



VALENTINE'S

Fake

ASHLIE SILAS

VALENTINE'S FAKE

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS BWWM ROMANCE



ASHLIE SILAS

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CHAPTER 1



“**Y**ou’re fired!” The words rattled my ears like he was standing there with a blow horn in the middle of the restaurant. It was after-hours, but is there ever a good time to get fired by your ex?

Alex Diamond was my high school sweetheart who broke my heart when he decided to break up with me to explore what the world had to offer, as he so elegantly put it at the time.

A couple of years ago, I had the misfortune of finally landing the perfect job. The only problem was that he owned the damn place.

It was excruciating at first. He was far too sexy to be the boss and our past was like adding insult to injury. Luckily, he quickly made my work-life bearable by showing me just how much of a jerk he had become.

“Chef, this sauce is much too dense and has too many mushrooms in it. Make it again.” He ordered.

“Who are we feeding it to, a newborn? This is exactly what this sauce is supposed to look, taste, and feel like. Are you forgetting I studied culinary at Columbia?”

“I am aware chef, and you were trained by the best. I’m sure he would agree that this is not your best work.” He said pouring the entire pot of my creamy mushroom sauce down the drain.

“Make it again,” he repeated.

I rolled my eyes and asked my staff to make a new batch. He walked out and continued his day unbothered while I was angry the rest of mine. That was my first day.

I prepared a long speech for him when I got home that day and fully intended to deliver it as soon as he walked in that next day. I waited and waited and waited but he never showed up until eventually, I let it go and simply enjoyed not having to work directly with him those few peaceful days. It turned out he only came in once a week for a couple of hours but whenever he did, he made it a point to stop by my kitchen and argue with me about anything and everything. He was infuriating in the worst way. Hot and cocky has always been an unpleasant duo.

We had our differences but some days, he was simply too fine not to acknowledge. Walking into work to find that tall, handsome, deep blue-eyed stud leading meetings and calling the shots just like he did in high school made me wonder what-if and take random trips to la-la-land in the middle of my workdays.

One day, I walked in on Alex as he was changing into his gym clothes, and I could tell he was as stunned as I was. “Hey Jasmine,” was all he could muster up while remaining frozen. It was the only time the two of us were in an unplanned situation at the workplace and we weren’t sure what to do with our hidden thoughts.

I could not help but look at his chiseled six-pack and he could not keep himself from flexing his arms to impress me. I was mesmerized and had to find my way back to the present moment and remember we were in the kitchen of a busy New York City restaurant. His office was slightly hidden but not enough to pursue the thoughts that were running in my head at that moment.

“Hi, I’m sorry I’ll just come back later,” I said turning away and closing the door behind me. I stood outside of his door for a few seconds to ground myself before returning to my crew.

That moment made things awkward between us. Nothing happened but it brought back scars and desires that we both kept hidden.

So much so that Alex opted out of coming in for several months after the incident. He never said that was the reason for his absence, but I knew. I just did not know why he would go through such extreme measures to keep his feelings at bay. He had dated several women just that year but at that moment, he was single and so was I. There was no real reason why we could not fulfill what we both really wanted but he never allowed himself to take the step which made me wonder, "What was Alex so afraid of?"

There were several days I wanted to walk into Alex's office and question him about our past and I saw him walk by my office a couple of times then change his mind and walk away. Work was not the place for that conversation, so we simply never had it. Every time either one of us said something to the other it turned into a dispute of some sort.

One day the meat cutter stopped working so when he walked into my kitchen before getting my nerves, I said, "Mr. Diamond we need new equipment. We would appreciate it if management took our requests more seriously considering we are trying to prepare award-winning dishes here." "Chef, this is a fine dining restaurant, but we do not need the finest of equipment. Modify your order to fit the budget and we can talk." It seems we could never see eye-to-eye. Or maybe we just did not want to. It seems we were afraid of what a real conversation between us might unveil.

I must have argued with my boss over 1000 times leading to the moment that he fired me, so I should have seen it coming but for some reason, I was blindsided.

"Fired? I quit!" I yelled removing my apron and throwing it onto the nearest table. Then I walked to my office in the back to grab my purse.

I intended to make a grand exit slamming the doors on my way out. I wore fitted pants which showed my curves perfectly and fully intended on taking advantage of my womanly sexual

dimorphism as he watched me walk away. He had not seen me without my robe often and I saw him checking out my 5'5, curvy, medium body as I removed it. My hair was in a ponytail as I often wore it for work, but it was just as curly as it was in high school. Seeing him take notice of my curves made me even more eager to present a grand, watch me walk away exit so he could drool at what he has now lost twice. Too bad when it rains in New York City, it thunders.

I went into my office near the kitchen to grab my belongings. When I walked out, I tried slamming the door forgetting it swings back. The door hit my back causing me to drop my purse, and everything in it flew out and hit the ground.

By everything, I mean everything! I do not know why we women insist on jam-packing our purses with so much junk. Next thing you know, you are getting fired and a freaking dildo flies out. That's right, a dildo. I used it for silly games at a bachelorette party I attended the week before and just never bothered removing it from my purse. There I stood, motionless as I watched my lifelike dildo vibrate at the feet of my nemesis.

I stood there for a few seconds trying to decide if I should just walk out or run for dear life. Unfortunately, I needed to start by elevating my head to see my boss's disapproving, deep blue eyes piercing into my soul.

"I'll let you get that," Alex said taking two steps back from the dildo which continued to vibrate and bounce around the carpeted floor.

To say that I was embarrassed is an understatement. This could have happened with anyone else. Heck, I would have preferred to ask the pope for forgiveness. Any other man but Alex. Yet there he was, firing me and trying not to step on my dildo. He was kind enough to pick everything else up from the floor. Too bad he could not scrape off any of the egg that was falling from my face.

He handed me the items and I realized I was still frozen in shock. "Thank you," I said holding the purse out in front of me

as he placed the items in it.

I considered walking out at the point but then the cleaning crew would find it and that would make things even more complicated. I reached down, grabbed the dildo, then I walked out without looking back. It continued to vibrate in my hand, but I was too embarrassed to try and turn it off. I just wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible and forget all about Alex Diamond once and for all.

CHAPTER 2



When I got home, I slammed the door, threw my belongings on the dining table, and screamed forgetting my roommate Corianne was home.

She is a life coach and spent most of her days in her office speaking to clients, but her schedule was unpredictable except on Wednesdays.

Every Wednesday, she left work at noon to go visit her grandmother in the nursing home where she lived. She stays there with her until visitation ends at 6:00 PM then comes straight home.

While Cori is great at what she does, she is not your typical coach. She lives life unapologetically which is one of the things I love most about her. She studied psychology and focused on people who suffer from depression, so she helps a lot of people improve their mental health by helping them see things differently than the way they were conditioned to view them. She said that people often hide who they are or behind titles and standards they must live up to when those things do not serve them. “Live your life in a way that makes you happy,” she always says.

I met Cori my junior year of high school when she moved to Manhattan to live with her grandmother. Her parents both died in a tragic hit-and-run car accident that year and grandmother took her in and raised her.

Unfortunately, her grandmother started suffering from dementia last year so Cori thought it would be best if she went

into a nursing home for her safety.

That was a challenging experience because her grandmother did not want to go, and Cori felt like she was letting her down. She hated having to make the decision, but it was the best one at the time.

Cori hired someone to watch her at home but one day, she went to visit her grandmother and found that she was missing while the nurse took a nap. She reported her missing and started searching everywhere for her. The cops found her roaming down an alley near her residence one that night.

She stayed with her that night and then moved her into a nursing home that very next day. Cori wanted to move her in with us, but it would have been the same issue. I was working eight to ten hours shifts all five to six days a week and Cori spent a lot of time with her clients so none of us would be able to offer the supervision her grandmother needed.

Luckily, we took time to research several nursing homes before the incident happened, so it was just a matter of getting her there which was no easy task. After living there for a couple of weeks, she started to enjoy it until eventually, she started feeling at home.

They have a huge garden where not only she could go gardening but they can use the fruit and veggies they grow for their meals. There is also a pottery room where they could make vases, there's yoga, and all sorts of things to keep her entertained.

She has never admitted it, but we think she is happy there. She always has so much to share with Cori during their visits that Cori always leaves her schedule wide open so that she is there until the end of visitation.

Cori promised not to miss a visit and wanted to make good on her promise, but her visits weren't out of obligation. They simply loved the times they spent together, and Cori has never missed a single Wednesday with her.

She said her grandmother was the rock that kept her going after her parents' deaths.

As tragic as Cori's life was, she was instrumental to me when my father passed away. I hated knowing I would have to go through life without my dad. I often wondered who would walk me down the aisle or protect me from bad men, but Cori would make dark jokes like, "It could have been worse. You could've lost both of your parents at the same time." Sometimes her statements were a bit much, but I realized she was still grieving, and she was right, that would have been much worse.

She said she was upset at first, but her grandmother always knew what to say and conditioned her to accept death as a part of life.

"My grandmother always told me that we are all a part of God's greater plan. We are here for an unknown period but once our mission is complete, whatever that mission might be, then God may call us home," she would say.

"I'm sure you've heard stories about the elderly who are ready to die and think they are going any minute but then live for years and years. Yet, some young people are eager about life and think they have centuries to go and barely make it 21 years of age."

"Life is unpredictable, but we have to live it joyously or before you know it, you kick the bucket without having any good days."

I was grateful that she passed her grandmother's words onto me because I found comfort in them.

In high school, she was the ideal pretty girl with long, blonde hair, dimples, 5'4, and medium physic. Since then, she had dyed her hair just about every color on the rainbow until she settled with a dark blue which looks very elegant on her. She usually wears it straight but sometimes she curls it to give it volume when she wants to go from pretty to stunning.

When I walked in, she was wearing a bralette and sweatpants showing off her tattoos of her mother on one arm and her father on the other.

“You know Cori, it’s okay to eat something baked now and then,” I said as I watched her place a heavily battered cod fillet into the deep fryer.

“What? And risk losing this full figure? I think not,” she joked.

“Seriously Cori, you are the only person I know who deep fry vegetables. Broccoli is supposed to be healthy,” I said seeming overly frustrated.

“Okay fine, I won’t deep fry the veggies anymore sheesh, what’s gotten into you?”

“Ugh, sorry Cori I’ve had a long day,” I said throwing myself on our blue sectional and slowly removing my shoes.

“What happened?” she asked concerned.

“Alex fired me.”

I heard her slam everything on the counter before walking towards me.

“What? Alex fired you. Why? What could possibly have been bad enough that he would fire you of all people?”

“Well, first, Alex is not the same Alex we went to school with. He is a complete jerk, solely focused on working results to impress his parents. Actually, that does sound like the same Alex we went to school with,” I said.

“Exactly. And the Alex I know, although having those bad qualities was always crazy about you. I know how secretly happy he was that you joined their company so what could have possibly caused him to fire you?”

“Did he say anything?” She asked

“Nope, just ‘you’re fired’”, I said trying to mimic his deep manly voice.

“Well, what did you say?”

“I told him I quit.”

“Of course, you did. Only you would quit a job you just got fired from,” she joked.

“Shut up, Cor. I was in shock. I would never have guessed in a million years Alex would fire me. Yet here I am, twenty-six and jobless!”

“Awww, I’m sorry, Jazzy I know this must be stressful,” she said putting her arm around me and pulling me close to comfort me.

“That’s not even the worse part,” I said putting my hands on my forehead.

“What could be worse than Alex firing you?”

“My dildo falling out of my purse and bounding on the floor like a damn ping pong ball right in front of him,” I said.

“Wait, what?” she said laughing.

“Yes, girl. He had to step backward to avoid stepping on the damn thing. I was so embarrassed I could have cried,” I said shaking my head.

“I’ll bet. Heck, I’m embarrassed for you. Which one? Don’t tell me it was... no, not little Alex,” she said with her hand over her mouth.

“Of course, it was. It would not be my life if it were any other dildo beside *the one*, I named after the jerk who was firing me. I would have preferred if there were not a dildo at all during that conversation but what fun would that be? This day started so wonderfully you know. Yet somehow ended in turmoil.”

“I know. We got our morning stretch out of the way early, we completed our meditation with the extra success affirmations and everything. To top it all off, we had those great lattes at the new café downtown. Today definitely had the makings of a great day. Who would have thought your day was going to turn into shits? I’m so sorry friend,” she said putting her head on my shoulder.

Then she stood up like she was getting ready to devise some master scheme.

“You just have to call Alex. Call him and tell him that he needs to fix this. Maybe there’s something he can do or

someone he can call. There has to be some sort of misunderstanding,” she said.

“Yes, there is, but they want to take the easy way out. They know the situation with that critic is not on me, but they only care about their bottom line. That’s it. Not me nor my reputation, so it was easier to use me as a scapegoat and simply terminate me to satisfy the press. I’m just surprised that Alex of all people is the one who did it. I know it’s been a long time, but I thought we still had a connection that could have been rekindled but clearly, I was wrong. Alex is a complete ass.”

“I am not calling him and begging him for my job back. If nothing else, I am worthy of respect in whatever position I choose to be in. Alex felt like he could simply dispose of me without a single thought about how it could jeopardize my life so there is no way I will give him the satisfaction of seeing me squirm. The only thing he needs to do is ensure my severance package is complete so I can get over this chapter of my life.”

“I’m just overwhelmed. I was doing so well in my career and getting closer to opening my dream restaurant that dad and I always talked about. I was looking forward to finally accomplishing that goal and realizing my dreams. I had everything planned out perfectly and I thought this was it you know? My career was on track, I was a well-recognized chef and once I had enough money, I was going to open my restaurant. Then, who knows, maybe I could start dating afterward and start settling down but now I am having to start over. It was all supposed to simply unfold as planned but look at me now. I am back to square one. Rebuilding my career. I feel like my life is in ruins,” I continued.

“No, it’s not. This is just a minor setback. You are a warrior. You’ll get through this just like you got through all the other obstacles in your life. And you know I will always have your back no matter what so don’t let this take you down. Alex has some nerve firing you. You need to call him out on his crap,” she said handing me my phone.

“Maybe tomorrow, Cori. Right now, I just need a long hot shower and a bed.”

“Grab a bite first. It’s like I knew you would have a bad day. I made all sorts of comfort food,” she said speedily walking to the kitchen to make me a plate.

“You call everything deep-fried comfort food,” I said jokingly.

“I also made mashed potatoes,” she smiled.

“I’m sure you’ll figure out how to ball it, batter it, and fry it soon enough,” I said.

“That sounds good chef, thanks for the tip. She said as she walked towards me and placed the plate of food on the table.”

“Thanks, Cori, this looks good, but I don’t have much of an appetite.”

“Eat! You know our motto, “Troubles will pass but good food won’t last”, so here, eat it while it’s fresh. For a moment, I had forgotten about the dildo, the lack of employment, and the prick behind it all, Alex Diamond.

CHAPTER 3



As surely as the sun was going to rise, I knew I needed to pucker up. Losing my job was a tough pill to swallow and my ex being the culprit behind it made it much worse but there was no need to dwell on it. I needed to get myself together and start rebuilding the pieces of my career. At least that was the plan.

Before I knew it, a week went by and not a single reputable restaurant in the city wanted to give me a job. They said I needed to take a little time off to let the lawsuit play out and then I can seek employment, but I was too much of a liability now.

Cooking and creating beautiful masterpieces in the kitchen meant everything to me. Cooking had been my life ever since I was a little girl. My father was a decorated chef whose work was admired by many, and he showed me everything he knew. When he retired, he became a professor at Columbia where he taught culinary students how to consistently impress people with their cooking. I was his best student of course.

Then one day, my mother went to wake him up for breakfast and found him unresponsive. My father passed away from a brain aneurysm a few years back and just like that, my mentor was gone. I suppose part of the reason I enjoy cooking so much is because of the memories I have with my dad. Somehow, losing my job made me feel like I disappointed him. I was so close to the next step of owning the restaurant and serving the food exactly how my father always taught me. Suddenly, my career seemed to be in ruins. I started to feel

numb as I was drowning in thoughts of sadness. I poured myself a glass of wine then laid in bed until I fell asleep.

“Wake up girl, I think this is the package you have been waiting for.” I opened my eyes and saw Cori standing near my bed holding a large envelope in her hands. “Yes! I think that’s my severance package,” I said gratefully knowing I would have something to help me get by until I could secure other employment or open my restaurant.

I waited for an entire week for the package but when I finally opened it, I was upset all over again.

Half of what I was promised when I accepted the job two years prior. I immediately contacted Human Resources and of course there was a hidden clause in there that would allow them to cut my pension due to termination. I mean, I knew Alex was a jerk, but I did not think he was completely ruthless. Cutting my severance package was a low blow, even for Alexander Diamond and I was not going to sit by silently.

I was so angry that I did something I probably should not have done. I called my ex-boss.

“Hello, Jasmine.”

“Don’t hello Jasmine me. You know Alex, you are a piece of work. How dare you cut my severance pay in half? Do you know what this means? Don’t you understand how much I gave up for that stupid job only for you guys to dispose of me like I’m not the one responsible for awards that have brought the company millions? I am a world-renowned chef, my work is celebrated in the most prestigious restaurants in the country,”

“You are also the one who served shellfish to one of the most followed food critics in New York City after he specified his severe allergy to it,” he said.

“You know I’m not the one responsible for that,” I snapped.

“Your team served that dish, and you are responsible for the team so yes, you are responsible.”

“Are you forgetting that there has not been any proof that his recent hospitalization had anything to do with the consumption of shellfish? I don’t believe any of this crap.”

“See, Jazzy, that’s your problem right there. Your need for proof and confirmation of things. It doesn’t matter if you believe the guy or not. Heck, it doesn’t even matter if he’s telling the truth or full of crap. The media believes him. Our sales and ratings have dropped by more than 2% since this incident and you refuse to do a press conference to give a public apology.”

“I’m not going to apologize for something that happened in my absence, has not been proven, and is highly questionable. A public apology would ruin my reputation, you know that. I feel sorry for what happened to that critic, but I do not believe it was caused by anything my staff served because again, there was no proof of shellfish in his system.”

“Well, proof or no proof, we had to let you go and like I said, our revenue is down, and we had to cut costs, so we sliced your pension,” he said nonchalantly.

“So, that’s it then? Screw me, my life, and my career? You’re just going to throw me under the bus like this?” I asked.

“No one is throwing you anywhere Jasmine. You are doing this to yourself. There are easy solutions to things in life. Everything doesn’t have to be a huge battle.”

“Says the rich white boy from Manhattan,” I said.

“Yes, to the educated and pretty well-off black girl from wait for it... Manhattan. Jazzy, we grew up in the same damn neighborhood so don’t give me that rich white boy crap” he said

“You know Alex, I don’t know what I ever saw in you. You are a real jerk, you know that?”

“It was not personal, Jasmine. It was out of my hands.”

“Sure, it was, screw you, Alex.” Then I hung up the phone.

I was so angry I could barely think clearly. The worst part is I wasn't sure if I was mad at Alex or myself. Alex was wrong on every level but I'm the idiot who allowed him to get me in a position where he could do this to me.

I should have known better than to put my trust in Alex Diamond. I hate to admit it but part of me was still holding onto that sweet, handsome kid I dated when I was in high school.

I still remember how nervous he was when he asked me to homecoming our sophomore year. There he was the high school jock sweating in anticipation of my response. He was nervous yet persistent. What Alex Diamond wants; he will go to great lengths to get. He was still the same today but a lot richer, finer, and much cockier.

I was walking to my next class after lunch when someone randomly started playing the trumpet in the hallway. At first, I was confused considering the band did not normally meet during lunch hour, but I did not ponder on it long. I had other things on my mind. Like getting to my next class without falling in the hallway trying to walk in my aunt's stiletto heels.

Homecoming was announced the Friday before so that week, I decided to dress to impress. I knew that there was a certain somebody I was hoping would ask me so I wore high heels knowing I could barely walk in them to try and get his attention. There I was, 16 years old, my boobs just barely out of my chest and I mean grape-sized at the time trying so hard yet unsuccessfully to walk around with high heels on.

If you have never worn a 7" stiletto heel, don't. I learned at 16 that excessive height on heels is overrated. Despite the desperate need to stop trying, I wore heels that entire week trying to get my crush's attention.

Who was I trying to impress? Alex Diamond of course. Alex was charming. He would flirt with everyone and made all the girls feel special but with me, it was different. He was genuine during our encounters, and it seems I made him a little nervous at times. Making him blush, made me blush.

I pushed through the entire day and my poor feet were getting ready to give up on me but that Thursday, my girly persona paid off.

I was walking with a friend, Lauren, and she knew I was struggling to walk so she let me put my hand on her shoulder and practically use her as a crutch. We were casually walking down the hallway when the entire band came out of the gym and started marching towards me playing the song Crazy in Love by Beyonce.

Once the band got in front of me, they played the song to the end, and then the cheerleading squad came in holding huge signs. I was unsure if the presentation was for me or Lauren, so we were both just standing there waiting to see what was next. My heart began to race when the girls turned the signs over and Lauren read it aloud.

Jasmine Be My Homecoming Queen

I was excited but still did not have a clue who was asking me to homecoming. Then the school mascot ran in holding a dry erase board that said Yes or No with a checkbox next to each one and a red marker.

“I have to know who this mystery man is before I can answer the question,” I said. Everyone laughed and booed me jokingly.

Then Alex walked up behind me wearing a black suit, white shirt, black tie, and white air force ones. He was one fine kid. When I turned around and saw that it was him, I was at a loss for words. He knew I had a crush on him, but we never even discussed dating yet here he was asking me to homecoming. I turned around, grabbed the marker, and put a huge checkmark in the YES box, and everyone started cheering. He was holding a single red rose which he handed to me after I said yes.

That was the beginning of our high school puppy love. We were the most talked-about couple in school but no thanks to me. Alex was one of those guys that whoever he dated immediately rose to stardom. He was a major flirt but reserved

otherwise. We dated several months before sharing our first kiss on Valentine's Day.

I was 17 by the time Valentine's Day came around but my curfew did not change one bit. We went to see a movie that started at 9:30 PM but I had an 11:00 PM curfew. My parents weren't very reasonable, but we made it work.

We went to a park near the theater then watched a Valentine's short, which was like half of an hour-long. The park was good but watching the movie was even better.

We each sat down on a swing set and started making small talk. Then Alex had something on his mind, and he is not one to bite his tongue.

"Have you ever kissed anyone?" he asked

"Maybe. Why do you ask?"

"Because I want to kiss you," he said.

"Have you ever kissed anyone?" I asked

"Maybe. Why?" he asked.

"What if you're a terrible kisser? Then the next time someone asks me if I've kissed anyone, I'll be forced to say yes but it sucked." We both started laughing.

"Okay, I'll make you a deal. If you let me kiss you and you like it, you must let me do it again,"

"Okay, but what if I don't like it?" I asked

"Then, I'll get you some popcorn," he said laughing.

"Wait, you weren't already planning on getting me popcorn?" I asked?

"Of course, I was," he said. "I meant, a slushy," he joked.

"So, you weren't planning on getting me a drink with my popcorn?" I asked just to screw with him.

"Um, yes of course, I just meant," he started to say. Then I got off my swing set and stood in front of him. He looked up at me and jumped off his.

“Okay, I’m ready,” I said standing there with my heart pounding in excitement over what was going to be my first kiss.

“I’m gonna do it,” he said not moving a single muscle.

“Okay, I’m waiting I said,”

“I’m doing it now,” he said.

“And I am still waiting,” I replied.

“let’s go sit over there,” he said pointing at a bench near the swing set.

“Come on,” I said grabbing his hand and holding it as we walked to the bench and sat down.

He kept wiping his hands on his thighs, but they weren’t sweating so I suppose he was just nervous. I was ready so I decided to kiss him first.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Huh?” he looked up at me a little shocked but before he could say anything else, I pushed my lips against his and kissed him.

Then I pulled away to see his reaction and he was smiling. He leaned in and kissed me a little longer and then we just smiled at each other until a cop came and kicked us out of the park.

“You kids know the rules, sunrise to sundown. Come on let’s go,” he said waving us over. We got up, went into his dad’s Mercedes and he drove to the movies.

When we got there, we got our popcorn and slushy then sat in the back of the theater where we could keep trying out our newfound hobby without being sighted by anyone.

From that day on, our relationship was the perfect high school love.

I would never have imagined that my Alex would turn into this prick of a man. I thought I knew the kid I was in love with, but

he was full of surprises that I was just beginning to unveil.

CHAPTER 4



The next day, I woke up to the sound of the fire alarm ringing in my ears and Cori banging on my door and screaming for me to get up. “Jasmine the building is on fire we need to evacuate immediately,” she screamed from the other side of the door.

I jumped up and ran to open it. I could already see water starting to flood the floor although no smoke had entered our apartment.

I started running around frantically grabbing whatever I could get my hands on and throwing them into a laundry basket Cori brought to me.

“Grab my laptop charger!” she screamed from across the room. I ran in and grabbed her laptop charger and a picture of her parents she had on her nightstand and place them in my tote bag.

As I was walking out of her room, the water began to rise, and we started freaking out even more.

After quickly running around like chickens with our heads cut off grabbing our important documents, electronic devices, and other valuables, we opened the front door of our apartment and saw that the rest of the building was already filled with heavy smoke.

“Oh my God,” Cori said as she began to cough. Luckily, our most important items were in our purses, so we dropped the laundry baskets with everything in them and ran towards the stairs.

When we got to the second floor, the smoke got even more intense, and we were barely able to breathe.

We started losing energy as the smoke filled our lungs. I could see tears rolling down Cori's eyes, but I grabbed her hand as we kept pushing to get to the exit.

When we finally arrived on the first floor, it was engulfed with flames. We covered our mouths and noses with our shirts to try and protect ourselves from the hot smoke, but our efforts seemed to be in vain.

I looked into Cori's eyes and I could see the reflection of the fire before us. We were nearly paralyzed by the fear but determined to get out. I was not ready to die, and neither was she. We decided to make a run through fire where we noticed the lowest flames but before we could act, I heard Cori scream my name. When I opened my eyes, I thought I was dreaming. I saw a handsome man with dark hair, and I could feel his muscles as he carried me. I closed my eyes and when I reopened them, I realized that the nightmare was happening. I realized at that moment that I was no longer in the fire. I survived and who was carrying me out of the flames? None other than my nemesis, Alexander Diamond.

We were greeted by medics along with hundreds of other people, many who also vacated the apartment building to escape the fire.

"Where's Corianne?" I asked as I searched frantically for my roommate.

"She's fine, they're just checking her out over there see?" he pointed to Cori who was sitting down on a stretcher with the paramedics.

I sighed in relief.

"Alex, what are you doing here?" I asked surprised to see him.

"I heard about the fire in your building. An electric box exploded so there are loose wires and flooding everywhere. Someone on your floor got electrocuted and taken to the hospital," he said. "Oh my God, are you serious?" I asked him.

“Yeah, I was at home, and this was breaking news, so I jumped in my car and rushed over here to check on you. They said you and Cori were just a couple of the five people who had not exited, and the situation turned deadly.”

“Where did you find us?” I asked.

“Just hanging out by a little fire,” he joked.

“That’s not funny,” I said still in shock.

“No, it’s not. I’m sorry. I’m in shock myself if you can believe that. I showed up and they said to stay out, but I knew you and Cori were close if we just met you part way, you’d be okay, so I ran through the exit door once they got some of the fire under control and there you were,” he said.

“You ran into a burning building to save me?” I asked him

“Oh hell no. Most of the fire was already gone, it was mostly smoke,” he said.

“I ran into a smoking building to save you, does that still count?” he asked jokingly.

“More than you know,” I said smiling up at him.

“Can you please go check on Cori?” I asked.

“Sure thing. I’ll be right back.” He walked over to Cori to talk to her as the medics ran a few tests on me.

Then he and Cori walked back together. “Girl, don’t you ever scare me like that again,” she said.

“Cori, I’m so glad you’re okay,” I said putting my arms out towards her. She got closer so I could hug her.

“That was quite the scare huh?” she asked tears falling down her eyes. “This is crazy. I can’t believe this happened,” I said as I began to cry with her. Then she looked up at Alex.

“Thank you. I don’t know what would have happened if you weren’t here. We had no idea all of this was going on and took too long to exit. The fire alarm just started going off then, our floors started flooding so we just grabbed a few items then ran out,” she said.

