

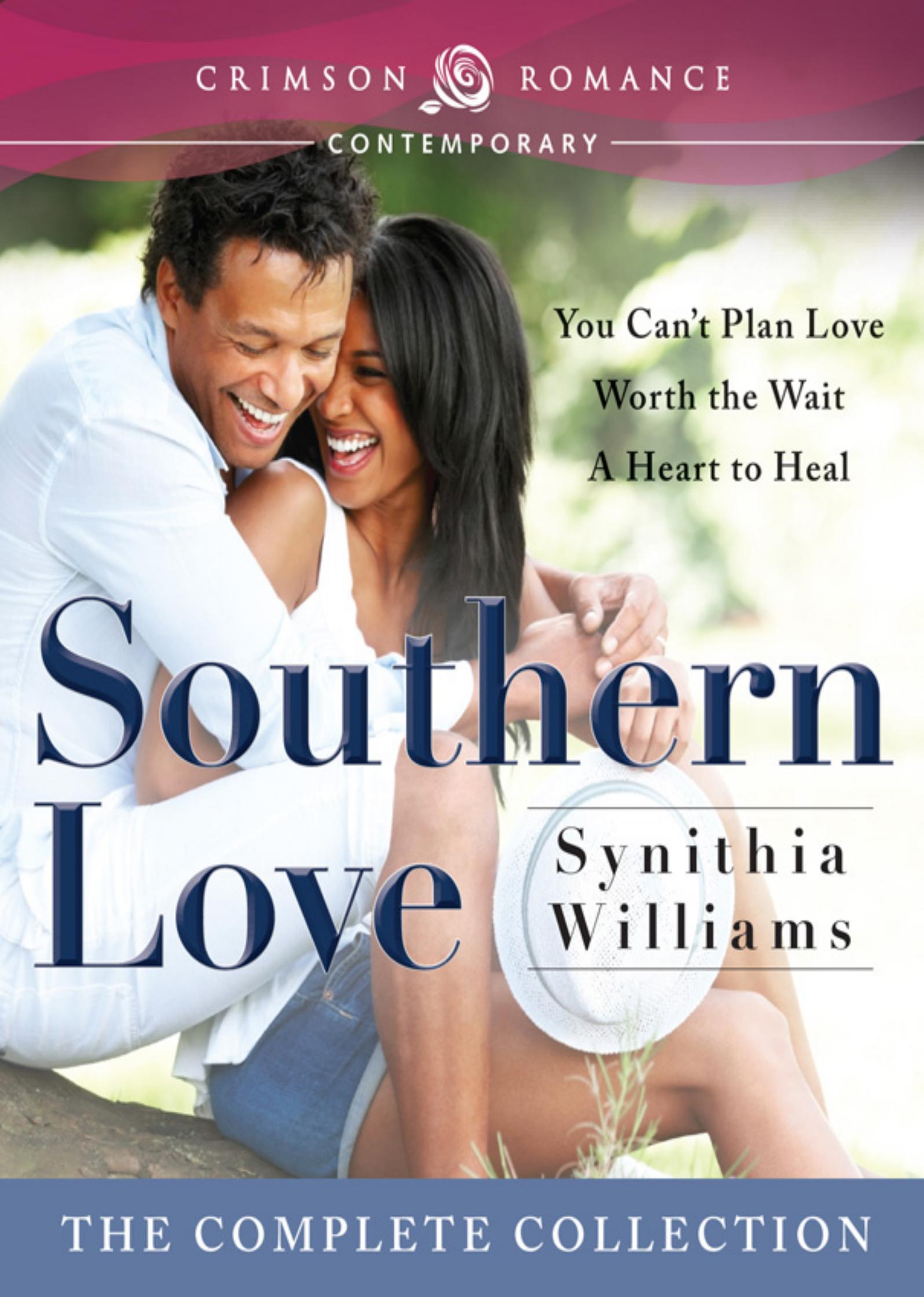
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Worth the Wait

A Heart to Heal



Southern Love

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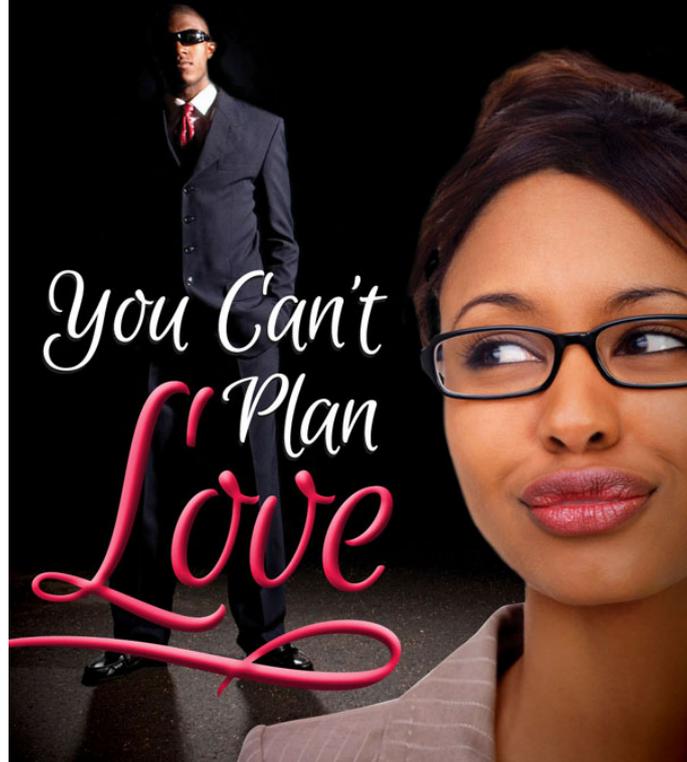
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About the Author

Chapter 1

Kenyatta Copeland felt bile rise in her throat. She looked down at the half-eaten quesadilla she'd ordered for lunch, but couldn't blame her sickness on that. Her friend Angie chatted happily about some game her daughters had played the night before, oblivious to the lack of interest of her two lunch partners.

She tried swaying from side to side with the Latin music playing in the background of the Mexican restaurant, hoping it would hide her anxiety. But when she caught the eye of Carol, her other friend sitting across from her in the booth, she knew she was busted. It would take a miracle to get through lunch without making Carol suspicious. Carol could sniff out a lie from a mile away.

With a deep breath to calm her rolling stomach, she pulled her hand from her lap and slapped it on the table. "Brad asked me to marry him last night." She looked into Carol's eyes and smiled. "And I said yes."

Angie froze in the middle of her sentence before squealing and leaning over to hug her. "Oh my God, that's wonderful!" Kenyatta couldn't help but smile at

her friend's exuberance. There was a definite blush beneath Angie's tan skin as she grabbed Kenyatta's hand for a better look at the ring. "I can't wait to go dress shopping with you! Picking out my wedding dress was the best part of my wedding!"

Kenyatta eased her hand out of her friend's grip. "He just asked me last night, Angie. I haven't thought that far ahead."

Carol raised a well-manicured brow. "Well, at the rate he's moving, I'm surprised he hasn't picked your dress."

Kenyatta sighed and rolled her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Carol shrugged her shoulders as if she hadn't loaded her comment with hidden meaning.

The air conditioning blasted to compensate for the August heat, but it was still warm inside. Yet there Carol sat wearing a long-sleeved zebra print jacket over a red camisole. On any other big woman, the outfit would have looked ridiculous, but as usual, Carol made it work.

"Don't get your damn panties in a bunch. I'm not saying anything you don't already know. You've only been dating for six months and he's already asked you to marry him."

Kenyatta sat up straighter. "It's been longer than that. I've known him for almost two years. We've only officially dated the past six months."

Angie jumped to Brad's defense. "When a man knows what he wants, he doesn't wait around for it. Brad loves Kenyatta, and that's why he's ready for a commitment."

"Maybe," Carol answered as she ate another tortilla chip. She flung the hair from her shoulder-length jet-black wig over her zebra-clad shoulders and sat back against the booth, never taking her eyes off Kenyatta.

Angie ignored Carol's dry reply and kept talking, "And we can both agree that he's better than the other guys who've sniffed around Kenyatta."

"Amen to that!" Carol agreed.

Kenyatta turned from one to the other and laughed. "Will you two stop talking as if I'm not here? You act as if I've been through a dozen failed relationships. Brad is only the second guy I've dated seriously since college."

"We're counting the fool you messed around with in college as well," Carol said around the tortilla chip in her mouth.

Kenyatta stopped laughing and pointed at the two of them. "I'm not alone in that department."

Carol looked away, and Angie gulped down her iced tea. She knew neither of them wanted to revisit the messed up situation they all were a part of in college.

Angie regained her composure first and stared pointedly at Kenyatta. "We're not going to get into a discussion about the fiasco with Robert, even though you've let that situation rule your dating life ever since."

Kenyatta held up her hand. “Well, it’s not as if I had any better luck with Chad after Robert. So, please don’t act as if I’ve had a multitude of brothas come through my life.”

Angie sighed. “Okay, so we’ve all made our mistakes — who hasn’t? But Brad is a really nice guy. I’m truly happy you’ve finally found love.”

Kenyatta suppressed the need to roll her eyes. In Angie’s world the sun rose and set on her husband; she wouldn’t understand Kenyatta’s reasons for marrying Brad. Brad was safe, and right now she only bet on sure things. Angie would just take that reasoning as another example of Kenyatta letting her past rule her future, and she wasn’t in the mood for that discussion.

She gave Angie a stiff smile. “Brad is great, and I am happy. I just hope he’ll come around about me giving up my job.”

Angie frowned. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“He keeps saying he wants to take care of me, and he can’t wait for us to have children. I mean, I want a family one day, but I’m not ready to give up my job, stay home and have babies.” She twisted her napkin with frustration. “I mean, I’ve worked hard to become project manager at H2O Consulting. I can’t just give that up.”

Carol lifted her glass of tea in salute. “Amen to that, girlfriend. If it wasn’t lunch hour I’d throw a toast.”

Angie shook her head. “But, don’t you want kids?”

Kenyatta threw down her napkin and laughed. “Yes, one day. But not right now.”

Carol waved her hands. “Babies, babies, everyone’s always talking about having babies.” She pointed at Kenyatta. “I don’t blame you for wanting to wait for a while.”

Angie pointed at Carol. “Says the woman who never wants kids.”

Carol wrinkled her nose as if she’d smelled a dirty diaper. “Hell, no, kids spoil everything. No offense, Angie.”

“None taken.”

Kenyatta rolled her eyes and smiled at her friends. “Regardless of the argument for or against pro-creation, I’m not ready to quit working. I don’t think Brad understands how much I love my job.”

Angie reached over and rubbed Kenyatta’s back. “He’ll come around. He loves you and wants you to be happy.”

Kenyatta grinned and shook her head. “You always believe in happy endings.”

Angie’s face glowed. “And why shouldn’t I? I’ve got a wonderful husband and two beautiful girls. I have my happy ending.”

Carol rolled her eyes at Angie before turning to Kenyatta. “You do realize that if you get married, Brad’s mother will be in your life permanently, right?”

Nausea rolled over her, and she quickly wiped sweat from her brow. She looked at Carol who had a knowing gleam in her eye. Her composure slip would give Carol all the ammunition she needed to blow holes in her plans.

Catching herself, Kenyatta plastered on a smile. “Actually, Brad’s mom and I are getting along better. I don’t think we’ll ever be best friends, but we’ve agreed to disagree on most things.” She continued to smile at Carol who frowned back.

“That’s great, Kenyatta!” Angie said. “Isn’t that great, Carol?” She turned expectantly to Carol.

Carol tossed the tortilla chip she’d picked up back into the basket. “It’s peachy.”

Angie sighed and turned back to Kenyatta. “So, have you set a date?”

“Not yet. Like I said, he only proposed last night. We’ve still got time.”

She looked at the platinum two-carat diamond ring on her finger and her stomach clenched in protest, which only upset her. It must be cold feet. There was no good reason to feel sick at the thought of marrying Brad. Still she pushed the rest of her quesadilla away.

“I think you should get married in the spring.” Angie broke into her thoughts.

Kenyatta squirmed in her seat. “Angie, please, can I get used to the idea first before we start all the planning?”

Carol held up her hands and pretended to tie a knot. “See? There we go again with the panties in a bunch.”

“Where did you get that bag, Carol? It’s nice,”
Kenyatta said.

Carol pulled her napkin off her lap and threw it on the table. “Cut the crap, Kenyatta. You said yes, but you’ve looked sick since telling us. What’s the deal?”

Kenyatta shook her head. “There is no deal. I ate too much.”

“Carol, you always try to find something negative,”
Angie said. “Kenyatta and Brad are in love. Right, Kenyatta?”

Kenyatta’s gaze skirted from Angie to Carol before settling on the table. “I love Brad. We’ve known each other for two years, and I trust him. He’s a smart, successful lawyer, we’re compatible, and he’s been patient and understanding. There’s no reason why we shouldn’t get married.”

Carol leaned across the table and narrowed her eyes. “But are you *in* love with him?”

Kenyatta glared at her friend, who gave her a “gotcha” look.

“I love him enough to marry him. He won’t hurt me.”

Angie leaned closer. “Kenyatta, marriage is serious.”

“I know. That’s why I considered all of my options. I’m twenty-eight. Thirty is right around the corner, and

my chances of getting married after thirty are slim. Brad is single, straight, and loves me. Just because I'm not head-over-heels in love doesn't mean I won't be some day. I genuinely care about Brad, and I do love him for how great he's been to me. I'm making the right decision."

Before her friends could reply, the waitress brought their checks, took their empty plates and walked away. The prickling sensation that came when someone watched you told her they were both staring. Ignoring her friends, she pulled out her debit card, laid the receipt folder on the table and waited for the waitress to return.

She looked down at her watch. She was running late for her meeting with her boss, and he didn't appreciate tardiness.

Kenyatta spoke before her friends tried to continue their previous conversation. "Well, girls, it's been fun, but I've got to go before the boss is all over me."

Carol's frown melted into a sultry smile. "I wouldn't mind having that man all over me."

Angie looked horrified. "Carol, you're married!"

"Oh, lighten up, Angie. Just because I'm married doesn't mean I can't enjoy the view. And that man is fine with a capital F. Chocolate skin, tight ass, and perfect teeth. I don't know how you concentrate at work with ... what's his name again?"

Kenyatta avoided looking at Carol by putting her wallet back in her purse. "Malcolm."

“Yeah, with Malcolm around, I’d be too busy staring at that bulge in his pants.” She grinned at Kenyatta.

Angie frowned. “I wouldn’t. Doesn’t he have a different woman every month?”

“Yeah, who’s the new chick bringing him lunch this month?” Carol asked with a wistful gleam in her eye.

Kenyatta sighed and finally looked back at Carol. “It’s been the same girl for the past few months.” She shrugged. “Maybe he’s settling down.”

“Men like that don’t settle down,” Angie replied.

Kenyatta shrugged and looked away. “Well it’s none of my business who brings him what.”

Carol’s eyebrow shot up again, and the “gotcha” look came back. “Are you sure you’re not interested in testing those waters before tying yourself to Brad forever?”

“Hell no! I’m not interested in sleeping with my boss,” Her denial was forced. So what if she’d had more fantasies about sleeping with her boss than she’d ever care to admit. That was one secret Carol wouldn’t pry out of her.

Angie shook her head. “As interesting as this conversation is, I’ve got a million errands to run before picking up the kids from my in-laws.” She turned to Kenyatta. “I don’t agree with your reason for marrying Brad, but I know he loves you. I’m sure things will work out.”

Kenyatta smiled. “Of course it’ll work out. We fit each other.”

Carol grunted, and Angie cut her eyes at her. “They are great together.” She turned back to Kenyatta. “What are you and Brad doing tonight? Do you want to come over and hang with your nieces?”

Even though they were not related, she and Carol both spoiled the girls so much they were like surrogate aunts.

Kenyatta smiled, but shook her head. “I’d love to, but I can’t. Brad and I are having dinner with Michael and Joi.”

“Brad’s best friend and his wife? Good luck with that. I don’t like them,” Carol said.

Kenyatta picked up a chip and threw it at Carol. “That’s because they don’t put up with your bull like we do.”

Carol shrugged and smoothed her hair. “I’m an acquired taste.”

They laughed as they got up from the table and headed for the door, Kenyatta had to admit they all looked good. Even after two kids, Angie still had a slim figure. She’d met them after leaving the gym and was still wearing her gym clothes.

Carol smoothed her hair and applied lip-gloss. She was the thickest of the three, but she also got the most attention. Her flamboyant, figure-flattering wardrobe, combined with too much confidence, never failed to draw men’s attention.

Outside the restaurant, the oppressive humidity and heat of another summer in Columbia, South Carolina hit them in the face. Thankfully, she had no meetings with clients today, which meant she was able to wear a sleeveless V-neck knit shirt with matching skirt instead of a full suit. She pulled her compact from her purse to check for damage, reapplied her lipstick and smoothed the edges of her hair.

“I hope you have fun tonight,” Angie told Kenyatta. “I miss those days when Jonathan and I went out with other couples, but I love my kids, so I guess it’s a trade-off.”

Carol shook her head. “Trade-off my ass. Greg and I never want kids. It would spoil the fun. You know we like to go at it on the kitchen floor any time of day!”

Kenyatta shook her head and hugged her friends before walking to her car. She opened the door to her black Volkswagen Passat and turned to Carol, who was parked next to her. “Carol, you’re crazy as hell.” She waved at Angie, who was parked across the lot. “I’ll see you later, Angie, call me.”

Angie waved back. “Okay, I will. Bye, Carol, tell Greg I said hello.”

“I will,” Carol told Angie. “Kenyatta, wait up.” She walked over to Kenyatta’s car. “I’m not fooled. Tell the truth, you know your relationship with Brad isn’t as perfect as you make it out to be.”

Kenyatta waved a dismissive hand. “You’re over-analyzing things again. I can’t be the single friend

forever. I want what my parents have, and Brad will give me that.”

“Can you really settle for that? Angie may think love conquers all, but you don’t love Brad.”

Kenyatta frowned. “I do love him. Maybe not as much as Angie loves Jonathan, or you love Greg, but I love him. It’ll grow stronger over time.”

Carol just shook her head and laughed. “You’ve been around engineers too long. You think you can engineer everything in your life.”

Kenyatta shrugged and laughed. “This route won’t hurt me. Mark my words: planning my love life is better than riding the waves of passion.”

“Keep planning. You’ll end up drowning in a tidal wave of lust,” Carol teased before turning serious. “Look, I know the situations with Robert and Chad were messed up, but don’t settle. Rodrick put me through shit, but I wasn’t afraid to open my heart when I met Greg, and I still can’t believe my luck. Don’t kid yourself into thinking Brad’s Mr. Perfect.”

“I’m smarter than that. I know Brad isn’t perfect, but he is perfect for me.” She glanced at her watch. “Look, I gotta go. I’ll call you later.”

She got into her car, turned on the ignition and sped out of the parking lot without looking back. She knew her friend meant well, but they were two different people. She scoffed at Carol’s reference to her ex Rodrick. That fool was crazy, and Brad was ten times the man Rodrick

was. Her decision to marry Brad, stomach queasiness aside, was the right decision. She'd let passion rule her life twice before and had nothing to show for it but a broken heart. No matter what Carol thought, making plans for what she wanted — marrying Brad — made better sense than waiting for some guy to come sweep her off her feet.

Chapter 2

As Kenyatta walked from the parking garage into her office building, a sense of calm infused her. Work was the one place where she was in control. Here she was levelheaded and capable of tackling any problem. She wasn't plagued with doubts about her life when she was working, unlike her personal life, which had often caused her to feel out of balance and unsure. After three years at H2O Environmental, she felt she was making a difference. She relished the challenge of being a woman of color in a field controlled by men. With every successfully completed project, she took pleasure in the congratulations — and sometimes envy — from her male counterparts.

Entering the office was like walking into a second home. She knew where everyone would be and what they'd be doing each day. There were the usual guys hanging at the water cooler procrastinating after lunch. Mr. Summers, the office manager, would come out and ask for a status update on projects if they stood there for more than twenty minutes. She passed the offices of the stressed-out few who thought their world would end if they didn't pretend to be working every second. She

smiled to herself. She didn't have to stress — her projects were always on time, on target, and within budget so she didn't have to appear busy to make herself look good. A few folks tried to stop her as she walked by, but she waved off their attempts to chat since she was running late.

When she entered Malcolm's office, he was on the telephone. He waved her in to sit down when he saw her at the door. Carol was right: Malcolm Patterson was fine. Her gaze traveled over the angular lines of his face, the thick lashes framing chocolate eyes, his wide nose and full lips accented by a perfectly trimmed goatee. He was sexual temptation in a six-foot-three-inch package, but it was more than that. He had confidence that border-lined on arrogance at times, and a presence that automatically drew attention. He was never cocky but didn't hesitate to let you know what he thought or when he was right.

Men like Malcolm were trouble. In the past, she had played the fool for a man with that same combination of good looks and swagger. She was proud of her ability to pretend as if he were no different from any other man she knew, instead of fawning over him as other women often did. Not that he ever noticed or cared. How would he react if he knew that just a whiff of his cologne caused her nipples to harden? *Stop it right now*; she gave herself a mental set down. *Remember past mistakes.*

When Malcolm hung up, he turned to Kenyatta and looked at his watch. "You're late."

"It won't happen again." She said.

He nodded. She could tell by the admiration in his eyes that he appreciated her admitting she was late without offering an excuse. “I want to ask you something. Come over and look at these plans.”

He stood and walked over to a set of engineering plans on the table in his office. Kenyatta followed and stood beside him. She was immediately aware of the spicy scent of his cologne and the heat of his body. Her nipples hardened in their usual reaction to his nearness. She gave a mental shake of her head and took a few steps away from him. Oblivious to her discomfort, Malcolm pointed to the plans. They were a preliminary design of a series of ponds to clean the runoff from a commercial area before it entered a protected wetland.

“Jeremy turned this over to me earlier today but had to leave before I could go over it with him. I know you’re helping with the project, and I had a few questions about the pipe sizing and the location you chose for the outlet.”

“Sure, what did you want to know?”

“Why did you change the original design?” His question wasn’t accusing, only curious.

For the next few minutes, Kenyatta explained why they chose a smaller pipe than previously discussed and why they’d changed the outlet design to prevent erosion into the wetland. She moved to the other side of the table and leaned over so she could point out a detail. When she finished explaining, and Malcolm hadn’t responded, she looked up to see if he understood.

Instead of looking at the drawings, Malcolm's gaze was on the V-neck of her top. Kenyatta's gaze followed his. The neckline of her shirt hung loosely, giving him a perfect view of her breasts in the red silk bra she wore. Embarrassed, she stood up abruptly. When he continued to look at her chest, she glanced down and was mortified to see her nipples protruding through the thin material.

Her eyes met Malcolm's, and she forgot to breathe when she saw the raw desire in his gaze. She had never, *ever* seen him look at her with even the slightest interest before. Instantly desire flooded her body and pooled heavily between her legs.

Not knowing what to say, she stood there holding his stare. Why was he suddenly looking at her as if she were the most desirable woman on the planet? He'd dated plenty of women, more than Kenyatta wanted to imagine, and she'd never seen that look on his face with any of them. He took a small step in her direction and her heart raced. Would he kiss her? Would she stop him if he did?

Just as quickly as it arrived, the moment was gone as he cleared his throat and looked away. "Um, yeah ... I see why you changed the design. That was a good idea, and it'll save money during construction." He abruptly turned and strode to his desk.

Kenyatta shook off the moment and his brusque change. It was foolish to read too much into his look. "That's what we thought. Did you need anything else?"

Her voice was breathless, and she hated that her reaction to him was so obvious.

“Actually, I do need to talk with you about something else.” When he faced her, any trace of the earlier desire was gone. She ignored her disappointment.

“It turns out Jeremy won’t be able to present the work we’ve done in Newberry County at the National Water Quality Association conference in Orlando next week. Since you worked with him on that project, I’d like for you to do the presentation in his place.”

This time Kenyatta’s heart raced due to excitement. Although she was anxious to get her name out as a leading authority on environmental regulations, it was a daunting task to present at a national conference to a room full of professionals. One of the reasons she loved her job was because she actually made a difference. After projects she worked on were completed, testing showed improvements in water quality almost instantly. It wasn’t curing cancer, but it did make an impact.

Working with Jeremy in Newberry had been one of her most challenging and rewarding projects. She personally developed the plan, and she had been a key element in working with the county on its implementation. Their efforts resulted in the removal of two waters from the State Impaired Waters list.

“What happened with Jeremy? Is he okay?” Kenyatta asked, sincerely concerned.

“He’s physically okay, but his mother passed away. He has to fly to Dallas tonight, and he’s unsure when

he'll be back. I know it's short notice, but we really need you to do this. You know this project just as well as he," Malcolm explained.

Kenyatta's brow furrowed. "Not that I don't appreciate the opportunity, but why aren't you doing the presentation? You're the senior project manager."

He nodded. "I know, but you know the details. I just stepped in for contract negotiations." He paused and smiled at her. "Besides, I talked it over with Mr. Summers, and we agree that you're the better candidate. Are you interested?"

Kenyatta took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. She knew she would say yes before Malcolm finished speaking. She also knew Malcolm was the reason for this opportunity. He had originally wanted her to present, but Mr. Summers said Jeremy had better presentation skills. She completely disagreed. Mr. Summers just preferred a man representing the company.

"Yes, of course I'll do it." She said, bouncing with excitement.

Malcolm cleared his throat and looked away quickly as if taken aback by her exuberance, but she didn't care. This would help her career, and she was excited about the opportunity. He looked at her hands — which she'd clasped in front of her — and the ring on her finger. She suddenly wished she'd taken it off before coming to work. Although she knew her reasons for marrying Brad

were statistically solid, she wasn't ready to tell people about her engagement.

"I guess congratulations are in order." He motioned to her left hand.

She could have sworn there was disappointment in his voice, but she dismissed it. There was no reason for him to have feelings about her engagement, yet she still covered her left hand with her right.

"It's more of a promise ring than anything."

He raised an eyebrow. "Aren't we a bit old for promise rings? Especially one that expensive."

"I think it's sweet."

"I think it's the sign of someone who doesn't want to make a commitment."

She frowned. "Brad does want to make a commitment."

"Then why give you a promise ring? What is he, twelve?"

"It's not a promise ring, okay? He ... asked me to marry him."

"So my earlier assumption was right and congratulations are in order."

"It's kind of early for that."

"Why? If he asked and you're wearing the ring, you must have said yes. Unless you're rethinking your answer."

He hit too close to home. She straightened her shoulders. “No, I lo-love Brad and have no reason to change my answer.”

His eyes bore into hers. “Maybe you’re waiting for someone else.”

Kenyatta saw lingering flames of the desire from earlier and her heartbeat went into overdrive. He couldn’t possibly think she wanted a chance with him. Or, could he? Feeling foolish for that thought, she shifted from foot to foot, anxious to get out of his office.

“There isn’t anyone else. What do you care anyway?”

He blinked and shook his head. “I don’t care. I saw the ring and thought I’d be the first to congratulate you. You’re the one who took us around in circles for no damn reason.”

Her anger flared at his apparent frustration. “I didn’t take us in circles. I’m crazy happy and in love with Brad.”

“Then marry him.”

“I am.”

“Fine. Congratulations. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a conference call in twenty minutes I need to prepare for.”

He turned away and she thought he looked like a pouting kid, but that was foolishness. Malcolm Patterson, God’s gift to women, would not be jealous of his employee’s engagement to another man. The man lived the bachelor’s dream and didn’t show signs of

slowing down. He'd never shown any interest in her, except for that brief moment a few minutes earlier, so he couldn't be jealous. She was letting Carol's warning cause doubts and boost her forbidden crush on her boss. Feeling dismissed as he began typing an e-mail, she turned and walked out of his office without another word.

Chapter 3

Kenyatta was engrossed with work at her desk when the telephone rang. She let out an exasperated sigh at the interruption and answered it.

“This is Kenyatta,” she tried not to let her irritation show through her greeting.

“Kenyatta, where are you? We’re supposed to be at Mike and Joi’s in an hour,” Brad’s voice came through the phone.

Kenyatta looked at the clock on her desk. It was after six. “Shit,” she whispered. So much for leaving work on time today.

She knew Brad was going to be upset. He hated when she didn’t follow their plans to the tee.

“I’m sorry, Brad, I lost track of time. I’ve been put in charge of Jeremy’s presentation and ... ”

“Sweetie, we can talk about it later,” he cut in. “Just leave the office now and meet me at their house. By the time you come home and change clothes for dinner it will be past eight.”

Kenyatta imagined him looking at his watch. It was pointless to try to tell him about the conference when he was in a rush.

She began to organize the various papers on her desk. “Okay, I’m leaving right now and I’ll meet you there. Sorry, work was very crazy today.”

“Well, work was busy for me also, but I remembered our dinner invitation.”

“I said I’m sorry and I’m on my way. You’re wasting time keeping me on the phone.” That would get him to shut up.

He was immediately contrite. “I’m sorry, baby, I just didn’t want to be late. I’ll see you in a few minutes, okay? I love you.”

Kenyatta sighed again, but accepted his apology. “Me too; I’ll see you soon.”

She hung up the phone and turned off her computer. She spent a few more minutes getting everything on her desk in order, grabbed her purse from the drawer she locked it in, and left her office. Seeing Malcolm’s office light on, she peeked inside. He was still working at his desk.

Deciding to forget about their earlier awkwardness, she knocked softly on the door. “I guess I’m not the only one who lost track of time.”

Malcolm looked up and smiled crookedly. Kenyatta’s heart did an extra flip. *Cool it girl. You’re getting married*, she thought.

“Yeah, but I’m wrapping up now. Are you leaving?”
He rubbed his eyes and reached for the cup of coffee sitting on his desk. He took a sip, frowned, and put the cup back down.

“Yes, I’m leaving now. But, I wanted to know if I’ll be able to transfer Jeremy’s reservation to my name? I checked the hotel and all of the conference rooms are booked.”

Malcolm nodded. “I don’t think that will be a problem. We’ll get Grace to do it tomorrow.” He referred to their receptionist.

“Good. No offense, but I didn’t want to bunk up with you,” she teased.

“It might have been fun,” he replied with a raised eyebrow.

Heat filled her face and she cleared her throat before looking away. “Well, regardless, I’m just glad it’ll be worked out. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Kenyatta,” his voice was smooth, almost seductive.

“Good night, Malcolm.” She turned quickly and left his office. He couldn’t be flirting with her. Did he really imply that he would enjoy sharing a room with her? These thoughts plagued her repeatedly as she entered the parking garage and went to her car.

• • •

Malcolm swore silently to himself after Kenyatta left his office. What the hell was wrong with him? Giving her the

third degree about her engagement earlier — as if he should even care — then using his bedroom voice to tell her good night. He must be losing his mind. Coworkers were off-limits, especially, his sexy-as-hell employee with soft brown eyes, smooth skin and a body that could tempt an angel.

It had taken every ounce of control in him not to come across his conference room table today and kiss her until she forgot her own name. But she was his employee, and he didn't mix business and pleasure. He'd learned that the hard way.

He needed a distraction. He picked up his phone and called his younger brother, Jared. If anyone could help him realize a woman wasn't worth ruining your career over, it was his brother. While Malcolm didn't have serious commitments because of the demands of his job, Jared did it because he enjoyed women.

Jared answered after two rings. "What's up, bro?"

"Nothing, man, finishing up at work. It's been a hell of a day, and I need a drink."

"Good timing. I'm meeting Devin for happy hour."

"What's Devin doing here? I thought the town of Helena's only black doctor was too busy to make it into Columbia lately." Their mutual friend was so busy with his practice he and Jared only saw him for an occasional weekend basketball game.

Jared laughed. "He had some workshop or seminar at Palmetto Health Richland. I was supposed to call you

earlier and tell you to meet us but had an important meeting and forgot. My bad.”

Malcolm shook his head. “What was her name?”

Jared laughed. “No lady this time, I really had an appointment. But I can’t hang too late tonight. I have another *appointment* later.”

Malcolm knew what type of appointment his brother meant. “That’s cool. I’ll meet y’all in a few. Where are you going?”

Jared told him the name of the bar and they hung up. Malcolm wrapped up the work on his desk and left the office. As he got into his black hybrid Yukon Denali and drove from Main Street to the Vista, his thoughts returned to Kenyatta.

Malcolm had wanted her from the moment she’d walked into his office. Mr. Summers had interviewed and hired her while Malcolm was out of town. He hadn’t been prepared for the temptation assigned to work for him. He was a man used to going after what he wanted, and he’d wanted her with an urgency he’d never felt before. His reaction surprised him. Not that he found her attractive, but by how much. He figured it was so intense because she was off-limits, and he wasn’t used to denying himself what he wanted. It was easier to treat her like a stranger than flirt with her as he did most women. It would be too easy to forget his boundaries.

He circled the Vista twice before finding a parking spot. As he walked to the bar where he was meeting Jared and Devin, a vision of how delicious Kenyatta’s

breasts looked in that red bra entered his brain. Just the thought stirred his arousal and he cursed himself again. This was crazy. Fantasizing about her like this was juvenile. She was off-limits — period.

The crowd in the bar was light as he walked past tables and a few guys playing pool. That would change soon. Thursday was college night in Columbia. It was also the unofficial start of the weekend. Soon, everyone would be heading downtown to start their weekend early.

He spotted Devin at the bar and walked over. He hoped that Jared was running late as usual. Although Jared could go on forever about why it wasn't smart to get caught up on one woman, Devin would help him make sense of his feelings for Kenyatta.

Malcolm sat next to Devin. His friend was oblivious to the obvious looks from two women sitting at the end of the bar. Devin always drew women's attention with high cheekbones and a straight nose that hinted at Native American ancestry, tan skin and wavy dark hair cut close to his head, but he never noticed the way women fought for his attention.

Malcolm turned to the bartender. "Crown and Coke please." The bartender nodded and began making his drink.

Devin's head jerked up. "Damn, man, bad day?" Malcolm rarely drank hard liquor. Devin had a beer.

"Yeah, man. Is Jared here yet?" The bartender handed Malcolm his drink, and he took a long swallow, enjoying the smoothness as it went down his throat.

“You know your brother’s always late. Why, what’s up?”

He pinched his nose. “Remind me that I’m not supposed to sleep with my employees.”

Devin grinned. “You’re not still thinking about Kenyatta?”

Malcolm looked at the door to make sure his brother hadn’t walked in. “She’s getting married.”

“And? You’re the one with the rule. If you’ve never asked her out, it makes sense she would end up with someone else.”

“I know, and I’m not breaking my rule. I would have happily ignored her for the rest of my life if I hadn’t seen that ring on her finger.”

Devin pointed his beer at Malcolm. “So, you’re jealous?”

“Hell, no. I just never thought she’d actually marry that clown.”

“What’s she supposed to do, fall for the man who’s been giving her the cold shoulder for three years?”

Malcolm pointed at Devin. “Hey, she deserves my cold shoulder. I’ve been in a constant state of ... ”

“Arousal.”

“No ... frustration since she started working for me.”

“And, it would be too easy to forget your rule if you hinted at your ... *frustration*.” Devin was grinning.

Malcolm looked into his drink. “Something like that.” He didn’t say that he liked to see the flash of jealousy in her eyes when he flirted with other women. She may be off-limits, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t appreciate her reaction to him.

“You know, you could always ease your *frustration* with no strings attached.” Devin took a sip of his beer.

Malcolm shook his head. “I don’t sleep with coworkers. Even if I did, she’s not the type. I don’t have time for, or want, a serious relationship. My job is too demanding. That’s why I have the arrangement with Jessica.”

“Ahh, Jessica. The once casual affair that’s turning into a full-blown girlfriend.”

Malcolm scowled. “Don’t say that. She is becoming too attached. It may be time to end things.”

“And start things with Kenyatta?”

“Aren’t you listening? I’m not going after Kenyatta.”

Devin held up his hands. “Then why are you so upset that she’s getting married?”

“Because she’s marrying a jackass.” Malcolm took another long swallow from his drink.

Devin looked doubtful. “How do you know he’s a jackass?”

Malcolm looked back at the door. His brother hadn’t arrived. “Last year he warned me to keep my eyes off Kenyatta.”

Devin laughed. “Okay, most men would say that if they thought another guy was interested in their lady.”

“It’s not just that. I don’t know how to explain it. I’ve only met him a few times, but he seems possessive, and jealous.”

“With a woman that fine, I’d be jealous of you gawking at her, too.”

Malcolm tapped his finger on the bar. “Nah, man, more than that. He doesn’t act jealous in front of her.”

Devin turned to face Malcolm and placed his hand in his chin. “What were the circumstances when he told you to back off?”

Malcolm sighed. “Our Christmas party last year. She was wearing this form-fitting red sweater dress, half the men in the office were checking her out.”

“So, you were gawking at her.” Devin said with a smile.

“No, I was trying to be discreet. This fool comes over to me and tells me to keep my fucking eyes off her.”

Devin’s jaw dropped and he raised his fist to his mouth. “Word, what did you do?”

“I was so shocked he came at me like that, it took a minute for it to register. When it sunk in, I opened my mouth to ask him who he thought he was talking to, and Kenyatta walked over. He smiled at her all happy-go-lucky like and walked away with his arm around her shoulder. I’m telling you that man is messed up.”

“What’s he supposed to do, fight you in front of her? I don’t mean no harm, but I would have told you to keep your eyes off my girl, too. Let you know that I ain’t no punk you can disrespect like that.”

“So you’re on his side?”

Devin pointed his beer at Malcolm again. “I’m just saying, what you call possessive, he calls putting you in your place.”

“It’s more than that.” Malcolm said.

Devin shook his head. “It’s not your problem. She said yes, so he must be doing something right.”

Malcolm scowled. “She deserves better than him. He’s weak, I can tell. She’s smart and needs someone who isn’t intimidated by her success.”

Kenyatta was beautiful, sexy, and smart — exactly what he was attracted to in a woman. He hated stupid women, no matter how beautiful they were. Kenyatta knew as much, if not more, about environmental regulations than he did. They were both a rare breed, two minorities who cared about the environment. Most women’s eyes glazed over when he told them he fell in love with nature when his father took him hunting and fishing as a kid. That’s the reason he became an environmental engineer. He had a feeling Kenyatta would not only understand but also go into the reasons why today’s urban development was ruining yesterday’s fishing holes. No wonder he wanted her.

Devin watched him closely. “It sounds like you think you might be better for her.”

Malcolm scoffed. “Nah, man. She’s a nice woman and one of my best employees. I’m just a concerned supervisor.”

Devin was grinning again. “Then why do I need to remind you that you don’t sleep with employees?”

Malcolm downed the rest of his drink. “She gave me a look today. It was ... I don’t know how to describe it. Maybe I’m making too much of things. It was probably nothing.”

“What was nothing?” Malcolm’s brother Jared walked up. He motioned for the bartender and ordered a beer.

Malcolm no longer wanted to continue his conversation about Kenyatta. He knew his brother would tell him to forget her, or sleep with her then forget her. He was no longer in the mood for that type of advice.

“Nothing, man. Work was crazy that’s all. I didn’t see you come in.”

“That’s because you were too busy talking.” Jared sat down next to Malcolm. Although they were brothers, they didn’t have similar looks. Malcolm inherited their father’s dark skin and rugged looks. Jared had their mother’s lighter complexion and a more muscled frame, a testament to his work as a professional trainer.

“What’s happening in your world?” Malcolm asked Jared.

“I had a meeting with the economic development director in Lexington County. I’m looking at acreage in the county’s industrial park for my production facility. Since Wal-Mart and Target have both decided to carry my line, I’ll need to increase production.”

“That’s great, man. I’m glad to hear you’re making moves.” Devin reached over to give Jared a fist pound.

“Yeah, man, I knew you were looking into that, but didn’t know you were so close to getting things started,” Malcolm agreed slapping his brother on the back. “I guess it was a real meeting you had earlier.” He was proud of his brother. After their father died, Jared left South Carolina and spent the last six years in Los Angeles as a personal trainer to the rich and famous. He’d opened a gym in L.A. before returning to South Carolina to find a location for a production facility for his line of protein bars and shakes.

“Well, if things work out, I’ll be ready to start in eighteen months. Then I’ll have plenty of time for meetings of another kind.” Jared winked at the women at the end of the bar. One fanned herself, and the bolder of the two, winked back.

Devin pushed Jared to get his attention. “Forget those chicks, and tell us what’s up.”

Jared gave the ladies one last look before telling his friends about his plans. Malcolm half listened. His mind replayed his conversation with Devin. He was behaving as if he were better for Kenyatta. If he’d met her under different circumstances, and wasn’t her boss, then yes he

would have actively pursued her. But none of that mattered. He was her boss, and he didn't sleep with employees. Even if she didn't work for him, she was now engaged to another man. He needed to remember that and forget her.

Chapter 4

Kenyatta arrived at Mike and Joi's house thirty minutes after leaving the office. They lived in the rapidly expanding northeast part of Columbia. Their neighborhood consisted of well-manicured lawns around houses well out of her price range.

Brad answered the door. She analyzed his tall, slender frame and sandy complexion. His gray eyes were warm as he grinned at her. When she'd first met him, she thought they were cold; the gray reminded her of a storm cloud. Over time she got over that, but she still preferred warm chocolate eyes.

She saw security when she looked at Brad. His inability to cause her heart to flutter with a look was one of the reasons she was with him. Brad wouldn't play games with her emotions; he didn't have a problem with taking things slow, or making her feel wanted. It was different from the usual rush of excitement and desire that led her to make foolish decisions in the past.

Brad smiled broadly and pulled her into his arms. "Finally, you're here. You look beautiful." He ran his hands up and down her spine. "You smell good, too."

Kenyatta pushed back the wave of panic and slowly slid out of his embrace. Brad was more persistent with his advances lately. He'd been more patient than other guys she dated, and now that she'd agreed to marry him, he had a right to want more, but she wasn't ready to go there yet. A warning bell went off in her head that was a reason to give the ring back now, but she ignored it.

"Thanks, Brad. Where's Mike?" she looked over his shoulder.

"He's out back with Joi. What's the rush? Can't we catch up?" he reached over to take her hand.

"We just saw each other last night. What's to catch up on?"

"We weren't engaged before."

He reached out and touched her left ear. "You're missing an earring. Hard day at work?"

She let go of his hand and stepped out of his reach. "Yeah, but I have some exciting news."

"About work?"

"Yes."

He waved his hand as if to dismiss it. "We'll talk about that later. Let's go out back."

She placed a hand on her hip. "Why do you do that? Act as if it's nothing important when I want to talk about my job?"

Brad reached over and took her face in his hands. "Kenyatta, let's not do this here, please. I do care about

your day, but we're here to have fun with friends. Not talk about work. Can we do that?"

She wanted to argue, but he was right. They didn't need to have this conversation at a friend's house. It would make the rest of the night uncomfortable. She nodded, and he kissed her on the forehead before they headed to the back of the house.

When they walked out onto the deck, Mike and Joi were sitting at the patio table drinking lemonade and talking. Mike jumped up and pulled her into a huge hug, his bear-like frame surrounding her. She gulped in air when he put her down.

"Hey, girl! Brad gave us the good news. Welcome to the family."

Joi stood up and gave Kenyatta a less confining hug. She was a petite woman who always reminded Kenyatta of what a perfect wife should be. Sweet, soft-spoken, and she completely adored her husband. She hoped Brad realized that she and Joi were different people. Joi was happy to stay at home, whereas Kenyatta did not want to give up her career.

"Congratulations, we're so excited," Joi said, holding Kenyatta's hand in hers.

"Thanks, guys, but let's not make a big deal out of it." She smiled weakly.

Mike frowned. "Why not? My boy's been bursting at the seams. I thought you'd be the same way."

“She’s just overwhelmed,” Brad cut in. “It’ll take some getting used to.” He placed his arm around Kenyatta and pulled her close.

Mike didn’t seem convinced, but luckily, Joi saved Kenyatta from a reply.

“You’re right on time. I just finished dinner. Will you help me bring it out so we can eat?”

Kenyatta nodded, pulled away from Brad, and followed Joi to the kitchen to bring the meal out on the deck. While they ate, Mike and Brad talked about work — which she thought was ironic considering he didn’t want to discuss work with her — while Joi asked Kenyatta her thoughts on the wedding. She once again fought back queasiness as she talked about it, while holding dinner down.

After dinner, the four of them played spades. Although Joi was soft spoken, when it came to playing cards, she was competitive. Any lingering uneasiness left Kenyatta once the conversation about the engagement was over. She and Brad were beating Mike and Joi, and as they talked junk, her earlier queasiness about the wedding evaporated. They argued and laughed through three games — Kenyatta and Brad winning two — before calling it a night and agreeing to get together soon.

Brad followed Kenyatta to her townhouse where they settled on the couch to watch *NCIS*. This was what she wanted: to be able to sit and enjoy someone’s company after a long day. Brad put his arm around her, and she smiled as she leaned against him.

“Guess what happened today?” she said during the commercial break.

Brad didn’t take his eyes off the television. “I hate guessing, just tell me what happened.”

Kenyatta shook off her frustration. He was always so damn serious.

“Malcolm asked me to do the presentation for Jeremy at the conference next week.” That got his attention, she thought, as he turned to look at her fully. “Jeremy’s mother died, and he had to leave town indefinitely. Because I worked so hard on this project, they’re letting me present it.” She couldn’t mask the excitement in her voice.

“Why would they give you so much responsibility? Do they realize if you mess up it will reflect badly on the entire company?” When she frowned, he reached out and cupped her face in his hands. “I’d just hate to see you upset when that happens.”

She pulled away. “What do you mean, when that happens? Do you think I’m going to mess up?”

She tried to stand up, but he stopped her with a firm hand on her arm. “Kenyatta, don’t get so upset. I don’t think you’ll intentionally mess up, but remember how nervous you get when speaking in public.” He gave her a reassuring smile. “I can’t believe Mr. Summers approved this. I thought you said he didn’t feel you were ready for a bigger role in the office.”

“I think Malcolm is the reason I was given the chance,” Kenyatta answered.

He sighed and rolled his eyes. “I don’t understand why he continues to encourage you knowing that you’ll be leaving after the wedding.” Brad snapped.

Disbelief and annoyance burst within her. “You know, it’s funny how you keep wishing my supervisor will stop giving me opportunities to advance my career.”

This time when she attempted to stand, he didn’t stop her. She paced in front of the couch for a few seconds before turning quickly toward him. “You know that I don’t plan on quitting my job, Brad. You also know how much this means to me. I’ve been waiting for the opportunity to prove myself for three years, and I’m finally getting the chance. Why don’t you support me on this?”

Brad stood and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Kenyatta, I really don’t want to go through this again. You know I support you to a certain extent, but I don’t want you working forever. We’re getting married, and we’re going to have children. I’m not putting my kids in daycare or paying some person to sit with them all day when you can take care of them yourself. My mom spent all of my childhood chasing her career, I don’t want that for my kids.”

“I’m not your mother. I’ll be there for my kids.” She said.

“But can you always be there? Or will you skip recitals, soccer games, and school plays because you have

to work late?”

She had no argument for that. She often worked long hours and after Orlando, would probably travel a lot more. But kids were in the future. Right now she was young, and her career was just taking off. She needed him to understand what she wanted out of life.

She gently pushed his hands from her shoulders. “Brad, kids are far in our future. We don’t have to settle this now.”

He shook his head. “Yes we do. My feelings won’t change.”

She looked at the ring on her finger. Maybe it was more than cold feet making her sick at the thought of marriage. “Perhaps we rushed into this.” When he didn’t reply, she continued, “I don’t know if getting married is the right thing to do.”

He slowly took a step back but still did not speak.

She began to pull the ring off, but he rushed over to stop her. “I realize you’re upset right now and that’s why you’re saying this.” When she started to interrupt him, he held up his hand. “Don’t say anything right now. I love you, and I’m not going to lose you. I’ll call you tomorrow, and we’ll discuss it then.”

“Brad, we need to talk about this ... ”

“Not tonight. We’re both upset and may say things we don’t mean.” He kissed her briefly on the cheek. “I love you, and I’ll call tomorrow,” he said softly as he turned and walked out.

Kenyatta looked down at the ring on her finger and took it off. She'd only worn it for less than twenty-four hours so no one would notice, but it felt as if she'd ended a long engagement. Or, at least she'd tried to. She couldn't say that her and Brad were over, or that she wanted them to be.

The sound of a car chase on the television was the only noise in her apartment. As she stood there, the doubts began to sink in. She wanted to marry and have a family. She wanted the kind of solid foundation her parents had, and that type of foundation didn't happen by allowing lust to rule her decisions. It happened when two stable people trusted each other enough to build a life together. That's why she'd stayed with Brad. Maybe she was overreacting. Brad was offering her something most women would be ecstatic to have — a man that wanted to take care of his wife was a dream. Wasn't it?

She turned off the TV and faced the silence of her home. Were her dreams less important than Brad's? No. She'd worked too hard to build up her career. She'd given up passion, romance and other frivolous pursuits in order to land — and excel at — her dream job. She couldn't sacrifice everything that made her happy just for stability, could she?

Brad was the only man she'd let get close to her in years. Twice before her heart had been broken, and he'd come in and slowly gotten her to believe there were still good guys in the world. So what if he didn't make her pulse pound or her breasts ache the way Malcolm did? Men like that didn't want to take care of her; they just

wanted to sleep with her. And what did Malcolm have to do with this anyway?

She walked over and locked the door behind Brad, knowing that if he chose to come back, he could use the key he'd insisted on having after she'd agreed to marry him. She took a deep breath. Tomorrow was going to be a struggle. If she knew Brad, he would call both her mother and his to tell them she broke things off. Both his mother and hers would call and tell her she was making a mistake, and things would be better when she came to her senses. Maybe they were right. But unless Brad began to understand how important her career was to her, this wouldn't work. No matter how safe, secure, and patient he was.

Chapter 5

Kenyatta arrived at work the next day ready to face whatever came her way. Her attempt to break up with Brad unnerved her. She was still unsure if it was the right decision, but she couldn't tie herself to Brad if he didn't support her. Getting married would only make Brad's dream of a perfect life come true, not hers.

As she walked into the office, she noticed a large bouquet of peace lilies on the receptionist's desk. She walked over to admire them and smiled at the receptionist, Grace.

"Well, someone must have done something good last night," Kenyatta teased. "Who's the man you've been hiding, Grace?"

Grace smiled back at Kenyatta. "Sorry to disappoint you, but they aren't for me. They just came and the delivery guy said they were for a Ms. Kenyatta Copeland. So, *you* must have done something *very* good last night." Grace pushed her glasses back up her nose and tucked an errant blond curl behind her ear.

She wasn't surprised when she read the card. *You don't mean it, Brad*, Kenyatta sighed.

“I was not a very good girl last night.” Kenyatta said to herself.

“Well, sometimes being a *bad* girl will get you flowers, too.” Grace said with a laugh.

Kenyatta gave a weak smile in return and picked up the vase of flowers. She turned to go down the hall when Mr. Summers stopped her.

“Oh, Kenyatta, I see you’ve received flowers.” He smiled at her and eyed the bouquet. He was a tall, thin man, with dull brown eyes, and thinning gray hair. “I remember when my wife and I were your age. We were so happy. I would send her small gifts as a surprise just because. I see that Brad is from the same school of thought.” He winked at her. “Good man.”

Kenyatta nodded as he walked away and once again started down the hall. Three more coworkers stopped her, commenting on her beautiful flowers and how lucky she was to have a man like Brad. She wanted to throw the flowers out the window and scream. If Brad wanted to show everyone how great he was, he succeeded.

Once she was in her office, she placed the flowers on the table in front of the window. She turned around and was startled to find Malcolm standing in the doorway. He reminded her of a dark knight in his charcoal gray silk suit, matching blue shirt and tie. Why did he always have to look so good?

His gaze left her and focused on the flowers. “It looks like Brad is reminding everyone why you’re

marrying him.” He walked across the office to stand beside her. “They are lovely.”

Although he spoke of the flowers, he was looking at her.

She blushed in embarrassment. “Yes, they are nice. We had a fight last night, and he thinks this will make things better.”

She didn’t know why she volunteered this information; she never told Malcolm any personal business between her and Brad, but the words flowed without thought.

“The perfect way to say I’m sorry is with flowers. It’s very original.”

Kenyatta heard the sarcasm in his voice and came to Brad’s defense. “They’re peace lilies. He’s clever.”

“No, he’s not trying very hard. He’ll send flowers to say I’m sorry instead of coming to you like a man, maybe with flowers in hand, and telling you he’s sorry and that you shouldn’t break your engagement.”

“How do you know I — ”

He pointed at her hand. “The ring is missing. So I guess congratulations were a bit premature.”

She touched her hand self-consciously. “Nothing is set in stone. I wouldn’t say we’re completely over.”

The corner of his mouth twisted but he changed the subject. “So, are you still prepared to take on the challenge of presenting?”

Kenyatta turned and faced him fully. “Yes, more today than yesterday. I promise to do my best not to let you down ... or the company.”

Malcolm frowned. “You won’t let us down. You’re one of our best associates. That’s why I’m giving you this opportunity. Why would you think you might not do a good job?”

His praise surprised her. Although he’d given her the perfunctory “Good job” before, he’d never told her she was one of the company’s best associates. “Thanks, Malcolm. That means a lot, especially coming from you. Someone questioned my abilities yesterday, and it’s hard to shake off feelings of inadequacy.”

Malcolm’s eyes locked with hers. “Whoever questioned your talent is a fool. You are great at what you do. You’ve accomplished a lot in the few years you’ve worked with us — not to mention your work in graduate school. Don’t let anyone say you’ll deliver less than one hundred ten percent because it’s simply not true.”

Happiness bubbled within her. This was what she needed, someone to support her, not tear her down. *Too bad it was Malcolm*, she thought. She wouldn’t read more into the exchange than necessary. He was simply praising his employee, not wooing a woman he was interested in. Still, she smiled before turning back toward the flowers.

She opened her mouth to tell Malcolm that Brad was the fool when the telephone rang. She moved from his side to answer the phone.

“Kenyatta Copeland,” she said into the phone.

“What is this nonsense about you breaking up with Brad? That man loves you, and he’s better than those other fools you’ve brought around here. I don’t understand why you wouldn’t want a man to take care of you. Do you plan for your job to keep you warm at night?” Adele Copeland fussed over the phone in her usual overly dramatic way.

Kenyatta turned to Malcolm who was still standing near her window. “I’m sorry, Malcolm, but I need to take this. Can we finish later?”

“Sure, I’ll catch up with you before lunch. I need to ask you about the Cayce project.”

As he walked out of the office, Kenyatta turned her attention back to her mother. “Mom, please try to understand. He’s not supportive of my career.”

“What’s wrong with a man wanting his woman at home running things? I stayed at home and raised you. And you do love him, Kenyatta. You can’t just fall out of love with someone within twenty-four hours.”

“Mom, it wasn’t in the space of twenty-four hours. Brad and I do complement each other, but this has been an issue for a long time. Last night it really hit me that Brad is never going to change.”

Adele sighed. “And why would you want him to change? He has a great job, he adores you, and he wants to take care of you. Those are not the qualities you want a man to change.”

Kenyatta was thankful her mother didn't notice her avoidance of the topic of loving Brad, but rolled her eyes as she tried to think of a way to convince her mother that it was just as important to have someone who supports your dreams. It was a hopeless battle. Her mother had imagined her with Brad from the moment her father brought him home for dinner. She was sure that before he even asked Kenyatta to marry him, her mother was making wedding plans.

“Mom, if you want me to be happy, you'll try and understand that — ”

“If I want you to be happy, I'll convince you that you're making a huge mistake. Even your father thinks that you're not behaving rationally, and you know how much he usually goes along with your little schemes,” her mother snipped. “Kenyatta, all I'm asking is for you to truly think this over, and don't give up this relationship without thinking it through. I know you want to advance your career, and I know that you like your independence, but this is a good man. A good man who loves you, wants to marry you, and take care of you. Don't break things off without thinking of all the consequences.”

Her mother made a valid point. She was upset last night when she told Brad she couldn't marry him. He was a good man, but was he the good man for her? Until she made up her mind, she would not argue with her mother.

“Okay, Mom, I understand. I'll think things over while I'm out of town next week.”

Kenyatta could hear the smile in her mother's voice. "That's all I ask. Well, I won't keep you longer than necessary. I know you're very busy, so just give me a call this weekend."

"Sure, Mom. Tell Dad I said hello."

"I will. Goodbye, Kenyatta."

Kenyatta hung up the phone and wanted to scream. This was just the beginning. She could expect a call from Brad's mother before the day was over. That phone call came right before lunch, and it was like talking to her mother all over again. He loves you, he wants to marry you, and he wants to take care of you. Kenyatta's frustration blossomed like the flowers Brad had sent. Since when did a twenty-eight-year-old woman need someone else to be solely responsible for *her* care?

Between the phone calls came more surprises from Brad: candy, balloons, and a teddy bear. She knew he was trying to break down her resolve, and as much as she hated to admit it, his ploys were weakening her arguments.

After she got off the phone with Brad's mother, she sighed and put her head on her desk. She wouldn't survive too many more of Brad's antics. Her stomach growled, and she looked at the clock. The conversation with Brad's mom had taken forty-five minutes. She hated going to lunch after 12:30. The crowds were always awful.

She took a deep breath and sat up just as Malcolm walked into her office. He looked at the assortment of

items delivered to her and laughed. She remembered what he said earlier about Brad not coming to apologize in person. He hadn't called yet, which wasn't unusual when they fought. He tended to let things cool off before seeing her in person. He was probably waiting for the words of their mothers to sink into her thoughts. Still, seeing the situation through Malcolm's eyes allowed her to understand why it would appear weak.

He gestured to the items in her office. "You've had a busy morning." He crossed his arms and leaned against her door. "I thought you might like to do lunch?"

Kenyatta looked at him and all the thoughts from her conversations with her mom and Brad's mother slipped from her mind. He looked calm and composed, as if nothing could rattle him. She wished at that moment she had an ounce of his composure because she wanted to break something.

"Sure. I really could use the break." She stood up and stretched, not realizing the movement caused her shirt to strain against her chest. When she looked back at Malcolm, he was looking at her breasts and her nipples tightened in response. She turned away from him quickly and pretended to look for something in her desk.

"Who else is coming?" she asked.

"Just us." When her jaw dropped, he smiled. "I thought we could discuss the trip next week."

Feeling conflicted about having lunch alone with him, Kenyatta tried for her most professional tone to

hide her nervousness. “That’s fine. Where would you like to eat?”

“Let’s try the new deli on Main. They’re busy, but I don’t think the noise will prevent us from getting some work done.”

Kenyatta grinned. “Always thinking about work? Just admit you want to try the new place.”

He winked. “You’d be surprised to know how much I don’t think about work around you. It’s safer to pretend otherwise.” He stood up straight and cleared his throat. “I’ll meet you around front in five minutes. Don’t take too long,” he chided as he turned and left.

Kenyatta felt as if he’d knocked her off center. *Why would he say something like that?* she thought. *He couldn’t be flirting with me, could he?*

It was one thing to be attracted to the boss who ignored you, quite another to be attracted to the boss who flirted with you. She reminded herself to focus on work. She was determined to hide how much he affected her.

Five minutes later, she met Malcolm in the reception area of their office. There was no hint in his expression that he’d given any more thought to what he’d said only a few minutes earlier.

They took the elevator to the first floor. Their office was located in the middle of Main Street, so it was an easy walk to many nearby restaurants. Downtown Columbia was a mix of old storefronts with three-piece

suits hanging in the windows, offices, shops, and restaurants stuck in nooks and crannies along a tree-lined street. It didn't have the nightlife similar to the downtowns of other capital cities — most of that was in the Five Points or Vista areas — but it was still a vital part of the city.

They passed the time with idle chitchat about how hot it was — the humidity was especially intense — and if either had plans for the weekend. It didn't take long for them to walk the three blocks to the new deli the others in the office recommended. Kenyatta released a sigh of relief when the air conditioning hit them as they entered. They ordered at the counter and snagged one of the tables along the windows overlooking Main Street.

They stuck to neutral topics before moving on to discuss what they should expect at the conference the following week. Kenyatta tried hard to concentrate on what he was talking about, but became distracted every time he licked his lips after biting his sandwich. She didn't know what was wrong with her. It was as if she'd forgotten all the reasons he was wrong for her after just a few flirtatious exchanges.

“Did you talk with Grace about getting a flight on Monday?” he asked as they finished their sandwiches.

“Not yet. I've been on the phone all morning. I'll get with her this afternoon. I'll admit I'm not too thrilled about flying. I'd rather drive.”

He smiled at her. “Are you afraid to fly?”

She returned his smile and sat back. “I know it’s silly, but yeah. It just feels unnatural. Being up there with nothing underneath my feet. I much prefer the interstate.”

“Flying isn’t my favorite thing either, but I do it so often, I’m used to it. Would you rather rent a car and drive down together?”

“You’d really do that?”

He nodded. “I wouldn’t have offered if I weren’t serious.”

Eight hours in a car with Malcolm. They wouldn’t be able to spend that much time talking about work. She couldn’t imagine spending that long in close contact with a man she found too attractive for words — a man who was exactly what she didn’t need. *No, she thought, there is no need to torture myself like that.*

“Thanks for offering, but I’ll be fine with flying.”

He shrugged. “No problem. I thought I’d offer. Is Brad coming down with you?”

The question surprised her, especially since he commented on her lack of ring earlier. “No, he’s not coming down.”

“I’m surprised.” He leaned forward and let his gaze travel along her face. “Brad seems like the type of guy who would want to keep close tabs on you.”

His study made her self-conscious but she didn’t look away when his eyes returned to hers. “Why would

you say that? He doesn't have a reason to keep tabs on me."

"He just seems a bit overprotective."

She crossed her arms. "He's not overprotective. What gave you that impression?"

"When he told me to keep my eyes off you last Christmas," he answered bluntly.

She blinked rapidly and shook her head. "What? Why would he say something like that? You must have misunderstood."

"No misunderstanding. You were wearing that red dress, the one that draped in the back. He caught me looking your way, and in a very clear voice, told me to keep my eyes off you." His voice lowered to that same seductive tone he'd used the day before.

"Why were you looking at me?" She didn't know what possessed her to ask, but for some reason she cared more about that than Brad's warning.

"You looked good that night. Half of the men in the office were checking you out."

She leaned forward and raised a brow. "So everyone was checking me out, and you were the one he happened to catch?"

His lips spread into the smile that drove her crazy. "Maybe he thought I was more of a threat."

Her heart fluttered, but she sat back and rolled her eyes. "Could you be any more conceited?"

“If I were any more conceited, I’d say he was definitely threatened because you were checking me out also.”

She choked on her tea. She had spent half the night trying not to look at him, but he’d looked sexier than ever that night. *Is my attraction to him that obvious*, she wondered?

“I’d say that you were mistaken, and your conceit is misplaced.” The tremor in her voice contradicted her words.

He smiled as if he knew she was a liar, and she smiled back. It was weird flirting with him. They’d always had such a structured relationship, but now, it was as if he’d crossed an imaginary line. She didn’t know what it meant, but she reminded herself again not to read too much into it.

As they left the deli, she checked her cell phone. She had three missed calls from Brad. She’d put her phone on vibrate on purpose. After setting their mothers on her that morning, she wasn’t in the mood to think about their situation — especially not when she was enjoying herself with Malcolm.

“Why are you frowning? Did you miss an important call?”

Kenyatta put her phone away quickly and gave him a half smile. “No, just a persistent telemarketer. I filled out some form online and now my phone keeps ringing.”

He nodded and began walking back to their office. “Do you want some ice cream? We could stop at Duck In for a sundae,” he said, referring to a dairy bar on Main Street.

“Sure,” she agreed quickly. She wasn’t ready for their time together to end.

He placed his hand on the small of her back and led her two stores down to the restaurant. She tried to act nonchalant, but the heat from his hand permeated throughout her body. She enjoyed it more than she should. When he removed his hand to open the door, she could still feel its imprint on her back.

Once inside, they waited in line without speaking until it was their turn to order. She offered to pay for hers, but Malcolm insisted it was his treat.

“Just don’t ever say I never did anything for you,” he teased.

Kenyatta put a huge spoonful of the hot fudge sundae she’d ordered into her mouth. She closed her eyes to enjoy the rich flavor of chocolate and vanilla ice cream. It had been so long since she’d indulged in ice cream, and it tasted like heaven.

When she opened her eyes, her face burned when she saw how intently Malcolm watched as she savored the ice cream. He reached over and wiped hot fudge from the corner of her mouth with his thumb, put it to her lips, and then smiled as she licked the fudge from it without a second thought. Their eyes locked, and she

returned his smile as he put that same thumb into his mouth.

“You made it look so good.”

Heat flooded her face and between her legs. She turned away quickly and walked out the door. *This is wrong. Very wrong*, she thought, admonishing herself. She'd just made a half-assed attempt to break her engagement and was already about to throw herself at her boss. She was letting her attraction to a handsome man cause her to make bad decisions, just like she'd done too many times before, but this time she couldn't blame it on the stupidity of youth.

“Kenyatta, I didn't mean anything by that. I was out of line.”

She turned around and faced Malcolm with a false smile. “For what? That back there? That wasn't anything. Let's just get back to work.”

He looked as if he wanted to say more, but sighed and nodded instead. “Yes, let's get back before they start to miss us.”

Chapter 6

On the way back to the office, Kenyatta and Malcolm walked up right after a delivery truck driver rear-ended the car in front of him. The driver tried to apologize, but the lady whose car he hit yelled and threw items from her car at him. A crowd was gathering to enjoy the show. The spectacle eased the tension from earlier. They were laughing about it as they walked into the office.

“It’s good to see you’re having such a good time, Kenyatta.”

Kenyatta’s laughter died in her throat, and she stifled a groan as she turned to face her mother. Brad must have really been in a panic to send her mom to her office.

“Mom, what are you doing here?”

Her mom glanced briefly at Malcolm before turning her full stare on Kenyatta. Adele Copeland always looked ten years younger than her fifty-five years. Today she looked more like Kenyatta’s sister in a pair of khaki crop pants with a blue silk top and her slightly graying hair swept up in a loose ponytail. Her mom smiled sweetly,

but fire burned in her brown eyes. “I hoped to catch you for lunch, but I see you had other plans.”

Kenyatta worked hard to keep from rolling her eyes. She could only imagine how the scene looked to her mother. She was supposed to be thinking about her decision to end things with Brad — the perfect guy in her parents’ eyes — not having lunch with another man.

“Mom, you know, Malcolm, my boss.” She stressed the last part.

Malcolm reached out to shake Adele’s hand. “It’s good to see you again, Mrs. Copeland.”

Adele barely grasped his hand. “Likewise. Kenyatta, if you’re not too busy, I’d like to speak with you for a minute.”

Kenyatta looked at her watch. “I have a conference call in thirty minutes.”

“It’s important.”

Malcolm reached over to touch Kenyatta’s arm. “Take your time. I’ll start the call if you’re still with you mother.”

Adele noticed the touch and narrowed her eyes. Kenyatta smiled tightly, nodded and thanked Malcolm. She watched him walk down the hall before sighing in frustration. When her mother wanted attention, everything was important. Her mother was only interested in telling her all of the reasons to marry Brad, but she already knew the reasons why she should marry

Brad. It was the few reasons why she shouldn't that gave her pause.

"Come on in my office, Mom."

Her mother smiled and followed her into her office. Once inside Kenyatta closed the door. She respected and loved her mom, so she assumed what little bit of authority she could by sitting behind her desk. It was the one place where she was in complete control.

Adele sat in the chair across from her desk and smiled. She didn't fool Kenyatta. Her mother used the same smile whenever she was upset.

"I would ask what was so important, but I can guess why you're here," Kenyatta started.

"It appears that I came just in time. I finally understand why you broke things off with Brad," her mother replied.

Kenyatta narrowed her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm just going to get to the point. Is he the reason you broke up with Brad?"

Kenyatta didn't pretend ignorance about who "he" was. "No, Mom, Malcolm is not the reason I broke up with Brad."

"It looked as if you two were very cozy around there."

"We were coming in from lunch, how could we possibly look cozy?"

Adele raised a hand. “Don’t get smart with me. I saw the way you two were laughing and having a good ole time. It’s not right, Kenyatta.”

“We were laughing at an accident downstairs.”

Her mom looked horrified. “What’s so funny about an accident?”

Kenyatta looked at the ceiling and groaned. “The accident wasn’t funny, Mom, the situation was.”

Her mom waived her hands. “It doesn’t matter what was funny. Yesterday you were in love with Brad. Today you’ve broken your engagement and you’re out laughing with another man. Don’t let lust ruin your life.”

Kenyatta looked through the papers on her desk. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not letting lust ruin my life.”

One of her mom’s eyebrows rose as she twisted her lips. “Now you’re being dense on purpose. This isn’t my first visit to your office, and I’m not blind. I know how you feel about him.”

Kenyatta slammed down the papers she was shuffling before clenching her hands. She counted to ten and concentrated on controlling her breathing. She’d tried to ensure no one knew she was attracted to Malcolm. He was just the sort of mistake she’d made in the past, and she didn’t want her friends or family to think she was going down that road again. To know that her mother could tell made her feelings of control slip.

“I don’t *feel* anything for him,” she said with a calmness she didn’t feel.

Her mom sighed and stood up. She walked to the window before responding, “Yes you do. I know, because I recognize the signs. I’ve been there before.”

Her head snapped toward her mother. “What are you talking about?”

Adele didn’t turn to face Kenyatta. “After college your father joined the army to help pay off his student loans before going to law school. He didn’t want us to get married with that much debt. When they stationed him in Germany for two years, it was the most difficult time of my life. I loved him so much, and I understood why he joined, but I wasn’t happy about it. It was hard seeing him only a few times a year.”

“I know, you’ve told me about that.”

Adele nodded. “It was eighteen months after he’d been gone. I began to question if he’d made the right decision. Did he really love me if he could just join the army and leave? I met a man ... well I didn’t really meet him. We worked together. I was a paralegal, and he was a new attorney in the firm, Leroy Jackson. The attraction was instant. I’d been faithful to your father the entire time he was gone, but I was missing everything about your father.” She finally looked at Kenyatta. “If you know what I mean.”

Kenyatta shook her head to clear her mind of the thought of her parents in a sexual way. “Mom, what are you saying?”

Adele shrugged and turned back to the window. “It started as flirting. I was flattered, and he was fun. Long story short, I agreed to go out with him one night after finding out they denied your father leave. He was charming, and I was horny. That was a recipe for disaster. We carried on for three months.”

“You cheated on Daddy?”

Adele sighed and faced Kenyatta fully. “Yes, I’m not proud of it, but at the time I wanted the attention.”

Kenyatta looked away. She picked up a pen on her desk and clutched it in her fist. “What happened?” She didn’t want to hear the rest of the story, but something compelled her to ask. She’d always thought her parents had a perfect relationship. She couldn’t imagine another man coming between them. “Did Dad find out?”

“No, Leroy broke it off when I got pregnant.”

Kenyatta took in a sharp breath. “What? You had another baby?” A million questions ran through her head, but one stuck out. Did she have a sibling out there? It was more than she could take.

Adele’s flinched. “No. I lost the baby, Kenyatta. But it scared me enough to know that I almost lost something good because of a fling with a coworker.” Adele looked at Kenyatta. “Never repeat this story. Your father doesn’t know and I’d like to keep it that way.” Kenyatta saw fear in her mother’s eyes, and she fell back in her chair. Her mother was never afraid of anything. “Promise me, Kenyatta, please.”

Kenyatta pushed back all of her questions and nodded. “I promise.”

Her mother visibly relaxed. “I didn’t come here to tell you this. When I saw you two together just now, it brought back memories. I love you, and I want to see you happy. Brad is a good man. Don’t make the same mistake I did. Reconsider your reasons for leaving Brad, and I’m sure you’ll realize the reasons to stay outweigh the ones to leave.”

“I don’t know if I — ”

“Just think about it, okay?” her mom said sharply.

She’d been about to say she didn’t know if she really loved Brad, but it was best left unsaid. Kenyatta wanted what her parents had, or at least what she thought her parents had. It was unreal to think her parents may not have been because of an affair her mother had. Her world was upside down. Was she about to ruin everything she and Brad could have because of the passionate feelings she had for Malcolm?

“I’ll think about it.” Kenyatta said with a nod.

Her mom smiled again. “Good. That’s all I wanted to hear. I know you’re busy and need to do that conference call. I’m leaving, and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Adele walked over and kissed Kenyatta on the cheek. She turned and walked out of Kenyatta’s office, giving a quick wave as she left. In fact, Adele breezed out of the office as if she hadn’t just laid a huge bombshell in her daughter’s lap. Not only had her mother cheated on her

father, but she'd gotten pregnant. Malcolm knocked on her door and peered in before saying he was going to the conference room. She looked at her clock; it was time for the conference call. She took a deep breath to settle her thoughts. There wasn't time to think about this stuff now; she had to work. But if one thing was clear, she couldn't let her attraction to Malcolm distract her. She didn't want to run the risk of being in a similar situation as her mother.

Chapter 7

Malcolm was dreaming. He knew it was a dream because what was happening was something he longed for but never thought would actually happen. Therefore, because it was a dream, he decided to enjoy it.

There was a woman in bed with him, and it was not just any woman — it was Kenyatta. She was on top of him, lying with her body pressed against his. Her warm breath caressed his skin as she kissed his jaw before moving lower to kiss his neck. Her breasts brushed against his chest, the pebble hardness of her nipples rubbing against him. Her legs were straddling his waist and the slick moisture between her thighs slid against his abdomen. She continued to kiss his neck and then moved her hips lower, sliding her wetness against him. He was already aroused but the slow up-and-down glide of her clit across his erection caused him to thicken and grow harder.

He heard her throaty moan as she continued to rub against him, pleasuring herself in the process. He moved his hands to cup her firm buttocks and squeezed them gently, enjoying the feel of her body against his. He kissed her neck and pulled her body up until her breasts

brushed his lips. He gently pulled one hardened peak into his mouth, suckled deeply and she moaned again. He moved one hand from her butt to cup the breast he feasted on. He kneaded the soft mound and pulled even more of her breast into his mouth. She was still moving against him, and he knew she was aching to have him inside of her. He wanted nothing more than to enter her and feel her juices flow around him.

“Oh, damn, Malcolm, now,” she pleaded.

That voice was too real, and it wasn't Kenyatta's. Malcolm opened his eyes and looked up not into the soft brown eyes of Kenyatta, but into Jessica's hazel eyes. The night before flooded his memory. He'd been hard as hell ever since Kenyatta had licked the ice cream from his finger. When Jessica called and offered to come over he'd readily agreed. And while Jessica was a welcome diversion the night before, now sunlight streamed into his bedroom. In the harsh light of day, he didn't like waking up from a dream about one woman with another in his arms.

He pushed her off, and sat on the edge of the bed. Disappointment had already killed his erection.

“Why did you stop?”

His back was to her, but he heard the irritation in her voice. “We used my last condom last night.”

“I'm on the pill.”

“I don't want to chance it.”

He wanted her to leave, but didn't know a right way to tell her to go. It was his own fault; he'd let their relationship become more than it should.

She came across the bed and hugged him from behind. "What's wrong, Malcolm?"

"Nothing's wrong."

"You looked ... disappointed when you opened your eyes and saw me."

Malcolm shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about, Jessica."

She rubbed his chest. "Maybe I just thought it." When he didn't respond, she changed the subject. "Do you want to see the new Jamie Foxx movie tonight? My sister saw it last weekend and said it was great. I thought we could go."

Malcolm started shaking his head before she finished. "No, I have to go to the office and wrap up a few loose ends before the conference this week. I don't know how long I'll be."

Her body stiffened, and she stopped rubbing his chest. "Today is Saturday. Can't it wait?"

He turned to look at her. "No, it can't wait. I leave Monday. I do have a job with real responsibilities."

After he said it, he realized it was a cheap shot. Jessica had lost her job with a bank a few weeks earlier due to downsizing.

She turned her head away, and he saw tears forming in her eyes. He cursed to himself. He knew she wanted more, but he wasn't willing to give more. Malcolm had no real complaints about Jessica. Her beautiful, honey-colored skin and dark brown hair, which first attracted him, hadn't changed. She still had an appetite for sex, which mirrored his, and she never complained about his hours or his traveling. She'd only recently begun trying to spend more time with him when he was in town. Logically their relationship should go a step further, but he wasn't ready. She wasn't the woman he wanted. He needed to break things off with Jessica before she got hurt, but not after she'd spent the night. That was too callous.

He reached out and wiped a tear from Jessica's eye then turned her face toward him. He gave her his trademark smile and kissed the corner of her mouth.

"That's better," he said when she smiled back. "I'm sorry for snapping at you. Maybe we can try to catch the late showing of the movie."

"That would be great." The look in her eyes changed, and she reached over to touch his now soft penis. "Why don't you give me something to look forward to?"

As sexy as she looked right now with her hair mussed and her dusky nipples pressed against his back, Malcolm couldn't summon up the desire for sex. It shook him up that he'd almost made love to her while thinking of Kenyatta. He moved her hand and kissed the corner of her mouth again.

“Sorry, baby, but I have to leave now if I’m going to be back in time to catch a movie.”

He got out of the bed quickly and pulled a pair of boxers from his dresser. Without looking at the disappointed woman in his bed, he walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower. He was going to have to get Kenyatta out of his mind.

• • •

Malcolm enjoyed the silence when he walked into the quiet office of H2O Environmental an hour later. He thrived on the bustle of his position, but it was on weekends, when the office was empty, when he got the most work done. No one asking questions, no fires to put out, just time to catch up on projects and prepare for the next week.

He frowned when he saw lights on in the conference room. They’d stressed to employees the importance of turning off lights at the end of the day. He would have to remind everyone on Monday. If they were going to be a leading environmental firm, they needed to lead by example.

He walked into the conference room to turn off the light and lost his breath at what he saw. Kenyatta was reaching for something underneath the table, giving him a perfect view of the back of her thighs and fantastic ass. Wearing a short green sundress that was leaving little to his imagination in her position, she hummed quietly to the Jill Scott song playing through the speakers connected to her MP3 player on the table. She leaned

forward and her dress hiked up even more, revealing light green underwear. Noting that her underwear was the same color as her outfit, Malcolm's imagination went into overdrive picturing a matching bra.

All of the desire he couldn't muster up for Jessica, hit him fully as he grew hard. How would she react if he came up behind her, ran his hands up her thighs and slowly removed her underwear? Would she moan, or sigh, as he slid inside her? He imagined how it would be to feel her tight, wet heat squeeze around him as he plunged into her again and again.

Malcolm was in an awkward situation. When she came from under the table and saw him, there was no way for him to hide his obvious arousal. He quickly exited the conference room as silently as he entered. He took a few deep breaths to calm his libido, but it was useless. He could not get the picture of her butt in the air, or the fantasy of sliding into her from behind, out of his mind.

Holding something in front of his pants was the best way to hide his massive hard-on. He held his laptop case in front of his erection and entered the conference room again. To his utter disappointment, Kenyatta was standing back up and using a remote, which must have been what she was reaching for under the table, to go through her presentation on the screen. She was completely unaware of the turmoil he was going through.

"So I see that someone else decided to pull a long weekend. I didn't notice your car in the garage," he said

in an unassuming voice.

Kenyatta turned toward him and smiled brightly before catching herself and looking away. Malcolm thought the room looked ten times brighter when she smiled at him. Her obvious discomfort made him want to find more reasons for her to smile when he walked in a room.

“Malcolm,” she said and smoothed her hair. “I drove my friend’s car while mine is getting a tune-up.” She sat and motioned to the chair beside her. “I hate to say it, but I’m glad you came in today. I want you to review my final presentation. I just completed the finishing touches and didn’t think you would be able to see it before we left on Monday.”

Malcolm walked over and sat in the chair she indicated. He motioned to the papers spread over the table. “What is all this?”

Kenyatta laughed lightly. “As much as I love PowerPoint, I still have to print it out and put notes on the slides. It helps me see the bigger picture.”

“That may work best for you, but I find it better to review the slides without the mess,” he teased.

Kenyatta elbowed him playfully. “Oh, be quiet, I printed it on the back of old fax confirmation sheets. Just review the presentation. If it looks okay, then I can head home. I have a few things I want to do before I leave on Monday.”

“Then I’ll be sure to take my time,” he replied.

She rolled her eyes and began to read through some notes. He was glad she responded to his teasing and her earlier discomfort was gone.

“I guess you and Brad have plans for later?” The minute the words were out, Malcolm wished them back.

Her full lips puckered as she frowned. “Actually, no. Brad and I haven’t seen each other since I broke things off.”

“After the flowers and everything else? Has he given up so quickly?” That was promising.

“No, we’ve talked on the phone, and he’s still apologizing for what he said. He’s a great guy, and I don’t know why I’m hesitating like this. I know it makes sense to marry him. It was almost inevitable, but it feels rushed.” She glanced at him briefly before looking back at her notes.

He could tell she wished she wouldn’t have said the last part. He was happy to hear that she was uncertain about marrying Brad. He didn’t know why he’d let himself get caught up in this situation. He really shouldn’t care, but he did. For some reason, even though Kenyatta was off-limits to him, he wanted her to realize she had other options. There were men out there better suited for her than that insecure, overprotective fool. She was smart and strong. She deserved a man who could appreciate those things.

“Maybe you’re hesitating because you know he’s not the right choice.”

She frowned at him. “How can you say that? You don’t even know him ... or me for that matter. Brad wants to take care of me. He’s patient and understanding.”

Malcolm turned away from the presentation and faced her. “You sound like you’re describing your best friend, not your man.”

She dropped her notes on the table and turned toward him. “Oh, really? Then how should I describe my man?”

“First of all, not by saying he’s patient and understanding. You can barely say you love him without choking on the words.”

She stood up abruptly and pointed at him. “That is not true. You don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

He stood and pushed her finger out of his face. “I know exactly what I’m talking about. I never see you daydreaming about him or hear you praising him to the ladies in the office.”

“That’s because it’s none of their business.”

“Bullshit, Kenyatta. When you’re on the phone with your girlfriends you don’t praise him to them either. You talk about him as you would a client, listing his qualities but never referring to the man. I’ve also heard you talk with him on the phone. You sound like a teenager arguing with her father.”

She raised a brow. “Why are you so interested in my phone conversations? Are you listening at my door now?”

“I’m right next door to you. I can’t help but hear it.”

She scoffed. “Sure. Well it sounds like you’re spending way too much time paying attention to me and my relationship.”

“Why not pay attention to it? I think it’s fascinating to watch a smart, beautiful woman try and convince herself she’s in love with a man who doesn’t even arouse her.”

Her brown eyes widened, sparking fire. She had never looked so damn tempting. He took a step toward her, but she was too angry to notice. She pointed her finger at his chest again and tried to push him back.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about. Brad does arouse me.”

“Liar.”

“How can you begin to make interpretations about our sex life?”

“You never have the look of a woman who’s had a great night of sex.”

She laughed caustically. “Really, that’s your answer? Unlike the chicks you bring through here, I don’t need to put on a show for the world to see that I’m having sex. I’m not going to walk around in yesterday’s clothes with my hair flying all over my head just to prove a point.”

“It’s not about putting on a show; it’s about the look in your eyes when you talk about him or see him. You don’t look at him as if he knows all your secrets and all the ways to turn you on.”

She swallowed hard before answering. “For your information, Brad knows ... enough about me to keep me happy.”

“That’s not the same as arousing you.”

“There’s more to a relationship than arousal. What we had — have is built on more than that.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, patience and understanding.”

She nodded. “Yes, and for your information, he does arouse me. He’s the best ... I’ve ever ... had.”

“That’s such a lie you can’t even say it with a straight face.”

“And how would you know?”

He stepped closer and lowered his voice. “Because I arouse you every day and you try to pretend like I don’t. I’m not a fool, Kenyatta. I can tell when a woman wants me.”

Anger flared in her eyes, and her cocoa skin flushed with emotion. “You conceited bastard! You think that every woman in the world is ready to fall at your feet. You’re the epitome of what I don’t want in a man. Cocky, chauvinistic, and convinced he’s God’s gift to women.”

“Not women, Kenyatta, just you.” He pulled her into his arms. Before she could utter another word, his mouth crushed down on hers. She stood against him motionless for a second before responding to his kiss.

Malcolm’s original intention was to prove his point. He knew she was attracted to him, and her accusation of his conceit hit a nerve. But as soon as she melted in his arms, he forgot his reason for kissing her and got lost in the feel of her soft lips against his. His erection, which hadn’t completely died down before, sprung back to life with full force. He’d never wanted a woman as badly as he wanted her. Malcolm squeezed her butt, pressing her against him so she could feel how she affected him.

When she rubbed her body against his erection, he forgot about everything. The only thing he wanted to do was pick her up, put her on the table and slide into her sweetness. The intensity of his kiss increased, and he slipped his hand underneath her dress to get a better hold on her behind. He slid his finger along the seam of her underwear, waiting for any sign that it was okay to feel the soft skin underneath.

She moaned before breaking off the kiss and pushing away. He stared at her back and called on every bit of his self-control to keep from grabbing her and pulling her back into his arms. He rubbed his hands across his face as he calmed his breathing.

“That was wrong and should *not* have happened.” She spoke calmly, her back still toward him. “I will not let this influence my decision. Men like you always

expect women to fall at their feet and give them whatever they want. I was stupid enough to do that once, but not again. I have too many examples of why this is a bad idea.”

When she finally turned to face him, her features were impassive, as if their kiss hadn't affected her as it had him. He had to admire her spirit and mirrored his expression to match hers. Even though he didn't believe a word she said, there wasn't a future in pursuing what was between them. His chest tightened with that thought, but he didn't want to examine why.

He looked her in the eye. “I'm sorry. I tried to prove a point and obviously did it the wrong way. It's none of my business who you marry.”

Before she could answer, his cell phone rang. It was Jessica calling to see which theater he wanted to go to that night. He answered her questions while keeping his eyes on Kenyatta. Although she tried to act as if she weren't listening, her subtle wince when he told Jessica that he would pick her up at eight told him she was listening to every word. He suddenly felt like an ass for kissing her. It wasn't his place to lecture her about her feelings for another man. He couldn't bring himself to break things off with Jessica because they were comfortable, and he didn't want to hurt her feelings. He was the proverbial pot calling the kettle black.

When Malcolm ended the call, there was an awkward silence as she began to pack up her stuff to leave. They couldn't go to Orlando like this. They would

have to work together to gain new clients. If the two of them were on bad terms, it would be harder to do.

“It may sound cliché, but can we just pretend that kiss never happened?”

Kenyatta hesitated before nodding. “It was nothing.”

“Right. Nothing and it will not be repeated.”

She looked at her watch. “It’s getting late. I’ve got to go. Can you review my presentation and e-mail any comments?”

He inclined his head. “I’ll get them to you as soon as I finish.”

She nodded and paused for a second before walking out. Malcolm wanted to call her back, but for what? There couldn’t be anything between them. He was her boss. They were both in relationships — for the most part. It made sense for them to act as if their kiss never happened.

Chapter 8

Kenyatta pulled up at her townhouse later that afternoon and let out a contented sigh. After leaving the office, she returned Angie's car and babysat to return the favor.

Angie's girls were wonderful, but they were still a handful. She smiled to herself as she thought about the three of them playing with Barbie dolls earlier. It was fun to forget all the troubles of being an adult and just enjoy letting her imagination run wild. Babysitting kept her from thinking about Malcolm's kiss. But on the way home, the memory of his lips against hers, the solidness of his chest against her breasts and the feel of his hands on her body flooded her mind.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it!" She chastised herself. "It's nothing. It never happened."

She got out of the car and walked to the front door. When she went inside, she saw another set of keys in the valet holder beside her door and smelled Mexican food, her favorite, coming from the kitchen. Brad was there. She wanted to be angry, but her hungry stomach growled in betrayal. The girls had wanted McDonald's and good Auntie Kenyatta had indulged them, but she couldn't stomach the grease.

She walked into the kitchen. Brad leaned over the stove, tasting the sauce for what she assumed was his famous enchiladas. Michael Jackson's "Thriller" played on the radio, and he was singing along. A reluctant smile came to her face as she listened to him sing, badly, to the music. He was cute as he used the spoon for a makeshift microphone, but he was also there, in her home, unannounced ... and he wanted her to give up her job. She remembered that everything with them wasn't perfect. *And he doesn't kiss like Malcolm*, she thought.

"Brad, what are you doing here?"

He turned and grinned. "Great, you're home." He walked over and grabbed her hands. "I made your favorite, enchiladas with Spanish rice." He pulled her over to the stove. "I even picked up tortilla chips and salsa for an appetizer and margarita mix. For virgin margaritas of course. Here, taste this." He held the spoon with some of the sauce to her lips.

"Brad, I asked why you're here." She tried to sound stern despite her growing hunger pangs.

He put the spoon down. "I know you're still upset with me," when he saw she was about to interrupt, he placed his finger to her lips. "I don't blame you. I know your job is important to you. I can understand why you wouldn't want to give that up. It's also important to me that my wife stay home with our kids, but I'm willing to compromise."

She hesitated briefly before responding, "I'm listening."

“We’ll wait a year, maybe two, before we try for kids. Then we’ll see how we both feel once the baby comes. Maybe you’ll want to stay home with our little boy, or girl, by that time.”

“Or maybe my career will be going great, and I won’t want to stay home,” she countered.

Brad took a deep breath. “Kenyatta, I don’t want to lose you. Let’s go through with the wedding and see how things go.”

“There are other things wrong in our relationship. I’m not sure ... ”

“You did promise to think things over while you attend your conference. Just think this over.” He pulled her close. “Kenyatta, I make great money. I’ve never cheated on you even though we’ve never had sex. All I want to do is treat you like a queen. Why do you want to throw all that away?”

There it was, out in the open: the other reason why she thought he was in such a rush to marry her. They hadn’t had sex, and he was becoming impatient. She understood his impatience, but she was afraid to take that step. Men who’d only wanted her for sex had broken her heart before. Brad offered her friendship before they became a couple, but she was afraid he would change once they slept together.

Kenyatta looked into his eyes. There were no heart flutters or burning flames of desire as she’d felt a few hours earlier with Malcolm. But with Brad, her heart would always be safe; there was no drama. He didn’t

have a new girlfriend every six months, and he didn't work with her. He was safe and secure, and he wanted to take care of her.

He sounds like your best friend. Malcolm's words rang through her head. *So what if he sounded like a friend? Weren't the best relationships between people who started out as friends?* It was time to settle down and grow up. If she wanted to have the stability of a family one day, she had the perfect person to provide that standing in front of her, cooking her dinner.

She nodded. "Okay, I'll think about it."

Brad smiled. "Great."

He leaned down to kiss her. Kenyatta waited for his kiss to sweep her way or overwhelm her with passion, but it didn't come. She wasn't surprised. Brad's kisses comforted her, but they didn't excite her. In an effort to keep from comparing him to Malcolm, she focused on what was pleasurable about his kiss. His lips were soft, but thin. He wasn't a sloppy kisser, and he had a slender well-built frame. When he deepened the kiss and pushed his hand up her shirt, she pulled back. She expected him to let her go, as he usually did, but he held firm.

He grimaced. "What's wrong?"

"I think we need to slow down."

Anger flashed briefly in his eyes, but then hurt replaced his glower. "I'm not Robert, or Chad. I'm your fiancé. I think it's time."

She pushed him away and was grateful when he let her go. “I know you’re not. I never said you were.”

“So do you still think I’ll leave as soon as we sleep together? Do you trust me so little?”

“It’s not that. I’m just ... it’s been a long day.”

He smiled and pulled her close again. “All the more reason to release the tension.”

She pushed away again. “Brad, stop. Not today, please.”

His gray eyes turned cold. “No, you stop. Stop treating me as if I’m the guys from your past. I’m not just trying to fuck you, Kenyatta. I’m trying to marry you. I’m not Robert who slept with your two best friends, and I’m not Chad who snuck to your neighbor’s house after leaving you. I’m not going to stop calling you the next day or only call after midnight for a booty call.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do. If you’re going to think about marrying me, then you need to think about sleeping with me too.”

Kenyatta remembered how badly she’d wanted Malcolm in the conference room and wished for a tiny bit of that for Brad. She *was* sexually frustrated, but not for the person she should be. Malcolm was probably more like Robert and Chad; only wanting her for one thing. Why did she always want the wrong man? Brad was her best choice, she reminded herself.

Her father introduced her to Brad right after she'd ended it with her previous boyfriend Chad. Just thinking about how she'd caught Chad kissing her next-door neighbor only twenty minutes after leaving her apartment — and her bed — caused her face to burn with embarrassment and anger. She'd sworn off sex right then. Brad didn't bat an eye when she told him she was celibate. Their friendship had grown naturally over time and six months ago, they made it official and began dating. She knew him better than she'd known Chad, whom she'd jumped into bed with after a date and too much wine. She knew Brad wasn't with her just for the sex. He was right. If they were going to get married, she would have to take that step; putting it off until after the wedding was archaic.

“You're right.” She took a deep breath. “I'll think about our engagement, and if I decide it's the right thing to do ... then it'll be right to do everything.”

Brad smiled broadly. “That's all I can ask for.” He took her hand and kissed it.

The doorbell rang, and Kenyatta raised an eyebrow. “Who in the world is that?” She looked at Brad.

He grinned. “Probably Mike and Joi, or Carol and Greg. I invited them over to eat with us.”

“What? I really wanted to pack and take it easy today and tomorrow. I'll be gone most of next week.”

“Are you saying you don't want to see our friends?” He asked coolly.

She placed a hand on her hip. “I’m saying, maybe you should have asked me first. We haven’t spoken to each other in three days and suddenly you pop up, and plan a dinner party.”

“It’s not a dinner party, Kenyatta. It’s just a couple of friends over. You always say we should get our friends together more.” He spoke as if he was explaining a simple equation to a child.

“But you always say you don’t like being around Carol. What changed in the three days I haven’t talked to you?”

“I’m just trying to show you how much I want us to work. So much so that I’ll put up with Carol. Is there anything wrong with that?”

Kenyatta sighed and looked away. She battled between believing this was a real attempt on Brad’s part to work out their differences and thinking it was just another way to manipulate the situation. He’d always been adamant that he didn’t like spending time with Carol. Could breaking their engagement shake him up enough that he’d hang out with her friend?

When she looked back at Brad, he was staring at her with pleading gray eyes. The doorbell rang again and the timer on the stove went off. His enchiladas were done.

She smiled tightly. “I’ll get the door.”

He visibly relaxed. “I promise to ask the next time.” He leaned over to kiss her on the cheek.

The doorbell rang a third time and with a sigh, Kenyatta walked out of the kitchen to answer it. Mike and Joi were there. Mike picked her up in a huge hug.

“What’s up, girl? I told Brad we wanted a spades rematch. Prepare for an ass cutting.”

He let her go and Joi stepped over to hug Kenyatta. “He’s been talking about y’all beating us for three days. So I hope you got your card table ready?”

Kenyatta laughed. “It’s always ready. Come on in.”

“Did I hear someone say spades? You know I’m ready to play.” Carol entered followed closely by her husband Greg. The saying opposites attract had to apply to Carol and Greg. Her yellow halter top, skin-tight jean capris and matching yellow-heeled sandals were a stark contrast to his plain Heart Association T-shirt and jean shorts.

“Well I hope you’re ready to lose.” Kenyatta said, hugging her friend and Greg.

Mike and Joi stood awkwardly in the hall watching the friends greet each other. Greg was open with his hello, it was frosty on the part of Carol.

Greg held up a twelve-pack of beer. “Where can I put these?”

“Stick them in the freezer so they’ll cool off quickly.” She said. “Brad just finished his enchiladas.”

Carol looked skeptical. “Can he cook? You know I don’t eat everybody’s cooking?”

Mike's chest puffed up. "My boy knows what he's doing when it comes to Mexican food. Don't know where he gets it from, but you'll enjoy it."

Carol shrugged. "We'll see."

Kenyatta shook her head. "Come on y'all. Let's get out of the entryway."

They followed her to the living room. Greg detoured into the kitchen to put the beers in the freezer and Mike followed. She heard them greeting Brad.

"Do you think you should help Brad?" Joi asked.

"Why, he put together this party, he can handle things," Carol said, falling onto Kenyatta's couch. "So I hear you're leaving town Monday. When were you gonna inform me and Angie?"

Kenyatta rolled her eyes and sat beside Carol. "I told Angie when I dropped the girls off earlier. I was going to call you tonight, but Brad invited you guys over so now I don't have to call."

"You didn't know he called us? So he just plans stuff in your house without you knowing?"

Kenyatta laughed. "It's not that serious, Carol. He was making dinner and invited friends over. Nothing's wrong with that." She avoided Carol's eyes when she answered by looking at Joi, who smiled approvingly.

"I'm so glad he called. We don't see you guys enough," Joi said.

Carol looked between the two. “Didn’t you just see each other earlier this week?”

Joi blinked as if Carol’s question threw her off. “Well, yeah, but in general we don’t see them enough.”

Carol shrugged. “Whatever.” She turned to Kenyatta. “So who else is going to Orlando? Your boss going?”

Kenyatta heard the suggestive tone to Carol’s voice and decided to lie. “No. Just me and a few people you don’t know.”

Carol frowned. “That sucks.”

Before she could answer, Brad, Mike, and Greg joined them in the living room.

“It’s good to see you again, Carol.” Brad said. He came over and gave Carol a hug before sitting on the arm of the chair next to Kenyatta.

Carol looked at Brad like he was a mental patient. “Good seeing you too, Brad.”

Brad smiled at Carol. “Greg was telling me you guys were thinking about going to Charleston for your anniversary next month. My parents have a summer home on the Isle of Palms. If you’re interested, you’re welcome to use it.”

Carol and Kenyatta’s jaws dropped, and they stared at Brad.

Greg was quick to speak up. “Hey, Brad, I appreciate that.”

Carol shook her head as if to clear it. “Thanks, we’ll let you know.”

Kenyatta suppressed a smile. Based on Carol’s airy tone of voice, she knew she would rather die than ask Brad for a favor.

Kenyatta looked up at Brad. “Are you sure your parents wouldn’t mind?”

He smiled and squeezed her shoulders. “They let friends use it all the time. Carol and Greg are *our* friends.” He emphasized the word *our* and Kenyatta looked away. She suddenly remembered Malcolm kissing her a few hours before. His hand underneath her skirt and her unbridled response. Brad was truly trying and she — like a fool — had been drooling over her boss.

She reached up to place her hand on Brad’s before looking back at him and smiling. “That’s sweet.”

“Sweet enough to give you diabetes,” said Carol. “So are we gonna eat?”

Brad winced before smiling. “Everything’s ready. Come on, fellas, we can put the food out for our queens.” He leaned over to kiss her forehead and stood. Greg and Michael grumbled half-heartedly and followed him.

Joi began asking Kenyatta about the upcoming conference while the men set the food in the dining area. Carol didn’t participate; she stared at Kenyatta with narrowed eyes. Kenyatta guessed Carol was upset about Brad’s offer, but she couldn’t see why. Brad said he was

trying, and based on the offer of his parent's summer home, she had to admire his efforts.

Five minutes later, the guys were calling them over to sit down and eat. Conversation flowed smoothly between the men. Once Brad asked Greg if he was ready for the University of South Carolina football season to start in the next few weeks, that was all they could talk about. Brad's parents were season ticket holders and they purchased multiple parking passes for tailgating. Greg almost choked on his beer when Brad not only offered for him to come tailgating, but said they may have extra tickets to the Carolina-Clemson rivalry game.

Conversation between the women wasn't as easy. Every time Joi tried to bring up the wedding, Carol changed the subject. It soon became obvious and Joi stopped trying. Kenyatta knew Carol's behavior was rude, but she was thankful for it. Their friends didn't know the engagement was off, even if temporarily, and she wanted to keep it that way for now. But when Greg excitedly tapped Carol on the shoulder and said they'd start tailgating with Brad and his family, Kenyatta knew her friend had had it.

"Kenyatta, where's your ring?" Carol asked suddenly and loudly. Everyone at the table became silent and all eyes went to Kenyatta's left hand.

"I'm getting it sized." Brad answered. "It was a little loose on Kenyatta's finger."

"It looked like a perfect fit when I saw it."

Brad glared at Carol. "Looks can be deceiving."

“Ain’t that the truth.” Carol finished off her beer. “Excuse me, I’m going to the little girls’ room.” She pushed away from the table and walked down the hall toward the restroom.

“Who’s ready for cards?” Mike asked. He looked around the table enthusiastically.

“I’ll put the dishes away and we’ll be ready,” Brad answered. “Why don’t you all go out on Kenyatta’s patio? It’s after six, so it shouldn’t be as hot outside.”

“I’ll help you,” Kenyatta said.

Kenyatta and Brad began cleaning off the table, while Mike, Joi, and Greg went to sit on the patio. Kenyatta loaded dishes in the dishwasher while Brad packed leftovers. Neither of them spoke. She knew he’d been trying hard, too hard, to get along with Greg and Carol, and that Carol’s reaction upset him.

Once the dishwasher was loaded, and he still hadn’t spoken, she turned to see if he was finished with the leftovers. He was leaning against the kitchen counter watching her. Frustration and desire burning in his eyes.

“I see why I don’t invite Carol over often.” He said softly.

Kenyatta smiled. “You are laying it on a bit thick. The home in Charleston, tailgating, tickets to the Clemson game. It’s a complete one-eighty.”

He stalked across the kitchen to stand beside her. “How do you put up with her?”

“Carol and I have been there for each other since college. Yes, she’s abrasive, but in the end I know she’s got my back.”

“I’m glad you’re not like her.” He reached over to brush her cheek. “I couldn’t have a wife that strong willed. The effort required to tame her is more than even I would want.”

Kenyatta pulled back. “Tame her? Is that what you want to do with me? Tame me?”

Brad shook his head. “No, no, no. You’re misunderstanding me. There’s no compromise in her relationship with Greg. I think he needs to take a firmer hand.”

She frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Brad closed his eyes. “Nothing. What they do has no reflection on us.” He opened his eyes and smiled at her. “Are you ready to beat Mike and Joi again?”

His comment still bothered her, but now wasn’t the time to confront him. She knew he didn’t like arguing when friends were around. And she didn’t like arguing when Carol was around.

“Sure. I’m going to get that bottle of wine out of the fridge and bring it out.” She moved toward the fridge, but his hand shot out to grab her arm.

“Didn’t you have a beer at dinner?”

“Yes, but a glass of wine won’t hurt. I’m at home, and won’t be driving.”

“I don’t like it when you drink.”

Kenyatta laughed. “You say that as if I make getting drunk a habit. I had one beer and am going to *share* a bottle of wine with six people. It’s not that big of a deal.”

She moved but he increased his grip and pulled her back. “Let me rephrase that, I don’t want you to drink.”

Kenyatta gazed from his hand to his face. “I think you need to let me go.”

“I think you need to let her go, too.” Carol’s voice came from behind them.

Brad immediately dropped his hand and stepped away. If looks could kill, Brad would be dead on the floor from the daggers shooting from Carol’s gaze. Kenyatta swallowed a groan. She knew Carol would jump to the wrong conclusion.

“It’s okay, Carol.”

“Does he grab you all the time?” She didn’t take her eyes off Brad.

His brows flickered. “No, I don’t grab her. I wasn’t grabbing her. I was trying to keep her from getting more to drink.”

“What was she going for, a pint of gin?”

Brad lifted his hands in defeat. “Forget it. I was just showing some concern. But you’re right, it’s no big deal.” He rubbed Kenyatta’s arm where he grabbed it. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. I would never hurt you.”

Kenyatta nodded. “I know.”

He smiled before brushing past Carol on his way out of the kitchen.

“What the hell was that? Does he do that often?”

“Carol, calm down please. I know your history makes you think every man is crazy, but Brad didn’t do anything.”

“Then why were you telling him to let you go?”

Kenyatta shrugged. “Because I wanted him to let me get the wine. Nothing more.”

Carol flipped her hair and frowned. “I don’t like him.”

Kenyatta feigned shock. “That’s such a surprise. As if your constant downing of him didn’t tell me that already.” She lowered her voice. “Look, I know you disagree with my reasons for marrying him, but that doesn’t give you the right to be rude to him. He’s trying.”

“He’s trying too hard. Calling us out of the blue like he did. Come on, Kenyatta, what’s up with that?”

“Then why did you come?”

“Because I had to see what he’s up to. Sizing your ring my ass, you’ve got cold feet and he knows it. So now he thinks he’s gonna sweet talk me into telling you he’s okay, think again.”

Kenyatta stepped up to her friend. “No, you think again. I don’t say a damn thing about how you walk all over Greg — and don’t bother to deny it — because I

know deep down you love him. I do love Brad.” The memory of Malcolm kissing her flooded her mind, but she plowed on.

“One day, I will be in love with Brad, so step off and stay out of my relationship.”

Carol glared at Kenyatta for a second before stepping back. “You want to make a mess of your life, fine. I’ve said my piece. I’ll even make sure you’re twenty minutes early for your damn wedding.”

Kenyatta took a deep breath then reached over and hugged Carol. “I know you’re doing this because you love me, but please, trust me.”

Carol was stiff for a second, before returning the hug then pulling away. “Whatever. But *I’m* bringing out the damn bottle of wine. He can’t prevent me from toasting this happy occasion. Then everyone has to drink.”

Kenyatta shook her head and laughed. “Fine, Carol. Whatever floats your boat.”

Chapter 9

Kenyatta arrived at the Marriott in Orlando, Florida, on Monday afternoon. The three-day conference started the next morning with her presentation following on Wednesday morning. She was anxious about presenting but excited about the opportunity. She knew the project inside and out so she wasn't nervous about knowing the information. Plus, she'd spoken in public numerous times before, although never in front of a crowd as large as this one would be. The fact that Malcolm trusted her to represent their company meant a lot and helped to boost her confidence.

While checking in, she asked the receptionist if Malcolm Patterson had arrived. They had not taken the same flight because her attendance was last minute, and she hadn't asked him about his flight when she saw him Saturday for reasons she refused to let herself consider. But she knew they would need to get together before Wednesday. She had a few questions about some of the comments he'd e-mailed to her.

The front desk clerk told her that Malcolm had not yet arrived, so with a disappointed sigh she headed to her room. The conference registration table was already up

and running, but she decided to register and get her information in the morning.

Once she reached her room, she tipped the bellman and quickly ushered him out the door. Richly decorated in shades of cream and pale green, the hotel room and bed looked comfortable and inviting after a day spent in airports. She couldn't wait to take a bath, lie in bed, and watch television. She quickly unpacked her bubble bath, body lotion, and snacks.

After lounging in the tub for at least an hour — she wasn't sure how long since she dozed off — she got out of the tub and put on a pair of pajama shorts and a tank top. She checked the movie listings as she rubbed down with a lavender-scented body lotion.

She was pleasantly surprised to see *Cabin in the Sky* playing on Turner Classic Movies. It looked like her night was going to be a good one.

Humming happily to herself, she was getting a bag of microwave popcorn from her luggage when someone knocked on the door, and she frowned. She heard a muffled, "Housekeeping," and sighed heavily. She hadn't called for housekeeping and hoped there was nothing wrong with the room.

She opened the door, and her pulse quickened when she saw Malcolm. He was dressed for traveling in khaki shorts, a red and white polo shirt and loafers. She was used to seeing him in business suits or slacks. Dressed casually, he looked much younger than his thirty-three years. He was also incredibly sexy. She self-consciously

tugged at her shorts. Their kiss two days earlier flooded her memory. It was going to be a long three days.

“Oh, Malcolm, I thought it was housekeeping,” she said. *Of course you thought it was housekeeping, idiot. He said housekeeping,* she thought.

She watched as Malcolm took a deep breath before letting his eyes roam over her body. When they paused at her breasts, she fought not to squirm. She wasn't wearing a bra and her arousal had to be on display as her nipples hardened.

“I ... ” He cleared his throat, “I wanted to check and make sure you arrived safely. I asked the concierge if you checked in, and she said you asked about me. I thought saying ‘hi’ would put both of our minds at ease.”

“Oh, where are your bags?” She looked around.

“I already took them to my room,” he answered. “I’m three doors down.”

She looked down the hall where he pointed and swallowed. When she looked back at him, she resisted the urge to rub her sweaty palms on her shorts. “I was just about to watch a movie and relax after the trip.”

“Were you going to eat dinner?”

She hadn't thought about it. She'd eaten a hot dog during her layover in Atlanta and the bag of popcorn she was going to make wouldn't serve as a filling dinner.

“No, I was going to pop some popcorn. I was so happy to be out of the airport, I didn't think about dinner.” She shifted to lean against the door.

“Can I persuade you to have dinner with me tonight? Just in a professional manner. I want to go over my comments I e-mailed before the conference starts. I’m not sure if we’ll have time to discuss it tomorrow.”

Kenyatta hesitated. Although they both agreed to act as if the kiss didn’t happen, it did, and it would always be the elephant in the room when they were together. She didn’t want to make things more complicated by having dinner with him.

She was about to say no when she noticed he looked completely indifferent to her answer. While her body was on fire just after he’d given her a few sweeping glances, he looked as if her answer didn’t matter one way or another. Once again, she reminded herself that she was probably one of many women he flirted with or kissed during a week. Okay, so maybe that was a bit of a stretch, but obviously, he wasn’t as affected by their kiss as she was. Just because he’d checked out her body twice didn’t mean he was ready to seduce her over dinner. Going to dinner with him didn’t put her in a similar situation as her mother twenty-some-odd years ago. He wasn’t actively pursuing her. He only wanted to discuss the project, and they both needed to eat.

She pushed away from where she was leaning on the door and took a step back. “Just let me change my clothes.”

He just nodded as if it were no big deal. “We can eat in the restaurant downstairs. I’ll go down and get us a table and see you in a few minutes.”

“That’s fine.”

He turned and walked down the hall. Kenyatta watched him go for a second before closing the door. If he could act as if nothing happened, then she’d do the same. She quickly pulled a pair of slacks and blouse from her garment bag. If they were meeting for business, she’d dress for business. That way there’d be no confusion about why she’d agreed to have dinner with him.

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Thirty minutes later, Malcolm was about to give up on Kenyatta joining him when she entered the restaurant. He suppressed a smile when he saw her. She’d gotten dressed as if she were back at the office. She’d replaced her tank top — which perfectly accented her unbound breasts — with a peach button-up blouse, tucked into gray slacks. She even had her laptop and portfolio with her. Even though he knew she wouldn’t come down in the tank top and shorts, he’d hoped she would be a little less formal. He wanted to make her feel comfortable around him again, as she’d been before he’d mucked things up by kissing her.

She quickly spotted him and walked over. When she sat down, she pulled her laptop out and set it up on the corner of their table. He was glad he hadn’t insisted on a table for two as he originally wanted and had accepted a table that would hold four.

When she finished and turned to face him, he raised an eyebrow and eyed her from head to toe. “I’m glad to see you got comfortable.”

Outwardly, she didn't appear phased by his comment, but she shifted slightly in her seat. "I didn't bring jeans."

"Why not? Do you plan on wearing business attire after hours?"

"No, it's over one-hundred degrees down here. I brought shorts and dresses for when I venture from the hotel and business attire for the conference."

"You didn't think shorts or a dress were appropriate for dinner?"

"No, now can we move on?" She began to pull up her presentation on the laptop.

He laid his hand on hers. "Can we order first?"

A jolt of electricity shot through his hand straight to his groin. She quickly pulled her hand away. His eyes met hers, challenging her to deny she'd felt it. She didn't look away, and instead she licked her lips. It was going to be a long dinner.

The moment was broken when the waitress came and asked what they wanted to drink. Malcolm ordered a beer and suppressed a smile when she asked for water.

"No cocktail?"

She shifted in her seat again. "I don't drink during business meetings."

He shouldn't have ordered a beer, but he needed something to ease his tension. He looked at his menu, and she followed suit. He'd had enough time to decide

what he wanted while waiting on her, so he took the opportunity to study her instead. Her lips constantly drew his attention, reminding him of their kiss. She tended to bite them when she was considering something. That habit had caused him to lose his train of thought during various meetings and work sessions in the past. He laughed to himself when he thought about how surprised she'd be to know she'd been a constant distraction to him over the years.

She looked up at him. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, just remembering something a friend of mine said before I left," he lied.

She seemed to accept that and looked back at her menu. When the waitress returned with their drinks, he ordered potato skins for an appetizer, the twelve-ounce steak with a baked potato, a side salad and asked the waitress to bring back the dessert menu once the food arrived. Kenyatta ordered a Cobb salad. When the waitress left, she had an amused look on her face.

"What?" He looked to see if something was on his shirt.

"Hungry?"

He smiled. "Starving, actually. I worked the entire trip down and ate mostly candy bars and sodas all day."

She laughed. "How do you stay in shape eating all of that junk?"

"I go to the gym every morning. Then blow my workout by surviving on junk food between meetings."

She shook her head. “You need to start eating better.”

He lowered his voice. “I will, when I find the right lady to come home to and sit down to dinner with.”

Kenyatta cleared her throat and turned back to her laptop. “Do you want to look this over while we wait?”

He wanted to say no, but didn't. He'd asked her to dinner to discuss it, so he allowed her to change the subject. The waitress brought his potato skins, and he ate those while they reviewed the presentation. He was glad when she ate one.

He didn't have a lot of comments, mostly questions about her intent behind a few slides. He made a few suggestions, but for the most part, her presentation looked good and hit the highlights of the project. Her attention to detail didn't surprise him; her work had always impressed him. She really was one of his best employees. It would surprise him if she still worked for him in five years instead of leaving for a more lucrative position either in or outside of H2O Environmental.

When the food arrived, their conversation moved to talk about the job.

“I've always wanted to know how you ended up doing environmental work.” Kenyatta said.

He shrugged. “I don't know, it just happened.”

She shook her head and laughed. “Don't give me that humble routine. You're adamant that we lead by example in our office. And I know you work hard to

ensure our projects have positive results. Your dedication has to come from somewhere.”

Malcolm smiled. “If you really want to know, it’s because of my dad. He always took my brother and me fishing when we were younger. It was our male bonding routine, you know. We’d leave Mom at home, and just go out on the creek, in our small boat, and talk. Just sitting out there with the sounds and smell of nature, made me appreciate it. When I started at South Carolina in the engineering school, it only took one environmental engineering class for me to become hooked.”

Kenyatta’s eyes grew wide. “You too? I was originally an English major but switched after an environmental science class. My dad didn’t take me fishing, but recycling lessons and episodes of *Captain Planet* turned me into a closet tree-hugger.”

“I loved that cartoon! My brother teased me incessantly for watching it.” They both laughed.

“I won’t tell anyone, unless you break out into the theme song.” She teased.

“You might like my singing voice.”

She shook her head. “I doubt it. Smart, handsome, and a great singer. You couldn’t be that lucky.”

His smile turned seductive. “You think I’m handsome.”

Kenyatta cleared her throat and squirmed in her seat. “Anyway, where were you before H2O? You don’t talk about your previous job much.”

Malcolm watched her for a second before chuckling to himself. “Changing the subject?”

“Yes, now back to my question.”

He nodded, still smiling. “Okay, I was with D.C. Carter for three years before coming to H2O. I started as an entry-level engineer, and busted my ass to be better than all the good old boys who thought I was there due to affirmative action. I was promoted to project manager after a year, but two years into it I decided to leave.”

“Why?”

He lifted his beer to his mouth. “Just time to go.” He didn’t elaborate. She opened her mouth as if to ask a question before closing it and taking a bite of her salad.

“So, you didn’t harp on me about my affirmative action comment.” He said to break the silence.

She looked up. “Why should I?”

“Some people take that as complaining, or trying to blame ‘the man.’”

She laughed. “You’re crazy. No, I understand. I feel that way sometimes myself.”

He scowled. “No one in our office is questioning you, are they?”

“No. It’s just ... you know when I worked with some of these small towns that H2O has had contracts with for a long time, they’re always like ‘I’ll double check with Mr. Summers’ or ‘Why don’t you check with Malcolm.’ It really used to piss me off, because I didn’t know if they

were saying that because I'm a woman, because I'm black, or both."

"I had no idea."

"And I wanted it that way. I didn't want to run to you or Mr. Summers just because my feelings were bruised. I just nicely tell them that I am the one assigned to their project, and that I don't need to run every idea by you two. And, I do bust my ass to be the best project manager you guys have. It took a few months, but now they all appreciate and respect my work."

Admiration filled his eyes as he stared at her for a second. "I've only gotten rave reviews about your work."

"Good. That's all I've ever wanted."

The waitress came with the dessert menu and they stopped talking. Malcolm felt a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach. As if he'd just been on a roller coaster ride. One that thrilled and scared the crap out of him at once. Kenyatta was turning out to be everything he'd imagined. If he didn't reign in his emotions soon, he'd be throwing his rule of staying away from coworkers out the window.

"Do you still fish with your dad?" Kenyatta asked suddenly.

He shook his head. "My brother and I still fish together when I can drag him home to visit my mom in Georgia. My father passed away when I was in college."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

“Thank you, but it’s okay. He lived a great life with my mom. It was a surprise when he had the heart attack, but we pulled through it. I think it hit my brother the hardest. Jared was at home when our dad had his heart attack. He doesn’t like to go home anymore and that’s been hard on my Mom. But, when I can drag him home, we do go back to the same place our Dad took us.”

She smiled wistfully. “It must be nice to have a brother to do things with. I’m an only child. My best friends Angie and Carol are like sisters though.”

“Jared is closer to me than anyone. That’s why I try to get him home more often. Our mom doesn’t say it, but I know Jared keeping his distance bothers her. The good thing is that he enjoys himself when we go back and relive the good times. The bad thing is that our fishing spot isn’t as nice as it used to be. There’s development all over the place in that part of Georgia, and it’s ruining the creeks. I would love to do a restoration project there. I hope I can meet with someone from that area during the conference this week.”

Her eyes lit up with excitement. “That would be great! I’d love to help you.”

He laughed at her enthusiasm. “I haven’t even secured a contract with anybody.”

“But you will. You have the drive and determination that’s helped you succeed. How else can you explain becoming the senior project manager by the time you were thirty?”

“I was in the right place at the right time,” he shrugged. “I landed a great deal with the city and had success with the majority of my projects. It just worked out.”

“Don’t act humble with me. I only hope I can be that successful one day,” she replied.

“You will be. After you present the work you did in Newberry, there will be all types of clients asking us to work with them. A few of them may even try to steal you,” he teased.

She smiled. “I like that you encourage me. A woman doesn’t always receive encouragement to climb the corporate ladder.”

He touched her hand gently. “I only tell the truth. You’re smart, hardworking, and determined. You’ve given your best since day one.”

She didn’t pull away. “Stop before you make me get all big-headed. I’ll become so dependent on your compliments I’ll want to work for you forever and never move up.”

Malcolm became serious. “I don’t want you to move up if it means I can’t work beside you anymore.”

She grinned and her lashes lowered over her eyes. “Why? You could do your job without me.”

“I could, but I enjoy working with you. I know I’ve never really said that before, it’s not my place to show favoritism with an employee, but you’re one of the highlights of my job. It wouldn’t be the same if I couldn’t

come to your office and bounce around ideas.” Malcolm didn’t know where those words came from, but he didn’t regret them. When Kenyatta’s breaths quickened and she licked her lips, he knew he wouldn’t take them back for anything.

“I ... I think it’s getting late,” she replied, pulling her hand away to look at her watch. She motioned for the waitress. “Check, please.”

So much for dessert and easing the tension between them, he thought. He’d just taken a great evening and turned it into an awkward moment. They didn’t speak as the waitress brought their checks and walked away to process the payments.

When they got up to leave, he took the laptop and portfolio from her.

“I’ll carry this for you.”

He knew she wanted to protest, but for some reason she changed her mind. “Okay.”

They got on the elevator and Malcolm was happy they weren’t the only ones on it. Every fiber in him called out for her. Just the heat from her body and the soft scent of lavender that clung to her made him want to take her in his arms and kiss her until they both were drunk on lust. It was an unnatural feeling to go against his normal inclinations, but after tonight he wasn’t so sure he wanted to anymore.

They reached their floor, and he walked her to her room. She opened the door and reached for her laptop

and portfolio. He handed them over reluctantly, wishing there was another reason to keep her with him.

He expected her to just say good night and go inside, but instead she turned to him after putting the items in the room. “Malcolm, thanks for what you said down there. I really appreciate the encouragement.”

“I only spoke the truth. I know you can’t work for me forever.”

She smiled. “No, not forever.”

“If you didn’t work for me, it would open up other possibilities.”

When she looked in his eyes, he saw that she understood his meaning.

She shook her head. “Not necessarily. There are ... other people to consider.”

At that moment, he didn’t give a damn about other people. The memory of her soft curves pressed against his body was the only thought in his mind. He leaned in toward her, but she took a step back.

“Malcolm, don’t. We know this can’t happen. You’re dating someone, and Brad and I aren’t completely over. Please don’t toy with me.” Her voice and eyes were pleading.

Was she so in love with Brad that he was causing a bigger conflict for her? Had he overestimated her attraction for him? Her response on Saturday would have led him to believe that wasn’t the case, but

attraction for one person didn't necessarily undermine love for someone else.

He took a step back. "You're right. There are other people to consider. I'm not trying to toy with you, Kenyatta. I won't bother you again."

He turned to walk away and heard her door close. Common sense said it was wrong to sleep with an employee, but it felt equally wrong to walk away from her. He was beginning to realize his attraction for her was deeper than just physical attraction; he genuinely liked her. It wasn't until he really thought about her no longer working for him that he realized she was the reason why he enjoyed his job so much. They clicked at work, often anticipating what the other was thinking or noticing a problem with a project at the same time before anyone else caught it. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd been thinking about a change they needed to make when she'd walk into his office and express concern over the same issue. Kenyatta was an integral part of his professional life that he would sorely miss if she ever left.

Malcolm began to wonder if it wasn't worth the effort to see what could happen between them. Were his reasons for leaving her alone valid? He couldn't sleep with an employee; history had taught him that. Then there were Jessica and Brad to consider. It was too complicated, and he hated complicated relationships. Kenyatta was right; he needed to stop making advances toward her. Starting tomorrow, he would treat her as just an employee. No matter how much her spirit called out

to his, he was going to remain professional ... even if it killed him.

Chapter 10

When Kenyatta entered the conference hall the following morning she could feel the combination of anticipation and dread in the crowd. Federal regulations were getting tighter, and the conference was the best place to get the latest news. She watched local government representatives discuss the changes with apprehension about how their already strained budgets would handle the additional mandates. Meanwhile, consulting firms circled like sharks waiting for the right opportunity to snare one of the representatives with a pitch about how their firm would best help them meet the inevitable challenges ahead.

Her usual eagerness during a conference was no longer there. She typically enjoyed talking to people and finding new clients at every conference she attended; however, this time around she couldn't muster up that excitement. She hadn't slept well the night before because she couldn't get her dinner with Malcolm out of her mind. She'd enjoyed herself more than she expected. It had been so easy to talk with him about things other than work. She hadn't thought of him as her boss. Instead, it was as if she'd been having dinner with a

friend. Then there was his comment about her being the best part of his job. She'd never considered the feeling could be mutual. She'd long acknowledged that having Malcolm as a boss was one of the reasons why she enjoyed her job, so it was nice to know he felt the same. The night would have been a perfect first date ... if they were dating. It was no wonder he leaned in to kiss her; it seemed like the right way to end the night. But her mother's words re-entered her mind. She'd promised to think about Brad and their relationship; not think about all of the reasons why spending time with Malcolm felt so ... right.

Yet it wasn't right, she thought. There were others to consider, and she didn't want to end up in a fated office romance the same way her mother had. Besides, she assured herself, compatibility as coworkers didn't equate to compatibility as a couple.

Kenyatta was barely able to focus during the first few sessions she attended. They were interesting, but her mind still wouldn't rest. What would happen if she and Malcolm did hook up, she wondered. She may not end up like her mom, pregnant by a coworker and left alone, but she also couldn't be sure that she wouldn't end up like that.

She left the next session early and sat on one of the sofas placed around the hotel lobby. She pulled out her laptop and logged on to the free Wi-Fi to check her e-mail. She had just begun looking through her e-mails when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She knew it was Malcolm before she looked up. It was just like before; the

heat from his hand radiated throughout her body upon contact.

“Don’t tell me you’re bored with the conference already,” he joked.

She shook her head and snapped the laptop closed. “No, I just wanted a break. The last session was kind of dry.”

“The one I attended was pretty good. Everyone is breaking for lunch. Do you want to go in together?”

Kenyatta noticed the lobby was filling up with conference attendees. She was hungry, but didn’t want to go in with Malcolm. Being with him didn’t help her keep her promise to her mom or Brad.

“No, I want to look up something before going in. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Disappointment clouded his eyes, but he didn’t argue. “I’ll look for you at the end of the day. We can compare notes on what we’ve heard and the potential for new clients.”

She nodded. “Sounds good.”

As he turned and walked away, she opened her laptop. She didn’t care about e-mails but it helped her keep her distance from Malcolm — even if the rest of her yearned to spend as much time with him as possible.

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That evening, Kenyatta got ready to attend the conference’s welcome reception. It was a casual affair

where the vendors handed out door prizes and attendees used the excuse of networking to enjoy the free cocktails. She, however, planned to stay far away from the alcohol. She didn't need anything else clouding her judgment. It was hard enough to resist Malcolm while sober.

The day had proven productive once she forced herself to focus after lunch. She and Malcolm had spread out and met many potential clients. She'd even found a representative from the county where Malcolm grew up who was interested in restoring the same creek. He agreed to attend her session to learn about the work they'd done to see what H2O had to offer. She was hopeful it would work out.

As she stepped out of her room, she ran directly into Malcolm's large chest. He reached out to steady her but released her quickly.

Her skin tingled in the spot where he'd touched her bare arms, and she rubbed them unconsciously. "Did you want something?"

His face was expressionless. "I was going down to the reception and thought we could go together."

Her heart did a silly flip-flop and she considered refusing. Regardless of her unnecessary reaction, there was no reason for them not to walk down together. "Sure, I was on my way."

His face relaxed as he smiled. "I see you decided on less formal attire tonight."

She fingered the edge of her sleeveless cream dress with horizontal black stripes. “It is a reception,” she replied dryly. When he raised an eyebrow, she just smiled. “Let’s go.”

“After you.” He motioned for her to precede him.

“So what did you think about the presentations today?”

Malcolm pressed the button for the elevator. “I really enjoyed the one on bacterial testing done with volunteer groups in Ohio. It seems like something we can introduce to a client in the Charlotte area.”

“I hate I missed that one. I stuck mostly with the program management track instead of the monitoring track.”

The elevator doors closed and Kenyatta felt as if the size of the elevator had shrunk since earlier. She forgot what she’d been about to say as the scent of Malcolm’s cologne filled the space. Stifling a groan, she pressed herself into a corner of the elevator, as far from him as possible. She stole a quick glance at him. He was examining the ceiling. He bit his bottom lip and glanced at her. Fire shot down her spine when their eyes connected. She suddenly realized that the pattern on the floor of the elevator was quite interesting.

Brad, think of Brad. She chanted in her head. Unfortunately, she’d spent half the day chastising herself for not thinking of Brad. She had talked briefly with him during her lunch hour, and he again expressed how sorry he was for making her feel as if he didn’t care about her

dreams. He told her he loved her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. His words only made her feel guilty for enjoying Malcolm's company so much.

When the elevator doors opened, she rushed out and took a deep breath. Her heart pounded in her chest as if she'd just run down the stairs instead of taking the elevator. She turned to Malcolm, who didn't appear to be aware of her discomfort.

"I think we're in Salon A." There was a tremor in his voice.

She nodded. "Let's go."

She headed toward Salon A and he walked alongside her. They entered the salon and took a second to look around at the setup. Her stomach rumbled when she saw the buffet. Lunch had long since disappeared and she was looking forward to the food.

"Do you want to get something to eat, and then mingle?" She motioned to the buffet. He winked at her. "You read my mind."

Her heart did that silly flip-flop again and she quickly turned to go to the buffet. They had only taken two steps in that direction when a woman rushed over and threw herself into Malcolm's arms. The woman's behavior stunned Kenyatta. She was dressed in casual business attire, but the V-neck of her shirt revealed far too much cleavage. The split in the side of her pencil skirt showed most of her thigh. She looked like a woman who was used to men falling at her feet, and Kenyatta

hated to admit that her caramel complexion and full lips would make many men do just that.

“Oh, my goodness! Malcolm Patterson, I haven’t seen you in years,” the woman gushed. She finally released Malcolm from her stranglehold but kept her hands on his shoulders.

“Tangy, um ... wow. It’s good to see you, too.” He glanced at Kenyatta before turning back to Tangy. “Are you attending or presenting?”

“Just attending. I was prepared to have a boring time until I saw you.” She lowered her voice seductively. “Now I can look forward to us catching up.”

Malcolm laughed nervously. He took her hands off his shoulders and turned toward Kenyatta. “This is Kenyatta Copeland, one of my coworkers.”

“Nice to meet you, Kenyatta.” Her words were welcoming but her tone was icy.

“Same here, Tangy,” Kenyatta replied, mimicking her tone. “I take it you and Malcolm know each other.”

Tangy smiled and slid her arm through Malcolm’s arm. “We did years ago when he was just starting his career. I hear you’re a big man now.”

“Not really. I’m the senior project manager for H2O Environmental’s Columbia, South Carolina, office. What are you up to?” He tried to move away, but Tangy clung to his side.

“Still with D.C. Carter, but now I’m a project manager. Although you left after our little ... incident, I

stuck it out. Now the whole thing is water under the bridge.”

Kenyatta was intrigued. “Incident? Don’t tell me Malcolm wasn’t always Mr. Perfect?”

Tangy smiled. “Oh, he was perfect all right — both in and out of the supply closet. When they found us, it was frowned upon, but not unexpected. Malcolm does have a way with the ladies, you know. He ran off and found another job, and I stayed and weathered the storm.”

Kenyatta’s anger grew with each word as jealousy fueled the flames. No wonder he thought he could toy around with her. He had a history of screwing the ladies in his office. Was she the only one at work he hit on? She stayed out of office gossip, but knew he was eye candy for her coworkers. Was he more than that to some of them? She felt like such a fool for even considering he was genuinely interested.

Kenyatta held up a hand. “That was too much information. I think I’ll just get something to eat while you two catch up.” She stormed off wishing she’d never agreed to come to this stupid conference in the first place.

Chapter 11

Malcolm watched Kenyatta go and wanted to strangle Tangy. She was the first, and only, coworker he'd ever slept with, and after that incident, his supervisor had a long conversation with him about how easily he could be labeled the office playboy. His supervisor wasn't upset about Malcolm sleeping with Tangy, but suggested he make it more discreet in the future. Malcolm vowed right then not to get involved with coworkers anymore. He wanted people to know him for his work efforts, not as the office lothario.

He removed her arm from his and scowled. "That was unnecessary, Tangy."

She stepped back with a sly smile. "Only fair to warn her. Besides, I can't have competition. It's a short week, and I meant what I said about catching up."

"That's not going to happen."

She just laughed. "We'll see. Come on over and see the old gang. We haven't seen you since you left."

"I'll come over and say hello later." His eyes scanned the crowd for Kenyatta.

“Wait a second.” Tangy grabbed his arm and waved over one of his old coworkers.

He recognized one of D.C. Carter’s project engineers he’d worked with, who quickly started up a conversation about how good it was to see him. Soon, three other old coworkers came over and asked about how things were going at H2O. Every time he caught a glimpse of Kenyatta and tried to excuse himself, someone pulled him back into the conversation.

He frowned when he saw Kenyatta smiling and chatting happily with a man he didn’t recognize. Malcolm sized him up and thought he didn’t look like someone she would be interested in, but then again, he didn’t think she’d agree to marry Brad. He zoned out of the conversation and watched as Kenyatta and the mystery man became engrossed in what looked like a serious discussion. He tried to excuse himself, but Tangy asked his thoughts on the update from the Environmental Protection Agency during the opening session.

He looked at his watch. Thirty minutes had passed and Kenyatta was still talking to that man. He shouldn’t care, since he’d spent the same thirty minutes in Tangy’s company, but he grew increasingly anxious about how it must look to Kenyatta.

When Kenyatta left the salon with the man, he’d had enough. “Excuse me.” He interrupted a former coworker mid-sentence and turned to follow.

Tangy reached out to grab his arm. “Malcolm, join us for dinner. D.C. Carter has been having some trouble in our Columbia office. I’d love to discuss potential partnerships on contracts in your area.”

Everything in him screamed no, but he could only imagine what Mr. Summers would say. D.C. Carter having trouble could present opportunities for H2O. He looked at the door again knowing he needed to talk to Kenyatta sooner rather than later; he also wanted to know where she’d gone. Looking at Tangy and the group of his former coworkers, he knew he couldn’t pass up the business opportunity. He would go to Kenyatta’s room as soon as he got back.

Chapter 12

Kenyatta watched as Malcolm left the hotel with a group of people that included Tangy. She hated to admit it, but she was jealous he could so easily forget her. He hadn't even tried to come to her and explain. But why should he explain things to her? She wasn't anything to him, just his employee. He might have considered sleeping with her until his old fling showed up.

She had finished her discussion with the rep from Georgia, who'd shown interest in working with H2O to restore Malcolm's old fishing spot. There she was, working her butt off trying to restore a place he cared about, and there he'd gone — off into the night with an old lover. If she wasn't the most idiotic person on the planet, she didn't know who was.

She left the reception early, no longer feeling up to having dinner with any potential clients or associates. As much as she hated to admit it, the sight of Malcolm with Tangy ruined her appetite. She was jealous in a way she'd never been with Brad.

Brad! She hadn't thought of him once. *I bet he's not out with some other woman. He's probably at home*

waiting on me to call.

When she got to her room, she saw she had four missed calls from Brad. She looked at the clock. It was only eight-thirty, but she didn't want to call him back. What was she doing? She had a good man back home, so why was she obsessing about one that was completely off-limits? *Because you're a sucker for a man who makes you feel the way he does*, her inner voice chimed.

She'd to call Brad tomorrow and tell him she was willing to work things out. It was better to work on a relationship with someone who cared about her than to stress over a nonexistent relationship with a man who was only good for sex.

An hour-and-a-half later, after showering and ordering a sandwich from room service, Kenyatta was lying in bed watching television. She was dozing off when there was a knock on the door. She knew who it was, and knew she shouldn't answer it, but she got out of bed and opened the door.

"I need to talk to you." He spoke quickly in a tone both urgent and firm.

"There's nothing to talk about, Malcolm. You ran into an old flame and spent the night catching up with her."

Malcolm shook his head and held up his hands. "I slept with Tangy ten years ago. I was barely out of undergrad and full of myself. I haven't seen her since I left the firm."

She tossed her head and shrugged. “Well then, I guess you guys have a *lot* of catching up to do.”

He looked over his shoulder. “Will you let me inside? I don’t want to have this conversation in the hallway.”

