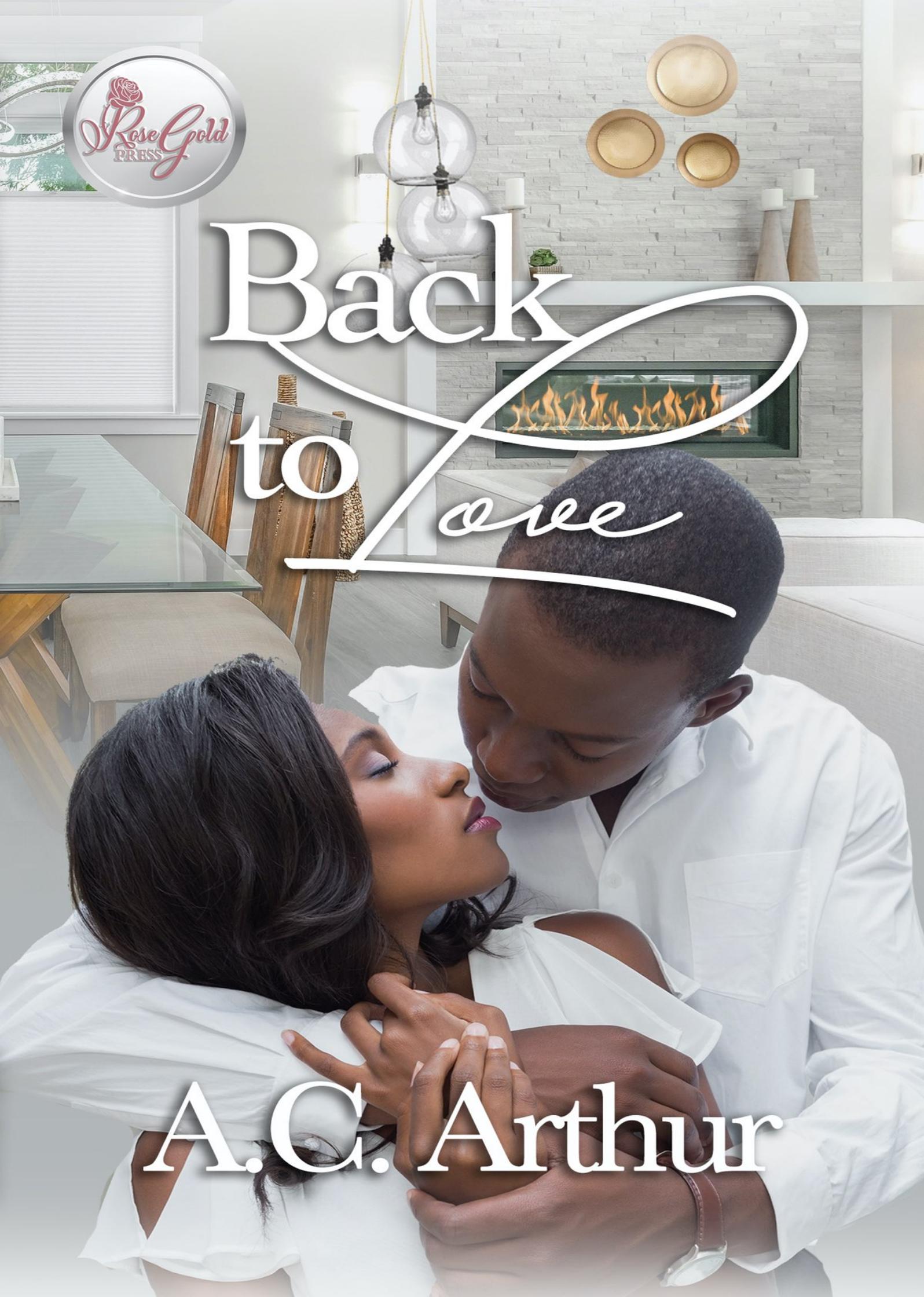




Back to Love

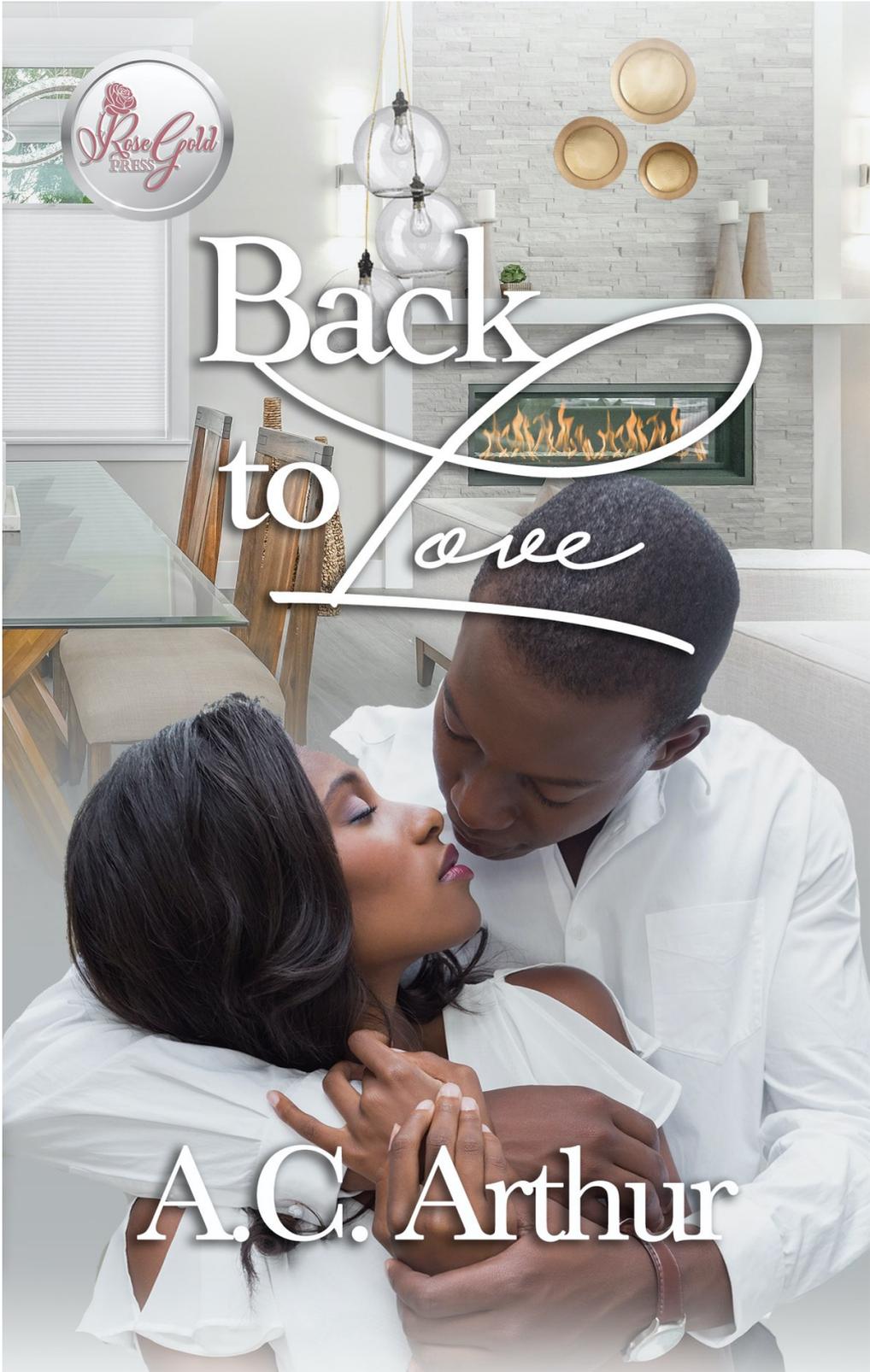
A.C. Arthur





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BACK TO LOVE

If the feelings come back, is it possible they never left?

When Jorie Kemp set out to put her design company on the national level by entering a contest to be on a flipping houses reality show, she had no idea she'd end up working with her ex-high school sweetheart, Dominic Hughes. Let alone falling for his precious son.

Baby mama drama, coupled with catastrophes on the project, makes the rekindled passion between Jorie and Dom seem like the worst idea ever. Yet, for these old flames, something just keeps reigniting the fire and pulling them back to love.

CHAPTER 1



Jorie closed the door behind her and took the first step into the house that was going to put her and JK Designs on the map in the design industry. Within seconds of her booted feet hitting the floor, the sound of cracking wood echoed throughout the empty space. In the same miniscule amount of time, a strong arm went around her waist and she was jerked to the side hard enough to have her teeth clattering.

“I got you,” a deep voice whispered just inches from her ear as the owner of the voice stepped back, carrying her with him.

Her feet were no longer touching the floor, and the smart retort that would’ve normally fallen from her lips by now was stalled by the strength of the grip this person had on her.

“Here ya go,” he said, releasing her to let her feet hit the floor or what she presumed was a more stable portion of the dilapidated wood. “I just ran out to my truck to get some signs to put up around the hazardous places. Almost didn’t make it back in time.”

Jorie had been about to turn around to ask who the hell he thought he was and why he was in the house she’d purchased to facilitate her appearance on the *Fantasy Flip* reality show,

but something held her still. Not something, his voice. It was familiar. That southern twang that snuck into some of his words, the raspy tone that almost sounded like he was sick but was really his signature timbre.

No. It couldn't be.

Her heart thumped and she felt like she was moving in slow motion as she turned to face him. The second her gaze settled on his rich, whiskey-brown complexion and connected with tree-bark brown eyes meant to make a woman strip without question, she sucked in a breath.

“Jorie?” He'd always said her name as if it were one delightful whisper—especially when they'd been in bed.

She trembled at that quick memory and struggled to find her voice. “Dom.” She rushed to clear her throat, because that crackling teenage tone she'd just used had to go. “What're you doing here?”

His head tilted in that way that always made him look a little confused, annoyed and too damn fine. “Checking out the place. What're you doing here?”

“Working.” One clipped word was all that was required. “Why're you checking out my house?”

“*Your* house?” His brow furrowed—three neat lines that often appeared along his forehead when he doubted something or was trying to figure out something. The reason didn't matter; the expression did nothing to taint the bad-boy good looks he'd been blessed with. “Wait, don't tell me you're JK Designs.”

“Kemp,” she said through clenched teeth. “That's my last name now and, yes, JK Designs is my company. This is the house I'm working on for the *Fantasy Flip* show.” She folded

her arms over her chest, leaving out the part where this house and the exposure from the reality show was what she needed to save her fledgling company. “Your turn?”

One corner of his mouth—the left side, which she should’ve recalled because he was left-handed and most of his actions tended to favor that side—lifted into a quick grin before he shook his head in disbelief. Taking a step back, he lifted a hand to rub down his thick beard. The neatly groomed growth along his jaw was new and, combined with the three or four strands of gray amid the black, added a distinguished look to an already dangerously handsome man. It hit her then, with as much of a punch as the instant memories, that she hadn’t seen Dom for almost twenty years. “I’m working on this house too,” he told her.

“No,” she gasped and reached into her back pocket to grab her phone. Pulling it out, she hastily scrolled until she found the email from Renegade Construction. The message was from someone named Jazmine, the administrative assistant most likely, but at the time, Jorie hadn’t cared who it was from, as long as the message said they were available and would take the job. Lifting her head to see him staring knowingly at her, she closed her eyes and said a quick prayer.

Ask, and you shall receive. Jorie remembered that from all those Sundays her mother had dragged her and her older sister Dani to church.

“I own Renegade Construction,” he said, and her eyes popped open. “I came back to town a few weeks ago and opened a branch here.”

“No,” she repeated, shaking her head. “Macon, my paint guy, told me he knew of a reputable company. How’re you reputable if you just got back in town?”

“My company’s nationwide.” Either he knew she wouldn’t instantly believe him, or he wanted to brag, which would be more in line with the Dom she knew—because he reached into his back pocket next, stepping forward to offer her the card he’d retrieved from his wallet. “In the past few years, we’ve been known for the skyscrapers we worked on in major cities, but I’ve always had a particular interest in residential properties. Since this was in the old neighborhood, I knew I couldn’t pass it up.”

She held the card, staring down at his name in embossed black letters: Dominic C. Hughes. The “C” stood for Calvin. That was his father’s name, and Dom hated it. “Okay. I’ll have to find someone else.” She handed the card back. When he only raised a brow but didn’t move to accept it, she sighed and stuffed it into the back pocket of her jeans. “Look, it’s just not gonna work. I can’t do this, and after all we’ve been through, I don’t know why you’d even consider doing this either.”

“Whoa, wait a sec. I didn’t know you were JK when I accepted this job. Your last name used to be Tomlin.”

“And you used to be my friend, but obviously things change.”

He was the one to sigh this time. “Fine. We have history that obviously still has some negativity brewing. This is business, and I don’t know how you go about handling yours, but I take mine very seriously. Which is why we’ve been able to expand so widely in such a short span of time. Now, you said you needed somebody who could get started right away and work on a tight six-week schedule. Well—” he continued with a shrug, “—that’s me.”

“I really don’t think I can do this with you, Dom.” She looked away to the wallpaper peeling off the walls and another

hole in the floor in the next room. “I don’t want to do this with you.”

He stepped closer to her. She turned to look at him again as he spoke. “You don’t have the time or the crew to do it without me.”

SHE STILL HATED HIM.

The way Jorie stalked away from him, albeit stepping gingerly over the rotted wood-planked floors, spoke volumes. The heated look in her amber eyes and the set line of her pink-tinted lips said everything she was forcing herself not to say. All the words and accusations he suspected she’d been holding on to since the week after graduation, when she’d read his note saying he was leaving Newton, seemed to hover in the air around them now.

He really couldn’t blame her. Walking behind her, he recalled those last few weeks of school when she’d hinted at their future and he’d already known there was no such thing. A year ahead of Jorie in high school, Dom had stayed in town a year longer than he’d wanted, just to be with her. But in those last twelve months when he was a nineteen-year-old orphan, he’d realized the things Jorie wanted were none of the things he could give her.

“I want these two walls knocked out.” She spoke, but didn’t turn back to look at him. “It’ll bring the kitchen all the way out to here. And we’ll open up that wall over there for windows to bring in more light.”

She’d stopped a few feet in front of him, stretching an arm out in front of her as she visualized the desired layout. Getting

his head into the game and out of the past, he pulled his phone out of his back pocket and began to type in notes. “I think this one might be supporting.” He touched a hand to one of the walls she’d been referring to.

It separated an awkwardly angled dining room from the smaller kitchen, but it was also part of the oddly curved archway that brought together another half wall on the other side of the room. He suspected they were there for a reason and tilted his head so he could look up at the ceiling to further investigate.

“This is most likely the main support for this floor. See how it stretches the length of the house?” He didn’t turn to see if she looked at him; he knew she did. The warmth sliding down the back of his neck like a trickling of water confirmed it. That sensation had come back with a vengeance the second they’d locked gazes. It had been years since he’d felt that way, so long ago he’d never thought that type of awareness of another person would exist for him again. “I can take it down, but we’re most likely going to need a beam for support. We could go with steel and build out around it, or you could spend a little more for something decorative to be exposed.”

“That may work with my design if we find the right material for the beam, but let’s cross that bridge when we get to it.”

He’d been typing in his phone but stopped at her words. His grandmother used to say that to him all the time. *Stop worrying about problems before they become your problem, Dom. Cross that bridge when you get to it.* Shaking his head, he held on to the sound of his grandmother’s voice echoing in his ear. When he was six, Dom’s mother had passed away due to complications from lupus. After her daughter’s death,

Martha Cooley had taken him in and had eventually become everything to Dom. He was seventeen when his grandmother died from a heart attack. The feeling of being lost and alone had almost overtaken him, even though Jorie had been sitting in the hospital waiting room right beside him on that dreary winter's day so long ago.

“We’re gonna need new windows throughout. I saw the ones upstairs briefly on my previous walk-through before the sale. And the basement, all the bathrooms, total gut jobs. Then we have landscaping.” She talked as she moved, and he followed behind her, taking notes. It was apparent she knew what she was doing. Her vision for the place was clear and she knew which materials would work best with not only her plan but with the area the house was in. She wasn’t trying to take a colonial house and give it a Mediterranean flair, but instead was going with a fresh update to a traditional single-family home in a community-focused neighborhood of the town. And she looked good while doing it.

There was no way he was ever going to miss how Jorie looked. He’d spent years admiring everything about her physically and mentally. At five feet three inches tall, she could’ve been considered short, but the top of her head had come just under his chin, requiring him to tilt her chin up and lean down just a bit to kiss her. The way she’d rise on the tips of her toes, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck when they’d kissed, had always made him feel comforted, needed, wanted.

If he remembered correctly, Jorie’s sister, Dani, loved to do hair. She’d graduated the year before Dom and by the time he’d packed up and left town, she’d been taking classes at the local hair school. Staring at the wavy, reddish-tinted waves of Jorie’s hair, he grinned at the memory of the days when she

used to sit on their porch while Dani braided her hair. Days later when Jorie would take her hair out, it would look wavy all over just like it did today, sans the color, because Ms. Regina was strict and didn't allow Jorie to date, dye her hair or wear makeup until she was sixteen.

“Are you listening?”

Her curt tone snapped him out of his thoughts, or at least partially. Staring at her now facing him with one hand on her hip, her head tilted slightly, eyes wide as she waited for him to respond, he couldn't help but continue to stare at her. She had a russet-brown complexion with gorgeous amber-hued eyes, lips that weren't too big—like he considered his own—or too small, but just right for licking and kissing. His body tensed at the thought and he coughed. It was a fake cough, of course, and when he lifted his arm to cough into his elbow and look away from her, that was all for show as well. Anything to keep her from noticing that he was still mesmerized by her.

“This is important,” she continued. “If you're not gonna be able to keep up, you need to let me know now and I'll find someone else. I don't have time to waste.”

“I'm not wasting your time,” he said, bringing his gaze back to her once more. “And I heard everything you said.” Not entirely true, but he wasn't about to start admitting things to Jorie this soon. “We'll have to sit down and talk about your budget and timelines before we can get started. How 'bout we go get some dinner?”

Retreat was clear in the way her shoulders squared and she quirked her lips. “How 'bout you start paying attention and take notes instead of texting or whatever you were doing on your phone?”

She walked around him then, going back toward the front of the house after scolding him like he was some elementary school student. Jorie always had been a bossy one. He followed her again, this time stopping beside her where she stood at the living room windows.

“You can open this up,” he said. “Make them stretch from the door to the wall. Then, once that center wall comes down, we take your sliding doors in the dining room and make them wall-to-wall, bringing the outside in from both angles. The sliders in the dining room will open out to the deck and the newly landscaped yard, which buyers will love seeing the moment they step into the living room.”

There was no immediate response as he suspected she considered his words. It wouldn't be easy for her to admit he was right—her tenacious and stubborn personality would fight against it. He held back a grin because those were the traits they shared, and damn if that hadn't made for more than one spirited argument between them over the years, yet there was one argument they'd never had. Jorie hadn't argued when he left because he hadn't given her the opportunity.

“That's a good idea.” Her tone was stilted and she stood rigidly beside him.

Silence fell between them again, and Dom resisted the urge to reach out and touch her. He'd never been able to be near her without touching her—brushing his fingers over the smooth skin of her face, twirling her hair, a graze of his hand at the small of her back, holding her hand in his as they walked. Dammit, how was he going to work with her without getting too close to her? He didn't have a choice; he needed this job, probably more than he needed to hold Jorie right now.

“This isn’t going to get personal,” she said and then walked to the door and stopped. She didn’t look back at him but spoke again, quietly this time. “You do your job, and I’ll do mine. All I want is to win this challenge and gain more exposure for my company. That’s it.”

“We want the same thing.” He tried like hell not to recall the time she’d once believed that. “I’m not here to disrupt your life, Jorie. It’s been a long time—we can still be friends.”

“No,” she said, cutting off anything else he might’ve thought he was going to say. “We can work together, and then you can do like it was so easy for you to do before and stay the hell away from me.”

CHAPTER 2



She couldn't believe she'd just been face to face with Dom again. After all these years, where the hell had he come from? And why here? Why in all the places on this great big 'ole Earth could he have not found somewhere else to go besides Newton? *Hell, he couldn't wait to get away from here twenty years ago—why come back now?*

"You keep pressing those buttons so hard, you're gonna have to buy Mama a new microwave," Dani said as she came into the kitchen.

Cursing, Jorie yanked her hand away from the oven and sighed. The bowl of macaroni and cheese she'd put inside to warm would certainly burn to a crisp if she let the 44:44 time she'd inadvertently pushed stand. Pressing the button to clear that time, she punched in a more realistic setting and stepped away from the machine to take a seat at her mother's kitchen table.

"Why're you here on a weeknight, anyway? And why aren't you eating at your own place?"

"Why do you have so many questions?"

"Ooh, wait a minute. Did we have a bad day?" Dani's eyes widened in that way that said I-know-you-ain't-lost-your-everlasting-mind, and Jorie sat back in her chair with a huff.

Her sister's deadly looks didn't serve half as much power over her as they had when they were younger.

"No. I didn't have a bad day. I had a wonderful day. Just wonderful." She heard the testiness in her tone and clamped her lips shut.

Dani continued moving about the kitchen, going to the refrigerator to take out a half-full bottle of soda and then across the room to the counter near the pantry, where she opened the cookie jar and took out three Oreos. Her sister took a seat across the table from her and bit into one of the cookies. Dani didn't speak another word, just kept chewing and staring at Jorie knowingly.

The microwave buzzed, and Jorie jumped up out of the chair, glad that something broke the stare-down she and Dani were having. She gingerly removed the hot bowl from the microwave, then snatched a napkin to put between it and the palm of her hand. Returning to her seat, she set the bowl on the table and picked up the fork she'd gotten earlier. She didn't look at Dani again, but instead pulled out her phone and pretended to scroll through Facebook while waiting for her food to cool down a bit.

Dani was a loud chewer, so each crunch echoed throughout the otherwise quiet kitchen. She unscrewed the top from her bottle and took a gulp of soda; all of that was loud as hell too, but Jorie refused to glance at her.

"Heard Dom's back in town," Dani said with a hint of laughter in her tone.

