



Yours for the
TAKING

FALLING FOR A ROSE BOOK TWELVE

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AUTHOR OF *IN THE HEART OF A VALENTINE*

YOURS FOR THE TAKING

Falling For a Rose Book Twelve

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Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Note from The Author](#)

[Other Books by Stephanie Nicole Norris](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Yours For the Taking

Falling for a Rose Book Twelve

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To my dedicated fans. I love you so much. Thank you for reading the Falling for a Rose series. We're twelve books deep, and you continue to love these stories. Amazing! Much love to you all.

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Chapter One



“Ooooh, yes, yes, baby, right there.”

Carla’s thighs quaked as her orgasm built, and the water that pelted her warm flesh created a massage of stimulation against her skin.

“Oh, my God, I’m going to come; I’m going to come!”

Her head fell back, and water rained into her mouth as her lips parted, eyes closed.

“Jacob! Ah!”

Her legs buckled, and her hand reached for the tile to find something to hold on to as she began to plummet. Her other hand worked her protruding clitoris as if she were flipping a doorstopper to and fro in an impassioned frenzy.

“Yeah! Yeah! Give it to me like that; that’s the spot!”

A squeal rang from her lips as her orgasm shot tingles to her clit when she came, and slinking against the wall, Carla slid down the slippery tile, her butt plopping to the shower floor.

She panted, breathless. “Hoooooly smokes.” Carla drew her knees to her chest, resting her arms there as her hurried breaths calmed. “Whew, I need to get laid.” She shook her head and laughed chaotically, like a madwoman who was losing her mind. “And to be calling out Jacob’s name, when the most contact I’ve had with him is, is...”

Carla thought about their last encounter. It had been at the wedding of her cousin London Jones. But their conversation never had a chance to get off the ground as the place bustled with energy, and he was in someone else's eyesight every time she turned his way. Before that, it had been at the wedding of her newfound friends and triplets of the Rose dynasty.

She'd been standing in the cut, awestruck by the sentimental ceremony, thoroughly overjoyed with witnessing the sheer happiness of the brides and grooms when a timbered note broke through her musings.

"A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS," A DARK VOICE STRUMMED.

A soft smile lifted the corners of her mouth as a spinning web of heat shot into her panties.

"Trust me, my thought's prices are on the rise. Are you sure you can afford them?" She teased, spinning on her heels to face the dark brown undercut of his sharp chin.

"Give me a second to check my bank account because the way it's set up..."

Carla tossed her head back and laughed, recognizing his joke before he could complete it. Jacob chuckled.

"Somehow, I gather with all these festivities, you're ready to take the ultimate plunge."

A correlating heat swept over Carla's skin as a rigorous pulse knocked between her thighs. "With you? Maybe. You know, there's a wedding suite upstairs."

The laugh that drummed from his lips caused her nerves to tighten, and he eyed Carla so intensely her spine tingled.

Carla Jones had been pretty upfront about her interest in Jacob Alexander Rose, and he had returned that curiosity. Still, they'd both been keeping that attentiveness at a very low level.

"Yes, I do," he said, "But before we go there, I've got something else to show you first."

Jacob took Carla's hand in his. "I'd like to be proper with what I want to say next, so let me ask you, Ms. Carla Jones, are you seeing anyone?"

A trail of unnoticeable chills scurried down Carla's spine.

"It depends on what you mean by seeing," she responded. "I have male friends if that's what you're asking."

His gaze lowered. "Does your heart belong to any of these friends?"

"No," she answered quickly.

His crescent smile lit up the temperature of her flesh, and at the same time, Jacob was internally attempting to comprehend the sudden jealousy that had knotted in his gut.

"Perfezionare," he responded in accented fluid Italian.

Piqued, Carla's brow rose.

"It means—"

"Perfect," she finished.

Now it was Jacob's turn to be surprised as his thick brows dipped. A sudden heat crawled over his skin at her understanding of the foreign language.

"You speak the dialect," he said, more of a recognition than a question.

"I'm a teacher, Mr. Rose. My studies include language arts and a portion of that deals with teaching foreign linguistic studies at the high school."

"Ms. Carla Jones," his deep voice drawled, "You are becoming more fascinating by the second."

Carla laughed, the melody of her mirth making his heart somersault.

"I'd like to take you out on a date. There's a restaurant on Thirty-Eight and Magnolia that I think you would enjoy."

Her heart beat faster. "How would you know what I would enjoy?"

Jacob's tongue traced his lips, and Carla couldn't help but follow the slip of his wet muscle. She shivered in response. He sucked off his bottom lip with the press of his tongue and teeth.

"We seem to have a connection, yes?"

"Sì."

His grin broadened. "Then humor me and know that I have an inkling of your tastes in mind."

The magnetic pull of his gaze caught a tactful sparkle in her eye.

"Just say when."

Jacob held his arm out, and Carla wrapped her arms around it. He pulled her close, giving her a whiff of his Clive Christian cologne.

Assaulted by his masculinity, Carla's body hummed with delight as her soft frame grooved against the rough ridges of his formidable physique.

Dressed in Armani like the rest of the groomsmen, Jacob's entire persona was cloaked in dark chocolate skin. The red necktie, matching pocket square, and the brief glimpse of a black button-down shirt highlighted his melanin tone.

Carla remembered when Eden had referred to him as a Lance Gross look-alike, but Carla had refuted that claim. Not because their images weren't familiar—more so because, as handsome as the actor was, her memory of him was that of a comedian from specific roles he'd played. Instead, Jacob carried the maturity of his thirty-eight years immaculately, his charisma laced with the luster of a refined gentleman.

"How about tomorrow?"

They strolled arm in arm, the two making their way to the courtyard.

"I'd like that." She hesitated, then asked, "Dinner?"

They paused, and Jacob eyed her, his gaze simmering as he kept a stronghold on her dark brown orbs.

“I think lunch would be preferable, as dinner would make for a larger appetite.”

Carla shivered, and Jacob felt her quake. “Cold?”

“Not in the least.”

He smirked. “I know you came here with the bridesmaids but save a dance for me, bellissima.”

“Hmm, you think I’m gorgeous?” she questioned his compliment.

He lifted her hand to his mouth for a kiss. “I don’t think. I know. Your spirit complements itself, and of course, your outer beauty is a bonus.”

THEY PROCEEDED WITH THEIR STROLL, LINGERING NEAR AS they entered the courtyard just in time to catch the end of Jonathon Alexander Rose’s speech.

It wasn’t ironic that their seats were beside one another since they’d been paired up in their walk down the aisle during the ceremony.

He pulled out her chair, and she sat. Then he swiftly took his seat, relaxing as the speaker pulled their attention.

CARLA WAS FEELING PARTICULARLY SPICY THAT NIGHT. IF Jacob would’ve taken her seriously when she mentioned the bridal suite, they would’ve disappeared long before they made it into the dining hall.

She quivered, imaging her feet planted as she rode his dick, ass slapping against his hard thighs while she cried out from the puncture of his solid shaft.

“Damn, damn, damn.”

Her body tingled as her thoughts ignited with pleasure.

But unfortunately, the date that they scheduled never happened.

Jacob Alexander Rose was a world-renowned architect. His designs had caught the attention of the Royals of Kéra Asnela, and as such, they'd requested a meeting on the same day as their date.

The day that his handsome face and intense gaze lit up her phone's screen, her pussy became a whac-a-moling jolt of activity that made her rush to answer.

"Bellissima..."

His tone was immediately regretful, and she knew the call wouldn't spawn into the pleasantries she imagined it would.

"I promise to make up for missing out on what I know will be a great time with you."

Carla smirked. "Damn right it would be."

Jacob's baritone guffaw churned the butterflies in her belly.

"Did you save my number in your phone?" he asked.

"Of course I did."

A dark rumble splintered her flesh. Carla twisted on her toes.

"Did you save my number?"

"How else would I have called, bellissima?"

She shrugged. "Good point."

He chuckled.

"Okay, well, I won't keep you. But don't forget about me."

"Never."

AND ALTHOUGH HE'D SAID IT, HEARING FROM JACOB FELT LIKE it had been forever. In reality, it had only been a few months.

"Still," Carla said, finally catching her breath.

On shaky legs, she pushed from the wet tile and stood to her feet, showering efficiently and stepping out just as her cell

phone rang.

Sasha, Carla's Bichon Frise, jogged up to her feet as if she were waiting for Carla to get out of the shower. She wagged her tail, indicating she wanted to be petted.

Wrapping a towel around her body, Carla dropped to pet Sasha, then scooped Sasha in her arms as she exited the lavatory and entered her bedroom, finding her cell on a dresser.

"Hello."

"Well, don't sound so excited, will ya?"

A smile played at the edges of Carla's mouth.

"Hey, Tina, what's going on, girl?"

"I'm calling to see if you're coming to our show tonight. We could use the support, you know."

Carla smirked. Tina Braddon was the lead singer in the local Chicago group Genesis Rising. She, Chelsea Bellamy, and Lisa Sharpton were three of Carla's closest friends. Usually, Carla would be at most of their shows, but tonight, she wasn't feeling particularly up to it.

"I know, and I just got out of the shower, but I also know, with the way the group's popularity has grown, that you've probably got a packed house."

"That is beside the point," Tina whisper-shouted. "And besides needing your support, it's New Year's Eve. You can't celebrate alone at that house. Come out, bring in the New Year with us."

Carla laughed. "Okay, fine, I'll be there as soon as I can get myself together."

Carla's line beeped just then, and taking her eyes to the screen, her heart did a jig behind her breasts. Jacob's mesmerizing gaze stared back at her, and she almost hung up in Tina's face.

"Okay, talk to you soon!" She clicked over. "Hello?" she crooned, her voice coming out sultrily.

“*Bellissima*, I hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time.”

Chapter Two



“*I*t depends. Who am I speaking with?”

The pause on the line was so extensive Carla feared he'd hung up.

“Hello, Jacob?”

A chuckle cruised through the line.

“I thought you didn't know who I was?”

Busted.

“I... um, was just playing with you.”

“Is that a fact?”

“It is.”

“Hmmm.”

“It's been a while, Jacob. To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?”

She could hear him suck off his teeth.

“Well, to be honest, Carla, you've been jogging around in my thoughts, and I would still like to have dinner with you if your schedule permits.”

“Dinner?”

“Or breakfast or lunch.”

She cleared her throat, trying to focus on the conversation without being distracted by his baritone.

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

A shiver slipped down her body. Close proximity with Jacob Alexander Rose would surely drive her pussy crazy. As she stood there with the phone to her ear, warmth covered her body, and it for sure wasn't the damn towel.

“Is that a good time for you, Carla?”

“Um.” Carla knew going out to the club tonight would make for a late night. *Damn it.* “Lunch should be okay.”

“Are you sure?”

She hesitated and considered dinner.

“I'm sure.”

“All right. I look forward to seeing you.”

“You as well. Talk to you soon.”

“Carla.”

“Yes.”

“I still have your address from the time you gave it to me at the Rooftop Connection Initiative.”

The Rooftop Connection Initiative was a non-profit organization founded by friend and real estate mogul Derek James Clark and Jacob six years ago when their need to do something about Chicago's homeless hit close to their hearts. Together, they made a plan that included gathering volunteers and, once a year, restructuring, designing, and filling a home with a family chosen by DFCS who'd fallen on hard times and were left with no choice except living on the streets.

Carla volunteered during their third year of the foundation's charity giveaway. It was when Jacob announced the names of people who would attend that Carla approached him.

“AT THIS TIME, FOR THOSE WHO WERE CHOSEN, PLEASE MAKE A line here at the table stationed against the wall and receive

your T-shirt,” his deep voice beat. “If your name has not been called for inclusion, then I regret to inform you that our spaces are filled at this time.”

“Aww...” A few people whined in the background, and the crowd began to disperse.

“Excuse me, sir,” a soft feminine voice purred. Jacob glanced to his side, his gaze darkening as heat scurried around his skin. Brown feline eyes scoped the outline of his delicious mouth just as a hand landed on his arm. A smile tugged at Jacob’s lips.

“How can I help you, Ms. Carla Jones?”

“I’m not sure whether my name was called,” she pouted, her lashes fluttering and mouth parting slightly as her eyes lifted to his gaze, then dropped to his goatee before darting up his strong structured profile—manly nose and over his dark fade. “Could you recheck your list to make sure my name was added?” Her voice was eliciting a tingling cacophony of chills over his skin.

“Ms. Carla Jones, I’m pretty sure you made the list.” His gaze dropped to her lips as her mouth turned upward, a smile exalting her eyes.

“Oh, how nice.” Carla suddenly squeezed his arm, and Jacob flexed a muscle, making her gasp with a jingling laugh. “What time should I arrive tomorrow?”

“If you don’t mind, I can pick you up. I’d be more than happy to give you a ride.”

Carla rattled off her address before Jacob could take his next breath. He chuckled and repeated her information in a low whisper that grooved across her skin. Carla’s pussy clenched, and her nipples tightened, almost making her moan.

“I’m coming—I mean, I’ll come out.” Carla paused and inhaled a slow breath as Jacob’s nostrils flared, his gaze staring her down. “You have my number. When you arrive, I’ll come outside,” she said, reorganizing her words.

“Seven a.m.,” his deep voice grooved. Carla winked, and Jacob returned her gesture, watching her walk away with a

sprout of chills encasing his molasses skin.

Jacob's sister, Eden, stepped to her brother's side.

"Don't let my friend seduce you," she teased.

Jacob's eye continued to follow Carla's sexy saunter. "It's not me you should worry about, sis. It's your friend," he said, resigned in his promise.

SURPRISED THAT HE REMEMBERED, CARLA'S BROWS ROSE.
"You still have my address?"

He chuckled. "Yes. Do you mind if I use it to pick you up for our date?"

Another layer of heat crawled down her skin.

"Oh, yes, well, that's not necessary. I can drive. It'll save time."

"Time won't be an issue for me unless the Good Lord disagrees. So, unless you've got a prior or post engagement, I'd like to pick you up if you don't mind."

I don't mind a damn thing, she thought.

"Okay." She dropped her location just to make sure he had the correct address. "Is there a dress code where we're going?"

"Depends. Would you like to be casual or formal?"

"Casual."

He chuckled. "Then casual it is."

Carla smiled. "What time?"

"How's noon?"

"Perfect."

"I'll be there at eleven fifty-nine, Ms. Carla."

"I'll be ready."

"Buona note amore." Have a good night, love.

"You too."

The line remained connected as one waited for the other to drop the call. When Carla realized he was too much of a gentleman to be the first, she disconnected the line and hugged the phone.

“Lord, have mercy on me.” She shivered. “Jesus, if this man is for me, let it be known. I mean, I need the biggest sign you have. And it may have to knock me over the head.”

She thought for a minute and knew with God being literal she might want to reiterate. “I don’t mean, like, physically hit me over the head, I mean, maybe words going across a billboard, he is the man for you, type of thing.” She paused and shook her head, then popped her forehead with the phone.

“Now I’ll have this man on my mind all night,” she murmured to herself.

Knowing this truth, Carla shrugged, sauntered into her closet and dressed to impress, then headed to the club.

Club Sangria

CARLA TUGGED AT THE THIGH-HIGH BANDAGE DRESS AS SHE removed her coat at the entrance of Club Sangria.

“Thank you,” she said, handing her jacket off to an attendant at the door.

“Not a problem. Here’s your ticket. When you’re ready to leave, hand that ticket to whoever’s here, and they’ll grab your coat from the closet.”

“Yeah, this isn’t my first rodeo.”

“In that case, welcome back and Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year to you too.”

Strutting into the party, Carla made a beeline for the bar. The phone call with Jacob lifted her mood exponentially. And though she was excited about their date, she tried to keep

herself cool—but what a way to start the new year, with a Rose.

Bumping into a couple dancing past her, Carla cut her eyes at the pair.

“Excuse us!” the guy called as the couple shuffled off.

“Mmhmm.”

Shimmying through a pack of people holding the bar hostage, Carla threw her hand up and snapped her fingers.

“Bartender!”

A cute guy, drenched in cinnamon skin, wide lips, and a short afro, lifted his chin as if to ask for her drink preference.

The phone hanging on the wall behind the bar rang suddenly, grabbing the bartender’s attention.

Carla pursed her lips and checked her razor-sharp shoulder-length bob in the bar wall’s mirror. Deciding she was fine as wine, she turned her eyes around the place, finally searching the crowd for Genesis Rising.

As expected, they were nowhere in sight.

“Probably backstage,” she murmured.

“What can I get you?”

Carla turned sharply to see the bartender standing on the opposite side of the bar with his full attention on her.

Her lips rose delightfully. “A Sex on the Beach, please.”

“Coming right up.” He made the drink in front of her, slid a napkin toward her, and placed the glass on top. “Anything else?”

Carla withdrew her Visa. “Not at the moment.” She handed it over.

“It’s on the house.”

Her brows rose. “Whose house, because my rent is high enough?”

The bartender laughed. “You’re funny; you know that?”

Carla shrugged. “I get that sometimes.”

“If you need anything else, let me know.”

He went to walk away.

“Wait a minute!”

Turning back, Carla said, “No, seriously, I need to pay for this drink.”

“Not according to the boss man.”

Carla frowned, then grimaced. *Lord*, she wondered, *who was the boss man?*

Carla could admit to being promiscuous in her past; well, more like as of about six months ago. But she’d been working to hold out for Jacob. Now she had to worry about somebody she’d possibly been intimate with owning this damn club and thinking he’d be owning her by the nights’ end.

Carla took in a deep breath. “Sir, I would really rather pay for the drink. I don’t want to owe anyone anything,” she said, emphasizing *anything*, “By the end of the night.”

The bartender smirked and lifted his chin. “Tell him that, then.”

Turning in the direction of his suggestion, Carla’s eyes fluttered around until they landed on broad shoulders. Her eyes rose up his thick neck, dark chocolate skin, a goatee, and full lips that spread into a gorgeous smile. The brightness of his teeth lit up the place, but it didn’t stop her perusal of his wide nose, dark penetrating gaze, thick brows, and low-cut fade.

Got damn.

Her entire body steamed as he approached her. Blue jeans accommodated his elongated stride, a thin, light blue button-down shirt opened at the collar, stretched over his muscular exterior.

Jacob Alexander Rose bit down on his lip, and the crowd opened for him as if he were Moses parting the Red Sea.

This was one time Carla had wished she had boned the owner—but she would keep that tidbit to herself.

The scent of Clive Christian covered her as he eased into her personal space, towering over her. Determined to take her eyes off of his pectoral display pushing through that shirt, Carla lifted her eyes to him, her heart slamming in her chest at the magnificence of ebony skin.

That was it.

Her panties were wet.

Chapter Three



“Well, tonight just got interesting,” Jacob said, biting on that sexy lip of his.

Carla covered her chest with a hand and held on to the Sex on the Beach with the other. “Mr. Rose.” Her lashes fluttered as she took in the intensity of him. “I did not expect to see you here tonight.”

A sexy smirk curved at the corner of his mouth.

“I’m here most nights, *bellissima*. I own this club.”

Even though she’d figured that out, Carla was still surprised.

“I never saw that coming.”

He rubbed his chin. “Why’s that?”

“You just...,” Her eyes roamed over him, and a shiver slipped through her soul. “I didn’t think you were the type.”

His brows rose, but his smirk spread into a full gorgeous smile.

“You didn’t think I was the type to own a club?”

“Correct.”

“What type is that?”

Her eyes dropped down his body again, taking note of the Timberlands on his feet. Her pussy thumped. Jacob was a chameleon. A world-renowned architect by day and a night-

club owner by night. Those endeavors were like night and day. A thought crossed her mind.

“Tell me, Mr. Rose, do you lead a double life?”

A laugh slipped from his beautiful mouth.

“No, *bellissima*, I’m afraid I don’t.”

She peered at him, unsure.

“Is that the type you think I am?”

She shrugged slowly and took a sip of her drink. The liquor went down cool but sizzled her internally.

“I think you think so.”

“I think you’re Bond. James Bond. Junior.” She cracked a smile as he laughed, watching him take his gaze over her carefully.

“You’re even more beautiful than the last time I saw you,” he said.

Her eyes lifted. “Is that so?”

Carla turned to her left side, arching her body, making her curves more prominent in the bandage dress. “Could it be my bodacious body in this fuck-me dress?” Her lips rose into a smile as his nostril flared.

Danger settled in his gaze if the way his pupils darkened and his jaw locked was any indication.

“Or maybe,” she turned back to face him, “It’s because it’s been too long since we’ve seen each other.” She shrugged, then sipped her Sex on the Beach.

Jacob’s tongue slid up his teeth, and he sucked, then smiled, his gaze driving over her more intricately than before.

“It could be both, and it could be because you’re even more beautiful than the last time I saw you.” His tone was more profound than before; gruff, on the level of a growl.

“Hmmm...” was all Carla said. She was too busy trying to control her body, though it felt impossible. Jacob managed to own her in the wildest way possible. The man hadn’t laid a

finger on her. Their conversations had been so short in the past that this shouldn't even be a thing.

Yet still, her nipples tightened to the point of being sore. Her clit was so sensitive that anytime she moved, it rubbed against her panties and caused her entire body to vibrate.

For God's sake, she thought.

She either needed to get laid extremely bad, or Jacob held some kind of voodoo over her that was so intense that she was almost scared to be led by his sorcery.

Almost.

"You know I don't usually accept free drinks from men at the club."

Jacob smirked. "Never?"

"Well," Carla leaned her head from side to side. "This year."

Laughter bellowed from his gut, still a deep guffaw that sprinkled Carla with heat.

Jacob reined in his amusement. "What changed this year, *bellissima*?"

She teased her bottom lip with the tug of her teeth.

"You."

His smile fell into a lazy grin, his gaze heavy as his lids lowered.

"Why's that?" He stepped closer to her, removing the meager air between them. "You got a jones in your bones for me, Carla?"

He felt her shiver and felt his libido rise when her hips squirmed side to side.

The DJ came over the loudspeaker.

"I hope you're enjoying your time tonight, and shout out to all of the beautiful ladies here to bring in the New Year with us. We see you, we appreciate you, and this song is dedicated to all of you."

He spun a record; then “Special Affair,” by The Internet, began to play.

“How apropos,” Jacob said just above a whisper.

“What was that?”

“Dance with me.” He slipped his hand into her unoccupied hand, intertwining their fingers.

That was it. The first time she’d felt Jacob’s touch. Her mouth parted, a soft gasp escaping her as the vibrations within her escalated.

What was happening?

His gaze darkened, and he cleared his throat as if to fight off a sudden upsurge of his own energy.

Downing the rest of her drink, Carla sat the glass on the bar. “Lead the way.”

Jacob stepped back and twirled her in his embrace, which sealed her back to his front.

Oh, God.

His every move so inexplicably aroused her, and now feeling his body almost kept her feet from shuffling forward. Still, Carla made a path, and they strolled together to the dance floor without the need to push through the crowd.

Like before, when Jacob made his way to her, the crowd parted, letting them get comfortable as the beat cruised through the speakers.

Spinning her back to face him, their hips swayed, their feet stepping in and out, as they remained locked in one another’s stare.

The Internet sang about taking their significant other home for the night, and Carla caught herself mumbling along with the chorus.

In college, she was known as a tease, but that’s because she was naturally flirtatious. Though, when she wanted to be purposeful, Carla didn’t have a problem making it apparent.

Tonight, as much as she wanted to say *forget all of this and let's go back to my place*, she wouldn't, simply because she'd tried that with Jacob before. At the triplets' wedding, and he didn't bite, deciding he wanted a date first.

This could technically be their first date. She smirked at the thought.

Jacob twirled her again, then pulled her into his chest. A sweet and spicy scent floated up to her nose as she inhaled him, and her hand landed on his pectoral muscle.

Together they danced, eyeing each other seductively, song after song, with no words between them.

After the fourth dance, Carla didn't know how much more of this grind against clothes she could take. Her body was scorched.

Jacob paused a second. Drawing her close, he tapped at his ear, then spoke.

“Can you handle it?”

Carla's brows dipped, and she glanced at his ear to see a tiny electronic earbud. Of course, he was the boss. How else would he communicate with his people around the club? His gaze left her and lifted to the stairway.

“I'll be there in thirty seconds.”

Dropping his eyes back to her, he pulled her hand to his lips for a kiss.

“Come with me.”

She nodded, and together they left the dance floor for the staircase. Making sure to keep Carla in front of him, Jacob's attention had gone into protection mode, watching their sides and their front, while casting a glance over his shoulder until they were at the VIP section.

He knew taking her with him on a business run wasn't ideal, but Jacob wasn't ready to take his eyes off of her yet. Call him selfish.

“Mike,” he spoke to a guard standing at the door. “Give me the short version.”

Mike, dressed in all black like he was straight out of the *Men in Black* academy, removed his shades and spoke to Jacob.

“Mr. Davis doesn’t want the VIP open to anyone but his people. But as you know, we’ve sold VIP tickets for tonight because it’s New Year’s Eve.”

Jacob waited for him to go on. When Mike didn’t go on, Jacob asked, “Is that all?”

Befuddled, Mike’s eyes shuffled as if to think if he’d left anything out.

“That’s it, boss.”

“Open up the third-floor VIP section. Problem solved.”

“Who should we put on the third floor?”

Jacob hesitated, then turned to Carla.

“Do you need to see me later?” she asked.

“If you have an engagement, I won’t hold you up. If not, it’ll only take a minute.”

She smiled. “Sure, no problem. Take your time.”

Jacob reached for her face and tweaked her chin, then turned to Mike.

“Your new assignment is to keep an eye on this beauty right here. Got it?”

“I’m on it.”

Jacob slapped him on the shoulder, then winked back at Carla and strolled with purpose past the long line of partygoers waiting impatiently to get into the VIP room.

Carla watched him until he disappeared, and when her eyes floated to Mike, he smirked.

“What?” she asked.

“You must be special.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He’s never had me watch any one person unless they were causing trouble.”

“Well...” Carla lifted her hands, then let them fall to her side, slapping her thighs. “No trouble here.”

“Maybe not in the way you think.”

Her eyes rose, then she chuckled. “You got me there.”

He laughed, and the DJ’s voice came across the speakers.

“We are thirty minutes from the midnight hour, ladies and gentlemen. Grab a drink, get close to someone you don’t mind kissing at midnight, and let’s dance it out as Genesis Rising takes us to another realm.”

Hearing the group’s name, Carla turned to the balcony and strolled to the railing. Sure enough, Tina, Chelsea, and Lisa strutted onto the stage dressed in scantily clad, barely-there black and silver thigh-high dresses. Catcalls and howls echoed, and commotion at the VIP entrance shifted Mike’s focus to the line of people now arguing about the holdup to the VIP.

Deciding it was best if she got out of the way and wanting to let her girls know she was there to support them, Carla eased back down the staircase and disappeared before Mike could catch up with her exit.

Chapter Four



Inside the VIP, Jacob approached Mr. Davis.

“Finally, someone with some fuckin’ sense!” Mr. Davis shouted. “What is this nonsense about letting regulars in the VIP section, Mr. Rose?”

“Mr. Davis, those are VIP members—”

“Like hell they are!”

Jacob glared at Mr. Davis, his voice steely and gutturally low when he spoke. “Watch your mouth, and don’t ever interrupt me when I’m talking again, Mr. Davis. It’s rude, and I’ll gladly refund your money and toss you out on your ass if you do it again.” He paused while Mr. Davis’s eyes widened as he straightened his posture. “Do you understand?”

Mr. Davis scoffed and nodded.

“Now, there is more than enough room here at Club Sangria.” Mr. Davis opened his mouth to cut Jacob off, and Jacob paused and waited for him to do it. Thinking better of it, Mr. Davis waited for Jacob to continue. “We have another VIP room. Would you like to keep this section or head to our third-floor privacy area?”

Perking up, Mr. Davis dropped the frown on his face. “How private is it?”

“It’s usually reserved for my family and me.”

You would’ve thought Mr. Davis heard the *cha-ching* of money ringing in his ears the way he became immediately

interested.

“My crew and I will take the third floor.”

“Follow me.”

Mr. Davis whistled, and he and his crew followed Jacob out of the room into a stew of activity from restless patrons waiting to get inside.

Jacob put his fingers to his lips and sent a sharp whistle into the air that was loud enough to be heard over the Genesis Rising song. All eyes turned to him, and the commotion calmed.

With command in his voice, he spoke. “Refunds, anyone?”

“No!”

“We just want to get into VIP!”

“This some bullshit, mayne,” someone else fussed.

Jacob smirked and looked at Mike. “Check their passes and let them in.” His gaze scoured the area. “Where’s Carla?”

“Who?”

Jacob turned a menacing eye to Mike.

“Oh, oh—I lost her during this commotion.”

Jacob cursed.

“I’m sorry, boss.”

“You had one job. Why didn’t you call Jerome and Troy over to help you if you needed it?”

“I didn’t need them.”

Jacob glowered at Mike, then strolled to the railing, glancing over the sea of people that danced and moved throughout the club below. His gaze landed on her, standing in front of the stage, dancing and pointing toward the group, making sure they had her attention.

A second passed when a guy in a black fedora sidled up behind Carla, tying her in his grasp. Jacob watched them closely, noticing Carla didn’t shake from his arms.

Jealousy hit him in the pit of his gut, and he cleared his throat and turned away from them, leading Mr. Davis and his crew to the third floor.

“BOY!” CARLA LET OUT A BREATH, TAKING HER EYE OVER HER EX, Lennox Jenkins. “I thought you were someone else.” She shimmied out of his embrace. “What are you doing here?”

“Who did you think I was?”

“Not you. Now answer my question.”

“I’m here the same as everyone else, to not bring in the New Year alone.” An easy smile slipped across his face, “I have to admit I’m happy to see you here.”

“Where’s your wife?”

His smile faded. “Come on now, you know I’m no longer married.”

Carla snickered. She knew that, but she couldn’t help but bring up his marriage. Especially with the way he left her because he wanted to stay single, only to turn up married a year later.

“How long are you going to make me pay for this? I’ve apologized. Should I do it again?”

“No. Please don’t.”

He grabbed her arms and pulled her close. “Carla Jones, I’m sorry for leaving the way I did. It was me being young and foolish. Will you forgive me?”

Carla pretended to think long and hard. “No.”

“Carla.”

“I’m just kidding.” She laughed. “I’m not trippin’ on it anymore. I just like to give you a hard time.”

Lennox smirked. “At least you’re honest.”

The DJ's voice came through the speaker. "Fifteen minutes before we count down! If you need to refill your drinks, do it now, and grab that someone special to hold close when the ball drops!"

Carla removed herself from Lennox, her eyes shuffling around for Jacob.

There on the stairway, he was making his descent back to the first floor, oozing masculinity as he stepped down.

"This will be the best New Year's Eve yet," Lennox said, grabbing a drink from a nearby waitress. When he turned back, Carla was gone.

"Hey." Carla's lashes fluttered as she stared up at Jacob, who she met as soon as his feet hit the bottom floor.

"*Bellissima*, did you get weary waiting on me?"

Her smile highlighted her face. "No. It started to get a little out of hand, and also, I wanted to make sure my girls knew I was here to support them."

"Genesis Rising?"

"Yes. We went to college together, and I've been stuck with them ever since."

He chuckled as she laughed, knowing she was telling a joke.

"I see. And what about your male companion?"

Carla scrunched her face. "Lennox?"

"Is that his name?"

"Yeah, no. He's not my companion. Just a friend."

Jacob nodded. "A friend."

"Yes."

"Hey, Jacob, can I have a word?" A mocha-skinned woman with ripped booty shorts, a spaghetti-strap sequin top, hair down to her ass, and high heels slid an arm down Jacob's bicep—entering their space.

He gave his attention to her briefly. “Bonita, everything okay? How’s your party?”

“The party is great. Our section is poppin’, but we’re getting ready to countdown to the New Year, and we’re missing one thing.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

She pointed to him, and Carla didn’t try to hide her eye roll.

“You.”

Jacob’s smile was soft but flattering. “How about if I stop by to make sure you all are taken care of in a minute?”

Bonita glanced at Carla, a quick appraisal of her, then flipped her eyes back to Jacob.

“Sure. I’ll wait for you.”

Bonita turned and strolled away, but slowly, making sure that Jacob would get an eyeful if he were still watching. Fortunately for Carla, his gaze had landed back on her, but unfortunately, Carla witnessed Bonita doing a little too much for her man’s attention.

Your man?

She was shaken out of her thoughts when Jacob spoke. “She’s a customer, in case you were wondering. Would you like something to drink?”

“I would.”

Jacob slipped a hand in hers and led them to the bar. He ordered Carla a Sex on the Beach while he requested Patrón on the rocks.

“Patrón, huh?”

He offered her a sexy grin. “Yes, ma’am.”

Carla whistled.

“Too strong for you?”

“Very. But I’m a dangerous girl, so I’m up for taking the risk.”

His lips spread into a gorgeous smile. “So, then you’ll glide with me over the Grand Canyon?”

She frowned. “Hell, no.”

His laugh caught the attention of women around him as they all turned with smiles, wondering what joke he was privy to.

“I mean...” Carla tried to backtrack.

“No, no.” His laugh simmered. “You meant that with your chest.”

She laughed and dropped her eyes, shrugging. “I kinda did, but I also think it would depend on if you’ve got my heart snuggled between your grasp at the time.”

His gaze lowered. “Hmmm.”

“If ever there’s a time like that, we will revisit this conversation then,” she added.

Offering Carla her drink, Jacob quietly observed her. Even in the dark corners of the club, he could see her rich maple cherry complexion. The coordination of browns amid her dark crimson made her skin glow like she was a rare gem.

His gaze dropped to her lips. A full bottom and a medium top lip that he wanted to taste on more than one occasion.

“We’re five minutes away!” the DJ yelled.

Carla took her eyes around the party, then back to Jacob.

“Do you have somewhere to be? Because, if so, you better get there before the clock strikes twelve.”

“I’m where I want to be.” His gaze scanned the room, then dropped back to her. “What about you?”

Her smile started tiny, then grew. “Same.”

Jacob sucked off his teeth. “It looks like we’re bringing in the New Year together, *bellissima*.”

Her heart ricocheted. They stared at one another for a long desirable minute, then Carla swallowed her drink, straw be damned.

“Excuse me.”

Carla turned to Lennox and almost spit her drink out. *What the hell did he want?* Carla straightened herself and remembered she and Lennox were friends, though this was the wrong time for him to want anything from her.

“One minute!” the DJ yelled.

“Yeah, so I was wondering if you wanted to bring in the New Year with me?” Lennox glanced at Jacob, who couldn’t tell if Jacob was smirking or glowering, but he quickly looked back to Carla.

“Lennox, you’re in the club. You can bring in the New Year with all of us.”

“Well, I was hoping—”

“Five, four, three....”

“To just bring it in with—”

“One!”

Slipping a hand inside the clasp of her fingers, Jacob twirled Carla away from Lennox into the breadth of his chest, slipping that same arm around her waist. Their gazes locked as he leaned closer toward her face.

“Happy New Year.” His lips sank into hers, siphoning her very breath as his tongue invaded her mouth.

Carla’s entire body melted into him, and sparks fired between them, charging their desire like a lightning bolt. “Mmmmm.”

Cheers from partygoers resounded throughout the club, and balloons and confetti fell from above.

But the kiss was never-ending, tongues swirling, mouths pressing, the hold on Carla from Jacob, gripping.

Her entire body was in flames, her pussy a racketeering mess as her pulsation ignited. She moaned into his mouth, and what felt like a solid log crept up her belly.

Jacob drew away from her then, fighting against his desire, wanting to remain connected.

Carla reached for him. “Where are you going?” she asked breathlessly.

His dark voice rushed another avalanche of heat down her skin.

“If you hadn’t noticed, *bellissima*, I can’t seem to contain my craving for you.”

“I noticed, and I don’t care.” She shrugged. “Hell, if I had a dick, it’d be hard too.”

A guffaw cracked the air as he pulled away even further and bent to laugh.

Carla joined him in laughter and shook her head. “I’m just saying.”

Tears clouded Jacob’s gaze as he laughed, then lifted and drew her back to him, holding her close.

“I could get used to your wittiness; you know that?”

“I didn’t, but that excites me even more.”

She looked up at him, and he down at her with delight in their faces as they enjoyed the rest of the night together.

Chapter Five



“*H*old on, wait a minute.”

Carla held on to her smile as she shuffled through her closet for something cute to wear, and on the other end of the phone, Tina switched from holding her device to turning on her Bluetooth earpiece.

“So you’re telling me, Jacob just swooped you up in his arms and kissed you in front of Lennox?”

It was the next morning, and Carla was looking forward to her lunch date with Jacob.

“Tina, words cannot express how much passion that man had behind...I mean...the kiss, the grip, the everything.” Carla paused her closet search and let out a swoon. “I can only imagine what his lovemaking must be like.”

“Ooh! My girl!”

Carla laughed. “And I didn’t even get to the freakiest part.”

“Wait! What?”

Carla nodded as if Tina could see her. “His dick got hard. I mean, this python rose up my damn stomach like an anaconda looking for its next meal.”

“Holy smokes!”

“Girl, there was nothing holy about it, okay?”

They laughed heartily.

“Wow. See what happens when you come out to support us?”

“Why didn’t you tell me Sangria was his club?”

“What makes you think I knew that?”

“Please. You were all booked for a show that has to go through Jacob, don’t even play me.”

Tina laughed again. “Okay, okay, you got me. But to be fair, I didn’t find out until it was time to have a face-to-face with the owner.”