He looked down and saw the large totes full of stuff that Cori and I had. “That looks like more than a few items to me,” he said.

“Yeah, we did good friend,” I said to Cori giving her a high five.

Then her phone started ringing and she stepped away to answer it leaving Alex and I alone.

“I’m glad you’re okay. I was worried that something happened to you,” he said.

“I’m fine. Thanks to you. Thank you, Alex. I’m still in shock honestly. We did not realize the extent of what was going on. I mean, we knew we needed to vacate and go through the motion, but there wasn’t any smoke or anything in our apartment, so we did not think it was this bad. The entire time we were filling up our laundry baskets with replaceable goods, the building was on fire and people were getting electrocuted? That’s just crazy,” I said.

“Tell me about it,” he said walking over and hugging me. It was strange considering we had not dated or been romantically involved since high school, but I suppose people do strange things after going through such an experience.

Cori walked back over. “Hey, Ray is coming to pick us up. We can stay with him until we know what’s going on with the apartment,” she said.

“No, you can go with Ray, I don’t want to impose. I’ll call my mother and just stay with her for a few days until I figure something out,” I said.

“You know we have to find a way to break this to your mother. No, we’ll call your mom together tomorrow. Today, we just need somewhere to lay our heads,” she said.

Just as she was finishing up her sentence, my phone started ringing. It was my mother naturally freaking out about the fire in our building. I assured her that we were fine, and I would give her an update the next day but her freaking out was not helping at the moment because we were still in a state of shock from what we had just endured.

“See? You know how your mom gets. Let’s not get her worried. Just come with me to Ray’s place,” she said.

“Cori, I appreciate the offer honey but there is no way I am going to Ray’s place. He’s your boyfriend and you know I love you both but nope, not doing it.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Ray with his guitar, you with your free life, I’ll lose my mind and end up going to a psych ward messing with the two of you,” I said not realizing she put Ray on speaker so he could hear me selling out as she put it.

“It’s like that, Jazzy?” he asked laughing. “Yep! I love you Ray and thank you for the offer but I’m going to have to pass.”

Ray is a great guy. Loving, thoughtful, and from my many sleepless nights, he seems to be pretty good in bed. The only thing is he’s a video gaming, guitar playing, football watching, all-man sort of guy. I can see why Cori is crazy about his amazing boyish charm. I love having him around and the two of them are great together but too much too soon would make anyone crazy.

“Why don’t you just stay with me?” Alex said carelessly like that was a plausible option.

“Alex, I appreciate you coming down here and saving my life and everything but no I can’t stay with you. I’ll just stay in a hotel for a few days until we know what’s going on with our apartment,” I said.

“A hotel? I mean, who knows how long it will take to get things in order, it could be months,” he said.

“All the more reason I can’t accept your offer. I don’t want to live with you for a few days, much less a few months. Again, thank you for coming but let’s not forget you fired me a couple of weeks ago. I’m still mad about that.”

“I know, and you should be. But you’ll be a guest in the house. There is plenty of room you’ll never have to see me if you don’t want,” he said. “I’m sure she’ll want to,” Cori whispered in my ears jokingly.

“Come on, Jazzy. You know I don’t bite,” he said.

“Unless you want him to,” Cori loudly whispered in my ears. Alex stood there pretending not to hear her but I’m sure the first responders on the top floor could hear her so-called “whisper.”

“Stop it,” I said softly hitting her with my shoulder.

“Come on, Jasmine, I want to do this for you. I feel horrible about what happened. Besides, you may need to seek treatment for a few days, and I have a doctor on staff who can take care of you and make sure there aren’t any damages from all of the smoke inhalation.”

“I’m going to get examined and then I’ll stay in a hotel. I think that would be best.”

“No. Just let me do this please,” he insisted.

I thought about it for a second. He was being kind and he did just carry me out of a burning building so I suppose it would be fine to lay my head in his home for just a little while.

“Okay, okay I will stay in your house,” I said.

“Great. Don’t worry, you won’t even know I’m there and I have a full staff to help you with anything you might need,” he said.

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” I said.

“Anytime,” he said. “Besides, we all know you do not want to move back in with your mom,” he said causing Cori to chuckle.

The medic returned and said we needed to get to the hospital so they could check and treat us for cyanide poisoning and ensure there was nothing else going on that could cause more problems later. I decided to ride with Cori and Ray to the hospital and agreed to call Alex when I was ready to leave.

Ray drove us to the hospital where we were both given a private room and placed on oxygen tanks. Several tests were run, and we were given medication to take for a few days. We felt a tad bit out of breath but overall, Cori and I felt fine and

were blessed to have gone through that experience with minor damages.

My mother was actively freaking out long after we left the scene of the fire. She wanted to come check on us but was unable to come to the hospital because she lived in Louisiana, and we were not expected to be there long. She remained on the phone with Cori and I on a three-way video call almost the entire time until Cori and I were released that night.

I called Alex to let him know that I was getting released and would take a car to his house since Ray and Cori were going the opposite way, but he would not hear of it.

“A car? No, I’ll pick you up, give me like 15 minutes and I’ll be there,” he said,

“No, I do not want to be an inconvenience, besides, the Uber is only 11 minutes away,” I said.

“Okay then I will be there in 11 minutes,” he said.

“Oh brother. Don’t get pulled over,” I warned.

“Don’t worry,” he said.

The three of us waited outside until Alex arrived. Then Cori and Ray left.

Alex got out of the car and opened the door for me then closed it after I sat down. He then walked to the other side and his driver let him in.

He sat near his door, and I sat near mine. We were like two elementary kids afraid to touch each other.

“How are you feeling? Are you okay? Do you want me to stop anywhere?” he asked.

“I’m fine thank you; I just need to get some rest. This whole thing has given me an excruciating headache,” I said.

“Okay, we’ll be there in just a few minutes,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said flashing a quick smile then turning to look out my window.

“Here,” he said handing me a tablet.

“What’s this?” I asked him

“It’s a tablet,” he joked.

“I know that jerk, why are you handing it to me,” I asked.

“My assistant will drop off some clothes for you in the morning. Just let her know your size and what you need. I also gave her your number so she will reach out to you directly,” he said.

“That is very thoughtful of you, Alex. I didn’t even think about what I was going to wear once I showered tonight. I just told her to go ahead and text me directly. We both know I do not need you to know my size,” I said smiling at him and he laughed.

When we arrived, his driver let him out and he walked around the car and opened my door for me once again. Sometimes he was a jerk, but he was always a gentleman.

When we got inside, I was immediately drawn to a huge fish tank in his living room. Then I found myself mesmerized by the breathtaking artwork he had throughout his beautifully decorated home. Black furniture mostly, with grey walls and blue lighting throughout the main living areas. Everything from his wall art to hand-crafted pieces was beautifully constructed and looked like they were hand-picked by an art connoisseur.

“This is a beautiful home, Alex, and these pieces are astounding.”

“Thank you. I have developed quite a taste for fine art throughout the years. I would love to take you with me on my next auction,” he said.

“I would love to accompany you to an auction,” I said as we continued touring the apartment.

“So, where will I sleep?” I asked him.

“I was thinking you can sleep with me,” he said.

“What? You know what, you are a real,”

“I’m just kidding,” he interrupted.

“You had better be because you were about to get it,” I said.

“Yes, I can see that,” he laughed as he guided me to my room.

“This is your room. You are welcome to paint, change the furniture, or do anything you wish to it to feel at home. Housekeeping comes in every morning but if you lock the door, they will respect your privacy. If you want to make any changes to your maintenance schedule, just reach out to Justin and he will take care of whatever you need,” he said.

“Thank you, but all of that will not be necessary. I should be able to return to my apartment in a couple of weeks at the most,” I said.

“Well, just know you’re welcome to stay here as long as you wish.”

“Thank you, Alex.”

“Anytime, Jasmine.”

I closed the door and turned to look at the huge suite and saw that there was a flower arrangement in a beautiful crystal vase on the coffee table of the sitting area. I walked over to read the card which read, “Feel better beautiful.” I wondered if Alex actually picked it up or if it was just a task, he passed on but either way, it brought a smile to my face.

The furniture was brown with white and gold comforters and overall décor. I was happy to see that the room was not as dark as the rest of the house.

I walked into the huge marble master bathroom complete with a large, rock crystal bathtub surrounded by candles. I did not want to come to Alexander’s house at first, but he may have had a hard time getting me to leave that bathroom behind.

I walked back into the bedroom and opened the doors to the balcony which was overlooking a beautifully kept garden. Every room, every scenery was simply breathtaking.

Then I felt a little out of breath and knew I needed to be recumbent until my health improved.

While lying in the bed, I was finally able to breathe and consider everything that was going on.

I was surprised that Alex came to my rescue. Surprised, yet intrigued. I could not help but wonder if he still had feelings for me or if something else was going on.

Maybe he was just showing me kindness in a moment of horror. Or maybe this was the beginning of something I thought we had lost forever.

CHAPTER 5



I woke up to find that someone had brought in breakfast and left it in the room for me. I got up to search for Alex, but he had already left for the day. I was surprised that he was not home because most days at the restaurant, he showed up well after noon so for him to have been out of the house at 9:00 in the morning was surprising.

I spent the day in Zen. I meditated, rested, and enjoyed the pampering by the house staff. From the bed to the balcony, then back to the bed I went. Every now and then, as a member of his staff would check on me, I found myself getting nervous. I kept thinking that it was Alex at the door but nope, just one of what seemed to be a thousand staffers he had in the home.

Why was I anxious to see him? I felt like a puppy waiting for her human to get home. I could not stop but I was not sure why considering I had seen Alex regularly for the past two years until he fired me.

Yet, for some reason I was in his house filled with angst every time someone walked by my door.

He sent a doctor to check on me and the staff continued to bring food and offer their aid throughout the day. I knew Alex had house staff, but I did not realize more people were working in his home than at the restaurant.

By 9:00 PM, I had given up hope on seeing Alex that night. I called Cori to check on her before taking a shower and

getting in one of my pajamas Alex was kind enough to have his assistant purchase for me.

It was time to turn on the huge television that was mounted on my wall until I dosed off to whatever show happened to catch my attention at the time. “*Bridgerton* will do just fine,” I thought to myself as I pressed play to embrace the wonderfully crafted Rege-Jean Page.

As I laid there watching the scandalous Lady Whistledown spread gossip in her newspaper, I heard a faint knock on the door. I thought it was someone else from the staff checking on me, so I didn’t bother fixing myself up. I opened the door and there he stood. Alex finally came home.

“Hey, you,” I said with a smile.

“Hey yourself. How are you?”

“I’m good. I’m great... actually. Today I felt like a princess thanks to you,” I said.

“Hmmm, then I need to arrange an urgent meeting with the staff,” he said.

“Why is that? Was I to be treated as a peasant?” I asked.

“You were supposed to be treated as a queen and nothing less,” he said.

I did not know what he would say but I did not expect him to say that.

“What has gotten into you? All the sudden you’re this super nice guy? I mean, don’t get me wrong. I am truly impressed with how well-mannered you suddenly became but come on, what’s up?”

I asked him. He just looked at me and said, “Goodnight, Jasmine.” Then he went to his room.

I texted Cori about how nice he was being, and she insisted that he was still in a certain mental state from the fire. She said that he was afraid something had happened to me when he picked me up off the floor, so he was probably just trying to overcome that scare. It made sense. I accepted her explanation and told her I would call her tomorrow. I got up and walked

over to Alex's room to offer an apology for being a jerk. I had not thought about how he may have been feeling and that was selfish of me. I got to his room and the door was closed.

I tried to knock but the door must have not been properly closed because it swung open a little bit but not enough for me to see inside. Alex called my name, so I thought he saw me and considered that an invitation to walk in.

"Hey, I just wanted to apologize," I said stepping into the room.

"Jasmine?" He jumped up, with his penis in his hands trying to hide it but I saw that his hands were quite full.

"I'm so sorry," I said as I ran out of his room and rushed back into mine. I wasn't sure what I saw, but it seemed as though Alex was masturbating and calling my name. *He did say Jasmine, right?* I asked myself to try to justify my reason for walking in while feeling embarrassed over the entire ordeal.

At that point, I decided to call it a night and let that part of my night bury with thoughts of yesterday.

I did not see Alex at all the following day which was great because I wasn't sure what I was going to say about what I saw. His staff continued to take excellent care of me for a few days until finally, I was started to feel like myself again.

On the fourth day in his home, I got up and finally decided to tour the rest of Alex's mansion before settling down to a table in his scenic garden when I continued my job search.

After lining up a few possible options, I went in to thank the staff for their hospitality and ask them to tone it down about 95%.

He had someone in charge of laundry, a couple of people for general housekeeping, people to handle the exterior parts of the home, a pool boy who I wouldn't mind seeing more of, landscapers, a chef and his assistant who went out for groceries and assisted with cooking, and a couple of other people I did not get a chance to meet. The house was huge but

Alex is the only one who lived in it so I can't imagine one man needed that much maintenance.

After touring most of his beautiful 13,000 square feet mansion and getting to know some staffers, I decided to send his chef home for the night so I could make dinner. It had been a couple of weeks since I prepared a real dish and felt I needed to do what I loved to help me get back in the right mindset.

Alex walked in just as I was finishing up.

I felt things would still be a little awkward after our encounter a couple of nights before, so I went right into conversation hoping he did not bring it up.

"Hey, just making a little dinner I'll be out of your way soon," I said.

He removed his brown messenger bag and placed it on one of his bar stools. He went on to remove his blue jacket and started walking towards me and he pulled it off his giant arms.

"What are you making?" he asked.

"I am making creamy spinach stuffed salmon in garlic butter over rice."

"That sounds delicious. Is there enough for me?" he asked.

"Of course, there is. It would be rude of me to make dinner and not make enough for you. Especially since I am living in your house," I said.

"I want you to know that you do have any obligation to do anything while you are here. Do you hear me? You are my guest and I want you to be comfortable. You don't have to cook at all, I have a private chef that prepares food every day. Just let him know what you want, and he'll get it done for you," he said.

"Yes, I met Stan," great guy. He made breakfast and lunch, but I told him I would take care of dinner. He agreed to step aside only if I promised to leave him a plate so I told him I would drop it off when I'm done," I said.

"Drop it off? You know where he lives?" he asked.

“Yeah, he gave me his address.”

“Okay, how about we have my driver drop that off for you? I don’t mean to be rude, but I try to maintain a professional relationship with my staff, I hope you understand.”

“I do. I’m sorry I overstepped. We just hit it off and next thing I knew, I was dropping off dinner,” I said.

“I’m not surprised. You were always the social butterfly. Everyone always loved you.” he said gazing into my eyes as if speaking for himself.

I did not want to get sucked into his world of mystery, so I said exactly what came to my mind. “Almost everyone.” Shutting down his moment.

“Now, if you want a taste of this award-winning dish, then I suggest you grab a plate.”

“Stan usually plates it for me,” he whined.

“Well Stan is not here. Now go and grab four plates please.” “Four?” he asked. “Yes, four. One for me, you, Stan, and now your driver,” I said.

“My driver?” he asked

“Yes. How rude would that be to have him drop off food to someone else and not offer him any?” I asked.

“I suppose you are right,” he said as he walked to grab the plates.

When he returned, I plated the food for his staff first which he went to deliver to his driver before returning inside to get his plate.

I put our fish on a bed of rice and topped it off with a lemon butter sauce, sprigs of fresh herbs, and grape tomatoes.

“What a presentation, thank you chef,” he said grinning.

“You are most welcomed,” I said as I walked and placed his dish on the table. Then I placed mine next to his and we began to share our first dinner as roommates.

“So, how was your day?” I asked him.

“It was good. I met with some buddies this morning then I stopped by my office in Coney Island. How was yours?”

“It was fine. I spent most of the day searching for a new job because I was fired a few weeks ago but you know all about that so no need to go into detail. After that, I did a little laundry, met some of your house staff, which I don’t understand why you have so many when you live alone but I’m sure you have your reasons,” I said.

“I do have a large staff here. I guess I never really paid attention to that. My mother handles the staff here and she tends to go a little overboard with me sometimes,” he said.

“Yes, I know,” I said rolling my eyes.

“Oh, come on, give my mom a break she’s old school.”

“Okay, if you say so,” I said.

“I know. My mom can be a little judgmental and overbearing but she’s just looking out for me that’s all.”

“She told me that you needed to be with another kind of woman, that was more than a little overbearing, don’t you think,” I asked him.

“I know. I wish everything would have been done differently back then,” he said looking down in regret. I felt bad. I had a lot on my mind, but my intent was not to bring him down with me.

I put my hand on his. “Hey, just a little reminiscing is all. Life isn’t perfect and neither are people. Well, people suck in general so, you know. We just need to let things go and move on. How is your mom anyway?”

“She’s good. She and dad are still bickering more than they are breathing but aside from that, they are both doing fine,” he said. “How’s your brother? Did he end up getting married to his child’s mother?” I asked.

“Yes, Chad and Rachel got married, then Chad and Rachel got a divorce and last year, Chad and Rachel got married again,” he said. “What? Those two have always been on and

off but I didn't think they would keep that habit in their marriage," I said.

"Believe me, if it weren't for my nephew, I would have told him to let that marriage go but I want him to grow up with both of his parents in his life," he said.

"What about you? How are your mom and the girls?" he asked.

"Mom is still the same, she's doing fine though. Although sometimes, she still struggles to find a balance without my dad but she's okay. As far as my sisters, well they're not really "girls" anymore. They are both adults in college now," I said.

He knew not to ask about my dad but after asking about everyone else, our minds naturally shifted to thoughts of him. After my dad passed away, Alex called me the day of the funeral to offer his support and condolences. He called me a few times after that to check on me and then we lost touch again.

Two years ago, he called me and offered me a head chef position in a restaurant he managed. I was the head chef at a smaller restaurant, but this was a chain of high-end restaurants that catered to the elite of New York City, so it was a huge opportunity for me. The dream job for any chef. I played hard to get at first just to kid around but he said I would be perfect for the position and offered me an outrageous salary that only a fool would refuse. I accepted and there was a huge announcement on the news about me joining the restaurant and bringing my southern roots to the elite of NYC. The restaurant won 8 awards while I worked there. One just two months after I joined them. The position was perfect for me, or so I thought.

It was good while it lasted but now, it was over. I was no longer the head chef at the fancy Diamond restaurant, yet I found myself sharing a home with Alex. I would have never guessed that we would get past our childish bickering at the workplace and be amicable. much less, roommates.

CHAPTER 6



Two days shy of a week after the fire, I received a call from the property management company for our apartment.

“Hi, Ms. Hall?”

“Yes, this is she.”

“This is Tracey from Lakay Management, I’m just calling to give you an update on your unit do you have a minute?” she asked

“Yes. Do you know when we will be able to move back in?” I asked her.

“Unfortunately, not at this time but we are working hard to have the building fully restored in a few months.”

“A few months?”

“Yes, unfortunately, there has been a lot of structural damage that we have to repair before we can allow anyone to move back into the building. Now, I know that you are insured with us, so I am calling to see if you are interested in filing a claim now. You are covered for temporary housing if needed as well as any loss that you may have incurred during the fire. If not now, I can always email the link over to you and you can do it at your convenience,” she said.

“Yes, please email the link, thank you.”

I called Cori to see if she was contacted and she said she got off the phone with them a few minutes ago so they must have called her before contacting me.

“So, what do you want to do? I asked her. “Should we start looking for another place?”

“Not yet. I really like our apartment,” she said. “So did I.”

After we graduated college, we decided to get a place together and there were plenty of nice apartments but this one stole our hearts the moment we pulled into the parking lot. By the time we actually got inside to see the breathtaking 180 views of the city, it was over. We applied, put our deposit down and agreed to get on a waiting list for almost a year before we were able to move in. Our apartment was everything we searched for and more so it was worth waiting to see what would happen before moving to another one.

We agreed to stay in our current living situations until further notice. Now I needed to contact my mother to give her an update. When I told Cori I was going to call my mom, she said I should expect a call from her soon. “What did you do?” I asked her. “Nothing. Your mom called me, so I gave her an update. She’s mad at the both of us but mostly you because you haven’t called her,” she said.

“You didn’t call her either, she called you,” I reminded her.

“Well, I’m just giving you an update. Just wait, she will be on the other end of your phone soon,” she said. Sure enough, my mom was calling.

I told my mom everything that happened and that I was staying with a friend for a while. She insisted that Cori and I move back home until we knew what was going on with our apartment, but I turned that down quickly.

“Mom, Cori has a business here and I’m a chef,” I said.

“You were a chef,” she said.

I texted Cori, “Remind me to kill you later.”

She texted me back, “Sorry. She was grilling me,”

After arguing with my mom for almost half an hour about making my own decisions, I decided to text Alex to see what he would say about what the property manager told me.

“Hey, you busy?”

“Hey, Jasmine. No, what’s going on is everything okay?”

“Yea. I just wanted to tell you that the property manager called and said it could take a few months before we could move back in.”

I waited in agony for one hour, 27 minutes, and 19 seconds before he texted me back.

“That’s wonderful. I mean maybe not for you but for me. I love these Jazzy dinners I’ve been getting,” he said.

“Well, tonight it’s going to be Jazzy ordered pizza, so I hope you have an appetite,” I texted back.

He replied by throwing up emojis and that concluded our conversation.

I started considering making dinner but then I got a call from Cori.

“What are you doing tonight?” she asked.

“I don’t have anything planned, why what’s up?” I asked her.

“Remember Ray’s friend? The accountant I told you about?”

“Yes, what about him?”

“He wants to know if he can take you out later,” she said.

“Later tonight? That’s a little sudden don’t you think?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, do you not have time to book a babysitter?” she asked.

“Stop being goofy, you know I don’t have any kids,” I said.

“Exactly. So, nothing is stopping you from going on the date tonight,” she said.

“You’re forgetting one thing,” I said

“What’s that?”

“I live with Alex, remember?”

“Yeah, and? The two of you are not dating. You’ve been there almost a week and he hasn’t so made any advancements towards you. I don’t think there’s anything between the two of you that you would be compromising by going on one date,” she said.

Besides, he’s not going over there. Just meet him at the restaurant,” she insisted.

“Oh boy. This just feels like a bad idea,” I said.

“So, is that a yes?”

“Yeah, why not,” I said.

“But I don’t have anything to wear, you feel like shopping?”

“Already got you covered. I saw the cutest dress on my way home from work and I bought it for you along with matching heels. I’ll come by to drop it off,” she said.

“You are perfect, you know that,” I said.

“I learn from the best,” she said then we hung up the phone.

She scheduled the date at 8:00 PM so I had plenty of time to wash and straighten my hair.

By the time I was done, Cori was already at the house to help me get dressed.

She brought me a beautiful beige dress sequin split dress.

I started to slip the dress on, but she stopped me to give me the push-up bra that she brought for me to wear with it. I changed into that and then she zipped me up. The dress was knee length, but the split was all the way up my thigh. The front was somewhat reserved until I put on the push up bra.

My boobs stood up demanding attention. I was a natural c-cup, so my breasts were a good size, but Cori always founds ways to enhance them to make them appear even bigger than they actually are.

Then I put on the black heels which had straps to the center of my legs. I completed my look with just the right

amount of makeup, then removed the rollers I placed in my hair to create a bounce.

I was done preparing for my last-minute date and I must admit, I felt fabulous. I hadn't realized how long it had been since I took the time to dress up and allow a man to treat me to dinner. I was solely focused on work so I forgot how nice dating could be.

When we were done, Cori went home, and I went to the restaurant to meet my date and see where it goes. Maybe something would finally go right in my life. Too bad with Alex Diamond around, you never quite knew what to expect out of life.

CHAPTER 7



My date decided to walk me to the door. Alex must have seen us walking up on the security cameras because as soon as we got in front of the door, he stepped outside.

“Goodness, Alex would it kill you to put a shirt on when you come outside?”

“I don’t know it might. Creatively at least I mean, can’t a man show off his six-pack in peace?”

“Please go put a shirt on! You are embarrassing me for crying out loud,” I said.

“Why are you so adamant about me wearing a shirt all of the sudden? You didn’t have any problems with me being naked when we first moved in together,” he said.

“Wow! We don’t actually live together it’s just a whole thing with my apartment but hey, dinner was great I’ll call you later okay, thanks for walking me up” I said as I looked at my date’s mortified expression.

“Oh, where did you guys go for dinner?” Alex asked now fully stepping outside.

“What’s up man, I’m Alexander, you can call me Alexander,” he said.

“Yes, Mr. Diamond, I am one of your family’s accountants. So are you two... um—” my date started to ask.

“Oh, me and Jasmine? Nah, I mean, we hung out a few times if you know what I mean but nothing serious. I’m not the settling down type of guy,” Alex said.

“And you’re her roommate?” he asked now feeling he was stepping on boundaries.

Then Alex started staring at me admiring my curviness in the dress.

“You look amazing, Jasmine. Breathtaking,” he said never taking his eyes off me.

At that moment, I knew my date was over.

I said goodnight to my date and walked in shoving Alex with my shoulder on my way in.

Alex stayed out in the hallway a few seconds longer than I expected him to before walking back in.

“Who was that guy?” he asked.

“Apparently, one of your accountants,” I said as I grabbed a glass and poured some tequila into it. “Alex, why do you insist on ruining my life, huh? First, you take away my job and now you refuse to let me enjoy myself on a date.”

“Whoa, why the attitude?” he asked.

“Because you just ruined a perfectly good date with a great guy. The heck, Alex?!”

“Oh, please that douche? If that’s all it took for him to run off, then he clearly does not deserve you.”

“So, I guess you have a handsome guy sitting around waiting to hook up with me?”

“Actually, I have one who wants to marry you,” he said.

“Oh. Well, why didn’t you just say so? Let me grab my bag and I’ll meet him in city hall in an hour,” I said.

“No seriously. I think I have the solution to both of our problems,” he said.

“What problems?” I asked confused.

“You need a new restaurant and well, I need a wife for ninety days,” he said.

“Stop right there. I already don’t like where this is going,” I said with my right hand up in a stop position.

“Just hear me out,” he said. “I need to become the next CEO, but the board won’t make it official unless I’m married,”

“What? That’s ridiculous. What does your love life have to do with you being a CEO?”

“I know it’s crazy but it’s one of the unspoken requirements they have. I guess something about making sure I’m stable,” he said.

“I don’t know what to say to you, Alex, but that sounds like a personal problem,” I said.

“So is your desire to own your dream restaurant,” he said.

“I’m listening,” I said suddenly somewhat interested.

“Ninety days,” he said. “I just need you to be my wife for ninety days to solidify the position. Once that’s done, then I can give you your dream restaurant,” he said.

“You want me to marry you so you can become CEO and you’ll give me my restaurant. Have you lost your mind?”

“No, but I may lose the opportunity to become CEO,” he said.

“Are you are seriously asking me to marry you right now? Is that what’s going on here? Am I keeping up? Because this feels like a big joke?”

“No, I’m afraid it’s not a joke, but it can be an opportunity of a lifetime for you,” he said.

“Well, then I recant my no to a hell no. I’m not going to marry you so you can become CEO. Not even for my restaurant. I don’t want a divorce on my record for your convenience. No. If you want your family to see you as a responsible adult, then you need to become more responsible. Marrying me doesn’t change anything. You are still the same you who wakes up at noon every day but have no problem firing your head chef.”

“That’s what this is really about. Jazzy, when will you forgive me for that?”

“I’m not sure but the answer to your proposal is no.”

“Have you considered that maybe you’re not ready to take on the family business as a whole? You wake up at noon every day, you live sporadically just doing whatever comes to mind at that moment. You would have to wake up early, go to meetings and actually do real work.”

“Hey, I do real work.”

“Really? You mean like the one day you finally showed up at the restaurant to fire me?”

“You know I did not want to fire you, I had to. If I hadn’t done it, I was afraid they would strip you of your entire severance package and leave you with nothing. I did it so I could protect you from losing everything.”

Then he walked up to me and grabbed my hand. “Jasmine, even though you are the most stubborn employee I’ve ever met, you know we have history. I could never hurt you.” He said.

“Well, you did. Now go away. I have to look for a new job so I can pay my bills and hopefully be able to scrape enough to save for my restaurant.”

“Or I can just give it to you. All you have to do is marry me, Jasmine. No strings or gimmicks,” he said.

“No strings? You don’t consider a marriage a string? And the divorce an even longer string?”