Jorie looked up. "You're not funny." She grabbed the fork and stuck it into the bowl, jabbing at a chunk of mac n' cheese before bringing it to her mouth. The roof of her mouth stung

with the heat of the food but she refused to react, tenderly chewing instead.

“And you’re not foolin’ nobody, sitting there acting like you don’t care that he’s back. You know he’s back, and that’s why you’re all bent out of shape.”

“Who told you he’s back?” She wanted to know, because why hadn’t that same person given her a head’s up? She would’ve appreciated that instead of being shocked and caught off guard at her job earlier today.

Dani had stuffed another cookie into her mouth; it pressed against her jaw as she chew-talked. “Come on now, you know I gets all the gossip down at the shop. Ms. Janet came in and said she saw him at the cemetery Sunday afternoon.”

“Visiting his grandmother’s grave,” Jorie said, sitting back in the chair.

“Yup. Dom loved himself some Ms. Martha. If she hadn’t died in his senior year, I bet he would’ve never left town.”

“I don’t care why he left town.” She knew she had to keep telling herself that. There was a part of her that had never gotten over the hurt of Dom leaving, and that part Jorie needed to keep firmly buried for the rest of her natural life.

“Liar.”

She eased another forkful of food into her mouth. “You can’t tell me how I feel.”

“I can and I just did.” Dani finished off her drink and leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “Don’t forget I was there when he left. I let you cry all those tears on my pillow after you came running in the house and collapsed on my bed. I know how hard it was for you to accept that he was gone and he wasn’t coming back.”

Four years later, Dani was also the maid of honor at Jorie's wedding when she'd married Garland two weeks after graduating from college. Her sister was her best friend—there was no doubt about that. She knew everything Jorie had been through with both men and how hard Jorie had worked to get her life in order without having some guy in the background toying with her emotions.

“That was a long time ago.” She tried to eat some more, but the food suddenly felt cold in her mouth and her stomach churned as she swallowed. “I need to focus on this job right now. It's going to give my company the exposure it needs to take us to the next level.”

Dani nodded. “I hear you, and you know I know how important this is for you. Staying focused is key.”

Jorie huffed. “That's easier said than done, considering Dom's the contractor working with me on the house.”

“What? How'd that happen?”

“My usual guy had to bail because his insurance company was acting a fool about some claim that came in against him. He couldn't work on any other projects until the coverage for him and his staff was renewed. Macon said he knew somebody who could help. He really vouched for this company, so I just went with it. I reached out, and they said they were available. The next thing I know, Dom's standing three feet away from me looking sexy as hell in jeans and work boots, and I'm forced to either work with him or quit the show.”

“Which you are definitely not going to do.” Dani's perfectly filled-in brows arched as she continued to stare at Jorie. “You're gonna do what you're good at for all those viewers on that cable channel and your phone's gonna start

blowin' up the day after you win that challenge. That's the only place your mind needs to be right now."

"You're right." Jorie nodded. "You're absolutely right."

Dani ate her final cookie. Jorie didn't chance another bite of her food, but she did lift the glass of water she'd poured earlier to her mouth to take a long drink.

"So he still looks good, huh?" Dani asked after another few moments.

Jorie rolled her eyes and drank from the glass again. "Better than good, the bastard."

"YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING." Dom groaned as his booted feet splashed through a half foot of water in the basement of his house. The curses that followed echoed throughout the lower level, and he dragged his hands down his face. "What next?"

The minute those words were out, he knew they were a mistake. He'd never been a superstitious person, yet the saying *when it rains, it pours* immediately came to mind as he yanked his ringing phone from his back pocket and saw who was calling. Gritting his teeth, he hit the button to answer the call and took a deep breath before saying, "Hey, Rasheda. What's up?"

"I thought you said you were coming by today? Don't start promising him shit and then you don't deliver. What I'm not going to allow you to do is drop into his life whenever you feel like it. I thought you understood that when you showed up on my doorstep three weeks ago."

Actually, this part of his life had started nine years prior; during one of his many trips to his favorite city—Las Vegas—where Dom had run into a familiar face from his hometown. It'd felt good kickin' it at the casino, by the pool and eventually in the king-size bed of his hotel room. The result of that trip was his son, Aiden, and a tumultuous relationship with Aiden's mother, Rasheda Kinley.

“It's barely six o'clock, and I said I'd stop by before his bedtime to help him with his homework and grab some dinner.” The words came in a strained tone, but dammit, he was trying. Rasheda's surly attitude didn't make it easy. “I'll be there in half an hour. I just gotta take care of something here at the house first.”

“He's hungry now, Dom. Everything can't be on your time. His well-being has to be a priority. But I understand if you can't make that happen.”

“Stop.” His fingers clenched the phone. “I'm gonna make a couple calls and then I'll be on my way. Bye, Rasheda.” Disconnecting the call after saying “bye” didn't count as hanging up on a person, even though most of the time he really did want to hang up on Rasheda. There'd actually been moments when he'd wanted to slam the phone down hard enough that she'd somehow feel the impact via a blast to her eardrum. Since that was obviously not possible, he settled for cursing again.

To be fair, Rasheda had cause to hate him. In the past nine years, he hadn't been a model father. Hell, he hadn't even been a good father and, at the moment, he wasn't in the mood to blame that situation on his own problematic upbringing. Instead, he did as he said he would and made a call.

“Yeah, Stan, this is Dom. Look, that problem with the pipes in my basement we talked about a few days ago took a turn for the worse. Any chance you can get a crew over here ASAP?”

He'd never wanted to hear a positive response more than he did in that moment and if he were planning to stick around, he probably would've given Stan a big hug on top of the bonus he was gonna add to the plumber's fee for an emergency visit. But Stan was another longtime friend, so Dom had no concerns about leaving the key to the house under the mat on the front porch so he could get in. He did need to get to Rasheda's before she took Aiden out to dinner herself and used that as another nail in his coffin at their upcoming custody hearing.

After cutting off the water in the house and changing into a new pair of jeans, he put on tennis shoes this time and was headed back to his truck five minutes shy of the time he'd quoted to Rasheda. She didn't live in the old neighborhood anymore. After receiving her master's degree in education and becoming a middle school principal, she'd moved into a townhouse development on the edge of town, which was about a twenty-minute drive from his house. He made it there in ten minutes and hopped out of his truck to run up the driveway. At the front door, he rang the bell and waited for her to answer.

Aiden opened the door.

“Hey, buddy,” Dom said after readjusting his expression. He'd been prepared to have words with Rasheda again, not come face-to-face with the child who was the spitting image of him as a young boy. “You ready for me to go over your homework?”

Aiden drew his thick eyebrows together and frowned. “I finished my homework at the rec center. Coach Ricky checked it for me.”

In other words, Aiden didn’t need him. That was a tough pill to swallow, but Dom knew he deserved the rebuff. “Okay, that’s cool. I’d still like to take a look, just to get an idea of what you’re working on in school. Then we can go out to eat. What’re you in the mood for?”

His son was tall for his age; at least Dom thought so as the top of Aiden’s head came to Dom’s chest. They shared the same dark, pensive eyes and full lips, but where Dom had been a thicker build, Aiden was a little on the long and lanky side, which made Dom wonder if he was playing basketball. “We got leftover spaghetti in the fridge, and Mom said I can play my game until it’s time for bed.” The frown on Aiden’s face remained in place and he folded his arms over his chest as a way of telling Dom he wasn’t going anywhere with him.

“I’d really like to take you out to dinner, Aiden. We can go to Dave & Buster’s, play games and grab dinner. You know, spend some father-son time together.” Something Dom never had in his life. Frank Hughes hadn’t been there for Dom, and Augusta Hughes hadn’t been there for Frank. The Hughes Deadbeat Dad curse was real.

“Why?”

The single word pierced Dom’s heart, and he took a slow breath in an effort to keep the pain at bay. “Because I’m your father and I haven’t spent enough time with you. That’s my bad, and I’m ready to make things better between us.”

“Then stop being late,” Rasheda said as she appeared from behind the door.

She was still a very attractive woman—if he ignored the scowl she wore more often than not and the abrasive tone of her voice. In the history of their weekend in Vegas, the call from Rasheda seven weeks later to tell him she was pregnant and Dom’s staggered appearances thereafter, he accepted that some of the discord between them was his fault. He just hadn’t wanted to be with Rasheda in the way she’d needed him to be. Sure, he’d sent her money from the time he’d found out she was pregnant until a few weeks ago, when he’d delivered last month’s child support check to her in person, but that wasn’t enough. Not for Rasheda and, unfortunately, not for Aiden, either.

“I had a plumbing issue at my house—otherwise I would’ve been here earlier. But I’m here now.” And while he thought that should be enough, Dom understood the importance of building trust between him and Aiden.

Rasheda frowned. She had a hand propped on her hip, a black skirt fit tight to her thighs and down just past her knees. Her blouse was green, a little sheer on the sleeves, and she wore fuzzy black slippers in place of the high heels he figured she’d worn to work today. Aiden had her curly dark-brown hair that he wore in cornrows that hung a couple of inches too long in Dom’s estimation.

“I know you like double cheeseburgers with lots of ketchup,” Dom said to his son. “You wanna grab a jacket in case it gets chilly later?” *Stay focused* was the mantra he’d adopted hours after his thirty-eighth birthday two months ago.

That was the moment he’d decided it was time to get his shit together and be the man he’d never been groomed to be.

Aiden looked from Dom to Rasheda and then back to Dom again. He shrugged and took the first step forward. “I don’t

need a jacket.” He pushed past Dom and continued down the driveway, heading for Dom’s truck.

“Have him back by nine,” Rasheda said.

“I will,” he told her. “And thanks. You know, for giving me this chance.”

“Oh, don’t get it twisted. I’m only doing this because the judge said I had to let you see him. But I know you, Dom. This won’t last long. You love your freedom and you’ve made that perfectly clear. You won’t stick with this parenting thing and when the judge sees that, he’ll grant me full custody of *my* son.”

She loved putting emphasis on that word. Had been saying it since the moment he’d told her he wasn’t moving back to Newton when she’d announced she was pregnant. It was nothing new that she considered Aiden one hundred percent hers but still cashed every check he sent her for child support. Shaking his head because he wasn’t in the mood to rehash the past with Rasheda tonight, or ever again for that matter, Dom walked away.

Moments later he climbed into his truck and snapped his seatbelt in place, thinking that he hadn’t considered it’d be this hard to come home. Dealing with Rasheda and Aiden was one thing, but now he was working with Jorie, and the renovation expenses to his grandmother’s house were adding up too. Every emotionally stressful aspect of his past was taunting him, and he hadn’t even been back for a full month yet.

Glancing over at his son, Dom prayed things would get better. They had to, or else he didn’t know how he’d go on.

CHAPTER 3



Two cameramen moved throughout the house, pulling thick black cords behind them while setting up cameras and other equipment Jorie wasn't familiar with. One tech and cameraman would follow Dom throughout the show, and another would be assigned to her. The producer would be on set every day, giving them cues and reminding them what shots the show needed to get in each day. The real work on the house would have to get done around the six hours a day they were contracted to be on camera.

Jorie had met the producer, Safiya, a tall, slim woman who wore her waist-length locks in a messy bun today, a couple of weeks ago when she'd first auditioned for the show. This morning, they stood face-to-face for the first time since last week when Jorie had introduced her team to Safiya and her crew.

"We'll begin shooting the demo work today," Safiya said while staring down at the tablet she always carried. "The kitchen first and then, what...the roof? I have notes here that Dom thinks there might be problems with the roof."

This was the first Jorie had heard about roof problems. "What? Is that really an issue, or just one of the dramatic effects you said we might need?" For Jorie, this show was

about free advertising and exposure for her design company. She had no idea what Dom stood to gain from working on this project. But for Safiya and the television station, Jorie knew the bottom line was ratings.

“No, Jessi said she talked to Dom at length on Friday, and this is the info she got from him. So it’s first up on the things we’ll deal with today, besides anything else that comes up when you start tearing down the walls in the kitchen.”

Which could be any variety of issues, so Jorie wasn’t sure why Dom hadn’t given her a heads up about the very real and expensive possibility of roofing issues as well. “Right. That’s fine. Excuse me for a second.” She left Safiya to find her contractor.

She’d seen Dom just one more time after their bump-in last week. With two other projects going simultaneously, she’d had to check in on those, and Dom had assured her via text message that he’d be at the property every day, assessing the safety issues before the network crew was slated to arrive in the mornings.

Music blared throughout the house from a radio and speakers somebody had brought in and hooked up. Earlier old-school hip hop had been playing—Public Enemy, LL Cool J and the like—now, some blend of pop and R&B was on in a song she didn’t recognize, but felt it might’ve been too loud. Or perhaps there was another reason her temples throbbed as she walked from one room to the next, searching for the man she’d thought she’d never see again.

He was actually one of two men Jorie never wanted to see again, but damn if she was gonna think about either one of them in those terms right now. In fact, she wished she didn’t have to deal with her ex-boyfriend or her ex-husband for the

next lifetime. Turning into the upstairs bathroom and colliding with a broad, hard chest was just another wake-up call.

“Hey there,” Dom said after she yelped and jumped back.

“Don’t ‘hey there’ me,” she snapped. “Why didn’t you tell me there was a problem with the roof? This is my project, my budget that’s going to be affected, so I should’ve been the first to know about something of this magnitude. Or were you just trying to work it so you’d get most of the camera time with your made-up problems?”

From her recollection, Dom wasn’t a conceited guy, but he’d loved every second of attention he’d garnered playing running back for their high school football team. The same went for the years he’d been on the wrestling team, bringing in the top awards from the statewide competitions. Every girl in high school had wanted to be with Dom, and he’d chosen Jorie. How many days had she wondered if that was a mistake? And how foolish she’d felt for believing all his words about wanting only her when, in the end, he’d left her high and dry?

He held up both hands as if in surrender. “Whoa, take a breath.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. I want an explanation.” Had she raised her voice? The quick glance at the three guys on Dom’s crew who were in the hallway confirmed she had. Huffing, she pushed past him until she was now in the bathroom and he’d turned to face her. “You’ve got to keep me abreast of what’s going on. Is this how you’re used to working on your other projects? If so, it’s unacceptable for me.”

“Jorie, hold up a second,” he said and then exhaled. “Really, I’m not trying to tell you what to do, but if you just calm down for a minute, I’ll explain what’s going on.”

She didn't want to do as he said, but he had a point. He couldn't explain if she kept firing off questions. This wasn't the way she normally acted with her crew, and she knew it was because she wasn't used to being in close proximity with Dom. By the way, he looked good in his torn and faded jeans and white T-shirt, and she resisted the urge to roll her eyes at him just because of that alone.

"You know it rained on Friday, right?" He didn't wait for her to respond, but continued holding her gaze earnestly. "When I got here, there was a leak in the master bedroom, so me and my crew immediately went into the attic to take a look. There's a patch up there that I'm thinking is from a slow leak. My first call after coming down was to a roofer, and my second call was to you."

She swallowed, knowing what was coming next. Major embarrassment and heat that would fuse her cheeks as a result.

"You didn't answer, so I sent you a text that we needed to talk ASAP. You didn't respond to that, either."

"You should've said what it was about."

"We're working this project together—what'd you think it was about?"

Silence fell like a ton of bricks between them, and they both stood rigid.

"Nothing," she replied finally. "I didn't think it was about anything but work." Stopping before she started babbling an apology, she cleared her throat. "In the future, just tell me what's going on in your messages, and I'll get right back to you."

He nodded curtly. "Yeah. Okay. Well, the roofer will be here at noon. We can go down and get started with the kitchen

demo so Safiya and her crew can stay on schedule. Once they're gone for the day, we can get everything else ripped out. The sooner we get a look at all the electrical and plumbing throughout the house, the better."

"Right. We'll need to sit down and go over the budget in detail." It was inevitable. She always worked closely with her contractor, and Dom couldn't be any different. Regardless of their past, she had to treat this like any other project. That was her lesson for today, since she vividly recalled ignoring his cryptic text and phone call on Friday. Thinking he wanted to do some sort of reminiscing or explaining why he'd left the way he had had been too much for her. Anger had overruled any other thoughts and she'd dismissed the call and message as easily as Dom had dismissed her twenty years ago.

That wasn't smart, and she'd have to deal with how that made her feel, but that was for later. Now, she walked out of the bathroom and headed downstairs again, mentally preparing to be in front of a camera doing what she loved.

JORIE WAS GOOD AT THIS. Her comments were knowledgeable and entertaining as they moved throughout the kitchen. She wielded a sledgehammer with almost as much efficiency and ease as any of the top guys in Dom's crew. A navy-blue bandana held wildly curly hair back from her lightly made-up face, while toned arms were on display via the short-sleeved black T-shirt she wore. Strength, professionalism, intelligence all poured from her as she moved throughout the kitchen alongside him and his crew.

"Cut!" the director yelled, and Safiya clapped.

“Great job, guys. This was a good take.” The producer walked from behind the director and other techs, coming to stop in front of Dom and Jorie as they stood near the back door. “We’ll edit this along with the footage taken when the roofers were here and have your second segment completed.”

“Is your crew coming back tomorrow?” he asked, because the production schedule was eating into his timeframe for getting specific things done on this job.

Like Jorie, this wasn’t the only project he had going. Thanks to old friends and contacts he’d made prior to returning to the east coast, business had started to pick up here. Still, this was the only job in Newton, where he was establishing his residence. The other two projects he’d snagged were farther south in Maryland, toward D.C. and Virginia.

“No, we’re shooting with the other team tomorrow morning, but if I need retakes, I’ll let you know early and we can swing by here after we finish with them,” Safiya replied.

The other team was a husband-and-wife duo known for flipping houses in Prince George’s County. As Newton was just on the outskirts of Baltimore City, he hadn’t been shocked to learn the other team was also renovating a home in a bustling urban neighborhood.

“Great,” Jorie chimed in. “We have some other things we can get done before then.”

Safiya shook her head. “Oh, no, not too much. We still need to get you buying materials and you dealing with that roof situation.”

“The roof situation is a minor fix, not a completely new roof, so that’s only going to take about an hour tops. The guys

are coming back on Thursday to take care of it,” he told her. Dom had never been happier to hear such news and had almost hugged the roofer who’d shared it earlier. Jorie’s audible sigh of relief at the roofer’s words had also been like music to Dom’s ears.

His partner in this project was on edge enough because of their history together; the last thing Dom needed was for their present situation to build an even bigger rift between them.

“Then we’ll be back on Thursday, unless we need any retakes. Hopefully you’ll also be ready to do some shopping at that time as well.” Safiya looked pointedly at Jorie as she spoke, then smiled at both of them before saying her goodbyes and gathering her crew.

“My guys and I can finish the demo in here and on the rest of this floor today if you’ve got other things to do,” Dom said. She’d looked at her watch twice since they’d stopped filming, and he supposed she had somewhere else to be.

It was almost five. Maybe she had a dinner date to get ready for or someone to meet for happy hour. Why his thoughts had taken such a trip, Dom had no idea, but the instant irritation at those possibilities was apparent when he felt his brow wrinkle.

With her lips pursed, she shook her head. “No. I’m scheduled to be on this site for the whole day. If we’re going to finish demo on this floor, then I’m in.”

And so she was. For the next two hours, she’d worked alongside him and the crew, tearing out cabinets and drywall, hauling debris to the dumpster on the front lawn, joking and singing along with the crew as they blasted an Usher song he’d never heard before. This was a side of Jorie he’d never seen or could’ve ever imagined, to be honest. In high school, Jorie had

hated gym and balked at taking the trash out at her mother's house, so seeing her lifting and hauling trash, sawdust and grit across her forehead and cheek where she wiped sweat away, was totally new. And sexy as hell.

“Let's get some pizza and a beer,” he said without thinking. “I really need a beer right about now.”

She was standing a couple of feet away from him, removing the bandana from her head and using it to wipe her face. “Pizza's still your favorite food, huh? You used to eat that morning, noon and night, all while your grandmother yelled about its lack of nutritional value.”

He paused at the memory, a slow grin spreading. “Grams was always on me about nutrition when really, I ate good most of the time. It's just something about pizza.”

“It calls to you,” she finished for him and rolled her eyes. “I know. I can't even count how many times I've heard you say that.”

Dom chuckled as he leaned against one of the studs left standing in what used to be the dining room wall. “You know it calls to you too. As much as you love cheese.” He folded his arms across his chest. “You remember that time you ordered an extra-large, double cheese pizza with pepperoni and ham from Crazy John's, and they delivered it to some house across town instead? You were pissed!”

She was using the bandana to wipe along the back of her neck now, lifting her hair and then dropping it again before gazing up at him. “I was beyond pissed.” With her head tilted now, they continued to stare at each other. “And you drove down to Crazy John's and demanded they make me a whole new pizza.”

“Then we ate that pie right in the car sitting out front of the joint. We didn’t even wait until we got back to my house. Cheese was so hot it burned the roof of your mouth, but you still kept eating.”

She smiled then, and every muscle in Dom’s body tightened. “It was so damn good, and I was so hungry,” she admitted.

“It was good.” His tone was softer than he’d expected. “We were good back then.”

He knew those were the wrong words the moment her shoulders tensed and the smile slipped from her face. But this was the elephant that had sat its big, stank ass between them since they’d met in this house last week. They had to deal with it, either now or later, because it wasn’t gonna go away.

“Let’s go get dinner,” he said before she could speak. “We can talk about the budget and about what happened between us. I don’t want this tension looming between us for the next six weeks.”

Her expression gave no warning of what she was about to say. She’d only stared at him blankly while he’d spoken as if she were piecing every word she wanted to say together. That couldn’t be good, but he wasn’t backing down. If the conversation was going to happen right here in this partially demoed house, then so be it. There were things he needed to say to her, things he should’ve said a long time ago, things he figured she’d want to hear. Or at least she would’ve wanted to hear them twenty years ago. Now, he wasn’t so sure they’d mean a damn thing.

“You’re right,” she replied after a brief silence. “We need to clear the air. Crazy John’s closed years ago, but there’s a

new spot out by the mall. They have New-York-style slices and they use the best cheese.”