“Again, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you’re always nervous when it comes to him.”

“And for a good reason! I need to be prepared and on my A-game.”

“And you were. This is what you fail to realize. You’re *always* on your A-game, girl. Period, okay? I knew you would come looking fine as wine like you always do, and you didn’t disappoint!”

Carla smiled and proceeded to pick out clothes for her lunch date.

“You’re right. But I also didn’t expect to see Lennox there either. Girl, when he crept up behind me, I thought initially he was Jacob coming to retrieve me until I saw his face.”

“I saw him ease up behind you from my place on the stage, but I couldn’t warn you because we were in mid-performance. But please tell me you’re not entertaining this man.”

“We’re friends. Nothing more.”

“How can you be friends with him?”

“Because I’m bored sometimes, and I’ve gotten over what he’s done.”

“Have you?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t have to be bored anymore. You’ve got Jacob now.”

Carla laughed. “First, I don’t have Jacob. Was last night amazing? Why, hell yes. That was the closest I’ve gotten to having a real conversation with him and hanging out with him, but still, he was on the clock.”

“On top of that, who knows what Jacob wants? He’s been too hot and too cold for me to be like, yeah, Jacob and I are a thing, whether that thing is friendship or a relationship. He would have to come right out of his mouth and say so for me to believe it’s true. Until then, Lennox will remain a friend I talk to. Devin too.”

“Devin?”

“Yeah, the guy I met at the gas station a few weeks back. He was cute or whatever. We had a couple of jokes, and we’ve spoken a few times on the phone. He’s cool.”

Tina sighed. “All right, girl—you do you. What can I say? You only live once.”

“Yolo!”

They laughed.

“You-all’s performance was,” Carla snapped her fingers, “Fire!”

Tina laughed. “It was pretty good, wasn’t it?”

“Pretty good? Girl, you all were swinging those hips and crooning like *Dreamgirls!*”

Laughter engulfed them.

“We’ve been practicing, and I’ve had to be all over Lisa’s ass because she’s been showing up to practice late, and one time she didn’t show at all.”

Carla frowned. “Is everything okay? What’s going on with her?”

“She’s been quiet about it, but I’ll find out soon enough. With the gig at Sangria, we’ve been spotted by a talent scout, and they want to set up a meeting. Whatever Lisa’s going through, we will figure it out together, and if it’s someone’s ass I gotta kick, then so be it.”

Carla chuckled. One good thing about Tina—she was down for fighting for her friends if someone was out of line.

“Even if that someone is a man, and you know how they do. You can hardly trust them nowadays.” She *tsked*.

“Yeah, unfortunately, I know,” Carla droned, thinking about Lennox. “You can fall out with a girlfriend and be cursing that heffa out under your breath throughout the day, but you still go to work, show up for church, and go on about your daily life. With men, you’d be good to open the blinds.”

“Ugh! Why do they get in our souls like that?”

“Because they get in our souls, like...” Carla pumped her hips, “That...”

Tina howled, knowing what Carla alluded to without the need to see her freaky hip jerk.

“Say that!”

“Girl, you know it’s true.” Deciding on a nice but comfortable two-piece black ruffled blouse and a skin-tight knee-length jean skirt with black heels to match, Carla left her closet with the phone stuck between her ear and shoulder.

“I do. So, before this meeting, Chelsea and I have decided to have a sit-down with her. We both need to be reassured that she’s in this thing for the long haul. I’m not trying to be a part of a broken band like a lot of these girl groups out there, struggling to find someone to fill the position. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I know life happens. We can also get past it together. It isn’t like we were unknown to each other and just started a band because we all have talent. We’re practically sisters.”

Carla was nodding, pulling out an ironing board to press her clothes.

“If you need help with that, let me know.”

“Help with what?” Tina asked.

“Kicking some ass.”

Tina snickered. “My girl.”

“You know it.”

“I’ll keep you in the loop, but for now, go ahead and get ready to bedazzle that fine-ass man.”

“You know that too.”

They laughed.

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay, bye!”

Carla disconnected the call, dropped the cell on her dresser, and proceeded to iron her clothes when it rang again. Seeing her father’s face brought an instant smile to her face. She answered without missing a beat.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Good morning, baby girl. Are you up, or did I wake you?”

Carla snickered. “Dad, it’s ten a.m., practically noon. I’ve been up for a while.”

“Oh yeah, there isn’t anything bugging you to get you up so early, is there?”

Carla laughed and shook her head. Her father was so protective of her. He made sure she was okay in all areas of her life, including her mental health.

“Dad, I work for a high school that requires me to be in attendance no later than seven a.m., trust me, everything’s okay.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“How are you since you’re asking all of these questions?”

“I’m not asking a lot of questions at all. I will always want to make sure you have everything you need.”

“I know and don’t deflect. How are you?”

“Fine as usual, thanks to our Lord and Savior. Fredrick and I are thinking about going ice fishing next weekend.”

“Ice fishing?”

“Yes. He’s been yapping about it for months and won’t let me forget that I promised I’d go with him.”

Carla smiled. Fredrick and her father had been friends since before she was born. Their long-lasting friendship had had its ups and downs like most friendships, and Carla was happy that they still bonded. Her thoughts traveled to her mother and her smile faded. Clearing her throat, Carla returned her attention to the conversation.

“If you promised him, Daddy, you should go.”

“I know. I’m going,” he huffed.

Carla chuckled. “Well, don’t sound so excited about it.”

“I don’t sound excited because I’m not.”

“I know, Dad. It was a metaphor. I was trying to be funny.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, there’s nothing remotely relaxing or fun about freezing your buns off while trying to catch dinner.”

A tinkling laugh floated from Carla.

“Buns.” She laughed more. “I could never figure out why you’re so southern when we’re from the Midwest.”

“It’s the way that I am, baby girl.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“What’s on your agenda today?”

Carla considered whether to tell him about Jacob. However, her father was so protective she wondered if she should wait.

“I’m meeting a friend for lunch.”

“Oh, tell Tina and the girls I said hello.”

Carla’s lips spread into a smile, and she sighed.

“It’s not with Tina and the girls, dad. It’s...” she hesitated. “It’s with a man friend.”

She could hear him shifting on the other line, and she braced for his list of questions.

“Who is this fella? It’s not that Lenard, is it?”

“Dad, his name is Lennox, and no, it’s not him.”

Her father sighed. “Okay, then, who is it?”

“Honestly, Dad, we’re not at the stage of talking about a guy in my life. It’s just a date.”

Carla bit down on her teeth when the word *date* came out.

Wrong move.

“A date is absolutely a reason to tell your father about the man who has the honor of being in your presence!”

Carla sighed. “Dad, I understand what you’re getting at, but I don’t want to scare this guy off. Trust me, when it’s time for you to meet, if that becomes a thing, then you’ll be the first to know.”

Her father grumbled. “Carla Jones, do not play with me.”

Mocking him, she returned. “Jefferson Jones, do not play with me.”

“I’m on my way over there, and we can meet in person. How’s that, since you want to be smart?”

“No! Okay! Okay! Sheesh, calm down, please.”

“Mmhm. I thought that’d get you in line.”

“Oh, look at the time. Dad, I love you, but I’ve gotta go.”

“Young lady, don’t you—”

Click.

Carla dropped her head and squinted, sighed, then slapped her forehead. Her father was going to give her an earful that would surely last through *next* New Year. But hey, it was something Carla would have to deal with. Having him meet Jacob right now was not the move.

Besides that, she didn’t want to be embarrassed if this was a one-time thing. Imagining having to explain to her father that he’s no longer in the picture was something she couldn’t do.

So, for now, she would avoid the conversation.

“I’m sorry, Dad, but I love you,” she whispered, grabbing her clothes and heading into the bathroom.

Chapter Six



*D*ing dong.

Carla strutted to the front door and opened it without peeking. A gust of sweet and spicy fragrant wind swirled around her as a smile cruised up her face. Her gaze fluttered over Jacob's silken lips to his penetrating gaze.

"Good afternoon, *bellissima*."

"Good afternoon, sexy."

His smile widened, and he winked and held his hand out.

"Are you ready?"

"I am."

His eyes roamed her from head to toe, and Carla accepted his open palm, squeezing his fingers as they exited.

Taking the keys from her hands, Jacob held up a brass key.

"This one?"

"Yes."

He locked her door, and Jacob ushered Carla to his Bentley Bentayga as gusts of robust, frigid wind whipped around them.

After he helped her inside, Carla shook off a shiver. "Damn, it's cold," she murmured.

The door shut as Jacob eased into the driver's seat, and as he drove away from her apartment, he could feel Carla's attention on him.

Smiling over at her, Jacob caught the corner of Carla's lip between her teeth.

"I taste good too," he teased.

"I don't doubt it."

They laughed, Carla sultrily, and Jacob boasting an edgy chuckle.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"I did. How about yourself?"

"I did."

"Could've been better though, right?"

He winked over at her. "*Decisamente.*" *Definitely.*

Her smile became a strong smirk as she attempted to turn her focus to the road. One minute later, that futile battle was lost as her head had a mind of its own, her eyes stroking back over him.

Jacob's mere presence was a commanding one. His physique was tight, muscular, and hard. Even his biceps pushed through the black wool trench coat he wore, and she was comforted that he decided on jeans and Timberland boots yet again.

"You know we're kind of dressed alike."

Jacob drove into a bistro lot and parked, meeting up with Carla's appraisal as he swept an eye over her again.

"I thought the same when you opened the door. What are you, psychic or something?" he teased.

"Me? What about you? I paced through my closet and randomly picked something out."

Jacob chuckled. "I don't believe you. You have powers. Admit it."

Carla scoffed. "The audacity to blame it on the woman."

Jacob's laugh stretched his sexy mouth, and for a split second, Carla lost her train of thought, distracted by his ebony gleam.

She blinked back to reality. “What is so funny?”

He reached and slipped his large hand into hers, lifting the back of her hand to his mouth for a kiss.

The warmth of his soft lips spreading over Carla’s skin made her body buzz.

Shit.

If this was what being around him would amount to, Carla was in trouble. A naughty thought crossed her mind. Actually, Jacob was the one in trouble.

“You don’t have to explain. I don’t think you’re psychic. I’m just yanking your chain.” He paused, a thick eyebrow lifting. “Unless you are.”

She drew her hand from him and swatted. “Whatever!” Then reached for the door to escape him.

“Whoa, *bellissima.*” Jacob held his hand out, and Carla paused.

“What?”

He sucked off his teeth, then exited the Bentley quickly, making his way around to her side. Opening the door, Jacob held his hand out, and Carla accepted it as he pulled her into the heat of his chest.

“You never get out of my vehicle without my assistance.” His tongue swept over his top teeth. “You got me?”

Carla smirked. “I got you.”

He never let go of her hand, leading Carla away from the lot to their seat inside the bistro.

After taking her jacket, Jacob sat across from Carla, and they ordered.

“I have to say, Jacob—we are on a first-name basis, right?”

His gaze was glued to her lips. “After the way I tasted your mouth last night, I would think so.”

She smiled, and a blush fell over her. That was something that rarely happened.

“You’re right about that,” she agreed naughtily.

“I don’t mean to make assumptions because I’m pretty straightforward so let’s make it clear. Can I call you Carla?”

“You can, or *bellissima*, or beautiful, or baby, or...” She shrugged, and Jacob’s guffaw surrounded them in a cozy blanket of warmth.

“I love your humor.”

She wiggled her brows. “I’ve gotten that all my life.”

“You must’ve been the life of the party in school.”

“Oh, yeah. Because seriously, ain’t no party until I walk in.”

His deep laughter tickled her flesh.

“So, what about at home? You either got on your parents and siblings’ nerves, or you kept them amused.”

Her smile faded a bit. “I would say both, but it was just my father and me. No siblings except for London, my cousin.” She cleared her throat. “My mother abandoned us, unfortunately.”

Jacob’s sparkle fell. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Carla shrugged. “She was strung out on drugs, and no amount of interventions or conversation about losing her family would deter her from getting what she wanted.”

“Addiction is a theft of life in every aspect. It takes years sometimes to help the ones you love to build a better future for themselves.”

“Yeah, except she left us when I was eight, then died from an overdose when I was eleven.” The table quieted. “I never got the chance to know her personally. I have vague memories of her healthy and thriving. My father says I remember her scent because I wear the same fragrances she wore.” Carla scanned the restaurant and saw the waitress coming to their table. “I would’ve never known it was her favorite perfume had he not told me.”

“Hot cocoa for you both, turkey, egg, and cheese breakfast sandwiches, on toasted oat bread. Is there anything else I can get you two?”

“I’m good,” Carla smiled.

“No, thank you,” Jacob added.

“I’ll be back to check on you both in a minute.”

She strolled away, and Carla took a sip of her hot cocoa.

“Ooh, that’s good. Went down nice and warm.”

She wanted to ask about his parents, but Carla had been around long enough to be privy to conversations about his mother’s death from a home invasion when he was also a child. His father, Christopher Lee Rose, remarried decades later and seemed to be happy and in love.

“I’m sorry about your mom. I can’t say I comprehend that specific loss and the frustration that accompanies it, but I do have an idea. As you probably are aware, my mother was taken from us when we were adolescents, so I’ve never had the chance to bond with her.”

“I’m sorry, Jacob.”

He nodded. “Sometimes life makes choices for you. However, I believe that every step we take is designed and bigger than any one person’s life. I also believe I’ll see her eventually, and oh, what a day that will be.”

Carla’s smile was genuine. “I hope you’re right.”

His heart swelled for her, knowing her pain on any given night could be unbearable.

“I am.” He winked, and she chuckled.

“Should we pray over our sandwiches?”

Carla nodded, and their hands met up at the middle of the table.

“Father God, please bless this food for the nourishment of our bodies and soul, and continue to do great work in us so

that we may, in turn, do a great work in someone else. In Your Son's mighty name, Amen."

"Amen."

Their eyes fluttered opened and seeing one another after connecting in spirit together, however short it was, brought joy to their hearts.

They ate and sipped their hot cocoa as their conversation turned to their careers.

"So, you're building a lake for the new boys club?"

"I'm adding to an already existing lake. The owner wanted me on the redesign, and because I love helping the children in the community, I accepted."

Her eyes sparkled at him. "I am not surprised."

"Not by this?"

"No."

"But by me owning the club?"

"Especially that."

They laughed. "I feel like you're going to tell me you ride a motorcycle on nights with a full moon in the sky."

"And then I turn into an immortal animal with fangs?"

"Yes. And I'm along for the ride without knowing what I'm about to get involved with."

"Hmmm."

She smiled.

"Would you be frightened if that were the case?"

"No."

His brows arched. "You are a dangerous woman, aren't you?"

"I told you so, but that's not the reason I wouldn't be frightened."

"Then what would be the reason?"

“I instinctively trust you. Don’t ask me why. I have no idea.”

He watched her for a long minute, and she could feel his thoughts churning, wondering what conversation was being held there.

“Am I crazy to trust you, Jacob?” She took the last sip of her hot cocoa.

“No. But you’ll let me know soon enough, yeah?”

“Does that mean we will see each other again?”

Jacob smirked and dropped his eyes to her lips, then returned them.

“Would you like that, Carla?”

This time, it was Carla that watched him for a long minute. As much as she thought she wanted to be involved with Jacob, his inconsistency concerned her.

“Can I be honest?”

“I would prefer it.”

She rubbed her lips together. “It would help if I knew you were interested in me enough to hold a continuous connection. We’ve missed a few dates because you’ve called them off. I know you’re important, so if the time for dating or acquaintances isn’t ideal for your schedule, I’d rather know up front.”

He nodded. “Fair enough. I would like to see you consistently, Carla, but I don’t want to force what we may or may not have. So, if that’s friendship or more, I’d like for it to happen naturally with no complications.”

“Complications?”

He stared at her. “Or surprises.”

“Surprises?”

“Like you’re married but separated, or you’re dating multiple men or women.”

Her brows rose. “I see.” Her mind shuffled to Lennox, then Devin, at warp speed. “I think I’m pretty open about my relationships. I’ve told you before. I have male friends, nothing more. But I’m sure you have female friends as well.”

“Acquaintances. Colleagues. Clients. Family. Those are the women in my life.”

She nodded. “Have you ever cheated on a woman before, Jacob?”

His mouth spread into a wide smile. “No.”

Her lips cruised up her face. “You wouldn’t tell me a fairy tale, would you?”

“You tell me.”

“Deflecting?”

“Not at all. You said you trust me. So, tell me, Carla. Would I tell you a fairy tale?”

Carla bit the corner of her lip, then tossed her hand up at the waitress walking by.

“Yes, ma’am,” the server said, attending to Carla’s request.

“Do you have anything stronger than this cocoa?”

“Stronger as in alcohol?”

“Maybe a bit of tequila.”

“Sure, we can add a shot into another cup of your hot cocoa for an extra spicy brew. Would you like that?”

Her eyes fluttered to Jacob. “I would.”

And God knew she needed it.

Chapter Seven



The waitress retrieved her glass. “I’ll be right back with your order.” She glanced at Jacob. “Anything for you, sir?”

“No, thank you.”

She disappeared, and Jacob couldn’t help but smirk.

“Oh, what?” Carla smiled. “You’re not going to be one of those people who tells me I shouldn’t be drinking this early, are you?”

“No. You are capable of making responsible decisions.”

“Is that a psychological way to stop me from drinking early?”

Jacob laughed. “Not at all.”

“Hmmm.”

“So, let me ask you. Have you ever cheated on someone you were with, Carla?”

Carla pointed at herself. “Me?”

He tilted his head in response.

Carla blew out a deep breath. “Well, only as get-back.”

“Get-back?”

“Yeah. He cheated. I wasn’t ready to let him go, so I returned the favor.”

His gaze dropped, and he grimaced.

“But, in my defense, that was long ago. You know, when you’re young, you play tit-for-tat sometimes. Unfortunately, I didn’t know my worth then. I’m ashamed to say that grew into my last failure of a relationship with...” She paused and wondered if she should proceed.

“Please,” he said, ushering her continuation.

“The guy at your club last night, Lennox. After we were in a relationship for a little over four years and talk of marriage came up, he suddenly wanted to be alone for a while. I believe the way he put it was: he still admired other women in ways that might cause him to step out on me.” She shrugged. “So we ended it, and a year later, he was married.” She smiled, but there was no amusement in her eyes.

Jacob’s brows dipped, his eyes tight in disapproval.

“I realized then I was accepting the bare minimum from men. So I started doing my own thing, focusing on myself, my happiness, my career.”

“And how’s your career as a professor?”

“An educator. I teach at Academy College Preparatory High School. It’s in full swing.” She smiled. He grinned in return. “The students keep me young.”

He chuckled. “How so?”

“I know all of the latest dances.”

His chuckle evolved into a deep guffaw. “Those moves you had on the dance floor last night?”

“No, no, not those moves. Those are all mine.”

They joined in the merriment.

“If you didn’t know, let me be the first to tell you, there’s nothing old about you. Your students just happen to be younger.”

Carla wiggled her brows. “I like the way you think.”

“It’s true. And, your students don’t have to be the only ones to teach you a few moves.”

Her smile broadened. “Is that so?”

A deep laugh escaped him. “Of course. You could take on the challenge to train your body to think it’s still young even with age.”

“Oh, so you have the secret to the fountain of youth, but I’m the psychic?”

The waitress returned with Carla’s brew.

“Thank you.” She took a sip, her eyes squinting. “Yeah, that’s it right there.”

Jacob’s smile remained intact. He loved watching her enjoy things. Even as simple as the taste of a good mix.

“So, tell me about this secret fountain.”

He bit his bottom lip. “It’s no secret. It’s exercise.” Carla’s smile evaporated, and Jacob couldn’t help but laugh.

“Oh, come on. It’s not so bad. I get up at four in the morning—”

“Four in the morning!”

Jacob nodded. “Four a.m. By four-thirty, I’m out the door. I run for an hour. In that time, I have a goal to run six miles.”

“Six miles!” Her eyes widened. “In one hour—are you a madman?”

His voice dropped, more baritone than it was before.

“I can teach you how to raise your stamina for activities that’ll exert you, *bellissima*.”

Carla’s mind went right to the gutter. “Oh, can you?”

His smile was delicious. “Absolutely.”

“It may take you a while to get my body in training for a six-mile one-hour run, Mr. Rose.”

His tongue slid across his top lip. “I have a good regimen that’ll get you there.”

Her body was tingling all over now. “I’m down.”

He laughed. “You haven’t heard what my workout plan entails yet.”

“I’m still down.”

His laugh turned into a low roar. “I’m going to make sure to hold you to that.”

“Please do.” She sipped more of her brew, and he watched her mouth. “I can’t help but wonder about your past relationships. You said you’ve never cheated, then why are you single? Is it by choice?”

His joy tilted, then dispersed.

“I’ve dated, but those relationships didn’t blossom the way I had hoped they would at the time. Because of my family’s celebrity, it’s not easy to find genuine relationships. When I asked my father decades ago how our family ended up in the spotlight, he would say, ‘the good, old-fashioned American dream. I was determined to give you, Janet, and your siblings a comfortable life. In that passion, I learned a lot about stocks, trading, and investments. Investing in Rose Bank & Trust Credit Union was my first swing at things, and it was life-changing. The company attracted the media because I was one of the youngest to own an institution of that magnitude. And, people love to help young folks who are investing in their futures. I received a lot of sponsors, donors, and clientele. From there, things took off and never turned back. We’ve been in the spotlight since, each of my brothers or sisters for a different achievement. My brothers and I also caught the attention of disingenuous women. Some of us learned the hard way.”

Carla nodded. “I can understand how having that attention could bring out the snakes.” She shook her head. “So, wow. Never been in love before, huh?”

“I never said never.”

His comment intrigued Carla.

“Twice.” He rubbed his lips together. “One was a physician I’d met on vacation in the Alps. We hit it off right away, and by the time our vacation ended, neither of us wanted

to go our separate ways. We decided to date long-distance for a while. Then, we began meeting up and getting serious. I was days away from proposing when I found out she was married.”

A gasp flew from Carla’s lips, and she sat back against her seat, deflated. Suddenly her heart hurt for him.

Jacob stilled for a moment, then continued.

“Apparently, they were ‘separated’ at the time that we met and had decided while we were dating that they wanted to give their marriage another try. So, I was the odd man out.”

“God, that’s awful.”

His smile was short. “You’re telling me.”

“I almost hate to ask about the second woman.”

“That’s easy. She was simply a pathological liar. In the end, she cried her eyes out and told me she needed therapy. She didn’t know how or why she lied so much and didn’t know how to stop it.”

“Have mercy.”

“I hoped for it.”

“What, mercy?”

He nodded.

“I decided it was best for me to...how’d you put it? Do my own thing?”

Carla nodded. She had to wonder if that’s why he was careful with her, why he seemed to be so inconsistent when it came to them getting together previously.

“Well, since we’re both doing our own thing, what do you say we do it together?”

“Promise me something, Carla.”

She perked up, her chin rising as she waited for him to finish.

“You’ll always be upfront with me. Though we’re not in a relationship, honesty in dating is just as important. That’s all that I ask.”

“Wait, are we dating?”

He smiled. “Carla Jones, would you consider dating me?”

“Just skip to the marriage proposal—you know you want to.”

He laughed as she snickered. Leaning forward, Jacob slid his hand across the table, and Carla met his fingers halfway. A charging electric current scattered through their palms as their hands joined.

“Nothing too serious. A light, getting-to-know-one-another agreement filled with honesty and possibilities.” He rubbed her fingers with the pad of his thumb. “What do you say?”

“I say I do.”

They laughed again, and he shook his head and lifted her hand to his mouth for a warm kiss.

Chapter Eight



Over the next few days, Carla and Jacob spoke regularly on the phone. That was before the hustle and bustle of the new week and going back to school entered the rotation.

Carla had to admit, having Jacob's attention felt like drinking a cool glass of water. It quenched her thirst, and he was easy to talk to. She never felt so relaxed before, so in tune with a conversation like listening to him talk about growing up with his brothers and messing with his younger sisters.

"So, wait, you actually put a banana peel down on the floor, and Phoebe slipped on it?"

They laughed that entire conversation.

"She was so serious all of the time. As a child, she practiced being an attorney—using her dolls as the jury and a teddy bear as the judge. I felt like she should loosen up a bit, so I played games on her and Eden and Jasmine constantly."

Carla couldn't believe it, but she imagined them in the household screaming and fussing at him while he laughed and got away with it. Growing up without siblings, Carla did want to know what it was like to have those connections. However, her homegirls had come to fill that gap, and for that, she was thankful.

Now, as she stood behind her desk, Carla went about getting the lesson plan for the day prepared, but thoughts of

Jacob lingered, and every so often, she would smile and stare off into space.

“OH, MAN, ARE THOSE THE NEW JORDANS?”

Coming out of her reverie, Carla glanced at Jared Moore, a sixteen-year-old Black teen who always had the latest fashion whenever he came to school.

“What you think?” Jared said to Omega Price.

Omega’s parents weren’t as financially able as Jared’s. His fashion was the more affordable of their crew.

“Come on, fool. You already know,” Leon said.

“Excuse me?” Carla interrupted.

All eyes turned to her. “Watch your language and stop standing in the doorway. Are you coming to class, or am I counting you fellas absent today?”

They slowly entered.

“Good morning, Ms. Jones,” Omega greeted her.

“Good morning, Omega. How was your holiday?”

He smiled. “It was good.”

“Would’ve been better if you’d gotten those Js, though,” Leon said, laughing.

Omega waved him off. “Whatever, fool.”

“Hey!”

Omega covered his mouth as his eyes went back to Carla.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Jones.”

“Take your seat before you and Leon have after-school detention.”

They sighed and took a seat as more students filed inside the room. Laughter bubbled from a group of Caucasian girls. The popular group, headed by Carrie Magnolia, daughter of

socialite Jenny McKinney, entered with her sidekicks, Samantha Sanders and Beverly Moore in tow.

“Did you see her hair? Oh, my God, I would kill my mother if she ever did that to me,” Samantha said, cutting her eyes behind her.

“She would’ve been better off going to her stylist. We’re not kids. What is her mother even doing, doing her hair anyway?” Beverly added.

“You idiot, her mother *is* a stylist,” Carrie mumbled. “Not a very good one.”

The girls laughed.

“A hot mess at its finest,” Samantha murmured.

“She must think she’s Dolly Parton with that big-ass hair,” Beverly added.

“Don’t disrespect Dolly Parton!” Carrie said, squinting at Beverly.

“I’m not.” Beverly folded her arms, and they made their way to their seats.

Trailing in behind them, Sicily Princeton, a Black student, clutched her books against her chest, her eyes downcast and her hair in a curly afro.

Carla sighed. These young people were so misguided about material possessions, hair, and what they thought made a person. It was a trend that went back to her youth and those before her as well.

She thought for a moment about how to get them to see they were all the same, had the same potential in life, and none of the things they held dear now would matter when they were adults.

This was a preparatory high school, after all. She needed to create a program that would force them to help each other and see that offering a helping hand and making a difference was the only thing that mattered.

Carla's mind whirled throughout her lesson. One thing she was proud of was none of her students were failing her linguistics class. But there were a few, Samantha and Beverly included, who could benefit from a part-time tutor.

Who better than to step in that role but Carla?

She would think about it a little more and then reach out to their parents to see if they could arrive an hour earlier for the course or stay an hour late.

WHEN LUNCHTIME CAME AROUND, CARLA HEADED FOR THE break room when she bumped into Pricilla Benton, the algebra teacher and the only other Black instructor at the school.

“Hey, girl,” Pricilla greeted, pushing through the swinging door of their break room.

“Hey. How was your holiday?”

“Relaxing. Too bad I can't say the same about the first day of school.”

Carla chuckled. “That bad, huh?”

They walked in line, headed to the refrigerator where they retrieved their packed lunches, warmed their food, and sat at a round table.

“Girl, these students come back from Christmas break with all kinds of new gadgets and clothes. You would think P. Diddy was their Santa Claus.”

Carla laughed and nodded.

“I'm looking at them all, checking each other out and half-paying attention. I guess the first day doesn't count until it's time for a test.”

“Say that,” Carla agreed.

They both dug into their food—Carla with vegetable soup, crackers, carrots, and celery sticks.

Pricilla took her eyes over Carla's food. "What are you, a vegetarian now?"

Carla almost choked on her carrot. "No. No," she repeated. "I'm just trying to lose a little weight, is all."

Pricilla smirked. "Must be a man involved."

"Involved with what? These hips? Because last I checked, if a man were involved, I'd be losing weight for getting this ass tapped."

Pricilla laughed and shook her head. "I can always depend on you to say something so out-of-pocket."

Carla shrugged. "It is what it is, girl."

"Don't let the students hear you talking like that."

"Oh, trust me, I won't. This conversation doesn't leave this room."

"Agreed." Pricilla grabbed the remote and powered the volume up on the flat-screen TV that hung in the corner.

"So, he's finally decided to follow in his father's footsteps and run for mayor. How about that?"

Carla's eyes shot up to the television to see Lennox Jenkins standing in front of a podium for a press conference.

"Thank you for giving me a moment of your time to inform you of my significant decision to run for mayor of Chicago. During my father Samuel Jenkins' term, the city's economic growth was thriving, and homelessness wasn't as rampant as it is under Mayor Luke Steele's leadership. That alone has prompted me to step in and bring the city back to the state it was before, and I hope you'll all give me the chance to earn your vote in the upcoming election. Thank you."

Reporters shouted questions at Lennox as Carla stared on in disbelief. She and anyone with any common sense knew Samuel Jenkins was the most corrupt politician in Illinois's history of leadership.

He was currently under investigation for possible money-laundering with a known gun-running enterprise headed by

Brian and Celine Devereaux. So far, those were only allegations. The two witnesses that were going to speak on the record—one changed his mind while the other disappeared altogether.

“That is a pretty brave move,” Carla said. She didn’t know how to feel about his announcement. On the one hand, if he were genuine about his love for the city, that was a good thing, but on the other hand, she had a bad feeling about it.

“Why do you say that?” Pricilla asked.

“Huh?” Carla turned to Pricilla. “What?”

“You said Lennox running for office was pretty brave.”

“You do know who his father is, don’t you?”

Pricilla thought for a minute. “Point taken.”

Carla nodded as her phone rang. Removing it from her satchel, she smiled and answered it on the second ring.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So, you’re just not going to call me and tell me how your first date with that fine-ass man went after I told you to?”

Laughter speared from Carla’s mouth. “I was eating lunch, thank you very much.”

“And?”

“And, can’t a sista eat lunch?”

“A sister can eat and talk, can’t she?”

“That’s kind of rude.”

Tina sucked her teeth and popped her mouth. “Please. You’re playing now.”

Carla shook her head, a broad smile on her face, and she rolled her eyes over at Pricilla.

“It was a great date. Informative. Intentional. I gained a lot of clarity.”

“Oooh, I like clarity.”

Carla snickered. “Girl, what am I going to do with you?”

“Love me to pieces. Now hurry up and tell me about it before you try and rush me off the phone under the pretense of your lunch being over.”

Carla laughed louder. She’d just sneaked a peek at the time.

“Okay. To make a long story short...”

“Mmhmm, don’t pause, continue!”

Carla was in a fit of laughter.

“Oh, you playing games with me.”

“Hey, would you look at that? My lunch break is over!”

“I will send you to hell if you do this to me.”

More laughter.

“I’m not playing with you, Ms. Jones!”

“Okay, okay, calm down, dang.”

“For your information, we are dating, okay?”

Applause echoed through the line. “Okay, kay, kay!” Tina shouted.

Carla shook her head and bit her lip. Saying it out loud had her guts tumbling. She was dating Jacob Alexander Rose. What were the odds?

“Don’t get too excited. Dating is light. It isn’t sealed like a relationship. I also get the feeling that he’s hesitant to get into anything of the sort because of past relationships.

“And yet, you two are dating. Mmhmm. Tell me anything.”

Carla’s smile was wide. “Stop making me blush.”

“Because she’s blushing hard,” Pricilla inserted.

“Who’s that?”

“The algebra teacher, Ms. Pricilla Benton.”

“Oh. Well, I won’t hold you too much longer.”

“Please, you sound like my father.”

Tina laughed. “I do have one more question, though.”

“What’s that?”

“When are you going to let him get in them guts!”

A shout flew from Carla’s mouth, and Pricilla’s eyes enlarged as she looked on with interest.

Carla covered her lips and stifled her scream while Tina laughed her ass off on the other end of the phone.

Releasing an exasperated breath, Carla shook her head and closed her eyes. “This is why I shouldn’t talk to you on the phone during work hours.”

Giggles echoed through the line.

“Don’t be like that. You probably could use that laugh dealing with them badass kids up there.”

“Hey, don’t talk about my kids. They just need some direction.”

“Straight to hell.”

“What is with you and sending people to hell?”

“I’m just kidding.” She paused. “A little bit. Anyway, I hope you have a great day and good for you manifesting what you want out of life and shit. You’re my shero.”

“I told you not to get too excited, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to do it anyway.”

“I will be reminded of this when you and Malik Anthony Clark start dating.”

“Girl, saying his name has my pussy buzzing, you hear me.”

“I gotta go.”

“Don’t try and hang up now. You mentioned my boo’s name—now I’m all hot and bothered.”

“Your boo? Is there something you want to tell me?”

“Not yet. But unlike you, I’ll keep you in the loop.”

Carla's cheeks burned from holding the smile on her face as long as she had.

"All right, now I'm excited."

"Don't act like you're not excited about dating Jacob, even if he does have a past. Exes are full of shit. Don't you feel the same?"

Bringing up Lennox made Carla's mind shift to his announcement.

"Yeah, yeah."

"And did you see his press statement today?"

"I did."

"Who does he think will vote for him, as corrupt as his father was?"

"Unfortunately, the people who wanted his father in power will vote for him and possibly do all kind of illegal shit to get him there. But let's just hope he's not like his father and has no connection with those people."

"Wait, why do you care?"

"You should care, too. We have to live here. If he becomes mayor and he's corrupt, we're all in for a bit of trouble."

"Amen to that," Pricilla said. "Maybe we should join Mayor Luke Steele's reelection campaign."

"There's an idea," Carla said. "And since you brought it up, get some information for us and let us know how we can help."

"Look at you," Tina teased, "Over there ready to help your man's best friend, I see you."

"Bye."

Carla disconnected the call and shook her head.

She and Tina hit it off so well because they were much alike. Both ambitious. Both smoked a little weed now and then. Both were funny as hell, or so they were told. Both grew

up in the southside of Chicago, Illinois. They knew what it meant to struggle on your way up. Or fake it till you make it.

With that in mind, Carla still wished Lennox the best and hoped he was on the straight and narrow.

Chapter Nine



K

nock. Knock.

“Come in.”

Carla entered Principal Sharp’s office and sat after he ushered her to the leather seat in front of his desk.

“And we could use the extra equipment. Thank you so much. I’m looking forward to it. Have a good day.” Principal Sharp dropped the receiver in the phone’s cradle and looked at Carla.

“Good evening, Ms. Jones.” His eyes ran over her navy-blue long-sleeve blouse and knee-length black skirt. “What can I help you with?”

He slid the bifocals back up his broad nose, still squinting even though the lens was at its highest prescription.

“Principal Sharp, I’m noticing a pattern with my students. When they come back from holiday breaks or even sometimes when they come off a weekend, they’re wearing the latest brand names and showing off their gadgets.”

“If it’s disruptive to the class, you know you can always collect those items until the end of the school day.”

“It’s not just that. There’s becoming an increase in bullying because of it.”

Principal Sharp was a seventy-four-year-old Caucasian man who had seen his fair share of troubled kids. But he also

believed in them and wanted to give them the option to do better instead of forcing them with discipline.

“What do you propose, Ms. Jones?”

“Two things. Uniforms. If we make it a priority, then everyone would be dressed in the same thing. It would eliminate room for kids to bully others about what they wear.”

Principal Sharp nodded. “It could work, but as we know, the kids will find a way to wear brand name uniforms. Even the shoes would still be a problem. They would add jewelry and still have those gadgets.”

“We could designate that the children only wear a certain brand.”

“I’m afraid we couldn’t go that far.”

“Why not?”

Principal Sharp sighed. “We would have parents up here all the time. Because frankly, some brands cost more than others. If the high-society families want their children to wear the best and we are adamant they can only wear something less than what they would choose, we could lose student tuition. This is a preparatory school, Ms. Jones. The state does not fund us. The parents who choose this school fund us.”

Carla nodded, understanding his point.

“Don’t look so down. The uniforms are a good idea. It’s not the first time it’s come up since I’ve been the principal here, but you make a good point. Let’s look into it. What was your second thing?”

“I think the children would benefit from an anti-bullying campaign. If they could get in a space where they work together to achieve goals and uplift one another, they would understand each other. It feels good when you offer a helping hand. Right now, most of these kids are used to getting what they want, and their attitudes match that.” She continued.

“They will be adults in the real world soon. They’ll need to help out, be law-abiding citizens, and sympathize with people who may not be in the same class as them.”

Principal Sharp nodded. “Go on.”

“I’ve thought it over, and I have a friend who might be able to help with an initiative. I have to ask, of course, and then I can let you know my ideas, and you can tell me if you feel it would benefit the kids.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought, haven’t you?”

“Well, it crossed my mind a time or two before but coming back today and seeing all of the new shoes, clothes, and hearing the way the students talk to one another solidified my decision to take action. I love these kids. They can be a bit rough around the edges, but it’s nothing a life lesson can’t teach them.”