“Okay fine then we can just stay married. Plenty of people get married and separate without actually divorcing,” he said.

“Alex, you’re digging yourself into an even bigger whole. Listen to yourself. Those people probably got married for the right reasons, but it didn’t work out, they did not just get married for the sake of a financial or social advancement. Which is what you are asking me to do,” I said.

“What would we tell your parents? Do you know how long my mother has been waiting for me to get involved with someone? She says all I do is work without taking the time to build on my personal affairs, so she knows I’m not dating anyone. How would I fake my marriage with her?”

“Maybe she doesn’t have to know,” he said.

“You mean maybe I don’t have to tell her, but we both know that she would find out when your company announces your new title. I can’t do it, Alex. I’m sorry it’s just too messy for me,” I said.

“Okay, tell you what. What if I make you an even better offer you can’t refuse?”

“If it has to do with me marrying you, I’m sure I’ll refuse, but go on,” I said.

“We are opening another restaurant and the CEO gets to make all of the decisions from the menu to staff to location,” he said.

“Go on,” I said.

“What if I make you the head chef of the restaurant and give you full control of your menu of not just any restaurant but the newest Diamond restaurant right here in the city,” he said.

“How about no?” I said.

“Okay, what if I make you a partner?” he continued.

“Go on.”

“I can offer you... five percent partnership of the new restaurant,”

“Ten percent.”

“Okay, how about seven?” he said.

“Fifteen.”

“Jasmine, the purpose of a negotiation is to close the gap, not increase it. You can’t keep going up,” he said.

“Twenty,” I said

“Okay, ten,” he folded.

“Ten percent, plus, I still want to be head chef with full control of the menu and when my restaurant chain grows, I want to maintain my ten percent across all new additions.”

“Okay.”

“And I want to name it,” I said.

“Okay but that decision will have to go through the restaurant board,” he said.

“Speaking of which, I want a seat on the board,” I said.

“Of the entire company?” he asked.

“Just the branch that handles the decisions about the restaurants.”

“Okay, I can make that happen. But you must agree to marry me and stay married for the full ninety days. At least until I’m officially the CEO,” he said.

“I don’t know, Alex. Let me sleep on it. It’s a little crazy.”

“Okay, but if you think about it, it’s the perfect arrangement. You’re broke and need a new restaurant, and I’m single and need a wife. We are the solution to each other’s problems. I can even fund a restaurant separate from the company for you if you prefer that, this is a win/win situation,” he said.

“First of all, I’m not broke. I’m broke-ish. Second, I know it’s not real but it’s still a marriage. How are we supposed to pretend to love each other in front of our families?” I asked him.

“Now, Jasmine, we both know I’ll never stop loving you so there’s no need for me to pretend. You’re the one who has to figure that out, sweetheart,” he said giving me a kiss on the cheek.

I walked into my room, and he followed me.

“Just think about it, okay?” he asked.

“I will, just give me a day to process it.”

“Take your time, I’ll be right here when you wake up,” he said as walked towards a chair in my room, grabbing the remote to sit down to watch television.

“No, you’ll be in your room,” I said grabbing the remote and escorting him out.

“But my Netflix app keeps freezing,” he pouted.

“Bye, Alex,” I said softly pushing him out of my room and closing the door.

After he left, my mind started running wild. Could I really marry my high school sweetheart for a chance at my dream restaurant? I couldn’t. Then again, maybe I could. Imagine that. Me, Mrs. Jasmine Diamond. I was reminded of all the hearts and pictures I drew of Alex and I getting married when we were adolescents. They say things manifest in God’s time, not ours so was this a teenager’s fairytale come true or a nightmare unfolding? Only time would tell.

CHAPTER 8



“**Y**es, Mr. Bacon, I smell you and I’m on my way,” I said as I made my way to the kitchen the next morning. I had gotten up and taken a quick shower before throwing on shorts and a sports bra to go for a jog, but the bacon had better plans for me and I did not mind.

When I got downstairs, I was expecting to see Stan, Alex’s chef but it was none other than Alex himself dancing to *Don’t Stop Believing* while whisking what looked like red velvet batter. He was wearing a blue muscle shirt with black performance pants and socks. His hands were completely covered in flour as he began to pour the batter into the waffle maker.

“Good morning, Alex. I see you’ve made quite the breakfast here.” I walked over to his beautiful white kitchen island to take a closer look at the dishes. “Yummy is this quiche?” I asked.

“Yes, it is. Now, when you taste it, your mouth may have an orgasm chef, so I want you to prepare yourself,” he bragged.

“Oh please, no one makes quiche like me, but I will give it a try,” I said taking a small piece and stuffing it in my mouth. I had to admit, it was one of the best I had ever had only beaten by my father’s secret recipe. I started to moan as I chewed on it pretending to have an orgasm and Alex started laughing.

“Okay, what do you need help with?” I asked as I walked around and grabbed an apron that was hanging near the stove.

“You chefs with your aprons,” he said.

I just laughed and walked over to taste the batter. “This is good but it’s missing one thing,” I said. I added a little almond extract to the batter to enhance the flavor a little bit and Alex was impressed at how much it added to the taste.

I peeled the potatoes and asked him how he wanted them cut and he asked me to shred them for hash browns.

“Okay but you mind telling me who is going to eat all of this food?”

“I figured we can send one to Stan, give the driver a plate, and share the rest with the staff,” he said.

“Aww, that’s sweet. Okay, hash browns coming right up,” I said.

“No, chef, I’m not making hash browns, I need you to cut the potatoes in shreds but we’re going to lay them on a pan and make a cheesy breakfast bake that will have you wondering why I’m not the award-winning chef here,” he said.

“I can’t wait to taste it,” I said preparing everything and setting it aside for Alex to make his bake.

Then he walked next to me to prepare it. “Okay, chef, so the first thing we are going to do is put the bacon in the pan then cook it to perfection.” We placed the bacon on the pan then put it in the oven until it was sizzling.

Then we removed the pan and took the bacon out leaving the bacon grease to cook the potatoes.

“Now, chef, we’ll season the hash brown with a little salt, paprika, garlic, onions, and fresh thyme,” he said as he added the different ingredients to the potatoes. Then we put it in the pan right on top of that bacon grease for a crispy texture and cooked it for 20 minutes. When the potatoes were done, we spread cheese across the top and cracked the eggs, and placed them evenly throughout the pan. After that, he added the bacon, ham, and a little more cheese before placing it back in the oven for baking.

We cleaned up our workspace while it cooked bumping into each other several times.

When the casserole was done, he removed it from the oven and placed it on the counter. I immediately began chopping green onions to garnish the dish.

“There you go again doing big chef things,” he said.

“Me doing big chef things? You’re the one who just prepared a gourmet breakfast. I must admit, I’m impressed,” I said tapping his nose.

“Thank you. It’s been so long since I cooked anything I forgot how much I enjoyed the art of preparing a magnificent dish,” he said.

“I do remember how much you loved to cook in high school. It was one of the most notable things we shared was our love of making and serving delicious food. I always thought you were going to join me in culinary school so we could build that restaurant we use to talk about. Remember?” I said smiling.

“How could I forget?” he said. “We practically thought of everything, even specialty drinks remember that menu we made?”

“Yes, with your famous ketchuppied French fries?” I laughed.

“Man, those days were remarkable. We had big dreams about our restaurant back then,” he said.

“What happened? Why did you stop cooking?” I asked him.

“I needed to take my place in the family business. Sure, I love cooking, but I have a duty to uphold the family legacy,” he said.

“Are you happy with the decision?” I asked him.

“I’m happy about this breakfast. How about we get some food in our system?” he said.

He prepared our plates then we went to sit outside where his staff had already prepared the table with a small mimosa bar made to order.

“Mimosa ma’am?”

“Yes, passionfruit please.”

The woman handed me my drink then made one for Alex then we enjoyed our mouthwatering breakfast.

He told the staff that there was plenty of food and to help themselves which was nice. It was the first time Alex cooked although he had lived in that house for a few years, so he wanted to share his natural talent with everyone.

After our amazing breakfast, Alex showered and left for work. It was nice seeing him in his natural element. We are both foodies and love preparing and serving almost as much as we loved sampling different things from around the world. Alex’s family owned an entire chain of restaurants so you would think fulfilling his passion of being a chef would be easy but sometimes, we get in the way of our own happiness.

After relaxing outside, I went in to grab my laptop and started browsing the positions available in the marketplace. I was surprised how much of a pay cut I would have to take for almost every position available until I remembered Alex paid me almost double the going salary at the time so I could accept the position.

The more I thought about it, the more I started to consider Alex’s bizarre proposal of becoming his fake wife. I knew that even if I decided to go through with it, there was one person I could not keep the secret from and that was Cori, so it was best to let her in on it from the beginning.

Cori would be the hardest person to hide the facts from. We had been best friends since high school and practically knew everything about each other so she would call my bluff almost immediately, so I decided to tell her the truth. Besides, I would need her to help me keep it as authentic as possible with my mother, so I called and told her all about it.

“Hello,”

“Alex asked me to be his wife,”

“Wait, what?”

“Alex, he wants to make me a deal and said that he would give me a restaurant if I agreed to be his wife for ninety days,”

“Why does he want you to be his wife for ninety days?”

“Something about having to be married to secure the CEO position with the company. I know it’s bizarre, but he agreed that once he is CEO, he would give me a ten percent share of the restaurant we build with his company and a seat on the board.”

“Why does it have to be with the company? Can’t he just buy you the restaurant and hand it to you? Or better yet, give you the money and you can buy it yourself?” she asked.

“Yes, we can go that route, but I would be a co-owner of a diamond restaurant. It’s a much bigger opportunity than starting from scratch,” I said.

“That’s true. I mean, what did you say?”

“At first I said no but agreed to think about it,” I said.

“I think you should do it,”.

“Really?”

“Yeah. You only live once, right? Why not marry the guy you love and build a business together?” she said.

“That’s not exactly the scenario here,” I said.

“Tomato-tomato. I say go for it.”

“You don’t think it’s crazy?” I asked her.

“Oh yeah it’s definitely crazy. I mean, you guys are like, weirdly obsessed with each other, now you live together and you’re getting married for a predetermined period to get ahead and then divorcing, the whole thing is insane but so is life in general so, go for it my friend. Marry the love of your life,” she said.

“You know, sometimes I regret telling you so much of my personal affairs,” I said.

She just laughed then we hung up the phone.

I got my best friend's approval to move forward with the scheme, but my heart still needed convincing.

CHAPTER 9



The following night, I made a pot roast for dinner with potatoes au gratin and grabbed a fancy bottle of wine from the wine cellar so we could celebrate. I decided to accept Alex's proposal but waited to tell him at the dinner table.

He had been on a call since coming home a few minutes prior, so I set everything and waited for him to finish his call. He walked past me, and I smacked his butt playfully calling him a stud.

He stopped and whispered in my ear, "don't start what you can't finish," then kissed my cheek before running to his call.

It was a friendly, platonic kiss on the cheek, but it was from Alex. His soft, long, and sensual kisses have always left me filled with butterflies. The friendly kiss on the cheek made me drop everything and daydream about the times that we shared when we were just kids. I used to sit around and doodle hearts with our names in the center all day long and they always concluded with forever.

Alex and Jasmine forever... A and J forever... Mr. and Mrs. Diamond, forever. So many pages of perfectly good notebook paper were used to delineate what turned out to be an adolescent dream.

Little did I know that the dream, was going to manifest in real life, but not in the way that I imagined it.

Alex came in and suddenly his face looked distraught.

"Family?" I asked.

“Family,” he nodded.

“What happened?”

“Nothing important. You know them,”

“Family business must be a pain,” I said. I’d known Alex for over ten years. I knew his family. I had gone to plenty of dinners at his home when we were in school. I was there for the birth of his brother’s firstborn. I was there when his dad got a heart attack and needed someone to take care of him. I was there when his mother got cancer and had to get a hysterectomy. They knew me as a part of their family. They were amazing people, but when it came to their business, and when it came to Alex, they were, let’s just say, less than perfect.

They were always grilling him and expecting him to do more. I knew that he was doing as much as he could. He never applied for a job after finishing college, even though he had been approached by plenty of Wall Street guys and Silicon Valley people to work for him. His parents wanted him to take control of the family business, but it seemed like they also wanted him to be someone that he was not.

They mistook his carefreeness to be carelessness. They thought that he was irresponsible. These were all Alex’s words, not mine. But he never bothered fighting for what he wanted, he always went the extra mile trying to make sure he kept his family happy.

This time, it was a little different. He was getting married as they wanted but only to get what he wanted. Maybe Alex changed after all.

“So, have you given my proposal any thought?” he asked.

“I have,” I said.

“And?”

“And, I will be your fake wife,” I said.

“Well, you’ll be my real wife just, not for long he said. Unless of course, you want to be,” he added.

“Not under these circumstances I don’t,” I said.

“Fair enough. So, it’s official? We’re getting married?” he asked.

“We’re getting married,” I replied.

“Whoo-hoo! Let me get my family on the line to share the good news,” he said getting up and going back to his room.

“I guess I should do the same,” I thought now even more nervous about telling my mother than before. My stomach felt uneasy, and my mind was all over the place.

It was, official. Alex and I were going to be husband and wife. I got dizzy just thinking about it. The truth is I was crazy about Alex. I enjoyed every moment we shared, and I hoped and hoped every night that he would hold my hands and tell me that he always loved me, but he never did. Instead, I got a fake proposal, good ole life.

I asked Cori to help me break the news to my mom, so we did it on 3-way to add more drama to the call to avoid too many questions.

“Mom, I’m getting married,” I said trying to fake the excitement in my voice.

“I’m sorry come again,” she said

“I’m getting married,” I said.

“To whom?” she asked.

“To Alexander,” I replied.

“Alexander?”

“Come on, mom, Alexander Diamond, you know him stop being annoying,” I said.

“Pardon me if I’m not immediately sharing in the celebration but I did not know that you and Alex ever dated again after high school. I know you were working for him, and he fired you, so how did we get to this engagement?” she asked.

I texted Cori, “Whyyyyy did you tell her he fired me?”

“Sorry,” she replied.

“I’m unfriending you after this call,” I texted her back.

“I love you,” she said.

Cori finally jumped in to help clean some of the mess she helped to create.

“People change, situations change. But hey, what’s with the twenty questions, huh? This is good news; you’re finally going to get a grandchild we need to celebrate! Save the questions for another day?” she said.

“Okay, but, Jasmine, is he forcing you to do this?” she asked

“No, mom. Come on, you know me better than that. No one can coerce me to do anything. I only act if I stand to benefit from the arrangement,” I accidentally said.

“Oh, okay well tell me then, Ms. Jasmine Hall, what do you stand to benefit from this arrangement huh?”

Cori texted me, “This one’s on you.”

“Nothing!” I said responding to my mom’s question.

“Oh please, Jasmine, I’m your mother. I know you. There is no way in less than a month, the man who broke your heart in high school, then fired you from your job, has won your heart and now making you his wife. Please, your mother is no fool just as she did not raise one. Now tell me the truth,” she said.

“Just tell her the truth, Jazzy,” Cori said.

“I hate you.” I text her

“And I love you,” she replied.

“Okay, mom. Alex asked me to be his wife for ninety days so he could get a CEO position and he would make me a partner in the newest restaurant,” I said.

She started laughing on the phone.

“Jasmine, are you kidding me right now? This is one of the most foolish things you have ever gotten yourself involved in,” she said.

“How, mom? I stand to benefit from the arrangement just as much as Alex does,” I said.

“Yes, you stand to benefit financially but you are messing with the affairs of the heart sweetheart, that’s worse than walking on fire. You know the rules, everything flows through the heart so you must protect it above all things. You’re selling your heart out,” she said.

“Mom, don’t make this a bigger deal than it has to be. It’s only for three months,” I said.

“A lot can happen in three months, Jazzy. I’m not trying to keep you from living your life or making your own choices honey, but this is a beast you’re up against,” she said.

“Okay, mom,” I said.

“*Okay, mom*, that’s all you have to say? So, you’re going through with this?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I thought it would be fine, but you’re making me freak out about it,” I said.

“Look, you’re a grown woman and you’re going to do what you want to do anyway but I will tell you this. Be careful, be smart, and be aware. Look, I’ve gotta go,” she said.

“But, mom,” I said.

“I’m hanging up ladies. I don’t want anything to do with this. Oh, and Jasmine, don’t be a fool and have a wedding. If you’re going to go down this dumb path, at least get it done silently between the two of you at city hall,” she said.

“Mom, it’s not real but I would still want you to be there,” I said.

“Not a chance sweetheart, but I do have to go, we’ll talk about this some other time,” she said then disconnected the call.

I called Cori back directly. “Cori, you were zero help on that call. And why did you tell her about Alex firing me?” I asked her.

“Hey, how on earth was I supposed to know you were going to be his fake wife soon? I was just venting to your mother about how audacious for firing you, things just took a complete turn I never could have seen coming,” she said.

“Yeah, I know. I’m not mad at you really, just a little overwhelmed,” I said.

“I know, this is a lot to take in and we both knew hiding the truth from your mom would not be easy although it would have been nice,” she said.

We stayed on the phone for a while until I found myself laughing again.

Then Alex came to the door, and I told Cori I would call her back.

“Hey,” he said

“Hey,”

“Is everything okay with your mom?” he asked.

“Not really, you know my mother,” I said

“Yeah, I was scared for you when I overheard you trying to explain the situation to her,” he said. “I just wanted to tell you that you don’t have to go through with this if you don’t want to.”

“I know that,” I said.

“I know you know that but, I was aggressive in our negotiation, and I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do,” he said.

“Alex, I am going to own a beast of a restaurant. This is going to change everything for me. I’m not doing this for you, I’m doing it for me. My mother does not understand it and that’s okay, but she will reap the benefits of my success once I have the opportunity to show the world what Chef Jasmine Hall brings to her table,” I said.

“I like the sound of that,” he said.

“I can see it now, a desert bar with some of the most decadent treats a person could long for,” he said.

“Yes, but that would be preceded by a fine salad bar featuring everything from a fresh variety to a touch of elegance,” I said.

“Oh yea, and our chef’s table experiences would start with only the best options money can buy,” he said joining me in my excitement.

For a moment, Alex forgot that he was not a chef and kept saying we as we discussed the restaurant the same way we use to ramble on about opening one together when we were younger. I know he was simply beside himself and did not intend on participating in the affairs of the restaurant but the way he talked about it was like he was taking a breath of fresh air. He chose to let that part of him die but Alex was a chef at heart.

CHAPTER 10



Alex and I agreed to fake a marriage so he could get the CEO position at his family's company, and I would finally get the restaurant I always wanted. The plan was solid. The only problem was trying to keep our real feelings outside of our fake marriage.

Cori started filling my inbox with wedding gowns.

"We're just going to city hall, Cori," I said.

"Yeah so? You still need to look fabulous on your fake wedding day photos," she said.

Alex walked in and I decided to get his input on the wedding. He was fine with something quick and easy at city hall.

"What are you doing in the morning? Do you want to go and get the license?" he asked?

"Tomorrow?" I asked.

"Yeah, I mean, you said your apartment would probably be ready in a few months so if you think about it, the sooner we start, the better. By the time your apartment is ready, this entire charade will have ended," he said carelessly.

"Jeez, such a romantic you are," I said walking away.

"Come on, Jazzy you know what I mean," he said.

I called Cori back and told her we were sticking with the downtown wedding, and I would be getting the license that next day so we could get it over with. Cori was silent when I

told her that, she was giving me the same reaction I gave to Alex when he said it so carelessly.

Then Alex's mother came to town and our simple plan blew up into a major nightmare.

When she got there, she showed up with several people including a photographer, wedding planner, florist, and just a whole team of people.

I could see the fear in Alex's eyes when I walked in and saw his mother sitting in the living room. He tried to excuse himself to talk to me in private, so I did not freak out or blow up, but his mother intervened.

"Jasmine, honey, it's been so long. How have you been? I'm so glad you and Alexander are tying the knot. I couldn't think of anyone better than you, dear," she said.

"Hi, I didn't know you were coming. What are you doing here?" I asked her.

"I'm here to plan your wedding, of course," she said.

"My wedding? We agreed to do something small in city hall," I said.

"Come now, dear, you are marrying a Diamond. We don't know how to do small. Besides, this wedding has to make some noise for it to be as impactful as we need it to be, so I'm not sure what you and Alexander discussed but there will be a wedding. Next week," she said.

"Next week?" I asked in greater shock.

"Yes, of course. Next week is Valentine's Day honey, can you imagine a better day to get married than Valentine's Day? I certainly cannot," she said then carried on with planning my wedding without me.

I walked out onto the balcony and Alex followed me.

"I'm sorry, I tried to tell her we wanted to keep it small but she's just so stubborn," he said.

"I know it's not what you wanted but can we just get through with this and get it over with? I promise no more

surprises,” he said.

“90 days,” he reminded me.

“90 days,” I repeated.

Then he walked over to me and put his arm around my neck and pulled me close to his chest. “Thank you. Thank you,” he said.

“Sure!” I said then walked into my room.

I called Cori to give her the latest update on my upside-down life.

“Well, if you’re having a wedding and they insist it be grand, then let’s get you a grand wedding gown she said. We started looking at wedding dresses, hair styles, accessories, and everything else I would need to fit the picture of the perfect bride his mother wanted to portray.

I left and picked Cori up then we went to check out a few wedding boutiques.

After trying on the first dress my attitude began to change. The wedding may have been a sham but there was no harm in having a little fun with it. I was going to have a dream wedding and that was something to enjoy so I decided to do that.

Alex handed me a card before leaving home and told me to go crazy knowing I am very reserved with expenses. Unfortunately for him, Cori was not.

We found the perfect wedding dress, but it was more than I was willing to charge on anyone’s card, even Alexanders but Cori was not going without a fight. She decided to call Alex on speaker.

“Hey Alex,”

“Hi Cori, what’s going on?” he asked.

“Your beautiful bride to be found the wedding dress of her dreams but she does not want to buy it because she says it’s too expensive,” she said.

“Put her on,” he said.

“Hey Alex,” I said

“Hey bride to be,” he said.

“Do you like the dress?” he asked

“Yes, but it’s too much, I don’t know why Cori called you,”

“Then buy it,” he said.

“Look, you did not even want a big wedding yet you’re willing to go through one. You may well do it the way you want. I want you to buy that dress and shoes and anything else you want okay; money is not an object. I don’t want Cori to call me again about this you hear me?” he said.

“I hear you,” I said smiling.

“Alright then, I’ll talk to you ladies later, enjoy your shopping,” he said.

I did. I bought a wedding dress for 35,000 dollars. It was overly expensive, but the gown made the fake wedding worth it.

I tried it on before it got fitted, and I felt like a real bride. Alex made my day.

Then we found shoes, purchased accessories, then scheduled my hair, makeup, and nail appointments. I had a wedding in one week, so I had to get everything done quickly.

By the time I had gotten back to Alex’s house, they were already preparing the yard for the wedding. I walked straight into the room without engaging, so his mother and I did not clash like we often did.

CHAPTER 11



My wedding day was approaching, and my stomach was in knots. I did not expect my mother to attend but I sent her an invitation so she would have all the details just in case she decided to attend my sham of a wedding.

I opted out of inviting any other family members other than my sisters to save myself from the countless explanations about why our marriage did not work.

My week was exhausted with different appointments Cori, and I scheduled in preparation of my big day. I took care of my nails first because they last the longest. I got them out of the way early so it was one less thing to worry about. Not the mention, a standard pedicure could easily take two hours and I did not have that much free time the final days leading up to the wedding.

The day after my nails, I went and got my hair dyed a cinnamon mocha color. People often told me I looked like Naomi Campbell and I don't see it, but our complexion was close, and she looked lovely in that brown colored hair, so I figured who better than her to borrow a hair color from.

I started to leave my hair curly but decided to straighten it the first time so that it was easy to manage the morning of the wedding.

I was barely home that week, so I did not see much of the wedding arrangements or overall décor until the night before.

I learned that Alex and his mother left to take care of a small business matter, so I went to see how the wedding décor

was coming along.

I walked out and followed a trail of flowers which led to the section where the ceremony was going to take place. When I got there, I was in awe of just how beautiful the floral arrangements were. Large magnolia flower blooms mixed with smaller flowers on long stems placed inside tall crystal vases. Each vase had long crystal strings dangling on the side to enhance the overall appearance of the beautifully constructed piece.

I then walked over to the large tent that was prepared for the reception and it was magnificent. White and gold Just like I always wanted; but how did they know? Everything was so beautiful I could sit out there forever daydreaming about what my wedding day should have been and in another life, maybe would have been. As I sat there admiring my beautiful wedding decorations, Alex walked up.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“I love it. It’s exactly the wedding I always wanted,” I said.

“Well, almost exactly like the wedding you always wanted. I couldn’t get Celine Dion here by this Saturday, she has other obligations,” he said.

“You tried to bring Celine Dion to the wedding?” I asked

“Well, I tried to book her. I don’t actually know her personally or anything. But there was just no way to get her here,” he said.

“Awww, you did that for me?” I asked.

“Yeah, of course.” He said.

“Why are you putting so much effort towards something that’s not even real?” I asked him.

He walked over and sat down next to me.

“Well, if I’m being completely honest with myself, I’ll probably never have another wedding so I may as well do it right this time. Besides, you’ve been amazing about all of this. Even though this wedding isn’t quite the fairytale wedding you

may have hoped for, I want to make sure it's at least perfect for you," he said.

"It is, it's perfect," I said staring into his eyes.

He started running his hand through my hair as he looked into my eyes. "I like this color on you. It really brings out your hazel eyes," he said.

"Thanks for saying that, I didn't think you would notice that I died it," I said.

"I notice more than you think," he said.

He held my chin, leaned in, and pressed his lips against mine. Then he closed his eyes as he began to kiss me.

"My my my," we heard his mother say as she walked towards us. You two be careful. We wouldn't want this thing getting messy," she said. Then she continued strolling down the yard.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" he asked me.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I said.

We walked inside and he walked me to my door.

"Goodnight, Jasmine."

"Goodnight, Alex,".

I went into my room with Alex on my mind, but I knew his mother was right, we did not want things to get messy.

The next morning, it was officially my wedding day. By the time I woke up, my hair and makeup artists had already arrived, but I was in no real hurry to get started. I need to find a way to calm my nerves, so I did not leave Alex standing at the altar.

I filled the tub with warm water and bath crystals. Then I added a little coconut milk bath soak and a stress relief bath bomb. Then I lit every candle in the bathroom, turned off the lights, and turned on the jets.

I stepped in and slowly lowered my body under the warm water. As I began to. Then I applied a face mask to enjoy

ultimate relaxation while exfoliating to get the fresh face look, I wanted for my wedding. The ceremony was scheduled to start at 3:00 PM so I knew I had plenty of time to get ready.

As I was in a deep state of meditation, I heard someone knock on the door then slowly open it.

“I know this girl is not taking a damn bubble bath right now.”

I washed off my face to see Cori standing by the bathroom door and shaking her head in disbelief.

“What? What time is it? I have plenty of time,” I said

“Oh, do you? It’s almost noon,” she said.

“I went into the shower around 10:00 AM, I was surprised I was in there for over two hours. I dozed off a couple of times, but my intention was to be out by 11:00 AM.

“Okay, please let the ladies know I’m coming out now. And see if the staff has offered them food and drinks, please,” I yelled while she was walking out.

I quickly got out to finally start getting ready for my wedding.

We started with my hair. My hairdresser straightened it again to smooth it out and then added some curls for volume.

Then she pinned it up so I could wear my wedding dress without messing it up too much. After putting the dress on, she styled my hair into an updo.

Then it was time for makeup. My makeup was a little bit heavy with gold on my eyelids and bright red on my lips, but it all came together at the end for a nice, classy finish. Once my makeup was done, I added my accessories, and I was ready to fake it.

I found myself getting cold feet a few times but was quickly reminded that it was just a 90-day scheme.

When I got outside, I sat in the designated area waiting for my cue to walk down the aisle. While I sat there waiting for the piano player to start playing the indispensable classic, *Here*

comes the bride, I realized something that I had not had a minute to dwell on since the announcement of my wedding.

I did not have anyone to give me away. I was suddenly overwhelmed with despair. Suddenly, thoughts of my father filled my mind as I fought to hold back tears.