She looked around him and saw a few people she recognized from the conference. Against her better judgment, she stepped back and let him in.

She didn’t move far into the room and glared at him as he stood against the door. “Malcolm, I don’t care when you slept with Tangy. It’s none of my business if you slept with her or half of the women in our office.”

His brow crinkled. “Kenyatta, I don’t sleep with my coworkers. Not anymore. That situation with Tangy happened when I was twenty-three. I’ve kept my relationships out of the office since then. It gets too complicated if things go wrong.”

“Well, now you’ve explained yourself and we can say good night.”

She reached around him to open the door, but he moved to block her. “I’ve done a good job of not mixing business with pleasure.” His eyes met hers. “Until you started working for me.”

Kenyatta’s pulse raced. She wanted to step away — run away — and tell him to stop saying things that made it so easy for her to forget he was everything she didn’t want in a man. But, her feet didn’t move a millimeter when he took a small step toward her.

“I think you should go.” Her voice was soft, breathless and completely contradicted with her words.

Malcolm took another step, bringing him close enough for his chest to brush against her breasts. “Say it like you mean it.”

She stared into his eyes. The heat in his gaze touched her just as much as a caress. Her eyes lowered to his lips and she remembered what kissing him felt like. She wanted him to kiss her again. It was foolish, and it was wrong, but she wanted him.

He reached out and slowly ran his fingers through her hair until he cupped the back of her head. Kenya knew things were getting out of hand and she opened her mouth to stop him. “I think ... ”

He cut her off when he brought his head down slowly and barely touched her lips with his. Her words died on her lips. She didn't pull away when he ran his tongue lightly over her bottom lip. Blood rushed through her veins. Her breasts felt heavy, aching for his touch, while liquid heat shot from where their lips met to the core of her womanhood.

He continued to tease her mouth, slowly kissing and lightly sucking her lips until she pressed herself against him, begging for more. Finally, he deepened the kiss and pulled her tight against him. The burning passion — she'd convinced herself she could live without — flowed through her body as his tongue caressed hers. All coherent thought fled from her mind, as all she could do was taste, touch, and feel Malcolm.

This kiss was different from the first. He kissed her as if she was the sweetest, most luscious thing he'd ever tasted — like an expensive chocolate reserved only for rare occasions. Kenyatta was aware of him turning her and pressing her against the wall. His body was flush against hers and she delighted in the feel of him against her. Desire, hot and molten, flowed through her body.

She moaned softly when he reached beneath her tank top and cupped one of her breasts. She pressed closer to him when he gently brushed his thumb across her already aching nipple. He broke the kiss to taste her neck and shoulders, before lifting her tank top and leaning down to take her nipple into his mouth.

Desire coursed through Kenyatta's body when he began to suckle gently. Heat pooled between her legs causing her core to tremble. When he moved to give the other breast the same attention, she whimpered. This was how it was supposed to be. This was what you were supposed to feel for the man you married. She had tried to ignore these feelings and act as if they didn't matter, but feeling Malcolm's hard body and warm mouth on her felt ... divine ... natural ... *right*. Why had she ever tried convincing herself she could live without this? She reached down between their bodies and began to work the fastenings of his slacks.

He pulled away from her breasts and stared into her eyes. She didn't think she could get any hotter until she saw the desire reflected in his gaze. She fumbled as she continued to try to undo the button of his slacks, feeling both desirable and unsure if what she were doing was the

right thing to do. She smiled triumphantly when she got the button of his pants free, but the moment was fleeting. He quickly placed his hands over hers and slowly pulled away.

He placed his forehead on hers and breathed deeply. “Kenyatta, we can’t do this.”

It took a second for his words to sink in. She gave him a bewildered look, but his eyes were closed. “What?”

He took a few more deep breaths before opening his eyes and pulling back. “We can’t do this. It would be a mistake.”

Shame, icy and immediate, washed over Kenyatta. Her breasts were still bare, and she was clinging to him like a whore, when he’d pulled away. She moved aside quickly and covered herself. Of course, they shouldn’t be doing this. He was her boss. He had a girlfriend. She had Brad.

“No, we shouldn’t. You’re right. You’re my boss, and this would cause problems in the office.”

“That’s not what I mean.” He reached for her, but she moved away.

“No, you’re right. I shouldn’t have let you in. You should go.” She reached for the door.

“Kenyatta, we need to talk. I’m not trying to push you away — ”

“Yes you are, and you should. This wouldn’t work out, and we know it. Lust and desire is all it is, and that

only leads to trouble.” She pushed him out of the way and jerked open the door. “Please leave.”

He tried to touch her, but she moved away. “No, please just go.”

She was so embarrassed she wanted to cry, but she refused. To do so would only give credibility to how much he affected her.

“Kenyatta, you don’t understand — ”

“Yes, I do. Now go.” She pointed toward the hallway.

Malcolm walked out, and she slammed the door. She’d never been so embarrassed in her life! She’d been ready to fall into bed with him after a few words and kisses, just as she’d done in her past with disastrous consequences. She felt just as gullible at twenty-eight as she’d been at nineteen. The humiliation sank in as she sat on the bed and squeezed her eyes shut to try to stem the flow of tears.

She cried for all of two minutes before reason took hold. Malcolm was upset when she kicked him out. He said he wasn’t trying to push her away, even though that was what he’d done. Had he meant something else? Part of her brain said it didn’t matter if he meant something else. Jumping into bed with her boss was not a good idea. She didn’t need the example her mother gave her to know that, but what he made her feel was unlike anything she’d felt before. Ever. Maybe she should have let him explain. Why *had* he stopped?

She jumped up from her bed and sprinted to the door. She didn't want to give herself time to think about what she was doing. If Malcolm wanted her as much as she wanted him, then she had to know.

When she stood in front of his door, she took a deep breath to steady her breathing. She couldn't go back after this. When he opened the door, he would know she was crazy about him. She only hoped he would feel the same.

Kenyatta lifted her hand to knock, when a sound on the other side caused her to pause. She placed her ear against the door. The sound of sex assailed her ears and her heart plummeted. He'd left her room not even ten minutes ago and he was already fucking someone else! It was Chad all over again. The humiliation from earlier came back with a vengeance, accompanied by white-hot anger. Not at Malcolm — he was a man, and she shouldn't expect any different from him — but at herself. She had once again let passion rule her life and had set herself up for failure. Her mom was right; Brad was right. She was throwing away something good for something that wasn't real. Tears burned her eyes as she ran back to her room.

Chapter 13

Malcolm's eyes scanned the conference area for Kenyatta. He spotted her near the stairwell talking to the same man from the night before. When her eyes met, his she glared at him before turning away. He sighed and headed her way. He expected her to be upset about his abrupt ending, but he refused to go through the day without explaining.

Telling her to stop must be the stupidest thing he'd ever done in his life. He could only imagine how badly his brother would clown him for leaving a hot and ready woman because his morals took control. He hadn't pushed her away because he wanted to, but because it wasn't the right time. He'd fantasized about sleeping with her for three years, and he didn't want to finally let it happen in a rush in a hotel room. She deserved more than a fling during a work conference.

His plan was to go home, break up with Jessica, and find a way to transfer himself or assign Kenyatta to another supervisor. He couldn't go on acting as if he didn't want her. If she were free from Brad, he would not miss the opportunity to see where this could go.

Tangy stepped in his path, but he brushed her aside and continued toward Kenyatta. Stopping to speak with Tangy would only make it harder for him to explain. He'd turned down her come on the night before and wasn't in the mood to do it again.

When he reached Kenyatta, he placed his hand on the small of her back. She stiffened and shifted away slightly, but his hand remained and his body followed.

He looked at the man she'd been talking too. "Excuse me, but I need to speak with Kenyatta quickly before her presentation."

The guy nodded. "No problem. Kenyatta, I'm looking forward to your presentation."

Her lips raised in a stiff smile at the man as he walked away. As soon as he was out of earshot, she turned to Malcolm. "I don't want to talk to you."

He leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Either follow me to the stairwell, or we can have it out here."

She looked like she wanted to argue. When she looked around at the crowd then looked at him he saw resignation in her eyes. "Fine."

He gently applied pressure to her lower back and led her to the stairwell. He led her down one flight to keep them out of sight. He couldn't help but admire the way her H2O button up shirt and pencil skirt hugged her figure. She smelled of lavender again, bringing to his memory the feel of her body pressed against his and the sweetness of her nipple in his mouth.

His eyes met hers and he saw desire mirrored there before she closed her eyes and turned away.

He rushed to stand in front of her. “Kenyatta, we need to talk about last night. I need to explain why I stopped.”

Kenyatta looked at her watch and turned away again. “Malcolm, the presentation is in a few minutes. I need to go.” She glared at him. “And there’s nothing to explain. It was a mistake, and it shouldn’t have happened.”

He moved again to be in front of her. “I wasn’t going to say that.”

She tried to walk past him, but he stepped closer, pinning her against the wall. “I misspoke when I said what we were doing was wrong.” She bit her lip and he bit back a groan. “The timing was bad, but not the kiss.”

Kenyatta looked away. “Yes, the timing is bad. You had previous arrangements.”

Confused, he frowned. “What are you talking about? I didn’t have other arrangements. I spent the rest of the night thinking about you.”

She laughed bitterly. “Really? Were you thinking of me while you screwed Tangy last night?”

He took a step back. “Tangy? I went to dinner with Tangy and some old coworkers last night. After dinner, I came straight to your room. I didn’t see her again until this morning.”

“Don’t lie to me, Malcolm. I came to your room last night. I was stupid enough to want to hear your explanation. Instead, I hear you and Tangy. Having sex.” She tried to move away, but he blocked her again.

“There was no one in my room last night except me.” He didn’t know who’d lied and told her he slept with Tangy, but she was the last person he’d wanted last night.

“I know what sex sounds like. I may not be doing a lot of it myself, but I’m not that forgetful.”

Malcolm continued to frown before comprehension — and embarrassment — dawned. He laughed quietly and turned away. He had ordered porn on pay-per-view and given himself a hand job. All the while thinking about Kenyatta’s body against his and how damn good her breasts had looked the night before.

“You think this is funny.” Disbelief and anger colored her tone.

He continued to laugh. “Yes, in a way. Kenyatta, I wasn’t sleeping with Tangy or anyone else last night.” He turned to face her. He rubbed the bridge of his nose before dropping his hand and saying in a rush. “When I left you, I was so damn frustrated that I ... ”

She crossed her arms. “You what?”

He rubbed his chin. “I ordered porn on pay-per-view and took care of myself. You must have heard that.”

He watched as first shock, and then relief flashed across her face. She continued to eye him warily and he

knew she was struggling to believe him. He didn't believe he'd actually told her. But, he'd rather her know he got off to her image than think he left her room and slept with Tangy. "You were ... "

He smiled sheepishly. "Jacking off? Yes."

She raised an eyebrow. "It's a convenient story."

"I'll show you my hotel bill if you don't believe me. I wasn't thinking about Tangy or anyone else when I kissed you last night, or after I left. I can't think of anyone but you." He reached out to touch her chin. "Have dinner with me tonight. We can talk about everything without feeling rushed."

"What's to discuss, Malcolm? You're still attached, we work together, I'm still with ... "

He interrupted her with a kiss. He gently pulled her lower lip into his mouth, asking for entrance, and, instantly she parted her lips. His tongue met hers as he slowly deepened the kiss.

After he was sure she was only thinking of him he slowly pulled away and kissed the side of her mouth. "Don't mention his name. Please, just have dinner with me," he whispered in her ear.

Her soft brown eyes looked into his. He saw the battle going on inside of her. He held his breath as he waited for her to answer. She lifted her head and excitement welled in him that she was about to agree when someone above them cursed and slammed the door. They jumped apart like teenagers caught by their

parents. They both held their breath as they waited to see if someone was coming down the stairs. When no one appeared, they turned back to each other.

“I’ve got to get ready for the presentation.” She moved to go up the stairs. “We’ll talk later.”

He reached out to take her hand “At dinner?”

“I’ll think about it.” She pulled her hand away. “Come to my room later.”

He nodded and watched her hurry up the stairs. He’d love to put his hands around the neck of whoever interrupted them. But he had the rest of the week to work this out. He was no longer going to deny how much he wanted Kenyatta, and he was ready to do whatever was necessary to explore what was between them.

Chapter 14

Kenyatta ran up the stairs and back into the conference hall. She wanted to go to dinner with Malcolm, but she didn't trust herself or the situation. *Relationships should be easy*, she thought, *not as confusing as this*. She smiled to herself when she remembered his confession. He put a lot on the line admitting to that, and she was grateful. The knot that formed in her chest when she'd thought he'd slept with Tangy eased and all she felt was a giddy excitement about the rest of the conference.

“Oh, Ms. Copeland, there you are.” Kenyatta turned to see a short man with unruly brown hair and glasses. Sam Hall, the conference director, smiled as he approached her. He was the head of the National Water Quality Association and the leading expert on water quality issues. His organization put together this yearly conference.

“We were looking for all of the speakers; your session is starting soon.”

Kenyatta smiled at him and followed him to the Salon. “Good, I'm ready to start.”

“I’m looking forward to your presentation. When I read your abstract, I was impressed with the results you and your company achieved. We’ve wanted to expand our reach to the Southeast. Maybe we can sit down later and discuss some possibilities.”

Kenyatta’s smile widened. “That would be great. I can think of one area that has a lot of interest from the local government. It’s a creek that’s in desperate need of repair, and it’s in a high-profile area. It would make an excellent project.”

Sam nodded. “It sounds as if you’ve already given this location some thought.” He opened the door to Salon B. “I look forward to learning more. How about you join me and my colleagues at the hotel restaurant this evening? We can discuss it with them.”

Kenyatta hesitated only a second. If she met him after the conference, she would not be able to go to dinner with Malcolm, but this was a big opportunity, and she knew he would understand. “That’s great. I look forward to it.”

He led her to the front of the room. The moderator showed her where her information was loaded and helped her become familiar with the equipment she would be using. The time flew, and before she knew it, she only had five minutes until she presented. Malcolm walked up to her before she started.

“I’d wish you luck, but you don’t need it,” he said. “I’ll be in the front to answer any questions at the end.”

But only if you need my help.” He reached over to squeeze her arm.

She nodded and smiled. “Good, that way I won’t have to seek you out.” When he turned to walk away, she called him back. “Malcolm, I can’t go to dinner.” Before she could explain, the moderator announced it was time to begin. Malcolm frowned before sitting in his chair.

Kenyatta handled the presentation so effortlessly she even surprised herself. She knew as much, if not more, about the project than Jeremy and was able to explain the details with ease. Even though Malcolm sat in the front for support during the Q&A, she breezed through all the answers. He smiled at her throughout, and it made her feel good to see the pride in his eyes.

After she finished her presentation, people inundated her with questions about her research and H2O’s services. She ushered everyone to H2O’s booth in the exhibit hall. There, she, Malcolm, and two associates from their Orlando office answered questions and stockpiled contacts. By the time the crowd cleared, Malcolm had been pulled away by a colleague, and the morning’s activities began to wear on her.

Exhausted from all the talking both during and after her presentation, she decided to skip the afternoon sessions and rest. She would catch up with Malcolm later to explain why she couldn’t go to dinner. Maybe he could join her and Sam for dinner and propose his father’s fishing spot as a project site. She and Malcolm could talk afterwards.

She got off the elevator on her floor and walked to her room. She was digging in her bag for the room key when someone blocked her path.

“Excuse me.” She said. When she looked up her stomach clenched when her eyes met a pair of gray ones.

“Surprise. I had to see my fiancée.” Brad smiled warmly as he squeezed her shoulders.

She blinked several times to make sure he was real. “Brad, what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be at work?”

“I twisted some arms and was able to come down for the day,” he said. He reached out to take her room key and opened the door. “I figured if we agreed to work on our relationship, then it made more sense to work on it together.” He ushered her into the room and closed the door. “Aren’t you happy to see me?”

Happiness wasn’t her immediate thought. More like dread. She glanced at the door and hoped Malcolm didn’t come to her room. “Well, yes, it’s just that I’m here on business and a lot has happened.”

Brad sauntered across the room and sat on her bed. “Things like what?” His voice was tense and his eyes accusing as he stared at her.

Guilt caused her face to burn. “Well, my presentation was a success,” she pulled the name badge from around her neck. “There are a lot of people who want to discuss my project and possibly other projects.”

Brad stood and walked over to her. “Yes, I saw your presentation.” He reached out and rubbed her arms.

“You did?”

“Yes, I sat in the back. I wanted to see what was so important to you.” He led her to the bed and sat her on the edge. He kneeled and removed her shoes. “Since you insist on working after the wedding, I wanted to see how good you actually were at your job.” He looked up at her and smiled. “You were wonderful. I never knew how great you were at your job until today.”

Who was this and what did they do with Brad? As many times as she’d told him about her day and the accomplishments she’d made, he never acted as if he cared. It took seeing her in action to acknowledge her career. “You can’t be serious.”

“Yes, I’m quite serious.” He reached for the buttons of her blouse and she stiffened.

“What are you doing?”

He toyed with the buttons on her shirt. “I’m just making you more comfortable. You look uncomfortable and tired.”

She pushed his hand away. “I don’t need my shirt unbuttoned to be comfortable.”

“Did you plan to change clothes?”

“Yes.”

“Well, go ahead. I’ll sit here and talk while you change.”

She hesitated before getting up. She'd never undressed in front of Brad, and she wasn't inclined to start today. She met his eyes, and he raised an eyebrow. "Do you have a problem undressing in front of me?" His voice was soft, but there was an edge to it.

She had no reason to not change in front of him. It wasn't as if she was doing a strip tease before sex. Plus, if he was willing to travel down here just to work on their relationship she had to be willing to act like a person in a normal relationship. She turned away, unbuttoned and removed her blouse. "No." When she glanced over her shoulder, he had a satisfied smile on his face. She looked away.

"When you broke off our engagement, I realized you were serious about keeping your job. I also realized if I want to keep you in my life, I have to be supportive. And I do want you in my life, Kenyatta."

She froze, but didn't turn back to face him. He continued, "What we have is special. Because we've abstained, we were able to get to know each other. Lust and desire hasn't clouded our judgment, and we were able to become friends. We don't have to worry about the fire dying in our relationship because our foundation is strong."

She thought about how easily she'd let lust lead her with Malcolm the night before. She'd practically torn his clothes off. Not once had she remembered her promise to Brad to consider their engagement. Guilt weighed heavily on her shoulders.

She heard Brad get off the bed and walk over. When his hands rested on her bare shoulders she stiffened and his grip tightened. He took a deep breath and continued. “So many people get caught up in the heat of the moment. In those situations, you can’t be sure where a relationship will lead. You end up hurt and hating yourself in the end, but we don’t have to worry about that, Kenyatta. We’re already secure, and I love you. All I want is to be with you and take care of you.”

Kenyatta closed her eyes. She couldn’t look at Brad, couldn’t answer him because of the guilt. He rested his chin on her shoulder and she turned her face away. “I saw your boss before I came in to watch your presentation. He was talking to some woman named Tangy about hooking up the night before. It was so obvious their *hook-up* was anything but professional. They couldn’t keep their hands off each other. I don’t want a life like that. I’d rather spend every night with you than sleep around with women at conferences.”

Pain sliced through her. Malcolm had lied. She squeezed her eyes shut to fight back the tears. He must have had a good laugh telling her he jacked off the night before. When Brad turned her to face him, she opened her eyes and met his. He looked at her and she wanted the floor to open up and swallow her. She’d almost lost something good by not following her plan. Brad reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring she’d left at home. “Please, please say the wedding is still on.”

More convinced than ever that it made more sense to marry Brad than continue to let men like Malcolm

humiliate her, she nodded. “The plans are still on.”

Triumph flashed in Brad’s eyes before he put the ring on her finger and pulled her close. She lifted her hands automatically to push him back and came in contact with his bare chest. His shirt was unbuttoned and he’d pulled it out of the waistband of his pants. “What are you doing?”

“We just made up. I’m on cloud nine right now,” he leaned close. “All I want is to make love to you.”

Her eyes widened as she remembered her promise. If they were back on, that meant their relationship was progressing.

“Brad ... I think we’re moving a bit too fast.”

She pushed and his hands tightened on her arms. He pulled her body against his. “We both just agreed we would get married. Are you saying I can’t tell my fiancée I want to make love to her? Am I not allowed to touch you?” He traced his finger along the edge of her bra. “Because if I can’t touch you, who can?”

His eyes met hers, and she heard the accusation in his voice. “No one, Brad.” She hesitated before finishing. “O-only you.”

As he leaned in to kiss her, she stopped him. “But I still want to wait. I want our first time to be special. Not here in this hotel room at a conference.”

He smiled. There was no warmth in it, and a chill went down her spine. “There’ll be no hesitation once we’re married, Kenyatta. Remember that.” He ran his

finger along her lower lip. His words sounded like a warning, but before she could ask, there was a knock on the door. Brad brought his lips down on her in a quick, hard kiss before pulling away. He looked gleeful as he took in her appearance. Panic seized her as she remembered telling Malcolm to come to her room.

“That’s room service,” he said and relief flooded through her. “When you headed upstairs, I ordered champagne at the front desk. I wanted to celebrate.” He let her go and went to the door.

Her relief was short lived. Malcolm stood on the other end of the door. The huge grin on his face fell when he saw Brad.

Brad grinned and pulled Malcolm into the room. “Malcolm, what a surprise! It’s good to see you. I’m glad to see you could break away from your ... friend. Come in and celebrate with us.”

Mortified, Kenyatta scrambled to pick her shirt off the floor and put it on. She sensed Malcolm’s gaze on her the entire time.

“Celebrate what?” Malcolm asked through clenched teeth.

Brad grabbed her arm and pulled Kenyatta to his side. “We had a little quarrel before she left, but we’ve since made up.” He held up her hand to show Malcolm the ring before leaning over to kiss her neck. “We’re engaged, and I think we both want a quick wedding.”

She glanced at Malcolm while trying to button her shirt. “Brad, stop.”

“That’s great. Congratulations to you both.” Malcolm said. The eyes he turned on Kenyatta were full of anger, hurt, and jealousy. “I just wanted to tell Kenyatta she did a good job today. I’ll leave you two to ... celebrate,” he spat out the last word and turned to the door.

“Malcolm,” Kenyatta called out, and Brad tightened his grip on her shoulder.

Malcolm stopped and turned slowly back to face them. Fury filled his gaze, and Kenyatta couldn’t stop her anger from returning. He had no right to look at her like that when he’d lied and slept with Tangy the night before. She lifted her chin. “Sam Hall wants to meet with us this evening. He’d like to discuss possible projects. I thought we could approach him about your creek in Georgia. I’ve already made a contact there, and it looks like it may be a go.”

A muscle in Malcolm’s jaw ticked. “That’s fine, but I won’t be able to stay long. I’m going back to Columbia tonight.”

“I thought you were here all week?” she asked.

“Something came up.” He looked disgustedly from her to Brad, then turned and stormed out of the door. She flinched when it slammed. Even though this was for the better, she couldn’t stop the disappointment from clogging her throat.

Brad grinned as he leaned down to kiss her neck.
“Now that your boss is leaving, I wish I could stay longer
so we can spend more time together.”

Kenyatta pulled away. “Let me change and we can go
to lunch,” she said before rushing into the bathroom.

Chapter 15

The next day, Malcolm sat in his SUV in front of his three-bedroom brick house. He'd just arrived from Orlando and was still angry about the scene with Kenyatta and Brad. He couldn't believe she would kiss him like that, then be in another man's arms the next day. Malcolm admitted she fooled him; he had thought she felt something for him, but it turned out she was only looking for someone to keep her company until Brad arrived. She had accused him of toying with her, and yet she was the one playing games.

He felt like an idiot planning to come home and uproot his life all because of a kiss. One incredible kiss that still aroused him when he thought about it, even when he knew she wasn't worth the time of day.

Malcolm got out of the car and removed his bags from the trunk before slamming it closed. Why did she even go through the trouble of acting as if she were unsure about her and Brad? It was obvious they had a fight, with all of the flowers and gifts Brad sent to the office, but had she really broken things off? Did he really come to Orlando to reconcile their differences? If so, it sure was a quick reconciliation. No, it must have been

planned, he decided. That was why she was so quick to remind him that others were involved.

Yet he couldn't get the image of her and Brad out of his mind. Kenyatta was practically naked when Brad opened the door. He shook his head. He was just glad he saw her true colors before he told her how much he really cared, before she knew he was considering changing his career path just to be with her.

He bristled, still angry at the thought that he had not only been willing to sacrifice his career but also his arrangement with Jessica just to have her. Like a teenager who'd gotten his first piece of ass.

Still, he couldn't put her out of his mind. If she'd only told him she wanted to finally end all the years of frustration. He would have gladly given her the one night they both needed, the night he still needed. He could have slept with her, finally gotten her out of his system and let her go on her merry way and marry Brad — Mr. Safe and Predictable.

Malcolm stopped at his front door. No, he wouldn't have done it. Not after he'd discovered what it was like to hold her in his arms. He knew he wouldn't have been able to watch her go back to Brad. He would have played himself. If he was this upset seeing her with Brad after a kiss, he couldn't image seeing her with Brad after she'd slept with him.

The sound of Keisha Cole coming from the kitchen greeted Malcolm when he opened his front door. *Jessica must be here*, he thought. She often parked in the garage

he never used, so it was always a bit of a surprise. So many tools and junk filled his garage that only a small sedan like the one she drove could fit. His Denali hybrid was usually parked in the driveway.

Malcolm dropped his bags in the entryway and walked into the kitchen to find Jessica on the phone while making a sandwich. He guessed by her conversation that she was talking with her sister. He hoped it wasn't the one in New York and frowned when she called out that exact name. He grew even more annoyed. Jessica always came to his house to make long-distance phone calls, which made no sense because she owned a cell phone with unlimited minutes. But, he reminded himself, it was just another one of her annoying habits that he put up with because she was content to stay with a man who obviously wasn't in love with her.

She turned around to put the mayonnaise in the refrigerator and stopped when she saw him. Her face instantly broke into a huge grin.

"Tammy, I need to call you back. Malcolm's home," she said as she hung up and ran over to greet him.

"Baby, what are you doing back so soon?" She kissed his jaw and neck as she spoke.

Malcolm tried not to let the annoyance show in his face as he removed her arms from around his neck and walked over to the fridge. "They didn't need me down there anymore, and I have more important things to do in the office." He pulled out a bottle of juice and poured a

glass. “What are you doing here ... besides calling your sister in New York?”

She had the decency to look guilty. “I miss you when you’re gone, baby. I like to come and sleep in your bed when you’re away. It makes me feel closer to you.”

“Sometimes I don’t know why you even pay rent at your place. You find a reason to stay here most days of the week,” he muttered.

Her eyes filled with excitement. “Are you saying you want me to move in?”

Malcolm suppressed a groan. For the past three months, she’d been leaving items here and teasing him about moving in, but he definitely wasn’t ready for that. Once she moved in, she’d expect an engagement, and he knew he didn’t want to marry her.

“Jessica, I’ve had a long trip and we’ve talked about this before. Can we save it for another day?” He finished his juice and walked out of the kitchen. He grabbed his bags out of the entryway and headed upstairs to his bedroom.

“No, it can’t wait another day,” she answered, following right behind him. “Why do you always put off conversations about our relationship? Don’t you think we should consider where this is going?”

“It’s only been six months. That’s hardly enough time to start making commitments.” He began unpacking his bags in an effort to concentrate on something else.

“It’s been six months since you introduced me to your family, but we’ve been sleeping together for a year. How long do you need before you determine how you feel about me?”

Malcolm sighed and turned to face her. “Jessica, you know how I feel about you ...”

“No, I don’t,” she interrupted. “You never say that you love me. You don’t show affection unless we’re in bed. Sometimes I wonder why I stick around.”

“Why do you stick around? I’ve never treated you badly. Hell, even though I’m not ready to let you move in, I’ve given you a key, and you’re here most days of the week. What else do you want?” he asked.

“That’s why I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal to let me move in.” She paused. “Is there someone else?”

Malcolm scoffed. “All right, here we go with the drama.”

“I’m serious, Malcolm. What other reasons do you have for not moving this relationship along?” She paused before quietly asking. “Is it Kenyatta?”

He threw down the shirt in his hands. “Where did that come from?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, okay? I’ve seen the way you look at her. I’m not stupid. I know when my man is interested in another woman. You practically idolize her. I hear you on the phone with your brother talking about your perfect protégé, Kenyatta; how great it is to work

with her, and how she's such an asset to the company. I also know how he and Devin tease you about screwing her."

He turned away and began pulling clothes out of his bag. "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't talk about Kenyatta any differently than I do my other coworkers."

"Please, Malcolm. Just because I haven't said anything, doesn't mean I'm deaf and dumb. Or blind. I've heard your reasons for not sleeping with her, and I'm never one them."

"Oh, so you're eavesdropping now?" he accused.

"Don't try to put this on me. It's true, and we both know it, so just admit it. You're keeping me at bay while you wait for things to eventually work out between the two of you."

Malcolm spun to face her. "Kenyatta has nothing to do with us. She may be an excellent employee, but she has a fucked-up personal life. She's conniving, deceitful and only out for her own personal gain. You don't have to worry about me *ever* sleeping with her."

Jessica blinked rapidly and stepped back. His outburst surprised them both. It may be an exaggeration, but right now he was angry enough to believe it. Had it been so obvious to everyone, including Jessica, that he'd carried around the smallest bit of hope he and Kenyatta would work out one day? After learning what type of woman Kenyatta was, he felt even more like a fool.

Regret filled him as he looked at Jessica's surprised face. She was a good woman who deserved someone that appreciated her, and he wasn't that guy. It wasn't fair to keep her waiting around while he in turn waited for what he wanted. It was time to end things before he hurt her.

"I'm sorry for not trusting you," she said quietly. "Look, it's obvious that we're not vibing tonight. I'll just grab my stuff and go home."

As she turned to leave, he called her name. "No, Jessica, I'm sorry. It's been a long trip, and I'm in a bad mood about losing a contract."

She walked over to him and put her arms around his neck. When she reached up to kiss him, he lifted his head out of reach. "But, maybe we do need to chill for a while."

"What?" Her arms fell from around his neck.

"It's obvious we have other issues going on. Let's be real. We both know that things aren't great between us. I think if we slowed down, maybe it could work out later. Plus, things at work are getting crazy, and I'm about to have even less time to spend with you than before — "

"Are you breaking up with me?" she interrupted.

He stepped back. "I just need some time to myself so I can focus. I don't want to upset you, but with the stress from work, I'm feeling on edge, and I might say something to hurt you."

Malcolm knew it was a lame excuse, and he hadn't closed the door on a possible reconciliation, but he was willing himself to believe that maybe one day, once he

got Kenyatta out of his system, he and Jessica could work things out.

She motioned from her breasts to her hips. “You’re seriously going to let this go?”

He sighed and nodded. “I just need to chill for a while. Can you understand that?”

She stared at him for a second before shrugging. Her face was impassive as she spoke. “Fine, I’ll go. I need the extra time to look for another job anyway.” She moved away from him. “You do remember my car is going in the shop next week. Can I still borrow yours?”

Malcolm cringed. He’d forgotten about her car and his promise to loan her his. “I won’t leave you hanging. I’ll help you out until your car is fixed.”

“Good. And, I hope you’ll still take me to the Fire Marshall’s Ball. I can’t give back those tickets.”

Swallowing his sigh of frustration, he nodded. “Sure.”

She turned to walk out but paused and came over to him. She pressed her lips against his and palmed his penis. “Think about this while I’m gone,” she cooed as she gave him one last squeeze.

Malcolm watched her go and questioned whether he was making a big mistake. He looked down at his pants and shook his head. *Nothing. Not even the start of an erection*, he sighed to himself. He was probably a fool for breaking things off with Jessica, but his feelings for Kenyatta were too raw. He couldn’t string Jessica along

while he dealt with that. Regardless of the reasons, it was as if a weight lifted off his chest. He'd finally let go of Jessica. It would be hard to share a car with her for a week, but the break would be better for both of them.

It wouldn't take long to get over this thing for Kenyatta, he reasoned. He had a bruised ego that was all. It wasn't every day a woman left his bed for another man's within twenty-four hours. Once his stupid heart realized the type of woman Kenyatta was, he'd be over her. He just hoped his heart caught up with his brain soon.

Chapter 16

One week later, Kenyatta sat at her desk reviewing updates to a local ordinance. It was her third attempt; she'd been unable to concentrate since she and Malcolm were at odds. After Orlando, she hoped they would put the episode in her hotel room behind them, but that had not happened. Even though it hurt that he lied about sleeping with Tangy, in the end, she told herself it was for the best that Brad came and showed her what she stood to lose. She was honest enough with herself to admit she wouldn't have considered him at all had he stayed in Columbia.

Still, she was convinced she'd seen hurt in Malcolm's eyes, and it perplexed her. He couldn't have cared that she reconciled with Brad. He had Tangy — and Jessica — to heal any hurts there might have been. She expected things to be awkward at work but had hoped that they could at least be professional. Instead, Malcolm had treated her with barely concealed scorn and hostility. Unless they were in a meeting together, he kept their conversations to a minimum, often dismissing her abruptly. He no longer asked her opinion on the projects they worked on, and whenever she asked him a question,

he answered as if she were the last person on earth to whom he would speak.

She got angry just thinking about his behavior. She would have preferred his indifference to his hostility, especially since he was the one who'd come to her room, gotten her all hot and bothered, only to stop, leave, and go sleep with someone else. To her utter humiliation, she'd been willing to let it go as far as he wanted.

Kenyatta still could not believe how easily she succumbed to passion. Her breasts ached every time she thought of Malcolm's kisses. After three years, she'd finally submitted to the feelings she'd tried to ignore, and he had abruptly pushed her away to hook up with an old flame. No wonder their kiss didn't appear to bother him. She dismissed the memory of how hard he was when she'd tried to unbutton his pants. Any man would get hard when caught in the throes with a willing woman in his arms. She looked down at her hand, cupped as if it were still holding that part of him. Warmth spread between her legs as she remembered the size of his erection.

With a groan of frustration, she stood up and walked to her office window. Maybe everything that happened did mean something more to him, but that didn't change the fact that he pushed her away and lied to her about sleeping with Tangy. Obviously, Malcolm only wanted to fool around with her at the conference. He may have enjoyed the game of seducing her, but his better judgment won out when he remembered they worked together in a relatively small office. Gossip would spread

like wildfire if they slept together. Not to mention he was still in a relationship, a happy one as far as she knew. He'd left the office early throughout the week to pick up Jessica, and she'd dropped by the office once. The fact that he could go back to Jessica after sleeping with Tangy proved he was no good. But knowing all of that didn't ease her pain.

In addition to her physical obsession, she just felt like an idiot. She'd completely abandoned her promise to Brad at the first sign of temptation. Brad cared enough about their relationship to show up and surprise her. She still couldn't believe how supportive he'd been. Talk about a one-eighty. It was the first time he showed genuine interest in her work; he'd even asked her questions about topics on the agenda. It was proof once again that a relationship not built on passion, like theirs, could stand the test of time.

Fortunately, Brad had agreed that their first time should be special, and he'd picked the Fire Marshal's Ball as the special occasion. Since his dad was the fire chief for the city of Columbia and his mom was on county council, it was a given they would attend. She'd accompanied him to the Ball for the past two years, and with it looming only a week away, Kenyatta only hoped she could work up the nerve to follow through.

The memory of Malcolm's mouth on her breasts flashed through her head, and she groaned again. She had to get him out of her mind.

“Something bothering you?” a voice interrupted her thoughts.

Kenyatta turned around quickly and saw her coworker, Jeremy, standing in her door. She hadn’t talked to him since he’d returned, and she welcomed the distraction.

“Nothing really. I was reviewing the ordinance for Sumter, and it’s giving me a headache, that’s all,” she lied and walked over to her desk.

“Is it anything you need help on?” he offered.

“No, I’m just having trouble concentrating. I haven’t really had the chance to say I’m sorry for the loss of your mother,” she said with genuine concern.

Jeremy shrugged one shoulder. “We weren’t that close before she died. I hadn’t spoken to her for over a year over something stupid.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” was the only response she could muster. Although Kenyatta and her mom didn’t always see eye to eye, she couldn’t imagine going a year or more without talking with her.

He brushed a lock of sandy-blond hair from his eyes. “It’s no big deal. In the end, I guess she did care.”

“Why do you say that?” she asked.

Jeremy grinned. He looked like a kid with a big secret. “I’ll get to that soon enough. What are you doing for lunch?”

Kenyatta looked at her clock and was surprised to see it was almost one. She'd spent the entire morning obsessing over what happened between her and Malcolm.

"I didn't notice the time. I guess I'll just go grab something."

"Good, come to lunch with me. There's something I want to discuss with you." He smiled and began to shift from foot to foot.

His excitement was so contagious she laughed. "Sure, I need a break anyway. Where do you want to go?" She saved her work and logged off the computer.

"Let's just go to the sandwich shop across the street," he said.

"Okay, just let me grab my purse," she said as she gathered her things and followed him out of her office.

Once they were in the hall, she almost collided with Malcolm. He looked at her with such open hostility that Kenyatta couldn't help but respond with a frown of her own.

"Where are you going?" Malcolm asked curtly.

"Jeremy and I are going to lunch. We'll be back in an hour," she replied and tried to walk past, but he held up his hand.

"Where is the ordinance for Sumter? I thought you'd have it on my desk by now."

Annoyed that thoughts of him were the reason her edits were late, she didn't try to hide her own hostility. "I've been working on it all morning and should have it ready for you to review by the end of the day."

"See that it is," he snapped and walked away.

Kenyatta wanted to scream, but refused to give him the satisfaction.

Jeremy watched Malcolm storm away and eyed Kenyatta's stony expression. "What was that about?" He scrambled to match her stride as she hurried to leave the office.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"The two of you have always gotten along. Now you act as if you can't stand to be in the same room with each other."

"It's nothing. Just a difference of opinion." They got on the elevator, and Kenyatta repeatedly punched the button for the first floor.

Jeremy scoffed. "Difference of opinion, my ass. What happened in Orlando? Did you sleep together or something?"

She jumped as if she'd been burned. "Why would you say that?"

Jeremy chuckled. "Why else would you come back from a conference hating each other?"

They got off the elevator and crossed the street.

“That’s not the case here,” she rebuffed. “He’s just being a pain in the ass right now.”

“Whatever you say,” was his reply.

They entered the shop and sat down at a booth near the window. They didn’t resume their conversation until after they ordered.

“So, why did you invite me to lunch?” Kenyatta asked eagerly as they both sipped their sweet teas. She didn’t want to continue their previous conversation. Jeremy had unknowingly struck a nerve, and she could only hope her and Malcolm’s change in attitude toward each other wasn’t causing the entire office to draw similar conclusions.

“Remember I mentioned that I thought my mother did still care?” he asked.

Kenyatta nodded and took a sip of her tea. “I couldn’t imagine that your mother would have stopped caring, no matter what the fight was about.”

Jeremy gave a wry smile. “That’s nice of you to say, but my mom wasn’t one to show loving emotions. I did try to call her once over the past year, but she didn’t want to talk to me. I learned afterward that was the same day she found out she had terminal lung cancer, so I guess it was just too much for her. I thought she was just angry and didn’t want to talk to me. So I never called back. She went through cancer treatment and everything without telling me.”

He paused and Kenyatta remained silent, because there really was nothing to make up for the time Jeremy lost with his mother.

He shook his head and shrugged one shoulder. “Anyway, that’s done now, and there’s nothing more to do about it. But my mom did leave me all the money she collected over her three marriages.”

“Three marriages?”

“Yeah, all of them to very wealthy men. My dad was a successful realtor. He sold million-dollar homes back in Dallas. Husband number two was a stockbroker, and husband number three was a big-time defense attorney. All of them died before she did and left her all they had. Which is surprising — she wasn’t overly affectionate with them either.” He shook his head as if he were baffled.

“Wow, some would say your mom was lucky, but I would hate to outlive three husbands.”

He looked out the window. “I think that’s one of the reasons she was so angry when I moved to South Carolina. It was another one of her men leaving her.”

“So what are you going to do with the money?” she asked quickly to divert his thoughts from the painful situation with his mother.

“Well, I’ve had a lot of ideas, but what I really want to do will depend on you.”

Kenyatta put down her drink. “How could your plans depend on me?”

He smiled. “Do you know Bobby Peeler?”

She nodded and he continued. “He’s been losing money and wants to sell his business to Jordan and Burke.”

“You mean that national engineering firm?” She said leaning forward. She knew from Malcolm that H2O had offered to purchase Bobby Peeler’s clients a year ago, but he’d refused.

“That’s the one. I’ve offered to buy his business instead. He’s going to sign everything over next week. I’ve also been having talks with Jordan and Burke about their plans to open a Columbia office. It appears they want the clientele Bobby has, and they’re willing to pay for it. Since it’ll be mine next week, I plan to sell it to them and become the head of their new Columbia office.”

“Wow, Jeremy, that’s great, but what does it have to do with me?” she asked.

“Next to me, you’re the best planner at H2O, and I want you on my team. Between the two of us, we already have the experience and the reputation to calm any fears their current clients may have about the switch, and we’re good enough to get new clients.”

Thoughts swirled around her head like a merry-go-round. She couldn’t believe Jeremy was offering her such an opportunity. She’d thought about leaving H2O, but never seriously, primarily because she’d never received an offer worthy enough. This was huge. The opportunity to start up a local firm’s franchise, if successful, would cement her career, but it was also a huge risk. While it

was true that the two of them worked on the majority of H2O's analyses and that their work was well known throughout the Southeast, leaving a well-established firm to work for one that wasn't as well known was taking a big step with no guarantee.

“Jeremy, are you serious? You've been with H2O for years, and you're willing to give up everything you've invested in the company?” she asked.

“It's not giving it up; it's investing in my future. Why should I continue to toil away at H2O? You're like me when it comes to working on these other projects. It takes away from what we'd rather be doing. You can't honestly enjoy spending your entire morning trying to rewrite an ordinance for some town. I know you'd rather choose your own projects *and* have the freedom to go after other prospects in areas beyond the Southeast.”

She bit her bottom lip. “That's true, but to go out on our own? I've been with H2O for three years, and I have a lot invested. I'm not sure if I can comfortably leave.”

He tapped his forefinger on the table. “I'm willing to double your salary.”

Kenyatta choked on her drink. “What? How can you afford that?”

“Kenyatta, I'll be part owner, but I want you to run the office with me. You've learned a lot from Malcolm, and you've learned it well. I don't want you to just be a project manager; you're too good for that.”

She considered that before asking, “What if Jordan and Burke decide the office isn’t profitable and close it?”

“I think the office will be profitable. Jordan and Burke is a nationally recognized firm that wants a presence in the Southeast, and this is the spot they’ve chosen. I think it’s secure, and I can show you the preliminary projections to confirm what I’m thinking. If for some reason it didn’t work out, it’s not as if H2O wouldn’t take you back. And even if they didn’t, you could get a job at another firm.” He leaned forward and looked her in the eye. “Kenyatta, you’re young, brilliant, and at the beginning of a great career. You’ve already made a name for yourself. Take this chance. You know you’ll regret it later if you don’t.”

Kenyatta chewed her bottom lip as his words sunk in. “I’ll have to think about it. When do you want my answer?”

He sat back and grinned. “No rush, but I’m putting in my notice at the end of the week. I told you we’re signing the paperwork next week. If you don’t come with me now, I’ll hire you later, but I need a partner now. I can’t promise to give you the same deal I’m offering in the future.”

“Jeremy, why would you do this?”

He stopped smiling and became serious. “Because I’ve worked with you, and even though we usually want to kill each other by the end of the day, H2O’s Columbia office has a good reputation because of the work *we’ve*

done together. Your tenacity and vision will help the company grow like H2O has grown.”

“I can’t believe you’re offering this to me. You could just hire me and take credit, but you actually want to give me a stake in the company.” She smiled at him. “You know you’re not as smart without me.”

Jeremy scowled, but the laughter in his eyes softened the look. “Yeah, whatever. Don’t make me regret my decision before you answer. I don’t wanna look like an ass when I take back my offer.”

The workers at the counter announced that their sandwiches were ready and Kenyatta let the gravity of Jeremy’s offer sink in while he went to get their food. It was a huge offer, one that she was sure she shouldn’t turn down, but she would definitely have to think on it over the weekend. She instinctively always waited at least twenty-four hours before making a big decision. She also needed to discuss it with her parents and Brad.

Brad.

Damn, he just might try to kill this dream outright, she thought.

“Why are you frowning?” Jeremy asked when he got back to the table.

“No reason, just wondering what it’ll be like with just the two of us running an office without Malcolm to break us up.”

“So you’re accepting my offer?” he asked.

Kenyatta paused before answering. “Not yet. I have to think about it over the weekend, but for now I’m giving you a soft yes,” she said with a smile.

Jeremy slammed his hand on the table. “Great! This will be the best decision you ever made.”

She held up her hands. “Well, it’s not final, but I am interested. Thanks for thinking of me. I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

He shrugged and took a bite of his sandwich. “Yeah, well it’s either you or some rookie straight out of college.”

“Yeah, I see you handling a twenty-two-year-old with a lot of patience.”

They both laughed, and the conversation moved on to other things as they ate. Kenyatta could barely contain her excitement, but until she decided this was the right move, she refrained from getting overly excited. She briefly wondered what Malcolm would say if she left H2O but pushed that thought out of her head. He didn’t matter, and it was for the best that she left, anyway. Things were getting too tense with them. Even if she didn’t start the franchise with Jeremy, it was time to look for another job sooner rather than later.

Chapter 17

Kenyatta walked into Malcolm's office at 4:59 and dropped the revised ordinance in the center of his desk. She'd busted her tail all afternoon to ensure she got it to him before the end of the day. It wasn't easy with Jeremy's offer fresh in her head, yet she'd done it in order to prevent giving Malcolm another reason to snap at her.

Malcolm glanced at the ordinance, then his clock, before raising an eyebrow and looking at her. "Not a minute to spare." There was a hint of surprise in his voice.

"Did you expect anything less?"

"In light of recent events, I would say yes."

She crossed her arms. "Please tell me what in my *professional* life would cause you to doubt my work?"

He paused briefly before answering. "You were late returning from lunch ... again. It appears you're making that a habit."

Her nostrils flared. She had not returned late. Both she and Jeremy had projects they needed to complete.

They'd made a point to get back on time.

"Then dock my pay for the extra two minutes," was her caustic reply. "You can let me know on Monday if you have problems with my revisions." She turned to exit.

"Did you feel any remorse when you jumped from my arms into Brad's bed? Or do you enjoy the thrill having two men at your service?"

Kenyatta stopped dead in her tracks. How dare he accuse her of playing games with him when he was the guilty one? He automatically jumped to the worse possible conclusion and put all of the blame on her. It was so typical. Men could toy with as many women as they wanted, but if they thought a woman even considered doing the same to them, let the proud, hostile accusations commence.

She closed his office door. There were still plenty of people in the office, and she didn't want anyone to overhear their conversation.

She turned to face him and replied in a cool voice, "The only remorse I have is for allowing things to go so far between us the night before."

Even from across the room, she could see the muscle tic in his jaw, as if he were biting back words. "You didn't act regretful when you tried to get my pants off."

"No, you were regretful enough when you told me we were making a mistake," she lashed back.

He shot up from his desk and marched over to her. "I don't sleep with my employees Kenyatta."

“That’s a load of crap, Tangy is proof that you do. Oh, and she’s proof that you’re a liar, too.”

His head snapped back as if she’d slapped him. “What’s that supposed to mean? I already explained about Tangy.”

It hurt her to know he would still lie when there was no reason for him to continue to do so. “Come off it, Malcolm. Brad told me he overheard you and Tangy talking about hooking up the night before. I know what I heard when I foolishly came to your door.”

Malcolm’s face twisted in disgust. “Brad told you that? If anyone is lying, it’s him. I explained what I was doing when you came to my door.”

“I’m really supposed to believe you bought porn, Malcolm? On the company’s dime? You must think I’m an idiot.”

Malcolm turned, walked over to his desk and snatched up a sheet of paper. When he came back, he shoved the hotel receipt in her hand. “Look. There. The hotel billed me for porn. Mr. Summers already chewed me out for ordering it on a company trip. It’s the first time I’ve ever done anything like that, so he’s letting it slide. Now do you believe me?”

Kenyatta studied the paper as relief flooded through her. He hadn’t slept with Tangy? The pent-up pain she’d been carrying in her chest weakened slightly. Why would Brad lie? Maybe he’d misunderstood what Malcolm and Tangy talked about. She handed the bill back to Malcolm. “It doesn’t matter.”

Malcolm tossed the bill on the floor. “I know it doesn’t matter to you. You accuse me of playing games then turn around and sleep with Brad.”

“He’s my fiancé,” she defended.

“Does he know the type of woman he’s planning to marry? Does he know you’ll throw yourself at one man and then jump back into his bed?”

“I didn’t jump into his bed. I had no idea he was coming.”

“Is that supposed to make it better?”

“No, but you could have at least tried to understand what happened.”

“I can guess. He shows up, says I’m sorry, and the two of you take advantage of the free hotel room.”

She reached up to slap him, but he caught her hand. “Don’t hit me.” His voice was dangerously, tauntingly low.

“Don’t accuse me of being a slut,” she replied, nearly breathless.

He slowly lowered her hand but didn’t let it go. He pulled her closer. “Did you think about me when he kissed you?”

She gasped and diverted her eyes from his, but not before he laughed softly.

“You did. You compared him to me didn’t you? And found him lacking, huh?” He leaned over to whisper in her ear, “When he kissed you, the only thought in your

head was my lips on yours. I bet you compared the heat between us to the cold indifference you feel with him. Am I right?"

"Stop it! You don't know what you're talking about." She tried to pull away, but he didn't release her.

"Tell me that you don't think about my mouth on your lips ... on your breasts."

With every whisper, a bolt of electric heat shot between her legs. She groaned and closed her eyes. He pressed her against the door and continued to whisper in her ear.

"You imagined my body pressed against yours. You remembered what it was like to feel the hardness between my legs against you." He rubbed against her, and Kenyatta felt his rock hard erection. Her body willingly leaned forward, trying to get closer to him. "You were disappointed that the man you've promised to marry can't make you feel the way I do. The need to have me inside of you keeps you up at night. The desire to feel me pushing in and out of you nags at you until you think you'll go crazy with wanting."

His words painted a vivid picture in her mind. She clenched her feminine walls as if he were inside her.

Slowly he moved his mouth from her ear until his lips barely touched hers. "You want me to kiss you right now ... don't you?"

Kenyatta wanted to say no. She wished her body wouldn't betray her like this, but it was useless. He'd

described exactly what she wanted. Instead of answering him, she looked into his eyes, letting him see how badly her desire for him burned in her.

Kenyatta watched as the anger melted from Malcolm's face. With a groan, he lowered his head to kiss her. It was a demanding kiss that denied all resistance, but there was no fight in Kenyatta. She wanted him and couldn't ignore the way his body called to hers. His tongue explored her mouth with slow, deep stokes, challenging her to deny how much she wanted him. She responded in kind, allowing her body to melt into his as she met every thrust of his tongue with one just as demanding.

Malcolm broke the kiss off slowly. He softly sucked her lower lip, before gently nipping at it, prolonging the pleasure and her need for more. Kenyatta sighed, and he answered by kissing her fully once more. When he finally stopped, he rested his forehead on hers. They stood there motionless as their breathing eased. Kenyatta kept her eyes closed as she waited for her desire to calm.

"If you kiss me like this while you're engaged, I can only imagine what it'll be like to fuck you after your wedding."

Kenyatta's eyes flew open. It was as if she'd been doused with cold water. Malcolm stepped back from her, took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped her lipstick off his face. He had that look of indifference that she instantly hated. She didn't try to fool herself this time. He was just as affected by the kiss as she was, but

was acting as if it were nothing. He accused her of playing games when this was all a game to him. She wished she could hate him for being so callous, but even now, her body yearned for his.

“You take pleasure in humiliating me, don’t you?” she asked.

His eyes flew to hers, confusion in their depths. “Humiliating you?”

“Yes, humiliating me. I’m trying not to make the same mistakes I’ve made in the past. But you kiss me until I can’t think straight. You say things that make me feel ... like no one has ever made me feel, but I’m only a diversion for you. You’re just the type of man that I stay away from — the guy who wants me in his bed, but doesn’t want me for me. I’ve got enough examples in my life to know that if I stay here, you’ll hurt me. Brad wants me. He’s willing to wait for me. It’s not a game with him to see how far I’ll let him go. *That’s* why I’m marrying him. *That’s* why I let him in my room when he came to Orlando. *That’s* why I made up with him. I can’t sleep with you just so you can discard me within the week and ruin my life.”

Malcolm didn’t respond. He just stood there staring at her. Kenyatta turned away, opened the door and walked out. She didn’t need a response from him. If her mom went through the anguish that Malcolm was causing her, then she understood that haunted look in her eye. She needed to stay as far away from Malcolm as

possible. She didn't want to end up like her mother. She had to take the job with Jeremy.

Chapter 18

Kenyatta went straight to her parents' house after work. The scene with Malcolm had her rattled. She couldn't work with him anymore. If she were going to try to make it work with Brad, she would have to leave H2O Environmental. The entire situation reminded her of what her mom had gone through with a coworker, and she was making herself sick wondering if she was heading down the same road — about to ruin her life because of an affair with a coworker.

Kenyatta doubted she would be able to talk to her mom about what happened, but she wanted to see her reaction when she mentioned her job proposition. Would her mom suspect Malcolm was the reason she suddenly wanted to leave her job?

Kenyatta wasn't concerned about her dad; he'd always encouraged her to spread her wings, so she couldn't imagine him telling her not to take this opportunity. She was certain he would see this as an opportunity to gain more experience and further her career.

She pulled up to her parents' modest, ranch-style brick home and grunted when she saw Brad's Infiniti in the driveway. It was a last-minute decision of hers to visit her parents, so she knew he wasn't there to see her. Brad always had a tendency to pop up, just as he'd done in Orlando. It occurred to her that as things became more strained between them he may be doing it to keep up with her.

Kenyatta parked along the road since Brad's car blocked the driveway and walked to the door. The humidity was once again in full effect, and she sighed in relief as she entered the coolness of her parents' air-conditioned home. She looked for Brad and her parents in the family room before checking the kitchen and was about to call out when she heard laughter beyond the French doors leading to the patio. Stepping out onto the patio, Kenyatta bit back a laugh when she saw her dad and Brad washing a mangy-looking dog. Her mom sat laughing at the scene, which Kenyatta had to admit was funny. Brad was up to his elbows in a dog bath, and her dad was soaking wet, still in his slacks and shirt from work. It was just like her dad to forget everything when it came to animals — especially dogs. Kenyatta figured he'd found another rescue pet.

Kenyatta kissed her mom on the cheek. "Hey, Mom, what's going on?"

Her mom laughed again as the dog shook the water off and soaked both her father and Brad even more.

“Girl, Brad found this dog and brought it over here for your dad. You know he’s wanted a dog for a while. Now they’re trying to clean the poor thing,” she said, still chuckling.

Kenyatta eyed her mom skeptically. “Brad found the dog and brought it over? I don’t believe it. He doesn’t like dogs.”

“Well, he loves you and your Daddy,” Adele replied a little too emphatically.

Brad saw her, smiled and waved. The dog must have sensed the shift in attention because it jumped out of the tub. Both her dad and Brad began to chase it down. It was funny, but she didn’t feel like laughing. Brad’s gesture felt like another annoying attempt to re-secure her affections.

“I know, Mom.”

“I honestly don’t know what you were thinking, trying to break off the engagement,” her mom scolded. “He’s such a sweetheart. He has a good job and well-connected parents. You two will give me beautiful grandchildren.”

Kenyatta sighed and sat down beside her mom. “Is that all you care about? Grandchildren? What about my happiness?”

“What about it?” her mom asked. “Are you telling me you’re not happy? I know he wants you to quit working so he can take care of you, but what’s so bad about that?”

“It’s not just that, Mom. Besides, you always told me I should be able to take care of myself. Now I’m supposed to just sit around and wait for Brad to give me an allowance after we get married?”

Her mom shook her head. “No, but it’s not a bad thing that he wants to take care of you. It’s damn sure not a reason to dump him. I’m glad you’ve decided to work things out. He obviously loves you.” Her mom paused and looked toward her Dad and Brad chasing the dog before continuing, “Brad told me he went to Orlando. He was impressed with how you handled yourself.”

“Yes, he was supportive,” Kenyatta agreed.

“So, obviously he’s trying to make things work. Don’t throw it away over some foolishness ... or because of some guy.”

Kenyatta looked away from her mom, faking nonchalance. “And why would you say that?”

Adele sighed. “Brad mentioned that he thought your boss was coming on to you.”

Kenyatta’s eyes darted back to her mom. “What? When did he say that?”

“Before he started washing the dog with your Daddy. He said Malcolm came to your room and seemed disappointed to see him there. He’s worried he may be losing you.”

“I told you before. There is nothing going on between me and Malcolm,” Kenyatta replied, knowing

her voice wasn't convincing. After the scene in Malcolm's office, she could no longer deny there was something between them.

"Mmmhmm, I'm sure there isn't," Adele groaned.

"Why do you sound like that?"

Adele sat up. "Because I've been where you are, remember? And I've seen Malcolm. That man is too fine for his own good. *And* I've seen the way you look at each other, and don't try to deny it. I'm not stupid," she said in a haunting, rushed whisper. "Just remember that it's easy for some men to go out of town and think they can have a quick fling with any woman that's with them. I'm glad Brad showed up to set him straight."

"There was nothing to set straight."

Her mom looked doubtful. "Whatever you say, but remember what I told you. Don't throw away the good thing you've got for some fling with your boss that won't go anywhere."

"You don't have to worry about Malcolm, Mom. He may not be my boss much longer."

Concern replaced her mom's frown. "Why, what happened?"

If you only knew, she thought.

"Nothing bad. It's the reason I came. I've got an offer to start up a new branch of a national engineering firm here in Columbia. It's something I've always wanted to do, and I'm finally getting the chance."

“That’s great, Kenyatta!” her mother exclaimed. “My baby owning her own company.” She chuckled as she warmly patted Kenyatta’s cheek.

Kenyatta laughed. She didn’t know if her mom’s sudden enthusiasm was because of the job, or because she’d be rid of Malcolm, but that made it no less contagious. “Not quite, but very close. It’s not set in stone. I’m still considering it. I want to talk with you and Dad since he started his own law firm. I figured you both might have good advice for me before I made a decision.”

“What advice would I have for my sunshine?” Harold Copeland’s booming voice interrupted them. He was soaking wet and carrying the dog, which had its tongue hanging out of its mouth. His delighted expression belied his fifty-six years.

“Hey, Dad, I see you’re in seventh heaven.” She nodded at the dog.

Her dad’s chest swelled with pride. “Check him out, Ken,” he said, using her childhood nickname. “He’s small now, but give him a few weeks, and he’ll fill out. Did your Mom tell you Brad found him and brought him to me?”

“She did,” she said as she turned her attention to Brad. “I thought you hated dogs?”

“They’re still not my favorite,” he said with a shrug. “But the last time we were here, your dad kept talking about wanting one. A guy at work was looking for a home for this one, so I figured what the hell.”

He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “I missed you today.”

Her parents exchanged a look and then smiled at the two of them. If Brad wanted to secure his position with her parents, he had wholly succeeded.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you today. I had to get an ordinance on Malcolm’s desk before the end of the day.”

Brad’s mouth tightened. “And how is Malcolm?”

Kenyatta frowned. “Fine, I guess. We barely spoke, and he was gone before I left,” she lied.

Brad had never asked her about Malcolm before. She noticed her parents exchanged another look, and it dawned on her that Brad had brought his concerns to both of her parents. She was annoyed but knew she definitely needed to leave H2O before any more people began to question her relationship with Malcolm.

Brad visibly relaxed. “Well, that’s good. Other than that, how was your day?” He sat in the chair beside her.

“Well, it started out pretty mundane, but then something really exciting happened.”

“Oh really, like what, sweetie?” her dad asked while he patted the dog with a towel.

“My coworker Jeremy just inherited some money, and he’s going to purchase a local engineering firm then sell it to a national firm as its local branch. He wants me to work with him and run the office.”

Her dad looked up at her. “That is an interesting turn of events. What do you know about this Jeremy?” he asked.

“They don’t get along at all,” Brad said. She glared at him, but he avoided her eyes.

She turned back to her dad. “That’s not true. We do the same thing at H2O, and we’re both good at what we do. We sometimes butt heads on projects, mostly because we’re both stubborn. In the end, we always find a resolution, and the projects we collaborate on are better than they would have been.”

“What’s his offer?” her dad asked.

“He’s offered to make me partner and double my salary. He said it’s because we work well together and, besides him, I’m the best planner at H2O.”

“Hmmm, and what do you think about that?” he asked.

“That it would be a great opportunity, but I’m hesitant to leave my current position. It is a gamble to leave and start a new firm that may not be successful.”

She hesitated and noticed that although her father was still drying the dog, he was keenly listening to her. It was a trick he used in the courtroom, appearing to be distracted while soaking in everything around him. It often led the opposing side to doubt his abilities until he tore their case apart by dismantling every argument.

“I do have money saved to cover me in case things were to go sour,” she assured him.

Brad sat straighter. “What money?”

“I’ve been saving money since college. I’ve saved two years of my salary, so if I needed it, I would be covered until I found another job.”

Brad’s eyes bulged. “Two years of your salary! Kenyatta, are you crazy?” He scowled. “What about our future? Do you know what we could do with that money?”

Her head snapped back as she held up a hand. “Excuse me? It’s *my* money, and I can do whatever I want with it.”

“Do you plan to be so quick to give up any plans of a life we could build together, whenever you get a whim?”

“A whim? You’re crazy. This is the opportunity of a lifetime, and I should consider it seriously.”

Brad shook his head. “This is a royal waste of time and money. You want to start a business at the same time we’re getting married. What about starting our life together? What about children?”

“Who said anything about having children right away? Remember, it was *you* who brought up the idea of us waiting a year or two before trying. If we happen to have a child before then, I could handle a family and the job.”

“Spoken like someone who has never run a business,” he mocked. “Do you really think you’ll be able to do both? This just sounds like another excuse to postpone our plans.”

“You mean *your* plans ...”

“Now that’s enough,” her dad’s voice boomed. They both jumped and turned to face him.

“This is a big decision, but ultimately the decision is yours, Kenyatta,” her dad preached. “Brad is right. It takes a lot of time and potentially a lot of money to cover expenses; if things don’t work out it will be hard starting a business and a marriage at the same time.”

Kenyatta started to reply, but her dad held up his hand to stop her. He turned to Brad. “But marriage is a partnership, and if one of the partners has a dream, it takes both to pursue it. Otherwise resentment will creep in and things will go downhill from there. I think you both should take some time to discuss this before you decide.”

They were silent for a minute before Brad spoke. “Your father is right, Kenyatta. Marriage is a partnership, and the consideration of both people’s dreams is important. I see that you don’t want to consider the fact that ever since I met you, it’s been my dream to marry you, have children with you, and take care of you for the rest of my life. I’m not trying to hold back your dreams. I just want you to include me in them.”

Kenyatta could say the same to him, but chose to remain silent. This wasn’t something she planned to back down on, but there was no need to continue this argument in front of her parents.

“I’ll talk with you tomorrow.” Brad stood to leave. “Mr. and Mrs. Copeland, have a good night. Don’t forget

about the Fire Marshal's Ball next weekend." He glanced at Kenyatta. "It will be a very special night."

Kenyatta looked away. After what she'd done with Malcolm earlier, she didn't want to think about her promise to sleep with Brad after the ball.

Brad turned to her dad. "Enjoy the dog." He pulled out his cell phone and made a call as he marched off the porch and around the house.

"Kenyatta, go after him," her mom encouraged.

"Why should I? He's never going to change. It's always, 'Stay at home and have babies for me.' This is a great opportunity, and all he can think about is that I won't be at home barefoot and pregnant."

"I wouldn't say that," her father said. "Your announcement was a surprise. Call him tomorrow, and you can talk about it after you've cooled off."

Her mom stood up. "Kenyatta, you're going to drive him away when all he wants to do is take care of you. If it feels too good to be true, then it probably is." She walked into the house without waiting for a response.

Kenyatta took a deep breath knowing her mom wasn't only referring to the job. Everything between her and Malcolm felt so right, but the way he spoke to her this afternoon proved it was unbelievable. He didn't really want her; he only wanted to sleep with her.

She turned to her dad. "Do you think I'm being unreasonable for wanting to continue my career? Is it really such a bad idea?"

Her dad patted the dog's head. "No, it's not a bad idea, Kenyatta. I'm actually proud of you and will support you whatever you decide. You've always been destined to do great things, and the fact that you don't want to sit back and give up everything you've worked for shows your strength of character. If you start the business, it'll be tough and it will take a toll, no matter what's happening in your personal life. So you need to come to some type of agreement with Brad before making a decision. If you were single, I'd say go for it, but you promised to marry him. You'll need your husband's support to do this. It will affect his life, too."

Chapter 19

Kenyatta spent Friday night thinking about Jeremy's job offer and her last encounter with Malcolm. The more she thought about Malcolm, the more she recognized the blessing that was Jeremy's offer. It was just the reason she needed to leave H2O. She didn't want to end up in a desperate situation like her mom, and starting the branch with Jeremy would prevent her from making a huge mistake. She didn't feel strong enough to resist him on her own.

A Saturday shopping trip to pick a dress for the Fire Marshal's Ball with Carol and Angie was just the diversion she needed. The Ball was a fundraiser for the city's fire department, and all of the bigwigs in politics and business attended. It used to be one of the highlights of Kenyatta's year. She'd attended before meeting Brad and always enjoyed the occasion, but now that Brad's mother wanted to show off her soon-to-be daughter-in-law, her enthusiasm had dampened.

The old, familiar knot in Kenyatta's stomach returned whenever she thought about the wedding. Part of her believed making up with Brad in Florida was a good thing. All of the reasons for them to stay together —

the stability and familiarity — were legitimate. Yet the other part of her couldn't ignore the passion between her and Malcolm. Could she honestly live her life without that? Malcolm's words struck a nerve. If she stayed with Brad — for whom she felt no desire — would it be easier for someone else to come along and tempt her later? Would she eventually end up like her mother and sleep with another man because she craved the attention? She dismissed the thought before it could take hold. She had more self-control than that. She ignored the voice inside her head asking where her self-control was on Friday.

She wasn't good company during the shopping trip, but fortunately, Angie and Carol didn't comment on her lack of enthusiasm. She guessed Carol was taking to heart her request to keep her opinions to herself. After finding the perfect sapphire dress for the ball, Kenyatta said goodbye to Carol and Angie and headed home. She was pulling into her driveway when her cell rang.

Surprisingly, it was Brad. Usually after they argued, he'd recruit their mothers to call, and give her a day to calm down. She'd taken comfort in believing she'd have time to clear her head.

She got out of the car and answered the call.

“Hey, baby, I just wanted to call and apologize for yesterday.”

Kenyatta almost dropped the phone. “You're sorry? What brought this on?”

He laughed. “I know I don't usually do this, but I'm sincere. Kenyatta, I meant what I said in Florida. I love

you, and I want us to work. If you really want to take this job, we can work things out. I want to marry you.”

Kenyatta looked around for the Candid Camera. An apology was the last thing she thought she'd ever hear from Brad. Her mind began to sound its usual, overly analytical alarms. His understanding and willingness to compromise should be comforting. She should have been ecstatic there wouldn't be a reason to break her engagement, but she wasn't any of those things. Instead, Malcolm's words forcing her to compare him to Brad haunted her.

She gave herself a mental shake. She could make it work with Brad if she got Malcolm out of her head. “Do you really mean that?”

“Of course I mean it. Why wouldn't I? I love you, Kenyatta, and I can't wait to be your husband.” He paused for a second before continuing, “I can't wait to show you, fully, how much I love you.”

Kenyatta knew he was referring to the night of the Ball. Instead of feeling excitement, she felt a panic she could no longer deny. She couldn't avoid it if she married him.

“Are you still there?” he asked.

“Yes ... yes, I'm here. I'm just ... surprised, that's all. I didn't expect to talk to you today.”

“Didn't expect to, or didn't want to?”

Disappointment colored his tone.

“No, no, nothing like that. You just never call me the day after an argument,” she replied.

“That’s not true. I called you after you tried to break off our engagement. I call you when I’m worried you may be slipping away from me. I’ve worked too hard to show you how much I love you to just let it all slip away.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He sighed into the phone. “It just means I’m not giving up on us without a fight. What’s wrong? I call to apologize, and get the third degree. I’m starting to think you don’t want us to work.”

“It’s not that. I told you, I’m just surprised.”

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Nothing. I just left Angie and Carol. We bought dresses for next weekend.”

“Well, if you bought a dress, then I know you aren’t planning on breaking up with me before next weekend,” he joked.

She laughed tightly. “No, Brad. I lo — um care too much to do that.” The words practically choked her.

“Good. Michael and Joi want to meet us for dinner tonight. How does that sound to you?”

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Kenyatta focused on what he’d just asked. She wasn’t in the mood to go out, but since she had no other plans, she saw no reason to refuse.

“Sure, that’ll be fun.”

“Great, I’ll pick you up at seven. Bye, doll.”

Kenyatta stared at her phone in bewilderment. The entire conversation was weird, but she wasn’t used to Brad admitting he was wrong. But he had done just that. In his own way, he admitted he was wrong the night before. She made up her mind. She wanted and had to take the job with Jeremy. If Brad was sincere she could make things work ... without Malcolm to distract her.

Chapter 20

Malcolm caught the basketball Jared passed to him and spun, landing an elbow in the chest of the guy guarding him. His opponent fell to the floor. Unfazed, Malcolm continued to the basket and dunked the ball. The guy jumped up from the floor and rushed him.

The guy pointed at Malcolm. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Malcolm stepped to him. “Hey, man, if you can’t play with the big boys then take your ass home. Play and quit complaining.”

“What?” The guy moved forward.

Jared rushed over and pushed Malcolm away. “Come on, man. That was game. Let’s go.”

“Yeah, take him out of here before I get mad,” the other guy said. He backed up as he spoke, contradicting his bravado.

Malcolm pushed against Jared. “I don’t give a damn about you getting mad.”

Jared looked to Devin for help, who quickly ran over and grabbed Malcolm’s other arm. “All right, that’s it.

We're leaving." They both ushered Malcolm from the gym.

"Malcolm, what the hell is wrong with you, man?" Devin asked when they got to the parking lot.

He avoided his friend's gaze. "What do you mean?"

"Dog, you know what I mean," Devin said. "You tried to get into it with every guy on the court. What's bothering you?"

"Yeah, man," Jared interjected. "I was going to leave it alone, but you haven't been yourself all week. You've been on edge ever since you came back from that conference. What gives?"

Malcolm considered how much to tell. He hadn't talked to anyone about what happened with Kenyatta in Florida or his break up with Jessica. The tension between him and Kenyatta had tormented him all week, and Friday's episode in his office only made matters worse. He had lashed out at her because he'd been jealous, but when she accused him of intentionally humiliating her, he'd felt like the biggest ass on the planet. It had never been his intention to toy with her. He wanted her, and it had simply become impossible for him to ignore his feelings.

He didn't understand it. He was usually able to control himself, but something about Kenyatta threw him completely. He genuinely liked her. Malcolm knew he could satisfy lust with any woman out there, but he didn't want any woman anymore — he wanted her, and he couldn't have her.

He needed to get it off his chest. He could trust Jared and Devin, knowing that nothing he said would go past the three of them. Jared might give him hell for pining after a woman, but he would get serious once he saw Malcolm was truly upset.

Malcolm looked at his brother and Devin. "I broke up with Jessica."

"What?" they yelled simultaneously.

"Yeah, I told her we needed to cool it for a while."

Jared frowned. "I thought things were good with you two? Bro, she was a freak. Why would you break up with her?"

"Kenyatta."

"Kenyatta?" Jared asked. "The chick from your job? Aw, man, what happened?"

Devin laughed. "I know. You finally stopped fighting yourself and hit it."

Malcolm shook his head. "Nah, nothing like that." He remembered that night in Florida and corrected himself. "Well, *almost* nothing like that."

He told them what happened in Florida. He left out the part about her overhearing the porn through his door; there was only so much information they needed.

"I couldn't stay with Jessica after all that. I would have taken it out on her," he explained.

Jared's brow furrowed in confusion. "Okay, this doesn't make any sense."

“I know. Why would she try to play me like that?” Malcolm asked.

“No, I mean why would you stop?” Jared said with a laugh. “And since you did stop, why would you break up with Jessica? You didn’t *technically* cheat on her, so she would have never found out.”

“It’s not about that. I’m not feeling Jessica like that anymore.”

“So now you have no Jessica and your chance with Kenyatta is over. Bruh, you should have tapped that ass. At least you’d have had something to show for your trouble,” Jared said wearily as he shook his head.

“Whatever.”

Malcolm knew his brother wouldn’t understand. To Jared, women were a pleasant convenience and nothing more.

Devin put a hand on his chin and studied Malcolm. “You know, it almost seems as if you played yourself.”

It was Malcolm’s turn to look confused. “How did I play myself?”

“Number one, I know you’ve wanted her ever since she started working for you. And don’t bother denying it ’cause I’ve seen her, and honey is fine. Plus, you *were* all sad when she got engaged — ”

“Wait a minute,” Jared cut in, signaling time out with his hands. “You were crying when she got engaged? Damn, you got it bad.”

“I wasn’t crying. Devin’s exaggerating. I was surprised,” Malcolm replied through clenched teeth.

Devin kept going as if he wasn’t interrupted. “I understand you don’t want to start messing with someone who works for you, but when you finally have the opportunity to get what you’ve wanted, what do you do? You tell her no and leave. Man, you played yourself.”

“He’s right, bro. You should have just gone for it when you had the chance.”

Malcolm tried to rationalize. “I wanted to do the right thing. Kenyatta and Brad were on the outs, or supposed to be, I’m still her boss, and I was still with Jessica. My plan was to break up with Jessica and switch Kenyatta’s assignments to another manager to cut out all the drama.”

Devin shook his head. “Do you hear how stupid that sounds?”

“You’re too much of a choir boy. I would have hit that,” Jared said, shaking his head. “And you still had drama because you broke up with Jessica. And now you’re just mad at everybody, when the only person you should be mad at is yourself.”

“Exactly,” Devin said. “Let me ask you something, the next day when the two of you were in the stairwell, didn’t she agree to go out with you that night?”

“Kinda, but — ”

“Hold up, let me finish. Why would she do that if she knew Brad was coming? He must’ve popped in on her,

and it was perfect timing on his part since you turned her away the night before. Of course, she'd act as if nothing happened. What would you have done if Jessica showed up at the conference?"

Malcolm didn't answer, and Devin continued. "Exactly. You would have acted as if nothing happened and kept things business as usual. What did Brad say when you showed up at her door?"

"That he decided to come down and be with her or something like that. And that I should congratulate them on getting back together," he spat out the last part.

"What else is he supposed to say? 'Hey, come in and steal my girl?' He's not stupid. Anyone who's ever been in a room with you two can see you're both trying to hide the fact that you're feeling each other."

"It's not that obvious," Malcolm said.

Jared laughed. "Yeah, right."

"It is that obvious. And I'm telling you, if my girl was out of town with a boss who was ready to jump her bones, I'd drop in, too. I'd tell her all the reasons I love her and get her so mixed up she wouldn't even think about losing a good thing," Devin finished.

What Devin said made sense when he thought about it rationally, without hurt and anger clouding his judgment. What would he have done if Jessica had shown up like that? It would have been too awkward to tell her they were breaking up because he almost slept with his employee. He would have just played it cool

until he could talk with Kenyatta and figure out exactly what was between them. Considering how he pushed her away the night before, plus her confusion about Tangy, he understood why she would get back together with Brad. It did look like he was toying with her, especially if Brad had lied and told her he'd overheard him and Tangy talking about sleeping together. And her remarks in his office on Friday, when she said he only wanted her in his bed — if she believed that, then of course Brad would appear to be a safer choice.

“Have you talked to her since?” Devin asked.

“No, we’ve barely spoken since the conference.”

Jared narrowed his eyes at Malcolm. “You’ve been treating her like shit this week, haven’t you?”

Malcolm shifted and looked away. “Why would you say that?”

“Because I know you. Whenever someone does you wrong, you treat them all cold and shit. You’ve been ignoring her all week.”

“Until yesterday afternoon ... ”

He told them about the scene in his office, including Brad’s lie about him and Tangy.

Jared scoffed and leaned against the car. “Aw, man, you might as well consider that door closed. If you had a chance after Florida, you killed it. She’s probably sitting with him now picking out honeymoon locations.” He pointed at Malcolm. “You need to watch that guy. He’s slick and definitely on to you.”

“He’s right, man. Brad knows you’re trying to move in on his lady. But besides that, what the hell were you thinking when you did that to her?” Devin asked him.

“I wasn’t thinking.”

Jared nodded. “Damn right. You might as well buy her a wedding present.”

“That’s just it. I shouldn’t be in the middle of that anyway. If she wants to marry that jackass, it’s her business,” Malcolm said the words aloud to convince himself, but they felt wrong.

Jared stopped teasing and looked at his brother. “Dog, she wants you as much as you want her. I could understand if you were just after her for the hunt, but on the real, I see the way you look at her. I’ve listened to the way you talk about her, and I’ve seen you two together. That girl is feeling you as much as you’re feeling her.”

“And she’s engaged, not married. Engagements can be broken,” Devin added.

“So you think I should finish what I started?” Malcolm asked them.

Jared smirked. “Hell, yeah. You may have killed it this week though, but if she’s the one, then you gotta go for it. And if it doesn’t work out, you and Jessica can always get back together.”

“Nah, I need to leave Jessica alone. She’s ready to get married, or at least move in together. I can’t string her along anymore.”

Malcolm thought about the time he woke up from a dream where he was sleeping with Kenyatta only to find Jessica on top of him. He didn't want to be in that situation again. Jessica deserved better than that.

He gave his last argument. "But we work together. I can't sleep with one of my coworkers."

"Why not?" Jared asked.

"Because it's got trouble written all over it. Kenyatta is my best employee, so she already gets the good assignments. If we start sleeping together, it'll look like I'm favoring her for personal reasons."

Devin put his hand on his chin. "Aren't you already doing that? And believe me — the folks in your office probably already think you're sleeping with her."

"It doesn't matter what they think; it matters what they see. If we're going to work together, we can't sleep together. It would only complicate things further. I can barely get through the day without thinking about sleeping with her. If it were actually happening, I'd get nothing done at work."

As soon as he spoke the words, Malcolm regretted them.

Jared laughed. "Damn, man, you really do have it bad."

"C'mon, you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I know what you mean all right," Jared continued to laugh. "You'd be tapping that ass all over the office is what you mean."

Jared and Devin gave each other a fist pound and laughed. It was time to go. He'd said too much and wasn't in the mood for jokes, even though Jared's comment rang true. Once he and Kenyatta became lovers, things would never be the same. How could he work closely with her and not touch or kiss her?

He already had to fight himself daily to keep his hands off her. Once they made love, he wouldn't be able to control himself. They would become the latest office scandal, and he'd vowed that would never happen again. He'd worked too hard on his career to blow his reputation on an office affair, no matter how real he believed his feelings for Kenyatta were. Plus, Kenyatta deserved better than that. He couldn't put her in that position.

Malcolm shook his head. "It's not worth it. It would tarnish her reputation and hurt my career."

Devin grinned. "Not if you transfer her assignments to someone else."

"What?"

"You just said that the reason you left her hot and bothered in Florida was because you had to come home and transfer her assignments to another manager. Do it. If you want her so damn much, make it happen."

Malcolm shook his head. "She made her choice, and it's Brad. Yesterday she told me I was the kind of guy she didn't want, and he was."

“What is she supposed to say? You kiss her and in the next breath tell her that you want to fuck her when she’s married. Now, if we’re wrong, and you only want to sleep with her ... ” Devin let his voice trail off.

“I want her,” Malcolm stated simply. As soon as he said it, relief filled him. He wanted her, not just her body, but her. Entirely.

“Then tell her.”

Malcolm sighed. “I don’t know. It doesn’t mean she’ll change her mind.”

“Then change it for her,” Devin countered.

“You think it’s easy to change a woman’s mind?”

Devin smiled. “It sounds to me like you’ve got a lot of groveling to do.”

“Yeah, I might.”

Jared looked between the two and shook his head. “Damn, Malcolm. I’m gonna have to take your player card.”

Malcolm shoved his brother. “Shut up, man. You can’t play the field forever.”

“Says who?”

“Momma.”

Jared flinched. “Well, Ma’s just gonna be disappointed.”

“Tell her that at dinner tonight. Remember, she’ll be in town today.”

Jared frowned. “I didn’t know that.”

Malcolm rolled his eyes. “I told you earlier in the week. Come on, man, don’t disappoint her and bail on dinner.”

Jared sighed but nodded. “I guess I can break a few hearts in order to clear my Saturday night.”

Malcolm just shook his head. “Whatever, just be ready to meet us around six. I gotta bounce.”

Devin pointed at Malcolm. “Think about what I said, man. If you want her, fight for her.”

He nodded and got in his SUV. He had a lot to consider. Did he try to convince Kenyatta to leave Brad for good? If he did, what reason would he give her? It couldn’t just be that he wanted to sleep with her. He knew that would only put him in the category of men she tried to avoid. Would she believe him if he told her it was more than that? He’d done a good job of pretending to be indifferent before. But would she understand it was only because he didn’t want her, or anyone else in the office, to know just how much he was attracted to her?

Even if she did believe him, it didn’t mean she would leave Brad. But, how could she kiss him the way she did if she loved Brad? He wasn’t sure he was willing to put his feelings on the line. She might reject him and marry Brad anyway.

On top of that, they still worked together. Even if he transferred her assignments, there would still be talk throughout the office. He had been at the center of an

office scandal before, and it wasn't fun. He'd fled the scene the first time and left Tangy to contend with the aftermath. Would Kenyatta be willing to face that? It was almost too much to think about, but he knew he didn't have a lot of time to make a decision. The longer he waited, the closer she would be to marrying Brad.

Chapter 21

Brad arrived promptly at seven P.M. Although his gray-and-blue striped button-up shirt, dark pants, and black loafers accentuated his slim frame, she automatically compared his build to Malcolm's. She immediately chastised herself for letting Malcolm's words affect her.

"You look beautiful," Brad said when she answered the door.

"Thank you, Brad," She smiled and smoothed the front of her pink sundress. She'd only put on a hint of lip gloss and pulled her hair into a loose ponytail, but Brad admired her as if she were dressed for a pageant. "You look great, too."

He grinned and pulled her into his embrace. "I've been thinking about you all day," he whispered in her ear. "That dress was made for you." He drew back to look at her.

Kenyatta fought the urge to pull away; instead, she widened the smile on her face. It was becoming harder to respond to Brad's increasingly frequent advances. Every time she felt his touch, she instantly remembered the warmth and strength of Malcolm's hands. Whenever he

kissed her, she remembered the taste of Malcolm's kiss. The guilt for betraying Brad, even in her mind, was oppressing.

"It's a new dress. I hoped you would like it," She pulled away to grab her purse.

"I like it a lot." He reached over to rub the back of her neck. "I like it enough to consider staying the night if you asked."

Kenyatta froze. She wanted to be mad at him for bringing it up before next weekend, but she couldn't. They'd dated long enough, reconciled recently and should be all over each other. Yet, she clung to the idea that she had another week before taking the next step.

Brad's lips compressed into a hard line, and he turned away. Kenyatta couldn't force herself to say the words he wanted to hear. She couldn't sleep with him until she was sure marrying him was the right decision. Unfortunately for her, time was running out along with Brad's seemingly endless reserve of patience.

"Look, Brad, it's just that two weeks ago our engagement was off."

He spun to face her. "That was your decision, not mine."

"I know, but with the argument yesterday and my accepting the job with Jeremy, I just don't want to complicate things."

He took a staggering step back and held up his hand. "There are so many things wrong with that statement, I

don't even know where to start. Apparently, you've decided to take the job. Thank you for officially informing me. And second, you don't want to complicate things with your fiancé by sleeping with him? Again, thank you for letting me know I'm a complication."

Kenyatta closed her eyes. She'd tackle the easiest subject first. "Brad, I really want the job. It's a great opportunity for me, and I'd be lying if I told you I'd rather stay at home waiting to get pregnant. It would be unfair to you if I lied."

"I never said I wanted you to just sit at home and get pregnant. I told you in Orlando that I understand why you didn't want to give up your work and that I would support you. I'm hurt you would make such a big decision without discussing it with me first. It's like your father said, marriage is a partnership and both partners have to be on the same page. I want to be on the same page with you, Kenyatta." He stepped forward and cupped her face in his hands. "I love you so much it hurts to think of you leaving me. If you want the job, fine, take it, but don't forget that you're my partner in life."

Kenyatta looked down because she couldn't meet his gaze. He always acted as if her love wasn't as strong or sincere as his. And because she knew that to be true, she felt guilty.

"I'm sorry, Brad," she reached up to and took his hands in hers. "I didn't mean to make you feel as if you aren't important, or that I'd make big decisions without talking with you. I know marriage is a compromise, and

you've already shown you are willing to try." She looked him in the eye. "I promise to remember that."

Brad smiled before pulling her into his arms for a kiss. Kenyatta stiffened for a second then forced herself to relax. She tried to enjoy his lips on hers and feel some sort of pleasure, but she didn't. Although it was obvious they wouldn't share the passion she had with Malcolm, she reminded herself how that kind of passion didn't last. The foundation she had with Brad would.

When he pulled away, she forced a smile. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, let's go before I take you upstairs and say to hell with Michael and Joi," he said then kissed her again.

Kenyatta chose not to respond and hoped by the end of the night she could think of a reason why he shouldn't stay over.

On the way to the restaurant, Brad told her about a conversation he'd had with his parents about the wedding. To her surprise, they were ready to set a date and reserve the club. She listened, but said very little. She counted her blessings that he didn't mention her lack of commentary.

As they got closer to the restaurant, Brad called Michael to see if they were there. They weren't, but since a line was already forming, Kenyatta got out of the car to put their names on the waiting list while Brad found a parking space.

After checking in with the hostess, Kenyatta turned around and bumped directly into Malcolm. All the air left her lungs when he touched her. He was wearing a tan blazer over a white shirt, which clung to his broad shoulders. She thought her heart would pound out of her chest when she smelled his spicy cologne; instead, her nipples puckered with remembrance.

He'd put his hands on her arms to steady her when she'd bumped into him, and the heat from his hands fueled the fire burning within her. She quickly stepped back, and his hands fell away. She could still feel his touch on her arms. She immediately wanted him to touch her again before she reminded herself that he only wanted one thing.

"Excuse me, I didn't see you there." She tried to walk away, but he stopped her by putting his hand on her arm again.

"No harm done. I'm actually glad to see you." The sound of his voice flowed over her like molten caramel. Feeling the familiar heat between her legs, she clenched the muscles of her sex to stem the flow of her desire.

"There's nothing we need to say to each other." She again tried to walk away, but he increased the pressure on her arms to stop her. He looked around before moving her to the side of the entrance, out of the way of other patrons.

"I want to apologize for the way I treated you this week. What happened in Florida — what almost happened in Florida — and the next day was crazy, but it

wasn't bad enough for me to treat you so rudely. You especially didn't deserve what happened yesterday."

"No, I didn't."

He shifted from foot to foot before continuing. "I was jealous of you and Brad and lashed out." He stopped shifting and looked into her eyes. "If I could go back, I wouldn't have stopped that night in Florida."

Heat crept up her face as she stared into his eyes. He seemed sincere, but it could be yet another way for him to humiliate her. "Why would you be jealous?"

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed and shifted slightly. His apparent unease calmed her. Malcolm was never uneasy.

"Because I've spent the past three years acting as if I didn't care about you. You are the smartest, most determined and beautiful woman I've ever met. I've told myself I shouldn't care, because you work for me. I've sat by and watched you but never let on that I wanted you."

Although excitement bubbled in her heart, she crossed her arms defensively. "Why? Why are you saying this now?"

"Because ... I'm tired of fighting myself. I'm tired of pretending as if it doesn't bother me to see you with someone else. I could have continued to ignore it, but I think you feel the same."

She shook her head. "Malcolm, I can't do this. I can't risk being hurt."

He stepped closer and lowered his voice. “I don’t want to hurt you. I only want to be with you. I know I have no right to ask, but don’t marry him. Please. Give me a chance. Let’s see where this can go.”

Kenyatta stared into his mahogany eyes and felt her resolve melting. His eyes were anxious, as if he were risking as much as she. A multitude of emotions went through her — anger at his timing, happiness that he wanted her, confusion over what the right choice should be. Could there truly be something between them? Was she willing to take a chance and see where it led? Or was this a ploy — another way to tease and torment her?

Overwhelmed, she stepped back. She cleared her throat and said the first thing that came to mind. “Brad is parking the car. We’re meeting friends for dinner.”

His jaw clenched, but he nodded before replying, “I’m here with my family.” Kenyatta smiled tightly. “That’s nice.” She scanned the crowd. “Where are they?”

“In the restroom, but they should be out in a minute.” He looked toward the door, then back at her. “We’re actually leaving. I planned to apologize at work, but when I saw you, I had to talk to you.”

“Why?” she asked softly.

“I had to tell you how I feel before I lost my nerve.” He looked in her eyes. “I don’t want to pretend like I don’t want you, like I don’t think of you all the time ... when every day I have to fight myself to keep from telling you. I want to find out what’s between us, and I think you do, too.”

Before she could reply, Brad walked in the restaurant with Michael and Joi. Kenyatta quickly masked her thoughts and smiled at the trio. As she waved them over, Malcolm's words played in her head over and over. *"Don't marry him. Please. Give me a chance. Let's see where this can go."*

Brad put his arm around Kenyatta's waist and pulled her close. "Well, Malcolm, it seems you're always around."

"Just in the right place at the right time. I'm here with my family and came over to say hello before we left." He turned as a woman came out of the restroom and joined a man by the door. Kenyatta recognized his mother from the pictures in his office and his brother from the few times he came to the office.

"There they are now." He turned back to Kenyatta. "It was good seeing you. I'll talk with you on Monday. Brad," he said curtly as he turned and left.

"Copeland, table for four," the hostess called out.

Kenyatta took a few deep breaths before smiling weakly at the others. "That's us."

"Great, because I'm starving," Michael said.

"Me, too," Joi agreed.

Brad winked at Kenyatta. "So am I, but not for the food on the menu."

Michael grinned. "Save that for later, man."

“My sentiments exactly,” Brad said and kissed Kenyatta’s neck.

“Brad, please, not right now.” She pushed him away. Resentment flashed in his eyes before he hid it with an impassive look. She knew she was wrong, but Malcolm’s words had filled her head. She needed a few minutes to recover before she could put on her usual facade.

“I was teasing, but I see you’re not in a teasing mood.” He turned to follow the hostess.

She hesitated. “Go to the table. I need to use the restroom.” She hurried across the room and burst into the restroom. Inside she took a few breaths to calm her heart.

If he could go back, he wouldn’t have stopped. He’d actually asked her not to marry Brad. Had he meant that? If so, what did that mean? Should she even consider it? *Yes!* her heart cried out. *No!* her mind countered.

She walked over to the sinks, wet a paper towel and pressed it against her face. After a few minutes, her heart finally slowed to its normal beat and she could breathe again. She’d have to figure this out later, otherwise she’d never get through dinner. But how in the hell was she supposed to concentrate on Brad now? Her heart beat sped up again, and she rushed out of the bathroom before she began analyzing everything again.

When she exited she almost ran into someone.
“Excuse me.”

“Kenyatta?”

She looked up and met the gaze of a young girl in her late teens or early twenties. She didn't recognize her but from the startled look on her face it was obvious the girl knew her.

“I'm sorry, do I know you?”

The girl glanced around and pulled on the collar of her shirt. There were faint bruises around her neck. When a young boy walked up and touched her arm, she jumped. The eyes she turned back on Kenyatta were filled with fear. “No, I thought you were someone else.”

She pulled on the boy's hand. “Let's go somewhere else. I don't want to eat here.”

Kenyatta frowned as she watched them leave. The girl kept her head down the entire way. She was still frowning when she joined Brad, Michael and Joi at the table.

“What's wrong?” Brad asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing. I almost ran into this girl leaving the bathroom and she knew my name.”

Joi raised an eyebrow. “Do you know her?”

“I've never seen her before in my life. She left with some boy.”

Brad straightened. “A boy.”

She nodded. “Yeah, but it doesn't matter.” She picked up her menu. “Let's order.” *So I can get the hell out of here*, she thought.

Brad frowned and pulled out his phone and started texting. She couldn't even muster up the curiosity to care to whom. Her heart and mind continued to fight over how to handle Malcolm's request.

Chapter 22

Monday brought a welcome end to Kenyatta's agonizing weekend. The dinner with Michael and Joi had been a disaster. Unable to get Malcolm out of her mind, Kenyatta barely kept up with the conversation. And Brad spent most of the night checking his phone and scowling. For the first time, Michael and Joi didn't ask them to come over after dinner, and Kenyatta was thankful.

She'd been even more thankful when Brad didn't pick up where he'd started before their date. Instead, he'd dropped her off with barely a kiss on the cheek before leaving. She'd only given his distraction a passing thought. Instead, she spent the night replaying Malcolm's words. *"If I could go back, I wouldn't have stopped."* *"I have no right to ask, but don't marry him."* By the time Sunday rolled around, they were stuck in her subconscious like a bad radio jingle.

She couldn't stop wondering. Why wouldn't he have stopped? Why did he ask her not to marry Brad? The questions were driving her crazy.

Malcolm drew her ever since she'd walked through the doors of H2O Environmental. She'd tried to ignore

her feelings, but never could. The only way she'd managed to restrain herself was by admitting the feelings were one-sided. But now that she knew it wasn't, she was nearly overcome with anticipation, happiness and desire.

She'd come to two conclusions. One, she was going to take the job with Jeremy. It was too great an opportunity to pass up, and even though Brad said he supported her decision, she knew he would only pressure her to quit sooner rather than later. Two, she had to find out what, if anything, was between her and Malcolm. Maybe it was stupid, but she had to know. She couldn't marry Brad until she did.

As she settled behind her desk, the first person in her office was Jeremy who quickly entered and shut the door behind him.

“Well, have you thought about my offer?”

Kenyatta took a deep breath before answering. “I have. You have to realize this is a huge decision that requires time to consider. I would be leaving a promising future here to walk out on a limb with you.”

He shrugged. “I know that, but like I've already told you, you're like me, even if you don't want to admit it. You want the challenge of something new. What we do here is great, but we're not calling the shots or making the big decisions, and I know that secretly you're waiting for someone to retire so that you can move up.”

Kenyatta tried to suppress a smile. “I know, but that still doesn't mean I'm ready to jump ship.”

“Does that mean you’re staying here? This is my last week here, and I’d like to have you go with me,” he said.

“I can’t go with you.” She held up her hand to stop him from interrupting. “At least not *this* week. I have to give Malcolm two weeks’ notice. I do owe him that much.”

Jeremy slapped his hand on her desk and grinned. “I knew you couldn’t resist the opportunity. This is one of the best career decisions either of us could make. Once we make the Columbia branch a success, we’ll have the pick of any job out there.”

“I know.” She sighed as her smile turned to a frown. “I just hope that everything works out.”

“Are you really that worried the company won’t make it?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not that. They’re a trusted firm, and they need the southeast branch. It’s just that once I take this job, Brad and I are pretty much history.”

His face became somber. “I had no idea, Kenyatta. I wouldn’t have pushed so hard if I knew it would break up your relationship.”

“You’re not breaking us up. My success has always been a problem. He said he supports my decision to take the job, but I doubt he’ll follow through with that support once he knows my decision’s final. He wasn’t thrilled with the idea of it.”

“Well, if he doesn’t recognize your talents, then to hell with him. I mean it. Life is too short to be with someone who kills your dreams.”

Both surprised and comforted by his outburst she smiled. “Thanks, Jeremy.”

He shrugged and waved a hand. “So, when are you turning in your resignation?”

“After I sit down and talk with Malcolm. I don’t want to just lay it on his desk. He’s been a great boss, and I want to tell him in person.”

“I understand. Just make it by Friday. I need you working with me by the end of the month.”

She smiled. “Already cracking the whip. I see we’re going to have an interesting working relationship.”

“As if we don’t already,” he said wryly as he walked out.

Kenyatta was still smiling when Malcolm walked in. It was the first time he’d been in her office since Orlando, and as she drank in the sight of him in his navy blue suit. The familiar pull he had on her was there — only now that she knew he felt the same, she no longer wanted to hide her attraction. She smiled at him openly ... happily.

“Good morning,” was all he said.

“Good morning,” she responded and held her breath. Her resignation was sitting in her portfolio on her desk, but from the look in Malcolm’s eyes, she knew he wasn’t there to discuss work. His eyes, usually calm

and impassive, were anxious, unusual for someone as collected as he always was.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No ... I just wanted to ask about your weekend.”

“It was okay. How about yours?”

“Fine, same here.”

They fell into an awkward silence as if they both knew their relationship would change dramatically with just a few words. She yearned for the change, but fear kept her from speaking. She could still end up getting hurt. She wasn't sure about trusting her heart again.

Malcolm finally broke the silence. “I've been thinking about you all weekend.” His words exhaled from him like a long, pent-up sigh.

Kenyatta's heartbeat quickened, and a shiver went down her spine. The ball was in her court. She could act as if his words on Saturday were meaningless, or she could admit she'd spent her weekend thinking about him, too.

She considered the risk of admitting her feelings. The pain of past betrayals still weighed her down, but she was tired of carrying the load. It was time to free herself of it; it was time to step out on faith and pray she didn't get burned.

She looked up into his anxious eyes, and just like she had on Saturday, she was calmed. If he was as afraid to reveal his feelings as she, it had to mean something.

“I thought about you all weekend, too. I couldn’t get your words out of my head,” she said.

He sighed and visibly relaxed. “I meant every word, Kenyatta.”

“Why didn’t you say anything before?”

“I’ve wanted you since the first day you walked into my office. I remember it like it just happened. You were wearing that silky green shirt and white skirt. Your hair pulled back in a ponytail, and you wore perfume that smelled like lavender. I was lost within seconds. But you were my employee — my young, sexy employee. How would it have looked for me to jump on the first young woman who worked for me? I know what it’s like for coworkers to brand me as a playboy, and you would have been called a slut. I couldn’t do that. I’d already come too close to ruining my career before — with Tangy. I couldn’t risk ruining your reputation, or your career, by pursuing you,” he explained.

Kenyatta was speechless. He remembered their first meeting with such detail. She smiled sheepishly. She, too, remembered what he’d looked like that day — he’d been working on a difficult project and, when they were introduced, he wasn’t wearing his jacket or tie. The first few buttons of his shirt were undone, and she’d been distracted by the sprinkling of hair on his chest. In order to hide her reaction, she’d asked about the project, and they’d spent the rest of the day discussing it.

“I’m still your employee. What’s different now? Is it just because I’m marrying Brad?”

“I won’t lie. The ring shocked me. I knew you were dating Brad, but I didn’t think it was serious. When I saw the ring on your finger, it hit me I was truly losing any chance with you.”

“You’re willing to risk your career?” She held her breath.

“I don’t care about that anymore,” he said waving his hand. “I’ll switch your assignments to someone else, or I’ll ask for a transfer. I’m willing to do whatever it takes for you to be mine.”

Kenyatta’s heart hammered. The look of hunger in his eyes set her on fire. No man had ever looked at her as though he wanted to devour her on the spot. Her nipples beaded beneath her bra, and a familiar warmth blossomed between her legs. Unable to focus when he looked at her like that, she looked away. “We don’t even know if we’ll work out.”

He leaned on her desk. “We’ll never know if we don’t try. We’ve denied this for too long, Kenyatta, and we can’t deny it anymore.”

“But there are so many complications. What about Jessica?”

“I broke up with Jessica after Orlando. She was the reason I stopped in Florida. I couldn’t sleep with you knowing I had someone back home waiting for me. You both deserve better than that.”

“She’s been here constantly over the past week.”

Malcolm sighed. “I know. Her car was in the shop. I was sharing my truck with her, but that’s it.”

Kenyatta stiffened. “She must have been upset that your break-up was so sudden.”

He stood up straight. “We both knew it was coming.”

Her eyes locked with his. “Will you do that to me? Come back from a trip and break things off because you want some other coworker?” She heard the sharp accusation in her voice, but she had to know if it was all worth it.

Malcolm didn’t break eye contact. “Kenyatta, I haven’t dated anyone seriously in years. Jessica and I started with a purely physical relationship that lasted too long. I want more than that from you. I want everything from you that you’re willing to give, and I’m willing to work for it.”

Kenyatta blushed. She searched his eyes for any signs of deception and only saw sincerity. The smallest bubble of hope filled her heart. “But Brad thinks ... he thinks we’re still getting married.”

“Then tell him otherwise, or I swear I’ll be at the wedding to drag you back down the aisle.”

She smiled at the image of Malcolm dragging her away from her wedding. Although a part of her thought it was comical, she realized it would be completely humiliating for Brad.

“Why the sudden change of heart? You were awful last week. I don’t understand how you could feel

differently in one day.”

He ran his fingers over his head. “You struck a nerve on Friday. I was never trying to humiliate you. At first, I thought I could make you see you deserved someone better than Brad, even if it wasn’t me. Then I realized I didn’t want to help you find someone else. I wanted you with me, but I went about it all wrong. I’m sorry for that. I want you, Kenyatta. In my life, in my arms, and in my bed.”

His words were an aphrodisiac. Her breasts felt heavy, and the trickle of desire between her legs became a flood. His hunger for her was overwhelming. She’d sensed it before, but hearing him verbalize his longing was more than she could handle. She hadn’t experienced true desire for a man in years, but she craved Malcolm so much it frightened her. Feelings this intense were uncontrollable and could lead to rash, stupid decisions.

She pushed her chair back from her desk, trying to get more space so she could breathe. “We need to talk about this. Outside of work.”

“Tonight,” he said.

“I’m supposed to — ”

“Cancel it.”

“But Brad — ”

“Doesn’t matter anymore.”

She began to acquiesce when Mr. Summers walked in.

“Malcolm, there you are. I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Malcolm turned to him. “I’ve been talking to Kenyatta about the ordinance for Sumter,” he said, transitioning easily into work mode. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve got a problem in the Charlotte office, and I need you to go up there for the week.” He looked at his watch. “I’ve got to sign some paperwork in accounting, but that should only take a minute. Meet me in my office in five minutes and I’ll fill you in on the details.”

Kenyatta and Malcolm fell silent after Mr. Summers walked out. With Malcolm leaving for the week, they wouldn’t be able to see each other. It also meant he wouldn’t be at work to discuss her resignation.

“It looks like fate is against us,” she commented wryly.

Before she could blink twice, he’d shut her door and was behind her desk pulling her into his arms.

“To hell with fate,” he said as he kissed her.

Kenyatta didn’t even try to fight the kiss. Heat exploded through her body. She wanted to feel his lips on hers, to taste his tongue in her mouth. She relished him, savoring the strength of his arms around her waist, the heat of his body infusing into hers and the rock hardness of his erection pressing against her. It intoxicated her, as she pressed her body against his. He took her breast in his hand and squeezed gently. Kenyatta sighed into his mouth, and he squeezed again. He ran his thumb over

her hardened nipple and a tremor rippled through her body. She wanted more.

He slowly ended the kiss and put his forehead on hers. They held each other as they tried to slow their breathing. Malcolm continued to tease her nipple, and Kenyatta bit her lip. His shaft pressed against her belly, and she slowly rubbed herself against it. He let out a low groan and began to suck on her lower lip. Kenyatta moaned and rubbed against him again.

“You’re going to kill me before we ever make it to a bed,” he groaned.

Kenyatta stiffened. “Is that all that you want me for?”

He looked into her eyes. “I definitely want you in my bed. Every night ... quite possibly for the rest of my life, but I’ve told you and I’ll keep telling you — that isn’t all I want.”

A weight lifted from her heart, and she leaned up to kiss him again. Malcolm obliged, cupping her butt and pressing her against him. Kenyatta lifted her leg slightly to better fit his hardness against the aching flesh at the juncture of her thighs. With a groan, he finally ended the kiss and took a shaky step back as she leaned against her desk for support. Malcolm whipped a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed the lipstick from his face.

“I’ll be back Friday.” He hesitated. “I did promise Jessica I’d take her to the Fire Marshal’s Ball. I’m guessing you’re going with Brad and his family?”

Kenyatta's desired evaporated as jealousy crept over her, but she realized his promise to go with Jessica was no different from her promise to go with Brad, so she nodded.

"Then it's probably for the best that I'm leaving this week. We can get that out of the way and then move forward ... together."

He cupped her face with his hand, and the jealousy melted away. He looked as happy as she felt.

She smiled. "Together."

He leaned in to softly brush his lips against hers. "I'll see you on Friday," he said before leaving her office.

Kenyatta watched him go and hoped she had made the right decision. Their relationship had taken another path, and there was no going back. Feelings would be hurt soon enough, but she didn't care. She was finally doing something she wanted to do, professionally *and* personally. She smiled to herself. For the first time, her life was an open book, and she looked forward to the next chapter.

Chapter 23

When Malcolm returned to Columbia on Friday, he was more than ready to continue where he and Kenyatta had left off. The potential loss of a major client in the Charlotte office, along with a new project in the gulf, was stretching their staff thin. Malcolm had helped resolve both situations, and although he'd spent a lot of time in Charlotte working, he'd spent just as much time thinking about Kenyatta and their future together.

The fact that she admitted she wanted him, made him feel things he'd never felt for another woman. The kisses, the feel of her body pressed against his, her passionate response — it had kept him up thinking about all the things he wanted to do to her. His blood boiled, and the hard-on he'd lived with for the past three years — pressed tightly against his pants.

But it wasn't just that his desire for her was more intense than he'd ever known. He was happy they would be a couple. He looked forward to doing the small things people in relationships did. He wanted to see her after a long day of work, talk to her on the phone when he was out of town, go to dinner with her during the week. All of

the things he never thought he had time for in a relationship, he wanted to make time for with Kenyatta.

He headed straight for the office. It was the night of the Fire Marshal's Ball, so he knew most of the people in the office would already be gone. He hoped Kenyatta would still be there. He didn't want his next sight of her to be with Brad's arms around her.

He walked into the office as Grace was packing up her things, getting ready to leave her post at the front desk.

"Oh, hey, Malcolm. We didn't expect to see you today," she said.

"Yeah, I just wanted to check the items on my desk before the weekend."

"You work too hard. The world won't come to an end if you don't check every e-mail and respond to every memo the minute it arrives," she said with a smile.

"Yeah, well, that's just me. So how have things gone this week while I've been out?" He tried not to appear anxious when all he wanted to do was ask if Kenyatta was still there.

"Just running at full speed. The strain in Charlotte trickles down here, you know." She reached over to turn off her computer. "I don't know how we'll manage with both Jeremy and Kenyatta gone."

"What?"

Grace looked at him warily. "I thought you knew. Jeremy resigned last week — "

“Yes, yes, I know about Jeremy, but did you say Kenyatta was leaving too?”

She shrugged helplessly. “Yes. She gave Mr. Summers her resignation after you left on Monday. She’s going to work with Jeremy with Jordan and Burke’s southeast branch. I thought she would’ve told you.”

Malcolm swallowed hard and tried not to panic. Was she leaving because of what happened between them? Had she already planned to leave before he confessed his feelings? Had she changed her mind about him and decided to stay with Brad?

“No, we discussed a project. She didn’t mention it,” he said distractedly. “Is she still here?”

“I think she’s still back there. Everyone else has left, and she was packing her things a minute ago.”

“Thanks, Grace. I’ve held you here long enough. I’ll see you on Monday.”

“No harm done. Hurry up and finish your work, so you can have a great weekend,” she said on her way out the door.

Malcolm immediately went to Kenyatta’s office. He had to know why she was leaving. He couldn’t imagine coming to work every day and not seeing her. Why would she go to a competing firm? She’d never shown signs of being unhappy at H2O — until he began coming on to her, and even then, she didn’t respond as though she was unhappy. He’d convince her to reconsider; he was prepared to beg if necessary.

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Kenyatta was packing up her things to leave when her telephone rang. She knew it was Brad before she even looked at the phone. He'd pestered her all day to leave work early enough to get ready for their special night, but there wasn't much that she needed to do. She'd already gotten her nails, feet, and hair done. Her dress was ready. All she had to do was shower and put on a bit of makeup, but she'd procrastinated as long as she could. Work had been crazy with Malcolm out of the office, and she'd been so busy handling the various projects in his absence, it had been easy to use that as an excuse to stall at the office. The fact that she had yet to break up with Brad was her main reason for stalling. She'd been too busy at work and too afraid of ruining everyone's expectations for the weekend to break up with Brad. She'd completely pushed their special night from her mind, but as usual, Brad's peskiness had caught up to her.

"I'm leaving now," she snapped as she answered the phone.

"You should have been out the door an hour ago, Kenyatta," was Brad's response.

"Brad, seriously, I told you it wouldn't take me long to get ready. It's only six, and we aren't leaving until nine. What's the big deal?"

It was harder than ever to hide her aggravation with him. He'd been irritable and short tempered since their disastrous dinner with Mike and Joi. That combined

with the possibility of a future for her and Malcolm practically erased her plans to marry Brad. Even if she and Malcolm didn't work out, she wasn't sure marrying Brad was the right decision. Life without passion no longer seemed very appealing.

“The big deal is that my parents want to ride with us, meaning, we'd have to pick them up by eight. Now that won't work.”

Kenyatta rolled her eyes. “It's fine if we don't go with them. My parents always arrive early and they'll be seated at the same table so they won't be lonely.”

“Can the sarcasm. I'm getting tired of your attitude with me lately. I don't know what your problem is. Because if it's about the job, I already told you that I support your decision.”

“It's not that.” She sighed heavily. “Can we just talk about his later? The longer I stay on the phone, the longer it'll take me to leave.”

There was a long pause before he answered, “Yeah. We'll talk about it tonight.”

She looked up and saw Malcolm. Kenyatta's eyes roamed over his body, and it hit her full force how much she had missed him. Immediately her thoughts went back to the last time he was in her office. How he'd kissed her before leaving. Her skin began to prickle, and she was almost ashamed at how much she wanted him to kiss her again.

“Malcolm,” she said on a long breath.

“Malcolm? What are you talking about? I thought he was out of town?” Brad’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

“What ... um ... yes, he is. I just realized I need to put something on his desk for Monday,” she lied. “Look, I’ve gotta go. I’ll be out of the office in two minutes.” She hurriedly placed the phone back on the receiver and turned to Malcolm.

“When did you get back?” Happiness and excitement filled her voice.

“Just now.” He closed her door and crossed the room slowly. Kenyatta took in everything about him, the play of his thigh muscles beneath his tailored pants, the sun streaming through the blinds casting a golden glow over his dark skin. He looked like an African warrior coming to claim his prize. Her mouth suddenly dried up as her breath pumped in short, shallow bursts. She wanted him to claim her.

His eyes narrowed on her. “Why are you leaving?”

Kenyatta groaned and looked away. She’d wanted to tell him about her decision in person, but when he left so abruptly, she’d had to submit her resignation to Mr. Summers.

“Jeremy asked me to start the branch with him when he came back from his mother’s funeral. It’s a great opportunity. I had to take it,” she explained.

He came around the back of her desk and pulled her up from her chair. Kenyatta waited anxiously to see what he would say and do next. His eyes were downcast and

she couldn't tell from his expression if he was upset. She remembered what he'd said in Florida, about her being one of the best parts of his job, and she hoped he wasn't upset about her taking the job.

“So it had nothing to do with what I said on Monday?”

He reached out and touched a lock of her hair. She'd gotten it spiral-curled the day before and pinned up into a chignon, but a few loose tendrils framed her face. “No. I was going to tell you Monday, but you left so quickly.”

He took her hand in his. “It's not because it would make it easier for you to marry Brad, is it? Because I wouldn't be around?”

She looked in his eyes. Anxiety swirled in their chocolate depths. “No. He had nothing to do with it.” She hesitated before asking. “You're not upset that I'm leaving?”

He pulled on her hand to bring her closer to him. “Yes, I hate to see my star employee leave, but, I understand why.”

Kenyatta let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. It meant everything to her that he understood her motivation. He'd always been supportive, but lately she'd wondered if it was just a ploy to seduce her. His answer erased that fear.

“You know what this means.” He licked his lips before they tilted up into the smile she'd always wanted directed at her.

“What?”

He pulled her fully into his arms, and Kenyatta gasped when she saw the raw heat and desire in his eyes. His gaze was so powerful it ignited a fire in her soul. “Now there really is no reason for us not to be together.”

He kissed her and their passion exploded. Kenyatta didn't care they were in her office; she'd been daydreaming about this moment for three years. When his lips met hers, she forgot about past hurts and mistakes and opened herself to the joy of being with Malcolm.

In one swift motion, Malcolm lifted her up and put her on top of her desk. He continued to kiss her hungrily as his hands roamed all over her neck, shoulders, and back. He unbuttoned her shirt and caressed the fullness of her breasts. Kenyatta moaned when his thumbs brushed across her hardened nipples through her silk bra. A shiver burst through her body. He did it again, and Kenyatta pressed herself into his hands, begging for more. Malcolm obliged taking a hardened peak between two fingers and squeezing it gently, and she released another moan. He kissed her harder.

Malcolm trailed hot kisses down her neck to the top of her bra. He pushed her shirt off her shoulders but didn't remove it, trapping her arms behind her. He pulled the front of her bra down until her breasts sprang free.

He stared at them and licked his lips. “I've been dreaming of this for too long,” he murmured and began

to kiss her breast. Kenyatta's nipples begged for his attention, but he kissed everywhere but there. He kissed, palmed and massaged both breasts until they became heavy and full.

“Malcolm, please,” she begged.

“Please what?” He continued to kiss everywhere but where she wanted.

“My ... please ... kiss ... ” she mumbled incoherently.

“Don't you mean suck?” He took one of the dusky peaks into his mouth.

Kenyatta thought she'd melt through the desk as he softly sucked one nipple and then the other. He lavished attention between the two until she cried out softly with pleasure. After loving them separately, he pushed her breasts together and took both nipples into his mouth at once. The ecstasy of it caused her to raise her hips off the desk. She struggled to release her arms from the shirt, but couldn't.

“My arms. I need to touch you,” she gasped.

He gave her breasts one last squeeze before lifting up to kiss her mouth and removed her shirt. When her arms were free, she quickly unbuttoned his shirt. Once his shirt was open, she ran her hands across the hard planes of his chest. She knew he worked out regularly and had often fantasized about touching him, but it didn't compare to the real thing. His body was hot, as her hands explored the hard play of muscles. She was delighted to hear his quick intake of breath as she rubbed

her hands across his flat nipples. Leaning over, she kissed his chest before kissing her way up to his neck. He tasted so good.

Malcolm ran his hands up her thighs, pushing up her skirt. His finger teased the edge of her panties. Kenyatta eagerly opened her legs wider. He took her mouth in another deep kiss and slipped his finger inside her panties.

“You’re so wet.” He breathed against her neck.

His excitement caused a new rush of desire to flood her body. She lifted slightly when he pulled her panties off, tearing them with his eagerness. He looked at them after pulling them from under her skirt. “They match your bra. Damn, you’re driving me crazy.”

His hand ran up her leg until they found her aching flesh. He fingered the seam of her sweetness before spreading her lower lips and gently rubbing her sensitive bud. Kenyatta hadn’t been touched like that in so long, the pleasure cloaked her body from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. She silently vowed passion would never be unnecessary again, as she exhaled another moan. All coherent thought left her as Malcolm slid one finger into her. He bent his finger up to rub the sensitive flesh inside her body, and she cried out his name.

“That’s it,” he whispered against her neck. “Call my name. Remember who’s making you feel this way.”

He slid his finger in and out of her in slow, deliberate strokes. Kenyatta didn’t think she could feel any better until he slipped another finger inside of her.

He rubbed his thumb over her clit while his fingers pushed in and out. Kenyatta climaxed immediately. Stars burst behind her eyelids as she floated in a state of bliss.

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Malcolm watched Kenyatta's face as he continued to stroke her through the waves of her climax. She was so damn beautiful. He removed his hand from her body, and she whimpered. Feeling even more urgency than before, he undid his pants and pulled out the long thick muscle throbbing between his legs. Kenyatta looked down at it and licked her lips. He thought he would explode right then.

“I would love for you to taste it, but we'll have time for that later.”

He saw embarrassment fill her eyes and he leaned over to kiss her. “Don't be embarrassed. I want to taste you, too.”

He rubbed his length against the hot flesh between her thighs and she gasped against his lips. She leaned back on her elbows and his eyes devoured her. He wanted to remember how she looked with her breasts heaving as he rubbed himself against her wetness.

“I've wanted to do this for too long.” His breath hitched when his head slid across her swollen clit.

She trembled and looked up into his eyes. “Please, put it in ... now ... ”

Without hesitation, he pushed inside her. They both gasped as he stretched her inner walls. Damn she was so

tight. He had to stop for a second or else it would be over before it started. Taking a deep breath, he slid further inside of her, clenching his teeth the entire time. This was heaven.

“Oh, God, you feel so good,” he said through clenched teeth. He grabbed her hips and settled within her more fully. “Am I hurting you?”

She didn’t answer, instead she slowly moved her hips and a wave of bliss flowed through him. Malcolm sucked in a breath when she moaned and squeezed her walls around him.

“I’ll take that as a no,” he said and he began to glide in and out. His movements started out slow but quickly increased in speed. There was no time for long, slow lovemaking. Not this first time. He’d wanted her for too long. The past three years had been enough foreplay; now there was only the need to be inside her — to make her his. Kenyatta cried out with each stroke and each sound brought him closer and closer to the brink of ecstasy. The feel of her wet heat as he slid in and out of her, the softness of her body underneath him and the knowledge that it was Kenyatta — finally Kenyatta — was overwhelming. She cried out his name as her body shuddered and clenched around his.

He could no longer hold back. She was so tight, hot, and wet. Every spasm of her body pushed him closer. He thought briefly about pulling out before exploding, but it was too late. He spilled himself within her with one last urgent push. He called out her name and lowered the

weight of his body onto her, happier than he could ever remember being.

As their breathing returned to normal and they slowly came back down to earth, Malcolm realized he was falling in love with her. It had always been there, but he'd refused to acknowledge it. Now he admitted it to himself as he felt the lingering spasms of her climax around his manhood; he would move heaven and earth to keep her.

Chapter 24

Brad picked Kenyatta up at exactly eight. She'd scarcely had time to get in, shower, and change. He greeted her stiffly and barely spoke. She assumed it was because she'd taken so long to leave work that afternoon. For the millionth time, the reason why flashed through her mind — her and Malcolm. On top of her desk. Heat filled her and she squirmed in the leather seat of Brad's Infiniti. She tried to push the memory from her mind but knew it was a lost cause.

Brad's silent treatment gave her more time to think about what had happened. After she and Malcolm came back to reality, Kenyatta had been nervous and embarrassed. How could she have had sex on her desk? In the middle of the afternoon! So what if everyone was out of the office? Even if her coworkers had been right outside her door, she wasn't sure she would have stopped. She'd wanted Malcolm so much that common sense had fled, and that scared her. They'd had sex — great sex — on top of her desk — without a condom! She'd promised herself she would never again be a victim of passion. She thought she'd gotten smart enough to know better and resist temptation, but she had obviously

been fooling herself. She was just as impetuous and reckless as before.

Malcolm had tried to talk to her afterwards, but she'd hurriedly gotten dressed, avoiding eye contact the entire time. He finally grabbed her by the arm and forced her to look at him. He told her he didn't regret it and asked if she did. When she saw the nervousness in his chocolate eyes, she knew she didn't regret it and told him so. He'd kissed her so sweetly after her answer she almost cried.

He held her hand as they walked out of the office. He kissed her again as she got into her car. They acted like a couple deeply in love, but Kenyatta knew that wasn't the case. They were definitely in lust, but not in love. At least she suspected Malcolm wasn't. However, she was in danger of loving him. She admired and respected him and truly enjoyed his company. She finally felt free to acknowledge the potential to love him had always been there. She'd gone from being infatuated with her boss, to idolizing him, to possibly falling in love.

Yet that didn't guarantee he felt the same. Sure, he was obviously attracted to her, but what else? What if, like her mother, she got pregnant? Would he really want that type of lifelong attachment? Would he even consider a baby as a lifetime attachment? How did she get so carried away? He told her he wanted her in his bed, but what if that was all he really wanted? She'd been lied to before, and it broke her heart. She couldn't take another hit like that. Not from Malcolm.

“You’re awfully quiet tonight,” Brad spoke sharply, breaking the silence.

“What? Did you say something?” She had heard his voice, but not what he said.

Brad gripped the steering wheel. “Is there something on your mind?”

“No, no, nothing at all,” she stammered. “I’m just tired.”

“Hmmm, maybe you left all of your energy back on your desk in your office.”

She laughed nervously. “Maybe I did. It was a long day.”

“I hope Malcolm didn’t pound you too hard at the end of the day.”

She inhaled quickly. “I told you he wasn’t there,” her voice wavered.

He just shrugged one shoulder. “Yeah ... that’s what you said.” He glared at her quickly from the corner of his eye.

A sudden wave of guilt led her to wonder if there was an underlying meaning in his words, did he suspect something had happened?

“Maybe he left a lot of work for you on your desk,” he continued.

“He did leave some items.”

Brad waited a few seconds before responding, “You know, I’ve always fantasized about making love to you on

top of your desk. Like on one afternoon right before you get off for the day. Can you imagine it?” He reached over and rubbed her knee exposed by the short hemline of her dress. She tried to pull away but he grabbed it. “Can you imagine me putting you on your desk, pushing up your skirt and plunging into you?”

A vision of Malcolm plunging into her hours earlier in that very position flashed before her eyes. Kenyatta tried to pull away again, but he held her knee tighter. Her face burned so badly with guilt she wouldn't have been surprised if she burst into flames.

They pulled up to the Fire Marshal's Ball and Kenyatta closed her eyes and sighed. Brad removed his hand from her knee to park, and she relaxed. Hopefully, he would forget she hadn't answered his question in the bustle to get out of the car and inside to the ball. But, as soon as the car stopped, and she turned to get out, he grabbed her knee more forcefully than before. She turned to complain, but froze when she saw the angry determination in his eyes.

“Answer my question, Kenyatta. You're my fiancée, and I need to know if you fantasize about me the way I fantasize about you.” He pushed his hand up her skirt and squeezed her thigh. “Do you think about me making love to you on top of your desk? Can you imagine it?”

Again, visions of Malcolm filled her head. “I ... y ... yes, I've thought about it,” she lied. She couldn't tell him about this afternoon when his fantasy was what she'd done with another man.

He clearly wasn't satisfied. "But are you thinking about it now? Are you thinking about us being together, finally, tonight?"

Her heart thumped. With everything that happened with Malcolm, she'd forgotten that they were finally supposed to sleep together. Nausea caused her stomach to roll and she swallowed audibly.

"Brad, really, let's go inside. I'm ready to get in there, get something to eat, and enjoy the evening." She tried to pull away once more, but he held on to her thigh.

"No, I want you to think about me and only me. I don't ever want you to harbor the thought of another man inside you. Do you understand?"

Kenyatta felt like the car was closing in around her. Guilt smothered her like a wet blanket. She didn't want to do this now, but if he didn't stop pushing her, she was going to tell him everything.

"Brad, please, don't do this now. I don't want to spoil the evening."

The muscle in his jaw clenched, and the pressure on her thigh increased. He looked like he wanted to pounce on her right there in the car. Desire filled his eyes, but anger mixed with that desire and it made her wary.

"No, you wouldn't want me to spoil your wonderful day now would you?" He looked at her with barely veiled disgust, but turned away so quickly she couldn't tell if she'd really seen it. "Let's go inside and find my parents. We'll have plenty of time to deal with this later."

Kenyatta breathed again. It was not going to be easy telling Brad about Malcolm. He didn't believe there were any problems with their relationship and was trying to make it work. She was the one who had strayed and was ready to end it. Another wave of guilt came over her. It was going to be a long night.

Brad got out of the car and came over to open her door. It was early September, but still a hot, humid South Carolina night. Brad smiled at her without a hint of any irritation on his face.

"You look beautiful. I should have told you that earlier," he said.

Kenyatta smiled in appreciation. As soon as she tried on her dress, she'd loved it. It was a sapphire silk, one-shoulder design that gathered at her waistline and stopped above the knee. The silk clung attractively to her curves and accentuated her hourglass figure, and the radiant blue hue perfectly complemented her skin tone. She was glad Brad appreciated it.

"Thank you. You look very handsome yourself."

Brad leaned in to kiss her cheek, but at the last second, he kissed the side of her neck. Kenyatta tried to move, but he put his hand on her waist and held her close.

"You smell great as well," he whispered in her ear.

Kenyatta tried to push away, but he held firm. She started to remind him they needed to get inside, but a voice intervened before she could.

“Kenyatta, I was hoping to see you here tonight.”

Kenyatta’s heart skipped a beat at the sound of Malcolm’s voice. She tried again to push Brad away, but he took his time to move to her side before firmly planting his hand on her waist.

At the sight of Malcolm, Kenyatta’s breath caught. He was gorgeous in a traditional black tuxedo. She thought he must have gone to the barbershop after work, because the stubble that had been on his cheek was gone and there was a crisp edge to his goatee and around his hairline. As Jessica moved closer to his side, Kenyatta realized she’d forgotten about her existence entirely. She looked stunning in an emerald green dress with an obscenely low neckline that dipped between her breasts. She wondered how it stayed in place. She fought back feelings of jealousy by reminding herself of what had happened on her desk earlier.

“Malcolm.” Kenyatta hated the breathless sound of her voice, but memories of that afternoon, flashed through her mind. Yet when their eyes met, she could see he was thinking about the same thing, and her jealousy evaporated.

“We were just going inside,” Brad interrupted. “If you’ll excuse us.” He headed toward the door with his hand still around Kenyatta’s waist. She looked back, but Brad was moving so quickly that she had to turn around to make sure she didn’t stumble.

“You didn’t have to be so rude. We could have talked for a second.”

“We didn’t need to stop and talk with him,” he replied gruffly.

Before she could ask why, they were at the door handing over their tickets. The Fire Marshal’s Ball had become such a successful fundraiser that it had to be in the massive Cantey Building on the state fairgrounds. Shades of blue, gray, and silver adorned the ballroom with arrangements of Asiatic lilies, spray roses, and irises on each table. A live band was playing an Earth, Wind, and Fire song that had a lot of people on the dance floor.

An usher at the door asked them if they knew their table number just as an older lady in a gray sequined dress approached.

“This is Chief Johnson’s son and soon-to-be daughter-in-law. They’ll be sitting at the head table.”

Brad smiled broadly. “Thank you, Mrs. Stevenson. You look wonderful tonight. If I weren’t so happy with Kenyatta, I’d try and steal you from Mr. Stevenson,” he teased.

Mrs. Stevenson laughed and lightly hit his arm. She was his father’s longtime administrative assistant who also handled the majority of the planning for the Ball each year. She’d spend most of the night running around putting out potential fires.

She winked. “Don’t let Mr. Stevenson hear that. He might tell you to take me.”

“If that’s the case, I did hear that polygamy has it perks,” Brad joked back. “What do you say, Kenyatta, do

you mind sharing me?”

Kenyatta laughed. “We’ll see. How are you doing, Mrs. Stevenson?” She asked leaning in to kiss her on her cheek.

Mrs. Stevenson rolled her eyes and began to escort them to their table. “About to lose my mind. It seems as if every year people get crazier. Caterers are harder to deal with, the wait staff get lazier, and to top it off, there’s always one fool who shows up drunk.”

Brad squeezed her shoulder. “And you’ll handle it like a pro as usual.”

Mrs. Stevenson laughed. “Say that again at the end of the night.”

They arrived at the head table and Kenyatta was happy to see her mom and dad had already arrived. Kenyatta looked a few tables over and saw Carol and Angie with their husbands. She waved at her friends and motioned that she would be over there soon. Everyone greeted one another and Brad pulled out the chair next to her mother for Kenyatta.

“Kenyatta, you look beautiful,” Brad’s dad said. Greg Johnson had a thicker build than his son’s and a touch of gray in his otherwise jet-black hair, but other than that, they looked just alike.

“Thank you, Mr. Johnson.”

“Brad will have to stick close to keep all the other guys off you tonight,” he said with a wink.

Brad settled in the chair beside her and put his arm around her shoulder. "I certainly plan to, Dad." He leaned over to kiss her cheek.

Kenyatta's mom patted her hand and smiled at her daughter with an I-told-you-so look in her eyes. Kenyatta stifled a groan and looked around the room as conversations began around the table. She didn't even try to fool herself into thinking she wasn't looking for Malcolm. The room was huge, and it would be nearly impossible to see him from her table.

"I'm going to say hey to Carol and Angie." She leaned over to tell Brad.

"I'll come with you," he said rising. She tried to hide her disappointment as he pulled out her chair and hoped he didn't plan to shadow her all night.

Two hours later, she realized that was exactly what he planned to do. He followed her everywhere. He chatted with Carol and Angie, introduced her to his new clients, asked her to dance and went to the bathroom at the same time she did. Kenyatta wasn't able to get a moment alone. She eventually discovered that Malcolm and Jessica were only a few tables away, and then she'd felt Malcolm's gaze on her all night. It drove her crazy that she couldn't get a minute alone with him. She had to watch him dance with Jessica while she danced with Brad and wished she could reverse their positions. She was desperate to know what he was thinking after their afternoon encounter, but stood no chance to talk to him with Brad stuck to her side all night.

Kenyatta and Brad were talking with Carol and her husband when Brad's father joined them. She hoped he was there to take Brad away. His constant presence was smothering and she was veering closer to no longer being able to contain her animosity.

"Brad, I want you to come over and talk to the new mayor. The city is looking for a new head of their legal department, and it may be a good opportunity for you."

Brad hesitated. Kenyatta wondered why he felt the need to guard her all night. Just like in the car, she sensed he knew about her and Malcolm, but dismissed it. He would have to be psychic to know what happened.

"Sure, I'm on my way." He turned to Kenyatta. "Come with me. I think you should meet the new mayor as well, especially since you're stepping out with that new firm. You could possibly get new business with the city."

Carol snapped her fingers. "Kenyatta, I really need to talk to you about that issue with my boss. Stay here with me while Brad goes off with his father."

Kenyatta gave Carol a grateful look. "Sure, Brad, you go and handle your business. I'll stay here and talk with Carol." She smiled sweetly at him.

"I'd really like for you to meet him. It would be good for your company," Brad replied with a hint of steel in his voice that sent a shiver down her spine.

"Nonsense, you can leave her side for a second," Brad's father spoke up. "C'mon, son, before someone else snags his attention."

Brad looked from his father to Kenyatta and then scanned the room. It was obvious his dad wanted him to meet the mayor alone, and it was equally obvious that Brad did not intend to leave Kenyatta unattended.

He turned back to Kenyatta and kissed her cheek. "I'll only be gone for a minute. Stay here with Carol." He placed his hand on her elbow and squeezed slightly.

Kenyatta shrugged out of his embrace. "Brad, it's no big deal if you leave my side for a minute. Just go."

His jaw clenched briefly before he answered. "Fine, but I'll be right back."

"What's up with him?" Carol asked as soon as Brad walked away. "He's sticking to you like white on rice. I knew he was clingy, but never like this."

"Yeah, I've never seen Brad this determined to keep you in his sight," Greg chimed in.

Kenyatta shrugged. "I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if he's spying on me."

Carol's eyes instantly went on alert. "What? Why would you say that?"

"It's nothing. I guess he just wants to be close tonight. Maybe he senses what I need to tell him," Kenyatta's voice trailed off.

Carol slid closer to Kenyatta. "What do you have to tell him?" Her voice dripped with anticipation.

Kenyatta looked at her friend and wished Greg weren't there. She suddenly needed to tell someone

everything that had happened that afternoon. She'd have to come clean about her entire history with Malcolm. Although she had mentioned her attraction to Malcolm, she'd never admitted her true feelings to her friends.

"I need to talk to you," she said in an urgent whisper. Before her friend could reply, the back of her neck tingled. She didn't have to turn around to know Malcolm was behind her. Only the smell of his cologne and the heat from his body caused her body to react that way.

She turned to him before he even spoke. He smiled at her and took her hand.

"Will you dance with me?"

As the first strains of Jagged Edge's "I Gotta Be" reached her ears, she smiled and again pictured the two of them on her desk.

"I'd love to."

They walked away from a dumbstruck Carol onto the dance floor.

Chapter 25

Malcolm had been waiting for an opportunity to be alone with Kenyatta since seeing her in the parking lot. He couldn't focus on anything else. He knew he was being neglectful to Jessica, but he was only there with her as a favor. He wasn't rude and had been attentive to her needs. He got her food, danced with her, and pulled out her chair, but his mind wasn't on her. The only thing he could think about was Kenyatta, where she was and what she was doing.

As he watched Brad affix himself to her side, he'd thought about walking over and physically removing her from Brad's grasp. It was a primitive reaction, one he wasn't proud of, but he felt it nonetheless. After their afternoon together, he couldn't fathom hiding his feelings for her anymore.

And so, the moment Brad walked away, he asked her to dance. Jessica was off talking with coworkers, so his dancing with another woman wouldn't appear to be completely inappropriate. He hadn't even cared what song was playing, as long as he got time alone with her. But when the band began playing "I Gotta Be," he'd sent

a quick prayer of thanks to heaven. The words of the song described his feelings perfectly.

When they reached the dance floor, he pulled Kenyatta in his arms a bit too close for their working relationship. He put his hand on her waist and marveled at how good it felt to hold her. He smiled as he realized he'd have plenty of time to learn every way their bodies fit together.

“I thought he would never leave.”

Kenyatta rolled her eyes. “I felt the same.”

“I’m glad he finally did. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have had the chance to dance with you.” He pulled her closer. “I’m coming to your house tonight.”

He saw the desire flash in her eyes before she looked away. She bit her lower lip and avoided eye contact.

He frowned. “What’s wrong?”

She hesitated for only a second before answering. “I don’t think you should come. This afternoon was — ”

“What we’ve both been waiting for,” he finished for her.

“Yes ... no. Malcolm, it was reckless. Reckless and stupid. We didn’t even use protection.” She finally looked at him.

Anxiety clouded her eyes. He knew it was reckless, but he didn’t regret it. And he didn’t want her to regret it, either. “Last month.”

“What?” she asked.

“Last month was the last time I was tested for HIV,” he said.

“Why would you say that?”

“If that’s what’s bothering you about today, I thought it would make you feel better.”

