

THE
SIDE
EFFECTS
OF YOU

ANNA BLACK

The Side Effects of You

Anna Black

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Urban Books, LLC
97 N 18th Street
Wyandanch, NY 11798

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ISBN: 978-1-6228-6744-8

ISBN 10: 1-62286-876-5

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Distributed by Kensington Publishing Corp.

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Chapter One

Andrea Young

I stood at the stove in my kitchen, preparing dinner for my family. It was my routine, nothing different from what I had done the night before and the night before that. I had been married for ten years to my husband, Jeremiah, and during that time, I had given him two children and had taken in Kelly, his daughter from his previous relationship with his ex, Regina.

Kelly was now fifteen; my daughter Lena, eight; and J.J., which was short for Jeremiah Jr., was five. My babies were my source of happiness—and three of the reasons I hadn't packed my bags, got in my car, and just driven away. I wanted a new life, a new start, a do over, to be absolutely honest. I was tired of taking care of everything and everybody and no one taking care of me.

I was a wife, mother, housekeeper, listener, problem solver, cook, maid, first lady and, my least favorite of all, my husband's doormat. It had taken me a year after getting married to realize that Jeremiah and I weren't compatible. But instead of listening to that little voice of reason in my head, which said, *Leave his ass*, I had stayed and had ended up pregnant with Lena. At the time, I had used the birth of my daughter to fill the void I had in my marriage and to deal with the loss of my mother.

Although we were raising Kelly, when my baby Lena came along, I fell in love. All the things that I hated and didn't like about myself and my life somehow became a distant memory when I held her in my arms. My world was all right because of my angel, and I honestly believed at that time that God had enough mercy on me to give me someone to love who loved me back.

I didn't have to impress Lena, say the right things, watch my tone, or hold my true opinion inside. She loved me for me. She didn't know my flaws, of course, but each and every time she saw me, she'd smile and laugh. I made her happy, something I rarely did for Jeremiah. Yet I still stayed.

As Lena grew up, she still adored me, but when her little brother came along, she became a little jealous. And since I didn't let her mistreat her baby brother, she turned to Jeremiah, and they began to bond. Now she was Daddy's little girl, and nothing I said was fair or right. J.J. was still young, still trying to find his way, but he was definitely not a mama's boy. He didn't like kisses or baths or anything that didn't move on wheels. I swore that kid was going to be a mechanic, a NASCAR driver or, worse, a car salesman. Either way, I didn't see us becoming close, at least not anytime soon. Lastly, there was my stepdaughter, Kelly. Since her mother was still in her life, there was little room for me, and she played us against each other. A miserable, losing situation for me.

Work, however, was great. I was doing what I had been born to do, and I loved it. I was a hair and makeup artist. I finally owned my own salon, but after all that I had accomplished, Jeremiah still looked down on me.

Over the years, I had gone from a size twelve to a twenty-two, but I still had a great sense of style, and hands down, I was gorgeous. Short, yes. I was short, five-three, with the prettiest hazel eyes and the deepest dimples. Being a stylist, I changed my look often, but now I was finally wearing my hair natural. This was best beauty decision I'd ever made for myself. Clothes ... I had racks of them, big girl or not. I loved to look good, but somehow I didn't look good anymore to my husband.

We hadn't made love in over two years. Sad, but true. It had been a year since we slept in the same bed, but somehow when I brought up the subject of divorce, we ended up in a yelling match. I could never understand how he wanted to stay married when he didn't want to be with me. I sometimes believed it was because he was the head pastor at our church. He'd say, "I can't teach my flock the values of marriage and how God hates divorce and then turn around and get one."

But he still refused to love me. He still refused to be kind to me. Not that he was pure evil. He was just not there. There was no fun, no loving, and no affection. We watched movies as a family, went out to eat as a family, and ate supper at the

dinner table together, but after the kids were down, he went to the spare room on the main floor and I slept alone upstairs, in our master.

Yes, I had tried to turn on the sexy. Yes, I had tried to entice him, but nothing had worked, and I'd felt like a fool for trying to make him do the things he just didn't want to do.

"Dinner is ready," I called out.

The kids rushed to the table.

"Did you guys wash your hands?" I asked.

They all headed to the bathroom to do something I reminded them to do every single night.

"I'll pass on dinner, Mama Ann. I'm going to Bianca's for dinner," Kelly informed me.

"Since when, Kel? Why can't you have dinner with your family?"

"Mom, I have a project due in three days, and Bianca and I have to finish it up. I already cleared it with Mrs. Wright. She said we can eat while we work on our homework."

"What are they having?"

"Beggars Pizza," she answered.

That was why she wanted to go. Beggars was not only the kids' favorite; it was also mine.

"Okay. Go. Just make sure you call when you are ready to come home. I don't want you walking, young lady."

"Yes, ma'am," she said. She shot out the door, and my other two kids took their seats at the table.

As I set the table, my husband walked in, wearing a suit instead of the shorts and tank he had had on an hour before.

"Going somewhere?" I asked.

He straightened his tie and then smoothed his jacket. "Yes. Sister Thompson called and asked me to come by to pray over her grandson. He has a fever, and it won't come down."

“Well, you know we all have the power to pray over our children,” I said smartly. “She can anoint him and pray for him, and you can pray to God from right here.”

“Yes, you are correct, Ann, but not every saint is blessed with healing hands.”

“According to the Word of God, all of us have the power to heal.”

“Let’s not do this, Ann. I’ll be home later.” He shut me up, as usual, and kissed the kids. “Where’s Kel?”

“She went to Bianca’s.”

“You permitted that on a school night?”

“Yes. She has a project. At least that is what she said.”

“Make sure she’s home before bedtime.”

“Will you be home before bedtime?”

“Please put my plate in the warmer,” he said, not answering my question, and then he walked out.

I took me a moment to get myself together. *Lord God, you are all-knowing. I’m not. How long must I suffer this arrogant man, Lord Jesus?* I was miserable, and I wanted a new life. I wanted a man who adored me, who wanted to be with me, who wanted to hold me and spend some romantic time with me.

I wanted to wear a smile behind my smile, instead of the frown that was buried beneath the curled-up corners of my lips. I was the first lady of our church and the go-to person for our members. I was on top of my career, my children, and my home. I was spread so thin, and I just wanted God to either take me home or give me my heart’s desires, because I no longer wanted to be in the Young house. I wanted to be free. I wanted a new love. Someone who wanted me.

“Mommy, I’m hungry,” Jeremiah Jr. said, snapping me back to the dinner table.

For a moment, I had been absent, the troubles in my life taking over my mind, but now I moved quickly and carried the

dish of potatoes to the table. Then I sat and ate with the only two people who I knew loved me for me, Lena and J.J.

I reached for their little hands. “Okay. Bow your heads and let us pray.”

Chapter Two

Samantha Cooper

I sat patiently and waited for my appointment at Sassy Styles. I hadn't wanted to go, but I had gotten a gift certificate from my staff, and I'd promised I'd redeem it. Even though I didn't want to admit it, I needed this appointment. I hadn't been to the salon in over six years, and even though I put a box relaxer on my hair every eight weeks, I hadn't had a trim, a haircut, or a professional styling in ages. I probably had six or seven inches of split ends on my head.

I had fallen into a dull routine of pressed powder, eyeliner, lip gloss, and my hair pulled back into a bun. Yes, that was my look, even for church and some of the social events my friends invited me to. I was divorced and hadn't dated in years, because my ex-husband had given me a gift called herpes.

I still didn't believe it, even though my doctor had diagnosed me with it. It had taken that first outbreak to let me know that I was truly infected. It had hurt like a motherfucker, and I had decided then that I'd never have sex again, because I didn't want anyone to get it from me. And to be completely honest, I didn't want to disclose my affliction to anyone, so I'd walked away from the dating scene completely.

None of my friends knew why I had turned into a dateless prude, so they spent a lot of time trying to convince me to get back out there and meet people. They all were under the impression that I was scared from my marriage with Charles and that I was just too afraid to get hurt again, but that wasn't it. I just didn't want to spread this horrible, painful virus to anyone else.

"Samantha Cooper," a young beauty called out. It was as though she had appeared out of thin air.

"Yes?" I stood.

"Come this way. Andrea is ready for you."

I got up and followed her. I secretly admired the salon's decor and thanked God that my staff had set me up with such

an upscale place. The last thing I needed was to get a makeover from some ghetto-fabulous joint.

“Have a seat here,” the young woman offered. I sat in the empty seat she pointed to, near the shampoo bowls.

“Thank you.” I looked around and wondered why there were two waiting areas. I could have stayed in front. It reminded me of the doctor’s office. The nurse called you back so you could wait an additional ten minutes, which you spent rereading all the posters on the walls ten times.

She put her hand on the shoulder of another young lady who had approached. “Amanda here is going to drape you, and Andrea will be out in a second to consult with you. Would you care for a drink? We have bottled water, sparkling water, flavored water, red wine, white wine, champagne, and strawberry daiquiris.”

I smiled. I’d had no idea it would be that upscale. “White wine will be great. How much is it?”

“It comes with your service, ma’am. There’s no extra charge.”

“Get outta here,” I said and waved my hand.

“Yes, ma’am, it’s included. I’ll have it out to you in a flash,” she said before walking away.

“Please stand,” Amanda instructed.

I stood. Amanda slipped the robe on over my clothes. Just then a beautiful, voluptuous sister approached me. She extended a hand.

“Hi. I’m Andrea Young, the owner of Sassy Styles. I’ll be your stylist today.”

“So nice to meet you.”

“Do you have an idea what you would like to have done today? Did you bring any magazines or pictures?”

“Actually, no. I came only because my staff and crew felt sorry for me, so they all chipped in and gave me a gift card,

and here I am. They said you were the best, so I'm up for suggestions."

The young beauty returned with my wine. "Here you are, Miss Cooper."

"Thank you."

"Thanks, Nicole," Andrea said to the young lady before she hurried off. "So I see you have relaxed hair and your ends are severely damaged."

"Yes, I relaxed it, like, a week ago."

"Okay, well, I will have my assistant, Monica, shampoo and deep condition you. While you enjoy your wine and conditioner, I'll have her give you a stylebook to look through, and we'll go from there. Now, I'm not saying you have to look for an exact style, but at least find something you like or a look you may want to try, and I'll tailor it to you."

"Wow. Thanks, Andrea. I'm excited. This place is lovely."

"Thank you."

I got up and followed Monica to the shampoo bowls and then to the dryer. During the twenty-minute conditioning treatment, I looked through a stylebook and got a refill on my wine. Two was my limit, because I had to drive home, but I savored the flavor. I could tell the wine wasn't a house brand. I owned a restaurant, and I knew good wine from cheap wine. I was definitely going to come back here.

"Come this way, Miss Cooper, so I can rinse you," Monica said when the twenty minutes had elapsed.

When I was finally in the stylist chair, I made a bold choice. "I like this," I told Andrea, pointing to a short, tapered style in the stylebook. It was time for a change. I had never tried short hair, but I felt like I wanted to be noticed. I wanted to walk into my restaurant and look as good as some of my patrons. I handed her the book. She took a glance at it and then put it to the side.

"Now, as a stylist, I know you can rock this haircut, but I have to ask you three times if you are sure before I can

proceed. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Samantha, are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Samantha, are you absolutely sure you want this drastic change?"

"One hundred and ten percent sure." I hoped it wasn't the white wine talking.

By the time she was done with the cut, I felt brand new. "Before you put that foam on, can I touch it? I mean, I can see the difference already, and I'm loving it," I said.

"Yes. You sure can."

I ran my fingers through my hair and played around with it for a moment. "Oh, my God, this is beautiful. I love it. I love it." It looked so good, and it wasn't even finished.

"It does fit you well. I'd love to do your eyebrows, and since you have a nice piece of change on your gift card, I'd love to do your makeup too."

"Let's do it." I was so excited.

When it was all done, I looked beautiful. I looked like my old self, the person I used to be before Charles took my life from me.

"You are beautiful," Andrea said, complimenting me. "Your man is going to be blown away."

"Well, I don't have one of those, but I know my staff and customers will be. I may never, ever have another man."

"Don't think like that. You are beautiful, Samantha, and we are not meant to be alone. God has someone for all of us. You just have to wait on the Lord."

"Listen, I don't get into all that religious mumbo jumbo. I lost faith in God years ago. I have always done the right thing. At least I thought I did. My crime was falling in love and

marrying a man who was no good for me. Now I'm scarred for life."

"Don't say that. Bad things happen to good people, and I'll tell you firsthand that life isn't all perfect or fair, but you should never stop believing."

"Yeah, well, God has cursed my body. I never cheated." My eyes welled up with tears. "I didn't deserve the cards I was dealt."

She handed me a tissue. "Shhh. Come on, beautiful. Don't ruin your makeup," she said and turned my chair so that she was closer to my face.

I dried my eyes, and she touched up my makeup real quick. "God is a good God, so whatever it is that has happened to you, you still thank Him for life. If it's not terminal, you praise Him for that. It's not over until they bury you six feet under, so you ask God to send you someone who can deal or cope with your imperfections. It didn't end for you with your ex. Do you hear me?" she said.

I smiled and nodded. "Yes. I guess you are right."

"Come on, gorgeous. Look at you. You are what? Five-seven? With long, beautiful legs. And you're slim, and you got junk back there. Your hair is banging. You are a ten. Someone will love you again. This, I know."

I stood and looked in the mirror, admiring myself. "I do look good, don't I?"

"You do, so go home, put on something sexy, and just enjoy you. I mean, that's what I'd do if I was single."

"Hey, it's early. I have a restaurant. I'd love it if you'd join me tonight. I just want to celebrate my new look. I mean, if you don't have plans."

"I'd love to." Andrea smiled.

I gave her the address of the restaurant and then headed out. I climbed in my car and checked my rearview mirror five times before I pulled off. I was gorgeous and could attract any

man with my new look, but who'd want me? I was a walking infection.

Chapter Three

Josephina Ramirez

Looking up from the front desk when I heard my apartment door shut, I caught a glimpse of Ana, my eldest, trying to breeze by without me seeing her outfit.

“I’m sorry. Can you hold please?” I put the caller on hold before he agreed to be placed on hold. “Hold it. Where are your clothes? What the hell are you wearing?” I asked my teen.

“Mom, it’s the latest style. I don’t want to go out looking like a nerd. Enriquez is going to be there.”

“I don’t care who is going to be there, Ana. You go and put some real pants on, and not those see-through tights. And that fake belly ring needs to be thrown out. Have some self-respect. You’re only seventeen,” I griped.

“And soon I’ll be eighteen and won’t have to listen to you,” she snapped back.

“And then you can get out of *mi casa*. Now, go and change, or you will stay home!” I ordered.

My oldest daughter was a pain in my bottom. She was driving me crazy. I was a single mother of two now, because my husband—well, now my ex-husband—was in prison for doing every illegal thing under the sun that you could name. I just prayed my youngest daughter, Angelica, didn’t follow in her big sister’s footsteps. Ever since her daddy went to prison, Ana had been flipping out on me, and I was at my wit’s end.

I remembered then that I had someone on hold.

“I am so sorry, sir. Thanks for holding. How can I help you?”

I took care of my guest and then waited for Ana to come back down. When she did, she had changed clothes, but she had a bigger bag than the last time.

“You must think I’m stupid or something. What’s in that bag, Ana?”

“Clothes. I’ve decided I’ll stay with Enriquez tonight.”

I thought my Puerto Rican ears were playing tricks on me, because I knew damn well my underage kid didn’t just tell me she had decided she’d stay at her boyfriend’s house.

“Qué?”

“I’m going to stay at Enriquez’s, Mom, and you can’t stop me.”

“Ana, estas loca?”

“No, Mama, I haven’t lost my mind. I need a break from this place, and I’m tired of being here. Why can’t I just live my life?”

My heart was broken, and I was saddened. I only did what I thought was best for my girls, but Ana was out of control, and I was tired. “Ana, I’m tired. If you wanna go, go, but don’t come back. I will not have a disobedient child who doesn’t respect me in my house, so if you think you are grown enough to tell me that you are going to stay someplace I don’t permit, go and don’t come back to this place,” I said, pointing to my own chest. My eyes welled up. I had done all I could for her, but I had to let go, because I was tired of battling with her.

“Fine!” she yelled and stormed back inside the apartment. I assumed she had gone back for more of her things, but I no longer had the fight in me to argue.

I sighed and went into my office. I was fortunate to have my job. When José got locked up, we lost our house. I had worked my way up from housekeeping to general manager at the hotel where I worked, and God had stepped in and blessed me with a job that gave us a free place to live. My two daughters and I lived in the spacious manager’s quarters at the hotel. After sixteen years of hard work, I had done something on my own, and I didn’t want any more stress or heartache.

Ana had graduated from high school, by the grace of God, and was a couple of months from her eighteenth birthday. I had had her when I was fourteen, and after all the hard years, I was still here, doing my best. I just had to let go.

After twenty minutes, she came down with a packed bag.

“Mama, I’m sorry, but it’s time for me to go.”

“Good luck, child. Que Dios te bendiga ,” I said, giving her my blessing. I couldn’t hold on to her anymore.

“Bye.” She sniffled, and then she was gone.

I dried my eyes and asked God to strengthen me. I loved my baby girl, but she and I bumped heads, and she needed to get a dose of reality.

After I finished my shift, I sat and ate with Angelica and explained that Ana was moving out. She was fifteen and smart, so she didn’t have a lot of questions.

Not tired, I decided to shower and go out for a drink. I went to a restaurant that my girlfriend Samantha owned not far from my hotel, but I was shocked when I laid eyes on her. She looked like a new person. Her makeover had made her look amazing, like a brand new person.

“Oh, *chica*, you look fabulous. What happened to the bun?” I said.

“I needed a change.”

“Well, you look beautiful. I mean, you don’t look like you at all.”

Raising a brow at my words, she said, “Gee, thanks.”

“No, no, I don’t mean it in a bad way. I always thought that you were attractive, *chica*, but now you are hot.”

She came around from behind the bar and sat next to me on a vacant stool.

“Well, I went to the salon today and just went for it. I feel good.”

“You should, because you look good,” I said.

“Oh, there is Andrea.” She waved a woman over. “She is responsible for this makeover.”

“Maybe she can hook me up too, ya know?” I had a heavy Spanish accent, even though I had been in the United States

for years. I still spoke Spanish on a daily basis to my Spanish-speaking staff and my family.

“Come join us,” Samantha said. “I’m not working tonight. I’m relaxing.”

“Are you sure, Samantha? I don’t want to impose.”

“Come on, Josie. You’re not imposing.”

We grabbed a table. When Andrea made her way over to the table, Samantha introduced us.

“Josie, this is Andrea. Andrea, this is my friend Josie.”

“Nice to meet you.” I smiled.

“You too.”

“Can you make me look like Sam?” I blurted. I wanted a makeover too.

Andrea nodded. “I certainly can. She looks amazing, doesn’t she?”

“Oh yes. I could hardly recognize her,” I said.

The three of us engaged in nonstop conversation. We got acquainted with Andrea, and I learned some new things about Samantha. I ate at her restaurant often, and she sent business my way, but we had never had an actual sit-down meal together. We drank and ate a lot. I could walk to my hotel afterward, but since Andrea and Sam had to drive home, we ordered coffee to sober up a little before heading out. Sam didn’t live far from the restaurant, and I learned that Andrea lived about ten miles away from our area.

“It was so nice to meet you, Andrea, and I have your card. I’ll be calling you tomorrow for sure for an appointment,” I said, standing.

“Yes, ma’am, and you ladies take it easy. I have your numbers, and as soon as I make it home, I will text you both,” Andrea said as she and Samantha both stood.

We departed, and when I got back to the hotel, I went straight to my bed. As soon as I shut my eyes, my phone

alerted me that I had a text. I knew Andrea couldn't have gotten home that fast. I grabbed my phone. It was Ana.

Mama, pls come get me. He doesn't want me 2 stay.

Damn! I was too tired to move, but I had to go and get my grown baby.

Chapter Four

Andrea

When I walked in the house, I didn't expect Jeremiah to be up waiting. He normally couldn't care less where I was or who I was with.

"Where in the hell were you, Ann?"

"Out."

"Out where? You are a pastor's wife. You have no business walking in at this hour," he bellowed.

"Are you serious right now, Jeremiah? You make prayer calls at all times of the night, and now I can't walk in after midnight? Man, please. Good night!" I headed toward the stairs. He was two steps behind me.

"Have you been drinking?"

"Yes, I have," I replied.

"You know you should not be indulging in God knows what and then getting behind the wheel."

"Again, the Bible doesn't say that. I'm not supposed to become a drunk. I had a couple of drinks. I'm not intoxicated. No way would I get behind the wheel drunk, Jeremiah, so go to your room so I can shower and go to sleep, sir." I spoke as nicely as I could. I didn't know why he had decided to act as if he cared anything about me. It was comical.

"Good night, harlot," he said.

I just laughed. I laughed out loud in his face. I was over him and his psycho biblical philosophies. God had given me the gift of understanding too, and I wasn't going to allow him to control me anymore. If he loved me like the Bible said to love a wife, he'd show me and not withhold love and affection from me. He constantly warned if I committed adultery, I'd burn in hell, yet he was pushing me to it. The Word of God told us not to deprive our spouse and not to tempt our mate to do ungodly things, but I was tempted. I was in need of love

and intimacy, and if I couldn't get it from my husband, I'd have to find it somewhere.

The next morning I dragged myself out of bed to cook breakfast for my kids. I had never stayed out after midnight before, and I knew I should not do that again if I had an early morning the next day. When I got downstairs to the kitchen, all eyes were on me, as if I was on trial.

"What's with the stare down?" I asked.

"You overslept, and I had to make the kids breakfast this morning," Jeremiah's baritone voice thundered.

My eyes popped. "Overslept? What do you mean? What time is it?" I hadn't checked the clock. I'd had no idea I was forty-five minutes behind.

"Time for us to get the bus, Mama, and we had to eat oatmeal. Yuck!" J.J. frowned.

"Yeah, Mom. We told Dad that you added fruit to our oatmeal, but he made us eat it without it," Lena said before grabbing her backpack. The kids headed for the door.

"Foot," I said. I'd wanted to use the word *fuck* so many times, but that was unbecoming. "I'm sorry, guys. I'll make it up to you with blueberry pancakes tomorrow morning," I offered. "Promise," I said as they hurried out the door.

Jeremiah looked at me and shook his head.

"What, Jeremiah?"

"Why didn't you check with me before going out last night?"

"Well, Jeremiah," I said, going for the coffee, "I called you at least ten times, and you never answered, so I figured you were doing your missionary work." He had probably been in the missionary position with one of our members.

"I was in a prayer meeting. I tried calling you several times after it, and you didn't answer."

I poured some coffee in a cup and took a quick sip. I needed the caffeine to get to work. I wouldn't make it without a pick-

me-up. “Well, the restaurant was loud, and I didn’t hear my phone. When I went to the ladies’ room and saw you had called, I just decided I’d see you when I got in.”

“Listen, I have to head over to the church. We will finish this conversation later. I expect to see you home on time today.”

“Maybe. I’m not sure yet. If something comes up, I’ll let you know.” I was not sure why I had said something so crazy, but I was just tired of being on standby for him and being exactly where he wanted me to be, while he was never where I wanted him to be—with me.

“Whatever has gotten into you, woman, you’d better pray it away. There will be order in this house. You will not act like the women of the world in my house.”

I clicked my tongue and rolled my eyes. I set my coffee cup on the counter and walked past him. I had to get dressed for work, and I no longer cared to hear his two-faced rhetoric. I was a lot of things, but I was not a fool. If he hadn’t laid his hands on me in over two years, he was laying his hands on somebody else.

“Yeah, okay, Ann. Do what you can afford. The wages of sin is a high price.”

“Whatever.” I went up the stairs, laughing to myself and shaking my head. I made a silent decision to start enjoying myself. I wasn’t going to continue to keep up a front for him and keep up appearances for him. I was miserable, yet I kept a smile on my face and walked around pretending that everything was fine, but it wasn’t. I decided I wanted a divorce, and I was going to get one.

* * *

My phone line buzzed. “Yes?” I answered. I was in my office, tallying the money we had made that day and preparing for my nightly deposit. My staff knew not to bother me when I was working with money.

“I’m sorry,” Carla said. She was my slowest stylist. She was a newbie, and she was always the last to leave. “There is a

man out here looking for you.”

“A man? What man?”

“I don’t know, ma’am. He asked if you were still here, and I told him yes.”

“Well, can you ask his name?” I laughed to myself. Carla was sweet, but not the brightest bulb in the tanning bed.

“I did. He says he wants to surprise you.”

I looked at the monitor that I had mounted on the wall so I could watch the goings-on on the floor, waiting area, parking lot, and breakroom. It was a split screen, so it did the job of four sets. Even though the image was clear, all I could see was a man’s back. “Tell him to hold on a few moments.” I put the cash away and stuffed all the day’s credit card receipts and tickets into an envelope. I stood and did a mirror check. I needed to freshen up my lips. I was not going to approach anyone, male or female, without looking my absolute best. After a fresh coat of lip gloss, I adjusted my belt and collar and went out to see who had come to see me.

I made it to the front and could still see him only from behind. “Can I help you?” I asked his back.

The gentleman stood still and then slowly turned around. My eyes bulged, and my heart stopped.

“Quentin,” I whispered. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

He smiled. “Hi, Andrea.”

All I could do was blink rapidly as I tried to see a figure other than my ex-boyfriend, Quentin Hughes. “What, what ... wha ... wha ... whaaa ...,” I stammered. “I mean, where have you been? How did you know to find me here?”

“Facebook.” He smiled even brighter.

Instantly, I became furious. “Are you kidding me? Why are you here?” I yelled and folded my arms across my breasts. He was the heart-breaker who had left me before I’d rebounded to Jeremiah.

“I wanted to see you. I wanted to apologize, and I wanted to do it face-to-face.”

“Get out!” I yelled.

“Wait, Drea. Let me explain.”

“There is nothing to explain. Now leave. I don’t want to see you or talk to you.”

“Listen, I know I hurt you. I ... I ... I—”

I cut him off. “Get out!” I yelled again and pointed at the door.

“Drea, wait. Give me five minutes.”

“I will call the police, Quentin. I will,” I growled, threatening him, as I went for the desk phone.

He rushed over to me and wrapped his arms around me. His embrace made my body shake. I hadn’t been that close to a man in a very long time. I hadn’t felt the heat of a man’s breath on my neck in so long. I felt my body heat up. I hated this man for what he had done to me, and now I was locked in his grip. As much as I wanted him to let me go, I wanted him to hold on to me just as much.

“No need to call anyone. I’ll go. I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you that hurting you is the only thing in my life that I regret. I was young and selfish and was only thinking of myself at the time, and what I did to you, what I did to *us*, I know is unforgivable, but I’m asking you to forgive me, anyway.” He spoke so close to my ear, the heat of his breath made me excited.

I stood there in his arms, breathing heavily. He placed his lips gently on the side of my head and let his kiss linger before he finally released me.

“I’m sorry for just showing up out of the blue, but I’ve wanted to apologize for so long. I couldn’t go another day with the guilt. So, there it is. I don’t know if you will ever accept it, but I feel better knowing that I’ve said it.” He loosened the embrace, stepped back slowly, and turned to walk away.

I was frozen in place. I had loved him once and probably loved him still, but I had never allowed him to occupy any space in my mind after he left me, and I had never, ever wanted any feelings for him to resurface. He had hurt me to my very core. I was madly in love with Quentin when he shattered my heart and took a part of me in the process.

I thought he was done and out the door, but he spoke again. “By the way, you are still as beautiful as I remember you. Your husband is a lucky man. I hope he makes you happy, Andrea. I was supposed to be the one, but I messed that up. I sincerely hope that he is putting a smile on your face each and every day.”

Then I heard the door open. *Breathe*, I reminded myself, because with just one touch from him, I’d forgotten how to. I let out a loud sound as the air escaped from my chest. How dare he just show up out of the blue? It had been eleven, maybe twelve years since I had seen him, and I was pissed that he had actually shown his handsome face.

I had blocked out my memories of him, and now, since he’d decided to show his face, he had jolted the emotions and feelings that I had managed to bury in the bottom of my sea of memories.

I was nineteen and a full-time student in cosmetology school when Quentin left me. He was in his second year at Chicago State University, and I thought he’d be mine forever, but, boy, was I wrong. We had been friends, for the most part, since about the fifth grade, but we hadn’t dated until our junior year of high school.

We had always been cool, but one school trip changed all of that. We had to partner up to be able to explore the planetarium unsupervised, and since all his boys partnered up with their girlfriends, and the nerds latched onto the other nerds, we were the only two left who weren’t considered weird, so we quickly joined hands as partners.

As we walked around, we talked and joked, and I learned some things about Quentin that I never knew, and he about me too. After our six-hour day of bliss, we sat on the bus together

and rode back to school holding hands. That evening, before I left the school grounds, I had my first real kiss. Yes, a tongue kiss with Quentin. He was popular—he was a hoop star on the varsity team back then—so when I became his girlfriend, I became one of the popular girls.

After months of fondling and going to second base, I let him deflower me the summer right before our senior year. I gave him the goods, and we were stuck together like glue. He was the love of my life, and when I graduated, we moved in together. That miracle happened because my father owned a couple of duplex buildings back then, and as long as we were in school and maintained the utilities, he let us live rent free.

Things took a nosedive when the college girls came into Quentin's life. Since he was still playing ball and was popular, girls came along with the territory. Fun became his middle name. He never came home at the time he said he'd be home, and it was always his friends this and school that. It was never us anymore.

The breakup came when I found out I was pregnant. What a horrible mess that was, because Quentin was angry and upset. He talked me into terminating the pregnancy. I didn't even tell my parents what I had done, and two weeks after I killed my first child, Quentin told me that he wanted to do other things.

He went on and on about his future this and his future that, and he asserted that if he stayed with me, I'd hold him back. He said that love didn't fit into the equation for him, and that if we remained together, I would be the reason he didn't go places. I was mortified. He acted as if I was a ball and chain, when all I wanted to do was love him. When he moved out, I was devastated, hurt, confused, and heartbroken. He was the love of my life, and I never thought I'd smile again.

After the sad breakup, I turned to God and started going to church all the time with a classmate of mine, Sheila. That was when I met Jeremiah. He asked me out, but I turned down his invitation. He was persistent and didn't give up on asking me out. I finally said yes.

Sheila talked me into it. “Girl, what is wrong with you? Jeremiah is fine, and you know he is going to be a pastor at his daddy’s church one day. He’s a God-fearing and good-looking guy. How could you pass him up? I mean, there will be no pressure for sex, and you will someday be first lady at our church.”

“I don’t want to be first lady. I want to be the baddest hair and makeup artist Chicago has ever seen. I don’t know if I’m godly enough to live up to that position.”

“Girl, ask God to guide you. You’re not wicked, Andrea, and the flaws you do have are not sinful. Like, running late for class won’t send you to hell. Going to the store in your pj’s won’t send you to hell. You’re a good girl.”

With that, I went out with Jeremiah. He was so sweet back then. And I learned that a man on a mission to become a pastor would still try to get into your panties. We certainly didn’t wait until after we had exchanged vows to exchange sexual fluids. After a period of time, we gave in to our flesh. It was only three or four times in that year we dated, and we both repented.

All I knew back then was that no matter how great Jeremiah was, he didn’t make me feel the way Quentin had made me feel. The sex was good when we were having it, but he didn’t make my body quiver the way Quentin had. Jeremiah was a conservative lover, and oral was out of the question. He refused to do me, but, of course, he’d gladly let me do him without hesitation. He stuck to the scriptures on how women were created for men, and not the other way around.

In love and longing to be in a relationship with a good, godly man, I listened and allowed it to go that way. I convinced myself that Jeremiah always had my best interests at heart and that he put God first. Yes, we had slipped, had had a couple of sinful moments, but we had always confessed, prayed, and asked God to deliver us from our fleshly ways. Spiritually, we connected. I fell in love, and we got married. He took over his daddy’s position in our church, and all was good.

That was before the expansion of the church, before the church became a business, versus a house of worship. After the expansion we had paid staff members and paid musicians. Before that, I was used to folks working full-time jobs and doing church services for free. But our church had been on its way to being a mega church back then, and now it was one of the largest in Chicago. Nothing like the old days.

Jeremiah even asked me to give up my career to be a full-time first lady, but that wasn't going to happen. I made serious money and had invested a lot of time and energy into my craft. I was doing what God had created me to do, which was to enhance beauty. I had never seen an ugly person, everyone had something special about them that they could accentuate, and I was there to help them do it.

Even though Jeremiah knew that was my dream, he pestered me about leaving my profession, something I knew Quentin would never have done to me. Quentin had been so supportive that he used to let me practice on him, and I'd promised never to tell anyone. But most of all, he had loved me.

Those were the good old days. Now they were just memories, and I hated the fact that Quentin had shown up and shaken up my memories of him and us.

I finally moved from the spot I had stood in for five minutes after he left. I knew I needed to hit the night drop, but I rushed to my office, tossed everything into the safe, and grabbed my keys and purse. I hurried to my car, and as soon as I got in, I called Sheila to let her know who had shown up out of the blue.

Chapter Five

Samantha

“What can I get you?” I asked Ethan, one of our regulars. He had come in about ten minutes before, but he had been on the phone and I hadn’t wanted to interrupt, so I’d waited for him to end his call.

Looking up from his tablet, he paused and then tilted his head to the right. “Sam?” He looked surprised.

“Yes.” I smiled.

“You look ... you look ... you are ... Wow,” he finally managed to say as he stared at me, his eyebrows vaulting toward the ceiling.

I knew he had not been expecting to see my new look. I had gotten the same reception from a few other regulars that day, so his reaction didn’t surprise me.

“Thank you, Ethan.” I smiled even brighter. “Can I get you the usual?”

“Yeah, yeah, that would be ...” He paused and licked his lips. “The usual will be fine,” he said.

I nodded and smiled. He continued to smile at me. I noticed he watched me walk away. I went for the scotch and hit him with a shot that was larger than the measured shot, and then I grabbed the nozzle and hit the COKE button.

I walked over and placed the drink in front of him. “Here you are.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you ready to order?” I asked him.

“Yes ... in a moment. I’d like to know, what inspired the change? I mean, I have never been into the short styles, but it looks so classy on you, and your makeup is beautiful.”

“Thanks. I don’t know. You know, I got a hair salon gift card for my birthday from my staff. I went yesterday, and now I have a new look.”

“Well, it’s working. I mean, you are a beautiful woman, Sam, but now you have stepped it up to sexy. And I must give it to you. This look is working for you.”

“You think so?” I blushed.

“Yes. I know so.” He smiled at me, like he usually did. He had never before complimented me or even struck up a conversation with me, so I welcomed his attention.

Interrupting our conversation, Marty, an irritating customer, yelled, “Can I get a refill, somebody, please?”

“I’ll be right there.” I smiled, leaving my eyes on Ethan but moving toward the grouch.

When I reached Marty, my smile had faded a bit. “What were you drinking, Marty?” I asked nicely.

“You don’t know?” he asked smartly.

“No, Marty. Keisha is your server today, so I have no clue.”

“Gin and tonic. Boy, I swear, you dingy broads.”

“Hey!” I said firmly. “Watch it, okay? Don’t make me have to throw you out of here again.”

Backing down, he changed his tone. “All right, all right, all right, Sammie. I’ll be good.”

A few minutes later I handed him his new drink and then eased back over to Ethan. I wanted to sit with him, but the place was too busy for me to abandon my crew.

“I see you got him under control. I was about to say something,” Ethan said.

“Yeah, I can handle Marty. He’s been coming here since I was seventeen, when my daddy ran this place. He’s annoying but harmless.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“So have you decided on dinner?”

“I sorta have. I mean, I frequent this place, but like you, I want to try something different.”

“Well, can I recommend something?”

“Sure.”

“The stuffed chicken breast is *delicious*.”

“Really? Well, I shall see.” He smiled.

“Will you like that with rice or potatoes?”

“I’ll take the potatoes, and please add mushrooms to the chicken.”

“Will do.”

I took his menu and went over to the register to key in his order. I tried to keep my eyes on what I was doing, but I felt him staring, so I kept glancing back at him. I wanted to encourage him, but I knew I couldn’t date or even think of having a man in my condition. That was something you had to be up front about, and I was terrified to tell anyone about my secret.

Since he was eyeing me, I decided to discourage him by moving around my restaurant to greet other patrons. No matter where I moved, I felt he was watching me. Before long, I went to see if his dinner was ready. It was, so I picked up his plate and headed over to his table.

“Here you are, Ethan,” I said, setting the plate before him. “I hope you enjoy this. It was one of my mom’s recipes, and it’s a hit here. I hope you agree.”

“Thanks. And can I get another?” he asked, holding up his glass.

“Sure. Coming right up.”

I worked on his refill while he watched my every move. Lord, why was this man making me warm? I didn’t want to be checked out by Ethan; he was the last man who I’d imagined would give me a second look. He had never been rude, had always been friendly, but he had never flirted with me, complimented me, or looked at me the way he was looking at me in that moment. I picked up my pace, gave him his drink, and decided to move from behind the bar.

As I made my way past him, he stopped me. “Sam, do you have a second?”

I paused and turned to him after letting out a deep breath. I tried to hold my smile in, but I couldn't. Ethan was gorgeous. He was clean-cut, and he had a tapered beard and mustache, and cocoa-brown skin. He might not have been six feet tall, but I was pretty sure he was taller than I was. His body was not fat, but I had no idea how lean he was, because he normally had on a button-down shirt, a nice tie, and slacks every time I saw him. I had always assumed he was coming from work. His eyes were tight and a little slanted, and I did consider him to be handsome.

“Yes. Is there something else you need?”

“Yes.” He smiled.

“And that is?”

“Utensils,” he said.

We both laughed.

“I'm so sorry. I'll get that for you now.” I rushed off and came back with silverware. “Here you are. I'm so sorry. I don't know how I forgot that.”

“It's all good, but if you're really sorry, you'd sit with me.”

“Aw, Ethan. It's peak time, and I can't sit. I have to make sure my customers are getting top-notch service.”

“How long does peak time last?”

“Normally, until ten. Everyone's had dinner by then, and the dinner rush is over.”

“What time do you close?”

“Midnight or one. It depends on the traffic.”

He looked at his watch. “Okay. Handle your business while I handle this chicken.”

I nodded and moved on. I got busy in the kitchen and didn't make it back to the bar area until close to ten. When I returned, Ethan had already made an exit. The rush was gone, so I went to my office to get my purse in order to freshen up. The kitchen had been busy, as it always was, and the hairnet had flattened my hair a bit, but after a few minutes of retouching, I

was back to gorgeous. I took off the kitchen apron, handed it off to an employee, and made my way back to the bar, looking fresh again. By ten, the pace was more relaxed, and I took advantage of the downtime and ordered a chicken-finger basket and fries for myself. While I waited at a round table in the bar area, I sipped on a glass of my favorite Riesling and watched the fish swim around in the in-wall tank.

A voice interrupted my quiet time. "Is this seat taken?"

I looked up, and to my pleasant surprise, it was Ethan. "Hi. You're back."

"Yeah, I went home, showered, changed, and decided I'd come back to see if you could take a load off and sit with me. Can I join you?"

"Sure. Why not?" I smiled and sipped.

I could now see his physique. He had some beautiful arms. They were peeking out of the short sleeves on his polo. The shirt clung to his skin, but was not supertight. It was just tight enough to show he had a nice chest and abs.

"I see the crowd has cleared out."

"Yep. The night is calmer and more peaceful now. Would you like anything?"

"A drink. That stuffed chicken was um, um good." He smiled.

"I told you," I said. I waved for Stacy, one of my waitresses.

She hurried over. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Can you get my friend Ethan a scotch and Coke on the rocks? He prefers Johnny Walker Black."

"That is correct." Ethan smiled. I really wanted him to stop doing that. His smile was gorgeous, and his teeth looked even and white.

"Would you like another also, Ms. Sam?" Stacy asked.

"You know what, Stacy? That would be great," I said.

A moment later another employee, Tre, brought my chicken fingers and fries. “Here you go, Ms. Sam. Your basket with extra ranch, just like you like it.”

“Thanks, Tre.”

“You are welcome. Would you like anything, sir?” he asked Ethan.

“No. No thanks.”

“Well, Ms. Sam, if you need me, you know where to find me,” Tre said, then dashed off.

When I moved my eyes up from my food, Ethan was staring again.

“Okay, you have to stop doing that,” I told him. “It’s beginning to feel weird.”

“Stop doing what?” he asked, as if he was clueless.

“Looking at me like that.”

Lifting his brows, he said. “Like what?”

“Don’t play innocent, Ethan. I mean, you’ve been coming here for two years, and although you are kind, polite, and always a gentleman, you’ve never looked at me like you have tonight.”

“You’re right, and I’m not trying to make you feel uncomfortable. I’ve noticed you before, and I’ve always thought you were a beautiful woman, in a shell, but I never gave any thought to it, because I was in a relationship. Now, three weeks after my breakup, I come in, and it’s like you’ve broken out of your shell and turned on the sexy. I will admit I like what I see. You were always attractive, Sam, but now it looks as if you know that you are too.” The pitch of his voice fell as he leaned toward me and added, “And that turned me on.”

I swallowed hard. Just then Stacy approached with our drinks, and I was happy for the interruption.

“Another Riesling for you, Ms. Sam, and a scotch and soda for you, Mr. Ethan. Enjoy.”

“Thanks,” we both said in unison.

“You’re welcome,” she said and then made her way back to the other side of the bar.

Time for a change of subject, I decided. I figured I’d talk about him, so I could avoid talking about me and why I was afraid to encourage his advances. “So you just recently broke up with your lady?”

“Yes, about three and a half weeks ago. She and I were on the road to destruction, and I had to let it go.”

“Did you love her?”

“Yes, I did, but Veronica and I were from two different sides of the track. I’m not saying I’m better than anyone, not by far, but she had some ghetto issues. I will admit I met her at the DMV. She worked there, and when I laid eyes on her, I was thinking, *Man, she is bad*. She was dark-skinned, her makeup was flawless, and her eyes were just mesmerizing. She helped me, and she was so pleasant that I went back in and gave her a card and asked her to call me. She did, and we went out. After maybe five dates, she started to let her ghetto nature come out, but I was already into her, so I couldn’t walk away.

“Beyond the neck-rolling attitude, Vee was smart, and she always saw the good side of everything. When I’d have a hard day at work, she’d soothe me. She could cook her ass off and kept a spick-and-span clean place for us, but she would always show her ass in public. I mean, if the food wasn’t right, she’d go off. If the cashier didn’t say what she wanted to hear, it was war. If I didn’t cater to her the way she preferred, it was a fight, and all that fussing, fighting, and arguing got old. About three weeks ago, I ended it. She moved out, and we tried reconciling, but if I’m not doing it the Vee way, there is no way, so I decided to be done.”

I nodded and dipped some chicken into the ranch dressing. I had been listening and munching at the same time. “Do you miss her?”

“Yes, in a lot of ways, but I don’t miss her enough to want her back.”

“I can understand that.”

“So what about you, gorgeous? How many men are beating down your door?”

“Ha,” I said, laughing. “None. I am single. By myself, but not alone. I’ve grown accustomed to being this way.”

“Was it a bad breakup?”

“You could say that. I was married for almost seven years. I thought he was a good guy, but it turns out he wasn’t,” I said. “He cheated and denied it, but I knew he did, so I divorced him.”

“Wow. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I paused. “Let’s just say he went too far.”

“Okay,” he said.

He changed the subject, and we talked about random topics while I finished my food. We had a couple more drinks and shared a lot of laughs.

“Can I take you out to dinner?” he asked.

I knew I should say no, but Ethan was so sweet. So nice and so good-looking. “Yes. When?”

“Saturday night. I know you own this fabulous spot, but I’d like to take you somewhere close to the water.”

“Okay.” I beamed. A change of scenery would be nice, and a different menu would be even nicer. I ate lunch and dinner at my place at least six days a week.

“How about I pick you up here around six?”

“Six is cool.”

We exchanged numbers, and, at closing time, I walked him to the door.

“I really enjoyed talking to you, Sam. And you look stunning.”

“Thank you, Ethan, and to be honest, I’ve always noticed you, but I never thought of you in a ‘Let’s go out’ type of way.

I just never imagined that a man like you would seriously even look my way, even after the makeover.”

“Well, you were wrong. I was involved, so I wasn’t trying to notice anyone. And at first, after the breakup, I still felt the same, until I saw you earlier this evening. I like what I see.” He moved in my direction.

I moved back a little to keep the space between us. I wouldn’t dare display that type of behavior in front of my staff or at my business. “Well, I have to close up. So you should go.”

“Okay. I’ll let you get back to work. But call me tonight, when you get in.”

“It will be late, Ethan. Sometimes I don’t get in until after two.”

“Okay. Then call me tomorrow.”

We burst into laughter.

“I thought you’d have a change of heart,” I said.

“Yes, I’m going home to hit the hay.”

“Good night, Ethan.”

“Good night, Sam.”

He walked out the door, and I watched him climb into his Range Rover. I stood at the door until his taillights had disappeared down the street.

Stacy snapped my attention back to the restaurant. “Are we locking the door, Ms. Sam?”

“Yes. Is everyone gone?”

