

A close-up portrait of a man with short, light brown hair and a light beard, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a light blue shirt. The background is a grand, ornate church interior with high ceilings, arches, and pews.

FRANCIS

HE'S DRAWN TO HER IN
WAYS HE NEVER DREAMED OF...

A bouquet of purple roses with green leaves, positioned at the bottom of the page.

KATIE DOWE

Francis

He's drawn to her in ways he never dreamed of...

A clean Christian, marriage romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

As a dedicated child of God, Amara Coombs vows to be of service not only to her church but to all the parishioners and people needing help.

She had also been brought up in a well-rounded family where love was the order of the day.

Troubled soul Francis Tobias Coleman is the exact opposite.

As the youngest son of a multi-billionaire investment banker, his is embittered by his controlling father and is determined to make a life of his own...

When he meets the enchanting African-American, he is immediately entranced...

Amara feels the sparks fly, but she is committed to her faith first and is determined to be resistant towards Francis and her own feelings...

Francis hopes to break down her resistance...

And now Amara will need to show him how strong her faith is in God!

Will Francis respect Amara's wishes and join her in faith
and hope?

Or will he be the first to break Amara's heart?

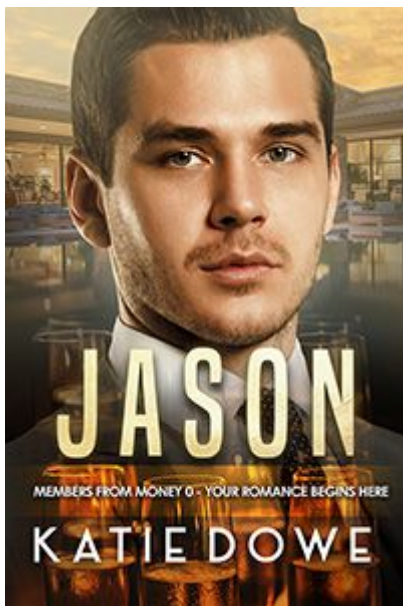
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Chapter 1

“Honey, what on earth are you doing in that attic?” Her mother called up, squinting her eyes to see better.

“Trying to find something to salvage from all the things we have up here,” Amara called down, “the garage sale at the church is this Saturday afternoon and I am determined to raise enough money to get a new sound system.

What do you think?” Moving forward, she held up a dusty pair of boots that had belonged to an uncle who had been staying with them in the past. “A little wiping and a lot of brown polish and they will look as good as new.”

“Those boots have a disreputable look to them.”

“Considering that Uncle James was somewhat of a rock and roll sort, they will certainly attract some interest. I will add them to the pile.”

“Your grand uncle was more of a renegade than anything else,” her mother said with a fond smile, “are you about finished? Your father and I are going to the matinee and we would like to get going. Are you sure you do not want to come along with us?”

“No. I am fine, mom. Go and have some fun, you deserve it. And it is a beautiful spring afternoon for an outing. Besides, I might be going to the chapel to finish up something that needs to be done before the service on Sunday.”

“You work too hard.”

“It is not work if it is for the Kingdom of God. Go, I will be okay.”

“We will see you when we get back. Remember your allergies.”

“I will.” Amara peered into the boxes she had already sorted through and picked up an old sweater with holes in the shoulders and arms, a smile on her lips. It had taken several threats from her mother for her to get rid of it and even so, it had been done with great reluctance.

It was aquamarine in color and had an elegant beaded collar, the beads still intact. She had bought it with her first babysitting gig and had been very proud of the purchase, wearing it for almost every occasion until the color was all but gone. “Into the dump pile with you.”

She gave the sweater one last lingering look before tossing it into the pile marked for trash pickup. Standing to her feet, she looked around the boxes she had packed, hands on her narrow hips.

The attic was her favorite place to be ever since she was a little girl. She was an only child and growing up without a sibling had made her very creative. She had found ways and means to entertain herself.

Her dolls - piles of them had been donated to the toy drive at church, but she had left one or two that she

could not part with. The space was also reserved for her prayer time.

She had family devotion with her parents, but as she told her friends, she often came up to the attic to have a private conversation with her dear Lord and Savior. Like when she was struggling with an issue - when she was afraid and uncertain of which direction to take.

She had always been a child of God and had made that conscious decision to give her life to the Lord since she was a child of ten. Back then, her commitment had been childish, an innocent decision based on the fact that others were going to the altar.

And she had always been fascinated with the stories in the Bible. Her quest for knowledge was great and before long, she could read the Bible on her own.

She had gone through middle and high school, not succumbing to the usual peer pressures children were introduced to because her family life was so solid. From the very beginning, she had known who she was and

was brought up with confidence knowing the love of her parents and the awesome love of a forgiving God.

She was not perfect, by any means, at all. She had a temper, something she had prayed about ever since she realized that she had a short fuse.

She was impatient - also something she was praying about, but she loved the Lord and it made it easy to follow his commandments. She had her crushes in high school, but aside from a chaste kiss or two, she had never allowed it to go further than that.

At twenty-eight years old, she was a virgin and was determined to hold out for a man the Lord chose for her. No one in the Baptist church appealed to her. She was aware of her looks but did not spend time primping before the mirror.

She never wore makeup even though it was allowed, but had been told that she did not really need it. "Honey, you have a natural beauty that does not require enhancement," her mother had told her with a smile.

She had gone to college and held degrees in communication studies and history because she was fascinated by the past. After college, she had come straight back home to take up her position as an administrator in the chapel and implemented several ministries involving young people.

Pastor Biggers and his First Lady were extremely grateful for the help and she realized that doing what one loves, is not work at all.

She supposed one day, the Lord would provide someone who would love and cherish her, the way she was created to be, but for now, she was not looking. There was simply too much work to be done.

Dusting her hands off, she made one last look around the area, before climbing down the steps and into the garage. She would grab something to eat and then head out to meet some friends for their usual Saturday afternoon discussion at the ice cream place a few blocks away.

The atmosphere around the dinner table was as usual, stilted, and Francis was wondering why on earth, he had agreed to come to dinner in the first place. His two brothers were slicing through their tender duck slices with the precision of a surgeon performing a delicate procedure.

Their wives with their perfect upswept hairdos were sitting straight with shoulders squared, their makeup perfectly applied.

They were beautiful women but reminded Francis of blocks of ice, the diamonds glittering around their throats giving credence to the thought. It was Saturday evening and they were all dressed as if they were attending a formal dinner, which at the Coleman's residence, it always was.

Thomas Coleman, presided at the head of the table, the same way he presided as CEO of the investment banks

that had been passed down to him from generations of bankers.

Brian and Jeffry had predictably followed in their father's footsteps of course. Francis was the only one who had broken from the tradition, something which was a constant source of argument between him and his dear old dad.

But he was not budging. He had toed the line and gone to Harvard to study banking and was brilliant with figures, but drew the line when it came to putting on a suit and sitting behind a desk day in and day out. He had chosen instead to do his own thing.

Painting was something he discovered was a balm to his tortured soul, so he decided that he was going to paint. It did not matter to him if his pieces were good or even if they were recognized. He just wanted to paint and be left alone. He would go into the corporate office dutifully once a month to attend board meetings, but that was it.

He was also all church-ed out. His family have been members of the prestigious Catholic church for several

hundred years. They had all been married there and every one of them had been baptized there.

The Colemans were the most prestigious family in the congregation and Francis was sick to death of the special attention given to them because of their wealth and power.

Most of the buildings and additions to the elegant structure had been done at one point or the other by his family over the years which ensured that whenever they were present, they would be escorted to the front pew, no matter how late they got there.

There had been another big blowout when he stood his ground and declared that he would no longer be attending services. His father had threatened him, trying to get him to realize that it would not look good to the priest and other members if he was missing.

“Tell them I am now a Muslim,” he had told the man in a laconic tone. His father had been apoplectic and had threatened to dock his allowance.

“Go right ahead,” he had told his father and walked out of the study.

Now he was sitting here - going through the usual ritual of the lengthy prayer of thanksgiving and the pious attitude of a man who looked like the epitome of an upstanding citizen but was in fact one of the biggest hypocrites Francis had ever come across.

While their mother was alive, he had had no less than two mistresses, stashed discreetly in apartments owned by the bank. His brothers were the same. Each of them had a mistress –each secreted in apartments also owned by the bank. Their wives were aware of it but were willing to turn a blind eye towards the infidelities.

As long as they were the wives and were receiving the prestige of being married to a Coleman, it did not matter to them.

Francis avoided them at all costs, finding their cold beauty way too clinical for him. They had both done their

duties and provided sons who would be the heirs to the family fortune and were firmly ensconced in their positions inside the family.

The relief had been palpable – Thomas Coleman expected sons and had been clear on that aspect of it. Francis had wondered snidely if his father had stood to watch inside the bedrooms to ensure they were doing their matrimonial duties.

“The bottom line is looking excellent!” Thomas cut into his duck with precise movement, glancing over at his two elder sons. It was a ritual.

The prayers of thanksgiving would be dispensed with and then the discussion which involves the business of the day or the week. Francis was chafing to be on his way. He had an idea for a series of paintings and did not want to lose the light.

“Thank you, Father,” Brian said graciously, preening at the compliment. Both he and Jeffrey vied for his attention and were willing to jump through hoops no matter what.

“The Lindstrom’s portfolio needed a lot of work, but somehow I managed to accomplish a great deal for us.”

Thomas nodded and concentrated on his wine.

“I have to say that Mrs. Vickers is quite pleased with her stock portfolio.” Jeffry predictably chimed in, not to be outdone by his brother.

“I hear the latest fashion trend is taking the fashion industry by storm. What do you think?” Francis interjected, dividing his glance between the two women at the table. His family was the old-fashioned type – and the belief that women should be seen and not heard was heavily endorsed.

He almost laughed aloud at the look of trepidation on their faces. Brianna was Brian’s wife and had to be perfect, from her ash blonde hair and light green eyes to the demure green dress she was wearing with the scoop neckline.

Loriann was Jeffrey's wife and a little less buttoned up, but was still under a rigid rule and was desperate to belong. In the beginning, Francis had tried to befriend her, but it had been a lost cause and he had backed away immediately.

"I-er-," Loriann cleared her throat and quickly reached for her wine.

"Brianna? Anything?" He asked smoothly, ignoring the looks of resentment being directed in his direction by his brothers.

"We do not discuss something as trivial as fashion at the dinner table," Thomas said stiffly, hazel eyes heavy with disapproval. His thick head of coffee brown hair was liberally streaked with gray and gave him a definite distinguished look.

Both Brian and Jeffrey had inherited his coloring and looks, but Francis was the spitting image of their mother with the same thick and lustrous honey-blond hair and sapphire blue eyes. The only thing he had inherited from

his father was the lofty six-foot-two height along with his brothers.

Francis had often wondered if that was the reason that he had never fitted in. Madeline Coleman had been the epitome of all that was good and right with the world and her death five years ago had left a hollow feeling inside his heart that had never been filled.

He had stopped trying a year or so ago and was now enjoying being single. The good thing was that since he was the youngest, there was no pressure for him to produce an heir.

His two nephews – Brian Thomas Jnr and Jeffry Charles were nice enough kids, and he would carve out some time to spend with them whenever he was at the manor. But he more or less preferred to be away from the people, he called family.

Each time he was here was a constant reminder of the hypocrisy that surrounded them and he would go away feeling depressed and in a foul mood for a week. He

would limit his visits to only once a month and would try his best not to exceed that.

“Why not?” Usually, he would lapse into silence and will the time to pass until the tedious seven-course meal was through. But a devilish impulse had him engaging.

“You know why not,” Brian told him with a pompous air of importance as he peered at his brother down his nose.

“Why don’t you explain it to me, Bri?” He deliberately used the shortened version of the man’s name, knowing that he did not like it.

“Don’t call me that.”

“That right there is a passion I am certain Brianna does not get to see in the bedroom.”

The silence around the dinner table was palpable. The three men’s faces were so red that Francis wondered if they were in fear of having a heart attack.

“I will not have that kind of crude talk at the dinner table,” his father told him coldly, lips thinned in dislike.

“I guess that is my cue to leave,” Francis pushed back his chair and threw down his napkin next to this plate.

“You are not finished.”

“I am definitely. My appetite is ruined anyway.”

“We expect to see you at the church services tomorrow. The new priest will be inducted and I would like the entire family to be there,” his father told him tightly.

“I would rather have my fingernails plucked out slowly,” he said succinctly, “count me out.”

“Now see here”

He escaped in the middle of the explosion, accepting his jacket from the smiling maid with a flourish. The spring evening was balmy and he stopped a bit to inhale the intoxicating scent of his mother's tea rose bush that was still flourishing even years after her death. His father had hired the finest landscaper to take care of the grounds.

The gardens had been his mother's pride and joy and her flowers had received many awards at the annual garden show. Plucking an iridescent pale-yellow rose, he held it to his nostrils and inhaled the delicate scent, the memories swamping him.

It was a poignant reminder of the best person in the family. Putting the stalk of rose into the pocket of his sports jacket, he swiftly went over to where his jeep was parked and smiled grimly at how incongruous it looked in the lush setting of the graceful manor with the roof rising upwards to the velvety blue sky.

He had eschewed the other vehicles that were made available to him, preferring the Jeep Cherokee which had a few thousand miles under its hood. He could go

anywhere and if the mood struck him, he would pack a duffle bag with some clothes and would be gone for a week or two.

Nodding to the guard at the gate, he made his way out onto the private stretch of land bordering the manor. The family home was relatively secluded and several miles from the nearest neighbor. The scent of the rose in his pocket sent a sadness through his heart that he had not felt in quite some time.

He had asked God why his mother had to go - why take away the only person in his family he loved. And he had yet to get a response. His bitterness stemmed from not knowing the answer to the many questions he had buzzing around inside his head.

Shaking off the morbid thoughts and melancholia, he turned the music on and increased the volume until he was singing along to a popular and upbeat Kenny Rogers tune.

“When did this discussion turn to matrimony?” Amara asked in friendly exasperation. “I thought we were discussing women and their roles in ministry.”

“It might have something to do with the fact that I am getting married in June,” Shelly Matthews had a dreamy look on her plain face that spoke volumes, “I never thought it would happen to me.”

“Why on earth not?” Amara put away the folder and resigned herself to what was certain to become a full-blown conversation about color schemes and destination weddings. “You are the sweetest sister I have ever met. You are active in the Sunday school and great with the children. People love you, honey.”

“Yes, but I am not you, Amara,” she pointed out, “let’s face it, guys - of all of us here, I am the plainest one of all of us. My shape is square - my face too round and my nose way too flat.”

“And yet Sidney is head over heels in love with you,” Jasmine pointed out.

“I cannot believe he is really in love with me.”

“What did we talk about in the last class?” Amara queried.

“Having confidence and remembering that we are wonderfully and beautifully made,” Shelly said in a chastened voice, “but you have to admit that I am nothing special to look at.”

“Beauty is in the inside.”

“It’s easy for you to say, Amara. You are exquisite. All that head of thick natural dark curls, the caramel complexion and those eyes and lashes. You can just about get any man you want.”

“Physical beauty is just skin deep,” she laughed as the others rolled their eyes, “I know I sound like a cliché board, but it’s true. All of this is going to fade one day.”

“Not right now,” Jessica piped up, sending the group into peals of laughter.

“I am serious guys. We are children of God and beauty; physical beauty should not be an issue. We are the kingdom’s daughters and the things of this world should not matter too much. Why is that again?”

“Because they are temporal.”

“Precisely,” Amara smiled at them gently, “and you, Shelly, have scooped up the last available bachelor in the chapel.”

“I was thinking we are going to have to go out and bring some of the men from outside our world in order for us to get husbands,” Charlene complained.

“We have all we need right here and besides; we have to believe that the Lord knows what we need at the exact time,” Amara said firmly.

“So, basically you do not believe we should be unequally yoked with unbelievers,” Jasmine said seriously.

“No.” Amara shook her head. “Even if the Bible did not say it, we have seen examples right here in our congregation. Look what happened to Marlene.”

“Jerry was a bad penny from the get-go. The guy had two baby mamas in one area and anyone could see that he was a disaster waiting to happen,” Shelly said with a shake of her head.

“Speaking of them, when was the last time anyone checked on her?” Amara asked quietly. The girl had been part of their group and was vibrant in the ministry until she met Jerry. He had gotten her pregnant and refused to marry her.

Shame had driven her away from the ministry and no amount of pleading on their part could convince her to return to the fold.

“I tried to reach out just last week and she told me she did not want to talk. But guys, she is really going through it. Jerry left her and she is living at her parent’s house again. You know what that was before. Can you imagine what she is going through now?”

“I will stop by her on my way home. Now ladies, can we please get back to the original topic?”

Chapter 2

“You should have called,” Marlene muttered as she opened the door a fraction.

“I called, several times!” Amara was careful not to allow the shock she was feeling to surface. The woman standing before her was a far cry from the formerly vivacious and energetic one she was used to. The wear and tear of life had settled on her face and even though the girl was the same age as her, she looked ten years older.

Her thick natural hair was in braids that seemed to have been done maybe a month ago. Her baby was attached to her hip, a thumb planted in his little mouth, dark brown eyes bright with tears. “May I come in?”

“I am busy. I need to get Jerome his food....”

“I will help,” planting a smile on her lips, she reached out to take the child who slid forward eagerly, “he is heavy. How old is he now?”

“Almost a year!” The girl stood inside the doorway as if deciding whether or not to allow her entrance. A peek inside showed that the living room was a chaotic mess with toys and a blanket thrown onto the floor. “I really do not have time”

“I am not leaving, Marlene!” Taking matters into her own hands, Amara pushed past her and entered the tiny foyer. “You said you have to feed this little man here; I will entertain him while you do so. What do you say, honey?”

The child giggled as she tickled his underarms and went off into peals of laughter that felt like music in the dull and dreary living room. “Go on. Where are Tom and Irene?” She asked referring to Marlene’s parents.

“They went to the farmers’ market to sell some produce.”

“They will be gone for the day.”

“Yes.”

“Perfect. We get to catch up,” she shooed the girl as she stood there inside the doorway.

“Okay little man, let’s see what we have here?” Seating the toddler into his feeding chair, she picked up a stuffed dinosaur and handed it to him. “I see you are into the ancient reptiles. So was I when I was your age.” She spoke to the baby softly, while going around the room and picking up the things off the floor.

By the time Marlene came back into the room with a bowl of spaghetti-o’s, the living room was a far different cry from the way it was before and baby Jerome was cooing, his tiny fingers clutching the stuffed toy.

“What did you do?” Marlene looked none too pleased with her effort.

“I figured you need the help,” Amara told her calmly, moving forward to take the bowl from her. “He feeds himself?”

“Yes. I do not need your pity.”

“I would prefer to call it empathy. Here you go, honey bun. He looks like you.”

“Thanks!” Marlene plopped herself down onto the now-cleared sofa and folded her hands into her lap. “You look good, but then again you always do. I have tried so hard to be like you and I failed.”

A frown touched Amara’s brow as she took a seat across from her friend. “Why on earth would you aspire to be like someone else?”

“Because you always have it all together,” Marlene gestured with one hand, turning her head to look at her

son, who was making a mess of himself, “you are beautiful and always seem to have this perfect life.

You do not make mistakes, at least, not glaring ones. Everyone loves you and would pay attention whenever you had something to say. Me? I am the screw-up who went to bed with a man because I was looking for love in the wrong places.”

“And we know who loves us the best,” Amara said gently.

Marlene gave her a look of resentment. “I do not need a sermon, Amara.”

“I am not about to give you one!” Leaning forward, Amara took the dry chapped hands in hers. “You made a mistake and I would not call that beautiful baby one.

You are still alive and yes, things have not turned out the way you expected, but you still have a chance to make it

right. The Lord is always waiting with open arms, ready to welcome us back to the fold.

There is work to do at the ministry and we would love your brand of expertise. The children's ministry is in dire need of helpers, honey. And you were such an excellent teacher. There is the daycare - the children's church, and so many things you can do. We would love for you to be a part of the ministry again."

"I am too ashamed," Marlene whispered, the tears standing out in her eyes, "look at me, Amara. I am the same age as you and I look more like your mother. People will stare at me and start judging me if I come back. I cannot bear it."

"We will be there for you and those who dare to judge you will not do so openly," Amara squeezed her hands, "it's time you returned to the fold, honey, you and that gorgeous baby of yours. There is no shame in wanting help and asking for it. You have a whole church ready and willing to babysit for you."

“I cannot come back looking like this,” she used her head to indicate her appearance. “It has been so hard, Amara. My parents are upset that I am here with a baby and so disappointed that I am not married.

They offer me shelter, but out of a sense of duty and we are all uncomfortable. You knew how they were before and now it has gotten worse.”

“How about I talk to Pastor Biggers about giving you the room at the chapel?” Amara suggested. She was determined to get through to the girl and bring her back to the fold. “It has not been occupied since Sheena left. I could get some of the girls to help me clean it out.

The kitchen is functional and you would have your own private apartment. If you say yes, I will call up the others and start right on getting the place ready for you. As for your appearance, we can do something about it right now.”

Marlene blinked at her. “What do you mean?”

“Little Jerome is busy with his meal. I could do a quick braid of your hair. Go and shampoo it and come back. I will keep him busy.”

Marlene stared at her with tears in her eyes. “Why are you doing this?” She whispered.

“Because you are my sister and this is what we are supposed to do. Now go and get that done.”

Francis threw down the paintbrush in frustration. He could not concentrate and he was losing the light. He should have followed his gut and gone to the club to chill for the weekend. He could still go, but it was getting late and he did not feel like traveling several miles in the dark.

The private jet was available to him, but he rarely used it. Using the rag he kept near the easel, he wiped the paint

from his fingers, slowly and methodically until he had removed all of it.

It was the visit to the manor. It always managed to put him in a very poor mood. Going over to the recessed cabinet, he pressed the button and selected a can of imported beer. His belly growled, reminding him that he had barely consumed the rich meal that had been served at the manor.

He had taken a cooking course when he decided to move out on his own and could rustle up a few dishes. But he was not in the mood to stand in front of a stove. Picking up his phone, he ordered pizza and went to stand by the window to await the delivery.

The apartment was owned by the bank and was the least luxurious one. His choice had been deliberate.

It was one of those repossessed buildings that had been seized by the company and had been slated for demolition to make room for a more modern structure. But somehow, he had managed to persuade the board

and his dad to let him have it. He had done a little fixing up here and there to make it habitable.

It had an old fireplace that Francis had restored to its former glory and whenever he was restless and could not paint, he would spend time doing work around the place. It was a three-bedroom structure with a basement and an attic. The area around it was isolated and afforded privacy, something he badly craved.

The dense foliage was a refuge and an inspiration for his creative mind and there was a natural lake where he would set himself to sit and paint for hours. His family never came to visit, which was a relief to him and he did not bring anyone here.

He was a loner, had been since he lost his mother and the only entertainment, he allowed himself, was when he went to the club where he and the rest of the males in his family were members.

The chiming of the doorbell intruded on his musings and putting away the beer can, he strode out of the room to pay for the pizza.

“Thanks,” he handed the boy a generous tip and closed the door behind him. His kitchen was functional with an old range and a state-of-the-art fridge he had invested in. The single rose he had brought back from the manor caught his eyes and had him moving towards the vase he had placed it in.

His mother had been so filled with love that nothing had stopped her from laughing and living life to the fullest. It had puzzled him that she had ended up with a man like Thomas Coleman. He recalled asking her one day why she had married his father and she had laughed.

“He is not such a bad person, darling. We all have our hang-ups and faults, but the trick is to be tolerant and realize that no one is perfect.”

But she had come close. She was the one who had read them stories at bedtime and been to every game he had ever participated in. He had been the typical jock, involved in every sport imaginable, unlike his brothers who had been prepared to sit on the sidelines.

His father had despised his 'earthy' behavior and the scent of sweat coming from his pores, each time he came home from a game. They had never rejoiced over his victories and he had stopped allowing the disappointment to get to him. Thomas

Coleman had once referred to him as a barbarian and had accused him of trying to disgrace the family.

"By being an accomplished sportsman?" Francis had asked him incredulously.

"We are Coleman's and we utilize our brains instead of our muscles. Why can't you be more like your brothers?"

"God forbid."

"How dare you call the name of the Lord in vain?" The man had thundered.

“Oh, believe me, this was a heartfelt thanks to Him.”

Putting the vase back, he went to sit at the counter and opened the box, sniffing at the aroma of pepperoni and anchovies. He went to the cooler to grab a bottle of wine and a glass, before settling down for his solitary meal.

“Mom?”

“In the kitchen, honey.”

Amara shrugged out of her denim jacket and hung it up on the mahogany coat tree in the large and cozy foyer. The scent of cookies baking permeated the air and wrapped around her like a warm and familiar hand.

From as far as she can remember, her home had always been redolent with the scent of baking, so much so that it had become a part of her.

Angela Coombs was the designated pastry person for the church and took her job seriously. Tomorrow at church there was going to be the spring function where several meetings would be held and refreshments offered.

“Something smells wonderful. Where is Dad?”

“Out with some of the deacons,” her mother pointed to a tray of pecan and oatmeal cookies cooling on the tray, “have a taste.”

Amara did and closed her eyes in delight. “Delicious as usual.”

“It goes great with a glass of milk.” Her mother told her with a smile. “Pour me a glass as well. I am just about finished. Where have you been?”

Handing her the glass of milk, Amara took her seat and reached for a couple more cookies.

“I went to visit Marlene.”

“That poor girl.” Angela’s eyes clouded with sympathy. “I saw her parents at the supermarket the other day and did you know they walked around the other aisle in order to avoid me!”

She shook her head as she took out another tray of cookies and placed it on the counter. “This one is an apple and cinnamon crumble; I have been experimenting with it. Have a taste.”

“Don’t mind if do,” she picked up the rapidly cooling cookie and added it to the pile on her plate.

“It’s a very good thing you have such a trim figure,” her mother said with a shake of her head as she sat across

from her. “Now tell me about Marlene. How is the baby?”

“Almost a year old and thriving. I offered Marlene a deal.”

“What sort of deal?”

Amara went into the details of the discussion. She had spent a little over an hour with the girl, giving her a brand-new look, which had somehow managed to lift her flagging spirits.

They had prayed together, during which Marlene had broken down in tears and started worshipping. She had called the others and told them of her mission to obtain Pastor Biggers’ permission for Marlene and her baby to stay at the church.

“Honey, that’s wonderful!”

Amara dusted her fingers and propped her chin into her palm, her expression thoughtful. “I think I have taken my

life for granted.”

“You? Absolutely not.”

Amara smiled at the staunch support. “I might have just a little. I have it so good, mom. You and dad love me without judgement and I have been brought up in a Christian home where love is the center of everything.”

“The Lord is the center of everything,” Angela murmured, “I was born and raised in this very neighborhood, with your dad and I, attending the same church. We always knew what we wanted.

I wanted to be a librarian at the local library and he wanted to be a carpenter. We went to the same schools and became friends before we became husband and wife. He was always the man for me.”

“And you never had the slightest regret?”

“None whatsoever,” she shook her head. “I have traveled to several places – Paris, London and Italy and I even went on a Caribbean cruise and I always come back to this place and to your dad.” She smiled at her daughter, a fond look on her face.

“That is what I am praying for you, honey. That one day the Lord will provide a man who is going to love you with the precious and anointed love of the Lord, the same way that I have been.”

“I am not interested in that right now.” She dismissed with a laugh. “I am too caught up in the ministry to be thinking about marriage and all that.”

“Even with the wedding fever going on?” Her mother teased. “Shelly’s mom is over the moon about the upcoming nuptials and is going overboard with the arrangements.”

“Are you sure you can manage all the baking? You have the summer school to contend with and you will be going back to the library part-time.”

“The Lord has given me the strength to perform all of those duties, my dear.” She patted her daughter’s hand and looked up, the pleasure lighting up her face as her husband came into the cozy kitchen. “You are back early.”

“After a few card games and Bible trivia, I decided that it was time to come home to my two girls.” He kissed first his daughter and went over to pull his wife into his embrace.

Amara felt her heart hitch as she looked at the couple who were obviously as in love with each other as they were when they first met. Getting to her feet, she placed the rest of the cookies into a paper towel and prepared to leave.

“Oh, honey, you do not have to leave,” her mother protested.

“It’s fine mom. I have some lessons to catch up on for Sunday school tomorrow. I will be leaving earlier than

usual to get the place ready for Marlene.”

“What’s this?”

“I will fill you in darling. Good night, sweetheart.”

With a wave of her hand, she exited the kitchen and up the stairs to her suite of rooms. She had her own privacy, a set of rooms with a large lavender and pink bedroom with cheerful drapes she had made herself hanging at the large bay windows.

The room was large and free of clutter and was as neat as pin. Her bathroom had the same color scheme, but the room she used for her office was papered in pearl gray with a mahogany desk she had picked up from an antique store and a very comfortable chair.

She had redecorated her suite the day she came home from college and had decided that it was not prudent for her to leave and find an apartment when she was perfectly comfortable here. Her parents had been

delighted with her decision and had expressed their pleasure at having her living with them.

“We wanted to beg you to stay honey, but did not want it to be too obvious,” her mother had told her with a smile.

After turning her comforter down, she went into her office and behind her desk. A coffee pot sat on a table near the large window and a small fridge. Pulling it open, she reached for the shake she had not finished before she left and took it with her to the desk.

She was happy, she reflected and it did not make much sense trying to deny it or make any excuses for it. She had had her fair share of heartbreaks – a church mother she had been very close to had been taken from them suddenly by a debilitating disease.

She had almost fallen prey to a guy who had started attending services and had plied her with pretty talks and fake promises. But her head had been screwed on right and she had stepped back just in time. He had left right after that, making her painfully aware that he had only attended so that he could have his way with her.

She was an advocate for prayer and the Word. The intellect in her was fascinated by the rich history there and the hungry spiritual person inside her yearned to be closer to the Lord.

She had told her mother that marriage was not something she had on her mind and that was the truth. She wanted to be secure in her relationship with the Lord before taking on anything else. Booting up her desktop, she clicked on the files she had saved earlier on.

She had started the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments last week in Sunday school and would be continuing with it. She taught teenagers between the ages of thirteen and sixteen and they had very curious minds. Their questions were pointed and detailed and she had to delve into the Bible and do her research in order to respond.

Their discussions were always stimulating and keeps her on her toes, but she enjoyed every bit of it.