He couldn't help but grin again. “You're still a cheese connoisseur.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I just know what's good and what's not.”

He watched her walk toward the front door now, hoping like hell she hadn't permanently cast him in the “what's not good” column. There was a time when Jorie had been Dom's best friend. They'd told each other everything, supported each other, cursed each other out when need be, and held each other down. She'd been everything to him. And the years without her had been hell.

CHAPTER 4



“*Y*ou left without saying a word to me. I had to hear the news from your boys after I went to your grandmother’s house looking for you,” Jorie said, the second the server had taken their order and walked away. “I went home and sat by the phone for hours that night and then woke up early the next morning and kept right on sitting there, waiting. I faked sick that Sunday so I wouldn’t have to go to church, carrying that phone from one room to the next throughout the house. Even into the bathroom because I didn’t want to miss your call. But you never called.”

Dom sat back against the red leather seat of the booth inside the pizza spot and let his arms rest on the table. If she were inclined to admit it, he looked sorry as hell right now. His shoulders had slumped a little, his eyes were filled with what she thought might be regret or remorse and his lips were set in a firm line. “Nah, I didn’t call.”

“You didn’t write. Even though I knew letters weren’t your style, I still raced home from school every day to go through the stack of mail just in case. I checked my email vigilantly, hoping you’d reach out that way.” She shrugged. “But you didn’t.”

He huffed. “I wanted to hear your voice so bad, Jorie. I needed to hear you say everything was going to be alright—”

“I would’ve,” she interrupted. “I would’ve told you to come back and we’d get through anything together.” Because that was what she’d always believed.

“And you would’ve been wrong.”

Her chest ached at his words. How in the hell could there be pain after all this time? “Tell me why.” It was a little disappointing that after twenty years, she still needed to know.

“Because I couldn’t give you what you wanted.” He lifted his hands from the table, shrugged and let them fall flat again. “I wasn’t going to be a good husband and father, and that’s what you wanted. It’s what you always talked about. How you weren’t going to be a single parent like your mother, how you’d prove her and all her man-bashing wrong by being in a loving and secure relationship and building a family. That was your dream. I was only going to hold you back.”

Her eyes narrowed as he talked because she’d never heard him speak this way. “You wanted a family too—you told me so. You wanted to give your grandmother great-grandchildren and to have them grow up learning from all the family history she taught you. It was important to you to keep your mother’s bloodline going.”

“Unfortunately, there was too much of my father’s blood running through my veins. You know he wasn’t shit, and neither was his father before him. There was no guarantee I wasn’t going to be more like him.” He sighed. “In fact, I did turn out just like the other Hughes men.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I have a son.”

Now the pain spread from her chest to fill her gut and her limbs. She trembled and forced herself not to look away. “You have a son.” Why she thought repeating his words would make them go away, she had no clue.

She watched him take a deep breath, his shoulders rising, chest expanding, eyes intent on her. When he released the breath, his lips parted slightly, and her gaze slipped momentarily to them, but nothing, not even the memory of those thick lips on her naked body, could hold her attention after what he’d just said.

“His name is Aiden,” he continued. “He’s nine and he lives with his mother in Beacon Creek.”

The newest townhouse development by Jansen Development. She knew the company and their homes well because she’d designed two of the model homes at other locations throughout Maryland. It had been her goal to obtain an exclusive contract with them, but that hadn’t happened yet.

“Wait a minute.” She slapped her palms on the table and then yanked her hands back as his gaze fell to them. “You returned to Newton long enough to get some woman pregnant but never had a moment to call or write to me?” The words stung the back of her throat, and fury began to bubble around the hurt. What had she done to make him want to get away from her so fast and so completely?

“Hold on, just breathe and let me finish.” He waited to see if she was going to do that or get up and walk out. Because he knew her very well—walking out was an option she was entertaining. Sitting across from him was becoming too damn hard.

Why had she thought she could have this conversation about him leaving when it’d been the most painful experience

of her life? Who'd said it was the mature and professional thing to do, to clear the air between them so they could proceed with a job that was the biggest priority in her life right now? She'd said it. The slow sigh that came next was an act of resolution. After seeing him last week, she'd spent the entire weekend thinking about how they were going to make this work, and the bottom line was they needed to talk this through. That was why she'd agreed so quickly when he'd suggested dinner tonight. She wouldn't second-guess herself now.

“Rasheda and I ran into each other in Vegas. It was a weekend thing.”

“A weekend thing that led to a nine-months-and-forever-responsibility thing.” She sat back and shook her head. “Wait, Rasheda? Are you talking about Ra-Ra Kinley who used to be the captain of the cheer squad?” When he nodded, she couldn't help but chuckle. “So the star running back for the football team ended up with a cheerleader after all. How cliché.”

“That's not how it—”

She held up a hand. “Oh please, don't tell me that's not how it happened. Because that's precisely what went down. You left me without blinking an eye, then later just miraculously hooked up with the girl who'd been chasing you all of our high school years. Then you have a family with her. The family you said you wanted with me. The family you just tried to tell me you didn't think you could have.”

The server arrived with their pizza, setting it down on the table between them. They'd both ordered beers and the server delivered those, too, but Jorie picked up the glass of water that had come earlier and drank from that instead.

She took a gulp. “Okay.” The server asked if they needed anything else, and she shook her head.

Dom thanked her and the woman walked away, looking slightly confused. Jorie didn't give a damn.

“So, here's how we're going to work together. You do your job, and I'll do mine. If I could find another contractor on such short notice who came as highly recommended as you, believe me, I would. But I need this to go well. My company needs this exposure to move up in the industry. I gave you my heart once, but I'll be damned if I give you my future.” She raised her hand to signal the server again. “Can you bring me a box?”

“You're doing too much,” Dom started.

“Don't you dare tell me what I'm doing after all you did to me. I waited for you, Dom. For a whole fuckin' year, I waited for you to come back to me, and you didn't!”

“Then you ran off to college and married the first guy you met,” he said through clenched teeth. “So don't sit there and play the martyr role, Jorie. You didn't sit around waiting twenty years for me, and I didn't want you to.” He sighed heavily. “All I ever wanted was for you to be happy. Even if that meant without me. Leaving hurt me too.”

“Not nearly enough,” she stood, “and you have no idea what I've gone through in the last twenty years. While you were off having babies with Ra-Ra, I was—”

She was being emotionally abused by that trash-ass husband of hers, and the one thing she'd wanted from the marriage had never come to fruition. To say she was pissed and jealous of Dom at the same time would've been an understatement, but he had a son to love and cherish, while all she'd been left with was a twice-broken heart and a career goal to keep her company every night.

Jorie didn't say any of those things to him. Instead, when the server arrived with the box, she took three slices of pizza and put them inside before closing it. She reached across the seat and grabbed her purse, pushing it up on her shoulder before picking up the box. "This conversation is over. I'll see you at the worksite tomorrow and we'll get this flip done as quickly as possible. After that, I don't ever want to see you again."

Walking away may have seemed childish to some, but to Jorie it was liberating. She was the one leaving him this time. If when she made it to her car, she set that pizza on the passenger seat and let her head fall back against the headrest, feeling weary as hell, then so be it.

DOM SHOULD'VE LET her go.

He couldn't. Not again, and not with the way she'd looked at him.

He left cash on the table and walked out of the restaurant, hurrying around the corner to the parking lot, where they'd both left their vehicles. Her car was still there, right beside his truck, and he jogged up to the driver's side window to lightly tap on it.

She startled and lifted her head slowly until she could stare at him through the window. Several seconds ticked by with her neither rolling down the window or opening the door while he stood there, wondering how long this standoff would last.

"I'm sorry, Jorie." He'd said those three words so many times over the last years. To himself as he lay in bed after dreaming about her. In a text message he was never going to

send because before last week, he hadn't known her cell number. To the mirror whenever he stared at his reflection and called himself ten times a fool for leaving the only woman he'd ever loved. "I can stand here all night and tell you that over and over again if that'll make you feel better."

It wouldn't. Dom knew that as surely as he was standing there. Nothing he said was going to take away the hurt she'd felt when he left—he knew that. Had dreaded it all these years.

"Or you can let me in and we can finish talking, or at least share one of your slices of pizza, since I didn't have the good sense to get a carryout box."

She looked over at the passenger seat, where the box of food sat, and then back to him before shaking her head. The window moved down just a couple of inches. "You wasted your money on a pizza you didn't even get to eat. Poor Dom." Sarcasm was Jorie's second language. But at least she was being sarcastic instead of hurt and angry, as she'd been when she'd left the restaurant. "I don't owe you anything," she continued. "Not the opportunity to explain further or a slice of pizza."

He shrugged. "You're right."

"We can talk about the budget. We'll keep this about business as I said before."

"We can do that."

"Fine."

He heard the sound of the locks on the car disengaging and saw her remove the pizza box from the passenger seat and slide it onto the dashboard. Dom walked around the car, opened the passenger-side door and slid onto the seat. He

closed the door and sat there for a few moments, thinking of what he wanted to say next.

“The budget,” she said again.

Clearing his throat, he ran his palms down his thighs. “Right. The budget.”

The numbers rolled around in his mind. He should start with the kitchen, since that was going to be one of the biggest expenses and was the most important upgrade in a home. The only real surprise numbers were some plumbing work and the extensive landscaping to the front of the house that was a direct result of the plumbing work. That pizza smelled good as hell.

And Jorie was sitting too damn close to him. In this small-ass car she had, there was no console between them, just her purse and the gear shift. They were practically touching, at least if not physically, then mentally, because he could swear he knew what she was thinking.

Her hands had clamped on the steering wheel, her chest heaving like maybe she'd run to the car too, or maybe she was having the same physical reaction to him that Dom had been having since day one.

“I want to talk about the budget.” He cleared his throat again. It was starting to feel scratchy, he'd done that so much tonight. “Or we can talk about how badly I want to kiss you right now.” She turned her head quickly to stare at him, and he looked at her earnestly. “I know it's not right. I did you wrong. You're still pissed about it and you've been clear in telling me so. Business, that's all we have going for us right now. I'm in no position to be thinking about kissing a woman when Rasheda's trying to take my son away from me.” He stopped babbling, hating the sound, and let out a big sigh. “But

I can't help it, Jorie. I remember how sweet your kisses were, how I looked forward to them every day, and I just want to do it again. I just want to—”

He'd never known she could move so fast or that his heart could pound with so much pressure in his chest, but when Jorie released her hold on the steering wheel and moved to clap her hands on each side of his face, Dom was stunned. Her lips crashed over his, fast, hot, explosive, and he was lost.

There was an instant, just a flicker of time, when he didn't know what to do with his hands. Shock, combined with the powerful bolt of desire that soared through his body the moment her tongue brushed against his, had his mind temporarily going blank. But the second he regained the feeling in his toes, Dom's fingers were in her hair, blunt-tipped nails scraping along her scalp as he held her in place and took the kiss deeper.

She was like fire and honey all rolled into one. The way her hands hungrily gripped the front of his shirt, daring him to try and move. Not that going anywhere was a consideration. All he wanted in this moment was right here. Tilting his head, he took more, sucking her tongue deep, swallowing the quiet moans that escaped her throat. Memories of her in his arms bombarded him, the energy of youth and a love so fresh and powerful it threatened to smother them both. They clashed with the new bold and confident woman now pouring years of pain, fury and banked desire into a kiss that was rocking his foundation. His hands trembled as his grip on her head loosened and it was his turn to moan into the kiss.

When she pulled away gasping for air, he did the same, sucking in the breath he'd lost with her quick decision to give him the kiss he'd said he needed. For endless seconds they

stared at each other, only the glow from a nearby streetlight illuminating the interior of the car.

“There, that’s what you’ve been missing for the last twenty years.” She dropped back into her seat. “That’s what you could’ve had if you weren’t such a coward. Now, back to work.”

Dom could only blink. His dick was so hard, any thoughts beyond the immediate lust that pounded in his head and every other sensible part of his body were lost. He could hear her taking steady breaths but hadn’t chanced turning to look at her yet.

“My total investment is two hundred thousand. The purchase price was one-oh-five, leaving ninety-five thousand for the renovation. I have a budget that was worked up with the previous contractor. I can email that to you. I should’ve done that already, so my bad, but I’ll get it to you when I get home.”

“Stop,” he said, pissed that his breathing still wasn’t steady. Nor was his dick going down, but he could at least produce coherent thoughts now. “What just happened?”

“I gave you what you wanted,” she said, and he looked over in time to see her dropping her hands to her thighs.

Really nice, thick thighs that he recalled were soft as they’d wrapped around his waist on so many occasions. Her nails were short but still manicured and painted white. There were no rings on her fingers, something he probably should’ve paid attention to before he’d told her he wanted to kiss her.

“Yeah, you did,” he continued. “But, um, what are we doing now?”

“We’re going over the budget. That’s the other thing we were supposed to talk about tonight.”

“We weren’t supposed to kiss, though.” He was sensing the vibe behind the cool façade she now had going.

“No. And we won’t again.”

He only stared at her then, and she met his gaze with a look of indifference that did nothing to hide her smeared lipstick and tousled hair. “Because that’s over.” Finishing her thoughts was familiar, just like everything about her seemed to be, and yet, Dom was certain he didn’t know this new Jorie.

The woman who’d given him all the fury and distress she’d felt about him in the restaurant and had kissed him like she’d wanted to get fucked in the front seat of her car only seconds ago wasn’t the girl he’d fallen in love with. She wasn’t, and then she was; it was confusing and eye-opening all at the same time.

“Exactly,” she replied.

Dragging his hands down his face, he vowed to think this over slowly and carefully, and with a glass of bourbon as soon as he got home. For now, he knew how to accept that no meant no. “The estimate for the roof is twenty-seven hundred. They’ll do a patch job in that corner, since the rest of the roof was confirmed as stable. Plumbing and landscaping are gonna chew up quite a bit of the budget. What are you thinking for finishes in the kitchen and the two bathrooms? Because we might be able to shave off some of the costs there.”

“No. Definitely not sacrificing the design. To win this competition, we have to bring a fresh, modern look into this two-hundred-year-old neighborhood while preserving some of its natural beauty. I’ve got drawings on my pad.” She looked

contemplative. “Team Thomas has investors in their corner—that means their budget is bigger. I have a better feeling for the citizens of this community because I am one, and they’re all pulling for me to win this so our neighborhood can be known for something more than its crime statistics and declining property value.”

So this wasn’t only about gaining exposure for her company. It went deeper, and Dom couldn’t have admired her more.

She moved again, this time turning so she could reach back and under her seat for a large leather tote bag packed with things he couldn’t see, until she pulled her pad out of it.

Dom told himself not to look at the cute curve of her ass or concern himself with the way she’d come up on her knees on the seat. Swallowing hard, he turned to stare out the window, willing his erection and all lustful thoughts about Jorie to disappear. They weren’t going anywhere. She’d said no, and he had no problem hearing her loud and clear.

After sitting in her car and going over numbers for another forty-five minutes before finally arriving at his house, he poured himself that drink and sank down onto the couch.

“Yeah, I heard what you said, Jorie.” He spoke into the quiet of the room. “But I also felt what I didn’t dare think could be again.”

Now the question was, what to do about those feelings that still lived between them.

CHAPTER 5



*H*er legs were wrapped around his neck, her arms stretched over her head so she could grip the headboard. Dom had her ass cupped in his strong hands, holding her up as he feasted on her like she'd been the day's feature on his favorite menu. Jorie's breaths came out in pants, her head lolled back, eyes closed to so much pleasure it was almost painful. With her bottom lip tucked between her teeth, she moaned, and resisted the urge to yell out in total bliss.

The walls in her apartment building were thin as hell. If she could hear her neighbors gettin' their freak on after somebody took that little blue pill, then she knew they'd hear her screaming Dom's name at the top of her lungs. Hence, she kept from doing that, but only barely, because his mouth and tongue were every damn thing.

He had no intention of stopping even after she'd shattered and fallen to pieces—two times already—at his ministrations. With each lick she felt the flame of desire rising higher and higher until she was completely on fire and about to torch the entire building. His fingers gripped her skin, creating the slightest tinge of pain to ride along the blurry haze of pleasure. Damn, how she'd missed this.

But he was much better now. He should be; he was twenty years older. A year older than her; she never forgot his birthday. After he finished with her, she was certain she'd never forget his tongue, either. She'd be completely ruined for any other man. Was there going to be another man? Hadn't she sworn off men after her divorce? Well, not forever, but at least until she got herself situated with her career. She'd waited so long to get started building her company, thanks to Garland and his foolish insecurities, but now that she was in it, she wasn't putting it aside for anyone.

Except, fuck, if Dom pulled away and looked up at her right now to ask if she'd fly to Mars to start a colony there with him, she'd do it in a heartbeat. Speaking of which, as he delved his tongue deeper inside her, Jorie could swear her heart pattered so fast and hard it was attempting to break free of her chest.

With that delicious, yet scary-as-hell thought, Jorie bolted up in her bed, chest heaving like she'd run a 10K marathon and back. "Dammit!" Shaking her head to clear the haze of a dream that felt way too real, she sat in the center of her bed and searched for coherent thoughts.

Minutes later, she realized there weren't any. She'd been dreaming about Dom, again. Her thighs still trembled, her pussy pulsating at the memory of the dream. She fell back against her pillows with a heavy sigh. "You've got to get it together, girl."

She had to get Dom out of her mind. It'd been four days since their dinner, talk and steamy-ass kiss on Monday night. By day she functioned well enough, going to the *Fantasy Flip* house and checking on progress before heading to her other job sites to do the same. She went shopping for materials

needed for all her projects and spent her evenings with a microwave meal and a stack of plans and pictures on her dining room table. But at night—each and every damn night since that kiss—when she crawled into bed, thoughts of Dom crept in. And in dreams, he came to her, giving her everything she'd missed over the years, with an emphasis on the physical pleasure.

Turning her head, she cracked an eye open to glance at the clock on her nightstand. “Damn. Damn. Damn.” It was only seven-thirty in the morning.

She wasn't a late sleeper but since she hadn't been getting much rest this past week, Jorie had declared this weekend a total rest-and-relax forty-eight hours. That didn't include waking up early with her body still heated with passion over a stupid dream. A dream she'd had too many times to call a fluke.

She wanted Dom, at least in her bed.

“Damn.”

The one word didn't seem like enough, and then again, it said it all.

An hour later she'd showered and put on a sage-green jogging suit. Sitting on the side of her bed, she leaned over and tied her shoes then stood at the mirror to do something about her hair. After running her fingers through the tangled tresses, she went for the wide-tooth comb and tried to tame the beast that was her natural hair. When she'd managed a bushy ponytail, she picked up her phone and sent a quick text to Dani about needing an appointment ASAP. Her sister had been her stylist since Jorie was a little girl. Dani had taken over washing and straightening Jorie's hair because Regina said she didn't have the time or patience to deal with Jorie's 4C hair

texture. Normally, Jorie loved her soft tight curls, but today, not so much.

Of course she could attribute that irritation to the other issue she was having this morning. The issue that just wouldn't release her from its cruel grasp. That was how she'd begun to think of this scenario with Dom. How many times had she wished he'd come back to Newton and tell her that leaving was a mistake, that he missed her and loved her? Too many. Even during her marriage, she'd still entertained the moment when she might see Dom again. That should've been her first clue that marrying Garland was a mistake but, according to her mother, Jorie had always been hard-headed.

Her phone rang as she walked toward the dining room to pack her pad and materials into her bag.

"Hey," she answered, knowing her sister was on the other end. "You have any openings today?" Fridays and Saturdays were Dani's busiest days at Fierce Creations, the five-chair salon she'd built in the basement of their mother's single-family home.

"Not today unless you want to sit in Candy's chair. Or you can come by tomorrow morning. It'll just be you and Mommy then," Dani replied.

Jorie usually hated being in the salon when her mother was also being serviced because that meant Regina would use that time for another how-to-be-a-bad-ass-bitch session especially designed for her daughters. "Well, you know I don't want Candy's hands in my hair. That girl is heavy on the products and scissor happy. I'll come over around ten tomorrow. Why isn't your mother going to church in the morning?"

"Cause her hair's not done." Dani laughed. "You know how she is."

“Right,” Jorie said with a nod. She did know how her mother was, and Regina definitely wasn’t stepping foot into the Lord’s house without being perfect from head to toe. Even though she’d cuss anybody out who dared to talk about any parts of her, she still had to make sure she was on point. “Well, I’ll have my earbuds.”

“Bye, girl,” Dani said, still laughing as she disconnected the call.

Jorie packed up her work things and headed out of the apartment. She knew she wasn’t supposed to be working, but she needed to do something to keep her mind off Dom. She drove over to the house and then struggled with the bag full of granite and marble samples for the kitchen and bathroom counters and tile samples for the walls as she moved up the walkway.

She was already at the door when she heard the music coming from inside. Still she paused, reconsidering. The door swung open, and she realized it was too late to turn around and go home. Dom stared at her with that seductive grin that had her immediately recalling the dream of his thick lips all over her tender folds.

“Hey, you,” he said. “Didn’t expect to see you today.”

Jorie forced herself to smile through the heady mixture of residual dream arousal and disappointment. “Same, Dom.” She huffed. “The same.”

“REALLY, I don’t need your help painting, Jorie.”

“Well, you’re moving pretty slow by yourself. I’ve been here two hours, and you haven’t left this back room.”

“That’s because I’m doing the job the correct way. I’m not usually the one doing the painting, but I’d like to get ahead of the game here,” he told her.

“Can’t get ahead if you’re moving slow,” she continued and walked around him to grab one of the paint rollers from a bag on the floor.

He sighed and shook his head. There was no arguing with this woman. He should’ve been well versed in the what-Jorie-says-is-what-Jorie-means world, but she’d been surprising him so much lately, she continued to catch him off guard. Like showing up here today. He hadn’t been expecting her. In fact, he’d come onto the site to start the painting in the basement today because he’d known he’d be alone.

His original plan for the weekend had been to spend it with Aiden, but at the last minute—meaning yesterday about an hour before he was supposed to pick up his son—Rasheda had called to say there was a party for a teammate Aiden needed to attend today. Then some program at her mother’s church he was participating in tomorrow. Had she just found out about those things yesterday? Because Dom had suggested Aiden stay at his house for the weekend when he’d brought him home after their dinner at Dave & Buster’s last week. Of course, Rasheda had known about these other obligations and, instead of telling Dom to make sure Aiden got to both these events on time, she’d told him Aiden had to stay with her.

