

Mallory Monroe

LOVE  
COMES  
FOR

CHRISTMAS

*A Rags to Romance  
Book*



**LOVE COMES FOR CHRISTMAS**

***A RAGS TO ROMANCE BOOK***

**BY**

**MALLORY MONROE**

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## PROLOGUE

*“City sidewalks, busy sidewalks,  
dressed in holiday style.  
In the air-  
there’s a feeling of Christmas.  
Children laughing, people passing, meeting smile after smile.  
And on every street corner you’ll hear:*

*Silver bells.  
Silver bells.  
It’s Christmas time in the city.  
Ring-a-ling.  
Hear them ring.  
Soon it will be Christmas day!” Jay Livingston/Ray Evans.*

The mall that evening was jammed-packed with Christmas revelers as they walked around with more bags than they could carry and looked around at more decorations than they were ever going to get around to seeing. But the mall was decked down with the tallest tree in town and every imaginable decoration on every post and bench and storefront throughout. And the carols that rang out from the rafters kept those shoppers and sightseers buying and coming back and buying some more. It was three weeks before Christmas in Dell, Alabama, and the mood for shoppers and store managers

alike was decidedly festive.

Even Bree Turner was happy.

She and her little girl walked hand-in-hand looking at as many decorations as they could get to. Although her daughter was three, it was their first Christmas together and both of them were enjoying the view. With them were Bree's best friend Andre Washington, along with his wife and their two young sons, and the mood on their end was festive too.

Although the Washingtons were there to shop more than sightsee, Bree didn't even consider purchasing anything in that upscale mall. She had four bucks to her name, which was just enough to put gas in her piece of car to get her to her piece of job tomorrow. And even though tomorrow was payday, she wouldn't have a dime for shopping. Keeping a roof over her and her daughter's heads, and food in their bellies, was as far as that paycheck would be able to go. And it was barely able to go that far.

"There's Santa Clause!" Andre's youngest son Ricky began jumping up and down when he spotted Santa Clause over in Macy's. "Can I go, Daddy? Can I go, Mommy?"

Their mother, Sharon, looked at their father. Bree learned long ago that what Andre said was what went down in the Washington family. Otherwise, Sharon would have kicked Bree out of Andre's life years ago. "It's up to your father," Sharon said to Ricky.

Ricky then turned excitedly to his father. “Can I go, Daddy, please? I wanna see Santa Clause. I haven’t seen him for a whole year!”

Andre laughed that booming laugh Bree loved. “Only if all three of you want to go,” he said, “then you can go.”

Everybody looked at Junior, who at ten was Andre’s oldest child and who was already over that Santa Clause nonsense he used to adore too. But his baby brother was so excited. “I guess so,” he said reluctantly, which caused Ricky to hug him in appreciation.

But Andre said all *three* had to agree. Which meant Danica, Bree’s three-year-old, had to agree too. And Sharon, who tolerated Bree but loved Danica as if she was her own child, knelt down to the little girl. “Would you like to go see Santa Clause with us, Dani?”

Danica, or Dani as they called her, looked at her mother, whom she knew even at that young age was the boss of her. “Mommy please,” Dani said, jumping up and down like Ricky. “Please mommy!”

Bree smiled. Her entire life’s mission was to make certain her daughter had the happiest life she could give to her. “Of course you can go,” she said. Then Bree looked at Sharon. “Want me to come too, Share?”

“I think I can handle it,” Sharon said in her nice-nasty way as she took Dani’s hand and, with the boys in tow, hurried into Macy’s to wait in the ever-growing long line.

Bree and Andre remained outside of the popular department store that took up half of the mall's second floor, and watched Sharon and the children. "She always wanted a little girl," Andre said as he watched his wife with a combination of love and sadness in his eyes.

Bree was watching Sharon too. With her smooth, deep-dark black skin, she'd always been the "it" girl, even when they all were kids together running around Dell, and she still had that beauty men craved. Bree had a few admirers herself, but every boy wanted Sharon. Most of them, if Bree were to be honest, had her too. But Andre won her heart.

"I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you and Share for taking care of Dani while I was gone. And considering where I was when I delivered her? You guys came through for me, Dre. For real. You're a true ride or die. You're a true friend. I'll never forget that. And the way Sharon happily took Dani in when everybody knows she ain't feeling our friendship like that?" She shook her head with nothing but gratitude in her eyes. "Thank you."

"You needn't thank me, Bree. You're family. My boys call you Auntie for crying out loud. You and Dani are family. That's what I don't want you to ever forget."

Bree smiled. "Thanks."

"And speaking of family," Andre said as he reached into his pocket,

pulled out his wallet, and began to pull out a few bills.

But Bree stopped him. “Don’t you dare, Dre, I mean it.”

“Come on, Bree, take it. Just so you can get her something for Christmas.”

“I’ll get her something. When I can.”

“And when will that be? *After* Christmas? You can barely meet your rent, Bree.”

“And you’re a schoolteacher with a wife and two boys to take care of. You can barely meet your own obligations. So put your money away. She’ll be fine. I’m just getting back on my feet. I’ll get it together. You know I will. I’m just glad your uncle gave me that waitress job. Because if he hadn’t?” She couldn’t even finish her thought. She just shook her head.

Andre touched her hand and nodded his head. “I know, Bree. I know. He was glad to help you out. He’s known you since you were a baby.”

They suddenly heard snickering behind them. When they turned, they saw a group of girls that attended the high school where Andre taught and where Bree used to teach. All four girls were gawking at them. Bree knew why. She was getting a lot of that ever since she returned to town.

But Andre tried to play it off. “May we help you?” he said to the girls in a loud baritone that reminded them that he was their teacher and not their

equal, as if he had no clue what their snickering was about. All three of them, although still giggling, hurried away.

Then he turned to Bree. “They think you and I are an item. They’ve always thought that.”

Although Bree knew that was true too, they both also knew those girls’ snickering and gawking and pointing fingers had nothing to do with that misconception. At all. “There’s still time, you know.”

Andre wondered if he had missed something. “Time for what?”

“For you and Sharon to have a little girl since that’s what she wants. She has been a great wife to you, Dre. You should give her whatever she wants. And don’t come at me with that *I’m too old* line either. Because that’s sick. You’re only thirty-nine.”

“No, *you’re* only thirty-nine. I’m forty already. And forty is the new fifty.”

“Boy bye!” Bree said with a playful shove, and Andre laughed. A smart, hardworking, God-fearing black man, every female teacher at the high school admired him and wanted him as their own. Bree could not have dreamed up a better best friend. She only wished his jealous wife would stop forgetting that she and Dre were best friends since childhood and friends were all they were ever going to be.

But she decided to forget all that drama and started looking

elsewhere. They were on the second floor of the triple-decker mall, and the entire place was a sight to see. “This is such a beautiful place,” she said as she walked over to the railing that provided a more expansive view of the first and third floors. “And so big. Dang!”

“Ah that’s right,” Andre said, following her. “This is your first time here.” He leaned against the rail beside her. With the Christmas lights reflecting from the rafters and hitting the side of Bree’s smooth, dark-brown face just so, she looked angelic to him. But what he loved most about her was how she never understood how uniquely beautiful, how drop-dead gorgeous, she truly was. “I’ve been here a few times since it opened. But this is your first time.”

“Very first.”

“Never thought you’d see something this grand in Dell I’ll bet.”

“Never ever.” She leaned over and looked up at the third-floor Christmas decorations. They both were born and raised in Dell, Alabama and never left. They’d never seen anything like that mall anywhere near their hometown. “I can’t get over how fancy it is,” Bree added.

“Does it seem strange that you once knew the . . .” Andre almost slipped and said it. He and Bree exchanged a hard but sad glance. And in her beautiful, still fragile eyes, he could see her begging him not to go there. She wasn’t ready to go there. He doubted if she ever would be.

But because he would never hurt her no matter what, he left it alone. “How’s my Uncle Slappey been treating you?” he decided to ask her instead.

“I’m grateful he hired me. Don’t get me wrong. He’s the only somebody in this whole town that would hire me after what happened. But he’s working me to death,” she added, and Andre laughed. “Real talk,” she continued. “I work the morning shift and Lisa works the evening shift, but the two of us aren’t enough for the crowds he gets. And Lisa hardly ever shows up on time to relieve me. Which means I’m late picking up Dani from the daycare. He needs to hire more people.”

“I agree. But it won’t happen. Unc is the stingiest man I know. He’ll be out there waitressing before he hires another one,” Andre added, and Bree laughed.

Then they continued to look at the view. “I still can’t get over how fancy this place is either,” he said, easily forgetting the elephant in the room as he looked up at the third floor too. “And the decorations are out of this world. How did they get them up in the rafters like that anyway? It’s like a Broadway production they’re putting on for us common folk.”

“They ain’t putting this show on for us,” Bree quickly pointed out with a serious look on her face. “Are you joking? All of this is for all of those rich white folks in those mansion-like houses they built all around this mall, and for those upper-class black folks that come up from Huntsville to



do all their shopping. But for us Shantytown folks? No way. They'd close this whole thing down tomorrow if they were depending on people like us to stay in business."

Andre laughed. "True that," he said.

But then they both heard a commotion and looked toward the mall entrance as a large contingent of all-white men came marching through the revolving doors as if they owned the place.

"Who are they?" Bree wondered.

"I see our crooked mayor is with them," said Andre. "So they must be big shots. But I don't think I know anybody else."

The group, at first, stood near the entrance as the man Andre recognized as the mayor of Dell seemed to be pointing out the magnificence of that massive Christmas tree that greeted shoppers as they entered the mall.

But as the group started walking further into the mall, toward the courtyard, Bree thought another one of the men looked familiar too. He walked like somebody she used to know. And that thick, chestnut-brown hair. And that rich, tailored suit that was a cut-above the suits the other men wore. And those big, expensive shoes that shined even from where she stood. But it couldn't be. She knew it actually could be because of where they were, but it *couldn't be!*

Until the mayor pointed up to the second floor, as if to point out how

grateful they were to have a prestigious store like Macy's as a part of the mall family too, and the entire group, including the man Bree found most familiar, looked up as well. And when Bree's eyes saw the face of the man, her heart nearly stopped. And when his eyes met her eyes, and it was no doubt who that was, she thought she was going to die where she stood. Because he recognized her too. But he didn't know the half of it. Because she never told him!

By the time Andre recognized who it was too, and he turned to Bree out of concern for her, she was already gone. She was already hurrying inside of Macy's to grab her kid and run. That was all she could think to do: grab Dani and run. *Run, Bree, run.* Get out of there!

But the man downstairs had recognized who she was too. He'd never forget that face. That same beautiful, dark-brown face that had haunted his dreams for four whole years. He knew he might run into her one of these days. He knew he might have to face what he did to her sooner or later. But he never dreamed it would be within the first minutes of his arrival in town!

To have her right there, just one floor away, floored him. Because that same feeling of connection returned. Because his every instinct that once told him that she was the one, forget everybody else and pursue her, overtook him again. And even as the mayor was still pointing out how the different stores and the very mall itself had given a massive financial boost to that

entire region of the country, he took off. The mayor and the rest of the contingent were confused. What was his problem? But those in his entourage, who would jump off a bridge if he ordered them to, broke away and ran after him. But they were no match to keep up with his speed. Pure adrenalin was steering him. Unrequited love was driving him.

He hurried to the staircase and began running up those stairs two at a time. His heart was hammering. His palms were sweating. His white face was red. He allowed life circumstances to intervene and drive him away from her once before. That wasn't happening again.

He couldn't get to her fast enough.

# CHAPTER ONE

## *CHRISTMAS TIME*

### *FOUR YEARS EARLIER*

The limousine stopped in front of the Elite Sportsman Club in midtown Manhattan and the bodyguard got out of the front passenger door and shooed the valet away. Then he went to the back passenger door and waited for the boss to give the signal.

But the boss was just sitting there watching the decorations that transformed the entire city. Thanksgiving was only a few days ago and they were already in full Christmas mode. Ready to break the banks of hard-working regular folk all across the country when all of that spending had nothing to do with the birth of Christ. But that never stopped America! Capitalism to the businessmen Marsh associated with meant capitalizing on every sucker they could find. Get the little guy in credit card debt up to his eyeballs and those same businessmen live off of the interest the poor guy pays on that debt. And then get the same poor guy to do it all over again next Christmas. And none of those poor jokers ever knew they were being used.

But the way Marsh saw it, given their willingness to participate in that hunger game year in and year out, they might not have even cared had they known.

Not that this bachelor party tonight was going to be any better. He knew it wasn't. Other than Marsh, Zack was the last holdout. Now he was getting married too. Which shocked Marsh. He thought he'd walk down that aisle before lifelong confirmed bachelor Zack ever would. But he knew he had to be there. Zack selected him to be the best man in his wedding just as all of his other buddies had selected him as best man in their weddings too. And the best man didn't skip the bachelor party. It just wasn't done.

He closed his eyes for a moment, as he was still jetlagged from his business trip to Paris that he had only a few hours ago returned from, and wondered what was wrong with him. He felt as though he was in a rut. After Zack's news of impending nuptials, he found himself rethinking his lifelong strategy to never marry. To always be the outlier. To still be a bachelor at his age. But for what reason was he still a bachelor? Because he was so mistrustful of everybody, especially females? But deep down he wanted a family. He wanted a wife and kids. But he never found that right girl and just knew he never would. But now that Zack declared he'd found the love of his life when he was even more adamant about maintaining his bachelorhood than Marsh was, it gave him pause. Could there be somebody out there for him too? It seemed implausible to Marsh given all the snakes in

the grass females he had to deal with all of his life. But it had seemed that same way to his old buddy Zackery too. But then again, he thought, Zack wasn't him. Zack never had women falling out of trees to be with him (and especially with his money). It wasn't the same.

He gave a knock on his window. As best man, he had a job to do. He had to at least make an appearance. His bodyguard opened the door of the limousine and let him out. He buttoned his double-breasted suit coat, walked across the sidewalk and under the portico with his bodyguard leading the way, and entered yet another bachelor party for yet another one of his fun-loving friends.

It was worse than he had imagined. When he first walked into the private lounge inside the Sportsman club it was so lit that it bordered on chaos. The entire huge room was filled with girls gone wild and boys gone crazy. Only the "boys" were men like Marsh in their upper-forties, and the girls were barely twenty. But it was yet another bachelor party for yet another frat brother in their circle at yet another nightclub where Marshall Bach, always the best man, was footing the bill.

Marsh sat alone on a cushioned bench surrounded by ladies doing all they could to get next to him. But his big, bulky bodyguard, whom he only utilized for night outs like those, made them keep their distance. If the boss wanted to speak with one of them, the guard had already told the ladies, then

he would initiate it. He would call them over.

But Marsh wasn't calling anybody anywhere. And to the ladies, that was a shame. They remembered a time when Marshall Bach was the life of the party. None of the fun could get going until he got going. Now he just sat there all stone-faced and dressed in a suit like he was going to work. Making them feel as if his very presence could drag it all down. What happened to him, they wondered? Why was he such a killjoy all of a sudden? But since he was, by far, the richest man there in a sea of well-to-do men, and the sexiest one hands down too, the ladies still preferred him.

“Have you seen those biceps on him, girl?” asked one of the ladies with a laugh. “And that chest. Be still my heart! I just adore a man with big pecs.”

“And more than that,” said another lady. “I heard from females with firsthand knowledge of the matter that *big* is the theme of his entire body. And I'm not just talking about his chest area either. They declare he's got it going on in every department. And I mean *EVERY* department. Up and *down!* He knows what to do and how to do it and he has the equipment to get it done. If you get my drift.”

“Oh I get it alright,” said another lady, and they laughed. “Trust and believe I get it. But does he get us?” she added as they all stared at Marsh again.

Although they were making eye contact with him as much as humanly possible, the interest wasn't reciprocated at all. But they still kept trying to get his attention by twerking harder than the other ladies, or by dancing raunchier than anybody else, or just by figuring out imaginative ways to be more *extra* than everybody else. Because they knew who he was. They knew what it would mean to be his lady. That was why they wanted to get his attention so badly. But all Marsh wanted to do was leave.

And even though all of that attention-grabbing behavior might have been working exceptionally well with his buddies, all of whom seemed deliriously happy with the girls and their booty pops, it had the opposite effect on Marsh. If he saw another female with her big greasy ass bouncing all up in the air and then all up in the guys' faces, he was going to puke. He understood it: he used to call that having fun too. But after so many of those parties that were always the same no matter what the theme, he was over it. He was tired of that kind of fun.

As he continued to sit there with his legs crossed and his hands resting crossbow on his lap like the patrician he was, the guys whooping and hollering as if they had no sense at all, he was so done. It was as if he had to get out of there without a moment to spare.

But as soon as he stood up, everybody reacted. The ladies especially, but his buddies too, many of whom he grew up with. They started yelling for



him to stay. That it was the last night of Zack's freedom and as best man he should be there to support him. Marsh heard them, and ordinarily would have sympathized with what they were saying, but he smiled, threw up his hand, and kept on walking. Zack was already passed out drunk anyway. He wasn't even in a position for Marsh to tell him goodbye. That was why he kept on walking. His bodyguard escorted him outside again, opened the back door of the limousine again, and Marsh quickly got inside. He couldn't get away from there fast enough.

But as Nat King Cole sang about chestnuts roasting on an open fire inside the limousine, and as snow began to fall outside as the limo whisked him away, that morose feeling he hadn't been able to shake returned. He used to love those parties. Now he detested them. He was behaving like some old-ass Grinch and he couldn't understand why. What was wrong with him? It was the beginning of Christmastime. The best time of the year they say. But he wasn't feeling that either.

And when he finally made it home and could hear the echo of his shoes walking across the marbled floors of his massive, dead-silent mansion, and could hear the soft hum of his central heat and air as the heater began its *on cycle*, it all reminded him of how alone he was in this world. Just him and his house. Him and his corporation. Him and his money. Him and *things*.

But what was the alternative? Every last one of those men in that

club were going to end of in bed with one of those exotic dancers. And every last one of them, except for the groom-to-be, was married with children. Every last one of them. And their wives were probably off somewhere doing the exact same thing with the bride-to-be and their male strippers. Or their gardeners. Or their pool boys. Yet they never ceased to show up in public spaces declaring their love and devotion and family values and the whole nine. Bunch of hypocrites every one of them. That was why, as far as Marsh was concerned, that the alternative to his aloneness, to his aloofness, to his downright melancholy, was worse.

He poured himself a stiff one, drank it all down, and then took himself to bed.



## CHAPTER TWO

In Dell, Alabama, Bree left her friends and the bar around ten that night because she was a high school teacher that had to go to work that next morning. Her friends, all of whom were professionals, had more flexible schedules than she could ever have. They could hang all night. But she wasn't about to go into work tomorrow morning hungover, sleepy, or just plain tired. That would make for a long, dreadful work day.

She hopped into her bright red Ford Mustang EcoBoost and headed home. All of her girlfriends were heavy drinkers whenever they partied, and they always had to have a designated driver. But they never chose Bree because she always left earlier than everybody else wanted to leave. Except on Fridays when she stayed half the night, and got as sloppy as they did. She could drink them under tables.

But this wasn't Friday. It was the Monday after Thanksgiving, which made it the beginning of Christmas time: her absolute favorite time of the year. That was why, as soon as she got in her car, she was playing her Christmas playlist: Mariah Carey singing *All I Want for Christmas is You*. Otis Redding singing *Merry Christmas Baby*. Donny Hathaway singing *This Christmas*. Songs, she felt, that never went out of style. And she was

strumming her steering wheel and singing right along.

But it wasn't all smiles and rainbows. In just over three-weeks' time the kids would be out for Christmas break, which meant the school district expected every teacher to give qualifying exams before the break. Which meant all kinds of new rules and regulations that they sprang on them at the last second every single year and expected every teacher to implement right away, were taking effect. And Bree had to get up to speed on those new requirements. On top of all of the other activities she was involved in, including her being drafted to run for a seat on the city council by the local chapter of the NAACP, it was a lot.

But the position she really wanted, that of mathematics department chair, was so elusive that it seemed downright unattainable. For the past seven years, including this year, she had been applying for the position, knowing she was more than qualified, but she was passed over once again. This time in favor of a young, white teacher with less than three years' experience under her belt when Bree had thirteen. She was passed over the year before too, and the year before that. And always losing out to younger white teachers barely out of college. Had she not loved her job passionately, she would have quit long ago.

When the radio station began playing some HipHop Christmas songs that were too fast and too syncopated for her to understand a single word, she

reached out to change the station. But as soon as she did, she felt a sudden jerk and heard what seemed like a tap against her back bumper. When she looked through her rearview and saw a big, white pickup truck behind her, she frowned. *What the hell?* Did he just hit her? But when that same truck bumped her again, there was no wondering. That asshole had hit her! And just as she was about to speed up, to get away from him, she saw the driver behind the wheel. And when she saw Doylan's high-yellow grinning face, her fear became rage. And instead of fleeing the madman, she angrily pulled over to the side of the road.

Doylan pulled over too, which she knew he would. Because this was all a joke to him. But she had something ready for his joking ass this time. The cops wouldn't do anything about his petty harassing behavior and she was tired of his foolishness. She even had a restraining order out on his butt that he violated at will and with no repercussions whatsoever by the corrupted criminal justice system in Dell. They liked Doylan so they gave him a pass time and time again. But as soon as she flung her car into Park, she reached onto her backseat, grabbed the metal bat laying across the seat, and got out of her car.

Keeping her bat to her outer side, she hurried over to the passenger side of his truck. But just as he pressed down the passenger side window, still grinning as if his latest idiotic move was funny, she revealed that bat and

tried to bust out his windshield. But he saw it coming and hit the gas in time to begin speeding away. She was able to hit the side of his truck and put a dent in it, but it was a tiny dent compared to the damage she wanted to inflict. And she could see as he sped away that he didn't care about any little dent anyway. His truck was loaded with dents. And he was still grinning. All he cared about was harassing her.

“You asshole!” she angrily screamed at him from the top of her lungs as he drove away. But even she knew she was alone, at night, on the side of an isolated road. And like her entire life in Dell, she was screaming to be heard, screaming from the top of her lungs, but nobody was hearing her.

She got back in her Mustang, threw her bat in that backseat, and angrily, frustratingly, drove away.

## CHAPTER THREE

The next day the private plane landed on the narrow runway and began taxiing toward the gate. The doors to the waiting SUV flew open and the three people who had flown in on a different plane, the company jet, stepped out.

Ronald Coleman, the senior VP in charge of acquisitions at Bach and the highest ranking African-American in the corporation, led the group. With him was Ben, their driver, longtime attorney Beth Fields, who was the head of Legal, and the newest member of the team, attorney Hannah Nebeckne who was shadowing Beth to learn the ropes. But Ronald and Beth knew Harvard Law graduate and beauty queen Hannah had more than learning the ropes on her mind. The only rope she was interested in learning about was the kind she could throw out and catch a billionaire. But Beth had already warned her, countless times, to knock it off. It wasn't professional. It wasn't smart. It wasn't going to happen. But every time Hannah was around the big man, she couldn't seem to help herself. She always had to try it anyway. But she'd been warned.

And when the door of the massive plane opened and the air-steps dropped down, Beth and Ronald could see Hannah sprucing up her clothes



and her long, blonde hair even more. It was *impress the boss time* and she aimed to do just that. Beth and Ronald looked at each other and shook their heads.

But Beth had more on her mind than Hannah as she looked around. “I was hoping we’d go to some island in Hawaii or some beautiful, quiet place in the Caribbean this time around. But another small town? And this time in Alabama of all places?” She shook her salt-and-pepper hair. “You sure can pick’em, Ron.”

“What can I do about it?” asked Ronald. “This is what he wants. The boss loves these obscure places. All of his most successful acquisitions have been in obscure places.”

“I agree with Beth,” Hannah said. “How would you even get people to move to a nothing place like this?”

“That’s where the boss comes in,” said Ronald. “He can sell a dying man a timeshare.” Beth and Hannah laughed. “It’ll be another Bach Original. When he tells them it’s the best swamp land in the world and that they should come, they will come. Because he told them to. Because he’s never been wrong before. Everybody wants to live in a Bach Original community. At least those who can afford it,” he added, and he and Beth laughed.

“Here he comes, guys,” said Hannah.

When they looked and saw Marshall Bach getting off of his plane and hurrying down those steps, each one of them became tensed. He was a good boss overall, but he demanded their absolute best all the time. As if their entire lives were centered around Bach Incorporated the way his life was. There was never any letup with the guy.

And as he approached, Beth could see from the corner of her eye that Hannah had already exposed even more cleavage. “You’re wasting your time, dearie,” Beth said to her.

“Why? Is he gay?”

Beth frowned. “No, he’s not gay!”

“Then there’s no way I’m wasting my time. You may not believe it, but I’m irresistible to men.” Hannah glanced at Ronald when she said that. They slept together her first week on the job, which he immediately regretted. He didn’t return her glance.

But Hannah was a master at moving on. “He’s wearing shades at night,” she said as they all watched Marsh make his way toward them. “No sun anywhere, it’s late November, and the man has on sunglasses.” Then she smiled. “That is so cool!”

Beth and Ronald looked at each other again.

But Hannah kept going. “And the size of him. He looks like he could do wonders to a woman in bed. Even from here I can tell he’s packing a

motherload between those legs.”

“Do you realize how gross that sounds?” asked the much-older Beth.

But Hannah kept going. “Problem is, I don’t know anybody who’s had a taste. I’ve asked around everywhere but not one girl on the job has slept with him before.” She grinned. “That’s outrageous to me.”

It wasn’t outrageous to Beth. She worked for Marshall Bach for over a decade, but when she first came onboard she tried to wrangle herself a billionaire too, just as Hannah was trying to do. He wasn’t having it. It nearly cost her her job.

“Where’s his people?” Hannah asked.

Ronald looked at her. “What people?”

“He’s a billionaire. Where’s his entourage?”

“We’re his entourage,” said Beth.

“But we flew on one of the corporate jets. I thought it was because he didn’t have enough room on his personal plane to accommodate us.”

Ronald laughed. Beth shook her head. “You’ve got a lot to learn, little girl,” she said. “The help do not fly with the boss. Not in Marshall Bach’s world.”

“Who’s help?” asked Hannah.

“We all are,” said Beth, as Marsh arrived.

“Welcome to Alabama, sir,” Ronald said jovially.

“Good evening, sir,” Beth added with even more vigor.

But Marsh didn't respond to either one of them as his driver opened the front passenger door for him. Hannah quickly moved closer to him, her cleavage on high display, as she extended her hand. “Hello, Mr. Bach. It is such a pleasure working for you, sir. I grew up just loving all of the Bach Originals displayed online like they were the top of the top brand-new communities, which they were. And now to work for the man himself? A dream come true, sir.”

Marsh looked at her, her cleavage, and her offered hand, and then he looked angrily at Ronald as if it was all his fault.

“You remember Hannah Nebeckne, sir,” Ronald quickly said. “I introduced her to you a week ago? She's a new attorney in Legal. Beth is showing her the ropes.”

Marsh gave Ronald another hard look, glanced at Hannah, looking at her exposed cleavage as he did, and then he got into the SUV.

Ronald wanted to kick Hannah's ass in that moment. Beth did too. Because now the boss was going to be even more demanding. But all three piled into the backseat of the SUV.

“Told you so,” Beth whispered to Hannah as they sat side by side.

“Yeah but he looked,” a smiling Hannah whispered back at Beth. “I told *you* so!” The driver got in behind the wheel, and drove them away.

Ronald spent the entire drive giving Marsh the topology report, the cost estimates, and the various organizations they still had to convince to get onboard, beginning with the city council.

But when they arrived in front of the school board building on Lane Avenue and Marsh saw the big banner across the top with the words *CANDIDATES' FORUM* embossed across the banner, he balked. "A candidates' forum?" He looked back at his VP. "Is this necessary, Ronald?"

"Very much so, sir. Just after Christmas the city council will elect a new member to join their ranks. It's the candidates' chance to be heard and win votes. It's our chance to be heard and win support. Since it's by invitation only, everybody who is somebody in this county will be there tonight. Including Connor Rogers. We can kill a lot of birds with this one stone. That's why it's necessary."

"Why is a city council meet-and-greet being held at the school board headquarters?" asked Marsh.

"Simple reason. They have the largest meeting rooms."

Marsh shook his head. *These country-ass towns*, he thought. "And who's Connor Rogers?"

"He's the president of the council. *As goes Conner Rogers, as goes the city council*. That's what they say around town. He's a force to be reckoned with for sure. We need his buy-in if we ever expect to be granted

permission to purchase those fifty-thousand acres in this county to build our state-of-the-art mall and multi-million-dollar housing developments around it. And since you're opposed to greasing palms to get what we want, we have to put on the charm offensive big time."

"I'm not opposed to greasing anything," said Marsh. "I am opposed to feeding the trough of crooked politicians with my money. They can be crooked, but not on my dime."

"Yes, sir," said Ronald, although that mindset made his job a zillion times harder. If he had money to toss around, they could get whatever they want from crooked politicians. But not in Bach's world.

"Before the night is through," Marsh said to his team, "I'd better have all the support we need. Because I'm not coming back here. Understood?"

They all mouthed *yes, sir*, although they all thought it impossible, and then Marsh got out. And then they did too.

But as they were about to enter the forum, Marsh pulled Ronald aside.

"Sir?"

"Tell your whore to button up that blouse. What does she think this is?"

Ronald didn't like the *your* part of that comment, but he knew to keep his mouth shut. "Yes, sir," he said and was about to walk away.

But Marsh pulled him back. "And if you sleep with anybody else in

any company I own, you will be fired. And fired summarily,” he added.

Ronald swallowed hard. How in hell did he even know? “Yes, sir,” he said. Embarrassed as hell, he walked away.

Marsh watched him walk away. He was disappointed in Ron. He expected a man he promoted to Senior VP to have enough self-control to keep it zipped around his underlings. He knew Marsh didn’t play that. Not with people that worked under you. But Marsh also knew it was done now. He didn’t come all the way to Timbuktu to scold his VP. He came to make a deal.

Before Marsh entered the forum, he exhaled, removed his shades, and then put on the biggest smile he could muster. He didn’t come all the way to backwater Alabama to lose. He would win all the support they needed to get that project rolling if it was the last thing he did. That he was clear about.

He and his team walked in, and put on the charm offensive to end all charm offensives when they did.





## CHAPTER FOUR

“We’re late,” Bree said frustratingly as she turned onto Lane Avenue and headed toward the school board headquarters. “And not only are we late, but I still don’t know why I’m even attending this forum. I can’t see any of those people voting for me. And every one of them is like in their fifties. They’ll say I’m too young, I’m too this, I’m too that.”

“You’re thirty-five years old, Bree,” Andre pointed out. “You’re older than everybody else running for that seat. And by many years too. Every candidate is young. But you’re the most experienced by far. Some of those candidates are barely a year out of college. Why wouldn’t they vote for you?”

Bree gave her best friend a hard *you know why* glance and Andre had no choice but to nod his head. “Okay, there’s *that*. But there are some progressives on the city council too, Bree. They know it’s high time an African-American get a spot on at least the council. They control everything else. Every single branch of government in this county is controlled by them. They gerrymandered us out of ever winning any elections the old-fashioned way. They’ve diluted all of our voting power, putting a minority of black voters in with a majority of white voters for every single precinct, even

though we live nowhere near those white folks. They can at least give us that one slot. We've earned that right. And we want you to represent us because you won't take their crap."

But as they turned into the parking lot of the Dell, Alabama school board headquarters building and Bree could see all of the Mercedes and the Porsches and the Bentleys and the huge pickup trucks parked all over that lot, she knew she would be insane not to have doubts. She lived in Dell her entire life. Had been active in recruiting blacks into politics from the time she was old enough to vote. And not one, in all those years of activism, had ever won a city-wide election. Not one. And she was going to be the first? The *agitator* as they called her? The one who had to receive a majority of votes from the all-white city council? They wanted a good Negro, not a rabble-rouser like her. But she was on the ballot now. This was the candidates' forum. She might as well get in there and make her case.

But she was just sitting there. Andre looked at her. He could feel her anxiety. "Just be your gorgeous self and you'll be okay."

"Child please."

"Child please what?" Andre was serious. "It's true, Bree. You are a very attractive woman. You're the best-looking girl in Dell if truth be told. You just don't believe it."

"Because it's not true."

Andre shook his head. He'd never met a woman like Bree Turner. Tough as nails and humble as humble could be. She was the best teacher in the school where they both taught mathematics, but she never took nor was ever given credit for it. She was the prettiest girl in town too – he'd put her up against any female anywhere including his wife – but she didn't believe that either. He used to be in love with her when they were little kids in Shantytown, the predominantly black part of wealthy Dell. He even told her he loved her, when they were kids, but she didn't believe that either. "Puppy love," she said to him when he told her. "You'll get over it."

He did get over it and got married to the most popular girl in their school, but only because he knew she would always see him as a big-brother figure in her life: as her best friend and nothing more. But the truth was still the truth. "Just be yourself," he said, leaving out the gorgeous part, "and you'll be fine."

