

JAYLEN

A DRUNKEN NIGHT OUT LEADS TO MARRIAGE...

KATIEDOWE

Jaylen

A drunken night out leads to marriage...

A sexy accidental marriage romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

Anika Groves is a career-focused PR manager for renowned music producer James Monteith.

Meanwhile, James's son Jaylen—a dashing model—struggles to find his own path, independent of his father's influence.

When a trip to Italy throws Anika and Jaylen together, a drunken night leads them to a shocking wedding!

Now, to avoid a PR nightmare, they agree to play the part of a happily married couple for one year...

Yet as the banter flows and tension mounts, they realize their faux marriage might be hiding real feelings!

But when Jaylen's ex returns, determined to ruin their budding romance, can they turn their staged love story into a real-life love song?

And can Anika navigate the complex notes of her heart without striking a sour chord in her professional life?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

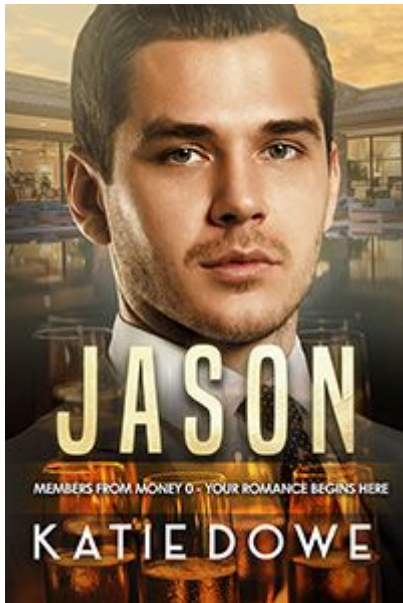
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Chapter 1

“You are going to Italy.”

“I am going to Italy, and it will be a working trip.” Anika was checking and double checking that she had everything. Passport, cards, and some euros she had managed to get at her bank. Appropriate clothing, she had checked the weather, and it would be cold, colder than home. It was November, and fall had rushed in with a bang.

“How do you feel?”

She folded the sturdy PJs, tucking them into a corner of her suitcase before sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I have traveled before,” she reminded him. The man seated on the sofa across from her was her best friend. Cory Fielding had been a constant in her life ever since she had been dumped into that group home when she was only five years old.

He had been eight at the time and tough. He had also taken a liking to her and attached himself to her from then. They had become inseparable and now, twenty-three years later, they still were. They had both done pretty well for themselves, considering.

He was a damn good lawyer, and she was the first assistant to one of the biggest music producers in the world. Her job was hectic and demanding, but she did not mind it in the least. She was in an enviable position and appreciated the opportunity that had been given to her.

“I am aware. But you are going to a music festival and will get to meet celebrities from all over the world. It must be a daunting prospect.”

“You know me. Always up for the challenge.”

He stared at her soberly. “I suppose you will get around to what’s eating at you.”

Sighing softly, she rose and resumed the packing. She should have known that he would figure out that it was not just nerves hitting at her but something else entirely. “Tyrone and I had a fight.”

His expression turned stony. “Physical? Did he lay hands on you?”

She cast him a look. “You know better than that.”

“When are you going to realize that he is not good enough for you?” The impatience was there, and so was the exasperation.

“You are an exceptionally beautiful woman who should be treasured.” He rose and started pacing around the room, hands jammed into the pockets of his dark blue dress pants. He had come straight from the law firm when she called him and was still wearing his work clothes.

“He is just going through a rough patch.” She was quick to defend the man she was seeing. She had met Tyrone six months ago and she and the singer/deejay had hit it off immediately.

Normally, she would stay away from the celebrity types, but she had found him charming and witty. He was an up-and-coming artist and was just beginning to get some notice in the press.

“Let me guess—” Cory stopped his pacing to face her. “His record label is not getting enough attention?”

She shifted and turned back to her packing. “Something like that,” she muttered. “I really like him.”

“And you are determined that this relationship will work because the others didn’t.” He strode over to pull her away from the packing. Leading her to the sofa, he sat her down and joined her.

“We both have abandonment issues. We were both left on the doorstep of a group home by so-called mothers who decided that they could not be bothered with raising children.”

His expression was gentle. “We are kindred spirits, the minute I saw you standing in that grimy hallway, I felt something, and I knew I wanted to protect you.” He rubbed her arms absently.

“I am not going to allow anyone to hurt you, Anika. And that saying, you deserve someone who is going to love you the way you deserve to be loved.”

The long speech made her feel slightly uncomfortable and brought back memories she wanted to suppress.

“He is not that bad.”

Corey’s eyebrows lifted.

“Okay,” She laughed softly. “He is selfish, and whenever he is in a creative slump, he ignores me.”

“Dump him.”

“No.” She shook her head firmly. “I have to see this through. You should understand. I am lousy at this relationship thing. The other two I had, I just left without an explanation. All that money paid to the therapist, and I would like to think that I am getting better now. I have to prove that I can be in a relationship and stay in one.”

“You are in one now,” he reminded her gently. “We have been friends for more than two decades. It seems to me that is proof enough that you can maintain.”

“It’s different.” She sighed. “You are different, and not for the first time, I wish we could feel something more than familial love for each other. It would make it so much easier.”

He laughed at that and squeezed her hands. Not once in their long association had he entertained impure thoughts of her.

She was his sister, they might not be from the same parents, but she was his family, and to him, that was so much better than being her lover. Their friendship had been maintained and that was something he was incredibly grateful for.

“We will find our someones—one day we will. But back to you honey, believe me when I say it is not that jerk you are hooked up with.” Letting go of her hand, he cupped her cheek lightly, dark brown eyes indulgent. “You don’t have to settle.”

“You are one to talk,” she grumbled. “Are you still going out with that lawyer?”

His hand dropped and his expression became shuttered. “We broke up.”

“Cory—”

“No.” He shook his head. “We are not going down that road.”

“That’s not fair. You get to dissect my relationship and yours is off-limits?”

“I really do not want to talk about it.” He rose and she watched as he went to finish her packing. As far as he was concerned, the conversation was over and she was not going to pry anything more out of him. With a sigh, she got up and joined him.

James glared at his son furiously. “You dare to disobey me?”

Jaylen let loose a harsh laugh, green eyes glittering. “You are forgetting that this past October, I turned thirty. I

can do whatever the hell I want and I am saying that I will be taking off for six months.

After this music festival crap that I am forced to attend, I am out of here. Who knows? I just might extend that to a year, if I happen to find someone who holds my attention for that long.” He gave the old man a mocking look. “You should be proud; I am following in your damn footsteps.”

James reigned in his temper with great difficulty. He supposed the resentment and anger—those were warranted, but he was getting tired of the disrespect.

Jaylen was his only heir and he had wanted him actively involved in the business that would be passed to him a few years from now. He had messed up his relationship with his wife when Jaylen was fifteen years old and compounded the problem by parading a series of women in the home.

Kathleen had moved back to Italy, where she had family, and had died a few years ago.

After his mother's death, things had gotten from bad to worse and the tenuous relationship had dissolved with Jaylen moving out of the manor and going about his own way.

He had chosen the path of modeling as an act of defiance and had excelled at it.

His golden beauty could be seen on billboards around the world. He had made the covers of more magazines than anyone in his career, and his reputation as a playboy was well-known. He showed no signs of settling down whatsoever and had told his father bluntly that marriage was the furthest thing from his mind.

"I have seen what it does to people," he had told him with a sneer. "And I think I have inherited your genes."

He had inherited his mother's outstanding beauty and her excellent bone structure. James had made a gigantic mistake by letting Kathleen go and hurting her like that and he was constantly paying for it.

Trying to reach his son at this point was a hopeless endeavor and he had just about given up. The boy was stubborn to the point of being mulish and whenever he made a decision, it was made in stone.

“I am asking you to reconsider.” The fight had gone out of him and he was suddenly feeling every inch of his sixty years.

“Why?”

“Because you are my son, goddammit.” He heaved out a breath. “Look Jaylen, we have not gotten along and I admit that most of it is my fault. I messed up. I was young and stupid and I made a mess of things. I don’t want you to make the same mistakes.”

“So what you are telling me is that you are looking out for me.” His lips curled in derision. “You want me to let the past go and come meekly home.” He looked around the posh office with its stunning gold and green decor . “I bet you have an office already set up for me. Is it as big as this one? Do I get an assistant as well?”

“The company is yours—”

“The company is yours.” Jaylen shoved himself up from the lounge chair he had been sitting on, with the spectacular view of the city. Not that he had noticed the familiar view much. He was seething with resentment for being summoned. “I have a wildly lucrative career in modeling, remember?”

“And when that is over and done with?” James asked him tightly. “You are thirty and your shelf life is just about over. What then?”

Jaylen smiled slightly. “Worried about me Dad? I have had numerous offers from agents, willing to represent me if I wanted to go into acting. I have enough money to travel the damn world and just take it easy.

You built this company for you. You get off on the hype, sleeping with the young nubile so-called singers who would do anything, barring nothing to get on with their careers.”

“And I am not like that anymore.” James admitted in a quiet and resigned tone.

“Ah, let me guess. You went to bed one night and got a revelation, an epiphany.” Jaylen dragged his fingers through the tangle of shoulder-length blonde hair that was his particular trademark.

Truth be told, he was sick of the arguments and the anger churning inside his gut. He was labeled a playboy and that was something he had come to resent. He wanted to be taken seriously but was afraid that his reputation had been cast in stone.

“I don’t want to fight with you son.”

“Neither do I,” he admitted. Glancing at his watch, he saw that he was already running late for his appointment. “Is that all? I have agreed to show a united front by attending this music festival. Consider my duty finished for the day. What time is the flight?”

“First thing in the morning.”

“I will be there.” He turned and headed for the door and James let him leave. The doors slammed shut behind his son and he leaned back in his chair, the weariness invading his body.

He could not blame the boy. An example had never been set. He had allowed power and fame to get to his head and had been unable to resist the women coming at him from all directions.

Now he had lost his only son. The constant battle between them had been going on for years and he was getting sick of it.

The knock sounded on the door and jarred him out of his despair. “Come in.”

“I hope I am not interrupting.” The coolly beautiful woman strode into the office, bringing the vibrant air inside with her.

“Not at all.”

“Jane was not at her desk,” she murmured, referring to his assistant.

“She had to run out for a bit. I hope you are ready for the trip.”

“I am looking forward to it.” A slight smile touched her lips. “I have a few statements to go over before I send out a press release.”

“You don’t have to run anything by me. I trust your excellent instincts.”

“And that is something I really appreciate and do not take for granted. But I need your input. We have all of

these talents attending the festival. The rumors surrounding Shenae are pretty off-putting. Drugs, the lackluster performance on stage at the academy has put a stain on your stellar record.”

“Have you contacted her agent?” James leaned back in the chair, the problems with his son, shoved to the back of his mind. He noticed that the young woman had not bothered to sit, but was pacing the thick powder blue carpet slowly as she clicked something on her iPad.

“Several times. She refuses to confirm the rumor, only saying that Shenae has agreed to go to an exclusive clinic to get some treatments. I need to spin this in a positive manner.” She looked over at James and jotted something down.

“The public will not be fooled by a half-assed statement and I am not in the habit of making one. I always check the source and the verity of the statement.”

A smile touched his lips. “You are always very thorough.”

“I have also added that your son Jaylen will be joining the entourage and attending the festival.”

She had seen the man striding out of the office with barely a civil nod and had surmised that there had been an argument as usual. She was just an employee here, and working for a man like James Monteith was difficult without the family drama thrown in.

“Yes,” he said in clipped tones, an ominous expression on his very attractive face. “He has deigned to grace us with his presence.” He shook his head as she opened her mouth to speak. “That’s not your problem. Report on the new group.”

“Nothing much to report.” She glanced at her notes. “They are very good and have been getting a lot of airplay. The video was a very good touch by the way. It shows them as a united front and women who are not afraid to take chances.”

He nodded, pleased at her insight. She was very good at what she did and embraced the challenges, even though

there were many. He was very demanding and expected exceptional work from the people around him.

Anika Groves was a determined young woman who was not afraid to speak her mind. He admired her honesty and her integrity. "I think that is all. You may finish up and go on home. We are heading out early in the morning."

"I have some things to finish up before I leave." Jotting something else down, she made her way out, leaving him to brood.

Jaylen kept up the pace until he had passed through the concierge's desk and returned the flirtatious and slightly adoring smile until he was inside the private elevator that would take him to his suite.

He had been so pissed and annoyed by the argument that he had forgotten that he had dismissed his security

detail and had simply jumped into the Corvette and left. He wanted space away from the corporate office.

He had just come home from a two-month-long tour of the Caribbean where he had been doing some commercials for colognes and loungewear for men. He was tired and crotchety and just needed some time to himself.

Keying in his code, he let himself into the elegant and luxurious cream and blue suite, heading straight for the liquor cabinet. The living room was spotless, of course.

He had a maid coming in to take care of the place whenever he was due to return home. Pouring a generous amount of whiskey, he wandered over to the window to stare broodingly at the leaden sky.

He was dead set on going away—far away for six months. He had already accepted the offer from the client. Six months of island hopping, something that sounded about what he needed right now.

He was at the peak of his career and was enjoying the fruits of his labor. He had treated himself to a speedboat just recently and was in the process of buying a helicopter.

He was not only an international model who commanded an incredibly large salary, he was the son and heir of James Monteith, music producer extraordinaire. He had more money than he could possibly spend in several decades.

But he was growing restless. He had lost the edge, the joy he had felt walking the runway or posing for the camera. Producers and directors had approached him, telling him that he would be perfect for this part or that one, but he was not interested. It would be more of the same.

He was unhappy. A grim smile touched his lips. On the surface, he had everything a young man could possibly want and need. He had women at his beck and call, but it was posing no challenges whatsoever and that was what was bothering him.

It was all so easy. He could pick up the phone and make a call and someone would come running. He was the life of every party. He was wildly popular and his looks and money opened doors for him.

Tossing back the rest of the liquor, he went to put the glass away and took a seat on one of the leather sofas.

Picking up the phone, he brought up the number and placed the call.

“I know it’s late, but I need you to fit me in.”

He listened for a minute. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Dragging his fingers through his hair, he rose and stood there looking around the room. He had been seeing this particular therapist for the past eight months and the woman was discreet. He needed a sit down before the trip tomorrow.

Anika rechecked her suitcase. She was tired and her feet were killing her. Kicking off the heels, she plopped down on the edge of the bed and massaged her soles. She had not meant to stay that long at the office, but she had been caught up.

Tyrone had been mad of course. She had promised to drop by his place earlier today, but time had gotten away from her.

“I can still come over.”

“Don’t bother.” She had heard the petulant tone in his voice and knew that there was going to be another long-drawn-out argument. “Obviously, your job is more important than our relationship.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she had said sharply. “You know I am going off to Italy in the morning and have to prep for the trip. I am always there for you.”

“Are you?” there had been a nasty note in his voice that had her anger increasing. “It seems to me that you are so caught up with this damn hype, the big prestigious music producer that it is getting to your head.”

She had counted to ten before she responded.

“I am going to let that pass because you are obviously pissed. I will ask again. Do you want me to come over?”

“Don’t do me any damn favors.” He had snapped and hung up on her. Corey was right, she thought with a sigh and she was hanging on because she wanted to be able to stick it out. To try and see if she can do the relationship thing.

Her phone pinged and she thought about not picking up. But it was Corey.

“Hey.”

“Hey. What are you up to?”

“Just laying her and trying to get the energy to go and take a much-needed shower. I just got in. Where are you?”

“Still at the firm. We are working this murder trial and it is beating our collective asses.

All packed?”

“Yep. We are leaving first thing in the morning.”

“Have fun.”

“It will be a working trip.” She propped the pillows behind her head and closed her eyes.

“Which does not mean you cannot get some fun out of it. Try and hook up with one of those smoldering Italian types and have sex.”

“You are forgetting that I am in a relationship.”

“Are you now?” he asked her dryly. “Promise me that you will not think of that—that piece of work while you are away. You deserve a break.”

“I promise that I will have fun. Satisfied?”

“For now, yes. Get some sleep and a safe flight.”

Chapter 2

Anika looked around the sumptuous room in appreciation. The rose and gold decor were appealing to the senses. She had been given a complete suite of her own, with a sitting room which she had immediately taken advantage of by plopping down into the soft and comfortable sofa and kicking off her shoes.

The flight had been long and a little uncomfortable. It had not only been her and James, but his son Jaylen had been on the flight as well. She had avoided speaking to him entirely. Not that he had even noticed her. He had been caught up in his own little world, broodingly staring out the window or browsing on his laptop.

The flight attendant had been embarrassed by her eagerness to serve him and Anika had felt slightly ill just looking at the entire scenario. But she supposed a man like him was used to women rushing to please him. She had buried herself in the article she was working on for the festival.

It was a global affair and reporters from around the world would be there to document what went on, but as the head of the PR, she had to be able to come up with her own spin on the artists they were representing.

She had told Corey that it was a great opportunity and she meant it. No, she was here, in Italy, in this sumptuous hotel that was part of the chain owned by Monteith's Music Industry and she was going to relax and enjoy herself.

Her eyes snapped open and a frown touched her brow as she thought back on the tension that had been thick in the air. They had been met at the hangar by a stretch limousine and even during the short ride to the hotel, the silence between father and son had been palpable.

James had been brisk and had wanted to know the salient points she had jotted down and she had launched into a discussion that had taken them the entire journey.

"The festival begins tomorrow at noon," he had told her as soon as they entered the elegant foyer of the hotel. "I suggest you use the time to get some rest and recover

from both the jet lag and the different timezone. We are going to be busy from then on.”

Rising, she went to the minibar to select a bottle of wine. There was a tray of cheeses and fruits on one of the side tables, along with some canapes and tiny sandwiches. She had eaten on the plane, and even though the ride had been uneventful, her stomach was still revolting from the different time zones.

Pouring the rich burgundy liquid into the glass, she piled some of the cheeses and grapes onto a plate and took it with her to sit on the sofa.

She had shot off a text to Tyrone letting him know she had landed safe, but there was still no response. No doubt, he was still sulking, she thought with a sigh. Reaching for the phone, she rapidly calculated the time difference in her head and wondered if Corey was in court.

“Hey.” She smiled in delight when he answered and nibbled on some cheese. “I was hoping I would not catch you at a bad time.”

“I am back at the firm, doing research. You landed.”

“Yes. An hour ago, and I am in this kick-ass rose and gold suite with all the trimmings. I was shown into my room by a very attractive Italian man with a mag accent.”

“Did you invite him in?”

“Oh yes. He is waiting for me in bed as we speak.”

“Yeah right,” he snorted. “How are you?”

“Jet-lagged and eating some fancy cheese. Oh, and drinking some Italian vintage wine. I am going to relax, take a long and leisurely bath in that big and fancy tub, and try to get some sleep. My system is shot to hell, but I will try and adjust.”

“It will take time.”

“Yeah. How are you?”

“Tired and wondering why the hell I chose to become a criminal defense lawyer.”

“I tried to talk you out of it.”

“You did not. You were the one who encouraged me to follow my dreams.”

“That’s because you were hell-bent on doing law. And you are extremely good at it.”

“I suppose you are right,” he sighed. “Did you call the guy?”

“His name is Tyrone and no, I just sent him a text, which by the way, he did not respond to.”

“Asshole.”

“Hey.”

“You know I am right. Dump the prick, Anika. You deserve better.”

“I have been thinking about that too. As a matter of fact, I have been doing a lot of thinking.”

“Good for you. Now I have several phone calls to return and tons of work to do before I get out of here. Check in, will you?”

“You know I will. Don’t work too hard.”

“Too late,” he muttered as he clicked off. Putting away the phone, she concentrated on the meal. Setting the plate aside, she went and poured herself another full glass of wine and took it with her into the bathroom.

In his own sumptuous suite, Jaylen was staring moodily into his glass of bourbon. He was having dinner with the old man and it was not something he was looking forward to. Besides this, coming here had brought the memories rushing back. His mother had lived here and had returned after the marriage had ended.

He had spent the holidays with her and at one point considered making it his home. It was in Italy, that he had decided that he was not going to follow in his father’s footsteps but choose his own path and she had encouraged him to do just that.

Missing her was something he was still trying to deal with and the years had not managed to dull the pain.

The therapy session last night had not gone as well as he had expected.

His mind turned to the conversation between them.

“You are not willing to meet him halfway? It sounds like your dad is trying to make amends.”

“For years of neglect? And for ruining my mother’s life?”

“You mean your life.”

Jaylen had glared at him. “I am fine.”

“Are you?” Dr. Jeffries had asked patiently. “It seems to me that you want him to pay for the way he handled things with your mother.”

“He left her.”

“And you told me in earlier sessions that he lived to regret it.”

“It was too damn late.”

“But it is not too late for you. For him to try and make things right between you.”

“I am no longer interested,” Jaylen said tightly.

“That does not appear to be the case,” the man had pointed out. “You are here in my office because you are interested. You just do not know how to forgive. Perhaps we should invite your father in for a session.”

“That is not going to happen.”

“I would like you to think about it.”

“It is not going to happen.”

Tossing back the rest of the drink, he rose and went into the bedroom to freshen up. He might as well get the damn dinner over and done with.

James dismissed the waiter as soon as his son came into the lovely blue and gold living room.

“Lobster quiche,” he murmured as soon as he took his seat. “And a bottle of Cabernet. An excellent vintage.”

Jaylen nodded curtly as he unfolded his napkin. “We have an early start in the morning. The press is already sniffing around.”

“I saw them in the lobby. Did you invite me here to boost ratings?” Jaylen reached for the glass of wine and took a sip. He had decided to try and be civil. No matter how he felt, he was going to make this a damn pleasant evening.

His father’s mouth tightened and he could see that he was trying his best to rein in his temper. He could safely say he was not off to the best of starts.

“I don’t need you for that.”

“I don’t suppose you do. Where is the estimable and efficient Ms. Groves?” The woman had ignored him the entire flight, not that he had minded in the least.

“I suspect she is in her suite, fine tuning the press releases for tomorrow.” James picked at his meal, feeling his appetite dissolving. He had hoped that inviting him on the trip would achieve some sort of truce and unity between them.

“Right.”

They resumed eating in silence. It was during the delicious, tart Limoncello that he brought up the topic of Jaylen's career.

"I noticed the billboards when we were coming in from the airport." He was referring to the wildly popular loungewear that had been showcased in the glossy photo.

"So?"

"I just want to say that I am proud of you son. You have made a career out of what you love."

Jaylen eyed him for a minute, looking for a hidden agenda. "Really?"

"Yes." James bit off a sigh. "I am not the enemy here."

“Sometimes it seems that way. And don’t think I did not notice your subtle ploy to get me to start seeing Anabel. I refuse to have my love life dictated by you or anyone for that matter. I saw right through her.”

“She is a sweet young woman from a very good family. And she happens to like you.”

Jaylen smiled grimly as he picked up his glass. “And I might have made a go of it if I did not smell your hand in the entire thing. When are you going to learn that I cannot and will not be manipulated?”

“I was not trying to manipulate you.” James felt the lid he had placed over his temper dissolving. The boy was determined to be difficult and he was sick of getting slapped in the damn face. “You are thirty years old and very soon, this very lucrative career of yours will be washed up.”

“It did not take too long, did it?” Jaylen’s green eyes smoldered. “Now we are getting to the real meat of the matter. You want me to tamely follow the rules. Get married, preferably to someone of your choosing, and take my rightful place in the company. Have I left anything out?”

“What the hell is wrong with that?” James filled his glass up, ignoring the tremors in his hand. “You are my only child, heir to that damn company. Is it that far-fetched that I would like to see you accept some responsibility and try to settle down? The company will be yours eventually.”

“I don’t want the damn company!” His eyes glittered as he shoved up and out of the chair. “It ruined Mother and made her unhappy. You were so focused on making money, building the company your father left you that you shut her in a room, screwed around on her, and then left her.”

“You don’t get to speak to me that way.” James lunged to his feet, his own eyes glittering. “I am still your damn father and I demand respect—”

“Demand?” Jaylen laughed harshly. “Is that the best you can do? You will get respect when you deserve it and you sure as hell do not deserve it. You cannot run my life, is that clear? I go where I damn well please and do whatever the hell I want to.

It is time you get that through your head. I am not one of your employees, not your puppet. I am my own person and you had better learn to accept it.” With that, he turned and strode out of the room, slamming the doors shut behind him.

James slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes. His heart was racing and his skin felt clammy. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he took out the blood pressure medicine and swallowed it down dry.

He was not supposed to be drinking at all and had promised his physician that he would cut back on everything. He was supposed to be cutting back on everything.

“You are doing too much James,” his doctor, who was also a friend, had told him. “You are supposed to be handing over the reins, not taking on more responsibilities.”

“And who am I going to hand it over to?” he had asked bitterly.

“Surely, if you told Jaylen—”

“No,” he shook his head. “I do not want him to know.”

“For Christ’s sake! You have cancer and as much as it is not terminal, you are going to need treatment. He is your son and only living relative, there must be a way to bridge the gap between you.”

“He blames me for her death and I cannot say he is wrong about that. I was a damn fool who allowed his cock to dictate, to take over and now I am paying the consequences. I am old and alone. My wife is dead and my son hates me. A hell of a thing.”

A hell of a thing, he thought as he reached for the half glass of wine. He had wanted them to talk, try and be civil, and come to some sort of agreement. He wanted Jaylen to at least attend some of the meetings and put some kind of interest in the company he would be inheriting.

They had holdings all over the world. It was not just the music, but in real estate, hotels, car marts, and the villas right here in Italy.

He had an excellent team working for him, but they were just that—employees—Jaylen was his flesh and blood, his son and before anything happened to him, he wanted to make certain that his blood, sweat, and tears would not go in vain.

And the boy was right—he shook his head. His son was thirty, but he still thought of him as his boy. He had missed years of his life, leaving the rearing to his wife and the well-paid nannies.

He had missed out on so much and trying to make up for it was not working. He could not make up for the mistakes he made and they had been many.

Downing the rest of the wine, he pushed the plate away and shoved up to his feet. He had an early morning and could feel the jet lag crashing down on him. Combined

with the pills he had taken and the wine, he could feel his body going lax.

Jaylen was here and that was going to have to be enough. Pushing the doors of his bedroom suite open, he went in and headed straight for the bed.

The dreams came that night. The memories she had tried to suppress came tumbling into her subconscious and there was no way she could avoid them.

Her childhood and of being left at the children's home at the tender age of five. She had started having them the very night she got there and had somehow managed to control the screams and shivers after a while.

Jumping up, she pressed trembling hands to her thundering heart, the sheen of sweat coating her forehead and the hairs clinging to her forehead. Gulping

in several deep breaths, she tried to even out her heartbeats.

She was still shaking. Dammit! Swinging her legs off the bed, she stood there for a minute to get her bearings before heading into the bathroom. She used the commode and then splashed cold water on her face.

It was almost midnight here, which means it was a little before six in the US. Pressing his number, she grabbed a bottle of water and went back into the bedroom.

“I am sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You cannot sleep. The time difference and—”

“The nightmares.” She took a long gulp of the water. “It was bad.”

“Hell. How bad?”

“Like the time I just got to that horrible place. I don’t know what brought it all back. She is dead, we know that she died a few years after dumping me at that place —“She rubbed her forehead where a headache was brewing.

“Will you be, okay?”

“Yes.” She swallowed the bile that was in her throat.
“Yes. I have to be. Tomorrow is a big day. Oh Corey,”
She drew a shuddering breath. “I am not weak, but I am just terrified of commitment- of caring, of putting myself out there and then having the person leaving—”

“You are getting ahead of yourself.” His deep voice turned harsh and was just what she needed to bounce back.

“You are right.” She took another swallow of the water and felt the calm surfacing. “I am okay now. I am okay.”

“Good. I am here, you know that. Night or day.”

She felt the tears pricking the back of her lids. He was not just saying it to comfort her. He had proven over the years that he was always there for her.

“I know.” Huffing out a breath she felt herself settling.
“What were you doing?”

“I was in bed.”

“Alone?”

He chuckled. “Yes. Alone. I was going over some briefs and trying to unknot the damn tension of dealing with a witness. A very hostile one.”

“And I interrupted your train of thought.”

“Timely interruption. Will you be able to go back to sleep?”

“Yes,” she told him and meant it. “Like I said, tomorrow is a- well, it’s tomorrow now technically. It’s a big day and I have to be at my best.”

“I suppose I will read about it.”

“I suppose you will. Thanks Corey.”

“Any time hon. Now go and get your beauty rest.”

She hung up and finished the water. Passing a hand over the messy bun she had made before dropping into bed, she dumped the bottle into the recycle bin and climbed back into bed.

Anika was not the only one having a difficult time getting some sleep. Jaylen had left his father's suite and had thought about heading out to take a walk to clear his head. But he could not just go for a damn coffee without being harassed by hopeful fans.

He was the son of a multi-billionaire music producer and on top of it, he was an international model. He could not very well take a stroll along the streets. Unless of course, he had an entourage with him and he had never been the type to have one.

So, he had done the next best thing. Flinging himself into his suite, he grabbed a bottle of expensive scotch and went out on the patio. They were in Milan, one of the most famous fashion capitals in the world—he knew the place like the back of his hand and he should make an effort to enjoy the week he would be spending here.

He had assignments lined up—a photo shoot for Romano’s latest cologne, and a spread for ‘Glamor’ magazine. He would be kept busy, busy enough to stay away from the old man.

Leaning back against the plump cushions, he ordered himself to chill. He had these breathing exercises he practiced, especially when he was harried or anxious. People naturally thought that he was not nervous, whenever he walked on stage and the spotlight was on him.

But deep down, he was shy and much preferred his own company. He had made that revelation to a talk show host during an interview and she had burst out laughing.

“We do not believe that,” she had told him with a glint in her eyes. “A man like you, looking the way you do, there is no way you have a shy bone in that beautiful body of yours.”

He had not bothered to refute her comment but had smiled and moved on to the next question.

Putting the bottle to his head, he took a healthy swallow and relished the burning in his gut. He had tried for calm, had he not? He had decided to take the path of peace and it had failed.

There could never be any common ground between them. Too much had happened in his life, his father had done irreparable damage that would not be soothed with a few apologies and regrets.

He was a grown man now and he was going his own way. After this damn trip, he was hightailing it—he needed the space and the time to get his head on straight.

James Monteith was not going to dictate to him. That was over and done with. Sighing deeply, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He had liked Anabel, but when she mentioned how much his dad would love to see them as a couple, that had been it for him. No more!

Chapter 3

The first day of the music festival was a success and Anika supposed she should be gratified by that. She tried to be, pulling out all stops to show that she was having a good time. She was objective in her comments and had written notes that she was going to use.

The press had come out in their numbers and the artists had performed to their best ability. But the nightmares combined with the text message she had received from Tyrone had left her shaken and stunned. He had broken up with her over a tersely written text message. 'It's not working out. We should call it quits.' That was it.

She had tried calling him but the phone went straight to voicemail. He had dumped her. Never mind that she had been thinking about dumping him. The bastard never even had the nerve to call and do it properly or wait until she returned.

Well good riddance to him. She no longer had to pander to his massive and fragile ego and she should be happy.

But the combination of circumstances and being in a foreign country was having a diverse effect on her.