Sure, he’d been pissed off and had even thought about pushing the point, but instead had decided he’d simply play by her rules and bide his time until the custody and visitation hearing coming up four weeks from now.

“See, you’re just standing over there daydreaming.” As if to prove her point, Jorie bumped into him as she passed around him to dip her roller into the pan of paint.

With another sigh, Dom reminded himself that he could only focus on one distraction in his life at a time. Jorie’s time was obviously now. “You’re gonna get your cute little jogging suit messed up,” he told her, since there was no use arguing over whether he needed her help.

“I’ve got a washer and dryer.”

She also had a body that was meant for wet dreams arousing him every waking moment. The way those pants fit tightly over the plump curve of her ass, and even the jacket zipped up just far enough to contain full breasts, should’ve been illegal. It was definitely a hindrance to his productivity, which was why after letting her into the house a couple of hours ago, he’d immediately come downstairs believing she’d do whatever she needed to do on the upper level. Out of sight didn’t necessarily mean out of mind in this scenario, but it did give his dick a fighting chance to rest easy.

“Is this the color I selected?” she asked after rolling her brush over the wall.

He rolled another section and replied, “It’s clay beige—which is more than a little redundant to me—just like you insisted. It’s written on the top of the tub, and there’s a sample of it on that swatch attached.”

“I didn’t pick the name, just the warm hue to make this basement an inviting space. But it doesn’t seem right.”

“You have to wait for it to dry to get the full effect.”

She paused to stare at him. “I know that. You act like I’m a novice here.”

“Not at all. I know you know what you’re doing.” Even if right now she was driving them both crazy with her ridiculous business-only stance.

As much success as he’d had with women, Dom didn’t believe for one moment that he was God’s gift to the opposite sex. He slept with women sparingly, especially after the Vegas incident, and he was certain to wrap it up tight when he did. Even though he knew he’d done the same with Rasheda, which was why he’d requested a blood test the moment Aiden had been born. His conclusion had been that Rasheda must’ve tampered with the condom when he wasn’t paying attention. They’d both been a little tipsy and she’d insisted on retrieving the condom from his wallet he’d placed on the dresser in the hotel room. He’d never been able to prove any of that and hadn’t wanted the unpleasantness of even trying to broach the subject with Rasheda. He was a father now, and that was that.

The one thing he knew for certain was when a woman was physically attracted to him. Sexual tension between him and Jorie had been off the meters since the first moment they’d stood upstairs in that living room. Two weeks later, they were still dancing around the fire that burned on slow embers around them. It made for mostly uncomfortable days during work and plenty of cool showers at night.

“Look, I’m almost finished this half of the wall, and you’re still taking your time over there,” she told him.

“I’ve got two windows over here and the door, so yes, I’m taking my time going around those edges.”

“You’re being slow and unproductive. I bet I can finish this whole side of the room before you.”

He knew better. He’d known her a very long time, even if there’d been a gap in their acquaintance. *Stay focused.* The

mantra echoed in his mind as it was meant to. Focus on getting this room painted, then focus on going to court and telling the judge about the job he'd taken to prove he was putting down roots to be with his son, then concentrate on building a relationship with his son. That was it. That was his whole goal in coming back to Newton.

Jorie was an interruption in his plan.

A very fine-ass one at that.

“I'll bet you can't.”

She stopped rolling and turned to him. Dom let his arm fall to his side and stared at her. “If I paint this half of the room before you finish your half, you have to carry all my materials out to my car and take my car for complete detailing tomorrow.”

He shook his head; she sucked at making deals. “One, I'd carry your bags to the ends of the earth without you ever asking, and two, when I finish this side of the room before you, I want you to strip.”

Jorie could be competitive as hell, and cocky to boot, so he wasn't as shocked when she gave a half smile and nodded. “Deal.”

CHAPTER 6



Dom was speechless when an hour later Jorie stood in front of him unzipping the jacket of that cute-little jogging suit. It hadn't been zipped all the way up, so he'd had just a glimpse of cleavage, but now, as he watched her hand dragging the zipper down slowly, more of the russet-brown hue of her skin was revealed. Taking a slow breath because he needed to keep oxygen flowing to the brain or risk passing out from overstimulation, he blinked and refocused. All the blood in his body was already pumping straight to his lengthening erection.

"Why'd you kiss me the other night?" He'd set his brush down already and now stood five feet away from her, hands at his sides.

She'd reached the end of the track; the jacket fell all the way open, revealing a lacy bra that perfectly cupped her ample breasts. Unable to look away, he marveled at the color that was as light as the clay beige paint they'd just applied to the walls. With a soft gasp, he felt his body warm in the way she'd said she wanted the paint to affect this space, inviting him closer to touch, taste and explore. His fingers tingled with the urge.

"Because I wanted to get you out of my system," she replied and shrugged the jacket off her shoulders. Pulling the

sleeves away from her arms, she dropped it to the cloth-covered floor.

He took a step closer. “Then why are you stripping now?”

Her hands skirted the band of the pants, pausing at the white string tie as she tilted her head. “Because you’re still there.” Only the hitch in her voice at the very end of that sentence alerted him to the emotion lacing her actions. “It’s like you never left.”

“I never wanted to leave you, baby.” The admission came as a shock to them both and he watched as her eyes widened. “I mean, my heart was always with you. My thoughts, my actions, I figured they were attuned to what was best for you. I just couldn’t stay knowing I’d hurt you more by prolonging the end.”

She toyed with the string, not untying it, but she wasn’t reaching for her jacket or attempting to get away from him again, so Dom took that as a good sign. He stopped just a few inches from her now, so close he could smell whatever product she’d put in her hair—a coconut scent he knew would forever arouse him now. “I waited for you,” she said softly, lifting her head to stare up at him. “For as long as I could.”

“You don’t have to wait now.” Because he didn’t plan to. He reached out, touching his hands lightly to her shoulders, but she took a step back, shaking her head.

“I lost the bet,” she said and nodded toward the corner of her wall that hadn’t been completed. It wasn’t that big of a corner, maybe two or three feet, tops, but it was still covered in flat white paint, not the clay beige that now coated the rest of the walls in the room. “I don’t renege on my commitments,” she continued and pulled the strings at her waist until they were undone.

If that comment was meant to be a swipe at him and what he'd done to her, Dom would take it. The words were spoken in such a husky timbre that his heart had skipped a beat, blood thumping through his veins so fast and hot it echoed in his mind.

“And I can't hide from the truth.” When she spoke this time, she kneeled down to untie her shoes.

Dom stared down at her, his dick jumping as her face passed its vicinity. He swallowed so hard and clenched his fists to keep from pressing his hands to the back of her head and guiding her in that direction. Arousal coursed through every crevice of his body, rocking his normally steady persona until he was nervous about speaking his next words. “What's the truth, Jorie?” In his mind, the answer to that question was that he needed to be inside her sooner rather than later. He hadn't given much thought to the request of asking her to strip, just that he'd wanted to see her naked again, to touch her smooth, warm skin and feast his eyes upon the curves he remembered so distinctly.

When she finished and removed both tennis shoes, pushing them to the side, she stood up again. “The truth is I'm still attracted to you and you're still attracted to me.” She licked her lips and shrugged. “We're older now, Dom. Grown and responsible for our actions. If we want to have sex, then we should.”

He couldn't help it—the smile spread slowly, his fingers releasing from their clenched position. “You've got a point there.”

“I know,” she replied and ran her fingers beneath the band of her pants. “So, since we both want this, we might as well get it out of the way.”

Before he could respond again, she pushed the pants down past her hips and thighs, bending again to pull them neatly from each foot. When she stood this time, she held the pants between the fingers of one hand, extended her arm and let them drop to the floor with a dramatic flourish.

Her bikini panties matched her bra, strips of lace in the same beige hue over a sheer material he didn't know the name of but would forever be grateful for.

“That’s some pretty sexy underwear. Did you wear it knowing I’d be seeing it today?”

She smirked. “You wish. I wear pretty things for myself, not to please or tantalize any man.”

He chuckled, because those words were so Jorie.

“Are you gonna stand there talking all day? I swear your mode is definitely slow today,” she said with an exaggerated sigh. Now she was taunting him.

“I’ll show you slow.” The threat was followed by his quick movement toward her. Lacing one arm around her waist, he pulled her up to him, causing her to gasp as she dropped her hands to his shoulders.

With his other arm he reached behind her thigh, lifted one leg and tucked it behind his waist. Their gazes held and she lifted the other leg, locking herself securely around him. Dom moved them into the front room of the basement. It was unpainted and still needed drywall repair in some spaces, but there was a pile of cloths he’d brought down to cover the floors.

Setting her down on the pile gently, he kept her legs behind his waist and put his lips on hers. She melted into the kiss, pulling him down against her tightly. Dom sank like a

man who couldn't swim. The feel of her holding him tight was the welcome home he hadn't known he needed. Soft moans from her when he deepened the kiss wrapped him in a sense of familiar and forever. He'd never stopped wanting her, of that he was certain even at this midpoint in his life. No matter how far he'd traveled or how fast he'd tried to run, he hadn't managed to get her out of his system; that had to mean something.

Drawing his mouth away from hers was a task but dropping warm, open-mouthed kisses along the line of her jaw and down her neck was the luxurious start to what he knew was going to be a satisfying ending. She arched her back beneath him, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

"You have specks of paint all over the top half of your chest," he whispered as his lips continued their downward trek over her body. "Clay beige never looked so good."

She chuckled lightly and gyrated her hips until she was pressed against his thick erection.

"Impatient, are we?" He grinned and nipped his teeth along her collarbone.

Moaning this time in a complaining way, she squirmed. "Now you decide to go slow."

"Oh, yeah. I've waited twenty years for this moment. Not gonna rush it now." He frowned as his chin brushed against the swell of her breasts and she shivered.

"Your beard's itchy," she said and just as he was about to curse the hair growth, she purred like a completely satisfied feline. "I like it."

Burying his face between the crevice of those delicious breasts, he inhaled deeply of her scent, letting it penetrate

every portion of his body and soul. He reached around her and unhooked the bra, moaning at the site of her freed breasts. Big, dark nipples were puckered and waiting for him to lick. The heaviness of each mound sat welcomingly in his palms as he kneaded and kissed them. His dick was harder than he'd ever known it to get before and he felt like combustion was soon on its way.

“Dom, please.”

Yes, if ever there were two words he longed to hear, those were it. At least at this moment. “Ask me again,” he whispered, still holding her breasts but taking his kisses down her torso.

Her reply came instantly. “Please.”

He kissed around her navel, over the slight swell of her stomach and down until his teeth locked on the band of her bikini panties. With a quick tug, he had them over her hips, baring her sweet mound to him. It took herculean effort to stay focused on the task at hand and pull the panties down her legs. When they were off, he didn't waste a second but propped her legs up on his shoulders and pressed his face into her pussy.

She arched up off the mountain of cloths. “Damn, damn. Yes, Dom, yes!”

Just a few seconds of feeling her plump folds against his cheeks and then his lips. He didn't move but stayed perfectly still, trying to commit everything about this moment to memory. The sweet scent of her arousal, the warmth of her most intimate part up close and personal with him, the sound of her voice, the plushness of her thighs on either side of his face. He was certain he'd been treading water to keep his head above the surface where Jorie was concerned, now he was most definitely drowning.

With a hungry groan he parted her folds with his tongue, sliding along the warm slit, tasting her desire. Her thighs gave a slight tremble and he continued, spearing his tongue inside her, twirling it around until her body quaked beneath him and his name was a litany on her lips. Telling himself she tasted good seemed trivial and cliché, so he settled on she tasted like she was meant just for him. His hands squeezed her thighs while he used only his tongue and lips to bring one deep moan after another from her.

“Killing me, Dom. You’re killing me,” she whispered. “Just like in my dreams.”

Shit. Jorie had dreamed of him. Sexy, wet dreams like the ones he had of her. His dick pressed painfully against the zipper of his pants and he continued to suck her juicy lips. She thrust into his mouth, twirling her hips until they were creating a passionate rhythm together. When she shattered, her thighs quaking around him, essence pouring onto his tongue, Dom cursed under his breath.

He cursed because this was perfect. Because he couldn’t have dreamed of anything as sweet and delicious, because he felt like a part of him was now complete.

Pulling away from her before his mind could drift anymore into the particulars, he yanked his shirt up and over his head, then he went for the belt and button on his jeans. When they were undone, he reared back and undid the ties on his boots, removed them and then stood to push his pants and boxers down and off. Digging into the pocket of his jeans, he retrieved his wallet before tossing his clothes to the side. He found a condom, tore open the pack and rolled the latex over his rigid length. All while watching her watch him.

“I remembered you, but now you’re different,” she said, her tongue stroking along her bottom lip. “More muscles, more strength, more...everything.”

As strokes to his ego went, her words were like a crowned jewel, and he tried not to appear smug when he eased between her legs again. “Slow,” he said. “Careful, easy, that’s my speed for today.”

She reached her arms up to him. “Cause you want me to beg.”

Dom shook his head as he touched the tip of his dick to her entrance. “Nah, baby. I want you to experience every moment of this lovin’ as if it’s in stereo and high definition.” He pushed an inch inside her, and she sucked in a breath. “I want you to remember every touch, taste and thrust.” Another inch was sucked into her waiting heat. “Keep your eyes on me so you’ll never forget who made you feel the way you do right now.” He pressed in deeper.

“Dom,” she whispered, her eyes fluttering closed.

“No. Open your eyes. You don’t want to miss this, Jorie.” When her eyes were wide open once more, he pushed all the way inside her, sinking deep, gritting his teeth at the sweet suction of heat surrounding him. “You don’t want to miss any part of it.”

“No.” She repeated the one word, her head moving from side to side. “I don’t want to miss you. Not again.”

“Not this time,” he said and began pumping slowly in and out of her. “Not this time, baby.”

Going up on his knees, he held her legs, spreading them into a wide V while he thrust deep and pulled out easy. Thrust deep. Pulled out easy.

She tucked her bottom lip between her teeth; her head thrashed against the cloth, titties bouncing with their movement.

“Missed you so damn much,” he murmured. “So damn much.”

“Me too,” she sighed and lifted her hands to cup her breasts. “I missed you too.”

Slow was going to kill him. He knew that with each thrust that pulled just a little more life out of him. Need pounded in every muscle of his body as memories, flashbacks, wishes and regrets bounced around in his mind. “I’m not goin’ nowhere this time, Jorie. Not again.”

“No,” she whispered, squeezed her tits and moaned. “Not again.”

Dying. He was definitely dying at the sexy sight of her fondling her breasts, the sound of her lust-filled voice, the feel of her juicy, tight pussy. His pumps came faster; he couldn’t help it and no longer had coherent thought to stop. Harder and faster until his breathing was labored and her screams were louder.

Seconds later, she arched up off the cloths again to stare wildly at him. “Dom! Yes. Yes.”

“Yes!” he echoed. “Yes, baby, you can come now.” As if his words alone were going to make it so. Well, just so happened they did, and her body stiffened as pleasure coursed through her.

She closed her eyes, moaning, her hands clenching the cloth beneath her, and he continued to pump into her. Moving at a fevered pitch now, he followed the urgings of his body on its quest for release. He breathed like he was climbing a

mountain with the bitter cold stealing every breath. Higher and higher, in and out, faster and harder until he fell. It was like moving in slow motion, pleasure and completion wrestling for dominance in his mind as his body emptied into the condom, his hands gripping her legs tight.

“Jorie.” Her name came in a choked cry. “My love.”

CHAPTER 7



“So you’re not coming home with me?”

Jorie stepped out of the only completed bathroom in the house to see Dom standing back against the wall, arms folded over his chest. This was the third time he’d asked her that question in as many hours.

“No. I’m going to my apartment, where I plan to take a long, hot bath, have some Fran’s BBQ delivered and watch romcoms for the duration of the evening.” That had been her original plan for the first day of her relaxation weekend, but that dream this morning had derailed her. If she’d only known how far the derailment would actually be.

“We can order BBQ at my place. Plus, I’d like to get your thoughts on redoing some of the rooms. You know that house better than any designer in town,” he said, still making his case.

He was right about that. She’d been inside Ms. Martha’s house almost as much as she’d been in her own. From the time she was thirteen and Dom had pushed her off the swing at the playground.

She grinned and continued to dry her hands on the paper towels she’d grabbed from the roll in Dom’s painter supply bag. “I’ll never forget the day you carried me into the living

room, my knee gushing blood, tears and snot smearing my face. Ms. Martha hopped up out of her recliner and immediately went to work.” The memory was as fresh as if it’d just happened yesterday.

“My heart was in my drawers,” he added, shaking his head while he joined in smiling. “You were screaming like you were dying, there was blood everywhere and I thought they’d have to cut your leg off.”

“Is that why you carried me to your house instead of mine, so you could hide my body?” She’d lived two blocks away from Dom, the big playground the midway point.

“Nah, I took you home ‘cause my granny could fix anything. I’d watched her take down ceiling fans and install new ones just as easily as she’d jimmy-rig that old washing machine to stop it from shaking and then spitting water all over the basement floor. If anybody could save your leg, it was her.”

“And she did,” Jorie recalled. “After pouring that fire-ass peroxide all over it and wrapping it up so I looked like I’d been hurt on a battlefield.”

They both laughed.

“Then she called your mother and asked if she could feed you before bringing you home,” Dom continued.

Jorie inhaled deeply, still recalling the scents of Ms. Martha’s house every time she’d walked in. On that first day, it’d smelled like some flavorful meat and caramel. “Yaaassss. Meatloaf, mashed potatoes and green beans. Grape Kool-Aid and white cake with caramel drizzle.” Her stomach growled at the memory. “I still remember all the meals I had in that house.”

“Me too.” He’d dropped his arms, pressing his hands into the front pockets of his jeans as a look of nostalgia covered his face. “I came back for her too. Losing her that summer before my senior year was hard as hell. It sent me into a spiral I couldn’t find my way out of.”

“I know,” she replied, sobering after the blast of fun memories. “You seemed so lost. I didn’t know what to do for you except to sit there on the porch holding your hand.”

“That was enough,” he told her. “It was actually everything.”

Jorie shook her head. “No. It couldn’t have been, because a year later you were gone.” He sighed and opened his mouth to speak, but Jorie held up a hand to stop him. “I can’t say I understand why you left, Dom, because I don’t. Just because your father and grandfather weren’t what you needed them to be in your life didn’t mean you weren’t able to have a family of your own.”

“But I thought that’s what it meant. I was afraid I couldn’t be better and without Granny there to keep drilling into my head that I could, I just didn’t know where to turn. All I knew was I never wanted to hurt you.”

“That’s what they all say.” She couldn’t help the quick retort, because it brought back so many other arguments that hinged on that same bullshit line.

“What’d he do to you?” Dom asked. “Because as pissed as I know you were at me for leaving, I also know you’re too strong-willed and tenacious to have let me being out of your life stop you for pushing toward your dream of having a family.”

He was right. She'd cried every night for six months straight after Dom had left. By that time she'd been partially into her senior year of high school, she'd pulled herself together enough to keep her grades on track and participate in activities so her college applications weren't affected. Then she'd graduated and moved to campus in D.C. She'd met Garland her sophomore year.

"He promised me the world," she said quietly. "He was a senior and was headed to law school. He had his sights on corporate law and by the time I graduated, he already had a job at one of the top firms in D.C. We had a big, lavish wedding so the partners at his firm would see he didn't do anything halfway." She managed a smile because at that point in her life, she'd thought her fairy tale was finally coming true. "Things got crazy real fast," she continued with a shrug. "I never thought I'd be in an abusive relationship."

Dom was stepping toward her instantly. "He hit you?" His brow furrowed, those thick eyebrows dipping inward until he looked like the proverbial mad face.

"No. No, he never put a hand on me," she insisted. "Are you kidding? Regina Tomlin's my mother, if you don't recall. After years of watching her fight family members who dared to jump in her face and lecturing me and Dani on always defending ourselves, there's no way I could let a guy hit me. Best-case scenario, we'd be moving all the furniture in that expensive as hell condo seconds after he dared to touch me."

Dom only slightly relaxed.

"But Mama never taught me how to handle verbal abuse. Probably because she did her fair share of that while I was growing up." A mixture of sadness, regret and a pinch of pity filled her mind. "Look, I've gotten over all this. The marriage

was bad; Garland wanted a trophy wife—stay in shape, wear all the expensive clothes he brought, keep a fabulous house and smile whenever we were out together. That’s it. I couldn’t work and I definitely couldn’t have any children because we couldn’t be a power couple with some whining brats hanging around.”

“Is that what he told you?”

She’d looked away to stare at a half-finished wall, but then turned back to him. “That’s what he demanded.”

“He was an ass.”

“Bingo! I stayed for ten years praying every night that things would get better. They didn’t, so I left and took more design classes to bolster my degree and then I opened my company.” Standing straighter, squaring her shoulders, she met Dom’s gaze and held it. “I’m focused on building JK Designs now, that’s all. Fairy tales, happy-ever-afters, that’s all done. I’m grown and I’m not settling anymore.”

“What about the big family you wanted? The big house and yard, cookouts, Sunday family dinners?”

“My mother’s still cooking on Sundays—that’s the only day she cooks.” Jorie laughed. “Dani hosts a huge Juneteenth cookout for her clients and the rest of our family in Mama’s backyard. I still go to Oak Street Baptist at least one Sunday out of the month and Easter, ‘cause you know my Mama don’t play about that.” She shrugged. “That’s good for now. I’m good.”

He nodded. “I’m glad to hear that.” He took another step closer until he could reach out and touch one of the stray curls that had fallen from her struggle ponytail during their many sexual escapades that afternoon. “And I’d like to buy you

some BBQ tonight while you tell me how I should redesign Granny's house. I can officially hire you if that's what it'll take."