Bree nodded. But he could tell she was trying with all she had to get her nerves together. She was naturally an affable person that people gravitated to, but she didn't like confrontation. She'd stand toe-to-toe with the best of them if she had to, but she never wanted to. And she knew she would have to do just that if she expected to ever win over those good old boys in that room. She hated the prospect.

But her name was on the ballot. It was done now.

“Merry Christmas,” she said with little enthusiasm since she knew it was hardly going to be a festive evening, and she and Andre got out of the car and headed for the entrance.

## CHAPTER FIVE

It took several minutes of meeting and greeting before Connor Rogers, the president of the city council, finally arrived. He was easy to spot. A stocky man of average height, his face was turning bright red just standing there, as if a part of him was always fuming inside from only he knew what. But when Ronald saw him, he made a beeline for Marsh.

“The man you need to see is here,” he whispered to his boss.

Marsh had been hounded by females the entire time he had been at that forum, and was glad to get away. Not saying anything, he just walked away while one of the ladies was still talking to him.

“Excuse us, ladies,” Ronald said with a smile, to ease the woman’s embarrassment, and then hurried over to his boss.

But as soon as Marsh met Connor, he immediately knew he wouldn’t like the guy when the first thing out of his mouth was all about money. Namely Marsh’s.

“Here comes the rich man,” said Connor with a grin as soon as they walked up. “What that make me? The poor man, or the beggarman thief?” He laughed again.

Ronald found the man off-putting too, but he went on with the

introduction. “President Rogers, please meet the founder and Chairman of Bach Incorporated, Mr. Marshall Bach.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” Connor said to Marsh as both men shook hands. “Connor Rogers here. It ain’t everyday a hometown boy like me gets to meet a gazillionaire. I mean that’s a lot of money. If you had to stack up that many dollars?” He grinned. “That’s a lot of stacking. How do you sleep at night with that kind of load following you everywhere you go?”

Money. That was all people thought about whenever Marsh was around. He wanted to leave that man’s presence and that nothing town without delay. They were already standing right at the entrance door, as if Connor Rogers wanted a quick getaway too. But annoyed or not, Marsh wasn’t there for his comfort. He was there to close a deal. And he aimed to do just that. “How are you?” was all he could pull himself to say in response to Connor’s money talk.

Ronald could tell Connor wasn’t happy by the boss’s lack of response, but he kept up the smiles anyway. “I’m great, if I may say so myself. How about you?”

“No complaints,” Marsh said. “Who’s your candidate?”

Connor smiled. “And they said you were no politician.”

“I’m whatever I need to be to get the job done.”

“Fair enough,” said Connor. “My candidate is any of the blondes

you'll see on stage. Because we got some very nice ones. But to be honest with you this vote ain't even necessary. They're creating another slot on the city council just to appease the Negras."

The *what-gras*, Marsh almost asked. Ronald almost asked it too. But they knew what that clown meant. They both held their tongue and decided to let him talk. That was the best way, in Marsh's experience, to take the measure of a man: his conversation.

"Just because this town is about fifty-fifty black and white, they figure they should at least have somebody representing their interest somewhere in city government. So the progressives on the council came up with this bright idea to create an additional slot and put a Negra in it. But you know what I say? Over my dead body."

Marsh considered him. "Why is that?"

"Why you think? Oh I forgot. You're from up north. Got them different values up there. But down here? We don't work like that. They'll never run this city like they run all them big northern cities. It's my life's mission to see to that."

What a deplorable man, Marsh thought. Don't even know the people he was condemning. But he was nobody's champion. Let the blacks worry about their own issues. They were more than capable of handling an old bigot like Connor Rogers any day of the week he was certain. Marsh just

wanted to get council approval for him to buy that land and zoning approval for him to build his mall and surrounding communities and then get the hell out.

Connor knew Marsh only had one thing on his mind. He was a politician from way back. He knew Marsh wasn't going to play the game the way he liked it to be played. Ronald had already told him there would be no kickbacks or back-scratches or any other gratuities to get the deal approved. That was why Connor was disinclined to seal that deal. "Now about all that land you're wanting," he said, "which I know is the reason you're here."

"That is correct."

"That's a lot of land you plan on destroying, you realize that? Fifty thousand acres you expect us to just hand over to you? Why that's unheard of. And all for what?"

"Money. I'm paying for the land."

"Yeah, but paying it to who? The city coffers?"

"The city owns it, yes."

"But what do I get out of it? Why would I put my stamp of approval on something that wouldn't benefit me one iota?"

"A major mall and an entire upscale housing development would benefit your town tremendously. Not to mention what is actually paid for the land purchase itself."



“I don’t think you understand what I’m trying to say.”

“Oh I understand perfectly what you’re saying.”

“Well then you understand I’m not approving your request.”

“Oh you will approve it.”

Connor looked at him like he was pissed. Then he smiled that good old boy smile. “Let me get something straight right now, Mister. You ain’t up north anymore. You’re in ‘Bama country. And in ‘Bama country no billionaire run nothing down here. Got it?”

Marsh reached out his hand to Ronald. Ronald quickly reached into his briefcase and pulled out the dossier they had on Connor Rogers. Marsh took the papers and reviewed the notes.

Connor looked at Ronald. “What’s that supposed to be?”

“All about you,” Ronald replied.

An odd look came over Connor. “What about me?”

“If you don’t approve my request,” Marsh said, handing the dossier back to Ronald, “I will expose every crooked transaction you’ve ever had in your entire life. And according to that dossier, you’ve had many.”

“What dossier? What crooked transactions?”

“Those crooked transactions that allowed you to purchase that beach house in the Hamptons. That summer house in Florida. That high-maintenance mistress you take care of in Baton Rouge. That winter

wonderland in Alaska.”

“And don’t forget all those kickbacks he’s still receiving after approving that land waste deal last year, Boss,” said Ronald as he snapped shut his briefcase.

“Oh yes,” Marsh replied. “That too.” Then he looked at Connor. “We can go on.”

Connor’s face was fire-red. With anger mostly, Marsh could tell, but also red with fear. And just when Connor was about to lash back at Marsh, to make clear he didn’t cower although he was cowering, the entrance door opened and Bree and Andre came in so fast that Bree had to stop herself before she ran right into Connor Rogers. But Andre didn’t see this abrupt stoppage and he ran right into Bree, causing Andre to slip and fall to the floor. His bump also caused Bree to stumble right into Connor and she and Connor both fell to the floor too, with Bree landing on top of the council president.

It was, at first, funny to Marsh as the big man went down. But when he realized the lady involved might actually be hurt, he quickly reached out his hand to help her up.

Bree was so shocked by the fall that it took her a moment to realize what had happened. Then she immediately wondered if Andre and Connor Rogers were okay. But when she saw that big hand reaching out to help her

up, she quickly accepted and Marsh pulled her to her feet.

When he did, and when she was within an inch of his face, their eyes met. And in that moment something incredible occurred. Bree seemed so familiar to Marsh that his look turned curious, as he wondered where in the world he met her before. Marsh seemed so familiar to Bree that her look turned inquisitive, because she knew she'd never laid eyes on him before, but it felt as if she had. For both of them it felt as if they were staring into the eyes of someone near and dear to them.

It stumped Bree so much that she immediately attempted to remove her small hand out of Marsh's big hand. Who was this person beguiling her like that? But he was holding her hand too tightly. She had to give an extra tug just for him to release it. And when he did release her hand, she immediately turned away from him to assist Connor. Andre was already on his feet.

"I'm so sorry about that, Mr. Rogers," she said as she reached out her hand to help Connor up.

"I'll bet you are," Connor said with clenched teeth as he reached out his hand to take Bree's hand.

But as soon as Marsh saw Connor extend his hand to accept Bree's offer to help get him up, Marsh snatched her hand away from Connor's touch. That flaming racist didn't deserve her kindness, was how Marsh felt

about it. Which caused Bree to look at Marsh strangely. Why wouldn't he let her help the man up? It was only common courtesy since she was the one that had knocked him down. And once again this odd stranger was holding her hand in what felt like a death grip. Ronald, after helping Andre to his feet, reluctantly helped Connor up too. But Ronald was also taken aback by the boss's behavior around the lady Ronald had never seen before.

That room suddenly felt closed-in to Marsh and Bree. It was as if they were in their own little world and they couldn't figure out why they were there and how did they get there. They couldn't make sense of it. And on top of that, Marsh was still holding Bree's hand!

Until Andre urged her to get a move on. "You only have a limited time to meet and greet before the speeches, Bree. Let's do this."

Marsh had no choice, at that point, but to let go of her hand. But even after he did, Bree hesitated as they continued to stare at each other as if they both were circus oddities. And then Andre grabbed Bree by the arm and all but dragged her away.

Bree didn't want to look back, but she couldn't help it. And when she did glance back at Marsh, she saw that he was still staring at her. And staring hard. From her legs all the way up the rest of her body as if he was seriously assessing her. Which she normally hated. Men who summed women up based on their body parts were dogs in her view. But seeing Marsh do it

made her feel all warm inside.

*Warm inside*, she thought. Where did that come from? Why did his assessing her body please her? That weirded her out. That was why she decided to forget the well-dressed man and get on with why she was there in the first place. She and Andre made their way to the council members who were the only ones that had a say on who would occupy the newly-created council seat.

Marsh felt as if he'd been hit by a sledgehammer and was still caught up in the glow of the aftermath as he watched the woman with the big, golden-brown eyes walk away from him. Who on earth could she be, he wondered, and why was he reacting to her that strange way? Even her body, so slender but so curvy too, was turning him on in ways he thought wasn't possible anymore. He'd been with every woman imaginable of every race. He didn't think there was a trick left in the book that could capture his attention ever again. But she caught it. And in a big motherfucking way. He was stunned.

Although Beth and Hannah were clean across the room talking to the city attorney, even they could see how odd that interaction with Marsh and that unknown lady had been. Ronald especially found it odd. Connor did too, as he gave Marsh a nasty look before leaving his side. Race-mixing of any kind was a no-no for a man like Connor Rogers.

But his disgust of Marsh didn't stop him from quickly, albeit reluctantly, coming right back by his side. He knew what he was doing. He knew Marsh was not lying about that dossier. "You got yourself a deal," he said.

Marsh didn't make agreements that weren't clear and concise and unambiguous. "And what deal is that?"

"You turn over that dossier to me," he said, "then you'll have my support."

This yahoo must take Marsh for a fool. He wasn't so blown away with that black beauty that had just breezed by him that he couldn't get back into ruthless businessman mode. "Your support," he said, "and how many others' support?"

Connor disliked the guy even less with his unreasonable demands. But he was the one in danger of losing everything. "I can bring all the conservatives along. But them liberals? They wouldn't walk across the street if I asked them to."

"I only need fifty-one percent of the vote for the initiative to be approved. The conservatives are nearly sixty percent of the council. If you bring all of them along, that's all I'll need."

Connor reached out his hand. "That dossier please."

"Put those signatures in a contract and you'll get your dossier," said

Marsh.

He could tell Connor didn't like to be handled that way, but he had no choice. He withdrew his hand and walked away.

But Marsh had more than that land deal on his mind. He glanced at Ronald. Ronald moved closer to him. "Sir?"

Marsh was already looking at Bree again from across the room. "Who is she?"

Ronald wanted to roll his eyes. Sometimes he felt more like a gofer than a senior VP. "Don't know anything about her, sir. But I'll find out."

"Find out now," Marsh ordered. "And also have a car waiting for me outside."

It was an odd request, given that they had just locked in all of the support they needed to make that land grab a reality and could get the commitments in writing and then hop in the SUV, get on their respective planes, and get out of Dodge. But Ronald was senior VP for a reason: he did whatever the boss wanted, even though it had nothing to do with his job description, and he did it with haste. He immediately got on his phone to headquarters as he also made his rounds in that room, searching for info, for gossip, on that unknown lady that his boss seemed so enchanted with.





## CHAPTER SIX

Twenty minutes later and the candidates' forum had begun. There were six candidates on that stage vying for the one slot on the city council. And although the seat was supposed to have been a chance to give African-Americans representation on the council, all but one of the finalists were white. All but one were blonde. None but one had captured Marsh's attention so thoroughly that he decided to stick around and actually hear what the candidates had to say.

Beth and Hannah, unsure why he was sticking around, stood beside him. Hannah tried to start a conversation with him, but his entire focus was on that stage and that one candidate in particular from whom he couldn't look away. Which made no sense to Hannah when he could have her, a gorgeous, sophisticated lawyer, any time he wanted. Not some backwater Alabama you-know-what. But she'd already heard how Marshall Bach was an oddball anyway. What man would own an international corporation filled with beautiful women galore, and never sleep with any of them? It boggled Hannah's mind.

Then Ronald showed up and moved her and her scheming butt out of the way. He then looked at Beth. Beth knew that *get lost* look. "Let's go get

some refreshments, Hannah,” Beth said to her underling and they left Marsh’s side.

“What you got?” Marsh asked as he continued to stare at Bree.

“Her name’s Sabrina Turner. She’s a math teacher at the public high school in town.”

“Married?”

“Never married.”

“Kids?”

“No kids.”

Marsh looked at Ronald. “None? At her age?”

Marsh was a lot older than that lady on that stage and he had no children either. Yet her not having children was a mystery to him? Ronald wanted to shake his head in frustration. “No kids,” he said again.

“What about the guy who came with her tonight? Is that her boyfriend?”

“His name is Andre Washington. He’s also a teacher at the same school. They’ve been best buds since childhood. Went to the same college and everything.”

“Which college?”

“Tuskegee. They were best buds there too. And still best buds to this day.”

But Marsh had a different thought. “Best buds with benefits?”

Ronald shook his head. “Not from what I’m hearing. He’s married with children. Happily so, by all accounts.”

Marsh was pleased to hear that. “That’s good news,” he accidentally said.

Ronald looked at him oddly. “Is it, sir?”

Marsh realized he had said too much. Nobody who worked for him, not even Ronald, had any insights into his private life. They were his workers and nothing more. Professional all the way. And he aimed to keep it that way.

After several of the other candidates had spoken, it was Bree’s time to make her case as she made her way to the podium. Smartly dressed in a black mini-dress with a waist-length red jacket and black heels, she came across to Ronald as a serious woman who wasn’t about the nonsense. Who wanted the job and was willing to put in the work to get it. But Ronald also could see Marsh tense up when she stood at that podium and began to make her pitch, as if he was worried about her. He didn’t even know her name until a few seconds ago. Why was she giving him such a rise? It made no sense to Ronald.

It didn’t make sense to Marsh either. That was the crazy part. But there it was: he was interested in her. He wanted her to do well on that

stage. Because if Connor Rogers was any indication of the kind of people on that council, she didn't stand a chance.

“My name is Sabrina Turner, although everybody calls me Bree. I'm thirty-five-year-old school teacher and I am running for a seat on your city council.”

*Thirty-five*, Marsh thought. Which meant she was no spring chicken. But which also meant she was a decade younger than he was. Which made him feel ancient! Which made him wonder if she was too young for him: a weird thought in and of itself. She was nothing to him. Why should her age even matter???

“I've been a math teacher for thirteen years, including this year at Jeff Davis Public High School. I'm also the assistant coach of the JV girls basketball team – go Vikings,” she said with a smile and a fist pump, although only a smattering of people responded to her.

Marsh tensed up even more. She had the sweetest smile he'd ever seen, and that backwards crowd didn't appreciate it.

“I'm also the president of the Citywide Activists League, the vice-chair of the local branch of the NAACP, and a guest columnist for the Dell Standard newspaper group. It will be my honor to serve on the city council.”

She then went on to give what sounded like a standard stump speech to Marsh, but still, in his opinion, the best speech of the night. He watched

her unblinkingly as she spoke with a voice that fluctuated between perfect diction and nervousness. Her nerves were getting the best of her. But she soldiered on, and he liked that about her. But as she spoke, it felt personal to him, as if he had some investment in her success. Which made no sense. He didn't know her at all. How could he be invested in anything about her?

Even when she finished speaking and sat down, he felt bad for her because she was nowhere near the front runners. A few in one section clapped vigorously when she finished her speech, but for the most part it was very tepid, barely respectable applause. There were no blacks in that *by invitation only* meet and greet but her and her friend, which only added to her doom. And she was older and not nearly as bubbly as the other candidates. They were all twentysomethings with that sense of entitlement that nauseated him. And this was their crowd.

“She doesn't stand a chance, poor kid,” Marsh found himself saying out loud before he realized he had said it. When he realized it, he was mortified that he had gone there. He moved away from his team.

Beth and Hannah, who had made their way back over to Marsh's side when Bree first started speaking, were floored. Ronald was too. Marshall Bach showing empathy for somebody? It was unheard of! Even Hannah was shocked. “What's with him and that whore on stage?” she asked with a grin on her face.

Ronald turned and looked at her. “You’re calling somebody a whore? You? Really?”

Marsh didn’t hear Hannah’s comment, nor Ronald’s comeback at her. He was moving around, glad-handing those good old boys on the council he needed to push that approval through, but he was mostly waiting for the forum to end.

Connor Rogers, on the other hand, was avoiding him like the plague. He stood near the back, trying to figure out his options after that bombshell of a dossier was laid on him. And when the council’s vice president came and stood next to him, he didn’t even realize he was there. Until he spoke.

“Not looking good, C. R..”

Connor looked at him. “What’s not looking good?”

“She may win this thing.”

“How do you figure that? I instructed every conservative on the council to vote against her ass. How can she win?”

“Because they’re all voting for different people. The others will split the conservative vote. But the progressives on the council? Every one of them are voting for that gal. She just may win this thing.”

“Over my dead body,” Connor said forcefully. “I mean that, Earl. Do what we discussed and you do it now. We only got one month before election day. It had better come to light before that day.”

“It will. Don’t worry.”

“No Negra or any other person of color is ever going to be on my city council as long as I’m president of that council. And I plan to be president for life. Do I make myself clear?”

“I told you not to worry. I’m handling it.”

“Handle it then,” Connor said, the anger still in his voice, as he walked away. But even Earl knew Connor’s anger had more to do with that dossier he’d been hearing about than any council candidate. And it made Earl smile. *Couldn’t happen to a better person*, he thought sarcastically, as he walked away too.

Other council members, after hearing about the dirt Marshall Bach had on Conner, were quick to hurry over to Marsh and offer their full-throttled support for his land grab. And although Marsh shook hands with everyone that came up to him, and listened as they went on and on about their resumes and if he ever needed whatever experience they had, he kept taking peeps at Bree as she worked the crowd too.

But her fate seemed already decided, if you asked Marsh. She was trying to drum up votes from those good old boys and uppity gals, and she seemed to have so much hope in her eyes. At least that was the impression he was getting from a distance. If only she’d look at him, he’d be sure.

But she wasn’t giving him a second glance. But if it was hope he saw

in her eyes, it was going to be dashed in a month when those votes were tallied. He was certain of that. And he felt a need, an overwhelming desire to protect her at all costs. To soften her blow. To rescue her from those small-minded people in that small-minded town.

And he did it. With his “entourage” following right behind him as if they were the bodyguards he refused to have, he made his way over to Bree. Andre, who had heard all about him since they’d been at the forum, was surprised that he would choose Bree as the first candidate to speak to.

But when Marsh was side by side with Bree, he didn’t mince words. He leaned toward her in a way that turned them both on and said in a voice he didn’t care who heard. “Have dinner with me,” he said.

Bree looked at him, as did his workers and Andre too. She was as shocked as they were. Andre had already told her that the man who had helped her up after she fell was some rich guy looking to buy up thousands of acres of land and was there to make a deal. He must have mistaken her, she assumed, for somebody who would decide his fate. “I’m not on the city council yet,” she said.

“I didn’t say you were.”

Bree just couldn’t get beyond the oddity of it. “I don’t even know your name.”

“My name is Marshall Bach. Will you have dinner with me?”



“But I mean why?” There was a puzzled look on her face.

Marsh wasn't at all sure himself. “Why not?” he responded. And then they both stopped their overthinking and actually looked deep into each other's eyes. And when their eyes locked onto each other again, that same sense of connection reemerged. But Bree was certain she'd never seen him before – she'd never forget a face like his that was equal parts strong and handsome but rugged and well-worn too, like an old suit that was still attractive, but that never seemed quite able to get all the wrinkles out. He was a man who had seen a lot and wore it in his weary face and that *who-gives-a-shit* look in his grass-green eyes. She would have remembered that look.

But what would a guy like him want with a girl like her? To bed her? To use her? To *abuse* her? “No, I can't,” she responded to his invite.

Ronald and Beth and even newbie Hannah were surprised that anybody would turn down the great Marshall Bach. But that foolish country girl had done just that. They all looked at the boss.

Marsh was surprised himself. He'd never clocked a turndown before. And he wasn't about to clock one now. “You can't what?” he asked her.

*I can't let you break my heart. I've had too many breaks already. One more will surely break me,* she wanted to say. But what she didn't understand was why was she so concerned about her heart when she didn't

even know this man? But just looking at him, just being so close to him, made it feel like a *heart* matter to her. “I can’t have dinner with you,” she said, answering his question. “That’s what.”

Inwardly, Marsh was hurt by her turndown. He’d never had it happen before. And he was determined to not let it happen this time either. “But I think you can,” he said to her.

Bree looked at him. It was as if he wasn’t going to take no for an answer. “Oh do you now?”

“I think you can. And you shall,” Marsh said firmly, his hard look with his hard green eyes never wavering. Bree was stunned by it. “I’ll wait for you outside.”

And then he, with his team right behind him like dutiful flunkies, headed for the exit.

Andre shook his head in utter bemusement. “Can you believe that dude?” he asked Bree as they both were watching Marsh leave. “No he didn’t tell you what you were going to do. Like who does he think he is? The nerve he’s got!”

But for Bree, it was different. The way Marsh spoke so forcefully to her wasn’t the turn off for her that Andre was making it out to be. It was, if she were to be honest with herself, a complete turn on. She liked strong men, and Marshall Bach was a walking personification of strength. Instead of

being pissed like Andre was, excitement swelled inside of her. She knew it was going nowhere: she wasn't naïve. But that wasn't why she was excited anyway. He just felt like somebody different than what she was used to. A kind of take-charge man she never experienced before. Most of the men she'd been with just wanted to take charge of her for their own egotistical reasons. Marshall seemed different. It felt as if he put his foot down because he might actually like her, and want to get to know her. That intrigued her.

Which worried Andre mightily. But Bree didn't see where that was Andre's concern. She continued to make her rounds in the forum. She continued to smile and shake the hands of men and women who had no intentions of voting for her. But her mother always told her to show up anyway. She showed up. But the entire time, she was thinking about Marshall.

When they finally made all the rounds they could make and walked outside, Andre was the first to see him. "Remarkably," he said to Bree, "he's still here."

When Bree looked across the parking lot and saw Marsh leaned against a pearl-white Bentley Continental, his legs crossed at the ankle, his big arms folded, she could feel that excitement return. He actually waited for her. He kept his word. She knew it would mean nothing to most women. He waited, so what? But to a woman like Bree, who'd only known losers and

sore losers in her entire dating life, it was refreshing. It said something to her.

It said something to Andre too, but not what Bree was hearing. “Want me to tell him to take a hike?”

“No, I got it.”

Andre looked at her. “You got what?” When he realized she wasn’t as dismissive of that arrogant playboy as he was, his entire demeanor sank. “Come on now, Bree. Don’t tell me you’re thinking about going out with that guy?”

Bree said nothing.

“He’s got one thing and one thing only on his mind. You do realize that, right?”

She did, in a way. But in another way she wasn’t so sure. He didn’t give her that lust-only vibe when she first met him. It was something else she saw. Something purer and deeper that took her to a place she’d never been before. She wouldn’t be able to describe that feeling if she tried. But it was there. She saw it and felt it because it was there. But she understood what Dre meant too. “Yes, I realize it,” she said.

“Then why are you giving him the time of day?”

Bree looked at her best friend with frustration in her eyes. She wanted somebody to love just like he had somebody. She knew she was

grappling at straws to even think that a man like Marshall Bach could be the one. She knew she was fool-hearted even considering it. But she also know what she felt. And she wasn't denying that either. "What's your problem, Dre? Why are you so against something that has nothing to do with you? It's my decision."

"I didn't say it wasn't your decision. But I'm just sus about that dude. Aren't you?"

"Of course I'm suspicious. I'm not stupid. But it's still my decision."

"He's just gonna use you and leave you, Bree, just like all those other dudes did to you." He looked at her with his own level of frustration. "I thought you was tired of that."

She was tired of being used and abused for sure. But she was tired of being alone too. Real tired of that.

And when was she going to have children? She was already thirty-five. It had always been her life's ambition to have a husband and as many children as God would allow: a family. But only with the right man. It had to be with the right man. But how was she ever going to find him if she never took another chance and turned everybody down? Especially the ones that seem so out of the realm of possibility. "You have a key to my car on your ring, right?"

"Bree?"

“Do you, Dre?”

“You know I do.” He had a copy of her house keys too.

“Since you left your car at my house when we drove over here together, drive my car back to my house and then get your car and go on home. Leave my keys inside my house. He’ll take me home.”

Andre stared at her. “Sure you wanna do this?”

“Have dinner with him? Yes, I’m sure.”

“He’ll want more.”

She was done with that conversation. “I’ll call you when I get home.” She gave him a quick hug and an air-kiss on the cheek. “Good night. Tell Sharon and the boys I said hey.” And then she nervously, happily, terrifyingly made her way to the only man since Doylan she’d ever even considered going out with.

Marsh, on the other hand, braced himself. He was as confused by their connection as she was. But it was as real to him as the nose on his face. He experienced what he experienced and nobody was going to tell him otherwise.

And although he knew it was odd as hell that his team had already gone and he was still in that nothing town, as if he actually thought this could lead somewhere. Which would be absurd. He didn’t even know her! But something happened between them. He can’t say what it was, but something

happened when he first laid eyes on her. It was a powerful reaction. So powerful that it caught him off balance. And he knew he had to know. He knew it would be a grave disservice to himself if he didn't stick around to at least see what that reaction, that connection, was truly all about.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Once he assisted her onto his front passenger seat and then made his way around the front of the car, she realized it was the nicest automobile she'd ever been in. But was this his car? Did he drive all the way to Alabama? Or did he live nearby? And in that moment, as he opened the driver side door and got in, she realized just how next-to-nothing she knew of this man.

As his phone beeped and he quickly began checking his text message, she decided to pepper him with questions. "Where are your team?"

"On their way back to New York."

She looked at him. "That's where you're from?"

"That's my home base, yes."

"Marshall Bach from New York City."

"That's me." He was checking additional messages.

"Is Marshall the name people call you?"

"Marsh."

"Oh okay. Do you love it? Hate it?"

"I have no opinion either way," he said and smiled.

Bree smiled too. He was very easy to talk to. "What do you do for a



living, Marsh? Dre said you were some kind of venture capitalist.”

“Actually I’m a real estate developer. I purchase properties and build on that purchased land.”

“That’s all you do?”

Marsh laughed out loud. It was the first time a woman wasn’t impressed with his profession. “Yes, that’s all I do, Sabrina.”

“You know my name?”

“I heard you say it onstage.”

“Oh right! But you can call me Bree if you like.”

Marsh looked at her. Her skin was flawless. “Do you prefer Bree?”

She thought about it. He stared at the contours of her attractive face.

“I like it. I like Sabrina too. You can call me either or,” she said.

“Then I shall,” he said with another charming smile, as he returned his attention back to his text messages.

She didn’t see him as charming when they were at the forum. But he was oozing with it now. “How do you like Dell?” she asked him.

“I don’t.”

That surprised Bree. “Then why are you building in a place you don’t like?”

“I don’t plan to live here. That’s why. It’s business.”

That answer burst her bubble a little bit. He wouldn’t dream of living

in her hometown, and she wouldn't dream of leaving her hometown. But it was what it was. "A Tuesday night in Dell must be very boring for a New York city-that-never-sleeps guy like you."

"Oh it would have been. Had I not met you."

Marsh stopped all movement. He was surprised those words came out of his mouth. He was not a sentimentalist at all. What was he doing?

Bree was surprised too. Sentimentality wasn't in her DNA either. Because of that, neither one of them knew quite how to take it. And silence took over.

After several moments of silence, as Marsh continued to check his text messages, Bree had another question. For some reason, she seemed invested in him somehow. She didn't want him to leave town right away. "When are you heading back to New York?"

"Don't know. Two to three weeks I would imagine."

Bree was pleasantly surprised. "You plan on staying in Dell that long?"

"Dell? No way. I've got to fly to Japan after I leave Dell. I'm looking to purchase a huge swarth of land and the negotiations are at a standstill."

Japan? That sounded so foreign to her. His words were just confirming how nowhere her interest in him was going to go. "When do you

plan on leaving?”

He thought about that. *It depends on how things go between us*, he should have said. “I don’t know,” he said instead.

“How long do you plan to be away?”

Marsh didn’t know if she meant away from New York, or away from Dell. Which made no sense since once he left Dell he had no intentions of coming back. Unless . . . He looked at her. He was usually great at gauging interest in him. With her, he wasn’t so sure. “A week if all goes well. Two or more if it doesn’t.”

Bree was inwardly disappointed. She really would have liked to get to know him for some reason. But it looked like a dinner was all she was going to get out of this deal.

She began looking around instead. “Nice car,” she said.

“I agree.”

“Yours?”

“No, no. I flew into town.”

“Your arms must be tired.”

Marsh smiled at her little joke, but remained serious. “It’s a rental.”

She was disappointed that her joke didn’t get more than just a fleeting smile from him. But she pressed on. “I didn’t know they rented out Bentleys.”

“Well, not quite a rental. It’s something I borrowed from a dealership.”

“Oh right.” She did remember there was a brand-new Bentley/Maserati dealership over in Huntsville. And they allowed him to “borrow” a brand-new car of this magnitude? She smiled. This man was so out of her league that it was crazy to her. She looked at him.

His face was still buried in his phone, but even still he just radiated sex appeal. And the size of his biceps! Women were probably tripping over each other trying to get next to him. She saw how that blonde girl that came with him to town was trying to get next to him during the entire time they were at the candidates’ forum. She probably already been with him. What was she thinking going on a date with a guy like this? Dre was right!

Then he put his phone away. “Okay.” He looked at her. She had a smile on her face, which made him smile. “Where to?”

“Where to?” Bree was surprised. “You mean you want me to pick a place?”

With her wide-eyed look, she seemed so innocent to him. “Absolutely. Where is your favorite dinner spot?”

“That’s easy. But it’s in the heart of Palace Town.”

Marsh didn’t understand. “Palace Town?”

“The poorer side of Dell. You probably have only seen the wealthy

side, since it's considered a wealthy town. But there's always another side. The city calls it *Shantytown*, but those of us who live there call it *Palace Town*. Or The Palace. Or just plain Palace. We aren't going to let the city define our spaces because they always define them with negative words: Bottom. Ward. Shanty. But their side of town? It's always Arlington. The Hills. Berkshire. Something majestic. We refuse to let them treat us as if we're lesser than."

Marsh nodded. He loved her fight. "Good for you."

"It's primarily working class, salt-of-the-earth, decent folk just trying to live the best way they know how. The name of the restaurant is Soul Kitchen. Head north on this street we're on, which is Lane Avenue, and then just keep going. You'll only have one turn to make."

"Simple enough," said Marsh as he pulled out of the parking lot and got on the Avenue heading north, and kept on driving. But something she said stuck with him. "You live in Palace Town as well?"

"Born and raised there. I bought a home a few blocks away from my mama's house."

"Your parents still live here too?"

"My mom did until she died a few years ago. Never knew my father."

"I was quite the opposite. I knew my father. My mother took off

when I was a kid and didn't want to have anything more to do with me."

That sounded crazy to Bree. But not knowing your father probably sounded crazy to him too.

"Any siblings?" Marsh asked her.

"None. You?"

"Plenty. My father was a whore. But I don't know any of those people."

"Do you want to know them?"

"Not in the least," he admitted. But he had already moved on. "Why would you stay in this area," Marsh asked her, "if it's such a poor area? I'm sure you could find more fitting accommodations."

Bree thought about it. He loved her thoughtfulness. "It's like *Cheers*," she finally said. "Remember that old TV show and the theme song? Where everybody knows your name? And they're always glad you came? Well, that's The Palace for me. I feel at home there."

Marsh was touched by her words. "Racism still the thing here, hun?"

"Here. There. Everywhere. People get used to that."

"But not you?"

"I'll never get used to that."

"Is that why you're running for city council?"

"Exactly why. You have to be the change you want."

Marsh was worried about her as he drove. Was she a realistic girl?  
“What are your chances of success, Sabrina?”

“Connor Rogers told me he was impressed by my speech. He’s the president of the city council and the man I knocked down. But if he says yes, and he indicated he’s going to say yes, then other conservatives on the council will vote for me too.”

“You like that guy?” Marsh asked her.

Bree hunched her small shoulders. “He smiles. Plays nice. He’s okay I guess.”

“He’s not okay,” Marsh said firmly. “I don’t want you to have anything to do with him, you hear me? He’s not okay.”

It sounded like a strange order, but for some reason she listened to him, and believed what he was saying. “I hear you.”

“He’s not voting for you I don’t care what he tells you. Don’t you ever trust him. And I mean that, Sabrina.”