She felt weepy and angry and could not get it out of her mind. Another rejection, she thought. She was sick of it. Sick to her stomach of never finding the right person. Someone to love her for herself.

She was not insecure, she knew how she looked, but right now she felt a little needy and would not mind holding a pity party where she could drink herself into oblivion and cry into her pillows.

What she needed was a good crying jag to get it out of her system. But first comes the drinking and not in the hotel where the others were. She was off duty and entitled to a little private time.

She just wanted to be alone for a little bit and she knew just the place. She had done a little touring earlier this afternoon and happened on the hole-in-the-wall place with a smoky interior. She had enough grasp of the language to make her purchases.

Sliding into a booth, she placed the order and sat there nursing the drink. She was on her second glass when he came in.

“Of all the pubs in the city,” he drawled, noticing her as soon as he entered the room. “Are you lost?”

“No,” she told him shortly. “I came here to be alone.”

His amused green eyes flickered over the crowd. “You should have stayed in your suite,” he spoke rapid Italian when the serving staff came forward and sat across from her.

“I came here to be alone from the people I know,” she pointed out.

“That’s funny. So did I.” His emerald green eyes studied her face. “Problems?”

“Like I would tell you.”

“I suppose not,” he murmured his thanks as his drink was brought to him.

“Aren’t you afraid of being mobbed?” she demanded.

“Italians are not as dazzled by celebrities as Americans are.” He sipped his drink and eyed her over the glass.
“Thank goodness.”

“I thought celebrities thrived on being adored.”

He grimaced. “Somehow, that must have missed me in the rule book. We have never really spoken before.”

“That’s because you are an entitled prick who usually stares right through me and you are usually fighting with

your dad.”

He shrugged, expression becoming hooded. “There is that.” his eyes wandered around the room and he wondered if it was a coincidence that they had both ended up at the same pub. He had had another argument and had decided to walk out to blow off some steam. He had walked in here and seen her as soon as he came in. She stood out. Among the several women loitering, flirting, or drinking at the bar, she stood out.

“Another drink?”

“I should get going.”

“We should drink away our collective miseries.” He gave her an appraising look. “I am not going to ask you what has put that sadness on your beautiful face—”

“And I would never tell you.”

“Fair enough.” He nodded with a smile. “But we should say to hell with everything and get wasted.”

“I don’t get wasted.”

“There is a first time for everything.” He lifted a hand and the server materialized. She half listened as he spoke in rapid Italian, some of the words sailing over her head.

“Now then, what shall we talk about?”

“Nothing,” she said firmly. “Let’s just drink.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“I think I am drunk,” she whispered as she clung to him.

“Think or know?” He was holding her against him as they made their way from yet another pub. The cold briskness of the night was doing nothing to sober them up, but that was fine by them.

“Know,” she giggled. If she was not so deep in her cups, she would have been horrified at it. She did not giggle and always thought it was childish and stupid. But at this moment, she just felt pleasantly buzzed and her sadness had melted away as if by magic. “Oh look! A chapel.”

“They have a few of them around. Want to step in for a minute?”

“I really think we should go in and pray for our lost souls.”

“Mine is not lost,” he retorted. “Just misplaced.”

She giggled again and let herself be led inside the tiny sanctuary. She was actually starting to like him. Or was it the drinks she had imbibed? Shaking her head, she

wrapped her hand around his waist as they made their way to the front.

“We should get married,” he said suddenly, as if hit by a brainstorm.

“Or pretend to be. That would piss off your old man.” She giggled again.

“You are right. Let’s do it.” He led them toward the slightly stooped priest who stared at them with kind eyes.

“We want to get married.”

The first thing she noticed was the horrible pounding inside her temple and the sickness in her stomach. Getting up slowly to ensure that her head stayed attached to her neck, she eased out of bed with a

frowning look around the sumptuous gold and cream suite.

She was not in her room. Turning her head to the right, she felt a jolt when she noticed the naked man sprawled against the pillows.

“Oh no, no, no!” she whispered. “What have I done?” The memories of last night or was it early this morning? It came back in bits and pieces. The man in the bed was Jaylen Monteith. She had sex with her boss or rather her boss’ son. Sliding off the bed, she gathered up her clothing, scattered with his, and went into the bathroom to get dressed.

The relief was palpable when she came out and he was still sleeping. Sliding out of the room, she opened the door and made sure that there was no one around to see her, before making her way back to her suite. The pounding inside her head had increased and the roiling in her stomach had her rushing into the bathroom to throw up.

Sitting back weakly against the tiles, she closed her eyes wearily and took stock of her situation.

She had had sex with Jaylen Monteith. That was bad. She had gotten drunk and had sex with her boss's son. Okay. She was going to chalk it down to temporary insanity and put it away in some locked compartment and pray that he would do the same.

They had both had too much to drink and somehow, she had ended up in his room. Bending her head to her drawn-up knees, she shuddered as some of the memories came creeping in.

Whispered words of passion, the feel of his mouth on her body, her breasts tingling as he suckled and him sliding into her. She had never done anything stupid before and she was guessing that she was making up for it. She would ignore the problem and pray that it goes away.

They would each go on to their separate lives as usual. No big deal. Firming her lips, she struggled to her feet and went to wash out her mouth. Some strong coffee

would do the trick and it was early enough for her to try and get some more sleep. If that was possible.

Jaylen struggled to surface from the deep sleep as if climbing out of a fog. His head felt as if someone was happily playing drums inside his temples and his eyelids were decidedly heavy.

Something was definitely wrong. Maybe he was coming down with a damn bug. But he never got sick and even if that happened, it would pass quickly. Slowly, turning onto his back, he tried lifting his head and it took several efforts for him to accomplish that.

The pain was like a white-hot dart and he had gotten up too suddenly, causing the nausea to rise inside his chest. Settling back against the pillows, he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths to settle himself. It was then he noticed the ruffled pillows next to him on the wide bed.

A frown touched his brow. Had he invited someone back to his room? And if so, why the hell couldn't he remember? He recalled storming out of the hotel after yet another argument with his father and going into a pub.

Pub? His brow cleared as the memories came tumbling back. He had seen her inside the smoky room. Anika. His father's PR. And had joined her and then—

“Oh Christ!” He whispered, hands going over his face as the memories continued to tumble back.

They had visited several pubs and then a chapel. Why the hell had they gone to a chapel? Obviously, they had ended up in his suite and- He closed his eyes as memories of whispered words and skin sliding against skin, reminded him of what they had shared.

“Okay Monteith,” he murmured as he dragged his hands over his face. “You did something stupid and now it is time to move on and hope to God that there have not been paparazzi hanging around.

Coffee. I need coffee. It's not a big deal. No harm done. It's not like she is married. No harm done," he repeated as he swung his legs off the bed and hurried into the bathroom.

She convinced herself that she had managed to put it behind her as the day progressed. Thankfully, by the time she ventured downstairs later that day, Jaylen was nowhere to be seen and it appeared that no one from their crew had noticed anything amiss.

Pasting a smile on her face, she went about her duty and after the meeting with James, had retired to her room. She made the call to Corey to tell him about Tyrone and he had been understandably furious.

"I am waiting for the part where you say I told you so," she said wearily. The headache was not so bad, just a slight pounding of her temples, but she felt weak and listless and had barely managed to eat a piece of dry

toast for breakfast. She had skipped lunch, sticking to water or OJ, the thought of food, started the roiling inside her stomach.

“I told you so,” he said grimly. “Are you okay?”

“I am furious, but more with myself than with him. I knew it was not working and I still hung on. What does that say about me?”

“It says that you are loyal and deserve better. Are you sure you are, okay?”

“I am fine,” she injected a cheerful note into her voice. “I am going to take a break from the relationship thing for a while.”

“You are too young to talk like that. Give yourself a little time and then get back out there. You are also too beautiful to sit on the damn shelf.”

“The image of that is depressing me.”

“And that is the last thing I want you to be. The bastard is not worth a minute of your time.”

“You are right. I just called to check in.”

“Glad you did. Call any time.”

She hung up and flopped back on the bed. She had things to do—some reports to write and she needed to get them down. But the events of last night keep popping up. It was nothing. Obviously, it was less than nothing to him. He had not had the decency to come by to see if she was okay.

But that's fine. It was better this way. She wanted no further contact with him anyway. It was done. They had made fools of themselves and that was why it was not a good idea to drink to the point where you have no control over your actions.

It was a teachable moment and she had learned her lesson. She was just praying that there were no consequences to their foolishness. She was certain they had gone at each other without protection and the thought of it was making her sick.

She was always careful. She had been abandoned by a woman who had decided that she could not be bothered to raise a child and she had vowed not to be the same.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and willed herself to forget.

But the next day, all hell broke loose. She was summoned to James Monteith's suite first thing that morning and from the grim tone of the man's voice, she knew there was trouble and not of the ordinary kind either.

Armed with her iPad and a steel-like posture, she made her way to the suite and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” the terse voice commanded.

Pushing the doors open, she was about to speak when she saw him standing by the window. He had his back turned and his hands shoved in the pockets of his well-cut khaki pants. His blonde hair was caught back into a stubby ponytail.

Deliberately ignoring him, she made her way over to the desk where James was seated behind and felt an awful premonition as she looked at the man’s face.

“You might want to take a seat.” His voice had barely contained fury that had her heart racing.

“Is something wrong?”

Without answering, he shoved a newspaper in front of her. A glance at it had her knees wobbling. Right there in explosive color was a large photo of her and Jaylen, coming out of the chapel and then it came flooding back to her.

She was competent enough in the language to read the headline which screamed: “International model Jaylen Monteith finally putting down roots.”

“What do you have to say about this?”

She swiveled to the silent man standing by the window as if seeking his help. “I - it was—” Groping for the chair behind her, she sank down, her entire body trembling. “It was- we were drunk. It was just a spur of the moment- Damn you! Say something!” she shouted at the silent man standing with his back turned to them.

“I already said my piece.” He turned to face them; his expression grim. “I told him that it was something that could be easily rectified. It could be annulled.”

“Except for this.” James opened the magazine and there it was, a picture of her leaving Jaylen’s hotel room. “Our lawyers are scrambling.”

“No one can prove that we- that anything happened between us.” This could not be happening, she thought frantically. She was a sensible woman who always stayed out of trouble. It was just a nightmare.

“The marriage was consummated and there was no prenup.” James told her icily. “Which means you are entitled to half of everything-”

“I don’t want it.” She gave him a pleading look. “I will sign a document and we can- we can pretend as if this never happened.”

“It has made international news.” He turned his laptop around. “It’s the biggest news since—” he gestured with one hand. “Since Harry and Meghan Markle. The press is salivating. Paparazzi are hanging all over the hotel to get a statement.”

“I am a PR.” She felt like crying. “I can put a spin on it. We were drunk-” She shot an accusing glance at Jaylen. “We had too much to drink and we ended up—”

“At a chapel with a genuine priest. You are married and will stay married for at least a year. If there is anything hinting at it going the way you said it went, the scandal will be spectacular. Not to mention the legal ramifications.” James’ expression was harsh. “Was this just so that you could piss me off?” he shot a glance at his son.

“Yes Dad, I deliberately got drunk and dragged her into a chapel to get a rise out of you.

Do you think I wanted this? I do not want to be married.”

“But you are!”

“I don’t want to be married to him!” she cried. “Surely there is a way out of this—” Her phone rang and she grabbed it, grateful for the interruption. “It’s my- It’s Corey.” Without waiting for permission, she pressed the green icon.

“What the hell is going on? You are married? To Jaylen Monteith?”

She closed her eyes in despair. “I cannot talk now—”

“Anika, you had better explain to me what’s going on. I have reporters camped out in the lobby of the firm.”

“I am sorry. I cannot think. We- I- we- were drunk and it just happened.”

“Are you married or not?” he was shouting and she was certain the two men could hear everything he was saying.

“I—” She closed her eyes briefly and fought tears. “I will get back to you.”

“Anika—”

She hung up on him and sat there staring at the phone in her hand.

“Boyfriend?”

“Go to hell.”

“I am already there sweetheart,” he told her sardonically.

“Here is what’s going to happen,” James’ icy voice drew them back to him. “You are the PR person. A press conference will be called and you are going to spin a story. The two of you had been seeing each other for a while in secret and used this trip to secretly marry.

You did not want the excitement of the press and fans spoiling the moment, hence the secrecy. I have had your things moved from your suite into his. You have two hours to gather your composure before joining me in the hotel lobby.”

“I am not that good of an actress, there is no way I am going to pull off expressing joy over this situation.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Jaylen shot at her.

“You are both going to do your damndest to make them believe this marriage is the real deal.” There was an ominous tone in James’ voice.

“Or try to clean up the spectacular mess. One whiff of a scandal will have ramifications that I am not going to even begin to outline. Just one whiff and it will all go to hell.” He glared at them. “You both made your damn bed; you are going to have to literally sleep in it. You are dismissed.”

She fled, slowing her steps when she saw the maid approaching. She could not go downstairs and the suite that had been assigned to her was no longer hers.

“Excuse me? Scusi? Do you speak English?”

“Yes, Signora Monteith.” She bobbed respectfully and Anika opened her mouth to tell her that was not her name, but wisely kept it shut.

“Is there a room, a private room I can use?”

“Of course.” The woman led the way to the left and opened a room with a pearl pink decor.

“Thank you.”

With a nod, she stepped back and closed the doors behind her. Walking across the thick carpet, she sank down on one of the plump sofas and leaned back wearily. Fishing the phone out of her pocket, she touched the number.

“About damn time! Are you really married?”

“Yes.” She swallowed the painful lump in her throat. “It was an accident. We were drunk and we went into this chapel—”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was not!” She could feel the headache brewing. “I was upset about Tyrone and I went to a pub and—”

“You just decided to get married to the most sought-after and incredibly rich man in your path. Nice going.”

“There must be a way to get out of this.”

“There is no way.” His tone was resolute. “James Monteith is a multi-billionaire and his son is one of the most famous models in the world. He is worth millions. You did not sign a prenup and someone saw you coming out of his room at dawn. The marriage was consummated—”

“They don’t know that.”

“Perception is everything. You are well and truly married, Anika and that’s that.”

Chapter 4

“What are you doing here?”

“In case you have forgotten, this happens to be my suite.” He strolled over to the bed and sat on the edge of it.

“I have chosen this bedroom,” she told him frostily. “Get the hell out.”

“Is that any way to talk to your new husband?” he tutted mockingly.

“You are not my husband.”

“We have the certificate to prove it. Dear old Dad sent for a copy of it to check the authenticity. And it appears we are well and truly tied.”

“This is your fault,” she hissed.

His thick blonde brows lifted. “How do you figure?”

“If you had not followed me into that pub—”

“Followed you?” he burst out laughing. “Lady, you got it all wrong. And besides, if it was not me, you would have probably roped in some poor bastard and dragged him to the altar.”

“I did not drag you.”

“See.” Kicking off his shoes he stretched out full-length with his hands knotted behind his head. “I am starting to remember now. You were the one who dragged us into that chapel and suggested we get married.”

“That’s not true.”

He gave her a knowing look out of emerald green eyes.
“I am also recalling how you cried out my name when you came, several times.”

“I hate you!”

His expression turned wintry. “An auspicious beginning to our new life together. I was told to come and hurry you along. The jackals are waiting and they are getting impatient.”

Suddenly the fight went out of her and she found herself wilting. “Neither of us wants this.”

“I concur.”

“Then why are you not doing anything about it?”

“Like?”

“Trying to find a way out?”

“We have a lethal team of lawyers who say otherwise.” He pushed up against the padded headboard. “There are laws in place, conditions if you may. James Monteith is worth billions and I am not so shabby myself. If you leave this marriage, it will open us to a gigantic lawsuit. We are stuck, darling.”

“Are you satisfied with that?”

“Hell no.” He shrugged. “But we do not have to be together. I travel a lot. Am out of the country more than I am in. My loft is spacious with several suites. You get to pick one. We put on a show for the public by attending a few functions whenever I am around.”

His expression became harsh. “I am under contract with a very strict line and any hint of scandal, just a tiny whiff of it will undermine my position. So, yes, I am prepared

to ride this farce of a marriage.” He sent her a humorless smile. “And after the year is over, you are going to be a very wealthy woman.”

“I don’t want your damn money.”

“Who doesn’t want money?”

“I don’t like you.” She gave him a contemptuous look. “You are vain and entitled. You live off your looks and strut around as if you own the damn world. I am not one of the women who will fall at your feet and be grateful for a smile or a touch.

If I am in this farce, I will play my part in public, but you had better damn well stay away from me when we are in private.”

The silence following her impassioned speech was fraught with tension as they glared at each other.

“Noted,” he told her icily. “Now shall we go and smile for the cameras?”

She fielded the questions thrown at them and proved that she was an ace at her job. She had also dressed the part, the navy-blue wool dress clinging to her slender curves.

James had discreetly found them a square-cut diamond ring, just in time for them to take their place in the reception area of the hotel. Her thick dark brown hair was loose around her face, tumbling artlessly down her shoulders.

And they held hands.

“We wanted it to be kept a secret,” she told the eager faces surrounding them. “With my husband’s high-profile job and the fact that I am employed at his father’s company, it is very difficult for us and we wanted to try

and have a life apart from the public eye.” She looked up at him and managed to look adoring towards him.

“My wife insisted on keeping us a secret.” She almost dragged her hand from his when he lifted it to his lips, but his grip tightened. “I wanted to tell the world.”

“Was that why you were not seen with anyone over the past six months or so?”

“Absolutely. People kept asking me what the deal was, but I could not say.” He slanted her a look. “I promised my sweetie here that I would keep things between us.”

“What now? Honeymoon?”

“We will be taking this time in Italy as our honeymoon. I have to fly to Scotland in the next few days and then I will be back to my loving wife.”

Other questions were thrown at them and they responded. And then it was time to drop the pretense and get back into the privacy of their suite.

“Dinner at seven. In one of the hotel’s restaurants,” James told them firmly as they made their way down the hallway. “We have to show a united front.”

“I thought we already did that? Wasn’t that what the press conference was about?” Jaylen asked sardonically.

“You dragged us into this mess. You would do damn well to remember that. Seven.”

“He is in a mood.” Jaylen threw her a grin. “Nice work.”

“Bite me.”

His grin widened. “I think I already did that last night. If you want a repeat—”

“Touch me and you will find out what it is to do without the use of your dick for a day,” she warned.

“Ouch.” His smile faded as they went into the suite.

“I don’t appreciate being threatened.” Gripping her arm, he spun her around. “Is that clear?”

“Let go of me,” her voice was frosty. He did so immediately and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Look, we are both in an untenable situation because of something we both did. Not just me, you as well, so you need to lay off the damn attitude. Do you think I want to be stuck in a marriage?”

“Especially with me? Why don’t you say it?” she asked him scathingly. “No doubt you have read the reports. I was raised in a group home where my mother left me to rot. I am a stain on the very prestigious Monteith name.”

He gave her a contemplative look as he rocked back on his heels. She was well and truly pissed. He was not feeling mellow himself and would have preferred to pick his own bride when the time came.

But his recollection of the night they had spent together had been hot and loaded with passion. And she was a beautiful woman. He could do worse.

“Your past means nothing to me.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “But obviously, it means everything to you.”

“I am over it.”

“Are you? It does not seem that way.”

“You are a shrink now?”

“I have been to too many sessions not to know the signs. Have you been to one?”

“That’s none of your damn business.” She realized that she did not feel as angry as before and that was bothering her.

“As your husband—” He grinned at the wrathful look she turned on him. “I am making it mine.”

“Just go the hell away from me and stay away.”

“We are having dinner in the next three hours.”

“I have work to do.”

“You don’t think the old man is going to allow you to work at the company now, do you?”

“What?” She gave him a dazed look.

“You are a Monteith. There will be plenty of things to attend to, a number of charities to head. Your position as head of PR will be passed to someone else. You are no longer going to be an employee.”

“I love my job!” Her eyes blazed as the full impact of what she had fallen into albeit inadvertently, hit her like a ton of bricks. “I am not giving it up and he cannot make me.

You cannot make me.”

“Relax.” He held up a hand. “I would never ask you to give up your job. But it is not up to me, is it?”

“Then talk to him.” She unconsciously reached out to grip his hand. “Convince him to allow me to stay on. I am very good at what I do and it would take time to train someone else.”

“And no one is indispensable,” he pointed out.

Dropping her hand, she stepped back, her expression cold and formal.

“I should know better than to expect anything from you.” She turned to leave.

“Anika—”

“Go to hell and stay away from me.” She stepped into the adjoining suite and slammed the door shut behind her.

Jaylen stood where he was and leaned against the door, shoulders hunched. She hated him, that much was

obvious. Yes, he had read the report of her being brought up in a group home after her mother had left her when she was five. And he didn't have the heart to tell her that the reporters were going to dig into her story and splash it all over the papers.

As soon as they reached the US, they were going to be greeted by that. The more salacious the story, the more the hungry and greedy public would want to read. Henry and Meghan Markle were perfect examples.

And his face sells magazines and ratings. He was now attached to her. They were going to romanticize it and follow them around. Her privacy was going to be invaded in the worst possible way.

She had gone from anonymity to the wife of a celebrity in a matter of days and her life was going to be changed irrevocably.

He was accustomed to the lack of privacy. He could not go for a cup of coffee without being recognized. Another element had been added.

For years, he had been paired up with one beautiful woman after another, with the press hinting as to the status of the relationship. Now he was married, and there would be something new to write about. The public would find it hard to believe that they had been secretly involved and yet there had been no hint of said relationship.

An enterprising and nosy reporter or two would want to dig deeper. Sighing softly, he eased off the door and made his way into the bedroom. She was going to make a hell of a lot of adjustments.

Inside her suite, Anika was far from relaxed. She was wearing a path on the carpeted floor. Usually, she would have admired the bold red and gold decor, the splash of colors, and the thickness of the cream carpet, but her mind was racing a mile a minute. She was married.

Lifting her left hand, she stared at the square-cut diamond he had given her. It was stunning of course, exquisite even. It would not do for Mrs. Jaylen Monteith to be wearing anything less.

Clothing—glamorous and elegant clothing from Romano's Milan had been ordered and sent to her suite, packed away by the efficient maid. She had not taken time to admire them either. They were just props, she thought angrily. She was the wife of a multi-billionaire who was also a celebrity. A personal maid would be assigned to her.

A personal assistant who was going to ensure that she did not wear the same outfit twice, at least whenever she was attending a function with her husband.

Some woman was going to pick out her clothes and she was going to have to worry about wearing makeup in case a reporter was following her around and taking pictures.

She was going to be shadowed because she was married to someone as visible as Jaylen Monteith and that pissed her off.

But she was the one who had gone into that fucking bar and gotten drunk. She was the one who had dragged them into that chapel and suggested the marriage thing.

She did not have a head for liquor or not much of one, but he should have stopped them.

He should have dragged them out of that chapel and walked her back to the hotel instead of falling in line. Now they were part of a mess they could not get out of for a year.

Now she was going to have to pretend to love a man she could barely stand.

He was too... everything. Too handsome, with those luxurious tresses of honey-blond hair. She had seen him naked and his body was lean and magnificent, the muscles toned and the golden complexion was all over, telling her that he either used a tanning machine or he sunbathed in the nude.

She had seen the long powerful legs, the taut butt and recalled the stroke of his impressive penis inside her.

He was beautiful and people like that tend to be vain as hell. He was not only beautiful; he was famous and he had loads of money.

He could have anything he wanted, any woman he wanted and he was a playboy. She had seen him photographed with hundreds of women. He would be unfaithful, not that she gives a damn.

He could screw whomever he wanted. She did not care. This was not a real marriage. They would endure each other for the year. He was going to be doing a lot of traveling and that suited her fine.

But hell, if she was going to let James Monteith take her job from her. She was going to beg if necessary. Line up points that would show him how valuable she was. She was not going to be some society wife who sat on her ass and went shopping.

She did not even like to shop. She knew he and his father belonged to a very exclusive club and that the wives of some of those powerful men were making

strides and achieving a hell of a lot when it came to setting things right in the world.

But she did not belong. She was an imposter. She was accidentally married to a man she did not want and could never have feelings for. Walking over, she sat on the edge of the soft and firm bed and felt the dejection and despair shrouding her.

She had been so sensible before, her mother was dead and so was the man who had made her, but she wanted to prove to herself that she could be someone. She had gone to college and excelled and proven to herself that she could rise about the situation and she had.

Now this. Now it was all ruined and she had no idea what to do about it.

“What are you doing?” she hissed, easing back when he moved in to give her a taste of the cake.

“We are being watched, darling.” He kept an easy smile on his face. “We are supposed to be newlyweds and madly in love.”

“This is a private booth.”

“With people eyeing us avidly. Even and especially rich people like to know what’s going on with other rich people. The cake was a very good touch and the butterscotch with the raspberry is a favorite of mine. Eat.”

She glared at him and opened her mouth so that he could shovel it in. But she was unprepared for the kiss that came after and was about to shove him away when he introduced tongue and left her weak and disoriented.

“Was that really necessary?” She had to clear her throat twice before she could speak.

“Absolutely.” He grinned at her. “And fun for me.”

James cleared his throat and Anika started as she realized that she had completely forgotten the older man was sitting there.

“You have given them something to talk about.” His hazel eyes touched on Anika and he had to admit to himself that she was a classically beautiful woman.

She was wearing one of the dresses that he had ordered from the clothing company, a raspberry-colored deal that suited her well. Her hair was loose around her face, giving her a decidedly girlish look and appeal.

And he was having dinner with his son, something that would not have happened otherwise.

“I understand you have concerns about your job?”

Anika's eyes flew to Jaylen's face, but he was busy scooping up another piece of cake. The meal was sumptuous and the best the kitchen had to offer. It was an eight-course meal which meant that they had been at their table for the past two hours and were now down to dessert. She was practically wilting by now.

"Yes. I want to continue working."

"I was against it at first, but Jaylen made some good points."

"I told him that you are the best and he should exercise wisdom," he told her mildly, reaching for his glass of champagne.

"Thank you," she murmured, humbly.

"You are welcome," he inclined his head regally. "Part and parcel of being the perfect husband."

“Don’t spoil it,” she warned.

James watched them and wondered if this was something that could lead to the permanent. He had been at his son to get married. Naturally, he would have preferred someone from their own society and the damn press was going to have a field day digging into her past, but the girl was strong and durable.

He had watched her fielding questions at the press conference and she had shown grit. Jaylen needed someone like her.

She just might do.

“Just saying.” He eyed her over the rim of the glass.
“And I have not told you how lovely you look.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I would not be doing my duty as a doting and dazzled husband otherwise.” Leaning over, he flicked a finger at the diamonds dangling at her lobe. “They suit you.”

“Stop it.”

“I am in love with my wife and cannot keep my hands off her,” he reminded her.

“Did I forget to tell you that I have a black belt in jiu-jitsu?” she asked him sweetly, reaching for her own glass of champagne.

His thick brows lifted and a smile curved his sensuous lips. “And I suppose you have read that I have a black belt in karate. We just might be evenly suited.”

His green eyes wandered from her face to her bosom where the material of the dress hugged lovingly. He could see a glimpse of nipples and felt the heat rising inside him. She really was a beauty.

“I can take you any time. You are accustomed to a pampered life which makes one soft.”

“We could prove how soft or hard I am—” His lips curved into a smile as she caught the innuendo in the word.

“Any time.”

Ignoring him, she turned to James to find the man eyeing them with a strange expression on his face. “I have some notes on the line-up for this evening. The fiasco- I mean the sudden marriage has taken away the shine from the musicians and we should try and get it back.”

“Or tie in both of them.” He picked up his glass and took a sip. “It will make for sensational news.”

“And put the spotlight back on us,” she muttered.

“The spotlight will always be on us.”

She looked at the man seated next to her. He was wearing a thin cashmere sweater, the color almost matching his eyes, and an exquisitely cut sports jacket.

His thick blonde hair was brushed back from his face, the overhead lights burnishing the strands. He looked relaxed and even so, managed to portray an image of leashed power that sent shivers up and down her spine.

“Please don’t remind me.”

“Are you prepared for what’s coming?” he asked her softly.

“I am not an idiot,” she snapped at him.

“Careful darling.” He trailed a finger down her cheek. “We are being watched, remember? It would not do for you to frown at your husband.”

“Would it be unseemly for me to stick this dessert fork into my husband’s hand?” she asked him sweetly.

He grinned at her but wisely removed his hand.

“That would be a definite disaster.” Before she could move back, he placed a swift kiss on her lips.

“What the hell was that for?”

“For anyone who happens to be looking and again for me. It certainly wiped the frown off your face.”

James watched the fire and sparks between them with avid interest.

Chapter 5

“I do not want you sitting next to me,” she said in an undertone. She had gotten through the last two days, had managed to answer the questions thrown at her whenever she went outside the hotel, and had locked the adjoining doors to their suite, in case he had the idea of sliding into bed with her.

But he had stayed over his side. He had asked her to have dinner with him last evening and she had refused. He had not insisted, which she told herself she was grateful for.

“We are newly-wedded,” he pointed out as he slid into the seat and buckled his belt. “It would look strange for us to be sitting apart.”

“There are no cameras in here,” she pointed out.

“People talk and there are two flight attendants, a pilot, and a co-pilot.”

“I really want to be alone.”

“Tough. You can always ignore me.” Pressing the button, he inclined the seat and closed his eyes.

As if that was even remotely possible, she thought nastily. He was bigger than life and even if she closed her eyes, she could still smell his signature cologne. He was wearing a black silk t-shirt over faded denims and had teamed it with a dark blue sports jacket.

His tangle of blonde hair was loose around his beautiful face.

She was acutely aware of him and would have to be deaf, blind, and dead not to be.

Shifting slightly in the spacious seat, she tried to concentrate on the files she had in front of her. She had

called to let Corey know they were headed back, just before they left the hotel.

“And where will you be staying?”

“With him.”

“I see. So, you will be giving up your apartment.”

“For now.”

“Do you know what you are doing?”

“No.”

He had sighed then. “I will see you when you get here.”

“You are interrupting my slumber.” He opened one eye to look at her.

“I am not doing anything.”

“Your thinking is way too loud and you are restless. How about some champagne?”

“It’s six in the morning,” she pointed out.

“We are on Italy time,” he pointed back, a lazy smile tugging at his sensuous lips. “It’s night in the U.S. of A.” He nodded to the flight attendant hovering as if waiting for him to beckon to her. “A bottle of bubbly and some snacks, please.”

“Of course.” The woman gave him a warm intimate smile. “Anything else?”

“That’s it for now.”

Anika waited until she had wandered off. “Did you sleep with her?”

He turned his head to stare after the girl before looking at her. “No. Why?”

“She looks like she wants you to invite her into the cabin. Don’t let me stop you,” she told him icily.

“Why darling,” he purred, “is that jealousy I hear?”

“In order for one to feel jealous, one first has to care.”

He nodded at that. “I suppose you are right. And you obviously hate me.”

“I don’t like you.”

“What can I do to change that?”

The question threw her and for a minute she had no idea what to say.

“Nothing.”

“Such a shame. Ah, here comes our repast. Thank you.”
He gave the woman a charming smile that had her blushing to the roots of her reddish-brown hair.

“If you need anything else—”

“I will let you know.”

“Champagne?” He handed her the glass and she took it. He also handed her a plate with cheeses and little nuts.

“I haven’t had my coffee yet.”

“We could get coffee after this.” He lifted his glass. “What shall we toast to?”