The ringing of the phone shook her out of her reverie and she reached for it.

“Marlene, everything okay?”

“I just called to tell you, thanks,” the girl’s voice was wobbly with tears, “you have given me my life back.”

“Oh, no,” she shook her head, a smile on her lips, “I cannot take responsibility for that. The Lord has everything to do with it. I was just His messenger. So does that mean you are all in?”

“I am coming to services tomorrow and I already called and told the pastor that I will be there. He told me to come prepared to stay.”

“The girls and I will be there to fix everything up. How did your parents take the news?”

Marlene laughed softly. "You should have seen the look of relief on their faces. They are not bad people Amara, it's just that they have no idea what to do with a fallen daughter."

"You are on your way back up girl, and I thank the Lord for that," Amara told her sincerely.

Chapter 3

The Crown Mall was crowded with Sunday afternoon shoppers. A group of teenage girls wearing tight-fitting denim shorts and midriff blouses were standing in a corner of the fast-food section giggling and pointing to a group of boys hanging by the protective rail.

A harried-looking mother was rounding up her three toddlers and juggling various shopping bags. It was a familiar scene and one Amara was accustomed to. She had left the service feeling on a high about the Word and had decided to integrate some shopping along with the handing out of pamphlets.

Shelly and the others had opted to go over to a sister's house for dinner and to talk wedding. Amara had decided to come on her own. She never missed an opportunity to spread the Word and hand out the pamphlets that were in the lobby of the chapel.

She had been doing this for years and the shyness and awkwardness had somewhat passed. She would get

some rebuffs and people would occasionally shake their heads with a friendly smile.

But she never allowed that to deter her. Today was no different. Her parents had gone to visit a sick and shut-in member, and would be going out to have dinner after. She was going to grab something from the Japanese restaurant as soon as she was through here.

First the shopping and then to see about her father's business, she decided.

Francis glowered into his root beer – the frown making him appear fearsome and unapproachable. He was not in a very good mood and was regretting the decision to come here. The loft had been stifling and as a last resort, he had jumped inside his jeep and headed here.

The Crown Mall was an investment of theirs, or rather of his family and there had been occasions in the past

when he had come here with his mother to this same ice cream store.

He recalled them sitting around the table reserved for them and having an ice cream float. His mother would lovingly wipe the milky moustache from his upper lip and playfully touch it against his cheek.

They had been allowed to be a little rowdy and dirty whenever they were with her and he had loved those outings. Then he had been free to be a child.

He was about to get up and go on his way when he saw her approaching. Her smile was wide, revealing very white teeth and for a minute he thought he was seeing an angel which was ridiculous of course. But she had thick natural dark hair that had been braided at the left side of her face and drifted past her left shoulder.

His eyes narrowed as she came closer, determination stamped onto her exquisite features. She was a woman on a mission and her body language indicated that she was not about to let anything stand in her way.

His blue eyes touched the papers in her hands and he stifled a groan when he realized what they represented. Usually, he would push back his chair and be on his way, no matter how good she looks, but something held him fast to his chair and before long it was too late to escape.

“Hi!” She had a shyness about her that was rather endearing.

“Hi.”

“May I sit?”

He nodded to the seat across from him. “You are here to tell me that if I do not turn from my wicked ways, I am going straight to hell.”

Her eyes widened at his direct approach and to his surprise, she burst out laughing, the sound like bells ringing in a quiet chapel. “Nothing that dire.”

“That would be a first,” he nodded at the pamphlets in her hands, “what are those?”

“Message of hope.”

His thick blonde brows lifted. “Is that so?”

“Yes.” His interest brought her forward - her hands propped onto the table. “My name is Amara Coombs.”

“Francis,” he deliberately left the surname off. He was not as visible as the rest of his family, but she might have heard about him.

“Well Francis, it is very nice to meet you,” she extended a slender well-kept hand to him and he shook it briefly before letting go.

“Do you come here often?”

She nodded. “Whenever I have the chance. I am not going to assume that you are saved.”

He gave her an assessing look. “Saved from what?”

“From the perils of hell.” A smile hovered at her lips and he could not help but notice how appealing and lovely her eyes were. A shade between gold and brown shining with an ethereal light.

“I thought we were going to stay away from the ‘h-word’,” he said mildly. He could not believe he was relaxing in her presence. She had a quality about her that made one forget oneself.

“I could not help it. What about you? Do you come here often?”

“Not if I can help it!” There was a sardonic twist to his lips that could not be missed.

“What is it? The crowds?”

“The teenagers,” he nodded towards a group of girls who were definitely checking him out.

“They are allowed to have crushes,” the soft voice brought his attention back to the serene woman seated across from him.

“I suppose you are right. So, Amara, sell me on the subject of heaven.”

Her laughter tinkled out again and he found himself smiling. “Will you be going to church tomorrow?”

“Oh no!” He said it with such emphasis that Amara gave him a contemplative look.

“I am all churched out,” he explained.

“Would you mind explaining that to me?”

“I am pretty sure that you have heard of the expression.”

“I have and whenever I hear people say it, I try my best not to assume the reason,” She shuffled the pamphlets in her hands, before looking at him, “what does it mean to you?”

He gave her a thoughtful look and took a sip of his root beer. “It means that I was brought up in the Catholic church and have noticed that it is just about collecting as much money as they can instead of really investing in people.

The priests get fatter by the week and the congregation is all about dressing in the very height of fashion. Kind of like a social club.”

“I am not here to judge”

“Oh, believe me, it is very plain to see. What do you have to offer that is so different?”

Amara thought about it before answering. She had just had the idea of handing out the tracts and answering one or two questions. But there had been something about the solitary figure that had drawn her to him.

“We are about saving souls,” she began earnestly, “we preach to everyone, the written Word of God. Yes, it takes money to build the Kingdom, but we are more concerned about saving souls and spreading the good news.”

“Like Jesus saves and all that.”

“Precisely,” she leaned forward, an intensely passionate look on her lovely face that drew his attention, “we

spread hope in an otherwise hopeless world.”

“And then you are going to tell me that Jesus loves us unconditionally.”

“He does.”

“Yet there are so many atrocities going on around the world, that it’s staggering. Children are starving to death, people are dying - the rich” His mouth twisted at that.

“They take from the poor to line their own pockets with little or no regard for the misery they are causing. Yet, you are here telling me that an all-powerful God loves us unconditionally.”

“And died on the cross to blot out our sins.”

“Lady, you are wearing rose-colored glasses,” the cynicism in his deep voice was unmistakable, “let me guess- you come from a very loving home with two

parents who have been members of the church since they were children.

You teach Sunday school and also are a member of several ministries. You never had a day of misery in your life and believe in angels and Santa Claus.”

“Angels yes, Santa Claus, not so much.”

He inclined his head at that, grudgingly admiring her ability to remain calm and collected under fire. “Sell me on your religion,” he prodded.

She shrugged slender shoulders. “I would like to believe it is not so much religion, but salvation. I do come from a loving home where my parents taught me to pray from a very young age. My home is filled with love and hope and good cheer. We have had our difficulties”

“Deciding what to prepare for Christmas?”

She gave him a look of reproach that almost had him apologizing. “My dad was in a terrible car crash five years ago. A drunk driver cut him off at the stoplight and we thought he would not make it.”

“I apologize,” he told her quietly.

“But we believed the Lord was going to bring him back to us. And even if that had not happened, we knew he would be in a better place.”

“What about the drunk driver? Didn’t you wish him to perdition?”

“No. He was badly wounded, but not as bad as my dad was.”

“And you went and prayed for him.”

“That was exactly what we did. And because of our forgiveness, he got converted. He served his prison

sentence and came out several months ago, fully rehabilitated.”

“And is now attending your chapel.”

Amara nodded, a smile playing around her lips. “The accident was a wake-up call for him and changed his life for the better.”

“And you are trying to tell me that your family greets him each day with not one ounce of resentment or lingering anger.”

“You may find it hard to believe....”

“Try the impossible.”

“We are not able to do it with our own strength, but the Lord is the one who gave us the fortitude to pray for this poor man instead of condemning him. “

He gave her a skeptical look. “You are trying to tell me that you did not carry an ounce of anger towards the man who almost cost your dad his life?”

“I was angry at first and the last thing I thought about was praying for him. When my mother suggested it, I looked at her as if she had lost her mind, but then she reminded me that our lives are never our own. The Lord gives and he takes away, it is His Right.

He created all of us - the earth belongs to Him and it is through his grace and mercy that we are alive. This poor man was going through a lot of pain - he had lost his job and his wife had died a year before. His only son had been gunned down in gang violence and he felt that his only option was to turn to the bottle. ”

She spread her hands out as if in an appeal. “We tend to do that to ourselves, take on the affairs of the world and mistakenly think that we can solve the problems facing us. But we cannot, we are so inadequate that it is amazing we get through an entire day without succumbing to the cares pressing us down.”

“I thought you were not here to preach.”

“I am not going to apologize for trying to get through to you.”

He studied her face for a minute or two before commenting. “What would you say if I asked you out on a date?”

She gave him a startled look and he had a feeling that it was the last thing she expected him to say. “I would then have to invite you to our church services.”

“And then?”

“And then tell you that I am not interested in a relationship.”

“With me or any guy?”

“With anyone!” She shuffled the papers in her hands and he was a little amused to see that it was a nervous gesture.

“Why not?”

She started to say he was not her type, but she had always been unfailingly honest.

“The Bible says that we are not to be unequally yoked.” The scripture tripped off her lips like something she had rehearsed and she felt incredibly foolish, especially when she noticed the amused look on his handsome face. And he was handsome, if in a definite disreputable manner. His honey-blond hair was too long and unruly.

He had tried to tame it by securing it into a ponytail, but that had not helped. His eyes were so blue that they appeared black and his strong jaws were covered with blonde bristles as if he had not seen a razor in days. He

was too masculine, too everything and it occurred to her that she had not thought it over before approaching him.

“It’s just a date. I am not proposing.”

“I am sorry”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why are you sorry?”

“God loves you,” she blurted out and felt like clamping her teeth onto her lip to stop from talking. She was only making things worse.

“And he will welcome me with open arms, no matter what atrocities I committed in the past.”

She almost sighed with relief at the change of topic. This she could handle. "Of course, he will," she tilted her head to look at him, "he sent his only son to die on the cross for our sins. He took our iniquities onto himself."

"You are very good at this aren't you?" He asked her softly. "It must take a tremendous amount of courage for you to approach a complete stranger like this."

"The Lord has given me strength," she smiled pensively, "there was a time when I would quake at the very idea of evangelizing."

"What changed?" Francis could not believe he was having this conversation and actually engaging. He had come to the mall to chill and get away from his melancholia and lack of creativity, but now he was feeling that the trip had not been wasted after all. She fascinated him, this innocent beauty with the intense look on her face.

“I prayed for courage. My conversion was not based on desperation. I was not at the end of my rope or even experienced something dramatic.

My conversion was simply watching my parents and the joy they experience every single day of their lives. How they pray together and the love they have for each other. I wanted that and I have it.” She gave him an earnest look. “You can too.”

“And if it is too late for me?”

She shook her head vehemently, the braid jiggling at her shoulder. “It’s never too late.” Taking one of the tracts, she dug into her pocketbook and took out a pen. He watched as she scribbled something at the bottom of it. “This is the address and name of my church; you are welcome to visit.”

“I already told you I have had enough of the church,” his comment had no bite to it and he was automatically reaching for the piece of paper.

“Come and give it another chance.”

“You are in the choir.”

“Yes,” she told him with a smile, “so is my mother.”

“I bet you sound like an angel,” he was flirting with her. He should leave well enough alone. His life was already messed up without him complicating things. She was pure as the driven snow and he really did not need the added situation of wanting what he surely cannot have.

“Why don’t you come and find out for yourself?” He was disappointed when she got gracefully to her feet.

“I might just do that,” he told her softly. With a nod, she picked up her packages and went on her way. He watched as she stopped a mother pushing a stroller. Her smile came quickly and easily as she bent over to whisper something to the toddler who was so delighted that it started laughing.

Then she engaged the mother in conversation, the woman taking in every word she was saying. She was a natural at this - very much a people person and her ability to draw people to her was something he admired.

His eyes tracked her progress as she made her way along the busy walkway, stopping every now and then to say something to someone. It was only when she disappeared that he got to his feet, his interest in staying any longer waning.

Turning the paper over, he looked at the excellent penmanship and was about to toss it. Deciding against it, he shoved it into his jacket pocket and turned in the opposite direction.

Amara tapped the icon on her car to turn up the music. Her favorite gospel singer was singing lustily about the amazing love of God and was singing along. But she was simply trying to distract herself from her troubled

thoughts. When he had asked her for a date, she had been tempted to say yes and had only just stopped herself in time.

She had told her friends at the meeting just recently that she was not interested in having a relationship - that she was having too much fun engaging in the work of the kingdom to be interested in anything of the sort.

And back then, she had meant every word. A frown knitted her brow as she recalled the look in his dark blue eyes. He had looked so worldly, sitting there all alone and nursing his root beer float.

There was also a kind of palpable sadness that clung to him like a shadow as if he had seen everything there was to see and was weary of it. She had also enjoyed talking to him - sparring with him and would have continued to do so if time was not against him.

“Oh, my Lord and savior,” she whispered, “I am not immune to temptation, but you have always kept me in the palm of your hand. Help me to concentrate on saving souls and not succumb to the lust of the flesh. I know

you hear and answer prayers and I am asking you for strength where this is concerned. Amen.”

His loft felt like a cage. He had arrived home ten minutes ago and went into the kitchen to try and fix himself something to eat. A maid came in once a week to do a thorough cleaning of the place and whenever she was around, he would vacate the premises and be somewhere else. He hated people underfoot and preferred his own company.

But tonight, was different. He did not want to think it was because of her. He was accustomed to beautiful women. After all, he was a Coleman and even if he did not have looks, his money would ensure that he was not short of female companions.

He had been all over the world - whenever the need came over him. He had resources at his fingertips and jumping on a plane was no problem. He stayed away from the company jet, the frivolous and extravagant lifestyle leaving a feeling of distaste inside his mouth.

Opening the fridge doors, he examined the contents and decided that a sandwich would do. Besides, he did not have the energy or appetite for anything that would require turning on the stove. His mind drifted to the conversation with the girl - Amara - an unusual name - but he suspected that she was an unusual woman.

He had nettled her somewhat when he asked her for a date. A frown touched his brow as he sliced tomatoes to go along with the fresh lettuce. Had he meant it or had he merely wanted to shake up her confidence?

Yes, he had meant it. Slapping the ham, tomato slices and lettuce between the bread, he went to get mayonnaise and ketchup. If she had said yes, where would he have taken her to? A nice restaurant? And then what? Have her talk some more about saving his soul? His lips twisted bitterly as he took his seat around the counter.

He was a lost cause, he thought grimly, picking the crust off the bread. He was too conflicted, had too many bitter

questions and had too many unresolved issues plaguing him.

She was a far cry from the so-called sisters at the Catholic church where his family belonged. A far cry from his dolled-up and expensively garbed sisters-in-law who attended services every Sunday just for show.

Her freshness and lack of coyness were appealing, dangerously so. It made him yearn - shaking his head, he went to grab a beer and slammed it down onto the counter, his frown deepening. He would throw away the paper and think nothing of the encounter again. He would forget about her and put the episode clean out of his mind.

Chapter 4

Amara was determined to put the restless night out of her mind. She had chalked it down to the long and unfamiliar discussion, something she was not accustomed to. She had told Francis the truth - she was not really good at evangelizing. She would pass out tracts and share the good news about salvation and that would be it.

Going into such a deep conversation with someone especially someone who looked like Francis, was not something she would usually do. She was a single woman and would never have approached a man like him without her sisters being present.

Last night had been one for soul searching and longer than normal prayer because she had been unable to forget how his thick honey-blond hair had been all over the place and the blueness of his eyes had reminded her of the sky on a particularly lovely and clear night. She was not supposed to be thinking of him in physical terms.

Not that she was not human, she was, but she was a spiritual being as well and she must never allow the lust of the flesh to get in the way of her relationship with the Lord.

So now, she was at work at the chapel and was determined to get him off her mind. It was not difficult. First Baptist was a pretty large chapel that sat on several acres of land. It was an old building that had stood the test of time and inclement weather.

Several renovations had been done to the building over the years and additions as well. The church was home to several operations throughout the day.

There was the large and operational daycare center which catered to more than members of the congregation and their children.

Amara had organized after-school care for the children of the parents who had to work late - a bus would pick them up from their schools and transport them back to

the chapel where various activities would be provided for a reasonable fee.

There was also a sewing class conducted by a sister three times a week and a cooking class taught by her mother twice a week.

Aside from the day-to-day running of the place which was placed onto her own slender shoulders and the businesses being carried on at the church, there was also the food drive where items of food and clothing were collected during the week and distributed to the various homeless persons and children's homes in the downtown area.

Pastor Biggers relied on her heavily. He had his own car wash business and was only able to be at the chapel twice a week. The other days, it was left up to her to see the running of the place and she enjoyed it.

She could have gone to some corporate office to earn a better salary but she had chosen to spend her days in a place she was familiar with and considered it her home away from home.

She did not have a lot of expenses. She still lived at home with her parents - her car had been a gift from them and was only three years old. Her salary was not exorbitant but was more than enough for her as well as the various charities she was interested in.

She believed in giving and her heart would break about the cares of the world, especially those in her area. She lived a charmed life and was a very happy person. She did not feel guilty about it, but she sincerely wished that others would be that happy as well.

She was not naive - well not really - but she had been sheltered from the really bad things in her life - there had been times when several church members had died and one or two of them had walked away from the faith, but aside from that, she was able to cope with her emotions.

A discreet knock sounded on her partially open door and she urged the person to come on in.

“Marlene! How nice to see you. Come on in, girl. I was just about to pour myself a cup of coffee.”

“I could smell it all the way down the passage.”

“No, leave the door open. I am expecting several packages and want to see when they are delivered. Cream and sugar?”

“I should really stay away from the sugar, but I am going to say yes,” Marlene told her with a wide smile as she took her seat on one of the chairs, “I did not get a chance to thank you for what you did.”

“I believe you already did that,” Amara brought over the coffee cup and a plate of cookies her mother always sent with her, “and you look so different.” Instead of going back behind her desk, she sat next to the girl.

“I feel different,” Marlene admitted, “Jerome and I spent the night in that room and we both slept like babies. Well, you know what I meant. I got up this morning and

prepared a full meal for both of us.” Her eyes shone with grateful tears as she sipped her coffee.

“There is such peace and contentment here.” She pressed a fist over where her heart was beating for emphasis. “I was welcomed back into the fold as if I was the prodigal son. No one was looking at me in a judgmental way and they were all eager to help with Jerome. I owe a debt of gratitude to you, my sister.”

Amara felt the tears moistening her eyes as she pressed the girl’s hand. “To God be the glory,” she said huskily and it was not just a rote, something she said automatically, she really meant it. “I was just his chosen vessel. How is the daycare?”

“Wonderful!” There was a catch to her voice. “I am in charge of the babies and that is exactly where I belong. I am earning a salary; I live here for the time being and I do not have to pay bills. Did you know the pantry in the kitchen is filled with food? So is the refrigerator. You have no idea how grateful I am.” She swallowed convulsively.

“I left because of a man Amara and was so ashamed when I realized how foolish I had been. I thought I could not come back because of the shame, so I stayed away. Now I am back and it feels wonderful to be where I really belong. This is my home and you guys are my family.”

“We are,” the phone rang just then and she looked over at the desk, “I am expecting several calls.”

“Go right ahead. I have to get back to work anyway.”

“Take the coffee and cookies with you. And come and see me later.” Amara kissed the girl on the cheek before hurrying over to pick up the phone.

“Francis.”

“Jeffry!” Francis greeted his brother with a cool nod of his head, struggling to hide his irritation that his solitude was

being invaded. The week had been an unproductive one and even the quick trip to Tuscany had lost its usual appeal.

He had decided to swing by the club this morning and had already participated in a very robust game of tennis with Adam Whitmore and swum several laps in the pool.

“We missed you at dinner last Sunday.”

Francis’ eyebrows lifted in disbelief. “You are a lousy liar, brother.”

The older man’s fair skin flushed at the insult as he lowered himself into the chaise next to Francis. “We are not your enemy, Francis.”

“I am aware. You are just family,” he reached for his glass of lemonade and took a healthy swig, “where is your wife? Is Brian also here?”

Jeffrey shook his head as he dutifully uncapped the sunscreen and started applying it to his arms and legs. "Brian is with dad. They have an all-day golf tournament with several associates from out of town."

"And you were not invited," Francis made a tsking sound with his mouth.

"You don't have to be such a pain about it," his brother said sulkily.

Turning his head, Francis studied the older man. There was a hint of dissatisfaction around his eyes and lips and tenseness that was unmistakable.

"Might I suggest something?"

"What is that?" He asked suspiciously.

"Relax. Dad and Brian are not around for you to impress. I do not care what you do or how well you do it. Go and

take a swim, play some cards or have a tennis match, get one of the single gals roaming around the place and take her to a suite and have some fun. Just let loose.”

His brother’s hazel eyes opened wide, “you want me to cheat on my wife?”

Francis laughed sardonically. “Isn’t that what the Colemans are famous for? Oh, that and robbing people out of their hard-earned money.”

Jeffrey bristled at that. “We are a respectable family-”

“Spare me the company’s mission statement brother. I am a member of the ‘said’ family and you are not in front of the camera, giving a press conference. We are far from being respectable. You and Brian have a mistress or two stashed in the company’s apartments.

It’s a family tradition, albeit a despicable one, but a tradition nonetheless. You are away from the influence of

our dad and brother, at least you have the opportunity to be yourself instead of their shadow.”

“How dare you!” Jeffry started and just like that, the puffed-up pride and self-righteous attitude evaporated and he gave a dejected sigh. “I am not like you Francis. I could not just go my own way as you did. I had to stay and do the right thing.”

“You are intimidated by dad and Brian.” Francis gave him a speculative look. There was a time when they were growing up when he had looked up to Jeffry. They were closer in age than Brian and had participated in several games together, but after mother died, everything changed.

Brian had taken Jeffry under his wings and started molding him. He had tried to do the same with Francis but had not succeeded. That was when the division started. He was not willing to fall in line and follow them like a puppet, so he had become the outcast, which of course was fine with him.

“My marriage is a joke,” he admitted quietly, “I have never loved Lorian.”

“And yet you married her.”

Jeffry nodded. “I could not say ‘no’ to dad.”

“You could have, but you did not dare to do so.”

Jeffry turned his head to stare at the younger man and felt envy building inside him. Francis did whatever he pleased, even when he was a little boy growing up. He was not easily intimidated and did not stand for injustice.

He was not a slave to their wealth either, something that was amazing to Jeffry. He did his own thing, went his own way and chose his own path. They had been close friends, once, but now they were practically strangers and it saddened him that they were so far apart.

“Lorian is the perfect wife.”

Francis gave him a cynical look. “Then you should be happy.”

“She is so perfect that we only get to have intercourse once a week, whenever it fits her schedule.”

“Giving you time to spend the rest of the week with your mistress. A perfect arrangement.” There was a bitter twist to Francis’ lips.

“I hate living like that.”

Francis turned to look at his brother. “Really?”

Jeffry nodded, a bitter look on his face. “I hate the duplicity and the lies in our marriage. On the outside, we look like the perfect couple and behind closed doors, we are anything but.”

“Then change the way you live.”

“It has always been that simple for you, hasn’t it?” There was a wistful quality to Jeffrey’s voice that touched something deep inside Francis’ heart.

“Yes,” he murmured quietly, “and it should be that way for you too.”

“I am not like you.”

“You do not have to be like me to do the right thing.”

There was a pregnant pause as the two stared at each other. Jeffrey was the first to look away, a defeated expression on his face.

“I miss our mother.”

Francis felt the pain of that and for a minute, did not say anything. His week had been one of torture.

He had convinced himself that he would not think about the slender girl who had challenged him to a spiritual duel at the mall and had even tossed the pamphlet she had given him with the church's address only to fish it out and put it inside his desk drawer.

And he had been unable to come up with one creative moment. He had gone out to the stream to spend hours looking into the clear water - he had just sat there, the thoughts tumbling around inside his head.

When he had not been thinking about her, he was pining for his mother and wishing she was here.

"So do I," he finally said gruffly.

"You were always her favorite," Francis said reflectively.

“She never had any favorites.”

Jeffrey slanted him a wry look. “You do not believe that. It was not only that you are a dead ringer for her, but you had that impulsive and stubborn nature that she admired. While Brian and I were always interested in indoor games, you preferred to get dirty. She was that type of person, too.

She would spend hours in the garden and would not listen to a word dad said about leaving it to the gardeners. She loved nature and would spend hours outdoors.”

“It made her happy. God knows she needed something to occupy her mind. She knew dad was cheating on her and it must have broken her heart. For the life of me, I could not understand why he would cheat on a woman like that,” his lips curled in dislike, “but then again, Thomas Coleman is not known for his commonsense.”

“I guess you could say the same about me.”

Francis turned to look at his brother and their eyes met. This felt like the times when they were growing up - there was a closeness here that had been lacking for years. He knew that as soon as Jeffry was with the others, he would revert to being the person they had molded him to be and that saddened him.

If he was allowed to be his own person, he would have been a better man. But his dad's and Brian's influences were too strong and he did not stand a chance.

"It's not too late to do something about your life, Jeff," he had unwittingly called him the name he had used when they were growing up.

"I am afraid it is," Jeffry said sadly.

"Ooh look at this!" Shelly held up the diaphanous lavender nightgown in delight, an impish look on her face. "I bet I can guess who bought this."

“Don’t look at me,” Jasmine snorted, “I sleep in sensible PJs and an old woman-type nightgown.”

“I bought it!” Marlene told them, a demure look on her face as they turned to look at her. The bridal shower was happening early because Shelly was leaving for New York in May to stay the entire month. Her job as a travelling nurse usually took her out of the state for weeks and she had the assignment to finish before the wedding in June.

She would only be back a week before the wedding, so there was a rush to get everything done before then. It was the last Saturday in April and the shower was being held at the chapel. “I just figured a woman should look more than desirable on her wedding night.”

“Oh, honey! I love it!” Shelly told her enthusiastically. “You did not have to get me anything. You just started working and getting your life back together.”

“And I am grateful to all of you for what you have been doing for me. This is just my small way of showing my gratitude.”

“Thank you so much,” Shelly leaned over and gave Marlene a tight hug before going back to open more presents.

Amara left the group of women and went into the kitchen area to see about the food. Her mother was in charge of the cooking along with a group of older women and the sound of laughter and rapid-fire conversations could be heard coming from the room.

The scent of barbecued chicken wings, honey-roasted ham and succulent beef permeated the air.

“What can I do?” She asked her mother as soon as she went into the kitchen.

“Take out the tray with the canapes and shrimp.”

“Mom, you did not have to go to all this trouble,” Amara protested as she looked around the room.

“It’s a bridal shower, honey and that young lady deserves the very best,” she placed a kiss on her daughter’s cheek, “this is a dress rehearsal for when we are preparing for yours.”

Amara rolled her eyes. “That’s a long way off.”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways and I have been doing a lot of praying. Your dad and I would very much like to have a grandbaby to bounce on our knees while we still have the strength to do so.”

“Mom!” She whispered, looking around the room to see if anyone was paying them attention. But the women were busy stirring the soup and slicing the homemade bread.

“That bit of information cannot come as a surprise to you.”

“I am not ready for anything like that!” She ignored the fact that her statement did not feel as convicted as it had in the past. She also shied away from the reason why.

“Go on out with the tray, the ladies and I will be by with the rest of the meal.”

Picking up the tray, she made her way into the convention hall where the shower was being held. She placed it onto the table the men had dragged to the side of the room for such an occasion and stood there watching the oohs and aahs coming from the women as the gifts were opened.

Shelly was decidedly happy and she was of course happy for her sister and friend. She had found the love of a very good man who was going to put her needs ahead of his at all times. She had seen them together and before; she had been indulgently happy for them. But over the last week, something had changed and it was making her anxious.

“You okay, girl?” She had been so deep in thought; she had not realized that Jessica had come up next to her.

“I am fine, just observing from a distance,” she forced a smile to her lips, her insides twisting at the lie. She was not used to hiding things from her friends, but there was a struggle going on inside her.

“She looks happy, doesn’t she?” Jessica murmured as she poured herself some of the fruit punch.

“She does and we are of course happy for her,” Amara murmured, taking a sip of her own drink.

“Of course, we are. Sidney loves her and she loves him. They make a great couple and they are going into this thing with their eyes wide open.”

Amara turned to look at her friend. “You are thinking about your sister.”

Jessica nodded. "They are getting a divorce."

"You cannot allow that event and what your parents went through to cloud your vision, Jess."

"You are different, honey. Your parents are loving and a wonderful example. While I am faced with a generation of people whose marriages never last."

"We believe in the Lord."

"And that means we will never go through anything?"

"You know that was not what I meant," Amara shook her head, "I am simply saying that if we allow Him to guide our steps, we minimize the mistakes we make."

"I want to believe that, honey."

“What’s stopping you?”

“Life!” Jessica said quietly. “Look around you Amara, all the single men are taken. The church is filled with elderly men and a few young ones. Shelly got the last of them. Where is the hope for the rest of us?”

“I do not want us to concentrate on finding a husband. That right there is heading into dangerous territories and often leads to errors of judgement. The Lord will provide the person at the right time.”

“I admire your faith, honey, and envy you for it.”

Before Amara could respond, the ladies from the kitchen, led by her mother came into the room bearing trays. The distraction stopped her from dwelling on how hypocritical she had become.

Chapter 5

She was in the middle of her solo piece when he walked in. She was so shocked to see him that at first, she stumbled over the familiar song.

Their eyes met and held and taking a deep breath, she started again, closing her eyes to keep from looking at him. The song was titled 'Tomorrow' and within seconds she had lost herself in the poignant lyrics.

Francis was ushered into one of the benches near the door and he had to grope to find the spot to sit. His eyes were trained on the slender woman wearing the gold and blue robe, her face portraying the words she was singing.

The other choir members were behind her, belting out the chorus of the song, but it was she that held him spellbound. She had a lilting and lovely voice that was surprisingly powerful for such a petite frame. And he was not the only one riveted.

A quick glance around revealed that the congregation was listening with rapt attention. He sat on the edge of the seat, his hands clasped loosely over the bench in front of him as he stared at her. His heart beat against his chest and he felt suffocated. He was tense and unmoving, his fingers gripping each other.