“Come on Jasmine, don’t mess up your makeup,” I told myself as if that was a good enough reason not to cry for the loss of the most important man in my life, my father was gone, and I was going to have to walk down the aisle alone.

As I sat there having second thoughts about the insane wedding, I was getting ready to have, my mother walked in.

“Mom,” I said as I got up to hug her.

“Mom, I don’t think I can go through with this,” I said.

“What’s wrong? I thought you said you thought this thing through, and this is what you wanted to do?” she said.

“I thought I did, I thought I was okay with it all but now, sitting here all alone thinking about dad not being able to walk me down the aisle is making me second guess this agreement,” I said.

“Well, if that’s the reason you’re second-guessing it then you may as well finish what you started. Honey, I know you miss your dad. I miss him too and so do your sisters. It was his time to go so we just have to accept God’s plans,” she said.

“But you still have me, and no one says a woman can’t give her daughter away,” she said as she put her hand out for me to grab it.

I reached out and held it. “You look, beautiful baby,” she said.

“Come on, let’s get you married-ish,” she said, and we both laughed.

I was so grateful that she came. I held her hand as we walked out to face over 200 people who had come to witness our marriage.

“My mother walked me down the aisle and handed me off to Alex before stepping away. I saw two familiar faces in the audience filled with strangers. My sisters came to my fake wedding.

When I finally arrived at the front and saw Alex, he looked at me with pure love in his eyes,

“You are the most beautiful bride this city has ever seen,” he said.

“Thank you, and you the most handsome groom,” I said.

There I stood in my white, draped, long train gown with my hair in a beautiful updo and face covered by a blush, silk veil.

Alex was in a white, shawl-collar tuxedo. He shaved differently that morning leaving more hair than usual on his face. It gave him a slightly rugged yet mind-blowing, attractive, clean look.

We stood there gazing into each other’s eyes as the preacher went through all the ceremonial norms.

We lost sight of our surroundings as we were deeply mesmerized by one another until it was finally coming to an end. We heard the marriage officiant bring the ceremony to a close with the famous, “I now pronounce you man and wife, you may now kiss the bride.”

Without a second thought, Alex pulled me close. As he inched closer to me, I could smell the faint scent of whisky on his breath. *He kissed me last night.* That’s what I needed to remind myself to put my mind at ease. He put his hand on my back and I watched as his lips slowly approached mine with intension. We were fake married but when our lips touched, I could feel electricity growing in intensity until suddenly, we parted and returned to the moment where everything was no longer perfect and we were once again, living a lie.

CHAPTER 12



The bride and groom will share their first dance.

Everyone remained silent as we walked onto the dance floor. “A dance? Alex, I did not think we would have a dance, I didn’t choose a song or anything,” I whispered.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you covered,” he said.

I was curious to see what Alex had up his sleeve.

I did not have a clue what he would play but I knew at that point, I just needed to go with the flow, so we walked to the center of the dance floor and waited for the song to play.

Alex and I walked onto the dance floor arm in arm. The lights were off, and we were standing in the spotlight.

I was expecting a Celine Dion song, Luther Vandross, or maybe even Adele but that would be too simple. The world of Alexander Diamond was full of surprises and that was no different when we shared our first dance to celebrate our fake wedding.

Just as the crowd started to make a little bit of noise from the elongated commencement of our much-anticipated dance, the music started playing loudly and it was the song he asked me to homecoming to those many years ago. Crazy in Love, by Beyonce.

The song started playing and Alex immediately started dancing. I was caught off guard, so I just laughed at him at first as he was doing all sorts of bad moves on the dance floor.

“Oh my God, Alex what are you doing?”

“I’m dancing baby,” he said as he continued to move his body.

Then he started walking side to side as if that fit into some category that would remotely resemble a dance,”

“Stop it Alex, you’ll scare the children,” I joked.

“Oh yeah? Think you can do better?” he asked.

“Definitely,” I said as I started moving my body to the beat.

Then he grabbed my hand and pulled me to the center of the room, and I danced with him. Everyone laughed and danced along as we playfully danced our first dance.

After our dance, we walked to our seats to indulge in some of the delicious food his mother hand-picked for us.

As everyone was wrapping up their food, his brother decided it was time to make a toast.

“Alex, bro. I’m happy for you man. I never thought any woman would be crazy enough to settle down with you, but I was wrong. I almost forgot all about your high school love that you never got over. Welp, you got her back man, kudos to you. I’m happy for both of you. Jasmine, welcome to the family,” he said. “Then he raised his glass, “A toast to the beautiful bride and groom.” Everyone raised their glasses and repeated, “To the bride and groom,” before taking a sip of their champaign.

“He doesn’t know, does he?” I asked Alex.

“Hell no, that drunken fool would tell the entire room,” he said.

“That was a nice toast thought,” I said.

“Yeah, I suppose it was.”

He looked at me and raised his glass, “To the most beautiful bride in the world,” he said

“To the most handsome groom in the room,” I joked.

“I’m not toasting to that. Not after I gave you to sexy shadow shave, I see you can’t turn away from. And I know you like this haircut,” he said. We both laughed and raised our glasses again to see if we could successfully have a toast between the two of us.

I raised my glass, “To happy endings,” I said

“To happy endings,” he repeated.

After our toast, we walked around to thank everyone. Overall, it was an okay day but at times while we spoke to Alex’s parent’s friends and partners, it seemed as though Alex was overcompensating. I liked when he was just being himself, even if sometimes that meant being a jerk.

When the wedding finally ended, we got in his car and drove away. Before we left, people were asking about our honeymoon and Alex told them there was not going to be a honeymoon. Of course, no one believed that Alex Diamond, the billionaire restauranter was going to skip out on a honeymoon with his new wife so they just laughed. Except he was not joking, there was not going to be a honeymoon or anything else for that matter.

The marriage ended when we drove off.

The wedding was extravagant but, in my vision, there was a honeymoon. We would vacation to a private island somewhere to consummate our marriage and start making plans for a family. There would be happiness, hopefulness, and most importantly love.

Alex tried to give me a dream wedding. The perfect colors, beautiful flower arrangements, great food. Then there was the most beautiful wedding dress a woman could wear. The pampering, the surprise dance, my mother walking me down the aisle, and everything else he carefully planned. The marriage had an expiration date, but the memories of my fake wedding day would last forever. Alex thought of everything. Well, almost everything. He gave me the glam I wanted. Only he failed to realize that the dream only existed where love was present. It was almost perfect.

A beautiful day with nothing to look forward to except a divorce.

The wedding had come to an end and the 90-day divorce countdown was officially on. We needed to stay focused and keep our eyes on the prize. Alex's mother made it clear. Some things must follow a strict order. Under no circumstances were we supposed to make love. Or even worse, fall in love. But that was easier said than done.

CHAPTER 13



The next day, it was almost like nothing happened. When I woke up, Alex had already left home, so I left to spend some time with Cori and when I returned, I made dinner.

When Alex got home, he joined me at the table, and we shared our first meal as husband and wife.

“I must admit, even though this is only temporary, I would have never guessed the two of us would be sharing a last name,” I said.

“I know right. It’s crazy how life just throws these awesome curveballs our way. One minute, I’m fighting to stay away from you at work, then I’m running to your rescue from a burning fire, and before you know it, bam, we’re married,” he said.

“Your account of these events are far different from mine. You seemed to go out of your way not to stay away from me at work, you marched straight into the kitchen every single time you came into our restaurant just to give me a hard time. And I wouldn’t say you were running to the burning fire,” I laughed.

“Hey, I was getting there. I was going to run right into that building to grab you and Cori flames and all. I would have carried you guys on my back and flown out with my cape,” he chuckled.

“Well, I still appreciate you coming out that day,” I said.

“I appreciate you doing this,” he said referencing our marriage.

“I just hope we make it to the end of the 90 days,” I said.

“Wait, what? Why wouldn’t we make it?” he asked.

“Don’t freak out. It’s just been so long since we have been this close and this personal. All of the sudden, I have all these unfinished thoughts and unspoken words that I thought I buried all those years ago when you abruptly left me in high school.

I know you said it was to take your place in the family business but, I guess I always wondered why I could not be a part of that plan. Especially since we were each other’s first everything and, well, I thought we were in love you know? I’m sorry. Let’s just forget all of that,” I said. I started looking down and playing with my food trying to recover from the sudden emotional flood.

He reached over and grabbed my hand. He looked into my eyes intensely and started to say something but changed his mind. “Jazzy... dinner was delicious, thank you,” he said before getting up and walking to his room.

I finished my dinner, washed the dishes, then went in my room to call Cori.

“Girl, I have been in this man’s wife for one day and I’m already stirring up trouble. I knew this was a bad idea. Maybe we can stay married but I’m just going to call my mom and go to her house,” I said.

“No. You know your mother will not let you stay at her house after going through with this,” she said. “Or she may force you to get an annulment and make you move back in permanently,” she said.

“Honestly, that’s starting to seem like a good idea. Think about it. I can move back home, find a job, and save even faster for my restaurant.”

“Nope. You’re not moving back home. No way,” she said.

“Why are you so against me moving back home huh?”

“Because your mom will make me move back in too. You know your mother worries about everything and if you tell her

your problems, she'll assume I have problems then we're back to sharing your old bedroom," she said.

"You can just say no Cori. Tell her you are adulting now and don't want to share a bed with anyone who's not sharing their goods with you," I said laughing.

"I don't mind. We both know your mom would know that a joke of such poor taste would come from you, and you'd be the one in trouble," she said.

"That's true. okay don't say that" I chuckled. We joked a lot about my mom because sometimes we felt like we needed to remind her that we are adults now and could handle the array of bad decisions we seemed to be prone to.

My mom has always been protective of me and my two younger sisters but shortly after meeting Cori, she considered her one of her daughters and treats her just as annoyingly as she treats the rest of us. When I was in high school, I brought Cori home because her grandmother had a 3-day study scheduled to track her sleeping patterns and she could not stay in the hospital with her grandmother so I asked my parents if she could stay with us that weekend. When my mom learned that she was the girl whose parents were both killed in the hit-and-run accident which was all over the news a few months prior, she became extra accommodating. Like everyone, my mom just felt bad about her situation and wanted to be there for her. That's how it started but as the years progressed, she got closer and closer to our family and now my mom considers her one of her daughters. It's funny because one day we were at a grocery store, and she was having a conversation with a co-worker. "Yes, these are two of my daughters Jasmine and Corianne," she said to the woman. The woman asked if Cori was adopted and my mother, being the sarcastic comedian, said, "No, why would you ask me that?"

The conversation got weird fast. Then the woman excused herself. "My mom turned around with a smirk on her face. Mom, why do you insist on getting on everyone's nerves in this city?" I asked her, joking.

“She was being rude. Asking me if Cori’s adopted, why would you ask a mother something like that?” she said.

“Mom, you are a black woman. Cori is white. It’s a fair question for her to ask.”

“Right Cori? Back me up on this.” I said.

“Nope, I’m with your mom on this one,” she said.

“What do you mean Jasmine, lots of black people give birth to white children,” my mom continued.

“Who mom?”

“Michael Jackson’s parents were black,” she said.

“So is he. You know that mommy. You know what? I’m just going to let you have this one because you are clearly out of control,” I said.

“What do you mean let me have it? I earned it,” she said giving Cori a high five.

“On that note, bye mom. “I said as my dad pulled up. He agreed to bring me his car and he would ride back with my mother so Cori and I could get to our student government meeting.

My mom insisted she would be in and out of the grocery store, but we had been there for almost an hour, and she was still going down her grocery list, so my dad came to our rescue.

He always did. Until he completed his mission on this earth as Cori always put it.

The more I talked to Cori about the possibility of moving back home, the more she reminded me how crazy of an idea it was, and I knew she was right. My mom would have let us both in without thinking twice but we needed to get our lives together. Well, I needed to get my life together. Cori was doing well for herself. She had several high-ticket paying clients she was coaching some with annual contracts, so her career was great, and she was happy in her relationship. It was me whose life was all messed up but not for long.

My parents raised a strong-minded woman who knows that life is always changing, and I must be brave and flexible. I was going to fulfill my goals. Every one of them started with getting my restaurant so I needed to start strategically planning my moves to ensure I achieved the results I wanted. In 89 days, my contract with Alex would be fulfilled and my plans would all start coming together.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” she asked.

“Not sure yet. Trying to figure out how to get through these days I suppose.”

“What do you mean, is he being mean to you? Do you need me to grab my bat and head over there?” she asked.

“No silly. He’s kind. I feel over-welcomed if you will. I just, don’t understand him. It’s like, he likes me, but he refuses to allow himself to cross the line. I know his mom said to keep this arrangement professional, but he was like that before she offered her two cents,” I said.

“Is he seeing someone?” she asked.

“Huh, actually I never thought about that. I haven’t seen him with anyone recently. He was dating a woman when I first joined the company, but I have not seen her in months. Plus, he doesn’t have any photos of anyone in the house,”

“What about in his room?” she asked.

“I don’t know, I haven’t been in his room.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Get in there and do some snooping. Let’s see what Alexander Diamond is hiding in his closet,” she said.

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Why not? We’re woman. It’s what we do. When we want to know something, we investigate to put our minds at rest. Do you want me to come, and we can do it together?”

“No. Stop with all that Cali. I am not raiding the man’s room. That is his personal space. I’m not going to invade his privacy.”

“Privacy? You’re his wife remember? What yours is yours and what’s his is yours so go in your other room and see what your spouse is up to,” she said.

“I will not. I’m just going to mind my business and let this thing play out.”

“You know what I don’t get, why was he so insistent of you staying with him in the first place if he’s not interested in sleeping with you?”

“Wow, Cali, classy.”

“No, seriously though. I mean, you guys dated in high school, and I’ll admit, you two were everyone’s hashtag couples’ goals at the time. But then he broke up with you without any warning and just like that it was over. Yet he keeps up with you because he called when your dad passed away and your mom said he insisted on paying for the entire funeral. But that’s not all, then suddenly, your dream job is open at his restaurant and you get more money than the chef who practically built the darn thing only to get fired. This is all just too coincidental, too tight niche and honestly, a little creepy,” she said.

“How many times have we talked about all of those things? You know it all lined up so don’t start trying to freak me out in the middle of the night when I’m in the man’s house. Now I’m freaking sitting here eyeballing the window in case I need to plan an escape,” I said.

“No, I’m totally kidding. All that stuff is weird, but it checked out. And we’ve both known Alex for years. He’s no killer. A big old softy if you ask me,” she said.

“Yes, we do know Alex. And he’s a complex man. It’s hard to get to know him,” I said.

“Every shell can be broken, and every door can be opened. If anyone can get through to him it’s you. Maybe he just feels bad about firing you like he said and wanted to make up for it by allowing you to stay with him. As far as him seeing someone, I’ll be there tomorrow so we can snoop around his room. Bye!”

“No...” I started to say but she disconnected the call. Then she sent me a text, “Good night sis, love you.”

“Love you too,” I replied. Then I put on a pair of headphones and fell asleep during my bedtime meditation.

CHAPTER 14



I had been married to Alex for about a week and we already had our little routine. He left home around 12:30 PM most days. He was not a morning person, so he slept in and started his days late which caused him to get home late. I on the other hand was up by 8:00 AM most days so I would get all my errands done and return home around two or three with plenty of time to make dinner before he got home.

The first few days, I made dinner, set the table then we would have a formal dinner. Alex started getting home so late I started taking a shower and getting in my pajamas to watch a few shows until he got home. One day he walked in and found me in my pajamas. I had plenty of sexy nightwear but did not want to stir up any extra sexual tension, there was enough of that already. I kept it clean with long pajama pants and matching t-shirts Cori and I picked up a few days after we were forced to leave our apartment so I would not entice Alex. He was kind enough to have his assistant buy me something before I was able to go out and get them myself but hers were a little showier than I wanted so I picked up a few myself.

“You look comfy,” he said. “I am. Why don’t you go and get comfy too then we could watch a movie while we eat dinner?” I said.

“Yes ma’am, I have just the thing,” he said leaving to go and get ready for our dinner and movie.

When he got out, he was wearing long red and black plaid pajama pants and a black, long sleeve shirt with a puppy wearing a red and black plaid Santa hat. “I knew these

pajamas would come in handy one day,” he said walking to the couch to have a seat. I put the food on the ottoman along with a bottle of wine and wine glasses. We spent the next 20 minutes trying to decide what to watch until we agreed to *Hitched*. By our 3rd glass of wine, we were up singing, “Put the weed in the coconut and light that shit up, put the weed in the coconut and light that shit up.” Then Alex felt the need to do the Kevin James’ part saying, “put the weeeeed in the coconuuutttt,” and we both started laughing.

Alex started letting his guard down and our interactions were a lot smoother after that night.

The next night, we watched *Couples Retreat* and found ourselves arguing about whether therapy works in relationships.

“Of course, it does, you just have to be open to the change that you want to see. If you show up to the session with a closed mind, then you can’t expect to achieve any results,” I said.

“All I’m saying is, it’s easy to get into a temporary blissful mindset. Sure, during therapy everything seems plausible. Wait a month, maybe six, or even a year after. That relationship will still fail because it wasn’t built on the right foundation to begin with,” he said.

“The right foundation? Many couples marry for all the right reasons, but life happens, and things change so they separate. Sometimes without any real cause or at least not on both sides,” I said.

“What you’re saying doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

“Since when do men ever say anything that makes sense in this woman’s world?” he asked.

“Never,” I said.

“Especially when you are a prime example of what couples therapy could be if you were a willing participant instead of just doing whatever you felt was right without discussing any of it with me first,” I said.

“If this is about high school Jasmine, then it is a great example. I was a teenager; I didn’t know what I was doing. If I knew then what I know now, things would have been different. If we stayed together then, we would just be living a lie and our relationship would have failed anyway so my parents did us both a favor by making me move, I wasn’t ready to love you like you deserve to be loved,” he said.

“A lie? I never lied about anything. You were my first kiss, my first love, you took my virginity and I thought it was the same for you. We were like, the perfect love story. Maybe that was a lie for you, but it was not for me. It’s not like we were twelve, we were 18 when we first made love on prom night. We both knew what we were doing and wanted to do it. Me mostly because I thought you were the one, so it didn’t matter but I was mistaken,” I said.

“You were not mistaken but as you said, life gets in the way of things. I’m going to bed. I have a meeting early in the morning,” he said.

“What time?” I asked

“10:30,” he chuckled.

“That is not early for normal people but for you, I suppose it is a little early. Goodnight,” I said as I flipped through Amazon Prime trying to find something else to watch.

“Goodnight beautiful,” he said. He leaned over and kissed my forehead then went to bed.

There I was, smiling from ear to ear again. I don’t know what it is about Alex that always made me elated when he touched me, but it was addicting.

CHAPTER 15



Alex and I shared dinner every night. The more we came home to each other and lived as one unit, the more inseparable we became.

“Guess what today is?” he said

“What?” I asked. It’s March 14th, our one-month anniversary,” he said smiling.

“It’s been a month already? I guess maybe we can survive this arrangement after all,” I said.

“What do you say we celebrate with a candle-lit dinner tonight?” he said.

“I don’t know. I don’t think it’s a good idea to celebrate anything. I don’t want to lose myself in our moments and end up getting hurt,” I said.

“Jasmine, I will never hurt you. We both know what this is, so I don’t see a harm in enjoying ourselves a little. Come one, let’s celebrate our anniversary,” he said.

“Just dinner, that’s all. I have another early meeting anyways so it’s not like we can pull an all nightery,” he said.

“Oh brother, two meetings in one week? How are you holding up?” I joked.

“Oh, the wife’s got jokes,” he said.

“That is not funny. Don’t do that,” I said.

“Dinner?” he asked.

“Okay, let’s do,” I said.

That night I wore a denim shirt dress and sandals I could easily remove to lie on the blanket. My hair was back to its naturally curly state, so I just let it flow on top of the dress.

Alex wore light blue shorts and a floral button-down shirt with sandals.

He said we were having a candlelight dinner but we both knew he meant a late-night picnic under the stars, so we dressed accordingly.

Alex instructed his staff to prepare a basket with everything we would need for our dinner. Once everything was ready, we jumped on his golf cart, and he drove to the area his staff had already prepared for us to enjoy our date. There was a dinner table set with food already plated and covered and then there was a large blanket on the floor with flameless candles all around it.

We got off the golf cart and walked over to eat dinner. “Lobster huh? I guess this is quite the celebration,” I said.

“Indeed, it is,” he said.

“We ate our dinner, then we walked around a little bit before succumbing to our blankets on the floor underneath the stars.

“Remember when we met?” I asked him.

“How could I forget? I got suspended for a week and both of my parents grounded me separately when I got home. I was glad I could do it consecutively or I’d probably still be grounded,” he chuckled.

“Well, when you punch a kid, you get suspended you know?” “Yeah well, he shouldn’t have asked you to the school dance.”

“We were in the eighth grade, Alex.”

“Doesn’t matter. Everyone knew you were my girl,” he said.

“Everyone except for me?” I laughed.

“Hey, I was going to tell you eventually. Just needed to work up the courage to say hi first that’s all.” We both laughed.

“I’m glad you finally got the balls to do it in the 10th grade. Homecoming was amazing,”

“Of course, I asked you, I grew like 10 feet the previous summer I felt invincible. Who else was I going to take to homecoming if not the most gorgeous girl in the school?” he asked.

“According to the boy’s locker room, Jennifer was the most gorgeous girl in the school.”

“The boy’s locker room? Who took you in there? Let me know if there’s anyone I need to track down and punch,” he said.

“It’s okay superman. I was looking for you and my friend Lauren convinced me to go in and see if you were in any of the stalls.”

“And then what happened?” he asked curiously.

“Well, let’s just say one of your friends had a really big...”

“Nope. Stop right there. I know my friends and none of them had a big anything so who’d you see? It was Landon, wasn’t it?”

“Why would you guess that?” I said sarcastically.

“He probably knew you were coming and started flexing or something. Geez, I couldn’t stand that guy and his freaking awesome British accent.”

“Jasmine, you look stunning today, Jasmine that was an excellent essay,” he said attempting to sound British.

“Come on, Landon was a nice kid. Besides, he never crossed the line, not once.”

“Yeah, he probably heard about what I did to that kid Billy in the 8th grade.”

“Oh yeah, I’m sure you’re a legend,” I said shaking my head.

“I still remember our first Valentine’s Day together, he said. You flew all the way to New Orleans to get me an autographed jersey,” he said.

“Well, I also have family there I wanted to see so it was a win/win,” I winked.

“See you left that part out. Made it seem like it was all about me, I see how you played me,” he said.

“Remember how much you tried to outdo my gift Junior year? You found yourself in that dilapidated toy store in Coney Island to get me a PS2?” I said.

“Oh yes, that trip. I tried to convince you to upgrade but, in your expert opinion cultivated by watching YouTube videos, the PS2 was the best console,” he said.

“I didn’t know the store was in Coney Island.”

“Yeah, the guy I’d contacted online told me he dealt in used and vintage consoles on Coney Island and was willing to give me two PS2’s for the price of one. It was a pretty awesome deal, so it was worth the drive. It was quite the experience though. I was sitting on the beach where the guy told me to meet him then a black van pulled up in front of me. No warning, it just pulled up fast and this guy walked out with like, four face tattoos, and a beanie and jumped out of it when the van came to a halt.”

“Wait a minute, that sounds like one of the guys who work for you. He has light brown hair, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s Jimmy. I met him that day and just couldn’t let the guy go.”

“He is a very resourceful man,” he said.

“Yes, he is, and ever since he made those two PS2’s happen for me, he’s been the man I knew I could count on for just about anything.

“Well, it sounds like you had quite an adventure,” I said.

“You have no idea, but it was all worth it,” he said. He turned my way and our eyes met. Suddenly, sexual tension filled the air. He put his hand over mine as we laid there in silence wondering what if and, what now?

CHAPTER 16



The next morning, I decided to take a long bath in the huge, jetted tub in my bathroom. Whoever installed the jets must have been a woman because they were hitting all the right spots. I found myself laying back, closing my eyes, thinking about Alex, and moaning to the thought of him being in there with me.

I opened my eyes and there he was. Standing in the doorway staring at me with lust-filled eyes. He knew he should have walked away but he wanted me. He stood halfway in, halfway out but could not look away.

He waited to see my reaction. If I would let him join me and we could finally free ourselves of the sexual tension between us. I put my arm in the water underneath the bubbles where he could no longer see them and started biting my lips. Then I gazed intensely into his eyes calling him over. He accepted my invitation. He must have been heading to work because he was fully dressed in business attire. He threw his jacket on the floor, then I watched as he started to unbutton his white dress shirt, his eyes glued to me as I lay naked in the tub, my breast just barely covered. As he began to remove his pants, I closed my eyes and continued caressing my body as I longed for his to join me. I did not want to see what he was working with, I wanted him to show me. He got in slowly. Then he laid on top of me and started kissing me passionately before showing me just how much he had longed for me. The love we shared was intense, deep, and potent. Our minds were afraid to pursue it, but our bodies indulged in the sensation of the immense chemistry that we never quite released, until then.

It was so intense I felt lightheaded. He laid on his back in the tub and I laid on top of him with my back on his chest. He was stroking my long, wet, curly hair as we lay there fully embracing the moment.

“You’ve grown a lot since high school,” I said

“So have you. Look at those babies. I remember you had lemons, when did they become melons?” he said.

“Hey, you know I was sensitive about those lemons,” I said splashing a little water on him.

“I’m kidding. Besides, they were perfect for the old you and these are perfect for the new you,” he said.

With his muscular arm on top of my breast, I started running my fingers up and down his arm admiring his biceps.

“So, what now?” I asked.

“Now? I suppose I should get to work,” he said.

“Oh right, you have a meeting today.”

“Go, you’re going to be late.”

“Okay, I’m going,” he said not moving one bit.

“What do you have planned for today?” he asked.

“Not much, just snooping through your room,” I thought to myself.

“Not sure yet,” is what I said.

We laid there a few more minutes, then I got up to grab a towel, and he followed behind me.

“Wow, look at you. You are sexy as hell,” he said.

“So are you,” I said admiring his model-like figure.

“Hmmm, we do make quite the couple, don’t we?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I said pretending not to feel all giggly inside.

“I’ll see you tonight?” he asked.

“I will be here when you get home,” I said.

“I like the sound of that,” he said. Then he kissed me on my lips and walked out.

As soon as I was sure he was gone, I called Corianne.

“Cori. Girl, we made love.”

“What? When?”

“Like, an hour ago.”

“An hour ago? What took you so long to tell me?

We were laying in the tub just talking.”

“What... Sex and a conversation? It must have been good.”

“It was everything,” I said.

“Look at you got your white boy back.”

“Cori, you know it’s weird when you say things like that cause you’re white,” I joked.

“But he’s not mine, it was just sex. Nothing has changed. When are you coming?”

“When am I coming? Well, something has changed after all. I’m on my way,” she said.

“You’re coming now?”

“Yeah, I don’t want to wait until later what if he comes home and finds us?” she said.

“Don’t you have to work? I don’t want you messing up your schedule to deal with my crazy.”

“I don’t have any sessions scheduled today. I’m just catching up on paperwork and that can wait. I would much rather we go through your husband’s closet,” she said.

“What am I going to do about his staff? I don’t want them to see me going into his room.”

“Aren’t the rooms on the top floor?” she asked.

“Yes, but they come up to check on me throughout the day,” I said.

“Well, we’ll just have to wait until they do and then we can go. And we will put a do not disturb sign on your door, so they don’t come looking for us. We will even give instructions before we go on our mission. Let’s give them all something to do and let them know we will be down shortly, so they don’t even come,” she said.

“Okay. Just call me when you get here,” I said then hung up.

When Cori arrived, it was go time. We asked the staff to prepare sandwiches and iced tea and leave by the pool for us.

Then we went upstairs and walked straight to Alex’s room. I thought my room was big but his was huge. It was decorated in a lion theme with a huge lion statue near the double doors that led to his balcony.

“No time for admiring his room girl we have to get to work,” Cori said already having gone through one of his nightstands. Then we started quickly going through things and mostly found business documents and a few bank statements.

“Wow,” Cori said as she was looking at a piece of paper, she found in a box in one of his drawers.

“What is it?” I asked walking towards her.

She turned the paper towards me so I could see. It was a bank statement from some bank we had never heard of with an account balance of over seven billion dollars.

“Sheesh,” I said.

