really?”

“Hell, yeah. That’s a good reason.”

“You’ve done plenty already, and I appreciate it.”

They slowed down as they arrived at the bench.

“We made it back, and neither one of us got glass stuck in our feet,” Montez announced.

“We’re very fortunate.”

“Yes, we are.”

Silence fell between them, and she stepped closer. “I’ve decided.”

“About what?” Montez asked, genuinely confused.

Her head tilted to the side. “Whether or not I’m going to have sex with you tonight.”

A smile spread across his face, and he stepped closer, as well. “And...?”

“The answer is yes,” she said softly. As if to punctuate the answer, she swept her tongue across her lower lip.

With such a blatant invitation, Montez lowered his head to hers. The kiss started slow and easy but as heat flared to life between them, it deepened and became amorous.

Making soft whimpers in her throat, Desiree slipped her arms around his neck.

Montez lifted her from the grass, and she circled her legs around his waist. Their tongues tangled together with urgency.

Slowly, carefully, Montez lowered onto the bench and tightened his grip on her bottom.

“We should go inside the car,” he whispered.

“Yes, we should,” she breathed.

Neither of them moved. They continued to devour each other.

She reached between them and stroked his dick, and he groaned. His throbbing hard-on ached in her hand.

“Come back to my place.” He heard the desperation in his own voice but didn’t give a shit. He wanted her horizontal and nothing else mattered in that

moment but achieving that goal.

Desiree cupped his face, and they kissed long and hard.

When she finally pulled back, his entire body pulsed with need.

Finally, she answered him. "Yes."

Montez's apartment was located about twenty miles away, and he made the trip in record time, weaving between nighttime traffic while Desiree had fun messing with his head by rubbing his thigh and occasionally grazing his crotch.

When they arrived at his place, they rushed inside the elevator, and thank goodness they were alone, because he immediately crushed her against him, claiming her mouth in a kiss that seemed to go on forever. Exiting the elevator in each other's arms, they navigated the hall while they kissed and he walked her backward at the same time. He kissed her temple, her cheeks, her lips—and she leaned into him and absorbed the seductive power of each caress.

As Montez fumbled with the keys at the door, Desiree stood behind him and pressed her breasts against his back. Reaching down the front of his pants, she closed her fingers around his hard dick and gently squeezed. Her knees almost buckled as she handled her old friend. She couldn't wait to have Montez fill her again, each stroke bringing her closer to a sweet orgasm.

He aggressively jiggled the key, and she was surprised he didn't break it off in the lock. As she laughed at his distress, he uttered a stream of curse words.

"You're in so much damn trouble," he muttered, dragging her inside.

They stumbled through the mostly dark condo to his bedroom, where he damn near tore the clothes from her body by yanking the skirt down her thighs and hauling the top over her head. He paused for a moment in the semi-dark room to appreciate the fullness of her breasts in an orange satin

bra, the curve of her hips in its matching thong, and the belly chain around her waist. As his eyes traveled over her, his breathing became more shallow.

“Damn,” he breathed in a rough voice. “My memory hasn’t done you justice.”

His words were an aphrodisiac, and Desiree reached for the hem of his shirt to pull it over his head, but Montez stayed her hands by grasping her wrists.

“Before we do this, I need you to say you no longer need the services of At Your Service, and you’re no longer a client.”

Her fingers tightened in the soft cotton. “I no longer need the services of At Your Service, and I’m no longer a client.”

He grinned his sexy grin and whipped the shirt over his head. “Now take this off.” He tugged the front of her bra.

With a sensual smile, Desiree reached behind her and unhooked the lingerie, and it fell low on her arms before fluttering to the carpet. Her nipples tightened in the cool air, or maybe it was because he stared at them as if seeing them for the first time. Whatever the reason, it didn’t matter. All that mattered was the look of appreciation in his dark eyes—the same expression she saw that first night.

He cupped each breast and dragged his thumbs over the tips. Then he bent his head and kissed the soft mounds and swiped his tongue over them. Her breathing trembled at the attention, and she caressed his neck and jaw, smoothing her hand over the softness of his beard.

Montez released the catch on her chain so it fell to the floor. Then he tugged her thong past her knees, and she stepped out of it. His clothes came off next, and then she turned her lips up to his mouth as he lifted her onto the bed. Crouching over her, he nuzzled her neck and placed deep, sucking kisses on the arch of her throat.

He bent his head to her breasts again and spent a long time on her nipples—plucking them into tight peaks with his lips and teasing them with the tip of his tongue. She arched her back and squeezed her breasts together to give him unfettered access and to heighten the sensation.

His hand drifted down her stomach to the soft curls above her sex. As he sucked her breasts, his fingers played between the damp folds, toying and torturing the quivering flesh until she burned to be taken.

They rolled over and she took advantage by straddling his hips. Bending her head, she swirled her tongue over his nipple, pleased when a soft gasp

drifted from his lips. She did the same that he did to her, suckling and playfully tweaking them with her teeth until he closed his eyes and let loose a low groan. Kissing her way down his sternum, Desiree reveled in the salty but sweet taste of his skin.

“What are you about to do, babe?” Montez asked in a pained voice.

She gazed at him through her lashes with the seductive look of a temptress. “You know what I’m about to do.”

She stuck out her tongue and licked his erection, leaving a moist trail from the base to the tip. Then she opened her mouth wide and took him deep into her mouth. His body jerked right before his hand landed on the back of her head.

Satisfied with his reaction, she wrapped her fingers around him and sucked with more enthusiasm.

“*Desiree.*” His voice was a hoarse moan this time.

She bobbed her head up and down, pleased when she saw his fingers curl into the sheets and his breathing started coming in short, harsh spurts.

Montez moved his hips in tandem with her mouth, flinging back his head as his body quaked at her relentless attention. She showed him no mercy. Not even when he grabbed the back of her neck like a vice. Not even when he hissed the names of the deities in a helpless, rhythmic chant.

She would have let him release in her mouth, but he had other plans. He pulled his body away and forced her onto her back. She was disappointed but eager for what came next.

Montez yanked out the drawer in the nightstand with such force the table wobbled and the lamp on top crashed to the floor. As he kneeled above her and fit a condom on his erection, she couldn’t help but admire his beauty. Lean waist, firm stomach, and a big veiny dick she could still taste. He was truly magnificent and a handsome man and appeared more so now with his face determined and almost furious in its resolution.

Taking her hips in hand, he wedged himself between her thighs and joined their bodies with one firm thrust. A moan of pleasure hummed in his throat as he slid his hard length deeper, shuddering before guiding them into a steady rhythm.

Frantic for more, Desiree pulled him closer. “Montez,” she whispered in a trembling moan.

“I’m right here, baby. Right here.” His voice sounded as rough and raw as sandpaper gliding against exposed brick.