He should not have come, he thought dazedly as he stared at her. But something had drawn him here to the chapel. He had been at home feeling the restlessness taking over and without thinking much about it had gotten into the shower and put some clothes on.

The song ended and for a few seconds there was a hush, and then a thunderous applause broke out. People stood to their feet and he followed suit, clapping along with the crowd. Some were shouting praises to God and the pandemonium was terrific.

He sat down when they quieted down and barely heard the person next to him.

“Pardon?” Tearing his gaze away from the pulpit, he gave his attention to the elderly woman seated next to him.

“She has the spirit of God inside her.”

“Uh, I suppose!” Discouraging any more conversation, he scooted to the edge of the bench and concentrated on what was going on up top.

A middle-aged African-American man came forward and Francis guessed he was the pastor. The man introduced himself to any first-time visitors and thanked the choir for their wonderful rendition.

“It certainly sets the tone for the Word I am going to be bringing.” The man had a benign expression on his weather-beaten face and an engaging smile. The chapel was not as large as the Catholic church he had been brought up in and the sense of disorder - the shouting and praise were alien to him.

The people were friendly, and the mode of dress ranged from casual to formal. The usher had greeted him with a smile and a hug, which he had avoided of course and had behaved as if he had known him a long time ago.

His eyes drifted back to where the choir was seated directly behind the pastor. She was looking straight at him and he felt a jolt in his heart. He really should leave, he thought restlessly, the panic taking over. He had no idea what he was doing here.

The man was preaching about the wonderful love of God and how he had died to save sinners from the perils of death and the grave.

The preaching was frank and passionate, emitting frequent cries of 'amen' and praise. The people clapped frequently - babies cried out whether it was because of the excitement pulsing through the congregation or they just needed attention. It was chaotic and strange at the same time.

Francis sat there and listened keenly as the man quoted scriptures from the Bible and expounded on them. He

was so lost in the preaching that it took a minute to realize that he was finished and was inviting the choir to sing.

His fingers clenched as she took the lead again and he could feel the goosebumps rising against his flesh. Her voice was clear as a bell, ringing out across the pews and holding the congregation in its powerful grip. The applause erupted again at the end of the rendition.

He was about to make his exit when the pastor asked first-time visitors to stand to their feet. Staying motionless, to avoid the attention, he was praying that they would pass over him. But he stood out. He was a white man, with honey-blond hair in a congregation of predominantly African-Americans. It was hard to miss him.

“Young man, in the back, would you be so kind as to stand and tell us your name?”

Swearing under his breath, he got to his feet and felt dozens of eyes on him.

“My name is Francis.” He deliberately left off his surname.

“Welcome, Francis. Who invited you, might I ask?”

“Amara Coombs.”

“Lovely!” The man clapped and the congregation followed suit. “Thank you for coming and we look forward to seeing you again.”

He sat down gratefully, looking up as the usher who had directed him to his seat pressed a package into his hand. “Just fill it out and send it back to us, brother,” the man said with a smile.

He could escape now. The offering was being collected and people were asked to stand on their feet. Making his escape, he hurried out to the parking lot and jumped into his jeep.

Amara found herself looking for him as soon as the service was over. The Benediction had been said, but it usually took some time for her to escape. There were always greetings and refreshments to be served for whoever needed them.

Her mother was in charge of that part of it and usually, she would lend a helping hand, but she was feeling a little tired and the headache that had been brewing was now full-blown. Making her way to her vehicle, she pressed the remote and as she was about to pull the car door open, she noticed him standing at the side of the jeep.

Her heart leapt into her throat as she stood there staring at him. "I thought you had left."

"Can we go somewhere we can talk?"

She nodded numbly. "There is a park...."

"I know a place. Will you follow me?"

She should say 'no'. He was a stranger to her and she had spent the week unable to get him out of her mind. She really should tell him no. Instead, she murmured. "Yes."

Francis drove out of the large parking lot - sneaking glances in the mirror to make sure she was right behind him. He had started the vehicle intending to leave, but something had kept him there. He had seen her coming towards him and felt the familiar puzzling feelings plaguing him since he had first met her.

She had changed out of her robe and was wearing a fetching red, white and blue skirt suit with a snazzy little jacket. Her thick natural hair was brushed ruthlessly upwards into an intricate bun emphasizing her small face.

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel, as he pressed the left turn signal that would take them to the patch of land belonging to his family. He drove beneath the thick branches of an oak tree and switched off the engine. She came to a stop next to him and sat there waiting until he had exited the vehicle before getting out.

“I really should go.”

“You just got here,” he said teasingly, coming to stand just in front of her. She was such a tiny thing, he thought whimsically.

Amara lifted her head to stare at him. “You came.”

“I had no idea that I was going to be there,” he shifted from one foot to the other restlessly. “You have a lovely voice.”

“Thank you.” She clasped her hands in front of her and looked very much like an angel who had fallen from heaven and lost her way. The analogy had him frowning. Turning away from her, he strode over to the stream bubbling over the stones.

“It’s a lovely area.”

“Yes,” he said abruptly, his back still to her, “it belongs to my family.”

“Oh.”

The silence stretched on for another few minutes before he turned to look at her. “Why did you come?”

“What?”

“I am a stranger - someone you just met at the mall. I could be a serial killer or a rapist for all you know.”

Instead of being flustered, she gave him a measured look. "Are you any of those things?"

"No," he gestured impatiently with one hand, "that's not the point. Do you make it a regular thing to just follow strange guys?"

"This is a first for me," she admitted quietly.

"Why?"

She shrugged slender shoulders. "I cannot explain it. Why are you so angry?"

"Because..." spinning away from her, he strode over to the edge of the stream and stared down into the water, a frown etching his brow. "You should run." His deep voice was so low that she had to strain to hear the words.

“Why is that?”

“I am a mess.”

“God can turn your mess into a message.” The words tripped off her lips before she could stop them.

“Is that so?” He turned to face her, a sardonic look on his handsome face and then it struck her. She really should not have come. Every disturbing feeling, she had been experiencing had started the day she witnessed the man standing in front of her.

All of her confidence and conviction about not being ready for a relationship, everything she had told the women in her confidence class was now in peril. And she had no idea what to do about it.

“Yes,” she swallowed the lump inside her throat and clasped her hands together, “did you feel convinced by the message?”

“Your singing made me feel as if everything will be okay with the world, but that is not true, is it?” He asked her softly. He was yearning for her and it was not a fluke. He had thought if he could see her in her environment, he would be able to just walk away, but coming to the service had made it even worse.

“No!” She shook her head. “What are you searching for Francis?”

“Peace,” he told her promptly.

“There is peace - you can have that peace if you just believe the Lord came to set captives free.”

“You do not think I have had enough preaching for the day?” An amused smile touched his lips as he stared at her.

“It’s a habit of mine,” she admitted ruefully.

“What is your typical Sunday afternoon like?” He asked her softly.

“Dinner with my parents and then I might go to visit a friend or a sick person or a shut-in person. Or someone from our congregation who is in the hospital.”

“Do you ever go on dates?”

The question flustered her and he watched as she stepped back a few paces.

“I have offended you.”

“No,” she turned to face him, “we are not encouraged to go on dates. If we find someone we are interested in, we start a courtship.” She passed her hands over her hips, drawing his attention to their restless movements.

“A courtship that eventually leads to marriage,” he surmised.

“Yes,” she nodded.

“So, you would not be open to going on a date with me.”

“No,” she bit her bottom lip and he felt the stirring getting stronger.

“Not even for an ice cream cone?” His voice had turned husky, mesmerizing her.

“No. That would not be wise.”

“What do we do now, Amara?”

“We go back to our homes.”

“As if nothing is happening between us.”

“Nothing can ever happen between us.”

“Never?” His thick brows lifted, dark blue eyes penetrating.

“Never,” she repeated firmly, wondering if he could hear the pounding of her heart. The area was quiet, with the sounds of birds chirping and the water gurgling over the rocks.

Turning away from her, he walked swiftly to his vehicle. Amara held her breath, thinking that he was leaving. But he was retrieving something from the glove compartment. Slamming the door shut, he came back to hand her a card.

“If you change your mind about the ice cream, give me a call,” he had simply scrawled his name and number on a

yellow post-it paper. She took it from him after a few seconds of hesitation.

“I won’t,” she had no idea if she was trying to convince him or herself.

A slow smile tilted his lips as if he was aware of her quandary.

“My soul still needs saving, Amara,” the way he said her name sent the nerves fluttering inside her stomach.

“I will pray for you.”

He inclined his head regally, a solemn look on his face. “I would appreciate that,” he stood there staring at her for a few seconds, disconcerting her, “you do not wear jewelry?”

“Pardon?”

He gestured to the bareness of her neck and the fact that she was only wearing a simple smartwatch.

“A locket, given to me by my parents, but the clasp is broken and I am getting it repaired.”

“What is your favorite stone?”

She frowned a little as she wondered where the conversation was heading. “I like sapphires.” Inadvertently, her eyes collided with his and a subtle message passed between them.

“They would suit you.”

“I have to go,” she shifted from one foot to the other but did not make a move to leave.

“It is getting late.”

“My parents will be home by now.”

“And wondering where you have gone off to.”

“Will you come back for a visit?” The words were out of her mouth before she could retract them.

He drew closer to her, bridging the gap between them.
“Do you want me to, Amara?” He was so near to her that he could feel her body heat.

“We would welcome you back, of course. It is always good to have returning visitors,” her voice was husky, dark brown eyes wide as her head drifted back to stare at him.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Will you welcome me back with open arms?”

“That would not be appropriate.”

“Because I am a man and you are a very desirable woman,” one hand lifted to tuck a wayward curl behind her ear.

“Are you afraid of me, little one?” He asked her musingly as she jumped slightly.

“Yes. No.”

“Which is it? Yes, or no?” His hand drifted down to tilt her chin up. “I noticed that there was a lot of hugging going on, after the services. It would not be extended to me?”

“No!” She swallowed the lump inside her throat. No one had prepared her for this. She had lived a very sheltered life - a happy-go-lucky one where her faith was the epicenter of her existence. His slight touch on her chin was sending heat pouring throughout her body. She had found herself in a situation where she did not have the upper hand.

“Are you afraid of me, Amara?” He repeated the question.

“We cannot do this...,” dragging her chin away, she stepped back. “Goodbye Francis,” she turned to leave when he called her name.

“What?”

“I need your number.”

“Why?” She asked in a panicked voice.

“Because we both know we are going to keep in touch with each other.”

“Francis”

“Please.” His voice and expression were very persuasive and she found herself going to her vehicle to take out a card.

She turned to walk back to him and stopped short when she realized that he was right behind her. Taking the card from her nerveless fingers, he studied it, noting her title.

“Administrator?”

She nodded, pressing back against the side of the vehicle. he was too masculine, too virile and way too potent for her peace of mind.

“What does that entail?”

“I handle the business side of things at the chapel.”

“What is that like?” His head tilted slightly as he stared at her. He was making her nervous, that much he realized.

“There are several outreach ministries as well as the ones we have in-house. I am in charge of most of them.”

“A little thing like you.”

Her chin lifted. “You are patronizing me.”

“There is fire beneath that cool exterior.”

“I really have to go,” she started to open the door.

“Shall I call you later?”

“What for?”

“You promised to pray for me,” he reminded her.

“I can do so without calling.”

“I would prefer to hear what you have to say.”

“I don’t....”

“Please.”

She was drowning in his dark blue eyes and her skin felt heated. “Francis....”

“I love it when you say my name. Will you answer your phone, Amara?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

He touched her pointed chin, his finger lingering. “I will look forward to the call. Drive safe.” He stepped back and allowed her to get behind the wheel. Executing a three-point turn, she drove away, her eyes on the mirror as she watched him until he was out of sight.

Long after the dust her car had stirred had settled, Francis was still standing there leaning against his jeep. He had not meant to invite her here. It was his private spot, a place he would come to whenever he was deep in thought.

It was the place that he had fled to when his mother died. He had sat right here by the stream with the tears rolling down his cheeks and blaming God for taking her away from him.

He had cried until there were no more tears left and had felt her presence so profoundly with him that at first, he had wondered if she was here. To him, the place was sacred and he considered it his spot.

He dreaded the time when his father or brothers decide that it was time to let the property go. It had belonged to his mother's family and no decision had been made about it yet. But he had brought her here and it had felt right.

Leaning against the vehicle, he inhaled the sharp clean air, dragging it deep into his lungs. He was attracted to her, he realized dully. His body was craving a woman who had given her life to the Lord and was completely committed to the Lord's service.

And he was pretty sure that she felt the same way. Opening the door, he sat down in the driver's seat and

buried his head in his hands, taking deep breaths.

But he could not pursue her. She deserves some nice church-going guy who was going to offer her marriage. She would want that - marriage to a man as committed to the Lord as she was, one who would give her children as well as a nice stable home.

That person was not him, but the thought of her marrying sent him into such a state of depression that he could not breathe. Closing his eyes briefly, he turned in his seat and slammed the door shut. This was getting ridiculous now.

it took a lot of willpower to enter the front door and face her parents as if nothing was going on with her. And for the first time in her life, she was not straight with them.

“Honey, where were you?” Her mother asked as soon as she went into the kitchen.

“I had to run some errands,” she said evasively, “are you making stuffed shells?”

“Your father requested them.”

“Where is he?”

“Outside pottering in the shed. Go and wash up, dinner will be ready in a few minutes. I am afraid we are going to have to eat and run. Sister Cynthia is having a little crisis and wants to speak to your father and me.”

“It’s fine, I will be okay.”

“Go on, honey. I would like you to set the table when you return.”

She left the kitchen and bound up the stairs. Locking her doors behind her, she went over to the bed and dropped down at the side, her hands clasped in prayer. Closing her eyes, she tried to find the words, but they were long in coming. She could still feel his touch on her skin and the intense look in his dark blue eyes.

“Dear Heavenly Father,” she whispered. “I need your strength to deal with this. I have never felt this way before and I am troubled by it. Tell me what to do dear Father, I really need your help. I know he is a creation of yours, but I am not supposed to be feeling this way about him. Just tell me what to do, Lord, I beg of you.”

Chapter 6

Amara had a ritual, something that she had been doing ever since she was a child. She would get ready for the next day - if it was a school day, she would carefully choose her outfit and put it on the sofa in front of her bed.

As she grew older, the ritual had not changed much. She would choose her outfit for work, brush and floss, use her night moisturizer and put her sensible night clothes on.

She would then reach for the well-used Bible on the nightstand and read several chapters while making little jottings in her notepad. The last thing she did was to kneel in front of her bed and say her prayers - have a conversation with her Lord and Savior. That had never changed - ever. Except for tonight.

She had forced herself to participate in the lively dinner conversation, making sure that her parents would not

notice her preoccupation and how distracted she was. She also had to force the stuffed shells down her throat.

Her relief had been almost palpable when the meal was over. She had helped her mother to clear away the dishes and stack them in the dishwasher.

And had uttered a sigh of relief when they finally left. Now she was upstairs in her bedroom. She had automatically chosen what to wear tomorrow. There would be a series of meetings with the board members and the pastor would be present for most of the day. So, she had chosen a red and blue pants suit and a matching scarf.

But she had stopped short of going into the bathroom to brush and floss and prayer was the last thing on her mind right now. She was waiting for him to call and the anticipation was consuming her.

She should not answer him, she decided. And he probably would not anyway. She was innocent, but she knew a player when she saw one. Francis- she shook

her head as she realized that she did not even know his surname.

Francis whoever he called himself was a player. He was too handsome, disreputably so, not to be a lady's man. All that unruly and long blonde hair, the velvety dark blue eyes and the rough stubble of his jaw.

Her friends had teased her about him, saying that she had taken their conversation to heart and was recruiting eligible men to come into the sanctuary.

"I don't even know if he is married," she had protested, willing them to stop the discussion.

"You mean you did not ask him his marital status while you were telling him about the love of God?" Shelly had asked her teasingly.

She had told them 'no' and turned the topic into something else. Even if he was not married, he must be involved. There was no way a man who looked like him

would be single. He was apparently using his charms to get with someone like her.

But that was the thing - he had not used his charms. The first time she had seen him sitting there nursing his drink, he had looked angry and sad at the same time as if he was going through something.

Today has not been any different. There was something tangibly disturbing about him - an aloofness, a weary stance that says - I am done with the world - I have seen what it has to offer and there is nothing good about it. He had that defeated air about him except when he was teasing her.

She was jarred out of her thoughts by the ringing of her phone and for a minute she stood rooted to the spot. Then galvanized into action, she rushed over to the nightstand and grabbed it up, pushing the green icon. She had to take a breath before answering.

“Hello?”

“Hi. It’s Francis.”

She closed her eyes and dropped down at the side of the bed. His voice was deep and distinctive and was playing on her nerves.

“I know. How are you?”

“Since you last saw me several hours ago? Peachy.”
There was the teasing inflection again. “How about you?
How was supper?”

“It was good.” She cleared her throat. “Yours?”

“I had pizza.”

A frown touched her brow at that. “On a Sunday?”

“Is there a particular time to have pizza?”

“Surely you have family...?”

“I do, but they are not people I readily spend time with.
Can you cook?”

She was thrown by the statement and the question. “I can. My mother is a terrific cook and I learned from her since I was a child.”

“Would you like to come and cook for me, Amara?”

Her heart skittered at that. “I am certain you have some culinary skills of your own.”

“A little. But I was hoping that with your kind heart, you would offer to rescue this poor bachelor from takeout and fast food.”

“There is - I mean- you must have - Isn't there someone?”

He chuckled, the sound warming her skin. “Not for some time.”

“I see.”

“Would you like to know why?”

She closed her eyes again and scooted up against the pillows. “It's none of my concern.”

“I think it is.”

“Why is that?”

“I think you already know why.”

“I don’t. Look, you said you wanted to pray”

“Talk first, pray later. How soon do you go to bed?”

“The latest ten.”

“That’s surprising.”

“Why is that?”

“I figured a girl like you would be all tucked in at eight.”

“A girl like me?”

“A churchgoing woman.”

“I am much more than that. I am a child of God.”

“Is there a difference?” There it was again, the cynicism. She recalled that he had told her he was churched out.

“There is. Can you tell me what happened to make you so disillusioned?” She asked him softly.

“Are you trying to fix me, little one?” The softly spoken words sent shivers along her spine.

“I don’t have the power to do so. What happened to you, Francis?”

“I was brought up in the Catholic church,” he told her abruptly.

“Their teaching does not appeal to you?”

“Their way of doing things does not appeal to me. I have noticed that church is a business these days and it is all about collecting as much money as possible to line one’s pocket.” This time there was much more than an edge of sarcasm to his deep voice.

“Not every church is like that,” she told him quietly.

“Next you are going to tell me that yours is not.”

“Precisely.”

“I have seen the offering plate going around.”

“We cannot do the work of the Kingdom without money. That is the practical side of the work, the Lord has laid upon our hearts to do.”

“What kind of vehicle does the pastor drive?”

She stiffened at that but forced herself not to be defensive. It was not his fault that the world had a cynical and not-so-accurate view of people who are supposed to be children of God. They were the ones who had made things worse for themselves. “An SUV. He also has his own car wash business.”

“Where did he get the capital to start the business?”

Amara was careful not to let her resentment show in her voice when she responded. She refused to rise to the bait.

“The bank,” she told him a little tersely.

“Have I offended you, little one?” His gentle voice had the anger deflating.

“You are entitled to your opinion. And why do you call me that?”

“What? Little one?” There was a whimsical note to his voice. “Because you are so petite, I could lift you with one hand.

“Oh,” she plucked at the sheets restlessly, “are you going to tell me about the experience that has you so bitter and unbelieving?”

“I believe I already did. Most people get off when it comes to the color green. Money means a lot to them and they would use anything or anyone to line their pockets.” A tinge of bitterness had crept into his voice.

“You are speaking from experience,” she intuited.

“Something like that.”

“And you don’t think that for some people money does not matter?”

“Are you saying that everyone in that congregation would happily go without?”

“I am not saying that and you know it. Money is necessary to make life bearable. The Bible never said that having money is a sin. It only says that the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil.”

“What does money mean to you, little one?”

“It means the ability and freedom to purchase whatever is needed and to help those in need.”

“And you do that? Help others in need.”

“Yes,” she told him promptly, “we are people who care about the need of others. We have several ministries geared toward helping the poor. As disciples of Jesus,

that is what is required of us – not just to go and spread the good news, but to find out what the needs are and try and do something about it.”

“You sound very passionate about this,” he offered quietly after a few seconds of silence.

“I am.”

“You support a lot of charities.”

“I do, and not just the ones in the ministry but others as well. We have a food drive and a soup kitchen in the very heart of downtown where most of the homeless are often gathered,” she paused, “we will be there this coming Saturday and we can always use volunteers to help with the serving.”

“You are trying to rope me into doing good deeds.”

“It never hurts anyone. Will you come?”

“Do you want me to, little one?”

Amara’s fingers tightened on the sheets, her heart accelerating. “This is not about me.... “

“Answer the question. Please.”

“Francis....”

“I am just asking you a simple question.”

“It does not sound like that.”

“Will you answer?”

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Was that so hard?”

“What are you doing?”

“Talking. What does it sound like?”

“I know you are probably accustomed to women falling all over you....”

“A little bit,” the teasing tone had her smiling despite herself.

“And you are thinking to yourself that I am a churchgoing woman who is not familiar with the workings of the world.”

“And you think I am thinking of having my way with you.”

His bluntness threw her for a minute and at first, she did not know what to say.

“Is that what you are trying to say, little one?”

“Is that what is happening here?”

“Perhaps.” She shivered at the response. “Or perhaps the fact is I am enchanted for more reasons than one. Perhaps I am enticed by your honesty and transparency and the debate we have going on. In the past, I had always stayed completely clear about discussing religion and politics.

I strongly believe that each person is entitled to his or her opinion and I am not going to be the one to dictate that. With you, it has been different. Perhaps it is your approach and I have to admit that the way you look has a lot to do with it as well. You have to know that I am attracted to you, Amara.”

She shivered again and pulled the sheets over her. “And you have to know it cannot go anywhere.”

“What do you think of me, little one?” He asked her gently.

“I think you are mad at the world and very unhappy,” she told him honestly.

There was silence for a few minutes and she waited with bated breath, wondering if she had gone too far.

“You might be right,” he finally admitted, the lack of inflection in his voice apparent.

“Would you like to change that?”

“I do not have the power to do any such thing. Only the Lord does. It is not fair for you or any of us to put that kind of pressure on people. We are all human beings and are subject to our emotions and the situations in our lives. Making you happy is not my job.”

“You were on the debating team in high school, were you not?” He asked her in amusement.

“How did you ...,” she rolled her eyes even though he could not see her. “That’s a good one.”

“You are very good at trying to convince someone that you are right. What time is work for you?”

“Eight-thirty, but I try to get there at least half an hour earlier to prepare myself.”

“Do you want me to hang up now, little one?”

No! She was almost positive that she had said it out loud, that was how much she wanted him to stay on the phone. “We have not prayed,” she said aimlessly instead.

“We have not,” he agreed, “do you want to continue talking to me, Amara?”

“What else is there to talk about?”

“Your childhood. I know it was a happy one, but surely something monumental happened? Something that stands out in your memory?”

“You are looking for some sort of scandal?”

“Is there any? I would find it difficult to believe of course, but I am all ears.”

“I hate to disappoint you....”

“Then don’t!”

She laughed a little breathlessly, realizing how much she really liked him. “I had an accident when I was a cheerleader.”

“Of course, you were a cheerleader. What sort of accident?”

“The jump was too high and I missed my step and broke my left arm.”

“Ouch. How long did that keep you away from school?”

“Six weeks.”

“I bet you enjoyed the time away.”

“Actually no. Believe it or not, I loved school. I was an ‘A’ student and was worried that my grades would fall even though I was sent work by my teachers.”

“Did your grades decline?”

“No. I was determined to maintain my place and I worked extremely hard to accomplish that.”

“Do you have pictures?”

“Of me with a broken arm...?”

“Of you in your cheerleading uniform. Can I get an autographed one?”

Amara pressed a hand against her chest to stop the clamoring of her heart and took several deep breaths to

slow down the pounding. “That would not be appropriate.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not Francis and I think this conversation is heading....”

“Into dangerous territory? I agree with you.”

“Then I should hang up.”

“I would like to see you, Amara.”

“If you come to the soup kitchen....”

“Before then. I would like to see you face to face.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“You are afraid of me.”

“I am afraid of what might happen between us.”

She heard his sharp intake of breath at her brutal honesty. “And I value my relationship with the Lord to do anything to jeopardize it.”

“Are you saying that I should stop calling you?”

She closed her eyes at that and felt her head spinning.

“No.”

“But you do not want to see me.”

“You know why not,” she rubbed her forehead slowly, “I am not into games....”

“And you think I am,” he released his breath slowly, “I lost my mother five years ago.”

“I am sorry”

“I have not told you that so you could feel sorry for me,” his voice was unnecessarily harsh.

“I apologize. It is still a sore subject; she was the only one in my family I was close to. I am telling you all this because since I met you, I do not feel as if I am falling off the cliff. You steady me for some reason.”

Amara caught her lower lip between her teeth and felt the tears blurring her vision. “I am happy about that.”

“And yet you want to take that away from me.”

“That’s not fair....”

“My resorting to emotional blackmail?” He asked her a trifle grimly. “I am not a child of God, remember? I am a sinner who is out in the world and is not as pure as the driven snow as you are.

I have done awful things - things that would make your sweet mind curl in disgust. I have been with women because I wanted to slake my thirst and after that, I would not look back. You really should stay away from me, Amara; you might get tainted by my ugliness.”

“Please don’t talk like that.” She whispered, the tears slipping down her cheeks. He sounded so lonely and sad that she wanted to take him in her arms and cradled his head against her.

“You want to save my wretched soul.”

“Only the Lord has the power to do so. What do you want Francis?”

“To see you,” he whispered hoarsely, “and to take you in my arms...,” he broke off abruptly, “good night, sweet angel, and pray for me.”

Before she could say anything else; he hung up leaving her with tears streaming down her face. Removing the earpiece, she put it away and slowly put the phone on the bed next to her.

She had locked the doors, so she had no idea if her parents were home yet. She felt drained and weepy and she wanted to talk to him again. She could not get involved with him.

She did not even know anything about this man and besides that, he was out in the world. He also seems to have a lot of problems on his shoulders. “Oh God please help me.” She entreated as she slid off the bed and went into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

He needed a cigarette. He had given up the habit several years ago, but now the yearning for one was searing through his body. He had told her he was not playing games and he meant every word. At first, it had started as one, but several minutes into the conversation he realized that he was drawn to her.

The resolve to stay away from her had not worked one bit. He had gone to the chapel to just check things out and had told himself that he was going to see to it that he erased her from his mind, but that had not happened.

Shaking his head, he strode into the kitchen to pour himself a drink. He enjoyed talking to her. Loved the sound of her lilting voice and her very expressive face.

She was truly a beautiful woman and unlike any woman, he had ever met but was as unattainable as the stars. He would never do anything to hurt her. He could never do anything to hurt her. Sitting around the counter, he cradled the glass, a deep scowl on his forehead.

What on earth was he doing? A woman like her would want marriage and everything it entailed and he was certainly not going to be able to offer her that. His life was too messed up. He had so much baggage to deal with, he would need a carousel to handle all of it.

But he was fiercely attracted to her – she was the light to his darkness, hope to his despair, but he could not selfishly pursue her for his own gratification.

And she has no idea who he was - he had not told her his surname and she had not asked. If he was a simple guy attending the chapel, he would be able to ask for her hand in marriage. But he was not, he was the youngest son of a multi-billionaire investor.

What was worse, his family – the entire lot of them were hypocrites. They would do anything for the bottom line and all the money in the world was not enough for them. She would be tainted by them, a few minutes in their presence would have her running for the hills.

He could never subject her to anything like that. Not only that - but they would look down on her with scorn and

that was something he would never be able to bear. She was sweet and beautiful- truly beautiful and he did not want to spoil that.

So, he should leave her alone, he decided. That was what he was going to have to do. He would bury himself in his painting and forget about her. Leave her to marry some nice church-going guy and live an ordinary and happy life. Getting involved with him would spell disaster for her.

He was going to do the right and unselfish thing and stay away from her. She had invited him to that soup kitchen to give a helping hand, but he was not going to go. He would stay away from her and try and forget her. Tossing back the drink, he stumbled upstairs.

Chapter 7

She could barely concentrate on her work. She had spent the night tossing and turning in her bed and had not gone to sleep until the early hours of the morning. Her mother had noticed the weariness on her face and commented on it.

“I was up doing some thinking.”

“We came in last night, but your door was locked.” She had given her a curious look because there were never any locked doors between them.

“I must have forgotten to open it after I was getting undressed.” She had taken the coffee and freshly made bagel and hurried away before there could be more questions. She had not said an honest prayer last night and was miserable about it.

She had a great relationship with her Lord and savior and was now feeling like she was cheating on both of them.

“My dear, here you are.”

“You are already here,” she glanced at her watch to see to her surprise that it was a quarter of nine. “I am so sorry pastor....”

“Nonsense! You are never tardy; something must have happened to delay you.”

She could not answer that and decided to change the topic. “Is everyone here?”

“All except Deacon Bridges. Marlene and some of the other ladies have rustled up some coffee and cupcakes your mother left in the kitchen. Just grab your laptop and let’s go into the conference room.”

“I will be right there. I just have to print off the agenda and get some files.”

“I will hold the fort until you get there.” With a friendly smile, he turned and walked towards the conference room.

Going into her office, she closed the door behind her and leaned against it, her knees trembling. She was going to have to get herself together. Usually, she was cheerful and ready for anything, but things have changed. She had met someone who had turned her life upside down and she did not know if she was coming or going.

Taking a deep breath, she took a few minutes to compose herself and went to collect the things she needed. Saying a quick silent prayer while she was printing the documents, she felt the peace stealing over her and was able to walk into the conference room with a smile on her face and ready for business.

Francis was required to attend board meetings once a month. There was no escaping. He was a Coleman and as such had shares in the company. He also had some sort of title, something he never bothered to think about much less use.

He would get a generous allowance at the end of each month which was sitting in his bank account barely used. He had his own money because he had inherited a generous sum when his mother died.