“Yes, ma’am, and everything is pretty much done. We haven’t had a customer in an hour, and we are pretty much done.”

“An hour? Are you sure?” I had been so busy chatting with Ethan that I hadn’t noticed.

“Yes, ma’am. The bar is broken down, the floors are done, and the kitchen is almost done.”

Happy to hear my crew had everything under control, I headed to the bar to close out the registers. I managed to get home at 1:15 a.m., which was a first. Once inside, I picked up my phone, scrolled to Ethan's name, and stared at it.

How could I date him, like him, or get close to him, or to any man, for that matter? I had a secret, a big secret. Closing my eyes, I asked God to take it back. I begged him to reverse my condition so I could love again. So I could share my heart, my life, and my body with a man again. I begged him to have mercy on me and to heal me so I could have a shot with Ethan. He was fine, and while chatting with him, I had learned about his job. I was impressed. He was a software programmer, and he worked on phone apps. He was brilliant, and I just wanted to be the old me. The me before Charles infected me, the me who loved life. The me who loved and had sex on the regular.

If he and I hit it off, how could I tell him? How? I went to sleep thinking I should cancel our date. I didn't want to like anyone. Damn. Why did I even get that stupid makeover? If I had stuck with my bun and pressed powder, he would have never asked me out.

I made up my mind. I wasn't going to date him.

Chapter Six

Andrea

“I have an opening at four,” I said to my client, “only because I had a cancellation. But if you need more than a shampoo and a style, I can’t squeeze you in. I am already overbooked.”

I had told my receptionist, Octavia, a million times not to transfer a call to me from a client looking to get squeezed in, and I was going to tell her one last time. I gave all the appointment scheduling to her, and if she couldn’t tell these women no, I’d have to hire someone with enough bravery to do so.

“I understand, Mrs. Richards, but I’m booked solid. That slot is only open for a shampoo and style. No color, no eyebrows, no makeup. I can get you in for your hair only. I’m sure another stylist can maybe fit you in for everything else.” I rolled my eyes. I had a client in my chair, and I didn’t want her to see the ugly, unpleasant faces I was making, but I was highly annoyed.

“No, Andrea. No one knows me like you do. I just need you this one time to make an exception. I’ll pay double. I just have an important dinner with my husband tonight that I totally forgot about,” she whined.

“Listen, I will do the best I can, okay? But you have to be here on time. *Not one minute late*. If you are, you won’t get serviced.”

“I’m there,” she said.

When we hung up, I hoped she didn’t renege on that double pay. If I was going to make another client wait, the money had to be right.

By the time I had finished my day, I was happy I hadn’t fallen behind too much. Luckily, even with the additional appointment, my day hadn’t run very late. After I let my last stylist out and locked the door, I headed to my office but was stopped by a tap on the front door.

I turned around slowly, wondering what one of the girls had forgotten. But it wasn't a staff member. It was *him*. I swallowed hard and just stood there, so he tapped again.

I finally instructed my legs to move forward and marched over to the door. I unlocked the lock and snatched the door open.

“What are you doing here, Quentin?” I barked.

“I need to talk to you,” he said sadly, looking as good as ever.

I had thought he was good looking back then, but now he was fine as hell. Despite that, I wanted him to stay away. I didn't understand why he had shown up again. He'd apologized, and I had accepted, so he had no reason to be here.

“About what?” I asked.

“Can we go someplace, or can I come in for a minute?”

I knew I should say, “Hell, no,” but I stepped aside. “Come on in.”

He walked in, and I locked the door. This time I powered off the OPEN sign. “I have a little more cleaning to do at my booth, so come on back.”

He followed me and took a seat in the chair to the left of my station. I started removing my combs from the sanitizer, waiting for him to speak.

“So this is your salon, huh? It's nice. Upscale, classy. I knew you'd do well.”

I paused and dried my hands. “Thanks, but get to you, Quentin. Why are you here?”

“To be honest, I just wanted to see you again, Andrea. I mean, lately, you're all that I think about, and I can't help but wonder how things would have been if I hadn't ... hadn't ...”

I jumped in. “Convinced me to have an abortion and then packed your things and left me alone?” He put his head down. I put my hands on my hips. “Look, Quentin, that was years ago. Even though you're just now apologizing, I forgave you a

very long time ago. If I had not, I'd be a mental case right now, instead of a wife, mother, and business owner. You can't keep showing up, because now, all of a sudden, you feel bad ___"

He interrupted me. "It's not all of a sudden, Andrea. I've walked around for years, feeling horrible for what I did to you. I was in love with you back then, but I was young, foolish, and focused on the wrong things. Every time I had a moment alone without the team, the girls, and the ill advice of others, who I allowed to poison my head, I thought of you. After I graduated and didn't go into the NBA, like I thought I would, I realized I gave up the wrong person and our baby. I didn't think I could handle that at the time, and I'm so sorry. It hurts me every single day. I can't help but think of the what-ifs."

I knew he meant well, and I felt he was sincere, but that was over and done with. He had to leave me alone.

"I don't blame you for anything anymore, Quentin. I have long since gotten over all the hurt, so you don't have to come around anymore. You are making all these emotions that I had a handle on resurface, and I don't want to continue revisiting our past. We both made some bad choices. As much as I hated to admit it, I was just as wrong. I didn't have to go through with it, but I did. I think what hurt me the most was I went through with it because you said it was the best thing for us. I trusted you, and a few days later you left. I thought that we were in it together and that we'd eventually heal from it, move on, transition into our lives, get married, and have more babies. But that didn't happen. Now, if there isn't anything else, you should go and not come by here again. I'm married, and you and I are history."

He sat in silence, with his head down. I turned back to my station, waiting for him to stand and make his exit, but he just sat there. I headed to the back to put the towels in the wash, and when I came back, he was still sitting there.

"Can I ask you one thing before I leave?" he said.

I hoped these would be his last words, because I had to go. "Sure."

He stood and walked close to me. I took a tiny step back. I knew I should have created a larger space between us. Quentin still made me hot, and I could feel the moisture forming in my center. I had to admit that I was still attracted to him. He looked damn good. I had missed his scent, and I could feel the electricity from his body, which I had also been missing—not just from him, but from a man, period. The closest Jeremiah and I had gotten lately was in a prayer circle, and there were no romantic exchanges there.

“Are you happy?” he asked.

I laughed. “What? What kind of question is that?” That was my way of avoiding the truth. Hell, no, I wasn’t happy. I was miserable.

“It’s a question that I need to know the answer to. If you tell me that you are happy, Andrea, I will go and will never bother you again.”

With that, I lied. “Yes, I’m happy.” I didn’t need Quentin coming around. I was raw and horny and weak. He would only make matters worse.

He backed up. “Good. Good for you. I’m happy to hear that. I won’t come by again.” He turned and walked toward the door. I let out the air in my chest and followed him.

Before he made his final exit, he turned to me one last time.

“I’m proud of you, Andrea. You turned out to be the woman I always imagined you would be. I am truly happy for you.”

“Thank you, Quentin,” I said. “Take care.”

He finally made his exit, and I locked the door. I went to my office, finished the daily accounting as quickly as I could, and then left.

As I drove home, a million questions ran through my head. I wondered what he was doing. Was he also married? Did he have kids? Was he was happy?

I shut thoughts of Quentin off when I walked into my house and was bombarded by the kids. After I got caught up on their day, I headed upstairs to bathe and relax. I went to kiss my

children good night and reminded Kelly to set the timer on her television. I didn't bother to ask if Jeremiah had been home when I said good night to her.

I went down to lock up and got a glimpse of the kitchen. It was a mess, and I knew Kelly had made breakfast for dinner—because she knew how to make only breakfast food.

After deciding to leave the kitchen as it was, I headed back up and started my bathwater. I undressed, grabbed my robe, and went downstairs again to see if we had any wine left from the last soiree I'd had. We didn't keep liquor or wine on hand, but we did buy it when we planned to have something at our home. Correction, when *I* planned to have something, because Jeremiah never entertained. I had my stylists over every so often for a night of fun.

I found a bottle of Riesling in the pantry and put it in the freezer, then ran up to turn off the water. I decided to clean my kitchen while my wine chilled, and before my task was complete, Jeremiah walked in. A very unexpected surprise.

“You're home. And before eleven,” I commented.

“Yes. I have an early day tomorrow, so I am going to shower and go to bed.”

“What's going on tomorrow?”

“Well, I see you don't check the calendar that Cathy makes out for you.”

With my back to him, I rolled my eyes. “I haven't checked it, Jeremiah. Again, what's going on tomorrow?”

“The men's retreat begins tomorrow. You know we will be gone for a week.”

“It's time for that already?”

“Yes.” He sounded annoyed. “If you'd give the church more of your attention, instead of that worldly place of a salon, you'd remember these things.”

“Well, maybe if you treated me like your wife and the first lady, I'd be interested.”

“Good night, Ann. I’m not for this. I will just do what I always do.”

“And what’s that, Jeremiah?”

“Pray for you,” he said, walking toward the guest room. The room that had become his about two years ago.

“Pray for yourself while you’re at it,” I retorted under my breath. I didn’t want to argue. I just wanted to finish up, pour myself a glass, and soak in my spa tub.

After pouring a glass of the chilled Riesling and taking a sip, I headed upstairs with the bottle in tow. Hell, if I wanted another glass, I didn’t want to have to go all the way back downstairs.

In the hot water, I rested my head on my bath pillow. I listened to Jill Scott on my iPod dock, sipped my wine, and thought about Quentin. Now, if he were my husband, he’d be in this tub with me. I smiled at that idea. Tried not to, but my mind went back to the days when we were together in our tiny one-bedroom apartment. Before college life came between us and injured our relationship. How sweet he’d been to me back then. Holding my hand had been a given.

“Lord, please help me.” I sipped and stared at the ceiling. “I believe and trust in you, Lord, and I don’t want to do anything against your Word, Lord, so please bring my husband back to me. Back into our bed. Let him love me again. I’m lonely, God, and I shouldn’t feel alone in my marriage.” My eyes watered. “Please, God,” were my last words before I sat up to refill my glass.

The next morning I fixed my kids breakfast. Jeremiah had already left, without saying good-bye. He would be gone for a week but hadn’t bothered to say “I love you” before he departed. Typical. I was happy he was gone, though. It didn’t bother me at all.

* * *

I enjoyed my break from the back-and-forth with Jeremiah by indulging in a shopping trip. The kids had gone to sleepovers, so when I got home from shopping, I had a

Saturday evening of peace and quiet before me. As soon as I stepped out of my shoes, I got a call from a number I didn't recognize. Imagine my surprise when I heard Quentin's voice on the other end when I answered.

Chapter Seven

Josephina

I needed a serious break. Working sixteen-hour shifts was getting to me. Ana was supposed to start helping me out, but she was too busy thinking of herself, and I was tired of trying to get her to act like a normal teen, to show a little respect for herself and her little sister. I was physically and mentally tired.

“Yes, sir. How can I help you?” A guest whom I had seen hanging around the lobby about an hour ago was back at the desk. I prayed he didn’t have a complaint.

“Dinner. I’m not familiar with this side of town, and I want to know a good place to eat dinner tonight.”

“The place to be is Sammie’s. It has a great variety of choices on the menu, and the food is delicious.”

My accent was still so heavy, and sometimes I hated it, especially when I was talking to an articulate white-collared male. I was not ashamed of who I was or where I came from, but I hated when I was mistaken for a housekeeper instead of the GM. There had been times, even when I’d had on a silk button-down and a name tag with my title, when I was still treated like I wasn’t worthy enough to be a manager.

“Sammie’s, huh? How far is it from here?” the tall piece of chocolate asked.

“Not far at all. Maybe two lots over. I walk over all the time.”

“Oh, I can walk?” he asked, hitting me with a set of sparkling white teeth. His smile was beautiful, and I had never seen a man with such deep dimples before.

“Yes, sir. If you go out the side door near the pool, it’s a straight shot.”

He hit me with his gorgeous smile again. “Thanks.” He walked away, giving me a view of his muscular calves and chocolate shoulders. He had on a pair of long shorts and a tank, and his chest was working overtime in the tank.

Hot damn! Oh my goodness, he was sexy. I had the opportunity to meet tons of men in my line of work, but so far none has been this delicious. I leaned over the lowest part of my counter, trying to get one more look at him.

“Mama, what are you doing?” my baby girl asked.

I jumped. I hadn’t heard her approach. “Angelica. Aye, yai, yai. You scared me.”

“I didn’t mean to. Why were you leaning on the counter like that?”

“I thought I heard something,” I lied. “What do you need, my love?”

“I’m done with my homework, and I can watch the desk for you if you want to take a little break.”

My Angelica was so sweet, and I loved how she was still a great kid, not like her sister.

“Yes, my sweet. Your mama just needs a little nap. Just an hour.”

“Sure, Mama. Go rest.”

I headed to my apartment to take a little nap. I decided to sit in the recliner, instead of going to the bed, because if I were to get too comfortable, I’d sleep longer than an hour. I grabbed my favorite blanket from the back of the sofa, and before I shut my eyes, I saw him on the monitor, approaching the desk again. I had two televisions in our living room—one was for watching TV, and the other, which got a feed from cameras, enabled me to keep an eye on things in the halls, the fitness center, the pool area, and around the entire exterior of the building.

I jumped up from my chair and ran back out to the desk. Interrupting Angelica, I answered the question I had overheard him ask. “Well, we do have valet laundry. There is a ticket and a laundry bag in your room. Just have it down before seven on Monday morning.” It was Saturday, and no laundry went out on the weekends.

“Okay. Thanks. I’ll bring it down before then.” He smiled and stared at me for a moment before he walked away.

“Mama, what was that? I could have handled that guest.”

“I know, baby.”

“Mama, no way! Are you checking him out?”

My smile must have given me away.

“Ewww. Gross.” Angelica made a face.

“Gross because you’re not into boys, Angelica, but he was definitely easy on the eyes.”

I walked away, smiling to myself.

I went back to my apartment, sat on the recliner, pulled the blanket up to my chin, and dozed off. By the time I woke up from my nap, it was after nine. I looked around and wondered why Angelica hadn’t awakened me.

I found her sitting at the desk, reading a book. “Angelica, why didn’t you wake me?”

“Because it was quiet, and you were sleeping so deeply. I just wanted you to get some rest.”

“Thanks, kiddo, but I slept too long. Now I’m going to be wide awake, and my shift ends at ten.”

“So why don’t you go over to Sammie’s? That guy came down and asked about you. He told me to tell you he was going to head over there. I think he wanted to invite you.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, he came down a couple of times, looked around, and then he finally asked for you. When I told him that you were resting, he said to let you know where he’d be. Only a person who was interested in company would say something like that.”

“When did you become an expert on dating?”

“I’m not. I could just tell.” She smiled at me.

“Well, I’m not going to go. I mean, I’m not dressed.”

“Ma, you’ve walked over to Sammie’s before in your uniform. He saw you in your uniform, so you should go while he’s still there.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, Mama. I’ll watch the desk until Lacey gets here. Nothing is going on.”

“Okay.” I hurried to freshen up my face a little. I had on makeup from my shift, but I had to touch it up a little. I freshened my breath and headed over to the restaurant. When I walked in, I saw my guest sitting at the bar.

I approached him nervously. “Is this seat taken?”

He turned to me. “Hey, no. Have a seat. I am glad you came in. I was hoping you’d come.”

“Well, my daughter told me you came down, looking for me. I was taking a much-needed nap.”

“I heard that. What are you having?” he offered.

“Umm, I’m not really a drinker, but I do like Zinfandel.”

“So you are into those sweet wines? How about you try a Moscato?” he suggested with a smile. “It is sweet, but is a bit tastier than Zinfandel.”

I smiled back. “Why don’t you order for me? I’m open to try it.” I didn’t know what had come over me. I was instantly attracted to him.

He signaled to the barmaid, and it hit me that I didn’t know his name. He had checked in during another shift, so I didn’t know his name or his room number.

“So what is your name?” I asked.

“Jayden. Jayden Pierce,” he said. His chestnut-brown eyes danced, and the lighting made his face look like a Milky Way. I just wanted to lick him.

“I’m Josephina, but everyone calls me Josie.”

“I know your name. You’re still wearing your name tag.”

I looked down at my blouse, and sure enough, there it was. We laughed. “I was in such a hurry to catch you, I guess I forgot.”

“No worries,” he said.

The barmaid finally made it over. Wiping her hands, she asked, “Another round?”

“Yes, and a Moscato for the lady.”

“Sure.” She moved quickly. I knew most of the staff and didn’t recognize her. She was a new face.

“So, how long are you in town for?” I asked Jayden.

“Forever. I took a new job here, at a law firm not too far from here. I had my sights on Houston, but the offer I got here was sweeter than the Houston offer, so I sucked it up and came back to Chicago. Decided I’d take the bad with the good, and I moved back. My parents live in a high-rise with a painful sofa bed, and at six feet three, I declined their offer to stay there. My best friend has a family and four kids, so that wouldn’t work. Since the firm is footing the bill, I’m going to be at the Hilton until I find a place.”

“Wow. That is interesting. But what do you mean by the ‘bad with the good’? What could you possibly say is bad about the city of Chicago? It’s a wonderful city. I’d enjoy it more if I didn’t work so much.”

“There is so much good that I can’t begin to name, but the bad is the brutal winters. I was focused on Houston because I was looking forward to warmer winters, but I guess it was meant for me to come back home—”

“Here you go,” the barmaid interrupted, placing our drinks in front of us. “Can I get you a menu, ma’am?”

“Yes. I need something to eat.” I realized I hadn’t seen Sam. “And is Samantha here?”

“Yes. She’s in the kitchen. Do you have a complaint?”

“Oh no. She is a friend of mine. Can you let her know that Josie is here?”

“Sure, and I’ll be right back with that menu.” She smiled and was off.

“So you know the owner?” Jayden asked me.

“Yes. When I got promoted five years ago to GM at the hotel, she came over to bring menus for our attractions table, and we hit it off. She’s about the only one, besides my family, that I can call a friend.”

“That’s cool.” He smiled, and I couldn’t help but smile back. “You have a beautiful smile.”

“You think so?” I blushed.

“Yes, I do.”

“Thank you. I haven’t had much of a social life, and I haven’t gotten a compliment in ... Shit.” I laughed. “I can’t even remember.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Well, it’s true.” I saw Sam approaching.

“Josie, hey, girl.” She leaned in for a hug.

“Hey, Sam.” I frowned. “You smell like onions.”

“I know. I’m sorry. The prep cook went home with some stomach issues, and that is the job everyone despises, so I’m on it. It’s good to see you. I’ve been looking for you.”

“Girl, working long hours.”

“I can imagine,” she said.

Jayden cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry. Sam. This is Jayden. Jayden, this is my dear friend Samantha.”

“Nice to meet you.” He flashed his gorgeous smile.

“You too,” Samantha replied. They shook hands. “Listen, I’m going to go and delegate and get out of these kitchen clothes. I have someone I’ve been dying for you to meet,” she announced.

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Please, you guys, don’t leave,” Samantha said. “It may be an hour before he arrives. Can you hang a bit?”

I looked at Jayden. I knew I could stay, but I didn’t want him to feel obligated.

“Sure. We are good,” he answered for us both. Instantly, I had a chill. I loved a man who took charge.

“Great. Let me go to my office, and I’ll be back shortly,” Samantha said.

We both nodded. I turned and grabbed the menu, even though I already knew I’d get the steak quesadillas.

“So, tell me a little more about yourself,” Jayden said.

I told him the short version of me coming to America, marrying young, and my ex-husband ending up in prison. Gave him the clean version of my troublemaker, Ana, and spent time praising my joy, Angelica.

We talked until Sam returned. Shortly after, her friend Ethan arrived. He was cool, nice-looking, and I could tell he was into her just by the way he gazed at her. And since she had been single for as long as I’d known her, I hoped he was a qualified potential boyfriend.

The four of us laughed a lot, drank a lot, and ate all we could. I was tipsy and felt high. I wished that Jayden and I were a couple, because I didn’t want our night to end. But I wasn’t supposed to be getting so personal with a guest.

Ethan and Sam were sitting close to each other and whispering in each other’s ears, so Jayden and I shared our own little intimate conversation.

“Are you ready to walk back?” he asked.

“I am, but I’m not. I know it’s close to closing, but I don’t want the evening to end. I don’t usually have a connection with a guest. No fraternizing is rule number one.”

“I see.” His facial expression became sad.

“Listen, I’ve been professional with all my guests but you. I’ll admit you are the first guest that gave me ... I don’t know.

Let's just say you are different. However, until you check out, we can't do much."

"So, in the morning I'll check out."

"Oh no. Don't do that. I mean, I don't want you to leave."

"I don't want to leave, either, but I want to get to know you, and if a 'no fraternizing with guests' policy is going to keep me from getting to know you, I'll find another hotel."

I took a deep breath. I didn't know this man, and I didn't know how serious things could get if I bent the rules. I mean, I was the GM. No one had to know. The owner didn't even live in this state anymore.

"Listen. I like you, Jayden, and I want to get to know you too. If we hang and do bad things, and you get mad and try to sabotage me, I will deny, deny, deny." I laughed.

He grabbed my hand and kissed the back of it. "I'm too old to play games, so you don't have to worry about me."

"Okay." I smiled. I was tipsy and was feeling good, and I wanted to be close to him. I had no intention of giving him my goods, but I knew I wanted to be close to his skin.

We said our good-byes, and Jayden and I walked back to the hotel hand-in-hand. We went through the side door. I didn't worry about the cameras, because I knew his door was too far down the hall to be caught on the monitor at the front desk.

We quietly slipped into his room. I flopped down in the chair, and he went into the bathroom. I wished I had showered and changed before going over to the restaurant. I got up and tapped on the bathroom door.

"I'm going to go and change, and I'll be right back, okay?" I said through the closed door.

"Okay," he answered.

I went to my apartment, stripped, and hopped into the shower. Ten minutes later I had dried off and gotten dressed. Before I could head back to Jayden's room, Ana walked in. I was going to keep going, until I took a look at my baby's face. I didn't know what had happened, but I knew someone had

whipped her ass. I couldn't go back to Jayden's room right now.

Damn!

Chapter Eight

Samantha

Relax, I told myself when he touched me. I didn't want things to go too far. I was terrified that they would, so I backed away. "Ethan, baby, please. We gotta stop."

"Why, baby?" he whispered, his voice low. "I want to taste you."

I wanted him to taste me too, but I was terrified. I hadn't had an outbreak, thank God, in over two years, but I knew I wasn't cured.

"I want you too, so bad, baby," I panted. But I couldn't risk it.

"Just let me. I am into you, Sam. I want more than a fling," he said, breathing heavily into my neck.

I froze, then got up from my sofa and moved away from him as fast as I could. This was where we'd always end up after our dates, at my house on the sofa in my living room, making out.

"What's wrong, baby? Why are you holding back?"

"It's too soon." That was all I could say.

"Samantha, I'm all in. I'm not going to play you. I think about you every minute of the day, and I'm so into you. I want you." He stood and walked over to me. "I'm not trying to move too fast, but I'm feeling you, Sam. I want to be with you, make love to you, and take this good thing to a more passionate level."

I lowered my head. "I know, Ethan, and, baby, trust me, it is not you."

He lifted my face by my chin. "Then, tell me, what is it? I mean, we've hung out every night since we got together. We are on the phone more than I have ever been on the phone with any woman. Why are you holding back, babe? Do I make you feel uncomfortable? Are you not feeling me too?" His expression was serious and sad.

“Of course I’m feeling you, Ethan. Trust me, baby, I’m feeling you, and the time we’ve spent and the long talks and all mean so much to me, but I’m not ready for the physical part yet, okay? Can you understand that, please? Let’s just move a little slower.” I tried to sound cautious, not callous.

“Yeah, I understand.” He backed away and put his shirt back on.

“Baby, please don’t be mad.”

“Sam, I’m not mad at you. I’m not. But I really like you, and I would like to have more of you, all of you. It’s getting harder and harder to keep my distance from you, babe.”

“And I really like you, but I don’t wanna rush into the physical. It makes things more complicated.”

“I disagree with that theory, but I respect you, Sam, and I’m good. It’s okay, baby.”

“Are you sure? Because I don’t want you to cut me off.”

“Baby, no. I am going to be right here, waiting. I can’t stop thinking of you, so you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Even though I’m keeping my legs closed?”

“Even though your legs are closed. I’m looking for a partner, a future with someone as beautiful, sweet, and successful as you. I’m not a ‘hit it and quit it’ type of guy. I wanted to have something with my ex, but it just didn’t work out.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for her and our failed relationship. That was bound to happen, because we were too different. You just focus on us. You are gorgeous and smart and beautiful and a damn good cook, so I’ll wait.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Ethan. I haven’t had a relationship, boyfriend, or date, for that matter, since my divorce. I’m not weird. I just want the man I’m with my next time to be the last man I give myself to. I don’t want to dive into a pool of hot sex before I get to know that person *well*.” I stressed the last word. “I don’t want to share my body with a man unless I feel that

we are down for one another. The harsh reality is we have pasts, ways, and personalities that everyone can't deal with or accept. I really want to get close enough where I can tell you everything about me and you won't run. Just understand, I need a man in my life who will love me regardless of what I've done, where I've been, or the mistakes I've made. I am flawed, Ethan, and I've got to have someone to love me past my imperfections."

He nodded. "I understand more than you know."

I looked him in the eyes. "Do you really?"

"Yes, baby, I do. Come here." He pulled me close, and I rested my head on his chest while he held me tight. His embrace felt better than that of any man who had ever held me. I felt safe, but not safe enough to tell him the truth.

I knew in my heart that I was pulling a bait and switch, but I liked him so much. I didn't want to send my first shot at romance since my divorce in the opposite direction.

I wasn't prepared to get weird stares or for him to tell someone else my personal condition. I was pissed and wanted to cry in his arms. It was a hidden scar in my life, one that I never wanted anyone to see. I wished it away, I prayed for it to go away, but I was still cursed with that awful incurable virus. I wanted to load my gun, get in my car, and go and shoot every last bullet into my ex-husband's dick and nut sack. I was mortified by my diagnosis, and there wasn't shit I could do about it.

"So do you want to go out for a while, for a drink?" he asked.

"Yes, that would be cool." I smiled.

Heavyhearted, I pretended I was fine, but I wasn't. I hated my secret. I hated that I couldn't tell him. I felt closer to him than I had to my ex-husband. He was kind and gentle, and I knew I had to dump him. He deserved someone who wasn't tainted, and I wasn't the one.

"Good. We can ride downtown, maybe hit a jazz or blues spot, or go to Dana's. That hotel has one of the most exquisite

lounges.” He smiled.

I enjoyed his smile. I enjoyed his presence. And as hot as I was, I knew I couldn’t spread my legs, but I wanted to give him something to assure him that I was into him.

Naughty thoughts racing through my mind, because he looked so delicious, I said, “That sounds nice, but can I give you something before we go?”

He smiled. “You have something for me? Like what?”

I stepped out of his embrace. “I just want to give you something to let you know that I’m feeling you, and even though I want to slow things down, I definitely don’t want them to stop. We can do other things.”

He looked puzzled. “What did you have in mind?”

“Just relax and let me show you.” I rubbed his crotch, then undid his slacks and pulled down his boxers. I then knelt down in front of him.

“Sam, I’m good with taking things slow.” But he didn’t pull away.

“I know, and I appreciate that. I just want to show you how much I do.” Eyes locked on him, I wrapped my thick lips around him, barely wetting his entire shaft. He hissed, and I knew he wanted some sexual relief.

“Aww, Sam, baby, you didn’t ... have to.... Ooh, baby, that is so good. Baby, I like that.” He moaned and placed one hand on my head. “Do that shit, baby. You look so sexy, sucking my dick like that.”

I went in even deeper, pleasing him the way I wished my infected pussy could be pleased. Hell, if I could keep him interested with blow jobs, it would be marvelous.

“I’m going to make this dick cum,” I whispered between slurps. I was bobbing my head up and down, taking his eight, maybe nine inches to Pleasureville. I wanted him to have this slob job on his brain the next day.

I wanted him to want more, and I wished I could feel this sexy-ass rod inside my body.

“Baby, let me see your tongue,” he requested.

I did exactly what he asked and followed every command he gave me until he released his fluids. Tempted to let him nut in my mouth, I pulled back. He wouldn't get that pleasure so soon.

Breathing heavily, he said. “Sam, what made you do that? I mean, one minute we are talking no sex, taking it slow, and then you sucked me to ecstasy, baby. I mean, that was ... *woo*.”

“I just wanted to show you that I'm interested.”

“I know you are, and what you just did, baby ... I'm convinced. I mean, you hit me out of left field. I'm still in awe. Please tell me that you will do that again.”

I stood. “Yes, darling. I plan to do that again.”

He stood and headed to the guest bathroom to clean himself up. I ran into my master bath to brush and gargle.

I met him back in the living room.

“Come here.” He pulled me close. “I really like you, Sam, and I don't want to mess this up, so whether you give me the goods, please my dick like you just did, or just want to hold hands and play Scrabble, that's what I want to do.”

I smiled. We had been dating for only four weeks, with each night spent together. He was the one. Ethan was 97 percent of the man I wanted. I knocked off 3 percent because he snored, but everything else about him was perfect.

I took a step back, touched his face, and kept smiling. “That's exactly what I want.”

He pulled me into his strong embrace again and kissed me tenderly. Our tongues danced, and my pussy was wet and ready to have that pipe in his pants, but I knew I couldn't let him inside unless I told him the truth.

I pulled back. “Baby, we should get going. I'm a little hungry.”

“Me too, but I'm hungry for you.”

“Soon, sweetheart. I promise.”

“Okay, babe. let’s go.”

He went for his keys, and I for my purse. We drove downtown, holding hands and listening to the radio. I was falling for him. Ethan was my type, my desire.

I hated that Charles had come before him.

Ethan was a gentleman. Pulled out my chair, opened my door, and always asked me, “What would you like?”

I had to end it. As perfect as this thing was, I knew he’d head for the hills once he knew my secret. *God, please let humanity find a cure*, I said to myself as he helped me out of his SUV. He was the perfect man for me, but I wasn’t the perfect woman for him. I wished I had never gone out with him in the first place.

If I had just said no, I wouldn’t have gotten to know such a wonderful man. So far, he had treated me better than any man I’d ever dated. He was sexy, smart, romantic, funny, and gentle. I loved spending every free moment with him. I couldn’t wait to see his face, and whenever he came into the restaurant to wait for me to get off or close, I knew I had found the one.

Because of that, I had to let him go.

Damn!

Chapter Nine

Andrea

Totally taken by surprise, I asked, “Quentin, how did you get my number?”

“It’s on your business card.”

Duh! How else would he have gotten it? “What do you want? Why are you calling me?”

“How are you?”

“I’m fine, Quentin. What is this about? Why are you calling me?”

“I just wanted to talk to you, Andrea. Listen, I know you are married, and I don’t want to rattle any cages or cause you any trouble.”

“Well, don’t call me, Q. I can’t do this with you. What do you want?”

“Can I see you?”

I looked up at the ceiling and rolled my eyes. Was he insane? Did he think I’d say, “Sure. Come on over”? I headed for the kitchen, still rolling my eyes. “No, Quentin, you cannot see me. I am a married woman, and we cannot hang out.”

“Why can’t we?”

Was he crazy? Did he not hear me say that I was a married woman? “Because we can’t, and please don’t call me again.” I hit the END button, tossed my phone onto the counter, and went to the fridge. I needed to chill the bottle of Chardonnay I had.

I didn’t know what Quentin was up to, but I wasn’t going to allow him to just pop back into my life. Things were bad enough with Jeremiah. I didn’t need any more drama in my life. Wherever Quentin was, there was sure to be some drama.

I grabbed my shopping bags and headed toward the steps. My cell rang again. This time, I wasn’t going to be so nice. I grabbed it and let out a sigh of relief when I saw it wasn’t the same number.

“Hello,” I sang.

“Mrs. Young?” the other voice recited.

“Yes, this is she.”

Silence.

“Hello,” I said again.

Nothing. A moment later, the call ended. That was strange. I figured whoever it was would call me back, but after a couple of moments and no calls, I went on up to my bedroom. I went into the bathroom, hit PLAY on my iPod dock, and started the shower. While I was undressing, my mind went back to the call, but quickly my thoughts shifted to Quentin. I wondered what was he up to and why he wanted to see me again.

I knew in my heart that hanging around Quentin would be a bad thing, because I was super horny and two seconds from cheating on Pastor Young. Hanging out with my ex would lead me down the road of adultery, because he still looked sexy as hell to me. Tall, still in good physical shape, with beautiful shoulders. I had a flashback of him holding me and breathing on my ear when he spoke. I felt butterflies in my stomach, just thinking of being close to him again.

I wanted him to take my body back to the days when my thighs shook, because it was so damn good. I wanted to moan in his ear as he slowly penetrated my wetness. He knew how to make me quiver, something Jeremiah had never mastered. Quentin had a way with my breasts and could make me cum just by sucking my nipples hard and good, something I had dreamt Jeremiah would eventually learn how to do, but it had never happened.

After showering and drying my skin, I noticed the alert light on my phone blinking. I went over and saw I had three missed calls. All from the number that the mysterious woman had called from. I called my voice mail to listen to the message she had left, but there was only silence. Not really interested in who she was or why she was calling, I tossed my phone onto the bed and applied my lotion.

Finally, in a comfortable pair of sweats and a tank, I headed downstairs to pour myself a glass of chilled wine and catch up on my recorded episodes of *Scandal*. I had missed the entire season and for weeks had waited for a quiet evening alone to watch the episodes. Snuggled on the sofa in my family room, I was enjoying the series and the peace and quiet. On my third episode and my second glass of wine, I got a text alert.

Meet me for 1 drink pls. I really need 2
c u 😊.

I studied the message for a few moments before I replied.
No.

I won't get u into any trouble. Pls,
Andrea.

No!

What can I do 2 chg ur mind?

Absolutely nothing.

Why r u treating me so cold? Can we at
least b friends? We were close once 😊.

We were 😊.

I miss that.

I wanted to say that I did too, but I didn't. So y do u
wanna c me so bad? R u dying or something? LOL.

No I'm not dying, LOL. U prob wish that I was.

No I don't. I don't hate u, Q.

That's comforting 2 no.

LOL. I couldn't hate u even if I tried. I wondered how I had just that quickly allowed him to engage me in this sneaky conversation.

Same here. Just one drink, Andrea. I really want 2 c u.

I can't.

Y not?

It wouldn't be wise.

Y wouldn't it be? It's me, Andrea, not some stranger.

B/c I'm married.

And if u r happily married, seeing me shouldn't have any effect on your marriage. We are old friends.

No, we are ex-lovers.

That 2, but we grew up together. We were friends before we dated, remember?

Yes I do.

I smiled to myself. I did miss that bond we'd shared, how he used to always make me laugh and smile, and how he'd keep me company in the kitchen while I tried to cook in our first apartment. Even if I burned something or if it didn't turn out right, he would find a way to make a joke about it so I wouldn't feel so bad.

It was wrong, and I knew I should have ended the conversation right then, but I keyed in a response. Ok, where do u want 2 meet?

Andrea, serious? U r not playing wit me?

Serious. U r right. We were close once n meeting u 4 a drink can't taint my marriage.

U r right.

There is a place not too far from my salon on Wabash called M Lounge.

Yes, I'm familiar. I can meet you.

In about an hour?

I'll b there.

I got up from the sofa and went up to my bedroom, wondering if I should back out. Seeing Quentin was harmless, but how long would that last? He was my first love, and although I had married Jeremiah for love, the love I had for him wasn't as deep as the love I had for Quentin.

Jeremiah was always serious and uptight. Yes, we had shared some good times. I'd be lying if I said we didn't. But we had never shared any romantic times. My husband wasn't cruel, but he was far from sweet. No holding hands, no kisses, just because ... or hardly ever, anyway. He would go out of town for ministry work and would not call me for a couple of days, as if he hadn't left his family back in a completely different state. He threw a bigger celebration for the church anniversary than he'd ever done for our anniversary, and six months after he'd initially stopped touching me, I'd woken up wishing I hadn't committed myself to him. When he stopped coming up to our bed and slowly began moving his items into the guest bedroom, I'd visited the divorce subject, but he'd put a lid on that topic quickly, saying, "Folks who follow God don't divorce."

I still scratched my head at that. To remain in a situation that brought unhappiness was just plain stupid, but there I was a little over two years later, still in an unfulfilling marriage with someone who had become a stranger to me. Yes, there was a stranger in my house, a man impersonating my husband, and I wanted to be done with that imposter. I at least wanted to get back to the times when he pretended he loved me, or even just liked me.

Now, as I headed into my bathroom to glam up, my phone rang. When I got to it, I had missed another call from that mysterious woman's number. Too pressed for time, I put the phone down and went back to the mirror to finish getting ready to meet with Quentin. After twenty minutes of convincing myself to go, I got in my car and headed out to meet the ex-love of my life. Traffic was light, so I made it in record time. I parked, went inside, and since the sports bar

wasn't crowded, I immediately spotted Quentin and headed over to his table.

"You look very nice," he complimented when I got there.

I took a seat. "So do you."

"I ordered you an amaretto sour."

I shook my head and chuckled. "I don't drink those anymore. I stopped drinking those ages ago."

He signaled for our server. "I didn't know, Andrea. I thought ... I just ..."

"Quentin, it's okay."

The server was there in a flash.

"Can I cancel that amaretto sour and get ...?" Quentin looked at me.

"Chardonnay will be fine," I replied.

"Yes, ma'am." The server was off, and I was left sitting across from a grinning Quentin.

"Why are you smiling so hard?"

"Because of you. I mean, you look amazing."

"Amazingly huge," I said and looked around the room to avoid eye contact with him.

"Yes, you're not that thin chick I dated back in high school and college, but it looks good on you. Thick or thin, you've always been beautiful to me."

That was sweet, but I didn't say anything. I looked down.

"I'm serious, Andrea."

"Listen, I agreed to come out and have a drink with you, Quentin. Now, if there is no motive behind seeing me again, we can't do this. I can't start hanging out with you. I'm married, and it's not a good look."

"Listen, Drea, I know you are married, but I can tell you are not happy."

Oh, now he was psychic. “What? What makes you think that?”

“Drea, come on. When you throw this marriage bull at me, it’s like your shield, your way of convincing yourself not to be near me. I can tell by your body language that you’re not happy. Your eyes don’t dance when you say the word *marriage*. A woman who is truly happy with her marriage or her mate would smile and say it gracefully. It wouldn’t come across as defensive. It would flow, like you are happy.”

Who the hell was he? Dr. Phil? Just because my face didn’t glow because I was married didn’t mean I wasn’t happy. Okay, it did, but I refused to tell that to him.

“Look, I *am* happy. Just because I didn’t do a handstand or a cartwheel when I said it doesn’t mean I’m not happy.”

“Okay, let me rephrase this. Does he make you happy? Happy is a state of mind, so you could be happy with Andrea. But does *your husband* make you happy?”

I looked away. I hadn’t been happy with him for a very long time. Yes, I was a happy person because of my salon, my kids, my beautiful home, and my family and friends, but Jeremiah hadn’t done a thing in over two years to make me happy.

In a whisper, I lied. “Yes.”

“Okay.”

That was it, although he said okay like he didn’t believe me. I didn’t care.

“Tell me about you and your marriage, Quentin. Are *you* happy?” I wanted to get caught up with him since he was so caught up on me.

“I’m divorced. Been divorced for four and a half months, and no, she wasn’t making me happy. We both became so consumed with work and image that we stayed in a loveless marriage for over three years. One day I came home to my huge five-bedroom house and decided I didn’t want that kind of marriage anymore. It was too much space for me and the woman who lived there with me, not sharing it with me. I mean, it stayed spotless ... always clean and organized, almost

sterile. Can you imagine living in a home where you sat at the table together only at the holidays?

“Just imagine coming home to takeout or a quick microwavable dinner and then going up to bed with your spouse, who has files everywhere, so you have to go lie down in the guest room. Imagine planning a romantic night, but then you get a text saying, ‘So sorry, babe. I can’t make it.’ Andrea, it got so bad that I said for seven days I wasn’t going to say a word to her. I was going to see if she noticed. And you know what? She didn’t. I was alone in my marriage. Awesome career, hefty bank account, a couple of fancy cars, but in a loveless marriage. When I filed for the divorce, all she said was, ‘Okay. It is what it is.’”

He chuckled. He was about to continue, but just then the server brought our drinks. We ordered a couple of finger foods, and then he dove back in.

“Scheduling sex, frowning when I touched her, changing the subject when I wanted to talk about it got old.” He sipped his drink. “I told myself over and over that Andrea would have loved me, taken care of me, and cooked for me. Even if the mean was burnt or a disaster, she would have tried, just to make me happy. I let the best thing I ever had go. And the baby, that is an even bigger regret.”

Both of our eyes welled up. I hopped up. “Ladies’ room.” I dashed off.

How dare he do that to me? Give me that sob story of how she treated him, I told myself as I stepped into the ladies’ room and walked over to sink. Still, I wanted to beat the snot out of her for hurting him. Quentin was one of the good ones. To have him was an honor.

“Stop it, Andrea,” I said to myself in the mirror. Why was his story so freaking similar to mine? Why did his spouse treat him just as horribly as Jeremiah treated me? Hell, even worse. At least Jeremiah had a scripture or two to hit me with each day to make me feel like I was the evildoer in the marriage.

And then Quentin brought us up. And the baby. I had to get the hell out of there.

“Okay, finish your drink and go home,” I told my reflection.

When I got back to the table, our appetizers were there. Then the server came over with another glass of wine for me.

“I didn’t order that,” I said, looking at the wine.

“I did,” Quentin said. “I know you said one drink, but I miss your company, Andrea.” He stared at me for a moment, then looked up at the server and gave her a nod. She set the glass down in front of me and walked away.

I wanted to refuse it, but what the hell? Since I didn’t have work the next morning, and since Jeremiah was still gone on his men’s retreat, I accepted it. I would just miss the first service at church in the morning. Truth was, I had missed Quentin too, and for some reason, I didn’t feel bad being out with him. After all, my marriage was over. So I continued to play catch-up with him. I learned he was a campus recruiter for Chicago State University. I had no idea what that meant, so he happily explained it to me.

We talked until closing, and after he walked me to my car, I didn’t stop him when he kissed my lips softly.

“Go home with me, Andrea. Let me be with you tonight, and afterward, if you want nothing else, I promise I won’t bother you again.”

Back off, Satan, I said to myself.

“I want to, Q. I do. But I can’t have that on my conscience. Two wrongs never make it right.”

“I know, Drea, but you deserve to be loved, held, and showered with affection. He hasn’t touched you in over two years. I know how it feels to have a desire to be touched.”

True. I hated that I had shared the entire truth about Jeremiah and me with Quentin. *Damn wine.*

“I know you want to be touched,” he said. He caressed my cheek, and I grabbed his hand and kissed the back of it.

“I do, Quentin, but I’m not that kinda woman. Even though I’m miserable, I can’t break that vow. God doesn’t excuse misconduct because we feel some type of way. You just

walked back into my life. I don't want us to make things messy by jumping into this physical trap."

"You're right, and I'm sorry for crossing any lines with you. I respect you, but I won't lie. I'm still attracted to you, and I really would like another chance to be with you. I'm a patient man. I'll wait for you. I'll dance to the beat of your drum. Just know, with me, it's not a physical trap. I want more than that."

"Thank you, Quentin. I should be going." I reached for my car door.

"Your welcome."

"Good night, Quentin."

"Good night," he said one last time. He shut my door, and I pressed the button to start my car.

"Dear Lord, please forgive me for lusting after Quentin. And more than that, forgive me for leaving Jeremiah. I'll be talking to a lawyer soon, so please, God, have mercy on me. In Jesus's name, amen." I pulled out of the parking lot and headed home.

* * *

The next morning, I was awakened by the phone. *Man, I shouldn't have drunk last night*, I thought. I didn't feel like moving. It was the same mysterious number. This time, I answered quickly.

"Hello?"

"Mother Young?"

"Yes, this is she," I said.

"This is Helen McCoy, Franklin's wife."

"Yes, good morning, Sister Helen."

"I wanted to know if we can meet to talk."

"Sure. What's this about?"

"I'm not sure if it's wise to say what it is over the phone."

My breath caught. *Oh boy, my worst nightmare. Jeremiah!*

“What’s going on, Helen? Did something happen to my husband?” I said in a panic. Jeremiah and Franklin were pretty tight, and I knew they were on the retreat together.

“No. Nothing like that.”

Relieved, I let the air escape from my lungs. “Okay, then, what else is there? It’s okay to tell me over the phone.”

“No, I’d rather tell you this face-to-face. Can we meet after church this morning?”

“Sure, Sister Helen. Where would you like to meet?”

I got up from my bed. I was fully awake by now, and my heart was racing. This would be the first time I had to deal with any issues related to my husband and another woman. I knew that was the only other important thing she would want to say to me in person.

She gave me the name of a restaurant and its location, and for the first time in ten years, I didn’t go to church. I showered, dressed, and was at the restaurant on time. I couldn’t wait to hear what she had to say.

Chapter Ten

Josephina

Monday rolled around quickly, and I was back at work. Ana had had to get a couple of stitches over her eye. When I'd asked her who had done this to her, she wouldn't say.