Bree already knew her candidacy was a long shot. And she understood why Marsh was saying what he was saying: he probably got to see Connor up close and personal as only whites could. And it apparently wasn’t a pretty picture. “I don’t trust him,” she said.

That seemed to satisfy Marsh as he was more animated about Connor Rogers than even Bree was. And they drove the rest of the way to the

restaurant in silence.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

It was a quiet, clean, beautiful restaurant in the heart of Palace Town and Bree and Marsh feasted on the best spare ribs and collard greens and old-fashioned potato salad Marsh had ever eaten. He even ate seconds. Now he was so full he wanted to unbutton his trousers. Bree hadn't eaten half of her first and only plate.

"You eat like a rabbit," Marsh said to her.

"You eat like an elephant," Bree said to him.

Marsh laughed. He liked her honesty too. And then he considered her. "Why haven't a good girl like you gotten married with children by now?"

How did he know she wasn't married with children? But it was a fact. A pitiful fact if you asked her. "You make it sound like that ship has sailed. I'm only thirty-five."

"*Only?*" Marsh asked and Bree smiled. But Marsh continued to stare at her. That was a non-answer as far as he was concerned.

"I was in a lot of bad relationships," Bree finally said. "One after the other one. But this last one," she added, shaking her head, "almost did me in."

“Who was he?”

“Doylan Struthers. His family owns a funeral home in Huntsville. Called Nice Mortuary. There’s nothing nice about him or his folks.” Then she shook her head again.

Marsh could see how hurt she still was. “What was his crime? Unfaithfulness?”

“He was slick with it, but when it came out it came out like a blast of reality for me. He had women everywhere. Some were even friends of mine. I thought I was in love with that joker. Remember Sam Cooke? That’s who he looks like and he knows it. Just a great looking guy that every woman wanted. And apparently every woman had too,” she said with a smile. But it was a bitter smile. “As soon as I found out about his cheating ways, I dumped him that same day. But dumping him for cheating turned out to be the easy part of that day.”

Marsh found that hard to believe. “What was the hard part?”

“His abusiveness.”

Marsh’s facial expression changed. “He was abusive?”

“Only that one time. The same day I confronted him about the cheating. The day he decided he was going to kick my ass for even bringing it up. That was the day I kicked his ass out of my life. But it was hard, I’m not gonna even lie. That man beat me down so bad he nearly killed me. My

face was so swollen it looked like a basketball. Dre rushed to the hospital, but he didn't even recognize me when he first saw me."

Marsh could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Where is this person? This Doylan Struthers? In prison, I hope."

Bree shook her head. "They didn't go for it."

Marsh frowned. "What's that supposed to mean? Who didn't go for it?"

"The DA. She said yes, he beat my ass. But I beat his ass too. She called it a draw and wouldn't prosecute."

Marsh was astonished. "Are you serious? How in hell could a girl your size beat up a dude? Did you see it as a draw?"

"Hell no! I mean, I threw everything but the kitchen sink at his ass. I did all I could to beat him down, yes I did. But it was no contest. I couldn't beat him up like he beat on me. There was no comparison. Even to this day he still bothers me with a lot of petty shit. Like I'm going to go back to his ass. Like I'm that stupid."

This concerned Marsh. "Have you told the authorities that he's still harassing you?"

"I told them. But they don't care around here. He's a man and men can do whatever they want. A judge did grant me a restraining order, though, but he always violates it. They talk to him, he disappears for a while, then

he's right back calling the school where I work and lying on me about bothering him and all that crazy stuff. But he's beloved in this town. He wouldn't hurt a fly let them tell it." She shook her head. "They just don't care."

"Are you afraid of him?"

"Doylan? No way. He's all talk. I ignore him. But it does get to me sometimes. Like last night."

Marsh stared at her. "What happened last night?"

"I was driving home after I met my girlfriends for drinks. He decides to wait until I get on this isolated road and bump my car and laugh about it. I pulled over, got out my baseball bat, and tried to smash his windshield."

Marsh couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You *what*? What did he do?"

"What he always does: laughed and drove away. It's all a big joke to him. To the authorities too."

Marsh continued to stare at her. "Why would a woman with your obvious talents stay in a town like this?"

Bree had asked herself that very same question hundreds of times before. But her answer never wavered. "This is where I was born and raised. This is my hometown. This is my home. Nobody's running me away from my home."

“Where everybody knows your name,” Marsh said.

“And they’re always glad I came, that’s right,” said Bree.

Marsh continued to stare at her. “Fancy yourself a tough broad, do you?”

Bree laughed.

“You ain’t so tough.” Marsh wasn’t laughing. He could see the vulnerability of Bree Turner a mile away.

Bree saw that he saw it too. And her smile slowly dissipated.

But she wasn’t above turning the tables. “If you’re so tough why aren’t you married with children yourself?”

Marsh took a sip of his drink. “Who says I’m not?”

A sick feeling came over Bree. “Are you saying you’re married, and that you have kids?”

She looked slightly panicked. He smiled. “Whoa there. I’m not married and I have no children.”

Bree relaxed again. “Oh okay good. Because I don’t play that.”

“I don’t either,” said Marsh, which pleased her.

“So why aren’t you married with children?” she asked again. “You aren’t exactly a kid anymore.”

Marsh laughed. “The truth had been spoken.”

But Bree had to wait for his answer.

He exhaled. And finally responded. “I haven’t found the right woman I would be willing to risk it with is the short answer.”

That’s an odd way to put it, Bree thought. “Risk what with?”

“My heart. My loyalty. *Me*. Because when I’m in, I’m all in.”

That interested Bree. “Have you ever been all in?”

“With a woman? No,” he said.

Another odd response. “Who have you been all in with then, if not a woman?” she asked him.

“I was all in with my mother.”

Bree wanted to jokingly say, *your mother is a woman*, but she didn’t go there. He’d already spoken of his mother abandoning him. To her, that wasn’t funny. “You were all in with your mother,” she said instead, “but she wasn’t all in with you?”

“That would be an understatement. She packed up and left when I was ten.”

“Who raised you? Your father?”

“My father in the name of his servants, yes. Nannies and nurses and so forth.”

“Oh that’s so sad,” Bree said.

Marsh had never heard anybody call his super-rich upbringing as sad because every woman he’d ever spent time with considered wealth as

happiness. Bree, probably the first woman he ever had dinner with who never experienced wealth, was the only one who knew better. He kept finding himself staring at her. Even as she slowly continued to eat her dinner, he couldn't stop staring at her. Could she be the one he'd been looking for his entire life? Could this sweet, modest school teacher in this nothing town actually be the one?

It baffled him. She didn't make him laugh any more than anybody else. She didn't make him any hornier than any other woman did. But it was different with her. She made him feel a warmth inside that he could hardly comprehend. As if he was cuddled up by a soothing fireplace on a wintry night with a cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows circling inside. And he was warm and comfortable watching the snow outside as it slanted across the windowpane.

He'd never felt that way before.

“What do you want for Christmas, Sabrina?” he asked her.

Bree smiled that gorgeous bright-white smile. “My two front teeth.”

Marsh laughed. “Other than that.”

“Good health. Good food. Good friends.”

“That's all?”

Bree thought about it. And she felt comfortable enough around Marsh to say it. “To find somebody to love would be nice too,” she said.

Marsh's heart went out to her when she said those words. "Love for Christmas," he said with a smile. Then his look turned serious. "Yes, that would be nice." Because it would be nice for him too. Love for Christmas? That would be priceless.

But was it even possible between the two of them? They were so unlike. And he was not a man without baggage, and plenty of it. Dangerous baggage in some ways. But nobody, and he meant nobody, made him feel the way Sabrina did.

And even after dinner, as the waiter was removing their plates, he felt a sudden urge to be closer to her. He needed to feel her in his arms, to somehow encapsulate with action that warm, sweet feeling he felt in her presence.

Then the moment finally came that he had been waiting for: all of those fast-moving, upbeat Christmas carols finally ceased playing, and a slow song came on over the restaurant's music system. "Let's dance," he said as he tossed his napkin on the table. "I need to work off some of this food."

Bree noticed that he didn't ask, but demanded, but since she wanted to work off some of the food too, she got up and went out on the dance floor with him. The song was Charles Brown singing the Charles Brown/Gene Redd-penned *Please Come Home for Christmas*.

And as Marsh pulled Bree into his arms and they slow-dragged



together, staring into each other's eyes, feeling that connection even more powerful than before, it was almost more than they could take. Because they still didn't understand it. But it was as alive as the air they were breathing. And it could not be contained:

*“Choirs will be singing,  
‘Silent Night.’  
Christmas carols,  
by candlelight.  
Please, come home for Christmas.  
Please, come home for Christmas.  
If not for Christmas,  
by New Year's night.*

*Friends and relations,  
send salutations,  
sure as the stars shine above.  
This is Christmas.  
Yes, Christmas my dear.  
The time of year,  
to be  
with the one you love.”*

Marsh pulled her closer as that haunting, bluesy, guitar chorus started playing, and they wrapped their arms around each other. And now they were no longer strangers dancing, but they were dancing as longtime lovers with no daylight between them. He was so aroused as he grind against her that she could feel his rock-hard manhood as if they wore no clothes at all. She was glad they weren't looking into each other's eyes in that moment because she

might have blushed.

They held onto each other, enjoying the music, and in rhythm, in every way, with each other.

Then Marsh leaned up and Bree looked up and they once again were staring into each other's beautiful, lustful eyes.

Marsh's need for her heightened as he held her. And he realized in that moment that something had changed within his very body and she was turning him on more than any other woman ever had. He wanted to kiss her so desperately that he could taste it. But he held on. Because he needed so much more than a kiss.

He continued to hold her so tenderly, and grind on her with such passion that he could hardly contain himself. And she felt that passion too. She felt that grind. And she was as helpless as he was.

After the dance was over, and they made their way back to their table, they both were feeling the heat. They knew where it was heading. They even knew where it would lead.

*But then what?*

A one-night stand, Bree thought, when she knew she needed so much more than that?

Would she want a commitment, Marsh thought, when he wasn't ready to commit like that to anybody?

Was one night of passion worth all the drama it could cause?

It apparently was worth it because as soon as Marsh paid the bill and they left the restaurant, he was speeding to get to her home. He even reached out and placed her hand in his hand, and then placed both hands on his lap: his hand on top, her hand on the bottom as he held it even tighter.

But her small hand ended up on top of his fully-aroused manhood. And she could feel the size of it as he slowly moved her hand along that ridge, and how it was throbbing beneath her hand. He looked over at her, because that was exactly what he wanted her to feel. He saw her close her legs tighter, as if she needed to pee and couldn't. But it was something else entirely that she needed. And he aimed to give it to her.

When they got to her house, Marsh got out and opened the passenger door for her. He looked at the beautiful, quaint little yellow house with the round window up front. It was all decked-down in Christmas decorations all over the front of the home, including a black Santa Clause on her lawn. It was so normal that it warmed his heart.

And when he walked her to her door, a different feeling came over him as they locked eyes again. Because as soon as they did, that connection neither one of them could explain returned in an even more powerful way. Because desire was in the mix too. Fierce desire. *They had to have it* desire.

Even before Bree had signaled for Marsh to come on in, he was

already coming. And when he crossed the threshold and waited for her to tell him yea or nay, she had no words. But when she closed that door and locked it with him standing inside and beside her, she didn't need to say anything. That simple action, of closing that door, of locking it, said all he needed to hear.



## CHAPTER NINE

As soon as the door closed, his control that had been battling him all night broke. And he grabbed her and pulled her into his arms and began kissing her with the kind of harsh, sweet, desperate kiss she'd never experienced before. It became so heated that he lifted her into his arms, she wrapped her legs and arms around him, and they continued kissing just as passionately. It became so heated that he pinned her against the door and held her up by his strong, muscular thighs as he swiftly took off his suit coat and tie and as she unbuttoned and removed his pristine dress shirt and dropped them all to the floor. Then he lifted up her blouse and her bra, snatching them over her head and dropping them to the floor too. He stared at her endowment, and then he got busy there.

Bree leaned her head back as he continued to do her breasts.

By the time they made it to the bedroom, they had nothing on. And by the time they both fell on the bed, they were so filled with passion that they were already driving over that cliff. They were in overdrive getting over that cliff. Like two sex-starved teenagers, all they could see was what they wanted. And both of them, in their own heightened sense of connection and passion mixed up together in a rage of lovemaking, went for it.

They didn't realize what they had done until they were already doing it and couldn't stop.

For Marsh, it wasn't until he was pumping and pouring his all into her, with a furious release, before he fully realized the weight of what he'd just done to her.

For Bree, she didn't understand the gravity until they were in the height of orgasm and no way they could stop it.

Because as they both were climaxing, and as they looked into each other's eyes, it hit them like a freight train. Marsh had never did it to any other woman like that before. He was super-cautious and very careful too. But he'd done it to Bree. And he could tell, by the look on her face, that she was just realizing it too.

He remained on top of her, staring at her, still unable to stop pumping into her, as her look became even more horrified. And he knew he had to reassure her.

But Bree was in a state of shock. She had just allowed this man, a literal stranger to her, to do her raw. Was she nuts? She needed to get up and go purchase a morning after pill right away. And what if he had some communicable disease??? No morning after pill was going to help that!

Marsh could not only see her anxiety, but he could feel it. And he didn't hesitate. He slowly pulled out of her even as those wonderful feelings

wanted him to push right back in. He rolled off of her. And then he pulled her into his arms.

He looked at her. “Please don’t worry,” he said to her. “Are you worried?”

Tears began to appear in her eyes. “Yes.”

“There’s nothing to worry about. Please believe me. I always wear protection. It’s been years, many, many years since I haven’t worn protection. I’m clean. I promise you. This is the first time in I daresay a decade that I went in raw.”

But that made no sense to Bree. She looked at him as if it was all his fault, when she knew it wasn’t. But she was upset. “If you’re that careful, why did you go in raw this time? Why did you do it to me?”

He shook his head, a baffled look on his face. “I don’t know.” He rubbed her soft hair that had fallen across her right eye, making her appear even more sexier to him. “But I knew I had to have you, darling. Something got into me when I got into you, and I had to have you just the way you are. I had to *feel* you.” His eyes were filled with regret for having hurt her. “I am so sorry.”

It wasn’t his fault. Bree knew she was a more-than-willing participant. But a part of her was blaming him. She felt that he was so much older than her, and by rights the more-experienced one. He should have



known better!

But another part of her, by far the biggest part, didn't blame him at all. Or herself. Because somewhere deep inside of her, she wanted it raw too. She just knew he wasn't like all those other men she'd been with in her past who hit it and quit it. Who promised her the moon to get her in bed, and then wouldn't give her cab fare home. She believed he was different. She believed she had nothing to worry about when she was around him.

She knew it wasn't rational. His first time in years raw? That didn't even sound true. But remarkably, and against everything she had armored herself against, she believed him.

It wasn't even like her to be that trusting, especially of some horny-ass man. But that connection she felt to him wasn't a fluke. It was real. And it made her feel as if she could trust him. She believed he was as he appeared to be. She believed he would not have done her raw had he not been so taken by her the way she was taken by him. She'd heard all her life that you can never help who you love. For Bree, she couldn't help who she trusted. Because in that moment, on that night, she trusted Marshall Bach.

But she was not on birth control. Didn't think she needed it anymore after she broke up with Doylan and given the pick of men in Dell. And that was why, trust or no trust, she had every intention of getting up first thing tomorrow morning and getting to the pharmacy to get that pill.

Until she woke up that next morning, and Marsh wasn't gone the way every man she'd ever been with had always disappeared. He was in her bed, still had her in his arms, and he was fast asleep.

It made her so happy. Even when she dated Doylan, he never stayed all night with her, or allowed her to stay all night with him. He had all kinds of excuses, but she knew it was mainly because he wasn't interested in her beyond the sex. She always woke up the morning after alone. But not this morning.

And when Marsh finally woke up too, and smiled at her with the most charming of smiles, she was his. Somehow she knew it even then.

It felt great to Marsh too, to awaken with her still in his arms. He never wanted a woman in his bed the morning after. He got what he wanted the night before. Why would he want her hanging around?

But Bree was different. He was pleased to have her around. So pleased that he pulled her on top of him and did her raw again. Only this time it was slow and sweet, with Bree laying down on top of him as he eased in and out of her. And when they both had reached the summit again, it was oddly even more intense than their first coupling. So intense that when he had poured all he had into her again, she collapsed on top of him, he stayed inside of her as he held her gently, and then they both, exhausted once more, fell asleep. And any idea of going to any pharmacy to undo anything they

might have done in their special moment of love and passion, flew out the window as they slept. Her standards might have been rock bottom low, but the fact that he was still in bed with her, the morning after, confirmed for her what her heart was telling her the moment they first met: that he was the one. Not anybody else. Him.



## CHAPTER TEN

Bree woke up at seven that next morning. Once again, she was pleased to see that he was still in her bed, and was fast asleep as if it was the best rest he'd had in a long, long time. She had to ease her way out of his clutches though, because she didn't want to wake him, and she made her way to the bathroom.

After brushing and gargling and then showering, she grabbed a towel and dried off as she made her way back into her bedroom.

When she opened her lingerie drawer, Marsh woke up in an almost comical way, Bree thought: his big green eyes flew open. She grinned. Because she could tell he wasn't sure where he was at first.

Marsh was confused by his surroundings when he first opened his eyes. But when he looked over and saw Bree standing at that chest of drawers in her all of her gorgeous nakedness, and with that beautiful bright-white smile on her face, he remembered exactly where he was. And he smiled. It wasn't a dream after all. "Good morning," he said to her as he yawned.

"Good morning."

"What time is it?"

“About a quarter after seven.”

Marsh frowned. “In the *morning*?”

Bree grinned. “Yes, Marsh, it’s in the morning. That’s why we said good morning.”

“But why are you up so early?”

“Because it’s Wednesday.”

Marsh still didn’t get it.

“I’m a high school math teacher, remember? School starts at eight-thirty. I have to be there by eight.”

“You can’t call in today?”

“And force the District to have to find a substitute when I’m perfectly fine and able to teach my classes?” She shook her head as she pulled a pair of panties and a matching bra out of the drawer. “No, I can’t do that.”

Marsh admired her commitment, even if he was a little pissed by it. But then his eyes was trailing down her smooth dark body again. And he knew he was hooked again. He stretched then yawned once more, kicked the covers off of him, and got out of bed.

Staring at her breasts as his naked body made its way toward hers, his goal was to keep going to the bathroom. But as he looked into her kind, cheerful eyes, and as he could smell her wonderful fresh scent, he couldn’t help it. He grabbed her from behind and wrapped his arms all the way

around her.

It was such a sneak attack that Bree broke into laughter. But when he started kissing her neck, and she could feel his manhood expanding against her butt at a rapid pace, it was hardly funny. And before she could object or remind him that she had to get to work, he had put it inside of her and was squeezing her breasts and still kissing her neck in ways that made her feel deliriously happy, and then bending her over. And they were at it again. Right there against her lingerie chest. Their moans and groans and slapping sounds kept them going hard.

Until they couldn't go anymore.

They came together. Just as hard as the times before. And then Marsh, who had given his all to her again and was so completely spent that his legs felt rubbery, leaned against her back and closed his eyes. Who was this woman that was taking him to heights he didn't think were scalable since he'd never been there before? But it was a fact. The more he was around her, the more he wanted to stay around her. The more he did her, the more he wanted to do her again and again. He couldn't seem to get enough of her. What manner of woman was this???

She leaned back against him too. She could go many more rounds with this man, but not this morning. Because now, given how much he poured into her, she had to take another shower. She had to dry off again.

And she still had to get dressed and get going.

Marsh sensed her need to get a move on too. He kissed her neck again and eased out of her. "I'll take you to work," he said as he removed his arms from around her and made his way to the bathroom.

She followed behind him. "No need for that," she said with a smile. "Get you some rest. I can take myself to work."

But he wasn't smiling when he stopped walking and looked back at her. "I'm taking you," he said with a look that brook no debate. As if his word was final. Then he went on into the bathroom and began peeing.

Bree was a little shocked by his attitude. She always thought she'd like a take-charge sort of man, not the kind of men she dated that always relied on her for everything. Like fronting them gas money, lunch money, rent. One guy wanted her to pay his back child support. None ever insisted on taking her anywhere, let alone to work. But to have a man who wanted to do something for her was a bit jarring. She didn't quite know how to take it. But like most women, she believed she'd like a man pampering her a little. Not that she would know for certain. She'd never had it before. But it was high time, in this season of giving, she thought, that she gave it a shot. Let the man do for her for a change.

That was why, when he insisted on taking her to work, she stopped all pushback, accepted it as just a kind gesture and nothing more, and headed for



the shower.

But she was thinking about what it would feel like being pampered. Being thought of as somebody worthy of their best. And it was a happy feeling that was made happier when he joined her in the shower.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The drive to school still seemed unreal to her. First the fact of how he made her feel in his arms. And the way he did her. It was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. She thought her ex's were good in bed. They had reputations as the best of the best. But compared to what she experienced last night and half an hour ago? That reputation was false. And to be riding to work in a car like this. That was unreal too. Not that she had a shabby car. Her mustang was dope and she knew it. But it was nothing compared to that Bentley. It just felt otherworldly to Bree.

She looked at Marsh. He was still drinking his coffee in her coffee mug from the house, and she could tell he was not a morning person at all. He still seemed groggy like he couldn't understand why anybody would have to be anywhere at eight am. Which made her smile all the more. The fact that he would take her to work that time of morning spoke volumes to her.

"Turn here," she said. "We need to pick up Andre."

"Who's Andre?"

"Dre, remember? My best friend."

"Oh right." He had forgotten about him. "Why do we need to pick him up? He doesn't have his own transportation?"

“Of course he does. We work at the same school and live a few blocks from each other. We carpool. He’ll drive some days. I’ll drive some days. It just so happened that this is my day to drive.”

Marsh exhaled. She could tell he wasn’t sold on her friendship with Andre any more than Andre was sold on his relationship with her.

She decided to change the subject as he drove. “You have meetings today?”

“Meetings? Not here in Dell, no.”

“No meetings? Then what are you . . . I mean, why are you here?”

Marsh glanced at her. And in that glance, Bree understood. He was still in town only because of her? She was amazed. Unless he planned to leave today?

“What do you plan to do all day? Or are you still going to be in town when I get off?”

The idea of Marsh leaving her this soon was a nonstarter as far as he was concerned. There was no way he was leaving her right now. “I’ll be here,” he said and they exchanged another glance. When Bree smiled, it made Marsh smile too. He really liked this girl! He took her hand in his hand, and squeezed it.

When they got to Andre’s home, Marsh noticed how larger it was than Bree’s home. It was very nice two-story, colonial-style home. Then he

remembered the man had a wife and children. He undoubtedly needed the space.

Bree reached over and blew the horn. Within seconds, Marsh saw the handsome black man come out of the house with a gorgeous black woman coming out on the porch and kissing him goodbye. She was even better looking than Bree. Which pleased Marsh. Maybe this bestie of Bree's wouldn't be so inclined to step out on a woman that looked like his wife, and especially step out with Bree as his target. Even though Marsh knew, when a man wanted to cheat on his wife, looks had very little to do with it. He'd known men to cheat on their beauty queen wives all the time. Wives who had no clue. Wives who thought their looks alone was going to keep their man in check when all it kept was them with blinders on so that their men could do whatever they wanted and with whomever they pleased. Marsh glanced over at Bree. Would she cheat on him, he wondered. He'd never cheat on her.

“Hey, Dre,” Bree said happily as he got in the backseat.

“Hey.” It was a dry reply, as he was looking around at the fancy car and the fancy man behind the wheel.

“You remember Marsh,” Bree said.

“What's up?” Andre said with a nod of his head.

“How are you?” Marsh asked as he watched Andre in his rearview.

“I’m good.”

“So am I.”

Andre wanted to say *I’m sure you are*, but he held his tongue.

“What’s in the bag, Dre?” Bree asked as Marsh began driving them away.

“Christmas decorations. We’re decorating my class today.”

“I already did mine.”

“Why am I not surprised? You’re always the best in class,” he added, and they laughed.

But Marsh took another peep at Andre in that rearview. He could tell that the handsome younger man, bestie or no bestie, had a crush on Bree. Which wasn’t unusual. He could understand the attraction. But was it more than that? Was it something he needed to worry about?

When they arrived at the high school, Andre was still getting himself and his bags of decorations out of the car even as Marsh, moving fast, had gotten out, walked around to the passenger door, and had opened the door for Bree and was unbuckling her seatbelt. They were so close when he released her belt, and she smelled and looked so wonderful, that he couldn’t help himself. He leaned over and kissed her hard on the lips. Andre watched as he seemed unable or unwilling to stop kissing Bree. But was he only going to use her and abuse her just like all those other jokers did? That was what

worried Andre.

When Marsh finally pulled his lips away, Bree, elated, got out.

“What time do you knock off?” he asked her.

“Four-thirty,” Bree said.

“I’ll pick you up.”

Bree smiled. “Okay,” she said as she removed the key off of her ring.

“What’s this?” Marsh asked her.

“The key to my house. I don’t want you wondering around all day long with nowhere to go when you get tired.”

He was touched as he accepted it. “Thanks.”

Then she gave him a quick peck of a kiss and that smile he adored, and then she and Andre hurried to their classrooms. She wore a very simple dress that hung just below her knees. But man was it sexy, he thought. It shouldn’t be. There was nothing sensual about it. Just a plain old dress. But it was sexy as fuck to Marsh.

He waited for her to look back at him, to wave, or at least just look. But she was so engrossed in a conversation with Andre that she seemed to have forgotten him. Which crushed him a little. Andre looked to be around Bree’s age. Marsh was ten years older. And although he was bigger than Andre’s slender frame, he wasn’t nearly as fit. He felt what he thought might be a hint of jealousy. He wasn’t sure because he’d never felt jealous before.

But if he had to venture a guess, that would be what it was.

Which floored him. *Him jealous?* What was he doing? He couldn't even explain it. He couldn't even attempt to figure it out. He just met this girl and already he was jealous of her best friend? It goggled his mind.

He got back in his car, and sped away.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

His plane was parked in the private airfield outside of Dell, and Marsh spent the entire day in conference calls and videoconferences with his various conglomerates. His final videoconference was with Ronald Coleman at headquarters. He had concerns about Japan.

“Negotiations are at a standstill again,” he said as Marsh glanced at his Rolex. It was a little before four. The Japanese are making noises that they may walk away entirely.”

“Nothing new there,” Marsh said.

“Understood. But the negotiators have been calling me all morning. They said you haven’t been answering your calls, sir.”

“Last I looked I was the boss of them. Not them of me.”

“Understood,” Ronald said again. It was always a tightrope walk whenever he was dealing with Marsh. He could lash out, or get it done. Ronald never knew what he was going to get with that guy. “But what they would like to know if when do you think you’ll be able to go to Japan to get the talks back on track?”

Marsh knew he was neglectful of some very major deals. But at what point was his happiness, his future going to take a front seat too? “I’m



going,” he said. “But not right now.”

It wasn't the answer Ronald wanted to hear. “May I ask if you're still in Alabama, and what you're doing there right now?”

Marsh usually would lash out right about now whenever a member of his team got too personal with him. But to Marsh's surprise, he ran his hand across his face and seemed genuinely confused himself. “Yes, I'm still in Alabama,” Marsh responded.

“And what are you doing there, sir? We've managed to seal that deal already.”

“I've gone fishing,” Marsh said.

Ronald didn't expect to hear that. “Fishing sir?”

“Fishing.”

“Fishing for what, sir?”

Marsh wanted to say *for love. I'm fishing for love. For somebody who just might be willing to love me.*

“Anything else?” he asked instead.

Ronald was disappointed that he went back into boss mode, but not surprised. He always went back into boss mode. “Branch Darcy is bugging again about you running for public office. He said the time is right.”

“Not to me it's not.”

“Rumor is, Senator McCartney may retire at the end of his term.

Rumor is he might endorse you to take over his seat.”

“He just got reelected two years ago and already he’s talking retirement? He has four years left.”

“That’s how long it takes for a run like this one. But it’s hush-hush right now. According to Darcy, he would endorse you, which would guarantee you a victory, if you put your hat in the ring.”

“He wants me to decide to run for public office four years from now?”

“That’s what he wants, yes sir.”

“Tell Branch Darcy to go screw himself. I don’t even know what I’ll be doing four months from now, let alone four years. Tell him to check back in four years, and I’ll let him know then.” Marsh looked at his watch again. He had to get going. “Any read on Doylan Struthers?” He had ordered his people to locate him the same night Bree told him what Struthers did to her the day she dumped him, and how he continued to try and harass her.

“I checked with Security before we got online,” said Ronald. “He’s out of state on a welding job, but we don’t know where the job is located. They’ll let me know when he returns back to Dell, and I’ll let you know.”

Marsh didn’t like that answer, but he knew it was the best they could do. “Anything else?” he asked.

“No, sir,” said Ronald, and Marsh ended the conference. He was

fishing alright. But why did he tell Ronald that?

He got up, put on his suit coat, and got off of the plane. One of his flight crew members carried his suit bag filled with new suits and his carrying case filled with his toiletries and put them in the trunk of the Bentley. Then he drove off. Another crew member stood at the top of the air steps and watched him leave too. But where was he going in such a small, nothing place? It was all a mystery to them.

But it was no mystery to Marsh. After picking up Bree and Andre, and dropping Andre off at home, they headed back to Bree's place where she cooked a delicious dinner for the two of them, and where they stayed in all night and watched television, and talked, and made love in every room, and just relaxed around the house. They did the same Thursday night, and Marsh loved doing simple things with Bree even more. During the day he was on his plane having videoconferences after videoconferences with his various conglomerates, but at night Bree commanded his total attention. And she loved that the most.

But the next night, Friday night, Marsh was shocked to discover that they weren't going to relax around the house the way they had the previous nights, the nights Marsh just loved, but that Bree had other plans. To his amazement, she had a date.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It took several seconds for him to respond. They had just eaten dinner, and were in her small kitchen washing the dishes since she had no dishwasher. It was a nothing chore, to be sure, but Marsh was enjoying it. He'd never washed dishes before in his life, which Bree found downright shocking.

“Never, Marsh?”

“Never. And I love it! I've been missing out.”

Bree looked at him. “You love what? You've been missing out on what?”

“Washing dishes, with you drying. I love it.”

Bree smiled. “I have no problem with you washing every dish we dirty up every time we ever eat a meal. Deal?”

Marsh looked at her and smiled too. “I don't know about that. You're far too quick to want to make this deal. Washing dishes must not be the fun times I think it is.”

Bree laughed. “It's not. Trust and believe. It's not!”

Marsh laughed too. And they continued washing and drying. “I haven't heard you mention anything about your campaign,” he said.

“Nothing to mention. I have to convince a simple majority of the current council members to vote to put me on that council. Part of the agreement for them to create the seat in the first place was that the vote would not be open to the public. Only members can vote. And I’ve already made my case to them.”

“And no public votes? That’s a bummer.”

“Not necessarily. They’ve gerrymandered the vote so badly here in Dell that all of the black vote is scattered around majority white precincts so that no black holds any position of any authority in this town.”

“Have any civil rights organizations filed any lawsuits?”

“Several have. All the way up to the State Supreme court.”

“And?”

“And it’s all been denied. They don’t see a problem.”

“Of course they wouldn’t,” said Marsh. “It would mean overturning their own power grab.” Then he shook his head. “I don’t know if I want you staying in a place like this.”

Bree was drying a pan when he said those words. Her drying movements slowed. He was about to hand her a couple of forks, but realized she still held the pan. “What’s wrong?” he asked her.

“This is my hometown.”

“People do leave their hometowns, you know. I left mine.”

“But if all of us up and leave who are able to speak up and make some things happen, what would happen to all of those who can’t leave? And who have no platform to speak for themselves?”

Marsh stared at her. If he wasn’t learning anything about her, he was learning about her integrity. This was a woman of great principles. And in that moment he had a frightening thought: He didn’t deserve her!

“This is my home,” she continued talking. “God sees what these crooks and racists are doing around here. Things are going to change only if we keep praying and fighting and doing our part. But we have to keep fighting.”

“But don’t you get tired of fighting, Bree?”

Bree shook her head and continued drying. That was an easy answer for her. “No way. Not yet,” she added, with a smile.

But Marsh exhaled. He was worried about her. “I can make some phone calls. Twist some arms to ensure you get on that council,” he said.

“Then I’ll be just like them, and they’ll know it. That’ll get me on the council, I have no doubt given your power. But that won’t change anything because they’ll know how I got there. They’ll know I’m just as bad as they are.” She shook her head. “We’ve got to do it the right way,” she said. Then she looked at her watch.

Marsh was smiling and shaking his head. “You’re one of a kind,

Sabrina. You're better than me."

Bree smiled too. And then she laid the news on him.

He looked at her curiously after she said it so casually. "You *what?*"

"I'm going out tonight. At seven. I wanted to make sure I fed you before I left."

Marsh thought she had to be kidding. "Are you telling me that you have a date?"

"Yes. At seven."

He frowned. "What do you think I'm doing? Do you think I'm doing this for my health?"

