

A muscular man with a very low body fat percentage is shown from the waist up. He is wearing a light-colored baseball cap backwards and light-colored athletic pants with a blue waistband. He is standing on a sandy beach with a blurred background of other people and palm trees under a clear sky.

**BONITA
SINATRA**

**TO
CATCH
A
JOCK**

A woman with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail is shown from the waist up. She is wearing a white blazer over a black sports bra and white high-waisted pants. She is looking off to the side with a serious expression.

**MALLORY
MONROE**

**BONITA SINATRA
TO CATCH A JOCK
BY
MALLORY MONROE**

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CHAPTER ONE

Five Years Earlier

“Wanna dance?”

“Sure don’t.”

Maybe the music was too loud and she didn’t hear him. He leaned in closer. “I said do you want to dance?”

She looked at him. Was he deaf? “I said I don’t.”

He gave her a hard look too. Who did she think she was? She was sitting on a countertop while other girls stood around her like she was some princess. She looked good, he had to admit. She was decked down in a white, Italian-silk pantsuit with a sports bra as her only shirt. Her exposed flat stomach emphasized how fine she was, and the contrast of her white outfit highlighted the beauty of her deep-toned dark skin. She was hot alright. But he was hotter than she’d ever be. One of the most popular boys at their private prep school. And he didn’t like being turned down. He wasn’t accustomed to anybody telling him no on any day of the week, but especially on the day after graduation. “Why not?” he asked her.

Bonita Sinatra didn't suffer fools well on a regular day, but this arrogant prick was already getting on her last nerve. What was his problem?

“You heard me, Bo. I asked you why not?”

“Because I don't wanna dance,” she responded, her small shoulders hunching, as if it was obvious why not.

She could tell he was pissed. He didn't like her answer at all. That was why she made a point of continuing to stare at him. Because he was staring daggers at her. “Oughta be glad I asked your ass in the first place,” he said, proving her point.

“Oh yeah? I should be glad you asked me? And why's that, Kace?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because I'm the shit, that's why!”

Bonita wanted to roll her eyes. “Yeah you're shit alright,” she said, and the girls that surrounded her giggled. But Bonita could feel his energy, and it was negative as fuck. She could tell he wanted to lash back at her.

And he was about to lash back harshly. The n-word was on the tip of his tongue she could tell. But it was that look

she gave him, where her big green eyes that had seemed so soft and beautiful just a few seconds ago, now seemed cold and dangerous. It was that look that reminded him who she was, and *whose* she was. It was why all the guys in his group told him to not even try it.

And just as she suspected he'd do, he asked one of her friends standing by her if she wanted to dance, her friend said she did because no girl turned down Kace McCoy, and he whisked her away. Which was all the more reason why Bonita didn't fool with any of the boys around town. Because they were still just boys. Because they wouldn't know how to stand up to a woman like her to save their lives. First sign of any pushback and they were out of there. She wasn't wasting her time like that.

But Rhea Langley, Bonita's closest friend and one of the girls who were hanging around her, saw it differently. It was the day after their high school graduation and they were at a house party. Many of the guys wanted to come over and ask one of the most popular girls in school for a dance, but none of them had the nerve. And the one that did, she rebuked. "Why you always doing that?" Rhea asked her.

"What am I doing? I'm just hanging out."

“You could have danced with Kace.”

Bonita looked at her friend. “But I don’t wanna dance.”

“That’s not the point, Bo. He wanted to dance with you. You could have appeased him and danced with him.”

“So it’s my job to appease him?”

“Yes!” Rhea was adamant. “And yes I said yes! Nobody else will even attempt to ask your butt. They’re all scared of your daddy and your brothers and they don’t even try. At least he tried.”

“That’s crazy.” Bonita wasn’t having it. “That’s fucking stupid.”

“It’s not stupid.”

“It is, Rhee. Listen to what you’re saying. I’m supposed to forget my feelings, dismiss what I want to do, and bend over backwards to appease some weak-ass boy who don’t have the balls to not take no for an answer? And you say he’s scared of my father and my brothers when they don’t even know his name? Girl bye!”

The other girls giggled. But Rhea was tough too. That was why she was Bonita’s best friend. Had she been weak like

those other girls that loved following Bonita around, she would have dealt with her with a long-handle spoon too. But Rhea was never afraid to push back. “Why you always so hard on guys, Bo? Didn’t your parents ever teach you that you can attract more bees with honey than with vinegar?”

“My parents taught me to never act like honey when you feel like vinegar or you may attract the wrong bee. They taught me to be true to myself. And right now I don’t wanna dance, so I’m not dancing. That’s no knock against him. I didn’t tell him to come over here and ask me to dance. I was minding my own business. Which is what I intend to continue doing.”

Rhea rolled her eyes. “You’re hopeless, you know that? Just hopeless.”

Bonita smiled and leaned against her dearest friend. “But you still love me, right?”

Rhea looked at her best friend and smiled too. How could anybody not love Bo? She was contagious. People liked being around her for some unknown reason although she was hardly the most gregarious person. But she kept it real. And they liked that.

It wasn't all that long ago when Rhea used to be the girl everybody picked on because of her weight. Because she wasn't considered the classically small, classically beautiful girl like most girls at their prep school. But popular Bonita would sit beside her at lunch time and tell her to ignore those fools. She'd hang out with her at P.E. and shame the ones who tried to shame Rhea. She'd ride Rhea around in her cute Lexus her daddy bought her for her sixteenth birthday. And they became fast best friends. And soon those same girls and guys that bullied Rhea and picked on her and wouldn't give her the time of day was inviting her to all of their parties and sitting by her at lunch, too, and riding her around in their cars too. But she knew their *nice* was fake as fuck because they wanted to get next to Bo. But she knew Bo hated bullies with a passion and was nice to Rhea because she genuinely liked her. "Yes," Rhea finally answered Bonita's question, "I do indeed love your stupid ass. Why? A mystery to me. And you're still hopeless," she added, and they all laughed at that too.

But then another one of their friends came running up to them as if she had a story to tell. "Bo, you need to come now!"

Bonita frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s Jared. He’s out front and I just saw him slap Zara. Zara’s in trouble!”

Bonita didn’t have to be told twice. As soon as she heard that her other closest friend needed help, she jumped down from the counter she had been sitting atop and took off running across the room, with Rhea and the other girls running behind her.

When they ran out of the front door, the girl who had told them about Zara pointed down the street. And that was when Bonita saw her. She also saw Jared grab her friend by the hair. They ran down the street, where Zara and Jared were in front of Zara’s car.

Zara Kortana was yelling for her ex to let her go, but he was yelling at her about some other boy she liked and it was as if they were dancing. She was trying to break free of him, and he was determined to never let go of her long, black, well-placed extensions. But Bonita was leading the pack, and as soon as she got within striking distance, she angrily pushed the much larger young man away from her bestie. Zara ran behind Bonita and the other girls, as Jared fell on his ass.

But he got right back up with his fists balled and ready to attack. “Why you black bitch!” he yelled. Bonita was biracial, but she looked far more black than white. Zara and Rhea were black too, but Jared was a white boy. And he was turning red-hot with anger. “I ain’t scared of you, Bo. You think I’m scared of you? And I ain’t scared of your family either!”

Why did they always bring her family into it? “Who said you were? That’s your insecurity talking. You just better leave Z alone. Always picking on these girls you know won’t fight back. You wanna pick on somebody, pick on somebody who can actually beat your ass.”

“Like who?” Jared asked. “*Like you?* Gimme a fucking break!”

“Just leave, Jared,” Zara cried out from behind Bonita. “I don’t want you anymore. Just leave me alone!”

He looked at her as if he couldn’t stand her anymore, and all the girls, seeing that hateful look on his face, closed ranks behind Zara should he try to go after her again. But he didn’t. He began turning to leave. The girls, especially Zara, sighed relief.

But Bonita wasn't buying it. Her father taught her to never believe a surrender or a retreat until the enemy was clean out of sight. She kept her guard up.

And for good reason because as soon as Jared looked as if he was turning to leave, he turned right back and swung on Bonita with a roundhouse right that would have taken any man down, let alone somebody as small as she was. But she ducked, punched him on his chin before he could readjust, and took him down. The girls thought it was the funniest thing in the world, and started laughing so loudly that others from the party who were hanging outside came running to the action too.

But Bonita wasn't thinking about the crowd. A wounded animal was at their most dangerous, and she knew Jared was so prideful that no way was that going to be the end of it for him.

He was stunned by how a girl so small could pack a punch so violent, but he was getting back up to handle his business. He was going to beat the shit out of her! But before he could get back on his feet, a big Ford F-150 super cab pickup truck suddenly came racing toward the crowd with its siren twirling and flashing silently on its dashboard. Most of

the crowd knew who it was as soon as they saw that truck, and they took off back inside the house. Underage drinking was going on inside that house, and they needed to clear out the evidence.

But Bonita and her girls stayed put. Because they knew who it was too. When the window was pressed down and Jared saw who it was, he still got back up. But a whole lot slower than he originally planned.

Brent Sinatra, the no-nonsense chief of the Jericho, Maine police department and Bonita's oldest half-brother, checked out his sister first, to make certain she was okay, but he was mainly glowering at Jared.

He had been in the shadows, parked in an empty lot on the corner, making certain no craziness was going on at that house party because he knew his kid sister was in that house, when all of a sudden she and her flunkies came running toward some little shuffle on the side of the road that Zara and Jared were having. But when his kid sister pushed Jared aside, as if her little butt was his equal, Brent almost forgot his cover and hurried to the scene. But when they began talking, he waited to let it play out. Because the last thing he wanted to do was let Bonita see that he had been spying on her. She

prided herself on being just as tough as her brothers, and whenever her grit was questioned she'd become irate.

And when Jared swung on Bonita and missed, and Bonita, being a Sinatra, swung back and connected, Brent was proud of her. But he also knew most dudes weren't about to take that kind of embarrassment lying down. He decided he had no choice but to blow his cover and hurry to the scene before Jared could do his beloved sister any harm. "What's going on out here?" Brent asked the crowd.

Bonita couldn't believe it when she saw her big brother drive up. Sometimes her family treated her as if she was still a little kid! But another part of her was relieved to see him. Jared was a punk, but he was a male punk. And a male punk, if angry enough, could outpunch her. Even she knew that. But she would go down swinging. With Brent there, he wasn't going to allow it to go that far.

"You hear me?" Brent was still talking to Jared. "Anything going on out here?"

Bonita looked at the troublemaker too. "Anything going on out here, Jared?" she asked him. Was he man enough to own his shit and walk away, or was he the punk she took him for who would keep shit going?

But he knew Brent's reputation around town too. He knew Brent wasn't above bashing in a head or two if those heads disobeyed him. That was why Jared did back down. "Nothing going on out here," he said. "So you can go on back to your cushy little job at your cushy little police station."

Brent, like Bonita, was hot-tempered too, and he frowned at Jared. "Who the fuck are you to tell me where to go? Your ass going home, that's what your ass is going to do. Your night's over."

Jared was livid. "But I just got here!"

"Let's put it this way," Brent said and Bonita knew a lecture was coming on. "I saw that assault you committed on Zara," Brent said to the young man. "I saw that attempted assault you tried to commit on my baby sister."

Bonita rolled her eyes and glanced at Rhea, shaking her head. Rhea was a youngest child, too, and understood the frustration. Why couldn't he just say sister? Why did her siblings always have to put *baby* in it?

But Brent kept talking to Jared. "Now if you don't want to spend the rest of this night in one of my jail cells inside that same cushy police station you're so anxious for me

to get back to, you'd better take your bitch-ass home. But the choice is yours."

Jared started shaking his head, like he knew the fix was in and no matter what he did it wasn't going to turn out well for him. And he caved. He still had some sense left. But he still felt a need to get a jab in as he began to walk away. "What's with you two anyhow?" he asked Bonita and Zara. "What you in a relationship or something? You two sleeping together? That's what this is?"

But all of the girls saw it for what it was. "Boy bye!" Bonita said to Jared.

"You need to quit," Zara said too.

"Girl kick your ass," said Brent, "and that's the best you can come up with? She has to be a lesbian? Will that make you feel better about yourself?"

Jared thought about it. To everybody's shock, he was actually thinking about it! And then he nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I would feel better actually."

The girls were collectively about to give him a piece of their minds when Brent beat them to the punch. "Just get your

ass from around here. Go home or go to jail, and I mean that boy. Now get!”

Brent was not a man to trifle with and everybody in Jericho knew it. Jared knew it too. And he dusted off his pride and left.

Brent looked at Bonita. “Stop trying to fight other people’s battles, Bo,” he warned her, “or your ass will be going home too.” And he sped off.

But Bonita’s friends were smiling as he sped away. “He’s so mean,” one of them said about Brent. “But so sexy,” she added, and the other girls giggled.

But Bonita was looking at Zara. “You okay?”

“I’m good now that he’s gone.”

“How could you be with a guy like that?”

“I dumped him, remember?”

“Yeah, after he kicked your ass enough times. But what’s the allure, Z? I don’t get it.”

“He’s good.”

“That fool?”

“Not that kind of good,” said Zara. “He’s good in bed.”

Bonita looked at Zara as if she had to be kidding.

Rhea grinned. “Bo don’t know nothing about that,” she said, and they all laughed.

“Let’s just get out of here,” Zara said as she began getting into her BMW convertible. “This party sucks. I got us a better deal anyway.”

Since Bonita and Rhea had rode with Zara, they got in the car too. The other girls headed back into the house. They weren’t ready to leave.

Bonita sat on the backseat of Zara’s car, a move that allowed Rhea to sit on the front seat with Zara. But as soon as Bonita buckled up, she was too curious to let it slide. “What better deal?” she asked Zara.

“An invite.” Then she smiled. “That’s why I came out here to my car, so that I could get the confirmation. It was way too noisy inside that house.”

“An invite to what?” asked Bonita.

“A party, what else?” Zara started dancing. Of the three friends she was the party animal. The other two liked to

party as well, but nothing like Zara. “We going to a pool party y’all!” she said happily, pumping her fist in the air.

“A pool party?” Rhea asked. “Without bathing suits?”

“It’s a high-end party, Rhee. And I’m talking big time high-end. You don’t have to bring anything. They give you brand-new bathing suits if you wanna swim.”

“Ah shit!” Bonita said out loud.

“What’s wrong?” Rhea asked her. “You don’t like bathing suits?”

Bonita pulled her phone out and looked at the time. “Ah shit!” she said again. “We’ve been at this party since noon. Now it’s after six.”

“So what? We ate. We danced. Time flies.”

“But I’m supposed to meet my parents for dinner at six. I told you that, Z.”

“Oh right! You did tell me that.”

“Why didn’t you remind me?”

“I forgot, same as you. But just call ’em damn! This is our graduation week. Everybody’s throwing parties. They’ll understand.”

“They might understand,” said Bonita, “but I won’t. I’m not neglecting my parents just to go to one party after the other one as if I gotta be johnny on every set. You said you would drop me off.”

“If they make you go, I will,” said Zara. “You know I will. But just ask them, Bo. They might not be as fond of your company as you think.”

Rhea laughed.

But as soon as Zara said those words, Bonita got a text. And it was from her mother. She knew her mother. She was as strict about being on time as her father was. And his ass invented strict. She read the text.

CHAPTER TWO

“She’s late. She usually beats us here. We should have just thrown her a graduation party like I wanted to.”

“But that’s not what she wanted. Her friends were throwing too many parties as it was, in her view. She didn’t see where she had to throw one too.”

Charles Sinatra, also known as Big Daddy Sinatra around town, chuckled. “That’s our baby girl. She’s young but she’s always practical. Always sensible. I love that about her.”

“You love everything about her because she’s just like you. I just text her,” Jenay Sinatra said as she placed her phone on the table. “But remember, Charlie, she has tons of friends. She’ll probably be pulled from one party to the next all summer, until they all go away to college.”

“Just make sure you tell her to carve out some time for the people who’ll be footing the bill for this college she’s going away to. And she picks Wharton of all places. It’s highway robbery what they charge for tuition. Do you realize how many properties I can buy for that kind of dough?”

Jenay rolled her eyes. Her husband was the most generous man in the world, but he was a masterful cheapskate too. Hated, just hated spending a dime.

“It’s highway robbery,” he said again.

“You’re the one who suggested she go to a top business school. Wharton at Penn is a top business school. And top ain’t cheap,” Jenay said as she sipped her wine.

They were at The Main of Jericho, an upscale restaurant in town, and time was money for both of them. Charles was the owner of a property acquisitions corporation, the largest in Maine and the second largest in the entire New England region, and his wife ran the most luxurious hotel in town, although it was hardly luxurious when Charles first purchased it decades ago. But Jenay turned it around so completely that it was now the premier hotel in town, the place where all the big wigs passing through preferred to stay. But their success came at a price. They both were workaholics. They both had an unhealthy balance with work well exceeding play. But they always made time for their children.

“Speaking of children,” said Jenay as she sipped more wine, “you heard from Donald lately? He’s always out of

town handling business. He used to call me every single day no matter where he was. Now I barely hear from his butt.”

“He doesn’t phone me like he used to either. But he still calls Ashley every chance he gets, and she still calls me all the time. She said he’s working his ass off as usual. Never time for anything or anybody.”

“He’s building his business,” said Jenay. “Completely understandable. But did she say if he’s found a young lady yet?”

“First question I asked her. She said nope. He’s not even looking.”

Jenay shook her head. Just thinking about her stepson used to always worry her. Now just knowing he had turned that corner and was doing his own thing put a smile on her face. “I remember a time when he couldn’t be without some woman somewhere no matter what was going on in his life. Which was usually chaos. And his woman was usually some chaotic biker chick.”

“More like a piece of shit, if you ask me,” added Charles.

“But now that he’s successful and can actually afford a really good woman,” Jenay said, “he’s not interested. That’s our Donnie.”

Charles chuckled too. “That’s our Donnie alright.”

Then Jenay’s phone began ringing. She picked it up off the table and looked at the caller ID. “It’s Bo,” she said and then she answered, placing it on Speaker. “Where are you?”

“I’m just getting ready to leave this house party. I’m on my way.”

“Ask her, Bo!”

Jenay heard what sounded like Zara’s voice in the background. “Ask me what?”

“I forgot I had to meet you guys for dinner, and now we have this invite to a pool party. But I’m on my way. Zara said she’ll drop me off.”

“Well wait a minute,” said Jenay. “Do you want to go to this pool party?”

“It’ll probably be some fun, so yeah. We got what Z declares is an exclusive invite. But I promised you guys. I’m not standing you up just to go to some party.”

“Who’s having the party?” Charles asked.

“Some people Zara knows.”

“I would feel better if it were people Rhea knew,” Charles mumbled. Rhea Langley and Zara Kortana were Bonita’s two best friends in a long list of friends. But like Bonita, Rhea was more into books than boys. Zara, a hot, boy-loving mess in Charles’s view, was the direct opposite.

“Well if you want to go,” said Jenay, looking at Charles.

“No way,” said Bonita. “I promised to have dinner with you guys.”

“You just graduated high school, Bo. Go have fun with your friends. You can have dinner with your father and me tomorrow.”

“But you’re already there waiting for me. Zara will drop me off.”

Jenay motioned for Charles to say something. He knew how diligent their daughter was. He knew how devoted she was to them.

Charles was somewhat more reluctant. He never wanted to turn his baby girl over to anybody. But he also

knew Jenay was right. “No, you go with your friends. Have a blast. Now I’ll have your mother all to myself.” Charles meant that part.

“Are you sure Daddy?”

“Positive. Just don’t forget who you are.”

“I won’t.”

“And stay safe. I don’t know why you didn’t drive your own car.”

“Zara just got this new Beamer and she wanted to show it off. But don’t worry, if she gets crazy I know how to get out and walk.”

“And?”

“And call you Daddy. How could I forget that part?”

Jenay laughed.

“Just be careful,” Charles said. He was getting worried already.

“I will be extra careful. Love you guys. Bye!” And Bonita ended the call.

Jenay looked at Charles. “She’s not our baby anymore.”

“Says who? I don’t care if she’s ninety, she’ll still be *my* baby.”

“If she’s blessed to be ninety, Charles, you’ll be dead.”

“And she’ll still be my baby!”

Jenay shook her head. “You stupid,” she said, and even Charles had to laugh at that.

But in Zara’s Beamer, Bonita ended the call with her parents looking like she’d just lost her best friend. Zara, who was driving and saw her through her rearview mirror, glanced at her. “What’s wrong, Bo? They said you can go.”

“I promised to meet them for dinner and here I am going to some pool party instead.”

“It’s not just any old pool party, girl. That’s like calling an Oscar just another award. I told you it’s a party at Clark McKenzie’s house.”

“And I told you I never heard of no Clark McKenzie.”

Rhea turned around in her seat and lifted her shades to get a good look at her best friend. “Quit playing.”

Bonita shook her small shoulders and looked side to side, which was her way. Then she looked back at her friend. “Why would I be playing, Rhee?”

When Rhea realized she was serious, she could hardly believe it. “Bonita! You’ve never heard of Clark McKenzie?”

Bonita wasn’t repeating herself. She’d already said she didn’t know him.

“He’s the quarterback for the Patriots, child,” Rhea said. “As in the New England Patriots football team? As in Gillette Stadium? As in just a couple hours up the road from where we live?”

“Well forgive me for not being into football. I don’t like it. It’s not my thing.”

“Oh it’ll become your thing once you meet Clark,” said Zara with a smile. “He’s celebrating his twenty-ninth birthday party and girrl, girrl, girrl, that white boy hotttt!”

“So hot that he invites high school girls to his birthday party?” asked Bonita.

“As of yesterday,” said Zara, “we’ve graduated high school thank you very much. We’re pre-college girls now. We’re in the big leagues now,” she added with a laugh, and she and Rhea high-fived.

“But for real, Z,” Rhea asked, “you’ve met Clark McKenzie before?”

“I sure have! And gorgeous don’t capture it, girl. He is sexy as hell.”

“Hell ain’t sexy.”

“You know what I mean! He’s cute.”

Rhea and Bonita laughed. “She went from drop dead gorgeous to cute real quick,” laughed Rhea. “Didn’t she, Bo?”

“Real quick!” Bonita said, agreeing with her. They knew Zara loved her some men. Plenty of them, which was becoming a problem for her.

“How did you get to meet this big shot quarterback anyway,” asked Bonita, “if he’s so all that?”

“My daddy works within the Patriots organization, which I told you before but like most things with you it went in one ear and out the next. In fact, it was my daddy that recommended Clark to the owners when he was first drafted seven years ago. But Daddy also said if Clark doesn’t win a Super Bowl this year, they may trade him.”

“Even though he won three other Super Bowls for them?” Rhea asked.

“I’m just telling you what my daddy said. He says that’s how it goes. But anyway, Clark attended a couple

dinner parties before, and I was there. That's how I met him."

"Did you just see him from across the room," Rhea asked, "or did you actually talk to him?"

"Now you know me. Hell yeah I talked to him! Tried to get his ass in bed while we were doing all that talking."

"But?"

"I was too young. Only sixteen at the time. He was polite and smiled a lot, but he didn't give me the time of day."

"Which is a good thing, right," said Bonita, "given the age difference?"

"It wasn't that different! He's only eleven years older than me."

Rhea grinned. Bonita, seeing the seriousness on Zara's pretty face, frowned. "But Z, you do realize that when you were sixteen, he would have been twenty-seven?"

"Right!" said Zara as if Bonita had just proved her point.

Bonita and Rhea looked at each other again. "I can't," said Bonita, shaking her head, and she and Rhea laughed.

"But one thing for certain," said Zara.

“What’s that?”

“We going to a grown-up party. This place is gonna be turnt up with real live grownups. Bonita won’t be able to complain that there’s too many immature boys at this party like she’s always complaining about at every party we go to. Boys won’t be at this party.”

“But jocks will,” said Bonita. “Which is worse.”

Zara and Rhea laughed. “There’s just no pleasing this girl!” Zara declared affectionately, since she loved Bonita just as much as Rhea did. And Bonita joined in the laughter too.

But soon they all got quiet. It was nearly a two-hour ride from Jericho, Maine to this party outside of Boston, Mass, and the night was coming on after what had already been a very long day. But they were young. The night was still young. They had a lot of fun still left in them before the day was through.

While Rhea slept and Zara drove, Bonita sat in the backseat texting other friends who were also inviting her to their various graduation celebrations throughout the week. She knew she would eventually have to say no to some of these invites and spend more time with her family before she headed off for college, but as long as she was enjoying herself

she would continue to say yes for now. And she was enjoying herself. So far, so good.

And then, two hours later, they pulled up to the mansion of the superstar quarterback. And as soon as they did, Bonita got a strange feeling in the pit of her gut. It wasn't a bad feeling, but it wasn't a good one either. It was as if her sensible, practical world was about to turn upside down. And inside out. For better. Or for worse.

CHAPTER THREE

When Zara's BMW pulled up to the big mansion in Foxborough, Massachusetts, some twenty-five miles outside of Boston, and they saw nothing but white bodies around the massive pool, Rhea shook her head. "Here we go again," she said as they got out of the car. "We were darn near the only African-Americans in our entire high school. And I guarantee you we're going to be the only African-Americans at this pool party. I'm tired of us always being the only dots in the milk."

"Are you joking?" asked Zara. "We won't be the only dots up in here by a longshot."

"And how do you figure that?" asked Bonita. "Look around!"

"Number one, we live in Maine. Ain't that many negroes in Maine, okay? That's why there were only a handful of us in our high school. Number two, this is Massachusetts, where there are plenty blacks. Number three, Clark is in the NFL, which stands for Negro Football League. His teammates and their black girlfriends and wives will be

here too. Only reason they aren't here yet is because they're black. Being on time is not our thing."

The three friends laughed. "You're so wrong for that," Bonita said as they laughed.

But Zara was right and wrong. They were indeed the only three blacks at the party initially. But within minutes a slew of Clark's black teammates began arriving with their mostly black wives or girlfriends until it was almost a fifty-fifty racial split at the party. And the fun was on. Bonita had even forgotten about her disappointment that she had skipped dinner with her parents, and was having a ball too.

But upstairs, having a ball wasn't exactly what Clark McKenzie was experiencing. He sat at his desk in his home office playing with a Panic Pete squeeze toy and watching and listening to the festivities over monitors on his desk. It was his home. It was his twenty-ninth birthday party. And all he wanted to do was hop in his lambo and race to the hills somewhere far away. And never return.

But that had never been an option for him. Drafted as the number one quarterback in the country, he'd had obligations and responsibilities for a billion-dollar franchise ever since. Didn't even get a chance to grieve. Was drafted

just three months after it all went down. Just three months after his world was shattered.

But Clark McKenzie as a sensitive and thoughtful and caring human being? He didn't have that kind of reputation. He was known nationwide as the ladies' man party boy. He was a party boy alright. A party boy who didn't like parties. A ladies man who found every woman he'd ever hooked up with revolting. But nobody listened to him when he was a hurting kid who told them repeatedly that he wasn't ready yet, and that he needed time alone first. Time to grieve. But they had millions to make off of his talent. They had Super Bowls to win off of his talent. They weren't trying to hear what he was telling them. So he stopped telling.

A group of black girls entered his backyard and caught his attention. Mainly because they were gorgeous, all three of them, but also because he recognized one of them. Jake Kortana's daughter. What was her name again? Sarah or Zahara or some such name. Zara! That was it. Zara. And he could see she'd turned into a beautiful young woman. Somebody he wouldn't mind trying out if her old man wasn't attached to the organization. Because no way was he fooling

around with anybody attached to that organization. He felt like he was stuck in prison ever since he joined that outfit.

He watched as the three girls walked over to the huge bar in his backyard. And, just as he knew she would, Zara took over.

“Beer for me. Beer for her,” she said, pointing to the girl just behind her. Then she looked at the third girl, the one who seemed to be enjoying herself, but not nearly as much as the other two. “What are you having, Bo?”

“Ginger ale if they have it,” the one in the back said. “Sprite if they don’t.”

Clark knew that wasn’t going to go over well.

“Ginger ale?” said Zara.

“Sprite?” said the other, larger girl. “Come on, Bonita. Live a little!”

“I will live quite a lot when I’m twenty-one and can legally drink.”

Clark was impressed. It wasn’t every day, hell no days, when he saw a woman with integrity anywhere near him. But her friends weren’t impressed. They both looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

And Zara wouldn't let it go. "I forgot we bought Mother Teresa with us," she said, and even the girl in the back laughed at that. Which meant she also had a sense of humor.

But Zara was serious. "It's a party, Bo. You can have a beer for once in your life at a party. We're eighteen, soon to be nineteen. We just graduated high school. Live a little, dang!"

Clark stared at the girl in the back to see if she would cave.

"Ginger ale if they have it," she said again. "Sprite if they don't."

Clark smiled. "That's my girl," he said out loud. Girl that age who wouldn't bow to peer pressure? Good on her!

But then the door opened and Harper Dutton, his best friend, former college teammate, and now his day-to-day manager, came marching in, his blonde hair flapping only on the top, his once-perfectly-toned body now growing a pouch from too much sitting around picking up contracts rather than barbells. "Why are you still up here, Clark? You got guests, remember? The guys have arrived. Including the owner's daughter who you know has been trying to get next to you for years. Treat her right and the brass might not trade you. You

can end your career where it started: right here in New England. Come on down and mingle!”

Clark’s smile disappeared. Obligations and responsibilities: his middle names. He turned off the monitors, sat momentarily to pull himself together, and then he put on the other smile, his public smile, and headed downstairs.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brand new bathing suits for the partygoers were being handed out and the three friends took advantage of it. Zara stayed dry-side. She wasn't about to get her five-hundred-dollar hairdo wet. But Rhea and Bonita didn't care. They jumped into that swimming pool with all of the other guests, seemingly a hundred guests in all, and had themselves a ball. Some of those already-attached ballers were trying to come on to the girls, especially Zara, who had movie star great looks. Even Zara was playing it cool. Rhea and Bonita wasn't interested at all. They just wanted to have fun.

After they got out of the pool, they dried off and began playing card games and ping-pong and eventually Zara and Rhea went out to the tennis courts. But Bonita kept playing cards. That was her game of choice, she'd played for years with her siblings, and she was good at it.

Clark had been eyeing her and many other girls all evening, but his attention kept going back to her. To the ginger ale girl. And in that bikini where her smooth brown legs were coming out of a tight ass, flat stomach, and very nicely packed set of boobs, she was giving him a hard-on.

Which surprised him. Other girls at that party were just as hot, if not hotter, and they were doing all they could to get next to him. But he kept going back to her. The one that didn't give him a second glance.

But his interest in her became even more heightened when he noticed a group of young guys across the patio that were standing around together, but were taking too many glances at Ginger Ale, as if she was their target. Then the one that appeared to be their leader nodded, as if he was about to prove a dare, and then he began walking toward Ginger Ale's card table.

The guy, some frat boy type whose rich old man probably snagged him an invite, sat in the chair beside Ginger Ale as if he was there to cheer her on. Clark was pleased that she didn't give the kid the time of day. But when the young man placed his hand over her chair and then looked back at his buddies grinning, Clark knew what that meant. He was going to *cop a feel*.

Even as another gorgeous woman came over flirting with him, Clark didn't even notice her. He sat his bottled water on the bar counter and began walking toward Ginger Ale's card table. But when he saw the young man pull out

what he knew was a roofie, his strides increased. And just as the guy was about to drop the pill into her soda, Clark hurried over and grabbed the guy by the wrist of the hand that still held the drug. “That roofie shit in my house? Don’t you even try it,” Clark said as his bright blue eyes stared deep into the young man’s now terrified eyes.

But when Bonita saw what was happening, and heard that word, she jumped to her feet. “You tried to put a mickey in my drink?” she asked the young man angrily. “You tried to put that date-rape shit in *my* drink?”

But the guy knew he wasn’t about to let some bitch get the best of him. He stood up like the entitled rich kid he knew he was. “You know you would have liked it,” he said to Bonita with a sneering look on his face.

Clark himself was about to punch the kid’s lights out and throw him out of his house, but Bonita jumped past Clark and began punching the bastard with such force in her licks that Clark stumbled backwards. The guy, thrown by her reaction, couldn’t do anything but cover up. Her blows were withering and unrelenting. He didn’t stand a chance.

And although the crowd was laughing and enjoying the very sight of a slip of a girl beating down such a big guy, Clark

knew if the tables turned it was little Ginger Ale that wouldn't stand a chance. That was why, just as she was drawing blood on the prick, he grabbed her into a bear hug and pulled her away from the date rape dude.