Ms. Martha's corner Cape-Cod-style house was a designer's dream, and a part of her itched to get inside and bring it back to life for him, but as she'd just told him—she was grown now. She wasn't a seventeen-year-old with hearts in her eyes. In three years, she'd be forty, the window for her dream of children closing just a bit more, and she'd have to accept that. What she didn't have to do was try to re-live her teenage years with the first guy to ever break her heart.

"I'll pass," she told him and then lifted a hand to cup his cheek. "But today was great. It was everything I'd dreamed and then some." Dropping her hand, she turned to walk away from him.

"And that's it? You satisfied a physical urge and now we go back to business as usual?"

The hurt in his tone was unmistakable, but Jorie couldn't allow herself to care, not again.

"It was what it was, Dom. Let's not try to tie labels to it or make any promises about what it could've been." Then she sighed because the way he was looking at her was touching something in her she couldn't allow. "I'm not saying I'm adverse to it happening again. We're adults and we've both been in and out of relationships. I think we can handle sex without creating a whole reunion love story out of it."

He didn't look like he agreed with her, but he didn't comment again. Instead, he walked to the back room of the basement, picked up the rolling brush and continued to paint that spot she'd purposely left undone.

“OH, NO. WHAT HAPPENED?” Dani asked three seconds after Jorie stepped through the door of the shop at ten Sunday morning.

The entrance was actually the side basement door next to the driveway. Jorie had parked her car and walked inside, shielding her eyes from the bright, sunny day with dark sunglasses. She wore another jogging suit, this one black and baggy. Her hair was a total mess, as she hadn't even attempted to comb it when she'd rolled out of her bed this morning.

Yes, *her* bed. Not Dom's, even though he'd invited her to his house several times after they'd done what they'd done at the worksite yesterday afternoon. He'd also asked her to redesign his grandmother's house, which would no doubt lead to more dinners, or meetings, or whatever other date-like things. She and Dom were not dating.

“Nothing,” she replied to Dani and walked over to where her mother sat in Dani's chair. “Mornin', Mama.” After kissing Regina on the cheek, she made her way over to the row of black guest chairs against the far wall and dropped down into one of them.

“Lies,” Dani said.

Regina followed up with, “And she ain't nevah been good at lyin'.”

There was a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall in one corner. Dani loved watching *Girlfriends* while she worked. Jorie had never been able to get into the show but she recognized Joan's whining without having to glance up at the screen. Four chairs in front of salon stations sat empty while at the end of the room Dani stood at the managing stylist's

station with her most judgmental client sitting with legs crossed in the chair.

“The two of you are like twins, always thinking you know everything about everybody,” she said, her tone as weary as her body felt.

Dom’s invitations hadn’t come immediately after they’d both been pleased. They’d actually come hours later after they’d continued to satisfy each other all around that room in the basement, even on the steps. She stalled the groan that threatened to escape at the memory. Never, in the five years she’d been working in the design industry, had she ever done anything like that at a worksite. Her professional mind said it was way out of line, while the woman who hadn’t known she’d needed to come so hard and so frequently as she had yesterday cheered her on for a part two.

“We’re intuitive,” Regina replied. “At least I am. Dani’s more on the nosy side. Anyway, what’s going on with you?”

“Nothing,” Jorie repeated and eased the glasses off her face just in case they were taking that as a sign that she wasn’t her normal self.

“You seem tired,” Regina said.

“You’re walking slow as hell like you’re sore. I know you ain’t been to the gym,” Dani added.

Jorie leaned back in the chair, letting her head rest against the wall. “No. I haven’t been to the gym. I was painting the *Fantasy Flip* house yesterday.”

“Oh.”

At that one word, Jorie turned to look at her sister. “What do you mean, ‘oh?’”

“Nothing,” Dani said, shaking her head. She parted Regina’s hair and used the rat tail comb to slap more perm into their mother’s hair. Regina wasn’t down with the natural hair crusade—she liked her hair straight, glossy and styled in a slick wrap.

“Is that the project you’re doing with Dominic? Annie at the church said she saw the TV crew pulling up at the house. You know she lives right across the street,” her mother said.

Regina loved gossip. She’d fight anyone, anytime, any place if she found out they were talking about her behind her back, but she had a no-holds-barred policy on talking about everybody else and their momma.

“Yes, that’s the project. We’ve got four more weeks to get everything wrapped up, and we’re a little behind.” That wasn’t a total lie. They were moving right along schedule, even if the appliances were going to be delayed by a day or two and one of Dom’s crew had been out a couple of days last week for oral surgery. She’d been careful to build in contingency time to the schedule. Safiya had been happy to hear about the small delays, as they’d add more drama to the show.

“Annie said Dominic’s looking good. You know she’s always sitting at her front window. With the weather being nice, you’d think she’d come out onto the porch, but then people would see her watching them. But it ain’t like the whole town don’t already know she’s nosy as hell.” Regina shook her head.

“So were you painting by yourself?” Dani asked. “Wait, isn’t that usually Macon’s job?” Her sister only knew that because she’d dated Macon for a couple of months last year.

“Yes. He wasn’t there so Dom thought he could get ahead of the game. I showed up to finalize my choices for the kitchen

finishes and decided to help him.”

“So only you and Dom were there. Painting.”

At Dani’s words, Jorie looked at her again. Her sister and mother were staring at her expectantly. She could continue to tell them nothing happened, even though they’d already seen through her pitiful lies, or she could get this over with and move on to the next topic of discussion. “Yes. Only Dom and I were there. And yes, we had sex.” There. Now they knew.

The pair stared at her from across the room until finally after a few annoyingly quiet moments, Regina shook her head. “Still got the hots for that big-head boy. I swear you act like I ain’t teach you nothing. You don’t go backward, Jorie. Ain’t nothing in your past worth taking that trip for, not even good dick.”

Dom’s dick hadn’t just been good. It had been phenomenal, and Jorie was already thinking about when she’d have it again.

“I thought I told you to play it cool with him,” Dani said.

Jorie shrugged. “I’m not in the mood to play at all. I wanted him, he wanted me, end of story.”

Regina wiggled in the chair. “This shit’s startin’ to burn, Dani.”

Dani clucked her teeth and returned her attention to Regina’s hair. That didn’t mean she’d forgotten about Jorie’s announcement. Glancing over at Jorie again with a decisive nod, she said, “If you think sex with Dom one time is the end, stick around and let me sell you some land on Pluto.”

Jorie didn’t reply. She wasn’t in the mood for games, nor was she in the mood for explaining her actions to anybody. What she and Dom did was their business. How long they

decided to do it was also nobody else's concern. And if her heart got broken again...well, she wasn't planning to let that happen.

LATE TUESDAY AFTERNOON, hours after Safiya and her crew had finished taping for the day, Jorie stood on a ladder measuring the newly installed windows in the kitchen. It was a sunny May day, and the light filtering into the space was exactly what she'd had in mind when deciding on the navy-blue cabinets and white quartz countertops. As Dom had mentioned on their first day of this project, taking the dining room wall down did require a beam to support the weight and structure of the house. While she'd considered what type and color beam she wanted, Jorie had decided that if they were tearing down one wall, they could easily tear down another. So the first floor of the house became one long space with horizontal oak-colored beams, the load-bearing one hanging seven inches lower from the ceiling than the other six matching beams that formed a more decorative aspect to the room. Recessed lights would be installed as soon as the electrician was finished with the complete overhaul—an added expense she'd just learned about yesterday and was still trying to process. Pendant lights would be added above the island in the kitchen, but right now the golden rays from the sun were enough to warm Jorie's spirits and have her humming along to Queen Latifah's "Ladies First." Dom's crew had a thing for old-school hip hop and R&B, and Jorie wasn't mad at them at all for it.

She'd just snapped her tape measure in place and typed the numbers into her tablet that rested on the ledge of the ladder when she heard a commotion coming from the front of the

house. A woman was yelling, and Reb, one of Dom's crew, had raised his voice in return. Deciding she might be needed as referee, she didn't bother turning to see what was going on but instead, eased her way steadily down the ladder and then walked through the now-cluttered workspace until she was just inches away from the scene in question.

There was a pang in her chest the moment she saw the young boy who looked like Dom's clone.

"I said I want to speak to Dominic Hughes, not you!" Ra-Ra Kinley yelled, shaking her head so her sleek, shoulder-length hair moved with the rhythm.

"Dom's not here," Jorie said, coming to stand beside Reb. He gave her a thank-you-because-I-was-'bout-to-choke-her look, and Jorie only nodded in response. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Jorie had no idea what she could possibly do to help Ra-Ra and, really, if this woman was the last person on earth and needed a helping hand, Jorie wasn't sure she would've given it to her. Captain of the cheer squad, class president, chairperson of the students' union and every-day bitch, Ra-Ra had never been Jorie's friend, and Jorie had never given a damn.

The look Ra-Ra was giving her now—the one that went from the top of Jorie's head, down to the work boots she wore and then back up again—was exactly the way she'd looked at Jorie when they'd been in school. Like she was somehow better than Jorie, even though she'd lived in the same neighborhood and her mother had worked at the same box factory Regina had. "Jorie Tomlin. Why am I not surprised to see you here? Still running around behind Dom."

"My name's Jorie Kemp now, and it's equally as nice to see you, Ra-Ra."

“Rasheda.”

Jorie’s initial reply was a shrug. “Again, Dom’s not here. Should I give him a message?”

Rasheda moved to stand behind her son. She put her hands on his shoulders and smirked at Jorie over his head. “Tell him that since he plans to lie to the judge about spending time with his son, I’m calling his bluff.” She edged the boy forward. “I’ll pick him up tomorrow after school.”

“But Dom’s not here,” Jorie said for what felt like the billionth time.

“Oh, if you’re here, I’m betting he’ll be along soon. You two always did stick together like Frick and Frack.” She leaned forward and kissed her son on his cheek. “Call him, ‘cause I know you have his number. Tell him to come get his son, since he wants to all of a sudden act like a daddy.”

Jorie didn’t bother to respond and, seconds later, Rasheda walked out anyway, leaving her to stare down at Dom’s twin.

“Hi,” she said when his wide brown eyes stared up at her.

“Hey,” he replied in the same clipped tone as his father.

CHAPTER 8



Dom hurriedly drove from the project he was quoting in Salisbury to Newton. It was a wonder he hadn't been pulled over for speeding or the three red lights he'd recklessly run. Cursing and slamming his palms on the steering wheel were doing nothing to ebb the irritation. Recalling his phone conversation with Rasheda a half an hour ago didn't make it better.

"What the hell are you doing, leaving Aiden at a jobsite when I'm not there?" he'd asked the moment she'd answered.

"Oh, that was fast. I see your little girlfriend did what I told her to do and called you."

"She's not my girlfriend, and you had no business telling her or anybody else at my worksite what to do. If you needed me to get Aiden today, all you had to do was call and ask me to get him."

"Ask you? I have to ask you to watch your son. What kind of bullshit is that?"

He'd almost run off the road at her tone and the way she was now apparently calling Aiden *his* son. "What kind of games are you playing?" he'd shot back. "When I ask to get him, you come up with a bunch of excuses, then you change the entire schedule around to suit you. Now, you're doing

these impromptu drop-offs and to people who don't even know Aiden.”

“Well, whose fault is it you didn't tell your girlfriend about your son?” She'd chuckled. “Don't you think you should've done that nine years ago? Anyway, I don't want to hear all this complaining. First you file for an emergency custody and visitation hearing and start showing up at my doorstep, and now you're trying to school me on when I can and can't let you have your son. Boy, please with this bullshit!”

She'd hung up on him then, and Dom had been seething ever since. It was taking way too long for him to get back to Newton. Of course, he'd already known it was a two-hour drive to Salisbury, which was why he'd left the worksite as soon as the taping ended. Now, it was almost eight o'clock, and he was just turning the corner that would put him on Tilghman Street.

When he pulled up in front of the house, he saw the crew had gone home. Only the dumpster that had been sitting on the front lawn for the past couple of weeks was out front, and the door was closed as opposed to open to the daily traffic of crew members and vendors. He parked his truck behind Jorie's sedan and jogged up the walkway to let himself in. The first thing that hit him was the quiet.

“Hello?” he called out as he stepped inside and closed the front door behind him. “Jorie?”

Nothing. Alarmed for the second time today, Dom walked further into the house until he came to the open back door.

The plan was to add a deck and design a comfortable outdoor seating area to the house, but as they'd been focusing on the inside of the house first, they'd just gotten to mapping out the space they'd need. Orange lines had been sprayed over

the existing grassy surface, indicating where each item would be placed. That was where he found Jorie and Aiden, walking from one part of the yard to the other, talking.

“I’m thinking two chairs here in front of an open fire pit,” she said.

“What about movies?” Aiden asked.

“What about them?”

“I like watching movies. At my buddy Tarique’s house, we had movie night out in his backyard. Then his mother let us sleep out there all night in this big ‘ole tent. It was so hype.”

Jorie held her tablet tucked between her arm and her chest so she could see the screen and type on it with her right hand. She nodded, looking from Aiden to the space they were considering. It was a big space and could easily accommodate a screen and set-up for a projector. “You know, that’s a good idea. We could still do the seating, probably four chairs if we stretch it out to here.” She walked a couple of feet before stopping. “And then still have the fire pit for the cool fall movie nights. Maybe a bench and side tables over there.” On the move again, she walked in the direction of the mounds of dirt where they’d already had two trees removed. “The projector could go here. I can get the stagers to bring one in so buyers will see the possibilities for the space. A privacy fence, probably eight feet all around.”

“Yeah, don’t want the neighbors catching an attitude when you watch action flicks in stereo.”

“Right,” she said with a nod toward Aiden. “You know, you’re pretty good at designing. You’ve got a great eye for details.”

Dom watched as his son shrugged. “Just thinking out loud.”

Jorie smiled at him. “Well, you keep on thinking, Aiden Hughes, because you’ve got talent.”

“You really think so? I mean, my mom keeps me in sports and everybody’s always talkin’ ‘bout me playing hoops because of my height. But I really like drawing stuff.”

Taking a step closer to Aiden now, Jorie hugged the tablet to her chest and cocked her head. “What types of things do you draw?”

Another shrug from his son as he talked to Jorie in a way he’d never talked to Dom before. “I just be messin’ around with like buildings and stuff. I saw this documentary once about the tallest building in Dubai and it had my head all jacked up. I was like, I can draw something like that. So I did. I’ve got a lot of pictures on my sketchpad. I can show them to you sometime.” Aiden paused. “If you wanna see them.”

“I’d love to see them.”

“So would I,” Dom said, coming down the couple of steps until he was on the yard’s grassy surface.

Jorie and Aiden turned to look at him; only one of them seemed pleased that he was there.

“Hey, Aiden. What’s up, buddy?” Dom spoke to his son first, going to him and pulling him in for a quick hug.

Aiden didn’t resist the embrace, but he didn’t participate in it either. “Hey” was his only response.

“Thanks,” Dom said, looking over at Jorie.

“It was no problem. Aiden’s been helping me with a few things I needed to get done. He’s good to have around, I told

him I might hire him for site assistance during the summer,” Jorie said.

“That’d be cool, right?” Aiden looked up to Dom and asked. “I could make my own money instead of depending on an allowance from Mom to buy me this program I want.”

“Or you could’ve just asked me to get the program for you.” Dom was pissed off that his son needed something and Rasheda hadn’t purchased it or told Dom about it so he could make sure Aiden had it. “Is it something you need for school?”

Aiden shook his head. “Nah. It’s this software for drawing. So I wanted to get it myself.”

“That’s very mature of you, Aiden. And for someone who likes to draw, having the most innovative software is important,” Jorie told him.

Dom picked up on her tone and watched as Aiden’s stance had gone from defensive to appreciative. “She’s right,” Dom said. “And I’d like to hear all about this software and what you’ll be doing with it. Why don’t we go get dinner and talk about it?”

“Can Ms. Jorie come?” Aiden asked, his entire mood perking up.

Jorie looked at Dom, and Dom stared at her in question. He hadn’t asked her to dinner since Saturday, when he’d issued multiple invitations to feed her, all of which she’d declined. After she’d told him in no uncertain terms that she was down for sex with him but nothing else, he’d decided to take the hint. Not for long, though. He still wanted Jorie and not just in a physical way, but he was willing to give her space while they worked through this project and he focused on the custody hearing with Rasheda. But now, he felt like the

dynamic had shifted. It was obvious his son liked Jorie. Aiden had trusted her enough to tell her about one of his hobbies. Dom took that as a sign.

“She sure can. In fact, I’ll let you and Jorie pick the restaurant,” he said.

“She wants tacos,” Aiden added confidentially. “About an hour ago she said she was hungry and that it was Taco Tuesday at some place. So we can go there, right, Ms. Jorie?”

“Um.” Jorie hesitated, looking from Aiden to Dom and then back to Aiden. “Uh, yeah, sure. We can go to Sy’s Southwestern Grill for Taco Tuesday.”

“Cool! I don’t really eat tacos much, but maybe I’ll try what you’re having,” Aiden told Jorie.

“Sounds like a plan, but I like mine spicy, so get ready to have your tastebuds on overload,” she told him.

Dom listened to the two of them chat all the way through the house and had to hurry Aiden into his truck so Jorie could go to her car. He walked her around to the driver’s side while Aiden got settled. “Hey, listen, I really appreciate what you did today. Staying with him and all that. I don’t know what Rasheda was thinking.”

Jorie waved a hand and shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. I got the impression she was just trying to push your buttons and I wasn’t going to play into her game in front of Aiden, so I let it go.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what she’s trying to do. Can’t wait until we get to court.” When he was about to get into other things Rasheda had done, Dom decided against it. “So, I’ll buy you a nice taco dinner tonight as a thank you and I’ll get to

enjoy how comfortable you seemed with my son in the process.”

When her brow furrowed and the light that had been in her eyes when she'd been talking to Aiden was replaced by a sad shadowed look, Dom knew he'd messed up. She turned away from him, then opened her car door and eased inside, saying only, “Okay, see you there,” before closing the door on him.

JORIE ENDED up in Ms. Martha's house, anyway. After tacos and three rounds at the pinball machine in the back of Sy's, where Dom and Aiden both beat her in six games, she walked into the foyer of what had once been her second home. This house had great bones. As she stood, letting Dom and Aiden move further inside, she stared straight ahead to the curved staircase, thick maple oak banister and chunky newel posts. Dark green carpet lined the stairs that had once been glossed wood. The walls were covered in an alarming cream wallpaper with huge magnolias and thick green leaves.

“See what I was talking about?” Dom said, interrupting her thoughts. “It gets worse throughout. I don't know who lived here for the last twenty years, but they did a total hack job on the tasteful traditional style Granny had.”

Jorie took a step closer, going to the curved archway now marred by thick crown molding that took away from the original tone of the house with its harsh attempt at the contemporary. “It's definitely different. And not in a good way.”

“Exactly,” he said with a chuckle.

“I’m tired,” Aiden said from behind Dom. He’d dropped his bookbag by the table against the wall.

There was a bowl on that table, and she’d heard Dom drop his keys into it.

“Yeah, it’s late. And it’s a school night. Sorry ‘bout that, buddy.” Dom ran his hand over Aiden’s cornrows and the boy looked up at his father, not with adoration or even love, but definitely acceptance.

Jorie’s heart ached for them. During dinner it’d been so apparent how hard Dom was trying to be a good father to Aiden and how distrustful Aiden was of Dom’s attempts. On numerous occasions she’d wondered if that was more Rasheda’s doing than anything Dom had or hadn’t done for his son.

“Say goodnight to Ms. Jorie,” Dom told him.

“Goodnight, Ms. Jorie,” Aiden parroted him. “Hey, would you like to see my room?”

The excitement in Aiden’s tone seemed as if he’d caught his second wind, and Jorie couldn’t help but smile. “Sure.”

Up the stairs they went, and she continued to look around as if she were in this house for the first time. That magnolia wallpaper stretched all the way up to the hallway. The crown molding that had been installed up here was stained a dark cherry wood color, and the green carpet continued. Even after Dom switched on the light to guide their steps, the space was still dark and narrow.

“It’s right down here.” Aiden grabbed Jorie’s hand and led her to the far end of the hall. “Dad said I could pick whichever room I wanted, even that big one in the back. But I don’t like that one because I can’t see the buildings. Here’s my room.”

Aiden pushed open the door, and she stepped in behind him. He hit the switch on the wall, and light flooded the space. The walls were a warm, off-white hue. The bed, dresser and desk tucked under the front window were a deep indigo color.

“See, I can sit here and work and look straight out to see the downtown skylight.”

He was right; in the distance he could see downtown Baltimore’s skyline with golden lights from the buildings twinkling against the evening sky.

“That’s an amazing view, Aiden,” Dom said. “I had this room when I was a kid but I never even noticed it.”

Aiden turned around to glance at his father. “This used to be your room?”

“Sure did,” Dom replied. “And my Granny used to have the room I’m sleeping in now. The room on the other side of the hall bathroom was Granny’s sewing room, and the other room was where I used to keep all my sports gear and stuff that couldn’t fit in here.”

“My stuff fits in here just fine,” Aiden said, looking around.

“For now,” Dom told him. “But I’ll bet in the years to come, you’ll start adding more stuff.”

“Yeah, like you can frame some of your pictures and hang them on your walls over here.” Jorie went to the wall near the closet and gestured to what she was talking about. “Automatic blinds would work better in these windows. They’re huge, and I’ve always loved that. And a chair over there, something comfortable and fun like a bean bag or a hanging hammock.”

“Oh, wow! I can have a hammock in my room? Is she being serious, Dad? Can I really have one?”

The way Aiden ran around her, just barely stopping in front of Dom, warmed every part of Jorie. It was a father-son moment like she'd imagined in her own family. Since her dad hadn't stuck around ten minutes after her mother had had her, Jorie had only ever dreamed about a two-parent household. And Garland had closed the door firmly on that dream. She'd thought she was over it, had accepted that she may not ever have a child of her own, even if/when she fell in love again and remarried. Every day was a reminder that time was ticking down on the clock of motherhood for her and she'd decided she would simply have to be fine with that.

Until tonight.

“Jorie's a designer, tops in her field. If she thinks a hanging hammock is a good idea in this room, I'm all for it.”

“Cool! So when can we get it?” Aiden asked.