Bree was confused. "Do I think you're doing what for your health?"

"This! Being here. With you. Getting to know you. Trying to see if ..."

She waited for him to say it. But he wasn't ready to go that far.

"Why would you agree to go on a date when you know I set aside my very hectic schedule, a *very* hectic schedule, to stay here in town to spend time with you?"

"I had no idea you set anything aside. You never told me that. You haven't told me anything. How am I supposed to just know all of this?"

Marsh had said too much already. He was pissed that he had to go that far. He wasn't going any further.



Bree could feel the awkwardness overtake them. They both were leaving a lot unsaid. But she wasn't about to put her true feelings out there the way she did in all of her other relationships when the man was never willing to put his true feelings out there for her. And the reason he never wanted to was because his true feelings weren't true. He would have had to tell her a pack of lies.

She began to wonder if Marsh didn't want to reveal his true feelings because they would have been selfish and sinister too. Was she reading him all wrong and he was only sticking around because the sex was way better than he thought it was going to be? Was that all she was to him too? She knew he couldn't seem to get enough of her body. Even when he picked her up from work and brought her home, he couldn't get her in bed fast enough. And as soon as they finished, he went another round with her. She'd never seen a man want her body that badly. But was that all he wanted from her?

It was too painful to think about. Another heartbreak would break her, she knew it. That was why she decided to do like she was an expert at doing: she moved on. "It's not the kind of date you mean anyway," she said.

"Then what kind of date are you talking about?" asked Marsh, happy to move on too.

"It's a date with my girlfriends. We're meeting at the bar for drinks."

Marsh frowned. "I thought you said you met your girlfriends for

drinks on Monday.”

“This is a different set of friends. These are my sorority sisters from our college days at Tuskegee. We meet once a month. The only reason I didn’t cancel is because they’re coming to Huntsville to meet with me when they all live in Birmingham. But they give me a break from that hour-and-a-half drive sometimes and come closer to me.”

“I see. Can you call and cancel?”

“I could. But I’m not going to,” Bree said. “They’re coming all this way on my behalf, and we only get to meet once a month.”

Most men would be offended after sacrificing their own time by sticking around, but Marsh had the opposite feeling. She wasn’t going to upend her life just because he could upend his on a whim. Which was exactly like this was beginning to feel like: a whim. An irrational decision to see what could become, if anything, of that connection he felt for her. So far, much was becoming of it. But only time would tell.

Then he handed her the last dish to drive off, and he wiped his hands on the cloth. “What time do you plan on leaving?”

She was surprised that he wasn’t pissed like any other man would have been given his initial reaction. She looked at her watch. “In a few actually.”

“Then we need to get going.”

Bree stared at him. “What you mean we, white man?”

Marsh laughed. “You and I. You didn’t think I was going to let you go to a bar at night again only to have that idiot that terrorized you before try it once more, did you?”

Bree forgot she had somebody looking out for her now. She smiled. It was a wonderful feeling. “Thanks,” she said. Although they’d never had a man at any of their previous get-togethers. But everything about her budding relationship with Marsh were loaded with firsts.

“Let’s go,” he said, and after she went and freshened up, they left.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Who is this?” asked Meri.

“And what’s he doing with Bree?” asked Judea.

“Very nice dresser, whomever he is,” said Camille.

“And that big-ass body,” said Meri. “Very nice too.”

The three women were seated in their circular booth watching Bree and Marsh as they entered the Huntsville bar and began walking toward them.

“He’s holding her hand,” Meri said. “Y’all see that?”

“I see it,” Judea said, “but I don’t get it. I never heard Bree mention dating any white man. I thought she liked herself some dark-chocolate. Not white meat.”

“Doylan’s high-yellow. He’s not dark-chocolate. Neither were a few of the other guys Bree dated.”

“She’s dated so many,” Meri said, “I can’t keep up!” And they all laughed. “But high-yellow to blue-black, they were still black men every one of them. What’s up with this?” Meri looked sidelong at the couple.

Bree saw that look as they approached the booth. She knew her soror sisters very well. But in that moment, as they made their way to them, she

realized her dilemma. How on earth would she introduce Marsh? They weren't old friends. They hadn't committed to any long-term relationship yet. What was she going to say?

But then they were at the booth and everybody were all smiles as they stood up and hugged Bree. They would have hugged Marsh, too, since all three of Bree's sorority sisters were "huggers," but there was something about his manner that made them shake his hand instead. He was a standoffish sort of person, was their take.

"And you are?" Judea asked as she shook Marsh's hand.

"Marshall," he responded.

They all kind of looked at Bree to give them more, but she only introduced them individually to him. But that was Bree anyway. Of all of them, she was not the kind of woman to flaunt anything.

With no more information than his first name, they all piled into the circular booth that had the ladies scooting further around the circle to make room for Bree and then Marsh. What he immediately noticed about the ladies were how beautiful they all were. And with that same level of sophistication he saw in Bree. He knew so little about southern ladies, and the little he did know was all negative. But these ladies, along with Bree, impressed him.

The evening was lighthearted and fun, with everybody laughing and

talking about their days at Tuskegee University. Marsh enjoyed that the spotlight wasn't on him. He enjoyed seeing Bree so happy and free and so in her element. He could see why she didn't want to leave all of this behind. He and his buddies partied in a raunchy way. These ladies know how to party with dignity and grace.

It was all good until one of the ladies, Meri, got nosy. "So tell us, Bree, what's this all about?"

Bree was still laughing at another joke Judea had told. "What's what about?"

"This," she said. "You and Marshall. What's this about?"

"And when's the wedding?" Camille asked.

Although they all laughed, she didn't ask it in a vacuum. They all could see how Marsh was sitting there watching Bree the entire evening. And not just watching her like a man might glance every now and then at a lady he liked. But he was watching Bree like a hawk, and with that look in his eyes. Like a man either deeply in love, or getting there.

Bree and Marsh laughed it off too. But Bree waited for him to shoot the notion of marriage down. *We've only just met*, he could have said to them. But he said nothing. And she didn't either.

They eventually parted ways with her sorority sisters later that night and made the drive back to Dell. Both were glad it went well, but both were

unsettled too. Marsh was driving her Mustang in case Doylan was somewhere in the shadows and wanted to try something, but mostly the it was a tense-filled drive. Mainly because of that simple question Meri had asked: What's this about? And neither of them were ready to answer.

Marsh was disappointed in himself that he didn't tell her friends the truth: that he was in town to see if that great connection they had wasn't a fluke. That it was two soulmates meeting. That it was meant to be. But he was battling his feelings. Because Bree was so happy in her circumstances. She was so carefree and loveable, and with so many friends that obviously cared about her. He could ruin all of that if he made her his own. He could destroy the person she was if he took her away from her humble roots and planted her in his cut-throat, selfish, ethically-challenged world. Because one thing he knew for sure: he cared deeply for Bree. So deeply that he was beginning to believe that his presence in her life would be a win for him, but a total net loss for her.

They rode all the way home in silence.

And when they went to bed, to Bree's surprise he wasn't all over her the way he usually was. But he told her goodnight, turned his back to her, and went to sleep.

Unsure if something was wrong, she wondered about it as he slept. But since she knew she did nothing wrong, she chalked it up to Marsh being



Marsh, a man she was only just getting to know, and fell asleep too.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Marsh and Bree showered together, with Marsh making up for his lack of activity last night, and then they spent their Saturday morning lounging on Bree's couch watching cartoons and eating popcorn for breakfast, a favorite food of both of theirs. Although Bree wore black spandex shorts, a bright burgundy Tuskegee University jersey, and a pair of Jordans, Marsh wore what he had at his disposal: a very expensive-looking suit probably made by some ritzy Italian designer if Bree had to guess, a pair of jazzy-looking dress shoes, and no tie, as if that alone made his appearance casual. It didn't. But Bree didn't tell him so.

Marsh fielded a lot of phone calls during that morning, and Bree was able to grade a handful of papers she still had to grade, so it all worked out perfectly for them. With her legs flapped over Marsh's muscular thigh, and with his hand massaging her between her legs even as he spoke on the phone and she graded papers, they both felt relaxed and stress-free.

What Marsh loved most about that morning was the way Bree never complained about the number of phone calls coming in. He finally asked her, after what seemed like his tenth call, if she was bothered by it all.

“Bothered by what all?” she asked him.

When she looked up from her papers with her little reading glasses perched on her perfect nose, and he saw that gorgeous, innocent-yet-sophisticated face staring up at him, he felt a streak of excitement shoot through his body. Despite his reservations about her not needing a man like him, a man who lived in a tough, dog-eat-dog world he wasn't going to be able to leave, he was falling in love with this girl. And the way she made him feel in so many different ways was still remarkable to him. Just sitting there remembering how it felt to be so deep inside of her while they showered that morning, and how he had her pinned against that shower wall and groaning with ecstasy as he slapped against her wonderfully tight ass, was arousing him again. He'd never been with anybody even remotely like her. It still staggered him. "I'm getting a ridiculous amount of phone calls this morning," he said. "I was wondering if it bothered you."

"Don't bother me," Bree said, hunching her small shoulders. "You're a businessman running a major corporation. And you're out of town. It would be nuts for me to think you wouldn't have to answer every call. I would answer every call if I were you."

Marsh smiled. "Don't be me," he said. "You're better than me."

"Don't sell yourself cheap. You aren't bad yourself."

Although Marsh smiled, he didn't agree with her one bit. But he couldn't help but try to be better around her. Every female he ever dated

always felt seriously slighted by his attention to his empire. But Bree wasn't even annoyed. He was beginning to feel that she could be that one-of-a-kind girl he was convinced he would never meet. But what then? The what then was the scary part.

He stopped thinking that way, and they both got back to their respective activities.

Until Bree closed her folder with a decided closing. "Done," she said. "All papers graded."

"Many A's?"

"A few. But it's advanced calculus. It's not an easy class."

Marsh smiled. "I hate math you know. And you're a math teacher."

Bree laughed. "How about that?" she said. Then she looked at her watch. "It's late. I'd better get going."

Marsh looked at her. Where did she have to go this time, he wondered? "Get going where?"

"Basketball practice. The coach is out of town. I'm the assistant coach. Which means I have to run practices until Meg returns."

"It hope it's a girls team," he found himself saying. The idea of her around all of those young, well-built and undoubtedly well-hung young men wouldn't sit right with him. At all. He didn't care how young they were!

But Bree reassured him. "All girls, yes. And I've got to get a move

on,” she said as she stood up.

Marsh stood up too. “I’m ready when you are,” Marsh said as he began standing too.

Bree smiled. “What do you mean?”

“I’m going with you.” Marsh said it as if it went without saying.

Bree was pleasantly surprised. “Really? A guy who wears suits everywhere is going to a girls basketball practice with me?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s crazy. You know that?”

Marsh knew it was. But he also knew he wasn’t ready to leave her side.

“I thought you were supposed to be hobnobbing with city leaders again today, to secure their support for your land deal?”

“I secured their support already.”

That was news to Bree. “Then why are you still in town?” she slipped and asked.

Marsh felt a bit embarrassed, but the truth was the truth. “I thought I’d give you a try,” he admitted. “Don’t you think you’re worth it?”

Bree realized how her entire line of conversation was selling her own self cheap. As if no man would make any sacrifices to be with her ever. Mainly because no man, before Marsh, ever had. But he was right. “I’m

worth it,” she said with a smile.

“There ya go. Now let’s not keep the ladies waiting.”

“Sounds like a pickup line,” Bree said jokingly as Marsh followed behind her. He slapped her on her rear, which caused her to grin and scoot up.

But as soon as Marsh touched her that way again, he couldn’t help himself. She felt his strong arm wrap around her from behind, and he stopped her in her tracks and pulled her back against his front. And to say he was aroused was the understatement of the year. Bree felt it as soon as he pulled her against him. He was tented. He was ready. And right there, in that living room, he unzipped his pants, pulled down her shorts, and laid her on her stomach on the very couch they had just departed from. He got on top of her, and gladly, excitedly, did her once again.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When they walked into the school's gymnasium, Andre was shocked Marsh was still around. Not that it would be out of the realm of possibility because he knew Bree was hot stuff. But to a man like Marshall Bach who had his pick of the female litter no matter where he went, it was a shocker.

And when Marsh sat up in the bleachers the entire time Bree coached the girls basketball team, helping them with repetitive defensive drills and three-point shooting, even Andre was impressed. Marsh wasn't on his phone. He wasn't distracted. He sat up there staring at Bree the entire time.

Marsh was himself surprised that he was enjoying the view so much. But just watching her in her cute little shorts run around that basketball court trying to show the girls, all of whom were much taller than she was, how to shoot the ball, how to block out the opponent, how to fast-break, pleased him. She seemed so devoted to those young ladies, as if she was determined not just to teach them, but to teach them right. She was a joy to watch.

But when Andre heard Marsh answer a call and say *what did you find out*, and then he went out of the gym for privacy, he told the guys to take five and motioned for Bree to do the same with her girls. Then Andre and Bree met over by the hallway that led to the offices. And Andre didn't stutter.

“He spent another night with you? When does he plan to leave? Or are you putting it on him so good that he doesn’t plan on ever leaving?”

It sounded so out-there and personal that Bree wanted to tell him it was none of his business. But she knew Dre too well. She knew it was coming from a place of concern. “Yes, he spent another night with me,” she admitted.

Andre shook his head. “That guy’s in it for one thing, Bree, and you know it. And the longer he hangs around is the harder you’re going to fall. Why would you do that to yourself again?”

“I’m not doing anything to myself,” Bree said, although she knew that wasn’t true. She’d already given more of herself to Marsh in one week than she’d given to any man ever. And she was falling harder for Marsh than she ever had for anybody else too. But she genuinely liked Marsh. She felt nothing but good vibes from him. She was going with her gut on this one. “He’s not like all the others,” she added.

But that only confirmed for Andre that she wasn’t thinking straight. That he’d already rocked her world. “Is he that good in bed?” he asked her.

Bree gave Andre an angry look. “You’re out of line,” she said. “For real.” And then she walked away from him, glancing back at him to make it clear she didn’t like him going there, and then she headed outside too.



Marsh stood just outside of the entrance into the gym talking on the phone with his security chief. But when he saw Bree coming out of the gym with a bottled water in her hand, he cut the conversation short. “Text me the address,” he said, and then ended the call.

“You’re good?” Bree asked him as she walked up.

“I’m good. You’re done?”

“I have maybe another hour of drills to go.” She smiled. “Don’t tell me you’re bored already?”

“Watching you in those cute little spandex shorts? No way.”

Bree shook her head. “Do women really fall for that line?”

“All the time. You’ll be surprised.”

No she wouldn’t. “We’re just finishing up a quick break.”

“I need to make a run anyway,” said Marsh. “I should be back before the hour’s up.”

Bree found it odd that he had to “make a run” when he already said he sealed the land deal he was in town to seal, but she didn’t question it. That was his business. “Okay,” she said.

She was glad she didn’t question it because it seemed to make him feel even better about her. Because he smiled a kind of appreciative smile and then pulled her into his arms. And right there outside of the gym he kissed her long and hard on the lips. She knew some nosy student

somewhere was watching it, and it would be hot gossip around campus come Monday morning, but she didn't care. It felt too good in his arms. She adored being with him.

But then he walked away, got in the Bentley, and drove away. Bree felt lonely as soon as he left her side. But when she turned to head back in, Andre, staring her down as if she was committing some kind of crime, was waiting at the door.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

His hangout was a bar across the road from a trailer park in Palace Town. Two in the afternoon and Doyle Struthers was already nearly wasted. He played his last game of pool, this time with another heavy drinker, swilled down his last beer, and then left the bar and made his way home. A welder by trade who was known for his precision and skill, he walked wobbly across the highway to the Paradise Trailer Park where he lived. Waving at a few neighbors as he made his way up the steps to his porch, it was his regular Saturday routine. Drink near tipsy for lunch, go home and sleep it off, and then go back to the bar and party hardy when nightfall came.

But as soon as he opened the door of his double wide, and closed it shut, he walked up on a party of a different kind. A man, looking as if he owned America, was seated in a chair at his kitchen counter. For a second he wondered if he had walked into the wrong trailer.

But he knew better than that. “What the hell?”

Marsh was surprised that a man like this, whose good looks were the first thing you noticed about him, would have been Sabrina’s type. Marsh could tell just from looking at him that he was a pretty boy and little else.

But it was a small town. Most men in small towns were married. Her pickings, he was certain, had to be few and far between for her to end up with a lover like this. “Are you Doylan Struthers?” Marsh asked him.

“Yes, I’m Doylan Struthers. Ain’t no mystery about who I am since I live here. Who the hell are you, and what the hell are you doing in my house? That’s the mystery.”

Marsh was relaxed, super cool. Too relaxed. Too cool. It scared Doylan. “What is it that you want?” Doylan asked him.

“I’m here to collect.”

“Collect? Collect what? Are you telling me Big Ed sent you? I don’t owe that man no more money. I paid up my debt three days ago.”

“Do I look like somebody that Big Ed would have sent?”

He didn’t look anything like the roughnecks Ed always sent to collect. This guy looked more like some arrogant stuff-shirt to Doylan. But that was the only debt Doylan had. And he paid that up. “If Big Ed didn’t send you, then who did?”

Marsh looked Doylan dead in the eyes. “Do you remember Sabrina Turner?”

Doylan stared at him. “What’s this about?”

“Do you remember her?”

“Why?”

“Do you remember her?”

“Yes I remember her. A good piece of ass she was. Some fine meat. But violent as violent can get. She tried to kick my ass once.”

“After you kicked hers?” asked Marsh.

Doylan could sense there was more to this crazy encounter. Much more. “What’s this about?” he asked.

Marsh stood up. “I told you I’m here to collect.”

“Collect what?”

“What you took from her.”

Doylan frowned. “That bitch lying. I ain’t took nothing from her. I’m no thief. I make good money welding. What I look like stealing from her?”

Marsh walked over to Doylan. Although he was unsteady on his feet, he steadied himself. No man was going to intimidate him in his own house. Even though he still couldn’t understand how this man got into his house!

“What she claim I stole from her?”

“You steal her peace every time you bother her. That’s over,” Marsh made clear.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I can’t steal your peace the way you have been trying to steal hers,” said Marsh. “But I can steal your livelihood,” Marsh said and as soon as he

said it he grabbed both of Doylan's hands and began bending them backwards.

Doylan screamed out in pain and tried to disentangle his hands from Marsh's ironclad grip, but Marsh was too strong. Doylan dropped to his knees as the pain intensified, still begging for release. But Marsh would not relent.

"Right now," Marsh said, "I'm one bend away from breaking both of your hands to a point where they will never be restored. I assure you, welding handles isn't the thing." He leaned down closer to Doylan, his mouth within an inch of Doylan's ear. "Stay away from Sabrina Turner or the next time I'll keep bending. And you'll break. Do we understand each other, Mr. Struthers?"

Doylan could see the determination in Marsh's harsh green eyes, and he could feel the seriousness. This man wasn't playing. He meant every word he said. And his head started shaking furiously. "I won't have nothing to do with her ever again. I promise you that. I won't have nothing to do with that girl. I promise you!"

Marsh continued to stare at him. Then he finally relented and released Doylan's hands.

Doylan slumped in relief as the excruciating pain and pressure on his hands eased. But as soon as Marsh let him go, and he thought the worst was

over, Marsh grabbed him up by the catch of his shirt and began punching him violently in the face. Doylan tried to fight back, but all of his punches were as if he was shadow boxing the air. Not one punch landed. But blow after blow landed on him. And Marsh didn't have to tell him why. He beat Bree down once. Her boyfriend, he assumed, was giving him a beat down in retaliation. Her boyfriend was making sure he got the message.

He got it loud and clear.

And when Marsh released his shirt and he fell straight to the floor, Marsh pulled out one of his business cards and tossed it on top of him. "You asked who I am. That's who I am. I would love for you to tell somebody about our encounter. I would truly love if you tell. I would also love for you to be within a hundred yards of Sabrina Turner. I would truly love that too. Because then I'll return and show you how fortunate you were to have only suffered a few bruises today. Every bone in your body will be broken if I ever have to return."

Then Doylan's nearly swollen shut eyes saw a chilling look in Marsh's stone-cold eyes. "You don't know who you're fucking with, Doylan," Marsh said with such intensity that it chilled Doylan to the bone. And then Marsh stepped over him, and walked out the door.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When Marsh drove back to the gymnasium, he could see Bree and Andre talking outside. Basketball practice was apparently over and the kids had already gone. But Bree and Andre were still talking.

For some reason Marsh felt a flash of jealousy wash over him. They seemed to be so relaxed with each other, as if they had secrets they would never share with anyone. On some level, he wanted that kind of relationship with Bree. But on another level, a deeper level, commitment horrified him. Especially with a woman like Bree. Because he already knew, in the little time he'd spent with her, that she was not going to take anything less than his total and complete surrender.

When she saw him pull up closer to the curb where she and Andre were standing, she smiled and waved at him like a kid waiting to go to the candy store and he was her ride. It made him smile too. Not so much, however, when she gave Andre a quick hug and then hurried over to the G-wagon and got in on the passenger seat. She waved at Andre too, as they drove away. Andre, Marsh noticed through his rearview, was staring at them as they drove away.

“Is that necessary?”



Bree looked at him. “Is what necessary?”

“You and that guy always hugging each other every time you leave him.”

Bree stared at Marsh. Every other guy she’d ever been with pulled that shit on her too. Doylan’s ass was still trying to pull it. For some reason men wanted to control her early in their relationship and they would never let up. When she was younger she didn’t see it coming. Now she saw it like a bright red flag. “Yes, it’s necessary,” she said. “He’s my best friend. He will always be my best friend.”

He stopped at the red light. “Even if I say no?” He looked at her.

Up until that moment, Bree was liking where their relationship was heading. She could see him as a great potential. But not if he was going to go there. “You cannot control who I have as a best friend, Marsh. It’s one thing if Dre was trying to harm our relationship, such as it is. Then yeah, that’s a different conversation. But for no reason you would say no? That’s not a conversation at all. That’s a *let’s move the hell on.*”

Marsh was so unaccustomed to a woman talking to him that way that he didn’t know how to take it. But he liked that she stood up for herself. And now with Doylan Struthers no longer in the picture to bother her, he felt she would be just fine when he left for Japan. Why it would even matter to him was a mystery even he couldn’t decipher. But it was that plain old truth.

“Point taken,” he said.

Bree was surprised when he didn't try to battle her about it. He didn't come across as a man who backed down easily.

“We're going out to dinner tonight,” he said.

“Okay. Any special place in mind, or do I need to pick a place?”

“It's at a club. We shall have dinner there tonight.”

Sounded like another command. “Are you asking if I want to go out to dinner with you tonight?”

Marsh glanced at her. It wasn't as if it was up for debate. “We're going to dinner tonight. At the Dell Golf and Country Club.”

Bree stared at him. “Are you for real?”

“Why would you say that? Of course I'm for real.”

“Do you know what kind of club that is?”

“Exclusive? Good old boys? Racist as fuck? Of course I know. This town is just like it.”

“Then why would you want to take me there?”

“Because it's exclusive. Because it's a haven for the good old boys. Because it's racist. You're running for city council to make a difference. You go wherever that difference is, and you just may win some votes.”

Bree stared at him. “You sound like you've got politics in your blood too.”

Marsh thought about Ronald telling him how political operative Branch Darcy wanted to recruit him to run for public office. “I’ve been told,” he said. Then he reached out his hand to her. She placed her hand in his hand. “I want every one of those good old boys to know you belong to me. They mistreat you, they mistreat me. They vote against you in that council vote next month, they vote against me. Those men are capitalists if they’re anything. They want to be a part of the millions my projects bring to communities I invest in. They want to be for me, not against me.”

Then Marsh exhaled.

“What’s wrong?”

“My Acquisitions VP received a phone call from Connor Rogers claiming that he doesn’t have the muscle to pull along the other conservatives on the council to vote my way. Although many of them had already committed to vote yes, not all of them had. I need to show up to make it clear that voting against me is not an option, and I have the receipts to prove it.”

“That sounds like blackmail.”

“Call it what you like. I call it hardball. I call it giving them the facts, and then they make up their own minds. And you’ll be with me. Those assholes will see that you belong to me.”

Bree exhaled too, and then a distressed look appeared on her face.

“You’ll be fine, Sabrina. You’ll be with me. They aren’t going to harm you.”

Bree wasn’t thinking about those jokers. “It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

She looked at him. “I belong to you? That’s what you just said. Are we there yet?”

Marsh realized that he did say those words. He also knew they came from the heart. “That’s where it appears to be heading to me. What do you think?”

Bree wasn’t about to put her heart out there like that. She’d done that too many times before, only to have it handed back to her broken. “The only way it could ever head in that direction,” she said, “is if both people are willing to commit.” She looked at Marsh. “And commit exclusively.”

Marsh looked away from her when she said the *c* word. And exclusive? He’d never been exclusive in his life. And just the thought of giving himself over to somebody else in that manner was giving him palpitations. “Don’t let me miss another turn,” he said.

Bree stared at him. She hadn’t read him wrong at all. He wasn’t ready. “I won’t,” she said.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Walking through the thick, august double doors of the Dell Golf and Country Club was like going back in time. A confederate flag was embossed above the wall as they passed the threshold. A life-size statue of Jefferson Davis was in the vestibule. Every service staffer was either African, Hispanic, or Asian. Even the Christmas music that played softly over the stereo system was so beyond old school music that it was ancient. It was like Roy Rogers kind of old. Fred Astaire kind of old. Hank Williams and Roy Orbison kind of old. For Bree, it was like walking into a world that time had forgotten: It was worse than she thought.

Marsh found it all ridiculous too. But that was the south in his eyes. They wanted it to be different. They wanted it in your face. They were bold with their bullshit. And that was why it didn't surprise him at all that as soon as he and Bree walked in, the entire dining hall went hush.

Bree looked gorgeous, Marsh thought, in her just below the knee, skin-tight and perfectly fitting blood-red flapper dress of sequins and pearls and red gloves that came up to her elbows. "If I'm going to go back in time," she said when she first came out of the bedroom and Marsh couldn't hide his admiration of her style, "I may as well dress back in time too."

He grinned. He could fall in love with this girl, he thought happily. But then he put the brakes on that sentiment, cut the grins, and they left.

Now they were standing there commanding the entire room. Everybody was looking at the interracial couple as if Mars had just dropped down for a visit. The diners then turned to Connor Rogers, their leader, who had stopped mid-laughter when he saw the couple enter. And as the waiter escorted Marsh and Bree to their reserved table, Connor quickly threw his napkin on his own table, excused himself from his dinner guests, and hurried to Marsh and Bree's table.

"Uh-oh, here he comes," Bree said to Marsh with a smile on her face. The waiter, a black man, smiled too.

But Connor wasn't smiling. "May I speak with you privately, Mr. Bach?"

Marsh didn't want to speak at all with the asshole, but he wasn't going to be the one to cause a scene. He held Bree's chair as she sat down. "I'll be back," he said as he kissed her on the lips. Then he buttoned his suit coat and followed Connor across the room.

"Yes?"

Connor was shaking his head. "We don't do that here."

Marsh played dumb. "Do what here?"

"That's not done here," Connor said firmly. "This is private

property. This is a private club.”

“That accepts VIP reservations from the public. I have a reservation, and I don’t think anybody on earth would deny my VIP status.”

“That’s not done here!” Connor said forcefully and loud enough to be heard by nearby diners. He lowered his voice. “Now you need to get that little Negra out of our club before they tell her about herself.”

Marsh’s anger rose. “I want them to try!”

Connor stared at Marsh as if he was looking at a unicorn. Even Marsh found it off-putting. “What?” he asked him.

“So they do exist.”

“So who exists?” Marsh asked him.

“Negra lovers,” said Connor.

Marsh gave him a harsh look. “You’re a despicable human being. So let me be clear: by the end of this night, if you don’t have every single one of these yahoos kissing my ring and vowing their support when my initiative comes before the council, I will expose the hell out of you. And I’m not just talking about those few issues I mentioned before. I’m talking everything. Criminal things.”

Connor turned beet-red. Who did he think he was? But then he settled back down, smiled, and slapped Marsh on his back. “I was just messing with you,” he said as if it was believable. But as he left Marsh’s

side, that look of strain appeared on Connor's face. And when he passed their table and Bree smiled at him a smile filled with guile and disgust for him, he knew he was way over his head. He knew that the preeminence he'd been afforded in the region was going to crumble if that initiative failed to pass.

He had work to do.

Marsh made his way back to his table. Bree leaned toward him. "Is he okay?"

"No," Marsh said. "Is that okay with you?"

Bree smiled. "All day long," she said, and they laughed.

All evening, they outlaughed, and out-enjoyed everybody else.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

After dinner and back at Bree's house, Marsh was lying on the sofa with his head on Bree's lap, and Bree was running her hands through his silky thick hair as they watched *Hidden Figures* on television, a favorite movie for a math teacher like Bree. Janelle Monae was dancing in Octavia Spencer's kitchen talking about how fine she was, and then she and Taraji P. Henson took a turn on the dance floor. And then Marsh's phone rang. Marsh listened more than he spoke. Even though the phone was not on Speaker, Bree could hear the caller on the other end mention something about Japan and an Amos Dempsey and too many complaints. But the caller was talking louder and then softer and she could never get the gist of the conversation. And then Marsh ended the call. But she could tell, by the look on his face, that it wasn't good news.

"Who was that?" she decided to ask.

"Headquarters."

"A breakthrough in negotiations?"

"More like another breakdown that could become permanent if I don't get to Japan."

Bree's heart began to sink. She knew he had to leave sometime

Sunday. But it was only Saturday night. She thought they would at least have the night together. “You’re leaving?”

Marsh didn’t want to go either. “I have to.”

“When?”

“Tonight. I’ve got to make a stop in New York and then head straight out,” he said and looked up at Bree. He could see the anguish on her pretty face. He sat up and turned to her. Promising nothing, which she appreciated, he pulled her into his arms. And then he pulled back and kissed her. And a simple kiss became passionate. Because it might just be the last kiss they would have for weeks to come. And that kiss led to so much more. On that sofa, they made love again.

Then, in her bedroom after a second round of lovemaking, Marsh was up and putting back on his clothes. Bree was sitting up in bed. Naked and with her knees drawn up to her chin and her arms wrapped around her legs, she was staring at Marsh.

So much so that it made him wonder why. “What’s on your mind?” he asked her.

Bree wasn’t sure if she should even broach the subject. But she wanted their relationship to remain open and positive. “I heard about your visit over at Doylan’s place,” she said to him.

Marsh was surprised she’d heard anything about it. How could she?

Bree realized his surprise. She smiled. "It's a small town, Marsh. Word always gets around in these small-ass towns."

She could tell that still didn't satisfy him. She had to break it down. "Sharon has a cousin who has a friend that lives by Doylan."

"Who's Sharon?" Marsh asked.

"Andre's wife. So when Share found out, she told Dre. And Dre told me."

Marsh continued to stare at her as he zipped his pants. But it was one of those probing, uncomfortable looks he sometimes gave her. "What?" she asked him.

"This friend of yours. This Andre. Or Dre as you call him."

"What about him?"

"Should I be worried?"

Marsh even asking that question warmed Bree's heart. It meant she wasn't just a body to him. It meant their time together meant more than that to him too. "You shouldn't be worried at all. I told you Dre and I have been besties since I can remember. I don't like him like that at all."

"I see how he looks at you. He likes you like that."

"He's married, Marsh."

"And?"

"He's a God-fearing, good Christian man married to a wonderful

woman. He don't play that. And I absolutely don't. But getting back to your visit with my ex," she added as she wondered if he brought up her relationship with Andre to keep her from discussing his encounter with Doylan. "From what I heard, you beat him up so badly he had to go to the emergency room."

Marsh continued looking at her as he began putting on his belt. "Let me guess: you wanted me to mind my own business."

"Are you joking? I'm glad you kicked his ass."

Marsh smiled. "Alright Thelma. Or are you Louise?"

"He needed somebody to beat his ass the way he's been harassing me all these months. I heard you almost broke his hands too. Something that would have deprived him of ever again doing his beloved welding."

"What do you say about that? Think I should have broken them?"

"Thank you for not breaking them," Bree said. "No point in depriving a man of his livelihood, even a snake like Doylan. What good would that have done? But kicking his ass and scaring him like I heard you did? Now that would have been worth the price of admission. Thank you for that. I'm certain he'll stop his little petty aggressions with me from here on out. Thank you."

Marsh smiled. "You're welcome."

But Bree did have a question. "Why did you track him down and go

and visit him like you did?”

“Why? Because he was bothering you. That’s not anymore happening, Bree. You have back up now.”

Bree couldn’t help but smile when he said those words. He was looking out for her. That was a first for her. “Thanks,” she said again.

Marsh considered her. He liked her. A lot. He began grabbing his wallet and his phone. “I’ll call you when I get back in town.”

“Which will be?”

“Couple weeks. Sooner if I can get the negotiations back on track.”

“Or later?”

“If I can’t, yes.”

“How much later?”

“Three weeks. Four weeks. Whatever it takes. I have to make this deal.”