But that created a problem of a different kind. Although the date rape dude was saved any further embarrassment, not to mention pain, Bonita's ass was jammed against Clark's dick, and that contact alone was giving him the kind of arousal that could tent his pants. Which would be a disaster. And a Catch-22. If he let her go, his erection would be seen by all. If he kept her against him, his erection would continue to grow.

It felt too good. He kept her against him.

Bonita was too fire-hot to notice anybody's erection, until she could hear Clark's voice in her ear telling her to calm down. "He got the message," he was saying as Clark's bodyguards came and grabbed the guy. "Take his buddies over there with him," Clark ordered the guards.

But as he was making that order, it was only then did Bonita feel his presence. And when she felt it, she felt it from the roots of her hair to the bottom of her feet. Since she was only wearing a bikini, she felt the palm of his large hand

against her bare stomach. She felt the material of his pants against her bare legs. And she especially felt his penis against the skimpy fabric of her bikini shorts, which, she was reminded, were nothing more than panties. Because she felt every inch of that massive, steel rod. It got her attention.

So much so that she turned her head as far around as she could and looked at him. And when their eyes met, and she realized just how blue his eyes truly were, and how sensual he was looking back at her, she began to feel dizzy. Lightheaded. Like it was too much all at once.

It was no walk in the park for Clark either, which surprised him. He'd been up against women all his adult life and he never felt this way up against any of them. Which meant it was getting too serious. Too crazy. Too dramatic for a drama-free man like him. He had to extricate himself from that situation.

“Are you alright?” he asked Bonita.

“Yes,” she managed to say, still unable to take her eyes off of his eyes. “Thanks.”

“No need to thank me. You had it well in hand. You didn't need my help.”

“I didn’t realize he was trying to spike my drink until you caught him. I needed you.”

When she said that she needed him, and then smiled the most alluring, bright-white smile Clark had ever seen, an odd feeling came over him. It was sudden and fleeting. It was gone as fast as it came. But it left a lasting impression that left him unbalanced. *What was that*, he wondered.

But that was enough for Clark. Too much, too little, too late! He released her. But as soon as he was no longer holding her, Bonita felt odd herself. As if she was suddenly all alone. As if she thought she had an ally, but realized she didn’t have anything.

“We got a game to finish,” one of the card players announced, a cigar between his teeth. “Let’s finish the doggone game!”

And Bonita, although unsteady, sat back down, and got back to work.

But Clark sat on the edge of a chair nearby and stared at Bonita the entire time she played her hand. He was still reeling from the way she made him feel. And just watching her kept him in that land of unfamiliar territory. Because she acted as if she’d forgotten him already. As if she was intent on

winning that card game, men be damned! She was focused like a laser beam.

But that didn't stop the guys from trying to hit on her. One by one they'd sit next to her like they were pulling for her, but all the while they were checking out her body with lustful eyes. But she ignored them every time. Until one bold ass sat beside her, eased his hand down behind her butt inside her chair, and tried to squeeze her ass. Clark was about to stand up and crush that asshole, but Bonita was on that case too. Because as soon as she felt the guy touch her, she slid her butt away from that touch and looked angrily at that joker. "Get lost, you perv!" she said to him, staring at him, daring him to defy her.

That look in her eyes was enough. The perv, embarrassed, raised his hands as if he was an innocent bystander, but he left her side. And the card game continued.

But Clark couldn't take his eyes off of her. He'd never met a woman that strong before. All the women who had ever been around him needed him to take care of them. But she could take care of herself. No doubt about that. And to be so young and that tough? And she was competitive as fuck. He could see that just in the way she played those cards. He

understood competitiveness. He understood toughness. But did he understand her? And why would he want to? After what happened to him, he swore he'd never ever let anybody into his heart ever again. He closed and sealed that part of him forevermore. Nobody, least of which some kid, was reopening it.

But even as other women came over flirting with him, encouraging him to do all sorts of things to their bodies, he kept taking peeps of that very same kid. His eyes kept roaming down her beautiful, black, bikini-clad body. That was the body he wanted. And his dick was throbbing.

“See,” said one of the women when she noticed his erection. ”I’m turning you on.”

But Clark didn’t even look her way. “Don’t flatter yourself,” he said, and left her side. Any woman willing to give it up to him that easily were a dime a dozen to Clark. And he was tired of dime bitches.

But that didn’t mean he wanted a more meaningful relationship. He just wanted to be left alone. Even though, no matter where he went on that patio, and what group he was hanging out with, he couldn’t stop taking peeps at Ginger Ale.

His interest in her kept intensifying for some weird reason. And a couple times, he noticed, she actually did glance his way. Or at least in his direction. But ultimately the game won out and her entire attention was back on playing those cards. And Clark had no choice but to grab another bottled water and listen to the parade of women who came over to flirt, to bedazzle, to do everything in their power to get him in bed. But every chance he could, he was once again taking peeps at Ginger Ale.

His interest became even more apparent when Bonita and her partner won the game and they jumped up from the table cheering and high-fiving so hard that she almost had a wardrobe malfunction at her breast area. One sweet boob nearly escaped. And when he saw that, he did it before he could stop it: he tented his pants. Which made him realize a profound truth: he had to have her. There was no getting around it.

He called over his man Harper, whispered in his ear, and then excused himself from his guests.

Zara had pointed out Clark to Bonita earlier, before it was her turn at the card table. And although Zara was admiring everything about him when she pointed him out, all

Bonita saw was just another good-looking jock who probably thought the world revolved around him. He was tall and well-built, had a full head of brownish-blond hair, and had eyes that even she could see from across the room were shockingly blue. Like a brilliant sky-blue.

But his great looks only made her all the more leery of him. She wasn't about to become his latest conquest to brag about to the fellars. Not her! That was why, after he saved her from date-rape boy and left her side, she went back to her card game and didn't give him the time of day. She didn't see him continually eyeing her. She didn't see him tent his pants after she won that game and was jumping up and down. She didn't see any of that. That was why she didn't see it coming.

She lost her next game and had to sit out and wait her turn to play again. That was when Harper came over and whispered in her ear. "Can I see you for a moment?" he asked her.

She didn't know who Harper was, but since she wasn't doing anything but watching a card game and waiting for her chance to play again, she followed him off of the patio and inside the house. There were seemingly dozens and dozens of workers in the huge kitchen that was off from the patio. They

were preparing food and taking more drinks to the bar area, so it all felt chaotic to Bonita. But totally safe. She could barely hear Harper hardly at all. “Say that again?” she asked him.

“Clark wants to see you.”

A part of Bonita was confused. Why would he want to see her? They already saw each other at that card table. Saw quite a bit of each other. But the other part of her was kind of excited.

But Bonita never lived her life based on excitement. She had to tamp that down or she could get herself in a world of trouble. “Are you sure it’s me he wants to see? It’s probably my friend Zara. Her dad works for the —”

“Not Zara,” said Harper. “You. He wants to see you. He’s right upstairs in his office,” he said. “First door on the left.” And then he left.

Had he not said office, Bonita would not have entertained the idea of going upstairs to see some jock. But he did say office, and since there were plenty of people in that house she could scream out to, she didn’t see any harm of going to say hey to the man responsible for all of the fun everybody was having. Not to mention the fact that he saved her from drinking a spiked ginger ale. And if it went

sideways, she was a Sinatra. Her father, her uncle, and all of her brothers and cousins had taught her how to defend herself. That part didn't worry her. But the fact that she was curious did.

That was what led her up those stairs to the first room on the left just as Harper had instructed her. She had to see for herself what he wanted. She had to satisfy that curiosity. She knocked on the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

When she didn't get a response, she opened the door slightly and peeped inside. Clark McKenzie was seated behind a desk, playing with his Panic Pete squeeze toy and watching what appeared to Bonita to be computer screens, although she couldn't see what was on them. "Come in," he said, without looking away from his screens.

She came on in, but didn't close the door. "Um, I think they got the wrong girl by mistake. I think you want to see my friend Zara. Her father works for the Patriots."

Clark looked up from his screens. When he saw her standing there, looking more vulnerable than sexy, he exhaled. What on earth was he doing? She was just a kid! But when his eyes left her face and began roaming over her bikini-clad body, he knew she was all woman. And his dick reacted to that part of her again. But he remembered that feeling he had when he held her for that short time at the card table. And how he felt so serene. And so at peace. Comfortable with her in his arms.

But as his eyes roamed her body, Bonita didn't feel comfortable. She felt exposed. She didn't like to be assessed like some meat on a hook. "I think there's been a mistake," she tried to explain to him again.

It worked. He looked up at her face again. "What's your name?"

"Bonita. Most people call me Bo."

"I'm Clark. Most people call me Clark."

She smiled. It was a cute comeback, even though he didn't crack a smile at all. He, in fact, looked way more serious than any jock she'd ever known. "Nice to meet you, Clark," she said. "But my friend Zara knows you. Her father works for your team. That's why I think there's been a mistake."

"No mistake," Clark said as he tossed his Panic Pete on the desktop, and stood up. He wasn't going to use her for sex. He wasn't going to do that to her. But maybe she could give him a reprieve from his other problem. Maybe she could give him some peace, if only for a few hours.

"Come on," he said without waiting for her, and began heading toward another door inside his office.

Bonita found him to be strange in his manner. And so abrupt, as if she was boring him already. But she was curious that it was her, in fact, that he wanted to see. So she followed him just to see where he wanted her to go, but she had her guard up overtime.

And when he opened the double doors and they walked inside, she didn't see anything but a foyer with a table at first. As if they were going into a sitting room. But when they walked around that foyer and a bedroom suddenly appeared, she stopped in her tracks. "I'm not going to bed with you!" She said this without hesitation.

Clark stopped walking, too, and looked at her. And to her he suddenly looked tired. "Do you seriously think, if I wanted to have sex with a woman, that of all the women out there I would have picked you?" He was talking as if his hard-on, his tent, had never occurred. As if he didn't want her, when he definitely did.

Bonita was offended. A part of her always felt as if she was less-than because she was the youngest of a family of high achievers. Her big brother Brent was the police chief in their town. Her other brother Bobby was the town's mayor. Her brother Tony had a PhD. Her sister Carly was a Harvard

graduate and successful marketing executive. Her brother Donald was fast becoming a successful business tycoon in his own right. Her father owned more land than anybody else in the entire state of Maine. Her mother ran the most luxurious hotel in town. She had big shoes to fill. That was why, whenever she was slighted, it always made her feel some kind of way. And her combative nature surfaced. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked him.

“You’re a sneeze out of high school. That’s what it means. What on earth would you know about pleasing a man like me in bed?”

“Plenty,” said the competitive side of Bonita.

“Oh really now? Like how?”

She couldn’t say.

Clark felt bad for her. Why was he goading her like that? But he couldn’t stop himself. “Did I read you wrong? Do you have this secret life where you aren’t a virgin?”

She couldn’t say that either.

Clark nodded. “Thought so,” he said and made his way to the bed. “Close the door and come on,” he added as he sat on the edge of the bed and began taking off his shoes.

But when he took off his shirt and Bonita saw the extent of his muscles, and they were extremely extensive muscles, it slowed her response. She was used to well-built men. She had well-built older brothers. Her father was still considered one of the sexiest men alive. But nothing like this!

But she gathered herself, took her eyes off of his body, and spoke up. “If I’m just a sneeze out of high school, as you put it, why would you call me up here in the first place?”

Clark stopped just before he was about to toss his shirt aside, and looked at her. “Because I have a problem,” he said, telling her the truth. “I don’t like to sleep alone and all the women who want to sleep with me want sex. All I want is some sleep.”

When he said that, Bonita saw it. That was why he looked so tired to her. He was exhausted.

She wanted to ask him why didn’t he like to sleep alone, but it would sound too much like prying. “But why me?” she asked instead.

“You ordered ginger ale.”

Bonita couldn’t hide her confusion. “What?”

“You have integrity even in the face of peer pressure. You do the right thing. You won’t try to turn this into what it’s not. Get in,” he said and laid, on his back, on the top of his bed.

Bonita thought it was the craziest thing in the world, but just looking at that big, comfortable bed made her realize how tired she was too. She could be a party animal with the best of them if the company was good, but she’d been partying all day. And he looked so drained. He looked as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders and he just wanted it to go away.

Besides, she believed him when he said it wasn’t going to be about sex. Somehow, she believed him.

“So all you want is to get some rest?”

“Exactly,” Clark said, his eyes closed. “And it won’t cost you a thing.”

“Except my reputation,” Bonita said.

When she said that, his eyes opened. Because he had never even considered that. He looked at her. Although he told Harper to be discreet, somebody still could have seen her come up those stairs and automatically assumed she was

giving it up to him. Because he had a reputation too. And when it came to the ladies, there was nothing good about his reputation.

“You’re right,” he said. “Go. Please. Just forget I ever asked you up here. If you go now, nobody can think anything because it wouldn’t have been enough time.”

But Bonita just stood there. Because she could see the disappointment in his brilliant-blue eyes, as if he wasn’t going to get the rest he so desperately needed. As if only she could give him the cure he needed. Which, she knew, was ridiculous. But then why was she still standing there?

Clark wondered the same thing as he watched her. Why hadn’t she run out of there already? But then another thought occurred to him. She had the look of somebody who wouldn’t give a damn what people thought of her. Maybe that was why he didn’t give her reputation a second thought. But she was the one who brought it up. He was great at reading people, especially defenses on the gridiron, but had he read her all wrong? “I don’t want you to worry about what people might say about you,” he said, testing her.

Bonita frowned. “I don’t care what people say. It’s what I say that matters to me.”

“But you bought up your reputation.”

“My reputation in my eyes. Not somebody else’s eyes.”

That made no sense to Clark, but why should he argue? She just might stay. “You’re a strange one, Ginger,” he said to her.

She almost said *that’s not my name*, until she realized why he said it. She ordered ginger ale. Somehow that was a big deal in his eyes. She said nothing instead, and just stood there.

“Well?” he said.

“Well what?”

“Are you staying, or are you going? Entirely up to you.” He said that, but he was hoping that she wouldn’t leave.

She closed the door, and as soon as she did there were no sounds of any partying or people, or anything else, as if it was soundproof. She could have heard a pin drop. It almost spooked her.

But Clark was inwardly elated that she made the decision to stay. His heart leaped for joy when she closed that door. And when she got on top of the bed beside him, it felt

more like relief. Somehow he knew she could bring him peace, if only for a few hours.

But when Bonita got in his bed, she didn't lay on her back the way he was laying. She lay on her side, facing him, as if she was keeping her eyes on him. But oddly enough, as soon as she laid her head on that pillow she felt comfortable. She felt at home somehow.

But just as he promised, he not only didn't touch her or make any advances toward her, but he didn't even look at her. He was staring at his cathedral ceiling. She had no clue why.

But Clark had every clue. He was reliving that nightmare that had plagued him, that had refused to let him go, since he was a kid in college.

The screams of his sisters always rang out first in his memory, although his mother's voice was in reality the first thing he heard that night. He was in bed, still in a drunken stupor after partying all night, and was useless.

Shots had been fired, but the shooter had a silencer on his gun and Clark never heard a single shot. It was his mother's screams that woke him up. And he was trying to get out of bed. He was trying to get out of that bedroom to find out what was happening. But he fell out of bed and ended up

on the floor. And as he kept trying to get up on his feet, he could hear his father scream out *noooo*, and then his mother was yelling for him to help them. “*Clark!*” She named him after Superman. “*Help us, Clark! Clark, help us!*” Because he was supposed to be their hero. Up until that night they led him to believe he was a *super* man. A superman who was on all fours throwing up as his mother called out for him to help them. A super man who fell right into his own vomit as his drunk ass tried to get back up.

He remembered being on all fours, crawling on that floor, trying to get out of that room as his mother’s screams and then his sisters’ screams were all around him. As the screams of his sisters clogged up his ears as if they were going to explode.

And then he heard nothing. No screams. No calling his name. Nothing.

As he lay in that bed beside Bonita, and stared up at his bedroom ceiling, he could still remember laying in his own vomit. He could still feel the texture of it. But even though he was drunk as a skunk that night, he still had enough within him to not pass out. He was determined to get out of that bedroom if he had to crawl out.

He crawled out.

And that was when he saw the gun smoke still in the hallway. His father and his mother were in their beds, their brains blown out. His little sister had made it out into the hall, with the blood still draining from her head. His big sister was lying on the top of the stairs, bloodied too. She almost got away when almost didn't count.

But that deafening silence, after he made it out into the hall, after he realized his entire family was wiped out in one night and his stupid ass was too drunk to help, was what he remembered most. And that was no memory he would wish on anybody. Not even himself.

Bonita was watching him the entire time he was reliving his nightmare. And when he suddenly looked so agitated to her, and his body seemed to tense up and he began breathing heavier, she felt a need to say something. To make sure he was alright. But what could she say?

“You okay?”

As soon as she said those two words, Clark snapped out of it. And he looked at her with a worried look on his face. Did he say something? Did he cry? Did he *scream*???

“Yes, I'm okay. Why would you ask that?”

“You seem tense, like you were thinking about some unpleasant. Is it this upcoming season?” She was fairly certain that wasn’t it. Whatever had him going that bad was more personal than that. But it was the least intrusive question she could think to ask.

He stared at her. “Why would I be thinking about the season?”

“A lot is on the line. The Patriots may trade you if you don’t win a championship this season.”

Clark exhaled and looked back up at the ceiling. “I led that team to conference finals every year I’ve been here. Already won three Super Bowls. Was named MVP all three times.” Then he gritted his bright-white teeth. “But they still want more.”

“How long have you been with them?”

“Straight out of college. Seven years.”

“When did you last win a Super Bowl?”

Clark exhaled. It was a sore spot for him too. “Three years ago.”

“Wow,” said Bonita. “That sounds like a long time considering you’re supposed to be the shit. Considering the

big bucks they undoubtedly pay you.”

He looked at her. “So you agree I should be traded if I don’t win another Super Bowl this season?”

“You won three in your first four years. Then nothing for your last three years. You set this up yourself, don’t you think?”

That only made Clark defensive. “Winning a Super Bowl is damn hard. Do you realize a lot of NFL teams have never won one Super Bowl, let alone three in just my tenure alone? They expect the impossible!”

“But you won three in your first four years. That’s the problem you created by being that good. They expect you to do the impossible, not every three years, but every single year.”

Clark was staring at her. She was lying there, looking so gorgeous and innocent, but so wise and sophisticated too, that it stunned him. And she wasn’t holding her punches either. Just like she didn’t hold them on that bastard downstairs.

“They got spoiled to your magic tricks,” she continued. “It’s never what did you do for them three years

ago. It's always what have you done for them lately. And by the sounds of it, and for a city that got used to winning Super Bowls, you haven't done much for them lately."

Clark stared at her. Even his agent wasn't that blunt with him. And how beautiful she looked laying there with nothing but a bikini on. And his dick began throbbing again. Why did he make that promise to her? Had he not he would be fucking the shit out of her just to forget about his problems. Then he'd feel even worse for doing that to her. Like his whole life, it was a no-win situation. He turned onto his side, his back to her. "Get some sleep," he said to her. "Looks like you could use some too."

He wasn't lying. Bonita knew she looked tired too. She regretted hurting his feelings by being so blunt, but what did he expect her to do? Lie to him like all of those hangers-on that hung around big-time jocks like him all the time? Not her! She turned over too.

It didn't take long, just a few minutes tops, and both of them were fast asleep. Only Bonita was now on her side with her back to Clark, and Clark was on his side facing Bonita's back. And tight, tight ass.

But when he finally woke up, he realized he was pressed so far into her bikini panties that his dick was wedged between her ass crack. And as soon as he had awakened, his penis, realizing the plum position it found itself in, awoke too. In a major fucking way. So much so that the stiffness and throbbing, he believed, had caused Bonita to wake up too.

But Bonita had awakened just before Clark had, and even before his penis was throbbing she was already feeling it pressed against her bikini shorts. And it felt just as it had felt downstairs: wonderful!

That was why, even as Clark's erection continued to grow, she didn't move.

And Clark was in agony. "Still sleep?" he asked her without either of them moving.

"I'm awake."

"Feel that?" His voice was getting heavy.

"I feel it." Her voice was getting softer.

"Feels good. Doesn't it?"

She didn't know what to say. It felt great, but so different than what she was used to feeling that it was

frightening her. She wasn't certain if she wanted to encourage him. But she wasn't going to lie. "Yes," she said.

Clark knew they were at a crossroads. If he pulled down her bikini, he believed she would let him, and he knew then there would be no turning back. But a real man would never do that to an innocent like Bonita. Problem was, he'd never been a real man a day in his life. And the way she made him feel! What was a dog to do?

He eased down her bikini panties until they were around her ankles, and then he pulled down his pants and briefs to his own ankles. Then he got even closer against her and began dry-rubbing against her naked butt with his penis, and massaging her between her legs with his fingers. Both of them were moaning. Both of them were certain it wasn't a good idea, but unable to put a stop to it.

Clark felt like a piece of shit as he fondled her. He knew better. He was much older, much more experienced. This was all on him. That was why he kept rubbing, kept massaging, kept delaying what his penis made clear it needed to do. And that hesitation was new to him. He'd never hesitated fucking a woman that turned him on ever. But hesitating was the least his horny ass could do for Ginger.

Until he couldn't even do that.

As he continued to massage her clitoris, and continued rubbing his penis against her ass, he spoke to her in soft tones that weren't measured, but were hoarse with lust. "You can tell me to stop at any time," he said to her. She wasn't his first virgin. He'd had hundreds in his lifetime. But she was the first one he wished he had the courage, the strength, not to have. "Just say stop, and I will."

"Okay," she said so softly, and so sweetly, and yes, so innocently, that it broke his heart.

And for the first time in his life, he couldn't do it.

He couldn't do it to *her*.

It was a painful realization, pure agony given how badly he wanted to do it, but he pulled her bikini back up and pulled his pants and briefs back up. He was breathing so hard he thought he was going to die. But he held on, and turned over. His back was now to her back. "Get some sleep," he said to her.

Bonita was shocked when he didn't keep going. He was acting as if he was going to go all the way. What jock wouldn't?

She almost turned around and looked at him. Was he for real? She was handing him her body, and he didn't take advantage of it? She could hardly believe it.

But as they lay there together, back-to-back but not touching, and as he soon began to snore, she began to feel as if she had just experienced something magnificent. He was going to take advantage of her willingness, she knew he was. And she wanted him to! She wanted to know what the fuss was all about. All of her friends had already found out long ago. She was the only virgin left in any of her various friend groups.

But he didn't take advantage. He didn't go all the way with her. He had some stopping sense. Even with the boys she fooled around with in high school, where it never got any further than kissing because she would always get bored with them and push them away, she always had to scream *no* at them, or threaten to beat their asses, to get them to stop. She screamed yes at Clark McKenzie, but he stopped anyway. How great was that? She actually smiled just thinking about that. And like she always did about people, she made up her mind about Clark too. She decided, based on that little act of

chivalry alone, and how he came to her rescue at that card table, that he was one of the good guys. He was a good one.

CHAPTER SIX

Three hours later and Rhea and Zara were in that very bedroom shaking her violently. She knew she slept hard, but damn! She woke up with a start.

But when she did wake up, she immediately remembered where she was. And what *almost* happened. But she was shocked to see her friends in that room.

She looked over to the other side of the bed. Clark wasn't there.

“Harp told us you decided to take a nap,” said Zara. “Until he told us that, we didn't know where you were for hours.”

Bonita was confused. “Hours? How long have I been asleep?”

“It's been more than three hours since I last saw you,” said Rhea. “So at least that long probably. We went over to the tennis courts. We thought you were still hanging with the card crowd.”

“Next time you want a nap,” said Zara, “let us know where you're going. Okay?”

“Anybody could have come up in here and done anything to you,” said Rhea.

But Bonita knew Clark wouldn't have allowed that. Or would he? “Okay,” she said. But she was still wondering where Clark had gotten to, and how long he'd been out of bed. “What time is it?”

“Two-thirty in the morning,” said Zara. “Time for us to get our black asses home.”

“For real,” agreed Rhea.

Bonita was surprised by the lateness of the hour and the fact that she had fallen asleep so soundly. But had Clark? For some reason she wanted to know. But she got out of that bed just the same.

And as she was leaving the room, she glanced back, as if she sensed his presence. But he wasn't there. And she and her friends left.

Clark was in his office again, in front of his monitors, squeezing Panic Pete as he watched her leave. He had only been awake for a few minutes when he told Harper to discreetly go get her friends. It had been the best three hours of sleep he'd had in a long, long time. Even after that almost-

sex debacle. Harper had commented that he looked well-rested.

And as he watched Bonita leave, he actually wanted her to stay. He actually considered asking her to stay. But he stopped himself in that direction too. What good could come of it? He'd just find a way to ruin her life too. And if he did find enough decency within himself to not ruin it, knowing her sensitive ass she'd fall in love and shit and force him to ruin it anyway. Besides, she was just a kid. What would she know about love? What did he know about love?

He flicked off his monitors, and after he was certain she had gone, he headed back downstairs to find himself a woman strictly and purely for sex.

But as time came and went, Bonita thought about Clark every day. She couldn't forget about him no matter how hard she tried. And when football season started, she watched all of his games. Didn't understand what was happening, but she was in the family room right alongside her father and brothers cheering on the Patriots too. She never told a living soul that she had spent those hours with Clark, and she never would.

They would taint it and turn it into something bad when she knew it was nothing of the sort.

On that football field Clark looked so serious to her. All of those other players were gathered around him in those huddles as if he was their undisputed leader and they were going to follow his lead no matter what. And whenever the cameras would go in close, she could see the pressure all over his face. Every game they lost, and they lost quite a few that season, he had given his all. It was never his fault if you looked at it objectively. But you couldn't tell the media that. Or even her brothers and father. They all blamed the quarterback.

But soon it didn't matter either way. She went away to college and was in her freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business with a very demanding schedule. Soon the reality of her newfound college life overtook the dream of that relaxing night, and she forgot all about Clark McKenzie. And she was certain he had long since forgotten about her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Five Years Later

His final step to freedom was to clear out his locker. He had so few things in that locker that he was able to carry them away in a small duffel bag. He had spent four years in Dallas after the Patriots traded him. He had failed to even make the conference finals in his final season with New England. But he got on a roll in Dallas, winning two Super Bowls in four years, including in his final year. He was determined to prove the Patriots wrong and to retire on top. And he did. Was named Super Bowl MVP. Was named league MVP.

Never thought he'd be a retired man at thirty-four and be glad to go. But that was exactly what he was. Retired. And glad to go. Because he hated football. He was great at it, but after what went down with his family he hated it with a passion. All those Sundays, or Thursdays, or Monday night games and he would look up in those stands for his parents

and his sisters, and not one of them would ever be there. Nobody was ever there just for him.

But after nearly three weeks of retirement parties and special ceremonies and special salutes, all of the hoopla was finally over. He was beholden to no one for the first time in his life. He thought he was going to feel free at last. But he just felt lost.

“Boss! Boss!”

He had hoped for a clean getaway from the stadium when he heard his name called. When he turned, just as he was heading toward his limo, he saw Lou Brazza coming his way. Lou was a private eye he hired when he knew he was going to be retiring and would no longer need to have that laser-like focus his career demanded. He wanted answers. He hired Lou, not in spite of his reputation for underhandedness in getting answers for his clients, but because of it. And from the look in Lou’s eyes, Clark knew he had some answers.

“Found out something?” Clark anxiously asked the private eye who doubled as his bodyguard.

“How you feeling?” Despite their employee/employer relationship, Lou, a much-older man, had become very protective of his boss. Clark wasn’t just his hero on the

gridiron, like he was to millions of Americans, but he genuinely liked the kid. “You looking good. How you feeling though?”

“I’m glad to be hanging up the cleats, I’ll tell you that,” Clark said. But he wasn’t trying to small-talk with Lou. “What you got for me?”

“Plenty. Major.”

Clark looked at him. Lou was no drama king. If he said he had the goods, he had the goods. Clark motioned for him to follow him. They went into one of the side offices at the stadium, and closed the door.

“I’m listening. Better be good.”

“Oh it’s good. We got a name.”

“Of what?”

“We got the name of the guy that killed your family,” Lou said, causing Clark’s mouth to open. And then Lou handed Clark a folder.

Clark nervously opened it. Was it somebody he knew? Was it some neighbor or one of his father’s business partners? But when he saw the fat face of the man that could

have possibly murdered his entire family, he knew he'd never seen that mug before. "Archibald Gravinzano?"

"Archie the Grave is what they call him on account of he was a hit man for the mob."

Clark looked at Lou. "The mob?"

"Oh yeah. We going there. He was a freelancer though, which makes him harder to trace. He didn't work for no one family. He worked for whatever family needed to get a job done, but wanted no fingerprints that pointed back to them. That's why they called him The Grave. Their secrets were buried with him."

"He's the killer? Where is he?"

"That part we don't know yet. But I got five different private eye agencies searching for his ass now that we got a name. And these ain't no goody-two-shoes agencies, either. They're like me. They get results by any means necessary. But it don't end there. We also got the name of his accomplice, and we know where that fucker is."

That was news to Clark. "He didn't act alone? He had an accomplice?"

"Not before or during, but after the fact," said Lou.

“Go on,” said Clark. He was all ears.

“What we could piece together is that it wasn’t supposed to go down like that. He was there to ice your old man. Nobody else. He was supposed to sneak in, late at night, and use a silencer to take him out. But his wife, your mother, woke up. And then she’s screaming and then your sisters woke up and were screaming and he couldn’t leave witnesses. Everybody that eyeballed him got it between the eyes. You were passed out drunk. That’s what saved your ass.”

It still pained Clark to think that his family was being murdered, and he was trying with all he had to get to them but was too drunk to make it. Was falling in his own vomit. Was useless when he needed to be Superman that night. And the way Lou described it. How it wasn’t supposed to be that way. Even the cops told him when it first happened that it seemed like a professional job gone sideways, and that it was probably due to his father’s gambling debts, which were substantial. But they could never get beyond that. They had no name, no leads, no chatter out there to put any further pieces of the puzzle together. Now Lou had something tangible.

“When it all went nuts like that,” Lou continued, “and he had to kill the wife and kids, too, that’s when he ran to his

cousin. Because he knew the heat was going to be different now that it was damn-near an entire family he had iced. His cousin arranged transport to get him out of the country.”

“But why would he do that? Did he know his cousin had killed an entire family?”

“We have no idea what he knew. But we know who he is, and what he did.”

“Who is he?”

Lou handed Clark a second folder. Clark stared at the picture. “Charles Sinatra.”

Lou nodded. “They call him Big Daddy Sinatra on account of he owns so much property in that region, like he’s Big Brother. Like he’s the government. He practically owns the whole town and damn-near half of the whole state of Maine.”

Clark looked at Lou. “Property?”

Lou smiled. “You feel where I’m going. Because yes, the man’s got property. And plenty of it. That’s how we get in the door. That’s gonna be our leverage.”

“How’s that?”

“We show up in his town on the guise that we wanna buy up property to build your massive, state-of-the-art mall. Which gives our presence instant credibility.”

“But is he willing to sell?”

“No way. Every word I’m getting back is a definite no. But that’s where you’ll come in at. We’ll use your fame and stature to get in the door. And then, once you glad-hand and grease enough palms and we get the city council to invoke eminent domain over a vast swarth of his properties, then we can negotiate with his ass. He gives us his cousin’s whereabouts, and we tell the council we changed our minds. And he gets his properties back.”

“But why can’t you just force him into a room, and force his ass to tell us what we need to know?”

Lou was already shaking his head. “Because he’s not just some businessman in Maine. He’s the big brother of Mick “The Tick” Sinatra.”

“Who’s Mick “The Tick” Sinatra?”

“Nobody except the most notorious mob boss in the world. The boss of all bosses. Even the government won’t lay a finger on him.”

“Your point?”

“Ain’t no forcing his big brother into no rooms,” Lou made clear. “We got to keep it legit. We got to make Big Daddy Sinatra believe he’s fighting a competitor, not a threat. Because when we negotiate with him, we gotta get in and get out. He gives us a location, and we give him back his properties. Even swap ain’t no swindle. His brother won’t have nothing to do with that shit.”

“But if Charles Sinatra is Archie Gravinzano’s cousin,” Clark asked, “wouldn’t that mean he’s Mick the Tick’s cousin too?”

“Yeah, he is, but Mick Sinatra don’t have nothing to do with the Gravinzanos. They’re cousins on his father’s side, and he hated his father’s guts. There’s only a few people he deals with on his father’s side. Archie the Grave was never one of them. The Grave can rot in hell for all Mick the Tick cares.”

Clark nodded. “That’s good to know. Another plus in our favor.”