“Getting home safely.”

He quirked a brow at her. “Not to our marriage?”

“What marriage?”

He slapped a hand over his chest where his heart was and gave her a wounded look that tugged a smile from her. “I feel an ache settling in. Most women would be over the moon being married to someone like me.”

“I am not most women.” She sipped the excellent champagne and felt it sliding smoothly down her throat.

“And you are more trouble than you are worth.”

“How would you know that?”

She shrugged slender shoulders and started to reach for a piece of cheese when he plucked a piece out of her plate and popped it into her mouth. His fingers touched her lips lightly and sent shivers throughout her body.

“I just do.” She hated the huskiness in her voice.

“You ought to get to know me better.”

“Not interested.”

“Sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“You have no idea what you are missing.” He liked sparring with her and had to admit that he found her enchanting. Her hair was brushed back into an elegant chignon and she was wearing an olive-colored cashmere sweater over faded jeans.

The ring he had given her twinkled and shot out colors as it caught the overhead lights. It felt strange being married to her, but it was not unpleasant.

“I think I do,” she finally responded as she stared at him. For a minute he had no idea what they were talking about.

“Hmm,” he muttered, downing his champagne and reaching for some nuts. “Want to return the favor?”

“Of?”

“Feeding me.”

“I never asked you to.”

“I was doing the husbandly thing.”

“I can feed myself.”

“I have no doubt. I just wanted to show how devoted I am to you.”

Ignoring the tripping of her heart, she gave him a bland look. “Do women usually fall for your BS?”

He grinned at her. “Yes. They usually do.”

“I am different.”

“We will see.”

“What does that mean?” she demanded.

“Relax, darling, I am not going to try and seduce you into falling in love with me.”

“That is never going to happen.”

He gave her an oblique look. “Was that a challenge?”

“I was just stating a fact.”

“Want to put some money on it? Make it more interesting?”

“No.”

“Afraid you are going to lose?”

“I don’t gamble.”

“Is that the real reason?”

Shoving the glass at him, she inclined her seat. “Shut up and let me get some sleep.”

“Coward,” he whispered.

Ignoring him, she closed her eyes and tried to force herself not to notice his scent which was beginning to become familiar.

“Are you sleeping?”

She did not answer.

“I suppose you are.” There was an exaggerated sigh in his deep voice that had her lips twitching. “I suppose I am going to have to stay here with no one to talk to.

Have I told you how lovely you look? The sweater looks great against your skin. I am still trying to decide what it reminds me of. Your skin, not the sweater. Caramel? Hazelnut? What do you think?” he waited for a beat as if he expected an answer from her before continuing.

“I think I am going to go with caramel. And you have long lashes. They make shadows on your cheeks. Am I disturbing you, darling?”

Her eyes popped open and he grinned at the dirty look she gave him. “Why don’t you go and have a conversation with your dad?” she suggested.

“And leave my wife’s side?” he tutted. “I don’t think so.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“That’s fine. I will do most of the talking.”

“You are impossible.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Oh no. It definitely was not one.”

“I was just checking.” His green eyes twinkled. “Want to watch a movie?”

“If that will shut you up, absolutely.”

“I bet your tastes run more to the boy meets girl and they both fall heavily in love with each other.”

“I don’t believe in fairytales.”

His brows lifted. “You don’t believe in love?”

“I believe in reality and I have seen too many people divorcing each other to believe that marriage lasts. The ones that do are the people who decide to stay together for the sake of the children.”

His teasing expression fled as he stared at her. “Your mother—”

“Is not a topic I will discuss with you,” she told him coolly.

“I am going to say something and then I will not talk about it anymore. I want you to be prepared.”

“For?”

“What the press will dig up.”

She turned her head away to look out the porthole. They were several thousand miles in the sky, enough for her to see the puffy white clouds sliding across the clear blue. She had been thinking about that very thing ever since this happened.

Her past was going to become someone's favorite topic and she worked in the public and knew that the juicier the story was the more they were going to milk it.

"I know."

"And?"

She shrugged. "There is nothing to tell." She turned her head to look at him. "She left me at the group home to chase after the man who donated his sperm.

Or so I heard when I decided to investigate. He did not want children and he made that very clear. When she

became pregnant, he told her to get rid of it.” Anika smiled grimly. “Her neighbors were very chatty.

And one of them, a Mrs. Lawrence, was outraged and told me she wanted to adopt me. Appears that she babysat whenever she wanted to go out, which was almost every night. She finally decided to dump me and take off with him.

End of story.” She lifted a shoulder. “At least she did not kill me.”

He started to reach for her hand but knew instinctively that it was not a good idea and she would not allow it.

“It’s a sad story.”

“The press will sensationalize it.”

“We will put a lid on it.”

“I can spin it to my advantage. It’s what I do after all.”

“And you are very good at what you do.”

She gave him a long oblique look. “Are you trying to make me feel better?”

“Did it work?”

“That’s not your job.”

“I beg to differ.” Before she could snatch her hand away, he picked it up and kissed the back of it. “Soft.”

“Let go.” She tugged, but he held firm.

“Strong too.” There was an amused look on his face that successfully hid the churning of desire he was feeling.

“There is an excellent gym at the loft, we should take advantage of it.”

He let go when she tugged and she told herself that it was not disappointment she was feeling or that her skin was not tingling from the touch of his lips on her skin.

“Speaking of the loft, how many bedrooms?”

“Four suites in total. I am hardly there, so I do not have a maid.” He flicked her a look.

“You are going to have to hire one, if you want.”

“I won’t.”

“You are going to do the housework by yourself?” He stared at her with a frown.

“I am perfectly capable of picking up after myself. I bet you cannot say the same.”

“I use a cleaning service whenever I am in town.”

“Good enough.”

“We are going to entertain.”

Her eyes flew to his face. “Why?”

He smiled slightly. “Because we are married and people will expect us to.”

She shifted in her seat a little. “We could go to restaurants instead of having them in the loft.”

“We are going to have to invite people over eventually.”

“Okay, fine,” she grumbled. It does not have to be now.

“But we are expected to want to spend a few weeks or so together before that happens.”

“I thought you were leaving soon.”

He grinned at the hopeful look on her face. “Not for another month. I have canceled my trip to Mexico in order to spend some time with you.”

“I don’t want you spending time with me. That’s ridiculous.”

“We are supposed to be going on a talk show.”

“What? When did you hear that?”

“My agent has been salivating ever since the news came about that we are wed. She signed us up.”

“Without consulting me?” The fury on her exquisite face made him want to haul her over and kiss her senselessly.

“She does not know you,” he pointed out with equanimity. “And she has been my agent since the start of my career. She knows how to spin things.”

“To her advantage.”

“And to mine,” he sighed at the look on her face. “We got married in haste. Previously, it did not appear we were anywhere close. People cannot believe that we managed to keep our relationship a secret. There are speculations—”

“I have heard them.” She shifted in her seat a little restlessly. “They think we are hiding something.” She looked at him. “Did James pay off the priest or whatever he is called in Italy?”

“Why darling, dear old Dad would never dream of doing any such thing.”

“That means money exchanged hands. We were drunk, or at least I was.”

He grinned at her. “Are you saying I was cold stone sober?”

“I believe you are a man who can very well hold his liquor.”

His expression became quizzical. “You are implying that I was in complete control of my faculties. You were the one who begged me to marry you.”

Her eyes flashed. “I did not beg—”

“Pleaded. And how could I resist a damsel in distress?”

“You are an asshole.”

“And you, darling, are beautiful when you are angry.”

“Oh, leave me the hell alone.” She started to unbuckle her seatbelt when the light flashed on and the flight attendant hurried over.

“We are experiencing some turbulence and the pilot is asking that you remain seated.”

“Thank you.” Jaylen gave the woman a charming smile before turning his attention to Anika.

“Where were you going?”

“Far away from you.” Setting her seat upright, she turned her head away from him.

“And now you are stuck. Want me to hold your hand?”

“I don’t want you touching me.”

“You seem a little nettled. Not a frequent flier, are you?”

She did not respond but felt her stomach clenched when the aircraft shuddered.

“We should remedy that.”

Her hands clenched as the plane seemed to dip. She barely managed to stifle a scream as the plane lurched. Her hand flew out and he grabbed it, wincing slightly when she dug her nails into his palm.

“It’s going to be fine,” he told her soothingly.

“How do you know?”

“I have been through worse. I should tell you about the time I was going to Mexico for a shoot.”

The plane dipped again and this time she lifted the armrest and burrowed her face in his chest. He held her, rubbing her back slowly. He felt....protective, for want of a better term.

He could feel the tremors in her slender body and wanted to slay dragons for her. The thought of it, had him frowning. She brought out strong feelings inside him, feelings he was certain he wanted to explore just now.

“There now,” he whispered. “We are okay.” He listened to the pilot announcing that they would be landing soon and that they had cleared the sudden storm.

“It’s over.”

She took a few minutes and just stayed where she was and he found himself wishing that he could hold her like this forever. The thought jarred him so much that he felt his heart hammering inside his chest.

Lifting her head, she gave him a strange look before settling back against her seat.

“Thank you,” she told him formally.

“You are welcome.” He gave her a measured look. “Want a shot of brandy?”

She laughed, the tension loosening inside her chest. “I will pass. Thanks.”

“We are about to land.”

She nodded and turned her head to look out the porthole. His cologne was clinging to her and was all she could smell. He had held her and, in his arms, she had found a sense of peace and calm, something that had surprised her.

But she was not going to think about it. Not going to think about the tingling of her senses. She was not going to think about the feel of his strong arms around her.

“I have to go back to my place.”

“Why?”

They were at the private airfield and had landed a few minutes ago.

“To get my stuff.”

“You already have enough things here to last several months,” he pointed to the mound of suitcases that were being loaded into the car.

“I still have to go and sort things out. I cannot just not show up—” she broke off as he took her arm and steered her away from the others.

“Going back to your apartment where there are reporters hanging around to interview you, is not a good plan. Dad will get someone to handle the details of the lease and pack up whatever you need.”

She gave him a frustrated look. “They won’t know what I need and I refuse to have some stranger pawing through my stuff.”

“Surely you have someone—”

“Corey.” Dragging her arm away, she reached for her phone.

“That’s the guy you were in the home with.”

“Yes,” she said briefly, before walking away to make the call.

He watched her as he stood there leaning on the hood of the vehicle. She had an easy stride, a little seductive and not at all coy. She certainly was not about pretending.

“Everything all right?” He was so busy watching her that he had failed to realize that his father had joined him.

“She is making arrangements to get some things from her apartment.”

“I was in the process of arranging that.”

“She wants someone she knows dealing with it.” He turned to look at the older man.

“You don’t seem displeased at the way things turned out.” Jaylen cocked a brow. “Is it that you are satisfied that I am at last hitched? You have been asking me to settle down and become part of the company. I can assure you that the second is not going to happen. I am still going to be doing what I damn well please.”

“And your decision to go away for six months?”

He turned to look at the woman who was talking and laughing on the phone.

“Obviously, that cannot happen now.”

“You don’t seem too put out about it.”

Jaylen shrugged. "Not particularly." He looked back at his father. "Don't get your hopes up. She hates me."

"Does she?"

"She doesn't want me to touch her and basically thinks I am shallow and vain."

"Most models are," he pointed out.

"I guess you are right," Jaylen said easily. He straightened when Anika walked toward them.

"Everything okay?"

"It's all arranged." She looked at James. "I was thinking I should call a meeting with my team to apprise them of the situation."

“Already done.”

She stiffened at that.

“I would have preferred to do it myself.”

“And you can do so when you are back at the office a week from now.”

“A week?”

“Yes.” James nodded. “You just got married and it would be unseemly for you to go back to work on Monday.” He stepped aside and allowed the driver to open the door.

“People will expect you two to spend some time together.”

“I cannot stay away for a week.”

“That was not a request.” With a nod, he turned and walked toward his own vehicle.

“Shall we?”

“Don’t touch me.” The rage was back again and since she could not direct it to the father, she was damn well going to pour it over the son.

“I am not the one you should—”

“You are handy and he is not here.” She slid into the back seat and closed her eyes as the butter soft leather and warmth enveloped her.

“Coffee?” He slid in beside her and touched a button that had a cabinet sliding forward.

“It’s cold.”

“I don’t want you to be nice to me.”

“I am just being courteous. How do you take yours?”

“One cream, two sugars.”

He grimaced as he reached for the cup. “That’s not coffee.”

“It is to me.”

“If you say so.” He handed her the cup. “We could take the week to get to know each other.”

“It’s not a real marriage.”

“The certificate states that it is.” He had programmed his own coffee, black with no additives. “We are going to have to avoid pitfalls by studying up on each other. The week could prepare us for the interview we are going to be doing.”

“I don’t want to do a damn interview,” she said huffily.
“How the hell are we going to sit there in front of the host and an audience and convince them that we are madly in love?”

He blew on his coffee and eyed her over the time of the cup. “We have a week to pull that off.”

Chapter 6

Corey was there when they arrived at the private building. No perimeter fence surrounded the elegant structure, but there was an outpost with a guard in position.

“What happened to the place you were before?” she asked as they swept up the long driveway.

“Too public. Dad recommended this be our home for now. I think you will like it.”

She did not say anything as they came to a stop in front of the surprisingly old-fashioned building.

“It’s not new.”

“No.” He got out before the driver did and helped her out. “It’s been in the family for ages.” He inclined his head to

the man seated on the hood of his car.

“We have company.”

“Let’s get this over and done with.” A dazzling smile touched her lips as she practically flew into the man’s arms. Ignoring the twinge of something unfamiliar, he strolled over to the couple, his hands inside his pockets.

“This is Corey.” She still had his hand in hers and they looked like a unit, something that was somehow pissing him off.

“No need for introduction.” The man told him with a grim smile. “You are all over the damn city.”

“That I am.” He extended a hand in greeting which was the last thing he wanted to do.

They were both eyeing each other like boxers in a ring.
“A pleasure.”

“Likewise,” Corey told him curtly. “Give us a minute, will you?”

“Listen—”

“I need to talk to him.” The pleading look she gave him did the trick. Dragging his eyes from her, he gave the man a terse nod before instructing the security and the driver to cart in the luggage.

“How are you?” Corey asked, leading the way to a black wrought iron bench partially hidden beneath the leaves of a palm tree. The weather was a bit nippy but not uncomfortable.

“Okay, considering. You pissed him off.”

“That’s low on my list of concerns.” His dark brown eyes studied her face. “You don’t look worse for wear. Getting along with the playboy?”

She shot him a glance as she stretched her legs out.
“We are trying. James said I have to stay home for a week to keep up the pretense of this damn marriage. It would not look good for me to go running back to the office after just a week of supposed wedded bliss.”

“And now you will be with him, here.” He gestured to the imposing building and the large space. “Not bad.”

“It will be a prison.”

“A prison should be this elegant. Did the jerk call you?”

She grimaced at that. The entire thing with Jaylen had shoved him to the furthest part of her mind. “Yes.”

“And?”

“He accused me of cheating on him.”

“The damn nerve. Is he threatening to go public? You were just recently seeing him.”

“James is taking care of it.” She rubbed her hands over her arms, not only to ward off the chill. “I keep asking myself how on earth I find myself in this mess.”

“You never had a head for strong drinks.”

“That’s putting it mildly. He is not that bad.”

“Really?”

She nodded with a faint smile. “He makes me laugh.”

“So he is a comedian.”

She shot him a look. "It's not on him that we are in this situation and he is dealing."

"Why the hell did he walk into that chapel anyway? Rumor has it that he is always butting heads with his old man. Could this be some sort of retribution on his part? Something he did to piss the old man off?"

Her tapered eyebrows lifted. "You cannot think he would go that far."

"Yeah." Taking her hand in his, he studied the ring. "It's exquisite."

"It is."

"And your life is about to change."

"Already has."

He looked at her. “Are you prepared for it?”

“Nope. But I made my bed and will have to lie in it.” She sighed deeply. “We will get through the year and after that—”

“You will still be Mrs. Jaylen Monteith. The reporters will still flock around, and follow you everywhere because of your association with the guy and his dad. It will never be business as usual for you again.”

“Thanks for that depressing statement.”

“I am just stating a fact.” He rose and pulled her up with him. “I have to go and I know you are exhausted.”

“There was turbulence just before we landed.”

“And I know how you are about that. How did you ride it out?”

She hesitated a minute before looking toward the building. "Jaylen helped me through it."

He gave her a curious look. "Perhaps there is hope for the pretty boy after all." Leaning forward, he kissed her on the cheek. "I am only a phone call away."

Cradling the scotch between his palms, he peered out the frosted window at the two people. The men had taken the suitcases upstairs and he had instructed them to leave them in the master suite.

She would decide where she wants to stay. He sipped the whiskey, a frown touching his brow as he watched them. He knew that they were close, having been in the same children's home. But the guy was behaving as if he was her damn lover.

Why that was making him edgy was beyond him. And it was damn cold, why was he keeping her out there in the cold?

Was she delaying being alone with him? Because they would be well and truly alone. She would be exhausted. There was a meal in the warmer. He could suggest they sit right here in the living room where the electric fire was making the place cozy and relaxing.

His shoulders straightened and he moved away from the window as he watched them separate. Moving away from the window, he walked over to the fireplace to stare into the mesmerizing flames.

He had things to do. His life had been interrupted enough and his agent had been calling his phone and leaving messages. He had contracts to look over and because he had put off his plans of going to the Caribbean, he was going to have to make some adjustments.

He felt when she came in, but deliberately did not turn around.

“Corey left.”

He turned then to see that she had shed her outer jacket and was rubbing her hands to warm them. “Nice and cozy in here.”

“I suppose you want to go and freshen up and get some sleep.”

“I am starving,” she told him with a laugh. “Let’s go and raid the kitchen.”

“Good idea.” He felt the relief coursing through his veins. “I think there is some roast beef in the warmer.”

“Sounds yummy,” she entered the kitchen and stopped in amazement. “Holy crap,” she breathed reverently. It was not as stark and modern as she had expected, but was a mellow yellow and white with an old-fashioned range in one corner.

It was big with lots of space and pinewood cupboards. Instead of an island, there was a dining table and four chairs tucked beneath the large bay window overlooking a pond.

“I take it that you are impressed,” he said teasingly.

“More than. This is some kitchen. I am happy whoever decided to leave it as is.”

“Warmer over there.” Setting her aside, he strode over to it and opened the door.

“I take it this is not your first time here.”

“No.” Pulling the door open, he took out the dish and plopped it on the counter.

“The place belonged to my mother. I used to come here some summers.” He smiled at her as he reached for plates. “There is a wine cabinet—just pull the handle—yes, right there. And grab some glasses.”

“We look very domesticated.”

“Is that a good thing?” He scooped out baby potatoes to go along with the thin strips of roast beef. The aroma wafted around the large room.

“It might be.”

She took the glasses and bottle of wine over to the table and sat as he came over with the plates.

He handed her the plate and took his seat.

“Don’t tell me that some magical being came over and prepared the meal and left before we came.”

“Something like that.” He dug into his meal, cutting off a piece of the tender beef. “I know it’s cold but if you want the tour, we could do that. Unless, of course, you want to go to bed.”

“Bed?”

“Your bed,” he told her hastily. “They dumped everything in the master suite, but I wanted to wait until you pick out a suite you like. Or if you prefer, you could take the master—”

“Jaylen, it’s fine. Let’s just enjoy the dinner and worry about that later.” She took a sip of the wine. “I did not look at the bottle. It’s very good.”

“Costa Regal. It is an excellent blend.”

“Hmm. This feels so weird.”

“In what way?”

“We are here, having a meal together. I thought I would hate you, be disgusted, and would not be able to stay in the same space. But it feels nice. We might be able to pull it off.”

“You think so?”

She nodded and reached for her glass. “You are not as despicable as I thought you would be.”

“Thanks?” There was a wry look on his handsome face that had her laughing.

“You are more than welcome.” She toyed with the stem of the glass. “I am scared.”

He looked at her in surprise. “Of?”

She shrugged. “I am not used to anything like this. Yes, I was introduced to a taste of it when I started with your dad. I am from very humble beginnings. From a group home to crashing on Corey’s sofa bed when I aged out of the system.

I worked my butt off to get a scholarship so that I could make something of myself. I don’t like to shop Jaylen. I am not a society princess. Yes, I know what fork and spoon to use at the dinner table and I have attended enough functions to know what the deal is.

But I was always content to be on the periphery—outside looking in and that was fine with me. Now I am going to have the spotlight shining in my face.” She gulped her wine. “And I will not be able to go for coffee at my favorite café.”

“What’s the name of it?”

“It does not have a name.” He frowned slightly. “It’s run by a brother and sister who took over from their dad. I think it’s just called—Café or something like that. They serve the best lemon meringue pie and apple cobbler.

And the coffee's not bad either." She looked at him.
"How do you deal with it?"

He fiddled with his fork, before lifting his head to stare at her. "I would love to tell you that it is something you get used to, but I would be lying," he told her quietly. "But it's the price you pay when you make a conscious decision to do what I do, then you also have to deal with the invasion of your privacy."

"And it does not bother you?"

"It does. There are times I would just like to go for a drive. To hang out at a certain place and there are times when I forget who I am and what I represent. I hate the fact that even if I smile at a woman, it is reported that we are involved."

"I don't read the trashy tabloids myself, but it is rumored that you were involved with Mary Jane Talbot. The girl with all those piercings and pink and purple hair."

He grinned at her. "She has piercings even in places that are hidden by articles of clothing."

"Really?" Propping her chin on her hand, she gave him her attention. "Such as?"

He shook his head. "I thought you were not into celebrity gossip."

"This is not gossip if it's true."

His thick eyebrows lifted. "Is that so?"

"If not, it should be. Anyway, it's true. You did sleep with her."

Picking up his glass, he leaned back and felt himself relaxing. The more time he spent with her, the more he realized that he was getting fascinated. And with her, he did not have to pretend to enjoy himself. "We attended a premiere of her movie together and that was it. She is a friend."

“Just a friend?” She gave him a skeptical look.

“Just a friend, oh suspicious one.”

“If you say so. I don’t hate you anymore.”

He felt his heart picking up speed. “Is that so? Why did you hate me in the first place?”

“Are you kidding me? Whenever you come to the office, you would look right through me.”

“You did the same,” he pointed out.

“I was predisposed to dislike you.”

“Predisposed?”

“It means—”

“I know what it means. I am not a moron.”

Her dark brown eyes flashed. “Did I say you were?” She snapped back. They sat there glaring at each other before she pushed back her chair and rose.

“Anika—”

“I am going for a damn walk. And please don’t follow me.”

He watched her leave the room and blew out a breath. And they were getting along so well. Shoving back his chair, he went to get his coat. He had heard the doors slam and realized she had left the building. Grabbing his jacket, he went to find her.

It had gotten dark even though it was only a little after seven. His driver had left, on his instruction. He had a vehicle parked in the underground garage. He supposed he was going to have to get someone to bring her vehicle here.

He found her by the pond, her shoulders hunched to ward away the cold. There was a stiff breeze blowing and she was not wearing a hat.

“You are going to freeze to death.”

“I told you not to follow me.”

“It so happens I do not take orders from you.”

She turned and blasted him with a look. “Go away.”

“I am sorry.”

She shrugged but did not respond. He stepped forward until he was standing next to her and to his relief, she did not move away.

“Want me to warm you up?”

“No.”

“Want my jacket?”

She angled her head to look at him. “Trying for chivalry?”

“Something like that. But I am hoping you say no.”

“And if I say yes?”

“I would hand over my coat, reluctantly. And probably hightail it back inside.”

She laughed and felt the irritation and anger fading away. “You are such a jerk.”

“That I am.” He nodded solemnly. “Forgiven?”

She nodded and hunkered down further in the not-very-adequate coat.

“Race you back?”

“What?” The word was hardly out of her mouth before he was sprinting away.

“I am not—” Throwing up her arms, she followed suit. As much as she put some power into her sprint, she was not able to catch up to his long legs that seemed to eat up the ground. By the time she arrived at the door, he

was holding it open for her and she was practically wheezing.

“You cheated.”

“And you are winded.” Taking her hand, he dragged her inside and shut the doors. “Let me get this.” He unbuttoned her coat and took it off her, hanging it on the many limbs of the coat tree in the parlor.

“I need to catch my breath.” She pressed a hand against her stomach. “And thanks for the heads up.” She gave him a baleful glance.

“I bet you are not cold anymore.”

“Nevertheless—” She led the way into the kitchen. “I am going to make hot chocolate and we can sit by the fire in the living room.”

“Sounds like a plan. What can I do?”

“Grab some mugs.” She studied the half-finished meal.

“We should wash up.”

“I told you I have a cleaning service.”

“Good, because I hate doing dishes. Should we dump them in the sink?”

“Leave them there. The clean fairy will come while we are sleeping and take care of it.”

He grinned at her.

“Very funny.” She went over to the large pantry and opened the doors. “Cocoa. Change of plans and— oh! Cinnamon. Hot cocoa instead and—” Going over to the fridge, she checked out the contents. “There is pie.”

“What kind?”

“I think it’s lemon meringue—“She squealed, the unexpected sound coming from her almost had him dropping the mugs. “It is lemon meringue. My favorite.”

“You squealed.”

“What?” She was busy taking the pie out carefully.

“I never pegged you as the type to squeal.”

“I squeal when I am excited. Sue me.”

Turning toward the cupboard, he took out dessert plates and stood there longer than necessary to hide his emotions. The few days spent with her were the best he had had in a very long time and it was doing something strange to his emotions.

She was candid, fierce, and beautiful and not bowled over by who he was. And she was not afraid to speak her mind. He was not accustomed to such outright honesty.

“Mugs. The water is ready. Now I just need to get some milk and a little sugar.”

He handed her the cup.

“What’s next?”

“Grab a dessert knife and start slicing.” She looked over at him. “I have to warn you that I am a pig when it comes to lemon meringue. I just might eat the entire pie.”

“Save me a piece.”

“I will try very hard to.”

Carrying the pie and plates over to the table, he stood there and waited until she brought the two cups over and handed him one. "Tell me what you think?"

"It's hot." He blew on it.

"Of course it's hot. Don't be such a baby."

"Insults will get you nowhere."

"I am just stating a fact. Well?"

"Will you give me a minute?"

"I want to know what you think?"

Shaking his head, he took a tentative sip and then another. "It's not bad."

“Not bad?” The frown on her forehead made him want to haul her in his arms and kiss her until she couldn’t think.
“Not bad?”

“That’s what I said. Don’t tell me you have gone deaf.”

“That’s it?”

“Are you looking for some kind of award?” He had to suppress the laughter at the daggers in her beautiful eyes. They were more golden brown than dark brown; he realized in amazement. He was noticing little things about her.

The slight dent in her small chin, the adorably turned-up tip of her nose, the way she waved her slender hands when she was making a point, and the fact that she has long and elegant fingers.

“I was looking for you to tell me that it is the best hot cocoa you have ever tasted. But if you want to be that way—”

“It’s the best hot cocoa I have ever tasted.” His deep voice was solemn and had her looking at him suspiciously.

“Why don’t I believe you?”

He grinned at her. “I just can’t please you, can I?” he took another sip of the now-cooling beverage. “It is very good. Really.”

“Thanks.” She cradled the cup between her hands and studied his face.

“What?”

“Why did you go into modeling?”

“To save lives,” he told her promptly, laughing at her expression. He was having fun with this beautiful and enchanting woman and it shocked him.

“You are not a damn doctor.”

“I did it to save my life and the old man’s,” he explained. “If I had taken the path he charted for me, one or both of us would be dead.”

She stared at him with a slight frown. “You hate him that much?”

He considered the question as he took a bite out of his pie. “If you had asked me that, a few days ago, I would have said yes.” He shrugged. “We have our differences. I blame him for a lot of things. He was never there when I was growing up and he- he was not a good husband.”

“He was lousy at the parenting thing. At least he stuck around.”

His eyes flew to her face and he realized the mistake he had made. “Anika-”

“I am feeling tired.” Pushing away from the table, she picked up her cup and the rest of the pie and took it over to the counter. “I am going up. Goodnight.”

He watched in frustration as she swept out of the room. It did not shock him that he wanted to go to her and take her into his arms to comfort her. Pushing away his own cup, he rose and started pacing. He would give her time to pick out her room before going up.

Chapter 7

Her screams shoved into his subconscious and had him jumping up. At first, he was disoriented and had no idea what had awoken him until he heard it again. Swinging his legs out of bed, he rushed to the adjoining door and shoved it open, marching toward the bed where she was twisting and turning.

The sheets were tangled at her feet, and he could see from the light from the moon that her nightgown was almost at her waist. He stood there for a pulsing minute, wondering what to do.

Another scream galvanized him into action, and he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her into his arms.

“Anika, wake up.” He shook her gently. “It’s just a dream, wake up.”

She finally stopped struggling, her eyes drifting open to stare at him.

“It’s Jaylen.”

“Jaylen,” she whispered hoarsely. “What—”

“You had a nightmare.” He was still holding her, his heart racing at the tortured look on her beautiful face.

“Oh.” She buried her face in his chest and breathed in his scent to steady herself. She was still trembling, the tremors decreasing as her heart rate evened out. “I am sorry I woke you. I am fine now.” Lifting her head, she looked at him. “It’s nothing.”

“I don’t think so.” He gave her a steady look. “I am not going to push you for the details, but I am not going anywhere.”

“You don’t have to—” She sighed softly and shook her head. “I guess you deserve an explanation. I am afraid of the dark.”

“What?”

Her eyes shied away from his. “When I was in the group home, we would be locked in a room, a dark room to punish us. It could be anything. We did not clean our plates or a certain chore was not done, anything.

The smallest infraction would get us punished. Combined with my parents abandoning me, it became too much, and I started having these nightmares. There you have it.”

His body had gone still, and the anger he felt was so vicious that it frightened the hell out of him. He wanted to find those bastards and rip them apart for hurting her like that.

“Are they still in operation?” he asked carefully.

Unaware of the emotions churning inside her body, she shook her head. He still had his arms around her, and it somehow felt right. “No. The state closed them down right after we left—Corey and I. They had been getting complaints about them for several years, and they finally did their investigations to determine that it was true.”

“The people who ran it, do you know where they ended up?” he asked her tightly.

Tilting her head, she gave him a curious look. “Want to go and find them and beat them up?”

“Something like that.” It took great effort for him to rein in his temper. Her hair was clinging to the moisture on her forehead, and she looked so appealing that he wanted to kiss her. “Want some water?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Stay.”

His heart jumped at her request.

“As in—”

“Get into bed.”

He did not have to be asked twice. She made space for him, and he slid between the sheets and reached for her. With a sigh, she curled into his arms. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” His hand wandered up and down her back. “Do you get them often?”

“Every now and then. It used to be worse, but I did therapy, and it somehow got better. I was rude downstairs.”

“Aren’t you always that way?”

“Ha. Ha. Very funny.” She smiled into his chest. “I don’t like to talk about it.”

“Then don’t.”

“Thanks,” she said again. “For an international model with daddy issues, you are not so bad.”

“You think I have daddy issues?”

“Don’t you?” She lifted her head to look at him, and somehow it did not feel strange to be in bed with a man whose pictures were on billboards all over the world. His honey blonde hair was a tangled mess, and his green eyes looked sleepy. She wondered what his fans would think if they saw him now.

“Perhaps. No more than you.”