She smiled. “It does a little.” She looked away briefly. “I was tested at my yearly physical two months ago ... if it makes you feel better.”

He hadn’t worried about her HIV status before, but he was happy to hear she was clean.

“But that’s not the only reason it was reckless. We didn’t even think about the consequences. We aren’t even truly single.”

“I am,” he said. “I told you Jessica and I have been through since I came back from Orlando. When are you going to tell Brad about us?”

“We don’t even know if there is an *us*,” she hedged.

“Kenyatta, there is an *us*. I thought we agreed to find out where this would go. Why are you hesitating?”

“Because I don’t know if you really want me or if you just want to fuck me,” she said in a rush.

The intensity of her response surprised him. He knew more than lust attracted him to her. He wasn’t ready to put a name on it and was somewhat afraid to explore the depth of his feelings, but he knew he wanted to do more for her than any woman he’d known. He cared about her and wanted to protect her from the evils

of the world. He wanted to lie beside her at night and wake up with her in the morning. He felt certain that if things kept going as they were, he could easily love her, but he was hesitant to tell her that too soon; she'd think he was crazy.

“Kenyatta, what I feel for you is a lot more than lust,” he said. “Yes, I do want to sleep with you. I’ve been dreaming about it since I first laid eyes on you, but it’s much more than that. I want to spend time with you. I enjoy talking with you, and I’m going to miss working with you. I don’t know what this is between us yet, but I do know I’ll regret if for the rest of my life if I don’t find out where we can go.”

Malcolm watched the play of emotions across her face. He’d laid it all on the line. Now anxiety churned in his stomach as he waited for her response.

Her eyes met his and they were soft and glowing with so much emotion it took his breath away. She smiled and said, “I believe you.”

Happier than he’d ever been it took everything in him not to jump for joy like a kid. Instead, he grinned at her. “When are you going to tell Brad?”

Kenyatta’s smile faltered and she looked away. “It’s more than breaking up. It’s calling off a wedding, and I have to do this gently. He thinks everything between us is fine. I don’t know how to do it without breaking his heart.”

“To hell with his heart,” His hand moved lower to the curve of her back. “All I care about is letting the

world know we're together. When are you going to break up with him?"

"Soon."

"Not good enough."

"Tomorrow."

"Tonight. You need to break it off tonight."

"Why tonight?"

"Because I told you that I'm coming to you tonight. I don't like sleeping with another man's fiancée."

She smiled. "It didn't stop you this afternoon."

He lowered his head, placing his mouth near her ear. "He was the farthest thing from my mind this afternoon. Tonight, when I take my time with you, I want to know that you are truly free."

She gasped. "I'll tell him tonight."

He lifted his head and squeezed her hand. "I'll be there at midnight."

Her eyes widened. "We don't leave here until midnight."

"Then find an excuse to leave early. I want you again." Desire burned in her eyes and it set him on fire. With every move they made, her breasts rubbed against him, further increasing his arousal. He pressed the proof of his desire into her and she rubbed against it. His breathing hitched.

She licked her lips. "Midnight," she whispered.

He smiled and began to softly sing the words of the song to her.

Her eyes widened. "I didn't know you could sing."

He remembered her teasing about his singing abilities in Orlando. His velvet voice was one talent he was proud of. He'd happily sing anything to her. "There's a lot you don't know about me, but you will."

As he sang to her, it was as if everyone else disappeared. He wasn't one to believe in fairytales, but finally having Kenyatta made him want to sweep her off her feet and out of the ball like a prince. But the song ended, and they had to go back to their dates.

He took her hand and kissed it softly. "I'll see you soon."

She looked at the edge of the dance floor where Brad was waiting. The fairytale was over.

Her lips twisted. "Not soon enough."

Malcolm slowly released her hand and fought back the need to leave with her. Instead, he looked for Jessica so they could leave. And he could start his night with Kenyatta.

Chapter 26

Kenyatta took a second to admire the confidence in Malcolm's stride before turning to face Brad. His body was stiff as he marched toward her.

"What the hell are you doing?" Brad demanded.

"Dancing with my boss," she replied. Her defenses rose at his tone of voice.

"Boning your boss on the dance floor is more like it." He took her arm and pulled her aside. "Are you trying to disrespect me in public? It's bad enough that you — "

"That I what?"

Brad took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. He held himself rigid as the anger radiated from him. She'd never seen him this angry before. There was madness in his eyes that made her uneasy.

"You know what?" He spoke softly. "We're leaving."

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, but she blamed it on guilt. She'd end their relationship that night, regardless of how difficult it would be. She couldn't let Brad continue to think they were going to spend their lives together.

“Fine, I’m ready to go. We need to talk anyway.”

“There won’t be any talking tonight.”

Her eyes snapped to his. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He sneered. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

“Is that a threat?”

He grabbed her arm painfully and pulled her close. “It’s not a threat. It’s just a reminder that you’re *my* fiancée. I haven’t forgotten what we were supposed to do tonight.”

“Brad, that’s what we need to talk about. Let me go, you’re hurting my arm!”

“There won’t be much talking,” he repeated, but he did release his grip on her arm.

“Is everything alright here?” her dad asked, seemingly appearing from nowhere.

Kenyatta nodded and attempted to smile. “Yes, everything is fine, Dad. We’re just getting ready to go.”

Her dad eyed Brad warily. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, everything’s okay.” She looked at Brad. “Right, Brad?”

Brad nodded stiffly. “I’ll go say goodbye to my parents.”

Her dad watched Brad walk away. “I don’t like the way he grabbed you. Has he done that before?”

“What? No. He’s just upset about me dancing with Malcolm.”

“Well you two were dancing kind of close out there.”

She sighed and looked at her dad. “I know, but that’s because ... I can’t stay with Brad anymore.”

He looked at her with unveiled surprise. “Where is this coming from?”

“I have feelings for Malcolm. I don’t know if it’s right or if I’m making a mistake, but I have to explore it, Dad, I can’t marry Brad when I feel this way.”

Her dad’s eyes searched her face before he nodded. “Well, baby, you know that I support you in whatever you choose.”

She sighed and smiled at him. “Thanks, Dad.”

“What’s up with Brad?” Angie asked as she and Carol walked up. “He looks like he wants to murder someone.”

Her dad narrowed his eyes and cocked his head. “Maybe I should take you home.”

Kenyatta shook her head. “No, Brad and I have some things to discuss. Everything will be fine once that’s done.”

Carol reached over to take Kenyatta’s hand. “I’ve seen that look before, Kenyatta. If you need me, just call.”

Kenyatta was more irritated than comforted. Before Carol had met her husband, she’d been in an abusive

relationship. It was not the first time Carol alluded to the situation when talking about Brad, but Kenyatta dismissed her. They were all overreacting. Brad might've been upset, but he wouldn't hit her.

“Don't be silly. He's just jealous. I'll call you tomorrow.”

Brad returned, and after hastily telling Kenyatta, “Let's go,” he acknowledged her dad and friends with a clipped, “Good night.” He took her by the hand and they left.

A tense silence filled the car as Brad drove Kenyatta home. She knew he was upset about her dancing with Malcolm, but she didn't understand why he was so angry. Although Brad had confided in her parents about something possibly going on between her and Malcolm, he'd never said anything to her directly. He'd usually been cordial to Malcolm whenever they met, but then she remembered Malcolm telling her how Brad had warned him to keep his eyes off her. Maybe he suspected more than she realized. That could explain his anger.

They arrived at her house, and she got out of the car before he turned off the engine. He followed her to the front door. She unlocked the door but didn't open it; instead, she turned to face him.

“Brad, you're obviously upset, and I'm tired. I think you should go home, and I'll call you tomorrow.”

He reached around her and opened the door. “No, there are some things we need to handle tonight.”

Kenyatta reluctantly let him in the house. It was best to go ahead and get it over with. If she broke off their engagement before Malcolm arrived, then she wouldn't feel any more guilt about cheating on Brad.

She stopped in the entryway. She knew she couldn't marry Brad, but that wouldn't make this any easier. She turned to face him, and before she could utter a word, Brad slapped her so hard she spun around and hit the wall behind her. Multiple thoughts ran through her head. Disbelief he'd actually hit her. Why had he hit her? Where was this coming from? A range of emotions fought for control within her: hurt, fear, and sadness, but the dominant feeling was fury.

She kept her back to him as she cradled her face. Her eyes scanned the hall for any type of weapon. She regretted not having any decorative vases or sculptures in her entryway that she could use to defend herself. The fact that he'd actually hit her without saying a word infuriated her.

"I should have slapped you a long time ago," Brad said to her back. "After everything I've done and sacrificed for you, how could you do this to me?"

Kenyatta took a deep breath and turned to face him. "If you ever hit me again, I'll kill you."

He just laughed. "Try it," he said then slapped her again.

She lunged at him. He was stronger, but she instinctively fought back. She had barely scratched his face when he grabbed her hands and slammed her

against the wall. He didn't look upset; instead, he had a sick smile on his face.

“Oh, you want to fight me, huh? If I had known you would fight, I would have done this the first time I saw you looking at your damn boss.”

He reached down and roughly pulled her dress up. Kenyatta fought but couldn't overpower him. Her anger turned to full-fledged panic as she realized what he was trying to do.

“No, Brad, stop it!” She bucked against him, but he slammed her against the wall again. Her head hit the wall, and she was stunned momentarily before renewing her struggle.

“Why are you doing this? What's wrong with you?”

He stopped for a second and looked at her as if she were an idiot. “Why am I doing this?”

The smirk left his face, replaced with an angry sneer. He put his hand around her neck. He squeezed slightly, not enough to cut off her breathing, but enough for her to recognize the threat.

“The next time you decide to fuck your boss on your desk, make sure you hang up the phone first,” he said.

Kenyatta's eyes widened with shock. The guilt of her indiscretion crept up, but she forced it back down. The look in Brad's eyes was too scary. Yes, she should have broken things off with him before sleeping with Malcolm, but she didn't deserve this.

“Brad,” she began slowly, “I know it’s worthless to say it, but I am sorry. This thing with Malcolm was not something I planned. I know it was wrong, and I shouldn’t have agreed to continue our engagement, but it doesn’t give you the right to do this.”

She didn’t think it was possible, but he got angrier. “Oh it doesn’t? I waited on you for two years. You tell me we should wait because you had to be sure that I wanted you and not just your body. So I respected your wishes. I waited on you because I wanted you so much.” His eyes swept over her body pinned against the wall, and she saw desire flash in them. “I still want you. So much that it’s almost an obsession. I waited and tried to give you everything you wanted, and what do you do? You go and *fuck* your boss on your desk!”

He slammed her against the wall again to emphasize his words. He was beyond reasoning with. She frantically looked around for a means to get away from him, but his hold on her was too strong. In fact, he was a lot stronger than she’d ever thought.

“What do you have to say for yourself? Just ‘I’m sorry’ and ‘It wasn’t planned’? That’s a load of shit, Kenyatta, and you know it. I’m not stupid. I’ve watched you two drool over each other since we started dating.”

“Then why did you stick around?” she asked, hoping that if she kept him talking, she’d find a way to strike back.

“Because you’re mine, Kenyatta. I don’t think you realize it yet, but I’m not giving you up. I’ve invested too

much into making you my wife, and that's what you're going to be."

She glared at him. "Brad, I'm not marrying you."

He laughed, and the smirk was back on his face. "That's what you think. If I'm guessing right, Malcolm is planning to come over tonight. I don't think he'll be very interested in you when he sees that you left his arms and jumped right into mine. Not again."

"What do you mean, *not again*? I'm not sleeping with you." She tried to push him away.

He pressed his body closer. "Kenyatta, I can clean this mess up the same way I did in Orlando."

She went still. "What?"

He lifted his other hand and pointed it in her face. "Oh yes, I heard your conversation in the stairwell in Orlando." Excitement filled his voice. "I know all about how he left you the night before. And your ... misunderstanding about Tangy. So when I met you at your room, I made sure to *ruffle* you up a bit before he came. I wanted him to see that you belong to me, and I'm going to do it again tonight."

Kenyatta's anger returned with full force. He had played her for a fool. Everything he'd said about their having a relationship built upon trust and understanding was a lie. His insistence that she change clothes, telling her that his love for her was the reason why he'd wanted to kiss her. It was all to make it look as if they were being

intimate. He'd done it all just to turn Malcolm away, and it had worked.

Kenyatta began to fight in earnest. She refused to make it easy for him this time. "Get off me! I'm not sleeping with you."

Brad laughed. "Oh, yes you will. Even if you aren't willing. I've spent far too much time waiting to consummate this relationship."

"If you force me, I'll tell him. He'll know I didn't want this," she argued.

He laughed harder. "Sweetie, you act as if you'll be conscious when he gets here." He pulled his hand back and balled it into a fist.

Kenyatta looked from his fist to his face. Adrenaline took over, and she kned him in the groin as hard as she could. He doubled over in pain but didn't let go of her. She was able to get one of her hands free and used it to try to pry her hand from his grip.

"You bitch," he ground out and jerked her back. He punched her, and when she fell to the floor, he threw himself on top of her.

Kenyatta yelled, screamed, hit, and scratched, but it wasn't enough. He continued to pin her down while jerking her dress up. Kenyatta heard the fabric of her underwear tear and tears flowed down her face. *This can't be happening to me*, she thought. She continued to resist, but she wasn't strong enough.

Brad reached down to open his pants and Kenyatta felt his erection press against her inner thigh. She struggled and screamed out again, and Brad slapped her. The force of the blow knocked her head into the floor. She saw stars and realized she wouldn't be able to stop him. By the time, Malcolm showed up, she would be unconscious, and Brad could feed him any line he wanted.

Chapter 27

Malcolm headed straight for Kenyatta's house after taking Jessica home. He'd overheard her friend Carol talking about the look in Brad's eyes and how she'd seen it before. It worried him. He'd never seen any signs that Brad was abusive to Kenyatta and couldn't imagine someone with her spirit in a relationship like that, yet something told him to go to her. Brad had shown signs of being overly protective. The way he had stuck to her side all night unnerved him. The fact that it bothered those close to her only made him more anxious to get to her house.

Jessica had been upset about their abrupt departure, but not enough to resist coming on to him again. He'd brushed her off before bluntly telling her he was going to Kenyatta. She'd slapped him, called him every name in the book, and he'd taken it. He'd treated her badly, and she deserved to vent her frustration. He'd left her cursing at her door before rushing to Kenyatta's house.

His stomach clenched when he saw Brad's car parked in front of Kenyatta's townhouse. The logical part of his brain told him they could just be talking. Kenyatta was probably trying to break things off gently without

hurting Brad's feelings. Although Malcolm knew his arrival would only make things worse, his instincts told him Brad's presence wasn't good.

He got out of the car and walked quickly to her door when the door of the neighboring townhouse opened. A young woman appeared.

"Are you going to Kenyatta's?" she asked anxiously.

Malcolm's uneasiness grew. "Yes, why?"

"I was just about to call the police." She began to wring her hands. "It sounds as if she's being attacked, but that doesn't make sense because I saw her go in with Brad."

Before she could finish, Malcolm ran to the door. It was locked, but he could hear Kenyatta's screams. The yelling ended abruptly and Malcolm's heart skipped a beat. It was too quiet on the other side.

He took a step back and slammed, shoulder first, into her door. He briefly recognized pain as the door flew open, but it was immediately forgotten when he took in the scene before him. Kenyatta lay on the floor, obviously dazed, with Brad on top of her.

Brad turned when the door opened, and Malcolm pounced on him before he could say a word. He jerked Brad up and punched him in the jaw so hard he flew into wall. He didn't give Brad time to react, punching him repeatedly in the jaw, stomach, and ribs. He wanted to kill him and would have done so if Kenyatta hadn't pulled him away.

“Malcolm, Malcolm, stop, you’ll kill him. He’s not worth it,” she begged.

Malcolm gave Brad one last shove and backed away. He didn’t take his eyes off him. He hoped Brad would fight back and give him a reason to hit him again as he pulled Kenyatta against his side.

He pointed at Brad. “You have five seconds to get out of this house before I kill you.”

Brad slowly stood up against the wall and glared at Malcolm. He struggled to fasten his pants before spitting blood on the floor. “I’m not giving up.”

Malcolm growled and would have hit him again for the audacity of that remark if Kenyatta hadn’t pressed closer to him.

“Get out,” he repeated.

Brad spit on the floor again and then limped out the door. Malcolm walked over to slam it shut, but he’d shattered the jamb and it wouldn’t close.

He turned around and studied Kenyatta. The bruises were already showing on her face, and her dress was torn. He was ready to turn and follow Brad to finish the beating, when she flung herself at him and began to cry. For a few seconds, he stood there not knowing what to do, before he instinctively wrapped his arms around her.

He expected her to cry for a while, but she quickly pulled away and screamed. She paced back and forth, her strides short and angry. She was rubbing her arms so fiercely he wouldn’t have been surprised to see sparks fly.

“Are you all right?” It was a dumb question, but he didn’t know what else to say.

“He hit me.” She continued to pace. “No, he *beat* me! I can’t believe he actually did that to me.”

Malcolm watched her and realized she was not only scared and confused, but also furious. He was just as surprised and angry as she was. Although he’d never liked him, he’d never thought Brad was a threat to Kenyatta.

“Why did he hit you?” he asked.

She kept pacing, and he thought she didn’t hear him. She stopped suddenly and faced him. Guilt now accompanied the other emotions showing on her face.

“I didn’t hang up the phone earlier. He heard us on my desk.”

Malcolm swore and pulled her into his arms. He was glad she didn’t pull away this time but let him hold her.

“I’m sorry he heard that, but that’s no excuse for what he was doing to you.”

Kenyatta nodded against his shoulder. “I know, but I was wrong. I *never* should have reconciled with him. I thought I could make it work. I thought he was safe and stable, even though he wasn’t exactly what I wanted. It was easier to be with him than leave.”

He tilted her head back to look into her eyes. “Kenyatta, we all make mistakes in relationships. Sometimes, we hurt those we care about, but it doesn’t give him the right to do what he was doing. You were — ”

He couldn't finish as the vision of her underneath Brad filled his mind. A new rush of anger bubbled up. He took a deep breath to calm himself. "No one has the right to hurt you like that," he finished simply.

She looked up at him and swayed on her feet. Malcolm caught her before she fell. There was a queasy look on her face and sweat on her brow.

"I think I need to sit down." She touched the back of her head and winced. "I hit my head."

Malcolm clenched his jaw. "You didn't hit your head, he did that." He picked her up, carried her into the living room and sat her on the couch.

"You should go to the hospital," he said.

Kenyatta shook her head. "No, I don't want them to look at me like I'm some battered woman. I'll just take some Advil and lie down."

Frustration replaced his anger. "You have a black eye, a swollen cheek, and possibly a concussion. You *are* a battered woman."

She glared at him. "That's not funny, Malcolm. I'll be fine." She stood up quickly, as if to prove her point, but swayed again. Malcolm caught her and swung her up in his arms.

"You're going to the hospital." He carried her toward the broken in door.

He expected her to argue, but she closed her eyes and lay against his chest. He thought she had fainted, but she reached up and put her arm around his neck.

“Not the one on this side of town. My mom’s best friend is an ER nurse, and everyone I know will know before the night is over,” she whispered.

He nodded and headed out the door. Her neighbor was waiting there. She cried out and rushed over when she saw Kenyatta in Malcolm’s arms.

“Oh, my God, Kenyatta. Are you okay? I would have called the cops, but I didn’t think Brad would hurt you. I’m so sorry for not doing anything sooner.” She began to cry.

Kenyatta looked up. “It’s okay, Vicki. None of this is your fault.” She looked back at her broken door and asked her neighbor. “Could you watch out for my things while I’m gone? The door is broken, and I don’t want a robbery on top of everything else.”

Vicki stopped crying and looked at the door. “I’ll do one better and have my boyfriend come and fix it while you’re gone. I’m so sorry, Kenyatta.”

“Please stop saying that. It looks much worse than it is.”

Vicki nodded, but didn’t look convinced. Malcolm gave her a brief nod before continuing to his SUV. He put Kenyatta in the front seat and buckled her seatbelt before getting in on his side. Within minutes, they were on I-20 headed toward Providence Northeast.

“He’s known about us since Orlando.”

Her statement startled him. She’d tilted her seat back and closed her eyes. He’d thought she’d fallen

asleep. “What do you mean?”

“The day after we ... we didn’t sleep together, he heard us talking in the stairwell. I don’t know how, maybe he saw us go in there and decided to follow. Who knows? He met me at my room, sweet-talked me into changing my clothes, so I did. Then he told me all the reasons we belonged together: our relationship wasn’t built on lust, we both knew each other and could trust each other ... our love was real.” She paused before continuing. “I was crushed by your refusal, and when he told me about you and Tangy, everything he said rang true. I turned around, and he was halfway undressed. He said he was my fiancé and had a right to be close to me. When he kissed me, I let him, but that was all that happened. He did it all because he knew you were coming to my room.”

She looked over at Malcolm. “He wanted you to think you were interrupting us having sex.” She laughed bitterly before continuing. “He was planning the same thing for tonight. He was going to punish me for cheating on him with you. Beat me until I was unconscious and then answer the door when you came by. He thought you wouldn’t want me afterward, and I would be forced to stay with him.”

She turned her head away from Malcolm and fell silent. He didn’t know what to say. He was furious to know Brad orchestrated the entire scene he witnessed in Orlando. If it weren’t for Brad’s interference, he and Kenyatta would have been together a lot sooner and none of this would have happened. It was another thing

to add to his list of reasons for beating the shit out of Brad the next time he saw him. If he hadn't arrived early, and Brad would have come to the door, he would have thought the worst. It would have crushed him to think Kenyatta left his arms for Brad's again. He wouldn't have wanted anything to do with her after that. It shook him to his core to realize how easily Brad would have manipulated him to give up the woman of his dreams.

Malcolm reached over and took Kenyatta's hand. "It doesn't matter what Brad's plans are from now on. I'll stand beside you, no matter what. And I'll protect you from anything he tries to throw your way."

Kenyatta turned back to him and smiled. It broke his heart to see her wince with the effort. He wanted to take the pain away. He knew in that moment he loved her and would fight to protect her from whatever came her way. He didn't know if she felt the same way about him, but he didn't care. Kenyatta had become a part of his soul now, and he would do everything in his power to ensure nothing ever hurt her again.

Chapter 28

Kenyatta woke the next morning to the feel of a strong chest against her back. She was confused, until the events of the night before flooded her memory: Brad hitting her, Malcolm rushing in to help her, the drive to the hospital. She moaned and tried to roll over. Malcolm's arms tensed around her before he sat up and looked down at her.

“Are you alright? Do you need something?” His eyes anxiously scanned her face.

She shook her head, touched by his concern. “No. I just remembered everything that happened last night.”

He frowned. “I wish I had gotten here sooner.”

“Please don't start that. What happened last night was unexpected to everyone — especially me. I really don't want to start the ‘If I'd only' crap.”

“I can't help it. I could tell he was angry after our dance. I never should have let you leave with him.”

It was her turn to frown. “And cause a scene at the Ball? I don't think so. It would have been much worse.”

“I doubt it. He wouldn’t hit you in front of other people.”

She considered that. “Maybe you’re right. Either way, it’s over now. I don’t want to think about it.”

He gently touched a bruise on her face. “I could kill him for what he did to you.”

She smiled slightly. “I appreciate that, but if you killed him, you’d go to jail. Then I’d never get to spend the night with you again.”

Malcolm grimaced. “Last night wasn’t what I expected for our first night together.”

“It may have started all wrong, but it ended perfectly.” She pulled him down to kiss her.

It was true. The trip to the hospital had been awful. They wanted her to press charges, but she’d refused. She didn’t condone what Brad had done, but she understood his anger. He probably regretted his actions. She just wanted the situation to end. Pressing charges would draw it out.

Malcolm had stood beside her the entire time. He’d taken the accusing looks in stride, even though Kenyatta assured the emergency room staff that he wasn’t the one who attacked her. Afterwards, she’d been exhausted and ready to go home. She was afraid he would drop her off and leave but was more afraid to ask him to stay, so she was relieved when he offered to stay with her. They made a stop at his house for clothes before driving back to her house. He helped her wash up, change into her pajamas

and put her in bed. They'd spent the entire night in each other's arms.

His kiss, which began softly, became more urgent. Desire stirred in her veins when the doorbell rang. The both froze before Malcolm jumped from the bed. She gave an appreciative glance at his bare chest before getting out of bed and looking for a bathrobe.

"It's not Brad. I'm sure of it," she said.

"For his sake, I hope not." Malcolm replied before sprinting down the stairs to answer the front door still shirtless.

Kenyatta put on her robe and walked down the stairs after him. He had already opened the door. She couldn't see who it was, but heard Carol's very surprised voice.

"Um ... I was checking on, um, Kenyatta?" she stammered. "I can ... I can just come back later."

Malcolm visibly relaxed. He stepped back and opened the door for her to enter.

"She's up," he said as he turned to look at Kenyatta at the bottom of the stairs.

"You're the one who tipped me off last night." Malcolm said, as Carol came into the house.

"Tipped you off, how did I do that?" she asked. Then she got a good look at Kenyatta. "Oh my God, Kenyatta! What happened?"

She rushed over to Kenyatta.

Malcolm answered. “You thought that he was on edge, so I came by to check on Kenyatta. It was lucky I got here when I did. If I hadn’t, it might have been a lot worse.”

Kenyatta looked at her friend. “I’m fine, Carol. Just a bit shaken up.”

Carol took in Kenyatta’s swollen face and didn’t look convinced. Tears fell from her eyes, and Kenyatta reached out to hug her friend. “I’m fine. Really.”

“Oh, God, Kenyatta. I thought I recognized the signs, but I didn’t want to believe it. Why ... how long ... why didn’t you tell me?”

Kenyatta hugged Carol again before leading her to the couch. They sat down, and Kenyatta gave her a reassuring smile.

“It was the first time he’d ever hit me, Carol. I would *not* have stayed with him if he’d done this before.”

Carol looked at Kenyatta for a few seconds before nodding, and Kenyatta knew she was deciding whether to believe her.

“But why would he do this now? I know you said things weren’t going well. Was it because you were having doubts?”

Kenyatta sighed and looked at Malcolm. “He knew that something was going on between me and Malcolm.”

“What?” Carol looked from her friend to the half-naked man in the room.

Malcolm cleared his throat. "I'll just get dressed and give you two some privacy." He walked over to Kenyatta and kissed the top of her head. "If anyone comes to the door, wait for me."

Kenyatta nodded. Carol watched him go with her mouth hanging open. Kenyatta knew she had a lot of explaining to do.

"What the hell is going on here?" Carol asked as soon as Malcolm left the room.

Kenyatta chuckled. "You know I've been attracted to Malcolm since I started working for him."

"I know that, but I didn't think there was any more to it."

"There wasn't for a long time, but it turns out he feels the same way about me. Things have been ... tense between us lately."

"Tense how? Girl, you need to give me some details." Carol crossed her legs and arms and sat back on the couch.

Kenyatta sighed with mock exasperation, and Carol waited expectantly. She explained everything that happened before and after Florida. Carol's eyes grew wider as the story went on.

"We had sex on my desk Friday afternoon. Unfortunately, Brad heard everything through my phone. That's what drove him over the edge," Kenyatta finished.

"What! You had sex on your desk?" Carol screeched.

“Shhh, I don’t need the entire neighborhood to know.”

“To hell with the neighborhood. You need to provide me with all the gushy details.” Carol sat up, grinning from ear to ear.

Kenyatta could only laugh. Any other time, Carol’s prying would annoy her, but today it didn’t bother her. She was touched that her friend had come by so early to check on her given how everyone teased Carol constantly for her insistence on not going anywhere before noon. The fact that she was there, at eight in the morning, made it clear she had been worried about Kenyatta.

Kenyatta shook her head and held up a hand. “I’m not giving you all the details.”

“Looking at him, shoot ... I can guess.” Her eyes wandered to the stairs before returning to Kenyatta. “I can’t believe you went through all of that and didn’t say anything to us.”

Kenyatta shrugged. “I thought I was being foolish over Malcolm. I felt stupid and didn’t want anyone to know. Now I know that what we felt ... still feel, isn’t crazy or out of control.”

“It’s out of control if you’re getting in on in the middle of the afternoon on your desk,” Carol teased.

“Stop it, I’m being serious.” Kenyatta playfully hit her friend’s shoulder.

“I hope you are. For all that you’ve been through I hope it was worth it.” She leaned in close to her friend.

“Was it?”

Kenyatta blushed. “Yes, dammit, it was worth it.”

They both laughed and hugged each other. They were just girlfriends enjoying the moment, but when Kenyatta winced with pain, Carol became serious.

“You need to report Brad and get a restraining order.”

Kenyatta shook her head before Carol finished her sentence. “No, I’m not doing that.” She held up her hand before Carol could say more. “I’m not excusing what he did, by no means, but look at the situation. He thought we were trying to work things out. I’d pushed him away for such a long time. I always had an excuse for why we shouldn’t sleep together. For him to hear me having sex with another man must have driven him over the edge. I can forgive him this one time so that we can both move on.”

Carol didn’t look happy. “That’s stupid, Kenyatta. If he hit you once, he’ll hit you again. You need to report him.”

“When is he going to hit me? We’re through, and while I’m not sure where this is going with Malcolm, I won’t be going back to Brad. He won’t have a chance for a repeat performance. I won’t ruin his life by putting this on his record when he obviously reacted out of hurt and jealousy.”

“Kenyatta, that wasn’t just hurt and jealousy. I’ve always thought Brad was overprotective and possessive. I

don't think this is a one-time deal. You need to start the paper trail. Remember your advice to me." Carol was repeating to Kenyatta the same thing Kenyatta had said to her when she'd been in an abusive relationship.

Kenyatta was adamant. "No, Brad isn't like Rodrick. He was jealous and hurt, but he isn't a batterer. We can move on from this. I'm sure he's upset about his behavior. There's no need to make a big issue out of this."

"But ... "

Kenyatta held up her hands. "No buts. I'm serious about this. I feel terrible for not breaking it off with Brad when I should have. I hate what he did, but I can understand it. I don't want to see him again, and I'm sure he'll respect that."

Carol gave her friend a look of disbelief but didn't say anything more. Kenyatta let out a sigh of relief when Malcolm came back into the room. Kenyatta thought he looked sexier in gray pajama bottoms and a T-shirt than he ever did in a business suit.

"Well, I think I should go," Carol said suddenly.

Kenyatta gave her a surprised look. "So soon? You just got here."

"I just wanted to check on you, but I can see that Malcolm is taking good care of you." She stood up and turned back to Kenyatta.

"I'll call you later." She leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Take care of yourself. And think about what I

said. Believe me, I've been there. Better safe than sorry."

Kenyatta sighed. "I know, Carol. I'll think about it."

From the look on her face, it was obvious Carol didn't believe her. She turned to Malcolm and sized him up with one look. Kenyatta knew Carol would have plenty to say when he wasn't around.

"It was nice to see you, Malcolm. I would have preferred under different circumstances. However, we *will* talk more later."

He nodded. "I look forward to it."

"Bye, Ken." Carol gave Kenyatta one last hug before she left.

Kenyatta sighed and lay back on the couch. Her friend's intentions touched her, but she wasn't about to get a restraining order. She felt sure Brad had only acted out of hurt and jealousy. How would she have reacted if she had heard her fiancé making love on the other end of the phone when they were supposed to be working on their relationship? She wouldn't put a domestic violence charge on his record over something for which she was partially responsible.

"What did Carol ask you to think about?" Malcolm asked. He sat next to her and she leaned over onto his chest. His arms automatically went around her, and a sense of security she'd never experienced in Brad's embrace surrounded her.

"It was nothing. She just wants me to take care of myself and stay away from Brad," she lied. She knew

Malcolm would agree with Carol and wasn't in the mood to have that conversation again.

“Do you plan to see him again?”

“No! God, no! Not after last night. I'm sure I'm the last person he wants to see, and he's probably mortified about what he did. He'll call me to apologize, but I doubt we'll see each other again.”

“You're very optimistic.”

Kenyatta sat up. “Why shouldn't I be? I don't think Brad will want to face me after what he did.”

Malcolm looked skeptical. “He said he wasn't giving up and that this wasn't over. That sounds like a threat to me.”

Kenyatta shook her head. “It was the heat of the moment. He was still upset. I think we should just forget the entire episode and move on. I won't even talk to him when he calls to apologize.”

“Kenyatta, I usually agree with your decisions, but not in this case — ”

“Can we just drop it?” she cut in sharply. She was tired of the whole mess. Her face hurt, her body hurt, and she wasn't in the mood to think about tomorrow or Brad. For now, she just needed to believe the incident was over and wouldn't come up again.

Malcolm took her back into his arms. “Carol is a good friend. She was really worried about you.”

Kenyatta smiled. “I know. She can be a bit self-absorbed, but I know if I ever need her, she’s got my back.”

“How did you two meet?”

The smile left Kenyatta’s face. “In college. We were sleeping with the same guy.”

“What?”

She hugged him closer. “Our friendship is a bit unorthodox, but she and Angie are like sisters to me. Angie is one of the other girls Robert slept with.”

Malcolm shook his head. “And you guys became good friends?”

She laughed at the disbelief in his voice. “Yes. Robert was a player. I’m surprised his picture isn’t beside the word in the dictionary. He had a thing for virgins, which I was at the time. He said he loved me, and I was the only one he cared for. I was nineteen and thought I would meet my husband in college. That’s how it worked for my mother, so why wouldn’t it work that way for me? Long story short, he fed that same story to every virgin on campus. I was so naïve; it was easy for him to charm the panties off me. I gave him my virginity and found out two months later he was sleeping with at least five other women just in my dorm. I felt like a fool.”

Malcolm’s arms tightened around her. “How did you find out?”

Her smile returned. “Carol found out. She came to me one day and told me that Robert was sleeping with

her and half the campus. I thought she wanted to fight, but she wanted revenge. I was so hurt, but I agreed to her plan. She'd already enlisted Angie, and the three of us planned it. Carol invited him over and after he fell asleep, we called a guy friend of ours, Tony, over to climb in bed with him. Everyone new Tony, he'd outed a football player when they were caught after homecoming. We took pictures, broke into Robert's e-mail and spread the pictures using his own e-mail. Robert transferred the next semester."

Malcolm's jaw dropped. "Wow! Remind me to never get on your bad side."

She laughed, but there was little humor in it. "In hindsight it was really stupid, but I was young ... and angry. I've moved past childish games. Now I just guard my heart."

Malcolm turned her face up so that she had to look into his eyes. "Well, you don't have to guard it with me. Is Robert the reason why you're afraid I only want you for sex?"

She looked away. "He's not the only reason, but yes he's a big part of it."

Malcolm sighed. "I know there are men out there who only use women for their personal pleasure. I won't lie, my brother's one of them." She stiffened and quickly turned back to look at him. He shook his head. "I'm not my brother."

"All of the women you've dated."

“Yes, I have dated a lot of women. But, I haven’t had a serious relationship in years. I work long hours and travel a lot. It was easier to have superficial relationships when I didn’t think I had the time to work on a real relationship.” He took her hand and placed it on his chest. “But I don’t think that way anymore. I don’t want a superficial relationship with you. I only want to make you happy, Kenyatta.”

Warmth and happiness spread through her and she smiled. “It would make me happy to stay here, like this, all day.”

Malcolm kissed her forehead. “I think I can make that happen.”

Chapter 29

Kenyatta was sleeping on the couch when a frantic knock at her door late that afternoon awakened her. Her heart rate jumped into overdrive. What if it was Brad? Everything he'd done to her the previous night flooded her mind, but how he'd looked when hitting her stood out the most. As if he enjoyed it. How could she have overlooked those signs? Was her judgment in men that bad?

She looked at Malcolm dozing beside her, and her heart slowed down. He'd stayed with her all day and had taken such good care of her. He was caring and considerate, but would it last? Would he disappoint her too?

There was another frantic knock at the door before her doorbell chimed repeatedly.

Malcolm jerked awake and reached for her. "Don't get up. I'll answer it."

He went to the door and Kenyatta held her breath. She hoped it wasn't Brad. He hadn't called to apologize, and she certainly didn't want to see him. The more she thought about the night before, the more she realized

she'd been smart to have reservations about marrying him.

“Where is my daughter?”

Kenyatta heard her mother's voice and cringed. *Damn, Carol, you had to tell my parents.* Before she could get up, her mother was standing in front of her with her father right behind.

“Oh, my God, Kenyatta! Brad did this to you? I didn't believe it when Carol called — ” Her mother began to cry. “Oh, sweetheart. I am so sorry. If I'd known — ”

“Mom, please don't cry.” Kenyatta took her mom in her arms. “Neither of us knew Brad was capable of this. I wouldn't have stayed if he'd hit me before.”

Her mother wiped her eyes, but the tears continued to flow. “I know you wouldn't have, baby, but I can't stand to think that you could have married him.” She held Kenyatta's face in her hands. “Oh, Kenyatta. You look terrible!”

“That's enough, Adele,” her dad said. “We were all fooled.”

He sat down on the other side of Kenyatta and took her hand. “You swear he's never hit you before?”

Kenyatta nodded. “Yes, Dad. This was the first and only time. We're finished.”

“Kenyatta, I saw the signs, but I thought I was overreacting. I was always a bit concerned about his lack of support for your career, but I thought he was a good man and that you two would work things out. I admit

that his reaction to your new job offer made me leery, but it was your life, and you needed to make your own decisions.” He paused, and Kenyatta’s heart ached when she saw tears in his eyes. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Kenyatta leaned over and hugged her father. His fight to control his tears was almost her undoing. She hated seeing her parents so upset over her.

“Has he called?” her mom asked.

She shook her head. “No, I haven’t heard from him all day. I’m guessing he’s too upset about his actions. I don’t plan to see him again. If he wants to explain himself, it’ll have to be over the phone.”

“I wouldn’t take his call. Just cut him completely out of your life,” her mom said.

“Why did he do this?” her dad asked.

Kenyatta cleared her throat and tried to think of a nice way to put it. At least Carol hadn’t told her parents the entire story. She looked at Malcolm standing across the room giving her and her parents space. He gave her a crooked smile that caused her heart to lurch. *I think I love him.*

“I broke off our engagement, because I ... I felt I should see other people.” Malcolm raised an eyebrow when she said that, and she smiled. “Another person actually.”

Her parents followed her line of sight. From the glances they exchanged with each other, she knew they

were wondering why he was there. Kenyatta watched her mom for signs of disapproval as she sized up Malcolm.

“Mom, Dad, you both know Malcolm, my soon-to-be former boss.”

Malcolm walked over and sat in the chair opposite the couch.

“Malcolm,” her mom spoke first. “What are you doing here?” Her tone was inquisitive, but not rude.

Her mother’s bluntness didn’t offend him. “Last night, something Carol said about Brad made me uncomfortable, so I came over to check on Kenyatta. When I got here, he was still here. I took care of him, then took Kenyatta to the hospital. I’ve been here ever since, just to make sure she’s safe.”

Her parents looked at each other but neither said anything. Her dad looked approvingly at Malcolm, but her mom’s expression was unreadable.

“Have you two eaten?” her mom asked.

“No, I was asleep, and Malcolm was watching TV. Are you two hungry? I can cook.”

“Cook, are you crazy?” Her mom shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Harold, talk some sense into your daughter.”

“Calm down, Adele. Kenyatta, your Mom doesn’t expect you to cook. I’ll go pick up a pizza or something.” Her dad stood.

Her mom smiled at Malcolm. “Malcolm, why don’t you go with Kenyatta’s father?”

Malcolm looked at Kenyatta before answering. It was obvious her mom was urging him to leave, but he hesitated. “Will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Kenyatta lied, wishing he would stay so she could avoid the conversation with her mom.

“Don’t answer the door while we’re gone unless you know it’s not him.” Malcolm hadn’t said Brad’s name all day.

“I won’t. Besides, Mom is here with me.”

“I don’t know if he’ll care.” Malcolm stood and came over to kiss her on the forehead. “I’ll be back soon.”

He gently rubbed her jaw with his thumb and Kenyatta was surprised by the stirrings of desire in her belly. Her eyes met his and she saw her feelings mirrored there. Suddenly, she didn’t care about food; she just wanted to be alone with him ... in her bed.

“Hurry back.”

He smiled. “I will.”

Her parents exchanged another look before her father walked to the door, and Malcolm followed.

“Well, I would ask about you and Malcolm, but it’s already pretty obvious what’s going on there,” her mom said as soon as the door closed.

“Why would you say that?”

“You almost started a fire with that look, and honey, I *never* saw you look at Brad like that.”

Kenyatta sighed. “I know, Mom, and it scares me. I’ve let my heart and my body lead me into relationships that have only beaten me down. I tried having a relationship with Brad that I thought was based on logic and perceived compatibility and got beat up for it. I don’t know if I can trust my judgment in men. I don’t want to end up in a situation like yours — pregnant by a man who doesn’t want me. I know you said I couldn’t bring this up, but I can’t help it. It’s bothered me ever since you told me.”

Her mom shook her head. “I never should have laid that burden at your door. You won’t end up like me.”

“How do you know that? I’m sleeping with my boss. We’re both barely out of relationships. What happens when the shine wears off?”

“Kenyatta, Leroy never looked at me the way Malcolm looks at you.”

“With lust in his eyes? From the way you describe your relationship with Leroy, I doubt it.”

“Yes, there was lust in Malcolm’s eyes, but there’s more.” A small smile spread across her mom’s face. “He looks at you the way your dad looks at me.”

Kenyatta fell back on the couch. “It’s just so hard to trust this. He makes me feel so ... so crazy. I can’t explain it.”

Her mom laughed softly. “You sound like me when I first met your father. That man could make me want to strip naked with just a look.”

She held up her hand. “Too much information, Mom.”

Her mom laughed again before getting serious. “I always knew you were attracted to Malcolm, but I didn’t want you to get hurt, pining after your boss. That’s why I was so concerned after you broke your engagement with Brad, and I saw you and Malcolm together. I thought you were throwing away something good with Brad because of an infatuation with your boss. I told you what I told you because I almost did that with your father, and I still regret it to this day.”

Her mom reached over and brushed the hair from her face. “I know you’ve been hurt before, and as messed up as those relationships were, you have to chalk them up to life experience. You can’t live your life carrying all that baggage.”

“I don’t know if I can. Brad seemed so right.”

“Did he feel right in here?” Her mom touched her heart.

She shook her head. “No. I cared about Brad, but I didn’t love him.”

“Then he wasn’t right. I’ll never forgive myself for pushing you to marry him, but you can’t let him control your happiness. Anyone with eyes can tell that Malcolm cares about you. I saw it when you danced last night.

There was something about your father that drew me to him from the moment I saw him. I was helpless to resist it. I cheated on him because I was angry that he left, and it was stupid, but I never stopped loving him. You have that same pull toward Malcolm. And you have to see it through.”

“You don’t think I’m being rash or stupid?” she asked.

“Child, no. His actions show that he cares. Look how hesitant he was to leave you. I’m not telling you to go out and marry him tomorrow, but take your time to find out where this leads.”

Kenyatta reached over and hugged her mom.

“Thanks, Mom.”

Her mother’s words eased her mind. She would have expected her mom to say she was being irrational. The fact that she understood meant so much.

They sat and talked until Malcolm and her father came back with a pizza. Then they all ate while her parents grilled Malcolm about his family, life, and career plans. She would have been embarrassed any other day but considering her ex-fiancé just assaulted her, she couldn’t blame them.

As her parents were leaving, her father hugged her and said, “We’ll check on you tomorrow, okay? Get some rest. That’s a good man in there.”

She smiled and nodded. “I know.” She waved goodbye and closed the door.

Malcolm was sitting on the couch waiting for her. She twisted her hands, unsure what to say. All day and the previous night, he'd focused on taking care of her. Now that the threat was over and she'd gotten her mother's blessing, Kenyatta could only think about their time together on her desk. *Sex is the last thing that should be on my mind*, she tried to rationalize, but it didn't work. She wanted Malcolm ... now.

She touched her swollen face and eye. She was probably the least attractive woman in the world. She would have to wait until she healed before sleeping with Malcolm again.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs and bit her lip. "I'm going to take a shower." She pointed toward the top of the stairs.

He stood up and turned off the TV. "Good, I'll join you."

Chapter 30

Malcolm's gaze didn't stray from her as she turned on the shower. She fidgeted with the shower curtain, straightened the bottles of body wash and checked the temperature of the water three times. She was stalling on purpose. The sex on her desk was a spontaneous eruption of three years of pent-up passion and frustration. Would this time be just as good?

When she could think of no other preparations for the shower, she turned to ask if he wanted the front or back. The words died in her throat. He had taken off his shirt, and all she could do was admire his muscular form. Before, she'd appreciated the feel of his body without getting a good look at him. She'd only gotten a glimpse of him before he rushed downstairs this morning, but now she could look as long as she wanted. He was magnificent. Her eyes roamed from his chiseled chest and washboard stomach to the rope of muscle that disappeared beneath the waistband of his pants.

He hooked his thumbs in the waistband and pulled. Her eyes flew back up to his. He smiled, and heat flooded her face. She imagined she looked like a sex-starved maniac. *But damn*, she thought, *he looks sexy as hell.*

He dropped his pants, and her gaze devoured his naked body. His erection stood out large and proud. She wanted to lick it and find out if it tasted as good as it looked. His thighs, which she'd always daydreamed about, were sculpted and trim and she remembered their strength as he'd thrust in and out of her. Liquid desire began flowing between her legs.

He grabbed the belt of her bathrobe and pulled her to him. He slowly untied it and pushed her robe back. His eyes slid over her body slowly. With each second he took to study her body, she could sense, feel, and see the desire in him growing.

“You're beautiful,” he said.

“I must look awful.” She touched her face self-consciously.

He kissed the side of her mouth then slowly trailed kisses to her ear. “You're beautiful.”

Malcolm kissed his way back to her mouth to rest his lips on hers. He softly sucked on her lower lip before taking it into his mouth. When she pressed against him for more, he pulled back slightly and nibbled on her lip again. Kenyatta took his head in her hand and pressed herself closer to him. Sensing her need, he put an arm around her waist and deepened the kiss. His erection pressed against her stomach and she reached between them to grasp it in her hand. The skin was soft over the hardness it enclosed. Squeezing him gently, she began to move her hand up and down slowly.

He grabbed her wrist. “Not yet.” When she moaned, he chuckled and removed her robe.

Malcolm picked her up and stepped into the shower. Kenyatta delighted in the feel of the warm water on her back. He turned her so that he took the brunt of the water, and she was against the back of the shower. He slid her body down his and Kenyatta shivered at the feel him against her.

She tried to kiss him again, but he stopped her and reached for her body wash. He poured a generous amount into his hands and rubbed them together to form lather. He slowly massaged the soap into her skin as the scent of the lavender body wash filled the shower. He started with her shoulders and worked his way down her arms and back up. She leaned closer to him, inviting him to massage her breasts, which ached for his touch.

Instead, Malcolm turned her around so that her back was to him. He massaged the back of her shoulders before working his way down to her hips. He put a hand on each hip and pulled her against him.

“I’ve taken hundreds of showers and fantasized about what it would be like to have you with me,” he whispered in her ear. He moved his hands up to cup her breasts, making slow slippery circles over her hard nipples with his palms. “I imagined the feel of your breasts in my hands while your body was pressed against mine. I thought about squeezing your nipples.” He took the tips between his fingers and squeezed. “Do you know how many times they teased me from underneath your

shirts?” He glided his hands over her nipples again. “They drove me crazy. But nothing compares to actually having them in my hands.”

Kenyatta pressed against his erection that lay heavily at the base of her spine and moved slowly back and forth against it. He groaned and pushed against her. Kenyatta tried to take his hardness in her hands again, but he stopped her. He ran his right hand from her breast slowly down the front of her body until he reached the tight curls between her legs. She held her breath as he gently teased the hair covering her sensitive flesh. She pushed forward to urge him on, but he held back. When he cupped her in his hands and gently squeezed, she whimpered and opened her legs wider to give him better access.

Malcolm ran his middle finger in the space where the lips of her sex met before spreading her open. Kenyatta’s hips bucked, and she pushed herself against his hand, no longer caring that she begged for his touch. He cupped her sweetness fully and rubbed back and forth across it, stroking the hardened gem at her core while his other fingers massaged the outer lips. His other hand continued to squeeze her breast and pinch her nipple in time with his caress between her legs. Kenyatta braced her hands against the back of the shower. She tried to fight her oncoming orgasm, but it was useless. When he slipped a finger into her, she exploded around him.

He turned her and swallowed her moans with a passionate kiss. He rotated their position until her body

received the spray from the shower as he continued to kiss and caress her as the water washed away the soap. Kenyatta's legs felt like cooked spaghetti and although she'd come, she wasn't satisfied. She reached down to touch his shaft and knew she wouldn't be happy until it was inside her.

Malcolm continued to kiss her as he lifted her against the shower wall. He entered her with one swift, hard stroke, and she gasped with pleasure. She squeezed her honeyed walls around him, indulging in the sensation of him filling her. He pulled back before sliding slowly inside her wet flesh and repeated the cycle over and over until Kenyatta once again felt the stirrings of another climax.

She couldn't believe Malcolm was going to lead her to multiple orgasms again. That had never happened with anyone else. She'd thought it happened the day before because she had gone so long without sex, but as Malcolm pushed in and out of her, she knew another orgasm was on the way.

She squeezed him as hard as she could, trying to get more of him inside her. Malcolm groaned as she continued to squeeze. She'd never felt so hot, so wet and as full as she did at this moment. Unable to hold back, her climax exploded around him. Malcolm quickly pulled out and spilled himself against her stomach. She was disappointed she couldn't feel his release inside her, but was thankful that he'd thought to consider the consequences this time.

They stood there clinging to each other as the aftershocks of their orgasms ran through their bodies. Kenyatta slowly became aware of the coldness of the shower wall behind her and the uncomfortable position of her legs, yet she didn't want to move. She wanted more of him.

Malcolm released her and she stood on shaky legs. He kissed her again, softly and with less urgency. Kenyatta was surprised to once again feel a stirring in her stomach.

“Let's get out of here,” he said.

They washed quickly and then took turns drying each other. By the time they'd finished rubbing each other down, Malcolm's erection had returned and Kenyatta's thighs were moist with renewed desire.

As he carried her to the bedroom, Kenyatta couldn't help but giggle. Here she was, the person who once claimed passion had no place in a relationship, about to have sex for the second time in an hour. Suddenly, she couldn't imagine her life without it.

“What are you laughing about?” he asked.

She kissed his neck before answering. “I'm just happy to be here with you, that's all.”

“Well,” he laid her on the bed, “be prepared to be even happier by the end of the night.”

“Why is that?” she teased.

“Because,” he opened her legs and kneeled between them, “I haven't had dessert yet.” She bit her lip as

Malcolm softly kissed the inside of her thighs before using two fingers to part the folds of her sweetness. Kenyatta had not had a man go down on her since college. She felt exposed, but was too aroused to tell him to stop. When he kissed her clit, embarrassment disappeared as pleasure consumed her.

Malcolm took his time. He kissed, licked, and sucked on her as if she were the sweetest dessert he'd ever had. When he took her pearl between his lips and sucked gently, Kenyatta cried out and grasped the comforter on the bed. She didn't think it could get any better until he slid a finger inside her and moved it in and out as he sucked. She came and Malcolm continued to kiss her until the waves of pleasure died down.

He kissed his way up her body, stopping at her mouth. Kenyatta gulped in air as she stared into his handsome face. It may be reckless and stupid to love him so easily, but she didn't care. She'd rather enjoy being in love with Malcolm than fight it.

“Is it finally my turn?” she asked.

His brow furled. “Your turn for what?”

She smiled and reached between his legs. He was stiff and ready for her. She ran her hand up and down his length before running her finger along the head. A bead of moisture appeared at the top and she spread it around his ridge. Malcolm sucked in a breath and she felt empowered to know she could affect him so much. She wanted to taste him, so much so that she licked her lips in anticipation.

Before he realized what she was doing, she scooted down and took him in her mouth. His skin was clean and sweet and she loved it. She tentatively sucked on the head and experienced a rush of satisfaction when he let out a low groan. Emboldened, her mouth glided up and down slowly but firmly, enjoying the way he clenched the bed. She cupped the heavy sack beneath and massaged it as she continued to take as much of him as she could in and out of her mouth.

She was really getting into it when he pulled her up and flipped her over. He started to enter her, but stopped. He reached over the side of the bed and pulled a condom from his bag.

He quickly put it on and before she realized it, he was entering her from behind. The unexpected thickness of him filling her swollen flesh surprised her, but her passion soon took over.

He plunged in and out and Kenyatta cried out with each thrust. He reached between her legs to massage her, and she counted her blessings that she was about to come yet again. Malcolm beat her to it. The weight of his body as he climaxed pushed her over the edge. She came with as much intensity as before and they both collapsed onto the bed.

Chapter 31

After a long night of lovemaking, Kenyatta got up the next morning and went to church with Malcolm. She'd wanted the comfort of the ceremony and Malcolm suggested attending his church to avoid running into Brad.

She should have watched church on TV. Although the swelling was down, she'd had to put on a lot of makeup to cover the bruises on her face, making her self-conscious. To top it off, Jessica was there. Apparently, both she and Malcolm were members, and there were a few curious, and some outright evil, looks thrown Kenyatta's way.

Kenyatta held her head high and tried to ignore the attention, but it wasn't easy. She was happy Malcolm's friend Devin was warm and open with her, as were the pastor and his wife after service. Yet, as much as she enjoyed the service herself, she wasn't anxious to return for a while.

"I'm glad that's over," she said when they were back in Malcolm's SUV.

He smiled. "I know. I should have warned you about Jessica attending. People are used to seeing me with her."

"They act as if I'm breaking up the family," she joked, but the humor in her voice was forced.

He reached over and took her hand. "Don't. Jessica and I should have split a long time ago. It'll just take time for everyone to get used to the idea."

"Your friend didn't seem too surprised to see me."

Malcolm rubbed his jaw and gave her a crooked grin. "Devin and my brother always suspected I had feelings for you. They knew it was only a matter of time before I realized it myself."

Kenyatta was flattered and surprised. Warmth spread inside her as she realized yet again she'd been on Malcolm's mind, as he had been on hers, over the past three years. They'd wasted so much time.

They parked in front of her home when Malcolm's cell phone rang. Based on his end of the conversation, she guessed it was his security company calling with bad news.

She got out of the SUV and waited for him. It only took a few minutes for him to finish the conversation. He was running his hand over his head and cursed when he joined her.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Someone is breaking into my house. The motion detector has been triggered and the police are on the

way.”

“Oh, my God!”

“I just hope the alarm scared them off before they took anything of value.”

“You should go now.”

His brow puckered, and he shook his head. “I don’t want to leave you here. Come with me.”

Kenyatta appreciated his concern, but she was tired. They’d barely slept the night before, and all she wanted now was to wash the makeup from her face, put on some comfortable clothes and lay on the couch.

“I’ll be okay. I doubt Brad will show up, but if he calls, I won’t answer. And if he comes by, I won’t answer the door.”

Malcolm wasn’t pacified. “Kenyatta, I don’t trust him. I’d feel better if you were with me.”

She smiled and reached up to touch his face. “I appreciate your concern, but I’ll be fine.” He was about to protest again when she stopped him. “Look, if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll go inside, change clothes, and go to my parent’s house. He won’t bother me over there.”

He thought about that for a second before replying. “Do you promise? I really hate to leave you.”

“Yes, I promise.”

He searched her eyes before taking her mouth in a searing kiss. Kenyatta leaned into him and desire rose hot and fast. Memories of the night before flashed in her

mind, and she clung to him. She felt his desire rise and press into her belly, and she moaned. She wanted him again!

He slowly broke the kiss and rested his forehead on hers. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Call me the second you get to your parents' house."

She nodded and kissed him again. Reluctantly she pulled away, but not before reaching between them to palm his erection.

"Hurry back."

He groaned. "You're going to be the death of me."

She giggled before strolling to her door. Malcolm watched her from his car until she went in. She locked the door and turned around. Her home seemed empty without him in it. In just one day, she'd gotten used to having him around and already she missed him. She sent up a quick prayer that the thieves hadn't had time to take anything from his home and added another prayer that he would get back soon.

She went to the kitchen and got a glass from the cupboard. She filled it with orange juice and drank it down quickly. Frowning at the funny taste, she looked at the date on the carton. The date said it was still good, but it tasted bitter.

She poured the rest of the orange juice in the sink and left the kitchen. After just a few steps, she felt light-headed. She braced her hand on the wall to steady

herself. Taking a few deep breaths, she tried to go upstairs, but the room began to spin.

Kenyatta sank heavily onto the bottom step, trying not to panic. Maybe she was still weak from Brad's attack or tired because she'd spent the better part of the night having sex instead of sleeping. She touched her forehead. It was cool, but clammy with sweat.

"God, please don't let me get sick," she said to herself.

"God had nothing to do with it," a voice came from her side.

Chills ran down her spine as she recognized Brad's voice. She tried to get up, but her limbs felt heavy. His thin fingers gripped her chin and turned her face to him.

"Hello, sweetie." He smiled at her. "We have some unfinished business to attend to."

Kenyatta tried to shake her head, but she became dizzy. She wanted to scream and struggle, but it took too much effort. Tears burned her eyes as she realized Brad had her completely under his control. Malcolm was right — he did not intend to give her up at all.

"I know your rituals. Get up, go to church, come home, drink some juice." He laughed. "You made it very easy for me to drug you, baby. It also wasn't too hard to get rid of your ... boss." He appeared to struggle over what to call Malcolm. "It took relatively little money to hire someone to break into his house. Oh, baby, don't cry. I promise that this will be easy. If you cooperate."

“Why ... Brad?” she struggled to ask. Her tongue felt swollen.

He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “Because I love you, Kenyatta. I’ve loved and wanted you for too long to just give up and let him have you. So today, I’m taking what’s mine.” He reached out and cupped her breast and Kenyatta wished she had the strength to push him away.

“I’m going to spend the day teaching you a lesson. I’m going to enjoy every minute of it, and when it’s done, I’ll make sure you won’t be useful to another man ... ever.”

“He’s ... coming ... back,” she struggled to say.

“I know, but you won’t be here, sweetie.” His voice was sickeningly sweet, as if he were talking to a child.

He lifted her up and carried her to the back door. The room spun wildly as bile burned the back of her throat.

“I parked in back,” he confessed. “Couldn’t let Malcolm know he was leaving you with me. Oh, and nice try with the new lock, but you forgot that I have a key to the back door.” He laughed as he took her to his car.

“Brad ... pl-please.” She tried to struggle, but each movement sapped her strength. She didn’t know how long she could remain conscious. Everything around her was blurry and spinning out of control.

“If you loved me ... don’t.” It took every ounce of strength she had just to say that.

Brad just chuckled and kissed her. “It’s because I love you that I have to.”

Chapter 32

Malcolm arrived at his house shortly after the police. Whoever had broken in was long gone by the time the police got there. They asked Malcolm if he knew anybody who would want to break in, or if he'd noticed any unusual activity lately. He answered no to both questions. His neighborhood was relatively quiet, and his house was the first and only one burglarized since he'd moved there.

The police searched for clues as he scanned his belongings for anything missing. Evidently, the thieves didn't get very far before the motion detector went off. Malcolm doubted they made it to the second floor. As far as he could tell, nothing was missing, and he was more annoyed about the break in than anything. It was probably some young fools looking for easy pickings.

Forty-five minutes later, the police were leaving and the locksmith arrived. Malcolm doubted the thieves would come back, but he still changed the locks, which took another hour. He kept checking his watch and phone, waiting for Kenya to call. He tried not to worry when he didn't hear from her, but he couldn't help it.

Kenyatta had always kept her word, and the fact that she hadn't called bugged him.

When the locksmith finally left, Malcolm called Kenyatta. When she didn't answer, his worry turned to fear. He didn't have her parent's number or know where they lived. He called again and still got no answer. He hurried to his car, anxious to get back to her place.

The twenty minutes it took to get there were the longest in his life. He pulled in the driveway and saw that her car still parked in the same spot. He hoped she'd fallen asleep. He had kept her up the night before, not that he regretted that one bit, but he was bothered she decided to stay here instead of going to her parents.

He knocked on the door and his concern grew when she didn't answer. He pulled out the key he'd kept to her new lock, unlocked her door and entered.

"Kenyatta," he called out. There was no answer, and a sinking feeling filled his stomach as dread crept over him.

He looked in the kitchen and saw a used glass and empty orange juice carton on the counter. He ran into the living room, but she wasn't there. He went to the hall leading to the stairway and saw one of her shoes on the floor. Picking it up, an icy fear ran through his veins as he ran up the stairs.

"Kenyatta!" he called out, but didn't expect to hear an answer. She wasn't in the bedroom, the bathroom, or anywhere else.

“That mutherfucker!” he yelled and punched the wall.

Panic squeezed his heart. What had he done to her? Where had he taken her? He looked around wildly, not knowing what to do. He finally forced himself to calm down. He had to be rational. Panicking would not get Kenyatta back.

He rushed back downstairs and picked up her telephone. He pressed the first speed dial number. He didn't know who it would be, but knew it had to be someone who could give him the number for Kenyatta's parents.

“Hello,” a voice answered.

Malcolm sighed with relief when he recognized her mother's voice.

“Hello, um, this is Malcolm. Is Kenyatta there?” He tried to keep the fear from his voice, but based on the pause, he hadn't done a good job.

“Malcolm, I thought she was with you. Where is she?” Adele asked warily.

“I ... I don't know. I think Brad took her.” As soon as he said it, he wished he hadn't.

“Brad took her?” Her voice rose with each word. “How could you let this happen? Where is my daughter?”

The line was silent and the next voice Malcolm heard was that of Kenyatta's father.

“Malcolm, what's going on?”

Malcolm told him everything. He didn't interrupt as Malcolm spoke, but the tension that grew as he listened was palpable.

"That son of a bitch," Harold said in a harsh whisper. "Call the police. They need to be informed. I'll get Adele to call Carol and Angie, just in case she's with one of them." Even as he said it, his voice revealed he doubted they would know anything.

"Where does Brad live?" Malcolm asked.

"He lives out in the northeast part of the county. Out in the middle of nowhere, not in a subdivision." Harold paused as Adele said something in the background. "Adele has his address written down; she's getting it."

"Good, I'll go over there."

"Wait until the police get there," Harold said.

"No. If he has her, I need to get her back."

"Do you think he's stupid enough to take her back to his house? I'd bet my life he took her somewhere else. He knows we're going to come looking for her. Call the police and wait for us to get there."

"But ..."

"I know you want to find her, but we've got to be smart. Call the police first. We'll get there as soon as we can."

Malcolm hung up, then immediately dialed 911. He explained the situation and said he thought Kenyatta's ex-fiancé kidnapped her. Dispatch kept him on the line

until the police arrived. Kenyatta's parents arrived at the same time. It took a moment for everyone to settle down enough for Malcolm to explain everything again, this time to the two officers. Neither appeared concerned about Kenyatta's disappearance until Malcolm told them about Brad's attack.

"Why didn't you call the police after the attack?" Officer Quinton asked. He was a tall, well-built man who looked like he should be playing for the Carolina Panthers defensive line. His partner, a shorter, red-haired man who looked like he'd seen and heard everything, was taking notes.

Malcolm sighed. "She refused to call the police," he explained. "We all told her she should, but she thought it was a one-time thing. We didn't think he'd ..." Malcolm broke off and turned away. The tightness in his chest grew. Here he was wasting time answering questions when Brad was out there doing God knows what to Kenyatta.

His throat tightened as he thought about everything Brad could be doing to her. After denying his feelings for so long, he couldn't believe life was so unfair to allow them to have a few days before snatching her away. He would kill Brad when he got his hands on him.

"We never suspected Brad would do this to Kenyatta," Adele finished for Malcolm.

Officer Quinton nodded. "I'm sorry to upset you, but we have to ask."

“Are you sure she didn’t go with him?” Officer Alexander asked. “There are no signs of a struggle or break in. They could have made up.”

Malcolm glared at the officer. “I spent the entire night with her. She wasn’t going back to him.”

Officer Alexander wasn’t fazed. “She wouldn’t be the first woman to do that.”

Malcolm took a step toward Officer Alexander and Harold called his name. He wanted to strangle the cop for implying Kenyatta would jump from one man to the other, and felt guilty for thinking the same thing himself in Orlando.

“What’s the suspect’s full name?” Officer Quinton asked.

“Brad Johnson, he’s an attorney with a practice on Senate Street. His father is the fire chief,” Harold answered. He was sitting on the couch with Adele at his side. Malcolm could tell by the way they clung to each other that this was taking a toll on them.

“The fire chief’s son?” Officer Quinton asked. He exchanged a look with Officer Alexander that made the hairs on the back on Malcolm’s neck stand up.

Malcolm didn’t care if Brad’s dad was the fucking president; they were going to get Kenyatta back.

“What’s that look for?” he snapped. “I don’t give a damn who his father is. We’ve got to find Kenyatta.”

Officer Quinton hesitated. “We’re not concerned about his family.” He looked at Kenyatta’s parents before

turning back to Malcolm. “Brad Johnson is also wanted for attempted murder.”

“What?” Adele yelled, fear lacing her voice.

Harold jumped up from the couch, and Malcolm staggered as if someone had punched him in the stomach. The situation had gone from bad to worse.

Malcolm moved closer to Officer Quinton. “What are you talking about?”

“Brad Johnson shot a college student yesterday morning. Apparently, the boy had been seeing a girl Brad was involved with, and Brad confronted them at the boy’s apartment. He shot the boy when he answered the door and took off with the girl. The girl’s father was on the phone with her and called the police to report what he heard. The boy woke up in the hospital early this morning and was able to tell us what happened.”

“It can’t be true.” Adele began to cry, and Harold sat back down to console her.

“I’m afraid it is,” Officer Quinton continued. “If Brad Johnson took your daughter, then I’m afraid she’s in more danger than we thought.”

Malcolm felt sick as he imagined Kenyatta in Brad’s hands. He shouldn’t have left her earlier; he should’ve just taken her with him. They should have known Brad would come back. He’d promised this wasn’t over. Malcolm buried his face in his hands and was surprised to notice they were shaking. He had to find her.

“What do we do next?” he asked.

“We’ve already been to his home, and he’s not there. We’ve also been to his parents’ place, and we’re searching the records to see if he owns property that we don’t know about,” Officer Alexander explained.

Malcolm clenched his fists to keep his hands from shaking. “I can’t just sit here and wait.”

Before the officers could respond, the front door burst open as Carol and Angie stormed in. Angie ran over to embrace Kenyatta’s parents and Carol ran to Malcolm. She had tears in her eyes and looked as if she’d been crying on the way over. She grabbed his arm with both hands.

“Brad has a house. On Lake Murray.” She rushed to get the words out. “Kenyatta mentioned it to me once. Apparently, Brad said something about it in passing, but when she asked about it, he changed the subject. She was surprised he’d never brought it up before. I know that’s where he took her.”

Malcolm grabbed her hand. “Where on Lake Murray?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. She hadn’t ever been there and never mentioned it again. I think it’s on the Newberry or Saluda side of the lake.”

“How do you know that if you never went there?” Officer Quinton asked.

Carol turned to the officer with an exasperated look. “I searched the Lexington and Richland tax records and only found the property his house is on. It bothered

Kenyatta at the time, so I did a little digging. Other things came up, and I forgot to look at the other counties around the lake.”

“Thank God for nosy friends,” Malcolm said, kissing Carol on the cheek.

Carol tried to act nonchalant, but he could tell she was pleased. “Well, we’ll see if you say that after I finish searching your records. I Googled you last night.”

Malcolm was surprised but truly didn’t care. If Kenyatta didn’t have friends like Carol, then they wouldn’t know where to look. Brad’s lake house was their only clue.

“We’ll check this out at the station and see what we can find.” Officer Quinton nodded and looked to Officer Alexander who’d written down what Carol said. “I think we’re done here.”

Malcolm walked over to the officer. “I’m going with you.”

Officer Quinton sighed. “There’s no need to go with us. We’ll call you as soon as we find anything out.”

Malcolm punched his right palm with his left fist. “That’s not good enough.”

Before Officer Quinton could respond, Angie came over and put her hand on Malcolm’s arm. “Malcolm, I know you’re upset, but let the police do their job.”

He turned to argue, but the pleading in her eyes made him stop. He looked at Carol, and she nodded.

“We’ll let you know as soon as we hear something,” Officer Quinton said before Malcolm could insist again.

As soon as the officers left, Carol pulled out her iPhone.

Angie tugged on Malcolm’s arm. “Where is Kenyatta’s laptop?”

“It’s in the case beside the couch,” Malcolm replied. “Why?”

“Because, genius, while the police are checking their leads, we can search the property records for Saluda County and Newberry County. We’ll find it and get there long before they do,” Carol answered. She didn’t even look up from her iPhone.

“Where are you checking, Carol?” Angie asked as she pulled out Kenyatta’s laptop.

“Saluda, you check Newberry. We’ll find his property in less than thirty minutes.”

Again the only thing Malcolm could think was, “Thank God for nosy friends!”

Chapter 33

Kenyatta felt a sharp pain on the side of her face. She wanted to slip back to the oblivion of sleep, but the pain came again. She tried to turn away, but someone grabbed her jaw and forced it back around. She slowly opened her eyes and had to blink a few times before her vision cleared enough for her to see Brad standing over her.

He sneered at her. “Wake up. I don’t have all day to wait on you to come around.”

Suddenly she remembered what happened after Malcolm left. She tried to sit up, but the room spun, and she fell back down onto what she realized was a sofa. She looked around the room but didn’t recognize anything. It looked like the inside of a cabin or lodge. Dark wood paneling covered the walls and paintings of the outdoors and mounted deer heads were the only decoration.

“That’s my girl. You’re finally waking up.” Brad reached out to touch the side of her face. “I was beginning to think I’d given you too much.”

“Where am I?” Her mouth was dry, and her voice scratchy.

“You’re at my lake house. Don’t you remember I promised to bring you here one day?”

He sat beside her on the couch. He had on a bathrobe, and from its opening, she could see he didn’t have anything on underneath. Her heart raced, and her stomach clenched as she remembered what he’d told her before taking her from her house. Something about getting what he’d waited for and preventing her from being good for any other man. *Oh, God*, she thought. *He’s going to finish what he started the other night!*

She tried to sit up again, and this time Brad helped her. His hands made her skin crawl. She tried to get out of his grasp, but he held on tighter.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked. “We have a lot of lost time to make up for.”

“Brad, why are you doing this? I know I hurt you, and I’m sorry. But I don’t understand? I thought you — ”

“You thought I was a doormat,” he stated.

She shook her head. “No, I never thought of you that way.”

“Oh really, then why did you always keep me at arm’s length? You wanted to control me, and I wanted you so badly, I let you do it.”

“You should have let me know how you felt.” she reasoned.

He laughed. “Tell you how I felt? Why didn’t you tell me you wanted to fuck your boss?”

She flinched and turned away. “It wasn’t like that. I didn’t plan for this to happen.”

“So you’re saying it was a mistake? That you’re going to forget him and stay with me?” He sounded hopeful.

“Don’t do this. You know it wasn’t working,” she replied.

He grabbed her face. “The only reason it wasn’t working is because you were too busy to make it work. It was always your job, never me. I let you hold on to that foolish dream for longer than I should have. I should have beaten it out of you long before the other night.”

“I was never going to give up my career. And if you would have hit me, we would have been finished long before this.”

He smirked and pushed her back on the sofa. “You wouldn’t have left me then, and you’re not going to leave me now.”

He got up and walked out of the room. His sudden exit surprised her, but only for a moment. The door was across the room, and she’d have to pass the room Brad had just entered. There was a window near her, so she decided to make a break for that.

She stood up only to have the room sway before her eyes, and she fell back on the sofa. She looked back at the door Brad had gone into and took a few deep breaths. She didn’t know where he went or how long he would be gone, so she had to get out of there quickly.

She stood up again, more slowly this time. The room didn't sway and she took a deep breath before looking over her shoulder. Brad was still in the other room. She turned toward the window and sprinted for it. She fought the nausea and dizziness, determined to make it out, but had only gone a few steps when she heard Brad's laughter behind her.

"Where do you think you're going? I own ten acres out here. You'll get lost before you make it a hundred yards."

Kenyatta froze and turned slowly. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw the young woman from the restaurant standing beside Brad. The girl was badly beaten and limped as Brad walked forward with his arm around her.

"I think it's time you met Robin," Brad said smiling. "It's only fair you see who's been taking all of the beatings that were meant for you."

Kenyatta's stomach rolled with disgust. She looked at the girl and didn't know what to say. Surely it wasn't true, but when Robin looked at Kenyatta, the anger in her eyes said otherwise.

She began to shake her head. "No ... no. How could you do this? You're sick." Kenyatta began to back away from both of them.

Brad pushed Robin aside and grabbed Kenyatta forcefully by the arms. "You're damn right I'm sick. Sick and tired of women like you taking advantage of me. But not anymore. Before the end of the night, you'll know

just how sick I am. Robin's taken your place for too long. Tonight I'm going to get what I've waited for. I won't lose you."

She tried to fight off his grip, but he shook her roughly. The room spun again, and she fell forward onto his chest. Brad cupped the side of her face and whispered into her ear, "Don't feel bad for her. Robin's no better than you. She also tried to leave me for some fool. She's learned her lesson, and before the night's over, so will you."

Brad dragged Kenyatta over to Robin. He held Kenyatta at his side and reached out to grab Robin's hand. "You see, tonight I'm going to be selfish and get everything I want. Robin will record us consummating our relationship." He grinned at Kenyatta. "She's always been jealous of you, so she should enjoy this. She'll record every hit, punch, scream, and fuck that I get out of you tonight. That way I can enjoy it long after you're gone."

Kenyatta struggled, but he shook her again. "Keep trying to fight, and it'll be a lot worse than what you already deserve."

He let go of Robin's hand to grab her breast. Robin flinched and closed her eyes, but Brad pinched her roughly. "Don't look away from me." She turned back, and Brad smiled. "I think I deserve to have both of you pleasure me at once. It'll be good for you both." He laughed sickly. "And we'll end the night ... well, let's just

say I'll leave here a happy man and will come back to visit you both in your final resting place."

Kenyatta swallowed back her nausea. She would not let him do this without a fight. She looked at Robin, but the girl looked like her spirit had been broken. Silent tears fell from her face, and her eyes were expressionless, the anger from before nowhere to be seen. Kenyatta's heart went out to her. There was no telling what Brad had put her through but damned if she'd let him do the same to her.

She moved quickly, and with all of her strength, she elbowed Brad in the stomach. He bent over, and she pushed him to the floor. The blow stunned both him and Robin, and she knew she only had seconds to escape. Running for the door, the room spun, but she could not stop. Not until she got out of this house and found help.

Kenyatta was almost at the door when she heard a gunshot and a blinding pain tore through her upper back. She screamed and fell to the floor. Reaching behind her, she touched her shoulder. When she drew her hand back, there was blood on it. She rolled over and saw Brad standing up with a gun in his hand.

He threw the gun to the floor and stalked over to her. She tried to crawl away, but he grabbed her by the hair and slapped her.

"Don't you *ever* try to run from me again! I'll kill you the next time. Do you understand me? I did everything for you! I would have given you anything and you throw it away, for what? He doesn't love you. I do! Has he told

you he wanted to be with you? Is he going to marry you? No! He only wants to fuck you, and you're such a slut that you let him. I'm saving you a lot of heartache, and you should be grateful!" He shook her with each question and pushed her back on the floor.

The pain in Kenyatta's back exploded. She was dizzy and could feel blood seeping out of the wound. *I'm going to die.* Tears burned her eyes, but she blinked them away. She wouldn't let him see her cry. She would at least die with some dignity.

"Where is your lover boy anyway?" Brad asked. He jerked off his robe, and Kenyatta almost threw up at the site of his purple, swollen erection. He grabbed himself and began to rub it as he watched her helpless on the floor. "I almost wish he was here to see this."

Kenyatta didn't know where Malcolm was. He didn't know where Brad lived or that Brad had a lake house. None of her friends knew, either. They may have guessed Brad had her, but they wouldn't know where to find her.

Suddenly, all Kenyatta could think about was how much time she'd wasted because of her fear of being hurt. She'd known from the moment she'd met Malcolm that she wanted him. If she hadn't been so afraid to trust her heart, she would have seen they would be great together. She hadn't even had the chance to tell him she loved him.

She looked up at Brad and thought she'd choke on her disgust. She wouldn't spend her last hours filled with revulsion and fear. She filled her mind and heart with the

love she felt for everyone else in her life. Her mom, her dad, Carol and Angie, and of course, Malcolm. She would hold on to his memory and their brief time together, in these last hours of her life.

“You want to know where Malcolm is?” she answered Brad. “He’s somewhere you’ll never be. In my heart.”

Brad’s fist balled up, and he curled his lip back in disgust. “I’ll rip your heart out before the night’s over.”

Brad jerked her to her feet and kissed her harshly. When she pulled away, he grabbed her hand and put it on his erection.

“He’s in your damn heart right now, but I’ll be inside of you for the rest of the night. When I’m done, you won’t even remember his name.”

Kenyatta grabbed and pulled as hard as she could. He cried out in pain and pried her fierce grip from his cock. She crumpled to the floor without his support holding her up. “You’re just going to make this harder on yourself, aren’t you?”

She glared at him. “Hell yes.”

His face turned purple with rage. He grabbed the front of her shirt and balled up his fist to hit her. Kenyatta closed her eyes and braced herself for the blow she knew was coming. She wouldn’t let him make her cry. No matter what, he wouldn’t break her spirit.

A gunshot reverberated through the room.

Something warm and sticky showered over her before a heavy weight crushed her to the floor. Stunned, she opened her eyes to see Brad's limp form slumped over her. The side of his head was missing, blown off by a gunshot wound. The fluid covering her was his blood. She looked up and saw Robin standing over them. She looked shaken and trembled as she held the gun in both hands.

Robin turned her pained-filled eyes to Kenyatta and continued to hold the gun. "He ... he hurt me so much. Because of you. I thought ... I thought he would love me if you went away." She began to cry.

A new panic seized Kenyatta as she stared down the barrel of the gun in Robin's hand. "Robin, I had no idea," Kenyatta whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"It doesn't matter. He didn't love either of us. He would have killed us both." She dropped the gun and fell to the floor. Huge sobs racked her body. Kenyatta struggled to move Brad's body so that she could reach Robin, but she didn't have the strength.

The front door burst open, and Malcolm ran into the room. He cried out when he saw Kenyatta on the floor under Brad's limp body, but within an instant, he was at her side. He shoved Brad's body off her and pulled her into his arms as Kenyatta finally released the tears she'd been holding.

"I thought I was going to lose you," he whispered.

Kenyatta cried and clung to him. "You found me," she said through the tears.

“God, Kenyatta ... I love you.”

She began to sob. “I love you, too.”

“Kenyatta!”

Kenyatta looked over Malcolm’s shoulder to see her mother and father followed by Carol and Angie. They all came for her, the people she loved most in the world. She tried to reach out to them, but the room began to grow dark. She felt fuzzy again, as if she were floating on a cloud.

“I’m so tired. Malcolm. I can sleep now that you’re here.” She reached up to touch his face. “I ... love ... you,” she whispered before she fell into darkness.

Chapter 34

“Kenyatta, do you mind if I leave a few minutes early today? I promised my dad we’d go out for dinner tonight.”

Kenyatta turned from her desk in her new office at Jordan and Burke. In the three months since the cabin incident, things in her life had returned to a normal routine relatively quickly. It had taken her a few days in the hospital to recover from the gunshot wound to her upper back, but luckily, it missed anything critical. Carol and Angie had been by her side almost constantly during her recovery. She thought about how truly blessed she was to have such close friends.

Everyone was dumbstruck to learn the depth of Brad’s problems. His friends, Michael and Joi, had both been shocked to learn of Brad’s abuse of her and Robin. They’d proven to be good friends and supported her, but Kenyatta was hesitant to let them help too much since they’d been such a big part of her life with Brad. She wanted to forget that life.

It had taken longer for Brad’s parents to speak to her. At first, she assumed they blamed her in some way

for their son's death, but when they'd finally contacted her a week ago, it was to apologize. They'd told her how Brad had become very possessive with the women he dated since losing his high school sweetheart. Kenyatta discovered Brad had beaten her when she tried to leave him to go to another college, but his parents assured her they hadn't heard of him hitting anyone since then. They'd assumed it was a one-time thing. They apologized for not telling her, but Kenyatta knew that as parents they would have kept Brad's secret forever. It was scary to know they would have let her marry him without saying anything. Although they told her to let them know if she needed anything, Kenyatta didn't want any reminders of Brad. She had no desire to speak with his parents again.

She looked up at her new receptionist and nodded. "Sure, Robin. I plan to get out of here soon myself."

Robin smiled. "Hot date?"

Kenyatta laughed. "Yeah, actually."

The police didn't charge Robin with homicide, since she'd killed Brad in self-defense. Kenyatta knew it would take a long time for Robin to heal from the wounds that Brad had inflicted. She wanted to help Robin as soon as she'd recovered. When she and Jeremy realized they needed a front desk receptionist, she'd suggested hiring Robin, and Jeremy readily agreed. It wasn't much, but Kenyatta felt it was the least she could do for the girl who'd put up with so much on her behalf. Their past with

Brad strained their relationship, but they were beginning to grow comfortable with each other.

“Do you need me to do anything before I leave?” Robin asked.

“No, everything here is good. This week’s been crazy, and I’m glad it’s finally over.”

Robin nodded in agreement. “Well then, I’m going to head out. Have a good weekend.”

“You, too.”

Robin turned to go then hesitated. “And, thanks. You know, for the job and all.” She gave Kenyatta another smile and left.

Kenyatta smiled before turning back to her computer to wrap up the final proposal for a potential new client. She and Jeremy had been pleasantly surprised to learn that due to Jordan and Burke’s status throughout the U.S., and their reputation as successful project managers, they’d been able to interview with several potential new clients in their first week. Combined with the clients the company already had in the Southeast, they were already busy.

She was finishing up when the phone rang. “Kenyatta Copeland, may I help you?”

“You can most definitely help me,” a sexy voice answered.

Kenyatta smiled and lowered her voice. “And how can I help you, sir?”

“Hmm, how about you turn off that computer, leave the office, and come to your man who’s been waiting to kiss you all day.”

“Is that all you’ve been waiting to do?”

“No, there’s much more, but I’d rather show you than tell you,” Malcolm replied.

“I’m turning off the computer and leaving the office now.”

“Good. I’ll see you soon. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” It still surprised her how easy it was to say that to him. She’d spent so much time thinking she wouldn’t have love and passion in a relationship that it was hard to believe she’d actually found it with Malcolm.

As Kenyatta prepared to leave, Jeremy was still working and she stopped to speak with him briefly. He teased her about leaving early because he knew she was in a hurry to see Malcolm but she didn’t care. If there was one thing she had learned from her experience, it was that life is too short to spend every night of the week working late.

Minutes later, Kenyatta pulled into Malcolm’s driveway. She got out and let herself in the front door. After she’d gotten out of the hospital, she’d been nervous sleeping in her townhouse alone so Malcolm gave her a key to his home. She knew Brad was dead, but every noise at night still caused her to wake up suddenly with her heart racing. Malcolm assured her it was fine to come

over whenever she wanted. She'd eventually put her townhouse up for sale. Malcolm suggested she just move in, but she wasn't ready for that.

She walked into the family room, as Malcolm was putting take-out on the coffee table. She'd quickly learned that Malcolm couldn't cook anything other than grits and eggs. He lived off take-out and whatever he could microwave, but she didn't mind. Brad only cooked as a way to say he was sorry for something. It wasn't related, but it was a comfort to know Malcolm wouldn't do the same.

"Hey, baby." She walked over to him and sat on the couch. "What did you order?"

"I stopped by the Hibachi place and got the steak and shrimp."

"Mmmm, sounds good. I didn't realize how hungry I was until I smelled the food."

"Well, I'm glad I made a good choice." He leaned over and kissed her before turning back to the food.

"How was work?" he asked.

"Ugh, long!" Kenyatta filled him in on the proposal she was putting together. He listened and offered suggestions. She'd been nervous that because they worked for competing firms it would be hard for them to discuss work, but to her surprise, it wasn't difficult at all. So far, they weren't competing for the same clients and had already identified areas where H2O could subcontract with Jordan and Burke with some of their

larger contracts. H2O still needed the expertise she and Jeremy had and collaborating would serve both companies well in the future.

They talked about work as they ate, then she helped him clean up the mess before they settled on the couch to watch television. Kenyatta relaxed into Malcolm's embrace and knew she should go home soon, but was enjoying the feel of Malcolm's chest underneath her head. She was dozing off when he spoke.

"I want to marry you, Kenyatta."

She froze and sat up slowly. That was the last thing she expected to hear from him. She wasn't even sure if she was ready to take that step after the fiasco with Brad.

"Hear me out. I'm not talking about marrying you today, tomorrow, or even next year. I know you need time and I understand that. I just want you to know that I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure you have whatever you need."

She spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully. "Malcolm, I love you, too. So much that it's scary, but, I don't know how long it'll take for me to fully believe it."

"I hear you, but I need to understand why you feel this way. I know Brad plays into it, but you didn't feel for him a quarter of what you feel for me."

She sighed. "That's why this is hard for me. The last time I was this crazy about a guy, he hurt me. You know about my experience in college, and well, it took years for

me to trust another guy. When I did, I found out he was sleeping with my next-door neighbor. I've only had men want me for one thing. Brad was the first guy willing to wait, and he turned out to be psychotic. I don't know if I can trust myself to make the right relationship decisions."

"Saying I'm not like Brad, or those other guys, isn't going to help you trust me. I know that, but I need you to understand that I have no intention of hurting you. What do you need me to do to prove it to you?"

Kenyatta smiled. "I know you're not Brad or Chad or Robert. You are nothing like any of them. I thought Brad was safe. It's ironic, considering how crazy he turned out to be, I thought he really wanted me, not just my body."

He considered her words before answering. "I'm not going to lie, Kenyatta. I feel a passion for you that I've never felt with another woman." When she turned away he put a finger under her chin and brought her face back around. "I've wanted you from the first moment I laid eyes on you. You're beautiful. Your eyes, your skin, your body, but it's not just that. Your mind and spirit are beautiful. I love everything about you. I know your first experiences were bad, and that Brad deceived you, but you can't expect a relationship that has no passion or desire to be fulfilling."

She gave him a lopsided grin. "My mind knows that, but my heart doesn't want to listen."

"That's why I'm willing to wait as long as it takes." He reached over to put his arms around her waist and

pull her close. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ve wanted you for three years and now that I have you, I can’t imagine life without you.”

She rested her forehead on his shoulder. “I can’t imagine my life without you, but what if it burns out? What if you lose this passion for me?”

He took her hand and placed it between his legs. Kenyatta’s eyes grew large when she felt the massiveness of his erection.

“I’m not worried about my passion for you burning out. You drive me crazy just by breathing.”

She squeezed his hardness. “But how do you know it’s not just *this* talking?”

“I’m not going to tell you that I want to be celibate. We’ve gone there and there’s no going back.”

“Well, I certainly agree with that,” she said with a smile.

“I’m glad to hear it. Even though you make me hard constantly throughout the day, if for some reason I couldn’t enjoy that part of our relationship, I’d still want you in my life. I enjoy *us*, the way we are around each other, the way it feels. I don’t know how to explain it, so I’ll guess I’ll just have to show you every day how much I love you, until you understand I don’t just want you for sex. I want you for life.”

Kenyatta considered his words and felt happier than she had in years. Brad had made her think she’d found someone who wanted her for herself, but feeling the way

she did with Malcolm let her know she'd mistaken complacency for happiness. The love shining in Malcolm's eyes was something she had never seen in anyone else's. Like her mom had said, it felt right in her heart, not just her body, and that is what mattered.

“Give me a year — or two — before we talk about marriage.”

He nodded. “Okay, but please know that I probably won't be able to stop myself from asking you periodically.”

She smiled. “I don't have a problem with that. Or with you showing me how much you love me.”

He grinned. “I'll be happy to demonstrate that right now.” He took off her clothes and showed her just how much he loved her for the rest of the night.

About the Author

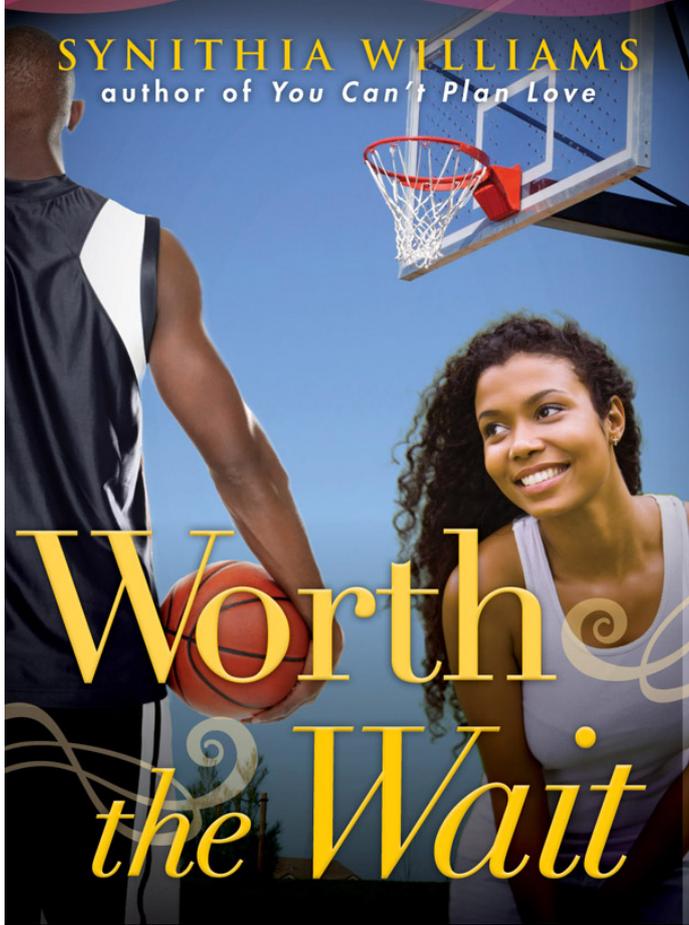
Synithia Williams has loved romance novels since reading her first one at the age of thirteen. It was only natural that she would begin penning her own romances soon after. It wasn't until 2010 that she began to actively pursue her publishing dreams. *You Can't Plan Love* is her first novel. When she isn't writing, this Green Queen, as dubbed by South Carolina's State Newspaper, works to improve air and water quality, while balancing the needs of her husband and two sons. You can keep up with Synithia by visiting her website, www.synithiawilliams.com, where she blogs about writing, life and relationships, on Facebook (www.facebook.com/synithiarwilliams) or on Twitter [@synithiaw](https://twitter.com/synithiaw).

CRIMSON  ROMANCE

CONTEMPORARY

SYNITHIA WILLIAMS

author of *You Can't Plan Love*



Worth
the Wait

Worth the Wait

Synithia Williams



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CHAPTER 1

“Look, Tasha. It’s been fun going out with you, but unless we have sex tonight this needs to end right now.”

Tasha Smith’s jaw dropped. She stepped back from her date, clenching her keys in her hand. She was at the end of what was previously a nice dinner and movie date with Charles Worthington, a software developer her sister had introduced to her weeks before. It’d been so nice that she had planned to invite him in for coffee, and only coffee, but apparently he wanted more.

She raised an eyebrow as her eyes narrowed in on him. “Excuse me?”

He tugged at the corner of his shirt and shifted slightly, his caramel skin and hazel eyes quickly losing their appeal. He stopped fidgeting and stood straighter, his stance becoming defensive, and she glared back.

“Look, it’s commendable that you’re a virgin, but I’m a man with needs. If you can’t satisfy those needs, then it’s best we move on.”

She looked away from Charles’s face to the silent street before her home. There were a few lights on in the other single family houses. Ten minutes earlier the cool

night air and faint scent from the roses along her porch would have been romantic. But now they set the scene for another disappointing date. She'd hoped — in vain — that Charles would be different.

Her internal warning bells had gone off about Charles when he'd hinted around about spending the night after a heated kiss on their third date and then didn't bother to hide his disappointment when she informed him of her virginal status. Of course he'd gone on to say it wasn't a big deal, and previous experience should have reminded her that she'd heard it all before. His good job, good looks, and winning personality had muffled those bells. But once again, dating a woman who was saving herself for marriage had put too much commitment pressure on a member of the male species. She knew only one way to deal with Charles.

She relaxed her stance and smiled at him. "You're right. You do have needs and I shouldn't have ignored them."

His face brightened. "I'm glad you said that. I'm willing to wait a little bit longer. I mean, you are fine as hell." His gaze swept over her body. "If you want to hook a brother up with a blow job, that's cool."

She fought the urge to roll her eyes and leaned closer. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

He took a step closer. "Hell yeah."

She reached out and put her hands on his shoulders. "Then you know what you can do? You can go suck your own damn dick," she snapped as she shoved him to the

ground ass first. “When I do give it up you’ll be the last person to get it.”

She turned and stormed into her house.

Once inside, she wanted to scream. The routine was beyond annoying. Every guy she dated was either overly fascinated to find a grown woman who was still a virgin, or ran away as if she carried the plague.

She was tired of the novelty of it. It had been easier to save herself when she was younger with hopes of meeting prince charming. But at twenty-nine, she didn’t feel the same satisfaction from being different from the girls in high school and college who’d slept with any guy who looked their way. As her thirtieth birthday approached, with no marriage prospects in sight, being a virgin wasn’t much fun, it was a burden.

She picked up her phone and called the person who was partly responsible for this latest disappointment: her sister. Angie was happily married with two little girls and made it her life’s mission to ensure everyone was as happy as she. She grabbed a discarded hair band from her coffee table and swept her shoulder-length natural curls into a ponytail while waiting. At least she hadn’t wasted time flat ironing her hair for this disappointment.

Angie picked up the phone on the third ring.
“Hello?”

Her sister’s hoarse voice gave Tasha only a passing second of guilt for waking her. Angie deserved to know she had set her sister up with an idiot.

“Never hook me up again, Angie,” she said, kicking off her heeled sandals and rubbing her feet.

“Tasha? What are you talking about?” Angie’s voice became more alert.

“I just pushed Charles off my front porch.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“According to him, if we’re not having sex we don’t need to see each other.”

“I don’t believe it.”

Tasha fell back onto her sofa and sighed. “It’s true. I’m so sick of this. It’s the same thing with every guy I date.”

“It’s not every guy. You just have to find the right one.”

Tasha leaned her head back on the couch and stared at her ceiling. “When am I going to find the right one, Angie? Men our age aren’t looking for a virgin wife anymore.”

“You’re being silly. Men appreciate virgins. You just haven’t found the one who appreciates you waiting on him.”

Tasha rolled her eyes. Her sister was the last person who would understand. They’d both taken to heart the teachings of their father, a Baptist minister, and abstained from sex. But Angie found her husband in college and married him before the ink was dry on her

degree. She'd never come close to going through the hell of post-college dating.

“Angie, you're living in a fairy tale. Guys aren't trying to wait around. The minute I tell them I'm saving myself for marriage, they run off as if I'd said I was a homicidal maniac.”

She heard Angie chuckle. “You're a fool.”

“No, I'm not, I'm serious. I'm tired of the whole thing.”

“Dating?”

“No, being a virgin. I just want to get rid of it. Maybe then I can move forward with a guy without him feeling as if dating me means I expect us to get married.”

“You can't be serious. Losing your virginity is a sacred, beautiful — ”

“Can it, Angie, Mom and Dad aren't on the phone. Maybe it was beautiful and sacred in nineteen sixty, but today it's a liability. I need to get rid of it.”

“You talk about it as if it were an old purse.”

Tasha frowned. “I feel as if it is an old purse. One that's full of baggage and weighing me down.”

“You're so dramatic.” Tasha could imagine her sister rolling her eyes.

“Well, dramatic or not, I want to lose it before my birthday.”

“Tasha, your birthday is next weekend. You've broken up with Charles, for a good reason, but now

you're single. How are you going to lose your virginity?"

"I can find someone to take it."

Angie laughed. "Are you crazy? You can't just get some random guy to sleep with you. Okay, let me rephrase that. You don't *need* to find some random guy to sleep with you."

Tasha laughed. "It won't be random. I'll find someone I know."

When Angie spoke again all humor was out of her voice. "Tasha, I'm serious. Don't even consider doing that. It's stupid and you're upset about Charles. You want your first time to be special. It should be with the man you marry."

Tasha thought about her last few dates. All were smart, successful, and generally nice guys — Charles excluded. But they hadn't been ready for the commitment that came with dating a woman who was saving herself for marriage.

"Angie, I know you're trying to help, but I think I'm serious. I can't have this hanging over me anymore. It's got to go."

There was a pause before Angie continued. "Look, it's getting late and you're upset. Will you promise not to do anything rash and come see me tomorrow? We can talk about it then." The rumbling of her brother-in-law's voice echoed in the background. It was time to end the call before he chimed in.

“I can’t come by tomorrow. The center is having its Senior Olympics. I have to be there all day.”

As the program coordinator for the Central Midlands Recreation Commission she’d be spending the day making sure the annual sporting event went off without a hitch.

“Can you come by afterwards?”

“I’ll see how I feel. It’ll be a long day. Look, Angie, I’m sorry for waking you guys up. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay, but I’m serious. Don’t do anything you’ll regret later. Too many of our friends regret their first time. Don’t make any quick decisions.”

“I hear you, Angie. Bye,” she said in a rush.

She tossed the phone on the couch beside her. She understood Angie’s concerns. They both had witnessed friends sleep with idiots in high school and college, mainly because they fancied themselves in love, or they thought the guy they slept with was interested in a long-term relationship. But if she took matters into her own hands and picked a guy with no foolish expectations, she wouldn’t fall into the same trap. She only wanted someone who would rid her of the nuisance, and that only required one sexual encounter.

If she did this, it would have to be someone who was good in bed. She didn’t want her first time to be with someone who didn’t know how to make it enjoyable for her — at least to some extent. It would also have to be someone she had no intention of falling in love with

because emotions had no place in the situation. It would just be a simple transaction. She frowned. That made it sound horrible. It would just be casual, one-time-only sex. That's all.

Feeling better with that clarification, she returned to her list of characteristics. He would have to be discreet. She didn't want everyone to know she was looking for someone to take her virginity. She wasn't ashamed of being a virgin, but she didn't want to flaunt it either. He would also have to understand this was a one-time deal. She wasn't trying to become some guy's booty call. A guy who expected a steady series of hook ups was out of the question.

Tasha sighed and mentally went through the list of men she knew. Where would she find a discreet, non-committal guy who was good in bed and she respected enough to give her virginity to? Who was someone with whom she could never, *ever* fall in love?

She sat up suddenly. "Yes. He would be perfect!"

CHAPTER 2

Jared Patterson stepped out of his shower with a smile. He was usually antsy when he missed a morning workout, but today's miss was for a good reason. He still couldn't believe he'd let Tasha talk him in to serving as a celebrity judge for the Central Midlands Recreation Commission's Senior Olympics. It would be just another day of signing autographs and dishing out fitness advice. He'd thought moving from Los Angeles to Columbia, South Carolina three years ago would give him a reprieve from the attention. Instead, people were just as anxious to work out with the guy from the infomercial who'd helped so many stars lose weight.

Not that he minded the attention. He thought about the other reason he was missing his workout — the woman lying in his bed at that very moment — and his smiled widened. His recognition kept new chicks in his bed. He grabbed a towel from the chrome rack in his bathroom and dried off. After wiping the condensation from the mirror, he grabbed his toothbrush and stepped back to check out his profile, flexing his biceps and chest. He nodded with satisfaction.

Leaning in toward the mirror, his smile faded when he saw the dark purple hickey on his neck. “What the hell?”

He leaned in closer and swore under his breath. *That damn Monica!* It wasn't a secret he slept around, but he also didn't flaunt it. That hickey meant she would be crossed off his list of future hook ups. He didn't date women who tried to mark their territory.

He brushed his teeth quickly and walked into his bedroom where a shapely brown ass awaited him, seemingly floating in mid-air. His raised bed was the focus of the room, and the sight of Monica, head down over the side of the bed, enticed him instantly. Maybe she could go on the reserve list.

He walked over to the bed and frowned. She was rummaging through his nightstand. “Are you looking for something?”

Monica froze before sliding back slowly. He had a generous view of the goodies between her legs before she turned to face him. She held up a condom. “Let's get one more in before you leave.”

Jared walked to the other side of the bed and pushed the nightstand drawer closed. He mentally scratched her from his reserve list. Going through his things was an automatic dismissal.

Slipping the condom from her fingers, Jared said, “I don't think so. It was fun, Monica, but I've got to go. The housekeeping staff will be here in twenty minutes. Make

sure you're gone before they arrive. I will ask them if you were here."

Monica pouted prettily. "You're not kicking me out. I thought I'd stay around until you get back." She flipped her legs toward him and spread her knees. "It was fun."

Jared ignored her. He didn't have time for women who didn't know their boundaries. He stepped away and swore as a sharp pain pierced his foot. "What the hell?" He lifted his foot and pulled out the small safety pin stuck in his heel. Snatching it out, he glared at Monica.

She blanched, guilt flashing on her face before she hid it behind a shrug and small smile. "Sorry, it must've come off my dress."

Something about the way she smiled nagged at him, but instead of arguing with her he threw the pin on the nightstand and turned away. "Just be gone, Monica."

He ignored her angry expression as he went into his closet and slipped on a Recreation Commission t-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts before sliding his feet into a pair of sneakers. When he came out of the bedroom Monica was still sprawled across his bed.

"You can't really want me to leave?" she said.

Jared shook his head. He picked her clothes off the floor and tossed them to her. "Just get out." He walked out of his bedroom without a second thought. He wasn't concerned about her staying too long. Housekeeping would arrive in fifteen minutes instead of the twenty he told her.

She would be his last quick pick up. The thrill of a new woman was easily washed away when she didn't understand the rules of a one-night stand. To make it worse, she had his phone number — she'd insisted on having it in case she got lost when following him home the night before. A dumb excuse, but that's what happens when he listened to the head between his legs instead of the one on his shoulders.

He called the housekeeping service as he entered his garage and got into his silver convertible BMW 650 CI. "This is Jared Patterson. If there's a woman in my house when your crew arrives, call the police."

The woman on the other end chuckled. "Yes, Mr. Patterson. We understand."

Jared ended the call and sped out of his garage and down his curving driveway. Twenty-five minutes later he swung his car into the side lot of the Central Midlands Rec Commission. The building used to be a school, but was converted into the offices for the Commission. It worked well, with classrooms used for adult and child programs, a gymnasium, and an outdoor running track where the Senior Olympics were taking place.

He glanced at the clock on his dash. He was a few minutes early, which meant he'd have time to figure out where he was supposed to be. He checked his reflection in the visor mirror, scowled at the visible hickey, and got out of the car.

He smiled and nodded at the group of people who'd stopped when they recognized his car before

approaching a young man directing traffic in the parking area. He asked the guy where the judges were supposed to register and was directed to the stage set up on the old playground.

People repeatedly stopped him along the way. He appreciated that people who purchased his fitness DVDs and followed his nutrition regimen saw results. Sometimes the best feedback he received came from impromptu testimonials when he was out and about. He answered questions and signed a few autographs, taking extra time to appreciate the ladies who happily flaunted new and improved figures.

Breaking away from the crowd he strode to the stage. The area was bustling with Rec Commission staff, volunteers, and seniors arriving for the games. He stopped mid-step to watch Tasha Smith tottering on a stepladder trying to hang a banner along the back of the stage, and changed direction to help her.

Back when he was starting his personal training career, he'd worked part-time at the Rec Commission while Tasha was in charge of afterschool programs. She'd never ratted him out to the administration when he sold his homemade protein bars to clients and he'd always appreciated that. Years later, after he'd returned to South Carolina, it was a shock to learn she had become the deputy director — not because she didn't work hard, but because he'd assumed she would have already been married with dozens of babies. She had never made it a secret that she wanted a family and word on the street was she was saving herself for marriage; it was precisely

how she had wound up in his “run far, far away from this chick” category in the first place.

He still couldn't understand why some fool hadn't married her yet. She wasn't his type — not enough height or breasts in his opinion — but she wasn't hard on the eyes. The Rec Commission polo shirts and khaki shorts she always wore didn't hide her nicely shaped figure. Her hair wasn't relaxed; instead, she pulled the curly, light brown tresses into a ponytail at the base of her neck. If she wore something other than a ponytail and showed off her figure, someone at her dad's church was bound to take notice.

He sprinted up the few stairs onto the stage and sauntered over. Her back was to him and he smiled when she cursed after one side of the banner fell. *Who'd have thought Tasha had a potty mouth?* She stood on her tiptoes and the edges of her khaki shorts rose up to reveal a smooth expanse of toned, caramel thighs. He whistled in his head. Tasha did have some nice legs.

Shaking that thought out of his head, he reached around her to help with the banner. “It looks as if you could use a hand.”

She squealed before falling. Jared easily caught her in his arms. As a man used to holding women, he couldn't help but notice she weighed next to nothing. He also realized he'd never been so close to her before. She smelled good. Not like flowers or perfume, but a clean, soapy smell. Her honey-colored eyes were wide with surprise, and her lips formed a delicate “O.” Just the

perfect shape to wrap around his ... *Damn, where the hell did that come from?*

Annoyed that she'd enticed him, even if unwittingly, he lashed out, "Tasha, what the hell are you doing?"

She scowled. "Why are you yelling at me? If you wouldn't have scared the crap out of me I wouldn't have tripped."

"I didn't mean to scare you, I only wanted to help."

"Well, announce yourself the next time." There was a breathless quality to her voice. It would sound delicious after a round of sex.

He cleared his throat. "Get someone else to hang the banners next time."

"I'm sorry, in the future I'll put you on the banner hanging committee. Then maybe you'd show up at the same time as the other judges instead of waltzing in late."

He raised a brow. "Are you trying to be funny?"

She tilted her head to the side. "Did I say something funny?"

He considered his response before glaring at her. She glared back, before smiling. *Damn, she was beautiful when she smiled.* Why hadn't he noticed that before? His gaze fell to her mouth. Maybe he'd overlooked a lot of good things about Tasha. Like how juicy her lower lip was. She gasped once again, her lips parting to reveal the pink tip of her tongue. His eyes met hers and damn if she didn't have the "kiss me" look. His

lips curled into a smile as he wondered what kissing her might be like?

Her eyes widened as if she'd read his thoughts. "Are you going to hold me all day?" Her voice trembled.

The hunter in him took notice. She was aroused. He winked as he put her down. "I'll finish hanging the banner."

She took a few steps backward and watched as it only took a few minutes for him to finish the job. When he stepped down she appeared calm. Too bad. He liked her breathless, kissable look.

"Thanks for doing that. Is there anything I can do for you?" She held her arms behind her back, causing her breasts to press against her shirt.

Hell yeah, you can help me, he wanted to say. Instead, he shook his head. She was a good girl. "Nah, I just need to register."

Another volunteer called her name and Tasha turned and motioned that she heard and was coming before turning back to Jared. "I have to go get things started. You'll be judging the hammer throw. Register over at that table." She pointed to a table beside the stage.

"Cool, thanks," he said flatly, fighting the urge to call her back as she turned toward the volunteer.

She paused at the top of the stairs and turned, as if she'd read his mind again. "Can you stick around until the end of the day? I need to ask you for a favor."

“What kind of favor?”

“Something I think you’ll enjoy.” She frowned. “Or at least I hope you’ll enjoy.”

He watched her walk away and reminded himself that despite the moment of attraction, she wasn’t his type of girl. Unfortunately, the switch in his brain that caused his dick to get hard was firmly flipped in the “on” position. He knew she was still looking for a husband, and he’d rather break both legs than get married — he had enough proof marriage was a fool’s contract — but there was no reason why he couldn’t enjoy a quick fantasy of her mouth on his body. With a smile, he strolled toward the register.

CHAPTER 3

By the end of the Olympics Tasha was a ball of nerves. She decided against watching any of the interviews she'd done for the local news later that night. She'd floundered like an idiot with simple questions every time she'd noticed Jared watching her, and he'd only made it worse by smiling like he knew some secret. It was sexy and distracting.

Just that morning she'd realized she was making a knee-jerk decision to ask Jared to take her virginity after her bad date with Charles. But a few seconds in Jared's arms proved her idea had its merits. He had held her as if she weighed nothing. She'd known he was strong, but his body was as solid as a rock. When he looked at her as if he wanted to kiss her, it ignited something within her so hot and delicious it was almost scary.

Her stomach tied in knots and she secretly hoped he would forget her impulsive request for a favor. But he helped break down equipment after the Olympics and waited patiently for her to finish. Two hours after the official ending of the games, she walked over to him and the handful of volunteers remaining at the registration table.

“Do you need us to do anything else?” one of the volunteers asked.

She set a box of equipment on the table and looked around. “No, most of the items I brought I’ve gotten back and the rental company should be here in a few minutes with the truck for the larger items.” Just as she said that, the truck pulled up behind the stage.

“There they are. They’ll handle the rest. Thanks, everybody.”

The guys in the truck walked over and Tasha gave them directions for packing up the bigger equipment. As they left to begin she turned to Jared. “I didn’t realize it would take so long to break down this year. You didn’t have to wait.”

He shrugged. “It’s no big deal. I didn’t have anything pressing this afternoon.”

Her lips curved into a teasing smile. “I don’t believe that. Friday night isn’t booked up already for Mr. Jared Patterson?”

He laughed. “Let’s just say I shuffled my schedule a bit for you.”

His low voice sent flutters across her spine and her heartbeat sped up as the breeze carried his scent over. She shoved the box in his hands. “Can you help me put this in the gym?”

He took the box from her and followed her into the back of the building. On the way she gave herself a pep talk. This wasn’t a dumb idea. Remember all of the bad

dates running for the hills. This would make her life easier.

He put the box in the storage room in the gym then sat on one of the bleachers. “So what is the favor you needed?”

She froze for a second before shuffling from foot to foot. *God, forgive me for what I’m about to do.*

She twisted her hands in front of her. “Well, I don’t know the best way to ask. It’s a personal favor.”

Surprise flashed in his dark eyes before he gave her a reassuring smile. “We’ve known each other for years, so I guess it’s okay to ask a personal favor. Do you need a reference or something?”

Heat crept up her face. How sophisticated, she was blushing. “Not quite. I need you to ... relieve me of something.”

He blinked and cleared his throat. “What is it?”

She took a deep breath and looked him in the eye. “I need you to take my virginity.”

A range of emotions ran across Jared’s face: confusion, disbelief, irritation, and desire. None of his expressions provided a clue to what his answer would be. Sure, he was her most logical choice, but it didn’t mean he was interested in sleeping with her. They had a limited acquaintance, nothing more.

His features finally settled into an impassive expression before he spoke. “What are you talking about?”

She sighed with relief. At least he hadn't flat out refused. "Look, Jared, I know it sounds like a lot. But really it isn't."

He looked doubtful. "Taking your virginity isn't a lot?"

"No, not really. It's a nuisance for me. Whenever I meet a guy and tell him I'm saving myself for marriage he either dumps me outright or tries to seduce me just for the fun of it. I'm tired of the whole process. Men today aren't looking for a virgin bride and I'm tired of my virginity scaring them off. I need to get rid of it and you made the most sense to take it." She said everything in a rush out of fear she'd chicken out altogether.

He pointed to his chest, confusion clear in his eyes. "How in the hell do I make the most sense?"

She held up her hand and ticked off her reasons. "I respect you and what you've done with your life. I couldn't lose it to someone I didn't like. You aren't looking for a relationship and are used to casual affairs, so a one-night thing with me wouldn't be a big deal to you. You're discreet, although I'm surprised about the hickey today. Usually you don't flaunt your affairs."

He covered the hickey with his hand. "That was a mistake that won't be repeated. Go on."

"Well, you're also ... I mean I assume ... since you've had so many lovers and whatnot ... " Her face burned. "I assume you're good in bed. I need someone who could at least make it decent. I know the first time hurts and isn't

always the best, but I figured you could make it bearable.”

“I can’t believe this,” he mumbled and lowered his head in his hands.

She went on. “Plus, there is no chance I would ever fall in love with you.”

His head snapped up. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She gave him a sheepish smile. “No offense, but except for respecting what you’ve done with your professional life, you’re not exactly my type.”

He frowned. “Why is that?”

“I mean really, Jared. You’re a whore. No offense, but you do sleep around, and you’ve made it no secret you don’t plan to ever get married. You’re not exactly good husband material. I plan to marry someone who is more responsible — with women, I mean.”

“So you think losing your virginity will help you find this pillar of responsibility?”

She ignored his sarcasm. “Yes, I do. It won’t be there hanging over my head. The next guy I meet won’t have to think that dating me means we’re automatically getting married. Since the pressure is off, he’s more likely to stay around.”

“Why don’t you just keep the fact that you’re a virgin to yourself?”

She crossed her arms. “Because after about two weeks of dating, men start hinting around about having sex, and then I have to tell them why I’m not going to sleep with them.”

“So when your virginity is gone, do you plan to start sleeping with them?”

She hadn’t thought that far ahead. She didn’t plan to sleep with every guy she dated, but maybe if she met someone she really liked it might be easier to move forward to a sexual relationship once her virginity was gone. “Not all of them, but maybe someone else in the future. I’ll worry about that later. I just need to get rid of my virginity.”

Jared stood up and shook his head. “Tasha, this is a big deal. Maybe you should wait — ”

“No, I’m sick of waiting. I’ve been waiting for twenty-nine damn years and I’m through. I need someone to help me and I’d like it to be you.”

He took a few deep breaths. “I need to think about it.”

She squared her shoulders. “I need an answer before next week.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Why so soon?”

“It’s my birthday. I’d like to lose it before I turn thirty.”

“So you want to do it this week?”

Her heart lurched, but she tried to go for nonchalant and shrugged. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll follow you to your house and we can take care of it tonight.” Her voice shook.

Desire flashed in his eyes before he hid it and slowly shook his head. She’d seen guys look at her with desire before. He was tempted.

“We are not doing this tonight,” he said.

She stepped closer. “But we are going to do this?”

His eyes traveled from hers to her lips. She’d never noticed how dark they were, like melted chocolate. She licked her lips and his eyes grew darker. It was suddenly hard to breathe. Feeling a surge of confidence, she licked her lips again and he stepped closer. Her heart pounded, her breasts ached, and an unfamiliar tingling trickled between her legs as she breathed in the spicy mixture of cologne and Jared.

She was heated from inside out. It was heavy, sensuous, and left her euphoric. She leaned up, hoping he would kiss her. He lowered his head and her breathing shallowed. With a curse, he quickly pulled back and turned away. Disappointment hit her like a tidal wave. She’d never anticipated a kiss that much before, never wanted a kiss that much. The knowledge was exciting and terrifying.

Hesitantly, she reached out and placed her hands on his arms. He stiffened but didn’t pull away. Slowly, she leaned her body against his. The top of her head barely touched his shoulder. She took a second to get used to

the feel of him against her. The softness of her breasts pressing against the hard muscles of his back caused a tremor to go through her. His body shivered in return. It was brief and so slight she only noticed because she was pressed against him so firmly.

“Are we going to do this?” Her voice was soft, throaty. The sound of her desire surprised her.

He took her hand and pressed it against the thick bulge in his pants. “You really want to handle this?”

Heat shot through her body and her panties liquefied. If any other man had done that she’d have cursed him out, but she welcomed his challenge. If she shied away from his boldness, then he’d say no. So with another prayer, and her face flaming, she softly squeezed his length. It got harder and her panties got wetter.

It was thrilling. It was frightening.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He groaned before pulling away. “Dammit, Tasha, I’m not doing this tonight. I need to think about it.”

She wanted to stamp her foot in frustration. It wasn’t supposed to be this hard to get Jared Patterson in bed. “For how long?”

His eyes traveled the length of her body and she felt as if fire burned her everywhere his gaze landed. If desire made you feel this wild and reckless, it was no wonder some considered it a sin.

“Come to my house tomorrow night. We’ll talk about it then.”

She hid her disappointment with a nod. Even though her body was on fire for something she'd never had before, she understood why he would want to think about it. This was out of left field to him. Hell, it was an impulsive decision on her part, one she'd talk herself out of again if she thought about it too much longer. She'd let him consider it overnight, and hopefully he would agree to take it tomorrow before she reconsidered. She wasn't sure how it worked, but hopefully once they had sex the fire she felt for him would go out.

She smiled and nodded. "Okay, I'll come by at seven."

He nodded and took a step back from her, giving her one last heated look before marching out.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, Jared was running at full speed on his treadmill when the doorbell rang. He cursed at the interruption and jumped off without stopping. He'd barely slept the night before, yet he'd woken up full of energy. He'd spent the morning doing every energy sucking workout he could think of, but exercise wasn't helping — at least not the type of exercise he was doing.

He'd been rock hard and aching after leaving Tasha the day before. He'd flipped through the names on his phone, but with each name he passed his frustration grew. He didn't want any of them. There was only one set of thighs he wanted to get between: Tasha's.

She was last person he needed to sleep with, but he'd known his answer before leaving. He was going to do it. Her favor was the last thing he'd ever expected, but he was flattered she'd chosen him. Even with the male whore comment. He wasn't a saint. Maybe it was male pride and barbaric, but the thought of being her first excited him. He'd never slept with a virgin. It would be a welcome change from the usual chicks he dealt with. Plus, she would remember him for the rest of her life. He

couldn't deny the satisfaction of knowing she would never be able to forget their time together.

The problem was when. A part of him wanted to have sex with her tonight when she came over, but, surprisingly, a bigger part rejected that idea. It was her virginity and regardless of her eagerness, losing it should be special. They'd only discuss the details tonight, and then he'd plan for a night she'd never forget. *Thank goodness her birthday is soon*, he thought. He couldn't live with this frustration for long.

He jogged up the stairs from his home gym. He jumped up and down to get rid of some restless energy before opening the door to where his older brother Malcolm stood with a grin on his face that could only be described as goofy.

With a raised eyebrow, he eyed his brother. "What's wrong with you?"

Malcolm kept smiling. "Man, nothing's wrong. I'm just the happiest man on earth right now."

Jared laughed. "Okay, why are you so happy?" He stood aside and let Malcolm in. They walked into the kitchen and he pulled a bottled water out of the refrigerator. When he turned around Malcolm was still grinning.

"Kenyatta finally said yes. We're getting married."

Jared choked on his water and coughed.

Malcolm came over and hit him on his back. "Are you okay?"

Jared nodded and stepped to the side. “Yeah, yeah, I’m cool. So you really want to marry her?”

Kenyatta was Malcolm’s girlfriend of two years. Although he liked Kenyatta and was happy his brother finally hooked up with her after lusting for her for so long, he couldn’t believe Malcolm wanted to get married. Then again, Malcolm didn’t know how fickle married women were.

Malcolm continued to smile like a lovesick puppy. “Yes. I’ve known ever since that crazy crap with Brad. After thinking I’d never see her again, I knew I wanted her in my life forever.”

Malcolm had worked with Kenyatta for years, but had never acted on his desire for her. It wasn’t until she’d agreed to marry someone else that he finally made a play for her and won. Unfortunately her fiancé at the time was a psycho who tried to kill her when he found out, but he was killed by an ex-lover after kidnapping both her and Kenyatta. Two years had passed and Malcolm and Kenyatta had remained inseparable. It shouldn’t have been a surprise for his brother to marry her, but Jared was still upset. He knew firsthand how unfaithful married women were. Malcolm would do better keeping things as they were.

“Can’t you two just live together or something? You know once you marry them everything changes. Kenyatta might not be so wonderful once you put that ring on her finger.” It was the first thing that came to his mind.

Malcolm's smile fell. "C'mon man. I thought you would be happy for me. Just because you never want to get married doesn't mean you have to rain on my parade."

Jared shrugged. "I'm not trying to do that, I'm just pointing out the facts. Once women get married they become bored. Before you know it she'll be tired of you and out trying to find some other man to keep her happy."

Malcolm stiffened and pointed at Jared. "Kenyatta's not like that."

Jared scoffed. "That's what you think."

Malcolm frowned and took a step toward him. "Hey, man, watch yourself. I'm in a good mood today, but if you say anything else about Kenyatta I'll knock the shit out of you."

Jared held up his hands. "My bad, I meant no disrespect to Kenyatta. Hey, maybe she is different."

Malcolm threatening to knock sense into him was nothing new. Although they hadn't fought since they were young boys, it wasn't unusual for them to disagree on things. Not only were their personalities different — he considered Malcolm a choir boy and Malcolm considered Jared a playboy — but they looked different too. Malcolm had the darker, more rugged looks of their father while Jared shared the lighter, more refined features of their mother, a resemblance Jared secretly hated.

Malcolm pushed away from the counter with a curse. “Damn, man, I should have known not to tell you first.”

Jared plastered a smile on his face. Today wasn’t the day to talk some sense into his brother. “I’m just messing with you, man. Truly, I’m happy for you. When is the big day?”

Malcolm looked skeptical but the goofy grin resurfaced. “We’re thinking a fall wedding. September or October.”

Jared put his water bottle on the counter with a loud thud. “That’s only a few months away.”

Malcolm shrugged. “We’ve been together for two years, there’s no need for a long engagement.”

Jared shook his head. “All right, man. Just let me know when and I’ll be there to stand beside you.” *And I’ll be there when she breaks your heart later*, he thought.

“Thanks, man, I’m glad to hear that.” Malcolm narrowed his eyes and studied Jared. “Are you training for something? You haven’t stopped sweating since you came to the door.”

Jared used his shirt to wipe the sweat off his brow. “No, why would you say that?”

“Cause it looks like you’re working your ass off. What’s up?”

Jared sucked down the rest of the water. “Just trying to work off some excess energy.”

Malcolm scoffed. “You usually say that when you’ve got some woman around. Since I don’t think anyone is here, she must have turned you down?”

Jared sucked his teeth. “Never that. She’s coming over tonight.”

Malcolm laughed. “At the rate you’re going you won’t be any use to her tonight.”

Jared blew air through his lips. “You forget who you’re talking about. Besides we’re not sleeping together tonight. I’m trying to wait.”

Malcolm’s head snapped back. “You’re trying to wait? Hell must be freezing over.”

“Man, I can wait, when it’s worth it.”

Malcolm raised an eyebrow. “Someone who’s worth the wait? Damn, man, I never thought I’d hear you say that. Who is she?”

“It doesn’t matter who she is, and I’m not waiting long. I just need to find the right place.”

Malcolm laughed. “What’s wrong with down the hall in that massive bed you’ve got?”

Jared shook his head and frowned. “Nah, she deserves better than that for her first time. I’m not going to treat her like any other chick.”

Malcolm stopped laughing and held up his hands. “Wait, wait, wait. Did I hear you right? Her first time? What, you’re playing with virgins now?”

Jared cursed. Malcolm didn't need to know what he was doing. His brother was such a moral high roller he wouldn't approve, but Jared didn't turn down beautiful women, and since Tasha offered, he wasn't about to pass up the chance to be her first.

"It's not like that. She asked me to be her first, so I agreed."

Malcolm crossed his arms and scowled. "What the hell is wrong with you? You don't F around with virgins, man."

Jared laughed at Malcolm's shortening of the curse word. "I'm not *fucking* around with a virgin. She's almost thirty and wants to lose it before her birthday. I was her choice, so why deny her?"

"Because her first time should be special. You're the last man to make something special with a woman."

"Whatever. I know how to make a lady feel special."

"It's more than that."

Jared lifted a shoulder and held his hands out. "Since when do I need your permission to sleep with someone? She's a grown woman and knows what she wants. Besides, the way she was palming my dick yesterday lets me know that she's more than ready."

Malcolm shook his head. "Man, you're something else. You're right, it's your business. I'm just saying this whole situation may blow up in your face."

"I doubt that. I'm going to take my time with her and make it good. It'll just be this one-time thing, and

then we'll move on."

"Sure, I'll believe that when I see it."

Jared was tired of the conversation. "Look, man, I've got to get back to my workout. Did you want anything else?"

Malcolm sighed nodded. "Mom's birthday is coming up. I wanted to rent out the community center in the old neighborhood and have a party for her. Sixty-five is a big deal."

Jared smiled tightly while inwardly he cringed. Pretending an interest in their mom was nothing new. Malcolm never questioned why he always had to relay messages between the two, and Jared had no plans to change that. He'd rather let Malcolm assume he was a less than stellar son than reveal they had a less than stellar mom.

"Sure, man, that's a good idea. Just let me know what you need."

Malcolm nodded and headed toward the door. "Don't work out too hard. You might tire yourself out before you can deflower your virgin."

"Ha ha, very funny."

"I'll holla at you later."

Jared waved his brother out the door before going back down to his gym, but he no longer felt like working out. Malcolm's announcement had killed his energy. His brother was getting married. It felt like it came from nowhere, but he should have known. They did seem

perfect for each other, so maybe it could work. But his parents had seemed perfect for each other too, and he knew that had been a damn lie. Hopefully Malcolm would be luckier.

His cell phone rang and he walked over to pick it up. Monica's number popped on screen under a new name: Clingy Snoop. He ignored the call, noting that it had been her fourth call for the day.

He crossed the gym to his home office. He needed a distraction, and the work on his desk would do. He was finishing up a fitness manual based on his exercise philosophy, and he needed to call Cassandra, his public relations manager in Los Angeles, for an update on her trip to his production facility.

After work he would decide how to handle Tasha's first time. He meant what he'd said to Malcolm — she did deserve better than just one night in his bed. Even though they wouldn't be together afterwards, he wanted her to look back with a smile for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER 5

Tasha parked in the circular drive of Jared's California style home at 6:59. She sat in the car taking several deep breaths as she stared at his door. Her body hummed with desire after leaving him yesterday. It was a new experience that thrilled and frightened her. Although she'd been attracted to men in the past, she'd never experienced it at this magnitude. He made it too easy to forget why she'd been a virgin for so long.

Feeling this way thrilled her, but the fact that it was for Jared worried her. Even though they'd worked together, she only knew him superficially. How could she desire him so much after one encounter? Why did his slight tremble at her touch yesterday keep her awake for hours? And why, when she had slept, she'd dreamt about feeling his erection without his pants in the way.

She would have to tread carefully to make sure she remained in control of the situation. She couldn't afford to lose herself, and if she forgot the reason for sleeping with him, Jared could make her lose all thoughts of self-preservation.

She got out of the car and went to his door. With a reassuring breath, she rang the bell. She'd never been to Jared's house before, but hadn't had trouble finding it. She'd gotten his address from the Rec Commission files before leaving the day before. She'd been nervous that if she called him for the address he would tell her over the phone he wasn't going to grant her favor.

Jared opened the door and Tasha's mouth went dry. He wore nothing but basketball shorts low on his hips. Her eyes ran over his body, taking in the broad shoulders, well-toned chest, and rock hard abs. His sinewy biceps gleamed in the late afternoon sun. A tattoo of an eagle with its talons out was on his left one. Her eyes followed the light sprinkling of hair covering his chest down his abs to where they disappeared in the waistband of his shorts. She skipped the shorts to take in thighs and calves that looked as if they were carved from granite. Even his feet were sexy.

When she finally dragged her eyes back up to his, he smiled as if he knew his body was an awesome sight to behold. He flexed his pecs and winked at her. Desire shivered through her and she squeezed the muscles between her legs.

“Like what you see?”

She cleared her throat and tried to appear calm. Control, she had to and maintain control. “Do you always answer the door undressed?”

“I'm perfectly decent ... for now.” He flexed his pecs again and Tasha wanted to run in the opposite direction.

This was too much for her. A smart woman would turn around, go home, and forget the whole damn thing. But at the moment she didn't feel very smart. She only felt hot and horny. She hoped his words meant he was accepting her offer.

“Does that mean you're going to relieve me of my problem — tonight?”

He reached out, took her hand, and drew her into the house. “We'll talk about that in a second. Come in and make yourself comfortable.”

Tasha took her eyes off of his body to look around. White marble floors in the foyer opened up to a sunken living area bathed with sunlight from large French doors connected to a patio. Sunlight sparkled on the surface of a pond visible through the doors. The living area was surrounded by four white pillars connected by wrought iron railing. A marble and wrought iron staircase led to the second floor. Neutral colors, yellows and greens adorned the walls and furnishing which combined with the windows and view of the lake to give it an open feel.

“You have a beautiful home,” she said.

He smiled, drawing her eyes to his sensuous lips. “Thanks, it was already decorated when I bought it. I thought it made the place feel open so I left it the way it was. Come on around to the kitchen.”

He took her hand in his and led her to a spacious kitchen with granite countertops and stainless steel appliances. It looked like a kitchen from Food Network and her fingers itched to use the commercial grade stove.

The small kitchen in her home was pitiful compared to his.

“Do you cook?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not often. I have someone come in and prepare my meals for the week. Why?”

“The kitchen is beautiful. It looks like it was made for cooking meals for a large family.”

He laughed. The sound sent an unfamiliar shiver down her spine. “Not here. Fortunately, I don’t have to make up my protein bars and shakes anymore. There’s an entire production facility for that. Do you want something to drink?” He let go of her hand and she clenched her fist to hold onto the warmth.

“Yes, thank you.”

He reached under the cabinet into a wine cooler and pulled out a bottle of wine. “I hope you like Chardonnay.” He took two glasses out of the rack above the bar.

“I just want water.”

“It’s no problem. I was going to open this anyway.” He opened the wine and poured her a glass.

“What if I don’t like white?”

He rubbed his jaw and grinned. “I have red, if you prefer.”

She did prefer white, but she didn’t like that he’d ignored her request for water. “I’d prefer water.”

His smile remained as he turned to get a bottle of water out of his fridge. When he came over, he stood so

close she was engulfed by his spicy scent. That combined with his near nakedness, made her skin tingle with anticipation.

“Your water.” His eyes bore into hers, desire and amusement rolling in the chocolate centers.

She cleared her throat and took a step back. “Do you plan to put on some clothes?”

He took a step forward. “Do I really need to get dressed?”

She blushed. It was true, if he agreed to her favor then he really didn't need clothes. Something about the idea that it could happen so soon caused her stomach to flutter. She fought the urge to wipe her now clammy hands on her pants. Instead she opened the bottle and gulped. “So you're ready to do it now? Okay, just give me a ... second to, you know, get used to the idea.”

He chuckled and stepped back. “I'm not going to take your virginity on my kitchen floor, Tasha. Although once it's gone I might make love to you on the counter.”

She swallowed loudly. A picture of him lifting her up onto his counter filled her head. As erotic as the thought was, she pushed it aside. Once her virginity was gone there wouldn't be another time. It was a one-time deal and that was all. For her sanity she would have to stick with that.

He grinned. “I'm teasing you, Tasha. You actually caught me as I got out of the shower. I lost track of time

and didn't realize it was so close to seven. If you give me a second I'll change and we can talk."

She gave him what she hoped was an impassive look before nodding. "I'll wait for you here."

"You can follow me to my room. If you'd like." There was a teasing glint in his eye, which only made him sexier.

She may be less sophisticated than the women he usually dealt with, but that didn't mean she couldn't handle his game. *Actually, you can't handle it, but you're going to pretend that you can.*

She raised her chin. "I need to see it sooner or later."

If he was surprised by her answer he hid it well. "Follow me."

With another reassuring breath, she walked behind him and froze at the door of his bedroom. In the middle of his room was a mahogany four poster bed. It was raised at least two feet from the floor. A black satin comforter and sheets gleamed in the recessed lighting that shined down as if it were a monument.

If Jared noticed she'd stopped at the door he didn't acknowledge it. He disappeared into his walk in closet. Blinking her eyes rapidly she looked around his room. He had a large flat screen television on one wall with a small sitting area around it. A matching mahogany dresser and chest of drawers took up the other wall. There were a few black and white landscape portraits on chocolate colored walls.

Her attention went back to the bed. It couldn't be ignored. She walked over to it. At five feet four inches she considered herself average height, but she would need a stepstool to get on it. How many women had he slept with in that bed? Probably dozens. The thought excited her. She wanted to experience what other women had with him, and she wanted it in that bed. She ran her hands along the smooth comforter and closed her eyes, imagining herself naked, sliding on the sheets.

“Do you like my bed?”

She snatched her hands away as if she'd been burned. She turned to the closet where Jared stood, watching her. He'd put on a loose fitting pair of jeans and a black shirt he hadn't buttoned. His feet were still bare. She definitely liked what she saw.

“It's a nice bed. Is this where we'll ... ” Although she knew what she asked she couldn't say the words.

He walked and placed his hands on the bed, trapping her between it and him. The heat from his body radiated toward her. Time seemed to freeze as the force of her attraction buzzed within her. If she was going to do this she couldn't be a ninny. She hesitated, before lifting her hands and placing them on his chest. His skin was surprisingly soft over the hard muscles underneath. He flexed his pecs and she jerked. Her pinky finger accidentally flicking over his flat nipple and his breathing pick up.

He lightly ran a finger down her cheek. “My plan was to wait, but you're making it very difficult.”

Tasha shivered as he gently traced her earlobe.
“How?”

“Because right now all I want to do is take your clothes off, throw you on that bed, and get deep inside you.”

Oh, God, what am I doing? Despite her fear she said, “Then ... then do it.”

He stared at her for what felt like hours before he closed the distance between them and kissed her. Fire spread throughout her body, so hot she was sure he could feel it. His lips were firm and demanding against hers. When his tongue reached out for entrance into her mouth she quickly obliged. He immediately filled her mouth with his tongue and Tasha’s hands clenched against his chest. He groaned, kissing her harder.

His hand came up to caress her breast through her shirt, softly massaging her aching flesh. When his thumb brushed across her nipple she trembled as liquid heat replaced her bones. His other hand clutched her waist, pulling her against him. He reached around to cup her behind as he pressed his erection against her.

His mouth left hers, leisurely kissing his way to her ear. “I’m going to touch you,” he said, his hand leaving her butt to pop open the button of her shorts. Excitement and fear trembled within her. It was happening to fast.

His tongue played with the curve of her ear. “Tell me to touch you.” Her zipper released, and his hands skimmed along the waistband of her panties. All reasoning left.

“Touch me.”

She felt his smile against the side of her neck before his lips returned to hers. At the same time his hand broke the barrier of her underwear. His fingers gently played with the hairs covering her sex, each pull sending a shockwave of desire through her. She knew she was soaking wet, and was almost embarrassed by it until he finally slid his finger against her clit. She gasped, pulling away from his kiss to drop her head back. He groaned and kissed the side of her neck.

He was devouring her. She could hardly breathe she was so engulfed by his passion. It was raw, hot, and overpowering. It was actually about to happen. She was going to lose her virginity.

But she wasn't in control. He was making her feel out of control, and very unsure. This was happening too fast.

The doorbell rang, bringing reality back to her. She pushed against his chest. “Jared, someone's at your door.”