“That’s how I see it,” said Lou. Then Lou looked over Clark’s shoulder at Charles Sinatra’s file again. “Good looking guy, ain’t he? I said damn when I saw his photo. Bet

he has to beat those ladies off of him like you do, Clark. He's like the older version of you."

"Bullshit," said Clark. "Don't compare me to this asshole." He was staring at Charles's photograph. "Because of his ass my family's killer is still free. If he wouldn't have given him safe harbor he would have been rotting in prison a long time ago and maybe I would have had something that at least resembled closure."

Lou nodded. "I hear you kid."

Then Clark saw the location. "Jericho?" He looked at Lou. "Where's that?"

"Right around your old stomping ground in the New England region. Couple hours outside of Foxborough." Then Lou nodded. "Yep. His ass was just that close."

Clark shook his head. "Wow." Then he looked at Lou. "Get me everything you can get on that bastard. If we can't force a name out of him, I need to at least know who I'm going to be negotiating with."

"I've got my guys compiling a folder as we speak."

Clark nodded. He placed his hand on Lou's shoulder and squeezed. "Good job, Louis. But I know your ass. You

knew about this before today. Didn't you?"

Lou smiled. "I found out a couple days before the Super Bowl, yeah I did. But no way was I telling you then. You needed to concentrate. You needed to win for Dallas, for the Cowboys organization, and for yourself. You wanted to go out on top, remember? And then you had to have all of your retirement parties. I wanted you to enjoy those too. And congrats on your retirement. Going out a hero, yes, you are. That's how you do that shit."

Clark gave his public smile, patted Lou on the back, and left the room. But he was hardly cheerful. And a hero? Double bullshit.

He got in his limousine where Harper was waiting. Harp had been one year ahead of Clark and made it to the NFL too. But a bum knee ended his career before it got off the ground, and as soon as Clark made it to the NFL he hired Harper as his day-to-day manager. A manager, when Clark entered the limo, that was just ending a call. "We got yet another state interested on our list. Which means we now have ten states to visit. Ten excellent opportunities to build our city-like, state-of-the-art shopping malls we plan to erect.

Which is going to kickstart your after-football business into the highest gear. There's no stopping us now."

But Harper could tell Clark's mind was somewhere else. "Why are you looking like that? You said you wanted to hit the ground running with no delays. I got the ball rolling like a motherfuck."

"Add Jericho to that list."

Harper frowned. "Jericho? Where the fuck is Jericho?"

"Maine. Jericho, Maine."

"You didn't say anything about putting a mall in Maine."

"I'm saying it now," Clark said, and looked at his friend. "You got a problem with that?"

Harper looked at Clark waiting for a punchline. Maine? Was he serious? He thought Clark wanted no parts of the New England area after all the pain he endured there. After that bitter trade. But no punchline came. He was serious. But Harper was Clark's best friend and day-to-day manager for a reason: he never rocked the boat.

“If you say we’re going to Jericho, we’re going to Jericho.” And he got back on his phone to make it happen.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brent Sinatra parked his big F-150 pickup truck in the parking lot of Saint Vincent's hospital and leaned his head back. It was barely noon and they were already dealing with eleven traffic accidents, most of them with injuries, and a shooting, a house burglary, and a car theft. It was going to be a hectic day. But when his cowboy boots hit the ground and he saw his brother Tony driving up in his classic Jaguar, he smiled. He and Tony were the oldest of all of Big Daddy's children, and they always had a special bond. But just like everything with Tony, Brent knew to expect a slower pace. Tony was driving so slow, in fact, that Brent reached into his truck, put on his big hat, and had closed and locked his door all before Tony finally pulled up beside him.

"Even Miss Daisy wouldn't want your ass driving her," he said with a grin as Tony got out of his car.

"Since I wouldn't want to be driving her, either," Tony responded with a smile of his own, "I'm good."

They half-hugged/half-shook hands as they bumped into each other's chest, and then they started walking toward

the entrance. The Sinatra brothers, with their fine bodies and great looks, had always been considered Jericho's most eligible bachelors. But Brent was married and Tony had a girlfriend. But Tony always had a girlfriend. The question everybody was asking was will Tony ever have a wife?

"I am not a fan of hospitals," Brent said as he looked up at the huge building in front of them.

Tony looked at Brent. Although Tony wore his customary business suit (he was a clinical psychologist in private practice, and he was also the county's prison psychologist), his older brother Brent wore the complete opposite. In his cowboy hat and cowboy boots, his blue jeans and elbow-patch blazer, he looked more like a Texas oil man than a Maine police chief. But he was a very good chief. "I know what you mean," Tony said in that smooth voice he was trained to use, as he continued to stare at his big brother's clothing. "I'm not a fan either."

When Brent realized he wasn't referring to the hospital, but to his outfit, he pushed him as they walked.

Tony smiled. "Don't you have criminals to catch anyway?"

“Just wanted to holler at Ma. You’re here almost as much as Pop. How is she?”

“She says she’s fine.”

“That’s what she always says.

Tony nodded. “That’s all I can tell you is what she tells me. Dad stayed all night with her.”

“Again? Has he gone home at all since they admitted her?”

“Don’t know. But I doubt it.”

Brent didn’t have to be reminded of how devoted their father was to their stepmother. He loved him some Jenay. Whereas Tony, on the other hand, Brent thought, was the most hesitant lover he’d ever known. He looked at him. “How’s Myles and Sam?”

Tony nodded his head. “They’re good.” Samantha was Tony’s fiancée, and Myles was her son.

“Pop says you still haven’t set a date yet.”

“Pop’s obsessed with me setting a date. Every time I see him. I don’t see why all the rush.”

“Because he knows you, Tony. We all know you.”

Tony looked at Brent. “And that means what?”

“Don’t let this one get away too.”

Tony smiled a smile that seemed fraught with a mixture of understanding and pain as the automatic doors of the hospital entrance opened to let them in.

But Brent pulled him back. “I’m not kidding, Tone. Don’t let Sam get away like all your other girlfriends in the past.”

Tony looked at his brother’s big hand on his arm, and then looked at his brother.

“No self-respecting woman is going to let you slow walk her for years like you always do,” Brent added. “Sam and Myles love you, but they deserve better than that.”

“You sound like Dad,” Tony said as he gently pulled away from his brother and they entered Saint Vincent. “Sound just like him.”

“I’ll take that. He’s never wrong you know,” Brent said as he walked in beside his brother. They didn’t agree on much, but they agreed that their father, whom they both adored, was and always would be their hero. He raised them alone, and taught them how to be men, and how to respect

women even if he, before Jenay, had plenty women chasing after him. But he respected them all, and taught them respect.

Brent didn't remove his hat, however, until they were entering their stepmother's hospital room. They saw her sitting up in bed on her iPad. When she looked up at them and smiled that smile that could charm birds from trees, they smiled too. Then they saw their father, sitting in a chair, fast asleep.

"Don't you get tired of him?" Brent said with a smile as they went over to give her a hug.

"He works too hard," said Jenay. "Except when he comes here. Leave him alone."

"Yes, ma'am," Brent said as he and then Tony gave Jenay a hug.

"How are you, Ma?" Tony asked.

"I'm fine."

"Is that what the doctors are saying?"

She sat her glasses up on her head. That was what they both loved about Jenay: she was a thoughtful person who never dismissed any of their concerns. "They say I work too much and need rest, which is what they've been saying every

time I get admitted. And all those experts your father and your Uncle Mick flew in from around the world are essentially saying the same thing too. Nothing's showing up in any of the tests. My body is just tired."

Brent shook his head. "Doctors. What good are they?"

A knock was heard on the door and a young African American doctor walked in. When the doctor walked in, Tony smiled. "Speaking of doctors," he said.

"I hope I am not disturbing anything," the doctor said.

"Nothing at all," said Tony as he went over and shook his father.

Charles slowly opened his eyes. When he saw his two oldest sons standing there, he woke on up. "What time is it?" he said with a yawn.

"You been here all night, Pop?" Tony asked him.

"Yes," said Jenay. "Just like yesterday, and the day before that. He needs to go home and go to bed."

"I hope I am not disturbing you," said the young doctor again.

It was only when he spoke did Charles realize he was in the room too. And he sat up. “You found something?”

Everybody looked at the doctor.

“Yes, sir, and no, sir.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“First, my name is Doctor Lennox Martin. I am on the team of physicians tasked with assisting your wife in whatever is necessary.”

“You’re awfully young to be on a team of doctors for my wife,” said Charles. “Only the well-experienced big boys should be on her team.”

“Indeed I am not one of the big boys. I am fresh out of medical school.”

They thought he was joking. But he was dead serious. “How did a newbie like you get a gig like this?”

“My role is a singular one. Instead of the nursing staff being responsible for the administration of whatever medications the team wish for Mrs. Sinatra to have, they have tasked me with that responsibility.

“Ah, okay,” said Charles. “Now it makes sense. Good move.”

“And in that role,” the doctor continued, “I believe I have discovered what may be wrong with your wife, sir.”

Everybody, especially Jenay, were all ears. Charles was listening, too, but skeptically. “Go on.”

“What I have discovered,” said Martin, “is that your wife was given what we call an energy boost shot, it has quite a long name, but it’s main purpose was to get your wife’s energy up as quickly as possible.”

“Right,” said Jenay. “Every time I check in they give me that shot.”

“But this time I did not give it to you.”

They all stared at him. “No wonder she’s been more sluggish in her recovery,” Charles said.

“Correct,” said the doctor.

“Why wouldn’t you give me the boost?” asked Jenay.

“Because I believe, and I have told the team as well, that it is that energy boost shot that is the source of your illness.”

Charles stood up from his chair. “Are you telling me these doctors have been trying to kill my wife?”

Martin was shocked. “Kill her? Oh no sir. Why would you go to something that odd, sir?”

“Don’t ask,” said Tony, shaking his head. That young doctor had no clue about their family history. “Just continue.”

“Right,” said the doctor. “But to be clear, the doctors had your wife’s best interest at heart. They just wanted her to feel better as quickly as possible. But I did loads of research on the drug they gave to her. There have been studies that suggest the energy boost can have just the opposite effect over time.”

“How’s that?” asked Brent.

“It is my belief that your wife’s first hospitalization was exactly what it was: she had been working too hard and was simply exhausted. That is why she passed out. A little bedrest and she could have been on her way.”

“But they gave her the energy boost,” said Tony.

The doctor nodded. “Exactly. And it worked, initially. She got better and was released within only a few days’ time. But then a pattern developed. Every ten to twelve days she was right back in the hospital again.”

“That’s right,” said Jenay. “The exhaustion went away, but then it came back worse than the first time. And I was taking it easy. My husband wouldn’t let me do shit the first time I got out of the hospital. But it came back worse. I told those doctors that.”

“Some of my colleagues, unfortunately, do not listen to black women, or women period. So every time she came, they ordered the energy boost. It was such a normal thing to do to treat exhaustion that none of the doctors even considered it could be the culprit.”

“But you considered it,” said Charles.

“I did.”

“Why didn’t you tell the team leaders what you suspected?”

“I did tell them. Repeatedly. That is why I am here on my own right now.”

“They didn’t listen to you,” said Jenay.

“They said that all of those European studies I cited, studies that suggested the drug can help then hurt a patient in the long run, were determined by every credible research center to be fatally flawed. And they are correct. The studies,

all of them, had issues. But the underlying conclusions were by and large the same. Which is very unusual. So I figured why not just see if it's the truth, since nothing else is adding up. Nothing else is helping."

"Let me guess," said Charles. "You, this black kid fresh out of med school, was voted down."

"The vote wasn't even close," said Martin. "It was like seventeen to zero."

"But you did it anyway," said Charles.

Martin nodded. "Yes, sir. I did it anyway."

Charles nodded. "I like your balls," he said. "That I like."

The doctor found that an odd thing to say as well. But he also knew that his patient's husband came from a long line of Mafia types. "Yes, sir," was all he decided to say about that. "What I am trying to do is to allow her to recover naturally this time with no boost. Nothing of that sort will be placed in her system. And we shall see, when she is released this time, if the exhaustion returns. Provided, of course, that she does not go back to overworking herself."

"That's never happening again," said Charles.

“It won’t,” said Jenay. “I’ve learned my lesson. Now if only my husband would learn his.”

She said this and everybody looked at Charles. But Charles ignored her little comment. “If you’re proven right,” he said, “you’ll be set up for life young man. A private practice is what you want?”

“Very much so, yes sir.”

“Then that’s exactly what you’re get. All expenses on me. If you’re proven right. Now if you’re proven wrong—”

“We will still be grateful that you at least tried to think out of the box,” said Tony.

“Absolutely right,” agreed Jenay.

“Correct,” said Brent.

But Charles only grunted.

Martin looked at his watch. “I’m late for my rounds. I’d better go. But I will personally monitor your progress, Mrs. Sinatra.”

“Thank you so much. And it goes without saying that any discussion of your experiment goes no further than this room.”

“Thank you so much, ma’am.” Then he nodded at Charles and hurried out.

“What time is it anyway?” Charles said as he looked at his watch.

“Gotta be somewhere, Pop?”

“I need to check on the construction progress over on Dunn. And I have evictions racking up.”

“No worries,” said Brent. “Bo’s handling that part.”

Charles looked at Brent. “Bonita’s handling what part?”

“Your evictions. Or at least she’s serving notice. One of my officers had to show up on one of them already this morning. It tried to get messy, but it didn’t.”

“I told her ass,” Charles said angrily as he grabbed his suitcoat that was flapped over his chair and began putting it on. “I didn’t authorize her to make any home visits.”

“She can handle it, Pop. She’s just like you. You know she can handle it.”

“That’s not the issue! I didn’t send her to Wharton to collect rents, or to evict tenants who want a free ride. She’s

going to run my company one day, and a CEO doesn't collect rents or evict people!"

"You do," Brent said and Tony suppressed a grin.

"I own the company. That's different. All of my children are going to own equal shares of my company when Jenay and I are long gone. But Bo's running it."

"See?" said Tony. "Even you know she's got the balls to run a corporation as large as yours. And you're worrying about her handling a few nothing evictions? She wants to learn the nuts and bolts of your company, Pop. I think it's admirable."

"So do I," said Brent.

"As do I," said Jenay.

"Nobody gets a vote but me," Charles said as he moved over to Jenay. "And I already voted." He leaned down and gave his wife a kiss. He looked into her eyes and rubbed her neck. "How do you feel?"

She nodded. "I'm fine."

"Fine but exhausted?"

Charles, she knew, understood her. And she wasn't going to lie to him. "Yes."

He exhaled. “These doctors are useless. Let’s just hope the kid’s on to something. But right now you need to get some rest.”

“I am resting.”

“With that tablet on your lap? Looks like work to me.”

“To me, too, Ma,” said Tony.

“I’m just checking on the hotel’s morning manifest, that’s all. Then I’ll put it up.”

Charles kissed her again. Then he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against hers. He loved her so much sometimes it hurt. Then he opened his eyes and stood erect again. “Let me go check on that hardheaded daughter of ours, handle what she hasn’t handled, check on my construction site, and then I’ll be back.”

“You’ll go home and get you some bed rest,” said Jenay, “rather than coming back here.”

Although Charles smiled and kissed her yet again, everybody in that room knew going home to bed wasn’t going to happen.

“But if you are going to be out and about,” said Jenay, “go by the hotel and make sure they’re doing what they’re

supposed to do.”

“I thought you wanted me to go home and rest.”

“I do! But I know your ass. You won’t.”

Charles smiled. “I’ll see what I can do,” he said as he hugged Brent and Tony, too, and then left.

But Tony hurried out behind him. “Dad?”

Charles was just beginning to walk up the hospital hallway. He smiled at two young, giggling nurses at a service cart in the hall who thought he was the most attractive man ever, when Tony called his name. He turned around. Tony walked up to him. “What are the doctors really saying, Pop?”

“Just what she said. They think she’s exhausted and needs rest. They have names for it, but that’s the bottom line.” Then Charles exhaled and placed his hands in his pockets.

Tony, who was the most perceptive in the entire family, could feel his anguish.

“Stay with her until I get back,” Charles said.

Tony knew then that his father was worried sick, unlike all those other hospital stays Jenay had endured. “Yes, sir,” he said. “I won’t leave her.”

Charles seemed to take solace in that. Tony, once a seminary student, knew how to get prayers through and he was the one Charles most wanted by Jenay's side. He patted him on his chest, and then he left.

"Don't go too hard on Bo," Tony yelled after him. "Or she'll give as good as she gets."

"She'll try," Charles yelled back, and Tony laughed.

The nurses, who thought Tony didn't look too bad himself, turned their affections his way. But then he was thinking about his stepmother, and how hard it had to be to not know for certain why she could never maintain any appreciable level of energy, and he headed back into her room. He was also praying silently that Lennox Martin was truly on to something.

CHAPTER NINE

Bonita Sinatra drove her Porsche Panamera onto the driveway of one of their properties, this one a two-story home that used to be beautiful but now looked like a dump: Dirty torn curtains blowing through the open windows. The house in need of several pressure washes. The yard filled with more trash than grass. Four broken-down cars on both sides of the house. She could hardly believe it. And they had the nerve to be behind in their rent?

But just as she was about to grab the clipboard off of her passenger seat, her phone rang. When she saw who it was, she leaned her head back. But then answered the call. “Hey Daddy.”

“Where your ass at?”

“And good morning to you, too.”

“Where are you, Bo? I’m not fucking with you. What are you doing?”

“I’m doing what you pay me to do. I’m working.”

“Where?”

“I’m at the Palmer house.”

Charles’s voice rose. “*Are you crazy?*”

“I got it, Daddy, goodness.”

“Take your ass back to the office. And that’s an order.”

“What? You’re breaking up, Daddy. What did you say? I can’t,” she said, and then ended the call. And she leaned her head back again. He hired her to eventually become CEO, but all he wanted her to do was sit in the office and twirl her thumbs. She wasn’t built like that.

“I wait on him,” she thought as she grabbed her clipboard, “we’ll never get anything done.” And she got out of her car.

Stepping high in her high heels and tight white jeans with a tucked-in sleeveless pink blouse that accentuated her perfectly-toned arms, she made her way toward the front porch. Everybody in Jericho declared she was the spitting image of her mother Jenay, but everybody also knew she was definitely her own person. And that wasn’t a good thing if you asked the men in town who wanted to get next to her but she wouldn’t give them the time of day. They saw her as some

she-woman: a man in women's clothing. She saw them as not enough man to handle her.

But she didn't get out like she used to, which kept her prospects limited too. Her two closest friends, the only friends she truly trusted, were no longer in town, which didn't help. But Rhea was in medical school in Illinois and had to give her total concentration to her work if she was ever going to be a well-trained doctor, and Zara had managed to wrangle herself a real African prince and was living with him in Ghana. Neither had any intention of ever returning to Jericho. Sometimes Bonita felt like the girl once voted the most likely to succeed but got left behind. Everybody seemed to have left town for greener pastures but her. But she knew it was her own decision.

She banged on the front door like she was a cop, which was how she saw her old man handle evictions: Let them know up front you aren't playing with them. Let them know up front who's boss.

But the woman of the house, Mrs. Palmer, flung the door open with an attitude of her own. "What's wrong with you knocking on my door like that? I told y'all we ain't got it!"

“And we told y’all you pay or you leave. My daddy’s not running a charity. You’re four months behind, Mrs. Palmer.”

Mrs. Palmer’s pink face was red hot, and her dark eyes were flaming with disgust of the young woman standing in front of her. “How we gon’ get money from nothing? My husband got hurt at your daddy’s factory and they won’t even pay him workman’s comp.”

“Because it was a bullshit injury,” said Bonita. “The camera caught him hitting his own leg against that machine. We’d be fools paying for that!”

The woman gave Bonita a hard, cold stare. “Think you so much,” she said with jealousy dripping from every pore. “Driving round in your Porsche and your fancy hair and your high heels. Your daddy might be white, but your mama ain’t. You just as black as the rest of them blacks round here, and don’t you forget that. You ain’t nothing.”

Bonita wasn’t going to argue with the woman. She signed her name on the third and final eviction notice, snatched it off of the clipboard, and reached it out to the woman. “You have four hours to vacate these premises.” When the woman wouldn’t take the sheet, Bonita let it drop to

the floor of the porch. And that was when it all went sideways.

Bonita was about to turn to leave. But that was when the door flung open wider and all she could see was the barrel of a shotgun. Her first instinct was to duck, which she did, and the man behind the gun, Billy Joe Palmer, fired a shot so deadly that it rocked him backwards and almost singed Bonita's hair had she not dropped down. But she was down.

"I hate every one of you Sinatras! I hate your guts! Get away from my house," he screamed out as he fired a second shot that flew just above Bonita's head, across the lawn, and shattered the windshield of her Porsche. Then he ran out onto the porch, straddled her with his short, stubby legs and tried to beat her down with the butt of his rifle.

But Bonita had another Sinatra trait: a hot temper. And it was on fire. She wasn't about to lay there and let that man beat her to death. She grabbed that rifle and tried to wrestle it from him, all the while kicking him repeatedly in his groin.

As she and Billy Joe wrestled for that gun, Charles drove up in his Cadillac. He had heard the shots from around the corner, which caused him to speed to the scene. But as soon as he saw his daughter down on that porch, with Billy Joe

standing over her with a rifle in his hand, his heart dropped. He grabbed his loaded Baretta sidearm and hopped out of his car. He could hear Mrs. Palmer screaming for her husband to *shoot that bitch, shoot her*. But Charles was yelling for Billy Joe Palmer to step away from his daughter or he'd blow his brains out.

But Bonita had weakened Billy Joe with her repeated groin kicks. So much so that she was able to wrestle his rifle away from him and then knock him over and onto his back. She then sat on top of him, and straddled him instead. As Charles ran up to the porch she was beating down their tenant with the butt of his own rifle, even as he was already screaming out in agony from the pain in his groin.

Charles had at first thought he would have to kill those motherfuckers to protect his daughter, but now his mission was to protect those motherfuckers *from* his daughter. Which was exactly why he didn't want her doing eviction runs. They all had tempers, with Big Daddy having the most-fiery of all. But his baby girl, if you crossed her, took it to a whole different level too.

He rushed up onto the porch and grabbed his daughter as blood began to pour out of Billy Joe Palmer's fat, pink

face. Police sirens could be heard in the background, which Charles appreciated, as apparently a neighbor had called 911 after shots were fired. But Bonita was still trying to hit or kick or scratch their tenant even after Charles had pulled her away. He had to wrestle with her all the way down from the porch. Then she tried to run back for more, but Charles grabbed her and pulled her back. “Get to my car now!” he yelled at her, and took that rifle away from her.

Bonita was on fire with rage, but she knew her father didn't play. She disobeyed him and she could be the one in the early grave she wanted to see Billy Joe in. She headed for his car, outraged even more when she saw that Billy Joe had shattered the windshield of her own car. “That bastard!” she yelled. But she didn't go back.

The police arrived and two patrolmen jumped out and ran up to the porch to assist their boss's father. But the action was over now. Palmer was helpless, in pain top to bottom, and his wife was bent down trying to assist him in his agony.

“What happened, sir?” asked one of the patrolmen as the other one called for an ambulance.

“My daughter was serving an eviction at this residence when he apparently shot at her. She was able to get the rifle

away from him,” Charles said, handing the young patrolman the rifle. “But not before she beat his ass,” he added.

The young cop grinned. “That’s Bonita for ya, sir. She’s something special!”

Charles looked at him with a look that chilled the cop to the bone. Forgetting how a prominent man like Big Daddy would be suspicious of any man that showed an interest in his daughter, he quickly walked it back. “For a girl I mean,” he said. “She’s special for a girl.”

It made no sense to Charles, but he didn’t argue with him. That cop was the least of his worries. He left the porch and made his way to his Cadillac. Bonita was standing in front of his car, her arms folded, staring at her own car’s shattered glass.

“See what he did to my car, Daddy?”

“See what you did to his face, Bo?”

Bonita could not believe her father would say that.

“He shot at me!”

“I wouldn’t have shot at you if you wouldn’t have been here. I told your ass not to come here!”

Bonita didn't know what to say to that. And Charles knew it. "Get your ass in the car," he said, as he got in behind the wheel.

Bonita walked around the Cadillac and plopped down on her father's passenger seat. Charles put his Baretta back in the glove compartment and took off. But Bonita knew he wasn't about to let it go.

"You know that fucker's crazy. You know I told you not to go there. But you still went anyway."

"He's four months behind in rent, Daddy. Four months! You said you wanted to elevate me to CEO someday. You said you wanted me to do it right. But we won't have a business at all if we keep running it like this."

Charles couldn't believe it. "Oh so you're gonna tell me how to run my own fucking business?"

Bonita looked at him. "Was it for the fun of it?"

Charles didn't know what she was talking about. His face frowned. "Was what for the fun of it?"

"You sent me to Wharton to learn how to run businesses more effectively. I learned how to do it. When I institute my knowledge that you sent me to college to gain,

you act as if all my education was just for fun. Like you have a problem with me utilizing what you sent me away to learn.”

“I have a problem with you putting yourself in harm’s way. That’s the problem! You don’t fuck around with Billy Joe Palmer period. I told you that.”

“Then why haven’t you evicted him yet?”

Charles rubbed his forehead as he stopped at a red light. He knew he wasn’t running his business like the well-oiled machine it used to be. “I’ve been worried about my wife,” he said, and then looked at his daughter.

Bonita felt a pain in her heart when she heard her father say those words. She looked out of the window away from him.

“You’re the only child she and I have together, Bo. You’re her only biological child. Every last one of my sons and our adopted daughters have come to see her whenever she’s having one of her bouts and have to be hospitalized. Every one of them has shown up. Except for you. Why haven’t you gone to see your mother?”

Truth was, her mother begged her not to come this last time. She knew how hard things like that affected Bonita.

Jenay knew Bo was a strong girl. Maybe their strongest child when all was said and done. But Jenay also knew that when it came to her and Charles, Bonita was vulnerable. She couldn't bear to ever see either one of them in pain. Jenay knew it. Charles did too. But he loved his wife so much that he felt Bonita had to just find a way to suck it up, to push through, and to go see about her anyway.

Bonita wanted to do just that. But her mother didn't want her to. She was honoring her mother's wishes. And her own, if she were to tell the truth. "I don't want to see her like that," she admitted.

"Like what?"

"Weak. Helpless." Then she frowned. "Sick." Then she looked at her father. He could see her big green eyes were bright with unshed tears. "I don't want to see my mama like that. Is she going to be okay, Daddy?"

Charles smiled a smile that only made him look exhausted himself. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "Yes, baby. She's going to be just fine. A total and complete recovery, you hear me? That's what we're praying for. That's what she'll be blessed to have."

"But they don't even know what's causing it."

“That’s why we pray! They’ll find out. This young doctor came by this morning. He’s trying something different. He’s given us some hope. We’ll see.”

Bonita nodded. Her father did have a way, with that look in his soft, kind eyes, that made her believe him.

“But I do want you to go see her,” Charles made clear. “She’ll love seeing her baby girl. You’re strong enough to take it.”

Bonita wasn’t so sure about that. Fighting for her life against a fool like Billy Joe Palmer was one thing. Watching her mother fight for her life against a disease, a sickness they couldn’t even name, was another thing altogether. But her father was never wrong. “Yes, sir,” she said. And he squeezed her hand even tighter.

The light turned green and Charles turned a corner. Bonita frowned. “I thought you were dropping me off at the office. This isn’t the way to the office. Where are you going?”

“I need to go over to the construction site.”

“Oh, Daddy, I’d rather go to the office. I’m hungry. I didn’t have breakfast. I haven’t had lunch. And we’ll be out

on that construction site all day. You go out there every day.”

“And you know why I go out there every day? Because it’s my money. It’s not their money. They don’t give a shit. If I want that sucker on time and under budget and yes, well built, I’ve got to ride their asses. That’s why I go out there every day.”

Bonita hesitated. But then she spoke. “I studied your blueprints.”

Charles looked at her. He had once hoped his oldest son Brent would want to take over the business someday. But Brent’s heart wasn’t in it. He was a lawman through and through, and would always be that way. Bonita was different. She was his youngest, but she turned out to be more like him than any of his seven children. She was his true heir-apparent. And he loved when she took that level of initiative. “What do you think?”

“You didn’t ask for my input at the time.”

“Your ass was still in college. You didn’t need to worry about anything but getting that business degree. I want my CEO to be legit. You’re legit.”

Bonita smiled. “Thanks.”

“Still haven’t told me what you think.”

“I think you’re putting together a modern, high-tech corporate office building that could rival Uncle Mick’s and Uncle Tommy’s and Uncle Reno’s too. Good job, Pop.”

Charles nodded his head.

“But you do realize that when your brand-new corporate office building is complete,” Bonita said, “it’s going to be the largest building in the entire state?”

“Not an accident. You have a problem with that?”

“Not at all. I say it’s about time. You’ve been running a major corporation from that storefront office of yours for decades. Long overdue.”

Charles nodded again. Her stamp of approval mattered to him.

Then Bonita smiled. “When you decide to do something you don’t go halfway, do you?”

Charles laughed. “Just like your ass,” he said.

Bonita knew it too. They were so much alike!
“What’s next after the construction site?”

“After we leave there, Mom wants me to check on the hotel, to make sure they’re doing what they’re supposed to do.”

“Why is Ma worrying about that hotel at a time like this?”

“Because that’s how she rolls. She looks out for everything and everybody, except herself. She get out this time, I’m putting a stop to it.”

Bonita nodded, but was inwardly doubtful. If it was anybody else, she’d believe her father. He knew how to make all of them bend to his will. But it was her mother they were talking about. Her father was faithful as a birddog when it came to her mother. What Jenay wanted, Jenay got. He bent to *her* will.

Then Bonita looked beyond her father. “What’s all of this?” she asked when they arrived at an intersection and her father’s Cadillac, along with three other cars in front of them, were stopped from going any further by a traffic cop, although it was a green light. That was when they saw three SUV’s, with police escorts front and back, come into the intersection and then turn onto the street where they were waiting. “This is kind of extra.”

“For Jericho for sure,” agreed Charles.

“Must be some big shot. Maybe Uncle Mick’s in town.”

“With a police escort? Get real,” said Charles. His kid brother, Mick Sinatra, was considered the number one mob boss in the world. There was no way he’d have police anywhere near him. “Probably some rich idiot passing through,” he added.

As the SUVs drove beside them, Bonita looked especially at that middle SUV. Because many of her relatives, including her Uncle Mick, had to have security everywhere they went, she knew that middle SUV usually housed the person all the fuss was about. And that was when she saw a man looking down at either his phone or some paperwork. But just as they were passing by, he looked up and out of his window too. Right at her, although he didn’t see her.

Bonita was struck by how intense his big blue eyes seemed, as if he didn’t know the meaning of chill. As if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. But then her eyes stretched with sudden knowledge and she did a double take. Because she realized who he was. It was no rich idiot passing through. It was Clark! It was the very man she still

judged all her subsequent boyfriends by. And every one of them failed the test. It was Clark McKenzie within inches of her!

And all of those old feelings she had: Feelings of gratitude that he didn't take advantage of her. Feelings of kindness when he allowed her to share his bed for good company so he could get some good rest. Feelings of lust when she thought about his naked body against hers, his penis wedged against her ass, his abs pressed hard against her back, came rushing back like a flood of emotions that she couldn't quite manage.

She was so blown away that her father noticed too. "What's wrong with you?"

Although she tried her best to play it off, because her father always asked too many questions, her heart was hammering. "Nothing's wrong with me," she said. "Why would something be wrong with me?"

"You just look weird," said Charles as the SUVs passed by, and the cop gave the go-ahead for Charles and the other three cars.

But Bonita turned around in her seat and watched those SUVs through the back window. Her heart was hammering.

A tiny part of her wanted him to be in town searching for her, which she knew was utterly ridiculous. But five years ago, after that night, she wanted him to come find her so badly that it hurt. She wanted him to finish what he had started. She wanted him to be her first.

But he never came. And then she had to watch him most every Sunday afternoon on television, looking gorgeous on that gridiron barking out orders to his players as the man among men. And the commentators would point out his latest girlfriend, who seemed to be a different girl every week. But she couldn't talk. She had a different boyfriend every year for her first three years in college, until she couldn't do it anymore and gave up on having another boyfriend for as long as she lived. Because that was the problem. They were *boys!*

But when the SUVs disappeared from view and she turned back around, she knew she wasn't hiding her shock very well. And there was her father's soulful, big green watchful eyes too. She used to tell him everything, about all of her so-called boyfriends, and he always had the same response: "Whatever doesn't add to your life, subtract it from your life. Value-added or zero. Period."

“Why are you so fascinated with those SUVs?” he asked her.

“I’m not fascinated. Just curious who it could be.”