Her nails raked down his back and scraped his ass, clutching his cheeks for leverage as he pumped into her. Their bodies slapped together on the mattress, and she clung to him as his quiet grunts and her breathless cries filled the room.

Desiree tossed her head back and wailed as pleasure filled every cell of her body. This was heaven. This was why she hadn't stopped thinking about him for weeks. Why she'd regretted pulling a disappearing act and missed this feeling of utter and complete euphoria.

When she came, her body shuddered and her cries became louder, her fingers sinking into his skin with the strength of talons. She lost control and he welcomed the pain, grunting and whispering, "Hold on, baby. I got you. I got you."

His hips moved faster until his release trampled through him, and he growled as he came with a vengeance, burying his face in her neck. Pumping, pumping until he had nothing else to give and collapsed on top of her.



DESIREE AWOKE to the sound of running water in the adjoining bathroom. She stretched and then lay still. She had sex with Montez again! And it was better than the last time.

She covered her face and quietly laughed. *Wow.*

She breathed his masculine scent in the pillow and then pushed up on her elbows to look around the room. Like the living room, it contained dark furniture—a large dresser and a dark brown armchair with a shirt thrown over the back. The king bed was covered in gray sheets, and a gray cushioned bench sat at the foot of the bed.

The bathroom door popped open, and Montez came out, naked and sexy as he walked his delicious body toward her. Her mouth went dry, and she swallowed to soothe the arid dryness his appearance evoked.

"Hey, gorgeous," he said, climbing into the bed.

She loved when he called her that.

"Hi," she whispered, plopping onto the pillow and watching him.

"So..." He slowly trailed a finger down the middle of her torso, in between her breasts down to her navel.

"So..." She became breathless and anxious. Already between her legs

moistened with anticipation.

Without a word, he leaned over and kissed her. She opened her mouth and sucked in his tongue.

Montez slid on top of her and she welcomed him with open arms and open legs.

Ready for another round.

On the first Monday of every month, the Rosses came together for a working lunch meeting.

When Montez entered the conference room, his siblings were already there, and he pulled out a chair and sat beside Devonte. A few years younger, he was the same complexion as Montez and clean-shaven. Unlike Montez who typically wore a jacket to work, his brother wore a striped tie and no jacket over his powder-blue shirt.

“Nice to see you, stranger,” his brother quipped.

“Stranger? What are you talking about? We work together.”

“We haven’t been out partying in a while. Last week you canceled on me twice. What’s up with you?”

“Just busy.” Montez opened his notepad, pretending not to see the look his siblings shared. Since he and Desiree had sex, they’d spent almost every night together in the past week.

“Since when do you cancel on anything? It *is* kind of weird,” Stacy remarked. She always wore a suit, and today it was dark brown. Her amber skin tone matched their mother’s, and she currently had her braids pulled back but allowed to flow loosely down her back.

“Weird that I had something else to do?” Montez asked.

“Weird that you’d rather do something other than go partying to run game on unsuspecting women—or whatever shenanigans the two of you get into.” She shook her head.

“That sounds really mean.”

“Your behavior in the past has been reprehensible.”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with Clarissa, does it?” Montez asked.

“Why yes, it does, actually.”

He was tired of this narrative. He should have never slept with her friend, but he hadn’t been concerned about right and wrong back then, only getting another notch on his belt. “I apologized—to you and her.”

“Not good enough.”

Devonte snorted his laughter.

“In case you didn’t notice, she’s a grown woman. It’s not my fault women fall madly in love with me,” Montez said.

“Don’t be an asshole,” his sister said.

“I’m not. That’s all you, acting as if Clarissa can’t think for herself. She wanted a no-strings relationship—one without the commitment, but her feelings got tangled up. As soon as she let me know she wanted more, I cut her loose. There are real assholes out there who would have continued stringing her along.”

“He has a point,” Devonte interjected.

Stacy pursed her lips at him like a disapproving mother, the same expression she used on her children when they did or said something she didn’t like.

Before the conversation went further left, their parents entered the room carrying sandwiches and drinks. Viola Ross and Barry Ross had been together since their teen years. Both in their sixties, they continued to have the type of relationship anyone would be envious of—playful, loving, and with mutual respect. Their mother wore her hair in a full, round Afro, while their father had his hair cut short and a full beard on his jaw.

“Good morning,” their mother sang.

Montez and his siblings returned the greeting, though less enthusiastically because of the tension from the conversation.

Barry raised his eyebrows as he handed out the drinks. “What’s wrong with you three?” he asked in his deep baritone.

“Nothing. Ready to get started,” Montez said.

“All right, let’s get down to business.” Viola sat at the head of the table.

The meeting began with a discussion of the new scheduling software they had purchased. “It’s much easier to work with, and I like it a lot,” Devonte commented, and he went on to express additional reasons why he liked it better than the old software. He then told them about scheduling bottlenecks he anticipated coming up and pointed out the surge in new clients from the

social media influencer marketing they had done with Monica Connor had seen a small decline over the previous month.

Stacy gave an update on the company as a whole, including her progress on finding office space on the West Coast. They had talked about expanding for several years, and now it seemed their dream would come to fruition in the coming months.

Montez took a sip of his drink before he began his report. “Things continue to look good on the marketing front, and I have a lead on a professional marketing organization with nine hundred female members in Georgia and more around the country. Approximately two-thirds of them are single and could be potential clients.”

“How did that come about?” his mother asked.

“From another client, Desiree Hagan. She’s a member of the Women in Marketing organization and put in a good word for us. I’m working on a presentation for the group.”

“She must be very happy with our services to recommend us to her organization,” his father added.

“She is—was. She’s no longer a client.”

Devonte set down his sandwich. “Desiree Hagan... Is that the woman you met with a few weeks ago because I couldn’t meet with her? Her name was Desiree Hagan, wasn’t it?”

“That’s the one,” Montez answered.

“You were able to find someone for her?” Devonte asked with surprise.

“Not exactly. I filled in.”

“You did? That’s unusual. You never said a word.”

Montez shrugged. “It’s not a big deal.”

His mother watched him closely. “It is a big deal. You must have really impressed her because now she wants to share our services with—”

Silence filled the room.

“Please tell me you didn’t sleep with her,” his mother continued.

“Ma!”

“I know you, Montez. What is her last name again?” Viola opened the laptop beside her.

“This is really unnecessary,” Montez complained.

“Last. Name. Please.” She added a smile at the end of the command.

They all waited while she did a search for Desiree in the database, and when she found her photo, she raised her gaze to Montez.

“She’s a very attractive young woman.”

“Now I understand why you’ve been canceling on me, which makes things worse,” Devonte said.

“We didn’t get involved while under contract,” Montez explained. “I know better.”

“I’m not so sure,” Stacy muttered.

He sent his darkest glare across the table to her, but she simply smiled.