He could tell it wasn’t what Bree wanted to hear. And that other part worried her too. “Sabrina?”

She just sat there hugging her legs.

“Sabrina, look at me.”

She looked at him.

“This is no one-night stand, alright? Get that out of your head.”

She was pleased to hear it, and even smiled after he said it, but she

still felt uneasy. They were just getting started and he was going to be gone for upwards to a month already?

He could feel her anxiety. It was almost palpable. He put his wallet in his pocket and sat on the edge of her bed. For several seconds they just stared into each other's eyes, feeling that great connection that came naturally to them now, and then he pulled her into his arms. He held her for the longest time. He held her until he couldn't stay a moment longer. Until he had to go.

He pulled back and looked at her. "I've got to stop in New York to handle a staff shakeup, and then---"

"What kind of staff shakeup?"

"I have to fire my Chief Operating Officer for dereliction of duty. And then I'll fly out to Japan."

Bree remembered that caller mentioning something about too many complaints. But good reasons for leaving still didn't make leaving easy.

"I'll be back," Marsh promised her. "I'll be home for Christmas, how's that?"

She smiled. "That's our song," she said.

"That's our reality," he said. Then he stared at her. "Sounds good?"

She nodded. That hope in her eyes returned. "That sounds great."

He smiled too. And then he kissed her, looked at her ample breasts

wanting her again but unable to squeeze in the time, and then he left.

As soon as he walked out of her bedroom, and when she heard her front door close with a decisive bang, as if it was a permanent closure, she felt a sense of heartache already and what she knew was going to be the coldness of nights alone without him. She immediately felt the big chill.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

His plane touched down at the New York airfield and Marsh, ready to get this business over with so that he could go on to his more pressing business overseas, hurried down the air steps. An SUV drove up, a bodyguard got out of the front passenger seat and opened the back passenger door, and Ronald Coleman stepped out.

When Marsh saw him he was pleased with his initiative. He met his plane when he wasn't asked to do so. But that was Ron. He always went that extra step. Marsh was considering making him acting COO until his board of directors could recommend a replacement, but he was still mulling over the idea. He was so accustomed to Ronald being his right-hand man that he didn't know if he wanted to give that up. Which, he knew, wasn't fair to Ronald's career.

"Welcome back, sir," Ronald said as he buttoned his suit coat. "I hope you caught a big one."

Marsh looked at him oddly. What was he trying to insinuate? Then he realized Ronald was referencing his gone fishing analogy he told to him during their videoconference. "I caught a big one alright. The biggest," he said as he moved past Ronald to get in on the back passenger seat. Ronald



chuckled although he was totally out to sea on what the boss meant. But just as Marsh moved past him to get into the SUV, a helicopter could be heard buzzing overhead.

When they looked up, it was Ronald who first saw what looked like the flash of a weapon pointing out of the chopper. And then panic set in. “He’s got a gun!” Ronald yelled and just as he began to push Marsh into the SUV gunfire rang out. Ronald jumped on top of Marsh as a hail of bullets came sailing down from that chopper and were heard ricocheting off of the door and body of the SUV and the driver of the SUV sped away. The bodyguard that was holding the back door open was firing back in rapid succession and the chopper began to fly away. But the bodyguard didn’t stop firing until he hit his target: the pilot and seemingly the only person onboard. When he hit and immobilized the target, the chopper began to lose control, and then altitude, and then it began a fast descent that caused it to crash land within inches of the air traffic tower. The flight crew ran down the steps. The bodyguard ran toward the chopper.

But Marsh was already well away from the scene. He and Ronald were getting off of the back seat and were knocking broken glass from their suits.

“What the fuck was that?” Marsh asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” replied Ronald, as he continued to

look around to ensure there was no additional attacks.

Then Ronald's cell phone rang. When he saw who it was, he answered and put the call on Speaker. "Did you get that motherfucker?" he asked the caller.

The caller was the bodyguard. "I got him. A lone gunman in a helicopter."

"He's dead?" Ronald asked.

"As a doorknob. And you won't believe who it is."

"Who is it?" Marsh asked anxiously.

"It's Amos Dempsey, Boss," said the bodyguard.

"Amos?" Ronald looked at Marsh. "I'll be damn." Amos Dempsey was the COO that Marsh had flown in town for the expressed purpose of firing. Amos Dempsey was a longtime employee that he used to trust. He was stunned.

He was so astonished that he said no further words the entire drive to Bach headquarters. Because it wasn't just that the man who tried to kill him was a man he once liked and respected. But it was Bree. He had already spent his entire flight to New York feeling guilty for not only leaving her back in Dell, but for allowing himself to get attached to her in the first place when he knew she deserved so much better than him. But that shooting crystalized his fears. That shooting was further proof to Marsh that his life

was too unpredictable for a sweet, kind, precious human being like her. It was a *hold-your-horses* moment for Marsh. A *not-so-fast* time to reflect. Because the reality of what it could cost Bree to be with him stung him far worse than any betrayal by Amos Dempsey ever could.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Two weeks later and instead of running out the door to get to work, Bree found herself running into her bathroom, hurriedly lifting the toilet lid, bending over and throwing up. She and Andre often car-pooled to work, and she could hear him already blowing his horn for her to speed it up. It wasn't as if they were running late. It was just that Andre was an early bird. He believed in arriving early everywhere he went.

Bree, on the other hand, would rather go back to bed. She felt horrible. But she knew she had math students to teach and a job to get to. It was the last week of school before Christmas break, and exams were due.

She cleaned herself up, hurried to her kitchen table where she grabbed her briefcase, keys, and her insulated coffee mug filled with hot coffee, and hurried out of the front door.

"You look terrible," Andre said as soon as she plopped down in his car.

"I feel worse than I look. Just drive and let the windows down. I probably just need some fresh air."

Andre looked at her. "You threw up again?" he asked her.

She felt too nervous to even admit it. "Yeah."

“We both know what you need, and it’s not fresh air. And you’re going to get exactly what you need right now. No more putting it off, Bree. No more living in denial. Right now.”

And within a few minutes of their drive to work, Andre was pulling his Honda Accord into the parking lot of a twenty-four-hour pharmacy.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Marsh plopped down in the recliner on his huge, private plane like a man given a last-minute reprieve. He couldn't get away from there fast enough. Two full weeks in Kawasaki, Japan had him feeling shell-shocked. The negotiations went off the rails so often that he felt as if he was driving a runaway train the entire time he was there. The train eventually righted itself and the deal was finalized, but it didn't feel like just a deal anymore. It felt like an ordeal.

As his pilot and flight crew flew him back to America, he turned back on his cell phone for the first time in two weeks. His job knew not to disturb him. As did his friends who knew he was unavailable no matter what when he was in high-stakes negotiations. And the one person he'd been thinking about those entire couple weeks didn't have his phone number to bother him. So he had no missed calls from her or anybody else.

But that didn't stop him from thinking about her. About Sabrina Turner. *Bree*.

He'd been thinking about her ever since he left Alabama. He still remembered what it felt like to be so deep inside of her, and how badly he wanted that again. And not just that. But just to be with her. Eating popcorn

for breakfast. Watching her coach that girls' basketball team as those adolescents towered over her. Spending quality time with a quality person. She made him feel like a kid again.

But there was a reason he hadn't phoned her. He could have, late at night when he returned to his hotel. But he never pressed the button. Because she seemed like such a happy person with friends and outside activities that kept her busy and upbeat. Whereas he was a man with so much baggage that Samsonite would have said too much. Even his COO tried to kill him. That was the kind of vengefulness his every existence put in people's hearts. How could he, in good conscience, drag that sweet lady into a cut-throat world like his?

That visit to her ex, Doylan Struthers, was just an ordinary, *leave my girl alone* visit to Bree. But Marsh knew it was so much more. There was a time when all he did was make those kinds of visits on behalf of his old man. His old man made his fortune on making those kinds of visits! Only he didn't deal with small time woman-beaters like Doylan Struthers. His aim was higher. Men and women on top of America higher. Marsh knew for a fact that one time his old man paid a visit to the President himself. A visit that caused the President to change his policy and kill a bill already on his desk and ready for his signature. It was all high-stakes, high-society shakedowns. But shakedowns nonetheless. Bree had no clue what kind of



man he used to be.

He wasn't that man anymore. When he left his father's business, he left without looking back and made his own way. Made his own fortune. But there was always a trail of destruction behind him. Always old scores to settle and people who remembered what his old man did to them. He'd never been threatened by any of his father's enemies. That was why he traveled alone. He could take care of himself and everybody knew it. But if he made it known that he had a lady love, would they come for his lady? Would they view her as a weaker target? And what about his political ambitions? She knew nothing about that side of him, either, and what operatives like Branch Darcy already had in the works for him. It would be a lot for a small-town schoolteacher of modest means to take on.

And was it even love? He knew it was more than lust or he would have hit it and quit it the first night he got some. But did it ever rise all the way up to love? *Could* it ever rise that high? He didn't know. But he kept going back to the main point: Did he want to subject a sweet young thang like Bree to the harsh lights of his jet-setting world?

She might have wanted him just as badly as he wanted her. She gave off vibes that made him believe that she did. But wanting and needing were two different things. She wanted him, but did she need him? That was the circle he couldn't square. Why would she need some hard-hearted joker like

him in her orderly life? He came with complications, more than she'd ever know, and he often wondered if the best thing he could do for her was to just leave her alone. He didn't deserve her. Nothing about his life could ever deserve a sweet girl like Sabrina. Why couldn't he be selfless for once in his life and get out before he caused her any real pain?

His cell phone began ringing. Word must have already gotten back to the states that negotiations were over. But when he saw the Caller ID, he stared at it. What the hell? It was as if all that relationship talk had conjured her up. But then he answered the call. "Hello?"

"No phone call in I don't know how long? Not even one call?"

He didn't respond to that.

"We talked all the time. Now you have nothing to say? Well I got plenty to say. And I'm just going to say it before I lose my nerve."

Marsh frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm pregnant."

Marsh nearly dropped his phone. "*What? You're pregnant?*"

"Yes. We're going to have a baby. That's what I'm talking about."

Marsh sat up straight in his recliner. He could hardly believe it.

"And I'm not doing it alone, Marsh. I'm not about to bring your baby in this world all by myself. I am not going to be a statistic and you are not going to make me one. That's what I'm talking about!"

Marsh sat there unable to speak. She was *pregnant*? She was having his *baby*? All kinds of irrational thoughts came to his mind. Thoughts like how was that possible? How did he let that happen?

But mostly it was a kind of terrified joy. He was going to be a father? He thought that ship had sailed. He thought that would never happen. But now he was being told that he was going to have an heir? That he was going to have to be committed for life to another human being when he was having trouble committing to a relationship? His father's greatest wish, for him to have an heir, was about to come true. The phone finally slipped from his hand and he had to lean back in his seat. His heart was racing. He could hardly believe what he'd just heard. He could hardly believe it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It was hump day at work, three days later. The kids were already off for Christmas break and Bree was making notations in her summary report, trying to tie up loose ends before she took off for Christmas too, as she sat in the teacher's lounge. She was also trying to stop from falling asleep when Andre came through the door like a man on a mission.

He waited until the one other teacher in the lounge refilled her coffee cup and then walked out before he raced over to the front of the table where Bree was sitting. "Did you hear the news?" he asked her.

Bree wasn't trying to get all caught up in Andre's latest crusade. She wasn't feeling it.

"Bree?"

"What?"

"Did you hear the news?"

"What news, Dre?"

"About Marshall Bach?"

When he said that name, Bree looked up. "Marsh?" She noticed how Andre's eyes looked wild with excitement. "What about Marsh?"

Andre sat down at her table and as soon as he looked into Bree's eyes,

his wild look turned into a sympathetic, bordering-on-pity-filled look on his face.

Now Bree was worried. Did something happen to Marsh? She hadn't heard from him in over three weeks, which was bad enough. And she had news of her own to tell him. Devastating news. At least, that was how he might take it. "What is it, Dre?" she asked him.

"Arthur, our most liberal city councilman, just told me in passing, thinking it was no big deal. He said Connor Rogers mentioned it to him."

"Mention what to him? That he's not going to support my candidacy on the city council? I already knew that."

"What? No, Bree!"

"Then what?"

There was no other way for Andre to say it, except to just say it. "Marshall Bach is getting married."

Bree frowned. She had to have heard that wrong. "He's *what*?"

"He's getting married, Bree. And from what Connor told Arthur, the reason he's marrying so quickly is because the woman is pregnant with his child."

Bree nearly fell out of her chair. "*Pregnant*?"

Tears nearly appeared in Andre's eyes. "I'm so sorry, Sabrina. I am so sorry."

He reached for her hand. But she jerked it away from him. She looked more confused than hurt. “But he never told me that he . . . that he . . .”

“It was his longtime girlfriend. They were off and on for years.”

“And she’s *pregnant*? With his *baby*?”

*Just like you*, Andre wanted to say. “Yes,” he said instead. “She’s having his baby. And he’s going to marry her. She’s something like a week more pregnant than you are. Which meant he was fooling around with her just before he came to Dell.”

Bree couldn’t even wrap her brain around all she was hearing. She knew he didn’t phone her for weeks. But he never said he would. All he said was that he would call her when he got back in America. And that he would come back to Dell for Christmas. But just like that, after only being away from her for two weeks and three days, he was having a baby and getting married? When she was pregnant with his child too?

“But what about . . .” Bree couldn’t even finish her sentence as tears stained her eyes. She could hardly believe it.

“Oh *Bree!*” Andre’s heart went out to his beloved friend. He reached out to touch her again, but another teacher entered the teacher’s lounge just as he did. And Bree, unable to face anybody in that moment, jumped up from her seat and hurried to the bathroom adjacent to the lounge.

“What’s wrong with her?” the teacher asked Andre. But he was too worried about Bree to respond.

Inside the bathroom, Bree closed and locked the door and fell against the wall beside the door. She just found out she was having his baby too. Just three days ago she found out. She even called his office to get his phone number. But they wouldn’t give it to her because they’d never heard of her before. She left a message at his office, but he never responded. And she never had his cell number.

But she had still been hopeful. He said those negotiations had to succeed. Maybe he was just that involved that he couldn’t call her. It was ridiculous even to her, and to Andre too. But she was still holding out hope for their budding relationship. She was still planning on telling him as soon as he got back in town.

But he had gotten another woman pregnant? A woman he’d been with for years? And he was going to marry this woman? Tears started flowing freely down Bree’s devastated face as she slid down to the floor. She couldn’t believe it. She even started wondering if maybe Andre was wrong. Maybe Arthur didn’t know what he was talking about, or Connor Rogers didn’t. She was still holding out hope.

But by nightfall when she was alone in her bed, and he still hadn’t called her although she discovered online that he had been back in America

since the weekend. And when she saw that picture of his beautiful blonde bride, she got real. He'd probably forgotten about her as soon as he boarded his plane. She was just another piece of ass to him just like every man she had ever been with. She wasn't good enough for any of them. What made her think she was good enough for him?

She laid down and flung her covers over her entire face. And she wept. She couldn't stop herself from weeping.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Early that next morning, when Andre didn't blow his horn like he usually did but came inside of her home to check on her, certain she probably would call in sick that day, she was dressed and ready to go. She was just coming out of her bedroom as he walked in.

"You okay?" he asked her.

"Why wouldn't I be?" She went to the table by her front door and grabbed her briefcase and keys. But her eyes were puffy from crying all night, and he could see the pain still there. It took all she had, he knew, for her to face the world again that morning. He was proud of her.

But as soon as they walked out of her front door and made their way to Andre's Honda Accord, three cars suddenly drove up and parked in front of her house. Men and one woman rushed out of those cars, all of them with *FBI* written across their blue windbreakers, and hurried to them.

"What in the world?" Andre said as both of them were confused.

One of the agents in particular moved in front of everybody else as they approached them. "Sabrina Turner?"

Bree's heart was pounding. "Yes, that's me."

The man pulled out a badge and opened it. "I'm Special Agent In

Charge Haverson, ma'am. FBI."

"What is this about, Agent?" Andre asked him.

But the agent kept his eyes on Bree. "You're under arrest, ma'am."

Bree was beyond shocked. "Under arrest? For what?"

"For money laundering. For conspiracy to defraud a federal institution. As an accessory before the fact. Cuff her and frisk her," he ordered and the female agent began putting handcuffs on Bree.

Andre was insisting they were making a grave mistake. He was protesting so vehemently that the agent-in-charge had to tell him to back off or he'd be arrested too. Bree was so dumbstruck that she couldn't even speak. She was being *arrested*, and arrested for *fraud*? For *money laundering*? For *conspiracy*? It was like crazy talk to her. Where did they get this from? It was so beyond what she knew to be true and right that it seemed like she was in a dream. They were talking. They were cuffing her and frisking her and putting her in their unmarked car, but it couldn't possibly be real.

And Dre refused to be silent. She could hear him even as she sat in that unmarked car. He was being threatened with jail too, but he kept on talking. He kept trying to get out of their grasp. He kept on insisting that they had it all wrong. That they were making a huge mistake.

Little did Bree know, at the time, how long that mistake would last.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### *THREE MONTHS LATER*

It wasn't right.

He knew, deep down, it wasn't right.

But what was he to do about it? The invitations had been sent. The RSVPs had been received. The venue, the orchestras, the singers, the caterers, the bridesmaids and groomsmen, the photographers and videographers, and the minister and his team all were ready to go. And the day had arrived.

His bride-to-be was certainly ready. She'd been ready for years. She had a little bump, but she didn't care. Her threats of getting an abortion had worked. It shook him enough that it spurred him into action. He promised to marry her and not let his child become a statistic. He was a man of his word.

But was it the right word to keep? He didn't love Natalie and Natalie didn't give a damn about him. He was her ticket to power. She was his ticket to what, he wondered. Fatherhood? He would have never picked a woman like her to be the mother of his child. Down through the years she had been good for a little bed action and nothing more. Now she was going

to be the mother of his child? How could he have been that clumsy?!

But his day of reckoning had come. The last time he was with her it was a fact that his condom did break, but he thought he had pulled out in time. But was it a thought or just wishful thinking? At the time he knew it was a real possibility that he hadn't pulled out in time. At the time he dismissed that possibility.

But today, he was marrying her. It would be a marriage of convenience, if even that. What would he get out of it? An heir. Somebody to bear his name into posterity. Something he always wanted. What she would get out of it was power and position and money: what she always wanted. It was supposed to be a win-win situation. But why did Marsh feel like such a loser?

But as he sat in that dressing room alone, fighting everything within him not to get up and leave, just run away and to hell with it all, he could hear the door opening. Natalie, his bride, not even dressed in her gown yet, walked in.

It barely got a rise out of him. He was already over it with her and her antics. "Isn't it bad luck for the bride and groom to see each other on their wedding day?"

"Not for me it's not. I always break the rules."

"Condoms too apparently."

Natalie gave him a sly glance. He gave her the same. It was his theory that she punctured his condom before he put it on, which was highly possible since she was the one who offered it up to him at that time. And like the horny idiot he could sometimes be, he accepted her offer and did his thing. All over the world he was doing his thing. And this was what all that doing got him: a soon-to-be loveless marriage and a child with a woman he knew had no business being somebody's mother. But when she threatened to abort that baby, he believed her.

He also believed that she could be full of shit and that baby-to-be wasn't even his. That was why he got her to sign a prenup. No prenup, no marriage. But even that didn't ease his anxiety. "What do you want, Natalie?" he asked her.

"I heard rumors."

"What rumors?"

"That you have been considering the remote possibility of leaving me in the lurch."

He looked at her. Nobody could look more beautiful. Nobody could be more cunning and conniving and heartless. "Your point?"

"If you pull that stunt on me, it will be the end of this child. Do I make myself clear? We will get married today. You will play nice and I will play nice and the papers will record our niceness. I will become Mrs.

Marshall Bach. Just wanted to make sure you understood what was at stake here.”

“I understood it when you first threatened it. Which was, let me see: two minutes after you told me about your pregnancy.”

“Do not stand me up,” Natalie said forcefully, “or you will regret it. That’s all I have to say about it.” And then she turned to leave.

“Does it bother you?” Marsh asked.

Natalie turned back around. “Does what bother me?”

“The fact that you’re about to marry a man you don’t love.”

He could see a look appear in her eyes, as if it did bother her too, but her words, as usual, defied her look. “Doesn’t bother me at all,” she said, gave him a hard stare, and then flung her long blonde hair, and took her long, lithe body out of the room.

Marsh exhaled and shook his head. How could his life have gone so off-track? Why did he ever agree to marry that witch? Because he knew what she was capable of. When she said she’d abort that kid, she meant it. And it could very well be his kid. He couldn’t take that chance.

But even so, even on his wedding day, his heart, his mind, his soul kept floating back to *her*.

He even pulled out his phone to give her a call. He must have pulled out his phone to do that very thing a hundred times since he left her three

months ago. That was where he'd rather be: with her. But why on earth would she rather be with him? A man like him who would allow himself to be in this position? She'd already forgotten him ten times over he was certain. Because, unlike his dumb ass, she had good sense.

As he put his phone away, knocks were heard at the door. "Yes?" he yelled out, and the door opened. Joe Jallic, his attorney, walked in with a folder in his hands.

"Did you do it?" he asked him.

"It's done," he said as he sat beside him. "Just need your signature."

Marsh pulled out a pen as the folder was handed to him. He reviewed the document carefully.

When he was about to sign it, his attorney chimed in. "But . . ."

Marsh looked at him. "But what?"

"As your longtime personal attorney, Marsh, I don't understand it."

Marsh frowned. "You don't understand what?"

"You're leaving the bulk of your fortune to your unborn child."

"Only if DNA proves it's mine, that is correct."

"And you're very generous with various charities throughout the world, and to all of your household staff and other workers as well."

"That's correct too."

"But you're also leaving a considerable amount to a Sabrina Turner."



Marsh's jaw tightened at the sound of her name. "That's right."

"Not to the woman you're about to marry, but to another woman."

Marsh knew it was odd for a traditionalist like Joe. "That's right."

"Are you certain you want to do such a thing, sir?"

"I'm certain."

"But I've never heard you speak her name. How long have you known this person?"

Now Marsh was offended. Who the hell did he think he was? "That's none of your business. I'll leave my money to a dog in the street if I so choose. Understood?"

"Yes sir."

Then Marsh signed the revised will, closed the folder, and handed it back to Joe. "Is there anything else?"

"No, sir. I'll record it with my office right away."

"Good."

"And congratulations, sir. I hope you have a long and successful marriage," Joe added, and then left.

Marsh exhaled, and leaned his head back. All he wanted in that moment was a little peace and quiet. On an island far, far away.

With *her*.

Which he knew was impossible. Which made no sense why he pulled

out his phone again. Why he kept attempting to call her, but never pulling the trigger. But then his door opened and his groomsmen, all excited like the overaged party boys they'd always been, and with a bottle of champagne and glasses in their hands, came barreling in.

Marsh smiled. Half of them were drunk already. But at least somebody, he thought, was happy. At least somebody was having some fun.

“Drink up my friend,” his best man said as he poured Marsh a drink. “It’s going to be a long, long, sad, sad day.” And his groomsmen, married men every one, all laughed.

Marsh put his phone away, got up, and raised his glass in a toast to his old friends. But little did he know that when he put his phone away on the day of his wedding, it would become the last time he would ever attempt to phone Sabrina Turner ever again. She was better off without him, and he aimed to keep it that way.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Her door to her prison cell opened with a clang and the guard escorted her to the visitor's lounge. It was her first week in prison, after a trial that was postponed so many times that she didn't think it would ever take place, and it was the first day she could receive a visitor. When she walked into that lounge, it was no surprise to her that her very first visitor would be Andre.

He sat at a table in a room filled with other inmates and their visitors and she was seated, by the guard, across from Dre. He was smiling, just like she was, but he could see the terror in her eyes.

“How are you?”

“Good,” she said as she sat down, trying her best not to show her truth. “It's good to see you. For real.” The guard went over by three other men that stood guard in the visitor's lounge.

Andre was nodding his head. “You look good, Bree. You really do.”

“How's Sharon and the boys?”

“All good. Junior hit a homerun at Pop Warner and was struttin' his stuff. He's now convinced he has the right stuff to make it all the way to the majors. I told him not so fast.”

Bree smiled. That was Junior.

“How’s the baby?” Andre asked her.

She glanced down at her stomach. She was barely showing, but it was a fact: she was three months pregnant. With a baby girl. “The medical staff says everything looks good.”

“I still say we should call him, Bree.”

But Bree was already shaking her head. “No way.”

“Bree?”

“No way! That man is getting married any day now.”

“Today,” said Andre.

A sad look came over Bree’s face. “Today,” she echoed. “He made his choice. He proved what kind of man he is. Don’t you dare try to call him.”

“But maybe he could get you a better lawyer than I could afford.”

“Why would he, Dre? He doesn’t give a damn about me. He slept with me. Promised to be back for Christmas to spend more time with me. He gave me hope again. He made me feel like he was different than all those other losers I’ve been fooling around with. Then the next thing I know he’s got another woman pregnant at the same time I was pregnant, and he’s going to *marry* her! He was different than all those other losers alright. He was worse!” She shook her head. “He showed me who he is. And I believe him.”

Andre nodded his head. "I do too," he agreed. "That was some cold shit he pulled on your, Bree. That was cold."

"So don't even think about calling that man to do anything for me," she added. But then she noticed a certain guilty look in Andre's eyes. And she couldn't believe it. "You called him? Dre, you didn't!"

"I called his office, that's all I did. I didn't have his personal phone number and you didn't either. I couldn't call him directly. But he's so high and mighty anyway, they wouldn't even let me talk to one of his assistants."

"That's what you get. I told you I'm not putting my baby at risk like that."

"What risk?"

"He could take my child, that's what, Dre. Look at me." Dre was looking around her. "Look at me, Dre!" He looked. "I just got sentenced to five years in prison. I'm pregnant in prison. I tell them who the daddy is and that daddy will be able to take my child and immediately terminate my parental rights. By the time I get out of this place my child won't even know my name and they would have barred me from ever even contacting her. That's what risk!"

Andre nodded. "I was desperate to get you some help, Bree, that's why I did it. But I understand what you're saying. He's a high and mighty asshole, I get it. It won't happen again."

Bree exhaled. She knew he was coming from a good place. “When I get out of here I’m going to start my life again. With my little girl. And nobody’s taking her away from me.”

Andre reached out and grabbed her hands. “It won’t happen again. I promise you that.”

Bree nodded. Andre was the big brother she never had. She’d forgive him anything. “I talked to Sharon yesterday,” she said.

“Yeah, she told me. I’m glad you reached out to her.”

“She said she’d be honored to take care of my child while I do my time.”

“That’s because she knows these are trumped-up charges against you. That jury believed Doylan Struthers. They must have been on dope!”

“That’s what she said. There’s one thing I can say about Share is that she comes through when you need her most. You couldn’t have picked a better wife, Dre.”

Andre smiled and nodded. “I think so too.”

“It really helped me so much when she gave me that reassurance, you just don’t know. I knew you was going to get my child and take care of her for me come hell or high water. But for your wife to agree to it too? That’s what I needed to hear. I appreciated that. And I appreciate you too, Dre. If I didn’t have the two of you agreeing to raise my baby until I get out of here, I

don't know what I would do.”

“We got your back, Bree, you know that. And we've decided that one of us will come and see you every time you have visitation, and bring the baby with us.”

Bree smiled as she fought back tears. “I hate that my baby will have to come to a place like this. Lord knows I hate it. But it's the only way she'll get to know me.”

Andre agreed. “Right,” he said.

And then time was up. And Dre had to leave. And Bree, crestfallen when her only contact to the outside world walked out, was escorted back to her prison cell.

As soon as that door slammed shut, she felt that terrible fear she'd been feeling ever since her ordeal began. A fear that ran down her spine as if it was implanted inside of her. And she made her way to her corner and slid down until she was crotched down knee-length: her back against the wall.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### *THREE YEARS AND NINE MONTHS LATER*

It was Christmas season. The air was filled with cheer and festiveness. The brand-new mall was packed with shoppers and decorations galore.

As Bree and her daughter Danica, and Andre and his wife Sharon, along with their two sons, were sightseeing at the mall, Sharon took Dani and the boys into Macy's to see Santa Clause. Bree and Andre remained outside looking at the decorations. And that was when everything changed again.

When Bree looked down and realized that Marsh, along with his entourage and the town's mayor, had entered the mall, her heart began to pound. And when he looked up at her, and when their eyes met and he recognized her too, they both were shaken. Everything within Bree told her to run. Get her kid out of Macy's and run. And that was exactly what she did. She took off.

Marsh ran up the staircase after her, determined to catch her and keep her this time, but he was no match for a woman that was not only scorned, but was hiding secrets too.

Marsh made it up to the mall's second floor landing and ran to the entrance of Macy's, not even recognizing Andre as he blew past him.

But by the time Marsh made it into that celebrated department store that was jam-packed with Christmas shoppers, and he searched and searched for Bree, turning around and around again in search of her, she had already grabbed her little girl, taken the escalator to the first floor, and escaped out of the back exit.

With her little girl in tow, she ran around to her old Pontiac G6, buckled her baby in the car seat, and then ran around to the driver's side entrance and hopped inside herself. Praying that it didn't fail her this time, she had to turn the key several times just for the engine to ignite. But it ultimately turned over and she was able to floor the gas and speed away, leaving nothing but a trail of smoke from the tailpipe, and pain in her heart, in her wake.

But while she was speeding away, Marsh was coming out of Macy's, unsuccessful in his attempt to find her. And although he ran past Andre as if he wasn't there when he first made it up to the second floor, he recognized him when he walked out of Macy's and saw him standing at the rail.

“You're her friend, aren't you?”

Andre wasn't about to give that guy an inch. Not after how badly he hurt Bree. “Whose friend?” he asked him.

Before Marsh could respond, Ronald Coleman, his senior VP of Acquisitions, and the rest of Marsh's team came hurrying out of Macy's too. They had run in after him, but could never keep up with him. "Sir, are you alright?" Ronald asked him.

Marsh saw how flustered his team of assistants were too. They had no idea why he took off like that. He opened his suit coat and placed his hands on his hips.

"You're okay, sir?" asked another assistant.

"Yes!" Marsh's tone was harsh. He was unable to shield his own frustration. Then his voice calmed. "I'm okay." He looked at Andre again, certain he was lying to him, but he felt embarrassed pursuing it. Who was he to ask anybody anything about Sabrina after he had ghosted her for four long years?

He and his team left the second floor, made their way back downstairs to the mayor and his entourage, and Marsh somehow managed, though barely, to continue the tour of the state-of-the-art mall that he had built, but had only had a chance to tour for the first time since its inception.

But all the while, his mind, his heart, his *everything* was focused, not on the magnificence of the architectural design or the amazing Christmas decorations, but squarely on Bree.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Three-year-old Dani was so confused she didn't know what to do. One minute she was waiting in line, with Auntie Sharon, to see Santa Clause. The next minute she was being grabbed by her mother and taken away.

She kept looking at her mother as her mother drove through the thick night air. Dani knew something was wrong because she never drove that fast. But she didn't ask what. The pretty little biracial child stayed silent as her mother wiped away tears as she sped away home.

Christmas songs were playing on the car radio. Including one of Dani's favorites: the Johnny Marks-penned *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*. She started singing along, the way she and her mother did the other night, but her mother didn't seem to even hear her.

*"... Then one foggy Christmas eve  
Santa came to say:  
'Rudolph, with your nose so bright,  
won't you guide my sleigh tonight?'*

*Then how the reindeers loved him.  
As they shouted out with glee:  
'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,  
you'll go down in history!'"*

But the song stopped in the middle of *history* when they arrived home

and her mother turned off the car, hurried around through the cold, wintry night and grabbed her from her car seat, and then ran with her into their apartment in one of the poorest parts of Palace Town. The guys hanging out on their cars joked that she acted like she was running from a ghost. Which was exactly what Bree felt she was running from. The ghost of her past. The ghost of a man who could find out the truth, and destroy her life.

She unlocked her apartment door, went inside with her daughter, and locked up. She sat Dani on the sofa and then plopped down beside her. And then she cried.

“Mommy, what’s wrong?” Dani asked her, tears staining her eyelids too. “Don’t cry, mommy.”

But Bree could only pull her into her arms. She was sorry she was making such a spectacle of herself in front of her baby girl. But she couldn’t help it. Her baby’s father had just stared her in the face for the first time in four long years. And from all indications he had no idea about her life after he left Dell nor did he apparently care to find out. What was she supposed to do?

He was a rich, powerful man that could take her baby from her. She was a poor, convicted felon who wouldn’t stand a chance in a court of law. Or even a court of public opinion! She’d lose her baby forever if he found out. What was she supposed to do?

Her entire soul was aching. Her entire thought process was focused on leaving town. Just pack up and run before he caught up with her.

But he'd already seen her. All he had to do was ask around town and he'd find out that she had a baby, and a biracial one at that. And then he'd find out, she was certain, that she delivered her baby in prison. Something she would never be proud of. It was an awful situation.

Her cell phone began to ring, which caused her to jump. But she quickly answered when she saw that it was Dre.

“You got out of here like a bat out of hell.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“That man don't remember me from a hole in the wall, girl.”