“I have parents’ issues,” she corrected him. “I win.”

“Oh, so it’s a competition?” he asked with lifted brows.

“You can say that. Like I said before, you are not all the way bad. You are sensitive.”

“Please keep it to yourself. I would not like to destroy my tough guy reputation.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Tough guy? You are a model.”

“Which says what exactly? I cannot be tough?”

“You strut on stage—”

“I do not strut. I am decidedly graceful, like a gazelle.”

She gave him a quizzical look. “As I was saying, you strut on stage and when you are not doing that, you pose to have your pic taken. Nothing tough about that.”

He gave her a wounded look. “I would have you know that modeling is not a walk in the park.”

“That’s exactly what it is—a walk. Nothing hard about slapping on some makeup and enhancing the package. How many of those stick figures have you banged?”

“What?” he gave her a startled look.

“Those fellow models who exist on nicotine and caffeine. How many have you banged?”

“I- we are not discussing that.”

“It’s not a discussion.” She folded her hands on his chest and propped her chin there so she could look at him.

“How many?”

“That’s inappropriate.”

“That many, huh? I bet their ribs poking out made it uncomfortable for you.”

“I cannot believe we are having this discussion.”

Her eyes widened as she stared at him. “You are blushing.”

“I am not.”

“You are embarrassed.”

“I just think that one should not discuss intimate details of said banging. And who says bang anyway?” There was a slightly irritated note in his voice that had her laughing.

“I do. I cannot believe you are so put out by the question.”

“Give it a rest. How would you feel if I asked you the same thing?”

She gave him a mischievous smile. “Ask away.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“That’s not polite or appropriate conversation.”

Her brows lifted. “And you are always polite and appropriate.”

He inclined his head. "I try to be."

"You are a strange one." Settling back against his chest, she sighed deeply. "I should get over it."

"Over me banging the models?" He winced when she poked him in the chest.

"Over them leaving me. It happened, and I am a grown-ass adult who should just simply let it go. So, they did not want me. Big deal."

His fingers lifted her chin. "It is indeed a big deal."

The tenderness in his deep voice was almost her undoing. "I cannot afford to dwell on it."

It screws me up." She sniffed.

“Have you ever tried to find out the circumstances behind them leaving you there?” He shook his head. “I said I was not going to ask—”

“It’s okay.” Wrenching her chin from his fingers, she propped her head on her folded hands.

“It’s going to be in the magazines anyway. Yes, I was curious or obsessed, if you prefer. She was in love with him and bringing a kid into the picture was not part of the plan.” She shrugged one shoulder. “I guess I can give her credit for trying to play mommy for five years. But then she left me and went running after him.”

“Their damn loss.” He passed a hand over her tangled hair.

“What I said.” She turned her head to look at him.
“Thanks.”

“For?”

“Being here and not being as bad as I thought you would be. You are going to make some woman a half-decent husband.”

“I am already married,” he pointed out lightly, trying to ignore the pain her statement was causing.

“This is our starter marriage. It’s not even a marriage.”

“Think you can do better?” he teased.

She studied his face—the sharp cheekbones and the excellent bone structure. His chin was firm and strong, his lips- She shied away from that and went back to his eyes, the deep emerald green of it.

“No.” She shook her head. “But you are way prettier than I am and I would prefer not to be in competition with my husband for the rest of my life.”

“What do you look for in a guy?” he asked casually.

She contemplated for a few seconds. “He has to be strong, not physically, but that too. I am stubborn and willful and really do not put up with bullshit.” She pursed her lips and sent his blood pressure into overdrive. “He has to be able to put up with the fact that I have deep-down issues and he definitely cannot be as pretty as you.”

“You keep throwing that damn word around,” he growled. He wanted to tell her that he already had most of the attributes she was looking for.

“Would you prefer handsome? Impossibly good-looking? What one would call a Greek god with a very hot body. I have seen you naked and have to say that you rock.”

“Lusting, are you?” his voice had dipped and was sending shivers along her spine.

“Why not?” She started the slide out of his grasp, but he prevented that by tightening his grip around her waist.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it feel like?”

“Jaylen, this is not a good idea. You know what? I think I will be able to go to sleep now.”

“Is that so?” With lightning speed and before she could make a countermove, he had trapped beneath him.

“Jaylen—“The moan escaped her as she felt the heavy pressure of his arousal. “I don’t- we don’t—“She broke off with a gasp when he kissed the sides of her lips. Words escaped her, when he introduced his tongue. It took little to no pressure from him to get her to part her lips.

The memories of that night came tumbling back in full force and sent the resistance drifting away. With a serrated sigh, her arms came up and she wrapped them

around his neck, her fingers tangling in the blonde curls tumbling around his face.

His tongue entered her mouth tentatively, large hands framing her face as he ventured deeper. A sigh, a groan, flesh meeting flesh, breath intermingling that had the heat rising between them.

His hands wandered over her face and down her neck, pressing against the pulse beating like a wild trapped bird there. He could feel her nipples pressing against the thin material of her nightgown and branding his chest.

His hand spanned her throat, lifting her chin, so that he could delve deeper into her mouth. The sweetness there was almost his undoing—certainly the taste of her was driving him to distraction.

When she moved restlessly beneath him, he knew he was not going to last long. But he was afraid that if he ended the contact with her, she would change her mind and he had no idea what he would do if she decided that

this was not a good idea. It feels so damn right and he needed her.

Still kissing her, he reached between them to pull at the front tie of her top, pulling it open, slowly and eased the material away so that he could feel her bare flesh. The touch of her nipple, the hardness of the flesh sent shivers all over his body.

Ending the kiss, he moved swiftly downwards so that he could pay attention to her nipples.

“Jaylen—”

“Shh—“his breath stirred the nipple and had her body arching. He introduced his tongue first, touching the tip of it to the tight bud. Her fingers clutched at his hair in desperation. When he pulled the bud into his mouth, she dissolved completely.

A cry escaped her and she could feel the fire unfurling inside her belly. Sensations hit her so swiftly that they left

her breathless and out of sorts.

He suckled hungrily, his body tight, his heart hammering inside his chest. His body felt hot and feverish and he was yearning. He was actually craving her. He could not wait any longer. Reaching between them, he managed to release his straining erection. Nudging her thighs apart, he entered her.

Her fingers dug into the corded muscles of his shoulders as her eyes flew wide open, her lips parted. His head lifted and their eyes met and held. He went still at the look of intense passion on her exquisite face. She was so tight that he felt as if he was being squeezed, sucked dry.

“Anika.” His head lowered and he brushed his lips against hers. “Anika.” He took her lips hungrily, swallowing her moans deep inside his throat. Her hands gripped his shoulders, before wandering restlessly down his long, lean tapered back.

He moved slowly at first, sliding into her. His hands drifted down to her hips where he nudged her left thigh

up and brought her foot to rest on his taut buttocks. He heard her gasp as he drove into her and felt when she stiffened.

The climax slammed into her viciously, sending tremors throughout her body. He came just then, too, his body shuddering on top of hers. He poured himself into her until he felt as if he would never stop.

He would have been content to stay where he was for the entire night, but as soon as he could, he eased off her, bringing her into the circle of his arms.

To his surprise and amusement, she buried her face in his chest. He stayed silent for a few minutes, giving her time.

But before he could say a word, she lifted her head to look at him. Her eyes were slumberous and a bright golden brown. Her lips were wet and swollen, turning his stomach into a liquid mess.

“So.”

“So.” His green eyes laughed at her.

“We did it.” Her fingers curled into his chest.

“Define it.”

She gave him a dirty look. “We have further complicated things.”

“I thought we already did that when we went into that chapel.”

“That night was supposed to be a one-night thing.”

“Was it?”

“Will you stop leading with questions?” she snapped.
“This is going to- What are you doing?” She pulled back when he clamped a hand at the back of her neck.

“Complicating things even more.”

“Jaylen-No! Wait—“The rest was swallowed as he seized her lips and stole her breath. Good God, the man can kiss, she thought dazedly. Her arms came around his neck as she sank into, her body vibrating. She barely realized when he settled her on top of him, sliding into her with a smoothness that had her trembling.

Pulling her knees up, she rocked her pelvis slowly before he picked up the pace and shattered them both with fierce passion!

He kept them up half the night, wringing cries from her that echoed around the room. He did not stop until she was sprawled half on top of him. In a few minutes she

was fast asleep on his chest, the talk she was supposed to be having with him forgotten for the night.

But he was not sleeping. His body was still wired from the marathon lovemaking, his heart still pounding from it. And he had made a discovery. He wanted this marriage. He wanted to stay married to this unpredictable, fiery, and feisty woman in his arms. And he had also discovered that he had never felt this confusing mix of emotions before.

He had never been in love before, but he definitely was now. His brow furrowed in contemplation.

She was going to take a lot of convincing. She did not take him seriously. She had bluntly told him that he was not her ideal mate. He was a model, a celebrity and his reputation was not stellar. On top of that, she had issues, ones he wanted to help her fight.

The room was thrown into the shadows, with the dark blue drapes, closed almost all the way. But the sliver of moon was enough for him to see her form, the slender curves wrapped around him. He had not wanted to stop,

had wanted to love her until he had poured everything inside her.

Lifting a heavy curl off her cheek, he brushed it back so that he could study her face.

She had an interesting one, more like an arresting one, he thought. Her cheekbones were sculpted, her chin slightly pointed.

And she had a tiny dimple in her left cheek. Her skin was like satin, smooth and flawless and she was tight as the proverbial glove. They fit, he thought achingly. They fit well together. She was not simpering or a wilting violet. She did not give a damn about who he was.

His photos were in magazines, and on billboards all over the world. He could not step out without being recognized. He had been interviewed by famous talk show hosts. But none of that mattered to her. Or to him while he had been spending time with her.

He had an assistant who took care of the little matters like fan letters, and his social calendar and he had called and instructed her not to disturb him. With her, he felt whole and normal, no—he shook his head. That was not the appropriate word. He felt like himself; he could let his guard down with her and laugh and be silly.

She murmured in her sleep and he tensed, wondering if the nightmare was coming back, but she just snuggled closer to him. He finally closed his eyes and drifted off, a smile on his lips.

He woke to find the place next to him empty and for one panicked moment, he thought she had left. Swinging his legs off the bed, he dragged on his sweats and went to find tees. Without even waiting to put on slippers, he bounded down the stairs, the heady scent of coffee hitting him and slowing him to a sedate walk.

“You are up early.”

“It’s after ten,” she pointed out, refusing to look at him.
“There is coffee and I am making an omelet.”

“What can I do?”

“Nothing. Just sit.”

Instead of obeying, he walked around to where she was busy whisking eggs. Taking the whisk from her, he put it away and turned her to face him. “Good morning.”

She huffed out a breath. “I don’t want to do this. I won’t.”

“Do what?” he feigned puzzlement that had her pushing at him.

“We should not have done that last night.”

“We had to.” Tugging her chin up, he bent to plant a sizzling kiss on her lips that had her toes curling.

“Stop that!” she whispered breathlessly.

“I enjoy it.”

“Look, I know you are unaccustomed to being without a woman and you usually have women falling all over you, but this is—” She blew out another breath. “We got married foolishly and there is no sense pretending that it is real. We have to be sensible about this.”

“Okay.” He kissed her again and this time introduced tongue and had her clinging to him weakly.

“Oh God,” she whispered, leaning into him. “I am not going to become one of your groupies.”

“I don’t have one.” He rubbed his hands up and down her back.

“Maybe we can have sex one or two times.” She grimaced as he gave her a pointed stare. The man was positively yummy. He was wearing a white t-shirt that was clinging to his impressive chest.

He had reduced her to tears so many times last night that she had become a puddle. Even now in the circle of his arms, she wanted to jump him, just lap him up and that kind of thing was a potential danger.

They were not suited and within a year, they would each go their own separate ways. It was no sense complicating things—well complicating it any more than it already was.

“I don’t share. I am damn selfish and if we are having sex with each other, I am going to have to insist that it be only me or I—” she shook her head. “I am going to get violent.”

He grinned. “I can live with that.”

“And you are too pretty.” She sighed deeply. “I should run in the opposite direction and—what the hell!” Dragging his head down, she planted her lips on his and turned his body into one hot ball of lust.

“The breakfast—”

“Can wait,” he whispered as he lifted her into his arms. “We use the living room this time,” he said before taking her lips again.

Chapter 8

Their first public appearance was nerve-wracking. It was the annual Thanksgiving masked ball and James had suggested that making an appearance there was a very good idea.

“Society turns out in their numbers, it’s perfect.”

“I don’t have anything to wear,” she protested weakly.

“You do now,” Jaylen told her and picked up his phone to call Monique Romano. They had spent the last few days practically in bed and she did not want to think about the ramifications of that.

The lovemaking was sizzling, enough to blow the top of her head off. And the conversation between them is stimulating. She was actually starting to like him. No, she had to admit to herself that it was more than that. He was charming and witty. And beautiful. Those were heady and dangerous combinations.

But she had to keep reminding herself that this was just for a year.

“I think they left off most of the material.” The dress was hammered gold with a plunging neckline that made it impossible for her to wear any sort of underwear. “And it’s cold—I am going to catch my death.”

“The jacket is cashmere and incredibly warm,” Jaylen pointed out.

“You are enjoying this way too much.”

“You are going to look great.”

“I really don’t understand why women are supposed to objectify themselves. You are fully clothed with not an inch of skin revealed. While I am going to be parading in this- this scrap as if I am on sale.”

He burst out laughing at her reasoning. The more time he spent with her, the more enchanted he was becoming. He did not want to admit it to himself, but it could not be denied. He was more than halfway in love with her. "Only you."

"It's true," she insisted. "Why couldn't I wear a tux? Like you?" She gestured to his immaculate attire, the dark blue suit and pearl pink shirt looking great on his long, lean frame.

"Perhaps because you have the figure that is worth showing off." Stepping over to her, he draped an exquisite diamond necklace around her neck. She was standing in front of the Cheval mirror, staring at the thin wool clinging to her slender curves critically.

He had called his makeup artist and stylist to come and deal with her hair and face and the result was stunning. Her thick dark brown hair was brushed back from her face with a jeweled barrette holding the left side in place.

“I don’t want to show off anything,” she pouted. Her fingers touched the diamonds and admired them. She was woman enough to appreciate the beauty of it.

“You are going to wow everyone,” he murmured, feeling the familiar stirring of desire.

“I am almost as pretty as you are. Almost. So that’s a plus.”

“Then my work here is done.” He turned her to face him, hands cupping her cheeks. “I am going to be the envy of every guy there.”

“Was that the plan?” she asked him suspiciously.

“Absolutely.” A smile touched his lips as he bent to kiss her.

“We do not have time—” The rest was swallowed up by the kiss that had her clinging to him. The man made her

weak and turned her mind to mush. She was going to have to be careful to guard her heart.

Letting him have access to her body was okay, it meant that she was human and it also meant that she could walk away when the year ended. She could not afford for her heart to be involved. That would be a disaster.

“Ready?”

“Hmm,” she murmured dreamily. “Just a minute more. Kiss me again.”

He laughed shakily but was more than willing to grant her wish. Sliding his hands over her back, he pressed her against him so that she could feel his arousal. Dragging his mouth from hers, he stared at her, heart hammering inside his chest. It was crazy how much he wanted her.

“We have time.”

“We don’t.”

Stepping back, she wriggled out of the dress. “Make it quick.”

With a groan, he pulled his zipper down and hefted her up against him.

“I smell of sex and your horribly expensive perfume,” she complained half an hour later as they stepped into the lofty ballroom packed with people. A car along with a driver had brought them here and they had immediately been accosted by reporters, wanting to know who she was wearing.

She had to admit that she was excited and felt privileged. She was with a drop-dead gorgeous man and attending the function of the year. She was also feeling

mellow after the sex, the hot sex they had just participated in. She had never done anything remotely naughty before and it felt great.

“You smell wonderful. Like something to eat.”

“Keep your lecherous thoughts to yourself,” she warned him. “I don’t want you feeling me up on the dance floor.”

His deep chuckle warmed her. “I will try and control myself.”

“Why are we wearing masks if everyone knows who we are?”

“The mask is just for decoration, nothing else.” He spotted several people he knew and members of his club and their wives. “Want to go and join them?” He indicated the group of people in one corner of the room.

“Why not?” The place was dazzling, not just the glittering chandeliers hanging from the ornately decorated ceiling, but there were the women, decked out in fall colors, red, burgundy, gold, russet, and green.

Some were already swirling around the dance floor and wait staff, looking stiff and professional in their basic black and white served endless supplies of champagne.

“I am usually here in a working capacity,” she murmured as they wound their way through the crowd. He was stopped by several people who wanted to congratulate him on his marriage.

“Now you are not.” He had his hand firmly on her arm, leaving no doubt to the reporters hanging around that he was committed. “You are here as my wife.”

She slanted him a look. “You need to stop throwing that word around.”

“I am going to enjoy doing so, several times as the evening progresses.” He shot a grin at her. “Ah, here we are,” he introduced her to Leesa, Kelly, Monique, and Amani, and she found herself enveloped by women she had only previously been acquainted with before.

“Go away darling while we get to know your new bride better,” Kelly, wearing a stunning red and gold dress told him with a smile.

“We have lots to talk about,” Leesa joined in. Her green dress was some sort of sheath that left arms and long legs bare.

“I knew the dress was definitely your style,” Monique told her admiring the way it clung to her curves. She was wearing a classy red and brown silk gown that draped around her like a cloak.

“Thanks. I told Jaylen that your designer somehow forgot to add the rest of the material.” She snagged a glass of champagne from the passing waiter and took a sip.

“I think Liam said the same thing about the dress I am wearing.” Amani swept a hand over her own russet gown that stopped short of being indecent. “I saw it when I went to hit up Monique for something to wear and could not resist.”

“I also told him that women are forced to wear clothes that objectify them and show off skin as if we are advertising the ware.”

That brought laughter to the group and had people turning to stare at them.

“But we have what to show off,” Kelly murmured. “And you are absolutely right darling. I should know, I was strutting the stage with barely enough covering when I was a model.”

She looked over to where Jaylen was standing with a group of men. “Your husband does the same and trusts me when I say that I do love looking at his magnificent body.” She gave Anika a curious look. “How on earth did you manage to hide the fact that you were seeing each other?”

She and Jaylen had come up with an answer to that question, they knew was going to be thrown at them. She liked these women and knew for a fact that they were making strides in the world.

They used their position of power to make a difference and she respected that. But she could not or would never involve them in her personal business. Her complicated personal business.

“She wanted secrecy, I wanted to shout it to the world.” She had been so absorbed in her thoughts, that she had not noticed that he had come up behind her. Sliding his arms around her waist, he brought her up against him.

“She has this thing about her privacy and she resisted for as long as she was able.” He kissed the tip of her left ear. “I managed to drag her into that chapel and begged her to make it official. I guess she loved me enough to say yes.”

“I had to give in, he was becoming a downright pest and making a nuisance of himself, like now,” she said airily.” She tilted her head to look at him. “You could not stay away another minute, could you?”

“I want to dance with my new bride. Do you have a problem with that?” He could feel the desire pumping through his body as she stared at him.

“No. It so happens that I want to dance as well.” She looked at the women who were watching them with avid interest. “Would you excuse us?”

“Of course, go ahead,” Leesa told her with a grin. “And circle back. We really have to chat.”

He led her onto the dance floor and she was sure it was not her imagination—people were making a path for them.

“I never asked if you can dance.” His hands came around her small waist.

“You are about to find out and this is not really dancing.”
Wounding her hands around his neck, she lifted her head to look at him.

“We are just doing some bump and grind.”

He chuckled, absolutely enchanted by her. “I think it is called a waltz in polite society.” She was wearing a half-face mask the color of copper, which gave her a mysterious look.

“And I keep forgetting that’s where we are.” She looked over his shoulder to see a group of women giving him longing looks. “Fans or lovers?”

He turned her so that he could see who she was referring to.

“Models. Commercial. We worked together on several projects.”

She gave him a curious look. “And you are telling me that you have never slept with any of them.”

“No, my suspicious one.” He kissed the tip of her nose for the hell of it.

“Not even the one with ebony skin and spiky hair. She looks like she would like to tear my hair out.”

“Her name is Karlene and she always looks mean.”

“She might be hungry.”

He laughed, green eyes twinkling. They were attracting a lot of attention., but did not seem to notice. “Why would you say that? There is enough food here to feed an army.”

“And I bet the champagne is the only thing they have had since they have been here. Models are always starving for their profession. Except you of course. You eat like a damn horse.”

“I am still growing,” he teased.

“I can attest to one area that I swear grows each time I see it.” His body lurched when she sneaked a hand between them to cup him. “See, growing.”

“Anika—” he hissed out a breath and missed a step. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Just checking.” She gave him a smug smile and to his intense relief, let go of him to put her hand on his chest. “Still growing.”

He gave her a pained look. “How would it look if I drag you out of here and find the nearest empty room?”

“It would look as if we are newlyweds and cannot keep our hands off each other,” she sighed softly. “And I should not have done that.”

“You are damn right—”

“Because now I want you to find an empty room and we can do something about this heat.”

He went still at that, ignoring the couples swirling around them. “Do you mean that?” he asked her hoarsely.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s get the hell out of here.”

They did not find an empty room but made the journey home. He wanted to take her just as they cleared the doorway but waited until they were upstairs.

“We did not say our goodbyes.” He was out of breath and sweating and realized that he had been more than a little rough.

“Rude of us.” She trailed her fingers over the beads of sweat on his chest. “Do you think they knew why we left so abruptly?”

“I think so and I do not care.” Picking up the hand tormenting him, he kissed the palm.

“And those women eyeing you like choice piece of meat probably hate me even more.” She liked the look of him, after the raunchy lovemaking. His blonde hair was tangled, green eyes clouded over with the leftover passion.

She was sliding into something and was not ready to dissect it yet. She had automatically and without protest moved over into the master bedroom and they spent every night together.

“I never slept with any of them.” He kissed her forehead, feeling the tenderness for her rearing up inside him. He was proud of her and territorial. He had found himself watching her when she was with the rest of the wives and had not cared for the comments one of the men had made about her.

“You struck gold right there, Monteith,” he had said with a leer. “With a body like that—”
“You are going to want to stop right there,” he had warned with steel in his voice.

“No disrespect.”

“Let’s keep it that way. That’s my wife you are talking about.”

“Is that the absolute truth?”

“Why would I lie to you?”

“I don’t know. You are a model and a very hot one at that. I was reading this magazine where you were featured on the cover and you had your shirt open. I thought the photo was airbrushed, but damn!” She trailed a hand down his chest and sent heat to the core of him. “It was all you.”

“And based on that, you think I sleep with every available woman who comes in my direct path?” He captured her hand again to stop her from straying.

“Something like that.”

“I will have you know that I am very selective and have not been in a relationship in months.”

“Why is that?” She threw her foot over his thigh, loving the feel of his crisp blonde hair on his powerful legs.

“I hate bed hopping.”

The papers make you out to be a slut. They refer to you as a playboy, but the appropriate term is slut.”

“I used to be,” he admitted.

“And now?”

“When I turned twenty-five, I decided that it was not something I wanted to continue doing.” He linked his fingers with hers. “There was an incident in Maui, we were doing a commercial, I believe it was for Romano’s or another brand, I am not exactly sure—“he gave a one-shoulder shrug.

“There was a crush, an after party, and a girl, one of the groupies called rape.

She pointed to one of the other male models and it so happened that I decided that I was going to sleep before I hit the hotel where the party was being held. The day

had been very hectic, the photo shoots had to be done several times and it was so damn hot that we were practically boiling.”

“You arrived during the excitement.”

He nodded. “Turned out the girl just wanted to get her name in the papers.”

“So, she was never raped.”

He shook his head. “But the damage was done. There was quite a stink and his reputation turned to hell. The brand dropped him during the investigation and even after his name was cleared, it was never the same for him again.”

She gave him a steady look. “And based on that, you decided that whoring was not the way to go.”

He gave her a mildly irritated look. “I was never a whore.”

“That was your wake-up call.”

“Yes.”

“When was your last relationship?”

“More than six months ago.”

She gave him an incredulous look. “I don’t believe you.”

“Calling me a liar?”

“Jaylen, it’s not possible for a man who looks like you —“Her eyes swept over his beautiful face. “With your kind of sex drive to be without a woman for more than six months.”

“I could say the same about you,” he pointed out.

“I am serious.”

“So am I.”

She gave him a frustrated look. “Let me guess—you got your heart broken. Some flighty society princess or one of those empty-headed models you work with, left you —“She shook her head. “That does not sound right. But anyway, something happened. Maybe she was banging someone else on the side—”

“You talk too much,” he whispered as he took her lips in a kiss that had her clinging to him.

“I was taking a break because I was dissatisfied with my life.”

“What’s there to be dissatisfied about?” she grumbled, already feeling the need to drop the subject.”

“Having money does not guarantee happiness.”

“I know that,” she told him quietly.

“Good. Now are we done with the conversation?”

“Absolutely.” Pulling his head down, she used her lips for something else.

“I hate this.” Anika whipped off the shades and tucked them into the pocket of her dark blue cashmere jacket. “I had to take a circuitous route and zipped in between vehicles in order to beat the tail that was on me when I left the loft. Hi.” She went in for a hug and stayed there for a few minutes. “It seems like I have not seen you in ages.”

“A little less than a week.” He ushered her into his office and closed the door. “Want anything?”

“Just water. Thanks.”

“Where is hubby?” Corey grabbed a chilled bottle from the mini fridge and tossed it to her before going around to sit behind his desk.

“He had a meeting with his agent. This is the last day of our honeymoon.” She popped the cork and took a sip. “I am going back to work Monday.”

“How do you feel about going back?”

She shrugged. “It is going to feel strange. I left there as Anika Groves and will be going back as a Monteith even for a short time.”

“Will it be for a short time?” he asked her quizzically.

“What do you mean?”

“You look happy.”

She took another sip. “I don’t know what I am.”

“You are also very photogenic.” Pulling out a drawer he slapped a tabloid on the surface of his desk for her to see. There they were in blinding colors. A very innovative reporter had taken the pic while they were on the dance floor.

He had captured the moment with Jaylen holding her intimately and smiling down at her. She was also smiling, her hands wrapped around his neck.

The caption told its own story. ‘Former playboy and international model dazzled by his new wife.’

“We were—“She took another sip from the bottle, her gaze straying again to the picture.

“We were dancing.”

“I happen to have eyes. And it looked like you were doing so much more. Like I said, you look happy. And the entire world can see that there is something going on between you. It’s not pretend, anymore, is it?”

“No,” she sighed. “I really like him.” She shrugged at the look on his face. “We are sleeping together. And without the use of protection.”

“Whose idea was that?”

“I had a nightmare that first night.”

“Bad?”

“The worst. Anyway, he heard me screaming and came to my rescue. I told him a little of what went on.”

“And you bonded. Honey, it’s natural for that to happen. You are two very beautiful people.”

“I cannot stay married to him. It would not work between us.”

“It seems to be working now.”

“It’s the newness of it.” She rubbed her palm over the moisture restlessly. “He is not my type and I told him that.”

“And yet you are still intimate.”

She sighed again. "Can we talk about something else? Anything else that does not give me a bitch of a headache?"

"Absolutely." He grinned at her. "You look hot."

"I always look hot."

"You are even more so now."

"I would prefer to talk about you."

Chapter 9

“Your husband is here.”

“My who?” She aimed a distracted frown at her assistant as she studied the report in detail. She had come back to work and was right in the thick of things.

It had been uncomfortable at first, with everyone referring to her as Mrs. Monteith, until she had told them to knock it off and she had refused to spring for a bigger office. That was just ridiculous.

“Your husband.”

“Oh. Where—”

“Right here. Thanks.” Jaylen sent the woman a slight smile that had her blushing. She had left him this morning to go to some photoshoot in a studio. The look

of him, the purely masculine beauty of him had her going weak. “Hey.”

“You are here.”

“I am here.”

“Why?”

“I cannot pop in to see my wife?”

“I am not really—” She shook her head. “I am swamped and you don’t have to come and visit.”

“It’s my company too.”

“One you have never taken an interest in.” She sat on the edge of the desk, one leg swinging.

“Never had a need until now.” He stood in front of her, hands on her shoulders. “You look very appealing.”

“You saw me this morning.”

He rubbed her shoulders a little absently. “I have to go away.”

Her heart took a dive, just simply shuddered downwards and stopped.

“Oh.”

He smiled at her.

“Something I have been putting off since—you know, we got married and all. A commercial for the latest line of men’s wear from Romano’s.”

“Where?”

“Italy.”

She looked at a point over his left shoulder and tried to appear unconcerned. “Well, have a safe trip.”

He shook her, an exasperated expression on his face. “It won’t kill you.”

“What?”

“To tell me you are going to miss me.”

“I will be fine.”

“Dammit Anika—”

“What do you want me to say?” she cried softly. “That I will probably resort to having nightmares again? That I am so caught into this damn hype; this pretense of us being married that it is starting to feel real?”

“Yes.” He felt the hope springing inside his heart. “I want you to say that.”

“It is not real.” She stared at him and felt the ache. He was leaving and she felt as if he was taking something vital with him. This was exactly what she had hoped to avoid. It was not the sex; it was the entire package. They had spent a week together and it had been wonderful, lulling her into thinking that it was real. “In a year—”

“We are not damn well near there yet.” He shook her, his eyes burning. “We are here in the now and we feel something for each other. Is it going to kill you to admit that?”

“Maybe.” She smiled weakly. “How long?”

“A week. It’s an intense shoot and we have to cram in several things at the same time.” He tilted her chin. “I would ask you to come with me, but I know what you are going to say.”

“I would cramp your style.”

“Not possible,” he sighed. “I have put things off long enough and have a contract.”

“I understand.”

“I want you to say it.”

“Say what?”

“That you are going to miss me. I can say it, Anika. I am going to miss you. It’s starting to feel like something real

and I am damn well going to be aching for you.”

“It’s the sex. You will miss the sex.” She felt everything in her shivering and melting at the same time.

“Perhaps.” He hauled her up so that he could wrap his hands around her. “You have to admit that it is pretty amazing.”

“It is.” She had to admit.

“And you are not bad in the conversation area.” He was rubbing his hands up and down her back and she could feel the heat through her sweater.

“Ditto. I have discovered that you are not just a pretty face. There is actually a brain there.” Her arms were around his shoulders and she was snug against his body.

“Why, thanks,” he said mockingly, head descending.

“I have work—” She stifled a moan when he captured her lips and sank into the steaming kiss that had her clinging to him. The man sure had a mouth on him, she thought dazedly as she returned the kiss. She loved the taste of him, those sensuous lips that could work so much magic.

And yes, she had ventured into dangerous territory. She was yearning for him, the thought of spending a week away from him was making her crazy. She poured her confusion, her desperation into the kiss and had him growling deep inside his throat.

His fingers bit into her back before drifting down to her taut buttocks. He wanted to be with her, sink himself deep into her, and for the first time, he resented his career. He wanted to say to hell with everything and stay.

She was his wife. The insistent ringing of the phone pulled them apart. Easing out of his arms a little, she leaned over to answer. “Yes?” She had to clear her throat and her fingers were trembling. She listened for a minute before hanging up.

“Your car is waiting.”

“It can wait.” He pulled her back in and kissed her again, the passion only increasing.