“I need to say something,” Montez began. “I know in the past I haven’t had a good track record where women are concerned.”

Stacy coughed, but when their mother sent a look her way, she patted her chest and quieted down.

“As I was saying... I know I don’t have the best track record, but this time—this woman—is different. She’s funny, generous, and works hard. Not just for herself, but to help her family. We mesh, in a way that hasn’t happened before.”

“I’ve never heard you talk about a young lady in that way before. This sounds serious,” his father said.

“It is. I... I might be falling in love with her.”

Soft gasps filled the room.

“You’re serious?” Barry asked, sounding more surprised than skeptical.

“Very,” Montez replied. He’d realized, when he woke up at her house one night and found himself staring at her, that he wanted to be in a position to wake up next to her every day from then on.

His mother touched his forearm. “If that’s the case, I’m happy for you, and I hope your relationship works out. One day when you’re ready, we would love to meet her.”

The conversation returned to business. Their father went over the financials and discussed the health of the company in comparison to the previous month and the same period last year. They wrapped up thirty minutes later with their mother giving a short speech about the direction the company was going in and her appreciation for all their hard work.

As they filed out of the conference room, Devonte tapped Montez on the shoulder. “Forget what I said earlier. If the reason you’ve been avoiding the clubs is because you found a woman you really like, I think that’s a good thing.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t hang out and spend time together anymore, but I’m no longer interested in clubbing. We could do other shit.”

“How about a concert? A client gave me tickets to a T-Murder performance that’s coming up. Maybe you, me, your girl, and some lucky female that I ask can go together.”

Montez laughed. “I’d like that.”

“I’ll let you know the details later,” his brother said as he walked away.

Montez went into his office and shut the door. He swiveled in his chair, thinking about the one person who had dominated his thoughts in the middle of the meeting. He had a sudden desire to speak to her, and after a while finally gave in to the urge and made the call.

“Hey,” Desiree answered.

“Are you busy?”

“I can take a break. What’s up?”

Montez popped his feet on top of the desk. “Nothing. Just thinking about you and wanted to hear your voice.”

Montez looped his arm around Desiree's shoulders, and she leaned into him as they strolled toward the front door of her apartment building.

The T-Murder concert had been a blast, with seats right up front. He had been shocked she knew the words to the songs and rapped with the artist at the top of her lungs. Every time they were together, he learned something new and interesting about her.

"It's crazy how good he is at his age," Desiree remarked.

"He's only about five years older than us," Montez pointed out.

"Oh yeah. He seems much older, but I guess it's because of all the drama surrounding him and his wife when he lost her and won her back again."

"That whole thing was crazy the way it played out in the media. I would never want to be famous." Montez grimaced.

Desiree opened the door and let them inside. "Are you staying the night?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I washed your shirt and boxers from last time," she said, leaving him in the living room to walk to the kitchen.

"I was planning to sleep naked."

Montez sat on her sofa with his back to the window. The apartment was small but had a ten-foot ceiling that made it seem bigger. She decorated in neutral colors—grays, creams, and beiges—for a contemporary design and incorporated her nature photography with clusters of images on the wall. The overall aesthetic was much better than his place, which he often referred to as "eclectic."

Desiree was very intentional with her design choices by picking modular furniture that had multiple uses. Like this gray, U-shaped sofa, which could be split into several pieces or transformed into a queen bed that an overnight guest could sleep on.

She returned to the living room with two bottles of water and handed one to him. “You could sleep naked if you want.”

“You wouldn’t mind?” he asked, pulling her down beside him.

“Does this look like the face of someone who would mind?”

He squeezed her close and gave her a kiss. “You have the prettiest, sexiest mouth. I love kissing you.”

“Well, what do you know? I love being kissed.” She leaned in and gave him a quick peck on the lips. “Your brother is nice.”

“Yeah, he’s a good guy. I lucked out with all my siblings.”

“Even Stacy?” she asked, with an arched eyebrow, knowing how they often bumped heads.

“She loves giving me a hard time, but that comment includes her.” Montez drank some of his water and then placed the bottle on the table in front of them. “What’s going on with the promotion?”

“We have interviews on Monday. After that, Mark will review our past evaluations for strengths, weaknesses, etc., and then finally pick the new senior VP.”

“This is a long process.”

Desiree nodded. “It’s important to him. You heard what he said at the dinner. This is his mother’s company, and I’m sure he wants to honor her by choosing the right people to be on the executive team.”

“He should give you the position and end the whole process.” Montez stretched an arm across the back of the sofa.

“I wish, but I’m patient.”

“If it were up to Gertrude, you’d already be the senior VP of marketing.”

“What makes you say that?”

“A vibe she gave off—like the hug she gave you when she arrived. She really likes you.”

“She’s a sweetheart for sure. I like her too, but I’m no fool. Her allegiance is to her brother, and she wants to continue her mother’s legacy the same as he does.” She picked at the label on the bottle with her fingernail.

“I don’t think Royce is the way to do that. What do you plan to do if Mark gives the job to him?”

She pouted. “That would suck, but... I love my job, and I’d stick around, though Royce might become unbearable.”

“He will, no doubt. If that happens, and he gives you any trouble, let me know and I’ll kick his ass.”

She lightly punched his shoulder. “That’s not necessary, but thanks.”

“It’s not necessary because you’re going to get the promotion. I know it.”

She eyed him as if seeing him for the first time. “You’re always so encouraging.”

“What else would I be?”

She shrugged, tracing the mouth of her bottle with her index finger. “Royce is... the opposite. He wanted me to dim my shine, and like a fool, I did to make him feel better.”

Montez nodded slowly. “I can see him being like that. At the dinner, he barely let Calandra speak the entire time. It’s obvious he has to be the center of attention.”

“And the *man* in the relationship. The one in charge. That’s very important to him. Were you always like this, or did you learn to be amazing over time?”

He chuckled but then slowly stopped laughing. “You want the truth?”

“The truth and nothing but the truth.”

He paused, wondering if he was about to make the right decision. Being open and honest meant being vulnerable—something he wasn’t used to with women. In the past, they’d been the ones to crush his self-esteem and make him feel small.

“I’m about to show you something, and you have to promise not to laugh.”

“I promise.” Desiree crossed her heart.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Because I’m about to show you that I wasn’t always this sexy and painfully handsome.”

“Oh my, did you have a pimple once?” she joked.

“Way worse.” Montez took out his phone and scrolled through the photos until he came to the one he wanted. He showed her the screen and the image of a scrawny guy with thick glasses and crooked teeth.

Desiree’s eyebrows drew together. “Who is this?”

“Me.”

Her eyes widened, and her mouth fell open. She snatched the phone and stared at the screen. “*You?*”

“That was in middle school. In high school, I had the same looks, but I grew a foot. Tall and goofy-looking is not a good combination.”

“Wow, you really changed.”