“Sheesh, is right. If you don’t marry him, I might have to take one for the team,” she joked.

“You and I both know money is only one of the core necessities in life and not necessarily the most important.”

“What have you always taught me?” I asked her

“That wealth consists of four components: Health Wealth, Social Wealth, Time Wealth, and Financial Wealth,” she said.

“Exactly. So, marrying a man solely for his money only to end up miserable, is not true wealth now, is it?” I asked her.

“Hey, don’t use my teachings against me Jasmine,” she said.

“I’m just saying. Besides, you have plenty of money you don’t even use,” I reminded her.

“I do use it. We took that trip last year. Plus, I would love to buy my sister-friend a restaurant with it if she would stop being so stubborn,” she said.

“No Corianne, you will not be doing that. I want you to use that money to buy yourself a house so you and Ray could start focusing on building your future together,” I said.

“Jazzy, are you really lecturing me right now while we’re in the middle of raiding your sort of lover’s room?” she asked.

“Good point,” I said continuing to go through the box quickly so we could leave.

As we started going through the box, we saw a legal envelope with some documents in it. We opened it, quickly flipped through the paperwork until we saw something that stood out. It said Juvenile Record Sealed and the documents that followed were just a bunch of legal jargon. We started trying to decode it. Then we heard footsteps at his door and quickly returned the box to the drawer and laid down behind the bed. The person knocked on the door twice awaiting a response. We just stayed there quietly hoping whoever it was would go away but then they tried opening the door. I was grateful Cori locked it or we would have been screwed.

Once we heard the person walk away, we quickly restored everything to its original state then listened to make sure there was no one outside of the room.

We opened the door and Cori poked her head out to scope the area before we took off running for my room laughing like teenagers who were almost caught in action.

When we got back to my room, we started searching the internet for more information about the sealed juvenile record but there was nothing.

“The way I see it, it’s not that bad. Whatever happened occurred when he was a kid, and it was sealed so it couldn’t have been that bad. I think they have rules about the type of crimes they can seal even for a minor,” she said.

“So, what do you think? Should I just let it go?” I asked her.

“Yes. Let it go. If it continues to bother you, just ask him about it,” she said.

“Sure, I can just say “Hey, Cori and I decided to invade your privacy one day and found something questionable in a hidden box and I demand you tell me more about it,” I said. “How was that?” I joked.

“It was perfect except for that part about Cori. Leave me all the way out of it. As a matter of fact, I was never here,” she said.

“Oh great, so you want me to ask him about it and I can’t even blame you? That’s not going to happen,” I said.

“Then leave it alone. One thing we know for sure is it is a juvenile record. Lots of people do stupid things as kids, that’s why they came up with Juvenile Detention. It’s over now so let’s just let it go, okay?” she said

“Okay, I’m letting it go.”

Then we went downstairs to enjoy our sandwiches and tea.

“Hey, I’m sorry I brought the topic of your money up there. I know that can be a touchy subject for you,” I said.

“It’s fine. I’m over all of that. It’s just money. I did struggle with it at first. I felt like I was spending blood money you know. My parents were killed in that car crash and the person didn’t even have the decency to stop. If they did, the medics would have gotten there before the car exploded but they didn’t. What kind of monster does that? The worst part is knowing that the driver was never caught. My parents’ killer is still out there ten years later I still don’t have the closure I felt I deserve.

I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm sure the person feels bad or whatever, but it would mean something if they would at least come forward and tell us what happened and how they could do something so terrible. I just wanted closure," she said looking down.

"But that was a long time ago and they were both extraordinary doctors, so they did more than their fair share of service during their time on earth. Their mission was over," she said.

She looked at me and saw that I had drifted into thoughts of my father as she was reminiscing about her parents. She put her hand over mine and said, "And so was his. We just have to accept that they are gone and sometimes, closure it not an option," she said.

"I'm sorry Cori. I know it's still hard sometimes; you are so strong. It's so hard not having my dad around so I can't imagine how hard it was for you to lose both parents at such a young age," I said.

"It was but between my grandmother and your family, I've been okay. I truly believe that it was their time and I understand that. No one knows how long we have on this earth but dealing with grief is still a complex issue. We must keep in mind that it is all a part of God's greater plan. I get all of that. I'm okay knowing they are both smiling down on me from heaven. I just hate knowing that the killer was never brought to justice," she said.

"As far as the money, I have no problem being a millionaire. I love knowing I don't have to work which makes it even more rewarding that I get paid for doing what I love so I spend that money, and this just sits here until I find something meaningful to do with it. Speaking of which, about your restaurant," she said.

"Stop it! You need to do something meaningful for you honey, not for me," I said.

"But that would be for me. It would be great if we could have one conversation that didn't start or end with your dream

of getting the restaurant. I would be doing it for my sanity,” she joked.

“Ha ha,” I said as I threw her hair which was in a beautiful, long, blue ponytail towards her back.

After we enjoyed our little lunch date, she decided she would help me with dinner so she could take a plate back for Ray.

“What should we make?” she asked. “I don’t know,” I said shrugging. I was thinking maybe steak tonight but not sure. What are you in the mood for?” I asked her.

“Streak sounds good, but it has to be country fried steak,” she said as she made her way to the kitchen.

“Of course, it has to be battered and deep-fried. Otherwise, it would not be your idea,” I joked.

“Hardee har har,” she said with a slight attitude. “Say what you want but you know you love my deep-fried everything,” she said.

“You know what I need to get you for your birthday? An air fryer. Yep, that’s what you’re getting,” I said confident I selected the best birthday gift ever.

“An air fryer? So, you want me to trade diabetes for cancer?”

“Cancer? Girl you are so dramatic,” I said.

“I’m just saying. I still don’t understand the concept of an air fryer. What is cooking the food?” she asked throwing her hands in the air.

“I quit. Come on let’s deep fry some stuff,” I said following behind her.

After we made dinner, she left after reminding me that she was never there just in case Alex became aware of our snooping. Then she went home, and I went to take a shower before curling up on the couch to wait for my husband.

CHAPTER 17



Delivery for Mrs. Diamond. I opened the door to a package with my new last name on it. Who could have gotten me a gift? No one really knew about my marriage to Alex and by the time the announcement would be made, the divorce would already be in motion.

I was in the middle of my morning workout, so I placed the box on the counter to open later. Cori had to meet with her grandmother and asked me to come along so I got dressed and went to visit her grandmother in the nursing home with her.

When we got there, she started by showing us a painting that she had mastered, and Cori joked with her about being able to do it better.

“Oh, please, Cori, you could barely write on a straight line on a piece of paper. No way you can paint as beautifully as me dear. I love you but you know grandma has to be honest,” she said.

Then we played a few rounds of Rummikub which lasted quite a while.

When the allotted time for visiting hours was coming to an end, she asked me about Alex.

“Jasmine, Cori tells me that you and Alex have gotten back together,” she said.

“Yes ma’am,” I said. “Well, something like that,” I said.

“Something like that is right,” she said

“Cori told me that you are in an arranged marriage?” she said.

“Not really, we’re just doing each other a favor,” I said.

“Oh, tell me about this, favor,” she said.

I explained the deal I had with Alex to stay married to him until he was CEO, and he would give me a restaurant.

“I remember how heartbroken you were after you and Alex broke up in high school. I’m surprised that you were able to just forgive him and do this huge favor for him,” she said.

“Well, the agreement is mutually beneficial so it’s not just for him. Also, we’ve talked about it and it’s in the past,” I said.

“Oh, have you now?” she asked.

“Nope,” Cori said.

“We have. And we are over that chapter in our lives,” I said.

“Can I ask you a question?” she said

“I thought you were already asking me a bunch of questions,” I said laughing.

She smacked me on my arm then continued with her line of questioning.

“Do you still love Alexander?” she asked.

“I mean—” I started to say.

“No. No, I mean. You are a woman, and you should have enough control over your feelings to be able to say yes or no,” she said

“So, I’ll ask you again, do you love Alexander.”

“Yes. I said putting my hand over my forehead.”

“Does he know you love him?”

“I don’t know,”

“Have you told him that you love him?” she asked

“No,”

“Jasmine, I will tell you this. Listen up Cori, this is for you too because you have been with Ray for many years now and the two of you are still shacking up,” she said.

“Whoa, when did this become about me? I thought this was a Jasmine fixing,” she said.

“Cori, you need to demand something of your relationship with Ray,” she said.

“Grandma, Ray and I are happy. I don’t want to ruin us by getting married or anything,” she said.

“Stop with the nonsense. There is no higher post or higher level of respect than that of a wife. You deserve to be Mrs. somebody one day. The sanctitude of marriage is unlike anything else. It means everything but if you are never a wife, you’ll never know what that’s like to have someone believe in you more than himself, trust you more than himself, love you more than himself. You need to require Ray to take that next step so the two of you can start building a real life of wealth together. I would hate for after everything you’ve been through with Ray that he just moves on with someone else and you lose everything you have invested in him,” she said.

“Grandma, I haven’t invested anything in Ray,” she said.

“Oh, no? you gave him the resources he needed to obtain the knowledge about creating those applications and he’s making a fortune on it. You helped him to become the man that he is today by nurturing him and showing him love and compassion which he used to become the Ray that we all know and love, why wouldn’t you want to settle down with a man like that?” “If you allow fear to be the reason that you stay in your current state, then fear will cripple you. You know that life is always moving so if you’re not moving forward in life, in your relationship, in the knowledge that you obtain, then you are getting left behind and no child of mine is getting left behind. Stop being happy in your comfort zone, there is more for you to explore in your love life,” she said. “Yes ma’am,” Cori said.

“Now, Jasmine. I’m not going to sugarcoat this. You have gotten yourself into one heck of a mess. You need to tell that

man how you feel and pursue the life that you want the way you want it. What is this nonsense about an agreement and blah blah blah? If you get the man to fall in love with you, you get everything he has. You don't have to sign an agreement for a restaurant, you can just sign the check and buy it yourself. Where did I go wrong with you two?" She said. "Tell that man how you feel and do this marriage the right way or step away. Nothing is worth peace of mind or the pursuit of real happiness," she said.

"Yes ma'am," I said.

After Cori and I finished getting our verbal beatings from her grandmother, we went to get smoothies to talk about our relationships without the wise ears. We accepted each other for the screw-ups we were but realized her grandmother's advice needed some thought.

"So, what's the plan?" she said.

"I'm going all in," I said.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"I'm just going to be myself around him and show him how I feel," I said.

"Jazzy, you have shown him how you feel. She said you need to tell him," she said.

"Oh, nah I'm not ready for that conversation," I said laughing.

"What about you? You did say you wanted to be married by 30 yet you haven't said anything to Ray about it. He is head over heels in love with you, if you tell him you want to get married, he'll marry you tomorrow. He would marry you today, but city hall is closed," I said.

"I know he would," she said.

"Then what's the problem? Talk to me."

"I don't know how to be a wife. My mother was always the glue in our home you know. The food, the cleaning, the advice. My dad was supposedly the King of the castle, but my

mom ran the King. I guess I don't know if I can ever be like my mother you know," she said.

"Oh, honey," I said hugging her.

"From what you have told me about your mother, she was an amazing woman, no doubt. But you know who else is amazing?" I said.

"If you say you, I'm walking out of this relationship," she joked.

"You," I said tapping her nose. We both started laughing to rid ourselves of the emotional duress we were under.

We finished up our smoothies then went back to our men. Well, she went back to her man, I returned to my arrangement.

When I got back home, I saw the box that was delivered earlier and decided to open it before returning to the room.

I opened the box, and it was a gift from Alex.

The card read, "Happy Anniversary, Jazzy, I hope you like it."

It was a menu guide for designing the perfect menu for any restaurant.

How thoughtful. I had been jotting down ideas about the menu we would have at the restaurant and Alex must have seen me.

I often thought that he was not paying attention to me and then he does something like this and makes me want to love him, openly.

I started to text Alex but decided to thank him properly when he got home.

I put plenty of alcohol on the ottoman which I started drinking without him.

When he walked in, he found the bottle, a special dish waiting for him on the ottoman. Me. I knew it was a bad idea, but it felt so good. When Alex walked in and saw me, he threw his work bag on the floor and started tearing his clothes off as he made his way to me. When he got in front of me, I handed

him a drink and he took it down in seconds. I handed him another one. He drank it, poured himself a third glass which he took down just as quickly, then placed the glass on the table. I took another shot just as he picked me up off the ottoman kissing me with subtle gradation. By this time, he was completely nude. I was already that way he got home wearing nothing but black, Christian Louboutin heels.

He carried me into his room with my legs wrapped around his back. He closed the door and made love to his wife.

CHAPTER 18



A few weeks had passed since Alex, and I made love and it became a regular occurrence. We were starting to act like a real married couple. He came home every day and we shared dinner. We would vent to each other about everything and then make love and cuddle to some late-night tv. He even started discussing his finances with me and getting my opinion on stocks and other investments.

We hadn't planned it, but our relationship was developing into something real. I did not discuss it with Alex but decided to simply let it grow organically.

One day, Alex said he wanted to take the yacht out for a ride and invited me to come along but I declined. I told him I was not feeling well so he canceled the whole trip and came home to check on me.

For some reason, my stomach was in knots, and I could not bring myself to make dinner, so I asked Stan to stay and make cook that day.

"Are you sure chef? Are you okay?" he asked. He knew how much I loved to cook, and dinner was the time I chose when I moved in, but I could not bring myself to stand very much, much less make dinner.

"Yes, I'm sure chef, thank you. Just not feeling well is all," I said.

"Very well chef, do you have anything particular you would like for me to cook, or should I just surprise you? I

mean, I'm no Jasmine Hall, world-renowned chef but I can make a little magic happen" he said.

"Trust me chef, after the way you prepared the braised short ribs the other day, I have no doubt your hands are magical so please surprise me," I said.

Alex came home in a good mood. He walked over and gave me a kiss right in front of Stan which was new. "Hey handsome, I take it you had a good day?" I asked. "I have news," he said.

"Oh yeah, what's up?" I asked.

"The board is considering moving up the meeting to vote me in as the new CEO," he said.

"That's great news."

"Yes, all of our hard work is finally paying off," he said.

"You can finally have your restaurant, I'll be CEO and we can put an end to this sham of a lifestyle even sooner than we thought," he said.

"Sham of a lifestyle?" I said.

"Ooh, you're in trouble," I heard Stan say to Alex.

"You know what I mean, Jazzy, our lives will just go back to normal that's all," he said.

"I'm sorry I didn't realize I was such an impediment in your life," I said.

"Babe, you're not an impediment, you're amazing. That just came out wrong," he said.

I went into my room, so I didn't have to see his face. As soon as I got in there, I felt nauseous, so I sat down on the balcony to get some fresh air while I waited for my stomach to settle down.

"Jazzy," I heard Alex call my name. "I'm on the balcony," I said.

He walked out and sat down. Then he held my hand and started rubbing on it.

“Hey beautiful, you know you have been nothing but a breath of fresh air in this house. The best thing that any of us, me and staff, have ever experienced. Stan is so crazy about you I’ve had to threaten him a few times or he’d take you from me,” he said.

“But Jazz, um. I know that things have gotten a little serious between us, but the arrangement hasn’t changed,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked him.

“I mean, in a little over a month, we have to dissolve our marriage,” he said.

I quickly jumped up and ran to the bathroom and started vomiting in the toilet.

“Jasmine, are you okay?” he asked me

“Get out,” I said shewing him away.

“Want me to get the doctor?” he asked.

“Leave Alex!” I said trying to talk while holding back the vomit.

Alex said that he wanted to dissolve the marriage and I would have been furious to know that after all we shared, he still found me that easily dispensable, but I knew that I had bigger problems. The kind that took nine months to form, and eighteen years to raise.

Cori was over the next day helping me with my pregnancy tests.

“I can’t look, what does it say Cori?”

“I’m still trying to figure out how to read this thing. It says, one pink line means Not Pregnant and two pink lines mean you and Alex are having a baby,” she said.

“Stop joking around Cori, what does it say?” I asked impatiently.

“It says that you my dear are having a baby with Alexander Diamond. Your marriage may be fake, but your seed is officially a part of the Diamond club,” she said.

My heart sunk. I wanted a baby but not like this. Not under these circumstances and certainly not with Alex and his 90-day rule which seems to be set in stone. I wanted Alex in my life, but the feeling did not always seem to be mutual, so I did not want to bring a baby in the middle of all our crazy. “Oh my God, what am I going to do Cori?” I asked distraughtly.

“Well, you should start by informing your baby daddy,” she said.

That statement was terrifying. How could I just walk up to Alex and tell him that I’m pregnant? The thought of it all made me gag in discomfort. Or maybe that was the little Diamond growing inside of me.

“Have you considered that maybe your marriage to Alex doesn’t have to be fake,” she said.

“I’m listening,” I said paying close attention to what she had to say.

“You and Alex dated and were madly in love before. Maybe you two can learn to love each other again? Just think about it. You two were inseparable in high school. Sure, that was years ago but I can still cut the attraction between the two of you with a knife. The chemistry the two of you share is unmatched,” she said.

“It’s not up to me. He did not ask me to marry him for a chance at a future together, he asked me for business advancement. It doesn’t have anything to do with love or us, just to get ahead and take his rightful place at his family’s business,” I said suddenly regretting the situation I put myself in.

“That’s how it started, yes. But things change. You two are much closer than when you first moved in. You’re practically a real married couple already. Besides, all the woman Alex knows, why did he choose to ask you?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Convenience? Familiarity? I can’t tell you why he chose to ask me but I’m certain it wasn’t because he suddenly loved me again. Alex is an opportunist, so he saw an opportunity and he took it,” I said.

“Whoa, I don’t know who you are, but I will not let you speak ill of yourself. You are too amazing for that,” she said hugging me. “You’re no one’s easy opportunity. You put your heart out there and if he’s dumb enough to miss out on a chance of loving you, then that’s his bad,” she said.

“I know. This is just a lot now. I will give it a day and take a few more tests tomorrow before I tell him,” I said.

“If that’s what you have to do then go for it but need, I remind you that this is our 5th test?”

“I know but we got them from the same store. If one is defective, it could be the entire shelf that’s defective. I’ll grab a few more in the morning” I said in complete denial.

The next morning, I went to another pharmacy and picked up eight different tests. They all came back positive. I was not ready to accept the fact that I was carrying Alex’s baby. But ready or not, here it came.

I read the instructions again.

“One line means not pregnant; two lines means pregnant.”

“This one says if it is a plus you are pregnant and if it is a minus, you are not pregnant.”

“Alright, now this kind says if it turns red, I am pregnant, if blue I am not pregnant.”

I spent hours taking and analyzing the pregnancy tests which all kept coming back with the same heart-wrenching answer.

I was pregnant with Alex’s baby.

At first, I was in a state of despair exploring every possible option available to me.

However, I knew before I did anything it was only fair to talk to Alex first since I was carrying his seed.

I put the most recent test in a zip loc bag and hid it. Then I did my best to prepare myself for one of the toughest conversations I was ever going to have. How on earth was I going to tell my fake husband that I was pregnant with his baby?

“Wine. I need wine,” I thought to myself. I went to the bar and poured myself a tall glass of fine wine. The aroma of the sweet wine hit my nostrils just as I was getting ready to indulge in a little calamity I remembered. “Damn it! I can’t drink. I’m pregnant!” So much for a little calming factor. Now I was forced to deal with my overactive nerves as I prepared to tell Alex the news that would change both of our lives forever.

CHAPTER 19



I spent the rest of the day mostly meditating only getting up once to eat. I did not have much of an appetite but most importantly, I wanted to prepare for when Alex got home that night. I called Cori and we tried a few different ways I could start the conversation, but every scenario was as nerve-racking as the previous one.

Stan decided to make dinner again knowing that I was still unwell. He made me a warm, decadent, chocolate treat to help get my mind off whatever was bothering me. I sat down and ate the dessert the instant he gave it to me.

Then I sat down on the couch and put the zip lock bag that was carrying the test on a pillow.

After waiting hours for Alex, he finally came home, and boy was he being a real grump. He walked in, slamming things on the countertop. He practically had smoke coming out of his ears.

“Hey, want to talk about it?” I asked him swiftly hiding the pregnancy test underneath the pillow.

“No, I do not. I’m just going to head to bed, okay?”

“Yeah okay. Stan made dinner; do you want me to leave it out for you?” I asked.

“Just leave it, the crew will get it in the morning,”

“I’ll just put it in the fridge,” I said getting up to put his food away, but he became furious.

“Just leave the damn plate on the table. I told you, I have a staff to care of all of that.”

“Whoa! Wait just one minute. I understand you may be having a bad day but don’t take your shit out on me. I won’t allow you to speak to me that way ever. There is no scenario where it’s okay for you to yell at me like you’ve lost your damn mind. As a matter of fact, I’m really getting tired of your bs. Don’t even worry about it, I’m moving out of your house,” I said forgetting the test under the pillow as I walked away.

“No! Please Jasmine, stay.” He ran towards me and stood in front of me for a few seconds before grabbing hold of my hand. He was standing right in front of me but could not look at me.

“What is it, Alexander? Just tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m sorry. I feel like a complete ass. Come here,” he said putting his hands out towards me.

I walked over to him and grabbed his hand.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I’m actually starving so how about I take a quick shower and we can just catch a movie or something?”

“Please?” he asked.

“No, Alex. I’m tired of this back and forth with you. I’m not the kind of girl you can just treat like shit and think I’ll sit around and take it, I’m not the one,” I said.

I know that, Jasmine. I have the utmost respect for you, you know what you mean to me please don’t end this now,” he said as he put his arms around me and held me.

“Never again Alex,” I said.

“I promise,” he said. Then he kissed me while still holding onto me.

“I am a little hungry after all, you think maybe we can have dinner together and watch a show?” he asked.

“I think that can be arranged,” I said.

“Thank you, I lo...” Alex started to say but then he caught himself and played it off.

It seems Alexander Diamond was falling for me but refused to let his heart fall victim to the only thing that even he could not control... love.

CHAPTER 20



The next day, Alex brought me flowers and chocolate as a peace offering for the night before. He never did tell me what it was that got him so rattled but I decided it was best to leave it alone for now.

“Hey Babe, these are for you,” he said.

“Thank you, these flowers are beautiful,” I said.

“Only the most beautiful arrangements for the most beautiful girl,” he said.

“Okay don’t oversell it,” I said.

“What do you feel like eating tonight?” he asked.

I’m not sure, I thought Stan said he was making salmon?”

“Is that what you want to eat?” He asked.

“I can go for some fried pork chops,” I said.

“An order of Fried pork chops coming right up,” he said.

“Are you making dinner tonight? I asked him.

“Yes, I am,” he said.

“Oh well then I am in for a real treat,” I said.

“That you are,” he said.

Alex started getting the ingredients he needed to make dinner and I sat on a barstool to watch.

“Fried pork chops huh? You’ve been hanging around Cori too much lately,” he joked.

“Oh, yes let’s be sure to make enough for Cori and Ray, I’ll text her and let her know we’re dropping it off,” I said.

“Can I send my driver to bring it to them?” he asked.

“Nope. We’re going to their house to bring it,” I said.

“Yay,” he said sarcastically.

“What? What is it? Do you have a problem with my best friend and her boyfriend?” I asked.

“No, of course not,” he said.

“I just never pictured myself in the meal delivery business,” he said.

“Meal delivery business?” I asked laughing.

“You have never brought food to a friend or family member?” I asked him.

“No, most of my family have their own cooks,” he said.

“Oh my gosh, you rich people kill me,” I laughed. “Well, Mr. I’m not in the meal delivery business, today, we will be delivering meals to Ray and Cori,” I said.

“Okay but I don’t think it’s fair that I have to cook and deliver,” he murmured.

“What was that” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“No worries, I’ll help you cook,” I said walking around to start helping him with the preparations.

“Are you feeling better today?” he asked.

“Yes, much better. Thank you,”

“That’s good. I was concerned that maybe you were, you know,” he said.

“Maybe I was what, Pregnant?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said,

“What if I am?”

“Then kill me now,” he said.

“You always know how to make a bad situation worse,” I said as I got up and walked away.

“What? What did I say?” he asked.

“Just call me when dinner is ready,” I said.

“Like that? What happened to helping?”

“I changed my mind,” I said. “You’re not even going to keep me company?” he asked.

“Nope. Bye,” I said as I walked in my room and closed the door.

I would have stayed out there and kept him company, but the truth is my stomach was started to bother me and I wanted to get in position before nausea kicked in.

I wanted Alex to know about the pregnancy, but he was not ready. I needed to prime him a little more.

When dinner was ready, Alex came into the room and told me that Cori and Ray’s meals were packed and ready to be delivered. I started laughing and got up to grab my shoes and purse. I was wearing a bralette and workout shorts, so I just threw on some comfortable Nike sandals and started walking towards the door.

“That’s what you are wearing?” He asked.

“What do you mean? You don’t like my outfit?”

“Yes, I love it for the gym but not to cruise around the city,” he said.

“Why? What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

“It’s workout attire. I can see every muscle on your body in that thing. No wife of mine is walking out like that,”

“Fake wife,” I said walking towards the closet to grab a top.

“Fake wife, real wife, no wife of Alexander Diamond’s,” he said.

“Alex now is not the time to start getting jealous, leave me alone,” I said.

I grabbed an oversized top to wear over my outfit.

“Happy?” I asked him.

“Very,” he said sarcastically.

“Well, that’s the best I can do, let’s go,” I said holding his hand.

I expected him to walk outside to meet his driver, but he decided that he was going to drive. He went into the garage, and we got into a green Lamborghini Huracan.

Alex was wearing a multi-colored Gucci shirt with beige shorts, a multicolored hat, and brown sandals.

I was happy my outfit was black, or it would have been one colorful ride.

We arrived at Ray’s place and Cori let us in. He lived in a nice apartment downtown, but the noise was outrageous there. I don’t know what they did wrong, but it seemed you could hear everything from the street in his apartment building.

“Hey man, a pleasure to see you again,” Alex said shaking Ray’s hand.

“Mr. Diamond, the pleasure’s all mine,” Ray said.

“Please, have a seat.” He said. The boys sat down making small talk while Cori and I plated the food so we could all eat together.

“We were going to set the table, but a football game was playing, and the boys did not have any plans of leaving where they were.

We brought the plates to them, and we all ate on the couch.

“You outdid yourself on these porch chops, Jasmine, this is so damn good,” Ray said.

“I can’t take any credit for them. This was Alex’s masterpiece,” I said.

“You made this Alex? You’re a fantastic cook man. You’re almost as talented as Jasmine,” he said.

“A minute ago, you said she outdid herself, so I take it you’re implying I’m a better cook than Jasmine am I right?” he said.

“Come on dude, why are you setting me up in front of the woman?” Ray asked.

“Nah I’m messing around, Jasmine’s talent in the kitchen is unmatched,” Alex said smiling at me.

“Yeah, but the two of you in the kitchen? Man, that would be something worth traveling for. I could see you guys doing big things together when you open up that restaurant,” he said.

“Well, I’m just investing in it, I won’t be doing any of the cooking,” Alex clarified.

“It would be pretty awesome if you did though,” Cori said.

“I can see it now, Alex and Jasmine Diamond, Chefs of the year with the best restaurant NYC has to offer,” she said.

“Okay you two, that’s quite enough,” I said.

“No! Come on OBJ!” Ray yelled at the TV just as Odell Beckham Junior missed a pass. Then he and Alex went on a whole rampage.

Cori and I rolled our eyes and handed each of them a Bud Light so they could finish their game. Then she and I stepped out onto the balcony where we sat down to some wine for some girl talk.

“Tell me, have you had a chance to talk to Ray about taking that leap?”

“Sort of. I brought it up in conversation to see his thoughts on it,” she said.

“That’s good, what did he say?”

“He said it was up to me. He did not care either way because he knew I’m the woman he wants to be with,” she said.

“Cori, that’s great. That means he’s ready to move when you are. Your grandmother will be thrilled,” I said.

“Why do you look so sad about it though?” I asked her.

“I don’t know. I guess I want him to want to get married you know. To want to make me his wife and take the time to do like a real proposal. I know Ray loves me and I love him but sometimes, a girl just wants to feel special. I feel like maybe he’s taking me for granted. No dates, no flowers, no nothing you know.”

“I do understand. And that’s one heck of a conversation to have. Especially with someone as carefree as Ray,” I said.

“You have no idea,” she said.

