



THE COWBOY SHE LOVES

— THE ELITES 17 —

CONSTANCE MICHAEL

The Cowboy She Loves

The Elites 17

A sexy cowboy romance by Constance Michael of BWWM Club.

Black country and western star Ivory Macmillan has fallen from grace.

She has no choice but to move back home to Texas where she must rely on her family for support and to find a way to get her life back together.

Desperate to appear to have some part of her life figured out, she makes a move and meets the first man she sees to convince him to play the role of boyfriend.

What she didn't realize is that the man is one of the richest young bachelors in the country, Tony Allen!

Billionaire and cowboy Tony has been obsessed with Ivory ever since he was a teenager.

And now that he has the opportunity to be her pretend boyfriend, he of course can't say no!

But neither of them expected to fall in love for real!

Yet with the wall Ivory has built around her heart, will their relationship be anything more than just pretend?

Or will she open herself up to love at last?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by
Constance Michael of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes!

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Chapter 1

Perfect days were for losers. Waking up, with a bright smile, to the warm sunshine or the view of a sweet couple walking their furry Samoyed through the park was, in Ivory McMillian's opinion, the perfect fairytale day for saps.

Winners like her had it tough. First, they had to stand the torture of popping balloons, squealing children, and adults more interested in hearing their own voices over the background noise. Then, they would not stop staring to make the situation even more unbearable.

They thought she couldn't hear them, but she could. Fallen. It is such a pity. She lives here? You would have thought she would be a star in the big city already. It is such a shame.

Then, they burst into laughter. It might not have been related to her particularly, but their high-pitched giggles still got on her nerves. She picked at her manicured fingernails and kept her head down. The black quartz

countertop on the kitchen island seemed more fascinating than acknowledging the world around her.

More visitors trooped in and out of the kitchen, expressing their admiration for the new rustic touches. It was either the yellow lights lining the bottom cabinets or the fine polished wood redecorating the top ones getting the most praise.

With the sweetheart of the town, everything was perfect.

“If I consumed as much sugar as those adorable little rascals, I’d know exactly how use the energy properly.”

Bubbling laughter rang out, and Ivory rolled her eyes. It was always horny Susan. It was no wonder she had three pesky kids within three years.

“A good fuck, huh?”

She recognized the voice and decided she should look up. As she thought, it was Cassie. The five-foot-six brunette with captivating blue eyes. Her long brown hair was in a ponytail, and her crisp, white shirt was neatly tucked into her skinny denim jeans. The knee-high brown leather boots were the perfect match for the ensemble.

She threw her head back and took a swig from the beer bottle in her hand. "I need to get laid," she said, and Susan snorted.

The blonde with piercing green eyes had crossed her arms. She held a beer bottle in a tight grip as well. The contents in the bottle danced as she swirled it lazily. "How is that even possible? You have a Duke in your life."

Cassie sighed deeply. She had a distant look in her eyes. "Seems like the Duke needs another Duchess. He is probably searching for greener pastures."

"Or tighter holes," Susan snickered, and a dangerous look from a pissed-off Cassie instantly shut her up.

Ivory shifted uncomfortably on her high stool and was just about to speak when the town's sweetheart piped up—her sister. The same person had walked into her town two years ago and stolen her limelight. Popularly known as Mrs. Rogers. Mrs. Imani Macmillan Rogers.

She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists, watching the precious one as she crushed a soda can and aimed it perfectly into the garbage can.

Imani leaned back on the countertop and placed her hands on either side. Her floral mini-dress accentuated her slender but curvy frame and glowing dark skin. She patted her styled dark Afro and crossed one leg atop the other. Her black cowboy ankle boots took the color of the yellow lights from the bottom cabinets.

They might have looked alike. But while Imani indeed looked divine, Ivory was sure she looked a mess.

“Trouble in paradise?” she said, raising her dark, sleek brows. “I thought we were going to hear wedding bells

soon.”

“I thought so too.” Cassie shrugged and placed her beet bottle on the countertop. “Seems like that won’t be happening, after all.”

Imani was smiling brightly, exposing her beautiful pearly-white teeth. The look of satisfaction and contentment on her sister’s face irked Ivory to the bone.

“Look, guys, how about we talk about this another time? We could have a girls day out. Today is my baby’s first birthday, and I don’t want any negative energy in the room.”

Susan chuckled lightly and downed the contents of her bottle. “Chill, Imani. The little ones are safe from our musings of a high sex drive and depressing talk of heartbreak. Nothing’s going to affect them today. See?”

She pointed at the happy children giggling and toppling over each other on the large, freshly mown lawn. They

squealed as Kai, Susan's eldest son, pointed and fired a bubble gun at them.

Ivory rolled her eyes, and her twin sister did the same.

Imani pouted. "Doesn't matter, Susie. Bill will be here soon with my parents, and we have to be happy when they get here."

Cassie twirled the tip of her ponytail around her finger. She smiled coyly. "Oh, Bill. Our dark-haired heartthrob. Such a fuckable delight."

"Eww, Cassie. That is my husband." Imani's face scrunched up.

The blue-eyed brunette pouted her pink lips and pushed herself off the countertop. She walked closer to Imani and took her hands in hers. "I didn't mean anything by it. I swear."

Imani mustered a smile, but Ivory saw right through the façade. She knew her sister too well. Cassie's crude comment did scratch the surface, but Imani shrugged it off, as usual, and beamed brightly. Ivory had been trying to avoid her sister nearly every day, but now she had to interact.

Their eyes met, and it felt like she stared at her reflection for a split second. Then, as quickly as it came, the moment disappeared.

“Hey, Ivory.”

“What?” She did not bother to hide her lack of enthusiasm.

Her sister straightened up and walked towards the kitchen island, where Ivory sat with a folded fist. “Can you help me take Jemimah's cake to the dining table? I want it on display before Mom and Dad get here.”

Ivory didn't have to think twice about her answer. She looked away. "No."

"Why not?" Imani frowned.

"I'm not in the mood."

It was barely audible, but nothing got past Ivory unnoticed. She heard the unladylike snort and scoff from Susan.

"That much is clear," Susan said, and Ivory hissed.

"Shut the fuck up."

"I dare you to say that again." Susan challenged, but Imani slammed a hand on the countertop.

“Enough. Please, both of you. I do not want my daughter’s birthday ruined because two adults cannot control themselves.”

Cassie cleared her throat and walked towards the cake. “I’m just going to take this to the table,” she said, lifting the cake. In seconds, she was out of the kitchen.

Susan, meanwhile, seemed determined to let off steam. She glowered at Ivory, but Imani shooed her away.

“Please, Susan. Give us a few minutes.”

The blonde reluctantly stomped off, and Imani focused on Ivory again. Imani reached out and placed a hand on Ivory’s arm. She had a questioning look in her eyes.

“Ivory, talk to me. What is wrong? Why are you on edge?”

Ivory felt the warmth from her sister's voice. What was wrong? Everything. Everything was wrong. Nothing was how it should be. Her life was a fucking shambles. But how was she expected to tell her sister all that? How could she look Imani in the eye and say, "You stole my crown?"

She stepped down from the high stool, pushed the seat backward, and attempted a smile.

"Everything's fine. I guess I'm not really in the mood to mingle. But thanks for asking. And I'm sorry I'm not the happiest right now. Jemimah deserves the best, and you are giving her just that. The party is super awesome. Everyone is having fun."

Imani needed more convincing. Ivory could tell by the look in her eyes. "You know you can talk to me about anything, right? You don't have to hide anything from me, Ivory. We are sisters. We should have each other's backs."

Ivory tapped her sister's hands. "Sure."

The faint sound of a gate closing distracted Imani, and Ivory took it as an opportunity to slip away.

“Ivory,” Imani called after her and hurried to catch up.
“Hey, where are you going?”

Ivory rubbed her forehead gently as she walked past a few guests, the neatly arranged furniture, and the dimly lit fireplace in the spacious living room. Finally, she got to the door, ignoring her sister, who followed closely behind her.

“I need some fucking air,” she muttered under her breath and pulled the door open.

Almost immediately, she wished she hadn't.

A matt black F-150 Raptor sped through the driveway, leaving a puff of dust behind it as it pulled up at the entrance. Ivory spotted Bill's beaming face through the

glass and noticed the dark-skinned man with nicely styled white hair seated in the passenger's seat.

It appeared that they were having a good conversation. Finally, the doors were pushed open, and they hopped out of the car, still engaged in whatever they were discussing.

“That was the first time I experienced such poor room service. So I suggested a week-long training for all personnel. I mean, it made absolutely no sense. No sense at all.”

“I agree with you. But, hold on a sec; I need to get the bag.” Bill said a bit too loudly and walked around the raptor to pull out a wrapped gift bag.

Mr. MacMillan stood proudly with a hand on his waist as he opened the back door to let her mother step out, and Imani lunged forward with excitement and hugged them both.

“I thought you wouldn’t make it.” Imani said and placed a kiss on her mother’s cheek.

“If it isn’t my two beautiful daughters?” Mrs. MacMillan hugged Imani tightly. “What can I say? Late departure equals late arrival. But we’re here now. That is what matters.”

Their dad nudged their mother gently. “Seems like only one is happy to see us.”

Bill held the wrapped gift bag tightly and joined them by the entrance. “Hi, babe,” he kissed Imani as she approached him. “You should bring your parents inside. They have had a long and uncomfortable ride, trust me.”

“I will.” Imani smiled and dropped a kiss on his lips. “And thank you, Bill.”

He smirked. “I’ll prefer this gratitude to be paid in kind later tonight. I’ll take this in and check on the kids.”

Ivory cringed. It was meant for only her sister, but somehow, her ears heard whatever they wanted to hear. She gave a wry smile and moved toward her parents.

“Mom. Dad.” She nodded curtly and knotted her fingers. “It’s nice to see you two again. You both look even more... radiant than the last time.”

“Ivory.” Her mother matched her audacity with a raised brow. “You don’t have to pretend to be happy to see us. You look like you’ve got a stick up your pretty behind. And maybe it should be that way. Maybe you should be uncomfortable. I see Imani’s still feeding you.”

The smile dropped off Ivory’s face instantly, and she subtly pulled at her fingers to remain calm. Imani placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Mother.” One word should have been enough. A simple warning not to continue. Imani’s tone was stern.

Their father had other plans. He scoffed, ignoring the warning signs, and rocked on his heels. His beady eyes bore through Ivory and reached to strangle her soul.

“What? It’s true,” he said with a disapproving glare. “And I don’t know what she thinks she’s doing, hanging around here and moping about while her life passes by without anything good to show for it.”

Ivory bit down on her tongue until she could taste metal. “I have something to show for it.”

“What?” her father sneered. “Past glory? Ivory MacMillan, you’re twenty-eight. You’re not getting any younger. Is this how you want to spend the rest of your life? Living with your sister? You’ve got no job, no family, and, worse, no plan to get any of those things. Have you taken a good look at your sister? Aren’t you inspired?”

“Dad, please.” Imani’s voice was strained. “Can we at least go inside? The party is already in full swing. It’ll be time to cut the cake soon.”

Ivory knew her sister was only trying to protect her and soften the blow. But it didn't stop the vine of envy and resentment wrap itself around her heart and squeeze tightly.

Winners like her had to deal with obnoxious parents who took great pleasure in stating the obvious and rubbing your face in shit. Funny how they didn't even wait to enter the house before indirectly telling her she was a loser. They couldn't wait to let her know she was a failure compared to her sister, Imani—the town's sweetheart.

Ivory held her breath. She would show them. She would show them once a star, always a star. It didn't matter if it was falling or rising.

"I might not have a job or a family of my own. But I have a boyfriend."

"What?" Imani spun around with an incredulous look. "I mean, how? You didn't have one about two hours ago."

Ivory maintained her calm composure, despite wanting to pull a face at her sister. “I don’t tell you everything, sweet Imani.”

Their mother didn’t bother to hide her disbelief. Instead, she whisked a hand in the air and took a contrary stance. She lightly ran the tips of her fingers over the gray streak on her thick, dark hair. “Prove it then. Surely he must be coming to your niece’s first birthday.”

“Of course,” Ivory smiled brightly, and she could tell Imani smelled something fishy. “He’ll be here any minute now. Before you got here, I came out to meet him. So, do carry on inside. As Imani said, the party is in full swing, and it’ll be time to cut the cake soon. Your granddaughter will be overjoyed to see the both of you.”

Mr. MacMillan cleared his throat and placed an arm on his wife’s shoulder. “Fine. We’ll go inside now. But we must meet your mysterious and sudden boyfriend.”

Ivory chuckled faintly and stepped away while Imani led their parents into the house. "You can count on it," she said and watched them disappear.

The smile fell from her face, and she could feel a massive panic attack coming. She breathed rapidly and picked at her nails with her thumb.

What the heck?

She struggled to take deep calming breaths and figure out how to crawl out of the deep hole she'd willingly flung herself into.

You can count on it?

Had she told them to count on it? A dry chuckle left her lips. She had no job, no family of her own, and she was almost broke. So that was her pathetic story. Ivory MacMillan. The once-upon-a-time famous country singer who'd disappeared from town for two months and

returned to discover that she'd lost her crown of fame to her twin sister.

Then, she continued to embarrass herself further. Where and how did she plan to get a boyfriend in less than half an hour?

She had to act immediately. She walked while her mind scrolled through her contact list. Unfortunately, she had no close male friend she could call to play the role.

She sighed loudly as she stumbled on a few guests having the time of their lives with bottles of beer and barbecued chicken. The sky was dusted with pink, orange, and purple streaks, and the breeze was cool.

The white and yellow lights in the modern-rustic ranch automatically came on –at the pathways, main house building, and the horses' stables. The sight of it, blended with approaching dusk, was breathtaking.

But Ivory didn't have the time to enjoy it. She had to find a boyfriend. And fast.

She stopped in the middle of the festivities and scanned the faces of the male guests. A tug on the hem of her oversized tee shirt distracted her. She spared the intruder a look.

"Imani, have you seen my mommy?"

It was Kai. Susan's ten-year-old son. He had green eyes and blonde hair, like his mum. He also wore a silly plastic cowboy hat and looked like he'd been drenched in grape juice.

Ivory's face scrunched up. How did anyone deal with kids? "I'm the one that doesn't like you. I'm not Imani."

The boy's eyes grew wide. "Ivory?"

She crouched slightly with a sickly-sweet smile on her face. “Yes, honey.”

“Oh,” he was disappointed, and fear lurked in his eyes.

“Run along now. Go find your mommy.”

The boy didn’t need to be told twice. So off he ran as fast as his little legs could go. She watched him run toward his father, Susan’s husband. One of Bill’s new friends. Austin Reid.

But it wasn’t the six-foot-two hunk with a loud laugh and cute dimples that got her attention. Oh, no. It was the six-foot-four figure –by her guess– with dark hair cut to a fade that stood beside him.

Ivory bit down on her lower lip. Although, she had to admit, from her view, he was drool-worthy. She took a few steps closer, discarding her cloak of desperation and replacing it with confident strides and a sultry smile that had never failed her before.

As she drew closer, she noticed his bulging muscles underneath the short sleeve of his crisp blue shirt. He looked fit.

Ivory didn't bother exchanging pleasantries with Austin. He was one of those who believed her glory days were over. However, she tapped the stranger's arm to get his attention.

Austin looked displeased as the stranger spun around.

Ivory gulped. He had intense grey eyes. The kind that reeled you in at first glance.

She cleared her throat.

"Uh, hi. I'm Ivory. Can I borrow you for a few seconds? It's urgent."

He had seen her coming out of the corner of his eye. He didn't need an introduction to recognize her instantly. To him, she was the most beautiful woman he'd laid eyes on.

He took all of her in. From her vanilla scent to her dark brown skin, full afro, almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips. To top it all, she had the most amazing body, and he believed she still had the voice of a nightingale.

Despite the tingles that ran up and down her spine, she placed a hand on his arm to lead him to a corner. He was curious to know why she'd singled him out to speak with him.

She folded her arms across her oversized graphic Texas tee shirt and repeatedly scrubbed her white platform Converse against the grass.

“This might sound absurd, but I need you to act as my boyfriend for tonight.”

She tried to act composed, but he saw right through her. Hence, the desperation in her eyes, silently begging him to agree with whatever game she wanted.

He shrugged. “Why me?”

“You’re hot.” She blurted and took a deep breath. “I need to make it believable.”

A cocky smile played on his lips. He caressed his trimmed stubble and shrugged. “Fine.”

Ivory hadn’t expected him to agree so easily. Her beautiful eyes grew wide. “Uh, great! Come along then. We don’t have time.”

To his surprise, her hand clamped down on his arm and pulled him towards Bill’s house’s back door. She looked

fragile, but her tight grip on him proved otherwise.

The family was already gathered in the dining room. Bill and Imani were all smiles as they looked at the camera while little Jemimah, helped by her mom, cut her cake. Bill whispered something into Imani's ears, and she laughed. They looked so in love.

Ivory, on the other hand, didn't appear to care. Instead, she pulled him towards an elderly couple he assumed to be her parents. The resemblance between them was striking.

She stopped in front of them, beaming. "Mom. Dad. He's a little late, but he's here. I want you both to meet – "

The look on Ivory's face was priceless as she realized she didn't ask for his name. He smirked and swooped in to save the situation.

"Tony," he said and snaked an arm around her waist. She froze, but he pretended not to notice. "Tony Allen.

And it's a delight to meet my sweetheart's lovely parents finally."

Ivory nodded, and Tony grinned. "Y-yeah," she stuttered. "Now, he's kind of in a rush – "

"Oh, no, dear." Mrs. MacMillan smiled. "Don't be in such a hurry to take this handsome man away. Tell us, Tony. How long have you two known each other?"

"Five months."

"Six months."

They said simultaneously, and Ivory couldn't grow stiffer in his arms. So he was quick to salvage the situation.

"Oh, sweetheart. Are you not counting the month I spent trying to woo you? No way, it took a lot out of me not to be counted. Mr. & Mrs. MacMillan. I've known your daughter here for six months. The first was a roller

coaster, I tell you. She gave me a hard time. Even on the bed.”

Ivory’s father coughed and released a nervous chuckle. “Oh, is that right? Well then, what do you do?”

Tony felt his heart bubble with joy. He would make the most of the rare opportunity Ivory had given him. “Well, besides fucking the missy here until her knees wobble, I’m a full-time businessman.”

“Goodness gracious,” Mrs. Macmillan looked away. Her cheeks reddened with embarrassment while her husband went into a coughing fit.

Ivory grabbed his arm and smiled slightly too brightly to be considered natural. “If you would please excuse us,” she said, whisking him away.

Most of the guests had left, and by the look in Ivory’s eyes, Tony guessed it was their turn.

“I know it was shitty of me not to ask your name before presenting you to my parents. But was the dirty joke necessary?”

Tony shrugged and smirked. “What, you didn’t like it? I thought it was hot.”

Ivory rolled her eyes. “Fine. We’re even then. I sprung one on you, and you did the same. Now, you may leave. Thanks for... you know.”

She was already on her way inside, ready to shut the door in his face. But, against better judgment, his hands reached out to stop her. Her past rejection had stung, but whoever said he couldn’t try again?

Tony swiped his tongue across his lips. “Ivory. I was thinking ... would you like to go out with me? I don’t know, maybe a real – “

“No.” Her tone was icy. “Thanks, but no. Whatever happened back there was a one-time thing.”

He pulled back and dug his hands into the pockets of his pants. He hoped she couldn't see how much it hurt to have her reject him. Again.

He wasn't Tony the teenager anymore. Now, he could deal with the sting of Ivory MacMillan's bite.

His lips curved upwards.

“Perfectly understood. I see you've lost your touch.”

Her brows rose. “What's that supposed to mean?”

He smiled. It was warm but mysterious. “You're less mean now.”

Chapter 2

You're less mean now.

Ivory squinted, trying to clear the fog and piece the puzzle together as she took cautious steps down the staircase. She clutched her phone tightly and scratched her head.

What did that even mean?

Ivory exhaled and grunted. She decided it was better to quit trying to figure it out and focus on having a less stressful day. And what better way to start than to have a good breakfast? So she walked past the large living room and headed for the kitchen.

The sound of moans mingled with soft gasps and female giggles hit Ivory's sharp ears before the sight met her eyes.

Her twin sister had her back to her. She sat on the countertop, and her husband, Bill, stood shirtless. Imani's legs were wrapped around his waist, and his face was buried in the crook of her neck.

There was a slight movement between the two, and Imani let out another moan.

"Ahem," Ivory interrupted. "Thanks to you, guys; I've just lost my appetite. Plus, the Wi-Fi is down. Who would have thought? I'm having such a splendid day already."

Bill responded without pulling away from her sister. Ivory rubbed her arms. Why did she expect them to pull away like adolescents in hiding? They were married, and, lest she forget, they owned the entire estate. She was nothing but a squatter. It was their house. They had the freedom to do whatever they wanted, wherever they wanted.

"Nobody cares." With his eyes shut, he muttered and placed more feathery kisses, one after the other, on

Imani's face.

She narrowed her eyes and watched her sister lean forward to whisper in Bill's ears. The dark-haired man scoffed and pulled away. But not before throwing Ivory a dirty look. He grabbed his black tee shirt from the countertop and rummaged through the top cabinet.

Imani bound her free, voluminous afro in a low bun and turned to look at Ivory. Her cheeks seemed flushed, and her full lips were mildly swollen. She looked like a cute teenager who was super in love with her college boyfriend.

Ivory envied her sister. Imani was living the dream life while she had nothing but a fake boyfriend to parade as a trophy.

She ignored her sister's gaze and drew a high stool by the kitchen island. "The Wi-Fi is down," she said.

Bill pulled out two jars of strawberry jam and shut the cabinet. “Why don’t you go fix it up yourself, huh? Your sister and I have more important things to do.”

Ivory narrowed her eyes and clenched her phone tightly. “Yeah, important work. Like shooting your load on the countertop. Do you have a problem with me, Bill?”

He pulled out a loaf of Al’s Home buttered bread and dropped it beside the jam jars on the island. Al’s Home was the most famous bakery in town, and Bill was obsessed with their freshly baked produce.

“Ivory,” he started. “I do. I have a problem with people like you, who have problems with everyone.”

Ivory turned to her sister. She didn’t bother to hide how pissed off she was. “Your husband isn’t funny, Imani. Tell him to cut it out.”

Imani rubbed Bill’s arm briefly with a pleading look in her eyes. Then, finally, she cradled his face, kissed his

cheek, and flashed a bright smile.

“Let’s change the topic, shall we?” Imani said. “On the way to their hotel, Mom and Dad mentioned something about a handsome stud with a loose mouth.”

Ivory fiddled with her phone. She knew exactly who Imani was talking about, but she wasn’t ready to discuss it. In truth, there was nothing to talk about.

“That sounds like Duke.”

Imani tapped her jaw. “I would have said the same thing, but that would be impossible. Duke couldn’t make it yesterday, and they wrapped up the conversation by saying something like Ivory’s boyfriend.”

Ivory knew where her sister was headed. “Where’s Jemimah?”

Imani placed her hands on the island and leaned forward. “She’s asleep,” she said and looked closely at her sister. “Ivory, I didn’t know you had a boyfriend.”

“That’s because she doesn’t.” Bill interrupted and bit down on his strawberry jam sandwich. “Your sister over there is lying.”

“I’m not,” Ivory spat.

“You are.”

Anger bubbled through her veins, and she scrolled through the contact list on her Hello app. Then, finally, she spotted the familiar number.

“How would you know? We aren’t exactly best friends. And fix the darn Wi-Fi, will you?”

He raised his shoulders and let them slump with a smug smile. “We don’t have to be pals. You live here,

remember? If you had a boyfriend, trust me, we'd know. And nothing's wrong with the Wi-Fi. I changed the password."

She slammed her palms on the incredible black quartz counter, seething. "You fucking did what?"

Imani blocked her view with an apologetic smile. "Imani Rogers. That's the password," she said. "There's no need to get worked up. But, look, if it counts, I believe you. And I'd love to meet him."

The sweetheart always came to the rescue. Ivory rolled her eyes and swiftly inputted the Wi-Fi password. She tapped on the familiar number and opened a blank chat page. She typed furiously.

[To Austin Reid]

IV: Your cute friend from last night. I need his number.

“Do you believe in ghosts, babe?” Ivory heard Bill say.

“No, why?”

He snickered. “I think you should start so when Ivory opens that door to introduce you to her boyfriend, you won’t faint from shock when you see nothing. Or no one, in this case.”

Ivory heard her sister stifle a laugh, and she ground her teeth. Then, a bubbling sound caught her attention, and she noticed Austin typing.

AR: No. Fuck off.

Could the day get any worse? Ivory felt her breathing pick up and her nose flare.

“Stop, Bill. If Ivory says she has a boyfriend, then she does. Why lie about it? Besides, she does have what it takes to make a good catch.” Imani babbled. “Ivory?”

“What?” She retorted sharply but kept her eyes trained on her screen.

“When can we meet him? You could invite him over today. Bill and I have some work to do at the stables, so we’ll be home most of the day.”

IV: It’s urgent. We have some unfinished business to discuss. Why am I explaining myself to you?

She hit send and looked at her sister. “You’ll meet him. But not today.”

Bill tossed the leftover sandwich into the garbage can and rinsed off the plate in the sink. He had his back to them when he said. “I bet she’s run out of magic to conjure him up again.”

“Bill, please...” Imani sounded stern, but her expression was far from it.

Thankfully, another text from Austin caught Ivory's attention before she could give Bill a piece of her mind.