"Good morning," a baritone voice said.

I looked up from the magazine I was browsing. It had been a slow morning, but I was posted behind the desk, instead of in my living room ogling the monitors. "Jayden, hey. I'm so sorry I didn't come back the other night. I had some issues with my baby girl and me. I—"

He stopped me. "Josie, it's okay. I think I came on a little too strong."

"No, no, no. You are perfect. I just walked in to find my daughter's face all bruised up, and yesterday we spent, like, the entire afternoon in the ER. I'm really sorry."

"Listen, I'm fine. I'm about to head out to the firm, but I wanted to know if you'd have dinner with me tonight."

My heart stopped. He wanted to see me again, after I'd played a move on him the other night.

"Yes, yes, yes, of course. I'd love to." I accepted his invitation with a bright smile on my face.

"Is seven good?"

"It's perfect." I looked him up and down. He was the most handsome man who had ever asked me out.

"Good. And wear a dress. I want to check out your legs." He winked. He gave me another warm smile and then exited the building.

A dress, huh? He had to be planning to take me someplace nice. I quickly dialed Sam. It was early, and when she answered, I knew she was still sleeping.

In a groggy tone, she said, "Hello."

“Sam, I’m sorry to wake you, but I really need to go to that salon you went to. Jayden wants to take me to dinner, and he said to wear a dress. I want this night to be perfect.”

“Josie, honey, it’s Monday. There are no salons open on Monday.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Supercuts maybe, but no regular salons.”

“Oh my, my, my. Can you call Andrea? She’s your friend. She’d make an exception for you, right?”

“Josie, I just met her a few weeks ago. We’ve hung out a few times, but I don’t know. We are cool, but I don’t feel comfortable asking for such a huge favor.”

“Oh, please. Oh, please, can you ask her? I have money saved up. I’m willing to pay whatever. She just may say yes. I’d ask her, but she knows you better, Sam, and I’m desperate. She made you look so beautiful, and I just don’t want to walk out looking crazy. You can’t trust just anybody with your hair, you know.”

“Okay. I’ll call her, but don’t get your hopes up.”

“I won’t. Just try. This is, like, the first man that I’ve been out with since my sorry-ass excuse for a husband got locked down again. I just want tonight to be special, and I want to look good.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’ll call you back.”

“Okay. Thank you so much, Sam.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she said. A couple of minutes after, Jayden texted me, asking where would we meet, and I said at Sammie’s. I couldn’t take the risk of one of my employees seeing us together.

Chapter Eleven

Samantha

Not wanting to make the call, I scrolled down my numbers on the screen of my cell phone, swiped Andrea's name, and waited for the call to connect.

"Good morning," she answered.

"Good morning, Andrea. How are you?"

"I'm okay. How are you?"

She didn't sound okay to me, but we weren't good girlfriends, so I didn't pry.

"I'm good. Listen, I know you may say, 'Hell, no,' to this question, but my friend Josie has a date tonight. She hasn't been out in decades, and she wants to get glammed up. Can you please perform the miracle on her that you performed on me?" I bit the corner of my lip, waiting for the "Hell, no."

"Well, you know I'm not open on Mondays, but I need to get out of this house. If you can meet me at my salon, I'll take care of her."

"You'd do that?"

"Yes, ma'am. I need a breather, and hair and makeup normally ease my mood. It helps me to relax my mind. Hair is my only escape, and I need it."

"Okay. Thanks so much. I'll come with her. What time?"

"Well, my kids are in school and pretty much fend for themselves when they get in. What time is her date?"

"I'm not sure. Let me text her."

"Go ahead."

"Okay. Give me a second to see what she says." I texted, and Andrea held on. While waiting for Josie to reply, I said, "Listen, Andrea, you don't sound like yourself. Do you want to talk? I mean, you can tell me to mind my business."

“No, everything is not okay. And the cut is so fresh, I’m not ready to talk about it.”

“Okay, but I’m here,” I said. My phone alerted me that I had received a text. It was Josie. I read her text, then said, “She said seven.”

“Well, I think she should come at about two, if possible. She will be my only client, but I definitely don’t want her to be late for her date.”

“Okay. I’ll let her know. Again, Andrea, thanks so much. Josie is going to be thrilled.”

“I’m happy to help. By the way, how are things with you and Ethan? He seemed really nice.”

I sat up in my bed with a big smile. “Aw, Andrea, he is. He is *perfect*. Too bad I have to stop seeing him.”

“What? Why?”

“I ... I ... I,” I stuttered. I wanted to tell her, but I had never shared my secret with anyone.

“Listen, you don’t have to give me the reason.”

“I know, Andrea. It’s just baggage from my first marriage.”

“Say no more. I’ll be divorced very soon.”

“Really? Is that why you need a breather?”

“Yep. Actually, I need a drink.”

“Well, you know you are welcome to come to my restaurant and get loaded.”

“I know,” she said. I heard her voice crack.

“Andrea, what did he do, honey?”

She sniffled and didn’t say anything. I could tell she was crying.

“Okay, Josie will be there by two, and afterward, you and I can go for drinks. We don’t have to go to my restaurant. We can hit a spot close to you.”

“Okay,” she replied, still crying.

“It’s going to be okay, Andrea, trust me. Whatever it is, it’s going to be okay.”

“I know,” she said through her cries.

“Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

We hung up, and by then, I was definitely up. She had sounded terrible, and I wondered what had happened. Could her situation be worse than the situation I had been in with Charles?

I suddenly felt sad for her. I felt really bad for both of us. I didn’t want to break up with Ethan, but I couldn’t bear to tell him the truth.

Chapter Twelve

Josephina

Sitting in my living room, I nervously waited for Samantha to call me back. I wanted to look glamorous, and I hoped Andrea would agree to make me over. Seconds later, my phone finally rang. It was Sam, and I was too happy with the news. “She’ll do it? That’s great!” I yelled.

“Yes, but you have to be there by two,” Sam said.

My smile faded. “Two? I can’t be there by two. I don’t get off until two.”

“Well, I don’t want to call and ask her to push it ahead, Josie. She’s already doing us both a huge favor.”

“I know, but Angelica doesn’t come in from school until after three, and you know Ana’s face is horrible. And even if it wasn’t, you know she never helps me out.”

“Well, you have to make a decision, sweetheart. I don’t want to call her and ask her to rearrange her schedule.”

“I know. Give me a moment. I’ll call and see if my employee can come in one hour early. That way, Angelica can relieve her at nine.”

“Okay. Check and call me back.”

“Okay. I’ll call you back.”

I hung up and texted Lacey, my front desk girl, and a couple minutes later, she replied that she would come in early. With that issue solved, I called Sam back and confirmed the location of the salon. I headed to my closet to find something to wear. I was sorely out of touch with the dating scene and the latest fashions. I hadn’t dated in a long time, so I wasn’t sure which regular clothes of mine would fit. I wore work attire most of the time and loungewear when I was at home. Since I had no social life, I had no fancy clothes. Something had to change. I wanted to join the land of the living, and Jayden was just a start.

“What are you doing, Mom?” Ana asked. I didn’t know she had been standing in my bedroom doorway.

“Looking for something decent to wear for my date tonight.”

“No way. You have a date? With who?”

“A guy,” I answered. I didn’t want her to know he was a hotel guest. I had been after her constantly to stay away from our male visitors.

“I gathered that much, Ma. I mean, I never pictured you to be a lesbian.”

“True. I’m not a lesbian. He is a guy I met at Sammie’s.” I shouldn’t have lied, but I was trying to set an example.

“So, does Dad know you have a date?”

“Ana, grow up. You know that your father and I are done. I told him the next time he went back to prison would be the last time he could call me his wife. We are divorced, so I can date.”

“But you’re still married.” She was still in denial.

I blew out a loud breath. I couldn’t believe she’d bring up her father right now. *Un-freaking-believable*. “Ana, for the last time, we are *divorced*. Your father is not my husband. Why are you in my room?”

“Fine. I’m going to e-mail him and let him know you’re dating now.”

“You can do what you will.” Ana had been the apple of my eye once, but she had become the thorn in my side.

“Then I will,” she said smartly.

Time to check her ass again.

“You know what, Ana? Tell him. Tell your father that I’m a whore, a man-eater, or whatever you like. The bottom line is he is in prison. Your father couldn’t be a law-abiding citizen. He can’t touch me from prison, so go ahead. Run and e-mail him.” She looked down, and I continued. “Yes, that’s right, Princess Ana. My face has taken a beating worse than the one

yours is wearing now, so run. Go e-mail him. Tell him what you want. You and your father have sucked every ounce of joy out of my life, and I can't do you or him anymore. So tell him what you like! I just want to be done with you both. You two have done everything to destroy me, and I'm tired of you both!" I yelled.

She stood there, arms folded, and I could feel she wanted to say something. I knew this would be the moment when she actually cursed me out or said she hated me, and I was ready to give her another ass whipping and show her to the door. No more. I couldn't take another moment of her. I wanted her out of my hair.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

I blinked. "Qué?" I knew I didn't hear her right.

"*Lo siento, mami,*" she repeated in Spanish. "I'll help you find something really pretty to wear tonight, because a lot of your stuff is ugly. I have a ton of clothes."

I burst into laughter. "Ana, why are you so hard on me? Why can't you just go with the flow and not be my difficult child?"

"Because I'm more like him. I don't mean to hurt you." She looked at me, and her eyes welled up. I hated to see my baby's face swollen and bruised. I wanted to go and get whoever had done this to her.

"You're like me too. You just have to stop rejecting your good nature. I know you are a sweet girl, but it's like you want this tough, bad girl image. And you want to hate me, as if I took your dad away or ran him off. I didn't make him into who he is, and I certainly didn't raise you to be like this, Ana. You didn't learn this irrational behavior from me. I never showed you this type of life."

"Mami, papi was a well-known hood thug. I can't be soft. I can't act like you. I want respect."

"Oh, Ana, you can. You are a lady. You are not him. Respect and fear are two different things. You play tough and act like a hoodlum, and those who tolerate you fear you. They

do not respect you. Respect starts when you respect yourself. You can act like a lady, Ana.”

“I try not to be him, but I am, and I miss him so much,” she said, and then she began to cry. I hadn’t seen her cry in ages.

“Come here, baby. I miss him too, and I can’t imagine how you feel as his daughter, but your father made his own choices, and you have to accept things for what they are. I didn’t even graduate high school, because I was running with and after your daddy. And then you came along. Once you came, I wanted more for my life, Ana. Don’t spiral into a life of craziness like him. You have a chance. You have a bright future.”

“I just don’t know how else to be.”

“Just start being you.”

The front desk bell sounded suddenly. I didn’t want to stop this conversation with my daughter, but duty called.

“I’ll be right back.”

She nodded, and I went to take care of the person at the desk. It was a delivery guy. By the time I got back inside the apartment, Ana had put together a fabulous outfit for me, but it was a bit too sexy for my taste.

“Oh, Ana, I don’t know about this sexy getup. I mean, I’m too old for clothes like this. This dress is so short.”

“Ma, come on. You have beautiful legs, a plump ass, I mean bottom, and you are going to turn heads.”

“I’m sure, but maybe not the kinda heads I wanna turn.”

“Don’t worry. You are going to look sexy.”

Letting down my guard, I agreed to try on the outfit. “You’re right. Thank you, baby.”

“No problem.” She headed for the door, then turned back to look at me. “One more thing.”

“What is it?”

“I do want you to be happy. I know you need someone, so I hope you have a great date.”

I smiled. “Thanks, baby.”

“You’re welcome.” She exited my bedroom, and I examined the outfit. It was a bit much, but Ana was trendy, and I wanted to look good.

Just then the bell sounded again, and I rushed back to the front.

All I had to do was wait until one o’clock to go get my makeover. I was too excited.

Chapter Thirteen

Andrea

As I headed to the salon, I thought about the day before, and I wanted to vomit again.

That day, I had sat and looked around the restaurant, wondering what was keeping Helen. I hated to be too early, and being early when your party was late sucked. I looked around some more. Everyone was dressed in their Sunday best. My thoughts shifted to Quentin. I didn't know why, but I thought about us having brunch after church and going home to change into some comfortable lounge clothes and cooking something fabulous together for dinner. I imagined us cooking while sipping on wine and listening to some neo-soul. And after eating and winding down with a movie or prime-time television, we would turn in and make love.

Quentin would have been the fun husband who always made me laugh. He'd remember anniversaries, birthdays, and he'd give me "just because" gifts.

I remembered back when he earned his first paycheck from the Taco Bell in the mall. He took me to Red Lobster. Back then, on a minimum-wage budget, that was considered fancy. That was the first night I let him inside of my body.

Even though I talked to boys and had so-called boyfriends, I never could trust them and would only go to second base. A little kissing, fondling, grinding, but never would I take off my clothes for another. But Quentin was different. I was in love with him instantly, and when I gave it to him, he and I became closer. We acted like a married couple. Everyone knew how much we were in love. My mother was upset when we moved in together, but my father convinced her to allow me to love whomever I wanted to love. Plus, I knew he knew that I'd be with Quentin no matter what, even if it meant living in a cardboard box. He quickly jumped in and offered us one of his rental units.

"Mother Young," a voice said. It snapped me out of my deep thoughts.

“Sister Helen, please sit. And please call me Andrea.”

She sat and put her handbag on the only empty chair. My purse had already made its home on the other.

“So, to what do I owe this meeting?” I asked, jumping right in.

“I need a drink first,” she said. Her hands were shaking. I could tell she was nervous about our meeting.

“Sure. Take your time.”

This had to be bad. I just knew she was pregnant, and I wondered how I was going to receive the information. I knew my husband might have been creeping, but with his best friend’s wife? That was low. I mentally braced myself for the impact.

The server came over, and we both put our drink orders in.

“Would you like a menu?” the server asked.

I spoke first. “No. Just the drink.”

“Yes, only the drink, and make it a double,” Helen said.

I looked at her closely. She looked as if she hadn’t slept. Relieved that a pregnancy probably was not her news, since she’d ordered a double, I went from ten to eight. An affair wouldn’t be a surprise, but if it was with Franklin’s wife, it was a huge deal.

She scanned the room and rubbed her hands together. I didn’t push. I just waited for our drinks. When the server sat them in front of us, Helen downed hers immediately and then asked the server for another. We didn’t talk until after the third round.

“Listen, Sister Helen, apparently, this is some heavy news, so out with it. Are you and Jeremiah having an affair?” I went for the truth. No more stalling.

She burst into laughter. She laughed hysterically, and people turned to look. Then her laughter turned into a silent cry.

“Sister Helen?”

“Andrea, I wish I had come here to tell you that it is me who is sleeping with your husband, but it’s not me.”

I frowned. “Not you?” I wondered if Franklin knew something about another woman and had let it slip to his wife. “Has Franklin told you something about my husband? Come on, Sister Helen. Enough with the hesitation. Tell me what’s going on. Tell me why we are here,” I demanded.

“Pastor Young isn’t interest in me, or in any other woman at the church, as a matter of fact.” She looked up and blinked, and a couple of tears fell.

“Helen, what are you saying? Tell me!”

“He is sleeping with my husband,” she blurted.

The room suddenly stood still. I didn’t hear any sounds anymore, just a dead silence. I batted my eyes several times, and then I laughed. I laughed harder than she had. That was absurd. Jeremiah was unaffectionate and was even an asshole on occasion, but gay? Hell to the naw! That was the funniest thing I had ever heard in my life.

“It’s not a joke,” she sneered.

“It is. My husband is not gay. Jeremiah is a homophobe. And he preaches against homosexuality constantly. No way. You are mistaken, sweetie.” I laughed again.

“I have proof,” she whispered.

I stopped laughing. “Come again?”

“I have proof.”

Oh, my Jesus. “What kind of proof?”

“I recorded them.” Huge teardrops settled in her eyes, and I knew she wasn’t pulling my leg.

“Okay. Let’s see.”

She reached for her handbag and pulled out her phone.

“I came home from work one day early, and I saw Pastor Young’s SUV in my drive. That day, I had a throbbing headache, and I just wanted an aspirin and my bed. When I

walked in, the house was quiet, like a funny quiet. I expected to see Pastor and Franklin in the family room or the kitchen, you know, but there was no one there. I crept up to Franklin's office door, and I heard weird moaning noises, and I thought, No. It can't be.

“The door was cracked open, not all the way closed, so I peeked in. When I saw them, my jaw dropped and my feet froze in place. I wanted to burst in and confront them both, but your husband is a powerful man and a pillar of the community. I stepped away, went for my phone, and I recorded them.” She slid her phone across to me. “Just hit PLAY.”

Trembling, I hit the button. There they were. Franklin was bent over at his desk, and my husband was fucking him like he was a female. Mortified, disgusted, and shocked, I couldn't stop watching. It was like I had to watch it longer to believe it. Finally, I had had enough, and I pressed STOP. I couldn't cry, I couldn't scream, and I couldn't cuss. I just handed her back her phone, reached for my purse, grabbed two twenties out of my wallet, put them on the table, and ran out of the restaurant.

She ran out behind me. “Andrea, please! What do we do?”

I held my car door handle and turned to her, my teeth clenched. “I can't tell you what to do, but I'm going to kill my husband.”

With that, I got into my car and drove toward home. About a mile away from the house, I pulled off the road and had a grown-up tantrum. I sobbed, cussed, banged the steering wheel, and asked God to help me. How had I married a so-called man of God who was fucking men? I was so disgusted, I got out and vomited on the side of the road.

My chest was tight, and I knew I had to calm down, before I had a heart attack, a seizure, or a stroke. I didn't feel like myself, and I didn't know who to call or where to go. I was too ashamed to call anyone close to me and share that information, so I called Quentin.

“Andrea, hey.”

“Quentin, I’m on Fifty-Fifth and Stony,” I cried. “Please come and get me. If I drive, I may crash. Please come for me.”

“What’s wrong, baby? What is it?”

By then I was crying uncontrollably. “Just come, please. I need someone.”

“Don’t move. I’m on my way.”

I rested my head on my arms, which were propped up on my steering wheel. About forty minutes later, he tapped on my window. I opened the car door, got out, and fell into his arms. He held me there on the street and let me sob without saying a word. He just held me tight.

“Thanks for coming,” I said, finally summoning words.

“You don’t have to thank me, Andrea. Baby, what happened? Did someone die?”

“No. Can we go to your place? I can’t go home.”

“Sure,” he said and helped me into the passenger seat of his car. He parked my car correctly on the street, because my back end was out, then got my purse, keys, and phone.

As we rode to his house, I couldn’t stop sniffing and he held my hand. As soon as we got inside his place, I asked for a drink.

“What would you like?”

“Tequila, if you have it, and please bring the bottle.” I stepped out of my shoes and flopped down on his sofa. He came back with a bottle of Patrón and two glasses. After two shots and a few tears, I told him the entire story.

I lay in his arms until my phone rang two hours later. It was the kids. They needed to be picked up. I called Regina, Kelly’s mom, and lied and said I had things going on at the church and asked if she could get the kids home for me. She agreed without question. She wasn’t a churchgoer, so she didn’t ask for details.

When I hung up, Quentin asked, “Are you hungry?”

“No. Not for food.”

“What are you hungry for?”

I began to unbutton my buttons.

He stopped me. “No, Andrea. We can’t, not while you’re like this. You’re upset and hurt, and I don’t want you like this. Not in this state of mind.”

“Oh, so now you don’t want me?” I snapped. “Last night you were ready to fuck me.”

“Yes, last night I wanted you, but you decided not to, because of your vows.”

“Fuck my vows, Q. He is a fag, a homo. A fucking lying, cheating ...” I sobbed.

He held me. “Shhh. Baby, it’s okay. This is why we can’t. This is why I can’t do that. You are so emotional now. Being with me isn’t going to make you feel better, and I can’t risk it making you feel even worse. I’m here for you, baby, and I will be with you until the end. But I want you to want me because you truly want me, not because you want to get even or lash out. I love you too much to let you go out like that.”

He’d said the word love. He’d said he loved me. I loved him too, I always had, and he was right. I was just so hurt and angry. I had to iron out my relationship with Jeremiah before dragging Quentin into my web of drama.

“You’re right, and thank you for being the brains in this moment. And yes, baby, I’m hungry.”

“Well, go and freshen up. I’ll take you to dinner and then back to your car.”

“Okay,” I agreed. I grabbed my purse, and he showed me to the bathroom. I got myself together and smiled. I had my way out. Not only had he cheated on me, but he’d done it with a man. I could walk away from him without feeling any guilt. I was free, and things suddenly didn’t seem so grim. Then again, my husband was having an affair with a man. Who wanted the world to know that?

A moment later, I got a message alert on my phone. Sister Helen had e-mailed me the video clip from her phone. I

downloaded it. I put on a fake smile, and Quentin and I went to dinner. When I got home later that evening, I was elated to see my kids. After I tucked them in, I grabbed my sleeping aid and took a bath. I had a great night's sleep, but the fact that my husband was gay brought tears to my eyes. I knew I wasn't okay.

Chapter Fourteen

Samantha

I sat in my car, waiting for them to arrive. I knew I was a bit early, so the wait didn't bother me at all. My mind drifted back to Ethan. I didn't have a legitimate reason to stop seeing him, none that would make sense, so what was I going to tell him? The truth? *Yeah, right!* That would be the ideal way to end it. He wouldn't ask any questions; he'd just bounce, I imagined. I wondered if he would be angry about me kissing him without telling him the truth about my virus. Hell, I didn't have anything going on in my mouth or on my lips, but this secret was stabbing me in the damn stomach. I wished someone knew so they could give me some friendly advice on what to do. I liked him so much.

Damn. Why me? I put a hand to my forehead and shook my head.

I was bound to be alone and was destined to live with my vibrator for the rest of my life. I had even thought of joining one of those sites where others who had my condition chatted, but I was just too scared to share it with anyone. This was one of the side effects of loving the wrong damn man. I didn't want a soul to know, and I wanted to kill the doctor who had given me my results. I had driven from her office, paranoid, thinking she had tweeted it after I left. Even though I knew that was impossible, I had been paranoid about it.

I had also thought Charles would tell others, because he had sworn that he didn't have it and that he didn't give it to me, but he was a coldhearted liar. I'd punched him in his lying face when he told me that bullshit. He'd stood there and said, "I don't know who you've been sleeping with, but I didn't give you that shit. I'm clean." He had gone to the doctor and everything and had tried to show me some bogus, altered documents. I'd thrown his lying ass out.

I hadn't had any other partners in almost seven years, so he had to be the one. And he had thought I was going to stay with his lying ass? Ha. He'd had me mixed up with someone else.

Now I was falling for a new guy, but I had an old secret. “Shit,” I said. “What the hell? I don’t deserve this,” I whined.

A tap on my window scared the hell out me.

It was Andrea. She wasn’t as glamorous looking as she’d been the last time I saw her. There had to be some heavy shit on her mind for her to look so plain. She was a plus-sized woman, but she was so damn pretty and so put together, no one could say one negative about her.

I opened my door. “Girl, you scared the shit outta me.”

“I’m sorry, darling. I was waving, but I couldn’t get your attention.”

“I have a ton of shit on my mind.”

“Welcome to my world.”

“Well, after you get Josie to gorgeous, we can go have a few drinks and talk.” I had never had the desire to tell anyone about my condition, but I wanted to tell Andrea. She seemed trustworthy, and since we weren’t super close, I felt she’d have no one to tell.

“I so need it,” she replied.

We headed inside, and I took a seat. A minute or two later, Josie walked in.

“Hey, Sam,” she called.

I stood, and we hugged. “Hey, darling. So good to see you.”

“You too, and, Andrea, you are a lifesaver. I owe you big-time. You have no idea how bad I need this. I haven’t even looked at a man since José, and I wished to God till this day that I’d never met him.”

“Girl, you are preaching to the choir.” Andrea’s eyes welled up. “I want to go back in time so bad right now. You have no idea.”

“Andrea, you’re not the only one. Don’t cry. I’ve been where you are, and trust, it gets easier with time,” I said.

“I don’t know what it is you’re going through, but trust, baby, I have an ex-husband in prison, a teen that hates me, and I haven’t had dick in what ... ?” Josie looked up at the ceiling. “Let’s just say in too damn long. I want to be sexy, beautiful. I want him to be in a trance when he lays eyes on me,” she purred. Her eyes danced, and her smile was bright. I could tell she was excited.

Josie was about five feet four, slim, a six or seven, with a little belly fat, which could easily be tucked into a shaper. She was tanned, with wavy hair that hung to the center of her back, like an arrow to her plump ass. Not much up top, but her hips and ass made up for what she lacked. Huge, round brown eyes and a smile that automatically made you smile back at her. She was not a diva, and she had an innocent look. She was beautiful, but she could be fierce with the right makeup and hairstyle.

“That is exactly what I’m going to do. Come back. Let’s get you shampooed and conditioned, and then we will talk styles.”

Once Josie was under the dryer, Andrea handed me a glass of red and sat. She sipped in silence, but I could see the stress all over her face.

“Whatever it is, it’s not the end of the world, Andrea.” I smiled at her.

“I know, but the repercussions from what he did are going to bring so much shame and embarrassment to my family. I’m not worried about me, Samantha. I am actually relieved to have a reason to end it all, because I’m miserable in this marriage. But I’m worried about the gossip, the shame, and my children. This is big.” She downed the rest of her drink. “These are the side effects of staying with a man who you know you should have left a long time ago, and I’m not ready to deal with it.”

I just said the same thing to myself, I thought. “You’re not the only one dealing with side effects from a man, Andrea. When we go out a little later, I’m going to share my story with you. It’s not to compare pain or to say my story is worse. It’s just to share and let you see that you are not the only one who

has something to be ashamed about with an ex.” The dryer stopped. “Josie doesn’t know,” I whispered.

She nodded and went to get Josie. Once Josie was seated, she started pointing out hairstyles in the stylebook she had browsed through while under the dryer. I went over to watch, and after a little debate, Josie decided on a drastic change, a tapered neck and bob. Andrea and I agreed it would be beautiful on her.

Andrea did the cut, rinsed her again, and set her hair in some large rollers. She put Josie back under the dryer, and while we waited, she and I kept up our conversation on fashion and clothes. When Josie’s hair was dry, Andrea did her brows first, gave her a quick face cleansing, and then made up her face. Even in rollers, Josie already looked like a new person.

“Oh my God, Andrea. I can’t believe this is me. I look so ... Wow. You are ... I look ...” Josie grew silent and sat there, admiring herself in the mirror.

“Hold on. Let’s get your hair out of these rollers, and then you can thank me,” Andrea told her.

We all laughed.

“Hell, he’d be happy to take me out in the curlers,” Josie joked. Her accent was still thick, and I loved to hear her speak.

“You won’t think that after we are done,” Andrea said. She turned Josie away from the mirror and then removed all the rollers. When she turned Josie back to the mirror and did the reveal, she had to give Josie a tissue and then retouch her eye makeup.

“You are gorgeous. Jayden is going to be blown away,” I said, admiring her new look.

The bob was an excellent choice. She looked stunning. She paid Andrea, thanked her again, said her good-byes and hurried out. It was already five, and she had to fight traffic and then get dressed.

“Andrea, thank you so much for doing this for her. She deserves to feel beautiful,” I said.

Andrea grabbed a broom to sweep up Josie's wavy strands from the floor. "Don't we all."

"We do, and I know you're going through a lot, but I suggest you hook yourself up a bit before we head out."

"I agree." She smiled.

After she cleaned her station, she sat at her booth, and we chatted while she made up her face and rejuvenated the curls in her natural hair. "Now you." She patted her seat.

"No, Andrea. I'm good."

"You are, but I want to edge you up to clean up your nape area and just put a few more curls on the top and enhance your makeup. You did well. Don't get me wrong. But in the beauty world, there is no such thing as too far."

I sat in her chair, and twenty minutes later, I had a fresher look. She did a final cleanup and turned down the twenty I offered her for my twenty-minute enhancement.

She locked up, and we went to a pub not far from her salon, where we had drinks and food. We made small talk, and then finally she told me exactly what had happened that was causing her so much distress.

She blinked back tears. "Okay. Yesterday I found out my husband was having an affair."

An affair is easy, I thought. "Aw, Andrea, honey. Darling, an affair is easy. Thank God you didn't find out something worse than that."

"That's not the worst part, Samantha."

"Oh, no. Did he give you something?" It was the same awful thing. We were in the same boat. Now I could tell her. "I know exactly how you feel."

"No, he didn't give me anything." She paused and took a sip of her drink. "Is that what happened to you?" she asked.

I froze.

"Samantha, is that what happened?"

I didn't want to confess, but I had to. I nodded, and my eyes welled up. "I have herpes, and that's why I have to break up with Ethan. Andrea, he is so great, and he is ready to be intimate, but I can't tell him this. He is going to flee."

"Samantha, as horrible as it sounds, you have to be honest if you really care about him. And if he really cares about you, he won't flee. You can have the virus and still have a healthy sex life."

"I wish that was true. I'm afraid to let anyone touch me."

"You have to talk to your doctor, Samantha. Trust me when I say I've heard it all. As a stylist, I hear it all, and I've known couples in which one person had it and the other wasn't infected."

"How is that possible?" I was confused, and I wasn't buying it. Charles had given it to me.

"I don't know, but you need to get more information, Samantha, and talk to Ethan. You can't decide for him. You don't know how he'll react. He may head for the hills, and if so, he wasn't the one, but he could stay and figure out what works for you two. Talk to him."

Everything she had said made sense and sounded good, but doing it was another story. I was terrified.

"I don't know, Andrea. You are the first soul that I've told."

"Well, since we are sharing our worst-case scenarios, the worst thing about my husband's affair is that it's not with another woman."

"I'm confused."

"No, you're not. It's exactly what you are thinking. It's with another man."

My mouth dropped. I tried to shut it, but I was blown away. "Isn't your husband the reverend or pastor or something of that mega church on the south side?"

"Yes. Now you see why I'm so messed up right now. And what takes the cake is the woman who told me is the wife of his lover. She recorded them. If or when this gets out, imagine

the impact it's going to have on our children's lives. On my business, everything, Sam. I'm mortified. I wanted out of this marriage, God knows I did, but not like this."

"Well, I'm no expert, and trust, I'm not a Bible-thumper, but God has a way of bringing us out of bad situations."

"Yeah, you say that, but did you want herpes to be the way out of your marriage?"

My face was cracked. She was right. Worst-case scenarios were so unnecessary. "Point taken. I'm so sorry, Andrea."

"I'm sorry too. I have no idea how you feel with something like that, and I truly, truly hope that Ethan is the one to stand up and love you beyond that. I will pray for you, Sam."

"Thank you, Andrea. I feel so much better to have told someone, and you were the right person to tell. I never stopped to think of him not leaving. I mean, if I tell him, he may stay."

"Yes, he may. Don't make decisions for others, Sam. I wish Jeremiah had told me the truth, so I could have removed myself from this situation a long time ago. I stayed, smiled, pretended, and put on this false image like I was happy, when the truth is he stopped sleeping with me over two years ago. I feel like a fat fool."

"Don't feel that way, Andrea. You did exactly what you thought was best. Don't blame yourself for his indiscretions. And don't even go there. You are gorgeous, and I know you know it."

"I know, Sam. I've never been insecure. I just want to punch him in the face."

"Child, don't. I punched Charles when I found out, and that bastard pressed charges on me." We both laughed. "Yes, girl, and they handcuffed me and everything. I spent nine hours in lockup." We continued to laugh at my experience.

We spent another couple of hours encouraging one another before we finally parted. After talking with Andrea, I decided to tell Ethan the truth. *When* was the question. I planned to tell him, but I didn't have a date in mind.

Damn. Why did this condition have to be the side effect of my being with Charles?

Chapter Fifteen

Josephina

I gazed at Jayden across the table and couldn't help but smile.

"I can't believe how amazing you look. That haircut is so sexy on you," he said, complimenting me again.

I blushed. I enjoyed the compliments and the attention and realized that I had never been romanced or even out on a real date. This was a real date, and I was beaming.

"Thank you, Jayden. It was a risky move, but I'm happy with my decision."

"As you should be, because it's a gorgeous look on you."

"Please, stop making me blush."

"Seriously, you just kicked gorgeous up about ten notches," he joked.

We both laughed. I knew the compliments were appropriate, because I did look good. I hadn't looked this good ever, not even on my wedding day.

"So, shall we order?" he asked.

"Give me a moment. I've been so busy enjoying our conversation that I haven't given dinner much thought."

"Well, I'm leaning toward the steak and potatoes. I'm definitely a meat-and-potatoes kinda man."

"Really? I am more into Spanish dishes. I don't know how to prepare many American dishes."

"Well, I'll have to teach you. And you can teach me how to make Spanish foods." He smiled.

"I'd like that." I smiled back.

The server interrupted us just then. "Are you ready to order?"

"Not yet," Jayden replied. "But we could use some spinach dip to start." He looked at me. "And you? Do you want

something different?” he asked me.

“No. Spinach dip is great. I’d like wine, though.” I turned to the server. “What would you suggest?”

“Well, if you plan on having chicken, I’d say a nice crisp white. If you prefer steak, an aged red,” the server replied.

“Well, I’m pretty sure it will be chicken, so white it is.”

“House?” the server asked.

“No. What are your brands?”

The server named their brands, and Jayden made a choice for me. He ordered himself a drink, and then we went back to the endless compliments, smiles, and jokes. I was having such a good time, I didn’t want the night to end. By the time the table was cleared and I declined dessert, I had had three glasses of wine, and I was feeling good.

“Are you ready to go?” Jayden asked me.

“No, but it’s getting late. I just don’t want this to end. I haven’t had a date in ages, and I’m just really enjoying your company.”

“Well, we can head back to the hotel.”

“That’s the thing. I don’t want my staff or my girls seeing me with you. Jayden, you are still a hotel guest. And how can I set an example if I’m breaking the rules?”

“I’ll tell you what ...” He stood. “Come. Let’s go. I’ve got an idea.”

“What?”

“Just come with me.”

I got up and took his hand. We walked out to his car and drove back toward the hotel. When we were almost to the hotel, he turned left into my competition’s parking lot.

“Jayden, you don’t have to do this.”

“I know, but I want to. After I get us a room, I will drive you across the street so you can get your car, and in the morning we can go back in different cars. We can walk in

through different doors, separately. I just don't have a place to invite you to yet, but next week I will be looking. And once I'm settled into my own place, then we are good." I guessed he detected the look of uncertainty on my face, because he said, "This will work, Josie. No one will suspect a thing, baby. I promise."

I shook my head, afraid it wouldn't work, but I was down with his plan. He went inside the hotel and came back with two room keys. He handed me one, then drove across the street and let me out five spaces away from my vehicle. I drove back to the other hotel and met him in the room, which was actually a whole suite.

I looked around the suite. "Wow. This place is nice. Not as nice as ours, but nice."

"I agree," he said and moved close to me. He stood right in front of me, and I knew what that meant. "Can I kiss you?"

"Yes," I whispered.

I finally found out what he tasted like, and it was good. We both had liquor on our tongues, but he still tasted good enough for me to keep right on kissing him. I started to undress, and by the time I was down to my panties, I was feeling a little nervous, but I wanted what was in front of me. I wanted to feel him inside of me. We fell onto the bed and when he sucked on my tits, it felt so new. I hadn't had a man treat my body so well, and I enjoyed his warm mouth and sweet caresses. He moved his hand down to my center and played around in my cookie. I wanted more. I wanted Jayden, and I wanted all of him.

"I want you inside of me," I panted.

"Yeah? You wanna feel me inside of you, baby?" he said and continued to please my nipples.

"Yes. Push it inside of me. I can't wait any longer." I squirmed. My pussy was soaking wet. It had been so long since I had had a man, and I wanted the one who was teasing my nipples with his magic tongue.

“Hold on, baby,” he said. He got up and undressed, then pulled out a condom. I removed my panties, and my hand made its way to my center. I stroked myself while I watched him put on the plastic. His dick was beautiful, and it matched his height, long and lean. He knelt in front of me, and I rolled my body up against his as he entered.

“Ahhh, ahhh,” I moaned.

Having a man inside of me was foreign to my sex-deprived body. I needed this. I wanted this, and I enjoyed it. Jayden did me over and over, and in every position imaginable. I collapsed onto his chest when we were finally done, and he held me all night long.

The next morning, when the wake-up call came, I didn’t want to move, but I had to get back to my hotel to work. I peeled my body from his, and that was the first time I wished I could call in and take the day off. Dragging ourselves, we both dressed without showering. I had time to go back to my apartment, shower, and put on my work attire.

“Can I see you later?” he asked before opening the door.

“Not tonight. I don’t get off until ten.”

“That’s okay. I can see you then.”

“Are you sure? I know that is late,” I said.

“I know, but I can’t go without seeing you.”

“Well, when I get off, I’ll walk over to Sammie’s.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He kissed me, and I walked out of the suite first.

When I got back to my apartment in the hotel, my baby was already up for school.

“Ma, where have you been?” she asked as we stood in the living room.

“I was out, baby. No biggie.”

“But you’ve never stayed away all night.”

“I know, Angelica. I had a few drinks, so I stay with a friend.”

“Okay, Ma. I’m going to go and get ready for school.” She went into her bedroom, and then my problem child walked into the living room.

“Wow. The dress worked, I see. Looks like you had fun,” she said.

“That’s none of your business, Ana.” I headed to my bedroom.

“Okay,” she said smartly.

I knew that that troublemaker was up to something. She was a daddy’s girl, and I knew she reported back to her father exactly what went on in our house.

I showered, dressed, and headed to the front desk, where I relieved my auditor. A little later Jayden stopped by the desk before he headed out.

He smiled. “Good morning, Ms. Josie. I hope you have a good day.”

“You too,” I said.

He moved on, and I smiled on the inside. I liked creeping with him. Hell, the night before was the best night of my life. I tried to focus on my work, but I could stop myself from watching the clock for the rest of my shift.

At ten o’clock, I raced out of there, ran over to Sammie’s, and found Jayden sitting at a table. He stood and greeted me with a kiss. Yes, I was falling head over heels for him, and I was happy about it.

We sat and then he caressed my cheek. “How was your day?”

“Long. I wanted to see you badly. Why didn’t you stop by the desk when you got in?”

“I wanted to, but I decided to lay low. I don’t want to bring any attention to us, and since I’ve been dying to kiss you, I probably would have leaned in for one if I had seen you.”

“Okay. I understand. I feel the same way. I missed you today.”

“Not as much as I missed you,” he said. He leaned in for another kiss. Although I had never been a public affection type of woman, I didn’t care who was watching us or what they were thinking.

“Get a room,” a voice said.

I pulled back and looked around. “Sam, hey. How are you?”

“I’m great. And I can see you two are cozy and comfy, making out in my restaurant.”

“I’m sorry, Samantha, but I can’t resist this woman,” Jayden said.

“Yes, Sam. I’m sorry,” I said.

“Chile, please. Have fun. I’m just kidding. If you two want to be close and intimate, I recommend the party room. It’s empty and away from everyone. That’s where Ethan and I go to keep from grossing the customers out.”

“Show us the way,” Jayden said, standing up.

“Come on,” Samantha said. “I’ll send a server over to you guys.”

We followed her to the party room, and as soon as she walked away, we tongue locked again.

“Um, you are so good,” I told Jayden.

“Me? You. I was in court today, and I promise you, I called my client Josie two times. I couldn’t get you and last night out of my mind.”

“Same here. Now, I didn’t call anyone, Jayden, but every moment I was alone, I said your name out loud.”

We kissed again. The server interrupted us and asked if we were ready to order.

“I’m sorry. We are ready,” Jayden said.

We ordered, and after I was good and tipsy, we went back to the hotel. I showered, eased out of my apartment, and crept

into his hotel room. I knew it was a risky move, but I wasn't worried about that. I let him do me even better than he had done me the night before, and after a nap, I crept back into my place before my daughter got up for school. The next night, we did the same thing.

I was hooked on Jayden.

Chapter Sixteen

Andrea

I waited for him to come in. It had been a few days since I'd learned he was a two-timing, gay-ass bastard. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to cause him bodily harm. I wanted to rush him, but when he walked in, I sat calmly at the kitchen island with a glass of wine and didn't move. Yes, I had wine at 11:17 a.m.

That was the first day I'd ever canceled an appointment, the first day since I'd opened the salon that I missed a day. I was grateful to have a father and a sister who cared for my kids if they were ill, and if I was ill, which was rare, I pressed on and did what I had to do to keep my clients happy. So I hadn't missed a day. Until now.

At the sight of me, his eyebrows vaulted to the ceiling. I guessed he thought I'd be at the salon.

"You're home?" he asked. "What are you doing home?"

"Yes, I am home. I took today off."

"Why? You never take time off."

"To see you, Jeremiah. How was your trip?"

"It was good, really good. We've discussed doing this quarterly versus twice a year." He went to the fridge and then noticed I was drinking. "Wine again, and in the a.m.? What's going on with you, Ann? You're drinking like a drunk, and I will not tolerate that in this house. In this house, we will worship the Lord, not give in to Satan's devices."

"And what else will we do in this house, husband?" I stood and got in his face. "Tell me, how is my drinking a sin?"

"It's not a sin, Ann, but at the rate you're going, it soon will be."

I laughed. I laughed loud and hard. I laughed so hard, he looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

"What in the hell is wrong with you, woman? What the hell are you laughing so hysterically about?" he asked. That was

typical Pastor Young. He used a certain demeaning tone with me that I hated, just to make himself feel in charge, I figured.

“You are, like, the biggest fraud that I’ve ever known. I mean, you’re standing here, scolding me and giving me a mini-sermon on drinking, when Christ himself drank wine. And according to the scriptures, sweetheart, he drank plenty of it. I’m not a fool. I have a sound mind, and even though you are the head honcho in this matrimony setup, *you’re* the one that God is looking at, not me. I’m not a sinner. I’m not a liar, adulterer, drunk, or fornicator. Although I should have been all of the above, since you and I haven’t behaved like a married couple in God only knows how long. You’re such a hypocrite.”

“Woman, what is wrong with you? What’s gotten into you? Whatever Satan has slid in and done to you, you need to be anointed and prayed over right away.”

He was nervous. I could see the beads of sweat on his forehead.

“Me? Me? Me? *I* need to be anointed? The Word of God says that we shall live by every word of God, not pick and choose what makes us comfortable, Pastor Young. You’re trying to hit me with things that are not unrighteous, like drinking. There is no sin in drinking. But you! You stand here like a pillar of righteousness, when I know you’re a fraud and you are doing something that God says is an abomination against Him.”

“Ann, I don’t know what you are doing or what you are talking about, but you are apparently out of your mind.”

“Out of my mind?” I yelled. I went for my Bible that sat on the counter and handed it to him.

“What’s this about?”

“Read Leviticus 20:13,” I shouted.

“I don’t need the Bible to read that. I know what it says.”

“Do you, Pastor Young? Do you? I know you know what it says, but I want to hear that scripture from your mouth. Just like you have made me recite Proverbs to you, about a

virtuous woman, I want you to recite that verse to me,” I demanded.

Finally, he did. His demeanor changed to defensive.

When he was done, I said. “Now turn to First Corinthians 6:9.”

“Ann, what are you doing?”

“Doing exactly what you have done to me. Showing you in the Word how you have failed in this marriage, failed as a pastor, failed as a so-called representative of God.”

“I’m done with this,” he said and put the Bible down on the island.

“Why? Huh? Is there something you want to confess to me, Pastor Young?” I knew he knew where I was going, but he’d never confess. I had other plans. This secret was going to be revealed today. Whether he liked it or not.

“Is there something you want to confess to *me*?” he asked. “Are you sleeping with another man or, better yet, a woman? Did one of your clients turn you out?”

How dare he asked me something so disgusting? First, I took a sip of my wine. I decided I had to confront him head-on right now. Then I decided to polish off my glass. What I had to say took balls, and since I had ovaries and there was no trace of a nut sack in my makeup, I needed the wine to give me valor.

“I don’t have *anything* to confess to you, Jeremiah. I have been a faithful wife to you since the day we stood before God and exchanged vows. Even though I’ve been miserable for the past two-plus years, I’m here, making the best of this sad situation. But at the same time, I’ve prayed and asked God to help me, to give me a way out, if that was His will, or a reason to stay, if that was His will, and you know what, Pastor?”

He looked at me strangely. “What, Ann? What? You’re acting like a lunatic.”

“No, no, baby. I’m not crazy. I’m just finally free. God has answered my prayers.”

“What? What are you talking about, Ann?”

“I know your secret.”

“What secret?” he said, in a panic. I could see him shaking. “What are you talking about? Has some member come to you with false accusations about me doing something inappropriate?”

“Oh, so you mess with the female members too?”

“What?” he yelled.

It was time to get to it. I changed my tone and said softly, “How long have you been involved with him, Jeremiah?”

“Him who? Ann, what are you babbling about?”

“You and Franklin. And don’t you dare stand there and lie to my face.”

A look of fear, shock, and surprise crossed his face. “Where did you get something so insane from? He is my chief of staff, Ann. What would make you come up with something so insane? You know that is an abomination against our God.”

“Our God, Jeremiah? The God I serve hates sinners like you. You have the nerve to call yourself a man of God? Hell is going to devour your soul if you keep this up. You are in a sexual relationship with him, Jeremiah, and I know it, so don’t deny it, please. It makes it worse when you stand here and lie to my face.” My eyes welled up. “All this time, I have been so hard on myself, thinking that it was me and that our failed marriage was my fault. But that wasn’t it at all. You stopped touching me and stopped loving me because you are interested in another man. How does that fit into your title? You were supposed to be a man of God.”