“I like the way you think. I’ll tell you what. I’m interested in all of it, but when you come back to me, have a full game plan together, and if it’s something that doesn’t violate rights, won’t have our parents in an uproar about, and is within the schools’ limits to pull off, we’ll do it.”

Carla stood to her feet, and so did Principal Sharp. She held out her hand. “Thank you so much. I’ll return with a game plan.”

He accepted her hand, and they shook. “I look forward to it, Ms. Jones.”

As she turned to leave, Principal Sharp watched her go, his eyes trailing over her butt and hips, unable to stop himself from appreciating her curves.

WHEN CARLA ENTERED HER EMPTY CLASS, HER MIND WHEELED with everything she wanted to do to help the kids. It was when she pulled up to her desk that her eyes finally caught sight of the bouquet of red long-stemmed roses in a gold vase, wrapped with a red bow.

A gasp flew from her lips, and she covered her chest with a hand, lifting the vase with the other.

“Beautiful.”

Leaning slightly into the arrangement, she took in the fragrance of the petals, and a smile ushered to her lips.

Stuck inside the bouquet, Carla plucked out a small note and read the sentiment.

It's never too soon for red roses, bellissima. Have a beautiful day.

—Jacob

Tingles filled her up, and she stood silently, trying not to look too deep into his lovely gesture. Still, she couldn't wait to see him again, and now that excitement she was trying to hold at bay was bubbling to the surface.

“What is this man trying to do to me?” she murmured. Knowing all too well, as Tina said, she'd manifested this.

There was something to this power-of-the-tongue mumbo-jumbo my father always talks about, she thought.

Grabbing her purse from inside the top desk drawer, Carla fished for her cell phone, then sat against her desk and crossed her legs at the ankles.

She scrolled to his name and speed-dialed him from her contacts. The phone rang three times before he answered.

“Good afternoon, *bellissima*.”

“Good afternoon, sexy.”

He chuckled. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your call midday?”

She warmed inside and tried to suppress a blush. “Well, I just received some flowers, and they got me to thinking about you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

“And what about those flowers made you think of me?”

“Because they're just as sexy, beautiful, and had me awestruck when I walked in the room.”

His deep guffaw splintered her skin with heat.

“You’re easy to adore, you know that?”

“Am I?”

“You are.”

“So are you, Mr. Rose.”

A bell rang, and the cafeteria door down the hall could be heard opening as the students’ voices filled the hallways.

“I’ve got to get going, but I wanted to say thank you for the roses. I love them. And, if you don’t mind, I want to run something by you later. That’s if you have the time. No pressure.”

“I’ll make time.”

She shivered at his assertiveness. “I look forward to hearing from you.”

“Me with you as well.”

Students entered her door.

“Who you talking to, Ms. Jones, your boyfriend?” a student asked.

“This is the part where you mind your business,” she responded.

Jacob chuckled. “Talk to you soon.”

“You too.”

She ended the call and haphazardly stroked her lips with her tongue, thinking about what was to come out of dating Jacob Alexander Rose.

Chapter Ten



“*I*n today’s news, Lennox Jenkins is challenging incumbent Mayor Luke Steele in Chicago’s upcoming election. Mayor Steele couldn’t be reached for comment, but we are told he is no stranger to the Jenkins family and is ready to run a non-aggressive race against him.”

Jacob watched WTZB for a moment more before shutting the broadcast off. “I see it’s that time of the year.” He sat the remote on a table and glanced at Luke Steele, his long-time friend and the mayor of Chicago.

“Can you believe it’s been three years?”

“Time is flying. Before the day can begin, it’s ending.”

Luke agreed with a head nod. Inside Luke and Jasmine’s three-story, five-bedroom home, Jacob strolled to the minibar across the Mediterranean-styled room and poured a shot of Patrón. “We were prepared for a challenger.”

“Were you?” Jacob turned to look at him.

“You know Jasmine’s my biggest supporter. She has all the I’s dotted and her T’s crossed. Nothing was going to surprise us.”

Jacob chuckled. His bold, intelligent sister and Luke were as different as night and day politically, yet otherwise, a match made in heaven. Where Jasmine would take her battles to the streets in protest, Luke would take his through the courtroom. The best part of it all was neither of them tried to deter one or

the other from their course of action. Instead, now as a couple, they took those steps together, with Jasmine at Luke's side during litigation and Luke at Jasmine's on the front line.

"Do you think Jenkins will run a fair race?"

"No." Luke turned his eyes to the powered-off TV. "Do you think he will?" He looked back at Jacob.

"No." He tossed back his shot and set the glass down. "I know you're about to gear up for political battle, but I thought you might be interested in helping your community with the new Boys & Girls Club. It'll be a good look on your record of outreach and will help keep your reputation solid while Jenkins tries to take you down."

"You know, saying the economy was better and homelessness was down during his father's term and has gone up during mine is complete bullshit."

"I know. But some will believe it. You have to remind them who you are, what you stand for, and what you've accomplished through not only words but action." Jacob paused. "Unless you're not up for the challenge?"

Jacob poured a shot in a different glass and strolled across the room and handed it to Luke.

Luke wasted no time taking the liquor back. "You're right, but I would've done this anyway."

Jacob smiled. "I know it, or I never would've asked you." Jacob held out a hand, and Luke accepted it in agreement.

"Is that why you stopped by, or is there something else on your mind?"

Jacob's mind slipped to Carla.

"Initially, I needed to make sure you were not going to let Jenkin's upcoming slander campaign get to you."

Luke's cinnamon nose flared, and he let go of a deep breath.

"But as I said, I felt the outreach would be great to add to your already outstanding record. Ergo, why I mentioned it."

Luke nodded. “You know I have your sister to keep me together if she thinks for a second the attacks are getting to me.” He chuckled.

“Is Jasmine here?”

“She’s in the kitchen.”

Jacob’s eyes widened. “In the kitchen?”

Luke laughed. “My baby got skills.”

“These are lies you can’t expect me to believe.”

“I’m telling you, man. You might not know because you’re not me.” Luke winked.

“This I have to see for myself.”

Leaving the room with Luke’s laughter trailing him, Jacob passed the double-column entrance to their foyer, across the marble floors, straight to the kitchen. He had designed their place when Luke and Jasmine were engaged. The blueprint was stuck in his mind, so he needed no direction as he meandered through the manor.

Smoke was the first thing Jacob noticed as he got closer. A few seconds away from the double doors, a smoke alarm blared down the hallway.

“Shit.”

Jacob hurried through the doors to find Jasmine standing on top of a countertop waving an oven mitten in front of the alarm in an effort to disarm it.

“Jasmine!”

Surprised, Jasmine wobbled and almost fell off the counter.

“Woman!”

Jacob ran to the stove and turned the knob off. Hitting the dial for the exhaust, he moved the skillet into the sink, then rushed to the back door to prop it open.

Luke burst through the kitchen doors, his gaze landing on his wife, who was still waving at the smoke detector. He ran to

her rescue, grabbing her before she fell while keeping her away from the stove.

The men worked to clear out the smoke while Jasmine watched on in confused horror. Everything had been going great for about twenty minutes. Then it was like the stove caught fire.

When they were done, both Jacob and Luke turned to Jasmine.

“I had this under control.”

The men glanced at each other.

“I did.” Jasmine turned to Luke for backup. “Baby, you know I can cook. This was nothing more than a fluke.” She glanced at Jacob, who held on to a tight smirk. “You,” she pointed at him. “Shut up.”

Laughter flew from Jacob, and Jasmine swatted him.

“Get out. What are you doing here anyway?”

Jacob held up his hands in surrender. “I’m leaving. Trust me. I won’t let you burn me down in this house.”

“Shut up!”

Jacob’s gut constricted as he guffawed, exiting the kitchen.

“I’ll call you in a few days when it’s time to get started, Steele!”

And with that, he was gone.

NAVIGATING ONTO THE EXPRESSWAY, JACOB CUT HIS STEREO AS his mind crossed over to Carla. Her soft brown eyes. Full but puckered lips. Maple cherry brown melanin. She’d been in his dreams since seeing her at his sisters’ wedding, stalking his mind and filling his thoughts with images of her smile.

Since Jacob’s last sham of a relationship, women were far from his radar. Focusing on each of his endeavors was what he

was known for, day in and day out. Some would call him a workaholic, a machine that didn't contemplate anything other than business.

But that wasn't true. In reality, Jacob was protecting himself. His heart. From the known fears of loving someone and losing them in whatever way life dealt that hand.

But though he'd managed to stay away from Carla in presence, she haunted him like a beautiful apparition that wouldn't go away.

Jacob didn't understand it. They'd had a few brief conversations in the past. Still, he came away from those feeling full, alive. Like she was the missing link to the half of him that would make him whole.

AND NOW THAT HE'D MADE A MOVE TO GET CLOSER TO HER, optimism for what would follow clung to a string of hope that he readily digested.

Dialing her, he sat in silence, cruising down the boulevard when she answered the phone.

"Hey, you."

His mouth curved into a smile.

"Hey, *bellissima*."

"I thought I'd missed you for the night for a minute."

His eyes glanced at the time. Ten thirty.

"Is it too late for me to call?"

"No. But I thought maybe you'd called it a night."

"I had to stop by a friend's house for a conversation."

"Oh."

He realized how that could've been interpreted, so he offered clarity.

"Mayor Luke Steele is one of my best friends, as you know. He's running to hold on to his seat against Lennox

Jenkins.”

Carla could’ve groaned. Lennox was the last person she wanted to talk about right now.

“Yes, I saw the broadcast.”

The phone fell quiet.

“He’s going to run a great campaign. I wanted to assure him that he was the best option for the city and also provide him an opportunity to prove it.”

“How so?”

“He’s going to be helping me with the redesign of the Boys & Girls Club.”

“I wanted to ask you a question about that. I hope I’m not getting into your business, but some of my students could use real-life experience. To show them that they all matter, and that each one can help the other, despite their differences. To put it plainly, I think the kids would benefit from an anti-bullying campaign. But I need to get them interested in something they have to help each other build or create for them to see their similarities.”

HIS HEART PATTERNED AT HER THOUGHTFULNESS. “THAT’S A great idea.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely.”

“So, do you think it’s something you could help me with, or is it too much of a job? I can’t pay you for your time, unfortunately, but I can make it a field trip or learning retreat that the parents will have to fund.”

“That’s not necessary. They need this. All students, especially high school students, would benefit from a program like this. I wonder about your future students, however. We could put together an annual event that high school graduates would participate in. A real-world practice. Their parents

would have to sign an agreement so they could work during the process.”

“I would love that.”

“What do you think about having your future students participate in the Rooftop Connection Initiative?”

“That is perfect!” Carla lit up on the other end of the phone. “My wheels were turning before. Now they’re spinning.”

He chuckled. “I love it when you’re excited. Those beautiful brown eyes glow, and your lashes flutter. Have I told you today how easy you are to adore?”

Carla’s smile stretched so far across her face that her cheeks burned. “Yes. And I don’t think anyone’s ever adored me.”

That’s because you were meant to be mine.

The thought crossed his mind in a blink, and he let that sit without expanding on it.

“You should see what I see when I hear you. When I look at you.”

“What do you hear and see?”

“A woman who takes pleasure in pleasing those around her. Someone who loves to assist. Who’s...the life of the party. You keep others’ spirits lifted, and I bet you’re the girlfriend who gives solid and necessary advice while not being harsh.”

Warmth swept down her skin.

“Am I right?”

“So far. I want to know how you know that?”

“Let me tell you what I also know, Carla.” He put the code in his gate and entered the driveway of his contemporary home. “That big heart of yours attracts everyone, including people who mean you no good.”

Her smile faded a bit, and her thoughts traveled to her past relationships.

“Do me a favor.”

“What’s that?”

“Guard it, but not from me.”

Carla closed her eyes. It was like Jacob knew she thought he was inconsistent.

“So, if we venture into something like...” She paused, the words lodged in her throat.

“Say it.”

Carla exhaled long and hard. “Something like love, you promise not to break my heart?”

He wished he could be where she was right then. To look in her eyes and allow her to see his sincerity. If anything, Jacob needed it, to also see her earnestness.

“Two broken hearts in the middle of the night, trying to navigate the highway of love.”

“Jacob, you don’t have to worry about me. Since you do know my vibe, then you know I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize our friendship.”

He would like to believe that, and at that moment, Jacob decided to let down his guards.

“The universe won’t let me run from you, Carla. I’ve tried.”

His honesty astonished her. “Why?”

“You know the answer to that.”

She sighed, silently agreeing. “I’m not your past, and you’re not mine. We already agreed to be open and upfront with one another. Let’s do it with no reservations. A clean slate, so to speak.”

His eyes tightened as his smile rose. “I’d like that.” He parked in his driveway but didn’t rush to go inside. “Tell me your dreams, Carla.”

“My dreams?”

“Yes.”

She inhaled. “Well, I’ve dreamed of walking through a garden of green vegetation with you. Taking in the outside scenery on a trail, maybe seeing a waterfall. Possibly getting wet.”

“Hmmm.”

He hadn’t meant her dreams literally, but he listened to what she said nonetheless.

“Visiting a pottery studio where you sit behind me, and we create together.”

His heart jiggled, eyes closing as he envisioned the scene she painted.

“Maybe feed each other fishcakes for lunch.”

His eyes shot open. “Fishcakes?”

She laughed. “Yes, I heard they were the best in Barbados.”

“Barbados...”

“Mmhmm. I heard there was a virtual studio downtown where we could visit the island and have this experience.”

“Or...” his deep voice stroked. “We could visit Barbados.”

“What?”

“Why not?”

“Um.” Carla’s mind shuffled to everything they both had going on in the city. “How?”

“After your anti-bullying campaign. We’ll take care of the students and community first, then take a trip to Barbados.”

Carla’s mouth opened.

“What do you think about that?”

“You’re not joking?”

“Why would I be? The only thing is the locals speak the Bajan dialect. It’s an English-based creole, with heavy West African roots.”

She exhaled, her lips curving into a satisfied smile.

“I would love to go with you. I’m sure I can make out what they’re saying, and if I can’t, you can, right?”

“You’re right. Then the decision is final. No takebacks.”

Laughter surfed from her lips.

“How long will we be away?”

“As long as you like.”

“Now listen, Mr. Rose, don’t be trying to make my dreams come true!”

His guffaw warmed her.

“Tell you what,” he said, containing his merriment, “I’ll let you sleep on it, and you let me know so I can book our reservations. Is that all right with you, Ms. Carla Jones?”

“Yeah, man.” They both laughed. “Hell, yeah.”

Chapter Eleven



I'm going to Barbados with Jacob.

Carla's thoughts were filled with her impending trip with Jacob as she pushed her cart through the grocery store. She could feel him opening up to her. His honesty, along with making plans to spend some real-time together, relaxed her to the bone.

She bit her bottom lip and smiled and maneuvered down the peanut butter aisle. Carla was hungry. She could eat a whole buffet right now. But she wasn't budging on her new diet—sticking with vegetables and proteins to feed her energy.

“Carla?”

She stopped strolling and turned to the voice that called out her name.

“Hey, I thought that was you.”

“Devin?”

Medium in height, with butterscotch skin and a long concrete-gray overcoat, Devin walked up to Carla, a smile pushing the glasses up his nose.

“It's nice to see you,” he said, looking her over thoroughly.

“It's a surprise to see you. Are you grocery shopping?” She smirked.

His brows dipped, and he smiled. “What? A man can't shop for himself?”

She waved. “That’s not what I’m saying, but I can admit I’m surprised.”

He laughed low and long. “Are you here with someone?” His eyes shuffled around, then back to her.

“No. I don’t need a chaperone to shop for groceries.”

“That’s not what I was saying.”

She pointed at him as if to say *ah-ha!*

Catching her meaning before the need to explain, Devin nodded. “You got me. But do you mind if I shop with you?”

She laughed and shook her head. “Why?”

“You never know what things you find out you have in common with someone until you take a stroll with them.”

“That’s cute. You might be right, but I have to decline.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Was it something I said?”

“No. I’m dating someone, and it would be rude to walk with you when I have no intentions of anything else.”

His brows arched as he understood her meaning.

“Why would you give me your number if you were seeing someone?”

Her mouth opened, stretched, her eyes darting. “Well, I wasn’t at first. We just started dating literally at the beginning of the year.”

“Huh. So, I missed out then.” He *tsked*.

“Afraid so.”

“You have my number. If this thing doesn’t work out, call me, not that other guy.”

Laughter shot from Carla. “Hold on a minute—what other guy?”

He laughed. “I don’t know, but I know there is one. You’re too beautiful for there not to be.”

“Laying it on thick.” She smiled. “Cute.”

“I try.”

“Have a good day, Devin.”

“You too, Carla.”

She pushed the cart out of the aisle, thrown about what she was there to pick up after seeing him.

Not only was she not prepared for his heavy flirtation, but him being here only made her think about Lennox. Was it necessary for her to contact him and let him know she was dating Jacob?

She shook her head, deciding against it. If ever there came a time to let it be known, she would. Simple as that.

After Jacob and she decided to go to Barbados, Carla’s days were filled with getting the information back to Principal Sharp for his approval on the anti-bullying project. Now she was simply waiting for him to return her email, and it was a go.

A smile crossed her face as she entered the checkout line. It had been two weeks since the New Year, and the plans for the campaign and the hands-on life experience her students would receive was a lesson they could take with them when they graduated.

“Thank you,” Carla said to the cashier. She completed her purchase then drove to toward north Chicago.

Her phone rang, and she answered it with the push of a button on her steering wheel. The surround sound speakers activated.

“Hey.”

“Hey, you.” Jacob’s deep voice tickled her ear.

“What are you up to?”

“I’m working on the blueprint for the Boys & Girls Club redesign.”

“It’s not finished?”

“It is, but I’m a bit of a perfectionist, so I’ve tweaked it a little. Would you like to see it?”

“Yes.”

“I can gather my materials and come to you.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary. You’re already at home, probably in comfortable wear. If you don’t mind me having your address, I can come to you.”

“Are you sure?”

“If you are.”

He chuckled and rattled off the address.

“The gate is open.”

Sasha jumped from the floorboard to the passenger seat.

“Oh, wait. I have Sasha with me.”

“Sasha?”

“My Bichon Frise.”

“Sasha, huh? I’d love to meet her. But you should know I have a Jack Russell Terrier.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

They mulled over their commonality, pleasantly surprised.

“A girl or boy?”

“A boy. His name is Jack.”

Her gut tickled, and laughter surfed off her lips.

“Jack for your Jack Russell Terrier.”

“Is it corny?”

“A little, but cute, I like it.”

“Good.”

“I’d like to meet Jack. Is he friendly?”

“He is. Come over.”

“Okay.”

“See you soon.”

A thread of heat slipped down Carla’s body, and she glanced at Sasha, who lounged on the seat. Jacob’s phone calls with her had sometimes gone on for hours. It reminded Carla of those times when she was young and getting to know someone. They’d spend hours on the phone and sometimes go to sleep on one another.

When Jacob invited her over, the titillation she felt could not be described. Could these emotions be the real deal?

She inhaled a breath and put the address in her GPS.

Twenty minutes later, Carla was driving down a road where houses were acres apart before she could see the next one. Forestry separated one mansion from the next, and when she pulled to a wrought iron gate, a gasp escaped her lips.

Her eyes shot up, and she rechecked the address on the GPS. “Could this be it?”

Her lids fluttered back to the home. It was a masterpiece and nothing like the castles she’d passed on the way.

The contemporary estate had a custom color blend of light blues and grays etched in sandstone veneer. Copper wall panels gave the manor a distinct style, and the floor-to-ceiling windows gave her a peek of his contemporary furnishings inside.

“Dayuuuum Jacob.” He was certainly living up to his renowned architect status. As she drove toward the circular driveway, a copper and stone water fountain guided her to the front door.

“This looks like something that would be on TV or in *Luxe* magazine,” she murmured.

Carla pressed the brake pedal, and the front door opened. In a thin T-shirt that hugged his muscular torso and a pair of gray sweatpants, Jacob strolled to her door, opening it before she put the vehicle in park.

“Oh!” She smiled, covered with the heat that rolled from him.

“I didn’t scare you, did I?”

She laughed. “No, I wasn’t expecting you to manifest so quickly.”

They eyed each other. “I was waiting for you. I would’ve been outside if the wind wasn’t having a tantrum this evening.”

She put the car in park. “Tell me about it,” then reached to grab a bag, and he took it off her hands. Sasha rose to her feet, tail wagging, as she barked.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Sasha.” Jacob reached over Carla, and Sasha jumped into his large palm, then scurried into his one-armed embrace and licked his face.

“I think she likes me.” His gaze moved from Sasha to Carla, whose eyes were wide and lips pursed.

“It appears that she does. You seem to have that effect on everyone.”

Jacob chuckled, and Sasha sniffed his throat, cuddling herself closer.

“Sasha, I should tell you up front that I don’t get down on the first date.”

Carla snorted in laughter, and Jacob smiled wide.

“Come here, you. I’ve got room for one more.”

Drawing Carla close, Jacob shut the door, and they shuffled inside to take cover from the frigid winds.

Waiting for them at the entrance, Jack barked, and Sasha barked back, the two of them having a conversation that Jacob and Carla weren’t privy to.

“Hi, Jack!” Carla reached down and rubbed his smooth white and tan coat, petting Jack as he sat back on his haunches, his tail spanking the floor.

Jacob’s grin spread. “I think he likes you too.”

Carla nodded. “Maybe it’s because I’m with you.”

“Or, maybe you’re just easy to adore.”

A blush rose to her cheeks, and Jacob sat Sasha down. She and Jack watched each other for a second, then took off through the corridor, playfully antagonizing one another.

“Your home is beautiful. I thought I had the wrong place for a minute.”

His dimples deepened when he smiled.

“Thank you, and why did you think you had the wrong place?”

“I have no idea.”

They laughed.

“I was taken back, I think. I don’t know what I was expecting. Maybe for your home to match some of the others I saw on the way. But this is vastly different.”

He slid his hand down her back and guided her softly down the corridor. The interior was just as gorgeous, if not more so than the exterior.

Flush walnut trim cased the walls. Walnut doors and reglet detailing outlined the frame while an ornamental iron staircase wrapped from the first floor to a story beyond her sight.

High ceilings, crystal chandeliers, and dim lighting inside contemporary wall sconces set the tone of his abode. However, the clean-lined black and gray furniture, sofas, and walnut bar chairs spoke with clear authority.

Plainly put, Jacob’s home was the *crème de la crème*.

“I’m glad you like the place. I spent the better part of a year coming up with the schematics.” They paused in the state-of-the-art kitchen. “At times, I still feel something is missing.” He dropped his gaze to her. “Or someone.”

A soft smile tugged at the corner of Carla’s lips. Jacob sat the bag on the counter.

“There’s wine in that bag if you’d like to put it on ice,” she said.

A long brow rose on his flawless face. “Are you trying to get me drunk, *bellissima*?”

Laughter bubbled from her gut and flew off her tongue.

“Not at first, but now that you mention it...”

His smile caught up with her laugh, and he shook his head.

Carla ogled him as his muscular physique tightened and stretched while he moved around the kitchen. He appeared so comfortable. Not because he was in his home but with her, like they were two longtime friends who knew each other from years past.

It felt good to her, too. Lovely, like relaxing on a beach with a cool breeze and a mai tai.

“Stella Rosa Peach Moscato.” He read the label on the wine. “This would be perfect with a shot of Patrón.”

Carla laughed. “You and that Patrón.”

“What?” He turned to eye her.

“You had it in the club, more than once. I didn’t see you with anything else. I’m starting to think it’s all you drink.”

He smirked. “I drink water.”

She laughed, and he thought for another minute.

“I drink Gatorade when I’m exercising like we’re going to do.”

Her laughter evaporated, setting off a guffaw from Jacob.

“You’re messing with me, aren’t you?”

“Kinda.” He winked and poured Carla a glass of wine, adding a shot of Patrón to a short glass on ice.

“If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to the study.”

They met up in the open hallway, and Jacob handed her a glass, his hand slipping down to the small of her back.

In the study, a huge circular cream table occupied the space in the middle. Blueprints were laid flat, open with intricate details of different areas, rooms, including the breakdown of walls and how they would open, or if they were solid.

Carla took her eyes across one design, impressed with the features.

“This is the lake?” She pointed, and no sooner than she did, the heat penetrating from his body marinated against her backside as he closed in on her.

“Yes. The land behind the club already stretches into a lake, but we’re going to open this up a bit more and add boats for the administrators to take them on a quick trip if they chose to.”

“This will give the kids something else to look forward to besides video games or staring down at their phones all day.”

“That’s the plan. When we were younger—”

“Hold on,” She turned to face him. “I’m still young.”

He smiled and folded his arms. “Yeah? How young?”

“Thirty-eight years young, thank you very much.” She flipped her hair and went into a neck roll but didn’t miss the way his gaze carried over her.

Before leaving the house for the grocery store, Carla had slipped into a pair of skin-tight jeans that she told herself she would throw away when she got back. It was time for her to accept that her hips had widened a little. However, there was still that part of her that wanted to wait until she dropped the weight.

Now watching Jacob’s hungry gaze ride her curves, she hoped she hadn’t made the wrong choice.

“I’m here to tell you, that’s old. But you carry it well.”

Her mouth dropped, a gasp flying from her lips. She sat her wine glass down and lifted her hand to protest when Jacob covered her with his arms. Drawing her into the warmth of his

muscular body—a fit of dark laughter tingled her ear where his mouth landed.

“You better be joking!”

His body vibrated against her as he laughed, then unexpectedly, his mouth pushed against her face, down her chin, melting into her neck.

A shiver coursed down her body, and her nipples knotted, pussy thumping.

Slowly she turned her eyes to him as he lifted his gaze to meet her stare.

“I was,” he said, “Kidding.” The timbre of his voice threatened to shake her. But she was consumed now, by his ever-glowing irises, captivated in the sparkle that hypnotized her.

Biting into her bottom lip, words evaded her.

“I’m thirty-nine myself, and I think—”

She leaned her lips toward him, and he took that opportunity to taste her mouth again.

The New Year’s Eve kiss they shared lit Jacob’s core when he moved to taste her. Naturally, he would let the woman take the lead on any physical activity. Consent was a must for him. Jacob was still adamant about that.

With Carla, however, he’d been so hungry to taste the flavor of her tongue that he’d taken the chance. He was happy to know she was evidently okay with it since she didn’t smack him silly but reciprocated the fervor of his kiss—like now.

A thread of chills showered them as they heated together, mouths meshing, sucking off each other’s lips. Jacob’s embrace tightened, their thighs grazing, and he couldn’t stop it when his dick grew up her belly.

“Oh...” She moaned against his lips, slipping her hand up to his neck and jumping against his body, her legs wrapping around his waist.

He caught Carla by her ass, lined the entrance of her mouth with his tongue, and inhaled her again, pressing his dick against her center.

A second passed, and Carla found herself on the tabletop, her bottom on the blueprint as Jacob leaned into her, sucking down her chin to her neck. A sting against her flesh shook her and damned if she didn't want to be consumed by him.

“Take the jeans off,” she purred.

Her prompt slowed him, his fervent hold on her skin loosened, then trickling into a nibble.

“Jacob,” she panted.

He lifted his gaze to her, looking every bit of the starved man she'd turned him into.

Thoroughly turned on, Carla wiggled her hips.

“Jeans,” she prompted.

Chapter Twelve



*H*is massive hands gripped her thighs when a cell phone rang from within one of her pockets.

Frowning, Carla groaned, recognizing the tune. “I’m sorry, I need to get this.”

Releasing her, Jacob lifted his glass and took the rest of the alcohol down in one gulp.

A soft hand landed on his forearm, and he gave Carla his attention.

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed, answering the call on speakerphone. “Hey, Dad, how are you?”

“Hey, baby. It would be better if you called me more often. What’s gotten into you?”

“I...um, I’ve just been a little busy, is all. But you’re right. I’m slacking.”

Jacob lifted her by her hips, and she slid down his torso, charging their bodies even more as she landed on her feet.

Damn!

This was such a bad time for her father to call.

She lifted her glass and drank the rest of her Moscato and mindlessly talked to her father while she watched Jacob move around the room, busying himself with other drafts.

“I can’t believe you spent four days ice fishing. Did you catch anything?”

“Three catfish.”

“Seriously?” She was impressed.

“You would’ve known had you called.”

“You’re right, as always.”

“And another thing, don’t ever hang up on your father like you did the other week.”

“Dad, I’ve spoken to you since then, and now you’re just bringing up old stuff.”

“Un-huh. I hadn’t forgotten, but you’re good with shifting the conversation. I wanted to make sure this time to let you know, just because you’re grown doesn’t mean you can’t get popped.”

Carla snickered. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“What are you doing now? You should come to spend the night with your father. It’s about time we sit back and eat dinner and watch your favorite TV show.”

“Dad, I haven’t watched *Mrs. Doubtfire* since the last time you made me watch it,” Carla shrugged.

“Made you?”

“Yeah. That, and *Liar, Liar*, and the full seasons of *Family Matters*.”

She could hear his smile through his tone.

“Well, that’s because you have a hard time remembering your youth. So sometimes I make it my business to do so with your favorite shows when you were little.”

“What is with this youth talk?” she mumbled, taking an eye over to Jacob.

He smirked, and she drank the rest of her wine. Strolling up, Jacob took the glass off of her hands.

“Refill?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Who is that?” Carla’s father asked.

“Oh, um, a friend.”

“Is this the same friend you went on a date with?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The one you don’t want me to meet?”

Jacob was halfway out of the room when she said, “It’s not that I don’t want you to meet him, it’s just, just...”

He circled back around to her. “Just what?” Jacob asked.

“Yes, I would like to know the same,” her father added.

Stuck between the two of their queries, Carla shrugged again. “Maybe not. Jacob, would you like to meet my father?”

“I would.” He placed a kiss on her forehead.

“Good fella there. I can tell already,” her father boasted.

Carla rolled her eyes. “Okay, we’ll set a date then.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

A squeal caught the attention of all three of them.

“What was that?” Mr. Jones asked.

“Dad, let me call you back.”

“Talk to you soon. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Ending the call, Carla followed Jacob out of the room down the corridor into the laundry room.

A gasp flew from Carla, and she covered her mouth with a hand.

More squeals came from Sasha as Jack was perched up on her bottom in doggy-style position, pumping frantically behind her.

A guffaw shot from Jacob’s mouth as they both stood there in shock while the animals had sex, wondering if they should break them up or leave them alone.

“Sasha, you don’t give it up on the first day; you don’t even know him!”

Sasha ignored Carla, continuing to let Jack pump her from the back.

Carla looked up at Jacob. “Is your dog neutered?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Oh, geez.”

They backed out of the room slowly and stood in the hallway in silence for a moment more then laughter fell from both of them.

Carla shrugged. *At least someone was getting some*, she thought.

THE FIRE CRACKLED FROM THE STONE FIREPLACE, AND ON THE floor in front of it, Carla relaxed across Jacob’s lap, her legs outstretched on the plush carpet. Staring at the handsome edginess of his face, she was delighted for his generosity. After ending her phone call with her father and catching Sasha and Jack having sex, Carla’s stomach growled so loud Jacob thought there was an extra person in the room.

“Wow, that was loud,” Carla had said.

His brows arched. “Was that your stomach?”

She sheepishly blushed. “Yes.”

“Woman, when was the last time you ate?”

“I had celery for lunch.”

“Celery?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes. I’m on a strict diet. One of those Beyoncé did when she prepared for a performance, and she wants to look perfect.”

He grabbed her hand, interlaced their fingers, and guided her to his kitchen. There, he whipped up a sautéed vegetarian

meal, complete with veggie meat and flatbread.

He turned it into a taco salad, adding sour cream, chopped tomatoes, and sauce inside a taco shell bowl and discarded the flatbread.

The way she ate the food after their prayer, you would've thought she hadn't eaten in a century. Carla appreciated him so much for that, and now she felt like devouring him.

His gaze dropped slowly to her, and a smile cornered his mouth. After eating, they checked on Sasha and Jack to find them both asleep and snuggled next to one another. Chuckling quietly, the two found their own comfortable spot in front of the fireplace.

“You look very relaxed.”

“I am.”

“It was the food, wasn't it?”

“And the wine.”

He chuckled and nodded, taking a sip of his glass. Throughout their night, they'd drank on and off, but now, sitting quietly in front of the fire, they enjoyed spending quality time together.

“I think we should set a dinner date with my dad before we go to Barbados. He will bug me to death if we don't.”

Jacob's smile stretched. “Then we'll make sure to dine with him.”

“Do you really want to meet him?”

His forehead creased, his brows dipping. “Of course. I wouldn't say it just to be nice. I'm not that type of person.”

“That's good to know.”

“I am highly interested in seeing where you came from and how you grew up.”

“As am I. Except, I kind of know more than I probably should.”

“How do you know? Did you ask my sisters about me?”

“Well, I...” she cleared her throat. “I’ve looked into you.”

“Looked into me?”

“Yeah. I mean—”

“You were stalking me.” It wasn’t a question. He peered at her.

“No! God, no. I mean, I was curious about your life,” she rushed to add. “But not to the point of following you home or anything.”

“Yet, you’re here. In my home.”

She raised to her elbows, staring at him. “You gave me the address.”

His smile developed into laughter, and she swatted him. “God, how do I keep falling for your jokes!?”

He drew her closer to his mouth, placing a kiss against her temple.

“It’s okay. I’m better at telling jokes than you.”

“Now, I don’t know about all that.”

He laughed and kissed down her face, and suddenly the warmth of the room wasn’t only because of the fire burning.

Chirp. Chirp.

A sigh ushered from Carla. It seemed as if every time she and Jacob got close, that phone of hers would go off. She had a mind to power it down until she left. Retrieving the phone from her pocket, she took her eyes across the notification.

It was an email from Principal Sharp. Rising completely, Carla tapped the notification and read the email.

“Oh, my God!” Her face brightened, and she turned to Jacob. “Principal Sharp approved the campaign!”

“That’s excellent. Congratulations, beautiful.”

She stared at him, and he pulled her back to his chest. Scooping Carla under his arm, she shimmied on her behind on the floor.

“This is so great. I can’t wait to tell the kids when I get back to school Monday.” Her thoughts churned, and she thought about Sicily. There was something she needed to do. It was necessary.

“How much time will you need to get the waivers and permission slips from the kids’ parents?”

Carla bit down on her lip. “Maybe two weeks. Is that too long?”

“It’s fine. The constructors and designers are already completing the hard work. I’ll have the students help each other with creating the interior look of the rooms. They’ll have to work together and be worn out by the time it’s finished.”

Carla laughed. “Good. That’s what they need.”

She turned her head to look up at him. “Thank you, Jacob. I appreciate you doing this with me.”

He planted another kiss on her forehead. “Don’t mention it. You are easy to work with.”

“You would say that until I am the boss.”

“Why don’t we test that theory?”

She peered at him, a lazy smirk on her face. “How would we do that?”

“When we go to Barbados, we’ll make sure to pick an activity where you’re the boss, and I’m the student. Then, we’ll see how unbearable you are.”

Carla bit her lip. She had an activity, all right, but it was totally bearable.

Chapter Thirteen



“Oh, lawd...” Carla stared at her image in the mirror. Today was Monday, and she was headed to Academy College Preparatory High School with her Pam Grier afro bold and beautiful.

It was three years ago when Carla did the big chop for the first time. She was not happy about looking like a cute little boy then. Because of that reason, there was always a protective style covering her afro. But naturally, her hair had grown healthy, not for lack of upkeep.

Still, Carla hadn’t gotten used to her afro. She was stuck on her razor-sharp jet-black bob, which she often pressed and colored to maintain the look.

Today, she was making a point to show Sicily that her hair didn’t define her, and more than that, she was beautiful with her afro. If any one of her students said anything to refute that, she would immediately give them after-school detention.

“That’ll show ‘em.”

Checking her side profile once more, Carla left her vanity, grabbed her coat and purse, and headed across town.

High heels shoes echoed off the school floors as she walked to her class, and halfway there, she caught her colleague, Pricilla Benton, also headed to her algebra class.

“Good morning,” Pricilla sang.

“Hey girl, good morning. Oh...” Carla snapped her fingers. “Principal Sharp approved my anti-bullying campaign, and I would love it if you could step in and help out. We can include your students. However, if it’s too much to add to your plate, that’s fine, too. What do you say?”

“They would do anything to get out of doing algebra.”

They laughed, and Carla nodded in agreement.

“How much time would we have before the campaign begins?”

“Two weeks. And that’s to give the parents enough time to sign permission slips and waivers. Also, I’ve been thinking of a name to give the campaign without using anti-bullying. I want the kids to understand their differences are okay, and each one of them can reach for the stars the same as the next regardless of their financial position or status in life without letting them know this is anti-bullying.”

Pricilla nodded. “Because with the word *anti-bullying*, they’ll kind of just go along with it to do it and be done with it when it’s over.”

“Learning nothing. Exactly.”

“Okay. I get it. What a great idea, by the way, and congratulations.”

“Thank you, girl.”

“Count me in. I’ll make the announcement when class starts this morning.”

“I’m doing the same.”

The bell rang, and simultaneously they began to walk away.

“See you at lunch,” Pricilla said.

“Okay.”

INSIDE HER CLASS, CARLA GATHERED PERMISSION SLIPS FROM the copier as her students entered, some assembling in the hallway.