AR: >T. Allen< His number is contained in that file.
Delete my number, Ivory. If you don't, I'm deleting yours.

She snorted. Like she'd ever text him again. However, desperate times called for desperate measures, which was the only reason she would ever text Austin Reid.

Ivory blocked his number and deleted it. But not before extracting her fake boyfriend's number from the file. She saved it as a contact in her phonebook and dialed it.

"I wonder what he looks like," Imani said with a distant look in her eyes. Bill came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and kissed her cheek.

"Air, babe. I'm sure he looks as beautiful as the air we breathe."

“You know what?” Ivory uttered in an icy tone. She placed her phone on speaker and pushed it to the island’s center. “I’m putting him on speaker right now. You want proof. That’s your proof.”

Tony picked on the third ring, and Ivory wasted no time taking the reins. There was no time to prepare him before the call. She couldn’t afford slip-ups.

“Hello?” His deep voice –a mixture of husk and crisp – came through, and Ivory found herself in a trance for a millisecond. Never had she heard such a captivating voice.

“Yeah, babe... I worked my way around my schedule. So you could swing by to pick me up by, uh, six.”

There was silence at the other end of the line before they heard the sound of shuffling papers and a creaking chair.

“Ivory?”

The surprise in his voice didn't go unnoticed. Bill snickered, and Ivory silently cursed the fake boyfriend. Then, she chuckled nervously and added a slight purr to her voice.

“I'm sorry, I'm calling with another number, babe. It's me. So, what do you say? Six?” She needed to wrap it up before things got awkward.

Imani and Bill stared at the phone with wary eyes. But she could tell her sister was slowly being convinced.

“Uh, sure.” Tony cleared his throat. “You're at Roger's ranch, right?”

“Yes, I am. Bye now. See you soon, babe.” She swiftly disconnected the call.

Imani turned with a smile to face her husband. “Well, that was interesting.” Ivory glared as they strolled out of the kitchen, hand in hand.

“I still have doubts,” Bill said, and Ivory gritted her teeth.

Her resolve to prove her worth only deepened. First, she pushed herself off the high stool and walked to the cabinets. Then, fuming, she pulled out a cereal pack and strutted over to grab a carton of fresh milk from the fridge.

Her desire for a good breakfast flew out the window and into the heap of horse shit in the stables when Bill had questioned her.

She crunched angrily and quickly, thinking of ways to regain her status as the town’s most loved and sought-after woman. She refused to believe that her glory days were over at twenty-eight.

She had more to achieve. More to prove. More to show the world. No one, not even her sister, had the right to steal her spotlight.

Footsteps, as light as a feather, approached the kitchen, and she quickly gulped down the softened cereal. Long brown hair and clear-blue puffy eyes greeted her.

“You slept over?” Ivory asked as Cassie pulled a bottle of water from the refrigerator and gulped it greedily.

“Yeah,” she shrugged and screwed the cap tightly. “You got a problem with that?”

“And if I do?” Ivory challenged with a raised brow.

Cassie rolled her eyes and pulled open the fridge again. She stuck her head in it and looked through the shelves.

“Then, you can go fuck yourself. It’s not your house,” Ivory heard her say.

Ivory patted stray strands of her afro down and folded her arms across her chest. She leaned against the counter and watched as Cassie munched on cold sausages from a Ziploc bag.

Cassie didn't look well. She had bags under her eyes, her brown hair was slightly frizzy, and her clothes were crumpled. Something was going on with her; Ivory was sure she didn't care enough or had the patience to find out.

"That," Ivory pointed at the cold sausages. "Is disgusting. Do Bill and Imani know you're here?"

Cassie sniffled and munched on another cold sausage. "They do. They offered to let me stay for the night. I was a mess when I heard the news."

Ivory arched a brow. She was sure she wasn't interested in spending a second longer with the brunette. Cassie was one of her least favorite people. She couldn't understand how her sister let her get away with so much.

But the brewing conversation was a welcome distraction. She needed something to take her mind off the date she'd fixed with Tony Allen.

"What news? Did someone die?"

Cassie scoffed and licked her fingers. "I wish. Duke's getting married."

"Oh," Ivory nodded curtly. So that explained the reason for Cassie's miserable mood.

The brunette waved a hand with a sausage in it.

"Her name's Peyton. Of course, it had to be a Peyton. She's twenty-four; eight years younger than Duke. Can you imagine? He replaced me with a younger woman. Oh, and she's a blonde.

She's perfect. They've been secretly dating for six months and plan to tie the knot. Susie wasn't kidding when she said he was probably searching for tighter holes. I was such a fool."

Ivory felt for the woman. She was beautiful. Crazy but beautiful and didn't deserve such heartbreak. "I'm sorry you had to go through such – "

"I don't want your pity," Cassie snapped.

"Then why the fuck are you offloading your emotional baggage on me? We're not exactly friends, you know? My sister can handle your shit, but I can't. I don't want to."

Cassie returned the remnant of the cold sausages and took out a bottle of freshly-squeezed orange juice. She threw her head back and let out a burp. "You seemed interested. And look, I get it. I get how you feel. But, there's good news: you're not only the reject in the town now. I just wish it didn't hurt so much."

Ivory folded her fists. "I'm not a reject."

"Oh, but you are," Cassie chuckled softly. "No one loves you anymore. Nobody... absolutely nobody cares about Ivory MacMillan. You're like a speck of dust flitting through the sunlight."

Ivory stepped toward Cassie. Her eyes narrowed to slits, and her shoulders squared.

"Fuck you."

They pushed open the glass doors, ignoring the faint jingles from the bells atop it, and walked inside. She moved ahead, struggling to dismiss the solid masculine scent enveloping her from behind, and quickly took a stool by the bar.

“The best alcohol you have; I want it,” she said with a frown and watched the bartender hastily swing into action.

Her date took the stool beside her, and she felt his gaze bore holes into her head.

“I thought you asked me out on a date,” his deep voice, somehow, caused tingles over her creamy brown skin.

“Technically,” Ivory said and turned to face him. He looked almost delicious in a crisp white button-down shirt with black pants. His grey eyes held her brown ones, and she noticed the smug smile on his lips. “You asked me out on a date.”

“And you said no. Yet, here we are.” His smile grew wider.

The bartender moved a small glass towards her, and she downed the shot. “Another,” she nodded at the blonde

bartender and slid the empty glass. She faced her date.
“Aren’t you going to drink something?”

The handsome stud with the loose mouth raised his hands. “I’m good. I’ll play the role of the sober driver tonight. But, on the other hand, it seems like you need to blow off some steam.”

Another glass was placed in front of her, and Ivory downed it. She cringed, and her face twisted horribly. She slid the empty glass for a refill. “I’m sorry you’re here, Tony.”

“Well, I’m not. No matter how awkward it feels.” Tony said with a deep chuckle. “I do have questions.”

She quirked a brow, “Like?”

“How did you get my number?”

Ivory shrugged and pulled at the collar of her tee shirt before taking another shot. Again, the harshness of the raw gin stung her throat, and her face scrunched up. She slid the glass for a refill.

“Austin.”

Tony caressed the stubble on his chin. “I could have guessed that.”

“You’ve got another question?” Ivory asked as she took yet another shot. Her tongue was slowly becoming numb to the taste, and she started to feel a buzz.

Tony shook his head and pointed to the shot glass. “I think you should slow down.”

She let out a laugh. It was dark and humorless. “That’s what they say about time. Everyone wishes that time will slow down. But it never does.”

The look of concern in Tony's grey eyes irked her. He raked his long and slender fingers through his hair and sighed. She noticed the slight bulge of his muscles through his shirt, and, to her surprise, her fingers itched to feel them.

She shut her eyes. She needed to forget that a beautiful man sat before her. He was nothing but a cover to shield her from further embarrassment.

"What's wrong?" she heard him say, and she looked at him. No way was she having a heart-to-heart talk with this attractive man. She had to create a diversion.

"You look different," Ivory said and squinted.

He raised a brow. "Different?"

"Yeah. You look like a businessman and not like an asshole."

That put a smile on Tony's perfectly chiseled face. A smile that strangely warmed up her insides. It must've been a result of the alcohol, she thought and shook off the fuzzy feeling.

"An asshole? Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Uh, your first impression on my parents? Your words weren't exactly refined or charming."

He laughed heartily, and a smile played on her lips at the sound of his. "I'm sorry about that. I was out of my element that night. I never expected someone as beautiful as you to walk up to me and ask that I play the role of her boyfriend. If it makes you feel any better, you should know that I'm not an asshole."

The smug smile dropped off Ivory's face, and she threw her head back, downing another shot. "How do you know I don't feel...good?"

Ivory knew Tony heard it too. The slur in her words. She was officially drunk. He must not have also noticed the slow drop of her eyelids as a frown masked his features.

“Ivory, you really should slow down,” he said.

It was the first time she heard her name from his lips. It sounded even more beautiful coming from him. But she shook her head.

The loud laughter in the bar rang even louder in her ears, and the world around her passed by in a blur. The lights above their head danced, and she began to chuckle.

“I’m pathetic. I’m nothing but a reject, Tony,” she hiccupped. “Everyone loves Imani. No one loves me. Why? Why her? I used to be a star, you know?”

Everyone loved me. Every guy out there wanted a piece of Ivory MacMillan. Crazy, huh? But I enjoyed every bit of

the attention. It's sad now that nobody cares. No one fucking cares about me. It's all Imani Rogers now."

Ivory couldn't tell why Tony looked at her like he felt her pain. She kept going – each individual agony within her fighting to be voiced.

She frowned and hiccupped. "You know something, Tony? I envy Imani. I envy my sister, her husband, and their cute daughter. I envy all of them. They have it so good... they have it all. And me? I have nothing. I'm twenty-eight and don't even have a penny to pay rent. Life is cruel. I fucking hate this world so much. I hate this fucking town."

Ivory felt the hot liquid form on her eyelids. She was on the brink of tears. She laughed and wiped it off.

"Maybe we should – "Tony started, but she held a finger. The light danced before her eyes and reflected her creamy brown skin. The colors made her smile.

“No, Tony boy. Let me finish,” she hiccupped and took another shot. Trickle of alcohol poured down her chin, and she wiped them off with the back of her hand.

“Maybe, I’m not a good person. And bad people don’t deserve good things. That explains it.”

Tony sighed and reached forward. His strong hands felt warm on her skin. “You’re not a bad person, Ivory MacMillan. You deserve good things. Come, you need a cold bath, a good dinner, and a long sleep. I’ll take you home.”

Tony felt closer than before. His masculine scent was positively intoxicating, and, not thinking clearly, she leaned forward and buried her nose in the crook of his neck.

Tony stiffened, and she inhaled. Her lips brushed his fair skin when she said, “I love how you smell.”

She pulled back to stare into his grey eyes. They were wide and full of shock. “Ivory,” he stuttered. And she smiled.

His hold on her arm tightened, and she cupped his cheeks. There was a lazy smile plastered on her lips. The world around her was long forgotten; the only thing worthy of her attention was the beautiful man in front of her.

“You have such beautiful eyes, Tony. Has anyone ever told you that?” she tilted her head upward and slowly leaned closer. Her eyes fluttered shut as she whispered. “I wonder what your lips taste like.”

Ivory could have sworn that her lips brushed his, but she couldn't tell. Not when he gripped her shoulders gently and pushed her back.

Her eyes shot open, and she straightened up. Tony's brows were creased, and the frown on his face deepened.

He hopped off his stool and lifted her off hers.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you want my babies? Are you rejecting me too?” Her lips quivered.

Tony shook his head and breathed deeply. He led her away from the bar and towards the door. “Let’s get you home.”

Chapter 3

The tall green grasses in the field swayed as the gentle breeze kissed their blades. The clouds were gloomy, and there was a rich, earthy smell.

Tony Allen laughed aloud as he fed one of his preferred horses, Adelaide. She was an energetic white mare with a playful spirit. He gathered more fresh carrots from the bucket and gave them to her.

“There you go, princess.” He watched happily as she wolfed them down. He ruffled her mane and shut the door of her stable.

With a warm smile, he walked over to feed his other horses, and his eyes caught the black stallion lying in a corner with its head bowed. Again, Tony felt the heavy weight of sadness pressing on his shoulders.

He walked up to it and crouched to its level. He stroked its shiny mane gently and tried to push down the lump in his throat. Seeing his best horse in such an awful state upset him.

“Hey there, old boy. How are we doing today? Good, I hope. You’re going to get better, all right? We’re going to get through this. I promise.” He kissed its head and tried to get the horse to eat a carrot.

The stallion nibbled a small amount and turned its head away. Tony sighed. He rose to his feet and walked away with a heavy heart.

He shut the door of the stables and glanced at the silver watch on his wrist. It was almost noon. He had to get going if he didn’t want to miss his appointment.

“See you later, Steel. Be good, okay?” he tipped his cowboy hat to Arnold, his favorite stallion with shiny dark fur, and walked away with a smile.

He breathed in deeply and exhaled. Nothing smelled better than fresh, clean country air. He walked past the grand structure of his modern-ranch home and kicked a pebble on the paved pathway with his leather boots.

Memories of his date from the previous night with the dark brown-skinned beauty, Ivory MacMillan, resurfaced as he got into his black Jeep and adjusted his rearview mirror. He caught his reflection, stared at his worried face, and sighed.

He put the key into the ignition and revved the engine. He raked his fingers through his hair and maintained a firm grip on the steering wheel. He hadn't known what to expect on his date with Ivory, but a drunk, depressed woman was the last thing he would have imagined.

It didn't change anything on his part. He still admired her outstanding beauty. And when she rambled on about how much of a reject she was, he'd wanted to run his fingers through her soft afro and reassure her that she was even more desirable than when he'd first met her.

Tony let out a grunt. She didn't even remember him. How could she? She was way out of his league.

He drove out of his estate and onto the main road, remembering the thrill that shot up his spine as her lips brushed the side of his neck.

He shuddered. It didn't mean anything. She was drunk. That's all it was. He blared the horn at a black Honda Accord that tried to enter his lane.

What was she thinking? Leaning into him the way she did to kiss him? He clenched his jaw. She was so close, yet so far away. He remembered how she smelled. A mixture of vanilla and John Barleycorn. It wasn't the best, but still, he'd wanted to taste it off her pouted lips.

Tony swerved his Jeep onto a partly dusty road. It was a road all too familiar. He'd used it last night when he played the gentleman and took the drunk woman home.

He approached the large steel gate and honked his horn. While he waited for it to open, he glanced at his watch. It was twenty-five past twelve. Five more minutes and Bill Rogers would have taunted him for being late.

I love the way you smell.

Ivory woke up with a start, panting and gasping for air as if she'd been in one of the silly horse races she'd never enjoyed watching. She threw off the soft blankets and hurried over to her full-length mirror. Her voluminous hair had been let out of its tight hold. The dark afro fell below her shoulder and framed her face.

Her almond-shaped eyes widened with fright, and, to her horror, she was wearing the same clothes that she had on in her dream. The previous night had happened. It wasn't a dream.

She touched her forehead to calm the throbbing ache because she couldn't believe she'd made a fool of herself in front of Tony Allen. A guy she barely knew.

You have such beautiful eyes, Tony. Has anyone ever told you that?

I wonder what your lips taste like.

“No!” Ivory panicked. She pulled off her clothes like an abomination and rushed into the bathroom. “No, no, no!”

She hopped into the shower, careful not to slip, and turned on the faucet. She buried her head underneath the harsh spray of cold water. “It was a nightmare. It had to be a nightmare. Ivory MacMillan, why are you so stupid?”

She scrubbed her body roughly and shut off the running water. Her hands searched for a towel, and she grabbed the first soft fabric her hands came in contact with. She

wrapped the warm towel around her soaking-wet body and strolled to the vanity.

She stared at her reflection and gasped when gray eyes looked back at her. It was a memory from last night: when she cradled his face and leaned closer to kiss him. Before she shut her eyes, the look in his told her he'd wanted it.

Ivory shuddered. It didn't matter. What she did was unforgivable. She hoped never to see him again. She wasn't sure she could stand the embarrassment she would feel if she bumped into him.

She wrapped her hair in a towel and walked out. She quickly changed into black leggings and an oversized graphic tee shirt. She had never wanted the country life. She didn't think it was a life she would ever settle for.

Their "Yeehaw's" and country lifestyle appeared to her like mere antics. She wanted more than quiet family bonding times and horse riding.

With one last glance at the full-length mirror hanging on the wall in the corner of the room, she gently fluffed her damp hair and made to leave.

Ivory heard faint voices coming from the bottom of the winding staircase. She stepped down, though careful not to draw any attention her way. She recognized Bill's voice but couldn't identify his guest.

"He's down with something, Bill. He's getting weaker by the day." The deep voice sounded familiar.

Bill cleared his throat. "It's been a month now. What are you waiting for? It'll only get worse if you keep treating him yourself. Get a professional."

"I am, Bill. I will. I will get him checked out. But I'm afraid of what Dr. Lee will tell me. I don't think I'll be able to handle it. He's served me for years now. I can't bear the thought of losing him."

Ivory rolled her eyes. She'd think they were speaking about a sick person if she was in a different house. But knowing Bill, she was ninety-nine percent sure the subject of their conversation was a horse.

"Hope for the best. He'll be fine." She heard Bill say as she hurried down the staircase. "About Betsy, are we going ahead with the trade? Or should we go for Adelaide? Bear in mind, however, Adelaide will be useful for the ride tomorrow."

"Yeah, I know that. Since the old boy is down, I've decided to ride on her or Blaze."

"I'd prefer you ride on Blaze and keep Adelaide on display," Bill said.

"About the trade. Betsy is fierce and fast. That's a bonus. Adelaide, however, she's faster, stronger, and..."

"Tony!" Ivory exclaimed as she held the railing to steady herself. How could life be so cruel? Was Tony Allen Bill's

guest? Did Tony know Bill personally? So many questions ran through her mind simultaneously, and she felt her knees weaken.

Tony looked up at her and quickened her heartbeat even more by greeting her warmly. His gray eyes twinkled as he held her gaze.

“Oh, I see Sleeping Beauty is awake,” Tony said, and Ivory parted her lips to say something. Anything that would save her from further embarrassment. But one accidental glimpse at Bill propelled her to shut up.

He took a self-assured stance, dressed smartly in a red shirt tucked into a snug pair of black jeans, and folded his arms across his chest. His lips were set in a grim line, and he slowly tapped his leather boots on the polished wooden floor. Bill did not look happy.

The blazing fire in his eyes and deep scowl on his face was all she needed to turn on her heels and run back to the room she had barely left a few seconds ago.

Ivory ran so fast she thought she would trip over and fall flat on her face. But instead, she pushed the door open and sat on the edge of her bed. She clutched the sheets tightly in her firm grip and released them repeatedly.

A gust of air ruffled her hair and breezed across her dark brown skin, and the door to her room was thrown open. The thick scent of cologne and fresh, green grass filled her nostrils, and she bent her head lower to avoid his gaze.

“What the hell! What the hell, Ivory?” Bill roared. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Ivory bit on her lower lip and nervously tucked a strand of her damp hair behind her ears. She had to get a grip on herself and handle the situation maturely before Bill took control.

“I don’t have the faintest idea of what you’re rambling on about.”

Bill scoffed. "You don't? Okay then. Let me help jog your memory. Tony brought you home last night. You were all drunk and depressed. You thought your sister and I wouldn't know? What was that about?"

"Look, Bill, I'm not in the mood to handle your childish tantrums."

"Don't," he growled menacingly. Ivory could almost feel the rumbling of the earth beneath her feet. "fuck with me, Ivory MacMillan. Please don't do it. What, is he another one of your conquests?"

Her head snapped up, and she shot up on her feet. "Conquests?"

He chuckled lowly. "You need a dictionary or what? Yes, your fucking conquests! I don't know what hidden agenda you've got up your sleeve, and frankly, I don't care. But leave Tony Allen out of it."

Ivory pushed his shoulder and stepped forward. “What the fuck is your problem? Who gave you the right to waltz in here and talk shit?”

“I fucking own the place, Ivory.”

“Yeah, go ahead. Rub it in my face, why don’t you?”

“Leave Tony the hell alone! The last thing he needs right now is you.”

Ivory gritted her teeth. “Who the hell do you think you are to decide that?”

“A concerned friend,” Bill smirked.

“Yeah?” Ivory took another step closer. “Well, you’re a concerned friend that doesn’t know shit!”

Bill narrowed his eyes, and his hands dropped to his side. The cocky smirk was gone. “What the fuck does that mean?”

The smirk appeared on her face as she squared her shoulders. “You thought my boyfriend was nothing but a ghost from a fairytale? You said he would be as beautiful as the air you’re fucking breathing, yes? Well, Bill Rogers... I’m pleased to announce that you finally met the made-up ghost of my dreams. Tony Allen.”

The look on Bill’s face was priceless. He looked like he was choking. “There’s no fucking way.”

She flashed a sardonic smile and walked past him. Then, with her hand on the cold steel knob, she said plainly. “Yes fucking way, Bill. Tony Allen is my boyfriend,” she said and left the room.

Ivory knew her problem wasn’t over yet. Bill didn’t believe her. That much was clear. Innocent Tony Allen had to be briefed.

He needed to be on the same page as her. She was sure Bill would do anything to prove that she was only using Tony and that nothing serious existed between them, which was the actual truth. But Bill didn't need to know. Not yet, anyway.

She quickened her steps, almost running down the stairs, turning her head searching for her boyfriend. She marched into the spacious living room. He wasn't there. She hurried to the kitchen with her heart pounding rapidly against her ribcage. He wasn't.

"Where are you, Tony?" She mumbled, and her breath caught when she heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. Bill must be looking for Tony.

She wasted no time. Her feet moved faster than her brain as she thought about the one place a horse lover would visit on a ranch—the stables.

She smiled, running now and delighted that she had figured it out.

She caught sight of his broad shoulders, clad in a white cotton long-sleeve shirt. He stood beside an older man with white hair, with folded arms, and the heel of his leather boots grinding the dirt beneath it.

Ivory hated to admit that Tony was more than just good-looking. The older man said something, and Tony was quick to respond. He touched his cowboy hat and walked deeper into the stables. She watched him stack a heap of hay and grab a wooden stick from the corner.

“Dr. Sam?” His deep voice called out. “I think it damp. Is that a good thing?”

Dr. Sam shook his head slowly. “It’s not bad, but let’s hope the sun comes out to do its work soon. If it does, the stables should be all dried out and cozy again in a few hours.”

Ivory was close enough to pick up the pungent smell of horses and horse shit. She heard the low rumble of the horses neighing and grunting, and her hand went up to her nose to wave away the smell.

“Imani?” The veterinarian, Dr. Sam, smiled.

She shook her head. “It’s Ivory. Her twin.”

The smile fell off his face, and he bent to pick up his bags. “Oh.”

Ivory felt the tinge of disappointment of being snubbed, but she didn’t dwell on it. Instead, she focused on the hunk with the knee-wobbling smile and intense gray eyes.

“Tony?”

His gait was confident, steady, and calculated. He had one hand tucked into the pocket of his jeans and the other gripping the stick. Ivory noted his legs’ slight bow and how they suited his perfectly built frame.

She gulped. She shouldn't have her eyes wandering. She kept them on his face, and he appeared to be amused.

“Ivory MacMillan, you're the strangest lady I've ever met.”

Ivory's nose twitched. She picked up a familiar scent and immediately recognized it to be his. Her cheeks flushed as she remembered the embarrassing scene from the previous night.

She leaned forward and buried her nose in the crook of his neck. She inhaled. Her lips brushed his fair skin as she said, “I love how you smell.”

“W-Why?” She stuttered. “Why say that?”

He tilted his head slightly and raised a thick brow. “Uh, you ran away? A few minutes ago?” He tossed the stick aside and dusted his hands.

“Oh, that,” she felt the heat burning on her cheeks. “I was embarrassed.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Why not?” Ivory felt her confidence boost. “I made a fool of myself in front of you and probably said many things I shouldn’t have.”

I wonder what your lips taste like.

She remembered and cringed. What was she thinking?

Tony held up a finger and turned to face the vet. “Dr. Sam, we might have to check on Brooklyn tomorrow. The little one isn’t looking so good.”

The man nodded. “Bill did mention something about Brooklyn. But she’s strong. I’ll come back tomorrow. In the meantime, tell Bill I said he should hold back on the apples. Just for a couple of days for observation.”

Tony beamed and shook hands with Dr. Sam. “Thanks, Doc. We’ll see you around.”

The doctor waved and went on his way. Tony turned and gave Ivory his full attention.

“Firstly,” he started and took a step closer to her. He glanced at the sky, and she could swear she saw the clouds in the reflection in his eyes. “I didn’t say it bothered me.”

“You didn’t have to say anything. Anyone with half a brain would know my stupid display made you uncomfortable.” She maintained her stance, despite being distracted by how close he stood.

Tony chuckled and locked eyes with her. “I loved spending time with you last night, Ivory. I did. Did your drunken babbling take me aback? A little bit, yes. But do I wish it never happens again? Hell no.”

Ivory clenched her fists. “Oh, yeah? Well, Tony Allen, it’s not about you. It’s about me and how I feel about my actions.”

“Of course, it’s about you. It always has to be, doesn’t it?” His smile faltered.

“Look, all I’m saying is this: you don’t have to worry. You’ll never have to see me in such a vulnerable state again.”

He looked up at something behind her. Ivory followed his gaze, and her breath caught. Bill stood a few yards away, talking to Dr. Sam, and Ivory knew he was coming for her.

“Is that why you ran all the way here? To reassure me?”
Tony said, and her head snapped back to him

“No. No, no... Tony, listen, I had no idea you knew Bill.”