He took the phone and looked at the photo. He must have stared at it hundreds of times over the years. “This photo right here is a motivator and reminder of how much of an outsider I used to be. No girls would talk to me. I was even too nerdy for the nerdy ones, and the guys—man, they ragged me relentlessly. My only real friends were my cousin Dre and our buddy who lived down the street, Jet. They always had my back. Everything changed in college though. My self-esteem was in the crapper, and I was sick and tired of being a loser. Didn’t help that I played golf instead of one of the popular sports like football or basketball.”

“Oh, you poor baby.” Desiree kissed his shoulder.

“College gave me the opportunity to have a fresh start and reinvent myself, so I started working out and saved enough money to get my teeth fixed. I still have glasses, but I mostly wear contacts now. The changes worked, and that’s when the ladies started flocking to me. It was crazy.”

“And you indulged.”

“Oh, I *indulged* plenty. I can’t lie. I had a lot of catching up to do, and I sowed the hell out of my wild oats. The night I met you was a normal night for me—meet a woman I was attracted to, hook up, and then go our separate ways—unless we mutually agreed otherwise.”

“But...? I sense a *but* coming.”

He took a deep breath and set aside the phone. “For years, I had a great time, partying and hooking up. Since all the women I went out with weren’t interested in relationships, I went with the flow. It was fun for a long time, but now... I want more. Stacy gets on my nerves, but she has a healthy, loving relationship and a family. My parents have been together for over fifty years—since high school, and they continue to act like newlyweds. Growing up, they showed us what a solid, loving relationship looked like. My dad treats my mother like a queen. Brings her flowers, compliments her all the time. They have date night once a month and take trips together—just the two of them—for alone time.” He took her hand. “I know we said we would keep things casual, but... that’s getting harder for me. I want more because I know what that looks like. I’m not trying to pressure you, but casual isn’t going to

work for me much longer.”

“Wow, this is unexpected,” Desiree whispered.

“I didn’t have any idea I’d say all this tonight, but I want you to know that I care about you, a lot.”

“I care about you too, Montez.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

They kissed, and she straddled his lap and cupped his head in her hands. “I’m glad we ran into each other again. I really screwed up when I dipped on you at the hotel.”

“Yes, you did.”

They both laughed.

“But you can make it right,” he told her.

“How?”

“Make sweet, passionate love to me as often as I’d like.”

“I’m not sure that’s a punishment, because I’d want the same thing,” she whispered.

“Then we should definitely do that.”

Their mouths connected in an amorous kiss, and then he lifted her in his arms and walked back to her bedroom.

Montez strolled down the walkway to Jet's home in Alpharetta. He remembered when his friend first bought the place. Man, it had needed work, but after extensive renovations, which included using his landscaping skills on the exterior, Jet turned the house into a jewel in the neighborhood.

He rang the doorbell, and his cousin Drevon came to the door with a beer in his hand.

"Hey man, what's up?"

"Nothing but my hungry belly," Montez quipped.

Drevon laughed, and they made their way to the kitchen where Jet was setting out the food. Rocky, his two-year-old boxer, looked up from his bowl where he was eating his own meal in the corner.

"Hey, big guy," Montez said, scratching him behind the ears.

The dog's tongue hung out of his head as he smiled in appreciation.

"All right," Jet announced, placing a platter piled with food on the counter. "I hooked you all up tonight. We have Philly cheesesteaks and potato wedges."

Whenever they played pool at his place, Jet either prepared a spread or bought food.

"This smells so dang good," Montez said, fixing a plate.

They sat in the dining room to eat their meals, where conversation mostly centered around work. After they finished eating and cleared the dishes, Montez and Drevon lifted off the top of the table to expose the pool table underneath.

“Ready to get your ass beat?” Montez asked Jet as he chalked his stick.

“This isn’t golf. You know better than to talk that shit in my house.” Jet racked the balls in the center of the table and the game began in earnest.

While they were playing, Montez received a text and checked the screen. It was a message from Desiree, and he responded with a quick *Thank you*.

“What’s that smile about?” Drevon asked. He sat in the corner and sipped his beer, waiting for the game to end so he could play the winner.

“I was smiling?”

“Like a damn Cheshire Cat. Number six, side pocket.” Jet fired off a shot and sank the ball.

“I got a message from Desiree. She went to Kizzie’s Diner and picked up an order of jalapeño poppers and was letting me know she left them at my place.”

Drevon’s eyebrows shot toward the ceiling. “She has a key to your place?”

“Yes, and I have a key to hers,” Montez admitted. He already knew the guys would harass him about that.

Jet, who was about to make another shot, straightened. “It’s like that?”

Montez chuckled. “We gave each other a key for the sake of convenience. For instance, if I’m not at home, Desiree can go inside and wait for me instead of having to sit in the parking lot until I arrive. Don’t make a big deal about this.”

Drevon pointed his bottle at Montez. “We’re talking about you, so we have to make a big deal about it.”

“I’m no different from you two,” Montez said defensively.

“Don’t change the subject. This is about *you*. A man who swore up and down that he wouldn’t get serious about anyone because he had to make up for all the times he got dissed back in high school. Are you the same person?”

“Must be a different guy.” Jet bent over the table to try his shot.

“All right, all right, I did say that, but it was a long time ago. I meant it then, but things have changed. Real talk, the night I met Desiree, I was already feeling different. I don’t know man, either she changed me or she came along at the right time—whatever the answer, I think she’s the one.”

Jet missed his shot and straightened. “How long have you two been dating? It hasn’t been that long, has it?”

“Almost two months.”

“Oh damn, she put it on you then, if she got you giving her the keys to the

kingdom and talking about forever.”

“I know you not talking,” Montez said with a smirk as he bent over the table and lined up a shot.

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, man. We hired you to do work for Amaya, not put in work. That woman has you wrapped around her finger, got you eating vegan food and shit. *Vegan.*” Montez shook his head.

Drevon laughed, and Jet shot him the bird.

“She’s a special woman, and I needed more vegetables in my diet,” he grumbled.

Montez sank his shot and then stared at his cousin. “I don’t know what you’re laughing about. Antika been had a ring in your nose, and truth be told, I didn’t expect it. Who goes from being an escort one day to being a fiancé of sorts days later?” He laughed while shaking his head.

“I can see why our boy got himself in a jam, though. She’s fire,” Jet said.

“Watch your mouth—both of you,” Drevon said with a laugh. “Yeah, she’s all that, but the situation I got us into... that’s on me. I got caught up in the moment, and well... I couldn’t help myself.”

“Frankly, anybody’s better than Kendall. I still have nightmares.” Montez shivered.

“*You* have nightmares? How do you think I feel? I was the one who got arrested!” Drevon exclaimed.

“And a valuable lesson was learned. Leave those super-possessive, batshit crazy women alone,” Jet joked.