Laughter resounded off the corridors, and she could hear Beverly's voice from outside.

"Why the hell do you keep coming to school with your hair like that? How many times do we have to laugh in your face for you to get it?"

"I don't care about y'all laughing. This is my hair. Worry about yourself," Sicily said.

"Grow up. No reasonable employer will give you a job with your hair wild like that. I don't care if it's natural or not. You need to press it or something."

"Aw, come on, Beverly. You don't have to be such a bitch," Carrie said.

Beverly gasped as Carla stepped into the hallway.

"How can you call me a bitch?"

"Because you are one."

"Agreed," Samantha added.

"All of you are suspended for the rest of the week."

The girls whipped around to face Carla.

"What?" Beverly screeched. "You can't suspend me. My parents will freak!"

"My mom, too!" Carrie seconded.

"You should've thought about that before you used that language."

Carrie folded her arms. "I was defending Sicily!"

"That's funny. You weren't defending her the other day when you all came in the class laughing at her hair." Carla turned a sharp eye to Beverly. "You are out of line. I know your parents aren't raising you to be a mean girl. But I plan to find out."

Beverly's brows dipped, and her mouth continued to hang open. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"You can't come back to school until I have a parent-teacher conference with your parents."

Another sharp gasp flew from Beverly, and anger was written across her face, lips tight, brows drawn together. "You can't do that!"

"I can, and I did." Carla folded her arms. "And another thing—since you think you're so smart. There's nothing wrong with Sicily's hair. It looks just like mine, and if you're smart enough to make it through college, Beverly, you might be able to have a career, as I do."

Beverly tightened her jaw. "I am smart enough."

"Prove it because right now you're failing my class."

Rounds of gasps flew from the girls, and Carla silently cursed. She wasn't supposed to let that information out in front of the other kids.

"You're failing Ms. Jones's class?" Carrie cut her eyes at Beverly, aghast.

"I...I..."

Samantha laughed. "Wow. How hard is it to learn a foreign language, you idiot?"

"Hey!" Carla shouted. She placed a hand on her hip and cut sharp eyes at Carrie and Samantha. "Unless you want a parent-teacher conference before you return, I suggest you be quiet right now."

The girls shut their lips tight and motioned with their fingers closing their lips like a zipper.

"Go inside before I change my mind and send you both home this instant."

The girls trotted inside. "As for you," Carla turned back to Beverly. "Go home."

Tears clouded Beverly's eyes. "Why do I have to go, and they don't?" she shouted.

“Bullying will not be tolerated in my class or at this school. You’ll return after I speak with your parents.”

“They’re going to kill me!”

Carla folded her arms, tired of Beverly’s charade. “Stop exaggerating and go.”

“I got here by the school bus. How am I supposed to get home?”

“Go to the principal’s office. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Beverly popped her lips and screamed, then pivoted and stomped off to the principal’s office.

Carla looked at Sicily. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Ms. Jones. Are you?”

Carla pursed her lips. “Child, go inside.”

Sicily smiled softly but stopped at Carla’s side before entering. “Thanks for taking up for me, and your hair is the bomb, too.”

Carla smirked. “You’re welcome, and thank you.”

Sicily strolled inside, and Carla went to deal with Beverly.

Chapter Fourteen



TWO WEEKS LATER

Boys & Girls Club Community Center

Carla cracked a smile as she looked at the students from Academy College Preparatory High School. They included a mixture of Carla's four classes, combined with Pricilla Benton's algebra classes.

In blue jeans, short sleeve shirts, and some with bandanas tied around their heads to keep paint out of their hair, the students stood along a wall waiting for instructions.

"Okay." Carla clasped her hands together. "We're going to break off into teams to get the community center painted. This is your first task. It's also the biggest. Because the club is half the size of the high school, it will take us all day."

She pulled her watch at eye level. "It's eight a.m. If you work together, you can get this done no later than five p.m."

"That is all day!" Carrie said, tucking a loose blonde strand of hair underneath her bonnet.

"I just said that, didn't I?"

"But we didn't think you meant it," Samantha added.

Carla put a hand on her hip. "What do you mean, *we*? Are you two an ecosystem of some sort that I didn't know about?"

"Might as well be, okay?" Carrie and Samantha slapped hands and laughed while some of the other students rolled

their eyes.

“Don’t worry about it, ladies.” It was Jared who stepped up, lifting his arm to flex a minuscule muscle. “We men will handle most of it anyway. Don’t get your panties in a bunch.”

Carla took in a deep breath and shook her head.

“Jared, step back in line, please.”

Instead of wearing the same dress code as the other students, Jared sported his Jordans and designer labeled clothes. The earring studs in his ears were new, too. Carla couldn’t wait for the dress code to be implemented. Principal Sharp wanted her to wait until the end of the school year to announce it next semester. It would rock the kids’ world, but she was looking forward to it.

“Are we ready?” a deep voice bellowed.

All eyes flowed to Jacob as he and Luke Steele entered the room. Immediately, the female students swooned while the boys looked on in admiration.

For Carla, however, a prolonged string of heat slipped down her skin. Along with it, chills crept down her spine. She and Jacob didn’t get the chance to talk for long periods every day, but they did make it a point to reach out to one another, whether to inquire about their time apart or give an update about the redesign.

The more they spoke, the more acquainted she became with his delicious character and desire to help her at every turn with her program at the school. It delighted her soul, made her desire him more, and wish to have him thrusting between her legs.

Truthfully, she’d wanted that last bit for a while. For now, that would have to wait, but my God, his prominent height and muscular, commanding presence completely captivated Carla.

He, along with Luke, was also dressed down in white T-shirts and denim jeans. It was purposefully done to show unification among the students.

“I was just telling the kids we would break them off into teams. If you would like to get them started, the floor’s all yours.”

The desirable energy between them was constant, even under the circumstances of everyday tête-à-têtes.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Ladies and gentleman,” Jacob began, “I’m Jacob, and this is my friend and the mayor of Chicago, Luke Steele.”

“We know who you are,” Carrie said, a smile on her face, lashes batting.

Carla smirked and shook her head. These girls were no less immune to the men’s attributes than anyone else.

“Then you know we work hard to accomplish our goals, and we’ll expect no less out of you all today,” Jacob added.

Carrie’s smile fell, and Carla snickered.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” Luke greeted.

“Good morning,” they all sang.

“Today, Jacob and I are going to coach you as you make this space for you—and those coming after you—a place to learn through physical activities as well as recreation.”

Jacob nodded and added, “Break yourselves off into a group of six. You have one minute to do it.”

They moved to get in groups, grabbing their friends to make sure they were linked up with people they knew.

“Time’s up!” Jacob called the first, second, and third groups to stand in front of him. “All right. You have ten seconds to switch teams. Do it now and don’t think about it.”

Confused but shuffling quickly, the students mixed with the others.”

“Stop!”

“No, wait, I meant to go over there.” Omega Price pointed to the group Jared was in.

“You were in the first group with him.”

“I know, but—”

“You’re in the right group now.”

Omega glanced around at the students in his group. He didn’t know them, even though some of them were in his class.

“Man, today is going to be a long day.”

Jacob nodded. “You’re right. And now that you all are assembled, stand to the left, and the next three groups step forward.”

After getting the units mixed, Luke took a third of the kids and headed to one part of the building, while Pricilla took a third.

Jacob and Carla took the rest, and together they went to the gym.

PLASTIC COVERED THE FLOOR, AND IT WAS A GOOD THING, considering paint droplets were in every section that a student stood. With a painter’s pole in her hands, Carla put the finishing touches on one corner of the room.

The problem was that the corner at the top was out of her reach, but with some determination, she sat the pole down, grabbed a hand brush, and then edged the latter over. Climbing up, she stretched, finally coating the wall that she couldn’t touch with the roller.

“Oh!” she wobbled, losing her balance a little as she painted.

“Be careful,” Jacob’s deep voice drummed a few feet away from her. He didn’t like the look of her position and, as a result, put his brush down to assist her.

“Whoa!” When she wobbled, she lost her footing and screamed as she went falling backward to the floor. “Oh, my

God!”

Sprinting to her, Jacob caught Carla in the full curve of his arms. “I got you.”

Her descent didn’t knock him off his feet; instead, he stood firm and tall, gazing at her wide eyes.

Quickly rejoicing, Carla tossed her arms around his neck.

“Oh, my God, Jacob! Thank you so much!” She kissed his lips before she had a chance to think about it, and whistles and giggles sprang from the students around them.

“Oh, shoot.” Carla covered her mouth, and Jacob laughed.

“It’s too late for that. Are you trying to give these kids a show or what?” His baritone grooved.

Hiding her face in his chest, embarrassed, Carla’s smile lingered.

“Ms. Jones, is Jacob your boyfriend?” Sicily asked.

Carla snapped her head up, and Jacob rested her slowly on her feet.

“Um.” Carla glanced at Jacob, and he offered her no assistance. Glancing back at Sicily, Carla folded her arms. “Mind ya business.”

The students laughed.

“That would be a yes,” Carrie said.

“Because we all know when you avoid a question, it means yes,” Jared added. He put his hand up to give Jacob some dap. “My man.”

Carla swatted at Jared’s hand. “Put your hand down, boy.”

“What?” He shrugged. “I’m right, ain’t I?”

“I’ll tell you what you are, getting on my nerves. Now get back to that paintbrush.”

The students laughed and went back to what they were doing. Glancing up at Jacob, Carla whispered, “You could’ve helped a sista out.”

He winked. “I could’ve.” He whistled and strolled away.

THE DAY PROGRESSED INTO EVENING, AND BY FIVE P.M., THE students were wiped out.

“I am so exhausted. Please don’t tell me we have to come back and do more tomorrow?” Samantha fussed.

“You signed up for this, remember?” Carla added.

“Yeah, because of her.” She pointed to Carrie.

“Next time, think before you follow.”

Samantha huffed. “Look at my nails.”

“Your nails? At least you didn’t almost bust your ass,” Carrie said.

“Hey, I’m not going to tell either of you to watch your mouths again.” Carla’s brow arched as she threw daggers at both Carrie and Samantha with a glare.

Carrie put her hands up in surrender. “This is the way I talk—don’t hold it against me, Ms. Jones.”

“Oh, is it? You won’t mind if I ask your parents for clarification, will you?”

“Why are you always trying to bring my parents into this? If anything, you should have mercy on me. I did good today.” She boasted with a smile and a lift of her chin. “If it hadn’t been for Sicily, I probably would’ve gone home on a stretcher.”

“You’re exaggerating,” Sicily said.

“Um, did I not slip and fall on spilled paint?”

“Something like that.”

“Because you caught my arms on the way down. Why did you, anyway?”

Sicily’s brown nose wrinkled, and her mouth twisted. “You’re asking why I stopped you from falling?”

“Yeah.”

“Because you would’ve hurt yourself, and I was standing right there.”

“But I’ve been on the opposite end of jokes about you. You could’ve let me hit my ass, then threw a punchline or two at me.”

Sicily shrugged and shook her head. “That’s not what I meant. I saw you falling. I knew you would hurt yourself. I stepped in to help. Same as Mr. Rose when Ms. Jones fell.”

“Oh, I would’ve love to be caught like Ms. Jones and especially by Mr. Rose.”

The students snickered.

“Okay, that’s enough of that,” Carla chimed.

“I don’t know. I’m going to be eighteen soon, Mr. Rose. Are you and Ms. Jones dating? If not, I’d love for you to take me out on a date.”

Carla had to stop herself from rolling her neck and going into a full-on rant, remembering that Carrie was her student.

“As a matter of fact, Ms. Magnolia, I don’t date students or young women who could be my daughter.” Jacob eased closer to Carla. “And it’s been on my mind to ask Ms. Jones if she’ll be my girlfriend.”

“Oooooh!” some of the boys yelled. The others laughed, and some of the girls looked on with huge smiles on their faces.

Carla’s mouth dropped. “Mr. Rose, are you serious?” He contained her in the depth of his gaze.

“I am.” He reached for her hand and stroked her fingers just a little. “So, will you be my girlfriend, Ms. Jones?”

Rosy blushes colored Carla’s cheeks, and she stepped into his shadow, her head falling into his chest again. “Yes.”

“What? I can’t hear you?”

“Yeah, Ms. Jones, we can’t hear you either,” Omega said.

Laughter echoed around the room. Carla pursed her lips and lifted her head, meeting Jacob's gaze straight on. "Yes, I'll be your girlfriend."

"Ooooooh!"

Jacob dropped a kiss on her forehead and embraced her in a tight squeeze before releasing her.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife, yada, yada, yada," Jared said, smiling.

"No. That comes later," Sicily added.

"All right, enough of this. It's time for y'all to go home."

"Oh, now Ms. Jones wants us to go home," Carrie said.

They teased her as she shoed them away.

"Go change your clothes and meet me on the bus. Don't get left behind!"

The students disbursed, and when the room emptied, Carla turned around, only to be swept up in Jacob's embrace again.

"You know, I've wanted to tell you all day that I love your hair."

Carla's eye widened. "My hair?"

"Yes. This sandy brown color is your natural color?"

"Yes."

"And these thick curls are your natural texture?"

"It's an afro," she said dryly.

"It's beautiful." His gaze carried over her mane and then dropped to her eyes. "You're beautiful." His dark regard dropped to her mouth.

"Thank you." She blushed, watching him eyeing her lips. "If you want to kiss me, you don't have to wait for my permission."

His lips dove into hers, and heat covered Carla's skin as she allowed him to taste her mouth. Warm, soft, firm, but

inviting, living in the sweetness of Jacob's kiss was heaven. If it were up to Carla, she would kiss him forever.

His arms drove up and down her back, and as if they weren't already tightly plastered, he strengthened his embrace.

"Mmmm," she moaned into his mouth.

If Carla didn't know any better, she would think she was falling in love with Jacob, and that was a feeling that not only scared her but thrilled her all the same.

Chapter Fifteen



When the class returned the next day, the paint was dry, and it was on to the next phase, to decorate the building. With the help of designers who'd been hired to come in and perfect the students' touches, they turned the Boys & Girls Club into a fun-filled atmosphere with different colors, playful furniture, game corners, and a library for reading.

Outside, crews had dug the claylike soil deeper than before, adding to the length of the small lake already there. Once the water supply line was installed, filling the lake came quickly, and the students were excited to see it filled to capacity.

They worked the three days of the redesign tirelessly. On the last day, camera crews were allowed a tour of the Boys & Girls Club Community Center, and the students were allowed to swim in the lake.

"Come on, Ms. Jones, you and Mr. Boyfriend have to get in with us!" Sicily teased.

Carla pursed her lips and shook her head as Jacob slipped an arm around her shoulder. "I've been reduced to Mr. Boyfriend. What happened to Mr. Rose?"

The girls giggled and ran to jump in the lake. Carla turned her smile up at Jacob. "That's what you get for putting a sista on blast."

“Speaking of putting a sista on blast.” He lifted her and tossed Carla over his shoulder, striding to the lake. “I hope you have a set of dry clothes.”

Carla’s eyes lurched. “Oh, my God, don’t you dare, Jacob!”

“Do it! Do it! Do it!” the students chanted.

Jacob wiggled his brows as he passed Pricilla, who stood to the side laughing and knowing Carla was going to freak about her hair.

“Jacob!” Carla screamed.

“Can you swim, *bellisima*?”

“No!”

“Are you lying to me?” He continued to walk towards the water.

“Not if you stop and don’t throw me in this laaaaaaake!” she screamed, flying into the lake when Jacob tossed her in.

The students and faculty erupted in laughs, and the camera crews caught it all on film. Diving into the water and scooping her up in his arms, Jacob swam to the surface, and Carla gasped and inhaled air, pretending to pass out in his arms.

Dark laughter slipped from his lips. “You are such a character, Ms. Jones.”

Opening one eye to peek at him, Carla smirked, then closed her eye again. “Don’t talk to me; I’ve passed out.”

Jacob’s gut tightened as his guffaws clenched his stomach while he laughed.

“IS IT POSSIBLE TO FALL IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE WITHIN A FEW weeks?”

Carla buttoned up her light blue blouse and slipped her hand over her pencil skirt with the phone in the crook of her

neck.

“That is more than enough time to fall for someone. Especially if that someone is a handsome-ass bachelor with manners!” Tina shouted.

Carla’s face lit up as laughter cruised off her tongue.

“That he is.”

“So, you’re in love, huh?”

Sighing, Carla looked herself over in the mirror, then finger-combed her sandy brown hair. Instead of adding another protective style, she straightened, then curled her tresses. Now her hair bounced in layers of curls around her shoulder.

“I don’t know. I’m in very strong *like*, that’s for sure.”

“And he ain’t even dicked you down yet. You’ll be a maniac once that happens.”

“Please don’t speak it into existence because I’m already half-crazy.”

They laughed.

“I’m serious, Tina. Seeing him at the club taking care of business, watching him with the students, the seriousness of his attention when he worked. He’s focused, sexy, warmhearted, funny, and caring.” She shivered. “The way he looks at me. Like he’s starved, and I’m the only meal there is to be nutrition for his soul.” A dreamy exhale escaped her lips. “I want to suck his dick.”

A squeal screeched from Tina. “Oh, my gawd!”

Carla laughed. “I want to suck it so hard he cums all against the back of my throat.”

“Carlaaaa!”

“Girl. Everything about this man is beautiful. I need to suck his dick.”

In a fit of laughter, Tina howled while Carla smiled.

“You know I’m honest.”

Cackling, Tina responded. “You should get your chance soon.”

Carla was nodding. At any moment, Jacob would be picking her up for the dinner date with her father. After that, she would ask him if they were still planning to travel to Barbados.

“I’m getting these lips ready. I need to practice on a banana tonight.”

“Yeah, like you need practice.”

“Listen, the way that python snaked up my belly, a sista needs practice, okay?”

“Ha, ha!”

“It’s all fun and games until I’m choking and gagging.” Carla shook her head. “I can’t have that. He gotta know what’s good when he messes with Carla Jones.”

“Show him, girl, yaaaasss!”

“I plan to. And if I die, I die.”

More laughter rang out as Tina practically choked herself. “I gotta get off this phone before you make me fall to the floor.

Carla’s doorbell rang. “Well, go ahead because Jacob is here. Bye.”

She hung up before Tina could say another word and, satisfied with her look, grabbed her purse and left.

Chapter Sixteen



The front door opened, and Mr. Jones smiled at his daughter.

“Hey, pumpkin.” He pulled her in for a hug.

“Hey, Daddy.”

They both turned to Jacob, who held his hand out for a shake. “Good evening, Mr. Jones.”

Mr. Jones accepted Jacob’s greeting. “Mr. Rose, it’s nice to finally meet you.” He glanced at Carla. “I thought for a minute my daughter would keep you hidden from me.”

Carla laughed nervously. “Oh, Daddy, don’t be so melodramatic.”

“I’m not.” He glanced at Jacob. “Please come inside.” They strolled into the cabin, entering the kitchen. “I hope you don’t mind meeting me at the cabin. Fredrick is determined for us to make ice-fishing a regular thing. This is our meeting point before he drags me off to the north pole.”

Jacob smiled, removing his trench and gathering Carla’s coat. “The north pole?” Jacob questioned.

“Yes, that’s what I call the ice rink up north.”

“Ah. I see.”

“Hand me those coats, and I’ll hang them up for you.”

“Where is Fredrick? Is he here?”

“Not yet, but he may trot in while we’re eating.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Fried catfish.”

“Would this be some catfish you caught recently?”

“Not as recently as the last time I told you about it, but yes.”

“Oh, okay.” Carla strolled to the stove. “What else?” She lifted pots and pans. “These look like southern collard greens.”

Mr. Jones winked over at Jacob. “They are.”

“Coleslaw, fresh corn, and this looks like dipping sauce.”

“Sounds delicious.”

“Dad, did you cook all of this?”

“I did, and why do you sound surprised?”

Carla pulled her face from the food and glanced at Mr. Jones. “I just thought when I moved out you would relax on cooking so heavily like you used to.”

“This is hardly heavy, and it looks like you could use a meal or two.”

Her brows creasing, Carla turned fully and placed a hand on her hip. “What are you trying to say?”

“Are you losing weight?”

She exhaled, taking an eye to Jacob, who looked on with interest. Glancing back at her father, she responded, “I’m glad you noticed. My hips have gotten wider than they were before.”

“No, they haven’t.”

“Dad, I think I know my hips.”

“I think I know your hips. They were the same size they’ve always been.”

Carla turned back to the stove and opened the cabinet. Gathering plates, she went about serving up their food and ignoring that last thing her father said.

Mr. Jones turned to Jacob. “She does that when I get on her nerves. Gets all quiet and pretend like we’re not having a conversation.”

“We’re not having a conversation, Dad. You’re taking digs at my weight, and I don’t care to talk about it.”

“Young lady—”

“I’m thirty-eight years old,” she mumbled. “There’s nothing young about me.”

Mr. Jones smirked and eyed Jacob again. “You’re my young lady,” Mr. Jones said. “Now, I wouldn’t talk about your weight in a bad way. I wanted you to know there’s nothing wrong with you the way you were.”

Carla finished fixing their food and served their plates.

Face-to-face with her father, she asked, “Do you have a problem with me losing weight?”

“I just—”

“Answer the question, Daddy.”

Mr. Jones closed his mouth tight then. “No.”

Carla looked at Jacob. “Mr. Rose, do you have a problem with me losing weight?”

“As long as you’re doing it to please yourself and not anyone else, including me, I support your weight-loss transition.”

Carla peered at him. His answer was neatly packaged, and she couldn’t figure out if she should feel some type of way.

“Don’t think too deep into it. I meant it exactly how it was proposed.”

Carla’s brow rose. So what if she wanted to do both—lose a little weight for her and him. She would keep that to herself, however.

“Good,” she finally said. “Now we can eat.”

Jacob stood and pulled out her chair.

“Thank you.”

“What are your intentions with my daughter?”

Carla’s eyes lurched. “Daddy!”

“I’m talking to Mr. Rose, young lady.”

“Can we pray over the food first, or are you going to go all-in on your questionnaire?”

“You’re right. Let’s pray.” Mr. Jones looked at Jacob. “Care to lead us in prayer, Mr. Rose?”

“I’ll be honored to.”

They bowed their heads, and Jacob led them into a spiritual realm with the Almighty God. He petitioned covering over their food, their lives, and requested a continuance of ordering their footsteps.

“Amen.”

“Amen,” Carla and Mr. Jones mimicked.

“To answer your question, Mr. Jones. I recently asked your daughter to be my girlfriend. I’ve always been attracted to Carla, but I didn’t pursue her because I wanted more than what meets the eye.”

He kept his gaze focused on her father though Carla was sitting next to him, watching Jacob speak. “Truth was, I’ve had some bad relationships in the past—not because of any fault of my own. I struggled with whether to give my attention to getting to know someone on an intimate—mind, body, and soul—level.”

He cleared his throat.

“I’m thankful, however, that Carla was still available when I did ask her out. Now, I’d like to continue getting to know every intricate thing about her.” He finally glanced at Carla. “Her fears and her happiness. Hopes, dreams, and worries. What makes her so silly.” He smiled. “How I can add to the good in her life.”

Mr. Jones glanced from Jacob to the growing blush on Carla’s face. “What makes you sure that she’s not like those bad women you had in the past?”

Carla whipped her head to her dad, brows furrowed, confused by his question.

Giving Mr. Jones his attention, Jacob responded, “Carla has a genuine spirit. She wants to love others and show them how to love. She just subliminally gave her students an entire lesson on loving one another, regardless of differences.” His gaze went back to Carla, who now had a sentimental look on her face.

“There’s not a disingenuous bone in her body,” he said with affirmation. “I want...I need her to give me the chance to show her we are the same.”

Carla’s throat tightened. Was this man trying to make her cry at the table, or what? Her heart swelled along with her intake of breath.

“That’s a great answer,” Mr. Jones said.

Jacob turned back to Mr. Jones. “I meant every word.”

“I know it.” Mr. Jones held out his hand for a shake, and Jacob gripped it. “If my daughter allows, welcome to the family.”

They shook, and Carla sat speechless, eyeing them both and dying with unimaginable happiness inside.

Could this be real? Was she dreaming, destined to wake at any moment? That’s what happened when dreams were too good to be true, right?

But as Carla pinched herself underneath the table, the sting assured her, she was indeed awake.

Chapter Seventeen



“*H*ey, Mrs. Valentine, how was the honeymoon?” Strolling mindlessly down the main aisle at Nordstrom, Carla slipped her cell into her purse after activating her Bluetooth.

“Girl, let me tell you something, Kyle is like the best husband a woman could dream for,” London Jones—now Valentine—Carla’s cousin, said.

“Well, he is your only husband, so you don’t have much to go on,” she teased.

“Carla, please, you know what I mean.”

Carla’s lips rose in a soft smile. “I do.”

“What’s up with you? Why do you sound so spaced out?”

It was the third time Carla traipsed down the lingerie aisle. “Huh? I do?”

“Yes, you do.”

“Oh. I’m looking for a bathing suit for my and Jacob’s trip to Barbados.”

“Wait, what?”

Carla chuckled then caught her cousin up on what she’d missed.

“Holy smokes, Carla!”

Carla gave off a schoolgirl giggle. “I know, right? I think it seems so good to be true that I’m in a fog.”

“I can hear it all in your voice. It’s like you’re here, but you’re not.”

“That’s exactly it.”

“Well, well, well. I am happy for you, cousin. You deserve to have your dreams come true.”

“Do I?”

“What do you mean, do you?”

“I’ve sinned a lot in my life. Should I have my dreams come true?”

“Are you being facetious right now?”

Carla cracked a smile. “I dunno.”

“Okay, snap out of it for one second and be serious with me.”

Carla blinked, took a look around the aisle, and noticed she was now being followed as she’d rounded the aisle a fifth time.

“Girl, I gotta go; this oriental lady is watching me, and I might flip out if I stay a second longer.”

London laughed. “There she is, ladies and gentleman, my cousin is back.”

“That shit ain’t funny.”

London continued to chuckle. “Well, if you weren’t wandering around there, maybe she wouldn’t be.”

“Don’t take up for her.”

CARLA EXITED NORDSTROM AND WENT TO VICTORIA’S Secret. “I would order from Fenty’s lingerie line, but I got no time to wait for it to come in the mail.”

“I thought you were looking for a bathing suit?”

Carla laughed. “Whew, girl, I lied. I mean,” her mouth opened, humor floating into the air. “I am...but first, lingerie.”

“I’m not even mad, do your thing!”

Carla’s lined beeped, and she reached into her purse, scooping her phone out as she neared Victoria’s Secret.

Lennox.

She rolled her eyes and let the voicemail grab it.

“All right, Imma have to holler at you. I need absolute concentration when I pick out this barely-there lace that I’m about to whip on Jacob.”

“Talk to you later! Love you, cousin.”

Carla blew kisses into the phone. “Love you too. Tootles!”

She disconnected the call on London’s outburst of laughter and headed inside Victoria’s Secret.

Chapter Eighteen



BARBADOS

*I*ntimidating rays of sunlight covered the Caribbean from end to end, but that didn't stop Jacob and Carla from dressing in horseback-riding gear.

Tall mahogany boots, tan breeches for riding pants, and snug-fitting shirts were mimicked on the couple. On their heads, they wore helmets with chin straps. On their hands were thin leather gloves.

Carla tried to adjust the helmet and forget about smashing the bouncing blowout she'd done to her hair the night before. The anticipation of arriving at the island with Jacob had her head in the clouds. Now looking over at him, her lips widened into a smile as laughter bubbled from her gut.

"What is so funny, *bellissima*?" He pierced her with a sharp stare.

"I can't believe you're wearing those pants." A burst of laughter rippled through the air.

"What?" he teased, turning side to side to flex his thigh muscles in the stretchy pants.

Carla doubled over. Mist crowded her eyes as she smacked her thighs in sheer joy.

"I thought you would like my pants." Moving behind Carla, Jacob lifted her from her bent-over position, and she giggled heartily as he swung her around once.

"Okay, okay!"

He placed her on her feet, a bit dizzy and thoroughly amused.

“I do like your pants.”

He wiggled his brows, and she laughed, her eye driving down him to hover at his crotch. Carla bit her lip.

“You know,” she eased closer to him, turning her chin up to whisper. “I can’t help but wonder if you’re wearing a cup or if you’re just happy to see me.” Her smile pushed her eyes to a squint as Jacob moved closer.

“Find out.”

Her eyes widened, and a ripple of heat shot down her body.

“Right here and now?” She turned side to side to look around. Their instructor was busy giving directions to another set of tourists who looked terrified of the horses. Sweeping her eyes across the lawn, she glanced behind Jacob, noting that others were minding their business, some riding in a slow trot with their geldings.

Feeling naughty and giddy, Carla leaned in to pretend to hug his hard body, and her hands slipped down to his stern thighs, where she slipped over to grip his package.

“Wha gine on, my lovely couple? Wanna ready to get on top an’ ride?” the instructor said, walking up.

Carla almost jumped out of her skin, and a low deep guffaw flew from Jacob as she snatched her hand back and twirled around to face the instructor.

She was ready to ride, all right, but it had nothing to do with the horse.

Covering her in the warm swell of his muscular embrace, Jacob planted his lips over Carla’s ear. “You move too slow, *bellissima*.”

She squirmed, his baritone tickling her ear and her body melting to the kiss he pushed against her face.

“We’re ready,” he said to the instructor.

Carla turned her lips up to whisper. “I was trying to make sure the coast was clear.”

Jacob chuckled. “Do you trust me?”

Her brows furrowed. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course.” She blushed.

“Then next time, don’t think. Do.”

Carla pursed her lips. Jacob kissed the side of her face again, then together they stepped to the horse, and as if she weighed nothing, Jacob lifted her onto the animal’s back.

“Whoa.” She shivered. “That alone was an adrenaline rush.”

The instructor spoke up in his Bajan dialect. “You eva ride uh animal dis size before?”

Carla’s mind drove straight to the gutter as she eyed Jacob.

“Not this size. But soon.” She bit her bottom lip, and he winked, then laughed and saddled his horse.

Watching his magnificence climb on top of the gelding ran a tingle through Carla. The horse moved slowly, then Jacob gave the horse a squeeze with his legs, and the gelding picked up speed.

The animal jogged down the gated field and turned in a simple circle when they made it to the curve. Coming back, Carla went into a daze watching his hard body bounce, dark melanin glistening in the sunlight, the cowboy hat on his head making him appear to be a lone ranger coming to rescue her.

With his eyes in front of him, Jacob slipped his gaze to her, a smile ushering up his face, putting his dimples and perfectly aligned teeth on show.

Trotting towards her, Jacob and the horse were like one being, circling to pull up beside Carla.

“Are you ready, *bellissima*?”

“To do that? No.” She shook her head.

“Why not?”

“I’ll fall off this thing.”

“Now you know better than that.”

“How? You’re going to save me?”

“Hell, yeah, I am.”

Crimson rose in her brown cheeks as she blushed. “You can’t save me from everything you know.”

“Lies.”

She giggled. “You believe that, don’t you?”

“I do. If you don’t believe in yourself, who will?”

She tilted her head. “Touché.”

Jacob smacked the animal on its flank, and Carla’s horse began a slow trot.

“Ah!” Taken by surprise, she clutched the reins. “Jacob!”

Riding up next to her, he eased her fears.

“You’re okay. It’s just a slow jog.”

Carla relaxed a little. “Whose idea was it to go horseback riding?”

“On the flight over here, you said you wanted to ride a horse.”

She mumbled, “I wasn’t talking about this damn animal.”

“What?”

“You know, Jacob, I appreciate you for taking me so seriously. I’m still surprised we’re in Barbados and not downtown Chicago at the virtual center.”

He smirked. “What’s the fun in that when we have the world at our fingertips?”

She looked between him and the field in front of her. “We do?”

“Absolutely.”

She thought it over and shrugged, one shoulder up, then the other. “If you say so.”

“I do. Now hold on.”

Her eyes lurched, and he slapped the hip of her gelding again. The animal kicked up a bit of speed.

“Aaaaah!”

Laughing, Jacob and his gelding galloped behind her, keeping close to their speed in case he did need to rescue her.

The breeze flew around them as their horses turned and ran back up the field. Jaw locked, Carla squealed, but the adrenaline did make her giggle. She was terrified and excited while holding on to the idea that she was safe with Jacob, whether he was behind her or beside her.

Her heart thumped with the speed of the horse’s gallop; then again, once they reached the curve of the field, they turned and rode back down the field.

This was pretty awesome, Carla thought.

She closed her eyes briefly and let the wind whip around her. The gelding slowed, and when she opened her eyes, Jacob was riding next to her.

“Feel better?”

Her lips spread. “Actually, I feel great.”

He nodded. “Good. Could you stand to get a little wet now?”

Her mind shot straight back to the gutter. “Are you playing with me?”

He laughed. “Yeah. I am.”

“You wrong for that.”

“No, seriously. I think we can ride the waves next, if you’re game.”

“Surfing?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do you know how to surf?”

“I do. If you need lessons, I’ll teach you.”

“I might know a thing or two. What don’t you know how to do, Mr. Rose?”

His lips spread in a teasing smile. “I can’t answer that now, but I’ll let you know.”

“Bahahahaha!” She slapped the horse as she laughed, and the gelding took off in a sprint. “Aaaaaah!” Carla screamed.

“Get up!” Jacob gave chase, catching up with Carla in a few strides. He reached for her reins and pulled them. “Whoa.” The horse slowed, then trotted to a stop.

Jacob swung his leg over and jumped down and quickly helped Carla off of the horse.

“Oh, dear God.”

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I am now.” She smiled up at him, and he pinched her cheek, then kissed her forehead. “Come, let’s ride the waves.”

Chapter Nineteen



“So, you’re a surfer—what else haven’t you told me?” Jacob slid an arm around Carla and drew her close. In a thin navy-blue wrap that covered her body and draped off mid-thigh, Carla slipped a hand up Jacob’s bare muscular torso. She’d barely been able to take her eyes off the ripples in his powerful physique. She wasn’t the only one either.

Every woman in the vicinity would stare at him until they saw Carla staring back at them; then, they’d smoothly turn away.

“I don’t know. I suppose if we stay together long enough, you’ll find out everything there is to know about me and vice versa.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Unless you tire of me.”

Carla popped her lips and half-rolled her eyes, pulling infectious laughter from Jacob.

“What does all that mean?”

“You know what it means.”

They were interrupted by the attendant. “Yuh boards and lifejackets, mistuh, missus.”

“Just one, for my lady.”

Carla loved the title of being Jacob's lady. It made her warm inside and her heart jittery.

Releasing her, Jacob lifted their surfboard rentals, and side by side, they strolled down the beach to the water.

"You know I could've carried my board, right?"

Jacob's brow arched. "There are times when your humor strikes me right in the gut. Then other times, like now, nothing."

Carla giggled. "I'm not being funny right now."

"Yes, you are."

Waves rushed up to their feet.

"Just a second."

Removing her navy-blue wrap, Carla tossed the thin material to the sand and turned back to reach for her board when Jacob's gaze stroked her with his arresting inspection.

Moving down her body, to her full breasts, her round navel to her wide hips and small feet. A string of heat poured down his skin, and he cleared his throat to speak.

"Come here," Jacob stood the boards against each other in the sand, "Let me help you with your life jacket." His deep tone warmed Carla just a bit. "I love your bikini."

"Thanks. It's not much, but I like it."

She twirled to give him a full view, and his gut tightened to see her ample ass practically spilling from the garment.

Not much was correct.

"Sexy."

He connected the life jacket, and when she turned around, a blush filled her cheeks. Carla stood in front of him, taking in his natural scent and wanting to taste him.

"Thank you."

Waves brushed their feet, and they stared at each other so long they both considered abandoning the activity in lieu of a different physical activity.

Still, neither one of them acted on it.

“Should we?”

“Yeah,” Carla said.

Finally turning his attention, albeit slowly, towards the waves, Jacob grabbed the surfboards, and the couple walked into the water, then put the boards on the surface. Lying flat on their bellies, they paddled out with their arms.

“This is going to be exciting,” Carla chimed, her eyes twinkling with enthusiasm.

They began to pick up momentum.

“Pull up with your left!” Jacob instructed. Together, they moved to stand, pulling up with their left knee then rising to their feet, arms out, and bodies slightly bent.

“Wooo!” Carla shouted, drawing a sexy grin from Jacob.

He rode the soft waves beside her, keeping Carla in his sight. “That’s my girl!”

She laughed and blushed as they turned slightly, riding a marginally larger wave than the last.

“Yeaaaah baby!”

There was something about her pure enjoyment for all things that made his heart zestfully alive. Not that it hadn’t been before. But this was different.

For years, Jacob had become content in his bachelor lifestyle. It saved him from any misunderstandings, any infidelities, any doubts, or worries about what his spouse might be doing.

But this wasn’t similar to what he had experienced before in previous relationships. It was the purest and most tranquil relationship he’d been in, even for a newly-kindled friendship.

“Slightly bigger wave coming!” Jacob shouted.

“Oh, shit!” Carla’s eyes bulged, and she mumbled something Jacob couldn’t understand.

They rode up the turquoise waters. “Right, then left!” Jacob instructed as they climbed to the top. Directing their boards, they leaned right, then left, and glided down the wave with efficiency.

“Oh!”

Water splashed around them, and for a second, Carla went down to one knee. She steadied herself, just as Jacob was set to jump off and go after her should she flip.