His head jerked up. He stared at her, searching her eyes for something while his hand slowly slipped out of her underwear. Her body thrummed and she fought between asking him to continue and thinking she needed to escape. Bewilderment and passion swirled within his eyes. Had he noticed her panic?

The doorbell rang again. He slowly stepped back, took a deep breath, and buttoned his shirt.

“I ordered dinner. That’s probably it. We can eat in another part of the house,” his eyes flicked to the bed and back to her, “where it’s less volatile.”

He strolled out of the bedroom and didn’t wait for her to follow. She was making a mistake. Jared had awakened an inferno of desire within her she didn’t know how to control. Even now, with him out of the room, the wetness continued to flow between her thighs and her breathing was ragged. She couldn’t go through with this. It was too much. *He* was too much. She would have to find someone else to take her virginity. Someone who didn’t make her feel as if she were riding a roller coaster of desire.

With shaky hands she buttoned and zipped her shorts. Her face burned as she remembered his hands against her. She wanted it again. Okay, so sex with Jared wouldn’t be bad. In fact, it would probably be awesome. But could she really do it without losing herself?

She rushed out of his bedroom to the front door. Jared’s back was to her and she could hear a woman’s voice on the other side. She couldn’t make out what the woman said. Jared’s shoulders were tense. He glanced over his shoulder, saw her, and cursed.

“Not today, Monica,” he said and slammed the door.

When he turned to face her he at least had the decency to look guilty. “Sorry about that.”

She held up a hand. “Don’t be. No need to apologize for who you are.” Her words were strong, but inside she was embarrassed. Common sense would have told her he

was seeing someone else, but it didn't ease the pain of having another woman show up at his door while they were pressed against his bed. "I think I should go. This was a bad idea."

He frowned and took a step toward her. "Because of that?" He pointed to the door. "That was nothing."

She shook her head. "No, that's the reason I chose you. No commitments, no chance of love. But you're too much, what happened in your bedroom was too much. I thought I could handle it, but I'm not sure anymore."

He relaxed and smiled. "Tasha, what happened in my bedroom was normal. You want to feel that type of passion with whoever you have sex with."

"Does it always feel that ... overwhelming?"

He walked over and took her head in his hands. "With the right person." He kissed the side of her mouth.

She froze. "But you're not the right person."

He rolled his eyes. "The right person in bed isn't always the right person to marry."

"But — " she started, but he interrupted her with a kiss. She forgot what she was about to say when his arms encircled her. With a sigh she wrapped her arms around his neck and let him deepen the kiss.

When he pulled away he smiled at her. "I want to take you to Charleston for your birthday."

It took a second for his words to penetrate her brain. "You want to spend the weekend with me in Charleston?"

“It’s not very far so we can get there in a day, and we don’t have to worry about people we know seeing us together. You mentioned that you wanted discretion.”

She frowned. “But my family and I get together for my birthday.”

“You’ll be thirty, Tasha. They will be okay if you miss a year.”

She tried to pull away. “That’s too much. I can’t do that.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“I won’t.”

“Why?”

“Because ... it’s not what I wanted. I don’t want a romantic getaway with you. I just want you to take my virginity as quickly as possible.”

“Romance isn’t a part of this, Tasha. I’m not taking you away in order to woo you. I’m taking you away so that we can be discreet.”

She looked around. “What’s wrong with your house?”

“Too many people know me and watch my house. Do you really want to be linked as my latest fling?”

“No, but ... ”

“Do you really want to lose your virginity, or was all this just some type of game?”

She thought about Charles and every other man either afraid of commitment or looking for a conquest when they realized she was a virgin. Did she really want to do that for another ten years?

Her eyes met Jared's. His arms were still wrapped around her waist, and even now she wanted to lean up and kiss him. It was much easier to remain a virgin when she wasn't burning with desire. If she were really going to do this, it made more sense to do it with a man who turned her on than one who didn't.

"I'll go to Charleston." Triumph filled his eyes. Feeling like his conquest, instead of the other way around, she pulled out of his embrace and he let her. "Don't look so damn cocky. I still might change my mind."

"I know," he said, smiling. "Let's get something to drink while we wait on the food."

He held out his hand and she took it while trying to ignore the feeling that she'd made a life changing decision with a man who would trample her heart.

CHAPTER 6

“I asked Jared Patterson to take my virginity,” Tasha said to her sister the next morning. Not a second later, she was hit with the mist of sweet tea Angie spit out of her mouth.

“You what!” Angie yelled, wiping her mouth.

Tasha grabbed the towel hanging on her parents’ stove and wiped her face. She cut her eyes at her sister the entire time. “Was that really necessary?”

Angie snatched the towel from her. “Yes, when you say dumb stuff like that.”

“Girls, is everything all right?” their mom called from the dining room.

Tasha looked at Angie and mouthed the word *please*. Angie scowled but yelled back, “It’s fine, Mom. Tasha almost dropped the macaroni.”

Their mom started muttering, probably about how silly they were, but thankfully she didn’t come in the kitchen. Tasha got the macaroni out of the stove and placed it on the counter.

“Why would you ask him something like that?”
Angie whispered.

“Because I need it gone and he’s the best person to do it.”

Angie put her hand on her hip. “I thought you were joking when you said that the other night. Did Shayla put you up to this? That girl is a straight up ho.”

Tasha rolled her eyes. Angie had never liked her friend Shayla. “Shayla is not a ho, and no, she didn’t put me up to this. I haven’t even told her about this. It was all my idea.”

Angie didn’t look convinced. “Well, it sounds like something she would support. I know Charles turned out to be an asshole, but that doesn’t mean you need to go out and sleep with Jared Patterson.” Angie wrinkled her nose when she said his name.

“He’s Malcolm’s brother, so he can’t be all bad.”

“Kenyatta got lucky with Malcolm. Jared is no good,” Angie replied. Angie and Kenyatta had been best friends since college.

“Jared isn’t no good. So he sleeps with a lot of women. He’s successful, good looking, and single. There’s nothing wrong with that.” She thought of the faceless woman he’d slammed the door on the day before and changed direction. “Look at the business he’s built with his gyms and health food line. You can’t deny the man is smart.”

Angie walked over to the stove and checked the collard greens. She stirred them before turning off the stove and turning back to Tasha. “Your first time is special. You don’t want to lose it to some guy who doesn’t give a damn about you.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Angie. You met Jonathan in college, and married him two weeks after graduation. You were lucky to find someone worth waiting for. I’ll be thirty next week. What if I never meet someone? I’ll die a virgin.”

“Better to die a virgin than burn in hell,” their mom’s voice cut in. She narrowed her eyes as she looked from one daughter to the other. “What are you talking about? You’d better not let your father know.”

Tasha sighed. Her parents would have simultaneous massive heart attacks if they knew her plans.

“I was just telling Angie she was lucky to find Jonathan and that I might die a virgin,” Tasha said with a frown.

Virginia Smith’s plump cheeks widened as she smiled at her oldest daughter. “Waiting to give herself to Jonathan on her wedding night was the most precious gift Angie could give him. We’re very proud of her.” Angie looked away guiltily and Tasha frowned. What was that look for? Virginia didn’t notice Angie’s guilt as her gaze drifted to Tasha. “Don’t go to your husband’s bed as damaged goods. Believe me, he’ll love you more for it.”

Tasha picked the macaroni from the counter with a pot holder and handed it to her mom. “I know, Mom. I’ll

remember that.”

Virginia smiled. “Good girl. Your father should be finished with the deacon meeting by now. He’ll be home in a few minutes, and we’ll be ready to eat when he gets here.”

When their mom walked out of the kitchen with the macaroni, Tasha rushed over to Angie. “What was that look for?”

Angie didn’t meet her eye. “What look?”

“That guilty look. You’re hiding something.”

“No I’m not.” Angie tapped her foot. A sure sign she was lying.

“Tell me.”

Angie sighed. “All right.” She lowered her voice. “Jonathan wasn’t my first.”

It was Tasha’s turn to yell. “What!”

Angie grabbed Tasha’s hand and pulled her out the back door into their parents’ sunroom. She lowered her voice so much that Tasha had to strain to hear. “I lost my virginity to this idiot in college who only wanted to sleep with virgins. It was devastating and I don’t want the same thing to happen to you. Every day I wish I would have waited for Jonathan, and I can’t take that back. He doesn’t know. Nobody knows except Kenyatta and Carol, so please don’t say anything.”

Tasha hit Angie’s shoulder. “How could you tell your friends and not tell me?”

Angie hit Tasha back. “It’s a long story, all right? And not one I’m proud of. Just remember, once it’s gone you can’t get it back. Don’t waste your first time on someone like Jared.”

Tasha opened her mouth to reply when Jonathan came into the sunroom. He was holding the hand of their youngest daughter, Angela, who was dripping wet and looking at the floor. Knowing the eight-year-old, it was no telling what she’d gotten into.

“Angie, please come help me clean up the mess in the family room. It appears your daughter thought it would be fun to swim with your dad’s fish.”

Angie jaw dropped. “Not the fish tank?”

Jonathan nodded. “Exactly.”

Angie rolled her eyes. “Angela, what were you thinking?”

“I didn’t know it would fall,” Angela answered, eyes still glued to the floor.

Angie went over and the trio walked from the sunroom. Tasha shook her head. Cleaning her daughter’s mess would keep Angie from finishing her story for a while. At least now she knew why Angie always lectured her about waiting, but it didn’t make her any less pissed. Angie had made a bad choice her first time, but that was her bad. Tasha was almost thirty, not nineteen. She knew where things stood with her and Jared, so she wouldn’t get hurt. If anything, Angie’s confession only proved she needed to lose her virginity on her own terms.

The front door opened and a second later, her dad's voice preached to Angela. It was the same thing every Sunday. One of Angie's kids would do something unexpected and damaging — which was odd for girls, according to their mother — and then their dad would preach to them for the remainder of the afternoon. She took a deep breath. Missing it next week may not be bad at all.

Later that evening Tasha picked up the phone and called Shayla. Angie was wrong about a multitude of things, including her opinion of Shayla. Despite the four-year age gap between her and Shayla, they'd clicked after meeting in high school at a cheerleading camp. Although they attended different schools, they'd kept in touch. Shayla often came to Tasha whenever she needed to escape the trials of her life. She wasn't a ho as Angie described, just really unlucky in love.

On the sixth ring Tasha prepared to hang up when Shayla's breathless voice answered. "Hello."

"Shayla, are you okay?"

"Oh, hey, Tasha. Yeah, I'm fine." Shayla giggled. "I'm finished what I was doing."

There was a man's voice in the background and she guessed what Shayla was doing. "I'll call you back."

"No, no, no. Don't go." There was shuffling in the background before it got quiet. "What's going on?" There was an echo to Shayla's voice.

"You're not about to use the bathroom are you?"

Shayla laughed. “No, I came in here for privacy. If you’re calling me at ten on a Sunday night it must be important.”

Tasha chuckled. “You’ve got that right.”

“Okay, so tell me what’s going on.”

“I told you about my date from hell with that guy Charles.”

“Yes. Damn, Tasha, I don’t know how you always end up with these fools. It might be better for you to sleep with someone and get it over with. Then the novelty of dating a virgin won’t plague you.”

“I know, right? That’s why I found someone to have sex with.”

The line went silent. “Hello? Shayla? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I just thought I heard Miss I’m Waiting for Prince Charming casually mention she’s found a guy to sleep with.”

“I did say that. I’m sick of guys either running for the hills or becoming fake Billy Dee Williams trying to seduce me into bed when they find out I’m a virgin. Angie thinks I’m stupid, but I’m ready to see what all the fuss is about.”

Shayla laughed. “Angie would think it was stupid. She’s a pure romantic. Who’s the guy?”

“Jared Patterson.”

“Wait, the guy from the infomercial?”

Tasha grinned. “I forgot he did that. Yes, that’s him.”

“Damn, Tasha! That brotha is fine. I went to his gym here in Atlanta for about a year. A picture of him was right near the treadmills. I damn near came just looking at his body every time I went for a run. How in the hell did you land him?”

“We worked together years ago, and he still mentors at the Rec Commission. He’s lived in Columbia since opening his production facility two years ago.”

“If I would have known that I would have moved back home.”

“Cool it. He’s mine,” Tasha told her friend. Jared wasn’t really hers, but hearing Shayla go on about him was making her uncomfortable.

“Girl, please, you know I wouldn’t go after your guy. I’ve got enough on my plate as it is.”

“Yeah, I heard him earlier. When are you gonna tell me his name?”

Shayla laughed. “When he’s all mine. Anyway, are you dating Jared?”

Tasha let her friend change the subject. When Shayla was ready to tell her who she was dating then she would. “No, we’re not dating. It’s just a one-time deal. I want to at least try to enjoy it this first time with someone who won’t expect anything.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re not expecting too much from him. From what I’ve read online he’s a true player.

One blogger even said that he likes to eat downtown, if you know what I mean.”

She knew exactly what Shayla meant and she squirmed in her seat. “How would they know?”

“Girl, nowadays no one’s secrets are safe. If it’s true, you will enjoy yourself. Just don’t get caught up. Like I told you, once you start it’s hard to stop. And if it’s good, it’s damn near impossible.”

Tasha crinkled her nose. “Do you think I should pick someone less experienced?”

“Hell no! You know how awful my first time was. I hate to even think about it. You did right picking someone who knows what they’re doing. Just don’t get all caught up in him. Learn some tricks of your own so he’s not always in control.”

“How do I do that?”

“Read some erotica, watch some porn, get all baby oiled up and ready, I don’t know. Whatever works for you.”

Tasha smiled. She’d heard enough from Shayla to have an idea about what men liked. It wouldn’t hurt to show Jared that she wasn’t completely out of her league. “You’ve got a point. He’s so full of himself. I don’t want him to think I’m some sex puppet on a string.”

“That’s my girl. When is this going down?”

“We’re going to Charleston next weekend for my birthday.”

“Damn, he’s taking you away. He must want this as much as you do.”

“You think?”

“Why else would he take you out of town? No guy’s gonna turn down sex. If it was a simple one time thing he would have just told you to come over and hit it once. If he’s taking you out of town that means you’ll have to spend the nights together as well as the days. He must like you a little bit.”

“Not like that. We’ve always been cool — I think he’s trying to be nice to a friend.”

“Yeah, well he can be nice to you for twenty minutes in his bed at home. Taking you out of town is a bit more than nice.”

There was a knock on the other side of the phone. “Look Shayla, go be with your guy. I’ll call you later this week.”

“All right, but call me before you leave and as soon as you get back. I need all the details.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ve heard my sex stories for years, it’s payback.”

Tasha laughed. “My story may not be worth discussing.”

“I doubt that. Bye, girl.”

“Bye.” Tasha hung up and stared at the phone. Why did Jared insist they leave town? He’d had other women

in his bedroom at home whose names were unknown, so the discretion thing was just an excuse. He was happy when she'd said yes. It didn't mean he was interested in her outside of the bedroom, but he definitely wanted to sleep with her. Was it for the same reason as other guys, to say he deflowered a virgin? She knew he wasn't sleeping with her because he cared or anything.

Tasha stood and went to her bookshelf. She pulled down a book of erotica Shayla had given her last year in an effort to liberate her mind. It was wrapped in the cover of a cookbook so her parents wouldn't know she had it. She'd forgotten it was there until now. She may be a virgin, but she wasn't completely innocent. Admittedly, her limited experiments with her high school boyfriend paled in comparison to Jared's love life, but Shayla was right. If she wanted to keep some control then she'd need to be able to meet him step-by-step next weekend. Or at least put up a good show.

CHAPTER 7

“Another excellent inspection, Mr. Patterson. I wish all of the facilities I visited were as well organized as yours.” The health inspector reached out a thin hand, which Jared happily shook.

“I appreciate that, Mr. Simmons, but it wouldn’t be this way without the hard work of my superintendent.” Jared turned to his plant superintendent Barry Jordan.

Barry’s already massive chest puffed up with pride at Jared’s compliment. “I appreciate that, Mr. Patterson.”

Jared hated formalities, but Barry insisted on giving him respect when others were around.

Jared nodded. “I’m only speaking the truth.”

Mr. Simmons turned back to Jared. “And you’re very lucky to have such a diligent superintendent.”

Barry continued to smile, but didn’t say anything else. Jared would have to thank him again later. Barry’s hard work allowed Jared the time he needed to focus on running the operations of his business and continue personal training for exclusive clients. Without Barry,

Jared's dream of a production facility would've been harder to achieve.

Mr. Simmons looked at his watch. "I have another facility to inspect before lunch. I doubt their inspection will go as well as yours ..." His voice trailed off and his jaw dropped.

Jared followed his line of sight as Cassandra Davenport, his public relations advisor, stepped into the lobby. He couldn't blame the guy, Cassandra was fine. Her exotic looks, courtesy of a black father and Korean mother, combined with dark hair that stopped mid-back, large breasts, and well-rounded backside were enough to stop any man in his tracks. She raised a brow, a knowing smile on her lips as she approached them.

Jared acknowledged Cassandra with a head nod. "Mr. Simmons, this is Cassandra Davenport. She handles my public relations."

Mr. Simmons's eyes were glued on the black camisole peeking out of Cassandra's red suit jacket. Jared cleared his throat.

Mr. Simmons shook his head, as if snapping himself out of a daze. "Um ... yes. It's nice to meet you, Ms. Davenport. I was just leaving."

Cassandra gave him her most award winning smile as she reached out a manicured hand. "It's great to meet you, Mr. Simmons. I noticed you during the inspection."

Mr. Simmons face lit up like a light bulb. Barry looked at Jared and rolled his eyes. Cassandra had that

effect on men. She'd once had that effect on Jared, but he'd known her for so long he now only saw her as a friend. And, she was too high maintenance.

Cassandra continued talking to Mr. Simmons. "I'm glad to hear you all are finished. I need Jared for a few minutes before catching my flight back to L.A." She turned to Jared. "Can we meet in your office?"

Jared reached out to shake Mr. Simmon's hand. "Mr. Simmons, thanks again. Barry, will you finish up with him?"

Barry nodded and Jared walked away with Cassandra. As soon as they were on the elevator Cassandra frowned.

"I can't wait to get back to L.A. The men in South Carolina behave as if they've never seen a woman."

Jared laughed. "You get the same reaction in L.A."

She smiled. "You're right. But if one more man calls me 'ma'am' I'm going to throw up." Her frown turned into one of her well-practiced pouts. "When are you going to move back to L.A., Jared? The facility is up and running perfectly. You don't have to stay here to oversee things, Barry is wonderful. I miss having my buddy around."

They got off the elevator and crossed the hall into the main office of the facility. One side was Plexiglas, allowing him to look out over the floor. Since Jared didn't work there daily, he'd assigned it to Barry, but used it whenever he came to the facility. Instead of

sitting behind the desk he went to the couch near the window, pressed a button to lower a screen, and sat down. Cassandra slid in across from him.

“I’m not coming back to L.A., at least not anytime soon. Like I told you before I left, I’m a southern boy at heart. I don’t like the hustle and bustle of L.A.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes. “Southern boy my ass. You love L.A. The women, the excitement, the celebrities paying too much money to work out with you. You’ll be back.”

Jared nodded and laughed. He did love the women in L.A., but the memory of Tasha’s caramel skin, honey-colored eyes, and soft lips filled his head. L.A. women didn’t compare to the sweetness of a Carolina girl. “Yeah, maybe. But for now, I’m staying here. My brother’s here so that works. Now, did you really need to talk with me, or did you just want to badger me about moving back to L.A.?”

“Both,” she said.

Jared could only laugh. He did miss Cassandra, his only female friend. He also appreciated she let one of the reasons for his hasty return to South Carolina slide: avoiding sleeping with her again.

He’d met Cassandra while working at a gym after moving to L.A. Every other male trainer worked overtime to land her as a client, including him. She’d denied him at first, but as usual his tenacity won out. It wasn’t long before their workouts began taking place out of the gym. He’d turned her on to his line of health food products,

which combined with his workout routines helped her get her already slim body down to Hollywood standards. After that she'd put all of her PR muscle into promoting him. She'd recommended him one of her clients, an R&B singer with roots in South Carolina who wanted to lose some baby weight. When that worked, his name was tossed around as a person who could make miracles in the gym. Before he knew it, he was the most preferred personal trainer in Hollywood. By then their sex life had run its course, but she'd stayed on to handle personal relations for his brand. She was the reason his products, gyms, and workouts received nationwide attention.

He reached over and squeezed her hand. He knew she wanted him back in L.A., but he meant what he said. He liked building his empire here, where things were more stable. Celebrities were fickle, and their love of him could be gone in a flash.

“Since you've already asked me to move back and I've said no, we can move on to your other reason for wanting to talk to me.”

She squeezed his hand back before pulling away. “I'm not giving up on you, but I guess I'll move on. I think you should consider placing some of your organic products at the new State Farmers Market.”

Jared sat back. He jerked at the tie he'd worn for the inspection and hastily untied it. “Really, why?”

“I've been working and I finally got the Department of Agriculture to award your products with the Certified South Carolina label. Since you use products grown in

South Carolina, it was a no brainer. With that certification, placement at the Farmers Market will introduce you to a line of customers you haven't reached before."

Jared threw the tie over the back of the chair and relaxed as he undid the top buttons of his shirt while considering Cassandra's suggestion. Since his facility was in an agricultural county, he had insisted on using products grown locally whenever possible. It not only saved on shipping costs, but the quality was better. The fruits, vegetables, and other ingredients were fresher since they weren't shipped half way across the country. It was a smart move on Cassandra's part to get the certification. He wished he'd thought of it first.

He nodded. "That's a good idea, Cassandra. Now I know why I hired you for PR."

Cassandra sucked her teeth and flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Don't play. You know I'm great at what I do."

Jared reached over and playfully tapped her chin. "Yes, you are." He stood, walked to the desk, and pulled out his duffle bag. He'd missed his morning workout due to the inspection and was anxious to change and get to the gym. He preferred working out in his personal gym, but since he was making rounds, it wouldn't hurt to combine his visit to his local franchise with his workout.

He pulled his shirt out of his waistband and finished unbuttoning it. When Cassandra whistled appreciatively as he pulled it off he gave her a grin. "Cut that mess out,

girl. I don't need your jolly green giant to come after me." Jared referred to Cassandra's boyfriend, a defensive end for the L.A. Raiders.

Cassandra stood. "Please, Ramon is the least of your worries."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm finished with him. It was fun while it lasted, but I'd rather be with a man who can talk about something other than Saturday morning cartoons."

Jared laughed. "What, all muscle, no depth?"

"Exactly." She walked over and ran a hand over his arm. "I need beauty and brains." Her eyes hinted he could fit the bill.

A few years ago he would have accepted her invitation, but he knew Cassandra too well. Beneath all of her gloss and sophistication, she was a woman looking for a stable relationship. She was his friend and he wouldn't take her up on that offer. Besides, he still couldn't shake the feeling that no one other than Tasha would satisfy him right now. He didn't want to think about why.

When he didn't reply she smiled slightly and let her arm drop. "I better go and get ready to catch my flight. I can work on placing your products in the Farmers Market from L.A., but I'll call if I need you to do anything on this end."

Jared was glad she didn't say anything about his brush off. "I can handle that. Call me when you land."

“Will do. Bye, lova.” She’d been calling him lova since their affair broke off years ago. She waved as she went out the door.

Jared hurried and changed, feeling much more relaxed and himself in basketball shorts and a cutoff t-shirt. He searched out Barry and thanked him for another job well done before going to his gym, Red Fitness.

When he’d first moved back to Columbia the local franchise was the first thing he’d overseen before plowing full steam on his production facility. Before Cassandra, his health food products were just a side hustle while he concentrated on building a name for himself as a personal trainer and fitness expert. He’d only been selling them to celebrities and a few health food stores, but she’d pushed to get them into Wal-Mart and Target. Once the big boxes placed his products, he’d quickly decided it would be smarter, and cheaper, to open a production facility in the south.

At Red Fitness he went straight to the general manager’s office. The gym was busy for a Wednesday afternoon. He looked at his watch and saw it was lunchtime, which explained the crowd. He met briefly with the general manager before starting a circuit around the gym.

Halfway through, he noticed a middle-aged man struggling with the equipment. Jared stopped his workout and went over to assist. Someone struggling with a workout today was the same person who gave up

working out tomorrow. After five minutes he'd introduced himself, learned the man was trying to lose the weight he'd put on after getting married a year ago, and hadn't worked out regularly since college. There was always an underlying reason why people either gained, or tried to lose, weight. Learning that reason was the key to ensuring his clients stuck to their goals.

Jared spent the rest of the hour working with him. During the course of the workout he'd discovered that the guy's wife had lost interest, something Jared wasn't surprised about. He hadn't come across a faithfully married woman in years. When they finished he offered the guy six weeks of free personal training. Despite his belief in the stupidity of marriage, the guy wanted his wife's attention again and Jared would help him try.

After he showered his phone rang. It was his friend Devin.

"What's going on, man?"

Devin groaned. "Nothing but a long day with no end in sight."

Jared laughed. "Why complain, doctor? Busy days mean more money."

"Easy for you to say. You don't have to see half the black population in this town." Devin was the only black doctor in Helena, a town on the outskirts of Kershaw County. It was where Devin had grown up, and he'd gone back to practice medicine after graduating from med school. Jared admired his friend for his dedication to his

hometown, because he would avoid moving back home like the plague.

Jared waved bye to his general manager and headed for the front of the gym. “You chose to practice in Mayberry, so don’t hate on the popularity.”

Devin laughed. “Never that. Look, I only have a minute before my next patient, so I’ll get to the point. I just found out about a basketball tournament in Columbia this weekend. One of my patients is trying to put together a team and I thought you, Malcolm, and I could play.”

Jared rubbed his jaw. “I’m not sure about a team that one of your patients is putting together. Can the brotha even play?”

“He’s not sick.”

“Then why is he seeing you?”

Devin chuckled. “For reasons I can’t say, but know this, I wouldn’t be playing with him if I didn’t think he could win. He played for Carolina back in the day. He’s good.”

Jared scoffed. “Now I know he’s sorry.” He was a strong Georgia Tech fan, having received his undergraduate degree from that very school.

“Blow that crap out your ass another day. You in?”

He would have usually jumped at the opportunity to play in a basketball tournament, but he didn’t want to cancel his weekend with Tasha. He was looking forward to it too much.

“It sounds like fun, but I have plans this weekend. I’ll have to catch y’all later.”

“Okay, I get it. What’s her name? Never mind, because I’ll never even meet her. Just cancel and tell her you’ll catch her after the tournament.”

Jared smiled. “I can’t cancel on this lady, Devin. It’s going to be a special weekend I don’t want to miss.” He looked at his watch again. “In fact, I’m on my way to take her flowers now.”

There was a silence on the other end of the phone and Jared called Devin’s name to be sure the call wasn’t dropped.

“Yeah, I’m still here,” Devin answered. “I just thought you said you were taking a woman flowers.”

Jared frowned. “It’s not like I’ve never given a woman flowers.”

“For as long as I’ve known you, you’ve never taken a woman flowers. You’ve already got a weekend lined up with this one, so why flowers? Are you getting serious?”

Jared laughed out loud. It drew the attention of a few people in the gym so he quickly exited and walked to his car. “Man, the day I get serious about a woman is the day you can call a psychiatrist to come and take me to the nut house. I’m just making it special for her.”

“Why? You’ve never cared before.”

Jared’s laugh died and he frowned. It wasn’t as if he’d been truly uncaring with the women he’d been with in the past he just made sure they understood he wasn’t

looking for any commitments. Devin talked as if he was cold blooded. He had been pretty cold to Monica, but she'd crossed the line. But he liked Tasha, and respected her. He couldn't treat her like any other chick off the street.

“Tasha's cool. She's not like the usual ladies I deal with, so she gets a bit more respect.”

Devin didn't immediately respond, but Jared could picture his friend with his brow furled as he considered that. “This should be interesting to see pan out.”

“Excuse me?” Jared asked.

There was rustling on the other end of the line. “Nothing, man. Handle your business. Look, my next patient has arrived. It seems like it'll just be me and Malcolm this weekend. Holla at me when you get time.”

“No problem. Good luck this weekend, all right?”

“Cool. Peace.” Devin hung up the phone.

Jared got into his car and sped out of the parking lot. He hadn't considered taking Tasha flowers until he'd said it to Devin. He wanted to see her. He still planned to wait for the weekend, but nothing could prevent him from trying for a kiss or something. He smiled as he thought of her lips on his. Yeah, it wouldn't hurt to go by her job and see her. Get her just as excited about their weekend as he was.

CHAPTER 8

“Excuse me, I’m looking for Tasha Smith.”

Tasha froze in the middle of filing papers in her office. What was Jared doing here? It was too early for his mentoring session. That happened at six and it was barely three. Her excitement at seeing him was dampened by the thought that he’d changed his mind. She peeked around the corner as her high school intern, Latiffa, answered.

“Hello, Mr. Patterson. I mean Jared. Do you care if I call you Jared? I know you don’t care, because you’re cool like that. I heard you started out here at the Rec Commission, way back when. I mean ... I don’t mean that you are old or anything. Just that you started in the nineties and that was like a while ago. My bad. I mean, you’re still fine as hell ... how old are you, anyway?”

Jared chuckled. “Too old for you.”

Latiffa leaned over the counter. “I’m old enough.”

Tasha slammed her file cabinet closed and came out of her office. “That’s enough, Latiffa.” She glared at the young girl. “We didn’t give you this job to hit on every man that comes in the door.”

Latiffa lowered her eyes. “I know, but dang, Ms. Tasha. Look at him.”

Tasha rolled her eyes and finally looked at Jared. Damn, why did he have to look so good? He licked his lips before they spread into a sexy smile. There was a promise in his eyes that left her breathless. Tasha cleared her throat and broke eye contact. “Jared Patterson knows how he looks. He doesn’t need me, or you, telling him.”

Jared leaned on the desk and winked at Latiffa. “I don’t know, Tasha. I don’t think you’ve ever told me your thoughts on my looks. Maybe I should take off my shirt, flex a few muscles, and you can give me thumbs up or down.”

Latiffa’s eyes sparkled like Christmas lights. “Oh, will you!”

“No, he won’t.” Tasha glared at Jared. “Did you have a reason for being here?”

He stood and nodded. “Yeah, I came to see you.”

Her heart sped up. “Why?”

He glanced at Latiffa before answering. “I had a question about one of my mentees. Can we go in your office?”

She nodded. “Sure. Follow me.”

Jared came around the desk but stopped at her door. He tapped the door’s glass window, then glanced at her. “You know what? I haven’t seen the renovations to

the gym. Why don't you show me and we can talk on the way."

Tasha frowned and put a hand on her hip. "Jared, I have some stuff to put together for the budget hearing next week. We can talk here and then I'll get someone else to show you the gym."

He stepped closer and lowered his voice. "I would prefer talking to you alone." His eyes went back to her mouth before returning to her eyes. "I promised discretion, but if you don't come with me I'm going to kiss you right here in the middle of the office."

Her eyes widened and she took a quick step back. With just a few words, her annoyance melted into a delightful tingling. Humor reflected in his eyes. He was teasing her again. Her anger returned full force. She squared her shoulders and scowled. "Fine. Let's go." She brushed passed him, knocking him with her shoulder in order to push him out of the way.

As she hurried out of the office and down the hall toward the gym, she fought the urge to slap the smug smile from his face the moment they were alone. How dare he come to her job, in the middle of the day, and look at her as if he wanted to devour her. She'd picked him for his discretion, but apparently, he didn't care about showing the entire world they would be sleeping together.

It didn't help that he came here looking like he'd just tumbled out of bed. Did the man own anything other

than basketball shorts and t-shirts? Just the sight of his well-formed biceps was enough to get her blood boiling.

“Why are you here?” she asked without turning to look at him.

When she didn't get an answer, she stopped and spun around. The hall was empty. She was about to call out his name when he came around the corner, grabbed her arm, and pulled her down the corridor they'd just passed.

“This isn't the way to the gym. What are you doing?”

He didn't say anything, just looked to see if they were being followed. She tried to dig in her heels and stop him, but it was no use. He just tugged on her arm and pulled her along as if she weighed nothing. He turned suddenly to the right and pulled her into an empty classroom. It was the room they used for the evening aerobics class.

Jared looked at the door and cursed. “I forgot every damn room in this building has a window.”

Tasha tried to pull her hand free. “Why does it matter if we have windows on the doors?”

He pulled her to the left of the door and pressed her against the wall. As soon as she felt the heat from his body her protest died on her lips. It was as if the air had been sucked from the room. She knew he was only pursuing her as a favor, but when he looked at her as if she were the most desirable woman in the world common sense left.

Jared ran the back of his hand along the side of her face before using his thumb to trace her lower lip. Without thinking, she poked her tongue out to wet her lips. His eyes grew dark with desire and he brought his other hand up to run his fingers in her hair. It was in its usual ponytail and he made quick work of removing the clip holding it back. Tasha sighed with relief when the pressure from the clip was removed. He ran his fingers along her scalp, massaging with strong sure strokes. Tasha closed her eyes and let her head fall back.

When his lips touched hers, she didn't fight it. He kissed her softly before running his tongue along her lower lip. Without hesitation, she opened her mouth and granted him access. Passion erupted as he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her as if he couldn't get enough. He slowed down and pulled back, but she grabbed him by the waist and pulled him closer. His hands went back into her hair and he angled her head to kiss her again.

His desire pressed thickly against her belly. If they kept doing what they were doing, she'd be willing to drop her shorts and let him make short work of her virginity right here. But that wasn't what she wanted. He'd swept in and taken control. He was overwhelming her senses and she was being taken for a ride. Control, she had to reestablish control.

She abruptly broke off the kiss and turned her face to the side. Undeterred, Jared kissed her jaw, ear, and neck. His sensual assault was going full swing and she

was about to be a causality of a war she didn't know how to fight.

“Jared, we've got to stop,” she said between gasps.

“I know,” he replied, but didn't stop kissing and sucking on her neck.

She reached up to place her hands on his chest to push him away, but he brought his lips back to her ear and traced his tongue around the sensitive edge. With a moan, she turned to kiss him again.

She was floating in a haze of desire and once again she was about to forget all of the reasons why she needed to stay in control. Why not let him take the lead? That was why she picked him, wasn't it? Why not lose herself in the experience of being with Jared Patterson? *Because once you're lost in him, you'll never find yourself. Or a husband.*

Tasha broke the kiss and pushed him away. When he groaned and reached for her she darted out of his reach and tried to catch her breath. He rested his head on the wall briefly before turning it to look at her from the corner of his eye. When he bit his lower lip and let his eyes travel the length of her body she thought she'd burst into flames.

“Stop it. You can't just show up here and kiss me senseless. This isn't what I asked for,” she said.

He didn't lift his head from the wall. “You chose me for a reason.”

“I know, but not for all of this. Just for one night, which you’ve turned into one weekend. I just need to lose my virginity, that’s it.” She couldn’t believe she could say that with a straight face. Not when her breasts were aching, her nipples were tingling, and there was wetness between her legs.

He turned his body and rested his shoulder against the wall. “I came to bring you flowers.”

She frowned and shook her head. “What? Why? There’s no need for all of that.”

He ran his hand over his face. “Don’t ask why. I’ve never taken a woman flowers. I thought it would make ... I don’t know what I thought.”

His discomfort was endearing. She’d never thought she’d see Jared unsure of himself. “Where are the flowers?”

“In the car.”

She laughed. “Why are they in the car?”

He grinned at her. “I was trying to be discreet. Obviously, I’m not doing a good job at that.”

She shook her head and combed her hair with her fingers. “Well. At least you picked an empty room.”

He pushed away from the wall and brought her hair clip over. “Score one for me.”

She snatched the clip from his hands. “This isn’t a competition.” She turned from him and put her hair back

into a ponytail. She was being sensitive, but it felt like she was losing and she didn't want this to be a game.

He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her against his chest. She held her body stiff until he kissed the top of her head. She relaxed into him.

“I know it's not a game, Tasha. That's why I'm trying to make it special. I'm sorry I showed up and attacked you in the aerobics room. I just wanted a taste of those lips.”

It would be so easy to get used to this. Their bodies fit together too easily, as if they were made for each other. Where the hell had *that* come from? She wasn't made for Jared Patterson. She didn't even want a man like him. He was only good for one thing and that was taking her virginity.

She pulled away and turned to face him. “Is it true that you like to eat downtown?”

He frowned. “Downtown Columbia?”

“No, I mean, is it true that you like to eat ...” Her voice trailed off and her face burned with embarrassment. Unable to finish, she pointed between her legs.

Comprehension dawned on his face and a sly grin split his full lips. “I do enjoy that, with the right woman. I don't eat at anyone's table. But I have a feeling I'm going to want a taste of everything you have to offer.”

Her panties became wetter, but she straightened her spine. “Good. It'll be nice to have a comparison.”

The smug smile dropped from his face. “Comparison to what?”

She lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. “I’m not as innocent as I look. I have had certain things done to me and I was ... curious to see if ... all men did it the same.” She could barely meet his eye her embarrassment was so great, but it was worth the look on his face.

He stepped closer, his shoulders rigid. “What the hell are you talking about?”

It was her turn to smile slyly. “You’ll be the first man inside of me, but you won’t be the first man to pleasure me. Remember that when you think you can come around and play games. I’m not just some dumb virgin.”

She left him with his mouth hanging open. It served him right. Just because he was going to be her first didn’t mean she would let him treat her like a puppet on a string. She hadn’t exactly lied. Her boyfriend in high school had tried that on her once as an alternative to sex. It had been awkward and uncomfortable, but Jared didn’t need to know that. All he needed to know was that he wasn’t the only man in the world who could pleasure her. And he damn sure wasn’t going to be the last.

CHAPTER 9

Unsure of when Jared wanted to leave for Charleston, Tasha took Friday off. After she'd thrown her limited experience in his face, she wondered if he'd show up. She hadn't called him to confirm their plans, and neither had he. The bravado she felt after speaking to Shayla had vanished. She'd read all of the erotica in her library, which consisted of the one book from Shayla, but couldn't imagine doing those things with Jared. Getting Jared to take her virginity was one thing. Sharing all types of intimacies should be reserved for her husband. She doubted Jared would see it that way.

While Jared hadn't called, her mother had — constantly, since Tasha had told her she was going out of town this weekend. She wasn't foolish enough say she was going out of town with a man, opting instead to say she had to go to a conference in Charleston for work. It was hard to break her family's tradition of getting together for birthdays, but a part of her was happy for the excuse. It was bad enough she was turning thirty without a husband, but to bring in the next decade with cake and ice cream with her mom and dad was depressing.

After cleaning all morning with still no word from Jared, she was starting to think he had changed his mind when her cell phone vibrated, alerting her of a text.

I'll be there around 3. JP

She let out an unsteady breath. She had four hours to occupy herself before he showed up. She wrung her hands in front of her and chewed on her lip. This was a bad idea. She'd waited her entire life for the right man to give her virginity to, only to casually sleep with a known player over the weekend. It was reckless, stupid, and way too impulsive. If she met a man she wanted to marry later, what would she bring to the table now other than the fact that she was Jared Patterson's leftovers? Another notch on the belt of the fitness trainer and entrepreneur who slept with half of the women in South Carolina? What man would want those sloppy seconds?

Her finger hovered over the call back icon on her phone display. She would call Jared, tell him this was a mistake, and continue to wait.

She didn't press the button.

Wait for what? Wait for the next guy she dated to become excited with the thought of deflowering a virgin, or break things off as soon as he discovered she was saving herself for marriage? She'd done that for thirty years. Whomever she married didn't have to know who she'd slept with in the past. Jared promised discretion. Although he'd shown up at her job this week, she doubted he would do that again. He was only doing this as a favor to her, not because he was overcome with the

urge to sleep with her. He was notorious for one-night stands. From what she'd heard, he rarely slept with the same woman for an extended period of time.

Her head cocked to the side as she considered that. Why did he switch from woman to woman so much? Could he really be that much of a lothario that he wanted to sleep with every woman he came in contact with?

Tasha shook her head. It didn't matter why he slept with the women he did, or why he stayed away from long-term relationships. His experience was the reason she'd chosen him. He knew what he was doing, would be discreet, and would make sure she enjoyed it.

Warmth spread through her body as she remembered the way he'd looked at her on Wednesday. He appeared as affected by the desire between them as she was. She agreed with Shayla he must want her a little bit. He may not have wanted her before, but he wanted her now. And if she didn't want the same situation her sister had, losing her virginity to a man who'd only pretended to care, then it made more sense to control the situation.

Feeling somewhat better, if not calmer, Tasha stood and went through her kitchen out the back door. Weeding her vegetable garden would distract her for an hour or two. She'd packed the night before, and really had nothing left to do to prepare for the weekend. A few hours tending her tomatoes, squash, and cucumbers would keep her from changing her mind yet again.

The outside air was warm without a trace of humidity as she walked into her backyard. The one tall oak tree in the middle of the yard cast shade on her porch, and the smell of the potted marigolds on her patio greeted her. Smiling, she walked to the garden along the privacy fence in her yard. These were the types of days when she preferred being at home instead of in her office. It was too beautiful outside to be stuck behind walls.

After getting her tools from the shed, she started pulling weeds from between the still growing plants. Before long, her mind began to clear as she focused on the joy of feeling dirt on her hands as she worked.

Shortly after she started a person's shadow covered her. She spun and held her trowel out in front of her, but the sudden movement from a crouched position caused her to fall awkwardly onto her ass. The sun behind him prevented her from seeing his face, but she knew it was Jared.

"You scared the crap out of me," she said with her hand over her pounding heart. "What are you doing here already? It's not three."

Jared reached down and pulled her up. A shot of electricity shot from where his hand clasped hers straight to her belly. She snatched it away and took a step back, only to step on one of her tomatoes.

If he felt it, he didn't show. He only stood there scowling at her. "Who are you comparing me to?"

Tasha returned his scowl. “What? You came here early and scared me half to death to ask who I’m comparing you to?”

He stepped closer. “Let’s get one thing straight. You’re not to compare me to anyone. When we’re together, the only person you’re supposed to think about is me. Don’t bring up another guy’s name when we’re together.”

Anger bubbled hot in Tasha’s belly. She reached out and shoved his chest with every ounce of strength she had. Caught off balance, Jared fell backwards into a pile of weeds. She put one leg on either side of his hips, stood over him and pointed a finger in his face.

“*You* need to get a couple of things straight. Number one, I’m not one of your groupies, so don’t talk to me like I should be privileged to sleep with you. Half of the women in South Carolina and California have slept with you so believe me, it’s not like it’s hard to do. Number two, stop trying to take advantage of the fact that I’m a virgin. My experience with men is limited, but I know enough to see that you want me. Badly. But I’m not going to let you take control of everything and get me all mixed up. Number three, there will be no more ‘when I’m with you’ after this weekend. I need a favor from you — that’s it.”

Jared stared at her for a few seconds before shaking his head and laughing. “I can’t believe you pushed me down.”

Tasha crossed her arms and tapped her foot.
“Believe it. And if you come around making demands of me, or trying to kiss me senseless again, I’m going to do more than that.”

He stopped laughing and looked at her seriously.
“I’m sorry, Tasha. I didn’t mean to try and take advantage of the situation.” She raised an eyebrow, and he rubbed his jaw. “Okay, I did. You’re right. I do want you, badly. And when I want a woman I let her know.”

His voice rang with sincerity while desire crept into his dark eyes. Some of her anger subsided as her body heated in response. How did he make her go from boiling mad to lustful with just a look?

Her body relaxed slightly and he took advantage. He grabbed her arm and pulled her down on top of him before she could blink an eye. He didn’t flinch when she landed heavily on top of him.

“You want me too, Tasha. Don’t you?”

Get up and tell him that you’ve changed your mind, she thought. But the hardness of his body underneath hers, and the thickness of his erection rising against her stomach, chased that thought out of her head. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

“Yes, I want you, Jared, but not like this.”

He smiled. “I don’t plan to fuck you on the ground in your backyard.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not talking about on the ground. I need you to stop being Jared the playboy and

just be the Jared I see on occasion at the Rec Commission.”

“I thought you chose me for the playboy side,” he said with a wink.

“I did, but it’s too much for me. I like the Jared who teases me about being anal with the mentor attendance logs, or the Jared who lets me twist his arm into judging the senior Olympics. I’ve always respected that when we’re together you don’t treat me like one of your playthings. You treated me with respect. That mutual respect was why I chose you. I can’t do this if you keep treating me like another woman off the street.”

Jared closed his eyes before rolling to his side and lifting her up as he stood. When they were back on their feet, he stepped away from her. “In my life women fit into two distinct categories. The ones I’m fucking and the ones I’m not. I never thought you’d be in the former category, but once you were, a switch went off in my head. This is new to me. I don’t sleep with female friends.”

“It’s new to me too. Brand new. I need my friend to do this ... please.”

She held her breath. He had the look of a toddler who’d just been told they couldn’t have cookies before dinner. He may have known her words made sense, but she doubted he was happy with it.

“I don’t know if I can do it,” he held up his hand when she started to interrupt, “without ever slipping back into old habits. But I’ll try.” He reached over to hold

her hand and pull her against him. “Now that I’ve gotten a taste, I don’t want to mess things up and miss my chance. But if I make you uncomfortable, let me know.”

Tasha stared into his eyes and her heart melted. He looked so sweet, and tempting as hell. It was easy to see why women fell at his feet.

“I’ll let you know,” she whispered.

“Good.” He rubbed his erection against her. “Am I making you uncomfortable?”

She trembled, but shook her head.

He squeezed her hips. “Good. I came early because I had to kiss you.”

This was going too far. They felt too familiar, too right. But it was only for one weekend. What would it hurt to indulge herself once? “Then do it.”

Before the words finished leaving her mouth his lips met hers. It was just like before, an explosion of heat and electricity. She didn’t hesitate to open her lips and grant his tongue entrance. He kissed her until her knees went weak. When she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, a groan rumbled through his chest. He slowly broke the kiss, but didn’t push her away.

“We can leave for Charleston, or go inside to your bedroom,” he said. She tried to push away from him, but his arms tightened around her. “I’m only teasing, Tasha. We can leave whenever you’re ready.”

Heat filled her face but she smiled. “I need to take a shower, then we can go.”

He nodded and finally let her go. “I’ll wait in your living room.”

Tasha ignored her disappointment when he didn’t offer to join her. That would have only freaked her out, but she already missed his aggression. It was a definite turn on, but not what she needed. She just needed to get through this weekend with her sanity intact.

“I’ll put these things up first.” She motioned to her garden tools on the ground.

“I’ll put them in your shed. You go take the shower. I’m anxious to get out of town.” He winked at her.

Tasha’s heart sped up. She hoped she could survive this weekend.

CHAPTER 10

While Tasha showered, Jared looked around her house. It could be considered snooping, but he didn't care. He wanted to know more about the personal side of Tasha. He'd always dealt with her professionally, and had intentionally never hit on her, so he knew little about what she liked outside of work. It was surprising that his professional treatment of her factored into her decision to sleep with him.

The moment he'd decided to sleep with her he'd begun treating her like any other woman he slept with. How was he to know she would view it as him not respecting her? It was true he had little respect for the women he slept with — they were always throwing themselves at him, going after his money, or were so easy to catch he treated them like the gold diggers they were. The only woman to ever go from lover to friend was Cassandra, and that was because she'd insisted on helping his career once their affair was over. Once she moved to the professional category, he no longer treated her like a conquest. But the sex also stopped, so there was no way to confuse the lines. Tasha asked him to blur his lines. He didn't respect his lovers, and he didn't sleep

with friends or colleagues. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to respect Tasha's wishes, but he wanted her enough to try.

Her home was nicely decorated with a lived-in feel. The things there showed pieces of Tasha. The stack of books on her coffee table told him that she liked reading in front of the TV. A sweatshirt was tossed over the end of her sofa with a pair of reading glasses on them. Pictures of her family were all over the house — one shelf of her bookcase was dedicated to her sister's wedding and another shelf was filled with pictures of her nieces. Another sign she wanted a family.

He took his perusal into her kitchen. There was a teacup and saucer in the sink, and mail littered her kitchen table. He smiled when he saw the recycling bin next to the trashcan. Malcolm and Kenyatta would like her just because she recycled and grew her own vegetables.

Where did that come from? It didn't matter if his brother and his fiancée liked Tasha. Things wouldn't go so far she would be introduced to his family.

Shaking off that thought Jared turned to leave the kitchen and ran right into Tasha. He reached out to steady her but quickly pulled his hands away. Touching her did strange things to his body. If he was going to remember her request, he would have to limit touching her until they got to Charleston.

“That was a quick shower.” His eyes assessed her. He'd only seen her dressed in Rec Commission uniforms

or jeans. But today she wore a white and gold sundress. The thin material hung from her body, clinging to her curves in just the right places and stopped just above her feet. Her hair wasn't in the usual ponytail. Instead, the curls hung loosely around her shoulders. His groin tightened and he had to fight to breath. She looked beautiful.

“I didn't want to linger and give you a reason to come looking for me.”

He cleared his throat. “Is there anything you needed to do before we leave?”

She shook her head. “No, I'm packed and ready to go.”

They stood there looking at each other. Jared felt like a teenager on his first date. He still wanted her, but now that he was respecting her wish to not lump her in the category of the other women he slept with, he wasn't sure how to proceed.

Tasha smiled and pushed her hair behind her ears. “I'll get my bag.” She turned and disappeared down the hall.

Feeling foolish, Jared ran his hand over his face. This wasn't a big deal. They were just going to go down to Charleston, sleep together, and come back. He'd taken plenty of women to his condo; this was no different. Except none of those women were virgins and none of those women drove him mad with desire.

He went into the living room just as Tasha came back down the hall rolling a small duffle bag behind her. It was a good thing she hadn't packed a lot of clothes because he planned on keeping her naked for most of the weekend. The thought sent his dick from half swollen to rock hard.

Tasha froze at the end of the hall. He continued to stare as he willed himself not to drag her back down the hall to her bedroom. She looked unsure for a second before dropping the bag and coming over to him. He held his breath as she reached up to pull his head down. Her eyes closed as she pressed her lips against his. Without a second thought, he squeezed her body and took over the kiss. He didn't know how long they were wrapped in each other, but she was the one to finally break the kiss.

"You looked as if you didn't know whether to devour me or run out the door," she said against his chest. "I thought I'd ease the tension a bit."

Jared smiled and kissed the top of her head. "You only created another type of tension." He pushed her away and walked over to pick up her duffle bag. "Lock up and I'll meet you at the car." He walked outside without touching her again.

Two minutes later Tasha came out. He'd already put her bag in the back of his car and was sitting in the driver's seat. When she got in, the fresh scent of whatever she'd used in the shower filled his car. Again, he appreciated it more than the fruit- or flower-scented

perfumes most women wore. When she fastened her seatbelt, he pulled away from the curb and drove toward the interstate.

He didn't start a conversation, and she remained silent. The tension was so thick he was surprised it didn't smother them. Maybe this was a bad idea. He didn't know how to treat Tasha like a friend *and* lover. As much as he wanted to slide himself deep inside of her, he was beginning to doubt if he could do this.

He gripped the steering wheel and opened his mouth to tell her that when she reached over and punched his arm. "Red Volkswagen," she said with a smile.

He'd barely felt her punch, but he rubbed the spot. "You can't be serious."

Tasha laughed and the sound washed over him. He wanted to hear her laugh more. "You bet I am. And if I see another one, I'm gonna hit you again."

"Don't start a game you can't win. And don't think that I'll take it easy on you because you're a girl."

She cut her eyes at him. "Excuse me? I don't think you understand I hold the championship title in my family. By Sunday you'll be begging me to quit. I can spot a Volkswagen from a mile away."

"You may have held the title, but that was before you challenged me, sweetheart. You see, my brother had to get a sling for his arm after I tore him up on a trip to D.C. when we were kids."

Unfazed by his claim Tasha rolled her eyes. “We’ll see who needs the sling.” As if fated, a yellow Beetle glided into traffic. “Yellow!” Tasha reached over and hit his arm again before he could open his mouth.

Laughing, Jared shook his head. This weekend was going to be more interesting than he thought.

CHAPTER 11

Tasha loved Charleston. The smell of the harbor, the historic buildings, the epitome of Southern lifestyle all combined to make Charleston one of her favorite cities. Even though she was only a ninety-minute drive from the beautiful city, she hardly had time to visit. Charleston was a place for lovers, and being a single virgin made it hard for her to come alone. The last time she'd visited was two years ago for a family reunion. Although she'd loved walking through downtown with her family, she'd still felt a pang of longing as she watched all of the couples in her family hold hands and chase after their kids along those cobbled streets.

She'd imagined visiting here often when she was married, but never had she expected to be here with a man just to have sex. It was the total opposite of every daydream she'd had about coming here. Charleston wasn't a place for weekend flings or unattached sex. It wasn't Las Vegas. But Jared had chosen the city she associated with romance as the place for their encounter. She wasn't going to tell him how strongly her feelings were attached to the place and make a weird situation worse.

She'd done all she could to break the tension in the car. Playing travel games was something she'd done as a child to pass the time. It had seemed like the easiest thing to do to take both of their minds off why they were coming, as if that were possible. She didn't know why, but she could tell her request had rattled him. Jared treated most women as interchangeable playthings — she wasn't much better since she was using him for sex — but it was her first time and she wanted it to be somewhat special.

She hadn't expected him to take her to Motel 6, but she couldn't hide her surprise when he pulled into a garage for a condominium on Broad Street in Charleston's French Quarter.

“You rented a condo?”

He cut the engine and winked. “I bought this condo last year just for the view of the harbor at sunrise.”

“I never would have thought you had a romantic streak.”

His head snapped back. “What's romantic about that?”

She laughed. “Don't get all wrapped up about it. Just the fact that you bought this place so you can watch the sunrise over the harbor is almost poetic.”

“Well, don't tell my brother or best friend. If they hear the word poetic and my name in the same sentence I'll never live it down.”

They got out of the car and Jared grabbed their bags out of the back. The lobby had an elegant modern décor, with tall ceilings that filled the area with light.

He punched in a code for the elevator and Tasha's heart did a tap dance in her chest as they rode to the top floor. It was time. They were finally here. He was going to officially deflower her. Her palms grew sweaty with anxiety and excitement. She did want this, there was no use denying it, but was she really ready for it?

Jared turned and squeezed her hand. "Let's go."

She nodded stiffly and followed him off the elevator. Her stomach was tied in so many knots she couldn't appreciate the panoramic views of downtown Charleston and the Cooper River. Her feet carried her through the tastefully furnished living room to the bedroom. A massive king bed sat in the middle of the room facing large windows that overlooked the harbor. She swallowed hard. Another altar for the god of sex where she would be sacrificed. Would he want to do it immediately? The way he'd looked at her at her house, as if he wanted to pounce on her, flashed through her mind. He'd almost sexed her in the middle of her vegetable garden. There was no denying he'd want to do it as soon as possible.

Her hands trembled and her breath came in short pants. She took a step backward and collided with his chest. Her body jerked and she tried to move away but his hands came up instantly to grab her forearms and pull her against his body. His erection pressed against

her buttocks and despite her anxiety, desire languidly slid throughout her. It was time to get it over with. She reached up to the straps of her dress and began to push it off her shoulders.

Jared's hands came up to stop her and she stiffened in his arms. Why drag this out? Why increase her anxiety? She wanted to lose her virginity and she wanted to lose it now.

He moved a hand from her shoulder and placed it against her chest, right above her breasts, before leaning over to kiss her ear. "Your heart is pounding."

Still breathing as if she'd run a marathon, Tasha opened her mouth to answer but nothing came out.

"I'm not going to pounce on you, Tasha. I told you I wanted to make this special for you and jumping you the minute we enter my condo is not the way to do that."

She swallowed loudly and took a few more breaths before she could talk. "Why keep waiting? It's obvious we both want this, we're here, the bed's ready, let's get it over with."

The rumble of his laugh against her back caused her to stiffen. "There are many things I want you to say before we have sex, but *let's get it over with* isn't one of them." He kissed her ear again before slowly trailing kisses down the side of her neck. When he softly sucked on the sensitive spot where her neck and shoulders met her tension evaporated. His hand slid beneath her dress to cup her breast, which was bare beneath the v-neck. Her knees buckled when he took the nipple between his

forefinger and thumb and squeezed gently. His other hand shot around her waist to hold her against him. “This is your weekend, Tasha. You asked me here as a friend, so I’m treating you like a friend and will let you decide when the time is right. If you hadn’t dragged that promise out of me, I’d have you naked and on top of that bed right now. So when you’re ready just tell me. Today or Sunday, it doesn’t matter. Okay?”

She nodded and he squeezed her breast again. “Right now, I think we should eat,” he said. His hand slowly slid away from her breast and she trembled as his fingers brushed across her nipple. He hesitated only a second before letting her go and turning her to face him. Desire burned hot in his eyes, and she looked for signs that he was upset about her hesitancy. She was the one who’d asked him, and kissed him like a maniac before leaving Columbia, so he had every right to be frustrated with her.

He leaned over and brushed his lips briefly across hers before chuckling.

“Why are you laughing?” she asked.

He brought her hand to his lips. “Because, I can’t believe I just told you that. Malcolm would have a heart attack if he could see me now.”

She nodded. “This friend and lover thing is new to you, but don’t worry, it’s only for one weekend.”

Disappointment flashed in his eyes so briefly she couldn’t be sure if it was really there. Regardless of what he may think, this couldn’t last more than a weekend.

Once her virginity was gone, she could start looking for a husband. Jared was the last man she needed to keep around if she wanted to get married.

Instead of replying to her comment, he tugged on her arm. “Come on. Let’s go eat before I say anything else that can be classified as romantic, noble, or decent.”

She laughed and followed him out.

CHAPTER 12

Jared cursed himself a thousand times as he and Tasha walked along the pier in Waterfront Park. He couldn't believe he'd told her they didn't have to sleep together until Sunday. He was really acting like a punk. The minute he'd seen her standing in the bedroom he'd wanted her, but her racing heart and stiff body had gotten to him. He knew she wanted him too, but he didn't want to rush her first time. Still, the amount of lust coursing through him was playing havoc with his patience.

He could have easily overcome her anxiety — the way her body melted when he kissed her neck told him that — but he wanted her to come to him, the same way she had at the park and in her house before they left: without hesitancy. But to give her until Sunday to relax and come to him was a bit much.

He walked behind her on purpose. His eyes followed the soft sway of her hips beneath her dress. He would have a serious case of blue balls if she wasn't ready until Sunday. There weren't any panty lines visible beneath her dress. His erection had doubled in size when he'd felt her bare breast earlier. Did she just slip out of the shower

and into that dress? All he had to do was slide it up and glide himself right into her wetness.

Jared groaned and she turned to face him with a frown. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m good.”

“Then why are you groaning?”

“Just thinking about something I need to do for my product line. We’re trying to get my line at the Farmers Market and I forgot to update the superintendent.” He lied easily. One good thing about being a player was he could come up with quick excuses. He ignored the twist in his stomach at the thought of playing Tasha. That wasn’t what he was trying to do with her.

She smiled and walked over to lean on the rail overlooking the river. “That’s one of the things I like about you. You’ve always pursued your dream with tenacity. Even way back when I first met you and you were just starting out as a personal trainer, you pushed your services and your fitness ideas with such enthusiasm.”

Jared rubbed his jaw as he walked to stand beside her at the rail. “You make me sound like some hustler.”

“Not like that. I just mean I could tell you really believed in yourself and what you were offering. Plus you care about your clients. You never were just another muscle head leading people from machine to machine. You want them to succeed. I knew you would be successful one day. I just didn’t realize how successful.”

He turned to look at the harbor. “I’m doing okay.”

“Okay?” she said with a laugh. “You have an infomercial.”

“Sales ad,” he quipped.

She rolled her eyes. “Infomercial, and from what I hear it rivals the top selling workouts in sales and intensity. You recently launched your product in two large retailers, and you own a huge production facility. And let’s not forget the gym franchise.”

“It’s only a few dozen gyms.”

She playfully hit his shoulder. “Will you stop being modest, it doesn’t suit you, Casanova. On the real, I’m proud of what you’ve done. It’s a testament to you and your skills.”

As Jared looked at Tasha’s upturned face there was a tightening near his heart. He’d had women praise his workouts, looks, and dick size, but never his skills outside of the gym or bedroom — two of his best rooms if anyone were to ask. Until that moment, he hadn’t believed her when she said she’d picked him because she respected what he did. He’d assumed she was like the other women he knew that wanted him in their bed.

The sunlight brought out red highlights in her curly hair and he couldn’t resist the urge to play with a tendril that blew softly in the breeze.

He leaned down and softly kissed her. “Thank you,” he said.

She blushed but didn’t pull away. “You’re welcome.”

He ran his hand across her cheek and studied her face. He may have given her until Sunday to say “let’s get it on” but that didn’t mean he couldn’t try to speed her along. And right now, the only thing he wanted to do was kiss her until she insisted they forget food and go back to his condo.

“Let’s get something to eat,” he told her, but didn’t remove his hand from her face.

“Then let’s go back to your place.”

“Are you sure?”

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him again. “Yes.”

To hell with food, was Jared’s immediate thought. He could always order something afterwards. *Calm down, man. At least now you know you won’t have to wait until Sunday.*

“How about we get something quick?” he said.

“What do you want to eat?”

“You.” It was an automatic response.

She blinked a few times before lowering her eyes.

“That won’t fill you up.”

He stepped close. “We’ll both be satisfied once I’m done.”

Tasha turned to lean on the rail. The wind blew the hair away from her face and the humid smell of the river drifted over them. “I doubt it. I don’t see what the fuss is about. It’s messy for men and uncomfortable for women. The entire act is overrated.”

Jared laughed loud enough to draw the attention of a few passersby. “Are you sure you’ve done it before? Or were you only trying to get to me?”

Tasha looked around before whispering. “I’ve done it before. I just didn’t like it.”

“Who was he?”

She shrugged as if it were no big deal. “My high school boyfriend.”

Jared waved his hand dismissively. “That’s the problem. We don’t know what we’re doing in high school. He probably went at it like he was eating an apple.”

“More like a dog lapping water from a bowl,” she said with a shudder.

He chuckled. “Even worse.”

She turned and placed a hand on her hip. “What makes you so good? The act is the same no matter who’s doing it.”

Jared leaned over and lowered his voice. “Because I don’t *eat* it. I kiss it. I use my tongue, teeth, and lips to taste, kiss, and savor every drop of goodness coming from you.”

The cockiness of male pride filled his chest when her breathing increased. He knew she wanted to know if he could do it better, and he was absolutely certain he could. She licked her lips and his tongue itched to retrace her actions.

She looked at him and he almost lost himself in her honey colored eyes. “You said you only do it with the right people. What makes me right?”

Jared couldn't answer that question. He hadn't kissed a woman's lower lips since a Hollywood writer had decided to give a play-by-play of his technique on her blog six months ago. The blog had caused women to throw themselves at him for over a month, but they were all disappointed. He didn't like his business in the street and wasn't going to give another woman fuel.

But ever since Tasha had come to him with her request, he couldn't stop himself from wanting to taste her. He wanted to see her face when he gave her the ultimate lovers' kiss, and feel her body climax around his tongue. She didn't need to know how much he craved it — he didn't understand it himself.

“I want to introduce you to your sexuality. I can't hold back any of my techniques if I were to do that,” he said.

She frowned and he loved the way her nose crinkled up. “Maybe you shouldn't do that. I should save something for my husband.”

Jared checked his annoyance at the mention of a non-existent husband. “Number one, you have to know what you like so that you can tell your husband.”

“He'll know what to do.”

“Men aren't mind readers, Tasha. You have to say what you like, otherwise he's going in blind. Just like

your high school sweetheart. Number two, you love my kisses and I know you want me to kiss you everywhere.” He ran his hand slowly down her arm. Goose bumps raised on her soft skin, sending his already heated body went into overdrive.

He bit back a smile — her thoughts were back on him.

“I wouldn’t say that I love your kisses,” she said softly.

“Well, I damn sure like yours.” He pulled her close and lowered his lips to hers. He couldn’t get enough of kissing her. He didn’t care that they were on the harbor surrounded by tourists. He’d ignored Monica’s calls offering easy ass ever since Tasha asked him to take her virginity, and he could barely walk straight from the constant arousal. He’d be damned if he got through the weekend without her feeling the same.

His tongue glided back and forth over the fullness of her lower lip until she opened her mouth with a sigh. Wasting no time at all, his tongue slipped past her lips to kiss her fully. He loved every inch of her mouth until she was weak and clinging to him. Thoughts of doing the same to every fold of her lower lips caused his dick to throb and he pressed it against her, letting her feel just how hard she’d made him.

“Get a room,” somebody called out.

Tasha stiffened and tried to pull away but he didn’t let her. Instead, he leisurely ended the kiss, sucking gently on her lower lip before gradually letting it slide

between his lips. Her eyes were like molten pools of caramel as she stared up at him. Damn, if they weren't so exposed he'd hike up her dress and take it right here.

“I think it's time to stop the torture. Let's go back to my condo and let me make love to you.” He'd never told a woman he wanted to make love to her. Let's have sex, do it, or fuck were common phrases he'd used, but not make love. Yet, that was what he thought of with Tasha. He'd always been a giving sex partner, with women coming back for more, but he wanted to do more than pleasure Tasha's body. He wanted to worship her body.

“Let's go.”

He couldn't stop the cocky grin from spreading his face. He grabbed her hand and nearly sprinted back to his place. There was no need to try and hide his anticipation, she wanted him just as much. He was going to make sure the feel of his body remained with Tasha for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER 13

Tasha didn't have time to think as Jared hurried the few blocks to his condo. It amazed her things could accelerate so quickly between the two of them. Thirty minutes had barely passed since she was hyperventilating as he'd held her. Now, she was just as anxious as he to get back to his place and, as he said, end the torture. Just thinking about him kissing every part of her body the way he'd kissed her mouth on the harbor had her on fire. Saying she should leave something for a future husband was her last attempt to keep herself from getting completely caught up in Jared's spell.

The inside of the lobby was a blur on the way to his condo. On his floor, Jared rushed inside and pulled her into his arms in a flash. In the next instant, his mouth was on hers and Tasha softened against him. He lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Instead of carrying her to the bedroom, he placed her back against the wall and kissed her with as much tenacity as he'd done on the harbor. Every sweep of his tongue against hers caused heat to pulse between her legs. She was so wet she wouldn't have been surprised if his shorts were damp where they pressed against her.

Jared broke the kiss and Tasha groaned in disappointment. He laughed softly against her throat. “Don’t worry, I’ll kiss you some more.”

“That’s not the only place I want you to kiss me.”

His head lifted from her neck and his eyes met hers. A wicked grin spread across his face. “That’s what I’m talking about. Tell me what you want.”

Tasha carefully took her hands from around his shoulders, afraid that if she let go she might fall. He didn’t show a sign that her letting go made it harder for him to hold her. His arms flexed beneath her behind and around her waist and another rush of desire flooded her. His strength was so damn erotic.

She pushed the dress away from her shoulders and pulled her arms from the straps exposing her breasts. She didn’t think it was possible but she felt him get harder between her legs and she flexed the muscles of her sex in response.

“Kiss my breasts.” It was barely a whisper she was so embarrassed to say it out loud.

“Hold them for me,” he said.

She blushed as she took a breast in each hand and lifted them up. Jared hoisted her higher so that her breasts were at eye level and she tensed in anticipation. He buried his head between the two mounds, kissing the valley in between. Tasha moaned as he licked the same spot before kissing and licking his way up the sides. He sucked each of her fingers on his way to her nipple,

which became pebble hard and aching for his touch. When his warm mouth finally covered the peak she gasped as pleasure rocked within her. He gently sucked one breast before moving to the other. Tasha gyrated her hips against him, his rigid stiffness creating mounting waves of excitement whenever her aching flesh pressed against it. Her movements became more frantic as the pleasure built. Between his mouth on her breasts and the pressure between her thighs she felt as if she was on the way to an explosion.

When she was on the edge of ecstasy, he pulled away from her breast with one last suck and carried her from the wall.

“No, you don’t. You’re not coming until I’m ready.”

She tried to press her body against his but he kept space between them. “What are you doing? Why did you stop me?” She grabbed his face and kissed him frantically as she tried to press her hot center back on his hardness.

Jared carried her into the bedroom. He dropped her on the bed, then climbed on, his knees between her thighs and a hand on each side of her head. “Dammit, Tasha, I want to take it slow but if you keep this up I can’t promise that.”

Slow. Not when her body was on fire from within and she was so close. “I didn’t ask you to take it slow.”

She sat up and pulled his shirt over his head. His muscles seemed to bulge even more than usual and the veins in his arms were prominent beneath his tan skin.

She ran her hands up and down his arms, then ran them over his chest to pause at his pecs. “Make them jump.”

He smiled. “You like that?”

“Yes.”

Jared flexed his right one before doing the left. Then he picked up the pace flexing them both at the same time. Tasha leaned forward to kiss his chest and smiled when she felt his body tremble. Her lips closed around one of his hard nipples and Jared cursed before pushing her away. Tasha pushed his hand away and took the other nipple in her mouth.

He pressed her shoulders back against the mattress and pulled her dress roughly down her hips. She lifted her legs so he could pull it off and he threw the garment across the room. His hands rested at the waistband of her thong as his eyes traveled over the length of her.

“Your body is beautiful.”

For the first time since they’d started Tasha felt shy but didn’t cover herself. The look in his eyes was a mixture of desire and adoration, as if he’d never seen another woman’s body as beautiful as hers. She knew that wasn’t true, but she didn’t want to think about how many other women he’d said that to.

The throbbing between her legs was insistent. Without thought, she ran her hand down her belly and into the waistband of her thong. Jared’s breathing hitched and his eyes grew darker. With one smooth motion, he pulled her underwear off. She jerked her

hand away, but he took her wrist in his hand. “Touch yourself.”

She didn’t know if her face burned from self-consciousness or desire. She’d masturbated before — just because she was a virgin didn’t mean she was completely unknowledgeable — but obviously never in front of another person. But the heat in his eyes evaporated any shame she may have felt. There was something erotic about the way he watched her.

She slowly began to massage her outer lips, spreading her wetness around. She used her fingers to open herself and slowly rubbed her clitoris. Jared’s dark eyes were focused on her movements. His body was tense and his breathing labored as he rubbed the rock hard staff between his legs. Tasha lifted one leg and closed her eyes as she slipped her middle finger inside of her dripping core.

“That’s it. Show me what you like,” he whispered.

Turned on by his encouragement Tasha’s eyes closed as she continued to glide her finger inside of her, before slipping it out and over her aching nub. She became so engrossed in her own pleasure, her moans and sighs echoing in the room, that she wasn’t aware of Jared moving lower until he moved her hand and replaced her fingers with his tongue. Tasha cried out as he slowly licked from one end of her goodness to the other. True to his words, Jared kissed her lower lips just as thoroughly as he kissed her mouth, his tongue doing a wicked dance with every nook and cranny. She thought her heart

would stop from the pleasure. When his mouth closed around her swollen clit she yelled as an orgasm unlike any she'd ever felt rocked her body. The spasms clenched in her womb and stars burst behind her eyelids.

She tried to curl up into a fetal position as the aftershocks went through her body, but he didn't let her. He opened her legs and reached into his pocket for a condom. She watched as he pulled down his shorts and underwear and his erection sprang forth. She'd seen penises before — mostly in porn that Shayla sent her — but Jared could give any porn star a run for his money. He tore open the packet with his teeth and quickly slid on the protection. His movements were effortless, another sign he'd done this often.

“It'll only hurt a second ... I think,” he said.

She opened her mouth to answer but Jared pushed into her with one quick thrust. When she cried out this time it was in pain. She'd known it would hurt, but this was excruciating. He needed to get off, now!

“Damn, Jared, that hurts. I don't think I can do this,” she said between clenched teeth.

“It's done now. Shit, Tasha, you feel so good,” he said through clenched teeth of his own.

She tried to move back but he held fast to her waist. “Don't move. Take a second to feel it.” He groaned.

Tasha went still. This wasn't nearly as good as what he'd told her it would be. This was painful.

“Relax, Tasha.” He leaned back slightly to move one hand from her waist and slowly rubbed her clit. “Give it time.” His eyes met hers, concern mixed with his desire. His body was as tense as hers and he was gritting his teeth as if in pain. She slowly let her body relax as he continued to massage where they were joined. The pain began to subside as pleasure ran through her. She clenched her muscles around him and was surprised at how good he felt inside of her. She hesitantly moved her hips and Jared groaned. “I’ve got to move now.”

“Move,” she said.

He pulled back slowly, then pushed in to the hilt. Tasha gasped with pleasure when his thickness rubbed against her inner walls. He repeated the move and her eyes rolled to the back of her head. This was more like it.

“That’s it. Feel me inside you,” he said.

“Move, Jared,” she moaned.

He picked up the pace and Tasha’s hips tentatively meet his. She wrapped her legs around his waist to get more of him inside. He continued to rub between her legs and Tasha felt the building of another orgasm.

“Move, move, please move!”

“Shit, yeah.” He increased his speed, but his movements were deliberate, as if he was still mindful that this was new to her.

Tasha felt her orgasm coming. And she wanted it more than she wanted the first one. “Jared, yes! Move, dammit!”

He squeezed her clit between his thumb and forefinger and Tasha's world exploded. "Jared, Jared, Jared!" she cried out over and over and she climaxed around him.

He grabbed her hips with both hands and pumped into her twice more before coming himself. "Damn, Tasha! Fuck!" He collapsed on top of her and they both tried to calm their breathing.

After a few moments, Jared lifted up and looked at her in awe. "Where did you learn to have sex like that?"

Tasha was still trying to catch her breath as she spoke. "You, I guess. It felt like what I should be doing with you."

All emotion drained from his eyes. He'd shut himself off. He hadn't pulled away from her, he was still inside of her, but emotionally he wasn't there. She tried not to be upset about it. Sure, they'd just had what she thought had to be mind-blowing sex, but it was only for this weekend. She didn't need him to cuddle with her afterwards or tell her romantic words.

She looked away, unable to continue holding his stare. "Now that it's done we don't have to stay all weekend."

"What are you talking about?"

She looked back at his now frowning face. "I don't know what to do next, Jared. You're still inside of me, but you look as if you don't want me here anymore."

He lowered his head. A few seconds later, he looked back at her. “I want you to stay all weekend.”

She should go back. Her virginity was gone and she had one round of great sex to get her through the months or years it took to find a husband. But one round wasn't enough. Just this weekend. She'd get through the weekend and not get caught up in him pulling away after sex. They weren't a couple and she didn't love him. So she could do this again.

She moved her hips to take more of him inside her. Desire quickly filled his eyes and she smiled. “I'll stay all weekend.”

He grinned and just like that, Jared was back. “Good.”

• • •

Hunger pangs woke Tasha later that night. She looked at the clock; it was half past midnight. She was officially thirty and no longer a virgin. She and Jared hadn't left his condo since having sex earlier. He snored softly beside her and she smiled. He truly knew his way around a bedroom. He also knew his way around a couch, against a wall, and in the bathtub. She couldn't believe how many times they'd had sex. It wasn't all on him. She couldn't get enough of him either. They'd completely forgotten about food and concentrated on feeding their sexual appetites. Now, she was starving.

She turned and studied him in the dim light from the moon shining in through the windows. The light cast a silver glow against his tan skin and created shadows,

which highlighted his muscular frame. The bed sheets were tangled in his feet, exposing his body for her to study. He'd pulled them over her before she'd fallen asleep. Her eyes paused between his legs. Even unaroused his size was impressive. She reached out to touch him but stopped herself. No need to start that up again. Despite how much she'd enjoyed the day locked in a room with him, her body ached. Especially between her legs. She did want him again, but didn't think she could handle it.

She'd avoided saying anything about how right things felt between them, and he hadn't shut down on her emotionally again. It was true, though, albeit foolish, that she did feel that way. As soon as he touched her, her shyness evaporated and she forgot he wasn't her type. She only wanted him to touch her again, and that was scary. All afternoon his hands had been on her — both during and after sex. Even now, in sleep, his hand was on her waist. It would be easy to become flattered and think she was special, but he could be this way with all of his lovers.

You're getting caught up and reading too much into this, her mind warned. Jared is a ladies' man. That's why you asked him to do this. Don't become a statistic. It was a good thing she'd only agreed to a weekend. If she routinely slept with Jared, she'd forget what she truly wanted in a man and see more to their relationship than there was.

Her stomach growled, reminding her why she'd woken up. She would love a slice of pizza, but quickly

dismissed that thought. It was too late to eat anything heavy. She hadn't brought any snacks, but he mentioned packing some of his protein bars in his bag earlier.

Tasha carefully slid out of the bed. There was enough light for her to make her way across the room. Her feet barely made a sound as she softly padded across the hardwood floors. She slowly unzipped his bag only to gasp after opening it. There were over a dozen condoms in the bag. He must have planned nothing but sex all weekend. She was amazed and annoyed by his cockiness.

She pushed the condoms aside and dug around until she found the bars. Her mouth watered as she pulled it out. Finally food.

"What are you doing?" The frigid tone of Jared voice startled her.

She turned to see him sitting on the bed glaring at her. She held up the bar. "I was hungry, so I got a protein bar out of your bag."

He continued to eye her with mistrust until her stomach growled loudly. He finally relaxed and a small smile played on his lips. "I guess I did forget to feed you."

Upset by his anger Tasha sat on the floor and frowned. "Why did you get so upset? You looked ready to kick me out."

He ran his hand over his face before lying down on his back. She thought he wasn't going to answer her but then he turned on his side and faced her. "I don't trust too many women."

Her eyebrows shot up. “Why?” Her stomach growled again and she opened the bar and took a bite.

“Because you can’t trust women. They all want something. Money, sex, attention. Even the ones you think might be cool end up trying to take all they can get,” he said matter-of-factly.

Tasha swallowed hard before replying. “Damn, who broke your heart?”

Jared chuckled. “No one. I never let anyone close enough to break my heart.”

“So you’ve never been in love?”

“Hell no! And I don’t plan to be. My view of women has been pretty accurate. They want my money or they want to have sex. I’m more than happy to sleep with them, though only a few are worth spending money on.” His shoulder lifted in a depreciating shrug. “So far it’s been a win-win situation.”

Tasha finished her bar in silence. His view of women was another reason she couldn’t get too caught up in this. She felt stupid for even entertaining the thought that things felt right with him. It was wrong. There wasn’t another way to describe it. To Jared all women were sex objects he couldn’t trust. No wonder he’d treated her like the rest after she’d asked him to take her virginity. She’d come to him for sex and in his world, that’s what women wanted.

He watched her while she ate. He hadn’t offered an explanation for his feelings, or tried to back pedal and

make his opinion less harsh.

“I guess I’m no different really,” she finally said. “I came to you for sex, then asked you to treat me like a friend. I shouldn’t have done that. What we’re doing isn’t different from what you do with other women.”

He sighed and shook his head. “I thought that, until you said you admire my work. You’re the first woman, outside of my PR agent Cassandra, to truly appreciate all that I’ve accomplished.”

“I meant what I said. After this weekend, I’ll still be a fan of your brand and your work. And I promise I won’t ask for sex anymore.”

He flinched. “Don’t promise that, because I refuse to promise not to ask you.”

She shook her head. “I told you, after this we’re through.”

He sat up and Tasha almost forgot to listen to him as his abs flexed with the movement. “You’re no longer a virgin, and there’s no need to be celibate. No reason not to have a lover until you find your perfect husband.”

The absurdity of that took her mind off his body. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. I can’t date a man while sleeping with someone else.”

He snorted and looked as if he wanted to argue but shook his head and smiled instead. “You’re almost refreshing.” He leaned back against the headboard, distracting her once again by flexing his pecs. “Since you plan to cut off the good thing we’ve started here come

Monday, let's not waste the weekend. Grab a condom and get over here."

Tasha laughed. "You mean one of the dozens you have in here?"

He shrugged innocently. "What's the problem? I have a big sexual appetite so I grabbed every condom in my drawer. Don't you think it'll be fun to see how many we can use?"

"I don't know if my body can handle it. I'm sore as it is."

He winked. "Don't worry, I'll go slow this time."

She watched as his erection slowly grew to life. Despite her soreness, desire gathered wetly between her legs. "You're going to kill me."

He licked his lips and smiled. "What a beautiful way to die."

With a half groan and a laugh she grabbed a handful of condoms and came to bed. He eyed the stash in her hand and grinned. "That's my girl."

CHAPTER 14

The next morning Jared got up at six and left Tasha sleeping in bed while he worked out in the condominium's gym. He was still exhausted from the day, and night, before but didn't want to miss another workout. When he returned two hours later, she was still where he'd left her. He smiled and admired her smooth caramel skin exposed by the sheet. Desire caused his dick to stiffen, letting him know he was up for another type of workout.

She turned him on more than he'd expected. She wasn't the first woman he'd slept with multiple times in one day, but never four times in less than twenty-four hours. That was a record even for him. He couldn't get enough of her, and he could feel it. His erection was sore, like a muscle he'd overused. It didn't stop him from wanting her again, but if he was feeling the effects of their continuous sexcapades, then so was she. It hadn't escaped his notice when she winced slightly as he slid into her warm body shortly before four. He only wanted her to experience pleasure when they were together, not pain. Pain would make it harder for him to convince her

to continue sleeping with him after the weekend. Having Tasha as a routine sexual partner wouldn't be too bad.

He'd let her sleep in before starting their day. Since it was her birthday, he was prepared to do whatever she wanted and had even planned a few surprises for her. Jared walked over to the bed and leaned down to kiss her shoulder. He squeezed her round butt cheek not covered by the sheet. She sighed and whispered his name in her sleep. A satisfied smile curved his lips before he kissed her shoulder again and went into the bathroom to take a shower.

Afterwards, he came back into the room and reached into his bag for clothes. Tasha was still asleep. She would be hungry when she woke up. There wasn't any food in his fridge, so he decided to run to the store for weekend essentials. Sliding on a pair of basketball shorts and a t-shirt, Jared looked through the nightstand for a pad to leave a note when the piercing sound of his cell phone ringing broke the silence. Tasha frowned in her sleep and turned over. He dropped the pad and looked around for his phone. Another ring came from under the bed, causing Tasha to stir again. He fell to his knees and reached under the bed. When he felt the cool plastic exterior of the phone he quickly pulled it out and answered the call.

“Hello?” he said quietly.

“Hi, Jared, it's your mother.”

He froze. His mother hadn't called him directly in years. They always spoke through Malcolm, at his

request.

“Were you looking for Malcolm?”

“No, I wanted to talk to you.”

Jared took a deep breath and looked at Tasha. Her breathing was deep and steady as she slept. He quietly backed out of the bedroom and shut the door.

“Why do you want to talk to me? There isn’t anything we have to say,” he said.

“There’s a lot to say, but you refuse to talk to me. It’s been fifteen years since your father died. Why are you still holding this against me?”

His mother’s voice was pleading, but Jared didn’t care. He’d stopped caring the day his dad died. “You’re the reason he died and we both know that.”

“No, you think that. You jumped to conclusions and haven’t talked to me since. You’re thirty-three now, Jared, not eighteen. It’s time to act like an adult and face this.”

Jared clenched his jaw to keep from lashing out. “You know what? I don’t have time for this. If you need something just tell Malcolm. I’ll help him get it.”

“The only thing I need is for my son to talk to me.”

“Yeah, well, you and Mr. Carter killed that when you killed my dad.”

“Stop saying that,” she snapped. “Your dad had a heart attack.”

“After finding you in the arms of another man.”

“That’s not what happened. At the time, I didn’t think I could tell you what really happened. If I’d have known you would have refused to come around me for the next fifteen years I would have explained.”

“I don’t need the sleazy details. Now, unless you have a point, I’m ending this call. Call Malcolm, he still thinks you’re a good mother.”

Jared didn’t care if his words were harsh. He’d stopped caring after he’d watched his father fall to the floor in agony after seeing his mother in Mr. Carter’s arms.

“Jared, I’m calling you because I’m getting married. I wanted you to hear it from me.” Her voice sounded tired.

Jared laughed bitterly. “Who did you trick?”

“I’m marrying Mr. Carter.”

He froze. The only sound was his heart beating loudly in his chest. He couldn’t breathe and fell heavily on the couch. He tried to take in air as his stomach rolled in disgust. “How could you do that?”

“We need to talk, Jared. You have to understand what happened that day.” Concern laced her voice but Jared barely noticed as rage filled him.

“I ... I can’t talk to you anymore,” he said and ended the call.

He squeezed the phone in his hands and covered his face. But the pain was too great; he couldn’t sit still. He jumped from the couch and threw the phone with a

curse. It hit the wall and fell to the floor in two pieces. He paced back and forth, rubbing his hands over his face frantically. The vision of Mr. Carter holding his mother and his father falling to the floor gripping his chest played over and over in his head. He stopped pacing and reached back to slam his fist into the wall.

“Jared!”

His arm stopped mid swing. He turned to Tasha standing in the door to the bedroom with the sheet around her. Damn, she was beautiful, her hair tousled and her lips swollen from the night before. He wanted to hate her for looking so beautiful, so innocent, when he knew she wasn't. She was just another deceitful woman. One who would be useful and take his mind off of the conversation with his mother.

Three quick strides had him across the room. He wrapped his arms around her waist, sweeping her up against his chest. He didn't want to think about his mother's betrayal. It was typical of a woman, and right now, he needed to forget his pain between Tasha's legs.

He dropped her on the bed and reached for one of the condoms on the nightstand. In a flash, Tasha scrambled to the other side of the bed and held up her hand. Anger and desire coursed through him as he watched her try to cover her naked body. Her eyes were hard as she looked at him.

“You're not going to screw me in order to forget your problems. That isn't how this works. I heard enough of

your conversation to know that you're hurting, but you're not going to take it out on me."

"I don't hurt," he said through clenched teeth.

"Bullshit, Jared. You think your mom and some Carter guy killed your dad, and whatever she said on the other end of the phone set you off."

"Eavesdropping?"

"It's not eavesdropping when you're yelling in the next room." The anger left her and concern filled her eyes. "Jared, why don't you go to the police if you think she had something to do with it? Why are you walking around with this?"

"Why do you give a damn?" he bit out.

"Because." She paused. Her eyebrows furled before she held up her hand. "Because I just do, all right?"

He gazed at her and the tension slowly left his body. Tasha was always trying to help someone. At the center, she was viewed as a surrogate mother, sister, or friend who was always willing to help. Another reason why he'd stayed away from her. She was too nice for him to run game on.

"She didn't kill my dad." He sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her. "I was eighteen. My dad and I went fishing that morning. When we got back, he went in the house while I put up the gear. When I came in my dad was peeping through the door to our home office. I walked up and he looked at me, looked back at the door, and clutched his chest. He fell to the floor and I saw my

mom kissing my dad's friend, Randall Carter. They broke apart when I cried out and my mom came running up to help, but it was too late. He died of a heart attack on the way to the hospital." His voice was flat as he finished the story. Pain filled his chest.

He heard the rustle of the sheet as she walked around the bed to sit beside him. She reached over and put her hand on his leg and squeezed gently. Her hand was warm and smooth against his skin. It was funny that he could actually enjoy her touch in a non-sexual way. It was nice, and comforting. He almost reached over to place his hand on hers, but stopped himself.

"I've never told anyone what happened that day. Not even my brother Malcolm. He was so worried about our mother after dad died, I couldn't tell him. He'd always been closer to her than I was."

She brought one leg onto the bed and faced him. "Why are you telling me?"

He sighed and rubbed his face. "Shit if I know."

She smiled slightly. "What did she say that upset you?"

Jared closed his eyes as the anger came back. "She's marrying Mr. Carter. Ain't that a bitch? She called to tell me that." Tasha gasped and he laughed humorlessly. "Your reaction is more fitting than mine, I guess."

"Why would she call with that?"

He shrugged. "She says we need to talk. That there's more to the story than what I saw."

Tasha rubbed his leg. “Maybe there is.”

He pushed her hand away. “I don’t want to hear a damn thing she has to say about that day. If my dad hadn’t seen them together, he wouldn’t have had the heart attack and died. As far as I’m concerned there’s nothing more to say.”

Tasha slapped his arm. “Stop it, Jared. Don’t push me away like I’m nothing. I know that we aren’t together, but what I gave you ... what we did ... was special. I’m just trying to be a friend. Don’t mistrust what I’m offering.”

He turned to look at her. Instead of feeling his usual annoyance when a woman said what they had was special, he felt something click inside of him. Like a switch shining a light on the truth of what she said. What they’d done was pretty damn incredible. The best he’d ever had. And for her it was life changing. It couldn’t be described as anything but special.

Warning bells rang in his head. He couldn’t be falling for her, that was impossible, but maybe he did trust her a little. Or maybe the great sex was turning his brain into mush. But she was right. What was between them wasn’t like anything he’d had with the other women he’d slept with. She wasn’t out to trap him or his money. If anything, Tasha was the most honest female he knew. Even Cassandra was shady when it came to getting hers. But not Tasha. He’d never seen her lie to anyone; she was always up front even if it wasn’t what you wanted to hear. But she was also compassionate, loving,

and trusting. Why in the hell had she chosen him to take her virginity?

He reached over and brushed the hair from her face. He ran his fingers through the silky curls before cupping the back of her head and pulling her forward to kiss her softly. “Thank you for listening.”

Her eyes softened. “It’s the least I could do.”

His gaze traveled to the swell of her breasts above the sheet. “Is it?” Now that he’d poured the equivalent of his heart out to her, his mind easily transitioned to other things. He still wanted the distraction her body promised.

She slid away. “Hold up, cowboy. I don’t think my body can handle any more.”

“Are you hurting?”

Dark lashes lowered over her eyes as she looked away. “A little sore.”

He stood and brushed his hand across her cheek. “Fill up the tub and take a bath.”

She grabbed her stomach. “I’m starving. A shower makes more sense.”

“Take a bath and I’ll run out for something to eat. You soak and when you’re done, I’ll have food ready. After we eat, we’ll go out and do some sightseeing. It’s your birthday, so I’m willing to do whatever you want to do.”

She smiled at him, her light brown eyes shining.
“Thanks for making my birthday special even when you’re hurting.”

An unfamiliar tightening in his chest made him back up. He had to get out of here before he had a warm and fuzzy moment. Snatching his keys off the nightstand he turned to the door before tossing them back on the bed. “I’ll run to one of the bakeries around the corner. When I get back you’d better be in the tub.” He said over his shoulder as he walked out the door.

CHAPTER 15

“Why were you a twenty-nine-year-old virgin?”

Tasha froze mid-step. They’d spent what was left of the morning exploring the sites in downtown Charleston and were walking back to his car after ending the day on the Isle of Palms. He’d still been upset about his mother’s call, so she’d made an effort to keep his mind off of things. True to his promise, he didn’t complain as she’d dragged him through the old slave market, into the various shops and around the College of Charleston campus.

Surprisingly, he’d opened up about his childhood memories of hunting and fishing with his brother and father. Though he’d tried to appear relaxed, his tense shoulders and compressed lips proved he was in pain. She’d quickly changed the subject to the joys and pains of growing up under her father’s strict rule.

A breeze blew her hair into her face and she pushed it away. She would have preferred to put it in a ponytail, but he’d asked her to keep it loose. “What did you say?”

“I didn’t stutter. Why were you still a virgin?”

She laughed and started walking again. “Religious beliefs.”

He snorted. “Come on, Tasha. Give me more than that.”

She sighed. “I’m serious. I grew up with my parents telling me it was a sin to sleep with someone before you were married. My dad preaches about it as much at home as he does in church. As I got older and realized there were a lot of people sinning, my parents scared us on the consequences of sex, like disease and pregnancy.”

“You can prevent both,” he said.

“Says the man with a lifetime supply of condoms,” she said gently bumping him with her shoulder. “Yes, I know that. For a while it was fun to be the virgin.” He looked at her skeptically and she giggled. “I know it sounds silly, but it was. I was different from the other girls. Guys treated me differently. They respected me more. Plus, I was into the same things they were, working out and sports. It was fun. But as I got older, guys’ attitudes changed. They either looked at me as a challenge or undateable. The last guy I dated actually told me I was nice, but if we weren’t having sex then we should just end it.”

He took her hand and steered her out of the way of another couple going toward the beach on the path. He didn’t release her hand after. “I still don’t understand why you asked your favor.”

She shrugged. “I could have met my husband ten men ago, but maybe he was scared away because I was a

virgin looking for marriage. I'm tired of the pressure to save myself for a man who might not be willing to wait."

"That makes absolutely no sense."

"Really, so you're telling me you would marry someone without sleeping with them?"

He cringed. "No, but I don't plan to ever get married. You caved in to the pressure."

"No, *I'm* tired of waiting. I'm thirty years old. My best friend has amazing sex apparently with every guy she meets and I have to hear about it. My sister is married and I have to walk in on her and my brother-in-law feeling each other up in every room at their home. I'm the only single person I know and I want a husband, but I'm tired of scaring guys away with my 'wait until marriage' speech. Especially when I don't believe waiting will make a man love me any more or less. I want to meet a guy, go out, feel attracted to him, and if it's right, *finally* sleep with him."

His brows furled, the afternoon sunlight reflected in his eyes making them appear light brown instead of their usual chocolate. "And if it doesn't work out, then what? You've slept with someone no good and you're still single. Except now you're heartbroken."

"Are you going to break my heart?"

He shook his head and laughed quietly. "Tasha ... "

"What we're doing isn't much different. I know you. I'm attracted to you, so we slept together. When it's done my heart won't be broken."

“That’s because we aren’t dating. What if you fall in love and the guy doesn’t feel the same?”

She looked away. “Why do you act like you care? What happens after we’re finished doesn’t matter. I’m not going to sleep with every guy I meet. I can’t do the things I’ve done with you with just anyone. He has to be special.”

She dropped his hand and rushed ahead to the parking lot. Her plan wasn’t fool proof. There was a likelihood that she’d still meet a guy just as sorry as Charles. But it was none of Jared’s business. Him acting as if he cared about her possibly getting hurt in the future caused her emotions, already wrapped into him more than they should be, to swell into dangerous territory.

They reached his car and she stopped her before getting in. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just curious, ya know?”

“Let’s just forget about it.” She said with a wave of the hand.

They rode back to his condo in companionable silence. Her heart rate picked up once they parked in the garage. Her body still ached wonderfully from the night before, but after spending the day with him just the idea of sleeping with him again made her wet.

“Hey, let’s walk down to the harbor.” He said once they got out of the car.

She groaned. “Really? We’ve walked all day. I’m tired.”

He took her hand and pulled her along. “Come on. I indulged you all day, you can give me this one thing.”

“Yeah, but it’s *my* birthday.”

The breeze carried the sound of his chuckle back to her. With a sigh, she stopped dragging her feet and followed him around the block to the front of the condominium. A guy dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt with long red hair pulled into a ponytail leaned against the building. He held a guitar in his hands and jumped up when they rounded the corner. Jared stopped and pulled her against his side.

“Why are we ... ” her voice trailed off as the guy started singing happy birthday. His smooth alto voice glided over the words into the night air. Tasha gasped and looked to Jared, who grinned at her.

“Malcolm got the singing voice in our family. So I found someone to sing for me. Happy birthday, Tasha.”

She was in trouble. Deep trouble. Jared was more than the playboy she’d taken him for. His softer side was playing a number on her romantic’s heart and she was perilously close to wishing there was more to this situation.

“You didn’t have to.” She said after the guy finished singing.

Jared shrugged as if it were no big deal. “Hey, you only turn thirty once.” He turned to the guy and gave

him pound. “Thanks, man.”

“No problem, Jared.” He smiled at Tasha. “Happy birthday, beautiful.” He saluted then turned and ambled down the street.

She tried to hide how much she appreciated the effort as she met Jared’s eye. “I can’t believe — ” He cut her off with a kiss. His warm tongue gently probed her mouth open. With a sigh, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

His dark eyes burned with desire when he broke the kiss. “Instead of telling me what I shouldn’t do, let’s go upstairs and end your birthday right.”

Without a word, she took his hand and rushed back to the entrance.

• • •

Tasha stood at one of the windows in Jared’s condo and stared at the boats gliding along the water in the Cooper River. It was Sunday. Time to go home and the end the best birthday weekend she’d ever had. It wasn’t just losing her virginity — although the sex had been amazing — it was spending time with Jared. The effort he’d put into making her birthday special was a gift she’d cherish forever. Despite his playboy persona, the man knew how to make a woman feel wonderful. It may be old hat for him, but she decided to accept it for what it was and celebrate in the fact that her thirtieth birthday and loss of virginity was a memory worth cherishing. Memories of the way he’d slowly made love to her the night before

hijacked her mind causing her nipples to pebble beneath her shirt.

She shook her head and pressed her temples. They did not make love. It was sex. Sweet, wonderful, perfect sex, but that was all. Love had no place in this.

He came out of the bedroom carrying their overnight bags. His biceps, revealed by the red cutoff shirt he wore, flexed as he dropped them by the door. He was in basketball shorts and her gaze dropped to the crotch. Her face burned; just looking at the man summoned memories of what they'd done. When he walked over to stand beside her at the window, it took everything in her not to lean into him.

What do you say at the end of an affair? She looked to him for guidance, but he was scowling.

She touched her face. "What?"

He reached over and pulled the clip out of her hair. "Wear your hair down when we're together."

His long fingers caressed the base of her scalp. Her eyes fluttered, heat infused her, but she straightened her shoulders and stepped away. "I think we should stop before it gets out of hand."

His scowl deepened. "Out of hand?"

She tucked her hair behind her ears. "Jared, I did this so that it would take the pressure off of dating. I still hope to find a husband. I can't do that if I'm sleeping with you."

He smiled devilishly and took her elbow to pull her close. “No one will be hurt if we sleep together until you meet someone else.”

She laughed softly, but pulled away. “Says the man with a trail of broken hearts behind him. No, this weekend was it. Thank you, for everything.”

He rolled his eyes and looked out the window. “You can stop thanking me for sex. The pleasure was all mine.”

“It’s not just the sex. Yesterday was ... the best birthday I’ve ever had. Despite your mom’s call, you helped me celebrate in a beautiful city and now we can go home as friends. Nothing more.” She stared at him, hoping he wouldn’t see how hard it was for her to say those words.

Jared cocked a brow. Crossing his arms, he leaned against the window and watched her. “You’ve gotten a taste, Tasha. It won’t be so easy to forget.”

“You’re pretty confident.”

He shrugged and grinned. “I have a reason to be.” He motioned with his head for her to come closer.

A smart woman would refuse, but the smoldering of his dark eyes and curve of his lips was a temptation hard to deny. Her feet slid across the hardwoods as she approached. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer. She melted against the heat of his body. Something flared in his eyes as they stared into hers. “You’ll call me when you want me, and I’ll be ready.”

She shivered. “I’m not calling.”

His head lowered until their lips barely touched. Gently he rubbed his nose across hers. Her face lifted, her breathing hitched, and he pressed her body against his.

Jared’s lips curved in a knowing grin. “I’ll be waiting.”

Straightening, he let her go and damned if she didn’t sway slightly with the loss of contact. Shaking the fog out of her head, she glared at him. His smile didn’t waiver. “I’ll take the bags down and we can go.”

She didn’t respond to his goading. God help her. She’d have to pray constantly to resist calling him.

CHAPTER 16

“Tasha, did you hear a word I said?”

Tasha blinked several times and turned to her dad.

“What?”

He shook his head and smiled, his white teeth gleaming in his tan face. Seeing the thin man with dark-framed glasses and a receding hairline sitting at the head of the table, you would never expect he could preach a sermon loud enough to shake the rafters in the church. Luckily, Angie’s daughters hadn’t done anything this Sunday to warrant a sermon. “You haven’t paid attention to anything going on at the table,” he said. “You’ve spent the entire dinner staring off. Have you met a man?”

She shook her head frantically. “No! It’s work, that’s all. I’ve got a lot on my plate.”

“You work too hard, Tasha,” her mom said from across the table. “You didn’t even get to celebrate your birthday two weeks ago. Are you sure you don’t need to take a vacation?”

Tasha avoided her mom’s gaze by looking at the meatloaf on her plate. “No, the conference wasn’t so bad. It was almost like a vacation.”

Angie snorted. "I bet."

Tasha glared at her sister before turning to her dad. "What were you asking?"

Her dad leaned back in his chair. "I asked what you thought of my sermon today. Some people think it's old fashioned when I preach about saving yourself until marriage, but you've been able to keep yourself pure for thirty years. I almost used you for an example." He laughed.

Tasha's eyes widened. "Please don't do that. I really don't want that type of attention."

"Why not, Tasha? It's something to be proud of," Angie said with a twisted smile and raised eyebrow.

She hadn't told her sister about her weekend with Jared, although Angie had probably figured it out. She hadn't talked to anyone about it, including Shayla. It was hard enough to not think about Jared, no need to purposefully talk about him.

"I don't want to talk about my personal life any more than you do. It's not the congregation's business," she said to her sister.

Angie shook her head and took a bite of the meatloaf.

Her dad waved his hand to get their attention. "I wouldn't do you like that, but I am proud of you. So many women out there get caught up in temptation. That's why we have so many diseases and babies out of wedlock. Whenever people tell me I'm being old-

fashioned, I want to say, ‘Hold up. Look at my two girls.’ One gave herself only to her husband and the other is still waiting. You girls are a true blessing.”

“Amen,” her mom agreed with a smile.

Angie caught Tasha’s gaze and both of them nodded frozenly. What would her dad say if he knew that at this moment she wanted to leave their house and run straight to Jared’s? He promised to be ready when she called, and God help her she wanted to call him every day. Pride stopped her. Pride, and the fact he hadn’t called her.

Memories of the way he’d kissed her from head to toe were her constant companion. She squirmed in her seat and her breathing became shallow. Every time he’d slid inside of her, it had felt so right, so wonderful.

“Tasha, are you okay? You look flushed.” Her mom’s voice broke into her thoughts.

She looked up with a start, her cheeks flaming. Here her dad was talking about how proud he was of his virgin daughter and she was fantasizing about her only sexual partner.

“I’m not feeling too good. I think I’m going to go home early,” she said as she slid her chair from the table.

“You can always stay here if you’re feeling bad,” her dad offered, concern in his eyes.

“No, I just think I’m tired.” She grabbed her plate from the table and hurried into the kitchen. She dropped her plate in the sink and rested her forehead in her hand. She would not call him.

She hurried from the kitchen before her sister could follow and question her mood, quickly kissed her parents goodbye, and left, avoiding Angie's gaze the entire time.

When she got home she cleaned the house from top to bottom, but it didn't distract her. All it did was make it easier for memories of her weekend in Charleston to hijack her exhausted brain when she finally lay down to go to sleep. Her breasts and the wet spot between her legs ached for more. With a groan, she hit the pillow and rolled over, willing herself to go to sleep.

The next day work was a typical Monday. Although summer camp at the center wouldn't start for another two months, they had to arrange the schedules and confirm locations for traveling field trips. The water park they always took the kids to was under new management and wanted to raise the price for the field trip. After a frustrating call where she negotiated the new price, she then had to get with the various counselors about the after school schedule. Standardized testing was starting and they tried to supplement the student's studies with information that would help them on the tests. After lunch, she got with the head of the local League of Women's voters to arrange the group's rental of the facility for a fundraiser later that month. By the time three o'clock hit, Tasha had a screaming headache.

Latiffa came when she got out of school at three to work the front desk. The teenager poked her head in after knocking. "Ms. Tasha, you have a call on line one. You want me to send it over?"

She didn't want to talk with anyone, but was expecting a call from one of the councilmen about funding for the center. The city was in the middle of budget talks and now was the time to press the case for continued funding.

“Sure, Latiffa.”

The girl nodded and went back to the desk. A few seconds later, her phone rang. “Central Midlands Rec Commission, Tasha speaking.”

“It's been two weeks.” Jared's voice came through the phone. A deep tremor ran through her body. Her heart vibrated and her thighs clenched.

She took a deep breath before answering. “Jared. It's nice to hear from you.”

He chuckled. “Nice to hear from me? Okay, so you want to keep up the fight.”

“There is no fight. I told you it was only for that weekend.”

“I've thought about kissing you every night since we got back. And I'm not talking about just your mouth.”

Tasha swallowed hard. “Jared, I need to find a husband.”

“Is there anyone in the running right now?”

“No.”

“Have you met someone in the past two weeks that you're even thinking about dating?”

“No, but — ”

“But nothing. Why deny both of us what we want when there’s no need to. You’re an adult and so am I. We can do this for a while. When you meet someone else, I’ll walk away, no problem.”

It was tempting, but she couldn’t do it. She got too wrapped up in Jared and that was scary. “No. I can’t open myself to another man if I’m fooling around with you.”

“Just tell me one thing. Do you think about that weekend?”

She wanted to deny it, but what was the point? He knew how good it had been. “Every day. That’s why I can’t do it anymore.”

She heard him sigh. “I’ll be ready when you come around.” He ended the call.

She wanted to scream. Now she had a headache and she was horny. Damn him and his good sex. She snatched up her phone to call Shayla, but didn’t make the call. She didn’t need Shayla to push her into something she already wanted to do. She’d wished for his call since they’d returned. Truthfully, she’d waited on him to call and prove he wanted her just as much as she wanted him.

What he’d said was true. She wasn’t seeing anyone right now. Would it really hurt to sleep with him one or two more times? Just to get it out of her system. And if she felt herself getting tied up in knots, she would stop. She could stop anytime she wanted. *You sound like a junkie!*

She jumped up from her desk and grabbed her purse from the coat rack. There was no time to think about this. The longer she thought, the longer she'd say no.

“Oh, Ms. Tasha, can you help me?” Latiffa called as soon as she exited her office. “This man wants to sign up for the men’s basketball league, and I can’t find the paperwork.” She pointed to a guy across the counter.

Not paying attention to the man, Shayla walked over to Latiffa. “Craig had copies made this morning. He probably has them in his office.” She pointed to the office of the director of intramural sports.

Latiffa nodded and jumped up from the desk to go to Craig’s office. Not wanting to leave the man standing there, Tasha finally looked up and smiled. She paused when she met warm black eyes set in a handsome brown face. His wide shoulders strained the seams of the hospital scrubs he wore. His hair was styled in a small afro that was tapered at the sides. When he smiled back at her, his full lips revealed even white teeth.

“You’re Tasha Smith,” he said in a smooth baritone voice.

“I am. Do I know you?”

He shook his head. “No, a friend of mine works out in your gym and mentioned you. He was right, you are a very attractive woman.”

Tasha blushed and fought the urge to straighten her hair. “What’s your friend’s name? I’ll have to thank him for such a wonderful compliment.”

“Charles Worthington.”

The smile left Tasha’s face. Charles Worthington, the asshole her sister had hooked her up with.

The man’s eyes widened when she frowned. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, it’s just that Charles and I aren’t friends.”

He held up a hand, regret in his eyes. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I guess I goofed up my introduction with a beautiful woman.” He reached out his hand. “I’m Dr. Kevis Flynn. No relation to Charles Worthington, and I only play ball with him occasionally. Please don’t hold it against me.”

Tasha accepted the handshake. His large warm hand squeezed hers firmly, but not tightly. She quickly removed her hand from his and smoothed her hair back. “Doctor?”

“Yes, I’m an ER doctor at Palmetto Health Baptist. Just started a few weeks ago.”

As handsome as Dr. Flynn was, his friendship with Charles’s dampened her attraction. Too bad, he may have been worth getting to know better.

“Well, Dr. Flynn, I really need to go.”

He smiled. “Please, call me Kevis. I hope you’ll come watch me play ball sometime. I’ll score twenty points just for you.”

Tasha laughed. “Are you always such a flirt?”

He shrugged. “Only when I see someone worth flirting with.”

Latiffa came back with the paperwork and passed it to Kevis. Tasha smiled at him. “Have a nice day, Kevis.”

“You too, Tasha.”

His voice could give Barry White a run for his money. She felt his eyes on her as she walked out, but didn't turn around. His relationship with Charles was enough to rule him out, and her mind quickly turned back to Jared.

• • •

Tasha didn't give herself time to think about what she was doing on her way to Jared's. Showing up unannounced was a bold move, but she had to be bold or else she'd chicken out. A part of her hoped he wasn't at home or was in the middle of a training session. It would give her the out she knew she didn't have the guts to make.

She pulled into his driveway and was thankful there were no other cars there. It was a good sign that he was either alone, or not at home. She took a deep breath and smoothed her hair back into the ponytail before getting out of the car and ringing his doorbell.

Just two or three more times to get him out of your system, she said to herself.

The door swung open and Tasha froze. Her sister's best friend, and Jared's soon to be sister-in-law, stood on the other side.

Surprise was obvious in Kenyatta's face, but she smiled openly. "Hey, Tasha, what are you doing here?"

Tasha gaped for a second before catching herself. "Um, Jared forgot to ... um ... turn in the mentor forms." She coughed. "I came over to ... get them. Because, you know, we've got to make sure we report that with budget hearings coming up." Good Lord, she was rambling. She cleared her throat. "What are you doing here?"

Kenyatta smiled and her brown eyes sparkled. It was not surprising Kenyatta had attracted the attention of one of the Patterson brothers. She was smart, beautiful, and curvaceous. "I'm helping Malcolm and Jared plan their mother's birthday party. I got off work early and Malcolm is meeting me over here." She winked at Tasha. "Plus, I want to get Jared's help on a picking a location for our honeymoon. Malcolm mentioned this fishing trip he took to Canada with Jared a few years ago. So I'm picking his brain before Malcolm gets here."

Relief and disappointment warred within Tasha. She had her way out, but now she wasn't sure she wanted it. "I can come back later."

Kenyatta waved a hand and ushered her in. "Don't be silly. Knowing Jared, your forms are on the seat of his car or something. If you want, stick around. I haven't seen you in a while. We can catch up."

"I wouldn't want to intrude. I'll grab them and go."

Kenyatta closed the door behind Tasha at the same time as Jared rounded the corner into the entryway. He froze when he saw her. Desire filled his eyes as he looked

her over from head to toe. His gaze was like a caress. Her heartbeat speed up, and her breathing became shallow.

“Tasha,” he said.

“Jared,” she answered.

Kenyatta looked between them. She raised an eyebrow then smiled. “Jared, I’m going to use your office computer to look up that place in Canada.”

He nodded. Kenyatta shook her head before walking away.

The heat in Jared’s gaze set Tasha’s body on fire. Blood rushed in her ears. How quickly could he get out of those clothes? It shouldn’t take long; he was in his standard attire: basketball shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt. But it was still too many clothes.

She closed her eyes to regain composure. *Two or three times, Tasha. That’s it.*

She opened her eyes and met his gaze. “I thought ...”

He didn’t let her finish. He quickly eliminated the distance between them and picked her up. Her legs wrapped around his waist as their mouths met in a passionate kiss. He pressed her against the door as his tongue danced with hers. She moaned and brought her hands up to his face as she met his kiss head on.

Jared moved one arm to run his hand up her thigh. She loved it when he held her as if she weighed nothing. When his hand went up her khaki skirt, he didn’t pause before sliding a finger in the side of her underwear.

He groaned when his finger slid through her slick heat. “Damn, you’re wet already.”

His mouth moved to kiss her throat and Tasha gasped when he slid a finger inside her. He moved in and out slowly, making her whimper in pleasure.

“Jared, you’re going to make me come,” she panted.

“Not yet. I want to be inside you.” He reached for the waistband of his shorts and pushed them down. His erection bounced against her. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. He rubbed himself against her underwear and cursed. “No condom.”

“In my purse. I stopped to buy some.”

He looked up, and she pulled the purse off her shoulder. Jared continued to press against her as she dug out the protection.

“We can’t do it here. Kenyatta,” she said.

“Is downstairs in my office.” He took the condom from her and ripped open the package with his teeth. He shifted her weight as he slipped it on while still holding her.

“You’ve done this before,” she teased.

“Not with you.” He reached between them to push aside her underwear and slid inside of her with one smooth stroke.

“Oh God!”

“Damn!”

They gasped in union. Tasha tightened her legs around him and buried her face in his neck. He pumped his hips and she smiled decadently as he rubbed within her.

“Hold your head up,” he told her.

She lifted her head and put it against the door.

“Grab my shoulders.” When she did, he took a step back and grabbed her waist. He tilted her pelvis forward and increased his speed.

Tasha’s shoulders pressed into the door, but she didn’t care. She looked down at where they were joined and her arousal grew with every slide of his body within hers. Her climax came suddenly and strongly. Still mindful someone was in the house she bit her lip to keep from yelling out.

Jared came a second after she did. Keeping her legs wrapped tight, he moved forward until they were pressed against each other. Their gazes locked as their breathing slowly came back to normal.

CHAPTER 17

Jared handed Tasha a glass of wine before leaning on the bar and eyeing her over his own glass. Thankfully, Kenyatta left a few minutes after he and Tasha had finished in the entryway. She'd said Malcolm couldn't get off work, and he hoped that was the truth. He didn't need her running to tell Malcolm which virgin he'd deflowered.

It was unlike him to jump Tasha when she was only two feet in his home. But no other woman ever drove him crazy with just a look. He did have the common sense to take her to bed after Kenyatta left. The door had barely closed behind Kenyatta before he picked Tasha up and sprinted to his bedroom. But once there, he'd taken his time reacquainting himself with every inch of her body. He'd been rewarded with soft sighs and cries of pleasure that he couldn't get enough of.

She'd snuggled against him afterwards. As if she was supposed to be there. Even scarier, he liked it. Needless to say he'd panicked. Jared Patterson didn't snuggle. He'd jumped out of bed and offered her a glass of wine.

The disappointment in her eyes was quickly replaced with gratitude. He knew his withdrawal was callous, but surprisingly she didn't ask what was wrong or pout like other women tended to do. She'd agreed to the wine and ignored the awkward moment. He could've kissed her for that while also wondering why she didn't seem to care.

He looked at her now. She'd put on his bathrobe and he lost his train of thought every time the soft swell of her breasts was revealed by the gaping fabric. And savored the smell of her clean scent mingled with the smell of their lovemaking. Why did this former virgin turn him on more than any other woman he knew?

"You're looking at me like I'm a puzzle you can't figure out," she said with a smile.

He lowered his glass. "Because I can't figure you out. It wasn't an hour ago you said you wouldn't sleep with me again, yet you show up and sex me at my front door."

She laughed. "Don't blame that on me. I was about to tell you I came over for the mentor reports and you cut me off mid-sentence."

He grinned and leaned forward. "I don't mentor on Mondays. So what gives? Why did you show up and let me cut you off mid-sentence?"

Tasha's eyes lowered, but the smile remained on her face. "You made a good point. I'm not seeing anyone right now. It won't hurt to sleep with you once or twice. Just to get it out of my system."

He cocked an eyebrow. “Once or twice? If that’s the case, then it should be out of your system.”

She looked back at him. Her honey eyes and flushed cheeks were adorable. Adorable? Where had that come from?

“I want to do this. Just for a few weeks.”

He crossed his arms on the bar. “Do what?”

Her blush deepened, but she kept eye contact. “Let’s sleep together.”

Hell yeah, was his first thought. But when he looked into her eyes he could still see the good girl who’d asked him to treat her like a friend. Not the usual woman he dated who understood the boundaries of a sex only relationship.

He straightened and shook his head. “I’m not that type of guy.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Yes you are. You sleep with women all the time.”

“Yeah, with women like me. Only in it for sex. I’m not a relationship guy. I’m not going to fall in love with you, and I’m not going to marry you. If you ever ask me where this is going I’m gonna tell you nowhere.”

She pushed her wine away with a frown. “You were the one who insisted we do this. I know who you are, and I don’t expect anything from you. You’re the last man on earth I want to end up with.”

He came around the bar to stand before her. “I know you’ve said that, but let’s face it, Tasha, I’m your first.” He reached out to brush the hair from her face. “You’re going to get caught up if we do this.”

She tensed before slapping his hand away. She jumped from the chair and pushed his chest. He stepped back, not from the force but to give her space.

“I’m not going to get caught up. This is only for a few weeks until I start dating someone else. Maybe shorter than that. I met a very handsome doctor this afternoon and he called me beautiful.”

Jared clenched his jaw and took a step toward her. “What did I say about mentioning other men when you’re with me?”

She smirked. “It looks like you’re more caught up than I am.”

She had him on that one. He lectured against getting feelings involved, but was jealous at the mention of another guy. It had to be sexual frustration. He’d gone to bed frustrated and hard every night since they’d come back from Charleston, despite the continued calls from the ever persistent Monica. He was used to women coming back, but Monica was on another level. He would’ve changed his number if he hadn’t been waiting on Tasha to call.

He’d picked up the phone to call Tasha a dozen times, but never had the balls to do it until today. He was the one behaving like a novice.

He relaxed and stepped back. “You’ve got me on that one,” he said. “You don’t belong to me any more than I belong to you.”

She smiled softly. “And we never will. So we’ll do this for a few weeks, okay?”

Jared considered what she said. In the past other women had enticed him enough to want more than a one night stand — true, none had affected him as much as Tasha — but he’d be over this in a few weeks.

He bit his lip and looked at her from the corner of his eye before answering. “Okay.”

She sighed and reached for her wine. “Let’s change the subject.” She bounced back into her chair as if they’d just agreed on ordering take out. “What’s up with you planning a birthday party for your mom?” She took a sip from the glass.

Jared flinched and walked back around to the other side of the bar. “Nothing’s up. I promised Malcolm I’d help before we went to Charleston. I can’t back out without telling him why.”

Fortunately, his mom hadn’t called again. It was hard enough to stomach listening to Malcolm talk about it. Malcolm said he was fine with their mom remarrying, but he’d seen the sadness in his brother’s eyes when he first brought it up. Their dad was long gone, but their mom remarrying didn’t erase how much they missed him. Especially since Jared wanted to strangle Mr. Carter every time he thought about *how* his dad died.

“Why don’t you tell Malcolm?” Tasha asked.

He shrugged. “He lost one parent. No need for him to lose both of them like I have.” He downed the rest of his wine and poured another.

Tasha’s hand paused as she lifted her glass to her mouth. Sympathy filled her eyes before she looked away. “That’s fair, I guess,” she said. “Are you okay ... with helping I mean?”

“I’m fine. It’s no different from any other time she’s needed something. She asks Malcolm, he arranges, and I throw money at the problem.”

Her brows furled. “Your mom asks for money often?”

“No.” He scoffed. “Never, actually. She lets Malcolm know when something is wrong with the house and we fix it.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “I’m surprised you do that.”

He sighed and gulped his wine. “She’s still my mom, even if she’s a bad one. Plus, it’s my dad’s house.”

She tilted her head to one side and studied him. “I think you still care. Maybe you should talk to her.”

Jared pushed away from the bar and downed the rest of the wine. “I think ... I’m tired of this conversation. Are you spending the night?”

If she was surprised by his change of subject she didn’t show it. Instead she shook her head and stood.

“No, that’s too much. I’m going to get dressed and go home.”

His shoulders slumped. He never kicked women out afterwards, but he also never stopped them from assuming he wanted them to leave. It surprised him how much he wanted her to stay.

“Come back tomorrow,” he said.

“Why come here?”

“Because my home is more secluded. Everyone would know what was going on if I come to you.”

“We’ll make up something. Say I’m helping you edit the manuscript for your fitness book or something. That’s what would be going on,” she said with a laugh. “Besides, you’d never stay the night.”

She was right. If he said she was helping with work, people would believe it because that’s the type of person Tasha was. But he wanted her here, in his home and bed. “Doesn’t matter. Come here tomorrow.”

She frowned. “You aren’t ruling this.”

Jared walked around the bar and slid his hands beneath the bathrobe to cup her bottom and pull her close. He leaned down and softly kissed her lips. “Come here, please.”

She looked into his eyes and he kissed her again. When he pulled away she was smiling. “Fine, I’ll come here tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 18

Tasha dropped her purse in her hall and slumped against the front door. She pinched her nose and willed the stuffiness go away. Usually she was long gone from the Rec Commission before the monthly pet adoption drive, but today she'd had to stick around and complete the budget. She'd been so wrapped up she'd forgotten today was the day the center would be overrun with shelter animals from the two county area. Even though the animals had been outside, she'd had to walk through the various penned dogs and cats, while being stopped by employees who wanted her to "ooh" and "ahh" over the cute puppies and kittens. The itching and sneezing had started in less than five minutes.

She slowly rolled her head toward the mirror in her entryway and shook her head at the reflection. Red rimmed eyes, swollen nose, and flushed skin. She stood closer to the mirror and groaned. The rash was starting. Sneezing, she turned away and dragged her feet across the floor to her bathroom. She frantically searched the medicine cabinet until she found the Benadryl. Cupping water from the sink, she swallowed two of the pills and prayed they worked fast.

Of course, everyone had understood when she'd sneezed and ran off, but the damage was done. She'd be good for nothing for the rest of the night as she waited for the reaction to pass. Hopefully she'd make it to work the next morning.

She dragged herself from the bathroom to her kitchen where she made a pot of green tea. It usually helped when she broke out. She took the pot and a warmer into the living room, poured a cup, wrapped up in a blanket, and turned the TV to ESPN. She was watching *Pardon the Interruption* when her phone rang.

Jared's picture popped up on her touch screen and she smiled before answering. "Hello?" She flinched when she heard the scratchy sound of her voice.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, today was pet adoption day at the center and I'm allergic to dogs. I try to get out of there before they arrive, but got caught up in work."

"Do you need anything?"

She smiled at his concern. "No. I've taken Benadryl, now I'm drinking green tea and watching ESPN. I should be fine."

"So I guess you won't be coming over tonight."
Disappointment clouded his voice.

"Not tonight." Her voice mirrored his disappointment. In the two weeks since they'd agreed to whatever it was they were doing, she'd gone to his house every night. Except Wednesdays when he mentored and

Sundays. She couldn't go to church and eat dinner with her family, then go sleep with Jared. She knew she was sinning the rest of the week, but she wouldn't include the day she pretended to be her father's perfect virgin daughter.

It was risky to see him so much, but she couldn't help it. She enjoyed sleeping with him, and since she knew the rules, she chose to take it for what it was. But she'd have to end it soon. She was becoming too attached.

The always flirty Dr. Kevis Flynn had shown up at the Rec Commission a few times for open court games of basketball. She was still wary, because of his connection to Charles, but it wouldn't hurt to get to know him better.

Jared sighed into the phone. "Well, I guess I'll talk with you later."

"So you only called to see if I was coming over?" As soon as she asked, she realized she sounded like an irritated girlfriend.

"You know the rules, Tasha."

She sneezed. "Forget I even asked, all right? I've got to go." She hung up the phone and reached for a tissue on the coffee table to wipe her nose.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why else would he call? They were not together. Over the past two weeks he'd only called or texted to see if she was coming over. She'd insisted they not do anything to cause the other one to get more involved than necessary. So why was she upset

that he only wanted to know if she was available for another booty call?

Throwing the tissue on the floor in disgust, Tasha took a gulp of her tea and gasped as it burned her tongue. With a curse, she put the cup back down and lay on the couch. She focused on every word spoken on the television so she wouldn't think about Jared, or if her unavailability meant he was going to find someone else tonight.

After an hour of television, a slight calming of her sneezing but an increase in itching, Tasha was prepared to take two more Benadryl and will sleep to overtake her. No matter how hard she tried, she still imagined Jared wrapped up in some other woman's arms. And each time the picture filled her mind she got mad at herself for even caring. She knew who Jared was and he wasn't monogamous. Especially after she'd insisted she couldn't possibly care about him.

She got up from the couch with the blanket still wrapped around her and was heading for the kitchen when her doorbell rang. She pulled the blanket tighter as she shuffled to the door and jerked it open.

Her heart thumped double time. Jared stood there with a plastic grocery bag in his hand. Relief swept through her like the winds of a hurricane. He wasn't sleeping with someone else.

He held up the bag while she continued to stare at him dumfounded. "I know nothing about allergies, but

thought since soup worked for a cold it had to be good for allergies.”

Tasha chuckled and shook her head. “Yes, soup is useful for a lot of things.”

He looked over his shoulder then back at her. “So can I come in, or are you going to just take my soup and shut the door?”

She stepped back and he walked in. Her entryway seemed ten times smaller as his large frame filled the space. He didn’t wear cologne, but the now familiar scent of his body wash invaded her senses, reminding her of what it was like to have his body pressed against hers. Swallowing hard she closed the door and took a few calming breaths. When she turned around, he was still standing behind her and examined her face.

“You look awful,” he said.

She hit his shoulder. “That’s a messed up thing to say.”

He laughed. “I’m sorry, Tasha, but you don’t look good. Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

She nodded while checking her reflection in the mirror. There was a definite rash along her skin now. Damn dogs. “I was going to take two more Benadryl. I’ll be fine.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Are you sure that’s smart? You don’t need to overdose on over-the-counter meds.”

It was her turn to laugh. “I’m not going to overdose. I’ve done it before.”

He frowned. “I’m serious, Tasha, don’t take anything else. If you’re still feeling bad tomorrow, I’ll take you to the doctor.”

“You can’t be serious.”

He gave her a hard stare. “Do I look like I’m playing?”

Unnerved by his show of concern, Tasha cleared her throat and scratched her chin. “What are you doing here anyway? Did you come to boss me around?”

Jared took her arm and led her into the living room. “No, you didn’t sound good on the phone so I came to check on you.”

“Oh.”

What else was there to say? She should say he didn’t have to because it was beyond the boundaries of their arrangement. But she welcomed the warming around her heart because he wanted check on her.

He sat her on the couch and touched her forehead. Tasha laughed and pushed his hand away. “It’s an allergic reaction, not a fever.”

He smiled. “Look, it’s my first time playing nursemaid, all right? So just sit down and let me figure this out.”

She shook her head but agreed. “Okay, boss.”

Jared winked at her and went into the kitchen. Tasha curled back up on the couch and flipped the TV to the basketball game. She watched the game while Jared heated the soup in the kitchen. She'd eaten a few crackers with her tea earlier, but that was all. Whenever she had an allergic reaction, she wasn't very hungry, but as the smell of chicken noodle soup filled her house her stomach grumbled.

A few minutes later, Jared came out of the kitchen carrying two bowls of soup. He handed one to Tasha and sat beside her with the other.

Tasha breathed in the smell of the soup and sighed. "This smells great. Did it come from a can?"

He scowled. "I don't eat out of a can. It's a soup that I made and froze. Try it and you'll stop eating canned soup."

Tasha took a spoonful and blew it off before tasting. "Oh my, this is good."

He smiled at her. "I know. Now eat."

They watched the game while they ate. Miami was playing Boston. They both cheered for Miami, although Tasha wasn't too upset whenever Boston scored. She'd always had a crush on Kevin Garnett.

She put her bowl down and scratched her arm. Jared watched her with a frown. He'd frowned every time she scratched or sneezed. She must look like a freak, scratching and sneezing every five seconds, but she'd been through this before.

Jared reached over and took her hand. He stretched her arm out and ran his hand over her irritated skin. Tasha sighed as his gentle touch relieved the itch, if only temporarily.

“Do you have something to put on this?” he asked.

“There’s hydrocortisone in my medicine cabinet, but it’s not that bad.”

He jumped up from the sofa. “I’ll get it.” He went into her bathroom and came back a few seconds later with the cream. He took her arm and smoothed the medicine on the rough patches.

When he finished with her arms, he slid closer and put some on her face. It was impossible to ignore the lighting flashes of desire running through her with each rub of his fingers against her face. The muscles in his arms, exposed by the sleeveless t-shirt he wore, flexed with each movement and Tasha watched as the eagle tattoo on his arm stirred with each play of muscle.

Her breathing hitched and she prayed she didn’t sneeze in his face. When he finished he looked in her eyes and cupped her face with his hand. “You don’t look awful.”

“No, I don’t.”

He smiled. “I like you, Tasha.”

There her heart went, doing a silly flip flop. But Jared was not the guy for her. “Jared ... ”

“Don’t tell me not to say that. I’ve always liked you, even when we were just starting out at the Rec

Commission. You say what you feel, but you're also compassionate. I respect you for that. I'm not trying to blur the lines of what we're doing, we both know this will end soon, but don't ever forget that I like you."

Tasha nodded. "I like you too, Jared."

"Good." He leaned over and kissed her quickly before sitting back. "Feel better?"

"Yes, the itching is getting better."

He pulled her against his side and they watched the game. Although he pretended to be relaxed, tension radiated off him. He wanted to talk. It was one of the things she'd picked up on in Charleston and in the weeks they'd been together. He often worked harder to appear calm when something bothered him, but his body would be hard with tension. Eventually he'd blurt out whatever bothered him: a new client, his deal with the Farmers Market, or something at the production facility. He hadn't talked about his mother since the last time she'd brought it up.

Tasha leaned into him and rubbed his chest. She told herself it was to relax him, but really, it gave her an excuse to touch him. She loved feeling his abs and chest almost as much as she loved seeing him without his shirt on.

"I can't go to my mom's party," he said after a few minutes.

Tasha's hand froze for a second before she continued rubbing him. "Don't go."

He sighed. “Malcolm got pissed when I mentioned I might not make it.”

“Why was he mad?”

“He said it’s because he doesn’t want to embarrass or upset my mom on her birthday. I think he just wants me there when she announces she’s getting remarried. Malcolm doesn’t have a problem with Mr. Carter, but he’s not eager to see mom get married.”

“Why not?”

“He’s too much of a good guy to admit he would rather our mom mourn for our dad for the rest of her life. Dad died the day before Malcolm got back to Georgia. He never said goodbye, and that’s always bothered him. That’s why he always tries to visit our mom, or calls and checks on her. Now that she’s getting married, he’s going to have to truly say goodbye to our dad.”

“If you’re there it’s easier for him to wish her well.”

“Yeah. But I can’t go down there and smile and act happy. I hate her for what she did to my dad. To know she’s marrying Mr. Carter makes me sick. I’ll end up saying something and making a bad night worse.”

Tasha looked up at his profile. He stared unseeing at the television, his jaw clenched. “Jared, you need to talk to her and settle this. You can’t go through the rest of your life pretending as if everything is okay.”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to hear her lies.”

She reached over to lay her hand on his hand, which was clenched in a fist on his lap. “You still care about

your mom, or you would have told Malcolm a long time ago what she did. You can't love and hate someone at the same time."

He scoffed. "Why not? I hate the fact that I still care when I know what she did."

"Maybe it's because you know what you saw, and yes it was messed up, but you also know your mother didn't literally kill your father. You don't have to be as close to your mom as Malcolm, but you need to clear the air."

He was quiet as he continued to stare at the television. Tasha laid her head back on his shoulder and watched the game. He finally opened his hand and clasped hers. "Come to the party."

She sat up slowly. She didn't face him but could feel his gaze on her. She wanted to go. She wanted to be there for him during something she knew would be difficult. She wanted to hold his hand as he tried to be nonchalant but tension clenched his body. She wanted him to squeeze her hand like he did now when things were tough. She wanted to end the night wrapped in his arms while they talked about what happened. She wanted it so much it scared her.

This was going horribly wrong. She should have known. How many books and movies were made about people who thought they could sleep together and not fall in love, but did in the end. Only this wasn't a love story. She'd fall in love, and Jared would move on to the next woman.

"I'm going to get something to drink."

When she tried to get up, he held onto her hand.
“Are you going to ignore me?”

She looked in his eyes. “Jared, we both know I don’t need to go. Do you want your family to think we’re together? If Malcolm’s there, then Kenyatta will be and she’ll tell my sister. Then before you know it, my dad is asking me to bring you to the next Sunday dinner. I can’t tell him it’s not proper to bring my lover to dinner.”

He studied her for a second before a small smile twisted his full lips. “It’s this whole friend, lover thing. The lines get blurry.” He pulled her back against him. “Forget I asked.”

“You can call me after the party,” she said.

He kissed the top of her head. “No need to worry about it until I’m sure I’m going.”

“You need to go.”

“Then go with me.” When she stiffened he laughed. “I’m joking, Tasha. Let’s change the subject, okay?”

“Yes, lets.”

“In Charleston, you said a guy had to be special for you to sleep with him. Now that your virginity’s gone, am I special to you?”

She sat up and groaned. “Why do you ask questions like that?”

“The hell if I know.”

“Maybe it’s time to stop this.”

“I think you’re right.”

They sat on the couch and stared at the television, ignoring the game. Just that quick, he was ready to end things. His agreement hurt more than it should have. She didn't want to stop sleeping with him, but she needed to. What was supposed to be one night had lasted long past its expiration date. It was better to cut things off now, before she became too accustomed to being with him every night.

She opened her mouth to tell him but sneezed instead. Luckily, she was quick enough to sneeze into the crook of her elbow instead of on him. He jumped up and reached for a tissue. She took it and wiped her nose and he smiled.

"I never do the right thing," he said. "We'll stop next week."

She lay back on the couch and he pulled her feet onto his lap. "That sounds good."

He began to rub her feet and she snuggled into the cushions. Yes, they were blurring the lines of their relationship. Yes, she was beginning to care about him. But right now she was achy and tired and didn't want to think about how minutes before she'd been lost at the thought of ending their arrangement. Right now, she just wanted to enjoy the fact he was there and was content to rub her feet and watch the game.

CHAPTER 19

Jared was satisfied Tasha was getting over her allergic reaction when he left her at seven the next morning. The rash was fading and she'd stopped sneezing shortly before ten. He didn't like the way she casually popped Benadryl that morning, but couldn't blame her too much since she hadn't taken any more the night before.

He didn't know why he cared so much; it must be because of what he'd said the night before. He did like her. He usually didn't know a woman long enough to like her before they slept together. It put him in an odd position. He didn't want to care, but couldn't help it.

He'd lied through his teeth when he said they would end things next week. He wasn't close to being tired of sleeping with her, and he planned to continue this arrangement for as long as possible. He just hoped he didn't hurt her too much when it ended, because it would end one day.

Jared had three training sessions set for the morning that he eagerly went through. Afterwards he met with Sam at the production facility and went over the operations for the week. Things were running

smoothly as usual and he once again complemented Sam on his hard work before going to meet Malcolm. He wasn't in the mood to discuss his mother's engagement party, but Malcolm insisted since he was leaving town for a conference tomorrow.

With a groan, Jared parked his car on Main Street before getting out and entering Malcolm's office building.

When he stepped off onto Malcolm's floor, he was immediately grateful he didn't work in "corporate America." The sight of the men in button up shirts and slacks and the women in pantyhose made him shudder. He didn't feel the least bit out of place in his t-shirt and workout shorts.

He smiled at the front desk receptionist, who nodded and said it was okay for him to go down the hall. He greeted some of his brother's co-workers before entering Malcolm's office.

Malcolm sat at his desk reading something, dressed in a shirt, tie, and slacks. Malcolm's straight-laced appearance was one of the things Kenyatta loved about him. He thought it made his brother look even more like the choirboy he always accused him of being.

"What's up, bruh," Jared said as he came into the office and sat in the chair across from Malcolm's desk.

Malcolm looked up and frowned. "What happened to you last night? Devin and I thought you were meeting us for drinks."

Jared flinched. He'd completely forgotten about meeting them. "My bad, man. Something came up."