“Do you want me to talk to him?” I asked.

“Would you?” she said.

“Of course. You know sometimes people like to hear it from someone else. Besides, I won’t sugarcoat anything. By the time I’m done with Ray, he should be calling and begging you for more,” I laughed.

“What about you? How are things with Alex?” she asked.

“Amazing. Too good honestly,” I said.

“How could I possibly be too good?” she asked.

“Because I’m even crazier about him than before. He is perfect Cori. In every way. I just want to be with him wholeheartedly and love him with all of me. And I want him to do the same with me,” I said.

“What’s holding you guys back?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” “I thought that maybe he had a change of heart after realizing just how good we are together, but he felt the need to remind me that the arrangement was still on and as soon as it’s over, we’re over.”

“Wow, that’s harsh,” she said. “Tell me about it.”

“Did you tell him about,” “No,” I interrupted.

“Why not? What are you waiting for?” She asked.

“I’m afraid of what he might say. Or what he might do,”

Earlier, he said he thought that I was pregnant, and I said, “what if I am?” do you want to know his response?” I asked

“What was it? What did he say?”

“He said to just kill him now.”

Cori started laughing hysterically.

“Why are men such assholes sometimes?” she asked.

“Girl, I don’t know. I mean, clearly I was saying something, but he did not even get the clue,” I said.

Then we both started laughing at the comical life I had been living.

“I understand it’s a tough conversation to have but the sooner you get it out there, the sooner you can start moving on at least with that part of your life,” she said.

“What if I get an abortion?” I asked her.

“Is that what you want?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

She grabbed my hand. “Don’t say crazy things you don’t mean. We both know you’re not aborting that baby. Just tell Alex and see what he says. If he wants to be a part of it, great. If not, smack him with child support,” she said.

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Alex is more than willing to take care of the people in his life so I’m sure he’ll take care of his duties as a father. The issue is telling him and going through the initial reaction,” I said.

“How are you feeling? Any baby blues yet?” She asked.

“Oh yea. I have been so nauseous lately. I can barely go through the day without laying down or resting so I don’t barf all over his house,” I said.

“The other day, while we were in the middle of that great conversation about our engagement, I had to run into the bathroom, so I did not throw up over the balcony right in the middle of my conversation with Alex.”

“So, your stomach is in knots, you’re throwing up, and you ask him his thought about a pregnancy, and he still doesn’t have a clue?” she asked.

“Not even remotely,” I said.

“Sheesh, men are something else,” she said,

“Tell me about it,” I said.

Ray walked out when the game was over and asked us to stop dogging them out.

“Oh, please Ray, believe it or not, we women have more to talk about than you men driving us crazy all the time,” I said.

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” he said.

We got up and joined them in the living room again.

“Ready to go, Alex?” I asked.

“Sure, let’s get home,” he said standing up.

We hugged Cori then I hugged Ray and he shook his hand before returning to his car and heading back to his house.

“Did you have a good time?” I asked.

“Yeah. I forgot how much fun Cori was and that Ray is something else,” he said.

“Not bad for your first meal delivery huh?” I asked him.

“I guess it wasn’t horrible,” he said holding my hand as he drove his green sports car home.

CHAPTER 21



The next morning, I walked into the kitchen to find heart-shaped pancakes and a mimosa station.

“Happy Anniversary Mrs. Diamond,” Stan said as I walked up.

I can’t believe it’s April 14th already. I said.

“Yes ma’am,” he said as he started making an omelet.

“Where’s Alex, is he here?”

“Yes, Mr. Diamond is in his office and will join us shortly,” he said.

“Okay, I’ll wait outside by the pool,” I said as I started to walk outside holding onto my stomach to help stop the cramps.

“Are you still feeling sick madam?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” I said as I walked out speedily to take a seat outside.

Alex walked out in an all-white attire. White pants, a white button-up shirt, and sandals.

“You look nice,” I said. Well, it’s the second of three anniversaries so I figured I’d milk it a little,” he said.

“You look lovely,” he said as he admired my cleavage in the long, floral, sun dress.

“Can you believe it’s been two months already?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s crazy how fast this time has flown by. I thought it would be a painful experience yet here we are,” I said looking at him.

“Here we are,” he said.

Then his phone rang, and he got up to take the call.

I did not hear anything his mother was saying on the phone but paid close attention to his responses to see if I could somewhat follow along with the conversation. Especially knowing that if his mother was calling, my life was most likely a part of the conversation.

“Hey, mom,” he said as he walked to the furthest end of the pool.

“I know,” he said.

“Don’t you think this is getting a little egregious mom?”

“I just don’t see why we can’t deviate from that plan. This is all starting to feel like one long nightmare. Everything is perfect and then just like that you want me to just walk away and it’s over?”

“I don’t know, mom; I don’t think I can.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“I know.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He returned to the table and sat next to me.

“What was that about?” I asked him.

“Just work,” he said.

“Hmmm,”

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Just have a lot on my mind that’s all,” I said.

“Well, Stan made quite the breakfast for us, what do you say we go and grab a bite?” he said putting his hand out towards me.

I grabbed his hand and we walked to the dining room to eat.

“I’ll take it from here,’ he said to his servers.

Alex made my plate and put it in front of me before preparing his and sitting at the head of the table.

“I was just thinking about what Stan and Cori said,” he said.

“What did they say?” I asked

“You know, all of that talk about us opening a restaurant together and how well we complement one another. It just had me thinking,” he said.

“And?”

“And I don’t know. Maybe in another life, a different time, this story ends differently,” he said.

“What about in this life? This time?” I asked.

“Life can be complicated. There are players involved and the situation may be out of our hands. So... in this life, this is the second of our last anniversary,” he said looking at me regretfully.

“Well, that was the plan, wasn’t it” I said as I started to nibble on my food.

“Indeed, it was,” he said.

I did not know what his mother said or the reasons to why she wanted to keep us apart. Or maybe Alex wanted to end things. Either way, it was our last anniversary and I intended to enjoy it.

“What are you doing later?” I asked him.

“I don’t have anything planned. I thought maybe I could take my wife out, but she seems a little under the weather,” he said.

“Maybe we can go out and do a little dancing?” I said. “It is our almost last anniversary after all,” I said.

“I have the perfect place,” he said. “How about we leave here at seven?” he said.

“Seven sounds good.”

We were going dancing, so I wanted to wear something elegant. A long, black, off-shoulder evening dress with high, beige, closed-toe heels.

After I was fully dressed, I put my hair up and in a loose updo to add just the right amount of sexy to my look.

Alex knocked on the door to see if I was ready. “Wow! You know, for someone who wore a chef’s coat almost every day, you certainly know how to dress to impress,” he said.

“You like?” I said spinning around. “I do,” he said. “There’s just one thing missing,” he said.

“What’s that?” I asked looking at him behind me while I looked in the mirror.

He pulled out a diamond necklace and put it around my neck. I touched it to feel on the stones as they dazzled around in the mirror.

“Now, you look perfect,” he said.

“Thank you, it’s beautiful,” I said turning around to kiss him.

Then I grabbed his arm as we walked to the car where his driver was waiting.

I saw him driving near our neighborhood when we were younger. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” he said.

Finally, his driver pulled over at a park that we frequented when we were teens. “He helped me out of the car, and we walked towards the swing set where he had an actual candle lite dinner prepared for us.

“I haven’t been here in years,” I said.

“Really? I come here all the time,” he said.

“Do you now?” I asked surprised.

“I do. This is where I come when I just need to take a breather,” he said.

“I have some of the best memories in this park,” he said.

“Oh yeah, like what?” I asked him.

“Like, the day we shared our first kiss. And the day you told me that you loved me,” he said. “We do have some fond memories of this place, don’t we?”

“Yes, I especially liked the day that we...” and he started tugging at my underwear.

“We did not do that here,” I said. “Not the first time,” he said. Then we both laughed as we remembered almost getting caught by the same officer twice for being in the park after hours.

I walked over to the beautiful, draped gazebo where our gourmet meal was set. There was a waiter there who poured champagne as soon as we arrived to get our evening started.

There was a small, artfully designed menu on the table. I picked it up to read the contents.

The first thing I noticed was what was written at the top. *The Diamond Hall - Fine Dining Cuisine Chef’s Menu.*

I looked at Alex. “What is this?”

“Just some ideas for your restaurant,” he said.

“I want you to be the first to experience the Diamond Hall Chef’s Selections,” he said.

“Diamond Hall Chef’s Menu, huh?”

“It’s just an idea, you don’t have to take it. Tonight, you just enjoy your date, my queen,” he said.

“I’m impressed. I love everything on this menu. How thoughtful of you.”

“Well, if you think it all looks delicious, just wait until you taste it,” he said.

“You know, Alex, the relationship may be fake but you’re making it hard to fake my feelings,” I said.

“Well, I don’t want you to fake your feelings,” he said.

“You leave me no choice,” I murmured under my breath.

“You always have a choice,” he said.

“That’s something for you to remember,” I said.

The waiter started with an artichoke amuse bouche followed by foie gras. The main was a roasted loin of lamb.

We ended the night with a beautiful sculpture of chocolate and exotic fruit which he called, the Jazz Tower.

As the waiter served us, he took the time to tell me about every dish and what made it special. I could tell how passionate he was about the selections and the excitement he had as he eloquently shared every detail made it clear that he did it for more than just entertainment, he did it because he wanted to make me happy. But why would a man go through so much trouble for a relationship that was destined to fail? Unless of course, that is not what he wanted.

The more he talked, the deeper I fell. By the end of the night, I realized that I was so deeply in love with Alex that I would be a fool to simply let him slip away. I was not just any chess piece in their little game, but the queen. I decided I was going to check my mate.

CHAPTER 22



The next day, I decided to go and speak to Ray. I went to his house announced pretending to be looking for Cori, but I knew she would be at work around that time.

“So, what are you up to Ray?” I asked him.

“Check out this app I just sold for 100 grand,” he said. “Whoa, that’s impressive Ray,” “That’s not all,” he said. Cori and I have been talking about getting an app together for your new restaurant, check out what I’d done so far,” he said.

He started showing me the pages that he had already built and some basic functionality of the app. “Thanks for thinking of the new restaurant Ray, I can’t wait to put this bad boy to work,” I said.

“I knew you would like it. Cori suggested the color scheme which I think plays a major role in the overall appearance,” he said.

“Speaking of Cori,” I started to say.

“Oh, oh,” Ray said.

“What?” I asked.

“What did I do?” he asked.

“You didn’t do anything,” I said. “Unless there is something that you did you wish to share.”

“Nope, don’t even try to set me up you know you’re not getting anything out of me,” he said.

“Fair enough,” I said.

“So, what’s up, Jazzy?”

“Marriage, that’s what. When are you going to ask Cori to marry you?” I asked him.

“Cori and I just talked about this. I told her I am ready whenever she is. Y’all know I’m not going anywhere. Cori is my everything,” he said.

“I know but, what woman would accept that proposal? I’m ready when you are babe. That’s your proposal to the love of your life?” Don’t you think Cori deserves a thoughtful proposal with a ring and you getting down on one knee to ask her?” I asked him.

“Yeah, of course she does. She deserves all good things,” he said.

“I see what you mean. I guess I wasn’t thinking about that stuff you know. I figured Cori and I are destined to be together, and we both knew that, so we didn’t have to do anything else to make that official, but I guess we do huh?” he said.

“Yes, you do,” I said.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay,” I said.

“I have somewhere to be, so I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Sure, we can act like you’re not getting ready to meet with Cori and talk about what just transpired,” he laughed.

“Of course not,” I said sarcastically.

Then I left to meet Cori for lunch. I updated her on the conversation with Ray and then I told her all about my date with Alex.

She called Ray to see what he was doing and invited him to watch a movie with us. I decided to call Alex to see if he wanted to join us. He was delighted I asked and met with us as well. When we got to the theater, we all agreed to watch Black Widow since it was the only movie coming up that hour. We enjoyed our double date before returning to our homes.

When Alex and I got home, we saw that Stan made creamy chocolate mousse in individual containers and topped them off with whipped cream and chocolate shavings.

“My man Stan,” Alex said when he saw the chocolatey treat.

What do you say we get in our pajamas and enjoy these out on the balcony?” I asked him.

“I like the sound of that,” he said.

After taking a shower and throwing on a three-piece pajama set, I joined Alex on the balcony, where he brought our desert and sesame fried chicken he prepared earlier while I was out.

His phone rang and he stepped away to the other end of the balcony to answer it. Then he started walking away until he was no longer in sight. I waited and waited but he never showed up. I got up to check on him and saw that he was having a heated discussion with someone.

He was moving around angrily and shouting. I don’t know what was going on with him, but he seemed to be very upset at whatever was going on. I walked over to him and grabbed his hand just as it appears he was getting ready to throw his phone over the balcony.

“Hey, you okay?” I asked him.

He took a deep breath and just stood there.

I gave him a couple of minutes to breathe then I hugged him for a while.

“Ready to eat?” I asked him. He took another deep breath and then looked at me.

“Yes, let’s eat,” he said.

I plated some of the chicken then let to get some cold iced tea. When I returned, I was happy to see Alex smiling and finally calming down from his call.

“This chicken is delicious,” I said.

“I know, Chef Hall shared his secret recipe with me years ago,” he said.

“Really? I didn’t know my dad thought you that,” I said.

“You’ll be surprised at how much he taught me. Who knows, maybe I’ll share a few of them with you when you open your restaurant,” he said.

“Okay, I can’t wait,” I said.

After eating dinner, we sat outside to talk for a little while before saying goodnight. I went to bed expecting Alex to do the same, but he walked into my room.

“Can I sleep in here with you tonight?” he asked.

I lifted the sheets and scooted back on the bed. “Come on in here,” I said.

Alex jumped in the bed excitedly. I had the remote control in my hand but had not decided on a show.

“What are we watching?” he asked.

“Let’s go with Chopped on the Food Network,” I said flipping through the channels.

The chefs were given strange ingredients to make a dish with, but Alex did not like the concept.

“What a minute, so they have to make a dish with jellybeans, duck, ice cream, and spinach?” he asked disgustedly.

“Yes, but they all must find a way to spin it. It’s not like they’re going to make the duck and top it off with ice cream and jellybeans,” I said laughing.

“I’m just saying, where do they come up with this stuff?” he asked.

“Hey, sometimes a good chef just has to figure out how to bring the most out of every ingredient. It may not be ideal, but they can add the right spices and make a glaze with the jellybeans and ice cream,” I said.

“That’s just disgusting chef, even from someone with your expertise,” he said.

I just laughed and shook my head. “Don’t be so close-minded, anything can change form,” I said.

“Yes, but not everything needs to. Some things should work according to the plan at inception,” he said.

Somehow, I no longer felt like he was talking about the show.

“Maybe,” I said as I laid back.

“So, you’re going to watch these people butcher perfectly good food?” he asked.

“It’s just for our entertainment. Watch it I think you’ll enjoy seeing what they come up with at the end,” I said.

“How about I give you a little entertainment?” he said as he covered his head and started kissing me from my stomach down. Soon after, I forgot the television was even on.

CHAPTER 23



“Dinner smells great, Stan.”

“Thank you, I borrowed one of your recipes,” he said.

“Is Alex in his office?” I asked.

“Yes, he’s been in there for a while,”

“I’ll grab him for dinner,” I said.

“I’ll set the table and be out of your way,” he said.

“Sounds good, goodnight, Stan,” I said as I walked over to Alex’s home office.

When I got there, he was on a very heated call with someone and did not see me standing at the door.

“How the hell did this happen? You told me this was under control.”

“It was, sir, but with the board getting ready to vote you in, everyone started shaking things up. Inquiries were being sent all over the place to ensure you would be a good fit for the position,”

“A good fit? No one knows this industry better than I do,” he said.

“I understand, sir, but there are also those who felt more deserving, and they are the ones who are out there trying to find whatever dirt on you they can to take you down,” he said.

“Someone decided to do a little digging and found the records,” he continued.

“So, all it took was a “little” digging? You call something that as that easily resurface handled? You listen to me. I do not want this thing to see the light of day, make it go away,” Alex said. “I want you to bury this thing so deep, they would have to dig below the Atlantic Ocean underneath a shark to find it. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you loud and clear, sir. I just don’t know how we can contain something like this. I think the best strategy is to get ahead of it while we still can. I think we can even use it to start a few campaigns, maybe a foundation or something to make people pity and respect you for how you are now handling the situation,”

“No damn it! What are you not understanding? I don’t want to get ahead of it, I want to get rid of it.”

“Mr. Diamond, please listen to me. You know I only want the best scenario to come out of this situation and the best way to do that is to simply get ahead of it before it’s too late. We can control this, but we have to do that now. Not after trying everything else with hopes that we can maybe buy it from enough people fast enough. And even then, there may still be a few copies out there and if the wrong person gets it, all of that work will have been in vain.”

“Listen to me. I want you to hear me real good. If this problem is not resolved by the time I walk into my office tomorrow, I am firing your entire legal team. Do you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, sir,”

“Good. Do it quietly. I do not want this getting back to my wife,” he said

“You mean your fake wife?”

“I mean my wife, and don’t you call her that again,”

“I’m sorry, sir I meant no disrespect,”

“Why are you still on the phone? Don’t you have something to take care of?”

“Sir, if you would just give me a minute to explain the plan, we have in place then maybe you would see it a little more clearly. It was a long time ago and you were young sir. We play on public sentiment to build sympathy from people who could relate to a teenager making bad decisions. We can 100% control it. I’m sorry but I’m afraid what you are asking of me is simply impossible. The information has already been leaked and we don’t know the source.”

“Find the source! What am I paying you for? Find the source, get rid of the information, make it all go away. I don’t care who you must call or what strings you need to pull. You have the backing of Diamond Holdings, so money is not an issue, just fix this,” he said then hung up the phone.

I started walking into the office and I could tell that Alex was shocked that I was there. He looked like he was seeing the ghost of something.

I walked over and sat on his lap.

“What was that about?” I asked him.

“Nothing, Jasmine, just go back to bed,” he said.

“It didn’t sound like nothing to me. It sounded like quite the opposite. Tell me, Alex, what’s going on?” I asked.

“I heard him say it was a long time ago, but you insisted that they make it go away. What has to go away, Alex?” I asked him, running my fingers through his hair to keep him calm while searching for the answers I needed.

He sat there with a worrisome look on his face.

“What is that look I see?” I asked him. “Is that fear? Anger? What is it? Just talk to me.”

I ordered.

“No. I need you to stay out of this okay. I know how you get with your investigations and crap but leave this alone Jasmine,” he said.

“Does this have anything to do with the sealed juvenile record?” I asked him.

“Wait, what? How do you know about that?” he asked. He jumped up almost knocking me over but grabbed my arm, so I did not fall. He walked to his room and pulled the drawer where those documents were being kept.

“Jasmine, have you been going through my stuff?” He asked. “I trusted you in my home and you were digging up dirt on me?”

“We can talk about all of that later, right now, I want to know who you were talking to and what you were talking about on the phone,” I said.

“As I said, it was nothing okay?”

“No, it is not okay. These past few days you’ve been walking around here mad at the world but you won’t let me in so I can try to help you,” I said.

“There’s nothing that you can do about this, Jasmine, trust me,” he said.

“How do you know? All the money in the world isn’t the answer, maybe I can offer some insight, just tell me what’s going on,” I pleaded.

“Alex, you know me. I won’t do or say anything that could harm you. I’m your wife remember?”

“Only for a couple more weeks,” he said. “I have to go okay. I’ll call you on my way home.”

“Don’t bother,” I said and walked out.

He looked at me like he wanted to chase me but had bigger problems than trying to cheer me up, but what were they?

CHAPTER 24



With the internet making everything so easily accessible, I was surprised at how hard it was to find anything non-business-related on Alex. There were a few women and some unsolicited photos but for the most part, his record was impeccable.

“Cori, have you found anything? I asked Cori who was sitting next to me in a library as I researched Alex’s past,”

“Nope, it’s just showing the sealed juvenile record, but it doesn’t show much else. Not even the year it was sealed, she said.

We kept searching and finding little bits of information but nothing to help answer the question. What was Alex hiding?

Then I found a record on PACER. I clicked on it, but I needed to have legal access.

“Hey, Cori, do you know a lawyer who might be able to get into this file?” I asked her.

“No one I could trust to do a private investigation on Alex, no,” she said.

“Wait, you know who you can call?” she said.

“Who?” I asked curiously.

“Landon,” she said.

“Landon is an attorney?” I asked her.

“Yeah, he’s my Facebook friend. Isn’t he yours?” she asked.

“No. I don’t think he likes me very much,” I said.

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, for one, he never sent me a friend request. Plus, he asked me out in college and when I declined. He had this whole attitude going on, so I ghosted him,” I said.

“Really? That’s surprising. I always thought you and Landon would hook up when you got over Alex. I guess I didn’t realize Alex was your forever soul mate at the time,” she said.

“Was... is correct. Now I don’t know what to make of Alex,” I said.

“So, what are you going to do?” she asked.

“I guess I’m going to see Landon,” I said.

We looked him up and got the address to his firm.

Cori had to meet with a client, so I needed to meet with him alone. That was one adventure I was not quite ready for.

I got to Landon’s office building and his secretary took me to a board room where I waited for him.

“Wow, so she was not mistaken. If it isn’t the one and only Chef Jasmine Hall,” he said. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Landon, you look amazing,” I said.

“Thank you, you know you’re stunning so no need for me to tell you that, what’s going on? What can I do for you?” he asked.

“Is there somewhere more private we can talk? Maybe your office?” I asked him.

“Jasmine, for you I’ll book an entire hotel if it’s privacy you want. Please follow me to my office,” he said.

We went up to the top floor to his office.

“When I got there, I started feeling like a moron. Was I sitting in this man’s office ready to ask him to help me

research my fake husband?”

“What’s the matter, Jasmine? You look like something is troubling you,” he said.

“No, I um, I came here to ask you for a favor, but I realize that’s crazy of me. I’m sorry so don’t worry about it. How have you been? Is that your wife? I said pointing at a picture he had on his desk.

“Something like that,” he said.

“Oh okay, I get it, it’s complicated,” I said with a chuckle.

“More than you know,” he said.

“Tell me about that favor, I don’t mind helping if I can,” he said.

“It’s a little crazy,” I said.

“I’m a divorce attorney in New York City, trust me, crazy does not scare me,” he said.

Then a man walked into the room, and he got up to greet him. “Hey honey what are you doing here?” he asked.

“I came to drop off this food but who is this gorgeous woman you have sitting in your office?” the man said.

“Her? This is Jasmine Hall, the most untouchable woman I have ever met,” he said.

“Hey guys, not sure if you are aware but I can hear you both,” I said.

The man walked over to me and started complimenting me on everything.

“Your hair is so beautiful, your skin is gorgeous, how tall are you? You’re like a model,” he said.

“Okay, thank you I think that’s enough compliments to last me the rest of the year,” I joked.

“You like handsome yourself by the way, so are you two an item?” I asked.

“Something like that,” he said smiling at Landon. “Ah, another complicated relationship, got it,” I said.

“Let me ask you something, are you into polyamory?” he asked me.

“I’m sorry poly what?”

“Polyamory. It’s when you have multiple partners and we are all aware of one another and sometimes even have a little fun together,” he said.

“I am definitely not into that,” I said.

“I told you,” Landon said.

“I have been trying to hook up with Jasmine for years, and she always turns me down,” he said,

“I’m sorry, Landen, it just seemed we were never compatible and now I realize my instincts were right,” I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” his friend asked.

“I’m just a simple girl. I don’t get into too many sexual alternatives if you will.”

“Oh, now you don’t get into sexual alternatives huh? Let’s talk about the night after that frat party I invited you to,” he said.

“Okay, you’ve got me there. But that was one time with one girl.” I said.

“Okay, so how about one time now, with two guys?” he said.

“What?” I said.

Then he and his guy friend started laughing. “I’m kidding,” he said. My wife would kill me if I slept with you. There are rules to this game of love you know?” he said.

“Yeah, too many rules sometimes,” I said thinking about my situation with Alex.

“Alright well we’re done fooling with you, tell me what you need, Jasmine. My calendar is wide open today. I don’t mind helping out an old friend,” he said.

“Do you remember Alex?”

“Oh yea, he is one handsome man,” he said.

“You think he’s handsome? He couldn’t stand your guts because he always thought you wanted to sleep with me,” I said.

“Well, he was right about that,” he said.

“Wow, Landon, you are a whole freak. I did not see that coming,” I said.

“I just live sexually free,” he said.

“Hey, as long as you’re living your life your way, do you, old friend,” I said. “Here is the information I want you to print for me,” I said handing him my phone with the information I found on PACER. He entered the document number but kept denying him access.

“I don’t think I can get into these files, Jasmine, they have been sealed so you’ll need to get this open by someone with governmental access,” he said.

“Dang it, okay thank you for trying?” I said.

“Wait, I’m not done, I have the perfect person to get this opened for you,” he said.

“Meet John, my friend from city hall,” he said pointing at the man.

Then John walked over to the computer and logged in. He printed all the documents for me and put them in a folder. “Keep these in your purse until you are somewhere private, okay? These are sealed records on very powerful people so keep it under wraps,” he said.

“I will, thank you so much,” I said then I left. As soon as I walked out, they locked the door.

He told me to wait to get home, but I was so anxious to see what was in those files that I started reading them in the car ride home.

CRIMINAL DIVISION

State of Ohio,
Plaintiff,

Sealing Case No: OH927743
Criminal Case No: CRL89O33740

Vs.

Alexander Diamond

Defendant,

**ENTRY SEALING RECORD OF CONVICTION
PURSUANT R.C. 2953.32**

In accordance with Section 2953.32(C)(1)(c), Ohio Revised Code, the Court determines by clear and convincing evidence that the applicant has been rehabilitated to the Court's satisfaction.

It is therefore ORDERED that all official records pertaining to the applications convictions in Case number: OH927743 be sealed and exempt as provided in R.C. 2953.32(F), ALL INDEX REFERENCES BE SEALED.

The First Offender The availability of expungement in Ohio is limited to the first offender,²² which the law defines as: "... anyone who has once been convicted of an offense in this state or any other jurisdiction. When two or more convictions result from or are connected with the same act, or result from offenses committed at the same time, they shall be counted as one conviction." ^{2 3} Unfortunately, this definition does not eradicate all uncertainty.

The Handling of the Expunged Records When the court determines that the requirements have been met to its satisfaction, it orders all "official" records sealed. ^{4 3} "Official" records should be distinguished from "public" records. The latter refers to "any record required to be kept by any governmental unit." ⁴⁴ More specifically, public records would include: Any document, device, or item, regardless of

physical form or characteristic, created or received by or coming under the jurisdiction of any public office of the state or its political subdivisions which serves to document the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations or other activities of the office 45 The term “official records,” on the other hand, has a broader meaning in that the term also includes those papers and documents made in the normal course of the performance of a public official’s duty.” Undoubtedly, this definition would also include copies of such papers and documents. 47 However, matters of opinion contained in an official report do not come under the definition.” Once it is determined which records are subject to a court order of expungement, the official in charge of them must decide exactly how he is to comply with the law. The Ohio statute merely provides for the sealing of all records pertaining to the case and the deletion of all index references. 49 There is no provision outlining the procedure, nor is there even a definition for the term “sealed.” Therefore, the individual official has been left to decide the procedure he deems appropriate.

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Case No: Cr88y9338409

Alexander Diamond

Defendant

Age: 16

Count 1: First Degree Assault

Count 2: Underage Drinking

Count 3: Reckless Driving

Count 4: Careless Driving

Count 5: Hit and Run-Leaving the Scene of an Accident
Involving Serious Injury

Count 6: Vehicular Manslaughter

Victims: Unidentified

Page 2:

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Involving Death

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Page 3:

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Alexander Diamond

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Age: 16

Count 1: First Degree Assault

Count 2: Underage Drinking

Count 3: Reckless Driving

Count 4: Careless Driving

Count 5: Hit and Run-Leaving the Scene of an Accident
Involving Death

Count: Vehicular Manslaughter

Victims:

Karla and Anthony Fisher

Cause of Death:

Vehicular Homicide

CHAPTER 25



I was in a state of shock. I knew I needed to confront Alex about this, but I did not know how. How was I going to ask the love of my life about the night that he murdered my best friend, Cori's parents?

I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone. Was I reading the information correctly? I had to be sure. I got home, ran into my room and locked the door.