With eyes straight ahead, Carla took in a deep breath, then glanced at him and smiled—her heart warmed that he was in a position to save her once again.

“I’m good!” she yelled over the birds squawking above their head and the waves crashing together. “Let’s go again!”

“Are you sure?”

Carla nodded. “You’re not scared, are you?” she teased.

Jacob gave her a look, and Carla burst into laughter. “Well, let’s go again, then!”

“I’ll follow you!”

Rising back to her feet, Carla steered her surfboard, happy that she still had the momentum to make the turn and ride another wave.

Behind her, Jacob judged the speed of their course, along with the wave up ahead. He sailed next to her, and they took on the water together. Thankfully, it wasn’t as high as the last wave, so they rode it with ease, content in the breeze that circled them and the sun that kissed their melanin skin.

“One more!”

“Let’s do it!”

They turned, headed back to shore at an easy pace while they waited on the next wave to arrive. When it did, a cool burst of wind came with it.

Jacob glanced behind them, his gaze rising at the velocity of the water.

“Is it bad?” Carla glanced at him, then turned her eye back to the shore coming up.

“*Bellissima.*” She glanced at him. “Steady yourself.”

Carla followed his movements, balancing herself as much as possible, but when the wave lifted them, its unruly waters sent her board zigzagging out of control.

“Shit,” Jacob cursed, and as soon as she flipped, he dove into the ocean, grabbing her in the tight grip of his arms as their bodies were slung back and forth by the waters.

Seconds felt like minutes—Jacob held on to Carla tightly with their bodies curled together.

When the water began to calm, he straightened his limbs and swam to the surface. The sun hit their faces when they broke the surface, and Carla went into a coughing fit.

“Hold on to my neck, baby.”

His voice soothed her, but she wheezed until air filled her lungs again.

“Look at me, lift your head, and try to control your breathing.”

She did as he told her and, getting a grip, relaxed her forehead against his lips. “That was crazy.”

He kissed her forehead, then glanced around. They were floating, not far away from the beach.

“I’m going to swim us to shore. Can you hold on, sweetheart?”

Carla nodded. “Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

She smiled, lifting to look into his eyes. “I am.”

He turned while she held on to his neck from the back and rested while he guided them to the shore. When his feet touched the sand, Jacob swept Carla in his arms as soon as her toes sank into the cool grains.

She tightened her arms around his neck and smiled up at him. “I think I can walk now, Mr. Rose, my hero.”

His gaze was stern, and she could feel his heart palpitating like they were still near danger. It made her face soften, and a hand slid up his chest.

“Hey. I’m okay.”

He exhaled. “I know.” He kissed alongside her face.

“I had that wave, by the way. I think it was chaotic because I took on the others with ease.”

Jacob smiled. He knew she was trying to get him to relax, but Jacob couldn’t explain the way his heart sank to see her flip over, helpless, recklessly because of no fault of her own.

“You absolutely did.” Her stomach growled. “Let me feed you.”

“Only if it’s some dick.”

She got him then, Jacob’s mouth spread, and laughter roared from his gut.

“See!” Her face lit up on a smile. “There’s no being serious around me, mister.”

“Girl,” he reined in his merriment. “What am I going to do with you?”

“I just answered that question.”

He laughed heartily. “Be careful what you wish for, *bellissima*.” His voice grew deeper, his semi-threat showering her with a heated compilation of chills. Jacob dropped his gaze to her, and she saw the desire that promised to show her exactly what he meant.

“Food,” she said, knowing she would need fuel when he made good on his promise.

Chapter Twenty



They were on a blanket that could fit a king-sized bed at the far end of the beach where they could be alone.

Wrapped in an oversized towel, Carla lifted a grape and stuck it in her mouth. “Mmmm. So sweet and good.”

“They’re freshly picked.”

She smiled, looking at him. “How do you know that?”

“Because I had them specially ordered—plucked just for us.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

He focused on her lips, moving as she ate the fruit. “I don’t know. Why aren’t you surprised, Carla?”

“Because you seem to be able to do everything!”

He chuckled and pulled another grape from the vine and held it to her mouth. “Not everything, but I’m pretty efficient.”

His body responded with vigorous chills when she closed her mouth around his finger.

“Mmmm.” She sucked in the grape, chewing it and swallowing it quickly while maintaining a soft suction on his digit.

After a light dinner, the two of them cuddled up on the beach but were interrupted by his fresh fruit delivery. Now, as

they watched the sunset, both of them wanted nothing more than to relax into one another.

“Jacob.”

He lifted her before she could finish her sentence, sitting her on his lap, seeking her mouth with his.

Heat showered them, with vibrations thundering down their bodies. Carla rotated her hips, grinding against his dick that sprang to life when his finger entered her mouth.

“Let’s wash the day away,” he murmured. “Join me for a shower, *bellissima*.”

“I’m ready whenever you are.”

Jacob rose to his feet, and they abandoned the fruit, the blanket, and the sunset.

THE SHOWERHEAD WAS PLACED SO HIGH ON THE OUTSIDE garden wall of their private villa that the cascading droplets felt like a waterfall.

Drenched from head to toe, Jacob held Carla in his arms as his lips kissed along her shoulder, biting into her neck.

She hissed, inhaling the warm shiver that shook through her body.

Naked, with her legs locked around his waist and her arms around the column of his throat, Carla reveled in Jacob’s arms.

Soap slid between them, sousing his torso, her belly, their legs.

The care he provided for her without even thinking about it—like watching for her safety at all times when they were out, washing her body in a caress so soft it seemed as if she were a fragile treasure needing to be cherished. His goal was to make sure she didn’t break and remain the rare pristine gem he considered her.

Carla was in love. Never had she felt anything like this in past relationships. It was unbelievably enchanting. The second Jacob dropped the soapy sponge, she was in his arms, her entire body stimulated by his bathing her.

She wanted to taste his mouth again—hungry, needy—and the feeling was mutual.

Jacob smacked her ass and slipped a hand up her back to grip the nape of her neck. “I’m so fucking hot for you, *bellissima*...” He sucked her neck. “How you’ve grown into my heart so easily should scare me. It doesn’t. I’m more thrilled to be with you, to have you, than I’ve ever been in my life.” He slipped his tongue up her chin, licked up to her mouth, and sank his lips onto hers, spreading her mouth to have her tongue again.

Showers of heat made them ignite like a furnace, and his dick smacked against the back of Carla’s ass, making her pull off his mouth and whisper, “Fuck me, Jacob.”

A guttural, animalistic growl scuttled from him.

“I have to taste you first.” Slipping his arms under her thighs, Jacob lifted her, sitting her thighs on his broad shoulders.

“Oh!” Carla gripped his head but didn’t need to. Jacob held her sturdily, determined and skilled as he slurped in her clitoris.

Back arching, Carla’s face turned towards the downward spray of the shower, her mouth open, eyes closed. Ecstasy raced through Carla, her body in a state of stimulation as she bucked against his mouth.

“Ooooh! Jacob! Baby...”

Jacob’s tongue stretched over her entire pussy, sucking and waving across her sensitivity.

“Mmmmm.” Starved for her essence, he slurped and spoke against her labia in his foreign tongue. “*Non ne ho mai abbastanza di te.*” *I can’t get enough of you...*”

“Jacob...baby...” Her body vibrated. A twitch here, a spasm there. “I’m coming!” And he sucked her so thoroughly she almost couldn’t bear the pleasure. “Aaah! Jacob...” she whined.

His tongue flicked and undulated against her clit, sucking and slurping hungrily, feasting off her plum.

“Have mercy!” Heat shot through Carla, her hips bucking, twisting, grinding against his mouth as every nerve in her arrested her in a high-voltage prickling sensation. “I can’t wait! Jacob!”

He slipped his tongue inside her sanctuary, licked up her pussy with the press of his wide tongue, sucked her clit, and then did it again. Over and over until Carla’s pleasure had built so high that she almost backflipped off of his mouth just to get away from him.

“Ah! Ah! Oooh my! Jacob!” Her orgasm rocked through her. “I’m cumming!”

He sucked and jabbed her clitoris with his tongue.

Carla twitched, spasms pitching through her body, ears popping, and head spinning. He sucked her bone-dry, intentionally paving the way for chaotic tingles to dance at her protruding nub.

“Jacob!”

Lifting her and sliding her down his rock-hard torso, Jacob gripped her neck again and kissed her mouth with urgency, the need to taste more of her flavor apparent.

“I don’t have a condom close,” he murmured.

She licked his lips. “We don’t need one yet.”

Wiggling out of his grasp, Carla dropped down to her feet, crouched, and then sucked in his dick before he had a chance to say a thing.

The true nature of his girth was not only python territory, but Carla so hungrily wanted it that she tried with all her might to take him fully in her mouth. Down her throat, she teased her

tonsils with the head of his dick, sliding her tongue along his shaft, invigorated and enthusiastic.

“*Bellissima...*” His hand reached to slip his fingers in her tresses, guiding her up and down, faster, faster, his teeth locked, a growl escaping his gut.

“Mmmm...” Carla sucked, slurped, tightened her mouth, opened her throat, and guided her other hand from the base of his shaft to her mouth.

She was thoroughly aroused by the tight, silken feel of his rigid erection massaging her tongue. Moans lifted from her lips as saliva spilled from the edges of her mouth.

“Shiiiiit!”

A steady chain of uninhibited pleasure surged through Jacob. Carla was consistent, steady, greedy—her fellatio spirited enough to make him cum, hard.

“Carla.”

She sucked off his dick. “I want your children.” His eyes widened. “In the back of my throat, first.” His gaze darkened, and she covered him again, keeping his eye contact as he guided her, and she took all that he offered. “*Sei una ragazza molto cattiva, bellissima.*” *You’re a naughty girl, beautiful.*

“Mhmm...” she agreed in a full-on moan.

His shaft was wet from her suckling, sensitive to every bob and weave. She wanted the whole of him in her mouth, and with every inch he gave, she attempted to take another. He was impressed by her mastery, taken off guard at the way she devoured his length, his girth, without choking a single time.

His brows were tight; his jaw locked, his gut constricted as she slurped his dick in aggressive, long sucks that threatened to make him cum.

“*Bellissima...*”

He stepped back to remove his dick before he came in her mouth, but Carla’s greediness to take everything out of him as he’d done to her was palpable when she sucked harder, faster, chasing his retreating step.

A growl shot from his mouth and tingles rocked through him, followed by a deep moan.

“Ah...shit!”

Jacob took her in his full control, fucking her mouth and coating her throat with his cum.

“Fuck!”

He went to draw his dick from her mouth, and she held the suction to him a minute longer, intensifying the tingles that fled his body through and through.

When his dick popped out, she spoke sultrily.

“What were you saying about a condom?”

Jacob snatched Carla off her feet, slamming her limber body against his solidness, sliding into her pussy in one rushing plunge.

“Ooooooh!”

Carla’s hands scrambled to grab ahold of his neck, her nails digging into his flesh as her body stung with fever.

Slap! Slap!

Her ass bounced from his love taps, and in his grip, he fucked her, sliding Carla up and down, plunging the entirety of his extensive strokes in her pussy.

Her bottom bounced off his pelvis in succession as his driving thrusts totally filled her.

“Oooh!” Carla’s head fell back, her mouth open as Jacob once again bit into her neck, sucking her flesh, inebriated by the sheer taste of their love. “Baby! Baby! Baby!”

“Tell me how much you want my children,” his deep voice drummed.

“More than anything,” she yelled as he fucked her harder. “I want every part of you to blend with every part of me.” She squealed again, her toes curling when he lifted her and drilled her pussy in his steady grip. “Jacob!”

“I’ve wanted you since the moment I laid eyes on you, *bellissima*.” Their bodies brimmed with heat so intense they felt as if they could combust. “I tried to run, but I can’t. I don’t want to anymore.”

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Their flesh slapped against each other, and Carla went into another spasm of fits as a subsequent orgasm tore through her.

“Oh, my God!”

His penetration was never-ending, persistent in its effort to pin himself inside her. Her cream washed his shaft in hot fervor, and when he thought she was drained, he kissed her mouth, then moved from the shower spray up the patio steps to the lounge chair.

There he sucked off her tongue, lifted her from his shaft, spun her around, and slid back into her as she scrambled to her knees on the furniture, arching at his extensive strokes.

“Ooooh!” Carla buckled, her body collapsing forward on the bench.

She was spread wide for him, stuffed with his girth as her pussy sucked his dick with each punch to her core.

He gripped one hip and slipped his hand down to her neck with the other, lifting her slightly, arching her more, and rocking into her steadily from behind.

“Fuuuu-ck!” he shouted, fiery desire a reckoning that spun around them as her ass bounced off his pelvis.

Her pussy was a springing trampoline that stretched and bent to his plunging will. Her mind was boggled with thoughts of forever with him.

Jacob fucked her hard and harder still, pulling a squeal from her lips and tears from her eyes. “I want you on top of me. I need to see you.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Whatever you say.”

He drew out of her again, and she was on top of him before he could sit down. Feet planted on either side of the

lounge chair, Carla bounced, popping her ass back and forth, dropping on his dick as if she wasn't coming completely undone.

Jacob gripped her ass and sucked on her nipple, spreading heat and tingles through her body.

Her pussy clenched as she continued to bounce, shouts and praises for him lifting into the air as he sucked in her other nipple.

Mesmerized by her love, Jacob held her tight, chasing her every time she yelped and attempted to run away.

“Come for me, *bellissima*. Again.”

Her body shook as their bodies rocked together, and when a spirited charge struck through Carla, she bounced faster to Jacob's gripping upstrokes.

“I'm coming, baby!”

He drilled, catching her drops against his erection with unencumbered passion.

“Ah! Ah! Aaah!”

Carla's ears tingled along with the wave of vibrational sensations seizing her body.

“I'm cumming with you. I'm with you. *Sono con te.*” *I'm with you.*

Electrifying and utterly spent, Carla's head rolled, and Jacob sank his mouth into her breast and up her neck, lifting her head to drop and capture her lips for a mouthwatering kiss.

He felt more alive at that moment than he'd ever been, and a wild thought to continue this throughout the night gave him the motivation to move to the patio table.

Chapter Twenty-One



A leisurely swing stirred her from slumber. Lids fluttering, Carla opened her eyes to find herself covered with a thin blanket and snuggled under a firm chest, embraced with chocolate biceps.

Lifting her head, a fringe of prickling hair tickled Carla's lips from Jacob's goatee.

They were inside a hammock, where they'd fallen asleep after their extensive night of sexcapades. Never making it back inside, they made love all over the veranda—from the shower to the patio and even on top of the outdoor table, which now had two broken legs.

Warmth moved through Carla. Since being with Jacob, her sexual appetite was more potent than before. And slipping her hand underneath the blanket, she stroked his morning wood and moved on top of him stealthily. Sliding onto his dick, she trembled from a charging shock of chills, and her plum stretched to take him in.

“Ooh.”

Warm, strong hands rode up her thighs, then slipped to her ass, helping Carla adjust to his length. Jacob's gaze was slitted, his lids so low his eyes almost appeared shut if it wasn't for the glimmering orbs that watched her. His voice was gruff when he spoke.

“Good morning, *bellissima*.”

“Mmmm, good morning, handsome.” Her body quivered, eyes closed, and body arched as she slid to the base of him. “Aah...” Her head fell back. Tingles covered her as she moved her hips up and down, becoming reacquainted with his thickness.

Straightening her body to withstand him, Carla leaned forward, stretching her arms up his torso. She ground on his dick, her nipples hardening and her mind spinning as pleasure consumed her. The hammock glided side to side, and a tepid breeze flew over them.

Warm, robust hands slid up Carla’s back to her neck, where Jacob drew her mouth to his and sucked in her tongue.

Heat split through them, and they moaned, making love as the hammock swung from left to right, circling a gust of wind that combatted the sizzle of their flesh.

It was as if they were in a dream—one filled with passion, desire, and unimaginable love.

Riding him slowly, and being led by his rhythm, had Carla in paradise. Last night, Jacob taught her what it was like to be manhandled with no regrets. It was the mindfuck of a lifetime, and she wanted more of it—every second of every minute that she could call her own.

His grip on her ass, the way his hands commanded her with strong finger strokes pressing in her flesh, melted Carla to the bone. She wanted to be fucked by him over and over.

The feeling was mutual.

For Jacob, being with someone who led his heart and gave as much vigor when they sexed as he threw back set him on fire. There was nowhere else he wanted to be. His desire to have Carla in every way filled him to the rim.

His hips undulated, driving his dick into her pussy, back and forth, drilling, grinding.

“Aah...sss...baby,” she purred, fulfilled and utterly stimulated.

“You’re so beautiful, Carla.” He kissed her lips, sucked in her tongue in a slurp, and spoke again. “So painstakingly gorgeous and passionate. I...” He tasted her mouth again as if he just couldn’t get enough of her flavor. His hands framed her face as they kissed, tongues surfing together. Their shared oxygen sustained them, and their bodies’ song mobilized them.

“You’re the only one I want. Stay with me.” His hands glided back down her body, his fingers dipping into her ass, adding pressure to her grind.

He whispered from Carla’s lips down her chin. Sweet melodies of compliments, giving her honor and praise.

She was in ecstasy. “Ooooh, Jacob...” Carla’s moans lifted in the air, carrying notes that surrounded them on their private villa.

Her desire strengthened his orgasm, and he slipped his hands to her derriere again, gripping her cheeks and slamming her pussy back and forth—driving their pleasure.

“Aaaah, Jacob, I’m coming, baby, baby, baby,” she purred.

Jacob drew from her lips, dipped his head to take a nipple in his mouth, and growled into her flesh as they came together.

“Ooooh!”

The pulsation between them was heavy, wet, and invigorating. Tingles drove up and down their flesh, and Carla collapsed onto his chest.

Jacob’s arms covered her, and their heartbeats matched as they laid close, coming down off a high they never wanted to leave behind.

Carla lifted her head just enough to look into his gaze.

“I love you,” they said simultaneously.

Eyes wide, both Jacob and Carla were surprised.

“Are you serious—Do you mean it?” Again they spoke at once. Jacob’s lips spread in a sexy grin, and Carla’s tinkering laugh thrilled his libido.

“I do,” Jacob affirmed. “I love you, Carla Jones.”

Her heart fluttered up a storm, and her eyes misted, her breath caught in her throat.

“I do.” He kissed her chin. “I do.” He kissed her face. “I really do.” He kissed her lips, and she sucked in a breath.

“I really love you, too, Jacob.”

He grabbed her neck and pulled her to him, and their kiss set off fireworks that got them riled up yet again.

THEY COULDN'T STOP STEALING LOOKS AT ONCE ANOTHER—batting eyelashes from Carla; winks and lip nibbles from Jacob. They were at Earthworks pottery, a studio that taught classes on how to mold innovative designs from clay.

Sitting side by side, they half-listened to the instructor, distracted by the newfound love in their relationship.

“We gine use water tuh shape dis clay wid de wheel in front uh you. Leh we start by getting we hands real dirty an' wet.”

Their minds shifted, and they peeked at one another and smirked when she said “dirty an' wet.” But that was about all Carla could understand of the instructor's Bajan.

Seeing the confusion on her face, the instructor asked, “You prefer me to speak Amurcan English?”

“If you're willing.” Carla pressed her hands together, as if to plead.

The instructor smiled and nodded. “No problem. We here at Earthworks are used to the tourist needing a li'l help, eh?”

“Thank God. Now I don't feel like a total klutz.”

“No. No.”

Carla glanced at Jacob, and he winked as the instructor continued with their lesson.

“If your clay isn’t centered, your pottery will not turn out shaped like any pot you’ve ever seen before.”

They laughed softly.

“It takes a little while, but if you’ve got some time to spend with me today, I’m going to whip you two into shape.

Whip.

Jacob and Carla glanced at each other again. A smirk on his face, a blush on hers.

The instructor regarded them both. “You’ll be professionals by the time I’m through with you.”

They nodded.

“First, take a piece of clay and use your hands to make your pieces into wedged balls.”

Balls.

They peeked at one another again and smirked, then back to the instructor.

“Are you two newlyweds?”

Their hands stopped moving, eyes wide and heartbeats matching in spirited enthusiasm, unbeknownst to one another.

The instructor looked back and forth between them.

“We are...” Carla began, but Jacob finished, “In love.”

They turned their eyes to each other, and Carla was warm all over, feeling as if she were living in a fairy tale.

“Yes,” she agreed. “We’re in newly-love.”

Jacob’s gorgeous mouth spread into an awestruck smile. “I like it. Newly-love.”

The instructor smirked. “You two are cute together. Very cute.”

Their smiles extended, and it was Carla who dropped his gaze to look back at the instructor first.

“How can you tell?” Jacob carried his gaze to the instructor.

“You’re carrying the same glow and can’t keep your eyes off each other.”

Carla’s mouth opened, and she gasped. Jacob laughed. “You’re not wrong,” he said.

“I know I’m not. Well, to an extent. You do act like newlyweds. That might be a good thing for your future.”

A spin of hot chills circled Carla, and she took her attention back to Jacob.

He puckered his lips and blew her a kiss, and she blushed, trying not to revel too deeply in those thoughts.

“Should I give you two some alone time?”

“No!” they both shouted, knowing if she did, they would never get back to making clay.

The instructor laughed and shook her head. “I think I should. But first, let’s get back to making your designs, and then, maybe, if you like, the two of you can make something beautiful together.”

Jacob’s thoughts shifted, and suddenly, he saw blended images of him and Carla. A little girl, with Carla’s whimsical attitude, love for life and humanity—but also carrying Jacob’s all-about-business conduct. A little boy who followed him around, snuggled with his mother and had all the ambition in the world. Jacob’s heart warmed, overwhelmed by the images.

Spaced out, his hands moved around the clay as the wheel turned, and although he couldn’t hear the instructor from the rapture of his thoughts, Jacob mimicked what she was doing.

Carla, however, wasn’t too far off from Jacob’s musings. The difference was she saw a little girl who clung to her father, as in love with him as Carla was because of his passion for others, his business sense, his love for her.

The boy would be Jacob’s spitting image. She’d seen his family, their genes were healthy and dominant, and she was sure their children would strongly resemble Jacob.

Carla’s entire body livened in quivers. She thought she’d been in love before, but this was on another level of bliss.

Following along with the instructor, Carla glanced at Jacob's hands, then to his face, catching his eyes on her. They both smiled, then went back to crafting their bowls, and before they knew it, they'd finished their first pottery class.

"Congratulations!" The instructor stood. "You did well."

"Yay!" Carla threw her hands up and shimmied her shoulders.

Laughing, Jacob looked from Carla to the instructor. "Thank you for your time. I would shake your hand, but..." he held his clay-covered hands up.

The instructor reached for his hand anyway. "We both have clay on our hands, so let's call it an even exchange."

Jacob nodded. "Touché."

"At this time, you can let me know if you want to be done with your lesson for the day or if you'd like to create together."

They glanced at each other.

"Together," they said.

The instructor smiled. "I am not surprised. I'll step out and give you some privacy to focus on your creations." She checked her watch. "I'll return in, say, thirty minutes?"

"We will have a masterpiece for you when you return," Carla said.

"A masterpiece? Well, watch out now." The instructor exited behind their laughs, and Jacob rose to his feet, got their setup together with more clay and fresh water, then pulled his stool behind Carla's.

She was engulfed by the heat of his shade, comforted and relaxed as his chest pressed against her back—his arms sliding around hers.

"Hey, *bellissima*."

She shivered. "Hey, handsome."

He smiled. "Are you ready to create something with me?"

His baritone was making her pussy jolt.

“Yes.” It was practically a whisper—already roused from his nearness and his vocal treat.

They dipped their hands together in the water and used the wedged balls to begin their design in the wheel. As it spun, the low vibration from the wheel emanated through their fingers, hands, arms, and bodies. It only further kindled the heat between them.

The sweet scent of her stirred Jacob, and he turned his lips to kiss down the side of her face to her ear, where he nibbled on her lobe.

Closing her eyes, Carla fell into a dream. His touch teased her entire body. Her nipples tingled, her pussy pulsating. Turning her face to him, she whispered, “There’s no way we’re finishing this project.”

He crushed his mouth against hers, stuck his tongue inside, and inhaled her lips and tongue, tasting Carla thoroughly.

“Mmmmm.” A moan floated from her lips as heat swept over their mouths. She was dizzy with desire. “Fuck this.” She spun around on the stool to face him, and he applied pressure to their kiss.

“Jacob.”

They pulled apart, both dipping their hands in the water and frantically wiping their hands with a towelette that sat nearby. It didn’t relieve them of all of the clay, but that would just have to do.

“We’ve only got thirty minutes. Well...probably twenty now. We should probably only indulge for fifteen. Or...” She panted as Jacob nibbled at her mouth. “Whatever,” she purred.

Lifting her sundress, Jacob’s hands rode her thighs as he smashed his lips back into hers, snatching the strings from her panties that kept them together.

They were tossed to the side, a zipper flew down, and she straddled his lap. “Aaaah...ssss. Shiiiiii-t.” Carla’s head fell

back, and Jacob sank his mouth in her neck, his hands gripping her ass to work her slippery pussy on his dick.

“Jacob...” she moaned, her head swaying from side to side as she rode him, crushing down on his erection with the strength of his fingers guiding her.

“You beautiful, sexy-ass girl...” He spoke against her flesh. “So fucking sexy. I desire you with everything in me. Look at me.”

She did, her hips grinding and rotating. Plopping, bouncing, dropping, churning from their dripping connection. Soaking wet, she was tangled in his web of hot love.

“Shiiii-t,” he growled, then smacked her ass and increased her speed with the force of his clutch.

“Jacob.”

He took her mouth hostage, sucking her tongue steady as they moved together, him slamming her pussy on his dick, hard. Again and again until a striking spark shot through them.

“Oh! I’m coming, baby!” Carla held on to his neck, her arms around him as he stood, thrusting upward to yank every bit of cream that threatened to spill.

She screamed into his mouth, and he ejaculated with her, coating her plum with the trajectory of his nut.

Her body twitched, ears ringing hard, taken from the spring of his erection.

“Oh... oh, Jacob.”

“I love you so much.” He kissed down her chin. “How have I fallen in love with you like this?”

She shut her eyes tight, then reopened them. “I’m wondering the same about you,” she confessed.

They watched each other as their pulses calmed, their hearts trying to regain some level of normalcy.

“We should probably get out of here before—” Voices could be heard from outside the door, and they were getting closer with every second.

“Shit!” Carla shouted.

Pulling apart, she hurried to grab her panties while Jacob tried to make himself presentable.

When the door opened, they were smiling languorously at the instructor, standing side by side.

She eyed them with interest. “Did you two finish?”

They glanced at one another and fell into a fit of laughter.

They’d finished, all right, but it had nothing to do with their pottery.

Chapter Twenty-Two



“*I* wish we could stay longer.”

Sitting in front of a bonfire on Bathsheba Beach, Carla snuggled under Jacob’s resting arm, relaxed over her shoulder.

Nightfall seemed to arrive quicker than it did the day before, but that could’ve had something to do with leaving Earthworks Pottery to go back to their villa and freshen up, only to get lost in each other again.

“We could, but you have class in forty-eight hours, yes?”

She sighed. “I do.”

Jacob smirked and tightened his embrace. “Don’t sound so down. You act like you’re going to miss me or something.”

Carla cocked her head to the side and looked up at him. “I will, Jacob.”

They eyed each other intensely. Tenderness looped through their gazes, and adoration controlled the beat of their hearts.

He leaned to kiss the bridge of her nose. “I won’t be far.” He pressed his forehead against hers and held her attention.

Fire from the burning wood rose, carrying a wave of heat to comfort them.

“I don’t know. You might go back to being MIA on a sista.”

His deep throttling laugh tickled her.

“Can I confess something to you?”

“Always.”

His gaze went to the fire, past the flames to the ocean beyond. “My past relationships aren’t the only thing that kept me away.”

Her brows dipped.

“I’ve had a habit of...” he cleared his throat. “When I love someone, it happens quickly. I don’t give the relationship what society thinks is enough time to mature before I think I love them.” He turned to look back at Carla. “After sitting with this, I’ve decided it’s linked to my mother’s death. Seeing my dad alone for so long after loving her for decades...” He paused. “I got this notion that if I found love, I should make it my business not to waste time admitting it and holding on so I could share every waking moment with that person if they were my forever.”

Carla’s heart warmed.

“Life and death are unexpected; so all of the fluff that men and women do in between to play games never settled right with me.” He looked back out to the sea, then back to Carla. “But, after my failed relationships, I thought maybe society was right. I shouldn’t act on how I feel until after knowing a person for some time. The problem was the instant attraction to you felt different.

In the sense that you were the missing half of me.” He paused. “It scared the shit out of me. I begin to question myself. Was this me opening up to chance, only to be disappointed again? Do I know what I’m doing? I needed time to work that out, and I realized it was only until I let you in that healing could begin to take place.”

Jacob pulled his arms from around Carla’s shoulder and slipped his hand into hers, locking their fingers. “Understand that I’m not saying I’m not sure if I love you.” He smirked. “I know my truth.” He sighed. “I needed you to know all the reasons why I was hesitant, initially.”

She wanted to love him so hard that he would never have to second-guess her motives. She wanted to make sure no one would be able to take her place either.

“You’re such an amazing person, Jacob. I’ve seen movies, I’ve read books, and I’ve daydreamed for love like this, for, for...” she shrugged, “Ever. To know that you are real. I feel your flesh, smell your scent, look into your eyes, and have witnessed the beautiful soul that you are amazes me, honestly. But it also tells me that men like you still exist. Even when society doesn’t believe it.”

He teased her. “I don’t know if men like me specifically exist, but, um...”

She smiled, laughed, and slapped her forehead with a hand. He snuggled her closer.

“I’m just kidding.” He kissed her temple. “Thank you for saying those beautiful things.”

“It’s the truth, Jacob.”

He grabbed her and held her closely, and for the remainder of the night, they cuddled by the fire and watched the stars.

Chicago

“TAKE ME BACK.” CARLA STRETCHED HER LIMBS IN THE backseat of the Escalade; her face pressed into Jacob’s collarbone as she extended.

He chuckled and dropped his eyes to her.

“If you would like to accompany me over—”

“Yes.”

His mouth spread into a gorgeous smile.

“You haven’t heard where we’re going.”

“As long as I’m with you, I don’t care.”

“So, if I said I was going to feed my tiger friend at the zoo, you’d come into the cage with me?”

Her eyes widened, and she sat up. “Now, hold on, now.”

Jacob’s guffaw made her belly quiver.

“Are you serious?”

He shook his head. “No. But you should’ve seen the look on your face.”

“Whatever!” She slumped back next to him. “Now, where are we going?”

“To visit family and a few friends.”

“Oh yeah, I’m down for that.”

He kissed her against her face. “Good.”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, THEY WERE STANDING AT THE FRONT door of Luke and Jasmine Steele’s residence.

The knock Jacob wielded against the door made someone rush to let them in as the entrance flew open in no time.

“Why are you knocking like the feds?” Jasmine said, accusing her brother with her glare.

“How do you know it was me?”

Carla gasped, and Jacob laughed. “I’m just kidding.” He drew her into the comfort of his chest.

“You see how you do me?”

His laugh darkened. “Come on, *bellissima*, I thought you had a sense of humor?”

Carla twisted her lips, a smirk riding her mouth. Jasmine glanced between them.

“You two are cute. Come in before you let out my heat.”

With a bold afro on her head, diamond stud earrings, and clad in a comfortable, thin, navy-blue maxidress, Jasmine

slipped to the side, and the two eased in, immediately surrounded by warmth.

“Oooh, it’s toasty in here,” Carla said.

She was no stranger to Jasmine’s home. Being around the family had come naturally to her from the time Josiah Rose tied the knot with Santana Summers—now Rose. Often, she would attend family barbecues, weddings, and vacations.

Jacob’s brothers were like brothers to her, so she fit right in nicely.

“Well, look who finally arrived,” Jaden Rose said.

All eyes turned to them enter the sitting room, and Phoebe, one of Jasmine’s triplet sisters, squealed. “Heeeeey!”

On her feet, Phoebe danced across the room and flew into Carla’s opened arms. They hugged.

“Hey girl, hey!” Carla responded, looking over Phoebe’s professional attire. “Did you just get off from work or what?”

Phoebe had quickly become one of the most sought-after attorneys at Rose and Garnett LLC when she and her brother Jordan took on a high-profile case that was considered unwinnable—and won.

Now she was a partner with a corner office and a team of attorneys who won cases for her clients. Anytime Phoebe entered a courtroom as the defense lawyer, it was known that the prosecutor didn’t stand a chance.

“Yes, well…” She motioned toward Jordan. “We grabbed a bite to eat before heading over here. I’m trying to get home to Quinten in a few minutes.” She glanced at her wristwatch. “We are Mayor Steele’s campaign legal team, so we stopped by to chat. I also heard about my sister trying to burn the house down. I had to come look and see if the kitchen was still here too.”

“Whatever!” Jasmine folded her arms and leaned into a hip. The room filled with chuckles and laughter.

Carla shook her head. “Do you have a minute to catch up, or…?”

“Yeah. I can spare a minute or two. I’m finished in here, I think.” Phoebe glanced at Jordan and Luke to be sure, and both men nodded.

Carla linked her arm with Phoebe’s. “In that case…”

Carla swept her eye around the room, landing on all the gorgeous brothers—some lounging, others standing, a hand in their pockets, brandy in their glass. Their genes were strong, as their features were similar but different in the way that made them unique.

“I’m going to steal you for a minute,” Carla continued.

“Hey guys, bye guys!”

They greeted her in return, then Carla turned to look up at Jacob. He had those same solid features, a dark gaze, chiseled jawline, suckable lips, wide nose, and powerful strength in his muscular physique. How their mother gave birth to such a dynasty, she would never know.

“Do you mind?”

“I don’t.” He dropped a kiss on her lips that lingered so long a swirl of heat played on their mouths.

“Ahem,” Phoebe said.

Carla pulled away, shivering, and Jacob smirked.

“I’ll see you in a minute.”

“Okay.” She smiled and exited with Phoebe close to her side.

WHEN JACOB GLANCED UP, SMIRKS, SMILES, AND THE LIKE were on his brothers’ faces. A whistle came from Jonas.

“It’s about time, Rose.”

Jacob’s smile stretched across his face. “What’s that?”

“You damn well know what,” Jaden added.

Luke, Jonathan, and Julian laughed, agreeing with head nods.

“You and Carla have been on each other’s radar for a while. I thought you two would never get together,” Jonas said.

Jacob nodded. “I had something to work out first.”

Jonas scrutinized him. “And did you?”

“I did, and interestingly, Carla’s love is...consuming.”

“Love?”

“Yes.”

“Do you love her?”

“I do.”

Their smiles stretched across their dark melanin faces.

“I’m in love with her.”

Next to the bar, Jaden poured a shot glass of tequila and strolled across the room to his brother.

“Congratulations. Love is not an easy thing to find, and being in love is something to celebrate.”

“I agree,” Julian said.

“We all do,” Jonas added.

Jacob accepted Jaden’s offer.

“Thank you.” He tilted his head and took a quick sip. “We just came back from Barbados.”

“Barbados!” Josiah finally spoke up. “You know I’m an island boy by nature.”

The men laughed. Josiah was the youngest of the brothers, but anytime he could take a trip to an island, whether near or far, he took it. His wife loved his spontaneous trips. Santana had become just as accustomed to the frequent trips as his brothers.

“They don’t want to take you with them, man! They were trying to get their groove on,” Jonathon quipped.

Jacob nodded. "True that. Sorry, little brother."

"Ah! All right." Josiah nodded. "I'll let you all have that one, but the next one!"

He pointed at Jacob.

"I'll think about it." The men howled. "Is Dad here?"

"He and Norma left a few minutes before you got here. But he's just a phone call away."

"I'll get with him some other time." Jacob glanced at Luke. "Have you decided what you want to do about Lennox Jenkins?"

Luke chuckled. "You say that as if we can have him disappear."

Josiah raised a finger. "Well—"

"Don't start."

Jacob laughed. "I was just kidding."

Jacob's guffaw grew. "No, he wasn't."

Josiah shrugged. "If you know, you know."

They drank more of their liquor and wrapped up their meeting.

"If you all could shake some hands, maybe join me at some upcoming fundraisers and tell your friends, that would be enough," Luke said.

"Consider it done." Jacob strolled across the room and held his hand out, to which Luke accepted.

"Thank you, sir."

"No thanks required. Whatever you need, let me know."

The men pulled in for a brotherly hug. Then one by one, they all took turns embracing one another before calling it a night.

"I should probably mention," Jonathon said, "Octavia's pregnant."

Gasps of surprise emerged from the men. “Congratulations!” They all went to him, tugging and hugging, slapping his shoulders in celebration.

“You were just going to throw that in at the last minute?” Jonas asked.

“Well, we were here for Luke, so...”

“Don’t put that on me, man,” Luke said.

They agreed.

“How far along is she?” Jacob asked with a twinkle in his eye. He couldn’t help but envision Carla with a protruding belly.

“Six months. She’s having twins.”

An outpouring of congratulations went around again, eyes wide as the men’s sincerity filled Jonathon with thankfulness.

“That’s beautiful, brother,” Jonas added, “Zoey and Zander will finally have cousins to play with.”

Jonathon smiled. He could imagine his children, niece, and nephews having playdates. No doubt that Octavia and Samiyah would plan everything.

“I look forward to that.”