He hated attending these meetings where a bunch of men sat around the table droning on and on about the bottom line and the profit or loss the company had seen over the last quarter.

But he would sit there and pay scant attention, eat the scrumptious refreshment prepared and be on his way. He never contributed to the meeting or anything like that and would leave as soon as it was over.

But today was different. He had spent last night twisting and turning on his bed, unable to get any sleep at all. He had managed to get some shut-eye in the early hours of

the morning and had consumed gallons of coffee to keep his eyes open.

“Before we table that matter, I would like to make a suggestion.”

Dozens of eyes swiveled to look at him, the shock in the room palpable. Thomas Coleman glowered at him and Brian looked like he wanted to reach across the table and grab hold of him for interrupting the natural order of things. “Go ahead,” his father said in a coolly polite tone of voice.

“I know we - as in the company is invested in several charities.”

“We are,” a member piped up, “there are the children’s homes, the art....”

“I do not require a list of the various charities, Marvin.” Francis sent the man a polite smile. “I was thinking that

we could invest in the homeless people in the downtown area.”

“Why is that?” Brian demanded.

“Because it would make good PR.” He sent his brother a mocking smile. “Something I am sure you would appreciate. There is a food program going on, I think every Saturday, a sort of soup kitchen and I am pretty sure that the people running it would love the contribution.”

“Where have you learned about this soup kitchen?” His father asked him, hazel eyes piercing.

“Here and there,” Francis said vaguely. He was beginning to wish he had not mentioned it. He had his own money and could very well fund a hundred soup kitchens, but he thought it should be the responsibility of the company to contribute.

He wanted to suggest that they take their collective selves to the area to see how the other half lives, but that would be a waste of time.

Thomas Coleman continued to stare at him for a few seconds before he nodded his assent to the project. "We will get the foundation on it. Thank you."

"I am assuming you did not call me into your sumptuous office to offer me a drink? Is that a new assistant I see at the desk? She is quite young, isn't she? Let me guess - she doubles as your employee during the day and your"

"Your mind is in the gutter as usual." Brian interrupted him coldly, adjusting his pearl gray vest and herringbone tie. Francis gave the eldest Coleman son a once over and mentally shook his head.

Brian was so buttoned up that it was a wonder he could sit at all. The suit he was wearing cost several thousand dollars and his vast closet - he did not share the space with his wife - his closet was filled with suits like the one he was currently wearing.

He was a stickler for order and the terrified maids would make certain his closet was organized to his specifications. His coffee-brown hair was superbly cut and his face clean shaven. His nails were buffed and polished and he looked every inch the investment banker.

He was also incredibly good at his job and equaled their father in his ruthlessness. "I would like to know what that was all about in the conference room."

"Oh, you mean the contribution I made?" Francis waved a negligent hand and without waiting for an invitation, walked over to the recessed cabinet to touch a button. "Would you like a bourbon?"

"It is my office and therefore my liquor cabinet," his brother reminded him stiffly, "and it is too early in the

morning. It is barely eleven.”

“It is afternoon or evening somewhere.” Francis poured himself a glass of scotch before retracing his step to take a seat on one of the plush chairs. “You need some color in the room.” He nodded to the ash-gray decor. “A bit of burgundy or electric blue would do the trick. You are practically fading into the wallpaper.”

“You are changing the topic.”

“I am simply ignoring you, Brian, learn to know the difference.”

“You have never contributed before. In fact, you always go out of your way to avoid saying anything at all.”

“What’s the matter, brother?” Francis asked sardonically. “Are you resentful that I took the spotlight away from you?” He took a sip of the excellent scotch in appreciation. Nothing but the best for his brother. “You were going on and on about divestiture and putting

everyone to sleep. At least I manage to wake them up with my request.”

Brian’s eyes glowered. “Is that why you did it? I have never seen you show the slightest bit of interest in feeding the homeless.”

Francis gave him a droll stare. “But you do not know anything about me, do you? I am an advocate for the poor and have always been,” he lifted his glass to indicate his brother’s attire, “that suit you are wearing could keep a third-world country in food for months.”

“I earn my keep here and I have to dress the part of a successful banker and heir to the company.” A scornful look touched his face as he glared at the simple dress pants, white cotton shirt and sports jacket that Francis was wearing. “We are all given clothing allowance, it would not kill you to use it.”

Instead of being offended, Francis chuckled in amusement. “I actually used mine to invest in helping a friend start his business. It would do you well to do the same. There are people out there who would benefit

from a show of charity from you, my brother, and it would actually make you feel wonderful.”

“The company has a very active charitable foundation-”

“I am talking about something personal.”

Brian bristled at him. “You know very well that we have a hands-on approach to a number of the charities the company is involved with. The ‘wives’ are very instrumental in raising money for various needs.”

“And I commend them for it. But what about getting out there and getting your hands dirty?” His blue eyes drifted to the well-manicured ones placed on top of the desk with the well-buffed nails. “But you would never dream of doing any such thing would you?”

“I do not appreciate....” “His buzzer rang just then.

“Saved by the bell,” Francis said sardonically as he rose lithely to his feet and tossed back the rest of the drink. He deliberately left the empty glass on the delicate-looking cherry wood table next to the sofa, knowing it would annoy the heck out of his fastidious brother and left the office.

Striding through the outer office without slowing down, he made his way to the bank of private elevators that would lead to the underground parking lot.

He blew out a sigh of relief when he managed to avoid coming into contact with any member of his family. Jumping into his jeep he looked incongruous among the shiny sleek rides of the executive members of the company, he sped out of the parking lot and onto the road.

“The daycare is doing exceptionally well – more than we ever hoped and prayed for. A preschool would be a bonus. We have been exploring this option for the past

five years now and I believe that we should go ahead with the preparation and implementation.”

Pastor Donald Biggers looked around the room at the men and women seated at the circular desk. “I would like us to take a vote on the decision.”

“There is also the question of the Ministry of Education getting involved and the red tapes and hoops we are going to have to jump through.” Minister Reeves spoke up.

“And we are a praying church. We have been doing so for years and I do believe the Lord is giving us the go-ahead,” he looked at Amara who was making notes on her device.

“Any thoughts, sister Amara?”

She looked up with a distracted smile. “The research is thorough. I have sent the findings to your emails for you to take a look at when you get the chance.

The numbers are encouraging. We sent around circulars to the members and those with preschoolers are enthusiastic about the idea. They want their children to be reared and educated in a controlled environment and one where their children can learn the Word and where prayer is a mainstay.

“We are now at almost the end of April and if the funding comes through, we can be up and running for the new school year. We have enough teachers in the congregation to make it happen. There are also scholarships being awarded to a pre-trained teacher who is interested in getting a teaching degree.”

Pastor Biggers gave her a pleased look and went on to add his own contribution before wrapping up the meeting.

“Would you stay a bit, my dear?” He waved a hand for Amara to resume her seat as the others left the room. “You have not eaten a bite of the delicious pastries courtesy of your mother.”

“I am not particularly hungry,” she told him with a forced smile.

“I have to admit that no matter how full I am, I cannot resist that good sister’s baking.”

Getting up from his chair at the head of the table, he went to pour two cups of the potent coffee and put some delicate croissants and cupcakes onto two plates. He brought her a plate and a cup of coffee before going back for his. “You were prepared as usual,” he added, taking a sip of the liquid, intelligent dark brown eyes meeting hers.

“I have some more details....”

“What you gave us was quite enough. More than, actually. Like I always say, you could be making a heap of money in the corporate world.”

“My place is here!” The coffee was bracing and exactly what she needed.

“And I thank the good Lord that you chose to stay with us.” Putting his coffee, he broke off a piece of cupcake and popped it into his mouth, closing his eyes in delight. “It just gets better.” Taking another sip of coffee, he gave her his attention. “I would like to think that we are more than just employer and employee and I am more than your pastor.”

“You are.”

He nodded at that. “I never had a daughter, four boys and not one girl. First Lady and I yearned for one, but the Lord never saw fit to bless us with one. You come very close, my dear.”

Tears gathered at the back of her eyes. “I am humbled by that.”

“Nonsense, my dear. We are the ones who are honored by your presence in our lives. Now that I have gotten that out of the way, I would like to know what is bothering that very intelligent brain of yours.”

She opened her mouth to say nothing, but her innate honesty and the man seated in front of her made that impossible.

“Oh pastor, I am in so much trouble,” she admitted in a wobbly voice.

“My dear...,” leaving his seat, he hurried over to take a chair next to her. “What is it?”

Biting her lip, she poured out what had been happening since she met Francis just a week ago. Was it just a week? She wondered. A little over seven days and it had changed her life drastically.

“That young man you ministered to at the mall and who came to services yesterday,” he took her hand in his,

“and you have been communicating with him.”

She nodded. “I went somewhere with him after services, nowhere inappropriate, a section of land he told me belongs to his family.” She gripped his hand. “I have...,” her voice faltered.

“You have feelings for this gentleman.”

She nodded miserably. “I have been praying about it, but I feel as if the Lord is far away from me. I think I am going to have to refrain from talking with him.”

“And then you would miss the opportunity to lead him to the wonderful and liberating love of God.”

“I don’t think I am strong enough.”

The man gave her a long measuring look. “I have known you since you were a baby. You were baptized right here in this chapel and I have had the privilege of watching

you grow up. You have admirable traits, my dear sister. You are strong, a born leader and you possess an indomitable strength that I find amazing.

People look up to you – they sit up and listen when you speak and your lovely voice brings across the songs in such a way that we can feel the spirit of the Lord moving in this place. There is nothing you cannot accomplish and with the Lord on your side, you are going to do very well.”

“My feelings....”

“You will allow the Lord to direct you in this. I recalled the time I first met Debra.” He gave her a whimsical smile. “I was in high school and I was as shy and gauche. I thought a classy beautiful girl like her was way out of my league.

But I knew right from the beginning that she was going to be my wife,” he patted her hand, “there is nothing too wonderful for our Lord to deal with. You just have to leave it to Him.”

He had brought his phone with him and left it on vibrate. After leaving the corporate office, he had taken a drive to his favorite spot and sat there, against the trunk of the huge oak tree, his knees drawn up against his chest, in contemplation.

Then he had gone to the café a few blocks from his lot and indulged himself by eating a full breakfast and two cups of coffee. Now here he was back at his loft and outside in the fresh air, trying to clear the cobwebs from his brain. He had reached for the phone several times to call her and just managed to stop himself.

He had decided to leave her alone and he was going to stick to that resolve. So here he was painting away his confusion. Bold colors were slashed against the canvas and very soon he was deeply engrossed in the play of colors that at first, he did not realize his phone was ringing or that the day had gone and the sun had settled over the horizon.

Shaking his head, he reached for the phone and went still as he looked at the LED. He should let it go to voicemail, he thought, his heart hammering inside his chest.

He had resolved not to have anything to do with her again and he should stick to that very sensible decision. Nothing good would come of him continuing this with her. Whatever this was.

But the sight of her name was - clicking the green icon, he growled out a greeting. "Hey."

"I am disturbing you." He closed his eyes at the lilting sound of her voice that sounded to him like a fresh breath of air to a man that had been cooped up in a stuffy room for days.

"I was just..." he closed his eyes and rubbed his hand at the back of his neck. "No. Are you okay?"

“I was not going to call you again.”

He went still at the bluntness of her statement. “I see. Why?”

“I cannot be with someone like you. But I have prayed about the situation and it would not be fair for me to keep the Word from you because”

“Because?” He pressed. The very idea of finishing the painting had fled from his mind and he settled back into the fold-up chair and stretched his legs out.

“Are you going to finish the sentence or do you want me to?”

“You already know what I was going to say.”

“I do.” He stroked the left side of his jaw, the bristles there reminding him that he badly needed a shave. “I was not going to call you again either. As a matter of fact, I was firm on the decision.”

There was a pause and he smiled, realizing that he had taken her by surprise.

“I see,” she repeated his earlier statement.

“Aren’t you going to ask me why, little one?” He asked her softly.

“No.”

“Because you already know the answer,” he sighed deeply, “where does that leave us?”

“Back to the beginning where I am supposed to tell you the wonderful news of salvation.”

“So just business as usual.”

“Precisely.”

“And nothing else. Whatever we are feeling for each other we should just go ahead and ignore it.”

“Yes.”

“Can you, little one? I have spent all night telling myself that I have no business thinking about you. That the heat inside my body was due to the temperature I had unwittingly turned up before I went to bed and not from thinking about you.

Can you honestly tell me that you can go ahead as usual? That you can tell me about salvation and that would be it for us?”

“I have to.” There was a funny little catch in her voice that tugged at his bruised and battered heart.

“Because I am not the type of guy you would ever be involved with?”

“Yes.”

“I agree with you, little one. You deserve so much better. Did I tell you what I do for a living?”

“You never did.”

“Then I suppose it is time to remedy that.”

Chapter 8

“I think it is time we were honest with each other.”

“I have been honest with you from the very beginning.”

“So, you have,” he rubbed the side of his face thoughtfully, “and I need to return the favor. My name is Francis Coleman.

“So, you do have a surname!” The teasing note in her voice made him realize that she had not connected the dots.

“I have two brothers – the eldest is Brian and there is Jeffrey. I am the youngest.”

“I bet you were quite spoiled.”

He almost ground his teeth in frustration. She had still not put two and two together to make the connection to whom he really was and he could scarcely believe that she was so sheltered or so spiritual that she did not listen to the news or go on social media.

“On the contrary,” his voice was laced with sarcasm, “I am the black sheep of the family.”

“Why is that?”

“My family has a long tradition of being investment bankers,” he paused, expecting her to conclude his connection, “my father’s name is Thomas Coleman.”

As soon as he said the name, he could hear her mind click; the pieces falling into place.

“You are Francis Coleman,” she whispered.

“That’s what I have been trying to tell you.”

“You are the Coleman’s - the ones featured in Forbes magazine and Business Journal.”

“Yes.” He averred tersely.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why were you pretending to be just a regular person?”
The hurt in her voice was palpable and left his stomach heaving.

“I am a regular person. I paint - I am an artist. I chose a different career path even though I had been groomed to take up my position in the corporate office.”

“You led me to believe....”

“Led you to believe what, Amara?” He ground out, his hands clenching into fists. “That I was a man you could be involved with? Even if I was some normal guy, there is still the question of my worldliness. I am darkness and you are light and never the twain shall meet.”

“Why didn’t you tell me who you are?” She demanded.

“Because I did not want you running in the opposite direction.” He leaned his head back wearily and closed his eyes. Birds were chirping in the nearby trees and the beguiling scent of flowers blooming filled his nostrils.

A squirrel or two rustled the leaves above his head and he found himself wanting - yearning for what he could not have. “Because I wanted to fool myself into believing that there could be a chance for us. But that can never be the case, can it?”

“You can have any woman you want!” She cried.

“Except for the one I really want,” he rubbed his forehead wearily, “I want you, Amara. You are who I yearn for whenever I close my eyes. I just met you - it has not even been two weeks and yet here I am aching to hear your lovely voice in my ear. Did you pray for me last night, little one?”

“Yes.” She whispered. “What do you paint?”

“Am I forgiven, sweetness?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Are you saying I do not have the right to do so?”

“Yes. No.”

“Which is it? Yes, or no?”

“Francis....”

“I love when you call my name. It’s like music to my ears.”

“What were you doing at the mall?”

“Our company is heavily invested in it and mother used to take us there for ice cream,” he rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. “I was feeling particularly low that day and decided to visit. It turned out to be a very fortuitous day.”

“You miss her!”

“More than I can ever explain. You remind me of her. She had a wonderful nature, was kind and generous and was always smiling. Every night she would come and tuck us in and read us bedtime stories. Her voice was lovely and soft and reminded me of a stream bubbling over stones. She was funny and loved nature.

Her gardens were famous and have been featured in dozens of magazines. Even though she was married to my father, she still managed to be happy, something I cannot comprehend. Thomas Coleman is a cold unfeeling man, only interested in the bottom line. She was too good for him.” He added bitterly.

“Perhaps she loved him.”

“She did. And he did not appreciate it. He had two mistresses stashed in apartments. On the outside, he was this pious individual who never missed mass on a Sunday and would fill the offering plate to impress the priest and the rest of them, but he was a lousy husband and father.”

“No wonder you did not want to hear what I had to say.”

He smiled slightly at the regret in her voice. "You have me convinced that there is some hope in the world."

"There is Francis," she told him in an earnest voice, "I am not here to judge anyone, but my duty is to tell you that there is forgiveness for your sins and a life beyond this one. There is joy and peace when you have a relationship with the heavenly Father."

"Are you back to preaching again, little one?" There was a tender note in his voice and a smile on his lips. He could not help but feel whole when he was having a conversation with her. It was like everything just fades away and there was nothing to worry about.

"It is a habit."

"Do you hate me, Amara?" He asked her suddenly.

"Why would I hate you?"

“My family is not the pillar of society they pretend to be. My brothers are married with sons and yet they follow the tradition of keeping women as well as their wives.

I should feel sorry and outraged for my sisters-in-law but they are beautiful empty shells who do not exhibit one ounce of emotion. I love my nephews, but I stay away from the manor whenever I can. You should run from me, little one, for your own good and for my peace of mind.”

“I have never run from anything in my life and I have a vested interest in your soul.”

He closed his eyes and felt the relief coursing through his body. He had given her a way out because of his conscience but was giddy with happiness that she had not taken it. “I would like to see you.”

“Just to talk.”

He smiled at that. “I promise to keep my hands to myself. I want to grow closer to you, little one. I don’t know about saving my soul, but I only know that ever since I met you, I want to be a better person. You would never guess what I did today.”

“What?”

He proceeded to tell her about the board meeting and the conversation stretched for several hours. Even when he had packed up his easel and headed back to his loft, he was still talking to her.

He made her laugh, loving the sound of the soft bell-like sound. Putting the phone on speaker, he made himself something to eat and teased her about coming over to rescue him from food poisoning.

“What are you making?”

“Mac and cheese and spinach.”

“That sounds horrible.”

“I told you that I am not a cook.”

“You had people doing that for you growing up.”

“Precisely,” he dumped the shells into the boiling water and went to pluck a bottle of wine from the cooler.

“Why don’t you have someone doing so now?”

“I hate to have people underfoot. I do have a housekeeper who comes in three times a week to clean up after me.” Twisting the cork from the bottle, he poured wine into the glass. “I travel a lot - so there is really nothing to do here most of the time.”

“Tell me about your work,” she encouraged.

Turning the flame down, he went to sit at the counter and cradled the wine between his hands. He could picture the avid look of interest on her exquisite face and the smile on her lush lips. “What do you know about art?”

“Excuse me! I would have you know that I took a course in creative design in college and can pretty much paint a lovely bowl of apples and a vase of flowers.”

He chuckled, immensely enjoying their sparring. “A five-year-old could paint something like that.”

“I do not appreciate you belittling my talent, Mr. Coleman.”

“I will not do so again. Have you ever been to the gallery in midtown?”

“Exquisite Paintings?”

“The very one. You have been there.”

“Yes. Wait! Oh, my goodness! You are Francis Gerard.”

“The one and the same,” a smile touched his lips, “I use my mother’s maiden name.”

“You take simple portraits and paint them over - there was one of a famous model and you painted her to look like a scarlet woman. Was that her idea?”

Getting up from his perch, he went to rescue the shells, by turning off the flame and adding the cheese. “People come to me and tell me that they want something different.

Not just a portrait - a likeness of themselves but one where the inner soul is revealed. The way they see themselves and I give them what they want.” Putting down his wine glass, he stirred the cheese into the shells

until they were golden brown. “I sketched you from memory.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think, little one?” The amusement was evident in his voice. “I have something in mind for you - but first I am going to need your permission because it is not something you are necessarily going to agree to.”

“I already do not like the sound of that.”

“It’s nothing outrageous really.” Pouring his meal into a plate, he collected a fork and napkin and took them with him to the counter. “An angel in a desirable woman’s body.”

“No!”

“Just like that?”

“It sounds inappropriate and I would not feel comfortable - I have to say no. I cannot have people looking at it and recognizing me. I am a child of God-”

“It would be just for me to look at.”

He smiled at the silence and waited for her to respond.

“It would still be inappropriate.” There was a breathlessness to her voice that was doing strange things to his insides.

“You cannot stop me from doing the portrait, Amara.”

“I know I cannot do that, but I was hoping you would do the right thing.”

“The right thing would be leaving you alone, but that ship has sailed,” he told her sardonically, “do you want me to leave you alone, little one?”

He heard her sigh and it twisted his heart a little bit. “No,” she whispered.

“You could have lied and said yes.”

“I try my best to be honest. I was brought up that way,” she admitted.

“One of the reasons I am so attracted to you. I live around people who lie to get what they want. You are so different. I would like to see you, Amara. Take you for that ice cream cone I have been promising or to the gallery, the movie theater, the Opera - do you like classical music or is it just gospel for you?”

“I would have you know that I am a big Luther Vandross fan.”

He chuckled. "Your voice had me spellbound. Why are you not on America's got talent? I happen to know most of the judges and can get you on the show."

"I am not interested."

"Because it goes against your Christian principles?"

"Yes, and not everything is about fame and fortune."

"I agree with you there."

"Francis?"

"Yes, little one?"

“I did not recognize you because you have never been featured in magazines like the rest of your family. Why is that?”

He got up to pour some more wine into the glass and came back to take his seat. “I never liked the limelight. Ever since I was little, I always knew that I was different from the rest of them. I was like my mother, thank goodness.

She shied away from the camera whenever she could help it. ” He paused and took a sip of the wine, his expression contemplative. “My dad and brothers live for the spotlight.

“They dressed to be photographed and do everything for the show. The opening of a new mall, the donation of a pediatric wing to the hospital, and the renovation of a local park was always photographed and written up in the papers.

Whenever they were at functions, the cameras always found them. I would stay in the background because the hypocrisy of it always kills me. It is all for show - they do

not care about the need, just the optics and it makes me sick.”

“I am so happy you are different,” she told him softly.

He felt a glow at that. “So am I, little one. What are you doing now?”

“Getting ready for bed.”

The sound of that, sent heat spiraling through his body and he had to take a deep breath to tamp down on his desire. “There is a question I am going to ask which you will probably think is inappropriate.”

“Go ahead and ask.”

“Have you ever - were you ever involved with a guy?” He waited with bated breath for the answer.

“No!” She told him breathlessly.

“You are a”

“Yes.”

“Oh, little one,” he whispered hoarsely. “In this day and age....,” he shook his head, “you are the most amazing woman I have ever met and I do not deserve to be having a conversation with you.

If I had known I would be meeting someone like you, I would have remained chaste, so that I would be worthy. I want to encourage you to be with someone in your congregation, but I am selfish and I want that someone to be me.

I would like a chance to get to know you, Amara. I know you said that because of our differences it could never

happen, but I would like that chance. Will you allow me to get to know you, little one?"

"You don't know what you are asking me," she whispered huskily.

"I do actually. I know your parents will not approve and as for my family, it does not matter. There is this infinite bond between us Amara - a magnetic pull that draws us to each other and we cannot deny it.

I have never felt this way before. I have tried to stay away from you, but I cannot do so. You have tried to do the same, but it is not working out. We belong together little one and it is time we learn to accept it."

"We only just met!"

His smile was whimsical. "And look at how much we mean to each other already."

“I am inviting you to Bible studies on Wednesday.”

He blinked at the change of topic. “And if I refuse? Does that mean you will never speak to me again?”

“I would be disappointed because I want you to have an idea what I am about, what drives me, but as for not speaking to you again, we have both established that is not going to happen.”

He was humbled by her honesty and could feel the yearning filling his very soul. “What time?” He asked her hoarsely.

“We start at 7.00 pm. sharp and you will not be disappointed.”

“Is there a chance that I can see you alone after?”

There was a pause and he could just imagine the indecisive look on her exquisite face. “Where would we

go?”

“Back to our place. I just want to see you - talk to you for a little bit. I promise to keep my distance.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you,” he told her hoarsely, “now as much as I hate to end this, I will let you go and get some sleep. But first, will you pray for me?”

Amara was flushed with excitement and giddy with it. She was no longer torturing herself about her feelings. She was at peace with it. She had not told her parents about Francis and wanted to keep the friendship to herself for the time being.

His wealth and status bothered her a bit, but the man she spoke to every night was someone she was getting

to know very well and money was only a means to an end for him.

He was down to earth and cared about people, especially the poor and downtrodden. He was funny and had a dry wit that would send her into peals of laughter.

He would ask her about her day and actually listen and make some input. He was brilliant and spoke four different languages. They had conversed in Spanish, the one language she had mastered in high school and he would tell her all the places he had been to.

“You look happy,” Jessica waltzed into the office on Wednesday, a slight frown on her brow.

“Aren’t I always?” She asked airily as she put away the files she was using. “What brings you here in the middle of the day?”

“John is missing.”

“What?” The haze of happiness evaporated like vapor. “I don’t understand.” John was Jessica’s older brother and had been in and out of rehab for the past five years. He had started attending church a few months ago but had not been back for several weeks. “I thought he was doing so much better.”

“That’s what we thought too.” She sat down heavily on one of the padded chairs and clasped her hands in front of her. “Mom called and said she had been trying to get in touch with him for the past two weeks and his phone just goes straight to voicemail.”

“Did someone check his apartment?”

“What do you think?” Jessica shook her head in remorse. “I apologize. I was in the middle of a meeting with a client - a sixteen-year-old who had been brought in on gun charges when I got the call. I have some friends at the precinct and they sent some officers to check out his place. He has not been there for weeks.”

She rubbed her hands together wearily. "I had not checked on him, Amara. The last time we had a conversation, I was angry and told him that I was through with him. A child of God saying something like that to her own flesh and blood. Now he is missing and if anything happens to him, I will never forgive myself."

"Have you called our pastor?"

She nodded. "He prayed with me and is putting feelers out with his contacts. My parents are going crazy with worry," she smiled sadly, "it's the first time they are not fighting."

Amara moved from behind her desk and came to sit next to her friend. "I am not going to sit here and mouth platitudes, telling you that everything will be okay. We live in a fallen world and the devil is seeking to kill, steal and destroy," she reached for Jessica's hands, "I do not have a sibling and can only imagine what you are going through."

What I do know is that you are human and whatever anyone does, they are the ones to make the choice. You

have tried to help John, honey, we all did. We did the intervention thing and we practically dragged him to services. It is not on you that he fell off the wagon and reverted to his old ways.”

“I know,” tears clouded Jessica’s eyes, “we grew up in such a volatile environment. Our parents were always fighting and we only had each other to turn to.

When I started coming to church, it was my salvation, my escape from the miserable circumstances at home. And I was shown such love and compassion that I realized what was missing from my life.” She squeezed Amara’s hands. “But John chose another way and I am afraid of where that has taken him.”

“Would you like me to pray with you, honey?” Amara asked her quietly. “I know pastor already did, but if you want....”

“I would love that,” she smiled through her tears, “prayer helps and like you said, we have to be real. I am a child of God, but that does not mean bad things will not happen to us. We live in a world where chaos reigns.

My work as a legal aid has taught me that and it breaks my heart to see young lives being wasted. My own brother has been abusing drugs since he was in high school and my parents were too busy hating each other to notice.”

“We are going to pray for peace, which is something we are all going to need going forward.” The phone lines were ringing, but Amara ignored them as she closed her eyes and started to pray. Her prayer was simple and heartfelt.

She asked the Lord for wisdom and understanding. She mentioned the fact that they were so human that they had no idea what was going on. Then she pleaded for peace - not only for the immediate family but the church family as well.

Chapter 9

She kept looking out for him. She was seated near the doorway so that she could see who was coming in. Their Bible studies were always popular and people would make an effort to come out or if not, they would go online to watch and participate.

Her parents would not be attending, because her dad had a slight cold and they did not want to take the chance of contaminating anyone.

Usually, on a Wednesday, she would just stay the entire time until it was time for Bible studies. She would always find something to occupy her time until the hour had come. But this time it was different.

She had brought a pretty red and white polka dot dress with a flair skirt and a chic red jacket to go with it. This morning, she had spent time with her thick, dark curls, brushing them until the strands were lustrous with good health and leaving them loose around her face and shoulders.

The woman who worked at the daycare had commented on how lovely she looked and asked her teasingly if she had a date after services. She had deflected the questions and managed to divert their attention to other matters.

She had also babysat Jerome for Marlene while she went and ran some errands. The girl was so different from the one she had seen two weeks ago that Amara was amazed by it. She was confident and the pastor had given her the use of a car that had been at his house.

Both she and Jerome seemed happier and more settled and Amara was giving thanks for that.

Forcing herself not to allow the disappointment to surface, she opened her Bible to the passage of scripture that Pastor Biggers would be concentrating on. The prayer and praise reports had gotten underway with a special urgent prayer going out for Jessica and her family as they go through this difficult time.

They were halfway through the announcements when he made his appearance. One minute she was making notes on her pad and then she was looking up and there he was, framed inside the doorway. Her breath caught in her throat and she was pretty sure that everyone in the room could see the naked pleasure on her face.

He was wearing faded denims that seemed to be molded to the length of his legs and a simple chambray shirt and a beaten-up dark brown jacket. His thick blonde mane was brushed back into a ponytail, with tendrils escaping around his freshly shaven jaws and he looked wonderful.

“Welcome, my dear brother,” Pastor Biggers stopped in the middle of his announcement to greet him. Amara hid a smile as she noticed the color creeping up into his face as he was suddenly the center of attention.

“Please sit anywhere,” the pastor added.

His blue eyes zeroed in on her and she held her breath as he made his way to the empty chair next to her.

“Hi!” He whispered.

“Hi.” She handed him one of the visitor’s Bibles and told him the scripture.

“You are beautiful.”

“No talking,” she admonished, a smile on her lips.

“Yes ma’am.”

She cut him a pained look that had him biting his lip to stop him from laughing. His first sight of her as soon as he reached inside had stolen his breath. Her hair was thick and curly and was in an artful tumble around her face and down her shoulders. And she was wearing some sort of shimmery lip gloss.

He was sitting next to her and had to shift several times to make himself comfortable. Perhaps it was not a good

idea to be so close to her. The perfume she was wearing was intoxicating and everything about her was heady.

His head snapped up when the pastor called her to come up to take the lectern. He watched as she made her way through the seats until she was standing behind the transparent lectern, a smile on her lips.

“We all know what it is like to work with young people and to dedicate time and resources to molding their young minds. Shenna and Tyler were two such young people and I am standing here to proudly announce that they both received scholarships for Harvard law.”