“I told you who. Some rich idiot passing through. What else you need to know?”

“Nothing at all, Father. Since you saw that convoy for two seconds like I saw it, and knew all about what those SUVs were up to, I would be insane, utterly mad, not to agree with you. I wish I had that skill to know everybody’s business without really knowing any of it.”

Charles looked at his youngest child. Sometimes he didn’t know if she was being funny, or cunning. “Kiss my ass,” he said to her. They looked at each other. And then burst into laughter.

But as the laughter died down, Bonita realized that her curiosity, not about some strange idiot passing through, but about Clark McKenzie, caused her to pull out her phone and do something she hadn’t done in years: She Googled him. When she found out he had just retired, she was stunned. Who retires at thirty-four? Unless thirty-four was old for a football player. She wanted to ask her father, who would know, but that would only lead to more questions. Clark was her secret.

In a lot of ways, he was her dream man. And she wasn't sharing him.

CHAPTER TEN

In a pair of cargo pocket shorts, a polo shirt tucked in, and shades and sandals, Clark McKenzie looked more like a tourist on vacation than a man on a mission. Seated on the balcony of his hotel suite, with one leg folded over his thigh watching the hotel's beautiful koi pond waterfall, he looked completely relaxed.

But he wasn't. He'd been retired for just one week, and he was already onto his next job, a job years in the making: to destroy the man who helped his family's killer escape justice. And then to find that killer, if his ass was even still alive, and destroy him too. And then, just maybe, he could find some peace.

Harper was also on that balcony. Oblivious to Clark's true intentions, he was at the table with Clark going over their initial plan before this excursion into Jericho.

"We've got to get to Santa Monica asap."

"Why?"

"The eminent domain bill is before their governing board in a week's time. You need to be there personally, glad-

handing as many members as you can, greasing the palms of those who are still on the fence. It has the potential to be our biggest location, Clark. We've got to seal the deal in Santa Monica before we can even think about doing any deep-dive into Jericho. Santa Monica comes first."

Clark exhaled. "Sheila's in Santa Monica."

"You know I know that."

"You know how she is. I don't want that drama around me."

"You won't get any drama. She knows better. Acting like she had no clue you'd break her heart when she knew darn well that's what you do. And every woman that's been with you knows that going in."

Clark looked at Harper. "You make it sound coldblooded."

Harper moved his head side to side. "News flash: Breaking these ladies hearts is coldblooded. Sorry. But it is. And that's what you do. Sorry."

Clark took another sip of his bottled water. Another sin in a long line of sins he had to atone for. The list was getting out of hand.

“The point is: Sheila’s the least of your worries,” said Harper. “She knew who you were when she first slept with you.”

“Okay what else?” Clark was getting irritated the way talk of his past usually did him. “Forget Sheila. What else?”

“Nothing else. Santa Monica’s the immediate thing. And ...”

“And what?”

“I just don’t get this Jericho thing.”

“You don’t have to get it. Just give me the facts.”

“It’s going to be a tough slog. That’s a fact.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because one guy, a man named Charles Sinatra, owns sixty-five percent of this county, and damn-near forty-eight percent of the entire state.”

Although Lou told him Sinatra owned a lot, even Clark was blown away by those percentages. “Geez!”

“I’ve never seen anything like it. And his office? Some storefront building downtown. You’d think the guy’s

business was a Ma and Pop operation. It's not. Believe me. It's not."

"Go on."

"The guy's so big in this region that they don't call him Mister Sinatra. Oh no. That's not big enough for him. They call him *Big Daddy* Sinatra. And he's mean as a junkyard dog, from what I'm hearing. Can be a very unpleasant fellow if you get in his crosshairs."

Clark was up for the challenge.

"But this is the thing," said Harper, continuing. "If we're going to get a foothold in this region, which can get us some of that Canadian shopping traffic, too, so I can see it being a pretty profitable undertaking, but it's going to require us to knock Big Daddy off his throne. And that ain't easy."

"What is?" asked Clark.

Harper smiled. "I forgot. Your mama named you after Superman."

"There's no such thing as a *super* man. Go on."

"The hardest part is that we would have to get the local council to invoke eminent domain over loads of that man's

properties to be able to cobble together the amount of land we're talking about for our state-of-the-art mall."

"Give me a percentage."

"We'll need to get eighty percent of his properties. Maybe more."

Clark nodded. "Good. He'll feel that shit. And that's what I want." Then he looked at Harper. "You said he's mean and unpleasant. But is he popular?"

"Depends on who you ask. I've asked the staff around this hotel, since he owns this too."

That was news to Clark. He thought they were at that hotel because it was the only five-star in town. "He owns this hotel?"

Harper nodded. "It didn't show up in the background because he gifted it to his wife. She's the one credited with turning it around."

"Why would he give it to his wife? For a tax shelter?"

"Nope. She changed his life. Seems old Big Daddy was a bigger whore than you before he met his current wife. She changed him. I guess he appreciated her."

Clark laughed. “No woman changes a man. Not possible.”

“I’m only telling you what I’ve heard. And people say she changed him. And to answer your original question, a few even says he’s highly popular.”

“What does the consensus say?”

“Not so much. He’s feared alright. And very respected. I’ll give him that. He is a highly respected man. But the vast majority I spoke with does not view him, in any way, shape, or form, as likeable.”

Clark nodded. “That’s a start,” he said as knocks were heard on the door of the suite. Harper got up and answered. When he saw it was Lou Brazza, he escorted him out onto the balcony.

“What up, Lou?”

“How you doing, Boss?”

“I’m doing. What you got for me?”

“I was downstairs in the hotel restaurant minding my own business like I always do. Was having myself a little dinner. And the fellar walks right on in.”

Harper frowned. “What fellar?”

“Charles Sinatra.”

Harper was confused. He stared at Lou. “You know him?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would you know Charles Sinatra?”

Lou seemed hesitant to Harper. Then Lou looked at Clark, prompting Harper to look at Clark too. Clark nodded to Lou, which, both Lou and Harper knew meant he had the green light to speak.

Harper looked at Lou. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“As you know I started working for Boss a few years ago, as his bodyguard mainly, but ... I also did other things for him.”

“Such as?”

“Private eye work.”

Harper frowned. “You’re a private detective?”

“Do you want me to tell you how I know Sinatra, or not?”

“Sorry. Keep talking.”

“Boss knew I had what you might call a less-than-lawful background, which never bothered him, and I appreciate that.”

“Get to the point, Louie,” Harper said.

“He tasked me with one other job. He gave me the case file on what happened to his parents and sisters. Told me he wanted me to get the word out to some of my, what do I call them, unsavory friends?”

“Get what word out?”

“He wanted them to find out who iced his family, what else?”

Harper’s eyes stretched larger. “Are you telling me Charles Sinatra, Big Daddy Sinatra, killed Clark’s family?”

“No! What are you got a loose screw? That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what has Charles Sinatra to do with any of this?”

“I got word that somebody knows somebody who knows Big Daddy. And according to what I was able to find out, Big Daddy Sinatra knows where to find the man that

killed Boss's family because he was the one that helped him escape authorities."

Harper frowned. "Why would he help a killer?"

"Takes one to know one. He's from a long line of killers. His own daddy killed his own mama. His baby brother is Mick the Tick Sinatra who, according to legend, killed his own father and his own son when his son tried to kill his wife. His nephews are Reno, Tommy, and Sal Gabrini."

"*Goddamn!*" Harper was astonished. "I heard of those guys before. It's like a Mafia top ten list. Every last one of them shady. It's like they're legit, with their names slapped onto all of these major corporations, but they're as dirty as dirty can get."

"Exactly," said Lou. "But they're also loyal. The killer, Archie "The Grave" Gravinzano, is Sinatra's cousin on his old man's side of the family. And he provided transport to get him out of the country. We're trying to buy up Sinatra's properties as a bargaining chip: he get his properties back when he lead us to The Grave."

Harper didn't understand half of what Lou was talking about, but as long as Clark understood it was what mattered.

Clark looked at Lou. “You said he was here at the hotel?”

“On account of his wife runs it, but she’s in the hospital. From what I was able to find out, he came by to check on things.”

“He’s still here?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I was in the restaurant, minding my own business, and he walks right in like he owns the place.”

“Maybe because he does?” asked Harper.

Lou ignored him. “He walks in with some young hoe that I know for a fact is not his wife, on account of his wife in the hospital. I figure it’s probably one of his side pieces or something, although everybody I talked to declares he loves his wife and shit. But a great looking guy like him with just one piece of ass to keep him warm? I ain’t buying it. But as soon as he and his hoe sat down to have their dinner, I got up and came to you. They’re in the hotel restaurant as I speak.”

Clark stood up.

“Where are you going?” Harper asked, standing up too.

“To have dinner. And to meet that bastard,” Clark said,
and headed for the exit.

Harper and Lou hurried behind him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Who was that?”

Charles had just ended a phone call. He and Bonita were seated side by side in a booth at one of the three restaurants inside his hotel. “That was Herbert. I ordered him to take your car to the office and let the glass people come over there and replace your windshield.”

“Did they do it?”

Charles nodded. “He said they just left.”

“Thanks Daddy!” Bonita gave Charles a big hug. “That’s what angered me the most.”

“What?”

“When Jim Palmer shot out my windshield. I was ready to kill his ass when I saw my car.”

Charles shook his head. “You and that car. I don’t know why I bought it for you.”

“Because you love me?”

“You say,” said Charles with a straight face.

Bonita playfully hit his massive bicep. “Very funny,” she said. “So what’s the verdict when you checked out the staff? Are they doing what they’re supposed to do?”

“There were a couple hiccups I had to handle, but other than, yeah, they’re holding it together.”

“Good. Make sure you let Ma know.”

“I already did,” Charles said as the waiter arrived and took their drink orders. When he left, Charles stared at his daughter. “You’re the spitting image of your mother. Anybody ever tell you that?”

“You mean other than you a thousand times?”

Charles smiled, too, and then looked out of the window.

Bonita looked at her father. “You’re worried about her, aren’t you?”

“I’m always worried about her. About all of you.”

Bonita waited. Then she exhaled. “I spoke to her.”

Charles looked at her.

“I told her I was going to come see her but she keeps telling me not to come. But I’m going to go anyway.”

Charles didn't want any of that open-ended shit.

“When?”

“First thing in the morning when Mom is first waking up so she won't have the energy to object to my being there.”

He nodded. “Good. I'm glad to hear that, Bo. Go see your mama I don't care what she says” Then their drink orders arrived and they settled into shop talk.

When Clark, Harper, and Lou walked into the restaurant, Lou pointed out who Sinatra was. But Clark had already figured that out. He'd never forget that face. Staring at Charles and Charles alone, he headed in that direction.

Lou and Harper stopped short of following him and took the booth just in front of Sinatra's booth.

But Charles saw Clark. And Charles was amazed.
“Why I'll be damn.”

“What?” asked Bonita.

“Clark McKenzie's in the house.”

When Bonita heard that name, her already huge eyes stretched even wider, and she quickly looked up. When she saw Clark walking their way, her heart leaped with joy and alarm all at once and she quickly looked away. She knew she

had to keep her composure. She knew she had to keep it together or her emotions would take over. She wasn't about to let that happen.

“He’s coming our way,” Charles said like some starstruck kid. “He’s coming our way, Bo!”

Clark put on his best public smile with his hand extended as he walked over to Charles’s booth. Charles quickly stood up.

“Charles Sinatra?” Clark asked. “Or should I call you Big Daddy Sinatra?”

“Charles is good,” Charles said as the two men shook.

“I’m Clark McKenzie.”

“Yes, I know.” Both men laughed. Bonita didn’t even look over at Clark just yet. She was still getting her emotions under control.

“So was that your entourage with police escort I saw earlier in town?”

“I plead the fifth,” said Clark. “My team asked for security, as they usually do whenever I’m coming to a town I’m unfamiliar with, and they give me all of that. But from what I understand they were off duty cops moonlighting.”

“I see,” said Charles. He knew it had to be something like that. Brent would have never signed off on any police escorts for some spoiled, rich athlete. Even if it was one of the greatest to ever play the game of football, in Charles’s opinion. “Congratulations on winning the Super Bowl, although I’m no fan of those Cowboys. But you did a great job. Congrats on that. And on your retirement.”

“Thank you.” Then Clark glanced at the young woman at his table.

“Please meet my daughter,” said Charles.

Clark was at first surprised that she was his daughter. Mainly because Lou described her as his “hoe,” but also because to look at her you wouldn’t think biracial. “Where’s my manners? Bonita, this is Clark. Clark, this is my baby daughter Bonita. But everybody calls her Bo.”

When Clark heard the name Bonita, it registered nothing. But when he heard Sinatra add *everybody calls her Bo*, somehow his mind raced back to that night in Boston. At his twenty-ninth birthday bash. Could it be possible? Could this girl be *his* Bo? Could she possibly be *Ginger Ale*? He’d met so many people in his life, there was no way he could remember some girl he only spent a few hours with. But he

remembered that there was something special about her that night, more than he remembered her face.

When she finally looked up at him with those massive, gorgeous, dark-green eyes, he didn't have to wonder a second longer. It was her. It was the young woman he was certain he would never see again after that night. The young woman, for many months after their encounter, he actually thought about calling to see if she was what he felt she was that night: somebody different. Somebody special. Somebody he might be able to love. And his heartbeat began to pound.

It had been five years since that night. But every now and then, when he wasn't having one of his nightmares, he had dreams of those wonderful few hours he spent with her. More than a few times, he thought about getting somebody to track her down. But he didn't do it. He was bad news to any female within breathing distance of him. He wasn't ruining her too.

But her father was a different story.

That was why he rallied. "Nice to meet you, Bo," he said with a nod of his head, as if she was as much a stranger to him as her father was. A stranger whose bare ass he dry-humped and almost ravaged. A stranger whose clitoris he nearly destroyed.

“Nice to meet you too,” Bonita responded.

She had a different take. She assumed, by his reaction to her, that he didn’t remember her at all. It felt a little devastating that he didn’t, but she was relieved too. He’d speak to her father and then go on about his business. And she could go on about her dreams of him, hopes for him, and her own life.

But her father, being the avid football fan he was, couldn’t leave well enough alone. “Why don’t you join us? We were just getting ready to order dinner.”

Bonita expected him to say no, and move on. But it wasn’t that kind of day.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Clark said and sat on the seat across from Charles and Bonita and directly in front of Bo. And the small-talk conversating began.

But as Charles did most of the talking, Clark did a lot of staring at Charles. And he agreed with Lou’s assessment. Charles Sinatra was a very attractive man. Even likeable on the surface. But there was also an undercurrent about the man, despite his charm and smiles. He kept his guard up. “I understand you own this establishment?”

Charles nodded. “I do, yes. You’re staying here?”

“In the presidential suite, yes, sir. I’m surprised they didn’t notify you.”

“I haven’t spoken to the front staff. Hope you aren’t having any difficulties.”

“None whatsoever. I just wanted to thank you for your staff’s hospitality. I only just arrived this morning, but so far so good.”

“In town for long?”

“Yes actually. I’m handling some business.” He looked Charles in the eyes. “Some unfinished business.”

“Well welcome to Jericho. As the saying goes: we aren’t much, but we’re clean.”

Clark smiled. *Clean my ass*, he wanted to say.

But when the waiter came and began taking their food orders, Clark realized his legs were so long that they bumped into Bonita’s legs. She closed her legs by reflex, to move them out of his way he supposed, but she moved them just as he opened his to give her more room, and both of her legs ended up between his legs. She wore a very short miniskirt, which meant her legs, and a good portion of her thighs were

bare. He closed his legs until they had closed her in. Until they could feel his thick thighs pressing against her thighs. They both glanced at each other, and looked away.

Although Bonita didn't take it as him remembering her, she did take it as an obvious flirtation. But because she knew how he treated her that night, she wasn't mad at him.

"Let me say right now," Charles said, completely in the dark about his daughter and Clark's leg dance, "that I opposed that trade the Patriots made with the Cowboys vehemently. We got a lot of good players, yes, we did. But we lost the best player in the league. So I say we lost."

Clark actually appreciated that. New England trading him to Dallas was still a sore spot for him. "Thank you," he said.

"But you showed their asses, didn't you?" Charles was grinning. "They traded you because you didn't win us another Super Bowl. Then you go to Dallas and win two in your four years there, including just this last one. And then your ass, smartly in my book, retired on top."

"That was the plan."

“And you handled it masterfully,” Charles said and Clark, unable to help himself, squeezed Bonita’s thighs, with his own thighs, even harder. They glanced at each other again. Bonita could feel her vagina throbbing.

“So do you work with your father, Bonita?” Clark asked her.

Bonita had to regain her composure. He knew how to turn it on and off like a faucet. She didn’t. “Yes.”

“Doing what?”

“Whatever’s needed.”

“I’m grooming her to take over my corporation someday,” Charles said. “She’s senior VP right now.”

“Very young to be a VP,” said Clark. “I’m impressed.”

“Oh she’s got what it takes,” said Charles. “She graduated from Wharton you know.”

“Penn? Even more impressed.”

“Where did you graduate from again?” Charles asked Clark.

“Princeton,” Clark said.

Charles nodded. “Not a bad school either.”

Bonita smiled and rolled her eyes. Clark laughed out loud. He was glad to see she had a playful side.

But he also felt conflicted. He was there for a reason. But now that he saw her again, he wanted her again too. He wanted to spend time with her, to get to know her. He wanted to see if that night was just a fluke and all those times he thought to check up on her was just his libido acting up. If it was just his libido, then all would be well. He'd do a hit-and-run on her ass. But if it was much more than just a libido issue, which his feelings toward her for months after the fact seemed to suggest, then he had a problem.

But avenging what happened to his family trumped all with Clark. No piece of ass, no matter how tempting, was going to change that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

After dinner, they all stood up ready to go their separate ways. But when the hotel's general manager hurried over and asked Charles if he could assist them with an irate guest who was threatening the staff, and Bonita was about to go with him, Clark touched her on the elbow. "Could I speak with you for a moment?"

Charles had already hurried away with his GM, and Bonita knew she was on the grill. Did she really want to be alone with this man? He was her ideal man who couldn't possibly be as good as she remembered him. Why would she want reality to mess with her dream? But she was always up for a challenge. "Sure," she said as if it was no big deal to her.

"Perhaps we can walk around the hotel grounds. I could use some fresh air."

"Sure," Bonita said again.

Lou, as his bodyguard, got up to follow them, but Clark waved him off. And he and Bonita made their way alone out of a side door that led toward the backside of the property near the nature preserve.

Both were dressed summery for early March, with Clark in shorts and Bonita in a mini-skirt, but the sun had been out brilliantly all day, even though it was late evening and going down now, and the wind was blowing briskly: it was a perfect day.

“So tell me about yourself,” Clark said as they walked.
“Are you married yet? Have children yet?”

“No and no,” said Bonita.

“Oh I forgot. You’re just a baby right?”

“Baby my ass,” Bonita said and Clark laughed. “I’m twenty-three years old. I’m still trying to get my career going before I start having babies.”

“Your career as the CEO of your father’s corporation?”

She nodded. “Yep.”

“Is that what you want,” asked Clark, “or what he wants?”

Bonita hesitated because she understood the distinction. Most people her age would say the latter: that they were working for their father and following in his footsteps just trying to please their old man. But she weren’t most people. “Both,” she said.

Clark smiled. "So you like small town living?"

"I like Jericho, yeah. I like it here. We all do."

"Who's we?"

"My brothers and me. We're all grown, but we all still live in Jericho. Our two adopted sisters, Ashley and Carly, are the only ones who moved away. But the rest of us are staying put. We aren't leaving our parents."

Clark was touched. "You guys are that close?"

Bonita nodded. "Yeah, we are. I don't think we could be any closer. They all, of course, try to run my business and I have to constantly check their asses," she said this with a smile. "But I know they're coming from a place of nothing but love. I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Clark studied her. "You mean that. Don't you?"

Why would he doubt that she did? "Yes, of course," she said. Then she glanced over at him. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Married? Children?"

"No and no."

Bonita stared at him. She'd read about his family, but dared not bring it up. "Why not?"

"Because I don't want that."

He said it so bluntly that she was certain it was because of what happened to his family. Every article she googled about him said it was something he never discussed. Not ever.

And they kept on walking.

But as they walked, and as Clark kept glancing over at her, he stumbled and nearly fell, but she grabbed him. And held him up. Which did something to him. When he stood back erect, he was staring at her. And that odd feeling of *could she be the one* reclaimed him again. Never before that night nor since that night had that feeling aroused within him. But it was back.

Bonita didn't understand why he was staring at her, and she didn't realize she still had her hands on his waist, which was where she grabbed him to help prevent his fall, until she stared back into his eyes. Until she felt his body on her hands. And remembered as he appeared to be remembering. But she thought he had forgotten. Could she be wrong?

It wasn't until he said it, did she believe it. "I never thought I'd see you again," he said.

Bonita smiled. She couldn't suppress it. Because he remembered her too. "You remembered me?" she asked him.

Clark loved the way she was smiling at him. As if it meant the world to her that he hadn't forgotten her. But for some reason, he couldn't lie to her. He just couldn't do it. "I didn't plan on remembering you at all," he admitted. "But yes, I remember you well. I remember every second of that night. I remember you more than I've ever remembered any woman before or since you."

Bonita felt a joy in her soul when he said those words. But she had to remember he was, at the end of the day, a jock. A jock who was used to flattering silly girls. She couldn't allow herself to fall into that trap too. She removed her hands from his person, and continued walking.

Clark was surprised that she didn't take that opportunity to confess her love and devotion to him the way every woman he'd ever been with had. Had he said to any of them what he just said to her and they would be all over him. But Ginger Ale? She just walked away.

And to his own shock, he hurried up beside her as if she, not he, was controlling this dance. And he didn't know how to take it.

But when they made it to the back door of the entrance back into the hotel, and he swiped his card and opened the door for her to go in front of him, and they were so close he could smell her fresh perfumed scent, it did something to both of them. They looked into each other's eyes and the sensualness that passed between them caught them off guard. And they both remembered the way he rubbed against her that night. The way they both wanted it so badly that night. The way he made the right decision to not do that to her. And how she respected him forevermore for that decision he made.

But this was a different night. And if he had her in his bed this time, there would be no last second stopping. There would be no turning back.

But how could he when he knew who her father was, and what he had to do to that man? To the very company she one day aspired to run? Was he that depraved? Was his sexual desires that overwhelming?

In that moment, as he looked into her beautiful green eyes, it was beyond overwhelming. He had to have her in the

worst way. He had to feel her beneath him. He had to get inside of her, and only her. And the way he always viewed his life: he'd think about the rest of it later.

He took her by the hand as they entered the backside of the hotel. He led her down a corridor that she knew led to the private elevator for where the hotel's most exclusive guests stayed: the presidential suite. And when he swiped his card and they got on that elevator, still holding hands, she had every opportunity to release his hand and tell him no. But she didn't say a word. Because she didn't want to tell him no. Because he wasn't the only one in that sensual state of need. After those hours with Clark, Bonita always wanted him to be her first, even though she assumed it would be an impossible dream. But now that he was back, and right beside her ready, willing, and able to make that impossible dream come true, she wasn't about to say no. It was exactly what she wanted.

Or at least though she did. Because as soon as they walked into his suite, and the door shut behind them, and he slammed her back against that door and began kissing her with a passion she'd never seen unleashed that way before, she felt so out of her depth that it scared her.

Until she started kissing him back.

Until he was pressing against her and she was feeling that wonderful, thick, long rod she'd only experienced that one time all those years ago, but she still missed having it against her.

And by the time they were undressed, and on his bed, and his face was between her legs her momentary fear was all passion too. She couldn't match his: he was a master. But she was close.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Clark moved back up, from between her legs, and was sucking her breasts in that urgent but gentle way she loved. And his penis was rubbing against her, almost to the point that it was going to go inside of her all on its own. But as she ran her fingers through his hair as his mouth couldn't get enough of her breasts, she was so enthralled with Clark that she wasn't at all sure if she would have been able to stop him.

Until he asked her.

Clark knew it was the time had come that he had to get inside of her in the worst way. And he wanted in raw. "Not since I was a teenager have I had sex without wearing a condom," he said to her. "I was just that terrified of some girl getting pregnant and putting her hooks in me for life. But I want to feel every inch of you, Bo. I want to go inside of you naked. It'll feel so good. I promise you."

"I'm sure it will," Bonita said as his mouth moved up and was kissing her neck and her ear.

"I want to be inside of you so bad I can taste it. I've never wanted a woman the way that I want you right this

moment.”

“I want you too, Clark,” Bonita said. “But you’re putting on a condom.”

Clark was shocked that he’d been turned down cold. He even stopped kissing her and looked into her eyes. He was that floored. “Do you realize how many women on this planet would have jumped at the chance to ride raw with Clark McKenzie?”

A part of Bonita wanted to say *get over yourself, you arrogant prick*, but she knew alpha males like him. All of her brothers, her uncles, her cousins, and especially her father, were just like him. “I realize you aren’t accustomed to women telling you no to anything you want. But get accustomed to it. I’m not risking my life for a few minutes of pleasure. You’re putting on a condom.”

Clark stared at her. A part of him was pissed with her. But the larger part was inwardly amazed. She didn’t want to trick him into getting her pregnant. She didn’t want to stroke his ego by giving into his demands. She was different just as he believed all those years ago when he first met her. She was nothing like any woman he’d ever met. And that pleased him immeasurably.

“Okay,” he said to her with respect, rather than malice, in his voice. “But you got one thing terribly wrong,” he said as he reached into his nightstand, grabbed a condom, and began putting it on.

Bonita didn’t understand what she could have gotten wrong. “What’s that?” she asked him.

“You said you didn’t want to risk your life for a few minutes of pleasure.”

Bonita nodded her head. “That’s right.”

Clark was now ready to enter her. “What the fuck is a few minutes of pleasure?” he said as he began to enter her. “I only please in hours,” he added and Bonita laughed.

But her laughter turned to horror when he thrust his big, thick penis through her super-narrow passageway and broke through her maidenhood for the first time ever.

She arched her back in pain when he entered her that dramatically, and Clark too was astounded. It had been five years. He knew she was a virgin then. Was what he was feeling true? Was she *still a virgin*???

Bonita looked into his eyes with eyes that appeared to be in shock. And in that moment he knew it was true. She

hadn't been with another man since she laid in bed with him. He was going to be her first.

And although he was sorry his primitive thrust inside of her had stunned and hurt her, the joy he felt inside that he was her one and only could not be eclipsed. He'd been with virgins before, but they all had been teenage whores ready to get going. He was their start, not their finish. But he was apparently Bonita's start and finish. At least that was how he felt about it.

Bonita didn't know how she felt about any of it. She had no intentions of losing her virginity to Clark McKenzie when she woke up that morning. But if she was going to lose it to anybody, she wanted it to be him. Why she wanted it stupefied her. But there it was, plain and in the open now. She wanted Clark above any man she'd ever known.

But that look of terror in her eyes did eclipse his joy. Because he couldn't bear the thought of hurting this precious person. "I'll stop if you want me to," he said although he knew it would take everything within him to ease out of her sweet wetness.

Bonita was in pain. She couldn't hide the fact that the way he rammed inside of her was painful. But as he sat there,

inside of her, felt good too. It felt different and full and great in some way. She wanted to see if her dreams of being with him matched the reality. “Keep going,” she said to him. “I want you to keep going.”

Clark was too weak to argue with her. He kept going. And when he got his rhythm, and her body became less tense and was able to enjoy what he was doing inside of her, it became dream-like for him too. He’d never felt sex like he was feeling it with Bonita. Because it wasn’t just sex. It didn’t have the feel of just sex. It was making love. He felt as if he was making love to Bonita Sinatra, not just fucking her.

Although he was doing a whole lot of that too.

And for over an hour they were enjoying the ease of being together. For over an hour, Clark was moaning and groaning as if every time he moved within her he was discovering a different part of her.

Bonita was discovering him too. And it not only matched her dream, but it exceeded it. And the deeper he moved inside of her, with his penis rubbing against every single sensitive spot within her, she thought she was going to climax. How could she hold on any longer?

But Clark had them both holding on. Because he didn't want that feeling of innocence and love and sex all mixed up together to ever end.

After hour number two, he was still inside of her, still hitting every right spot, and she was have orgasm after orgasm. She never thought it was possible.

And Clark was so enthralled with Bonita that he couldn't stop himself. Even after he came to a thunderous cum, he was going at it again. The idea of pulling out of her was as anathema to him as the idea of pulling away from his heart, from his soul, from his very being. He felt as if he and Bonita had connected on a level that he had always been certain was beyond his realm of capability. But as he began cumming again and was pouring into her once more, the connection was there. It could not be denied.

When it was all over and Clark finally eased out of Bonita, taking his overfilled condom with him, he rolled off of Bonita. She turned toward him watching him as he laid on his back tried to get his super-heavy breathing back to normal again. But when he got up and went to the bathroom, apparently to remove his condom, she thought that was her cue

to get lost. But he didn't stay long at all. He came back with a damp cloth to clean her up. Although he had worn a condom, there was a little blood there from the way he so dramatically broke through her maidenhood. And she was thrown. Was that what men did to the ladies afterwards? They cleaned them up? Or was it only if they had been with a virgin? She had no idea. She was astonished by how little she knew about what happened afterwards.

After taking care of her and then disposing of the cloth in the bathroom, Clark returned and got back in bed. But Bonita was so conflicted that she didn't know how to process it all. She had allowed herself to get caught up in the moment. She didn't regret it. It was what she wanted. But how was she going to turn it back off again? He could do so. She knew he probably had already turned her off when he pulled out and rolled off of her. But she didn't have that skill. Because she loved how he felt inside of her. She loved him lying next to her. To her shame because she should have known better, she didn't want it to end.

But she knew it had to. And she wasn't about to let him kick her out of his bed the way she knew he was going to. She had too much pride to let that happen, even though she put

herself in the very position that allowed it to happen. But even so, she was going to leave on her own terms.

She slid away from him and was about to get out of his bed, put back on her clothes, and just leave, when she felt his strong hand grab her wrist. She turned to face him.

When he saw her big, sweet, innocent eyes staring back at him with fear still in them, as if he had hurt her, his heart dropped. “Where are you going?” he asked her.

“I know you have things you need to do. I was just ...”

“Just what? Walking out? Leaving me?”

She was surprised by how hurt he sounded, as if she was the one who was doing it to him, not the way she feared he was going to do it to her. And she decided to come clean. What was a relationship at all if it wasn't built on truth? “I read somewhere how you didn't like women spending the night with you. And since it's getting late, I decided —”

“You decided to believe that shit you read instead of just asking me?”

It sounded horrible the way he said it. Especially since it was the truth. “Yes,” she admitted.

Clark appreciated her honesty. That was why he came clean too. “Those articles are right,” he said. “I don’t like the women I sleep with spending the night with me.”

Bonita frowned. “If it’s exactly as I thought, why are you upset about it?”

“Because you aren’t them. You aren’t in that category.”

Bonita studied him. “What category is that?”

Clark didn’t mince words. “You’re not my whore,” he said to her. “And never will be. Lay back down next to me.”

Bonita felt all kinds of good, and all kinds of bad. She was pleased that he didn’t think of her that way, but it was such a low threshold that she wasn’t sure if not being considered the lowest of the low was a compliment. It still could mean he thought of her as low. Just not *that* low.

But every time she looked at him, and looked into his deep blue eyes, it did something to her. And she weakened again and slid back over to him, and laid her head on his shoulder.

“How do you feel?” he finally asked her.

She didn't know where to begin. But she didn't want it to be about her. She was still processing her feelings. She couldn't verbalize them if she tried. She decided to ask about him. "I feel like I have a few questions for you," she said honestly.

She could feel his body tense up a little. And she was right. He did feel the tension. He wasn't accustomed to ladies not interested in talking endlessly about themselves and how wonderful they were and how they would be the catch of the century if only he'd give them a chance. "What would you like to know?" he asked her.

"Do you talk about it?"

Clark didn't expect that question. "Talk about what?"

"Your family. And what happened to them." Bonita said this and then looked up at Clark. "I Googled you after I saw you with that police escort in town."

Clark exhaled. He didn't think he would ever go there. But for some reason, he was willing to go there with Bonita. As if he was willing to trust her, and only her, with his past. "My old man was real smart. He was an inventor. Holds many patents for more inventions than you can imagine. But there was a problem. Everything he invented

was a bunch of crap and they all failed to take root. So to drown out his failures, he had to go work for his old man in his carpet cleaning company. And when my grandfather died, my old man took over the company. But to drown out his hatred of his lot in life, he became a gambler. He wanted to get rich quick so he could go back to inventing crap while able to feed his family too. But all he did was accumulate debts with some very shady, bad people. One night, they hired a hit man to take him out because he owed so much and had no way of paying them back. but my mom and my sisters woke up during the hit and the hit man had no choice apparently but to take them out too. I was there.”