"Something or someone?" Malcolm asked with a raised brow.

Jared hated when he looked like that. It was the same look their dad had used when he'd been scolding them. "Someone, if you must know. You know how I do," he said with a grin.

"Is that someone Tasha Smith?"

The grin dropped from his face. "How did you find out?"

"Kenyatta figured it out the other day." He lowered his voice. "That's the virgin you took out of town."

Jared shrugged. "And so what?"

Malcolm rolled his eyes. "So what? She's the sister of my fiancée's best friend. If you fuck around with her then *I'm* going to suffer."

"Please. You're overreacting," Jared said.

"Kenyatta and Angie spent two hours on the phone the other night talking about how my no good brother is going to break this poor girl's heart. Believe me, I will suffer."

Jared frowned and sat up in the chair. "I'm not going to break Tasha's heart. We have an understanding."

"Virgins don't know the meaning of *understanding*," Malcolm said sarcastically.

Jared held up a finger and smiled. “Number one, she’s no longer a virgin.” He lifted another finger. “Number two, she gets me. She knows who I am and I know who she is. What we got is working.”

Malcolm studied him. “How long will it work?”

Jared shrugged. “Until one of us gets caught up.”

“Meaning until Tasha falls in love with you.”

“I’ll stop it before it gets there,” Jared said, but he didn’t meet Malcolm’s eyes. What would it be like for Tasha to say she loved him? He’d probably freak out before the words were out of her mouth, but it would be different to be loved by a nice woman. Tasha wouldn’t say it for clothes, money, or connections. If she said it she would mean it.

“You don’t look convinced,” Malcolm said.

He met Malcolm’s gaze head on. “Look, you tell Kenyatta and Angie to mind their own damn business. Tasha is thirty years old and can make her own decisions.”

“And I’d usually agree with you, but I know Tasha. She’s a nice girl. Jared, you’re used to playing around with women who are used to the game. You shouldn’t be messing around with a good girl.”

He scowled. “What, just because I’ve been around I don’t deserve to have her care about me?”

Comprehension flashed Malcolm’s eyes. “You want her to care about you.”

Jared scoffed. “Whatever.”

“Whatever, hell. You do. I can see it in your eyes. You want this girl to fall for you. Jared, that’s wrong.”

Jared jumped up from the chair and paced back and forth. “Look, I didn’t come here for a lecture on my sex life. Tasha is happy, I’m happy, and what we’re doing is working.” He walked toward the door. “Pick out whatever you want for Ma and *Mr. Carter*, I don’t give a damn anyway.” He stormed out of the office.

His brother wouldn’t chase him down the hall. It would make a scene at his job, and Malcolm hated being the object of rumors. Jared didn’t care what Malcolm, Kenyatta, or Angie thought. It would be nice to have Tasha care about him. He hated when she acted as if he wasn’t good enough for her to marry. It may be true, but that didn’t make it any less annoying every time she said he wasn’t what she wanted. But he wasn’t deliberately trying to make her fall in love with him.

Sure, he treated her better than any other woman he’d slept with. And yeah, he continued to blur the lines of their relationship in an effort to shake her up a bit. She was always so damn calm about their situation. Always insisting she leave after they had sex, making him wish she would stay. She didn’t want people to know about them, and acted as if he were another co-worker when he showed up for mentoring at the Center. Even when he was deliberately abrasive, she never complained or cried. He was used to women crying and acting as if he’d broken their hearts, when in reality he’d only broken

their dreams of uniting with his money. She didn't want anything from him and dammit, he wanted her to want something from him.

Outside, he stopped at his car. What did he want her to ask for? Not marriage. He didn't trust women enough to marry one. But it wouldn't hurt for her to want to be with him.

He smiled. He'd never considered having a long-term lover. It would be hard to convince her to put off marriage. But it would only be for a few months, until they grew tired of the arrangement. If he applied a little pressure, showed her what it would be like, then it should be easier to convince her. She liked what they had going just as much as he, and the sex was amazing.

Whistling, Jared got in his car and headed for the Rec Commission. It was time to turn up the heat and convince Tasha there was no need to rush and find a husband when she had a perfectly good lover at her service.

CHAPTER 20

The buzzing of Tasha's cell phone interrupted her count of the basketball equipment. She sighed in frustration, not because of the phone's interruption, but because she'd have to count the equipment for the tenth time. Thoughts of Jared had distracted her the previous nine times. She pulled her phone from her pocket and saw a text from Shayla.

Big party in ATL this weekend. Come, you need the break.

Tasha put the phone back in her pocket. She did need the distraction. Her agreement with Jared to continue their arrangement for one week had easily turned into two. He'd turned up the heat so much, by the end of the first week she hadn't even brought up ending things. She'd gotten caught up. The realization wasn't surprising. All it took was a phone call or text from Jared and she was ready.

She'd been with him almost every night for the past four weeks. Now she was hooked and it was getting harder to get out of his bed and go home. He always said she didn't have to leave, but he never asked her to stay.

Refusing to spend the night was the last front she could put up to pretend she didn't crave him, but it was useless. She wanted to stay, and he wanted her there.

If it were just sex then maybe she wouldn't have gotten attached. But she'd learned more about Jared over the past weeks than she'd known in the years of working with him. They talked about his business, a new offer to reissue his DVD, their childhood memories, and happenings at the Rec Commission. Since the night he'd tended to her allergies, there'd been other nights they hadn't had sex and just hung out and watched the NBA playoffs. The lines were so blurry Tasha didn't even know what label to put on what they were doing.

But she could label what was happening to her: she was falling for Jared, and she was falling hard.

Her phone buzzed again. Cursing, she put down her clipboard and checked the message.

I'm hungry.

It was Jared. *Damn, damn, damn.* She knew what he was hungry for and it wasn't food. Her face flushed as she remembered the last time he'd texted those words. He'd shown up at the Center twenty minutes later and feasted on her inside one of the storage rooms. Her panties became damp as her mind's eye visualized what they must have looked like: her back against the wall, legs open, and Jared kneeling, dining to his heart's content.

Tasha kicked the wall and grabbed her foot as pain sliced through her big toe. She never should have asked

him for the favor. That's why Shayla invited her to Atlanta. The birthday party for Jared's mother was this weekend. Once Tasha had updated Shayla on her current situation with Jared and how he continued to ask her to go, Shayla had quickly pointed out it was time to stop sleeping with Jared and move on.

Her phone buzzed again and she seriously considered throwing it against the wall. Instead, she pulled it from her hip again and checked the message.

Hey girl. I hope we can catch up for lunch soon. I really need to talk to another Christian woman.

She should have thrown the phone into the wall. Monica Javers was the newest attendee at her father's church and for some reason the woman had designated herself as Tasha's newest friend. She was usually happy to welcome any new members to her father's church, but Monica's immediate connection to her was unnerving. Tasha cringed because as the preacher's daughter, eventually she'd have to accept Monica's lunch invitation.

She pulled out her phone one more time to check the time; it was almost six. It was the first night of the intramural basketball league so she'd stayed late to make sure things kicked off okay. Giving up on her count of equipment, she grabbed a bag of balls and left the storage room. Two teenage boys she recognized from the mentoring program nearly knocked her over as they ran down the hall.

“My bad, Ms. Smith,” said Jevaras Jones, a seventeen-year-old who had on a t-shirt that swallowed his thin frame and shorts that looked more like oversized pants.

“Yeah, we didn’t see you,” Tony Wilson, the sixteen-year-old Jared mentored, spoke up. He was a miniature version of his mentor in a sleeveless t-shirt that showed off his developing biceps and basketball shorts.

“You would have seen me if you weren’t running in the hall,” Tasha said with a scowl. She shoved the bag into Tony’s hands. “Take these to the gym. I know that’s where you’re headed.”

“You know it,” said Tony, laughing. “We got to see what these old dudes can do.”

Javaras crossed his arms and pursed his lips. “Why you don’t let us play in the league, Ms. Smith?”

“Because you boys only want to pretend you’re LeBron, or fight each other, instead of playing the game. Now take the balls and stop running in the halls,” she said, tapping her toe.

“Dang, no need to be all nasty,” said Javarus. He tapped Tony on the shoulder. “She must be PMSing.”

“What did you just say?” Tasha snapped. Tony took off down the hall with a mumbled apology and Javarus quickly followed.

Shaking her head Tasha followed. She wasn’t PMSing. She froze. In fact, she hadn’t experienced PMS

or her cycle since before Charleston. She mentally counted the weeks and groaned. Six weeks had passed.

Her vision blurred and she gasped for breath. *No, no, no, no. This can't be happening*, she thought. *I'm just stressed. I've been late before due to stress.* She placed her hand against the wall to brace herself.

“Are you okay? You look as if you're going to faint.” A warm hand grasped her shoulder. She looked up and met the concerned eyes of Dr. Kevis Flynn.

Tasha nodded and gave him a shaky smile. “I'm fine. I just ... had a bad thought.”

He still frowned as he turned her to face him. He lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. “It must have been some thought. You're shaking.”

Tasha grasped his hand to remove it from her chin. Instead, he turned his to clasp hers. “Something one of the mentoring kids said. It was silly. I shouldn't take them serious.”

He frowned. “Are they that bad?”

She shook her head. “No, they just don't know when to stop playing.” She squeezed his hand and tried for a brighter smile. “See? I'm fine. No more shaking.”

He finally smiled back at her. His thumb caressed the back of her hand and, surprisingly, she was comforted by the small gesture. “Good. I thought I would have to rush you to the hospital.”

“No need for all that. Are you playing tonight?” she asked to change the subject.

“Yes, the six-thirty game. I was hoping you’d be around to watch me play.”

This time her smile came easily. “I only like to watch men who know how to play the game. I’m not into watching showoffs.”

“Oh, I know how to play.” His baritone voice lowered an octave.

Someone cleared their throat loudly. They both turned as Jared walked up. Although he didn’t appear upset, it didn’t stop her from feeling guilty. She pulled her hand out of Kevis’s and smiled at Jared.

His eyes flicked over her before turning to Kevis. “My bad, man, I didn’t mean to break up your flow, but I need to speak to Tasha about something.”

Kevis pointed at Jared. “I know you. I work out at your gym and tried your exercise program. It’s a great workout, man.”

Jared smiled and gave Kevis a pound. “Glad to hear you liked it.” He looked at Tasha, jealousy clear in his dark eyes before he hid it behind a sly grin. “Do you mind if I pull her away?”

Kevis shook his head. “Nah, man, but give me a second.” He turned to Tasha. “I was just about to ask the lady if she’d go out with me on Saturday.”

Tasha kept her eyes on Kevis, but saw Jared stiffen in her periphery. “You move pretty quickly,” she said.

Kevis smiled. “When I like what I see there’s no need to beat around the bush.”

“Tasha, weren’t you and your sister coming to my mom’s party this weekend?” Jared asked. When she cut her eyes at him, he looked at Kevis. “It’s in Atlanta. Tasha’s family is pretty close to mine.”

Kevis frowned before turning back to Tasha. “If you have plans for this weekend we can make it another night.”

She planned to refuse Kevis, until Jared spoke up. Pushing aside her anger with Jared for stepping in she smiled at Kevis. “The party isn’t until Saturday. How about we go out Friday?”

A huge grin replaced Kevis’s frown. “Sounds good.” He walked backwards away from her. “Don’t forget to come watch me play. Remember, I’ll score double digits just for you.”

Tasha laughed. “I knew you were a showoff.”

Kevis laughed, turned, and hurried down the hall. When he rounded the corner, Tasha whipped around to face Jared. “What was that about? I never said I was going to your mom’s party.”

He stepped back and held up his hands. “Tasha, quit playing. You know you’re coming.”

“Why are you insisting I go? I know it’s going to be hard, but you need to go and air things out with your mom. You don’t need me there to hold your hand.”

He crossed his arms. “I could call Cassandra and have her fly in to hold my hand?”

Jealously churned in her gut. He'd told her about his previous relationship with Cassandra. At first, she couldn't understand how he could work so well with someone he used to sleep with, but now she empathized with the woman. One day that would be her, forced to work with Jared, while remembering what it felt like to be with him.

She bit her lip and inwardly counted to five. "If that's what you need to do, fine." She spun to walk down the hall but Jared reached for her hand. When she turned around he gently pulled her back.

"Stop. I don't want to fight you." His voice was soft. "I'm not calling anyone else." He leaned down to look her in the eye. "For anything. You got that? I'm only calling you."

Her heart rate to speed up and her stomach fluttered. That's all it took from him, a few soft words and those soft eyes and she was pudding in his hands. "Jared, I'm not asking you to do that. I think it's time — "

"It's not time," he interrupted. "You don't want this to be over."

"I don't, and that's exactly why it's time."

"Because of him?" He motioned down the hall in the direction Kevis had taken.

"Not just because of him. Because I'm starting ... "

Her voice trailed off.

Excitement filled his dark eyes. "Starting to what?"

"I'm starting to ca — "

“Jared, what are you doing here?”

Tasha blinked rapidly. She'd almost told him she was starting to care. With a sigh of relief, she turned to see who'd saved her from herself. A tall, handsome guy with tan skin, high cheekbones any woman would die for, and a slim but sculpted build walked up to them. He looked familiar but she couldn't place where they might have met.

“Devin, what's up man?” Jared said without sincerity. He and Devin gave each other a one-arm hug.

“A few of us doctors put together a basketball team. We're playing tonight.” His eyes left Jared and turned to Tasha.

Jared cleared his throat. “Devin, this is Tasha. She's the assistant director at the Rec Commission.”

Tasha smiled and shook Devin's hand. “Nice to meet you. Although, you do look familiar.”

Devin smiled warmly. “I get that a lot. Where are you from?”

“I grew up in West Columbia.”

He frowned as if he were trying to place her. “West Columbia. I had a friend in high school who used to hang out over there.”

“Kenyatta's best friend Angie is my sister. We may have met in passing through her and Malcolm,” Tasha said.

He nodded. “Yeah, that may be where.”

Tasha took the opportunity to escape. “Well, I’ll let you two talk. I’m going to watch the first game.” She looked at Jared. “I like the guy playing,” she said before walking away.

CHAPTER 21

Jared started to follow Tasha down the hall but Devin placed a hand on his arm. “Hey man, don’t even go there.”

Jared turned to his friend. “Why not?”

Devin let him go. “You had your fun, but it’s time to move on to the next one.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Jared said going after Tasha.

Devin followed. “I talked to Malcolm.”

“Aw hell.”

“He said you’re messing around with a good woman.”

He cut his eyes at Devin. “So what, I can’t be with a good woman?”

“Not if you’re only trying to sleep around. Look, Jared, we all know the type of guy you are.”

Jared stopped at the entrance of the gym and frowned at Devin. “What type of guy am I?”

“Don’t get pissed at me, man. You’ve never tried to hide you only want a woman for one thing. You clown me whenever I date a woman for an extended period of time and you questioned Malcolm about marrying Kenyatta. I don’t have a problem with your viewpoint, because usually you’re dealing with women who ain’t about nothing. But, when you start messing with *virgins*, you’ve got to admit that’s pretty messed up.”

Jared turned and pointed at Devin. “Let’s get a few things straight. I’m not messing with virgins; I did one virgin a favor by being her first, at her request. Sleeping with her wasn’t even on my radar before she came to me with that. Second, she chose to keep this thing going. I can’t help it if honey got hooked on a brotha. I’ve been upfront with her from the start, so both you and Malcolm can quit acting like I’m hanging around the playground picking up young girls.”

Devin pushed Jared’s hand away. “I’m not trying to start nothing with you. I’m just letting you know that when you mess with a woman like that, their feelings get involved. She’s gonna end up hurt.”

“How do you know that? For your information, I was thinking about keeping her around for a while,” Jared said and turned to scan the gym for Tasha.

“What’s a while?”

Jared shrugged. “I don’t know, man, a while.” His eyes landed on Tasha seated in the bleachers. The guy from earlier, he hadn’t gotten his name, was stretching out his legs on the bleacher in front of her. “She’s cool, all

right. We've always been cool; I just never hooked up with someone I respected before. I like it." He frowned when Tasha laughed at something the guy said.

"You like *it*, or you like *her*?"

Jared shrugged again. "Her, I guess. Who the hell is that dude?"

Devin turned to follow Jared's gaze and grinned. "That is Dr. Kevis Flynn. He's an ER doctor, moved here from Charlotte. That dude has every female doctor, nurse, and orderly at the hospital panting after him."

"So he's a player?"

"Nah, he's straight and narrow. Nice to all the ladies, but not running through them. I hear he's on the lookout for a wife."

Jared's frown deepened. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Some of the nurses were gushing about how he mentioned being ready to settle down and have kids."

"Damn, that's just what I need." Jared wanted to spit fire when Tasha laughed again. Was the dude a comedian or something?

"What you mean?"

Jared sighed. "Me and Tasha agreed to do our thing until she met someone else. The good doctor over there just asked her out. I tried to block, but she just went around. He's exactly the kind of man she's looking for." *And I'm exactly the type of man she doesn't want*, he thought.

“Are you looking to marry and have kids?” Devin asked.

“Hell nah!”

“Then it’s time to move on. Kevis is a good dude. Let the chips fall.”

Jared shook his head. “No, I’m not ready.”

“Then you better lay something on the line that’ll make her stay.” Jared opened his mouth to interrupt but Devin kept going. “And I’m not talking about sex. If you like her, tell her.”

“I already did.”

Devin did a double take. “Hell must have frozen over. I never thought I’d see the day when you told a woman you liked her.”

Jared pushed Devin’s shoulder. “I ain’t said I love her or anything like that.”

Devin smiled. “Sorry, man, but love is probably the only thing that’ll keep a girl like that.”

Jared frowned and turned back to Tasha and the good doctor. She would expect something like that. He liked her — a lot — but love? He didn’t even know what love was.

“I’m not telling you to say it just to get what you want either,” Devin said.

Jared nodded. “I don’t play dirty like that. I’ll find another way to keep this going.”

Devin shook his head. “What you want may not equate to what’s good for her.”

“Damn, y’all act like I’m Lucifer or something. I’m not going to kill the woman.”

Devin laughed. “I know. But you will crush her heart. Think about what I said, man. I gotta warm up.”

Jared watched Devin as he walked over to Tasha and Kevis. They said a few words and then Kevis joined Devin on the court to warm up. *Good looking out*, he thought. Devin would have his back, even if he didn’t agree with him.

Tasha glared at Jared before turning her body away from him. He guessed she figured out what Devin was doing. Jared walked to the other side of the gym. He passed his mentee, Tony, who was flirting with Tasha’s front desk helper, Latiffa.

“What’s going on, Tony?” Jared reached out to give Tony a one-arm hug.

“Nothing much, Jared. Just came to watch these old dudes ball,” Tony said with a laugh.

“Yeah, well, remember this old dude can still whip your ass on the court,” Jared replied.

“I been lifting, man. Don’t underestimate.” Tony flexed his biceps and Latiffa’s eyes lit up.

Jared shook his head and kept walking. He sat in the bleachers directly across from Tasha. The fact that she kept her eyes trained on everyone in the gym except him told him she knew where he was.

The game started after a few minutes. The team of doctors quickly took the lead against their opponents. Jared would have been happy for Devin, if the good doctor wasn't on the team. Jared scowled after Kevis scored a three point shot, kissed his fingertips, and pointed at Tasha, who smiled back. Did he look that stupid when he'd done the same motion to women in the stands? The good doctor was laying it on thick.

Jared pulled out his cell phone. Time to remind Tasha of what they had.

I'm still hungry, he texted.

Tasha pulled her phone from her hip and read his text. He smiled when her lips parted as she took a deep breath.

Burger King is open. Go get a whopper.

I'm not hungry for a whopper. I'm hungry for you.

I'm not going to be your booty call whenever you get horny.

You're more than a booty call, Tasha.

Really? You could have surprised me.

Don't trip. We have fun even when we aren't having sex. Remember the game the other day?

He watched her smile and shake her head. *Yeah I remember.*

Come on girl. Don't break up what we got going.

What do we have going?

Why we got to label it? All I know is I've never done this before but I like it. I like you.

*I like you too *sigh**

So are you going to feed me?

We can't do this forever.

But we can do it now. Let me taste you.

Jared looked across the gym. Tasha looked up from her phone at him. She smiled briefly before turning back to the game. He kept his eyes trained on her, willing her to say yes. His heart speed up when she finally got up and walked out of the gym. A few seconds later, his phone buzzed.

Meet me in my office.

Hell yeah! Jared caught Devin's eye and lifted his chin with a smile. Devin shook his head. Jared didn't care what his friend thought. He was going to handle his business.

CHAPTER 22

Tasha groaned with a mixture of desire and self-loathing when Jared leaned down to kiss the side of her neck. The satin sheets were strewn across his bed from where he'd thoroughly explored every inch of her body. For the second time in two days, she regretted her actions. The night before he'd tasted her so meticulously she'd practically begged him to fuck her on the wall of her office. There was no other word to describe what she'd wanted him to do. Instead, he'd left her panting, soaking wet, and horny as a teenager, while he walked out with a cocky look in his eye. She was too embarrassed to go back to the game, so she'd briskly given the maintenance crew instructions for closing up.

It wasn't hard to figure out why he'd left. Even though he'd been just as turned on as she, he'd wanted to leave her wanting more. More from him and no one else. And dammit, like a junkie she'd run over after work today so he could finish what he started. It was crazy, reckless, stupid, and every other adjective out there used for bad judgment.

She tried to push him off. Instead, he slowly slid out of her and she gasped at the pleasure and loss.

He rubbed his cheek against hers. “I could do this every day.”

Her heart thumped repeatedly. She pulled his head up so she could look into his eyes. “Do you mean that?”

He froze. His mouth opened and closed regret clear in his eyes. He hadn’t meant those words the way she’d taken them.

She tried to smile, but it was more of a grimace. “Of course you do. What man wouldn’t want to have great sex every day?”

He didn’t stop her when she slid away from him and sat on the edge of his bed. She pushed her thick hair out of her face and stared at the wall. If he didn’t want to commit to her now, why would he if her fears were confirmed? Even after he’d left her wanting him, her last thought and prayer the night before was for her period to come in the morning. It hadn’t. Jared’s expression confirmed what she’d already known. He was content to sleep with her every day, but that was all. What would he say if she was pregnant? What would she say? She couldn’t imagine facing her parents, her father’s church members, or even herself in the mirror. Jared was always clear he didn’t want marriage or kids. She had only herself to call a fool if she was pregnant.

Jared’s hand brushed her back and she jumped. “What’s wrong, Tasha?”

As if he didn’t know. She wanted to yell at him for being so callous. For not caring about her the way she cared about him. Instead, she shook her head. “Nothing.”

She hopped off the bed. She pulled the sheet with her and wrapped it around body. "I've got to go."

"You don't have to go."

She whipped around to face him. "I can't stay here."

"Why not? You can't possibly tell me you feel like driving after what we just did." He smiled.

"No, you don't understand. I *can't* stay here."

He frowned and reached for her but she took a step back and held up her hand. "Stop, Jared. Just stop it. Stop acting like you want me here. Stop telling me you *like* me, and calling and texting me when you want me. I know you think nothing is wrong with doing those things, but it is."

His thick arms flexed as he crossed them and leaned against the headboard. "Why don't you tell me why letting you know that I want you is wrong?"

She glared in response to his calm voice. "You're acting like we're together, when we're not."

"I'm giving you what you want. You asked me to treat you differently from my usual women. That's what I'm doing."

"That's the problem."

He rolled his eyes. "You're making no sense."

"I know." She paused and took a deep breath. "Look, I'm not cut out to do this. I ignored the consequences."

His eyes narrowed. "What consequences?"

She looked away. "I have to think about the future and what I want." Her gaze returned to his. "Right now all I want is you."

He jumped off the bed so quickly she jumped. He reached for her hands and pulled her close. "You've got me. We can do this for as long as you want."

"Will you marry me?"

He dropped her hands and stepped back. "I'm not talking about marriage, Tasha."

"Well, I am. I want a husband and kids. I don't want to be someone's jump off or baby momma."

He screwed up his face. "You're not my jump off, and you're damn sure not going to be a baby momma. We protect ourselves from that."

"It's not one hundred percent," she whispered.

He shook his head. "It's been foolproof for me so far. Besides, if we ever had an accident I'd take care of it." She flinched and he cursed. "Tasha ... "

She held up her hand. "No, I needed to hear that. I've never asked you to hide who you are. Just like I can't hide who I am. I *can't* do this anymore. I'm caught up, Jared. I'm falling so damn hard for you and I can't afford to stay."

He rubbed the back of his head and looked away. That simple movement broke her heart. He didn't feel the same. She was even more naïve than she'd thought.

"I'm gonna get my stuff and go," she said.

“Look, why don’t I call you tomorrow and we’ll talk?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” She turned and snatched her clothes from the floor. When she had everything, she headed for his bathroom. She dressed slowly. Her eyes trailing to the door as she waited for the knock, for him to tell her he still wanted her to stay. If he said he felt a smidgeon of what she felt for him then she’d keep this up. She would even tell him about her fears. If he cared, he couldn’t possibly hurt her by “taking care of an accident.”

The knock never came. Her feet were like lead as she left the bathroom. He looked at her before getting off the bed and sliding into a pair of basketball shorts. He walked over and kissed her cheek. “I’ll call you tomorrow. We’ll talk.”

Tasha stiffened. He expected her to come running back to his bed. And she’d been the stupid fool who gave him that impression. She’d been running to his bed for weeks. Every time she said she was through she came back. There was no reason for him to believe she was done.

She looked into his eyes. “Don’t bother calling. Tomorrow’s Friday. I have a date.” His eyes turned cold and she walked out.

CHAPTER 23

Instead of going to Atlanta on Friday, Jared waited until that night to pull out his cell and call Malcolm. He'd used work as an excuse to get out of helping with last minute preparations and arrive later, but as the day wore on and he thought about smiling in the faces of his mom and Mr. Carter, he couldn't bring himself to go.

If Tasha were coming, it would be different. In the six weeks since Charleston she'd become a fixture in his life. After a day of training, putting out fires for his business, and working deals with Cassandra, it was nice to come home and have someone there to talk to. She'd push him to talk whenever he tried to change the subject. No one else did that. She'd listen and offer advice without being pushy or opinionated. He'd never had that before.

Her consistent refusal to come to his mother's party impressed and irritated him. When other women would jump at the chance to meet his family, she'd insisted it would give the wrong impression. He didn't care what his family thought. He wanted her in his life. At what capacity he wasn't sure. Every time he thought about the dreaded L word, he broke out in a sweat. He'd choked

the night before when he should have admitted that he cared too. How could he possibly admit to something stronger?

Malcolm's voice mail picked up. "Hey, Malcolm, it looks like I need to leave town and ..." His message was cut off by the beep from call waiting. Malcolm was calling him back. He switched calls. "I was just leaving you a message."

"My bad, man, I was getting settled here with Mr. Carter and didn't pick up in time. Are you in Atlanta yet?"

Jared frowned. "Mr. Carter. What are you doing with him?"

"Kenyatta went to see a movie with Mom, so Mr. Carter and I decided to get a drink. I was hoping you were calling to let me know you were here and could join us."

"Even if I were in town I wouldn't join you for drinks," Jared said.

"Excuse me for a second, Mr. Carter," Malcolm said. There was shuffling in the background before the murmurs of bar conversations disappeared. When Malcolm spoke again he didn't try to hide his hostility. "Jared, it's time for you to stop acting like a kid and accept the fact that Mom's moving on. I'm not thrilled about it, but I want her to be happy. Why can't you do the same?"

“Because I don’t care if she’s happy, especially if it’s with someone like Mr. Carter. That man’s no good and I don’t want anything to do with him.”

“What’s wrong with you, man? Why are you being so hateful? It’s our mom.”

“You don’t want to know.”

“How about you stop telling me what I do and don’t want to know. I’m a grown man, and I don’t need my *little* brother trying to think for me. So you either start talking or your ass better be here tomorrow for the party.”

Jared looked up and shook his head. “Look, Malcolm, I had some stuff come up and I need to go — ”

“I don’t care what came up. Your ass better be here tomorrow or I’m gonna personally kick the shit out of it when I get back in town.” Malcolm paused and Jared could picture his brother trying to calm himself down. “If you don’t want to do it for Mom, then do it for me. I need my brother beside me.”

“Look, man, I’ll see what I can do, all right?” Jared said before ending the call. It wasn’t the answer Malcolm would want, and sure enough, his phone rang almost instantly. Jared turned off his phone. He rubbed his eyes and pushed aside the guilt for letting Malcolm down. He didn’t doubt his brother would come straight to his house after leaving Atlanta just to kick his ass.

A fight with Malcolm was preferable to going to the party. Sure the party would be tough for Malcolm, but

he'd have Kenyatta by his side. Tasha wouldn't be there to make it easier for him.

He'd texted and called all day, but her phone went straight to voice mail. He'd even called her office and was somewhat mollified when they told him she was in meetings all day. But she would have had some breaks to check her phone and call him. He looked at his watch: ten on the dot. Her date with the doctor should be coming to an end.

He wasn't worried about one date with the good doctor. She'd said herself she was falling for him. What concerned him more was thinking she'd keep up this silent treatment as a way to end what they had.

What should be a simple confession would get her to Atlanta with him. It would keep her from looking at another man ever again. But it would require putting his feelings out there. How could he — self declared playboy and denouncer of long-term commitment — tell her he was just as caught up in what they had as she? How could he explain how much he wanted her in his life, but ask her to leave out the marriage and kids part?

Jared snapped his fingers. He didn't have to tell her. He could leave the long drawn out discussion about their future for another day. Right now, all she needed was to know he wasn't interested in anyone except her. It should be enough to calm her fears, kill any thoughts she had about the good doctor, and get her to Atlanta. *Yeah, but that's messed up when you know what she wants,* his conscience intervened. He shook the thought out of

his head. He pushed away from his desk and grabbed his keys. Right now he had to get to Tasha's before he chickened out.

CHAPTER 24

When Tasha turned her cell phone on briefly at lunch, she ignored the texts from Jared and called Kevis to confirm their date. Kevis's message telling her to dress casually piqued her curiosity. But she wouldn't complain after spending a day in heels and a suit. He'd agreed to meet her at city hall then follow her home so she could change. The air was balmy when she walked out of city hall at six, but Kevis looked fresh and comfortable as he waited for her in a graphic t-shirt that hugged his muscular chest, jeans, and sneakers.

Tasha smiled at him in greeting. "You really meant casual."

"You're going to have to change," he said. He openly admired her legs below the hem of her grey pinstripe suit skirt.

Her smile widened. "Sounds good to me."

He drove her to her car, which was parked in a nearby garage and followed her home. She quickly changed into a red and orange tank top, flowing white linen skirt, and gold sandals. She pulled her hair out of the ponytail she'd worn all day and let her natural curls

frame her face. Jared liked her with her hair down, so Kevis probably would too. He sat on her couch and waited for her to change exactly where she'd left him. Unlike another man who'd roamed around looking at everything during his first visit.

“I'm ready,” she said.

He stood up and paused. “Wow, if this is casual I'd hate to see dressed up.”

She blushed and reached for her purse. “Thank you.”

She led the way out and he opened the door to his car so she could slide in. As he drove back downtown she talked about sitting through various meetings with Richland County and City of Columbia staff to gain continued support for the Rec Commission. From there the conversation flowed to his night before in the emergency room. He didn't go into detail about any of the patients, but the compassion in his voice proved that he cared about what he did.

Downtown he parked in front of Macs on Main and had her wait while he ran inside. He came out with bags of takeout. From there they went to Finlay Park.

“How does a picnic dinner and movie at the park sound?” he asked.

Tasha grinned. “Sounds like a lot of fun.” It was her first real date in over a month. Getting together with Jared every night at his house didn't count. She couldn't resist the familiar excitement of a first date.

They found a spot in the grass before the stage where Kevis spread out the blanket he'd brought. Tasha tried to help but he insisted she relax. She sat back and sipped on a soda as he laid out their food as carefully as if he were laying out a meal for the queen. Their conversation flowed around first date topics: where are you from, where's your family from, what are your hobbies.

Kevis pushed his finished plate aside and met her eye. "What are you looking for in a relationship?"

Tasha froze mid-chew, before slowly swallowing the peach cobbler. That question would have been so much easier six weeks ago.

He softened his features and smiled. "I'm not trying to scare you off or anything, but I'm at a point in my life when I don't want to play games. I'm ready to settle down and have a family, and if that isn't in your long term plans, I'd like to know. I'm not saying we'll get married, but I would like to know I'm dating someone who isn't playing the field."

Tasha took a long drag from her soda can. Kevis was exactly what she'd been looking for — before she'd stupidly asked Jared to sleep with her. She meant what she'd said the night before, she couldn't keep sleeping with Jared, but until she knew for sure that she wasn't pregnant — and she prayed every night she wasn't — she couldn't say he was completely out of her life.

"I don't play games," she said. "I do want to get married one day, but it's too early to say who I'll do that

with.”

Kevis smiled. “Fair enough. Just as long as we’re straight with each other.”

It was dusk and the park staff announced the start of the movie. Tasha leaned back on her elbows on one end of the blanket to watch. Her eyes widened, but she didn’t move when Kevis scooted close enough for their hips to touch. Her heart didn’t flutter as it did when Jared touched her, but she enjoyed the pleasant scent of his cologne, the warmth of his body, and the solidness of his frame. By the end of the movie, she was leaning into his side and he’d wrapped his arm lightly around her waist. It was a nice date. Not earth shattering or mind blowing, but nice. So nice, she let him hold her hand on the way to the car, and later when he walked her to her front door.

Tasha turned to smile at him. “I really enjoyed myself, Kevis.”

He returned her smile. “So did I. Maybe we can do this again sometime?”

She nodded. “I’d like that.”

His gaze left hers to settle on her lips. “I’d really like a goodnight kiss.”

Her heart sped up. She’d forgotten the good night kiss. Would she’d enjoy anyone’s kiss after Jared? Only one way to find out.

“I’d like that too,” she whispered.

Kevis took a step closer to her, his wide shoulders blocking the glow from her porch light. She breathed in

the scent of his cologne and although it didn't increase her arousal, it was nice. When his lips settled on hers, she was disappointed there wasn't an immediate rush of desire. But she didn't pull away when his tongue grazed along her bottom lip. She opened her mouth to let him deepen the kiss and slowly slight warmth started in her belly. His hand came up to the side of her breast, but instead of cupping it, he pulled back.

"I'd better go before I get ahead of myself." His deep voice was heavy with desire and Tasha could feel the evidence pressing against her.

She cleared her throat and took a step back. "That was nice."

He smirked. "Nice? I'd hoped for something a bit more."

Her eyes widened. "No, I didn't mean it in a bad way. I definitely enjoyed it."

He smiled crookedly. "That's better."

She laughed and he joined in. "Give me a call when you get back in town."

She frowned, then remembered Jared had given the impression she was going to his mother's party. She wasn't going, but hadn't dismissed the idea of going to the party Shayla invited her to. Not because it would put her in the same town as Jared — or so she told herself.

She nodded. "I will."

He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Her smile froze on her face as Jared's voice went through her head. It was stupid to think of him and the fact that he'd said the same every night before she left, but she couldn't help it. Thankfully, Kevis didn't notice. She had to force the smile to remain on her face as he walked off the porch to his car. He watched as she unlocked her door and went inside. Once inside, her face fell. Why did he have to say that? Now her mind raced with memories of Jared kissing her before she left him when it should be racing with thoughts of her first kiss with Kevis.

There was a knock on her door and she released a shuddering breath. He'd come back. Maybe she could kiss him again and get thoughts of Jared out of her mind.

Grinning, she opened the door. "I'm glad you came back."

Jared stood on her porch. "Well, when the person you want ignores your calls all day you have to pop up."

Tasha's smile crumbled. She mentally shook her head and stood on her toes to look over his shoulder. "What are you doing, did Kevis see you?"

He smirked. "I waved at him as I drove up."

Tasha rolled her eyes. "Are you crazy? Now he's going to think ... "

"That there's something between us." He stopped smiling and stared at her solemnly. "Isn't there?"

Tasha felt herself melting as she looked into his eyes and she cursed herself a thousand times. "No." She tried

to slam the door but he pushed it open. “Get out of my house.”

“Why did you kiss him?”

Her jaw dropped. “You were watching.”

“I was parked across the street. Did you kiss him because I was there?”

“I didn’t see your car, stalker. And for your information I kissed him because I wanted to.” She turned and went further into the house. “If I would have known you were watching I would have let him come in.”

He followed her. “He asked to come in?”

She whipped around to face him. “Did he see you parked across the street, watching my house?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know and I don’t care. He doesn’t matter.”

She stomped her foot. “Yes, he does. Look, Jared, I wasn’t joking last night when I said this was over. I had fun tonight with Kevis. It was a real date, something we’ve never had.”

“That’s because you didn’t want anyone to know about us.”

“Because we were only supposed to be a one-time thing. What happened later was ... a mistake, okay? Kevis wants what I want.”

“How do you know that?”

She sighed and sat on the couch. “Because he told me. He’s looking to settle down, Jared. I can’t date a guy

like that while sleeping with you.”

He sat beside her. “What if you date me instead?”

She closed her eyes and sat back on the couch. “Do you want the long or the short answer?”

“I’m serious, Tasha.”

She looked at him out of one eye, he was smiling. “Jared, I don’t have time for these games. You don’t want to date me. You just want to keep sleeping with me. Dating is just a nice name to put on it, but we both know it’ll go nowhere. Let’s just chalk up our losses and move on.”

“You know we can’t move on. There’re consequences to what we’ve been doing.”

Tasha stiffened. Had he realized they’d had uninterrupted sex for over a month? “What consequences?”

He leaned closer to her. “Last night you said you were falling hard for me.”

She turned away with a groan. “Please don’t go there.”

He held onto her arm and turned her back toward him. “I didn’t want to say it, but I ... ” He stopped.

She opened her eyes and gave him a wary glance. “You what?”

“I’m falling for you too, Tasha.”

Instead of falling into the gooey puddle of happiness his words invoked, she jerked her hand away, stood, and

pointed a finger in his face. “Don’t give me that load of crap, Jared. You think you can just come over here, say you’re falling for me, and I’ll jump right back into bed with you? That’s weak, especially for you. Go run that game on some other chick, because I’m not that stupid.”

She turned away and he jumped up from the couch and took her arm. “I’m not running game on you.”

“Really? I’m supposed to believe you suddenly realized you’re falling for me? And what next, Jared? We keep on sleeping together, maybe we even let our families know we’re lovers, just to break things off immediately afterward because you can’t handle a relationship. I’m not letting myself get wrapped up in you only to find myself broken hearted and alone.”

She tried to jerk away but he held fast. “Dammit, Tasha, it’s not like that.” He paused and glared at her before the tension slowly left his body and he let her arm go. “Okay, maybe it was like that ... ” When she sucked her teeth, he hurried on. “At first. I did come over here to tell you I was caught up, hoping you’d stay with me. But when I saw you with him, when I saw you kiss him, I realized I wouldn’t be saying it just because. I’ve never been in love with a woman before — I don’t know how to say it, or even if what I’m feeling is love. All I know is that the bad things in my life don’t seem so bad when you’re around. I *like* coming home and seeing your car in my driveway. I *like* watching basketball with you, talking to you, and, yes, making love to you. I’m not usually a jealous man, but when I saw the good doctor kiss you, I

wanted to rip his arms out of the sockets. The only explanation I have for that is because I love you.”

Tasha couldn't breathe. It was as if each word out of Jared's mouth sucked some of the air out of the room. She was afraid to speak, because if she spoke maybe she would wake up and realize this was just a wonderful dream.

Jared reached out and cupped the side of her face. “I just poured my heart out and you're gaping at me like a fish. Say something.”

She finally took a shaky breath before smiling. “You mean it?”

He nodded. “Yes.” He laughed. “I just surprised my damn self.”

She laughed with him before reaching up to pull his face down. His mouth glided over hers and intense heat erupted below her skin. There was no slow build up when Jared kissed her, it always crashed over her like a tidal wave: forceful, uncontrollable, and sweeping her under.

He lifted her and carried her into the bedroom. For once, she didn't feel hurried as he kissed her. She had a lifetime to enjoy him and wanted to savor every moment starting now. He slid her body down his and she marveled at the softness of his skin contrasting with the rock hardness of muscle underneath. They undressed each other slowly, both taking the time to kiss every bit of skin revealed. When Tasha pulled down Jared's pants and underwear, she gasped at the sight of his erection,

large and proud before her. She took it into her hands and kissed the top before slowly taking him into her mouth. He'd loved her like this so many times, but she'd only returned the favor once. She took her time learning every inch of it and became more aroused by his quickened breathing and groans as he dug his hands in her hair. She tasted the salty sweetness of his pre-cum and moaned with satisfaction.

Jared lifted her up and slammed his mouth down on hers. "I'm coming inside of you, Tasha."

She grinned. "That would have been inside of me."

"Damn, you know exactly what to say," he groaned before laying her down on the bed.

Jared kissed her with unbridled passion before making his way down her body. He paid homage to her neck, breasts, and stomach before reaching his ultimate destination. He kissed the folds of her sweetness before using every part of his mouth: tongue, teeth, and lips to worship her goodness. When she felt the coming waves of a climax, he pulled up and she groaned in frustration.

"Not until you tell me what I want to hear," he whispered.

Tasha groaned. "What ... don't stop."

He grinned before reaching over and getting a condom out of her bedside table. He opened it and easily slid it on before teasing the edge of her wet walls with his blunt head. "Tell me," he slid one delicious inch inside of her, "you love me." He slid out and she whimpered.

“Jared, please,” she begged.

“Tell me,” he slid two inches inside of her before pulling out, “you love me.”

Mindless with passion Tasha, lifted her hips. “You know how I feel.”

“Tasha,” he slid three inches inside of her, “Look at me.” She opened her eyes and met his, which were filled with uncertainty. “Tell me you love me.”

Any last strains of doubt about his feelings fell away as she met his eyes. “I love you, Jared. God help me, but I do.”

He slid into her completely and she cried out in pleasure. “Oh, God, I love you,” she panted. He kissed her neck as he thrust slowly in and out of her.

“Say it again,” he demanded.

“I love you.”

He quickened his pace. “Again.”

“I love you.”

His speed increased and when his lips met hers she climaxed. He swallowed her screams with a kiss, but broke away to cry out with his own orgasm. He buried his head in her neck as their breathing slowed down. When he slowly slid out of her, she moaned.

He didn’t roll away — instead, he lifted his head and stared in her eyes. “I do love you, Tasha.”

Tasha’s heart soared. It didn’t matter what happened tomorrow because he loved her. If her scare

turned out to be legitimate, they would work it out together. If her family thought she was crazy they'd have to get over it. She'd known deep down the first time he kissed her she would fall under his spell. Now she knew it was because it was leading them to this.

She reached up and touched his cheek. "I love you too, Jared."

He smiled his cocky smile, her heart skipped a beat, and he kissed her again.

CHAPTER 25

Tasha squeezed Jared's hands as they entered the doors of the banquet facility where his mom's party was being held. It was a standalone building with a lobby decorated in shades of gold and cream. Small sitting areas were in each corner and double doors led to the main banquet hall. At the last minute, the party had been changed to a birthday and engagement celebration. Luckily, Malcolm and Kenyatta had rented the entire facility for the party.

Tasha had finally agreed to come around noon. They'd barely gotten out of bed, dressed, and arrived in Atlanta before the start of the party. But remembering Jared whisper in her ear he loved her as they made love during the night was worth every hurried second to get there.

On the way, Jared said they'd invited all of his mom's friends from college, church, her job, and the old neighborhood. Based on the full parking lot and the large number of people mingling, everyone invited must have shown up.

Jared winked at her between smiling and nodding to various people. To anyone else he would appear to be at

ease, but his nervousness and tension was as plain to her as the nose on his face. His smile was tight, his movements jerky, and laughter forced. After watching Jared agonize over this event for the past few weeks, she was nervous.

Jared was right — what he'd seen was hard to justify, but for his sake, she prayed there was more to the story. Despite her anxiety, she had to stifle a yawn as they entered the main room.

Jared caught her yawning and concern filled his eyes. "Are you tired?"

She smiled. "After last night, you're surprised?"

He grinned. "You're right."

She rolled her eyes and looked away. She was exhausted, and that pissed her off. Angie had been exhausted during her pregnancies. Her recent fatigue combined with a still absent period probably meant the worst. Her breathing picked up. What Jared would say? When he'd said he loved her the night before she'd thought things would be okay, but today she wasn't so sure. He didn't trust women. His newfound feelings for her might dissipate as soon as she voiced her suspicion. She wouldn't say anything to him until she worked up the nerve to take a pregnancy test.

His grip on her hand tightened and she looked up. He wasn't looking at her and her gaze followed his to Malcolm and Kenyatta talking to an older couple. The woman's features were so similar to Jared's, she could

only be his mother. A tall, well-built man had his hand around her waist and she assumed it was Mr. Carter.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

He clenched his jaw before taking a deep breath and visibly relaxing. “Let the games begin.”

Tasha felt Jared’s hands become sweaty as they approached his family. She reached over to place her other hand over his.

“I’m here,” Jared said to his brother. “Where’s the bar?”

Surprise was the first emotion on Malcolm’s face before annoyance replaced it. “Jared,” he said through clenched teeth.

“It’s okay, Malcolm,” Mrs. Patterson said. She smiled warmly at Malcolm before turning to Jared and Tasha. The warmth in her eyes and was replaced with cool indifference as she looked at Jared. It was an expression so similar to his, the exact same mask he put on to hide his hurt. “Hello, Jared.” Her eyes flicked coldly and dismissively over Tasha. “I see you brought a friend.”

Jared pulled Tasha closer to his side. “Tasha, this is my mother, Gladys Patterson. Mother, this is Tasha.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Tasha.” Although the words were cordial, the warmth behind them was as welcoming as the Antarctic. “This is Mr. Carter, my fiancé.” She raised a slim hand to Mr. Carter.

Jared squeezed her hand again and she pasted a smile on her face. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Carter."

"Please, call me Randall," he said sincerely. There was warmth in his gaze, and after the cold reception of Jared's mother, she couldn't help but respond with an open smile. She hadn't expected hugs and kisses, but a little pleasantness would've been nice.

"Don't call him anything," Jared said before she could respond.

Randall's smile was replaced with a somber expression. "Look, Jared, I don't care how you feel about me, but for your mom's sake, don't make tonight harder than it has to be."

Jared sneered. "And why should I do that?"

"Jared, please," Tasha said.

Gladys held up a hand. "Don't, my son stopped caring about me a long time ago."

All pretense of calm left Jared, his body visibly stiffening. "Since the day my dad died."

Malcolm stepped up. "I think we need to talk. Tonight."

Jared laughed bitterly. "No need. Tonight's all about celebrating love ... and life." He looked at Tasha. "Come help me find the bar."

"There isn't a bar," Malcolm said.

Jared cringed. "I'm supposed to do this sober?"

“I’ve had enough of your attitude,” Randall said, taking his hand from around Gladys’s waist.

Jared glared back. “I really don’t give a f — ”

“Gladys, I’m so excited.”

Tasha sighed with relief as a middle-aged woman rushed over to hug Jared’s mom. “Celebrating a birthday and an engagement at the same time. It’s about time you found some joy in life. I thank the good Lord it was with Randall.” The lady turned to look at Malcolm then Jared. “And both of your boys are here. You boys must be so happy for your mom.”

“We are, Mrs. Jeffries, thank you,” Malcolm said.

“Ecstatic,” Jared said.

If Mrs. Jeffries noticed Jared’s lack of enthusiasm, it wasn’t apparent. “Well, we all knew in college Randall loved Gladys, but she had a soft spot for your father. Good thing too, because she saved his life. God bless him. I think even he would approve of this match.” Jared snorted but Mrs. Jeffries continued on. “Now, Malcolm, I’ve met your girlfriend.”

“Fiancée,” he said, smiling and holding up Kenyatta’s hand to show off the ring.

“Oh, Lord, another reason to celebrate. Congratulations!” She turned to Jared. “Are you next?”

“No, excuse us.” Jared turned and walked away, pulling Tasha along with him.

“That was rude,” Tasha said when they were out of earshot.

“Mrs. Jeffries will talk to a wall. Believe me, I did you a favor,” he said. “Can you believe that nonsense? So he’s wanted my mom since college? I wonder if their affair lasted that long. And what did she mean, *saving his life*? How did my mom save my dad’s life?”

Tasha hurried to keep up with his pace. “You were too busy hightailing it out of there to find out. It’s obvious you have more questions than answers. You need to talk to her, tonight.”

“I thought I could, but seeing them together ... ” He sighed. She squeezed his hand and he nodded. “Tomorrow, I’ll try tomorrow.”

She stopped. When he turned to face her she stared pointedly. “Tonight.”

He looked as if he would argue, but didn’t. Instead, he lifted her hand and kissed it. “I’ll try.”

They walked over to the buffet table where Jared’s friend Devin was piling food on his plate.

“Man, you and my brother love filling your body with junk,” Jared said, slapping Devin on the back.

Devin turned and grinned. “Hey, man, I’m just trying to let Kenyatta feel good about the food she ordered.”

“Whatever. You remember Tasha?” He pulled Tasha to his side.

Surprise flashed across Devin's face before he covered it with a smile. "I do. Nice to see you again."

"Same here."

Devin turned back to Jared. "So have you pissed Malcolm off yet?"

"I think so. I'll steer clear of him tonight."

Devin shook his head. "I'm staying out of this family drama."

Before Jared could answer, Kenyatta came up to their group and pinched Jared on the arm. Tasha admired her beaded lavender jumpsuit and wished she'd taken more time to pick out something for the evening. Jared had complemented her yellow maxi dress, but Kenyatta looked more polished than she felt.

"You know Malcolm's gonna kill you," Kenyatta said to Jared.

"He'll be all right. I'll keep my distance for the rest of the night."

Devin laughed and shook his head. "You must have really pissed him off."

Kenyatta nodded. "I didn't order them, but I think they'll be fireworks."

Jared grinned at her. "Why don't you take him to some dark corner and distract him? That'll get him off my case."

"At your mom's party? You must be crazy."

It was the first time Tasha had been with Jared around other people. She'd thought his openness with her was something special. But he teased Kenyatta with an open friendliness she'd never seen him give other women. Maybe she was deluding herself into thinking she was more special to Jared than she was.

"Tasha, girl, I am so glad to see you," Kenyatta said.

Tasha blinked several times. As much as Angie complained about her spending time with Jared, she'd figured Kenyatta would feel the same. Angie had even told her previously Kenyatta thought Jared was a dog.

"Really? What's up?"

Kenyatta smiled and clasped her hands to her chest. "Can you help me with something in the kitchen? I tried to make the pasta salad recipe I got from Angie. You know the one your mom makes that everyone loves? Well, it needs some work."

"I thought you catered the party?" Jared asked.

"I did, but some of your mom's friends asked if they could bring food, and since I didn't want them to think Malcolm was marrying a woman who can't cook, I figured I'd make something too."

Tasha laughed. "Kenyatta, you can cook."

"Only when necessary. Malcolm and I eat out most days of the week because of our schedules. I know you can, Tasha. You're almost better than your mom, but don't ever tell her I said that. Will you help?"

Tasha laughed at the obvious compliment. “For that, I’d make a red velvet cake. Sure, I’ll help.”

Kenyatta’s eyes lit up. “Great. Come on.”

Tasha looked and Jared who raised an eyebrow. She shrugged helplessly before Kenyatta pulled her away. They didn’t talk much as Kenyatta wove her way through the thickening crowd. Before they got to the kitchen, Gladys stopped Kenyatta.

“I can’t believe he did that. He’ll never listen to me.”

Pain laced Jared’s mother’s voice. She stepped around Kenyatta to offer sympathy, but when Gladys saw her, the hurt in her eyes was quickly replaced with disappointment.

“Never mind, Kenyatta, we’ll talk later,” she said before turning and walking away.

Tasha frowned and followed Kenyatta into the kitchen. “What was that look for?”

Kenyatta sighed and pulled Tasha out of the way of a caterer with a tray of sandwiches on his shoulder. “That’s why I pulled you in here. Jared’s mom is upset he brought you.”

Tasha scowled. “You must be joking.” How dare his mom be upset about her presence when she was the one in the wrong? As soon as the thought came she felt bad. She was no better than Jared. But that didn’t ease the pain of knowing Jared’s mom didn’t like her.

“Come on, Tasha, we all know the type of woman Jared usually dates. She thinks he brought some dumb

broad he can paw on in front of her friends all night to embarrass her.”

“Did you tell her you know me?”

“Yes, but it didn’t change much. Just because we’re friends doesn’t mean you’re not a slut.”

Tasha cringed. “Kenyatta.”

Kenyatta bit her bottom lip. “Sorry, her words, not mine.”

Tasha took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. “It’s not like that with me and Jared.”

Kenyatta looked skeptical. “Maybe you think that ...”

“I don’t *think* anything. I *know*.” She crossed her arms.

“Tasha, you’re my best friend’s little sister, and I care about you and your happiness. But, Jared is no good. I mean, he’s a decent person and all, but when it comes to women, he’s a dog. Angie’s really worried you’re in over your head.”

Tasha uncrossed her arms to put her hands on her hips. “Angie’s being overprotective. I know you guys are trying to do what you think is right, but I know what I’m doing. You don’t have to protect me from the same type of mistakes you all made.”

Kenyatta reached out to take her hand. “This isn’t about that, it’s about us caring about you. Jared uses women. We’re worried he’s using you.”

She snatched her hand back. “Jared isn’t using me, he loves me.” The words were out before she could think about it. She hadn’t meant to go professing their love for each other so soon, but now that she had she was ready to fight anyone who doubted it. What she wasn’t ready for was the pity in Kenyatta’s eyes.

“You really believe that?”

She clenched her fists to keep from shaking her sister’s best friend. “I believe it because he said it. Jared loves me.”

Movement at the door caught her eye and she turned to see Malcolm standing there, a stricken look on his face.

He took a small step toward her. “Do you love my brother?”

His tone begged her to say no. The anger in his eyes made her more uneasy than anything her sister or Kenyatta could say. Why was everyone so against her and Jared being together? She wanted to cry, instead she clenched her fists. It had to be hormones.

“Yes,” she answered. He cursed and she flinched. “Is it really so terrible?”

He held up his hands. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It doesn’t matter how you meant it. If you’ll both excuse me, I’m going to look for the one person in your family who’s actually happy I’m here.” She rushed past him back into the main room.

Jared was the first person she saw. She couldn't shake the unease from the scene in the kitchen, but when he looked at her and smiled, it was almost forgotten as warmth spread within her. She'd fallen in love with him, and hoped she wasn't stupid for believing he loved her too. He wasn't despicable enough to tell her such a hurtful lie. Was he?

As handsome as he was in the silk peach shirt and tan slacks he'd worn, she wished he was wearing his customary basketball shorts and sleeveless t-shirt, and that they were sitting on his couch watching television instead of here. Surrounded by people who didn't believe what they had was real.

When his eyes met hers his smile faded, and he rushed over. "Are you okay?" He took her hand.

She smiled and squeezed. "Yes. Perfect."

He didn't look convinced. "Are you sure? Was Kenyatta's pasta salad that bad?"

She laughed. She'd completely forgotten about the excuse Kenyatta had used to get her in the kitchen. "Let's just say stay away from the pasta salad."

He continued to study her face and she looked toward the dance floor. "Let's dance. I feel like dancing."

He hesitated for a second before smiling. "All right, let's see what you got."

CHAPTER 26

Jared spent the half hour since Tasha had disappeared with Kenyatta avoiding his brother and mother, while keeping an eye on Tasha. He'd known Kenyatta's pasta salad excuse was just a way for her to get Tasha alone. When Malcolm followed them into the kitchen, and Tasha came out looking like a kid who'd just been told Santa wasn't real, his suspicion was confirmed. She'd tried to act as if everything was okay, but the worry line in the middle of her forehead told a different story.

He was tempted to grab his soon to be sister-in-law and find out what was up, but Malcolm would only follow. His brother followed Kenyatta around like a trained puppy. He would usually tease Malcolm about it, but he was doing the same thing with Tasha. His gaze followed her around the party and whenever she left his side, he was quick to follow. He'd deny it if anyone knew how attached he'd become. It wasn't anyone's business what was between him and Tasha.

They were limited in the people they spoke with. He only wanted to talk to his father's friends, but after a few conversations, he began to wonder if he'd entered the Twilight Zone. Most of his dad's friends were happy

about the match. Some even commented it wasn't surprising his mom and Mr. Carter ended up together. With each well wish his stomach knotted up. His mom's affair with Mr. Carter must have been well known.

After they walked away from another of his dad's friends, Tasha frowned at him. "Jared, I think there's more to the story about your mom and Mr. Carter."

"Yeah, it sounds like they were together throughout my parents' marriage."

Her frown deepened. "No, I don't think everyone would be so happy if that were true. It seems like they're happy she's happy. I don't know. Did your parents ever have problems?"

"Not that I know of." He pulled her to his side. "Obviously I was wrong."

She shrugged. "You'll find out tomorrow when you talk to your family."

He didn't say anything. He didn't want to talk to his family and confirm his mother had been unhappy during her entire marriage. It would undermine everything he'd ever thought growing up. Knowing all of the smiles his mom had given to his father, the hugs and kisses they'd openly shared were all fake on her end would shatter the little bit of faith he was starting to have in relationships. He looked at Tasha who was watching the couples on the dance floor. Could she be that fake too?

The music changed to the "Cha Cha Slide." Tasha beamed up at him. "Come on, Jared. Let's dance."

He began shaking his head before the last word was out of her mouth. “No, ma’am. I gave you one dance earlier and that’s it.”

She pouted and immediately he wanted to take her lower lip into his mouth. Damn, she could turn him on with the simplest gestures. It had to be love.

“Are you really gonna have me stand around all night?”

He leaned over to kiss her cheek. “No, you can dance all you want.”

“Fine. I’ve gotta have some fun tonight.”

“You’ll have plenty of fun later.”

She licked her lips and leaned toward him. His body tingled and he lowered his head for her kiss. Her eyes shifted to his left and she leaned back. “Later.”

His shoulders slumped when she turned away and hurried to join the line of people dancing. He looked to his left and saw his mom. She shook her head and walked away. Jared cursed and turned back to the dance floor. Kenyatta joined Tasha in line. Tasha slid back until she was in line behind Kenyatta. What was that about?

He looked back to where his mom had been standing. Malcolm marched toward him. Not in the mood to talk to his brother, he went in the opposite direction toward the door. His steps slowed when a large bald man dressed in all black entered. With a fierce scowl on his face, the man could easily pass for a club bouncer.

Jared's face broke out into a grin and he quickened his steps. "Uncle Bruce. What are you doing here?"

The frown on his uncle's face immediately dissolved into a huge grin that showed off the one gold tooth in a line of otherwise perfect white teeth. "What's up, nephew? It's good to see you, young blood."

They clasped hands and embraced before stepping back and sizing each other up. His uncle's massive build was one of the reasons Jared had begun lifting weights in high school. But after watching his dad die of a heart attack, health and fitness had become more important than just being buff. His uncle was still a big man, but he was starting to get soft in the middle.

"Looks like you're staying out of the gym, Unc," Jared teased.

Bruce rubbed his rounding stomach. "Yeah, well, I still got the ladies all over me."

Jared laughed. "That's because you own a strip club."

Bruce grinned. "Doesn't matter why they're on me, as long as they're on me."

"So what are you doing here?"

"Why do you think? To wish my sister well."

Jared scowled. "You must be losing your mind and your muscle. She *was* your sister-in-law."

Bruce shrugged. "Family is family. I'll always be there for your mom. She knows that."

“Why, don’t you know she’s — ”

Bruce held up his hand. “Look, I know you and your mom haven’t been close since Mike died, but she deserves some happiness. Hell, I’m even happy it’s with Randall. He fought hard for your mom before Mike got her.”

Jared snorted. “Dad knew about Mom and Mr. Carter?”

Bruce laughed. “Knew about him, hell it was full on warfare to win your mom back in the day. Most of the guys on campus were trying to impress her, but only Randall and Mike had any real chance. I would say the old Patterson charm got her, but that wasn’t what did it.”

Jared shook his head. “Then what did, because as far as I can tell, Dad wasn’t as lucky as he thought. Mom was cheating with Mr. Carter during their whole marriage.”

Bruce’s frown returned with full force. “Hold up, young blood. I don’t know who’s been telling you lies, but your mom only had eyes for your dad.”

“Then why is everyone saying this was meant to be? Why aren’t people surprised they’re together?” Uncle Bruce was the only family member he trusted to tell him the truth.

“Jared, don’t you know how Gladys and Mike got together?”

“They met in college.”

“True, but why your mom chose him over Randall?”

“She didn’t choose one over the other. She had her cake and ate it too.”

Bruce’s scowl was so fierce Jared understood why lesser men cowered when faced with it. “You’re not going to talk about your mom like that to me. Your mom is the reason your dad survived college. Didn’t you know your daddy was a junkie?”

The music became a dim thumping in the background, the only sound his blood rushing through his veins as he tried to absorb his uncle’s words. He shook his head to clear it before responding. “What?”

Bruce put his hand on Jared’s shoulder and pulled him to the side of the door. He lowered his voice and Jared had to lean close to hear. “Mike was hooked on heroin. He said it made him smarter. We all tried to get him off that stuff, but Gladys was the only one who could. She locked herself with him in his apartment for weeks. Threw out all his shit and fought him like a man when he tried to leave. We tried to convince her to let us in to help, but she refused. When the smoke cleared your dad went to rehab, got cleaned up, and they were joined at the hip forever. Randall knew he was out of the picture then, but they did remain friends. Hell, everyone cemented around them to keep Mike clean.”

Jared shook his head. “What?”

“You didn’t know?”

“That my dad was a fucking junkie? Hell no.” He rubbed his jaw. “It doesn’t change what I saw.”

“You mean when Robert kissed your mom before his heart attack?”

Jared froze. “You know about that?”

“I spoke to both of them after it happened. Mike had started using again. Randall came to tell her and, like a fool, kissed her. Mike saw it, but the only thing he did was ask Randall why he’d ratted on him before clutching his chest and falling. I know you saw it, your mom told me, but I thought you knew the whole story.”

Jared looked away. There were too many emotions running through him to deal with before an audience. He patted Bruce on the shoulder. “Now I know. Excuse me.”

He went around his uncle into the entryway and around the corner of the lobby where the lights were dimmer and it was quieter. He braced his hands on the wall and closed his eyes. His dad had been a junkie? His mind raced back to that last day. They’d gone fishing. His dad had been fidgety and distracted. Stress at work was what he’d said when Jared mentioned it. That was the only weird thing about that day. They’d caught fish, laughed, talked. Had his dad been craving a hit the entire time?

He hit the wall and cursed. Why hadn’t anyone told him? His dad had been a deacon in the church, always telling him and Malcolm to do right and keep their noses clean. He’d spent the past fifteen years thinking his dad was perfect when he’d been a drug addict!

“Jared, Uncle Bruce said I needed to check on you.”

Malcolm's footsteps were hesitant and he approached. Jared shook his head. "Why didn't you tell me about dad?"

Malcolm sighed. "You thought he was perfect, I didn't want to take that from you."

He kept his head down. "You don't keep something like that from me."

"We both know you were dad's favorite. I'm not upset about it, he loved me too, but let's face it, you were more like him than I was. You idolized him, I lost that when I found out he struggled with his addiction."

He looked up. "When did you find out?"

Malcolm leaned his back against the wall next to Jared. "High school. He caught me smoking a joint and told me his story. You should have seen him, man. It was difficult for him to even throw away the joint. It was hard on him, and it hurt to see him so weak. You wouldn't have wanted to see that."

"So you've been lying to me since high school?"

"I didn't lie."

"We can argue that later. When did he start using again?"

Malcolm rubbed his face and sighed. "I don't know. Mom called me in college to say Dad was having a hard time, but I didn't ask with what. I didn't want to know, but I suspected. There was heroin in his system when they did the autopsy."

“Hell no!” Jared pushed away from the wall. “I was with him all day. He didn’t do anything when we were out.”

“Were you with him every minute of that day?”

He opened his mouth to say yes but stopped. He remembered his dad rushing into the house when they’d gotten back. He’d stayed out and put up the fishing equipment. Could he have gone in to get a hit?

“Just as I thought,” Malcolm said.

Frustrated, Jared rubbed his eyes. “This is some bullshit. I’m gonna grab Tasha and we’re out of here.”

Malcolm pushed away from the wall. “You can’t keep running from difficult situations. That’s why I didn’t tell you in the first place.”

“I don’t run from situations.”

“Yes, you do. Anytime a conversation is too tough or too serious you bail. You shake your head, say you don’t have time for it, and haul ass out the door. Randall’s right, it’s time for you to grow the fuck up.”

“You and Randall can kiss my ass.”

Malcolm shook his head. “That’s real mature. Face it, Jared, you’re still a kid. You ran after Dad died instead of facing mom. You ran from California when Cassandra started wanting more than a business relationship. And you lied to Tasha to get her here so you wouldn’t have to face your family. The first two only hurt you, but this shit with Tasha is messed up.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Malcolm got in Jared’s face. “You told her you loved her? Come on, Jared, I could see it in your face that day in my office — you wanted to make her fall for you. You were supposed to end it before that.”

“No, you assumed I would,” Jared said, pointing a finger in Malcolm’s chest.

Malcolm scowled. “Tasha’s a nice girl. I know you like running game on women, but this is low even for you.”

Jared wasn’t about to tell Malcolm he was in love with Tasha. It wasn’t any of his damn business anyway. What they had was working, and until he was used to the idea of loving, and trusting her, no one needed to know what was going on. “You think I care what you think? She’s here, isn’t she? Tasha’s happy and that’s all you need to worry about.”

“Is that why you told me you loved me? Because you wanted me here?” Tasha’s voice hit him like a ton of bricks.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He turned away from Malcolm to face her. “Tasha, don’t listen to Malcolm.”

She waved her hand as she approached him. Her face a mask of pain and confusion. “No, I think I should listen to him. I should have listened to him, my sister, Kenyatta, and everyone else who told me I was in over my head.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Isn’t it? I break it off with you, told you why, and you still ... ” She broke off and held up her hand. “You know what, it doesn’t matter.”

“Tasha ... ”

Devin strolled up beside Tasha. “Malcolm, Jared, Kenyatta’s looking for you. It’s time to cut the cake.” He looked from one face to the other and frowned. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Tasha said, turning to Devin. “Can you give me a ride somewhere?”

“Where?” Jared asked.

She whipped around to glare at him. Her usually warm honey eyes were cold. “That’s none of your damn business.” She turned back to Devin. “Please. It’ll only take a minute.”

Devin looked from Tasha to Jared, who shook his head, then to Malcolm, who nodded. When he looked back at Tasha, he nodded. “I will.”

She sighed. “Thank you.”

Jared stepped up. “Wait a minute.”

She pointed at him. “No, you wait a minute. I’m tired of this. I thought I knew what I was doing, but it was wrong. From the start, it was wrong. I shouldn’t even be mad at you for doing what you do. That’s why I picked you in the first place. But right now, I am mad and if I

have to look at you any longer I'll say something I'll regret."

Tell her you love her, screamed his brain. He opened his mouth then closed it. Devin watched expectantly. Malcolm glowered as if he would choke him if he didn't say it. He couldn't say it with everyone standing there. He wouldn't beg in front of Devin and Malcolm. He would talk to Tasha when she wasn't so angry and they didn't have an audience.

He swallowed before forcing out the words, "Maybe you should go."

The pain that flashed in her eyes was like a knife in his chest. He would have expected hysterics or crying from any other woman. Her ability to be strong when things hit her hard was one of the things he loved about her. His hands flexed with the need to grab her and kiss her, but instead he stepped back.

Devin shook his head and glared at Jared. "Let's go, Tasha."

She nodded and turned. Jared bit the inside of his jaw to keep from calling her back. Devin gave him a scathing look before turning and following Tasha. It was a bad scene, but he would get her back. When they were alone, and he wasn't pressed by Malcolm and Devin to pour his heart out, he'd talk to her and get her back.

CHAPTER 27

“So where are we going?” Devin asked as they buckled their seatbelts in his black Ford F-150.

Tasha blinked back the tears that threatened to spill the moment Jared admitted he’d lied about loving her. She’d suspected it, even accused him of it, but stupidly let him convince her otherwise.

“My friend is at a party at the St. Regis hotel in Buckhead, can you take me there?”

He nodded. “Sure.”

Tasha thanked him and pulled out her cell phone to call Shayla. She hadn’t told her friend she was coming to Atlanta with Jared. It had been such a whirlwind decision she hadn’t told anybody. It would be a miracle if Kenyatta didn’t tell Angie as soon as she left the party.

Shayla answered after a few rings, the sounds of laughter and talking were in the background. “I can’t believe you have the nerve to call me after avoiding my calls all day. You better not be wrapped up with Jared somewhere and coming up for air just to tell me you’re not coming to my party. I could have figured that out myself.”

Despite her crushed spirits, Tasha mustered a small laugh. “You’re a fool. No, I’m calling to tell you I’ll be there in about thirty minutes.”

“Are you serious? It’s after ... ten. And *you* don’t leave the house that late.”

“Unusual circumstances.”

“You came with him, didn’t you? Is he coming too?”

“No.”

“Oh.” A slight pause. “Fine, come on, girl. You can tell me the story when you get here.”

“Thanks, girl. I’ll see you soon.”

She hung up and looked out the window. “I can’t believe he lied to me,” she whispered.

“Neither can I.”

She turned toward Devin who glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “Why would he say ... what he said?”

Devin shrugged. “That’s a new low, even for Jared. But sometimes I don’t think he understands himself.”

Tasha rolled her eyes and turned away. “Spare me. I know he doesn’t trust women, doesn’t believe in love, and doesn’t believe in marriage. This is my fault.”

Devin didn’t say anything and Tasha leaned her head against the seat rest. She closed her eyes and images of her time with Jared flashed in her mind. The way he looked at her, touched her, made love to her. It had all felt so right. They’d clicked, or at least she’d

thought they had. But with the good images came the bad. He'd manipulated her to stay every time she'd tried to end it, starting in Charleston when she'd known he was too much for her to handle. She should have trusted her instincts then and walked away. Now she was broken hearted and ... pregnant. She bit her lip to keep from sobbing. If Devin noticed, thankfully he didn't say anything.

Thirty minutes later the car stopped. She opened her eyes and stared at the front of the St. Regis hotel. She blinked several times as the valet attendant came over to open her door.

“Thank you, Devin,” she said.

“I'll walk you in.”

“There's no need for that.”

“I know, but it's against my nature to drop you off at the door.”

Tasha smiled. “Thanks.”

He got out and told the attendant he'd be right back. They walked into the hotel and Shayla immediately ran up to Tasha. She looked flawless as usual in a sleeveless red dress that hugged her perfect figure and complemented her smooth brown skin.

“Girl, you look like someone stole your dog.” She embraced her friend. “I told you it was time to break it off. I told you not to come here with him. But I also agreed you should sleep with him in the first place. Don't listen to me when it comes to men.”

Tasha sighed and pulled away. “Amen to that.”

Shayla sucked her teeth before looking over Tasha’s shoulder and freezing. Her mouth fell open and she pulled at the top of her dress. Tasha turned to see what had stunned her friend. Devin wore a similar expression. His gaze ran over Shayla’s figure from the top of her perfectly flat-ironed shoulder-length brown hair to her pedicured feet in black peep toe heels.

“Devin,” Shayla gasped, her almond-shaped eyes wide.

Devin swallowed before answering. “Hello, Shayla.”

Confused, Tasha looked between the two. She could light a match with the electricity firing between them. Shayla always had an effect on men, but she’d never seen Shayla reduced to staring.

Tasha pointed from one to the other. “You two know each other?”

Shayla cleared her throat and looked away from Devin. “Devin Jones,” she said. Tasha raised her eyebrows and shrugged. Shayla shook her head and said, “Devin Jones from high school.”

Tasha’s eyes bulged and she looked back at Devin. “You’re Shayla’s Devin?”

“I’m not Shayla’s Devin,” he answered.

Shayla pointed at Devin. “You didn’t recognize him?”

“I never met him. You two were at Helena High, I went to Airport, remember? He only dropped you off at my house once. You always kept *Your Devin* to yourself.”

“I’m not her Devin. She was my teammate’s girlfriend.”

Shayla stiffened. “That’s right. Remember, Tasha? Devin and I weren’t cool after I started dating Tony.”

Tasha frowned. “You didn’t start dating Tony. That ass took advantage — ”

Shayla cut her off with a wave of the hand. “It doesn’t matter, that was years ago.”

“Years ago,” Devin agreed.

She didn’t like how Shayla had breezed over what she was about to say. Tony was a jerk who’d taken advantage of Shayla, but she respected her friend’s wish and left it alone.

Tasha turned to Devin. “Thanks for the ride.”

He opened his mouth to respond when a man approached. He walked with a swagger and an air of arrogance in his blue eyes. He presented Tasha and Devin with a large fake smile, before turning to Shayla. “I was able to get away for a minute. We can have that talk now.”

The look in his eye gave Tasha the impression he was interested in more than talking.

Shayla glanced briefly at Devin before pulling the man to the side. “Mark, my friend just got here and she’s

upset. I'll call you tomorrow."

Mark rubbed his chin, the light gleaming off the gold band on his left hand. He looked at Tasha quickly before turning back to Shayla. "I'm free tonight."

Shayla crossed her arms and stepped back. "Then we'll talk another time."

Mark smirked. "Fine." He ran a finger down her arm. "Tomorrow." Without so much as a word to Tasha or Devin, he turned and walked away.

Tasha didn't like him. "Shayla?"

Shayla held up her hand. "Don't even start. We'll talk about this after we talk about you." She looked at Devin. "I guess I still disappoint you, huh?"

Devin's eyes were sad as he shook his head. "It's not about disappointing me. You know what you're worth." Shayla stiffened and he sighed. "You look beautiful, Shayla," he said before turning away.

"Devin," Tasha called. He turned to look at her. "Please don't tell Jared where you brought me. I don't want to talk to him."

He nodded and walked out. After he left, Tasha turned narrowed eyes on Shayla. "What was that all about? And who was that man?"

Shayla crossed her arms. "Forget the man. I can't believe you brought Devin Jones here. Ever since Tony he's only found fault with me."

“Don’t yell at me. I didn’t know he was *Your Devin*. Maybe he wouldn’t find fault if you’d tell him the truth about Tony.”

Shayla scoffed. “Doesn’t matter. That was years ago, and since I have no plans to move back to Helena, hopefully I’ll never see him again.” Tasha started to interrupt but Shayla shook her head. “No more talk about Devin Jones. I’ll get my stuff and you can tell me about Jared Patterson.” She turned to walk away.

“I think I’m pregnant,” Tasha blurted out.

Shayla spun around so fast Tasha was surprised she didn’t trip over her five inch heels. “No.”

Tears burned the backs of her eyes but she wasn’t going to cry. This was her mess and she had to deal with it. “Yes.”

“No, no, no, Tasha. This shit isn’t supposed to happen to you. This is the type of mess that happens to me,” Shayla said walking back to her.

“Tell me about it,” Tasha said.

Shayla laughed and Tasha joined in before they turned into sobs. Shayla pulled her into her arms. “Stop it. You don’t cry over a man, remember?”

Tasha nodded and tried to stop the tears.

Shayla put her hands on her shoulders and held her away. “Now you said you think you’re pregnant. Have you taken a test?”

“No,” Tasha answered, wiping the tears from her face.

Shayla nodded. “Okay, I have one at my house.”

“Why?”

Shayla shrugged. “You never know when you need one.”

Tasha shook her head. “You’re a mess.”

“Tell me about it.”

They laughed again and Shayla squeezed her shoulders. “It’ll be okay.”

“How am I going to tell my father?”

“Daddy, I’m pregnant.”

Tasha rolled her eyes. “It’s not that simple.”

“I know. Preacher isn’t going to be too happy about this, but what can he do? If you are, you are. Unless you don’t want to be.”

Tasha knew what Shayla implied and she shook her head. She knew of at least one abortion Shayla had had years ago, but had never asked her friend if she’d done it again. Tasha couldn’t do it, no matter how hard it would be to have this child.

Shayla’s lips rose in a small smile. “I didn’t think you would. Come on. No need to stand in this lobby looking like two lost souls. Let’s go to my house, take the test, and go from there, okay?”

Tasha closed her eyes and took a reassuring breath.
“Okay.”

“Good. Now let me get my stuff.”

Tasha nodded as Shayla walked off. She closed her eyes and sent up a silent prayer that everything would work out. She didn't know how she'd face her father, but telling Jared scared her more. How could she face the man who lied about loving her that she was having his baby?

CHAPTER 28

Jared stood by the door of the banquet hall and checked his watch. An hour had passed since Devin and Tasha left.

He looked across the room at his mom and Uncle Bruce dancing. Pain and anger sliced through him. Why didn't they tell him about his dad? He'd replayed every encounter he'd had with his dad, trying to find signs of addiction. After Malcolm left for college his dad had been busier, working later, and was easily frustrated and distracted. He'd blamed it on his job, but it must have been more. Around that same time, his parents started spending less and less time together. It wasn't anything drastic; his mom started going to church and family functions by herself a lot more because of his dad's schedule. Had his dad been out getting a fix instead of working? Had his mom known the entire time what was going on?

He tapped his toe, checked his watch, and rubbed his jaw before looking out the door toward the entrance. Where in the hell was Devin? He wasn't concerned about getting Tasha back once he explained, but he needed to talk to her. He needed her soothing voice and soft touch

to ease his anxiety. He needed to explain to her how his family's lies were tearing him apart.

He stopped his fidgeting and froze. She had to come back to their hotel room. Her clothes were there, and she needed a ride back to South Carolina. His shoulders relaxed and he breathed easier for the first time since she'd walked out the door.

Mildly comforted by these thoughts, he still jumped and hurried toward the entrance when he saw Devin approach.

Devin was shaking his head before Jared even spoke. "Don't ask me where I took her, she doesn't want you to know."

Jared scowled. "You can't be serious. Just tell me where she's at so I can go get her."

"Why? Do you love her?"

Jared tapped his foot and looked away. "Just tell me where she is."

Devin scoffed. "You can't admit it to me, can you? You'd rather keep up the appearance that you're some kind of player than admit you fell for her."

Jared waved dismissively. "You know what? Keep your secret. She has to come back to our room. I'll wait for her there."

He turned to walk out, but Devin stopped him. "She's with a friend and she doesn't have to come back to your room. Do you really think she's going to face seeing you again when you lied to her like that?"

The truth of Devin's statement twisted his gut. Tasha wouldn't leave a friend to come back and face him. He clenched his jaw; she would probably go back to South Carolina without talking to him first.

He gave Devin a hard stare. "She'll be back."

Devin shook his head. "I don't know. She seemed pretty hurt."

"She knows me."

Devin grinned. "So she knows you're an asshole?"

Jared glared at him. "Whatever." He looked around the room, but he didn't see Malcolm or his mom. "Tell Malcolm I'm leaving. I'll call him tomorrow."

He brushed past Devin and headed for the lobby. Anxiety fueled his urgency as he absently waved goodbye to people. His mind went over everything she'd said over the past few weeks. She must have mentioned a friend in Atlanta before.

He stopped abruptly. His mother stood at the glass doors leading out of the building. She stared at him, her eyes calm and assessing. "I knew you would sneak out without talking to me. Bruce told me he filled you in on what happened."

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. What was there too say? They hadn't talked in years, now a jumble of emotions bounced around within him fighting for release. The dominant one was hurt. Hurt no one trusted him enough to tell him the truth about his dad. He'd royally screwed up by not telling Tasha how he felt

and letting her walk out of the door. He could use her hand in his, and her soft voice telling him things would be okay.

“Can we talk about this tomorrow?” He moved toward the door.

She didn’t move out of his way. “We’ll talk now.”

“I need to go.”

She scowled. “Where, to find that girl you brought here tonight?”

Jared stepped back. “That girl has a name. Tasha.”

His mom waved her hand. “What does it matter, Jared? You only brought her here to bother me. I know the type of women you date, so I know she isn’t worth you walking out on this discussion.”

“You don’t know what type of woman I date.”

She pushed away from the door and reached for him. “That’s because you haven’t spoken to me in years.”

He stepped back, avoiding her touch. “You should have told me about Dad.”

She dropped her hand. “You didn’t give me a chance. After it happened, you were so upset.”

“I had a right to be upset.” His voice was loud, and a few people in the lobby turned to face them. He lowered his voice. “My dad dropped dead from a heart attack after seeing my mom kissing another man. You should have told me.”

His mom closed her eyes and crossed her arms. When she looked at Jared again her eyes glistened with tears. “Jared, you wouldn’t even look at me in the hospital. You were so angry, if I would have tried to explain, you wouldn’t have listened. Then you started college and ran to South Carolina, then Los Angeles.”

“That’s no excuse. You could have called ... ”

“For what? I’ve had to talk to you through Malcolm ever since.”

“Then why didn’t you tell Malcolm?”

“I’d always assumed you told him, and that he was too principled to say anything to me,” she said. “Why didn’t you say anything? You hated me so much. I would have expected you to want your brother to hate me as well.”

Jared sighed and looked away. “I never hated you. I hated myself because I couldn’t. Do you know how hard it is to still care for your mother, even when you think she’s the reason your father died? I didn’t want Malcolm to feel the same.”

His mom gasped and reached out to touch him. Again he stepped back. Pain flashed in her eyes. Eyes the same color as his. She balled her outstretched hand into a fist and put it over her chest. “I’m glad to know you never hated me. Because I’ve always loved you, Jared.”

He hadn’t heard his mom say she loved him in years. A rush of emotion hit him, and he didn’t know how to take it. He didn’t deserve his mother’s love. Not after the

way he'd treated her. He didn't deserve Tasha's love, either. But he wanted both.

Jared rubbed his hand over his jaw and looked away from his mom. "Look, I've gotta go find Tasha. She's not like the others, she's ... she's my rock."

He glanced at his mom who nodded. Saying no more, he brushed past her and left the building.

• • •

Jared arrived at his hotel in record time. He burst through the door of his room and called out Tasha's name. There was no answer, but still he checked the bedroom and bathroom. He pulled out his cell and called her number. It went straight to voice mail.

"Think, Jared, think," he murmured to himself. Where would she be? Who would she run to? He thought about the friends she'd mentioned over the past few weeks. He snapped his fingers — there was a friend in Atlanta. A female friend, but he couldn't remember her name. That had to be who she'd gone to.

He went into the bedroom and rummaged through her bag. He knew it was useless. No one carried address books anymore. Any contacts she had would be in her cell phone. She might have a card or contact information in her wallet, but that would be with her. He froze in the middle of pulling out her clothes and turned to look at his bag. Her wallet was with him.

He folded his hands in front of him and looked up. "Thank you." When they'd stopped for gas, she'd gotten

out her wallet to buy some chips and he told her not to worry about it. She'd thrown her wallet in his bag on the backseat of the car instead of putting it back in her purse. Smiling, he pulled clothes out of his bag. He had to remove everything before finding it. He reached for it and stopped when he saw the silver tip of a condom wrapper sticking out of the panel in the bottom of his duffle bag.

His smile softened as he pulled it out. It had to be left over from the Charleston trip; he'd brought gold condoms to Atlanta. He'd thought they'd used all of them in Charleston. He sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the wall. Charleston seemed like it happened yesterday, but so much had changed. He never would have imagined he'd fall in love with Tasha. Or that he'd be racking his brain trying to find her when she left.

He rubbed the wrapper with his thumb. He'd have to use this one when they made up. Kind of a tribute to their beginning. He frowned. The wrapper wasn't smooth. Instead it was rough, irregular. He lifted it and took a better look. Tiny pin marks broke the surface. He flipped it over; the same thing was on the other side.

A vision of Tasha going through his bag in the middle of the night when they were in Charleston flashed through his mind. He'd believed her when she said she was looking for something to eat, and instead she'd been poking holes in his condoms!

Betrayal pierced his heart like an arrow. She'd played him. She'd been trying to trap him from the start.

All of her talk about losing her virginity to find a good man had never sat right with him. He should have known she was up to something more. She was trying to get pregnant, trying to catch him. He stood and balled the spoiled condom in his fist.

Tasha, his Tasha, was no different from the rest of the women he'd dated. They always wanted something. He'd thought she really cared. He'd trusted her more than he'd trusted another woman in his life. And she'd betrayed him — hurt him — more than any woman ever had.

Dear God, please don't let her be pregnant, he prayed. Because if she was, she was in for a big surprise. He didn't want kids, and he'd be damned if he was going to pay for one conceived in deceit. He'd fight her in court for the rest of his life before paying for a child she tricked him into having.

CHAPTER 29

Sunlight cast a cheerful glow in the hotel lobby. Even though the rays were warm on her face, Tasha felt ice cold. Three pregnancy tests were in her purse, all positive. She'd brought them in case Jared didn't believe her. She'd prayed for strength all night. The strength to cope with telling a man who'd deceived her she was carrying his baby. The strength not to cry if he asked her to get rid of it. She'd thrown in a selfish prayer too. She'd prayed he'd take her in his arms, say he loved her, and ask her to marry him. It was a long shot, but that was the point of praying. Too ask God for the impossible.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Shayla reached over and wrapped her warm hand around Tasha's icy one.

Tasha shook her head stiffly. "I'll go alone."

Shayla's glossed lips twisted into a tight smile. "It won't be so bad. Just say, I'm pregnant, it's yours, and I'm keeping it."

"And if he says get rid of it?"

"Then tell him you'll see him in court. It takes two to make a baby."

Tasha closed her eyes and groaned. “I don’t even want to go through that. This isn’t supposed to happen to me. I’m not supposed to be a baby momma. I’m supposed to be a wife, then a mother.”

Shayla shrugged. “Stuff happens. Life happens. You’re not a bad person because of a mistake.”

Tasha laughed bitterly. “Tell my dad that.”

“First you have to tell the father.”

Tasha nodded. “You’re right.” She took a deep breath and squeezed Shayla’s hand. “Don’t leave yet. Jared isn’t as tough as he appears, so I think things will go well but ... just in case.”

Shayla pulled her in for a hug. “I’m here as long as you need me.”

Tasha smiled and left her friend. The elevator ride had to be the fastest in history. Before she could even think of what to say, she was standing in front of their door. Taking another deep breath, she reached into her back pocket and pulled out the room key. Jared was sitting on the couch when she entered. He stared at her with cold and impassive eyes. Her bags were packed and sitting beside the door. Dread washed over her.

“Jared ... last night ...” She stopped speaking. He hadn’t moved. He just continued to stare at her, hurt and anger in his eyes. She frowned. Why was he angry? *He* was the one who’d lied about loving her. He was the one who’d used her for his own gain. “Are you mad at me?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why did you come back?”

There was a sharp pain in her chest, as if her heart were fracturing. “You didn’t want me to come back?”

“Do you have something to tell me? Is that why you came back?”

She nodded. “I do, but first I want to know why you’re so angry.”

“Let me guess. You’re pregnant.” He spat out the words.

Another pain pierced her. “How did you know?”

He finally stood and marched over to her. He threw a condom that hit her chest and fell to the floor. Stunned, she looked from the condom to him. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I found your secret. I know you’ve been punching holes in my condoms. I know you’ve been trying to trick me into having a baby. I’ve told you over and over I don’t want kids. I swear to God, Tasha, I don’t want this kid. You did this, and I’ll be damned if you’re gonna make me pay for it.”

She stood there, her mouth gaping as she tried to comprehend what he was saying. “You think I planned this? You think I want to have your baby? You don’t care about anyone but yourself. I’d rather it be anyone’s baby than yours.”

His eyebrows formed an angry line as he scowled at her. “Are you sure it’s even mine? Were you sleeping with the good doctor too?”

She staggered back. “You know I’ve only slept with you.”

“I don’t know anything, Tasha. I didn’t know you were punching holes in my condoms!”

“I didn’t punch holes in your condoms.”

He scoffed and turned away. “Then who did? Tell me? What other woman has been in my stash?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know? If anyone was promiscuous in this relationship it was you.”

He whipped around and pointed at her. “Don’t call what we did a relationship. You were a booty call, that’s it. Someone to keep me company at night. Nothing more.”

The pain from the shattering of her heart was so great she gasped and clutched her hand to her chest. “So you did lie to me. You never did love me.”

“Oh, I was fool enough to believe I was falling in love with you. I should have known better — you can’t turn your side piece into your girl. I’m glad I found out what you were before ... before I really got caught up.”

“Jared, I’m having your baby. Doesn’t that count for something?” she whispered.

His face hardened. “It doesn’t count for anything when you tricked me. You know how I felt, how I still feel. This is your problem, not mine.”

“I didn’t trick you.”

He picked up the condom and held it in front of her face. “Don’t lie to me. Don’t stand there looking as if I’m breaking your heart, when you’ve tap danced all over mine. But that’s what you’re good at, isn’t it? You play the innocent role, you look wounded, you tell me you’re getting caught up and I need to commit or you’re leaving. Oh, you played me well. So damn well I actually believed you were different. I thought you cared. But you wanted something from me, just like all the rest. And you’re not getting a damn thing from me. I don’t want this baby, and I don’t want you. Get out.”

“Jared.”

He pointed to the door. “Get out.”

Tasha stared at Jared. She was too stunned to cry. She couldn’t believe he would think she’d be capable of something so horrible. He couldn’t have ever loved her, or truly known her. Not if he could believe she would trick him into having a baby. Her pain was so intense it numbed her. There was nothing left to say, nothing that would heal this hurt. Without a word, she picked up her bags and left the room.

CHAPTER 30

Tasha studied her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail. Her makeup was simple, but flawless. There wasn't a spot on her white A-line dress. She'd opted for color with red shoes, hopefully, her dad wouldn't be too upset about that. She smiled, shook her head, frowned, and tried again. Wider this time. She laughed out loud. Shaking her head again, she laughed once more, louder and more forcefully. That was better. She turned to the side and smoothed her dress. Her hands hesitated over her midsection before she dropped them and turned back toward the mirror. She took a deep breath, pasted on the smile she liked and left her house.

She didn't feel the warmth of the summer sun. In the two weeks since Jared accused her of deliberately getting pregnant, she hadn't felt warm. She shivered slightly when a humid breeze brushed over her. Her smile faltered, until she saw her neighbor. She fixed her smile and waved, but hurried to the car to avoid being drawn into a conversation. When she got in the car, she turned the radio to an AM station and listened to a

gardening segment on her way to her father's church. Music, of any kind, only made her colder.

She checked her smile in the rearview mirror before getting out. Various parishioners waved and called hello as she walked inside, but she didn't stop to talk. Her sister, also in white, was standing just inside the entrance with another usher. Tasha walked over and ignored the frown on Angie's face.

"Good morning," she said with forced cheer.

"You're late. You know Daddy wanted you here for Sunday school," Angie said. She handed a bulletin to the people who'd come in behind Tasha.

"Sorry, I overslept." She took the bulletins from Angie. "You go inside for the start of the service. I'll stand by the door today."

Angie turned to the other usher. "Sister Jones, go on in, I want to talk to Tasha."

Sister Jones nodded and entered the main fellowship hall. Angie narrowed her eyes at Tasha. "Tasha, what's going on with you? Ever since you went to Atlanta ..."

"Angie, church is about to start. You'd better get inside, I'll watch the door." She turned away from Angie and greeted the rest of the stragglers. When her sister finally walked into the fellowship hall, she let her smile fall.

A few minutes later, the first strains of music began as service started. She didn't enter; instead, she stood

outside of the double doors and took a few deep breaths. Angie wanted to know what had happened in Atlanta, but she was too ashamed to say. She didn't want to face the I-told-you-so look on Angie's face when she heard what Jared accused her of.

She turned to look through the windows of the doors leading into the sanctuary. The choir was singing. She spotted her brother-in-law signing in the back. Her parents, sitting in the pulpit, were scanning the crowd, probably looking for her. She stepped to the side so they wouldn't see her. They were all worried about her. Eventually she'd have to tell them what was going on. But for now she liked to pretend as if it had never happened. As if she weren't pregnant.

But she was, and it wasn't the child's fault. So she'd finally called her doctor and made an appointment for the following week.

The doors of the church opened again and Tasha pasted on her practiced smile before turning to greet the latest arrivals. Her smile was short lived. Jared stood there looking better than she'd ever seen him in a tan silk suit, white shirt, and pink striped tie. Warmth filled her chest as she drank in the sight of him. Pain accompanied the warmth when she remembered he'd rejected her and their baby. The tiniest glimmer of hope formed in her chest that he'd come to apologize. That he'd realized she would never do something so horrible.

He hadn't noticed her yet; he was looking down at the woman he'd come in with. The warmth in her chest

immediately went icy. Numbness had been Tasha's companion since he'd accused her of deceiving him, but white-hot fury bubbled inside of her as she watched him smile at another woman after treating her so callously. It took a second for it to register that he was with Monica, the same newcomer to the church who'd been trying to get together with Tasha for weeks.

"Monica," Tasha blurted out.

Monica flipped her long black hair over her shoulder — probably a weave — as she turned from Jared and grinned. "Good morning, Tasha."

Tasha didn't return her greeting. She looked at Jared who glared back at her. "What are you doing here?"

"I invited him," Monica said, still smiling. She looked between the two. "Don't tell me you know each other."

"I mentor at the Rec Commission. That's how we know each other," Jared said.

She gasped. "That's how we know each other? You mentor at the Rec Commission?"

Jared didn't answer. They stared at each other and Monica looked between the two. She finally moved forward and reached out her hand. "May I have a bulletin, please?"

Tasha looked from Jared back to Monica. Monica had a small frown on her face and glanced back at Jared

before reaching out to touch Tasha's arm. "Are you okay? You look sick," she said in a stage whisper.

Tasha nodded. "Fine. I'm fine."

Monica smiled brightly. "Good." She turned back to Jared and held out her hand. "Come on, baby, the service has already started."

Jared's mouth lifted in the barest of smiles and he took her hand. The sight made Tasha sick. She dropped the remaining bulletins and ran down the hall to the ladies' room. She burst into the first stall and gagged up the toast she'd forced down for breakfast. Even though her stomach was empty, she continued to gag until a sob tore through her. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her hands over them. He wasn't worth crying over. He wasn't worth being sick over.

She slowly stood on shaky legs and exited the stall. She wet a paper towel and pressed it against her mouth and the rest of her face. *Get it together*, she thought. She'd made her bed, now she had to lie in it. She was going to get through this with her head held high. No matter what Jared thought, or her family said, she'd never show them or her child how much Jared's rejection hurt.

She took a deep breath and looked in the mirror. Her hair was still smooth, her makeup still in place. She practiced her smile over and over until it was perfect. No one would know she was dead inside.

CHAPTER 31

Jared hated himself for being concerned after Tasha ran down the hall. He shouldn't care if she was sick. Her welfare, or that of the baby, wasn't his problem. Yet he still dropped Monica's hand and followed Tasha.

"Go on in. I'll be back in a minute," he said to Monica over his shoulder and jogged down the hall.

He didn't look back to see if Monica heard him. He wasn't there because she'd invited him. He'd run into her in the parking lot and walked in with her. He was there to catch a glimpse of Tasha. Anxiety and self-loathing had filled him as he'd gotten out of the car in front of Tasha's church. He'd felt like a fool for coming to see her. He'd been overwhelmed with relief when he'd seen Monica in the parking lot. Going in with her hid what a broken-hearted fool he was for pining after a woman who wasn't worth it.

His anger over what Tasha had done hadn't diminished since Atlanta. Now he wanted answers. He wanted to know why she tricked him. Was it for money? Had she known her claims of him not being what she wanted would make him want to be a good man for her?

He was used to women using him for their own selfish reasons, but no one had gone so far as to hurt him so completely. And he wouldn't be satisfied until he knew why she'd done it.

He paced outside of the bathroom. He begrudgingly admitted he was worried about the baby. He'd tried not to think about the baby, but knowing she was having his child pressed on him like a heavy weight. He wasn't father material and wouldn't fathom trying to take the baby from her, but he knew he wouldn't be able to keep himself from ensuring she took care of it. It was a part of him, and his family.

His pacing stopped when she came out of the bathroom. The anger, hurt, and disbelief that had been so clear on her face earlier was gone. She looked calm, with a smile on her face that would look genuine to anyone but him. He knew her well enough to tell it was fake. Or at least, he'd thought he knew her well enough.

She froze when she saw him, and to his amazement, her frozen smile widened. "Do you need help finding something in the church?" She sounded like a flight attendant.

"I wanted to ..." He couldn't say he wanted to check on her. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing that despite how much he hated what she'd done, he still wanted her. "I wanted to tell you I'm leaving for L.A. next week. It's Cassandra's birthday."

"You made it abundantly clear that I mean nothing to you. Why are you telling me this?" Her voice was still

pleasant and it irked the hell out of him.

“I’m telling you because you’re carrying my baby.”

“Which you don’t want, so your whereabouts mean nothing to me.”

He rolled his eyes and turned away from her. Instead of yelling in frustration, he took a calming breath and ran his hands over his face. When he turned back, he said, “So that’s your game? Reverse psychology? Tell me all the reasons why I’m wrong so I’ll try to do right?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She turned to walk away, but he blocked her path. Their eyes met and he almost lost himself in their honey colored depths. He took a deep breath and her clean scent assailed him. Damn, why did she have to smell so good? She broke eye contact first and stepped back; he mirrored her actions.

“Why did you do it, Tasha? Why did you trick me?”

Her smile left her face and she scowled at him. “I didn’t trick you. I didn’t plan on getting pregnant.”

“Just admit it, and I’ll move on. I’ll give you what you need for the baby if you’ll just admit you did this on purpose.”

“I won’t admit to anything. Why don’t you ask Monica? Was she the one you were sleeping with when we were together?”

He scoffed. “I slept with Monica before I slept with you.” She turned away and put her face in her hands.

“Don’t lay blame somewhere else. I saw you going through my bag in Charleston.”

She spun to face him. “I didn’t go through your bag to punch holes in the damn condoms, I was looking for something to eat.”

He clenched his fists. “Dammit, Tasha, stop lying to me. Just tell me why you did it. Did you think I’d marry you?”

She held up one hand and put the other on her forehead. “Let’s stop. This is pointless. You are determined to believe the worst about me, and I can’t ... deal ... with knowing how easily I fell for you. I’m having this baby, and I don’t need anything from you. My life will be just fine once you’re out of it.” She lowered her hand and placed the fake, frozen smile back on her face. “I hope you do well in L.A. Goodbye, Jared.”

He reached out as she walked away, then closed his hand and pulled it back. There was nothing left to say. She denied it so sincerely he almost believed her. He *wanted* to believe her. The Tasha he thought he knew wouldn’t have deceived him, but he’d seen the evidence himself. He didn’t know Tasha at all.

He walked back toward the doors leading into the fellowship hall. Tasha was standing inside. When he entered, she passed him a bulletin and fan. She smiled as if he was any other late arriving parishioner, but her eyes didn’t meet his.

Monica waved at him from one of the back pews, and with an inward sigh, he walked over to join her.

CHAPTER 32

Tasha didn't hear a word of her father's sermon. She spent the entire service staring at the cross above the pulpit. The struggle to ignore Jared seemed physical. It was as if she could feel him in the same room, breathing the same air and hearing the same things. A few times during the service, her skin would tighten and tingle, and she knew he was looking at her. During those times, she read the words on the cross over and over, to avoid meeting his gaze.

She wouldn't talk to him as long as he accused her of deliberately getting pregnant. She'd always wanted to have kids, but if given a choice she wouldn't have had his child. Or at least, the child of the Jared she knew now. She'd been afraid, but she'd admit hopeful, when she'd first learned of her pregnancy. But Jared's accusations killed all of that hope, and turned the light happiness she'd had in her heart into a cold, dead weight in her chest.

The final chords of the benediction played and Tasha gave up her cross gazing vigil to prepare for everyone's departure. Her gaze traveled to Jared and an electric shock went through her when their eyes met. She

quickly looked away and smiled as she watched her dad and his deacons descend from the pulpit to walk down the aisle. She stepped to the side to give her dad room at the door.

“Are you okay, Tasha?” her dad asked. “You looked as if you were daydreaming through my sermon.”

Tasha patted her dad on his shoulder. “I’m fine, Daddy. You did a great job.”

He didn’t look as if he believed her, but couldn’t say more as church members began to exit. Her dad shook everyone’s hand on the way out and Tasha stood beside him, smiling and nodding. She was about to leave her dad’s side to join her mom and sister and the front of the church when Kevis approached.

Her eyes widened when her dad shook his hand and turned to smile broadly at Tasha. “Tasha, I’m sure you’re glad to see our newest visitor. I’d hoped you would have gotten here earlier to sit with him. He came to bible study earlier just to see you, although I hope he enjoyed the lesson and my sermon.”

Kevis smiled at her dad. “I did, sir.” He turned to smile at her. “Good morning, Tasha. You look wonderful.”

Her dad beamed. “You two go on and talk.” He ushered Kevis around him toward Tasha then turned to the next people exiting.

She took Kevis’s hand and pulled him down the aisle away from her dad and the exiting congregation. Jared

and Monica were shaking hands with her father now. Jared smiled cordially to her dad, before quickly moving on. He glared at her over his shoulder as he walked through the door.

She ignored the pain of that look and instead gave Kevis her practiced smile. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s been two weeks since our date, and not a word out of you. I’ve played basketball at the Rec Commission almost every night, and I haven’t seen you there. I remembered you saying your father preached here, so I thought I’d take a chance.” He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. “I hope my persistence is wanted. I thought we had a great time.”

Tasha nodded, but looked toward the front of the church. Her mom and sister were watching her and Kevis with unconcealed interest. “I did have a great time. I’ve just had some things come up. It’s kept me busy.”

“Is that your nice way of saying you’re not interested?”

She shook her head, but still avoided his eyes. “No, I was interested. I am interested. I just don’t know if the time is right. Or if you’ll stay interested.”

He gently took her chin in his hand and turned her to face him. “I was interested the first time I saw you. Nothing has changed.”

She sighed and really smiled for the first time in weeks. “You say that now.”

“And I’ll continue to say that. I meant what I said on our date. I’m not into playing games, I’m looking for something real.”

Tasha reached up and pulled his hand from her face. She didn’t let go, but held his hand in hers. “Why couldn’t I have met you two months ago?”

He frowned, but her dad walked up before he could question her. “Tasha, why don’t you invite Kevis to dinner?”

Tasha looked between her dad and Kevis. “I didn’t know you were so close.”

Her dad shook his head. “Just met him today.” He grinned at Tasha. “I guessed you were dating someone, I’m glad you finally decided to introduce him to the family.”

“Daddy ... ”

“It’s okay, Tasha,” Kevis cut in. “I would love to join your family for dinner.”

Tasha sighed. It would be easier to get this over with than try to explain to her dad she and Kevis had only had one date. A part of her realized by doing this, her parents may assume Kevis was the father of her child. She had no intentions of telling them who the real dad was. Angie would know, but she wouldn’t tarnish her parent’s good thoughts about Malcolm by admitting what an ass his brother was. But, she’d be sure to clear Kevis’s name.

Her dad’s eyes shined with pride. “Good. Good. Tasha, why don’t you and Kevis go on to our house?”

Angie and Jonathan will be there shortly with the girls. Your mother and I have to talk to Georgia Brown. She's got a ... situation she wants to discuss with us."

Tasha frowned. "Is she okay?"

Her dad nodded. "She's fine. We'll talk about it later." He turned to Kevis. "I look forward to dinner with you, son. Tasha is our baby girl, so I want to make sure you're taking good care of her."

"My plans are to take good care of her," Kevis said, smiling at Tasha.

Her dad laughed. "I like him already." He patted Kevis on the shoulder and walked away.

Tasha raised an eyebrow. "What on earth did you do to win him over so quickly? My dad usually gives the men I date the third degree."

Kevis chuckled. "Nothing crazy, I swear. I just introduced myself, told him that we'd been out, and that I really liked his daughter. Oh, and I might have mentioned that I was a doctor."

She laughed. It felt good to really laugh. She hadn't thought she'd laugh again. "You might have?"

"Hey, my goal was to impress. Father *and* daughter." His full lips curled into a seductive smile.

There were probably many women who'd thrill over that smile, but it didn't affect her in the least. The slight attraction she'd felt for him before was gone. Jared's accusations had killed more than her happiness and hope; it had killed her faith in men.

She shook her head to rid herself of that thought and took Kevis's hand. "You have impressed me. Come on, I'll introduce you to my sister and you can follow us to my parents' house."

They met up with Angie and Jonathan at the front of the church. Angie grinned at Tasha when Kevis introduced himself as Dr. Kevis Flynn. Apparently dropping the doctor bomb impressed sisters as well. Kevis stayed with them as they gathered up Angie's girls and headed to her parents' house.

Thirty minutes later, Angie and Tasha began prepping for dinner. Her mom already had a pot roast ready so they busied themselves with making sides. Jonathan and Kevis got along easily as they talked about sports, but when Kevis mentioned that he'd volunteered on the campaign for a local democrat who'd run for county council, the same underdog that Jonathan had supported, they quickly got into a discussion about the upcoming election year.

Tasha and Angie came out of the kitchen every once in a while to check on the men. When she brought Kevis some tea, he took her hand and thanked her before turning back to his conversation with Jonathan. Angie didn't ask Tasha again what was wrong, as she smiled happily between her and Kevis.

An hour after they arrived at her parents' home, Tasha realized she was enjoying herself. It was the life she'd wanted, the life she would have had, if she hadn't fallen for Jared and gotten pregnant. When Angie's girls

came in and insisted their dad participate in a tea party, Kevis didn't hesitate to join.

Tasha laughed as her oldest niece took Kevis by the hand and dragged him to the tea set they'd put up in the playroom. He grinned and shrugged as he passed her, then pulled back to place a quick kiss on her cheek.

"I couldn't help it, you look so beautiful," he said before following her niece down the hall.

Dammit, Jared, dammit! she thought. *Why did I have to fall in love with you? Why don't you want me, or our child? I would have been happy with this life. I wanted this life, now I don't. I want you.*

But she didn't have Jared and never would. He thought she'd gotten pregnant on purpose. He didn't want her or the baby, and only offered to help if she admitted she was wrong. It wouldn't be fair to Kevis to continue to act as if they could be together. In a few months, he and the rest of the world would know what had happened.

Tears filled her eyes and she rushed back into the kitchen, her hands resting over her abdomen. Angie was beating mashed potatoes. She turned when Tasha walked in and the smile on her face withered away.

"What's wrong?"

Tasha went around Angie and took a dishtowel out of the cabinet. She dabbed her eyes and tried to smile. "Nothing, I'm —"

“If you say you’re fine one more time I’ll choke you.” Angie marched over to Tasha and took her shoulders in her hands. “I should have known it was wishful thinking to see you and Kevis together. Kenyatta told me something happened in Atlanta, but you and Jared won’t talk about it. Tell me. I’m your sister. I love you.”

Tasha looked at Angie. The concern in her sister’s eyes was comforting. “Angie, I messed up.”

Angie frowned. “How?”

“I’m ... ”

“Hey, girls.” Their mother breezed into the kitchen with a huge smile on her face. “Is dinner almost ready? Your father is starving. That was all he talked about on the way home. Eating dinner, and Georgia Brown.”

Tasha turned away from Angie. She picked up a spoon and stirred the mashed potatoes. Her mom began looking in the pots on the stove, oblivious to the tension in the room.

Tasha could feel Angie’s gaze on her back, but didn’t turn around. She was grateful when her sister answered their mom.

“Everything is ready, Mom. We just need to set the table.”

“Good, good. You know, I’m so glad you two are my girls.”

“Oh, really, Mom? Why?” Tasha asked. She didn’t turn around, but if she didn’t contribute to the conversation, her mom would ask what was wrong.

Her mom stirred the gravy on the stove. She nodded, satisfied, before answering. “It’s that Georgia. She’s gone and got into trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Angie asked. She moved to stand beside Tasha, who continued stirring the potatoes.

“I know it’s the new millennium, and things aren’t the way they used to be,” their mom said, “but I still don’t like the way people accept women getting pregnant outside of marriage.” Tasha’s hand slowed. “She doesn’t even know who the father is. Apparently she was seeing two guys at once. It’s awful, when you think about it. Sleeping with two guys without protection. Anyway, neither of them want her or the baby. She came to me and your dad for advice.”

Tasha stopped stirring, but didn’t face her mom. “What did you tell her?”

“To give it up for adoption. What else would we tell her? That baby would be better off with a mother and a father, instead of growing up with a mother who doesn’t have the good sense to know not to get pregnant by a man who doesn’t want her.”

Tasha gasped. From the corner of her eye, she saw Angie turn to look at her. She turned to face her sister. Angie’s eyes were full of dread as she shook her head.

“Is that what you’d tell me, Mom? To give up my baby?” Tasha said, still looking at Angie.

Angie shook her head again. “No, Tasha.”

Their mom looked between the two. “Don’t be silly. Your dad and I both know you wouldn’t do something so stupid.” Her mom giggled. “If things work out, you’ll marry that doctor in the other room and give us some legitimate grandchildren.”

Tasha whipped around to face her mom. She held the spoon she’d used to stir the potatoes in front of her like a knife. “But what if I was that stupid? Would you want me to give up your grandchild?”

Her mom scowled. “Tasha, stop. You don’t speak those things into existence.”

Her dad came into the kitchen. He walked over to the crockpot to look at the pot roast inside. “Is it time to eat?” When no one answered, he looked around and took in the scene. “What’s going on?”

Her mom shook her head. “I was telling the girls about the situation with Georgia, and apparently Tasha doesn’t like our advice.”

Her dad frowned at her. “What’s wrong with our advice? She and the baby will be better off if she gives it to a loving home.”

Her mom snorted. “Tasha was asking if we’d give the same advice to her.”

Her dad laughed. “Really, Tasha. I only know of one immaculate conception, and until you get married, I don’t think we’ll be saying your name and baby in the same sentence.” He turned back to the crockpot, dismissing the subject.

Rage, white and hot, flowed through Tasha. No one wanted her child. Not Jared, or her parents. It wasn't her baby's fault she'd made a mistake. A few months ago, she would have agreed with her parents' advice. But now that she was a soon to be single mother, it wasn't so easy to just give up the child she'd created.

She lowered her hand and placed it over her midsection. Angie gasped. Her dad turned around and looked at the two of them.

Tasha raised her head and met her dad's eye. "It wasn't immaculate conception. I had sex with a man who made no secret that he never wanted to marry me. I thought I knew what I was doing, but apparently I didn't."

Her mom reached for her dad, who glowered at Tasha. "What are you saying, girl?"

Tasha took a deep breath. "I'm pregnant, Daddy."

Her mom cried out and her dad's face fell. "This isn't funny," he said in a hard voice.

"Tell me about it," Tasha said. "He doesn't want me or the baby. He thinks I did this on purpose, but I didn't. I can't change what happened, but I can do what I think is right for the future. I'm having this baby."

"Baby?"

Tasha turned to Kevis standing in the door of the kitchen. He looked as if he'd just seen a ghost. She nodded. "I'm sorry, Kevis. I should have told you that I ... I'm pregnant."

He frowned. "But I thought you were a virgin."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Never mind."

She quickly put the pieces together. "Charles told you I was a virgin. Is that why you asked me out?"

He sighed before meeting her eyes. "I told you I don't play games, so there's no need to lie. Yes, when Charles told me you were saving yourself for marriage, I was curious. When I met you, I wanted to go out with you regardless of what Charles said. But I won't play second to another man." He looked at Tasha's dad. "It was nice meeting you all, but I think it's time for me to go."

Tasha glared at him. "You were only interested in me because I was a virgin?"

He shook his head. "And you used me to make your jock jealous. Goodbye, Tasha." He left the kitchen and a few seconds later the front door closed.

"Tasha, tell me this is a joke. Tell me you didn't really go and get yourself in trouble," her dad said.

Tasha swallowed her surprise over Kevis's confession and faced her dad. "I can't tell you that, Daddy. I swear to God I wish I could, but I can't."

He slammed his fist on the counter, making their mother jump. "How could you do this? I thought you had more sense. You and Angie were my pride and joy. I bragged to everyone about my daughters and how they were waiting for their husbands."

“That’s your fault, Daddy, not mine. I never said — ”

“Yes, you did!” he cut in. His face was balled up in anger and he pointed at her. “You promised your mother and me you’d wait. You said you’d keep yourself pure. Instead, you bring disgrace down on you and me.”

“I didn’t plan for this to happen.”

“What did you think would happen? Sinning with some man who doesn’t want to marry you?” He slapped his hand on the counter again and she flinched. “Good Lord, Tasha, you’re about to bring a bastard into my house.”

Angie stepped up. “Daddy, don’t say that.”

Her dad looked at Angie. “Why not? It’s the truth. She’s having a bastard, by some bastard that doesn’t want her or the baby. And now she’s expecting me and your mother to step in and help her. No, I don’t want anything to do with it.”

“I don’t need anything from you,” Tasha said. “I’ll raise this child on my own.”

Her dad waved a hand and walked out of the kitchen. Tasha ran behind him. He went up the stairs and Tasha yelled after him. “I don’t need anyone’s help! I’ll do this on my own!” The door to her parents’ room slammed.

The sound was the final blow to her heart. She bit back a sob as she stared up the stairs, waiting for her dad to come back, knowing he wouldn’t. When she turned around her mom and sister stood in the door of the

kitchen watching. Her mom looked at her with disappointment in her eyes. Angie's eyes were filled with pity and sadness. Unable to take it, Tasha grabbed her purse by the door and fled.

CHAPTER 33

Jared hopped in his car and sped up I-20 east toward Helena. The morning sun was quickly burning off the fog, the only reminder of the previous night's rain. The traffic was light on the interstate and he made good time. He'd skipped his morning workout — something he hadn't done without reason in weeks — in his haste. When he pulled up in front of the small brick office building he breathed a sigh of relief. Devin's Ford F-150 was parked in the side lot.

It was too early for the front door to be opened, so he walked around to the building's side entrance. A nurse was slowly getting out of her car as he rounded the corner. He gave her his best heart-breaker smile. "I'm here to see Dr. Jones."

The nurse didn't smile back. She looked at her watch. "Sir, it's seven. Our office doesn't open until eight."

Jared kept smiling as he walked over to help her out of the car. "I realize that, but I'm a friend of his and I really need to see him."

She frowned at him, shook off the hand he had on her arm, and walked to the side entrance. “Like I haven’t heard that before.”

Jared rushed up behind her. “Just tell him Jared Patterson is out here.” When she rolled her eyes he reached out and took her hand. She glared and he immediately dropped his hands. “Please.”

“Mmmhmm,” she said and disappeared behind the solid brown door.

Jared tapped his foot and checked his watch. He wanted to catch Devin before he was bogged down with his patients. Plus, he had a plane to catch. He checked his watch again — only two minutes had passed, but it felt like two hours.

He turned toward the door and raised his hand to knock when it opened. Devin stepped back when he saw Jared’s raised fist. “I know you didn’t come all the way up here just to hit me.”

Jared dropped his fist. “Nah, man, I was about to knock.”

Devin stepped out and eyed Jared curiously. “What’s going on? Malcolm and I have been trying to reach you.”

Jared ran a hand over his face. “I know. He even came by the house last night. I pretended I wasn’t there.”

Devin crossed his arms. “You want to tell me why?”

“Because I didn’t want to see him.”

“I know you have a tendency to avoid difficult situations, but there’s no need to do that with Malcolm. He’s your brother.”

Jared shook his head. “And he’s a choir boy. I didn’t want to listen to him preach.”

“Preach about what? How you treated Tasha? Because if that’s the case you’ll hear it from me instead.”

“You two need to preach to Tasha about how she treated me.”

“Jared, that girl loved you.”

“Yeah, she loved me enough to sneak and get pregnant.” The words didn’t feel right. But what else could he say? He’d seen the evidence.

Devin unfolded his arms and put them on his hips. “Tasha’s pregnant?”

Jared rubbed his jaw and began to pace. “Yes. She told me in Atlanta.”

Devin reached out to grab Jared’s arm. “And you kicked her out after she told you that?” He glared at Jared.

Jared pulled away. “You don’t understand. I found a condom in my bag with holes in it. She was poking holes in my condoms, Devin.” He shrugged. “She tricked me.”

Devin frowned. “Tasha poked holes in your condoms? You’ve got to be mistaken.”

Jared shook his head. “I don’t want to believe it. I swear I don’t, but what other explanation is there? I

caught her going through my bag in Charleston. It was one of the same condoms we'd had down there. She even told me how much she wanted to get married and have kids. I just didn't think she would do that."

"Did she confess?"

"No. She says she didn't do it."

"Maybe she didn't."

"I wasn't sleeping with anyone else when we were together. Who else had access?"

Devin held up his hands. "I don't know, but she doesn't seem the type."

"I didn't think Tasha would do something so low either." Jared sighed and leaned against the nurse's car. "You were right in Atlanta. I did love her. Shit, sometimes I feel like I still love her. But I can't be with her knowing she did that to me."

If Devin was surprised he didn't show it. "Jared, she's having your baby. Regardless of the circumstances, you've got to make things work."

"I can't. I'm leaving for L.A. today."

Devin scowled. "You're leaving? What about Tasha?"

His stomach clenched. "Look, she chose to get pregnant without telling me. I don't owe her anything."

Devin stalked over to Jared. "I don't condone what she did, but you can't just up and forget your child like that."

“I know, but I need some time ... away from her. When I’m around her, I forget how messed up she treated me. I can’t deal with that.”

“So you’re gonna run. Just like you always do.”

Jared stood. “Look, the plan to go to L.A. came long before Tasha got pregnant. It’s Cassandra’s birthday, I go every year.”

Devin looked skeptical. “When are you coming back?”

Jared shrugged. “I don’t know, Malcolm’s wedding.”

Devin pointed his finger. “That’s September.”

“I know.”

Devin raised another finger. “It’s June. You’re going to forget the woman who’s having your baby for the entire summer?”

Jared sighed. “That’s why I’m here. I want you ... no, I *need* you to check in on Tasha for me. Make sure she and the baby are okay. If she needs anything let me know. I’ll get it.”

Devin’s brown furled. “Why aren’t you telling her this?”

Jared balled his fists. “Because I can’t look at her right now.” He took a deep breath. “As much as I want to turn my back on her and the baby, I can’t. I wouldn’t make a good father on my own, and I don’t have to be in their lives to take care of them.”

“Just like you weren’t in your mother’s life, but took care of her,” Devin said.

“Yeah, something like that.” Jared looked at his watch. “I’ve got a flight to catch.”

“Are you going to tell Malcolm about the baby?”

Jared’s lips rose in a twisted sad smile. “I’ll call him from L.A. If I told him in person, he’d try to kill me.”

Devin drew his lips in. “You’re probably right. Look, man, don’t stay out there that long. I guess I can understand your need to get away after that kind of betrayal, but come back and work things out with Tasha. You two are having a kid together.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Jared reached out his hand. Devin looked at him for a second before taking it. “Thanks, Devin. Just keep an eye out on her.”

“How am I supposed to do that from Helena?”

Jared smiled. “Kenyatta will tell Malcolm everything, and he’ll come running to you complaining about how pissed he is at me. Don’t you know that’s why you’re our friend? You keep us sane.”

Devin grimaced. “Well who’s going to keep me sane?”

Jared laughed. “You got it all together, man.”

Devin joined in but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I do, I guess.”

Jared turned to go back to his car, but paused. “Oh, and keep an eye on that doctor Kevis whatever. I don’t

want him sniffing around trying to claim my baby.”

Devin’s brows rose. “Is he still trying to see Tasha?”

“He was at her dad’s church this weekend, and they looked all chummy.”

“Why do you care, if you don’t want her?”

“I never said I didn’t want her. I just don’t want to want her,” Jared said. He turned and got in his car.

He checked the clock on his dashboard. It was seven twenty. His plane didn’t leave until nine. He pulled out of the parking lot and drove through the small town toward the interstate. He didn’t need to go back home — his bags were in the car and anything else he might need his assistant could send later. But he wasn’t in the mood to sit around the airport for hours. Columbia airport was nowhere near as busy as Atlanta or Charlotte, so arriving early wasn’t a necessity. He wouldn’t give in to the urge for what he wanted to do. He’d done that on Sunday, and that had blown up in his face.

His mind ran over the conversation he’d had with Tasha on Sunday. She was adamant she hadn’t gotten pregnant on purpose, and he wanted to believe her. He wanted to believe her so badly he was almost willing to say to hell with it and try to get back what they’d had. Or, what they’d started to have. He couldn’t hate her. He hadn’t lied when he told Devin the love wouldn’t go away. She’d buried herself deep inside of him in a place that no other woman had ever accessed. Because of that, he didn’t trust himself around her. Seeing her get sick on Sunday was like a knife in his chest. He wanted to take

care of her the same way he'd done when she'd had the allergic reaction. Watching her stand for the rest of the church service had annoyed him more than he cared to admit. She should have been sitting down, not wearing herself out.

He gripped the steering wheel and cursed in frustration. But he couldn't ignore what he'd seen. His mistrust in women went too far back, it was so much a part of him it overruled his need to have her in his life. Even though he now knew the misunderstanding behind his father's death, it didn't change the fact that he'd spent the last fifteen years believing women were untrustworthy. One revelation couldn't take away years of having women pursue him for money, sex, or fame. He didn't want to see her and he didn't want to talk to her. Asking Devin to let him know if she needed anything was better than most men would do in this situation.

Yet his hand still grabbed his cell phone resting in the cup holder and pressed the preset number for the Rec Commission. His immediate need to make sure she was okay before he left town outweighed his desire to forget her.

Feeling sick with himself for calling after admitting to Devin he couldn't handle seeing her, he started to hang up but the receptionist answered on the second ring.

He cleared his throat. "Is Tasha Smith in?"

"No, she called in sick today. Is there anything I can help you with?"

Jared squeezed the phone. “No thank you. I’ll try later.” He tossed the phone in the passenger seat. He’d reached the outer edges of town and increased his speed as he approached the interstate. Ignoring the voice in his head calling him a fool for caring, and the knowledge that going to her took him on the opposite side of town from the airport, Jared drove toward Tasha’s home.

CHAPTER 34

Tasha walked out of her doctor's office in a daze. It was confirmed by a professional. She was pregnant with Jared's child. She barely noticed her surroundings as she got on the elevator and pressed the button. It wasn't as if she hadn't known what the doctor confirmed, but before coming she could almost ignore it. She could say to herself the tests she'd had were faulty or she'd misread the result. But when her doctor came back and said "Congratulations" there was no way to ignore that.

The surprise on her doctor's face was almost comical. To have a patient go from being a virgin at their January visit to pregnant in June must be unusual. Tasha liked Dr. Robinson, and usually found it easy to open up to her about anything regarding her health, but when she'd hinted about the father, she'd clammed up. She knew Angie, Kenyatta, and Malcolm would guess who the father was, but the truth wouldn't come from her lips. If Jared didn't want her, then she didn't want to even mention his name.

"Excuse me, miss. Isn't this your floor?"

Tasha blinked several times and turned to the man in the elevator with her. He had a frown on his face and was holding the door open.

“Thank you, it is,” she said and got off the elevator. She looked down the hall toward the parking garage, before turning in the opposite direction and entering the walkway that crossed Taylor Street and connected her doctor’s office and Baptist Medical Center. She walked onto the walkway and stared at the people on the street below. She didn’t want to go home. There was too much stuff there to remind her of her stupidity. Her bookshelf filled with romance novels and romantic comedy DVDs. All of them were going to Goodwill. They were full of lies. Life didn’t work like that; life wasn’t full of happy endings and romantic men who loved you forever. Life was full of men who didn’t trust women and fathers who abandoned daughters in their time of need. The box under her bed with her life goals, including the plans for her future wedding, would go in the trash. That plan had been shot to hell the minute she’d asked Jared to take her virginity.

How stupid and naïve she’d been. The main reason she’d kept her distance from Jared after meeting him years ago was because she knew his reputation. She’d heard the gossip about him, followed some of it actually. She was fully aware women threw themselves at him. It was foolish to have thought she would be immune to what other women craved. She could have moved on if he’d treated their situation like any of his other affairs. But she’d asked him not to treat her that way. She

opened her heart and he'd crashed in, setting himself so fully inside of her that even when she'd known it was time to move on she hadn't.

She pressed her head against the glass of the crosswalk and sighed. Her eyelids fluttered down as she remembered the way they were. How he'd talked to her about his problems. The way he'd held her on the beach in Charleston. How much fun they had watching basketball together. How he'd come to her after her date with Kevis and said he loved her. Her heart lurched painfully and she squeezed her eyes tighter. It was all a lie. He'd admitted it in Atlanta. In the end he had treated her like the rest of the women in his life, and that hurt as much as him accusing her of planning this pregnancy to trap him.

"The time for pity parties is over," she whispered. Taking a deep breath, Tasha pushed away from the glass and stared at her reflection. She may have been stupid, foolish, and naïve before, but she couldn't afford to be now. She had to be smart, strong, and capable for the child she carried.

"Tasha?"

She froze, before whipping around and facing Kevis. He was in scrubs, carrying a cup of coffee in his hands. When she didn't speak, he came closer.

"Are you okay?"

She blinked and nodded stiffly. "I'm fine."

He looked around. "Where's your jock?"

Tasha glared at him. “That’s none of your business.”

He scoffed. “He’s no longer in the picture is he?”

Anger snapped up her spine. “What does it matter to you? It’s not as if you’re much better. You only asked me out because you thought I was a virgin.”

“I was curious about you because of that. What man wouldn’t be, but I asked you out because I was attracted to you. I showed up at your dad’s church because I thought there was something between us.”

She crossed her arms. “Well, you were wrong.”

“I wasn’t wrong. I just didn’t realize the thing between us was another man.”

She shook her head. “Forget this.”

When she tried to walk away, he sighed and placed a hand on her elbow. “I’m sorry I was out of line.”

She snatched her arm away and crossed them. “Yes, you are.”

He looked down, shuffled his feet, then met her eye. “Just tell me if he’s still in the picture.”

“Why?”

“Because, if he’s not ... I’d like us to try and be friends.”

Holy crap. Her palms became sweaty and her heartbeat picked up. A solution. She wouldn’t be a ruined woman. She shook her head to rid herself of the thought. Kevis was not a solution. “You can’t be serious.”

He nodded. "I'm not saying let's start dating or anything, I'd just like us to be friends. I like you Tasha, and I don't want us to part on bad terms." He held out his hand. "Friends."

She stared at his hand before finally taking it. "Associates."

He smiled. "Whatever you want to call it." He lifted an eyebrow. "We would have been good, huh?"

Her lips curved into a reluctant smile. "We might have been."

"Fair enough." He squeezed her hand. "Promise you'll take care of yourself."

She nodded. "I will."

He dropped her hand. "Good."

She turned back toward the parking garage and her car and he crossed the walkway into the hospital. Sure they'd said they would be friends, but would they really. She wasn't sure if she'd ever be able to trust Kevis, and the look in his eyes told her he'd been hurt by her pregnancy. As much as she wanted to regret sleeping with Jared, she wouldn't have this child if she'd never had, and despite the circumstances behind its conception, she wanted this baby. She also wanted Jared, now more than ever. Which was stupid.

On the way home she stopped at Dollar General and bought four storage containers for the books, magazines, and everything else she needed to clear out of her house. Angie called her when she was in the store, but she didn't

answer her phone. She hadn't talked to Angie since the disaster that should have been Sunday dinner. From her sister's messages, she'd gathered her parents were still upset, but her mom was begging her dad to apologize. It was a small comfort to know her mom was taking her side in this. But she couldn't face her family until she got her feelings straightened out.

She turned the corner onto her street and gasped. Jared's silver sports car sat in her driveway. The very small amount of fortification she'd built since leaving the doctor's office nearly shattered. She pulled in beside his car and stared at him sitting on her porch step.

She allowed herself one second to let her feelings for him warm her insides. He was dressed as usual, basketball shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt, and as always, her heart did a silly flip flop when his eyes met hers. He stood and she had to remind herself to breathe he walked toward the car. His gait was unhurried, but tense.

He came and opened the door. She swallowed hard before getting out. He didn't speak as he looked over her face and body. Feeling his gaze as much as a touch she took a step back.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded and turned away to get the storage containers from the back of her car. "I'm fine, but why do you care?"

He took the containers from her. "I called your job, and they said you called in sick. I came to make sure you were okay."

Tasha looked at the roses growing along her porch, the tree in the yard, and the sky. Anything was better than looking in his eyes. “You’ve already told me how you feel. You think I’m a lying, scheming, conniving bitch that’s trying to trap you into ... something by having this baby. You don’t want me or this baby and you’re moving back to L.A. where I can’t expect to get anything from you.” Her voice grew shaky as she spoke and she had to stop and take a deep breath. She wouldn’t cry in front of him. “So again, I ask why you care.”

Jared groaned. “Dammit, Tasha, I can’t just shut off what I feel for you. Regardless of what happened.”

Her eyes flew to meet his and her lip twisted in anger. “You don’t feel anything for me. You said it in Atlanta, you only told me you loved me so I’d come with you.”

He put the containers on top of her car. “No, that’s what I let Malcolm believe. I’m the one who always said I’d never fall in love. I’m the one who doesn’t trust women. I was going to be a bachelor forever. I couldn’t say out loud to everyone something I’d only just admitted to myself.”

She crossed her arms. “So you were too proud to admit you loved me. I wasn’t thrilled about falling for you either, Jared. But I admitted it to Kenyatta. I took the sad pitiful way she looked at me because I believed what we had was real.”

He stepped toward her. “It was real until you ... ” He sighed, looked away, then turned back to her. “Can we

talk about this inside?”

She shook her head. “Shouldn’t you be training or somewhere? I’ve got a lot to do today, and I don’t have time to beg you to believe me.”

She reached for the containers on her car, but he was faster and grabbed them before her. “Look, I’ve already missed my flight waiting on you.”

She froze. “You’re leaving today?” She’d known he was going back, he’d even told her it would be this week. But that didn’t make it hurt less to know he was really leaving her in a matter of hours.

He nodded. “We need to talk before I go.”

She walked around him toward her front door. His footsteps followed. What was left to say? Even though he said he’d really loved her, he couldn’t have. You trusted those you loved, and it was obvious he hadn’t trusted her.

He followed her into the living room and placed the containers on the couch. The couch had too many good memories. Pushing back her anxiety, she turned to go into the kitchen. He followed.

“Were you sleeping with Monica when you were sleeping with me?” She blurted out the first thing she wanted to know. Someone had to have ruined his condoms other than her.

“No. I did sleep with Monica, but it was a few weeks before you and I hooked up.”

“Were the condoms messed up when you bought them?”

He ran his hand over his face. “No, the package was sealed.”

“How many women did you sleep with while using those condoms?”

Jared cringed and looked away. “Tasha, stop it.”

“No, I won’t stop it. I didn’t do this, but you’re determined to think I did. You said you really did love me, but you couldn’t have. If you did you would know this isn’t something I would do.”

He rushed over and took her hands in his. “Don’t you understand that because I loved you I don’t want to believe it?”

Pain sliced through her when he said “loved.” He didn’t love her anymore, and, idiotically, she still loved him. “Then believe it. Believe me.”

She stared in his eyes, begging him to trust her. It didn’t take long for her to become aware of the heat from his body and the intoxicating smell of him. Her eyes traveled to his lips and memories of them together flooded her system. She leaned closer to him and his head lowered. She tried to ignore the hot frenzy within her, but his eyes became soft and she licked her lips in anticipation. He dropped her hands and stepped away.

He put his back to her and she watched his shoulders rise and fall as he took several deep breaths. “I can’t think straight when I’m around you. I never could,

otherwise I would have turned down your offer in the first place.” He slowly turned to face her. “I’ve got to get away and going to L.A. is what I need. Regardless of how it happened, it happened. You’re pregnant, and because I care about you, I take back what I said earlier. I’ll help with the baby.”

Anger shot through her like a lightning rod. “Don’t give me that crap. You don’t care.”

He tensed. “Obviously I do or I wouldn’t offer to help after what happened.”

“Either you love me or you don’t. Either you believe me or you don’t. I don’t want some half assed attempt to do what’s right.”

“I can’t do that right now.”

“Do it now, or don’t do it at all. Don’t come back into my life if you don’t believe me. We don’t need that.”

He flinched. “Tasha, I will take care of my child.”

“As far as I’m concerned this isn’t your child. Unless you admit right now that you believe me, I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is for me.”

She stared at him and silently prayed he would believe her. It was reverting back to her foolish ways to hope for love to conquer all. That he would look in his heart and realize the Tasha he loved would never do something so awful to him. He walked toward her and

reached out to brush his hand lightly over her cheek. He splayed his hands in her hair and pulled her close. Happiness washed over her when he pressed his lips against hers. It was a brief, fleeting kiss. He buried his nose in her hair before inhaling deeply.

“I’m sorry, Tasha, but I can’t. Not right now.” He stepped away. “If you need anything, let Malcolm or Devin know. They’ll be sure to tell me.” He turned and walked out of the kitchen.

She didn’t know how long she stood there after her front door closed. He couldn’t trust her. No. He wouldn’t allow himself to trust her. She saw it in his eyes.

She slowly walked from the kitchen to the living room. She picked up one of the storage containers and walked over to her bookshelf. One swift stroke of her hand and one shelf was empty. Then the next, and the next. She dumped everything into the box until the shelf was clear. She marched into her room, pulled the box from underneath her bed, and carried it out the back door. She didn’t look through it before she dumped first the contents, then the box directly into the trash. She was tired of letting Jared Patterson break her heart. She would clear her mind of him and everything that reminded her of love, happiness, and fairy tales. It was all a lie. Love didn’t conquer a damn thing.

CHAPTER 35

The acrid smell of strong coffee woke Jared. He groaned as he pulled a pillow over his head and rolled over, burying his face in the satin sheets on the bed. There was a dull ache behind his ears and his stomach rolled from the coffee scent he couldn't muffle. He knew Cassandra liked her coffee strong, but that didn't make it any easier getting used to waking up to the smell. He'd avoided looking for a place to stay in the three weeks he'd been in Los Angeles, but after suffering this particular wakeup call for too long it was time to make a decision. Either find a place in L.A., or go home.

He peeked from beneath the pillow at the clock beside the bed. The red numbers glowed, announcing that it was eight A.M. He swore and jumped from the bed, but paid for it with another wave of queasiness. Cassandra's birthday party was today, but the celebration had started the night before. Her ex-boyfriend insisted on throwing a party in her honor at a club. Jared had known he'd pay for the tequila shots he'd drowned like Kool-Aid, and his sick stomach was testimony to that.

Ignoring the urge to lie back in bed, he pulled on a pair of basketball shorts and a t-shirt before leaving the bedroom. Cassandra hadn't asked why he'd insisted on coming early for her birthday and he hadn't offered. He'd thought about Tasha and the baby constantly since leaving Columbia.