He cleared his throat and took a couple of steps in my direction. His eyes turned cold, and his jaw clenched. There were no more traces of fear or nervousness. He reached for my neck. At first, it was a light hold, but then his grasp became firmer.

Between tight teeth, he said, “You have no idea what you are talking about, and this will be the last conversation we

have in this house about me carrying on an affair with Franklin. I don't know who put this crazy idea in your head, woman, but you tell them to back the hell off. I'm warning you, Ann. This is the last time we will have this conversation.

“Now I'm going to go shower, because I have a meeting at two. I suggest you go and pray about what you have just accused your husband of. If you need more wine to assist in your reassessment, pour another glass or two, but don't you *ever* let words of me and Franklin being more than church family and associates come out of your mouth again.”

He gave me a shove when he released me. I fell into the pantry door, coughing, trying to catch my breath, frightened by his tone and demeanor. Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I kept telling myself that that didn't just happen to me. He had transformed into Satan himself, and for the first time, I was afraid of him.

Once I stopped coughing uncontrollably, he moved in my direction again. I jumped, but he kissed my forehead.

“I love you,” he said gently, transforming into another person, not the demon he'd been a few seconds ago, when he cut off my air supply. “And I'll be home for dinner on time. I'm in the mood for fish. How does that sound?”

Terrified, I could speak barely above a whisper. “Fish sounds great.”

“Great,” he said and went toward his bedroom.

I went for the wine, and as soon as Jeremiah left the house, I called Quentin. I didn't know who else to call. I started sobbing into the phone as soon as he answered and I couldn't stop.

“Calm down, Drea. Calm down, baby, and tell me what happened. Did he hit you?” Quentin asked.

I was sobbing so hard, I knew he couldn't understand a word I said, so I took a few deep, cleansing breaths and then started over. “No, he didn't hit me, but he tried to choke me to death. I've never seen him like this, Quentin, and he is so angry, because he knows that I know the truth. I'm terrified.”

“Pack a bag and come to my place.”

“Quentin, I have kids. I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can, baby. Bring your kids. I have five bedrooms. I don’t feel comfortable with you staying there.”

“He was just angry, Q. He reacted irrationally. He wouldn’t hurt me. He just reacted because I confronted him. Jeremiah has never done anything like that before. He’s not going to do anything, Quentin. He is a pastor. I’m sure he doesn’t want to have this bad publicity.”

“Drea, people are crazy, and no one can be trusted. People kill their spouses every day, and I want you safe. You have to move out at least. You and the kids. I mean, I know your dad still owns rentals. You have a place to go, Andrea.”

I began to cry again. I couldn’t believe the scene in the kitchen, and I was now terrified of my husband. “I know, Quentin, but for now, I have to stay here to feel him out, you know. If I leave abruptly with the kids, I know that is only going to make matters worse. I’ve never seen him like that before. I mean, it’s like he was another person.”

“All the more reason for you to pack a bag and get yourself and your kids out of there.”

“I can’t, Quentin. I will call you later, okay?”

“You promise?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Okay, and if you need me, call me. If he puts his hands on you again, Andrea, you dial the police right away. Don’t try to fight him, baby. If something were to happen to you, I’d go insane.”

“I’ll be okay. I’ll call you later.” I hung up and headed to the grocery store for fish. I had to play nice, because Jeremiah had me on edge. During the episode in the kitchen, it was like I was standing before a stranger. I didn’t know what else he was capable of.

Hell, he was having an affair with another man for sure and, judging by his comment, maybe with female members of the

church too. All I knew was I didn't want to rock the boat until I was sure what was really going on in my house. I had to relax and play it by ear. One thing I did know was that Jeremiah was definitely not the man he pretended to be.

I had to get away from him and soon.

Chapter Seventeen

Samantha

I sat in my office in a daze. I had avoided Ethan for the past couple of days, and I knew that wouldn't last much longer. He was begging me to spend time with him. I had to tell him. I just didn't know the words to say.

"Lord, why me?" I asked again. And again, I heard nothing. Just as I stood to go back on the floor to work, one of my employees, Amy, tapped on my open door.

"Yes, darling?" I said.

"There is a man out here who wants to see you," Amy replied.

I was sure it was Ethan. I knew he'd show up sooner or later. We had talked, but I was hiding behind work.

"Tell him I'll be out in a minute." I went over to the mirror. I was looking sexy, even though I had on a Sammie's polo and khakis. I headed out of my office, but when I looked around the restaurant, I didn't see him. That was strange.

I approached Amy, who was at the front of the restaurant. "Amy, didn't you say someone was here for me?"

"Yes, ma'am. At table nineteen." She pointed.

I looked over at that section. "Oh, my Lord," I said out loud when I saw him. It was Charles, my ex, the last person I wanted to see. "Thanks," I whispered as I walked off. I headed in Charles's direction, wondering why he thought it was okay to show up at my damn restaurant.

"Sam." He smiled as I approached.

"Charles, why on earth are you here? I told you never to come here."

"Well, it's been a long time, and I miss your cooking. I was hoping I could get you to make me some of that stuffed chicken that I love, and please, please add mushrooms. You know I love it with mushrooms."

“Why are you really here?”

“For your stuffed chicken. Come on, Sam, I’m not trying to make waves, okay? I miss your cooking, babe, and this is the only way I can enjoy what I’ve been missing.”

Last I’d heard, he’d married a woman half his age. “Where is Shana?” I asked.

“Well, let’s just say that didn’t work out.”

“Go figure.” I rolled my eyes.

He grabbed my hand, and I tried to pull back, but he wouldn’t let me. “Listen, Sam, I don’t have an agenda or anything up my sleeve, okay? I just came to eat, and if you’d join me, we can catch up.”

“I don’t need to catch up with you,” I said. I snatched my hand away. “You are the last person I want to break bread with.”

“Because you still think I gave you—”

I cut him off. “Don’t you dare say it! And yes, you know you did.” I looked around. No one was in earshot, but I didn’t want him to announce my business.

“I didn’t do it, Sam, and still, to this day, I don’t have it.”

I looked at him like he was crazy. “Are you kidding me?”

“No, and I told you a thousand times during our marriage and after our marriage, it wasn’t me. When you told me, I went to see my doctor, and he said I was clean. Why you don’t or wouldn’t believe me, I can’t understand.”

“Because I was clean until you.”

“Maybe you weren’t.”

“What?”

“I’ve done a little research on it, Sam, and that can lie dormant in your system for years. It wasn’t me,” he said.

I just stood there staring.

He went on. “I’d take another test and another test and another to prove to you I wasn’t messing around on you.”

“Man, please.” I tried to walk away, but he got up and grabbed me.

“Sam, I loved you. I would have stayed with you after you were diagnosed, because in all that time, you never gave it to me. You are the one that’s convinced it was me. I was tested four more times after we divorced, and still, I don’t have it.” He looked sincere. He sounded sincere, but it was impossible.

This wasn’t the time or the place for such a discussion, and I hated that I thought he was telling the truth. I snatched my arm away from his grasp and changed the subject. “Do you want rice or potatoes with your chicken?”

“Rice and broccoli,” he said.

I headed to the kitchen. There I snatched an apron from a hook, put on a hairnet, and prepared his dish myself. When I finished, I picked up his plate, walked over to his table to serve him, and stood there until he took his first bite.

He chewed like there was a party going on in his mouth. “Still as delicious as the last time I had it,” he finally said and smiled. I was tempted to sit and ask him more about this herpes-free thing, but I decided to move around the restaurant.

“Enjoy,” I said and walked away.

I got back to work and tried to keep my eyes away from his direction, but it wasn’t happening. Charles was Idris Elba fine, with swagger. He was not really tall, under six feet, but his body was nice and tight. His shoulders were broad and strong, his chest hung a shirt like none other, and his stomach was a tongue’s playground. He had chocolate skin and low-cut salt-and-pepper hair, and his beard and mustache framed his masculine face to perfection.

He was a successful mortgage broker, and when we were together, he had done everything in his power to make me smile. Yes, he had worked late a lot of evenings, and I had had doubts that he was faithful, but I had never had any proof, until that first outbreak.

I woke up feeling a little funny down there, and later, it was itchy as hell. Convinced it was a yeast infection coming on, I

hit Walgreens for some Monistat. On day four things went from bad to worse, and when I touched my area, I felt little bumps. Not sure what was going on, I called my doctor and made an appointment. By the time I got to the doctor's office, I was burning severely.

As soon as my doctor took a look, she uttered that evil word but said she still had to do a test. Four days later, I got the confirmation call, and when I confronted Charles, he played crazy.

"You have what?" he said.

"Herpes, damn it! How could you do this!" I yelled at the top of my lungs.

"Do what? I don't have herpes, Sam, and you need to get a second opinion. I'm fine."

"Let me see your dick," I ordered.

"What? You're not serious?"

"I am."

He undid his pants and dropped his undergarments. I didn't see a bump or a blister.

"Are you happy now?" he muttered.

"Well, you must have it, Charles. I didn't just get it out of the air."

"No, you didn't. Where did you get it?"

"Are you kidding me?" I snarled.

"No. I'm not cheating on you, Sam, nor have I ever cheated. You have herpes, and I know damn well I didn't give it to you."

"Impossible, Charles. We've been married six years, and we were together for two before that. I've never stepped out on you."

"And I've never stepped out on you," he insisted.

"Well, you have to get tested."

"I will."

The next day he called his doctor and arranged to have the test, and a week later he told me that the test results came back clear. I didn't believe him.

"I need to see the results," I told him.

"I don't have them, Sam. They called me."

"Who did you pay to lie?"

"What? Are you serious? That's absurd, Sam. Are you kidding me?"

"I've never cheated on you!" I cried.

"And I've never cheated on you!" he retorted. I didn't believe him.

"You must have done something, Charles. I want you to leave."

"No, I'm not leaving. You are the one with herpes, Sam, so you leave," he countered. "You said you've never stepped out, but I'm clear, and that means you did something you are not telling me."

"That's bullshit, Charles. You charmed some nurse or paid someone off to say you're clean."

"Samantha, you are crazy, and if anyone is leaving, it's you, because I didn't do anything wrong."

"Fine." I stormed out of the room, ran upstairs, grabbed a suitcase, and began to pack. He was a liar. And I knew he was the only one who could have given me this awful virus. I left that day and ignored his attempts to talk to me.

He did try to reconcile with me, but I didn't trust him. I didn't believe that he was clean, for one, and I definitely didn't believe that I had got herpes out of midair. After six months of arguing and pointing a finger of blame, I filed for divorce. In court, my husband at the time asked the judge not to grant our divorce and asked me to come home. I thought about the last painful breakout I had had and told my lawyer to tell him, "Hell, no."

Charles looked at me and then whispered in his lawyer's ear. His lawyer then proceeded to say, "She can have the house and whatever amount of alimony she is asking for."

Shocked, I asked my lawyer to confirm this. He nodded at me, letting me know I had heard right. I would be able to move out of the hotel I was living in, which was close to my restaurant. That was how I met Josie. At first, I didn't tell her that I was the owner of Sammie's, but when I saw the hotel had an attractions table, I wanted to add some of my to-go menus to it.

I stopped at the front desk. "Do you mind if I leave a stack here?" I asked. We had already talked briefly.

"Sure. Go ahead," she said. She had a sad face.

I put the menus in place and then went back over to her. "Are you okay?"

"No, but I hope to be," she confessed.

"You wanna talk about it?"

"No, but I could sure use a stiff drink."

"What time are you off?"

"Ten."

"Come over to my place and have one on me. And if you want to talk after, we can talk. I'm a good listener."

She smiled. "Thanks. I need a friend right now. I don't have anyone to talk to. No one who's not biased, anyway. Everyone I know says the same thing."

"Well, I'm a new and fresh ear. Come over to Sammie's when you're done."

I went back to my restaurant, and close to ten thirty, she walked in. I rushed over to greet her.

"Come sit at the bar. It's slow and quiet. I'll join you."

I fixed us both a martini and then sat down, ready to listen. "By the way, I'm Sam."

"I'm Josie." She smiled. "I am just tired of my life."

“What’s wrong with your life?” I asked, thinking, Do you have herpes too? That was the worst of my burdens at the time.

“My husband is a jailbird. He’s been in and out of prison, and no matter what, I can’t seem to shake him loose. I’ve spent more than I’ve made on legal fees and this and that,” she said. Her accent was so thick, it tickled me. “I’m just drained, you know. And then my girls love him, and I’m tired of explaining to them why their papa has to go away again. He just won’t do right. I’ve had cousins and uncles give him a legal job, you know, to keep him straight, but no, he’s a rebel. Always trying to get rich quick. And he’s now back in prison, and this time, for a very long time.”

“Hey, maybe you should count your blessings,” I said encouragingly, hoping I wasn’t out of line. “At least now your girls don’t have to see him come and go. And it’s a time for you to rebuild, so if and when he comes home again, you can show him the exit.”

She wiped her eyes and nodded. “Yes, I guess you’re right. It’s just scary, you know. God has blessed me with a new job, and I can live there rent free, so that helps me and my girls.”

“See? Things are not all bad.”

She smiled. “I guess they’re not,” she agreed.

We had a couple more drinks, and after that night, Josie and I became good friends.

Now Charles was sitting in my dining area, enjoying my stuffed chicken. I went over to get his plate when it was empty.

“Did you enjoy?” I asked him.

“You know I did. It was delicious.” He licked his lips.

Charming bastard.

“That’s good to know. Now, pay up and get the hell out,” I barked.

“Seriously? That’s how you treat your customer and ex-husband?”

“Charles, what do you want? I know it’s something.”

“You,” he said with a straight face.

I laughed. “Seriously, why are you here?”

“Again, because of you. Our marriage didn’t have to end, Sam. I loved you in spite of what happened. I did some research later, and I believe you didn’t cheat.”

“Research or no research, I didn’t cheat. Are you still going to lie that you are clean?”

“I’m clean, and it’s no lie. I read up on the virus, Sam, and if your doctor had educated you, we might not have divorced.”

“Go on,” I said. I didn’t want anyone to overhear our conversation, but I wanted to know more. I’d been so angry at the time of my diagnosis that I hadn’t hear a word my doctor said after she said I had it. Every other word out of her mouth had fallen on deaf ears.

“Herpes can be in a person’s body for ten years and not create symptoms, so I figure you may have had it before me, and since you’d never had an outbreak, I didn’t contract it.” He paused. “All I’m saying is there is no telling how long it was in your body before you found out. I don’t have it, Sam,” he said. He looked me in the eye, and he seemed sincere.

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t. I’d go to any doctor, your choice, just to prove to you I’m not lying.”

I wanted to say, “Cool,” but just then I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Sam, table six is asking for a manager,” Trina, one of my waitresses said.

“Excuse me.” I hurried over to handle my customers.

It turned out one of the diners at the table had received the wrong dish but didn’t have time to reorder. After I apologized for my waitress’s mistake and said I’d comp the dish that was prepared and served by mistake, I turned to head back over to Charles.

I was stopped in my tracks by Ethan’s voice.

“Sam,” he called out.

I turned to greet him. “Ethan, hey,” I said, trying to pretend I wasn’t disappointed to see him. I had some unfinished business with Charles, and Ethan showing up was not good.

“Hey, baby,” he said and kissed me. “I’ve missed you, babe. Can you cut out of here?”

“Ethan, I wish I could, but I can’t. As you can see, we are busy tonight.”

“I see. I’ll just have a seat at the bar and get me something to eat and wait until you’re done.” He smiled.

I wanted to say no, ask him to leave, and tell him I’d call him later, but I smiled instead. “Okay, baby. Have a seat. I’ll be over in a few moments.”

I went over to Charles.

“Your man?” he asked as soon as I approached.

“Yes, something like that.”

“Really? Are you guys serious?”

“Why?”

“Does he know?”

“No, and we aren’t serious enough. Okay, Charles? I haven’t told him.”

“So you are not sleeping with him?”

“Not that it’s any of your damn business, but no.”

He smiled. “You don’t have to tell him, Sam. Knowing you like I do, you’ve been celibate since our divorce. I just know it.”

He was right, but I didn’t confirm his statement.

“I want a chance to work it out,” he went on. “I know this virus is an unfortunate thing for you, but I love you, and there are preventive ways to be safe. I’m hoping you’ll give me another chance. I never stepped out on you.”

For the first time, I did believe him. “Just go, Charles. We can talk soon, but for now, it’s best that you go.”

“Fair enough. Is your number the same?”

“Yes,” I told him.

“I’ll call you.” He stood and kissed my cheek. I turned to look and see if Ethan was watching, but he was at the bar, with his back to us.

“Good night, Charles.”

“Good night, Sam.”

He made his exit, and I went over to Ethan.

“Hey, you. Why have you been avoiding me?” he said.

“I have not,” I lied.

“Yes you have. I mean, the past couple of nights, you have turned me down. You know I’m trying to be close to you.”

“I know, but I’ve been closing and been beat, babe.” I gave him a weak smile.

“Well, I don’t care how late you are done tonight. I refuse to take no for an answer.” He pulled me closer and whispered in my ear, “I want to do something to make you feel good.”

Oh no!

“Well, it may be late,” I said, hoping he’d be too tired to fulfill that promise.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t have an early day tomorrow, so I’m all yours. Now, please let me get that stuffed chicken and potatoes, baby. Hook it up with the mushrooms.”

I wondered why he’d just ordered the same meal my ex had. They were both hooked on my stuffed chicken.

Damn! Damn! Damn!

Chapter Eighteen

Andrea

“Come and sit,” Quentin insisted. I had been pacing the floor of Quentin’s living room and babbling on and on about my situation with Jeremiah. I had no idea what to do, and I didn’t know what my next move was going to be.

“I can’t sit, Q,” I cried.

He got up and came over to me. “Come here. Come here.” He held me. “It’s going to be okay, Drea. First things first. Get a lawyer. You don’t have to *out* him, just leave him. It doesn’t have to be messy.”

He was right. All I had to do was leave him. I didn’t have to have a reason, nor did I have to reveal he was gay.

“I hope it’s that easy. I don’t see Jeremiah just letting me walk out the door. He wants to keep up this image.”

“Fuck that. You have the power, babe. You know his secret. He doesn’t have shit on you.”

“You’re right. You’re right.” I smiled at him, feeling a little better now, not as nervous as I was before.

“It’s going to be fine.”

I let out a sigh. “I guess.”

He cupped my chin and then kissed me. Every nerve and sense in my body became activated. I hadn’t been touched in over two years, and it didn’t take much to get me wet. My nipples instantly hardened, and I wasn’t going to stop him from taking me to Pleasureville.

“Quentin, I shouldn’t,” I said, showing counterfeit resistance. I wasn’t going to stop him. I wasn’t going to leave before I had an orgasm.

“I want to make you feel good, baby. Let me make you feel good, Andrea.”

“Okay,” I agreed, and then my top came off. My jeans were next, and we were both naked within a matter of minutes.

“Let me taste you again, baby,” he said.

I nodded and followed him up the steps to his master bedroom. He pulled back the fancy bedspread and helped me onto the bed. I relaxed, and he climbed on top of me and kissed me down to my nipples.

He still knew how to kiss, and his nipple-pleasing skills had improved. My body was screaming, and as soon as I felt his tongue on my clit, I moaned louder than I’d ever moaned in my life. Knowing he was now an oral master, I trembled in anticipation. I hadn’t come in a very long time, and when I did, it was so hard that it hurt.

“Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah,” I panted. “No more please.”

“Baby, I haven’t broke you in yet.”

“Q, you have no idea.” I had climaxed in less than two minutes. “Let me,” I said between short breaths.

He brought his massive rod to my mouth. Just like swimming or riding a bike, you never forgot how to suck dick. His skin smelled so fresh, and the heat from his throbbing pole enticed me. I sucked his dick as if it was the last opportunity I’d get to please him.

“Baby, ooh, baby, ooh. That’s so good, baby,” he breathed. “You are going to make me squirt, baby. It feels so damn good.”

“Ump, ump.” I sucked, making slurping sounds as I enjoyed him. I was getting wetter the more I sucked.

He reached down and touched my center, played with my opening. “Aw, baby, you are so wet. Can I feel you?”

“Yes,” I said between slurps.

He pulled back and stood. I watched him get a condom and roll it on, and at that moment my guilt tried to kick in. But as far as I was concerned, my marriage was over. Correction, my marriage was dead.

Quentin positioned himself over me, and I took a deep breath, waiting for him to enter my body. I was anxious to feel him inside of me again. I thought back to when we’d been in

love and when making love to Quentin had been the only thing I wanted to do. Kissing him now was like being that young, beautiful, slim woman I used to be. I suddenly felt uncomfortable. I turned my head, and my eyes welled up with tears. I felt the tip of his penis near my opening. He was about to slide in, but he stopped.

“Andrea, what’s wrong, baby?”

“I ... I ... I ... Am I still beautiful to you? I’ve changed, Q, and I know I’m not sexy anymore. I just let myself go. After Jeremiah stopped touching me, I just let myself go.”

“Baby, stop. You are so beautiful. I love the way you look.” I felt him slide inside of me.

“Owww.” It felt like it had ripped me open. As he pushed in and out of me, I frowned in pain, wondering why it hurt so badly. “Slow, baby, please. That hurts.”

He pulled out, then took his time and slid back in gently. After some getting used to, his dick felt like magic.

He looked at me the entire time he pleased me, not taking his eyes off of me.

“You’re beautiful, b-baby. Your beauti-ti,” he stuttered. “Baby, it’s g-good. I’m coming.”

He came down on me and buried his face in my neck. After he released, he pushed his tongue back into my mouth. He kissed me deeply, and I felt his pelvis rolling around in between my legs. He was limp, but he moved as if he was trying to get it back up. After a couple of moments, he got up and went into the bathroom.

I smiled to myself and waited for him to rejoin me. He crawled back in bed with me a few minutes later and wrapped his body around mine. He felt good, and I wanted to stay there forever. I missed having someone to hold me. I missed having a man tell me I was beautiful, and I definitely missed having dick deep inside my canal.

He nudged me. “Maybe it’s because it’s been a while for you, babe, but you’re bleeding.”

I jerked my head up. “What?”

“There was blood on the condom.”

“Well, it’s been over two years, Q.”

“Are you okay? Because I want more.”

“Do you?” I smiled.

“Yes. You felt even better than the last time I remember having you. Tighter and wetter than I remembered.”

“Well, I did have two C-sections. Canal’s too small, according to the doctor, so nothing has changed down there.”

“Well, that soft tunnel of yours is even better than I remember, and I want to be with you, Andrea. I want you to be with me. I’m sorry for leaving you the way I did. You didn’t do anything to deserve that, and I want another chance. Please, can you give me a chance to be right with you?”

“Quentin, my life is so messed up right now. I don’t want to bring drama into your life. Jeremiah and I have a lot of issues, and I can’t go making plans or committing to a new relationship until I’ve resolved the one I’m in.”

“I know, Andrea. I know this won’t happen overnight, but I’m here. I will give you your space to handle your business, but I just want you to know I want to be the man in your life. I’ve waited this long to be next to you, and I’d gladly wait for you as long as you need me to. Just don’t shut me out or stop allowing me to see you.”

I smiled, because I wanted that too. I had never gotten over Quentin, and if I started over, I’d rather start over with him. After all, he was the one. “I want you too. Just please be patient with me and let me take care of this mess of a marriage with Jeremiah.”

“I’m patient, Andrea, and I will be here for whatever you need. I love you.”

“Thank you,” I said and rested my head on his chest. I wanted to say, “I love you too,” but I knew not to.

He kissed my hand and then pushed it down to his erection. He was ready, and even though I hadn't been on a rodeo ride in over two years, I got on top. Not even five minutes into it, I cramped up and my thighs tightened.

"Baby, I'm out of practice," I confessed. "This is killing me. I can't." The pain was unbearable.

"It's okay, baby. I got you," he said.

We changed positions, and I ended up on my stomach. Quentin made my body moan, and I was sore when we were finally done. We showered, then went to dinner,

By the time I made it home, Jeremiah was there, cooking pasta for the kids.

"Hey," he said with a bright smile. "How are you, baby? Where have you been?"

Shocked at his upbeat demeanor and his effort to be nice, I lied, "I had a couple of house calls. You know Drew Sidora is one of my clients. She is on the *Motown Review*, so I did her and a couple of young ladies from her cast."

"That's great." He smiled. "Dinner is ready. Come and join me and the kids."

I wasn't hungry, but I didn't want any trouble. "Just let me run up and change."

"You do that," he said behind his fake smile.

I knew he was being a sarcastic ass, but I went on up. I changed and examined myself in the mirror in my bathroom, noticing how big I was. A solid twenty, a twenty-two in some clothes. But Quentin's voice telling me how beautiful I was kept ringing in my ears. "I am beautiful," I told myself. I threw on some loungewear and headed back down the stairs.

I sat down at the kitchen table. During dinner my kids laughed, joked, and enjoyed their father. He hadn't been at the table with us in a while, so they welcomed him, while I gave him evil looks.

He smiled at me, as if to say, "Try me, bitch," but I just let it go and played with my pasta with my fork. The kids finished

and volunteered to take up our plates, leaving me and my estranged husband seated there. When they finished retrieving the plates, the kids headed up to bathe and get things ready for school the next day. Pastor Young and I sat in silence.

“You look different. Relaxed,” he finally said to me.

“I’m coming to terms with this situation,” I returned.

“What situation? There is no situation. We are fine. Our marriage is fine, and all anyone needs to know is that Pastor Young and his first lady are still madly in love and living out God’s will.”

“How can you still pretend to be this soldier for the Lord, when you are just as vile as a man of the world?”

“I’m a man of God, Ann, and whatever filthy thoughts or evil ideas you have about me, pray about it, because you are wrong.” He got up and went to the fridge. He grabbed my pinot and poured me a glass. That was a first. He handed it to me. “Here you go, sweetheart,” he said tenderly and then sat back down.

I was confused. I was a second away from literally scratching my head when he said, “Drink up, love, and let this wine be the relief to the ill things that you have imagined about your husband. Whoever you got your information from is wrong. I want you to tell me right now, who told you this foolish thing?”

“Why does it matter, Jeremiah? I know it’s true,” I said and sipped.

“It’s not true!” he yelled. He stood and took a calming breath. “Who told you that I was involved with him?” he asked again.

I sat in silence. I sipped my wine, and as soon as I put my glass on the table, he grabbed my neck again. He put so much pressure on my airway, I couldn’t breathe. I struggled to pull away from his grip, but he tightened his hold. My eyes teared up, and I tried to beg him to let me go, but no sound came out of my mouth.

“Tell me, Ann. Who told you?” he asked through clenched teeth.

This was the second time he’d tried to choke me. He let go only because one of the kids came running down the steps. I coughed uncontrollably, trying to catch my breath.

“Mommy, are you okay?” my baby girl, Lena, asked.

“She’s fine, baby. While drinking that wine, she swallowed it down the wrong pipe,” Jeremiah lied, patting my back, as if he was trying to help me.

I had tears rolling down my cheeks, and I continued to cough. Finally, my coughing subsided, and my baby girl went back up to her room.

“You gon’ tell me?” he asked.

Scared he would kill me, I said, “Franklin’s wife. She knows.” In tears, I continued. “She saw you two in his home office,” I confessed. I didn’t tell him that she had recorded them, and I certainly didn’t tell him that she had sent me a copy of the video.

“Now, was that so hard?” He laughed. “She is a liar, Ann, and I’ll see to it that Franklin puts his wife in her place. Good night,” he said.

He stood and headed to his bedroom, and I sat there and sobbed. This putting his hands around my neck had to stop. I wasn’t going to take it anymore. I was tempted to call Quentin, but after our day, I knew he would end up in jail, because he’d kill Jeremiah.

I got up, grabbed the wine bottle, and took it and my glass upstairs. I put them on my night-stand and went to say good night to my kids. Afterward, I locked my bedroom door and went into the bathroom. My neck had red marks on it from Jeremiah choking me, and I knew I’d have to wear a scarf the next day to keep clients from seeing traces of my crazy-ass husband’s attempts to choke the truth out of me. I turned out the bathroom light, got into bed, and texted Quentin.

I miss u & I wish I was there with u instead of here.

I miss u 2, and I was just thinkin' the same thing.

This is a nightmare.

I know, baby, but it will be over soon.

Are u sure u can handle my drama?

Drea, I'm all in.

Thank u.

No need 2 thank me. I luv u.

I know & I luv u 2, Q. We should have never parted.

I know. U r the only 1 4 me.

U r for me 2.

Can I c u tmr?

I am booked solid tmr. I will b at the salon all day.

I understand. Afterward will be fine, even for 30 mins. I miss u.

Okay. I can see u late. I want 2 come home & cook 4 my kids. I'll come by after I've gotten them down. How about that?

Will u b able 2 get out?

I'm sure I will b. Jeremiah will not be here. Being here tonight was a scare tactic.

How so?

Don't worry about it, babe. I'm fine.

R u sure? If he is putting his hands on u, Drea, u know I will kill him.

I know, but I'm fine. He's not crazy.

Don't lie 2 me, Drea. U kno I luv u & I got ur bck, babe.

I know, Q, but I'm fine, trust me.

Well, I'm here, no matter what, day or nite.

I know, baby. Get some sleep. I'll c u
tmr.

Ok, beautiful.
Don't say that.

Say what?
Don't cll me beautiful.

Y not?

B/c I'm not.

2 me u r & don't forget it.

U always make me smile 😊.

That's my job. I know Pastor Young
ruined u with not lovin' u, but I'm not him.
U r beautiful inside & out. Don't u ever
4get it!

Thank u, baby.

I luv u.

I luv u 2, Q.

So tmr.

Yes, tmr. I promise.

R u going to give me some?

I blushed. Maybe ;-).

I'll take that.

Gn, my love.

Gn, my love. I'll be up 4 a while. I'm working, so u can text or call me.

Ok ... I'm just in bed, sipping pinot, relaxing.

Ok. Let me wrap this up, and then I will text u when I get in bed.

Okay, Q. I'll be waitin'.

Ok 😊.

I refilled my glass, climbed back in bed, and then turned on the tube. I flipped through the channels, and by the time I was on my last swallow of wine, my phone chirped. It was Quentin. We spent the next two hours texting. Sleepy, unable to keep my eyes open, I said my final good night and fell fast asleep.

The next morning, the blaring alarm woke me, and I headed downstairs to fix my children breakfast. When I glanced out the kitchen window, I noticed Jeremiah's vehicle was gone. I

went to his bedroom, but he was nowhere to be found. I wondered what had gotten him out of the house before seven in the morning. I returned to the kitchen, cooked, and fed my offspring. Then I went back upstairs and dressed for work.

Since I was excited about seeing Quentin, my day was a breeze. I made it home before seven and threw a quick meal together. Once my kids had eaten and showered, I dressed and headed to Quentin's.

I hadn't eaten the Hamburger Helper I made for the kids, so I welcomed the delicious meal Quentin had put together for me. With the good wine, good food, and good company, I smiled the entire time. After dinner, we cuddled on the sofa, and before I made my departure, he serviced my body. I drove home with a bright smile on my face.

It was after one in the morning when I pulled up to my house. No Jeremiah. His vehicle wasn't in the drive or in the garage, and he wasn't in the house. Not feeling bad at all for my night spent with Quentin, I headed up to my bedroom. After two in the morning, I finally heard the house alarm chime. My husband was home. I didn't bother to go downstairs to greet him, and, of course, he didn't come upstairs.

The next morning, I woke to the same routine. I was certainly over and done with this bogus marriage.

Chapter Nineteen

Josephina

I listened to the lady's voice on my GPS as I tried to find my way to Jayden's new condo. I was so happy that he was checking out of the hotel and that I wouldn't have to sneak in and out of his room in the early hours of the morning anymore. I could date him openly and freely now that he was no longer a hotel guest.

I had a feeling that Ana knew what was going on, and I knew she was writing to her pop, telling him things about my personal life, but I didn't give a damn. I was moving on with my life, and I wasn't going to stay hooked on a jailbird. I wanted more for myself and my Angelica.

Ana had already decided she was going to live to do evil, and no matter how many good moments we had, she would never change. I just had to get her out of my place, and for good. No matter how many times she stormed out or I put her out, within a matter of days, she'd be right back there. I wanted that to be over.

I found the address I was looking for and turned into the gated lot. After stopping at the gate, I reached for my phone and went to my text messages to retrieve the code that Jayden had texted me earlier. I keyed the four digits into the touch pad, and the gate opened. I found my way to parking space 24C, pulled into it, and turned off the engine. I did a quick mirror check and then headed over to the building, walked through the door, and stopped at the desk.

The building was beautiful. Judging by the marble flooring and the mahogany wood finishes, I knew this was an upscale complex.

"Good afternoon, madam, Can I help you?" the man at the desk said.

I smiled. "Good afternoon, sir. I'm here to see Jayden Pierce. He's expecting me. I'm Josie Ramirez."

He smiled back. “Certainly.” He picked up a phone and rang Jayden’s unit. After getting the okay from Jayden, he said, “It’s okay to go on up, ma’am. Just sign your name here for me, please. The elevators are over to the left.”

I took the pen and scribbled my name quickly. “Thank you, sir.” I went to the elevator and pressed the call button. When the doors opened, I got on the elevator and headed up to the twenty-fourth floor. I walked down a short hallway, and when I got to Jayden’s door, it swung open.

Jayden greeted me with a smile. “Hey, gorgeous. Come on in.” He stepped aside so I could enter, and then he shut the door behind me.

I looked around, taking it all in. “Wow, Jay. Baby, your place is amazing. I mean, it’s not even fully furnished, and you haven’t finished unpacking, but I can tell it’s going to be spectacular.”

“Thank you, babe,” he said. He grabbed my hand and gave me a quick peck. “Come and let me show you around.”

The condo was maybe nine hundred or a thousand square feet, with one bedroom and a second room big enough to be an office. Since I didn’t see a closet, I figured it wasn’t a second bedroom. It had a half bath near the door, and his master bath was heavenly.

“That tub is massive, Jay, and it has jets. I need one of these in my quarters,” I said.

“You’re welcome to relax in it whenever you want.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” I joked.

“No, babe, I’m serious. *Mi casa es tu casa*,” he said, imitating me.

“Not bad, Mr. Pierce. Your Spanish is a little better.” I laughed. “I’m going to hold you to that.” We both laughed.

We went into his bedroom, where he had an amazing king-size platform bed.

I sat on the wooden base. “Your place is nice, and this room is so spacious.”

“Yes, this room is the largest of the entire condo. The living space doesn’t seem small, because of how open it is. My designer is coming by tomorrow to take measurements to get me the right-size pieces to make things flow well, so it doesn’t look as small as it really is. I’m thinking a built-in shelf around the fireplace will house my books and stuff like that. Plus, we have a storage in the basement, so I’ll be good. It’s just me.”

“Yes, you’re right. When my Angelica goes off to college, maybe I’ll be able to get me something like this.”

“Why wait?”

“Well, my quarters are huge, with two spare bedrooms for my girls. And it’s rent free, with no utilities, so I can save some money for Angelica to go to college. Plus, she loves her school. She is involved in so many activities, and to move her would devastate her.” Looking around, I noticed a slider door. “You have outdoor space too?” I asked, getting up.

“Oh, yes. That is the best part.”

It was October and not too cold, so we stepped outside. It wasn’t a lakefront view, but he had a view of downtown and all its high buildings.

“Wow. I bet it’s gorgeous at night out here,” I mused.

“Well, I haven’t seen it at night yet. I moved in yesterday but stayed at the hotel last night because I didn’t have a bed.”

“Well, I’m anxious to see it at night.”

“Me too. Come. Let me pour you a glass of wine. When I went to the grocery store, I grabbed a couple of bottles.” I followed him to the other end of the balcony, and we entered the living room through another door.

“This is neat ... the way you have access from your bedroom and your living room.”

“Yes, it is. I figured I’d put a small grill, two chairs, and a table at this end and two chaise lounges and a small table for drinks at that end, near my bedroom.”

“That sounds like a plan.” I smiled.

He moved into the kitchen after the tour and poured us both a glass of wine. We toasted, and I hung around and helped him unpack a few boxes.

“So where were all your things?” I asked.

“In a small storage. My pops helped me get them over here this morning after I checked out. I didn’t have much. I always wanted to wait until I had bought a place to do it big.” He laughed.

“Well, you’ve done well, Mr. Pierce. Your place is awesome, and every time I can get away from that hotel, I plan to visit.”

“Well, you’re welcome anytime.”

“Yes. Until you meet another chick and then you will forget about me.” I sat down on the floor.

“Why would you say something like that? I’m digging the woman I’m seeing right now.”

“Really? Enough to be exclusive?” I knew it was early, so I wasn’t expecting him to say yes.

He came over and squatted down in front of me. “I know it may seem hard to believe, because we’re still in phase one and getting to know each other, but I’m not a ladies’ man, Josie. I’m cool with one woman and one relationship at a time. Now, if you, on the other hand, think you want to see other men, just tell me, so I won’t be confused.”

“No, no, no, Jay, no. I’ve never been a player, and I have no idea where to begin juggling two men. I’m just sorta, kinda really liking this great guy that I’m seeing, and I was too cowardly to just ask if I am the only woman he’s seeing.” I put my head down, embarrassed. I felt my face getting hot. I didn’t know if it was because of the wine or my total embarrassment.

“Well, you are. From the first night we went out, I’ve been captured by your smile, your innocence, and the fact that you are humble. You have this ‘gorgeous woman’ thing going on, but you don’t use what you’ve got to entice men, at least from what I can see. The fact that you are just so meek makes me

more attracted to you. Meeting someone as beautiful as you are and as genuine is rare, so I know you're a keeper." He leaned in and kissed my nose.

"Those are very kind words, Jayden. I've been with only one man before you, so I'm coming out of my shell. It's always been about José and chasing him and pleading with him to do right, to help me with the girls. The money I've spent on lawyers and crap ... and he just kept spitting in my face, you know. Meeting you just felt ... I don't know. It just felt different. I have never felt this good about a man in my life, and I don't know if I'm rushing or if I'm asking for too much, because this is new to me. All I know is I like you a lot and I think of you even when I try not to."

He sat beside me and grabbed my free hand. "Don't worry, babe. We are on the same page. I like you a lot too." He smiled.

He kissed me, and I set my wineglass down on the floor. He started to undress me, and even though the hardwood was as uncomfortable as hell, we still made each other moan. I was an amateur when it came to sucking dick, but after he licked my clit again, I had to return the favor. I was a little clumsy with it at first, so I allowed him to coach me through it.

"That's it, baby. That's what I like. You got it, baby. That's nice," he moaned. I had found my rhythm, and I enjoyed pleasing him.

"I want to make that fat ass giggle," he told me and groaned as he pulled away.

I had always known I had a plump ass, and for a long time, I had hated it because all men did was gawk at me and make rude comments. I'd never wear anything sexy to show off my Puerto Rican curves, but with Jayden, I wanted to be sexy. I wanted to be desired, but only by him. I had purchased new underwear after we started dating, because I didn't own a matching set.

With my new do, my new makeup routine, and a few new pieces added to my wardrobe, I was starting to feel like a woman. A sexy woman, not just a mother and the wife of a

convict. I wanted to be noticed in a crowd now, instead of fading into the background. I had scaled back on my hours at work. I was done with sixteen-hour, back-to-back shifts. And since I had to keep my payroll hours down, my baby, Angelica, worked more unpaid hours for me without a complaint.

“Turn over and let me hit it from the back, baby,” he demanded. I turned and got on all fours. “Your ass is so sexy, baby, so smooth and beautiful,” he said before he planted a wet kiss on my cheeks. He rubbed the head of his dick down my crack and rubbed it over my clit a few times before he slid in.

I was on fire, and he felt so good that I ignored the sharp pains in my knees from kneeling on the wood floor as Jayden pounded me with his thick pipe. He pumped fast and hard, then slow, then hard and fast again. I moaned in pleasure. Every time he plunged inside of my body, my tits bounced hard.

I wanted to get on top so he could suck my nipples while I rode him. That position always got me there, because Jayden was a nipple master. He’d grab a firm hold and hold tight while he sucked and nibbled and met me halfway with his upward strokes. My clit would get a nice massage from his shaft in that position, so I spoke up.

“Baby, let me ride you. I want to come all over your big dick, baby.”

He pulled out, stood, and reached for me. “Let’s go to the bed, baby.” He pulled me up, and we went into his room and climbed into his unmade bed. It was a new mattress, with nothing covering it.

“Baby, do you have a sheet?” I asked.

“Yes, look in that Target bag near the closet,” he said, pointing.

I got off the bed, rummaged through the bag, and found a set of sheets. I carried the set over to the bed, and he helped me rip open the package. We shook the sheets loose and just

threw the flat sheet over the pillow-top mattress. He fell back on the bed and stroked his dick with his hand. Horny and excited, I put my mouth on it again for a few slurps, and then I slowly slid down on it. I bounced on him for a while, and then, not able to wait any longer, I fell forward and let him service my breasts. Going crazy with pleasure, I moaned loud and rolled harder, then released an orgasm that was out of this world.

It felt so good, I started speaking Spanish. I pushed my tongue in his mouth to give him a thank-you kiss and then rolled off of him and onto my side.

He pulled my body back to him, slid back in, and made my entire body bounce as he banged the hell out of me. He grunted, shook, and released, and I closed my eyes.

I was in sexual bliss ... until it hit me. We had just done it without a condom.

My eyes popped open. "Jayden, we didn't use protection."

Still breathing hard, he replied, "I know."

"But I'm not on any birth control."

"You're not?"

"No," I said in terror.

"Okay," he replied.

"Okay? That's all you have to say?"

"Yes. We made love, we didn't use anything, and we have to deal with whatever the result is. In the end, it will be what it will be." He kissed the top of my head. "I'm not worried."

"If you're not, neither am I," I said and relaxed in his arms.

After a power nap, we showered and went to dinner. When we returned to his condo, he walked me to my car, begging me to spend the night, but I couldn't. I had to work the night shift.

"So tomorrow let's do dinner. How about I cook for you?" he said.

"That would be nice," I said.

He gave me a final kiss, opened my car door for me, and watched me get in. “Drive safe, and let me know when you’ve made it in.”

“I will.” I smiled.

He leaned in and gave me one more kiss. “I know what we did was reckless, and we can’t do that again. So until we figure out another birth control method, I’ll use condoms.”

“Another method? Like what?”

“The pill,” he suggested, shrugging his shoulders. “I mean, you feel so good, and the pill will give us freedom to, you know, get that full sensation, and it will help us with spontaneous moments, like today.”

“True. I’ll give it some thought.” I smiled, knowing damn well I’d be making a doctor’s appointment first thing the next morning. I was under Jayden’s spell, and if we got away with no protection this time, I’d be grateful and glad to get on the pill.

“Okay, babe. Good night.”

“Good night.” We kissed again, and then he shut my door.

He stood there until I pulled out of the parking lot. In my rearview mirror, I saw him head back into his building.

I think I’m in love, was my last thought before I dialed Sam.

Chapter Twenty

Samantha

I sat there, pushing my rice around with my fork, wondering if this would be our last meal together. I had it on the tip of my tongue to tell him, but I couldn't get it out.

"You know, we could have gone somewhere else," Ethan said, interrupting my thoughts. "I brought you here only because I figured you wanted to get out and try something different."

"I'm sorry, Ethan. The food is fine. I just have something heavy on my mind."

"Talk to me, babe. I mean, the past couple of days have been awkward. You are becoming distant. Did I do something wrong?"

"No, baby, no. You are perfect. It's me."

"I've heard the 'It's me, not you' speech before, Sam. I mean, what's really going on? Are you no longer interested? Did I come on too strong? If so, I told you I'm willing to slow it down."

"Listen, I'll tell you everything, okay? Let's just eat and go to my place, and I'll tell you the truth."

"Okay."

Thirty minutes later, we were in his car, headed to my place. My stomach was in knots. I felt like a kid who knew it was ass-whipping time after having misbehaved. I almost felt sick, like I would throw up. Was Ethan the one? Was this relationship serious enough to share this with him? That wasn't the question. The reality was that it was better to tell him before we got closer, before he said the three magic words.

We walked into my place, and I took his coat and hung it up. I offered him a seat on the sofa, and I went to change out of my dress and heels and into something more comfortable. Once I had changed, I went into the kitchen and popped open a

bottle of white wine, but then I took two shots of tequila before I joined him.

“So what is it, Sam? Talk to me.”

I swallowed hard. “Well, you know I was married once, to my ex, Charles, right?”

“Yes, and you told me you two had had a bad breakup.”

“Yes. It was because he cheated on me.”

“Yes, I remember you telling me that.”

Now shaking, I continued. “Well, what I didn’t tell you is ...” I paused. Everything stopped, and it felt like my ears were filled with cotton. All I could hear was my pounding heart. I was terrified to say what had to be said, but I struggled to find the courage to be honest.

“Sam, come on. Tell me.”

My eyes welled up, and I wiped them. I didn’t want him to feel sorry for me. “I didn’t tell you that he gave me herpes.” I put my head down and waited for the outburst, but it never came.

“Oh,” was all he said.