“Just as soon as Jorie signs me up as her client, we can get started with redesigning the entire house. She can start in your room and then work her way around.”

Now two sets of warm brown eyes rested on her, and Jorie could do nothing but shake her head. “Oh man, you two are one formidable pair.”

The huge, satisfied grin on Dom's face was cocky as hell, while Aiden had a while to go to perfect his shy, but enthusiastic smile.

“I'll work up a complete proposal and have it to you by the end of the week,” she said, not feeling half as bad about going back on her word to not work on this house with Dom as she probably should've. “But right now, you should be getting to bed, young man. It's almost ten-thirty, and you've got school tomorrow.”

She sounded like a mother. Taking a quick breath, she let that sink in.

“Jorie’s right. It’s bedtime.”

“Alright, alright,” Aiden said. “Just one more question. Can I go with you to pick out the hammock?” He looked at Jorie and then back to Dom. “Or whoever goes to buy it, can I be there to say if I like it or not?”

“Of course you can,” Jorie replied, aching from that sound in his voice that said he felt he didn’t have any control over the decisions in his life.

“Definitely,” Dom added. “We’ll all go shopping if our schedules permit and if not, then you can certainly go with Jorie. It’s your room, buddy. Nothing goes in here unless you approve it.”

Aiden beamed up at his father and when Dom hugged him this time, Aiden wrapped his long arms around his father’s waist and held on.

“You’re a great father,” she told Dom a few minutes later when they’d walked downstairs into the living room.

He shrugged. “I just hope I’m not too little, too late.”

She shook her head, watching him stand a few feet away looking so much like the young Dom she’d known. It caused a clenching in her chest. “I don’t think it could ever be too late to be a part of your child’s life. I know I would’ve jumped at the opportunity at a relationship with my father if he’d come back.”

“Even though he’d left your mother right after you were born?”

Jorie pursed her lips and ran her fingers along the arm of a chocolate-brown leather couch. It was nice, but this room was big and needed a warmer look than this mixture of whatever style the previous owner left behind and what was obviously Dom's additions. "I just wanted to know who he was. A part of him is in me, and I have no idea what that means. That bothered me a lot more when I was younger, but seeing you and Aiden tonight, it occurred to me that I would've loved to see him again." It wasn't necessary to confide the other feelings seeing him with his son had evoked.

"That's kinda how I felt after my last birthday. I was like, man, I'm gonna be forty soon and I hadn't spent one full weekend with my only child." He sighed. "I didn't know his favorite sport or what subjects he was good at in school. Did he snore, or was he a light sleeper like Granny used to be? I'd never taken him to the barber shop or given him any guy advice. I was missing out."

She leaned against the arm of the couch now, watching him as his eyes lit up while he spoke about his son. That was the moment she realized he was telling the truth. He really had been afraid he wouldn't be a good father. "You don't have to be like your father and your grandfather, Dom."

"I know." He nodded. "I could choose and I did. I'm trying to right the wrong."

She admired that he was attempting what most absentee parents never gave a damn about trying. "You're doing a good job."

He closed the space between them then. Touching a finger lightly to her chin when he was close enough. "I wronged you too."

“I’m over it.” That was a lie, and then it wasn’t. How could she still be angry with him for doing what he’d thought was right, what he’d believed were his limitations in life? Sure, he could’ve talked to her first—he definitely should’ve talked to her instead of leaving her high and dry—but that had been twenty years ago. Jorie had made mistakes in that time that she couldn’t go back and change, so holding a grudge against Dom for something he couldn’t undo either just didn’t seem healthy or productive.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I’m so sorry for messing up with you. And I’d do anything, Jorie, anything you want to make things right between us again. Just tell me what you want me to do?”

Her heart hammered at his words, the comfort and simplistic perfection of tonight still weighing heavily in her mind. They’d had a family dinner and now they were home and he was standing so close, touching her, asking her for something...anything to make this all seem real. Maybe permanent?

Okay, he hadn’t said all that, but her mind whirled with possibilities. She was jumping the gun, taking things too fast. She should think about this more, try to make a viable plan, instead she whispered, “Kiss me.”

CHAPTER 9



*I*t'd been days since his mouth had been on hers, too many hours and an eternity of minutes. He held her face in his palms, tilting her chin up so their mouths could fuse. Lucky for her she was still leaning against the couch, or the hungry licks of heat soaring through her body would've sent her to her knees.

How could they still be this combustible after all this time? Wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her body closer to his was the most natural thing in the world for her to do, even though just a few weeks ago she hadn't entertained any thoughts of ever seeing him again.

His hands went to her hair, fingers scraping along her scalp in that way that never failed to make her moan. It was one of the most sensual touches she'd ever experienced, and Dom knew to do it each and every time.

He tore his mouth away from hers in time for her to suck in a breath. His teeth scraped along her jaw and down her neck. "I've been wanting to get my hands on you again for days now." His voice was a hoarse whisper, his mouth warm as he kissed along the line of her neck.

"I thought we'd decided not to do this again." Even as she spoke the words, she knew they were a mistake.

How were they going to not touch each other again? After what had happened on Saturday, she hadn't thought of anything else but feeling his hands on her once more. Although she hadn't initiated another tryst, she'd wanted it. The impatient way her hands moved up and down his back now was evidence of how much.

"I couldn't take it," he murmured and continued kissing down, until he was pushing the collar of her shirt aside to find the swell of cleavage beneath. "I need you, Jorie. Now."

Her mind was a blur of arousal, questions, warnings and yes, just like Dom, need. Did she really need him? She'd been there and done that with him before, and it had ended badly. Was she really trying to put herself in that position again?

Speaking of impatience, Dom pulled her shirt out of her jeans, pushing a hand under it to yank the cups of her bra down. The minute his fingers clamped down on her nipple, she gasped and arched in his arms.

"Dom." His name was a desperate gasp. Everything felt so good. His touch, his tongue that was climbing back up her neck until his mouth claimed hers once more.

She sucked his tongue in deep this time, anxiously grabbing at his shirt even though she knew she wasn't going to get it off that way. With his other hand, Dom lifted one of her legs, tucking it back behind his waist. Jorie thrust forward, rubbing against him, irritated it wasn't skin-to-skin.

"No." She broke the kiss and breathed in and out deeply. "We can't."

"What?" If she hadn't heard it in his tone, the mix of bewilderment and desire in his gaze spoke volumes. "What do

you mean we can't? Jorie, we're adults and we clearly want each other. I've apologized and—"

"No," she said again, this time bringing her hands up and around so she could cup his face. "I mean we can't right here, right now. Aiden's upstairs."

Her words showered down in cool droplets, and for a few muted seconds they both stood still. Then Dom grumbled. "Fuck that."

He grabbed the back of her thighs and lifted her, taking them across the room where he slammed her back against a wall. The wall that was part of a corner nook in the living room, tucked into a part of the space that wasn't visible from the stairs or the foyer.

"Fixed that," he said and then sucked her bottom lip into his mouth.

Jorie let the kiss proceed; she was in big trouble because Dom's kisses were addictive. But in moments she was pulling back again. "You can't be serious? You think moving to the other side of the room makes this safer?" She had to chuckle because all of a sudden she felt like they were sixteen again, sneaking to have sex on the couch in her mother's basement while Regina sat on the couch one floor above them.

Ms. Martha had gone grocery shopping every Saturday morning, so with Jorie's excuse that she was going to the library on the weekend instead of during the week when it was too crowded, she'd spent many Saturday mornings in Dom's bed. They'd carefully timed their interludes with the two-and-a-half-hour timeframe it took Ms. Martha to get to the market and back.

“Hell yeah.” He pulled her hand from around his neck and pressed it down between their bodies, where her fingers immediately wrapped around his growing erection. “I’m more than serious.”

Stroking her tongue over her lips, Jorie grinned and squeezed him lightly. “Yeah,” she said. “You sure are.”

“So all you have to do is keep quiet.” He released her legs so he could take a step back and unbutton his pants.

“Me?” she retorted as she did the same with the snap on her jeans. “You make way more noise than I do.”

He frowned, reached into his pocket to grab his wallet and then found a condom. “I don’t think so, ma’am. But it’s cool.” He ripped the packet open with his teeth and then winked at her. “I like when you scream my name.”

Jorie had kicked her shoes off and was just stepping one leg out of her jeans. If she heard Aiden on the steps, she could break away from Dom and hop into the dining room to get decent again. Dom would only have to pull up his pants and keep it moving. Damn, sex always seemed easier for guys. “There will be no screaming of anybody’s name tonight. In other words, you keep your mouth shut.”

He grinned after rolling the condom over his hard dick. “Yeah, whatever. If I keep my mouth shut, then you’ll miss out on this.” With one hand lightly at her neck, he eased her back against the wall, then used the other hand to lift her shirt up. His mouth settled over the nipple he’d exposed by pulling the cup of her bra down moments ago.

She sucked in a breath and bit down on her bottom lip to keep the scream of ecstasy shooting throughout her body like a piston at bay. This should be illegal, feeling this damn good

just because a guy's tongue licked over her nipple, because he sucked said nipple into his mouth and then used his teeth to scrape along the sensitive bud. There should be laws against anybody's mouth being this damn good.

He pulled away, making a loud suckling sound, and hiked one of her legs up to again wrap around his waist. The other nipple went into his mouth before she could take another breath, and she gyrated toward him. "You ready, huh?" he asked between licking one nipple and then giving the other that same attention.

"Don't play. We gotta hurry up."

"Nah, you gotta hurry up." He nuzzled her breasts then brought his lips up to hers for another greedy kiss. "You wanna hurry up and come, baby?"

Fuck, his voice was so deep and sexy she almost came just at the sound. "Dom," she whispered against his mouth. "Now."

"Now," he repeated and thrust his dick deep inside her.

Jorie couldn't help it, her head snapped back, mouth opened, poised to scream. Luckily Dom clapped his hand over her mouth and began pumping into her fiercely.

"Yeah, that's what you wanted," he murmured right up against her ear. "You wanted this dick inside you so you could scream with how good it feels."

So he planned to be a total bastard and taunt her because he knew she couldn't scream out in pleasure. Well, two could play that game. Wrapping her arms tight around his neck, she lifted her other leg until he had no choice but to tuck them both behind his back. One of his hands was flat on the wall but he kept the other one tight over her mouth. With both her legs securely around him, she could meet his thrusts better, circling

her hips, pulling back slightly and then slamming into him again and again.

“That’s it, that’s what I want. Give me all that good pussy, Jorie. All of it!”

She’d give him the stars from the sky if he asked at this moment. She just needed him to keep going, to keep dragging his dick right along that spot that made her tremble. Unable to speak, she moaned instead, long and she prayed not too loud. He was hittin’ every single pleasure spot and probably creating more. She moved her head until his hand eased from her mouth and then she kissed him this time, sucking his tongue deep into her mouth as if it were his dick. He pumped harder, faster, until stars exploded behind her eyes, her legs shook and her walls tightened around him.

He broke the kiss. “Right behind you, baby. Right. Fuckin’. Behind. You.” Each word was punctuated with a thrust. Each thrust emptying his release into the condom. And making her fall deeper and faster for this man she’d thought she’d never see again.

ON FRIDAY AFTERNOON, Dom walked out of the courthouse with a huge grin on his face. The high of being awarded temporary joint physical custody of Aiden was short-lived when Rasheda came up behind him.

“You still ain’t shit!” She was pointing at him as she spoke, or he should say yelled, because two passersby turned to look at them after her words.

“Don’t do this, Rasheda. Not out here in the open.”

“Why? You afraid somebody’s gonna run and tell your girl that I cussed you out again?”

“You’re not gonna cuss me out.” He walked away. Nothing good was going to come of this conversation and instead of standing in front of a very public place having a very personal argument, he decided to walk toward the parking lot, where he’d left his truck.

“Don’t walk away from me. I’m sick of you doing whatever you want, whenever you want, and nothing ever being done about it.”

“I don’t know what you want to be done about it. I didn’t see my son regularly for nine years—I admitted that in an open courtroom today. I’ve apologized to you and Aiden for the careless and immature way I’ve dealt with being a father. What else do you want from me?”

She hurried to cross in front of him, causing him to stop as she now faced him, one hand on her hip. “I want some respect, Dominic. Ever since we were together, you’ve been treating me like the gum you scrape off the bottom of your shoe and I’m sick of it.”

“So this is really about you? About how you’ve wanted me to treat you all along?”

“It’s about my son—you know, the one you raved about spending time with back there in the courtroom. I swear you make me sick with your phoniness.”

He gritted his teeth. “And you’re starting to really work my nerves with your melodrama.”

“Melodrama? Man, please!”

They were at the corner making an extremely public scene, but he didn’t see any way out of it now. If he attempted to

walk away, she was only going to block his path and because he'd been raised right, he wouldn't put his hands on her even if to just move her ass out of his way. "You're the one who requested this emergency hearing. We had a court date already scheduled two weeks from now, but nooooo, you had to tell your lawyer you were afraid for Aiden's welfare when he was with me." He shook his head. "And why did you tell him that? Because you couldn't stand the fact that Aiden told you we had dinner with Jorie and that she was going to take him shopping to re-decorate his room. You don't want that boy to want anybody but you and it's sickening, Rasheda. You need to grow up."

"Oh, that's cute coming from the guy who didn't even come see me when I told him I was carrying his baby." Of course she said that especially louder as a group of two women and a guy walked by them.

But Dom didn't give a damn. He didn't know them, and they didn't know him. Their opinions over what was being said wasn't his reality. Still, the scene was uncalled for. "No, I didn't come see you, but I started sending you monthly checks days after you told me about the pregnancy. I sent that money for the next seven months until you delivered and continued to send them while we waited for the results of the DNA test. So don't play the victim here, because you're far from it."

"You could've come back before he was born just to see that I was alright."

"And if you weren't alright, I'm sure you would've told me in the letters and emails you sent regularly, chronicling every awful moment of your pregnancy." He rubbed a hand down the back of his head. "Why don't you just say what you really mean? Just say you're pissed because I didn't come

back and continue a relationship with you. That's what you wanted in high school, and the tryst in Vegas gave you hope for a second chance."

Pain and embarrassment etched her perfectly made-up face, and Dom instantly felt like an ass. At no time—even when she was driving him crazy—had he ever wished any harm or ill-will to Rasheda. He certainly didn't mean to accuse her of making their son pay for the failed relationship between him and her, even though he'd always known that was her biggest gripe with him.

"Look—" He sighed.

She held up a hand to stop him "Don't." The one biting word escaped and she nailed him with a laser-like glare. "I don't want you, Dom. I'm not a high school teenager anymore and I'm certainly not pining over you or chasing you around town like I've heard Jorie's been doing lately. Using that show as an excuse to reel you in." She rolled her eyes. "My only concern is my child. The reason I'm so pissed with you is because you've been a disappointment since that night in Vegas. I should've known it wouldn't get any better, but I at least thought you'd be man enough to care for your child."

"I did care for him." He'd sent money faithfully and whatever extras she asked for, he'd done that too. Now, he knew the money hadn't been enough and he planned to make up for all the lost time, but just like with Jorie, he couldn't go back and recreate the past. "And I'll continue to care for him for the rest of his life."

She pursed her lips and stepped out of his way. "And to me, you still won't be shit. But you go 'head and enjoy your temporary win. We're still going back to court in a couple of

weeks, and I'm sure I'll have more evidence to prove you're unqualified to have custody of my child."

"Goodbye, Rasheda," he said because there didn't seem to be anything else to say. He'd taken only two steps before she spoke again.

"I'll be waiting for you to mess up, because you will. You don't know how to stick around. Your father didn't, and neither did Jorie's father from what I've heard. Maybe that's why the two of you work so well."

Dom didn't bother to respond. His head was pounding and he wanted to stop by the *Fantasy Flip* house to check on the progress. Unfortunately, this wasn't the last time he'd have to deal with Rasheda or hear the foolishness she routinely spat from her mouth. They were officially co-parenting now, and he planned to get this right. His father nor grandfather had gotten things right with him, but he was a better man than either of those Hughes men ever had been. And he vowed to raise Aiden to be the best of the Hughes men if it was the last thing he did.

CHAPTER 10



“Out!”

Jorie was getting way too used to hearing that word. She rolled her head and shook out her shoulders while walking away from where they’d been installing the slider doors in the dining room. It was the third time today they’d worked to get the right take; Safiya had something exact in mind that neither Jorie nor Dom had gotten the first couple of times around.

“That’s precisely what I wanted,” Safiya said when she came up behind Jorie.

There was a cooler for the crew on the other side of the room. Jorie walked over to it and bent down to snag a bottled water out of the ice. She unscrewed the top and said, “I’m glad you finally figured out what it was you were looking for because I had no clue.”

“I don’t know why. You and Dom are usually so natural with it on camera.”

Jorie took a gulp of water then stared at Safiya. “Good with what? Knocking down walls, picking drywall out of my hair or tripping over the ladder three times?” Dom had been the one with the ladder issues, and each time she thought about him frowning and cursing at the inanimate object, she grinned.

“It’s the easiness between you two, like you were born to do this type of work together.”

“That was definitely not the case,” she said with a shake of her head. “I mean, I don’t think either one of us thought this was what we’d be doing when we were younger.” She certainly hadn’t. Jorie’s first career goal had been to be a youth counselor. It wasn’t until after spending years decorating and redecorating the condo she and Garland had lived in that she’d found her niche. Her knowledge of the basic construction work had come over the years as she’d worked closely with project managers.

Safiya nodded. “Right, because you’ve known each other since you were kids. That makes this whole story that much more romantic. A second-chance love story steeped in a heated house-flipping contest. Viewers will be wondering what’s the best prize—a forever kind of love or the fifty thousand dollars prize money.”

Jorie hadn’t thought about the money portion of the prize that much. Not to say she couldn’t use it, because of course she could. Expanding her downtown studio was in her five-year plan. But the vendors and clients she knew she could accumulate once the show aired and her work was on display was much more lucrative in her estimation. With two big clients, she’d easily make fifty thousand dollars. “If you’re talking about the other team, yeah, sure I can see that since they’ve been married for fifteen years and have been working together for nine years. And they are a really nice-looking couple.” Jorie had stalked their website for the first week after finding out who her competition was. They were a Black couple, which she appreciated, and they also worked in neighborhoods like the one they’d grown up in as a way of

giving back to the community—again, she admired them. Still, she wanted to kick their butts and win this contest.

“I’m actually talking more about the chemistry I’ve seen since day one with you and Dom. Even before he told me the two of you had grown up together, I sensed something was there between you.” Safiya taped a finger to her chin. “A familiarity was present in the way he sometimes finished your sentences or the way you’d move in the space with him like some sort of dance. It’s been very...um, interesting to watch.”

Jorie took another drink from the water bottle. Something told her she should get out of this conversation now. “I’m glad it works well on camera. So, now that we’ve gotten all the windows and doors installed, the basement is fully painted, and the guys are putting the carpet down tonight after we leave. All we’ll have to do up here is have the lighting installed. Cabinets and countertops are coming in for the kitchen in the next few days. If everything stays on track, we’ll use the last week to get the place staged and then we’ll be done.”

The way Safiya was staring at her told Jorie the woman wasn’t about to let that change of subject stand. “You’re in love with him.”

“I’m not.” Her answer came too fast and sounded too adamant. She clapped her lips shut and tried not to show any other clues that Safiya’s words were pushing a very familiar button. “We’ve done that already, when we were young and probably too dumb to know better.” More lies. If there was nothing else in this world that Jorie knew without a doubt, it was that what she and Dom had shared during their teenage years was a love as true as any other. It was certainly truer than anything she’d ever felt for Garland.

Safiya only smiled. “It’s okay,” she told Jorie. “I already had this conversation with him too. You both seem so smart about everything that pertains to this house and then so oblivious to what’s going on between the two of you. It’s fascinating.”

Jorie wished she could feel as entertained as Safiya when the producer finally let her walk away in peace. She knew exactly what was going on between her and Dom—at least, she knew what she was doing. Were she and Dom having a good time together on a personal basis? Yes. She had no doubt about that. And did she enjoy spending time with Aiden almost as much as the time she spent with his father? Of course.

Aiden was a great kid, who at this moment was grabbing up all the boxes and plastic they’d discarded while installing the sliders and taking it out to the dumpster. Wednesday afternoon through Friday were Dom’s days to keep Aiden overnight. On the opposite week, Dom would pick Aiden up on Friday afternoon and take him back to Rasheda on Tuesday. Whenever Aiden was with Dom, he was at the worksite with his father. He’d become quite the little helper around there, and Jorie knew she’d miss him when she moved on to other projects.

Still, none of that meant she and Dom were in love again. Hell, they hadn’t even talked about their feelings in that regard. For now, sex was great, company was nice and life was good. End of story.

Except, two hours later, she couldn’t get Safiya’s words out of her head. Even after she’d left the house to pick up some things from the mall for her mother, she was still thinking of whether or not this casual sex she’d thought she

was having with Dom wasn't just a prelude to something deeper. And if that were truly the case, what in the world was she going to do about it?

DOM KNEW he shouldn't say anything. He should just shut up and let things continue to progress in the phenomenal way they had been for the last week and a half. There were only twelve more days of shooting for the show. At the end of those twelve days, Jorie would know if she'd won the contest or not. Of course, they'd be named winners together, as a team, but he knew that title meant more for her company's exposure. Dom had signed on to this job for other personal reasons and now that he'd gotten temporary custody of Aiden, he couldn't be happier. Well, he could and he was because Jorie was downstairs in his kitchen waiting for him.

She'd offered to cook dinner for him and Aiden tonight but since Dom knew he'd have to stay late at the house, he'd given her a key to get in. It was a little after six, and he and Aiden had just arrived home, both of them sweaty and dirty after helping to install the carpet and then cleaning up afterward. They'd both come right upstairs to take showers, but now Dom was finished and his mind was whirling with how domestic this entire scene felt.

Him coming home from work to a house that smelled deliciously of pepper steak and rice, which Jorie knew was one of his favorite meals. His son down the hall getting cleaned up to enjoy the same dinner. And downstairs was his...Jorie. What was she to him now? They'd been so busy working on the *Fantasy Flip* house, going over plans for his house and getting to know the adult version of themselves intimately, that

they hadn't stopped to discuss what their relationship was or wasn't. He was simply going with the flow, and so far that had taken him to a very comfortable and enjoyable place.