I grabbed the folder out of my purse and started reading the documents again trying to dissect the information to make sense of it.

The first page was mostly legal jargon, but I read it again.

CRIMINAL DIVISION

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Plaintiff,

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Criminal Case No: CRL89O33740

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What did any of this mean? That he was a first-time offender? I mean, of course he was, he was only 16. Then I frantically continued to read through the additional pages.

It said that he was 16 when the incident happened which lined up because that’s when Cori’s parents were killed and shortly after that, she moved to New York City.

The following three pages looked identical. I wasn’t sure why they printed the same information three times. And then I saw it. The first one shows a hit and run leaving the scene of an accident involving serious injury.

The one after that changed to hit and run leaving the scene of an accident involving death.

Then on the third page, they identified the victims.

Karla and Anthony Fisher, Corianne’s mother and father.

For years Cori searched for answers regarding her parent’s deaths but there was nothing but unanswered questions and closed doors.

We knew that there were powerful people behind the murder because it was as if no one wanted to solve the case. But our hypothesis was entirely different. Her parents were oncologists and they believed they found the cure for cancer. There was a lot of powerful people trying to buy their formula but when they refused to budge, it started to get ugly. She always thought that they died protecting what they believed in but now she will have to face the fact that her parents died, not at the hands of their enemies protecting what they knew to be

right, but at the hands of a teenager who decided to drink and drive.

No matter how many times I played it in my mind, I could not believe after all these years, Alex did it.

My Alex was a killer. I could not bring myself to believe such nonsense. There is no way that Alex did this. There had to be an explanation for it. Maybe he was framed? Or there is more to the story than I had access to. I just knew there had to be more but the only way I would know the truth is if I confronted Alex. I realized that this was one truth I was not ready to face.

I sat on the bed for hours without realizing it. Suddenly, my stomach started cramping and I needed to lie down. I was upset about Alex's secret forgetting that I had one of my own.

Somehow, I managed to dose off only to be awakened by a faint knocking on the door. I jumped up and sat on the bed. I quickly stacked the papers together and hid them under my pillow.

The knocking continued.

"Who is it?" I asked.

I heard Alex's voice on the other side of the door. "Hey, Jazzy, it's me. Can we talk?"

"No. Not today. Please go away," I said.

"Come on, Jasmine, we have to talk about this," he said.

"No, Alex. I don't want to talk. I just want you to leave me alone okay," I said.

"Can you meet me out on the balcony at least?" he asked.

At that moment, I hated that he had a wraparound balcony, but I agreed to go out and meet him.

"Where have you been? I've been calling you all day," he said.

I marched into the room and grabbed the papers. Then went back out onto the balcony to show him.

“What is this, Alex?”

I said holding the document in front of his face.

“I can explain,” he said.

“You can explain? How? How can you explain killing Cori’s parents all those years ago and just going on with your merry little life as nothing happened huh? What kind of monster are you?”

“You spent so much time with her. Watching her cry and hurt mourning the loss of her parents. You were there with us when she visited their tombstones. There when she could not eat because she was haunted by the fact that they were gone. You were always there. But you did it. You killed them. How could you live with yourself after doing something like that huh Alex? And then you just stuck around her, why? Were you making sure she did not know it was you so you could be free? What was your plan huh, Alex? You killed Cori’s parents.” I said tears filling my eyes and fear surrounding my heart.

“I trusted you, Alex. Cori trusted you. I loved you,” I said.

“You loved me? Please don’t say that, Jasmine. Please don’t stop loving me,” he said.

“You’re a monster. You don’t even know how to love me in return. How can you expect me to love you?” I said.

“It’s still me, Jazzy, you know you can love me,”

“Me? Who is this “me” you speak of? It turns out, I never knew you,” I said. I pulled the door to the balcony closed and locked it leaving Alex standing outside. I looked at him and all I could say was, “I never knew you.”

CHAPTER 26



I sat in the room, and I cried. I cried for Corianne, I cried for her parents, I cried for my broken heart.

I cried until I felt there were no more tears to shed. Then I sat there drowning in my thoughts.

How could this happen? Why him? Why her parents? Why must one face so many obstacles in this life?

I heard Alex at my door. He was sitting there hoping I would let him in. Maybe he was hoping I would come out, or simply hoping for forgiveness of an unforgivable mistake. Honestly, I don't know what was going through his mind while he sat out there.

He did not knock or ask me to open it, he just sat out there in an eerie silence.

Then I heard him softly hitting his head against the door in frustration. Maybe I should talk to him? I'm sure he could fix this. If anyone knew how to make me feel better, it was Alex. But how can I turn to Alex about his own evil? I could not talk to the devil about his works, but that was out of the question.

I started to call Cori with a heavy heart but quickly hung up the phone. How was I going to tell my best friend that the love of my life was responsible for the death of hers? All those years she searched in vain. Hoping that she could find her parent's killer and bring him to justice. Yet the killer was always there. Living, walking, breathing, dwelling among us.

Then he just started talking hoping I was listening.

“Remember when I took that trip back in high school? The one I had been looking forward to because my dad and I were supposed to be spending some time together?”

Well, I got out to our family cabin and my dad never showed up. He called with another lame excuse about having to go to work or something, but I knew that wasn't the case. He had a whole other family and had practically abandoned my mother and I them.

I kept calling him and asking him to stop by for just a little while, but it was just one excuse after the next.

I got bummed out and decided to go to a club. I was only 16 and if you remember, I looked it, but I gave the guy \$200, and he let me in. I was too young to drink but I started the bartender off with a \$100 tip and she went ahead and made me a drink. I ran into one of my buddies there and the next thing I knew, we were both sitting at the bar drinking. After that, we crashed a party and had plenty to drink there also.

After all the partying, I dropped him off at home and started driving back to the cabin.

I was drunk, it was dark and before I knew it, a car was coming towards me head-on. Honestly, I don't remember much about what happened, but I was sure I was on my side of the road and there they came driving towards me. I swerved to get out of the way, but I hit their vehicle and their car started flipping over and over and over again. When it finally stopped, I ran out of the car and tried to help them. Her father was already dead, and her mom was stuck. I kept trying to pull the door out, but I couldn't. She told me to run because the car was going to explode but I didn't want to leave her.

I said, “No, I'm going to get you out of here I promise.” But she wouldn't let me try. She told me that she had lived her life, but I was too young to die. She said she had a daughter and to tell my parent to take care of their daughter. I told her she would survive to take care of her kid and she just laughed. Then she kept telling me to go, I didn't want to go I wanted to help her, but she wouldn't let me. She said go, I need you to make sure my daughter is ok. Go silly kid, you're too young to

die. Then I smelled gas and I started running. Before I even made it to the other side of the street, the car exploded. I didn't know what to do so I called my parents, and they came and called their buddies in law enforcement who told me to leave, and they would document the crash as a hit and run. Well, someone saw the accident and reported seeing me there so that did not stick but somehow, they managed to reduce it to like. Reckless driving or something and then all the charges were dropped, and the record was sealed.

I know I screwed up. I know I should have said something, but I was scared. I didn't know how to tell her, or you about what happened. Every day I was haunted by the memories of that night and the uncertainty of that incident.

One day I just couldn't take it anymore and I moved away after graduation.

That's why I left. No other reason Jasmine. I love you more than anything in the world and I always have. But I did not know how to be with you with this secret between us. Especially with Cori as your best friend. I felt like a hypocrite every time she came around. I hated myself so I just stayed away from you. My mother told me not to choose someone else for my fake marriage because she was afraid that the details of that night might resurface, and she was right. I started falling for you all over again and not sticking to the plan. Then suddenly, everything started coming back and I started drowning again. That's why I've been such an ass lately. I don't know what to do Jasmine. I don't know how to get over this or how to forgive myself. I was 16 when this happened. Here I am at 26 and I still have nightmares about that night. I did what I could Jasmine I really did. I even made a fake trust fund for Cori because her parents spent all their money on developing that drug that they didn't have anything left. I guess that's why her mom asked me to take care of her so I did what I could. I wish I could do more, but I just don't know what else to do." And then he wept.

I wanted to go be there and be there for him. I could feel his pain from the other side of the door, but I was consumed

with fear and anger. I could not convince myself to go to him, not this time.

I just stayed in bed until my stomach started growling. I almost forgot I was eating for two and my little diamond was hungry.

“What can I eat? I said to myself shuffling through my purse hoping for a hail Mary.

“Peanuts!” I found a small bag of half-eaten peanuts in my purse, and I must say I had never been so happy about peanuts before. I emptied the contents to the last grain of salt then drank some water to tame my unborn baby.

Then I laid down and started rubbing on my stomach until I fell asleep.

As soon as the sun had risen, I woke up still in disbelief. I walked to the door and opened it. There he was, still sitting drowning in hurt and regret. I sat down on the floor next to Alex.

“Did you sit here all night?” I asked him. But he ignored the question.

“I wanted to tell you,” he said. “But I talked to Marge, and she said it was best to just leave it alone.”

“Marge? Her grandmother knows about this?” I asked.

“Yeah, she ummm, she helped me set up the trust fund where I put eight million for her until she was old enough. Marge told me that it had matured to over ten million which is a great return,” he said trying to make light of the situation. “But yes, I told her grandmother, Marge, about it because it was eating me up inside. I tried to talk to my parents, but they refused to hear it. When the sheriff started investigating me, her grandmother went to the station and next thing I knew, I was getting hit with careless driving and everything else was dropped and sealed,” he said.

“What do you think she said to the cops?” I asked him.

“Hell, if I know. I figured maybe my parents paid her off to tell a lie of some sort but I found out years later that there was

no agreement between them. When I told Marge I was going to tell you about it, she said that Cori had been through enough and if I told you, you would be forced to tell Cori and all of that would not only stall the healing process but it may have affected her mental health. So, I just kept it all to myself. I kept lying to you every day. I felt like a complete fraud. I was lying to the girl of my dreams about a murder I committed while the victim's daughter cried in my arms. It's all pretty fucked up when you think about it," he said.

"Yeah, it is," I said. "But I can't imagine what you must have been going through after having experienced something like that," I said as I put my arms around him and held him.

Maybe I should have but I had not forgiven Alex. This was something that happened when he was only a kid, and he is remorseful even after all those years. But that's the thing. There had been many years, many encounters, many opportunities to come clean but instead, he lied and lied and lied until the lie finally caught up to him.

Yes, he made a mistake but lying about it was a choice that he made for far too long and that was unforgivable.

Time heals all pain so we would have to give it time. In the interim, we were tasked with figuring out how to tell Cori that her parents' killer is the keeper of my heart.

CHAPTER 27



Alex and I did not know how to break the news to Cori, so we decided to share the responsibility with someone a little wiser. We went to see her grandmother.

We got there early Wednesday morning knowing Cori would be there soon. We had a lot to say and wanted to make sure there was enough time to get through the madness.

“Hi Ms. Marge,” Alex said when we got to her room.

“Alex, it’s been a while, how are you?” She asked.

“Sit- sit, come and try one of these fresh raisin cookies I baked this morning,” she said pointing to a batch of about 20 cookies.

“That’s quite a few cookies for one person,” he said. “Well, I knew the two of you were coming so I made enough for you guys and Corianne,” she said.

“Gotcha,” he said with a wink.

“What brings you two by? It must be urgent that you would come without Cori Jasmine and Alex, this is the first visit I’ve had from you since my grandmother moved me to this luxurious, she-shack,” she joked.

“I think this is a nice place,” he said. “Who knows, maybe I’ll move here one day,” he said.

“Well, you’d be the first man worth looking at in here,” she said.

Alex just laughed. “Tell me what’s going on you two. What did you get yourselves into that you needed to seek advice from the old lady?” she asked.

“It’s about Cori,” I said.

“Well, it’s about more than Cori. It’s about her parents.”

She turned to look at Alex.

“She knows,” he said.

“Oh my! Well, this is certainly not the conversation I was expecting to have this morning” she said.

“I suppose even the most elite are unable to keep things hidden in the dark forever,” she said.

“I tell you kids, no matter what you do in this world, you will one day have to face the consequences of your actions, good or bad. That’s why you should always try your best to do good so you can expect good things to come back to you.”

“Now, Jasmine honey, I’m not sure how much you know,”

“It’s ok you can talk, she knows everything,” Alex said.

“Well then. If you know everything then you know that Alex was just a boy when the incident took place and he was not the only one at fault,” she said.

“What do you mean? Who else was involved in the accident?” I asked.

“My son in law had been drinking that night after he and his wife got into an argument about something. They were in the car and my daughter texted me saying Anthony was being erratic and she feared for her life. She texted me, ‘Mom, he refuses to pull over. He’s driving so fast I’m scared.’

“Oh my God, that must have been terrifying,” I said.

“More than you know,” she said as she continued.

“I called and asked her to put me on speakerphone so I could try and talk some sense into him. I tried talking to Anthony, but it was like speaking to a brick wall. I said ‘Anthony, you need to slow down. Your daughter needs the

two of you so just pull over honey, what do you say?’ At first, he ignored me, but I kept pleading with him and finally, he said, ‘Ma, I don’t know what your daughter has been telling you but she is a two-timing whore.’

“I was a little surprised that he called her that, but it was not completely shocking. They had been married for almost twenty years and the one thing that was always consistent about Anthony was his jealousy. My favorite quote to him was a bible verse, *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”*

“That’s a good quote to live by,” I said taking note of it on my phone.

“Yes, I often shared that verse with him as a reminder of what is expected of love. He was a good man but when he got jealous, he became senseless, angry, and violent. He would say the vilest things to try and make himself feel better, but it did not help. It only added more strain on their marriage. I know my daughter and she was not capable of doing the things that Anthony said but they had been working so hard on their new drug that he was losing his mind over it all. He started getting jealous about her being in the lab with a fellow doctor who helped her figure out a missing component that he and Carla previously missed. She told him that’s all it was, but he hated that guy.

“He demanded that Carla leave her position and be a housewife, but of course she refused. The arguments kept getting worse, then Anthony started drinking more and more. The night that they died; he was suspended from work for creating a hostile work environment for his co-workers. It was mostly Carla he was terrorizing, and she just let it go. I mean, that’s her husband and they had problems before so she knew it would pass and they would move on but the other doctors, they weren’t so forgiving.

“They reported him, and he was suspended for two weeks. When he learned that it was the same guy who he was jealous over who filed the paperwork, oh he lost it. He lost his mind that night and it cost him and his wife their lives.

“I hate to speak ill of the dead, but that accident was not your fault Alex, it was Anthony’s jealousy and rage that killed them, not you.

“I never told you all of that because when you came to me, you were just a kid. Only 16 years old so I helped to put your mind at ease the best I could but assuring you that nothing in this world happens without God’s permission. Nothing. You can put a bullet to my head right now and pull the trigger but unless God says yes that gun will continue to misfire, and you’ll never know why.

“You did what you could at the time, but that accident was not your fault. I saved the messages Carla sent me those final moments leading to that crash.”

“So, do you think he meant to commit suicide?” I asked.

“Heavens no. Anthony was just one of those guys who felt like he was invincible. I doubt that he thought for a second that there would be a kid on the road just as he decided to play another game of chicken causing the deadly accident.”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked. “So, he was driving on the wrong side of the road? I knew it. I knew I was not on the wrong side of the road. I kept telling everyone, but they were all so busy trying to hide the accident that they never bothered seeking the truth. I still feel horrible about what happened, but this has relieved me. I guess I just wish you told me all of this sooner,” he said.

“I didn’t know it was still haunting you. I thought we had an understanding about that night, and you were okay,” she said.

“No. I wasn’t. I felt like a murderer. Everything was unclear you know. I had been drinking so it was all like a blur for a while. Then I fabricated my own version of events to fit what everyone was saying because, like I said, I had been drinking and I was in bad shape. How do you know he was driving on the wrong side of the road?” he asked her.

“Carla. She said he was playing chicken with the other drivers, and he refused to listen to her.”

“How come you never told Cori any of this?” I asked her, confused at why she would keep something like this from her granddaughter.

“The thing about death is that it really is the final stage for us. When someone dies, you try to hold on to the best memories of that person to get by. Cori admired her parents. I was not going to, in their death, tell her that her father was an abusive drunk and her mother never had the strength to leave him. As far as Cori was concerned, they were heroes who discovered the cure for cancer and died because of it. Knowing that gave her strength to know that they lived their life with a purpose and died fulfilling it. You should have heard the different conspiracy theories she was coming up with.

“Many days, I felt horrible for lying to her, but it was for her own good. I did not want her to become depressed or angry by finding out the truth. Now, she is an adult, and we can tell her everything and allow her to process it her way,” she said.

“How can we tell her something like this? This is like the worst conversation you can have with someone,” I said.

“The worst conversation was telling her that they both died in a car accident, the rest I think we can manage,” she said.

“So, what do we do now?” I asked.

“Let’s see, it’s currently 10:55 AM and she will be here right around noon, so now, we wait.”

CHAPTER 28



“Hi, grandma!” Cori walked in cheerfully as she always did when she went to visit her grandmother. She had a huge smile on her face until she looked up and saw me and Alex sitting there. She knew nothing good could possibly come out of Alex and I meeting with her grandmother in her absence. Suddenly, her cheerful smile was replaced with a look of concern.

“Jasmine, Alex, what are you doing here? What’s going on?” she asked.

Alex and I looked at each other but we were both speechless.

“Is everything okay?” She asked.

“Sit down, dear. Your friends and I have a very serious matter we wish to discuss with you,” her grandmother said.

“I will stand thank you. What is it? Did something happen to Ray?” she asked.

“No, honey, Ray is fine,” I said.

“Okay, so what’s going on? Everyone is standing here looking like someone died but none of you are saying anything. Grandma, what is it? Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine, sweetie but come here and sit next to me,” she said waving Cori over.

Cori went and sat down next to her grandmother as she awaited the devastating truth about her parents’ deaths.

Her grandmother decided to start from the beginning sharing some of the most memorable times she had with her parents before getting into the times where there were challenges as there is in every family.

After she told Cori everything, Alex shared his piece. He apologized for his role and told her that he would have done anything to change it if he could.

After Alex finished, he turned to look at me so I could share my part.

“I went to see Landon yesterday,” I started.

“Landon? I didn’t know you still kept in touch with him,” Alex said.

“It’s not what you think,” I said to Alex then continued explaining myself to Cori.

“I went to see Landon and he got into that PACER file we found. He printed everything out for me and that’s when I saw that Alex’s sealed record was regarding the accident that killed your parents,” I said.

“Why didn’t you just call me and tell me then? You know how much this means to me,” she said.

Then her grandmother intervened. “Corianne, how irresponsible would it have been for her to call you and give you news like that?” she said.

“Oh, don’t you get me started, grandma. You have no right to have lied to me for all these years. You know that Alex was involved, and you never bothered saying anything to help me heal,” she said.

“Everything I did was to help you heal. If I would have told you, then what, huh? You would go and seek revenge on Alex or maybe go on a quest for justice that did not exist. Alex is not to blame for that accident honey. Your father played a role in it and it’s not fair for Alex to live in shame any longer over it,” she said.

“How do you know any of that? What makes you think it’s ok to blame my dad for the accident?”

“I don’t blame him, honey. We all make mistakes. Like I’ve told you before, it was their time. God allowed it, so it was time. But, here, take a look at this,” she said handing Cori her phone.

“What is all of this?”

“Those are the messages I exchanged with your mother minutes before the crash,” she said.

Cori stood in silence as she read the messages. Then, tears started rolling down her face. The room was silent, filled with despair. We watched Cori begin to shake, reading the messages over and over again as she wept.

Then she barely said anything else as we went through and told her everything else, she needed to know, she sat mostly in silence only asking a few questions.

When we were done talking, Cori handed her grandmother the phone. Then she got up and walked out without saying another word.

I started to go after her, but her grandmother told me to let her grieve in peace.

“She has a lot on her mind right now. Let her process it her way,” she said.

I felt terrible. So many buried memories suddenly resurfaced. Talk about breaking someone’s heart.

CHAPTER 29



As difficult as it was, I left Cori alone that day. The following morning, I called Ray to ask him how she was doing, and he said she was processing. “She’ll be ok. She just needs to work through this. I told her to take a few days off work and surprisingly, she obliged so I’ve just been trying to get her to eat something. I’ll keep you updated.”

“Ok thanks, Ray. Let me know if there’s anything I can do,” I said.

“Sure thing. Hey, while I have you on the phone, do you think now would be a good time to do that thing we talked about?” he asked.

“What thing? Propose?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“No, Ray. Why would you ask her now while she is in a state of mourning?”

“I don’t know. I think it will make her feel better,” he said.

“Ray, if you propose to my friend now, I will personally come over there and punch you in the throat, do you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” he said.

“Did you get a ring?” I asked.

“Not yet.”

“So how were you going to propose?”

“I was just going to ask her to marry me,” he said.

“Get off my phone, Ray.”

He started laughing. “I have a ring in mind. Two. I wasn’t sure which one she would like,” he said.

“Why didn’t you ask me? I can tell you whether she would like it. This is the sort of stuff best friends do,” I said.

“Okay, hang on, I’ll send you a picture. Tell me what you think,” he said.

He texted the photos to me and the second one was screaming Cori! “Ray, if you get Cori that princess cut ring, she will marry you that day,” I said.

“That’s what I’m hoping for,” he said. “How do you think I should do it?”

“Think of something romantic. Somewhere you know she likes to eat or maybe some scenic place she references. You can even do something romantic at home if you want. Just be genuine in your efforts,” I said.

Alex walked in as I was hanging up the phone. “Is that Cori?” he asked.

“No, I didn’t want to bother her, so I called Ray to check on her,” I said.

“How is she?” he asked.

“She’s going through it now but it’s Cori, she’ll be fine. We just need to give her some time,” I said.

“Yeah, how about you? How are you?” he asked.

“I’m okay. How are you?”

“I’m good. The best I’ve been in a very long time,” he said. “How about we go out on the yacht tonight?”

“No, not tonight,” I said knowing I would probably get nauseous and throw up all over his beautiful boat.

“You must not be a water person,” he said

“Do you know any black water people? I mean, I can barely swim as it is and you want me touring the ocean on a sinkable boat,” I joked.

“You know I would not let anything happen to you out there. I’m an avid swimmer,” he said.

“Aren’t all white people?” I asked jokingly.

“Yes. It’s a prerequisite to being white. If they don’t pass, then we give them a black card.”

“Makes sense. Just like if you can’t dance or jump high enough to make a dunk you get a white card,” I said.

“Hey, I can jump,” he said.

“Stop the madness, we both know white boys can’t jump,” I said.

“People also say white boys aren’t packing. What are your thoughts on that?” he asked.

“Maybe they got that wrong,” I said.

“Maybe?” he asked as he pushed his body against mine and I could feel his erection.

He picked me up and carried me into the bedroom to show me just how wrong that stereotype was.

The truth is, so was the part about us not being good swimmers. I was a great swimmer but it was easier to pretend than to admit that I was afraid I would get seasick because I was carrying his baby. The conversation needed to happen, but not today, I thought to myself, and I somehow convinced myself that it was a good idea not to tell him at that very moment.

We laid there feeling relieved that the secret that had been keeping us apart was no longer a factor.

“I’m so glad that’s all finally over,” he said. “No more secrets, I promise,” he said.

“No more secrets,” I said kissing his arm which was around me.

At that moment, everything seemed perfect. Alex and I were finally going to be happy. No more secrets. Well... there was one, but it was the kind of secret that I couldn’t hide for very long.

CHAPTER 30



The next day, I decided it was time to visit my friend. I stopped by one of our favorite ice cream shops to get a little peace offering before heading to Ray's place to check on Cori.

"I hope you brought ice cream," she said when she came to the door.

"Only your favorite rocky road sundae," I said lifting the bag carrying our specialty ice cream.

"Okay. I forgive you. Come on in," she said moving out of the doorway to let me in.

"Why does life have to be so crazy? All the people in this world, the person God uses to bring my parents home was a 16-year-old kid whose girlfriend was going to be my best friend. What a small world we live in."

"I know. I still can't believe it. After all these years. I don't know how Alex could have hidden something like that," I said.

"To be honest, he didn't do a very good job at first. I just didn't understand it until now. He was very accommodating when he first found out who I was. He would offer me food, a ride home, just all sorts of stuff. One day he even offered to pay for my homecoming ticket but it's not like he asked me to go with him, he had already asked you, so I just didn't understand why he was acting so weird all the time. I thought he was trying to impress me because he liked me, but I didn't

care, I just ignored it until I met you at your party and realized how amazing you are, so I told him off,” she said.

“Really? You never told me that.”

“No, I didn’t want to make a thing of it. After I told him off, he stopped, so that was the end of it.”

“Oh wow. So, what are you going to do now? Do you think you can face Alex again?”

“I forgive Alex for what happened. He was just 16. Remember the kind of crazy stuff you use to get into at 16? It’s not like there was any malice aforethought. He made a mistake when he was a kid. Plus, after reading those messages my mom sent my grandmother the night of the crash, he was not the only one to blame. I wish I knew all of this before though. I feel like I finally have some closure,” she said.

“I’m so happy to hear you say that, Cori,” I said reaching over to hug her.

“Oh, and I just got off of the phone with the apartment people,” she said as she moved some pillows around on the couch for us to sit.

“Oh yeah, what did they say?” I asked her.

“They said they are in the final stages, and we should be able to move back in within a couple of weeks. It’s like perfect timing for you,” she said.

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Unless of course you weren’t planning on moving back?” she said.

“Of course, I am. You know I would tell you if I had other plans. It’s just the situation with Alex,” I said.

“I understand but the situation is ending soon, remember?” she said.

“Yes, I remember but, I don’t know. I think we’re becoming more than we anticipated. There is a possibility that we might just stay together.” I said smiling.

“Jasmine, I know you guys have been getting close and the baby adds a new dimension to it all, but you know Alex. If there’s one thing he does not play with, it’s work. If he said 90-days, he probably meant that” she said.

“I know Alex is by the books when it comes to working but who can win a battle against love? You should see us together. It’s like, everything has changed. Our connection has gotten so strong that I can’t see us apart. It’s like we were meant to be together, and this situation has put us in a position to do that. I mean, I know we’re supposed to keep this as a three-month arrangement but things have changed, you’ll see,” I said.

“Just, keep your head out of the clouds and be prepared for whatever the outcome might be.”

“Now, ice cream please,” she said putting her hand out. I sat down and removed our ice cream from the bag so we could indulge in our sundaes.

“Ugh, isn’t it a little early for me to have all of this heartburn?” I said pressing down on my chest. “That reminds me, I have to schedule an appointment to see an OBGYN.” “I have a client who is an excellent OBGYN. Here is the info to her practice. Check it out and let her know I sent you. I think you’ll like it there,” she said.

“You know I have an OBGYN, Cori,”

“Yes, but we both know Dr. Lee is not going to be doing your delivery,” she said.

“That’s true. Okay, I’ll give her a call.”

“A call? Girl it is the COVID era, you can schedule online and have the entire visit done on your computer screen,” she said.

We laughed it off then I went online to schedule the appointment.

As I was scrolling through the available options, I tried to choose an appointment time that would work for Alex. Just in case I found a way to break our little secret to him.

“I still can’t believe you’re having a baby,” Cori said. “You are going to be the best mom this part of New York has ever seen,” she said.

“Well, that makes one of us,” I joked. I was glad Cori was back to her normal self. I hated everything she went through and the events that recently unfolded but she was one tough girl and handled it all gracefully.

She was still on the Ray induced leave of absence, so she spent the following day with me at Alex’s place. We ordered relaxing poolside massages before sitting by the pool.

“This looks like a great place for a little sunbathing,” Cori said as she walked towards what appeared to be the hottest and most sunny spot by the pool.

“Sunbathing, Cori, I’m black, we don’t tan,” I said as I went to sit by the shade.

“I meant for me, Jasmine, sheesh,” she said laying down in the sun a few feet away from me. I miss our apartment Jasmine, but I must admit, you’ve got quite the pad here,” she said.

“This is Alex’s pad, not mine. But yes, this place is amazing,” I said as we both stopped to watch the pool boy replace the net after working on the jacuzzi.

“If anything happens between me and Ray, I call the pool boy,” she said.

“Then who do I get if something happens between me and Alex?” I asked jokingly.

“Hmmm, tell you what. If something happens between you and your baby daddy, I’ll take the pool boy and you can have Ray,” she joked.