“I had no idea you didn’t know.”

Ivory wasn’t sure why she placed her hands on his arms. She was amazed at her sudden actions but carried on. She couldn’t stop now. Her voice dropped to a harsh whisper. “I know I borrowed you that night to put on a show for my parents. But now, I need you to prolong whatever charade we have”

Tony bit down on his lower lip. He looked like he was stifling a laugh. “You want me to put on an act in front of Bill and Imani as well, right?”

She smiled, happy he had caught on quickly. “Yes! Exactly. That’s right.”

He shrugged. "What if I don't want to?"

The smile fell off her face, and she searched his eyes, laughing nervously. "Why wouldn't you want to?"

"You have more to gain from this," he looked away from her. "You get to keep this perfect image of yourself in front of your family while I can't date anyone. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Ivory felt a strange bitterness well up in her chest. "Why would you want to date someone else at a time like this? I'm in a crisis, and I need your help."

Tony shrugged nonchalantly and caused a ripple of shock to hit her spine as he wrapped his strong arms around her waist and pulled her closer.

"Like you said. Your crisis. Not mine," he said with a cocky smirk. Ivory was distracted. Their bodies were so close; she thought they'd melt into each other. Instead, she struggled to find her voice.

“Tony, what are you doing?” She tried to push, but her small hands were no match for his muscled chest.

He held her in place, rubbing circles on the spot right above her buttocks, and buried his nose in the crook of her neck.

“I love the way you smell,” he said. And Ivory stiffened when his lips brushed the nape of her neck.

He pulled back, and Ivory gasped at the intensity of the desire in his eyes. A dark storm brewed in them when he said, “Here’s the deal: I’ll help you, Ivory. But only if you help me figure out one thing.”

Ivory unintentionally swiped a tongue lightly over her lips, and her breath faltered when she finally found her voice. “What’s that?”

Tony smirked and leaned closer than ever. She could taste the warm breath that escaped his lips. Her eyes fluttered, and her breathing sped up.

“I’ve always wondered what your lips taste like.”

No!

She barely had time to protest when Tony’s soft lips came crashing down on hers.

Chapter 4

Cherries, strawberries, and butter.

That's what he said her lips tasted like.

Ivory rolled over on the queen-sized bed, tangled between the soft white sheets, and picked up her phone from the bedside table. She double-tapped on the screen and squinted when the bright light hit her eyes.

5:49 am

Dawn was fast approaching, but the roaring thunder and lightning tearing through the sky didn't make it seem so. Heavy rain poured down, hitting harshly against the roof and hammering against the window. Ivory snuggled between the sheets and woolen blankets and closed her eyes.

The memory of the lingering sensation of Tony's lips on hers came rushing back, and her eyes snapped open.

"Fuck!" She groaned.

She remembered everything; the smug look on his handsome face when he pulled away, the way he held her protectively and defended their fake love after Bill caught up with them.

He even dared to drop a light kiss on her cheeks to make the story all the more believable.

Ivory mumbled a silent curse under her breath and rolled over again to look at the time.

5:52 am

"Darn it!" Time wasn't moving any faster, and the pounding on the roof worsened her frustration. In her opinion, the noise should have been enough to ward off

irrelevant thoughts or memories, but the commotion only fanned and heightened her crazy desire.

To kiss him again.

To feel his ripped biceps beneath her touch and melt in his strong arms.

What the hell was wrong with her?

She tossed and turned over toward the direction of the window. The windows were closed, but cool air still breezed through the tiny gaps between the panes and flapped the curtains.

She remembered the tenderness of his lips and the warmth of his tongue as it delved deeper into her mouth. It had been so quick that she accidentally released a moan.

Tony had smiled against her lips and pulled away while she silently wished the ground would open up and swallow her whole before she died from embarrassment.

Ivory tightened her grip on the pillow beneath her head. She couldn't understand why she enjoyed every moment of the unexpected kiss with Tony. Or why she wished for it to happen again.

She shut her eyes forcefully, and before the noise around her died down, and she drifted into the welcoming arms of sleep, she remembered his last words before she walked off with Bill,

See you tomorrow, babe.

A loud knock on her door jolted her awake. "Who the fuck are you, and what do you want?" she yelled.

"Ivory?" It was Imani. "Open the door!"

Ivory tossed the blankets aside and turned to grab her phone from the bedside table. She tapped on the screen, and her eyes went wide. “How on earth?”

2:55 pm.

“Open the fucking door, Ivory! Don’t make me ask again.”

“Jeez! Hold your horses, will you? I’m coming.” Ivory rubbed her eyes and held back her thick afro in a bun before she got up. She couldn’t believe she’d slept for most of her day.

She pushed down on the knob and pulled back. Just as she thought, a very pissed-off Imani stared back at her. She stood with legs apart and had a tight hold of her cute daughter, Jemimah, who sat on her hip.

Jemimah giggled and began flailing her arms. The little girl wanted Ivory to take her, but her mother would have preferred flinging her twin out of the window.

“Five more minutes, Ivory. Five more minutes and, I swear on every horse Bill loves, I would have kicked the fucking door down.”

Ivory snickered and backed away from the door. “With Little Jemimah on your hip? I highly doubt it.”

Her sister followed her and placed her daughter on the bed. Jemimah busied herself with the sheets and pillows, and Imani crossed her arms.

“It’s not funny. We started to think the worst had happened.”

“Like the worst happening wouldn’t have given you and the entire family some relief.” Ivory matched her sister’s glare with one of her own.

“Don’t talk rubbish, Ivory. We were only concerned.”

“Who’s we?” Ivory arched a brow, and Imani sucked in a deep breath.

“Bill and I.”

Ivory was overly dramatic as she looked from corner to corner. “I don’t see a concerned Bill here.”

Ivory’s comment seemed to have lit the fire in Imani’s eyes. Her sister gritted her teeth. “Exactly. He left. To the place where all of us should have been right now. Together. The event started two hours ago. Why did you sleep so long?”

Ivory shrugged. “I’ve never liked those horse-riding events, and you know that. They’re so boring. Imani, I swear, my heart won’t take watching another trot, gallop, or giddy up, boys! Yeehaw!”

Imani looked super cute in a white sleeveless crop top, high-waist boot-cut jeans, and brown lace-up boots. A cowboy hat dangled from the belt loop on her jeans to finish the look. Ivory was sure she would wear it at the event. She stepped toward Ivory.

“Firstly, Ivory... the earth doesn’t revolve around you. You know how important these events are to Bill. And you know he loves having us there.”

“You and Jemimah. Not me.” Ivory corrected, but Imani shook her head.

“Us, Ivory. That includes you.”

“Whatever. Doesn’t it matter that it rained cats and dogs earlier? The ground will be muddy and wet.”

Imani kept a poker face. “Where’s the fun if it’s warm and dry? Grow up, Ivory. Quit giving lame excuses. And secondly, don’t you care that your boyfriend will be riding too?”

Boyfriend?

Ivory gasped. See you tomorrow, babe.

Tomorrow.

He said it yesterday.

Tomorrow! I meant today.

“Oh, shit!” She shot up from the bed and frantically searched for a towel.

“So you do care?”

“Uh-huh,” she responded, preoccupied as she pulled a plain white tee shirt and denim shorts from the wardrobe

and tossed them onto the bed. Jemimah made a happy gurgle and clapped her hands.

Why did she care?

Imani's laughter rang behind her as she rushed into the bathroom to shower.

"Look who's all interested now," Imani called after her.
"And no cussing in front of the baby!"

The event was already in full swing when they arrived at Al's Ranch. Some little kids, with their hands held firmly by their parents, strolled past giggling excitedly and requesting ice creams, hot dogs, candy floss... the list went on and on.

"This way," Imani said, holding Jemimah firmly on her hip, and they turned toward another entrance. They

passed a group of young students quarreling over a football game, and Ivory rolled her eyes.

They got to the horse-riding center, and Ivory groaned. The ground was slightly muddy. The people sitting by the bleachers had no problem with it. Instead, they whooped and hollered every time a rider did something impressive.

Ivory followed her sister to their reserved spot, and a nasal voice cried out from behind them.

“Oh, we thought you were never going to make it!”

They spun around, and Ivory gritted her teeth. Fucking Susie.

“I’m sorry we’re late. Something came up. I hope we haven’t missed much. Bill won’t be happy about that,” Imani said as she leaned forward and placed air kisses on either side of Susie’s face.

The blonde spared Ivory a dirty look and flicked her hair. “It’s okay, sweetie. You don’t have to apologize for other people’s mistakes. Oh, you’ve missed some spectacular riders. This is the fourth lap, Bill went round on the second.”

“Crap,” Imani cussed. A deep frown marred her radiant smile, and Ivory felt guilty.

“Not to worry, love,” Susie immediately interrupted with a gleeful laugh. “He’ll be back on the fifth lap to ride next to Duke and Tony.”

At the mention of Tony, Ivory could swear her heart flipped. She was not a fan of horse riding, but she wanted to see Tony ride.

Imani visibly brightened up. “Oh, thank goodness. And what about Austin? Is he riding with them?”

Susie sucked her teeth and waved her hand in a circular motion. "Business. He couldn't make it. Never mind, your husband and those two studs will be the highlight of the evening. Everyone has been waiting for it all night. It's been a while since they all rode together, and, even better, they'll be riding the mustangs."

Imani squealed delightedly and walked beside Susie to their reserved spot. Susie sat next to Imani and placed an ecstatic Jemimah on her lap. Ivory sat beside Susie and looked out at the enormous field.

They had always used the same venue, Al's Ranch, for horse-riding events, but she'd never bothered to acknowledge the land's beauty or care to know who Al was. She heard rumors that he was one of the wealthiest men in Texas, some even said he was one of the wealthiest men in the entire country.

His status didn't excite her, but she did give him credit for the proper management and maintenance of his estate. He had areas set apart for horse riding and various other fun sports. The orderliness showed how he ran his business.

“What was he thinking?” Ivory heard the spite in her sister’s voice and turned to eavesdrop on their conversation. “Why would he bring her here?”

“I asked him the same thing. And guess what he said? He didn’t know Cassie would be here.”

“Bullshit!” Imani spat, and Susie rolled her eyes.

“I said the same thing. The bastard is only trying to hurt her more.”

Imani turned her head toward the bleachers, and Ivory did the same. The brunette was definitely upset, with her chin buried in her propped-up arm.

“You should invite her over. She looks miserable sitting all by herself.”

Susie shrugged. “We saw you at the same time, and I tried to make her come with me, but she point-blank refused.”

Ivory scoffed and looked away from the bleachers. “Poor Cassie.”

“What does that mean?” Susie hissed.

Ivory was ready to tell Susie, and anyone else willing to listen, that Cassie was stupid for wasting her time moping around and whining for a guy who dumped her without a second thought blink when somebody interrupted.

“Babe!”

“Dada!”

Imani and Jemimah said in unison as Bill appeared at their reserved spot. Imani shot up from her seat and

embraced him tightly, and they kissed. The twinkle in his eyes as he looked down at her sister didn't go unnoticed.

"Hi, Susie. Babe, how long have you been here for?" He asked as he crouched to pepper his daughter's face with kisses.

"Over half an hour?"

"Great! I didn't want you to miss the big finish." He rose to his feet and wrapped an arm around Imai's waist.

"Yeah, Susie told us. You, Duke, and Tony?"

"Yup," he beamed. "I can't wait and the crowd looks ready too."

Ivory knew he had ignored her deliberately. A smirk formed on her lips, and she cleared her throat. "Not everyone is looking forward to seeing you jack your butt

and lean forward, Rogers. I'm here for Tony. I've never seen him ride."

That got his attention.

Bill snorted. "That's because you don't care about Tony. This relationship of yours, I think it's fake. There's no way a real girlfriend of Tony wouldn't have seen him ride at least once in her life. You said you two have been together for how long now, six months? And you've never seen him ride?"

She clenched her fist and looked away from him. "Anything is possible."

"Anything is possible, my ass." Bill countered immediately. "You want to know what I think? I think you're using AI."

Ivory stiffened. The crowd cheered loudly for the stunt rider's latest trick, and the noise brought her back to her senses. "What?"

“Yeah. I think you’re using him to regain fame. I bet you love the attention you’re getting too. You should stop this game, Ivory. Tony has his whole life ahead of him, and I think he’s a little too young for you.”

Ivory didn’t deny that she loved the attention or was using Tony. What got her mind twisted was the fact that Bill called him Al. She refused to believe Tony was Al—the Al of Al’s Home and Al’s Ranch.

And what did Bill mean by saying Tony was too young for her?

She sighed. She’d never thought to ask Tony how old he was.

A loud whistle interrupted their conversation, and Bill backed away. “That’s my cue, babe,” he said to Imani. “I’ll see you two later. Love you, baby!”

The fifth and last lap of the ride started. Bill and Duke mounted two huge black mustang stallions. Ivory recognized the horses. Bill's stallion was Troy, and Duke's was Grady. They looked good on the shining horses, but Ivory's eyes were trained on one person.

Tony.

Tony Allen.

Who could be one of the youngest billionaires in Texas or the entire freaking country.

He climbed on a mustang with a shiny brown coat and a full mane. The horse was beautiful. It must have been Blaze. The horse Bill advised him to ride.

A pistol was fired, and the three men took off. They kicked back on their horse and galloped at a tremendous pace. Each pound on the muddy ground kicked up a puff of dirt behind them.

It was fascinating to watch Tony grip the horse's reins tightly and take control. His focus was steady as he held on, crouching and possibly whispering into the horse's ear. The scene seemed strangely intimate, patting the horse's mane and stroking its sides as they sped forward.

The crowd went wild when Tony's stallion crossed the finish line first. She almost succumbed to the temptation to scream for joy too. Bill closely followed Tony, but Duke was well behind. Thankfully he had a broad smile when he caught up with Bill and Tony.

The three men quickly hopped off their horses and gave themselves bro hugs. They waved at the crowd and began walking their horses towards the stables when an insanely attractive brunette, not Cassie, ran onto the field and flung herself at Tony.

Ivory felt her heart drop to her stomach. She expected Tony to pull away. She wanted him to push the woman away. However, he did something worse. He lifted her off the ground with a huge grin and spun her around.

You get to keep this perfect image of yourself before your family, while I can't date anyone. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Ivory heard Susie chuckle beside her, and, against her better judgment, she stood up. The sight of Tony tucking strands of the strange woman's hair behind her ears made her stomach churn.

She wasn't sure why it affected her, but she was certain of one thing. She wouldn't let some mysterious woman steal his attention away from her.

She walked away from the reserved spot and moved closer to the fancy stables built to display some of the horses. Ivory looked through the name tags on each aisle, and one caught her eye.

Adelaide.

She was a beautiful white mare with a long silvery mane. She was feisty, and she looked slightly intimidating. Ivory sucked in a deep breath. She still had time to back out of this suicide mission. But one glance at Tony and the brunette got her blood boiling.

She lifted the bar keeping the wooden door shut, and let it clatter on the floor.

Adelaide made a fuss, and Ivory felt her heart rate quicken. Finally, she lifted her hands as a sign of peace.

“Hey there, pretty girl. Or woman. Whatever.” She breathed deeply. “Look, I don’t want any trouble, all right? I just need to borrow you to teach my boyfriend a lesson.”

The mare calmed down, and Ivory smirked. “How about that, huh? So you do believe in love. Great! So, uh, you stay here, okay?”

She walked around the horse, trying to figure out how to get on it. The saddle hung on the aisle's wooden rung, and she pulled it off. She nibbled on her lower lip.

She had never wanted to ride a horse and didn't bother to learn how to put the saddle on. Instead, she mumbled an incoherent mantra and threw the saddle on the mare.

It seemed to settle perfectly, and, with some more gibberish, she climbed on.

“Okay, that wasn't so...”

Ivory swallowed her words as Adelaide grunted and moved. The horse didn't seem comfortable, she shook her mane and reared up.

Ivory's eyes widened at the realization that Adelaide was trying to throw her off.

She searched for something to hold as the mare trotted out of her aisle.

“Shit!” She didn’t attach the reins. She gulped. The thought of dying no longer seemed absurd.

She wrapped her hands tightly around the mare’s neck. That upset Adelaide. Big time.

She let out a loud neigh and kicked off with such blinding speed that Ivory was sure she would hurl right after she called for help.

“Help!” she screamed. “Someone save me!”

The breeze sliced through her face and ruffled her hair as Adelaide galloped uncontrollably. Tears formed in Ivory’s eyes as she gripped the horse’s neck tightly and held on for dear life.

The horse must have caused a commotion in the horse-riding section. She heard voices around her screaming and felt the energetic thump on the muddy earth beneath them. Finally, the mare made it to the field.

“Help! Please, anybody!” Ivory screamed and spilled a tear. “I don’t want to die!”

Adelaide kicked back and stood on her hind legs, and Ivory felt her grip on the horse’s neck loosen.

“No! No, no, no!” She landed with a heavy thud on a mud puddle, and the horse galloped away.

Some riders ran past to catch the mare while the crowd, previously seated on the bleachers, gathered around her.

She hung her head in shame, aware that her clothes and glowing brown skin were covered in mud. Her arms ached from gripping Adelaide tightly, and so did her thighs.

She tried to get up but couldn't.

“Give her some space, will you?”

A familiar voice came through before the crowd parted. She got a whiff of his intoxicating scent as he crouched to her level.

“Come on, take my hand. We can discuss how this happened while you clean up.”

Ivory sniffled. She fought to hold back the tears, but the concern and compassion in his voice threatened to tear her resolve apart.

She put her hand in his, and he lifted her to her feet. He wrapped his arm around her waist to steady her, but it didn't stop the bolt of electricity that shot through her spine.

Ivory turned to gaze up at him. The least she could do was express gratitude. “Thank...”

“Tony?”

The melodious voice suited the face. It was the brunette. Like Tony, she had intense gray eyes and full pink lips that fitted her heart-shaped face. And the sight of her curvy hips and tiny waist only fanned the flames of Ivory’s anger.

She put some distance between herself and Tony, almost falling flat on her face in the process. But he quickly reached out again and grabbed her. He was gripping her even more tightly.

“Gosh, is she okay?”

“Who’s asking?” Ivory snapped, and it earned a chuckle from Tony.

“Trisha’s asking.” He said and held her gaze. There was a mischievous glint in his eye when he said, “It’s my fault for not introducing you.”

Ivory watched him gesture to the pretty brunette. “Ivory, meet Trisha Allen. My sister.”

His sister?

Her anger vanished, leaving behind a puff of smoke, and her jaw dropped. She had gone through such an embarrassing and tortuous moment because she was jealous of Tony’s sister.

Tony continued introducing his sister, but Ivory’s mind was elsewhere. Something else bothered her. She felt her cheeks heat up with shame, and she looked away. It wasn’t like she and Tony had anything serious going on. So, why did she get jealous?

Chapter 5

I'll lead you.

I'll take your hand.

I'll comfort you.

I'll make you smile.

You are,

You are,

the love of my life.

Ivory sang under her breath as she rinsed a plate underneath the cold water running from the faucet at the sink and placed it on a big drying mat. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she positioned the cutlery beside the plate.

Do you believe me?

Do you believe me when I say?

I'll be your comfort

In the dark of night

And in the day?

The doorbell rang out, and she turned off the faucet. "Coming!" She yelled loudly and cleaned her hand on a dishcloth.

The hum of one of her favorite songs remained on her lips, and she whistled in between as she walked out of the kitchen and past the living room. She stopped by the door and adjusted the light pink scarf wrapped around her hair before grabbing the door handle and pulling it open.

She blinked twice as she stared into the gray eyes of the visitor. “Tony?”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss.” The boyish grin on his face made the dark-haired man appear years younger.

Ivory wanted to speak but couldn't. She hadn't set eyes on him since she embarrassed herself at the horse-riding event three weeks ago. So instead, she had her sister to thank for rescuing her by offering to get her cleaned up instead of Tony.

Why had she been jealous? Ivory still had not the slightest clue. But she did figure out other things about

this handsome man after spending many nights stalking his profile on Ivid and every other social media platform she could lay her hands on.

He was Al, after all.

Tony Allen had turned out to be one of the youngest billionaires in the country and made it to the front page of *Sexy & Single*, a top magazine that featured successful bachelors.

Ivory remembered rolling her eyes after putting the pieces together. The cowboy was very impressive. And she had discovered an intriguing detail.

Tony Allen was twenty-six years old. That put two years between them. Nevertheless, she finally understood Bill's meaning when he spoke about their relationship three weeks ago.

"Are you going to let us stand here all day?" Tony said, and Ivory shook her head. His sister, Trisha, stood

behind him with a small smile playing on her lips. She looked pretty in an oversized plain blue tee shirt on a denim mini-skirt and black lug sole loafers.

“If you’re here for Bill and Imani, I’m sorry you just missed them.”

Tony’s strong hands landed on her shoulders, and for a split second, she wondered what it would feel like if he held her in those arms.

He surprised her instead by gently moving her away from the door. “Come on, Trish. We came for a visit, didn’t we?”

“But Bill and Imani aren’t here. So what, you think I’m lying?” Ivory protested as they marched into the house, uninvited, and shut the door behind them.

“They might not be, but you are. You deserve a visit too, don’t you?” Trisha said coolly. “Lovely place you have here.”

“It’s not mine. The credit should go to the original owners,” Ivory suggested, and Tony laughed.

“You live here too. And by the look of that on your head, I can tell you contribute to making sure this place is all clean and sparkling ” He grinned.

“Are you mocking me?” she asked pointedly.

He shook his head. “Of course not. I’m only complimenting your efforts. I don’t think you get that often. You know, appreciating the little efforts you make.”

Ivory glanced briefly at Tony. His expression appeared to be genuine. She wondered if he meant what he said about appreciating her little efforts. How did he know she didn’t? And why did it matter to him if she did?

“Oh,” was all she could say.

She led them to the living room and fluffed the cushions while Trisha looked at the family photos lined neatly atop the fireplace.

Tony took a seat on the sofa, and Trisha spoke. She turned to them with a frame in her hand and pointed at a beaming Jemimah. “This cutie here must be Jemma.”

Ivory smiled and nodded. “Yeah. We call her Jemma for short. Her name is Jemimah.”

“She’s adorable,” Trisha gushed and returned the frame. “Right, Al?”

Tony nodded at the exact moment his phone buzzed. “You should see her in person. She’s a bundle of joy, I tell you,” He said and rose from the sofa. “Excuse me, guys.”

Ivory wasn't aware that she was staring at Tony until he left the living room, and Trisha cleared her throat and chuckled. Then, the brunette sat on the sofa opposite her and crossed her legs.

"He's fascinated by you, you know?"

Trisha's comment surprised Ivory, but she shook her head. "I doubt it."

"Well, I don't. I'm his sister. I know it for a fact." Trisha raked her fingers through her long hair and ruffled it. "I'm sorry about the other day. That should never have happened."

Ivory folded her arms and leaned forward. "You say that like you could have done something to have changed my terrible fate."

Trisha chuckled. "Not exactly. But I'm sure there were precautionary measures we could have taken to make sure no one had such a terrible experience."

Ivory shrugged. "There's nothing we can do to change the past now, right?"

"True," Trisha bobbed her head in agreement. "But we can make a change in the future."

"I agree." Ivory drummed her fingers on the plush arms of the sofa and crossed her legs. "You say that with some kind of intuition; why?"

Trisha leaned forward with a bright smile on her face. "I'm getting married, Ivory. You don't know how excited I am."

Ivory's jaw dropped. "You're getting married? Wow! I mean, I never expected such great news. So who's the lucky guy?"

A flush of red swept across the brunette's cheeks, and Ivory thought she would burst from all the joy she

contained. “His name is Marcus, and he’s an attorney in a top firm in Seattle.”

“An attorney? Wow!” Ivory knew why she was so shocked. Firstly, Tony hadn’t mentioned a word to her about his sister getting married. She couldn’t blame him. What they had was nothing but a charade. He wouldn’t share important family information with someone he wasn’t dating.

Secondly, Trisha had been nothing but sweet and friendly to her. She expected someone with such tenderness to settle for a cowboy like her brother. An attorney was definitely unexpected, in a good way, but not the picture she would have painted.

Thirdly, Ivory wasn’t sure why a beautiful young woman, like Trisha, with such a promising future, would want to throw her life away by settling down.

“He’s super sweet, Ivory.” Trisha rambled on. “Maybe you’ll get to meet him someday. Everything about him made me fall in love. I never expected it to happen, but it did, and in a few months, we’ll be tying the knot.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Ivory said with a small smile. The young woman’s joy was contagious. But was she truly happy for her? Ivory didn’t think so.

Trisha rose to her feet and walked back to the fireplace. She touched Jemimah’s photo frame with a longing in her grey eyes.

“It’s been Tony and I against the world for years now. Sometimes, I wished there were more of us. Too bad not all wishes get granted. But that was the past,” she said, turning back to Ivory with a smile.

“I’m going to make a change in my future. I’ve always wanted kids, and I almost danced with happiness when I found out Marcus loves kids too. So we’re going to have five if we can.”

Trisha laughed heartily, but Ivory didn’t get the joke. She cringed.

Five kids?

To her, one was more than enough trouble.

Trisha's dreams were a far cry from hers. Where she wanted a more career-oriented life, with no kids at all, Trisha wanted to settle down and start a family with five pesky creatures.

How could anyone ever dance with happiness for such a dream?

Trisha looked at her closely and stepped forward. "Ivory, you're looking at me funny."

She snapped out of her trance and pointed at her chest. "Who? Me?"

“Yeah. What, you’ve never thought of settling down?”