The applause was thunderous and Francis got to his feet automatically when the rest of the crowd did. He watched with avid interest when the woman who was the focus of his mind and body beckoned to the two young people, who ran up and threw their arms around her for a tight hug.

“Speech! Speech!” The congregation shouted.

Shenna took the microphone and had to take a few minutes to compose herself. “Tyler designated me to be the speech giver, but I don’t mind in the least. I just want to give the highest honor and glory to my heavenly Father who made this all possible.”

She turned to Amara who was standing a few feet away. “And to my wonderful sister, friend and confidant who cheered us on when things looked bleak.

She fought for us and without her daily encouragement and the fact that she never allows any of us to forget that we are fearfully and wonderfully made and that nothing is impossible where our Lord and savior are concerned. To show our appreciation, we put a basket together for you, Sister Amara.”

“You did not have to do that,” she protested.

“We did!” Tyler told her with a grin as he went to get the foil-wrapped goodie basket and handed it to her.

Francis felt the quick dart of something when the young African-American young man leaned in to kiss her cheek and realized to his shock that he was jealous.

His hands clenched into fists and he had to take several breaths to remain calm. He felt ridiculous. He was not a callow youth with his first crush. He was a sophisticated man with wealth and power.

His family were well recognized and he could get any woman he wanted - he broke off the tirade going on inside his head and redirected his attention to what was going on up top.

The two young people had left to go back to their seats and Amara was expounding on how important it is never to give up on one's dream. Her soft lilting voice commanded attention and the glow on her exquisite face and golden-brown eyes were mesmerizing.

He was in love with her! The revelation startled him so much that he had to suck in his breath. He was in love with a woman he had just met not quite two weeks ago. Ever since their meeting, she had managed to impact his

life and now he could not bear the thought of being without her.

Forcing a smile to his lips when she came back to her seat, he concentrated fiercely on the rest of the service.

“Are you okay?” She asked him curiously. They had arrived at the spot. As soon as she pulled up behind him, he moved forward to open the door for her to alight from the vehicle. That had been ten minutes ago and he had not said anything since then.

“Yeah.” Walking over to the stream, he stood with his back to her and shoved his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, palms facing out. “That guy, Tyler – how old is he?” He asked abruptly.

“Twenty. Why?”

“He has a crush on you.”

“What?” She asked in a startled voice.

“He has a”

“I heard you the first time and that is ridiculous.”

“Why?” He turned to face her. The moon was out in all its glory and the light shining between the leaves showed his unsmiling face. His broad shoulders were tensed, his lips a thin slash on his face. “You are a looker and I am certain most if not all of the men are panting after you.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Because I am being honest?”

“I am leaving,” she turned and reached her vehicle; he had caught up with her.

“Let go of me.”

“I am sorry.” He told her hoarsely, a miserable expression on his face. “I was jealous....”

“Of Tyler?” She gave him an incredulous look that made him feel lower than dirt.

“I feel like a jerk.”

“You sound like one.”

Her words and the tone of her voice had him staring at her. “You are disgusted with me.”

“I am shocked that you would – there is no need to be jealous of anyone.”

“Why is that?” He whispered huskily.

“Because ...,” she bit her lip and turned her head away.

“Because?” He waited with bated breath for her answer.

“I have never felt this way about anyone before.”

“Oh, little one.” He drew her into his arms and wrapped his arms around her slender waist.

“I shouldn’t....,” she buried her face into his chest and felt the unsteady beating of his heart.

“You are not going to spoil it now, are you?” He teased her in a shaky voice.

“Francis, this is crazy. We are miles apart....,” she broke off when he lifted her chin so he could see her face.

“I am aware of that. I never asked for any of this,” he whispered hoarsely, “I was just sitting there being my usual miserable self when you came walking up to me and it bowled me over.” His blue eyes caressed her face lovingly.

“I am not going to insult you by saying that I am going to suddenly be part of the congregation. It has to happen naturally. But I am here saying that I have fallen in love with you.” He closed his eyes briefly. His hands were trembling, his heart thumping inside his chest.

“It’s not going to work,” her eyes were so huge, he felt as if he was drowning in the golden-brown depths.

“Because we are incompatible.”

“We are.”

“We talk to each other for hours,” he pointed out.

“I am a child of God.”

“And I am not. No. I am a regular person and you are....”

“Not interested in money. Little one, tell me you love me too,” he urged.

“Francis....”

“You cannot lie,” he reminded her huskily, “even if you do not say the words, I will know.”

“I am in love with you and I am not supposed to be.”

His heart thumped inside his chest. “You could not just say the words without adding anything to them?”

“It will never work!” She stopped as he put a finger vertically against her lips.

“Shh, my love.” He whispered. His head descended and she gripped the lapels of his jacket, her body trembling. He kissed her passionately and before long the emotions were swirling madly between them.

Amara felt her hands trembling and she had to press them together to keep them steady. He had followed behind her to make certain that she made it safely home even though she had told him it was completely unnecessary.

“You are mine now,” he had whispered thickly, “and I take care of my own.”

The kiss had been fiery and had taken them both by surprise. It had left her clinging to him, her fingers buried in his thick mane. It was he who had ended it, putting her away from him, his blue eyes darkened, his face taut. "If we do not stop now, little one, I won't be able to," he had told her thickly.

"We need to leave now."

And she had hastily headed for her vehicle and climbed in on trembling legs.

Now she was home in the parking lot and was trying her best to compose herself. She was in love with a man who was not saved. Not only that, he was part of the powerful Coleman family - a family who made the news frequently.

It did not matter that Francis was not as visible as they were - but that was not true, was it? She thought in despair. His paintings were controversial and intriguing.

Arts & Crafts Digest had said those very words when they dedicated an entire spread in their magazine. he was sophisticated and worldly and she was just a simple churchgoing girl who enjoys a simple life.

“Why Lord?” She whispered achingly. “I never asked for anyone. I was not interested in a guy. I was content to go on about my life doing your work.

And if and when I was ready, I would have expected someone in the church. Not someone like Francis.” She closed her eyes and placed her head on the steering wheel.

She loved him. She had never been in love before, but she was smart enough to know what it was. She looked forward to talking with him. He made her laugh and at nights after she finished talking to him, she would pray for him.

When he kissed her, she could almost swear she heard music and bells ringing and she did not want him to stop.

The front door opened, spilling the light from the foyer and she saw her dad framed inside the doorway.

“Honey?”

“I am just coming in.” Firming her lips, she pushed the door open and stepped out. She made a production of engaging the alarm before walking the rest of the way and onto the porch.

“Hi, dad. How are you feeling?”

“Better,” he looped a hand over her shoulders as they made their way in, “we were beginning to worry about you.”

“It’s not that late.”

“It’s a little after nine and you are usually here earlier,” he kissed her cheek fondly, “your mother tells me I worry too much.”

“Why worry when you can pray?” She said automatically.
“Where is she?”

“Tucked up in bed. I ran her ragged with my demands today.”

“Men are like babies when they are ill,” she smiled at him and hugged him tightly.

“Go on up while I secure the doors. If you are hungry, your mother made a pot of stew.”

“I am fine. Night, dad.”

“Night, sweetheart. Sleep tight.”

She climbed the stairs and poked her head in to call her mother only to find her fast asleep. Going along the passageway to her suite of rooms, she let herself in and closed the doors, heading straight to her bedroom.

Methodically taking off each item of clothing, she folded them and put them away before putting on an old t-shirt and climbing in between the sheets.

She had just propped herself onto the pillows when her phone rang.

“Hi.” She suddenly felt shy. He had carnal knowledge of her mouth and had done what no man had ever done before and she felt as if she had grown up since tonight.

“You are all tucked away in bed?” His deep voice made her yearn for much more than his potent kiss.

“Yes. Just now.”

“Are you okay, little one?”

“I am suffering from guilt.”

“Why?” He demanded.

“Francis, this is the first time....”

“It’s your first kiss and I am finding it hard to believe that a beautiful woman like you has never - what happened to the men around you? Are they blind?”

“You have to understand that I ...,” she plucked at the sheets restlessly, “I never allowed anyone to get that close.”

“No.”

“You must think I am very naive.”

“I think you are the most wonderful woman that has ever been created,” he told her hoarsely, “I want to tell you to run in the opposite direction, my sweet one. But I am selfish and I cannot think of my life without you in it,” he paused, “it’s not going to be easy, Amara; I have to be honest with you.

My family ...,” he paused again, “they are not very nice and my dad had someone picked out for me to marry some years ago and I stood my ground. I refused to marry anyone I do not have feelings for. But I want to know that no matter what, you will stick by me.”

“I am not afraid of anyone Francis. I am confident in who I am and that will never change.” She paused. “it’s just that...”

“What?” He asked her urgently.

“You are sophisticated and worldly. You have been with women-”

“That does not mean anything,” he said urgently, “I already told you that and I would like you to believe me. For the first time in my life, I have a purpose. After my mother died, I concentrated on my paintings, pouring myself into my work, because there was nothing more for me.

Then you came into my life and all of that changed. You are my light, little one ...,” his voice had deepened, “my hope and I are bursting on the inside because of you. I kissed you tonight and it staggered me how powerful and potent it was. I have never felt this way before and I am humbled by it.”

Amara felt the warmth washing over her and the heat spiraling through her body. “Oh, Francis,” she whispered.

“I would like you to do something for me.”

“What is that?”

“Come over to my place. I will be at the soup kitchen and afterwards, I want to invite you over for dinner. I will show you my work and we could spend some time outdoors. The view is lovely....”

“You cannot ask me that.” She swallowed the lump inside her throat as she realized how much she wanted to say yes.

“I give you my word that I will not touch you,” he entreated, “we could stay outside for the entire time and I will stay away from you.”

“Will that be possible?” She asked in a trembling voice.

“Oh, little one!” He laughed shakily. “I will do my best endeavor to keep my hands to myself. I just want to spend some time with you. I would invite you to the

gallery opening uptown, but there are going to be the press there. Jackson Colby is having a showing there and wherever he goes, the press follows.”

“When is it?”

“Sunday night at eight.”

“I would love to be there.”

“I will procure an invitation for you. Tell me you will come on Saturday.”

“I don’t know,” she demurred, “how will it look for me to be alone with you at your place?”

“I want to see you, Amara. Not just in a crowd at church or a few stolen moments at our favorite spot. I would like to spend time with you, without you having to worry about being seen. I need that.

We could talk about the Bible or anything you want. I cannot sleep at night thinking of you. Give me this, my sweet one, and I promise you that I will be on my best behavior.”

“Why would you want to subject yourself to something like that?” She asked him fretfully. Her resolve was weakening and they both knew it. “You could be with someone who does not have so many restrictions. Why are you putting yourself through this?”

“You already know why, little one,” he told her gently, “I would rather be with you and be hands-off than be with someone I do not care about. Even if it is just to sit and talk. Will you come, sweetheart? Please say, yes.”

Amara closed her eyes briefly, her flesh fighting with the spirit. She was in love with him and if one of her sisters from church came to her with this particular problem, she would urge them to stay away from the temptation.

But she supposed one could never know what to do until one was in the situation. And spending time with Francis was something that she was yearning to do. She was strong, was she not? Surely, she could spend time with him without compromising her standards, could she not?

“Yes,” she found herself whispering.

“Yes?”

“Yes,” she repeated. “I want to spend time with you as well.”

“Oh, sweet one,” he whispered hoarsely, “you have no idea - I am going to be counting the hours until you are here. Now I am going to have to get the housekeeper to come on Saturday morning to clean up,” he added teasingly.

“Please promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“Promise me that no matter what, you will not....,” she swallowed and could not continue.

“I will be on my best behavior,” he told her solemnly, “you have my word, that no matter how tempted I am, I will not touch you unless you want me to.”

“I cannot let that happen.”

“Then there will be no touching.”

Chapter 10

“I was hoping for the best.” They were seated in the conference room on Friday morning. Jessica had called them with the news that they had found her brother dead from an overdose of opioids in an abandoned warehouse on the edge of downtown.

“So was I....” Jessica had come over and the pastor as well as First Lady Antoinette had met her at the chapel. Marlene and several of the church mothers were also there to give their support to the distraught girl.

“The police said there was no foul play.” She clasped her hands in front of her, her face ravaged with tears. “My brother is gone and the only thing I can think of is that I will never get to see him again. He was not saved. His life was for nothing.”

“Now my dear, we cannot think like that.” Pastor Biggers told her firmly. “In the last hours or minutes of death, one never knows what goes on between the person dying and the Lord. Remember the thief hanging on the cross

next to our Lord and Savior? Well, he asked for forgiveness and received it at that very instant.

Your brother was brought up in the church and knew the Bible. He also knew how to pray. I am sorry he had to go that way, a young man with so much to live for, but we cannot speculate on his last hours or minutes. It is beyond our scope of comprehension.”

“Am I allowed to be angry, pastor?” She asked tearfully. “Because I am. My parents did this to him. They forced him to turn to drugs. There was never any peace inside our house and he had to look elsewhere for it. They did this to him.”

“That I cannot agree with my dear sister. John made a choice - yes there were mitigating circumstances, but he was the one who chose to turn to drugs. You made a different choice, the right one, I might add.

You chose Jesus and his wonderful forgiving and compassionate nature. We tried to be there for him, but he went back out there. I know you want to blame

someone, but blame the enemy who comes to steal, kill and destroy.

I know you are not in a position to pray for your parents yet, but consider what they are going through at this time. And who knows? This might just be the catalyst that draws the family closer together. Now we are going to ask our dear Lord and savior for strength going forward. When one of us hurts, then all of us feel it.”

“You are going back to work?” Amara stared at her friend in consternation. The meeting had ended and the others had left. She had invited Jessica to sit a while in the office with her.

“It’s the only way I can think to take my mind off my troubles.” Jessica went to pour a cup of coffee and brought it back with her.

“There is this sixteen-year-old boy from the hood who has been brought up on gun charges and I am trying to get his sentence reduced,” she smiled sadly, “I deal with so many of these kids and I feel a sense of despair that I am not reaching them.

They come from broken homes, like John; and his senseless death has given me the incentive to do more than try to keep them out of juvenile detention or even jail. I want to form a club or something like that where reformed gang members or drug users will come in and talk to them.

Whenever I am representing them, I would give them the Word, and tell them of the hope that Jesus offers. They listen, but then they have to go back into that same abusive environment. And then what?” She raised her shoulders in a helpless shrug. “Then what I tell them just disappears. I want to do much more than what I am doing.”

“Then do it.”

“You think I can?” She asked hopefully.

“I think you can do anything you set your mind to Jess,” Amara told her quietly, “I was just thinking that I live in this bubble. I am from a very decent and loving home - where my parents are very supportive.

I have never really experienced anything traumatic, except for that time when dad almost died and even then, if the Lord had chosen to take him, he would have gone to heaven. I always have food to eat, more than enough and I have somewhere to turn to whenever I have a problem.

Most people do not have that. Providing a place of refuge is a very good idea. We could have it here. This place is huge with rooms that are not being used. We could assign one of the rooms for such a special purpose.”

Jessica’s eyes flared with hope. “You really think we could do it in here?”

“I will ask the pastor, but I am pretty certain he will say yes.” She told Jess with a smile.

“It seems I hardly see you, honey,” Angela complained as she sat on the side of her daughter’s bed, watching as she picked out her outfit for the next work day.

“I have been quite busy,” Amara selected a tailored pants suit in pale pink with a steel gray blouse and held it up against her slender frame. Francis would be calling her in the next hour and she wanted to be alone when he did.

She had developed a routine - talked for hours with him and then read her Bible and prayed before falling asleep. She has no idea what they found to talk about every single day, but they did and she could not think about ending her day without hearing from him. “What do you think?”

“An excellent choice,” Angela’s dark brown eyes wandered over her daughter’s exquisite face. There was something so different about her that she could not put her finger on it.

She had said something like that to her husband and he had waved a dismissive hand. Men were not very observant when it comes to matters like this, but she was a mother and she knew her daughter well. “I spoke to Jessica today.”

Amara nodded; her eyes shadowed by grief. “She is holding it together by a thread. I am finding it hard to pray for peace as well.” Putting her outfit onto the side of the sofa, she went to sit at the vanity. She had secured her hair into a neat chignon at the nape of her neck and was about to twist the strands so that it did not get tangled.

“He was a troubled young man.”

“Who refused to change his ways and allow the Lord to work things out in his life.”

“Once a person is hardened by sin and has been in the world for a long time, it is difficult to change.”

Amara glanced at her in the mirror. “Do you believe that?”

Angela observed the shadow of uncertainty on her face and presumed that the question was not as innocent as Amara pretended it to be.

“I do. But there is nothing impossible for our Lord to do,” she stared at her daughter and wondered how to broach the topic, “is there something you want to tell me?”

Amara gave her a startled look, pausing in the act of twisting her hair. “What do you mean?”

“You have been distracted and preoccupied for the last two weeks. You sit down to supper and have devotions

with us, but you then go into your room and be by yourself.

Normally, we would sit on the porch- all of us and enjoy cups of tea and watch the sunset and talk about something like a scripture we have read. That has not happened of late. I am assuming there is a good reason for it?”

Angela watched as her daughter avoided her eyes and concentrated on the simple task of twisting her hair. “You can tell me anything honey, I hope you know that.”

“I do,” she said softly, “I am just not ready to share yet.”

“You have met someone.”

Her eyes widened as she met her mother’s gaze in the mirror.

“Yes.”

“And it is not someone from our congregation. I hope you know that is quite all right, honey. It does not matter from which congregation....”

“What if he is not saved?”

“Oh!” Angela was at a loss for words. “Then I would ask you if you know what you are doing.”

“I have no idea,” she laughed shakily, “I just know that he is ...,” she closed her eyes briefly, “he is special and wonderful and I have seen past his bad boy image to the real person. He is hurting a lot, mom.

He has been through so much and there is bitterness there. Before you say it, he is not someone I am hoping to save, even though I have been witnessing him. It is so much more than that.”

“You are in love with him,” her mother said quietly.

Amara finished twisting her hair and bundled the strands into a fat roll with an elastic band before turning around, “and I have been praying and asking the Lord for direction. he is different.”

“And maybe that is the attraction,” her mother pointed out. She had prayed that the Lord would send a wonderful man into her daughter’s life, one who was going to love her as Christ loves the church. One who was of the same faith and who loved the Lord. But she was not expecting this.

“No!” She shook her head. “We talk a lot. He is a gentleman - or he is trying to be. He does not disrespect me or anything like that. We are so very different, but I feel as if I have known him for ages,” she clasped her hands in front of her, “he is coming to the soup kitchen on Saturday.”

“So, I will get to meet him.”

“You have already seen him at church. Francis.”

“Ah. He is quite handsome - too handsome in fact. And that unruly blonde hair and the way he dresses.”

“We are not supposed to judge a person by his or her apparel.”

“You are right.”

“There is something else.” Amara took a deep breath.
“You know who he is.”

“I do?”

“His name is Francis Tobias Coleman.”

Her mother stared at her with a frown. “It does have a familiar ring to it.”

“His dad is Thomas Coleman,” Amara watched as her mother’s expression cleared.

“My dear, they are extremely wealthy.”

“Yes. But he is not - he is not in the family business. He is an artist. he paints.”

“Oh sweetheart, do you know what you are getting into?” Her mother was clearly agitated. “They belong to a whole different world and this young man, surely he can get someone from his world?”

“The world belongs to the Lord,” Amara said automatically.

“We are in the world”

“I know what you are going to say mom and I have been saying it too. He says he is in love with me.”

“And you believe him?”

“Yes,” she took a deep breath, “he has not said anything about marriage because I am not certain I could ever marry him knowing full well that he is not saved. But that has not stopped me from falling in love with him.” She shook her head at the question on her mother’s face.

“It is not the glamour of who he is. You know me better than that. Ever since our first meeting, something has drawn me to him and it has only gotten worse or better, it depends on how you look at it. I am irrevocably linked to him and that has not changed.”

“But you cannot marry him.”

“No,” she shook her head, “and he is too honest and respects me too much to pretend to be saved because he wants to please me. I would resent him for that and

would not believe it anyway. His conviction has to be something he wants to do for himself.”

“So, what now?”

“Now, I simply talk with him. Now I wait for the Lord to do His thing. Now I just allow him to lead. Now I wait to find out if this is the way for my life.”

“Oh, my dear girl. I, so, wanted something uncomplicated for you.”

“So did I,” Amara said with a sigh, “I breezed through life, thinking that I was not interested in a relationship, that I was too busy with kingdom building and just enjoying my life and now this,” she shook her head, “now my life has irrevocably changed.”

“Then the only thing to do is to pray.”

Amara found her eyes wandering to the doorway of the community center every few minutes. The place was packed with volunteers as well as people lined up to partake of the delicious serving of soup and homemade bread.

The people in charge of the center had told them of the good news of an added donor who remains anonymous, but the extra money had made it possible for them to purchase some essential items for the people who came through the center daily.

She was in the middle of serving a ragged-looking elderly man and pointing him to the clothing section so that he could get something clean to put on when he showed up. The minute he entered the building, she was made aware of his presence.

“Your gentleman is here.” Her mother said in an undertone as she ladled out soup.

“Yes.”

He came right over to stand next to her and greeted the ladies in the line. "Hi."

"You came."

"Was there any doubt? Where do you want me?"

"You can take over the pastry section. No sampling," she ordered.

"No ma'am," his wide smile had her smiling back at him. She was careful not to show her feelings as she concentrated on serving the meals. It was during a break that her mother beckoned to him.

"Would you join me for a cup of soup?" She said politely, ignoring her daughter's sharp look.

“Of course,” Francis sent her an inquiring look before following Angela.

“Here is good,” she gestured to a table in the corner of the room, far away from the rest of the people, “the soup is quite delicious, I made it myself.”

“Amara tells me that you are quite the cook.”

“Hmm...,” Angela handed him a bowl and a spoon, “please sit.”

“Why do I get the feeling that I am in some sort of trouble?”

“Is there any reason for you to think that?”

“None whatsoever.”

Angela sat across from him. “You and my daughter have grown close.”

“She told you.”

“I had to pry it out of her because I noticed that she is behaving quite unlike her usual self. She also told me that you are Francis Coleman.”

He felt himself tensing. “And you do not think I am good enough for her.”

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. “I like to think that we were all created equal.”

“But I am not the man you would have chosen for her.”

“No, and I think you know why.”

“I am not a Christian.”

Angela nodded. Her eyes wandered over the handsome face. He had attempted to tame his unruly blonde curls, but it was a hopeless effort. The man was a looker and she had noticed the sisters eyeing him in appreciation.

“And you are too pretty. Amara is sweet and generous and has a big heart. She deserves a man who will appreciate the woman she is.”

“And you are fearing that I will not be that man?” His lips were tight.

“Are you? You are accustomed to tremendous wealth....”

“Did she also tell you that money means nothing to me?” He asked her tersely.

“I am quite certain you would like to think so....”

“I know so. Look, Mrs. Coombs, I appreciate you wanting to look out for your daughter and I admire the fact that you feel the need to speak up for her, but I would like to assure you that my intentions are honorable.”

“You want to offer her marriage.”

“Nothing less. But I am not certain she is ready to accept me and you know why.”

“Her faith means everything to her.”

“I,”

“Is everything okay?” They had been so engrossed in the conversation; they had not noticed that Amara had joined them.

“Your mother and I were just getting acquainted,”
Francis’ easy smile belied the frustration churning in his
gut.

“Mom, we are needed at the serving table. Francis, you
may stay and finish the soup.”

“Thanks,” he gave her a preoccupied smile.

“What was that about?” Amara whispered as they made
their way back to the table.

“As he said, we were getting acquainted.”

She was wilting by the time she left the community
center.

“Will you be coming home with me?” Her mother had inquired.

“I have somewhere to go.”

“Be careful, honey,” Angela had told her soberly, “there are times when we have to learn to avoid temptation.”

“I will be okay, mom.”

But now that they had arrived at his loft, she was not so certain.

It was secluded, the narrow building situated on a patch of very large land and miles away from any other buildings. He waited for her to exit her vehicle and was careful not to touch her.

“We will go around the back,” he gestured to the wooded area where the breeze was stirring the leaves of the

trees, “I have to go and grab something inside and will be right back. You may go on ahead.”

She did so, wandering over the lush grass and inhaling the scent of flowers growing in profusion everywhere. A sound of delight left her lips as she caught sight of the stream. The building was set smack dab in the middle of the ground and offered a solitude that appealed to her.

She turned at the sound of footsteps coming towards her and saw him weighted down by blankets and cushions and an easel.

“I would have offered to help,” she protested.

“I do not want you to think that I am trying to entice you indoors,” he told her brusquely as he dropped the blankets and cushions onto the carpet like grass.

“I would not think that.”

“Would you not?” He asked her sardonically, setting the easel against the trunk of the tree.

“Francis....”

“I have to get something else,” he turned away and strode off before she could finish.

Sighing deeply, she set about spreading the blanket and arranging the cushions. She was sitting with her back against the trunk of the tree and enjoying the flights of the colorful butterflies darting from one flower to another when he came back with a picnic basket.

“A picnic?” She clapped her hands in delight and got onto her knees to help him with the basket. “You prepared this yourself?” She opened the flaps and started taking out the grilled chicken and various sandwiches.

“I told you that my culinary skills are quite limited,” he could feel the resentment and frustration seeping away

at the animated look on her lovely face. The conversation with her mother had thrown him on the defensive and he had felt the doubts and despair surfacing. But he could not be in a bad mood when he was with her.

Being with her made his heart light, no doubt about that. "There is a friend who owns a restaurant and he did me the great favor of preparing everything. I wanted to impress you."

"You have succeeded," her dazzling smile sent him into a dizzy spin of desire and he had to take a deep breath to steady himself. "Will you allow me to serve you?"

He looked at her in surprise. "I wanted to serve you."

"You provided the meal and this absolutely gorgeous ambiance. It is only natural that I do the serving. Sit!" She ordered.

“Yes, ma’am,” he grinned and sat down, stretching his long legs out and folding his hands into his lap, content to watch her busily taking out the food and putting it on the plate. “Wine?”

“There is fruit punch if you do not....”

“I love wine,” she handed him the plate and took up the bottle to look at the label, “Costa Regal. Is it very potent?”

“It’s a light blend - very fruity. Here ...,” he took the bottle from her and popped the cork. She handed him the glasses and he poured the rich burgundy liquid and placed the bottle back into the basket.

“What shall we drink to?” She asked him softly.

“To us.”

Chapter 11

The food was consumed and she declined the second glass of wine he had started to pour into her glass. “How would it look if I was stopped on the way home by the police and cited for drinking under the influence.”

“You could always spend the night,” he responded casually, topping up his glass, “I have two other bedrooms.”

She cast him a look which spoke volumes.

“There are locks on the doors and the wood is very strong.”

“I am not even going to grace that with an answer,” she told him serenely, “you must love it here.”

“I do,” he did not prolong the conversation, even though it was something that appealed to him - greatly. But having her under his roof would be more than he could ever be able to resist. “I do most of my painting out here. You should see it when the sun is just coming up over the horizon.”

“The trees bathed with light and the leaves dappled by it,” she murmured dreamily, “it must be quite an inspiration.”

“You could discover it for yourself.”

“I could not.”

He finished the wine and moved the basket off the blanket. Amara watched as he took off his boots and wriggled his toes. “I am going to get comfortable.” To her shocking surprise, he stretched out full-length, placing his head onto her lap. Her eyes were wide. Turning his head towards her, he smiled slightly at the look on her face. “What?”

“You know what,” she held her hands stiff at her side, refusing to touch him.

“Sing to me.”

“What?”

“Soothe my fevered mind with your lovely voice. Wasn’t that what David did for Saul in the Bible?”

She gave him a look of gentle exasperation. “He played an instrument.”

“Your voice is lovelier than an instrument. Sing to me.”

“What has your mind so fevered?”

His thick brows lifted and sent her heart fluttering inside her chest.

“You promised not to touch me,” she reminded him.

“I am not touching you, technically.”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

“Not everything,” the expression on his face sent the heat fluttering through her body.

“Your hair!” She blurted out, trying to divert them both.

“What about it?” There was a hint of amusement in his deep voice that told him he knew what she was doing.

“It’s so long.”

“So, it is.” His amusement deepened.

“You have never thought of having it cut?”

“Several times, but it annoys my father and brother Brian. You see, they are all well-groomed and well-dressed. I am the opposite.”

Of her own volition, her hand came up to brush back tendrils of hairs from his forehead. the gentle touch of her hand had him going still. “It’s healthy and thick.” She loosened the thong and dragged her fingers through it. “Kind of like silk,” she mused.

“Amara....”

“And it smells nice. Like some sort of herb.”

“I could give you the name of the shampoo I use.” When did the subject of hair and shampoo become so erotic? He wondered. Or was it her touch? Definitely - her touch.

“I use my own brand of shampoo.”

“What do you mean?” He was trying his best to divert himself from the feelings stirring up inside him.

“I love to experiment,” her cute little dimple peeked out as she smiled at him, “I have never used chemicals in my hair and I was determined to find out what works for my hair type. I have natural curls and wanted what was best for them. So, I scrolled the internet and did my research and made my own hair products.”

He gave her a look of amazement. “Do you sell it?”

She shook her head. “I give it to friends who have natural hair.”

“You could market it and make a fortune.”

“I would not feel right doing so.”

“Of course not. That’s not the kind of woman you are.”

She tilted her head to look at him. “What were you talking about to my mother?”

His head shifted so that he could avoid her eyes. “She wanted to know my intentions.”

“And?”

“I told her that I want to sleep with you. Ouch!” He winced as she tugged at a lock of his hair. “That hurt.”

“It’s going to do more than that if you do not tell me the truth.”

“I thought you are not supposed to harm anyone.”

“Sometimes the circumstances call for it. Now dish.”

He grinned at her authoritative tone. “I bet the children in your Sunday school class dare not disobey you.”

“You are changing the subject, Mr. Coleman,” she said sternly.

His smile widened. “That right there gives me an inkling of what you are about when you are teaching the class. Sing to me, little one....” His eyes had turned hooded and his expression was making the heat settle all over. Perhaps singing was not such a bad thing after all.

“What would you like me to sing?”

“You choose.”

Her fingers were still entangled in his hair and she did not think of removing them. suddenly it felt so natural to have his head resting on her lap. The environment, the atmosphere was so serene, that she could feel the contentment stealing over her.