“I have never told a soul, and I’m telling you only because I like you, Ethan, and I can’t have sex with you, knowing I have this, and not tell you.”

He cleared his throat. “That was heavy, and I can see why you were terrified to tell me.”

“Yes, and I understand if you never want to see me again. It won’t offend me or anything, Ethan.”

“Well, that’s nice to know, but that’s not a deal breaker for me.”

I raised my head and looked at him. “It’s not?”

“No, and although it’s a lot to swallow, and I’ve never had a person tell me anything like this before, I’m not going to run. I like you, Sam, and I do know that this is a virus that is incurable, but I’m also educated enough to know that there are

precautionary measures we can take. We just have to be educated about it. Is this the reason you've been alone for so long? Why you don't or haven't dated?"

"I'm afraid it is. I didn't want to get close to anyone or start a relationship with anyone with this horrible defect."

"Let me ask you this. How do you feel? Are you taking care of yourself? I mean, what's it like?"

"Well, I'm fine. I mean, I feel fine. I haven't had an outbreak, as they call them, in over two years. My diet is right. I'm hardly ever sick, and I've only experienced an outbreak twice—when I found out I had it and then a couple of years ago. The crazy thing is my ex denies having it. He denies giving it to me."

"Was he tested?"

"Yes, and the doctor said he was clean, but I thought for sure he was scamming me."

"So did you ever cheat on him?"

Surprised that he would ask me this, I raised a brow. "No, never."

"Well, maybe you had it before you got married."

"I've never had a symptom."

"I don't know, but what I do know is I plan to get all the information I can about it. Don't worry about me, Sam." He kissed my forehead and pulled me close. "Thank you for being honest with me and giving me the option to make up my own mind about us. There are a lot of people out there who never would have said anything and would have just passed it along, so thank you."

"I like you so much, Ethan, and I want to be intimate with you, and it was killing me, so I had to tell you, even if it meant I'd lose you. I just never wanted anyone to know that about me. It's embarrassing."

"Well, I'm a grown man, and even if it had sent me running, I'm mature enough to keep your business to myself. No way would I have shared that with anyone."

I let out a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Ethan. You have no idea how much better I feel.”

“I can only imagine.” He kissed my head again and held me.

He spent the night with me, just holding me, and the next morning, he gave me a tender kiss good-bye. All was good until my phone calls and text messages went unanswered the next day. I frowned and figured he had had a change of heart. It was obvious he really couldn't live with my condition, and I wasn't even angry with him. It was nice while it lasted. I had to move on.

Chapter Twenty-one

Andrea

“Thank you, Lord,” I said aloud at Sunday’s service.

I sat in the front, where I normally sat, in the seat that was reserved for the head pastor’s wife. I rose to my feet and praised my God and asked Him to free me from the drama and confusion I had going on with Jeremiah, and to forgive me for the adulterous acts I had going on with Quentin.

He and I were close again, and we made love as often as we could. I knew I was wrong, but I was in love with him. I couldn’t resist him, and I prayed and asked God to have mercy on me. I knew God didn’t excuse sins, so there was no way for me to dare ask Him to consider how I felt, because, truthfully, that didn’t matter. Doing right by the Lord was the way we were supposed to live.

“Ain’t God all right?” my scandalous husband sang. “God is a good God.” The congregation shouted their amens, hallelujahs, and thank-yous.

I was in the spirit, and not under Jeremiah’s spell, so every time our eyes met, I rolled mine at him.

Jeremiah went on. “Please, please, please, everyone, take a seat. I am just overjoyed right now, and every time I look over at my beautiful wife, the spirit speaks to me, and I just have to hear her angelic voice. My first lady, my love, my heart, my everything, Mrs. Andrea Rochelle Young, please come up here and bless our congregation with a song.”

Everyone applauded.

I used to sing a lot at our church, but I hadn’t sung in a while. I gave Jeremiah a look.

“Come on, baby. I know I’ve put you on the spot, but you need to bless us with that beautiful voice of yours,” he said.

I headed over to the spare mic and took it from the stand. “Praised the Lord, church.” I said. Looking out at everyone, I felt horrible. I stood before all these members under the

leadership of my tainted husband, and all I wanted to do was warn everyone. “Pastor Young put me on the spot, and I’m going to get him later for that.” The children of Christ laughed. “But there is a song on my heart that I’d like to sing.” I was a huge Mary Mary fan, and “Yesterday” was one of my favorites. I loved Erica’s and Tina’s voices, but God had given me a set of chords that allowed me to smoke their song.

I opened my mouth to sing, and immediately the musicians caught on to what I was singing and came right in. I sang that song better than I’d ever sung it, and the members of the congregation were on their feet, praising and shouting by the time I was done. I placed the mic back on its stand and made my way back to my seat, and Jeremiah took over. He started twitching and doing head shakes. When he started to do his holy dance, the musicians started to play and let Pastor Young do his dance. They kept the music going until he stood in front of the podium, removed his glasses, and wiped his sweat with his handkerchief.

“Yes, yes, yes. I want to say thank you to my beautiful wife. Y’all heard that voice, right? The voice of an angel. This woman of God right there ...” He pointed to me. “She is truly a gift. That song, baby ...” He did a spin. “Praise Gawwwddd!” he yelled. “I thank God for our first lady, y’all.”

The church applauded.

“No, no, no. Stand up, baby,” he said to me, and I stood. “Ain’t she beautiful, y’all?” he said. The church applauded and agreed. Jeremiah had never gone that far. “I just have to tell the world how much I love her and how I know I’m blessed. He that findeth a wife findeth a good thang!” he yelled. “Beautiful, a beautiful voice, and the mother of my wonderful children. I’m so blessed.”

I sat without him telling me and kept my eyes on him. By the time he closed out and gave the benediction, I was about ready to vomit. He had put on this show like we were fine, in love, and great and happy, which was all a lie.

About ten minutes later, we stood at the door and greeted our members, as we usually did. When Franklin’s wife

approached, I got nervous.

“First Lady Young, how nice, and Pastor Young.” She smiled.

Jeremiah spoke up before me. “Greetings, Sister. We are well. Brother Franklin assured me that you two are just as well.”

“Yes, sir. We are great. And, First Lady Young, all is water under the bridge. I misjudged.” I could see the fear behind her fake smile. “You two have a good day.” She hurried off.

“Really, Jeremiah?” I said.

He smiled and waved at a couple of members as he spoke through his teeth. “Let it go, Ann. She is crazy. We are fine.”

I didn’t argue. I just continued to smile for the members. “So will you be home for dinner?” I murmured under my breath

“I will. As a matter of fact, a few of the deacons will be by, so cook enough, and then I may have to leave for a couple of hours.”

“For what? When are you going to spend time with your beautiful wife, Jeremiah, huh? The one God blessed you with?” I was just calling him on the performance he had just put on in service. I couldn’t care less if he had somewhere to creep off to. I was over him.

“Ann ...”

“Never mind.” I left it alone.

I was cool with it, because ten minutes after he left to meet Franklin, I headed out to meet Quentin. I wasn’t lonely anymore, so it didn’t matter.

Chapter Twenty-two

Samantha

When I opened my front door to head out to the restaurant, I was shocked to see Charles standing there. He was last person I expected to see, and I wondered why he was at my house.

“Charles, what are you doing here?”

With a sad expression on his face, he just looked at me.

“Charles, what’s wrong? What happened?”

“It’s my mom. She ... she ... she ...” He fell into me, almost knocking me down.

I struggled to help him inside. I managed to get him to the couch in the living room, and he fell over on his side and sobbed. He didn’t have to say it. I knew she had died. I sat on the edge of the coffee table and let him cry. I let a few tears fall, because although his mom and I hadn’t been really close, we had still talked and I had gone to see her often. Collette had been an active woman, so this news was a shock. I hadn’t known she was ill at all.

A few minutes later I moved from the coffee table and sat next to Charles on the couch, and his head ended up in my lap. I just rubbed his head to comfort him. Once he had relaxed a bit, I asked, “Charles, what happened?”

He sniffled and then sat up. He did a few wipes of his face, and it still took him a few moments to tell me. “She, um, um, had a stroke in her chair, and then she had a heart attack.” He sniffled more. Tears continued to roll down his face. I’d never seen my husband—I mean my ex-husband—cry so hard. “I tried calling her yesterday morning on my way to work, like I normally did, and I didn’t get an answer. I went on to work, not thinking anything of it, and at lunch, I texted her. She didn’t reply, and that was odd, because we had texted and talked often, you know, since Dad passed a couple of years ago.” He shook his head.

“I kept asking her to come stay with me, but she resisted,” he cried. He paused for a few moments. “She’d say, ‘Son, I am

a grown-ass woman, and I need my privacy. I can't be living with my grown son." He chuckled a little bit. "Anyway, I decided to go by her place after work. She was in her chair, cold as ice. She had been dead for over twenty hours, Sam, in her chair. I should have gone by earlier. I found my mother dead, Sam." He wept.

All I could do was comfort him. I knew it was hard, because Charles was a mama's boy. He and his mom had been super close. "Let me call the restaurant."

"No, no, no. I don't want to keep you from work."

"Charles, it's okay. You shouldn't be alone."

I got my phone and went to get him a stiff drink. While I poured his drink, I called my assistant manager, Patrice, and she said she was happy to fill in for me. I went back to the living room and handed Charles a double shot of Crown.

"I just can't swallow it. Daddy was sick. He had all kinds of things going on with him, and I have wondered how he lived as long as he did. But Mom was in good health. I mean, she took care of herself. She still walked with her neighbors and swam. I don't understand."

"Baby, don't try. Don't do that to yourself. We can never understand death, so don't try to."

"I know, Sam, but it hurts like a motherfucker. I mean, I didn't say good-bye. I did say, 'I love you,' the evening before, and Mom knew I loved her. I just wonder if she was in pain. Did she call out for me? Did she need me, and I wasn't there?" he cried.

My eyes welled up again. "Baby, listen," I said and took his glass. "That isn't your job, okay? You are going to worry yourself to death with those kinds of questions. God was with her." I got up to refill his glass.

"Can you go with me to do the arrangements? I can't do it by myself, Sam."

"Sure, sure, Charles. Whatever you need." I hated that he wasn't with the other woman, because now he depended on me to be by his side. I didn't hate Charles—not anymore—but

I didn't want to be the one who had to pretend to be his wife. I knew he was going to need me, but I had enough going on. My boyfriend had disappeared on me after pretending to be okay with my secret. I didn't need Charles all off in my space.

Damn!

Lord, I know you know best, but why right now, Lord? Why me?

"I'm going to run up and change, and then we can head out," I told him.

"Okay." He nodded.

I ran upstairs and put on a pair of jeans and a sweater. Since I'd been on my way to work when I found Charles on my doorstep, I had glammed up, so my makeup and hair were done. When I went back downstairs, he was lying back on the couch with one hand over his head.

"I'm ready," I announced.

He jumped a little and sat up. "Wow, Sammie. You are so beautiful. Your new look really fits you. It looks really nice on you," he said, as if he hadn't noticed me before I'd gone up to change.

"Thanks, Charles," I said and looked away.

"I didn't mean to make you feel awkward."

"I'm fine." I smiled. "We should go."

He stood. "Let me use the bathroom really quick."

I nodded. I stood near the front door, and a few moments later, we were headed to the funeral home. Charles wanted the best of everything, and I kept reeling him back in. His mother wouldn't have wanted him to spend so much on her funeral. She wasn't flashy; she was classy.

"Thank you, Sam," he said when we got back into the car.

"You're welcome."

"I mean, no way I could have done any of this without you."

“It’s no big deal, Charles. This is a difficult moment and a hard thing to go through alone.”

“Yes, it is,” he said.

I wondered where we were going next, because he wasn’t heading back to my house. “Where are we heading to now?”

“The house. You heard them. We have to bring Mom’s clothes and shoes to them tomorrow. You know I can’t do that alone.” He sighed.

I agreed. “Okay. I’ll go with you.” I rubbed the back of his hand, and he looked over at me and smiled. “What?”

“You were a great woman, Sam. I don’t want to talk about us, because I don’t want to piss you off, but I never broke any vows. I worked long and hard, yes, but I swear to you, on my Mom, that I never stepped out on you.”

My heart stopped, and my eyes welled up. I believed him. Charles loved his mom more than me, and he’d never say such strong words if he didn’t mean them.

“Charles ...” I looked at him.

“I didn’t, Sam. I didn’t give you herpes. I don’t understand for the life of me how I never contracted it, but I didn’t. I tried so hard to prove to you that I didn’t cheat, but you just ... you just ...”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“Sam, I loved you. Our marriage wasn’t perfect or fairy tale-like, but I was happy.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

He squeezed my hand, and we rode the rest of the way in silence. When we got to his mom’s house, we sat in the driveway for a while.

“If you’re not ready, I’ll go in alone. I know where everything is,” I told him.

He took a few cleansing breaths and turned off the engine. “I’m okay.”

He got out, and I grabbed his hand. We walked up to the door, and his hand shook so badly, he couldn't get the key in the keyhole. I did it for him and unlocked the door.

"Charles, baby. Really, we don't have to do this tonight. I'll come back with you tomorrow," I said as he stood frozen on the threshold, trying to will himself to enter his mother's home.

"Okay, okay." He sobbed.

I locked the door, and we went back to the car.

"I'll drive," I offered. He didn't resist.

A few minutes later we were back on the road. Silence enveloped the car, as we were both lost in thought.

"Can you stay with me tonight?" he asked out of the blue. I was fifteen minutes from home and hadn't expected to hear him ask me that.

Thinking it was not a good idea for him to be alone, I said. "Sure. What way do I go?"

As we went, he gave me a few instructions, telling me where to turn. When we finally pulled up to his home, my jaw dropped. I suddenly thought I needed to ask for more alimony.

"This is your house?" I asked.

"Yes," he said and opened the car door. I got out and followed him to the front door. It was a keyless entrance. He keyed in a code, and when we walked in, lights started to come on by themselves.

I looked around. His place was amazing.

"So," I said, "I think you're not paying me enough alimony, dear."

"What? If I kept the money from the alimony checks, I could work three days a week instead of six." He laughed. "Are you hungry?"

"A little."

“You wanna order something? You know I’m not a cook. I have every take-out place on speed dial.”

“What do you have? I can cook.”

“No. You need to relax. We’ve had quite a day. There is a great Italian place that delivers. Here is one of their menus.” He pulled an actual menu from one of the kitchen drawers, not a paper menu.

“Did you steal this menu?” I asked.

“No. I frequent the place, since, as you know, that last so-called relationship was a bust, so I asked for a real menu from all my favorite places.”

I looked over the menu and decided on the chicken marsala. Charles called in our order and then offered me a pair of new boxers and a tank to get comfortable in while we waited. I decided to take a shower first and went into the master bathroom. When I was naked and ready to get in the shower, I realized I had no idea how to turn it on. There were buttons everywhere. I looked around and grabbed a towel and called for Charles to come help me.

He got the shower going, and when he left the bathroom, he didn’t shut the door. He talked to me from his adjoining bedroom, so I guessed that was a sign for me not to shut the door myself. While I was enjoying the hot water running over my skin, he came back into the bathroom and opened a drawer, looking for something.

“Charles,” I yelled.

“Yeah?” he said, looking at me.

“I’m in the shower.”

“And I’ve seen, touched, and tasted all of you, so relax.” He smiled.

When I was done showering, I had to call for him and ask him to turn off the water. He reached past me to push some buttons while I tried to cover my breasts with my hands. He smiled, and I couldn’t help but smile back at him.

Once he had turned off the water, he pointed out the lotion on the counter, and since he didn't have any women's deodorant, he told me I could use his. I had shaved in the shower and it set my underarms on fire. I was freshly showered, my skin was silky from the Bistro Body Butter he gave me to use, and I had on a fresh new pair of cotton boxers and a fresh tank. He gave me a pair of socks for my feet, and I felt at home.

"Let me give you a quick tour, and then I'll shower," he announced when I was dressed.

He showed me around, and with the click of a couple of buttons, the fireplace came on and the sexy sounds of Joe began playing softly over the sound system.

"If the food comes before I'm out of the shower, the code for the alarm is zero-four-eleven-seventy-five. You have to disarm the alarm before opening the door," he told me.

"My birthday?"

"Yes." He smiled, and then he left me there.

I looked around. Everything had buttons. I went into the open kitchen, and my eyes lit up when I saw the wine cooler. I had plans to remodel my kitchen one day, and this was one of my must-haves. I grabbed a bottle of white, and the label spoke for itself. Top notch. My mouth watered. I looked around, and not far from the cooler was an electric wine bottle opener. I grabbed it and opened the bottle. It took me a few seconds to find the glasses. I poured a glass and went over to look at some of the photos Charles had on display.

He had some of relatives, a lot of pictures of his parents, and more than a couple of me. I picked up one of me and him and smiled. I remembered the day we had taken it.

The doorbell chimed suddenly, and I jumped. I put the picture back, set my glass down, and went to answer to the door. I remembered to key in the code on the alarm panel before I opened the door. I got the food and asked how much it was. The deliveryman said the bill had already been taken care of.

I took the packages into the kitchen and got a couple of plates from the cabinet. Charles came in a moment later and parked at the island while I fixed our plates.

“Wine?” I asked him.

“Yes, please.”

“Can you grab my glass from over there?” I gave a head nod. The glass was right by our photo.

“You remember when we took this?”

“I do.” I smiled. “It was the day after you graduated, with your master’s.”

“Yep. We went to that Japanese spot with my parents and had to sit on the floor. Dad complained the entire time ’bout his back, his knees.”

“Yes, and I remember Mom saying, ‘Larry, if you can’t walk out, we’ll roll you out.’” I laughed.

He was silent, and I realized I had brought up his mom.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He came over with my glass and he then sat down at the island. “It’s okay. I have to remember her. Hell, him too. I know this is going in the right order. Kids bury their parents, but it’s not easy.”

I placed his plate in front of him. “I know, Charles. It will get easier in time. Just like with Dad.”

“I know.”

I sat with him, and we chatted during dinner. Afterward, we cleared the dishes and cleaned everything together.

While we cleaned, I said, “Why are there so many gadgets? I’ve never been in a house that needs an instruction manual to live in.” I laughed.

“Well, I got this house just four months ago or so. It’s a smart home, and trust, I’m still learning things every day.” He refilled our wineglasses. “I haven’t even enjoyed the pool. It’s heated, but it’s still too chilly, in my opinion, to get in.”

“You have a pool?” I said, thinking Charles and I were definitely going to have to remain friends, if anything. I wanted to enjoy that pool. Having access to a private pool would definitely beat me hanging out with Josie at the hotel pool.

“Yes, and a hot tub.”

“Why did you wait until after we divorced to come up?” I teased.

He laughed. “I just made some good decisions, Sam, and things just started happening big for me. All along, I wished you were with me to enjoy it.”

I looked down. He lifted my head.

“Listen, things between us ... I don’t know. It’s like I lost my best friend, and I thank you for being here with me right now, because if you weren’t, I’d be in horrible shape,” he said.

“I’ll be here for you during this time, Charles.”

“What about after?”

“Charles,” I said, but he stopped me with a kiss.

I let down my guard. Charles was so gentle. He was the man I had originally fallen in love with and had planned to spend the rest of my life with.

I pulled away, grabbed my wine, and took a big gulp. He took my hand, and I followed him into his bedroom. What was wrong with him? He knew I had herpes.

“Charles, I can’t. I can’t risk this.”

“I was married to you for six years and was with you for two years before that. Not once have you given it to me. I have condoms, Sam. I will wear one. I’m not worried. I want be with you.”

He kissed me again and lifted my tank. Then his mouth was over my nipples. He knew me, he knew my body, and he knew what to do to make me feel good. He wasn’t afraid of me. Ethan had run at the news, but Charles knew and still wanted me.

I gave in and let him have me. I gave him head, and I wasn't mad at all about him not doing me. I was clear, and there was no outbreak going on, but I didn't want to chance it. I squealed when he pushed inside of me. He was the last man to be inside of me, and he felt as good now as he'd felt back then. I remembered his dick. I remembered his rhythm. I remember his techniques.

I came so many times that night that I lost count. I was so happy to have had pleasure again in my life. For a very long time, I had thought I'd never experience it again, and now I was resting on his chest, cradled in his strong arms.

I slept like a baby that night, and the next morning, I woke up thinking I had dreamt it all. But when I saw Charles sleeping, I knew it was real.

I had hated him for a moment, but now I was falling in love again.

Chapter Twenty-three

Josephina

I was introducing my girls to Jayden today, and I was terrified Ana was going to act up. She had been rolling her eyes at me all day and asking why it was so important for her to meet my new guy.

“Because he is special to me,” I answered for the tenth time as we stood in my bedroom. “And if he is going to be in my life, you girls need to meet him.”

“I don’t want to meet him.”

“Well, that’s not an option. I told him I’d bring both of my daughters, and like it or not, you’re one of my daughters, Ana.” I was growing really tired of this one, for real.

“Fine,” she huffed.

“And you are going to be respectful and act like a lady,” I scolded. She was too old to be pouting like a baby. She wanted to be grown when it was convenient, but then she’d behave like a small child.

“Whatever.”

“Ana, please. I’m trying to get dressed,” I said, raising my voice. “Go and do something and stop stressing me out. *Please!*”

“Fine. I’ll go e-mail my papa and tell him what you’ve been up to,” she whined like a baby, then stomped out.

“You do that. As if you haven’t already,” I yelled behind her.

I had been receiving e-mails from José in which he asked about Jay, but I had replied, “None of your business,” to all of them. He had called my phone several times, but I never answered. He’d made big man threats, as if he could do something to me or Jay from prison. I wasn’t worried. Ana was his baby girl, and Angelica was mine. Angelica talked to him, but she didn’t tell him anything, because she recognized my struggle, my pain, and my mission.

My mission was to love someone who wanted to live an honest life, and even though Ana chased after thugs and men like her father, Angelica had a head on her shoulders. And since the day before had been Angelica's sixteenth birthday, Jay and I had decided to have dinner with the girls at her favorite place, Dave & Buster's. It was located downtown, somewhere we barely ventured, and she hadn't been in a long time. She'd asked so many times to go back, and I'd always said we'd go soon, but we had never gone. She had gotten to a point where she stopped asking. As soon as Jayden asked where I thought the girls would like to go, I'd said, "D&B." He was excited and promised he'd teach me how to play pool.

"Are you girls ready?" I yelled.

Angelica rushed into the living room, all ready, but we had to give Queen Ana five minutes to come out of her bedroom.

"Are you ready?" I asked, annoyed, when she appeared. I knew she heard the aggravation in my voice.

"Yes, I'm ready." She clicked her tongue, and I wanted to slap her face.

We headed out, and when we got to Jayden's place, Ana said, "I'll stay in the car."

"You won't," I snarled. She was on my last nerve.

We all got out of the car and walked to the entrance. I smiled at Mel, the doorman.

"Good evening, Ms. Josie. Does Mr. Pierce know you're coming?"

I continued to smile. "He does."

"Let me just get a quick okay, and you and the lovely young ladies can go on up." He buzzed Jayden, and a few moments later, the girls and I were on the elevator.

"Wow, Mama. This building is fancy." Angelica said.

"Whatever. It's because you're a kid and ain't used to nothing nice," Ana muttered.

“And what are you used to, Ana? Where have you been that’s so nice that you can boast about?” I wanted to choke the life out of her. “And, yes, Angelica, it’s a nice building, and Jayden’s place is really nice. It has a great view of downtown.”

I smiled at Angelica, and she smiled back. When the elevator stopped, she grabbed my hand. She was my sweet baby.

When we got to Jayden’s unit, he opened the door before we rang the bell. “Ladies, come on in,” he said, smiling.

We walked in, and Angelica was impressed. She wanted to rush out on the terrace. Ana, however, frowned. Not unusual.

“Jayden, these are my girls,” I said, introducing them.

“Nice to meet you two.” He extended his hand. Angelica politely shook it, but Ana looked as if he had shit on his hand. I wished I had left her evil ass at home.

Angelica jumped in. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Jayden. Can I see what’s out there?” She pointed to the sliding glass doors. The vertical blinds were not completely shut, so she could see the city lights.

“Sure. Come on. It’s a bit chilly, but we’ll be okay.” He smiled at her.

Angelica turned to me. “Mom, can I?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

As soon as Jayden and Angelica were out of earshot, I addressed Ana. “Listen, I know you hate me. I know you are José’s number one fan, but please, Ana, just one drama-free night, okay?” I begged. “Can you at least act as if you like me, just once? Angelica’s birthday was yesterday, and we didn’t celebrate, because of work. At least for her, just be nice.”

She folded her evil arms and let out a breath, as if to say, “I can’t stand you, but I will behave this one time.”

“Thank you, Ana.”

I went to join Jayden and Angelica on the terrace. When Angelica learned he had a telescope, she wanted to see it. He

got it out, and she spent twenty minutes babbling on about how amazing it was and then asked us if she could come back. Jayden and I smiled at each other, and he answered before I did.

“Sure. Anytime you want.”

“Can we go now? I’m, like, starving,” Ana grumbled, standing in the terrace doorway.

Jayden smiled at me to assure me he wasn’t bothered by my annoying-ass preadult child. “Sure. Let me grab my jacket and keys,” he said. We all went back inside.

We piled into Jayden’s car and headed downtown. Jayden, Angelica, and I talked and laughed as we went, but Ana just looked out the window. I hated that she was such a dark child. I hated that she wasn’t happy. I hated that she didn’t try to be happy.

When Angelica saw the D&B sign, she didn’t hold in her excitement. “Mommy, no way!” she yelled.

I nodded and smiled. “Yes, birthday girl, this is all for you. We can stay as long as you want, and you can play every game in the building if you want.”

“Awesome,” she bellowed.

“Dang, bring it down!” Ana barked.

“Shut up, Ana. You’re always a drag,” Angelica snapped at her sister.

“Yes, Ana. If you don’t want to go in, just stay in the car with your funky attitude,” I said.

“Hey, you guys, it’s all good. Angelica is the big one-six, and this is for her, right?” Jayden said. I knew he was trying to be the peacemaker.

“That’s right,” I chimed. “So we are going to have a good time.”

“Even if no one else does, I know I am.” Angelica bounced in her seat.

She was such a joy, always sweet, always positive. I think I'd have given up on life if it wasn't for her. She had always been my cheerleader. I hoped and prayed that Ana would change. It seemed as if we exchanged pleasantries only when she was in pain or needed me for something.

Jayden parked, and Angelica was the first one out of the truck. The two of them walked ahead. I could tell she liked him.

"You don't have to go in if you don't want. There are a lot of other things you can do if you want. I'll give you money," I offered. There were restaurants all around, and if she wanted to sulk, she could do it alone.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Then why are you messing with your sister, Ana?"

"I was just joking, Mom."

"You were not."

"Okay. I wasn't. But if this makes Angelica happy, I'm good. I will even play a few games with her. She's a brat. She acts more like six than sixteen, but for Pete's sake, I'll be nice."

"Thank you. You don't have to like me or Jayden. I didn't expect you to, anyway, but let's just show your sister a good time. She is sixteen and a good kid and smart. She goes the distance to do good, so for her—"

"Damn, Mom. I said okay," she snapped.

I didn't want to argue, and slapping her would just take things to an avenue I didn't want to visit, so I let her tone, attitude, and manner go. "Fine."

I walked fast and caught up with Angelica and Jayden. Surprisingly, they were talking about astrology, something I knew absolutely nothing about, but Jayden was intelligent, so he matched wits with Angelica. That was something she needed, since she was so bright.

I had only a GED, but I had worked my way up from a housekeeper to a GM. I wasn't the brightest, but I got by. I

didn't know fancy words, but I could read enough to handle my business and my job.

We walked inside and were escorted to a table.

"Let's do this," Jayden said after we were seated and had taken off our jackets. He and Angelica headed off to play some games.

Eating was the last thing on Angelica's and Jayden's mind, but Ana acted as if she was dying of starvation. After she agreed to order whatever she wanted, I rushed off to join my baby and Jayden.

They played tons of games, and when Angelica finally said she was ready to eat, we made it back to our table. Our jackets were still there, but not Ana. Since she had eaten already, we didn't bother to look for her. Angelica ordered what she wanted, but Jayden and I just looked at each other. I knew that look we shared. We were used to eating at fancy restaurants or cooking for each other, so the menu had us both frowning because we were not used to eating so much junk food. We finally decided on burgers.

Fifteen minutes later our order arrived, and we dug in.

"After we're done, Angelica, are you cool with your mom and me playing a little pool?" Jayden asked. "I mean, I know this night is your night, but your mom has never played, and I wanted to show her how."

"I'm good." She nodded and chewed at the same time.

"Great," Jayden said. He smiled at me, and since we were done eating, we decided to take all the jackets over to the pool table area. Luckily, one table was available, and we snatched it up.

"You want a drink?" he offered.

"I thought you'd never ask. I'm so sorry about Ana. She is not a fan of mine."

"It's okay. I'm cool. I mean, she's never seen you with a man other than her dad, so it's going to take some getting used to."

“I’d share that sentiment if she was eight, but she’s eighteen, and she still behaves like a baby. Let me rephrase that. *When* she wants to. Other times, she’s roaring that she is grown and is not a kid. I just want her to get her grown ass on. I mean, a job, school, or something. She is on the road to nowhere.”

“No disrespect, Josie, and, baby, please don’t take this the wrong way, my love, but you’re part of the problem.”

Confused, I looked at him like he was a stranger. “I’m sorry? Come again.”

He let out a breath. “Ana only does what you allow her to do. You’re the adult, and if you let her continue to do nothing, she’ll do nothing.”

At first, I was offended, but the truth always hurt. “Let’s just play.” I sighed.

“Okay,” he said.

He racked the balls, and soon after, a waitress came and took our drink orders. We had a couple of drinks, and I paid attention to the lesson he gave me. We were having a great time, until we heard a commotion.

We looked to see what was going on, and I saw a security guy with Ana. She was cussing and fussing and yelling for him to release her. We quickly approached.

“Ana, what’s going on?” I asked.

She started speaking in Spanish to me, something she did when she wanted to lie her way out of something.

The guard spoke over her. “Ma’am, she was in one of the rides, on top of a guy. We asked them to take it elsewhere, and she continued on, as if no one had asked her to take her activities to another place.”

“What guy? Ana, what is he talking about?”

Again, she tried to give her version in Spanish, and I knew she was lying. I was so embarrassed. When I saw Angelica’s face, her look of sadness and disappointment, I made a decision.

I turned to the guard. “Do what you gotta do, sir. She’s not with me.” I rushed over to Angelica and didn’t watch the guard drag my eldest out the door.

“Ma, I’m ready to go,” Angelica cried.

I wrapped my arms around her. “Baby, it’s okay. Ana is gone. We don’t have to leave.”

“No, Mama. I want to leave.”

I looked at Jayden for help.

“Hey, why don’t you come over and play pool with your mom and me? You do know how to play pool, don’t you?”

She shook her head.

“Well, tonight is your night to learn. It will be fun,” he said.

I could tell Angelica was still upset, but she said okay. I mouthed the words *thank you* to Jay, and he winked and took Angelica by the hand. We went back to our table, and he waved over the server.

“Hey, listen, it’s my baby girl’s birthday, so we think she needs a special drink.” He looked at Angelica. “How do you take your shots? Dressed or undressed?” he joked.

“Huh? I don’t even know what that means.” Angelica shrugged.

Jayden feigned surprise. “What? Didn’t you turn twenty-six?”

“No. I’m only sixteen.”

“In that case, bring Princess Angelica a virgin piña colada,” he told the server. “Make sure it’s fancy. I mean birthday fancy. Umbrella, cherry, and all the works.”

Angelica beamed. I was so happy that she—well, we—didn’t let Ana ruin our evening. When my baby’s first virgin drink came, I excused myself, saying I was heading to the bathroom. What I really did was look around for Ana. I found her outside, sitting on the ground.

“I can’t believe you let them throw me out!” she cried.

“Well, you shouldn’t have been acting like an ass, Ana. Look, I can’t do this with you anymore. You are just angry, and about what, I can’t understand, but you can’t keep putting your hatred on Angelica. I can take it, but now it’s time for me to look out for Angelica.” I reached in my pocket and gave her five twenties. “Get a cab back to the hotel and gather your things. It’s time for you to go.”

“Just like that? You’re throwing your kid out on the streets?” she yelled at the top of her lungs, causing a scene. She was known for that. When people started to stop and stare, I had to finish it before security came out.

“You’re not a kid, Ana!” I yelled back. “You are a thorn in my side. You are a manipulator, a freeloader, and a hell-raiser. I don’t want you around my baby girl, so be gone by the time I get home.”

I walked away, and she called out to me, but I kept walking. It broke my heart to let my firstborn go, but it wasn’t working out. I made a pit stop at the bathroom, and when I got back to the table, Jayden and Angelica were laughing and joking.

When Angelica went to take her turn at the pool table, Jayden looked at me, leaned over, and asked, “How do you feel?”

“Huh?”

“Josie, I know you went outside. A mother can’t just not go and check on her young.”

“I did, and I let go.”

“How do you feel, baby?”

“Relieved, numb, scared. I feel a lot of things. This is the first step. Sticking to it is where I know I’m going to struggle.”

He pulled me close and kissed the side of my head. “It’s going to be all right.”

I agreed. “I know.”

“Mr. Jayden, your shot,” Angelica called.

He looked over at her. “It is? I think you pulled a fast one on me. Why are you winning?”

“I’m a quick study,” Angelica boasted. “And it’s basically geometry.” She was my star child, and she needed to be Ana free just as much as I did.

Jayden and Angelica shot a little more pool. Then we left and headed back to Jayden’s. Once we got there, he agreed to follow us home. I was afraid Ana would still be there and there would be more drama. I knew he would help me to be strong. I needed him to help me stick to my guns.

We got back to the hotel, and for the first time, Jayden went into my quarters. I hated that I had chosen this time to be the first time. My place was a mess. Hurricane Ana had made sure she left her mark. She had totally destroyed our place and had broken every breakable item we owned.

“Angelica, go to the front and tell Ashley to give you a key to a vacant room on the first floor, and you go there now.”

“But, Mama ...”

“Go now!” I yelled.

“Yes, ma’am,” she said and hurried out.

“Why?” I cried. “She ... she is ... she is ...” Jayden held me while I sobbed.

“Shhh. Come on, baby. Let’s get a room and tackle this tomorrow.”

“Why does she live to make me miserable?”

“Come on, Josie. Tomorrow, baby. We are not going to do this tonight. Not tonight. We are just going to focus on the smile on Angelica’s face. That is the only memory we’re going to hold on to for tonight.”

I didn’t want to let it go. I wanted to wallow, but what would be the point?

“Let me get Angelica some bedclothes,” I said. It was a Saturday night, and I thanked God there was no school the next day. I grabbed her some pajamas, her favorite bear, and

her toothbrush. I went to the front, found out the room she had gone to, and got myself and Jayden a room across the hall.

I tapped on Angelica's door, and she opened up for me.

"Hey, sweetie pie," I said as I step in the room and closed the door.

"Hey, Mom."

"I got your pj's and Oscar." Oscar was her bear.

"Thanks." She sniffled.

"Baby, don't cry."

"Why is Ana so angry? Why does she hate us so much? Why would she do that to our home?" she cried.

I held my baby and rocked her in my arms. "I don't know, baby. I just think she misses your papa so much, and she doesn't know how to handle him being away."

"Doesn't she get it? He's in prison. He misbehaved, so he had to be put away."

"She knows, but she has trouble dealing with it, Angelica. Deep down, she loves us, but she is just so angry."

"She doesn't love me."

"She does, Angelica."

"She doesn't. When you're away, she treats me really bad. She says that Papa is not my father, because I'm a wimp. And she hits me."

I was floored. "She hits you, Angelica? When? Where? When?" I said in a panic.

My baby lifted her shirt. She had bruises on her stomach and back.

"Ana did this to you?" I was close to hyperventilating.

I loved both my kids, but it was my duty to protect my young. I trembled. I couldn't stop shaking. I was going to kill that evil bitch. I wrapped my arms around Angelica and held on tight.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.

She just sobbed.

“Answer me,” I demanded.

“She said she’d kill you if I told. She said she wasn’t afraid to go to jail.”

I was dumbfounded. “Don’t worry. She can’t come back here, and she will never hurt you again. Don’t you worry about me. I got this. Ana can’t hurt either of us. Understand?”

Angelica nodded.

“Come on now. Change for bed.”

She put on her nightclothes, and I stayed and held her until she fell asleep. Then I went to the front and told Ashley and our night guard, Stan, that if they spotted Ana, to dial the cops.

When I went back to join Jayden, he was lying in bed, watching television. I updated him about all that Ana had done, and vowed that I was going to choke the life out of her the next time I saw her. After he let me rant and rave, he brought me to the logical thing to do, which was to press charges. He was a lawyer, so he knew the law.

The next day, I took pictures of my baby’s bruises and the scene Ana had left behind in my place and called the authorities. Now Ana Marie Ramirez had a warrant out for her arrest, and I couldn’t care less.

Chapter Twenty-four

Andrea

For some reason, I was feeling supergood. My day was going well, and I was relaxed. I had to be honest with myself, since I couldn't be honest with anyone else. It was the dick. I used to be on edge, nervous, and anxious, but now I was calm, and I was singing loud enough for my clients to hear me, something I never did.

My walk was different, my stride was in perfect sync with the tempo of my heart, and I was feeling like I could handle anything. Yes, anything other than Jeremiah walking in the front door. He hadn't stepped foot in my salon since the grand opening, and that was over two years ago. But here he was.

"Hey, you," I said, trying to sound casual. I had a client in my chair, and I didn't want to look like a deer in the headlights because my estranged husband had walked in.

"Hey, baby. Is this a bad time?"

I looked at my client. "Um, I have, like, five people waiting, baby. What is it?" I tried to appear calm, but my heart was racing. So many things ran through my mind. Did he know about me and Quentin? Did he know I was just as foul as him?

"Forgive me." He paused and studied my client's face. "Sister Chapman, right?" he asked. She was a member of our church, and to my complete surprise, Jeremiah knew her by name.

"Yes, Pass-sa," she sang out in her church drawl.

"Can you please excuse me and First Lady? I have something that I have to discuss with her, and it's urgent and can't wait."

"Go 'head. I ain't in no hurry," she replied.

I didn't know what urgent business Jeremiah had to discuss with me, but I knew it had to be super serious for him to show up.

“Mrs. Chapman,” I said, addressing her. We were at my salon, not in the sanctuary.

“Yes, baby?”

“Can you give me a few?”

“Gon’, chile. I’m good. That no-good son of mine gon’ show up late picking me up, anyway.”

I didn’t respond to her. I just headed toward my office. My nerves were on one hundred, because I thought the good pastor knew my secret.

“Why are you here in the middle of the day?” I spat as soon as he shut the door.

“We have a situation.”

“We have a what?” I asked, leaning my head in his direction.

“We have a situation, Ann. There are some false rumors going around, and some of the members are talking.”

My heart sank. How did the church know about me and my affair with Q? “Look, Jeremiah, I ... I—” I tried to say it, but he cut me off.

“Andrea, this will pass. Whatever you hear, or whatever someone says about me behaving poorly or doing the unthinkable, just know it’s not true.”

I blinked. I blinked again. “Come again?” I had to make sure he was putting the rumors and drama on himself. Hell, I had thought I was busted.

“I am not messing around with any members of the congregation ... male or female. There have been some rumors, and as my wife, you should know what’s going on.”

Relieved that it wasn’t my dirt, I went from one hundred to zero. I knew he had already begun a relationship with his right-hand man, so I then became a little cocky. “Going on, Jeremiah? No. Tell me what’s going on. I need to know what the congregation is saying.... I mean, whenever you do foul things, it causes side effects, Jeremiah. So what are the people

saying?” I thought he’d spill the rumors about him and Franklin, but that was not what he delivered.

He breathed deeply and rubbed his head.

“Spit it out. I have clients waiting,” I barked, pushing him.

“There are rumors of sexual misconduct,” he revealed in a whisper.

“What? Say it again, Pastor.”

“Listen, Ann, you know me, and these rumors are just what they are ... rumors. I am a man of God, and I would never conduct myself in such a way. I love you, and I love my kids, and you know that I’d never hurt you, right?”

I looked at him, blinked, and said, “If any of what they say is true, just tell me the truth. What am I up against?” I knew he was a two-timing, double-dipping bastard. I just wanted the truth.

“Ann, how could you say—” he began, but I stopped him.

“How could I what? Question the allegations, when you and I haven’t shared a bed in God knows how long? So why are you here?” I asked, and he said nothing. “I don’t know what to believe about you anymore, Jeremiah, and I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want you to have my back!” he yelled.

My eyes watered, because for a split second I saw the man I had fallen in love with.

He went on. “I want you to know that no matter how bad things are at home, I love you, and I’m not capable of doing what they are trying to accuse me of.”

I wanted to laugh in his face, but I told myself to handle things like a woman.

“Whatever it is you’re asking me to do for you right now, I’ll do. But know that I know that you are not who you say you are, Jeremiah. When you left my bed, you left me. I will only have your back because of our children, so whatever it is that you’re not telling me. God will fix it. This is not about you....

It's about us, our children, and our family, so fix it!" I demanded and exited my office. I didn't need to know the details, because I already knew how foul he was. I just had to figure out what my next move was going to be, and I didn't have time to deal with Jeremiah's woes.

I had other stuff to worry about, like how I was going to keep Quentin a secret and when was I going to have my next orgasm. Whatever the rumors were or whatever the church was whispering about most likely reflected some truth, because after what I had seen, I didn't put shit past Jeremiah. "Jesus, fix it," I mumbled as I headed back to my awaiting client. I hoped that the church threw his gay ass under the bus. At that point, I couldn't care less what happened to him or to my phony-ass sham of a marriage.

Chapter Twenty-five

Samantha

I hadn't seen my house or restaurant in two days. I got up after my first night with Charles and put on the same clothes I'd worn the day before, and we headed to his mother's house to choose an outfit for her home going. After we dropped it at the funeral home, we went to the grocery store to get something to prepare for dinner. Well, something for me to prepare for dinner, because Charles wasn't a cook.

It was close to five when we finally made it back to his place, and even though I insisted I needed a change of clothes, he persuaded me to stay. We sipped wine and talked. I thought I had learned more things about him in these few days than I had when we were married.

"I didn't know you were afraid of heights." I laughed.

He refilled my glass and tried to assure me that this wasn't the first time I'd heard that news.

"Sam, you've known forever. Remember when we were house hunting? You were dead set on a high-rise, and I was like, 'Never. No. Never. No way.'"

"I didn't know it was because of your fear of heights," I teased.

"Ummm, you did."

"Ummm, I didn't."

We laughed. We paused and looked at each other and then kissed. I pulled away. I was in love with the idea of us, but I wanted to make sure he wasn't simply reacting to his mother's death.

My tone changed. "Charles ..."

"Yes?" He smiled.

"What is this about? I mean, what are we doing? You are in a raw state right now with Mom passing. I mean, I don't want to get all confused and wrapped up, and then you throw me away when you are feeling better."

“Sam, honey. Baby, come here.” He pulled me closer. “Inside, I’m an emotional wreck, and Mom’s passing is killing me. But I have loved you since the moment we met. I didn’t want the divorce. I moved on because I was forced to move on. I didn’t want us to split. I was pissed about the STD, don’t get me wrong, but I loved you and trusted you enough to know that you were not out two-timing me.

“I went into research mode and sought out any and all information I could get about the virus and learned that a person could have the virus in their system for a very long time and not have any symptoms. I tried so hard to talk to you, to show you that it happened before me, but you were hell-bent on me being a cheater. I mean, you rushed out and filed for the divorce and kept shutting me down, when all I wanted to do was work it out with you.

“I don’t care what you have been diagnosed with Sam, or whether it’s terminal or incurable. I love you. I never wanted to leave you, and I never stopped loving you. I may never get over you.” His eyes welled up, and then mine did. “I am not using my mother’s death to get close to you. I want to be with you. I love you beyond whatever health issues you may have. Making love to you is all I want to do, and there are ways we can please each other. I know each and every time we are intimate, I’d put myself at risk, but I’ll risk it all for you.”

My heart thumped inside of my chest. Charles was the man I had fallen in love with. He was that man who had swept me off my feet, because I had honestly played hard to get. I had met him when I was in college and was working at my family’s restaurant, Sammie’s.

He came in, looking not dapper but ordinary, and asked, “What specials do you have? Because I’m on a budget.”

I smartly replied, “McDonald’s is a few blocks away. They have a value menu. However, we don’t.”

“Well, do you have any student discounts?” That time he smiled.

His smile was beautiful, so I said, “For you, we do.”

After that, he became a regular, and I grew fond of him really fast. I began to sneak in the kitchen and whip up his dish myself just to keep from charging him.

One day, out of the blue, he asked. "Can I take you out?"

"With what? You don't even pay here."

"No place fancy. Just to the park. We can take a walk and talk."

Inside, I was doing cartwheels. I had grown to like him. "Only if you can afford to get me a snow cone."

"I can." He smiled brightly at me.

One date, one kiss, and I was hooked. I was not a young girl. I had been around quite a bit, but never had I met anyone like Charles. I fell head over heels in love, and I was falling in love all over again now.