“Did you talk to him, Dre.?”

“No, I didn't talk to him. He tried to talk to me, though, after he thought he recognized me.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him I didn't know what he was talking about.”

“Thanks, Dre.” Then she exhaled. “Where is he now?”

“Still downstairs. He continued the tour with the mayor and all those other people with him. It was as if he saw you, and was initially shocked, but it was right back to business as usual.”

Bree should have been pleased that he didn't try to track her down

any further. But it only proved just how little he regarded her. But him marrying another woman when he said he'd be back for Christmas proved it too. And now it was Christmastime four years later. Tears appeared in her eyes again. Those four years were nothing like she had thought they would be. She was filled with such hope for their relationship. She was looking forward to getting to know him better. "What if he starts asking questions, Dre?"

"To be honest with you, I doubt if he even bothers." Andre didn't tell her that Marsh ran into Macy's like a madman on steroids. That would only give her false hope again. He wasn't letting that man hurt her twice. "He's not thinking about you, Bree."

"You're probably right," Bree said, although just admitting it hurt a little too. Then she asked the question that had been plaguing her ever since she saw him. "I wonder if his wife is in town with him," she said.

She could hear Andre's exasperation. "Don't start obsessing on that man again, Bree, please don't do it. He's not worth it. You got your daughter, a job, a car, and a place to live. You're doing good considering what all went down. Don't let that man sweep you sideways again. Don't let him do that to you."

And in the fog, Andre gave her clarity. "You're right. You are so right, Dre. I was sitting up here dreading what could happen, and the



questions he could ask. But why would he even bother? He didn't bother all this time when I needed him most. Why would he bother now?"

"Exactly," Andre agreed. "He'll be back on his plane in the next hour or so I'm sure, and won't even remember seeing you again. Relax. Smile. It's your favorite time of the year. Don't let that man steal your joy."

Bree actually managed to smile, which made Dani smile too. "You're right again."

"I tell you what: why don't you and Dani meet us at Chuck E Cheese. The kids can have fun and us grown folks can eat some pizza."

It sounded good to Bree. Dani looked so worried about her. But what about Sharon? "Is that going to be okay with Sharon?"

Bree could hear him ask Sharon that very question. Then Sharon came on the phone. "It's absolutely fine with me, Bree. And Dre's right. Don't let that man steal your joy."

Bree smiled. She needed that. Sharon always had a way of showing up when she most needed her to. "Thanks, Share. We'll meet you guys over there." And they ended the call.

Then Bree smiled at her daughter. "Wanna go to Chuck E Cheese?" she asked her.

Dani's already big, beautiful hazel eyes sparkled. "Yes, please," she said as she jumped from the sofa and began jumping in place. "Yes, yes, yes,

please!”

Bree laughed. And then she did all she could to forget that zero as she bundled up her daughter, and they headed back out into the cold night air once again.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Bree might have been able to forget about Marsh, but Marsh wasn't able to forget about her. Seeing her again was almost traumatic for him. Now he couldn't get her off of his mind. The way she looked down at him, as if she was devastated. He knew he had to have hurt her on the margins. Before he married Natalie, they were considering making a serious go of it. But that look she gave him didn't look marginal to him. It looked as if he had broken her heart.

He was supposed to fly back to New York that same night. See the mall and the surrounding housing development, pat himself on the back for another project well done, and then hightail it out of there. It was the way he always did completed jobs. But after the grand tour was over, and they made their way back to the waiting SUV, Ronald noticed a Mercedes G-wagon waiting too. Which Ronald immediately knew wasn't a good idea.

"Everything okay, sir?" he asked Marsh.

"Everything's fine. I've got some business to take care of and then I'll be there later."

"Be where later?"

"New York."

“But sir, your campaign manager--”

“There’s no campaign yet,” Marsh said, reminding Ronald that it was all still exploratory. It was all still conjecture about him possibly running for public office. Just because Branch Darcy was involved didn’t mean it was inevitable. “I’ll handle Darcy,” he added. “Don’t you worry about him. Good night.” Then he got in the Mercedes and drove away.

Ronald and the rest of the team all knew something was up, but how do they argue with a billionaire who also happened to be their boss? They got in the SUV and left too.

While they were heading to the airport to fly back to New York, Marsh drove straight to Palace Town and to the house he remembered belonged to Sabrina. He remembered how it had the cutest oval window. And the Christmas decorations all over the front porch that seemed so very much like something Sabrina would have done. But when he rang the bell, a short Hispanic man answered. “Yes?”

Marsh didn’t know if the man was her husband, or what. “Is Sabrina home?”

The man seemed confused. “Who?”

“Sabrina Turner.”

“No Sabrina Turner here.”

Marsh was certain he had the right house. “How long have you

stayed at this residence?”

“I bought this house three years ago.”

“Do you remember where the previous owner moved to?”

“I never met no previous owner. I bought this house as a foreclosure. Got it for a steal too. Why you asking me all these questions, bro?”

Marsh exhaled. “No reason,” he said, and left and got back in his SUV. He was baffled. Her house was foreclosed? Why? *What the hell happened to her?*

He phoned Connor Rogers, the president of the city council. Desplicable though he might be, he did know the goings-on in that town.

“Connor here.”

“It’s Marshall Bach, hello.”

“Marshall!” His voice screamed cheerfulness. “How are you doing, old buddy?”

“Listen, do you know what happened to Sabrina Turner?”

“That black gal? The one that got out eight-nine months ago?”

Marsh was puzzled. “Got out? Got out of where?” Then he started to panic. “She’d been in the hospital? She’d been ill?”

“She was ill alright. She was in a hospital alright. If that’s what they call prison nowadays.”

It took a moment for that word to register with Marsh. And when it

did, it staggered him. “*Prison?*”

“That’s right. That’s where that gal been. Spent three long years there too. Little longer than that if you include all them months she sat in jail waiting for her trial. They wouldn’t even give her bail. That’s how they felt about her crimes. She just got out eight or nine months ago, or something like that. I remember because it was a couple months before your mall was having its grand opening. You was out of the country and couldn’t attend. Which was insanity to me. If I was opening a mall like that one, I would have been there smiling from ear-to-ear come hell or high water.”

*Prison?* Marsh was still shocked by that revelation. He wanted details, and plenty of them, but not from Connor Rogers. “Do you know where she lives now?”

“I have no idea. But I know where she works.”

“What do you mean? She’s no longer at the high school?”

“High school? That crook? No way! They fired her the day she got arrested. Which didn’t surprise me one bit. All them Negras nothing but crooks and thieves anyhow.”

Marsh lashed out. “I don’t want to hear that bullshit, you hear me?! Where does she work now?”

He could tell by the way Connor hesitated that he was royally pissed, but he answered the question. “She works over at Slappey’s.”

“Slappey’s?”

“A little hole-in-the-wall restaurant over in Shanty Town. I remember when Slap first hired her. Folks didn’t like that, no sir, not one bit. Even them Negras, them *blacks* I mean, didn’t like it. He lost some business behind that hire. But he stuck by her side. Probably because he was Andre’s uncle and Andre begged him to.”

*Andre.* Marsh remembered that that was the name of the guy at Macy’s last night. Her childhood best friend. The one who pretended he didn’t know who she was.

“She usually works the 10 to 5 shift if I’m not mistaken,” Connor added. “But about that mall of yours. Buddy, it’s a beauty. I get phone calls all the time from all around the region with people asking me if--”

Marsh hung up in his racist face. And he just sat there in that car. He was beyond stunned. Prison? Sabrina went to prison? *His* Sabrina? It didn’t make sense!

But there was nothing he could do tonight. And he couldn’t contact his team to get intel for him. With his potential campaign still in the exploratory phases, they’d already had to fire a couple people that were leaking information to the press. He wasn’t bringing the New York press to her front door in any way, shape, or form.

He was going to have to find out what happened for himself. But not

from the likes of some strangers or that asshole Connor Rogers. Not even from the local press or online accounts. He was going to find out straight from Sabrina herself. It was a pack of lies. It had to be. And only she, he believed, would tell it to him straight.

But as soon as he was about to press the Start button in the car, his cell phone rang. When he looked at the Caller ID, and saw who it was, his head leaned back again. But he answered the call. “What?”

“Don’t you what me,” she said in that grating voice he hated. “When are you coming back? And why are you still there anyway?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Don’t get snippy with me, Marshall Bach! I’m holding up my end of the bargain. I’m doing what I agreed to do. But you’d better treat me right or I declare I’ll . . .”

It was her usual threat that Marsh knew was just her way to get what she wanted. She knew the consequences if she crossed him. “What do you want, Natalie? I don’t have time for this.”

“But you’ve got mountains of time to hang out in Alabama doing whatever dirt you’re doing there?”

“I’m going to end this call. What do you want?”

She hesitated. She could be as feisty as Marsh. But then she got on with it. “They’re giving me a Woman of the Year award tomorrow night.”



“They who? The Nazi party? The Mississippi Chapter of the KKK? The Proud Boys?”

“Fuck you, Marsh!” she yelled out. “Fuck you! The only reason I’m calling your ass is because Darcy said you have to be there or the press will get suspicious. I want you to be there.”

“No thank you. I’m not about to attend that bullshit.”

“Darcy said--”

“I don’t give a flying fuck what Darcy said! Find you another fake date. I’m not interested.” Then he ended the call. Nobody got his dander up faster than Natalie did.

But even his hatred of her wasn’t enough to ease his concern for Sabrina. She was still front and center for him. Not even his possible campaign, or that woman he still had to deal with, could stop him from being consumed by the need to see her again and talk to her again and protect her. And to protect her at all costs.

He backed out of the driveway that no longer was hers, and drove away dazed.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“One burger with fries and two chicken platters coming up.” Bree took their menus and headed for the kitchen. Then she was back at another table, bringing an order to that group, and then taking another order from another table back to the kitchen while picking up another order and bringing it back out front. And on and on it went.

The next day and Marsh was seated in his rented Mercedes SUV, parked on the side of the restaurant’s parking lot, watching her through the floor-to-ceiling window that surrounded the building. It was late afternoon, ten-to-five, and she appeared to be the only waitress on duty. But she didn’t seem to mind at all as she zipped around that place, smiling at every one of those customers, even the demanding ones, as if it was heaven to her. And that was what he remembered most about Sabrina. The way she was always so happy and upbeat and so sweet and kind.

And the way it felt to be deep inside of her. He could never forget that either.

He also couldn’t forget what that despicable Connor Rogers told him last night. He was still reeling from that news. Arrested. Three years in prison. Fired from the job she loved. Undoubtedly ostracized by this town

she loved. The only employment she could get was at this nothing restaurant. It still seemed surreal to Marsh.

All those years and he thought she was better off without him. That he was doing her a favor by leaving her alone. His jackass didn't even think to check on her. To make sure she was okay. To confirm that being without him was the best thing that ever happened to her when it obviously wasn't.

He leaned his head back. He was still unable to wrap his brain around the fact that all of those horrific details was Sabrina's life story. She was doing so well the last time he saw her. She was running for city council. She was a math teacher and an assistant coach. She was involved in all kinds of extracurricular activities. She was a young woman on the come up. Now *this?* What the hell?

Ron Coleman phoned him earlier and asked what time he would be back in New York. Branch Darcy, a major political operative with dreams of being his campaign manager should he officially announce, wanted to know too. But all he could tell them was soon. He'd be back soon. When they asked what soon meant, he took his guilt out on them and cussed their asses out. "When I get there, that's what it means," he added angrily and ended those calls. When it was his own ass he needed to cuss out. When it was his own ass he needed to hang up on.

He looked at his watch again. It was already after five, which was

supposed to be her get-off time, but she was still hard at it. The only way he knew she was counting the time was because she kept looking at the clock on the wall. She knew she wasn't supposed to still be there. And she was getting antsy about it.

But what Marsh couldn't understand was why was he still there. Why didn't he hop his plane and get out of Dodge last night when she ran away from him? A blind man could see she didn't want to have anything to do with him. And had he left town with his team, he would have never found out any of this shit about her, and would have not felt a guilt that seemed to be eating him alive. She wasn't his responsibility. He only knew her for those couple days they spent together. Why was this news tearing him apart?

Because that connection he felt for her four years ago was still there. As vivid as her sparkling brown eyes. And all that she'd been through? What about that? Did she suffer alone? Was she still alone? He knew he couldn't walk away now. He had to hear her story. He had to look into her eyes again and make sure she wasn't just putting on smiles for the public, but was truly doing all right. That crazy-ass campaign would complicate things incredibly, not to mention that crazy-ass woman he had to put up with. But, no matter what, he had to make this right. He wasn't leaving her side, until he knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she was good.

It would be nearly an hour after her get-off time before another

waitress finally arrived and she was able to get out of there. Marsh quickly got out of his SUV and followed her to the back side of the restaurant where her car, apparently, was located.

Bree was walking fast because she was already late picking up her daughter from daycare. She could have phoned Andre to go get her, she knew, but she was tired of bothering that man. He and Sharon had done too much for her already. But when she got to her car, a 2005 Pontiac G6, and was about to unlock the door, she heard a voice that was so familiar that it staggered her.

*“Sabrina?”*

She froze. She didn’t want to look up. Because she knew it was him. Because looking up meant confronting, once again, the consequences of her actions. The destruction it would surely cause. And she quickly unlocked her car door and got inside.

“Sabrina?” Marsh yelled out to her as he approached her driver side door. But she refused to let it down. What he did after spending that time with her was something she couldn’t forgive. That devastated her. And she couldn’t forgive what she did to him either. It was a no-win situation for both of them, and she wasn’t dealing with that. She began turning the ignition and pumping her brakes repeatedly, but she could get no fire. It just wouldn’t start.

But that wasn't unusual. She almost always had to turn that ignition repeatedly before it turned over. But this time, given her luck, it wouldn't budge. And then all she could hear was the clicking sounds of one turn too many. Her car was toast. It was dead. And Marshall Bach was knocking furiously on her window.

She didn't want to do it. She'd rather eat nails. But she slowly, reluctantly grabbed the handle and rolled down her window. "What?" she said in a voice she had hoped would show her contempt for him. But what it actually showed Marsh was her pain.

He could feel her pain. Could see it in her remarkable eyes. But he could feel that contempt too. "I can take you wherever you need to go," he said to her.

If she wasn't already really late picking up Dani from daycare, she would have never taken his offer. But she couldn't afford to call an Uber, nor did she know anybody other than Andre who would bother to give her a lift on such short notice, and she wasn't bothering Andre again. She reluctantly got out of her car, locked her door although she knew nobody would want to steal that hunk of junk masquerading as a car, and followed Marsh to his SUV.

She walked slightly behind him, he noticed, but at least she was walking with him.





## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Neither one of them knew how to respond to one another. So they didn't even try. They walked in silence from her disabled car to his shining bright SUV. When he opened the front passenger door and helped her inside, she could smell that same cologne scent he had four years ago. It reminded her of so much, including that insatiable appetite they once had for each other. How it went so wrong so fast still haunted her.

Then she shook her head. It was just a mess, she thought, as she got into his vehicle. But she got in anyway. She even allowed him to grab the seat belt, reach over her - coming within half an inch of her face, and buckle her in.

Marsh could feel his heartbeat quicken when their faces were less than an inch apart. And although she'd been working all day long, she still smelled so fresh and sweet, just like he remembered her. And when he buckled her in and his arm accidentally swept against her breasts, he looked into her eyes. She looked into his eyes. And it registered for both of them. That connection, that odd bond they felt when they first met all those years ago, was incredibly still going strong. Marsh felt it last night when he looked up at her from the first floor of his mall, but feeling it that close and personal

rattled him.

It floored Bree. She thought she would hate him if she ever got that close to him again. But there was no hate there. Quite the opposite, she thought, and it caught her off guard.

It threw her so much that she knew she had to distract. Emotions mixed with all of that guilt was more than she could take in that moment. And as soon as he plopped down behind the steering wheel and closed his door, she started talking. About everything, anything, but THE thing.

“This is what they call a G-Wagon, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Is it true that an SUV like this would cost you two-hundred-thousand dollars to own?”

Marsh was surprised that she was talking so freely. After the way she shunned him when he was standing at her car door, he fully expected an entirely silent trip to wherever she needed to go. He was pleased that it wasn’t that way. “I think so, yes. Somewhere in that ballpark.”

“But it looks like a mail truck.”

Marsh smiled. And then he laughed. She still had that wit about her. “I agree.”

“But you’d still pay that kind of money for a mail truck?”

“Some do. I’m just borrowing it.”

“From a car lot?”

“From a dealership, yes.”

She shook her head. “They’d never let me borrow any car like this. Or any car like any car anywhere,” she added with a smile.

Marsh laughed at that too. But he noticed that although she was smiling too, her eyes didn’t have that gaiety within them. Despite their issues, she was soldiering on, was his conclusion.

And then her cell phone rang.

She looked at the Caller ID. Then answered quickly. “I’m on my way now, Stace. Right now. Yes, I’m in the car. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Yes, I know. You know I know. But it couldn’t be helped: Lisa was late again today. But I’m coming now. Okay. Bye.” She ended the call.

It was obvious that she had to be somewhere. “Where to?” he asked her.

She had no choice but to give him the address to the daycare. “Go to that stop sign and make a left. Then I’ll tell you when to turn again.”

Marsh pressed the Start button on his SUV. But when elevator music started playing on the car’s radio system, Bree looked at him. “What’s that?”

He looked at her as he drove. “What’s what?”

“That music.”

“It’s music. Vic Damone I think.”

*Who the heck was Vic Damone*, Bree wanted to ask. “But it’s Christmas time,” she said instead. “Why aren’t you playing Christmas music?”

He knew what she was doing. All of this off-topic talk meant she didn’t want to go there. He understood that. And changed the channel to Christmas music. One song was ending, and then, to the astonishment of both of them, “their” song started playing. The one they danced to that night at that restaurant in Palace Town: their first date together. And it was the same version: Charles Brown singing the Brown/Gene Redd-penned *Please Come Home for Christmas*:

*“Bells will be ringing  
the glad, glad news.  
Oh what a Christmas  
to have the blues.  
My baby’s gone,  
I have no friends  
to wish me greetings  
ooh, once again. . .*

*Please, come home for Christmas.  
Please, come home for Christmas.  
If not for Christmas,  
by New Year’s night.”*

Not exactly the song Bree would have chosen, but she didn’t ask him to change the channel again. But that song, and the memories they both

shared when they slow-dragged to that song, was enough to slow her down. And with the exception of her giving him directions, they rode all the way to the daycare in silence.

But as that haunting song played, Marsh kept taking peeps at Sabrina. Every Christmas she spent since they parted had her incarcerated when he thought she was doing just fine. But if what Connor Rogers said was true, she was in prison that whole time. Which had to be horrific for her. Just horrific. And as the song continued, he saw her wipe tears away. Because he had promised, back then, to come back home for Christmas. To her home. And he never came back.

He couldn't help it. He reached out and placed her hand in his hand.

*“So won't you tell me,  
you'll never more roam.  
Christmas and New Year's  
will find you home.  
There'll be no more sorrow.  
No grief and pain.  
And I'll be happy, Christmas, once again.”*

And as that bluesy guitar melody began playing, Bree couldn't remove her hand from his hand even if she wanted to. Because she didn't want to. He had been the last man that had ever touched her. And his touch was four years ago! It felt too good to let go. It was insanity, but she couldn't let go.

And when that song ended, it was Marsh's time to talk. And the anguish on his face just asking that simple question said it all: "How have you been, Sabrina?"

He was the only one that called her that. God help her, but she missed that too. But that didn't mean she was going to go there. She couldn't go there. "Okay," she said, keeping it surface. "You?"

She looked at him when she asked that question. She had no idea how life had been treating him. He looked tired to her, and weary, older than he should look, as if his life after their encounter hadn't been a bed of roses either.

But Marsh had his own reasons for keeping it surface too. "I'm alright," he said. "My father had a heart attack and died a couple months ago, but other than that I've been managing okay."

"I'm so sorry to hear about your father."

Marsh nodded. But her situation was nothing like his. And he was too concerned to not go there. "What happened, Sabrina?" he asked her with distress in his voice.

She looked at him. He seemed genuinely concerned. But if he was so concerned, why did he do her the way he did her? He didn't even text her about his marriage. Or the fact that he was having a child. Or the fact that he slept with her repeatedly when he knew he was still entangled with that

woman. “How’s your wife?” she asked him.

But he didn’t skip a beat. “I wouldn’t know. I’m divorced.”

Bree stared at him. Divorced? That surprised her. She never once thought he might have divorced his wife in those four years since they last met. It was a startling revelation.

But she didn’t pursue it. Because the fact that his marriage didn’t work out still didn’t excuse how he handled that situation. It still didn’t ease her worries about what he might do once he found out how she handled her own situation. She had too much stuff of her own to worry about his stuff too.

They rode in silence again until Marsh pulled up into Stacy’s driveway. And Big Stacy as they called her, red hot because she was so late getting there, was already coming out of the house with Dani in tow.

Bree had opened the door as soon as Marsh put the SUV in Park, and Marsh saw a little girl come running toward the SUV. “Mommy, mommy!” she was saying excitedly as soon as she realized Bree was in that vehicle, and Marsh was stunned. The little girl was standing at the door of the SUV by the time Bree stepped out.

Stacy was at the passenger side door too. “You can’t keep being late like this, Bree,” she said as Dani fell into Bree’s arms. “I got things to do too.”

“Sorry, Stace. It won’t happen again.”

“You said that last time.”

“Lisa keeps coming in late. I can’t just leave.”

“Then get another job. For real. Get another job.”

“I would if I could. You know that.”

Stacy exhaled, as if she had forgotten all about Bree’s backstory. “Whatever,” she said, refusing to back down. She glanced inside the SUV at Marsh, and then she gave Bree a hard look that said *you and these white men* when the truth of the matter was that Marsh was the only white man she’d ever been with. But you couldn’t tell Stace anything when she got in her feelings.

Stacy gave Dani a hug. “Be good now, I mean it,” she said, and then she headed back inside of her home daycare.

But Marsh was still looking at that little girl. Sabrina had a child? A *child*? When did this happen? He didn’t know why it was so shocking to him. She was a wonderful woman who should have had many babies. But for some reason it surprised him to see that she did have one. He was dumbstruck. He didn’t expect that at all.

Bree could see how thrown he was when Dani came running to her. She had planned to ask Stacy to take them home. But Stacy was over it already. She wasn’t taking them anyway. And Bree refused to call Andre.



He was the one paying the daycare bill so she could work as it was. He had done way more than enough. And Sharon, she knew, would agree with her.

She put Dani in the backseat of the SUV, buckled her in since there was no car seat, and got in the backseat beside her.

Marsh was looking through the rearview mirror the entire time. “Where to?” he asked Bree, although he was mainly looking at Dani.

Bree didn’t want it to go down like this. She would have preferred later, or *never*. But that horse, she felt as soon as Marsh laid eyes on Dani, had already left the barn.

“Back out and turn left. Then keep going,” she said, her heart hammering. But she knew it was time. It was way past time. And as they made their way home, she pulled out her phone.

And sent a quick text.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

When Marsh turned onto Harbor Road, it felt like he was driving into a different world. Poor was an understatement. Broken down cars. Dogs running wild everywhere. People on porches of shack houses drinking beer and arguing to the point of fisticuffs. Women of the evening on the corner trying to entice whomever would give them a fix, or at least money to get a fix. Marsh looked through the rearview as if he wanted to ask if he had made a wrong turn.

Bree was sitting there, holding her little girl's hand seemingly in her own world, with a perplexed look on her face. But when he drove further into this otherworldliness and she told him to turn right into that apartment complex near the end of the road, he knew there was no mistake. This was actually where she lived!

And that guilt that had already been riding him hard, took him over. He pulled into the parking lot feeling as though he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

And when Bree thanked him for the lift and she and Dani got out, as if driving her around was the only reason he was there, he got out too. He could see all the young bloods around that complex looking at him when he

stepped out. He didn't care what Bree might say: it was not a safe place.

Bree wasn't exactly surprised when Marsh got out of the SUV. She knew he had questions. She knew he wanted answers.

As they made their way to the front door of her apartment, she could see Marsh staring at the young guys hanging out. She thought he was staring at them because he was worried about his bad ride. But she wasn't worried. She'd never had any problems with any of the young men out there ever.

Marsh was staring at the guys, alright, to make certain that their asses saw that he saw them. A thug knew a thug when he saw one. Although that was Marsh's former life, he wanted to make certain those guys saw him. And Bree was correct: he was worried alright. But the safety of that Mercedes was the last thing on his mind. Bree's safety was what worried him. A beautiful single lady with a little girl in her charge could be easy prey. That worried him.

But then something else occurred to Marsh. He assumed she was single. But was she? Somebody helped her make that baby. Maybe that somebody was still around. What if she had a man? What if she had a *husband???*

The very thought of it made Marsh feel a sense of dread in the pit of his stomach. He glanced over at Bree. She was already looking at him.

When they made it to Bree's first floor apartment and she unlocked

her door, her reaction to him would tell him a lot. They held hands and was haunted by their song while he drove her to pick up her daughter. Except for her giving him directions, they didn't even talk to each other on the drive to her apartment.

But when she led her daughter inside, and then stepped aside to let him in, that action alone made him less doubtful of some husband lurking about. He accepted her unspoken invitation to come back into her life, although he knew that was an overstatement. But that was how it felt to Marsh. He closed – and locked – the door behind him.

Bree kicked off her shoes, a reminder to him that she'd been on her feet all day, as they entered the small living room. Although it was tastefully decorated with the little furniture she had, and with all kinds of Christmas garland on the walls and fake mistletoe hanging from the doorway that led to the back of the apartment, and with a tiny red Christmas tree sitting up on a shelf with decorations galore that gave the room a very festive feel, it still depressed Marsh. She went from that cute, cozy, charming little house to this drab apartment in the serious hood, while he was living in a lap of luxury every day since he left her. She'd been struggling when he thought she was doing just fine. When he was certain she was better off without him. That guilt, again, tried to overtake him.

“Mommy, can I have some gummy bears please?” Dani was looking

up at her mother with great expectations in her soft eyes.

The way Bree looked down at her so lovingly let Marsh know she'd do anything for that child. "Go wash your hands first," Bree said.

Dani was smiling now. "Yes ma'am." She began running down the hall toward the bathroom.

"Have a seat," Bree said to Marsh as he watched Dani run down that hall as if he couldn't believe she had a child. Which made her start second-guessing herself. She didn't know why she let him into her apartment in the first place. Maybe it was the way he held her hand on their ride to the daycare. Maybe it was the warmth she felt all over again when he touched her. Or maybe it was that harsh reality she could no longer conceal. He had every right to know. She knew that all along. But she'd grab Dani and run to the ends of the earth before she allowed him or anybody else to take her away from her.

Marsh sat in a chair in the living room while Bree went down the hall to assist her child. The walls were razor thin and he could hear them talking. Something about somebody named Auntie Sharon. But water was running too, and he could barely hear that.

But when they finally came back up front, Bree was carrying a diaper bag. The little girl didn't appear to be wearing diapers still, so he assumed it to be an overnight bag.

As her mother went into the kitchen, the child leaned against the sofa staring at Marsh. She seemed as fascinated by him as he was with her.

“What’s your name?” she asked him.

“Marshall,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Danica.”

“What a pretty name.”

“Nobody calls me that.”

“No? What do they call you, Danica?”

“Dani. What do they call you?”

“Marsh.”

Dani thought about it. “That’s a pretty name too,” she said, and Marsh smiled.

She looked to be about two years old if he had to venture a guess, which meant Sabrina would have had to have had some serious conjugal visits with some serious guy in order to have produced a child while incarcerated. But did states still allow those kinds of intimate visits? He had no clue how any of that would have worked. But there was no doubt in his mind that she wasn’t adopted or just given to Bree: she was definitely Sabrina’s. She looked so much like Sabrina that it was uncanny to him. The same facial features. The same coloring. Her same big eyes with that same kind of droopiness that solidified her innocence. The same mannerisms even.

But there was something else about her that made her look more familiar to Marsh than should have been the case. But he just couldn't put his finger on what it was. But something was there.

"Where's your father?" he decided to ask her.

As soon as he did, Dani hunched her tiny shoulders as if to say she didn't know, but Bree came hurrying into the room as if she had flown in. "Here you are," she said to her little girl and handed her a gummy bear out of a small package.

"Just one?" Dani said, disappointed.

"The other one after dinner tonight, if Auntie Sharon says so."

*Who was Auntie Sharon*, Marsh wondered. He didn't recall Bree mentioning having a sister.

But even in Dani's disappointment, she didn't pout. She ate the one gummy bear given to her happily. Bree sat down beside her daughter, and Marsh noticed that she was staring at her as if she was scared for her. And her fear wasn't of those hoodlums outside either. Which meant only one thing: Marsh was the threat. But what threat could he possibly pose? Or could his abrupt entry and then exit from her life have affected her that much?

"I love your decorations," he said, looking around at the *Merry Christmas* banner that was draped above the sofa on the back wall. "And



your little Christmas tree.”

“I helped Mommy put the bells on it,” said Dani.

Marsh could see Bree tense up when Dani talked to him. But he smiled nonetheless. “You did a very good job,” he said.

“Thank you,” Dani said as she ate.

But before any other words could be spoken, knocks were heard on the front door. Bree got up and went to the door. What pissed Marsh off was how she flung open that door without peeping to see who it was or at least asking first.

But Bree didn’t peep or ask because she knew who it was. It was Sharon. “Hey, Bree.”

“Thanks for coming, Share.”

“Don’t mention it.” Sharon was looking beyond Bree at the white man she had in her living room. “She’s ready?”

“Yeah,” Bree said as she turned toward Dani. “Come on, baby, and bring your bag.”

Dani was small, but she was able to pick up that diaper bag without much trouble. “Bye Marsh.”

“That’s Mr. Marsh to you,” Bree corrected her.

“Bye Mr. Marsh,” Dani said, correcting herself.

“Have a good evening, Dani,” Marsh said, wondering if she needed

help with that bag.

But she seemed to manage just fine as she made it to the front door.

“Thanks again, Share,” Bree was saying. “Especially on such short notice.”

“You know it’s no problem,” Sharon responded, still glancing at Marsh. Then she asked Bree in a whispered tone: “Are you going to be okay?”

A look came over Bree’s face that concerned Sharon. It was like a part of her would be just fine, but the other part of her was scared to death. She had texted Sharon on the drive home, telling her that Marsh had found her and wanted to talk. Sharon knew the situation and immediately volunteered to take Dani for the night. She knew how difficult a conversation Bree needed to have with that man, and how they all – Andre included – wanted to make sure Dani was in safe hands, and far away from Marsh, when that conversation did take place. He wasn’t snatching her and then claiming to be the custodial parent. No way. No how.

Bree tried to reassure Sharon that she was okay with a nod of her head, and then she kissed Dani and handed Sharon the bag of gummy bears. “I promised her one after dinner if that’s okay with you.”

“For Danica? That’ll be fine,” Sharon said with a smile. Then she took the bears from Bree and the bag from Dani and she and Dani left.

Bree stood at that door watching them leave far longer than she knew was necessary, but her heart was hammering. She was trying to get her nerves together. And then she closed and locked the door. For a brief second it reminded her of those prison guards closing and locking doors.

She went over to the sofa. “Would you like something to drink?”

“No thank you,” Marsh responded and she sat down, Indian-style, on her sofa.

Marsh leaned forward in his chair, his elbows resting on his thighs, his handsome face with the seriousness of a man who was tired of the okey-doke. He wanted answers.

“What happened to you, Sabrina?” he asked her.

So much had happened since they last were together that Bree didn’t know which event he meant. “What do you mean?”

“You went to prison?” He was still trying to wrap his brain around that one. “Is that true?”

Bree was relieved. Compared to the other thing, that was the easy part. Which said an awful lot about the other thing. “They said I helped my ex-boyfriend commit all kinds of crimes.”

“Such as?”

“Money laundering, and conspiring to defraud a federal institution, and as an accessory before-the-fact. They had several charges against me.”

Marsh was puzzled. “But why would they concoct all those lies against you?”

Bree was surprised that he automatically assumed they were lies. “They weren’t lies,” she told him.

Marsh stared at her. His heart nearly stopped. “What do you mean they weren’t lies?”

“The lie was that they said I knowingly and willfully participated in George’s schemes. That part wasn’t true.”

“But the rest of it was?”

“I didn’t know George was stealing that money from the bank. I thought that was his money and he was giving it to me to deposit in his various accounts like he said. He was Vice President of the bank and he owned several businesses of his own. I knew for a fact that he earned the kind of money he gave to me to deposit into his different businesses so I wasn’t suspicious at all.”

“Why didn’t he make those deposits himself?”

“He said he didn’t want his employer to know about his outside activities or they may try to shut them down for conflict of interest or some other excuse.”

“What kind of businesses did he have?”

“A massage parlor. A house flipping business. A car flipping

business. Lots of different things. I didn't know they were fake front companies he used to clean up his dirty money until the FBI arrested me. I had no idea, Marsh, I promise you I had no idea."

He could see the anguish in her eyes. He could hear it in her voice.