The look in her eyes when she'd begged him to believe her that day in her kitchen haunted him. He had believed her, and that scared him more than anything. He'd felt his suspicion slipping away when she'd insisted yet again that she hadn't tricked him. Her sincerity pierced through all his defenses and cut him in the gut.

His love for her said she wasn't lying, but logic said she was. He wasn't used to trusting emotions when it came to relationships. What if his love for her was clouding his judgment? He'd never been in love before. It was scary to think love would have him trust her so deeply. So he'd run. Malcolm, Devin, his mom, they all were right. When he didn't know how to handle things he took off. That was why he'd taken tequila shots like a frat boy on spring break — he knew he'd run from Tasha and he wanted to drown his shame.

Bright sunlight bombarded his senses when he opened the door to the bedroom. Cassandra's apartment could only be described as bright. Everything was white: the walls, the carpet, her furniture. The monochrome theme was broken up by bright splashes of red, orange, green, or yellow in the form of pillows, throw rugs, or paintings. Floor to ceiling windows let sunlight in and the effect on his senses was overwhelming.

He squinted as he jogged down the stairs into the kitchen. Cassandra sat at the bar with a white coffee mug in her hand. She was another blotch of color in her all white paradise in a hot pink camisole and shorts pajama set. She had on full make up, which meant she'd already showered but planned to lounge around all day before her party that evening. Despite his annoyance with the coffee, he smiled inwardly. Cassandra couldn't even be comfortable in her own apartment without looking as if she'd stepped out of a makeup studio.

Her perfectly arched eyebrows rose when he entered the kitchen. "Well, I see you finally decided to climb out of bed."

Jared opened the fridge and pulled out a glass pitcher of orange juice. "Eight in the morning isn't late."

"Maybe for some, but it is for you. You've gotten up at four every morning since you've been here to go jogging before working out. I thought you were training for something, or trying to kill yourself."

He poured juice into a glass. "I work out every morning."

"But you also work out for a few hours in the afternoon."

He shrugged. "I'm a trainer."

She cupped the mug in her hand and placed her elbows on the bar. "But you're not training anyone."

He downed the juice. "I'm back in L.A. If I want clients out here then I need to make sure my body is

tight.”

The corner of her mouth lifted in a smile. “Your body looks pretty tight to me.”

She winked and he laughed. “I think the tequila is still in your system.” He walked over to sit across from her at the bar.

She laughed. “It’s in everybody’s system. Ramon knows how to throw a party.”

Jared groaned. “Please tell me tonight won’t be as wild as last night.”

She bit the tip of her tongue and grinned. “Tonight’s going to be wilder than last night. It’s my birthday. We have to celebrate it in style.”

Jared dropped his head to the bar. “I’m too old for this.”

Cassandra sucked her teeth. Her hand, still warm from holding the coffee mug, rubbed the back of his head. “Poor baby, you stayed in the country too long. Now you can’t hang with us city folks.”

Jared lifted his head and glared. “You’re getting too old for this too, Cassandra.”

She tossed her head. “You must be crazy, I’m twenty-four.”

Jared laughed. “Okay, keep telling yourself that.” He stood. “I’m going to jog off some of this alcohol.” He went back over to the fridge and pulled out a Gatorade and one of his protein bars.

She took a sip of her coffee. “Come on, lova, take today off. Whip up one of your hangover remedies and lounge on the couch with me.”

“If I don’t run this morning I’ll be jumpy all day. I have a lot of built up energy I need to get out.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you running to get in shape, or are you running from something?”

“That’s foolishness.” He ripped open the protein bar and took a bite.

“When are you going to tell me about the woman that drove you back here? Don’t look so surprised — you ran to South Carolina when I hinted at us getting back together, it only makes sense that a woman made you run back to California.” She drank the last of her coffee, stood, and walked over to put the mug in the sink. When she turned to face him her arms were crossed. “What happened?”

Jared shook his head. “Nothing happened.”

“Jared, don’t play me for a fool. What’s going on? I know you promised to come out for my birthday, but showing up three weeks early for it and having no solid plans for when you’ll return is a bit much.”

He grinned. “What, a guy can’t spend some time with his homegirl?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Jared.”

He sighed. He might as well tell her, although he hated to hear the different ways she would curse him out for running. He’d been cursing himself out since walking

out of Tasha's door. He opened his mouth when his cell phone rang.

Cassandra sighed and pointed at him. "I'm not forgetting this," she said as she walked out of the kitchen.

Jared picked up his phone from the counter and checked the caller ID. It was Devin. "How is she?"

"She looked the same, but you'd know that if you were here." Disappointment colored Devin's tone. Devin was updating him as best he could, but he only saw her during his Wednesday night games.

Guilt pressed down on Jared. "I know. Look, I'm coming back next week."

"When did you decide that?"

Jared could hear the surprise in Devin's voice. Hell, he'd surprised himself. He couldn't keep this up much longer. Cassandra was right, he was working out like a crazy person. But it wasn't for clients, it was to pound out his guilt for leaving Tasha. It was time to go home and face this situation.

"I've been out here busting my ass working out or drinking trying to forget this situation with Tasha and I'm tired of doing it. It's time to come home and work things out."

"Can you really handle knowing what she did to you?"

Jared pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't know if I believe she really did it. I mean, I saw her in my bag

that night, but Tasha wouldn't poke holes in my condoms."

"Are you sure?"

Jared remembered the devastation in her eyes when he said he couldn't trust her. "I'm sure. She's having my child. We can work something out."

He heard Devin sigh on his end. "Well, it may be harder than you think."

Jared gripped the phone. "What do you mean?"

"Kevis is still in the picture. He's coming to games early and helping her get the equipment set up. It's obvious he's still feeling her. If you don't want someone else calling your kid Daddy, you better get back here quick."

Crazy thoughts invaded his mind: Tasha sleeping with Kevis, passing her pregnancy off on him, Kevis doing the honorable thing and marrying her. Him watching another man live a life with the woman and child he'd left behind because like a fool he'd run to L.A. He didn't need to wait to get back to Columbia, he needed to go home today. "That baby's not calling anyone Daddy but me. Thanks for looking out, man."

"No problem. I'll see you soon."

"All right, bye."

He ended the call and stared at the phone. "Cassandra!" he yelled. He spun around and was startled to see her ducking behind the door. "I saw you."

She came around the corner and eyed him guiltily. He wasn't upset about her eavesdropping — she was his friend and she wanted to know why he'd run. But, she had the same deer in the headlights look Monica wore. Right after he'd caught her ruffling through his nightstand for a condom and then stepped on a pin.

“Monica.”

Cassandra scowled. “I'm Cassandra.”

He shook his head. “No, Monica did it. She was in my nightstand. She poked the holes in my condoms.” He balled his hands into fists. “That bitch. It was right in front of me and I accused Tasha.”

It came to him as simply as if he'd always known. The reason he'd thrown Monica out in the first place was because of her snooping in his nightstand. The same nightstand where he kept his condoms. It was so obvious, but he'd only considered Monica a nuisance after he'd fallen for Tasha. Her constant popping up now made sense. She'd been trying to trick him. Shame and guilt brewed nastily in his gut. He'd blamed Tasha when the answer had been right in front of his face.

Cassandra took a tentative step toward him. “What's going on? Is Monica the pregnant one?”

“No, Tasha's pregnant. Monica poked the holes.”

“You were sleeping with both of them?”

“No, Monica did it before I started with Tasha. Tasha didn't do it.”

Cassandra gave a weak smile. “But she’s still pregnant.”

“I don’t care. I love her,” he said. Cassandra’s eyes grew wide as saucers. He waited for the regret to hit him for saying it out loud. But it didn’t come. It was liberating to say it and not be afraid to admit it. He’d been afraid to accept how much he trusted her. Afraid to admit he believed her when she said she hadn’t tricked him based on her word alone. Now that he realized the truth had been staring him in the face the entire time he felt like a royal idiot.

He grabbed Cassandra by the arms. “How do I fix this?”

“Fix what? I don’t know. I’m still trying to comprehend you saying you love her,” Cassandra said.

“I accused her of tricking me. I left her even after she begged me to stay. You’re a woman — how do I fix it?”

Cassandra shrugged. “I really don’t know, Jared. Like they say, when a woman’s fed up there’s nothing you can do about it.”

He let her go and ran his hands over his face. “I fucked up. I left her. She won’t forgive me.” His head snapped up and he looked at Cassandra. “I’m not good at this stuff. I don’t know how to tell her I messed up and I’m sorry.”

Cassandra leaned against the counter. “You can’t tell her, you’ll have to show her.”

Jared rubbed the back of his neck. “For how long?”

“As long as it takes.”

He tried to imagine how long it would take for Tasha to forgive him. He couldn't blame her if she never forgave him. For him to accuse her of deceiving him after refusing to admit his feelings for her in front of his family was bad enough, but the fact that he'd walked away after she'd begged him not to made his task seem as possible as moonwalking to Mars.

He turned his back to Cassandra and dialed Tasha's number. It went straight to voice mail and he wanted to throw the phone against the wall. He was going back today and would stick so close to her during this pregnancy people would think they were joined at the hip. He'd show her every day until this baby came and beyond that, he loved her until she finally realized they belonged together.

He turned back to Cassandra. She held up her hand. “I know, you're going back tonight.”

He nodded. “I have to. I need to check on her and my baby.”

Cassandra took a deep breath. “I can't believe this. You'll probably marry her too?” When he cringed, she rolled her eyes. “I'll look for flights and pack my bags.”

He stopped her as she tried to walk past him. “Wait a second. You're skipping your birthday celebration?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn't miss seeing you crawl after a woman for anything. Just remember that

you owe me a huge party next year.”

He pulled her into a bear hug. “I don’t deserve you.”

“No, you don’t,” she said with a smile before pulling away and going upstairs.

CHAPTER 36

Jared rubbed his jaw and took a deep breath to calm his racing heart. He stared at Tasha's front door and reached for the doorbell for the third time. The afternoon sun burned his back and sweat beaded along his brow. But even if it were cloudy he'd still be sweating bullets. He wasn't used to begging forgiveness from a woman and he wanted Tasha's forgiveness more than anything.

Once he'd landed the first thing he did was call Monica and confront her. To his amazement she hadn't lied, but thankfully confirmed that she wasn't pregnant. He would have dragged her to every court in America if she were. Instead of calling her every dirty name in the book he'd ended the call and deleted her number. From the defeated sound of her voice, he didn't expect to see her again.

He wiped the sweat off his hands on his khaki pants. The second thing he'd done was shower and change into what he hoped was a responsible looking outfit before coming to beg Tasha to forgive him. With a sigh he pressed the doorbell.

She opened the door and his breath caught. She was dressed in her pink Rec Commission t-shirt and khaki skirt, her hair hung loosely around her shoulders and there was a glow to her caramel skin. She was breathtaking. He held out the bouquet of roses he'd brought.

Her cold gaze went from the roses to his face before she lifted her chin. "What do you want?"

He swallowed his guilt and called on his pride. "I'm sorry. I never should have doubted you."

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "What do you want?"

He dropped the flowers to his side. "I know you didn't poke the holes in the condoms."

Her lips twisted. "Really, what brought on this epiphany?"

"I realized you wouldn't do something like that. I trust you."

Anger flashed in her eyes. "You trust me? You *trust* me! After I begged you to believe me and you still ran off to L.A., you have the audacity to come here and think flowers and saying you trust me will make it all go away? You don't trust me, Jared. If you did you wouldn't have left."

He reached out and she stepped back. "I know, and I'm sorry. Tasha, I didn't know how to handle it, okay? I'd just found out about my dad — "

Her brow furled. "What about your dad?"

“There was more to the story. Drugs caused his heart attack. My mom wasn’t having an affair.”

Concern replaced the anger in her eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

He stepped forward. “I’ve wanted to talk to you about it since finding out. My mind was so screwed up after learning what happened. Then Malcolm was digging on me for misleading you,” he sighed heavily, “When I saw the condom, it was easier to believe you would do that than trust my instincts.”

Her face hardened and she raised her chin. “That’s supposed to make me feel better? You were a coward and you ran. You didn’t want to face what was real. You didn’t want to make what we had real and you took the easy way out.”

“It wasn’t easy, Tasha. I’ve thought about you every minute since Atlanta.”

She scowled. “Really? Were you thinking of me while hooking up with Cassandra? I saw the reports of you two partying it up. I also know you stayed with her in L.A.”

He closed his eyes and dropped his head, mentally cursing the media. “I didn’t sleep with Cassandra.” He lifted his head and looked at her.

Tasha made a noise that sounded a lot like a growl and tried to slam the door. He caught it before she could close it and pushed his way in. “Nothing happened.”

“You expect me to believe that? You had to sleep with me almost every night.”

He reached for her again but she stepped away. “You, Tasha, only you. I don’t want another woman the way I want you. I haven’t loved a woman the way I love you. I don’t want to sleep with Cassandra, or Monica, or anyone else. I only want you.”

Her eyes softened slightly but she turned away. “It doesn’t matter, Jared. I told you before if you couldn’t believe me then it was over. I meant what I said.”

He stepped up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. He wanted to draw her close, but instead took comfort that she hadn’t pulled away. “I know you meant what you said. I know coming here and saying I’m sorry won’t erase what I did. You offered me love and trust and I didn’t know how to handle it. I’ve spent so much of my life mistrusting women and second-guessing every gesture they made. I know it’s not a good excuse for what I did, but it’s the only excuse I have. I love you, Tasha. And I love this baby.” She tried to pull away but he increased the pressure on her shoulder. “I won’t ask you to forgive me today. I haven’t done anything to make you trust me again, but I will. I will show you that I mean what I’m saying until you believe me.”

He pulled her against him. She relaxed into his embrace. He leaned down to place a kiss on the top of her head and breathed in her fresh scent.

The moment was fleeting and she jerked away. She turned to face him but didn’t meet his eyes. “Please

leave.”

He stiffened. “Are you and the baby okay?”

She nodded, still avoiding his gaze. “We’re fine.”

“I’ll come back tomorrow to check on you.”

Her eyes snapped up, frustration and desire clearly evident in her glare. “Don’t. It’s over, Jared. It should have been over a long time ago, but now it’s truly over.” She opened the door and pointed. “Just go.”

He walked over to stand before her. When he spoke, his voice was like steel. “It’s not over. You’re carrying my child. I will be a part of this baby’s life and I will fight every day to be a part of yours. I meant what I said — I love you.”

“Love doesn’t mean a thing if you don’t trust me.” She looked into his eyes. “And you don’t trust me. If you did, you wouldn’t have left. If you did, you wouldn’t be ashamed to let your family know. You would have believed me.” Her voice broke on the last words and his heart constricted. He reached out to touch her, but she slapped his hand away. “Go.”

He wanted to argue, to beg her forgiveness, but he wouldn’t. Right now actions would speak louder than words. Regardless of what she said, he would show up tomorrow and every day after that to check on her and the baby. Even if she never forgave him, he’d make sure she understood that he wouldn’t leave her again. He’d show her constantly how sorry he was and how much he

loved her. Without another word, he turned and walked out.

CHAPTER 37

Tasha twisted in the seat in her obstetrician's waiting room. She studied the other occupants in the large waiting area. There were couples smiling and holding hands. Mothers and daughters sitting around talking, even a grandfather sat with his wife and granddaughter. Some women were alone reading magazines or e-readers or playing with cell phones. Of the women who were alone, two were obviously pregnant. She caught the eye of one and they both gave the small awkward smile of strangers caught staring. Before she looked away, Tasha noticed the wedding ring on the other woman's hand.

Her eyes lowered to her naked ring finger. She absently rubbed the spot where a ring would fit. In the two and a half months since Jared returned he'd pushed his way back into her life. He called to check on her daily. He volunteered to set up for the Wednesday night basketball games, and reminded her to leave early on animal adoption day. He popped up at her house at least once a week with a new item for the baby. Last week it was a crib he'd insisted on putting together. Watching him in her developing nursery as he smiled and talked about the baby caused her heart to yearn for him so

badly she'd fled. His determination to show her how much he cared was frustrating, infuriating, and killing her resolve to fall out of love with him.

He didn't pressure her to forgive him as he'd done the day he returned. Instead he said, "I love you" at the end of each phone call, which she refused to repeat. He constantly touched her. The back of her neck, her lower back, her hand. It was maddening. It was heaven.

He shifted in the seat next to her. She looked at him and bit back a smile as he drummed his hands on his knees and tapped his toes. Her appointment was at eight on Friday morning. He'd missed his morning workout to come, which meant he was bursting with restless energy. As endearing as his fidgeting was, she didn't want him there. He'd insisted on coming after she'd mentioned a doctor's appointment. To her surprise, he knew the twenty-week visit was the one where she'd learn the baby's sex. He'd read *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. Her resolution not to love him almost completely dissolved when he'd mentioned that.

The problem with not loving him was twofold: one, she did love him, and two, he was showing her daily he still loved her.

Whenever she felt herself slipping she remembered his accusation, how he left her, and the way he'd rather his family believe he didn't love her than tell them. But it was harder and harder to remember the bad when he was working so hard to show her he cared. She knew he'd told Malcolm and his mother about the baby. Kenyatta

called Angie to tell how Malcolm went ballistic when Jared explained what happened before he left for L.A. The only thing that kept the brothers from fighting was Jared admitting he was wrong and taking responsibility for his actions. Between that, and Malcolm's happiness about his approaching wedding, the brothers remained on speaking terms.

Despite all his efforts, Jared never mentioned the word marriage. He said he loved her, he wanted to be in her life, he wanted to take care of the baby, but that was all. Realizing it was better for her child to have a father in its life, she'd grudgingly accepted his assistance, but she wouldn't let Jared back into her heart. She wouldn't be happy as his girlfriend for the rest of her life. If there was even the smallest chance for her to meet someone else, she couldn't afford to fall back into the easy relationship she'd had with him before.

She turned away from him. He reached over and placed his hand over hers. Heat shot through her and she stiffened. She began to pull her away but he held on. When he rubbed her ring finger the same way she'd done before, her eyes shot up to his. He wasn't looking at her. He stared at her hand.

She gazed at his face, taking in his smooth brown skin, full lips, and shiny black hair. He wasn't in his usual workout uniform, instead wearing a green golf shirt and slacks. He didn't wear the cutoff shirts and basketball shorts everywhere anymore. She liked the more mature look, but missed seeing the tattoo on his upper arm and those marvelous legs. The desire to reach

out and touch him hit her hard and fast. Her breathing quickened and the blood felt thick in her veins.

She closed her eyes and looked away from him in a weak attempt to break the spell. “Are you nervous?”

He continued to hold her hand. “Isn’t it obvious? I can’t sit still.”

She glanced back at him; the corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. He still wasn’t looking at her so she let herself stare longingly at his lips as he spoke. “I hope it’s a boy. I know what to do with a boy. I’d have no clue with a girl. But I guess it would be perfect payback for me to have a girl after the way I treated women.” His eyes rose to meet hers so quickly she wasn’t able to hide her longing. She wanted to look away. She wanted to forget Jared had a chokehold on her heart, but when he smiled, she let out a staggered breath. His smile melted away. Longing and desire swirled in the depths of his chocolate eyes. “Let me back in, Tasha.” His voice was low but passionate. “You know we’re good together, and you want it as much as I do.”

Yes, yes, yes! is what clamored through her heart, but her mind pulled her back. She wanted it all, not part of the story. “What I want hasn’t changed. I still want to get married someday.”

He closed his eyes and sighed before looking back at her. “Tasha, we don’t need a piece of paper to make this real.”

“I want it all, Jared, and I’ll have it one day. It’ll be harder with the baby ... and you around, but one day I

will meet someone else and he'll want to marry me.”

He leaned closer. “But we ...”

“We used to sleep together and got pregnant. Nothing more.” She pulled her hand away and sat back. It hurt to say those words, but they were necessary. She had to be strong for her child.

The waiting room door opened before Jared could answer and Tasha's mother burst into the room. She looked around until she spotted Tasha. The bright smile on her face dimmed a bit when she saw Jared, but it didn't go away as she walked over.

Her mom had gone against her dad's will and insisted on being at her side. It was a small comfort, but her dad's refusal to talk to her still hurt. She'd missed every Sunday dinner since their fight. She was willing to keep up the silent treatment until her child attended college, and hated that she'd be forced to come back to his church because of Kenyatta and Malcolm's wedding.

Inevitably, her mom had learned Jared was the father after he'd returned and made such an effort to be in her life. Although her mom had pressured her into accepting his help — he was the baby's father, after all — it didn't stop her from asking if Kevis was still an option. Tasha knew her mom secretly hoped she and Kevis would work out. Their tentative friendship was working, although he stopped coming to the Rec Commission to play after Jared returned.

Her mom sat in the empty seat next to Tasha. “Angie told me you had your appointment this morning. Why

didn't you call me? This is a big occasion." She didn't acknowledge Jared.

"Mom, I don't need you to come to every visit."

Her mom waved her hand. "Yes, you do. The more I report back to your dad, the closer he is to coming around. Last night he asked if we knew the sex of the baby yet. I think he's looking forward to seeing you at the wedding tomorrow."

"He could have visited me long before Kenyatta and Malcolm's wedding," Tasha said.

Her mom patted her hand. "He wants to see you, baby. He's just stubborn. You know how he feels about appearances before his church. Maybe if you brought a date to the wedding ... "

"A date?" Jared cut in. "Tasha doesn't need a date, she's carrying my child."

Her mom rolled her eyes. "But you two aren't together. She can date whomever she chooses. What about that doctor? Aren't you two still taking on the phone?"

Tasha closed her eyes and groaned. Jared sat up in his seat. "What? You're still seeing the good doctor?"

Tasha shook her head and cut her eyes at her mom before turning to Jared. "No. We're just friends. He just calls to check and see how I'm doing."

Jared scowled. "It's none of his business how you're doing. If you need anything you tell me, not him."

Tasha stiffened. “We’re friends, Jared. Besides, I haven’t said anything about Cassandra living with you.”

He narrowed his eyes. “She stayed with me for a week after I came back from L.A. You know there’s nothing between us.”

“Do I really?” He opened his mouth to reply but she held up a hand. “It doesn’t matter. We are not together.”

His dark eyes flashed fire. “Is he the guy you’re hoping to marry? The reason we can’t be together?”

She rolled her eyes and grunted. “You’re the reason we can’t be together.”

The ultrasound technician came into the waiting area and called Tasha’s name. But she and Jared just glared at each other. His jaw was tense. His eyes clouded with anger. The sparks between them were so thick she was surprised the air didn’t crackle. His eyes dropped briefly to her lips and despite herself, she licked them. It was enough to ignite the desire that always lingered when he was near.

“Come on, Tasha, let’s go back,” her mom said. She jumped up and pulled on Tasha’s arm.

Tasha slowly stood and Jared popped up behind her. They headed toward the ultrasound technician, who held up a hand. “Only one other person can come with you.”

Tasha turned to tell Jared to wait, but he took her elbow and pulled her forward. He turned to her mom with a determined look in his eye. “Wait here.”

Her mom's mouth fell open before she snapped it closed. Tasha expected her to argue. Instead Virginia nodded stiffly and sat back down.

Tasha snatched her elbow out of Jared's hand and turned toward the ultrasound tech, who smiled nervously and looked from Tasha to Jared. "I'm Jane, I'll be doing your ultrasound. You can follow me."

Tasha nodded and followed Jane from the waiting room. She didn't have to turn to know he followed. As always, she sensed him behind her. Jane led them into a small room with a bed and an ultrasound. Pictures of the various stages of pregnancy lined the wall and a few hand drawn pictures, presumably from Jane's children, were on the cabinets.

"If you'll go in the bathroom and empty your bladder. Leave off your bottoms and wrap in one of the hospital gowns when you come back out," Jane said.

Tasha nodded and followed her instructions. When she finished she avoided looking at Jared who stood stiffly beside the door. Jane smiled when she came out and motioned for her to sit on the bed. Anxiety crept up her spine. What if something was wrong with the baby?

Jared rushed over and took her hand. Her eyes met his and he smiled reassuringly. When he squeezed her hand, her anxiety fled. She forgot about their earlier argument and all of the reasons why she shouldn't love him. If her mom had insisted on coming back, she would have wished Jared were there instead.

They didn't speak as Jane squeezed the cold jelly on Tasha's slightly rounded stomach. She tensed when Jane put the ultrasound on her belly. A relieved sigh rushed out of her lungs when the sound of the heartbeat filled the room.

Jared looked around. "What's that?"

Jane smiled. "Your baby's heartbeat."

A goofy grin split his face. He looked at Tasha's stomach in wonder before meeting her eyes. "You hear that?"

She smiled. "I do."

He squeezed her hand again and looked at the screen. "What's that?"

Jane explained what she looked for on the screen, how she checked the baby's skeletal system and took measurements, and the blood flow in the heart. Jared was enraptured and asked a lot of questions. Jane smiled and answered his questions in stride. Tasha's heart melted with each one of Jared's grins, gasps of wonder, and swellings of pride.

Jane looked at them both with a grin. "Are you ready to know what you're having?"

Tasha gulped. "I guess so."

Jane turned to the screen and pointed. "It's a girl!"

Happiness and love swelled within her. A girl. Her mom would be disappointed that she'd have to wait on a

grandson, but she would easily get over it. Tasha hadn't cared either way, as long as she was healthy.

Jared clutched her hand and she turned to him. "She'll be as beautiful as her mother," he said. He leaned over to kiss her forehead.

Tasha bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. She wanted too much, she wanted him too much. She pulled away and turned to Jane. "Does everything look okay?" She took her hand from Jared's. His body stiffened beside her, but she didn't look his way. She was getting sucked into feeling this was a real relationship when it wasn't.

"She looks beautiful," Jane said. She printed out the pictures and made notes on her chart. Jared reached over to touch Tasha's shoulder but she shifted away. Jane looked back at them oblivious to the tension. "I'll take your chart to the nurse while you get dressed, then come back and take you out for your regular visit."

Tasha smiled and nodded at Jane. "That sounds great, thanks."

When Jane walked out, Tasha began to slide off the table but Jared moved to stand in front of her. He placed his hand on the ends of the bed, making it impossible for her to get up. "What's wrong? I thought you'd be happy to find out it's a girl."

She avoided his gaze. "I am happy."

"Then why did you pull away from me? I'm ecstatic and you're stiff." He grinned at her. "We're having a girl."

She sighed and met his eyes. “No, I’m having a girl.”

His smile twisted into a scowl. “Tasha, we are in this together.”

“No, we’re not. We aren’t together and we won’t be together.”

“That’s because you won’t let me back in. What else do you want me to do? I’ve apologized. I’ve told you over and over how much I love you. I’ve tried to learn everything I can about babies so I can help when she’s here.” He straightened and pulled the golf shirt from his pants. “Hell, I’m even dressing like a choir boy to prove I’m ready to be with you. But you keep pushing me away.”

“I never asked you to change.”

“I know. I want to change. I’m doing all of this because I want you to forgive me and take me back. Shit, Tasha, I’m not this guy. I don’t *chase* women and beg them to come back, but I’m willing to do that for you. I know I messed up. I know I didn’t believe you when I should have, but can’t you see how much I regret that? Can’t you see how much I love you?”

“You don’t love me enough, Jared.”

He looked at her as if she’d sprouted another head. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You want a relationship on your terms. You don’t want to step out of *your* comfort zone. I have to compromise. I have to give up my wish to get married. I’ll have to face my parents’ disapproval about our

relationship every Sunday. I'll have to trust that your love, which is so fickle, will be strong enough to keep you with me without a commitment." She pounded her chest with each statement. Tears burned the back of her eyes, and for the first time she was afraid she would actually spill them in front of him.

He scowled and put his hands back on the ends of the bed. "Do you think marriage is going to make me more committed to you? Married people cheat, get divorced, and leave. I know married guys who are far less committed to their wives than I am to you. I can't jump off the deep end and change who I am in the blink of an eye. I'm offering you commitment, love, and security for as long as we want it."

"But I want it forever."

He spun away. "A piece of paper doesn't equal forever, dammit!" He slammed his hand on the counter.

She slid off the table. "It's more than a piece of paper, Jared."

"Maybe to you, but not to me."

She lifted her chin. "And that's why we can't be together."

He clenched his jaw, rubbed his hand over his face, and took a deep breath. "I'll let your mom finish this visit with you."

Her throat constricted. Afraid to speak without crying she nodded. He looked at her once more before stalking out.

CHAPTER 38

“Jared, you ain’t finished with that tie yet?”

Jared turned from the mirror in the church basement and faced his brother. Malcolm looked comfortable and polished in his traditional tuxedo. Devin and Uncle Bruce were sitting on a couch in a corner laughing, while Mr. Carter sat nearby smiling. They were all fully dressed, while Jared was still trying to figure out the intricacies of a bowtie.

Malcolm had the same goofy grin on his face he’d sported when Jared had picked him up for the bachelor party the night before. Surprisingly, he’d enjoyed himself just sitting at a bar laughing and drinking with Malcolm, Devin, Uncle Bruce, and even Mr. Carter. Months ago, he would have bemoaned the lack of naked women involved. Now, the only woman he wanted to see naked asked for something he wasn’t sure he could give.

Jared scowled at Malcolm. “Who knows how to tie a damn bowtie?”

Malcolm laughed and walked over. “Most men who wear more than workout clothes every day.” He pushed Jared’s hands out of the way and took over.

“You would pick a bowtie instead of a regular tie. I know how to tie that,” he grumbled.

Malcolm shrugged. “Kenyatta and I wanted a simple and straightforward wedding. No frills, no extras. A traditional tux is as simple as you can get.” Malcolm finished and stepped back smiling.

Jared rolled his eyes. “Are you gonna grin like that all day? It’s sickening.” He turned back to the mirror. The tie was perfect, but he still tugged at it.

Malcolm laughed and sat on the arm of the couch next to the mirror. “Why shouldn’t I smile all day? I’m finally marrying the woman I love. After two years of waiting, I’m not ashamed to be happy.”

Jared looked over to make sure the other guys weren’t listening before turning to face Malcolm. “Why get married? Why does the piece of paper make what you two have real? I mean, you were perfect before and committed to each other. Marriage doesn’t change that.”

Malcolm rubbed his goatee and considered Jared. “I know marriage doesn’t mean much to you, but it does to me. I saw what Mom and Dad had before he got all messed up, and I want that. Kenyatta does too. She’s always wanted the same type of relationship her parents have.”

Jared shook his head. “But you can have that without being married. You can still be committed to each other without going through the pomp and circumstance of a wedding.”

“You could, but it’s more than that. When I almost lost Kenyatta, I knew I wanted to be with her forever. I can tell her every day, but I want to make it official. I want to stand before God, our family, and friends, and tell her I love her and will be there forever. No matter what comes our way, I want the world to know I’m with her until the end. I want to introduce her as my wife, not just my girl or my lady.” Malcolm stood and continued to grin. “I know it sounds crazy to you, bruh, but that’s just me. You’ll just have to permanently revoke my player card.” Malcolm hit Jared’s arm and walked over to join the rest of the guys.

Jared watched Malcolm as he joined the conversation with Devin and Uncle Bruce. Malcolm laughed and joked around a lot more. Before Kenyatta, it was always work; now he seemed happier, freer. There wasn’t a hint of anxiety or stress in his stance.

Jared looked at himself in the mirror. His shoulders were stiff. His jaw clenched. There was tension around his eyes. The only time he’d felt as relaxed and comfortable in life as Malcolm appeared was when he was with Tasha. She eased his fears about success, she made his burdens more bearable, she made his days brighter. He’d been tense and edgy since they’d parted ways. Even before her, he’d never been completely relaxed. It was always some sort of hustle: hustling to get client, hustling to start his line of food products, hustling to avoid relationships. That was what his life would go back to without Tasha.

He imagined life without her and his neck tightened. She deserved to have it all: husband, kids, the whole nine. But could he give her everything? He didn't know if he was the type of man who could make her happy forever. She wanted the perfect life he'd never believed existed. Except it had for the months they were together.

He wanted that perfect life when he was with her. He wanted the sweet, honest, dependable woman who'd be there for him at the end of the day. He wanted to take care of her and make things easier when her job brought her down. That was why he couldn't give her up — he had the perfect life with her, and he wanted it back.

Jared's hands got clammy and his heart beat erratically. *Damn, I can't really be considering this.*

"Jared, you all right? You look like you've seen a ghost," Devin said from across the room.

Jared cleared his throat and wiped the sweat from his brow. "I'm good," he said in a tight voice.

Malcolm and Uncle Bruce both looked over. He would have taken pleasure that the smile finally left Malcolm's face when their eyes met, but Tasha's dad came downstairs. Jared recognized the stern jaw and commanding posture from the pictures in Tasha's house. Reverend Smith glanced briefly at Jared before going over to Malcolm.

"I hope you're ready, son. The ladies have arrived and we'll be starting soon."

Malcolm's smile returned full force. "I've been ready for years, Reverend Smith."

Jared would have rolled his eyes if he weren't so shaken by the realization that he wanted to marry Tasha.

Reverend Smith laughed and patted Malcolm's shoulder. "That's what I like to hear. Who's your best man? I'd like to go over some things before the wedding."

Malcolm called Jared over. Reverend Smith frowned at Jared before turning back to Malcolm with a smile. Jared barely heard the instructions, but it didn't matter. Stand beside Malcolm, hand him the ring, walk down the aisle behind him and Kenyatta. It was pretty straightforward. The hard part would be not rushing over to Tasha the moment he saw her and telling her he thought he could handle marriage. They could elope, go somewhere just the two of them, and say simple vows. No big deal, no big fuss.

But he knew she'd want the church wedding with their family and friends surrounding them. A band, a large reception, and all the trimmings. He cleared his throat and tugged at his bowtie. He'd have to do it. Eloping would be her caving in to his terms again.

"Did you have something to add, Jared?" Devin asked.

Jared looked up. Everyone stared at him. He shook his head and wiped his hands on his pants. "Nah, just something in my throat. Is that all?"

Reverend Smith nodded. “That’s all for the wedding, but I would like to have a word with you.”

Jared looked at Malcolm, who gave him a warning look. They hadn’t discussed Tasha’s pregnancy as part of the pre-wedding peace agreement. It would have been too much to ask for the wedding day to go by without it coming up.

“Sure, where do you want to talk?”

Reverend Smith held up his hand. “There’s no need to sneak off for this discussion. We all know that my youngest daughter is ... pregnant with your child.”

Devin and Uncle Bruce made faces and turned away. Mr. Carter sighed and sat on the couch. Malcolm didn’t move.

Jared nodded. “She is.”

“And we all know you two aren’t together. I’ve heard about you, and I know you’re not the type to make an honest woman out of her. So I’m asking you to step aside and let her be happy.”

Jared’s eyebrows shot together. “Excuse me?”

“It’ll be harder for her to find a husband with a baby, but times have changed and since it’s just one child it’s still possible for her to be happy. If you cared a little, step aside.”

“But sir ... ”

Reverend Smith raised a hand. “I found the number of the guy who was interested in Tasha. He knows she’s

pregnant and still offered to help. I believe he can make her happy, so I invited him to the wedding. Let's make this day go smoothly, okay? No antics, no, as you kids say, *blocking*. Let her be happy."

Jared's eyes narrowed. Hitting the reverend before the wedding could only delay things by a half hour tops. "I can make her happy."

Reverend Smith shook his head. "Please, she's not here to see your dramatics. Just step aside." He turned to Malcolm and smiled. "We'll use the back stairs to go up so we don't see the ladies." He turned and strolled toward the stairs.

Jared pointed and started after him, but Malcolm stopped him with a hand to the chest. "Not today, man."

"But he just told me to step aside and let another man have Tasha and my baby." Jared tried to push away but Malcolm pressed hard.

"Jared, this isn't a competition. It's real life. If she'd be happier with someone else ... "

"She loves me, she'd be happier with me."

Malcolm rolled his eyes. "Don't ruin this day, okay? Just let it go. You can fight this out later."

Devin stood and walked over. "It's time to go up."

Jared and Malcolm stared at each other. He wanted to fight this battle now. He wanted everyone to know he was the right choice for Tasha. But Malcolm was right, today wasn't the day. He nodded stiffly and Malcolm relaxed. Jared tried to control his breathing as Malcolm,

Devin, and Mr. Carter followed Reverend Smith up the stairs.

Uncle Bruce came over. He narrowed his eyes and stared at Jared. “Do you love her?”

He straightened his shoulders and looked his uncle in the eye. “I do.”

Uncle Bruce smiled. “Then to hell with them. Make all the ruckus you want today, that’s what family does — ruin other people’s occasions.” He winked before turning to go up the stairs.

Jared followed slowly. He appreciated Uncle Bruce’s advice, but he wouldn’t ruin Malcolm’s day. He’d pull Tasha to the side, explain how he felt, and covertly work to keep this guy her dad mentioned — he’d bet money it was the good doctor — away from her.

All that was shot to hell when he entered the sanctuary. Tasha stood at the back of the church. Her tan skin glowed in the silver dress and her full lips were curved into a smile. His heart lightened and his crotch tightened. His gaze traveled over her still thin figure, lingering on her stomach. The roundness of her pregnancy was only slightly visible beneath the dress. Their child was there. His mouth curved into the same goofy grin Malcolm had worn all day.

The doors of the sanctuary opened and Jared’s grin fell as Dr. Kevis Flynn entered. If Tasha was surprised to see him, she didn’t show it. They shook hands, and Kevis leaned over to kiss her cheek. White-hot jealousy shot

through Jared. He took a step forward, but Malcolm grabbed his arm.

He turned to Malcolm who shook his head. Pushing back the need to rip every appendage from the good doctor's body he stepped back. Tasha turned away from Kevis and caught his eye. Her lips parted and her eyes softened for the briefest second before she looked away.

Almost instantly, she was moving to the side and the bridal recession music began to play. He noticed nothing as the wedding party entered. He kept his eyes on Tasha. She'd sat beside Kevis. He willed her to look at him, but she avoided his gaze. She looked at everything except him. He wanted her to see the look in his eyes, to see he wanted the same things she wanted. He wanted everyone to know he loved her.

Reverend Smith began to talk. The wedding had started. He looked at Malcolm and Kenyatta. They looked as if it were only the two of them in the church. Love and happiness shone in both of their eyes. He looked back at Tasha and his heart constricted when their eyes met. He would marry her. Today if she wanted. He mouthed the words *I love you* and hoped she would do the same.

Instead, she closed her eyes and for the first time since he'd known her, he saw tears go down her face. She stood and turned to walk out. Kevis looked between her and him before standing too.

Without thinking, Jared did the first thing that came to his mind.

“Stop!” he called out.

• • •

Tasha froze at the door. The murmurs and rustling of the people in the church proved her imagination wasn't running wild. Turning slowly, she faced the front of the church. Her eyes met Jared's, hers questioning, his pleading.

“Are you stopping my wedding?” Kenyatta screeched.

Jared looked between Kenyatta and Malcolm. “No.”

“Then why did you yell stop?” Malcolm said, scowling.

Jared turned back to Tasha. “Tasha, don't leave. Please, don't leave.”

She looked around the church. Everyone looked eagerly between her and Jared. It was too much. The entire day had been too much. Seeing him at the altar, feeling his gaze on her so keenly it could've been a caress. The pain of knowing it would never be them at the altar was worse than she could imagine.

“No, you stop, Jared. This is your brother's wedding. Please stop the games.” She turned to leave.

“No more games. Tasha, I love you. Do you hear me? I love you and I don't care if everyone hears it.”

She turned back. He moved away and came to the front of the aisle. “You were right. I wanted our relationship on my terms. I was uncomfortable with

people knowing how I felt, so I only shared my feelings with you. I was ashamed to let people know that I love you more than anything. I didn't know how to trust what I felt. I didn't know how to trust in general, and because of that, I hurt you. I am sorry, and I'll show you that I'm sorry for the rest of my life."

"But it's not enough," she said. "I want more than that."

He walked toward her. "I want more than that too. Marry me, Tasha." She staggered and he rushed forward. "Marry me today. Be my wife, let me take care of you, our child ... our children. Please, Tasha, please marry me."

Warmth spread from the tips of her toes to the roots of her hair. Tears welled in her eyes and for the first time she didn't care who saw her crying. Jared Patterson had proposed to her in the most dramatic fashion possible, and she was ecstatic.

He reached for her, but she hesitated. "But you said marriage doesn't matter."

"It matters when you realize you've waited forever for your soul mate."

Unwilling to fight her feelings, Tasha flung herself into his arms. His lips came down on hers and she clung tighter. He kissed his way to her ear and repeating over and over that he loved her. She didn't know how long they stood there, before the sound of people clapping broke through her haze.

Jared pulled away but held her hand. He rushed back down the aisle and pulled her along with him. He turned to Kenyatta. "I'm sorry."

Kenyatta grinned and shook her head. "I can't believe it."

He pulled Tasha to his side and joy fluttered through her.

Jared looked at her dad. "Reverend Smith, I know we'll need a license later, but will you marry us after you marry them?"

Tasha reluctantly met her father's gaze and was surprised to see satisfaction in his eyes. They hadn't spoken in weeks, but apparently the tidy ending to her pregnancy pleased him. It hurt a little to know that's what it took for him to accept her, but her happiness was too great to make room for pain.

Her dad smiled. "If you promise no more outbursts." There was laughter from the pews and her dad's smile broadened.

Jared looked back at her. "Is this okay? I know you probably had your perfect wedding planned out."

Tasha looked at her sister, standing as a bridesmaid, smiling at her. Her mom sitting in the front pew with tears in her eyes. Her dad at the pulpit with a self-satisfied look. Then she looked at Jared, smiling at her with love and affection.

"This is the perfect wedding."

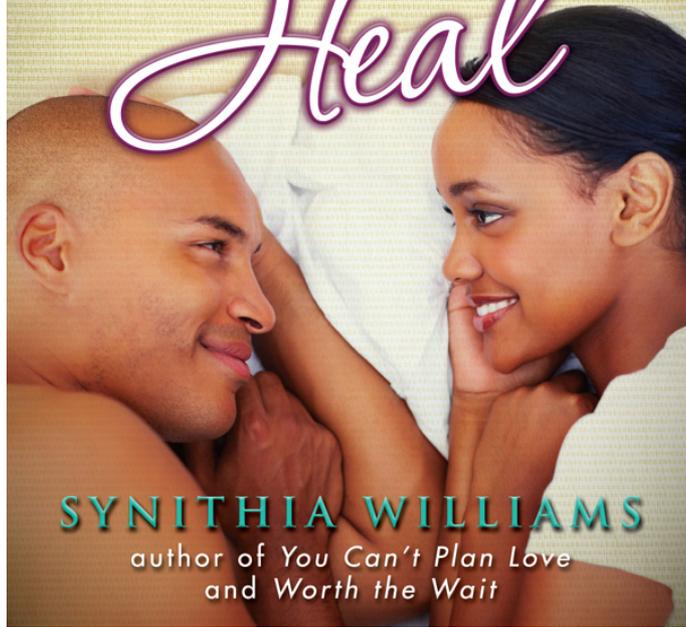
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Synithia Williams has loved romance novels since reading her first one at the age of 13. It was only natural that she would begin penning her own romances soon after. It wasn't until 2010 that she began to actively pursue her publishing dreams. Her first novel, *You Can't Plan Love* was published by Crimson Romance in 2012. When she isn't writing, this Green Queen, as dubbed by South Carolina's State Newspaper, works to improve air and water quality, while balancing the needs of her husband and two sons. You can keep up with Synithia by visiting her website, www.synithiawilliams.com, where she blogs about writing, life and relationships, on Facebook (www.facebook.com/synithiarwilliams) or on Twitter @synithiaw.

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A Heart to Heal



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About the Author

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Chapter 1

“Well, it’s not what you’re used to, but it’s as good as you’ll get.”

Shayla Monroe ignored her mom’s comment and dropped a box of her belongings on the old hardwood floor. If there was one thing she was sure of, it was that Marcella Monroe wanted her to know how lucky she was to have any place to stay. She suppressed a groan and took in her surroundings. As if coming home with a tarnished reputation wasn’t bad enough, she had to live here. The tiny house barely knocked on the door of 1,000 square feet and consisted of a living area, small kitchen, one bedroom, and a bathroom with a tub.

No shower. Just a tub.

It was a far cry from the spacious apartment she’d had. Atlanta was a large city, but when you created a scandal, it wasn’t large enough. Shaking aside the regret she constantly lived with, she walked over and took the box her mom was carrying and placed it on the floor.

She cringed after dusting her hands on her jeans. They were once the epitome of style, now they were reduced to a dust rag.

“The house is fine, Mom. I’m glad Mr. Porter was willing to let me rent it.”

The frown line between her mom’s eyebrows deepened, blending in with the other worry lines on her tan skin. “Yes, well, he did it as a favor to me. Remember that before you invite anyone over.”

Shayla bit the inside of her cheek. Her plan was to hide out here for a few weeks, not throw a party. But it would be a waste of breath to say that out loud. “I won’t have company.”

Her mom lifted one large shoulder as if what Shayla said didn’t matter. “Just remember, the house is owned by a church deacon.” Marcella turned away. “Did you see the kitchen?”

She didn’t answer because her mother’s question didn’t require a response. They both knew she’d walked through the house with Mr. Porter the day before. His acidic tone and accusing eyes were just as scorching as they’d been when she was in high school. He was one of the many people she’d hoped to never see again when she left Helena, South Carolina after high school. Instead, she had to return home disgraced and needing help from those who weren’t happy to give it.

Her mom shuffled through the small kitchen and adjoining hall into Shayla’s bedroom. “If you paint this room a lighter color, it’ll brighten things up. Just be sure to get the okay from Mr. Porter first.”

Shayla walked from the living area into the connected bedroom. Marcella spared her a fleeting glance

before turning away. She ignored the pain. Her mom hadn't made eye contact with her since she wore pigtails.

Shayla walked over to the king bed and ran her hand along the cream and gold bedspread. The bed took up most of the small room, but she refused to give up all her luxuries. With a defiant stare at her mom's averted face she said, "I think I'll paint the walls red."

Marcella scowled, but didn't rise to the bait. "On second thought, I'll go to the hardware store later and pick up some paint swatches. If Mr. Porter agrees to one, your brother can paint."

"I can paint my own room."

"Don't trouble yourself, Kenny can do it."

Shayla sighed and rolled her eyes. "Kenny has classes. I can do it. It'll keep me busy until I find a job."

Marcella's gaze skirted to her for a second. "Hmmm, well maybe it is a good idea for you to stay occupied."

Shayla's lips pressed into a thin line. After a lifetime of her mom's accusatory tone it still grated her nerves. There would be a huge scarlet letter on her chest if her mom, family, and neighbors had their way. She wasn't the first person to have an affair end badly — okay, horribly — and she wouldn't be the last. No need to waste her breath trying to explain the truth behind the situation. The good folks of Helena always preferred thinking the worst about her.

Hopefully someone else in town would cause a scandal and everyone would forget about the harlot in

their midst. Or she'd find a job in Columbia or Charlotte and hightail her ass out of here as soon as possible.

"Yo, mama, where ya'll at!" Her brother's voice boomed through the small house.

Her mom smiled as she hurried out of Shayla's bedroom into the living room. Shayla followed, and leaned against the connecting door to watch her brother drag her luggage in the house. Kenny was twenty-nine, six years younger than her and still living at home. He'd been going to the local technical college for the past six years with no major or graduation date in sight. As long as he attempted school her mom let him stay rent free. Probably the reason he stayed in school.

His beefy shoulders bunched and he lifted her bags as if they weighed nothing. "Where you want this stuff to go, Shay?"

She pointed over her shoulder. "In the bedroom."

Kenny tipped his bald head up in answer just as his best friend Bobby slithered through the front door. He'd trailed her brother everywhere since grade school.

"Alright, let me check out where I'll be staying." Bobby said rubbing his thin hands together.

She sucked her teeth and glared at Bobby. He'd been an annoying horny teenager that had grown into an annoying horny adult. While most people in town talked about her behind her back; the day before Bobby brought up the reason for her flight from Atlanta, then outright propositioned her in her mom's kitchen. He'd laughed

when she'd slapped his face and stormed out. There was no need to tell anyone what a jerk he'd been. Her mom would say she deserved it, and Kenny shrugged off his friend's behavior as teasing the way he shrugged off most things.

Shayla glared at Bobby. "I never invited you into my home."

His beady eyed gaze traveled over her. "Not yet."

Kenny shoved a bag at Bobby. "Quit playing, man. C'mon and help me put this stuff up."

Shayla stepped back as they passed, but not fast enough to prevent Bobby from "accidentally" brushing against her breasts. When she glared at him, he smirked. Her face flushed as anger and humiliation warred within her. Bobby was an ass, but his juvenile action was something she'd dealt with longer than she could remember. She'd come to accept that her figure presented an open invitation for touches from creeps like him.

She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. It was time to get everyone out of her space. "Is that everything?"

Her brother put the bags on the floor. "Yeah, that's it. Do you need us to do anything else?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks."

"Cool, then we're out. C'mon Bobby."

Bobby stopped in front of Shayla and eyed her from head to toe. "You sure you don't need me to work on your

pipes?”

She held up her hand. “That line is older than both of us. Get out of my face.”

Kenny burst out laughing. Bobby looked at Kenny before turning back to her and shrugging. “Like it really takes more than an old line to hook up with you.”

She balled her fist and took a step forward. Bobby’s smirk fell and he rushed out the door. Kenny gave her an apologetic look, then followed.

Marcella walked to the door. “Don’t get mad at Bobby. Until you clean up your act, you’ll only get more taunts like that.”

Shayla’s shoulders stiffened. “That was uncalled for.”

Her mom raised an eyebrow as she looked over Shayla’s jeans and tank top. “Maybe if you didn’t walk around with all of your stuff out.”

Shayla bit her tongue and counted to three. This was her mother and she wouldn’t curse her out. “What I’m wearing is fine. Bobby is just an ass ... I mean, jerk.”

Her mom lifted a shoulder. “I’m just trying to give you some advice. But you’re just like your daddy. Always thinking you’re right, but never wanting to do what’s right.” Her eyes focused on Shayla’s forehead. “You need anything else?”

She was surprised it had taken this long before her mom compared her to her absent father. Her return

home was further proof to her mother that she was as big of a screw up as her father.

Shayla shook her head. “No, I’m going to start unpacking.”

Marcella hurried out the door and Shayla followed. “Well, if you don’t need any help, I’ll head home.” She stopped on the front porch. “I’m frying chicken for dinner. Are you coming over to eat?”

“I’ve got so much to do here. I’ll just microwave something.”

Her mom nodded. “Do what you want. I’ll leave a plate on the stove if you change your mind.”

Shayla didn’t comment and watched her mom go down the porch steps to her car. Only four houses separated them and her mom still drove the distance. She went back into the house and leaned against the door, facing the inside. Every room connected to the other and visible from the front door. Nowhere to hide.

She tapped her hand on her leg. One stupid decision and her career in public relations, stylish lifestyle, and hopes for the future were all down the drain. Her other hand came up to touch the small gold heart charm she wore around her neck, a gift to herself. It was supposed to be a reminder that self-love was important. Instead it reminded her that she had a long way to go to achieve that goal. With so many regrets, it was hard to find something worth liking, much less loving.

With a quick shake of her head she pushed away from the door. She had to get out before she succumbed to the pity party lurking in her subconscious. If she sat in the confined space Mr. Porter called a house, she'd lose her mind. Grabbing a bag off the floor of her bedroom, she rummaged through it until she found a pair of running shorts and a sports bra. In less than five minutes she was changed and out of her front door, jogging down the street.

The warmth of an early September afternoon caressed her skin. Neighbors sat on porches and kids tossed a football in the street. The hometown scene should have comforted her. Instead it made her anxious as she felt the gazes of her neighbors watching her run. Maybe it was narcissistic, but she guessed they were clucking their tongues about her. Her Aunt Linda and her mom's neighbor sat on her mom's porch. She smiled and they waved before huddling together to whisper behind their hands. This scene was repeated on her way out of the neighborhood. Fake smiles and hushed conversations. In the years since she'd left nothing had changed. The citizens of this small town loved a story, and unfortunately her shameful homecoming was the most recent one.

The tension didn't leave her shoulders until she was out of her neighborhood and passing through Hangman's Woods, a nature preserve in the outskirts of town with biking and hiking trails. Bittersweet memories assailed her as she passed through the gravel parking lot and into the entrance of the woods. The familiar comfort

that came from the muffled sounds of her feet falling along the path, the rustle of the wind in trees, and birds chirping erased the last vestiges of anxiety from earlier. It was funny that after avoiding Helena for all of her adult life, the comfort she got from these woods was still there.

The park was the one place she'd found shelter and solitude growing up. The last time she'd come here was right after graduation, heady from the excitement of the coming freedom of leaving behind everyone and everything in Helena that boxed her in. No one looked for her there that night. Only one person knew about her hiding place, and he'd stopped looking for her after she'd fucked up their relationship in true Monroe fashion.

As if the memory pulled her, she continued toward the path she'd been on that night. She should have learned her lesson about bad men and dramatic relationships after her disastrous screw up in high school, but no matter what, she could be counted on to fall for a loser. Former Atlanta councilman, Mark Reed, was the last in a line of bad choices.

It was time to take a break from men and reevaluate the belief that she'd held any type of power in her relationships. Psychologists probably had a name for whatever attracted to her to sorry men. Fool for a nice smile-itis or something similar.

With a determined huff she picked up the pace. When she rounded a bend her steps faltered. Tripping over her feet she fell onto her knees. This could not be

happening. It was too cliché for the one person she hoped to avoid during her short stint in town to be in the once place she sought refuge. But sure enough, Devin Jones, the guy she'd loved with all of her teenage heart, stared at her as if she were an apparition.

She'd avoided seeing him after graduation, then to her utter embarrassment, had to face his disapproving stare twice over the past year. Once at a party when she'd been with Mark, and then at a reception celebrating the marriage of her best friend Tasha Smith to his best friend Jared Patterson. They'd avoided each other during the entire party. His dislike still hurt after all these years, but it wasn't as if she didn't deserve it.

The man looked better every time she saw him. Golden skin over high cheekbones, a straight nose and a full lower lip that used to send her teenage hormones into overdrive. He'd always been tall and thin, but now his body was all man. Wide shoulders, sinewy arms and legs shown off to perfection in an Under Armor running shirt and basketball shorts. Heat from embarrassment and desire ran through her body.

She quickly tried to stand. A sharp pain shot through her ankle. With a wince, she fell back. Devin shook his head as if to clear it before rushing over to her side.

“Shayla, are you okay?” His long fingers gently gripped her ankle.

She nodded and tried to ignore pleasure vibrating through her body just from his touch. “Just embarrassed.

I must have tripped on something.”

He looked at the clear trail before one corner of his mouth lifted. “Those leaves can be pretty cumbersome.”

Her breath rushed out in a nervous laugh. “Maybe you can sign my petition to have something done about the hazardous leaves in Hangman’s Woods.”

Eyes the color of whisky, smoky brown with golden tones, met hers. Something stirred in their depths before he cleared his throat and looked at her ankle.

He pressed gently and she sucked in a breath. “I don’t think it’s that bad.”

“My ankle?”

He shook his head. “No, the leaves.” He smiled at her. It was the first friendly smile she’d gotten since returning home and warmth filled her chest. “Your ankle, on the other hand, is swelling.”

She frowned. “Really?” She tried to pull her leg away but he increased the pressure. His touch was firm but gentle. Desire rippled through her as she imagined him pinning her in other ways.

“Really.” His hand flexed before slightly moving up her leg.

She squirmed and bit the inside of her cheek. They were close enough that she could see his pulse jumping at the base of his neck and she watched his Adam’s apple move enticingly as he swallowed.

He stood briskly and held out a hand. "I'll take you to my office and wrap it up."

"There's no need for that. I don't live far from here."

He shook his head. "By the time you limp home your ankle will be in worse shape."

"I don't want to inconvenience you."

"Don't be foolish. You're hurt." He reached down, placed his hands beneath her arms and lifted her. The movement was so swift her head swam. She placed her hands on his chest to balance herself. His thumbs brushed the undersides of her breasts, making her nipples harden against his chest. It would be so easy to lean closer, wrap her arms around his shoulders. But this was Devin, the last man who would welcome her flirtation. And didn't she just vow to take a break from men? It was one thing to walk into a relationship not knowing the man would break your heart. Completely self destructive when you knew the man had the power to crush you.

As if sensing danger, he quickly stepped back and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Can you walk?"

She took a small step and grimaced. "Yeah."

With a sigh he lifted her into his arms. "It'll be faster if I carry you."

Her heart went into overdrive. He smelled good, a mixture of sweat and him that made her want to bury her face in the crook of his neck. If he had any clue how much he affected her, he'd drop her on the spot.

Despite her internal warning, she went with her natural instincts and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “And more fun.”

He glared at her. “Save your flirtations for someone else. I’m only helping because I’m a doctor and can’t leave you limping in the woods.”

Once again her natural inclination was self-destructive. How could she forget that Devin Jones hated her?

Chapter 2

Devin ran through every curse word he knew as he carried Shayla to his truck. He'd known she was back in town. Half his patients were buzzing about what happened to her in Atlanta and were eager to fill him in. Helena was small, so he'd mentally prepared himself to see her. He'd expected it to be at the grocery store, if she came with her mom to a doctor's appointment, or at some community event. He'd even imagined seeing her in Columbia now that her friend Tasha was married to his friend Jared. For each of those scenarios he'd thought out how he would react. How he would treat her with the cool indifference his best friend Malcolm had down to a science. He would participate in any necessary small talk, comment on the weather, and move along as if she wasn't the woman who'd shredded his heart years ago.

But for all that preparation, he hadn't come up with a response to seeing her trip over her own feet after one glance at him. His concern pushed aside all thoughts of acting indifferent. Not surprising. He could never stay indifferent when it came to Shayla.

When they reached his truck, he unceremoniously dumped her in the passenger seat and slammed the door.

He should've let her limp home, but as a doctor he couldn't leave her injured in the middle of the trail. Plus, Hangman's Woods wasn't the safe place it had been in the nineties. With dusk approaching, most hikers left as unruly teens and other folks with ill intentions began hanging along the trails.

He jumped into the driver's seat and started the engine. "You shouldn't be running in the woods this late in the day," he said as he drove out of the lot.

She crossed her arms under her breasts, pushing the swells higher above her sports bra. He gripped the steering wheel and jerked his eyes away. *Focus on the road.*

"I've wandered those trails too many times to count. I won't get lost," she said.

"I know, but you haven't been here in years. Once it gets dark all types of whack jobs start hanging there. Hikers don't even camp anymore after a family was robbed two years ago."

"Oh," she said. "I'll remember that next time."

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Don't make a next time. Just stay off the trails close to dusk. I'd hate for you to get hurt."

Her lips twisted into a sardonic smile. "I'm surprised you care."

He sighed. "I've always cared, Shayla. I stopped offering my advice because you never listened."

“You’re the only person I’ve ever listened to,” she murmured.

He thought back to Homecoming and the night she’d broken his heart. “You didn’t always listen.”

She stiffened before turning to look out the window. It was a low blow, and hurts from the past weren’t worth stirring up, but he needed to remind them both why they’d never worked out.

“You know, high school was years ago, can we just say we were young and dumb and move on?” she said still facing the window.

He relaxed his hands on the wheel. “Agreed.”

They rode in silence the remaining minutes it took for him to drive to his office. It was a red brick building across from the small county hospital. He pulled into the side parking lot then helped Shayla out of the truck.

“You really bought a truck. You always said you would. It’s nice,” she said.

Taken aback that she remembered, he could only mumble his thanks. That was the thing about Shayla, she remembered everything. He couldn’t count the number of times he would mention something he wanted to do and somehow she’d make it happen. Back in high school she’d surprise him with the latest CD he wanted, or do something simple like show up with a can of pineapple just because she knew it was his favorite. She was both caring and selfish. A paradox he never could understand.

When he placed her arm around his shoulder, her intoxicating scent floated over him, reminding him of cinnamon. He closed his eyes briefly before helping her limp toward the side entrance.

He pulled the keys from his pocket and unlocked the door. They didn't speak as he helped her through the darkened interior toward an exam room. He unwrapped her arm from his shoulder so she could go into the room first. Her eyes met his and his throat constricted. Shayla Monroe had the looks and body that would fit perfectly in any rap video. Exotic dark eyes that slanted at the ends, full breasts and a butt that even the most devout man couldn't help but imagine palming. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail. When they were younger she'd worn the thick tresses loose, where they curled around her shoulders. He used to love the way it would brush his face when she braided his hair in high school.

Shayla shifted and he blinked. Damn, not even ten minutes in her company and he was reduced to staring. Without a word, he lifted her onto the exam table. He spun away to flip on a light and get a bandage from one of the cabinets.

He brought the bandage to the table and lifted her ankle. It had swollen slightly over her shoe. He slipped off her sneaker and the sock and gently applied pressure to her ankle. She stiffened but didn't jerk away. He moved her foot from side to side then up and down. Satisfied it wasn't broken; he placed it back on the table.

“You’ll live. I doubt it’s even sprained. I’ll wrap it and you’ll need to take it easy for a few days.” He said. When he met her eyes she was smiling with her head cocked to the side. “What?”

“I can’t believe you’re a doctor. I mean, I knew that was your plan, but to actually see you here with your own practice, taking care of me. It’s great. I’m proud of you.”

Tiny pinpricks of heat crept up his cheeks and he looked away. He was used to receiving praise for being the only black doctor in their small town, but it affected him more coming from Shayla.

He began to deftly wrap her ankle with the bandage. “I’m fortunate to do something I love.” He lifted his chin in her direction. “What about you? Why are you back in Helena? If memory serves me correctly, you were never coming back to this place.”

Her eyes became guarded as she stiffened. “You know why I’m back.”

He finished with her ankle before turning to lean his back against the exam table. “I know why people say you’re back. I want you to tell me the real reason.”

“So you can lecture me?”

“No,” he said. He didn’t need to know the real reason. It didn’t matter what she did with her life. He pushed away from the table. “I was just making conversation. Forget it.” He said walking to the door.

“I lost my job ... for sleeping with a client.”

He paused. He kept his back to her as he lowered his eyes. He didn't want to know. The idea of Shayla in another man's bed caused feelings he didn't want to explore to swell in his chest. And jealousy over her relationships was a waste of time.

He turned back to her. "It's none of my business."

She swung her legs to the side of the table.

"Apparently it's everyone's business. You've heard the rumors, so you might as well hear the entire story. Yes, he was a member of the Atlanta city council. Yes, my firm handled his campaign. Yes, I ... slept with him. But not for as long as the papers reported."

A vision of the arrogant blonde guy insisting that he was free to *talk* with Shayla when he'd seen her in Atlanta a year ago came to mind. He'd been in Atlanta for a party Jared and Malcolm put together for their mother's engagement. The happy celebration quickly turned sour when Jared and Tasha got into an argument and he'd been enlisted to take her from the party to a friend. If he would have known the friend was Shayla, he would have let Tasha and Jared fight it out. At the time he hadn't seen Shayla since high school, but it didn't stop his body from reacting the way it had when he was seventeen whenever she was around. But when the man walked up to her and caressed her arm with his wedding ring clear for everyone to see, he'd pushed his desire aside and remembered that Shayla was only out for herself.

"Was he the guy I saw you with in Atlanta?"

She raised her chin and met his eyes. “Yes, but we weren’t together at the time.”

He shook his head. “If you knew his position, why were you seeing him?”

She shrugged a shoulder. Dark lashes lowered over her eyes. “I don’t know.”

Irritation snapped within him. “Bullshit, you know. Why were you with him?”

Her eyes widened, anger sparked within their dark centers. “I don’t owe you an explanation.”

She was right, but he couldn’t help himself. Once again she picked the wrong guy. A part of him knew this push for answers was because he never asked for them when it was his heart she’d broken. He wouldn’t think about how unappealing years of old jealousy looked on a man. “No, you don’t. But you owe yourself one. Shayla, why do you choose these guys?”

She looked away. “Sometimes they choose me.”

“Admit it. You enjoyed the excitement, the rush of doing something forbidden. Regardless of the consequences, you wanted what made you happy.”

Her lips curled into a sneer as contempt filled her eyes. “That’s easy for you to say, isn’t it? Easy to believe I only care about myself. Not that I avoided his advances for *years*. Or that I didn’t believe it when he said their marriage was in trouble until *she* filed for divorce. It doesn’t matter I didn’t agree to one date with him until *after* they separated. Forget that he swore he loved me,

but quickly changed his tune when he realized it would be easier for him to run for senate with his wife of ten years than me.”

Pain and humiliation were clear in her eyes, yet she held her head high. A part of him believed her. There were men who lied about their marriages to sleep with other women. But he clearly remembered how Shayla’s need to have fun — regardless of the consequences — did a TKO on his heart years ago.

He tried to relax and lower the tension between them, but couldn’t keep from saying, “In the end he was still a married man.”

“Well now I know to scratch married men off my list,” she said mockingly as her fingers played with the gold heart pendant resting on her chest.

He ran his hand along the back of his neck. “There’s no need to joke. His lying doesn’t excuse what you did.”

“Why do you insist on seeing the bad in me?”

“I don’t insist on it. I just don’t believe in sugar coating things to make them sound better.”

She rolled her eyes. “You haven’t changed at all. You still try to rationalize everything. Never take into account emotions, or feelings — ”

“Emotions and feelings are the same thing.”

She scoffed. “Who cares? My point is that you want things to be black and white when life isn’t like that.”

“Are you telling me you loved him?” Jealousy gripped him as he waited for her answer. The door to a relationship between the two of them was shut, bolted and nailed closed, but it didn’t make it easier thinking of her in love someone else.

She chewed the inside of her cheek before answering. “No, I didn’t love him.”

Relief relaxed his shoulders. He didn’t want to exam why. “So why were you with him?”

His eyes bore into hers. He shouldn’t have asked. But ever since Shayla had gone from the one person in life he could trust, to the person who’d hurt him the most he’d always wondered what went on inside her mind. The same rationale she criticized him about was what she once claimed kept her sane. Now she didn’t appear to want any sanity in her life.

“We had fun together, okay. The thing you hate to hear me say, I did something just because at the time it seemed like a fun thing to do.” Her shoulders slumped and he saw in her eyes how much it upset her to admit that to him.

She shifted on the exam table. “Can you take me home now?”

The entire conversation was unnecessary. Why Shayla Monroe did the things she did wasn’t his concern. If she never realized how smart, beautiful and special she was and continued hooking herself to men who never realized it either, then more power to her. From what he’d heard she was only in town temporarily. His best bet

was to try and avoid her while she was here and move on with his life after she left.

He reached out to help her slide off the table. It was easier to ignore his reaction to her closeness this time. He pulled away abruptly and with a brisk “wait here” left to get a pair of crutches stored in a closet. He helped her adjust them to her height, she was only a few inches shorter than his six feet, and they left without a word.

The silence continued as he drove toward her mother’s home. On the way, memories of driving her home after football and basketball games rushed through his head. The way they’d talk and laugh about everything that happened during the day. Then end the night sitting on her mom’s porch until Marcella finally told him it was time to go. He hadn’t thought of the good times with Shayla in years.

As he approached her mom’s house he remembered his nurse, Lisa, complaining about Mr. Porter renting one of his homes to her. The main complaint was the assumption Shayla would have strange men parading through. That was unfounded. Shayla may be reckless, but she wasn’t a slut, or at least she hadn’t been.

Dusk had settled, and the only illumination on Shayla’s street came from the old street lights. It was enough to see there were still a few people sitting on porches. His truck was well known, and by morning every gossip would know where he’d been. He could only imagine the speculation after he dropped her off. He pulled up to the small house she rented and cut the

engine. If she was surprised he knew where she stayed she didn't say anything.

"I got it." She said when he came around to help.

Ignoring her, he took the crutches and helped her out of the truck. "I'll help you inside then leave, alright."

She nodded and he assisted her up the stone steps. He frowned when she opened the old screen door and front door without a key. "You didn't lock the door?"

She hopped into the house before turning to face him. "I was only supposed to be gone for a half hour at most."

He sighed and shook his head. "Shayla, you lived in Atlanta, you should know better than to keep your door open."

She waved her hand. "This isn't Atlanta."

"We still have criminals." He looked over her shoulder. He could see most of the house and it didn't appear as if anyone was there. Boxes were on the floor in the living room and kitchen, but he didn't like leaving her there without knowing if things were secure. "Do you want me to check the house?"

She laughed. "Really? Where would someone hide in this matchbox?" She tilted her head to the side and a teasing glint came to her eye. "Are you searching for an excuse to come inside?"

She was only teasing him, but it didn't register with his dick as it twitched at the implication. It had been too long since he'd had sex, something he'd have to remedy if

he were to live with Shayla in the vicinity. Ignoring his long neglected libido, he stepped back. “I don’t want to come in, but I’ll wait in my truck for a few minutes. Flash the porch light if everything is clear.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Man, you’re old fashioned. Good bye, Devin.”

She closed the door and he ambled off the porch toward his truck. He got in and waited, wondering if she’d really flash the lights. Although he’d warned her about criminals, he doubted she had anything to worry about. Everyone knew everyone on this street, and even though there were a few less than savory people living in this part of town, no one would blatantly hurt her. Even so, he tapped his hands on the steering wheel when a few minutes passed and she hadn’t flashed the light. He reached for the handle to open the door and check on her, when the porch light flicked on then off. Feeling relieved, and foolish, he turned on his truck and sped off.

Chapter 3

The next morning Shayla woke up frowning. Her reunion with Devin went just as she'd expected. He'd clearly shown his disappointment and as usual, hadn't let her off the hook for wrongdoing on her part. What was worse, his disappointment mirrored her own. Yes, Mark lied to her about his relationship with his wife, but he wasn't the first cheating man to use that excuse. In the back of her mind she'd always questioned if he would really let his wife go. She knew he planned to run for senate; and intuition, more than her public relations experience, told her it would be easier if he ran with his wife at his side. But when she'd learned of their pending divorce, loneliness overran good sense. After years of ignoring Mark's advances, she let herself entertain the thought of them together.

She hadn't lied when she told Devin she'd stayed with Mark because he was fun. From the moment she'd met him, he was charming and easy going. She may not have loved him, but she'd believed he loved her. It wouldn't have been long before she would've eventually allowed herself to drop the shield around her heart and try to love him.

With a disgusted grunt she got out of bed. She tested the pressure on her foot and was relieved that it didn't hurt as badly as yesterday. Leaving the crutches where they were, she half walked, half hopped into the bathroom and flipped on the lights. Halfway through brushing her teeth she remembered the lack of a shower. With an eye roll, she turned on the water in the tub and finished brushing her teeth. Too impatient to wait on the tub to fill, she stopped the flow when there was enough water reached her calves. It wasn't as if she could soak with her foot wrapped up anyway. A bath was good after a long day, but not as the sole source of cleanliness. One more reason to get the hell out of this house and this town.

She dressed in a red and black sequin halter top and a pair of skinny jeans. Frowning at her wrapped foot, she opted out of matching heels, and slid on a pair of red flats before putting on a thin black leather jacket and leaving the house. Remembering Devin's disapproval at her leaving the door unlocked, she made sure to lock it even though she was only going down the street to her mother's. It was after eight thirty, so her mom would already have left for her job as a custodian at the high school. Hopefully she'd left her newspaper so Shayla could look through the classifieds. She had a laptop and an iPad, but of course neither Mr. Porter nor her mother had internet. So searching for a job the traditional way was what she was stuck with, unless she visited the Helena library and used one of the public computers.

She hated having to drive the short distance, but didn't want to draw more attention to herself limping down the street. She slid into the driver's seat of her Audi — thank goodness it wasn't her driving foot that she'd hurt — backed out and drove to her mom's house. She parked beside her brother's old Toyota Camry.

Her cell phone rang as she put her car in park. It was her friend Tasha. She ignored the call. She loved Tasha, but right now couldn't face talking with her friend. Tasha knew about the scandal in Atlanta, but Shayla was still too embarrassed to discuss it with her. Tasha was the good person in her life who gave her friendship without judgment. But she didn't think her newlywed friend could really hide her disappointment that Shayla had slept with a married man. Eventually, she'd have to make the drive to see Tasha. Sooner or later the heat from the rumors in Helena would get too close to her heart and she'd run to her friend in Columbia, just like she'd done when they were younger.

She got out of the car and limped up the porch steps. She knocked on the screen, before opening it and turning the knob on the door. It was locked. With a sigh she rang the bell before banging on the door. After a few minutes of constant bell ringing and knocking, she finally heard the heavy footfalls of her brother in the house.

“Who the hell is knocking on the damn door like the police?” He yelled as he swung the door open. His scowl turned into a look of exasperation when he saw her. “Shayla, why are you banging on the damn door? Ain't

you got a key?” He turned and headed back into the house.

“As if Momma’s gonna give me a key.” She said following him.

Their mom’s house hadn’t changed much in the years since she left. The living room furniture was new to her, but the thin spots in the flower pattern proved it was probably another second hand purchase. A plastic runner made a path from the living room to the kitchen and a matching one lead down the hall to the bedrooms. Pictures of her and Kenny from grade school adorned the wall and a curio cabinet overstuffed with inexpensive figurines. The smell of bacon filled the house and years of eating healthy were forgotten as she entered her mom’s kitchen. A plate of bacon sat on the old white stove, next to a pot of grits.

Shayla walked over and turned off the stove. The grits were still smooth and her stomach growled as she breathed in the buttery smell. “Momma, forgot to turn off the stove.”

Kenny plopped down in a chair at the kitchen table. He scratched his chin with one hand while pulling the black wave cap off his head. “She didn’t forget, she left it on so I’d have something to eat when I got up.”

“I didn’t know you liked burned grits.” She said getting two bowls out of the cabinet.

“Nah, Momma adds extra water before she leaves and turns it way down.”

“If I remember correctly, you don’t get out of bed before noon. Even with extra water they’d be burned.” She spooned grits into both bowls and put them on the table before grabbing the plate of bacon and setting it down.

Kenny laughed. “I got class this morning, that’s the only reason I’m up.”

She cut her eyes at him. “Then why were you screaming at me for knocking on the door.”

“I’m sitting in the bathroom minding my business and someone comes banging on the door. What would you do?”

She grimaced. “Sorry I asked.” She looked in the fridge for some juice. The only thing in there was Kool-Aid and milk. She grabbed milk and two cups out of the dish drainer next to the sink before sitting down.

Kenny held out his hand. “I need a spoon.”

“I fixed your grits and brought you something to drink. The least you can do is get your own spoon.”

He leaned back. “You need one, too.”

She glared and he grinned. With an exasperated sigh she got up and took two spoons out of the dish rack. “Here, fool.” She said tossing his spoon on the table. He laughed and she sat down with a smile. “Man, you’re spoiled.”

“No one to blame but you and Momma.”

“Yeah, I know.” She said eating a spoonful of grits. She looked around the kitchen. “Did momma leave the paper?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I had it in the bathroom; you want me to get it?”

With an exaggerated cringe she shook her head. “That’s okay, I’ll go to the library later. I need to look for a job.”

“What’s the rush? You took a pretty hard hit down there in Atlanta, take some time off. Relax and regroup before putting yourself out there again.” He said in between shoveling large spoonfuls of grits into his mouth.

She raised an eyebrow. “What, you majoring in psychology now?”

He grinned flashing even white teeth. Neither she nor her brother looked like their mother who was short, plump, and fair skinned. They both inherited height and chocolate skin from their dad. Shayla hadn’t seen her dad in years, but Kenny was a mirror image of the man. Bald head, thick build, and winning smile. Still, she was the child her mom resented.

“Nah, just a suggestion. You out of money?”

She shook her head. “No, I was smart enough to save, and Mr. Porter’s rent is much lower than what I paid in Atlanta. I just need to get the hell out of Helena.”

Her brother frowned and put the spoon in his bowl. “Why you always hating on Helena? It ain’t so bad here.”

She picked up and bit into a crispy slice of bacon. “Maybe to you, but I don’t have many good memories here.”

He shook his head. “You didn’t have to leave town and become a wild child.”

“I didn’t become a wild child.”

“That’s what everyone round here was saying.”

She slapped her spoon on the table. “That’s exactly why I left. People in this town feed off rumors. Where did this come from? All I know is that one day mom calls me at Spelman saying I’ve embarrassed her by going off to college and sleeping with every man who visited our campus.”

Kenny’s brows came together in confusion. “Peaches visited you and met the two different guys you were dating. Then she told Momma about three other guys coming to your dorm when she was there.”

Shayla sank back onto the seat. Peaches had been a part of her high school clique. There were six of them: Shayla, Devin, Tony, Jermaine, Peaches, and Roxanne. Devin, Tony, and Jermaine grew up beside each other and played football and basketball together since little league. She, Peaches, and Roxanne cheered together since junior high. High school social dynamics pulled the six together more than true friendship. She’d only considered Tasha her true friend after meeting her one summer at a cheerleading camp.

Peaches had come to visit during her freshman year of college. It was true there were two guys interested in her at the time. But after escaping Tony and the relationship he'd forced on her, she hadn't been interested in becoming tied to another guy.

She wasn't surprised Peaches lied. Their friendship had been more rivalry than anything. Each year they'd gone against each other for head cheerleader, Homecoming and Prom queen. Swapping wins every year. Peaches couldn't stand not being the center of attention, so Shayla took pleasure in stealing some of her thunder. She'd even gone so far as to date a few guys that Peaches liked in high school. Not something she was proud of, and it didn't help her reputation for being loose, but at the time it seemed fitting. It all seemed so silly now; being "friends" with someone you didn't like much.

"Peaches lied, I had a few guy friends, but I wasn't doing everything she apparently led you all to believe."

Kenny shrugged. Her brother rarely passed judgment on others. A shrug and an "oh well" were as far as he'd go into anyone else's drama. "You know how things go. She came back blabbing, and everyone ate it up." He finished off his glass of milk before standing. "You can take it up with her later. Last night she and Roxanne came by looking for you."

She sputtered in the middle of drinking her milk. "What? Why?"

He laughed. “Why do you think? To see you. I think they want to have a party to welcome you back.”

She got a napkin out of the holder on the table and wiped up the milk. “Only they would have a party to welcome back someone who came home in disgrace.”

“Either way, they said they were coming by again today to see you.” He leaned against the door jamb and crossed his beefy arms. “I see you already reconnected with Devin.”

Just as she suspected, the gossips were on patrol the night before. “We didn’t reconnect. I was jogging and fell. He saw it and helped me out.”

He looked at her foot. “So that’s why you’re limping. I wondered.”

She raised a brow. “Why didn’t you ask?”

“Figured you’d tell me eventually.” He pushed away from the door. “Tell Devin I said ‘what’s up’ when you see him.”

“I won’t be seeing him.”

“Why not, the band’s back together now.” He said laughing as he turned to go down the hall. “I gotta get ready for class.”

Shayla picked up her spoon and played with the remaining grits in the bowl. The band was back together. It’s funny how she hadn’t thought about Peaches or Roxanne in years. After Peaches’s one visit freshman year, she’d hadn’t kept in contact with her. At the time, she hadn’t wanted the visit from Peaches, who was a

reminder of all she'd lost and all she wanted to get away from. After Peaches's visit, she had reached out and called Devin, but he'd said Peaches told him she'd moved on and he hoped for her sake she knew what she was doing. She hadn't called him again. Seeing him in Atlanta a year ago was the first time she'd laid eyes on him in years, and of course it had to be when she was with Mark.

She put her elbows on the table and dropped her head in her hands. She was destined to always look bad in front of him. It would be so much easier to take if he'd grown into a fat, ugly toad. Instead he looked even better than he had in high school. Now his bronze skin covered the sculpted muscles of a man, not a boy. He had his own practice and from what she'd learned, everyone in town loved him. He became a pillar of society, and she became a tainted woman.

Pushing back the frustration that always came when she thought about what could have been with Devin, she got up from the table and put the dishes in the sink. Her ankle would prevent her from painting today, but she could unpack her bags this morning before going to the library to look for a job. She doubted Peaches and Roxanne would show up before noon and if she could get most of her unpacking done by then, she'd be long gone before they came looking for her. Although it was only a matter of time before they caught up with her and she'd have to face them, and Tony.

Chapter 4

Devin swung his car into the side parking lot of his office at 8:30 the next morning. His receptionist Anna's blue minivan, and his nurse Lisa's red Malibu were already in the lot. He breathed a sigh of relief as he cut the engine and jumped out of the truck. His rounds at the hospital had taken longer than he'd expected. With a glance at his watch he entered the building to prepare for his first patient at nine. Memories of being there the night before with Shayla were fresh as he walked down the hall to his office. Instead of proving that seeing her didn't affect him at all, he'd acted jealous and condescending. It was no secret Shayla didn't care about his opinion, yet he still felt the need to lecture her.

She was probably sitting at home now calling him a pompous ass, or was on the phone with one of her friends in Atlanta laughing at him. He hoped she didn't call Tasha and tell her about it. The last thing he needed was for his friend Jared to know he'd lost his cool. While he was happy to give his friends advice when it came to women, he preferred to keep his relationships — or lack thereof — to himself.

He entered his office and sat in the leather chair behind his desk. Unlike other doctors he knew, his office wasn't adorned with family pictures of a wife and children. The only embellishment to the bookshelf filled with medical texts and his degrees on the wall were a few potted plants Anna insisted he needed and some awards received over the years. A stack of faxes with the results from various patient labs samples sat on his desk. He reached for them as he flipped on his computer and waited for it to boot up. He was shuffling through the results of his first patient when Anna came in.

“You're here. Lisa and I were wondering what was keeping you.” She said placing a steaming cup of coffee on his desk. Anna was in her late fifties, but still had the smooth skin and toned body of a woman in her thirties. Whenever someone complemented her on her good looks, she always grinned and said it was because her husband made her so happy. Her dark eyes sparkled with curiosity behind stylish red glasses.

With a sinking feeling he guessed what was going on beneath her salt-n-pepper cropped hair. “Rounds took longer than usual. I'll make my patient follow up calls during lunch.” He said taking a sip of coffee. He sighed with satisfaction; besides Annie's ability to keep his office running smoothly, he kept her around because she made the best coffee.

She leaned against the desk and grinned. “I wondered if you were up late last night.”

He stopped shuffling through the lab results and looked at her from the corner of his eye. “Why would I be up late?”

Annie waved a hand and shrugged. “I thought you may have been busy, that’s all.”

Not buying it, he flattened his hands on the desk and raised an eyebrow. “Why don’t you ask whatever question is bouncing around that head of yours?”

“He’s here. Did you ask him?” Lisa, his nurse said from the door. If Lisa was 100 pounds soaking wet it would surprise him. But she ate more than most men he knew. She made her own scrubs, like the purple butterfly pair she wore today, because she couldn’t find any small enough to fit her slim frame. The sharp lines of her face were almost as sharp as her attitude, but she was the best nurse he’d ever had.

Devin rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Okay, what is this about?”

Lisa placed a thin hand on her hip. “Don’t act like you don’t know. You passed right by my cousin’s house last night when you took that Shayla Monroe home. I was sitting on the porch and saw you with my own eyes.”

“Then you would have seen when I drove away from her house.” He said with a tone of forced patience. “She was out jogging and fell. I saw her, brought her here to wrap her ankle, and took her home.”

Lisa straightened up and pointed at him. “You brought her here? So you two were in here alone last

night.”

He scoffed and rubbed his hand over his face. “Just so I could check out her ankle.”

Annie motioned for them to calm down. “As long as that’s all that happened it’s no big deal.”

He froze and brought his hand to his chin. “Why is that?”

Annie shrugged. “I’d just hate to see you mixed up with someone like that.”

“Like what?”

“A slut,” Lisa said.

He glared at Lisa. “She’s not a slut. She’s an old friend, so please watch what you call her.”

Lisa harrumphed and crossed her arms. Anna smiled at him as if he were a child. “You’re a man, so of course you see it that way. I’m a married woman and I don’t have any remorse for a woman who fools around with a married man.”

“He lied to her and said he was getting a divorce.” He said.

Lisa harrumphed again before Anna replied. “Doesn’t change what she did.”

The accusing tone in Anna’s voice caused him to regret even more the way he’d spoken to Shayla the day before. Everywhere she went in town she must get the same response from other married women. Although he didn’t condone what she’d done, the situation wasn’t

entirely her fault. “All I’m saying is that if he hadn’t lied about his marriage, she wouldn’t have been with him.”

Lisa sucked her teeth. “Almost divorced and divorced are two different things. That girl’s just like her daddy. She probably thought she had a right to him. Watch your back, doctor.” She turned and left his office. “Oh, and your first patient is in room one.” She tossed over her shoulder.

He looked at Anna. “Shayla isn’t a bad person.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “I don’t know her very well. But it doesn’t look good. Now, I’m a Christian so I’m not gonna say she deserved to lose her job, but God does show people when they’re wrong.”

He heard the back door open as his other nurse, Kia, came in. It must be close to nine. He stood up and grabbed his lab coat off the rack behind his desk. “I think she learned her lesson,” he said to Anna.

She moved away from his desk toward the door. “For her sake, and the sake of the married women in town, I hope so.”

He rubbed his forehead as she walked out. He’d had the same disparaging thoughts about Shayla’s relationship, and even though he believed her story, he’d allowed his feelings from the past to rule. Just because she’d hurt him in high school didn’t mean he had to join the line of people waiting to throw stones.

He grabbed his stethoscope off the coat rack, before getting his light pen and an ink pen off his desk and

putting it in the lab coat pocket. Grabbing the lab results for his first patient, he left his office. Kia was scrambling to get her purse and keys hung in the hall closet. She smiled shyly at him beneath thick lashes. She was a cute girl, but at twenty-three she was too young for him. Besides, she was Shayla's cousin and reminded him too much of her.

“Good morning, Dr. Jones,” she said smiling.

“Morning, Kia.” He returned her smile before grabbing the chart out of the bin and entering exam room one. “Good morning, Mr. Jones. Luckily we were able to get your lab results in time for today's visit.”

“Don't Mr. Jones me, boy.” Roscoe Jones said with an exaggerated frown. Although his scowl was meant to be severe, the twinkle in his eyes softened the look.

Devin smiled and hugged his dad. Roscoe thumped him on the back with the same strength he'd had when Devin was a boy. He resembled his dad, with the same long nose, high cheekbones and bronze skin. But his dad was close to thirty pounds overweight and battling diabetes. No matter how much Devin fussed, his dad refused to listen. Food became his comfort after his wife died five years ago. It was a devastating blow after losing his first wife, Devin's mom, nearly sixteen years ago. When his stepmom died, his dad was left with Devin and his stepbrother Javaris, who was eight years younger than Devin.

When Devin leaned back the smile left his face. “Your blood glucose levels are off the charts. Did you fast

before coming in to give blood?”

Roscoe scowled and sat on the exam table. “You can’t expect a grown man to go without food in the morning. Ain’t I supposed to eat breakfast to start up my metabolism?”

Devin sighed. “Yes, on most days, but not when you’re giving blood for lab work.” He looked at the chart. “What did you eat, anyway?”

“Nothing big. Just some frosted flakes.”

Devin’s eyes bulged. “You’re joking.”

Roscoe held up his hand. “I measured out a cup and it was the low sugar kind.”

“There is no low sugar frosted flakes.” Devin sat the chart on the exam table and crossed his arms. “Dad, you have diabetes, you can’t eat like this anymore.”

As if Devin’s words didn’t make sense he asked, “Then what the hell do you give me all that medicine for? Isn’t that supposed to help?”

Devin rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Yes, Dad, they’re supposed to help, but you have to do your part. Diet, exercise, and medicine. Not eat frosted flakes before a blood test.”

“So, I can eat them without a blood test?”

Devin’s head snapped up, but he relaxed when he saw the teasing glint in Roscoe’s eyes.

“Dad, watch what you eat, please. I just visited a patient who had their foot amputated because of

diabetes complications. I really don't want that to be you."

His dad stopped smiling and sighed. "I hear you, I hear you. So, what else does my blood say?"

Knowing that was as close to a promise he'd get from his dad, Devin went over the rest of the items on the chart. His dad's blood pressure was elevated. When Devin said he'd need to come back in two weeks for him to check it again, and that if it was high he'd have to prescribe something, Roscoe just grumbled something about white coat anxiety. Ignoring it, Devin continued to try and reiterate to his dad that at sixty-five he couldn't go around eating like he was sixteen anymore. By the end of the visit they were both frustrated.

Devin decided to make more time to visit his dad. After losing his second wife, Roscoe moved to a house in the outskirts of the county. With Devin's schedule he didn't make it out to visit as often as he liked, but he'd have to do better if he wanted to make sure his dad was taking care of himself. His stepbrother moved to Charlotte after graduating college, and Devin only saw him on the occasional Christmas he decided to visit.

"So I'll see you in two weeks," Devin said at the end of the exam.

His dad nodded. "Yeah, but you're filling my truck with gas. It's a long way to drive in to your office."

Devin smiled. "No one told you to move out to the boondocks."

“It’s peaceful. I like it,” Roscoe said getting off the exam table. He placed his hand on Devin’s shoulder to get his attention from writing notes on the chart. “I wanted to talk to you about Shayla Monroe.”

Devin gripped the pen in his hand. “What about her?”

Roscoe held up his hands. “Don’t look at me like that. I don’t have a problem with the girl. But Anna couldn’t wait to tell me that you drove her home last night.”

“And if I did?”

“What you do is your business. Forget what everybody in this town thinks, I know Shayla isn’t a bad person. I remember when you two used to hang out together, before she hooked up with that fool Tony. I could see then that she was looking for love, hell, I hoped you would come to your senses and ask the girl out.”

Devin looked back at the chart but didn’t see anything on the paper. Instead his mind’s eye saw Shayla sitting at the dinner table with him and his dad years ago. How she’d tell silly jokes and bring candy to cheer them up after his mom died. “I did ask her out,” he said softly.

Roscoe leaned closer. “What happened?”

His lips formed a grim line. “She hooked up with Tony. Shayla and I were always just friends. Nothing more.” He turned to face his father. “Look, Dad, there’s nothing to worry about with me and Shayla. I just gave

her a ride, but everyone in my office is trying to link us together. It's not like that."

Roscoe nodded and stepped back. "All I'm saying is that the girl might need a friend. Coming back to this town filled with fools who'd rather see you fall on your face than give you a hand is hard enough without the scandal she's got floating around her. Y'all were friends once. She might need a friend again."

Guilt jumped on his back and put a stranglehold around his neck. Shayla did need a friend, not someone else ready to tear her to shreds. But could he do that? Could he get past the years of hurt and befriend her? He couldn't avoid her. They were joined by mutual friends and were bound to run into each other. It would be easier to do that if there was no hostility between them.

With a resigned nod he looked at his dad. "I'll see how things pan out."

His dad smiled. "That's all I'm saying."

Devin's lips twisted in a wry grin. "You've actually said a lot this morning."

Roscoe laughed. "It's not often I get to give you advice, *Dr. Jones*." He turned toward the door and Devin followed. "Let me get out of here. I know you've got a lobby full of patients by now."

Devin sighed. "Yeah, my last patient is at 5:45."

Roscoe nodded and gave Devin a pat on the back. "I'll talk to you soon."

Devin watched as his dad exited the exam area for the reception area. Through the door he saw the lobby was full.

“Are you ready for your next patient, Dr. Jones?” Kia asked.

Devin turned to the young girl and smiled. “Yes, Kia, I’m ready.”

Chapter 5

With a sigh, Shayla turned off the library computer. As expected, there weren't any jobs in Helena, but there were a few interesting positions in Columbia and Charlotte. She'd spent the day taking notes on the various jobs she saw, calling the contacts she had in Atlanta that had taken her side in the fallout after the affair to ask for references, and updating her resume and cover letter. Her brother was right, she didn't have to rush and find a job. Fear that someone would recognize her name had kept her finger hovering over the send button on many emails to hiring managers. But her need to leave town finally forced her to hit send.

On her way out of the library she stopped to admire a painting on the wall near the entrance. She wouldn't call herself an art connoisseur, but she did love art. Something about the painting intrigued her. She'd spent a good portion of the day staring at it.

It wasn't an elaborate painting of the Helena town square, but the colors were so vibrant and the strokes of the painting so bold she felt as if she could walk into it. It was the only piece of original art work in the small

library. She leaned in to get a better look at the initials of the painter.

“T.C.,” she said to herself.

“Tyrell Crawford, he’s the artist.” One of the staff librarians said walking up to Shayla.

Shayla nodded and stepped back from the painting. “It’s beautiful.”

The older woman smiled and gazed at the canvas. “It is. Tyrell is a local celebrity, or at least he is in Columbia. But we’re close enough to claim him,” she said with a laugh.

“I guess so.”

The librarian pointed at the work of art. “He did that last year as part of his small town collection. His work is so true to life it’s as if you’re really there. He painted two portraits of our square, along with the downtowns of other small cities around Columbia. One was donated to each town, the other he’s selling in a silent auction in a few weeks.”

Intrigued she asked, “How old is he?”

The lady shook her head. “He’s in his thirties, I think. Married to Senator Robert Watts’ older daughter. That’s why he’s such a celebrity, a politician’s son-in-law who also is an artist. He’s got the Columbia art scene abuzz.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Really, I would imagine someone who painted this well would be older. There’s a

cynicism to this painting that speaks of someone with years behind them.”

She looked back at the canvas. On the surface it was a beautiful portrait showing any given Sunday in Helena, but subtle things undermined the down home feel. Most of the people in the painting were families smiling or children playing. Upon a closer look there was the homeless man everyone ignored sitting on the stoop at the end of Main Street clutching a brown bag in his hand. One of the mothers in the painting scolded her child who had tears in his blue eyes. And one of the kids in a group standing outside of the drugstore was hiding candy under his jacket while looking over his shoulder, the drug store owner was peering out of the window scowling. Most people who passed the painting and gave it a quick look wouldn't notice, but Tyrell painted what was beneath the idyllic setting.

The librarian tilted her head to the side. “Really, I don't get that.”

The corner of Shayla's mouth lifted in a small smile. “Maybe it's just me. So when is his auction? I wouldn't mind seeing the rest of his work.”

Smiling brightly, the librarian walked over to a table with various brochures and flyers and brought back one. “Here's more information. It's a few weeks from now in Columbia. It should be a great show.”

Shayla took the flyer. “Thanks, have a great day.”

“You, too.” The lady said.

As Shayla left the library she had a smile on her face. The librarian was the only person who hadn't looked at her as if she were trying to steal their man. She didn't know if it was because she was unaware of the scandal, or didn't care, but it was enough to brighten her day.

She stuffed the flyer in the glove compartment of her car and drove through town to her mom's house. It was almost six, so her mom would be home cooking. It also meant her aunt Linda was there, too. For as long as she could remember, her Aunt Linda drove to her mother's house every day after work to gossip. She didn't look forward to hearing it, but she was hungry and didn't feel like buying fast food. She didn't cook. Today she'd have to put up with her family long enough to get a decent meal.

There were four cars in her mother's driveway when she pulled up a few minutes later. She recognized her brother's car, her mom's old Cutlass, and her Aunt Linda's white Taurus. She didn't recognize the fourth. Parking her car along the road, she got out and crossed the yard to the front door. This time when she tried the door after knocking it was open. Voices came from the kitchen, so she headed in that direction. The hiss of cooking oil and the smell of something frying led the way. She made a mental note to go to the grocery store tomorrow, or else she'd put on twenty pounds eating at her mom's house every day.

"Hey," she said entering the kitchen.

Her mom looked up from the stove, a breaded pork chop in her hand. She briefly met Shayla's eyes before turning back to the bubbling pot. "Hey, Shayla."

Her Aunt Linda sat in one of the three chairs at her mom's kitchen table with her foot propped up in another. Her raised eyebrow and twisted lip answered the question of whether or not she'd move her foot. Her younger cousin Kia sat in the third. Shayla gave the first real smile to a family member since coming home.

"Oh, my goodness, Kia!" she said rushing over to hug her cousin.

Kia stood and returned her hug. "Shayla, I was just on my way to see you."

Shayla stood back and checked out her cousin. Kia was eight when she'd left town after high school. Her young cousin had idolized her, always playing in Shayla's makeup, trying on her clothes or jewelry and saying how she wanted to be just like her when she grew up. Instead of being annoyed by her younger cousin, Shayla had enjoyed having Kia around. She'd reminded her of how it used to be, before puberty and high school skewed your judgment and being a glamorous princess was as easy as putting on borrowed lip gloss and high heels.

She shook her head. "Wow, Kia, you're all grown up now. Girl, you're making me old."

Kia had to be about ... twenty-three. Shayla gave herself a mental shake seeing her young cousin as a fully grown woman, a beautiful woman in fact. Her skin was smooth, clear and glowing as only a girl in her early

twenties would have. Her hair was in a complicated style, twisted against her scalp on one side and falling in spiral curls on the other, but her age made it work. She had the same brown eyes tilted up at the corners that most of the women in her family had, and full lips. The scrubs she wore didn't hide the fact she'd also grown into the family curves. Shayla would be surprised if Kia didn't have a string of men chasing after her.

Kia laughed. "Whatever, you still look awesome. No wonder you got politicians potentially ruining their careers to get with you."

Shayla's smile froze. There wasn't any malice in Kia's eyes or tone. She looked as if she meant what she said in a nice way. After a day in the library without the looks or whispered conversations she'd finally felt the burden of the scandal lift, but a few innocent words brought it all back.

Her Aunt Linda cackled and slapped a hand on her large thigh. She was dressed in the same blue polyester custodial uniform she and her mom wore when at work. Her jowls quivered as she laughed. "Girl, look at your face. I don't know why you're acting all upset whenever someone brings up why you fled from Atlanta. You did it. Own it. If your stuff was so good you got a senator chasing after it, don't hide it."

Her mom snorted. The grease on the stove hissed as she added another pork chop. "Linda, shut up."

"Don't tell me to shut up. I'm the only one who keeps it real round here."

Shayla rolled her eyes. “Yeah, too real.”

Kia stared wide eyed between the two. “I didn’t mean it in a bad way.”

Shayla smiled and patted her cousin on the shoulder. “I know you didn’t. I didn’t take it in a bad way.”

Linda dropped her foot out of the chair and kicked it out. After Shayla and Kia both sat, Linda pushed forward and pointed a swollen finger at Shayla. “You don’t need to take it in a bad way. Hell, if everyone in town’s gonna talk about what you did, you might as well give ‘em something to talk about.”

“Linda,” Marcella said from the stove.

“Don’t *Linda* me. Shit, if I had a fine ass powerful man chasing after this here,” she pointed between her legs, “I’d brag about that to the whole damn world.”

Shayla laughed despite herself. “Then you wouldn’t be a good side chick. You’re not supposed to run your mouth.”

Kia leaned forward. “So he wasn’t your first married man?”

Shayla shook her head. “I didn’t make a habit of sleeping with married men. In college, once, I dated a guy and found out about his girlfriend later. When I got mad he outlined all of the things a side chick is supposed to do. Apparently I didn’t know my place.”

“Did you stay with him?” Kia asked.

She sneered. “No, I told him to kiss my ass. After that I promised myself to always be first with a man.” She scoffed and fingered the heart pendant. “Apparently it’s easy to break promises to ourselves.”

Linda nodded. “Ain’t that the truth? You get a man that can talk a good game and you forget every damn promise you ever made to yourself. And if that fool knows his way around the bedroom ... shit, it’s downhill from there.”

Her Aunt Linda hit the proverbial nail on the head. Mark’s charm had always appealed to her. But when she crossed that line and slept with him, she found out he was a pretty good lover. Not the best she’d had, but good enough to overlook his shortcomings whenever he spun game about how things would be when they could finally be together. Guilt, humiliation and anger clashed to make a bitter brew in her stomach. It was what she always felt when she looked back on her history of failed relationships.

With a toss of her head she smiled at her cousin. “Forget about my problems, tell me what’s going on with you. From the scrubs I guess you work at the ... *hospital?*”

“A doctor’s office.” Kia answered.

Shayla smiled. “Cool, what do you do?”

Aunt Linda answered. “She’s a nurse for your old friend Devin Jones. Kia was just telling us how the ladies in the office were pretty pissed he gave you a ride home yesterday.”

Kia looked down at the table, while heat crept up Shayla's face. Her conversation with Kenny this morning proved people were talking, but she hadn't expected it to be that big of a deal. She figured most people would know they were old friends. She hoped they would just believe they were catching up, but given her reputation, and the love of a good story, it wasn't surprising to learn people assumed more was going on.

"I fell, twisted my ankle, and Devin gave me a ride home. Can't a friend give another friend a ride?"

Her mom pulled the last pork chop out of the pan, slid the pot to the back of the stove and turned off the eye before shuffling over to the table. "Was that all it was? You're not hooking up with him."

An incredulous laugh burst from her lips. "Devin is just an old friend. No, we're not hooking up."

Her mom, aunt, and cousin all visibly relaxed. She frowned as she looked between the three. Skepticism was in her mom's eye, while relief and happiness were in Kia and Linda's. She sat back in the chair and crossed her arms. "Why does it matter if I hook up with Devin Jones or not?"

"We got plans for Dr. Jones." Linda said.

"Momma!" Kia burst out. Her eyes were wide and pleading as she looked across the table. "He doesn't even look at me like that."

"But he will," Linda said. "That man's been alone for too long, and does so much good for the community. He

needs a wife to keep him warm and give him a bunch of babies. It might as well be you.”

Marcella nodded and walked back over to the stove. Kia gave a flippant wave of the hand. “You’re so old fashioned.”

Linda laughed. “Don’t act as if you don’t want him. I’ve seen the way you look at that man. Not that I blame you. He looks just like his daddy back in the day. And I’ll tell you what, Roscoe Jones knew his way around a bedroom.”

Marcella swung around. “You didn’t!”

Linda cackled. “Hell yeah, before he married Delores. Best damn night of my life,” she looked at Kia, “Counting your daddy.”

Jealousy hit Shayla so hard she felt it like a punch. Devin and Kia? There was more than a ten year age difference, but that didn’t mean anything. They both worked in the medical field. Kia was young and beautiful. Devin was handsome and successful. That was enough of a combination to make any power couple in Atlanta.

It shouldn’t matter if he was interested in Kia. He’d given no implication that he was interested in her the day before. In fact, he’d been disappointed in her once again. Combine that with the way she’d betrayed his trust in high school, she had no claim on his heart.

“Momma, can you fix me a plate and I’ll take it home,” Shayla said. “I need to finish unpacking and re-work my resume for some of the jobs I found.”

“I’ll wrap up something,” her mom said. With speed that belied her age and weight, she’d put together a plate, wrapped it in foil and dropped it in front of Shayla. The subtle reminder of her mom’s dislike of her company hurt, but she smiled brightly and stood.

“It was good seeing you, Kia. Come by another day and we’ll catch up. See you later, Aunt Linda.” She looked at her mom as she placed dirty dishes in soapy water in the sink. “Thanks for the plate.” Her mom waved a hand, but didn’t turn around.

“Bye, Shayla.” Linda said. “Remember what I said.”

With a nod she quickly left the kitchen and walked out the door. She heard footsteps behind her and turned as Kia ran up and followed her out. Kia motioned for her to go down the porch. They walked in silence to her car where Shayla placed the plate on the passenger seat.

“What’s up?”

Kia looked back at the house before looking at Shayla. She had concern in her eyes. “Are you really not going after Devin Jones?”

Shayla’s heart rate picked up. She took a calming breath before answering. “I’m not going after anybody right now.”

Kia sighed and placed a hand over her heart. “Good. Don’t tell my momma, but I am trying to win him over. If she knew, she’d think it was her idea.”

Shayla swallowed before asking. “Was it her idea?”

Kia smiled. “No. Don’t you remember the crush I had on him when I was little? It never went away. I told you before you graduated that I was gonna marry him. Well, I am.”

A dim memory of Kia saying that flashed through Shayla’s mind. It was one of those things that older people hear kids say. It goes in one ear and out the other without a second thought. “Does he feel ... ” she couldn’t finish.

Kia nodded. “I think so. I mean, he’s nice to me and smiles at me. He remembered me when I applied for the job. It may not happen overnight, but one day he might come around. I just wanted to let you know how I felt ... in case you got any ideas.”

Kia’s jaw firmed and a brief warning flashed in her eyes. Shayla knew that look. She’d seen it in the eyes of other women all her adult life. The challenge, the warning to back off. The instinct to fight back was fierce. She’d wanted Devin all her life too, but did that matter? Did she really have any chance of winning his love? Hell, she didn’t deserve his love. So she pushed her instincts aside and nodded.

“Good,” Kia said. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Shayla watched as her cousin turned and flitted back to the house. Annoyance tickled her spine and she slapped her hand against her leg as she got in the car. If Kia wanted Devin, she could have him. She had no prior claim on him. It wasn’t as if Devin would give her the time of day anyway. Her heart twisted as she pulled out

of her mother's driveway and drove the short distance to her house.

Kia was better for him. She was young, smart, interested in medicine and probably happy to stay in Helena and give him half a dozen babies. Besides, she had no plans to go after Devin. He'd made it perfectly clear how he felt about her. And after Kia's declaration, her unwarranted reputation as a whore would be cemented in Monroe family history if she did go after him. It was bad enough to be branded a home wrecker and husband stealer; she didn't need the added censure that came with taking the man her younger cousin was in love with.

Unsatisfied with her decision, Shayla slammed the door as she got out of her car and went inside. The silence annoyed her and she sucked her teeth in frustration that she hadn't spent the day calling to hook up cable or internet. Cable and internet came with news and potential stories about what happened in Atlanta. It could wait until next week.

She stormed into the kitchen, dropped the plate of food her mom made on the table and turned on the radio lodged in the kitchen window. There wasn't a great selection of radio stations in Helena, but with the radio on the window sill and the antennae tilted against the screen, she was able to get decent reception of a hip hop station out of Columbia. She didn't pay attention to the words Lil Wayne rapped as she spooned half of the food from the plate her mom made onto on a smaller plate.

She sat at the table but didn't eat. Her appetite had disappeared with Kia's warning. Tapping her toe repeatedly, she drummed the fingers of her left hand on the table while twirling her fork in her right.

There'd never been a good time for her and Devin. For all the years of friendship they shared in high school, they never caught each other between break ups. Never found the nerve to reveal their feelings. Back then she'd been so optimistic that their opportunity would arise one day. It finally did at Homecoming their senior year.

It was the first night he kissed her, and the first time he'd looked at her with disgust.

Shayla threw down her fork and dropped her head in her hands. "Stop it, stop it, stop it," she said. She rubbed her eyes, hoping the movement would prevent the memory of that night from coming. The drinking. The shadows. Tony's body. Devin's anger. She slapped her hand on the table.

"No!"

It was time to get out of the house.

She jumped up and looked for her keys. It was nearing dusk. No Hangman's Woods, thanks to her promise to Devin. Her options were limited. The one good thing about being home was that there were plenty of country roads she could drive fast on, with the windows down and the music blaring loud enough to drown out stupid old memories. On the way home she'd stop by a convenience store and pick up a bottle of wine.

It wasn't as if she had a job to go to. She could spend the night drinking away the memories.

She snatched her keys off the counter, before nearly running to the front door. When she wrenched it open she gasped. Devin stood on the other end with his hand raised to knock. She stepped back and placed a hand over her pounding heart.

Concern replaced the startled look in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yes, I was just about to leave. I need to get out of here." She tapped her hand on her leg, her eyes looking everywhere but at him.

He looked over her shoulder. "Did someone hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No." A caustic laugh escaped her. "Yes. Just not today."

He stepped into the house and placed his hands on her shoulders. They were large and warm, and just like in high school, sent shivers down her spine whenever they touched her.

He kicked the door shut and leaned down to look into her face. "What's wrong? I'm sorry about yesterday. I shouldn't have dug into you like that. But I'm still your friend. You can talk to me."

She lifted her gaze to his and stopped breathing. Whisky brown eyes stared back at her. The dappled sunlight through her window caught the gold in their depths and the woody scent of his cologne washed over

her. Then it happened. The concern in his eyes switched to desire. Her nerve endings sizzled, her skin heated. His gaze lowered to her mouth and despite herself, she drew her bottom lip between her teeth.

He groaned.

She gasped.

Kia was forgotten as he slowly brought his head down. Her skin tightened when his lips pressed against hers and without a thought she sank into him. His right hand gently grasped the back of her head while his left clasped her hip and pulled her against him. A whimper of longing swept through her when the hardness of his arousal pressed against her stomach. She was drowning, losing herself in this kiss and damn if she didn't want to.

The thought was enough to jolt her back to reality. She was taking a break from men. She was focusing on her. Her cousin was in love with him. He didn't like her. One kiss and she was forgetting everything she was supposed to do. She tried to pull away, break contact, but his hand stiffened against her neck before turning her head and pulling her back against him. When his tongue touched her lips, desire won over reason and she opened her mouth. Letting him inside, letting him into her.

Chapter 6

Devin knew he was going down the wrong path. He was supposed to come over, apologize, and shake hands. He was supposed to tell her they could still be friends, but avoid her like the damn plague. Instead he'd recognized the signs she was upset and lost his reason. As if years hadn't passed, he wanted to find out what upset her and make things better. But in high school he knew enough not to kiss her, otherwise things would go too far. He was supposed to be smarter as an adult, but apparently he wasn't.

He couldn't even blame it on an overwhelming rush of desire. It was a slow burn which started the day before. He'd given her plenty of time to pull away, and she hadn't. Then she'd made that sound, half whimper, half moan, and his dick became rock solid. He knew exactly what he was doing. He wanted Shayla Monroe, had wanted her for years, and right now he couldn't resist her.

She tried to pull away, but he wasn't finished. His grip tightened and he turned her head to plant his lips firmly against hers. His tongue slid over her lower lip, anticipating getting inside her mouth. When her soft lips

parted, he wrapped his arm around her small waist and pulled her closer. He lifted her a few inches off the ground so her full breasts pressed against the center of his chest. Her arms shot around his neck, her right hand running across the tight coils of his hair, causing a tremor to go through his body. Her hand slowly slid from the back to the side of his head. Her small fingers curled around his earlobe, sending currents of desire through him.

His grip tightened. If he didn't stop he was going to fuck her. There was no denying it. There was enough common sense left in him to know that didn't need to happen. Having sex with Shayla would only complicate matters. He'd tried casual affairs, and they didn't work. She planned to move on, live an exciting life somewhere else. He wanted to stay in Helena, run his practice, and grow old here. Just like before, he'd want more from her than she'd be willing to give, and he wasn't horny enough to risk it.

He slowly broke the kiss. Her eyes were out of focus, her hand still curled around his ear. She blinked a few times before meeting his gaze. Damn, he loved her eyes. Tipped exotically at the corners, large and dark, just one look from beneath her lashes always sent his heart into overdrive. Now they were filled with desire, longing, and uncertainty.

He licked his lips before speaking. "I came to apologize for last night."

“You’re forgiven.” She whispered. She rubbed his ear with one hand while the other stroked his hair.

His dick leaped in his pants. “We can’t do this.”

For a second he thought she would argue, before resignation settled over her features. With a bland smile she said, “You’re right.”

Slightly disappointed she didn’t argue, he gently pushed her away. He cleared his throat and straightened the front of his khakis, but the bulge in his pants was prominent. Her eyes focused on it before she blinked and turned to sit on the small leather sofa.

“So, let’s skip the whole *we’ll pretend this didn’t happen* conversation, and you can get right to telling me why you decided to apologize for yesterday,” she said.

Gratitude fought with annoyance at the way she easily changed the subject. It was best to take gratitude’s side. He sat on the edge of the couch making sure to keep as much space as possible between them. He would have preferred to sit somewhere else, but there were no other chairs in the small living room.

He rested his arms on his thighs and rubbed his hands together. “I didn’t like it today when everyone dumped the blame on you for the affair. They didn’t know, or care, about what really happened. I wasn’t any better. Worse even, because you told me what happened when you didn’t have to.” He turned his head and looked at her. “I shouldn’t have done that, and I’m sorry.”

She took a deep breath before shaking her head. “You don’t need to be sorry. You only did what you’ve always done and held me accountable for my mistakes. At the time, I thought he cared and I let that justify what I did. Even when I suspected he may not go through with the divorce.”

“He lied to you.”

She shrugged. “He wasn’t the first, and he won’t be the last. Next time I won’t be dumb enough to fall for a married man’s game.” She fingered the small, gold heart resting at the base of her throat.

“You deserve more.” He sat back and brought his leg on the couch as he faced her.

She lowered her head before glancing at him through her lashes. “You’ve always said that. That’s one of the reasons I love y ...” she cleared her throat and sat up. “Loved being your friend.” She glanced around the room then asked. “So how’s your dad?”

It took a second for her question to register. Had she really almost confessed to ... he didn’t complete the thought. Shayla claimed to love him once before and broke his heart hours later.

“Other than ignoring his high blood pressure and diabetes, he’s good.” He said.

Concern crinkled her brow. “Is he really sick?”

He shook his head. “No, just stubborn. This morning he said he didn’t need to eat right because that’s what the pills were for.”

Shayla laughed; it was a deep and throaty laugh that sent chills across his skin. He watched her throat vibrate with the movement and wanted to run his lips across the smooth column. He twisted in his seat as his dick went back to half swollen.

“That sounds like your dad.” A wistful smile brushed across her lips. “Some of my best memories of this town are sitting around the dinner table with you and him. Maybe I’ll go see him.”

The memories filtered through his mind and he smiled. “He would like that, but he’s not in the old house. After Delores died, he moved out in the county.”

The happiness on her face was replaced with sadness. “I was sorry when I heard about her passing. I sent flowers with my condolences.”

“I didn’t know that.”

She glanced at him. “He didn’t tell you? I’ve kept in touch with him every year, mostly through Christmas cards, but I called when Delores died.”

He floundered in the silence. On one hand he was touched she’d kept in touch with his dad. On the other he was angry she never reached out to him, and that his dad never told him about it.

“You reached out to him, but not me.” His words were solemn.

Her eyes met his. “I reached out to you once, and you didn’t want to talk to me.”

He couldn't deny that. She'd called him during her freshman year of college, and he hadn't wanted to talk to her. It was right after Tony and Peaches visited her, and Tony had called him, bragging about how he still had control over Shayla before giving a play by play of their most recent sexual encounter. He'd foolishly hoped they could try and reconnect after graduation. That once she was away from Tony, she'd come back to him, but that hope was dashed with one phone call.

"I didn't feel like talking ... after Tony updated me on his visit."

She frowned. "What visit?"

"When he came to Spelman with Peaches."

"He didn't come with Peaches. He wanted to. She called to tell me he was coming. I told her to stay home if that was the case."

"Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack. I went to Atlanta to get away from him, why would I want him to visit?"

Devin frowned as he looked at her. "He told me you two had sex."

She winced. "I never willingly slept with Tony."

A vision of Shayla and Tony in bed together flashed through his brain. He shook his head to clear them away. "We both know that's not true."

She scowled. "Do we?"

Before he could respond there was a knock at the door. Shayla groaned and rolled her eyes. He watched as she went to the door, his mind whirling over what she'd said. Tony lying about sleeping with her wasn't surprising. His friendship with Tony died after high school, but when he saw Tony around town he still had a story about the latest woman whose back he'd blown out. But her saying she'd never willingly slept with Tony was like a slap in the face. He knew what he'd seen, and it wasn't Shayla fighting Tony off. If that was the case, he'd have killed Tony that night.

Two voices shrieked, "Shayla!" when she opened the door. With his own suppressed groan he recognized Roxanne's and Peaches's voices.

"What's up, ladies," Shayla said. Her voice was full of false cheerfulness and a small smile played on his lips. Just like old times.

He stood and went to the door. Even though his truck was in the driveway, both Peaches and Roxanne's eyebrows raised to their hairlines. They hadn't changed much since high school. They still had that round the way girl look: hair extensions, eyelash extensions, flashy costume jewelry and even flashier clothes. They could've been twins except Roxanne had short hair with a blonde bang and more ass than any other woman in town, while Peaches's jet black extensions hung to the center of her back.

"Oh, my goodness, Devin's here, too!" Roxanne said waving a hand in the air. "I told Jermaine and Tony to

come with us, it would've been a high school reunion.”

Peaches only looked between him and Shayla with a smirk. She'd always hated on his friendship with Shayla. Mostly because he never followed up any of her attempts to get with him. She'd accuse him of turning her down because he was waiting to catch Shayla between boyfriends. Her accusation was correct, but that was only part of it. He'd never felt Peaches that way.

Shayla stiffened slightly before asking Roxanne, “You're still with Jermaine?”

Roxanne nodded. “Girl, yeah, we've got two kids. Jermaine Jr. and Jordan. He wanted to say what's up, but said he'd see you next Saturday?”

“What?” Shayla asked.

Peaches grinned. “Yes, when we have your welcome back party. We reserved the VIP section at Club Voracious.”

Devin fought the urge to cringe. Tony's club. It was almost fitting that the guy she picked over him would throw her a welcome home party.

Shayla frowned. “Club Voracious? You really shouldn't have gone through so much trouble.”

Peaches sucked her teeth. “Don't act like that. You're my girl, and you know I love a reason to party. Besides, Voracious is Tony's club. He opened it about ten years ago. Unless you want to go to Columbia, Voracious is the only place to have a good time in this town. When I told Tony it was for you, he didn't charge us, just reserved his

best spot.” Peaches’s eyes slid to Devin. “You can come too, Devin. You ain’t been to Tony’s club before. It’ll be a good way to get everyone back together. I know Tony’s looking forward to catching up with Shayla,” she smirked. “Or have *you* already done that?”

Shayla laughed and playfully patted his arm before he could answer. She moved her hand until her fingers dug into his biceps as she said too cheerfully, “Girl, please. Devin just came by to check on me. I fell and twisted my ankle yesterday and he helped me out. Apparently he’s a dedicated doctor.”

Roxanne humped. “Apparently.”

“Anyway, I appreciate the party — ”

Peaches raised a hand. “I know you not so high class you can’t party with us no more?”

Shayla’s grip tightened on his arm. “You can’t let me finish? I appreciate the party because I’ve been bored out of my mind.”

Roxanne and Peaches’s both grinned. Shayla glanced at him before moving her hand to high five with Peaches and Roxanne. Despite her claims, her smile was brittle and her shoulders stiff. She was back to playing the party girl. Something she’d done constantly in high school instead of rocking the boat. He wasn’t in the mood to relive the social dynamics of his youth.

He placed a hand on Shayla’s shoulder. Some of her tension eased and he squeezed gently. “I’m leaving now. I’m glad your ankle’s feeling better. Don’t hesitate to call

if it bothers you.” He should have asked about her ankle before, but completely forgot after kissing her. She still had it wrapped, but wasn’t limping. He expected she’d be back to 100 percent by the weekend.

The corners of her smile softened as she met his eyes. “You’re coming to the party?”

The last thing he wanted to do was spend a penny in Tony’s club. But the way she glanced at him with pleading note in her eye stopped his negative response.

“I think I can make it.”

Roxanne’s eyes widened. “What, you actually gonna party with us?”

Devin shrugged. “Might as well make it a real reunion.”

Peaches frowned and a grateful look came to Shayla’s eye. He could guess what Peaches’s problem was, but he would party with them every weekend to get Shayla to look at him like that. With a mental shake to rid himself of that idea, he nodded before walking off the porch.

Chapter 7

Shayla let her breath out in a huff and tapped her hand against her leg. When the woman ahead of her in line at Piggly Wiggly looked at her, she smiled tightly in a weak attempt to hide her annoyance. What was supposed to be a quick trip into the grocery store for bread and lunch meat had quickly turned into a long wait. The lines were ridiculous, everyone had a buggy full of groceries, and there were only three registers open. She tried to summon some small amount of patience as the woman ahead of her double checked the price of every item rung up and handed the cashier one or two coupons per item.

“No, no, that soup is buy one get one free. I saw it in the paper,” the lady said pulling out the sales ad.

The teenager at the register sighed before answering. “It’s not this soup, ma’am. It’s the ones with the blue label. Everyone’s making that mistake today.”

The lady looked at her paper then the dozen cans of soup in her buggy. “Oh. Well, can you wait a second for me to go get the right one?”

“Oh, good Lord!” Shayla hissed under her breath. She tried to peer over the candy display at the people in

line next to her, but from what she could see it wasn't any better over there. She was tempted to leave the damn bread and walk out. Someone behind her chuckled. She whipped her head around, ready to lacerate whoever found the situation amusing. Her words were forgotten as Devin and his dad approached with a cart behind her.

“Are you laughing at me?”

Devin continued to smile as he walked around his cart to stand beside her. “Yes. You were never patient in check out lines.” He reached over to gently massage the back of her neck. “Calm down.”

The urge to melt into his hands was strong. He used to do the same thing whenever she was nervous or upset when they were in high school. She never understood where his endless amount of patience came from, but it always balanced her need to keep moving. She turned to gaze at him and his hand stopped its massage. Heat slid across her body and she shivered when his thumb gently rubbed her throat. His fingers flexed and brushed against the hair at the base of her neck, reminding her of the way he gripped her head and kissed her earlier in the week. She was right to skip the “*we'll pretend it never happened*” speech because she'd never forget what it was like to kiss Devin. Never stop wanting to kiss him, but she wouldn't repeat it. Her reputation was damaged enough.

She stepped back and he let his hand fall before turning to look at his dad. Mr. Jones was watching them like a hawk, his eyes unreadable. For the first time she

worried if he was disappointed in her too. Mr. Jones was the only father figure she'd had growing up. She only had vague memories of her own dad, who moved to Tennessee when she was six without a goodbye. When Devin's father accepted her into his family fold she'd soaked up his love like a sponge. A rejection from him would hurt as much, if not more, than from Devin.

"Hi, Mr. Jones," she said.

Roscoe Jones' face split with a huge grin. "Don't 'Mr. Jones' me. You're just as bad as Devin when I come to his office." He pulled Shayla into a warm welcoming hug. "It's good to see you, Shayla. I'm glad you came home."

Relief and happiness rushed through her as she stepped back and grinned at Roscoe. "It's good to see you, too."

He looked at Devin. "Isn't it good to see her, Devin?"

Devin shook his head and smiled. "I've seen her already, Dad."

Roscoe waved a hand. "It's still good to see her. What are you getting?"

Shayla held up the loaf of bread and lunch meat. "I plan to make a sandwich for dinner tonight. If I eat any more of my mom's cooking I'll gain ten pounds."

Roscoe laughed. "Girl, you don't have to worry about weight. You look as good as you did in high school." He nudged Devin. "Doesn't she, Devin?"

Devin cleared his throat. He quickly eyed her from head to toe. "Yes, Dad."

Even though it was a brief inspection, her stomach still clenched.

Roscoe turned back to Shayla. “You can’t eat a sandwich for dinner.”

Shayla smiled. “It’s the easiest thing for me to do. I haven’t bought groceries. I thought picking this up would be a quick meal.” She turned as the woman in line before her rushed back with another half a dozen cans of the correct soup. “It’s taking much longer than I thought.”

Roscoe shook his head. “Nonsense. You are not eating a sandwich, and you don’t have to eat with your mom. Devin met me here to pick up a pack of chicken breasts to grill.” He leaned in and held a hand up to his mouth. “Devin’s got me on some low salt, low fat diet. Tastes horrible, but maybe he’ll let me put some real seasoning on it if you come to dinner.”

“I don’t care who comes to dinner, I’m seasoning the food.” Devin said.

Roscoe scoffed. “See what I mean, he’s trying to take everything away in my old age.”

Shayla smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “I’d like to take your side in this, Roscoe, but I’ve got to go with the doctor. He told me about your blood pressure. You need to keep it under control.”

Roscoe frowned but his eyes twinkled with laughter. “Damn kids. Always ganging up on me.” He turned to Devin. “So you agree she should join us for dinner?”

Devin's mouth opened and closed a few times. "Um, I'm sure she has something else to do."

Roscoe scowled before turning to Shayla. "You don't have anything to do except go home and eat a sandwich, right?"

Shayla looked between the two. Common sense said stay the hell away from Devin and his dad, but she genuinely missed Roscoe and hadn't talked to him since his wife died. Dinner with them would be the only reminder of the good times she had in the town. It wouldn't hurt anything, or anyone, to indulge herself in this, would it? Plus, no one could accuse her of trying to get her claws in Devin if her arm was twisted by Roscoe to come to dinner. That was a lie, but she'd let herself believe it.

She smiled at Roscoe. "Nothing at all planned. I'd be happy to eat with you two."

The lady in front of them finally completed her purchase and Shayla dropped her bread and lunch meat on the counter. Mr. Jones put the items from Devin's cart on the counter and told the cashier he was paying for it all.

Shayla shook her head. "Mr. Jones, don't. I can pay for my own bread."

He gently pushed her past the debit card scanner. "I know you can, but I want to do this."

The cashier raised an eyebrow and looked between Shayla and Mr. Jones. Feeling the start of another rumor

Shayla opened her mouth to protest when Devin spoke up.

“Just let him get it. Otherwise he’ll stand here arguing all day.” He said with a grin.

Overruled, Shayla stood out of the way and let Mr. Jones handle the rest of the transaction. Hopefully it wouldn’t get back to her mother that Devin’s father bought groceries for her. When he finished paying, Shayla followed them outside. “Thanks, Mr. Jones, although you really shouldn’t have.”

“Nonsense, you’re practically family. In fact, I used to hope you would be family one day.” He looked meaningfully between her and Devin.

Devin cleared his throat. “Shayla, you can follow us to my dad’s house.”

“Don’t waste the girl’s gas. She can ride with us. You’ve got to come back to town anyway.” Roscoe said. He walked toward Devin’s truck parked near the front. “Come on.” He hollered over his shoulder.

Shayla and Devin stood frozen staring at each other. Devin looked skyward then at her with a wayward smile. “You heard the man.” He held out his hand for her to precede him.

Roscoe kept up a constant flow of chatter on the drive to his home. He sat in the backseat, insisting Shayla sit in the front next to Devin. It took everything in her to pay attention to the man’s conversation. Her eyes kept sliding to the side to look at Devin. Once he caught

her gaze and smiled. Her heart jumped in her chest. She was as nervous as she'd been when she was the junior varsity cheerleader with a crush on the captain of the football team.

They pulled up at Roscoe's house, a white ranch style home with a wrap around front porch. Acres of crop land surrounded it except on one side where there was a pine forest. When she asked if he owned all the land, he just grinned and winked. There was a barn off to one side, with no animals according to Devin and a small chicken coop next to it.

"I've never seen a real chicken in my life." Shayla said grinning. "Can I check them out?"

Roscoe laughed. "Might not be a good idea since we're eating chicken for dinner."

Shayla cringed. "Good point. Why didn't you kill one of them?"

"They're mostly for the eggs. Plus, I didn't have time to butcher one today."

She frowned over at the chicken coop. In hindsight, she probably never needed to see those chickens. She wouldn't want to wonder which one was on her plate if she ate at Roscoe's again.

Devin gently ran his hand along her back. "Are you coming in?"

She jumped and stepped out of his reach before she began to enjoy his touch too much.

Devin cooked the chicken on a small grill in the kitchen, while she chopped vegetables for a salad. Roscoe sat at the table watching them. He kept the conversation on the times she used to visit him and Devin regularly. She was grateful he didn't ask about Mark or her reason for coming home from Atlanta. Soon she was completely relaxed and laughing as Roscoe teased them about the old days when she and Devin were inseparable.

She glanced at Devin, and their eyes met. He lifted the corner of his mouth and her chest tightened with longing for something she couldn't have. She quickly looked away and concentrated on Roscoe's story about their attempt to teach him the words to a Biggie Smalls song. Roscoe had said the song was noise, and they'd insisted it was prophetic. They'd spent that afternoon replaying the lyrics over and over until Roscoe got it right.

Soon she forgot her longing, and tears streamed from her eyes as she laughed at the memory. "I'll never forget you rapping that song. With your pants sagging and your arms waving." She moved her arms in an exaggerated swagger before breaking into a fit of laughter.

Roscoe laughed. "I hate that damn song. But sing it every time it comes on the radio. You two were something back then." He looked at Devin. "I never understood what happened."

Shayla's laughter faded and she looked at Devin. His eyes skirted to hers.

“Dinner’s ready,” he bit out.

He dropped the plate of chicken breasts on the table with a loud thud. Roscoe looked between the two and shook his head, but thankfully changed the subject. She brought the salad to the table and tried to concentrate as Roscoe started talking about old times again, but the jovial feelings from before were gone.

Shalya shifted uncomfortably in her seat and tried to force the chicken down her throat. She’s what happened. She was the reason her and Devin’s friendship ended and she wondered if Roscoe would still welcome her to the table if he knew why. He probably already did. She absently rubbed her cheek as the memory of her mother’s slap after the rumors about what happened after Homecoming reached her. Everyone in town knew why she and Devin fell out.

She and Devin eventually stopped talking. Roscoe tried to keep the conversation flowing, and she appreciated it, but by the time they finished the tension was thick. There was no way she and Devin could ever be friends. She didn’t know who she was fooling.

“Why don’t you two sit on the porch while I clean up the kitchen,” Roscoe said once they finished.

Shalya swallowed a groan. She wanted to go home and drown in a bottle of wine to forget all of her past mistakes.

“I should head home.”

Roscoe waved his hand. “Nonsense. Wait until I finish and then you can go.”

Devin shook his head. “Dad, if she’s ready to leave.”

“Just sit on the damn porch. Y’all cooked, I can clean. It’ll only take a minute. We ate bird food, so there’s not a lot to clean up.”

Shayla couldn’t help but laugh. Resigned to following the man’s instructions, she and Devin left the kitchen. It was dark out, the chill in the air was the first sign of autumn and the sweet smell of the countryside wafted on the breeze. With a contented sigh, Shayla sat on the porch step. She looked at the stars right as one shot across the sky. She closed her eyes and wished things were different. That she and Devin could be together and no one would condemn her for being with him.

She felt his warmth as he sat beside her and opened her eyes, but continued to look to the heavens, not trusting herself to look into his eyes.

“My dad is determined to make things like they were before ...” his voice trailed off.

She sighed. “Before I fucked it all up.” He didn’t answer and it broke her heart. “Look, I know you tried to extend the offer of friendship, and I appreciate that, but who are we kidding. I’m too fucked up and you’re too good.”

He exhaled quickly before answering. “Shayla, I’ve wanted you since the day you braided my hair on

Peaches's porch. It's never gone away."

Her head whipped around. He didn't look at her; instead he too was looking to the heavens as if the answer to their problem was there. Longing pressed heavily on her chest. His braid job was the worse she'd done that summer she'd helped Peaches braid hair. She'd been so distracted having him sit between her legs, that all of his braids were crooked. It was the first time she'd felt desire. The first time she'd known what it was like to want a man.

But she couldn't have Devin. Not then and not now. Her reputation was in shambles and her cousin loved him. It wasn't as if she needed to break up another person's dream.

She smirked. "Don't waste your time wanting me. I'm no good."

He ran his hands over his face. "Shit, Shayla, quit saying that. You've downed yourself since we were kids. I'm not smart enough. I'm not pretty enough," he said in a falsetto tone. "When you know damn well you're smarter than anyone I know and fine as hell. What you lack is confidence."

She stiffened. "I am confident."

"Bullshit." He finally looked at her with anger in his eyes. "If you were, you wouldn't say something so stupid."

"It's not stupid, it's true. You even said it yourself. I'm no good."

“I said that mess after you slept with Tony. What did I say before that? What did I say every day before that? That you were worth more than you gave yourself credit for. Worth more than what your mother gave you credit for.” He reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear. “You’re worth so much and you don’t realize it.”

Tears burned her eyes. She looked away. She wished she could believe him. But she wasn’t worth a damn. If she were, she wouldn’t have gotten drunk at homecoming. She wouldn’t have mistaken one guy for another. She wouldn’t have spent the rest of her life living up to the image of a whore.

She tried to pull away but he stopped her. She looked into his eyes. The darkness hid part of his face, but the intensity in his gaze burned bright. Her breathing stuttered. She wanted more than anything to kiss him. To forget all of the reasons why she should leave him alone and learn what it would be like to finally belong to him.

When his head lowered she turned away. “I can’t, Devin.”

He stiffened and pulled back. When his hand fell away it hurt more than if he’d slapped her. “Now it’s my turn to ask why, Shayla. Why every other man, but not me?”

She gasped as pain sliced through her. She jumped up and fled from the porch to the side of the house. The crunch of his footsteps followed her and she ran trying to escape, but knew she didn’t have anywhere to go. Within

seconds his hand grasped her upper arm and he stopped her. He pulled her into his embrace and she wished she were angry enough to push him away, but dammit, she wanted his arms around her.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

She shook her head. “Stop apologizing to me.”

“I keep insulting you.”

She jerked away. “As if I haven’t insulted you. Admit it, Devin. I’m the slut that ran from your arms to Tony’s in the same night. I flaunted my relationship with him to the entire town and embarrassed you in the process. It’s not you, it’s me. It’s always been me. Sorry, no good, easy Shayla.” Her voice started to waver so she stopped.

His face grew rigid as she spoke. She knew her bluntness was painful, but they both needed to hear it. They both needed to realize that pursuing anything between them was a mistake. Devin was a model citizen, the pride of the community. She was a joke, the easy girl from the wrong side of town.

“I’m ready to go home.”

He regarded her for a few moments before nodding stiffly. “I’ll tell Dad we’re leaving.”

Chapter 8

Shayla parked her car behind Peaches and Roxanne's in the gravel parking lot of Club Voracious. She gripped the steering wheel as she stared at the white flat front building. A large red neon sign blinked the word *Voracious* and cast its glow across the people standing in line and the cars in the parking lot. She'd insisted on driving herself just in case she felt the need to escape. *You're not in high school. You don't have to do what Tony says.* She repeated her mantra again. She hadn't seen Tony in fifteen years and could have gone her entire life never setting eyes on his face. So why was she here?

Peaches and Roxanne hopped out of Roxanne's burgundy Oldsmobile and waved for her to hurry. With a deep breath, she opened the door and got out. Their idle chatter about the outfits of the other women in line was background noise to her. Instead, she concentrated on trying to calm her racing heart. This was crazy, she wasn't a teenager anymore. There was no reason to let one person have such a chokehold on her emotions. Still, her steps shortened as they approached the entrance.

Roxanne turned and put a hand on her hip. "Girl, hurry up. It's your party."

Peaches turned and waited with a raised eyebrow. Amusement and a cold resentment filled her eyes. Peaches looked as if she knew Shayla was afraid to enter and enjoyed every moment. Shayla swallowed, clutching her small purse to keep from tapping her hand on her leg. She wasn't doing this. To hell with being considered stuck up for bailing on her own welcome home party. She didn't want to, couldn't, face Tony.

Peaches's eyes narrowed and shifted over Shayla's shoulder at the same time a warm hand clasped the back of her neck. Instantly she relaxed and breathed. She turned and looked into Devin's eyes. His fingers gently massaged the back of her neck, sending comforting warmth throughout her body. She hadn't seen him since returning his confession with brutal honesty the week before. She hadn't dared hope he would still come tonight. Why would he want to witness the reunion of Helena High's notorious couple of the late 90s?