Ivory froze like a deer caught in headlights. She tried to say something in her defense. “How...”

“Trish, we need to leave now.”

Tony waltzed into the living room with his handsome face marred with worry. He barely paid her any attention.

“Is there a problem?” Trisha asked as she walked up to her brother.

He raked his hair with his fingers and rolled his eyes.
“Nothing serious. It’s a work emergency. Tammy had an issue with the deliveries. Again. I need to think of a way to deal with this once and for all.”

“And you will. Just take a deep breath, okay?”

Trisha smiled up at Tony, and Ivory admired the bond they had. How could Trisha have ever wanted more siblings? What they had looked perfect.

“Ivory?”

She had spaced out again. “Did you say something?”

Trisha chuckled. “Yes. Tony and I are inviting you over for dinner later tonight.”

Ivory looked up at Tony, and he grinned. His gray eyes sparkled, and she noticed the worried look he had previously was gone.

“Are you just going to keep staring, or will you say something?”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Thank you for the invite, Trisha. I’ll be there.”

“Perfect! See you soon!”

“I’ll send a car to pick you up by seven,” Tony said, winking before they turned around and walked away.

Ivory stepped out of the black Toyota Tundra, feeling her confidence waver. She took in a deep breath as she started for the entrance.

Unlike Bill, Tony didn’t reside in the Al’s Ranch estate. He had chosen instead to settle with a smaller and more intimate ranch, hidden behind a long stretch of trees and situated closer to the picturesque view of tall blades of green grass underneath the open sky.

She secretly admired his view of the countryside but believed the city had more to offer.

“Come in, please. By the way, you look gorgeous,” Trisha squealed and ushered her inside. The house was warm and smelled like fresh roses, strawberries, and roast beef.

Ivory was grateful that she had opted for a sleeveless top. She matched it with Deluxe high waist jeans and high-quality knee-high leather boots and bound her hair in a low bun. It was simple but snug.

“Right this way,” Trisha gushed, leading her to the dining area.

It was brightly lit by a glass globe pendant light, and the sight of mashed potatoes, gravy, chicken, roast beef, and pork on the table made Ivory salivate. Trisha pulled back a chair for her, and Ivory sat carefully.

She didn't want to ask but couldn't help herself. The empty seat opposite hers was a distraction. "Won't Tony join us for dinner?"

Trisha wiggled her eyebrows and began setting out the dishes. "Oh, missing him already, I see. Don't worry; he'll join us soon. He's taking a shower."

Was she that obvious?

"Okay."

"Yeah, on the other hand, let's finish our discussion. What are your thoughts on a ranch wedding?"

Ivory had never taken time to think about weddings, especially not one on a ranch, but she didn't want to dampen the spirits of the bride-to-be. So she told a little white lie.

“I think it’s great! Your brother’s ranch has the perfect view too.”

That was all the boost Trisha needed to keep riding on the wave of excitement. Trisha asked more questions, asking what Ivory thought about unconventional wedding gowns, theme colors, pre-wedding parties, and after-parties.

Ivory never thought she would enjoy conversations about wine and cake tastings or picking the perfect bouquet. But she did. Trisha painted the most magnificent mental picture, and Ivory loved it. For Trisha, of course. Her opinion about settling down or filling an entire house with crying babies hadn’t changed.

She bit down on a juicy piece of roast beef and smiled at Trisha’s joke about riding on pigs at the wedding. Then, she reached for a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and paused.

Tony was descending the stairs carefully, and water droplets smattering his shirt from his damp hair.

He looked more delicious than the roast beef in a plain grey tee shirt and snug black sweatpants.

Their eyes met as he joined them at the table and flashed her a warm smile. Ivory blinked. The scent of cologne and soap saturated the air around them.

“You finally decide to join us after dinner. Well done, brother,” Trisha said as she rose. She gathered the empty dishes on the table and headed for the kitchen.

“Wait up,” Ivory called after her. “Don’t you need my help?”

“Not at all, Ivory. You’ve done enough. Just enjoy the evening.”

Ivory knew she intentionally left her alone with her brother. She smiled at the brunette’s retreating figure and was stunned to catch Tony staring intently at her.

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head and dished a small portion of mashed potatoes onto his plate. “Nothing. You appear to be happy. Content even.”

She didn’t deny that she loved seeing him relaxed and comfortable. Unfortunately, the stubble on his jaw also appeared to have grown slightly longer.

She folded her arms on the table and leaned forward. “And that’s not usual?”

“Nope.”

“Huh,” she shrugged. “Well, if anyone in this house is happy and content, it’s your sister. Honestly, I can’t wrap my head around it.”

He dug up a spoonful of mashed potatoes and slowly put it into his mouth. Ivory forced herself to zoom out from the sensual scene and look at his face.

“You can’t wrap your head around what?”

She straightened up. “Your sister’s delight. How can she be happy about settling down and having five kids?”

Tony was amused. He drank some water and moved his plate aside. Most of the food remained untouched. “She said five?”

“She did.” His calmness added to her incredulity. “Can I be honest with you?”

“Sure. Go ahead. I’m all ears.” He rose from his seat and stretched out his hand. “Let’s continue our chat in the living room.”

She placed her hand in his and joined him. They got to the living room and sat on the same sofa. Ivory felt uncomfortable sitting close to him and opening up, but he was easy to talk to. And he smelled good. Really good.

Unlike some cowboys she had crossed paths with in the past, Tony was among a few that didn't take it upon themselves to smell like the horse dung they shoveled.

She sucked in a deep breath and exhaled. "I've always wanted a better life," she said. "I don't... I can't settle for this life. I can't accept mediocrity. Whatever it is, as long as I'm involved, it just has to be the best. And frankly, I think this town is too small for me. Maybe Texas even."

"How about the whole country too?" he laughed.

She deadpanned. "Not funny, Tony. I'm serious. I want something more. I want something more than stables, horse races, or staying in a town where everyone knows shit about everyone."

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing, you know?” Tony pointed out and swiped a thumb over his brows. The gray in his eyes looked more intense.

He put an arm on the edge of the sofa and brushed his fingers across her arm. She couldn’t tell if it was intentional. He didn’t seem to notice and was more interested in talking to her.

“Ivory, having a big dream like yours is not wrong. I love that you have a vision of a bright future. But...”

She chuckled lightly. “I don’t like buts.”

“Yeah, but this one is necessary. You can lose a lot if you don’t enjoy the present. So while you’re looking out there, waiting for something big to hit you in the face, what do you do with the life that’s going on here and around you?”

He wasn’t done, and she had no intention of interrupting him. Listening to Tony speak stirred strange emotions

inside her.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

Ivory smirked. She already knew.

“You don’t have to go through the trouble.” He arched a brow, and she continued. “You are the famous AI? AI of AI’s Home and AI’s Ranch? Yeah, I know. You’re pretty famous around these parts. There’s no need to rub it in.”

He scoffed. “That’s hardly a secret, Ivory. I’m even more surprised that you’re only catching up to speed now.”

“That’s not the secret?” She asked, and he shook his head.

“If you’ll let me, I’ll spill it right now.”

She blushed and glanced at the expensive rug underneath the spirally crafted center table. "Please, go ahead."

"Thank you," he did a mock bow. "I decided to permanently reside in Texas after my dad died. Before then, the dream was New York City. I'd spent most of my life picturing my future in that city. What would my life be like?"

Of course, I'm a businessman. I planned to start as many businesses as possible and make them thrive. I did love the country life. I loved our horses, but I wanted something more."

Ivory could still spot the spark in his eyes as he talked to her about New York City. But present also was the look of resignation.

"Your dad died, and your dream crashed?"

He attempted a smile. "It didn't crash. I killed it. Far more important matters arose. Do you see Al's Ranch? That belonged to my dad before I inherited it. My dad willed it to me. I couldn't say no."

She gaped and searched his eyes. "But you had a choice."

He leaned forward, meeting her gaze. "And I chose to stay. I chose to look after my father's ranch. I invested my time and resources to build it and make it what it is today. And you know what, Ivory? I don't regret my decision.

There's no single regret in my heart for dedicating these past years living and working in this town. Do you want to know why? It's because some things are worth giving up for others."

She shook her head defiantly. "I don't agree with you."

He smiled and did the unexpected. He moved closer, eliminating their distance, and snuck his arm around her.

“You don’t have to,” he said. “I’ll prove it to you.”

Ivory felt every goosebump rise as Tony pulled off the band that held her hair. He slid his fingers into her thick hair and teased it until it balanced evenly below her shoulders.

“I like it better like this.” His voice had an edge to it. It sounded deeper, crisper, and more mesmerizing.

Ivory felt herself sinking into him. “How do you intend to prove it?”

“Easy.” He smirked and leaned forward. Their lips were barely inches apart. Ivory could feel the warmth of his breath flutter against her lips. “There’s something I’ve wanted to do from the minute I saw you bite into the roast beef on that table.

But I held on to self-control. To me, having self-control seemed the better option. But having you so close to me now proves that I can lose out so much on life if I don't enjoy the present."

Her eyes went to his lips, and she bit down on hers. She felt the rising sensation within her but fought to ignore it. Her insides threatened to burst.

"That's not sufficient proof, Tony." Her breath faltered. "I need actual evidence."

A cocky smile took over the smirk on his lips, and an arrogance Ivory never knew he possessed shone through his eyes.

"Fine then," he said and dipped his head. "How about I just show you?"

Ivory knew what was coming. And she welcomed it with parted lips. A soft groan escaped her as Tony dragged her closer and ravished her mouth with his.

Her hands went around his neck, and she shut her eyes. It was a battle between them. Neither wanted the other to let go.

Tony claimed her lips, and she let him. The warmth of his tongue mingled with hers, and she gasped.

“I want you, Ivory MacMillan,” he mumbled against her lips and pulled away. The intensity of desire in his eyes caused moisture between her legs.

“What do you say?” His eyes flickered to her mildly swollen lips and back to her face. “Will you let me have you?”

Chapter 6

“Ow!”

“Fuck!”

“Turn on the freaking light, dammit!”

Tony reached for the switch and flicked it upwards. He had a lazy smile, and she stifled a laugh. Her chest heaved as they stared at each other in silence.

He had jacked her from the sofa, wrapped her legs around his waist, and took her to the master bedroom. His bedroom. It was big, clean, and somewhat tidy, save for some boxes Tony had forgotten to move away. They had to pay the penalty by kicking and tripping over them during their heated session.

“Stay with me,” Tony blurted out from nowhere.

Ivory tried to catch her breath. “What?”

“It’s a popular song. I can’t remember who the artists were, but I love it. I listen to it after a hectic day at work. And,” Ivory found his rambling cute, “I want to make this special for you, but I need your permission first.”

“To do what?” She wrapped her arms around his neck and chuckled.

“Play a song. It doesn’t have to be that one.”

She shrugged. Song or no song, she was sure of one thing. She wanted him. “I don’t mind, Tony.”

He pulled out his phone from his pocket and fumbled with it before tossing it on the bed. He wrapped his strong arms around her waist and buried his face in the crook of her neck.

Ivory pulled back and looked into his eyes. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Hush now,” he said and kissed her cheek. “A few seconds more.”

The brightly lit bedroom vibrated with the slow thump of drums in the background as if on cue.

I’ll lead you.

Ivory took a step back with widened eyes. “This is my song.”

He smiled and took her hands in his. “I know. I think it’s better than Stay With Me.”

Tony slowly ran his finger up and down her arm, and Ivory couldn't tell if he felt the heat that crept on her skin. The intense look in his eyes threw all humor out of the window and clouded the air with burning desire.

I'll take your hand.

He pulled her close and captured her lips with his. They moved in perfect harmony and with fierceness against each other.

She moaned in his mouth, and he broke away only for air. Then, she backed him against the bed and tugged on his shirt.

He swiped his tongue over her lips and delved deeper as his fingers sought the zip of her top from behind.

I'll comfort you.

“Are you ready?” He muttered against her lips, and Ivory wore a proud smile. Her almond-shaped eyes shone with confidence.

“Fuck yeah! Make me scream, cowboy!” She said with a peck on his lips, and Tony laughed.

I’ll make you smile.

He pulled down her zip and gently peeled off the top. He wasted no time unhooking the clasp of her bra and let it fall to the floor with a soft thud. His eyes clouded over as he stared at her.

She saw the ardor and desire as he ran his hands lightly over her erect nipples. She didn’t flinch or feel the need to move from him. Not when he kneaded the soft mound of her breast and kissed the bottom of her neck as he worshipped her.

You are,

You are,

The love of my life.

“You’re fucking beautiful, Ivory,” he growled against her skin, teasing and pulling on her nipple. She felt his erection press firmly against her stomach.

She pulled back and stroked the bulge through his sweatpants. Tony looked tortured. He kissed her roughly, and she tugged on the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head.

Their breaths were short and raspy. She ran her hands over his muscled arms and teased the smooth hair running from his defined six-pack, which disappeared beneath his sweatpants.

She held his gaze and pushed down the cotton sweatpants and briefs simultaneously. Tony groaned as

his crotch sprung free.

She gasped at how big his cock was and stood up. She made to undo the button of her jeans. He took over and pushed them down her hips. She was left in her lace panties.

He hooked his fingers in the elastic band and pulled down as he squatted. Cool air brushed the smooth brown skin of her naked legs, and she shuddered.

Tony had other things in mind. He gripped her hips and trailed kisses from her thighs to her waist and finally to the V-shaped mound between her legs.

“Ah,” Ivory gasped and threw her head back when he swiped his tongue over her pink nub.

Do you believe me?

Do you believe me when I say?

He rose to his feet, gripping her thighs and lifting her from the ground, and sat on the edge of the bed so that she cradled him.

He grabbed her soft buttocks, and she slid her fingers through his hair. They gazed into each other's eyes, and, at that moment, Ivory knew there was no place she would rather be.

He grazed her jaw lightly with his teeth and trailed passionate kisses down her throat. Finally, he dipped his head and flicked her hard nipples with his tongue. Pleasure rippled through her, and she felt a warm sensation between her legs. She rose higher, and his warm mouth latched onto her breast.

I'll be your comfort

Ivory moaned, and he sucked harder. He spanked her butt cheek lightly and slid a finger toward her wet pussy.

In the dark of night

And in the day?

His hands parted the lips of her wet cunt, and he stroked and rubbed her clitoris until she squealed to release the built-up pressure. Tony seemed calm and collected in the outside world, but in the bedroom, he unleashed a side of him that knew exactly how to get what he wanted.

She squirmed and gasped, and he positioned her glistening opening at the head of his hardened cock.

“Are you ready to scream?”

She nodded and pressed her lips against his. His tongue slid into her mouth, and he lowered her gently onto his erection. Ivory felt her insides stretch to accommodate his size, and she released a gasp.

Tony wasn't done yet. He held her down and raised his hips.

"Fuck!" she moaned, feeling his cock drive deeper inside her. Her nails dug into his skin, and he kissed her shoulder.

When she thought he would pull out slowly, Tony delivered quick and hard thrusts, one after the other. Heat formed between them as he thrust deeper and harder, groaning and cussing at the same time.

He flipped them over and moved deeper into the bed. He locked her legs around his waist and pinned her hands above her head.

His hips slammed against her buttocks, and she raised her hips as he thrust faster. The animal desire in his gray eyes only heightened the pleasure inside her.

Her breasts moved following their rhythm, and his calloused hands covered them. He teased her nipple and kneaded her breast, driving deeper into her with no remorse.

Her hips tightened around him, and dots formed in her eyes.

“I’m coming, Tony.”

A lazy smile formed on his lips, and he leaned forward. He placed a light kiss on her lips and spanked her buttocks.

“I like the way you say my name, Ivy.”

Ivory heard the nickname but couldn’t focus on coherently responding when his fingers rubbed against her clitoris roughly.

Her thighs clenched, and her body vibrated as she released a scream of pleasure. She exhaled, and a smile of satisfaction formed on her lips.

Her eyes opened to see Tony smiling above her as well. She frowned.

“You didn’t finish,” she said, and he shrugged. She didn’t want to admit it, but Tony Allen was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. Every outline of his body was perfect, including the faint scars on his thighs and waist. They must have been minor injuries he sustained from horse riding or sports.

He rolled over her and lay on his back with his hands behind his head. His chest rose and fell slowly, and her fingers itched to caress his hair. “I wanted to make you scream. I like it slower. You seem to like it hard and fast, Ivy.”

She sat upright and threw her legs over him so that she straddled him. Her fingers pinched his tiny pink nipples lightly, and he grabbed her buttocks and squeezed.

“What’s up with Ivy, huh?”

He shifted slightly and leaned his back on the headboard so they saw eye to eye. He pushed her buttocks closer to his cock, and she felt him twitch underneath her.

He kissed her forehead and her shoulder. “It suits you. But I’ll take it back if you don’t like it.”

She kissed his hair and his eyes. “I think I do.”

Tony chuckled and leaned against her shoulder. She raked her fingers through his damp hair and patted his back. “Do you think you can go one more round?”

She laughed and moved closer to him. She had more than enough energy to go again. “I’m game, Al.”

Ivory couldn't understand the sudden burst of happiness that flooded her chest when

Tony cradled her head and covered her lips with his, why she took delight in how he gasped and shuddered beneath her or when their breaths mingled as she rode him slowly. She took the reins with pleasure, gripping the headboard behind him and kissing him until she stole his breath away.

Ivory slept on his chest after they showered together, smiling as she remembered when his hot spunk splashed against her thighs. He had kissed her with intense passion and called her His Ivy.

The morning breeze felt chilly on her skin as she stood on the Welcome mat on the front porch. A memory of last night with Tony resurfaced, and she felt the heat rise on her neck.

“Get a hold of yourself, Ivory.” She shut her eyes and sucked in a sharp breath.

“It was one night only. The meal was delicious, the wine tasted great, the setting was perfect... and he just had to give me a nickname,” she mumbled under her breath and groaned.

“It suits you. But I’ll take it back if you don’t like it.”

“What was I thinking?” She groaned and bound her hair in a low bun.

She retouched her lip gloss and gently pushed the door open. She stepped in quietly and went to the winding staircase when a loud and clear voice halted her steps.

“Hold it right there, lady.” It was Bill. His arms were folded, and his wife, her sister, mimicked his stance. Imani leaned against the doorframe by the kitchen while Bill stood closer to the sofas. He looked pissed. But

again, Ivory was used to his frequent scowls or taunting comments.

“What?’ she snapped and equally matched their look of displeasure with hers. “What is it this time?”

“No communication, Ivory. Not a call or text. You think you have the right to just breeze in and out of here whenever you want, like fucking air?”

She huffed in disbelief and marched forward. “Oh, I’m sorry, Dad, I didn’t know I had to tell you everything. So what, do you want to know where I’ve been too?

Or better yet, an update on where I am and who I’m with every second? Are you fucking nuts, Bill, or have you forgotten that I’m a fucking adult? The last thing I need right now is a babysitter.”

“And the first thing you need is a sense of purpose,” Imani said as she pushed herself off the doorframe and walked closer to her husband. “You can’t continue like

this, Ivory. Can't you see? You are wasting time. You are letting your life pass by before your eyes. You have to sit down and plan your next steps."

Ivory scoffed. "What is this? Some wacky plan to talk some sense into me and inspire me to become the next president?"

"This is exactly the problem I have with you, Ivory." Bill seethed. "We're trying to get you to see the bigger picture. We want you to see the world from a different perspective. You don't want to listen to facts. You'd rather hide away behind your unrealistic dreams and waste time that could be spent doing something productive."

Ivory gritted her teeth and clenched her fists. "Oh, wise ones. I deeply apologize. But I don't remember asking either of you to get me a new pair of glasses. I can see the world just fine, Bill, and it is so much bigger than your small town.

I don't need your help, or yours, Imani. I don't need either of you getting in my face and talking shit. So stay

out of my business.”

“Not when it’s costing you your life.” Her sister’s dark eyes held a blazing fire Ivory had not seen in years.

“I’m not fucking dying, Imani!” She shot back.

“Well, you could! You need to start taking these things seriously, Ivory. You have to plan. Plan your future. You still have a chance at this. There’s so much this small town could offer you if you...”

“I cannot believe someone as smart as you would be so dumb, Imani.”

“Hay, watch it!” Bill hissed. “Don’t you dare insult my wife.”

Ivory’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Buzz off, mosquito. She’s my fucking sister, and I can say whatever I want. Oh, it hurts, doesn’t it? I say one word to your wife, and it gets

you all riled up. You stand spewing rubbish about me, and you don't expect it to hurt?"

"Don't you see what's happening, Ivory?" Bill rudely interrupted. "You are wasting away, dammit! What kind of people would we be if we don't point that out?"

"Considerate people! Normal people, Bill! People that mind their damn business." Ivory yelled. She felt tears brim at the corner of her eyes, but she fought the urge to cry with ferocious anger.

"What do you fucking want from me? To be like you? Or you, Imani? What, you want me to murder my dreams because they appear to be unrealistic? Well, news flash: I fucking hate this life of mediocrity and small-town bullshit! I detest it with every fiber of my being. And I hate that you both think you're better than me because I live here."

Her voice broke, and she saw the resolve in her sister's eyes leave. Imani took a step forward. "Ivory..."

“Stay the hell away, Imani. I’m sick of this. I’m sick of being the minor around here. So, you know what? I’ll leave you two alone. That’s what you both want, isn’t it?”

Imani’s tough front vanished. “How can you say that, Ivory? I don’t want you to leave. I only want...”

“It doesn’t matter what you want, Imani. You and your husband over there seem to enjoy making my life miserable. I can’t do it anymore. You can’t accept me. You both want a version of Ivory MacMillan that you’ll never get. So, I’ll spare you the trouble and get out of your hair.”

Imani’s lips quivered, and she reached out for her sister. Ivory backed away and turned toward the winding staircase. A tear rolled down her cheeks, and she wiped it away roughly.

“Ivory... wait!” Imani called out behind her, and she spun around.

“Fuck off, Imani! And don’t you dare cry. Don’t you dare act like the victim here. You’re no fucking saint.”

Her sister’s face was drenched in salty tears. She sniffled and coughed with red eyes. “What do you mean, Ivory? I only want the best for you.”

“You only want what’s best for me.” Ivory snarled.

“Fucking liar! You are the reason I’m here in the first place, Imani. You stole everything from me. You stole it all! Now look at you pretending like I caused this when you did!”

Imani crumbled to the floor, and Bill ran to gather her into his arms. Her shoulders trembled as she sobbed. But Ivory ignored the heart-wrenching sight and marched upstairs, heading for her room.

She shut the door with a loud bang and leaned against the cool doorframe. Her shoulders trembled as she muffled a sob. She marched to her closet and yanked clothes off the plastic hangers.

She had not thought things through and never thought she would have to leave her sister's house. She didn't have friends in town either, but she knew she couldn't stay a second longer under Bill and Imani's roof.

Tears dropped on an orange baggy crewneck sweater she packed into a suitcase. She sniffled and wiped them away. She tossed her toiletries into the purple suitcase and zipped the bag. She felt her jeans pocket for her phone and pulled it out.

One name crossed her mind, and she bit down on her lower lip. She knew it would be embarrassing to arrive with a suitcase, but she needed a place to stay—desperate times called for desperate measures.

“You told me what you two have is complicated.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled vaguely, dusting the saddles with a dry cloth. The stables had not been cleaned in a few

days and smelled like dust and dung.

He had started to scrub the floors with solid brushes and shovel the horses' excrement. Sweat dripped down his bare torso as he hung the saddle on a wooden rung. He patted Adelaide's mane and walked out of her aisle. He took a shovel that leaned against the wall and stuck it into a heap of hay.

"Last night didn't sound complicated to me." His sister, Trisha, stood with one hand on her hip and a leg stretched out. She had a cocky grin plastered on her face and an inquisitive arch of her brow.

"Leave me alone, Trisha. You're trying to get me to talk. I've told you all you need to know. Are we clear?" He said and lifted a heavy sack. He began to refill empty buckets with enough carrots and apples for all.

He heard his sister snicker behind him. "You like her, don't you?"

He ignored her and pushed a bucket each into the horses' aisles. Trisha followed him closely.

“Silence might constitute acceptance in this matter, Tony. Come on, spill already.”

He snorted. “I see Marcus is rubbing off on you. He’s been drilling you with a little bit of the law, right?”

“This is not about me, dear brother. This is about you and your new lady.”

He jutted his jaw and shoved the last bucket into Arnold’s aisle. If only he had the privilege of calling her that. With a pat on the stallion’s mane, he turned around.

“She’s not mine, Trisha.” He huffed and raked his fingers through his hair. “Look, what happened last night was a...”

“Mistake?” His sister blew a raspberry. “I doubt it.”

He groaned. "It's complicated."

"Do you want to know what I think, brother?"

"No."

"Doesn't matter. I'll tell you anyways. I think you like her."

He wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead and strolled past her with a lazy smile. "I don't know what you are talking about, dear sister."

"Oh, really now?" She followed closely behind him.

"Complicated sounded pretty loud to me."

"No one asked you to listen," he stopped by a hose and turned the tap on.

“You guys left me no choice,” she shrugged and lifted the hose to spray the water on his body. He twisted and turned around while she picked off dried leaves. “She was loud, and you couldn’t stop groaning. It was something like this: Oh, my sweet Ivy. Give me some more, my Ivy. Oh, Ah! –“

He splashed cold water on Trisha, and she almost toppled over with laughter. She squealed and backed away, and he chased her from the backyard to the front porch.

It felt like they were kids all over again. The breeze sliced through his face as he caught up with her and wrapped her in a tight embrace.