“How does Octavia feel about carrying twins? Was she shocked by the news?”

“She loves it. The moments she spends bonding with them and feeling them move inside her is something to behold. Her face will light up, and she’ll reach for my hand, placing it over her belly.”

They all were in the moment with him, each thinking of their wives and starting a family.

“You know she wants me to take a leave of absence from my team.”

Jonathon was the head honcho at Rose Security Group, a private company that offered a range of protection services to government and high-profile clients. There were times when

he went out on jobs with his men and was in the line of direct fire when his clients were under attack.

“Rightfully,” Jacob said. “I’m sure knowing you’re safe and that her children’s father will be around to hold and love them crossed her mind when she asked.”

Jonathon nodded. “I’m taking it. It’s past time I do so. I have more than enough manpower to oversee the operations without me.”

“Good for you,” Jonas interjected.

They spread love to one another again; then, all began to trickle out. When Carla met up with Jacob in the hallway, she slid right into his arms as if she never left.

“Hey, you.”

“Hey, beautiful.”

Carla’s eyes twinkled. “Are we ready to go?”

“We are. Unless you’re not.”

“My girls are calling me out,” she chuckled. “They want me to come chill at the Velvet Café.”

Jacob placed a warm kiss on her lips.

“But I can always stay with you,” she backtracked.

He chuckled. “Go hang out with your girls and call me as soon as you get home to let me know you made it safely.”

“I will.”

Their kiss extended with pecks here and there in the hall, in the car, until Jacob dropped her off at home. But even as she watched Jacob pull off after closing her door, Carla considered calling him back.

Chapter Twenty-Three



“*M*a’am!” Tina stood from their reserved table inside the Velvet Café Lounge. Planting her hands on her hips, she smiled and perused Carla as she sashayed to their table. “Look at you with a little pep in your step and shit!”

Carla dropped her head back, mouth open, laughing.

“It’s dark in here, and you are lighting this place up with that glow, got *damn*, girl!”

“She sure is,” Chelsea added.

“Oooh, shit,” Lisa rubbed her lips together. “Tell us all about it.”

Carla glanced at the trio of Genesis Rising. The three women were primped and dressed down in dresses, tights, asymmetrical sweaters, heels, and boots.

“Ladies,” She held her clutch tucked under one arm and slid a hand over her red thigh-high body-hugging dress. “Ya girl is in love.”

The group squealed with shouts, delighted by Carla’s news.

Shaking her head, Carla exhaled as a server approached their table with a round of drinks.

“That’s right, we already ordered, and we didn’t leave out your Sex on the Beach.”

Carla laughed. “Thank you, darlings. I appreciate it.”

She grabbed the drink offered from the server and winked her thanks, then turned back to her crew.

“So, tell us all about it, and don’t leave nothing out!” Tina shouted.

“Do you have to be so loud, though?”

“Who’s listening?” Tina waved her hand around. “Everybody is minding their business.”

“The music is too loud, anyway,” Chelsea added.

“I feel like you’re delaying this girl-talk confession, and I don’t appreciate it,” Lisa said.

“Y’all won’t give me a break. I just got here.” Carla rolled her eyes and smirked.

“Tell us, hussy!”

Carla fell into a fit of laughter, and she brought them up to speed on her and Jacob’s trip to Barbados.

“When I tell you guys I had a blast, it’s an understatement. Look, not only did we have fun, we fucked like it was the last days of our lives.”

“Ooooooh!” the trio yelled.

Mouth wide, Carla laughed heartily.

“I. AM. NOT. JEALOUS,” Tina lied.

It only revved Carla’s laughter.

“What else? I know there’s more!”

Carla blushed and held her lips tightly together.

“Don’t be trying to hush now.” Chelsea peered at her.

“What else could there be?” Lisa asked. “Shit, a fabulous overseas trip with a demi-god whose sexual prowess is fitting for his divine title, and he doesn’t do anything to turn you off. I say sign me up!”

The ladies agreed with head nods and hand slaps in the air.

“He told me he loved me.”

Gasps sprinted from them all, and their mouths dropped.

Tina pushed Carla hard in her shoulder. “Shut up!”

Carla rolled her head back and pursed her lips, and rubbed her shoulder. “You been lifting weights or something, damn?”

“Carla!”

“What?”

“Answer my question.”

“You know I wouldn’t throw that out there if it weren’t true. He told me he loved me. Actually, we kinda said it at the same time.”

More sharp gasps flew from the ladies. Carla giggled and dipped her head.

“You love him, Carla?” It was Lisa who asked.

Carla gave her a heartfelt look, her eyes softening. “I do.”

The ladies sighed in contentment.

“Well, this calls for a round of shots. Hold on.” Tina stood and stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled.

A waitress bustled over to the table.

“Ms. Lady, we need a round of tequila shots at this table right here.”

“I’m not done with my Sex on the Beach.”

Tina turned her eyes sharply to Carla.

“What does that have to do with these shots we’re about to take?”

Chelsea and Lisa laughed. Tina turned back to the server. “Make those double shots. Thank you!”

“Oh, my goodness, you’re about to have me drunk.”

“Now that, you can’t blame on me because these few drinks won’t take you there.”

“Please. You know I’m a smoker before a drinker.”

“Speaking of smoking...” Tina whipped a joint from her purse.

“Biiiiitch!” Carla screeched. “Where’d you get that from?”

“Don’t worry about all that. Are you smoking with me or not?”

Carla pursed her lips.

“What?”

“I have to work tomorrow!”

“Okay, your high will be well gone by then. And you don’t usually smoke until the seasonal breaks, so smoking this one little joint won’t hurt you.”

“You’re such a peer pressurer.”

The ladies laughed.

“What? That’s not even a word.”

“It is if I say it is.”

“Your students would be ashamed if they knew their linguistics teacher just said *pressurer*.”

“I warn my kids about people like you.”

Aghast, Tina’s eyes widened, and Carla waved her off. “Peer pressurers.”

They fell out laughing, and “BMO” by Ari Lennox bounced through the speakers.

“Oh! This is my song!” Carla grabbed Tina’s and Chelsea’s hands. “Come on, let’s dance!”

The foursome made their way through the crowd of gyrating bodies to the dance floor. Circling each other, they grooved to the beat, shaking their asses and rotating their hips.

Men admiring their beauty and their moves also began to circle them. Seeing the ladies together gave the guys inspiration to ease in and dance too. The ladies didn’t mind it. Once the men did move in, they all danced, but Carla made sure to keep her space as not to be grinding on another guy.

Ari Lennox had the entire club jamming to her cool tempos and R&B musical notes.

With hands up, the crowd easily grooved, leaning back and forth, fingers snapping, and some sang along with the song.

Colorful stage lights flickered across the club, lighting the party up at times and going dim at others.

Carla was having the time of her life. Her career was great, her bank account was in the triple digits, thanks to all the saving she'd been doing, and most importantly, she was in love with a man that took her breath away.

It was the ultimate dream come true—especially thinking about where she was a year ago, or even two years ago, trying to find another gig because of the tragic loss of her last one—being single and underpaid. Her power had been turned off during that fiasco, and because she was too proud to tell anyone, Carla slept in the dark, in her cold, queen-sized bed under as many covers that she could find.

Time had a way of revealing how your life could change in an instant. Carla was exceptionally excited that hers had changed for the better, and as the song began to fade, Carla did a little extra jig and pinched herself.

“I think I need another drink!”

Tina danced away from the guy trying to get freaky with her on the dance floor, and they went back to their table. The server returned with their shots.

“Ladies!” Tina shouted back at the crowd, catching Chelsea and Lisa's eyes. She waved them over, and they promised the guys they were dancing with they would be back in a flash.

“Okay.” Tina handed them their shots one by one and lifted hers in the air. “This is to our girl, Carla, who found and fell for a boss!”

The women squealed and clinked glasses, then tossed the shots back.

“Whoooo!” Chelsea shouted as Lisa pressed two fingers in her neck and winced.

“Whew!” Carla half-slammed the shot glass down and took her fingers through her sandy brown hair. After her styling change, she decided to keep the look and began to get used to it, especially since Jacob loved her thick curls. That didn’t mean she wouldn’t continue to straighten her hair. But without a perm, her tresses would be a bouncing poof by the end of the night.

“Excuse me.” A familiar voice cut through their celebration.

Carla turned to find Lennox, dressed in all black, a baseball cap on his head, a clean-shaven face, and an alluring smile on his face.

“Heeeey.”

Lennox held his arms out. “What’s up, girl? You’ve been MIA.”

Carla laughed nervously. She’d been ghosting Lennox for a while, pretty much since New Year’s Eve.

“If I didn’t know any better, I would think you were trying to ignore me.”

Carla sighed. “We should talk.”

“Gladly.”

She glanced at her girls. “I’ll be right back.” Carla stepped to walk off.

“Um, missy.” Tina grabbed her elbow, and Carla glanced back. “What do you have to talk about with him?” she whispered, leaning towards Carla’s ear.

Carla held up her finger at Lennox, turned full circle to Tina, and whispered in a lean-back.

“I’ve got to get him off my back. I haven’t mentioned how much he’s called me, but,” she shrugged, “I have been ignoring him. I need to tell him to stop calling.”

Tina inhaled a breath and scrunched her nose. “I suppose. But hurry up, we have some more celebrating to do, remember?”

Thinking about the joint, Carla snickered. “Gotcha.”

She slipped out of Tina’s snare and headed to the bar with Lennox.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Lennox leaned against the bar. “Gin and juice for me, Sex on the Beach for the lady.”

“Oh, you don’t have to get me anything. I’m good.”

“I know I don’t have to, but I want to. Is that okay?”

Carla offered him a dry smile. “It’s your money.”

“Thank you.” He scanned the room, then dropped his eyes over her curves. “You’re looking good tonight. As usual.”

“Thanks.”

“What’s up with you? Why are you so short with me?”

The bartender approached with their drinks.

“Appreciate you, man,” Lennox said. His eyes went to Carla’s cleavage, then dropped down to her thighs. “You’ve been working out. You look better than ever.”

Carla’s gut tightened. Her transformation wasn’t for him. It was for her, and...Jacob. Her dry smile was back, and Lennox was getting agitated.

“Aye.” He grabbed her elbow. “I said, what’s up with you? Are you ignoring me now? I’ve been calling like I’m a stalker or something.”

“Why have you been calling me so much?”

Lennox balked. “Why haven’t you answered?”

“I’m busy.”

“So now you’re too busy to talk to me? Since when?”

Carla sighed and carried her eyes back to her girls, then cleared her throat, giving Lennox her full attention. “I’m seeing someone now.”

Lennox’s facial expression didn’t change, but his voice did, dropping an octave. “You’re seeing someone?”

“I’m in a relationship, Lennox. I won’t be taking your calls anymore.”

Lennox placed a hand on his chest, watching Carla drink her Sex on the Beach. “Damn. You’re punishing me, aren’t you?”

Her brows furrowed. “How did you manage to make this about you?”

“Tell me it’s not.”

“It’s not. I love him.” She batted her eyes, and even saying it in front of Lennox made her blush.

His forehead creased, eyes dipping, scowling. “Girl, you ain’t in love with whoever he is. It was only, what, a few weeks ago when I spoke to you on the phone? You didn’t bring it up then.”

Carla sighed. “Look. I know you’re having a hard time processing this; which, I don’t know why considering we were not and are not together. Still, I was only dating then. Now, I’m in a relationship. Can we move on from this? You’ll have no trouble finding someone else to call, I’m sure.”

“See.” Lennox pointed. “I knew it. That’s what I’m talking about right there.”

Carla rolled her eyes. “Lennox, you have to let this go. What is your problem?”

“I thought we were moving in a positive direction with our relationship.”

Carla was taken aback. “Our relationship?”

He exhaled roughly. “We were rebuilding our friendship, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, that was going somewhere else. I wanted to regain your trust so we could be together again.”

Her eyes faltered, and she shook her head slowly and sipped her drink.

“No. That was never in my plans, and I suppose if you had made known what your intentions were, I could’ve told you that up front and saved you the time. I have no desire to be with you again. We had our time. It’s over. I was seriously only cool with being cordial with you because...” She shrugged. “Why not? Life is too short to hold onto grudges.”

Her words sliced through him. Lennox locked his jaw, then blew out another harsh breath. Glancing around the club, his mind ticked.

“So that’s it then,” he said.

She nodded. “I’m afraid so.” She tossed back the rest of the drink. “Thanks for the drink. I told you not to buy it.” Carla turned to walk away, and Lennox grabbed her arm. She looked back.

“Let’s have a proper goodbye.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “Excuse me?”

He chuckled. “I’m not talking about anything sexual.” He paused. “Unless you are.”

“If you don’t get on with it, I’ll be gone in two seconds.”

“Okay, okay, hold your horses, mama.”

He reached in his inside pocket and produced a joint. Carla scoffed.

“What the fuck is up with everyone pulling a joint out on me tonight? Am I this easy to lure?”

Lennox frowned. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I’m serious.”

Carla sighed. “Okay, how are we supposed to smoke this in the club?”

“We could...go in the men’s bathroom, and I’ll lock the door.”

“Nice try.” She turned to walk away, and he grabbed her again.

“Hold on, hold on now.”

She shook out of his grip, folded her arms, and pursed her lips as she turned back to him—leaning into a hip.

“We can stand outside at the corner. It won’t take long.”

She peered at him and thought it over just as a quick dizzy spell hit her. Rubbing her forehead and shaking out of the spin, Carla looked back at him.

“You okay?” Lennox asked.

“I’m fine. Come on, let’s get this over with.”

They turned and exited the club together. Carla’s heels clocked against the cemented sidewalk. “Shit, I should’ve grabbed my coat.”

Lennox removed his jacket and covered her back and arms with it as they stopped at the corner.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He lit the joint. “See, you should’ve given me another chance, girl. I’m telling you, I’m the love of your life.”

“How’s the wife, Lennox?”

He scowled at her and rolled his eyes, then passed her the joint.

“You know we’re not together. But you love to bring that shit up.”

“Aww, it must’ve ended badly since you’re all puffed up about it.” She hit the joint, then swayed again, another dizzy spell hitting her.

Lennox pierced his eyes at her. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I...” The joint dropped from her fingers to the ground. “I think I need to sit down.”

CARLA’S LIDS FLUTTERED OPEN, THE OBJECT IN FRONT OF HER indistinct. She moaned groggily, stretched her eyes, and blinked rapidly again.

“Mmmmh.” Her moans made her headache bang harder than before, and she winced.

“Here, drink this. It’ll help with the hangover.”

“Hangover?” Her vision cleared slowly. “What?”

“Drink this.”

Focusing on the hand in front of her, Carla’s gaze moved up a hairy arm to a familiar face.

“Lennox?”

“It’s been my name since birth.”

Carla noticed then she was lying down. She sat up quickly and was hit with another powerful dizzy spell.

“Oh, shit!” She squeezed her temples, and Lennox crouched in front of her.

“You should stay still and give your hangover time to wear off.”

“This is no hangover. My head feels like it’s about to split apart. I’ve never felt anything like this, and...” She lifted her eyes, swept them across a bedroom, then glanced down at herself.

Naked.

“What the fuck!” Scrambling, Carla grabbed the sheets and pulled them up to cover herself.

Lennox tilted his head to the side. “Seriously?”

“Where the fuck are my clothes, Lennox, and whose house is this?!”

“Calm down.”

“I will not calm down. Are you kidding me?”

Lennox took in a deep breath. “You’re at my home. This is my bedroom. There’s no need for you to be so frazzled. You’re safe here.”

Another titanic wave of pain filtered through Carla’s head, and she dropped her head into her fingers and rubbed.

“Uuuugh, whatever this is, is nasty!”

“I’m trying to give you something to make it better.”

Her eyes shot up at him, holding a steady glare on him.

“Where are my clothes, Lennox?”

His nostrils flared, and anger settled in his eyes. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Excuse me?”

“You can barely stand.”

“And why can’t I? You don’t expect me to believe this was from liquor? I didn’t have that damn much, and, and...” Her thoughts ran through the previous night. The last thing she remembered was smoking a joint outside with Lennox. Her glare was back. “What was in that joint, Lennox?”

Lennox left the room.

“Lennox!” Carla’s heartbeat raced as questions bombarded her. Why was she in his house? Why the hell was she naked? Why didn’t she remember anything after that joint?

He returned with her red dress and tossed it at her face. Carla snatched it off and shoved it over her head, pulling it down her body. Jumping to her feet, she pushed past him, hurrying into the next room.

It was the living room. It spun, and she stumbled, her eyes landing on her red and black clutch on a nearby table. Marching over to the piece, she snatched it up, opened and fumbled through it, looking for her phone and wallet.

“What are you doing?”

“Why am I naked in your house, Lennox?”

She found her phone and pulled it out. One bar left. Ten missed calls—fourteen text messages.

“Why do you think?”

She twirled around, and that was the wrong move. Hit with another dizzy spell, Carla squatted, then sat on the floor.

“My God, my God, what is this?”

“I told you to—”

“Just shut up!”

Even her own voice made the pain worse. It was unbearable when she yelled. She had to be quiet. Needed silence. She needed...to get out of there.

Lennox approached her with a cup and shoved it in her face.

“I said drink this.”

She slapped the cup out of his hand, and it flew across the room, its contents splattering on the wall.

“You ungrateful little bitch.”

“What was in that joint, Lennox?”

“The audacity of you.” He sneered and got closer to her face. “Do you think I need to put something in a joint to have you?” He *tsked*. “You’re easier than you think, bi—”

Smack!

Carla reached back to slap his face again. Though her palm was stinging, her anger was boiling over.

He caught her hand. “Do it again, and I’ll return the favor.”

She shook out of his grip and smacked him, then ducked and rolled across the floor in an attempt to escape him.

He caught Carla rising on her feet, grabbed her neck, and pushed her body against a wall. “You don’t want to fight with me. You’ll lose.”

“Let me go.” It came out as a whisper as he choked her esophagus. He squeezed tighter, and she grabbed his wrist with both hands, desperately trying to pry his fingers from her throat.

Veins popped in her forehead, and she scratched at his wrists, her feet dangling against the sheetrock as he held her steady.

“See, I told you, you wouldn’t win.”

He dropped her, and she fell to the floor, wheezing, spinning, on the brink of passing out again.

I’ve got to get out of here.

She closed her eyes and steadied her breath, then opened them and scanned the room for her shoes.

Fuck it.

Rising back to her feet, Carla snatched up her clutch and headed around corners, searching for the front door.

“You need to sit down.”

“You need to go to hell.”

When she found a door, Carla didn’t know if it was the front or the back door, but she increased her speed, desperate to get out.

“I need you to attend a gathering with me.”

She stopped in her tracks.

“I’m running for mayor, and I need you on my arm at a private event this weekend.”

Carla turned around slowly. “Why do I care about what you need, Lennox?”

“Trust me. You will.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “Is that some kind of a threat?”

He pushed his lips together and shrugged.

“Ugh!”

Turning back around, Carla unlocked the door and pushed through it. On the porch, she scanned the area. After a moment, she identified it as the southside of town.

“Great,” she mumbled. “Fool probably got me in the hood.”

She took off in a fast walk down the sidewalk, crossing the street and trying to get as far away from Lennox’s house as she could while she fished for her phone.

Barefoot and still a bit dizzy, Carla hit the ride-sharing app and ordered a ride.

Five minutes.

A courier was in the area. Carla breathed a sigh of relief, thankful for that.

Her phone beeped with an incoming notification.

It was from Lennox.

“Ugh!” If she hadn’t needed the phone, she would have thrown it into traffic.

Opening the message, her eyes ran across an image.

Of her.

Naked in his bed.

Her feet stopped walking, heart ricocheting, heat sweeping up her skin.

Along with it, the words: **As I said, I need you this weekend, and you’ll be there if you don’t want this delivered to your boyfriend.**

Another message came through from him.

Have a great day, Carla. Kiss emoji.

Carla grabbed her chest.

What was she going to do?

Chapter Twenty-Five



“Not right now, Sasha.” Carla swatted at her Bichon Frise, who licked her fingers hanging over the bathtub. Inside, Carla soaked her body, needing to feel uncontaminated after the fiasco an hour ago.

It didn't take long for the ride service to get her home, even though she lived some twenty minutes away from Lennox.

Once inside, she made a beeline for the bathtub but was still too tired to run hot water and get inside. She sat slumped against the porcelain clawfoot tub for thirty minutes, calming her breath, catching up with her thoughts before finally reaching over to turn on the water.

Now with her cell phone plastered to her ear, she waited for the person on the other line to take her call.

“This is Principal Sharp.”

“Hello, this is Ms. Carla Jones. I have a family emergency and will not be able to get to my class today, unfortunately.”

“I'm sorry to hear that, Ms. Jones. Is there anything I can do?”

“No, no. But I will be in class tomorrow morning.”

“Okay. Thank you for letting me know.”

“You're welcome. Have a good day.”

“I’ll say a prayer for your family.”

Say a prayer for me.

“Thank you, Principal Sharp.”

The call ended, and Carla dropped the phone over the tub where Sasha sniffed the screen. She said a quick prayer of repentance for the lie she’d just told Principal Sharp.

“Carla, Carla, Carla,” she chanted. “What have you done?”

Once again, she tried to run the night through her head. Everything was going great. She was dancing with her girlfriends, drinks, the joint...

She paused. They never got to the joint because Lennox kidnapped her. She was sure of it.

“Ugh!”

Carla couldn’t believe she would’ve left with him—not in a sober state of mind or a drunken one. On top of that, she was adamant that she wasn’t drunk. Was she feeling good?

Sure.

But not good enough to be drunk. Her mind raced, thoughts shuffling.

Lennox. He’d appeared out of nowhere. Why was he there? In that ugly-ass baseball cap.

“Probably trying to hide from the media,” she murmured.

That did make sense. He was running for office. The last place he needed to be seen was a nightclub.

The Velvet Café wasn’t any nightclub. It was more of a poetry lounge. Still, people smoked from hookahs inside, and the place still embodied a club’s atmosphere.

She had a drink, told him to stop calling her, and then obliged him in what she considered a farewell smoke.

“Uggggggh!”

Carla was so frustrated with herself. Standing outside, thinking nothing of it and then, then...nothing. Her mind was drawing a blank.

“Everything’s going to be okay. You will figure this out and get through it.”

Her phone buzzed, and Sasha barked at the device. Leaning over, Carla tapped it frantically to get it to stop making any noise. Lifting it, she saw a message from Tina.

Pick up the phone.

She set the phone on the edge of the tub and stared at it as if it would bite her. She couldn’t talk to Tina right now. All of the questions she would ask, Carla didn’t have any answers. She needed to get those first. But, how would she?

The phone rang, and Jacob’s face filled her screen. Her heart thundered, and she reached for the phone but hesitated to answer it.

A second ring, third ring, fourth ring, the call went to voicemail. Exhaling a breath, Carla dropped the phone over the tub again and sank so far into the water she submerged her hair, and only her face was above.

How could she talk to Jacob right now?

This was the nightmare of all nightmares.

On her way home, she scrolled through the text messages. Four of them were from Jacob. Three missed phone calls from him. The rest of the text messages and phone calls were from Tina, except for one call from Academy College Preparatory High School.

Carla had yet to go through any of the messages. She was sure Tina’s were a blitz of questions and Jacob...

Carla shut her eyes tight. There was no way she would betray him. No. She wouldn’t believe it. Lennox was a liar. Her body didn’t feel penetrated. She knew when she’d had a dick inside her. But she didn’t have proof. Worst, he had naked pictures of her. How could she defend those if he sent them to Jacob?

“Why am I naked in your house, Lennox?”

She found her phone pulled it out. One bar left. Ten missed calls—fourteen text messages.

“Why do you think?”

Anger boiled through her, thinking about Lennox.

“I need you to attend a gathering with me.”

She wasn't going anywhere with him, but even as she thought it, anxiety-riddled her veins.

She closed her eyes and prayed, and prayed, and prayed.

“I need you, Lord.”

After refilling the water because it became cold, Carla soaked for another hour in the tub. Pulling herself from the tub, she grabbed a nearby towel, and blot-dried her body as she moved to stand in front of the mirror.

A gasp flew from her lips, her eyes getting closer to the image. She lifted her head.

Bruises. On her neck. They were light, but apparent.

Anger filled her again, and she tossed her hands up and screamed.

TURNING ON CARLA'S STREET, JACOB TRIED TO PUT THE worry in the pit of his stomach to rest.

Since they'd separated when they arrived back in town from Barbados, Carla was in the wind. No phone calls from her, no text messages, and all of his efforts to reach out had gone unanswered.

That wasn't the thing that had him on her street, pulling his Bentley into her driveway behind her Infiniti. It was when he went to Academy College Preparatory School to surprise her with lunch and roses—only to find that she'd called in with the excuse of a family emergency.

Immediately, Jacob thought to call her father. But if this emergency wasn't about him, Jacob didn't want to alert Mr. Jones for naught.

Exiting his vehicle, Jacob took the three steps up her front porch, opened her screen, and knocked firmly against the door.

INSIDE, CARLA'S HEAD SNAPPED UP FROM HER POSITION IN front of the bathroom sink. She'd been inside, sulking, when she'd heard the knock on the door.

Tightening the bath towel around her body, she quietly walked through her apartment to the front door.

She leaned to look through the peephole into a mass of chocolate skin, medium lips, that wide nose she loved, and goatee made her heart thunder.

She pulled away from the door but stood in front of it. Her mind raced. If she let Jacob in, he would surely see her bruises.

She sighed and closed her eyes as dread consumed her.

Turning around, Carla braced her back against the door and spoke.

“Hey, you.”

“*Bellissima?*”

Her eyes closed on an exhale. “Who else would I be?”

“Are you okay?”

Her heart picked up an unruly palpitation. “Why would you ask me that?”

He was quiet for longer than a second. “I’ve called and texted, and your school said you had a family emergency.”

Carla locked her jaw.

“Also, I’m still outside of the door. Did I do something I’m not aware of?”

“No. God, no.” She wouldn’t dare go with the *it’s-me* rhetoric, but what would she say? “I’m not feeling well, and in case I’m contagious, I’d rather not let you in.”

She bit her tongue after that lie.

He cursed. “Have you been to see the doctor? This could be something we brought back from the island unknowingly.”

“Um, no. I’ve just started to feel miserable.”

Well, that was the truth.

“Please, my love, let me take care of you.”

Carla closed her eyes. She felt like shit. What if she went ahead and told him everything right then and there? She would have the upper hand, right? He would believe her, no doubt. They loved each other. They were in love. He trusted her to tell him the truth. They made a pact.

Carla nodded. That’s what she would do. She turned to face the door, removed the chain, reached for the lock, then paused, her hand opening to cover the deadbolt.

The pictures. His past. Would he believe her?

“I can’t.”

Jacob leaned into the doorjamb. “I miss you.”

She smiled. “It’s only been twenty-four hours.”

“And still, I long to hold you again.”

“You don’t make this easy.”

“I hope not, but since you are adamant, I’ll let you rest. Promise to pick up the phone when I call.”

“I promise.”

“I love you.”

Her heart palpitated, and she took in a weary breath. “I love you, too.”

They stood silent, neither wanting to remove the link they shared even beyond the barrier of the door.

“Make a doctor’s appointment, or I’m coming back with my personal MD.”

She smiled. “Pushy.”

“When I need to be.”

“It may pass. It could very well be a twenty-four-hour thing, but if I feel any worse, I promise to make an appointment.”

“Good. I’ll talk to you soon?”

“Yes.”

“Have a good day, Carla.”

“You too, Jacob.”

He lingered a moment more, then turned, took his gaze around the neighborhood, and left.

Chapter Twenty-Six



“Thank you for seeing me, Dr. Morrison. I know you were probably on your way out of the door when I called.”

“I was.”

The fifty-six-year-old gynecologist bent to grab her stool, sat, and gave Carla her attention. The rapport the two had stemmed from being introduced to Dr. Morrison by her cousin, London Valentine.

For the two women, finding an African-American doctor was necessary. It gave the assurance that the gynecologist would understand not only their bodies but their culture—and consider that when offering information. From the age of eighteen, Dr. Morrison had been Carla’s OB/GYN, so she was thankful to have her to come to in her current situation.

“Tell me—what’s your emergency?”

“I’ll give it to you straight.” Carla straightened her shoulders as she sat on the exam table. “I was out last night at a poetry lounge. To make a long story short, I was...taken back to my ex-boyfriend’s home, and when I woke up, I was naked. I need you to check me out and tell me if there are signs of sexual intercourse.”

Dr. Morrison also straightened her shoulders.

“You were taken?”

Carla blew out a breath. “Yes.”

“Ms. Jones—”

“I know what it sounds like.” She paused. “Listen, I know what it sounds like, but I’m not sure exactly what happened. I’m missing some of my memory.”

“You’re missing some of your memory because you had too much to drink, or...?”

“I didn’t have too much to drink!”

Dr. Morrison’s brows furrowed, Carla’s outburst silencing her. She watched her steadily, then tried again. “Do you need a rape kit, Ms. Jones?”

Carla’s eyes widened. “No.” She shook her head. “No, no, no.”

Dr. Morrison stared at Carla for a moment more. “You are more than welcome to refuse, but I do think if you’ve lost your memory and you woke up naked, you should have one.”

“I don’t want one. Lennox is a lot of things, but he’s not a rapist.”

“Hmm.”

“Can you check me out or not?”

“You said you were going to be straight up with me.”

“I am.”

“You’re not telling me everything.”

Carla let an exasperated sigh. “I smoked some weed. It was just a little joint. And I’d only hit it maybe twice, and...I remember nothing else after that.”

“Could it be possible that this Lennox may have put something in your joint?”

“Anything’s possible.”

“A rape kit would give you the biggest answer you’re looking for.”

“Jesus! Can you please stop with the rape kit? Lennox would never do something as nefarious as that.”

“But you believe he would slip something in your weed and...kidnap you?”

Carla wiggled her hips and jumped off the table. “Never mind. Have a good day, Dr. Morrison.”

“Stop. Carla.” Dr. Morrison went and stood in front of Carla. “I apologize. I didn’t mean to frustrate you at all. I just want you to get the answers you’re looking for.”

“Can’t you find that out by taking a regular exam?”

The doctor sighed. “Let’s just call it an exam using the kit. Not to insinuate anything, but to check for everything. It’s thorough, and it will give you some relief.”

Carla sighed and nodded. “For the record, I don’t think I was penetrated at all. I know my body. But I need to prove that Lennox is lying about us having sex. I’m...” her eyes shuffled away from Dr. Morrison, then back, “...in a relationship, doctor. I love him, and I would never do anything to hurt him. I need to know I didn’t have sex with my ex.”

Dr. Morrison pulled Carla in for a hug, and Carla breathed and exhaled on her shoulder.

“I understand, and I’m here for you.” Dr. Morrison drew back and looked into Carla’s worried eyes. “Climb back on the table. I’ll get Nurse Stenson to help me out. Is that okay?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

Carla pulled back onto the table as the doctor left the room.

“ROSE AND GARNETT LLC, THIS IS PHOEBE ROSE-DAVIDSON speaking.”

“Hey Mrs. Davidson, this is Carla Jones.”

“Carla? Girl, why are you calling my office phone?”

“Because you’re still at work, and you don’t answer your cell when you’re working.”

“Good point.”

“I need a favor.”

“What’s up?”

Carla cleared her throat. “Is there any way you could subpoena a video recording from a bar or club?”

Phoebe sat up from her recline in her office chair. “Yes. I would need a good reason for the judge to grant it.”

Silence lingered.

“Do you have a good reason, Carla?”

“Can this be between us?”

“Of course. What is it?”

“I was smoking a joint last night outside the Velvet Café with a person I thought I could trust, and I think the person I was smoking with laced the joint with something.”

“Oh, no.”

“Unfortunately. It was already rolled, but I don’t remember what happened after that. I just need to see what happened after that. Can you run with this, or do you need more details?”

“I got this.”

“Okay, good. How soon will you know?”

“I’ll let you know the moment I am granted or denied the subpoena.”

“Thank you very much.”

“You do plan to tell me some details after I get this, right?”

“I will.”

“Okay. Are you okay?”

Carla hesitated. “Not really. I might lose my mind if I don’t find some answers.”

“I’m all over this, then I’m coming over, and we can talk.”

“Okay. Thanks, goodnight.”

Carla ended the call and sat back against her headboard.

After the doctor’s visit, she came home, showered, and climbed into bed to call Phoebe. She sighed, knowing she would have answers soon for it all.

And if they revealed what she knew in her heart—that she hadn’t slept with Lennox, Carla would breathe easy and never look at Lennox’s lying face again.

“GOOD MORNING MS. JONES.” CARRIE MAGNOLIA STROLLED into the room with books crushed against her chest and her sidekick Samantha in her shadow.

“Good morning, Ms. Magnolia. Why don’t you just get a bookbag?”

Carrie frowned. “Nothing about those are very stylish.”

Carla smirked. “So, you’d rather tote around an armful of books instead of putting them in a bag that you can carry easier?”

“I carry these just fine. Thanks for your concern, though. How’s the boyfriend?”

At the mention of Jacob, Carla’s heart warmed, but her smile fell. “Mind your business and have a seat.”

Samantha laughed, and Carrie cut her eyes at Samantha.

“What are you laughing about?”

Samantha’s mirth dried up instantly. “Nothing.”

Carrie put on a phony smile. “That’s what I thought.”

Sicily strolled in. “Good morning, Ms. Jones.”

“Hey, Sicily!” Carrie said enthusiastically.

Both Carla and Sicily eyed Carrie suspiciously.

“Hey.”

Carrie tossed an arm around Sicily’s shoulder and pulled her close. “I didn’t see you yesterday.”

“Yeah, I had a doctor’s appointment.”

“Oh. Everything’s okay, isn’t it?”

Beverly Moore entered the room, annoyed that Carla was back instead of the substitute teacher.

After being suspended for a week, Beverly had been punished by her parents every single day. Not only did she have to do her everyday chores, but she had to clean her brother’s nasty room, and her parents took away Beverly’s allowance, cell phone, and social media accounts.

Her wicked mother made a video and posted it to Beverly’s Instagram and Facebook feed, telling everyone that she was on punishment because she was failing and had been suspended from school, further embarrassing her.

Her supposed-to-be best friends, Carrie and Samantha, had yet to reach out to her or even comment on her posts. She checked the few times she was able to get to the library for “studying.”

Now she stood behind them and watched Carrie gloat with Sicily for reasons unknown to her.

“Yes. It was a routine check-up.”

“Great. We have room at our lunch table if you’d like to join us from here on out.”

Sicily’s expression, along with Samantha and Beverly’s brows, arched in surprise. “Since when?”

“Since now.”

“Why?”

“You’re cool. I didn’t know that until we got a chance to get to know each other at the Boys & Girls Club. So, it’s only right you take your place with the cool kids.” Carrie turned to Samantha. “Right?”

“Right,” Samantha agreed, smiling.

“Wrong,” Beverly interjected.

All eyes turned to Beverly. “Excuse me, no one was asking you,” Carrie said.

Beverly frowned. “You asked Samantha.”

“Yeah. But I didn’t ask you. The cool kids pass their classes and don’t get suspended. That would not be you.”

Beverly’s brows furrowed more, and she scowled.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll find your place with the losers.”

“Hey!” Carla interrupted. All eyes turned to Carla.

“I’m just keeping it real, Ms. Jones.”

“You’re acting mean. And that was not cool. So, tell me again how much of a cool kid you are.”

Carrie sighed. “You’re right.” She looked back at Beverly. “I apologize, Beverly. There’s still no room for you at our table, but I am sorry.”

Carrie tugged Sicily, coaching her to walk in sync with Carrie, and Samantha followed as they found seats in the front of the class.

Carla exhaled woefully. What was she going to do with this one?

Beverly twirled around and stomped out of the classroom.

Carla left her seat and went after her. “Ms. Moore, where are you going?”

“I’m out of here!”

At her locker, Beverly shoved her books inside, then slammed the metal container shut.

“Look, I know that was uncalled for by Carrie, and I’ll pull her aside again and reprimand her, but you can’t leave. If you do, I’ll be forced to give you detention.”

“Do whatever you want! You’ve already ruined my life!”

“How have I ruined your life? Please, don’t be so dramatic.”

Beverly turned her eyes to Carla and flipped her off. “Fuck you, Ms. Jones.”

With that, she turned and marched out of the building.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Roses trailed her walkway from the mailbox to her front door. Every day for the rest of the week, Carla would arrive home to a different color of flowers welcoming her home.

At her door, there was always a note—something heartfelt, rendering her speechless for the moment.

I miss you more than words can say, bellissima. I pray for health over your life every night and wage war against our spiritual enemy to rid you of any illnesses or worries that may weigh you down. Light of my life, I wish you peace and comfort in the days ahead.

—Jacob

That was just one of many notes that made Carla fall in love with him all the more. By Saturday, she couldn't take any more of their separation, and when the call came in from Dr. Morrison, Carla answered the phone so quick it barely had a chance to ring.

“Give it to me straight.”

“Good evening to you, too, Ms. Jones.”

“I'm sorry. I'm just... I'm about to lose my mind, doctor.”

“I understand. As a friend, I'll tell you. There was no evidence found that you've been sexually assaulted.”

Carla exhaled so hard that she fell onto the floor. Tears clouded her eyes, and she covered her heart with her hand.

Her voice broke when she responded. “I knew it. I knew it. I knew it.”