"You came." Her voice was breathless and full of gratitude.

The corner of his mouth lifted. "I said I was coming." He looked at Peaches and Roxanne. "Let's get the party started."

Peaches's lips twisted in a scowl, but Roxanne smiled and waved them to come on. He dropped his hand and followed. Shayla brought up the rear and focused on how good Devin's ass looked in his jeans instead of the upcoming reunion with Tony. The guy at

the door hugged Roxanne and Peaches. His eyebrows shot up when he saw Devin.

“What, Dr. Jones coming out to hang?” the guy said.

Devin grinned and gave him a one armed hug.

“What’s up, Larry. Yeah, I’m coming out to celebrate Shayla’s homecoming.” He turned and held out a hand to Shayla.

Despite knowing it was wrong, she grabbed his hand and held on for dear life. When she met the eyes of the guy at the door recognition hit her. Larry used to play football in high school. He hadn’t been part of their clique, but he was a frequent attendee at Tony’s parties. Larry smiled and reached over to hug her.

“I heard you were back in town. Long time no see.” He pulled back and grinned.

“Same here, Larry,” she said. “You work here?”

He shook his head. “Part time. I work for the sheriff’s department, and on my days off I handle security for Tony.” He eyed her hand still clasped in Devin’s and smirked. “Hopefully nothing will pop off tonight.” He stepped out of the way. “Have fun.”

Devin squeezed her hand and they crossed the threshold into the dimly lit club. Hip hop music blasted and she read Peaches’s lips to follow instead of hearing the words. She would have expected the inside of a club owned by Tony to look like a hole in the wall. But the interior was impressive. Flashing lights bounced off cream walls adorned with large mirrors in gilded frames

reflecting the dancers on the floor. The bar was stocked, the chrome railings and wood top shining. The tables not part of the VIP were full, as were all of the seats at the bar. Devin didn't let go as they followed Peaches and Roxanne through the crowd to one of the partitioned off areas. There black velvet furniture and a few tables, all polished to a shine, waited with bottles of chilling champagne.

Because VIP was partitioned off from the rest of the club it was not as loud, but Roxanne still had to shout for them to hear her say this was their spot. Someone grabbed her from the side and pulled her away from Devin. She fought panic as she hastily turned to face them. Her panic quickly fled when she met Jermaine's friendly brown eyes.

"Jermaine!" She grinned and hugged him before standing back. There were laugh lines on his tan skin, his once thick hair was balding at the top and there was more padding around his middle than there'd been in high school. But he still had a ready smile and laughing eyes.

"Welcome home, Shayla! I would have come to see you sooner, but I've been busy at the shop. It's good to see you," he said.

"Same here, Jermaine. Shop, did you actually start your own mechanic shop?"

Surprise lighted Jermaine's eyes. "You remember that?"

Shayla laughed. “How could I forget? Whenever anyone had a problem with their car you were the man to call. I’m glad to hear you finally made your dream happen.” She looked between him and Roxanne. “I hear y’all got kids now.”

Roxanne hugged up to his side and he grinned. “Yeah, Roxanne can’t get enough of big daddy.”

Roxanne rolled her eyes, but squeezed him tighter. “Whatever. You know it’s the other way around.”

Jermaine laughed and reached out to give Devin pound. “What’s up, Devin? I didn’t believe it when Roxanne said you were clubbing with us tonight.”

Devin shrugged. “Hey, they said let’s get the band back together.”

Jermaine nodded but looked at Shayla with a sly smile. “No doubt.”

Peaches popped a cork on one of the bottles of champagne. “Let’s have a drink until Tony can join us.”

Instead of appearing anxious about Tony’s arrival, Shayla accepted the glass of champagne from Peaches and sat on the couch beside Devin. The next hour was spent drinking champagne and reminiscing about old times. She made sure to steer the conversation to fun times before Homecoming by bringing up some of Jermaine, Roxanne and Peaches’s most shining moments in high school. Thankfully, no one brought up that ill fated night.

Two glasses later and much of her anxiety had faded. She could do this. Picking up the routine was like riding a bike. In fact, now that everyone was older and more mellowed out, she didn't have to try so hard.

Jermaine leaned forward in his seat and grinned. "Remember that party we had at my house the summer before senior year?"

They all let out a collective sigh and groan. Shayla placed a hand over her face. "I barely remember it."

Peaches laughed. "Me too. How many shots did we take that night?"

Devin took a sip from his drink before saying. "Too many." But there wasn't any disappointment in his voice.

Shayla grinned. "How many did you take? That was the first time you got drunk."

He nodded. "The first and last."

Roxanne clapped her hands. "And a good thing too. Oh, Devin, I'll never forget the way you were on that couch. Moaning and saying you were going to die."

Devin shook his head while they all laughed. "I felt terrible. What was that stuff?"

Jermaine snapped his fingers as if trying to remember. "Some stuff my cousin brewed up. That crap will rot out your gut."

"I believe it," Devin said. He bumped Shayla with his shoulder. "I wouldn't have gotten through the night without you."

She couldn't help the blush that came across her face. Since his parents were out of town and they'd all been too drunk to drive home, they spent the night at Jermaine's. It was the first time she'd slept with a guy, even though there wasn't much sleeping on her part. Devin fell asleep with his head in her lap and she spent most of the night rubbing his head and wishing he were sober enough to make a move. Though nothing happened, holding Devin and the gratitude on his face the next morning made up for it.

Peaches grunted. "Devin didn't drink after that night." She smirked at Shayla. "We can't all say that."

Devin shifted away from her on the couch. Shayla's smile froze. It was the first reference to the disaster that was Homecoming. She narrowed her eyes at Peaches, whose smile turned sly before she looked away. Although Peaches always claimed to not look down on Shayla for what happened that night, she'd taken a perverse pleasure in bringing it up afterwards. Especially whenever Shayla tried to bridge the gap between her and Devin.

Jermaine quickly changed the subject to something else. She gave him a grateful smile and joined in. Realizing no one was going to go there, Peaches let it go but kept her eyes on the door marked 'office' across the dance floor. Eventually Devin relaxed again and stretched his arm out along the back of the couch. Every so often his thumb would brush the skin on her back exposed by her gold halter top, sending a shiver down her spine. He seemed oblivious to his affect on her, while

she kept taking deep breaths just to breathe in his cologne. The urge to curl up into his side, the same way Roxanne was curled up next to Jermaine, overwhelmed her. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the way his copper skin glowed beneath the lights, but she went with it.

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and pretended to pull on the waistband of her leggings as a way to scoot closer to him. His fingers toyed with the ends of her hair where it brushed against his hand. He gave her his half smile, his eyes telling her he knew she was trying to get closer. She couldn't help but return with a smile of her own.

“Hey, Devin, I thought that was you.”

Devin turned away. “Hey, Kia.”

The moment shattered. Shayla slid away from Devin. She wasn't supposed to be flirting with him. Not only had she forcefully reminded him why she was wrong for him, but her cousin loved him. She pushed her champagne flute away before she drank more and really started acting foolish.

When she met her cousin's eyes the warning she'd given previously was there. “What's up, Shayla?”

Shayla smiled. “Nothing much. My friends just decided to celebrate my homecoming.”

Kia licked her lips and smiled at Devin. “Well, I hope you don't mind me borrowing Devin for a minute. I was hoping he'd dance with me.” She looked back at Shayla. “Besides, y'all have just been sitting here talking.”

Fighting back jealousy and the urge to answer her cousin's challenge Shayla, gave Devin a slight nudge. "Go on. It'll be fun."

Devin nodded and stood. "Sure."

Kia's eyes lit up and she reached out to take Devin's hand. Forgetting her promise not to drink, Shayla gulped down the rest of her champagne as she watched her young, sexy cousin sashay across the room to the dance floor with her man. *He's not your man.*

"C'mon, Jermaine. Let's dance." Roxanne said. Jermaine groaned but got up and followed her onto the floor.

Peaches's smile returned as she refilled Shayla's glass. "Devin looks good with your cousin. I know a lot of people who want to see them together."

Shayla cut her eyes at Peaches. "Are you one of them? I remember you used to crush on Devin pretty hard back in the day."

Peaches's smile became brittle. "I didn't crush on Devin."

Shayla swirled the champagne in her glass. "Whatever you say."

"I'm over that. Just like it seems he's over his fascination with you." She looked out on the dance floor. "Looks like Kia's auditioning to fill the empty spot in his bedroom."

Shayla took a sip of the bubbly liquid. She looked out on the dance floor and swallowed hard. Kia was

bumping, grinding, and damn near sexing Devin on the dance floor. Didn't the girl remember he was her boss? When did Kia's breasts get so big? They almost popped out of the top of her black and silver dress. And she knew her aunt wouldn't approve of the length; it barely reached mid thigh. When Kia bent over and rubbed her butt against Devin's crotch, Shayla gripped her glass. Did he have to put his hands on her hips? Granted it was to put space between them, but still. All Kia had to do was hike her skirt up and Devin could easily slide right home.

Two more glasses and a song later, she'd about worked up enough anger to break up Kia's freak show regardless of the consequences when the music changed. It took a second for her alcohol and anger clouded mind to register what played, but once she recognized the opening strains of LSG's "My Body" all of the blood rushed from of her face. Her stomach churned queasily and memories of that song playing in a dark room, and warm breath that smelled like stale beer against her neck flew through her mind. She shook her head to clear the memories, but it was useless.

Pushing down the disgust and anxiety that came whenever that song played, she stood. Hoping to escape to the bathroom for a few minutes and regroup. She put her glass on the table. When she straightened, instead of making her escape she met Tony's black eyes. He smiled, a knowing glint in his eye. He hadn't changed much since high school. She briefly wondered why Jermaine, the nice one, had to go bald and gain weight. Tony's body was sculpted beneath the tight black v-neck shirt and

white slacks he wore. His dark skin was barely creased with age lines and it gleamed in the lights just like the polished furniture. His smile widened, revealing even white teeth while his narrow eyes swept over her from head to toe.

It took all her self control to hold back her shiver and paste a nonchalant smile on her face. She would not let him know how much he repulsed her.

He held up a bottle of cognac and two glasses. “Welcome home, Shayla.” His voice was low, smooth and it made her skin crawl. He entered the VIP and sat where Devin had before. “Sit.” He said to Shayla before turning to Peaches. “What’s up, Peaches?”

Peaches grinned. “Chillin’ with Shayla. How you doing, Tony?”

Tony nodded. “I’m good. Give me and my girl a minute.”

With a sly smile, Peaches stood and left the VIP. Tony opened the bottle and poured the liquid into the glasses. He raised a glass to her and cocked a brow. “Sit. Unless you’re afraid of me.”

Raising her chin she sat on the chair, but put as much room in between them as she could. He ran the glass against her arm, the coolness causing her to shiver. “Take the drink. Or are you worried about what’ll happen if you drink around me.” There was laughter in his voice. He was mocking her.

Shayla straightened her spine. He was an asshole that had no control over her. She took the glass and gave him her coldest smile. “I’m not seventeen anymore. This time I’ll fight.”

He laughed and stretched out on the couch. “I always liked it when you fought.” He lifted his glass. “I hope you like the song.”

Shayla gulped the cognac. It burned her throat, and she wished it was just as easy to burn memories away. “I should have known you picked it.”

“Why not? It’s our song. I look on that night fondly.”

“I don’t think about that night.”

He tisked. “You hurt me, Shayla. We were the most popular couple in school. Everyone wished they could be us, and it all started that night.”

She took another swallow and welcomed the warmth in her stomach and lightness in her head. She could do this. “How long have you owned this club?”

“Just like old times. Change the subject when you don’t want to talk about something.”

“Damn right.”

He snickered and slid closer. “I got a better way to change the subject. Why don’t we go on the floor and give Devin and your fine ass cousin some competition.”

Her eyes flew back to the dance floor. Devin and Kia had stayed on the floor with the music change. Bile churned in her stomach when she saw how close Devin

held Kia. She closed her eyes and finished her drink. “I see no reason to do that.”

Tony’s fingers slid across her back. She stiffened, but didn’t pull away. She kept her eyes closed when he whispered in her ear. “I hear you got caught sucking some politician’s cock in Atlanta. Good ole Shayla.”

She jerked away. “That’s not what happened.”

He scoffed and sipped from his drink. “You gonna blame it on the alcohol again?”

“Fuck you, Tony.”

He smiled. “Sounds like a plan. We can go to my office.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

He shrugged and refilled her glass. “Why should I, being myself got me everything I’ve wanted.” His gaze swept over her. “I never understood why you wanted to change. Run off to Atlanta and try to play the good girl. You’re no good girl. You’re just as fucked up as I am. Otherwise you wouldn’t be up to your same old tricks. You just moved on to bigger fish. Face it, Shayla, that night I got what I wanted only proved you’re just as scandalous as me.”

“I said no.”

He cocked a brow. “Once, and that doesn’t count.” He tipped his glass to her.

Confusion whirled around in her fogged brain. The old feelings were back. Humiliation, anger, fear,

uncertainty. She reached for the charm on her neck to keep from tapping her hands. Had she done enough, fought enough, or had she just been another drunk girl at a party, too fucked up to realize she was making a mistake. Her heart pounded in her chest as anxiety crept up her throat. She gulped from her drink to shove it down. She didn't feel the burn of the alcohol, just welcomed the dulling of her memories.

Tony grinned and brought his glass to his lips, but his hand froze. "Devin, glad you came to the party."

Shayla's head snapped up. She blinked to bring Devin into focus then wished she hadn't. His disappointment was back. She was stupid for coming. Stupid for asking him to come, and wrong for forcing him to witness her reunion with Tony. He deserved someone better than her, someone like Kia.

With her practiced smile she reached out a wobbly hand and picked up the bottle of liquor. "Join the party." She said with forced cheer and refilled her glass.

Chapter 9

Not for the first time that night, Devin wondered why in the hell he'd come. He should turn and leave Shayla here with her mission of self destruction that surfaced whenever she was around Tony. He watched as revulsion flashed in her eyes when Tony brushed against her. Her hand trembled when she poured another glass. Instead of leaving, his knees bent and he lowered himself in the neighboring chair. He cursed himself for a fool, but as usual he couldn't resist trying to fix things when Shayla was upset.

Tony smiled at Devin, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Well, well, well. Dr. Jones left his home on Johnston Street and joined the regular people."

Shayla gasped. "You live on Johnston Street?"

He met her eyes and shifted uncomfortably. "Yes."

Her lips curved into a wobbly smile. He wished she didn't look so happy to find out he bought a house on the street he once promised her he would. The moment was interrupted by Roxanne and Jermaine joining them.

There was a noticeable difference in Shayla's behavior. Before Tony came she'd been relaxed. Now her

laughter was forced, her smile didn't reach her eyes and she was pressed into the side of the chair away from Tony. She flinched almost imperceptibly whenever Tony brushed against her.

She'd been the same way in high school after she'd hooked up with Tony. At the time he'd been so angry about her betrayal, he'd written it off as something she deserved. Now that he wasn't bogged down with all of the hurt and teenage angst, he could see that she was scared. But why would she be afraid of Tony? Had it been fear in high school, too?

Anger caused his shoulders to stiffen as he watched them. She didn't want to be here, so why pretend as if she did. Thankfully she'd just held onto the last drink she'd poured. After downing champagne like water when he'd danced with Kia — something he would regret come Monday morning — and nearly inhaling two shots of liquor when Tony came over, she didn't need another drink. Her eyes were drowsy, her words slurred. He pressed his lips together in a frown. She couldn't drive home like this.

He looked at Tony and frowned when Tony's lips rose in a sly smile. "We had a lot of good times in high school, but the best night was Homecoming."

Roxanne and Jermaine's smiles froze before they both gave equally forced laughs. Shayla groaned and lifted the glass to her lips with shaky hands.

Devin reached out and took the glass. "Don't you think you've had enough?"

Embarrassment flashed in her eyes before anger replaced it. “Disappointed in me again, Devin?”

Tony laughed. “Just as uptight as he was in high school. I guess that’s the reason you made your decision.”

Shayla glared at him. “Shut up, Tony.”

Tony shrugged. “Or was it because you know we’re just alike.”

Devin narrowed his eyes on Tony. “She’s nothing like you.”

“Tell yourself that.” Tony lifted his shot glass and downed the drink in one gulp.

Shayla jumped up. She swayed before righting herself and glaring at them both. “I’m not like either of you. I’m not as fucked up as Tony and I’m not as good as Devin. To hell with your pissing match, I’m going home.”

She took an unsteady step and Devin shot out of his chair. “You can’t drive.”

She tried to step away, but stumbled and knocked over the ice bucket that once held the champagne. It hit the floor with a loud crash and people nearby turned to watch. There was laughter as she tried to stand and straighten her halter top.

Tony laughed and brushed ice from his lap. “She got it, Devin.”

Devin rolled his eyes and reached for Shayla’s arm. She snatched away and with a frustrated sigh he hauled

her over his shoulder. Her feet swung with her kicks as her small fists pounded into his back while she cursed him out. He tightened his hold on her legs, refusing to allow her to drive home drunk. Peaches ran over while Roxanne and Jermaine got out of the way. Tony just sat and watched with a satisfied smile on his face.

Peaches took one look at Shayla and grinned. “Home girl up to her old tricks again.” She looked at Tony and winked.

Devin glared at Peaches, who had the decency to stop laughing and get out of his way. Shayla froze. “Devin, I’m gonna throw up. I won’t drive, just put me down.”

He quickly placed her back on her feet and held her as she tried to steady herself. Her skin was flushed and her mouth pressed closed. “I’ll drive you home,” he said taking her hand and leading her out of the VIP. He ignored the curious stares from those who’d witnessed the show on the way out. He’d get another lecture about Shayla when he returned to work on Monday.

She didn’t say anything when they got to his truck. After he helped her in and shut the door, she curled up in the seat and faced away from him. But what was there to say? He didn’t have to be the one to take her home. Roxanne or Peaches could have done that. The truth was he’d rather take her home than leave her there and find out through the grapevine that she’d ended up going home with Tony. He wasn’t even going to pretend he wouldn’t care if she hooked up with Tony again.

Although her actions tonight made that possibility seem unlikely.

Why she was afraid of Tony? After Homecoming she used to try harder to prove she was happy whenever Tony was around. Before he thought it was only to rub their relationship in his face, but now he doubted that. *I never willingly slept with Tony.* Her words a few days ago rang through his head.

He thought back to that time in high school when Shayla had broken his heart so completely. Tony was the leader of their clique mostly because his ego couldn't let him be anything less. Shayla confessed to him that she thought Tony was conceited and rude. They'd talk for hours about the hypocrisies of high school and the way everyone tried to be something they weren't just to fit in. She'd said Devin was the only person she could be herself around.

Everyone assumed she and Devin would end up together; Shayla was the reason half his girlfriends in high school broke up with him. But he'd always hesitated to ask her out. Her father left when she was young and her mother only saw the worst in her. Her mom did nothing to combat the rumors that Shayla was just as easy as her dad. The rumors made every guy in high school try to get with her, and in turn she resented it. He didn't want to be in the same boat. Even though he'd wanted more, he'd vowed to be her friend first.

Until Homecoming. His latest girlfriend had broken up with him because he'd had a late night study session

with Shayla, and she didn't believe that the only thing going on was geometry. Shayla waited outside of the locker room after the game and admitted she wanted to be his girl. He said yes. She'd grinned from ear to ear and kissed him so hard he'd wanted to forget the Homecoming party and spend the night with her in the back seat of his dad's car. From the way she'd snuggled into his side on the way to the party, and kissed his neck he'd thought she felt the same. He'd even suggested they skip, but she said they had to at least make an appearance.

His grip tightened on the steering wheel when he thought about how badly the night went from there. Peaches had passed around drinks the minute they'd arrived. Tony was extra cocky, since he'd scored the winning touchdown. Devin would never forget the sneer Tony gave when he and Shayla announced they were a couple. From that moment Tony had spent the rest of the night keeping her from Devin's side: dancing, playing cards, and wrapping his arm around her shoulder whenever he pulled her away. She'd rolled her eyes, but every time she tried to leave Tony's side, somebody always pulled them back together.

Memories he'd pushed away for years came rushing back in a blur: Shayla stumbling when she walked, him insisting that they leave, Peaches begging him to fix her flat tire before he left. Shayla had argued with him when he told her to lie down upstairs and wait on him, and said he was embarrassing her. Once the tire was changed and he'd brushed off Peaches attempt to kiss him, he'd

gone upstairs to the last thing he ever expected to see. Tony and Shayla having sex.

His heart broke in that instant. When she tried to explain the next day he'd refused to listen. What was there to explain? They barely spoke after that. He'd been too embarrassed to admit how badly she'd hurt him. Half the football team saw him kissing Shayla after the game and Tony told the other half he'd slept with Shayla later that night. Instead of showing that he cared, he went along with everyone else who treated Shayla like a slut. He'd watched her spiral down a path of self destruction: drinking, partying and smoking weed with Tony for the rest of the school year. But he'd never stopped and asked her why.

He was so deep in thought he hadn't realized he drove home instead of to her house until he pulled up in the driveway. He sighed and hung his head before turning to Shayla. A soft sigh escaped her lips as she curled up against the door, fast asleep. Too tired to drive across town to her house, he got out and carried her in.

She woke up enough to wrap her arms around his shoulders. He took her upstairs to his guest bedroom. Shayla sighed and rubbed her nose against his neck. Despite the bitter aftertaste of high school memories, arousal heated his blood.

“Devin,” she said.

“What?”

She gripped his neck tighter. “My Devin. I thought it was you.”

He walked over and placed her on the bed. Her eyes cracked open and tears slipped down the side of her face. He sat beside her and wiped them away.

“Why are you crying?”

She moved her head from side to side then groaned. He let her turn over and hug the pillow. “That night, I thought it was you.” Her words were soft, he had to strain to hear them, but they pounded through his head as if she’d shouted.

She sighed and snuggled into the pillow, her breathing becoming slow and even. Gently, he shook her shoulder.

“Shayla.”

She didn’t stir. He wanted answers. Had she been so drunk that night she couldn’t tell him from Tony? Nobody got that drunk. He wasn’t a lush, but he’d had his drunken moments and every time he was cognizant of what he was doing.

The need for answers scattered around inside him like a spilled bottle of marbles. He wanted to shake her awake and demand to know what happened, how she could possibly make such a grievous mistake.

Instead, he got up from the bed and slipped the shoes off her feet. He covered her with a blanket and walked to his room. Without even thinking of what he was doing he undressed and got into his bed: confused, angry, and burning to finally settle the rift between him and Shayla.

Chapter 10

Shayla awoke with a start after falling and hitting something hard. She cried out. Her arms and legs were pinned against her body by a blanket, and scrambled to get loose. The blanket covered her face, but after a few seconds of frantic struggling her arms and head popped free. She was on the floor, in an unfamiliar bedroom next to the bed — where she must have fallen from. The last thing she remembered was trying to drink the memories of Tony out of her mind. Panic squeezed her chest. *Oh, God, please don't let me be in Tony's house!*

Her gaze darted around the tastefully decorated room. There were no personal effects: the dresser wasn't cluttered with keys, coins, and the junk that accumulated in her bedroom. Except for the covers that slid off the bed with her, it looked like a seldom used guest bedroom. She fell back and placed a hand over her pounding head. Tony wouldn't put her in a guest bed. He wasn't that decent.

Footsteps pounded down the hall and the door flew open. She jerked up and lifted her arms in defense. Her throat constricted as Devin stopped at the door wearing only a pair of boxers. She dropped her hands, and her

jaw, as the morning sunlight streamed through the blinds onto his copper skin. His body was slender with lean ropes of muscle defining his arms and legs. Golden brown strands of hair covered his chiseled chest and trailed down across a trim stomach to disappear beneath the waistband of his boxers. Her gaze followed the trail to where his boxers tented in the front. She gulped. Everything on him appeared long ... and strong.

She blinked and raised her eyes to his. "It's you."

He eyed her warily. "Of course it's me. I brought you home last night. Are you okay? I heard a thud."

She looked at the bed and rolled her eyes. "I fell out of the bed."

"You can't be serious."

She heard the laughter in his voice and wanted to be mad. Instead humor fought with embarrassment. "Yes, just like a drunk."

"I was thinking more like a five year old, but we can go with drunk."

When she looked at him he was smiling and she shook her head. He moved toward her and she held up her hand. "Stand back, I probably smell worse than I look."

She untangled the blanket from her legs and stood. The hardwood floors were cool against her bare feet. She looked around for her shoes. "I'll grab my stuff and go."

"No hurry. I have to take you to your car. Why don't you take a shower first?"

She cocked an eyebrow. “You can’t possibly want me in your home longer than necessary.”

Despite her earlier warning, he walked over and cupped her chin with a warm hand. His thumb softly caressed her cheek, sending tingles down her spine. “Stop telling me what I want.” He spoke softly, his whisky colored eyes boring into hers.

She held her breath; she couldn’t breathe when he looked at her like that, and she was afraid to breathe on him.

“There’s an extra toothbrush in the guest bathroom, I’ll lend you some clothes while we wash yours.” His fingers brushed against her chin as he dropped his hand and walked out.

She stood there blinking after him caught up in the warm sensations caused by his brief contact. Then, his words registered.

He planned to wash her clothes.

That would take over an hour, and she needed to run as far away as she could. Every time he looked at her like that she forgot all of the reasons she was wrong for him.

She sniffed her halter top and scowled. How could he bear to stand so close to her? The aroma of cigarette smoke and alcohol from a night of clubbing was coming from her in waves. By now the entire town would know he’d brought her to his home. Her mom, aunt, and

cousin would all be ready to tear into her the moment she pulled into the driveway.

What the hell. The damage was done. She might as well shower and wash her clothes before facing the judge and jury.

She walked out of the room, just as Devin pulled a towel and wash cloth out of a closet. She took them from him with a grateful smile and hurried into the room he indicated. She took a quick shower, enjoying the sandalwood scent of the body wash he'd left on the counter, before brushing her teeth. She frowned at her reflection. Her hair was a wavy damp mess, but she had to wash the club smell out. At least there weren't any dark circles under her eyes.

When she finished, she did a quick look in the medicine cabinet and under the counter for signs that another woman shared the space. Satisfied that her search came up empty handed, she wrapped herself in a towel and rushed back to the guest bedroom. A pair of men's plaid pajama bottoms and a grey t-shirt were on the bed. She had to roll up the hem on the pants twice to keep from tripping over them.

A few minutes later she wandered downstairs. His house was beautiful, full of large windows, hardwood floors, and dark furniture. She didn't know which one on Johnston Street he lived in, but the inside matched the historic colonial style of the houses in this neighborhood. Following the scent of food into the kitchen, she found

Devin at the stove. He looked over his shoulder when she shuffled in and sat at the table.

“You look a lot better.”

“Dang, did I look that bad?”

He slid an omelet from the pan onto a plate and set it in front of her. “Let’s just say hung over isn’t your best look.”

“I’m not hung over.”

“I’m surprised. You fell asleep in my truck.” He pulled another omelet out of the microwave, grabbed a bowl of pineapple, and joined her at the table.

Her cheeks heated with happiness knowing he’d given her the warmest one. Most guys would have shoved the cold omelet at her. “Why did you bring me here?”

He stared at her. His brows knitted over his eyes as if he were trying to figure something out. “I had a lot on my mind last night. I drove home without even realizing where I was going.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“Homecoming.”

Her gaze dropped to the omelet. The happiness from before hardened into a knot of dread in her stomach.

“And I was trying to understand why you’re afraid of Tony.”

Shayla slowly took a bite of the omelet. He watched her and she knew he was judging her reaction. It was foolish to deny Tony upset her. She hadn’t handled her

reunion with him with half of the dignity she'd imagined. She'd always thought that if she saw him again she'd tell him just how much of a slimy creep he was for doing what he'd done. Instead, she'd cowered and succumbed to the shame and humiliation that had held her captive in high school.

She swallowed and looked around. "Do you have anything to drink?"

He smirked, before getting up and getting orange juice and two glasses. She took the juice from him and poured for both of them. "This omelet is really good. What's in it?"

"Spinach, mushrooms, and gouda. Now, stop changing the subject and tell me what's up with you and Tony."

She tapped her foot and avoided his gaze. "There is no me and Tony."

"You were a nervous wreck before going into the club. It took an hour for you to relax, but the minute Tony showed up; you became skittish and started drinking like a sailor."

She shrugged and concentrated on the omelet. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He folded his arms on the table top and leaned forward. "You were the same way around him after Homecoming. Before, you viewed Tony as an annoyance, but after Homecoming, you became edgy and had to drink, or smoke, to have a good time. At the time, I

thought it was because I was still around and you wanted to flaunt your relationship in my face, but last night proved differently.”

She flinched. Flaunting her relationship with Tony was the last thing she'd ever wanted to do. The only way she could cope with her relationship with Tony was to escape. It helped her deal with the names people called her and the humiliation of knowing she was trapped.

She kept her head down and pushed the omelet around on her plate. She tapped her fingers against the table while trying to think of what to say. He reached over and placed his hand over hers. “Last night, you said you thought it was me that night.”

She pulled her hand away and finally met his eyes. “Did I?”

“You did. I think it's time you finally told me what happened.”

Her brows drew together. “You want to know now? After fifteen years? You didn't give a damn to hear what happened the next day.” She rubbed her cheek, remembering her mother's slap. “No one wanted to know.”

“I know, and I'm sorry. But Shayla, you have to admit that night was pretty fucked up. You waited for me after the game, said you wanted to be my girl, and I said yes. I thought we both wanted the same thing, but I find you in bed with Tony. How could you get so drunk that you couldn't tell us apart?”

“It wasn’t like that. I wasn’t trying to get drunk. I only had a few beers, and the one drink Peaches gave me. The next thing I know, the room’s spinning and you’re hauling me upstairs telling me to lie down. It was dark. I heard the crackling of a condom wrapper. I called your name, but got no answer. Then there were lips on my neck. My shirt was pulled up ... and my skirt hiked up” she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I started to panic and called your name, again. A voice said ‘yes’ so I relaxed, until he kissed me. I knew it wasn’t you, but by then it was too late ... he was ... ” she shook her head as the memories of that night with Tony played through her mind.

“You didn’t tell him to stop, or try to push him off?”

She met his gaze. “It had gone that far, I figured I’d let him finish.”

Disappointment reflected in his brown eyes and she couldn’t take it. She stood and took her plate to the sink. She’d said no — asked Tony to stop — but he ignored her. By then it was easier to let him finish than fight. Every time she remembered, she hated herself for not trying harder. What type of girl just lay there and let a guy do that? Someone as no good as her mom had always said she was. Someone who didn’t deserve a man like Devin.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She turned to face him. He still sat at the table, toying with the food on his plate. “I tried to explain, but you didn’t want to listen. I really couldn’t blame you. If I

would have found you in bed with Peaches or Roxanne, I would have been pissed. It wasn't that big of a deal."

He turned to look at her and she averted her eyes so he couldn't see the lie in them.

"Not a big deal. He took advantage of you?"

She scoffed. "Come on, Devin. I opened my eyes and saw it was him. I could have stopped him ... if I'd tried. I didn't and that's that."

He got up from the table and came to her. "Shayla."

She moved away, avoiding his hand and his gaze. She played with the charm at her neck. "You know what, forget about washing my clothes. I can go home like this."

He dropped his hand. "You don't have to run away."

"I'm not running away. I just want to go home and sleep off this hangover."

"I thought you didn't have a hangover."

"I lied. Not like that's anything new."

She didn't look at him, but knew he was staring. Studying her the way he always did when he was trying to understand her reasoning. He'd been trying to figure her out since they'd met, but still hadn't realized she wasn't worth the effort.

Tired of his scrutiny, she flipped the conversation. "Why did you buy a house on Johnston Street?" She finally looked up.

He blinked. It was his turn to look away. He got his plate off the table and put it in the sink.

His long fingers gripped the edge of the counter. “I like this house.”

“Did you remember your promise to me?”

Johnston Street was the good part of town. They’d walk down Johnston Street after school and admire the large colonial style houses. Picking out which one they’d buy if they had the money and making up stories of the perfect lives the owners had to have. He’d teased her, said they could buy one together. At the time he was dating some girl on the beta club so instead of letting him know how happy that statement made her, she’d reminded him that she didn’t plan to live in Helena. Though he’d looked disappointed, he’d still wrapped an arm around her shoulder and said he would buy a house there for her to stay in whenever she visited. Afterwards it became their secret joke; their house on Johnston Street.

He pushed away from the sink. “It had nothing to do with buying this house. In fact, I’d forgotten until just now.”

She hid her pain beneath a smile. “It was a stupid promise.”

He shook his head. “Nothing between us was stupid, Shayla. Our friendship was real, our feelings for each other were sincere, but we’re different people. Too different. There’s a reason you and me never worked out.”

Although he'd finally admitted to what she'd tried to tell him, her chest tightened. She tried to blink back tears, but one escaped which she hastily wiped from her cheek.

“You know my cousin wants to marry you.”

A surprised panic flashed in his face. “Are you serious?”

She nodded. “Yep, and I think it's great. You two would make a cute ... co-couple.” The words almost stuck in her throat.

He reached over and wiped another tear from her eye with his thumb. Instead of pulling away he stepped closer, enveloping her with his warmth. He smelled like the body wash he'd put in the bathroom with her. She looked up and gasped when she saw the anguish and desire mingling with the gold flecks in his eyes. Sizzling heat flowed within her, gathering wet and hot between her legs.

What would one time hurt? Everyone already assumed she was going to seduce him. Now that he'd brought her here the damage was done. She might as well get something out of the gossip that was sure to come. But besides that, she'd wanted Devin since she'd first laid eyes on him. And he wanted her, too.

Before she could change her mind, she slid her hand under his shirt. His body was hot, and it ignited a twin fire within her. The muscles in his back flexed beneath her hands. He sucked in a breath before exhaling it in

one ragged rush. She parted her lips and lifted her head in a silent invitation.

Doubt flashed in his eyes before he quickly lowered his lids and covered her mouth with his. She parted her lips, gliding her tongue across his full lower lip. His mouth opened and she took the lead, but it was fleeting. He pulled her against his hard body and took over.

She couldn't breathe; she was dizzy with desire. She tried to pull back, to regain control, but he was relentless. Finally she succumbed. Her hand beneath his shirt gripped his muscled back as her other ran through his soft hair.

When he pulled away, she groaned, wanting more. With hungry eyes he stared at her. Uncertainty and desire fought for control in his gold flecked gaze. Desire won out. He didn't say a word, but took her hand and swiftly led her out of the kitchen.

She didn't give herself the opportunity to think about what she was doing. To say it was a mistake, or that she'd regret it later. They both knew this wasn't going anywhere, but to deny the attraction would only make the fire burn hotter.

She only got a glimpse of his bedroom before he pulled her against him and took her lips in a demanding kiss. His hot lips blazed a trail from her mouth to her neck, where he gently sucked on the sensitive skin above her shoulder. Liquid heat shot through her and she clenched her trembling thighs together to increase the pleasure. He pulled back only to roughly pull her shirt

over her head. Immediately he went back to kissing her neck. His mouth returned to hers at the same time his large hand covered one of her aching breasts. His other hand tangled in the damp curls of her hair while his blunt fingers toyed with the puckered tip of her breast. Each caress increased the currents of her yearning pounding within.

She couldn't think, couldn't do anything but accept his attention. This wasn't like her. She took control. She brought men to their knees, not the other way around. With a moan, she pushed him back and lowered to her knees. She'd barely gotten her fingers in the waistband of his pants prior to him pulling her up.

Before she could protest, his hand slipped inside her borrowed pants and parted her wet folds. She gasped and clutched his broad shoulders as his fingers slid across her swollen clit. His captivating gaze held hers. The passion in his eyes only intensified the pleasure his expert fingers caused between her legs. When his long finger dipped within her slippery center, she constricted around it. He gasped haggardly.

Too quickly, he removed his hand and led her to the bed. She lay back against the soft cotton sheets. He slowly slid the pajama bottoms down her legs. Her breathing hitched as he leaned over to thoroughly kiss his way from her neck to her navel. Her body jerked and shook with each soft touch of his lips, each flick of his wet tongue against her skin. He moved lower, nuzzling her moist curls with his straight nose before drawing his stiff tongue across her in one long stroke. Her back

arched off the bed. She cried out. He repeated the torturous movement and her body bucked. Two long fingers slid within her dewy flesh. He pressed upward against her G-spot, his expert tongue capturing all of her juices as they freely flowed from her.

The stirrings of a climax expanded within her: pulling, tugging and yearning to explode. Usually she could control her orgasm, hold out as long as she needed, but she couldn't control it with Devin. Her body hummed, her nipples ached, and her legs shook with the need to release.

He lifted his head. Slowly his fingers slid from her creamy center. She protested, and he silenced her with a kiss. She returned it, enjoying the taste of her on his tongue. Frantically, she wrapped her arms around his neck, urging him on. He disentangled from her embrace and stood. She watched as he took off his t-shirt revealing his wide, sinewy chest. He jerked off his pajama pants. His thick erection, slick with his own desire, stood rigid before him from the juncture of his strong thighs. She spread her legs wide, biting her lower lip to keep from jumping up and sucking him deep.

Hunger flamed within his light eyes as he reached into his bedside table and removed a condom. He put it on quickly before gently lowering his large body over hers. Her breath caught with the first full contact of his hot skin against hers. Wanting more, she pulled his head down for a passionate kiss. He kissed her long, slowly, and thoroughly, while his large hands roamed over her body. She writhed beneath him, lifting her hips of the

bed urging him to end the exquisite torture. Finally, he reached down to take his erection in his hands and guided it to her silky opening. His head lifted and he gazed into her eyes as his rock hard erection pushed within her. He filled her completely, stretching her wet walls, and bumping against her womb. It felt so good, so right; she squeezed her eyes shut and threw her head back to savor it.

He moved slowly, sliding each wonderful inch in and out of her with slow, deep, purposeful strokes. Her moans started softly, but with each glide of his body they grew louder. His fingers brushed across her eyelids and cheek before he took her chin in his hand and lowered her head. She opened her eyes and met his fiery gaze. They didn't speak, just watched the ecstasy on each other's face as he deeply stroked her.

His thrusts were steady, strong, and deliberate. Just like him. He placed one hand on her hip, shifted to anchor her better beneath him, and added a twist to his movements, rubbing every thick inch of him against each crevice inside her. Her passion built. The heat and intensity grew until she couldn't hold back. Her body cracked. The wave ran over her skin, exploded where they were joined. Her nails dug into his back and her legs locked around his waist, pulling him deeper. Her vision blurred as tears came to her eyes.

Devin's lids lowered, he bit his lip and groaned as his body tensed. His dick pulsed jerkily within her from the power of his on climax. He buried his face in her

neck, and Shayla let the tears flow. She'd just experienced perfection and would never see it again.

Chapter 11

After leaving Devin, Shayla went home only to change clothes and hurry out of town before her mom could catch her. It was time to escape the pressure of Helena and seek refuge somewhere else. So she'd decided to finally come to Columbia and visit her best friend Tasha. She suppressed a smile as she sat on the floor of her friend's nursery and watched Tasha hurry across the room. Every shade of pink known to man adorned the walls, furnishings, and accessories in the nursery. It looked like a Pepto-Bismol explosion. Shayla hated pink, but the color brought out the happy glow in Tasha's tan skin. Contentment and excitement practically oozed from her friend, who looked like an extension of the room with her natural curls pulled into a high ponytail and pink sundress dress hugging her slightly rounded belly.

Tasha stuffed the toddler dresses Shayla had brought in the overflowing closet. The dresses were an attempt at a peace offering for neglecting to call Tasha since returning to Helena. Tasha was only an hour away in Columbia; Shayla had no real excuse for ignoring her friend's calls. Despite the fact that Tasha married a

former player after asking him to take her virginity, she would always be her “good girl” friend. The moral yin to her immoral yang.

“So, are you going to tell me why you finally decided to call me? I know you’ve been in Helena for a few weeks.” Tasha said turning and cocking brow.

Shayla leaned back on a huge pink stuffed bear on the floor. “Come on, Tasha, you know why. It was bad enough facing my family after that disaster in Atlanta. I didn’t want to face you, too.”

“Have I ever judged you?”

Shayla picked an imaginary piece of lint off the bear. “No.”

“So why would I start now?”

“I judged myself. My instincts told me Mark wasn’t through with his wife, but after she moved out and filed for divorce I ignored common sense.”

“Did you love him?”

She shook her head. “No, just the idea of him. It was nice to think a man that put together would be interested in me.” She gave a half hearted smile. “Silly, huh?”

Tasha nodded. “Silly for you to think that, yes! I never understood why you think good men wouldn’t be interested in you. There are always dozens of men drooling over you. You’re smart; you had a great job and will get another one. Dang, Shayla, grab some confidence.”

Shayla covered her eyes and groaned. “Man, you sound like Devin.”

“Wait, I thought you two didn’t get along. Have you seen him?”

“I did a lot more than see him.” She said. She kept her eyes covered or else she’d cry.

She heard the shuffle of Tasha’s feet as she came to sit in the rocking chair beside her. “What does that mean?”

Regrouping with a deep breath, Shayla dropped her hands. “You remember Roxanne and Peaches?”

Tasha nodded, even though she’d never met them. Although she and Shayla became friends after meeting at cheerleading camp, Shayla kept Tasha far away from her friends at Helena High. Shayla could be herself around Tasha, which made her a refreshing relief from the constant show she had to put on when hanging with Roxanne, Peaches, and the rest of their clique.

When Shayla didn’t continue Tasha raised her eyebrows. “And ... ”

“They threw me a welcome home party. Devin came.”

“That’s good. You know, that he came. When he saw you at our reception he seemed pretty stiff.”

“He did me a favor by coming.” She quickly recounted everything that had happened with Devin since coming home, ending with them having sex. When

she finished, Tasha sat there, her eyes blinking slowly as if she were trying to process everything Shayla had said.

“Damn, Shayla, you’ve lived an entire drama in what ... two weeks.” Tasha smiled and Shayla playfully hit her leg. “I don’t know where to start ... I’ll skip Tony; my feelings haven’t changed since that situation. He raped you.”

Shayla flinched. “Don’t say that. You make it sound worse than it was.”

“That’s what it was, Shayla. Stop making excuses for it. You told him to stop, he didn’t listen.”

Shayla jumped from the floor and crossed the room to the window. “I didn’t try hard enough.”

“No. Don’t do this. Leave me alone. All of that should have been enough.” Tasha said.

She smirked at her reflection. Tony was right, she’d only said no once, but she’d said everything else Tasha mentioned. Before closing her eyes and turning her head away until it was over.

“Why didn’t you tell Devin that?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’d rather him think I went along with it, than let him know I was too drunk to do much of anything.”

“From what you said, he already knew you were too drunk to do anything and that’s why he took you upstairs. Tell him the truth.”

With a sigh she turned around. “Why? So he’ll magically fall in love with me? I haven’t changed much since high school. I’ve returned home after an affair with a married politician became headlines. I still get drunk and pass out at parties. And to top it off, I have no damn idea when I’ll get another job. That’s the perfect type of woman to be on the arm of the town’s all around outstanding citizen.”

Tasha held up her hands. “I can’t talk to you when you’re like this. I don’t understand why someone as gorgeous as you has low self esteem. You need a therapist.”

“To tell me what? My mom has told me I’m just as no good as my dad for as long as I can remember. I lost my virginity after getting drunk at Homecoming. Since half the town already thought I was as trifling as my dad, people easily believed I broke Devin’s heart for fun.” She sighed and turned back to the window. “I already know why I’m messed up. As long as I exude confidence — no matter how fake it may be — if people buy it, I’m cool.”

“You left out a whole lot of other issues in that list of yours. What happened after — ”

Shayla squeezed her eyes shut. “Stop, Tasha, please. It’s over.” She gripped the heart charm around her neck. She’d done what was necessary after Homecoming and then refused to discuss it ever again.

“Fine. You want to act as if everything that happened was nothing, go right ahead. Although, I should knock some sense into you.”

Other than Devin, Tasha was the one person who took her for what she was, and told her the truth. It was one of the reasons she loved her. Despite Tasha's strict family lifestyle — a Baptist preacher father who refused to speak to his pregnant daughter until after Jared married her — she never judged Shayla. Tasha always listened, gave her a shoulder to cry on and a kick in the butt when she needed it.

Shayla pasted a smile on her face. "Don't think I won't hit you because you're pregnant again."

Tasha laughed. "Bring it. I'll still whip your ass."

Shayla joined in the laughter. Their moment was interrupted when Tasha's husband walked in. Jared was tall with smooth brown skin, handsome features and a body well honed from years of personal training. Shayla couldn't hide her surprise when his eyes lit up after seeing Tasha. Not because Tasha wasn't completely loveable, but to see the former playboy still look like a lovesick teen one year after their marriage.

Tasha grinned. "Hey, you're home."

He rushed over to help her out of the rocking chair and kissed her forehead. "Yeah, we played a few games before Devin and Malcolm agreed to come over and watch the game. Malcolm can't wait to hold his niece," he said, referring to their first child.

Shayla tried to smile past the lump in her throat. Devin was here. Crap, she'd forgotten he and Jared were friends. Well, maybe not forgotten, but she wouldn't have expected him to be here today of all days.

Tasha giggled. “Malcolm’s going to be disappointed. My mom and dad picked her up earlier so I could get a break. She’ll be back later.”

Jared frowned. “Are you okay? Do you feel bad?” His hand went to her stomach. Tasha had mentioned that Jared was concerned when she’d gotten pregnant so soon after their daughter was born. Luckily, her health was good. Shayla’s only advice was for her and Jared to stop screwing like rabbits. Tasha said that was out of the question.

Tasha shook her head. “Not at all. Those were their words, not mine.” She looked at Shayla. “Besides, Shayla came over to keep me company.”

Jared smiled. “What’s up, Shayla. Good to see you.”

“Same here, Jared.”

Tasha patted his chest. “Did you say Malcolm and Devin are here?”

“Yeah, I hope that’s not a problem.”

Tasha shook her head. “No problem. Did you know Devin and Shayla went to high school together?”

Jared looked at Shayla. “For real? Cool, come down the hall and watch some of the game with us.”

Just the thought of seeing Devin so soon made her palms sweaty. Shayla waved her hand. “I really gotta get going.”

“No you don’t, you just got here.” Tasha said. She smiled at Jared. “Go on, we’ll join you in a second.”

He looked between the two, before shaking his head. “Okay,” he drew out the word. “Whatever you two are up to, I don’t want a part of it.” He playfully swatted Tasha on the butt before running out of the door, dodging her swing at his head.

Shayla rushed over to Tasha. “I can’t face him.”

“Yes you can, and you will. Tell him the truth.”

“It doesn’t matter — ”

“Yes it does. You’ve loved Devin since high school, maybe now’s your second chance.”

Shayla’s lips twisted as she gave Tasha the side eye. “I thought you stopped believing in fairy tales and romance.”

Tasha grinned. “That was when I thought Jared was walking out on me and our baby. But since the day he put it on the line and asked me to marry him, I’m all roses and hearts again. I’m going to the den,” She picked Shayla’s keys off the dresser and dropped them in the pocket of her dress, “and you’re going to join me.”

For the first time in Shayla’s life she contemplated assaulting a pregnant woman. She took a deep breath, wiped her hands on her jeans, smoothed her hair, and plastered on what she hoped was a nonchalant smile before following Tasha.

Chapter 12

Devin didn't have time to absorb Jared saying Shayla was visiting Tasha before the two joined them in the upstairs den. He stared like a fool as she breezed into the room and smiled graciously as Tasha introduced her to Malcolm. Devin knew Malcolm was happily married, but it didn't stop jealousy from churning in his gut when Malcolm's gaze quickly ran over her.

He couldn't blame Malcolm. Shayla looked like a burst of spring in the middle of fall. Her pink shirt had a v-neck that drew Devin's eye to her cleavage, her black leather jacket accentuated her small waist, and she must have poured herself into the tight jeans she had on. He sat there mesmerized by the way her high heeled boots caused her hips to sway as she walked. When she finally met his eyes he was fighting back memories of her legs wrapped around him, her soft moans as he entered her, and the way she'd become putty in his hands. She, on the other hand, gave him the same serene smile she'd given Malcolm and Jared. There wasn't a hint in her expression that she was thinking about that morning.

He rejoiced and inwardly groaned when she sat next to him on the small leather sofa. She sat sideways, one

knee curled up on the chair, the other leg stretched out in front. “What’s up, Devin?” she said resting her elbow on the back of the chair and supporting her head in her hand.

Her lips curved in a teasing smile, tempting him to kiss her. The scent of her perfume drifted over him, and although it excited him, he preferred the way she’d smelled earlier, when the scent of his body wash mingled with hers. Despite himself, his dick grew hard and he leaned toward her. Desire — remembrance — flashed in the brown depths of her slanted eyes before she looked down, hiding it with her lashes. But it was enough to send hunger rushing through him.

He didn’t know what to do. He wasn’t used to sex-only relationships. Should he follow her lead and act as if it were nothing, when all he wanted to do was rush her out of Jared’s house and find out what she was thinking before losing himself within her silky walls again?

He didn’t know how long he stared at her before he became aware of someone standing over them. He turned to face Jared’s raised eyebrow and knowing smile.

Jared waved a brown beer bottle in his face. “Want one?”

“Yeah, sure.” He snatched the beer from Jared.

“Can I get one?” Shayla asked. She looked at Tasha, “Unless you mind. I don’t want to leave you the only one not drinking.”

Tasha crinkled her nose. “I hate beer. Please, don’t mind me.”

Jared handed Shayla a beer. Devin stared as she screwed off the top and her lips wrapped around the edge of the bottle. She drank slowly, her lips tugging and pulling along the rim. When she finished, her tongue glided around the edge before she licked the moisture from her lips and smiled. What was his asinine reason for stopping her from doing the same thing to his dick earlier? Right now, his need to control the sex seemed unimportant with the thought of her lips wrapped around him.

He tore his eyes away, looking anywhere but at her. He caught Malcolm watching them and glared back. Malcolm smiled and looked away. When he looked at Jared, his friend was grinning. A “go for it” look in his eye. Damn, he’d have a hard time escaping their jokes later.

He shifted in his seat and stared at the announcers talking on the big screen television. “When will the game start?”

Jared laughed. He sprawled back in a recliner, Tasha beside him in a matching one. “We got a few minutes. So, Shayla, tell us about Devin in high school.”

Devin groaned and shook his head. “No, Shayla, don’t tell him anything about me in high school. He’ll only use it to blackmail me later.”

“Damn right,” Jared said.

Shayla laughed and shifted closer in the chair. “Well, Devin was always the sensible one.”

“Boring,” Malcolm said, “he’s the sensible one now. Tell us about the non-sensible things he did.”

Shayla grinned. “I wish I could give you more, but I can’t. If you were about to make a dumb decision, or had made a dumb decision, he wasn’t afraid to point it out.”

Malcolm sighed. “Always was, and always will be, the voice of reason.”

Devin pointed at Malcolm with his beer bottle. “Hey, you appreciate my honesty.”

“Most of the time,” Malcolm said with a smile.

“Boring,” Jared said.

Shayla held up her hand holding the bottle. “He wasn’t boring. He had fun and partied with the rest of us, but he knew when to throw in the towel and say ‘that’s enough’. He kept our clique out of a lot of jams ... most of the time.”

Jared shook his head. “Okay, you gotta give me something. I’ve been looking for dirt on this brotha for years.”

Devin faked a wounded look. “I’m hurt.”

“Well,” Shayla said. “He did wear braids.”

Jared laughed. “What? Dr. Jones with cornrows?”

Malcolm joined in. “Hell yeah, I remember. You had braids our first year of college.”

Devin rubbed his head. “Hey, man, quit laughing. I might bring them back.”

Shayla reached over and ran her hand along his head sending heat through his body. His hair was long enough for her to pinch it between her fingers, reminding him he needed a haircut. “I like your hair longer.”

He met her eyes and she slowly lowered her hand, her fingers brushing against his earlobe as she pulled away. “It was always soft when I braided it.” Her words were spoken quietly, he doubted they heard it across the room, but it was as if she’d screamed the way they bounced within his head.

“What are y’all whispering about over there?” Jared asked.

Devin cleared his throat and looked at his friend. Jared and Malcolm shared a glance and Devin bit the inside of his lip. They were going to dig into him for every detail about his relationship with Shayla. While he’d happily offered advice to them when needed, he wasn’t thrilled with the idea of receiving any. He trusted his friends, but baring his innermost feelings with them wasn’t what he did. He was the giver of guidance, not the recipient.

Shayla scooted away. “I was just telling Devin that it’s time to come clean about his secret.”

Malcolm sat forward. “What secret?”

Devin raised an eyebrow and looked at Shayla.
“Yeah, what secret?”

She grinned. “About your hip hop dance lessons.”

Devin groaned and rolled his eyes as Malcolm, Jared, and Tasha burst out laughing.

“I can’t believe you remember that,” he said.

Shayla pushed his shoulder lightly. “I remember everything. And you can’t expect me to forget driving with you to Columbia twice a week for hip hop dance lessons.”

“Wait a second,” Malcolm said. “Why were you taking hip hop dance lessons?”

Devin’s face burned with embarrassment and he threw Shayla a ‘you will pay for this’ look that was only met with a grin. “For half a second, I thought I wanted to dance like ...”

He didn’t finish. Jared and Malcolm both leaned forward. “Like who?”

“Usher,” Shayla said with a laugh. Everyone broke out in laughter again. He held his hands out as if he would choke her. She shrieked with laughter and batted his hands away. He joined in and sat back, taking their barrage of jokes before the game finally started.

He wanted to take Shayla over his knee for telling, but had to admit she’d effectively distracted everyone from their relationship and eased the tension between them. She didn’t like football, but she cheered for the Atlanta Falcons with Jared and Tasha, against him and

Malcolm who cheered for the Carolina Panthers. She was the life of the party, telling jokes, making people laugh and have a good time.

She didn't curl up against his side like she had at the club. The way she'd done when they were growing up. He missed it.

He stared as she jumped up and gave Jared and Tasha high fives after Atlanta scored. How did she do it? The tears in her eyes after they had sex were real, so was the longing. He'd hurt her when he said they couldn't be together, yet she still teased and joked with him as if his words meant nothing. The same way she'd played along as Tony's willing girlfriend after he took advantage of her.

His jovial mood evaporated. He knew the real Shayla, or had known her, but after Homecoming was forced to interact with the public Shayla. The Shayla who wanted to please the crowd and went along for the ride. She'd rather pretend as if the people close to her hadn't hurt her than acknowledge how much they did.

He used to think he'd never hurt her; that he had her best interests at heart, but he didn't. He'd wanted her, known it was wrong to have sex with her after she'd just described the way Tony used her, but still he'd thrown better judgment to the wind and took what she offered. Then planned to move on and forget that having her in his arms was like having a piece of him he didn't realize was missing replaced. It had slipped out the moment he'd seen her in Tony's arms after Homecoming

and slid back the moment she rounded the bend in Hangman's Woods.

Angry at himself for having sex with her in the first place, and angry at her for acting as if what happened hadn't mattered, he jumped from the couch.

"Jared, I'm going to the kitchen to see if you have anything worth snacking on. Shayla, come with me."

Her mask slipped, uncertainty flashed in her eyes, but only for a second. She smiled and shrugged. "Sure."

Jared laughed, oblivious to Devin's mood. "Go on and *dance* your way downstairs."

He rolled his eyes as Jared, Malcolm, and Tasha laughed. It would take a miracle to get Jared to not tease him about it. He jerked his head toward the door and Shayla walked out with him on her heels. She let him lead the way down the stairs and into the kitchen. Once there, she breezed past him and looked in the fridge.

"What do you want? It looks like he's got salsa and ... ooh pineapple. You still love pineapple don't you?"

He crossed the room to stand behind her as he tried to figure out an answer. He *wanted* to know how she felt about him, about what they'd done. He *wanted* to know how she could sit beside him as if it were nothing, when just being in her presence caused him to forget all of the reasons why Shayla Monroe was bad news. Instead, he opted to ask a question that protected his feelings.

"I want to know why you became Tony's girlfriend."

She slowly stood, but didn't face him. Her fingers gripped the door of the refrigerator. When she didn't answer he continued. "Did you really not care so much about what he was doing, that you just went along with it? Do you really care so little for yourself?"

She pulled out a bowl of what he recognized to be Jared's homemade salsa and faced him with a sigh. "It was easier to be Tony's girlfriend than the easy girl who sleeps around at parties."

"I don't understand."

"Come on, Devin, just because you stopped talking to me afterward doesn't mean you didn't know what was going on. Suddenly, I went from being the girl whose father slept around to the girl who was just like her father. Guys assumed I was an easy lay. I was fighting off the advances of two of your teammates when Tony came down the hall and told them to back off because I was his girl. They stopped. Everyone stopped. It was easier to go along with — "

He spun away. "It was easier ... it was easier. That was always your excuse and I'm sick of hearing you say that." He turned back. "It was easier to just lie there and let Tony handle his business than say no. It was easier to offer me sex this morning than let me console you."

"I don't need consoling." She marched toward him. "I don't need you, or anyone, feeling sorry for me and trying to tell me how to handle my life. I get by just fine."

"No you don't. You get by pretending as if you haven't been royally screwed over. Don't pretend with

me, I know the real Shayla.”

“Really, because you have a messed up way of showing it. You’re constantly judging me.”

“I don’t judge you, Shayla, I want to help you.”

She scowled. “I’m not your damn charity case.”

He rubbed his eyes with frustration. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then how do you mean it, Devin? Now that you know what happened you suddenly want to sweep in and make things better?”

“I just ... want to be a friend.” She sucked her teeth and turned away. “But you make it impossible to do that!”

Tasha came in the kitchen followed by Jared. She had a frown on her face as she looked between the two. “Is everything okay? We could hear you shouting upstairs.”

Shayla flipped her hair over her shoulder. “It’s all good. Look, Tasha, I’m gonna head out. I’ll give you a call later.” She walked over to Tasha and held out her hand. Tasha glared at Devin before pulling a set of keys out of her pocket with a sigh.

She dropped them in Tasha’s hand. “Let me know you got home okay.”

Shayla nodded. “Sure. It was good seeing you, Jared.” Then she was gone.

Jared walked over. “Devin, what was that about? I thought you two were vibing upstairs.”

Devin shook his head and patted Jared on the shoulder. “I’m gonna bounce, man. I’ll holla at you tomorrow.” He hurried past his friend and out the door before Jared could ask any questions. Shayla’s car was just disappearing out the driveway when he got outside. He could follow her and explain, but what would it serve. Shayla wasn’t his charity case, and she didn’t want his advice. No need getting his heart any more wrapped up in her than it already was.

Chapter 13

Still shaken up after her conversation with Devin, Shayla put on her running clothes and escaped to Hangman's Woods as soon as she got back to Helena. Even though she was angry that Devin considered her a charity case, she was mindful of her promise to him to leave the woods before dark. Her run was short due to this, but the brief time she spent surrounded by the silence was enough to calm her.

She'd been more shaken than angry. He'd hit a nerve when he'd accused her of taking the easy way out. Her "it's easier" motto had gotten her through too many hurtful situations. It *was* easier to pretend as if the emotional pain she suffered didn't bother her. As if she were immune to the fact that so many people she wanted in her life didn't feel the same. She'd only gotten the attention of those who wanted to use her, and because she'd craved attention, she'd taken whatever she could get.

Tasha was right, she needed therapy. She was completely screwed up. But didn't it make her crazy if she saw a therapist? It was tough telling the few people she did trust how she felt, and even now found it easier

to breeze over the difficult situations in her life than go into detail. Maybe it would be easier, to confide in someone who was supposed to judge her and tell her why she made such bad decisions?

One problem: her lack of a job, and therefore lack of a way to pay a therapist. That idea would have to go on hold until there was a break in that department. She had enough savings to cover her living expenses, but not regular visits to a shrink.

The sun was falling beneath the skyline when she finally left Hangman's Woods. There weren't any crazy looking people hanging around when she left. Devin probably made it all up as another way to "help" her. As she jogged the remaining distance back to her home, the sky darkened and there was a chill in the air. She shivered as a breeze cooled the sweat on her back. Her pace increased on the last block to her house. When she stopped in her driveway another shiver went down her spine, but this one was in trepidation.

Her mom looked up from where she sat on Shayla's porch. Her lips were twisted in a frown. She shook her head as her gaze skimmed over Shayla.

"Do you have to run around town almost naked?"

Shayla suppressed an eye roll. "I'm not almost naked. A sports bra and running pants are perfectly decent." She said stretching her legs.

"You could run in a sweat suit."

“I don’t think so. Even though it’s cool now, it was warm when I started. Try that suggestion again in February.” She continued to stretch and Marcella watched in silence. A few minutes later, Shayla met her mom’s gaze, who quickly looked away.

“Did you come here just to talk about my clothes?” It was a redundant question. After her show in Club Voracious, her mom could only be there to lecture her.

Marcella shook her head. “No, I came because you missed church today. I know why you missed. I had to hear it all day about Devin dragging you ... drunk ... from that club.”

“Would you rather he had left me drunk at the club?”

“I’d rather you didn’t embarrass me like that. I shouldn’t be surprised. Your daddy used to go out and get drunk like that.” Her mom looked at her briefly. “You look and act just like him.”

Another breeze drifted through the trees. Crossing her arms to ward off the chill, Shayla walked up the stairs. “Let’s go inside, it’s getting cold.”

Her mom stood, but shook her head. “No, I’m not coming in. This will only take a minute.” She reached into the pocket of her house coat and pulled out a blue sheet of paper. “They’re looking for volunteers for the church’s fall festival. I signed you up.” She shoved the paper in Shayla’s hand.

Shayla quickly scanned the paper, a flyer outlining the volunteer needs for the annual fall festival. It was held on Halloween night as an alternative to trick-or-treating. Spending a night helping kids bob for apples and do the latest line dance wasn't her idea of fun.

"I'm not doing this."

Marcella's eyes hardened. "Yes you are. You've barely been home two weeks and already people are talking. I won't let you drag my name through the mud."

"Your name?"

"Yes, whatever you do reflects on me. This will give you something to do besides go clubbing with your friends, drinking to excess, and seducing Devin Jones."

Shayla furiously tapped her toe. "I'm not seducing Devin Jones."

"Good, because he deserves a good woman. Someone like Kia, who won't embarrass him. Believe me. I know how hard it is to be tied to someone who doesn't give a damn about how they make their family look." Her gaze scathed coldly over Shayla.

The comment could refer to her or her father. They'd both had caused a fair amount of embarrassment and pain for her mom. Marcella hated the ties to both of them. Swallowing the pain, Shayla lifted her chin. She gave her mom what she hoped was a look of boredom.

She held out the paper. "Don't worry yourself. Devin agrees with you and everyone else in this town. We're not getting together."

Marcella reared back. “Are you telling me you tried?”

Shayla’s lips lifted into a frozen smile. “No, we actually laughed about the way everyone assumes I’ll seduce him. We’re friends, that’s it; we’re too different to be together.”

Relief flashed in Marcella’s eyes. “Good, so you’ll have plenty of time to help with the festival.”

“I don’t want to help.”

Her mom finally met her eyes. The resentment and anger in her gaze was enough to silence anything Shayla had to say. “You *will* help with the festival. You need to be around decent people for a change. Learn how to carry yourself with some respect. I don’t ask you for much, but I’m telling you you’re gonna do this.”

Shayla’s frantic toe tapping stopped. Slowly, she pulled the paper back and pressed it against her chest. She wanted a mom that loved her. That may be disappointed in the mistakes she made, but would still welcome her home. But she didn’t have that. And fighting Marcella damn sure wouldn’t give her that.

“Fine,” she said.

Her mom tipped her head in a stiff nod. “Alright.” She took a deep breath then looked away. “I left a plate for you on the stove. Come and get it after you put on some clothes.”

“Fine.”

Her mom walked off the porch and down the street toward her house. Her stride was stiff, as if she were in pain. She must have waited on the porch for a long time.

After Marcella entered her house, Shayla went into her own rented home and looked over the flyer. No telling what task her mom signed her up to do. She was tired of fighting her. It was too hard. This was easier, and something she could do well. One thing she was good at was promotion. Every church in Helena had a fall festival for as long as she could remember, but none stood out from the rest. She'd put all of her efforts into making Mt. Grove Missionary Baptist Church's fall festival the best one the town had ever seen. She'd make members from other churches leave their festivals just to come to this one. She'd get along with everyone on the committee, smile until her face cracked and become the best damn decent church volunteer Helena, South Carolina had ever seen.

Chapter 14

Devin followed his dad into the basement kitchen of Mt. Grove Missionary Baptist Church. They both smiled and nodded at the few church members who made up the volunteer fall festival committee. His dad had attended Mt. Grove and helped with the fall festival for years. Devin's stepmom had first twisted Roscoe's arm to help, and even though his father complained, every year he answered the call and came. Over the years it was getting harder to find volunteers, and this year Roscoe finally convinced Devin to help.

Roscoe hadn't had to try too hard. Devin welcomed some type of distraction in his free time. During the day his job kept him so busy with patients, he didn't have time to think about Shayla. It was during his free time that he couldn't stop thoughts of her from entering his mind. Thoughts of why things seemed to continue to go from bad to worse when he was with her.

Reverend Jenkins, a tall thin man with a tuft of white hair around the perimeter of his head and jet black eyes, approached Roscoe and Devin with a smile on his lips. "Ah, good to see you Brother Roscoe." He shook

Roscoe's hand before turning to Devin. "And Dr. Jones, so glad you came."

Devin smiled and nodded. "Happy to help, Reverend."

Roscoe looked around at the group of people gathering at the table and rubbed his hands together. "Is that one of Mrs. Jenkins' lemon pound cakes?"

Reverend Jenkins laughed. "Wouldn't be a proper meeting without it. We just made a pot of coffee, grab a cup and sit down."

Roscoe patted the Reverend on his shoulder. "Sounds good to me."

Devin shook his head as his dad headed for the coffee pot. It was useless to argue about the sweets. Mrs. Jenkins made the best lemon pound cake in Helena; even he was looking forward to a piece.

"Is this everyone?" Devin asked.

Reverend Jenkins shook his head. "It usually would be, but we've got another new committee member." The Reverend's eyebrows rose and he motioned with his head toward the door. "There she is. We can get started."

Devin turned and had to clench his jaw to keep it from dropping. Shayla came in, and once again she took his breath away. Did the woman own a pair of pants that didn't look like they were molded to her body? These were black and clung to her luscious backside, which was lifted up by her high heels. She'd pulled her hair into a sleek ponytail at the top of her head, which emphasized

the exotic flare of her eyes, and the shiny silver camisole and olive see through blouse only made him want to go digging for the treasure beneath it.

He shook his head and turned back to the Reverend, wondering when he developed such an interest in women's fashion. "Shayla Monroe volunteered?"

"Not quite, her mother signed her up last Sunday. But surprisingly, she called the next day and asked how she could help. She seems excited about the fall festival." The reverend watched her cross the room and nodded his head. "I know some people don't care for her ways, but it's not my place to pass judgment. Besides, what better place for a lost soul than surrounded by church folks?"

Devin looked back at Shayla who smiled. Someone on the outside would never know their last encounter ended in a shouting match. She walked over and shook hands with Reverend Jenkins.

"Sorry I'm late. I lost track of time at the library."

Reverend Jenkins shook his head. "You're fine, we haven't gotten started. What were you doing at the library?"

She shrugged. "I haven't called to install cable or internet at the house I'm renting. I go there every day to search for a job."

"Any luck?"

She smiled. "Still waiting, but I've only been at it for a few weeks." She finally looked at Devin. "Hello, Devin."

“I’m here with my dad,” he said, and then wanted to slap his forehead for sounding like an idiot.

Her smile brightened. She looked toward the table and waved her fingers at Roscoe sitting with a huge slice of cake in front of him.

Reverend Jenkins motioned toward the rest of the group. “Let’s get started.”

“Great,” Shayla said.

Devin followed them to the table. Greetings were quick; the group only consisted of eight people. Besides Reverend Jenkins, his wife, Roscoe, Devin, and Shayla, one of the deacons — Mr. Porter, the owner of Shayla’s rented house — was there. He scooted his chair in the opposite direction when Shayla sat next to him. Martha Taylor, the children’s choir director smiled tightly and gave Shayla a stiff nod. Devin’s receptionist Anna smiled at Shayla, but threw him a warning look.

Thankfully, Reverend Jenkins went directly into plans for this year’s festival before the lukewarm greetings became more awkward. Devin tried to pay attention as the reverend went over discussions for the trunk-or-treat, where church members offered candy out of the back of their car, and games for the children. But he found himself paying more attention to Shayla than anything else. She smiled and nodded whenever the Reverend looked around the table for affirmation of his ideas, typing notes on her iPad. It was surprising to see her so interested in helping with something her mom signed her up for.

Volunteering didn't seem like it would take much effort. From the way the meeting was going, Reverend Jenkins told them what he wanted and the rest of the committee agreed. The reverend was ready to assign duties when Shayla raised her hand.

"I had some ideas of things we could add to the festival." She spoke clearly and with confidence that perked up many of the eyes that had dimmed during the reverend's speech.

Reverend Jenkins pursed his lips before nodded. "Okay, what were you thinking?"

Her shoulders relaxed slightly before she slid her finger across the iPad. Devin leaned forward after she stopped and looked back at the reverend with a smile.

"I looked up the names of a few local bands that we could bring in to perform."

Martha Taylor shifted in her seat. "Bands? We don't need no secular music playing at a church function. The children's choir can sing like they always do."

Shayla held up her hand. "Let me clarify, I'm talking about young adult Christian bands. There's this one that specializes in Christian rap, I watched a few of their videos on YouTube today. I think the younger kids in the church would really like it."

Martha rolled her eyes. "Noise. And an excuse to get some young kids in here with their pants sagging to their knees. No, we don't need them."

Shayla cocked her head to the side, but her smile didn't waver. "It's not noise and it's not a group of kids with sagging pants. You probably have a lot of little kids coming to the festival with their parents for candy and toys, but do the teens come out? This would be a way to draw them in. You can also have a signup sheet to start a Christian hip hop choir at the church. That way they'll continue to come."

Mr. Porter scoffed. "This is ridiculous. Our church isn't a club."

Reverend Jenkins held up his hand. "Wait a second. That isn't a bad idea. We don't have a lot of teenagers in our church. And you've said yourself, Deacon Porter, that we need more young men in the congregation." He looked at his wife. "What do you think?"

Mrs. Jenkins stared at Shayla for several seconds before nodding. "I like it. What other ideas did you have?"

Devin suppressed a cheer when Martha and Mr. Porter both sat back frowning. He did look across the table at Shayla and gave her a reassuring smile.

She blinked, uncertainty flashed in her eyes before she looked down at her iPad. He'd forgotten they were not on the best terms.

She lifted her head and met his eyes. "I'm glad Devin is here, he'd be perfect to handle my next idea."

He raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

“A health screening during the festival. You know, blood pressure, diabetes screening, body mass index.”

Anna spoke up. “This isn’t a health fair.”

Shayla nodded. “I know, but it may be another way to draw people in. Everyone in town knows Devin, and trusts his decisions—”

“Not all of his decisions,” Martha said under her breath.

Roscoe slapped the table. “I’ll have words with anyone who has a problem with anything my son does. I trust his judgment,” he looked at Shayla, “in everything.”

Reverend Jenkins held up a hand. “No need for all that. I agree with Shayla. This would be a good follow up to my sermon last month on taking care of our bodies as temples to God. Anything else, Shayla?”

Her smile widened, and Devin watched with a mixture of pride and desire as she outlined ideas for drafting a press release for the festival, how they can apply for the Christian rap group to attend their event free of charge, and ways to market the festival to neighboring towns. Despite the enthusiasm of Reverend and Mrs. Jenkins, Martha and Mr. Porter staunchly argued against every point Shayla made, which Devin and his father helped counter. Anna stayed relatively quiet throughout the rest of the meeting, her shrewd gaze going between him and Shayla.

Thirty minutes later, the meeting ended with Reverend and Mrs. Jenkins excited about the new

direction of the fall festival. Martha and Mr. Porter quickly left, followed by Anna. Reverend and Mrs. Jenkins continued to talk with Shayla about her ideas for the festival. Devin followed his dad behind the basement's kitchen counter where Roscoe cut a few slices of cake to take home.

After piling a plate with almost half of the remaining cake and covering it with a paper towel, Roscoe turned to Devin. "You ready to leave?"

Devin tore his eyes from Shayla to his dad. "Yeah," he glanced back at the trio. "Y'all have a good night."

Reverend Jenkins held up a hand and Mrs. Jenkins smiled and waved. Shayla glanced at him briefly before looking away. Disappointed, he turned and followed his dad to the parking lot. They walked to where their trucks were parked beside each other. When he got to the driver's side of his truck, he turned back to the basement door of the church.

"You can wait on her to come out," his dad said.

Devin turned away from the door. "For what? Every time I'm around her I say the wrong thing. I'm not used to this. I'm the one who's supposed to have it together."

"Says who?"

Devin laughed. "Well, it's what everyone thinks. But, when it comes to Shayla, I just don't know ... "

His dad leaned on the hood of Devin's truck. "Does Shayla ever talk about her daddy?"

Devin frowned. "No, why would she?"

Roscoe shrugged. “I thought maybe she had when y’all were younger. That man slept with half the women in town, but for some reason married Shayla’s mom before sleeping with the other half. He left the family when Shayla’s mom was pregnant with her brother, but before that, he carried her everywhere. Showing off his baby girl, and telling everyone she looked just like him and was gonna be a heart breaker just like him. So, that’s what everyone believed.” Roscoe eyed him shrewdly. “I know half of the story of what happened between you and Shayla in high school.”

Devin staggered back. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I figured if you wanted me to know, you’d come to me. It was easy for people to think she was taking after her daddy. Her mom doesn’t help, always reminding everyone that she’s just like him. That’s why I always tried to be nice to her, show her there were people who cared. She’s used to people dumping stuff on her. Don’t be another person putting pressure on her.”

Devin tapped his chest. “I don’t pressure her.”

“Don’t you? Quit trying to figure her out, and don’t act like you ain’t. You’ve been studying her since y’all were young. You can’t figure women out, especially complicated ones. Be easy, take your time, let her talk. She’ll reveal what’s going on in her head a whole lot faster that way than if you keep on trying to unravel her like a medical mystery.”

The basement door opened. Devin turned away from his dad. Shayla froze when she saw them. Her smile was wooden when she looked at Devin, but warmed when she looked at Roscoe. He let his father's words sink in as she crossed the parking lot toward them. The late afternoon sunlight reflected off the brown highlights in her hair. The same way the morning sunlight reflected off it when she'd lain across his bed as they'd made love. He welcomed the memories of that morning, tired of trying to suppress them as he had over the past week.

"It was good to see you, Roscoe," she said. "Thanks for having my back in there."

Roscoe walked over and gave her a hug. "Not hard to have your back when you got good ideas. 'Bout time someone shook up things a little." He glanced at Devin. "Devin needs to talk to you." He glared at Devin. "Don't you."

Devin looked away from his dad to Shayla. She avoided his gaze, instead focusing on the front of his truck. Her hands nervously patted the side of her leg. It struck him that she could easily stand up to the scrutiny of others, but when it came to him she seemed unsure. Did his opinion really affect her that much?

After moments of silence, her eyes finally met his and his heartbeat picked up. To hell with what people thought, he wanted Shayla Monroe. And it was time to get past all of the bullshit and make her his.

"I do," he said.

Chapter 15

She should run. Get in her car and drive one hundred miles in the other direction. Anything to prevent her heart from turning further into mush after Devin and his father sided with her in the meeting. It had taken a colossal amount of effort to stay at the church after walking in and seeing Devin there, but after talking to Reverend Jenkins about the festival and doing some research, she was actually looking forward to helping. She'd expected her ideas to be met with resistance, but was overjoyed by the way Reverend and Mrs. Jenkins both agreed with them. Seeing the pride in Devin's eyes warmed her more than anything, sending her wayward emotions all over the place.

But succumbing to those feelings would kill the fragile approval her mom was finally showing. The only thing her mom asked was for her to do a good job with this festival, and stay away from Devin Jones so her cousin Kia had a clear shot. This was her one chance to gain her mom's love, acceptance, and possibly her approval; she couldn't throw it away on a relationship that would end the second she left town. Yet she'd agreed

to follow him when he asked her to so they could talk somewhere other than the church parking lot.

They traveled out of town toward Roscoe's home. When she pulled up in Roscoe's yard behind Devin, he asked her to get in the truck with him. She glanced at Roscoe, who nodded before going up his porch and into the house. With a sigh and a prayer that her mom never found out, she climbed into Devin's truck.

Once she closed the door to the cab, she was surrounded by Devin's scent. Like a drug addict she inhaled deeply, as the memories of his body on top of hers took over. Life wasn't fair, but it was damn near cruel that the one man who'd given her the best sex of her life was off limits. The muscles in his hands hypnotized her as he maneuvered the truck around his dad's house. They weren't soft hands, but neither were they calloused as they'd run across her body. His long fingers flexed as they gripped then slid up and around the steering wheel. Gentleness was what she'd felt when they'd caressed her breasts. Strength and firmness when they'd parted her slippery folds and slid into her body.

Desire flowed between her legs. She squeezed her thighs together. Getting horny was not what she needed. She lifted her gaze to his face. He stared out the windshield, oblivious to her discomfort. There was a slight frown on his face, and his jaw clenched and unclenched, as if he were biting back words.

He hadn't spoken since she'd gotten in the truck, and the silence within the cab only increased her

awareness of how they hadn't been truly alone since having sex a week ago. When he took the truck down a small dirt road in the woods next to his dad's house, she finally broke the silence.

“Where are we going?”

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. His lips lifted in a smile that heated her body and sent tingles across her skin that concentrated at the tips of her breasts and between her legs.

“Don't worry; I don't have any sinful plans.”

“What if I want you to?” The words were out before she could rethink them.

The gold flecks in his eyes turned molten and a flush crept up his high cheek bones. He broke eye contact. “As much as I enjoyed it, having sex with you again is not my plan.”

That was good. They didn't need to have sex again. The other day was a onetime deal to get it over and done with. Still, she asked, “Why not?”

They broke through the trees into a clearing that surrounded a small pond. Devin backed the truck up to the pond and cut the engine before looking at her. “My brain already makes me say dumb shit when I'm around you. Do you really want to take away what little blood flow I have up there and reduce me to a gibbering fool?”

His teasing reply eased the sting of his rejection. “I don't remember a gibbering fool. I do remember a very

capable man.” Despite herself, she bit her lip and let her gaze travel over his body.

He groaned and opened the door. “Get out of the car before I forget why I brought you out here.”

Instead of mentally listing all of the things Devin could do to her out there, she got out of the truck. He walked to the back, and let down the tailgate. He held out his hand, indicating that she climb up. With a raised eyebrow she slowly made her way around the truck. The heels of her boots sank into the soft ground. She stumbled forward, and he easily caught her. Her hands squeezed his hard biceps and their eyes locked. Electric heat sizzled between them. He hesitated a second, that felt more like hours, before lifting her on the back of the truck.

When he jumped up beside her, he stared at the pond. Her gaze followed his, watching dragonflies zip across the surface that sparkled in the late sunlight.

The only sound was the breeze rustling the grass, and their steady breathing. Slowly, her desire went from a raging inferno to a smoldering burn. It would never go away when he was around. She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun, letting the warmth and the quiet wash over her. Minutes passed before he spoke.

“Remember when things were easy with us? I could listen to you talk for hours about school, life, what you wanted for the future.”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “I was probably exhausting. The way I always came to you with my

problems.”

“I liked having you around. Talking to you away from everyone else.” He leaned forward, resting his hands on his legs. “I should have listened to your explanation about Tony.”

“No need for shoulda, woulda, coulda. We were in high school. After what you saw, who would have expected you to listen.”

He turned and met her eyes. “Don’t blow this off, Shayla. I’m sorry about that, and about what I said at Jared’s. It’s not my place to judge how you deal with things in your life.”

The urge to gloss over his apology was strong, but the sincerity in his eyes pushed it away. He was being an adult about it, facing their problem head on, and she could do the same.

She looked back at the water. “It wasn’t easy to play along as Tony’s girlfriend. I didn’t want what happened, but I didn’t know how to stop it.”

He shifted next to her, and ran a hand over his face. “You don’t have to explain.”

She nodded. “I do. I did tell him to stop ... begged him to leave me alone, but I was too drunk to do much else. I should have fought harder.”

Anger flashed in his eyes as he sat up and faced her. “He shouldn’t have been in there. I shouldn’t have left you.”

“Stop, please, all of the reasons why it happened don’t matter. It did, and it broke my heart that I hurt you like that.” She looked away as tears welled in her eyes.

When he reached out to pull her against his side, she didn’t resist. She rested her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes as his hand softly ran up and down her arm, soothing her ragged emotions.

“I know it’s tough, being back here and having everyone treat you coldly.” He said. “I know we’ll never get back what we had before, but I am here for you. You’re not a charity case to me, and I know you can handle yourself. I’m just offering friendship. You can talk to me when you feel the need. I promise not to offer any advice unless you ask for it.”

She laughed. “Devin Jones, not giving advice. I don’t believe it.”

His body shook slightly with his laughter, sending shivers down her spine. “Well, I’ll try not to.”

She lifted her head. “Despite my teasing earlier, what we did the other day, we can’t do it again.”

He turned to face her. Only a few inches separated them. “Shayla ...”

She pushed away. His voice was too soft, too inviting. “I’m serious, Devin. I promised to stay away from you.”

“Who asked you to do that?”

“My mom, my aunt Linda, and my cousin Kia.”

“They don’t matter. There’s something here ...”

“There’s always been something here, Devin.” She pointed at his chest then hers. “We both know it, but what can come of it. I refuse to live in Helena. Your life is here.”

“But —”

“And Kia is crazy about you. She’d make a much better match for you than I would.”

He crossed his arms. “Really? How?”

She blinked several times then turned back to the pond. She felt his gaze as he waited for her answer. Swallowing the lump in her throat she said, “Well, she’s young and pretty.”

“She’s young and gorgeous, but so are a lot of women.”

She scowled, thrown off by his quick agreement. “She’s in the medical field. You’d have something to talk about.”

“I don’t need to talk about my job all day. It would be nice to talk about something different after work.”

“She doesn’t have a reputation for sleeping around and passing out drunk at parties.”

“How many men have you slept with?”

Her head whipped around. “Why?”

He leaned forward, a curious glint in his eye. “Let’s see if you’re really as wild as they say you are.”

Crossing her arms over her chest she fired back.
“How many women have you slept with?”

“Twenty: now answer my question,” he said,
unfazed.

She looked away. Her heart pounded and her cheeks heated as she tried to wrestle back the jealousy. Twenty different women had been in Devin’s arms. Had he made love so intently with each of them, the way he’d done her? Did they also have an orgasm so mind blowing it brought tears to their eyes?

It took a minute before the realization that he’d slept with more women than she’d slept with men sunk in. After Tony, she’d spent the first few years of college as a tease before starting a string of sporadic, but disastrous relationships. The most recent being Mark.

“Thirteen,” she said meeting his eye once more.

His eyebrows rose. “Thirteen. That’s it? You’re such a slut,” he teased.

“I believe out of the two of us, you’re the slut.”

His lips curved into a sexy smile and he leaned toward her. “I believe you’ve listed weak reasons why we should deny what we both want.”

His arm snaked around her waist and pulled her body against his. The slow smolder went back to a raging inferno as desire swept through her. His eyes were hot as he held her gaze. He didn’t rush into it; he never did, always giving her the chance to pull away, to know what was going on.

“I promised,” she whispered.

He slowly lowered his head. “You didn’t promise me.”

One more time, she thought, *just once more*. He may not have had intentions of sleeping with her out here, but plans change. No one had to know what was going on. They could be discreet lovers, meeting away from prying eyes. It was only until she left town, then she’d go away and Kia or anyone else could have him. When his big hand slid under her shirt, she pushed away thoughts of him doing the same with her cousin or anyone else. He was her Devin now, and that was all that mattered.

She sighed as his soft lips met hers. He wasn’t close enough. She pressed against his strong chest, forcing him to lie back in the truck. Her leg slid over his trim waist as she straddled him and ran her fingers through his hair. It was longer than it had been the week before and she loved it. His braids were a thing of the past, but she would always delight in the memories of her hands in Devin’s hair.

She deepened the kiss while simultaneously reaching for the buttons of his shirt. His skin was hot against her hands. She lightly dragged her nails down his chest, playing with the springy hairs on the way to his navel. He groaned, intensifying the fire burning within her.

He gently grabbed her upper arms and pushed her away. “Shayla, this is not why I brought you out here.”

“I know.” She said leaning down to kiss his neck. Her greedy tongue trailed lightly across his bronze skin, savoring his salty flavor.

A tremble ran through his body. “What happened to us not being able to do this anymore?” His voice was strained.

Reaching for the button on his pants she said, “No one has to know.”

He stiffened and pushed her away. She still sat on top of him but he held her at arm’s length. “I’m not going to be your convenient sex partner.”

“I wasn’t thinking convenient. I was thinking occasional secret lover.”

His dark brows clashed over his eyes. “If we do this, then we’re going to have to be together. I stopped having casual affairs after college.”

His words touched a place in her heart that had long been neglected. It would be great to have more with him. To be more to him than a woman he called whenever he felt horny. But she couldn’t.

She rolled her eyes, hoping he’d believe her disdain. “Come on, Devin. It’s easier this way.”

He flipped her over so quickly she barely had time blink. Anger blazed in his eyes as he stared down at her. “I’m not doing what’s easy anymore. I’m either your friend, or your man, but I won’t do this friends-with-benefits mess.”

Her mouth opened and closed. She couldn't give up the approval of her mother on something that she was sure Devin would wake up one day and realize was a mistake. Him being her friend was tolerated, but him being her man wouldn't be. She'd end up dragging his name through the mud with hers.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, giving him her best seductive smile. "Don't be angry. You said yourself that we're too different. A relationship won't work, but friendship and occasional sex will."

His eyes narrowed. She didn't know if he wanted to accept her offer or curse at her for it. Suddenly, he leaned down to kiss her roughly. He didn't give her time to react, but no thought was needed. His hard body against hers was all that mattered. In an instant his hand was up her shirt. She arched her back so he could easily unhook her bra. She moaned in relief when the pressure from the underwire was taken away, replaced by his warm palms. His fingers toyed with her sensitive nipple until it hardened in his hand.

Tearing away from her mouth, his head lowered to her aching breast as he raised her shirt. His lips closed around the stiff peak, sucking it deeply into his hot mouth causing her to gasp with pleasure. He shifted to lie beside her and pushed the other side of her shirt up. The cool air caressed the burning skin of her other breast. It didn't stand a chance against the heat Devin caused within her. Her body tightened like a pulled string when his strong hand skimmed lightly down her flat stomach to the waistband of her jeans. She held her

breath as he slowly breached the barrier. His mouth continued to suck her breast his hand pushed past the waistband of her underwear to gently tease the wet curls at the apex of her thighs.

He lifted his head and stared at her, his broad fingers continuing to tease between her legs. She spread her thighs. His fingers lightly danced across her enlarged clit before he pulled back to once again tease her.

“You want to make love to me.” His voice was low, strained.

“Yes.”

One blunt fingertip teased the opening of her sex. “I will. As soon as you agree to be mine. In the open, for everyone to see. Otherwise, I can only offer you friendship.”

He leisurely removed his hand, brushed his lips across hers and pulled away. She fought to breathe as he rolled away. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and got off the back of the truck. She stared at the darkening sky. The juncture of her thighs was soaked, swollen, and aching for more. But he asked for something she couldn't give.

“Let's go,” he said from the side of the truck.

She continued to fight for breath. With her eyes closed she sat up and straightened her bra and shirt. She willed the desire away, for the sense of need to subside, but it was a losing battle. She couldn't have Devin, and she couldn't disappoint her family. When her heart

finally returned to a semi-normal beat, she opened her eyes and met his gaze.

“Let’s go.”

Chapter 16

Southern soul music and the smell of warm food greeted Shayla as she entered Helena's Main Street diner. The restaurant was the gathering place for citizens of Helena looking for a good meal and a good conversation. Shayla had avoided the place since arriving. For the last few weeks, she'd been the topic of conversation in town. After surviving the church festival meeting yesterday and the acceptance of Reverend Jenkins, facing any accusing looks from neighbors in the diner seemed paltry.

Mr. Wilson, the owner, waved his large hand and smiled at her from behind the counter when she entered. She returned his greeting with a small wave before looking for a place to sit. Most of the booths were filled with families or couples. Her gaze collided with a few of the women, who either slid closer to their men or wrapped possessive arms around their shoulders. As if she really planned to outright snatch them from their grasp.

She sat at the bar and pulled out a vinyl menu squeezed between the napkin dispenser and ketchup. The offerings hadn't changed since she left.

“What can I get you?” Jennie, the red-head waitress who’d worked there since Shayla was in high school, asked not looking up from her notepad.

“Let me get the baked chicken, okra, and tomatoes and cabbage.”

Jennie scribbled in her notebook. “Sure thing, hon.” When she looked up the smile on her face withered away. “Shayla Monroe. I heard you were back in town.”

Shayla straightened her shoulder lifted the corner of her mouth. “Only temporarily.”

Jennie harrumphed. “You look just like your daddy.”

“I’m not my daddy.”

One of Jennie’s thin shoulders lifted. “According to what happened in Atlanta, the apple don’t fall far from the tree.” Jennie stuck her pen in her ponytail. “I’ll put this in for you. To go.”

Shayla’s face burned and she clenched her fist to keep from slapping the smug look off Jennie’s face. “It’s for here. And my personal life isn’t your business.”

Jennie raised an eyebrow. “Tell that to the news.”

Jennie walked away, and Shayla glanced around to see if anyone had overheard the exchange. Thankfully, the seats next to her at the bar were empty, but the guy sitting two seats over gave her a once over before his lips spread into a sly smile. She looked away, drumming her fingers on the counter with one hand and fingering the heart at her neck with the other. Complaining to Mr. Wilson about Jennie was useless. The man had been

sleeping with the woman for years and despite her bad attitude she ran the place better than any other waitress he had.

The bell chimed over the door, bringing in a blast of air from outside and new patrons. She glanced over her shoulder and nearly fell off her seat. Devin held the door open for Peaches, who grinned up at him as if he were the president and Santa Claus all wrapped up in one. This confirmed her suspicions that Peaches wasn't over her crush on Devin.

Devin chuckled at something Peaches said. The warm sound sent a thrill through her. She'd tried, unsuccessfully, all day to accept that they would only be friends. That she would no longer experience his kisses on her body or the wonder of being in his arms. But a voice in her head kept reminding her that he wanted her. Not just for a one night stand or occasional hook ups, but out in the open, in a full blown relationship for the entire town to see.

He looked up and froze when their eyes met. Heat flared in their whiskey colored centers. It was so intense she had to look away or else she'd make a fool of herself and run up to hug him or something.

She looked at Peaches and smiled. "Hey, girl."

Peaches smile turned stiff. "What's up, Shayla." She sauntered over and sat in the chair next to her. "I haven't seen you since Devin had to carry you out of the club."

Peaches didn't try to lower her voice, and several patrons in booths near the bar stopped talking and

looked expectantly at Shayla and Peaches.

“I walked out,” Shayla said in a tight voice.

Peaches grinned. “Yeah, after saying you were about to throw up. Isn’t that right, Devin? Just like old times. Shayla and Tony getting drunk and partying it up.”

Devin’s jaw clenched. His eyes were hard as he sat on the other side of Shayla. “I think we can talk about something else now.”

Peaches’s devilish smile turned into a frown. “Always taking up for Shayla.”

“Come on, Peaches, let’s move on to something else.” Shayla said. She refused to look at Devin and see his disappointment.

Peaches waved a hand. “Okay, tell me what’s up with you and that politician? Girl, you really know how to pick ’em. But then, you always had men eating out of the palm of your hand.”

Shayla’s heart thumped heavily in her chest. Conversation in the diner ceased. The anticipation for her answer was almost tangible. She didn’t have to answer Peaches’s question. It was no one’s business, but if she didn’t shut Peaches down now, she’d go on to tell an exaggerated version of the story to anyone who would listen. If she hadn’t already.

“His wife filed for divorce long before I started seeing him. I didn’t break up their marriage,” she said in an even tone. It was so quiet in the diner everyone heard.

Peaches raised a brow. “That’s what they all say.”

Devin shifted in his seat. “That’s enough Peaches.”

If looks could kill, the glare Peaches shot at Devin would have ended his life. “I’m just asking what we all want to know. I mean, it’s not like she was all virtuous before she left town but it takes a certain kind of low to sleep with a married man.”

Shayla jumped up from her seat. She took a small amount of satisfaction watching Peaches jerk backwards. “I really appreciate your support, Peaches. I mean, it’s hard to come back to a town after a difficult situation. It’s nice to know my *friends* have my back.”

With a sigh, Peaches leaned forward. “I’ve always kept it real with you Shayla. I even told you how messed up it was when you screwed Tony the same day you started seeing Devin.”

Murmurs started in the nearby booths. Shayla’s stomach knotted. Her vision blurred and she clenched the back of the barstool. The familiar humiliation from her youth crawled over her like an army of ants. Her eyes darted to the nearby table where a couple sat. She didn’t remember their names, but recognized their faces from high school. They both nodded, their heads close as they threw accusing looks her way.

A warm hand rested on her shoulder. She jerked away, refusing to meet Devin’s gaze. She didn’t need his defense of her. This was good. It was exactly what she needed. A very public reminder that she didn’t belong with him.

She glared at Peaches. “Don’t bother doing me anymore favors.”

Jennie dumped Shayla’s food, wrapped in a to-go box, on the counter. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she pulled wad of cash from her pocket and threw it on the counter.

Devin touched her arm. “Shayla ...”

She snatched away. “Thanks, Jennie.” Jennie just smirked as Shayla grabbed the food and rushed out the door.

• • •

An hour later, Shayla’s food remained in the packaging on her kitchen table while she sat and stared at a bottle of wine. The urge to open it and drain its contents pulled and tugged at her insides. Memories of that night and the shame that followed would fade at the bottom of the bottle. It was a coping mechanism she’d started right after it happened. Otherwise, she never would have survived high school. A tear spilled from her eye.

Slutty Shayla. What the guys called her afterwards.

Stupid Shayla. What her mom called her.

She never let them know how much it hurt. Instead she partied harder, laughed louder, and accepted Tony protecting her from the worst of it by dealing with his verbal abuse. It was fitting punishment for what happened, and what she’d done afterward.

With a sad laugh she leaned forward and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. She was pathetic. The

only good thing was nobody knew how pathetic. The last thing she would do was show anyone how hard it was to deal.

A knock on the door jerked her out of her thoughts. She picked up the wine and headed for the front door. Another frantic knock stopped her in her tracks. Turning, she went to the back door with a frown.

“Who is it?” she called turning on the back porch light.

“It’s me.”

She gasped and flipped the light off. She quickly unlocked the door and poked her head out. “What are you doing here?” she whispered looking around the dark back yard to see if anyone was watching.

Devin sighed. “Checking on you. Are you okay?”

His eyes were filled with concern. It nearly brought more tears to her eyes. “I’m okay.”

He scowled. “Liar. You look like you’re about to cry.”

Her shoulders stiffened and she gripped the wine bottle in her hand. “I’m not crying.”

“Cut it out, Shayla. I could always tell when you were about to cry. You scrunch your nose over and over. It’s kinda cute, like a rabbit.”

A reluctant laugh burst from her lips. “I forgot you used to say that.”

He lowered his head to meet her eye. “Will you let me in?”

She started to say no, but he crossed his arms and spread his legs as if he were prepared to stand there all night if needed. She stepped back and pulled him in. “What if someone saw you?”

“No one saw me. I walked here from the diner, and made sure to come through the back. No need to set the gossips off with my truck in your driveway.”

She cringed and heavily dropped the wine bottle onto the table. “I don’t know why you even want to see me after the fiasco at the diner.”

She went over and closed the window blinds above the sink, then went into the living room to draw down the shades. Peeking through the small glass windows on the front door she made sure no one was in front of the house.

When Devin’s hand brushed the skin at the back of her neck she jumped. He didn’t let her pull away; instead he turned her to face him and gently massaged the muscles.

“Stop running. No one in here is going to judge you.”

She drummed her fingers against her leg. “It’s not in here that I’m worried about.”

“They don’t matter. You’re the latest bit of news, next week it’ll be someone else. Don’t let them get to you.”

His fingers continued their delicious ministrations to her neck. The tension slowly eased from her body. Her fingers soon stopped their frantic beat. She closed her

eyes and didn't fight when Devin pulled her against his chest. Nuzzling against him, she sighed. He smelled like the fall air, but was as warm as a summer afternoon.

"I don't want them to get to me," she said against his shirt. "I don't want them to know how much I hate the rumors about me. Tonight, Peaches brought it all back. What Tony did, living with it afterward, the abortion, everything."

Devin froze. Shayla gasped. She'd said too much. She jerked away, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "What abortion?"

"Nothing, it's no big deal."

He shook her arm. "You were pregnant? He made you get an abortion?"

"No." She met his gaze, but quickly looked away. His grip on her arm softened. "Tony didn't know I was pregnant. Nobody did. I couldn't have his baby. I would have been stuck here in Helena, with him, forever."

Devin didn't speak. He released her arm and she rushed back into the kitchen. The only other person who knew about the abortion was Tasha. Only because she'd found Shayla crying one afternoon after it happened and dragged the story from her. Over time, she'd pushed the incident to the back of her mind. A necessary step she'd had to take to protect her sanity in the long run. It only haunted her on nights like this when something brought back the shame of her first slide into disgrace.

The bottle of wine beckoned her, but she turned away and pulled the milk out of the fridge. It was time to find another way to deal.

Devin finally made his way into the kitchen. His eyes were bright with anger when they landed on her. She raised her chin and met his gaze head on. She wasn't proud of her decision, but at the time she had no other choice. She'd beat herself up enough over the years for denying life to the child created that horrible night, but in the long run it was the best choice. She and Tony would have made the worse type of parents.

“You can save the lecture. I did what I had to.”

Devin's brows clashed in a dark line over his eyes. “I'm not going to lecture you. I'm going to kill Tony.”

Her shoulders slumped with relief. He wasn't mad at her. She walked over and ran her hand along the rough stubble on his jaw. “Why? He had nothing to do with it.”

“If he hadn't — ”

“We went through this yesterday, remember?” Her hands lifted to the back of his head where they tangled in his hair.

The anger in his eyes melted to desire. Her body responded with an ache between her legs and tightening of her nipples. She pressed against him and brought her other hand up to his shoulder. “Kiss me, Devin.”

His head dipped slightly. She licked her lips. He brought his hands up to her face, his thumbs brushing her cheeks and sending warm shivers through her.

“Be my lady, Shayla, and I’ll do a lot more than kiss you.”

Her heart thumped. His eyes were intense as they stared into hers, pleading for her to agree. She lowered her lids, but didn’t step out of his embrace. How long would he want her? How long before the murmuring at the diner, and the reminders of what happened in high school and Atlanta become a burden he didn’t want to deal with.

“I don’t care about them. I only care about you,” he whispered as if reading her thoughts.

She lifted her head. Standing on her toes she brushed her lips against his. He groaned, a sound of pleasure and pain, before kissing her. Her tongue reached out to play across his tempting lower lip when her cell phone rang.

With a start she pulled back. Her breathing came in ragged bursts, her lungs burned and her body yearned for him. His hands squeezed into her back, one gliding down toward her behind. The phone stopped ringing, and then chimed with a voice message. She shook her head before pulling out of his embrace. He didn’t say anything as she picked up the phone. She’d missed her mother’s call.

The phone rang again. Her mom’s number popped on the screen. She ignored it.

“Thank you for checking on me. I’m fine now,” she said.

Devin's soft footsteps crossed the room. He didn't touch her, but she felt him behind her.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'd be better if you spent the night." She whispered.

He brushed the hair from her neck to run one finger down the back. He rested his hand on her shoulder. "You know what it'll take for me to do that."

She moved far enough away for his hand to drop. "I can't do that. Good night, Devin."

A heavy sigh rushed from his lips. "Let me know when you're ready to trust me, Shayla."

She didn't turn as he quietly left out the back door. She couldn't have Devin. She was only here for a short time. After she left, he'd forget about her and the passion they shared. But she would always be her mother's daughter. She'd always have to live with her disappointment if she accepted Devin's offer. Shayla hastily wiped the tears from her eyes and called her mom back.

Chapter 17

“Can I enter, or will you chew my head off?”

Devin looked up from the lab reports he'd been reviewing. Kia stood at his door holding a patient file against her Tweety Bird scrubs. One of her eyebrows was raised as she looked at him.

He sat back in his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Have I really been that bad?”

She smirked and that was all the answer he needed. His frustration simmered just below the surface ever since he'd ask Shayla to be with him and she refused. The heat between him and Shayla was damn near physical. He'd been willing to ignore it and offer friendship, but she'd offered sex. As much as he longed to sleep with her again, he wouldn't do it with the hidden relationship she offered. If he slept with Shayla again, it would be because they were together. She may be afraid of what people would think, but he didn't give a damn.

Kia crossed the room and placed the patient file in his inbox. Instead of walking out as she usually would, she sat on the edge of the desk. She'd gotten a lot more comfortable talking to him after they danced at the club

the other week. Luckily, she hadn't started outright flirting with him, and after what Shayla told him, he'd been sure to keep his responses as professional as possible.

"Is there a reason you're so uptight?" She cocked her head to the side.

"We've been busy. I think I'm just tired."

"We're always busy. My feet are killing me every day when I leave here. But it's worth it, you know. To help so many people."

"It's one of the reasons I love my job."

She smiled. "Me, too. Like Mrs. Abney today, it's so sweet that she always brings you cookies when she comes. And the way the Harmon boys always get so excited when they come in for a checkup. I've never seen kids so happy to see the doctor."

Devin laughed. The three and six year old boys had chanted his name and asked for him constantly before he came into the exam room. The entire office heard and thought it was cute, himself included.

"Those boys are hilarious. And Mrs. Abney knows I can't resist her oatmeal raisin cookies," he said.

"I love this town because everyone knows each other. When I have kids, it'll be good to know that if someone sees them acting the fool they'll give me a call. If I moved away, I wouldn't have that."

Devin cocked a brow. "You're already planning for kids?"

“What, just because I’m young doesn’t mean I’m not ready to settle down. I don’t want to end up like Shayla.”

Devin shifted in his seat. “She’s your cousin.”

Kia raised a hand. “I know, and I love her, but all she talks about is getting out of this town. Moving back to where life doesn’t stop at eight every night. She told me she never wanted to get married or have kids.” Kia sighed and shook her head. “I feel bad for her. One day, she’ll wake up old and alone.”

Devin toyed with a pen on his desk. What Kia said wasn’t news to him. Shayla had never planned to live in Helena. After the situation in Atlanta and what happened with Tony, he couldn’t blame her for not wanting to get married. But, it still hurt to hear the words coming from someone else. Deep down he’d begun to hope she’d realize life here in Helena, with him, wouldn’t be too bad.

“Some people prefer to be alone,” he said softly.

“I prefer to come home to someone I love. Watch our kids play in the yard, go to softball games and watch my boys play football at Helena High or my girls cheer. Wouldn’t you?”

He looked up from the desk to Kia. She was a good looking girl. Ten years younger than him, but she had a decent head on her shoulders. He wouldn’t have hired her otherwise. But could he really consider a relationship with her when he had feelings for Shayla? Strong feelings that stretched further in years than the gap between his and Kia’s ages. He didn’t date for fun, and at this point in

his life he only wanted to date a woman who could be Mrs. Devin Jones. He'd never let anyone know how badly he wanted settle down with a wife. His friends would clown him and their wives would go on a match making binge.

“Maybe one day,” he said with a nonchalant shrug.

A slow smile spread across Kia's face. She reminded him so much of Shayla that he had to look away before she mistook the longing in his gaze as longing for her.

“I should finish going over these reports and call my patients before going home.” He said.

She immediately stood, but didn't leave. “Um, would you like to go out sometime?”

“Kia ... ”

“Look, I know that you and Shayla have history. And I know that with her in town it's stirred that up. But, Shayla's leaving, and I'm not.” She walked over and stood before him. “Don't let her toy with your heart, when I'm willing to cherish it.”

He sat dumfounded after she turned to leave. Despite Shayla's warnings, he hadn't really believed Kia was seriously interested in him. But her words left little doubt. This could make working together awkward, and the synergy of his staff was finally coming together. The nurse he'd hired before Kia had an aggressive attitude that grated on everyone's nerves, from him to the patients. Kia fit in perfectly and his office ran ten times smoother since. But if she began hinting around that she

wanted a relationship with him, it would throw off the dynamic. And he didn't want to start looking for another nurse.

With a sigh he turned back to the lab results. But Kia's warning still played in his head. It wouldn't be a surprise to learn Shayla had put her up to it. The girl said everything Shayla tried to emphasize, except for the toying with his heart part. Shayla didn't have to toy with his heart. It already belonged to her. He rubbed his eyes as memories of kissing her on the back of his truck came back to him. She'd been so damn wet. Wet and ready for him. And he'd been the better person. His dick swelled in his pants. It would be difficult to keep his promise of friendship only. He couldn't think of Shayla without wanting her, much less be around her.

His hands balled into fists and he took a deep breath. He would keep this promise if it killed him. Her abortion revelation proved she hid a lot more hurts than he'd ever imagined. He refused to be another guy who took advantage of her.

A soft knock on the door startled him from his thoughts. He looked up at Anna standing at the door. She wore the same wary expression Kia had earlier.

“You feeling okay?”

He closed his eyes briefly before nodding. “I'm okay.”

Anna visibly relaxed. “Good. I'm getting ready to go get something to eat before the festival meeting tonight. Are you coming?”

“Yes.” He said his voice filled with regret.

Anna wagged a finger. “I know you’re not upset about helping with the church festival.”

“No. I’d forgotten and I still haven’t made all of my patient calls.”

“You forgot, or are you trying to avoid going?”

Devin turned back to the papers on his desk. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Anna came over and propped a hip on the same side of the desk Kia just left. “You know, I was really surprised by Shayla’s ideas. They were good.”

Devin looked at Anna from the corner of his eye. “Shayla’s not all bad. She just made some bad decisions.”

Anna shrugged. “Reverend Jenkins seems to believe there’s good in her. So I’m willing to look for it, I guess.”

Devin leaned back in his chair and raised his brows. “Really? A few weeks ago you were ready to run her out of town.”

Anna pushed away from his desk. “I still may. Depending on her intentions.”

“Intentions?”

Anna waved a hand. “I’ll keep that to myself for awhile longer.” She headed toward the door. “Go ahead and make those calls then come over to the church. I’ll see you soon.”

Devin relished the silence in the office after Anna and the rest of the staff left. He hadn’t forgotten about

the meeting, but wasn't ready to see Shayla. With a sigh he turned back to the lab results and picked up the phone to make his patient calls.

Because his days were so busy, he was only able to call patients with the results of their lab work during lunch or after hours. Oftentimes afterhours were better when he could catch people at home. Luckily, today wasn't filled with too much bad news. But he still spent a lot of time on the phone answering questions and partaking in idle chit chat. He would usually only briefly engage in small talk and end the call to get on to the next one, but tonight he held on. He listened to stories of kids, pets, and work stress until it was close to eight. By then it was too late to make the festival meeting. He could get updated by his dad later, and give himself a little more time before facing Shayla again.

He stood and stretched his cramped muscles. Rubbing the back of his neck in a feeble attempt to work out the kinks from holding a phone between his shoulder and ear, he reached for the light jacket he'd hung behind the door. He was flipping off the lights and checking to make sure everything in the front office was secure when there was a knock at the back door. His head dropped back and he exhaled heavily. It wasn't unusual for someone to see his car at the office after hours and drop in for a quick diagnosis. He wasn't usually bothered by it, but even after all of the talks with patients, the frustration from not having Shayla strained below the surface.

As he walked to the door, he resigned himself to quickly get rid of whoever it was on the other side.

“I was just leaving the office,” he said opening the door.

The frustration inside of him quickly heated to desire. Shayla stood on the other side of the door in a green and brown wrap dress that clung to every luscious curve of her body. His dick stood at immediate attention as a breeze drifted over her, sending the intoxicating mix of her cinnamon scent to his nose.

Her smile was huge and would appear nonchalant if not for the way her eyes shifted away. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I had some questions about the health screen for the festival and you missed the meeting. When I saw your car, I thought I’d stop by and ask.”

He couldn’t take his eyes off her mouth. He wanted to taste her lips again. When her tongue quickly flitted across her lower lip he narrowed his eyes. She was here to tempt him. Her eyes returned to his and widened.

“It can wait.”

He reached out and took her arm, slowly bringing her into the dimly lit hall and shutting the door.

“Is that what you really came here for?” The level of wanting in his voice surprised him.

She shifted slightly but didn’t look away. “It is.”

“Have you thought about what I said?”

Her head lifted and lowered slightly in acknowledgement.

“And?” he asked.

She stepped closer. “I’m not the one denying us what we want, Devin.” Her voice was low and husky. It sent a tremor of lust straight through his body.

He slid his arm around her small waist until his hand rested right at the curve of her perfect behind. He left just a sliver of room between their bodies. She shivered, her eyes softening with desire.

“Neither am I, Shayla.”

She lifted her head her lips barely brushing his. “Then take it ... please.”

Damn, her plea almost caused him to come right then. He closed his eyes and gripped her waist to regain his composure. “Not until we’re together. I won’t take advantage of you, or use you. I want all of you.”

Her full breasts brushed against him when she sighed, causing his erection to lurch almost painfully. “I can’t.” she whispered.

He opened his eyes. Hers were filled with regret and need. Anger burned him that she was so afraid to let people see them together. He knew some of the minds in Helena were small and would hate to see him with Shayla. But they were also fickle. Their relationship would cause murmurs for a few weeks before people moved on to the next thing. He didn’t care that people looked down on her because of what happened in

Atlanta. He knew the truth, knew what was in her heart and that's what mattered. And if anyone did have something to say about it, he'd happily shut their mouths.

He wanted to lash out. Accuse her of toying with his heart the way Kia insinuated. But that wouldn't bring her closer to him. It would only push her further away, and his ultimate goal was to make her his.

He barely brushed his lips against hers, embracing the cockiness that came when she pressed against him for more. He stepped back and let his arm leave her waist.

“Call my office tomorrow at lunch and I'll answer your questions about the health screening. Or work it out with Anna. Otherwise, I'll see you at the next meeting.”

Confusion clouded her beautiful eyes as he led her to the door. “But ... ”

“No buts, Shayla. We're friends, nothing more.” He said gently pushing her out the door.

“Devin, I wish I could, but ... ”

“I know. It's *easier* this way.” He couldn't keep the resentment out of his tone. When the pain flashed in her eyes it was almost his undoing, so he quickly closed the door. Damn her and her exotic brown eyes that always tore at his heart. He couldn't keep protecting Shayla from hurt. If he did, who would protect him?

Chapter 18

Shayla lay staring at the ceiling in her bedroom. Two weeks had passed since Devin hadn't kissed her in his office and sexual frustration chewed at her insides constantly. Two weeks of seeing him at the festival planning meetings. Talking and laughing with him when they discussed the health screening. His friendship was pleasurable and painful. While it was good to have her friend back, it wasn't easing the constant yearning between her legs.

Her thoughts went to the way he'd gently rubbed her back while saying goodbye after the festival planning meeting the night before. The simple act heated her arousal, and it wasn't cooled when he leaned in to whisper in her ear that he was "still waiting". She closed her eyes, succumbing to memory of his large warm palm against her lower back, the humid kiss of his breath against her sensitive ear, the drugging scent of his cologne and the comfort that came from the closeness of his large body. Her hand moved from its resting spot above her head on a slow trail down her body. As her mind's eye filled with Devin's image, wetness spread heavily between her thighs. Her breathing hitched as her

fingers grazed across her breasts. Her hands were too small. Still, she imagined the sound of his voice, deep and husky with desire after he'd kissed her. She parted her legs, pretending he was there urging her to do it. The tips of her fingers just breached the barrier of her underwear when a pounding on the door startled her.

She'd ignore it. She drummed her fingers on her abdomen and clenched her eyes closed. Hoping whoever it was would go away and she could get back to her fantasy.

"Shayla, wake up," her mom's called from the other side.

With a groan, she took a deep breath and snatched her hand away from their destination. Her mom effectively ruined her fantasy.

She got out of bed and grabbed a t-shirt out of the drawer to cover her camisole and panties before hurrying to the door. She had to take a deep breath to regain a semblance of composure before opening the door. Marcella greeted her with a smile. Shayla was momentarily taken aback. Ever since she'd taken such an interest in the church festival, and Reverend Jenkins boasted to everyone in town about the new additions, her mom's icy treatment had warmed significantly. Proof that fantasizing about Devin was smarter than actually sleeping with him.

"Oh, good, you're up," she said. "Get dressed and come to the farmers market with me and your aunt Linda."

Shayla grinned and stopped herself from reaching out to hug her mom. No need to push things too far. “Sure, I’ll be ready in twenty minutes.”

Marcella nodded. “I already made breakfast. Hurry up before Kenny eats it all.” She gave Shayla one last smile before turning to walk off the porch.

Shayla shut the door and rushed into her bedroom. She pulled out a pair of jeans and an orange top. Instead of waiting to fill the tub and take a bath, she stuffed her bathroom toiletries into a bag, put on some yoga pants, and hurried to her mom’s house for a shower.

Her Aunt Linda arrived just as she finished showering and the three left shortly thereafter for the farmer’s market. Five hours later they were sitting on her mom’s front porch snapping beans and watching people in the neighborhood go about their weekend business. Kids played, women sat on porches talking, and men huddled in corners laughing and joking.

Life in Helena had the potential to be kinda nice. Reverend Jenkins’ approval of her festival ideas not only softened her mother’s attitude toward her, it also softened some of the people in town. A few people smiled and nodded at her in the grocery store. Devin was right, after one of Tony’s friends was caught sneaking around with a married woman, most of the gossip in town went to that instead of her. Plus, she enjoyed eating dinner with her mom and brother every night.

Thankfully, she’d only run into Tony once since the party. In the grocery store when she was shopping with

her mother. She didn't have to ignore him; her mother's evil stare was enough to keep him at bay. It didn't prevent him from leering at her, but she'd rather have his leer than be forced to talk with him. Roxanne had proved to be a real friend after volunteering to help with the festival after she'd learned Shayla was on the committee. Roxanne made another ally against Martha Taylor and Mr. Porter on the planning committee.

If she could be with Devin things would be perfect.

Her hands slowed in their efficient movements snapping the ends of the beans. She wished it were as simple as he thought it was for them to be together, but agreeing to a relationship with him, would also mean giving up the small amount of peace she'd found in Helena.

Her mom and aunt cackled beside her. She missed the joke, but still turned and smiled before picking up the pace and snapping beans. Her brother came out the door, followed closely by his friend Bobby.

Kenny squeezed between their mom and Aunt Linda's chairs which blocked the front door and rested his large shoulders on the railing at the top of the porch. Bobby leaned against the porch rail right in front of Shayla. She glared at him and he just grinned back.

"Damn, Ma, you think you got enough beans," Kenny said grinning and nudging the tub of beans with his toe.

"The way you eat, I probably need to go back for more."

Kenny laughed. “Yeah, you probably right.”

Aunt Linda pointed from Kenny to Bobby, “What are y’all about to get into?”

Kenny rubbed his hands together. “Gonna hit up Club Voracious tonight. Check out the ladies.”

Aunt Linda’s lips twisted with a frown. “Nothing good goes on in that place.”

“Save that for Kia. She’s up in there every weekend,” Kenny said.

Marcella waved a bean at Linda. “That’s what I said.”

Linda shrugged. “I told that girl she’ll never catch Devin hanging out there every weekend. She don’t wanna listen.”

Shayla’s hands slowed only momentarily. Her family acted as if it was inevitable for Devin and Kia to hook up. She snatched the ends off the bean in her hand and threw it into the bucket.

Bobby shifted and cleared his throat. “I thought Devin’s interest was elsewhere.” He stared pointedly at Shayla.

Everyone else on the porch turned toward her. Her face prickled with heat. She quickly picked up another bean to break apart. “I hope you don’t mean me. I have my sights set on bigger fish than Devin Jones.”

Her mom and aunt both fell back in their chairs. The relief in their eyes caused a pain in her chest.

“Who you got your eye on, sis? Ain’t too many big fish round here besides Devin.” Kenny asked.

She didn’t have her eye on anyone, but it was better to make up a pretend love interest than have her family suspect she was going after Devin.

“A guy in Columbia. Don’t ask who, you’ll find out when you need to,” she said.

Her mom stopped snapping beans and faced her. “When you get time to meet a guy in Columbia?”

“It’s nothing serious. Just something I’m thinking about. Can we leave it alone, please?”

Kia’s car pulled up in the driveway, ending the interrogation. Kia got out and walked toward the stairs, a bounce to her step. “What’s up, everyone. Hey, Momma,” she said leaning on the railing opposite of Kenny.

Aunt Linda eyed Kia from head to toe. “What got you all happy?”

Kia grinned, brightening her entire face with youthful exuberance. “I just ran into Devin and his daddy at Piggly Wiggly.”

“Really?” Marcella asked.

Linda planted a hand on her hip. “Did you get the vinegar like I asked you to?”

Kia nodded. “Yeah, it’s in the car. Kenny, go get it.”

Kenny rolled his eyes, but left the porch for her car. Aunt Linda nodded and Kia continued.

“I went over to say hi. And then we got to talking about weekend plans. They’re eating dinner at the diner downtown tonight. I said I didn’t have plans, but loved the pot roast down there ... ”

“You hate that pot roast.” Kenny said coming back up the stairs. He handed the bag with the vinegar to Linda.

Kia sucked her teeth. “Shut up. He don’t know that. Anyway, I kinda hinted around that I wouldn’t mind eating there tonight.” She paused and grinned at everyone on the porch.

Linda leaned forward in the chair. “And come on girl, spill it.”

Shayla held her breath. But the answer was obvious. Her cousin wouldn’t be so happy if she wasn’t eating with them. Still she hoped for another answer.

“And,” Kia said drawing out the syllables for effect. “Roscoe said ‘why don’t you two go there tonight and I stay at home’. I could have jumped for joy.”

Linda squealed. Raising her hands in the air and shaking them. Shayla lowered her head and fought back tears. Roscoe pushed them together? She would have expected Devin to do it as a way to get back at her, but for Roscoe to do it hurt more.

“Damn, y’all women be plotting,” Bobby said rubbing his neck. “I feel for old doc.”

Marcella flicked her wrist. “Boy, please. We ain’t no worse than men. Always plotting and scheming to get a

woman in bed.”

Kenny shook his head and shuddered. “Momma, hush. I don’t want to think of you like that. Come on, Bobby; let’s hang at your place.”

Bobby straightened away from the railing and followed Kenny. “Looks like things are working out. Kia’s bout to snag Dr. Jones and Shayla has a new man in Columbia.” His snicker made Shayla’s skin crawl.

Kia’s face brightened even more. “You got a man, Shayla?”

Shayla tossed the last of her beans in her bowl and stood. “Something like that.” She dumped her bowl into the bucket between her mom and Linda. “I’m going home to chill for awhile. I’ll be back later.”

“Okay, baby,” her mom said.

Shayla froze. Her mom hadn’t used an endearment with her ... ever. She smiled tentatively at her mom, who returned the gesture before looking at Kia with satisfaction.

Shayla turned to go down the stairs and Kia stopped her. “Hey, can I borrow that red blouse up you wore the other day?”

No, was on the tip of her tongue. Kia didn’t need more ammunition in her hunt for Devin Jones. That shirt was cut to accentuate curves and the buttons didn’t start until right above the breast. The last thing she needed was for Devin to notice the curves on the, as he said, young and gorgeous Kia.

“Of course you can borrow her shirt,” Marcella said.

Kia smiled turned triumphant and Shayla fought the urge to slap it off her cousin’s face. “Come on,” Shayla said.

Kia followed her off the porch. Kenny blew his car horn as he and Bobby pulled out of the yard and down the street. They both waved and then walked the short distance to Shayla’s rented house. A few minutes later they were inside and Shayla was grudgingly pulling her shirt out of the closet and handing it over to Kia.

Instead of leaving, Kia plunked down on Shayla’s bed. “So, you really don’t care about me going out with Devin?”

Shayla crossed her arms and leaned against the dresser. “Why should I care? I told him you two would make a cute couple.”

Kia’s eyes widened. “Really? What did he say?”

Shayla picked an imaginary piece of lint off her shirt in an effort to pretend this conversation wasn’t excruciating. “Something about you being gorgeous.”

Kia clapped her hands and fell back on the bed. “I can’t believe it. Oh, Shayla, I was so worried that you really planned to go for him.” She sat up and sighed. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you, because I really like him.”

Kia’s apology and happiness was like a knife to the gut. She turned away and fiddled with the mountain of perfume, makeup, and jewelry on her dresser. “It’s okay.”

“So, who’s the new man you’re into?”

Shayla shook her head. “Just an idea I got, that’s all.”

“Don’t hold back, what type of idea?”

Shayla pulled a folded sheet of paper from the mess on her dresser. It was the flyer for the art show held by the artist who painted the picture she’d admired in the library. She’d forgotten the show was tonight. It was something she’d hoped to do when she’d first gotten to town. A way to get a taste of some of the culture she’d enjoyed in Atlanta, but over the past week she hadn’t missed art shows or fancy conversation any more. Suddenly, the idea of doing that versus waiting around for Kia to come back from her date seemed promising.

She picked up the flyer and gave it to Kia. “I’m going to that show tonight. Maybe something good will pop off.”

Kia read the flyer, and her brow furled. “You’re not going there to hook up with Tyrell Crawford. He’s married!”

Shayla rolled her eyes. “Oh, Kia, please.”

Kia held up her hands. “Never mind, it’s none of my business.” She jumped up from the bed and put the flyer on the dresser.

“Kia — ”

“You be careful and have fun, because I know I will.” Kia said. The last part effectively ended Shayla’s attempt to clarify her assumption.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Kia smirked. “Whatever Devin Jones wants it to mean.” She grabbed the shirt off the bed and gave Shayla a quick hug. “See you tomorrow.” Then breezed out the door.

Chapter 19

Devin glanced at Kia over the top of the menu. She caught his gaze and smiled. The corner of his mouth lifted slightly before he looked back at the plastic covered sheet. He was stalling. He knew what he wanted, what he always ordered when he and his dad came to the Main Street diner for dinner. Grilled pork chop, collard greens with rice and gravy. Right about now he'd be arguing with his dad about ordering the apple pie a la mode to eat before dinner. Instead, he was on an unwanted date with a member of his staff. He could strangle his dad for forcing this on him, but why bother. Roscoe Jones would come back as a ghost and try to influence his life.

“I think I’ll get the baked chicken,” Kia said putting the menu down. “I’m in the mood for something different.”

Devin set his menu aside and cocked a brow. “Not feeling your favorite dish here tonight?”

She grinned prettily and leaned forward. “No, but I am in the mood for a good dessert.”

He cleared his throat and sat back. Thankfully, Jennie came up. She pulled a pen from behind her ear

and braced it against the pad in her hand.

“Good evening, Dr. Jones.” She glanced at Kia.
“Decided for prettier company than your dad, I see.”

Kia beamed and Devin shifted in his seat. “Kia works with me.”

Jennie shrugged. “Don’t mean she ain’t pretty.”

Devin slid the menu to the side of the table and changed the subject. “I’ll have my usual, thank you.”

Jennie wrote down his order and looked at Kia. After Kia ordered, she stuck the pen back in her hair and sauntered away. Kia looked at him with thinly veiled stars in her eyes. He shifted in his seat and looked everywhere but at her. That didn’t help. All eyes were on their table. Many of his patients had to pick that night to have dinner there. He hadn’t brought a date out in Helena in years. The last few women he’d dated he’d met in Columbia. He knew that if he was seen with a woman around town the gossips would have him engaged before the end of the week. His dad knew the same thing, yet he’d insisted Devin come. He wasn’t sure what Roscoe’s game was, but forcing Kia on him wasn’t cool. It would only make it harder to convince Shayla to get over what the gossips thought and agree to date him.

He gave another weak nod and half smile to one of his patients from across the room. Shayla’s idea of keeping a relationship between them a secret had merits. He hadn’t gotten through dinner with Kia yet, but already he could see the tongues wagging and speculating.

He turned back to Kia who was twisting the napkin into pieces in front of her. He could try harder to be a better dinner companion. It wasn't her fault they were here.

"So, what is ... " he stopped mid sentence. Asking what Shayla was up to tonight wasn't going to redeem his lack of enthusiasm. "What's your mom up to?"

Kia sighed and relief filled her eyes. "She's probably at home trying to dig herself out of a mountain of beans. I don't understand why she buys so much stuff, but every time she goes to the farmers market, she comes back with enough food to feed the entire neighborhood. Her deep freezer is overflowing."

Devin smiled. "She does this often?"

"Yes. But she's not alone. Shayla's mom is right there with her."

"And Shayla?" It was out before he could stop it.

The light in Kia's eyes dimmed. He would bet money that she was waiting for him to bring up her cousin's name. "She was snapping beans, too."

Kia twisted the last bit of napkin and tossed the remains on the table. Devin drummed his fingers on the plastic surface. Okay, talk of family led to talk of Shayla, so he searched for another topic.

"Do you like working in our office?"

The smile returned to her face and she sat up. "Yes, I love it. But that's no secret. I told you how I feel about working in your office."

He slowly lifted his head up and down. “Good. I’m glad things are comfortable for you.”

They became silent again. He fought the urge to look at his watch. Kia pulled out her cell phone and checked the screen.

“Waiting on a call?” he asked.

She shook her head and put the phone on the table. “No, just wanted to see if anyone texted or Tweeted.”

He wrestled back his annoyance. Kia spent most breaks and lunch hours scrolling through her cell phone. He hated it when people spent half of their time cultivating online relationships instead of having real conversations. He hadn’t thought much of how Kia spent her spare time before, but the fact that she was leaving her phone out while they were on a date — albeit an unwanted date — ate at him the wrong way.

“And did anyone text?”

She picked up her phone and slid her thumb over the screen. “Yeah, my friend Mariah said there’s a new DJ at Club Voracious.” She looked up at Devin. “Maybe we can check it out after leaving here?”

He shook his head. “Not a club fan.”

She raised a brow. “You went with Shayla.”

He shrugged. “One time for a welcome home party. Not something I’d want to do every weekend.”

She sighed and set her phone down. Again they grew silent. He looked toward the kitchen, willing Jennie to

come back with their food. Kia's phone chimed and she ran her hands over the screen again before chuckling. Devin clenched his jaw, and no longer fought the urge to check his watch. Damn, only twenty minutes since they'd sat down.

“This is crazy. Why is it so hard for us to find something to talk about?”

Her question startled him. Feeling guilty, he pulled his shirt sleeve over his watch. “We're not at work. In the office we have specific things to discuss. Here, we need to find common ground.”

“I thought it would be easier. I mean, I've known you forever.”

Devin smiled. “Watching me while you grew up isn't the same thing as knowing me.”

She sat forward, revealing too much cleavage. “Then let me get to know you.”

Devin sat back. “Kia, I can't do this.”

“Do what?”

He motioned between the two of them. “This. Look, you're an attractive girl and ... ”

She held up a hand. “Stop it. I don't need the ‘it's me not you' speech. Especially when I know the reason why.”

He looked her straight in the eye. “She'll always be the reason why.”

Kia's lip twisted. "Not for long. You know where she went tonight? To some art show in Columbia for that senator's son-in-law. The one who came to Helena a year ago and painted downtown."

Devin shrugged. "And?"

Kia smirked. "She told everyone this afternoon that she had her sights set higher than you. When I asked her about it, she admitted it was for Tyrell Crawford. She doesn't even care that he's married. Don't buy this good girl act she's putting on, it's all a front." Kia picked up her phone and slid out of the booth. "Don't bother to call."

Devin watched her walk out with his mouth hanging open. She had to be lying. Shayla wouldn't have gone to Columbia to hit on a married man ... would she? Anger, jealousy and frustration formed a tight ball in his gut. Had she moved on after he pushed her away? He refused to believe it, and he damn sure wasn't ready to watch her make another foolish decision like she'd done in Atlanta.

Jennie finally came with their food. "Date's in the bathroom?"

Devin pulled out his wallet and threw more than enough money on the table. "No, she left."

"What the hell did you do?"

Devin slid out of the booth. "Agree to go out with her in the first place." He stormed out of the diner. He ignored the curious stares of the patrons. One of them

was probably going to call his dad to report that Kia had walked out on him.

Outside, his anger kicked up a notch when Tony's red sports car pulled into the spot next to his truck. He owed Tony an ass beating for everything he'd done to Shayla in high school. But now wasn't the time, or the place.

"What's up, Devin," Tony said getting out of his car. "Where you running to?"

Devin jerked the door open to his truck. "Not tonight, Tony."

Tony laughed. "Oh, I see. Did Shayla call? You always did go running when she called. But in the end, she made her choice."

Devin slammed his door and turned to face Tony. "From what I hear, you didn't give her much of a choice."

The smile left Tony's face, but the cocky look in his eye remained. "She didn't seem to mind."

"When a woman says no, that usually means they want you to stop."

Tony held out both hands. "She didn't say it like she meant it."

Rage pumped through Devin. He rushed over and grabbed Tony by the shirt, slamming him against the front window of the diner. "If you *ever* lay a hand on her again, I'll kill you."

Tony smirked. “Before she leaves town she’ll be begging me to lay more than a hand on her. Shayla ain’t ’bout nothing. Never was, never will be. You look like a fool chasing after her.”

Devin’s hand balled into a fist at the same time that Mr. Wilson, the owner of the diner, came out of the front door. “What’s going on out here? We don’t need any trouble.”

Tony smiled and pushed Devin’s hands away. “Ain’t no trouble, Mr. Wilson. Dr. Jones and I were just having a talk.” Tony straightened his shirt. “We’re through. He’s got a bitch to catch.”

Devin’s fist flew into the side of Tony’s face. Tony was stunned momentarily before taking a swing that Devin easily avoided. Mr. Wilson ran over and put himself between the two. By then, other male patrons of the diner came out and pushed the two apart. Mr. Wilson dragged Devin toward his truck. The sight of Tony’s smirk as Mr. Wilson pulled him away fueled his anger. Adrenaline pumped through him, fueling his need to beat the crap out of that sorry excuse for a man.

“Get out of here, Devin. Or else I’ll have to call the police, and I really don’t want to do that,” Mr. Wilson said.

Devin looked at the man, who was friends with his father. He didn’t regret hitting Tony, but did regret causing a scene in front of Mr. Wilson’s establishment. “I’m sorry, Mr. Wilson.” He glared at Tony. “I’m not through with you.”

Tony straightened his clothes and wiped at his shoulders. “You know how to find me, playa.”

Mr. Wilson patted his arm and Devin turned away. He fired up his truck and left skid marks in his haste to leave the parking lot. This entire situation would be the talk of the town. Even though she wasn't here, those who knew their history would assume the fight was over Shayla. And knowing Tony, he'd hype up the situation to all of his friends. Tony may not have had any intentions of going for Shayla before, but Devin's warning would change that.

“Stupid!” Devin said, slamming his hand against his steering wheel. Tony had hated on Devin and Shayla's friendship all through high school. It was only because Shayla preferred Devin. If she would have fawned over Tony the same way Peaches and the other girls had, he wouldn't have given her the time of day. But because she didn't want him, he'd wanted her. He should have known that Tony would have found a dirty way to come between him and Shayla.

Without thinking, his foot pushed on the pedal and he headed toward the interstate. He was going to get her. He knew exactly where the art show was, since he'd turned down the invitation mailed to him. He'd liked Tyrell Crawford when the man came to town. He seemed to be down to earth and likable when they'd met, but just the idea of Shayla possibly trying to hook up with him made Devin want to cause the man physical harm.

His fight with Tony would give the gossips all they needed to link him with Shayla. And, dammit, if they were going to do it then it might as well be true. He'd waited years for them to be together, and his patience had run out. By the time the sun rose he would convince Shayla that openly acknowledging what was between them was worth fighting for.

Chapter 20

Shayla slid through the thick crowd of people admiring the artwork displayed on the unfinished walls of 701 Whaley Street. Although she'd been out of the Columbia area for years, she recognized enough faces to know that 701 Whaley was the "it" place for everything from parties to art exhibits. A show of this magnitude brought out the who's who of the city. The mayor, local elected officials, and editors of local art magazines all mingled in the crowd. The open beam ceiling and rough walls of the refurbished building did have a charm that only enhanced the art.

Despite coming by herself, she didn't feel out of place. She was there to admire the paintings, and escape her mom and aunt's happiness about Kia's date with Devin. She'd worked hard to make sure she looked stunning. Her one shoulder black, silver, and blue sequined dress stopped mid thigh and fit her body like a glove. Five-inch glitter silver sling backs elongated her shapely legs. She'd spent an hour flat ironing her hair to perfection so it hung bone straight to her shoulders. All outward armor to prove Devin and Kia didn't matter.

She caught the eye of a young man in a suit too big for his small frame and dark freckles across his pecan complexion. He'd been admiring her legs all night. Before he could head her way she lifted her eyebrow and gave him her best "don't even think about it" look before turning away. She'd like to think that he was only admiring her because she looked good. But he'd also had a whispered conversation with a reporter who recognized her from the scandal in Atlanta. Both men had shared plenty of chuckles while gazing at her before Freckles decided to follow her around the room.

A waiter dressed in a tight black t-shirt and white jeans passed by carrying a tray of champagne. He paused and held out the tray for her, but she declined. After the fiasco at Club Voracious she'd decided to forgo alcohol. Even though she was dying to forget the fact that at this very moment Devin and Kia were probably laughing and having a great time on their date.

"Please don't tell me my painting is the reason for the frown on your face," a deep voice said from behind.

Shayla turned around and recognized Tyrell Crawford from his picture by the door. He'd spent most of the evening going through the crowd and talking. She'd purposefully stayed on the opposite side of the room from him. The last thing she needed or wanted was to be linked to a high profile married man.

The man was good looking. Midnight black skin encased a slim, but toned body, and dark eyes stared from beneath thick lashes. His hair was twisted into

short locks, which surprised her since his hair was closely cut in all of his pictures. He was dressed casually in a pale blue button up and khaki pants; if he weren't the artist, she'd assume his casual appearance would look out of place. On him it worked.

He walked over to stand beside her and motioned to the painting. "I'll admit it's not my favorite, but it shouldn't cause scowls."

He made a face of mock terror that brought a smile to Shayla's lips. "Fear not, your painting had nothing to do with my frown."

She turned back to the painting. It was a beach scene, as seen through the window of what appeared to be a seaside home. In the distance there was the silhouette of a woman lying on her side on a beach towel. Her back faced the artist; the sun reflecting off chocolate skin. There wasn't a hint of the cynicism in this painting that she'd seen in the others. She'd spent most of the night coming back to it trying to find something.