That probably meant now was not the time to rock the boat. Still, as he slipped into sweatpants, a T-shirt and house socks, he couldn't help thinking he'd like nothing more than to make this situation permanent. To lock in place all that he'd never thought he could have—a family of his own.

“Hey, Dad.” Aiden peeked his head into Dom's room. “You ready? Ms. Jorie said not to come down until we were clean, so I'm guessing she wants us both to come down so we can eat together.”

“Yeah.” He nodded, still marveling at the way Aiden had loosened up around him. In the week and a half since the court appearance, Dom was certain Aiden had actually enjoyed spending nights here with him.

“We'll all eat together.” The same way he had when Granny had been alive. Even though it'd been only the two of them, Granny had a set time for dinner every night except Saturdays, and Dom had been expected at that table with her unless there'd been a damn good reason that she'd known about ahead of time.

He glanced in the mirror, ran a hand over his beard and decided against brushing his low-cut hair. It was still damp from the shower, anyway.

“What, you tryin' to look cute for Ms. Jorie?” Aiden laughed and then chuckled. “It ain't goin' to work with those crazy-lookin' socks you're wearing.”

Dom glanced down at his black-and-red *Game of Thrones* socks. “Man, whatchu talkin' 'bout, these are Targaryan fire

and blood socks.” He lifted one foot, putting a hand on the dresser to brace himself so Aiden could see the words on the bottom.

His son continued to grin and shake his head. “Like I said, those crazy-lookin’ socks.”

Waving a hand at him, Dom set his leg down. “Whatever, man. You don’t know good stuff. You ever watched *Game of Thrones*?”

“Nah.” Aiden playfully swatted Dom’s hand away when he moved closer and tried to touch his head. “I’m more into shows like *The Walking Dead* and *Supernatural*.”

Dom frowned. “Really? Your mother lets you watch gruesome and weird stuff like that?”

Aiden arched a brow. “Should she let me watch *Game of Thrones* instead?”

Dom nodded. “Touché.”

They walked out of his room and started down the steps.

“But for real, are you and Ms. Jorie gonna get married? Is she gonna be my stepmother?”

Wow. Had his son been eavesdropping on his thoughts from just a few moments ago? How was he supposed to answer that question? How much did a parent tell a child about their personal relationships?

He figured the truth was best. “I don’t really know all that yet.” He shrugged. “I mean, right now we’re just getting to know each other again. Kinda like you and me.”

They were at the bottom of the steps now, and Aiden shook his head. “No. There’s a difference with you and Ms.

Jorie. I'm not that young that I can't see when a guy likes a girl."

Well, he told him. Dom grinned. "You're a pretty smart kid. I wonder where you get that from?"

"That depends." Aiden lifted his fists and began to dance around like he was play boxing with Dom.

"Oh yeah." Dom joined in, taking a swing and loving the way his son blocked it and took a swing himself. "Depends on what?"

"On whether or not you score big and get her to say yes."

In a sneak move, Dom danced around Aiden and came up to grab him in a loose chokehold. "Whatchu' know about scoring big with a girl? Huh? Huh?"

Aiden laughed, and Dom enjoyed the sound as much as he enjoyed his son twisting out of his grip and coming back with a surprise punch to his ribs. Damn, he loved this kid.

"Are you two gonna play around all night, or are we going to eat dinner?" Jorie asked from where she now stood in the doorway.

"Ut-oh." Aiden pointed to Dom. "You got us in trouble."

"Nah, not me. You're the one who wanted to be all chatty Kathy until I shut you up with my swift moves."

They joked and swiped at each other until they were at the dining room table. Jorie had set the table with a lace cloth, china plates and glasses that were cleaner than Dom recalled when he'd first unpacked them. There was a pitcher of iced water and one of lemonade in the center of the table. An already opened bottle of beer in front of one plate which he presumed was his. She brought the pepper steak out in a bowl

with steam rising from the top. On another trip she had the white rice and dinner rolls.

“There’s sweet potato pie for dessert. I didn’t bake it,” she added hurriedly. “I’m not a good baker. But my mother is, and she was happy to help out with our dinner tonight.”

Which meant she’d told her mother she was seeing him again. After Jorie had prayed over their meal, Dom couldn’t hide his smile at the hope that she was on the same page as he was. At any rate, the fact that she’d talked about him to her family meant something, and he planned to act on that sooner rather than later. Aiden’s quick devouring of his food and request to be excused so he’d have some time to play his game before bedtime opened the door for the conversation to begin.

“Thanks for this,” he said after finishing his second plate. “I haven’t had pepper steak that wasn’t in a box and slightly bland in so many years.”

She set her glass down after taking a drink. “I remember you always talked about it when your grandmother made it. And that one night when I came over, I remember asking her the name of each pepper she used in the dish. Mine doesn’t taste as good as hers, but I think it’s a passable imitation. Especially the gravy.”

Dom sat back in the chair and rubbed his stomach. “It was delicious, and I could definitely get used to it.”

She eyed him carefully then. “I don’t mind making it for you from time to time.”

“What about once a month?”

Chuckling, she shook her head. “Sure. Whatever. Like you’re gonna remember to ask me to come over and make this for you once a month.”

“What if I don’t have to ask you to come over? I mean, if you lived here, we could talk about what’s for dinner every morning. Then at night we’d come home and prepare the meals together, or when you’re making this, you can handle it and I’ll stay upstairs and play games with Aiden.”

He watched her closely as he talked, saw the way her eyes had widened and now had a guarded expression.

“What?” he asked. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

But before she could do that, his phone rang. He’d forgotten he’d slipped it into his pocket before his son had joked him about his socks.

“No phones at the dinner—” Jorie began, before the sound of her John Legend ringtone sounded from the kitchen where she’d left her phone.

Dom pulled his phone out of his pocket and looked at who was calling. “It’s Reb.” He swiped to answer the call, watching as Jorie got up and went into the other room to get her phone.

She’d obviously had the same concern he did, that it was no coincidence both their phones were ringing at the same time.

“Hey. What’s up?” Dom had just started listening to Reb’s words when Jorie came back into the dining room.

“The house is on fire, Dom. It’s on fire!”

CHAPTER 11



The joys of fatherhood meant in times of emergency he'd either have to find a babysitter or Aiden would be pulled from his video game and put into the backseat of the truck while Dom broke all the speeding records to get to the *Fantasy Flip* house. To his credit, there were no complaints from his son, probably because there'd been so much quick action after he and Jorie received those calls that Aiden knew just to go along with whatever Dom said.

Jorie hadn't spoken since coming into the dining room with the announcement that Dom had actually heard in double time as Reb had said the exact same thing over the phone. For Dom, however, it was the horror mixed with pain and dread that had swept over Jorie's face in those first seconds as she'd stood across the table from him. The slight trembling of her hands as he'd disconnected his call and had gone around to stand close to her. She'd also been wearing house socks just like he was, and he'd only told her to get her shoes and he'd get Aiden so they could go, but he knew she hadn't really been listening to him. Everything she'd done from that moment on had been automatic, not instructed, but there hadn't been time for Dom to stop and take care of her. The fire department was already on their way to the house. Now they needed to get there too.

When he turned the corner onto the street ten minutes later, he saw flashing red lights. Coming to a stop behind a fire truck and two other fire department vehicles, he turned back to look at Aiden. “Stay here,” he said sternly and watched his son nod in response.

Jorie had already jumped out of the truck and was running toward the house. Dom followed her, only to have a guy in a firefighter’s uniform stop them.

“What happened? I own this house,” Jorie told the guy. “My name’s Jorie Kemp. I have to see the damage.”

Dom touched a hand to her shoulder and she quieted, looking over at him with impatience.

The fireman nodded. “You can’t go in, ma’am. Just step back over there, and I’ll get my chief to come and speak to you.”

Jorie opened her mouth to speak, but Dom responded first. “Thanks. We’ll be right over here.” He guided them back about twelve feet, stopping by a tree. “Let them do their job. We’ll find out what happened and what the damage is as soon as they’re done.”

She ran a hand through her hair, leaving the curls to spike a little on top at the haphazard action. “I don’t know what could’ve happened. We just had all new electrical work done. The fireplace we installed in the living room is electric, and it wasn’t even hooked up yet.”

“I know.” Dom had been mentally ticking the same items off his list. “Reb said he thinks it started in the basement. He’s the one who called the fire department. He’d been ready to go home, had done a site check of the whole place before locking up, got to his car and realized he’d left his phone and had to go

back in. That's when he smelled smoke." Shaking his head, Dom continued to replay the conversation with Reb in his mind. "Aiden and I'd been here with Reb. We hadn't been gone twenty minutes and this happened. Shit!"

"In the basement." Jorie paced a short length to the tree and then back to where Dom stood. She circled and moved the same space again. "The main electrical box is in the basement."

"Closed," Dom said. "We were down there laying the carpet. Everything was cleaned up before we left. I did a spot check myself, and Reb said he did too before he left."

"I don't know what it could be," Jorie said on her next pass by him.

Dom grabbed her shoulders, holding her still. "Then we just have to wait until the firemen do their job. They'll come and tell us where the origin of the fire was and how they think it started."

She was shaking her head, staring up at him with eyes wide from worry. "That could take weeks to learn the real cause of the fire. And what about the damage? We're already right at our budget with all the extras we've had to accommodate. The contest is over in twelve days."

Her voice cracked on those last words. They were both responsible for this project, but Dom knew for Jorie there was much more to it than just an average flip and resale. He pulled her close, holding her tight, providing all the comfort he could at this moment. "Whatever the damage, we'll get it fixed. My crew and I'll work double time to get it all done before the deadline. This isn't over." He said the words while breathing in the sweet, candy-like scent of whatever product she used in her hair.

She held on to him, not speaking, heart pounding, but she held on and in that moment, Dom reaffirmed that coming back to Newton had been the best decision of his life.

AN HOUR-AND-SEVENTEEN MINUTES seemed like a lifetime as Jorie and Dom stood outside the house watching and waiting. Smoke still billowed up in constant streams, stretched toward the indigo sky, but it was no longer those thick, choking swirls of black. Instead, they'd turned thinner, the air around them full of the burning stench.

“You the owners?” A guy dressed in a black uniform that was different from the other firemen's approached them.

“Yes,” she replied, stepping in front of Dom to face the guy first.

“Chief Thompson, Engine Company 77.” He gave her a grim look, but she ignored it.

“Jorie Kemp. This is my project manager, Dominic Hughes.”

Chief Thompson nodded and shook Dom's hand.

“What happened? Was anybody hurt? How much damage is there? When can we go in?” The questions that had been rattling around in her mind this whole time came tumbling out, and she wasn't apologetic. She didn't want small talk or appeasements, she wanted to know what was going on.

“Nobody was found in the house,” he replied. “Fire actually started outside, right at the basement door, where there was a box of trash.”

“So somebody started the fire on purpose?” Dom asked as Jorie’s heart sank.

“How was it started? Accelerant?” she asked.

“We’re not totally sure on that yet. There were some power tools in that pile, along with cloths and what looked like pieces of carpet, plastic, other debris. We’ll have to give it a closer look in the morning, but for now the damage is basically to that back side of the house,” Chief Thompson said. “I’m gonna need names and contact information for all your crew and statements from everyone who was at the house today.”

Dom nodded. “No problem. I’ll get that all to you and I’ll coordinate times for my crew to speak with your reps.”

“Were you onsite any time today? Either of you?” The chief continued his questions.

“We were there all day taping for the show...um, the *Fantasy Flip* show,” she added when the chief raised his brows in question. “We started around eight in the morning, but I arrived here at six. Then we wrapped up at around two-thirty. I left close to three o’clock. Had to go to the mall.” The last words were spoken quietly as she recalled how content she’d felt leaving the worksite and getting into her car to run errands.

Her mother had a banquet at church on Sunday, and her white suit had been at the small family-owned cleaners located in the mall. The cleaners closed at six-thirty. Regina wasn’t going to get off work until seven tonight, so she’d asked Jorie to pick it up for her. That was fine with Jorie, since she needed to swing past her mother’s to pick up the pie Regina had made for her to take to tonight’s dinner— the meal she shopped for after she’d left the mall.

“And you?” The chief turned his attention to Dom.

“I was here a little earlier than she was in the morning, about five-thirty. The crew started filing in right after that. Stayed ‘til six. We finished up installing the carpet in the basement, then Aiden—that’s my son—and I left. Reb and I think Stewart were here, but they were packing up, so I knew they’d be leaving right after us,” Dom replied.

Chief Thompson nodded. “Rebel Francis?”

“Yeah, that’s Reb. He’s the one who called me about the fire.”

Jorie could tell Dom was getting a little agitated. Probably because he sensed the same thing she did, that the chief was circling around the fact that Reb could’ve been there alone and started the fire. Jorie wasn’t sure she believed that, not from the Reb she’d gotten to know in the past weeks.

“Reb’s worked for my company for seven years,” Dom continued. “I’ve personally been on half a dozen projects with him up and down the eastern region. He’s a good guy—safety always comes first.”

The chief nodded again. “Call came into the station at six thirty-two. Where were you when Mr. Francis called you?”

Dom pulled his phone out of his back pocket, bringing up the call log. “He called me at six thirty-eight. I live four blocks from here and came immediately.”

“And where were you?” The quick way in which the chief turned his attention back to her was also probably on purpose, but Jorie wasn’t rattled. She was raging at the possibility that someone had intentionally set this fire, and that was all that mattered at this moment. She’d even overlooked the chief’s

biting tone and the skeptical way in which he was staring at them.

“I went to the mall after leaving here, then to the grocery store and then to my mother’s house. After that, I went to my apartment, changed my clothes and then headed to Dom’s house, where I cooked dinner and was there when he and Aiden came in.”

“So you two are married and have a son?” It was a weird and presumptuous question, considering the circumstances, and before she could respond, the chief had more. “You own this house and you’re starring in some type of reality show.” He gave a wry chuckle. “I’m gonna have to verify all this, you know.”

Jorie tried really hard to believe he was going to verify everything they said simply because he was investigating a fire and not because he felt some type of way about a Black couple owning property on a street where a majority of white people lived. The knee-jerk reaction sometimes made her feel judgmental, something she strived not to be, but his attitude wasn’t helping.

“You can verify every word we’ve said,” Dom told the chief, his words only slightly less strained than Jorie’s had been. That wasn’t a good sign.

“We’re not married, and Aiden is Dom’s son. I cooked dinner for them and we were still sitting at the table when Reb called,” she said. “Is it safe for us to go and inspect the damage? We’ll have to get a crew out here in the morning to get to work. We’re on a deadline.”

The chief was already shaking his head. “Not tonight. We’ll be back here tomorrow around eight in the morning. You be here, too, with the crew that worked today, and we’ll talk

more.” He turned like he was going to walk away, but then looked back. “Those reality shows are like competitions, right? Think the other team might want to put a stop to your work?” He shrugged. “I don’t know how these things work, but when a fire is set, it’s usually for money or revenge. Accidents are less common, but if it were wintertime, I’d say someone homeless was looking for a spot to get warm. That’s not the case here, so I’m just thinking if it was set on purpose, then enemies would come to mind. Or insurance fraud. Take your pick.”

“Sonofabitch.” Dom snapped after the chief walked away.

Jorie frowned, folding her arms across her chest against the chill of the fire chief’s words. He’d done it on purpose, she knew, trying to get a rise out of them. She’d say he’d been successful, even though she and Dom somehow resisted the urge to comment directly to him again.

They walked back to the truck in silence; she wasn’t sure what to say next. There were so many things going through her mind now. Dom was probably thinking many of the same things, but she recognized this was a different situation for both of them.

“I don’t want to get too far ahead of ourselves thinking about enemies or sabotage,” he said after they’d pulled off and turned down another street. “I mean, I know this contest is going to be on TV, but it hasn’t even aired publicly yet.”

“Publicity started a couple of weeks ago, remember?” They’d done a promo photo shoot the weekend before she’d first met Aiden. One of the final selections was a picture of her and Dom both dressed in dark jeans and white T-shirts with the *Fantasy Flip* logo on the front. Dom wore a hard hat and held a sledgehammer, while she held fabric swatches up to a

window as if trying to make a decision. Recalling that scene in her mind now had her wondering if that was where Safiya had gotten the silly notion she and Dom were in love.

“Yeah, I know, but I just don’t think this contest is that cut-throat. We’ve never even met the opposing team in person. Reb knows a couple of guys on their construction crew, but that’s about it. We’re all too busy with our businesses outside of this show to be worrying about sabotaging anybody. Besides, who’s trying to go to jail just because of a TV show?”

His questions made sense, and Jorie’s temples throbbed with what she knew was going to end up being a tremendous headache. “Well, the chief seemed certain that somebody started the fire. So we do have to think about who that might’ve been.”

“Not tonight,” Dom said moments later as they pulled up in front of his house. “Let’s just go inside and get some rest.”

When he parked, Aiden got out first. She was just rounding the front of the truck when she saw Dom toss him the keys.

“He’s tired and he has to get up early tomorrow for school,” she said. “Maybe I shouldn’t come in. I should just go home, and we’ll meet at the house in the morning.” This wasn’t the way she’d seen this evening ending. Not that she’d been planning on spending the night with Dom. They’d agreed she wouldn’t stay overnight when Aiden was there. And since this thing with them was still relatively new, she’d only stayed two nights when Aiden wasn’t at the house. But tonight had been her first night cooking dinner for them and it felt *different*, for lack of a better word.

“I want you to stay.” He reached out to take both her hands in his. “These past couple of hours have shaken us all up. And

Aiden is tired. He's probably going to sleep like a rock as soon as his head hits that pillow. But I'm gonna check on him first. Then you and I can have a drink and try not to get too ahead of this situation before we have more concrete answers."

She wasn't sure she'd be able to do that. Her mind wasn't liable to stop churning with thoughts about this, but truthfully, she was just as tired as Aiden. The thought of going inside and falling onto the couch sounded a lot better than getting into her car and driving another fifteen minutes to her apartment.

"I'll sleep downstairs." She let him lead her toward the door.

"Aiden's much smarter than that," he replied. "I know because he told me so earlier tonight. He knows when a man likes a woman."

She paused at the open door. "He did not say that."

Dom's smile was quick, genuine and touched her with unexplainable warmth. "He absolutely did. So I'm gonna go up and make sure he's straight. You can head straight to my room and find a shirt or something in my drawer to sleep in. We'll sleep in the bedroom like two adults who like each other."

With yet another thing to wonder about, Jorie did as Dom said. Except she went to the kitchen and cleaned up their dinner mess first, loading the dishwasher before fixing them both a glass of the wine. She'd bought it for dinner but noticed the beers in the refrigerator, so had given Dom that instead. Now, she took the glasses upstairs, setting one on each nightstand on either side of his king-size bed. She was just coming out of the bathroom wearing his Miami Heat T-shirt that came to her knees when Dom entered the room.

He closed the door behind him then looked over to her and grinned. “The Heat’s never been hotter.”

She smirked. “And you’ve never been cornier.”

They both laughed. She sat on the bed with her legs crossed in front of her, sipping her wine while Dom undressed. This felt strangely like the wind-down after a long day at work. When they’d come together to *not* talk about what may or may not have gone wrong in their day, but instead to just enjoy these quiet moments together. She had to shake herself as a reminder that this wasn’t her home, and Dom and Aiden weren’t hers to keep.

By the time Dom came out of the bathroom, she’d told herself to stop thinking about everything. It was too hard keeping all the questions and scenarios, facts and doubts straight at this point, and she was exhausted from trying. She was under the covers now, half of her wine left in the glass and the lamp on the nightstand on her side turned off. Dom sat on the opposite side of the bed, drank his entire glass of wine and then slipped under the covers beside her.

He shocked her by not saying anything until after he’d turned off the lamp on his side of the bed and reached out to take her hand. “Everything’s going to work out the way it’s supposed to.”

The calm that settled over her at those words was unexpected and encompassing. “We don’t control the outcome. The sooner we figure that out, the better off we’ll be.” She whispered those words while hearing Ms. Martha speak them as if she were standing in that room with them. “Your grandmother gave the best advice,” she continued after a few seconds.

“She did. I just wish I’d listened to her more.” He rolled over then, finding her lips in the dark and kissing them lightly. “Goodnight, Jorie.”

“Goodnight, Dom.” Despite all that was going on, she agreed that was all that needed to be said for now.

BY SIX THE NEXT MORNING, Jorie was up and standing in Dom’s kitchen, waiting for the coffee to finish brewing. Dom had grumbled something and crawled out of bed right behind her, then headed down the hall to wake Aiden up so he could get ready for school.

Birds were chirping loudly, which was actually what had awakened her. She normally woke early so she was a little surprised at how groggy she still felt, but standing in this kitchen with the early morning beams of sun slicing through the window blinds was beginning to wake her up. There were so many possibilities in this space; however, her first instinct was to recreate that sense of hominess she’d always had whenever she was in this kitchen alongside Ms. Martha. Her mind was full of thoughts about bold-patterned backsplashes and lemons. Ms. Martha had loved the scent of lemons, so that shade of yellow stuck in Jorie’s mind. Gray cabinets stretched to the ceiling could warm that vibrant hue. Flooring options were... The doorbell buzzed, and she jumped.

Before she could push herself from the counter she’d been leaning on, it buzzed again. And again. Then the banging started, and Jorie frowned.

“Who the hell is banging on the door at six in the morning?” She frowned as she walked toward the foyer and

opened the door without giving any thought that this wasn't her house.

Rasheda's frowning face was not who Jorie expected to see.

"I should've known your ass would be here," she sneered. "Dom! Get your ass down here right now." Rasheda pushed past Jorie, coming into the foyer to yell again. "Dominic."

Jorie closed the door. "Keep your voice down and act like you've got some manners," she snapped. After last night, Rasheda was the last person Jorie wanted to deal with, but since the simple-ass woman was there, it would be whatever it was going to be.

Rasheda was wearing jeans and a royal-blue blouse. Flat black leather shoes, with her hair pulled back into a silky ponytail. She turned around fast, and the tail swished behind her. "Don't you talk to me like that, with your clingy ass. You can't let this man breathe, can you?"