“Amen,” Drevon muttered. “Wait a minute, how did the conversation shift to us? We were talking about you and Desiree, Montez.”

Montez rested his pool stick on the floor and took a moment to reflect on his relationship. “This is new to me, but all I want to do is spend time with her, even if we’re not doing anything. We go out, of course. Couple of weeks ago, we went to the T-Murder show with Devonte and his date, but I just like sitting with her and talking. She’s funny and smart, and we never tire of things to talk about. I-I’m falling in love with her, and I’m not afraid to admit it.” He shrugged, waiting for the fallout and not caring if it came.

His feelings for Desiree ran deep, and whenever she called and said she was on the way to his place, he became excited, as if he’d hit a hole-in-one on the golf course. If he wasn’t at home, he liked that she had her own key and could let herself in and be comfortable until he arrived. She had also

started keeping some of her clothes at his condo, which he had encouraged, surprisingly. In the past, he had been very particular about women leaving personal items at his place. He simply didn't allow it.

Desiree was different, though, because... well, because he didn't consider her passing through his life. He intended for her to be a permanent fixture.

Drevon lowered the bottle from his lips. "Love? Damn."

"That's what's up. Does she know?" Jet asked.

"Not yet, but I plan to tell her."

"I'm happy for you." Drevon saluted with his bottle.

"I'm happy for all of us. Does this mean we're getting old and have to be responsible adults?" Jet asked.

Montez chuckled. "I'm afraid so. Hold up, is this the first time we've all been in a serious relationship at the same time?" He shifted his gaze from one to the other.

Jet frowned. "I think it is."

"A lot of firsts happening." Montez bent over the pool table and called the next shot.

"What's going on with Desiree and her promotion? Did she get it?" Jet picked up his beer and took a sip.

"Funny you should ask. She's going to find out on Monday." Montez sank the ball in the pocket.

"I bet she's nervous."

Montez circled the table, searching for another shot. "She's a wreck, but I already told her she's got it. Eleven, corner pocket." He missed.

He and Jet went back and forth until his friend called the final shot. "Eight ball, corner pocket."

The ball went in with a thunk, and Jet straightened with a smirk on his face.

"I'm convinced you only invite us over to beat us in pool," Montez said.

"No way. You guys are my brothers... *and* I like beating you in pool."

Drevon stood. "Let me see what damage I can do at this table."

Montez sat in the vacated seat and thought about how much his life had changed in a short time. He no longer went prowling the streets for a hookup, and he felt satisfied—content—in a way he had never felt before.

All because of Desiree.

After leaving Jet's place, Montez drove to a gas station a couple of miles away when he noticed his fuel gauge was almost on empty. As he pulled to a stop, he had a sudden urge to see Desiree, though they hadn't made plans to see each other tonight.

He tapped out a text. *You home?*

Desiree: *Yes.*

Montez: *Omw.*

Desiree: *Use your key. See you soon!*

She added a heart emoji at the end, and Montez smiled.

He hopped out of the Navigator and stuck his card in the reader. As he was filling up, a sleek black sports car pulled under the canopy across from him. Out stepped Royce Brayden with his dreadlocks loose around his shoulders.

Montez quietly groaned. He could have gone the rest of his life without ever seeing that guy again. They nodded at each other, and Montez continued pumping the gas.

Royce inserted the nozzle into his car, but soon after he looked at Montez. "My wife had the baby. A boy. I don't know if Dee mentioned it."

Montez didn't feel like talking to him, but there was no need to be impolite. "No, Desiree didn't mention it. Congratulations."

"Thanks. He came a little earlier than planned, but he and my wife are fine. I'm not taking leave right away because of the upcoming promotion, but once that's been decided, I'll take a few weeks for sure." Royce paused. "I'm not surprised Dee didn't mention we had the baby."

Montez frowned.

Royce followed up with an explanation. “Because she doesn’t care about that kind of thing. I mean, you probably know that, right? Marriage, family—none of that means anything to her. Everything is a competition and a means to an end. That’s why she and I didn’t last.”

“Really? I thought you didn’t last because you were an asshole.”

Royce appeared startled at first, but then he laughed. “You’re crazy, man.”

Montez forced out a laugh too. “Yeah, that’s me. Crazy.”

The pump stopped, and he replaced the nozzle.

“Look, I’m not trying to talk bad about Dee,” Royce started again. “She’s a great woman. Smart, funny, sexy as hell. But, uh, I didn’t get the impression you two have been together very long, so word of advice—be careful. That’s all I’m saying. Relationships don’t mean much to Dee. The most important thing in her life is work. That’s her priority, always has been, and probably always will be.” He shrugged with one shoulder.

“Thanks for the advice, but I consider *Desiree* perfect the way she is. We’re good.” Montez kept his response short so he could get the heck out of there before the urge to connect his fist to Royce’s nose became too difficult to resist.

Without another glance in his direction, Montez climbed into the SUV, silently fuming, and headed to Desiree’s apartment.

The drive there didn’t take long, and when he arrived, he let himself inside with the key.

“Honey, I’m home,” he called.

“I’m in the bedroom,” she called out.

Montez walked in that direction. “What have you been up to—” He came to an abrupt stop inside the bedroom door. Desiree’s bed was filled with clothes. “What’s all this?”

Before she answered, he walked over and kissed her beauty mark and then her plush lips. “Don’t you look sexy.”

She wore sweatpants and an oversized long-sleeved shirt, with her hair piled up in a messy ponytail.

She gently slapped his chest. “I know I don’t look great, but it’s been a long day.” She heaved out a breath and placed her hands on her hips. “I can’t decide what to wear to work on Monday, so I emptied my closet of some of my best outfits because when I win the promotion, I want to look fabulous.”

“You always look fabulous, babe.”

A grateful smile touched her lips. “Thank you, but this is so important, maybe I want to look better than fabulous.” She held up a black pantsuit against her chest. “What do you think about this?”

Stepping back, Montez stuffed his hands into his pockets and surveyed the outfit. “It’s nice.”

She wrinkled her nose “You don’t really like it.”

“I do, but I think you should wear something with color. That’s when you look your best to me.”

“Color, okay...” She scanned the items on the bed and then rummaged through the clothes. Eventually, she pulled two more suits from the pile.

She held a red skirt suit against her body and then a lavender pantsuit. “Which one?”

Montez recognized how important all this was to her, so he determined to give her his undivided attention and very honest opinion. “Let me see the red again.”

She made the switch.

“Now the lavender.”

She switched again, holding the lavender under her chin.

“Lavender,” Montez said with a decisive head nod.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Definitely the lavender.”

While Desiree gazed at the suit with a critical eye, Montez took them both from her. “You need to relax.”

She watched him place the outfits on the bed. “I can’t. Everything I’ve worked for comes to a head on Monday.”