Bonita hadn't read that part. “You were?”

“I had been out drinking all night with friends and by the time I got home I was plastered. I was too drunk to help anybody. I was wallowing in my own vomit as my mother was crying for me to come and help them and as my sisters was screaming.”

Bonita could see the agony in his eyes. And then he tried to smile a smile that was so joyless it wasn't a smile at all. “My mother had the nerve to name me after Superman. Can you believe it? I was named after Clark Kent because she

thought my stupid ass was special. I'm falling down in my own vomit while a hit man is taking out my entire family, and I'm superman? It was like a cruel joke.”

Then he decided to try her. Would she appease him, or be real with him? “I fucked up,” he said. “Didn't I?”

But Bonita didn't mince words. “Yes,” she said. “Big time.”

He stared at her. He was hoping she didn't go along with pretending he didn't mess up. But damn. He didn't expect her to be that cruel.

Bonita could see the shock in his eyes. And she knew she had to explain what she meant. “You didn't fuck up because you came home drunk. You didn't know a hit man was going to pay your family a visit when you were out getting wasted. But you fucked up because you kept wallowing in your own vomit of pain and shame and grief and you didn't get up.”

Clark was staring at her.

“You couldn't save your family against a trained assassin. Had you been able to go help your family, you

would have been dead too. The fucked-up part is that you refuse to see it.”

Clark had never even thought of it from that perspective. He knew, on some level, there was nothing he could do. But that didn't stop the guilt and shame and pain. “You're wise for your age,” he said.

“No I'm not,” said Bonita. “I just don't play the fool.”

“you think I'm playing you?”

“I wouldn't be here if I thought that.”

“Why are you here?”

“The same reason you're here. Sex,” Bonita said with a smile. “What else?”

Clark smiled and then laughed a big, booming laugh. “I like you, Bonita Sinatra,” he said, and that meant a lot to her.

“I don't dislike you either,” said Bonita, which made him laugh again.

Then he looked at her. “I've noticed something about you.”

“What's that?”

“You like to wear white. I get it. It looks gorgeous against your dark skin. But you aren’t vain like that. That’s not why you wear it. Is it?”

Bonita shook her head. “Nope. I wear white because it’s a challenge to keep it clean.”

Clark found that odd to say. “And you like challenges?”

“I thrive on them,” said Bonita. “I don’t know why, but I do.”

Clark studied her. “Am I a challenge?”

“The Mt. Everett of challenges.”

Clark laughed. “That doesn’t sound like a compliment.”

Bonita wasn’t playing around. “It’s not.”

Clark’s smile faded. “Then why bother?”

“If I find somebody interesting and he’s a real man, I know he’s going to be hard, and complicated, and challenging. But I always figure I’m up for the job.”

Clark stared at her. She just might be, he thought.

But within seconds, her phone was ringing. She grabbed it from the nightstand and looked at the Caller ID.

“Who is it?” Clark asked.

“My father. He’s probably ready to go.”

“Tell him to go on without you. You have a ride.”

Bonita knew what that meant. She was either going to stay all night, or he wanted to do her again before sending her away. Either way sounded good to her. She was in it now. She wasn’t ready to leave it just yet. “Hey Daddy,” she said as she answered the phone.

“Where are you? I’ve got to get going.”

“I’m going to hang around a little longer. I’ll get a ride home.”

“Hang around? Hang around with whom?”

Bonita didn’t want to admit it, because she knew her father wouldn’t like it. But it was her life, not his. “Clark,” she said.

She could hear her father sigh. “Not a good idea, Bo.”

She glanced at Clark, but didn’t say anything to her father.

“But it’s your decision,” he said. “Just remember what I always taught you: don’t forget who you are.”

“I won’t,” Bonita said. And ended the call.

When she sat her phone back down, Clark told her to shut it off. But she refused. “Can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because my family might need me.”

Clark used to understand the meaning of family, but that was long ago and far away for him. But he didn’t argue with her.

And just like the first time they were in bed together, they both had fell asleep and Clark slept that peaceful sleep that he had only experienced sleeping next to her.

But unlike that first time, when Bonita woke up again, he was still there. And not just present, but he had pulled her on top of him and had his arms wrapped so protectively around her that she felt safe and trapped all at once. But mostly safe.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In his SUV, with his driver and with Lou on the front passenger seat, Clark was taking Bonita home. They had showered together that morning, and made love again in the shower, and Bonita knew she had her head in the clouds. She was falling for the bad boy of bad boys: a jock. The one kind of man she always knew to steer clear of. And she would have had it been any man but Clark.

It also didn't help that on the entire drive home Clark, who had been nothing but a gentleman towards her, was holding her hand. This man women would give their right arm to be with actually asked her to stay the night with him. Who asked her to shower with him. Who could have called a Uber for her, but instead took her home himself. How could she not fall for a guy like that when the only guys she'd ever known were little spoiled boys who wanted one thing and one thing only from her.

That was not to say Clark wanted more than that from her than exactly what they wanted. The only thing she knew for sure was that he wanted her sexually. He made that clear before they even went up to his suite. He never made clear he

wanted anything else from her. She was the one entertaining those notions.

But was it unheard of? Was she in lala land with her emotions?

But when they drove onto her street, and they were nearing her father's house, she looked at him. When he returned her gaze, she asked the one question no other woman had ever had the guts to ask him. "Will I see you again?" she asked him without batting an eye.

Clark stared at her. What she didn't realize was that his emotions were all over the place too. And that very fact was shocking to him because it was so new to him. Because it took him back to that night, five years ago, when he spared her from ruin. But he didn't spare her this time when this time was even worse than before. Because he knew why he was in that town to begin with. And it wasn't because he was dying to build a shopping mall there either. He was there to ruin her father's business, and in so doing force him to give up that killing cousin of his. But how could he destroy her father that she loved dearly without destroying her? How could he allow this to even be a discussion?

And he took her virginity. He was her one and only. It made him feel ten feet tall when he found out last night. This girl was a real lady who didn't let some anybody mess with her. And he loved that about her. He loved that she allowed him to be her first. It felt like an honor last night. But now it felt like a burden.

“Will I see you again, Clark?” she asked him again.

But this time, he didn't think about it. He knew what he had to say, but he couldn't bring himself to go that far. “We'll see,” was the best he could do.

But that wasn't good enough for Bonita. “Is it more likely than not I'll see you again,” she asked him pointblank. “Or not?”

Clark knew it was going to hurt her. And she was the last person on earth he wanted to hurt. But lying to her would be worse. “Not,” he said.

Bonita's heart sunk. Even Lou on the front seat could feel the tension in that SUV suddenly change. And even he felt bad for the kid. But she could never fault a man for telling her the truth. “Thanks for being honest with me,” she said to him. And meant it.

But as they turned into her father's driveway, Clark felt like a pile of shit. Because he could see the pain in her eyes even as she was thanking him. He'd hurt her.

"Oh great," she said as she looked out of the window.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"My brothers are here."

It was only then did Clark realize there were something like five cars parked in that circular driveway. "Is that a problem?" he asked her.

"No problem," said Bonita. "I just don't wanna be bothered right now."

Clark looked at her. He could kick his own ass for hurting her the way he had. And when he moved to get out of the SUV, to walk her to her door, she stopped him. "No," she said. "You don't need to do that." And she got out on her own and made her way to her front door.

It felt like a slap in the face to Clark. It felt as if she thought he had treated her like one of his whores, but suddenly wanted to treat her like a lady. And she wasn't going for it. But that wasn't it at all.

But he didn't press the issue. Why should he? All that would do was confuse her and extend the pain. He was a bastard. She knew he was a bastard. He was going to leave it at that.

The driver looked at Clark. Clark motioned for him to go. He drove away.

But inside the Sinatra household was no getting away from the fact that every one of her brothers, including Donald who happened to be back in town, were sitting in their parents' living room.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She walked through that door and saw her three oldest brothers sitting on the sofa staring at her. Ready, she knew, to pounce. Her dad was there, too, seated in the chair, his entire countenance tight and tense. He had undoubtedly phoned and told them that she didn't come home last night and who she was with. Not it was a family crisis. When they were her age, they stayed out all night all the time. She did it once, and it was a crisis.

Now all four of them, who had been whores in their own right, were so afraid that this big shot baller was going to do to her what they did to all those women from their past, that they were making a mountain out of a molehill. They were so afraid that their sins would be visited upon their beloved baby sister.

But when she walked in and sat in the other chair and they didn't pounce like she expected, her anger cooled. She no longer saw four judges sitting up there ready to render verdicts, but her concerned brothers and overly-concerned father.

Not that they didn't have opinions. They all sat around that living room with nothing but opinions. From their father to Brent, the oldest brother who thought he was her father too. To Tony, a Doctor of Clinical Psychology who loved diagnosing everybody. To Bobby, the town's mayor who was a ladies man before he settled down and declared that Clark was a user just like he used to be.

Brent was sitting there in his jeans and blazer, his cowboy hat for certain on the front seat of his big pick-up truck because if he got a call of a crime-in-progress, he was out of there. He loved his family, but his job always came first. He always had one foot in and one foot out of the family for as long as Bonita could remember. It was how he rolled.

Tony, her second oldest brother, danced to his own tune too. He sat up there in his tailored pants and argyle sweater, his glasses perched on his nose as if she was a patient on his couch ready to be emotionally dissected.

Bobby sat up there in his Armani head-to-toe ready to beg her to leave Clark alone if it came to that.

And then there was her father, sitting in that chair in his suit that was just as expensive as Bobby's, but looked wrinkled and worn that early in the morning. And in that

moment, Bonita realized in horror that her Mom usually took care of her dad's wardrobe, and made sure he was ready for work each day. But she wasn't there. And he spent most nights and half of the days at the hospital with her. And he was worried sick about her and had to fend for himself. And here she was spending the night with some jock, and worrying him too. And she suddenly felt selfish. She suddenly felt embarrassed. She suddenly understood why they would be so concerned. Their parents didn't need any more drama in their lives.

But when they started questioning her, all of that shame and selfishness went away. She felt as if she was under attack.

"Why are y'all making a capital offense about nothing?" she asked them. She was genuinely floored by their response.

"We don't want to see you hurt," said Bobby.

"But that's exactly what it's looking like," said Brent.

"Do you realize who Clark McKenzie is?"

"When Pop told us you were with Clark McKenzie and you didn't come home last night," said Bobby, "we all raced over. This is unacceptable, Bo."

“What’s unacceptable, Bobby? What have I done that’s so unacceptable?”

“You’ve put yourself in a position to get your heart broken,” said Tony. “That’s the unacceptable part.”

“And we aren’t going to sit around and let it happen,” said Brent. “He’s a jock,” he added. “And not just any jock. But a love’em and leave’em jock if there ever was one. Have you forgotten that little fact?”

“I haven’t forgotten anything.”

“A man like that doesn’t give a damn about you, Bo,” said Bobby. “Believe me I know. Have you forgotten that?”

“No.”

“So you know he doesn’t give a damn about you?”

“Yes, I know it.”

“Then why would you spend the night with him?” Tony asked.

“Because I wanted to. Because I spent the night with him before and he treated me like a lady. He treated me better than any boy ever had. Because I’m a grown woman and y’all need to stop treating me like I’m some stupid child. I know what I’m doing.”

They all looked at each other and shook their heads, like they knew she knew no such thing. Like they wanted desperately to spare her all the agony they either experienced or inflicted on others.

“He’s not a monster,” Bonita added.

“But is he husband material?” asked Tony.

Bonita hated to admit it. “No.”

“Are you wasting your time?” Bobby asked her.

She hesitated but answered him. “Yes.”

“But why?” Brent asked her, genuinely confused. But Bonita didn’t answer him. They all looked to their father for help.

Charles leaned forward, and spoke for the first time. “The thing is, baby,” he said to his youngest child, “if you get yourself involved with a man like Clark McKenzie, he’s probably going to break your heart. Do you realize that?”

When her father said those words, and when she thought about how Clark all but said he was never going to see her again, tears appeared in her eyes. And it was suddenly so sad to her that it was too much. And rose to her feet. “Excuse me,” she said, and hurried across the room and up the stairs.

Tony and Bobby started to hurry behind her, but Charles stopped them. "I'll go," he said as he stood up. Then he looked at his sons. "And I don't want any of you harassing that man. Leave that man alone. And I mean it, Brent. Bobby. I mean it. Bo's a grown woman now. She's got to make her own mistakes. Let's just pray they make her stronger."

Then Charles went upstairs to the third floor, where Bonita's bedroom was located. When he walked into her room and got on her bed with her, she fell into his arms. And what had been sniffers and a few unshed tears before he arrived, became loud, heartfelt sobbing as he held her.

"I don't know why I'm crying," she said. "I don't know what's wrong with me!"

But Big Daddy knew. He knew it like he knew his name. But he didn't say another word. He just held her in a judgement free zone.

When she woke up nearly two hours later, he was gone. Her brothers had long since left too. And, alone in that big house, she couldn't stop herself from crying.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jenay sat on the side of her hospital bed, with her bags packed and ready to go, staring at her husband. Charles had returned to the hospital earlier that morning, after their baby girl had fallen asleep in his arms. Now he was asleep in the chair, and even when the doctors came and told her she was being released as soon as they could finish her paperwork, she refused to awaken him with the good news. He needed rest. Maybe more than she did. And she was determined to see to him getting it however and wherever he could.

They had come a long way, she and Charles. He was a man with four grown sons that thought the world of him when she first met him, and boy did she love the way he loved his sons. And his sons still, to this day, loved him. They had lots of tough days, she and Charles, but they had great days too.

But her thoughts kept floating back to the only child they had together: Bonita. The tough one. The no-nonsense one. The one who'd kick a man's ass if he crossed her. She was a lot like her father in that regard. But she was fragile too. More fragile than anybody else in the family. Because when she was on your side she was ride or die to the bitter

end. But that wasn't good. That was their fear about her. That she'd get hooked up with the wrong man, and ride or die to the bitter end with him.

Jenay had Googled Clark McKenzie when Charles told her about Jenay spending the night with him. She didn't like what she found.

Bo was just starting her life, and it was already off to a rocky start.

“Hey Ma.”

At first Jenay thought she had fallen back asleep and was dreaming. She was just thinking about her daughter and then her daughter showed up? She turned toward the entrance. And it was no dream. Her baby girl, now a grown-ass, gorgeous young lady in her white pantsuit with a black sports bra as her blouse, was walking through that door.

Jenay smiled too, even though she had disobeyed her. “I thought I told you not to come.”

“Daddy said that I should,” Bonita said as she walked toward her mother. “And he was right. How do you feel?”

“I feel great,” Jenay said as she and Bonita hugged. “Hopefully Doc Martin is on to something.”

“That’s that young doctor Daddy was telling me about?”

“One and the same. And, I might add, very much single.”

“Oh Ma!”

“Just kidding,” Jenay said, although he wasn’t. “But anyway,” she added, “I’m being released today.”

Bonita smiled happily. “Oh Ma, that’s great!”

“I’m just waiting on the paperwork.”

Then Bonita looked over at her sleeping, snoring father. “I guess that’s why Dad’s here.”

“I haven’t told him yet. He came, we made out—”

“Yuck Ma, TMI!”

Jenay laughed. “We made out,” she made certain to repeat again, “and then we talked. Then he fell asleep. When the doctors came with the good news, I refused to let them wake him up. He needs his rest.”

Bonita couldn’t agree more. “Yes he does.”

Then Jenay looked at her. “What’s going on with you?”

That was when all of the pressure and the uncertainty and the unfamiliar territory called falling in love began to show on Bonita's pretty face. And in that instant Jenay knew why she had come. She was a grown-ass woman. But she needed her mommy.

And Jenay knew her daughter. She wasn't the type to tell all her business to anybody except maybe to Tony and Ashley. And Jenay had already spoken to them. She hadn't told them anything either. But to get anything from Bonita, you had to pry it out of her. "Daddy told me you stayed out all night," Jenay said, prying.

"I am twenty-three," said Bonita, resisting.

"Twenty-three and in love? Or twenty-three and in lust?"

Bonita didn't answer.

But that didn't deter Jenay. "In love on your part?" she asked. "In lust on his part?"

Bonita looked at her mother. In a way, she'd hit the nail on the head. "I'm not in love," she said. "How could I love somebody I just met?"

“According to your father, you told them last night wasn’t the first night you spent with this guy. This was your second time around. And that he treated you like a lady both times.”

“He did.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“How could I be ... How could somebody fall in love with a guy she only been around twice? That’s crazy.” Then she looked at her mother. “Isn’t it?”

“Nowadays, honey, people fall in love over the internet. Nothing’s off the table. But twice is pushing it, yes.”

“Right,” said Bonita, although her face still showed her uncertainty.

Jenay saw it too. “You think you’re falling in love with Clark McKenzie?”

Bonita didn’t respond.

“Sounds like a yes to me,” said Jenay.

A distressed look appeared on Bonita’s face. “He told me this morning, after he took me home, that he’s probably never going to see me again.”

Jenay stared at her. “He told you that?”

Bonita looked down at her hands as she nodded her head. “And um ...” She was fighting back tears. Jenay knew she was no crybaby. She waited for her to continue.

It took a moment, but Bonita kept going. “It kind of hurt me to my heart when he said that, you know? I thought we had connected on so many levels. I thought we had connected last night. He even told me about what happened to his family, and how he couldn’t help them.”

“I read about that. It was awful. But something like that changes a young man, Bo.”

Bonita agreed. “He said it changed him. He said he never was the same again. He has a lot of hurt inside of him. I saw it the first time I laid eyes on him. And I never forgot that first time. Because he didn’t ... He could have, but he didn’t go all the way with me.”

That was news to Jenay too. She had assumed that he had, given his track record with the ladies which, if the news reports were accurate, was atrocious. “He didn’t?”

“That first time, no ma’am, he didn’t. And he never forgot me. And I never forgot him. And then last night, I

thought we had ...”

Jenay could just feel her anguish.

“Ma, what would you do if you were me?”

Jenay placed both of her daughter’s small hands into her hands. “Let your heart lead you, baby girl. I had to let mine lead me when I decided to hook up with your father. On paper, it wasn’t a good match. Like Clark McKenzie, Big Daddy didn’t exactly have a great track record either.”

“But you took a chance on him?”

“I took a chance on him, yes I did,” said Jenay. “That’s why I’m telling you to not go by what the world says you should or shouldn’t do. Or even your siblings or your father or even me. Let your heart lead you. But don’t let it lead you astray.”

Bonita didn’t understand. “What do you mean?”

Jenay had to think up an example. Then she found one. “Remember when we saw that movie *Dreamgirls* and Jennifer Hudson sang that showstopping song *You’re Gonna Love Me?*”

How could she forget that? “I remember it, yes, ma’am. It was great.”

“It was bullshit,” said Jenay. “Ain’t no man *gonna love you* unless he wants to love you. You unilaterally declaring it so doesn’t make it so. And I don’t ever want you out there loving on a man who doesn’t love you. That’s when you’re letting your heart lead you astray.”

She squeezed Bonita’s hands. “Don’t force it, Bo. That’s all I’m telling you. Especially after he said what he said.”

“I’ll bet you never had that problem. I’ll bet Daddy always wanted you.”

“That’s not true. He wanted what he wanted. And he wasn’t sure about the rest. He wasn’t always attentive to me at all. I was ready to go on with my life. But he dropped by. And that changed everything. His heart led him, even where there was doubt. My heart led me, even where there was doubt. You’re our child. Your heart is going to do the same thing for you. But if you understand that *You’re Gonna Love Me* is bullshit, then you can’t go wrong.”

Bonita smiled even as a tear trickled down her face. “I miss you, Ma,” she said.

“Well I’m back now,” Jenay said with more energy than Bonita had seen in her in a long, long time. “And if our

young Doc Martin is correct, then I'm not coming back here."

"Amen to that!" Bonita said and mother and daughter high-fived. But their vigor woke up Charles.

And he woke up as if he was startled. "Amen!" he said, his eyes opening wildly, his body jerking forward. Then he looked over at his wife and daughter. "I thought I was in church," he said.

"Why?" Jenay asked playfully. "Because you're always sleeping through the sermon?" She and Bonita laughed. Charles flapped his hand dismissively.

Bonita stood up. "I'd better get to the office. Hey, Daddy."

"You feel better?"

Bonita nodded. "Yes, sir. Especially now that they're releasing Ma."

Charles looked at Jenay. "You're being released?"

Jenay smiled. "And feeling better than I ever had all those other times I was released. Doc Martin may be on to something."

"From your lips to God's ears," said Charles as he stood up, went to his wife, and pulled her into his arms. When

he lifted her chin and stared into her beautiful eyes and then began kissing her, Bonita knew it was time for her to tip on out. But not before turning back around and watching the way her father seemed so in love with her mother, as if they were as new as morning dew.

But on her way to the office, she couldn't get Clark out of her head. Or her heart. She had feelings for the guy and she wasn't going to lie to herself and pretend she didn't. Her mother said if her father had not dropped by at a crucial time in their relationship, that would have been the end of them. But he let his heart lead him.

She decided to let her heart lead her.

She turned her Porsche around, and headed for the hotel.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Bonita parked her Porsche inside the circular entrance to her mother's hotel and the valets, all young men who knew who she was and would love to get next to her, hurried over to assist her. But she waved them off. She was only staying for a minute, she told them, and then made her way into the lobby just as Clark and the team of negotiators that were traveling with him, along with Harper and Lou, were walking out of the downstairs conference room alongside the president, the vice president, and several high-ranking members of the Jericho City Council.

It at first seemed odd to Bonita that all of the city's big wigs would be in one meeting together, but then she assumed they were welcoming the big football star to their city. Although they had celebrities far bigger in stature than Clark passing through the city and staying at their hotel, including couple presidents in her recent memory, and she never remembered them being given that level of treatment. So the oddity was there, right before her very eyes, but her energy was nowhere near deciphering something like that. She had Clark on her mind, and couldn't see anything else.

Clark didn't see her staring at him initially. He was too busy doing his job and glad-handing and backslapping and doing everything he knew how to do to convince those city leaders that investing in him would bring nothing but tourist dollars and prestige to their *pristine* town.

It was as the leaders were leaving, and Clark was waving bye to them, did he see Bonita.

“What's she doing here?” Lou asked.

But Clark knew exactly why she was there. He had been thinking about her all morning long too, even as he was entertaining the very men that would aid him in his takedown of her father. And he didn't know how to process that. He knew he had to leave her alone. That was the best thing he could ever do for her. But a part of him also knew it was already too late.

“You and Harper go in the restaurant and have yourselves some lunch,” he said. “I'll be there a little later.” And he made his way over to Bonita.

“You okay, Bo?” It was the desk supervisor who was nearest to Bonita.

“I’m good,” Bonita said with that serious look on her face she was known for. It was a look that made her less approachable than say her mother or her brother Donald, who used to be the hotel’s general manager before he branched out on his own. But it made her just like her father in their eyes: no nonsense. No joking around. No fun.

But what that supervisor didn’t realize was that Bonita wasn’t trying to be anything at all. She was just trying to figure out her own heart, and if she was following it to love, or to its own destruction. She, in truth, wasn’t thinking about that supervisor or anybody else in that hotel. Except Clark.

He was dressed like a business man, which threw her a little because he looked so much older in suit and tie when she was accustomed to him dressing more casually. But then she realized she’d only been around him a couple times in her entire life. She knew next to nothing about this man. How on earth could she be so serious about him?

Clark was thinking the same thing as he made his way across that lobby toward Bonita. How could he be so serious about a girl he’d only met twice in his whole life? He’d had girlfriends that lasted for months on end. And in Shelia’s case, for two solid years. But he never felt that level of seriousness

toward any of them the way he felt toward Bonita. But that night five years ago, and last night both taught him something profound. That it wasn't in the quantity of contacts you had with a person, but the quality of those contacts. And all the times he was around Bonita were quality times. The most quality time he'd spent with anybody else in over a decade. And she looked sweet standing there, in her white pantsuit. If his memory served him right, she wore a similar pantsuit the night he met her, before she changed into that bikini. Sexy then. Sexier now. He was in trouble.

And when he got up to her, they both just stood there, staring at each other. Bonita felt so awkward, she started rocking side to side. Clark didn't feel awkward, but he felt exposed, as if she knew his heart was with her and she was going to exploit it for all she could get out of it. Including his love. Something he'd withheld from everybody since the day his family died. But he was in danger of giving it to her.

And he couldn't just tell her to get lost, he didn't want her, why was she hounding him. Any other woman and he would have said those very words. He could be cruel when he wanted to be.

But somehow he could never be cruel to Bo.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he said to her and began heading toward the exit.

Bonita felt kind of strung along the way he just started walking without waiting for her response. And when she glanced over at the desk supervisor, she had a smirk on her face that made it seem as if Bonita was some groupie who wanted to get next to sexy Clark McKenzie. Or, knowing the staff at that hotel, Bonita figured the supervisor had already heard that they spent the night together in the presidential suite. She must have figured Bonita liked how he put it on her, and was coming back for more.

That was only partly true. She loved how he put it on her. But the main reason she came back had nothing to do with that. It was a heart thing. Sex was easy. The heart was hard.

She forgot about that smirking supervisor and followed Clark.

Outside, they walked around the backside of the hotel, toward the nature preserve, the way they had yesterday. Only this time there would be no ending up in bed. She wasn’t there for that. She had to tell him how she felt, and if he felt the same way she did too. Because her mother was right. She

wasn't going to make him love her. That wasn't possible. She could only hope he'd tell her the truth.

For quite a while they said nothing. They just seemed content to walk in peace. But then Clark spoke up. "I'm not good to women, Bo," he said to her.

"Why not?"

"I never saw the value in them. The women who hung around me were a dime a dozen to me. Just a bunch of leeches and phonies trying to get pregnant by me or get money out of me or prestige, whatever. It was never healthy relationships."

"I don't want anything like that from you."

Clark glanced at her and slowed his walk. Because she had just proven his point. "I know," he said as they kept on going. "What you want from me is tougher. Money I can toss away. Prestige I can give away without giving it a second thought. Pregnancies? No woman has ever been impregnated by me."

Then he stopped, near the edge of the koi pond, and she stopped beside him. "But what you're asking of me, I've never given to a woman before."

Bonita studied him. “What am I asking of you?” she asked him.

“Devotion. Loyalty. Heart.” He looked at her. “Love.”

Bonita could feel her heartbeat quickened when he said that word.

“Am I wrong?” he asked her.

She wasn't there to play games. “No,” she said. “You aren't wrong.”

He stared at her. He'd never met anybody like her. But how could he love her when he wanted to destroy her own father? How in the world was he going to ever make that work?

But that was the story of his life. His family was murdered, and three months later he was drafted number one into the NFL. He met a woman he somehow knew years ago was the woman of his dreams. And just when they reconnected, he had a bad connection with her father. It was always the best of times and the worst of times for him every time.

If he cared about her, he'd leave no doubt whatsoever that it wasn't going to work.

He cared about her. He realized it last night, maybe even that first night five years ago. But he absolutely knew it as he stood there staring at her. And he had to make this right. He would be all alone in this world. But he was already alone.

"We can't work," he said to her.

Bonita stared at him. He was talking in riddles as far as she was concerned. He had to be clearer with her. "What are you saying?" she asked him. "Are you saying you can't love me?"

He didn't expect that comeback. Most women would have heard him say they can't work and burst into tears. But not his Bo. "I'm saying I won't be doing you any favors loving you."

"I'm not asking for a favor," said Bonita. "I'm asking for your love if you have it to give to me. If you give it to somebody else, it's not going to work. Because it belongs to me. If I give the love I have for you to somebody else, that won't work either. Because it belongs to you. I'm just asking for what's mine. If it's not mine, you tell me that, then I'll

never come near you again. But if it's mine, you need to tell me that too."

Clark was blown away as he listened to her. He'd never heard anybody put it so oddly. But yet he completely understood what she meant. "And if it is yours," he said to her, "and I tell you that. Then what?"

Bonita didn't bat an eye. Her sincerity was startlingly clear. "Then I'll be your ride or die for life," she said.

Clark's heart began to hammer. Because he believed her. In that moment, he believed that he just might be able to trust his broken-down, dusty-old secluded heart with her. With her alone. He believed her. But that only meant she would be great for him. It didn't address the question of what he would be for her.

But before he could formulate any response to anything she said, they suddenly heard a pop sound then the sound of a ricochet off of the koi pond's cement surrounding. And both Clark and Bonita realized, to both their horrors, that it wasn't a firecracker that they heard, but a gunshot. They realized, in that moment, that they just might be the target since they were the only people out there. And without saying

a word, Clark grabbed Bonita and ran with her, his body behind her, shielding her, into the nature preserve: the woods.

As they were running, the shots became more aggressive and were ringing out one after the other one after the other one. Once inside the thickest part of the wooded area, Clark pushed Bonita down onto her stomach, and got in front of her. He pulled out his loaded weapon and waited for the gunman to come anywhere near them. But then the shots stopped and Bonita was able to sit up and pull out her own loaded gun.

Which shocked Clark. “You’re packing?” he asked.

“Just because those gunshots stopped,” Bonita said, “doesn’t mean he’s finished.”

“I agree,” said Clark. “But who taught you how to shoot?”

“My father, and mother, and brothers, and sisters, and aunties, and uncles, and cousins.”

Clark looked at her like she was crazy. “What?”

But Bonita was dead serious. “Clark, concentrate on that gunman, what are you doing? What difference does it make who taught me how to shoot? Just know I can shoot.

Just know I'll kill that motherfucker he come anywhere near us. Just know that.”

Clark believed her about that too. Her sincerity wasn't fakable. But then Bonita heard a footstep behind them inside those woods. And she turned and started firing without hesitation. She must have spent five rounds in a row. Pow-pow-pow-pow-pow! And then she stopped before Clark could even turn his gun in that direction. And that was when he heard the sound of movement further over from where she had been shooting. And as soon as he heard it, he saw what looked like a red beam. Realizing it was the scope of a rifle, he pushed Bonita down just as the bullet whizzed past her head, and fired in rapid succession.

It was enough, because as soon as Clark stopped firing his weapon, they heard even more footsteps again. Only they weren't coming toward them, but running away.

“We can't let that bastard get away!” Bonita cried as she jumped up and began running after him.

“I'll get him, Bo!” Clark yelled nervously after her, and grabbed for her arm, but she was too fast for him. She had already taken off running.

Clark ran after her and the gunman both at the same time. But she knew that trail far better than he did, and she was able to find a shortcut that led to a back trail. And that was when they saw a car, and a guy, with a long rifle, running toward it.

“There he is!” Bonita said and began chasing after the car, shooting at it as she ran.

But Clark wasn't blindsided by her speed anymore. He was the one who was the world class athlete. He ran past her as if she was standing still and was shooting at that car too. He took out one tire, but that was it. The car sped away. But the time he got to the end of the trail that led to the street, that speeding car was already clean out of sight.

Bonita finally ran up to him. “Did you get the plate?” she said, her breath nearly gone. Clark ran faster than anybody she'd ever known in her whole life. And he was barely breathing hard at all. “I was too far away to see the plate.”

“There is no plate,” said Clark. “It was a professional hit. He knew what he was doing. He'll probably stop somewhere and put the plate back on. But it won't be near cameras, I'll bet that.”

Bonita looked at Clark. He sounded like her uncles did when the family had that kind of trouble. “What would you know about professional hits?”

“It was a professional who killed my family,” Clark said, staring at her. “I know everything about it.”

Then they heard sirens in the distance. “Somebody from the hotel must have called the cops.”

“Oh brother,” said Bonita. Because she knew, if shots were being reported as fired at their mother’s hotel, her brother Brent, the chief of police, was sure to show up.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He was the first cop there. And Bonita introduced her big brother to Clark. Brent placed them in a conference room inside the hotel and interviewed them himself for nearly an hour. When he got a call and had to leave them, it was only then did Bonita realized the rest of her family was already at the hotel. Her brother Tony had been the first to arrive. And soon after Tony, both of her parents, who were on their way home from the hospital when they got the call, had shown up too. Even Bobby, the town's mayor, took out time from his busy schedule to make it to the hotel to eyeball his kid sister too. The only members of her immediate family who didn't show up were Donald, Ashley, and Carly. But that was only because they were all out of town.

"I'm okay," Bonita said for what seemed like the hundredth time when Bobby showed up and was hugging her and looking in her eyes to make certain she was telling him the truth. They took hard looks at Clark as Bonita introduced them to him, but she could tell her family wasn't feeling him. They were pissed with him. They were blaming *him*.