“A week you say?” She was breathless and flushed and horny. God, the thrill of it. She felt giddy, she had never been giddy before. Not over a man.

“Yes.” He stepped away and it took willpower to do so. He felt angry and confused. And it was mixed in with the terrible passion he was feeling. No other woman would do. “If you can manage, will you come?”

“Jaylen—”

“It could be our second honeymoon.” The pleading look on his face tore at her.

“What are we doing?”

“Being married.”

“We are—”

“Don’t!” His sharp tone had her jumping. “Don’t stand there and tell me that you don’t feel it, Anika. It’s unbearable.”

She stared at him with huge eyes, feeling weepy and weak. “We don’t belong together.”

“And yet here we are.” He dragged restless fingers through his hair. “Miss me.” He hauled her into his arms and kissed her with heat.

And then he was gone, leaving her sitting on the edge of her desk shaking. It was a few minutes before she could compose herself enough to go and do the work, and even so, she could not concentrate. Damn him.

He did not speak to anyone. All through the flight, he pretended to be asleep. He could hear the rest of the crew chatting and laughing, but his mind was on her. He felt like he had left his heart right there inside her office. He had wanted to go back and just say to hell with it.

But he had a contract and he was never one to shirk his duty. But he missed her like crazy. A smile curved his lips as he recalled snatches of conversation. She made him laugh, and made him feel good about himself. With her, he did not have to pretend.

He felt when someone came and sat next to him, but did not open his eyes.

“I brought you some champagne.”

“I am not thirsty.”

“You seem out of sorts.”

His eyes popped open and he turned his head to look at the very interesting and striking face of the Amazon-like woman seated next to him. He had idly contemplated taking her up on her offer for a relationship several months ago.

“I am fine.” He took the champagne from her and sipped.

“You are married.”

“I am.” He inclined his head mockingly.

“A sudden wedding, in an Italian chapel.” She stretched her long graceful legs out. Even though it was cold, she was wearing a crotch-riding pair of denim shorts and a long cashmere jacket. She was rail thin, with hints of curves.

And she had a brain. Lila was a Harvard graduate and came from money, like him. One of the reasons, he had been drawn to her. And they worked well together.

“I could not wait to make her mine.” He realized that he could say it now without it being a lie.

“You are in love with her.” Her slanted hazel eyes, startling against the ebony complexion, eyed him curiously.

“I do believe I am.”

She pushed back her seat and curled one of those famous legs beneath her. “And to think I was going to suggest we make something of this trip. It seems I have lost my chances.”

“Indeed, you have.” He smiled at her and also realized he could look and stop there. He felt nothing except mild

interest.

Touching her glass to his in a toast, she smiled back.
“Here’s to you and to finding happiness and love in a screwed-up world.”

“I will certainly drink to that.”

“This is amazing,” Anika murmured as she dug into her meatballs.

“It’s just something I picked up at Luciano’s.” Corey came and joined her at the kitchen counter.

“I have not had meatballs in ages.” She twirled her fork around a noodle and dunked it into the sauce before popping it into her mouth.

“You look like you are starving.”

“I skipped lunch. Lots to do on my first day back.”

“How was it?”

She shrugged and ate some more. “Strange. To them, I am part of management and they had no idea what to do or how to be around me. I went into the staff lounge, like I normally did and they all clammed up and stared at me as if I was an interloper.”

“You are married to the boss’s son.” He pointed his fork at her.

“It made me feel strange and irritable. So, I just hightailed it back to my office and went to work. And they are calling me Ms. Monteith, polite as you can.”

“That happens to be your name.” He grinned at her. “You are even dressed for the role.” He nodded to the lime green cashmere sweater she was wearing.

“He bought me clothes even though I specifically told him not to,” she muttered. “He doesn’t listen.”

“You are in love with him.”

“What?” She gave him a startled look and dropped her fork.

“It’s plain to see.” He resumed eating.

“I just have strong feelings for him, that’s all. He is hot and the sex is amazing. It cannot be love.” She was trying to convince herself more.

“Tell yourself that,” he said mildly. “You are over at my place because you cannot bear to stay at the loft without him.”

“He called me when he landed. The time difference is going to screw us up. And I cannot be in love with him. He is not my type.”

“Hmm.”

“I cannot,” she insisted.

“I heard you the first time. Beer?”

“With meatballs? I don’t think so. Don’t you have any wine?”

“You have gone fancy on me.”

“I suppose I have.” She sighed and pushed the plate away. “What am I going to do?”

“Roll with it.”

She eyed him darkly as he went to fetch the wine and glasses.

“That’s your profound advice—roll with it?”

“You are already rolling in the proverbial hay.” He grinned at the dirty look she threw at him. Taking the full glass of wine, she took a long gulp, trying to steady herself.

“Perhaps this time away from him will do the trick and help us get things into perspective.”

“You don’t believe that.” Corey took his seat and sent her a sober look.

“I cannot be in love with him. It will only complicate things.”

“Hon, the fact that you are sleeping with the guy, already did that,” he told her mildly. “And you know it.”

“Is something wrong?” Anika had brought her iPad along with her. James was standing by the window staring at the spectacular view. Buildings speared upwards, the heavy gray clouds somehow adding to the somber beauty. He looked tired, she thought, and felt a pang. This man was her father-in-law, at least for a year and it shook her.

“Have a seat.”

She sat on one of the plush chairs and tried not to fidget. “Have you heard from Jaylen?”

“He called when he landed.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s afternoon in Italy and he did say he was going to be tied up most of the day. He might call later.” She did not mention that he had called her almost midnight her time and kept her up talking and trying to convince her to have phone sex.

She had refused of course, but had been unable to go back to sleep. She had tried sleeping in the big bed they shared but had given up and gone into the room, she had originally taken as hers,

“He has not called me.”

“He is busy—”

James held up a hand as he crossed over the thick steel gray carpet to sit behind his desk.

“I don’t need you to make excuses for him.” He fiddled with a paperweight before putting it back in its original space. “We are at odds. Yes, over the past two weeks

since he has been with you, there has been some progress—he sighed deeply.

“The point is, I made a hell of a lot of mistakes, and that pushed him away. I have been trying to heal the breach, but it is slow going.” He stared at her with intense hazel eyes. “You are good for him.”

She shifted and uncrossed her legs.

“I don’t know about that—”

“No,” he shook his head. “I want this marriage to work.”

She stared at him for a few seconds before looking at her screen. She had brought it with her to discuss the upcoming line up of musical talents they represent. To try and spin a potentially delicate situation where one of their singers had been caught with his pants down inside the hotel room of the wife of yet another singer.

A sticky situation that needs to be addressed. She was the PR for the company and hated the fact that she had to navigate through these personal minefields. “That’s a surprise,” she told him bluntly. “I am not the type you would have chosen for him.”

He nodded at that. “Initially, no. But you are good for him. He needs someone who is not going to pander to his every whim. You are strong and have handled yourself well with the press.”

“It’s my job.”

He smiled at that. “It’s more than that.” He gave her a curious look. “I have also seen you without cameras aimed at you. There is something there.”

“James—”

“I am just an old man who wants to see his son get some happiness. And he seems happy. I am ill.”

She felt a lurch as she stared at him. “As in—”

“My heart.” He rubbed the spot where his heart was beating somewhat irregularly. “Just a blip, but my physician wants me to slow things down. He is advising me to take a long cruise—” he grimaced at that. “I am not a fan of sitting around with a bunch of idlers and staring at the sea.”

“Some of them are actually on vacation.” There was a slight note of amusement in her voice and got a snort for her effort.

“I am going to have to take things a little easier.” He stared at her for a minute. “I just want to see my son settled.” He sighed. “I have made a lot of damn mistakes.

Was never there for him and his mother and used my position here to screw women who could not hold a candle to my wife. I did all of that and I am now regretting every damn minute of it. I want my son back,

Anika, and I am hoping that you will help me accomplish that.”

“How—”

“He respects you. I know you might think that because of who he is and the way he looks—“He smiled wistfully and turned his head to look at the life-sized portrait of a woman wearing a stunning green gown that highlighted her alabaster skin. Her thick honey-blonde hair was swept back from a heart-shaped face.

She was smiling, green eyes twinkling as if she was privy to a secret no one else knew. And the resemblance between her and her son was remarkable. “He is not like me. He could have used his looks and fortune to have any woman he wanted, but he is loyal. He has a good head on his body.”

He turned back around to stare at the woman in front of him. “The papers, the internet made him out to be a playboy, but that is just rumors. I know him. He saw the way I cheated on his mother and it turned him into a

cynic. Part of the reason, I imagine, is that he had never been able to settle into a relationship.”

Anika had listened and absorbed everything he said. She had been about to tell him that it was between her and Jaylen. But something, not just the words, but the tone of the man’s voice had her reining in her original remarks.

“We got married in an unorthodox way. I would want to think that marriage should be built on a solid foundation and even then, there is no guarantee that it is going to last. You are a perfect example.”

“And yet, that unorthodox beginning can turn into something unexpected,” he pointed out.

“Jaylen and I barely know each other,” she protested.

“And yet you get along. He came to see you. I have my spies,” he told her with a faint smile as she gave him a questioning stare. “The source also told me that he spent

a few minutes inside with the doors locked. I know my son, he would not have done that, if he was not interested.” He shrugged. “I am a man on a mission.”

“And your mission is to see that we stay together.”

“Something like that.”

Her phone pinged and he encouraged her to get it.

“It might be him.”

“All the more reason to answer.”

With a nod, she fished it out of her jacket pocket, a smile touching her lips that had James’ suspicions confirmed.

“Hey.” She listened for a minute, her smile widening.

“You are making it up. Oh please. As if I would believe

you.” She lifted her head, realizing that she had an avid audience. “I am here with your dad and I cannot discuss that now.” She turned away and lowered her voice.

“Go to sleep Jaylen and leave me be.” She listened again and burst out laughing. “God, you are annoying and I am not saying that. Okay fine. I miss you too. Now I have to work.” She hung up and put away her phone, fiddled with her iPad for a minute. “He said hello.”

“Did he?”

Her impish smile came and he found himself enchanted. Funny, he had noticed how beautiful she was and of course talented, but this was a different side altogether. “Among other things.” She rose. “I don’t know how this is going to work out between us and I have been giving some thought to the matter. I am conflicted.”

She shook her head. “It is much more than that. We are supposed to be doing this talk show deal when he gets back and—” She laughed breathlessly. “I really miss him. He can be a pain, but—” She shook her head again. “I

have work. There is something I need to run by you before I send out the press release.”

“I trust your judgment. Anika.” He stopped her as she turned to leave. “You are good for him.”

She nodded, hesitating slightly. “You should try reaching out to him when he gets back. I was thinking we should have dinner. That would be a start.”

“And I would be forever grateful,” he said humbly.

“Don’t get your hopes up about us. It might be a thing now, but we might find that we want to part ways after the year.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

She could not tell him that there was a funny ache inside the pit of her stomach at the idea of parting ways. The

man had wormed his way inside her emotions and lodged there.

“I don’t know,” she said instead. “I have work.”

With that, she was gone, leaving him staring after her thoughtfully.

Chapter 10

Letting herself into the too-quiet loft, she went straight to the kitchen where the housekeeper had left a plate inside the warmer. She had considered going over and spending the night at Corey's, but she had brought home some work to occupy her time.

And she had managed to avoid the rather pesky reporter who had been calling to confirm the name of the group home she had stayed at when she was a child.

She was head of the PR team, but Jaylen's social secretary. She had shaken her head at the concept. A social secretary for Pete's sake. The woman was a bulldozer, a plain Jane, but she knew her thing.

"Just shoot what you need left out and I will take care of the rest."

She was not hungry. Lunch had been sent up to her, some sort of lobster. She no longer ate in the staff's

lounge, not because of the name change, but because the staff were uncomfortable with her there.

Wandering into the pristine kitchen, she selected a bottle of wine and took it with her into the blue sitting room. The place was big and comfortably furnished.

She could not help but glance at her watch. It was after six here which means- She shook her head. "He is probably asleep. It's after midnight. He is not going to call and it does not matter." She sipped the wine moodily, the conversation she had with James, resurfacing.

She was not going to get involved. She never had a parent and she was not familiar with the dynamics of family.

It did not matter that the man was ill and wanted to reunite and bond with his son. That was between them. She was just a temporary wife. Only here for a year and then- she shied away from thinking about it.

Curling her feet underneath her, she took another sip, her mind straying to their conversation. Typical man, he had asked what she was wearing. When she had disclosed that she was with his dad, he had insisted she go into a private room and facetime him so he could see her underwear. Perv, she thought whimsically.

The motion of her phone vibrating had her jolting. Ignoring the racing of her heart, she reached over the table and turned it around.
It was him!

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she pressed the green icon. “You are supposed to be asleep.” She was ridiculously happy to hear from him.

“I closed my eyes and I kept seeing you in that black number you were wearing the last time I was there.” His deep voice was making her weak.

“You mean that scrap that is part of the things you ordered?”

“I am switching to video.”

“I am not having phone sex—“Her breath hitched as his image swam into view. He was bare-chested and had angled the device so that she could see most of him. A sheet was draped over his narrow hips and was low enough for her to recognize that he was not wearing anything beneath the silk sheet.

Her mouth went dry and her nipples turned to stone.
“Were you with someone?” she demanded.

“No. Why?”

“You are naked.”

“I always sleep in my bare skin.”

“It’s-you should put something on.”

“Am I making you hot darling?” he asked her huskily.

“No,” she lied.

“Really? How about now?” He angled the device so that she could see what he was doing. “I am hard for you.”

“This is ridiculous and I am not doing it.” Her breath was coming in short pants. The man was positively lethal, she thought dazedly.

“Doing what?”

“Pull the sheets back up.”

“I need you,” he told her thickly. “I am several thousand miles away and it is driving me crazy that I am not with

you. How the hell is that possible? I want to come home to you Anika, be with you so much that I am aching.”

“Jaylen—“She had no idea what she wanted to say. Everything he just said, she wanted to repeat. She was here inside his loft and missed him so much that she could practically taste it.

“Tell me.”

“No. This is silly.”

“Is it?” He sighed long and deep and snuggled back against the pillows. “Are you going to strip for me?”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“What damn good is it going to do?” she cried out in frustration. “You are with your female models; you could very well invite them back to your room.”

His eyes glowered and she recognized the temper in them. “Is that what you want me to do Anika?”

“You are an adult and can pretty much do whatever you want.”

“And you would be okay with that?”

“I don’t care.”

“Stop lying, damn you!”

“Don’t you dare talk to me—”

“I don’t want to fight with you. Not tonight. It was a damn lousy day and a particularly tiresome one. I was bombarded by reporters who wanted the scoop on my marriage and I had to field questions in Italian as well as English.

I cannot sleep because I am craving you. My cock is aching and I already took two cold showers and it is not doing a damn thing. So, don’t sit there and give me permission to screw someone else. It makes me mad as hell.”

She was silent for a minute as she stared at his image and felt the tears blurring her eyes. She had never needed anyone before.

Ever since she had realized that her parents were not coming back for her, and it had taken a lot of crying in her pillows to come to that realization, ever since that time, she had been determined never to put her emotions out there again. And now, it was different. She needed him and it scared her.

“Anika.”

“What?” She sniffed.

“I am not going to apologize for expressing my feelings.”

“As if you would stoop so low.” She wiped at a tear that had escaped.

“Why are you crying?”

“I am not.”

“Anika.”

“I hate you.”

He sighed wearily. “I hate the distance. I want to take you in my arms and just hold you.”

“It’s just sex. You want really good sex.”

He smiled slightly. “That too. Why are you crying?”

“I already told you why. I hate you and I do. I hate you for making me need you so much. God!” She huffed out a breath. “I miss you. You are annoying as hell and way too pretty, which makes me think that this is not going to last. We are not going to last and I should do the sensible thing and bail before it gets too sticky.”

“But?” His intense green eyes were boring into hers and even from a distance, she could feel the heat in them.

“But I like the really amazing sex and want it every chance I get.”

“Come to me, darling. The old man would let you use the jet. Come to me and spend the next couple of days soothing my frayed nerves.”

Her smile was a little wobbly. “It’s just two days and I am not going to abuse my position like that. The people I work with already resent me for my sudden change in status. And I have a ton of work to do. We also have the stupid talk show thing to do when you get back.”

“I miss you,” he told her sincerely. “I feel like a sad baby who has been deprived of his mother’s milk. I get irritated by the slightest thing and I am moody and irascible. I was always a very likable guy until now.”

“I bet that moody thing shows up well on camera. Any naked pose?”

He laughed, feeling the irritation fading. She could always accomplish that. “None.”

“Good. I want to be the only one ogling that hunk of flesh.”

“I feel like a slab of meat.”

“That’s what you are to me.” She scrubbed at her wet cheeks. “I don’t cry.”

“You don’t?”

“I did that a lot when I was little. Crying because my parents were not coming back for me and I learned to get strong, kick-ass strong, you know? I decided that no one would ever have that power over me again. Now you are making me cry. I really hate you.”

“It so happens that I really hate you too. You make me so damn vulnerable.”

She sighed at that. “What are we doing here?”

“It appears that we are well and truly married.”

“This is madness. We have only been with each other for two weeks.”

“And?”

“That’s not enough time for us to be feeling like this.”

“Isn’t it?” He sighed then. “I know how I feel Anika. The last thing I wanted was to be married, to give the old man the satisfaction he had been waiting for. But now, it is what I want more than anything else.”

“It will not work!” she cried. “You are Hollywood and I am some small town and never the twain shall meet. You are going to cheat on me with all those women crawling all over you and I am going to be forced to commit murder and I don’t want to go to jail. I am not going to do very well behind bars.”

He burst out laughing. He could not help himself. No wonder he was so enchanted by her.

“It’s not funny,” she muttered, a smile tugging at her lips.

“Oh, but it is. Who will you be murdering? Me or the unfortunate female?”

“Both of you of course.” Her smile widened. “You cannot think I would leave you alive to bounce on another female while I languish in jail, can you?”

“I don’t know what I was thinking. Of course, you wouldn’t. You would want to be thorough about it.”

“Damn straight,” she sighed again. “You need to get your beauty sleep.”

“I don’t need it.” He sent her a cocky grin.

“Vain.”

“How about you darling? Will you be able to sleep?”

“I have moved out of the master and am trying to sleep in the original bedroom. Damn you for making me miss having you wrapped around me.”

“It’s the same for me.”

“Are we really doing this?”

“It appears so.”

She studied him for a minute, feeling the yearning to touch. For one ridiculous moment, she almost put her hand on the screen. Fortunately, she came to her senses before she did that. “Call your dad.”

“What?”

“He wants to hear from you.”

“I don’t want to talk to him.”

“Have you called since you left?”

“Why would I do that?”

She had sworn to herself that she was not going to get involved, but she had seen the look on the man’s face and the regret there. “Do it for me.”

“Anika—”

“Please. If we are doing this marriage thing, we have to listen to each other.”

He gave her a narrowed look. “That’s not how it works.”

“How would you know? Have you been married before?”

“Stay out of it.”

“I said I would, but now that I am stuck, I feel obligated to intervene. He wants to hear from you.”

“You are becoming a pain in the ass and using your position to soften me up.”

“My position as your wife or your lover?”

“Both.”

“Are you mad at me? Bear in mind that you are thousands of miles away and I do think that it says in the Bible or some marriage book that we should not go to bed angry at each other.”

“Is that so?” His voice was soft and menacing.

“I believe it is written somewhere. If we are going to do this, we should follow the damn rules.”

“You are being very convenient.” He blew out a breath.

“Okay, I will call.”

“See how well we are working?” She gave him a guileless smile.

“Remind me to strangle you when I get there.”

“Is that a sexual thing?”

He laughed again and she felt an answering smile tugging at her lips. He made her happy and light-headed. She was always so sensible and sober, but he made her feel as giddy as a teenager. She had no idea if that was good or bad.

“It is.”

“Looking forward to it. I cannot wait to see you.”

“Oh, Anika.” His voice had deepened. “I want to see you naked. Let me see your delectable body so that I can get some sleep.”

“Jaylen—”

“Please. Humor me.”

Rolling her eyes, she propped the phone against a cushion and rose to take off her clothes. “I am leaving my underwear on.”

“That’s fine by me. You are wearing red.”

“And it’s skimpy as hell. You are a perv.”

“I am your perv. Ah. Just like that.” She saw when his hand disappeared between the sheets.

“What are you doing?”

He moved the sheet for her to see and she felt the heat plunging through her body.

“Jaylen, I can’t—” she whispered, feeling her nipples tightening.

“Touch yourself.”

“I am not doing that.”

“Do it for me.” His voice had thickened. “Just a gentle touch. Pretend it’s my fingers teasing and tormenting you.”

She slid her hand between the lace to touch the swollen flesh. “Jaylen.”

“Darling.” His breathing had become shallow. “I am sliding in—just the tip right now, allowing you to get adjusted to me. Do you feel it?”

“Yes.” Her fingers dip in and she jolted as she felt the moisture.

“I am itching in darling - and you are opening up for me.” Her eyes were glued to the movements of his fingers sliding up and down the rigid length of him. She felt weak and hot.

“I am all the way in now, but I have to stop a minute, your tightness is more than I can bear. That was the first thing I thought about when I entered you. She is tight, like a vice clamping around me and squeezing—squeezing, taking me in.” His fingers were moving rapidly now. And she felt the sensations bubbling inside her.

“Can you feel me darling Anika?”

“Yes.” Her body arched.

“Don’t close your eyes my sweet. Look at me. See only me.”

“I do,” she gasped, her body arching. “Jaylen!” The cry escaped her as the climax slammed viciously. He grunted, his body lifting as he spilled his seed.

They were both silent for a spell, only the sounds of their labored breathing filling the air.

Then he spoke. "Thank you," he whispered hoarsely. "I do believe I will be able to get some sleep now."

"Speak for yourself." She removed her fingers and refused to look at him.

"We are not supposed to go to bed upset with each other," he reminded her softly.

Her eyes flew to him and she felt the embarrassment fading. "You are right. It's just that- I- I have never done anything like that before. You make me do things I have never done before."

"Is that so bad?" he asked her softly.

“We will see. Go to sleep Jaylen.”

“Will you do the same?”

She nodded.

“No nightmares?”

“None.”

“Good. I would not want you to have them when I am not there to hold you.”

“Neither would I. You are starting to grow on me.”

He smiled. “The feeling is mutual. Goodnight darling.”

“Goodnight.”

She hung up and sat there staring at shadows, realizing that she had not eaten yet and it was almost ten. But she did not want food, she wanted him. And it was scaring the crap out of her.

“I don’t need an assistant; I have one at the office and that’s good enough for me,” she told the woman firmly. She was a little stretched and to make things worse, she had not been able to sleep after that particular evocative session with Jaylen. She was putting it on her calendar to kill him as soon as he returned.

“And you need someone to coordinate your wardrobe.” Brandy eyed her chic navy-blue pantsuit critically. “It seems to me that you just grabbed something from the closet and you are not wearing makeup.”

“I hardly wear makeup and I carefully selected this outfit from the closet. I am not a damn society princess.”

“You are married to an international model who has the most magazine covers under his belt. That’s quite an accomplishment. I know most people think that modeling is a walk in the park and does not take much brain power but your husband went to Harvard, has degrees in business and foreign policy.

He speaks Italian, French, Spanish, and Greek and has a working knowledge of Chinese. He is a bright spark and works damn hard to make things happen. He is sensitive and completely not an asshole. He treats people like people. He is not some rich entitled prick.”

“Well.” Anika huffed out a breath. She had to admit that it felt good hearing the woman waxed almost poetic about him. And she felt proud and fuzzy inside. She had known he was not just a very pretty face because she had read up on him and had heard him speaking Italian while they had been in the pub.

“Just saying.” Brandy clicked something on her iPad. She was a big-boned woman in her late forties with brightly dyed red hair that somehow managed to look good on her. Her skin was golden brown, and her eyebrows thick and black. Her light blue eyes showed that she was not afraid of anything or anyone.

“And you have more than a mild crush on him.”

She guffawed a laugh. “I am not blind honey. That man, your husband is delicious.” She eyed Anika critically. “You are a beautiful woman, flawless skin and that figure. You don’t need enhancements, but you will be photographed frequently.”

“I will try my best not to disgrace my husband,” she told the woman dryly.

“I cannot persuade you to let me hire someone?”

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yes. You.” Anika picked up her glass of fruit juice and took a sip. They were having lunch at Luce’s and she had seen several reporters lurking around. No doubt it will be reported that she was spotted having lunch with Jaylen’s assistant. People are weird when it comes to celebrities or those associated with them.

“You are Jaylen’s assistant. He actually trusts you and told me that you are his right hand or arm or whatever the hell the term is. I am busy—my job is demanding and I am now married to an international model.

I cannot get a freaking cup of coffee without being stopped by people wanting to know what kind of magic wand I waved to get him to marry me. It pisses me off.

But I am embracing it.” She eyeballed a few women staring at her from a table a few weeks ago. “Exactly my point. I bet they are whispering about me. Not that I give a damn—“She turned to look at Brandy to see the

woman grinning from ear to ear. “What’s so damn funny?”

“You are going to do very well. And yes, I can divide my time between you and Jay.” She made a note on her device. “The compensation side of things will be handled by his accountant. I will select the appropriate outfit for you to wear on the upcoming program.”

She made another notation. “There are also several functions coming up. There is the press party for the new line featuring your husband.

He is going to be the star of that function, even though those things really make him uncomfortable.” She sent Anika a wry smile. “For a man who looks like that and who is in the spotlight the entire time, he is kinda shy and retiring.”

Anika’s tapered eyebrows lifted. “I have discovered that myself. And I suppose I am going to have to dress up real pretty and be his eye candy.”

Brandy grinned in delight. Jaylen could not have chosen a better female. She was not stuck up, because she had not been born with a silver spoon in her mouth. She was also not afraid to speak her mind. “He is his own eye candy, but you make a very good accessory.”

Anika smiled at that. “You are not a complete asshole Brandy, is that your real name?”

She shook her dyed head. “Wilma. My mama must have hated my guts to stick me with a name like that. I decided to change it legally as soon as I was able. Now Ms. Anika, let’s get started, shall we?”

Chapter 11

One more day. One day he would be home. He had not called her last night and she figured he was dead on his feet. She had seen a clip on the internet about the photoshoot. He had told her that they had left from Venice to Milan and their last stop would be in Rome. She did not envy him for that amount of travel.

The nightmares had come last night and she had found herself reaching for him and resenting the fact that he was not there. That had put her in a damn bad mood, the fact that she needed him so much that she could not very well sleep without him. It was a hell of an inconvenience, she decided.

Parking in the underground garage, she grabbed her oversized tote and headed toward the elevator that would take her straight up. The wind had picked up speed and the temperature had dropped significantly. She had passed stores on her way home, with red lights flashing half off everything for the Christmas season.

Keying in the code, she stepped back when the door swung open and there he was.

For a few seconds, she was frozen to the spot. His shoulder-length blonde hair was tangled as if teased by a very playful breeze and he was wearing black.

Sweater, jeans, and boots and he looked so wonderful and beautiful that she felt the tears clogging her throat.

“What sort of greeting is that?” His deep voice had the ability to make her weak.

“You are here.”

She had no idea that her eyes were shining with tears or that the pleasure on her beautiful face was sending a funny feeling inside the pit of his stomach. Reaching out, he drew her in and closed the door.

“You are here.” She was repeating herself, but it was too much for her to handle.

“I am.” Putting her away, he took in the weariness on her face. “You had a nightmare last night.”

She nodded and swallowed the lump inside her throat.

“You were not here and you did not call. It’s fine—”

“No.” He shook her gently. “Baby, I did not call because I was moving heaven and hell to leave a day earlier. I worked until midnight trying to get things finished. All because I was determined to be here today.”

His hands slid up to cup her cheeks. “I could not bear to be away from you another day.” He drew her in and she dropped her tote, hands curling into his sweater.

“Oh God!” she whispered tremulously. “I need you. I am not used to that. I did not want to but you are here and I want—”

“Tell me,” he whispered hoarsely. “I managed to grab some sleep on the plane, but my body is still on Italian time.”

“You need rest.”

“I need you.”

“I need you. Right here and now. I cannot make it upstairs. I am going to—” she pushed him against the door and tugged his sweater up. He lifted his arms to make it easier for her.

“The living room.” Lifting her into his arms, he strode toward it where there was a fire glowing in the electronic hearth.

“You smell great.” She was nibbling at his throat and making him weak. “I am going to take a bite out of you.”

And she did. His knees buckled and he felt as if his heart was bursting through his chest.

“I am about to drop you,” he hissed. “If you continue—Christ! Baby, wait. Let me—” he groaned as she sucked the skin into her mouth. “You asked for it.” He dropped her unceremoniously on the sofa.

“Hey!”

“You did ask for it.” He tore off his jeans and got out of his boots.

“You are still dressed.”

“I am.” She remedied that, by dragging off her jacket and the inside blouse and getting rid of the trousers. “Now I am not. Oh, the panties—”

“Leave it on. White and lacy. Love it. You are not wearing a bra.”

“I was in a hurry this morning and could not find the matching pair. I decided what the hell—”

“It’s as if you were expecting me.” He pulled her on top of him as he tumbled to the carpeted floor and managed to grab a throw.

“Yeah.” She landed on his chest and felt his erection sliding between her thighs. “We should- Oh Lord. Now Jaylen.”

“So impatient.” Spanning her small waist, he hoisted her until she was straddling him.

“Good God,” he whispered reverently as she wrapped tight around him. “Nothing in my damn imagination, my dreams could ever come close to this.” His hands slid from her waist to cup her breasts.

“Nothing.” He caressed the nipples, his body tightening when she reached up to pull the pins from her hair. “So sexy,” he murmured dazedly when the thick dark hair tumbled to her shoulders. “Incredibly sexy and desirable. I missed you.”

Leaning forward, she planted her hands on his chest. “I am going to ride you so hard; we are going to end up keeling over breathless.”

“I am waiting,” he told her thickly. She moved then, her hips rotating. He felt as if he was burning up from the inside out. His cock was sliding into her, touching deep and he did not want it to end. He wanted to stay inside her until they were glued to each other. Lifting his head, he seized a nipple and suckled urgently.

Anika’s fingers dug into his tangle of hair; her body arched. His hands left from her waist to dig into her taut buttocks as he tried to slow things down, but she wasn’t having any of that. It was as if a fuse had been set off inside her and had burst free.

The first climax hit her like a ton of bricks that had her crying out his name. He had to hold her, his fingers gripping her hips to anchor her. She fell forward against him, pushing him back against the carpet, her body heaving.

Sensations, emotions, heat raced through his body with the swiftness of a wildfire. Tearing his mouth from her nipple, he nipped her throat as his own climax came. His long, lean body shuddered, his heart racing at full speed. He poured himself into her, arms wrapped around her as he held her tight against him.

They stayed that way, their bodies still feverishly hot, hearts working overtime. Her face was buried in his throat and she could feel the moisture on his skin.

“Don’t move,” he ordered huskily when she shifted.

“I am not even capable of doing that. Can you check if I am still in one piece?”

He gave her a thorough once over, hands starting from her neck down to her taut buttocks and then up again. “Seems to be.” He was still buried deep inside her and her moist flesh wrapped around him was the best thing he had ever felt.

“Check again,” she whispered in his throat.