“Ew,” she wheezed between fits of laughter. “Get your filthy body off me.”

He laughed and ruffled her hair. “You asked for it.”

“Tony?”

A strange but familiar voice called, and Trisha pulled away. His eyes followed the direction of where the voice came from, and his feet moved with a mind of their own at the sight of his distraught fake girlfriend. Her eyes were puffy, and her lips were in a thin line.

He didn't bother to find out what was wrong. He took her hand in his and helped her with her suitcase. “Come on,” He pushed open the door and led her inside. “I'll take care of you, Ivy. I promise.”

Chapter 7

The kitchen had a lot going on; the sharp hissing of scrambled eggs tossed in the pan, shuffling of feet back and forth from the electric gas cooktop to the island, cutlery being meticulously arranged beside black ceramic plates and the high-pitched whistling of the kettle on the cooktop.

Tony lowered the heat and tilted the kettle to pour hot water into his powder blue mug. The stainless-steel teaspoon clinked against the cup as he leaned against the cabinet and stirred the freshly-ground black coffee.

He lifted the mug to his lips and blew away the steam. His eyes were trained on the dark-skinned darling with the wild and voluminous thick afro that walked around his kitchen in a black crop top and cargo pants with a silver fork in her hand.

A smile crossed his lips as she hummed melodiously while whisking another half a dozen eggs into a plastic bowl. Her back was to him, and he enjoyed leaning back

to watch her work her magic. Every sway of her hips, flick of her hair, and hum from her lips welcomed shivers down his spine.

Thunder roared, and purple streaks of lightning ripped through the sky outside, but the soundproof windows and doors muffled the sound.

He stirred the coffee again and placed the spoon gently in the sink. "You still haven't told me what happened."

A sharp hiss erupted from the pan as she poured eggs into it, and muffled sounds of thunder roared above them. She did not turn to face him, but he heard her.

"That's because I don't want to," she said, stirring the eggs in the pan. "We have a lot of other interesting things we could discuss."

"Okay," he said and slowly sipped the steaming black coffee. "But don't you think I deserve to know, at least?"

You have been here for two weeks, and I haven't brought it up. Not even once."

She raised her shoulders and let them slump. "And we have had a lot of fun. Besides, I know you love having me here."

"I am not disputing that. I do love having you here. It feels right. But..."

She chuckled. "I don't like buts."

He placed the mug on the marble surface of the counter framing the sink and crossed his arms. "I'm only concerned."

"And curious," she said and lowered the heat, turned off the electric gas cooktop, and lifted the pan from it.

Tony smiled. "And curious."

He patiently waited as she served the eggs on the two plates and walked to the sink beside him to drop in the pan. She inhaled slowly and released an exasperated sigh. Her hands sought the foamy sponge, and she began scrubbing the pan lightly.

“I had a fallout with Bill and Imani,’ she said with her side to him.

His nose twitched. She smelled like jasmine—one of his favorite fragrances. He gave it to her a few days ago, fearing she wouldn’t like it. Instead, she gave him a light kiss on the cheek with twinkling eyes and thanked him.

“How regularly does that happen?” He asked.

A lock of her hair fell forward, and he could tell it made her uncomfortable. His lips turned upwards. She had not wrapped her hair in a bun since arriving at his house. He knew it was because he told her he preferred it when she wore it down.

Ivory was stubborn, though, so she was never going to admit it. He uncrossed his arms and stood behind her. While she talked, he weaved her hair into a single loose French braid.

“Not regular with Imani. But Bill always has it out for me. It’s always something with him. I am always at fault, and whatever I do does not satisfy him. Not like I care or anything,” she said with a shrug. “This time, I couldn’t take it. They staged an intervention.”

“Ouch! Two against one. That must not have gone down well.”

“Not at all,” Ivory affirmed. “There was no way I was going down without a fight. I defended myself.”

He barked out a short laugh. “I bet you did, Ivory MacMillan.”

She laughed and dried her hands with a checkered dishtowel. She turned to face him, and he had to fight the urge to dip his head and kiss her. They stood so close that he could see the flecks in her eyes.

Tony focused on the matter in hand and disregarded the torture of desiring to bury himself in her on the countertop. Or the kitchen island. Whichever seemed more comfortable. He still didn't know why only a single thought or touch of Ivory was enough to get his full attention.

Ivory had a distant look in her eyes, and she almost seemed sad. She was an energetic woman who appeared to have everything. In the past, when she was famous for singing at Vanity, he had thought she was invincible. Ivory MacMillan was beautiful, fiery, and untouchable. She was the woman every man wanted. He still wanted.

But the Ivory in front of him, tempting him with her jasmine scent, full lips, and alluring beauty, looked vulnerable.

“I don’t get why they cannot just leave me alone,” she said, nibbling on her lower lips. “Why breathe down my neck, huh? What good is that going to do? And Imani just had to push it. I didn’t mean to hurt her, but I couldn’t take the pressure anymore.”

They made me feel worthless. And I don’t like that feeling, Tony. It’s like falling from the top of a mountain and crashing in a ditch below with nothing to break your fall.”

He didn’t like seeing her this way, with tears glistening at the corner of her eyes. “Or maybe it’s like falling from a horse and landing on a sticky mud puddle.”

She punched his shoulder with a laugh, and he smiled. Seeing the light in her eyes return made him feel like he had won a trophy.

“I can’t say I know or understand what you’ve been through, Ivy. But I know everything that has happened will only make you stronger.”

She smirked. "You're going with the motivation again."

"Uh-huh," he grinned and cupped her cheeks with his hands. His heart soared as she leaned closer and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"You are going to get through this, Ivy. I promise. It will not last. About Bill and Imani, I think they are only looking out for you. They can't possibly want to hurt you. Knowing them, they only have your best interests at heart."

"Imani, yes. Bill, uh, not so much. Bill's just a big A-hole," she said with a severe expression, and he laughed.

"True, sometimes. He can be," Bill concurred.

She leaned her head against his chest, and he stroked her hair. They stayed in that position for a few minutes, feeling the faint thump of their hearts beat against their ribcage and listening to the pitter-patter of rain against

the windows and the rooftop. Tony had never felt so happy.

“I am happy, you know?” He broke the silence.

She raised her head, and her brown eyes bore into his. “About what?” She arched her brows.

“If you didn’t have a fallout with Bill and Imani, you wouldn’t be here.”

She rolled her eyes and playfully shoved his chest. He backed up, and she walked towards the fridge. “I should have known. You have always wanted my downfall,” she said.

He raked his fingers through his hair and strode slowly to stand behind her. She pulled open the fridge door and retrieved a glass of milk. It was still unfinished from the previous night. She threw her head back, emptied the glass, and shut the door. A naughty thought crossed his mind.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pressed himself against her. “Not exactly. But any downfall that leads you to my doorstep is positive.”

She giggled uncontrollably as he kissed her neck and gripped her hips firmly to keep her in place. “There’s no such thing as a positive downfall, Tony.”

He spun her round to face him and trapped her against the fridge. There was a trail of milk on her upper lip, and he licked it off with a flick of his tongue. Tony was pleased with the look of surprise and want in Ivory’s eyes. “I think there is such a thing. You are responsible for holding that glass until I’m done with you.”

He knew she could feel the heat grow rapidly between them like wildfire. His hands went under her top, and she shuddered. The warmth of her skin against his hand was inviting. He moved it higher, and she stuttered. “Your sister could walk in at any time.”

He smirked. His hands cupped her bra, and he squeezed gently. A gasp escaped her lips. “Trisha’s been gone for two weeks. She is planning her wedding. And even if she decides to come here today, she won’t come now. It is raining. Try again.”

Tony kissed her jaw and teased her erect nipple through the thin fabric of her bra. He could feel himself grow in his briefs. His free hand grabbed her buttocks, and he lightly grazed the nape of her neck with his teeth. Desire rushed through his veins, and he thought of ways to satisfy it.

“The food’s getting cold.” Her breath faltered, and he smiled.

“You taste more delicious than those eggs right now.” She shut her eyes, and he kissed her passionately.

She moaned, and he knew wouldn’t be able to last as long this time.

His tongue delved deeper, and she fought back, kissing him with equal passion. He cradled her face and ran his tongue over her upper lip. He teased her and slid his hand downwards to the gap between her thighs. His fingers began work on the clasp of her bra when a loud ringtone erupted from the back pocket of his sweatpants.

It distracted him, but feeling the warmth of Ivory's naked skin against his seemed more important than whomever the caller was.

He ignored it and tugged on Ivory's pants. She bunched up his shirt and placed her warm hands on his stomach. He knew she loved roaming her hands on his chest. She played with the elastic band of his sweatpants and brushed her hand against his growing cock. She smiled as he pulled her top over her head.

"Remember, you can't drop the glass," he muttered, and she nodded. Her top dropped to the floor with a soft thud, and he kissed her exposed cleavage and sucked her beautiful dark-brown skin. Ivory nibbled on her lower lip, and he kissed her.

His hands started again to work on the bra clasp when the call came in again.

He groaned and pulled away while fishing out his phone from his pocket. With a brief kiss and an apologetic smile, he answered the call without sparing the ID so much as a glance.

“Tony Allen speaking,” he said hurriedly. He needed to get back to unfinished business before Ivory lost interest. From the corner of his eye, he watched her pick up her top from the floor and walk to the kitchen island to sit.

She scooped a spoonful of scrambled eggs and shoved them into her mouth. She was probably upset, he thought. But then she smiled at him.

“I know it’s you, Tony.”

“Dr. Lee?” A frown marred his features. It was his horse’s veterinarian on the line.

“Tony, the results just came in.” The heaviness laced in Dr. Lee’s tone was unmistakable. “I’m afraid it’s not good news about Arnold’s condition.”

But I’m afraid of what Dr Lee will tell me. I do not think I will be able to handle it. He has served me for years now. I cannot bear the thought of losing him.

Tony felt his eyes water. He turned away from Ivory and looked through the window at the stables. The grey clouds were much darker, and the downpour was heavier. “Tell me, doctor. What do the results say?”

A lump formed in his throat, and his heart pounded faster. He gripped himself tightly to shield himself from the incoming bad news. But it did not stop the slow ripping of his heart to shreds.

“The Equine Infectious Anemia virus, as you already know, barely has a cure. We tried, Tony. We tried, even when we knew the inevitable was going to happen. I am

truly sorry, Tony, but there is nothing more that we can do. Arnold is dying.”

The call disconnected, and Tony stared at the stables with trembling shoulders. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he moved closer to the back door.

“Tony?” He heard Ivory call from behind him, but it sounded far away.

He pulled open the door, and a gust of wind and rain ruffled his hair and seeped into his shirt.

‘Tony!’ Ivory shrieked. But he was not listening.

He ran in the rain, feeling the goose pimples rise on his skin due to the cold, and the water beat against his hair and drench his clothes. Blades of grass and dirt stuck to his shoes and splattered on his sweatpants, but he did not care. He couldn’t tell what blurred his vision. The rain or his tears.

He also didn't care that Ivory ran behind him with an umbrella. Only one thing mattered now. He had to say goodbye.

One minute she was sure she would shudder and drop the glass as a result of his hands kneading her breast and teasing her nipples and the next, he turned away from her like the sight of her appalled him. She had never wanted a man as much as she wanted Tony.

Ivory did not understand why a grown man would drop everything and run around in a heavy torrent, except if there was trouble. Judging by the look on Tony's face, it appeared there was.

She found the nearest umbrella and rain boots and ran after him to the stables. She tried to conjure different scenarios of the reason behind Tony's distress, but none made any sense.

His legs were longer, and he was faster. She arrived at the stables to see him enter the isolated aisle. After she arrived at his house, he talked to her about his favorite horse. A black stallion named Arnold. He took her to the stables once to see it. It was a beauty. Now it was sick, and Tony was upset about it.

“Tony?” She called out in a whisper.

He was kneeling by the frail horse, sniffing and wiping his eyes repeatedly.

“Tony, what’s wrong?”

He wiped his eyes and stroked Arnold’s mane like he had stroked her hair only minutes ago.

He did not look at her when he whimpered. “He’s dying.”

Ivory's brows scrunched up. Was that why he ran into the rain like a crazy person?

"People die, plants die, and animals die, Tony. It hurts at first, but after a while, life moves on."

"Things don't work like that," he said in a clipped tone, and she saw his jaw clench. Her words must have gotten to him. But his stubbornness only irked her. Why was he making such a fuss over a horse?

"Look, you're going to catch a cold. It would be best and would make sense to go inside now and warm up. You can always come out later."

He scoffed. "You can leave if you want to. I never asked you to come in the first place."

Ivory bit down on her tongue. "Is that so? Fine then," she spat. "I brought you an umbrella. When you're done, please be smart enough to use it this time around when you're coming inside."

She heard him sigh. "Ivory?"

"What?" She snapped.

"Things aren't that simple, Ivory. Arnold is not just an animal."

She thought he looks that way to me but did not say it out loud. Tony wouldn't appreciate her lack of empathy.

"He's a companion and a friend. He has been for years now." Tony's voice broke, and he wiped his eyes again. She couldn't remember the last time she had seen a man this upset. "I didn't have the privilege of growing up like some folks around here, you know?"

Without a father and loving mother, Trisha and I had it tough. I think I had it tougher. I tried to shield her from it because I grew up fast. I can still remember the days I

cried into my pillow or wished endlessly that my mother would come back.”

He sniffled again, and Ivory felt his pain.

“She never came, Ivory. Ever. You don’t know what it means to grow up without a mother. There were more sad, lonely days than happy ones. I did whatever I could to reach out to her and get her to come back. But she never did.”

His eyes were red and puffy, and his teeth chattered. She could tell he was shivering. The cold from the rain must have gotten to his bones. Ivory longed to comfort him in a warm hug and wipe his tears away. The feeling was alien to her but strangely welcoming.

“Arnold was always there,” he continued. “Arnold stayed through it all and helped me conquer my loneliness. How can I act normally knowing he will be gone soon, Ivory? My friend is dying, and I can do nothing about it.”

Tony's shoulders slumped, and he let out the flood of tears he had been struggling to lock in. Ivory hurried into the aisle and fell to the floor, bundling Tony in a hug. He wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face in her neck.

She stroked his wet hair and felt a lump rise in her throat. "It is going to be okay, Tony. I promise you, it will."

He shook his head. "No, it won't."

Ivory kissed his forehead and hugged him even tighter. She had no more words to comfort him. It broke her heart to see him this way.

Five days later, they stood by a mound of dirt at the far end of the field with white roses under gloomy skies. She wore a simple black gown, and Tony wore a black hoodie with black sweatpants. Ivory couldn't bear to look at him. The last five days had been torturous. He barely said a word to her or ate a meal.

He barely answered work calls or showered either. His room was his place of solitude, and she reluctantly gave him the space he needed and moved into one of the other bedrooms in the house.

“Be good wherever you are, old pal,” he said, tossing his rose onto the mound.

She followed his lead, and they stood together in silence. Until he surprised her by snaking an arm around her waist, she turned to face him. The pain in his gray eyes was still visible.

He kissed her forehead and let it linger for a second before he pulled away to look at her. He smelled like soap and coffee. He hadn't eaten breakfast again. “Thank you for being here. And I'm sorry for these past few days.”

She mustered a small smile and searched his eyes. He was close, but not quite. The Tony she knew and recognized was still locked up in the version of the person standing before her.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” she said, and he dipped his head. His lips caught hers, and he kissed her hard, fast, and half-heartedly. It was nothing at all like the kisses they shared previously.

“Thank you,” he breathed and pulled back.

As Ivory watched Tony kick a small stone and walk away, something seemingly like a veil lifted from her eyes. She saw the world around her differently.

It was no longer terrible to be in the midst of people who somehow knew something of everyone, and the thought of spending one’s life surrounded by stables, barns, or a stretch of trees and grass under the open sky didn’t appear to be so scary anymore.

She oddly felt at home.

Chapter 8

Ivory felt the sting of loneliness prick her senses until she emptied it on the blank page of the leather-bound notebook on her lap. Her pen moved swiftly, and the fresh ink formed words in her cursive handwriting. She tried but failed to comprehend the reason for her sudden need to write. Her sudden need to write for Al.

You took my hand

Cursed me with promises.

Led me

And left me.

She stared at the words on the paper and scoffed. She ripped the page out in the blink of an eye and crumpled

the paper, wondering when and how she had turned into such a sap.

The faint ache of her beating heart reminded her that the words on the paper were not lies but were a true reflection of how she felt. Ivory shook her head and let the pieces fall at her feet.

She stared again at the blank pages, tapping the tip of her ballpoint pen against the distressed black jeans she had on and remembering that the relationship she shared with Tony was nothing but a temporary arrangement to salvage what little was left of her image.

“I heard all about your amazing voice, but I never knew it was that amazing.”

Ivory swiftly spun around with wide eyes. “Trisha?” She said with a voice that sounded like she had run a marathon.

“You seem surprised to see me here,” the brunette with twinkling eyes raised an inquisitive brow, and Ivory smiled. She pushed the pen and notebook aside and rose from the sofa to help Trisha.

Tony’s sister had three grocery bags bunched up under one arm and two plastic bags tightly gripped in the other. She made it look easy, but Ivory knew better. She reached for the three grocery bags, and they walked side-by-side past the dining area and headed to the kitchen.

“I didn’t hear the doorbell ring or the lock turn,” Ivory said as they approached the kitchen. She placed the bags on the kitchen island top and tied her hair in a low bun. By the excited look on Trisha’s face, they would spend a while in the kitchen.

Trisha packed up her long hair and wrapped it in a messy bun atop her head. She began emptying the bags and sorting through the items. Her hands pulled out a bag of frozen chicken, and she shrugged. “I have my keys,” she said.

Ivory felt silly for not figuring out the obvious. “That makes sense.”

Trisha continued. “My brother didn’t mention that I would be coming?”

Ivory followed her lead and began separating the vegetables from the meat. She selected a few vegetables and arranged them in a plastic bowl. She walked over to the sink to wash them. “That might have happened if we crossed paths today.”

“You haven’t seen Tony?”

“Nope,” Ivory replied nonchalantly. She turned on the faucet, and water cascaded out. Her fingers scrubbed lightly on the vegetables to avoid breaking through their skin. “I haven’t seen him for two days now.”

“That’s crazy,” Trisha mumbled, and Ivory turned. She turned off the tap and lifted the bowl.

“Tell me about it,” she chuckled. Trisha had already started on the chicken. “He loved that horse; that much is obvious. I have never understood such passion for animals until the day at the stables when I saw how devastated he was about Arnold.

It got worse on the day of the funeral. He entered the house, walked to his room, and slammed the door. That is how we ended up here.”

“That’s crazy,” Trisha said again with a shake of her head, and Ivory laughed. The brunette wasted no time in marinating the chicken. She sprinkled a bundle of ingredients Ivory didn’t recognize and covered the ceramic bowl with foil.

“Well, that’s why I’m here,” Trisha said brightly. “I plan to cheer him up with a big meal. I get that he loved Arnold a lot. I guess he must have told you the story behind that undying love.”

Ivory rubbed her arms and mustered a smile. “He did.”

“It doesn’t change anything. He can’t stay cooped up in his room like some hopeless chicken forever. He has to come out eventually. No, scratch that. He will come out. Arnold died. Yeah, I know, it’s sad. There’s good news still: Hello, someone is getting married!”

Ivory threw her head backward and let out a hearty laugh. She didn’t know how it happened, but she knew Tony’s sister was slowly growing on her. She enjoyed the company she provided and admired her youthful energy and free-spiritedness.

“Fixed a date yet?” Ivory asked, and Trisha nodded.

“We have. But we thought having a pre-wedding party would be a good idea first.” Trisha chuckled lightly.

“Marcus appears to be all suit, tie, and straight to business, but there is a fun side of him only I get to see. You must find that with my brother, too, right?”

Ivory found her mind wandering to discover if there was a side of Tony he was comfortable sharing with only her.

The answer came back negative, and she shut down the feeling of hurt at the realization.

“Yeah,” she hurried to change the topic. “Have you found a venue yet? You know, for the pre-wedding party.”

Trisha snorted and waved her hand in the air. “That, dear Ivory, is the least of my worries. I thought about using the field here on my brother’s ranch. There are two problems, though. One, you must have noticed that Tony loves his privacy. I really wouldn’t want to intrude. Two, Arnold was recently buried there.”

Ivory nodded slowly, Trisha was right. “So, what’s the plan? Where else do you have in mind?”

“Al’s Ranch.”

“Oh,” Ivory crossed her arms and leaned against the countertop. “That’s a perfect idea.”

“I know, right?” The young woman peeled off the foil covering the chicken and tossed the crumpled piece into the garbage. She strode quickly to the cabinet. She pulled out a pot, and Ivory scrunched up her face.

“What exactly are you doing?”

Trisha snickered. “I’m about to make a sauce.”

“Okay. Aren’t you going to cook the chicken first?”

“Not yet. I’ll steam it and then fry it,” Trisha said with a shake of her head. “Tony loves my special chicken sauce. He loves it with brown rice too. I promise, once you taste it, it will blow your mind.”

Ivory tilted her head. “If you say so.”

Trisha sprang into action – chopping and slicing vegetables, sprinkling powdery ingredients, and setting out another pot she intended to cook the rice with. It was

fun for Ivory watching her work. She helped by passing items, utensils, or anything else Trisha needed.

The special gravy was done in less than half an hour, and Trisha began to cook the rice. Ivory strolled over to the fridge and opened it. Cold air whooshed past her face as she crouched slightly to retrieve an apple. She shut the fridge and bit down on the apple. The memory of the heated moment she had shared with Tony resurfaced.

“I’d love it if you could sing at my wedding.”

Ivory choked. A chunk of the sweet and juicy apple she had bitten into went down the wrong way. She heaved, coughed, and sputtered until it dislodged.

“Shit! Are you all right?” Trisha ran to her, soothing her with gentle pats on her back. She smelled like cilantro, ginger, and onions. “What happened?”

Ivory's eyes were red and teary from the choking, and her voice was hoarse when she said. "Did you just ask me to sing at your wedding?"

Trisha gasped. "Is that why you almost died?"

A smile crossed Ivory's lips. "There's no need to exaggerate. I was surprised, that's all. I mean, why me?"

"Why not you?" Trisha said as she backed up, giving her room to breathe. "Your voice is amazing. Back there, you sounded like you knew what you were doing. Ivory, you have the talent and experience, nobody could do it better."

Ivory sighed. She felt a nagging feeling in her chest unrelated to Tony. If anything, it had more to do with the life she had in the past – when she had to sing.

She rubbed her arms nervously and looked away from Trisha's curious gaze. "You might be wrong."

“How so?”

She had only recognized it after the night Tony played her song in his bedroom. She loved singing and had always wanted to make a career from it. She couldn't put her finger on it.

“I don't know. It all feels different now. For some weird and unfathomable reason,” Ivory huffed. “You must have heard, there was once a time in my life when I sang for Vanity.”

The young woman's head bobbed up and down slowly. “I heard. That was Ivory MacMillan center stage.”

“I guess. Back then, it was everything I ever wanted. I wanted to be on that stage, performing under the spotlight and singing my lungs out. It was all I lived for. I loved the attention and everything else that came with it. Over time, the magic around it faded. It got tiring... boring, even. And I lost touch.”

Trisha looked like an enlightened therapist listening to her patient. eager to give advice. "Purpose."

A frown touched Ivory's lips. She remembered the fight between her twin sister and her husband, Bill.

"What?"

Trisha shrugged and took brisk steps to check the pot on the electric gas cooktop.

"All you need to do is find your purpose, Ivory. Once you do that, everything else will fall into place."

Tony groaned into his pillow. The buzzing was incessant. He threw off the soft comforter and snatched his phone

from the bedside table.

“What?” he snapped. “Why won’t you stop bugging me?”

“Come out from there before I come up and break that door down,” Trisha matched his annoyance with her irritation.

He gripped the edge of the sheets tightly and gritted his teeth. “What if I don’t want to?”

She sighed. “I made your favorite.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You knew I was going to be here.”

“I never said I would come out.”

“Tony Allen, you better bring your behind down here! And don’t you dare think, even for a second, that I won’t break that door down if I come up there,” she snapped back and disconnected the call.

Tony groaned and slammed his phone on the bed. He massaged his temple and raked his fingers through his hair. Thankfully, and luckily, he had awakened early enough to have a cold shower.

He dragged his feet out of the room reluctantly and descended the stairs. The first human he saw was a belle with dark-brown skin and almond-shaped eyes.

Her hair was packed neatly behind her head, and she looked simple in a white woolen sweater that looked big enough to fit two people paired with distressed black jeans. She looked more beautiful than ever.

Unfortunately, the first human that saw him was his sister.

“See now, walking down the stairs. That wasn’t so hard, or was it? Why do you look like an idiot?” she commented, shoving a spoonful of rice into her mouth.

He rolled his eyes and joined them at the table. “Idiots don’t have a certain look.”

“I beg to differ,” she scoffed. “Who wears a pea coat on sweatpants?”

Tony recognized that Ivory kept silent. “A person in a state of mourning or extreme grief,” he said. The dish’s aroma on the table in front of him tickled his nostrils, and he picked up a fork.

“How long will you be mourning for?”

He shrugged and shoved his fork into a massive piece of chicken sitting in the gravy. He lifted it to his mouth.

“About a week, maybe more. It depends on the weather.”

A short laugh filled the silence on the table, and he glanced at the source. She averted his gaze and focused instead on the vegetables on her plate.

“You sound like you’re stoned.” Trisha folded her arms across her chest and leaned back in her seat. Her plate was empty, and she was full. “Are you?”