For a brief moment, the conversation he had with Royce flitted through his mind. “I have every confidence in you, but there is a teeny-tiny possibility that Mark chooses Royce because he doesn’t see how amazing you are. What will you do then?” Montez asked.

“That’s not really an option,” Desiree said with a vigorous shake of her head.

“But what if that happens?” he insisted.

“Then I have to work harder and put in more hours to prove myself.”

“You’re already working fifty or more hours a week, babe.”

Desiree shrugged. “I need to blow Mark’s mind with new ideas. Or, I could get a job somewhere else where there are better opportunities.” She

lifted clothes off the bed and walked with them to the closet.

“I saw Royce at the gas station before I came here.”

Desiree peered out of the closet. “Did you speak to him?”

“Yes. He spoke first, and he had a lot to say. He and Calandra had a baby boy.”

Desiree’s voice came from inside the closet. “Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you. They named him Royce Junior, of course. Poor kid.”

Montez lifted a gold belt from the bed and examined it. “Despite him working so hard, he made time to start a family. You ever think about that—a family, kids?”

Desiree came out of the closet and placed a blazer on a hanger. “Sometimes. That’s not a priority right now with everything I have going on. But one day, you know... maybe.” She walked into the closet with a stack of clothes.

“Maybe?” That didn’t sound very encouraging.

She returned to the room and looked at him with curious eyes. “What’s going on? Why are you asking me these questions?”

It was Montez’s turn to shrug. “I just want to know. We talk about a lot of stuff but never about that. The future, marriage, kids. I know it’s early yet, but are we on the same page?”

The conversation with Jet and Drevon earlier, plus running into Royce, had him thinking a lot about the future—particularly a future with Desiree. Tension filled him all of a sudden.

“I think we are,” she said carefully, “but I can’t do any of that right now, and it’s different for me as a woman. Getting married might be no big deal, but kids could derail my career.”

“Maybe in a typical company, but Mark made it clear that family and relationships are important to him, as part of his mother’s legacy.”

“Are you saying you know my boss better than I do now?” Desiree asked with amusement.

Montez let out a little laugh. “I know how that sounds, but to be honest, I think you’re being unnecessarily pessimistic, that’s all.”

The smile died on her face. “Oh really? Well, I disagree. I’m not being pessimistic, I’m being realistic. I don’t have your privilege. I’m not a man, and I don’t work for the family business.”

Montez bristled at her tone and what she was implying. “Working for my family’s business doesn’t mean my life is easy,” he said evenly.

“But you have security, Montez, which I don’t. I know very well how companies can turn on loyal employees. It happened to my dad.”

Montez took a moment to parse his words carefully because he didn’t want to offend her. “What happened to your parents was terrible, but you can’t spend the rest of your life basing all your actions on what happened in the past. You have to live your own life and make decisions independent of those events.”

“Are you serious?” Desiree asked, voice elevated.

“Yes. All I’m saying is, your fixation on what happened isn’t healthy.”

“My fixation...” Resting her hands on her hips, Desiree burst out laughing and slowly shook her head.

“What is so funny?”

“You. You’re talking about my fixation, but what about yours?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Montez demanded.

She closed her eyes for several seconds as if counting backward in her head. “You claim the reason you haven’t been in a serious relationship is because you keep running into the same women, but *you* approach those types of women. Ever asked yourself why? Because with them, there’s less chance you’ll get your feelings hurt. A couple of girls back in high school hurt you, and now women who date you until the end of time only get a piece of you.”

He had shared his feelings in confidence, and what she said felt like a slap, particularly since he’d given her all of himself and opened up to her in ways he hadn’t with other women.

“Royce might be a jerk, but he was right about one thing. You have a very narrow focus, which is your career and its advancement. Keep that up, and you’re going to end up alone.”

Desiree’s eyebrows flew higher, and her face hardened. “The usual threat that men toss around. I’m going to end up alone. Oh, how awful for me! Guess what? I’d rather be alone—and therefore happy—than with a man who doesn’t appreciate me or wants to put me in a box. Get out of my apartment!”

Startled, Montez stared at Desiree in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. Leave!”

She marched past him, and he followed more slowly and walked to where she stood holding the door wide open.

“You’re overreacting,” Montez said through tight lips.

Her eyes flashed angrily at him. “No, I’m not. I put up with that

foolishness from Royce and learned my lesson the hard way. I'm not going to put up with it from you. If you can't understand how important my career is to me, especially after I explained why, then there's nothing else for us to say to each other."

Montez bit his lip to keep from yelling. Then he stepped close to Desiree, so deep into her personal space that she shuffled backward while staring up at him.

He spoke in a calm, even voice. "I'm going to give you time to calm down because obviously you're not thinking clearly."

"Do that."

They glared at each other, but neither said another word. When Montez stalked out of the apartment, Desiree slammed the door behind him. He turned and looked at the closed door in disbelief.

What the heck just happened?

Desiree slipped on the lavender pantsuit, which tied on the side with a belt. Black heels completed the outfit. Next, she took her time carefully applying her makeup.

Despite her stellar appearance, she was not in a good mood. She missed Montez and missed what they had become. They had created real inside jokes, not fake ones. They had shared interests and made memories together instead of made-up lies like the ones they told at the Stumptons' dinner. Being with him had made all her resolutions about putting off a serious relationship melt away.

Her phone chimed, and hope soared inside of her. Maybe that was Montez reaching out to wish her good luck. She took a look at the phone screen on the bathroom counter. It was her mother.

Good luck honey. No matter what happens, we're proud of you.

Almost immediately, another text came through, this time from her sister, Monica. *You got this!*

She picked up her purse and headed for the door. On the way out, another text alert. This time, from Nina. *Good luck!*

She smiled and swallowed the thickness in her throat. It was unreasonable to expect him to call or text after their argument, but she wanted him to. She couldn't stand thinking that what they had shared was over that easily. Couples fought all the time, and it didn't have to mean the end of a romance.

The drive to work seemed longer than usual, and the closer she got, the tighter her stomach. When she arrived, Gertrude gave her a faint smile, and she returned the greeting, though nerves made her stomach queasy.

Staff watched as she walked down the hall, and a few people gave her the thumbs up on the sly. If the employees were in charge of the decision, she didn't doubt she would have clinched the promotion. Unfortunately, that final decision rested with Mark—with input from Ethel.

She entered her office and pulled up short when she saw a huge bouquet of summer flowers on the desk.

"Those arrived ten minutes ago." Gertrude stood behind her, a knowing smile on her face before she walked away.

Hands trembling with hope and anticipation, Desiree checked the card.

I'm sorry. Call me later with the good news. Your new Ass-Face, Montez.

She laughed as happy tears filled her eyes and picked up the phone on her desk to call him right away, but then checked the time. Not now. She had a meeting to go to and then a sit-down with Mark to learn her fate.