Francis watched the play of expression on her exquisite face and felt the love swelling inside his heart for her. Closing her eyes, she started singing of the amazing love of God and he felt the goosebumps springing up on his arms. Her voice was strong and lovely, the notes clear.

She did not need any accompaniment. There was silence as if even the wind had stopped whistling through the leaves. The squirrels that had been scampering up and down the nearby trees had suddenly stopped their foraging and even the water trickling over the stones had slowed its passage.

It was as if nature itself had stopped everything to listen to her voice. Francis could scarcely breathe, for fear that the sound would interfere with something so amazingly beautiful. When the song ended, neither of them moved for a few minutes. Their eyes met and held, the message between poignant and meaningful.

“Your painting?” She was the first to break the pregnant silent.

“What?” He blinked at her.

She gestured to the easel he had propped up against the tree.

“Oh!” Clearing his throat, he shifted and with one lithe fluid motion was on his feet. “I want us to paint together.”

“What?”

He grinned at her and felt the tension that had been wrapped around his heart easing. “You told me you were an artist, Ms. Coombs, or did I hear wrong?”

“An amateur. You were the one who told me that a five-year-old could paint the things I am capable of painting.”

“Now you can prove me wrong.”

“I am not - Francis!” She cried out as he hauled her to her feet and produced a folding stool for her to sit on.

“Unless you are a coward.”

She glared at him and he burst out laughing.

“Show me what you can do, little one.”

Pursing her lips, she set about using the brush to capture the amazing scenery around them. The water bubbled over the rock, the thick trees shrouding the area and the blaze of colors from the flowers growing in such rich abundance.

She was concentrating so hard on the painting that she had forgotten about the man standing behind her and staring at her effort.

“Not bad,” his deep voice made her jump a little.

“I think it’s brilliant.”

“It’s a little amateurish and the lines are jagged and uneven.”

She gave him a pained look that had him grinning at her.

“But I give you a B for effort.”

“I happen to think that this is amazing. And I am going to put my signature to it.” She did so with a flourish, before

standing to her feet. “And I better not see it hanging in some gallery.”

His grin widened and without thinking, he pulled her into his arms. “Are you implying that I am going to sell your painting, little one?”

“It’s good enough to be displayed,” he was warm, his body heat wrapping around her.

“That might be the case,” he had already forgotten about the painting. She was in his arms and all he could think about was how her slender frame fitted his body so well. And how much he wanted to kiss her.

“Francis. You promised,” her lips were trembling, and her fingers curled into his shirt.

“I know,” he whispered. “Perhaps this was not such a good idea after all. I cannot be alone with you and not want to....,” he broke off to kiss the tip of her nose.

“I should go.”

“You should go,” he agreed, his hands still wrapped around her tight.

“Release me.”

“I will, soon. You barely come up to my shoulder and you are wearing heels,” he said in wonder.

“You are tall.”

“Six foot two,” he was tracing a finger over her cheek, “your complexion is lovely, so smooth and flawless.”

“And you managed to shave,” she was touching his jaw, heading down to the deep cleft in his chin.

“I wanted to tidy up for you. You make me want to be better my sweet one.”

“Francis...,” she sucked in a breath when he traced the outline of her bottom lip.

“Yes, my love?” His voice was thick, his expression intense.

“We cannot....”

“I would never do anything you are not ready for. I respect your faith and your wishes. I just want to feel your body against mine. I need you so much, but I will wait.”

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes,” his head bent and she knew what was coming, but did nothing to stop it. The kiss was potent and so passion-filled that it had her clinging to him. Eventually, he was the one who pulled away, his raspy breathing loud in the quiet environment. She buried her face into his chest, her slender body trembling.

“I had to, my love,” he told her hoarsely. He could not afford to be alone with her like this. He had told her that he would respect her wishes, but he had no idea how much more of this he could take.

“I have to go.”

“I know.”

“Will you come to our services tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

She lifted her head to look at him. "I want you to be there, but not because of me."

"Right now, it is because of you," he touched her cheek gently, "about the gallery...."

"You said the press will be there."

"I will do my best to stay away from you. Bring a friend or two."

"I will ask mom if she wants to accompany me."

"Even better. Your mother is pretty scary."

She smiled at that. "I am her only child and she wants what is best for me," she touched his jaw in wonder, "I really have to go. I am teaching Sunday school tomorrow and need to prepare."

“Call me when you get home.”

“I will!” She nodded to the things strewn onto the grass.
“Do you need help taking them back inside?”

“I do not think having you inside my home is such a good idea, little one,” he told her gravely.

“You are right,” she leaned into him again and he held her close, his heart hammering inside his chest.

“Go my sweet,” he released her reluctantly and accompanied her to the parking lot. “Drive safe.”

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her again, before letting her go. he watched her back out of the lot and waited until the taillights had disappeared before turning to go back to the area where they had been. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he stopped in front of the easel and studied the painting.

A smile touched his lips as he stared at the lines and the clump of leaves she had drawn. She was actually quite good. She had scrawled her signature on the bottom right-hand side of the canvas. It was going to be hanging in a place of prominence inside his bedroom.

She let herself in an hour later and was startled to see her father standing in the shadows waiting for her.

“Dad, you are up,” she squelched the feeling of guilt rising up inside her. For the entire journey, she had been thinking about the kisses she had shared with Francis and her body was still tingling.

“I was waiting for you,” he stood there while she secured the lock. “Leave the alarm off, your mother went to visit a friend and she is not back yet.” Taking her arm, he steered her into the cozy living room with the large fireplace.

“Hungry?”

She shook her head, a feeling of trepidation coming over her. Ian Coombs was a man of few words and had been the most indulgent parent when she was growing up. She recalled the times sitting on his lap as he told her stories and taught her to read the Bible.

But beneath the gentle exterior lies a hint of steel and she had been privy to that a few times in her life.

He sat across from her in the familiar easy chair that her mother had brought for him several Christmases ago. “You are an adult and I would never belittle or insult you by asking where you have been. That said, your mother told me about the young man you are seeing.”

“And you do not approve.”

“I do not approve for several reasons, honey. One, he is worldly and two - he is very wealthy.”

“And that is a sin?”

“No!” Her father shook his head, his gaze sober. “It is not a sin to have money. Abraham, Job and so many others in the Bible were immensely wealthy. What I do not approve of is this sneaking around. He has not come forward to tell us his intention and the fact that you are keeping him hidden is bothering me.”

“I am not keeping him hidden,” she fiddled with the tassel of her belt to avoid his eyes, “it’s - I don’t know, it’s just that it is complicated.”

“Because he is not a child of God.”

She nodded, a miserable expression on her face. “I am in love with him dad. I never set out for this to happen. I keep thinking to myself that I was too smug in my own ability to avoid things like this.

I was so wrapped up in the ministry that I did not believe anything like this could ever touch me. I am ashamed to say that when Marlene got involved with that guy, I condemned her and told myself that I would never allow anything like that to happen to me,” she sighed wearily, “I have since asked for forgiveness from the Lord.

For the first time in my life, I am in love and it is with a man who is out there in the world. I cannot marry him because I cannot be with someone who is not saved. But at the same time, I cannot tell him goodbye. The thought of it is breaking my heart.”

“You are a well-behaved young lady and have been so sheltered. This man is sophisticated and I would not be human or a loving dad if that does not cause me concern,” he told her quietly, “the more time you spend with him”

“Will be harder for me to resist - doing things that are against my faith,” she concluded dully, “I have thought about that as well. But he is gentle and understanding and will never do anything that goes against my belief.

I can talk to him, dad, - spending time with him makes me giddy with happiness and it is becoming a task for me to leave him whenever I do. He is not stuck up and when I am with him, I forget that he is Francis Coleman. He is simple and down to earth and does not put on airs or behave as if he is better than anyone else.

You should have seen him in the soup kitchen!” She shook her head with a smile. “He did not scorn the homeless people - as a matter of fact, he was in discussion with one of the men, talking about sports. He actually sat next to the guy who stank to high heaven and was talking with him.”

“Your mother told me that as well. She likes him.”

“She does?” Hope flared on her face.

He nodded. “But it still remains that he is of the world and there are complications where that is concerned. Has he indicated that he wants to be saved?”

She shook her head. "He was brought up in the Catholic church," she bit her lip. "The first time I met him, he told me he is all church-ed out. His family attends mass regularly, but it is all for show. He told me that they never miss a service, but they are involved in some terrible things whenever they are behind closed doors."

"We are not here to judge, honey."

"It's not judging if you are stating the fact. When I first met him, he was so bitter and cynical."

"And now?"

"Now he is different."

"And you think it is because of you."

“No. I think the Lord is using me to get through to him,” she clasped her hands in front of her, “I never wanted this, dad, and I have spent hours praying that the Lord takes it away from me and it is not happening.”

“Then there is a reason for all of this,” Ian stared at his beautiful daughter and felt a tug. She had always been his little girl and he knew one day; some guy was going to replace him in her life. He had prayed and asked the Lord for his direction and intervention so that she could be provided with a man who will cherish her and not hurt her.

He could not bear that. He knew he did not have the power to stop her from going through what she must, but he wanted to spare her from hurt and pain. “Will he be coming to the services tomorrow?”

“He said he will be.”

“I would like to be officially introduced.”

“Dad, we are not ready....”

“I insist on it, honey,” he told her firmly. “Invite him to dinner, I will inform your mother.”

“What’s the matter?”

It was uncanny, the way he could read her voice. She had said good night to her dad and left him waiting for her mother to return home. Her phone had rung as soon as she put her nightclothes on. “What makes you think something is wrong?”

“I can hear it in your voice, little one. Talk to me.”

“Dad was waiting for me when I got home.”

“And?”

“He wants to officially meet you. He has invited you to dinner.”

“And you are afraid he will forbid you to continue seeing me.”

“He would never go that far, but there are reservations.”

“Because of who I am,” he said heavily, “do you want to stop seeing me, little one?”

Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes wearily. The emotions battering her were making her physically tired. She had never experienced anything like this before and she had no idea how to deal with it. “What do you think?” She asked softly.

“I think you are torn and I hate that you are. I know exactly what I want, little one. I know that I want you to

be in my life for the rest of it. I already told you that I am not going to insult you by pretending to be saved just to get you to marry me.

It has to happen naturally. I also told you that I had it bad when growing up and I am skeptical when it comes to religion. It is going to take some time for me.”

“What if you don’t have time?” She cried. “It is all I can think of Francis. You could die any minute now and where would that leave you?”

“Dead!” He said out loud.

“That’s just it. There is a life after death, one where we are going to have to give an account to the Lord and I cannot bear the thought of you not being there when I get to heaven. I want you to experience the joy of salvation - of knowing that no matter what happens in this world, we have a risen savior.”

“And you cannot force that on me. I have to want it for myself,” he told her tersely, “does that make you want to have nothing to do with me?”

“No.” She whispered brokenly. “For better or worse, I am in love with you.”

“Then I can live with that for now.”

Chapter 12

For the first time in her life, Amara was feeling out of sorts. Ever since the invitation had been extended to Francis to come to dinner at their place, she was on tenterhooks. She had fallen asleep after saying her prayers and had prayed earnestly for him. “Lord, you put him into my path for a reason.

That was not the first time I have witnessed a man with very good looks. But this is the first time I have been so drawn to one. I went all through high school without a single crush, well, except the tiny one for the captain of the football team and that lasted only a few weeks.

I have been to college for four years and have never been tempted once. I have been a member of my church since I was a little girl and there have been eligible men and none of them made an impact on me,” she paused and took a deep breath.

“Until now. I have begged you to take this away from me, but it has only grown stronger. I cannot marry an

unsaved man, because it goes against the teaching of your Word and yet, I am in love with this man who is so different from me. His entire world is different.

He comes from wealth – not some ordinary wealth but billions of dollars' worth. He does not act like it and when I am with him, I am so comfortable and contented and yes – happy. You are my joy, but Francis makes me so happy that I find I am unable to stay away from him.

Is this the enemy's way of trying to trip me up? Has he placed this man into my life to prove that I am not invincible? I know I am not, dear Lord, but I have always been so avid and firm in my faith. I allowed him to touch me, Lord, to kiss me, and I have to confess that I wanted him to do so much more," she buried her face into her hands.

"Now my dad wants to meet him and I am scared that this is going to come to an end. I know that all things work together for good to those who love you and are called according to your purpose. I know that if it is your will that this ends between us, you will offer me comfort, but I am dreading it, dear Lord. Please tell me what to do. Amen."

She performed her duties in the church, going early to teach her Sunday school class. She had dressed with extra special care – wearing a raspberry wool dress with a cowl neck and black patent shoes with very high heels.

Her hair was done in a meticulous style, she had braided the front and left the rest of the shiny curls loose around her face and down her back. She was wearing big gold hoops and a thin gold bracelet around her left wrist. Her lips shone from the raspberry lip gloss she had added and she had applied nude color nail polish to her fingernails.

Her mother had sent her a sharp appraising look as soon as she made it downstairs for breakfast, but had not commented on her appearance, something she was grateful for.

She taught her children from the Book of Job and impressed on them; the importance of standing in God's Words. She then stepped into her office to finish some emails she had not managed to do on Friday.

Sometimes she would come in on a Saturday, but that had not been possible yesterday.

She went into the chapel to don her robe for the choir and go over the selection for the day with the music director. She did all of this automatically, her body tensed as she waited for him to make an appearance. She was seated near the pulpit and was in the middle of talking to another member of the choir when he walked in.

She managed to finish the conversation, her heart fluttering inside her chest as she stared at him discreetly. He sat near the entrance and lifted his head to search unerringly for her. Their eyes connected and held and for one infinitesimally second, there were only the two of them in the chapel.

Everyone had faded away and it was just them. The spell was broken when Minister Rogers took to the pulpit and started the service. After the announcements were made it was time for the choir to give their rendition.

Taking a deep breath, she took up the microphone and stepped from among the others. Saying a silent prayer,

she felt the peace of the Lord settling over her as she started singing. The solo was so heart-wrenching that everyone from the pulpit to the pew was affected. Francis was on the edge of his seat, his eyes trained on her exquisite face.

Not for the first time was he made aware of how different their worlds were. This was a woman who was untainted by the ugliness of his world. She was pure and innocent, something he could not believe in this dreadful world.

Something told him that it would be better to leave her alone, allow her to find a man worthy of her, but the thought of that sickened him so much that he could feel his breath backing up inside his throat. He could not leave her alone and the thought of another man being with her, made him murderous.

Settling back against the soft padded seat, he clasped his hands together, when he realized they were shaking.

“Honey, I got this,” Angela watched as her daughter flitted around the kitchen, obviously very nervous. “The pot roast is almost finished and the salad is in the refrigerator. The potatoes are almost done and the table is set. There is nothing left for you to do. What time is he coming?”

“He just went home to change. I told him he did not have to, but he insisted,” she had spoken to him briefly on the phone as she was driving out of the church’s parking lot.

The chapel had been crowded and they had not wanted to draw attention to themselves. So, she briefly acknowledged him and went to her car. That was two hours ago and he was expected any minute now.

She had showered and changed into soft-shell pink cotton pants and a red blouse with fancy buttons going down the front. She had touched her hair. She would be wearing the same outfit to the gallery opening and her mother had consented to accompany her.

“I hope dad will not grill him too much.”

“You are worrying for nothing. Ah, there is the doorbell, right on time. Go and let him in, honey.”

Amara hurried to the front door, beating her dad to it. Pulling the door open, she felt the familiar sizzling heat settling inside her as she looked at him. He had brushed back his usually unruly strands into a neat ponytail and was wearing a light blue cotton shirt over his faded denims. “Will I do?” He asked her in amusement.

“You will.” Her eyes were drawn to the bouquet of flowers in his hands.

“I picked them for your mother and I have no idea if your dad enjoys a good glass of scotch...?”

“I do, actually,” they both jumped at the voice behind them, “honey, why don’t you let our guest in?”

“Of course.” She stepped back and allowed him to pass her, closing the door behind him.

“This is for you, sir,” Francis told him politely, handing him the bottle.

“Please call me, Ian. Thank you.”

“And these are for you.” He handed the bouquet of baby’s breath, wild red and pink roses and daffodils to her mother who had come in from the kitchen.

“How lovely,” she gave him a beaming smile and took the bouquet from him, “dinner will be served in ten minutes. Why don’t we allow the men to get acquainted honey?” She tucked her arm through her daughter’s and led her away.

“Shall we have a sample of the scotch?” Ian beckoned towards the arch doorway of the cozy living room.

“Of course!” Taking a deep breath to settle his nerves, Francis followed him into the room and stood by the mantle, watching as the older man went to a cabinet to pour the liquor.

“I enjoy a drink or two before dinner and I am a whiskey man.”

“So am I....”

“Please have a seat,” he brought the glass over to Francis and went to sit in his favorite armchair, “you are seeing my daughter,” he began without a preamble.

Right to the meat of the matter, Francis thought wryly.

“Yes, sir.”

“None of that ‘sir’ business. I already told you to call me Ian.”

“I will try to remember. I know that you think I am not good enough....”

“No one is good enough for my little girl and when you start to have children, you will realize that,” dark brown eyes settled on Francis’ face, “I have read up on your family.”

Francis stiffened at that. “I want you to know that I am not like them.”

“I am not here to judge anyone, son. But the fact of the matter is – your family will never accept my daughter. There are several obstacles in the way of your courtship. I am assuming that this is what you are doing. Courting my daughter?”

Francis gazed at the man warily, sensing a trap. “I am.”

Ian nodded. “You are not saved.”

“I am aware of that.”

“Your family has vast resources and she will never be able to fit into your world.”

“That world has never been mine.”

“That might be the case, but there is no denying, who you are.”

“And you would hold that against me?”

“No. But I do not want my daughter getting hurt.”

“Neither do I,” Francis told him tensely, “I am deeply in love with her.”

“And she appears to be in love with you,” he sighed deeply, “telling her or advising her to end this thing

between you two will only make her more determined to see you.”

“Is that what you want to do?” Francis’ fingers tightened around the glass until his knuckles turned white.

“I think that is the prudent thing to do, but I trust my daughter and respect her judgement.” They both looked up as the subject of their discussion appeared inside the doorway.

“Dinner is ready,” her eyes went from Francis to her dad and back to him, “everything okay?”

“Everything is fine.” Francis finished the scotch in one gulp and went to put the glass away.

“Dad?”

“Everything is as it should be, honey,” he told her with a smile as he rose to his feet, “go on ahead, you two while

I finish this excellent scotch.”

Francis reached for her hand and linked his fingers through hers. “Any chance of me seeing your room?” He whispered.

A relieved smile touched her lips at the teasing inflection in his voice. “None whatsoever.”

“I thought so, but just had to check.”

He charmed her mother and discussed world views with her dad. After taking a bite of the roast beef, he asked her for her recipe. “Not that I could ever do justice to this the way that you have, Angela.”

“You do your own cooking?”

“Your daughter could not believe it when I told her that I do my own limited cooking. But yes. I have someone who comes in three times a week to take care of the

house and whenever she is there, she would make something that lasts two or three days. I am left to fend for myself the rest of the time.”

“There are plenty of leftovers, I will be sure to pack you something to take home.”

“My stomach and I would be indebted to you,” he told her with a grin.

“You were worried,” she had walked with him to his jeep which was parked behind his.

“I was not.”

“You were and I do not have to tell you the consequences of lying,” he said with a grin. He wanted to snatch her into his arms and kiss her, but he knew they were being observed.

“What are those?”

“You tell me, you are the expert,” he took her hand in his,
“your parents are quite lovely.”

He said wistfully. “Your mother reminds me of mine.”

“Francis”

“I am okay, little one. I am happy I was invited to supper.
It was quite an experience. Although, I thought your dad
was preaching instead of praying.”

She laughed, her white teeth gleaming against her lips
and sending the yearning into the lower part of his body.

“I want to kiss you so much,” he whispered.

Her laughter died at the look on his face.

“We cannot.”

“I know, little one, and I would never disrespect your parents by doing so,” he squeezed her hand and let go hastily, “I will see you later.”

She nodded and stepped back from the vehicle. With a wave of one hand, he backed out and was soon gone from sight.

Her mother came out to join her on the porch as soon as she made her way to the swing.

“He is a very nice young man,” she murmured as she took her seat next to her daughter.

“And I’m quite certain that dad gave him the third degree,” Amara used her toes to push the swing a little.

“As any good God-fearing father would,” she pointed out, “but he withstood it and passed with flying colors.”

“Except he is not saved,” she lamented heavily, “oh, mom what am I going to do?”

“Continue praying for him to find his way. We do not have the power to save anyone, honey, and our God answers prayers. We just have to wait on Him.”

“I used to tell people that a lot and now I am the one who has to do the waiting,” she leaned her head back against the padded rest and closed her eyes, “every time he leaves, he takes a piece of me with him.”

Her mother squeezed her hand. “One day soon, there will be no leaving.”

He had no idea what to do. Usually, when something like this happens, his family would not be involved.

They did not respect his talent, but he supposed it was due to the fact that Jackson Colby and his brother Jason were also part of the ensemble of artists at the gallery opening. They had all turned up, his two brothers and their wives as well as his dad and his current mistress, a woman young enough to be his daughter.

He had invited the woman he loved and her mother was coming along. They were coming to this cesspool and would see him or what he really was.

He had to call and tell them to stay away of course. But she was not picking up.

“Hey!” He looked up to see Jackson approaching him. “You look stressed and unlike a man whose paintings are causing a lot of conflicts.”

“My family are here,” Francis felt like pulling at his hair.

“So, they are and I see your father has found himself a new young thing.”

“He is disgraceful.”

“His actions are not on you,” Jackson searched his face curiously, “but that is not the only thing upsetting you, is it? You usually manage to ignore them.”

“I invited someone,” he muttered.

“I see and this young woman does not know of your family.”

“Parts of it. I managed to keep most of the sordid details from her. And here they are now.”

Jackson turned to look in the direction he was staring at and whistled in admiration. "She is quite a looker."

"And a Christian."

"A what?" Jackson turned to look at him with a frown.

"A born-again child of God. I am sure you are familiar with the term."

"I am. And you say you are involved with her?"

"We have not been..." he waved a distracted hand, "you know."

Jackson whistled again and turned to look at the two women. The resemblance between them was uncanny, but his eyes were drawn to the younger of the two. There

was an ethereal beauty about her that was unmistakable.

“I am expecting to see a halo over her head,” he murmured.

“You should hear her sing!” The proud note in Francis’ voice did not go unnoticed.

“You have been to her church.”

“Yes. Several times. What should I do?”

“Go and talk to her while I distract your family. Your dad is coming this way.”

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” Jackson inclined his head and struck out to intercept Thomas Coleman.

“It’s so wonderful to see you,” he included Amara’s mother in the warm welcome and was careful not to appear too interested in her.

“May I have a word with you, Amara?”

“Go ahead, honey, I am going to have some of the finger food and feast my eyes on the artwork.

He guided her over to a secluded section of the room and used his height to hide her from view. “My family is here,” he told her tersely.

“And you were not aware they would be.”

“I should have figured they would show up. They glory in this sort of attention,” he said bitterly. “The press is here.

Not to mention that Jackson and Jason Colby are well-renowned figures.”

“So are you,” she pointed out quietly.

“I am not in their ilk, which is fine by me. I wish I could introduce you to them.”

“But you cannot.”

He shook his head. “And if they see me paying close attention to you....”

“They will put two and two together.”

“Yes.” He bit out.

“I am here for the show and we will talk later.”

“I apologize, little one.”

“No need,” she started to touch him and thought better,
“go and do your due diligence, I will be fine.”

“I love you, sweetness,” he whispered.

“I know. Go.”

She watched him walk away and noticed the two men dressed in immaculately expensive attire bearing down on him.

“Fancy seeing you guys, here,” Francis said caustically as his brothers joined him, flutes of champagne in their hands.

“We were invited,” Brian told him laconically, eyes sweeping the crowded room, “the press is out in full.”

“And I am certain you have already preened for the cameras.”

“We should never waste a good photo opp. Are you here alone, brother?”

“What is that to you?” Francis was fearful that they had noticed him talking to Amara.

“We worry about you.”

He laughed harshly. “Is that so?”

“You have not been to dinner for the past three Sundays,” Jeffry chimed in.

“That’s because I have not been hungry.” He nodded at the woman standing with his sisters-in-law. “I saw her with dad, but I am not certain if she is your side piece, Brian, or perhaps yours, Jeffry.”

“Don’t be crude. We are here with our wives. Debra is a friend of dad.”

“They do seem to get younger each year.” A bitter smile curved his lips.

“Have some respect for the man who conceived you,” Brian admonished.

“Respect. What a load of crock. When he starts behaving respectfully, I will give it a shot. Now if you will excuse me, my fans are waiting.”

He turned away from them and felt the joy of the day draining away. He had so looked forward to seeing her here, even if he could not reach out to her and take her hand, the fact that she was here had made a difference.

Until his family had shown up. His father had brought his mistress without the slightest regard for his feelings and he was beginning to realize the difference between them.

He did not want to taint her, but that was what he would be doing. His family were ugly, their very actions indicated that. Pasting a smile on his face, he mingled with the crowd and managed to answer the myriad of questions thrown his way.

Chapter 13

She could not get in touch with him. It had been two weeks since the gallery opening and they had been visiting their favorite spot almost every evening after work.

It was getting increasingly difficult for them to stay away from each other and when they were at their spot, the kisses were getting increasingly passionate and incredibly potent. He had told her that it was all he could do to hold onto his control.

He had told her that he had something at his club to do on Saturday, but had promised to be back in time for the services on Sunday morning.

But he was not picking up his phone and all sorts of things were running through her head. She busied herself by spending time at the soup kitchen with the rest of the ladies from church and tried her best to participate in the lively discussion going on.

She then went to the chapel to do some work in her office and was finding it very difficult to concentrate on the tasks in front of her.

Abandoning everything, she went into the daycare to help with the children, taking particular interest in little Jerome who was growing up so fast.

“His birthday is coming up,” Marlene told her with a smile.

“We should plan something for him. He is going to be a year old and that is a big milestone, right little man?” She gave him a wistful smile.

“I do not want to put you all through that trouble,” Marlene protested.

“What trouble?” Amara said dismissively, gathering the little boy in her arms. “It’s going to be fun. Leave

everything to me.”

“You are going to make a very good mother someday,”
Marlene told her.

Amara felt a jolt at that and did not respond. She still had not heard from Francis and was trying her best not to panic.

“Come along, Jerome, and get some cookies in the kitchen.”

* * * * *

Francis was not having a good day of it. He had left to come to the club to get away from her. The past three weeks had been wearing on him and his temper and sexual appetite were blazing out of control.

He had told her that he would never do anything to disrespect her, but the kissing and the feel of her slender

curves against him was dragging him into a pit of despair.

He could not have her, not without placing a ring on her finger and that was something he would happily do, but she was firm on her decision. She could not marry a man who was not committed to her faith and he could not pretend to be someone he was not.

So, he decided to come to the club and participate in the spring activities they had going on. He was punishing himself, that much he was aware of.

First, it had been a robust round of tennis, where he had brutally annihilated his partner and then he had swum several laps in the pool. Then he participated in a boxing match and had bruises to show for it. Now he was involved in a very high-stake card game that had been going on for hours. And he had been drinking steadily.

He had always been able to hold his liquor and had told the bartender to keep it coming. He had lost a few thousand dollars and was winning it back much to the disgust of the other men seated at the table.

“That’s what you get for underestimating me,” he told them mildly.

“You are supposed to be drunk, Coleman,” Jerry Bridges said petulantly as he folded.

“That’s precisely what I wanted you to think.”

The game went on for several more hours and then he decided to go to the suite of rooms assigned to him for the night. Stumbling in, he made his way to the bed and fell on top of the sheets with his clothes on. Within minutes he was fast asleep.

Amara could not sleep. She had read her Bible and said her prayers, but she could not close her eyes. She had not heard from him at all today and that was not like him.

He must have grown tired of her unavailability and was with someone else.

The thought of that was slowly destroying her. There had been tension between them for the past week and when she asked him about it, he had told her brusquely that it was nothing to worry about, but she knew him.

“I cannot be the woman you want me to be,” she had told him hesitantly.

“Was I asking you to?” He had snapped at her and then immediately apologized.

But she realizes what was bothering him. They were involved in heavy petting and kissing and he was frustrated because they were not going all the way.

He was a man of the world and what was even worse was the fact that he was handsome and wealthy with his pick of women. He had told her himself that he would be

with women in the past and after he was finished, would walk away without a backward look.

This was new for him. She knew that he had never been in a situation like this before and she was kidding herself if she thought he would just be okay with it. Was he with someone else?

She wondered, staring into the darkness, unseeingly. And could she blame him if he was? She had felt the evidence of his desire and it had both frightened and excited her at the same time.

But she was a child of God and had made a vow to herself and the Lord. She would go to her wedding bed chaste and innocent, giving herself only to her husband. Nothing was ever going to change that. Pulling the sheets over her, she closed her eyes and willed herself to get some sleep.

The service the next day was wonderful, the message was based on John 3:16 and the amazing and undeserved love of the Lord was emphasized.

The spot where he usually sat was empty and Amara found her eyes straying there every few minutes, expecting to see him sitting there, his blonde hair escaping from the untidy ponytail, dark blue eyes watching her. She had called him this morning several times before she readied herself and his phone had gone straight to voicemail.

She had cried last night and felt her heart breaking in two, but anyone looking at her would never know the heartache she was going through. She sang her heart out, gave the announcements and spent time in the refreshment room to help with the serving of the food that had been prepared by the ladies.

When her friends suggested they go for ice cream and a walk in the park, she accepted. Shelly had called only this week and told them she was coming a week earlier than planned. Her wedding was the first Saturday in June and that was only two weeks away. There was the planning and decorating to do.

The dresses to be tried on and the bridal shower the night before. Amara would be busy planning all of that and could not allow her personal life to get in the middle of it.

The outing was wonderful, the fresh spring air bracing. They ordered their ice creams and sat on park benches watching the families out for the day. Children were playing on rides and the atmosphere was friendly chaos.

She kept checking her phone, but when it reached three in the afternoon, she turned off her phone and decided that it was time to stop thinking about him.

She went home and was weak with relief when she found her parents gone and a note tacked to the fridge. "Lasagna in the oven, honey. Your dad and I are visiting an old friend from out of town."

But she was not hungry. Her stomach felt hollow and she was suffering from a headache. Taking out the bottle of

OJ, she poured some into a glass and took it into the living room with her.