“Your wish is my command. We want to make certain.” This time, it was a caress, the light trailing of his fingers against her skin. He massaged the small of her back and wandered down to her buttocks, squeezing lightly. Lifting her head, she stared at him out of slumberous and incredibly sexy golden-brown eyes.

He stared back, his breath caught inside his throat at the look of her. Her hair tumbled all over her face and her lips where he had fed with such helpless hunger were swollen and moist. He continued his exploration, his cock hardening inside her.

He saw when she felt it. Her eyes widened and her breath escaped softly. “You are—”

“Ready?” he suggested when she paused. “Hungry for you? It seems like a normal state for me.” His hands wandered up to cup her breasts.

“You are supposed to be tired,” her voice was thin and weak, body going limp.

“I guess my need for you is far greater than that. Do you need me darling?” He was driving into her slowly.

“Yes.” She was not afraid to say it now. It would have been a blatant lie if she did. “So much.”

“I am happy about that.” Suddenly, he shifted their position so that she was beneath him. “I don’t want to crush you.” Taking her hands in his, he pulled them up over her head and linked their fingers.

“You won’t.” She met his eyes, her gaze staying there.

“Good. I am in love with you.”

Her body jolted and her heart splintered.

“Jaylen—”

“I have never been in love before and never hoped to be.” He was dictating the movement and he had deliberately slowed things down. Long slow strokes, sliding in and out of her wet tightness as he stared into her eyes.

“But I am head over heels in love with you. Ridiculously so. I don’t want just a year—” his fingers tightened on hers. “I want one hundred years with you and even then, it would still not be enough. You undo me.” He bent to brush his lips against hers, rearing back when she would have deepened it.

“You have become the heart of me—the most important thing in my life.” His heart was pounding inside his chest and when she lifted a leg to wrap around his back, he increased the pace a little.

“I don’t want to leave you. It’s too difficult. I never expected this and I am asking myself how. I have seen you before and never looked at you twice.

But then I happened to step into that pub at that particular time and we did the foolish or what appeared to be the foolish at that time,” his voice thickened. “We stepped into that chapel and made vows that never meant anything at the time.”

His body was trembling and emotions were clogging his throat. “Then in the space of a week—one damn week—I felt as if I had known you forever. You make me vulnerable and strong. If that makes any sense. I am yours Anika.” He kissed her again, the tenderness sending tremors all over her body.

Her eyes were bright with tears.

“It does not matter if you do not say it. I can—”

“Shut up,” she whispered achingly. She wanted to hold him, but he was still gripping her fingers. “Just be quiet.” The tears had started, running unchecked down her cheeks. “I was afraid to care,” she said hoarsely. “I had been abandoned by people who are supposed to love me.”

The only person I allowed into my heart, into my life was Corey. And now you. Oh God, I love you. I told myself that it could not be. I did not know you and besides, you were not my type.”

She gave a watery smile. “And you were too pretty. Too everything. But when you left, I could not function. I reached for you at night and it was unbearable without you.”

“I don’t want to feel this way, it’s weird and I am vulnerable. You are capable of hurting me. Jaylen if you leave me, if you go with another woman, I am going to

kill you. I will live with the grief of it, but I could not bear the thought of you being with someone else.

I was not planning on you either—” She tugged at her hand. “Let go. I want to hold you. I have to hold you. Please.” He did and she wrapped her hands around his neck and buried her face into his throat. “I love you so damn much.”

That set him off, both of them as the lovemaking took on a madness that had them both reaching for the climax, the release. It came violently, shattering them in the aftermath.

He called out her name, his voice hoarse as he poured himself into her. She trembled beneath him, the tears still falling as she surrendered.

He held her to him, emotions crashing throughout his body, the shudders still wracking him. When he was able, he eased out of her.

“No.”

“Carpet burns,” he whispered. Getting on his knees, he lifted her into his arms. Leaving the clothes strewn all over, he strode with her out of the room and upstairs with her clinging to his neck.

He climbed into bed with her still wrapped around him.
“You should be hungry.”

“Not yet. Let me—” She was still shaking. All of this was new to her, the love pouring into her heart and the man she adored wrapped up against her. It was unexpected and not a little scary. “Just let me be with you for a little bit.”

“Of course.” He pulled her even closer, her slender curves feeling just right against him. He had contemplated whether or not to tell her of his love.

He knew she had issues that would prevent her from sharing her feelings, they both did, but he had been

unable to keep quiet about it. But it had worked out. He had expected to wait for her to realize how she felt, but she had expressed her love for him and nothing else mattered just now.

“Brandy has the hots for you.”

“What?” His body jerked at the unexpected topic.

She lifted her head, cheeks wet with tears. “I met with her for lunch and she was telling me the whys and wherefores and don’ts of being your wife. She wanted me to hire someone.”

“And you said no.” He used the pad of his finger to wipe the tears.

“I did. I told her that I could use her. You have several functions coming up and she wants to make sure I do not embarrass you by wearing the same outfit twice.”

“I don’t care about—”

“Shh.” She placed a long index finger over his sensuous lips, jolting when he nipped at her flesh. “I don’t mind. I thought I would, but I want to show you off.”

“Like an arm candy?” His eyes narrowed at her and she laughed.

“I said that to her. But it was the other way around. I am your wife and I- I love you Jaylen. Everything else is just- nuisances, little annoyances that I would put up with because I have you.”

“And I am your husband.” He was getting emotional again and was shocked that he could feel all shivery inside. “And any time you feel it is too much, if you want to cry, pause, let me know.”

“I will.”

“And based on that, you think she has the hots for me?”

She laughed, dispelling the thickness of the tension around them. “She said it. But it’s a harmless thing where she is concerned. If it had been anything else, I would be kicking her ass and insisting that you fired her.”

“Of course.” He gave her an amused look.

“And she cares for you. It’s not just the horrendously high salary you pay her, she genuinely cares about you. And that’s a plus.”

“She looks out for me,” he acknowledged. “I brought you gifts.”

“Oh Jaylen, I have more than enough,” she protested.

“I could not resist.” Putting her away, he climbed out of bed and went to get the packages.

“More than one?” She sat up against the pillows, admiring his trim body.

“More than two.” He came back loaded down with gift bags. “I am finding that I love to spend my hard-earned money on you.”

“Hard earned my ass,” she muttered as she dug into the first bag and came out with an emerald green dress with slender gold stripes and was little more than a napkin. “I might as well be naked.” She sent him a look. “This is not a dress.”

“There is a new designer at Romano’s Milan store and she is creating waves. I saw it and thought of you.”

“I am not wearing that.” She passed her hand over the fabric and sighed at the softness before putting it away. He had brought her sweaters as well, but it was the knee-high tan leather boots that had her exclaiming in delight. It was as soft as butter and had a sheen to it that was very eye-catching.

“You like it.”

“I love it.” She ran her hands over it reverently.

“There is more.” He handed her the other bags.

“It’s not even Christmas yet.”

“It will be in a few days.”

She dug in and came up with two oblong shaped boxes.

“Jaylen—”

“Just be quiet and open them.”

Giving him a simmering glance, she did and gasped.

One was a slender emerald and diamond necklace and

bracelet set. The other was a ruby and sapphire bracelet that shimmered with fire. "You went all out."

"I did." He tilted her chin up. "I adore you."

"Now I am going to start blubbering again and you know how I hate that."

"Spoiling your tough image," he teased.

"Precisely." Putting away the things, she shoved them out of the way to get to him. To just simply wrap herself around him. "I love you," she whispered into his chest.

"I will never get tired of hearing it," he told her.

"So, we are well and truly hitched, huh?"

“It seems that way.” He rubbed her back tenderly. “I did call the old man.”

“I know you did. He thanked me.”

“We talked.”

“And?” She lifted her head to stare at him.

“It’s going to take time, but because of you, I am willing to give it a shot.” His green eyes wandered over her face. one that he had grown attached to in an amazingly short time. “I was hurt by him and that kind of pain does not just go away.”

“I know.”

“I know you do, darling.” He cupped her face. “I am here for you. To get us both through the pain of the past. I know I would never be able to make up for—”

“You are doing a great job so far.” She smiled at him.

“There are rules.”

One thick eyebrow arched. “Such as?”

“I am signing a post-nup and I don’t want you showering me with expensive gifts. And we remain exclusive. If you cheat on me one time—”

“I won’t,” he said swiftly.

“It just takes one time for me to get rid of you. I mean wipe you off the face of the earth.”

“I got that the first time.” There was an amused look on his face. “Anything else?”

She cast him a pained look. “We talk.”

“Like we are doing now?”

“I hate when you do that?”

“Do what?” he asked with a quirk of his lips.

“Ask all those questions and in that snotty voice of yours.”

“Snotty?”

“Will you just stop it!” her voice rang with exasperation.

“One last query and then I am through. Are you done?”

“I am.”

“Good. I don’t want you signing a post-nup. The only way you are getting out of this marriage is through death and that is not going to happen for perhaps a hundred years from now.”

“Is that so?”

He smiled at that. “Yes. And it is my right as your loving husband to spoil you rotten.”

“I don’t need spoiling.”

“That’s exactly why I am going to do it.”

“I don’t need it.”

“I will be the judge of that.” Dropping his hands to her neck, he massaged her skin. “Want to talk about it?”

She knew he was referring to her time in the system.

“I was a scared and skinny five-year-old. The first few days, I refused to eat. After a week, Corey took notice of me.” She smiled slightly. “He was this big brawny kid that the others looked up to and he took a special interest in me.

His mother had been a drug addict and his dad a pimp. He was tough and had this shield around him, a defense mechanism. Somehow, he took an interest and took me under his wings. He became my big brother and toughened me up.”

She closed her fingers around his wrists. “I needed it. I was crying all the time and spent nights crying into my pillows and wishing she would come back. He made me realize that was not going to happen.”

“I owe him for taking care of you,” he told her softly.

“I owe him my life. When we left, he took me to live with him in this crappy apartment and saw to it that I furthered my education. He fought for us. If it had not been for him, I would not have made it.”

“Like I said, I owe him. Because of him I have you. Now we have each other. And that is something I am going to treasure.”

“What are we doing here Jaylen?”

“Darling, we are building a life together,” he told her tenderly. “We are a unit and will remain one. There is nothing I would not do for you. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.” She climbed on top of him.

“Darling, we need sleep,” he groaned.

“We are still young,” she told him with a grin as she slid over his throbbing cock.

Chapter 12

“I feel naked.”

“You look lovely.” His fingers tightened on hers.

“You are nervous.” She allowed her gaze to wander over his immaculately cut tuxedo and the burnished blonde of his hair. The few days had been wonderful, kind of like an unofficial honeymoon. He was back home and aside from several meetings with his agent, his assistant and accountant, he was free.

He had surprised her by dropping by to look for her at the office. And had taken her to lunch. Even though they had been swamped by people who recognized them, it had been well worth it.

Now they were at the press party with his photos all around the vast ballroom.

“I just hate this,” he muttered.

“You who have been behind the cameras for years,” she teased him.

He cast her a pained look. “That’s entirely different,” he sighed when he noticed some people bearing toward them. “The sponsors.”

“Then I am guessing it is time to talk shop. I am not going to be part of that.”

“Oh no.” He drew her back as she started to tug away. “We are in this together. We are married, remember?”

“This is your deal—”

“In this together.” He held onto her and it was too late for her to leave.

With a sigh, she gritted her teeth and made nice.

“He is a delicious looking man, is he not?” The sultry voice had her looking at the source and was one that she recognized. Jaylen had given her a break she sorely needed when he had to go up to the stage with the other models for a group shot.

“He is,” she agreed.

“And he is married to you. Go figure.”

She felt her spine stiffened. “Yeah. Lucky me.”

The woman gave her an amused look from dark brown eyes. She was a model as well and was rapidly growing a reputation. She was also tall, a little over six feet and wore her bleached blonde hair in short tight curls. Her exotic good looks were featured in magazines and on TV advertising skin care products.

“You are. Very lucky.” She was sipping champagne and eyeing Anika’s dress with a critical eye. “Romano’s original. And those sapphires cost a small fortune.”

“Good eye. May I help you with something?”

“We are all wondering why he chose you.”

Fire flashed in Anika’s eyes. “I suppose if it was any of your business, I would say it is the sex. I give you a good head.”

The woman’s eyes widened in shock. “You have a sharp tongue.”

“Sister, you have no idea. Now get lost.”

Bella’s eyes glittered with temper. “He was with me.”

“And now he is with me.” She lifted her left hand to display the wedding rings. “This says I am legal. It also says that I am his present and his future and his past, none of it does not matter a damn.”

“Bella, I see you have met my wife.”

Both women had been so absorbed by the argument and temper darting between them they had not noticed the on-stage event had ended.

“Darling—”

“What we shared was several years ago and it was over then.” His green eyes glittered dangerously as he wrapped his arm around Anika’s waist. “I would hate to think that you are harassing my wife.” His emphasis on the word ‘wife’ was not lost on the woman.

“I was just congratulating her on the marriage.”

“Thank you. Would you excuse us?” He guided Anika onto the dance floor. “Should I apologize?” his arms came around her as he twirled her around.

“Why? Because your bimbo wanted to rip my hair out?” She asked him mildly, her hands wounding around his neck. “She said I am lucky.”

“Aren’t you?” He was relieved to see that she was not upset. He grimaced when she tugged at his hair. “Ouch.”

“That was for sleeping with that bitch in the first place. And for subjecting me to her venom.”

“Noted. If you want to slap me around when we get home, feel free.”

“Pervert,” she muttered and caused him to laugh. “I adore you darling. And I can see that you are bored.”

“What gave it away?”

“The expression on your beautiful face and the fact that you have not eaten anything much.”

“I feel a little queasy.”

“Want to get out of here?”

“It’s your deal,” she reminded him.

“I can bail now. I did my duty.” He tilted her chin up. “You look a little green around the gills.”

“I do feel like crap.”

“Then we are leaving. Right now.”

“Okay.”

“You made me tea. Aiming for the husband of the year award?”

He shot her a wry look as he took the tray from her and placed it onto the table. They had arrived at the loft and headed straight upstairs where he had ensured she undressed and put on her nightgown. He had then gone back downstairs to make her some tea.

“Don’t make me regret it.” He had taken off his jacket and was now removing his shirt. “How is your stomach and why was it queasy?”

“I ate lobster tails and caviar.” She wrinkled her nose. “Too rich for my system.”

He eyed her for a minute as he sat on the sofa to take off his shoes.

“What?”

“It might be something else.”

“Like what?”

His eyebrows lifted.

“Oh. You think—” her hands flew to her stomach.

“Could it be?”

“I am irregular.”

“Which means you don’t know.”

“Not for certain.”

He finished taking off his clothes and joined her on the bed. “We have not discussed that.”

“Having children.”

“Yes.” His eyes searched her face. “What do you think?”

“Well, if that is what’s going on here, the horse has already left the paddock or the stable,” she said with a shrug.

“Anika, I want to know what you think.”

Her eyes slid away for a second. “My parents were lousy. They were not even parents. I might not be a good mother.”

“You are not them,” he pointed out, turning his head to look at her.

She shrugged. “Maybe not. What about you?”

“I wanted to wait—to spend some more time, just us. I am selfish, and I did not want to share with you, not for another few years.”

“And this might just be the lobster or the caviar.”

“You don’t think so and neither do I.”

“We have not been using anything and the last thing on my mind was asking you about protection.”

“How careless of us.” Her hands raced over his bare chest.

“Single Minded, more like.” He captured her hands as they headed downwards. “We are going to give it a rest for tonight.”

“Why?” She tugged at her hands, but he held fast.

“Because I might be pregnant?”

“Because you were not feeling well.”

“I feel fine now.”

“Anika,” he sighed her name.

“Jaylen.”

“Go to sleep.”

“As if I could now.”

“We will find a doctor, there is a friend of the family who would be discreet. We do not want this getting out.”

“The price of being a celebrity.”

“Precisely.” Letting go of her hands, he gathered her into his arms and held on, breathing in deeply. “Whatever comes, we will face it together.”

“We are not telling anyone. Not even your assistant. Just your dad,” she said firmly as he helped her into the passenger seat of the vehicle. “I like Brandy, but people talk. And I don’t want it splashed all over the internet.” She settled back against the seat and closed her eyes.

“How do you feel?”

“Great. And strange. I have a human being growing inside me.”

“You are going to do great,” he assured her. On the one hand, he was happy that he was going to be a father, but he remembered what his dad had been like and how he had been more absent than present. Besides that, their love was new, and he had wanted to concentrate on just the two of them.

“You don’t sound too convincing,” she intuited.

“I am fine. We will be fine.”

“Jaylen.”

“What?”

“Talk to me.”

“I might be a lousy father.”

“When I said that I might not be a good mother, you assured me that I was not like the woman who gave birth to me.”

His hands tightened on the steering wheel. “The old man was never there.”

“Ah. I am going to tell you the same thing you told me. You are not him.”

“I am a damn model. Is that what I am going to tell my child?”

“What’s wrong with that?” she demanded. “Are you ashamed of your profession?”

“I pranced in front of a camera, pose sometimes with my shirt off, and smile. It does not take much brain power to do something like that.”

“You have two degrees from freaking Harvard and speak four languages. You could be anything you want to be.”

“And I choose a career that does not require much thinking.”

“What the hell is going on with you?”

He touched the left signal that would take them into the parking lot of the corporate office. “I am really scared,” he blurted.

“Of what?” He had parked the car and was leaning back with his eyes closed.

“I am looking at my life and it seems too frivolous.”

“Look at me.”

When he did, she took his hands in hers. “I happen to think you are great at what you do.”

“You said I was too pretty and entitled.”

“Well yes, you are. But you are also wonderful and sensitive.” She kissed the back of his hands. “And I do not need my husband freaking out on me now. I am going to be a mess, hormones raging and some days, I am going to be as sick as a dog. Our child will be dazzled by what you do.”

“Are you?”

She rolled her eyes and caused him to laugh, dispelling the awful knot in the pit of his stomach.

“Completely dazzled. Coming up?”

“I think we should break it to the old man together.”

“I agree. Ready?”

He nodded and leaned over, kissing her gently on the lips. “Thanks.”

“What I am here for.”

James stared at both of them in dazed shock. “You are certain.”

“Positive,” Anika told him with a smile.

“And you are, okay? Health-wise, you are doing good? Who is the doctor? We have a friend—”

“It’s Alvin.”

He looked at his son.

“Good choice. He will be discreet. You are going to want to be very careful. We do not want this to get out before —”

“We have that covered.” Anika turned to her husband.
“You are late for your appointment.”

“I still think you should go home.”

“I second that.”

“I am not going to be ganged up on. I am fine.” Getting on her toes, she kissed him. “I have work to do.” With a wave, she left the room.

“This calls for a celebration,” James said with a wide grin on his face. “You are going to be a father.”

“Hopefully a good one.”

James stopped in the process of pouring the scotch and turned to look at his son. “You mean unlike me?”

“If the shoe fits.”

Putting the stopper back into the bottle, he came back to sit behind his desk. “You are spoiling what should be a very happy moment.”

“I cannot seem to help myself.” Jaylen shoved his hands in his pockets and started pacing. “I froze when I learned that she was really pregnant and all I could think about was what a lousy father you are.

I found myself asking the question, ‘will I be that way?’ I travel a lot. I am trying to cut that down to the minimum, but what if when the child comes, I find that I do not want to be there?”

James gripped his hands and stared at his son, his expression one of regret. "I am sorry. I don't know how much more I can say.

I made some mistakes and am paying for them." Unclasping his hands, he rubbed the back of his neck wearily. "You have always been a better man than I ever was. You inherited that from your mother. And the way you look at your wife, anyone can see how much you love her."

"You are right. And I have every intention of being there for her and my kid."

"You will be. And one day, I hope you will learn to forgive me."

"It's going to take some time." Jaylen huffed out a breath. "I have to go."

James watched him leave and felt the sorrow clouding his body. He had not told him what was going on and

figured he was not ready to hear. But with this good news, he was determined to fight for his health.

“I cannot express how much of a privilege it is to have you guys on my show. Let’s show the newlyweds some love.” The talk show host called to the crowd as the couple made their way toward the sofa.

“Thank you.” Anika waved at the crowd as she and her husband took their seats. “Wow. Full house.”

“When they heard who the guests were going to be, I had to put out some more chairs.” Jenny B. told them cheerfully, clapping her hands in delight. “It has been a while since I issued the invitation, but the timing was not right, until now.”

“Better late than ever,” Jaylen murmured with a smile.

“I know there have been speculations in the papers about the secrecy of the relationship as well as the way you got married so quickly. One minute you were single, and then you and Anika. How on earth did you manage to keep the relationship a secret until then?”

“Anika wanted that. And what my beautiful wife wants, she gets.”

“How sweet.” The woman clapped her hands together. “And you darling, how does it feel to be married to such a delicious-looking man?”

“Oh, I pinch myself every single morning.”

“Or I do it for her.” He brought their joined hands to his lips and kissed hers, much to the delight of the crowd.

“And I pinch him back hard.”

“Goodness gracious me, you two are really in love,” Jenny B. exclaimed in a hushed tone. “I had to see it for myself. And now that I have, I am absolutely over the moon for the two of you.”

“Thanks,” Jaylen nodded regally.

“And you are still working at his father’s company. Head of PR. Any chance of you hanging that up?”

“I happen to love my job and my husband is fine with it.”

“If I wasn’t, it would not matter.”

“Oh darling, that’s not true.” She grinned at him, bumping her shoulder against his. “I would listen to you very attentively and then make my own decision.”

“See what I mean?” he asked mildly. “The part of the vow about obeying sailed right over her head.”

“I listened attentively and dismissed it.”

The audience erupted.

“You two are just delightful. And your devotion and seamless commitment to each other is a thing to see. Now Jaylen, you are the face of Romano’s both in the states and in Europe.

You have made more covers than any model in the industry, and there is no indication that you are slowing down. We have also heard rumors that you are being courted by a well-known producer for the lead role in his movie. What do you have to say about that?”

He glanced at his wife before looking at the host. “Just rumors. I have no intention of taking on something like that.” He looked back at his wife. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“Is that so? I would have you know that I have an unimpeachable source.”

“Sources can be so unreliable at times,” Jaylen said smoothly.

“And if there was anything like that going on, I would be the second to know,” Anika added. “Besides, we want the chance to get to know each other better and spend as much time as we can together.”

“Which is only fair. You have been in the public eye for so long that it is difficult to even have a relationship without the public wanting to know every minute of the day what is going on with you.”

“We intend to keep our private lives as private as we can,” Jaylen told her quietly.

“And we wish you all the best, and we are rooting for you.”

“You look great on camera.”

“It’s the makeup. They piled it on.” She reached into the bucket to scoop up some more popcorn. It was a cold and windy winter day as December wove its way to the end of the year. It was also a Saturday, and they had decided to stay home for the weekend and have a lazy day.

“You are a natural.” Jaylen had one arm around her as she lay there sprawled on his chest as they switched back to watch the movie. “And your tastes in movies suck.”

“Take that back.”

“Darling, I adore you, but this is a black and white.”

“It’s a classic,” she protested. “I am a big John Wayne fan and all of his movies are terrific.”

“I prefer blood and gore.”

“You prefer those modern-day movies where people don’t know how to act. It’s just fighting and mayhem, and anyone can do that. Even you.”

“Oh, you are going there, are you?” Moving the bucket of popcorn, he started tickling her.

“Jaylen, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” He reached under her armpits. He had discovered that weak spot one night he was making love to her.

“Stop it!”

“Take back what you just said.”

“I won’t. I am going to pee myself,” she gasped as she tried to wriggle out of his arms. He held her fast with one hand and continued to tickle her.

“Okay fine. I’ll take it back.”

“And I have better taste in movies.”

“That’s pushing it- Okay fine!” She laughed. “You have better taste in movies.”

“And you love me to distraction.”

“I love you to distraction,” she whispered.

“Good enough. Did you pee yourself?” He shifted so that she was on top of him.

“A little bit.”

“Let me see.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“You are a weird and disgusting man.”

“That I am.” He pulled the shirt over her head. “No bra.”

“No bra.”

He peeled off the panties. “You lied.”

“About?”

“Peeing yourself.”

“I was about to.” She sighed as he dragged off his loose sweats to reveal that he was not wearing anything under it.

“Let me.” She took off his sweater and ran her hands over his smooth chest. “Very impressive.”

“I am very happy you are pleased.” Lifting her up, he planted her squarely on his cock. A groan escaped him as she fitted him like a glove. “Are you okay?” he asked anxiously. She had been a little off this morning and he had insisted she stayed in bed until in the afternoon.

“I am fine. You are not getting out of servicing me.”

He gave a crack of laughter, his delight in her soaring.
“When have I ever neglected my sworn duty?”

“Last night when I told you that I was not feeling so hot.”

“You were tired. Sue me for being a considerate husband.”

“I just might.” She rotated her hips and sent his blood pressure soaring.

“Sweetheart.” He gripped her hips, his breathing coming fast. “Slow down. We have all day.”

“We can start over.”

“You are going to end up killing me.”

“Not likely. Now shut up and serve me.”

“With pleasure.” Letting go of her hips, he cupped her breasts and lifted his head, he took a nipple into his mouth. Her back arched as she rocked her hips. Her fingers curled into his chest, body vibrating with passion.

“Jaylen—” she breathed. She felt as if she was on fire, the heat pouring through her entire body.

Reaching a hand between them, he teased her swollen flesh and sent her tumbling. The climax was vicious and had her crying out his name.

Gripping her small waist, he switched position so that she was on the edge of the sofa. Wrapping her legs around his waist, he drove into her, teeth bared, skin coated with moisture.

The climax almost broke him, tearing him in two as he poured himself into her, his body shuddering. Gathering her into his arms, he collapsed against the cushions, his heart hammering inside his chest.

Chapter 13

“I think I am being watched. Or followed.”

“Think or know?” Corey handed her the cup of tea. She was going on three months into her pregnancy and aside from the nausea that plagued her every blessed morning, it was not too bad.

The winter had turned brutal, dumping snow over the city almost every day. Jaylen was again busy with his photo shoots, but at least he was sticking close to home.

He had had to take a run to New York a few days ago, but that had been just one night. They had not advertised her pregnancy yet. Only his father and Corey knew about it, and they were keeping it that way.

Their relationship was blossoming and instead of the public's interest waning, the reporters were still dogging them. Every time they made an appearance together,

they were photographed. They were the 'hottest' couple around, and the cameras loved them.

"Maybe I am paranoid." She sipped the tea gratefully. She was at his condo and had taken the usual precautions so that she would not be followed by reporters. Jaylen had gone to the club with his dad. Their relationship seemed to be improving and she was happy for them.

"Have you told your husband?"

She cast him a look, "And have he put guards on me?" She snorted. "We already have arguments about me leaving the loft without a driver." She pressed a hand to her stomach automatically.

They were still in the new stage of their marriage and ever since they had both declared their love for each other, something had shifted. They talked way into the night and made love sometimes until the sun rose.

“You are married to a celebrity,” he pointed out. “People do crazy things to get near people like you.” He took a seat around the counter and stared at her. “You look great. Pregnancy agrees with you.”

“I am scared.”

“Anika-”

She shook her head. “I know we have been through this several times.” She gave him a steady look. “I have been through it with Jaylen as well, and we argue. His dad was not there, and my parents—” She lifted a shoulder. “They were not parents. I don’t know how to be a mom.”

“There are books.”

“And that’s pure bull. We have bought all the requisite materials. Jaylen even plays classical music every damn night and talks to my belly. He is becoming so weird and annoying about it.

He makes sure I am stocked with enough milk to feed an entire city, and not to mention vegetables. He was sweet and caring and all that, but I am still scared. What if I discover down the road that I don't want this baby?"

"Are you in love with your husband?" Corey asked her mildly.

"Undoubtedly. But that's not the point."

"I think that is exactly the point." He rose to get the food he had prepared for them. They were both off from work and instead of hanging out in the loft by herself, she had decided to hang with him. He had been by for visits several times and he and Jaylen had a tentative relationship. "I hope you can tolerate roast beef."

"We will see."

“Like I was saying,”—he took his seat and handed her a glass of water—“you are in love with each other. By some damn miracle, this is turning out more than well. You married the guy by accident or whatever, and you are making it work. I have seen you with him and I have to say that I am decidedly jealous. He is completely in love with you.

So much so that he is making a fool of himself. We never had that.” He dug into his mashed potatoes.

“We had people who were selfish and who did not give a damn about us. You have each other and you are not that woman who dumped you at the home and took off. You are sweet and caring and sensitive and you are going to make a kick-ass mother.”

Her eyes teared up and she blinked. “Damn hormones. I water up every few minutes.”

“Sucks.” He grinned at her. “Now back to your suspicions.”

“What n?” She ate the delicious roast beef tentatively, sincerely hoping she would not have to make a trip to the bathroom. “It’s just a feeling. Like when I am driving into the parking lot at work.

And the other day, Jay and I went to this cafe up the street from the loft. And at the winter ball just a few days ago, I went into the ladies’ room and some woman came in behind me.”

“Maybe she wanted to do her business,” he pointed out. “That’s not enough to go on. Have you seen her before?”

She shook her head. “I got a good look at her when she was there. Blonde, light green eyes, and vaguely familiar. I did not see her the rest of the night because I wanted to ask Jaylen if he knew her or slept with her.”

“You think it’s one of his many exes.”

“Surprisingly, there have not been that many. The papers tend to hype things up. My husband might be

astoundingly pretty, but he was far from being a world-class slut.” She threw him a grin. “Anyway, I just have the feeling that someone is watching.”

“Perhaps it is not such a bad idea to use a driver.”

“Have you seen his driver? He looks like a damn wrestler. Bulging muscles and fierce expression.”

“Enough to deter any potential assailant. You live in a world where sick people would want to harm or try to get close to you. Your husband has a very recognizable face.

Aside from that, he is the only son and heir of a multi-billion-dollar company. He is extremely loaded. You have to be careful, honey. You are married to a celebrity and there is no getting around it.” He forked up beef. “When was the last time you went for a run?”

“There is a private park near the loft and we both go for runs even though there is a kick-ass gym at home.”

“I have seen the park, but it is also accessible to anyone coming off the road.”

“And Jaylen has cameras everywhere.”

“Which is a very good thing. I do not like that the loft is so remote. Your nearest neighbor is several miles away. That entire area is too private and too secluded.”

“It has to be. And I happen to love the quiet. I work in the city and as much as I love the whole bustle and hustle of it, I go home quiet and relaxed. It’s magical.”

“And a pervert with passable skills in electronics could do his thing to get to you.’

“Now who is being paranoid?” she asked him mildly as she reached for the glass of water.

“Just saying.” He shrugged. “I want you to be careful.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Bite me.”

“I prefer to do that to my husband.”

He gave her a look which had her laughing. “When we were at home, did we ever dream that our lives would turn out like this?”

She shook her head. “You pushed me to be the best. I recalled you saying to me that the only way to get back at the people who abandoned us was to be the best at what we do.” Her eyes teared up again.

“You encouraged me to study, to never stop reaching for the top. You provided a home for me, made certain that I did well in school. You took jobs so that we could have

food on the table.” A smile touched her lips. “Remember that first apartment?”

“That old hole?” he laughed softly. “The place was too hot in the summer and icy in the winter. We had to bundle up or strip down to almost skin. We spent two years there and as soon as I got a better job, we moved the hell out.”

“The second place was not so bad.”