I turned to him. "Charles, I'm sorry for blaming it all on you. I was wrong, and I do miss you. I have been missing you, and if you want to be with me, I'm willing to try us again."

He held me tight. I didn't know if what I had said made him happy or sad, because he began to sob. I held on to him until he stopped crying.

"Baby, are you okay?" I asked.

"I am. I lost my mother, but I got you back. This is truly a bittersweet time for me. I'm so angry and hurt about losing her, but at this moment, I'm overjoyed to be with you. Forgive me for being like this. I know it's not manly."

"No, baby, you are perfect. This is a very tough time for you. Losing your mom, I expect you to cry. You have no idea how much I understand your position. I'm your lady, your wife, your mate, and we should have never parted. I was so focused on blaming and making you out to be the bad guy that I lost sight of the man I married. I never had any doubts until my outbreak. You were a good husband. Too many long hours working, but you were a good husband." I kissed his head.

"I love you, Sam."

“I love you too.” I smiled and stood up. “Now I should get dinner going, because my tank is empty.”

“Hook it up, baby,” he said, slapping my ass.

I was grateful I had him back in my life. There was no big secret I had to hide, and it was a huge relief.

I cooked dinner while he kept me company. We fed each other, and afterward, we cleaned the kitchen together again. He showed me how to work some of the gadgets in his home, like the fireplace, the stereo, and that complicated shower. I told him the tub would be my best friend, and he agreed, as long as I took my last shower with him tonight.

We had fun, and when we got into bed, he surprised me with a contraceptive called a dental dam. It was a thin latex film that you could put over your area and still receive oral sex. That was probably what he had disappeared to get when he’d said he had to run by the office.

“Charles, baby. It’s okay. I know I’m infected. You don’t have to.”

“But I want to, Sam. I want to please you too. This thing is horrible, baby, and I’m sorry you contracted it, but I don’t want it to ruin it for us. I want to marry you again, and I want to please you. Let me do that.”

I looked at him and digested it all. Charles loved me. He went above and beyond to express that, so I lay back and let him please me. He started at my lips, then my nipples, and worked his way to my center. Although the pleasure was not as intense as I remembered, it was enough to make me cum. Trembling, I panted and thanked him over and over again for pleasing my clit. It had been so long since I had had oral done on me.

I devoured his dick, sucking it like it would be my last time, and let him release inside of my mouth. I swallowed it all, and we both collapsed on the bed.

A few minutes later, he nudged me. “I’m not done with you yet.”

I was okay with what had already gone down, but I was up for more.

“Okay, baby. I’m ready.”

Ten minutes or so later, he was hard again, and I was still wet enough for him to slide in easily. We went at it for what seemed like hours, and by the time Charles passed out, my body was immobile. If a fire broke out, I’d burn, because I couldn’t move. He pulled me close, and we snuggled under the covers. It felt like old times, and I was glad to be with him. Happy to be back with the man of my dreams.

The following day, I had to go home. I needed to get clothes, and I had to check on my restaurant. Everyone knew I had a death in the family, so I got a lot of condolences when I walked in the restaurant. After surveying everything, I went into my office.

My assistant manager stuck her head in the door. “Hey, Sam.”

“Hey, Patrice. Thanks you so much for filling in. With Charles’s mom and the funeral arranging, I’ve been so busy.”

“I can imagine. I’m sorry about your loss.”

“Thank you.”

“So, Ethan has come by a couple of times for you. I finally told him that you had a death in your family and I wasn’t sure when you’d be back. The strange thing is he asked for your number.”

I cocked my head to the side. “What? That makes no sense.”

She shrugged. “Well, he did, and I told him I’d tell you to call him, but since you were dealing with family issues, I decided not to disturb you.”

“That’s fine,” I said. I was confused. I had texted and called him the entire day after he left my place, but he hadn’t answered.

“So when will you be back to work?” Patrice asked.

“Well, the service is Saturday, so I should be back on Sunday for sure. Will you guys be okay?”

“Of course, Sam. You need some time off. You work so much.”

“Well, at first I had nothing else, but now ...” I blushed.

“What?” she said, stepping into my office. She took a seat in one of the chairs. “Come on. Spill. It’s you and Charles, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I squealed. “I think we are going to be together again.”

“What about what’s-his-face? Ethan? I thought you guys were a hot item.”

“I thought so too. I mean, things were fine, but I confided something in him, and then, the next day, no him.”

“Well, it couldn’t have been that bad.”

“Well, he assured me it wasn’t, and then, the next day, he went ghost and I was ignored. The following day, I was heading out to come here, and Charles was on my doorstep, with the news of his mom. I’ve been with him ever since, with no calls or texts from Ethan.”

“For the record, he came here looking for you,” Patrice said.

“Well, I’m back with my husband now.”

“Wow. I’m happy for you, though. You look happy.”

I smiled brightly. “You know what, Patrice? I really am. I promise you I did not see this coming, but the very first night, being alone with him, we just reconnected.”

She stood. “Well, that is great. I gotta get back to work. I’ll see you soon, and good luck to you and Charles.”

“Thanks.”

After she left my office, I went through the deposits for the past couple of days that I had missed. Then I left the restaurant and headed to my house. When I got there, I was shocked to find Ethan sitting on my stoop.

I got out of my car, and he stood up from his spot on the stoop.

“Where have you been, Sam? I have been looking for you for three days.”

“Really?” I barked.

“Yes, really.”

I walked by him to open the door, and once I had it unlocked, I stepped inside. He walked in behind me. “After you just conveniently ignored me the day after I confided in you.”

“I didn’t ignore you, Sam. I lost my phone.”

I laughed in his face. “What kind of fool do you take me for?”

“I’m serious. I left here, went home to shower and change for work, and I couldn’t find my phone. I went without it the entire day, and the next day I finally went and got a new one. Since I didn’t have my numbers backed up, I lost everything. My calendar, pictures. Everything.”

It might have been true, but I didn’t believe him. And, on top of that, I was back with Charles. “Well, I didn’t know that was the case, so I apologize.”

“You know I wouldn’t have just left you like that. I’m not that type of guy,” he said, pulling me close.

I pulled away.

“What’s wrong, Sam? I’m not lying. I didn’t have your number. I even went by the restaurant, looking for you, a few times, and then I came here. Where were you? I heard someone died in your family.”

“It was my mother-in-law, well, my ex-husband’s mother. I have something to tell you. You may want to have a seat.”

“I’m fine standing,” he said sharply.

I felt horrible. He hadn’t dissed me because I’d told him about my virus. He’d merely lost his phone.

“Listen, first of all, I thought I scared you off. I ... I ... I ... thought what I told you was too much and that you had a change of heart.”

“Sam, just come out with it. What’s going on?”

“Charles and I ...” I swallowed hard. I was so scared to tell him. I liked Ethan, I really did, but Charles and I had rekindled the flame.

“You and Charles what, Sam?” he replied.

“We’ve decided to get back together,” I said in one breath.

His eyes bulged, and he looked at me like I had just told him he was dying. “You’re joking, right? In the course of *four days*, since I left your house the other morning, you have managed to work things out with your ex-husband?” His tone was harsh, and I deserved it.

“I didn’t plan for it. It just happened.”

“Did you forget that you had a boyfriend?”

“No. I thought my boyfriend was done with me.”

“Sam, I can’t believe what you’re telling me.”

“I know, Ethan, and I’m sorry. I can’t explain how things changed just that quickly, but I’m sorry. I honestly thought I’d never see you again after that.”

“Well, I’m here now, and I care about you, Sam. You can’t just throw me under the bus.”

“Please, Ethan, don’t make this hard for me. Some old feelings have resurfaced. I love him.”

“Wow,” he said, backing up. “Now you love him? The dude that cheated on you and gave you herpes?” he said sarcastically. I knew he was pissed, but that was a low blow.

“Well, I believe him now. I believe he didn’t.”

He shook his head. He paced a bit and stared at me. “Are you sure this is what you want? Because if I walk out that door, Sam, I’m not coming back.”

I wasn't sure, but then again I was. Hell, now that Ethan had explained why I hadn't heard from him, I was a little torn. "I can't say for sure, Ethan, but I can't be with both of you."

He let out a sigh and flopped down on the sofa. A cushion rose from the impact, and I caught sight of an object.

"What's that?" I said.

"What?"

"That." I pointed. "Between the cushions." He reached down and retrieved his phone.

"My phone. Thank God I found this. I need all my info out of it." He looked relieved.

"I'm glad you found it too. I had no idea it was there."

"It's cool." He stood. "So I guess this is it?"

"It is." I dropped my head.

He stepped close, lifted my chin, and then pulled me closer for a kiss. His kiss was so good, so sweet, and I didn't want him to let me go. But I was back with Charles, so kissing Ethan had to stop.

I allowed myself to indulge for a bit before I pulled away. "You should go."

He caressed my face. "Yeah, I should." He turned and started to walk away. He stopped at the door. "I do wish you two well, Sam. It was nice. I just hate that I fell in love with you." Then he walked out.

In love? Did he say, "In love"? I felt like shit. Ethan was the perfect boyfriend, and even after learning my secret, he still wanted to see me.

"Charles, you'd better be worth it," I said as I shut the door. If he messed up, I'd hate that I'd dumped Ethan for him.

Chapter Twenty-six

Andrea

I was dead asleep, until Jeremiah burst into my bedroom, roaring like a lion. “Ann, get your ass up!” he blared.

I jumped up, jolted out of my sleep. “Wha, wha, what?” I mumbled.

“What in the hell is this?” he yelled and threw a newspaper in my face. Yesterday and the day before, the newspaper’s headlines and front page had showcased him and me, but this morning it was me and Quentin. My heart started to race.

Our publicist had been working nonstop on our image because of all the whispers and rumors among the congregants at the church. We had agreed to interviews, television appearances, you name it, to prove our sham of a marriage was real. Jeremiah had assured me that this would blow over and that they were taking care of things. Now, the fact that I was in the headlines with Quentin was another fish to fry. Lately, there had been reporters at my salon door every day, with questions, trying to get answers. Quentin had shown up to rescue me, but one of his attempts had been captured by a camera, and I had been found out.

“I ... I ... I can explain,” I stuttered. I didn’t know what to say, but I was going to come up with something.

He snatched up the paper and read, “Bliss or bull? Pastor Jeremiah Young and his wife, Andrea Young, pretend to be the happy married couple, but are they? Whisked away by her lover, Quentin Hughes, Mrs. Young avoided a mob of reporters—”

“Listen, Quentin and I are ...” I couldn’t say lovers. “Friends, okay? We started hanging out, catching up, and he just happened to come down to check on me that day. That was a day when reporters stormed my salon and bombarded me with questions about the rumors, and I was outnumbered. I was grateful he was there, Jeremiah, to save me from that aggressive crowd of reporters, because you weren’t.”

“Don’t give me no bullshit,” he said. “If I find out your ass is sleeping with him, so help me God ... ,” he growled, trying to threaten me.

I refused to be bullied when he was the one in the hot seat. “So help you God what, Jeremiah? Don’t threaten me, Pastor Young, because you are the one who is living foul in this house.” It just jumped out of my mouth. I was trying to keep the peace, but I was exhausted from him, his lies, and the bullshit.

I went on. “If I’ve done anything, I’ve been here and stood by your lying-ass side to make you look good. You don’t love me. You don’t want me. You don’t even sleep next to me at night, so don’t come at me with this crap. I’m not afraid of you, and what I do is my business, like what you do is yours!” I snapped.

He backed up a few paces. “Okay, you want to test me, Mrs. Young? You want to see what I’m really capable of doing? You, my dear, underestimate the power I have in this city. You, sweetheart, are a nobody. And since you want to try me, want to make a fool out of me and make me look bad, I got something for you.” He walked out and slammed my door so hard, it sounded like a gun going off.

I got up and went for my phone. I called Quentin to tell him what was going on, and he told me to relax and not to panic. He said that Jeremiah was all talk and that I should not worry. I trusted him, so I relaxed.

I dressed for work and went in. When the busy day was done, I knew I should’ve gone straight home, but I let Quentin convince me to stop by his place. We hadn’t seen each other since the day he rescued me from the mob of reporters, and it was like a breath of fresh air to be with him.

“So you know we have to chill for a while, until this scandal with Jeremiah blows over,” I told him as we sat on his couch in the living room.

“Yeah, I know. I just miss you so much, Drea.”

“I miss you too, Q.” I rested in his arms. He gave me gentle kisses on my cheek.

“So, can I get a li'l bit?”

“Q, didn't I just say we have to lay low?”

“Yes, but you're here now. And since I won't be getting it for a while, I think I deserve a li'l bit.”

I smiled at him. I agreed because I wanted a “li'l bit” too. “Okay, but we have to get it in now, because I got to get home.”

I stood up, and he undressed me. Then I lay down on his living-room floor, and he opened my legs wide and dipped his head low. I felt the heat from his breath on my clit. I couldn't take the anticipation, so I lifted my bottom from the floor and put it in his face. He didn't make me wait any longer. He pleased me, he teased me, and when I came, he didn't release me.

“Q, baby, let go. It's too much, baby. Let go,” I begged, trying to get free.

He finally let me go and came up and went for my nipples. I wanted to reciprocate, but he plunged inside of me and started pumping like he had never felt my insides before.

“Awww, baby,” he moaned. “Drea.”

He panted and pumped like he was enjoying the pleasure my walls provided him. Then he pushed my legs back farther and went deeper, his sweat dripping down on my skin. The more he pumped, the wetter I became. It felt better with each stroke.

“Get it, baby. Do it, baby. That feels so good,” I moaned.

He picked up the pace and then pulled out. “Turn over, baby. Let me hit from the back.”

He got no argument from me. I flipped over, and he had me facedown and ass up. He banged and banged, pushed and pulled. I moaned louder, cheering him on with sexy bedroom talk. He pumped hard and fast until he came.

He swatted my ass cheek. “Drea, baby, that was the best, baby. I mean, I want this every night.”

“It was good, babe. I need some water. My mouth is dry.”

He headed to the kitchen, and I went down onto the floor. He came back and handed me a bottle of water. I propped myself up on an elbow and drank it down.

“Damn, Drea. You need another one?”

“Nah. I’m good.”

I handed him the empty bottle. I needed to get up and get dressed, but I was exhausted. He lay down on the floor with me.

“You know, I’ll be so glad when this is all over,” he mused.

“Me too,” I said. I rested my head on his extended arm.

“I have to ask you a question.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you want more kids?”

That caught me off guard. “I haven’t thought much about it, Q. I mean, initially when I got married, I thought I’d have more than two, but my marriage ended so fast that this idea went out the window.”

“Well, I wanted to know if you’d give me another chance at fatherhood.”

“I don’t know, Q. That’s a lot to think about.”

“Well, can you at least think about it? I want to be with you, Drea, and I do want to have children. If not children, at least one child.”

“Okay. I’ll think about it.” I sat up. “I have to head home.”

He looked sad. “I know,” he mumbled.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” I smiled.

“I just wish you could stay.”

“Me too, Quentin. But soon. Soon we will be together again.”

“And this time, I’m never letting you go.”

“You couldn’t if you tried. I’m not that young woman anymore. This time, I’d fight for you.” I kissed him.

“I’m all yours.” He stood and helped me up from the floor.

I dressed, grabbed my purse, jacket, and keys, and he walked me out. When we reached my car, he gave me a sweet, passionate kiss and then opened my car door.

I got in and smiled up at him. “I love you.”

He leaned in and gave me one more kiss. “I love you too, babe. Drive safe and let me know when you’re home.”

“I will.”

He shut my door, and I headed back to the house of horrors.

When I got in, of course, the kids were running around like crazy, and the kitchen was a mess. I knew they had made grilled cheese sandwiches and fries, because the evidence had been left out.

Jeremiah was nowhere to be found, so I headed upstairs to shower and change. After ordering my children to clean their rooms, bathe, and get ready for bed, I took a long shower and thought about Quentin and a baby.

It would be nice to give him a child. I was still young enough, so I thought, *What the hell? I’ll do it.* I got out of the shower, did my moisturizing routine, dressed in sweats and a tee, and went downstairs to clean my kitchen. When I finished, I went back upstairs with my glass of wine and checked on the kids. They were getting ready for bed. I thanked God that they hadn’t had any trouble in school, what with the scandal going on with me and Jeremiah.

I went into my bedroom, climbed in bed, and texted Q, and we messaged each other for about an hour before I finally said good night. A few minutes later I was fast asleep. Around 2:00 a.m., Jeremiah came into my room and shook me awake.

“What?” I asked. I hated to be woken out of my sleep.

“Here,” he said and tossed me a large manila envelope.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

I did, and I found pictures of me at Quentin’s. Pictures of our last exchange, when he opened the door and greeted me with a kiss and a tight hug. There was one of us kissing in the driveway when we said good-bye. I didn’t say anything for a few minutes. I just looked at the dozen or so photos he had handed me.

Finally, I spoke. “Now you’re following me?”

“Um, yes. This morning I put someone on you. And since you’re such a whore, it didn’t take long to get what I needed. So, in the morning, pack your bags and get the hell out of my house. I am filing for a divorce, and I’m keeping my children.” He headed for the door.

“Jeremiah, please, don’t do this to me. Not like this. I was wrong. I have no excuse for my behavior. No matter how bad things were, I didn’t have to step out, but I did, and I’m sorry. Please don’t throw me out of this house, and don’t threaten to take my kids. A divorce is exactly what we need. I won’t argue about that.” Tears rolled down my cheeks. I didn’t yell, and I didn’t cuss. I was too tired to fight. “We can draw up the papers, and I’ll sign, but you’re not taking my children, and I’m not leaving my home. You left me long before this. You stopped loving me long before it came to this.” I stuffed the pictures back into the envelope.

“Ann, you don’t call any shots around here, and if you don’t want this to get any uglier than what it has, I suggest you go. My kids will stay put. No judge is going to give our children to an adulterous woman.”

“No judge is going to give our children to a faggot-ass bastard,” I barked.

He rushed over and grabbed my neck. I fought back, but he pinned me down. He was foaming at the mouth, spitting words of warning that he’d kill me if I ever said that to him again. I thought I was going to die. I clawed and punched, and he

finally released me. He backed up, breathing like a man who had just run the one-hundred-yard dash.

“Get out of my house, you whore!” he growled.

My face was drenched with tears, and once I could catch my breath, I just sobbed. He backed out of my room and left me there alone. I didn’t want to call Quentin, but this time, I had no choice. Pastor Young had put his hands on me one too many times, and I thought that night would be my last night on God’s green earth.

I didn’t pack a bag, I just got my coat, purse, and keys and left.

The next day, Quentin was by my side when I went to pack up my clothes. I didn’t get to say good-bye to my kids, but I knew I’d have them soon. Pastor Young thought he had me with those photos, but I had something worse—a video of him banging another man in the ass.

I knew the judge would see things my way, and if not, the press would. Hurting me, I could handle, but my kids were a different story. I could live without any and everybody, but I could not live without my kids. I had been silent for too long. If exposing him for what he was, was the key to keeping my kids, so be it.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Josephina

“Are you sure you wanna do this?”

“I’m sure,” I said.

The officer handed me a pen, and I signed a restraining order against Ana. My child, my offspring, my firstborn, one of my babies. My hands trembled, but I signed my name on the line.

“This goes into effect immediately.”

“I understand,” I told the officer.

Jayden squeezed my thigh in a show of support.

“I ... I just want to make sure my daughter is safe. Like at school. What if Ana goes to her school?” I asked in a panic.

“This restraining order means she can’t get within a hundred feet of you or Angelica at school, at home, in a restaurant, at the local grocery store, or anywhere,” the officer explained.

I knew what the restraining order meant, but I also knew that a piece of paper didn’t guarantee that she would not show up. I didn’t want to be overprotective, but after finding out what had gone on, I was now keeping a careful watch on Angelica. I now stood outside and watched as Angelica walked across the parking lot to get to the hotel, just in case Ana was lurking there.

I was sure I’d kill Ana with my bare hands if I saw her. Putting her evil hands on Angelica had me in a rage, and I wanted to give her an old-school Puerto Rican ass whipping. I wanted to see her challenge me. I hated that I had allowed my baby girl to be hurt by her, and I was a minute away from riding the streets like a hood chick to find her.

“You ready?” Jayden asked.

“Yes. I want to make it back before Angelica gets out of school.”

“Okay.” He grabbed my hand, and we walked out. “They will find her, Josie. I know you want to put an ass whipping on her, but it won’t help.”

“It may not help, but I’d feel a hell of a lot better. She hurt my baby. Angelica is a special kid. She’d never hurt anything or anyone. She is sensitive, and she is loving. I can’t believe that Ana would do her harm. The bruises, Jayden, were horrific. And I wasn’t there to protect her. Do you know how bad I feel? I never thought in a million years that Ana would hurt her little sister. Every time I think of the abuse my baby endured, I just want to explode.”

Angelica was soft-spoken, funny, smart, and so loving. I imagined my baby being defenseless against her evil sister. The bruises on her stomach and back were horrible, and I was so mad at myself.

“Josie, it’s not your fault. No matter how much thought and anger you put into this, it won’t change the facts. We just have to find Ana and let the courts decide.”

“Fuck the courts, Jayden. The courts don’t feel like I feel. The courts have no idea the impact she’s had on Angelica. My baby didn’t have to suffer like that, and I’m so furious that I want to find her and ... and ... and ...,” I cried.

He wrapped his arms around me and held me when we reached the car. I was so angry.

“Come on, babe. Let’s go and get Angelica from school,” he urged.

“Okay.” I sniffled as I got in the car.

We drove straight to the school and parked. It was ten minutes before the bell, so I texted Angelica and told her we were out front in Jayden’s SUV, waiting for her.

“So, do you want to go to my place or hang at the hotel?” Jayden asked while we waited.

“Your place. I’ve been cleaning little by little. My housekeepers have been a big help, but the place is not back to normal yet.”

“Okay. How about we cook something special for Angelica?”

“That’s a great idea. What did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t we let Angelica decide?”

“That’s fine. Thank you, Jayden.”

“For?”

“Being great. I mean, you are a great man, and I’m lucky to have you.”

“Well, I love you, and I want to see you happy.”

“You what?” I asked, surprised.

“Huh?”

“You said you love me.” I smiled at him.

He looked at me and smiled back. “I love you,” he repeated.

“I love you too.”

He leaned in, and we kissed. I was happy with him and my baby, but I was sad about my eldest.

“There she is.” I pointed.

Jayden blew the horn, and I let down the window and waved. Angelica looked our way and headed over.

“Hey, Mom. Hey, Mr. Jayden,” Angelica said as she got in the SUV.

“Hey, baby. How was school?” I said.

“Good.”

“What’s going on, Princess Angelica? We were just talking about making you a special dinner tonight, but we need to know what you want.” Jayden put the truck in gear.

“Wow. For me?”

“Yes, for you,” I said. “Seat belt, baby.”

“I don’t know. I mean, I like lots of things.”

“Well, can you narrow it down to one thing?” Jayden asked.

“Um ... Beggars Pizza. Mom used to take us all the time.”

“We wanted to cook, Angelica,” I reminded her.

“I know, but I can’t think of a special dish. But I’d love some Beggars Pizza.”

“Beggars, it is,” Jayden declared. He was too easy. Angelica had him wrapped around her finger.

We went and stuffed ourselves and then ended up going back to the hotel instead of to Jayden’s place. We settled on a movie, and I rested on Jayden while Angelica rested on me. Halfway through the movie, we were interrupted by a loud bang.

Someone had thrown a brick through my kitchen window. Jayden rushed to another window to see if he could catch a glimpse of whoever had done this, but all he saw was a dark car speeding off.

“Stay here,” he ordered.

I nodded as I held Angelica. She was shaking like a leaf.

Jayden ran out of the apartment.

“It’s Ana, Mom, I know it’s her. She is going to kill us. She said if I told, she’d kill you,” Angelica cried.

“Listen to me. Ana isn’t going to hurt us, okay? Don’t worry. I’m going to protect you. Do you understand?”

“But, Mom, I’m so scared. She texted me and said she is coming back for us.”

“She did what? Where is your phone? Let me see.”

She dug in her pocket, pulled out her phone, and showed me her text messages. There were several threatening messages from Ana. When Jayden came back in, I showed him Ana’s texts.

“Call the cops. You two are coming home with me tonight. Until they can catch her, you two are going to stay at my place. Angelica, go and pack some clothes, sweetheart.”

She ran to her room.

When she was gone, he continued. “Baby, they vandalized your car. Your tires are flat, and there is a brick on the front seat. They spray painted foul words on the car, so we are going straight to my truck. Angelica doesn’t need to see that. She’s scared enough.”

“I’m so sorry, Jayden,” I cried. “I have you in the middle of my drama.”

He held me. “Shhh, baby. Don’t cry. I’m not going anywhere. I don’t scare that easily. I’m going to be by your side and protect you and Angelica. Now, dial the police so we can do a report, and then pack a bag.”

“I need to clean this mess,” I cried.

“No, Josie. Leave it, baby. The police need to see this.”

He pulled out his phone. “I have a friend, well, a few friends, on the force. I’m going to help you find her. She isn’t that smart or powerful.”

“Thank you,” I said and dialed the police.

They were there within ten minutes. Jayden took them out to my car, while I stayed inside with Angelica.

“Mom, she knows where Jayden lives too.”

“Yes, she does, but Jayden lives in a secure building, Angelica. You have to know the code to get through the gate, and there is twenty-four-hour security at the desk, remember?”

“So we’ll be safe there, right?” Her hands were still shaking, and I could see the fear in her eyes.

“We will, baby. Don’t worry.”

Finally, the police came back in, and I signed the report. They reminded me that there was a warrant out for Ana’s arrest, and said that as soon as they had her in custody, they’d notify me.

Jayden and I cut up a box to cover the broken window, and I called the security company the hotel used and told them we needed round-the-clock service. I knew it would cost the hotel, but I wanted my front desk agent to feel safe. Jayden loaded

our things in his SUV, and we sat out front with my clerk until the security guard arrived. He normally started at ten, but he came in an hour early.

“Thanks so much, Mike, for coming in early,” I said.

“No problem, Ms. Josie. I need the overtime, anyway.”

“Okay. You guys, dial nine-one-one if she shows up. And, Mike, do whatever it takes if she comes here,” I instructed.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Josie. Tonight is not the night to get crazy with me.” He smiled, clutching his Taser and nightstick. Mike was a cop but did security on the side, like most of the guys who worked there.

“Thanks again, Mike,” I said.

Jayden, Angelica, and I climbed in the SUV, and we headed to Jayden’s. Once we got there, I could see that Angelica was more relaxed. She showered, and we made her a pallet to sleep on in Jayden’s office.

“Tomorrow I’ll go and get her a twin bed, and we’ll put it in there,” Jayden told me after we said good night to Angelica and closed the office door.

“Jayden, you don’t have to do that. She’s fine.”

“I do, and you guys are not going back until Ana is arrested and in custody. It will be a stretch in terms of your commute, with that bit of distance between here and the hotel, but drastic times call for drastic measures.”

“I know.” He came over to the sofa, from the kitchen and handed me a glass of wine. “I just keep wondering where I went wrong with Ana.”

“Don’t blame yourself. People are who they are, regardless of the upbringing or status. Good guys turn bad, and bad guys turn good. It’s all up to chance. You did nothing wrong,” he assured me.

I believed him, but at the same time, I still blamed myself. I felt that there might have been something that I could have done differently. I loved Ana, and I had spoiled her just as much as I spoiled Angelica. Until she turned fifteen, we’d

been close. But then her dad had got locked up for the second time, and she had just started to rebel. She'd started cutting class, hanging out with the wrong crowd, and talking to me like I wasn't in charge. She'd stayed out late, past her curfew, and many times the cops had shown up at the hotel, bringing her home. She'd kept promising that she'd change, and then maybe she'd stay out of trouble for a week or two, but only because she wanted new clothes, money for an outing, or the latest gadget that all her friends had.

I had run out of patience long ago, but what could I do? You couldn't throw your child out into the streets. Then the state would be on you, all in your business. I had left the state behind, however, when I got a promotion and a free place to live. I had gladly got off assistance, and I was grateful I was able to afford a better life for my family.

Now my daughter was following in her father's footsteps and was on her way to prison. I hated how things had turned out, but she deserved to be put away after what she did to her sister. The terror in Angelica's eyes, her fear that her sister was going to kill us, hurt me to my soul. I didn't want the judge to go easy on Ana. I wanted her to get the max.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Andrea

I had been at Quentin's for two days, and I missed my kids. I talked to them on the phone, and they had a million questions. Jeremiah had labeled me the bad guy, and they thought I had run off with another man, leaving them behind. I had no idea he was having me followed, and he had some nerve, when he had church members whispering about him and his so-called secret life. Hell, I knew he was two-timing me with Franklin, and yet he had humiliated me publicly and had put me out of my home. It was just too much. I wanted to be as low down as he was, but I had my kids to consider. Fighting fire with fire would hurt them more than it would Jeremiah. I didn't want to go to the media with his affair. I didn't have it in me.

"That's not true, J.J. Mommy would never leave you. I love you too much," I told my son as I spoke to him on the phone now.

"But Dad says you found a new husband and you don't want our family anymore," my baby cried.

"Listen, Mommy is going to come and see you guys today, okay? Don't listen to Daddy. He is not telling you the truth, son, and you are too young to understand what's going on. But Mommy will be by today, okay? And we will talk."

"Okay. Do you still love us?"

"Of course I do."

"Do you still love my daddy?"

I paused, let out a deep breath, and lied to my son. "Yes, I love your daddy. Now, I have to go. I have a client in my chair, son, and the sooner I'm done working, the sooner I can come."

"Okay," he said. For some, reason kids sounded so damn sweet over the phone, even though you knew they were little snots sometimes.

I finished up and called Quentin to let him know where I was going.

“No, you’re not going alone. I’m going with you,” he insisted.

“No, Q. My kids are there, and I don’t want a scene in front of them.”

“Well, I’ll wait in the car.”

“Q, baby, he’s not going to try anything in front of the kids.”

“Are you sure, Drea? He seems like a loose cannon. I promise you I will go to jail if he puts his hands on you again.”

“He won’t. Don’t worry.”

He sighed. “Okay. You call me as soon as you’re on your way home.”

“I will. I don’t plan to stay long. I just want to talk to my kids and kiss their faces. Hopefully, Jeremiah won’t even be there.”

“Okay. Be careful, and I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

We got off the phone, and I headed to the house. The kids were so excited to see me. Kelly was trying to cook, but I took over. Once dinner was ready, we sat down at the kitchen table, and while they ate, I told them the truth.

“Listen, your dad and I are not going to be together anymore.”

“Why?” Lena asked.

“Because we just don’t get along anymore,” I answered.

“Plus, you have a boyfriend, and you’ve been creeping around on my daddy.” Kelly rolled her eyes.

“Kelly, you have no idea, little girl, so close your mouth and listen,” I scolded. If she were my biological kid, I would have slapped her across the mouth. “I do have a man in my life who loves me, guys, and I did a bad thing. I started hanging out

with him and spending time with him in secret, and I was wrong for that, so your dad is going to divorce me.”

“Can he give you one more chance to be good?” J.J. asked.

I smiled at him. “No, baby. It’s not that simple. And I have to deal with the consequences of what I did wrong. The Bible tells us not to commit adultery, but I did it, anyway, and the consequence is divorce. It’s no one’s fault but mine, and I’m sorry I let you guys down. I love you so much, and once the divorce is final, you guys will visit me sometimes and then visit Daddy sometimes.”

“But I don’t want you to go. I want you to stay right here with us. You can sleep in my room. I’ll ask Daddy to forgive you and take you back. I know he will,” Lena cried. It was breaking my heart to see my kids cry.

“I’m sorry, baby, but he won’t. We have to go our separate ways,” I said.

Kelly just sat there with her arms folded. Her eyes welled up, but she didn’t say anything.

“Come on now, guys. Finish your dinner, because I have to go soon,” I coaxed.

They all played around with their food. J.J. wanted me to stay and started crying his eyes out. I finally took him upstairs, calmed him down, and lay with him in his bed until he was asleep. Then I went in and kissed Lena good night. I was glad she let me leave without a lot of tears.

I went downstairs and let Kelly know I was leaving and she was standing in the living room next to the sectional. “Hey, Kel. I’m going to go now.”

She turned to me. “Mama Ann,” she called out.

“Yes, sweetie?”

“I’m sorry you have to leave. I know that Daddy was mean to you, and I also know he stayed in the guest room and not in your bedroom. I’ve heard you two argue, and I know. I know.” She put her head down and began to cry.

I rushed over to her. “What, Kel? Baby, what is it?”

“I know he beats you up.”

I wrapped my arms around her.

“Everybody thinks my dad is such a good man, and I know he can be good, but I’m old enough to know that this isn’t how a marriage should be. I heard him call you names and call you a fat ass behind your back. I’ve overheard him being mean to you, so I understand why you would want another man, because I wouldn’t like a boy that acts like my daddy.”

I held her tight. “I’m sorry you had witness all these things. I had no idea you were paying attention.”

“Lena and J.J. are just little brats. They don’t know nothing, but I know more than you think.”

“Well, what else do you know?”

“I can’t say.”

“Why?” I asked. This little girl was nosy.

“If I show you, will you promise me you won’t tell Dad?”

“I promise.”

“No, you have to *promise*, because I know he’d be super mad.”

“I promise I won’t tell him.”

“Come with me.”

I followed her down to his bedroom on the lower level. She looked out the window in the hallway to make sure Jeremiah wasn’t outside.

“Hurry. This way,” she said as she entered his room.

I followed her into the room.

She walked over to his dresser. “I found these one Sunday, when Daddy sent me in here to look for some cuff links before we went to church.” She opened his middle drawer and moved some of his T-shirts to the side. He had dirty magazines hidden there. The kicker was that they were filled with naked men, not women.

“When did you find these?”

“About four months ago. And I know that Daddy might like men, because I don’t think a man looks at naked men. That’s not normal, right?”

“Right.” I straightened his things and shut the drawer. “Who else have you told?”

“No one.”

“Come on. Let’s get out of here before your dad comes home.” We hurried out of the room and headed upstairs. I couldn’t believe that she knew.

“You can’t tell anyone, Kel, you understand? Your dad is a respected minister at a mega church,” I told her as we sat down on the sofa in the family room.

“I know, but that is all the more reason that people should know. He tells us every day about lying and being honest, and he scolds us, telling us that God sees all things and that He will throw us in the lake of fire for being bad. And he is bad, Mama Ann.”

“I know, Kelly, but he is still your father. Do you love your father?”

“Yes, but I hate that he is ... you know. And that he is a liar.” Big, glossy tears welled up in her eyes, and she sniffled.

“God sees him too, and all things will be revealed soon, so you don’t have to worry about anything. This news won’t come from you, Kelly. Your dad will be found out soon enough.”

Just then, Jeremiah walked in and saw us sitting there. “What did you say to my daughter?” he yelled when he saw her tears. “Kelly, don’t listen to her, sweetheart.”

“Dad, we were talking about this stupid boy at my school.”

“What? Did he try something? What’s his name? What did he do?” Jeremiah quizzed.

“He’s just a jerk, okay? And I want to talk to Mama Ann, please. You wouldn’t understand,” she protested.

“I’m sorry, Kel. I can take a hint. I’ll let you two do your girl talk thingy.” He headed toward his room but stopped. “And you will be leaving afterward, right?” he asked, looking at me.

“Trust, as soon as we are done,” I said coldly.

He proceeded to his room, and after she heard him close his door, Kelly gave me a hug. “I’m going to miss you, Mama Ann. I’m sorry things didn’t work out with you and Daddy.”

“Well, you can come visit me on my days with your sister and brother too.”

“Are you sure your new guy won’t mind?”

“Of course not. He knows I have three kids.” I winked at her.

“Oh, before I forget, my friend Myah is having her sweet sixteen in two weeks, so I’m going to need a dress and to have my hair done nice and pretty. I know you said I had to wait until I was sixteen, but all the other girls are going to be wearing makeup, so can I just this once?” she asked all in one breath.

“Just this once. Text me tomorrow so I can remember to put you on my books. And we can’t dress shop until after school on Monday, because you know Saturday is my busiest day.”

“I know.” She smiled and walked me to the door.

“Take care of them for me. You know your dad stays busy with the church.”

“I know. I got this.”

I gave her a hug and a kiss. “Be good.”

“I will,” she said.

I hurried to my car, headed for home, and called Quentin as soon as I got in.

“No way. He doesn’t have dirty magazines in your house,” he said after I told him about what Kelly had shown me.

“He does, and Kelly knows.”

“Wow. How is she taking it?”

“Well, I guess okay. She’s known for a little while now.”

“Well, soon everyone will know.”

“I know, Quentin, but I’m having second thoughts about outing him. This is going to affect our children. I don’t know if me going public with this is a good thing.”

“He doesn’t have trouble telling the world that you’re an adulterer. He is broadcasting that like you’re a harlot, when his own shit stinks.”

“I know, Q, but playing dirty is Jeremiah’s style, not mine, and I don’t want to do that to my kids.”

“So you’re just going to take the blame for your failed marriage and walk away the pathetic loser, which is what he wants everybody to think you are?”

“No, I’ll walk away with you, my kids, and my self-respect. My affair with you was wrong. I mean it *is* wrong. I’m woman enough to say, ‘Yes, I had an affair’ and ‘Yes, I’m in love with another man.’ They can think whatever they want to think about me, Q, as long as you love me and my babies love me. That’s all I want. Jeremiah is no longer a thorn in my side. I have a great career and business. I have a few dollars stacked in the bank, and my new man has me living in a huge five-bedroom home, which I’m loving more each day. I’m happier now than I’ve been in a long time. So I win. Being done with him makes me a winner.”

“With that said, I’m proud of you, baby. Whatever you decide, I got your back.”

“Thanks, Q. It’s only a matter of time before the divorce is final and we are free to get married, have babies, and live like we should have been living from day one.”

“Did you say, ‘Have babies’?”

“Yes, I did.”

“If you were here, I’d kiss your lips. That is music to my ears, Drea. I’m so happy to hear you say that.”

“We deserve it all, and if you want to be a dad, I want to help you out on that.”

“Hurry home, baby.”

“I’m on my way.”

Chapter Twenty-nine

Samantha

After the burial, we headed to the banquet hall for the dinner. Charles was quiet while he drove.

“The service was nice,” I said.

He looked out the window. “Yeah,” he said dryly.

“And what a surprise to learn that your cousin Quentin is with my hairdresser. I had no idea. Especially with that scandal going on with her and her husband. I’m going to have to call her and catch up.”

He said nothing.

I rubbed the back of his hand. “Baby?”

“Please, Sammie, baby, please. I don’t want to talk right now, baby. I just want to ride in peace, please.”

He didn’t yell, and he didn’t snap, so I just leaned my head on his shoulder and held his hand. He rested his head on my head, and his teardrops fell onto my breasts. He sniffled, and I didn’t say a word. I just let him have his moment in peace.

When we arrived at the banquet hall, he let out a few deep breaths, and then we got out of the car.

“Hold on, baby,” I said. He turned to me. “Let me check you out.” I wiped his face and straightened his tie and then smoothed his jacket. “There. All set, handsome.”

“Thank you, and I love you. I wasn’t trying to be mean before.”

“I know, baby. It’s fine. Come on.” I grabbed his hand, and we went inside.

We caught up with his family. Most of them were shocked to see we were back together. A few minutes later I spotted Andrea at a table across the room.

“Charles, baby, I’m going to go over and speak to Andrea. I’ll be back.” He nodded, and I headed her way. “Andrea,” I called out when I was a few yards from her.

She looked up. “Sam. Hey, lady. I wanted to speak earlier, but you were with Charles. So how are you?”

I took a seat next to her. “I’m good. Need an appointment. You see my taper is almost a mini fro.” I laughed.

“Yes, you need to visit with the clippers. But your hair still looks good. You’re maintaining it well.”

“Yes. I’m learning. The first week was hell, but I’m getting better.”

“Yes, you are.”

“I had no idea you were with Q.”

“Well, you must have been living under a rock, because we made the paper,” she informed me.

“When, girl?”

“Last week.”

“Well, I haven’t read the paper or watched much television since Mom passed,” I told her.

“I see you’re hugged up with Charles. What happened to what’s-his-face?”

“Ethan,” I reminded her.

“Yes, Ethan. I thought you two were hitting it off.”

“That is a long story. Let’s just say in the blink of an eye, my life changed. My husband and I are getting back together.”

“I thought you two were divorced.”

“Yes, we did divorce, but we are going to remarry. We call it renewing our vows. And this time, it is forever.”

“Wow. Look at you glowing.”

“So, what’s up with Q? I know there is some crazy mess about your husband going around, but how in the hell are you with Quentin? I was shocked to hear he divorced that stuck-up heifer he was married to, but I was even more shocked to see you on his arm.”

“Well, Quentin was my first love, my high school sweetheart, but in college we went through some changes, broke up, and both of us married the wrong person. He tracked me down, showed up at my shop one night to apologize to me for the foul way we ended, and then I foolishly started hanging out with him, knowing that would lead to disaster. My marriage was in the toilet, but I pretended to be in bliss. Quentin and I are just made for each other, and it didn’t take long for us to rekindle our romance. And now here I am. About to be divorced and to share custody of my kids with Jeremiah. As bad as it sounds, I’m happier now.”

“Well, love has a way of doing that. If you’d asked me the night we met if I would ever go back to my ex, I would have probably slapped your face,” I said.

We both laughed.

I went on. “But the first night that we were together, it felt natural. It felt right. And from that night on, we’ve been back together.”

“I’m happy for you. How’s Josie? I mean, I never got an update on the date.”

“I haven’t seen or talked to her this week, but the date went well, and they are happy, last I heard.”

“We should get together, have a girls’ night,” she suggested.

“We should. How about next Thursday night? I’ll text Josie.”

“That’s cool. Let me put it on my calendar.”

Andrea and I continued to talk until the guys came over. We told them how we met and knew each other, and we made plans to get together that week for dinner. Then Charles and I excused ourselves to greet our guests.

My feet were aching by the time we got in that night.

“I’m going to go shower,” Charles said as we stood in the foyer. He leaned in and gave me a peck.

I headed to the master bedroom, removed my dress, and then walked into the kitchen in my robe to get a glass of wine.

There had been no alcoholic beverages at the dinner, and I needed my fix. I had just finished pouring the wine when the doorbell rang, and I jumped.

“Hold on,” I yelled and headed toward the door. I looked through the peephole and saw a young lady. I opened the door.

“Hi. Can I help you?” I said.

“Um, who are you?”

“Who are *you*?”

“I’m Shana.”

Charles’s teenage ex. What in the hell did she want?

“I’m Sam, Charles’s wife.”

“You’re Sam, Charles’s *ex*. Why are you here?”

“Why are *you* here?”

“I came to speak to Charles,” she said.

I folded my arms across my chest. “About?”

“None of your business. Is he here?”

“Yes. He is in the shower. I’ll let him know you dropped by.” I went to close the door, but she stopped me.

“Did he tell you about me?” she asked.

“No. What’s to tell?”

“Well, we’ve been together for only two years.”

“You *were* together. I heard things didn’t work out.”

“Well, there are reasons for that.”

“You don’t say.”

“Look, I’ll come back at another time. I need to talk to him.” She stormed off, and I shut the door.

I went back to my glass and took two gulps of the wine. “Bitch,” I mumbled.

A few moments later, Charles walked into the kitchen. “Did I hear the door?”

“You did,” I said.

“Who was it?”

“Take a wild guess.”

“My neighbor? Did he want to borrow something again? Boy, I wonder how he can afford to even live on our block. He borrows everything,” he said. He went for a glass and hit the ice dispenser on the fridge.

“No. It was Shana.”

He froze. “Shana? What did she want?”

“I don’t know. I asked, but she informed me that it was none of my business.”

He headed for the liquor cart, chose something dark, and poured it over the ice in his glass.

“Well, I have no idea why she came by. Normally, she’d call first,” he said.

“Well, tonight she thought it was cool to just show up.”

“Why didn’t you let her in?”

“Are you kidding me? What if I had invited her in and you didn’t want to see her or something?”

“True, but now I’m just curious. I wonder what she wanted.”

“If you’re so concerned, why don’t you call her?”

He took a sip of his drink. “Yeah, I’ll call her.” He went into the bedroom for his phone, or so I thought. He didn’t come back right away.

“Oh no, you won’t talk to her in private,” I said aloud to myself and walked into the bedroom.

Charles was pacing, with the phone to his ear. “Yeah, of course, you know this is Charles. You stopped by. I’d like to know why. Give me a call back.” He ended the call. “Her voice mail.”

I rolled my eyes. “I figured that much.” I walked back into the kitchen. I needed a refill.

He followed me. “Baby, why do you have this attitude with me? I didn’t do anything.”

“I know, Charles, but the teenage tramp dropping by here out of the blue is a red flag for me.”

“How? Why?”

“I don’t know, babe. I mean, we just got back together, and I don’t want any drama. And my gut is screaming *drama*.”

“Come here, babe,” he said. He pulled me into his arms. “You have absolutely nothing to worry about. She and I have been over for months. Why she decided to show up out of the blue is a mystery, but I’m not worried, and you shouldn’t worry.”

“Are you sure, Charles? I mean, I’m not in the mood to deal with young, hot ex-girlfriends, and I’m not up for any love triangles or stalking. I mean, none of that.”