She turned to Tyrell. "I will admit it has me puzzled."

He crossed his arms and leaned back on his heels. "I'd love to hear why."

Cocking her head to the side, Shayla looked back at the painting. "It's happy."

"Everyone here thinks my pictures are happy."

She shrugged. "Everyone here is probably on uppers." She froze and turned back to him. "Sorry, that

was callous.”

He waved a hand and leaned forward. “And probably true, to some extent.” He said with a smile before pointing to the painting. “So tell me why this one is happy and the others aren’t.”

Shayla motioned to the painting. “There’s nothing hidden in the background, that I can see, which shows the underlying hypocrisy of the world. All of your other paintings show what people want to see in small town America, but you sneak in the story behind that picturesque scene. The fakeness of it all.”

His dark gaze bore into her. She tried not to appear unnerved and met his gaze dead on. “Do you have a problem with that? The hypocrisy I show in my other paintings?”

She frowned. “Why would I? It’s true. It’s life.”

He nodded slowly. “True, but most people call me a cynic for adding that to my landscapes.”

Shayla sighed and looked back at the painting. “Most people go through life pretending as if unhappiness didn’t exist.”

Again he studied her before saying. “I paint these scenes to show that outside perfection often hides inner turmoil. I’ve found people either love it or hate it.”

Shayla looked around the crowded room. “I’d say most people love it.”

He shrugged. “They love to see a senator’s son-in-law indulge in his little art hobby.” He leaned in and

smiled. “Behind their wine glasses they’re calling me a skeptic. They’re trying to figure out why I paint such unhappy pictures when I live such a wonderful life.”

Shayla returned his smile. “I’d gather from these paintings your life isn’t as wonderful as they all believe.”

He gasped with mock horror. “Are you implying I don’t love my charmed life?”

Shayla bit her lip and really looked at him. He was smiling, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. There were small lines around his mouth, proof he used to laugh a lot, but now his smile was guarded. He was someone used to holding his feelings in check. Someone who used their face as a mask.

“Let’s just say I recognize a kindred spirit,” she said.

His eyes traveled over her and he shook his head. “I thought I recognized something special about you.”

His perusal sent an unwelcome shiver down her spine. As much as she was enjoying their conversation, it was time to pump the brakes. She wasn’t about to go back down the road of mistress to a politician. “There’s nothing special about me.” She took a small step back. “The kindred spirit comment was just a joke.”

He threw back his head and laughed. A few people next to them turned, surprise evident on their faces. When he stopped, he held up his left hand. “There’s no hidden meaning behind my words. I’m married, unhappily maybe, but married.”

She didn’t relax. “I’ve heard that line before.”

“I’m sure you have, and while I won’t lie and say I’m not flattered that you thought I was hitting on you, I will have to set the record straight.” All humor left his eyes. “As much as I hate pretending to live the life of a happily married politician’s son, I can’t afford to embarrass my daughter.” He stared back at the beach scene. “She’s the reason I stay. The reason I play the game.”

The sincerity and pain in his voice hit her. She’d had every slick man in Atlanta try to run game on her. Unfortunately, she fell for the game of the wrong one, but for some reason she believed Tyrell. She knew what it was like, to smile on the outside and want to die on the inside. She’d done it for years.

“It sucks doesn’t it? To experience happiness but know you’ll never have it?”

He grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter and handed one to her. “At least we knew it for a few stolen moments.” He stared wistfully at the painting.

Shayla looked at the profile of the woman in the painting and then back at Tyrell. “Is that her? The one who made you happy?”

He downed his champagne in one swallow. “Yes. That’s why this one is happy. I painted it years ago.”

“Why isn’t it one of your favorites?”

His eyes met hers. “Because it’s too painful to look at. Hopefully someone will buy the damn thing tonight.”

Her lips lifted in a soft smile. She liked him. Not in a sexual way, but as a potential friend. If she were dumb enough to befriend a high profile man. He smiled back before he looked over her shoulder. His smile quickly changed. Became tighter around the corners and the warmth in his eyes disappeared. The game was back on.

At the same time her scalp prickled. Someone watched her. When she turned around her gaze collided with Devin's across the room. The desire, anger and frustration in his eyes zeroed in on her, sucking the air from her lungs and causing her to forget everyone else around them. His hunger called to her, and for the life of her she couldn't remember why she continued to fight her need.

"It looks as if your happiness has arrived." Tyrell spoke, jerking her from her spell.

She blinked rapidly to clear her mind. When she looked at Tyrell he smiled. "From the looks he's shooting my way, I'd better make a quick exit. Have a good night ... " he held out his hand and lifted an eyebrow.

"Shayla," she said shaking his hand.

"Goodnight, Shayla." He dipped his head and glided away.

She turned back to Devin. Her stomach quivered as he crossed the room. His eyes never left hers and she didn't know whether to run or stay. One hand clenched the champagne flute, the other tapped against her leg as he stalked toward her.

When he was in front of her she couldn't speak. She stared into his eyes, the gold flashed dangerously within their depths. His warmth and scent surrounded her. A woodsy mix of bodywash and him.

Instead of being frightened, or upset by his anger, she was turned on. Her breathing hitched as anticipation danced across her skin.

“Are you here for him?” his voice was low, but urgent.

She quickly shook her head. “No.”

Relief flashed in his eyes, but the frustration and desire remained. “I’m not tap dancing around this anymore.” He stepped close enough for her breasts to brush against his chest. She gasped at the touch. “We’re leaving.”

She swallowed. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere with a bed.” He held out his hand.

If she went she betrayed her cousin. She would prove to everyone she was the selfish whore they all considered her to be. Her mom would hate her. The blissful peacefulness she’d found in Helena would be shattered.

But if she didn't go, she'd betray herself. And if he was here instead of with Kia, that had to mean the date had been brief. She hated herself for hoping it had been a disaster.

She placed her hand in his. When his warm fingers wrapped around hers she wanted to cry with happiness.

Instead she lowered her eyes so he wouldn't see how ecstatic she was and let him lead her out of the building.

Chapter 21

Shayla didn't remember what happened between Devin leading her from the art show to him walking her into a room at the Marriot downtown. Frankly, she didn't care about any of that when he pulled her against him and closed the door behind them. He walked backward toward the bed. One hand held firmly but gently onto her waist, the other cupped her face. His gaze held hers captive, his brown eyes lighter with the fire of his desire.

He stopped when the backs of his legs bumped into the bed. The hand on her cheek moved to run through her hair. Each individual strand tugging against her scalp sent an answering jolt of anticipation through her. It was hard to breath, her breasts were heavy, and the liquid proof of her desire dampened her panties.

He slowly pulled her head forward until their lips met. All of the craving and frustration she'd held in check for the past few weeks rushed to the surface. Instantly, her hands were up and diving into the soft curls on his head.

She pulled back, her hands still running through his hair. "When was your last haircut?"

“Not since you mentioned liking it longer.”

Her heart constricted. No declaration or love or flowery phrases would have made her forget all of the repercussions of this night like those simple words. The extra hair on his head was a far cry from the afro she braided in high school, but it still lent him a more relaxed air. The soft tresses on her fingers were as much of an aphrodisiac to her now as it had been then.

She opened her mouth to tell him she loved him. The words were on the tip of her tongue, but for all of Devin’s promises that he wanted to be with her, he hadn’t said for how long, or that he felt the same.

“I love it,” she said instead. His lips spread into a grin. The fullness of the lower one set her insides on fire. She twisted her hands in his hair. “It’s sexy.”

He pushed her back just enough to let his approving gaze roam over her body. “Not as sexy as you are in that dress.”

“Wait until I’m out of it.”

He pulled her back against his hard body, his demanding mouth taking claim of hers. She met his hard kiss head on, delighted by same urgency in him. The cool air in the room teased her back as he unzipped her dress. She shivered from the shocking heat of his wide hand as it dove beneath the fabric to gently massage the taut muscles in her back.

His lips stayed on hers and his other hand left the thick tresses of her hair to push down the one strap of

her dress. She had to drop her hands from his head to let it fall, but quickly returned them to their exploration as soon as it hit the floor. His powerful arms engulfed her in a hug as he continued to kiss her. Her senses were inflamed; the protective gesture combined with his kiss sending her over the edge. His thick erection pressed heavily against her belly, but that wasn't where she wanted it. She wrapped a leg around his waist, getting his hardness closer to her dripping wet center.

In a flash, he spun her around until her knees were against the back of the bed. He broke the kiss and Shayla stared at him in a daze. He slowly turned her back to him and unfastened her strapless bra. She sighed in pleasure when her breasts were released from the confines, and again when his strong hands kneaded the throbbing flesh. He gently brushed her erect nipples, sending another torrent of desire flowing between her thighs. His fingertips danced across the oversensitive skin of her belly to the top of her thong. His forefingers hooked into the edges of the skimpy material before continuing his slow descent down her body. After she stepped out of the underwear, he pressed a soft kiss the dip in her back just above her butt before standing and turning her to face him.

“You're so beautiful, Shayla.”

Goose pimples shivered across her skin. She wanted him. Not just tonight, and not just physically, but she wanted Devin Jones to belong to her. It was a silly dream, one that would alienate her from everyone in her family for years if it came true, but when he looked at her

as if she were the most wonderful treasure in the world, it all seemed worth it.

Without a word, she reached out and pulled the bottom of his sweater up and over his head. She ran her hands across his sinewy frame, delighting in the way his body jerked and his breathing caught whenever she dragged her nails across his golden flesh. Lowering her head she kissed the center of his chest, the light brushing of hair tickling her lips. His hands smoothed the curtain of her hair away from her face as she traced her tongue from one of his hard nipples to the other. Lightly flicking the pink tip across each one until his breathing became haggard. She took her time to suck one flat nipple while her hands busied themselves with unbuttoning his pants. She didn't waste any time pushing them down his trim waist.

She looked at his wonderful dick. Long, thick, and dripping with his desire. Slowly, she lowered to her knees hoping he wouldn't stop her as he had before. Instead, he pulled her hair back and held it in one hand at the base of her neck. Without hesitation, she took the swollen head into her mouth. His precum was sweet, like the pineapple he loved, and she couldn't get enough of it. She pulled him deep within her mouth. Then slowly worked her way back up to the blunt head where she sucked out more evidence of his desire, before repeating the motion. He worked his hips back and forth, making love to her mouth and causing her own body to thrum with desire. Her excitement flowed down her leg, and

with each thrust she grew more aroused as she imagined him doing the same within her.

His grip tightened on her hair. His movements increased in frenzy. She wanted him to come, wanted to suck him dry and celebrate in the victory of having him tremble just from the actions of her mouth. But he quickly pulled out. Gasping for breath he reached down and pulled her up, taking her lips in a searing kiss that doused any complaints she may have made. One of his hands plunged in her hair, the other reached down to part the swollen folds of her sex. His finger sunk into her creamy wetness and she gasped. His mouth left hers to suck on the sensitive flesh where her neck and shoulder met. He pushed another long finger within her and she moved up and down, craving the release that was hovering in the distance.

Quickly, he pushed her back onto the bed. He grabbed his pants off the floor and dug out a condom which he quickly put on. Her legs dangled on the edge and he spread them wide. Using two fingers he rubbed both sides of her swollen clit, causing her to clutch the duvet. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head, she spread her legs wider, and rotated her hips. His other hand ran up her body to gently grasp her chin. She opened her eyes only a slit, but it was enough to see the claim within his.

“I don’t care what happened before,” he said softly. “But you, this — ” he slid two thick fingers within her wetness and she clenched her walls around them “ — is mine.”

“Yes,” she gasped.

“Good.” His fingers slipped out of her and he thrust his rock hard dick within her before she could utter a complaint.

Her breath came out in a hiss, and she reached up for him.

His arm snaked around her waist, pulling her further up on the bed. Again it was perfect. The softness of her breasts absorbed the hardness of his chest. The heat from his skin matched the heat of hers. Her wet core contracted and hugged his rigid flesh with the comfort of a glove. He began the same slow, deliberate strokes, the same pleasurable rotation of his hips as before, each slippery glide creating an exquisite pleasure inside of her. It didn't take long for her to near the peak. Arousal had been her constant companion since the day on the back of his truck. With each solid plunge she cried out. Louder, and louder until she finally shattered and clung to him. Tears filled her eyes. Tears of joy, pleasure, and contentment. His body tensed, he pulled back but she clenched her legs around his waist and contracted the muscles of her sex around his solid shaft. He yelled out. She joined in as the warmth of his orgasm burst and spread within her.

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Devin tried to catch his breath. His face was buried in the space between her neck and shoulder. Already her scent mixed with his cologne, an intoxicating concoction that would haunt him for the next few days. A late spasm

from her climax flexed around his now semi-hard penis, sending a rush of satisfaction through him. He could lose himself within her and fall asleep with her body wrapped around him forever. But would she want the same?

He lifted his head. Once again tears were streaming down her face. Concern for her quickly pushed aside his doubts.

He wiped the tears off her cheek. "What's wrong?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Nothing. That was ... perfect."

"Twice you've cried. I'm beginning to think my performance is bad."

Her eyes widened and she reached up to run her fingers through his hair. Desire flexed within him when her hands gripped his hair. He was too old for braids, but he was beginning to reconsider ever cutting his hair again.

"Your performance was excellent." she said.

He leaned down to rub her nose with his. "Then why the tears?"

She sighed. "Because I'm so happy when I'm with you." She lowered her lids, avoiding his gaze.

He lifted her chin with a crooked forefinger. "I'm happy with you, too," he said when her eyes met his.

Her full lips spread in a smile that warmed his heart far more than he wished it did. He'd loved Shayla once, and if he didn't remember that she planned to leave town

one day, he'd blurt out that he was still in love with her like a fool.

Forgetting the fact that she hated living in Helena, he kissed her. Letting the memory of her body against his, and the feel of her lips while he was still buried deep within her flood his senses for easy recall after she left.

He broke off the kiss. A look of contentment enhanced the exotic flare of her eyes. To his utter satisfaction, she continued to play with the hair on his head. "I'm not hiding what's between us anymore. While you're in town, you're with me."

Her hand dropped from his head and she looked away. "It's not that easy."

He turned her face back to his. Pushing back his frustration as he tried to remember not to push or judge her. "Tell me why it isn't."

"Devin, my life has finally gotten easier in Helena. My mom actually looks me in the eye. The people at the church are listening to my ideas, and people are no longer treating me like I'm there to steal their husbands. It's nice. And I know you're not supposed to admit to caring what other people think, but after years of having people look at me like I'm just like my dad, it's good to have them view me as a productive member of society."

"How is dating me going to change that?"

"You should have seen how happy my mom and Aunt Linda were when Kia told them about your date. They practically danced on my mom's porch. If I came

home tomorrow and announced that you were my man, they'd think I set out to steal you on purpose."

The regret in her eyes twisted his heart. "You didn't steal me. I came for you."

She frowned. "Why? What happened with Kia?"

He rested his forehead on hers briefly before lifting his head. "We have nothing in common outside of work. I spent the entire time trying to think of something to say that didn't involve you and she spent the entire time playing with her phone."

Her face brightened and her hand thankfully delved into his hair again. "You were thinking about me?"

He nuzzled her nose again. "Don't look so pleased. Come on, Shayla, as if I could think of anyone else."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I know, but you don't understand. The entire town loves you. Always has. I'm finally getting respect from people. Stealing you from Kia, no matter what the true circumstances are, would ruin that."

He sighed. "Shayla, I don't do secret affairs. I'm not ashamed of being with you. No matter how fleeting it is."

"Please, Devin. Let's keep it between us just for awhile. Let my family get over the fact that you and Kia didn't work out before we go holding hands in public or eating at the diner."

He grimaced. "Even if we do that, people are still going to talk."

“Why?”

“Tony.”

She stiffened and tried to pull away. He held fast, but his half swollen erection slipped out of her.

“I don’t want to talk about him.”

“I think you’ll have to. I punched him earlier tonight.”

Her brown gaze collided with his. “You didn’t.”

“I did, and I’ll do it again.”

“Why?”

He brushed the hair away from her forehead. “For you.”

Her gaze softened. Her full lips tilted upward, and if he were a foolish man, he’d swear that love shone from her eyes. When she opened her mouth he kissed her to cut off whatever she was about to say. He’d like to think she was going to say she loved him, but knowing she would say something along the lines of “that’s sweet” — which would only wound him — he opted for the better option. To kiss her senseless and make love to her again.

Chapter 22

Shayla's soft laughter woke Devin the next morning. He reached for her in the bed, but only grabbed a handful of the sheet. He turned his head from where it was buried in the pillow toward the sound of her laughter. She sat in a striped chair beside the window in their room. Her slim fingers played with the curtains as she looked out. Morning sunlight reflected off her brown skin. She laughed again and he frowned. She should be in the bed with him, not giggling on the phone.

“Yes, Mom, I'm okay. I'm sorry I'm gonna miss church ... again ... but I'll be home in time for dinner.” Shayla giggled and pushed the hair from her face. “Tell Kenny you're not supposed to leave a hot iron on a shirt. I seriously think you dropped him on his head.”

Her mom's voice sounded through her cell phone. He couldn't make out what she said, but she was laughing. His frown deepened as he tried to remember a time when Shayla and her mom ever laughed together. He drew a blank. Shayla was always trying to escape her mom's company, now they were on the phone chatting like girlfriends?

“The art show was good. I met Tyrell, he’s really nice.” There was a pause as her mom said something. Her shoulders stiffened. “What did Kia say?”

She sighed. “When I want you all to know the guy I’m interested in I’ll let you know.” Another pause. “Really, her date with Devin went well.” Shayla pulled her legs up into the chair and rested her head on her knees the thick curtain of her hair blocking her face from view.

Devin watched with mixed emotions. He didn’t like the idea of hiding his relationship with Shayla — regardless of how brief it would be. But there was a defeated slump in her shoulders as she spoke of him and Kia. He wouldn’t be surprised if her mom brought up the possibility of him and Kia getting together as a way to manipulate her. A report on her niece’s date wasn’t necessary.

He clenched his jaw, his entire body tensed as if it were physically rejecting the idea in his head. As much as he hated the thought of pretending as if there was nothing between him and Shayla, he would do it. Shayla had always craved her mom’s approval. He wouldn’t break up the tentative truce she and her mom had formed during her stay in Helena.

Shayla lifted her head. “I’m glad their date went well. Hopefully things ... work out with them.” She turned and caught him watching her. The corner of her mouth lifted in a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. The tension left his body as he returned the gesture.

“Hey Mom, I’ve gotta go ... yes, I’m staying in a hotel room and I’d like to enjoy the shower before coming home.” She paused, then laughed out loud. “I’d pay money to see you convince Mr. Porter to do that. Okay, bye.”

She held the phone in her hand and stared at the screen until it went black before turning to look at him. Her lips curved seductively. “Good morning.”

“Morning.” He turned on his side to face her. “So my date with Kia was a success?”

She kinked a brow and tossed the phone on the bed. “Yep.” She ran her fingers through her hair before taking a deep breath. The simple movement unsettled him. It was as if she were preparing herself for something bad. He’d be damned if a conversation with her mom was going to change her mind about them being together.

He was a grown man and wasn’t going to deny himself a relationship with the woman of his choosing. If he had to keep it from her family, so be it, as long as he had her.

“Look, Devin — ”

“Come here.” He said lifting the sheet.

She didn’t argue. He grinned when her soft body slid against his. Pulling her into his embrace so that her back was pressed against his front, he pushed the hair from her shoulder and kissed her neck. Her skin was warm against his lips. She sighed and wiggled her butt against him, causing his dick to harden.

“We’ll keep this between us for now,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

His hand traveled up to cup one of her breasts. The nipple was already hard and his mouth watered. He gently played with the erect tip with his fingers, taking pleasure in the change in her breathing. She pressed her behind firmly against him.

“Damn sure.” He said against her neck. “Now turn over.” She quickly complied. As his hand glided across the wetness between her thighs and he took one of her nipples into his mouth, he tried to convince himself this would be enough.

• • •

A few hours later, Devin sat with Malcolm on the bleachers in the Central Midlands Recreation Commission’s gym as they waited on the current teams playing basketball to finish their game. If Jared would have gotten there on time they would have been able to join the first pick-up game, instead he’d called to say he was running late. Devin didn’t mind, his spirit wasn’t into playing today. He’d forgotten about agreeing to meet his friends this afternoon to ball until Malcolm called to remind him that morning. Luckily, he kept workout clothes in the back of his truck. Even though he wasn’t in the mood, he looked forward to the distraction and the excuse to stay out of Helena for a few more hours.

“So you gonna tell me why you had to change clothes in the gym instead of coming dressed?” Malcolm said still watching the game.

Devin tried for nonchalance when he shrugged, but inside he reeled. He hadn't expected Malcolm to call him out. "No reason, just rushing to get here."

"Really? Rushing from where?"

"Does it matter?"

Malcolm laughed. "Hell yeah. You show up in wrinkled clothes and grinning from ear to ear, man, I want to know what's up."

Devin shook his head and leaned on the bleacher behind him. "Nothing's up."

"Come on, man. You've listened to me and Jared talk about women for years with barely a peep about the women you date. Your love life was so dry it didn't matter, but now that Jared and I are married men, your dry love life is the only thing new."

"We can still talk about your love life."

Malcolm scowled. "Hell, nah. Nobody needs to know about my baby in the bedroom, but me."

Devin laughed. "Well, looks like we'll be talking sports from now on."

He looked back at the guys running up and down the court, but Malcolm continued to stare him down. He tried to ignore it, but after a few minutes he finally turned. "What?"

"Spill it."

Devin sighed and held his head back. He might as well tell Malcolm. He hadn't confided in his friends

about the women he dated before because usually there wasn't much to tell. His relationships with women only lasted a few weeks, if that long. He always found some reason to move on, and if he dared tell himself the truth it was because he never wanted to let himself trust a woman enough to get close to her.

“Fine, I spent the night with Shayla.”

“Tasha's friend Shayla? I knew something was up there.”

Devin lifted his head and stared without seeing at the basketball court. “There's always been something up where Shayla's concerned.”

“You've never mentioned her before.”

“Wasn't anything to mention. We were friends in high school, at one point tried to be more than friends and it didn't work out. I hadn't talked to her in years, until Tasha and Jared hooked up. I didn't realize she and Tasha were such good friends.”

“According to Tasha, she's only been home about a month,” Malcolm said. “For someone you haven't talked to in years, it seems like y'all jumped in bed fast. Especially after the fight you two had at Jared's place.”

“Long story, man.”

Malcolm looked at the guys on the court before looking back at Devin. “We got time.”

Devin considered how much to tell at the same time Jared came through the doors of the gym. He looked around until he spotted the two of them and rushed over.

“My bad,” Jared said dumping his gym bag on the bleacher before them. “Tasha was dying for some ice cream, so I ran out to get her some.”

“I still can’t get over you being married with kids.” Devin said.

Jared grinned. “Hell, me neither. But waking up with Tasha every morning reminds me why I did it.”

“True that,” Malcolm said.

Devin looked at the brothers. Both married to the women of their dreams. They were completely different from the men he’d known a few years ago. Malcolm and Jared had lived by the motto of sex-only relationships. Malcolm because he hadn’t thought he had the time for a serious relationship, and Jared because he didn’t believe in monogamy. All it had taken was for them to finally get with the right woman and they were happy to give up that lifestyle to stay home with their wives.

He didn’t hate on the change in his friends. If anything, he envied them. Instead he was forcing himself into doing what they’d done for years without a second thought. What he really wanted was to turn this hidden affair with Shayla into a real relationship and see what happened.

Jared sat sideways on the bleacher in front of them. “So, what I miss?”

Malcolm cocked his head in Devin’s direction. “Devin was about to tell me how he ended up in bed with Shayla last night.”

Jared leaned back and raised his eyebrows. “I got here right on time.”

Devin shook his head. “It’s no big deal. We’re just having a little fun.”

“Having fun?” Jared said. “From what my wife says it’s more than that.”

Devin’s eyes shot to his friend. “What did Tasha say?”

Jared grinned. “Something about Shayla having a thing for you going back to the late nineties.”

Malcolm rubbed his goatee. “Now that’s a bit more than what Devin said.”

Devin shook his head. “We’ve got history. I told you that much. Things just never worked out.”

“And now you’re making it work?” Malcolm asked.

Devin grimaced. “Something like that. But we’re keeping it to ourselves right now.”

Jared leaned forward and frowned. “You and her are a secret?”

“For now.”

“Wait a second.” Malcolm said. “You two are doing the late night hook up thing?”

Devin bristled at the way Malcolm described it, but his friend was on point. That was what he was doing with Shayla. It felt wrong, but he knew no other way to get her to trust him other than to go with her wishes.

“If you want to call it that, yes.”

Malcolm and Jared exchanged a look. Devin waited for one of them to tell him it was okay. Tease him, give him pound and tell him to play on, playa. Instead, they both looked as if they were at a loss for words.

Jared spoke first. “Hey man, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I can’t believe you’re saying that either,” Devin said, trying to lighten the mood.

Jared shook his head and continued. “I don’t know Shayla well, but Tasha’s afraid you’ll end up hurting her.”

Devin scowled. “Where would she get that idea from?”

“Man, I don’t know. You know how women get. All I’m saying is tread carefully.”

Devin looked at Malcolm. “What you got to say?”

Malcolm held up his hands. “Hey man, do what works for you. I had my share of night time only relationships before I got with Kenyatta. Just make sure one ... or both ... of you know the rules.”

“Believe me, I know the rules.” Devin said. He looked at Jared. “*She* laid out the rules, so you can tell Tasha not to worry about her friend.”

Jared studied Devin. “I’m wondering if I should worry about you.”

Devin scoffed. “Don’t bother. Look, y’all been telling me to get laid for months. I am. End of story. Shayla’s

isn't here forever and I know that. We'll have our fun and move on." His chest constricted with each word. "They're almost done with the game, I'm gonna run some laps and warm up."

Afraid that they would see through his lie, he got up and jumped of the bleachers before his friends could say another word. It was hard enough lying to himself about this situation with Shayla without having to lie to his friends.

Chapter 23

Shayla finished applying the last coat of red nail polish to her pinky toe when her mom's car pulled into her driveway. She leaned forward to peer out the front door which was propped open with the glass raised on the screen to let in some fresh air. Light jazz played on the radio, not her favorite, but she was too lazy to get up and change the station.

In a way the music helped sooth her uneasiness. Devin agreed too readily to keep their relationship a secret that morning. After making such a fuss about letting everyone know they were together, she'd thought he would continue to insist. A part of her hoped he would. It was nonsense, but she liked that he didn't care what people thought. But, as she watched her mom get of the car and lumber toward her porch, she had to admit she could kiss any chance of her mom visiting her after church goodbye if Devin had gotten his way.

The smile Shayla had to greet her mom melted away when Marcella yanked open the screen door. There was a thin sheen of perspiration on her face along with a fierce scowl. Her blue dress suit was spotted with sweat. It was

the same look her mom had when she'd heard the rumors about Shayla and Tony.

Shayla lowered her feet from where they'd been propped on the coffee table. "Everything okay?"

Marcella put her hand on her hip and took several deep breaths. "You care to explain to me about last night?"

Shayla's heart pounded. There was no way her mom could have found out about her and Devin. She'd told no one, not even Tasha. "I told you about the art show."

Marcella narrowed her eyes. "Not the art show. You care to tell me why Devin tried to fight Tony at the diner last night?"

Shayla released a sigh of relief and sat back on the couch. "I have no idea. They've never really been close."

"They were close before you started playing games with them. Don't play with me, Shayla, are you up to your tricks again."

"My tricks! Are you serious?"

"I'm very serious. It's was all anyone could talk about today. The way he and Tony got into it after Devin's date with Kia. Aren't you tired of playing those two against each other?"

Shayla shot up from the couch. Her indignant march to her mom was more of a waddle due to the cotton balls between her toes, but she was too angry to care. "I'm not playing those two. I don't want anything to do with Tony. I never did. He — "

“Save it, Shayla. There wasn’t a problem between them for years. You come to town for a few weeks and suddenly they’re fighting in the street. Did you go to Tony and put him up to this? Were you trying to ruin Kia’s date?”

“I can’t believe this. I went to Columbia last night. I haven’t seen Tony since that horrible night at his club and I don’t want to see him again. Disregarding my feelings, I listened to what you said and haven’t gone after Devin. When he has, and always will be, the only man — ”

“Stop it.” Her mom held up a hand and walked away. When she turned back to Shayla her lips were compressed in a hard line. “Don’t say anymore. I believe you didn’t put him up to it. It’s just that people assumed you were the cause and knowing your history ... ” Her mom shrugged as if that explained it all.

Marcella’s abrupt change of subject was clearer than words that she knew her request for Shayla to stay away from Devin was painful. It should have been a shock to discover her mom’s complete disregard for her feelings. But, it was just another example that no matter how much she may try, Marcella’s feelings wouldn’t change. Why the hell did she keep trying to make her mom happy?

“No matter what, you’re never going to approve of me,” she said quietly.

Marcella scoffed. “Quit being overdramatic, Shayla. It’s not like I haven’t tried to find the good. Your bad

keeps coming through.”

“I am not a bad person.”

“No, but you’ve got bad genes.” Marcella marched toward the door.

Shayla moved out of the way. Tears burned the back of her eyes, but she refused to shed them. She’d cried over her mom’s lack of affection for too long. The first few months after leaving Helena, when she’d call home from Spelman, she’d cried every time her mom hurried off the phone or quickly passed it to Kenny. The illusion that life in Helena was getting better was just that: an illusion. She could go to church every Sunday, raise money for ever orphan in South Carolina, and remain celibate for the rest of her life; her mom’s feelings wouldn’t change.

Marcella left without another word. The screen door slammed. Shayla flinched. She had to leave town. There was nothing for her here. *There’s Devin*, she thought. With a shake of her head she pushed that thought away. Would having him make living here better? Would it really lessen the pain of knowing her family would ostracize her forever? And would he even want to be with her forever? Sure, there was something between them, but that could be leftovers from pent up adolescent longing. She would further degrade herself in her mom’s eyes only to have their relationship fizzle after six months or a year. No other guy stayed around that long. Why would he be any different?

Chapter 24

Shayla increased her job hunting efforts the next morning. She hounded her friends in Atlanta for any word on potential jobs. She followed up every lead she'd found when she first started looking. Her fingers flew over her keyboard all day, and the librarian gave her a few dirty looks whenever she made phone calls from the corner of the library she'd made into her own personal office over the past few weeks.

Her cell phone rang; breaking the peaceful silence once again. The librarian walked by and scrunched her nose like bird at Shayla, who quickly picked up her phone. She didn't recognize the number.

"Shayla Monroe?" a calm male voice said on the other end.

"Yes, this is Shayla Monroe."

"Hi, I'm Bentley Prill with G and N Solutions. You submitted a resume to us a few weeks ago and I'd like to schedule an interview."

She looked up and said a silent "thank you". It wasn't out of state as she hoped, but G and N Solutions was a well established marketing and public relations

firm in Columbia. Working with them would go a long way toward redeeming herself professionally.

“That sounds great,” she said.

“Spectacular. Can you come to our office this Wednesday at three?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll see you then.”

They ended the call and Shayla kicked her feet. “Yes, yes, yes!”

The librarian shushed her, but she didn’t care. Finally, there was light at the end of the tunnel, and a way out of Helena. She checked the time on her phone. The festival committee was meeting tonight. Halloween was two weeks away, and the call was fate. She — hopefully — would get the job and leave town with some repair to her reputation if the festival went well. She grinned and packed up her laptop.

She smiled the entire way to her car and on the drive to the church. She hadn’t seen Devin since leaving him on Sunday. No need to lie, part of her smile was from the anticipation of seeing him again. She’d decided after Marcella left to enjoy every minute of her secret affair. Forget being guilty about seeing him. Whether they were together or not it wouldn’t change anything between her and her mom. She would continue to keep their relationship a secret to avoid hurting Kia.

She pulled into the church’s parking lot at the same time as Devin. Her grin widened when he parked his

truck in the space beside her. Their gazes locked though the window and her smile softened, remembering their last time together. The corner of his mouth lifted in an answering smile that sent ripples of anticipation down her spine. Maybe another trip to the pond behind his dad's house was in order.

They got out at the same time. She leaned against the front of her car and he came over to stand beside her. He looked at her with a mixture of desire and wariness. He had no reason to be unsure. She had no intentions of changing her mind about them.

“Hi,” she said.

He leaned next to her on the car. “Hello.” He nodded toward the church. “Ready for the interrogation?”

Her smile faded and her gaze slid from his. “What interrogation?”

“My dad's already asked if you're the reason I hit Tony Saturday night. I doubt Reverend Jenkins will say anything, but you can be sure Martha will.”

“Why does everyone assume it had something to do with us?”

He bumped her shoulder with his. When she looked up he raised a brow. “Because it did.”

“We're not together.” When he scowled she hurried to clarify. “Around them, we're not together. Make up some reason for fighting Tony, other than me. I'm sure it won't be hard.”

His body was tense as he straightened from the car. “I didn’t have a reason to fight Tony for years, now I suddenly have to make up some offense.”

“It might not come up.”

“Or,” He shoved his hands into the pocket of his pants. “We could tell them I hit him because he insulted you.”

“No, Devin, please.”

His eyes narrowed. “But I won’t. I’ll make up something, since we’re *not together*.” He turned to walk away, but halted and looked back at her. “If you’d like to have sex, we can meet at the hotel off the interstate exit around midnight. I doubt anyone would see us.” His voice was hard and accusing. His gaze raked over her body before he turned and stormed off.

Hurt and humiliation clogged her throat. He reminded her of Mark. It hurt because she was the reason he did it. There was more to their relationship than sex. A lot more, but why expect him to treat her like more than a fling? She’d made it clear that she didn’t plan to stay in Helena. That didn’t mean he had to be so clinical about it. How hard could this be on him, really? She would expect him to view their arrangement as a win.

But, Devin wasn’t that type of man. He was more open and honest than anyone she knew. It wasn’t in his nature to hide his intentions. She was the one asking him to go against his nature.

She trailed behind him into the church basement. Most of the committee was already there. They were huddled at a table looking at something. When she came through the door, all conversation ceased as they turned to look at her. The looks ranged from accusing, to pitying, to disbelief. The only one that mattered was Devin's. Annoyance flashed in his eyes as he stared at her.

She slowly walked over to the table. "What's going on?"

Reverend and Mrs. Jenkins exchanged glances. Mr. Porter glared at her while Roxanne shook her head slightly.

Martha looked at everyone expectantly, before picking up a sheet of paper and shoving it in Shayla's direction. "They're just reading what I found on the internet today."

Shayla took the paper and sighed. She didn't look at it, just glowered at Martha. "Let me guess, another article about what happened in Atlanta. I've already explained, and I won't let you dump it over my head every time someone decides to stir up old nonsense."

Roscoe leaned back in his chair. He looked at Shayla with sad eyes. "It's not about Atlanta."

Frowning, Shayla looked at the paper. It was a print out of an article on a blog site. There was a picture of her standing next to Tyrell Crawford at the art show. They were smiling at each other before the beach house picture. A large caption read "Atlanta Home-wrecker

Sets Eyes on Politician's Son." Her eyes scanned the paper, not really ingesting the words but getting the gist. Someone at the party made broad assumptions that her quick conversation with the artist was about more than his work. References to the fact that he never smiles so "warmly" with others, or laughs out loud combined with the fact that she had a history of seeking out married men automatically put them together.

She looked up from the paper at Devin. "You don't believe this?"

Martha spoke up. "It doesn't matter what we believe. What matters is the perception of the church. We can't have you heading up our festival if you're going to be seeing a married man."

Shayla glared at the woman. "I'm not seeing a married man."

Martha snorted and turned up her nose. "But you have."

Reverend Jenkins held up a hand. "That's enough, Martha." He walked over to Shayla. "Is there anything between you and this man?"

Shayla met the Reverend's stare dead on. "No. That was the first time I met him."

Martha walked over and practically bumped the reverend out of her way with her massive hips. "But you went there to see him. My daughter is friends with your cousin Kia, and she told us both that you were going there specifically to see Tyrell."

Shayla rolled her eyes. “Do you hear yourself? You sound like a teenager with your ‘he said, she said’.”

Devin walked over to Shayla’s side. “Let’s calm down. Shayla said she didn’t go to the art show to seek him out and I believe her. This *blog* doesn’t give any specifics or details of anything, just smiling and rumors about Shayla’s past. We don’t have to kick her off the committee.”

Martha huffed. “I’d expect you to say that. She’s got her hooks in you, too.”

Once again Reverend Jenkins held up a hand. “That’s enough, Martha.”

Martha opened her mouth to speak when the door to the church basement opened again. Shayla bit back a groan when her mom came through the door. There was no reason for Marcella to be here except to check in and make sure Shayla wasn’t causing any more problems.

Marcella’s smile was stiff as she greeted everyone before walking over to stand between Shayla and Devin. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your meeting, but Shayla got a package today and I couldn’t wait to tell her.”

“Mom, this couldn’t wait until I got home?”

Marcella shook her head. “Not when you hear who it’s from.” She looked to the rest of the group with barely concealed excitement. “Tyrell Crawford sent her a painting today. It’s beautiful, a beach scene. Can you believe it? My daughter got a gift from a famous artist.”

Martha smirked while Reverend Jenkins cringed. Shayla's breathing stuttered as ringing started in her ears. This couldn't be happening.

Martha snatched the article out of Shayla's hands and shoved it at Marcella. "I can believe it. Was it this one?"

Marcella looked at the paper. Her smile froze. "This exact one." She looked at Shayla. "So he is the man you spent the night with on Saturday."

If her mom would have kicked her in the gut she wouldn't have hurt her more. Marcella's eyes were accusing as they looked at Shayla, but delight was also there.

Devin stepped forward. "This has gone too far."

Shayla's eyes widened. She didn't want, or need, him to step in and rescue her reputation. As if learning she spent the night with Devin would make anything better. They'd already made up their mind about her. Long before the story about her and Tyrell came out.

"It has gone too far," she said. Relief washed over Devin's face. She looked away. "I wasn't with Tyrell on Saturday, and it's nobody's business who I was with. Did you ever once stop to think that I was alone on Saturday night? That I would want to get out of this damn town away from the gossip, lies, and accusations."

"If that were true, why did he send you that painting?" Martha asked. Her mom nodded.

“Shayla,” Devin started but she held up a finger to cut him off.

She turned to Reverend Jenkins. “I’ll finalize the loose ends I was working on for the festival, but I won’t come to anymore meetings. I won’t let rumors ruin everything.” He frowned and she looked away. “Thank you for letting me help,” she gripped the heart charm around her neck and rushed out.

Chapter 25

Devin followed his dad home after the festival meeting. It wasn't really a meeting after Shayla left. Instead everyone took sides about whether or not to believe she was alone that night. He'd opened his mouth to say he'd spent the night with Shayla too many times, but what would that fix? They wanted her in some man's bed so they could throw their poisonous gossip darts. The Reverend had finally gotten tired of the escapade and cancelled the rest of the meeting. Saying he'd pray for everyone's soul that night.

Roscoe sat on his front porch and Devin folded his large frame beside him.

"You were with her on Saturday, weren't you?"
Roscoe asked.

Devin sighed, no need to deny it to his dad. "Yes."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"And make them hate her more for luring me away from her cousin?"

Roscoe rubbed his face. "I never should have pushed that."

Devin turned toward his dad. “Why did you? I thought you wanted me with Shayla.”

“I do, but you two were working hard at staying apart. I thought forcing you on a date with Kia would show both of you how wrong you were. I didn’t know she’d storm out on you, that you’d get in a fight with Tony.”

“Tony deserved to be hit.”

“If you hit him for what I think you did, then I agree with you.”

Devin’s eyes widened. Roscoe frowned and looked away. “I overheard him one day, years ago, bragging about what he did to Shayla. If that’s why you hit him, then good job.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew everything?”

“Shayla had left town, you were determined to forget her, it was better to leave it alone.”

Devin turned to watch the sun set behind the trees. The beauty of it was lost on him, his mind on Shayla.

“How does she get wrapped up in these messes?”

Roscoe placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Because people want her wrapped up in these messes. Everyone needs someone to be their morality scapegoat. It makes them feel better if they can look at another person and think that person’s life is more screwed up than theirs.”

“If we were together, is that how it would be?” Devin said mostly to himself. “Everyone waiting for her to mess up and prove that she’s a screw up.”

“No. Everyone would see how much you both love each other.”

Devin’s head whipped around toward his dad. “Who said anything about love?”

Roscoe shook his head and squeezed his shoulder. “Son, it’s as clear to me as the nose on your face. You’ve gotta decide if it’s strong enough to face the constant attacks that’ll come if you pursue it.”

His dad stood and went into the house. Devin turned back to the trees, but the sun was no longer visible, the sky a mixture of reds and oranges reflecting off the pine trees. He let his dad’s advice sink in. He didn’t give a damn about what anyone thought of his feelings for Shayla, but she did. He wasn’t afraid of withstanding the attacks. But Shayla was.

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket. Pulling it out, he read a text from Shayla. *Midnight*. He gripped the phone in his hand. Regret for treating her like a booty call ate away at his insides. She didn’t deserve his anger. He’d agreed to keep their relationship a secret and couldn’t behave like a petulant child whenever she reminded him of that.

Loosening his grip, he started to text back that he’d meet her, but stopped. He had rounds at the hospital tomorrow. And his first appointment was scheduled for

seven forty-five. As much as he wanted to spend the night with her, he couldn't afford to.

He dialed her number. His heart rate picked up speed when her silky voice answered.

"I'm sorry for inviting you to the hotel like that. It won't happen again."

"There's nothing between me and Tyrell." Her voice was firm. It wasn't necessary, he believed her.

"I know. But why the painting?"

She sighed. "It was just a gift, Devin."

Her tone was defensive which irritated him. His confidence wavered. If there was nothing between them, she had no reason to get defensive. But, there was no need to pick a fight.

"I can't meet you tonight."

"Because of the painting?"

"No, because I have to work tomorrow. I can't spend the night in a hotel room."

"You know what, fine. Call me when you're ready for my *services*."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Shayla, come on. You know it's not like that. Besides, you're the one who wants a secret relationship."

"I'm through talking to you. Goodbye."

After she hung up, he stared at the blank screen of his phone. Damn, foolish woman. Why did everything

that involved Shayla Monroe have to be so complicated?

Chapter 26

“Those are all of my questions. Do you have any for me?” Bentley Prill set down his pen and smiled at Shayla.

She forced herself not to collapse her shoulders in relief. She'd been nervous throughout the interview. She clenched and unclenched an ink pen in her hand to keep from tapping it against the table during the interview. Surprisingly, he hadn't brought up anything about her abrupt departure from her previous job. While she was relieved it hadn't come up, a part of her was afraid it could still bite her in the ass later. She tried to think of all the good post interview questions she should ask, but the only thing screaming within her head was how had he not heard about her scandal.

Bentley tented his fingers in front of him and stared at her with friendly grey eyes behind wire framed glasses. The lines around his eyes and mouth, along with the grey hair, were the only thing that hinted he was in his sixties. The bicycle hanging in his office showed that his trim figure was due to exercise and his mind was as witty as half of the people her age.

“You look as if you’re trying to figure out if you should say something,” he said.

Shayla nodded slowly. “I am, but I’m not sure if it’ll help or hurt my chances.”

Bentley laughed lightly and leaned back in his chair. “Right now, there’s not much you could do to hurt this interview. I’m very impressed, I’ve seen your work and it’s notable.”

She frowned. If he was familiar with her work, then he had to be familiar with her history. She silently hoped her next question didn’t turn out to be a huge mistake. “You know about my previous work, so you must know why I left.”

His smile left as he pulled the glasses off his face. Shayla’s stomach clenched. She never should have brought it up.

“I know why you left, and personally, I don’t understand why you didn’t fight to stay. I know Mark Reed. He and his wife have been playing this little jealousy game with each other for years. I can’t believe he would take it out of his private life and make it public just to win a senate seat.”

Shayla couldn’t stop her jaw from dropping. She hadn’t told anyone that Mark and his wife laughed about planning the entire affair so the media would feel sorry for them.

The public loves a victim. The story of an older man lured by a younger woman but admitting it and asking

for forgiveness from his faithful wife won votes. They started attending church together, and visiting a marriage counselor between television appearances on daytime talk shows about how they were learning to reconnect and save their marriage. By throwing the blame on Shayla, they'd become the sweetheart couple of Georgia politics that other married people could relate too.

“How did you know that?”

Bentley's lips twisted into a cynical smile. “A few years ago I saw Mark at some function in Atlanta. He'd had too much to drink and let it slip that he might try that type of scheme before running for senate, but wasn't sure because it was a big risk. When I saw the headlines, I knew that he'd decided it was worth the risk.” Bentley sat forward and looked her in the eye. “I'm not offering you this job out of pity. I truly am impressed with your work and your interview. But I did ask you for an interview because I felt bad about what happened. No one deserves to be used as a pawn.”

“I didn't think anyone would believe the story,” she said stunned.

Bentley shrugged. “They wouldn't. I wouldn't, if I hadn't heard it myself.”

Slowly the rest of Bentley's words made it through the fog in Shayla's brain. “You're offering me the job?”

He held his hand across the table. “Can you start on Monday?”

Shayla grinned from ear to ear. “I’ll be here at seven.” She took his hand and pumped it enthusiastically.

Laughing, Bentley said. “I’ll be here at eight.”

It was all a blur as Bentley led her out of the office and introduced her to some of the staff on her way out. The office was in a refurbished home in downtown Columbia. Again, it wasn’t the limelight that came with working in downtown Atlanta, but it was light years away from the close-at-eight downtown of Helena.

Her good luck continued when she found a parking spot near the front of Starbucks in the Vista. After such a great afternoon, a caramel macchiato was just what she deserved. Her smile lasted through the wait in line. She would have to find an apartment in Columbia soon. Luckily, her lease with Mr. Porter was month to month — something they’d both eagerly agreed upon — so the sooner she moved here the better they’d both be. It would also give her and Devin a place to meet away from the prying eyes of the town. And not a sleazy hotel.

Her gift from Tyrell upset him, but there was nothing behind it. The painting came with a simple message “to happiness”. Despite their rough encounter the day before, she believed she and Devin could be happy for a small amount of time. Helena was an hour away from Columbia, but close enough for weekend visits and maybe quick mid-week visits. She’d be busy with her job, but they could make something work until he grew tired of her.

The thought dampened her high spirits. She didn't want to think about Devin growing tired of her. It may be inevitable, but she would enjoy it while it lasted.

The barista called her name and she picked up her macchiato at the counter. She thanked the college aged guy and turned to find Tyrell waving at her from a table in the corner. Despite the warning bell that being seen with him was the last thing she needed, she still walked over. One stupid blog post didn't mean she couldn't thank him for the painting.

He folded up the magazine in his hands and smiled at her. "You breezed right past me when you came in, smiling from ear to ear. I'm guessing you did find happiness."

Shayla laughed. "That, and a job. I'm starting with G and N Solutions next week."

He raised a brow. "Congratulations! Bentley is a great guy, I'm sure you'll enjoy working with him."

"You know him?"

"Bentley knows everyone, and their company handled the marketing for my father-in-law's campaign two years ago. He sees through the bullshit, but will get you elected anyway."

Shayla frowned at the possibility of being assigned to another politician's campaign. "Hopefully, my projects will deal with other areas."

"Same here." He held his hand out to the chair across from him. "Have a seat."

Biting her lip, Shayla looked around the coffee shop. It was a brisk October afternoon and the place was packed. Although no one paid any attention to them, Bentley's seat was near a window that faced Gervais Street. The last thing she needed was a cell phone shot of the two of them having coffee.

He noticed her hesitation and the warmth in his smile diminished. "You saw the blog post."

"Yes, and I really don't need that type of publicity. Not right now."

Tyrell shrugged. "That blogger has been trying to dig up dirt on my family for years. Fortunately, no one reads it."

"Well, the ladies at my mom's church do."

He flinched. "Ouch, that is touchy. Look, just for a second, I did send you a four thousand dollar painting."

Shayla pulled out the chair and flopped down into it. "Four thousand dollars." She said in a hushed whisper while leaning across the table. "That's too much. You have to take it back."

He waved a hand as if it were nothing. "It didn't cost me anything but some canvas and paint."

"Still, I can't accept it."

"Only a few things make me happy nowadays, and giving you that painting is one of them."

"I don't understand. We only talked for a moment." She sat back and eyed him warily. "I meant what I said

about not being interested.”

He chuckled and took a sip of his coffee. “And so do I. I didn’t give it to you expecting anything in return. I’m around so many plastic people I forgot what it was like to talk to someone real. The way your face lit up when he walked through the door,” the corner of Tyrell’s mouth lifted as he looked out the window, “she looked at me like that the day on the beach. When she caught me painting her.” He sighed and met her eye. “I couldn’t look at it anymore, or bear to have some pretentious fool own it. That’s why I gave it to you.”

Honesty reflected in his gaze. Reminding her why she thought she could like him the first time they met. Again, she didn’t get the sense that he was playing games or trying to deceive her. Tyrell Crawford could probably sleep with any woman he wanted to without going through so much trouble.

Taking a sip from her coffee and delighting in the rich flavor of warm caramel, she sat back in her chair. “So, what are you doing hanging out in Starbucks.”

He laughed. “I’m not usually so ordinary.”

Shayla lifted a brow. “Hanging in Starbucks is ordinary?”

“Yes. So many people enjoy saying ‘I’m in Starbucks’, or ‘let’s meet at Starbucks’ that its become ordinary.”

“So why are you so ordinary today?” she said, taking another sip of her macchiato.

He held up his cup. “They make a damn good cup of coffee.”

They both laughed. An hour and a half later, Shayla left Starbucks with Tyrell’s promise to draw caricatures at the Fall Festival. She still wasn’t sure how she’d convince Reverend Jenkins to agree to it. Her ability to get a well known artist to do caricatures drawings at a small town church would be attributed to her bedroom skills instead of Tyrell’s eagerness to help. Apparently his father-in-law helped get him off the streets as a teenager, and he liked the idea of drawing in older kids to the event. Even though she was thrilled at the idea, she would also run it by Bentley. No need threatening her newly found position. If he expressed any concern over her ties with Tyrell she’d cut them. No matter how much she liked him, she liked having a job better.

There was a ticket on her car that she snatched off with a curse. Her phone rang as she got in and tossed the ticket in the passenger seat. She smiled when she saw Devin’s number.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“In Columbia. Are you off work?”

“Yeah, I finished up early to play basketball with some other doctors at the Rec Commission tonight. Since you’re in Columbia, why don’t you come watch me play.”

Shayla laughed. “You’re not in high school anymore. I don’t want to watch you throw your back out.”

“Woman, please. I haven’t lost any of my skills on the court. If you don’t believe me, come see for yourself.”

“I will, now what’s the address?”

He told her and she plugged in into her car’s GPS.

They talked for a few more minutes before getting off the phone. Elated that the tension from their conversation on Monday was gone, Shayla pulled her car out of the parking spot. That’s how it was with her and Devin. They’d fight one day, then talk the next day as if nothing happened. She sensed his moods as well as he did hers. And in the time it took her to leave downtown and head toward Northeast Richland County toward the Rec Commission, she pretended they’d always be like that.

Chapter 27

Shayla followed two women into the refurbished school that housed the Central Midlands Rec Commission. She scanned the people sitting in the bleachers and the teams playing, but didn't see Devin. The score board showed there was fifteen minutes left in the current game, so hopefully Devin would arrive soon.

“Shayla, what are you doing here?”

Shayla turned around and smiled as Tasha walked over carrying a clipboard and wearing a pink Rec Commission t-shirt. “You're still working the night games?” Shayla said giving her friend a hug.

Tasha grinned. “Only because Jared insists on helping out when I do.”

“That's sweet.”

Tasha rolled her eyes. “It's crazy. I'm pregnant, not an invalid.”

Shayla put her arm around Tasha's shoulders. “Pregnant and lucky.”

Tasha briefly leaned her head on Shayla's shoulder and laughed. “I won't argue with that.” Tasha's eyes lit

up. “I know why you’re here, Devin’s team plays tonight.”

Shayla tried to pull away but Tasha put her hand around her waist. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on there.”

“Nothing to tell. I’m just watching a friend play ball. Let’s sit down.”

Tasha let her go and they walked over to sit on the first row of bleachers.

“Okay, Jared probably wasn’t supposed to tell me, but he did. I know that you and Devin are doing some secret love affair.”

Shayla leaned back on the bleacher and looked skyward. “It’s not some secret love affair. We’re just not letting anyone in our business.”

“And what is your business?”

“For now, nothing serious.”

Tasha’s forehead crinkled with a frown. “Shayla, I know how you feel about him, remember. You can’t fool yourself into thinking you can handle that. Sex-only relationships don’t work. I’m proof of it.”

Shayla sat up. “Don’t even pretend as if you’re not happy with the way your situation turned out.”

Tasha grinned. “I’m not. I’m thrilled, but you remember how I was when I found out I was pregnant the first time. Jared thought I tried to trick him, I didn’t think he loved me, we almost didn’t make it.”

“But you did.”

“And it could have easily not worked.” Tasha sighed. “I’m worried about it not going the way you expect with Devin.”

Shayla’s lips twisted in a self-deprecating smile. “I expect us to keep this up for six months before he grows tired of it or finds someone so much better suited for him.” She toyed with the charm at her neck, thinking about how hard it would be when that day came.

Tasha shook her head. “You say that as if it weren’t sad either way. Why sign up for something you expect to end so badly?”

“Why not? I’m being real, going in with my eyes open. Can you let me enjoy myself while it lasts?”

“No, not when you’re going to get hurt.”

Movement in the corner of her vision caught her attention. She turned as Devin walked in the gym with a few other guys. She stopped fingering the heart at her neck, the tension in her body evaporated and a smile curved her lips. If she could get away with a pre-adolescent sigh of happiness she would, she was so thrilled to see him.

She let her gaze sweep over him, admiring the virility of his body in the basketball shorts and cut off shirt. He looked younger, more carefree than he did in Helena after work. Back home his khakis and polo shirts were accessorized with stress lines around his mouth after spending a day in the office.

“Look at you,” Tasha said. “You’re like a love struck teenager and he just walked into the room. Seriously, Shayla, you’ve got to get out of this. I’ve never — ever — seen you so wrapped up in a guy.”

Shayla blinked and looked at her friend. Concern reflected in Tasha’s gaze. She wished she could tell Tasha she didn’t have to worry, but she couldn’t. She’d been crazy in love with Devin in high school and hadn’t gotten over it. She loved the man more than she could have ever loved the boy. Heartbreak was inevitable, but when you had a chance at a few months with the person you always wanted, you didn’t turn it down.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said. “If I don’t take this one chance, I’ll regret it. I promise you won’t have to pick up the pieces of my broken heart.”

Tasha shook her head. “Yeah, right.”

Ignoring her friend’s doubt, Shayla turned back to Devin. He walked toward her with another tall dark skinned guy. She suppressed her grin and only gave him a small smile that she hoped hinted at how badly she missed seeing him. The upward tug of the corner of his mouth, and the smoldering desire in his eyes was all the answer she needed.

“I’m glad you made it,” he said when they stood before her and Tasha.

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

He smiled at her and her heart flipped in her chest. “This is Kevis Flynn, he works at Baptist Hospital.”

Kevis reached out to shake Shayla's hand. "Dr. Kevis Flynn," he said in a deep voice. "It's nice to meet you." He turned to Tasha. "Tasha, you look lovely as ever." He said leaning over to kiss Tasha's cheek.

Tasha smiled fondly. "It's good to see you, Kevis."

Devin elbowed Kevis in the side. "You better get on before Jared sees you."

Tasha laughed and pointed to the door. "Too late."

They all turned to see Jared scowling and heading their way. Kevis grinned and winked at Tasha. "I'll see you around. Devin, I'm going to warm up."

"Cool," Devin said. "I'll join you in a second."

As Kevis walked away, Jared walked up. Still scowling in the direction of Kevis, he sat beside Tasha on the bleachers. "What the hell did the Good Doctor want?"

Tasha smiled and scooted closer to him. "He was just saying hello."

"Well, he can say hello without kissing my wife. I may have to talk with him after the game."

Tasha rolled her eyes before kissing Jared. "I'm going home with you."

He stopped scowling and put an arm around her shoulder. "Damn right."

He kissed Tasha who giggled in return. Surprised by the public display of affection, Shayla turned toward Devin with raised eyebrows. "This is Jared Patterson, the

famed playboy with a string of girlfriends from here to L.A.?”

Devin laughed. “I don’t believe it either.”

“I don’t need a string of girlfriends anymore. I got all I need right here.” Jared said squeezing Tasha’s shoulder.

Devin shook his head, still smiling. “Let me warm up before I throw up.” He leaned over and kissed the corner of Shayla’s mouth. “There’s no one here to see.”

She did do a silly sigh and grinned back. “Then do it again.”

“Gladly.” He kissed her again before straightening putting his gym bag beside her. “Will you watch my stuff?” She nodded and he followed Kevis to where the rest of his team warmed up.

“He’s one to talk,” Jared said. “I think my boy’s got it just as bad.”

Shayla glanced at Jared. He was grinning at her. Tasha’s look of concern from earlier was back. She shook her head and turned to watch Devin warm up. Getting turned on by the bunching and flexing of the muscles in his body as he went through stretches and sprints as if he were doing a strip tease. She leaned forward, placed her elbow on her knees and rested her chin in her hand, pretending for a moment that he did have it just as bad as Jared.

Despite what Jared believed, Devin wasn’t in love with her. It was easy for newlyweds to see love and

sunshine wherever they looked. Cynics like her, who'd been burned too many times to count, took things for what they were. And right now, she and Devin were both in the throes of a tumultuous relationship made exciting by great sex, moments of anger and snippets of happiness. It was hot, intense, and would burn out — at least on his end — quickly.

She cheered for Devin with the same enthusiasm she had in high school. Tasha, despite her concerns, joined in. They laughed and lifted the spirits of the patrons sitting near them in the bleachers as they tried to remember the cheers they'd learned in cheerleading camp so many years ago. A few teenage girls in the crowd came over and started some new cheers, which she and Tasha quickly caught on to. They sat as they cheered, to accommodate Tasha, but it didn't lessen their zeal. By the end of the game everyone on their side of the gym was rooting for the doctors, and from the score of the game, it worked. Devin's team crushed the other team.

Devin came over after the game. He was sweaty, breathing hard, and sexier than ever. "Always the life of the party."

She grinned and slapped high five with one of the teenagers cheering with them. "Yes I am."

He shook his head and leaned over to kiss her. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Buoyed by his praise, she jumped up and took his hand in hers. If only he could move to Columbia and they

didn't have to hide their relationship. It would be so easy to do this every day.

He squeezed her hand and turned to Jared and Tasha still sitting in the bleachers. "We're leaving, how bout y'all?"

Tasha shook her head. "I've got to stay through the last game. It won't be as fun without Shayla."

Shayla grinned. "Nothing's as fun without me. I promise to come to another game." She leaned over to hug Tasha. Devin didn't let go of her hand. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Tasha looked at their joined hands and sighed. "Please do."

Devin picked up his gym bag with his free hand and slung it over his shoulder. They continued to hold hands as they walked out of the building into the cool night air. Devin shivered when a breeze glided over them. Putting her arm around his waist, she pulled him close and leaned her head on his shoulder. She breathed deeply, enjoying the smell of his sweat and the feel of his warm body against hers.

"Where did you park?" he asked.

She pointed and he led her in that direction. When they got there, he leaned against her door and pulled her against his. His arms draped around her waist, hers twisted around his neck.

"You don't mind that I'm sweaty?"

She grinned. "I like you sweaty."

“Hmm, I like you sweaty, too.” He lowered his head and kissed her. His dick pressed stiffly into her stomach, igniting a fire within her.

She broke the kiss and tried to catch her breath. “Do you want to ... ” she couldn’t finish. She couldn’t ask him about getting a room. It was fun reliving their high school days in the gym earlier, but Shayla was a very grown woman who right now wished she could take this very grown man back to her home, and her bed. She didn’t want to sneak around.

His hand ran lightly up and down her back. “I wish I could, but I’ve got rounds again tomorrow. I can’t stay in Columbia tonight.”

She nodded, and tried not to show her disappointment. Four days between sex wasn’t technically too long, she had gone longer in the past, but four days since sleeping with Devin was like four years.

“I could sneak in your back door,” she said with a smile.

He grinned and brushed his lips across hers. “I would love that, but prefer if you came to the front.”

She stiffened and his smile dimmed. “Sorry, I won’t bring it up again.” he said.

She shook her head. “It’s only until Kia moves on.” *Or you get tired of me*, she thought.

Devin tried to straighten but she held on when he would have moved away. “Stop.” She said softly.

“Tonight was so much fun. Let’s not end it on a sour note.”

He sighed. “But it has to end here.” He gave her behind a soft pat. She didn’t stop him when he straightened and pulled away. “I’ve got to get home, shower and go to bed. We’ll get together this weekend. I promise.”

She swallowed her disappointment and smiled. “I can’t wait.”

He kissed her cheek then paused. “You never told me why you were in Columbia?”

Her excitement returned full force. “I had an interview at G and N Solutions. They offered me the job.”

He grinned. “That’s great.”

“I know! I can *finally* move out of Helena.”

His grin melted away, disappointment settled over his handsome features. “It’s what you’ve been waiting for.”

“This is good, for us, I mean. I’ll only be an hour away. We can have nights like this every night.”

“No we can’t, Shayla. I live in Helena. I work there. I can’t stay in Columbia every night.”

“It’s not that far.”

“It’s far enough.” He held up a hand when she opened her mouth to argue. “Look, we said we wouldn’t end the night on a sour note.” He took her hand and

gently pulled her against him. "I'll call you tomorrow," he said, kissing her softly.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. There was resignation in his voice, and a note of finality. Was he already thinking of bringing this to an end? When he opened the door of her car for her, she smiled, said something, and got in. She held back her tears until she pulled out of the parking lot on her way back to her small rented home.

Chapter 28

Devin went through morning rounds and his first few patients in a flash. He barely had time to think between appointments. When lunch hour arrived, he decided to skip eating in his office and walk to the barber shop instead. It would mean staying late to go through lab reports and patient calls, but it was worth the sacrifice to clear his head for an hour.

He told his staff he was taking lunch away from the office and would be back soon. Kia avoided eye contact and hurried into one of the storage rooms as he passed. He'd have to deal with that soon, this afternoon preferably. He wasn't sure if she was mad at him about their failed date, or embarrassed now that it was obvious there wasn't much between them. She'd avoided him as much as the small office would allow, and he'd been too wrapped up in figuring out how to handle things with Shayla to care. But getting Kia to admit there was no chance of a future between them would go a long way to ending this stupid concealed relationship he had going.

His office was two blocks off of Main Street. The air was crisp and cool, and for the first time he noticed the yellow, orange, and red leaves on the trees along the

street. Fall was here. He breathed in the fresh air, energized after a day cooped up in hospital and exam rooms.

The crisp air gave way to heated, incensed air in the shop of his long time barber. Devin had gotten his hair cut by Al Larson since he was a kid. Al was a young man when Devin's dad first brought him. Boastful, full of swagger, and everything that represented 1980s cool with his Adidas track suit, gold tooth, and perfectly parted high top fade. Decades passed, yet Al still represented the best of the eighties.

"What's up, Devin," Al said when Devin walked in. His gold tooth shining in the bright light of the building. He wore a purple and black sweater that would have made Bill Cosby proud with black acid wash jeans. Despite his refusal to give up his golden decade, Al and his barbers still gave the best hair cuts in town.

"Nothing much, Al. Just came in for a tape up." Devin greeted the two other barbers in the shop, Joe and Terry.

"Sit down, my man," Al got up from his seat and motioned for Devin to take it. "Always got time for my favorite customer."

Devin smiled as he sat. "Everyone's your favorite customer."

Al laughed and draped a cover over Devin. "True, true, but you been coming since I opened this place. I appreciate that man." Al grabbed his clippers and studied Devin's head. "You letting it grow?"

Devin ran his fingers through the inch and a half worth of growth on his head. He wouldn't let it get too much longer, but for now this was good. He couldn't help but smile when he thought of Shayla running her fingers through it.

“Yeah, but not much longer than this.”

“Cool, I'll shape you up right.” He spun the chair around so Devin's back was to him. “I hear you playing Mike Tyson at the diner the other night.”

Devin stifled a groan. “Nothing like that. Tony said something that was uncalled for. It's over.”

“He must've said something pretty messed up to get you fighting in the street.”

Joe lowered his paper. “I was there. They weren't fighting in the street. Devin did get a good swing on him though.” He lifted the paper back up.

The bell on the door chimed as another customer walked in. Devin recognized Stan, one of Tony's friends. His body tensed, the brief relaxation he'd experienced dissipating.

They made eye contact and Stan narrowed his. Devin clenched the arm of the chair. No telling what kind of trouble one of Tony's friends would try to start.

“What's up, Al. You got time to cut my hair?” Stan asked.

“I'm just starting, get Joe to do it.”

Joe looked up from his paper and sighed. "I'm on break."

Al sucked his teeth. "You always on break."

Joe snapped the paper and lifted it in front of his face.

Stan laughed. "No problem, I can wait." He sat in one of the chairs against the wall.

Devin held Stan's stare until Stan finally looked away. He tried to relax, but the reminder of Tony and their fight the weekend before irked him.

"Devin, you still cool with Shayla Monroe," Al asked.

Stan's eyes snapped to Devin and Al, while Joe lowered the paper.

"We're friends, why?"

"Just wondering. I saw her in the store the other day, and damn, that girl can get it." Al said.

Devin sat up and glared at Al, who raised his hands, his eyes immediately filled with remorse. "No disrespect, just real talk, man. I thought y'all were just friends."

"We are friends, so don't disrespect her."

Al pulled Devin back in the chair and resumed edging up his hair. "My bad. I was just pointing out how much she's grown. I never believed the rumors about her being fast when she was little."

Stan laughed. "She lived up to those stories in Atlanta."

“Shayla made a mistake in Atlanta. And don’t act high and mighty, Stan,” Devin said. “We all know about you and Lila Green. Don’t you still run the other direction whenever you see Mr. Green?”

The shop erupted in laughter. Stan crossed his arms and shut his mouth. Al changed the subject to other town gossip and Devin relaxed somewhat. He should have known better than to come here. Al’s was the place to get the best hair cut, and the best story. Usually he didn’t pay much attention to what the men talked about; occasionally he participated in discussions on sports and women. He knew Al took the conversation away from Shayla out of respect for him, but he also knew her name would be right back on their lips when he left.

He didn’t notice the fresh air, or fall leaves on the walk back to his office. The waiting room was full, which didn’t leave him much time to think about what the men were saying about Shayla in the shop. He pushed it out of his mind and focused on his patients. The afternoon flew by just like the morning had. It was almost six by the time the last patient left the office.

He’d just slumped in his office chair, and was rubbing the bridge of his nose when Kia came in. She dropped a few patient files in his box, gave him a tight smile, and turned to walk out.

“Kia, stop. Close the door, we need to talk.”

She cringed, but closed the door and turned to face him. She looked everywhere but at him, reminding him of Shayla.

Shayla. He wanted nothing more than to sit and laugh with her for a few hours. Unwind after the long day he had. But he couldn't, unless they snuck to some hotel to do it. Annoyance clenched his stomach. Foolishness prevented him from going to her house tonight or her coming to his. Just so some petty people in town wouldn't have proof of what they already knew.

Devin stared at Kia. "Are you angry with me?"

She blinked, clearly startled by his question. "No. I thought you were mad at me."

He shifted in his seat. "Why would I be mad at you?"

"I walked out on our date."

"I deserved it."

She shook her head. With a sigh, she came to stand by his desk. "No you didn't. I knew you were in love with Shayla, but I thought I could make you forget her. It wasn't until we were staring across from each other at the table that I realized we didn't have a whole lot in common."

That was unexpected. The past few days he'd felt guilty for not trying hard enough on their impromptu date, and she'd felt guilty for pushing the issue.

"I like us better as friends." Devin said.

She sighed and smiled. "I do too. Plus, I met this guy at the club that night and I've been seeing him since. I didn't know how to tell you."

Devin grinned and leaned back in his chair. “I’ve never been happier to be replaced so quickly.”

Kia visibly relaxed. “Good. I thought you’d be upset after I said I was better for you than Shayla.”

He shook his head. “I’m not mad.”

Kia sat on the edge of his desk and frowned. “I’m still not sure if Shayla is good for you.” His smile fell. “It’s just, this thing with her and that artist. I love Shayla, and looked up to her for years, but you’re a good guy, Devin ... ”

Devin held up a hand. “Shayla was with me last Saturday night, not Tyrell.”

Kia’s jaw dropped. He eyed her warily. “Are you upset that I replaced you too quickly?”

Her mouth snapped shut and she shook her head. “No ... I just thought ... I mean she said there was someone in Columbia.”

“Shayla loves you, and her mom. She didn’t want to hurt you.”

Kia scowled. “But she didn’t know that I didn’t like you anymore. Why would she go after you?”

“She didn’t. I went after her. Because as you’ve already said, I love her.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “As crazy as it is, I do. But she’s afraid to tell anyone, because of what people will say.”

Kia’s face relaxed and she bit the side of her lip. After a few seconds she said, “You didn’t have to tell me

this.”

He dropped his hand and met her gaze. “Yes, I did. I don’t want to hide the fact that I’m with her, but she won’t tell anyone as long as people think there’s something between us. Introduce your new guy to your family.”

Kia’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. She jumped up from the desk. “I can’t. He just got out of jail. My mom would kill me.”

He fought back the small sting to his pride that Kia found an ex-con to be more her style than a doctor and continued. “Then tell them there’s nothing between us.”

She brought a hand to her chest and relaxed. “Okay, I can do that. Are you sure about coming clean about you two? Despite what you say, wherever Shayla goes, scandal follows. I know it’s not always her fault, but that’s a lot to deal with.”

“I’m not worried about that. I can handle what comes our way.”

Kia nodded. “If you’re sure.”

There was a knock on his door before Anna poked her head through. She looked between the two before settling her gaze on Devin.

“Sorry to interrupt, but Reverend Jenkins here to see you.”

Devin looked at the pile of lab results on his desk. A visit from the Reverend would push back his work even

more. With a reluctant nod he looked at Anna. “Send him in.” After Anna left, he glanced a Kia. “We’re okay?”

She nodded. “We’re good. I’ll see you later.” She followed Anna out.

Reverend Jenkins came in a few seconds later. The man’s brow was crinkled with worry, the lines around his eyes pronounced. He sat in the chair across from Devin with barely a hello.

“I’ll get right to it. Shayla has done a great job with the festival. She’s gotten the town excited about it. The band she’s booked is Tweeting about it, or that’s what my grandson tells me. I’ve agreed with every change she suggested, but I’m not sure about the latest one.”

Devin folded his hands together before him on the desk. Trepidation slivered up his spine. “What has she come up with?”

“I mean, under any other circumstances, I would be thrilled. But, with the rumors ... I’m not sure if it’s the right image for the church.”

“Reverend, please, just tell me what it is.”

Reverend Jenkins slid forward in his chair. “She called this morning to tell me that Tyrell Crawford agreed to paint caricatures at the festival. This is big, it’s wonderful, but the rumors about her and him will make it look bad.”

Devin shook his head. One blog post shouldn’t have shaken the Reverend’s faith in Shayla so much. It was surprising that she’d gotten the offer, but she wouldn’t

do anything drastic to bring Tyrell here. He'd never asked her more about the painting, but would bring it up again. Men didn't give expensive gifts just to be nice.

“Reverend Jenkins, it was just one bloggers far reaching opinion that Shayla and Tyrell have something going on.”

“I agree, if it was just that one article. But Martha came by the church today with a new one. Shayla spent the entire afternoon in a coffee shop with the man. There are more pictures of them smiling and laughing. One of the Columbia news stations has a link to it on their website. This could blow up into something big.”

Devin tried to keep his face impartial, when jealousy and hurt battled for control inside him. She'd spent the afternoon with Tyrell but told him she was there for a job interview. His fists clenched. Taking slow and controlled breaths, he tried to calm his rapidly beating heart.

There had to be more to this story. She wouldn't lie to him. But Kia even said herself Shayla was interested in someone in Columbia. Her betrayal in high school was one thing, it wasn't her fault and out of her control. For her betray him now, made him question if anything between them was real.

“What do you think, Devin? You're her friend. Would this be good or bad for the church?”

Devin took a deep breath before looking back at the Reverend. “I'm not sure,” he said slowly. “Let me talk to Shayla. Find out what's going on.”

The Reverend nodded, but didn't look relieved. "For her sake I hope it's not true. I like her and would hate to see that she's making the same mistakes."

"Me too." Devin said in a grim voice.

Devin stared at the pile of lab reports on his desk after the Reverend left. Everything in him burned to go to Shayla and demand the truth. But he was an adult, a professional. He would not overreact and assume the worst as he had in high school. Tyrell at the church would be great. But if it did turn out to be a way for her to play them against each other he was through with her. He wouldn't play second string on Shayla Monroe's list of men ever again.

Chapter 29

Devin didn't care who saw him as he drove down Shayla's street and parked in her driveway. One way or another, their charade would end tonight. Either she wanted to be with him, regardless of the consequences, or she didn't. Between patient calls, he'd let what Reverend Jenkins said sink in. He wanted to believe there was a reasonable explanation for Shayla spending an afternoon with the artist. But the fact that another man was giving her expensive gifts, and spending time with her in public — something she insisted they couldn't do — was dissolving his reasoning. Her reputation would suffer a lot more being seen with Tyrell than it would with him. It was time for her to choose.

He slammed the door of his truck. The loud noise would cause her neighbors to look out of their windows, but he didn't care. He marched up the stairs and pounded on the door with his fist. She was there within seconds.

“Devin, what are you doing here and why are you banging on the door?”

It was after eight. She was already in pajamas, if that's what the red scrap of silk clinging to her curves was supposed to be. The flimsy material had to be made to drive a man crazy: thin straps, a lace hem that stopped mid-thigh, and a front split that revealed creamy brown skin. He narrowed his eyes. No woman dressed that provocatively this early in the evening.

His eyes narrowed. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"Who would I expect?" she snapped, a hand on her hip.

"I'm not sure, but you're dressed as if you're expecting someone."

"No, I'm dressed for bed. I've been packing all day, and trying to tie up the loose ends for the festival. I'm tired. Or at least I was before you banged on the door and scared me half to death."

Her next door neighbor flicked on their porch light. He pushed himself through the door and shut it behind him despite her protests.

"I thought we agreed — "

"That was before you spent an entire afternoon in a coffee shop with a married man."

She took a step back. "I didn't mean to stay there so long. We started talking and — "

"I can't be seen in public with you, but it's okay for you to sit in public with a married man that you've already been connected with. A man who sent you an

expensive painting,” he pointed to the painting resting against the wall, “A man who you insist there’s nothing going on between you two.”

She crossed her arms, pushing her breasts up. If he were closer, one glance downward would reveal the darkened edges of her areola. He took a step forward. Lust stirred in his pants when she swallowed hard.

“There isn’t anything between me and Tyrell.”

“How can you expect me to keep our relationship a secret, if you flaunt your relationship with a married man?”

Her eyes sparked fire. She put her hands on her hips. Her legs spread in a defensive stance. Desire hardened his dick instantly. He tried to concentrate on why he was here and not the way her nipples were outlined beneath the thin material.

“I don’t have a relationship with him.”

“Who do you have a relationship with?”

“You.”

He took another step forward. “Right, me. No one else. So if you’re going to spend an afternoon in a coffee shop, laughing and having a good time, it’ll be with me. If a blogger or your noisy ass neighbor wants to know who’s in your bed there will be no guessing because everyone is going to know that it’s me. Do you understand? I’m not hiding anymore.”

Her brown eyes became uncertain. “My mom and Kia.”

“I’ve already told Kia that I love you. She doesn’t care because she’s seeing some ex-convict. Your mom can be as upset as she wants, but it’s time for you to stop trying to make her happy. It didn’t work in high school, and it’s not going to work now. It’s time to make you happy.”

Her arms fell to her side. Tears filled her eyes and immediately he became contrite. Rushing forward, he placed his hands on her shoulders. “Don’t cry. I know I’m being firm, but I can’t stand sitting by watching people connect you with another man.”

She shook her head. “It’s not that. You told Kia what?”

He froze. It was too late to take it back now, and truthfully he didn’t want to. If he was going to insist that she come clean, he’d have to as well.

“I told Kia,” he pulled her close, “that I love you.”

She blinked; two large tears fell down her cheeks, but her lips spread in the most beautiful smile he’d ever seen. “I love you too. Always have, always will.”

He wanted kiss her senseless. Snatch off that sorry excuse for a nightgown, toss her on the king size bed that was too big for her bedroom, and fuck the hell out of her. And he would, after they settled this.

“Then say we won’t hide this anymore.” He lifted a hand to wipe the tears from her face. “I don’t care what the town thinks, what your mom thinks, I just want us to be together.”

“I’ve got the job in Columbia.”

He pressed his chest against the softness of her breasts. “It’s an hour away. That’s nothing.” He ran his lips across her jaw. “No more hiding.”

Her body trembled, sending another jerk through his aching penis. She lifted her hands to his head. Her fingers slid through his hair, tickling his scalp, exciting him even more. She grabbed his hair in her fist and gently pulled his head up. Their eyes met, and she nodded.

“No more hiding,” she said

That was all he needed before pulling off her night gown and tossing her on the bed.

Chapter 30

Shayla groaned when the alarm on Devin's phone went off the next morning. She hadn't had to respond to an alarm clock in weeks. Starting a new job the following week was great, but she would miss sleeping in. Her back was against Devin's chest, his arm around her waist. When he shifted away to reach for his phone, she groaned again, and turned with him. Wrapping her arm around him and pulling her body against his back, she nuzzled him with her nose.

"It's not even light out." She said.

His body vibrated with his deep laughter. She kept her eyes closed, but her grip on him tightened as he reached for his phone on her night stand. The shrill alarm stopped soon after.

"I have rounds this morning. This gives me time to go home and change before going to the hospital." He turned on his back and she shifted until her head rested on his chest.

"Why can't someone else do rounds?"

His fingers softly trailed up and down her arm. "I'm the only doctor in my office, remember? I don't ask other

doctors to see my patients unless I'm out of town."

"How about when you have a woman begging you to stay in bed?"

She wrapped her leg around his; pulling him closer until the hairs of his sack tickled the top of her knee. Warm fluid desire meandered through her body, awakening her much better than the alarm clock ever could. His breathing hitched, and she smiled against his chest. His hand stopped its gentle massage of her arm and instead traveled down the length of her body to cup her butt and pull her against him.

"I may have to look into that," his voice was low and coated with desire. He gently squeezed her behind, before groaning and kissing the side of her neck. "But I can't today."

Shayla sighed and pulled away to lie on her back. "I know."

He turned to his side to face her and propped his head in his hand. "Stay with me tonight."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say no, argue about why they couldn't. But after he'd spent the night here, there was no use trying to hide that they were together. He loved her; she still couldn't believe he admitted that to her *and* Kia. She would have to find out for herself that Kia was okay with her relationship with Devin. She wouldn't think about what her mom would say. It didn't matter anyway. There was nothing she could do to earn Marcella's good opinion.

She met his concerned gaze with a smile. “What time do you want me there?”

He grinned then leaned over to kiss her quickly. “It’s Friday, so we’re only open for half the day. Still, I doubt I’ll be out of there until two. Meet me at three?”

She nodded. “It’s a date.”

“Good.” He kissed her again, and then got out of bed.

She tried not to pout as she watched him pull his clothes back on. She could do this every day: wake up beside Devin and watch him get ready. *But will he want to do this every day?* She pushed the thought aside. For now he loved her. Despite the fact that other men had claimed to love her, only to play baseball with her heart, she didn’t — wouldn’t — believe Devin would intentionally do the same. She’d savor what he gave her now, and build up enough happiness to get her through the days after he eventually left her.

He dressed quickly and came back over to the bed to kiss her forehead. “I’ll see you this afternoon.”

“Can’t wait.”

His full bottom lip enticed her as he smiled. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” Seizing temptation, she lifted up to gently take his lip between her teeth. He groaned, kissed her hard then left.

With a sigh, she looked at the clock. It was five; her mom would be up getting ready for work. She wouldn’t

go down the street until after Marcella left. She'd interrogate Kenny to see what to expect. She didn't doubt someone on the street had called to tell her mom that Devin's truck was in the yard all night. And if her mom had a blow up after hearing the news, Kenny would let her know how bad it was.

Instead of going back to sleep, she got out of bed and took a bath. She hoped to find an apartment soon. Living without a shower had definitely run its course. Afterwards, she finished packing the small amount of stuff she'd unpacked when she moved in. She called Tasha to ask for recommendations for apartments to consider. Her friend offered something better. Tasha had moved in with Jared after they were married and had never sold her own home. She offered to rent it to Shayla who readily accepted. That was one less thing off her back.

She didn't leave the house until eight, when she was sure that her mom would be long gone. When she entered her mom's home, the sound of a morning news show blared from the kitchen. Her heart sped up. She looked out the window to be sure her mom's car wasn't parked on the side of the house. Slowly, she walked into the kitchen. Kenny sat at the table watching television, and she heaved a sigh of relief.

"You're watching the news?" she said walking in and sitting at the table with him. She grabbed a piece of bacon off the plate in front of him. He looked from the plate to her with a frown. She smirked.

“I can watch the news if I want.”

“Turn it down, the neighbors can hear it.”

He picked up the remote and lowered the volume. “I had it up to drown out ma’s fussing this morning.”

She cringed. “Me and Devin.”

“You know it. Damn, Shayla, you couldn’t go to his place? Two people called last night to tell her and she spent half the night debating on ignoring it or going to your house demanding he leave.”

“I don’t understand why she’s so against it. I’m not hurting anybody. If it’s because of Kia, then I she shouldn’t worry because Kia already knows.”

Kenny scoffed. “Kia don’t care. She hooked up with Bobby’s cousin who just got out of jail. I don’t know why mom’s always on your back like she is. He’s my daddy too. She don’t ever get on me.”

It was the first time Kenny had ever admitted that their mom was harder on her than him. She’d never said anything to him about it, preferring to keep the good relationship she had with her brother versus trying to get him on her side against mom.

“I didn’t think you noticed,” she said in a soft voice.

“Come on, Shayla, give me some credit. I stay out of y’all’s fights, but I know when she’s giving you a hard time.”

“I appreciate that.”

Kenny shrugged and stuffed the last piece of bacon in his mouth. “I always look out for you. That’s why I beat the shit out of Tony a few years ago.”

Her hand fell to the table with a slap. “What?”

“Yeah, his homeboy Stan was talking to me one day about what Tony did to you back in high school. I ain’t ever understand that situation. I know you never felt Tony like that, so what Stan said made sense. I handled it. And let Tony know not to bother you again. I thought I’d have to handle him again after the way he got you all messed up at his club, but Devin did instead. I knew then you two were back together.”

Tears filled her eyes as she stared at her little brother. She’d always assumed Kenny was oblivious to the things going on around him. He kept his business to himself, never offered advice to her or her mom, and usually bailed whenever things got rough in the house. To know that he’d been her silent champion, even when she hadn’t been home in years, touched her more than anything.

She got out of the chair and wrapped her arms around her brother’s neck. “Thank you.”

He gently pushed her away. “Stop all that. You’re my sister, what else am I supposed to do.”

She smiled and sat down. “You didn’t have to do anything.”

He shrugged again. “Then I wouldn’t be a man.”

• • •

Strengthened by her brother's support, Shayla had lunch at the diner. The owner, Mr. Wilson, greeted her warmly and even talked with her for a few minutes while she waited on her food. Jennie took her order with no attitude. She assumed it was due to Mr. Wilson's friendly greeting. The few patrons nodded in greeting, one even offered an actual hello.

She was starting to feel silly about hiding her relationship with Devin for so long, when Martha from the church came in with a few of her cronies. They gave her the evil eye and whispered behind their menus. It wasn't long before they started to loudly discuss how loose women tended to lead good men astray. The looks they threw in her direction with every head nod and 'mmmhmmm' were a testament that she was the loose woman they referred to. She hurriedly ate her food and left, instead of confronting them and causing a scene.

She went to Piggly Wiggly for fruit, instead of going home. A few people who she'd worked with to make the changes to the festival were there and were cordial. But there were others who whispered and pointed as she walked through the store. She overheard her name, Devin, and Tyrell in one loudly whispered conversation. By the time she made it home her good mood was deflated.

It was foolish to think things would magically become easy because Devin said he loved her and her brother admitted she received the short end of the stick. If one afternoon of dirty looks and whispered conversations had her miserable, how long would Devin

put up with it? Sure it would be easier when she lived in Columbia and no one would really care what they did. But he lived here, and if this week were any example, his job prevented him from staying in Columbia during the week. By the time two thirty hit, she was once again wondering if a relationship with Devin would cause more harm than good.

But she had a selfish side. And that side packed a few clothes to meet him at three. She was leaving her house when Kia pulled in the driveway. Even though both Devin and her brother assured her that Kia was seeing someone else, Shayla's heart rate accelerated. Kia was one of the few people in her family who had looked up to her; she'd hate to ruin any chance of a future relationship with her.

Kia got out of the car and walked over, a tentative smile on her lips. "You should have heard them at work today, giving Devin a hard time about you."

Shayla slumped against her car. "Did they really?"

Kia nodded. "Not Anna. Mainly Lisa, but she gives everyone a hard time. It's not you personally, they all treat Devin like the brother they never had. No one wants to see him hurt."

Shayla had to stop herself from snorting her disbelief. If anyone would end up hurt after this it would be her. When he realized he could do better.

"I'm not going to hurt him. I love him."

Kia scrutinized her for a second before nodding. “I believe you don’t want to hurt him, but you did. I know it was almost twenty years ago and you were in high school, but you’ve come home with a lot of baggage. I realize that me and Devin won’t work, but he’s a good guy. Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“There’s a lot more to the story about what happened in high school than I care to go into right now. But I will tell you that I care about Devin more than anyone I know. I’m more afraid he’ll wake up and realize he could do better.”

Kia raised an eyebrow. “Devin hasn’t shown interest in a woman in town in years. You show up and he’s falling over you in less than twenty-four hours. I don’t think he’ll move on quickly.”

“I hope you’re right, because I don’t want him to.” Shayla straightened and looked her cousin in the eye. “Are we good? My intention was to stay away from him. I didn’t want to come between you two.”

“He told me. And I know you tried. Despite everything, you’ve always been real. I know you wouldn’t deliberately try to hurt me.”

Shayla hugged Kia. “Thank you.”

“Are you going to see him now?” Kia asked pulling away.

Shayla grinned. “What do you think? I’m escaping before my mom gets home.”

“I don’t blame you. I’ll wait around and talk to Aunt Marcella when she gets home. If she’s gonna be mad about you and Devin, it won’t be because she thinks you stabbed me in the back.”

Shayla sighed with relief as some of her earlier optimism came back. It wouldn’t be easy, but there may be hope for her and Devin.

Chapter 31

Shayla's lips lifted in a tight smile when Devin squeezed her shoulder. She looked out the windshield of his truck at the church parking lot where the committee was preparing for the Fall Festival. It would be the first time she and Devin were out in public as a couple. After the see-saw day she had last week, she'd insisted on spending time with him at his home. She said it was fitting since they'd joked as teens about living together on Johnston Street. And it wasn't too hard to convince him to spend his nights after work in bed. Truthfully, it kept them out of sight of prying eyes. She wanted to enjoy a few days of it being just the two of them.

She hadn't gone back to her rented house since leaving after her conversation with Kia. Everything was too good when she was with Devin. Seeing her mom, and facing her accusing looks, would only make it seem wrong.

"We can't sit in the truck all night." Devin said.

She took a deep breath. "I'm good. Let's do this."

He gave her shoulder another squeeze then got out of the truck. She waited on him to come and open her

door, and took his hand as she hopped down from the cab. The steady, comforting strength of his grip eased some of her nerves as they approached the others. After booking Tyrell she'd avoided committee meetings and handled her end of things through phone conversations with Reverend Jenkins. While everyone on the committee probably knew she spent the past few nights at Devin's home, it didn't mean they would look favorably on the two of them being together.

Reverend Jenkins glanced at their clasped hands as they approached. She waited in vain for him to frown or show disapproval. Instead, he smiled.

“Great, you're here. Devin, one of the doctors from the hospital is already here with his nurse. I showed him where the health screenings would be, but if you'll go and make sure you all have everything you'll need, that would be great.”

“Not a problem. I actually have some stuff in my truck, but I wanted to check with you before taking it out.”

Reverend Jenkins nodded. “Good. Shayla, will you make sure everything looks good over by the stage for the group tonight? They should arrive soon.”

As soon as the words were out of the Reverend's mouth, the van with the Christian hip hop group pulled into the parking lot. Devin gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before going to handle his task. Shayla went over to meet the group's manager. He introduced her to the four boys in the group. Each one looked like any other

teenager. But when they spoke, they expressed their excitement to be there along with their eagerness to spread the word of God. Shayla sent up her own silent prayer of thanks that the group would work out.

On the way to the stage, the parking lot went from peaceful to chaotic. The vendor with the bouncy house arrived, volunteers to assist with the various booths came, and even some church members who were giving away candy out of their trunks were there early. Shayla worked alongside Mrs. Jenkins and Martha, to make sure everyone knew where they were going. She nearly tripped over her feet when Martha complimented her on setting up a detailed site plan and task list to make set up easier.

When she finally got a second to breathe and sit with Mrs. Jenkins at the designated command post, Tyrell arrived. Her feeling of accomplishment plummeted. The Reverend and Bentley had both agreed it was okay for Tyrell to draw caricatures, but that didn't mean people wouldn't assume he was there just to see her. She briefly considered leaving the table and letting Mrs. Jenkins deal directly with him, but running would only make her look guilty. He wasn't alone. A tall, cocoa skinned woman, and a little girl who looked like a miniature of the woman, came with him. Shayla sighed with relief.

“Shayla, it's good to see you.” Tyrell said. “I'd like you to meet my wife, Elaina, and my daughter Iyana.”

Iyana bounced forward and smiled. Elaina's smile wasn't as bright. Her almond eyes made a calculating

sweep around the parking lot.

Shayla stood and held out her hand. “It’s great to meet you, Elaina. Tyrell speaks highly of you.”

Elaina’s smile froze for a second before it softened into what would appear to be sincerity to the untrained eye. She looked out of place with her silk blouse, slacks and pearl necklace. Tyrell appeared more comfortable in jeans and a black sweatshirt. His daughter was dressed exactly as him.

“Great to meet you, Shayla. As soon as Tyrell told me about this festival, it seemed like the perfect place to bring Iyana,” Elaina said.

Shayla pulled her hand out of Elaina’s icy one and held back the urge to rub it along her pants. “I’ll show you where to set up.”

“I’ll get my stuff out of the car.” Tyrell said.

“Can I come with you, Daddy?” Iyana asked.

“You sure can, pumpkin.”

Shayla watched them walk away before looking back at Elaina. The woman’s expression was a mask of happiness, too fake and frozen to fool Shayla, but probably good enough to convince anyone not used to wearing masks.

“Come with me,” Shayla said.

They walked in silence to the area reserved for Tyrell. Shayla caught Devin’s eye on the way over and he raised a brow. Tyrell bringing his wife and daughter

would weaken any ideas that there was anything between them, but it didn't make Shayla feel any better. She didn't want Elaina to think there was anything between her and Tyrell.

When they stopped at the roped off area for the paintings, Shayla turned toward Elaina to clear the air.

"I know there's nothing between you two." Elaina said before Shayla could open her mouth. "Don't look so shocked. That man hasn't slept with another woman since our daughter was born. Which it hard to believe, since I can only bring myself to sleep with him when my father reminds me to."

Shayla coughed to cover her gasp of shock. "Excuse me?"

Elaina raised a manicured brow and flipped her smoothly flat ironed hair over her shoulder. "Please, this marriage was arranged by my father to support his political career. I'm only telling you this because for some reason he seems to like you." She smiled at Shayla. "It would really take a load off my back if you would sleep with him. You have my permission. I'll tell everyone you're a good friend of mine and that's why you come to the house."

Shayla blinked several time and stepped back. Disgust that the woman would offer up her husband so callously crept over her. Even though she believed Tyrell wasn't coming on to her, she wondered how he prevented himself from cheating on such a heartless bitch.

“No, I will not sleep with your husband.”

Elaina lifted a shoulder as if Shayla turned down a piece of gum. “So you’re reformed now? Whatever, eventually he’ll move on. I did.”

Shayla placed a hand on her hip. “What?”

Tyrell walked up with Iyana. He took one look at the two of them and the easy smile he had with his daughter hardened.

“You asked her, didn’t you?”

Elaina rolled her eyes. “Why not, it would make everything easier.”

“Easier for you.” Tyrell looked at Shayla with apologetic eyes. “I’m sorry about that.”

Shayla took another step back. “Let’s forget it. Call me if you need anything.”

She hurried away from them. It was one thing to have a man proposition her, but for a wife to offer up her husband was a new one. It took a cold-hearted bitch to do something so horrible. She wasn’t even upset about Elaina’s assumption that she would accept. No matter what, some people would remember what happened in Atlanta. She was beginning to accept that.

She went in search of Devin. She kept a serene look on her face. The last thing she needed tonight was to stir up more rumors about her and Tyrell. Devin was laughing with one of the other doctors at the health screening area. When he caught her gaze he stopped talking and rushed over.

“Are you okay?”

She forced a smile and nodded. “Yes, just wanted to see a friendly face.”

She laced her arm through his and walked him away from the tent.

Devin pulled her closer. “I thought you and Tyrell were friends. Did he say something to upset you?”

“We are, but his wife is a frigid bitch. She just asked me to sleep with him as a favor to her.”

“What!” Devin tried to turn toward Tyrell’s tent but she held him close.

“Don’t look, and try to look happy. I don’t want to start any new rumors tonight.”

His attempt at a happy was more like a grimace. “Why would she ask you that as a favor?”

Shayla shrugged. “Something about her dad arranging their marriage and only sleeping with Tyrell when she’s reminded too. She assumed I’d say yes. I feel sorry for him. He’s a nice guy and is married to a witch.”

Devin pulled her in front of him. He wrapped his arms around her waist. His brow was furled as he stared at her with intense eyes. “I don’t care how nice he is or who he’s married to. The only guy I want you concerned about is me.”

She grinned and brought her arms around his neck. Running her fingers along the back of his neck, she pressed closer to him. “Yes, doctor.”

He lowered his head and kissed her. “That’s what I like to hear,” he murmured against her lips. Heat spread from her belly to her breasts. Her panties dampened instantly from the desire in his voice.

A car horn blared. They both jumped before moving out of the way to let it into the parking lot. Shayla looked around at the quickly thickening crowd. If the number of people here at the start of the festival were any suggestion of things to come, it was going to be a huge success.

She groaned and brought her eyes back to him. She slid her hand up his neck to tangle in his hair. “I better go see if Mrs. Jenkins needs anything,” she said.

“Don’t work too hard,” he said with a sexy smile. “I’ve got plans for later.”

She laughed. “I think you’ll be the one working hard.” She motioned with her head to the people making their way over to the health screening tent.

Devin sighed and lifted a shoulder. “Let me get back.” He brushed a soft kiss across her cheek. “I’ll see you around.”

Shayla watched him walk away. She tilted her head to the side for a better view of his ass in his khakis before turning to check in with Mrs. Jenkins. Luckily most of the exhibitors had arrived and were set up, so the early arrival of people from town wasn’t a drawback. Before long, the church parking lot was full and the show had started on stage. The festival was in full swing, with parents, kids, and other members of the community

enjoying the activities. She recognized lots of people from Helena, but many of the faces weren't familiar. Her hopes that the event would draw people from all over the county seemed to be coming true.

An hour into the festival a camera crew from a Columbia news station arrived. She walked over to meet the crew, grateful that her press release was picked up by the media, and directed them to Reverend Jenkins and his wife. Her goal was to keep attention focused on the church and their activities, not her.

She made a hasty retreat into the church basement while they were getting the cameras set up. The warmth inside was welcome compared to the cool air outside. Her flats clicked softly against the floor as she made her way to the kitchen and sat at the table.

Spreading her legs before her and laying her head against the back of the chair, she sighed and closed her eyes. Thank goodness, the festival was a success, but her feet needed a break. The quick reprieve would be even better if Devin could have joined her, but the health screening tent had a line. He'd be busy until the end of the festivities.

She shifted on the chair to get even more comfortable, when the basement door opened and closed. She sat up and turned, only to freeze as disgust bubbled within her.

"What are you doing here?" she said with a sneer as Tony approached.

Her negative response didn't drop the smirk from his face. He walked over with his disgusting swagger, stopping in front of her.

"I thought I'd keep you company."

She tried not to shudder as he looked over her body with barely concealed lust. She was covered from head to toe in a bright yellow shirt, tan cardigan and jeans, but he looked at her as if she were in her running outfit.

"You're the last person I'd want to keep me company."

He laughed, the sick sound causing her skin to crawl. "Oh, are you expecting someone else? You've got a lot to choose from tonight."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your painter, Devin," his grin widened, "me."

Shayla scoffed and stood. He didn't move. His closeness raised the hairs on the back of her neck, but she pushed it away. Clenching her fist, she ignored the need to nervously tap her toe. She wasn't a kid anymore, and she wouldn't let him hold this fear over her.

"As if I'd ever sleep with you ... *intentionally*." She pushed him out of the way.

He gripped her arm. "You wanted it."

She narrowed her eyes. "Do I need to get my brother to remind you to keep your hands to yourself?"

Surprise flashed in his dark eyes. He continued to sneer, but released her arm and stepped back. "So he

told you about that.”

Relief blew over her like a breeze when he let her go. She stepped away and reached for the heart around her neck. At the last second she dropped her hand. She’d denied it for years, but wouldn’t any more. Tony raped her. She didn’t need to clutch the heart at her neck as a reminder that self-love was important. She hadn’t forgotten that that night, he’d taken advantage.

She raised her chin and glared at him. “Why wouldn’t he. He’s my brother.”

Tony shrugged. “No matter, I could’ve gotten you in bed without drugging you. You were a tease then, but you wanted it. Just like you’re a tease now.”

“You did what?” Boiling hot rage shot through her. After all of these years thinking she’d been too drunk to stop Tony. He’d drugged her. The smirk finally fell from his face as he eyed her warily.

He took a step back. “You said he told you.”

“That he kicked your ass, but I thought it was because you raped me. Not because you drugged me.”

Fear flashed in his eyes. “I didn’t rape you. Don’t go throwing that type of shit around. I only helped the situation along.”

“You sorry bastard!” she lunged for him and he roughly pushed her aside. She barely registered pain in her ankle as she twisted and fell against the counter. She pushed away from it and clawed at his face.

“Stop it, Shayla,” he said between deflecting her blows. “I’m already on probation for CDV, but I will hit you if you don’t quit.”

His words didn’t register. They didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was beating the crap out of him for the years she’d suffered thinking she was complacent when she should have fought. She attacked harder, kicking his shins while she tried to hit his face. Hot tears ran down her face. She fought back sobs as she tried to beat him for every ounce of insecurity she’d succumbed to after what he’d done.

“That’s it,” he yelled, shoving her away.

She fell on the floor, but didn’t give up her fight. She growled and jumped up. Her lunge was stopped as Tyrell ran over and grabbed her around the waist.

“What’s going on?” Tyrell asked looking from her to Tony. He stared at Tony as if he were an infectious disease. His body tense against hers.

Tony spoke first. “She’s a fool, that’s what’s wrong.”

“No you’re a fool,” she said struggling against Tyrell’s hold. “A fool who raped me, and destroyed my pride. Never again, Tony. If you come near me I’ll kill you, understand. I. Will. Kill. You.”

Her struggles stopped. Tony stared at her. She glared back, hoping he would say something that would give her a reason to scratch his eyes out.

Tony finally held up his hands. “You ain’t worth all this.” His spit at her feet then walked to the stairs.

When the door closed behind him, Tyrell let her go. Her knees gave out. She fell to the floor, her shoulders shaking from her sobs. It hadn't been her fault.

Tyrell kneeled and put his arms around her, but she didn't want his comfort. She wanted Devin.

“When did he hurt you? Was it tonight?”

She shook her head. “No ... he won't come near me again,” she said as another round of sobs tore through her. Tony wouldn't bother her again. He may be a bully, but he was also a coward.

Crying was useless, but she couldn't stop. She'd beat herself up for years over what happened in high school. Afterwards, she'd convinced herself that maybe she was as bad as her dad. Maybe she had wanted it that night. She'd gotten roaring drunk plenty of times in the years after just to test herself. But even when drunk, she'd known what she was doing. Had slept with the guys she wanted to, and turned away from those she didn't. Before there was no explanation for why she wasn't able to tell Tony no, or fight him off. Now there was reason for her self-loathing, a reason for her doubts. He'd drugged her. The stupid, fucking, arrogant asshole!

Tyrell talked softly and patted her back while she cried. She appreciated his concern, but she wanted to find Devin and get away from here. She looked up to thank Tyrell and he wiped the tears from her face just as the basement door opened. Devin walked in, followed by the reporter from Columbia. The reporter's eyes took on

a predatory gleam. The smile on Devin's face quickly hardened into an icy look that chilled her blood.

Chapter 32

Shayla jumped up from the floor. Tyrell rose slower. Her gaze flew between Devin and the reporter. There wasn't any way to explain the situation without causing a problem. Either she confessed what happened between her and Tony in front of the reporter, or find some other excuse for why she was in Tyrell's arms in a dark basement. Either way, it was a bad scene.

"Well, just the two I hoped to interview tonight," the reporter said with a sly smile.

Shayla took a step forward. Pain sliced through her ankle from where she'd twisted it earlier. She ignored the pain as she lumbered to Devin's side. He tensed as she slid her arm around his waist. His hand was stiff when it gripped her shoulder, sending her heart into a fast pace.

Devin's gaze ran over her face. She couldn't read any emotion in his eyes. His brows furrowed as he wiped the remnants of tears from her face. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'll explain later," she whispered.

The reporter raised an eyebrow at her arm around Devin's waist. "Looks like we interrupted something."

Tyrell walked over. “You didn’t. Shayla twisted her ankle and I was helping her up. We were on our way upstairs when you came in.”

The reporter scoffed. “Of course. So there’s no truth to the rumors.”

She didn’t think it was possible, but Devin’s body became even stiffer. “What rumors?”

The reporter motioned between her and Tyrell. “About a relationship between these two.”

Tyrell laughed. “You’re putting your foot in your mouth. I don’t think Shayla’s *boyfriend* will appreciate the innuendo.”

The reporter looked at Devin with newfound interest. “Boyfriend?”

Shayla glanced up and her weak smile almost wilted. A glower covered Devin’s handsome face. Her already shaken spirits plummeted. If he scowled at the mention of him as her boyfriend then a breakup wasn’t far off. After only a week together and the drama that followed her like a poisonous cloud was already killing their relationship.

The gleam in the reporter’s eyes dimmed only slightly. “So you’re not concerned finding your *girlfriend* in the arms of another man.”

Devin glared back. “I have no reason not to trust her and Tyrell. We’re all friends,” he said in a cool voice.

“Pretty close friends, I’d guess,” the reporter said with a laugh.

Shayla pushed away from Devin and crossed her arms. “Look, tonight is about the festival. We worked hard to make it a success, and Tyrell is here as a friend. You can stop looking as if you’ve just landed the story of the century. There’s nothing going on.”

The reporter looked at the stony expressions of the three. He finally shook his head and shrugged. “I think I’ve gotten enough to cover the festival. As to everything else,” he grinned cockily, “time will tell.” He gave a quick wave of his hand and left.

As soon as the door closed Devin whipped around to face her. “Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head. “No, Tyrell helped me.”

“I’m talking about Tony. I saw him leave just as that reporter and I were heading in here. Are you okay?”

Her ankle throbbed painfully. Her hands hurt from where Tony had deflected her blows. But she wouldn’t say a word. Devin’s body was tense. Telling him about the extent of her attack on Tony might break the tenuous amount of control he was showing.

“No. Can we go somewhere and talk? I’ve got to get out of here.”

“Not until I find out what happened.” His eyes narrowed on Tyrell.

Tyrell came toward them. “I was more afraid for Tony than Shayla. She was hitting him.”

Devin’s jaw clenched. His left hand moved up to massage the back of her neck. His gaze ran over her as if

searching for signs of injury. “Why were you hitting him?”

Shayla wanted to slump against his hard chest. Bury herself in the safety of his arms, but the calculating look in his eye held her back. Her eyes slid away from his as her hand reached up to clench the charm around her neck. “That night in high school ... he’d drugged me. I bet it was that drink Peaches gave me. It wasn’t just the alcohol that prevented me from pushing Tony away.”

Devin’s face became a mask of fury. He spun toward the door. Shayla grabbed onto his arm. Tyrell hurried around to block his way.

Tyrell held up his hands. “It’s cool, man. He won’t bother her anymore.”

“Why, because you came in and saved the day?” Devin said with a sneer.

Tyrell shook his head. “No, Shayla had the situation under control.” Shayla met his eye over Devin’s shoulder. Her relief that he understood not to mention that things were getting out of hand was almost palpable. Tyrell continued, “When I came in, Shayla was slapping him around. He said it wasn’t worth it and left. I only put my arms around her because she was crying. Trust me. I’m not trying to overstep my bounds. Anyone with eyes can tell she loves you.”

Some of the tension left Devin’s shoulders. He pulled her against his side. His hand once again began its gentle massage of the knots at the base of her neck. “Thank you for helping her.”

Tyrell shrugged. “Just helping out a friend.”

Shayla smiled at Tyrell before looking up at Devin. “Can we go?”

He sighed. “The festival should be winding down.” He looked at his watch. “It’s almost nine. Let’s see if we can slip out early.”

“I’ll go wrap up my area,” Tyrell said and left.

No sooner than the door closed did Devin turn toward her. The frustration in his eyes apparent. “Is that all that happened?”

Shayla held up her right hand. “I swear. He helped me with Tony. Then I started crying and he was only offering comfort. I don’t want him, Devin. I love you.”

Devin sighed and shook his head. “How do you always end up in these situations? It’s as if trouble follows you.”

He gave her a small smile, but it didn’t soften the blow his words inflicted. It was happening already. First, the flinch at being referred to as her boyfriend. Now, the complaints about trouble surrounding her like gnats at a cookout. He was already getting tired of her.

He held out his hand for her to take. They didn’t speak as they exited into the cool night air. Reverend Jenkins was on the stage telling everyone the festival was coming to a close and thanking them for coming. Devin’s hand dropped from hers as they walked closer. He didn’t touch her, just kept the frown on his face.

“I especially want to thank Shayla Monroe. We wouldn’t have been able to pull this together without her dedication and support. She is a true asset to the community and I appreciate her efforts,” Reverend Jenkins said. He clapped his hands and a few seconds later the rest of the crowd joined in.

Reverend Jenkins’ thanks, coupled with everything else that happened that night, brought a fresh wave of tears to her eyes. Reverend Jenkins was one of the most respected men in Helena. By giving her his stamp of approval in front of the entire town, there would be few who would outright ostracize her. With just a few words he’d told everyone to back off.

Within minutes, several people came up to tell her what a good job she’d done and how great the festival was. She blinked back the tears and called on her years of hiding her emotions to smile and accept the congratulations from the same people who’d whispered about her behind their hands when she first arrived.

Devin excused himself to help pack things up in the health screening area. He didn’t meet her eyes, and although he squeezed her shoulder and kissed her cheek before going away his actions were aloof. She dreaded the ride back to his place and the awkward “it’s me, not you” speech.

She looked up from the last person who gave her another over exuberant congratulations just as her mom approached. Her mom’s full lips were twisted in a scowl that could only be fiercer if she were sucking on lemons.

Taking a deep breath Shayla prepared herself for whatever was coming, even though her battered emotions couldn't take much more.

Marcella stopped before her and shuffled her feet. She stuffed her hands into the oversized coat she was wearing before letting out a loud breath. "Good job on the festival."

Shayla blinked several times. "Um ... thanks."

Marcella looked across the parking lot at the health screen tent. "You and Devin. Kia told me she gave you her blessing. I won't say anymore to you about him except don't hurt him again. He's a nice man."

Shayla sighed. "I love him ... always have. And that night I supposedly hurt him was because Tony drugged my drink and had sex with me after I passed out."

The surprise on her mom's face would have made her feel better if she thought it would make a difference.

"I had no idea."

"No, and you never asked what happened. You just slapped me, called me a whore like my daddy, and walked away."

Her mom's face hardened and she straightened her shoulders. "What was I supposed to do? Everyone in town said —"

"Everyone in town believed that I was loose because you always said it. But you know what, it doesn't matter. It was a long time ago. I'm over it. Devin knows and he's

over it. I'm done. Done waiting on your approval and love. Done."

She walked away from her mom who stood there with her mouth gaping open. She looked at the sky and took a deep breath. She no longer craved her mom's approval. It would never come. After years of living with regrets and self loathing she was ready to let go of the old feelings that plagued her. Easier said than done maybe, but now that she had a job she'd look for a shrink.

She looked around at the dispersing crowd, the exhibitors packing up their tents, and the committee and volunteers breaking things down. She should help. Clean up would be more than usual because the festival was so large, and she was the reason for that. But right now she wanted to go home — except she didn't have a home. She had a place she rented and one side of the bed in Devin's house.

Tears welled in her eyes again. She was a mess. Nowhere to go. Devin's behavior after the scene with Tyrell and Tony made it obvious that he was rethinking their relationship. This time she wasn't sure if she could let him go without losing a piece of herself.

Strong arms encircled her shoulders. The warmth from Devin's body surrounded her and his scent infused her as he leaned over to kiss her forehead. "Let's go."

"But the break down ... "

"I spoke with Reverend Jenkins, he said they're good. I'm taking you home."

It's not my home, it's your home, she thought as he led her to his truck. They didn't speak as he drove. His silence grated her nerves. She'd rather he get it over with than prolong it. She closed her eyes and rested her head on the back of the seat. Mentally, she went through her very grown up response she'd have to make when he ended things. No need to be a complete basket case.

The truck made a sharp jerk to the side. Shayla's eyes popped open. She jumped in the seat. Before she could ask what was wrong, Devin was out the door and running around the side of the truck. Tony and Peaches were walking down the street together, probably on the way to Peaches house which was close to the church.

"Oh, shit," Shayla breathed when Devin grabbed Tony, swung him around, and punched him.

Shayla jumped out the car and rushed over. She tried to pull Devin off, but he brushed her aside. He took a handful of Tony's shirt and punched him again. When Tony fell to the ground, Devin kicked him. There were gasps from the few people who were also walking home that night. So much for not causing a scene tonight.

Shayla grabbed Devin's arm. "Stop it! It's over."

Her jerked out of her grasped, but thankfully took a step back. Peaches slowly walked forward. She froze when Devin glared at her. "You gave her the drink with the stuff in it?"

Peaches looked warily between the two. Shayla couldn't help it, her fist curled up with the need to enact her own revenge.

“It was supposed to be a joke,” Peaches said. “He was only going to get in bed with her. Make you think they ... you know. It went too far, alright.”

Shayla went for Peaches, but Devin grabbed her arm. “Get in the truck.”

She turned to him. “You get to hit Tony, but I can’t hit her?”

“You’ve got into enough trouble tonight,” he glared at Peaches. “Either of you say one word to me or Shayla, you’ll regret it.”

Peaches scowled. “You two can have each other.”

Devin looked down to where Tony groaned on the ground. “Likewise.” He tugged Shayla’s arm. “Get in the truck.”

With a glare, she turned her back on Peaches and Tony. Devin remained silent on the short drive to his home, and as they entered the house. She went directly into the living room and sat on his sofa. He stopped at the door and leaned against the jam. They stared at each other. Her heart beat so hard she’d be surprised if he didn’t hear it. Devin had never lost his cool, but he’d fought Tony twice because of her. Both times in front of people and this time there would be no doubt it was because of her. She loved him even more for defending her.

After a few minutes, he walked to her, his steps slow and measured. The light in the room reflected off his

high cheekbones, enhancing the frown on his face. “I don’t like being called your boyfriend.”

Inside she screamed, but she swallowed it. It wasn’t as if this wasn’t what she expected. But the pain was fierce. She took in a shaky breath and tried for an unaffected smile. “I gathered that much. I can pack my stuff and go.”

He took a step back, his eyes widened. “I don’t want you to go.”

She frowned. “I’m confused.”

“Shayla, I just beat up a guy in the middle of the street to defend your honor. I bought a house on Johnston Street because you once said you wanted to live here. I want you to stay here ... forever.” He spoke the last word softly.

She swallowed hard as her heart raced. “I’m still confused.”

He lowered himself onto the couch beside her and took a deep breath. “I know you hate Helena and you just got the job in Columbia. I know you’re used to a more fast paced life and you like excitement and parties. I know that trouble follows you around and most of the time it’s not your fault. But even though I know all that I still want you to ... consider staying here. With me.” When his eyes met her they were filled with determination and love. “As my wife.”

It was the last thing she expected. In all of her wildest romantic fantasies she never even allowed herself

to think he'd bring up marriage. Sure, sleep together off and on for awhile. Go out occasionally. Maybe even spend the weekend with him, but marry?

“You can't be serious. I thought you were breaking up with me.”

A humorless laugh escaped his lips. “You would think that. Why would I?”

“Because drama follows me everywhere. You constantly have to defend my honor. That reporter's probably going to write a story about what he saw tonight. The town thinks I'm a whore. I had an affair with a married man. I hurt you ... *so badly* ... in high school. I don't deserve you.” Her hand gripped the heart at her neck while her toe tapped frantically on the floor.

He reached over and pulled her hand away from the charm. She placed her hands over his swollen knuckles, before lifting them to her lips for a soft kiss. He cupped her face with his other hand. “Let it go. Stop trying to convince me that I don't want you. Yes, you drive me crazy, but Shayla I haven't loved another woman since the first time you braided my hair in high school. Even when you were away, I thought about you. A piece of my heart's been missing for years and ever since you came back its felt whole.”

Her eyes flew up to meet his. “My heart's been broken since that night I hurt you.”

A fierce scowl came over his features. “It wasn't your fault. And believe me, if Tony so much as looks at you wrong, I'm going to kick his ass again.”

She shook her head. “Forget about Tony. Please, let’s not let him affect our lives anymore.”

He nodded, but the look in his eye didn’t convince her that he would keep his word. “I love you and if it hasn’t gone away after years of separation, I don’t see how it could possibly go away now. Let me love you. Let me be the one man to show you every day how wonderful you really are.”

She grabbed his wrists and pulled his hands away. Excitement set her nerve endings on fire, but he had to understand what he was asking. “I don’t make up my bed. I keep my room a mess, I hate cooking. You’ll get tired of me.”

He pulled her close. His full lips brushed against hers. “As if you’d let me. You’ll keep me on my toes until we’re ninety. Trust me. I want to marry you.” He cleared his throat, uncertainty clouding his eyes. “Do you think you could marry me?”

She took a deep breath and met his gaze. Even in the dim light, the fierceness of his love blazed. She looked for any signs of doubt. Any indication that he was unsure of what he was saying or may regret it in the morning. All she saw was love ... and honesty, the same honesty that was the cement of their relationship.

“Yes. I want to marry you.”

He grinned. When he pulled her in for another kiss, she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. She wanted to hold him forever. Let him know that there was no other man for her. Her past was filled with mistakes

as she tried to find a guy who made her feel a smidgeon of the way Devin did. It took coming home and facing her demons to learn that no man would ever come close to comparing to him.

When they broke she couldn't help but laugh and smile. "You've asked me, so you can't get rid of me. I've wanted you since I was fifteen. I'm not letting you go."

"Is that a threat?" he said with a sexy lift of his lips.

Her heart flipped in her chest. It was bruised, had gone through a fair share of heartbreaks, but something told her she was on the road to healing. With a smile, she sank her fingers in his hair and pulled him close. "It's a promise."

About the Author

Synithia Williams has loved romance novels since reading her first one at the age of thirteen. It was only natural that she would begin penning her own romances soon after. It wasn't until 2010 that she began to actively pursue her dream of becoming a published author. Her first novel, *You Can't Plan Love*, was published by Crimson Romance in August 2012. When she isn't writing, this Green Queen, as dubbed by the State Newspaper, works to improve air and water quality, while balancing the needs of her husband and two sons. You can find Synithia, online at www.synithiawilliams.com, on Facebook (www.facebook.com/synithiarwilliams), or Twitter (www.twitter.com/SynithiaW).

A Sneak Peek From Crimson Romance

***Running Interference* by Elley Arden**

Mmm. Mmm. Mmm. There was something about a sunny Sunday morning that put extra spring in Tanya Martin's already speedy steps. No dealing with ornery high school students and excuses about forgotten gym clothes. No football practice. Just hours to spend however she liked at her father's boxing gym.

She lifted her face to the unseasonably warm rays and wished late February in Cleveland, Ohio, always looked like this. But the heaping mounds of filthy snow lining the sidewalk reminded her winter wasn't done with them yet. She didn't care. Today was going to be a great day.

A glass door opened up ahead, and a man backed onto the sidewalk. He was so big his body loomed around the stainless steel framing, and his voice boomed when he laughed at someone inside the coffee shop. Her pace slowed as she took in his profile. Black, fitted ski jacket.

Dark denim jeans that clung to his tree-trunk thighs. And a pair of designer work boots that had never set foot on a jobsite. *Not from around.* These new businesses brought in all kinds, sellouts who couldn't get through their Sundays without a double shot of something she couldn't even pronounce let alone swallow.

She put her head down and picked up her pace, wanting to pass before she was forced to say hello. She didn't want her South City neighborhood to change, and she didn't want these people getting comfortable. They weren't wanted. They weren't needed. What this place *needed* was people with a sense of loyalty and conviction—people like her parents, who both owned mom-and-pop businesses on this stretch of street. For even longer than her mother had been cooking her “almost famous” pulled-pork and holding twice-monthly Free Soup Fridays at her restaurant, Mama Mary's, her father had been taking kids off the streets and teaching them life skills with the help of boxing and martial arts at his gym. Those things were so much more important than overpriced warehouse condos and a chain coffee shop.

“Oh crap!”

The rich rumble of words came first, followed by a splash of something hot along her neck, and then an impact that had her careening toward the icy snowdrift. Her hands jutted out to break her fall, but she never hit. Instead, a crushing grip circled her right elbow and a jolt set her upright. Somehow her shoulder remained attached to its socket.

“I’m so sorry,” said the deep voice again. “I ... ”

She looked from the work boots to the face of the trendily dressed, mammoth man, and her jaw dropped.
Cam Simmons.

“Tanya Martin?” he asked. “Holy shit!”

Stunned into silence, she reached a hand to her neck and wiped at the droplets.

He pulled a napkin bearing the Coffee Bean logo from his pocket. “Are you okay?” He dabbed the napkin at her neck, then her chest. A little too rough. But the swipes that followed were a little too friendly.

She nodded and brushed his hand away.

How long had it been? *Five years.* Not that she’d been counting ... lately. Their friendship had cooled on a barrage of texts and calls that tapered off as he got used to life away from Cleveland. Eventually the distance between them proved too great to cross. Who needed old friends when you had a shiny new multi-million-dollar NFL contract?

And that contract looked good on him, too. It had turned him into an entirely different person from the anxious, overachieving high school boy she’d spent hours with at Pop’s gym. Taller and bigger, naturally, but there was also a relaxed confidence gleaming in those deep brown eyes. He didn’t just want to be good; he knew he was good.

“What happened to your hair?” she blurted.

He’d had curls that rivaled hers in high school.

He palmed his nearly bald head and smiled. Somewhere angels sang. He'd always been too talented and handsome for his own good.

"I like my helmet to have a snug fit," he said. "And I was tired of messing around with skull caps. Does it look bad?"

Sly dog. Always digging for compliments, but he didn't need the ego boost. "Do you really care what I think?" Again, the last five years weighed heavy on her mind. There hadn't been so much as a Facebook like or a forwarded chain email between them. "I mean, come on. You're the Super Bowl MVP. You hardly need approval from me."

"But it would be nice." He flashed that smile again and her heart spontaneously warmed.

Disturbing. She did not want to have feelings for him after all these years. Their one night together senior year had muddied the innocent friendship, and it had taken years for her to find a neutral place, where she could hear his name, see his face, watch his games without feeling some sense of loss and hurt.

"I can't believe you're here," she said.

"I owed my mama the trip. Been promising for years. Got nothing going on until optional team activities in April, so I figured why not."

That was at least a month away. A month of running into him like this.

Shit. She backed up. "Well, it was good seeing you."

“Wait a minute.” He grabbed her arm. Softer than the last time. Even through the layers of her hooded sweatshirt and long-sleeved T-shirt, she felt an unsettling tingle. “Where you running off to so fast? I’ll buy you a coffee.”

She glanced behind him at the gleaming monstrosity that required the leveling of two locally owned businesses to create. “No thanks. I’m not a coffee drinker. Besides, I have some ring time waiting for me.”

“That’s right! Pop’s Gym & Ring.” Deep, loud, and somehow flashy, he sounded like he’d already signed his name on a lucrative sports network announcing career. “I’m going to tag along. Say hey. Do you mind?”

She did, but if she made a big deal out of it, then she wouldn’t be neutral. “Come on.”

They walked the next two blocks with a safe distance between them, talking about the obvious: his Super Bowl win. It seemed safer than delving into their overly personal past. She’d never been so happy to push open the doors to the gym. Her sanctuary. She breathed in the musty smell of hard work and dedication, and exhaled her restlessness over seeing Cam.

“I’ll catch ya later,” she said, waving a hand at him and eyeing up the hallway that led to the locker rooms. With any luck, he’d be gone by the time she came out, and if he wasn’t, maybe she’d throw on some gloves, challenge him to a few rounds, and teach him a couple things. He might be bigger and stronger, but she wasn’t

above hitting below the belt if need be. Hell, he deserved it.

It was always good to have a backup plan.

She ducked around a support beam and dragged her hand along the red ring ropes as she passed, smiling at a couple guys who were lifting free weights. This was still going to be a good day. Literally running into Cam Simmons was not going to change that.

Her father's office door opened and out stepped a man in a suit. Business on a Sunday? Or maybe church. That made more sense. She smiled at the man and then at her father, but her father didn't smile back. He looked stricken and pale.

"You okay, Pop?" She went to him, now highly suspicious of the well-dressed man. With all the real estate bullying that had gone on in this "up-and-coming neighborhood" over the past year, she couldn't be too careful.

"I'm fine," he said, and then he flashed an uneasy look at the man and made a gesture toward the door. "He was just leaving."

"Who is he?" She directed the question at the suit, who looked down his nose at her.

"Foreman Keller, from Great Lakes Savings and Loan, and you are?"

A banker. She lifted her chin and looked down her nose at him. "Tanya Martin, Pop's daughter." She looked

at her father who was shaking his head like he wanted this conversation to end.

“Well, Tanya Martin, you might want to tell your father to pay his bills. It would save all of us time and money.”

“Excuse me?” She puffed out her chest. Habit. Two older brothers, four hundred high school students, and a roster spot as a women’s professional football linewoman taught her the bigger you looked the more seriously people took you.

“Stop,” her father said. “It’s not her concern.”

“What do you mean it’s not my concern?” She set her sights on the suit again. “Why are you here?”

“Just doing my job. And as long as he does his, I won’t be back.” He pointed at Pop. “You hear me?”

Smug *and* threatening? Not on her watch. She sort of snapped. The heels of her palms hit his lapels and knocked him back a couple feet.

“Stop!” her father said again.

“You’re crazy!” The man scrambled for the door, but she followed.

“Get out and don’t come back.” She raised her hand for emphasis—not to hit him again—but still he flinched.

A pair of strong arms rounded her waist and halted her forward progress. A second later her back hit something hard and unforgiving, and the banker fled through the double doors.

When the arms released her, she spun around and came face-to-face with Cam. Again.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she spit out.

Cam’s eyebrows rose. “Stopping you from getting arrested for assault.”

“*Please*. I just pushed the guy. And you didn’t hear how he was talking to my father.” She looked around him in time to see the office door close.

What was going on? There was only one way to find out.

She raised a dismissive hand to Cam, warning him to stay away, and stalked back to the office. Her father was sitting at his desk, face in his hands. “Pop?”

He looked up, and his expression crumbled. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Messin’ up.”

“How?” She fell to her knees and patted his thigh. “Start at the beginning.”

When he exhaled, he shuddered, and her already rattled mood plummeted. Whatever it was, it was bad.

“I borrowed money to help someone out. I put the gym up as collateral, and now I’m behind on payments. I have ninety days to pay in full or they’re gonna take it.”

Fuck. Tanya swallowed against the lump in her throat. How the hell had this happened? She was in the

gym whenever she wasn't teaching or playing football, and her brothers Terrell and Tyler were in and out too. None of them had intimate knowledge of the gym's finances, because that was Pop's thing, but somebody should've seen or sensed trouble.

He rubbed the back of her hand. "I failed everyone."

"No!" Those words didn't belong on her father's lips. He was South City's big-hearted hero. "We can fix this. We can talk to everybody in the family, and whatever you owe, we'll pull together and pay it back. It's the least we can do for everything you've done for us. How much do you owe?"

His voice muffled in his throat as he said, "Thirty thousand."

Damn it. She didn't have anywhere near that much. Neither did any of her brothers or sisters. Terrell was unemployed. Tyler's money was tied up in a messy divorce and custody battle. Tori was raising three kids on her own. And Teresa had just gone back to graduate school.

"Who'd you loan the money to?" she asked. "We'll just have to make them pay you back sooner than they expected. Then we can settle the debt."

Pop crossed his arms and hardened his expression. "Nope."

She squeezed her father's hand in an expression of sympathy and strength. "I know you don't want to call in

a debt, but no friendship is worth losing the gym. Who is it?”

He looked at her, and his eyes fluttered as they rolled toward the back of his head. “I gave the money to your mother.”

Tanya sat back on her heels and let his words sink in. Talk about worst-case scenario.

After a few calming breaths, she asked, “Why would Mom take \$30,000 dollars from you? You haven’t owed child support payments in years, and it can’t be the restaurant. I live right above it, remember? It’s freaking packed on weekdays.”

Pop sighed. “The Diazes got an offer to sell the building to developers, so they told your mother they wouldn’t be renewing her lease. She came to me panicked, and we put together an offer to buy the building ourselves.”

What an unbelievable mess with her mother at the heart of it. Tanya bit back a growl. She’d been so proud of that purchase, thinking her mother had done it while standing on her own two feet. A strong, capable, independent woman. When in reality, her father had helped his ex-wife. Of course he had. His sense of obligation didn’t quit. Pop Martin swooped in to save the day with no care for the trouble it would cause him.

Tanya didn’t want to take sides. She’d thought she was beyond that. But in times like these, it was hard not to. The anger tossed her back seventeen years to the day

he moved out of the family home. She'd been eleven, and convinced her mother was to blame.

Damn it. It just proved her theory on love and marriage. Once you loved someone enough to promise them forever, you were tied to them and their freaking problems even after forever fell apart. That's why she stayed far away from relationship strings.

"What's done is done," she said, grasping desperately at words that would help her remain neutral. "We just have to figure out a way to fix it."

There had to be an idea that would let both her parents hold onto their dreams.

She looked around, hoping for inspiration. Photographs lined the office walls, chronicling the accomplishments of the kids that had worked out in this gym. Some of them actually made it onto the few remaining college boxing teams. Her heart squeezed. This gym was so many things to so many people. Her father had even managed to bring low- and no-cost healthcare to the neighborhood in this very space by partnering with her best friend MJ's fiancé, sports medicine guru Tag Howard.

Wait! Maybe that was the answer. "What about Doc?" She jumped to her feet and pointed at the medical equipment in the partitioned corner of the office. "He's pumped a ton of cash into this place to create the training room. I bet he'd lend us more."

"No." Pop's face wrinkled. "I won't borrow any more money I can't pay back." He slapped his hands on his

thighs like he'd done her whole life whenever the situation was non-negotiable. "Enough is enough. I've had a lot of time to think about this. And without any savings, my pension alone can't cover all the payments I already have. Borrowing more money would be irresponsible."

"What happened to your savings?"

Pop shrugged. "The house needed a new roof last summer."

The house where her mother lived. Tanya threw up her hands. "Unbelievable." Her father hadn't lived in that house since her parents had separated and he moved into the apartment above the gym. Sure, Tori and her kids had been living there for years, upping the responsibility Pop must've felt, but still...

How about a little independence, people? Take care of your own problems. There was a novel idea.

More deep breaths. More head shakes. "Okay," she said. "There's gotta be a way to stop this." There had to be.

Think, Tanya. Think. Something would come to her, because nobody threw a block like she did. Protection was the name of the game. They'd be prying this gym from her cold, dead hands.

A knock sounded, and she turned in time to see the door she'd forgotten to close completely swing open.

"Cam!" her father said.

"Hey," Cam said.

Great. For five years, he hadn't been anywhere to be found. Today, he was every-damn-where.

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“How can I help?” Cam stepped into the office and closed the door behind him. “I couldn't help but overhear.”

Pop stood. “Whatever you heard, forget about it, and get over here and give me a hug, Mr. Cam Damn Simmons.” He whistled. “Super Bowl *champeen*.”

Cam hugged the little man, letting him slap him soundly on the back. He hated the circumstances he'd walked in on, but it sure felt good to be back. He'd spent so much time here as a teen, Pop had become a surrogate father to him.

“Glad to see you made it home,” Pop said.

“Glad to be home.”

Cam heard a scoff from someplace behind him. *Tanya*. But when he turned she was leafing through papers on her father's desk, looking uninterested in the conversation.

“Can you give my dad and me some time alone, please?” she asked without looking up.

He nodded. “Yeah. Of course.” But as he backed toward the door, he made eye contact with Pop and said again, “I can help ... if you let me.”

Tanya glared at him. *Woo wee!* Ice cold. And it didn't get warmer until he was back in the gym.

Under the circumstances, he wasn't surprised by her reaction. He wouldn't want his dirty laundry being aired in front of anybody. But he wasn't just anybody—at least he hadn't been. That's why he'd walked in and offered to help. Apparently, five years away changed things. Something else that didn't completely surprise him. He just hadn't thought it would erase ten years of a friendship so close they were damn near family. With one exception—what had happened beneath the bleachers senior year. Thinking about it still made him smile.

They'd always been willing to go the extra mile for each other back then, and after what he'd overheard standing outside Pop's office, he wasn't going to let that change.

When Tanya had time to really talk to him, he'd get her to see he could help.

“Cam Simmons?” A short, chubby guy with moon-shaped sweat marks underneath his man-boobs stood in front of him. “No way! It's me, Goby Klinker, John-John's little brother.”

“Holy crap.”

They grabbed hands and bumped opposite shoulders.

“It's been forever, man,” Goby said.

“I was just thinking the same thing.” He looked around the gym. “Is John-John here?”

“Hell no. He’s in worse shape than me. Works three jobs now because of the little ones. Hasn’t been to the gym in years.”

That guy had never made it to a full week of high school classes. How was he holding down three jobs? “Wait. John-John has little ones?”

“Three. Under four.” Goby wrapped his hands around his neck.

Damn. “I didn’t know that.” He’d lost touch with the guys he used to run with too. “What about Joe and Marquis? Are they around?”

“Not around here. Joe’s banned ‘cause Daria thinks it’s a meat market. She don’t trust him.”

Like Cam’s ex-fiancée Sabrina hadn’t trusted him. He rolled his eyes. “That sucks.” Especially when it was unwarranted. “And Marquis?”

“Workin’ in Atlanta. Moved about a year ago. Hear he’s doing real good.”

Now that was something to smile about. Marquis got out. Hopefully Cam would be saying the same thing about his mother at the end of this trip. Boston was where she belonged. With him.

“Bobby, come here!” Goby waved his hand to attract some guy’s attention, and then he shifted back to Cam. “This dude’s the biggest football fan. Browns, of course, but we ain’t winning a Super Bowl anytime soon.” He faced the room and the half-dozen guys who were lifting

and practicing footwork. “Listen up, everybody! Super Bowl MVP Cam Simmons is in the house.”

Cam smiled as heads turned and eyes widened. Three weeks after earning the title, and he still got a rush from it.

“What’s up, gentlemen?” He raised his arms in invitation.

Something about the attention stoked his adrenaline. Always had. Like walking into school Monday morning after a big Friday-night win. Everybody knew your name. Everybody wanted a piece of you. Powerful stuff. The kind of stuff that helped a man feel important.

He signed a few autographs and told a few “war” stories, but when Pop’s office door opened and Tanya stepped out, he was too distracted to do much more than listen to the guys rattle on about football. She said something to her father, who returned to his office, and then she walked over to the punching bags and systematically went down the line pounding the hell out of each one.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Gotta take care of something real quick.”

He made his way through the small crowd toward Tanya, who was now whaling on a punching bag out of view from most of the gym.

“Hey,” he said.

“Oh my God,” she mumbled, then shot him a look, but didn’t miss a beat with the bag. “You want the bag, you have to wait, Simmons. Super Bowl MVPs don’t get special treatment ‘round here.”

He almost smiled at the exasperation in her voice.

Tanya Mary Martin. Five feet, nine inches of attitude and curves that would get a guy’s head bit off if his admiration wasn’t discreet. The best female basketball player East High had ever seen. And the most loyal daughter he’d ever seen. This shit with her dad was tearing her up.

“Let me help,” he said.

She cut another glance at him, scornful and pitying like he was the biggest moron she’d ever seen. “He won’t take your money.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s proud.” Boom, her fist connected with the canvas. “And we don’t need your charity.”

“Okay. I respect that. Fine. We’ll figure something else out.”

She pushed the bag into another and straightened. “We won’t be doing anything, Cam. This is my family’s problem. You are not my family.”

“But I’m your friend.”

She narrowed her golden eyes. “Are you? Because I thought friends stayed in touch.”

Fair enough, but she could've nudged him when his silence had gone on too long. He was a busy man. But now was probably not the time to point that out, so he simply nodded. "I'm sorry about that, and I'd like to fix it. We can move on from here and not lose touch again. Deal?" He held out a hand.

She ignored his peace offering. "I've got a lot to figure out these days, so you're going to have to get in line."

Again, he almost laughed, because it had been awhile since he'd been around a woman who was so clearly not anxious to be around him. "Should I take a number?" She didn't blink at his attempt at humor. "You know, so you can call for me when it's my turn?"

"I wouldn't hold my breath, Simmons. It could take a while." She shot him a snotty smile before she turned and headed toward the hallway, then tossed over her shoulder, "Maybe like five years."

He laughed then. She'd always been a spitfire. And he had a feeling she was just getting started. He was going to be taking a lot of potshots from her over the next month.

The funny part? He kind of couldn't wait.