Jorie held eye contact. "I'm not the one banging on his door first thing in the morning."

"No. You're the one staying so far up his ass he can't sit down and get his life together." Rasheda huffed. "I don't even care what you're doing here. I just came for my son."

"He's getting ready for school."

"Go get him. Now."

Jorie didn't even blink. "You have a son. I'm a grown-ass woman—don't come up in here telling me what to do."

"You're a basic-ass woman and you disgust me. You and Dom both make me sick. Letting my son hang out 'til all hours

of the night at a damn fire scene. What kind of bullshit is that?”

And just like that, Jorie’s mind went from how badly she wanted to slap this heffa to the fire chief’s comments about possible enemies setting the fire. “How’d you know where we were last night, Rasheda?”

“Don’t question me, Jorie from the debate club. I’m not here for your entertainment.” Rasheda rolled her eyes. “And my son’s not here to play house with you and Dom in some pitiful reunion love scene.”

Jorie didn’t bristle at the jab to her tenure as president of the debate club when they were in high school, but she did keep her eyes laser-focused on Rasheda now. “I asked you a question. How did you know where we were last night? Are you having Dom followed? Or were you there?” Setting the fire, perhaps, and then watching to see how everyone reacted. Jorie didn’t say that part but she knew from watching crime procedurals on TV that criminals often liked to show up at the scene of their crime to see everyone react to their handiwork.

“I don’t know why you think I’m gonna answer any of your questions. You’re nobody to me.” Rasheda turned as if she were going to go up the steps and find Dom herself.

But Dom was already there. Jorie had glimpsed him coming down the stairs, but she’d been intent on questioning Rasheda herself.

“Well, I’m the owner of this house, and I’m asking what the hell you’re doing here making all this noise so early in the morning?” Dom asked when Rasheda nearly bumped right into him.

Despite Rasheda's earlier claims, it might've been entertaining for Jorie to watch her look of surprise and then quick retreat back from Dom. Unfortunately, Jorie was too pissed to give the scene that type of energy.

"I'm here to take my son out of this toxic environment. How the hell you gonna have him at a crime scene at all hours of the night?" Clearly Rasheda had regained her footing.

"Hold up? What?" Dom asked. "How'd you even know where we were last night?"

"You just as simple as your ho," Rasheda spat. "It was on the news last night. You, her, that reality TV house and my son. I texted Aiden asking where he was because I thought you were stupid enough to leave him in the house by himself. But, oh no, you're even stupider because you took him to a crime scene."

"How'd you know it was a crime scene?" Jorie asked from where she still stood behind Rasheda. "They haven't figured out the cause of the fire yet."

Rasheda whirled around. "Shut up, little designer girl." She turned back to Dom just as quickly. "Go get my son while I call the judge to tell him you're endangering my child's life."

"You're a pitiful bitch." Jorie couldn't help it—she'd wanted to say those words to Rasheda so many times during high school, but not as much as she needed to say them now. "Pitiful. Spiteful and jealous of anybody who has what you don't. You can't stand that Aiden wants to be with him and that Dom still doesn't want to be with you."

"Dom, get this girl before I—" Rasheda threatened.

Aiden's cry as he came running down the stairs stopped his mother's words. "Stop it! Stop arguing. I'll tell you why we

were at the house last night.”

Dom reached out an arm, his hand landing lightly on Aiden’s chest, stopping his son’s trek into the foyer. “This is an adult conversation, Aiden. Go back upstairs and get ready for school.”

But Aiden wasn’t trying to hear it; he shook his head vehemently. “No. Daddy, I gotta say something. I gotta tell y’all what happened.”

All eyes were on Aiden now, Jorie’s chest heaving as this morning seemed to become even more eventful than the night before.

“I should’ve told you last night.” Aiden shook his head and looked down at the floor. Then like a child much more mature than his nine years, he inhaled deeply, letting the breath out as he lifted his head and met his father’s gaze. “Mr. Rebel told me to put the old tools in the red bin out in the backyard because they were hazardous, and all the other trash went in the blue bins. I was tired and hungry and the blue bin was closer, so I just put everything in there, the tools and all the other stuff.” Aiden sighed as Dom’s hand slid from his chest. “When you and Ms. Jorie got back in the truck last night, you were talking about what the fire chief said might be the cause of the fire, and I knew it was my fault. I knew I messed up by not placing those old tools in the correct bin. That’s probably how the fire started. And I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry about your house, Ms. Jorie.”

“Wait, what are you saying, son?” Dom’s tone was as incredulous as Jorie felt.

“I’m saying the fire was my fault, and I’m sorry.” He looked hurriedly at Rasheda. “And Dad didn’t put me in danger. I created the danger. It was my fault. Please don’t call

the judge. I like staying with Dad sometimes, Mama. I don't want to stop seeing him just because you're always so mad at him."

"First," Dom took Aiden by the shoulders and turned him to face him, "nobody's ever going to separate us again, buddy. *Nobody*. I'll fight 'til my last breath to be with you, so I don't want you worrying about that." Dom pulled Aiden close.

Aiden hugged his father tight, but he looked over Dom's shoulder to Jorie. "I'm really sorry, Ms. Jorie," Aiden said the second Dom released him. "I know how important winning this contest was to you. But I'll understand if you don't want me to help re-decorate my room anymore. Just don't be mad at my dad. He really likes you, and I really like seeing the two of you happy together."

Her heart was breaking. Not only for the obvious turmoil and stress this young boy had been forced to live through because the grown-ups in his life didn't know how to act, but also because this same distressed little boy believed that her winning a contest would ever be more important than the friendship they'd begun to build.

"Oh, Aiden," she stepped closer and took his hand in hers, "I know we've only just met a couple of weeks ago, but in that time I've gotten to know you and to care about the things you like and the goals you've set for yourself." She rubbed her thumb over the back of his hand, emotions clogging her throat. "You're such a smart child and you're talented. That means you're so much more important to me than winning a reality television contest." He was looking at her so earnestly, trying to hold his shoulders straight, chin up, the same way Dom always did. But she'd seen his bottom lip quiver as he'd told

them what had happened and she knew he was genuinely afraid of losing his father again.

“We’re going to design such a great room for you.” She squeezed his hand. “Together. You and I are going to make it great. Okay?”

He nodded. “Okay. But what about my dad? Are you still gonna come around and be nice to him? Because it wasn’t his fault I didn’t listen. He told me I really had to pay attention on the job sites in order to be a valued employee. I just messed up and I know he might not let me work with him again, but that’s okay if you’re still gonna come around and hang out with him...and us, I mean. As long as we can still be together like we were.”

To answer his question, Jorie reached out her other hand and took Dom’s. “I’m not angry with either of you. It was an accident.” She couldn’t have imagined how good it would feel to digest that fact over the possibility of sabotage. “Your father and I will get this all worked out. We’ll get the house fixed, but that’s not even such a priority right now. We need to get you ready for school so you won’t be late.”

The sound of staggered clapping behind them reminded Jorie they weren’t alone.

“Isn’t this cute. The little family. Only, he’s *my* son, not yours,” Rasheda said.

Dom dropped Jorie’s hand and went to face Rasheda. “You really need to stop this. Didn’t you hear our son? He’s tired of you being so angry all the time. You said you didn’t want me, and that’s cool. That’s really good, actually, but I’m here to stay. I’m committed to Aiden, so you don’t have to worry about me messing up again. Just chill for a bit while I prove that to you and to the court.”

“Please, Mama, let him prove it. He can do it. I believe in him.”

Now, Jorie was definitely going to cry. Her eyes had already begun to water, even though her fingers still itched to slap the taste out of Rasheda’s mouth.

For once it seemed like Rasheda didn’t know what to say. She looked from her son to Dom, but didn’t spare Jorie another glance. Which was fine with Jorie; she was ready for this woman to leave.

“Come here,” Rasheda said, lifting her arms out to Aiden.

He ran to his mother, falling into her embrace, and regardless of how much Jorie despised the woman, she couldn’t help but feel a punch of envy at the mother/son bond they obviously had. Would she ever feel that? Suddenly, all the years she’d wasted with Garland came rushing back, and regret slammed into her with a force that almost knocked her down.

“I just want you to be happy and safe,” Rasheda told Aiden. “That’s all.”

Aiden pulled back to look up at his mother. “I’m happy and safe with Dad.”

Rasheda stared at her son and shook her head. “I’ll believe it as long as you say so, son,” she told him and then looked over to Dom. “But I’ll still be watching you.”

Dom shrugged. “I have no doubt.” He reached out and took Jorie’s hand again, holding it tight in his. “But all you’re going to see is me doing everything in my power to be the best father I can be.”

Jorie wanted to hug him and tell him he was already doing a fantastic job with Aiden. That he was exactly the type of

father she'd always known he would be. The father she'd wanted for her children.

CHAPTER 12



Two Weeks Later

“YOU SURE YOU wanna be here tonight?” Dom asked when they pulled up in front of her mother’s house.

Aiden had his earphones in and had been jamming to his own music during the drive, so when Dom stopped the truck, he just got out and began walking toward the house. He’d been to Regina’s house twice in the last two weeks, once to meet Jorie’s mother and sister and the second time because Dani had offered to—at Aiden’s request—trim his hair and redo his cornrows.

Jorie had been staring out the window during the entire drive, and he’d been debating whether or not he should say anything. Now that they were here, he wasn’t about to let her walk into a situation that might make her feel uncomfortable.

When she turned to him, her eyes were bright with the smile she gave him. “I’m fine, Dom. I’ve been telling you that all day.”

Despite her words, he reached over the console to take her hand. “It’s been a rough day. No, it’s been a rough couple of

weeks for us, but I know losing the contest was especially hard for you and the plans you'd made."

Once the fire chief had confirmed the origin of the fire and that the cause was sparks from a malfunctioning tool left in the bin, Dom had instructed Jorie to file an accident claim with his insurance company. Dom and his team had worked overtime to get the damages repaired—at no extra cost to Jorie's budget or her company—and to have the place staged in time for the final judging. And while the house had turned out spectacularly, it hadn't been enough.

Her fingers closed around his. "I promise you I'm good. Plans can be adjusted. Besides that, Safiya's email offering me another opportunity to be on the show was a nice buffer to the loss."

"It was," he admitted.

They'd filmed the final show earlier today. The network celebrity judges had been present, doing a walk-thru with them. In the final shot, the winner had been announced. They hadn't been live, but even if they had, Jorie was the perfect gracious loser. He'd stood by her side, proud of everything they'd done on the project.

"Plus, I didn't get a chance to tell you," she continued, "but yesterday I received a call from Miranda Sage."

He must've looked as confused as he was feeling.

"She's the ex-wife of Senator Corvin Sage. Apparently, she was at her daughter's house in Baltimore the night of the fire and saw us on TV. When the reporter mentioned we were flipping the house for the *Fantasy Flip* show, she looked me up. Her family's originally from Baltimore, and she's making plans to leave D.C. and come back to this area now that her

divorce is final. She wants me to take a look at a house in Laurel for her and give her my thoughts on what can be done with it.” Jorie’s smile hadn’t wavered, and now he could see the excitement brewing in the way she shifted in her seat and tilted her head when she spoke.

“So she wants a consultation for design?”

“Well, she bought the place through a bank auction, so it needs a little work before I can start designing. I was planning to ask you tonight if you wanted to go out there with me. This way I could give her a complete overview of what I think the project will need.”

No wonder she was smiling—she’d scored two big opportunities as a result of losing a reality show that hadn’t even aired yet. “Look at you.” He brought her hand up to his lips for a quick kiss on the back. “You’re doing the damn thing””

She shrugged. “That’s what this was all about. Me and my company getting exposure, moving ahead in the industry. If Miranda likes my work, she’ll tell her friends. Word of mouth is the best form of publicity, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s how I got hooked up with you again.” He’d promised himself he was going to buy Macon the biggest bottle of White Hennessy he could find as a gift for referring him to Jorie. That was the least he could do for the guy who’d given him the chance to find his one true love again.

Not that he wouldn’t have run into Jorie in town eventually, but having these last six weeks to work closely with her proved what he’d been too foolish to see all along, that he belonged with her. The fact that he still hadn’t gotten around to telling her that wasn’t lost on him.

“I’m happy with how things have turned out,” she said.
“Are you?”

“Most definitely.”

“Good, then let’s get inside before my mama comes out to get us. You know she and Dani have been planning this celebration party for the last few weeks. There’s no way I wasn’t going to show up just because I didn’t win.”

“But you did tell them the results already, right?” Because Dom did not want to walk in there and have everyone congratulating them at this point.

“Of course. I texted them as soon as we stopped taping. But my sister loves a party, so that’s what we’re gonna do tonight, party like we did win.”

“We did,” he said. “At least in my eyes. You’ve got two good opportunities on the horizon. My business was already good, but if JK Designs is going to start using Renegade as their exclusive construction company, then I’ll just have to reciprocate and start using you as our exclusive design vendor.”

“Oh, then we need to talk about these new exclusivity agreements.”

There was so much they needed to talk about, but not right now. At this moment he needed to kiss her. As if reading his mind, she lifted her free hand to cup his face, and he moved in closer until their lips touched. It was a slow kiss, a tentative meeting of tongues and a gentle dance of intimacy. He loved being intimate with Jorie, sharing every physical want and need, giving to her with the same urgency and devotion that she gave to him.

Releasing her hand, he reached out to hug her closer to him, taking the kiss deeper. Her arms had gone around his neck as a soft moan slipped from her throat. His body warmed all over, his dick pressing urgently against the zipper of his jeans. Was he really getting ready to pull her into the backseat and fuck her right in front of her mother's house? A house that was full of guests waiting for them. Hell naw, that wasn't going to happen. Regina would kick his ass, and Granny would turn over in her grave if she knew that thought had even flashed into his mind.

Deciding he needed to end this kiss and get them both out of confined space and around other people so he'd keep his hands off her, he began to pull away from her. Dom's truck had a push-button start, so he always set his keys in the front part of the console. His elbow must've hit the panic button on his keychain, and the truck alarm blared throughout the neighborhood. They jumped apart and sat back in their seats. Seconds later he looked over at her, and she glanced at him. They both exploded with laughter.

TWO HOURS LATER, and the party was still going strong. There were at least thirty people inside her mother's house and another twenty-five who'd taken the party out to the backyard, where tables had been set up and games of Spades and Pinochle had been started.

Jorie had just walked into the kitchen to get napkins to take back out to the table where the kids were listening to their own music and having discussions they didn't want adults to hear. She'd been happy to see Aiden with some of her cousin's

children and a few of the neighborhood kids, getting to know each other.

“You seem pretty happy, considering you didn’t win that contest like you planned,” her mother said as she closed the refrigerator. Regina set another bowl of potato salad covered in plastic wrap on the kitchen table and went to the drawer to find one of her big spoons. There was so much food in this house: from the grilled meats—BBQ chicken and spare ribs, steak, hot dogs, smoked sausage and hamburgers—to the salads—potato, seafood, macaroni and pasta—and then the desserts—rum, 7Up pound and pineapple upside cakes, cookies and ice cream for the kids. Jorie had only one plate, and she was stuffed. She’d seen Dom with two, but he’d been making his rounds catching up with people he hadn’t seen in years, so she’d lost count of whatever else he may’ve eaten.

“I’m fine with it. Just because I wasn’t the winner doesn’t mean I didn’t get anything out of it.” She’d decided not to tell her mother and Dani about her new opportunities until after the party. The two of them had so much going on being the hostesses tonight she hadn’t wanted to pile anything else on.

“Yeah. I’d say you got a lot out of it.” Regina talked while she moved, her hair smoothed back neatly with gel and styled in a bun. Medium-sized gold hoops were in her ears, and she wore a yellow halter top with khaki Bermuda shorts. Silver rings were on just about every one of her fingers, and her favored diamond ankle bracelet sparkled from her left ankle. “Like that fine-as-wine Dominic with his silky-smooth self. And then, who would’ve guessed he’d have such a handsome and polite son?”

Jorie decided against the napkins and grabbed an extra roll of paper towels from the cabinet instead. This way nobody

would have to keep running back and forth to clean up after the kids. They could do it themselves. “Aiden is great, and Dom’s a good father,” was all she replied.

“Guess you *can* go back in the past and not get your ass burned again,” her mother said and ripped the plastic off the bowl of potato salad.

Jorie held the paper towels under her arm. “That was your rule, not mine.”

Regina clucked her teeth. “Don’t give me that. You were scared too. I saw it that morning at the salon. You’d slept with that boy again without even knowing you’d already given him your heart a second time. You were so scared you’d made a mistake, your best defense was denial.” When Jorie didn’t reply, Regina continued. “What I tell you and Dani all the time? I done been around the block a time or two. Or three or four,” her mother said and then tossed Jorie a raised-brow look. “I know what I’m talkin’ about.”

“I know, Mama. You’ve definitely told us that enough.” And she had. All throughout their lives, Regina had prided herself with being honest and upfront with her girls. She didn’t sugarcoat anything and loved them with a stern hand. There’d never been any doubt that Regina cared deeply for her daughters, none at all. Yet there had been times when Jorie had hoped for a little more compassion from her mother. It wasn’t until she’d become an adult that she understood you couldn’t change people who didn’t want—or think there was any need—to change.

She walked toward the door because she figured Regina had said all she’d had to say, but then her mother spoke again.

“I think you’re doing the right thing,” Regina said, and Jorie turned around to face her again. “Following your heart’s

not always smart—or easy, for that matter. But it’s bold and fearless, and I can respect that about you. When you finally made the decision to leave that bastard Garland, I knew it was the right time for you. That you’d learned all you needed to learn from that situation and you were ready for the next phase of your life. I’m proud of you, Jorie.”

Speechless. Jorie wasn’t often in that predicament, but she didn’t know what to say to her mother’s statement, didn’t even know how to feel about it.

“Now, I’m gonna tell you something else, and then you’re on your own.”

Jorie should’ve known not to think her mother had gone soft. She almost chuckled at the thought.

“Don’t you let that simple woman drive a wedge between you and Dominic. She’s got her own problems, and I’ve heard she’s been putting them on the boy by way of trying to keep Dominic out of his life.”

“Well, they went to court again a couple of days ago and the judge made the joint custody agreement permanent, so Rasheda has no choice but to deal with it.”

“Yeah, I know. Dominic told me the other day when he stopped by to fix that part of the ceiling where the pipe was leaking. But what I’m telling you is she’ll keep doing sneaky stuff, especially taking jabs at you, because if she can’t be happy, she definitely don’t want Dominic happy. Add that to the way you are with Aiden, and I’d say she’ll be your enemy for life. But don’t you let her take you out of your character. Dominic chose the best woman, and you make sure you keep acting like it. Karma will deal with her ass soon enough.”

For once, Jorie listened attentively to her mother's advice. Rasheda was going to be a pill, but Jorie figured she was time enough for her. "Thanks, Mama. I'll be on my best behavior," she said. "Until karma needs my help in making Ra-Ra see the light."

With the spoon in hand, Regina winked and pointed it at Jorie. "That's my girl."

Jorie was chuckling when she walked outside into the balmy night air. She went directly to the table at the end of the yard, where the kids were sitting. Some of them had their phones out, and others were huddled together talking. Aiden had a plate full of all different types of cake in front of him and looked up at her while chewing a mouthful.

"You're gonna be sick if you eat anymore tonight," she warned.

"Uh-uhn," he mumbled, and crumbs spilled from his lips.

She ripped off a paper towel and handed it to him while smiling. Leaving the roll on the table, she was walking away when she saw Dom. He came up to her, took her hand and led her to the very end of the yard.

They stood at the metal gate that separated the yard from a narrow alleyway, the sound of crickets and whatever other nighttime insects flitting around competing with the music that blared from the speakers near the basement door.

"This has been a night, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah. I can't believe all these people came out just to celebrate us being on that show. I mean, even after we announced we hadn't won, everybody was still so happy just because they'd be able to say they know somebody on TV."

She chuckled as she recalled her Aunt Janet saying exactly that.

“I know. I wish Granny was here. She loved a good house party.”

Jorie brought his hand up to run along her cheek. “I miss her too.”

Dom looked at her then. A tender kind of look and yet exploring at the same time.

“What is it? You’ve been getting this faraway look in your eye for the past few weeks. You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

He sighed and then leaned in to kiss her lips softly. When he pulled back, he nodded. “Yeah, I do want to tell you.”

Bracing herself, she cleared her throat. “Okay.”

“I love you, Jorie.” He said the words as if they were so simple. “I’ve always loved you. I was a fool to leave you, but I won’t be a fool again.”

Twenty years ago, when Dom had told her he loved her for the first time, Jorie remembered her heart hammering so loud and fast she’d thought it would beat right out of her chest. Tonight, her reaction wasn’t nearly as dramatic, but it was certainly just as pure. Her heart swelled until she didn’t think there was any more room for it in her chest. How many nights had she lain awake wondering if she’d ever hear him say these words again? When had she finally admitted to herself these were the exact words she needed to hear?

“I don’t know how it came to be that after all this time, you came back home. Back to me and back to our love. And you managed to bring along the one thing I’d always wanted for us—a child.” Tears filled her eyes but she ignored them,

bringing his hand to her lips again to kiss the back the same way he'd done to her earlier in his truck. "I love you too."

There was nothing else to say, nothing to discuss or contemplate. They were meant to be together. She'd known it the moment he walked into that house, and now Jorie really did have what she'd always wanted, a family with the man she'd always loved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AC Arthur has worked as a paralegal in every field of law since high school, but her first love is and will always be writing romance. She's written and won awards for her acclaimed *Donovans* and *Shadow Shifters* contemporary and paranormal romance series. Under her pen name, Lacey Baker, she created the quaint small town of Sweetland and wrote the novelization for the Original Hallmark Channel Movie, *A Gingerbread Romance*.

After years of hosting reader appreciation events, AC created the One Love Reunion, an event designed to bring readers and authors together to celebrate their love of books.

AC resides in Maryland with her family, where she's currently working on her next book...or watching *Criminal Minds*.

To learn more about A.C., visit her at: <https://acarthur.com>



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