He laughed. “Baby, relax. You are making a big deal out of nothing. She may not even call me back. I’m sure it’s nothing.” He kissed me and smiled. “Are you cool?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m cool.”

“Good. Now, I’m going to go up to my office. I have to check some e-mails and see what I need to get back to work on Monday.”

“Are you sure you’re ready to go back so soon?”

“Yeah. I mean, Mom is resting, so sitting around makes no sense.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll be going in tomorrow. Is that okay?”

“Sure, babe. Sure. And we need to talk.” He moved to make another drink.

“About?”

“Our living arrangement. I don’t want you to go home. I want you to stay here.”

“Really? Don’t you think this is a little sudden?” I asked.

“Sammie, this is me. We were married for six years. We’ve dated. We’ve lived together. We’ve made love a ton of times. I’m serious about getting our lives back on track together.”

I heard him and understood. And in a way, he was right. I had agreed to come back, and it was not like we weren’t married before. “Okay. I’ll talk with a Realtor this week, and I’ll start making arrangements to bring my things over.”

“What things? All you need is clothes. There is an entire empty side in the master walk-in for your things. That closet is larger than our smallest room in the house.”

“Oh yeah? I need to check that out. I have things I want to keep. I mean, everything is beautifully decorated here, but there are a few things I want to hold on to.”

“Come on. Follow me.”

I walked behind him as he gave me another tour of the house.

“Besides my office, there is another master for guests, two spare rooms for our kids, with a Jack and Jill bathroom, and this space down the hall.” He pointed out each room as we went. Finally, we stopped in the doorway of an upstairs room. “This could be your office slash craft room slash whatever. So I say we keep your bedroom furniture for the guest room, and everything else, we can sell.”

He was right. His place was completely furnished and straight out of *Homes & Gardens* magazine. The outdoor living area had furniture, a fire pit, a pool, and a hot tub. I really had nothing I needed to keep.

“I hate to say it, but you’re right.” I smiled. “Now I have a question for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“When are you going to put a ring on it?”

“Wait, I already put a ring on it. Where are your rings?”

“I have them, but that was then. This is post-six figures. I need you to upgrade me if you wanna be with me.” I snapped my fingers in the air.

“Okay. I can do that. You pick a date, and I’ll be there on time.”

Ready and willing, I said, “How about Monday?”

“As in the day after tomorrow?”

“Yep. If you’re serious?” I said as a challenge.

“I’ll pick you up at one.”

“I’ll be ready,” I squealed. I leaped into his arms and kissed him. “We’re getting married. We’re getting married,” I sang.

“Yes, we are.”

I gave him a final kiss and headed back downstairs. I figured I’d wait until after we tied the knot before I spread the word. Most of my family and close friends were going to think I was insane after all the bashing of Charles I had done, calling him scum, a dog, and a whore. Everyone who knew me knew that Charles and I had ended on a sour note. They were going to flip.

I went into the kitchen, grabbed my glass, then headed into the living room and settled on the sofa to watch a little television. At some point, I dozed off. A couple of hours later, Charles woke me with a kiss.

“Come on, Sam. Let’s go to bed, baby.”

I allowed him to help me up and guide me to the bedroom. I climbed in bed, and I slept like a baby.

Chapter Thirty

Andrea

I sat with my lawyer and nodded at everything Jeremiah's slick lawyer said, until he mentioned full custody of my children.

"No, we didn't agree to that. He can keep that house, all those cars, and the vacation home. I keep my share of our investments, and I want joint custody of my kids," I asserted.

Jeremiah whispered something in his attorney's ear.

"Well, due to the circumstances and why we are here today, Jeremiah feels that he will be a better influence for the children," his attorney remarked, clearly repeating what his client had told him.

I looked at my soon-to-be ex-husband square in the eye. My eyes burned. "You know the truth about what went on behind closed doors in our house. You do *not* want to do this to me after everything else you've done. All that material crap, I'm willing to give you, because I know my kids need a nice place to stay when they are with you. Don't do this, Jeremiah. I don't want to go to court. I want to get this over with so I can move on, but there will be hell to pay if you continue with this pursuit to take my children. Don't do this to them. I'm a good mother, and you know it." My voice broke at the end.

I was stronger now, but when it came to my kids, I'd go to mush. Losing them would drive me to a place Jeremiah did not want to see.

Jeremiah whispered something else, and my lawyer and I waited for his next offer.

"Full custody with visitation," his attorney declared.

I wanted to jump across the table. "No!" I shouted. "Hell no!"

"My client won't accept anything less than joint custody," my attorney countered. "We don't want to go before a judge with this. Let's just agree to joint custody and proceed with the

divorce. My client is being more than generous. She is not even asking for spousal support.”

“Spousal support?” Jeremiah chuckled. “I wish this whore would try to sue me for alimony,” he said, showing his true colors.

“And your client is a man of God,” I spat at his attorney. “As I said, no. I’m not giving up custody of my kids. I’m not a whore, and I *am* a good mother.” My gaze went to Jeremiah. “If you had been taking care of your wife instead of running behind—” I was about say the word *dick*, but I caught myself. His eyes narrowed at me, and I dropped that subject. “I’m a good mother, and I’m not giving up my children.”

“Well, if this is your decision,” his attorney said, “this will have to go before a judge. Now, be careful, Mrs. Young. You did have an affair. The judge isn’t going to look too kindly on that behavior.”

I twisted my neck. If I had to hand over the video clip of Jeremiah and Franklin to keep my kids, that was what I had to do. I had to fight fire with fire. “I’ll take my chances.” I stood.

“You may want to think about what you’re doing, Ann. You know what I’m capable of,” Jeremiah said in a low voice, threatening me.

I walked around the table to stand in his face. “I do know what you’re capable of. Too bad for you, you have absolutely no idea what *I’m* capable of. Try me, Satan.” I headed for the door. “Good day, gentlemen,” I said just before leaving the room.

I headed out of the law office and hurried to my car. I had to do it. I didn’t want to, but I had to. The video clip was only three minutes or less, but it was my weapon.

I got in the car and called Q to bring him up to date on what was going on with Jeremiah. I told him that if Jeremiah and I went before a judge and the judge didn’t give us joint custody, I’d have to submit my evidence. He agreed that I should.

He asked me to meet him at the house, but I told him I needed to go by my shop to take care of some things. He

insisted that I come over, but business had to come first. After a lot of going back and forth, he let me go.

I headed to the salon so I could check my inventory. I had to see if I needed to place an order. I was booked solid for the rest of the week, and I didn't want to come up short on products. I was in the back with my order list when I heard someone knocking. I wondered who thought we'd be open on a Monday.

I rushed over to the door and smiled when I saw it was Q. I unlocked the door and let him in. "Baby, what are you doing here?"

"I had to see you, babe." He kissed me.

"Well, I'm working in the back, getting my order list together. Come on back." I turned to walk away, but he grabbed me.

"Hold on, baby. I wanted you to come home because I got something for you."

I put my hand on my hip and smiled. "What do you have for me, Mr. Hughes?"

He pulled a red velvet box from his pocket. "This."

"Is that what I think it is?"

He opened it. "If this is what you were thinking, then it is."

"It's beautiful."

"Just like you." He took the ring out of the box and slid it on my finger. "I was wondering if you would keep this safe for me for a little while."

"I can, but why can't you put it in a drawer or a safe or a jewelry box?"

"Because if I did that, no one would know that we're engaged."

"Is this your way of asking me to marry you?"

"Yeah. Um, will you?"

“Come here.” He stepped forward, and I kissed him. “Of course I will.”

“I love you.” He kissed me.

“Now, you know I’m not telling anyone about your wack-ass proposal, right?”

“Hey, I was nervous and was trying to be clever and superromantic. You know I’m not good with stuff like this. All I know is I love you, and I didn’t want to wait until tonight to give you this ring.”

“Well, I’m glad you showed up with this gorgeous ring, and as corny as that proposal was, I’m glad to have gotten it.” I held up my hand and admired my ring.

“Yeah, that was a bit lame, wasn’t it?”

“It was, but I loved it. Thank you, baby. My ring is gorgeous.”

“You like it?”

“I love it.”

“Good. Charles and I met up at the jewelers, and he got Sam a beautiful ring too.”

“What? He’s going to propose today too?” I asked.

“No. They are getting married today. They are at the courthouse right now.”

“Get the hell out of here. She didn’t tell me on Saturday.”

“Well, I guess they decided later. All I know is he got the ring and said he’d size it later. I wished him luck.”

“Come to think of it, how did you know my ring size? I mean, this is a perfect fit.”

“Your wedding rings were on the dresser, so I took them with me. Fortunately for me, the ring I picked was the right size, so, boom, you got your ring, baby.”

“Maybe I should give the rings back to him,” I said.

“No. Save them for your daughter. I’m sure she may want her mother’s rings, or your son may want to get engaged to his

future wife and seal it with those rings.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So, how much longer do you have here? I want to go celebrate, and I want to ... you know.”

I locked the door. “We can celebrate here. I mean, we do have champagne, and I can put the washer on the spin cycle.”

“I just got an erection,” he said.

“Come on. Bring your erection into my office. We can start on my desk.”

“Let’s go.”

Chapter Thirty-one

Samantha

I had on my champagne pantsuit, and I had managed to slam-dunk my hair and makeup. I had had to use a little extra gel to lay down my tapered sides and nape, but my makeup looked damn good. Charles had asked me to meet him at the courthouse, because, he said, he had to make a stop, so I headed there alone, with my stomach doing flips. After I parked the car in the courthouse lot, I texted him.

I'm here.

I'm five minutes away, he texted back.

Ok. I'm excited.

Me too!

I let down my visor and did another mirror check, and then I prayed. Before I took the leap with this man again, I asked God to give me a sign if that wasn't His will. I relaxed, with my eyes closed, and a sudden tap on my window made me jump.

I undid the lock, and Charles opened my car door and helped me out.

"Wow, baby. You look amazing," he told me.

"Thanks, handsome. Are you ready to do this?"

"More than ready."

He took my hand, and we walked into the courthouse. We followed the signs to the clerks' office, approached the counter, and handed over our IDs to one of the clerks.

She examined our IDs. “You two have the same last name?” she asked, looking at us over her glasses. I had kept Charles’s last name.

I nodded. “Yes, we were married before.”

“Second time around, huh?” she said.

I smiled. “Well, yeah.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve seen up to the fifth time around.”

I looked at Charles.

“Well, this is it for us,” he said.

She processed our request, and he asked, “Where do we go to see a judge? We want to get married today.”

I held on to his arm, nodding.

“Oh, I’m sorry. You two didn’t do any research on this. You have to hold on to this paperwork for twenty-four hours, and then the judge will marry you,” the clerk explained, handing us our paperwork.

“Why?” I asked like an idiot. Policy was policy; there was no why.

“Really, ma’am? Really?” she said smartly.

I smiled politely. “Well, can we sign up for tomorrow?”

“No. You can come back tomorrow with this paperwork. It’s a first-come, first-served type deal. And FYI, we don’t have a photographer, so you can dress down if you’d like.”

Bitch, I thought, but I smiled. “Thanks.”

Charles and I walked back the way we had come. “So what now?” I asked him. I was so disappointed.

“We can check into our suite. I mean, we did reserve it.”

“I guess.”

“Baby, it’s only twenty-four hours. It’s not the end of the world.”

“I know, but I was excited,” I said, pouting.

“I know, but I’ll still marry you tomorrow.”

I nudged him. “You’d better.”

We walked out to our cars, and I followed him to the hotel. Our suite was beautiful. It was so private.

“I’m going to take a bath,” I announced after touring the suite.

“Good. I’ll bring this champagne and this lovely tray of chocolate-covered strawberries into the bathroom.”

I gave him a quick kiss, undressed, and hung up my clothes. I didn’t care what that stupid clerk had said. I was going to wear the same outfit again the next day.

Not long after I got in the bathtub to soak, my husband came in with two glasses in one hand, the champagne bottle in the other, and the tray of strawberries balanced on his forearm and held in place at the crease of his elbow.

He set the glasses down first on the tiled tub surround and then the tray and the bottle. He moved the little seat from the vanity over and sat next to the tub. He popped the bottle, filled our glasses, and we toasted to our love. Afterward, he fed me one of those delicious strawberries.

“Um, that is so good,” I moaned. My mouth was in chocolate-strawberry heaven. The berry was so juicy and sweet. “Oh, baby, let me get another one of those.” He obliged, and I sipped and moaned as I chewed.

“So, I got something for you. I wanted to give it to you today, but since we had to wait, I couldn’t. I know I should wait, but I’m too anxious,” he announced.

“What’cha got for me, Daddy?”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a black box. “I upgraded you,” he teased.

He opened the box, and my mouth dropped open. It had to be at least five carats. I wasn’t sure, but it was huge, the kind of ring that would cause conversation. I was speechless.

My eyes watered. “You got that for me?”

“You like it?”

“Are you crazy?” I put out my finger. “It’s beautiful, Charles. I didn’t think we’d exchange rings today. I thought we’d go shopping later. I didn’t get you one.”

“No worries.” He pulled out another box and opened it, revealing two matching bands that complemented the hell out of the rock he’d just given me.

“Oh, Charles. Oh, Charles, you have to give me the invoice for yours. No way should you have paid for both.”

“Well, I wanted them to match.”

“I know, baby, and you did good. I just wanted to buy your ring.”

“Well, they are paid in full, but I can think of a reimbursement plan for you if you’d like. I mean, you can always pay me back in head.”

“Well, I plan to give you head whenever you want, Mr. Cooper, so I need an invoice.”

“Well, since you’ve twisted my arm, I’ll in-box it to you. If you need to pay in installments, there will be interest.”

“Well, my ex-husband has paid me a substantial amount in alimony over the years, so I think I can cover it.”

“Ooh, speaking of alimony, I don’t have to pay that anymore.” He pumped his fists in the air.

“Yeah, yeah. Now, please slide that bad boy on my finger.”

He put the boxes down and slid the ring on. It was beautiful but a tad bit too big. We agreed it was best to get it fitted before I sported it. I definitely didn’t want to lose it.

I soaked while Charles showered, and then we put on the soft, comfy robes. We wanted to go out on the terrace and enjoy the downtown view, but it was too chilly out, so we started a fire in the fireplace and got comfortable on the sofa. We talked, devoured the strawberries, and called down for another bottle of champagne. We decided to wait until after we

had exchanged vows again to make love. That night we slept naked in the luxurious bed, holding each other.

The next morning we ate, dressed, and headed back to the courthouse to get married. My band fit nicely. Afterward, we went by the jewelers to size my ring and then headed home.

We arrived home to find an envelope taped to the front door.

“What is it, baby?” I asked.

“It’s a letter from Shana.”

“What does it say?”

“Hold on, babe. Let’s get inside.”

We went in, dropped our overnight bags, and removed our coats. I met him at the island in the kitchen, and he opened the envelope. I watched his eyes as he scanned the letter.

“Charles, baby, what does it say?”

“It says that I’m being sued for child support. Shana is claiming that I’m the father of her one-month-old little girl.”

“What? Let me see that!” I snatched the papers from him. “Charles, what the hell is that about?”

“Sammie, baby, calm down.”

“Calm down?” I went from one to twenty.

“Yes. I have no idea what she is talking about. I never knew she was pregnant.”

“Charles, don’t lie to me.”

He looked me in the eyes. “After everything we’ve been through, Sam, do you think I’d stand here and lie to you? Come on, baby, you know me better than that. I’m not that guy. I don’t abandon the ones I love, and I certainly wouldn’t abandon my kid!” he yelled. “I didn’t know.” His eyes were sincere.

I believed him. “I believe you, babe, and I’m sorry.” I walked into his arms. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Sam, this is new news to me, I swear.”

“I know, baby, and we will figure it out,” I assured him.

I had to start trusting him. I had remarried him for a reason, and I wasn't going to start my marriage on the wrong foot. Not trusting and not listening had landed us in divorce court the first time. I loved Charles, and whether he was the father of Shana's baby or not, I was there to stay. This all had happened when we were apart, so I wasn't going to let this news ruin it for us.

He grabbed his phone and dialed Shana. He put the call on speaker and laid the phone on the counter. It rang about six times, and finally, her voice mail answered.

Charles left a message. “Shana, I know you know it's me. My wife and I got the letter from your attorney. I don't know what this is about, so we really need to talk. Call me back.” He hit END.

I was proud that he had said “My wife and I,” and I was happy he had made it clear to her that I was more than just an ex.

“So what now, baby?” I said.

“We wait. I'll call my lawyer tomorrow and let him look over these papers to determine how legit they really are.”

“Okay. I know all of that, baby. I mean, what if the baby is yours? Is there a possibility that it could be yours?”

He looked down, but again, he was honest. “There's a strong possibility. I mean, we lived together, and we behaved like a couple.”

“I see. What then if it is?”

“I don't know, Sammie. I mean, the baby is a month old, so there aren't many options. She's here, and you know if she is mine, I have to be a father.”

I was sad, but the truth was that he had to be. “I know, babe. I just hate this entire situation. I mean, I thought finding out I had herpes was the worst thing that could happen to me, but my husband having a daughter outside of our marriage trumps that, I think.”

“We are not strapped, Sam. I can take care of her if she is mine. This isn’t the worst thing that could happen, so don’t think like that. The only thing that would trump this would be if one of us was deathly ill, not herpes. If one of us died, not a little girl’s birth. In spite of it all, Sammie, we are fine. We are going to be fine. All the heartache and pain are behind us.”

“I know. It’s just that today, when we remarried, I had visions of being a mother. I thought I’d be the one to give you children.”

He pulled me to him and held me. “And, baby, you will. This isn’t the end of the world.”

“I know, baby. I just hope it doesn’t get any worse.”

“As long as we have each other’s back, everything will be fine, baby. We are going to be fine. Nothing, I mean absolutely nothing, will ever tear us apart again. Absolutely nothing.” He kissed me.

I trusted him more now than I’d ever trusted him before. I knew we’d be fine.

Chapter Thirty-two

Josephina

Things were quiet. We'd heard nothing from Ana. I wanted to turn off her phone, but the police had advised me not to. They'd said that if she called, they could pick up the tower she was on. But she hadn't called. I loved staying at Jayden's, but the commute in the mornings was killing me and Angelica, and my shift at work seemed off, because I was so used to living on the property.

I wanted to go home, but Jayden was totally against it. My window had been repaired, and I had managed to get my place back in order. And I was homesick.

I went to join him in the kitchen and took a seat at the island. "Jayden, I was thinking that Angelica and I should go back to our place. I mean, it's been three weeks. Maybe Ana has given up on her mission to hurt us."

"I don't know, Josie. I don't feel comfortable, babe. I mean, if something happens to you girls, I'm going to hate myself."

"The commute is killing me, babe. Angelica and I have to get up an hour early just to make sure she makes it to class on time. And living out of a bag is getting old," I whined. I wasn't afraid of Ana. I wanted to go home.

"Okay, but if you and Angelica go, I go."

"No, Jayden. You've done so much already. I mean, I feel horrible that you have to carry our burden."

"Josie, don't you recognize love?" he asked me.

I put my head down. I honestly didn't. I was used to going out of my way to do for José, to help him and be there for him. I'd never had anyone do that for me.

"I guess I don't," I said softly.

He lifted my head. "I know we haven't been together long, but you are the one. I want us to be together, Josie. I don't want you to be just my lady or my woman. I want you as my wife. I'm in love with you, Josie, and Angelica, she is so

sweet, she just melts my heart. I've been single for a long time. And I recognize love, Josie, so please marry me."

My mouth dropped. My eyes bulged, and my heart raced. "You want to marry me, Jayden?"

I was shocked. We were great together, and I did love him. We never argued, he was a peaceful person, and he always compromised. He was gentle when he had to be and a rock when he had to be, and I did want him. I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted a man.

"If you'll have me," he replied.

"Of course I will." I leaped off the bar stool and wrapped my arms around his neck. We kissed, and he held me close and rocked me.

"I will get you a ring. I didn't expect to ask you like this. It just happened this way. You know I'm a romantic."

"I know, baby, but your proposal was perfect. I wouldn't change it for the world."

We kissed again.

"Well, let me go and pack some things," he said. "We can come back during the weekend and get the rest of your and Angelica's things. Oh, and please don't forget Oscar. Angelica would make us drive all the way back for him."

I smiled and gathered a few things, making sure to pack Oscar. We picked up Angelica from school, and when we got back to the hotel, I started dinner. She and Jayden sat at the table, talking science. I couldn't stop smiling. My world was better than I'd ever imagined it would be, and I couldn't wait until Ana was off the streets. That would make things perfect. When dinner was ready, we ate, and then we watched a little TV.

An hour later I told Angelica to go shower and get ready for bed, and her smile faded. With a scared look in her eyes, she asked. "Mr. Jay, are you staying with us tonight?"

"I am going to stay tonight and every night if I have to. Don't worry, Angelica, sweetheart. You're safe. Your mom

and I would never let anything happen to you.”

With a sigh, she smiled. “Okay. I’ll go shower.”

“She is still afraid to be here,” I said after she had left the room.

“I know,” he said. “We need to find a house. I can sublet my condo, and we can get a house out this way, so she can feel safe.”

“A home? Wow, Jayden. I live here rent free. I don’t know what a lawyer makes, but I don’t think I can afford a mortgage, and my credit is embarrassing,” I said, being completely honest.

“And that’s why you have me. Stop worrying so much, Josie. I wouldn’t suggest anything if I didn’t have your back.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say okay. I wouldn’t put myself in a position that I couldn’t handle.”

“But your place is so nice.”

“It is, and if I lease it as is, furnished, I can probably make more in rent than what our mortgage would be in this area.”

“You are heaven sent.” I exhaled and let my man take care of me.

I was so used to being the pilot, and now I could be a copilot. With Jayden, my world was perfect. I thanked God for finally giving me better days. I had thought José going back to prison again, leaving me alone to take care to the girls, was the side effect of my loving his dumb ass, but it wasn’t. Having a loose cannon of a child lurking around somewhere, waiting to hurt me and my baby, was. My world would be perfect if it wasn’t for Ana still being on the loose. *God, please let them find her soon*, I silently prayed.

We went to kiss Angelica good night.

Chapter Thirty-three

Andrea

My court date was approaching, and I was anxious. It had been five months since we started this custody battle, and I couldn't wait to get it over with. I was stressed out, I was gaining weight, and I was just plain tired. I was taking a nap at my desk when someone tapped on the door.

I jumped. "Come, come, come in," I stuttered, hoping I hadn't overslept. The stress was getting to me. I was burnt out.

"Andrea, did you forget about your three o'clock?" Yasmin, one of my stylists, asked.

"No, no, of course not." I focused on the clock on the wall. It was ten after three. I had a forty-five-minute break between clients, so I had taken advantage of it by getting a little nap in.

"Andrea, what's wrong with you? You're, like, sluggish and fatigued all the time, and you are sneaking in naps between clients. What's going on, boss?"

"Life, Yas. Dealing with Jeremiah, barely seeing my kids, and worrying about losing them are driving me crazy. I just need a boost."

I got up and went over to my mirror. I always made sure I looked good enough for a client to want to sit in my chair.

"Well, you should do some yoga, get some exercise in." Coming from her, a size six, that idea seemed logical. I was squeezing into my twenty-twos, so I wanted to slap her, but instead I gave her a look.

"Get out of my office, Yas. Have someone greet my customer and see what she's getting done. Offer her a drink, and somebody get her draped for me. And apologize for the delay."

"Yes, ma'am."

When she was on the other side of the door, I turned back to the mirror. I got the crust out of the corners of my eyes and freshened my face with a brush of bronzer, more liner, and a

swipe of lipstick. I adjusted my belt, which used to fit more comfortably around my midsection, and I had to admit that Yasmin might be right.

Quentin had been treating me so well, and he had a housekeeper, so I was becoming a tad bit lazy. Even sex was starting to become a chore.

“You have to do something, sexy mama,” I told myself as I looked at my reflection in the mirror. “You don’t want to lose another man’s interest because of your weight.”

Although I knew in my heart that Quentin wasn’t that superficial or shallow, I still didn’t want to become unattractive to him. Hell, as stout as I was, he could still handle me in the bedroom. He’d push back my big thighs and get all the way in. Riding him was easy, because he always had a moving pelvis. Where I lacked, he made up for it. And his favorite position, hands down, was me on my side, with one leg bent, my other thigh resting beneath him. He rode me hard that way, and my stomach quickened every time I imagined him fucking me that way.

I headed to the floor, got to work, and finished out my day. Then I headed home. When I arrived, my darling Quentin had dinner waiting.

We sat at the kitchen table and ate, and then I asked that question that no man wanted to answer.

“Q, do you think I’m getting fatter?”

He paused, looked at me, and swallowed hard.

“Come on, baby. Be honest. I know my clothes are snugger, and I’m exhausted all the time. I need naps during the day now,” I told him.

“Well, you’ve been stressing a lot, babe. I’ve noticed a little weight gain, but I’m not complaining. I love the way you look, baby. All of you. Your body is still beautiful to me, because I’m in love with the woman inside of it. I know looking at you naked isn’t like looking at a sexy, fit woman, but I’m not turned off by it.”

“I know, but I’d like to join a gym.” I put my head down. I was totally embarrassed to be having this conversation with him. I had never felt insecure around Quentin before, but I knew my body was changing. I knew the weight was coming on pretty fast, and I had to slow it down. “I need some motivation. I need help, baby. I need you to help me.”

“Hey, baby, come here.” I got up and walked over to his chair, and he embraced me. “Stop, okay? Stop. Don’t get down on yourself. I’m your man, and I will do anything for you, Drea. You know this. I will help you, babe. Whatever you need, I will do. We will do this together.” He smiled at me.

“Thank you, baby.”

“No thanks needed, my love.”

“You’re too good to me.”

“That’s my job.” He smiled again and pulled me closer. “Now, come on. Let’s clear the table and clean the kitchen.”

After we were done, we relaxed in the family room and watched a movie. Before the movie was halfway through, I was asleep and drooling. I didn’t understand what was going on, but I was anxious to start working out, just to have some energy. The next few days were worse. I started to have headaches, and I knew that wasn’t normal. I knew I had a lot going on with my current situation, but Quentin thought it was time for me to see a doctor. I agreed and made an appointment for the following Monday. I preferred to go alone, but he wasn’t hearing it. Since I couldn’t convince him to let me go alone, I gave in.

When Monday rolled around, Quentin and I headed to my doctor’s appointment. I sat with him in the waiting room and waited for them to call me back. A nurse called my name and escorted me down a hallway to a scale. When she weighed me, I cringed. I hadn’t been on a scale in forever, and I was blown away by the number. Oh, I definitely needed to run to somebody’s gym.

“Is that accurate?” I asked.

“Yes, there could be a difference of five pounds from your scale at home, but that’s about it,” she said dryly. “Let me get your pressure.”

“I’m sure it’s sky high. I’ve been under a lot of unwanted stress lately,” I told her as motioned for me to take a seat in the chair near the scale.

“Well, we’ll see,” she said as she placed a blood pressure cuff around my arm. “Just try to relax, and if it’s high, I’ll take it again in about fifteen minutes, after you have relaxed a bit.”

I yawned and nodded. I had just gotten up three hours ago. How in the hell could I feel sleepy again?

She read my numbers. “Well, it looks normal to me.”

“It does?”

“Yes. Most patients are happy with that news.”

“I am. I’m just shocked.”

“Well, count your blessings. Come on. Follow me.”

I followed her into an exam room, and then she walked out.

“Oh, Mrs. Young, I’m going to need you to go in this cup,” she said after she came back into the room.

“Why?”

“We have to test your urine to rule out everything.”

“Everything like what?”

“Infection, pregnancy. It’s just standard.”

I took the cup and headed to the bathroom. When I finished, I put the cup on the little ledge that said LEAVE SAMPLE HERE and went back to the exam room to wait for my doctor. Surprisingly, she came right in.

“Andrea, how are you? It’s been a long time. What brings you in today?”

“Hey, Lauren. It’s good to see you.” I smiled. She had been our family doctor for years.

“Well, I’d say the same, but seeing you here means something is wrong.”

I sighed. “I don’t know. I just feel weak and tired all the time. I’m sure you’ve heard about me and Jeremiah, the custody battle, and the divorce. It’s just so much, and I’m stressed. I just want to make sure there are no other issues.”

She sat down and looked over my file. “Well, we’ve always had a conversation about your weight,” she began.

I held up a finger. “Lauren, you know I’m not going there.”

“I know, Andrea, but it could be a factor, so I can’t rule it out. You are clinically obese.”

“According to science. God didn’t confirm that. People who are at a so-called healthy weight could have way more health issues than me.”

“That’s true, but we have to look at things from a medical standpoint.”

“I know, but when it comes to shape and size, I look at it as the way God meant for me to be. I could consume the exact same things a person half my size does in a day and do the same activities and still be my size, and they would remain their size.”

“Okay. With that said, let me look at your vitals. Your pressure is normal, which is a plus, and your temp is fine. I just need your results for your urine sample, and we go from there. When was your last cycle?”

“Um ... I think, um ...” I had to think. I remembered having one not long ago, but how long ago was the problem. “I have been stressed, and I’ve spotted here and there, so I really couldn’t pinpoint the last actual period. I think it was four or five months ago. I mean, like, a real period. I’ve had spotting, blood on my liner every now and then, but my last actual *period* period was about four, maybe five months ago.”

“Really?” She stood and washed her hands. After drying them, she checked my heart and made me breathe deeply. She checked my throat and then made me stick out my tongue. “Okay, remove your top and lie back for me.”

“Lauren, I just had a woman exam about seven months ago.”

“I know, but I want to check you out.”

I removed my shirt and lay back.

“Bra too,” she said.

I did as I was told. She checked my breasts, and my nipples were sore. I frowned.

“Is that painful?” she asked.

“Yes. Which is good, right? That means my period is coming soon.”

“Or it could mean something else,” she said. She made her way down to my abdomen and began to press on it. She had a look on her face that had me confused.

“What’s going on, Lauren? Talk to me.”

“I feel something, but I gotta be sure.”

“Like?” I asked, raising myself onto my elbows.

“Hold on, Andrea.” She picked up the phone and called the nurses’ station. “Do you have Mrs. Young’s urine test results yet?” she asked, tapping her pen. “Can I have them right away?”

“Lauren, what’s going on?” I was starting to feel scared. I thought it was an infection, a cyst, or a tumor. Whatever it was, it was draining me.

The nurse tapped on the door, and Lauren went to the door to get the results. “You can get dressed, Andrea.” She sat and read the report. “Okay, that’s what I thought.”

“What?” I said, pulling my bra straps over my shoulders.

“You’re pregnant.”

I had a Tasha Mack moment. “Now, what now?”

“Pregnant. The test was positive. Therefore, you’re pregnant.”

“Pregnant how? I’ve been on the pill for six months. I mean, I’ve been taking my pill every day.”

“Well, according to this, you need to stop taking your pills immediately. You need to get with your ob-gyn right away to find out how far along you are and to get your prenatal care started.

“Pregnant,” I said in disbelief. I didn’t know what to think or how to feel. I wasn’t happy or sad. I was blown away. “Pregnant,” I said again.

Smiling, she said, “Yes, Andrea. Pregnant. Maybe this is a way to keep you and Jeremiah together.”

“Jeremiah hasn’t touched me in over two years.” The words slipped out of my mouth before I could stop them.

“Excuse me?”

In a daze, I said, “I’m sorry. I’m not pregnant by Jeremiah. It’s my fiancé, Quentin. Once my divorce is final, I’m getting remarried.” I held up my ring.

“Wow. A new husband and a new baby. Congrats.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, looking at the chart on the wall, which I had read ten times already. I got up and promised I’d make an appointment with my OB. Still in shock, I walked out to the waiting room.

Quentin rushed over to me. “Baby, what did the doctor say? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” I said softly.

“Then why have you been so fatigued and dragging?”

“Because I’m pregnant.” My voice sounded flat, even to myself.

Confused, Quentin said, “Come again.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“You’re pregnant!” he yelled, snapping me out of my trance. “Oh, honey, that is great.” He hugged me tight. “How

far? I mean, when ... ? Is it a boy or a girl? Talk to me Andrea.”

“I ... I ... I don’t know,” I stammered. “I have to see my OB.”

“What’s an OB?”

“It’s a ... Never mind, Q. Can you believe I’m pregnant? That means we are going to have a baby,” I squealed.

I suddenly got excited. We hugged and celebrated in the doctor’s office waiting room, not caring who was watching. I was having his baby, and I was elated.

When we were in the car, he said, “We have to call my moms.” He pulled out his cell phone.

“Why are we calling your mom first?”

“It doesn’t matter, baby. I just have to tell somebody. This is our first baby,” he said.

“Second,” I said, correcting him.

His smile faded, and he put the phone down. “Why would you do that?” he asked sadly.

Ashamed of reminding him of my first pregnancy during our happy moment, I said, “I’m sorry, baby. I’m so sorry. I should not have said that.”

“No, Drea, you shouldn’t have. Are you still angry with me about it? Huh?” he yelled. “If you are, let it out now. I live my life every day, telling myself to have no regrets, and even though I broke your heart way back then, the one thing I do regret is making you get rid of our child. So, if you are still bitter, get it out now.” His eyes watered. “I was young, foolish, and had no clue about life back then. I’m so fucking sorry, okay?”

“Either you forgive me or you don’t, because I want to feel good about this moment. I want to yell the news out to the world, but if you haven’t forgiven me, I can’t embrace this moment. Back then, I wish I could have felt the way I feel right now. You are pregnant with my baby, Drea. A part of me

is inside of you, and I want to celebrate this moment, but if you can't celebrate it with me ...”

I felt low because of what I had said. After all, he hadn't put a gun to my head back then, so I was at fault too.

I reached over and wiped his tears. “Call your mom first, baby. Let her know you're going to be a daddy.” I smiled.

He rubbed his face to dry his tears and then shook his head. “Do you forgive me, Andrea? Do you? For what I forced you to do to our baby? Do you forgive me?”

I grabbed his hand and squeezed it so tight. “Yes, Q, I forgive you. You're not the only one responsible for what happened to us back then. I didn't have to go through with it, but I did, so do you forgive me?”

“I forgave you a very, very, very long time ago, Andrea. I know if I had never spat the bullshit to you about how big the burden and responsibility would be, and how we had too much on our plates as it was, you would not have budged. I played you back then, Drea, listening to motherfuckers who are not even around anymore, thinking they knew what was best for us, when they had no clue. I loved you so much, and leaving you was, like, the hardest thing, but I believed the hype back then. And when it all came crumbling down and reality hit me, the smoke cleared, and all the things I thought I was shooting for were beyond my reach, and I was too cowardly to come crawling back to you.

“When I heard you were engaged to a church boy, I thought that was the best thing for you. And loving you so much, I said to myself, ‘I won't bother her. I want her to be happy.’ I got engaged to and married the first smart chick I dated, but I knew she didn't love me, not like you. When we made love, there was no passion. We talked, but there were no deep conversations. All we had in common were educated friends, liking upscale dining, wanting to live the life and have the image of a successful couple. Can you imagine making love by a schedule? Pulling out a fucking calendar to confirm what night it was? I was penciled in on her schedule, Drea, and kids weren't on her timeline. I just wanted a normal life, a normal

wife, a normal marriage, where we could eat the wrong shit when we wanted to, have comedies on our movie list, and if I saw you in the shower and I wanted to push my dick in you, I could.

“You being pregnant, you accepting my ring, and you loving me are all I’ve ever wanted. I forgive you, baby. I am happy, happier than I’ve ever been in my life. You can gain, lose, whatever. Just don’t change who you are. I love you, Andrea, inside and out, and I’m bursting right now. You’ve always been beautiful to me, and looking at you right now, with my seed growing inside you, you are the most beautiful I’ve ever seen you.”

I smiled. “You are an amazing man, Q. You are going to make a good husband and a great dad. I love you, and I am blessed to have you in my life. Blessed to have another life granted to me by God. Right now, you are also the most beautiful I’ve ever seen you. I needed a love like this. If every woman on this planet could experience this, there would be a bunch of happy women. To find that good, unconditional love from a man is rare, and you are my reward. I know we went about things the wrong way, but God still loved me enough and had enough mercy on me to give me another chance at love. And I’m grateful it’s with you.”

He leaned over and kissed me softly.

“So call your mother. Tell her that you are going to be a dad.” I smiled.

“You don’t mind if I call her first?”

“Baby, I don’t mind.”

I never wanted Quentin as much as I wanted him at that moment. Being pregnant was a shock, a mind-blowing thing, but I was happy. He was the man of my dreams, and if he was the prize in the end, he was a welcome prize, because I needed him to get me through the side effects of Jeremiah. He was the right prescription, administered in the right dosage, to help me get over Pastor Young. While he grinned and gave his mom the news, I held his hand.

He was definitely the man whom God had made for me, and I loved him. I truly loved him.

Chapter Thirty-four

Josephina

I wiggled my hips to salsa music as I diced veggies for my fajitas. I enjoyed the wine that Jay had cracked open for me before taking Angelica to the store. She had a project for school that she needed to work on, and he volunteered to take her to get the supplies while I started dinner. As I diced the veggies, I couldn't help admiring the rock that he had adorned my finger with a couple of days before. It was beautiful. I had never felt so loved, so alive, so happy. My ex-husband had never given me anything but a couple of STDs, heartache, headaches, and problems.

I was happy that he was locked away, because if he were free, he'd be a thorn in my side, just like Ana was. I was relieved not to have him lurking around my place. I put the veggies to the side and flipped my cutting board over to the meat side. I opened the rib eyes, sliced them into thin strips, put the strips in a bowl, and added seasonings. I'd wait until Jay and Angelica walked in before I sautéed everything. I wanted it to be hot and fresh. Everything prepped and ready to go, I refilled my glass and waited for them.

My phone buzzed as it vibrated on the counter, and when I saw Ana's name on the caller ID, I quickly answered.

"Ana, you have to turn yourself in," I said without a hello.

She was quiet.

"Ana?" I said.

Still silence.

"No juegues conmigo, niña."

But still nothing.

"Hola, hola, hola," I yelled. *"Donde estás?"* I demanded.

I heard sniffing. "Help me, Mama. Help," she whispered. I could barely hear her.

"Help you? What do you mean, help you, Ana? Where in the hell are you?" I quizzed.

“Please come, Ma, please. I’m in trouble,” she cried. I couldn’t care less if she was in trouble. I just wanted them to pick her up. I had no idea where she was living, what she was doing, or who she was doing it with.

“Ana, where are you?” I asked again. Then I heard her scream a bloodcurdling scream.

“Nooo, nooo, please, nooo!” Ana shrieked. I heard my baby crying. I heard what sounded like punches and fighting noises.

“Ana! Ana! Ana!” I yelled. But she didn’t answer. I was in a panic. All I heard were loud noises, Ana’s screams, and a man saying, “I’m going to kill you, bitch! Where in the fuck is my money?”

Terrified, I ran to the front desk and told my agent to dial the police. I didn’t know what was going on; all I knew was my baby needed me.

“Ana, baby, I’m coming,” I cried into my cell phone. I was going out of my mind.

My agent handed me the desk phone. I held it to my free ear, keeping my cell phone to my other one. “Listen, this is Josephina Ramirez,” I said quickly. “My cell phone is being monitored for my daughter, who has a warrant, and she’s somewhere, in trouble.”

I heard the police operator typing something. “I’ll get you to the right department.”

I was transferred.

“Mrs. Ramirez, this is Officer Davis. I see there is activity.”

“Yes, and she’s in trouble. I don’t know where she is, but someone is beating her. She is screaming for help.”

“All we need is two minutes. Whatever you do, don’t hang up that phone.”

In a panic and shaking, I cried, “I won’t. Just find her please. She is in trouble.”

I held my phone to my ear. I couldn’t bear to hear my baby scream and beg for her life. I thought my heart would stop.

“Just one more minute,” Officer Davis said.

I was trembling, and my face was soaked with tears.

Jay and Angelica walked in the lobby just then, laughing and joking.

“Josie, what is it, baby?” Jayden asked as soon as he saw my face.

“It’s Ana. She’s in trouble. She’s—” I heard a bang, and the screams stopped. “Ana!” I yelled into the cell phone.

“We got her,” Officer Davis said. “You stay put. We are headed over there.”

“Please tell me where,” I pleaded. “I need to go and see about my baby.”

“Just hang tight, Mrs. Ramirez. We will call you as soon as we bring her in,” the officer said and then hung up.

I was shaking. I couldn’t hang up my cell phone. I heard more yelling from unknown voices, and a couple of minutes later, the phone went dead. I fell to my knees, and Jayden and Angelica got on either side of me, lifted me to my feet, and helped me into the apartment. Jayden was asking questions, and I had no answers.

“I don’t know, Jay,” I yelled. “I don’t know!” He held me tight and helped me over to the sofa.

“Shhhh, baby. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Relax. They are going to find her.”

I just sobbed.

Angelica sat down next to me on the sofa and held my hand. “Mama, don’t worry,” she said. “Don’t worry.”

I dried my eyes and took a few deep, cleansing breaths. Jayden refilled my wineglass and handed it to me. My hands were shaking. I was so scared for Ana. She had somehow gotten herself into a bad situation. I didn’t know if my child was dead or alive.

What felt like hours later, there was a knock at the door, and my heart pounded. It was Officer Davis and his partner.

Jayden let them in, and I jumped up, demanded information.

“Where is she? Is she okay? Can I see her? Is she in custody?”

“Mrs. Ramirez, we are sorry, but your daughter didn’t make it. She was already deceased when we got to the location,” Officer Davis said. “We do have the guy that did this to her in custody. We have your daughter’s killer, and he is not going to walk. I guarantee it.”

I heard a painful wailing and realized it was coming from me. “Nooo!” I screamed. Jayden held me tight. “Please, God, no, no, no, no.” I sobbed uncontrollably. My legs were weak, and I sank back down onto the sofa. Angelica rushed to me, and we held each other and cried.

“We are going to need you to come and identify her body,” Officer Davis said.

I heard Jay answer for me. “We will, sir.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Officer Davis said quietly, and then he and his partner left.

I was in a daze and couldn’t speak. Ana was my problem child, yes, but never in a trillion years did I want my child to be killed. It hurt like hell. The pain was indescribable; it was a pain I’d never experienced in my life. Even a beating from my ex-husband had nothing on what I felt at that moment. I literally wanted to die too. I felt like my heart had been ripped out of my chest.

Jayden begged me to get up so we could go and identify her body. I couldn’t.

“Please no, Jay. I can’t. I can’t.”

“Baby, we have to,” he declared.

I knew he was right, but I didn’t want to go. It took him an hour to finally convince me to go. In the car, I just sobbed during the entire ride. When we got to the morgue, a man greeted us and took us back to see her. He pulled back the sheet that covered my baby’s face and body. She was unrecognizable. Whoever had done this to her was evil and

cruel. No amount of makeup would have made my child look normal again. The hole in her chest was small, but I knew that was where she had been shot. I touched her wound and her cold hand and sobbed. If it hadn't been for her tattoos, the ones I had forbidden her to get, I would not have been able to recognize her.

“It's her,” I cried. “It's my Ana.”

The man quickly covered her back up and told me it was okay to come back the next day to discuss arrangements. I simply nodded, and Jayden walked me back to the car.

That was the absolute worst day of my life. The only thing that allowed me to sleep that night was the Ambien from my medicine cabinet.

The next morning, I woke up and broke down again after Jayden confirmed that it hadn't been a dream. My Ana was gone.

Chapter Thirty-five

Andrea

I sat in the small courtroom and wondered what the decision was going to be. I didn't want to show the judge that video clip, but I would if I had to, because I wasn't going to be on appointment-only terms to see my kids. Jeremiah pursuing full custody was insane. He was only trying to get back at me, and after hearing the news that I was pregnant, he was sure he was going to walk away with my kids.

I sat and listened to our attorneys handle the proceedings, and when the judge finally addressed me, I thought for sure that I'd have a chance to tell my side and that he'd understand that Jeremiah had driven me into the arms of another man. He'd have to see that I didn't set out to be an adulteress and that I had just happened to get caught at a raw time in my life.

"Yes, Your Honor, it's true that I had a physical affair with Quentin Hughes," I told the judge. "He and I were friends, and we reconnected. The more I had issues with Mr. Young, the closer I got to Mr. Hughes. I never intended to have an affair. I didn't want things to go this way. I know right from wrong, and I am sorry for my actions. However, I'm a good mother, Your Honor. My children deserve to have us both, and I just want to work it out with Jeremiah so we both have equal rights when it comes to them."

The judge nodded. "As much as I would like to have sympathy for you, Mrs. Young, as a man of God and an upholder of the law, I don't think you'd be a better fit for your children at this time. I will grant the petition for divorce, and I will give sole custody of Lena Young and Jeremiah Young Jr. to their father." He continued to ramble on, but all I heard was custody was going to be given to Jeremiah.

"Your Honor, please, I know what I did was horrible, but Jeremiah knows our marriage was over long before Quentin. Jeremiah, please don't do this. Don't let him take my kids away. This isn't fair. Jeremiah, please, don't do this," I cried.

The judge banged his gavel and ordered my attorney to quiet me. I couldn't believe the judge had taken my kids.

"I have proof that Jeremiah has secrets too," I blurted. It was time for me to expose him.