Although Clark's allies, Lou and Harper, were also allowed in the room, Lou left out to check on the status of the investigation. Harper knew to be present, and to hear everything, but to keep his mouth shut. Especially when Bonita's family had all gathered in that conference room. For over an hour it was mainly just small talk and phone calls from family members who were not in town. But then the conversation shifted and became all about Clark. Mainly from Tony and Bobby, but also Bonita's father, and why a man of Clark's age and experience would want to be with their sister.

"All these women in this world your age," said Bobby.

"Why my baby sister?"

"I don't know why, man. She's different."

Bobby frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"With all due respect, Mayor," Clark responded to Bobby, "it means what it means. She's different. She's special."

"She's young," said Tony, who was leaned against the wall and far more reserved in his opinions than Bobby. But he had them.

Clark wasn't immune to the age difference conversation either. He'd had it with himself a time or two. "I understand that," he said. "But what can I say? It is what it is."

Bonita looked at Tony, who was the most cerebral of her brothers. And although Clark wasn't the most verbal of guys, and wasn't about to hold any intellectual musings with the likes of Dr. Anthony Sinatra, Tony didn't seem alarmed by his lack of insight. He wasn't impressed with it, either, Bonita could tell. But not alarmed by it.

But Bonita was probably attracted to Clark because he wasn't one of those cerebral guys. Those types never turned Bonita on. They were stuck in their heads too much for her. And because they had to think everything through to the hundredth degree, they were never honest about anything or anybody by the time they were through. That was probably why Tony still hadn't married his girlfriend Sam, or any other woman. And he probably would never marry, if you asked Bonita.

But her family members were not deterred. They went on and on with the questions as if they just knew they were an

item already, when even Bonita and Clark hadn't made that determination themselves:

“Have you ever been married?”

“No.”

“Do you have any children?”

“No.”

“We don't just mean legit kids,” Big Daddy said. “But a kid some woman's claiming is yours?”

“Daddy!” said Bonita. That question seemed out of bounds.

But not to Jenay. “Don't daddy him,” she said. “It's a good question.”

And Clark didn't hesitate in answering. “No,” he said.

“Are you financially stable?” That was a Bobby question. “Some footballers retire broke as mud and poor as dirt.”

Clark smiled at that one. Here was a man who made over two hundred million dollars a year in his football career. “I have no such issues,” he said.

Tony only had one other question. “Are you a good man?” he asked, and everybody looked at Clark. Especially Bonita. It was a question none of them were expecting.

But Clark didn’t shy away from that question either, although it seemed to be the only question that gave him some distress. “No,” he said honestly. “Not at all.”

That answer stopped them all cold. Except for Tony, who saw honesty as the most important virtue. An honest man was a man who could be trusted. And trust, in any relationship, was everything. “I appreciate your honesty, man,” Tony said. And although the rest of the family appreciated it too, they were alarmed by what he was honest about as well.

“What do you have to say about that, Bo?” asked Bobby.

Clark could feel his palms sweating as he turned to look at Bonita too. Had he frightened her away? Was his honesty as alarming to her as it was to her family?

“He saved my life,” Bonita said. “What else you wanna know?”

Clark had to suppress a smile. And a *that's my girl* that bubbled deep within him. Because she was strong enough to take it. She got him. Nobody ever had. Not even his parents truly understood him, if he were to be honest. But she got him.

And then Brent entered the room, and the questions shifted away from Clark and his issues, to the issue at hand.

“Do you have any enemies that would do something like this to you?” Brent asked Clark.

“No. I mean, not that I’m aware of. Unless you include most of the fans of all the NFL teams I played against. They hate my guts for beating up on their teams. But that’s been the story for years. Nobody ever tried to shoot me down over it. That’s why I’m more concerned about Bo. Maybe that gunman was targeting her.”

“That’s what I was wondering too, Brent,” Charles said, to Clark’s surprise. He looked over at Big Daddy Sinatra. He didn’t see some sinister bastard who would give aid and comfort to a family killer. He saw a very concerned, very worried father. He, in fact, was seated on the arm of the couch Clark and Bonita sat on, with his arm around her shoulder. Her mother was seated on the opposite side of that

same couch with her arm around Bonita's waist. It was a very caring family. Clark saw that right off. And was impressed.

“What if they were targeting my baby,” Charles added, and they all looked to Brent.

But Brent was already shaking his head. “I reviewed the footage. The gunman was seen for the first time the morning Clark arrived at this hotel, as if he had followed him here. And there were other video of him following Clark all around the hotel. Including when he was walking with you that first time, Bo. But you were definitely the target, Mr. McKenzie Not my baby sister.”

Bonita would have rolled her eyes at that *baby* part her brothers loved to add, but she didn't have the energy. She'd already been expending it in her deep conversation with Clark before the shooting started. Then the shooting just sapped it all away. She was spent.

“I agree Boss,” said Lou. “He let me take a look at the video. That character was casing this joint as soon as he learned you were staying here.”

“Does anybody know who he is?” asked Jenay.

“Yes,” said Brent.

They all waited for him to continue. But Brent, being Brent, never gave up too much information.

“Who, Brent?” asked his impatient father. “Who?”

“His name is Marvin Temanken.” Brent looked at Clark. “That name ring a bell?”

“No,” said Clark, who looked at Lou, the head of his security.

Lou was shaking his head too. “Never heard that name before either,” Lou responded.

“How do you know his name?” Charles asked his son.

“We have him in custody,” said Brent. “He was a new face in town after a shooting, so my officers stopped him. He tried to make a run for it. So they brought him to me. Found the rifle used in the shooting in his car. I interviewed him. He confessed.”

It was just like Brent to withhold that vital piece of information in case Clark had something to say that countered what the perp had said. That cop style of his always infuriated his family. But that was Brent.

“What was his motive?” asked Clark.

“Just what you said. A crazed fan. Only this one is a true fanatic. He’s from Foxborough. He’s a diehard of the diehard Patriots fans. The Foxborough PD searched his house. They found a shrine to the Patriots. And all kinds of hateful bullseyes of you. He’s a goner.”

“But I haven’t been with the Patriots for four years,” said Clark.

“That’s the thing. He’s a conspiracy theorist too, and all kinds of conspiracies about your retirement was all over the dark web he frequented.”

“What were they saying?” Bonita asked.

“All kinds of bullshit. But the one that caught Temanken’s attention was this belief around your retirement. He already hated you for leaving the Patriots to begin with. He hated you more when you won two Super Bowls with the Cowboys. But then he heard that you weren’t really retiring but planned to join one of the Patriots division rivals, the Buffalo Bills, as the Bills new quarterback so that you could win more Super Bowls and ensure the Patriots never won one again. He viewed his mission in life was to stop you from ever playing with any team again, and thus ensuring, in his mind, that the Patriots would make it to the Super Bowl again. I’m

telling you this guy's a goner. And a lousy shot, that's why it wasn't as best as it could have been."

Clark and Bonita squeezed each other's hands. Clark had heard about those kinds of fans his entire NFL career.

"Those are the kind of fans that give security guys like me heart palpitations at night," said Lou. "But don't worry, Boss. I already tightened security. Ain't happening again, I'll promise you that."

But it all still felt so raw to Clark and Bonita.

"What's going to happen to him?" asked Bonita.

"He'll be arraigned here locally and no bail will be set because he's already proven himself to be a flight risk. He'll do a long stretch in prison, I can guarantee you that."

And although that was good news, and everybody, satisfied, were standing up to leave, Clark and Bonita felt differently. It was as if they couldn't see themselves separating from each other. Especially after Clark saved Bonita's life. She felt joined at the hip to him. And Clark, after realizing how close he came to losing Bonita, felt joined at the heart to her. There was no way he could just let her walk away.

And he still wasn't convinced it wasn't her they were gunning for. He felt a strong urge to protect her. And to keep her by his side, although he knew she could fend for herself. But that wasn't the point. He could fend for her even better.

And they just stood there, as Bobby and Tony hugged Bonita and left. Her parents told her to come on, they'd take her home. She could get her car later. But as they walked off, and Bonita remained by Clark's side, they stopped and turned around. And it was only then did Jenay realize their baby wasn't going anywhere. At least not with them.

Charles hadn't reached that realization yet. Probably because he didn't want to. "Come on, Bo. Let's go home."

Bonita was about to speak up to her parents, even though she wasn't sure what she was going to say, when Clark said it for her. "She's staying with me," he said to them.

Charles looked at Bonita. "You need to come home. After what happened, and what could have happened, there's no way you're staying with him. I can protect you."

"I can protect her better," said Clark boldly.

Charles was offended he could tell. But he didn't give a shit. A man who could harbor a killer like Gravinzano,

wasn't a man he could respect. But he cared deeply for Bonita, and he wasn't letting her out of his sight until that shooter was caught. She was staying with him.

Charles started to object again, but Jenay touched his arm. "Let's go, babe," she said. "She'll be okay."

Somehow Charles knew it too, but he didn't want to accept that some other man could protect his baby better than he could. He couldn't accept that. And he wanted Clark to take it back.

But he knew that wasn't happening. Eventually his baby girl was going to leave home and start her own family. He'd hoped it would be with a nice, quaint doctor or lawyer. Somebody like Doc Martin from the hospital. But Bonita, he learned long ago, was too hot to handle for an ordinary man. He didn't want to do it, but he and Jenay left their baby girl in Clark McKenzie's hands.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

That night, after all the questionings and conversations about the shooting were over, they were upstairs drained and still rattled, naked in bed. But he did not have sex with her that night. He just wanted to hold her. And he did. He held her all night. She woke up several times, and he was still holding her, which gave her permission to fall back asleep feeling protected. And they both slept peacefully.

Until morning, when Bonita finally woke up, and she saw Clark's bags packed and Clark, showered and fully dressed, ready to go.

Her heart dropped. She leaned up on her elbows. "You're leaving?"

"I've got to be in Santa Monica for a few days."

"Santa Monica?"

"I put it off far too long already. Now I have to go. But," he added, as if he was still coming to terms with it himself, "I want you to come with me."

Bonita was as confused as she was uncertain. "But I can't just pack up and leave. I have a job."

“Do you take time off?”

“Never.”

“Then you’re due time off. I’m not leaving without you.”

Although his words warmed her heart, she was not going to let her emotions overtake her. She was not going to make him love her. He had to do that all on his own. She studied him. “Why aren’t you leaving without me?” she asked him.

Clark was staring at her because he knew it was his moment of truth. Tell it, or lie. He decided to tell it. “My heart. I’m giving it to you. Because it’s yours,” he said to her as if their conversation, before the shooting started, never ended. “I have to trust you won’t break it.”

Bonita could hardly believe what she was hearing. And it warmed her heart. She smiled at him. And he smiled too. And just like that it was no longer foggy to either one of them. But clear as day.

They were an item.

They were a couple.

It soothed them both just as much as it terrified them
too.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Charles's Cadillac swung in the circular driveway of his home, just behind Bonita's Porsche, and he jumped out and ran into his home. And he knew exactly where he was going. He took the staircase two steps at a time until he was on the third-floor landing. And then he hurried into his daughter's bedroom.

"Maybe you can talk some sense into her," Jenay said as she stood in the room while Bonita was folding clothes and packing them into a suitcase.

"What are you doing?" Charles asked, completely mystified. "You're going to Santa Monica with him?"

"Just for a few days."

"What the hell for?"

"Because he wants me to go with him. Because I want to go with him."

But Charles wasn't buying it. "Don't do it, Bonita. Don't become one of his whores."

When Charles said those words, Bonita hurried over to her father as if she was going to jack him up. She got all up in his face. “Take it back, Daddy,” she demanded. “Take it back! I’m not his whore. I’m not!”

Charles stood his ground. But he and Jenay both were shocked. They’d never seen their baby girl so unhinged. “Okay,” Charles said. “You’re not his whore. Although you’re sure acting like you are.”

Bonita was hurt. He could see the pain in her eyes. But he’d rather have her angry with him than heartbroken. “I thought you liked Clark McKenzie. You and my brothers used to cheer for him every Sunday when he was playing for the Patriots.”

“I love the guy as a football player. I hate his ass as the man for my daughter.”

Bonita gave up. She went back, snapped her suitcase closed, and then grabbed it and her phone and began to head toward her bedroom door.

But Charles couldn’t take it. He grabbed her by the arm. “Don’t go,” he begged her. “Don’t do this.”

She knew she was hurting her parents. But for once it wasn't about them. It was about her. And her life. And how she intended to live it on her terms. "I have to go," she said to him.

"But why?" The distress wasn't just on Charles's face, but in his voice too.

"I have to go," Bonita said again. "I have to know if he's the one."

"If he's the ... Bo, we're talking about Love'em and Leave'em McKenzie! Of course he's not the one!"

"You used to be Love'em and Leave'em too, Daddy, and Mommy took a chance on you."

Charles was appalled. "Don't you dare compare that man to me!" he yelled in his own self-righteousness.

But even though Jenay agreed with most of what Charles was saying, she also knew Bonita was telling the truth. "She's right," Jenay said.

Charles and Bonita both looked at Jenay. "She's right?" Charles asked, astounded. "How could you say that?"

"Because it's true. You had an awful track record with women before I came along. And I did take a chance on

you.” Then she looked at their daughter. “Do what you have to do, baby. But if that peg don’t fit, don’t you dare try to force it. You get the fuck out of there. And if he starts resisting, you call us and we’ll get you the fuck out of there. But you do what you have to do.”

Bonita felt a wave of relief that swept through her body. And she dropped her suitcase, ran to her mother, and grabbed her into a tight embrace. “Thank you, Mommy,” she said in tears. “Thank you for believing in me.”

Jenay fought back tears as was her way, as they stopped embracing.

Then Bonita looked at her father. He looked stricken with worry. She went over to him too. “I won’t forget who I am, Big Daddy,” she said to him. “And I won’t forget whose I am. You can trust me.”

When she said those words, Charles nearly buckled. Because she was right. What was he thinking? In a lot of ways, Bonita was the strongest child he had. But she just looked so fragile to him. So vulnerable. He pulled her into his arms, his eyes shut tight.

When they stopped embracing, he tried to smile at her. But his fear won out. “You’re a good kid,” he said, smoothing

down her soft hair. “And you’d better come back to me that way.”

Bonita smiled. She was always going to be a kid in his eyes. “Yes, sir,” she said, kissed him, and then grabbed her suitcase and took off.

Charles and Jenay walked across the landing and stood at the railing as she made her way down the staircase.

“She’s right, you know,” Jenay said. “You and Clark McKenzie are a lot alike.”

“I pray you’re right,” Charles said as he watched his baby. Then he shook his head. “But I don’t see it,” he added. And then he made a phone call.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The convoy of SUVs arrived at Clark's California mansion just outside of Santa Monica in Pacific Palisades. And even Bonita could see that security around the property was extra tight. It started at the airport, when a line of SUVs were waiting to escort them in, and it continued at the house. Bonita immediately started texting her worried father to let him know the layout of the land too. How many guards on the perimeter of the property. How many guards in the shadows not meant to be seen but she was trained to see. Clark, she told her father, had excellent security.

She could tell Clark wasn't thrilled when he asked and she told him she was texting her father, but that was his problem. Just because she made the executive decision to go on this trip with him to see if he could be the one and only for her, didn't mean she was going to shut her father out. She would never do that. She was always keeping Big Daddy in the loop whether Clark or anybody else disagreed. And by the way her father answered her text quickly and was asking additional questions about the security, pleased her. It let her know that they were, as a very close-knit father and daughter

team, still right as rain. Nobody was putting a wedge between her and her beloved father. Not even Clark, who gave off the kind of vibe she could fall in love with.

Bonita also loved how wonderful Clark was treating her. Instead of letting his bodyguard Lou Brazza get out and open the door for her, Clark himself got out, walked around, and opened her door. And after assisting her out of his SUV, he placed his hand around her waist as if he was proud that she was with him. He did the same thing at the airfield where there were some adoring fans waiting to get a selfie with him. He made certain she was with him, his arm around her, in every shot. Which made her feel like the queen of the ball. So far her decision to go with him was looking genius.

But Bonita was nobody's fool. As she walked with him toward his front entrance, she'd freely admit that it felt good to be treated so well. But she'd also admit that it was still too early to conclude anything on the level of what she'd need to see to risk her heart. It was still early days. She was determined to keep her wits about her as he stepped aside, and she entered his world.

Although they were up in the hills, it was all ocean views from every room, as she expected it would be for a jock

like Clark. Although he spent his entire football career in places like Foxborough and Dallas, he always had that California look about him. That sun-kissed, surfer-dude look. When he told her he owned a home in California, and spent more time there than anywhere else, she wasn't surprised at all.

But what did surprise her, after he showed her all around the house and then his bedroom last of all, was when she saw that one of his staff had already placed her luggage in his bedroom. When he saw her looking at her luggage as if she wasn't at all certain if she liked the insinuation of it, he looked at her. "You okay?" he asked her.

She looked at him. And in that moment he realized how far over his skis he had gotten. He realized that she was nothing like the well-experienced ladies he was accustomed to dealing with: ladies who would be offended if he didn't place her luggage in his room. Bonita was so able and strong, and so advanced for her young age that he would often forget that she was just a kid who had been a virgin before she hooked up with him. He was the first man she'd ever slept with. Was going to be the only man she ever slept with if he had anything

to say about it. She was nobody's whore and she wasn't letting anybody treat her was if she was.

“We need to get something straight right here,” Bonita said, “and right now.”

Clark could feel a lecture coming on. The one thing he disliked was being lectured to. But he held his tongue.

“I allowed you to be the first man to go all the way with me. I allowed that because that's what I wanted. But I'm not allowing any man to handle me. Let's get that straight right now. You ask me if I wish to sleep in your room, because that's my decision, not yours. You don't assume that you know what I want, because you don't.”

It was a lecture, alright, but one he couldn't disagree with. He loved that she was tough, and her own woman, and nobody's pushover. “That's fair,” he said to her. “And yes you're right. I did order my staff to place your luggage in my room without consulting you, and for that I apologize. But it's easily reversible. You absolutely have a choice. You can sleep in one of my many guest rooms if that would make you feel more comfortable. Or you can sleep with me, in my room. But the choice is yours.”

Clark said it as if it was a choice, but he would be gravely disappointed if she chose to sleep separate from him. He felt they had a strong connection. The strongest he'd ever had with anybody outside of his family of origin. Why wouldn't she want to be with him twenty-four-seven the way he felt he wanted to be with her? Was she the only one willing to see where this went? Had she changed her mind about him?

But Bonita was cool if she was anything else. She always held her cards close, even when she was a child. Her parents used to call her *determined*, as if it was a trait that could be good and bad. A character flaw and a character strength. She couldn't help it. It was who she was. And she was inwardly glad that Clark understood her too, and that he cleaned up that insinuation before she had no choice but to clean it up herself. Which would have been messy. Which would have turned their so far good start rocky.

"I choose the guest room," she said to him.

She could see Clark's entire demeanor drop a peg, as if he wasn't expecting her to make that choice at all. And then Bonita, seeing his reaction, smiled. It was just her way of joking. And then she laughed.

When he realized she was messing with him, he shook his head. “Really? This what we’re doing?” He couldn’t suppress his own smile that this waif of a girl had fooled him. “Really?”

“That’s what your ass get for giving a girl a choice.”

“So it didn’t offend you that I had my staff place your luggage in my bedroom?”

“Oh it offended me alright. You should have asked,” Bonita made clear. “But that doesn’t mean I was going to object. I just need to be asked.”

Clark stared at her. If he was still wondering if she was who he thought she might be, in that moment his fears were all eliminated. She was that and more to him. And he moved closer to her and pulled her against him, staring in her eyes. “You demand a lot from a guy, don’t you?”

Bonita didn’t answer right away, which pleased him. She was thoughtful too. And after thinking about it, she nodded her head. “I demand everything if he’s gonna be with me,” she said. “Because I’m bringing everything within me to the table too. It won’t work if it’s just me bringing my all.”

Clark already felt he could be vulnerable with her. That was why she was the first and only person he had ever felt safe enough with to tell about that night, and how he truly felt about it. “I’ve never given my all to anybody,” he said. “Not even my parents.”

Bonita knew that too. “I understand that to be true. But if it’s going to work with me, you can’t be half in and half out, or I’ll be all out. I’m not settling for less. Not even from you.”

Clark smiled a strained, stress-filled smile that reminded Bonita of his playing days when she used to watch a close-up of him on TV. How he looked so stressed in that huddle as the leader of all of those world-class athletes who were depending on his good arm and judgment, that he looked like an old man even then. He had that same look now. He was trying to smile for ease, but the weight and gravity of the burdens he bore were coming through more. That sadness deep within him that Bonita first saw when she first laid eyes on him was coming through too.

“Kind of scary, isn’t it?” he said to Bo.

Bonita understood that he was being vulnerable again. Something she knew was not a side of him he revealed lightly.

She understood her responsibility to make certain he doesn't regret it. "What's scary?" she asked him.

"Giving your all to somebody. That's motherfucking terrifying."

"But isn't living a life half-way, or with your heart locked away out of fear that it might get broken, even more terrifying? Because later, when it's too late, you might regret not going for it. Not giving it a chance. Not taking that leap."

Clark had never felt closer to another human being as he did to Bonita in that moment. He leaned his forehead against her forehead and closed his eyes. It was as if he finally found somebody who just might be able to help him bear his burdens because she loved him and wanted to help him and didn't want to use him for what she could get out of him the way every living soul he had ever known did. She just wanted to love him. She just wanted to be with him. She just wanted him. Baggage and all.

He opened his big blue eyes and looked into Bonita's soulful green eyes. And he made himself clear. "I'm willing to take that dive with you. But you better not break my heart."

Bonita was touched by his sentiment, but not so thrown that she couldn't make herself clear too. "And you'd better

not break mine,” she said to him.

And it was that comeback, more than anything else she could have said, that solidified it for Clark. Because he just wanted to love her too. He just wanted to be with her too. He just wanted her, baggage and all, as his one and only. It was such a new prospective for him that it was actually exciting to him. And he pulled her into his arms.

But the more they held onto each other in that quiet bedroom, the more their love turned into passion. And Clark started getting a hard-on. And Bonita started breathing heavier. And before either one of them could identify what was going on, they looked at each other and Clark’s mouth captured Bonita’s mouth in a kiss that sealed the deal. And once again, there was no turning back.

They were naked in bed within minutes. Clark was on his back, Bonita was on top of him, and they were still kissing as if kissing was new to them. It wasn’t the kissing, it was the love and the commitment and the decision to see it all the way through that was new to both of them. They were both virgins in those situations. And when Bonita began kissing down the length of his body and began giving him an oral when she got to his penis even though he knew she’d never done it before

and didn't know what she was doing, it was the best oral he'd ever had. Because it wasn't transactional. I make you feel good, you're give me this or that. For him and Bo, it was just innocent caring and loving and looking out for one another. She was easing his burdens and looking out for him. That, not her skill, was what made it the best.

But no way was he cumming that way. He was cumming inside of her. The first time she didn't trust him when he told her he wore a condom with every woman he'd ever been with, which was the truth, she still made him put one on. But not this time. She trusted him this time. And when he pulled her back up and eased his way inside of her super-tight passage, staring at her as he did, feelings overwhelmed him. Because he realized he was making love to her. He'd fucked more women than he could count. He'd never made love to any of them because love had nothing to do with it. Until now.

For nearly an hour they made the slowest, most passionate love they had ever dreamed was possible. For nearly an hour he held her and grind inside of her and kissed her and sucked her breasts and nearly came every single second. They were both moaning and groaning. They were

both breathing heavily. They were both loving it so completely that they lost themselves and found each other.

And when they came, just like everything in that hour, they came together. Clark's penis throbbed and Bonita's vagina pulsated and they came in a thunderous roar. They even yelled out as they came. They left nothing on the field. It was the beginning of giving their all.

But that night, at a dinner party Clark had to attend at the home of the head of the governing board that would decide if his petition to build his state-of-the-art mall in Santa Monica would be accepted or rejected, Bonita would quickly find out how giving her all to Clark was never going to be as easy as being all in. Not when there were bitches in the wings salivating to be all in too, and to take her place.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was another California mansion, this one in Bel Air, and it was a half-an-hour's drive from Clark's house. Bonita wore a short evening dress with *ruching* at the waist and that fit her like a glove, while Clark wore a tailored Brioni suit. They had showered together, and Clark had fucked her in the shower, but now they looked pristine and as far away from their wildness in bed and in that shower as they could get. But it didn't take long for Bonita to sense it was going to be a long night.

It started when they entered the house and the host and several other big wigs hurried over to welcome the man of the hour and Clark introduced her as Bonita. Not as his lady Bonita. Or his woman Bonita. Just Bonita. Not that she cared if those uppity mucks knew any more than that, but it felt kind of lacking to Bo. They were supposed to be all-in, weren't they? By him not acknowledging her as something more than his usual bimbo on his arm, she felt decidedly all-out.

And then they whisked Clark off to meet some other business big wigs, which only opened the door for the vultures to gather. Ladies suddenly showed up at her side as if they

had come out of the woodwork. All of them were beautiful and blonde and so stereotypical Valley girl that it was ridiculous. All of them smiling. All of them, Bonita could instinctively tell, hating on her with a bitter hate. One in particular, a woman the other ladies called Sheila, took the lead.

“So,” said Shelia, “you consider yourself with Clark, as we all once considered ourselves. It’s a club, you see. But tell us, Bonita, I think he said your name was, which is an odd name. But tell us, Bonita, how long have you known Clark?”

“Not long.”

“What’s not long?”

Bonita said nothing more. She felt she had given a sufficient answer.

But Sheila wouldn’t let it go. “You heard me, right? I asked you a question. How long have you known our Clark?”

Still no response from Bonita.

“Can’t you answer a simple question?” another one of the vultures asked.

“Or has the cat got your tongue?” asked yet another one and they laughed.

But Bonita grabbed a drink from the tray of a waiter passing by and began to move away from the vultures. But true to their specie, they blocked her path. “You heard us, right?” asked Sheila. “Why are you such an angry black woman? We’re just asking you a very easy question.”

Bonita tried to move away from her again, but she blocked her again.

Bonita pointed her drink at Sheila. “Look bitch,” she said, “I’m not the one.”

The ladies grinned. Sheila took offense. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not with your bullshit. Get out of my way.”

Sheila smiled, as if she’d caught her in a trap. “So I was right. You are an angry black woman.” The other ladies were nodding their heads too. “Why are you Africans so angry all the time?”

Clark had kept an eye on Bonita and saw what was transpiring. He broke away from the businessmen that surrounded him and made his way to Bo’s side.

“Hello, Clark,” Sheila said with a grand smile as soon as he showed up.

But he wasn't smiling back. He placed his arm around Bonita's waist. "Why are you badgering her, Sheila? Leave her the fuck alone. What do you want?"

Sheila didn't skip a beat. "How about you for starters?" When she said it, her girls all laughed. Bonita just rolled her eyes. They were all in their thirties and should know better, but they were so *high school* to her.

Clark saw it more sinister than that. Because he knew Sheila Morgan. He knew what she was capable of. "Shill, I'm telling you," he said. "Leave it out."

"Leave what out?"

"Nobody's up for your bullshit tonight."

"What bullshit? I haven't said anything about that child over there."

Bonita frowned. "Kiss my ass!"

But Sheila was quick too. "I thought that was your job to kiss Clark's."

Clark was about to lash back at his ex-girlfriend, but the host hurried over. "Clark, there you are! I want you to meet a developer friend of mine. Really outstanding individual. He's had his hand in a number of those famous

New York skyscrapers we all know and love. He just might be interested in partnering with you on the deal. Come!”

Clark wasn't about to have a partner, he didn't care how great he was, but he needed the host to back him all the way or it would be no deal for his ambitious after-football business plans. He looked at Bonita.

Bonita was already encouraging him with her eyes. “Go,” she said. I got this, her eyes also said.

Clark looked at Sheila. Would have told her more had the host not been standing there. He squeezed Bonita's waist and then he headed across the room with the host.

But that didn't mean it was all over for Sheila. Even Bonita could see that. She saw that look of hatred he had in his eyes when he looked at her. She saw him squeeze the new chick's waist. His ex was as jealous as a motherfuck.

And it came out in a more escalating tone. “So you wanna be me, don't you?”

Bonita smiled and shook her head. High school her foot. More like grade school. Kindergarten! She began to move away from the madness.

But Sheila blocked her path again. “I said,” Sheila said, her voice rising, “your ass wanna be me. Don’t you?”

“Bitch,” Bonita said, her voice much lower but in many ways more menacing, “get out of my way.”

But Sheila was begging for a fight. “Who are you calling a bitch?”

“Um, let me think. You.”

“You aren’t even his type. He likes women who looks like me. Women his own age. And color,” she added, to snickers from her flunkies. “You’re just a snot-nosed kid. A whore starting early.” More grins.

Then Sheila’s look turned hate-filled. “Where on earth did Clark dredge you up from?”

Bonita moved to get away from her again. She blocked Bonita’s movements again. But Bonita had had enough of this. She moved to leave the madness again, but this time, when Sheila blocked her path, she made a point of taking the heel of her stiletto and stomping it on Sheila’s big toe.

And that was all it took. Sheila was begging for a fight, she got one. “Why you little bitch!” she yelled and

slapped Bonita hard across her face.

The room gasped when they saw the slap, and when Clark looked over and saw Bonita leaned sideways holding the side of her face, he began hurrying over there. But not before Bonita stood upright and instead of slapping Sheila back, she punched her hard across the face with all the strength she had within her. Sheila went tumbling to the floor.

But Bonita wasn't done with that bitch. She jumped down on top of Sheila, straddling her, and began to beat the living daylights out of her. By the time Clark and the other men got over there, Sheila was bleeding. Clark grabbed Bonita and pulled her to her feet.

The flunkies were too busy covering their grins to help their leader, but when Sheila cried out help me, they gave her a tissue and hurried to her aid.

But Clark was only concerned about Bonita. "You're okay?"

"I'm fine," Bonita said in a louder-than-usual tone for her. But she never wanted anybody to get the best of her. Or even think they did.

But the head of the governing board, the host, was so livid when he got over to the scene that he could hardly contain his fury. “This is unacceptable!” he yelled. “You do not bring that black, hood rat nonsense anywhere near my home! Get her out of here now,” he added, grabbing Bonita by the arm.

But Clark pushed him away from her even before she could do it herself. “Don’t you dare touch her!”

“I’ll touch anybody I damn well please in my own home. Who the hell is she?”

“She’s my woman!” Clark said forcefully. Even Sheila and her flunkies looked over at him. But Clark wasn’t done. “She’s my lady,” he continued. “She’s the only woman I’ve ever loved. That’s who she is! And don’t you forget it, either.”

Then he placed his hand around Bonita’s waist. “Come on, babe,” he said, staring at their host. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

He looked at Sheila, and looked at the still red-hot host again, and then he and Bonita left. If his after-football success had to be tied to people like them, success could kiss his ass.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was almost eleven when Bonita finally woke up in Clark's bed the next morning. She was stunned she had slept so long. She was usually an early bird. She was equally surprised that he wasn't still in bed with her, nor anywhere in the room. But she didn't panic like she could have, considering what went down last night. She didn't even trip. She got up, brushed and gargled, took a shower, and then dressed in a pair of white shorts, a yellow sleeveless tucked-in blouse, and white-and-yellow sandals. If he was pissed with her, so be it. She would pack her bags and leave because she knew she had done nothing wrong.

But the way he defended her last night, and claimed her as his own in front of all of those uppity mucks, gave her hope that he wouldn't abandon her now. But she wasn't depending on that hope. She put all of her makeup and toiletries back in her suitcase, and sat it by the door of the bedroom. Just in case.

Then she made her way out of the room, around numerous corridors, until she was in the front of the large

house and could hear voices in the kitchen. Clark's voice, but Harper and Lou's voices too.

“Good morning,” she said when she entered the kitchen and saw Lou and Harper seated at the center island and Clark standing behind it sipping coffee from a mug. He looked at her when she entered the room, and although he was trained to never wear his emotions on his sleeve or the opposing defenses would eat him alive, he was inwardly pleased to see her. He glanced down at her neat little outfit and remembered why she always preferred white clothing, and he was pleased there too. For a woman who never worked out as far as he could tell, she was always so well put together. So perfectly toned. But he was beginning to understand what all the fuss was about now. He was in love. He admitted it, for the first time in his entire life, last night. And loving eyes were very different eyes. They were vivid eyes. Everything was in living color. Because he loved her, she could look like a horse's ass and still be beautiful to him.