“As your doctor, I’ll tell you that you should report this to the authorities and ditch the guy you trusted.”

“Oh, he’s ditched. Trust me. I never knew this would be something I’d have to worry about with him. It’s so weird. I don’t understand why he lied about it.”

“To manipulate you. He has nothing over you now. You can rest assured about that.”

Carla’s lids blinked rapidly. He did have something. The picture of her naked. Her line beeped, and when she pulled the phone away from her ear to look at it, Lennox’s number bounced back and forth on the screen.

“Is there anything else, doctor?”

“Not unless you have more questions for me. I received these results yesterday but was so busy I didn’t get to call you before the day’s end.”

“That’s okay. Thank you for calling with the results now.”

“You’re welcome. Have a good weekend.”

“You too.”

Carla hung up and clicked over, answering Lennox’s call. “You lying piece of shit.”

“Good afternoon to you too, Carla.”

“Why are you calling me?”

“You know why. I need you on my arm for this fundraising event.”

“I need you on the first flight to hell, but we don’t see that happening.”

“Ouch.” He laughed. “You’ve always been bold with that tongue. You should use it properly, and me and you would be in love right now.”

“Trust me. I use it properly on Mr. Rose every chance I get.”

Lennox sighed harshly. “Why must you turn me into a jackass?”

“You’re a liar. I know we didn’t have sex. What I don’t understand is what was the purpose of you lying?”

“If you know that, then why are you so mad? That should make you feel better, right?”

“Why did you lie?”

“I never said we had sex. You assumed it.”

“You insinuated it!”

“I still never said we had sex.”

“Okay, have a good life.”

“Ah, ah... I need a plus-one at this party. You need to be here within the hour.”

“It’s never happening.”

“Never say never.” His voice grew ominous. “You know what I have that could not only ruin your relationship with Mr. Rose but also your career. What would your principal or director over Academy Preparatory College High School think when a nude picture of their teacher shows up online? And doll, you look wasted. You saw the picture. It’s not a good look.”

“You son of a bitch. How can you do this to me? I’ve never done a single thing to you to provoke this. Why?”

“Simple. I need you. I still love you, and if you give me a chance...”

Carla scoffed. “Some love! You left me, remember?”

“Yeah, you won’t let me forget it.”

“I would if you’d leave me the fuck alone! I mean, how dare you? Now you’re blackmailing me? And this is what you think will make me want you more? You’re crazy.”

“I might be. In fact, you’re right. I am crazy over you. Now get your ass down here in the next forty-five minutes, or this picture will haunt you for the rest of your life. You know I

mean it—whether we had sex or not. There’s no denying you laying there in your ex-boyfriend’s bed.” He paused and rattled off the address. “I’ll see you soon.”

Lennox disconnected the call, and Carla screamed.

SHE PACED BACK AND FORTH IN FRONT OF HER INFINITI, dressed in a pinstripe pants suit that covered her curves nicely. Her hair had been brushed into a tight ponytail and the extensions she added sprouted from the top in a bounce of layered curls. She was beautifully and intelligently dressed. However, being at the venue had her stomach in knots.

She stopped pacing and took in a deep breath.

“You don’t have a choice,” she whispered to herself. Locking her jaw with an attitude the size of the Grand Canyon, Carla left the parking and entered the building.

The venue was packed with businessmen like CEOs and presidents of one corporation or another. Men in suits, women in cocktail dresses, some with arms linked while others were standing idly by.

Jacob checked his Cartier watch. He was donned in Armani. The royal blue suit fit his muscular physic immaculately. A crisp white button-down left two buttons undone, showing off the pillar of his throat. Though he was there to mix and mingle to garner support for Mayor Luke Steele, he was relaxed, ending his day with Carla on his mind.

Contact between them had been scarce. Jacob was well aware that, between Carla’s classes and her falling ill, it would have to be that way. Well, according to her.

Moving through the private party, Jacob turned the heads of fellow businessmen and women, leaving them lingering in admiration or wanting to gain his attention.

“Mr. Rose.”

Jacob spun on his feet, a smile ushering up into a devilish grin. “Mayor Luke Steele, I thought I was going to miss you for a moment.”

Luke smiled and slapped Jacob on his shoulder, deep laughter coming from the two. “Gentleman,” Luke turned to his circle, “You’ve met Jacob Alexander Rose before, yes?”

“Well, of course,” they muttered, one after another. As Luke made the introductions, Jacob’s mind veered back toward Carla.

If it were up to him, they would be together, and Jacob would nurse her back to health. Interestingly, Jacob felt fine since they’d gotten back from Barbados. But their meager conversations hadn’t allotted him the time to find out if maybe it was something else.

Still, he longed for the time he could wrap her in his arms again. It was safe to say, Jacob had it bad. Carla’s immeasurable personality, whimsical and delightful, was a pleasure to experience. That was the thing about her. She was so lively, whether during breakfast or in the times he enfolded her in exchange for successional hyper-stimulating strokes of his dick.

Heat swept his skin just thinking of her touch, her flavor, her heart, her love.

And yet, when Jacob flipped his gaze up to scan the area, the image of Carla across the room on the arm of Lennox Jenkins, ex-boyfriend, and candidate for mayor of Chicago, ushered confusion behind the sentiment in his thoughts.

Jacob’s brows dipped. His laser focus tuned into their stance. She was exquisitely beautiful, her maple brown skin a rhinestone of highlighted melanin. She spoke to the gentleman in front of her and then smiled, however coy and semi-uncomfortable it was.

Carla’s nod, followed by a glance into Lennox’s eyes, nearly sucked the wind out of Jacob. Her arm was linked with his as if she were his...date.

Jacob's heart felt as if it would stop. Certainly, he must have misunderstood what was happening right before him. Never mind that his eyes had never deceived him before.

Jacob dropping out of the conversation brought the attention of Luke. He went to speak to Jacob when his eyes followed Jacob's gaze.

"Excuse me for a minute," Jacob said. Luke grabbed his arm, and Jacob slipped out of his grip.

He couldn't control his body, his strides across the room. Nothing made sense as he walked toward them. The guests who spoke out to him were all but forgotten, and when she glanced up, Carla's eyes meeting Jacob's, the blood in her face drained.

Jacob moved into their circle of five, facing Carla but getting a closer look at their posture.

Carla dropped her arm and took a meager step of distance, separating her and Lennox.

"Mr. Rose!" The congressman standing next to Jacob greeted him. He held out a hand, turning his eye to the man.

"Congressman," he greeted.

"It's great to see you here. Are you campaigning for Mr. Jenkins? I know you and Mayor Steele have history."

"Excuse me," Jacob said, taking his attention back to Carla. "Who do I have the pleasure of being in the company of?"

As if he spoke to the congressman, the congressman introduced the circle.

"...And this is as you know, Lennox Jenkins and his lady Carla Jones," the congressman gloated. "The two make a great couple, don't you think?"

Jacob's gaze dropped back to Carla's, and he waited behind the uptick of his pulse for her to refute the congressman's claims—but silence lingered amid the unsteady rhythms of his collapsing heart. Perplexed, despair, pain, and

disappointment filled his gaze. Jacob nodded, feeling like the air was sucked out of his lungs.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Jacob said, “Have a good night.”

He turned and moved away from the group, and Carla went after him.

“Jacob.”

He paused, waited for a second, then turned to face her.

“So, this is why you’ve been so unavailable to me?”

Carla’s heart stuttered. “No. It’s, it’s...”

“It’s what? Not what I think?”

She took in a breath. “I know that’s cliché but, if you trust me—”

“If I trust you?”

“If...” She could barely craft her sentences. “If you trusted me before, trust me now, please; it’s not what you think.”

“Sweetheart, is anything the matter?” Lennox said, his voice drifting into their conversation from behind Carla as he glided up.

Jacob’s gaze lifted to Lennox, a challenge crackling between them. Ire darkened Jacob’s eyes. Two seconds and he could cut the wind from Lennox’s lungs with a quick throat punch.

Looking back to Carla, Jacob shook his head. “Have a good life, Ms. Jones.”

With that, he pivoted, and she watched him stroll further away until he disappeared through the exit.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Carla spun around. “You son of a bitch.”
“Watch your mouth and lower your voice.”

“I would smack you in your face if I didn’t care about embarrassing the mayor.”

Lennox snarled as they spoke in hushed tones. “Carla, don’t aggravate me. Put your god damn smile back on and get over here.”

“Go to hell, Lennox, and I mean that.”

She turned to leave, and Lennox called out Principal Sharp’s office number.

Pausing, Carla straightened her shoulders, then tossed back, “Do what you have to do. I’m done playing these games with you.”

Holding her head high and walking as steadily as she could fathom, Carla left the venue.

On her way home, tears fell from her eyes. Seeing Jacob’s heartbreak right in front of her was worse than having her own heart broken.

What did she expect? So far, her life had been one disappointment after the next, and she seemed to be the thing that her suffering stemmed from.

Dangerous thoughts of ending it all rocked her core, but just as quickly, she shook them. She wouldn’t, couldn’t give

up like that—if for no other reason than to face her trials head-on and prove to herself that she could conquer them.

She would ride to Jacob's house if she thought he would let her inside, and even knowing there was a big chance he wouldn't, Carla executed a U-turn and headed across town.

JACOB WAS INCENSED. WHEN HE BREACHED THE THRESHOLD OF his home, he snatched the loose tie from around his neck, tossed it, then grabbed the floor vase and slung it into the nearby wall.

It shattered into thick pieces of glass, and along with it, Jacob flipped the foyer table—lifting it and slinging it into the wall, over and over, until the legs on it bent, then collapsed.

“Got damn it!”

He was feeling like a madman, in need of a way to let off some steam. Awakened from the commotion, Jack jogged through the house, tail wagging and pausing right before the broken glass.

Jacob left the room with Jack by his side, crossing through the den, and headed down to his basement, where he kept a fully operational gym. Stepping into the dark, he moved with knowledge of his layout, flipping the switch on the wall that illuminated lights overhead.

Stretching out of his suit jacket and his button-down shirt, Jacob grabbed a set of boxing gloves, shoved them on his hands, and stood in front of a hanging punching bag as Jack watched him.

One punch, two, a collection of power-driven boxing jabs landed on the heavy bag, revving his insanity to get it all out.

How could she do this to him? Didn't she know how insufferable it would be to betray him? Was she confused about his love for her?

“I know that it's cliché but, if you trust me—”

“If I trust you?”

“If...” She searched for the words. “If you trusted me before, trust me now, please; it’s not what you think.”

“Sweetheart, is anything the matter?”

Jacob hit the bag with insanely driven punches. Once again, he’d put his heart on the line, and yet again, he’d fallen for someone who couldn’t care enough to handle his love and show him the same in return.

More power-driven punches.

She said she loved him.

More punches.

Told him she was in love.

“Aaaaaah!”

He punched and punched, as bridled anger became scalding fury. Tears burst from his eyes, and he screamed, then dropped to his knees as the bag swung back and forth.

In an abundance of despair, awful agitating pain sliced through him like daggers.

He was a man broken, and the announcement of Carla at his gate went unnoticed over the wail of his cries.

OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS, JACOB WAS MIA, AND WHEN the knock on his front door went ignored for the third time, Jonas used his emergency key to enter and search through Jacob’s home.

“Yo, Jay!”

Empty rooms greeted him, and they appeared untouched as if no one had lived there.

“Jay!”

He entered the kitchen and found two pieces of china in the sink.

“Well, that’s something,” Jonas said. “At least I know he’s been eating.”

He exited the room and strolled down the hall. After speaking with Luke, Jonas was worried about his brother.

Finding out that Carla was in the company of Lennox Jenkins, of all people, while dating his brother was more than disturbing.

As a natural fighter because of his ex-championship boxing skills, Jonas wouldn’t deny that his initial thought was to find Lennox and get down to the bottom of it in the ring or otherwise. But his brother could fight his own battles. At the moment, he was there for support alone.

“Yo, Jay!”

“I’m downstairs.”

Heading to the end of the hall, Jonas glanced down the thirty-something stairs into the basement to see his brother in basketball shorts, his chest bare, with boxing gloves on his hands. Next to him, Jack wagged his tail, then barked, his way of greeting Jonas.

Taking the steps two at a time, Jonas entered the full gym and immediately removed his shirt, flipped off his shoes, and grabbed a pair of Jacob’s sneakers that sat against the wall.

Grabbing the boxing mitts, he strolled up to his brother, who had gone back to the punching bag.

Glancing over at Jonas, Jacob eased up off the bag and turned to him, throwing punches at the mitts as Jonas held his hands up.

They worked in sync—hands up and down, two punches here, three here, a round of singular back-and-forth punches.

“You’ll get past this,” Jonas said.

“Yeah? How do you know?”

More punches as he worked the mitts.

“You always have. This won’t break you.”

Jacob's punches became more vigorous, his gaze tight, focused as power pushed through his gloves.

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

"I don't know how this feels, but I do know you."

"You don't know."

"I don't know?"

"Not when it comes to this. Not this time. Not now."

"I know you love her, but..."

"THIS WAS MORE THAN LOVE!" he roared, pausing long enough to stare Jonas in the eyes, his chest rising and falling. "SHE WAS A PART OF ME. MY lifeline, my..." He killed the conversation, going back to his punches.

Jonas locked his jaw. "Tell me what I can do."

"Nothing. Just hold your stance and let me get the anger out my way."

Jonas nodded and stayed with his brother for the remainder of the evening.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Every minute that Carla was awake, her anxiety seemed to increase.

Besides the fact that she hadn't heard from Jacob—in a week. Any breaking news story that popped up on television or alerted her cell phone scared her to death.

Once upon a time, Carla thought she knew Lennox well enough that he would never do something so vile as blackmail her. But the hatred she felt for him now was so deep and intense that she frightened herself.

Lennox had singlehandedly ruined everything good she had going for herself, and she couldn't rule out the possibility that he had the power to destroy her career any day now.

That wasn't the worst of it. Carla's student, Beverly, withdrew from the others in the class. Where she used to be loud and obnoxious right along with Carrie and Samantha, now she stewed every second, despondent and alone, in the corner of the room.

This withdrawal caused her grades to suffer. However, that wasn't what worried Carla the most. It was the disconnect she felt to the girl. Regardless of Carla's positive attempts to get Beverly's attention, reconnect her with her classmates, or include Beverly in activities, the young woman wouldn't comply.

Usually, Carla would reprimand a student with in-school or after school detention. However, those punishments didn't

seem to faze Beverly anymore. Soon, Carla quit using them altogether.

THIS WOULD BE WHEN SHE WOULD CALL JACOB AND CONFIDE in him about what was happening with her student. But her calls were going straight to voicemail. Not in the sense that they rang until voicemail answered.

Carla knew the difference.

She was being sent to voicemail.

Jacob was seeing her call and outright rejecting her connection. Even now, as the sunset and Carla pulled into the driveway of her apartment home, she dialed Jacob.

His phone rang, once, then twice, then...voicemail.

Carla's head dropped back against the headrest, and tears misted her eyes and ran down her brown cheeks.

She was not one to give up, but defeat began to settle in her soul.

Wheels popped against gravel as another car pulled in behind Carla. Opening her eyes but not lifting her head, Carla listened as the driver opened their door, slammed it, and seconds later, Tina was marching up her walkway to the front porch. She beat on her front door, completely overlooking Carla sitting in the front seat of her Infiniti.

Carla sighed. It was true; she'd ignored Tina from the moment she woke up in Lennox's bed. She was surprised Tina hadn't made her way over before now.

"I know you're in there, Carla! Your car is in the driveway, open this door and let me in!"

Carla rolled her eyes again. Had she been in a better mood, this would've likely tickled her. But her silliness took a plunge right along with her sour disposition.

Seconds turned into minutes that Carla continued to wait out her friend to see if she would leave.

Bang. Bang. Bang!

“I’m not leaving! I don’t have anywhere to go and no one to see. I’ve cleared my schedule,” she shouted at the door. “So, if you want to play this game, I’ll be out here freezing my ass off because my so-called friend is shutting me out!”

Carla sighed and pursed her lips.

“Real friends would never do this to the other, by the way!”

Carla rolled her eyes again.

“If you don’t open up, I’m calling the cavalry, then all of us, London included, will be over here beating down your door!”

“Jesus,” Carla whispered.

“The only reason I haven’t called the cops to make sure you’re still alive is because I’ve called your job. I know you’ve been there!”

Carla gave her another few minutes before she finally opened her car door and stood, removing herself from the warmth that cuddled her inside. Her voice was dry and unenthusiastic when she spoke.

“Will you stop screaming already?”

Whipping around, Tina marched off the porch right up to Carla, looking her over as if to inspect her.

“Well, what do you know! She’s alive!”

Carla sighed. “You already knew that, remember? Don’t be so dramatic.” Stepping around Tina, Carla walked to her steps, climbing the porch to her front door.

“Oh, *I’m* being dramatic?” Tina followed her closely. “You are being dramatic, sitting in that damn car while I’m on the porch screaming at you to open the door!”

Carla stuck her key in, and seconds later, they were entering. The door slammed behind them as Tina pushed it up, shifting her purse from one arm to the other.

“Hey!”

Carla dropped her work bag on the floor, then turned to face her friend.

“What is going on with you?”

“Let’s see, I’ve managed to fuck up the relationship between Jacob and me, I’ve possibly fumbled my bag, and this may just be another instance where I lose my apartment because who knows how long I’ll be working to pay my rent. Even with my savings account being plentiful without work, it will eventually dry up. And, who’s going to want to hire a nude, high-ass teacher when it all hits the news? I’ll tell you who,” Carla continued to sob, “No one! And why would they? I’m the most irresponsible person I know, and I can’t even believe I’ve learned nothing from this game of life, but hey...” she shrugged, “Here we are!”

Tina’s eyes were wide. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, what?!”

Carla sighed as Sasha ran to greet her at the entrance. “How much time do you have?”

“I’m staying over. Let’s just call it a girls night in.”

“I could use one of those, but I gotta be honest. I don’t know how much fun I’ll be.”

“I’m not here for fun. I’m here to be your shoulder to cry on if you need it. Also, for healing.”

“Healing?”

Tina removed a freshly rolled joint, and Carla tossed her hands in the air.

“I don’t want it.”

Tina’s eyes grew. “What?”

Carla gave Tina a rundown of what happened after she went to the bar with Lennox, ending with being caught at his side by Jacob.

“Oh, my God.”

Carla nodded. “Yep. Ugh!” Hearing the events out loud made Carla’s mood get even worse. She walked to the sofa, but dropped to her knees and rolled onto the floor, arms out,

eyes to the ceiling. Sasha sniffed her, licked her face once, then sat down next to Carla.

Tina squatted, then sat down next to her. “That’s pretty bad, friend.”

Carla pursed her lips. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Wow. I always knew Lennox was a dick because he ended your relationship and got married soon after. But this is next level.”

“He loves me! Go figure!” Carla said sarcastically.

Tina shuddered. “If this is what love is, I don’t want it.”

“It ain’t!”

“What ain’t?”

Carla motioned with her hands flying in the air.

“It ain’t what love is.”

“Isn’t, girl. Isn’t.”

“Are you really trying to correct my grammar right now?”

Tina rubbed her shoulder. “You’re right. I’ll tell you how you handle this.”

Carla sat up. “I’m listening.”

“Deal with one problem at a time.”

Carla plopped back down. “Where do I start? And what solutions do I bring?”

“Where do you want to start?”

“With Jacob! He thinks I’m a horrible person, and maybe I am, but I need him to know I... I...” Her eyes clouded with tears. “I love him, and I am in no way interested in Lennox, and I’m sorry I embarrassed him, and I’m sorry I broke his heart, and I’m sorry I disappointed him, and...”

“Why haven’t you told him this yet?”

Carla looked at Tina like she was growing a second head.

“He won’t answer my call!”

“But have you tried confronting him face to face?”

“I went to his home the same night of the event, and I couldn’t get in the gate.”

“Hmmm.”

“He works from home most of the time. His physical business building is mostly made up of his interns and the people that work for him.” Carla was so frustrated. “Most importantly, while I have proof of the text from Lennox showing me a naked picture of myself, I have no proof that I didn’t willingly go home with him. It’s all a big mess!” She sighed. “Maybe I should just leave him alone and let him be with someone deserving of him.”

Tina reared her head to look down at Carla. “I don’t like this, Carla.”

“What?”

“The Carla I know would never give up her man, especially when yeah, you were wrong, but you had reasons. Jacob is the kind of guy who would understand you not wanting to have your naked ass cast all over the damn internet.”

“Maybe, but I have no proof!”

Ding, dong.

Carla’s, Tina’s, and Sasha’s heads snapped toward the front door.

“Are you expecting company?”

“No.”

Tina turned back to her, and when Carla didn’t move, Tina rose to her feet and went to the front door.

Seconds later, Phoebe glided into the room with Tina by her side. “I have something you should see.”

Carla moved to her feet as Phoebe scanned the room. “Where’s your laptop?”

“It’s in my bedroom.”

Phoebe strutted quickly to Carla's flat-screen TV and glanced behind it.

"Never mind, your TV has a USB port. Turn it on." Carla grabbed the remote and powered on the TV. "I'm sorry it took so long to get back to you, but the judge is backed up with subpoena requests, it seems."

Phoebe grabbed the remote from Carla and flipped to the right mode to see the USB video. When she got there, the interior of the Velvet Café came into view. Phoebe fast-forwarded the recording.

"There's us!" Tina shouted, pointing at the girls talking, laughing, then heading to the dance floor.

When they came off the dance floor, Phoebe played the video. The audio couldn't be heard, but they were witnessing the activity around them. Lennox approached in a blue baseball cap, but he wasn't immediately identifiable because he kept his head out of sight until he and Carla strolled to the bar.

He ordered Carla a drink, then glanced up as if searching for something. That was the first time his face came into view. Carla looked toward her girls, and Lennox lifted his hand and dropped something into her drink. It took all of five seconds that she'd been distracted, and immediately when she turned back to him, she lifted the alcohol and drank it.

"Oh, my God." Tina glanced at Carla.

"It was never the joint. It was the drink," Carla whispered in disbelief.

"He slipped you a mickey," Tina said, astonished.

The video continued.

"Okay, this is going to flip to outside of the club," Phoebe said.

They were on the corner, speaking back and forth. The joint was in Carla's hand, then she rocked back and forth and dropped to the ground.

"Oh my God!" Tina shouted.

The three of them watched in horror as Lennox lifted her from the concrete, tossed her over his shoulder, glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then slip off into the darkness with her.

Carla's lips tightened, and she began to shake.

“I’M. GOING. TO. KILL. HIM!”

She ran from the living room to a back room and came back out with a baseball bat. Then she headed straight for the front door.

Chapter Thirty



Tina and Phoebe ran to jump in front of Carla.
“Where do you think you’re going?” Tina shouted.

“Tina Braddon, get out of my way!”

“Shit, all right, you could’ve asked nicely.” Tina moved out of Carla’s way, not wanting to be behind the uncontrollable anger that stirred in her friend’s eyes.

“What a minute!” Phoebe exclaimed, holding her hands out at Carla and cutting her eyes at Tina.

“What?” Tina said, “I’m not getting bludgeoned to death for that fool.”

Phoebe let go of a languorous sigh. “Carla, listen to me.”

“NO!”

Tina took another step back. In school, they weren’t in trouble often, but when a fight confronted them, Tina remembered all too well how Carla got down. She would—and could—knock someone out, minus the bat.

Carla let the bat hang at her side and grabbed Phoebe’s shoulder.

“Phoebe, I appreciate you. God, you have no idea. But listen to me. No one is stopping me from doing what needs to be done. Get OUT OF MY WAY!”

Concerned, Phoebe's eyes moved between her and Tina. "A little help, please?!"

Carla sighed harshly and rushed past Phoebe.

Both Phoebe and Tina screamed, "Carla!" Then they ran after her.

"It's not worth it!" Phoebe yelled at Carla's back as she exited the front door. Phoebe caught the screen door before it shut in their faces. "We'll call the police; trust me, Lennox won't get away with this!"

They tracked her to the Infiniti, where Carla opened her car door and slipped inside.

"Carla!" Phoebe shouted, exasperated. She turned to Tina, who shuffled around her, running to the passenger door before Carla could peel off, jumping in and slamming the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Carla looked at Tina and threw the car in reverse.

"You don't think I'm about to let you go over wherever it is that you're going alone, do you?" When Carla hit the gas pedal, the car swerved into the road and shot off down the street.

Back in the yard, Phoebe snatched her phone from her purse and dialed Tina. "Come on, pick up the phone, Tina."

The call went to voicemail, and quickly Phoebe sent off two text messages.

I need to know the address when you get there.

Carla hasn't told me what's going on outside of what we witnessed on tape. Who is this guy Lennox?

A minute passed, then a text message from Tina came through.

Are you going to represent her in case if she needs a lawyer?

Phoebe frowned and typed.

Hell yes.

Phoebe knew Carla would need a lawyer, especially if she were on her way to assault Lennox.

Tina responded, giving Phoebe the same story Carla gave her when she arrived today. Phoebe's eyes widened as she read the message, and all of a sudden, she was angry.

Stop her from going in, and don't forget to send me the address.

Phoebe jogged back up Carla's porch and pulled her door and screen closed.

How am I supposed to stop her? Did you see how well that worked at the house?

"Lord, have mercy, help me please," Phoebe prayed.

Stop being scared and grab her or something!

The next message that came back was an address and a middle finger emoji.

Phoebe would have laughed, but her humor was sucked out, worried about her friends. She dialed her brother and put the phone to her ear as she headed to her BMW.

"Pick up the phone, big brother."

The call went to voicemail after five rings. Phoebe hung up again and called back.

One hour earlier

A CHAMPAGNE CORK POPPED AND BUBBLY SHOT FROM THE TOP.

"Congratulations!" The crowd of friends and family around Jacob pulled him in for hugs and handshakes.

Jacob's smile was dimly lit. "Thank you. Thank you all for your generosity and for holding this celebration in honor of the contract with the Royals of Kéra Asnela."

Jonas slapped Jacob on his shoulder. “No thanks needed. Who else would the Royals contract with to build their home in the States?”

Jacob nodded. “There are others.”

“Now you’re just being modest,” Jaden added.

The Rose men laughed, and Jacob accepted more greetings, embraces, and compliments from his brothers.

They were in Club Sangria’s third-floor VIP room while the partygoers below celebrated to the gyrating rhythms of Jamaican dancehall artist, Shenseea.

He watched the sea of people jam to song after song behind the transparent partition that separated the guests’ area, wishing he could pull from their exhilaration.

News of Jacob’s deal with the infamous Royals spread like wildfire once King Winthrop signed on the dotted line.

His brothers appeared to be more enthusiastic on his behalf than he was himself. Though Jacob was no stranger to constructing homes for iconic figures, the Royals’ castle had an estimated fund base of slightly over two billion dollars. Thirty-five percent of that went into Jacob’s bank account for his services. It was the single biggest deal he’d ever negotiated, and that alone was more than enough reason to celebrate.

Unfortunately for Jacob, he was having a hard time commemorating the opportunity for one reason.

Bellissima.

He wanted her on his arm, at his side, rejoicing, drinking, and fucking the night away.

Every time she called, he mentally talked himself away from answering the phone just to hear her out. What excuse would be sufficient to cast doubt on what he’d witnessed?

His mood was incessantly dull regardless of what he or anyone else did to change that.

A soft feminine voice called out, “Mr. Rose.”

Blinking from his reverie, Jacob cast an eye to Bonita Fellers as she sashayed up to pause next to him.

“Congratulations, handsome.”

Her smile grew wide, her lashes batting flirtatiously.

He grinned. “Thank you.”

Bonita handed him a glass of white liquor.

“Patrón on the rocks. Like you like it.”

Jacob accepted the drink. “Thank you again.”

“Anytime. This is a monumental occasion for you. Do you have special plans tonight?”

He took a swig of his liquor. “None.”

Bonita’s eyes brightened, her brows rising. “Well, since you got away from me on New Year’s Eve, why don’t you let me entertain you tonight?”

His gaze dropped over Bonita, taking note of her long shapely legs, and the sequined dress. On New Year’s Eve, she’d been dressed similarly. Either she had a thing for sequins, or she thought he did. Either way, his thoughts plunged.

Maybe, just maybe, being entertained by someone else was what he needed to get his mind off of Carla, for good. And even though it sounded like an idea, still, the loss he felt in his gut, the love that stirred his soul for Carla, attempted to change his mind.

“What did you have in mind?” his deep voice murmured.

“If you get rid of your company, I can show you.”

They stared at each other for a moment more, then he turned towards the room and whistled.

All eyes turned to him, and a few of his brothers took note of Bonita standing next to him.

“Clear the room.”

More congratulations were shouted at him as the room emptied. Jonas approached, apprehension in his gaze, as he

gave his brother eye contact.

“Are you certain this is what you want to do?”

Jacob held his attention. “What am I doing?”

“Yeah, what is he doing?” Bonita interrupted.

Jonas glanced down at her. She reminded him of the type to have a video recording once she’d weaseled her way into a place where she didn’t belong. She would sell it to the highest bidder, whether that be a popular blog or the news.

“Can you excuse us for a minute?”

Bonita pursed her lips and touched Jacob’s arm.

“I’ll wait for you over there.” She pointed to the sofa area of the lounge, but she strutted to the DJ area. The VIP was equipped with its own surround sound in the case that the people occupying the space wanted to separate their music from the main club’s tunes.

Glancing back at his brother, Jonas spoke candidly. “If you’re in love with Carla, give her a chance to tell you her side of the story before you make a decision you might regret.”

“Her side of the story?” Jacob smiled, but there was no pleasure behind the grin. “Did you forget that I saw her at who was supposed to be her ex-boyfriend’s side?”

“I didn’t. But do you know why?”

Jacob was speechless for a minute. “You think a woman of sound mind would accompany him for...what, exactly?”

“That’s a question she can answer.”

Jacob sighed.

“Look,” Jonas said, “I understand that this may be all for nothing. However, if you’re in love with her—”

“Do you remember what I went through with Pamela?”

“Of course I do.”

“What about Nadine?”

Jonas nodded. “I remember.”

“So, what is this? Let’s call it what it is. I’m unlucky in love. Or, cursed to live my life alone or without someone who doesn’t love me as much as I love them.”

Jacob locked his jaw, the pain of those words slicing through his heart.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me. I’m going to purge her from my system.”

“You know that’s not going to happen. You’ll wake up in the morning with a wet dick, your heart will still be broken, and you’ll probably be starring in a video on TMZ.”

“Jonas. I appreciate your concern. Thank you for voicing it.”

Jonas sighed. “All right.” He lifted his palm, and they slapped hands. “I’ll be downstairs.”

Jacob nodded as Jonas strolled across the plush carpeted floor, glancing at Bonita with somewhat of a scowl as he exited. Jacob’s long strides took him to a chair fit for a king. He sat, opting not to get comfortable on the sofa.

Bonita turned some music on and strolled to stand before him.

“Dance for You” by Beyoncé began to play, and moving her body to the slow hypnotic beat, Bonita winked, rolling her hips.

Jacob took the rest of his liquor back, emptying the glass and placing it on an adjacent table.

Taking his gaze gradually over Bonita, he tried and failed to find desire in her ruse, even as she dropped to the ground in an impressive split and made her ass clap.

Swinging her leg around, she bounced to her feet and removed her sequined dress, letting the shimmering gown fall in a pool to the floor.

He felt a spark coast through him then, and it warmed the more his gaze trailed up her mocha legs, to her curvy thighs, thin red panties, bare brown belly. Her belly button was just as

cute as he remembered it, an outie that he enjoyed flicking his tongue over.

Jacob paused his thoughts for a second. Shaking his head a bit, he blinked and took his focus back to her belly.

Bonita didn't have an outie at all. He frowned. What the hell did he just see?

Moving his eyes over her matching bra, her breasts called out to him, wanting a taste from his tongue.

But those were not Bonita's breasts. Nor were those her lips, nose, brown eyes. They were Carla's.

Jacob stood to his feet suddenly, and Bonita smiled and strolled over, reaching to touch his arms.

"I was about to get rid of this." She popped the clasp on her bra that connected in the front.

His hand landed on her hands, and she looked at him questionably.

"You should go."

Inside Jacob's pocket, his cell phone buzzed.

Bonita frowned. "What are you talking about? I'm just getting started."

"Let me be frank with you, Bonita. You're a beautiful woman, but I'm in love with someone else."

Bonita's eyes widened, then frustration made her face scrunch. "Where is the one you're in love with, huh? Why am I here instead of her?" Bonita folded her arms and leaned into a hip, annoyed.

Jacob slipped his hands inside his pockets. "Unfortunately, the feeling is not mutual."

Bonita popped her lips. "I can help you forget about her, trust me."

Jacob smirked. "I don't think you can."

He turned his back on her and removed his phone when it began buzzing again, glancing at the screen.

Phoebe.

“Little sister. If you’re looking for somewhere to park, drive into—”

“No! I’m not at the club. Jacob, listen to me!”

An immediate air of panic hit him in the gut from the alarm in her voice.

“What’s wrong?” He listened intently.

“The guy Lennox Jenkins who’s running for mayor is Carla’s ex-boyfriend. He’s been blackmailing her into doing God knows what because I didn’t get that far before she took off to go after him!”

Jacob was moving, yanking the car keys from his pocket, exiting the VIP section.

Phoebe continued her plea. “I know something’s going on between you two, but I need your help. Carla needs your help. She called me and asked if I would subpoena footage at the Velvet Café, and I probably shouldn’t be telling you this because this is her information, but I feel it’s important—”

“Phoebe, spit it out!”

He hit the first floor as if he had skates on his feet, running toward the front door. Jonas, Jaden, Julian, and Josiah all turned and shouted to get his attention, interested in where he was going and why he looked so alarmed.

BUT JACOB HAD TUNNEL VISION. HIS ONLY FOCUS WAS TO GET to Carla.

“She was at the club, and this freak put a date rape drug in her drink. The video shows her passing out and him carrying her off.”

“What?!” he roared.

“God knows what he did to her after that, but apparently he took nude pictures of her because he’s been threatening to share them with her principal at the school and the media if she didn’t obey him!”

A murderous rage-filled his veins, and homicide controlled his thoughts.

“Where is Carla?” he barked.

Phoebe rattled off the address.

“Where are you?”

“I’m sitting in front of Carla’s house. She left without locking her door. I’m hesitant to leave, but she’s not alone. Tina is with her. I told Tina to stop her from going inside Lennox’s house, but I don’t know if she can. I’ve never seen Carla this angry, but she’s not the type to back down from anyone, even if she has no chance of winning the fight.”

By now, Jacob was in his Bentley, blowing his horn to scatter the partygoers who lingered in the parking lot. He powered his window down.

“MOVE!”

They scurried out of his way, and he pulled onto the road and hit the gas.

Chapter Thirty-One



Carla threw the car in park and reached in the backseat, grabbing the bat. Tina removed the keys from the ignition and locked the doors with the push of a button.

“Really?” Carla’s forehead creased. She unlocked the doors, pushing the unlock button on her door.

Tina grabbed her hand, and Carla glared at her. “I know you didn’t come all this way to get in my way. Now, move, Tina!”

They were sitting in front of Lennox’s mailbox. The street was quiet, with minimal traffic.

“Think about your kids.”

“I don’t have any kids!”

“The kids at school, Carla!”

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me right now? Did you see that video? How are you not ready to go in here and help me take his head off?”

“Please! You know I’m the first person to help you, but it’s dark out here, he’s running for a government position, and you’ve got everything to lose! You don’t think someone will see you?”

“You’re right. The problem is, I no longer care, Tina. I have tried to keep quiet and actually went along with the bullshit he told me to, to keep from embarrassing Jacob, my

kids, my colleagues, and the entire staff at the school. I tried, okay? And the one person I love more than anything in this world hates me! Do you know how that feels!? It eats at your heart, Tina! I know I'm flawed. I've never been perfect, but I don't deserve this!"

Her chest rose and fell as she shouted indignantly, "Something has to be done! And if it's me that has to do it, so be it!"

"But it doesn't have to be you, Carla. You've got evidence. Let Phoebe fight your battle in the courtroom."

Carla nodded. "That's really cute, but I don't think you understand. I want to rip his head OFF!" She shook as madness overtook her. "I'm not hiding from him anymore! You know better than anyone I'm not scared!"

"You don't have to be scared, but you need to listen to reason. If you manage to get in his house, he's a man, Carla. He's bigger than you, stronger than you. It only takes a moment for him to get the upper hand, even with me climbing his back!"

"Sit in the car, then." Carla shrugged. "Or call the police. I don't care." Carla shook out of Tina's grasp and opened the door, hopping out.

"Shit!" Tina cursed, opening her door and slamming it.

"What if we can't even get in the house?"

Carla went to his mailbox, and Tina moved as she swung the bat on top of the box, crushing the container where it splatted to the ground.

"We'll get in if I have to bust his door down."

Tina sent Phoebe a quick text.

We're going to need two get-out-of-jail free cards, thank you!

Shoving the phone in her pocket, Tina turned to follow Carla to the front door when brakes from a vehicle swinging in to park in front of their car hit a hard stop.

Both Tina and Carla turned to see Jacob emerging from his Bentley, rushing around the car and up the sidewalk.

Eyes wide, Carla faced his approaching stride, the bat falling to her side immediately.

“Jacob?”

“Where are your keys?”

Tina held them up. “I got them.”

His gaze turned to Tina. “Can you drive her car back to her house?”