A coy smile played on his lips, and he lifted a fork full of rice to his mouth. “Maybe. Maybe not. Delicious meal, by the way. No one could have done it better.”

Trisha waved a hand in the air. “You better not come to my party looking like... whatever this is. I want your hair and that stubble of yours trimmed. Do you hear me?”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“I think I am.”

He raised his fork. “Not.”

“Who made you come down here?”

“Me.”

Trisha slapped her palm on her forehead. “You’re unbearable.”

He chuckled and chewed with a groan of satisfaction. The meal was delicious. He couldn’t remember the last time he had eaten a decent meal. Throughout the past week, he had turned down Ivory’s offer to join her at the table.

He shot her a glance. His instincts were right. Ivory must have had the same train of thought running through her mind and did not look happy.

His sister chugged half a glass of water and rose from her seat. "Arnold is happy now, and my pre-wedding party is in five days, brother. You need to bring back the Tony I know in forty-eight hours."

"Why forty-eight hours?" He inquired, watching her clear away the empty dishes.

"You have to do some shopping for me," she said, disappearing into the kitchen.

Silence settled again between himself and his guest at the table, and he chewed uncomfortably. His heart rate quickened when he heard her clear her throat. The feet of her chair shuffled against the rug, and he felt her move and then picked up the strong scent of her honey fragrance.

“It’s good to know that you are fine now.”

She sat close to him, and he wondered why. He dropped the silver fork and folded his arms on the table’s edge. He leaned forward.

“What makes you think I am?”

She raised her shoulders and fiddled with the hem of her sweater. Ivory appeared seemingly serious. It was not her natural image, and it surprised him.

“You finally came out of your room, and you seem happier, and you are eating well.”

The corner of his mouth tilted upwards. It warmed his heart to know that she genuinely cared, even if she wouldn’t admit it.

“In case you didn’t notice, most of that supposed humor was sarcasm.”

“Maybe,” she said and twirled her little finger on the rim of a wine glass. “Eating has nothing to do with sarcasm.”

“Why do you care so much?”

The question surprised her, and he could tell it rattled any answer she could have possibly thought through. Her eyes snapped up to meet his, and he spotted the sparks in her brown eyes.

“Is that so bad? That I care?”

“It’s not that...”

She wasn’t done. “At least someone cares around here. I’ve been alone here, wondering how you’ve been feeling, but you didn’t bother breaking a sweat.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And that’s supposed to do what, magically fix everything?”

He let out an exasperated sigh and rubbed his eyes. “I lost a friend, okay? I haven’t lost a close friend or pet in a long time. You can’t hold it against me if I shut myself in to grieve.”

Ivory breathed out and closed her eyes. She patted the sides of her hair and covered his hands with hers. Her hands were warm, and the look in her eyes was smoldering.

Tony noticed that there was something different about her. She appeared sober, more thoughtful, quiet even. Her vigor and fiery countenance stayed the same, but she exuded a different vibe altogether.

“I’m sorry,” she said. He shook his head, covering her hands with his. He looked down at their hands and

locked their fingers.

He looked up at her with a smile and caressed her wrist.
“Weirdly, this is not the worst I’ve ever felt.”

She was curious. “What do you mean?”

He vividly recalled the memory and how deep her rejection stung. “You might not remember, but I do. It happened six years ago after one of your many incredible performances.”

Her eyes widened. “You’ve watched me sing?”

“Not once or twice. Or six times.”

Her jaw dropped. “You are kidding, right?”

“Wrong,” he grinned. “I’m not ashamed to admit that you were once the obsession of my teenage years and young adulthood. I loved hearing and watching you sing.”

“Then, on one of your big nights, I summoned the courage to walk up to the woman of my dreams to tell her how much I admired her.”

“I don’t remember,” she stuttered. “Did you? I mean, I should remember if we met in the past.”

He laughed. “I’m not surprised that you didn’t, based on the circumstances surrounding how we met and what happened afterward.”

Her brows creased. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“Oh, trust me. It wasn’t. The humiliation was terrible. I caught you at completely the wrong time. It turned out that I wasn’t your only admirer.” He tapped her wrist and drew invisible circles on the back of her hand.

“I still remember how beautiful you looked that night. You were dressed in a sleeveless gown. It stopped mid-thigh and was woven with silver sequins.

It showed off your curves and long smooth legs. Your hair was down that day, below your shoulders, sitting like a crown on your head. Your eyes twinkled under the lights, and I saved the picture. In my memory, of course.”

“That doesn’t sound humiliating.”

“I’m getting to the best part.” He began reliving one of the worst moments of his life. “With a bright smile, I walked up to you as you came down the stairs. I knew the words by heart. Be mine. I had rehearsed those words over a thousand times and was sure you’d give in. I had never been so sure of anything in my life.”

“I knew I wanted you. Just you and no one else. I squared my shoulders and blocked your path, still smiling like the idiot I was.”

He saw a frown takeover on Ivory's face. She seemed to be remembering quickly. He parted his lips, and so did she.

"We didn't order anything today," they said in unison, and Ivory flinched.

She withdrew her hands from his and covered her face. "How could I have said that? I didn't even know you."

"You remember now," he mustered a smile. "I did tell you I wasn't the pizza guy and went on to tell you who I was and why I was there. I told you the words I had rehearsed over a thousand times with a proud smile.

I told you how high my heart soared when I heard you sing or saw you from a distance. Your words crushed every sliver of hope I had."

Ivory groaned, and her eyes watered.

“I don’t know what kids are on these days. But whatever it is, it’s working. What did you say your name is? Rooney? Yeah, great. Look, kid. I promise to forget that this ever happened. You’re not thinking straight, so I’ll let it slide. You should be on your way home now. Come on, run along now.”

“I was twenty. I’d never felt so small and insignificant. You kept your word, Ivory. You forgot, but I never did. I couldn’t sleep for two weeks or eat after that night. I drank black coffee until I passed out. I was diagnosed with PTSD. Silly, right? PTSD as a result of heartbreak.”

“No,” her lips quivered, and he was amazed when she reached forward to cup his cheeks. “It’s not silly. That was mean, Tony. I should have never said that.”

“But you did,” he said, beaming as she leaned closer. “I didn’t say anything to make you feel bad, Ivory. It’s all in the past now.”

She looked into his eyes and placed a kiss on his forehead. Her lips were soft against his skin. When she pulled away, her cheeks were stained with tears.

“It might be, but it doesn’t change the fact that I was wrong. I am so sorry, Tony. You didn’t deserve that. You shouldn’t have had to go through such a tough time.”

He shrugged. “Well, it happened. We’re here now. What are you going to do about it?”

She smiled and leaned closer. “I’ll make up for it.”

The air around them charged, and his eyes flickered to her lips. “How?” he asked. And it earned him a light flick of her tongue on his upper lip.

It was a familiar tease, and he knew what it meant.

“Like this,” she said, her lips crashing down on his.

Chapter 9

Ivory nuzzled her head against his chest as he carried her bridal style and played with her fingers around his neck, breathing in his scent. He smelled like a rare but soothing mixture of hay, coffee, and apples.

They arrived at a white door that led to a guest room in the house, and he maneuvered his way inside with a light but firm shove at the door with his waist. It turned out that it was unlocked. He passed the threshold with her in his arms and set her down on her feet.

Ivory looked up at him, boring into the dark gray cloud in his eyes. He placed a hand on the door behind her and shut it. His hands remained on the frame, and the muscles contracting in his neck were even more apparent.

She could feel the heat brewing and the electricity crackling in the air around them. Her heart hammered against her ribcage as she tightened her hold around his neck and gently lowered his head to her height. His jaw

became taut, and he leaned forward with a tilt of his head and unbound her hair.

She was suffocated by the overwhelming desire to taste every inch of the man standing in front of her. The warmth of his skin against her hands, the feel of his muscles beneath her fingers, and the intoxicating air he breathed against her lips sent her senses into a frenzy.

Her insides melted at the contact of his soft lips against her neck, and her eyes fluttered closed. She relished in the sensation and moaned. He kissed her cheeks and forehead, then pulled away. There was a lack of personal space, but neither seemed to mind.

“Ivy,” he mumbled. “I don’t think I have it in me to control myself around you.”

Her nickname rolled off his tongue like a purr. Her breath was raspy and short. “I don’t want you to.”

He licked his lips, eyeing hers dangerously, and she saw the movement in his jaw. "I'm not sure if you have noticed, but I am not gentlemanly about these things."

The need to taste the faint tinge of wine on his tongue fanned her impatience, and she stood on her tiptoes to lean in closer. "I don't want you to be."

"You are only saying that because you're horny."

"Well, aren't you?"

Why was he wasting time? She tried to shut him up with a brief kiss, but he moved away. She frowned and took a step forward, closing the distance between them. He peeled off the horrible pea coat he had on and threw it on the queen-sized bed behind them. He slid his fingers through his hair and put a hand on his hip.

"I am, Ivy. I am horny and super crazy about you. If only you knew the things I want to do to you." She saw the spark in his eyes and the intensity of his gaze. "You

deserve to be treated like the Queen that you are. Like the Queen you have always been.”

She nibbled on her lower lip, placing her hand on his shirt and running her fingers through the thick outlines of his hard abs. It must have been sorcery. She was losing her mind and burning with a raging passion for the man in front of her, and he had still not laid a finger on her.

“Tony, I want this,” she snuck her hand beneath his shirt and teased the soft hairs splayed on his abdomen. “I don’t care about being treated like a queen. That’s not as important as having, feeling, or tasting you.”

His eyes were hooded with matching desire, and he leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

His hands went down her back and rested on her thighs. He lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. A sigh left her as his tongue delved into her mouth.

He nibbled on her lips, and she matched his ferocity. His hands slipped under her sweater and sought the clasp of her strapless bra. Swiftly he undid it, and it fell to the ground with ease.

“Ah,” Ivory gasped when his firm hand covered one of her breasts.

“I love the way you taste,” his warm breath fanned her as he licked her neck.

He pinned her against the wall and fumbled with the button on her jeans. She pulled off her sweater and leaned forward to cover his lips with hers.

Ivory felt the flex of his muscles beneath her palm, and one glimpse at the unadulterated lust in his eyes made her feel like she was losing her mind. She grabbed a handful of his shirt and pulled it until it fell over his head.

Her erect nipples brushed against his chest, and he groaned. His free hand held a fistful of her hair and

gently pulled it backward.

He closed his warm mouth on one of her breasts and flicked her nipple with his tongue. Ivory felt herself moisten between her legs, and she didn't know how much longer she could wait to have him inside her.

He sucked hard and flicked her nipple with his tongue until she breathed his name.

The stretch and hard poke of his erect cock against her thighs was all she needed to know he heard her.

"How do we take these off?" she muttered between kisses, pulling at his leather belt and lowering his zip.

He smiled against her lips and lifted her off the floor. Their tongues battled, and their warm breath mingled until he gently laid her on the soft mattress.

Tony backed away slightly to help ease her jeans off her waist. His eyes watched her every movement, and he kissed her thighs, causing tingles to run up her spine.

“Have I told you how beautiful you are, Ivy?”

He kissed and caressed her, and her breath caught. The jeans lay at her feet, and he rose from the crouched position to push down his.

She sat upright and reached forward to take over. With light kisses on his abdomen, she pushed down his jeans and kissed up and down the length of his throbbing cock.

Tony shuddered, and she rose from the bed.

“Sit,” she said, and he did. He sat on the edge of the bed, and she pulled down the black cotton briefs that sat snugly on his hips. His cock sprung free, and she kissed his glistening tip.

The conflict of need and impatience flashed on his face. She stood up and lowered herself to sit on his lap so that she straddled him. Tony gripped her naked thighs and positioned himself ready to enter. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she held on to his broad shoulders, silently granting him permission.

He lightly kissed her collarbone and thrust into her. Her nails dug into his skin as he stretched and filled her pussy. She matched his thrust with quick hip movements and felt the passion build up inside her.

Her nails dug deeper, and she threw her head backward, releasing soft moans. Tony held her closer and buried his face into her neck. Her fingers slid into his hair, and his muscles tensed. They reached their climax and expelled a sigh of satisfaction in harmonious synchronization.

Tony kissed her neck and wrapped his arms around her tightly. His slow breathing showed he was completely out of it. She smiled at him and stroked his back gently.

Ivory could tell that there was a strange shift in her relationship with Tony. There was a nagging prod and fluttering of her heart as she held him closely, but she ignored it. She had hurt him in the past and only wanted to comfort him to apologize for her mistake.

That was all—no other reason.

Or so she thought.

With matching shades and gray graphic Nashville tee shirts, they stepped out of Tony's jeep and fell in line beside each other. Tony held her hand and locked their fingers, and she smiled up at him. He swung his arm around her shoulders, pulled her closer, and kissed her forehead. Ivory felt her heart skip a beat.

"You could have asked her not to pay," Ivory said and flicked a speck of dust off her denim shorts. She looked up at him as the sunlight was briefly blocked by the

massive Al's Home sign on the top of the bakery building.

Tony shrugged and pushed open the door, and immediately the aroma of hot, fresh bread, brownies, scones, muffins, and cakes hit her nose. They had coffee as well. It didn't surprise Ivory. With a devoted coffee drinker like Tony, it would have been odd not to serve coffee at his bakery.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Al," a young man with sandy-blond hair from across the polished counter greeted. Tony waved at him with a smile.

"Ah, it's good to see you again, Tom," Tony grinned and walked over to the counter. He leaned an elbow against the finely-polished butcher-block countertop and turned his head to face her.

His gray eyes twinkled with mischief when he said, "I didn't ask her to pay. She made a good offer, and I accepted."

Ivory raised her eyebrows. “She’s your sister.”

“All the more reason why we should support each other’s businesses.”

Ivory gawked at him. “What more support do you need, Tony?” she blurted. “If anything, you should be the one supporting Texas. The entire state needs your support.”

His deep chuckle bounced around the bakery, and he stunned her by stepping forward to place a light kiss on her nose. He held her gaze with warmth and affection that caused a flutter in her chest.

“If it makes you feel better, I didn’t take any money from Trisha. She made a good offer, and I accepted. I didn’t take any money though.”

Despite being overwhelmed by their proximity, Ivory was curious. “What was it then?”

He smiled. It was cool but cheeky. Ivory rolled her eyes. He looked like a college boy who had all the girls in class ready to fall at his feet. She didn't mind.

It was charming to see him in his business element – working but casual at the same time.

“Adelaide,” he said.

“What can I get you and your lady, Mr. Al?” Tom, whom Ivory assumed was the barista, piped up.

“Nothing at all, Tom. Thanks, but we can't stay. My sister's party starts in an hour. We'll get the cake and be on our way.”

“Noted, Mr. Al. Give us a few minutes to wrap it up,” the barista said with a smile, but Ivory's mind was elsewhere.

Your lady.

She glanced at their locked fingers and looked up at him, though he had his attention fixed on Tom.

Being held like Tony held her felt nice. She secretly admitted to enjoying the flutter in her chest when he teased her with light kisses on her cheeks or how heat spread to her toes when he buried his face in the crook of her neck.

She loved holding him, stroking his hair, bickering with him, and teasing him. Her world with Tony in it was different – it was not hers alone but theirs.

They had spent the past five days together, cuddling on everything that appeared comfortable and writing songs when Tony was hungry. Ivory insisted that she wouldn't cook, so they would find themselves eating jumbo-sized beef burgers at odd hours after midnight.

They also busied themselves looking through documents for Tony's business meetings, visiting places Ivory

considered boring, running most of Trisha's pre-wedding party errands.

Without thinking, she covered their locked fingers with her free hand and caressed the soft hairs on the back of Tony's firm hands. It got his attention, and her heart leaped at his broad smile.

"I take my eyes off you for two seconds, and you're already craving attention," he chuckled.

He was right. She loved it when he looked at her, talked to her, laughed with her, and laid his head on her shoulder to sleep like he had repeatedly over the past few days.

Ivory gulped. Trisha was not the only one growing on her.

She took her hand off his and mustered a smile of her own. "What about Adelaide?"

“Trisha will let the trade happen between Adelaide and Titan if I give her Blaze.”

“Not bad,” Ivory nodded.

“I know, right?”

“The cake is ready, sir!” Tom appeared with a six-layer white buttercream cake with gold frosting and crystal-like butterfly wings embellishments.

It was beautiful.

Tony thanked Tom, fixed the cake in a box, and carried it out of the bakery. They walked hand in hand to Tony’s jeep. Tony gently put the cake in the back seat, and they got into the car.

The drive from Al's Home to Al's Ranch was exactly fifty-five minutes. The party was already in full swing when they strolled into the lit backyard. Empty cups and half-eaten chicken wings on plastic plates were strewn across the yard. It was a mess, but the gyrating bodies on the grass didn't seem to mind.

Tony placed the cake on the display stand, away from the guests, and moved toward a red cooler filled with ice cubes and cans of beer. Tony wasn't a drinker. He fished through the cans and pulled out a bottle of grape juice, and got one for Ivory.

"The man of the hour has finally arrived!" A crisp baritone yelled from afar, and Tony grinned from ear to ear the minute he recognized the voice.

On the other hand, Ivory was not as pleased as he was. They walked up to Austin, whose arm was draped around his wife, Susie, and Tony shared bro hugs with Austin. Susie shot Ivory a dirty glare and rolled her eyes.

"Fancy seeing you two together," Austin said with a frown and looked her way. She looked away and focused

on other guests dancing in the distance.

Tony nodded curtly with a small smile. “Yeah, that’s life. The unexpected could happen at any time.”

Austin arched a brow and looked from his wife to Ivory. Anyone could tell he had plenty more to say but swallowed it with a shrug. “You could say that. I mean, look at Duke and Cassie.”

Tony opened his bottle, and it let out a short hiss. He took a sip and put the cap back on.

“Are they back together?” He asked Austin, but it was Susie who barked out a sarcastic laugh.

“Back together?” She crossed her arms and leaned into her husband’s side. They were the perfect match for each other. Ivory had them on her list as one of the reasons she didn’t fancy the idea of marriage.

“Those two turned from being the most loving couple in the world to despising each other. Cassie got high and threatened to kill Peyton for stealing her man,” Susie scoffed.

“What?” Ivory unintentionally blurted.

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it. Duke got a restraining order issued,” Austin completed with a swig of his beer.

Tony shook his head. “That’s nasty, man.”

“Dude! Duke was ready to throw her ass in jail. He had two lawyers on the phone the night she broke into his house with a baseball bat and waved it at his girlfriend. This shit went down about a week ago, man. Duke’s thinking of moving after his wedding, and Cassie has disappeared without a trace. Where have you been?”

Tony shared a look with Ivory. They knew the answer to that but feigned ignorance.

“It is quite strange that you have no idea what happened, Ivory. Bill and Imani are up to speed with everything.”
Susie sneered.

Ivory gritted her teeth. “I’m neither Bill nor Imani. And I don’t believe in sticking my nose in other people’s business.”

“That much is obvious,” Susie said with a roll of her eyes, and Ivory bit down on her tongue to keep her calm.

Tony must have noticed as he held her hand and squeezed it gently. “Uh, guys, we have to catch up with Trisha now. She doesn’t know that we are here. Well, the cake is more important to her now than we are. I have to let her know all is well. Somewhere around here, she is probably going bonkers.”

Austin chuckled, and Tony waved them goodbye. Ivory snuggled to his side, and he wrapped an arm around her.

“What’s their problem with me anyway?” She mumbled.
“Especially Susie. She’s always, always in my face.
We’ve never been friends, so I don’t know her problem. I wonder what Imani sees in her.”

Tony chuckled lightly. “Those two are not exactly the nicest people in town, and you know that. According to their standards, they are not the nicest to anyone who isn’t okay. I have had to face the wrath of snide comments and sarcastic remarks in the past.”

She snorted. “You’re only saying that to cheer me up.”

“No, my Ivy. If I wanted to do something to cheer you up, I would have shown you that,” he pointed at two people dancing together on a raised platform at the center of the yard.

The man was tall, slightly muscular, and had rich brown skin. His hair was cut low, his brows had the perfect arc, and his lips were curled upwards, revealing an excellent set of straight teeth.

He was clean-shaven, which suited him, and had the most transparent hazel eyes Ivory had ever seen. He was a worthy contender for Tony in the department of being the most beautiful man on Earth.

“That’s Marcus,” Tony said. “My future brother-in-law.”

Ivory quickly figured that out as Trisha was the lady twirling and laughing in his arms with twinkling grey eyes and a happy smile. She looked stunning in a short sleeveless floral gown and wedge heels, with her long hair let down.

Trisha and Marcus looked perfect for each other, unlike Austin and Susie, who only gave off negative vibes.

The cool breeze ruffled Trisha’s hair as she spun, and her eyes landed on them. With quick steps and Marcus’s hand gripped tightly in hers, they walked down the platform and headed straight for them.

“You made it!” Trisha did not hide her excitement as she threw her arms around her brother’s neck. She hugged him briefly and pulled back. “I see you cleaned up real nice. I am proud of you.”

“You shouldn’t be. I didn’t do it for you,” Tony responded with an air of certainty, and Trisha wiggled her brows.

“Point taken. Thanks for the cake.”

“Not a problem. Hey, man,” Tony greeted the tall, dark, and handsome young man with a friendly pat on the back.

“Ivory, I am so happy to see you here,” Trisha beamed at her fiancé. “Babe, this is Ivory MacMillan. My brother’s Ivy.”

Ivory felt herself blush as she extended a hand. Marcus shook it firmly with a bright smile. Almost business-like.

Her nose twitched. He had a similar scent to Tony. It was like brown sugar.

“Boy, am I glad to have finally met you. Trisha has told me a lot about you,” Marcus said with a cheeky grin, and Ivory stuttered.

Trisha’s fiancé exuded great confidence and an intimidating aura. She was rendered speechless for a few seconds. Tony laughed, and so did Trisha.

“I have heard many things about you too,” she said, finally.

“Good things, I hope?”

“Of course,” Ivory smiled. Her poise had returned. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Great! Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have a dance routine to finish,” Trisha hugged her, dropped a light peck on her

brother's cheek, and whisked her beaming fiancé away.

They climbed onto the platform again and threw their hands in the air in time with the beat.

As Ivory watched them dance their heart out, laughing comfortably in each other's arms, she felt a tug on her chest. She looked up at Tony's handsome face and, for the first time in twenty-eight years, the idea of getting married did not seem so bad.

Chapter 10

Ivory lay on the soft sheets of the mattress, tossing and turning with one major problem plaguing her mind.

Tony.

To think that a week after Trisha's pre-wedding party, she had expected the silly feelings to evaporate into thin air. But no, her thumping heart and the fluttering sensations in her stomach proved her wrong.

How could getting married suddenly be a good idea?

Had she been hit by a train, or did she hit her head while asleep? Whatever the reason, it had to be banished. She was not that woman. The woman who waited on her Prince Charming or dreamt of what color her wedding gown would be.

She didn't squeal about wine tastings or honeymoon locations. She wasn't interested in picking the best necklace or most gorgeous stilettos. Standing in a line and waiting to catch a bouquet sounded absurd, never mind throwing one.

She had more important dreams – about the city, her career, living big, and having trophies of her numerous achievements lined neatly in a glass case that would hang in her personalized room of fame.

That was Ivory MacMillan.

Whoever this current person was, gripping the sheets, muffling screams into the fluffy pillow, and counting the hours until her lover returned from a business meeting, it was not her.

It just couldn't be.

But denying it did not change her current position. She lay on the bed, gripping the sheets, humming a sad tune,

and counted the hours until she saw his captivating gray eyes again.

Tony had grown on her more than she cared to admit. More than she could accommodate. She did not have the space for mushy feelings. She did not appreciate the fluttering butterflies in her tummy whenever his hands touched her skin or how warmth spread throughout her body whenever she made him smile.

Ivory MacMillan was not that woman. Even if there were the slightest opportunity that she could be, she would not allow it.

She threw off the sheets and summoned the strength to get out of bed. Her heart pounded against her chest as she marched to the walk-in closet. Tears formed in her eyes as she ripped her clothes off the hangers and took them back to the room. She dumped the clothes on the bed and wiped her eyes.

Memories of the countless nights she had cuddled on his chest, stroked his back as he lay on her, or melted in his arms as they shared passionate kisses on that bed came

rushing back. Her eyes closed of their own accord, and she took a deep breath. She was not going to cry over something as irrelevant as moving out.

She marched to the room's far corner to retrieve her purple suitcase. It was funny how intending to spend a few days with him turned into weeks—the best weeks of her life.

She began folding her clothes and arranging them in the suitcase when the door flew open. His cologne enveloped the room, and Ivory could swear she felt her heart drop to her stomach. It was easier to think like this when he wasn't around.

Having him cover the distance between them, spin her around, wrap his arms around her, and cover her lips with his made it difficult to breathe or think.

He kissed her solidly and knocked her off her feet —as if his life depended on it. He cradled her head with his strong hands, and she inhaled sharply. Her mind wandered.

He could be mine.

He nibbled at her lips and delved his tongue deeper. His breath was warm, and he tasted like lemonade. She moaned.

I could be his.

His hands slid down her back, and he pulled her closer to him, kissing her with burning desire and need. Then, he stopped abruptly. Startled, Ivory opened her eyes. Her heart dropped, and she took a step back.

She knew what he saw; the heap of clothes on the bed and the opened suitcase beside them. Reality came crashing down, and the ecstasy she had reveled in only a few minutes ago became a distant memory.

But he isn't mine.

And I am not his.

“What’s this?” Tony inquired, looking from the bed to her face. The spark in his eyes dulled, and she only noticed the stress on his face. His hair looked like it hadn’t been brushed all day, and the tie on his shirt sat askew.