She had stopped in the bathroom along the way and took out two Tylenol to swallow for her headache. She should have known it was not going to last. Her dad had told her and her mother had warned her.

She did not hate him. How could she? She thought wistfully as she sipped her juice. She loved him and would always do. He was her first love and she had a feeling that he will be her only love. What she felt for him was so strong that it encompassed her – it overflowed inside her and that was not going to change.

She would continue to pray for him of course. Nothing was going to stop her from doing so, but she was going to accept that it was over between them. She was going to have to be realistic. Blinking back the tears, she finished the juice and went up to her room.

Francis resurfaced slowly, the pounding inside his head, sending nausea rising to his throat. He leapt off the bed and made it just in time to empty his stomach. He had drunk too much and was now paying for it in spades.

The thing about it was that he had never done anything like that before. Excess was never his style. His head was pounding and he felt the vicious ache in his temples like someone was driving a nail into his skull.

Sliding down against the tiles, he held his head between his hands and willed the pounding to stop. He groaned as he looked at his watch and realized that it was late afternoon. He would never be able to drive himself in this condition. He was going to have to bum a ride from one of the members who were still here.

But first, he was going to have to take a shower and drink several gallons of coffee. The thought of food sent him bending over the bowl, retching because there was nothing left to bring up. What had he done to himself? He thought wearily as he struggled to strip off his clothing and make his way into the shower.

He turned on the water on full, making sure it was tepid and ducking his head beneath the spray, he closed his eyes and allowed it to beat down on him. In a few minutes, he began to feel a little better and was able to step out and towel dry himself.

He had brought a fresh change of clothes and he quickly put them on, sitting on the side of the bed when he got dizzy.

Suddenly his eyes flew open and he reached for his phone. "Oh no! no! no!" He said as he saw the missed calls and quickly dialed her number. It went straight to voicemail and he left an urgent message.

"I am so sorry, little one. I will explain everything when I see you." galvanized into action, he got up carefully and stuffed his clothing into the duffel bag.

Making his way out of the room, he headed for the nearest restaurant and ordered a jug of coffee.

After he had downed the second cup, he started to feel like his old self again. He finished the pot and drank two glasses of water that had been brought to him. Ignoring several members coming his way, he requested that his vehicle be brought around to him.

It was late in the afternoon and he had several hours to do before he reached home, but he had to try and get in touch with her. The headache was still there, but the edge had been taken off. Swallowing some painkillers, he went into this jeep and started his journey home to her.

Francis paced the length of his room. He had gotten back after nine and had tried calling her to no avail and he was going mad with frustration. His drinking binge had cost him dearly and the journey had been excruciating.

His mouth tasted like sawdust and his headache was still very much evident. He had taken a couple of painkillers and washed them down with a bottle of water. Never

again, he swore to himself as he climbed in between the sheets.

And this morning he had tried to get in touch with her and her phone kept going to voicemail. In desperation, he dialed information and got the number for the church office and made the call. "Pastor's office, how may I help?" Her melodious voice was like a balm to his fevered brow and for a few seconds, he could not say anything.

"Hello?"

"It's Francis," he told her hoarsely.

There was a pause before she responded in a courteous and oddly detached tone of voice. "I cannot talk"

"I left you several messages and have been calling you. I would like to see you - to explain what happened."

“After work at the usual place.”

“Thanks. I, ...,” he broke off as he realized he was talking to the dead phone. So, she was angry and he did not blame her. But he would explain to her what had happened and ask for her forgiveness. It was what she was supposed to do, was it not?

Forgive and move on. She would not like the fact that he had been drinking but he would reassure her that it would not happen again.

He had been frustrated in more ways than one and he had done something foolish. He would make it up to her of course. And he was going to ask her to marry him. It was silly of them to be punishing each other like this. With that resolved, he felt better and went about his day.

He got there before her and waited impatiently for her to arrive. He had just glanced at his watch again when he

heard the sound of her car engine coming up the path.

Straightening from his perch on the hood of his jeep, he waited until the vehicle had come to a stop before hurrying forward to open her door. A slight frown touched his brow when he realized that she was not her usual smiling self.

“I cannot stay long,” she told him coolly, refusing to take his hand, “we have a meeting to attend. Shelly’s wedding is two weeks away and we have to get busy.”

“I hope I will be invited,” he said teasingly, desperate to lighten the mood.

“The invitations have been sent out months ago,” she turned her back to him and walked over to stand by the stream. Something was dreadfully wrong; he could feel it.

“I was at the club,” he came to stand next to her, “I spent the day participating in several games and I did

something foolish.”

“It does not matter,” she told him woodenly.

“It does!” He turned her to face him. “I have been angry and out of sorts lately. Being near you and not able to - you know-” he shrugged, “it set me off and I wanted to vent. I drank too much and I fell sick. I went to bed and slept the night and the entire day away. I did not hear the phone ringing....”

“You were drunk,” the distaste was plain on her face.

“That has never happened to me before,” he was pleading with her to believe him, “I was yearning for you and had no idea what to do about it.”

“I am happy you did not call,” she told him softly, “it got me thinking and it was revealed to me that we are not compatible. We were fooling ourselves, Francis; we do not belong together. It took all of that for me to realize that it would have been a mistake.”

He stumbled back and stared at her in shock. “You cannot mean that.”

“I mean it. I am a child of God and I should never have gotten involved with you in the first place. I have asked the Lord to forgive me, but this is the end. You need someone from your society. And when the time comes, I need a man who is saved. That man is not you.”

“You are upset....”

“I was upset,” she smiled at him slightly, “I was mad at you and wanted to smash things, but then I calmed down and felt a peace right here,” she touched the spot where her heart was beating, “and I knew I had made the right decision. I will pray that you will come to know Jesus as your Lord and savior, but as far as we are concerned it is over.”

He swore under his breath and caught up with her as she got to her vehicle. “I will not let you do this, Amara, shout at me, rail and do anything, but I am not going to

let you walk out on me, on us. I made a stupid mistake and I swear to you that it will never happen again.”

She smiled at him, a gentle sad smile that tore at his heart. “My mind is made up. I would appreciate it if you do not call me again.”

He stepped back and watched as she got in and started her vehicle. He was still standing there when she drove away and even when the rain started, he did not move. He was numb with pain, his heart breaking into tiny pieces.

The rain beating down on the vehicle mirrored the tears streaking down her cheeks. Several times, she had to stop and pull off the road because she was crying so hard.

She felt as if her heart was breaking as if her entire life was falling apart. She was angry with God and even

more so with herself. She had fallen in love with a man who was completely unsuitable and was now facing the consequences.

“Oh, God!” She cried. “Please help me. I need you so much right now. I feel as if I am dying. Please take away the pain and help me to start living again. I love him, Lord, oh how I love him. If this is my punishment for stepping out of the faith then I am asking you to help me get through it. I am entreating you.”

He went back to his place drenched and chilled to his skin, but did not feel it. He recalled getting into the jeep and driving home, but he had no idea how he got there.

When he arrived, he jumped out and went straight up and into the kitchen. He was shivering, but he did not care about that. She had left him. She told him that she never wanted to see him again.

When his mother died, it had been a very dark day for him and he had spent the night locked inside his bedroom, the tears coursing down his cheeks. He had ranted and railed at a God who had taken his beloved mother from him. Back then, he had thought it was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. How wrong had he been?

Amara had come into his life and given him hope - she had brought life and love in with her - something he had not thought possible. Now she had taken it away and he could feel the oppressive darkness covering him. Striding to the recessed bar, he selected a bottle of scotch and took it with him upstairs.

He tried calling her again, but she had turned off her phone. Surely, she was going to calm down and come to her senses. She loved him, she had said so and he had seen it in her eyes, the way she responded to his kisses.

Twisting the cork off the bottle, he chugged from it, allowing the liquor to warm his shivering body. He was still wearing his sodden clothing. Putting the bottle down, he stripped down to his skin and rummaged in his drawer to find a pair of sweats and an old t-shirt.

Sitting on the side of the bed, he resumed his drinking, his mind going over the day he had met her. He remembered her smile and the way she had been eager to share the 'good news.' He recalled their conversation and what was most clear in his mind was the picnic they had shared together.

He had put his head in her lap and her touch on his hair had been so soothing that it had been more than sexual. He had felt a peace he had not felt for a very long time. Her singing was like a balm for his weary and scarred battled soul.

She had been the woman he had been waiting for his entire life and now she is gone. He had no idea what to do. Maybe drinking the entire bottle of scotch would bring him a much-needed memory loss. He did not want to think of her or the fact that she had told him she wanted nothing to do with him again.

He had fallen in love for the first time and it had been thrown back in his face. Never again, he swore as he continued to chug the alcohol. He would never again

give up his heart or expose his emotions to anyone ever again.

Chapter 14

She slowly began to heal. She had spent several nights huddled beneath the sheets crying her heart out and praying ineffectively. Her mother had asked her about Francis and she had told her that it was over. “We were never going to work.” It had been a relief not to be pushed for an explanation.

She could not bear to talk about him. The first Sunday, she did not see him sitting in his familiar place was difficult, but she carried on. She was a child of God and nothing was impossible to overcome as long as she believed.

It was the second week that strengthened her resolve. She was scrolling the internet when his photo caught her attention. There he was, laughing down at a raven-haired beauty clinging to his arm. She managed to tear her eyes away from the photo to read the caption.

” Youngest son of multi-billionaire banker seen here with up-and-coming actress, Serenity Williams. Francis

Coleman, also an artist has been seen going on dates with the actress.

The artist, whose paintings grace several galleries all over town was formerly a camera-shy individual. When asked if the two were a couple, the enigmatic young man told us to read between the lines. Dare we say that wedding bells are in the future?"

She stared at the photo again, achingly admiring the thick lustrous honey-blond hair and laughing dark blue eyes. She had been right to end things between them. He had moved on quickly. All that talk about being in love with her had just been because he wanted to sleep with her.

Her heart twisted at that and it took a moment for her to regain her composure. She still prayed for her and will continue to do so. Switching from the internet, she resumed the report she had been typing, determined to put it behind her.

Francis stared at the painting he had just finished with a critical eye. There was something wrong with it and he could not put a finger on the problem. A glance at his watch told him that he was going to be late for the party.

Ever since Amara had ended things with them, he had thrown himself into partying. Whenever he was not working, he was off somewhere getting his picture taken by the press. Serenity was a beautiful and vivacious woman and he enjoys spending time with her.

She made him forget the problems plaguing his heart and she would do her best to get him out of his funk. He had put Amara behind him, or so he told himself.

The painting she had done when they had been on the picnic was now stashed somewhere in a cabinet inside his den. He needed no reminders of her. He had opened his heart for the first time and had it crushed into smithereens. No way was going to happen again.

He had been a fool to expect that things would work between them. They were different, like night and day. He had indulged himself in a drunken binge for three days before he woke up the fourth morning and decided enough was enough.

He had also humiliated himself by calling her and leaving her pleading messages, begging her to reconsider, none of which had been returned. She had not even shown him the courtesy of responding to his calls. It had been a wake-up call for him.

He would go on about his life without any emotional attachments whatsoever. Serenity was fun and a great company to have around. She was not pressuring him for a commitment because he had told her he was not ready for that yet.

“You were hurt,” she had intuited and he had only just nodded. She had accepted it without pressing him for more and he respected that about her. His mind flitted towards the woman who had captured his heart in such a short space of time.

It was Saturday and he recalled clearly that there was to be a wedding where she was going to be a bridesmaid. For a few seconds, he allowed himself to feel the wrenching pain of losing her and then taking a deep breath, he packed up and readied himself to leave.

Her smile was bright and false. Over the past two weeks, she had been busy with the plans for the wedding as well as many other activities that came with the summer. The Lord could not have created a better day for Sidney and Shelly to join their lives together.

The sun was shining - a brilliant yellow orb in an equally brilliant blue sky that was practically cloudless. The ceremony was being performed in the chapel and there were tents erected on the grounds for the reception. Amara would be playing two roles - she was a bridesmaid and would be the one serenading the couple.

She was glad for the distraction. During the days, she would busy herself with work, but whenever she went to her room at night, the yearning and bitter ache would

start. She had met someone - Dwight Patterson. an attractive young brother who was a cousin to Sidney and attended the Church of God a few blocks over.

They had a lot in common - both were committed to their faith and shared the love of singing. She had gone out with him several times already and they seem perfect for each other.

He had sensed that there was some hurt and pain she was going through but never pressed her for the details. She respected him for it. She was not ready to talk about him yet. Not even to her mother. The pain was still fresh and sharp. He was her first love and she had a feeling that she was going to love him for the rest of her life.

But she had to move on and she was determined to do so.

The vows had been said and the rings were exchanged. She serenaded the couple with Luther's - 'Here and Now' and had the guests applauding enthusiastically. She would tell anyone that the tears in her eyes were a result of the song and the ceremony.

Not the ache that was so apparent in her heart. As she was singing, she closed her eyes and pictured singing to the blonde hair, blue-eyed man who had captured her heart in such a short time.

“That was a lovely rendition,” Dwight had claimed his dance with her. A carpet had been placed in the middle of the grounds for the purpose of dancing. The bride and groom had danced their first dance as a couple already and made room for others to join them.

The white chocolate cake had been cut and distributed. A large table loaded with wedding gifts was next to the towering rose bushes.

Food, sumptuous and delicious was being served by the people assigned to do the serving. A champagne fountain had people going to and from and the children were trying to catch the balloons drifting towards the sky.

“Thank you.”

“May I say how exceptionally lovely you look today? I think peach is your color.”

“I don’t think peach is anybody’s color,” she smiled at him slightly. He really was a very nice young man and if she had met him before- breaking away from the thought, she aimed a bright smile up at him. “You look rather dapper yourself.”

“Thanks,” he grinned at her. “What are your plans when all of this is finished?”

“Go home and soak my feet in some warm water. These new shoes are not conducive to much movement and I have been running to and from for the past two weeks.”

He hesitated briefly as he stared at her. He really liked her - more than liked her in fact. She was exquisite - the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but she was emotionally unavailable. Someone had done a number on her and he wondered if the guy was a moron.

“There is a showing at the gallery in midtown, I wondered if you would do me the honor of coming with me.”

She opened her mouth to say no and thought about it. Why should she not go? She thought defiantly. She had promised herself that she was going to start living again and here was the chance. Dwight was interested in her, she should allow herself to start feeling again.

“I would love to,” she told him quietly.

“Excellent!” His voice was enthusiastic. “I will pick you up at eight.”

“I will be ready.”

“He is a nice young man.”

“Yes!” Amara agreed briefly as she sat on the vanity stool, trying to decide what to do with her hair. She had taken it out of the intricate coils and twists the stylist had done and it was hanging past her shoulders in thick waves. She was already dressed, wearing a chic red and cream dress with a flared waist.

“You should give him a chance.”

She directed an amused look at her mother who was sitting on the edge of the bed and watching her.

“I do not need you to play matchmaker, mom.”

“I want to see you happy, honey, and ever since....”

“I will be. I am,” she corrected, “what do you think?”
Using both hands, she lifted the heavy strands of hair. “A ponytail? A bun?”

“Why don’t you leave it loose?”

She dropped her hands, the hair spilling down her back.
“I think I will.” She added diamond knobs to her lobes
and spritzed on some scent.

“Amara?”

“Yes?” She got up and went to fetch her wrap.

“It is going to be okay.”

“I know,” moving forward, she kissed her mother on the
cheek, “the wedding was a complete success.”

“It was. Have a good time, sweetheart.”

With a wave, Amara made her way out of the room. Angela sank back down on the edge of the bed and started praying for her daughter. She asked the Lord to take away her love for Francis. “Only if it is your will, dear Lord,” she added.

“I thought you were too famous to be going to a local gallery,” Serenity teased him. The party on the yacht was still going on, but he had made a promise to the gallery owner that he was going to lend his support. He had told Serenity that she could stay if she wanted to, but she told him she wanted to come with him.

“He is a friend and I am not that famous,” he said dryly.

“Modest as usual!” She tucked her hand through his arm as they made their way into the building. The place was already milling with people. He was just going to show his face, stay an hour and take his leave.

“I prefer realistic!” He scanned the crowd, looking for Anthony. “Ah there he...,” his voice petered off and he felt as if someone had plunged a dull blade into his heart. It was her! Her ethereal beauty could not be mistaken.

His eyes passed over the man clinging to her and the sharp dart of jealousy took his breath away. She was with someone. What did he expect? He thought bitterly.

“Francis?”

He forced himself to look at the woman on his arm.
“Shall we?”

“Are you okay?”

“Of course,” it was a large gathering and if there was a God, he would be able to avoid coming face-to-face with her. But he should have known better. She turned just then and both started walking towards him.

They were almost upon each other before she turned her head and saw him. He saw the surprise and shock on her exquisite face and something else before she schooled her expression. A smile was on her lips and he knew she was about to greet him.

Deliberately, steering Serenity away, he brushed past her without even acknowledging her. For the rest of the evening, he kept to his side of the room, but the awareness of her presence was so intense that he told Serenity abruptly that they should leave. He could not bear to be in the same room with her and watch her with his replacement.

“Are you sure you are, okay?” Dwight kept glancing at her as he made his way to drop her off. She had told him she had a headache half an hour after coming face to face with Francis.

Seeing him with his new girl had sent her plunging into a pit of despair that was not going away. And to make matters worse, he had ignored her, looking straight through her as if she did not exist.

“I am fine,” she forced a smile to her lips, “just a headache.”

“I had no idea Francis Coleman would be there. He is sort of famous.”

“So, I hear.”

“And Serenity Williams is an up-and-coming actress,” he sent her a sheepish smile, “I am afraid I read celebrity news every now and then.”

“So do I.”

“Are you certain you are, okay?” He repeated.

“Yes,” leaning her head back, she closed her eyes wearily and stretched her legs out, “I am just tired.”

He dropped her off and made her promise to take something and go straight to bed. “I am visiting your church tomorrow.”

“I will look forward to seeing you.”

Her parents had turned in for the night and for that she was grateful. Rushing into her bedroom, she closed the door behind her and without taking off her clothes, got into bed and allowed the tears to flow.

He drank himself into oblivion that night. He had seen her leave with the guy and shortly after, had told Serenity that he was not feeling well and wanted to leave.

He took her back to her place and knew she was disappointed that he had not come up for a nightcap. He just wanted to be alone in his own private hell. He was still in love with her, that much was obvious.

The pain of seeing her with another man had almost doubled him over and he had wanted to smash his fist into his face. Seeing her had brought back every single memory of their time together and he had felt the pain tearing through his gut.

What sick coincidence had her coming to that gallery on the same night he was there? He had brought the bottle of scotch with him upstairs and was determined to drink until every painful thought of her had dissolved.

She looked wonderful, her beauty had shone brightly in that room where many beautiful women were present, including Serenity. He would get over her, even if it killed him.

She heard it on the news. A month had passed since she had come face to face with him at the gallery and during that time she had been going out with Dwight. They were being called a couple and her friends had hinted that there was going to be a wedding soon.

But she was not ready for that yet. It would be some time before she could ever open herself for such a commitment. His father had suffered a massive heart attack and died on his way to the hospital.

She knew that he had no love for the man, but the fact remains that he was his father and surely, he was feeling something. Sitting behind the desk at work, she stared at the phone and took a deep breath, she made the call. She was about to hang up when he answered.

“Yeah?”

She closed her eyes at the cool formality of his voice. “I do not wish to intrude. I just saw it on the internet that your dad died.”

“Thank you for calling,” his voice was cold and frigid and she had no idea what else to say.

“How are you?”

“I am well. You?”

“I- I am okay. Are you going to be all right?”

“What? Are you going to offer me some words of comfort? To pray for me?” There was an edge to his deep voice that had her swallowing.

“Of course, I will pray for you and your family.”

“Thanks. I have to go.” Before she could respond, he had hung up on her. She should not have called, she thought in despair. He hated her and the way he had

spoken to her just now proved that he had never felt anything for her in the first place.

“There is the reading of the will.” All three brothers were seated inside the large study that had belonged to their father. His death had come as a surprise to all of them and Brian was taking it harder than they were. Francis felt nothing except a sense of duty to the man who had made his life so miserable.

Loosening the tie around his neck, he took off his jacket and slung it carelessly on the back of the chair.

The funeral had been a show, with the huge Catholic church overflowing with well-wishers. The priest had waxed poetic, repeating himself saying what a good man Thomas Coleman had been and how he was smiling in heaven at Jesus’ feet. Francis had wanted to throw up at the hypocrisy of it.

The repast had been at one of the hotels the company owned because Brian and the others had not wanted people lingering here at the private residence. Francis had left in the middle of it to avoid the constant sympathy coming from almost everyone.

“The lawyer is on his way,” Jeffrey added.

“It should be pretty straightforward,” Francis said with a bored look on his face. “You are now CEO, Brian, and I suppose you are second in command,” he nodded to Jeffrey.

“Dad always wanted you to be part of the company.”

Francis gave his brother an appraising look. It was as if the eldest Coleman son had changed overnight. No longer was he the obnoxious arrogant whelp that had tried to be the son his father wanted. This Brian looked as if he was seconds away from dropping. “You should take a load off.”

“I cannot sit.” Shoving his hands into his pockets, he went over to the window to look out. “We are all each other has now and we should try and stick together.”

“Surely you are not suggesting that I move back here,” Francis gave his back an incredulous look.

“Would that be such a bad thing?” He turned to face them both, hazel eyes shadowed. “I know you did not get along with dad....”

“I did not get along with anyone in this family,” Francis told him bluntly.

“I would like that to change.”

“So would I,” Jeffry said sincerely.

“What’s going on here?” There was a cynical twist to Francis’ lips as he divided his glance between them. “Some sort of epiphany?”

“We just want to be a family again,” Brian said quietly. Before he could respond there was a discreet knock on the door and a maid announced the arrival of the lawyers.

“You can contest the will,” Francis told his brothers later that evening. The lawyers had left and the rest of the family had retired. Brian had suggested a drink before Francis left for the night and he had reluctantly agreed.

“Why would we want to do that?” Brian handed him the glass of bourbon and took a seat on the edge of the desk. “You are entitled to a third of the company.”

“I am not involved in the company,” he pointed out with equanimity.

“That is beside the point. You are a Coleman, just like Jeff and me.”

Francis eyed his brother quizzically. “I am not used to this side of you.”

“Dad’s death has given me a whole new perspective.”

“Me, too.”

“Next you are going to tell me you found Jesus.”

“Or he found me,” Brian stirred the liquor in his glass slowly, “I never expected him to die, at least, not right now.”

“No one lives forever, Brian, not even Thomas Coleman.”

Brian eyed him thoughtfully. “You still have not forgiven him.”

“He is dead, so the point is moot,” he finished the liquor in his glass, “what now?”

“I was hoping you would become more involved in the company.”

“I have my own career,” he pointed out.

“It does not mean you cannot make your contribution,” Jeffrey added with a pleading look on his face.

“I do not appreciate you ganging up on me.”

“Is that what we are doing?” Brian gave him a whimsical smile. “Think about it, brother. There is no rush for you to give us your answer.”

Chapter 15

“Who are you?”

Amara stopped short just as she entered the room that his brothers and their wives were occupying.

“The nurses told me that it was okay for me to.... My name is Amara. I was told that Francis was in an accident and he listed me as his emergency contact.” It was exactly three months since they had broken up - three months of unmitigated misery that had not been erased- not by prayer or by even being with Dwight.

“I am Brian Coleman,” he stared at her puzzled, “why would my brother have you as his emergency contact?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” The younger man came forward with a thin smile. “This explains why he broke it off with Serenity.”

“We were...,” Amara ventured a sad smile as she looked at him, “we were involved - how is he?”

“We are waiting to hear. His jeep is a total wreck and the doctors are saying he is fortunate to be alive. I am Jeffry by the way.”

“Nice to meet you,” she was introduced to the two women seated in one corner of the room as well, “what are his injuries?”

“Multiple lacerations, several broken ribs and a swelling on his brain,” Brian told her grimly. He was still eyeing her in puzzlement. “Why do we not know of you?”

“May I?” She gestured to one of the chairs as she felt her knees giving way. “I got the news while I was at church....”

“I am sorry. Did you say church?”

She smiled at him mistily. "I met your brother while I was handing out tracts at the Crown Mall in April. And after that..." she folded her hands into her lap and took a deep breath.

"We started seeing each other and he would come to visit my church. We got close and then..." she blinked away the tears, "we - I told him that it was - we were not compatible and..." she swallowed the lump inside her throat. "I hurt him and now..."

"And now you are going to have faith." Jeffrey came over and sat next to her, his expression tender. "We lost our dad a month ago and we are not going to lose our youngest brother."

"No!" She shook her head and gave him a grateful smile, "I was such an idiot."

"So were we," Brian told her grimly, "we spent years being at odds with him and we only just recently decided

to put it all behind us.” They both looked up as the team of doctors came into the room.

Amara surged to her feet, her heart thudding at the grave look on their faces.

“We have done all we can. He was bleeding internally and we managed to locate the source of the bleeding, but the swelling on his brain is not receding.”

“What are you saying, Gerald?” Brian snapped.

“The next couple of days will tell whether or not....”

“No!” Amara cried. “We are not going to lose him, is that clear? He is going to live and not die - there is nothing the Lord cannot do and he is going to save him and bring him back.” She sank back down into the chair and buried her face into her hands.

The doctor cleared his throat and gave the family an inquiring look.

“May we see him?” Brian asked him tersely.

“One at a time, please.”

“Of course!” He waited until the doctors had left before making his comment. “We will go in first,” he told Amara quietly, “I will tell the doctors to allow you to stay if that is what you want.”

“Thank you.”

“Honey, you have been at the hospital for the past three days. Perhaps you should take some time off from work. I am sure our pastor will understand under the circumstances.”

“No. We are getting ready to open the preschool section in September and everything needs to be in order.” She had dashed home to change out of her work clothes to go back to the hospital. Francis’ family had been very accommodating, allowing the pastor there as well as several other members of the church to come and pray for him.

She had brought her Bible with her and was reading to him every single day. She had finally told Dwight that there was no hope for them and he had bowed out gracefully.

She was praying and asking the Lord for a second chance with him. “You have not taken the love away from me Lord, so I am thinking that there is a chance for us.”

“Honey, you are tired,” Angela took her hand and forced her to take a seat on the bed next to her, “I am worried about you.”

“There is no need,” she took a shaky breath, “I have wasted so much time, mom,” tears filled her eyes, “I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he would be the only man for me and I refused to acknowledge it.

Now he is lying in a hospital bed, battling for his life and I cannot stand it. I want to be strong in the Lord, but I keep expecting to hear that he is...,” she bit her lip to stop the flow of words.

“And you know that prayer changes things,” her mother said gently, “prayer and the excellent team of doctors monitoring him every single day. Faith is what’s going to keep us now honey. Faith in our Lord and savior. I have been through it too, remember?”

She nodded. “But dad was saved.”

“And I am certain that the Lord will not want Francis’ soul to be lost.”

“I love him so much,” she whispered.

“I know.”

Amara squeezed her hands, “I have to go, mom.”

Angela watched her daughter walk out of the room and closed the door behind her. Bowing her head and clasping her hands, she murmured an urgent prayer, asking for a miracle.

“I love the story of Joseph,” she told him softly. She had been choosing different characters of the Bible to read to him. She had gone through Adam, Abraham, Noah, and Moses and now was up to Joseph.

“It’s a story of hope and amazing grace,” she touched his hand briefly, “his brothers threw him into a well and were about to kill him, but the Lord intervened. He had plans

for Joseph. To think he went from the pit to the palace....”

“And then to prison,” the deep voice had her head snapping up and for a minute all she could do was stare at him. His blue eyes wandered over her face, before meeting her eyes. “I thought that was your voice I heard.”

“You are awake,” she was finding it difficult to articulate.

“Unless I have died and gone to heaven,” he whispered hoarsely.

“You are still here. Francis...,” she stopped as the tears coursed down her cheeks.

“I must look worse than I feel,” he said teasingly.

“You look wonderful,” putting the Bible aside, she got to her feet, “I have to call the doctors and your family.”

“Not yet,” he stretched out a hand to her and she took it, “you are here.”

“I have been here ever since..., I am your emergency contact.”

“Oh yeah. I never got around to changing it,” he gave her a crooked smile, “I thought I had died and when I saw the tree looming up in front of me, my entire life flashed before my eyes. I regretted two things.”

“What were they?”

“That I had not given my heart to the Lord and I allowed you to put me out of your life.” He squeezed her hands. “Both of those things will be remedied immediately.”

“I should get the doctor....”

“I love you. And the first thing I would like to do is to be baptized.”

“And the second?” She whispered tearfully.

“To be your husband.”

He refused to let her out of his sight. Even when the doctors were examining him and his family had come back to see him, he insisted on her staying. She called her mother with the good news and she told her she would tell the pastor and the others.

Francis was impatient to get rid of them out of his room, but he understood that he had been unconscious for four days and the worry had been real. He exchanged a look with Brian which was interpreted. He quickly shepherd everyone out, so Francis could be alone with Amara.

“Come here,” he said softly.

“You need to rest,” she protested, walking over to him and taking his hand.

“I have been resting for four days,” he linked his fingers with hers, “my brother said you have been here the entire time.”

“Yes.”

“Praying?”

“Of course.”

“I could feel it,” he drew her forward and pressed her until she was sitting on the side of the bed, “aren’t you afraid to be here alone with me, little one?”

“No!” Bringing their joined hands up, she kissed the back of his, resting her cheek on his flesh. “I was such an idiot.”

“I agree with you. That guy....”

“We are no longer a couple. We never were and I should not have started anything. I knew that I was still in love with you. Oh, Francis, I have wasted so much time being away from you.”

“And you will bear the consequences.”

“What are those?” She asked him huskily.

“Loving me for the rest of my life.”

“That is too easy.” She brushed back a lock of his hair that had fallen over his forehead.

“That actress...?” She shook her head. “It does not matter.”

“Does it not, my sweet?”

“No. What you did - It does not matter; it is not going to change how I feel.”

“Nothing happened, my darling one.”

“What?” She blinked at him.

“Nothing happened. I could not touch her. I kept seeing your face each time I tried and just gave up. You have ruined me for other women, my sweet one.”

“I am happy.”

He chuckled, closing his eyes as the movement hurt his ribs.

“Francis, I should leave you to rest.”

“Stay with me, darling.”

He did not have to ask her twice.