“Good morning,” Lou returned her greeting and glanced back to her with a smile, but Harper glanced at her and turned back around. She always got the instinct impression that Harper didn't like her. That he saw her as his

main rival for Clark's affections, which was ridiculous. The man was Clark's best friend and aide, and had been for years. Bonita just got there. She wasn't trying to compete with anybody for anything. But she was used to being accused of competing anyway. She was accustomed to being misunderstood.

She walked around the island to where Clark was standing. "Good morning," she said especially for him as she placed her arm on his back and leaned against him, to give his big body a little good morning hug, but he placed his hand around her waist and kept her there.

"How did you sleep?" he asked her as he looked at her.

Although he wasn't smiling, Bonita could feel his energy. It was positive. "Like a baby," she said. "You?"

He smiled this time. "Like a baby."

And they both stared into each other's eyes.

"Anyway," said Harper, "we need to figure this out, Clark.

Clark exhaled as if Harper was getting on his last nerve, which Bonita knew wasn't going to help Harper's image of her. He'd probably blame her for any negative

reaction Clark gave to him. She moved out of Clark's grasp and grabbed a coffee cup to pour herself a cup of coffee. But Clark even took the cup and began to pour it for her. Bonita glanced at Harper. He was watching Clark's little act of chivalry even as he was talking.

"Last night was an unmitigated disaster," Harper was saying as he watched them. "There's no two ways about it."

"So it's over?" Lou asked Harper.

"I've been calling the other board members all morning. Some last night. But nobody's taking my calls. Nobody's going against the head man. And you know he's over it already. He made that perfectly clear last night, from what I heard. Or did I hear wrong?"

"No," said Clark. "You heard it right. He's not going to approve any amendments or permits or anything else associated with me."

Then Harper's phone rang. He looked at the Caller ID. "It's Gerry," he said.

"Take it in the office," Clark said, and although Bonita could tell Harper wasn't crazy about that little order either, he did what he was told.

“Lou, you go with him,” Clark also ordered and Lou got up and followed Harper out, even as Harper was answering the call.

“Who’s Gerry?” Bonita asked after the two men left the kitchen. “Is he the guy who hosted the party last night?”

“No way. I doubt if I ever hear from him again. Gerry’s the vice chair of the governing board for Santa Monica county.”

“You didn’t want to hear what he had to say?”

“Not right now. Right now I want to hear what you have to say.” He looked Bonita dead in her eyes. “How are you doing, and don’t give me any bullshit *I’m okay* answer.”

“I’m ...” She almost said okay, but caught herself. “It was a lot to digest last night. I felt like I failed on so many levels.”

“You didn’t fail. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Oh hell I know that,” Bonita said firmly. “That chick was begging for a fight. So I gave her one.”

Clark smiled. “Would have killed her had I not been there to stop your ass.”

“That’s why you don’t beg for fights.”

“If not that, why would you feel like you failed?”

“Because I know how important it was for you to get that building permit for your mall. I heard Harper say on the plane it was going to be the largest one of all of the ones you have built. My whole deal was to do no harm last night. To just leave people alone and get through it. But people just won’t leave me alone.”

“Sheila’s an asshole who never got over our breakup.”

“I also feel bad because they both went there. Sheila and the host.”

Clark felt as if he had missed something. “Sorry? They went where?”

“To race. As soon as they got angry with me, I was the mad black woman. I was the hood rat. They always go there.”

“Because they hate that you’re better than them. They hate that you’re with the GOAT, and the GOAT stood by you. It’s jealousy, Bo. Don’t think it’s anything else.”

“Oh I understand that part. I don’t fit into their construct. My very existence in the same circles they travel

disproves their hate. But I'm tired of being forced to participate in their bullshit."

Clark nodded. "I'm tired of it too."

Bonita looked at him. "Oh so you're black now too?"

Clark laughed. "Not that bullshit. But the kissing-ass bullshit. The glad-handing and backslapping bullshit just to get permission to build from people I can't stomach. That's what I'm tired of."

Bonita looked at him. "What will you do now?"

"I'm sure Harper will think of something."

"You don't blame me?"

"You?" Clark pulled her into his arms. "You defended yourself, Bo. I loved that about you. Don't ever let anybody run over you. Not even me."

"Don't worry. I'll kick your ass too, if you try it."

"It'll be some ass-kicking going on alright," said Clark. "But your ass will be the red one." Bonita laughed.

"Don't get it twisted," Clark added, with a grin.

But then their smiles slowly dissipated as they both stared at each other thinking about each other's ass. And how

good it felt whenever they made love. And they both began to throb.

And it reached a crescendo as quickly as it began, and within moments Clark had unzipped Bonita's shorts, pulled them down, and sat her on the center island. And he opened her legs and began eating her.

Bonita leaned back and enjoyed every second of his oral. But it didn't last long because Clark wasn't sure if he could. He wanted her just that badly.

He unbuckled and unzipped his pants, dropped them and his briefs around his ankles, and then entered her with a hard thrust that caused a yelp to escape from her mouth. And as he fucked her he pushed up her blouse and bra and began to suck her breasts too.

Bonita was sitting up holding his head and holding on as his dick buried deeper and deeper inside of her, and his face was ravaging her breasts, and it felt like another world to her. Like the best morning fuck of all times. She had no experiences to compare, except for the times she'd been with Clark. But he was besting himself.

But as they were completely caught up in the moment, Harper, who heard the yelp while he was in the living room on

his phone, ended the call. Instead of heading to the office to wait on Clark as he had been instructed, he eased his way around to the kitchen area and peeped in. When he saw Clark fucking the shit out of that girl, his dick went hard. And he was throbbing as Clark's mouth sucked her breasts, as his ass kept pumping into her harder and harder and faster and faster until he tented his pants. And Bonita came.

Harper hurried to the bathroom as Clark, as satisfied as Bonita, came too.

When it was all over, and they were still intertwined hanging onto each other, Harper's voice could be heard from the dining room. "I got some news, Boss," he said.

Clark quickly pulled up Bonita's panties and shorts as Bonita pulled down her bra and blouse. Then Clark pulled up his own briefs and pants, zipped up and buckled up. Then he lifted Bonita off of the island. "What is it?" he asked.

Harper came in. "The board just voted," he said.

"Already?" asked Bonita.

"That's what I said," Harper said to her.

"And?" asked Clark.

“It’s a no. A unanimous no. Nobody was going to cross their leader.”

Clark leaned his head back. Then he shook his head. Bonita knew it wasn’t her fault, that Sheila had put her in a position she couldn’t get out of. But it still felt like crap.

“Fuck it,” Clark said. “Come on, Bo. Let’s go get some lunch,” he said, “and then go to the beach.”

Bonita was confused. “The beach?”

“Hell yeah! I can’t change that vote and I’m not about to let those fuckers ruin my day.” Then he looked at her. “Are you?”

Bonita smiled. He was learning how to get back up. “Not for a second,” she said. “The beach it is,” she added, thrilled.

And Clark smiled a smile of satisfaction even as Harper thought they both were mad. They’d just lost the deal of the decade and they wanted to go to the beach? But to Clark, it had nothing to do with business. It was a heart thing. It felt good to finally, after all these years, have somebody he could truly call his lady. His woman. *His*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Although they had bodyguards everywhere, it still felt great to be at the beach for Bonita. Clark's people had provided her with a surfboard, and she and Clark were riding the waves the way she used to do when she was a student at Penn. But although Bo was good, she couldn't keep up with Clark. He was world-class at surfing too, and took the bigger waves as they came and refused to let her do the same. But he didn't have to trip anyway. She wasn't putting herself in harm's danger no matter what.

But that didn't mean she wasn't in harm's way closer to the shoreline, because she was. Because further over, where there were other surfers, one of them had more than riding waves in mind. Although Lou and Harper remained near Clark and were able to ride the high waves with him, a bodyguard was close to Bonita. Despite the fact that the shooter at the hotel in Jericho had been caught and his motive was known, Clark had ordered that one guard to remain with Bonita no matter what. And he did as he was ordered.

But when the surfer nobody was paying attention to because he was so far over, pulled out a gun and fired one shot

that knocked the guard next to Bonita off of his surfboard, and then another shot seemed to hit Bonita and knock her off of her surfboard. And then a flurry of shots took the shooter out even as Clark, Harper, and Lou were just turning to see what was happening. They saw an older man running across the shore and then dropping his gun and diving into the water. But the lifeguard and everybody else on shore had run for cover because of the gunshots.

But it was only then did Clark see that Bonita's surfboard was suddenly floating empty, and that the gunman might have been diving into that water to finish the job. He dived off of his own board and swam as fast as he ever had toward where Bo should have been. Lou and Harper dived in too, after Clark, and swam behind him.

But before they could get there the gunman from shore had lifted up out of the water with Bonita in his arms, and was swimming with her toward the shore. Was he trying to kidnap her?

But Lou saw what had happened and he recognized the man. It was Mick the Tick Sinatra. The boss of all mob bosses. Lou saw Mick shoot that gunman, drop his own gun,

and then was running like a bat out of hell into that water. To rescue his niece.

But Clark didn't know any of that. He took off after the man and Lou had to take off after him. Harper was able to lift Bonita's bodyguard, who had also gone down, from beneath the water back onto his own surfboard. But Clark had tunnel vision. He could only see, think about, and worry about Bonita. His heart was hammering as he tried with all he had to get to Bonita. He had to get to her!

But by the time he made it to her, Mick the Tick had reached the outer banks and was running through the low water toward the shore with Bonita still in his arms. The driver of Mick's big black Cadillac Escalade SUV had driven as close to shore as he could, and was waiting with the door open for Mick and his niece to get inside.

But when Clark got in the low water with Mick, he was easily able to run up to the man he only knew as the gunman, grab him by the arm, and try to turn him around. Ready to punch his lights out. But Lou was able to get there in time and quickly pulled Clark back. "That's Mick the Tick," he yelled. "That's Mick Sinatra! That's her uncle, Clark. That's her uncle!"

Clark immediately saw the chilling look on that man's face, and he remembered what that name represented. Mick the Tick was considered the boss of all mob bosses. And in that moment he was certain it was Mick who had shot down that gunman instead of the one who had shot down Bonita and her bodyguard.

But he didn't give a shit. He still tried to get Bonita out of his arms. But it was like trying to pry steel open with your bare hands. Mick the Tick didn't budge. And when he got to his SUV, he hopped into the middle seats with Bonita still in his arms. Lou hopped onto the front passenger seat while Clark hopped onto the middle seats with Mick and Bo. And Mick's driver hopped behind the wheel and sped away.

"You okay, Bo?" A distressed Clark just needed her to open her eyes. To be present with him, even though Bonita was still unconscious in her uncle's arms. "Bo, are you okay?"

It wasn't until Mick lifted one of his hands from Bonita's arm, and her blood was on his hands, did Clark realize this was no test. She had actually been shot! "Dear God," he said when he saw the blood. "Dear God!"

But his reaction only amplified the rage Mick had been trying to contain. “What the fuck did you think was going to happen out on a fucking beach with your ass surfing and not paying any attention to my niece?”

Clark was surprised by his rage. He looked at him. “I had a bodyguard right beside her.”

“And that shooter had a fucking speedboat right beneath him! You had no logistics, you had no back up security, you had no plan in place to protect my niece from all angles. You don’t put her in that kind of danger!”

“How was I to know she would be in danger?”

“She’s the niece of Mick the fucking Sinatra. That’s how you know, motherfucker!” Mick roared so loud that even Lou turned around to see it for himself. He was talking to Clark like Clark wasn’t the greatest quarterback to ever play the game of football. A future Hall of Famer. All he saw was the asshole who was fucking his niece and nearly screwed her.

And Clark was devastated that he had failed again. That his inability to understand that Bo’s family connections to the mob wasn’t just something to dismiss the way he had dismissed it. It was a way of life for her. And his need to be

daring, to go further and further out to ride the waves, just might cost her her life.

Clark was so outdone that he didn't know how to respond to Mick's rage. Because it was completely understandable. Because he deserved every verbal lick. All he could do was look at Bonita, and rub her hair, and sit shoulder to shoulder with Mick the Tick because he wasn't relinquishing Bonita to him.

And he didn't blame him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

By the time they arrived at the local hospital, Bonita was coming back to them. she was opening her eyes. And by the time the doctors hurried her into an examining room and examined her, with Mick and Clark both refusing to leave her sight, and with Lou and Mick's driver standing at the door of the room for security, the news could not have been better.

“She hasn't been shot,” said the doctor in charge.

Both Mick and Clark was floored. “What do you mean?” asked Clark. “She's bleeding.”

“Not from a gunshot wound. She apparently cut her arm when she fell off of that surfboard. But even that isn't a deep wound. A few stitches, and she remain here at the hospital overnight for observation and she'll be fine.”

Mick finally exhaled and leaned down, his hands on his knees. And Clark, so overcome with relief, fell all the way down onto his knees. “Oh thank God. Oh thank God. Oh thank God!”

But Bonita was more concerned about the man that had been guarding her. The one she knew had gotten shot. “Is my

bodyguard okay?" she asked.

Clark had no idea. Mick either. But when Mick opened the door to ask Lou, Lou gave the thumbs up. "He's in surgery now," he said. "But they expect him to have a full recovery."

It was Bonita's time to sigh relief. But then she thought about something else as the doctor prepared to give her stitches. "Don't tell Daddy, Uncle Mick," she pleaded. "Don't tell Daddy and Mommy or they'll try to force me to come back home."

Mick was about to tell her no deal, that he wasn't keeping something like that from his brother, but Clark spoke up before he could say a word. "He has to tell'em, babe," Clark said. "Or you must. Because I was there. And people on that beach knew I was there. It's going to come out eventually."

Mick knew the kind of reputation Clark had with the ladies. "You'd better not allow the press or anybody else to drag my niece's name through the mud."

"They won't do that, Uncle Mick. Will they, Clark?"

Clark nodded. “They will, yes. They’ll see you as just another one of my temporary flings.”

Bonita looked horrified.

“But don’t worry,” Clark said, holding her hand, “I’m going to get ahead of the story.”

Bonita didn’t know what that meant, neither did Mick. But as the doctor prepared to give her the few stitches he said she needed, Mick left the room because he didn’t like needles. Bonita braced herself, holding Clark’s hand so hard it was beet red. Because she didn’t like needles either.

Clark laughed for the first time since the ordeal. “All of these big and bad Sinatras, and a little needle clears the room.”

He couldn’t stop laughing at the irony of that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“How does it feel?”

Charles and his son Tony Sinatra were in Jenay’s office at the hotel, and Jenay was reclining in her desk chair. “It feels great to be back to work. I feel great. I think Doc Martin may be on to something.”

“I agree,” said Charles. “It’s usually around this time when your energy drain would begin again and lasts for weeks before you can’t take it anymore and have to be hospitalized again.”

“Who would have thought that it was the medication they were giving me when I first went into the hospital that was causing me to keep coming back?”

“It’s entirely possible,” said Tony. “Let’s be grateful that young doctor had the balls to try and see if that was the cause because I’ll tell you right now, many of those experienced doctors would not have dared think the explanation could be that simple.”

“Doctors,” said Charles. “I’m so over their asses.”

“Except for Doc Martin,” said Jenay.

Charles smiled. “Except for him. If you continue to improve,” he added, “I’m going to set that young man up for life just like I promised him. But time will tell if he’s right or full of shit.”

“He’s not full of shit, Charlie,” said Jenay. “Even if he’s proven wrong. At least he tried.”

Charles couldn’t disagree with that. Then Tony’s iPhone rang. When he saw that it was Bonita, he answered and placed the call on Speaker. “Hey baby sister,” she said with a smile. “Ma’s back at work.”

“That’s great. I’ve been trying to call her, but her phone was turned off.”

“That’s right!” Jenay said, grabbing her phone to turn it back on. “Everything okay?”

“Yes ma’am. But there was a little incident.”

Charles and Jenay looked at each other.

“What incident?” Jenay asked.

“I’m fine and so is Clark. But one of his bodyguards got shot. But he’s okay too.”

“Were you there?”

“I was there,” Bonita admitted, “but I wasn’t shot or anything.”

“As if that’s the standard!” Jenay said horrified. “That’s important, Bonita. Why didn’t you call your father if you couldn’t reach me?”

“Because I didn’t want to hear his mouth.”

“Well your ass hearing it now!” Charles blared. “You don’t withhold shit like that from me because you don’t want to hear my mouth. You understand me, Bo?”

“Yes, sir.”

The door to Jenay’s office few open and Bobby hurried inside and hurried to the TV’s remote.

“Well hello, Mister Mayor,” said Charles. “What happened to your manners? Don’t you ever walk past my wife without acknowledging her presence.”

“This is important, Pop,” said Bobby as he grabbed the remote.

“And my wife’s presence isn’t?”

“Yes, of course. But Bo just phoned me as I was coming into the hotel to welcome Ma back to work. She said there was a shooting and Clark’s holding a press conference.”

“That’s why I was calling you guys,” said Bonita.

When they said those words, everybody in that room sat at attention as the television came on. It was a press conference on CNN. Clark was at the podium getting ready to speak, but his right-hand man Harper was whispering something in his ear.

Then Clark began to speak. “I won’t take up too much of your time,” he said in the microphones attached to the podium. “I just wanted to make a statement about the incident this morning, to make sure the facts get out ahead of the rumors and lies. There was a shooting at the beach today. That part is true. I was not shot nor was I shot at,” he stated. “So any accusations to the contrary are totally false. One of my bodyguards was indeed shot, and the person who shot him has been killed. The police also believe that the shooter’s intended target wasn’t the bodyguard, but the young lady he was protecting. The young lady, Bonita Sinatra, is my girlfriend, whom I love dearly, and who thankfully was not shot at all. She incurred an injury to her arm, but it has only required stitches. She’s fine,” he said and then the press released with a barrage of questions. But one reporter was louder than all the others.

“Wasn’t you the victim of a shooting in Jericho, Maine as well?” the reporter asked.

“Yes,” said Clark. “A fan, a very fanatic Patriots fan, wanted me dead for leaving the Patriots and leading Dallas to two Super Bowls. He heard a rumor, online of course, that I was planning to not retire as I have publicly stated, but to join the Patriots’ archrival and take them to a Super Bowl too. It’s ridiculous, but myself and my girlfriend could have been killed then too. That’s why I wanted to get ahead of this story.”

“You think the shooter was a crazed fan in this instance too?”

“We don’t know that. The police are still investigating.”

“You said you loved this Bonita Sinatra person. Is it that temporary love you’ve shown toward your girlfriends in the past, or is this different?”

“This is different,” Clark admitted.

“In what way, Clark?”

“In every way. There’s nothing temporary about my relationship with Bonita. Thank you very much!”

And Clark left the stage.

“Isn’t that great, Daddy?” Bonita said over the phone’s Speaker.

“What’s great about it?”

“Clark acknowledged me to the world.”

“And that only put a bigger target on your back. We’re on our way.”

“On your way where?”

“There.”

“But I’m fine, Daddy. You don’t have to come.”

“Like hell I don’t! Nobody’s telling me my daughter was nearly killed and I just stay where I am and hope for the best. You were nearly killed because there was a security breach. I’m on my way.”

“And so am I,” said Jenay, rising.

“And so am I,” said Tony.

“And I’m going to move some meetings around and come too. To eyeball you for myself,” said Bobby.

They could all hear Bonita sigh. But they didn’t give a shit. Charles was already calling his pilot, and they were already hurrying out of Jenay’s office.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Nearly eight hours. That was how long the flight had been, but they were finally taxiing on the runway in California now. Charles and Jenay were already out of their seats, waiting for the plane to stop, the air steps to drop, so that they could get off of that plane and get to their baby. Tony was also on the flight. And Bobby too. Brent stayed back, along with his wife and children, and other family members were taking their own planes to Cali.

But as they were waiting, Tony, who had been in the conference room, ended the phone call and hurried to his father's side. "Pop, we got a problem."

But with his baby in trouble, Charles was in a foul mood. He looked at his son as if he had lost his mind. "Bo's been shot and you say we got a problem. No shit? You think?"

But Bobby wasn't just his son. He was the town's mayor. And he was privy to many things. "I just got word that eminent domain has been invoked."

Charles and Jenay both knew what that meant. A city council could vote to take your property if it was in the town's

best interest. That got their attention. Tony's too. "They invoked it over my property?"

Bobby nodded. "Yes sir."

"Which one?"

"Not one, Pop. Several."

"Several?" asked Jenay. "What's several?"

Bobby didn't want to say it.

"Stop fucking around and give me a number," Charles said angrily. "How many properties, Robert?"

"Nearly all of them," Bobby said. "The estimate is that they have invoked nearly eighty percent of your Jericho County properties. Nearly all that you own, Pop. Just about the only thing they didn't touch was the hotel."

Charles was floored. Jenay was too.

"I wouldn't have told you until we eyeballed Bo and made sure she was okay," said Bobby, "but I didn't want any of your friends calling and telling you before I could."

"And I would have kicked your ass if you hadn't told me," Charles said. "You never withhold that kind of information. Never."

“That’s why I told you.”

Then Charles thought about the idea of it and shook his head. “Those motherfuckers,” he said, with clenched teeth.

Bobby and Tony looked to Jenay to calm him back down. She was just out of the hospital herself, but she was doing great. And only she could handle their irascible father.

But Jenay wasn’t trying to handle him. Sometimes shit was just bad on top of bad. And they had to deal with it all and sometimes all at once. At least they knew their baby girl was out of surgery. At least they had that. But to invoke eminent domain over nearly everything her husband owned? “Those motherfuckers,” she said too.

But as the plane was grinding to a stop on the runway, Tony saw that look on Bobby’s face. “There’s more,” he said to his younger brother. “Isn’t there?”

Charles and Jenay looked at Bobby too. “Don’t you dare hold information back from me,” Charles said. “Is there something else?”

Bobby exhaled. “Yes.”

“What?” asked Jenay, bracing herself.

“Tell me dammit,” said Charles, bracing too.

“The reason why they invoked E.D.,” said Bobby, “is for a world-class, high-tech, state-of-the-art shopping mall that will easily be the largest in all of Maine.”

“Who the fuck cares about that? I don’t care if they took my land to build a garbage dump. The point is they took it.”

“This shopping mall, Pop,” said Bobby, not knowing how to say it other than to just say it, “will be owned by Clark McKenzie.”

When they heard that news, it staggered them all. So much so that when the doors opened, and the air steps were there for them to deplane, they just stood there. All kinds of thoughts were racing through their heads. But the main thought was Bonita. Did he have something to do with that shooting? Was he stringing her along, distracting them, while he pulled the rug from under her old man?

“Pop? Mom?” It was Tony. They looked at him. “We need to go see about Bonita.”

They snapped out of it then, and began hurrying down the steps. But as they were getting into the waiting SUVs, Charles was pulling out his phone, calling his baby brother. Ordering him to keep his eyes on Clark McKenzie, but to also

keep Clark's slick ass as far away from his child as humanly possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Mick had gotten the call from Charles, and listened dispassionately as he explained what Clark was up to. But Mick was leaned against the back wall in Bonita's hospital suite and had been keeping his eye on Clark McKenzie even before that call. Mainly because he never liked jocks. Mainly because he had to see for himself what man had the balls to win the heart of Big Daddy Sinatra's baby girl. And if the affection was one-sided, or mutual.

The doctor had already finished his stitches, but they wanted to keep Bonita overnight for observation.

As Clark sat by Bonita's bed, holding her hand while she was still sleeping off the sedative the doctor gave her to numb the pain, he still looked devastated to Mick. He was so outdone he looked as if he was unwell. There was no faking that. That was why, as Mick listened to his brother, he didn't have much to say. He took in everything his big brother told him, but he was going to judge the jock for himself. And no matter what might or might not have happened on that business end, he'd already judged Clark McKenzie to be

madly and completely in love with their baby. Who, Mick also noticed, watching Bonita, wasn't a baby anymore.

Many in the family were already at the hospital and they were all seated around the suite too waiting for the surgeon to come in and give them some news. Reno and his wife Trina, along with brothers Sal and Tommy Gabrini, who all lived much closer to California, arrived within a few hours of the shooting. But the family members on the east coast, including Bonita's aunt Amelia, and her sisters Ashley and Carly, were all so far away that Mick ordered them to stay put and wait. It was only a minor injury. She was okay. But the Gabrinis wanted to eye her for themselves, and Big Daddy and Jenay, along with two of Big Daddy's sons, were on their way too. Because it wasn't just a minor injury to them. It was an attempted assassination of Big Daddy's youngest child. The fact that Mick was there to stop him from succeeding didn't make it less horrific.

And all of the Gabrinis already in that hospital suite had their eyes on Clark McKenzie too. All of the men and Reno's wife Trina, who was a football fanatic too, had admired the future Hall of Fame baller for years. But what they were

trying to work out was his angle. Why was he there? Was this love affair they'd heard about with young Bonita mutual?

But Reno Gabrini, the owner of the largest hotel and casino on the Vegas Strip and a former mob boss in his own right, was clueless. He was the only one who hadn't seen the press conference and who didn't even know there was a love connection. "What are you a friend of Uncle Mick's?" he finally asked Clark.

"No Reno," said Trina as she hit him on his arm. "Jenay says he's her boyfriend."

Reno frowned. "Jenay got a boyfriend? Big Daddy allows Jenay to have a boyfriend?"

But mob boss Sal Gabrini could only shake his head. "Fools rush in," he said.

"Not Jenay, Reno," said Trina, correcting her husband. "I'm talking about Bo."

"Bo?" Reno said so loud, and with such shock in his voice that Bonita finally woke up. Which caused all of them to jump up and hurry to her bedside. Mick stayed put.

"Hey babe," Clark said, happy to have her awake and alert again. "How you feeling?"

“A little sore, but okay,” Bonita said. But she was looking from one of her relatives to another one. They weren’t there when she was first given the sedative and dozed off. “Who died?” she asked them.

And they all laughed. It was the Bonita they all knew and loved. Bonita was smiling too.

But Reno needed more info. “How you manage to catch yourself the jock of all jocks when your ass so young?”

“Maybe because I wasn’t trying to catch him, Uncle Reno,” Bonita responded. “What’s your excuse?”

Tommy snickered. He was the only Gabrini to get it because Reno and Sal both were confused. “My excuse?” Reno asked. “What’s my excuse for what?”

“How did a joker like you manage to get a great looking woman like Aunt Trina to marry you,” asked Bonita. And everybody, including Trina, laughed at that one.

“You tell him!” said Trina.

Reno was inwardly amused, but he made certain Bonita didn’t get out of her lane. “You’ve always been a smart ass. Even as a little kid you always had your own opinions. Which is fine. But don’t get ahead of yourself, young lady,

because I'll still kick the shit out of that smart ass. You feel me?"

Bonita was still smiling, but she was nodding too. She knew her uncles didn't play. "Yes, sir," she said.

But Clark, above all of them, still looked worried. And as they all were asking her if she remembered what happened and how she was feeling, Clark just stood there as if he was lost. Tommy noticed it like Mick had. "You okay, Champ?" Tommy asked him.

Clark couldn't pretend that he was. "I thought I had lost her," he said and then he looked over at Tommy with bright eyes that seemed to contain unshed tears. Everybody, including Bonita, were looking at him. "I thought I had failed her too."

"Your ass did fail her," said Sal, the no-nonsense mob boss in the room. Because Sal was all emotion. Because whenever a family member was harmed in any way, he took it to heart. He nearly died when he heard about Bonita. And he had to make sure it never happened again. Mick and his syndicate was at the top of the Mafia food chain in every corner of the globe for a reason. But it wasn't by accident that Sal's outfit was number two.

“She got harmed and could have died under your watch,” Sal continued. “She nearly drowned while you were out there on a *gotdamn* surfboard riding the waves and playing surfer dude like she wasn’t your responsibility. The bodyguard you assigned to her was fucking useless. What the fuck kind of protector was he? That guard survived too, and that’s a good thing, but he was out there trying to ride the waves too, rather than checking every face, every movement, doing anything and everything he could do to protect our baby. What the fuck you mean you *thought* you failed her? You did fail her!”

A hush came over the room when Sal said such harsh words. But they all knew those were words that needed to be said. That was why everybody in the family, including Bonita, were looking to see what kind of man Clark McKenzie truly was. Would he own his shit, or would he make excuses? Owning your shit was a rite of passage in their family.

Clark just stood there. Those words seemed to have slapped him down to size when he’d never been slapped before. It was like he didn’t know how to handle being put in his place. He was grieving what happened to Bo, but he didn’t know how to handle that either. “It was ... my fault, yes, of

course it was my fault. I should have realized that I shouldn't have had her exposed like that without lots more security. I didn't know what I was doing. I'm not used to being responsible for anybody but myself. I never learned how to ... All I know how to do is play football. That's the only thing in this life I've ever been good at. When I saw that Bonita wasn't on that surfboard anymore and . . . I thought it was happening all over again. Somebody I loved was being snatched away from me and I wasn't able to do a *gotdamn* thing. I thought ...”

They all were stunned that he was being so raw with them. And every one of them could feel his agony. He looked so lost to all that it was painful to watch.

But Bonita recognized it for what it was. He never really grieved the loss of his family because he had a football career to get to, and almost losing her was bringing it all back like a tidal wave. She squeezed his hand. “Clark, look at me,” she said as his eyes were floating away into yesterday. “Clark?”

He eventually looked at her.

“It was a close call,” Bonita said, staring deep into his eyes. “It was real close, I'm not gonna lie. But we survived

it. What happened back then to your family,” she also said, “was just awful. There’s no in-between about it. It was awful. And you have to acknowledge that. But you also have to acknowledge that you survived it. And surviving isn’t bad, Clark. Surviving is always a good thing.”

Clark was staring at her. It wasn’t her words that were affecting him, it was the feeling she gave to him. A feeling that together they could ride this tide too. That with her he just might be able to get to that other side. He pulled her into his arms.

Sal and Reno looked at each other. “What’s that about?” Sal asked.

Reno shrugged his shoulders.

And then the doctor came into the room. Clark and Bonita stopped embracing and Clark, whose eyes looked bright with unshed tears, wiped his eyes and got himself back together too.

“Hello Doctor,” said Bonita.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay. A little sore, but that’s all.”

“It only required very few stitches, so you should have no complications.”

“Is she going to be alright, Doc?” asked Clark.

“She’s just fine, Mr. McKenzie,” the doctor said. “All of the tests are negative. And we ran a huge battery of tests. She’s going to be just fine,” he said and Mick could see the relief wash all over Clark’s handsome face.

“Then if she’s fine,” said Reno, “why does she have to stay overnight?”

“That’s why I came. She doesn’t. We should be able to release her within the hour. She can recover at home.”

“Home is Maine,” said Tommy. “She’s able to get on a plane today?”

“Oh absolutely.”

That was great news to everybody. Then the doctor looked at his patient. “Ready to get out of here?”

“Absolutely,” Bo said with a grin.

“I’ll contact Security and let them know,” Clark said, pulling out his phone.

“Not so fast, partner,” Reno said. “She’s going home. To her home. Not yours. And we’re handling her security.”

“I know that’s right,” said Sal.

“You may be king of the gridiron,” said Tommy, “but you’re on our turf now. We’ll take it from here.”

“No, Uncle Tommy,” said Bonita, and everybody looked at her.

“What do you mean no?” Sal asked her. “Tommy’s right.”

“I’m going with Clark. He can protect me.”

“You mean like he protected you before?” Reno asked.

“Nobody could have protected me from that guy.”

“Bullshit!” said Reno.

“What are you talking?” asked Sal.

“You aren’t lowering your standards to be with him,” said Trina. “His ass failed. End of discussion. You’re going with us.”

“No I’m not, Aunt Trina. I’m going with Clark.”

“It’s okay, Bo,” said Clark.

Bonita looked at Tommy. In their family he was always the voice of reason. But even he was sticking to his guns. “You’re going back home,” he said.

“But I don’t want that.”

“It’s not about what you want,” said Reno. “It’s about what we say you’re going to do. And your family has determined you’re going home. End of discussion.”

Bonita knew it was absolutely the end of the discussion when her uncles and aunties got in their feelings. There was no reasoning with them.

She looked to Mick. He was the only one in the family, other than her own father, that everybody obeyed. “Uncle Mick,” she pleaded. “I want to go with Clark.”

Mick at first said nothing, as if he at least understood her concern. Then he spoke up. “Your father isn’t going to allow it.”

“He will if you tell him to. Could you do that for me?”

When Clark heard Bonita all but beg her uncle to help her, he knew he had to intervene. “No,” he said to her before Mick could.

Everybody looked at him. Including Mick, who had been waiting for him to rescue her.

“You aren’t going with me,” Clark said bluntly.