“Yes.”

He reached for Carla’s unobstructed hand as she just stared at him, confused yet mesmerized by his presence.

“Come with me.”

He led her down the sidewalk and pointed at Tina. “She’ll call you soon.”

Tina nodded like a bobblehead. On the one hand, she was happy to see him because he was clearly the only one who could calm Carla down. On the other, she was trippin’ at how her girl had gone into a full-on trance when he appeared.

At the passenger seat of his car, Jacob opened the door but touched Carla’s chin to speak to her eye to eye. Carla spoke first.

“I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I love you so much. I would kill this fucker in a heartbeat. My dilemma was no excuse. I should’ve sucked it up and told him to kiss my ass. I was scared. I was nervous. I didn’t know what to do. I hate that I embarrassed you. I love you to death. Jacob, please, you have to bel—”

“Sssssh,” he shushed her. “*Bellissima*, I know everything.”

Her eyes widened, and she swallowed the knot in her throat, her voice nervous as she replied, “You do?”

“I do. If you don’t mind, I’m taking you home with me.”

A smile pushed her cheeks into her eyes. “Hell, yes. I mean, no. I don’t mind. But this,” she pointed to Lennox’s home, and Jacob finished her sentence.

“He will pay the price for what he’s done. Do you trust me?”

Her heart fluttered. “I do.”

“I’m not talking about in the courtroom.”

Her pussy thumped, and her lips quirked in a badass smile. “That just turned me on for some reason.”

He smirked, then kissed her forehead.

“This is not the place, and I understand that you’re very capable of taking care of yourself and fighting your own battles, but you don’t have to do that anymore, okay?”

“I don’t?”

“No. Because you’ve got me. Let your man fight your battles, baby.”

“I didn’t know I had a man anymore.”

His gaze warmed as his heart fluttered. “You do if you still want me.”

She threw her arms around his neck, and he crushed her against his hard chest with a tight embrace. Heat engulfed them both, and his lips pushed against her neck and rose up her throat.

“Let’s get out of here,” he murmured.

“Gladly.”

She pulled back to look into his gaze, and his lips dropped to her mouth. A burst of heated tingles showered them. It was the euphoria they remembered, rushing through their veins, igniting their fervor for one another.

A horn honked, and they both turned to Tina, who was mouthing: *get a room!*

They smirked, and Jacob ushered Carla inside his vehicle. Strolling around to the driver’s side, he took one last look at

Lennox's house before pulling away from the curb.

“PHOEBE TOLD YOU ALL OF THAT?” CARLA STARED AT JACOB, sitting in his lap on the sofa back at his home.

“She did.”

“When you say it all at once like that, it sounds awful. I mean. It is awful, but it sounds a thousand times worse.”

“There's nothing worse than someone taking your trust for granted, drugging you, kidnapping you, then manipulating you to do his bidding.”

Even as the words came out of Jacob's mouth, madness began radiating inside of him. He locked his jaw and took in a deep breath to rein in his insanity for the moment.

“I tried to beat his ass the morning I woke up,” she hesitated, worry in her eyes as she stared at him.

“Don't be afraid to let it out.”

She swallowed. “The morning I woke up in his bed naked.”

She witnessed Jacob's jaw clench and his eyes grew dark.

“There is no telling what that sick son-of-a-bitch did to you while you were out.”

“I had an examination done. There was no sex.”

“Sex is consensual.”

“I mean...” She paused and took in a breath. “There was no sexual assault.”

Silence grew between them as Jacob worked to keep his temper down and Carla wondered what he was thinking.

“I want to tell you more of the truth.”

“Okay.”

“It wasn’t just me worried about the picture getting online or ending up in my principal’s email. He threatened to send it to you first.” She paused and dropped her eye contact. “I wasn’t sure what happened, so I didn’t know if I’d actually went home with him willingly.”

“Why didn’t you know?” He tapped her chest. “Here.”

She sucked in a breath. “I’ve always been labeled the wild one in my group of friends. Outspoken, unapologetically Black, forward. When it came to men, if I saw someone I liked, I was never the girl to wait for his approach if he took too long. I would go after what I wanted.” She shrugged. “Although I do consider myself a trustworthy person, that reputation—”

“Made you think the worst of yourself.”

She only nodded.

“Look at me, Carla.”

Her eyes rose to his piercing gaze.

“You are not merely made up of what others think of you. Not only are you deserving of love, but the benefit of any doubt, even within yourself. You are a beautiful person, inside and out. Never doubt yourself again. And I want to apologize, too.”

She frowned. “For what?”

“I should’ve given you a chance to tell me what was going on.” He sighed. “Looking into your eyes at the private event, I saw your sincerity when you asked me to trust you, but...” he pulled in another breath, “...the situation was too much for me to handle at the time.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Jacob.”

“Yes, I do. I would want that same benefit of the doubt if I were in a similar situation.”

“You would never be in a similar situation.”

“Listen, I don’t want you to ever feel as if you have to hold something back from me. Yes, when we started dating, we

promised to be up-front with one another about anything. But I understand why you felt you needed evidence to prove your innocence. I don't ever want you in a place like that again, regardless of what's happening. Come to me. Tell me. Please. Let me be the one to help you."

She nodded and dropped her eyes again.

"*Bellissima.*"

She glanced back up at him. "You don't have to be ashamed. You didn't do anything wrong. And what I want you to know more than anything is that I got your back and your front. Let's promise to not let anything come between us again."

"Okay."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

"Promise on a covenant with me?"

Carla blinked rapidly. "What?"

Jacob's hands moved from her hips to her fingers, linking their digits together. "The time away from you gnawed at me. It was unbearable. I don't ever want to feel that way again." With her rapt attention, he asked, "Marry me?"

Carla's eyes lurched.

"Become my wife, Carla. I promise to love you, cherish you, above all else forever."

She began to hyperventilate, her chest rising and falling, her breathing rasping out in short, sporadic bursts.

"Are you... ser..." Her breath was cut short.

"Take in a long breath, *bellissima.*"

She did.

"Now exhale slowly."

She did.

His smile spread, rising up his face.

“Are you okay, love?”

Carla nodded.

“Let me hear you.”

“Yea, yes.”

“Yes, you’ll marry me?” he teased, tricking her.

She laughed and dropped her head. It calmed her and steadied the beat of her heart.

“Are you sure?” His forehead creased. “I can be kind of wild.”

“Oh, yeah? Show me.”

She dipped her head, and he brushed her lips with his, heat swarming around them in a rapid tornado. Tongues invaded mouths, tasting one another fervently.

“I’ve missed you so damn much,” he confessed, his lips melting into hers.

“Not more than me,” she murmured in a passionate kiss against his mouth. She tugged at his jeans and clothes went flying urgently. He lifted Carla, sliding her pussy onto his dick in one slippery plunge.

“Aaaaah!”

She hit a high note, her ears tingling, and body shaken from the sudden onslaught of pleasure.

“Oh, how I’ve missed you,” he murmured against her neck, nibbling the flesh of her breasts. “I yearned for you every day of my life we were apart.” He sucked in one nipple, guiding her hips as her pussy-gripping walls clenched his dick, curling her toes.

“Jacob...” she purred, her head rolling back, biting her lip as heat from his mouth shocked her and strokes from his thrusting hips filled her.

“I never want to be without you again. Never, never,” she stated.

“Promise me.” He sucked in her other nipple, then flicked his tongue over both areolas, back and forth.

“Aaah! I promise.”

Her bounce popped on his erection, and stings of pleasure ripped through them both.

“Ooooooh!”

“Promise on a covenant with me, *bellissima*.”

He slowed their rhythm, sucked off her breasts, and looked her in the eyes.

“Yes, Jacob. I would love to be your wife.”

Jacob grabbed the back of her neck, crushed their mouths together, and relieve her of the very oxygen she breathed through a smashing kiss.

“Mmmmmm...”

Standing with her in his arms and still connected to his erection, Jacob dropped his hands to her ass and fucked her to his dining room table.

There, he planted her bottom on the edge and slammed into her, back and forth, wielding fervent plunges of hardcore thrusts.

“Oh! Jacob! Oh, baby, oh!”

He dug into her, leaning forward to slurp in her nipples while maintaining a steady, jacking rhythm.

Her body shook. “Shit!”

And Jacob pounded, engulfed in her labor of love as if he couldn’t get enough of her.

Wet and gliding, their bodies charged one another, provoking conducive orgasms that shook their core and threatened to spill at any moment.

“Jacob!”

Her body quaked, roaring with heat as desire raced through her veins on edge, unstable.

Slaps of penetration filled the room, so much so that their session resembled a fighting match between two lovers striking one another.

Flesh against flesh, stinging, dragging, long thrusts milled her pussy. Enthusiastically, Jacob's shaft drilled, plumbing a pipeline for their shared release.

“Ooooooh!”

He leaned against her thighs, folding her, pumping, delivering reverberating strokes, his teeth biting into her belly, up her flesh, tasting her breasts, to her neck, he filled her, rocking Carla's core, extending her pussy under duress. Tears welled in her eyes, and pleasure consumed them as they melded, forming a bond so strong it could withstand the pressure of anything that they met.

Over her mouth, they kissed, exchanging moans and grunts as their soul ties merged.

“Love of my life,” he murmured against her lips, unable to break away from her mouth fully. “You'll forever be my wife.” He wound his hips, digging and springing off her G-spot. “Never, never, never, will we separate again.”

His dark voice made her shiver.

“Oooh, baby...” A tumultuous wave of heated tingles shocked her. “I'm about to cum all over this dick.”

Lids low, Jacob kissed around her mouth. “Then cum all over this dick, baby.”

He fucked her with no pauses in between. Stroke after unmerciful stroke, he watched her desire as it reached its ultimate peak. She was an angel, flying high and he was the wings that carried Carla into a stratosphere of pleasure.

They came together, mouths meshing as sparks detonated across their flesh, thoroughly consumed.

He murmured sweet loving sentiments against her lips, their bodies buzzing as they continued to float high.

Shaken, stirred, and completely spent, Carla was in heaven. One minute she was on the brink of losing everything

—the next, she was back in Jacob's arms, where she so desperately wanted to be.

The possibility of Lennox blackmailing her was but a distance memory. She trusted that Jacob would handle it for her, and as she fell into a cocoon of blissful slumber, her lips rose into the subtlest of smiles.

Chapter Thirty-Two



“*A*s night falls, the city of Chicago will be covered in a layer of clouds, so if you’re heading home from work, be careful on the streets. The fog is looking to clear up at dawn,” the weatherman said.

Lennox checked his wristwatch, then his cell phone, and grimaced. There was no word from Carla. He’d texted her four times today, and all of his most recent calls were going to voicemail.

Annoyance set up in his nerves. She was a fool if she didn’t think he would release the picture he had of her.

If Carla were testing him, it was a big mistake. Lennox always got what he wanted. He was clever with every move he made. After being with Carla for four years, and cheating with his now-ex-wife for half of that time, Lennox was sure he could get away with anything.

It was too easy to leave, explore the possibility of love with the woman he’d fallen for during his and Carla’s relationship. Quickly he realized it wasn’t love that he wanted—it was power. Control. He wanted it in his relationships the same as he required it in his business life.

That’s why running for mayor was a no-brainer. He would have power over the city. Anything moving would have to come through him. To add to that, the surplus of women at his beck and call was everything he craved.

The problem was, as the mayor, Lennox needed to appear like the family man, mostly to solidify a critical base in Chicago. Carla was perfect for being his trophy wife. Though they were around the same age, her duty would only be to look gorgeous, smile for the cameras, and let him fuck her whenever he so desired.

With the money he looked to gain, Carla would be okay with staying by his side if she ever found out he was in bed with other women. A part of him wanted to be up front with her and let Carla know his intentions. Then, there would be no need for pretense. But Lennox had to warm her up first.

Unfortunately, Carla was giving him a hard time while he was trying to get them on the same accord.

Then, when she ultimately decided to cut ties with him for Jacob Alexander Rose, Lennox had to move fast to keep her in his crosshairs.

Now, she was pissing him off. If Carla wouldn't cooperate, he would ruin her life, then find another woman to manipulate.

Exiting the campaign office where he spent most days making plans for his desirable future, Lennox flipped the collar to his coat upward and took his eyes up and down the street.

It was time to call it a day, but thoughts of stopping by Carla's on his way home taunted him the more he waited for his car service.

“Where the hell is the limo?” he growled, irritated.

As if sailing on a cloud, the limousine cruised through the fog to a stop in front of Lennox.

He waited a moment more, then when realizing the chauffeur wasn't exiting to open his door, he yanked the back door open in frustration and slid inside with a curse on his tongue.

“Whose piece-of-shit car service would—what the fuck?!”

His eyes widened at the man sitting across the seat, dressed in all black—suit pants, a trench coat, and cufflinks could be

seen at the wrists of his button-down shirt.

“Usually, when I dress to impress, it’s to remind myself what a fuckin’ gentleman I am,” Jacob said. He took out a cigar and twirled it around his fingers. “And I only smoke when I have something to celebrate.” He tucked the cigar in his inside pocket. “I also have prided myself in being slow to anger.”

Jacob’s gaze lowered, now shooting daggers at Lennox.

“But, because you deserve everything you’re about to receive, I’ll let you experience my madness this time. Lucky you.”

“Get the fuck out of my limousine,” Lennox spat.

Moving quickly, Jacob’s fist connected with Lennox’s face with such power that Lennox’s head smashed into the window, cracking the glass.

Grabbing his collar, Jacob slammed another fist in his face, cracking his nose where blood spilled and ran down into Lennox’s mouth.

“Arrrrgh!” Lennox screamed.

He attempted to cover his face when Jacob punched him again, snatched Lennox’s hands away from his nose, and struck him back-to-back. Jacob grabbed Lennox off the seat by his collar as the limo pulled away from the curb, and Lennox was so dizzy he couldn’t defend himself from the three images of Jacob bouncing in front of him.

“You see, I had no plans on talking to your bitch-ass about anything.” Jacob slammed his fist in Lennox’s face again, and Lennox howled in pain.

“But I wanted you to see me coming. Never would I let a man say I sucker-punched him.” Jacob punched him repeatedly, then tossed him across the seat, causing the limo to bounce as the driver drove at average speed down the road.

“I believe you must have a death wish, Mr. Jenkins.”

Jacob threw a heavy double-fisted combo in Lennox’s ribs, making the man cower in a fetal position and bawl in agony.

“You dare to drug my fiancée, blackmail her, and think for the slightest minute you’ll get away with it?” Jacob snarled, beating Lennox in his face, his head, his chest, his ribs. Bracing himself on his hands, he kicked him, stomped him with the same ferocity as if he were standing over him.

Blood splattered from Lennox’s nose, his mouth, his face swelling almost immediately from the beat-down his body endured.

The limo cruised into an alley, and the partition slid down as Jacob went mad on the man, punches, kicks, again and again.

“Rose.”

Pausing with his fist mid-air, insanity written on his face in the way his features were twisted, Jacob glanced to the front seat where Jonas was eyeing him through the rearview mirror.

“Finish it.”

Nostrils flaring, Jacob punched him again.

“Listen to me, Mr. Jenkins. What you will do is call off your race for the mayoral seat. You will never, and I mean NEVER, contact Carla again.”

He patted Lennox’s pockets in search of his cell phone. When he found it, he slipped the phone into his pocket. Though Lennox could have the picture saved outside of his cell, Jacob would make sure he never had access to the one in his phone, in case it was his only copy.

“The picture you’ve been blackmailing her with—get rid of it. I have a full video of you dropping a date-rape drug in her drink and carrying her off in the dead of night.” He punched Lennox a few more times for good measure, and the man only gurgled and cried out in pain.

“Understand me. If you ever see me face-to-face again, it will be the last time you see anything.”

Jacob opened the door, grabbed Lennox by his collar, and tossed him out. Lennox hit the base of the alley wall, howling in pain as his body dropped to the ground.

Jacob was tempted to get out of the limo and beat the man more, but he and his brother's agreement was that he wouldn't get out, to keep their identities concealed from any outside cameras.

A simmering growl trekked from Jacob as he watched the man writhe in pain for a few seconds more. Then, he slammed the door shut, and the limo pulled back onto the road and disappeared.

Chapter Thirty-Three



Within the span of twenty-four hours, Carla's life had become a dream again. She drove toward Academy College Preparatory High School, her thoughts on a cloud, fantasizing about her and Jacob's reunion.

The next time she talked to Phoebe, it needed to be in person so she could hug her and thank her for reaching out to Jacob.

To say she was surprised when he manifested outside of Lennox's house was the understatement of the year. Initially, Carla didn't know what to expect. The only thing she cared about at that moment was him being there. Her mission of revenge was immediately halted.

As much hatred as she felt for Lennox, being back with Jacob made it all feel okay. And not only were they reunited, but Jacob asked Carla to marry him. The elation Carla experienced every moment after his question was heavenly.

Reaching for the radio, Carla turned on the dial in search of some sexy R&B to coincide with this mood she was in. Static could be heard through her speakers, then country music. Carla twisted the knob a little more.

“Breaking news, a representative for mayoral candidate Lennox Jenkins told WTZB Mr. Jenkins is calling off his campaign. When asked for further comment, we were given no comments at the time.”

“Minutes later, another report came in that Mr. Jenkins was hospitalized late last night. He arrived at the hospital by ambulance with five broken ribs, a broken nose, his jaw dislocated, and his eyes swollen shut.”

“After finding Mr. Jenkins in an alley, a homeless man went into the local dollar store to call the police. Speculation about who’s behind the attack remains unknown at this time. Count on us to keep you informed.”

Carla’s thoughts shuffled as she pulled into her assigned parking spot at the high school.

That morning she checked her phone to find text messages and missed calls from Lennox. They’d come in right after leaving his home with Jacob yesterday, and Carla hadn’t seen them until the next morning.

She showed them to Jacob, and he slipped a hand up her face, staring Carla in her eyes.

“I need to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“If we turn over the tape of you and Lennox at the club, he will be charged and locked up, but your identity will be revealed.”

Her gut tightened and worry assailed her.

“It is possible to manipulate the video, so your face isn’t clear. In that case, he would still be locked up and charged, but it’s possible if authorities find out the video was tampered with, that he could be released, and his charges dropped.”

Her anxiety spread over her face.

“Whatever you want to do, I’m behind you one hundred percent.”

She sighed and folded her arms. “I can’t have my identity out there. Please, Jacob.”

He drew her into his embrace.

“I don’t want him free, either. He’ll never leave me alone.”

“You won’t get any more calls from him. I’ve taken care of it.”

Her brows rose. “You...when?”

He didn’t respond, only stared at her with that sexy gaze she loved. For one second, Carla remembered rolling over in the middle of the night to find Jacob’s side of the bed empty. But she was too out of it to go in search of him. Now, however, Carla wondered if his absence had anything to do with the report she just heard.

“Serves him right. Piece of shit.”

Reaching for her briefcase and purse, Carla left her car and headed into the building.

“Morning, Ms. Jones,” her colleague Pricilla greeted.

“Good morning.” Carla’s eyes lit up, and Pricilla planted her hands on her hips and paused her stroll.

“Well, look at you, shining like a diamond.”

Carla’s lips spread into a wide smile, and she twirled on her feet but completed her circle, singing, “Am I...?”

Pricilla laughed, and Carla winked, strutting to her classroom door, unlocking, then entering with love on her mind.

“Da, da, da, da, da,” she sang, a tune she had all but made up.

The bell rang, and as she unpacked her briefcase, voices could be heard filling the halls. A few students entered the classroom, followed by Carrie and Samantha.

“Good morning, Ms. Jones,” they chimed.

“Good morning.”

She watched them take their seats, noticing their skirts looked shorter than usual this morning. Carla twisted her lips. She would have to tell them later to stick with the standard length according to the school dress code.

They were growing up so fast, but life has a way of slowing everyone down. They would understand eventually.

Beverly power-walked into the room and headed straight for the back of the class. Still, Carla didn't know what to do to get to Beverly. She was unreachable. Maybe today, Carla would say something to the principal. It might be essential to get Beverly in a program that would get to the root of her issues.

Carla nodded. It was a good idea. If someone else could get through to her, that would be a good thing.

“Okay, come on in.” Carla raised her voice as she strolled to the door, leaned against it, and folded her arms. “If you're in the hallway when the bell goes off, I'm marking you absent.”

Several students ran into the classroom just as the bell rang. Sliding through the door, Jared yelled, “I'm in!”

The students laughed, and Carla shook her head.

“Jared, are you ready to talk to me in Italian today?”

Jared frowned. “Ms. Jones, can't we start with something easy like Spanish?”

“Oh, Spanish is easy now?”

“Sí.”

The students laughed.

“That's all you know, isn't it?”

“Sí.”

More laughter rang out.

“That means you'll fail my class.”

“Hold on now, Ms. Jones, don't go getting all extra on me.”

“Mr. Moore, have a seat.”

Jared rushed to his seat, slapping Omega's hand along the way.

“If you look on the bright side,” Carrie turned to Jared, “You won’t be the only one failing this class.”

“Oooh,” some of the students chimed, in reference to Beverly. Carrie cut her eyes at Beverly. “Loser.”

Beverly jumped from her seat and removed a chrome handgun from her book bag, pointing it at Carrie.

“Oh, my God!” several students screamed. The entire class shifted, with some climbing under their desks, some hiding behind Carla’s desk, while a few ran out of the door.

Beverly pressed the barrel of the gun against Carrie’s cheeks. Wide-eyed in a hurry, Carrie trembled and whined. “Ms. Jooones...”

Frozen in place, Carla snapped out of her trance. It had all happened so fast it seemed as if she were moving in slow motion.

“Beverly.”

“Shut up!”

Carla closed her lips, her heart beating fast. Beverly looked back at Carrie, pressing the gun harder in her face. Carla moved, and Beverly put her aim on Carla.

“Don’t even try it! I know how to use this thing! I’ve been taught by a very serious gun-toting father who screams at the political commentary on his TV about second amendment rights every time he gets the chance.” Her hand shook. “One step and I’ll blow a hole in your chest, and I mean it!”

“Oh, my God!” some of the students cried.

She turned her anger and fury towards Carrie, and Carla hit the black panic button against her desk drawer. It was a safety device which had been added to all teachers’ desk after the Columbine school shooting.

The silent alarm went off, notifying the principal, the authorities, and other school teachers that there was an active gunman on high school grounds.

“You think you’re so smart, don’t you, Carrie? The popular girl in school. The one everyone wants to be around. The one everyone loves. And with the snap of a finger,” Beverly snapped her finger and nudged Carrie with the tip of the gun’s barrel. “I can erase people. Completely eliminate them.”

“I’m sorry!”

“You’re not sorry. You’re just sorry I’ve got this gun to your head!”

Carrie winced. “You’re right! I should be a better person.”

“Damn right about that, but it’s too late, isn’t it?”

“No. There’s plenty of time for me to get my act together.”

“Not when you’re dead, Carrie!”

Carrie’s eyes widened, and tears fell down her ivory face. “Are you really saying you’re going to kill me right now? After all we’ve been through!?”

Beverly poked Carrie with the gun again.

“Shut up! You didn’t care about that when you called me a loser! Did you?”

Carrie trembled and bit down on her lips as her tears blinded her.

“Beverly, no one needs to get hurt. Put the gun down.”

Beverly glared at Carla. “You are just as bad.”

Carla’s brows rose. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah.” Beverly nodded. “I told you not to suspend me, didn’t I?” Tears welled in Beverly’s eyes, and she unzipped her sports jacket and tossed the blazer at Carla, revealing her arms branded with long red whip marks.

Carla’s eyes lurched. “Are those...?”

“Yeah. My father beat me every day that I was suspended. With an extension cord!” Beverly’s laugh was chaotic.

“Oh, my God,” Carla whispered, covering her chest. The lashes extended from her wrists to the top of her arms. Some could be seen peeking from the collar of her shirt.

“There are more on my back. I can barely lay in bed at night.”

“Beverly, please, let me help you. You don’t have to endure abuse from your parents.”

“It’s your fault!” Tears rushed down Beverly’s face. “For years, I was beaten, and then I found a way to make sure I never endured that pain again. I did whatever they asked. I spoke softly. I never got in their way. I kept the house spotless! I cooked dinner! I kept my grades above average! It was good enough to escape this pain for eight whole months.” She pointed her gun at Carla.

“Then you...” Her bottom lip trembled. “You just couldn’t give me another chance. So, I’m going to tell you what’s about to happen now. First, I’m going to kill you, then I’m going to...” She grabbed a handful of Carrie’s hair and jerked her up on her feet. “I’m going to kill Carrie. Then I’m going to kill myself.”

Whimpers ran around the class as the students cowered, some watching on in horror.

But in the back corner of the room, Jared rose slowly to his feet, then glanced at Omega, who was at the other side of the room. They gave each other a head nod, and seeing their exchange, Carla shook her head softly, no.

But the boys were ready to jump into action, and each second that ticked by could mean life and death for them all.

Chapter Thirty-Four



Thirty minutes earlier

“*Y*our total is forty-five thousand, five hundred twenty-nine dollars and ninety cents, Mr. Rose.”

Jacob slid the jeweler his American Express Black card. The five-point-five carat platinum oval diamond engagement ring was top-tier. With a huge stone in the middle, the ring was outlined with a layer of diamonds that ran into a double diamond band.

The sparkle cast a twinkle in Jacob’s eyes, and enthusiastic about his purchase, he collected the black bag, slipped his card inside his suit pocket, and headed to Academy College Preparatory High School.

In his Bentley, a bouquet of long-stemmed roses lay across his passenger seat, and he couldn’t wait to see the look on Carla’s face when he proposed.

Jacob was thankful for Principal Sharp. After contacting him about his plans to propose to Carla in front of her class, the principal had been delighted to agree, since the students were there when he and Carla officially began a relationship.

That seemed like just yesterday, but times flies when you’re in a relationship with the one you love. Pulling into the school parking lot, Jacob parked, grabbed the roses, slipped out of the Bentayga, and strolled to the school’s side door.

The doors burst open before he could grab the handle, and he jumped back as three students ran right into him.

“Whoa!” Jacob grabbed Samantha to steady her. “What’s going on? Are you all okay?”

No sooner than he said it, a crew of police cars pulled into the parking lot, and officers hopped out, but didn’t move to enter the building.

His forehead creased as a frown settled on his face.

Frantically, Samantha shouted, “Beverly’s got a gun! She’s going to shoot Carrie!”

Jacob’s gaze darkened further.

“I think she’s going to shoot Ms. Jones, too!” Sicily yelled. “We ran out of the classroom, but we were the only ones to get out.”

The bouquet of roses fell from Jacob’s hands, and he spoke to the girls as he sprinted through the double doors.

“Go stay by the police and don’t come back in!”

Moving down the hallway, the silent alarm lights overhead didn’t distract him. It was the thought of losing Carla.

A flashback of watching his father grieve during anniversaries of his mother’s death dashed through his mind at warp speed, and the pain that attacked his chest made Jacob move faster, rounding the hall until he got to the only open door.

Shouts could be heard coming from the room.

“It’s your fault!” Tears rushed down Beverly’s face. “For years, I was beaten, and then I found a way to make sure I never endured that pain again. I did whatever they asked. I spoke softly. I never got in their way. I kept the house spotless! I cooked dinner! I kept my grades above average! It was good enough to escape this pain for eight whole months.” She pointed her gun at Carla.

“Then you…” Her bottom lip trembled. “You just couldn’t give me another chance. So, I’m going to tell you what’s about

to happen now. First, I'm going to kill you, then I'm going to..." She grabbed a handful of Carrie's hair and jerked her up on her feet. "I'm going to kill Carrie. Then I'm going to kill myself."

Out of sight, Jacob leaned forward, looking into the classroom. The first thing he saw was Carla. Beautiful and horrified, doing her best to keep it together. His gaze dropped to her hands. They trembled, and his gut churned, hating to see her body respond to the fear she felt.

Taking the risk to look deeper, he saw Beverly, whose eyes were currently on Carrie. Then, the boys, Jared and Omega in the back of the class. He could read their language. They were about to make a move, even though Carla was subtly signaling them not to.

He waited, watching the boys, then...they moved, and Jacob ran into the room at the same time that they jumped Beverly.

The gun went off twice when Beverly was tackled.

Bang! Bang!

Screams filled the class, and Carla fell to the floor as Jacob covered her body and took her down.

"Get off of me!" Beverly screamed, but the boys pushed the gun away and forced her hands behind her back, holding her there.

"Oh, my God!"

Everyone turned to Carla and Jacob. Blood was spilling between them, and Carla's hands shook as both she and Jacob checked her chest, her stomach, her legs.

"It's not me!" Her eyes widened, and she frantically checked Jacob. "You're hit!"

"Ugh!" he groaned.

"What the hell are you even doing here!?" Tears clouded her eyes. "No, no, no!"

"It's okay. It's all right."

“How can you even say that! You’re not supposed to...” she hyperventilated. “You’re not supposed to be here!”

“*Bellissima*. Look at me.”

“I am looking at you!”

He lifted her eyes to his gaze. “I’m going to be all right. I’m made of steel, woman.” He smiled, then groaned, and Carla sobbed as police filed into the room.

“We need a paramedic!”

As a precaution, EMTs were already on the scene. A group of the medics sprinted into the room; all of them immediately began working on Jacob.

Three days later

“DIDN’T I TELL YOU I WAS MADE OF STEEL?” JACOB GRINNED at Carla as she opened the passenger door of her Infiniti and helped him inside.

“Ha, ha, that’s not funny.”

“Eh,” he handed over his crutches. “I considered it a light joke.”

Carla twisted her lips.

“No?”

“No.”

“A brotha can try, right?”

“No.”

“Damn. What happened to your sense of humor?”

Carla closed the door and walked around the car, slipping into the driver’s seat.

“My sense of humor went out the door when you were shot!”

She backed out of the parking lot.

“In the back of my thigh, though.”

“Twice!”

“The shells came out easily. The worst part of it was the burning.”

Carla inhaled and exhaled sharply, poking her lips out.

“Come on, love. Let’s move past this.”

“Jacob, this could’ve been worse. You could’ve been hit in your stomach, or God forbid, your heart.” She stopped at a red light and looked at him. “Do you know what kind of mess I would be if that had happened?”

“But...” he reached to her chin for a soft caress, “That didn’t happen. Why dwell on what could’ve been? I’m alive. You’re alive. Beverly’s getting the care she needs. She’ll see a therapist at the institution for battered children. And we get to spend the rest of our lives together.”

That last part made Carla’s mood shift.

“I am looking forward to loving you forever.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.

“Then show me.”

She twisted her lips. “I plan to.”

“Now.”

The light turned green, and Carla made a left turn. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“Elope with me.”

Her eyes widened, and her heartbeat kicked up a ruckus. She glanced at him, her mouth going wide, unable to hide her smile.

“Jacob...”

He reached across the seat and slipped something on her finger. Glancing down, Carla swerved, then pulled over and

put the car in park.

“Holy smokes!”

The five-point-five carat diamond ring sparkled on her hand, and she trembled all over, her hands, her lips, her body.

“Jacob!”

“I love you more than life itself, and I don’t want to spend another second without you as my forever.”

Tears ran down her cheeks, and she covered her mouth with her right hand.

“I know how close our families are to us and what they mean to us. This is not us shutting them out. We will have that fairy-tale wedding if you want it, but first, let’s make it official.”

She nodded as tears splashed against her fingers covering her mouth.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes! *Hell*, yes!”

He laughed, his heart filled with warmth. “Tonight, we wed, in Barbados.”

Her eyes shot over to him. “Jacob!”

“Take us to the hangar, love. There’s a jet waiting.”

“How did you prepare this? You’ve been in the hospital for three days!”

“I had all of this prepared before I got shot. I just managed to live to see the day.”

Her face fell. “That’s not funny.”

“Still?”

“No!” She pushed him in the shoulder and chuckled.

“All right, all right. Three strikes and I’m out?”

“No!”

He laughed as she pulled out of the parking lot and drove to the airport.

CANDLELIGHT ILLUMINATED A PATH DOWN THE BEACH. Barefoot, in a white Vera Wang gown that draped off her shoulders with a mermaid top, flaring from her waist and stretching into a sheer train behind her, Carla strolled to Jacob.

He was debonair in an all-white suit that highlighted his chocolate skin and brought out his beautiful broad smile. His feet were also bare, and the only people in attendance were him, Carla, and the island bishop. On the sand, next to him laid his crutches, and around them as a makeshift altar were seven fire torches sticking from the sand.

Jacob drew her into his embrace when she got close enough to touch, and while the bishop went on with the traditional commentary, they stared at each other—hearts beating and nerves dancing at the thought of becoming one.

“Jacob Alexander Rose, do you take Carla Jones to be your lawfully wedded wife, for better or for worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.”

Carla’s heart slammed in her chest, and tears sprang from her eyes. She sniffled and tried to pull herself together, but it was no use.

The bishop smiled at her, then looked up at Jacob and winked. Jacob rubbed her hands in the spirit of calming her.

He lifted her veil and pulled her close as her body vibrated, her cries growing heavier by the second.

“Ti amo così tanto Bella. Luce della mia vita. Amante della mia anima.” I love you so much, beautiful. Light of my life. Lover of my soul.”

She sniffled and looked into his eyes as she responded.

“Ti amo troppo bello. Il Mio amante. Mio eroe. La mia vita.” I love you, too, handsome. My lover. My hero. My life.

He kissed her on her forehead, desperately wanting to taste her mouth. Looking back at the bishop, Jacob nodded, and the bishop continued.

“Ms. Carla Jones, do you take Jacob Alexander Rose to be your lawfully wedded husband, for better or for worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health as long as you both shall live?”

Her voice was shaky when she said, “I do.”

Jacob squeezed her fingers as his heart also drummed behind his breastplate.

“By the power vested in me, by the islands of the Caribbean and the country of Barbados, I now pronounce you, husband and wife. You may kiss your bride, Mr. Rose.”

The caress of his lips on hers set off sparks as they melted into one another. A moan fumbled between them, and heat swirled in a gust of wind. Their tongues tangled, and tingles crawled up their spines.

“Mine, mine, mine,” he murmured as they kissed.

“Newsflash, husband, I’ve always been yours for the taking.”

He deepened their connection, never wanting to breathe without her for a minute.



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Note from The Author

Hey, reading family! Can you believe we've come to the end of the *Falling for a Rose* series? Oh, gosh. Twelve books of creating this family, loving them, becoming a part of their dynasty, and now bringing it to a close is surreal. I hope you enjoyed Jacob and Carla's story. The ups-and-downs had me on an emotional rollercoaster! It has been such a pleasure to pen this series. *Falling for a Rose* received its first recognition with the Best Series Award, and it is unbelievable. I am thrilled that these characters have touched your lives as they have touched mine. You guys are the best part of this series. Without you, it's possible there wouldn't be twelve books in this series.

So for that, thank you for showing so much love to the Roses. I love you, and thank you so much for reading.

I hope you'll continue to follow me through more stories that are on the horizon. There are so many more who want their lives told, and I will continue to write as long as my Lord and Savior allows.

As a reminder, reviews are an indie author's bread and butter. They are a vital part of the publishing process. Not only do they help others who are shopping for good reads find books that they'll enjoy, but they also help gain access to specific promotions that are vital to the success of a book. With that said, I would be more than thankful for your review!

XOXO

—Stephanie

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Contemporary Romance

- Everything I Always Wanted (A Friends to Lovers Romance)
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- Fever (Falling for a Rose Book Four)
- A Lifetime with You (Falling for a Rose Book Five)
- She said Yes (Falling for a Rose Holiday Edition Book Six)
- Mine (Falling for a Rose Book Seven)
- The Sweetest Surrender (Falling for a Rose Book Eight)
- Tempted By You (Falling for a Rose Book Nine)
- On The Naughty List (Prelude to Her Naughty Suitor)
- Her Naughty Suitor (Falling for a Rose Book Ten)
- Promising Forever (A Falling for a Rose wedding novella)
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- Give Me A Reason (In the Heart of a Valentine Book Three)
- A Game-Changing Christmas (A Falling for a Rose & In the Heart of A Valentine, Holiday Edition)
- With Your Permission (In The Heart of A Valentine Book Five)
- Wait No More (A With Your Permission Spin-Off)
- In Pursuit Of You (In The Heart of A Valentine Book Six)
- If I Could Stay (Lunch Break Series Book One)
- Escort (Lunch Break Series Book Two)
- Valentine Rush
- Move Your Body.
- Cabin Fever
- A Moment Of Forever

- Impromptu Seduction

Romantic Suspense Thrillers

- Beautiful Assassin
- Beautiful Assassin 2 Revelations
- Beautiful Assassin 3 The Queen
- Mistaken Identity

Crime Fiction

- Prowl
- Prowl 2
- Prowl 3
- Hidden

Fantasy

- Golden (Rapunzel's F'd Up Fairytale)

Non-Fiction

- Against All Odds (Surviving the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit)

About the Author

Stephanie Nicole Norris is an author from Chattanooga, Tennessee, with a humble beginning. After becoming a young adult, her love for romance sparked, leaving her captivated by heroes and heroines alike. With a big imagination and a creative heart, Stephanie penned her first novel in 2012. She went on to write grin-inducing romance and has been nominated multiple times, receiving six literary awards, two for Best Series, Best Book Cover, and Author of the Year, and others. As a prolific writer, Stephanie's catalog continues to grow. You can find her books on Amazon.

<https://www.stephanienicolenorris.com/>