“You should give yourself time to heal.” Amara protested. His brother had insisted on him coming back to the manor after he had been released from the hospital a week later and he had wasted no time in asking her parents for her hand in marriage.

He had then sent for the family jeweler and she was wearing a stunning square-cut diamond engagement ring.

He had then told Pastor Biggers that he was ready to be baptized and, in a month, they were getting married. "I am not waiting any longer," he told her firmly. She would visit him every single day and he would call her whenever she was at the office.

The church was in a tizzy of excitement over the upcoming nuptials and a wedding planner had been hired to take care of most of the details.

"I can walk without pain and my ribs are healing nicely. There is absolutely no reason for me not to be baptized and the pastor agrees with me."

She looked up at his brothers who had come into the room for help, but they shrugged.

"We cannot shake him," Brian told her with a smile.

Francis was amazed at how changed they are. It had started with the death of their dad - it was as if his passing had loosened something that had been binding them to their father's poor behavior. And it had gotten even better since his own near death.

"You are outnumbered my darling," he told her teasingly, "I am determined to give my heart to the Lord and start my new life. I would think you would be pleased."

"I am over the mountain pleased, but you need more time."

"Not going to happen," he tugged at her and to her acute embarrassment, gave her a passionate kiss, not caring that his brothers were in the room.

"Francis....," she whispered.

"Your shyness is endearing," he murmured.

“I have to go.”

He looked deeply into her eyes. “There is going to come a time very soon when you will not be saying that.”

“I cannot wait,” she whispered.

The flurry of excitement in the sanctuary was palpable. The pews were packed to capacity and the family members of the one being baptized were seated in the front row.

Pastor Biggers had taken the time to counsel him on the huge step he was taking and told him frankly that the road would be strewn with all sorts of obstacles. “I want you to be certain you are doing it for the right reason.”

“I am,” Francis had told him solemnly.

Amara was seated in the pulpit with the other choir members and would be doing her solo pieces as well. The women of the choir had asked her if she was not nervous and she had told them, not at all. It was a joyous occasion for her and she was giving thanks for the second chance she had been given.

Her eyes strayed to the man seated with his brothers and their wives and their eyes met and held, a silent message passing between them.

The choir rendered the songs and then Pastor Biggers came up to take his place behind the lectern, a beaming smile on his face. “This is indeed a joyous occasion. The Bible says that when one sinner has given his life to the Lord, angels in heaven rejoice.

We are rejoicing right now. Our brother Francis experienced a near-death experience and is alive to tell the tale.

He has taken the initiative to use that experience to turn his life around. And he will soon be joined in matrimony to our own dear sister Amara. It is indeed a blessing. I have chosen as my topic for this morning - the story of the prodigal son and I think it is an appropriate one.”

Amara broke down in tears as she rendered her item. The baptism was the last thing before the benediction and it was an emotional few moments of time. Francis came up out of the baptismal font, lifting his hands in praise and was greeted by everyone who wanted to wish him well and welcome him to the church family.

He had been invited to have dinner at Amara’s parents’ home so that they could discuss the preparations for the wedding, even though a wedding planner had been hired, the church mothers as well as Amara’s friends wanted to be involved.

“You should both go for a walk,” Angela urged as she cleared the dinner plates, “it’s such a lovely day.”

“What do you say, darling?” Francis asked her tenderly.

“Are you up to it?” She countered worriedly. “You said your ribs are still hurting.”

“Remind me never to complain to you again,” he said teasingly.

“You were not complaining, darling, and I really do not want you to over-extend yourself.”

“You have stepped into the role already,” he lifted her hand and placed it against his jaw. They were seated at the table and had completely forgotten they had an audience.

“Of a wife.”

“We are engaged and, in some cultures, it is as binding as a marriage.”

“Which means you cannot back out now. It is too late,” he said solemnly.

“I have no intention of doing any such thing,” she retorted.

They looked up to see that her parents had taken their leave discreetly.

He held her hand as they made their way across the grounds. He had acquired a new jeep and had insisted that he was okay to drive. “I am counting the days,” he murmured, breaking the silence as they made their way towards the patch of rhododendrons in full bloom.

A stone bench was conveniently placed there by her dad some years ago. the sun was still high in the sky, but the overhanging branches of an oak tree offered shade.

He sat down and tugged her down next to him. They had started praying together and the bond between them had grown even tighter. “So am I,” she told him dreamily, “I still would like to pay for my dress.’

“Didn’t I tell you?” He was playing with her long graceful fingers absently.

“Tell me what?”

“Your father insisted on paying for it.”

“Oh, no, Francis!” She protested. “It cost a fortune.”

“And they have been saving for this day since you were born.”

“If I had known, I would have chosen something less extravagant,” she fretted.

“This is going to be your only wedding my sweet, so no shortchanging,” he told her firmly, “I want to kiss you.”

“We cannot,” she protested weakly.

“We are legal.”

“Not really.”

He lifted her left hand, watching as the sunlight dappling the leaves struck the diamond, sending prisms of light everywhere. “This ring says otherwise. Just a little peck.”

She rolled her eyes at him and he laughed. She cried out softly when he tugged her onto his lap. “Francis....”

“My darling.”

“My parents...,” she leaned into him as he cupped her face between his hands.

“You have changed my life,” he said thickly, “before I met you; I was hopelessly lost and adrift. You gave me hope and pointed me to a whole new life. I love you, my sweet one. I have a joy inside me that will never be quenched and I have you to thank for that.”

“I thought I was supposed to marry someone already in the church. Someone who was saved and when you came into my life, I had no idea what to do.” The tears were streaking down her cheeks.

“I met you Francis and I knew instinctively that the Lord had sent you, that the love I feel for you was not something simple or on the surface. It could only have come from Him.

And even when I tried to fight it - fight what I was feeling, it would not go away. I thank God for you, thank Him for this incredible blessing I have been given and will spend the rest of my life showing my appreciation.”

He kissed her then, his lips moving over hers in an intensely tender moment that had her clinging to him. Then he cradled her against him, his hands moving over her back in gentle motions. His heart was thudding inside his chest and he was yearning for her. But above that, he felt the contentment stealing over him.

He had made a commitment to the Lord and a smile touched his lips as he recalled where he had been several months ago. The height of despair he had felt and how angry he had been. Now he was filled with happiness and joy. He had almost died and it had taken that to make him realize that he had something wonderful to live for.

“Are you falling asleep on me, little one?” He nudged her with his chin.

‘Hmm. I just might. I feel so comfortable.’”

“Little one?”

“Hmm?”

“I want your first time to be spectacular.”

Her head lifted so suddenly that she bumped his chin.

“Oh.”

He grinned at her. “It never ceases to amaze me how very innocent you are.”

She toyed with the buttons on his white cotton shirt to avoid his eyes.

“Amara?”

“Please do not expect too much.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

She fiddled with his collar and then went back to the buttons. “I might disappoint you.”

Francis bit back a smile and used his fingers to tilt her chin up. “How could you possibly do such a thing?”

“You are experienced and I am not.”

“I am in love with you, my sweet one,” he told her softly.
“That in itself will make the union unbearably wonderful.”

“I will not know how to please you.”

“You please me by just being you,” he told her huskily.
“The thought of you, the image, the scent is more than

enough to send me into a dizzying spin of desire that I can hardly stand it.

You please me by mere touch,” he pressed his lips against hers and felt her tremors, “you please me by being mine, a wonderful amazing woman of God who for some indefinable reason has agreed to be my wife.”

“I want to please you in every possible way,” she told him achingly.

“You have and you will,” he gave a shaky laugh and plucked her off his lap. “I am afraid I am going to need a few minutes before we make our way back to the house.”

“Why is.... Oh!” He laughed when she buried her face into his chest. He held her close to him, and they stayed that way for several minutes, wrapped up in each other and dreading the separation.

Chapter 16

The last Saturday in September was a spectacularly beautiful one, something she had prayed for. The sky was so blue that it hurt the eyes and the dazzling sun was a perfect foil. It was not too hot and definitely not cold; the weather was just perfect.

The weeks had whizzed by so quickly that Amara could scarcely believe that it was her wedding day.

The women had organized a bridal shower for her at the chapel and the gifts had been overwhelming. She had also been introduced to several 'wives', women married to members of the club her soon-to-be-husband belonged to and she had discovered that she actually liked them.

The press had been alerted - it was a novelty. The youngest of the Colemans was getting married to a woman in the church. There was a buzz about the entire thing. She had included Brian and Jeffry's wives in the

group of bridesmaids and had been horrified at the number of people at the wedding party.

“It’s too much,” she had protested to Francis who had reminded her that she was marrying a man of means.

“I am not going to allow the money to change me,” she had told him firmly.

“Nothing on this side of the earth will ever accomplish that, little one,” he had told her soberly.

Now she stood here inside her room for the last time and stared at herself in the mirror. She had been so excited last night that she had scarcely been able to fall asleep.

“Oh, my goodness!” Her mother’s voice just inside the doorway had her turning around slowly. “My dear, dear girl.” Angela, looking lovely in a baby blue dress clapped her hands over her cheeks.

“No bride has ever looked as lovely as you do. That dress!” Tears sparkled in her dark brown eyes as she stared at the slender girl clad in the whisper of the finest silk and lace.

The dress had a Victoria collar with pearls wound right around the high neck. It was closely fitted from neck to waist where the skirt flared out swirling around her each time she moved.

The sleeves were transparent and gathered into folds at the wrists. A jeweled belt hugged her small waist and glittered with pearls and diamonds. Her thick natural curls were coiled and styled in an intricate chignon at the nape of her neck. the tiara and wispy veil were on the bed, ready to place on her head.

The stylist had dusted foundation on her face and her lips were coated in shimmering nude. Diamonds glittered at her lobes, a wedding present from her fiancé.

“This is my last time in this room,” she walked over to sit on the edge of her bed, “this has been my room since I was a baby.”

“And it always will be. Now you will be going to your new home, a married woman,” Angela came to sit next to her, “are you frightened, honey?”

She shook her head with a laugh. “I cannot wait to say ‘I do’ to the man I love.” Tears shimmered in her eyes. He had attended services faithfully, even when she had protested that he should at least stay home for another week to heal.

Angela squeezed her hands. “Your father is waiting and we certainly do not want to keep your groom waiting.”

Amara was giddy with anticipation. At the last minute she had added something else to the program, a surprise she had instructed the members of her bridal party and her pastor to keep to themselves, her dad would get the opportunity to give her away, but not walk her down the aisle.

She was waiting in the doorway of the pulpit, right next to where the choir sits every Sunday - waiting on her cue to begin. All eyes were trained on the arched doorway waiting for her to make her appearance. The bridal party was already standing at the altar and the pastor had asked the guests to stand to their feet.

“We have a very special item, one that I am looking forward to,” with a smile, he turned to the musician on the podium and gave a nod.

Francis heard the gasps from the guests before he heard her voice. Turning slowly, he felt his heart thudding inside his chest as he stared at the woman to whom he was about to dedicate his life. She looked like an angel.

The veil was still covering half her face and she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. She started singing Luther Vandross’ ‘Here and now’ and he was rooted to the spot.

Her eyes had sought him out and every word, the aching melody of her voice wrapped around him like a warm blanket. He had eyes for no one else and it was as if everyone had magically disappeared leaving them alone in the large chapel.

Of their own volition and almost without him realizing it, he had left his position at the altar and was making his way towards her. She reached out a hand to him and he grasped in both of his. Her dark brown eyes shimmered with tears as she made the words of the poignant and significant song their very own, the promises theirs.

The guests were still standing, the atmosphere in the chapel one of engrossed silence. The song came to an end and still, they stood there staring at each other.

It was Pastor Biggers who broke the silence, clearing his throat and indicating for the guests to take their seats. Clasp ing her hand in his, Francis led her carefully down the steps to stand next to him at the altar. “Who give this woman to be joined to this man?”

“I do,” Ian Coombs stepped forward and took her hand.

“You may be seated, Deacon Coombs,” he waited until the man had taken his seat next to his wife before he continued. “Marriage is not something to be entered into lightly.” he smiled at the couple in front of him.

“I have known Amara since she was a baby - she was christened right here in this chapel and I have watched her growing up and blossoming in the Lord.

She is like a daughter to me and my wife and we respect and love her with all our hearts,” he looked at Francis, “I have known this young man for mere months, but there is no doubt in my mind as to his commitment to the Lord and Amara. I wish you all the best and know that the Lord will bless this union. Let us pray.”

Francis was impatient with the lengthy ceremony. He knew it was tradition to ask if there was anyone who objected to the union and all that, but he just wanted to reach the part where they were declared husband and wife. Then it was time for the vows and they were both so overcome that at first, they could not say anything.

“The couple will be saying their own vows,” the pastor smiled at them, “you may begin.”

“Amara Joy Coombs,” Francis’ voice rang out clearly, “the day is finally here when I get to say in front of our family and friends how much I love you.” His hands gripped hers tightly, his dark blue eyes bright.

“I vow that I will love and cherish you all the days of my life and as God is my witness, I will protect you, guide you and always put your happiness ahead of my own.

I was saved in more ways than one when you came into my life. You have brought me so much happiness that I have been asking the Lord what I have done to deserve such a tremendous blessing. We are here together in this fashion and I am humbled by it.

I love you, my darling girl, and promise to forsake all others and cling to you. When you laugh, I will celebrate with you. If and when life throws heartbreak at us - I will be there to wipe your tears and offer my shoulder to cry

on. I will be with you every step of the way as long as God gives me breath.”

Amara had to swallow the lump inside her throat before she could speak. “Francis Tobias Coleman, my love, my heart, my body. I love you with every fiber of my being. I promise to love, honor and obey you. I promise to always be there for you, through sickness and health, through joy and tragedy.

I will be your rock, just as you will be mine. From this day onward, I will forsake all others - as the Bible instructs us. I will hug you in comfort and promise that as the Lord gives me life, I will be with you. It will always be you, there will never be another and that is something I say with all my heart.”

They stood there staring at each other, the poignancy of their vows reverberating, not only with them but with the other couples who were guests of the wedding.

“Let us pray,” Pastor Biggers murmured into the silence. After the prayer, he said a few more words and then it was time for them to make their way to the office for the

legal documents to be signed. The guests were treated to a song by the choir while they awaited the couple and their witnesses to return.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I now introduce, Mr. & Mrs. Francis Tobias Coleman.” The pastor beamed at him. “You may now kiss your bride.”

Francis felt his hands trembling as he lifted the transparent veil from off her face. His breath caught inside his throat as her ethereal beauty was revealed completely for the first time.

Forcing himself to be composed, he framed her beloved face and lowered his head to hers. Her hands encircled his neck as she met his chaste kiss eagerly. It was all he could do not to deepen the kiss, but with a supreme will, he never knew he possessed, he ended the kiss and stepped back, his eyes smoldering with passion.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please give a round of applause for Mr. & Mrs. Francis Coleman!”

His speech was a testimony. The reception was held outside on the church grounds where tents had been erected. There was plenty of food and the pink champagne cake was on the table by itself. She had changed out of the matching pair of shoes that went with her dress and was wearing flats.

Her husband had whispered that she barely came up to his chest. "I feel like a lecherous old man, taking advantage of an innocent girl," he had told her teasingly. The tiara and veil had been dispensed with along with Francis' dark blue suit jacket.

"Ladies and gentlemen, families and friends, I would like to thank you on behalf of my wife and I...", he paused as the guests went wild. He grinned as the cameras clicked, the flash almost blinding them. "We would like to thank you for sharing this very special day with us." His expression became sober.

Reaching down, he took her hand and helped her to her feet. "I have been born again. It is so crazy that I have

been attending church my entire life and have grown cynical about the things I saw.

“My darling wife introduced me to another world, where people care about each other, at this place, in this congregation people actually care what happens to another person.

I have been embraced as part of the family and I am humbled by it. I feel as if I have known all of you for a very long time and it is a strange feeling for me,” he turned to look at her, his eyes bright with emotions, “I will never tire of telling you how much I love you, little one.

I will never get to the point where I take you for granted. I pray...,” a smile touched his lips, “I have gotten into the habit of doing so. I pray for you every single day and night, the way you have taught me to. There is God and then you, my darling wife.” Amidst the thunderous applause, he drew her against him, his arms crushing her small waist.

He had surprised her by taking her to their favorite spot. When they arrived, she was shocked to see that everything had been set up. A baby blue tent had been erected and folding chairs set up outside.

“When did you get all of this done?” She gripped his hand as he helped her out of the jeep. “A day ago. I had initially planned on us going to Europe, but this is much better. I hope you think so too.”

“I do,” she whispered, he was hugging her from behind and she leaned into him.

“And I get to tell you that this will be the land where we are going to build our home.”

She turned her head to look at him swiftly. “Oh, Francis!”

“Is that approval, little one?” He asked her tenderly.

“It definitely is.”

“Good. Work will commence next week. I was assured by the contractors that our home will be ready by Christmas.”

She turned around and threw her arms around his neck.
“Oh, Francis, I love you so much.”

“And I love you,” his eyes had darkened, “it’s time my sweet wife.”

“I am ready,” she whispered.

“What is it, my sweet?” he asked her tenderly, sensing that something was bothering her. “Are you still hurting?”

“No,” she was trailing a finger down his chest, tangling with the hairs there. “I hope I was not a disappointment.”

He captured her wandering finger. “Are you looking for a rating, little one?” He asked her teasingly. The lovemaking had been more than he had ever imagined and his heart had soared with passion.

“I am serious, Francis,” she lifted her head to his, “you are experienced and I....”

“Were wonderful,” he brought her closer to him. “Was not my reaction to your touch proof enough? Did I not cry out your name in the throes of passion?”

“I want to please you....”

“You have done more than that,” he lifted her hand and kissed her fingers, “I never want you to doubt what we mean to each other darling. Nothing I have ever done

before can compare to this. My only regret is that I did not remain chaste for you.”

“Your experience is to my benefit,” she gave him a shy smile.”

“Oh, my darling!” He gave a shaky laugh as he pulled her on top of him. “You are the only woman who could take my past and make it into something positive. I am so blessed by you my sweet.”

“And I, by you,” her eyes widened as nudged at her, “you cannot possibly-”

“Unless you are hurting, my darling.”

“No,” she whispered huskily.

“In that case...,” he did not finish the sentence, but there was no need for mere words.

“Tell me you like it.” He was staring at her anxiously as she made her way through the large, cozy living room and up the stairs.

“It’s very big.”

“Too big?”

“No. Oh, Francis! The bedrooms - they are so spacious!” She stepped into the gold and blue bedroom suite that was to be the master suite. They had been married for three months and every single day was like a revelation to them both, “and the view!” She rushed over to the floor-to-ceiling window to look.

The master suite had been built facing the sparkling stream and from where she was standing, she could see the water gurgling over the rocks. A contented sigh left

her lips when he came over and wrapped his arms around her slender waist. “You have been here every single day with the contractors to get things done.”

“And ended up getting on their nerves,” he said wryly. Their lovemaking had been taken to another level with her shyness and uncertainties disappearing with each passing night. She had gotten bold with his patient teaching and was now a master at taking him over the edge with just a simple touch.

Francis could not believe this slip of a woman could hold such sway over him and that she had been instrumental in helping to change his life for the better. “I was determined to get it done before Christmas.”

“Which is just a week away. We have so much to do. There is the nativity story....”

“Where I will be playing Joseph. You roped me into that role, little one.”

“You are perfect for it,” she placed her hands over his and leaned back against his solid chest. He was now as much a part of the ministry as she was and despite being a man of immense means, he was humble beyond measure.

The members loved him, especially the children. First Lady had mentioned that he was going to be a terrific dad. But they were not ready for that yet. They wanted to spend time getting to know each other first.

“Ready to explore outside, my love?”

“Absolutely.”

“You must be exhausted,” Francis murmured, cradling her against his chest. The week had flown by so quickly, with the movers, taking in the furniture that had been sourced from all over the country with some pieces imported from Italy.

The end result was a combination of comfort and elegance that had been remarked upon by their guests earlier this evening. The Christmas dinner had been the first she had hosted and she had been determined that it would be a success.

Her mother had come over to help with the cooking as well as several of her friends from church. Pastor and First Lady along with their own grown children had been part of the guest list as well as Francis' brothers, their wives and children.

Now their guests had departed for the evening, leaving them alone to enjoy the towering Christmas tree and the fire blazing in the hearth.

"A little bit. We still have the rest of the gifts to unwrap," she stretched luxuriously and settled more comfortably against his chest, "have I told you that I love being your wife?"

“Hmm,” he pointed his chin down so that he could look at her, a smile lurking around his lips. He had watched her entertaining their guests, the emerald green wool dress a perfect foil for her thick dark curls and caramel skin and had felt the pride welling up inside him. “I would not say no to hearing it again.”

“I love being your wife, darling,” she whispered, “I love how you take care of me; how indulgent you are and how your innate sense of protection comes to the fore whenever you think I am in some sort of danger.”

Her dark brown eyes glimmered in amusement. “Like when you thought I was going to fall when we were playing basketball at the church picnic.”

“You would have scraped your knee or broken something,” he muttered. There had been much laughter when he had charged over to catch her.

“Or when that cyclist came whizzing by while we were talking a walk at the quaint little fishing village in Pompeii.”

“He was not paying attention and neither were you,” he shifted so that she was snug against his shoulder, “I never dreamed or expected anything like this.” He tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

“I was so comfortable in my misery that I was resigned to stay that way.” A tender smile touched his lips. “Then this slip of a girl walking towards me with a smile as big as Texas and started talking about the love of God.

And I could not dismiss her. I sat up and took notice.” His smile faded, his expression getting intense. “You have shown me how to love again, little one and for that, I cannot thank you enough. My family is healing nicely and even my sisters-in-law are taking a leaf out of your book.”

“I am starting to like them,” she touched the deep indentation in his chin, “and your brothers are not so bad after all.”

“Your life is an example, darling, and I want you to know how proud I am that God chose me to be your husband.”

Tears formed in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

“It’s Christmas,” he whispered, using his lips to catch the tears, “a time of merriment.”

“Oh, believe me, I am merry,” she whispered as she climbed over him. “And something else too.”

“What is that my sweet?” He was already undressing her.

“You already got the picture,” she told him huskily.

The end... but wait:

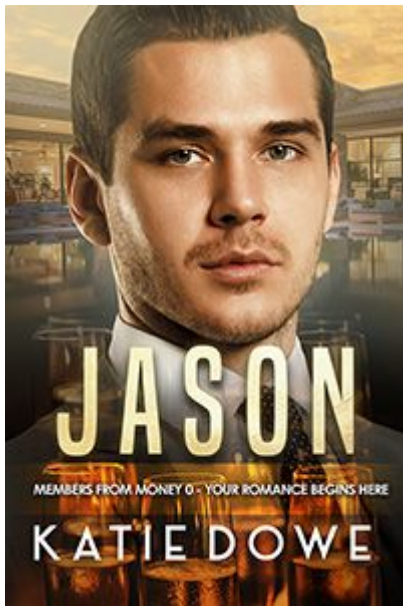
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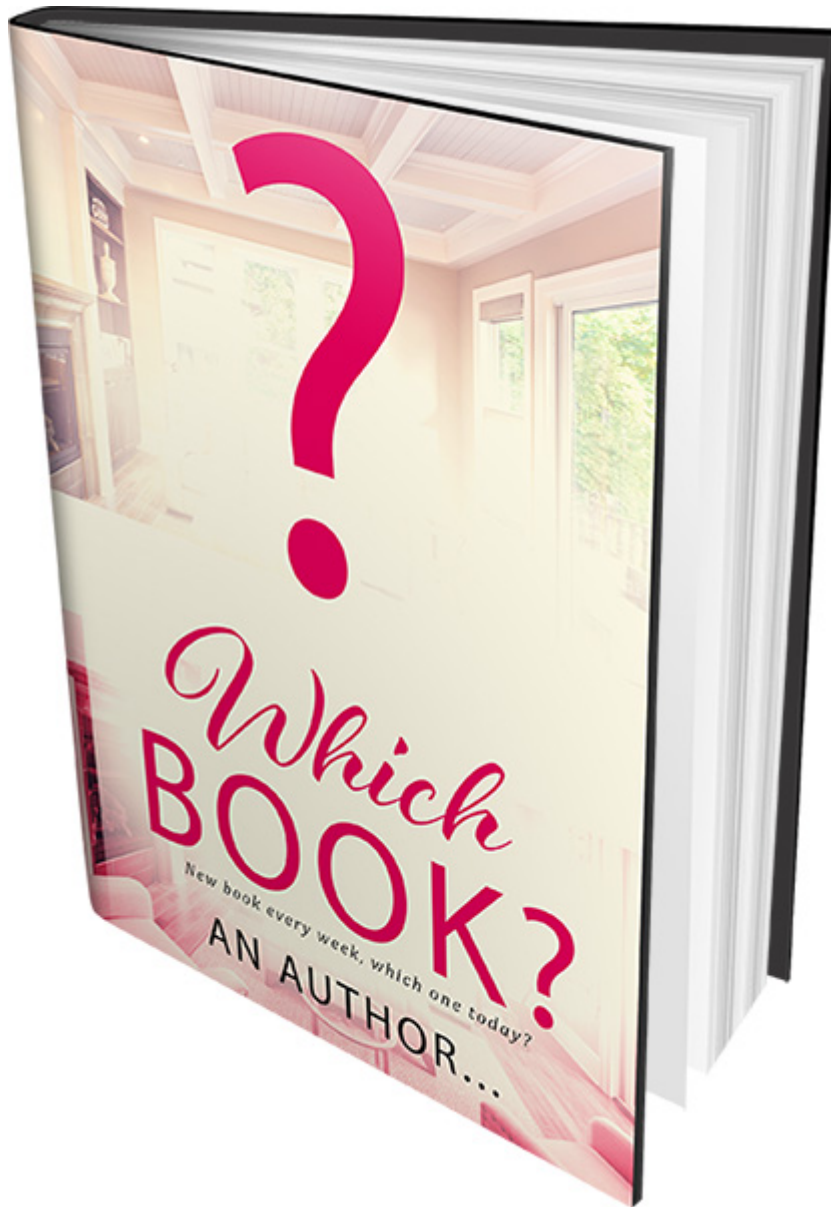
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Also available: [The One](#) by Joy Martin:



Description:

A sexy unlikely bride romance by Joy Martin of BWWM Club.

Jason Roberts is used to being in the limelight.

But the famous music star, writer, and performer didn't expect the backlash when he breaks up with his movie star girlfriend!

Now in an attempt to escape from the paparazzi, he goes in disguise to a small restaurant...

And immediately meets the woman of his dreams!

Hardworking and voluptuous waitress Casey can't believe her luck when Jason asks her out on a date...

But before she knows it, she's being swept up into a dazzling and passionate romance!

But when she realizes that no one close to Jason knows of their relationship, she starts to question his motives...

Does Jason truly feel the same way about Casey?

Or is there something he is hiding from her?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Joy Martin of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to shockingly hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get The One now.](#)

*

Also available: [Aaron Oakley](#) by Monica J Charles:



Description:

A sexy childhood sweetheart romance by Monica J Charles of BWWM Club.

Makenna is not the adventurous type.

Even visits to her coastal hometown are infrequent, as she has a phobia of the ocean after nearly drowning in childhood.

But one day she decides to face her fears, and instead finds herself running into her childhood sweetheart, Aaron.

Billionaire cruise captain Aaron didn't expect to run into Makenna during a normal day at the beach...

And he certainly didn't expect to have feelings for her after all these years!

Now his only desire is to bring Makenna into his arms and into his heart!

However, Makenna's fear of the ocean puts a damper on the reunion, and now they are about to lose each other yet again...

Fate brought them back together, but will hard work, dedication, and love make the relationship last?

Or are Makenna's fears too deeply rooted for her to fall in love?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Monica J Charles of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Aaron Oakley now.](#)

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Also available: [Owen](#) by Katie Dowe:



Description:

A sexy triplets pregnancy romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

Twenty-eight-year-old African-American beauty Abrianna Britney Jennison had been brought up in an orphanage until she was four years old.

Adopted by an older couple in their late fifties had been her saving grace.

But it made her yearn for a family of her own!

Billionaire Owen Anthony Hoffman is in love with Abrianna but frustrated by her hang ups and obsession to have children.

And on top of this, she will not agree to marry him!

As one last parting gift to her, he agrees to IVF, then it is goodbye for him!

Yet when he sees her further down her pregnancy, old feelings begin to arise that leave him in doubt...

He knows that he cannot abandon her in her time of need...

But will she change her mind about marriage?

Or will she raise her triplets alone?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to smoking hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Owen now.](#)

*

You'll also want to check out these hot billionaire brothers and cousins in the [Brothers From Money series](#) too:



& many more...

[Click here to meet them and more now.](#)

*

Also available: [Branson Farris](#) by Monica J Charles:



Description:

A sexy secret baby romance by Monica J Charles of BWWM Club.

The older boss falling for his younger secretary is a tale as old as time...

Branson thought he was better than that, but he can't ignore the sparks between himself, and his secretary, Simone, and the pair began to see each other in secret!

Simone loves the thrill of dating her gorgeous boss...

But she is devastated when she learns she's pregnant with Branson's child!

Coming from a troubled childhood, fears and uncertainties weigh her down, forcing her to confront the past she wanted to leave behind.

Secret arrangements never stay that way for long, however, and neither do secret pregnancies...

How will Branson react once she tells him she's pregnant?

Will he stay by her side, or leave her in the dust?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Monica J Charles of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to shockingly hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Branson Faris now.](#)

*

Also available: [The Billionaire's Accidental Surrogate](#) by Charleen Wilson :



Description:

A sexy surrogate pregnancy romance by Charleen Wilson of BWWM Club.

What was supposed to be a routine checkup for Nova ends up with her accidentally becoming pregnant due to a mix-up!

Now she is thrown into the lives of billionaire Aaron Lewis and his fiancée Lina, whose baby she's now carrying!

Aaron and Lina are together only for business reasons and to assist their families...

And the three of them decide that Nova should come live with them until the baby is born.

But now that Nova is in his life, Aaron starts to realize that he won't be satisfied until he has her in his arms!

Nova has fallen hard for Aaron as well, but it's becoming harder to keep their love a secret...

And Lina is furious that this will mess up her plans to become Aaron's wife and secure her fame!

Will Nova and Aaron's relationship end once their secrets are spilled?

Or will they be forced to part once the baby is born?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Charleen Wilson of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to shockingly hot sex scenes!

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