She ached to pull him into a warm embrace and possibly prepare his favorite meal as Trisha had shown her. She balled her fists, she was not that woman.

“I can’t keep staying here,” her voice sounded like it belonged to someone else –strained and distant. The flash in his eyes showed he knew what she meant, but Tony seemed ready to feign ignorance.

“What, you want to move to a bigger house?” he attempted a laugh, but it sounded choked. “All you had to do was say so. You don’t need to go to all this trouble.”

Ivory stood her ground, determined. “No, Tony. You know what I mean.”

“Ivory, I don’t. Can you please explain?”

“I can’t keep staying here under this roof. With you. This,” she pointed at him and then at her. “isn’t right.”

The mask of ignorance dropped from Tony’s face. The hurt in his eyes was visible. “What do you mean by it isn’t right? So it’s wrong now? Everything we’ve done, who we’ve been, these past few weeks is wrong?”

“You know what I mean, Tony.”

“No, Ivory. I don’t. I honestly don’t understand anything that’s happening right now.” He scoffed and ran his hands over his face. “I can’t believe this. I can’t believe I spent the last nine hours – through tight schedules and boring business meetings – thinking about you, wanting

and longing to be with you, and here you are packing your suitcase.”

She felt worse knowing he had been counting down the hours too. Nothing would change her mind. “Tony, please listen to me: this has to be done. I have to leave. I can’t keep staying here. I cannot keep up this charade.”

His brows creased. “Charade?”

“Yes, Tony. Can’t you see? My life is out there. My future is brighter than small town events, stables, polo...”

“Again with this?” He massaged his temple. “But why now, Ivory? Why now? Everything was going just fine.”

“Fine?” She scoffed. “How can everything be fine, Tony? Whatever it is we’ve had has been based on nothing but lies.”

“Lies that you started.”

She placed her hand on her hip and leaned backward with a raised brow. “That’s real neat, Tony. You consented to it. That doesn’t sound like something a fucking saint would do!”

“I’m not trying to be a saint, Ivory. Look, whatever the problem is, I promise, we can fix it. Just...,” he took a deep breath, looking pained, “don’t go.”

Her head dropped. He was desperate enough to grasp any straw. She knew she was hurting him, but focusing on the future was more important. “We can’t fix something that isn’t broken, Tony. We can’t fix something that never existed.”

“Never existed, Ivory?” He flared. She had never seen him as upset as he was. Saying he was furious was an understatement. “Did you say it never existed? What, you think I stuck by your side for months just for show?”

“Wasn’t that the deal?” The tears formed in her eyes again, and she gritted her teeth. The glare of revulsion

and hate in his eyes stung deep. Her resolve was failing by the minute. “We agreed to make this one time only.”

“Months spent together... you being there for me and me being there for you... having you, loving you, Ivory. I fucking went past one time only, but none of that matters to you.”

“Tony... don’t make this harder than it already is.”

His eyes were red with fury and pain. “You know what, Ivory? Fuck you! I don’t deserve this; the hurt, the pain... I don’t deserve any of this. What do you take me for, huh? You stand there, talking about how you wanted this to happen just one time.

We have come this far, not because I enjoyed playing with you or pretending like you wanted me to. I’ve held on, stupidly hoping you’d realize I’ve done nothing but love you.”

Time stopped, and Ivory's heart stopped beating. Her tears dried up instantly, and she stuttered.

“What?”

Tony also had tears in his eyes, but his jaws were clenched tightly to keep them at bay. He turned away from her and stood by the door.

“You heard me,” he clenched his jaw.

“Tony,” her lips quivered, and a tear dropped onto her cheeks. “Tony, you can't say things like that.”

“But it's the fucking truth, Ivory! I love you. I have always loved you. But you're too stubborn, selfish, spoiled, and vain to see it.”

Her hand flew to her chest, and she clutched it tightly.

“Tony, just calm down. “

“I am calm, Ivory,” he said. “I’ve never been calmer. I feel like my head is in the fucking clouds right now. Leave if you want. Do whatever the hell you want. I don’t care anymore.”

Ivory watched him turn his back to her and shut the door with a loud bang as he stormed out. His words resounded in her head, and she angrily wiped away tears from her cheek.

I love you.

I have always loved you.

Why did he say that? Why drop a massive bombshell like that and walk out?

She hurriedly packed up her clothes and zipped up her suitcase. Things had not gone the way she expected. Tony’s confession was highly unexpected. She grabbed

her bag, tucked her phone in her pocket, and gripped her suitcase tightly.

She put it down as an emotional outburst and left the room.

His fists connected with the thick material that hung from a structured floor-to-ceiling frame in the dark room. He clenched his fists tightly, pulled his arm backward, and landed another blow on the black punching bag.

Hard rock music, which he hated, blared in his ears through the white Air pods he had plugged in. His chest rose and fell quickly, and sweat poured from his hair to his bare torso.

I can't keep staying here. This is not right.

His heart struck his ribcage, and he landed another blow. The bag dangled, but he wasn't done. Rage filled him and flowed through his veins—a punch on the left side, another on the right, and one straight down the middle.

This has to be done. I have to leave. I can't keep staying here. I cannot keep up this charade. Can't you see? My life is out there. My future is brighter than small-town events, stables...

Was that all he was to her? A small-town dream? A man that wasn't worth her time? He grunted and landed blow after blow on the bag.

Whatever it is we've had has been based on nothing but lies. We can't fix something that isn't broken, Tony. We can't fix something that never existed.”

Her voice echoed in his mind, and an image of her smile flashed before his eyes. Memories of their times together flowed, and moisture fell on his cheek. It was sweat. It had to be. There was no way he was going to cry over Ivory MacMillan.

He remembered it all – from the first day he saw her on his doorstep. The nights he held her tightly, not wanting to let go; the days they planned his next business plans together; the times he succumbed to following her lead and intruding on strangers at various hangouts; the days she pampered him like a child and held him until he fell asleep.

How could all of that have never existed? Did he make up those memories? Had she been truly unhappy?

The hard rock music stopped playing, and he knew it was interrupted by an incoming call from Trisha.

After he watched Ivory leave, he shut his doors, marched into the small gym room in his house, peeled off his shirt, and put his phone on Do Not Disturb. He needed to blow off some steam but added his sister to the list of people who could interrupt.

He tapped on the air pods and leaned forward to strike a blow.

“What do you mean Ivory isn’t coming for the wedding?” Trisha shrieked. After Ivory zoomed off in a cab with her purple suitcase in the heat of the moment, he hurriedly texted his sister to tell her to cancel Ivory from the guest list.

He landed a double jab at the bag and straightened up to catch his breath. “I mean, Ivory isn’t coming for the wedding.”

“It’s in two weeks, Al.”

“I know.”

He heard Trisha sigh and imagined her massaging her temple. “She was meant to sing.”

He delivered a triple blow on the bag and withdrew with a grunt. “Find somebody else.”

“What’s your problem?” she snapped, and he rolled his eyes.

“Ivory is in a better position to answer that question.”

The line was quiet for a while, and he took a deep breath, ready to land another blow. Then she spoke up.

“Are you boxing?”

He closed his eyes and struck a powerful blow on the bag. It rattled on the frame, and he thought it would fall off. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

He could hear the panic in his sister's voice. "Al, what's wrong? You haven't been in that room for years now."

"Trisha, nothing is wrong. I need to blow off some steam, that's all."

"What pissed you off?"

"Why so many questions?"

"Answer me, Tony. What happened?"

He peeled off his boxing gloves and let them fall on the floor. He walked out of the gym purposefully and headed for the kitchen.

"Tony?"

He passed the dining area and glanced briefly at the gift bag on the table next to a box of chocolate muffins. On his way back from work, he quickly stopped at a clothing store to buy her new clothes. He also got perfume and picked up a box of muffins from his bakery. He never got the chance to give them to her.

He peeled his eyes away and stepped into the kitchen.
“What?”

“I asked you a question,” Trisha said, and he grunted.

“I heard you,” he opened the refrigerator and pulled out a water bottle. “Ivory left.”

Trisha’s voice was almost a whisper when she said,
“What? When and how did that happen?”

He threw his head backward and chugged the entire contents of the bottle. “About three hours ago.”

“Why didn’t you stop her?”

“Stop her?” Tony felt the rage he had spent the past three hours trying to quell rise up again. The hurt he had suppressed with hard rock music and hours in a dark, stuffy room reared its ugly head and stung ten times deeper.

“Trisha, I told her I loved her. I pleaded with her to stay. What more could I have done? Held her suitcase and rolled on the floor with tears in my eyes? Ivory wanted to leave. She has always wanted to, but I was too stupid to see it. I held her against her will. I forced her to be here.”

“I don’t think so.”

“That’s because you weren’t here, Trisha. You didn’t see the look in her eyes when she told me how bright her future was meant to be without me in it.”

Trisha gasped. “She said that?”

“Well, not directly.” He shook his head, “Let Ivory stay right where she is, Trisha, in the past. That has been where she always belonged. I should have known to let go when I had the chance.”

“You couldn’t because you love her.”

“Where has that left me?. With nothing but a huge hole in my heart,” he chuckled mirthlessly. “What good is love when it couldn’t get me the girl? She’s gone. Off to fulfill her dreams of greatness.”

Trisha said. “I don’t know, Al, all of this sounds strange to me. Ivory... she looked like she felt something for you. I believed she loved you.”

He scoffed and closed the refrigerator.

“Ivory borrowed me for a few seconds to play the role of her boyfriend in front of her parents. Then, she dumped me and was off on her way. Ivory needed to convince Bill and Imani that our relationship was real, so she begged me to play along.

Ivory came here to cool off for a couple of days after a fight with her sister because she had nobody else to manipulate. I don't know about you, but that sounds like a selfish person to me. Someone who loves nothing and no one else except herself.”

Trisha was quiet for a while before she cleared her throat. He left the kitchen and headed up the stairs to his room.

“The first time was out of desperation. The second time, she had a choice. Although trying to save face in front of Bill and Imani might have been reckless, she had a choice to blow her cover, wave her middle finger in the air and move on.

She didn't. The third time was a sign, Al. She didn't come to you because she thought you were easily

manipulated. You were the only one she could turn to at that time. She needed you.”

“I’ll tell you what she needed: a place to stay, that’s what.”

Trisha laughed softly. “I have to go now, dear brother. This time, I’ll sit this one out and leave you to figure things out on your own. I know you’ll see things clearly soon. I’m sad that she won’t be there at my wedding, and I hope you understand when I say you are not allowed to bring a stranger as a plus one.”

That caused his lips to curl upwards. It was all he could do. “Thanks for calling, Trisha.”

“I love you, Tony,” she said and hung up.

He threw his phone on the bed and snatched a towel before entering the bathroom. He undid his pants, let them fall to his feet, and stepped out of them. His fingers

sought the faucet, and cold water rushed up and out of the steel showerhead and hit his skin.

He pressed down on the pool of water flowing from his hair and down his face. The intensity of salty sweat and cold water slowly fading until he was sure he had rinsed off every trace of sweat.

He swiftly washed off with extra soap and let his body settle under the rush of cold water. His sister's words rang out in his mind.

I don't know, Al. All of this sounds strange to me. Ivory... she looked like she felt something for you. I believed she loved you.

Tony let out an exasperated sigh. Apart from his sister, Ivory was the only woman who meant a lot to him. He was sure he could do almost anything for her. It was like she had him under a spell.

A spell of love.

Why Ivory MacMillan?

Why did his heart choose her?

He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. He walked over to the mirror and wiped off the steam.

His gray eyes stared back at him. Someone else might not have noticed, but he did—his eyes' faint redness and puffiness. Ivory MacMillan had caused him pain. And joy. The latter didn't matter to her as much as it mattered to him.

The third time was a sign, Al. She didn't come to you because she thought you were easily manipulated. You were the only one she could turn to at that time. She needed you.

He clenched his fist. Ivory needed no one. Well, she had made it clear that she didn't need him. A laugh escaped

his lips, and he felt bitterness slowly burn his chest.

“I’m such an idiot,” he said.

He wasn’t angry with Ivory anymore, only himself. Six years ago was the only sign he needed to move on with his life and find somebody else. Recovering from the terrible time she had put him through, he should have let go of his obsession with her and focused on starting afresh. He didn’t.

Six years later, he saw her again and believed things would turn out differently because the tables had turned. He didn’t have to wait after one of her many performances to speak to her. She made it happen all on her own.

He remembered the day like it was yesterday.

Uh, hi. I’m Ivory. Can I borrow you for a few seconds? It’s urgent.

He should have said no. He should have pretended not to know who she was and ignored her. He didn't and now stood in front of a mirror, hating himself for falling in love with Ivory MacMillan all over again.

Chapter 11

“How long are we going to keep doing this?”

Ivory snorted and turned over on the bed to have her back facing her sister. “For as long as necessary.”

She heard Imani let out a short laugh behind her, and the bed sunk slightly under her weight as she sat down.

“Two months isn’t long enough?”

Ivory groaned. She threw the sheets off and sat up. She tucked her hair behind her ears and leaned against the headboard. Her hair had grown considerably longer, thicker, and fuller. She had neglected everything for the past two months, including her sister and the entire family.

“Two months is my way of saying we’ve only just begun.”

A frown took over her sister's face. She reached forward, attempting to place a hand on her shoulder, but she flinched. Imani withdrew with a sigh. "You have been living like a ghost here, Ivory."

"And that should make you happy, right? Isn't that what you have always wanted? It's a shame I had to come back."

Imani shook her head. "How could you possibly think I would want you to be invisible here, Ivory? You are my sister.

You have always been, and nothing or anyone can ever change that. I am sorry about everything that happened months ago. I never meant for things to go down the way they did. Isolating yourself or sneaking in and out the way you do won't solve anything."

Ivory grabbed her phone, which lay beside the orange lamp on the bedside table, and tapped the screen.

“It’s ten in the morning, Imani. I have every reason to believe this is just some ploy to get me out of bed and ready for that boring horse race.”

Her sister smiled and tucked a strand of hair behind her ears. Ivory felt like she looked like some of the horses she despised, her sister looked gorgeous. Imani had tinted the tips of her hair to a soft shade of brown and styled it so that it sat like a crown atop her head.

Her eyes were bright, and glossy lips only heightened her appeal. It made Ivory feel more miserable than she already did.

“Ivory, I came here to talk.” She smelled like jasmine. It was one of Tony’s favorite scents. A gnawing sensation formed in the pit of her stomach, and she forced her eyes to focus on Imani’s face.

“Talk about what?” Ivory lifted a perfectly lined brow.

Imani smirked and leaned closer. “What really happened.”

Ivory gulped. “What are you talking about?”

Imani shrugged her shoulders. She was dressed casually in a tight plain tee shirt and skinny jeans. She tilted her neck and playfully bumped her head with Ivory’s. “I’m talking about the actual source of your misery. I know Bill and I had a part to play, but still... there’s a missing piece of this puzzle. I know it has a lot to do with Tony Allen.”

Ivory rolled her eyes. “You don’t know shit.”

Imani squealed and grabbed her hands. Ivory was transported to memories of when she and Imani gossiped about boys and their plans. “You’ve told me all I need to know.”

Ivory didn’t admit how good it felt to chit-chat with her sister. Her dark curtain had been ripped to shreds by

Imani's blinding light.

"My lips are sealed. I don't know what you're talking about."

Imani gripped her arm tightly with a pout. "Come on, Ivory, spill. Since when did we start hiding things from each other?"

"Since years ago?"

"Are we still on this?" Her sister groaned and released her grip. "Why are you so stubborn?"

"And why won't you just leave me alone?"

"Two reasons: I want to know every juicy detail about what went down. Two, the race will be starting in a few hours. We need to hurry up if we don't want to be late."

Ivory grumbled, “Who’s we? I never said I was going.”

“I don’t think you have a choice,” Imani pressured, and Ivory gave in.

“Fine! I’ll tell you. To get you off my back. I sort of cut things off with Tony.”

Imani laughed like a maniac, squealing like a fifteen-year-old, and suppressed it with a pillow. Her eyes twinkled, and she beamed. “I knew it! I knew it had something to do with Tony.”

Ivory rolled her eyes and threw her legs off the bed. “You are happy that I broke things off with him?”

Ivory knew she would never tell her sister the whole truth about how she met Tony. Imani knowing about it was as good as their parents knowing. That secret was hers and Tony’s alone.

“Oh, no.” Imani frowned and waved her hand in the air.
“I’m not happy about that. That’s terrible news. I’m just happy to see you so in love!”

Ivory spun around swiftly and jumped out of bed. She fixed a hand on her hip and raised an inquisitive brow.
“In love, Imani? That’s far from it, okay? I mean, yes, there were sparks...”

“Still are,” her sister wiggled her brows, but Ivory ignored her.

“Yes, I was attracted to him. Tony’s a pretty attractive guy. Who wouldn’t be attracted to him?”

Imani released a dreamy sigh. “You’ve said the word ‘attracted’ twice now.”

Ivory glared at her but couldn’t ignore the faint fluttering in her stomach. The mere mention of Tony’s name still

affected her. However, her sister was wrong. What she felt for Tony wasn't love.

"I am not in love with Tony, Imani. That kind of stuff is not for people like me. Love makes a person vulnerable and weak. I don't ever want to be vulnerable or weak."

"But you've been that person for two months plus now, Ivory. Are you blind or what? Since you got back, you've been whining and pouting like it's the end of the world. You miss him and want to be with him, but your pride won't let you be happy."

She averted her gaze from her sister. "I am happy, thanks."

"No." Imani sighed. "You're not happy, Ivory. You haven't been happy for a long time. When was the last time you had a good laugh or remembered to smile? I might not have witnessed it, but I had heard you'd changed while you were with Tony."

Ivory narrowed her eyes and paced the room with folded arms. "Susie and her big mouth. I'm going to kill her when I next see her."

Her sister chuckled and rose from the bed. "The last time someone used those words as a threat, a restraining order was issued."

Ivory stopped pacing. "Any word on Cassie?"

Imani shook her head and made for the door. "Not a word. It is sad, you know? How that ended up. It's terrifying to watch how much someone's love for another could make a person crazy.

Honestly, I would say Cassie was a tiny bit obsessed. I love Bill, but I would never wave a baseball bat to threaten another woman because he chose her over me."

Ivory didn't hold back a snort. She joined her sister at the door, and they left her room together. Contrary to Imani's

belief, she had been up hours before and had showered quickly before curling up underneath the sheets again.

“You are only saying that because you’re not the one who got engaged, only to have your heart broken by hearing your so-called fiancé would be marrying someone else. And for the record, Bill would never do that to you. That guy is whipped. I think Duke is an ass.” Ivory paused, “and Cassie is a nutjob,” she added.

Imani almost fell over with laughter.

“Exactly. Cassie is a nutjob. But a sweet one. They weren’t meant to be. Secretly, we all wondered how they lasted as long as they did. You and Tony are different, Ivory. You guys are meant to be.”

They reached the living room, and Ivory grabbed a jacket from the rack. She was not in the best mood to play dress up. Comfortable black jeans, a pale blue tee shirt, and a top coat were good enough for her. She flicked her hair and grabbed the car keys from the center table.

“There is no meant to be because there is no us. Tony and I together don’t exist. I don’t love him.”

“But he loves you,” Imani uttered quietly.

They stood by a sofa opposite each other. Ivory couldn’t help but wonder if Tony had broken the code of silence to make contact. After she walked out of his home two months ago, she hadn’t heard of him or run into him once. It was like he never existed.

Once, she had hesitantly joined Imani on a trip to Al’s Home, and both dreaded and fanned a sliver of hope at running into him again. Thankfully, and sadly, she didn’t.

She peered closely and looked into her sister’s eyes.
“Did he tell you that?”

Imani hummed. “He didn’t have to. The whole town knows Tony has a huge crush on you. A few photos have been circulating on the net for a while, shocking everyone. You know Tony is a private person. He loves

staying away from attention. With you, though, he didn't bother trying."

Ivory gasped. Photos of them had circulated? She had quickly forgotten that Tony was a public figure, and that made his private life a big deal to the public.

"What kind of photos?"

Imani waved off her concern nonchalantly. "Cute photos, Ivory. That's not the point. That man is madly in love with you, and you love him too. You just need a push in the right direction until you see it. Ivory, you're only scared.

All you have to do is accept that love also means giving in to those parts of yourself you are scared of. Giving in will help you conquer that fear, and you will be able to live a happy life. With Tony by your side."

Ivory caught her lower lip between her teeth and turned away from her sister. Everything Imani said made perfect sense, but she did not feel ready to give up the life she

had spent years dreaming of and building. She was not prepared to give in.

She clutched the keys tightly and headed for the door.

“Go get Jemma,” she said. “I’m driving.”

Hooves pounded the earth heavily, and the cracking of whips on the animal’s bodies resounded in the air. Riders yelled – their veins rushing with adrenaline as they aimed for the finish line – and the crowd cheered in unison.

Ivory ignored the scene and the noise and accompanied her sister and niece to the reserved seat for every member or close friend of the Rogers’ home.

“Are you sure you won’t sit here with us?” Imani asked as she settled on the chair with a sleeping Jemimah in

her arms.

“Yeah, I’m good. I’ll probably see you guys after the...”

“Excuse me,” someone shoved her from behind and brushed past her to embrace Imani.

“Uh, hi?” Imani maintained a smile, but Ivory knew her sister couldn’t figure out who the blonde stranger was.

“Oh, Imani. It’s so nice to meet you finally. My name is Cat, and I just want to say I loved your wedding gown.”

Ivory and Imani shared an eye roll. Cat was just another admirer. Just like Cassie had once been. For security reasons, Ivory didn’t leave her sister’s side. She stood by her and her niece like a bodyguard and did not regret her decision.

Cat was not the only one with something to say about how much they loved, adored, admired, and idolized

Imani Rogers. More folks trooped in from the north, south, east, and west. The long queue even included children.

They formed a crowd around Imani and tried to wake Jemimah up until big Auntie Ivory had to scare them away with a threat that she would cook them for breakfast if they didn't run away with their tiny little legs.

Kai, Susie's oldest child, had been the leader of that troop. The terror in his eyes as they ran for the hills caused a laugh to escape Ivory's lips.

"Thank you, sister," Imani said with a smile. The gratitude in her eyes was unmistakable. And for the first time in what felt like forever, Ivory felt satisfied.

Her breath caught at the realization.

She enjoyed playing the role of a witch to scare away the children and had no problems standing by her sister to ward off strangers.

There was no doubt that something had changed during the past months. If anything, the town had grown to love Imani Rogers more than ever before. The love was massive. But what drew Ivory's attention was her indifference to it. She wasn't trying to ignore or be far away from the love. She should have, but instead, she was content.

It didn't matter that almost no one paid her any attention. She looked within herself to confirm how badly she had been hurt. Maybe she had grown numb. That wasn't it either. The sight of the children screaming at each other to run away from her was heart-warming.

Ivory straightened up and looked over at the field. She knew what she was searching for. Not what, but who. Whom she searched for.

"Sister, are you all right?" Imani asked with concern laced in her voice, but it sounded distant.

Ivory searched for the man that had transformed her into someone new; a version of her that didn't care about fame or achievements anymore; an understanding of her that felt satisfied playing the role of a sister and an aunt; a version of her that craved to be by his side.

Susie hadn't lied when she told her sister she was a changed person with Tony. It was the truth. Ivory palmed her forehead. It took her leaving him to realize he was all she truly wanted.

Granted, she had not realized her dreams or had the slightest clue what to do with her life, with Tony by her side, it had seemed more straightforward. Easier to figure things out.

"I am," she responded to Imani, who had not stopped tugging on her jacket to get her attention. "I am all right, Imani. Thank you."

Her sister's face scrunched up. "Thank you? For what?"

An uncontrollable smile broke across her face. “Thank you for helping me see things clearly. I just need a few minutes.”

A knowing grin settled on her sister’s face as she squealed in delight. “He is not here, is he?”

“Nope.” Ivory shook her head.

The man she searched for neither rode a horse nor stood at the displayed stables. He hadn’t come for the event. That sent a clear message to her. If Tony turned down a horse race as exciting as the one they watched, it meant one thing. He was still hurting.

“Go get your man, girl! Take all the time you need!” Imani winked, and she crouched slightly to embrace her sister.

“Thank you for not giving up on me,” she said softly.

“I didn’t do anything a sister wouldn’t do, Ivory.”

They shared a brief hug, and Ivory pulled away. She knew what she had to do, but with the constant trooping in and out of strangers, she had to ensure her sister and niece's safety first. "Are you sure you're okay by yourself?"

"No," Imani shook her head. "But don't worry, Bill is heading over. You can go if you have to. He isn't riding today. We're safe."

"I'm not leaving till he comes," she stood her ground defiantly. She was only made to turn around when Bill approached them. He appeared in a white button-up shirt, black jeans, Chelsea boots, and a cowboy hat. He smelled nice too, but Ivory craved someone else's scent.

"Ivory," he called, and she paused.

"Yeah, what?" she might have started a new chapter with her sister, but Bill remained in the old and torn pages.

“You’re leaving already?” Ivory noticed that his voice was softer than the usual tone he used whenever he spoke to her.

“It’s not like you care that I’m here, right? I know. No need to try and pretend, Bill. I just need to do something real quick, and I’ll be back to take my side by my sister.”

His shoulders slumped, and he rubbed his eyes. To her surprise, Bill appeared to be mentally exhausted. “Look, Ivory. I don’t want to fight. Not anymore. Things were pretty messy the last time that happened.”