By the time she entered Mark's office later that morning, Royce was already there, seated before Mark's desk. Their boss, however, was not present.

"Good morning," Desiree said in a cool voice.

His gaze swept her from head to toe before she sat beside him.

"Good morning." He straightened his tie. "Whatever happens, you put up a good fight, but I'm sure you know only the best man can win."

She was determined not to let him get to her. "Or the best woman."

He snorted as if she had said something hilarious.

Mark entered the office. "Good, you're both here. Sorry, I'm a little late. I got caught up on a phone call with our overseas production team, but of course, you don't want to hear about those issues."

"Everything about the company is important to me," Royce said.

Mark smiled, and Desiree fought the urge to burst out laughing.

Instead of sitting, Mark remained on his feet behind the desk and let his gaze encompass them both. "I'm not going to drag this out any longer. I'm sure you both feel the promotion process has gone on long enough. You know I called this meeting to tell you who will receive the senior VP position. Before I do that, I want to let you know this was not an easy decision to make. You're both excellent and bring different skills and talents to the table. Royce, you have drive, smarts, and.... and, uh, determination."

Did he stumble over his words? Weren't drive and determination kind of the same?

"Thank you, Mark."

Royce tilted up his chin, and Desiree clenched her hands together on her lap while her heart thumped in her chest.

Mark smiled at her. “Desiree, you have similar qualities. You have drive, you’re intelligent, you take initiative, and I’ve seen you flourish over the years. You’ve helped the company grow with brilliant suggestions and strategies, including some you probably didn’t get credit for.”

Holy crap, did he know Royce stole her campaign idea?

“That’s why, though choosing a new senior vice president was a tough decision, I have chosen you. You, Desiree, are our new senior vice president of marketing.”

Royce stiffened.

Desiree gasped. “Mark, thank you!” Though she had desperately wanted the position, hearing she had actually received the job surprised her.

“Thank *you* for all your hard work.” He turned to her ex. “Royce, you do a great job, and I’m sure other opportunities will be available for you later.”

Royce cleared his throat. “Thank you, sir. Congratulations, Desiree.”

Mark came around the desk and shook Royce’s hand, effectively dismissing him. After he left, Desiree came to her feet, and he shook her hand too.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” she said.

“Keep up the great work, and let me know if you have any problems in the future,” he said in a meaningful tone.

He must know, but how? Perhaps Gertrude told him?

“I will,” Desiree promised.

“Good. I’m expecting big things from you.”

“I won’t let you down.”

On the walk back to her office, Desiree fielded congratulations and applause. Standing in the middle of the hall, she lifted a hand to quiet her coworkers.

“Thank you for your support and well-wishes. I promise I won’t change after I move to my brand new, big old corner office with lots of windows.”

There were a series of chuckles, and someone at the back yelled, “You deserve it!”

“Thank you.”

She headed to her office on cloud nine, and when she entered inside received another surprise. Montez stood with his hands in his pockets, reading one of the certificates hanging on the wall.

“Montez,” she whispered.

He turned to face her. “Gertrude let me in—”

Desiree flung herself into his arms, and he laughed as he lifted her off her feet into a bear hug.

When he set her down, she gazed up at him. “What are you doing here?”

“This is your big day. Whether you got the promotion or not, I wanted to be here for you.”

She patted his chest. “You’re a big softy, you know that?”

“Shh. Keep that between us.”

She laughed. He was here. He was really *here*, and their angry words seemed like a distant memory.

“I’m sorry about what I said. That was unfair to you,” Desiree said.

Montez shrugged. “You spoke the truth. I let some crap from over a decade ago dictate how I move through life. Can you forgive me for what I said?”

“Only if you forgive me, because you were right. I need to live my own life.”

“Of course I forgive you.” He leaned down, and they shared a kiss.

Desiree wound her arms around his neck. “We had our first fight.”

“It sucked, didn’t it?”

“I hated it so much. I was worried we might not... that we were over,” she whispered.

He raised his eyebrows. “We both touched on sensitive topics, but you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

She laughed. “Good.”

He lowered his head and kissed her again.

Someone cleared their throat, and they pulled apart immediately.

Gertrude hovered in the doorway. “Excuse me. Congratulations, and HR says they need to see you today, as soon as possible, to fill out paperwork for your new perks. I also need to know where you want your celebratory dinner to take place so I can make reservations.”

“I’ll get right on that,” Desiree said.

Gertrude was about to walk away when Desiree called her back.

The older woman lifted her eyebrows in inquiry.

“Thank you,” Desiree said.

“For what?”

“For saying what I wasn’t brave enough to say about what you-know-who

did.”

She needn't say anymore. The light of acknowledgment filled Gertrude's eyes. “No one should take credit for someone else's work, and besides, us girls gotta stick together.” She winked and walked away.

“What was that about?” Montez asked.

“I'll tell you later. Come on. You're taking me to an early lunch.”

“But Gertrude said—”

“I can do all that after lunch.” Desiree took his hand.

“Yes, ma'am,” he said, and they walked hand in hand out the door.

Desiree pulled up outside the small house on Mitchell Avenue, a smile already broken out on her face at what she was about to do. Today was the day.

Eight months ago she took on the role of senior vice president of marketing, which so far had been challenging but exciting. Thirty days ago, she received a huge bonus, her second in the position. When she added her bonus to the other funds she had saved, she had enough to pay off her parents' mortgage, and that's exactly what she did. The best part was, they had no idea. All they knew was that she was coming for a visit.

She strolled up the walkway and saw the neighbor sitting on her porch across the street.

"Hello, Mrs. Foster," she called with a wave.

"Hello, Desiree. How have you been?"

She paused to answer the question. "I've been doing great, staying busy at work, as usual. I don't know if Mom and Dad told you, but I got a promotion last year that's been keeping me very busy."

Royce left the company months ago, allegedly for greener pastures. However, the rumor mill at the office suggested that he'd been asked to leave for stealing Desiree's idea and other actions unbecoming of an executive at the company.

"Congratulations! I know your parents must be very proud. Both of you girls have turned out so well."

"Thank you."

"Next time you talk to Monica, tell her I said hello, and I would love to

get pictures of that little baby of hers.”

Desiree laughed. “He’s not so little anymore, but I’ll be sure to do that.”

“I appreciate it.”

Since her parents knew she was coming, Desiree used her key to let herself into the house. As she closed the front door, laughter drifted from somewhere near the back.

“Mom? Dad?”

“We’re out on the patio,” her mother called.

She walked toward the sound of her voice and found her parents seated on plastic chairs beside each other, enjoying the afternoon’s waning sunlight.

“Hey, there she is!” her father, Jonathan, said with a big grin on his face.

One thing about her parents, they always made her feel welcomed.

People were always surprised when they saw her parents because she was tall and they expected her parents to be too. Her father, however, was a little below average, and Desiree was taller than both of them.