Bonita couldn’t believe he said that. Had he changed his mind about her? “But I want to be with you, Clark.”

“You will be with me, sweetheart. You will be with me. Because I’m going with you.”

Those words shocked the entire family. They didn’t expect a jock like him to give an inch. But he was completely giving in. For Bo. They stared at him.

“If they want you back in Maine,” Clark continued, “then that’s where we’ll be. But we’ll be together.”

“But what about your business here?”

“You’re my business here, there, and everywhere. From here on out,” Clark said without shame that all of her alpha male uncles were hearing it. He didn’t give a shit.

Bonita didn’t either. “Oh *Clark*,” she said, heartfelt too, and in tears, and threw her arms around him.

But just as she did, another voice cried out. “Get away from her!”

They all knew that voice. And they all, including Clark and Bonita, turned in that direction.

Bonita's family had arrived from Maine and were standing at the entrance into her suite. But Big Daddy, like the freight train he sometimes could be, was coming straight for Clark. And before Clark could hardly react, Big Daddy punched him with a punch so hard that it knocked the very athletic Clark McKenzie over the nightstand and into the wall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“Daddy no!” Bonita screamed, but Charles would not be deterred. He flung that nightstand out of his way, jumped down on Clark and began beating the shit out of him.

As Jenay was hurrying over to her daughter, to keep her from jumping out of that bed and tearing open her stitches just to help that jock, Trina was telling Reno they had to stop it.

But Reno didn’t think so. “Just two dudes working shit out. They can handle it.”

But he said those things while Charles was beating the fire out of Clark. But as soon as Clark flipped Charles onto his back and punched him with a hard lick of his own, every member of the Sinatra/Gabrini clan was offended.

“Oh hell no!” Mick said angrily and he and the Gabrini men, along with Tony and Bobby, all hurried to Charles’s rescue. They grabbed Clark, jerked him up on his feet like he was a rag doll, and threw him violently against the wall, knocking over the hospital tray and spilling the pitcher of water. Clark might have been a big-time baller in the eyes of

America, but he had put his hands on Big Daddy Sinatra. Even Mick the Tick had never done that. Clark wasn't shit to them. Led by Mick, they kick Clark's ass.

Bonita was screaming for them to stop, and the hospital staff came running to the room too, but nobody was stopping those wild Italians who all looked like Mafia bosses all in on a beatdown. Lou and Harper and the guards who were outside of the room quickly closed the door, and assured the staff that all was well. Just a little family disagreement. "Go back to your jobs," Lou said to them. And since Lou looked like Mafia too, they did as they were told.

Until Charles himself put a stop to the madness he had started. "Leave him alone!" he yelled out as Jenay and Trina helped him to his feet.

Everybody looked at Charles. "I said leave him alone," Charles said again. "I came for him. He was defending himself. A man has a right to defend himself," the always moral, always fair, and always honest Big Daddy said to his family. And the men, knowing Charles was telling nothing but the truth, finally released Clark. A battered Clark angrily snatched away from them.

“Clark, are you alright?” a very anxious Bonita said to him.

Clark, seeing her anxiety, hurried over to her. “I’m alright, Bo. I’m okay.”

But Bonita was blown away by her father’s behavior. It was so unlike him that she could hardly believe it. “How could you come at him like that, Daddy? It wasn’t his fault that some crazy idiot shot at me.”

“That’s not the reason,” Tony assured his kid sister. “You know Pop wouldn’t be unfair like that.”

“Then why did he attack Clark? What did Clark ever do to him?”

Charles just stood there. He was still trying to wrap his brain around it himself.

“What’s the reason, Daddy?” Bonita asked. “Why did you do it?”

It was Jenay, who was seated on the opposite side of the bed from where Clark was now seated, that spoke up first. “We believe,” she said, “that Clark might be using you.”

“That’s a lie!” Clark quickly responded.

“Watch your tone with my wife boy!” Charles quickly said.

“I know that’s right,” echoed Jenay.

Clark knew he was between a rock and a hard place. No matter what he did in this family, it was never going to be enough. But for Bonita’s sake, he knew he had to try. Because she wasn’t feeling anybody disrespecting her mother either. “I apologize, Mrs. Sinatra,” Clark had enough within him to say. “I meant no disrespect.”

Jenay could tell it took a lot for him to say that. And Bonita was falling hard for that joker, she could tell that right off. She wasn’t trying to make an enemy of her daughter’s man. “Apology accepted,” she said.

But Bonita was still confused. “Why would you guys think Clark’s using me?”

It was Bobby’s time to explain, since he was the one who decided to let his father know. “The Jericho City Council, the JCC, has invoked Eminent Domain over eighty percent of Pop’s properties.”

“Eminent Domain?” asked Reno, who was shocked to hear it too. “Isn’t that when the government can take private

property if they can prove a greater use of that land for the betterment of the town?”

“That’s exactly what it is,” said Bobby. “A government entity can expropriate private property and use it for the good of the town. And Jericho has some of the most stringent ED laws on the books.”

“But what does this have to do with Clark?” asked Bonita.

“They have preliminarily agreed to a public-private partnership to build, on Pop’s vast land, the Clark McKenzie, a one-of-its-kind, state-of-the-art mall that would be like a town onto itself. It would be a tourist attraction for Americans and Canadians too.”

But Bonita was still getting over the fact that Clark’s name was a part of the scheme. That Clark was a part of the decision to take her father’s land. “That can’t be right,” she said. “It’s not true. Is it, Clark?”

“I’m not using you,” Clark said.

“That’s not what I asked you,” said Bonita. “Are you working with the JCC to take away my daddy’s land?”

Clark knew he had to own it. And as he glared at Charles, it should have been his pleasure to own it. But he felt no pleasure at all. “Yes,” he said.

“But that’ll ruin his business. Why would you do that to my dad?”

“Ask your father,” Clark said.

“Ask me what?” said Charles. “What the fuck I got to do with that shit?”

His denial only angered Clark. “Archie Gravinzano? That name ring a bell?”

“Archie the Grave?” asked Sal. “What does Archie the Grave have to do with this? He’s our cousin on Big Daddy and Uncle Mick’s father side.”

Everybody knew Mick didn’t accept his father’s side of the family. He hated every one of them. But even he couldn’t believe Arch would stop that low. “What about Gravinzano?” Mick asked.

Clark steeled himself. “He’s the hit man that murdered my family.”

Everybody was shocked. Especially Bonita and Jenay. They were not expecting to hear that.

Even Reno was stunned. “Arch murdered your family?”

“And Big Daddy Sinatra gave safe harbor to him and got him out of the country,” said Clark, staring at Charles. “That’s why I wanted his land. As a bargaining chip. He deliver Gravinzano to me, then he gets his land back.”

Everybody was looking at Charles. Charles suddenly looked unsure of himself, and perplexed too.

But Jenay was shaking her head. “That can’t be right,” she said. “You’ve made a mistake. There’s no way that can be right.”

“Pop?” asked Tony who, like Charles, didn’t play any games when it came to the truth. “Where is Clark getting this from? Did you harbor a man that killed women and children? Did you harbor the hit man that killed Clark’s family?”

Charles ran his hand through his thick hair. “It wasn’t like that.”

Jenay frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean, Charlie?”

“Archie said he had heat, and he needed to hide out.”

An audible gasp was heard in the room. They all understood family looked out for family, even when family was wrong. But that kind of wrong? “Are you telling us that you hid that monster after he murdered this man’s family?” Tony asked.

“I didn’t know he was connected to that,” said Charles. “He said he had to do a retaliatory strike on a crime syndicate out west and he needed my help. There was no connection to anybody murdered in Massachusetts. I was looking out for family until the heat was off. That’s all I was doing.”

“So he lied to you?” asked Bonita.

Charles was rubbing his forehead. “Apparently so,” he said as if he still could hardly believe it himself.

“And you hid him and got him out of the country?”

“I hid him, yes. It’s what family does.”

“Pop!” Tony said angrily. “How could you put it like that?”

“Because that’s what it was! I had no idea he was connected to those murders. I turned my own son into the police for beating his wife. You think I’d give safe harbor to

somebody that killed an innocent family? I thought it was a mob-on-mob attack and he needed protection from the mob. That's what he told me and that's what I believed. I'd never knowingly hide anybody from anything like that. Never!"

The entire family believed Big Daddy. They knew he was no liar. But Clark didn't know him like that. He just wanted to look into the eyes of his family's murderer. "Do you know where he is?" Clark asked him.

Charles looked at the younger man and nodded his head. "Yes."

"Where is he, Daddy?" asked Bonita for Clark.

Charles opened his suit coat and placed his hands on his hips. And then he exhaled. "He's in Jericho," he said. And even Mick was thrown for a loop.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Arriving back in Jericho, after assurances to the Gabrinis that the Sinatras could handle it themselves and they needn't fly all the way to Maine, the family split up at the airfield and took two SUVs. Clark and Bonita, Charles and Jenay, and Mick and Lou got into the Mick-driven Cadillac Escalade that would pay a visit to Archibald Gravinzano, while the second SUV would transport Tony and Bobby to their homes, and Harper back to the hotel. But everybody were on pins and needles. They all had read about or lived through what happened to Clark's family. They never dreamed it could ever hit this close to home.

Charles was especially floored as he directed Mick to drive down a long stretch of dirt road that led to a small house in the woods. Well off the beaten path. Easily a very good hiding place.

"He's a married man with a sixteen-year-old son," said Charles.

"And?" asked Mick.

“And I want this handled right. I know you can’t stand the sight of anybody remotely related to our old man, but I don’t want any shoot first, get answers later bullshit. I want answers.”

Mick held his tongue. Only two people on earth had the power to shut him up: his wife Roz, and his big brother Charles. But that didn’t mean he wouldn’t take matters into his own hands if he thought his way was the better way. Nobody controlled his actions.

Charles, Clark, and Lou got out of the SUV, while Mick stayed inside to protect Bo and Jenay. But just as the three men had made their way up the steps to the front porch, the sound of gunfire could be heard inside the house.

They all pulled out their guns and Mick, who heard the gunfire too, ordered the ladies to get down as he sped his SUV around to the side of the clapboard house.

But as soon as Charles kicked the door down and they raced inside, it was clear to Charles, Clark, and Lou what was really going on. Gravinzano’s wife was shot dead in the living room. His teenage son was shot down near the kitchen, as if he was trying to get away from his fathers’ madness, and then

they saw the kitchen door opening and the man Charles knew was Archibald Gravinzano running out of the house.

They all ran after Gravinzano, but by the time they made it outside, he was already jumping into a car and speeding away. Mick drove up in a fast dash and slammed on the brakes. Charles, Clark and Lou hopped back inside the SUV, and Mick sped off after their target.

“Motherfucker killed his wife and kid!” Charles said.
“What man would kill his own wife and kid?”

“And you still think that bastard wasn’t capable of killing my family?” Clark asked.

“I never said his ass wasn’t capable,” Charles responded. “He came to me before your family was even killed. He came to me like two weeks before. How the fuck was I supposed to tie him to what happened to your family? Do I look like I got a fucking crystal ball?”

Charles was livid. But they all knew it was all about the feeling of betrayal. And what Gravinzano had just done to his own family. It was guilt that was driving Charles’s anger. Even Clark saw that.

They also saw that Mick Sinatra was a very daring driver. So daring that he was downright reckless. He was slinging in and out of lanes in that big tank of an SUV as if he was on a race track. And although Gravinzano had gotten a head start and was in a fast car, Mick had managed to get right on that car's bumper, kiss that bumper with his own bumper, and was riding the shit out of it. Gravinzano was swerving and trying to break free of that big-ass SUV, but Mick was too skilled for any breakage. They were thick as thieves. There was no getting away from Mick the Tick.

“Enough of this bullshit!” Mick said angrily when Gravinzano turned onto a deserted back road. Mick moved up beside Gravinzano's car as if he was about to perform a PIT maneuver the cops liked to perform.

Which terrified Charles. “We want him alive, Michello! Don't kill the man. We want answers. We want him alive!”

But in Mick's mind what answers did Charles need? The man killed his own family. The man was blood kin to their father, the biggest bastard that ever lived. What more did Charles need to know? And Mick rammed the shit out of that

car, causing it to spin around and then flip several times until it stopped in a small ditch on the side of the road.

“Goddammit, Mick!” Charles said angrily as he jumped out of the SUV, along with Clark and Bo. They were the three who needed the answers. They were the three praying that Gravinzano didn’t die before he told them what Clark needed to hear.

They ran into the ditch and Charles tried to pry open the front driver side door, where Gravinzano was leaned sideways after the airbag had deployed. But it wasn’t until Clark took over did the door finally open.

Charles took over the questioning. “Did you kill Clark McKenzie’s family, Arch? Did you kill his family?”

Gravinzano looked at his cousin. Blood was streaming down the side of his face. It was obvious he wasn’t going to be with them long.

“I didn’t want the shame on my wife and my son,” Gravinzano said. “I didn’t want them to live with the shame.”

“The shame of what, Arch? Did you kill Clark McKenzie’s family?”

Tears were in the man's small, beady eyes. "It wasn't supposed to be all of them. Just the father. I was paid to take out the father. But his wife woke up and started screaming. I had to take her out too. And then those girls came out into the hall. All I was trying to do was get away from there, but they came out into that hall. And I had to take them out too. I had to ..."

He was losing his breath. He was passing away. Charles saw it too. "Who ordered that hit?" he asked him anxiously. "Who ordered you to kill Clark McKenzie's family?"

Gravinzano looked at Charles as if it was obvious. "You," he said breathlessly, and then he passed on away.

But they all were floored. Clark and Bonita were staring at Charles. But as they made their way back toward Mick's SUV, Charles was as in the dark as they were. And his face was frowned with confusion. "Why would he say I ordered him to kill your family? He looked at me and said *you*. He said I ordered that hit. He knows better than that."

"You heard him say you?" Bonita asked.

Charles and Clark stopped walking and looked at Bonita. "That's what I heard too," said Clark.

But that's not what I heard."

"What did you hear?" Charles asked his daughter.

"I heard Lou," said Bonita. "I thought he said Lou, not *you*. I thought he said Lou."

When Bonita said that name, Charles looked at Clark. And then all three of them looked toward the SUV where Lou was still seated on the back row. Which made no sense. Why did he stay in the SUV? He was supposed to be Clark's bodyguard. And as soon as they realized why, they began running toward that SUV.

But Lou had already seen them coming and he pulled out his gun. He was seated on the SUV's third row, but Jenay was seated on the second row. And as soon as Charles flung open the middle-row door, Lou placed his gun into the back of Jenay's head, startling her and causing Charles to stop in his tracks.

And Clark couldn't believe it. "Lou, what are you doing? You ordered that man to kill my family?"

"You know I did."

Clark frowned. "But I didn't even know you then."

“It had nothing to do with gambling debts. That was the story we wanted told. And The Grave agreed to do it for the right price. But he wanted a cover story first because he knew a lot of heat was going to be around that killing. That’s why he got in touch with his cousin Sinatra. He knew he’d give him cover if he thought it was just another mob situation. And he never left his cover. He stayed right there for all these years, knowing that you had the power to take him down if it ever came out.”

Lou started shaking his head. “But it wasn’t supposed to be the whole family. Just the father. He was only ordered to kill your father.”

“You sound as if that would have made it okay.”

Lou looked like a man who knew he was at the end of his rope. “It wasn’t supposed to be the whole family,” he said again.

“But why did you order him to kill my father?” asked Clark, still mystified.

“Not gambling debts. But replace,” he said, and was about to pull the trigger and take Jenay away from there. Charles screamed no, Bonita screamed no, and Mick the Tick,

who had gotten out of the SUV just in case, blew Lou's brains out.

When the smoke cleared, and they all had looked up from their reflexed ducking, Mick was standing behind the SUV, the back window shattered, with the shotgun still smoking in his hand.

Charles hopped into that SUV and grabbed Jenay, pulling her into his arms. Clark held onto Bonita and was staring, not at Lou, but at Mick the Tick. He wasn't mad at him for taking out that bastard that ordered the hit on his family. He was glad.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Later that night you could hear a pin drop in the home of Charles and Jenay. They were both in bed, hugged together and trying with all they had to get some sleep, but it wasn't happening. Because too much had happened. Because they still had unanswered questions.

Clark was asked to stay at the Sinatra home too. But not before he phoned the president of the city council and informed him, in no uncertain terms, that he was no longer interested in building that mall and was withdrawing his request that the county invoke eminent domain. No Clark. No mall. Because they needed Clark's millions to pay the fair market value of Charles's properties, which the council could never afford to do on its own. Clark backing out was the end of it.

But as they lay in Bonita's bed, and as Clark lay on his back staring at the ceiling, Bonita was staring at him. "Thank you," she said to him.

"What is there to thank me for? I'm the fella that could have ruined your father."

“If I would have believed he harbored the man that killed my family and knew what he was doing, I would have tried to ruin him too. But my father looked out for family. He’s the patriarch of our family, not my Uncle Mick the way most people believe. And Gravinzano used that very fact by telling him lies about some mob issue because he knew Daddy would help him.”

“But I now know your father would have never helped him had he known the truth,” said Clark.

Bonita nodded. “He never would have. I can tell you that.”

Clark looked at her. “Was that true what he said in Santa Monica? About calling the cops on his own son over a domestic situation?”

Bonita nodded to that too. “It’s true. And my brother Donnie spent time in prison behind that. And it worked. Donald never looked back at that kind of behavior ever again. But that’s my dad. He’s not gonna uphold wrong.”

“Then why did he hide Gravinzano in the first place?”

“Because he thought it was a mob issue. You have to understand this and understand it clearly, Clark. My family

comes from a long line of mobsters. My uncles were just a taste of what kind of family I'm a part of. They're hard men and they don't play. If a mob family goes after our family, we look out for our family, right or wrong. That's just how it is."

Clark nodded. "I understand that."

"But can you live with somebody like me who will never renounce her family, or what they stand for? Not even for you."

Clark smiled and turned toward Bonita. They were now face to face. "I used to dream that I could someday be a part of a big happy family. I didn't see it as a big, happy mob family," he added and they both laughed. "But you do have a big family that will go to the ends of the earth for you. I saw that already. And I love that."

Bonita smiled and placed her hand on the side of his face. But she could still see the tension in his bright blue eyes. "But we still have a question to answer," she said.

"What Lou meant by my father's death had nothing to do with gambling debts, and he said replace. But then he decided he was going to die, but he wasn't going to die alone. He tried to take your mother out."

“But thank God for Uncle Mick. He’s always thinking ahead of crooks and bad men. He knows them so well.”

“Is he one?”

“A crook? No. A bad man? Absolutely.”

Clark was surprised to hear Bonita admit that. But that was the quirkiness about her that he loved. “Okay,” he said and they laughed.

Then Bonita exhaled. “How did you survive it, Clark?” she asked him.

He knew exactly what she meant. “I had a distraction,” he said. “I had football. It was still hard, though, because my old man had already made clear he wanted to be my day-to-day manager. Like Harper is today.”

“How did Harper get the job?”

“Because my ...” Then Clark stopped midsentence.

Bonita stared at him, confused. “Because why?”

Clark looked at her. “Because my old man died. Because my father was murdered.”

“And Harper replaced him,” said Bonita, finishing his thought, and they both sat up in bed in shocked.

Then they threw their covers off and began throwing on clothes. Bonita was calling her father's name before they even made it out of the bedroom.

Charles and Jenay heard their daughter's cry and they quickly sat up as their bedroom door flew open. Bonita and Clark rushed in.

"Daddy, we think we know who hired Lou," Bonita said.

"Who?"

"Harper," said Clark.

Charles frowned. "Your manager?"

"The man who got injured in his first year as a pro in the NFL. We were great friends and he was a year ahead of me. He knew my old man wanted to manage my day-to-day business dealings, but when he got injured he must have felt my old man would push him aside. Because they never got along. They were both always competing for my attention. If Harper got rid of my dad, then he could replace him as my day-to-day manager."

“Replace,” said Charles. “That’s the term that Lou character used before he tried to take out my wife.”

“Right,” said Clark.

Charles threw the covers off and jumped out of bed. He was only in his boxers, but he quickly began putting on his pants. “How did Lou come into the frame anyway?”

“He’s Harper’s cousin.”

“Another cousin,” Jenay said.

“Harper hired him just before I retired when I was ready to hire a P.I. firm to find my family’s killer. Harper handled it because he knew who killed my family, and had to make certain was never told the truth. I figured they knew you had given him a safe place to live, but they didn’t know where that was. They needed to turn me against you enough that I would be willing to take your land, use it as a bargaining chip, and finally you would lead us to Gravinzano. And they’d get to Gravinzano and kill him before he told the truth. They knew he lied to you to get you to help him. They couldn’t afford for the truth to come out.”

“Where’s Harper now?” asked Jenay.

“He’s at your hotel, Ma,” said Bonita. “We’ve got to get Brent to pick him up.”

“Like hell,” said Charles, putting on his shoes. “He tried to kill my child and my wife. I’m picking his ass up. You go downstairs and get Uncle Mick. And you come too, Nay. I’m not trusting your security to anybody but myself or Mick.”

Jenay was surprised. Charles almost never allowed her to go anywhere near any potential problem. But she didn’t wait around for him to realize what he was saying. As soon as Bonita and Clark left the room, she got her naked ass out of that bed with the quickness.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Charles and Jenay got out of the SUV and made their way to their hotel's lobby. Clark and Bo were back, while Mick remained behind the wheel of the SUV just in case Harper tried to make a run for it. If, they all understood, he hadn't already.

They walked up to the front desk and the young desk clerk stood up as if she recognized the owners.

“Good evening, Mr. Sinatra. Mrs. Sinatra.”

“Hi,” Jenay said. “Is Harper Dutton still checked in?”

“Mr. McKenzie's manager?”

“That's who I mean yes.”

“Yes, ma'am, he's still here. But he just left a few minutes ago.”

“He left?”

“Did he say where he was going?” Clark asked her.

“No, sir. But he did have his packed bags with him.”

“Ah shit!” Charles said.

“Which way did he go?” Bonita asked. “Do you know?”

“I just saw him leave from right in front of the lobby door. But he did go that way,” she said, pointing toward the right.

“That’s better than nothing,” Jenay said and they all hurried out of the lobby and were about to pile back into the SUV so that Mick could give chase. But Clark stopped in his tracks.

“What is it, Mac?” Charles asked him.

Clark looked at him. “What bags?”

“What do you mean?” Bonita asked.

“Harper wasn’t coming back to Maine no time soon. He took all he had with him. I was coming back, and Lou, but Harper had planned to remain in Santa Monica to work with the governing board, although that was before they turned me down. And when we came back here, nobody had time to get any luggage. We just scrambled, got on the plane, and hurried back here. Harp had no luggage to take.”

“Then why would that child say he had his bags packed?” Jenay asked.

“To make it seem he was running away,” said Bonita, and they all agreed.

“Do you know the desk clerk, Nay?” Charles asked his wife.

“No. Never saw her before. I assumed my desk supervisor hired her while I was in the hospital.”

“Or she’s working with that Harper guy,” Charles said, and they all ran back into the lobby. As soon as the clerk saw them running back in, she took off running down the back corridor just behind the front desk.

“Let Mick know to get around back!” Charles yelled as he, Clark, and Bonita took off behind the clerk. Jenay ran to tell Mick.

But Charles, Clark, and Bonita had Harper on their minds. They had to get to him before he got away. They had to finalize what happened that night for Clark’s sake. They ran fast and they ran hard around corridor after corridor until they were running out of a back door.

As soon as they ran outside, Harper was standing in the middle of the courtyard with a gun to his head. “Back off, I mean it now!” Harper was yelling.

“Take it easy, Harper,” Clark said, getting in front of Bonita and Charles. “Just hold on.”

“I’ll blow my brains out,” Harper said. “I’m not playing, Clark.”

“But why?” Clark wanted to know. “Why did you do it, man?”

“Because he wasn’t going to let me be with you. He was jealous of our relationship. I told you all the time your father hated me. But you would never listen. I told you all the time that as soon as you signed that big NFL contract, he was going to make sure I had nothing to do with you. And I needed you. I blew out my knee in my first season. My career was over before I had a chance to have any stats. And your father wanted to wipe me away from you. And you were the only connection to football I still had left.”

“So you killed him?”

“I didn’t kill anybody! I ordered Lou to hire somebody. But how was I to know he’d hire the cousin of the woman you met at your twenty-ninth birthday party? How was I to know her father was the man who hid the shooter? Lou found out the name of the man who hid Archie the Grave,

but I didn't find out about the man's daughter until after we got to Maine."

"You knew we were planning to go to the beach. Did you hire that guy to try and kill Bonita?"

"I had to. She was just like your father. She was going to make you get rid of me too. The writing was on the wall. I had to get her out of the picture."

"Did you hire Temanken, that supposedly super-fan to take shots at Clark and my daughter?" Charles asked.

"No," said Harper. "I had nothing to do with that idiot. He was just a distraction."

Then he leaned his head back and shook his head. "He was only supposed to shoot your father. Nobody else was supposed to get hurt. But he wiped out your whole family. I still have nightmares about that. I love you, man. I would have never let anybody harm your mother and your sisters."

"Then Put the gun down and let's talk about it, Harper. Let's talk this out."

Good move, Charles thought. The kid knew what he was doing.

And Harper looked like he was falling for it too. Until he realized Clark was standing directly in front of Bonita, as if he was protecting her. And Harper realized, in that moment, that Clark wasn't going to go against anything that bitch wanted. He would pretend to be putting his gun down, to talk the way Clark claimed to want, but as soon as they thought the threat was over, he was going to earn a name. He was going to take Clark McKenzie away from this earth. He would be gone, too. He was certain they weren't going to let him get out of it alive, even if it meant prison. But his legend would have already been made.

As soon as it appeared the he was removing his gun from his head and about to place it on the ground, he suddenly lifted the gun up, aiming it directly at Clark, and was about to fire.

But Charles fired first, and Harper's gun fell from his hand even as Clark was pushing Bonita even further back with his hand. Then Harper's body, with his shocked eyes still wide open, fell down and died.

Clark and Bonita were shocked. They looked at Charles. How did he see that coming?

But Charles saw it a mile away. “Once a slickster,” he said, “always a slickster. Never trust a man that loves you in the name of death.”

And it was in that moment, looking at Big Daddy Sinatra, a man he thought he was going to hate, did Clark see Bonita’s father in full. And he understood, in that instant, why Bonita had to be the one and only for him. She had the right stuff.

He squeezed her hand even tighter as her father placed his arms around both of them.

EPILOGUE

A barbeque in the backyard and Clark thought he had died and gone to Heaven. Bonita had a huge family of brothers and sisters and uncles and cousins and they weren't fighting or jockeying for position or doing anything but laughing and having the time of their lives.

He didn't think they would come. He invited them all to come to his mansion in Dallas, for a Texas-sized cookout, but he thought they wouldn't approve of a jock like him being with their little sister/niece/cousin. But they all came. Even her best friends Rhea and Zara managed to break away from their busy schedules and showed up too. And everybody came with good cheer and well wishes. It was like the big family Clark always dreamed of having after his family was gone. He was a man walking on air.

But as the festivities wore on, he knew there was still a job he had to do. It just might be the hardest thing he'd ever done. But he steeled himself and did it. He went over to Bonita, took her by the hand, and then they walked over to Charles and Jenay, who were lounging near the pool.

“Could we see the two of you for a few minutes, please?” Clark asked them.

Although Jenay jumped right up, Charles was more hesitant. But he slowly got up too and he and Jenay followed Clark and Bonita into Clark’s house, down a corridor, and into a sitting room. He closed the door, and they all sat down.

Charles could see that his daughter was happy, but he could see a nervousness in her eyes too. She didn’t know what to expect from her father, and he understood that. But what he liked about Clark was his resolve. He always got to the point. He wasn’t a bullshitter. But that didn’t mean Charles was going to go along with any okey doke.

“Let me start off by saying how good it is to see you again, Mrs. Sinatra,” Clark said. “Bo tells me your bouts of exhaustion are no more.”

“It was the medicine the hospital was giving to me whenever I went in due to an energy drain. When Doc Martin didn’t give it to me that last time, I never had another episode. I never had to go back. And it’s been five months now. I’m usually back in that hospital in weeks after I get out.”

“It’s a blessing,” said Charles.

“Yes it is,” agreed Bonita.

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Clark.

“And my husband set Doc Martin up in private practice, a beautiful practice, just like he promised he would. It was a win-win all around.”

“But I know that’s not why we’re here,” said Charles.

“No, sir,” Clark said, and Bonita steeled herself. Her father was going to be the one to convince. And he wasn’t looking like he was interested in being convinced. But Clark already knew that.

He leaned forward, his eyes trained on Charles. “As you know,” he said, “your daughter and I have been dating for several months now.”

“Five months and three days, to be exact,” said Bonita.

Jenay smiled and shook her head. “Girl, if you don’t let that man talk.”

“During those months, I have gotten to view your daughter as the most magnificent person I have ever known.”

Charles and Jenay looked at Bonita. Bonita was smiling, but Charles still could see that nervousness beneath her smile.

“To make a long story short,” said Clark, “I told Bo that I was going to ask the two of you for her hand in marriage before I asked her.”

Both Charles and Jenay sat up straight. Although they both had a feeling Clark’s request to see them had something to do with marriage, it still was a jolt when he actually said it.

“I’m coming to you first,” Clark continued, “because I know, if you don’t approve, Bo will feel torn between her loyalty to you as her parents, and to me. And I don’t want that. I will never come between you and your daughter.” Then he exhaled. “Mr. and Mrs. Sinatra, will I have your blessings when I ask your daughter to marry me?”

Bonita was staring at her father, but also her mother too. They both seemed as if they were in deep contemplation. And then Jenay looked at Charles, as if she wanted to hear his thoughts first.

And Big Daddy didn’t mince words. “No,” he said to Clark. “You don’t have my blessing yet.”

Everybody were staring at Charles.

“May I ask why, sir? Is it because of my past behavior with women?”

“Of course that’s a part of it. I lived that life. I know what it’s like. But the main part is my daughter herself. She’s only twenty-three. She’s just starting her career. It’s too soon. Give her a couple years to get on her feet, to get her career off the ground, to see if you’re the one for her. I know you say she’s the one for you. But you’ve got to be the one for her too. So I say not yet. Give it a couple years. And if you two still feel that way about each other then go for it. I will gladly give my blessing. But not yet.”

You could hear a pin drop in the room. Clark had not expected that. He and Bonita looked at Jenay.

“Love is a tough thing,” Jenay said. “It takes time to settle. Charles is right about that. But had I followed your father’s advice, I wouldn’t have ever married his ass!”

Clark and Bonita laughed. Charles looked at her as if he knew he didn’t hear her right.

“We barely knew each other and you were moving me to Jericho,” Jenay continued. “Because you knew I was the one. Yes, Bo is young. But who’s more mature than her? Tell me that. You didn’t select her to be your CEO because she was your daughter. You selected her because she’s tough and

a leader and knows what she wants and nobody's going to persuade her otherwise."

She looked at Bonita. "If you love him with all of your heart, and you want to be his wife above any other human being alive, and if you believe he will treat you right, then you have my blessing."

Bonita and Clark smiled. "Thank you, ma'am," Clark said.

"Thanks Mom," said Bonita.

Then they all looked at Charles. But Charles was staring at Bonita. He trusted her. "What do you say, Bo?"

Bonita hesitated the way her mother often did, and then she spoke. "I love Clark very much. In the five months that I've known him, I've found him to be a wonderful man."

"But?"

"But ... if I don't marry this man, Daddy, I do believe I'm going to burst at the seams!"

Clark and Jenay laughed.

"Are you kidding me?" Bonita continued. "He's my dream come true, Daddy! He's everything I've ever wanted in

a man. He treats me like a queen. He loves me. He truly loves me. What more could I want?"

Everybody were looking at Charles again. But this time Charles smiled. "I was just testing your ass," he said. "I was just seeing if there was a shred of doubt."

"There's no doubt at all on my part," said Bonita.

"There's definitely none on my part," said Clark.

Charles smiled. "Then you absolutely have my blessing," he said, and they all stood happily. Clark went over to Charles and offered his hand. Charles pulled Clark into a big bear hug.

"Hurt her," he whispered in his ear, "and I'll kill you in so many different ways that you won't know your ass from your eyes. You feel me?"

Clark's eyes stretched. That was rather graphic. But he smiled. He knew what kind of family he was joining. "Yes," he said. "I feel you very deeply, sir."

And then Charles, satisfied, shook his hand.

And Clark looked at Bonita. And Bonita looked at Clark. All they could do was smile. They couldn't find words

to say. But the twinkle in their eyes, and the joy in their hearts, said it all.

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