"When I started getting suspicious, I dumped him right away."

"You dumped this George person?"

"George Talbot, yes, I dumped him three years before they arrested me. I wasn't into that shit. I wasn't trying to be into that shit."

But Marsh was confused. "Three years after you dumped him? Why would the Feds wait that long?"

"They didn't know about it until Doylan told'em."

"Doylan? Doylan Struthers?"

"Yes."

Marsh was confused. "What did he have to do with it?"

"I told him about it when we were dating. We told each other everything. I knew I did nothing wrong so I thought nothing of it. I was just telling him why I dumped my various ex-boyfriends, or why they dumped me. It was no big deal."

Mick suddenly had a terrible thought. "When did Doylan go to the authorities with that information?"

"He first went to somebody on the city council to try to get them to

not vote for me. I don't know which one he went to. And then they went to the FBI and the FBI went to him for more information."

"But when did Doylan go to the city council?" Marsh asked. He had to know. He was hoping against hope that his actions didn't spur on Doylan's desire to hurt Bree again, but he had to know. "When did he talk to the city councilman?"

Bree exhaled. "Right after you beat him up," she said.

Marsh's heart sank.

"I didn't know it was even him who turned me in until my trial," Bree continued. "He was the State's star witness and he testified against me and then left town. Only he lied on the stand and said I told him that I was in on it all the way. And the jury believed him."

Marsh was floored. He wanted to die where he sat. He thought that little beatdown he administered on Doylan Struthers would help her and keep that loser from harassing her again, when it did just the opposite. "Sabrina, I am so sorry," he said to her heartfelt.

But Bree would have none of that. "It's not your fault," she said firmly. "It was my fault for trusting that fool in the first place and telling him all my business like that. He was bound to try and cash in on his revenge-against-me card eventually. I sealed my own fate when I fell for his con and trusted him."

But Marsh knew that wasn't true. He hadn't cashed in all those other times he could have. It was only after that beatdown that he did. "You served three years?"

"I was locked up for three months before I even had my trial. They gave me five years, but they let me out early for good behavior. George was tried separately. He got thirty years."

Marsh exhaled. He still was blown away by just the thought of Bree caught up with that situation. When he thought she was doing just fine! "You were incarcerated when you had Dani?" he asked her.

Bree's heart began to pound. A nervous chill came over her. She nodded her head.

"They allowed conjugal visits?"

Bree looked at him with a puzzled look on her face. "Conjugal visits? No. I mean, I don't think so. I don't know."

Now Marsh was confused. "But you said you had Dani in prison."

"I did."

"But how could you if . . ." He paused. And a strange look appeared on his face. Did he have her age all wrong? "How old is Dani?" he asked Bree.

When Marsh asked that question, it was too much for Bree. And suddenly tears began to drop from her expressive eyes and she covered her

mouth to avoid crying out. He nearly jumped up and went to her when he saw those tears. “Bree, what’s wrong?” he asked her anxiously. “Bree, what is it?”

“I’ve lost everything I had,” she said with a cry in her voice. “I can’t lose Dani too. I can’t and I won’t!”

Then she got up, trying with all she had to suppress her terror, and ran to her bedroom.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Marsh was as confused as he was terrified. He never dreamed that anything could have eclipsed her prison story. But if he was thinking straight, it just did.

He got up and followed her to the back of her apartment. She had gone into her bedroom and was laying across the bed. He saw another bed over in the corner, a small twin bed: undoubtedly where Dani slept.

He sat on the edge of Bree's bed as she laid on her stomach and cried her eyes out. He didn't touch her. He didn't tell her not to cry. He let her get it all out. Because, in truth, he wasn't sure what he was going to say to her. Or how was he going to broach this subject!

It took several minutes, but Bree eventually turned onto her back and faced Marsh. She could tell he was already figuring it out, but he wanted to be sure. "She's three," she said to Marsh in answer to the question that led to her breakdown.

"But . . ." He thought she was around two. He thought she was conceived while Bree was incarcerated. And she still could have been. But it wasn't with conjugal visits, then how? Unless one of the prison guards could be her father. He'd heard of guards taking advantage of pretty female

inmates all the time. It wasn't impossible. But somehow he didn't see Bree allowing it, and remaining silent too. And deep down he knew he was avoiding the truth. The truth that had stared him in the face when he first saw that child. And how Dani looked so familiar to him!

“When did you find out you were pregnant?” he decided to ask her.

“I took a pregnancy test the day before I was arrested. The day I found out that you had a girlfriend I didn't know you had and that she was pregnant with your child too.”

When she said the word *too*, she looked at Marsh. Marsh heard her. He heard her loud and clear. And the look on his face, a look of such agonizing anguish, devastated her.

“I'm her father,” he said like it was a fact.

“Yes,” Bree responded, because it was.

“You were pregnant with my child while you had to go through all that madness, and you had to go through it alone?” Then he looked as if he was looking through her, still unable to even comprehend it all. “Why didn't you call me, Sabrina?”

Bree started shaking her head. “I was terrified.”

“Terrified of what?”

“Of me being found guilty and you and your wife taking my child away from me. No court would have denied you that right. And every court

in this land would have saw that I was in prison and terminated my parental rights. And with a smart attorney like I knew you'd have, it would have been so easy to do. But I wanted to keep my child. She was all I had.”

“But how were you going to keep a child in prison?”

“I knew Andre and Sharon would take care of her for me until I was released. I knew they would bring her to see me. I knew they wouldn't say bad things about me and turn her against me.”

Marsh stared at her. “But you thought I would do that to you?”

“I didn't know you like that. I didn't know what you were capable of. I didn't know you had a longtime girlfriend you were still involved with. I didn't know you would announce a marriage to somebody else three weeks after you were acting like we were going to make a go of it. I was so scared, Marsh. I was so scared!”

As her tears returned, Marsh immediately lifted her up and pulled her into his arms. And then onto his lap. His eyes were squeezed shut as he held her. He had a child? He was a father? It seemed so surreal to him. And Dani was so precious. He could hardly believe she belonged to him. And Bree's pain was almost unbearable for him.

He pulled back and looked into her tear-stained eyes. “For the record,” he said, “I would never take that baby away from you. You understand me? I would never do that to you. Or her.”

“I didn’t know,” Bree said, “and I was too scared to take that chance. I had lost everything, Marsh. I lost my job. My home. All of those positions I held in the community stripped me of my titles. Every friend I had turned their backs on me too, except for Andre and Sharon. And Sharon didn’t even like my friendship with Andre like that. But she stepped up for me. She’s still stepping up for me. Because she didn’t believe all that bull-crap Doylan told that jury either.”

“Thank God for her and Andre. I only wish you would have had that kind of confidence in me.”

“But how could I, Marsh? You never mentioned you had a girlfriend when we were . . . When were intimate. You made it seem like you were single.”

“I was single. She wasn’t my girlfriend. Contrary to media reports, she’s never been my girlfriend. She was somebody I messed around with every now and then. It wasn’t that serious ever.”

“But you told me you had never been with a woman in the raw before.”

“I never had. She claimed the rubber broke. But I suspect she put holes in that condom to ensure leakage. It was all lies, Bree. My entire relationship with her were a pack of lies. All of it.”

“But you married her.”

He still regretted that move. “Yes, I did.”

“But why if you didn’t love her?”

“For the child’s sake. She promised to abort that child if I didn’t marry her.”

Bree was surprised to hear that. “She would have done something like that?”

“Oh yes. And more. She’s a ruthless, vicious bitch when she wants to be.”

What was wrong with these men? Bree was just dumbfounded. “And you married a woman like that anyway?”

“It takes one to know one. I’m not that unlike her, Sabrina.”

Bree didn’t know if she could believe that! But then again, she thought, he did ghost her for four years as if she never gave her body to him, and her heart too, although he didn’t know that part. It seemed like it was nothing for him to act like he never promised to get in touch with her when he returned from Japan all those years ago. Or come back to Dell for Christmas.

But she also remembered what Maya Angelou said: if they show you who they are, believe them the first time. He showed her a side of him she didn’t think existed. Now he was all but calling himself ruthless and vicious just like that woman he married? She stared at him. She didn’t know this

man at all!

“Another reason I married her,” he kept talking, “was because I didn’t want my child to come into this world with any bastard label attached to him. Little did I know,” he added, “that the child by a woman I could barely stomach would turn out not to be mine but would come into this world with all the strappings of my name, while the child that was mine by a woman I adored came into this world with nothing of me. Not even an acknowledgement.”

Tears appeared in Bree’s eyes again. “I was scared, Marsh. I was so scared that I would lose her to you forever that I had to make a decision. I was bound and determined to not lose her too. I knew you wasn’t going to want a convict like me. You showed you didn’t really want to be bothered with me before I even had a criminal record. You wasn’t going to just stand by my side: you didn’t know me like that. And besides, you were married with a child. At least that’s all I knew. I didn’t know your backstory. I didn’t know.”

“I understand, sweetheart,” Marsh said, meaning it, as he pulled her into his arms again. “You wouldn’t harm a flea. But everybody, including me, had no problem harming you.”

But he said something else that Bree suddenly realized. She pulled back from him, wiping away her tears. “You said the child your wife gave

birth to wasn't your child?"

Marsh nodded his head. "That's what I said, yes. He isn't mine."

"Dang, Marsh. That had to be horrible."

She'd never know the price he had to pay. She'd never know how he gave up a life with her, for a lie with Natalie. "As soon as the baby was born we had a DNA test which proved there was no way I'm the father."

"And that's why you divorced her?"

"Yes. That's exactly why. We didn't make the reason public for her son's sake, but that was the reason. Now we're supposed to be in a relationship again for the sake of our so-called son, because of this political campaign I'm considering launching. Because I feel I can actually do some good in this world in the political arena. All the way up to the United States Senate."

Bree stared at him. "You want to be a senator someday?"

"It's where the power is. So I go for it even if it means pretending that my ex and I are attempting a reconciliation and we might possibly remarry. Of course that will never happen, *not ever*, but that's the game we play."

"But why?"

"Voters like family men. They like their leaders to be married. Simple as that, Sabrina. As simple as that."

“And you’re going along with that?”

“It’s still in the exploratory phase right now. Although my would-be campaign manager is making noises like I’m already running. But if I run, yes. I play to win. Even if the game doesn’t appeal that much to me, if I get in it, I plan to win it.”

“You sound as if the nuts and bolts of politics don’t appeal that much to you.”

“It doesn’t. But that’s where the power structures happen to be.”

Bree stared at him. He wasn’t lying: he *is* ruthless. Then she realized what he had said. “What would you be running for?”

Marsh had forgotten that Bree knew nothing of his life after he left Dell four years ago. He also hadn’t formulated a great answer to that question. He should say to help the country or to give back or some such answer like that. “If I run, I’ll be running for a United States Senate seat,” he said instead.

“I didn’t hear anything about you being a candidate for the Senate.”

“Why would you? I haven’t decided to run, for one thing, and I seriously doubt if Alabamians care who’s running for the U.S. Senate from the great state of New York no matter how great it is anyway.”

Bree had to agree with that. “That’s true,” she said.

“But I’ll be done with Natalie Gilbert for good soon enough. And



good riddance.”

“You aren’t exactly a profile in courage, Marsh,” Bree said honestly.

“Never said I was,” Marsh admitted. “I’m not a great man, Bree. I’m just a man.” Then he added: “A man who happens to care deeply about you.”

Bree stared at him. It sounded like the kind of talk they were talking four years ago. She was too cautious now to even go there. “When is election day?”

“A year from now. If I officially announce.”

“You don’t sound like you’re at all sure if you’re going to run.”

Marsh nodded. He wasn’t sure at all.

Bree considered him. It sounded as if he was out there searching too. “Your life hasn’t been a bed of roses either. Has it?”

“No. But there’s no comparison, Bree. I only wish I had been here. I would have tracked down that asshole Doylan Struthers and got him to recant that bullshit he told on you.”

“Don’t do it, please. I served my time. It’s over now.”

It was never over to a man like Marsh, who grew up settling scores for his old man. “But about Dani,” he said. And when he said it a distressed look appeared in his eyes. “You’re saying that she’s . . .”

Bree nodded. “She’s your daughter, yes. I hadn’t been with any other

man since I left Doylan. I'll be happy to let her take a DNA test to prove it. You won't have to get any court order or anything like that either."

"You don't have to prove anything to me, Sabrina. Are you kidding me? I'd believe you if you told me the sky was purple."

She smiled.

"You have total credibility with me."

Bree stared at him. "Even though I'm an ex-con?"

"Stop calling yourself that. You were railroaded. Let's be clear."

Then he stared at her as he thought about the horror her life had to have been back then. And a look of pain appeared in his eyes. "I thought you were better off without me, Bree. That's why I never contacted you. I honestly thought I was doing you a favor." Then the pained look turned excruciatingly sad.

It was all that and more for Bree too. And she wrapped her arms around him. He held her with an embrace that bespoke the horrors of both of their lives. They held onto each other like two drowning people in urgent need of a lifeline. Neither knew, at the time, the hell the other had gone through.

Marsh pulled back and looked into her sweet, kind, teary eyes. She looked into his pained eyes. And before either of them could stop it, they kissed. Soft and sweet at first, and then hard and passionately. Exactly like

they did years ago. Only this time it was passion mixed with desperation. It was passion mixed with regret. It was passion mixed with love.

And that was exactly what they felt for each other: Unbridled love.

But as they continued to kiss and Bree began to feel his arousal expanding to the point of steel beneath her, she realized the position she was putting herself in again. She pulled back from him. It was too soon. It was too fast. She couldn't get caught up with this man again. Not again!

He was deep in the throes of passion when she pulled back from him. He was within seconds of going down on her hard on that bed. But she had a look in her eyes that broke his heart. He had hurt her four years ago. Now she was scared of him doing it once again.

He stared at her. She was strong; she had to be strong to endure what she endured and came out on the other side not bitter and angry with the world. But she was so vulnerable too. And although he wanted her badly. He could just taste how badly he wanted to be inside of her again. But he respected her fears. He respected her sense of right and wrong. He respected *her*. He wasn't about to rip that to shreds too.

"I understand," he said, and pulled back too.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Marsh and Bree slept together that night too. Bree was pleased that all they did was sleep. Emotionally, she wasn't ready for more. And when they woke up the next morning together, they both had smiles on their faces. The stress and strain was gone from their eyes. It had been the best sleep they'd had in years.

They were laying on their sides facing each other. Marsh had his big hand on the side of her cheek, rubbing her smooth dark skin. "When do you have to be to work?"

"I'm off today."

"Really?"

Bree smiled and nodded her head. "Really."

Marsh smiled too. He was pleasantly surprised. But they both knew they had work of a different kind ahead of them. "How are we going to handle this, Sabrina?"

Bree thought about it. "The first thing we need to do is pick her up from Andre and Sharon's."

"Then maybe we can take her to breakfast and spend some time with her that way?"

Bree agreed. “She would love going to breakfast. Especially if it’s at Golden Corral.”

Marsh didn’t know what a Golden Corral was, but he was all in. “Sounds good,” he said.

They kissed on the lips, but both were careful to keep it sweet and quick. And then they got up.

While Marsh made business calls, Bree took a shower and got dressed. Marsh would later use her toothbrush and toothpaste and freshen up too. He would not have dreamed of using anybody else’s toothbrush. But it was his honor to use Bree’s. And then they made their way to her front door to go and get Dani. They both were as nervous as they were excited.

But just as they were nearing the door, Marsh stopped and looked at her. Bree was already unsteady. She looked at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Once we tell her that I’m her father,” he said, “there’s no going back.”

Bree continued to stare at him. She believed she knew what he was saying, but she had to hear him say it. “What do you mean?”

“Once I tell this child that I’m her father, there’s no way I’m leaving her side, or your side, ever again. There’s just no way.”

He said what Bree thought he was saying. And she thought about it for a long moment. “I hear what you’re saying. But you just got back. And

I'm not the one to marry you just because you're Dani's father. You got to show me more than what you've shown me so far. And then we'll see."

That strong, determined look in Bree's eyes disturbed Marsh. This woman wasn't kidding. He wasn't going to just waltz back into her life and pretend those four years never happened. He was going to have to earn his place back. He was more than willing to do so. "I'm willing to show you, Sabrina. With everything within me, I'm willing to show you. I'll never hurt you again. And I'll never disappoint our child."

Bree was so pleased to hear it that she wanted to thank him. But she held her peace. It was all still words at this point. He had touching words four years ago too. And where did that get her? "I hear you," was all she said about that. "Let's go do this," she added, moving on.

Marsh smiled. "Fancy yourself a tough broad, do you?"

Bree smiled. "What you gonna do about it?"

"Respect that shit, that's what," he said, and they both laughed.

But just as they were about to walk out the door, Marsh remembered that he had left his cell phone on her nightstand and hurried to go and retrieve it. But just as he was leaving Bree's side, a barrage of gunfire sliced through their peace and took with it her shattered front window and bullet-sprayed walls.

As soon as Marsh heard the gunfire, he ran back to Bree, knocking

her to the ground, and with her, on their stomachs, they moved as fast as they could out of the line of fire. They made it down the hall to her bedroom, where Marsh was pulling out his own gun and about to close the door. But then the shooting stopped.

Knowing an ambush when he heard it, he quickly yelled for Bree to stay put as he ran out of the bedroom, down the hall again, and then out of the front door.

When Marsh ran outside, one of the guys that had been hanging out last night was outside again. When Marsh looked at him as if he might be the shooter, the young man pointed across the open field. When Marsh looked, he saw three white guys with rifles in their hands running toward a parked car.

“Guard Bree!” Marsh yelled to the young man as he ran across the field after the gunmen. He fired shots as they hopped into their car. He stopped and aimed for the driver as they sped away. Then he aimed for the tires. But he was too far away. But he was unsuccessful in every shot. They had a clean getaway.

When he ran back to the apartment, Bree was outside. And a wall of young men, those same young men Marsh had considered thugs the night before, had formed a barrier around her and were protecting her. Which shocked and pleased him. And made him feel that much smaller.

Bree broke through that wall of protection when she saw Marsh approach them, and she ran to him and fell into his arms. She was so terrified that he could feel her shaking as if she were a leaf in a whirlwind. She was so nervous that she was rambling, unable to stop talking, unable to stop asking if he was okay. Unable, he knew, to conceive of anything ever happening like this on the morning of his official introduction to his little girl.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

As Bree and Marsh were still locked into each other's arms, and before the cops could arrive, an SUV sped into the complex and four white men hopped out. Bree and the young men, at first, thought they might be those same white gunmen that had shot up Bree's apartment. But Marsh recognized them as members of his security detail that he didn't know was still in town.

"They're my guys," he said to alleviate any confusion.

His guys came with a twofold mission in mind: get the boss away from the horrific scene for safety reasons, but also get him out of that cesspool of poverty before the press could get wind of his involvement and take photos.

"Sir, we've got to get you out of here," the detail chief said hurriedly, and he didn't wait for Marsh to give his consent either. He grabbed him to whisk him away.

But Marsh stopped him, pulled out a wad of hundred-dollar bills and gave each of those young men a handful of hundreds for protecting Bree. But also to keep their silence. "You don't know anything," he said.

They all happily agreed as they collected their pay. And then Marsh

grabbed Bree's hand and they were whisked off to the G-wagon where the detail chief put them in the back seat and then got on the front passenger seat himself. A second guard got behind the wheel. The G-wagon sped off as the other two bodyguards hopped into the second SUV and sped off behind them.

Bree was in such a state of shock that she couldn't begin to understand any of it. She didn't even know what to say it was all so incredible. But when she heard the detail chief tell Marsh that they were taking him to the airport to get him back to New York, and that the cops would have to call his lawyers if they found out that he was there and they wanted to question him, she spoke up then. "Airport? New York? What do you mean? Take me to Andre's house. Drop me off at Dre's house."

"You're going with me," Marsh said.

But Bree couldn't believe he was even suggesting it. "I'm not going anywhere without my baby. There's no way I'm leaving town without Dani."

Marsh, in that moment, had forgotten she had a child. That *he* had a child! It was like a trauma on top of a trauma and something got canceled out. "Yes, of course we're getting Dani. What's Andre's address?" Marsh asked her.

Bree told him the address. The detail chief quickly put the address in the GPS, and the SUVs headed in that direction.

Bree looked at Marsh. “Who are these people?” she asked him.  
“Where did they come from? What’s happening, Marsh?”

“They work for me. I thought they left town when my team left.”

“We were ordered to stay in town but to stay out of sight, sir,” said the detail chief. “Now we need to get you on that plane before the Police can stop us.”

“But why can’t you talk to the Police?” asked Bree.

“The New York press will get wind of it and try to use it against my potential campaign.”

“Use it how?”

“They’re twist it into something sinister and disqualifying. That’s the nature of the business, and it’s a dirty business, Sabrina.”

Too sordid for her. She couldn’t even deal. “You can just drop me off at Andre’s. I’ve got to get my car from Slapppy’s anyway. Sharon will take me to pick it up.”

But Marsh was already shaking his head.

“Why are you saying no?”

“Because that’s not happening,” said Marsh. “I’m not about to leave town without you again. And definitely not without Dani. That’s not happening. We will get Dani and then get to New York. To my house. I don’t know who those gunmen were or what they were after and I’m not

leaving you two here while I figure it out.”

Bree stared at him. “Are you saying they could have been after *me*?”

“It’s not likely, but it’s possible.”

Bree was astonished. “But why would somebody be after me?”

“We don’t know. That’s the point.” Then he tried to reassure her.

“The chances that you were the target are extremely low, Bree. But low is too high for me when it comes to your safety. I have to be cautious until I find out.”

“But if they were after me, that would mean Andre and his family might be in danger too.”

Marsh nodded. “That’s a possibility, yes.”

“But what about them? It’ll kill me if anything happens to them because of their association with me. They’ve been so good to me and Dani. I wouldn’t be able to live with that, Marsh.”

Marsh ran his hand across his face. It was so much all at once and he could see it beginning to take a toll on her. He exhaled. “Then they’ll have to come too,” he said.

Bree was surprised. “You’ll let them go to New York with us?”

“For your peace of mind? Of course I will.”

“But what about your ex-wife? Would she mind having all of us at her house?”

“I told you that situation. She’s not in my life at all. Our life has nothing to do with her.”

The detail chief and the driver glanced at each other when the boss used the term *our life*, as if that lady already belonged to him.

“But what is this all about?” Bree asked him anxiously, her eyes searching his. “Why are we running off to New York in the first place? What’s happening, Marsh?”

Marsh put his arm around her waist. She was still reeling and trembling, but he couldn’t answer her questions because he had no answers. Because he didn’t know himself what was going on. So he pulled her closer, and remained silent.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

It took little convincing for Andre to leave work, round up his family, and then get to that airfield with Marsh, Bree, and Dani. Especially when Bree told what happened and said she could have been the target. Especially when Andre made clear that he was not going to risk his family's lives on the off-chance Bree was the target. Like Marsh, he couldn't take that chance either. They hopped into that second SUV without reservation, and followed Marsh's G-wagon to the airfield.

During the entire flight, Andre, Sharon and Bree all saw Marsh do nothing but stare at Dani as she played around up and down that huge private plane with Ricky. Bree liked that he was smiling as he watched her. And as she and Sharon talked about how beautiful the plane was and as Andre told her about school gossip, she kept taking peeps of Marsh. His eyes remained glued on the little girl he now knew to be his daughter.

While Junior was playing video games on his iPad, Dani and Ricky had been running up and down the aisle of that wide aircraft during the entire trip. They all looked at Marsh to see if he had a problem with it, but he didn't seem to mind at all. So they let the kids have some fun. It wasn't a fun trip. It was a stressful trip. But they didn't have to know that.

But something remarkable happened as they were running up and down the aisles. Dani, trying to keep up with Ricky who was twice her age, tripped on her own shoe and fell to the floor. Before Andre, Sharon, or even Bree could even react, Marsh, horrified, jumped from his seat and ran and picked up that child so fast that it almost gave them whiplash watching him move.

“You alright, baby?” He was holding the back of her head as if she was a arm baby.

At first Dani tried to be brave and nodded her head. But when she looked into Marsh’s soft, caring eyes, her face began to scrunch up and she started to cry.

“Oh baby, it’s okay,” Marsh said as she laid her head on his broad shoulder and he held and bounced her.

Everybody was frozen. Even little Ricky could tell something different was happening as that man held Dani.

For Andre and Sharon, it was a feeling of relief. A feeling that Marshall Bach was not going to do anything to ever hurt that child: including taking her away from her mother as they had once feared.

But for Bree, it was just sad. Just so sad. Because she had deprived him of knowing his baby girl for all of those formative years. That she had done him a grave injustice. That those years she spent in prison felt like

punishment for her crime. Because he would have loved Dani. He would have loved Dani and never would have kept her away from Bree.

But Dani was but a child. She wasn't thinking that deep. She wanted a little attention and affection after her fall, and he gave it to her. Now she wanted out. She lifted her head up from off of his shoulder. "I'm okay now," she said.

Marsh looked at her. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir," she said, nodding.

Then Marsh reluctantly put her down. As soon as he did, she took off running after Ricky. Andre and Sharon laughed. Typical Dani, they thought. But Bree could see the devastation in Marsh's eyes. He was bewildered. "Excuse me," he said to whomever heard him and went to his bedroom in the back of the plane.

"What's wrong with him?" Sharon asked.

But Bree was already getting up. "I'll be back," she said and made her way to his bedroom too.

When she opened the door, Marsh, who was standing at the window, turned and looked at her. And when she saw that pain in his eyes, her heart broke for him. "What's wrong, Marsh?" she asked him.

"What if she doesn't want me to be her father, Bree?" It was as if he was panicking. "What if she prefers Andre?"



Bree was already shaking her head. “She won’t.”

“But what if she does? Nobody but you has ever wanted me just for me. you’re the first.”

“Then Dani will be the second,” Bree said with total confidence. And then she hurried to Marsh, and pulled him into her arms.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

If they thought getting on a private plane, especially one owned by a billionaire, was surreal to them, that plane had nothing on Marsh's lake estate in upstate New York.

A Mercedes Sprinter bus picked them up at the New York airfield, and with an escort of two SUVs, they made their way to Marsh's home. Bree's eyes were as big as Kennedy Fifty Cents when she saw that vast estate. From the Tudor-style mansion to the various courtyards and water falls and tennis courts and golf courses and gardens and more gardens, it looked like something out of a movie. Even Andre and Sharon had to look at each other in astonishment. A man that owned all of this was Bree's man? A man that owned all of this was the father of Bree's little girl? A man that owned all of this cared enough for Bree and her child to shuttle them off to his home to protect them? Or, Andre and Sharon also wondered, was it all a ruse to take that child away from Bree?

Bree had the same thought. Because she could hardly believe it too. It was one thing to know that Marsh was rich. It was another thing to see his wealth up close and personal. It made her feel so inadequate. It made her feel as if this couldn't be right. That things like this never happened to

people like her. She pulled Dani closer against her. She still didn't know that this uber-rich man was her father. They had to tell her, and they would once they settled down. But it felt even more daunting now.

Marsh was seated in the front of the bus on his cell phone. Nearly the entire trip from the airfield to his home in Sands Point had been a series of phone calls. From what Bree could hear, a few of the calls seemed to be centered around his exploratory campaign committee, but most seemed to be about that ambush at her house: who could have been involved, and why. Marsh seemed understandably more focused on that scary event than Bree or anybody else. But he kept his eyes on Dani.

And when they all piled out of the bus, and made their way across the cobblestoned driveway toward the entrance, his attention remained on his little girl. When he wasn't staring at Dani, Andre noticed, he was staring lovingly at Bree.

Three men in servants' uniforms came out of the house and made their way toward the bus. A fourth man, in a servants' uniform as well, did not rush over. He, instead, waited for instructions. Bree assumed him to be the butler: the man in charge of all of the others. Which made it all even more surreal to her.

But when an SUV that had not been a part of the entourage of SUVs that had escorted their bus from the airfield drove up and parked beside the

bus, Marsh went over and conferred with the men inside. The three servants grabbed all of the luggage from the bus and began taking the luggage into the house. And all of the men that were walking around the extensive grounds, apparently security for the property, made Bree and her group feel as if they were just surrounded by activity. It was a lot for country folks like them to digest. Bree was just happy she had Dre and Sharon with her. She might have been overwhelmed beyond belief had they not been there.

Marsh finished his conversation with the men in the SUV and walked over to his guests. “My butler will get everyone settled,” he said. “I’ve got to make a run.”

Bree remembered the last time Marsh made a “run.” He beat the crap out of Doylan Struthers on that run. Then she began to wonder if Doylan was involved in that ambush and Marsh was just told about it. And if Doylan was involved, did that mean Marsh was flying right back to Dell, or wherever Doylan lived now? She didn’t know, and it wasn’t as if Marsh gave her a chance to ask. “Nobody leaves the grounds while I’m gone,” he said, looking at Andre specifically, as if the ladies would do whatever Andre told them to do. That might have been true for Sharon. It wasn’t true for Bree. “I’ll be back,” Marsh said to Bree, and kissed her on the lips. “Andre’s in charge,” he added, to Andre’s delight, and then he got in the SUV and left with the two men. Another SUV followed behind them.

Then his butler walked over to the group. “Sir, madams,” he said to them, “my name is Harold. I will show you to your wing.”

*Their wing*, they all thought. They had their very own wing? But they all held their tongues. Andre and Sharon had already warned their boys and each other to act like they were used to this. Bree already knew to act that way. “Sure thing,” Andre said to the butler, and they all walked across the cobblestoned driveway and stepped into the marbled floors inside the mansion. It was so beautiful it felt as if they were stepping into a dream. But they still kept their composure and followed the butler up one of the three crystal staircases.

But after the butler showed Andre and Sharon to one room upstairs, and their two boys and Dani to their own separate rooms too, the children were ecstatic. They were used to sharing, not having their own.

“I can get used to this,” Junior proclaimed.

But when Bree saw there was no room set aside for her, everybody realized it. “Where’s your room, Auntie Bree?” Ricky asked her.

“No worries. I’ll just share with Dani.”

“But I want my own room, Mommy,” Dani said.

“Your room, madam,” the butler said before Bree could tell her daughter to be grateful, “is not on this wing.”

“Oh,” said Bree. It was then did she realize she wasn’t in control of

this house. Marsh was. And they all were going to sleep wherever Marsh had designated.

“Mommy has her own room too?” Dani asked the butler.

“She sure does, young lady,” the butler said, smiling. It was the first time he showed any emotion whatsoever. But that was Dani, Bree thought. She brought out the best in everybody. But how was she going to take this news about Marsh?

Bree would rather be on the same wing with her child, and was hesitant to leave her, but Sharon stepped in. “He probably needs to talk with you privately, Bree,” she said. “Out of earshot of the kids. Don’t worry about, Dani. She’ll be fine on our wing.”

“We promise you that,” Andre added.

Bree already suspected the same thing Sharon was saying, and even more than that. And she relented and followed Marsh’s butler down the staircase they had just come up, and then up another staircase to an entirely separate wing inside the massive home. What Bree quickly realized was that there was only one bedroom on that entire wing. A huge bedroom. And she quickly realized it was Marsh’s bedroom. And her luggage was in that very room. How did his servants even know it was hers, she wondered. Did they look inside?

“You needn’t worry,” the butler said. “Mr. Bach will not harm you.”

Bree considered the old man. “How long have you worked for him?”

“Almost fifty years, madam. Since his birth.”

“Is he a good man?”

The butler didn’t hesitate. “No ma’am,” he said bluntly. And Bree’s heart sank. What was she doing if he wasn’t good?

But then the butler added: “He’s a great man, madam. He’d never admit it, but he is.”

Bree stared at him. Was he a yes-man who would tell anybody whatever they wanted to hear? “What makes him great to you?”

“When he was seventeen years old, his father, who was decidedly *not* a good man, fired me. We lived in California at the time and I was not a live-in servant. He became angry because his dinner was cold and he fired me on the spot. I was earning a very good salary and my bills were expensive too: almost as much as what I was earning. And he made it clear to all of those in his vast circle not to hire me. I struggled. Incessantly. Would have lost my house. My mode of transportation. Everything. But that young man who everybody dismissed as his father’s enforcer and nothing more than a surfer dude, paid my mortgage with his monthly allowance. And when he turned eighteen, he moved out of his father’s home, into his own home, and hired me, at a much-higher salary than his father paid me, to be his butler. And he did that for a lot of other workers too. Everybody who works here has been

considered an outcast at some point in their lives. That's the kind of man he is. He looks out for the underdogs of this world. And he treats us right. He looks out for his own."

Bree was impressed. "What makes you think I'm his own?"

"He has never brought a woman to his home in his life. Not even that skank he was briefly married to," he added, and Bree was shocked that he used such a term. But when he smiled and asked her to pardon his French, she smiled too. And then they laughed.

"Good evening, madam," he said, and left.

Bree continued to smile at the thought of being a member of Marsh's tribe. But the idea of sleeping in the same bed with a man while her daughter was in the house still concerned her. That was something she never even considered doing before. Not with her child in the house. But it had been a trying day that she was still reeling from. They were wings apart in that massive mansion. And that big bed, she realized, looked so darn inviting.