She pulled a chair close and engaged in small talk for a few minutes until she could no longer hold on to the secret. “I have something for you,” she said, pulling an envelope from her purse.

“What have you got there?” her mother, Doreen, asked.

“It’s a gift. Something I’ve wanted to do for a long time, and now I’m finally able to do it.”

She removed the canceled check, as well as the statement from the mortgage company. She showed them the statement, which confirmed their account had a zero balance.

“Baby, what is this?” her father asked with a puckered brow.

“You’re free. I paid off your mortgage.”

It felt amazing to say that. She had worked hard over the years, and she’d saved as much as she could, living a modest life so she could tuck away extra dollars. It helped that she worked for a clothing store, which meant her clothes budget was not ridiculously high. But whatever sacrifices she made, she had happily made them.

Her mother’s mouth fell open. “What? No, how... I...”

Doreen and Jonathan looked at each other in shock, and then they turned their attention to Desiree.

“That’s your money, you earned it,” her father said in a firm voice.

She had anticipated they would argue against her paying off the mortgage. That was simply the kind of people they were, and she had an

answer for them.

“I wouldn’t be where I am today if it wasn’t for you. My college degree, the apartment I rent, the car I drive, the place where I go to work—all of that is because of you. You took a risk and invested in my education, so this is the return on your investment.”

Her father wiped tears from his eyes.

“I don’t know what to say,” Doreen whispered in a shaky voice.

Their emotional reaction was exactly what she had hoped for, and tears filled her eyes too.

“I love you both, and I want you to finally have peace. What that man did was terrible, and I hope your retirement years will be a little less stressful now.”

Her father rose from his chair and pulled her into a hug. Doreen joined them by wrapping her arms around their torsos and squeezing.

Tears flowed down Desiree’s cheeks. The group hug did her in. She had intended to fight her emotions, but she wanted to feel everything she was supposed to feel at that moment.

“This is the best gift anyone could ever give us. Thank you, Desiree. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.” Her father squeezed her tighter.

Montez met Desiree outside his door, and she raised her eyebrows in surprise. “What’s going on?”

He had been looking forward to this moment all night and held up a strip of cloth. “You have to put this over your eyes.”

Her eyebrows inched higher. “Kinky.”

He laughed. “Get your mind out of the gutter, although we can do whatever you’re thinking later. I need you to put this on because I have a surprise for you.”

She grinned, immediately closing her eyes and turning around so her back faced him. “Go ahead.”

Montez placed the blindfold over her eyes and tied it behind her head.

“I can’t see,” she said, waving her hands around.

He took her by the forearm. “That’s the point, gorgeous. You have to trust me and let me guide you.”

Gently, he led her into the condo, and they started across the floor. Desiree sniffed the air.

“Something smells good.”

Montez didn’t reply but continued to lead her to where he had set up a romantic indoor picnic. At least, he thought it was romantic, and he hoped she did too.

He stopped in front of the spread on the floor, where he’d placed a low table covered with spicy food from their favorite Indian restaurant, including lamb vindaloo and madras curry with chicken. The table was flanked on either side by large pillows for them to sit on, and he’d purchased battery-

operated lanterns and strategically placed them on the floor to cast a soft amber light on the setting. He had never done anything like this before and felt simultaneously cheesy while excited to see her reaction.

“Ready?”

Desiree bounced on her feet. “Yes.”

Montez carefully removed the blindfold, and when she saw what he had done, she gasped. Then she looked at him. “Baby, this is so nice.”

“You like it?”

“I *love* it. Thank you.”

She raised onto her toes, and they shared a brief kiss.

Being with Desiree allowed him to do all the things he’d wanted to do in the past but never did because of his bad experiences in high school, and as she had pointed out months ago, from making the wrong choices with women. With Desiree, he had become a different man and stepped into the type of relationship he’d always secretly hoped for. The kind he had seen at home between his parents, where the love and affection his father demonstrated for his mother was a timeless, romantic example to follow.

Desiree sat cross-legged on a pillow. He joined her on the one across from her and poured them each a glass of wine.

“Next week, we’re rolling out the last phase of the marketing plan to Women in Marketing, and it’s been a success. Thank you.”

Not only had revenue increased because of the campaign, the new clients were very vocal about their positive experience with At Your Service, which generated more clients.

Montez held up his glass, and Desiree touched hers against it.

“You’re welcome,” she said.

“How did the conversation go with your parents?” he asked.

Desiree tore off a piece of naan bread. “They were happy, though reluctant to accept the gift at first.”

“You knew that would happen,” he said, putting some of the spicy lamb into his mouth.

Desiree nodded. “I did.”

She reached across the table and used her thumb to wipe sauce from the corner of his mouth.

“Thanks, babe.”

They spent the meal catching up since they hadn’t seen each other all day, and after they finished eating the delicious meal, Montez leaned against the

back of the sofa and opened his arms. “Come here.”

Desiree crawled to him and snuggled into his side.

“I want to ask you something,” Montez began. “How do you feel about taking a trip somewhere, just the two of us? I plan everything, and all you have to do is show up.”

Months ago she had told him she’d never taken a trip outside the country, but seeing all of Gertrude’s photos over the years made her want to.

“I love that idea. I’m all for it.”

“That’s the answer I wanted to hear.”

He pulled an envelope from under the sofa cushion.

“What’s that?” Desiree asked.

“Open it.”

She shot him a curious glance—looking cute as hell—and then opened the envelope. Inside were two first-class tickets to Jamaica.

Her mouth fell open. “Oh, my goodness! We’re going to Jamaica?”

“We’re going to Jamaica,” Montez confirmed.

Her eyes sparkled with excitement and she let out a happy squeal. “I don’t know what to say.”

Montez chuckled at the joy on her face, more than happy that he was the reason for her excitement. “Say yes, because those tickets are nonrefundable.”

Desiree laughed and lifted onto her knees. She straddled his thighs and draped her arms over his shoulders. “My first trip out of the country, and I’m taking it with you. Thank you so much.”

Montez slowly rubbed his hands up and down her back. “I don’t think you understand how much you mean to me. Your happiness is my priority, and I didn’t like knowing you haven’t had an opportunity to travel outside of the States, despite all the success you’ve had. I wanted you to experience that, and I wanted to be a part of it. We’ll start with Jamaica, and maybe next year we’ll hit Europe or South America or Africa.”

“Oh my goodness, I have to get a passport.” Her eyes softened as she gazed at him, stroking his hair. “I’m so glad I met you. I play golf now, and I’m about to take my first out-of-the-country trip. I’m going to take a thousand photos! Thank you for everything, Montez. I appreciate you, and your happiness is my priority too.”

She leaned in, and their lips met in a soft, affectionate kiss.

“I love you,” Desiree whispered against his mouth.

“I love you too, babe,” Montez said softly.
Then he pulled her in for another kiss.

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