"Well, you need to go to family court with that. As of now, this session is adjourned. Good day," the judge said and stood.

I couldn't even show him the video, because he had shut me down. I stood and marched over to Jeremiah. I slapped his face so hard that his deacons rushed over and pulled me back. I wanted to spit nails.

"You will rot in hell!" I yelled as the deacons dragged me out of the courtroom. "Your secrets won't stay buried forever," I shouted, trying to break free. "You're a fraud, Jeremiah, and God is going to punish you," was the last thing I could get out.

As I was being dragged out of the courtroom, Quentin saw one of Jeremiah's men rough handling me, and he rushed over. He had come to court with me, but we had decided it was best if he didn't come into the courtroom.

"Man, you better take your hands off of my fiancée," he yelled. The deacon released me. "What the hell is wrong with you, man? She is pregnant." Quentin shoved him in the chest, ready to fight.

Jeremiah's flunky just looked at him, straightened his jacket, and went back inside.

"Baby, are you okay?" Quentin asked me. "What was that about?"

"That bastard got custody of my kids. The judge gave that motherfucker full custody of my kids," I cried. I was now sobbing. "I can't see them unless he allows me to visit. He gave him my babies."

Quentin wrapped his arms around me to comfort me. "Shhh, Drea. Don't cry, baby. It's not over. We can fight him."

"To lose again? Jeremiah has all these crooked-ass judges in his pocket. They love that faggot-ass bitch. I can't fight him, Q."

“You can, and we will. Come on. Let’s go. You need to calm down and rest. We still have a baby in here”—he touched my stomach—“that you have to take care of. You can’t let this stress you, honey.” He pulled me by my hand. “Come on. Let me get you home.”

This was the ultimate side effect of Jeremiah. It was time to get his ass back.

And I knew just how to do it.

Chapter Thirty-six

Samantha

The alarming sounds of a little crying voice jolted me out of my sleep. It was the first sleepover for little Charlie, and she wasn't doing too well. I hit Charles a few times so that he would get up and get her, but he acted as if he was in a coma.

I nudged him. "Charles, the baby."

"I got up last time."

He was right, but she was his kid. Tired from a twelve-hour shift at the restaurant, I pulled my body out of the bed and headed over to her crib. I yawned and looked down at her as she kicked her chubby little legs and her arms fought the air. She was actually crying for real this time. There were tears, something she didn't always have when she fussed.

"Okay, okay, Charlie." I lifted her from her crib, laid her head on my shoulder, and patted her back. "Oh my, sweetie. You are soaking wet." Her bottom felt like a drenched sponge.

I took her over to her changing table and strapped her down. I didn't have a lot of experience with babies, but somehow, what to do came to me. I unbuttoned the bottom of her sleeper and pulled her legs out. I got a new diaper, her wipes, and baby powder. While I changed her, her cries ceased, and she began to babble to me. I didn't know this little girl, so I didn't know what to say to her. She wasn't mine, so there was no bond, but after her diaper change, she was all smiles.

"Is that better, little lady?" I said, taking her back to her crib. "I wouldn't want to sleep in wet drawers, either." I went to put her back down, but she started to cry. "Okay, okay. We can stay up a little while longer, but it's after midnight, darling, and we girls need our beauty sleep."

She laughed. She was such a beautiful baby. She looked so much like my husband.

"Your dad did well." I smiled.

I became a little jealous as I spent the next two hours awake with her. I wanted to have a baby of my own. Charlie was a sweet baby, but she wasn't mine.

The very next morning, I cornered Charles. Charlie was still sleeping, so after I handed him his coffee, I said, "I want to have a baby."

He swallowed and said, "I know, babe. We said next year."

"I've changed my mind. I want to get pregnant now."

He rubbed his head and face. "What? What brought this on?"

"Charlie. Last night, when you pretended not to hear her cries, I got up and took care of her. She's a beautiful baby, Charles, and I know we will spend time with her, but I'm not her mother. She has a mother. I want a baby. I want us to have our own baby."

He laughed. "You're serious right now? Listen to yourself, baby. Charlie is only six months. We should wait at least until she turns one."

"Why?" I asked, a little aggravated. We were financially sound, so why did I have to wait?

"Because I don't think you're ready to become a mom. I mean, just before we learned of Charlie, you were dead set on waiting. You said you wanted us to spend a year having fun and traveling a bit and doing all these fun newlywed things. And now you want to get pregnant?"

"Yes. I've changed my mind, Charles. I mean, this is our second time around, and I've spent plenty of alone time with you, so I want to have a baby. Why is there a debate?"

He held up his hands. "Baby, there's not. I just think this change of heart has something to do with you being a bit jealous."

He knew me so well. He was right, but I did want children. I just wanted to move up the timeline.

"That's not the point, Charles. The point is you're my husband, and if you can have a baby with some other woman,

you could just as easily have a baby with me.”

He hopped off his stool, came around to me, and pulled me into his arms. “Sam, baby, I am more than willing to give you as many babies as you want. We can start baby making right now, but I want you to be sure this is what you want. We don’t have to rush.”

“It’s what I want,” I said.

“Well, that’s what we’ll do.” He lifted me onto the counter and moved in closer to me, his dick pressed against me. We kissed, and soon he was ravishing my nipples. My center responded to the pleasure he was giving my breasts. We hadn’t made love without a condom since we’d been back together, and when I felt his bare flesh enter my tunnel, I thought I’d come instantly. His dick was always good, but flesh to flesh made it feel like we were husband and wife.

He pressed his body closer to mine, and the sounds he made let me know that he enjoyed feeling my flesh without the plastic wrapper around his manhood.

“Baby, you feel so good,” he whispered.

He moaned and then lifted me from the counter. He carried me over to the sofa, laid me down, and went down on his knees. He pulled my ass over the edge of the sofa, and when he slid back in, he fucked me hard and fast. We both moaned in pleasure, and as soon as he grabbed my breasts and leaned in to suck my rock-hard nipples, he exploded.

He made faces that I’d never seen before, and his body jerked harder than ever. Afterward, he rested on top of me, panting and breathing hard.

“Sam, baby, you felt so good. I missed feeling your flesh, baby. It felt so, so good.” He kissed the side of my face. He slowly pulled out, and I could see our juices glistening on his dick. “I love you,” he breathed.

“I love you too,” I said, out of breath. He was right. Just feeling him release inside of me made me feel as if we had just consummated our union. He stood and reached for me to help me up, and then we heard Charlie crying.

“Oh, boy. She’s awake,” he said, pulling up his pajama pants from around his ankles.

“Yep, and it’s your turn, because I’m going to shower.”

“Okay, but before you go, can you please show me how to mix her formula one more time?”

“Of course.” I headed to the kitchen, and he headed to get Charlie. It took him a minute to come back, so I figured he was putting a fresh diaper on her. By the time he got back, I had four bottles on the counter, the measuring cup, and her powdered formula. Before I went to shower, I gave him the directions one more time and handed him a ready bottle to give to her.

When I finished showering, I kept an eye on her while he showered. Our routine would definitely be different when she was over at the house, but it was a welcome change, because we enjoyed her. I just hoped I’d be blessed with the good news of being pregnant.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Josephina

I sat on the front pew, with Jayden on one side and Angelica on the other. Jayden had his arm wrapped around my shoulder, and Angelica held my hand tight. José came in, escorted by two uniformed officers, and took a seat. The service was nice. I hadn't realized so many people would come. There were members from both my and José's sides of the family. News traveled fast.

After the service, we went to the cemetery. During the burial, the officers let José put a white rose on Ana's coffin before they lowered her into the ground. I wondered who was footing that bill, because I wasn't going to. I knew José had wanted to be at Ana's service. He had told me so when I delivered the news to him of her death, but when he had started talking about the cost, I had cut him off. I wasn't strapped, because I had a small policy on Ana, but I wasn't going to give any of that money to help him do a damn thing.

I was doing better today than I'd thought I'd do, but I felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest at the sight of her body being lowered into the ground. I held on to Angelica tight, because she was all I had left. As much as I wanted to convince myself that I was okay, I wasn't. When everyone dispersed, I couldn't move. I let Angelica go over and hug her father and speak to him, but my legs wouldn't move.

"Come on, baby," Jayden said.

"No," I said. "I don't want to leave her alone." I knew I had to sound like a nutcase, but it was true. I didn't want to leave my baby there in that hole.

"Baby, you have to be strong, okay? Let's head to the car." He pulled my arm, and I snatched it away.

"No, no, no," I yelled. "I can't leave my baby alone. I'm not leaving her right now. She needs me!" I didn't want to bury my child. I wanted to take her home. I shook my head. "I can't. I can't leave her."

Jayden held me close and let me cry my eyes out. I had made it through the service without breaking down, but the thought of leaving her in the ground had an entirely different effect on me.

“Josie.” I heard Sam’s voice.

I looked up and saw her and Andrea.

“Jayden, take Angelica to the car,” Sam said. “I’ll stay with Josie.”

Jayden nodded and headed to the limo with Angelica.

I looked around. José was gone, and I thanked God that the two uniformed officers had taken him away. I didn’t want to look at him.

“Rough day, huh?” Sam smiled as she stood to my left.

“The worst day of my life,” I said and sniffled.

Andrea stepped up a little closer to me and stood on my right side. She and Sam both took one of my hands.

“You know God is going to watch over her for you, right?” Andrea said.

“Why did He take my baby from me? I know she wasn’t the best kid, but she is the one He gave me. And He took her,” I cried.

“I’m sorry you lost Ana, Josie, but God knows best. I don’t have any answers or any reasons why, but what I do know is He is going to bring you through this. He does what He wants to do and how He wants to do it, but He loves us all so much. We have good days, and we have bad days, but I guarantee you that the good always outweighs the bad. Ana was headed down a horrible road, and sometimes God decides to save us from ourselves. We may not understand it, but we have to trust that He is going to be with us.” Andrea voice and words were soothing, but my heart still ached.

“Andrea, I can’t see any good in this,” I said quietly.

“Of course not, darling. You’ve lost your child. I’m not saying you should be celebrating. All I’m saying is you have

to accept it and asked God to help you cope. It's grim now, but it will get easier."

"Yes, Josie, it will get easier," Sam said. "Now, we will stay here as long as you want, but the longer you stay, the harder it will be to leave."

I knew she was right. I wiped my eyes and let out a deep breath. We stood in silence until I was finally ready to go. They walked me over to the limo and promised to meet me back at the hotel, where the banquet room was set up for dinner.

Hours later, after everyone had left the hotel, I felt a little more at peace. Back home I kissed Angelica good night and went to remove my dress. Jayden had already taken off his suit, so once I had changed, I joined him on the sofa. He handed me a drink that wasn't wine.

I frowned. "What's this?"

"Vodka and cranberry. I thought you needed something a little stronger tonight."

"I do, to be honest." I sipped. "Today was hard, but I feel better. I know Ana was not a good girl, and I know God had His reasons for taking her. I just pray that she prayed for mercy for her actions. I don't know. I'm not a big religious person, but I know some things, and I know God don't like evildoers."

"Well, the best way to deal with those feelings is to try not to guess or figure it out. She's gone. Where her spirit is now, there is absolutely nothing you and I can do about that, so don't try to figure it out, Josie. It will drive you insane."

"I know, Jay. And I know that in time it will get better."

"Yes, it will." He held me in his arms, and I sipped my drink.

We sat in silence and listened to the smooth jazz he had playing. A little later we called it a night, and I prayed and asked God to give me peace of mind. I drifted off to sleep in Jayden's arms and woke up with a smile on my face. God had allowed me to have a dream of Ana. She was smiling and

happy in the dream. She told me not to worry, said that she was okay. I didn't know if that was just what my heart wanted to hear, and so I'd dreamt it, but it was just what I needed to be at peace with her passing.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Andrea

Since I was five months pregnant and divorced, Quentin didn't want to wait any longer to get married. I wasn't for a courthouse wedding, so I asked a minister friend of ours to perform the ceremony. He agreed. I thought he'd be against it because of Jeremiah, but he told me that he was in no position to judge. We exchanged vows in a very small ceremony. Only close friends and family members attended, and we all headed to Sammie's to eat and celebrate afterward.

Quentin and I were happy with our decision, because the only thing that mattered to both of us was becoming husband and wife.

I hadn't seen my kids in a couple of weeks, because Jeremiah had kept playing me off, so I broke the agreement and went by the house. He wasn't home to put me out, so I spent a couple of stolen hours with my kids. Kelly missed me just as much as the little ones did. She said that she was tired of being a mom. She wanted to go back to being a big sister, instead of doing everything. Jeremiah was hardly ever home, and she said that Brother Franklin was always coming over now. She said that he was often there late at night and that she felt something was going on.

"Going on like what, Kel?" I asked her point-blank.

"Unnatural things, Mama Ann. One night I came down for a drink of water at three in the morning, and his coat was on the sofa, but he and Daddy were nowhere to be found. I had a feeling he was in Dad's room, but I was too afraid to knock. And then I heard them through my vent. They are disgusting. I sleep in your room just to keep from hearing them."

"Oh, my God, Kelly. I'm sorry, baby."

"I just want you to come home. We miss you, and Daddy just makes pit stops to check on us. He gives me a ton of chores to do, Mama Ann, and I can barely finish my homework. All we eat is takeout and pizza."

I felt horrible. I knew he was working her like a slave since I wasn't there anymore.

"I will talk to him about hiring someone, Kelly. Don't worry, baby. And I'm taking him back to court. It won't be long before I can see you guys more often."

"But we want you to come home," she cried.

I held her. "I know, baby, but I can't. Your dad and I are divorced, and I'm married to Quentin now. And you will have another little sister or brother soon. Things are just different now."

"But it doesn't have to be. We can come live with you, can't we?"

I felt so bad. Her real mother couldn't care less about her now, since she had a new man in her life, and now I was gone. I knew it was hard for her. Even though I knew that her living with me would never be possible, I said, "I'll try, baby. I have a lawyer helping me, and as soon as we go before the judge again, I will try."

"Okay." She sniffled.

"I have to go now, before Jeremiah comes home. If he sees me here, it's going to make things worse."

She walked me to the door and hugged me tight. "I love you, Mama Ann, and please try. We want to be with you," she said.

"I will try. I promise, baby."

I left the house, and as soon as I got in my car, I dialed my attorney. I wanted to know what was going on and how we could speed things up. I wanted my kids back. Yes, including Kelly. Jeremiah was a demon, and having that man in our house, in his bed, with our children being there, was just wrong. I had to get them out of there before they caught him doing something inappropriate with his lover.

Not happy with the red-tape bullshit that my lawyer fed me over the phone, I hung up with an attitude. I headed to the

church and marched right into Jeremiah's office. Several people were there, including Franklin. Everyone looked at me.

"Ann, what are you doing?" Jeremiah asked as I stood in front of his desk.

"I need to talk to you," I snapped.

"Well, I'm busy. You can make an appointment with my secretary." He chuckled, blowing me off.

"If you don't want me to go to the press, you need to stop what you are doing and talk to me."

"You can't barge into my office with demands, Ann. You're not my wife anymore."

I looked at Franklin, who sat in one of the armchairs. "Brother Franklin, if you don't want me to discuss your meetings at our home, I suggest you tell your pastor to give me a moment."

Franklin looked scared to death. He was the first one to stand. "We need to give you two a minute, Jeremiah," he said.

Everyone else stood, and then they all vacated the office.

"If you don't give me my kids, I will go to the press with this." I hit PLAY on my phone to start the video clip and then held up the phone.

He stood to see what it was. When he realized what it was, he lunged at me. I hadn't expected that at all. He grabbed me by my throat, pushed me against the wall, and took my phone. He looked at the video clip, which was still playing, and slammed my phone on the table. The sound of him moaning and groaning still played, so he went over and threw my phone in the blazing fire that was burning in his office fireplace.

"You bastard!" I yelled and started pounding him on his back.

He turned to me and pinned me down on the table. "You whore! You will not destroy me! I will kill you, you hear me?" he said with his hands around my neck.

Franklin rushed in just then and pulled him off me. I stumbled to the door.

“You will not get away with putting your hands on me this time, you bastard! I’m going to the police,” I shouted, threatening him.

“Go to the police. This city can’t touch me,” he said, gloating.

“I’m pregnant, you bastard, and if I told my husband what you did, he’d beat the shit outta you!” I yelled.

“Ann, just go,” Franklin advised. “Please.”

I didn’t hesitate. I got the hell out of there. I was pregnant, and he had attacked me and had destroyed my phone. I knew Franklin’s wife was not going to out them or come forward, so I was on my own. I got in my car and sobbed, hating myself for confronting him alone.

I should have told Quentin my plan. I knew he would kill Jeremiah once he found out what he had done to me. I went straight to the police and filed a report. They called my husband. He met me at the station and vowed he’d kill Jeremiah. I begged him to calm down.

When the police had collected all the information they needed, we headed home. Quentin was still on ten, pacing and yelling and fussing at me for going alone as we stood in the living room.

“I know it was stupid, Q, but I didn’t think he’d attack me. Not there, not at the church.”

“I’m going to kill him, Drea!”

“No, please, Q. Stay away from him. He’s won. He can’t be touched. The police will pick him up, and he’ll be home in an hour. Jeremiah thinks he is God.”

“Well, he’s not God. And, Andrea—” he said, pointing a finger at me, but I interrupted him.

“Please, Quentin, please promise me you will stay away from him. This battle isn’t ours. God is going to deal with him.”

He came over and held me. I had never seen him that angry. I couldn't let my husband go to jail. I had to be patient and do things the legal way. Jeremiah was as crooked as they came, and could buy his way out of anything. If Quentin went and did something, it would make matters worse. I'd never see my kids again.

Going to the press would be pointless, because I didn't have any proof, and the media would let Jeremiah convince them that I was the crazy ex-wife and was trying to get even.

"I want to take a bath," I said, breaking free of his embrace. I was exhausted.

"Okay, baby. I'll make you some tea."

I nodded and headed upstairs. I ran the bathwater, and Quentin came up with a cup of tea for me a little later.

"Here you go, babe. I'm going to run out to Sprint really fast before they close and get you a new phone."

"Thanks, baby, and promise me you won't go anywhere near Jeremiah."

"I won't. As much as I want to beat his ass, you're right. It will only make things worse, and I know how bad you want the kids, so I will let it go for now."

"Thank you." He left, and I got in the tub.

When he got back with my new phone a few hours later, I saw that I had a text message from Kelly.

I heard what happened at the church, and I'm sorry. Dad is here with Franklin and is saying some horrible things about you.

I texted her back. Stay out of it, Kelly. Your dad is a man on edge. Don't provoke him and anger him more.

I'm in my room. I can hear them through the vent.

Just don't get involved, Kelly.

Does this mean we have to stay with him? He said you will never see us again.

For now, Kelly. We have to be patient. Just please don't provoke your father.

I won't. I love you, Mama Ann.

I love you too, baby.

Gn.

Gn.

I felt so bad. While Lena and J.J. were too young to know what was going on, Kelly was old enough to understand everything. I hated that she was being affected by this.

I said a prayer and went to bed. There was nothing else I could do at that point, so I gave it to God.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Samantha

It had been six months of trying to get pregnant, and I was about ready to give up, but Charles suggested that we talk to a doctor. He said that there might be some medical issues that were causing the issue, so I agreed.

We got to the appointment, only to learn that we were already pregnant. I was blown away. Since we weren't expecting to get a positive result, I didn't know what to say when the doctor asked me how far along I thought I might be. I had just had a menstrual the month prior, so I knew the miracle had occurred a couple of weeks ago, when we'd decided to just make love. No ovulation kit, no temperature taking, and no pillows under my ass to elevate my pelvis.

"Pregnant," Charles repeated.

I had the same astounded look on my face that he had. "Doctor, are you sure? I mean, we've taken a test every month."

"Well, sometimes you can get a false negative, so we are going to do a vaginal ultrasound to see how far along you are," she answered.

"Okay, but I do want to add that I was diagnosed with vaginal herpes a few years ago," I said.

"Oh yeah? When was your last outbreak?"

"Oh my God. It's been over three years now."

"That's amazing. I mean, that virus is a nightmare for some and a breeze for others," the doctor noted.

"I've heard, and we're blessed that my husband hasn't contracted it."

"And he may never, but unless you two are working on babies, I recommend you still take protective measures."

"I'm not worried," Charles said, taking my hand.

“I’m sure, but if you can prevent it, you should,” the doctor told him.

“I know, but I’m with Sammie forever, and I’ll handle whatever comes our way.” Charles smiled at me. He was truly in love with me, and he had my back.

“Okay, but I want to be honest with you, Mrs. Cooper, with that being a factor, a vaginal birth won’t be an option. We can’t risk harming the baby.”

“What about during the pregnancy? Are there any concerns?” Charles asked. I wanted to know the same thing.

The doctor shook her head. “No, none at all. In your womb, your baby will be safe.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Thank God.”

“Well, let’s take a look, and as we get closer to your due date, we’ll determine the date for a scheduled C-section.”

I nodded and stood. She walked over and gave me a gown.

“I need you to remove your clothing from the waist down, and I’ll be right back.”

I did as she instructed, and Charles and I waited nervously. He stood next to me, holding my hand.

“I can’t believe we are pregnant, baby. This is so surprising, I mean, wow. We are pregnant.” I smiled at him.

“I know, Sam. I mean, baby, I’m bursting. I can’t believe this. Are you happy, baby?”

“Yes, I am elated. I’m just scared, honey,” I said.

“Why? She said you will be fine.”

“I know, but I really wanted to have a vaginal birth. And there are so many concerns about C-sections.”

“Baby, don’t worry. Women have them every day, and this is the best thing for the baby.”

“I know.” I smiled again. “I hope it’s a boy.” I knew Shana had given him his first child, but giving him a son would mean so much.

“I didn’t want to say it, but me too. Charlie is adorable, and I love my baby girl to death, but a son, a little replica of me, would be ...” He paused, grinning. “Let’s just say I’d love to have a son.”

Just then, the doctor came back in, with a nurse in tow. They had wheeled in a piece of equipment, and I assumed it was the machine that was going to tell me how far along I was.

They dimmed the lights, and twenty minutes later, we learned we were approximately ten weeks along. I had been getting false negatives, apparently.

I asked about all the wine I had drunk after getting negative results and having what I believed at the time was my cycle. The doctor said the baby should be fine, and my husband and I went home with huge smiles on our faces.

Chapter Forty

Andrea

I sat in my rocker, rocking my three-month-old baby girl. She was perfect, and although I was happy to have a new addition to my family, I missed my other kids terribly. I had seen them only a few times since that night Jeremiah attacked me in his office, and that was because Kelly and I were thick as thieves now. She helped me to see them. She was now driving, and she brought them by whenever she could. Behind Jeremiah's back, of course. Lena, J.J., Kelly, and I had a code of silence. We kept it our secret.

I put little Quintana down when Q alerted me that Kelly was downstairs. I went down, surprised to see her. She was upset. It wasn't anything new, so I fixed her a strawberry smoothie to turn her frown upside down. I made one for myself, and since my breast milk was too weak for my baby and she was on formula, I added a double shot of vodka to my smoothie. Kelly was there to vent about Jeremiah again, and I always needed something strong when we spoke about that snake. I was glad to have Q, my remedy and my prescription for the side effects of my first marriage.

"I hate him, Mom," Kelly said. She was no longer calling me Mama Ann. Her real mom had broken her heart three weeks ago, when Kelly had asked if she could come back to live with her. She had told Kelly no and then had informed her that she was getting married and was leaving the state. Not happy at all with her gay father, Kelly had driven to my house first after getting that news and had cried her eyes out, begging me to take them away from Jeremiah.

"Don't say that, Kel. You know that isn't true."

"It *is* true. We sit in church, and I watch him put on this performance, like he is so holy, when I see Brother Franklin creeping out of our house at the crack of dawn. Do you know Dad told me that he and Brother Franklin are only praying when he is over? He said that brothers in Christ can sometimes be closer than a husband and a wife, like David and Jonathan in the Bible."

“Yeah, well, he is lying. King David and Jonathan shared a brotherly love and bond that had nothing to do with sex or anything against Christ. Your dad is just twisting the Word of God to justify his behavior.”

“I know, and he needs to be shut down, Ma. The church needs to know who he really is. There have been countless rumors, whispers, and allegations, and they have paid off everyone who has accused him of sexual harassment or inappropriate conduct and have just swept things under the rug, like it was nothing. Sometimes, I feel like they want to ignore the obvious. Some church folk want to believe in a fairy tale and not the truth.”

“Kelly, baby, I told you that God will take care of him.”

“I know, but I wish that God would move now. I don’t want a gay father!” Her eyes welled up. “And we want to live with you. I miss out on everything, because I’m either at the church or babysitting or cooking or cleaning or helping with homework. And I’m not even looking forward to the summer, because Dad has already decided we are all going to Bible camp. I don’t want to go home, Ma. I mean, I love Lena and J.J., but we had a mom who took care of us and Dad took you away. I hate him for that. I miss your blueberry pancakes in the morning.” She started to cry.

I got up and wrapped my motherly arms around my baby. I’d had Kelly since she was a small child, and we’d had our differences back in the day, when her mother used to put foolishness in her head about me, but her visits to her mom had become sporadic over the years, she and I had grown closer. She’d rebel—all teenagers did—but all in all, I knew that she loved me and that she was thankful I was her mom.

“Baby, please don’t cry. I know you want God to pull him off of his throne, and so do I, but your father is powerful and has a lot of people on his team. We are no match for him. Being the head pastor of a mega church kinda makes him untouchable. I’ve tried to expose him, but with no proof and with none of his alleged victims actually pursuing an investigation, there is absolutely nothing we can do. Brother Franklin must be in love with him to carry on such an evil

affair, and they just throw money at those who try to challenge him. Only God can tear him down.”

She cried even harder. “If it wasn’t for Lena and J.J., I’d run away,” she sobbed. She was hurting, and my hands were tied.

“I know, baby, but all we can do is pray. I miss you guys so much, more than words can say. I miss taking care of you all and seeing your beautiful faces every day. I’d give anything to have you guys right here. We just have to pray, Kelly. All we have is our God. I know I was wrong for having an affair while I was married to your father, but I’ve repented, and my conscience is clear. God knows how bad I want you guys back.”

She just cried. After a few moments, she wiped her eyes. “I have to go and get Lena and J.J. from Mrs. Morrison,” she said. “I was supposed to be in band practice, but I had to come and talk to you. Dad is going to Memphis next week for a weeklong revival, so as soon as school is over, we will come over.”

“How about we forward the calls to your cell and you guys stay here? I will make sure Lena and J.J. get to school on time. That way, you will have some time to hang with your friends, and I will cook blueberry pancakes every morning and make dinner every night. I only have one more month to be off. A week with you guys would be great.”

“I know, Mom, but Dad has asked Mother Pearl to stay with us.”

“Well, I’ll have a chat with Mother Pearl, Kel, and I promise you will be with me, even if I have to come and stay there.”

“You promise?” she asked, with hope in her eyes.

“I promise.”

She stood to leave. I packed up the fried chicken, mac and cheese, greens, potato salad, and sweet potatoes I had prepared that afternoon for dinner. *Oh, well.* It was for my kids. There was nothing left for me and Q, so I picked up the phone and ordered carryout. I hadn’t expected Kelly to stop by, but I’d

rather the kids eat a home-cooked meal versus some restaurant food, like they had been eating.

After Kelly left, Quentin came into the kitchen. “Baby, I’m starving. Bring on the food.” He sat down at the table, rubbing his hands together.

“It will be here in forty-five minutes,” I said.

“Huh? Where is the food you cooked? I walked in earlier to the aroma of home cooking. Where is it?”

“I gave the food I cooked to Kelly. The kids don’t get home-cooked meals often, so I sent what I cooked home with her.”

He looked disappointed. “Seriously?”

“Yes, baby, and I promise I will cook tomorrow. I just couldn’t send my child home to order another pizza.”

He sighed. “It’s fine, baby. I understand. I wish we were all under one roof and could have dinner together. I’m sorry, baby. I know you miss them. I know you want them back, and I know it’s hard to be away for them.”

“Harder than you know. I’d feel much better if Jeremiah was at least at home, looking after them. He’s putting the burden on Kelly, and she is a mess, Q. I just want to go and get them.” I looked down. “By the way, next week they will be here, or I have to go there. Jeremiah is going to Memphis for a week, and I want to take advantage of the time I can spend with them.”

“Baby, is that a good idea? I mean, if Jeremiah finds out, it will ruin your custody case.”

“Q, I know. I just pray he doesn’t. He is asking Mother Pearl to look after my kids. Baby, Mother Pearl is older than dirt. She’s sweet, but she can’t take care of my kids.”

“I don’t know, Drea. I don’t want you violating any laws. I mean, we have Quin now, and you can’t get in any trouble with the law.”

Frustrated, I yelled, “Don’t you think I know that, Q? I love my baby, you, and my new life, but I am not whole without those kids. You’ve met them only on a few occasions, and you

haven't spent enough time with them to bond. My kids are my everything, Q. As an adult, you will be all right. Quin will always be all right, because we will be together forever, but I still have Kelly, Lena, and J.J. I love them, Q, and I miss my babies. I miss my babies." I began to cry. He came around the counter to hold me. "You don't know my kids. You haven't had a chance to fall in love with them." I sobbed.

He held me tighter. "You're right, baby, I don't know them well, but I know you, and I love you. I love what you love. I want what you want. They are a part of you, and I love them through you. I understand, baby, more than you know. I hate whatever makes you hurt, and I know not having them hurts. However you want to do it when Jeremiah goes out of town, I've got your back. Even if it causes trouble, I'm on your side."

I appreciated my husband for having my back. And I was grateful that he was willing to go out on a limb for me.

* * *

I thought all was lost when it came to Jeremiah getting his comeuppance, until the following Sunday, right before Jeremiah's departure for Memphis. I was in the kitchen, preparing a big dinner. I was expecting the kids to come over as soon as he left.

Q ran into the kitchen. "Baby, turn on the news," he said, looking around for the remote to the kitchen TV.

"Why, babe? What's going on?"

He grinned. "They got him. They got his ass."

He found the remote and turned the television to the local news channel. The caption on the TV screen read PASTOR JEREMIAH YOUNG EXPOSED BY A VIDEO OF HIM AND HIS GAY LOVER IN A UNCOMPROMISING POSITION. A clip with blurred-out body parts was shown, but it was clearly of Jeremiah and Franklin in his bedroom, doing the unthinkable. How that footage had been captured and then leaked to the press had me puzzled. Kelly was the only one who could have pulled this off.

"I gotta go to the house," I blurted.

“I’m going with you,” my husband declared.

We rushed up and got the baby and headed to my old house. Reporters were everywhere, and I was grateful I still had the garage-door opener in my car. I pulled inside the garage and quickly shut the garage door, leaving the loud, aggressive reporters in the driveway and on the lawn. Once I got inside the house, I told the kids to run and pack a bag. Once they were ready, I loaded them in the car, and we got the hell out of there.

The next afternoon, Jeremiah texted me and asked me to meet him at the house.

With my kids safe and sound, I agreed, and after some convincing, Q allowed me to leave alone and meet Jeremiah.

Chapter Forty-one

Josephina

Although I thought house hunting wasn't necessary, since my daughter had been laid to rest, my fiancé thought it was what we needed. He'd said that we didn't have to live in a hotel, that we needed our own space, so I'd agreed to go and look.

After we saw three houses, I was ready to go home, but I stuck it out. I was glad I did. House number four was it. It had five bedrooms, four baths, a finished basement, a beautiful deck, gorgeous landscaping, and a pool. Swimming was something Angelica loved, and I didn't want to leave the hotel, because of the pool. She was a human fish. She spent a lot of time in the pool when the weather was warm. But even if the house came without a pool, it was perfect. It had been remodeled and upgraded with all the modern touches I desired. And the kitchen ... Oh, my Lord, the kitchen was fantastic.

Jay and I hung around, looking at each room for the third time, talking about all the meals we'd prepare in the kitchen together. We decided right then and there that we wanted to make an offer.

"Jay, I love this house, but my name cannot go on it. I've destroyed my credit, babe, and if you attempt to run my Social Security number, it will ruin our chances." I confessed this because I didn't want any secrets.

"Josie, I'm buying me and my family a house. I've never asked about your financial status, because I can take on the responsibility of a family. I don't care if you save your checks or quit your job. We can get your credit back on track, so I'm not worried. As far as food, shelter, clothing, and utilities are concerned, I will take care of that. You can shop for you and Angelica with your checks, as far as I'm concerned. I will managed the house."

"It's just so much to ask, Jay, and I feel funny. I know I shouldn't, but I've never had a man take care of me. I have

twenty grand left over from Ana's policy. It's yours. I'd be happy to give it all to you for a down payment for this house."

He chuckled. "Baby, you set that aside. I don't need it. I'm not a millionaire, but I'm okay. If you want this house, just say it."

I hesitated and looked around. The house was perfect. Master on the main floor, a guest suite and bathroom, and a loft area upstairs, a finished basement, a pool, and Angelica's bedroom would be bigger than my master at the hotel.

I smiled. "I want this house, baby. I love this house. It is perfect. I can't wait to cook in this gorgeous kitchen."

"Well, it's yours," he said.

He went outside to speak with the Realtor. The house was listed at 420 grand, and he put in an offer for four hundred, with all closing costs included. Two days later we got a counteroffer of 405, closing costs included. We accepted.

"Baby, we got a house!" I screamed.

He shared in my excitement. "We got a house. Now we need to head downtown and change your last name."

I froze. "Huh? Now? You want to get married now? I want a wedding, Jay. I went to city hall with José."

"We can have a wedding, a fabulous one at the house, if you'd like, but I don't want to move into our home being just your fiancé."

I let out a deep breath. "I don't want to go not being your wife, either, so let's do it."

We went to get a marriage license and found out that we had to wait twenty-four hours after we submitted the initial paperwork. I was sort of glad, because I really wanted Angelica to be there. The next day, we took her out of school and went to exchange vows.

Once married, we went to Sammie's to celebrate. I shared my good news with Sam, and she shared hers with me. I was married to the man of my dreams, I was moving into my first

house, and the side effects of José and Ana seemed like a distant memory.

Chapter Forty-two

Andrea

I pulled up to the house and was grateful the reporters were gone. Still, I was sure there was someone out there taking his or her job a little too seriously, lurking in the bushes, so I used my garage-door opener and drove into the garage. I gave less than a nickel for what Jeremiah had to say, but I did hope to hear him say I could have my kids. I got out of the car and went inside. The house was still—no movement, no sounds—so I walked slowly into the family room.

“Jeremiah?” I called out. I heard nothing. All four of his vehicles were there, and I knew he hadn’t asked me over only to be gone. “Jeremiah?” I called out again, a little louder. This time, I heard his voice.

“In here,” he called from his bedroom.

I headed in that direction and stopped at his open doorway. Nervous and shaking, I stood there. My mouth was dry, and I wished I had stopped for water before I went to his room.

“You wanted to talk to me?” I said nervously, my hands trembling. I was in no mood to fight, and I prayed for God to protect me, because Jeremiah liked putting his hands on me. I knew he was in a bad place, and I prayed he wouldn’t beat my ass or choke the life out of me.

“Yeah.” He sniffled. He was sitting on his bed. “I wanted to settle up.”

Confused, I said, “Jeremiah, what are you talking about? You don’t owe me a thing.”

“I do,” he said and scratched his head with a gun.

Stunned at the sight of it, I said, “Jeremiah, please put that away. You know I’m terrified of guns.” I didn’t know what his state of mind was, and I feared he wanted to kill me. Tears formed in my eyes. “Please, Jeremiah, don’t hurt me,” I begged. “I have four kids to raise. Don’t do this to me. I can’t leave my babies.”

“Relax, Ann!” he yelled. “I’m not going to hurt you. Our children need you. I would never do that to them.” He got up and paced. “I’m fucked up right now, Ann. I can’t bounce back from this. There isn’t a number amount that I can write on a check to make thousands of members not see what they saw. My baby, my firstborn, betrayed me. She set her fancy little gadget—which you bought her, I might add—to record me and Franklin doing our business. She exposed her father, Ann!” he roared.

“Jeremiah, please put that gun away. We can get through this. All is not lost. God forgives. You know that. This gun thing is not how He wants us to handle things,” I whispered.

“I won’t put the gun away. God has a special place in hell reserved for my soul. You were a good wife, a good woman, but I couldn’t love you the way Christ loves the church. Even though I know you wanted to, you never turned me on.”

He continued to pace. “I lay with you and fucked you only because that was what I was supposed to do. I’ve never been attracted to you, Ann, and I detested making love to you. Touching your body, sucking your tits, made my stomach turn. Yes, a nut felt good. I mean, I see why Quentin loves you. Your pussy was good. But I fucked you while thinking about a man’s asshole, darling. When you gave me head, I used to imagine you were Denzel or Morris, you know, those niggas you and the girls at the salon blush over.

“I’ve been gay since I was fourteen, Ann, but I had to be a preacher’s kid, had to follow in my righteous father’s footsteps. I tried to suppress these feelings, but I’m bound for hell either way.” He sniffled and put the gun to his head.

I slid down onto my knees. “Jeremiah, you still have me and our children. If you lose everything, we will still love you and will be here for you. Don’t do this. Hell is your home if you take your life. As a man of God, you know this. But if you repent and ask our Savior to help you, He will. God is not ready to toss your soul into the pit, but if you pull that trigger, you leave Him no choice. You can be forgiven for this, Jeremiah, God is a good and long-suffering God. You have been evil to me, but I forgive you, Jeremiah. Baby, I forgive

you. I will be by your side every step of the way. Don't let Satan trip you up. You've always preached that, Jeremiah, so you've got to believe it."

I was terrified. He continued to pace, and I had no idea what his next move would be. I began to sing. With a tear-filled face, I sang Marvin Sapp's "Grace and Mercy." That had once been Jeremiah's theme song, the song he played over and over again, the one he beckoned me to sing so many times, because he said I had the voice of an angel.

Finally, he stopped pacing. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and I got to my feet, continuing my song. I went from a soft voice to a powerful voice when I sang, "*You see, I'm not what I want to be, but I'm not what I used to be, since He cleansed and made me whole.*"

I reached for his hand, begging my God to let him give me the gun.

In a voice barely loud enough for me to hear, Jeremiah said, "Heaven has no room for faggots." Then he pulled the trigger.

His body hit the floor, and blood and brain fragments sprayed the bed. I was paralyzed. My heart raced, and I took quick, short breaths. My phone, which I gripped in my hand, just in case I had to call Quentin, rang at that exact moment. When I saw Sam's number, I answered. I didn't know what to do.

I was too scared to move. I told her to come quickly to the house I once shared with Jeremiah. "He, he, he, ... just come now please!" I was in the same spot, two inches away from him, when the paramedics rushed in. They told me later that they found me by the sounds of my sobs. I cried for him. I wailed for his soul, because I believed what I'd been taught about heaven and hell. I knew there were some who didn't believe, some who had a different belief, but from what I believed in my heart and soul, my children's father's final resting place would be in the pits of hell.

His body lay there, his lifeless eyes open, blood and flesh everywhere. The image was embedded in my mind. It was all I could see.

“Come on. We got you,” Sam said as she and Josie helped me from the floor and led me to the kitchen. I was hysterical and was crying uncontrollably.

The police rushed in, and I heard Josie say, “He’s in the bedroom on the lower level. That way.”

As it turned out, there was no need for the paramedics. He was already dead. I started to hyperventilate, and the EMTs rushed into the kitchen to help me. They gave me oxygen, and I felt a prick in my hand.

“She witnessed the entire thing,” I heard Sam say before everything went black.

I woke up in the back of the ambulance, and Quentin’s was the first face I saw. “Oh, baby,” I said and began to sob in his arms.

“Shhh, baby. Calm down. It’s okay. You are okay. You are fine.”

“Is he gone? Did it really happen? Did Jeremiah... ?” I hoped I hadn’t really witnessed that horrific scene.

“Baby, it’s okay.” He held me.

“No, no, no, no. Did he? Is he dead? Please tell me that he’s okay,” I demanded.

“Drea, he is gone, baby.”

I sobbed harder. I didn’t cry for him; I cried for my children and for myself. That sight had been horrific. I didn’t need that in my memory, and I hated him for choosing me to witness his suicide.

“My kids, my kids. Oh, God, my kids.”

“It’s going to be all right, baby.” Quentin continued to hold me.

* * *

I thought that all would be good after that, but the controversy started. Accusations, dragging my family’s name through the mud, and harassing my children. We had to put them in private school. Since Jeremiah had never changed his

will after our divorce, everything was still slated to go to me. Lawyers worked rapidly on my behalf to settle our assets, and I sold the church. With the profits, I gave my children over twelve million dollars, and I set all of them, including Quintana, up with a trust fund. She wasn't Jeremiah's, but I'd been through enough to give her a portion.

It took a good seven months for the scandal of our lives to die down, and I thanked God that the publicity generated by it increased business and profits for my salon. By the time Quin was one, I was pregnant with my fifth kid. Things were finally starting to feel normal.

Kelly had exposed Jeremiah. I guessed she needed to be free of him too. I had been through it all because of the side effects of Jeremiah, but I was grateful that God had seen the best in me, my husband, and my children to allow us to move on and forget our tragic life with Pastor Young.

Chapter Forty-three

Josephina

We were at my new house and were holding Sam's baby shower. She had wanted to wait until after he was here and healthy, so we were celebrating his birth.

"Gather around everyone. Gather around," I said, tapping a glass. "We are ready to open the gifts, but I have an announcement. We have another pregnant woman here. Well, make that two."

Everyone started whispering.

I went on. "Andrea and ..." This got Jayden's attention. "I am also pregnant, so in seven months, we will be right back here, doing the same thing for Jayden and me."

This was the first time Jayden had heard the news. He scooped me up in his arms and kissed me. Everyone applauded. I was happy. I had lost a child, and for a long time, I had thought I wouldn't be able to get over it, but God had had mercy on me, and each day had got easier.

For a while, Andrea had had nightmares about Jeremiah's final moments, but, thank God, they'd gone away. Andrea had her children and the man of her dreams, and she was happy.

Sam had finally shared with me her secret concerning why she and Charles had divorced. What mattered was that they were stronger than ever now and they were happy.

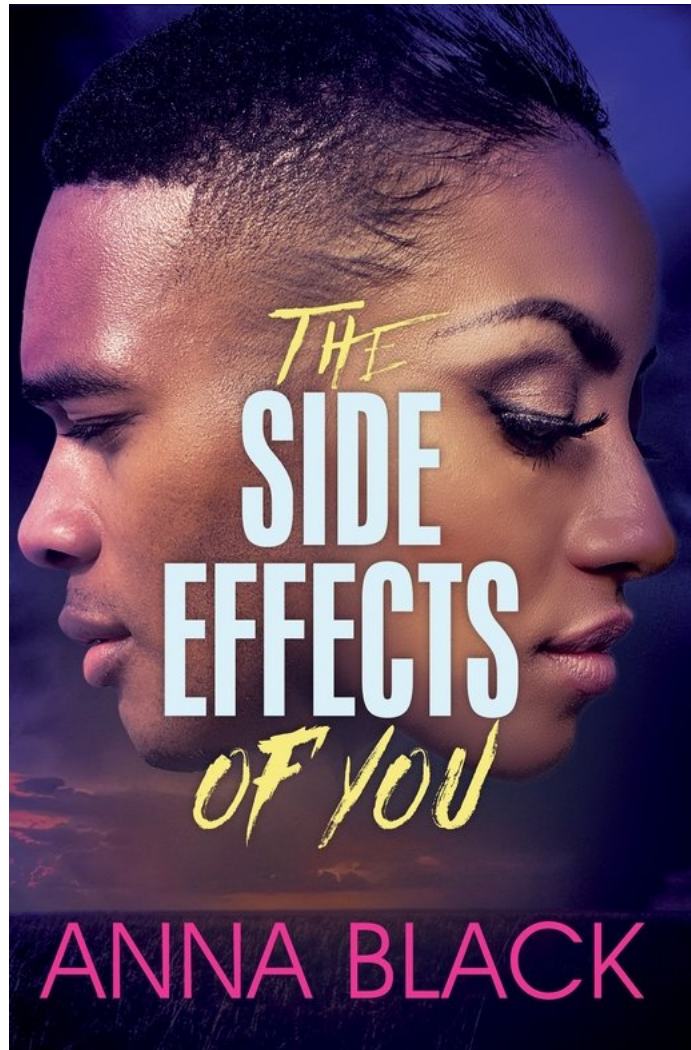
Jayden was heaven sent and helped me get through the most difficult time of my life. I was happy. Angelica was still a superstar student, but now, at seventeen, close to eighteen, she had her first boyfriend. Jayden and I were both relieved that he was just as much of a nerd as she was.

I missed my Ana every day, but every now and again, God gave me a nice dream so I could spend time with her, and for that, I was grateful.

We all experienced the side effects of prior relationships and fucked-up situations, but for every side effect, there was a

remedy. Jayden, Angelica, and my new baby girl, Analicia, were mine. Charles, Charlie, and Charles Jr. were Sam's. Lastly, Quentin, Kelly, Lena, J.J. Quintana, and Quentin Jr. were Andrea's. We all went through a lot to earn a lot, and we lived the rest of our lives in peace and in happiness.

The End!



THE
**SIDE
EFFECTS**
OF YOU

ANNA BLACK