The crowd cheered loudly in unison, interrupting him. He paused and waited until they settled to watch the race again.

“Fighting does more harm than good, and I don’t want that. We’ve not been the best acquaintances or in-laws, but we can always start again. I’m sorry for the things I said that might have hurt you in the past. I didn’t mean it.”

Ivory crossed her arms and smirked. “Are you sure, Bill? I’m willing to bet my entire savings that you took a good kick out of my misery.”

He flashed a cocky grin and mimicked her stance. “Okay, okay... Fine. Maybe a little bit,” he held his index finger above his thumb to illustrate the amount. “But I don’t wish the worst for you.”

Ivory amazed herself by going in for a hug. She patted his back and pulled back, ignoring Imani’s coo in the background. “I know, Bill. Thanks for...you know, but I have to go now.”

Bill caressed his jaw and looked around. “You’re looking for Tony?”

“Yeah.” she responded breathlessly. Every fiber of her being screamed to see him again, and she wanted to get moving.

Bill pulled out several keys from his pocket and tossed them to her. "Hand over yours."

She tossed over the keys in her grip and gasped at the bunch Bill had given her. "You're letting me have the Raptor?"

He shrugged with an air of confidence. "Yeah. Only to help you get there on time."

Her brows creased. "Get where? Is Tony not at home?"

"Home?" Bill scoffed. "The poor guy temporarily moved out after his sister's wedding. He couldn't stay there by himself. He said the silence threatened to drive him insane."

So he did reach out. Not to her though. Ivory felt her heart sink. "Where is he now?"

“Al’s Deluxe.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” she groaned.

Bill snickered. “I kid you not, Ivory.”

“How far is it, and how many businesses does this guy own?”

Imani spoke up from behind them. “About a chain of seven and three other stand-alone corporations. How do you think he made it to the top? He’s a fucking workaholic; I’ll tell you that. And the Deluxe is a bit far, but with good directions, you’ll get there in less than an hour.”

Ivory gulped. Who said love didn’t cost a thing?

Bill and Imani gave her directions on how to get to Al's Deluxe, and she was on her way. She hurried through the crowd, passed the bleachers, and went to the private parking space beside the stables. She hopped into Bill's Raptor and revved the engine. It came alive with a magnificent roar, and she selected first gear.

Finally admitting that she had fallen hard and fast for Tony was a big step in the right direction. She didn't know if he still felt the same. She pressed down on the accelerator and maneuvered through the traffic.

Her heart pounded against her chest, and the fluttering in her stomach awoke from its slumber. The only thought she had was Tony and what she would do when she saw him again.

The Raptor entered a prosperous neighborhood, and she drove past a lineup of tall buildings. From a distance, she spotted the winding curve that led to the place Bill and Imani had described. She turned the wheel and zoomed around the bends.

The Raptor stopped at the majestic entrance, and she turned off the engine and pulled out the key. She took in a deep breath and watched a few guests enter and exit the hotel before pushing the door open.

Well, here goes nothing.

Chapter 12

“For the umpteenth time, Mr. Al is not entertaining visitors, ma’am,” the red-haired petite figure across the desk said in a high-pitched nasally voice.

Ivory tucked her hair behind her ears and buried her face in her hands. She could feel tears in her eyes but sniffled to keep them at bay. She had not driven across town, beating the traffic and putting Bill’s Raptor through mud puddles on untarred roads, just to be turned away.

“I’ve told you, I’m his wife,” she tried again.

The receptionist rolled her eyes and muttered something incoherent under her breath. “Yeah, sure. And I’m Kim Kardashian,” she said, waving over a porter from the lobby.

Ivory was desperate. She hadn’t been desperate in a while. The last time, she had to meet a random stranger

to play the role of her boyfriend for a couple of minutes. Now, that stranger was the one person she desperately needed. She intertwined her fingers and bit down on her lower lip. "I'm sorry, I'm his ex-wife."

"Ma'am," the red head had had enough. Her green eyes blazed like a fiery furnace. "If you don't leave now, I will call security. That is not a threat, it's a promise."

Ivory would have made the scrawny figure swallow her own words on another day or maybe months ago. She was a changed person now and had to see Tony before leaving. The only person that had to swallow something was her. And she did. She swallowed her pride and let the tears fall.

"Look," she glanced at the red hair's name tag.
"Grace..."

"It's Cassie," the girl retorted sharply, and Ivory cringed. That's rather unfortunate. She thought but didn't say.

“Great! Cassie. Such a lovely name. Look, Cassie. I have to see Al. It is a matter of life and death. Just please do this for me: put a call through and tell him Ivy is here to see him. I promise if he doesn’t want to see me, I’ll leave, and you will never have to see me again. Just do this one thing for me, I beg you.”

Ivory bit down on her tongue. If all went well and Tony forgave her, she would make the young lady pay for having her beg.

Cassie did not say a word but picked up the phone and dialed a number. Every ring seemed like an eternity for Ivory. She held her breath and silently prayed Tony would see her.

“Yes, sir, some lady is here to see you. Yes, Mr. Al. She says her name is Ivy.”

Ivory tried not to notice, but the receptionist fell silent. Was it a good or bad silence?

She felt her heart hammer against her ribcage when Cassie looked at her funny.

“He said I should send you up,” she muttered in disbelief. The receptionist couldn’t believe it, and neither could Ivory. Her heart soared, and she regained her composure.

“What’s the room number?”

“What?” Cassie seemed distracted. The poor girl must have turned away a hundred people from seeing Tony Allen. One name changed all that.

Ivory smiled like a conqueror that had defeated a thousand armies. “The room number, please.”

“Room 788,” Cassie muttered. “That’s Mr. Al’s private suite. It’s on the fourth floor.”

Ivory muttered her false gratitude and practically ran to the elevator. It opened with a ding, and she stepped aside, allowing other guests to pass by. One even mistook her for her twin sister, Imani. She ignored them as she was on a mission.

As soon as she stepped into the cool space, she pressed four. A few seconds later, the door shut. She exhaled. Alone at last to rehearse her lines of apology.

She went through I'm sorry, Tony. I promise, I never meant to hurt you over a thousand times before her ride ended and the doors slid open. She stepped into the spacious lobby and could tell the entire floor was reserved for the famous AI.

It was cold, even though she wore a jacket. She wrapped her arms around her body and slowly strolled past giant immersive paintings hanging on the wall. She didn't have to be an art expert to know that each painting cost a fortune.

There were impressive ornaments lined up in the lobby and small flower pots. The whole space smelled like him.

She wondered how often he had paced the floor, treading on the soft gray rug while making a phone call or reviewing documents in folders, as he had always done at home.

Home.

She missed the feeling of being at home with him.

A sigh left her lips as she got to a finely-polished brown door with cursive gold numbering lined side by side.

788

That was it.

She raised her hand and held her breath. Her clenched fist rapped on the door three times, and she waited. Nothing happened—no sound or movement.

She raised her hand again and was about to knock again when the ding of a key card inserted, clicked, and the locks turned. The door opened, and every word Ivory had rehearsed in the elevator flew out the window.

Those gray eyes.

She thought she would never see them again. Her eyes roamed his face and then his body—from the trimmed stubble on his jaw, overgrown dark hair, and pink lips to his broad shoulders and slim waist. He was still the same but hotter. Even more beautiful than the last time she saw him.

She would have gladly wrapped her arms around him to embrace him if he wasn't frowning deeply. He raised a brow and crossed his arms.

“What are you doing here?”

That voice.

A warm feeling spread throughout her body as she remembered how he would whisper sweet nothings in her ear as they made love.

She waved the thought away and focused on his face instead. “I came to see you.”

He frowned even deeper. “I believe that has been accomplished. You can go now.”

Her jaw dropped. Was he kicking her out? “You’re not going to invite me in?”

“Why? Give me one good reason why I should do that, Ivory?”

She attempted a joke—a miserable one at that. “I don’t know; it’s been months? I thought you would love to, you know, catch up?”

“Catch up?” He scoffed. “I have a lot of catching up to do. With work. I don’t have the time or patience for this.”

He was kicking her out. Her pride was wounded as she looked him in the eye. “Tony,” her lips quivered. “I came here to apologize. I mean, I even rehearsed it a thousand times before coming here. Seeing you made me realize nothing I could say would make up for the damage I caused.”

He was unfazed. Stoic. Still. Emotionless. “If that is all, you can leave now. Apology heard, but not accepted.”

“Tony...” she felt the pieces of her heart fall apart. The pain that suffocated her was too much to bear. He couldn’t possibly be serious, right? There was not even the slightest chance that he had moved on and already shut her out, or was there?

If he had, she couldn’t blame him. She had ruined everything beautiful they built with her own hands. If she felt as miserable as she did before realizing she loved

him, she wondered what the hell she had put him through after he confessed his love for her and still had to watch her walk out.

She deserved his rejection. Deserving it didn't stop it from hurting like a bitch.

"Tony... come on, don't do this. Hear me out," a tear slipped from her eyes, and she sniffled, wiping it off. Crying was another new development that she wasn't proud of, and it was all thanks to the stud standing before her.

"I have heard you out, Ivory. What more do you have to say?" He seemed curious. His back was straightened, and his brows were raised.

Ivory felt her tongue dry up. It was time for the moment of truth. Suddenly, it felt too heavy to speak. She looked away from him and closed her eyes. She needed to summon courage.

Confidence came to her, and she looked up at him.

“I’ve fallen madly in love with you, Tony Allen,” she confessed, and his mask of indifference fell off.

He hadn’t expected her confession. The conflict of emotions that swam through his eyes told her.

“Ivory...”

“No, Tony,” she raised a hand. “Please, hear me out. I promise I’m not trying to hurt you more than I already have. I don’t deserve your love, care, or anything you’ve done for me over the past few months.

None of that is enough to stop my heart from wanting what it wants. Or whom it wants, in this case. And my heart wants you, Tony. It has wanted you for the longest time, but I was too blind to see it. I thought I had it all figured out.

My future, I mean. I thought I knew the life I wanted. And maybe I did. When you came along, you showed me that I could have something different but even more beautiful at the same time. I am so sorry I hurt you, Tony, in the past and the present. You were right. You didn't deserve my bullshit."

She ended with a soft laugh and wiped her eyes with her thumb.

"I feel relieved and glad that I got to say all of that to you. It's like a heavy load has been lifted off my chest. Thank you for listening, Tony. If you still want me to leave, I promise I'll leave now to make you happy."

"You would do that just to make me happy?" he repeated like he had not heard her.

She nodded. "Yeah."

They stood in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes before Tony did something strange. He stepped away

from the door and pushed it wide open.

“Ivory,” he started in a serious tone. “Twice, I have opened the door to my heart for you. And twice, you walked out. This door here is symbolic. You have to choose what you want now. There is no going back. If you walk in now, you must promise you won’t back out. I don’t think my heart can take being broken for the third time by the same woman.”

Ivory didn’t need any time at all to decide. She had known from that moment in the field.

With a proud smile, she walked dramatically across the room.

Tony couldn’t believe it. He looked at her as though he was dreaming. He covered the distance between them and searched her eyes.

“Ivory, you’re not fucking with me, right?”

She shook her head, feeling her heart soar with joy at having the opportunity to stand so close to him again. She placed her hand on his chest and marveled at how fast and hard his heart beat against his chest.

“I’m not, Tony.” She hoped her eyes could say everything she couldn’t. “This is not a joke to me. I really do love you.”

Tony shut the door behind her, and it locked with a click. He backed her up against it and lifted her head upwards with a gentle nudge of his finger under her chin.

Ivory felt her toes curl in her shoes, and she slowly kicked them off. She recognized the look in his eyes. It was filled with need, desire, and warmth. Her arms went around his neck, and she smiled.

He tensed under her; mad she saw his resignation. “Fuck it,” he said, lips crashing down on hers.

Ivory moaned against his lips. "I've missed you," she said, breathless, and he smiled between short kisses.

"I've missed you more, my Ivy."

He peeled off her jacket, and his hands were warm as he gently cupped her face. It felt different from any other time they'd touched. It felt more intimate. He paused for a moment to take her in.

The fire in his eyes steadily crackled, and he leaned close enough but didn't kiss her. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, and she felt his hands slide down to her thighs. He lifted her effortlessly from the ground, and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Slowly, as he peppered her neck and cheeks with kisses, he led them to the bed. Gently, he lay her on the soft mattress and hovered above her. His lips took hers gently, and she sighed.

He leaned back to pull her tee shirt over her head, revealing her black lacy bra. His gray eyes turned darker, and he trailed kisses from her throat to the valley between her cleavage.

He sought her lips again, and his kisses were demanding as his fingers unhooked her bra. He tossed it aside, and she pressed her body against his.

Tony groaned at the contact of her erect nipples pressing against his chest. He pulled away only to remove his shirt, and Ivory wished she could take a snapshot of how beautiful he looked.

He flung his shirt away and helped her undo the button of her jeans.

Ivory sucked in a deep breath the minute his fingers grazed her skin. He yanked her jeans off her legs and began to undo the top button of his jeans as well.

“What’s funny?” he asked, and she shook her head with a smile.

“I’m just relieving moments.”

“Like?” He raised a brow, standing briefly to take off his jeans. He was already erect, and it poked through his cotton briefs. “Care to share these moments with me?”

He joined her on the bed, and she parted her legs to give him room. “I think I’ll share them later. They’re not important.”

“You sure you can’t tell me now?”

With a mischievous look, his hands ran down her stomach, and he stopped at the band of her underwear. Ivory knew he was about to torture the moments out of her. Without permission, his fingers slipped inside and pressed against the wall of her wet pussy.

“I’m sure,” she shuddered, feeling the hairs on her skin rise. Tony knew exactly what to do and where to go. She closed her eyes, losing herself to the rhythm, like gentle waves crashing in the ocean.

He dipped his head and kissed her deeply, tasting every inch of her and swallowing her moans as his fingers probed inside her, sliding in and out with gentleness and speed.

Heat pooled between her thighs, and her desire grew more potent by the second. Tony was also lost in the pleasure, and the need of him devoured her. Her fingers skimmed up and down his back, raising her hips to guide his fingers deeper.

Tony got the cue, and his eyes snapped open. He pulled out his hand and dragged off her pants. They flew across the room with a flick and landed on the floor. Before he could move, she flipped them over until she was on top.

The look of surprise in his eyes gave her all the confidence she needed. She pulled down his briefs and stroked his hard cock. Tony shuddered beneath her and groaned. His hands gripped her slender waist, and he maneuvered her until his glistening tip was in the right position.

Ivory regained control and lowered herself onto him, letting him consume every inch of her. Tony gasped and gripped her thighs firmly. His hands reached for her breasts, and he squeezed gently.

Ivory threw her head back, gazing at the stars on the ceiling as she felt her climax build. Tony took the wheel and raised his hips, thrusting faster and deeper into her until the stars on the ceiling blended to form a blinding light.

There was an explosion. He cradled her to his chest as she fell from her high.

With short, shaky breaths, he kissed her forehead and lips. It was delicate and slow, like he took his time to savor her.

Ivory knew Tony would kiss her until he found his release, so she let him take over. He flipped them back again until he hovered on top.

With one swift movement, he wrapped her legs around his waist and lowered himself. The movement was slower than her preferred pace, but the intense look in his eyes and the position he trapped her in made him reach depths of her she never knew existed.

He felt good. Too good. She leaned forward, and their lips locked. He felt like a drug but tasted like strawberries. His muscles tensed, and he held her closer.

One more thrust, and he pulled away. He jerked and shot his load over the sheets.

Ivory laughed as he wiped them off with more of the sheets, and she helped him though her knees were wobbling. He rose from the bed and offered a hand to

help her up. She grabbed the stained sheets and walked with him to dump them in a laundry bag.

Tony's eyes twinkled, and he pulled her again to kiss her. She wrapped her arms around his waist and followed him to the bathroom. Together, they stepped into the shower and waited for the water to heat up.

Tony hugged her from behind as the hot water poured down on their skin, and she could feel her knees almost give way under the weight of happiness. She turned around and wrapped her arms around his neck. He kissed her forehead and reached for the soap.

Showering with Tony was fun, silly, and sexy, all at the same time. He scrubbed her like Imani scrubbed Jemma during bath times and promised her a kiss if she stayed in the shower with him a little longer.

They left the bathroom, wrapped in warm towels and smiles, and quickly changed into Tony's oversized sweatshirts and sweatpants.

Her back landed on the bed with a soft thud, and Tony lay beside her, scooping her in his arms and nuzzling his head on her chest like he always loved to do. He snuck a hand under her sweatshirt and drew circles on her stomach.

“Who would have thought that we would be here together five months later?” Tony asked.

Ivory laughed. “I wouldn’t have. Honestly, I didn’t think we would last this long.”

“Yeah,” he said and sat up. His eyes were warm, and his smile was kind. “With that said, do you remember how we met? Well, the second time we met, at Jemimah’s party?”

“Yeah?” Ivory was curious to know where he was going with all the questions.

Tony looked nervous. He cleared his throat and held her hands. “You remember what you said to me, right? You

asked if you could borrow me for a few seconds.
Seconds you turned into five months, Ivy. But I want to
add a little something. Do you mind?

Her heart skipped a beat, and she stifled a smile playing
on her lips. “Not at all, Tony. What do you propose?”

“Uh, okay,” he held her hands tightly, and Ivory could
swear he was about to ask her on an official date. “Ivory
Macmillan, can I borrow you forever?”

Ivory thought she heard wrong. He couldn't possibly be
proposing, right?

Right?

She froze up and blinked. “What?”

He seemed more confident. “My Ivy, I am asking you to
marry me. Will you marry me, Ivory MacMillan?”

Who would have thought that the failed singer could land herself a huge package like Tony Allen? Who would have thought she had it in her to fall in love? Who would have ever thought he would propose and she would say —

“Yes.”

“Yes?” he peered closely. “Ivory, you sound unsure.”

She kissed his cheeks and threw her hands around his neck. “Yes! Yes, Tony. I will marry you.”

“Yes!” He kissed her forehead excitedly. “I cannot believe you said yes!”

She laughed and kissed his lips. “I cannot believe you proposed without a ring.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Ms. MacMillan, nothing is normal with us. We are the weirdest couple I know,” he chuckled and cupped her cheeks. “Come here.”

He pulled her close and sealed their future with the sweetest kiss ever. Ivory had never been happier.

The end... but wait:

Great news: if you **genuinely** enjoyed this book, please consider giving it a review on Amazon. We highly appreciate them, and it helps us know which books you like the best (so we can write more like them in future). It’s win win, so please take 1 minute out to do that now beautiful person. :)

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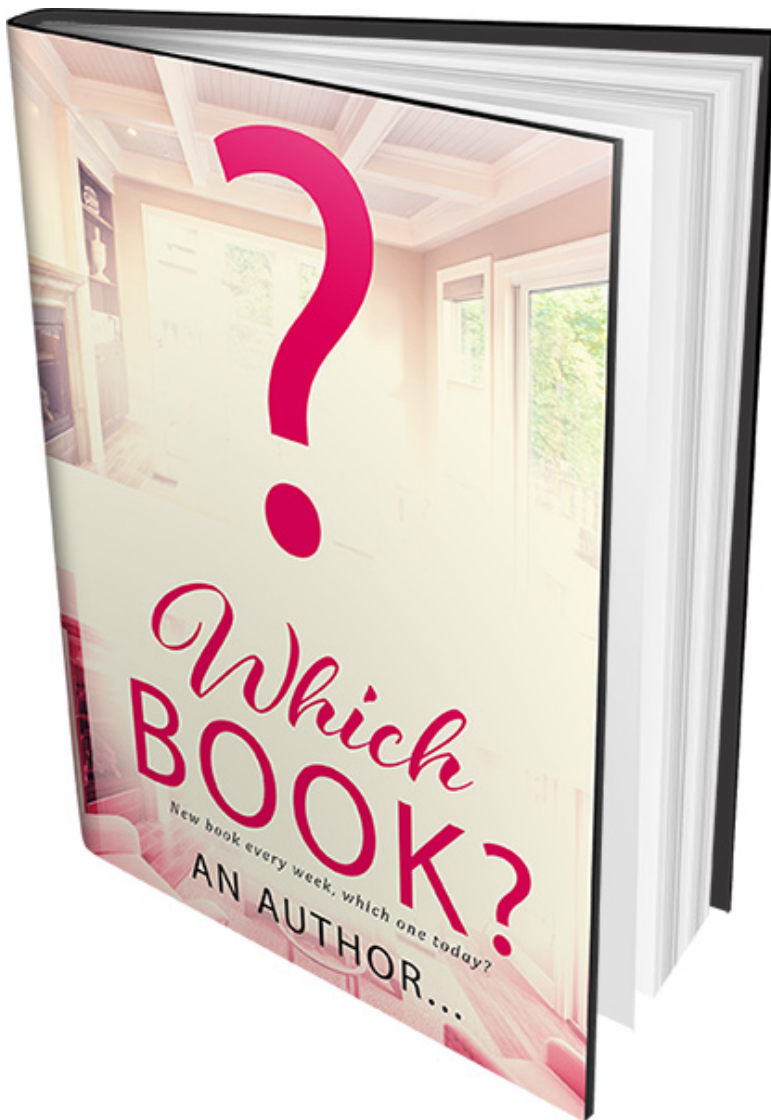


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*

Also available: [The Bachelor Tycoon](#) by Charleen Wilson:



Description:

A sexy triplets pregnancy romance by Charleen Wilson of BWWM Club.

Celebrity blogger Mara Stevens is in a creative slump.

So her editor tasks her to getting the gossip on a local, well known billionaire, Jonathan Peters!

At first, Mara is convinced that her love for her job will keep her from falling for his impressive charms and sex appeal, but eventually, Mara finds herself falling head over heels for him, leaving her editor furious!

But despite their whirlwind romance, Mara is keeping her career—and the reason why they met—a secret from Jonathan...

And now that things are getting more serious Mara is forced to choose between her growing love for Jonathan, and her beloved job.

But with a surprise pregnancy and enemies just around the corner, Mara needs to make a decision soon.

Will she stand by her man through thick and thin?

Or will her career come first?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Charleen Wilson of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get The Bachelor Tycoon now.](#)

*

Also available: [Harrison](#) by Katie Dowe:



Description:

A sexy BBW, over 50s romance by Katie Dowe of BWWWM Club.

Fifty-two-year-old Summer runs a women's shelter, using her past experience of surviving an abusive relationship to help others.

She has little or no trust in the opposite sex, and was certainly not looking for romance, especially at her age...

But she never counted on meeting Harrison!

Billionaire Harrison is a confirmed bachelor whose main interest in life is work, but as soon as he sees the gorgeous plus size Summer, he falls in love!

And they begin a whirlwind romance that Summer never thought possible!

But she is still haunted by her abusive past, and finds herself only pushing Harrison further away the closer they get...

Can Summer find the courage to fall in love again, despite all that she has been through?

Or will it take a tragedy to make her understand that she can love again?

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

Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes that will make you gasp out loud!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Harrison now.](#)

*

Also available: [The Wedding](#) by Joy Martin:



Description:

A sexy arranged marriage romance by Joy Martin of BWWM Club.

Florist Cara Hudson's first love was multi-millionaire Peter Chase.

But his audacious behavior towards women, and lack of seriousness and care created a huge rift between them that she couldn't ignore!

Now their parents are forcing them to get married, and Cara has no choice but to be in the same room as Peter...

And possibly in the same bed!

Yet to their surprise, their relationship begins to bloom, and they realize that not only are they friends but that they're actually in love!

But before they can get settled into a lifetime of happiness, a relic of Peter's past, and Cara's obsessive admirer, will stop at nothing to ruin what they have built...

Will Peter and Cara get through these hurdles?

Or will their relationship end as quickly as it began?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Joy Martin 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 The Wedding now.](#)

*

You'll also want to check out these hot billionaire brothers and cousins in the [Brothers From Money series](#) too:



& many more...

[Click here to meet them and more now.](#)

*

Also available: [Gerald](#) by Katie Dowe:



Description:

A sexy surrogate romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

Beautiful and vivacious African-American businesswoman Gabriella Myers runs Surrogacy Inc, an up-and-coming elite surrogacy agency.

So, of course when recluse and embittered multi-billionaire investor Gerald Vincent Murphy calls her for a meeting, she quickly accepts!

But his request leaves her reeling...

He specifically wants Gabby to carry his heir and is willing to pay four times the amount to make it happen!

Gabby agrees, only because she feels something for the man that she has never felt before in her life...

And now that she's pregnant with his child, she has fallen head over heels in love with him!

But first she must learn his true reasons for wanting a child...

Reasons that may very well break Gabby's heart!

Can Gerald move on from his past and allow himself to fall in love with Gabby?

Or does he only care about the child she carries?

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

Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes with a multi-billionaire!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Gerald now.](#)

*

Also available: [Protect My Heart](#) by Alanna Richardson:



Description:

A sexy older man younger woman, pregnancy romance by Alanna Richardson of BWWM Club.

At 50 years of age and after a series of tragic events, Daniel Whittmaker is desperate to have a child and is ready to go the surrogacy route.

It's at the surrogacy service that he meets the younger romance novelist, Janice Robinson, who agrees to be his surrogate...

Daniel is ensnared by her captivating beauty, her talent as a writer and her general approach to life...

And the two are drawn irresistibly towards each other in a way they never had planned!

Yet even though they spend most of their time together, Janice feels Daniel building a wall between them.

Even though she realizes she's in love with him, she fears his past trauma will stop him from opening his heart to her!

But will Daniel find a way to open up to love again?

Or will he lose Janice forever?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Alanna Richardson of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Protect My Heart now.](#)

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