She gave in.





## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The SUV drove to the backlot of a shuddered factory and pulled up alongside a waiting limousine. The bodyguard on the front seat got out, looked around, and then opened the back passenger door. Marsh got out, buttoned his suit coat, and walked over to the limo. The large man guarding the limo opened the back passenger door and Marsh stepped inside. And the door closed him in.

A much older man, James Zakashian, or Zaka as Marsh called him, sat in the back of the limo. He smiled when Marsh sat down. “Hello Marshall. Still doing good for yourself I see.”

“How are you?” Marsh asked. “It’s been a while since I laid eyes on you.”

“The gout got me this time. Last time it was the arthritis in my wrist. Couldn’t flex like I used to.” He flexed his fat wrist. “Now it’s the gout. But if it’s not one thing . . . Well. You know how it goes.”

“You didn’t ask me to come all the way out here to hear about your gout,” Marsh said.

Zaka smiled. “Patience is a virtue. Anybody ever tell you that?”

Marsh exhaled. He was not a patient man. “You know what

happened in Alabama?”

“I heard.”

“That’s why you’re here.”

“And to see my godson, yes. You’re supposed to be my godson for crying out loud but you only come around when you need intel. Like I’m a fucking Google. I’m Armenian. We have incredible databases. But I’m no fucking Google.”

Marsh didn’t smile. Zaka was his deceased father’s friend, not his. A friend who didn’t bother to show up for the funeral a few months back.

“I don’t like funerals,” Zaka said as if he could read Marsh’s mind.

Marsh didn’t respond to that either.

“How’s your boy?”

“He’s not my son. I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Shame on Natalie. I’m sure there was an attachment. But he was a baby when you divorced her. He’s already over it. But your old man told you not to mess with that one. Didn’t he tell you that? But you married her anyway. I looked around, you were married. I looked around again, you were divorced. But I hear you’re trying to reconcile?”

“That’s bullshit for the campaign.”

“No reconciliation?”

“Never. What you got for me, Zaka?” The little patience Marsh did

have was gone.

“For a man considering running for public office, you’re awfully inconsiderate of your potential voter.”

Marsh had been thinking about dropping out of the race ever since he reconnected with Bree. “What you got for me?” he asked again.

Zaka didn’t mince words. “There’s a contract out on your life.”

When Marsh heard him say those words, he stared at him. “Why?”

“Can’t tell you that. I don’t know why.”

“Who’s behind it?”

“Ducovney is the name I’m hearing.”

“Duco?” Marsh frowned. “What would Duco have to do with me?”  
He was another one of his father’s associates.

“That’s the name I’m hearing. Duco put paper out on you. That’s the only name I been hearing. Why he did it? Don’t know any of that.”

“How do I find him?”

“I’ve got boots on the ground now. When they catch up with his ass – and they will – they’ll bring him to you. Otherwise, keep your eyes open. That ambush in Alabama was a certified hit. And I hear the contract is big.”

Marsh looked at Zaka. “How big?”

“North of a million. Way north.”

A pained look appeared on Marsh’s face. Not because he feared

anything Duco would be up to. But because he had Bree and Dani to think about. Because Bree and Dani were now linked to him.

But as he sat there and listened to his godfather go on and on about the intricacies of what men would do to get their hands on that kind of payout, another thought occurred to him too. When this all blows over, and it will, Bree and Dani would return to Alabama. They would return with him relying on bodyguards and security details to keep them safe, rather than him, who had an international conglomerate to run, being able to do it himself. They would be out of his hands. If he wasn't protecting them personally, they would be unprotected as far as he was concerned. And that wasn't happening.

"Thanks for letting me know," Marsh said, about to get out of the car.

Zaka touched his arm. Marsh looked back at him. "I hate funerals," Zaka said.

Marsh stared at him. "There's a lot of things we hate that we have to do anyway because it's the right thing to do. My old man deserved better." He stared at Zaka a moment longer, and then got out of the limo.

Marsh walked around and got back into the SUV. His bodyguard closed the door behind him and got in on the front passenger seat. And his driver drove him away.

Then he looked in the rearview. "Home, Boss?"

“Not quite,” said Marsh, his mind thinking in overdrive. And that contract was only part of it. “Take me to see Roger Oliphant,” he said.

The driver and bodyguard glanced at each other. He must have heard some scary-ass news in Zaka’s limo. “Sure thing, Boss,” his driver said, and drove in that direction.

## CHAPTER FORTY

It was after nine at night by the time Marsh made it back home. After talking with Sharon and Andre, who were at the dining room table playing Monopoly, and after introducing them to Roger Oliphant, he headed to Bree.

He took the stairs two at a time until he was on the second-floor landing of the west wing of his house. But when he entered the master bedroom, he didn't see her. In the ensuite bathroom either. Beginning to panic, he hurried over to the door that led to his balcony. When he looked out and saw her sitting there, he finally calmed back down. And opened the sliding glass door and walked out there too.

Bree, who was seated in one of the loungers on the balcony with her knees up to her chin and her arms wrapped around her legs, smiled when Marsh walked out. 'You're back.'

Marsh's heart soared just seeing her again. And the way she looked up at him with that beautiful smile on her face did something to him too. Their connection was unbreakable. He knew it in that moment. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"I couldn't sleep until you got home. I was downstairs trying to play Monopoly with Share and Dre, but I was too anxious. I checked on Dani and

the boys. They were all fast asleep. Then I came out here.”

Marsh walked over to the lounge next to hers and sat on its edge. He leaned toward her, his elbows resting on his knees. Bree could see he was in deep concentration. “What’s wrong?” she asked him.

Marsh wasn’t going to ever keep her in the dark again. “There’s a contract out on my life.”

Bree’s heart dropped. She knew what it meant, but only in movies. “What kind of contract?”

“The kind where someone pays someone to take me out.”

“Somebody wants you dead?”

Marsh nodded. “Yes.”

“But who?”

There’s a long laundry list of people, Marsh wanted to say. “A guy named Duco. Len Duco. We call him Duco.”

“Who is he?”

“An old associate of my father’s. My father, you see, handled messy situations for very powerful people. So does Duco.”

“Are you saying some powerful person hired Duco to kill you?”

“To put the contract on the street calling for my elimination, yes.”

“For a price?”

“Yes.”



“How much?”

“At least a million bucks. Zaka wasn’t sure about the amount.”

Bree didn’t know who Zaka was, but that didn’t matter to her. What concerned her greatly was Marsh. And if Dani and the boys were safe. “What does it all mean, Marsh? Is Dani in danger?”

Marsh nearly lifted up from the edge of his seat to reassure her. “Oh no, baby. She nor you nor anybody else under my roof are in any danger. Brinks would envy the level of security I have here.”

Bree saw that for herself.

“And most of it you can’t even see unless you’re looking for it,” Marsh added. “So please don’t worry about your safety or Dani’s, nor Andre and his family’s safety either. That’s my job, and I do it well.”

Bree was relieved to hear it. For some reason she believed everything Marsh said to her. For some reason she believed him. “Where’s this Duco person now?”

“Zaka, he’s my godfather, has his men searching for him. When they find him, they’ll bring him to me.”

Bree nodded. “Okay.” But she could tell that wasn’t even the most pressing thing on his mind. “What else?” she asked him.

Marsh was staring deep into her eyes. “When I was sitting in that car with Zaka, I realized something that I can’t shake.”

Bree was staring deep into his eyes. “What did you realize?”

“That I could have died in that ambush in Dell and I would have never heard my daughter call me Daddy.”

Bree was so touched by his words that her lip began to tremble. She covered her mouth with her hand.

“I can’t wait any longer, Bree. I know we wanted her to get more comfortable being around me, but we’ve got to tell her.”

Bree was nodding. “I agree.”

“As her mother and her father, we’ve got to tell her.”

“I agree.”

“As husband and wife, we’ve got to tell her.”

Bree was about to voice her agreement again, until she realized what he had just said. “*Husband and wife?*”

“I know it’s crazy. I know I have a lot to prove to you after how I botched our love affair four years ago. But I love you, Bree, with the kind of love I’ve never felt before.”

Bree was nodding. Tears were staining her eyes. “I love you, too, Marsh.”

Marsh was relieved to hear her say those words. It gave him the courage to keep going. “We love each other,” he said, “then what are we waiting for? I’m almost fifty years old. You’re almost forty. Spring

chickens we are not,” he added.

Despite her shock, she managed to laugh. “No we are not,” she agreed.

Then Marsh’s look turned serious. “Another thought occurred to me too.”

Bree’s smile eased. “What thought was that?”

“That I could have died and never claimed you as my wife. As the only woman I have ever loved. I truly love you, Bree.” Then he got down on one knee and placed her hand in his hand. He pulled out a huge diamond ring.

When Bree saw that ring, her heart began hammering with joy, with excitement, with love. Incredible love for that man. And when he said, “Will you marry me, Sabrina Turner,” her heart almost stopped.

She just sat there, unable to speak. And then she asked a question she knew made no sense in that moment. But she was trying to regain control of her emotions. “When did you buy a ring?” she asked him.

“The night I saw you at my mall.”

Bree was shocked. “After not seeing me for four long years?”

“I knew as soon as we locked eyes that I wasn’t losing you again. I knew it as soon as I saw you that I couldn’t do it again.”

“Do what again?”

“I couldn’t stay away from you for your own good. I couldn’t do that again. Because it wasn’t just Natalie threatening to abort that baby to force a marriage. It was an incident that happened the same night I left Dell.”

“The night you had to stop in New York to handle a staff shakeup?”

Marsh nodded. “Yes. My Chief Operating Officer had to be fired for inappropriate behavior with several females on his staff. He was angry and bitter and tried to kill me.”

Bree was shocked. “*What?*”

“That’s the kind of world I tried to protect you from. But I realized tonight that you and Dani will be best protected if you carry my name. If you’re with me, not apart from me.” His look displayed a need Bree felt too. “Will you marry me, sweetheart, so that I can introduce myself to our daughter, not just as her father, but equally important as her mother’s husband? As an intact family. Will you say you’ll marry me, Sabrina, before my arm falls off from holding this ring?”

Bree laughed. And was crying and nodding her head. “Yes, I’ll marry you. You know I will,” she said happily.

Marsh, smiling too, put that big rock on her finger, although it was a tad too large, and then he held her in his arms. And their eyes closed tightly as they held onto each other. As they could feel each other’s heartbeat.

And then they opened their eyes. Both had tears in their eyes. Both

were smiling. But were overjoyed.

And Marsh stood up, bringing Bree, by the catch of her hands, with him. "Let's go," he said.

Bree was elated, but confused. "Go where?"

"Downstairs to get married."

Bree smiled. "You're joking?"

"No, I'm not. That's what I've been doing for the past several hours. Making all the arrangements. Using every ounce of my considerable power to get all the paperwork pushed through. Right now my pastor is downstairs ready to perform the ceremony. Andre and Sharon, who have agreed to serve as witnesses, are downstairs waiting too." Then his look turned serious again. "Are you ready?"

Suddenly it wasn't funny to Bree either. But was beautiful and thoughtful and touching. This man meant business. And so did she. "Yes," she said. "I'm ready."



## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

While the children were upstairs asleep, downstairs in Marsh's living room Pastor Roger Oliphant performed the wedding ceremony. Andre and Sharon, unable to stop wiping away tears, were best man and maid of honor and witnesses too. Harold, who was invited to the ceremony as well, was wiping away tears himself. But it wasn't until the pastor said those last words that it fully sank in for everybody: "I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

And they were grinning happy grins as they kissed.

They made long, hot, passionate love that night too. Bree was happy they had the wing to themselves or everybody in that house would have heard them. Because it was next-level great. Because for the first time they were making love as man and wife.

For Bree, it was a dream come true. It was like driving blind in a thick, heavy fog and then suddenly the skies cleared and there was nothing but sunshine ahead.

For Marsh, it was all about the love he felt for Bree. A love that overtook his passion. He couldn't stop kissing his bride. Long after the

pastor had said those defining words, he was still kissing his bride. Every way he could kiss her, and everywhere he could find to kiss, he was kissing his bride.



## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The next day and Bree and Sharon were on the tennis courts trying to play tennis, although they were laughing at the way they were hitting the balls more than they were actually playing. Andre and Andre, Junior were playing basketball over on the basketball court. And Ricky was forcing Dani to chase him all over the vast backyard that contained, on the perimeter of the property, at least four guards for each one of them. It was the day after the wedding, and Bree was on top of the world.

“Bree?” It was Andre calling her from the basketball court. “Bree?”

Bree and Sharon heard him and looked at the same time. “What?” Bree asked.

“He’s awake,” Andre said and motioned toward the patio.

When Bree looked where Andre was motioning and she saw Marsh, dressed casually in a pair of Dockers with a tucked in boat-neck shirt that highlighted his muscular upper body walking out onto the patio, her smile increased significantly. She used to be worried sick about this moment coming. Now she relished it. She couldn’t wait for it to come.

“Pray for us y’all,” she said to Sharon and Dre as she sat the tennis racket down and made her way over to the patio.

She sat at the table with him. She could see the deep stress in his eyes. “Are you ready for this?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“She’s not going to reject you, Marsh. She’s not like that.”

“Nobody’s like that until they meet up with me.”

As his cell phone rang, Bree watched him. She found it extraordinary to see a strong, confident man like him filled with such self-doubt. But his phone continued to ring. “Aren’t you going to answer that?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s only Darcy.”

“Your would-be campaign manager?”

“There’s no campaign.”

Bree didn’t understand. “What do you mean?”

“I suspended my exploratory committee early this morning. Darcy hopes I’ll change my mind before it hits the press. That’s why he keeps calling. But my mind is made up.”

A part of Bree sighed relief. The idea of being a Senator’s wife when she still had to navigate being a billionaire’s wife would have been daunting had he decided to run. “Why did you decide against running?”

“I didn’t have a good enough reason to be in it to begin with. It was

where the power was. That was my only real reason. But more importantly, I'm not about to drag my brand-new bride and my brand-new daughter through any political cesspool for the sake of my own blind ambition. There's no way."

Bree smiled. "I'm glad to hear that, I'll be honest with you."

"That's the only way I want us to be: honest with each other."

Bree agreed with that. But then she exhaled. "Ready?"

He exhaled too. He wasn't. But he had to be. He nodded his head.

Bree got up and walked over to where Dani and Ricky were taking a break from their running and were building dirt men. She knelt down to where Dani sat. "Ricky, can I borrow her for a few minutes?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Why are you asking him?" asked Bree's precocious little girl. "He's not the boss of me."

Bree laughed. "Girl, come on here," she said, took Dani by the hand, and then they walked together toward the patio.

Although Bree wasn't as nervous as she would have been for this moment to come, Marsh was terrified. He sat there with a calm exterior, but inside he was mortified by the prospect that she might not want him to be her father. That she might insist that Andre was her true daddy because he'd been there for her the entirety of her life. It would break his heart if she

reacted that way.

“Hey Mr. Marsh,” Dani said happily as they walked up on the patio and sat at the table where Marsh was sitting.

“How are you, Danica?”

“I’m okay. I couldn’t catch Ricky. We’re resting now, but I’m going to catch him for sure when we start racing again.”

Marsh smiled. “The little competitor,” he said. “That’s right. Never give up.” She took after her father, he thought.

“We need to tell you something, Dani,” Bree said to her, to get her attention. Her life was always centered around her best friend Ricky.

“What do you want to tell me, Mommy?”

Bree was about to tell her, but Marsh leaned forward and touched her hand. It should come from him.

He looked at the precious little girl in front of him. But he wasn’t going to beat around the bush. He got to it. “What we want to tell you,” he said, “is that I’m your father, Danica.”

Dani stared at him. “My father?”

She wasn’t smiling, which scared Marsh. But he maintained his cool and nodded his head. “Yes. I’m your father. Your biological father. I haven’t been in your life because I was away and --”

“And because I was afraid to tell him about you,” said Bree. If they

were going to go there, they were going all the way there. “I was afraid that you were such a special little girl that he might want to keep you all for himself and not let me see you like I wanted to.”

“You worry too much, Mommy,” Dani said.

Bree smiled a warm but weary smile as lines of age appeared on her face for the first time that Marsh could ever remember seeing. She had plenty to worry about, he thought.

But then Dani looked at Marsh again. Marsh, unable to smile until he knew her true feelings, was staring at her. “You’re my daddy like Uncle Andre is Ricky’s daddy?” she asked him.

Marsh finally exhaled and smiled too. She did not sound disappointed that Andre was not her father. That was huge for him! “Yes, baby. I’m your daddy just like Uncle Andre is Ricky’s daddy.”

She smiled. “I have a daddy too?”

Bree and Marsh both were touched. And both were fighting back tears. “Yes,” he said. “You have a daddy too. A daddy that loves you with all his heart.”

Dani smiled even greater, got up from her chair, and hurried over to Marsh, hugging him. He lifted her up and pulled her into his arms. “Oh baby,” he said. “My baby girl!” He held her with a tight grip.

Bree was in tears. “And guess what, Dani?” she said to their

daughter.

Dani looked at her, still smiling. “That Daddy’s my daddy? He already told me.”

“Not that,” Bree said with a laugh.

“Then what?”

“Daddy’s my husband like Uncle Andre is Auntie Sharon’s husband. And I’m Daddy’s wife.”

“Like Auntie Sharon is Uncle Andre’s wife?”

“Yes,” Bree said, nodding happily.

“Ricky said there’s no family if there’s no husband and wife.”

“There are many types of families, baby,” Bree said.

“But if you’re daddy’s wife, and daddy is your husband, and daddy is my daddy, and you’re my mommy, then that means we’re a family too.”

Bree and Marsh looked at each other with nothing but joy in their eyes. “That’s exactly what it means,” Marsh said. Then he looked at Dani. “How do you feel about that?”

“It’s great,” said Dani. “Thank you, Daddy, for making us a family.”

Marsh pulled her back into his arms. “No, thank you, for accepting me as your father.”

“No worries,” Dani said, and they all laughed.

Then Dani pulled back from her father’s tight embrace. “Can I go tell

Ricky? He'll be happy for me. He said he wants me to have a family like he has a family because he's tired of me cutting into his playing time with his family by always coming around."

They laughed. "Yes, you can go and tell Ricky," Marsh said as he helped her down from his embrace. She took off running to tell her best friend. Andre and Sharon saw the joy on her face as she ran away from them and they both were relieved by her reaction too.

"I told you she would gladly accept you, Marsh," Bree said.

"It's going to be a joy raising her," Marsh said wiping his wet eyes. "I could not have asked for a more thoughtful, sweet, caring child." Then he looked at Bree. "Just like her mother," he said as he reached out for her hand, and she gave it to him.

Then Harold appeared on the patio. "Excuse me, Mrs. Bach, but the decorations have arrived."

Marsh and Bree smiled when Harold called her by her new name. But then he realized what his butler had said. And he looked at her. "What decorations?"

"Christmas decorations," Bree said as she stood up. "We about to deck your halls with boughs of holly boy. So you may was well *fa la la la la, la la la la.*"

Marsh laughed a huge belly laugh as Bree yelled for Andre and

Sharon and the kids to come to her.

“Christmas in less than three weeks and you don’t have one single decoration up.” She shook her head. “Sad,” she said, and Marsh laughed again.

And all of them, including Marsh, opened up boxes and boxes of decorations as the servants brought in the massive Christmas tree. They decorated the Bach estate for hours on end. It was like the Christmas of a lifetime for Dani, although she had yet to see a single Christmas gift. But she and Ricky were in competition to see who could decorate the best too. It was the best day ever for both of them.

Even Marsh, who never in his life celebrated Christmas as much as tolerated it, was having a blast too.

Until he received a call from his security chief at the gate notifying him that Duco had been captured, and was waiting for him in guest house number nine.





## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

He's known the man since childhood, as he was another one of his father's associates. That was why it felt surreal to have him seated in the living room of one of his guest houses like the prisoner he actually was. But it was also surreal knowing that a man he knew for so long, and never had any beef with, would have put a contract out on his life. That was the real surrealism for Marsh.

He took a chair and sat in front of the older man he'd always known as Duco. And he wasn't there to reminisce. Marsh crossed his legs and folded his arms. "Hello Duco."

Duco tried to smile, although the stress on his face betrayed it. "Hiya, Marsh. How's it been going for you? It's been a minute since I saw you last."

"Why did you order a contract on my life?"

It was a question given so bluntly and dispassionately that the guards in the room with Marsh looked to make sure the boss was okay. They'd heard about the news that he had a daughter, and the fact that he was actually decorating his house for Christmas, but he was still the boss. And the boss could be extremely animated if you crossed him.

But Marsh wasn't interested in emotional outbursts. He wanted answers. He had a family now. He had to get answers. He remained calm, even as Duco was pretending he had no idea what he was talking about. "A contract on your life? Are you kidding me?"

Marsh remained calm, but he also remained Marsh. He pulled out his Ruger Super Blackhawk and sat it on his lap. Duco looked at the gun, and then looked into Marsh's steely eyes. He knew, better than anybody else in that room, what Marsh was capable of. They both were enforcers for his father's wealthy clients once upon a time.

"I will ask you again," Marsh said. "And we'll start at the beginning. Why did you order that hit in Alabama?"

Duco was about to ask what hit he was referring to until Marsh placed his finger on the gun's trigger. And he knew Zaka didn't order his men to round him up and get him to Marsh for the hell of it. "It wasn't my hit," he said. "I was paid to organize it. One local guy and three freelancers. The local guy provided the logistics. The freelancers handled the rest."

Although Marsh had a good idea already, he wanted it confirmed. "Who was the local guy?" he asked.

"I just know him as the local guy. Names are not required."

Marsh knew it too. The confirmation would have to wait. "Who paid you to organize it?" he asked. "That name is required."

Duco hesitated, but then he spilled the tea. “Natalie Griffin,” he said. “Formerly Natalie Bach.”

On one level Marsh was shocked. Why on earth would she want him dead when they divorced over three years ago and had had zero contact? But on another level he wasn’t surprised at all. He’d put nothing past her. “Where’s she holed up these days?”

“Still here. At the lake house.”

“That’s bold of her.”

“She’s convinced you’d never put two and two together. She’s convinced your upcoming campaign will need her too much for you to even consider the possibility.”

“She’s wrong again,” Marsh said as he stood up. “There’s no campaign.”

Duco stared at him. His only concern was himself. “I needed the money, Marsh. That’s the only reason I agreed to do it. For the money.”

Marsh stared at him and then headed for the exit. When he got to the door, he spoke with the detail chief. “Keep him here,” he said, “until I can confirm his story.”

“And after that?”

“The cops will come and get him. Let the courts sort it out.”

There was a time when Marsh would have sorted it out himself. But

he was married with a daughter now. He wasn't about to go back into that life again. No way.

But he also wanted Bree with him: to see Natalie for herself. To see the woman who ruined their past on a simple lie and now, if what Duco told him was true, was seeking to destroy their future.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Marsh always took the straight approach back in the day and he did it again as he, Bree, his security chief Lou Karna, and two additional bodyguards walked up to Natalie Griffin's front door. Bree was amazed by the beauty of the lake estate and wondered why a woman with all that she obviously had (or that Marsh gave to her in the divorce) would stoop to paying people to put contracts out on other people. Especially on a man she purported to once loved.

Bree felt that way until the door was opened before Marsh could ring the bell and a woman with fire in her eyes stepped out. "You can't be there for me at my woman of the year ceremony but you need me for your campaign shit? Get off of my property!"

"Sabrina, this is Natalie," Marsh said calmly. "She's that bitch."

"And you're that bastard!" Natalie shot back. Then she looked at Bree. "Who are you?"

Bree smiled and extended her hand, although she knew she'd be rebuffed. "I'm Mrs. Marshall Bach. Nice to meet you."

When Natalie heard that introduction she looked at Bree as if she was an alien. "Mrs. who?" Then she looked at Marsh. "What kind of ghetto slut

bullshit is this?”

“I’m looking at the only slut I see on this porch,” Marsh fired back.

“And you’d do well to watch your mouth.”

“Or what?” Natalie said angrily.

“Or Duco might say more,” Marsh responded.

And as soon as he mentioned that name, everybody saw a change come over Natalie. It was as if she was shocked that he knew. She tried to recover, but it was already too late. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Who’s Duco?”

“The question is not who did it. I know your ass did it so don’t act as if you’re out to sea. You don’t know what a sea looks like. The question is why did you do it. Why, Natalie? You got paid in that divorce.”

“Paid? Are you joking? Fifteen million against your billions and you call that getting paid?”

Bree was stunned that she got that much. And she still wasn’t satisfied?

“Why did you pay Duco to hire that hit squad? And when that failed, why did you hire him to put a contract out on me?”

Bree could see a kind of resignation come in her once fiery eyes. “You came here so you obviously know everything there is to know. So you tell me why.”

“You thought if I died then your son would be my heir since it’s not public knowledge that he’s not my son? Because that contract was initiated before you would have known about my marriage to Sabrina.”

Natalie smiled and shook her head. “You’re still dumb as rocks. Yet you’re the one who has all of this money bestowed on him.” Then her fire returned. “They came to me. Told me, if I took your ass out, then they’d give me half. That’s right half of your fortune. That’s over a billion just my share alone. Because nobody would have ever suspected me. You set me up, let the world tell it. I wouldn’t have a motive to harm you.”

Bree was dying to know. Marsh was too. “Who came to you? Who promised you half of my estate if you got rid of me?”

She smiled. “Does Aaron and Croy and Xavier ring a bell?”

None of those names rang a bell to Bree. She looked at Marsh. He looked stunned. “My *brothers*?”

“Your half-brothers, as you always corrected them. Yes, your brothers, you idiot! When your father died a few months ago, he left his entire estate to you. His entire estate to a man who was already a billionaire when he knew the rest of his sons were struggling. But did you reach and offer a helping hand to them? Did you try to make it right with them?”

“They hated our father and our father hated them. No, I wasn’t reaching out to those vultures.”



“Well they reached out to me. And I was happy to oblige them.”

“Where are they?”

“Long gone. You’re never find them! So you can forget that.”

“You’ll talk. You’ll tell.”

“Says who?”

“Says you when they become your get-out-of-jail free card. Because that’s where you’re headed. You just admitted to a murder-for-hire.”

“I didn’t admit to anything.”

“Oh yes you did.”

“Says who? You and your goons? My lawyers will tear your testimony to shreds.”

“But they won’t tear down ours,” said one of the bodyguards.

Natalie looked at him. “And why not?”

The bodyguard pulled out his badge. “I’m Emory Grantson with the Police. You’re under arrest, ma’am,” he said and the second guard began putting her in handcuffs.

“You can’t do this to me!” cried Natalie. “Marsh, make them stop!” Then she started screaming from the top of her lungs. “Help! Help! Help!”

As she screamed, Marsh had the distinct feeling that she wasn’t just saying words. She was crying for help. Somebody else was on that property. “Take my wife to the car now,” Marsh ordered Lou Karna as he

began pulling out his Ruger.

Lou didn't hesitate. He pulled out his weapon, too, and began hurrying Bree to the SUV.

Marsh was looking around. "Silence her," he said to Grantson. Grantson quickly covered her mouth as he, too, had his gun out and was looking around too.

And then suddenly they heard footsteps. And as soon as they came around, two of Marsh's three half-brothers came running around from the side of the house with their guns drawn. But as soon as they rounded the corners, Grantson and his fellow cop didn't ask questions. They started firing. They shot down both men in less than three seconds.

But Marsh knew there was a third one. When he realized it, he saw a figure coming from out of the hedges near the driveway and running toward the SUV that now housed his wife.

"No," he said in barely a whisper, although he thought he was shouting it out. And he took off running toward that SUV. Just as the man, his half-brother Croy, lifted his gun ready to fire through the SUV's window, Marsh stopped running and lifted his Ruger to fire too. But before either of them could get a shot off, another shot rang through the inside of the SUV and gunned down the assailant. Marsh's half-brother dropped dead before he could fire a single shot. Marsh, along with Detective Grantson, ran to the

SUV and flung open the door. Bree was on the floor and Lou Karna was sitting on top of her with his gun drawn. With his gun still smoking from the shot he fired at Marsh's half-brother. Marsh leaned against the door, his heart hammering. Bree broke free from Lou and crawled over to him. He pulled her into his arms.

They both stayed there, wrapped up together, as the police officer led a still angrily boastful Natalie Griffin to the other SUV. She was yelling at Marsh, and telling him and Bree to go to hell, but neither one of them heard her or noticed her.

They went home instead.



## EPILOGUE

It was barely seven am on Christmas day and the children tore out of their rooms and ran downstairs as if they had fire under their feet. Marsh and Bree and Andre and Sharon had been up all night: drinking eggnog and playing cards and singing Christmas songs Karaoke-style as they laughed more than Marsh had laughed his entire life. It was the best Christmas ever for him.

And when the kids realized there were actual presents under the tree when there had been none when they first went to bed, their hearts rang with joy. But before they could open a single gift, Andre called them all together for a moment of prayer, thanking God for Jesus and thanking Him for allowing them to spend Christmas in New York with a man that was now a part of the family too. Marsh and Andre hugged after that prayer, and the children didn't hesitate. They grabbed every gift with their names on it, and went to town tearing open the boxes.

Bree stood back and watched them have at it. Marsh was helping Dani open her gifts while Andre and Sharon were helping their boys. They returned to New York a week before Christmas, when school closed for the holidays, and after Andre had submitted his resignation.

Bree was stunned. “Why would you resign, Dre?” she asked him when they arrived back in town and Andre told her the news. “You love teaching.”

“Time to try something new.”

“Like what?”

“Like my Senior Vice President for Acquisitions,” said Marsh as he entered the living room.

Bree was floored. She looked at Marsh. Then she looked at her best friend. “Is it true, Dre? You and Share and the boys are moving to live here now?”

Andre nodded. “That’s right,” he said. “Why would I break up the band?”

Bree ran to Dre and Sharon and hugged them both mightily. She would have hugged the boys, too, but they had already run outside to play with Dani. It was the best news Bree could have ever heard “Dani is going to be so happy,” she said. “She was pining over Ricky not being here ever since y’all left.” Then she looked at her husband. “Thanks, Marsh.”

“I’m the one who’s thankful. My former VP, Ronald Coleman, has been promoted to my Chief Operating Officer. My COO. I needed another good man I could trust, and I needed one fast. Andre is perfect for the job.”

“And the salary,” said Sharon, still unable to believe it, “will finally

allow us to live and not just survive.”

“You know I know what you’re talking about, girl,” Bree said, and the two ladies laughed and hugged again. Ever since Sharon realized Bree was no threat to her marriage, they became as close as close could get. Andre and Marsh, on the other hand, were becoming as close as close could get too. Bree could not have dreamed up a better situation.

But that was a week ago. Now it was Christmas day and both families were together again as if they were one family. Because they were. And Bree could not have been happier.

Marsh finally got up from the floor after he had helped Dani open her last gift, and he walked over to Bree. They both then looked at their daughter. “She’s going to melt a lot of boys’ hearts,” Marsh said affectionately.

“One heart is enough,” said Bree. “The right one.” Then she looked at Marsh. “Thanks for the Bentley. I never got a car for Christmas in my life. Or for any other day either,” she added with a smile. “And a custom-made one at that!”

“You deserve so much more,” Marsh said. “I’d give you the moon if I could.”

“No thanks to the moon. Your heart is enough,” said Bree.

Marsh smiled and put his arm around her waist. Then she pulled out a

wrapped box of her own. “Merry Christmas, darling,” she said as she handed the box to him.

Marsh smiled. “You didn’t have to get me a gift.” But he was unwrapping that box like he couldn’t wait to see what was inside.

But when he saw what was inside, his heart nearly stopped. And he looked at Bree. “Are you serious?”

“Completely,” she said.

It was a test. A pregnancy test. “It says Pregnant,” he said.

“That’s right.”

“Does that mean we’re . . .” Marsh was so excited he had to slow himself down. “Does that mean we’re having another baby?”

Bree was nodding with a grin on her face. “That’s exactly what it means, yes, Marsh. I’m pregnant again. I’m having your baby.”

“Oh babe!” Marsh said with joy in his voice as he lifted her off the ground and pulled her into his arms.

Then they shared the news with a thrilled Andre and Sharon. And then they went outside and told Dani and the boys. And they celebrated all day long.

After dinner, they slow-dragged to a slow Christmas song as they danced in the middle of the living room, a room filled with Christmas paper and gifts all over the floor. But when the next song came on over the stereo



system, and it was their song, they looked at each other and smiled. It could not have been a better day.

*“Please come home for Christmas.  
Please come home for Christmas.  
“If not for Christmas,  
by New Year’s night.”*

They both came home for Christmas that year, only it was four Christmases later. But as they slow-dragged and as the children played with their video games and dolls, and as Andre and Sharon went upstairs to finally get some sleep, it all felt just right to Marsh and Bree. They both felt that they did it just right. It took four long years and a lot of heartbreak and pain, but they felt within their souls that they had saved their best for last.

*“Then won’t you tell me,  
you’ll never more roam.  
Christmas and New Year’s,  
will find you home.  
There’ll be no more sorrow.  
No grief and pain.  
‘Cause I’ll be happy,  
Christmas,  
once again.”*

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