“Just tiny. We barely had space to move around.”

“And then you went off to college and took me with you.”

“I wasn’t going to leave you alone. You are my family,” he reminded her gruffly. “Always will be.”

“I love you.” She smiled when he jolted. “I know we never really said that to each other, but falling in love with Jaylen, opened me up to a lot of things. I find that I

can express myself easier now. I just want to say that anything I have is yours.”

“I don’t want your damn money.”

She gave him an offended look. “I was not talking about money. It’s just that you took care of me for years and I wish there was something I could do for you.”

“It was my pleasure and I- I happen to love you too. You are my sister.”

They stared at each other a little uncomfortably before going back to eating the meal.

Joelle Brody stared at the glossy photos. She had spread them out, to get the full impact. It had been risky, but she had decided that it was well worth it. And

following the bitch into the ladies' room a few nights ago had been necessary.

She had no idea that she was being targeted. Jaylen was hers. She had seen him first. They had grown up together, in the same circle, from kindergarten. She had been in love with him ever since.

Yes, he had gone to a different school, an all-boys school, but she had kept up with his progress. Whenever they had crossed over, her school going to his for competitions, they had spoken briefly.

His mother had been friends, well not exactly friends, but acquaintances with her parents. He had gone off to college, and she had gone to Europe to further her education.

She had tried to make him see her, not just the occasional smile or a dance or two at the various functions. She had been angry and bitter when he was in a relationship and was his biggest fan when his modeling took off.

She had approached him at a function and made it obvious that she was available and he had just spoken to her kindly and walked away. But still, she had hoped, until the bitch took him away. Tears blurred her vision as she stared at the photo.

This was one with them holding hands. Her fingers traced over his beloved face, touching the laughing mouth. An ominous frown touched her forehead as she directed her attention to the woman. She was wearing a black cashmere sweater and faded jeans and looking up at him as if he belonged to her.

She had expected the marriage to fall apart, but she had seen them on the talk show. The bitch was not even pedigree, she had been brought up by the system. Her own parents had left her there. Jaylen deserved better, she thought fiercely.

Maybe if he had chosen someone from their circle, someone with some class and money, she would probably bow out and retreat. But she had to save him from the mistake he made.

“Honey?”

Shuffling the photos and stacking them, she hastily put them away.

“Dad?”

“What are you doing? It’s dinner time.”

“I am not feeling so hot.” She summoned up a smile as he came into the room. “I think I will take something here and just go to bed.”

William Brody came in and shut the doors behind him. “Are you okay?” he asked her softly. His only child had suffered a psychotic break a few years ago, and he thought he had lost her. Years of intensive sessions with the doctors had brought her back, but he was aware that she was still fragile. His heart broke a little as he looked at her.

“Have you taken your meds?”

“Daddy, you worry too much. And I cannot take pills on an empty stomach.” She patted the space next to her, and he came and sat with her. “I am getting better. In fact, I feel better than I have felt in years.

The charity—it helps you know.” She pasted on a bright smile to further alleviate his worry. “Seeing children in need reminds me how good I have it. And Leesa and Kelly and the others are inspirations.”

He took her hand in his and marveled at how delicate it was. The blue veins were standing out and she was far too thin. But she had inherited her mother’s build. His dearly departed wife had been such a beauty if a little not there sometimes. He still loved her and even after her death, had not the heart or inclination for anyone else.

“I am happy you have found some sort of purpose.” He smiled at her. “How is that young man? I have not seen

him around in weeks.”

“We broke up.” She shook her head at his look of concern. “Brian is a dear, but the relationship was not going anywhere.” Using her free hand, she patted the one he placed over hers. “I am concentrating on charity work now. And I am fine. Nothing to worry about.”

“You are so beautiful.” He stared at her wistfully. “I just want to see you settled and happy. You should find someone who is going to love you despite everything.”

“You mean despite the fact that I am a little out there?” She smiled at him.

“Don’t say that!” He admonished sharply. “You are a fine young woman and like you said, you are getting much better.” He patted her hand. “It would be nice if you would join me on the terrace.”

“It’s cold!” she protested.

“And there is a fire going on. The view is breathtaking.”

She shook her head at his imploring look and realized that he wanted to keep an eye on her. Struggling to get rid of the resentment, she smiled. “Give me a few minutes to freshen up and I will be right there.”

Looking pleased at his accomplishment, he leaned over to kiss her cheek. “Take your time darling. I will be waiting.”

She waited until he had left her room and closed the doors behind him before taking out the photos. With a vicious movement, she tore it in half and shredded the one with Anika. She was getting closer to finding a plan to get rid of the bitch.

“You fear you are being followed.” That was the first thing he greeted her with when he came home later that afternoon. “And you have not said anything.”

“Damn Corey and his big mouth,” she muttered. She was cozily snuggled in the comfortable sofa with a blanket thrown over her legs.

“Why am I the last to know?” He had shed his jacket and boots, the green sweater mirroring his eyes. The man was so delicious looking that each time she saw him, it was an effort not to jump him.

“Actually, you are the second—” She rolled her eyes as his expression became ominous. “I think I am being paranoid and I did not want you to overreact. Like you are doing now.”

“I have a right to know that my wife has concerns,” he told her tightly. The fact that he took a seat across from her warned her that they were in for an argument.

“I need tea.”

“That’s not going to work.” He gestured to the cup on the cherrywood table. “I am sure Mrs. Henson made you a pot before she left.”

“And I am pregnant and queasy all the time.”

He gave her a narrow-eyed look. “We are talking about this Anika.”

“There is nothing to talk about.” A smile curved her lips. “Tell me you kicked ass in that ice hockey-”

“I kicked ass in that ice hockey and you are not changing the subject. When did you first discover that you were being followed?”

Huffing out a breath, she pleted the edge of the blanket. “It’s silly.”

“I would still like to hear it.”

With a shrug, she told him of the times she thought someone was watching her and the encounter in the ladies' room.

“Why do you think it's her?”

She shrugged again. “I told you it's silly.”

“Or it could be you are on the ball. You are not going anywhere without someone with you.”

“That's what I was hoping to avoid,” she pointed out, irritation in her voice. “I am with you, and your face is all over the world or close.

People are silly and have nothing better to do than to follow celebrities. Our story is still fascinating and racking up ratings. Until something more fascinating comes along, we are the wonder couple. I am trying to get used to that.”

He moved then. Picking her feet up, he placed them across his thighs and rubbed her calves. “I am sorry.”

“For?”

“Putting this on you.” His eyes met hers. “It’s on me.”

“Of course, it is.” She smiled at him. “But I love you anyway. And I also love the fact that whenever we go into a room, I have the best-looking guy on my arm.”

“Is that so?” His smile came and she sighed in relief.

“Yep. I am human enough to gloat. I missed you.”

“Same here.”

“I was thinking about getting nekkid and jumping your bones.”

His heart jumped and skittered at the same time. He was still a little upset that she had not come to him about her concerns, but he could not stay mad at her for long.

“Yes?”

“Hmm.” Moving her right foot, she poked at his crotch.

“How ready are you?”

He clamped his hand around her ankle. “We are not done with this.” He warned.

“Why does that not surprise me?” she asked with a sigh.

“Can I get my husband to pay me some much-needed attention?”

“I thought you wanted tea?” One thick brow lifted.

“I need you more. Besides, my stomach is not queasy anymore.”

“You were just trying to play me.”

“Are you going to bang me or not?” She asked, asperity in her voice.

Biting back a laugh, he slid closer and plucked her onto his lap. “Ever romantic. I am about to swoon at your eloquent term.”

“Whatever.” She wound her hands around his neck. “You feel cold.”

“It is icy.”

“And smell nice.” She nuzzled his neck. “I just want to bite you.”

“I will bite back.” His body was already primed and ready. That’s what she did to him. It just took a look or even the thought of her.

“I want you to. Hmm.” She nibbled at his throat and used her tongue.

“Anika. Baby.” He hissed out a breath, his body tightening with incredible need. “Here?”

“Can you make it upstairs?”

“No. But I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I am not glass.” Easing back, she pulled the sweater over his head, followed by the undershirt. Passing a hand over his chest, she hummed. “You are mine,” she said fiercely, eyes meeting him. “Never forget that.”

“And you are mine.” He tugged her robe away, feeling the familiar jolt at her naked flesh.

“I still find it hard to believe that you are.”

“Why?” He cupped her breasts, passing his thumbs over her rigid flesh.

“You are hot.” She arched her back as the heat coursed through her body. “You are still half dressed.”

“Let’s get back to the topic, shall we?” Lifting her off him, he made short work of taking off his pants and boots, before settling her on top of him. His breath escaped in a whoosh as she sank down on top of him.

“You are beautiful, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. You are my ideal woman, the first, my only love-” his hands cupped her face. “The heart of me.” He drew her face down to skim her lips. A groan escaped him when she rotated her hips. “Baby, not yet.”

“Now.” Her teeth sank into his bottom lip and he felt as if an electric charge had been shot through his body.

“I love your impatience.” His tongue darted into her mouth, hands gripping her hips. She was greedy for him and he gave back as good as he was receiving.

His body surged toward hers, his lips ravishing hers. He had spent the day at the club, impatient to return home to her. Switching position, he lowered her against the cushions and settled on top of her.

Wrapping her legs around his trim waist, she met his thrusts with frenzied ones of her own. It was not long before the climax was slamming through her. Dragging her lips from his, she buried her face in his throat, the tremors starting. He came then, arms wrapped around her body as he poured himself into her.

Chapter 14

The news about the pregnancy pushed her right over the edge. It had gotten out that she was six months pregnant and the sex of the baby was being kept under close wraps. The news hounds had left them alone for a little bit, but this particular news had shoved them clear into the limelight again.

They were on the cover of the spring issue of 'Celebrity!'. A glossy photo featuring him wearing the latest sports jacket from Romano's. He had his arms wrapped around her small baby bump, and she had her hands covering his. And she was looking up at him with a laughing and indulgent expression on her face.

She had closed her bedroom door and slashed her pillows before falling into bed, weeping as if her heart was going to break. The bitch had taken away her man, and he had planted his seed inside her.

But she was going to fix that. She was going to fix her and the unwanted seed growing inside her. They had not

been married long enough for them to be having a baby. Was it really his? Or had she been shacked up with someone else before shoving her way into Jaylen's life?

Men are such simple creatures, she thought viciously. And so easily fooled. The crying jag was over, and it was time to think rationally. She could not afford to make a mistake. She had been planning this for months, and it was time.

She would disguise herself and take her in the parking lot of the company. And the greedy bitch was still working. It was not enough that she had access to Jaylen's money, she still clocked in every single day unless she was going on trips with him as she had started doing.

What kind of wife does that? She was married to the most beautiful man in the world and instead of staying home and catering to him, she was working for money she did not need. When she is dead, Jaylen would come to his senses and see that he could be so much better.

She was going to disguise herself. A brunette wig and a cap to hide her face. She would go in on foot and wait. She knew where the cameras were.

And she had the place ready to take her. She would keep her for a while, letting her stay there fearing for her life, while she would go back home and pretend not to know what was happening. It was a perfect plan and it would work. Had to.

Feeling better about herself, she removed the slashed pillows and hid them away inside her closet.

Taking a deep breath to further calm herself, she picked up the bottle of prescription meds and hefted it in her palm for a minute before tossing it into a drawstring bag and hiding it away with the other things as well.

It did not do for Daddy to know that she had stopped taking them. They made her loopy anyway and she needed a clear head for what was about to happen.

They were having a son! The uncertainty, the questions about her being a good mother, had disappeared almost overnight. Now, she was in the process of decorating the nursery. Both of them. She had stood her ground about that. She did not want some celebrity baby decorator doing the job, and she had told him that.

“I love you to pieces, but if you go behind my back and hire some company, I am leaving, and I mean it.”

“You don’t get to threaten me,” he snapped. The man was bullheaded, but then again, he had told her she was as stubborn as a mule. They would argue about her care, and he had brought up the subject of her staying home until after the baby was born.

“I am perfectly fine. The nausea is gone as if by magic, and I am more than capable of doing my job. If I was some ordinary woman who had to earn her living, I would be at it until I am ready to pop.”

“There is nothing ordinary about you, and you do not need the money.”

“Nevertheless—”

“You need rest.”

“I need rest because you ride me every night and morning.”

That had pissed him off even more.

“We make love because we cannot keep away from each other. If you prefer, I can stay in one of the other bedrooms,” he had told her stiffly.

“As if that would work. You are my damn husband, and we sleep with each other. You planted your seed in me, mister, and you get to bear the frequent trips to the bathroom and my disgusting habit of passing wind every five seconds.”

“You think I care about any of that?” He looked wounded.

“I am here—”

“I know you are.” Her expression had softened. “I am just saying that I want to do my job. I would go stir-crazy if I am at home. I promise that as soon as I feel uncomfortable, I am going to stop.” It had ended that particular argument, but then came the part about the nursery. The man was determined to get on her last nerve.

“You think because I am ridiculously in love with you, that you can twist me around on your little finger?” he had asked softly. “That you can have your way every damn time?”

“I would never use your love for me to get what I want.”

He had merely lifted a brow at that. “I was not using your love to have you bring breakfast in bed. That is what a husband is supposed to do for his pregnant wife.”

“You sent me to a bakery across town.”

“They have the best macarons.”

“Mrs. Henson is an excellent cook.”

“She is not a pastry chef and I had a craving.”

“I almost got mobbed.”

“You took that sumo wrestler you called a driver with you.”

“Still.” He heaved a breath and capitulated. “No heavy lifting.”

“I would never dream of it.”

Now she was heading home because they had a dinner thing to attend. She loved the man to pieces, but she hated going to functions in the middle of the week.

She was married to Jaylen Monteith and now that the public knew they were pregnant, the interest had picked up again. Which means she would have to go home, slap on makeup, and wear a dress Brandy had chosen for her. It was tiresome.

She was about to press her alarm button when she noticed the woman coming toward her.

“Oh hi.” She offered a friendly smile, one hand over her bulging belly. She looked like she was about to pop.

“Hi. You, okay?”

“I am here waiting for my husband. Bill—he works in the accounting division. I went in and the security told me he

had already left.” She smiled wryly. “We are supposed to go to dinner—” She gave a grimace and pressed her belly.

“Something wrong?” Anika gave her an alarmed look. “You look like you should be in the hospital. When are you due?”

“Not for another three weeks. By the way, my name is Anna Bitters.” She had drawn closer. “And I know who you are. Anika Monteith. You are married to Jaylen.”

“Yes. Would you like me to take you somewhere?”

“I already called Bill and he is on his way back. Some stupid mix-up.”

“What are you having?”

“A boy.” Her smile widened. “You?”

“I would rather not say.”

“Of course. You are afraid that I am going to blab and it will be all over the papers.”

“Something like that. I have to go.”

“Thank you for listening.” Joelle waited until she had turned to open the door before making her move. The needle was in Anika’s arm before she knew it.

“What—”

“We are going for a ride bitch,” Joelle hissed and shoved her into the car. Getting in swiftly, she wrestled Anika over to the passenger side and took the wheel. She was going to change cars in another minute or two. It was all arranged. And it was all coming together.

“Darling, I am officially pissed off now. If you had wanted to get out of going, you should have said so. Where the hell are you?”

He hung up and called the corporate office again, but they told him what they had said before. His wife had left almost an hour ago. And she was not with any of the wives, or with Corey. And she was not answering her phone.

He called his dad.

“No sign of her?”

“No. And she is not picking up. The phone goes straight to voicemail. Are you certain she did not have an appointment? I know she has been meeting with clients over the past weeks.”

“No. She said she was heading straight home because of the function you both were attending.”

“She would bitch about attending but she would never miss a date. And she would have called.” He passed a hand over his hair.

“I can get some of the guys in security to go and retrace her route.”

“What about the cameras in the parking lot? Can you ask them to check to make certain she left there?”

“If it would ease your mind, of course. I will call you right back.”

“Thanks.” He hung up and called his driver. “Hey. I need you to do something for me.”

“Wakey, wakey, eggs and baky. Wake up!” Anika surfaced when she felt the nudge of steel against her cheek. “Oh good. You were out the entire journey and I had to drag you inside.”

She sat up then, touching a hand to her swimming head. “What—”

“I gave you something to make you cooperate. So that I could bring you here.”

“Who are you?” Her voice was scratchy and her mouth felt like cardboard. “What the hell am I doing here?”

“I am the pregnant woman in the parking lot. Anna.” She laughed a little hysterically. “You fell for it. Not so smart after all. Don’t you know that you are supposed to be on the lookout for people who would want to do you harm?”

You are a celebrity now and should act like one.” She nudged the butt of the .22 pistol to Anika’s cheek hard enough to cause a twinge of pain.

“You are not pregnant,” Anika noted dully, as the darts of fear came. “And you are blonde. I know you.”

“Yep. We attended some of the same functions. I followed you into the ladies’ room that time at the winter’s ball.”

“I knew someone was watching me.”

Joelle’s eyebrows lifted. “How clever of you. I thought I was very discreet.”

“What do you want?”

“Your husband.”

“You were involved with Jaylen?”

“No.” She waved the gun. “We grew up together. I have known him since kindergarten.” Her expression turned dreamy and Anika felt the fear blossoming. The bitch was unhinged.

“He was the most beautiful little boy there and all of us were enchanted by him. Then he went to an all-boys school, but they would have competitions, cross-overs to ours and I would get to see him. I decided from then on that he was going to be mine.” Her eyes sharpened as she focused on Anika. “You came along and spoiled it.”

“You were never involved with him?”

“No!” she screamed. The slap took Anika by surprise and was hard enough to draw blood.

She saw stars as she fell back against the dusty worn sofa. “I hate repeating myself. Anyway. ” She smiled, that mad vacant smile that had Anika cringing inside. “I went to Europe to school and he went to Harvard. I thought that when I got back that he would see me.

We danced several times and it was magical. I wanted him to kiss me, but he didn't. And I waited and waited for him to notice me and then you—” She slapped Anika again, viciously. “You took him away and now you are pregnant. Is the brat even his?”

Anika's ears were ringing and she could feel the nausea churning inside her belly. The woman was obviously crazy and delusional. She was going to have to try and find a way to work her way out of this.

“Yes.” She gritted against the pain and tasted her own blood. “Look I am sorry Jaylen did not notice you. You are a beautiful woman—”

“Shut up!” She screamed, kicking the sofa and turning it over. Anika felt her head hitting the board floor.

“I am going to kill you and that brat.” She aimed the gun at Anika’s head and for one terrifying moment, she thought it was over for her. “But not yet. I am leaving you here. Get up. I am going to tie you up and leave you here in this cold dank place to think.

You are miles away from anywhere and I switched your car and left it in a vacant parking lot. No one is going to find you. I am going back to allay suspicion and when Daddy is asleep, I am coming back to finish the job. When you are dead, Jaylen will realize that he has made a mistake, and I will be there to comfort him. Get up!”

“Who the hell is she?”

“No one we know. It appears she is wearing a wig, and she knows where the cameras are angled,” James pointed out. The police had been called when it was determined that Anika had been abducted.

“This is because of me.” Jaylen felt sick to his stomach. It had been going on for five hours since his wife was missing. They had found her vehicle at a vacant parking lot a few miles away and the trail had grown cold.

Every minute she was missing means that there was less chance of getting her back alive. And there had not been a ransom call. Which meant that it was personal.

“You cannot think that way, son.”

“How the hell am I supposed to think?”

“We have men out trying to pick up the trail.” The detective in charge told him.

“I cannot stay here. I have to do something.”

“Our security team is also on the job. Someone will find out what’s going on.” James was careful not to allow the icy fear to show. His son needed him to be strong. “Your wife is strong and very smart; she will get through this.”

“She is pregnant.” He closed his eyes briefly as terror struck through him. “I cannot lose her. Cannot lose them.” Sinking down into the sofa, he buried his face in his hands.

He had a feeling. A gut feeling that was telling him that something was not right. He stood at the doors, his hand on the gold handle as he hesitated. He should respect her privacy. She was getting better. But there was something off about her the past few weeks. He had asked if she was taking her medication, and she had told him yes.

“Daddy, I don’t like the feeling of mistrust you are giving off right now. I am fine.”

But there had been something manic about the way she was smiling. And she had flown off on one of the maids

just the other day, accusing the woman of moving around the things in her bedroom.

And she was not home yet. She was not answering her phone either. Taking a deep breath, William opened the doors, and stepped over the threshold of the elegant cream and rose-pink sitting room, and headed into the matching bedroom.

He headed to the vast closet and flung the doors open. She had a locked box where she kept the things she valued the most.

He found it easily at the back of the closet and took it down, taking it with him to the loveseat in front of the fireplace. It was locked, but the lock was thin and easily dealt with.

Closing his eyes, he prayed that what he would discover was just frivolous stuff, a young woman of her age would store away. He was praying that he was a silly over cautious old man who was overreacting, but his gut told him that he was not wrong.

Opening the lid, he felt his heart sink to his slippers as he stared at the contents. There were dozens of newspaper clippings of Jaylen Monteith and his wife. One as recent as last week at some restaurant or the other.

She had torn away the photo of the wife and crushed it up. His trembling hands dug through the pile to see notes that documented times she had spent stalking them and how she was going to get rid of the wife and take her rightful place at his side.

Reaching for his phone, he dialed her number again and it went straight to voicemail. "Honey, it's approaching nine and I am getting concerned. You missed dinner. Please call me."

Hanging up the phone, he sat there staring at the contents of the box, the dread in his heart blossoming.

The bitch had taken her phone and had not left her with anything to cover with and she was freezing. She had left half an hour ago. She had heard the car engine driving away. And she was exhausted, pissed off, and hungry.

She was also determined to get out of there alive. She had her son to think about and Jaylen was by now going out of his mind with worry.

She had used a zip tie and the more she tried to get out of it, the more it was cutting into her skin. Heaving herself up, she tried to get adjusted to the darkness.

The place was musty and the dust was making her sinus act up. Forcing herself to calm down, she took stock of the room. It was dingy, the furnishings sparse and it was a single-room deal.

Waiting until her eyes became adjusted to the shadows, she shuffled over to the sad-looking kitchen.

If she could find a nail or some sort of sharp instrument, she could cut through the restraints and go and get some help. She did not have a jacket as the bitch had also taken that, and she did not want to think about the creatures lurking around outside.

Shuffling her way and stumbling several times, she finally found a nail jutting out from a rotted board. Dropping down, she turned around to try and hook into the nail. It took several frustrating attempts that had her screaming out and crying, but then she finally got it hooked.

She was exhausted and her wrists were bleeding. She wanted to give up and actually did so a number of times.

But she tried again. Whenever the woman came back and she did not know when there was no reasoning with her. She was bat-mad. Taking a deep breath and holding the tears at bay, she started again. She felt herself going limp from exhaustion but was determined not to give up.

“Please. Please. Please,” she whispered hoarsely. “I don’t want to die. I have a baby inside me and I want to live. Please help me.”

She had no idea if it was the entreaty or the damn thing that had finally worked, but her hands were freed. They were throbbing and bleeding, but she was free. Now to get to work on the ones on her ankles. Switching around on her butt, she worked the nail out of the wood and started on the restraints there.

It was slow work and she had to stop several times and rest before continuing. It took several minutes before she was able to loosen the tie and by that time, her feet were so numb, it took several tries for her to stumble to her feet. Struggling to the rough log wall, she leaned against it and took several deep breaths.

Pressing her hand against her stomach, she felt relief when the baby kicked against her fingers.

“We are okay buddy. And we will be fine.” With that, she made her way carefully outdoors.

Chapter 15

“Daddy!” Joelle stopped short as she came into the foyer. “I was just out—”

“I know Joelle.” He was waiting for her to come home before calling the relevant authorities.

“Know what? She took off her light jacket, but he noticed the heavy bag she was carrying.

“What’s in the bag?” He started to reach for it and she stepped back.

“I did some shopping.”

“Let me see what’s in the bag.”

“I don’t appreciate the interrogation.” There was a manic light in her eyes that he recognized. “Now, if you would excuse me, I am going up to my room. I am tired.”

“I have seen the things in your locked box.”

She turned around then, eyes fluttering. “You invaded my privacy?”

“What have you done honey?”

“I have not done anything. How dare you—” She screamed when he grabbed the bag and upended it. Everything spilled out. The extra car keys, Anika’s jacket, and the pregnancy pad she had used. The last thing to fall out was the black wig.

“I can explain—”

“What have you done?”

“Nothing. That bitch made me do it,” she said defiantly.

He felt the fear lodging inside him.

“What have you done Joelle?”

“She took him away, Daddy. She took him away and now she is pregnant.” She gave him a pleading look, tears in her eyes. “I had to do something. You understand, don’t you?”

“Joelle, oh honey.” He was weak. “What have you done?”

“You are all against me. I thought you loved me.”

“I do.” His eyes were shadowed with grief. “Why don’t we go to your room and you tell me all about it?”

“You are not mad?” She gave him a hopeful look.

“No. You are my daughter and I love you.” Taking her hand, he led her up the stairs and into her suite. “Why don’t you sit?”

She nodded and sat on the edge of the bed.

“What did you do to her?”

“I took her out to the cabin.”

His heart shuddered. “You mean the decrepit place we used to go to when you were little?”

She nodded.

“So, she is, okay?”

“Yes. I was going to kill her right then but decided to leave her out there. No one is going to find her.”

“That’s clever of you. Let’s ring down for some tea.”

She nodded again. “I feel like drinking some tea. Will you join me?” She smiled at him sweetly and he felt his heart breaking.

“Of course, my darling.” He rang the bell and a maid materialized. “Amy, could you send up a pot of tea, please?” he joined her on the bed as soon as the woman had left. “Now darling let’s talk.”

Jaylen was exhausted and so worried that he could not stand still. There was no sign of her and it was close to midnight. She could be anywhere. He was forcing

himself not to give into the terrible fear inside him. Several teams were out there scouring the place looking for her.

He was helpless, felt helpless, and said the same thing to his dad.

“You should go home,” Jaylen told him wearily, rubbing the back of his neck. “As soon as I hear anything, I will call.”

“I am staying.”

“What good is that going to do?” he snapped. “I don’t need you here holding my hand.” He shoved trembling fingers through his hair. “Hell, I am sorry.”

“No apologies necessary. We are all under stress. She is strong—”

“Don’t do that. Someone has her. Someone took her and for them to do that, they must have drugged her or knocked her out. I cannot bear to think of her being hurt. I—” he paused as his phone pinged inside his pocket. “I don’t recognize the number.”

“Let us set up a trace,” the detective urged. “It could be the abductor. Put it on speaker.”

Jaylen waited for the signal before pressing the icon.

“Who is this?”

“Is this Jaylen Monteith?”

“Yes. Who is this?” he repeated, body tensed.

“Jaylen, this is William Brody. You might not remember me—”

“Yes. I am sorry Mr. Brody but I cannot tie up the line. I have—”

“I know where your wife is.”

Jaylen stiffened at that. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“It was my daughter who took her.” The man sighed heavily. “I feared she was getting worse and not taking her meds, but I had no idea she was this bad. I—”

“Where is my wife? What did she do to her?” Jaylen cut him off abruptly.

“She is in an old cabin. I will give you directions.”

“Is she hurt? If she touched a hair on Anika’s head—”

“She is not herself and I want to tell you how sorry I am
—”

“Give me the damn directions.”

“Jesus! Jesus! She is not here.” It had taken them more than an hour to get to the location and even then, they had passed the narrow dirt road several times.

“She was,” Detective Olson indicated the zip ties and the drops of blood.

“Then where the hell is she?” He was going out of his mind with fear and worry.

“She might have gone to seek help. She managed to free herself.”

“We need to go and find her—“His phone rang and he dragged it out of his jacket pocket.

“Hello?”

“Jaylen?” her voice was low, but he would have recognized it anywhere. His knees buckled and he had to brace a hand against the rough log.

“Anika, darling is that you? Where are you?”

“I don’t know.” He heard when she swallowed. “I am at a diner. Here is the owner.”

“This is Annie. Is this the husband?”

“Yes. Where are you?”

“A couple of miles from that cabin she described. It’s tucked away from the road, so I have to give you directions.”

“How is she?” he asked hoarsely.

“She is all battered and tired. I fed her and she is almost dropping on her feet. Honey. Go lie down until that man of yours gets here. Let me tell you where we are.”

He jumped out of the vehicle almost before it stopped and Annie was waiting for him.

“Where is she?”

“Come with me.” The ample woman turned and led the way into a small room.

She was fast asleep and he felt the anger and tears as he stared at her curled under the blankets. Her wrists

were swollen and bruised and so was her face. Her eyes flew open and she started crying.

“Hush darling.” Springing forward, he gathered her carefully into his arms and rocked her as she sobbed into his sweater.

“The ambulance is on its way.” The detective said as he came into the room.

“I want to go home.”

“They need to check you out, darling.”

She clung to him. “Don’t leave.”

“As if I would.” He lifted her into his arms, stopping to talk to Annie. “Whatever I can do for you, just say the word,” he told her humbly. “You saved her life.”

“What any decent human being would do,” the woman told him dismissively.

“No. You don’t understand, she is my life—“he buried his face in her hair and took a breath to steady himself.

“Isn’t he the sweetest?” Anika whispered. “Annie, we owe you. Do you have a card?”

“Yes. But you don’t owe me anything.” She bustled away to grab a card and handed it to him.

“Thank you,” Jaylen told her.

“And take care of yourself and that baby of yours.”

By this time, the ambulance had pulled up outside.

“How is she?” Corey came rushing into the private waiting room where a small crowd was gathered which included Kelly, Leesa, and his dad, as well as Brandy.

“They are examining her and the baby now.” Jaylen dragged his fingers through his hair. He was tired to his bones. “She was hit several times in the face, so there is swelling on her left cheek and her jaw is swollen.

There are lacerations on her wrists and ankles and she is suffering from shock and exhaustion. The baby is doing well, but she is in and out of consciousness.” He spun away to the window and shoved his hands into his pockets. It was approaching dawn and the sky had a rosy look about it. “I did this.”

“You didn’t—”

“It was because of me,” he cut off his dad. “I knew her a long time ago. Some girl I never even thought of and she had this idea in her head that we had a connection. She was going to kill my wife—“He had to brace against the window as the entire horror of it swept through him.

“She held a gun to Anika’s head and threatened to kill her. Jesus! Jesus!” he pressed his fingers into his sockets. “I could have lost her and I- I want to kill that- that woman, that bitch for doing that to her.” He jerked at the hand on his shoulder and turned to see Corey standing behind him.

“She is not going to tolerate the guilt. She is here and she is fine and yes, I want to put my hands around that woman’s neck and squeeze the life out of her. But I was told she is unhinged and belongs in a psych ward. What is important is that you be there for your wife. She is fine and I am thinking about everything I know about her.”

They both looked up as the doctors came in.

“How is she?”

“Asking for you. Demanding, more like it.” Dr. Reynolds looked at Corey. “Are you Corey?”

He nodded. “She wants to see you too.”

They both followed the man and stepped into a private room to see her propped up against the pillows.

“You look like hell,” Corey told her teasingly as he moved forward to kiss her on the bruised cheek gently.

“Pardon me if I was too busy to put makeup on.” Her eyes drifted to the man standing in the middle of the room. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“I will leave you two alone.” Corey kissed her again.
“How soon are they springing you from the joint? I guess money shouts. It looks like a damn diamond star hotel.”

“I want to go home and I am kicking up a stink about it. They are releasing me after they ensure that I am good to go.”

“Then I will come and see you at the loft.” He kissed her on the forehead. “If you ever scare me like that again, I am going to kick your ass.”

“I won’t.” She hugged him and then let go.

With a nod at Jaylen, he left and closed the door behind him.

“Are you going to just stand there?”

“Depends.” He had been with her in the ambulance, but now he felt vulnerable.

“On?”

“If I am going to get to hold you in my arms and tell you how damn sorry I am.”

“Will you get over here?”

He moved then and kicked off his shoes, joined her on the bed.

“When was the last time you slept?” She asked, brushing tendrils of hair from his face.

“Twenty-four hours. Who is counting?” he framed her face with his hands, careful of the bruises. “She put hands on you.” He was shaking. “And I want to kill her for that. She hurt you and I—”

“Shh darling.” She placed a finger over his lips. “When I was in that dank and dark cabin that made me want to break out in a rash, I focused on you, my husband, the love of my life, the center of everything, and our baby. And that was what did it for me.”

Her eyes glittered with tears. “I was determined to make it because I said to myself that I did not get enough time with you and I wanted more time. I love you so much Jaylen, if I had doubts before, about anything, it’s gone. I don’t want to think about her, I just want to relish the fact that we are here together. Can we do that?”

“You have to ask?” he asked thickly. His throat was hurting from the tears he was trying to avoid. “Anything for you, my love.” He held her against him and within minutes they were both fast asleep.

“You need rest.” He had carried her upstairs and settled her in the bed. Somehow it had been leaked to the press and they had to be avoiding the press.

“I need you. Come to bed with me.”

“I cannot touch you.” He was trying to keep his hands off her and was finding it very difficult.

“Just lay with me.”

“You were just discharged and I—“he passed a hand over his hair.

“We both need sleep. You dismissed the housekeeper—”

“Because I want to be the one to take care of you. I am going downstairs. Try and get some sleep.”

“Please,” she whispered, the tears starting. “Oh God, Jaylen. I thought I was going to die.”

Taking off his shoes, he got in and gathered her close. He suspected this was going to happen. She had not cried at all and held back while she was in the hospital. Now it was like a stopper had been removed.

He held her, hands running up and down her back soothingly.

“Better?” He eased back to wipe her wet cheeks.

“Yes. Marginally. Stay?”

“I am.” He brushed his lips on the tip of her nose and then her wet cheeks. “Hungry?”

“No.” Taking his hand, she moved it down to her belly.

“He is moving.”

“I think he is happy to be back home. So am I. And this is home, wherever I am with you, it’s home. I want to marry you—a proper ceremony with friends and family at your dad’s place.

I want to wear a wedding dress,” She pressed his hand against her belly. “I want the speculations about our marriage put to bed. And I want to say my vows to you, to dedicate my life to you for the rest of it.”

“When?” he asked her hoarsely. “Because I have been thinking about that very thing.”

“This weekend. It gives us enough time to plan and I can just call Monique for a dress. I love you so much darling and I want to show you.”

“You already do.” His green eyes were bright, his heart hammering inside his chest.

“You did not give me a ring.”

“And that is something we have to remedy.”

“Then it’s settled. We get married on Saturday.”

She went into his arms and he just held her.

“You do not have to see him.”

“I want to.” She was ensconced in the living room sofa, making her plans. He had agreed to work from home for the next few weeks in order to get some rest and recovery. “It’s not his fault darling.”

“I look at him and see her. I cannot help it.”

“Invite him in darling.” She reached out a hand and he took it. He had finally made love to her last night, but she knew he was holding back.

“Sure?”

“Yes.” She squeezed his hand before letting go and putting away her folders. He refused to leave her an inch and had given her the news that he was getting out of modeling. “I am going to do endorsements and ads as well as do the occasional photo op for Romano. But I will be going into the office a couple days of the week.”

Anika sat up against the cushions as William Brody came shuffling in. The man had a haggard and decidedly haunted look on his face and had lost some weight.

“I have some calls to make.” Jaylen gave her a pointed look. “Call if you need me.”

“Would you like something to drink?” Anika gestured to a chair.

“No. Thanks,” he said and folded his hands in front of him. “I was not certain I should come.”

“Why did you?”

“I had to see for myself that you were okay.” He looked toward the open doorway, his expression one of sorrow. “Your husband is not pleased that I am here.”
“It’s going to take some time for him to forget that—you know, what happened to me.”

He twisted his hands in his lap. “I should have known.”

“You told the police you thought she was on her meds. How is she?” Joelle had been taken into custody and placed in a mental facility.

“Not herself,” he laughed bitterly. “But she has not been for years. I guess I had hoped that she was getting better. Her mother was the same way and the depression got the better of her. She ended up hurting herself.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“I wish there was something I could do.”

“Mr. Brody—”

“Please call me William.” Tears glittered in his hazel eyes.

“William,” She started to reach out a hand. “It is not your fault. I cannot stress that enough and, in the end, you did the right thing. It could not have been easy calling the police on your own child.”

“I put something in her tea and got her to sleep. As soon as I discovered what she had been about, that’s what I did. It was hard, but it had to be done. How is the baby?”

She placed a hand over her bump. “Kicking up a storm.”

He smiled wistfully. “Take care of him, please.”

“Oh, I intend to. Will you be, okay?”

He nodded and rose to his feet. “I will not keep you any longer. I am happy you are okay.”

“So am I.” She smiled at him. “Thanks for coming.”

As if he had timed it, Jaylen came back into the room. “I will see you out.”

The man nodded and followed Jaylen from the room.

She did not touch the folders as she waited for him to come back in.

“What did he want?”

“You hate him.” She watched as he approached, a tight expression on his face.

“I want justice for what was done to you. It does not seem like we got it.”

She took his hand and dragged him down next to her. “I feel sorry for him. She was his only child.”

“And that only child almost took away my life. I am not in a very forgiving place.”

“I understand.” She linked their fingers. “But I can afford to be generous. I am pregnant and will be bringing a child into the world. He appeared to be a very good father and loved his daughter. I had people who left me at home and never came back.”

“Don’t—”

“Hush darling,” she told him mildly. “I love you to death, but you do not need to try and shield me from everything. I can safely say that it is okay now.” She lifted his hand to her lips and closed her eyes.

“You have brought me so much happiness and meaning to my life that I can afford to be generous.” Her eyes were wet with tears. “You love me and I never have to wonder about it.”

“I hope you don’t.” He pulled her into his arms. “I hope you never have to question what I feel for you. You consume me,” he told her thickly, his hands trembling. “I cannot envision my life with you.”

“Same here. Damn you.”

He laughed. As usual, she had managed to make the moment light. Leaning her forehead against hers and breathing in. “Christ, I adore you.”

She held him to her before lifting his head, she kissed him slowly, sending heat to the core of him.

“Sweetheart—”

“Shh. I am kissing my husband.” She touched her tongue to his lips before probing his mouth. His hands came around her waist as he sank into the kiss.

“Are you okay? Can we—”

“If you don’t serve me right now, the marriage is not happening,” she warned.

“You do have a way with words.” He pulled the oversized shirt over her head and hummed deep in his throat. Her breasts were fuller, the nipples bigger.

“I need your mouth.”

“We should go upstairs.” He made a halfhearted attempt to pick her up, but she slipped away from him and propped herself up against the cushions.

“Strip,” she ordered.

He rose and swiftly took off his clothes before sinking down on top of her.

“Oh darling.” He slid into her, his teeth gritted, his body bowed.

“And don’t hold back.” She wrapped her legs around his trim waist. “I want everything.”

”I don’t want to hurt you I—“he bit off a groan when she surged up, and bit down hard on his bottom lip.

“Christ!” he exploded. His body jerked in reaction and sent off a chain of violent orgasms that had them clinging to each other.

Chapter 16

The dress highlighted her baby bump. She had specifically asked for that to happen and Monique had come through. The ice-blue silk material was light with a close-fitting bodice and a slight flare at the waist.

He had given her sapphires this time and she was wearing them at her throat, ears, and wrists. And the ring was a simple gold band that matched his. This time the wedding was going to be different. Not some spur-of-the-moment thing in an impersonal chapel.

They had spent the night at the country house where Jaylen had grown up. His father had been overwhelmed with gratitude of course and had insisted on a celebratory dinner being served. The atmosphere had been relaxed and comfortable.

“Ready?” She looked up to see Corey standing just inside the doorway. He was wearing dark blue pants, a white shirt and a blue and red sports jacket.

“You look hot,” she said with a grin.

“And you make a spectacular bride.” He came further into the room. “I am happy you decided to do this. I wanted to be part of the ceremony.” He handed her a handkerchief.

“Something borrowed. You can give it back after the ceremony.” He drew her into his arms for a hug. “I am proud of you.”

She wanted to cry.

“You are going to ruin my makeup.” She sniffed. “And that peacock warned me not to destroy his perfect work.” Easing back, she looked at him, placing a hand on his cheek.

“Let’s go get me hitched again, shall we?”

He saw her walking toward him and felt a lump the size of a golf ball in his throat. He was committing himself to her, binding them together with cords that would never be broken. The atmosphere was hushed, the setting one of ethereal beauty. The gardens were spectacular with flowers blooming everywhere.

A red carpet had been placed in the center of the thick, lush grass leading to the gazebo. A live band was already playing and the few guests that had been invited were seated with plates of canapes, cheeses, and fruits. It was an informal setting and they had both insisted on that.

Corey handed her over and Jaylen took her hand in his, gripping her fingers, his expression intense with love. "You are exquisite," he whispered.

"I am pregnant and will probably interrupt the ceremony several times to go and pee."

“Always the romantic.” He grinned as he turned her to face the minister.

The ceremony was over in minutes and they had exchanged their vows as well as rings. The documents had been signed and the formality finished with. They had wanted a ten a.m. wedding because he had plans for them. They would be going back to where it all started.

The pink champagne cake was cut and they had their first dance as a couple.

“I feel married,” she murmured as they circled the makeshift dance floor.

“That’s because you are.” He lifted his left hand to look at his ring. “It feels wonderful.”

“I want to make certain that everyone knows you are taken.”

“Branding me, are you?” He bent a tender smile to her.

“Absolutely. No question about it.” She brushed at his shoulder, admiring the excellent cut of his gray jacket. He looked wonderful with the rose-pink shirt opened at the throat and his blonde hair shining from the light of the sun. He was breathtaking and was all here. She knew that without a doubt.

“I love you. All the things we said, and the vows we repeated were not just a formality. I meant every word. I will love you until I draw my last breath. I will always honor you and always be your biggest fan. We are a team and the bond between us will never be broken.”

His eyes darkened, his grip around her waist tightening. “And I adore you. The words were inadequate. They did not fully describe how much I feel about you. The emotions that well up inside me when I even think about you. You are my life and my heart and that will never

change.” He drew her in for a kiss and the passion escalated.

“Break it up, you two. Stop hogging the bride and put a lid on until the honeymoon.” Corey tapped on his shoulder to get his attention. “Other people would love a chance to take the bride for a whirl.”

He let her go reluctantly and handed her over. “We leave shortly,” he warned.

“He has it bad,” Corey murmured as he guided her around the dance floor. “And apparently, so do you.”

“And I make no apologies for it.” Her eyes followed him as he made his way to the group of men gathered around the fountain. “I love him.”

“And I am happy for you.” He touched her cheek gently. “You deserve this kind of happiness, and I am glad you did not settle for that idiot. He has been in touch?”

She nodded with a smile. Was it just months ago she was wondering about that relationship? And here she was, married to a man she was head over heels in love with.

“To congratulate me. I told him thanks for breaking up with me.”

“I bet that did not go down well.”

“It didn’t.” She breathed in the clean air. “Jaylen and I are contemplating moving here. James suggested it and even offered to move out.”

Corey’s eyebrows lifted. “He did? That’s pretty generous of him.”

“We can live with him. The place is big, and there is more than enough space for a growing child. I see a treehouse in the future and a swing, maybe a park.”

“It’s a big ass place.”

“Precisely.” She kissed him on the cheek. “I love you.”

He shifted uncomfortably. “Stop being so wimpy,” he growled. “I love you too. And your husband is headed this way.”

They spent the eight-hour flight in the cabin of the private jet.

“The flight attendant knows what we are doing here.” She was sprawled on top of her husband’s chest, her chin propped on her folded hands.

“Do you care?” He shifted the lock of hair that had fallen onto her forehead so that he could get a better look at his beautiful bride.

He had hustled her into the luxurious cabin of the jet that had been generously offered by his dad as part of the honeymoon package. He was alone with her and that was what he had yearned for since the ceremony started.

“Not really.” She smiled at him mistily. “Remember the time we were coming back from Milan, after that fiasco we caused?”

One brow lifted. “You mean how incredibly rude you were to me?”

“Something like that. I did not like you,” she reminded him. “And I was trying to figure a way out of the mess. And furious with myself. I was always so practical and sensible.”

“Perhaps I should call that jerk you were seeing and tell him thanks,” he said teasingly.

She trailed a hand down his chest. Sometimes it was hard to believe that this was her life. That this beautiful man was hers.

Lifting her hand, she stared at the plain gold band on her finger. Their names were intertwined and engraved with the words: ‘Together forever.’ He had a matching ring on his ring finger as well.

“You could still wear the diamond,” he suggested.

She shook her head. “I love this better. It means much more than the one your dad procured for me. This is from you and I will treasure it forever.”

“I want forever with you.” He caught her chin between his fingers. “A lifetime to lavish you with love.” Leaning forward, he brushed her lips with his.

“We will have it.” She was emotional and close to tears.
“And this is just the beginning.”

He saw when she closed her eyes and swallowed.

“Again?”

“Hmm.”

“Shall we darling?”

“You are weird. Most men would shy away from their
wives hurling, but you welcome it.”

“Everything. Through thick or thin, remember?” Swinging
his legs off the bed, he bundled her in his arms and bore
her off to the head.

They explored Milan. He had spent most of his life there and knew all the good sites. Starting with the dazzling Duomo di Milano Cathedral, one of the largest cathedrals in the world. They went biking on several of the biking trails. At first, Jaylen had balked at the idea, but she had worn him down.

“I want to do everything and I am feeling fine,” she insisted.

Surprisingly, though he was recognized, people left them alone. Even the paparazzi left them in peace. Aside from snapping pictures while they strolled through the Brera Botanical Garden, they were left alone and it felt wonderful. They walked hand in hand as they enjoyed the breathtaking beauty of nature.

They did the tour on Lake Como making a day of it and afterwards, they topped it up with a typical Milan food tour.

He watched carefully as she insisted on trying everything. Panettone, Ossobuco and the Risotto Alla

Milanese. They took the finger-licking sweet pizzas with them to finish off on the deck of their villa.

The weather was lovely and the view from where they were staying was spectacular. And best of all, they were with each other.

“I bet we can make love right here, and no one would notice.” She was pleasantly buzzed from the tours and just a little sleepy.

“Or there could be a nosy reporter hanging from one of those trees.” He had his arms wrapped around her waist in the chaise.

“I still want to.” Turning her head, she looked at him. “People were staring at you and we did pass that huge billboard with you on a blue silk sheet, wearing just a robe. Sexy.”

To her amusement, she saw a dull flush staining his cheeks.

She laughed in delight. “I cannot believe that sort of thing embarrasses you.”

“Cut it out,” he growled.

“I will not.” She turned in his arms, eyes glowing golden brown. They had come back and taken a shower together and she was wearing one of the sexy lingerie she had brought with her.

The black silk highlighted her caramel complexion. The lace was transparent and he could see her nipples. Her hair, which had grown during the pregnancy, was tumbling around her face.

“I loved the fact that the man posing on those silk sheets is the same one wearing my ring and servicing me every single night.”

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” She had plucked the baby blue tees over his head.

“We are in full view of anyone who is looking.”

“I don’t care.”

“I do.” Swinging his legs off the chaise, he lifted her into his arms and headed to their bedroom.

“I cannot believe that under this handsome exterior lies a very sensitive and shy guy.”

“Just shut up,” he told her mildly as he stripped off the rest of his clothing. “Leave it on,” he ordered when she would have taken off her lingerie.

“I want to—“Lowering himself neck to her, he allowed himself the luxury of admiring the snatches of flesh through the lace. “I like it.”

“You are such a guy.” Her fingers stroked his muscular chest, smiling when he flinched in response. “Now take it off. Now. Or I will.”

“Always so impatient.” He peeled it off, a groan escaping him as her nipples were revealed.

“They have gotten slightly bigger.”

“To prepare for our son to feed.”

“I am going to be in competition.” His hand wandered to the bump, body shivering when he felt the movements there. “He is energetic.”

“So, he will definitely not be a model.”

“Cute.” Shifting closer, he kissed her forehead and then the tip of her nose. “I adore you.”

She sighed softly. “I will never get tired of hearing it.”

“It comes naturally.” He palmed her sex, watching as her eyes widened and her lips parted. “I love looking at you—seeing the expression on your face when you are all riled up.”

“You do the riling up.” She moved restlessly, her teeth worrying her bottom lip and sending shards of passion through his body. “I need you.”

“I need you more.” His eyes holding her, he dipped a finger in watching as her lips parted and her tongue snaked out to touch her lip. “You are wet.”

“Yes,” she gasped. “Jaylen—”

“Do you hear that slick sound?” he introduced another finger, dipping in slowly, going in deep, and sliding back out. “It means that you are ready for me.”

She gripped his wrist, fingers biting into his flesh. “I am. Darling- Oh!” Her hips lifted as he increased the pace. “I can’t.”

“You can. “His body was shuddering with the effort it was taking to keep his desire in check.

“You can. I am going to pleasure you until you are mindless with need.” He picked up the speed, thumb rubbing the swollen flesh.

She screamed, her body lifting as the climax slammed into her with a violence that left her breathless.

He waited her out, before pulling his fingers out and using them to lubricate the tip of him slowly. Lifting his

head, he caught her watching him, and her eyes on his cock left it throbbing. Taking her hand, he wrapped it around the pulsating shaft and squeezed.

“I love the feel of your fingers on me.” His breath was coming fast and he felt as if his chest was bursting. “But more than that, I love to feel your tightness wrapped around me.”

“I need that, I need it now.”

“I do too.” Removing her hand, he turned her onto her side and guided himself in. It always took him by surprise, always a shock to his system—her tightness and the effect of him sliding into her silky moisture. And he had to take a minute, his body jerking in awareness.

Twisting her head, she sought and found his lips, sinking into the torrid kiss as he started to move. He pressed one hand possessively over her bump. She came again, body bucking against his as the climax overwhelmed her.

He held her, lips locked against hers, tongue darting into her mouth and savoring hers. She was trembling, her moans swallowed inside his mouth. It did not take long for him to erupt.

Dragging his lips from hers, he buried his face into the back of her neck as the climax pummeled him to pieces. He poured himself into her, his body shaking—heart hammering. He breathed in her scent as he held her against him and could not find the strength to move.

“I think we should sleep like this,” he finally said weakly.

“I have no objections to that.” Her fingers slid over his, joining both of theirs. “It feels wonderful.”

“Hmm.” He was nibbling the back of her neck. “Go to sleep.”

“In a minute.”

“We have been up since dawn. This is our honeymoon.”

“And we are entitled to enjoy every minute of it,” she reminded him.

“And we should also get some rest.” He took her left hand, his fingers going over the slight abrasions that had not quite healed. “It reminds me.”

“I know.” She met his eyes. “And I am fine.”

“It still bothers me.” Lifting her hand, he kissed the faint marks tenderly. “I never want to see you hurt by anything, not by anyone.”

Tears blurred her vision. “We are going to hurt each other with our words eventually. We are going to disagree and argue about bringing up our son. I am going to want to poke the eyes out of all the women looking at you and probably, possibly piss you off or annoy you before my pregnancy is over.”

“And I will love you through all the difficult moments,” he promised her thickly. “Nothing is worse, nothing is bad as long as we are together. Even the terrible moments will be bearable as long as we are together.”

The tears slid down her cheeks. “I often questioned whether or not I deserve complete happiness. I just wanted to get through life. When I left the home, Corey and I rejoiced, we ate a whole pizza and he let me have beer. It tasted horrible at the time, but I drank it just the same.” The tears were coming harder by now.

“And that day to me was the best. When I went through college and got my degrees, that was another milestone and when I was hired by your dad’s company, I figured that was the pinnacle. There was no further I could go.” She was choking back sobs.

“I never expected anything like this. I never expected you. I am overwhelmed, I am so overcome with love and happiness and being with you that I can hardly breathe.” She blinked the tears away.

He finally eased out of her so that he could turn her to face him.

“No.” She shook her head when he would have pressed her face into his chest. “Let me finish.” Her fingers touched his chest. “I love you so much that I feel it everywhere. Not just my heart. But every fiber of my being.”

She laughed suddenly as he wiped the tears away. “Now I know what true happiness is, and you and our baby are the most important and will always be the most important people in my life.”

Using the pads of his thumbs, he wiped away the moisture from her tears, his touch gentle and his own green eyes bright with emotions. “I was restless and angry for a long time.

I hated my dad for never being there and leaving everything for my mother to pick up the slack. I knew he was having affairs and it turned me off. It made me

cynical and thought that relationships, marriages would not last.

That love and all that was a crock.” He tilted her chin up, his expression unbelievably tender. “Then I met you. I touched you, made love to you that night and everything shifted inside me. You made me believe.” He swallowed the lump in his throat.

“And the more time I spent with you, the more I realized that I had found the one, the only woman I would ever love.” He bowed his forehead to hers and inhaled sharply, trying to bring his rioting emotions under control. “You have made me a believer darling. I adore you. You have my heart and everything else. You are it for me. Period.”

She went into his arms and buried her face in his chest, just breathed in his scent and took him in. She had told him she was overwhelmed and that was the truth.

He was her best friend, her lover, her husband, and the father of her baby. He was everything she had never

dared to dream of – the man of her dreams, even though she had never dared hoped for this.

“Hush,” he whispered as she continued to cry. “Hush baby.” He rubbed her back soothingly. “You are going to make me start bawling and how would that look? I am supposed to be this macho guy, an iconic, epic model, sexy and immensely appealing—”e winced when she pinched him hard. “What was that for?”

“For being a moron.” Lifting her head, she smiled through her tears. “Kiss me darling.”
He did much more than that.

Their son was born during a blistering and sweltering day the last Saturday in August. The labor was only six hours and the delivery was surprisingly easy. The proud and happy mother was able to return home that evening much to her relief.

Corey stayed for half an hour and promised to be back the next day. “He is a looker,” he observed. “But that’s not surprising considering who his parents are. And the sharks are going to be pestering you for photos. My godson.” He shook his head. “You did good honey.”

“You did an excellent job,” her husband told her later that night when they were alone in his nursery. James had stayed back to hold his grandson, his eyes moist with tears.

“I have to say the same myself.” She gazed at their son, admiring the sparseness of his dark brown hair and creamy complexion. “His eyes are blue.”

“And will change as he grows older.” Jaylen reminded her. He had his arms wrapped around her waist as she leaned back against him.

“I know.”

“Thanks darling,” he whispered against her ear. “Are we going to watch him sleep?”

“For a little bit.”

“Then we do it in comfort.” He lifted her and walked over to the soft padded sofa across from the cot.

“We did good,” she murmured as she snuggled in his arms and stared at her son. “And Jared Anthony is a good strong name.”

“So it is.” He kissed the top of her head. “I have everything I need, right here,” he told her and meant every word.

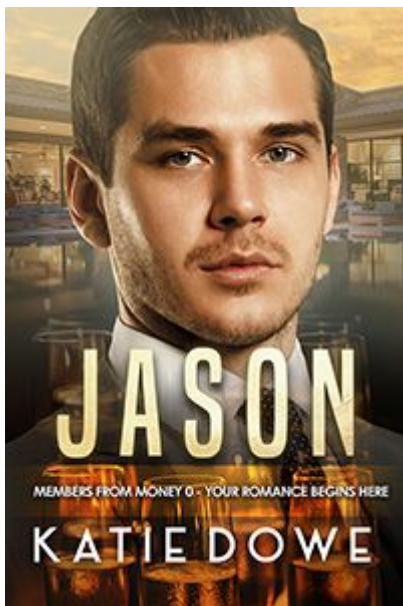
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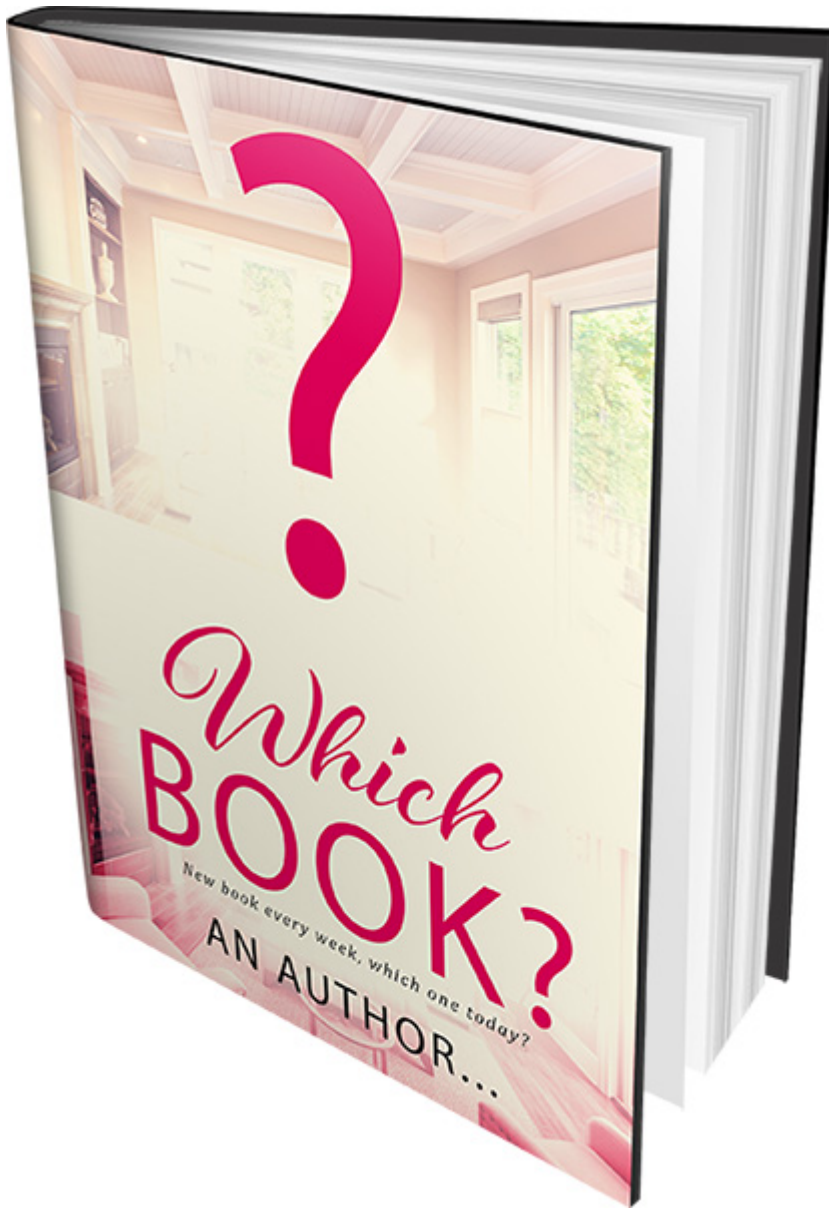


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Also available: [That Lifelong Love](#) by Constance Michael:



Description:

A sexy BBW, marriage romance by Constance Michael of BWWM Club.

Tara Moore has made peace with the belief that love is not in her future.

Being a twenty-seven-year-old plus-size black woman in a world as judgmental as hers has convinced her that she's destined to spend her life alone.

What she doesn't realize is that her best friend and billionaire CEO, Thomas Whitlock, has been secretly in love with her for years!

Thomas has harbored feelings for Tara for nearly two decades, and he's finally mustered the courage to ask her out.

When marriage becomes a possibility, they both feel a joy they never thought possible...

But when the media catches wind of their relationship and criticism starts to mount, Tara's doubts creep in, and she

begins to question if their love can truly withstand the pressure.

Will their love endure the scrutiny of a judgmental world?

Or will Tara's self-confidence struggles and concerns about her appearance unravel the fairy tale romance they've begun to build?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Constance Michael of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to shockingly hot sex scenes with a billionaire!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get That Lifelong Love now.](#)

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Also available: [Nigel](#) by Katie Dowe:



Description:

A sexy BBW, over 40s romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

Ava Richards, a plus-sized African-American entrepreneur, prides herself on her thriving cleaning agency, Maids Inc.

Raised by a single mother who served the wealthy, she's developed a strong distaste for the rich.

But when she's called to clean the home of forty-five-year-old real estate mogul Nigel Hawthorne, she's met with an unexpected surprise...

Nigel, sick in bed and unexpectedly attentive, sees something in Ava she's never noticed in herself.

Despite her skepticism and his troubled past, a spark ignites between the two!

Yet when challenges and doubts erupt like a storm on the horizon, their newfound romance teeters on the brink, threatening to crumble before it can truly begin...

Can Ava overcome her prejudices and embrace unexpected love from a man she was taught to distrust?

And will Nigel's determination prove that true connection can bridge even the widest gaps?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to smoking hot sex scenes with an over 40s billionaire!

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Also available: [Whoops, We're Married](#) by Taylor Holton:



Description:

A clean, accidental marriage romance by Taylor Holton of BWWM Club.

Bakery and cafe owner Nicole Wilcox has only ever known Liam Anderson to be one thing, the dorky neighbor she grew up with whom she has always hated with a passion!

But as an adult, Liam Anderson is nothing like the boy she used to know, he is now a handsome media industry leader and a billionaire!

The only thing that stays the same is his desire to get on her nerves!

Liam needs good PR, and the only way he can get that is by pretending he's settled down and married...

He offers Nicole a once-in-a-lifetime deal: play his doting wife and she will have all the money she could ever imagine!

As they enact the charade of a marriage, they begin to uncover that the boundary separating hate and love may be more fragile than they ever imagined...

Will Nicole and Liam's fake marriage ignite unexpected feelings, turning childhood rivalry into love?

Or will the strain of their charade drive them apart, losing something that could have been real?

Find out in this emotional romance by Taylor Holton of BWWM Club.

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Whoops, We're Married now.](#)

*

Also available: [An Online Love](#) by Constance Michael:



Description:

A sexy online dating romance by Constance Michael of BWWM Club.

Shauna Johnson, a hopeless romantic and diligent personal assistant, is disillusioned by her commitment-phobic boss Chandler Brown's endless parade of short-term relationships.

When they both independently decide to test the waters on a new dating app, little do they know they're being set on a collision course with destiny—and each other!

Adopting aliases, they discover an electric connection neither had anticipated...

But upon their shocking face-to-face revelation, sparks fly, but so do tempers, causing Shauna to push Chandler away!

Now they must navigate the complex maze of love and identity where true connection is rare, but life-altering

surprises await around every corner...

Can Chandler overcome the scars of his past and his cavalier approach to win back Shauna?

And will Shauna reconcile her deep-rooted beliefs about love and commitment and realize that her perfect match may be hiding in plain sight?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Constance Michael of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to smoking hot sex scenes!

A sexy online dating romance by Constance Michael of BWWM Club.

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