“Wow, just throwing away your friend and your man for a set of abs, huh?” I laughed.

“Not just a set of abs, Jasmine, *the* set of abs,” she said as she turned to admire the pool boy’s physique one again. “I can lay here all day long and get pampered. This is my kind of life,” she said.

“You can have this life, Cori, you have millions in the bank,” I said.

“Shhh, don’t say that out loud, I don’t want people to stop spoiling me,” she said.

We were laying there enjoying our moment until we suddenly had an unexpected visitor, and he was grumpy.

CHAPTER 31



“**W**hy didn’t you tell me?” Alex asked infuriated. He was so upset he was practically shaking.

“Hey, honey, what’s up?” I asked casually to change the dynamic of the conversation.

“What’s up? Let’s see... my wife has been keeping something from me that she should have told me about Lord knows, how long ago. Why, Jasmine? Why didn’t you tell me about this?” he asked again without actually saying what it was I hadn’t told him. I had an idea, but I felt at that point it was best to simply let it play out.

“Tell you about what?” I asked pretending not to know exactly what he was referring to.

“Tell me about what? So, you want to play games is that what it is? Why didn’t you tell me about this, Jasmine?” Alex said slamming the pregnancy test on the poolside table.

I knew I was in trouble.

“Welp, that’s my cue to leave. See you later,” Cori said quickly exiting the pool area to grab her belongings before heading home.

“I guess it’s safe to assume that Cori knows. I guess everyone knows that you’re carrying my child except for me. You know, Jasmine, you have some nerve. You were upset with me for keeping a secret from you meanwhile you had your own secret you’ve been keeping from me the entire time,” he said.

“Well, not the entire time,” I said. “You’ve had your secret for over ten years, I’ve only been pregnant for 10 weeks so...,”

“That’s not funny, Jasmine. How can you keep something like this from me? Do you know what this means?”

“Not to make matters worse but it wasn’t as hard keeping this from you as you might think,” I said. “I tried to tell you a few times but every time I tried, something always got in the way. Mostly your attitude.”

“When were you planning on telling me? While you were laying down in the delivery room?” he asked.

“I’m sure you would have noticed my belly long before that, Alex.”

“How? When? Once our divorce is final, who knows when I would see you again? This baby complicates everything. We had a perfect plan and now this situation is putting it all on jeopardy,” he said.

“Do you think I did this alone? From I learned in sex-ed, it takes two to make a baby. Don’t get upset with me because we both succumbed to our weaknesses.”

“I’m not saying it’s your fault. I’m saying it’s complicated. We’re getting a divorce in two weeks and once it’s final, then what are we going to do about this baby?” he asked.

“Wait, what? What do you mean once our divorce is final? You still want to get a divorce?” I asked

He sighed.

“Yes.”

“Why? Why can’t we stay married and just build a life together?”

“Because that was not the plan,” he said.

“I know that Alex, but you told me the only thing that was keeping us apart was the secret about Cori’s parents. Unless that’s not the only reason why you left. Is there something else

you're not telling me? Because obviously this was not the only factor in your decision to leave."

"It was a major factor in my decision," he said.

"But not the only factor."

"No. Not the only factor," he said.

"So, what is it? What's the real reason?" I asked him.

"I told you before, I needed to take my place in the family business. This company is massive, and we cannot let it fall into the wrong hands. I had a responsibility to step in and take control of my post to keep this legacy alive," he said.

"Why can't you love and lead?"

"Life does not have to be one-dimensional. You can explore all the happiness life has to offer at once. Why do you refuse to be happy? Why do you refuse to love me?" I asked.

"I don't expect you to understand," he said looking down.

"I understand alright. I understand that for years I hoped that I would find closure from you leaving me after graduation. Then for years, I hoped that we would find each other once again and love one another without limits. But I see now that you are incapable of real love."

"The only person you care about is yourself and proving to your family that you have what it takes to lead the company," I said.

"Well, what's wrong with having a little ambition?" he asked.

"Nothing. Have your stupid ambition, and your stupid ring, and your stupid arrangement. I'm done with this shit. Whatever this thing is that we have, I'm over it. I'm filing for divorce in the morning," I said as I removed the ring and placed it on the counter.

"You can't do that, Jasmine, we have an agreement," he said.

"Screw you and your damn agreement," I said walking out.

I went into my room and started packing.

I expected Alex to come after me like he usually did, but he did not, and I was okay with that. I decided it was time to move on and finally rid myself of the ongoing pain and disappointment that comes with loving Alexander Diamond.

CHAPTER 32



As I started packing what I thought would be a few items, I realized I may have a bit of a shopping problem. Cori and I were only able to grab a few items the day of the fire and clothes did not cut. However, when I started throwing my items into a large tote bag I bought a couple of weeks prior during a day out with Alex, I realized I had more accumulation than I anticipated.

While trying to stuff the last bit of items into my bag, I found myself daydreaming about the day I purchased it.

We were walking around downtown looking for somewhere to eat and I saw the bag on display at a boutique window. The moment my eyes landed on it, I knew I had to have it.

To make it even more irresistible, it was on sale.

“Alex, I must have this bag,” I said deviating from the path we were following. “Don’t take this the wrong way Jazzy but I seem to recall you have the same purse in your room,” he said.

“My other tote is navy blue and a completely different brand,” I said. “This one is also blue,” he said raising one eyebrow. “It’s not blue Alex, it’s grey. Look, either way, the bag is 30% off. I’d be losing money if I don’t take advantage of this opportunity. A sale like that does not come around often,” I said.

“All I’m saying is, it looks blue to me,” he said taking another look. “It’s bluish-grey,” I said walking to grab the bag then placing it on the counter.”

I took out my wallet and removed my card to pay for my new purse but just before I handed it to the cashier, Alex grabbed it. “Put that away,” he commanded. “You know you don’t have to spend a dime when you’re with me. Even if it is on the same purse that you have at home.” He joked.

“You mean like the same two lime-green sports cars you have in the garage?” I asked.

Then Alex put his arm out in front of me like he was talking to a stranger. “Excuse me, can’t you see I’m trying to buy this very unique purse for my wife?” he said.

“Well, your wife appreciates it,” I said kissing him on his cheek.

It was a nice gift but now I get to use it to leave. The irony. I had only been there for a couple of months, but it appeared I had an entire wardrobe already. After packing up the 8th pair of shoes, it was time to go and grab a bag from the kitchen.

I didn’t have time to be fancy and get a suitcase, it started as a wonderful day of relaxation but by the end of it, I felt like I was finally thinking clearly and keeping my head out of the clouds as Cori recommended. I was going to move on with my life, it was time.

I grabbed my black bag and overstuffed totes and went to a hotel. I found myself starting to doubt my decision before I even arrived, but I knew in my mind it was the right decision although my heart disagreed.

When I checked into my room, I immediately went to work on pursuing my dreams. Only this time, without Alex.

It was late in the day by the time all the madness transpired so I lined up a few places I wanted to visit in the morning. Then I called Cori and she agreed to go with me. Just like that, I was one step closer to rebuilding my life.

“I’m proud of you for taking these steps Jasmine, but how are you doing otherwise? I feel like this is all moving quickly. You just left Alex’s house and you’re already in full work mode,” she said.

“I know but, I’ve wasted nearly three months if you don’t count the last two years and now, I have this baby who will need security so I can’t keep wasting time, there is someone else I need to work for now,” I said.

“Oh my gosh, look at my friend Jasmine already in mommy beast mode,” she said.

“I know right.”

“What’s the plan?” she asked.

“The plan is to find my dream restaurant, and hopefully get a loan from a bank to purchase and set it up. Then I’ll start paying off the loan while I build my empire.”

“I like the sound of that,” she said.

“How did the whole baby thing go with Alex?”

“Not great. He was upset I hadn’t told him but now that he knows, he didn’t say anything about it except that it complicates things.”

“Complicates things? What’s that supposed to mean? It’s a baby for crying out loud.”

“Right. And the fact that he still wants to go through with this divorce,”

“Wait, he still wants to get a divorce?” she asked.

“Yes. That’s why I stormed out and came to this hotel. Can you believe after everything we have been through; he still wants to throw this away?”

“I am shocked. I thought for sure Alex was here to stay. Did he say why?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter at this point. One thing we women know is we cannot force a man to stay or want to be with us. I love Alex but I cannot force him to be with me.”

“I know that but it’s clear that he’s in love with you,” she said.

“Well, I guess he will have to love me from a distance because I am in a different mindset now. I want to get my

work-life resolved before giving birth so I can feel confident about my future as a new mom,” I said.

“Well, if anything you can stick Alex with child support. Then you’d have plenty of money,” she said.

“And when I successfully launch this new restaurant, I will also have plenty of money. The only thing I want from Alex is to be a good father to his baby, but that’s something else I cannot force him to do.”

“Are you sure you made the right move friend? You’re almost there. I mean, just a couple more weeks and the contract is fulfilled. He would become CEO and give you the restaurant,” she said.

“I don’t want anything from Alex. He can keep his restaurant. But I know how much he wants to be CEO.”

I was upset with Alex about the way he was handling everything, but the truth is, I still loved him and wanted what was best for him. I wanted out but not to his detriment. “Maybe I can give him two weeks just so he can seal the deal and get into his new position,” I said.

“Does that mean you are moving back in with him?”

“Oh hell no. I’m staying at this hotel until I get clearance to return to our apartment. In the meantime, I’ll keep myself busy with planning my new business venture.”

CHAPTER 33



I was up all night. I do not know if it was the excitement of finally pursuing my goals or my way of protecting myself from being overtaken with sadness from the adrenaline of my broken heart.

The balled paper was thrown in the corner of the room and my notepad was filled with possibilities. Before I knew it, the sun was out, and it was time to choose my building.

Cori came to the hotel wearing off white dress pants and a beige shirt. Her dark blue hair was in a neat ponytail, and she wore light makeup. “You look nice Cori.”

“Thank you. I want these property managers to be impressed when we show up so they can just run and give us the keys to your new restaurant. You look nice yourself. Do you have a jacket you plan on throwing on top of that dress?”

“Yes, I have a grey blazer that matches this dress and black shoes. Let me put my hair up right quick, grab my shoes and we can go,” I said running to finish getting ready.

“Hurry Jasmine, I want us to find a place today,” she said.

“You and me both,” I said as I grabbed my purse and walked towards the exit.

When I got in the car, I called the places I selected and scheduled showings back-to-back.

We started with an old building in Brooklyn built in the 1920s. The place needed work but very few renovations had been done. There was a jazz club there which closed down

years prior and it looked like no one has done anything to the building since. It was dusty and full of spider webs. I tried to remain optimistic, but it was hard to see the vision in it.

Then we visited a small building in Manhattan. It was an ice cream parlor, but the owner retired and wanted to sell the building. This one was nice but small.

Then we went to see one in Queens. The building in queens was tempting because it was once a restaurant and the owners had recently moved out, so all the kitchen equipment was in great working condition. So far, that was my favorite. Until I saw the next one.

We pulled up to an elegant, art deco-style building that was already zoned for my restaurant. I was amazing at the elegant structure of the outside of the building but when I walked in, I knew I found it.

There was a corridor leading to the check-in desk. Once you go past the desk, there was a huge open space that could fit what looked like hundreds of people. There were two separate rooms which I would use for chef's table experiences. There was a small stage for the piano bar, and I could hear the keys playing in my head.

Then we walked into the kitchen. It was spacious and the paint was light, so it felt inviting. Then there was the best part, the balcony seating for the select few. Each side had just ten balcony seats to help our guests celebrate special occasions. I hadn't even made an offer on the place, but I was already visualizing myself in it and my restaurant filled with people there to enjoy my food and some of my dad's best recipes.

"I'll take it."

"Great, take this application, fill it out, and fax it to that number below for me. I will review it and you should be able to get started as early as next week," he said.

I was elated. "I cannot believe how easy that was. Why did I take so long to take action, Cori?"

"Because you don't have any money," she said. "Now we have to go to the bank to see if they will give you a start-up

loan,” she said.

We went to my bank and met with a small business specialist. She asked for a few documents which I was able to obtain online so that sped up the process. Thank goodness for the advancement of technology. After asking me what felt like a million questions, she stepped out to grab some documents then returned to her office to give me an update. “Ms. Hall, You are approved for \$150,000 with zero collateral but your payments start in six months.”

“Yes!” I said slightly dancing from the excitement of realizing my dreams. After we left, we started walking around Times Square to grab a bite to eat.

“Is everything working in my favor or what? Just like that, I have a loan and I have found my dream restaurant. Everything is just lining perfectly, what can go wrong?”

Then we looked up at one of the billboards as the news anchor was announcing some breaking news. *“This just in, Alexander Diamond was accused of utilizing non-FDA approved goods to keep his costs down in his restaurants throughout the city. This news comes in just days before his official placement as the new CEO of Diamond Holdings. Stocks are dropping and people are livid. Here we have Lisa, a longtime client of the Diamond restaurant chain. Lisa, what are your thoughts about all of this?”*

“The Diamond family has plenty of money and are living large at the expense of our health. My family has been dining at their restaurants for years and always had good experiences but now knowing that they have been serving us things that could be detrimental to our health is appalling. I think he should be held accountable for these selfish acts,” she said.

“Now, let’s get the input of this small business owner located just two minutes from one of the busiest Diamond restaurants where their head Chef, world-renowned Jasmine Hall was fired because someone got food poison after dining under her direct supervision. Here we have David. David, what do you think of these recent accusations?”

“Having met Mr. Diamond personally, he’s an ok guy. I get it, anything to save a buck these days with the way we’re getting hit with inflation. I just don’t know if he’s the right guy to run the company, or any company if I’m being perfectly honest,” he said.

Then the news anchor returned, *“We’ve reached out to Mr. Diamond’s attorney and the Diamond family for comments but so far, information has been sealed airtight. More on this news later as the story develops,”* he said.

If my eyes were opened any wider my eyeballs would probably fall out of the socket.

“Did you know about any of this, Jazzy?” Cori asked in shock.

“No. And I don’t believe either. There’s no way. Alex may be a bit of a jerk, but he is a good guy overall. He would never jeopardize other people’s health to make a buck. They already have billions of dollars and the damage news like this would do to their stocks is much greater than the pennies he would be saving otherwise. Besides, all that crap about someone getting food poisoning is just fake news. The man says he told my staff he was allergic to shellfish before being served it, but we looked at everything and the proof simply isn’t there,” I said.

“Alex must be devastated,” she said.

“Yes, he wants this CEO position so badly. I should call him,” I said.

“Yeah, I think that would be a good idea,” she said.

I stepped away and called Alex twice but there was no answer. This would be the first time we talked since I left his place, but I thought it was a call worth making.

“I don’t know, Cori, something about this is not adding up and I’m going to get to the bottom of it.” I spent the night before looking to solidify my dream and now I was knee-deep in research trying to find the source of this news with Alex.

“Here I have something,” Cori said turning her laptop to show me a legal complaint filed against Alex’s company stating the same crap that was being said in the news.

“Who filed that complaint, Cori? Let’s see if we can find the source,” I said.

“A company, Raven Lunatic. Let’s see if they have a website,” she said immediately going to google to find the company.

“Nope, no website,” she said. “But I did find their Articles of Incorporation. It’s owned by this guy named Bill Lamiardi?” she said. “Bill Lamiardi, that name sounds familiar for some reason. Bill Lamiardi? Where do I know this name from?”

“Maybe Alex knows, trying to send him a text,” Cori said. I texted him,

“Hey.”

He texted me back about three minutes later.

“Hey, Jazzy, sorry I’ve been in meetings all day, but I promise I will call you later,” he said.

“Does the name Bill Lamiardi ring any bells? I feel like I know someone by that name but can’t remember.”

“That’s Billy Lane from the eighth grade. My team is all over it,” he said.

“Right! Billy Lane. Isn’t that the kid you punched those years ago?” I texted him.

“Yep. Now he’s out to destroy me.”

“Tragic.”

“Indeed,” he said.

I turned to tell Cori about Bill Lamiardi who we called Billy Lane in the eighth grade.

“Why was his nickname Billy Lane?” she asked.

“Because when you say his last name, the first part sounds like lane and he was just a goofy kid, so everyone use to call him lane thus the nickname,” I said.

“Do you think this has something to do with what happened those many years ago?” she asked.

“I don’t know, I don’t think so. Why do you ask?” I asked Cori.

“Because that’s the same person behind the food poisoning accusations that cost you your job,” she said turning her computer screen to show me some information she dug up on some government archives.

“Oh my God. Maybe it is related after all. But why? Why after all these years would he try to sabotage us?”

“I don’t know but maybe we should find out,” she said.

“Yeah, where is this Raven Lunatic located? Let’s see if we can at least find a mailing address,” I said.

After hours of searching, we finally put enough information together to track Billy down.

I sent a text to Alex. “I’m going to pay Billy a visit.”

“Send me the address,” he texted back.

“No thanks. Somehow, I have a feeling it was you that got us into this mess so I’ll just go and talk to him. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Do you think I’m going to let you go alone? Send the Address Jasmine,” he texted.

“Fine!”

I sent it to him then Cori and I was on our way.

When we got outside of his business building, I saw Alex had already arrived and was walking boldly towards the building.

“Alex, wait,” I yelled, and he stopped to wait for me.

I asked Cori to wait for me in the car so Alex and I could speak to Bill.

We walked into a dimly lit room with magazines, video games, and newspaper clippings which were framed and hanging on the wall.

“Hello, is anyone in here?” I yelled while walking through the building.

“Bill, come out here and face me like a man you asshole. You don’t have a problem being vocal behind the media but how about you handle your problems like a real man,” he said pulling up his sleeves.

“Calm down, Alex. We did not come here to start any trouble. I just want to talk to him, maybe this is all a big misunderstanding,” I said.

“A misunderstanding?” I heard a man’s voice say from behind me. I turned about to see Bill standing there. He was about 5’10 with blonde hair and brown eyes. He was thinner than I expected but very attractive.

“Wow, Bill look at you. You look amazing. How have you been all of these years?” I asked.

“How have I been? Let’s see. I spent my high school years trying to get over the humiliation that you two put me through, college years, plotting my revenge, and now I have the easiest job of all. To ruin both of your reputations as you did mine,” he said.

“Reputation? The hell is wrong with you man? What kind of reputation does an eighth-grader have?” Alex said trying to remain calm.

“I was the man. Then one day I decided I was going to ask the hot girl in school to the dance. Alex, you came out of nowhere with your big money and followed and punched me in front of the entire school. Then everyone started to make fun of me. They called me names and took my stuff. Then when I got to high school, it was the same people doing the same things. They made my life miserable because of you,” he said.

“Bill, we never even talked after that day, your life was miserable because you didn’t know how to handle your shit, don’t put that on us,” Alex said still trying to maintain his composure.

“Bill, he’s right. Besides, we were in the eighth grade. Are you seriously making us pay for something we did when we were in grade school? I mean, I’m sorry you’re still hurting from this, but I didn’t even say no to your proposal, I told you I would think about it,” I said.

“But you never did think about it did you? After Alex came on his rich high horse, just like everyone else, you abandoned the thought of possibly going anywhere with me. I waited for you to get back to me and at least have the decency to come up with some lie, but you didn’t. Every time you saw me in the hallway, you looked away and you and your little friend Lauren just laughed at me,” he said.

“I don’t remember us laughing at you, Billy,” I said.

“It’s Bill! Don’t call me Billy,” he said pulling out a gun and pointing it at me.

Alex quickly stood in front of me. “Look man, this is getting out of hand. Why don’t you put the gun down and we can talk about this? I have plenty of money, let me set you up. I can get you whatever you want. Let’s talk about this,” he said.

“What I want? Okay. Let’s talk about what I want,” he said.

“I want you,” he said pointing the gun at Alex.

“And you,” he said then pointing the gun towards me.

“To not have made my life a living hell. You two ruined everything. My life at home was horrid. I went to school to escape but I made the mistake of asking you horrible bitch to the dance,”

“You need to watch your fucking mouth,” Alex said immediately going into alpha protective mode.

“Or what? What are you going to do huh Mr. Alexander Diamond?” he said laughing.

“You see. You can have all the money, all the fame, heck you can even have the girl. But if you don’t have the gun, then you my friend, have lost control of everything,” he said.

“Bill, please put the gun away. This can end very badly for all of us, and we don’t want that,” I said.

“Now you’re concerned with what I want. All I wanted then was a little respect. You respect me now, don’t you?” he said.

“What do you want, Bill? This isn’t getting anywhere, and I don’t have all day to stand here and deal with your shenanigans,” Alex said getting frustrated.

I elbowed him on his side. “Alex, he has a gun,” I reminded him.

“If he was going to shoot us, he would have done it already,” he said. “Look, Bill. Let’s talk about this, but you have to start by putting the gun down man.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. I’m not one of those groupies in your entourage, you don’t tell me what to do. I’m in control here,” he said.

“Such a tragic love story. Alexander Diamond devastated that his secret was discovered, and he was going to lose everything. His high school sweetheart Jasmine Hall came to talk him out of it, but he had made up his mind. He killed her and then killed himself to rid himself of taking responsibility for his actions. What do you think?” He asked.

“I think you need to put the gun down Bill. If you do this, you’ll spend your life in prison. This would end badly for all of us,” I said hoping he would just put the gun down.

I moved to the side of Alex to talk to Bill, but Alex moved to stand right in front of me again then held me behind him.

“Let me talk to him,” I said.

“Talk to him from behind me. I don’t want anything to happen to you,” he said.

“Awww, how sweet. Alex Diamond is still in love with his high school sweetheart. I gotta tell ya, I’m surprised man. I thought a guy like you would have moved on by now. I mean, every girl at the school was practically throwing themselves at

you but you didn't want just any girl right, Alex? You wanted my girl," he said.

"She was never your girl, Bill. Why don't you let this go?" Alex said.

"She was my girl!" he shouted angrily. "After sharing our first kiss, I know she felt what I felt," he said.

"First kiss? Jasmine, what is this fool talking about?" he asked.

"There was a party and we played spin the bottle. I didn't even want to play but everyone said it wasn't a big deal and I was being a party pooper, so I played. Twice a girl landed on Bill and passed. I felt bad for him so when I spun the bottle and it landed on him, I gave him a little peck on the lips then I stopped playing.

"I didn't need your pity. I thought you kissed me because you wanted to, not because you felt bad for me," he said.

"Bill, we were kids. Look at you now. Any of the girls would be happy to kiss you. You were just a boy but you're a man now. A handsome one. There is no need to do all of this, I said.

"Don't tell me what to do!" He yelled shooting a bullet toward the roof.

Alex pushed me out of the way and my heart dropped to the floor.

"Look man. Put the damn gun down," Alex demanded.

"Nah, I think I'll hold on to it," Bill said.

"I think you'd better put it down, Bill," Cori said standing at the doorway.

"Miss, thank goodness you're here. He came in here behaving like a madman," he said putting his gun down to address Cori.

Alex took the opportunity to tackle him to the floor and hold him down.

Cori immediately called the police. Alex pinned him down until the officers arrived.

“I can’t believe all of this over middle school drama,” Cori said. “At least you two can start putting the pieces of your lives back together.”

Alex was already on the phone with his legal team so they could get the newfound information out to the media as soon as possible.

Just a few moments later, the media reported the updates.

“Thank you, Cori, you saved our lives. Want to tell me why you’re driving around with a gun though?” he asked.

“A girl can never be too careful,” she said winking at Alex.

“Yeah, thanks Cori, that was scary. How did you even know to come out to check on us?”

“I’ve seen enough movies to know that the situation was going to turn bad. I was ready to jump out at the first sound of something outside of the ordinary. Then I heard a gunshot. I grabbed my gun and here I am,” she said.

“My dawg,” I said giving her a high five.

Sure enough, the next day the incident was all over the news.

To my surprise, attorneys from all over were contacting me and suggesting that I file a wrongful termination suit against Diamond Holdings. I was even more upset at their decision to fire me, but I was not about to sue Alex.

I was going to open my dream restaurant, so I had my eyes on the prize. No more deviating. In two days, I was scheduled to sign my lease agreement and start building my dream. That was the plan, but since when does life step aside to adhere to our plans?

CHAPTER 34



The next morning, I got a text from Cori with her beautiful engagement ring. Ray finally proposed.

“Congratulations, friend, tell me everything! How did he do it?” I asked her excited about the news.

“When I got home last night, I was looking everywhere for him to tell him about our crazy day and when into our bedroom, he was laying there butt naked on rose pedals, a with a rose in his mouth. He had jazz music playing in the background and when I got on the bed, I saw the ring on his penis,” she said. Then he started making it jump as if it was talking and he said, “I love you baby, marry me,” she told me laughing hysterically.

“Yep, that sounds like a genuine Ray proposal,” I said joining her in laughter.

“That’s amazing friend we need to start planning your wedding,” I said.

“Yes, but maybe early next year. I’m thinking we can have a December wedding, but this year has been too hectic. I’ll just finish this year off right and next year Ray and I can have our Christmas wedding,” she said. “Ok but in the meantime, lets keep our eyes and ears open and alert on all things wedding,” I said. “I love the sound of that,” she said.

Then someone started calling me on the line so I told Cori I would call her back. When I answered, it was the property manager of the building I was looking to lease.

“Ms. Hall, I’m sorry but I have some bad news. The owner has decided to build on the property and the lease agreement that we had in place has been voided,” he said.

Life. Just when everything seemed to be perfect, life let me down... again.

Cori decided that she was going to buy a property for me, and I would pay her back in installments. “Jazzy, I know you want to do this on your own but the words say to ask. I ask you for stuff all the time and you always provide it. Let me do this for you please,” she said.

“I can’t borrow that much from you, Cori. I just can’t” I said.

“Why not?” she asked. “Talk to me, Jazzy, what’s going on?” she asked.

“What if I fail?” I asked her finally admitting to my fear of failure.

“Fail?” she asked. “So, what if you fail? Jasmine, people fail and fall a million times. The trick is to keep getting up. You’re the best chef I know, and I’m not alone in saying that so there is no way for you to fail. You just do what you do best. Create the most delicious and artfully designed meals. You don’t have to know every single aspect of running the business, you can hire people for all that. Your passion is food so just focus on that and find someone else with the proper business training to do everything else. Besides, your restaurant is going to be massive. You won’t have time for that multiple role nonsense that you are concerned about,” she said.

“That’s why I thought that arrangement with Alex’s company was a perfect win/win scenario, but it did not work out, so we move on. Your best friend has millions of dollars in the bank and would like nothing more than to invest in your business,” she said.

“Cori, you’re the best,” I said.

“I learn from the best,” she said.

Although Alex and I were no longer an item, he was still my husband for about four more days. We had been talking

regularly since the incident with Bill, so I called him to give him the terrible news.

He told me to keep my head up and that there would be other opportunities. Then he told me about his CEO announcement in a couple of days and wanted me to attend. I told him I would think about it but we both knew I was going. I loved Alex more than I hated him, and I would not miss such a big day in his career.

For the big announcement, I wanted to dress business sexy. I started by straightening my hair then I wore a light blue work dress with a silver belt. I topped it off with high silver heels and light makeup which I finished with a subtle light pink on my lips.

I arrived downtown where the company was making its announcement. When I got there, there were 100s of people waiting around to see Alexander Diamond and pitch business ideas during the possible five seconds they might get with him.

I made my way to the front and Alex send a bodyguard to get me and escort me to the row by the stage.

The host started speaking and making jokes. The crowd was lively and some were drunk during that 2:00 PM event so every other thing the speaker said received a loud accolade or excessive laughter.

While I was sitting on the row near other close family members of the leadership board, I turned to see Alex staring at me from the stage. "You look stunning," he mouthed.

"Thank you," I said feeling proud of my selection for the day. Then I realized just how stunning he looked. He was wearing a dark blue suit with a white shirt and a shiny black tie. His black shoes with a silver buckle over his big size 11 feet.

Finally, they made the announcement and Alex stood up. The crowd went wild. "We love you Alex," I could hear one woman scream and someone else threw her panties at him.

It was 2:00 PM so either she brought the panties from home and carried it in her purse, or she was a complete

lunatic. I tried to see where the panties came from so I could throw them back but there were so many ladies I was impossible to guess. I found myself getting jealous. “I know they know he’s married,” I thought to myself. Then Alex started talking and I forgot all about it.

“Whoo, this has been my dream since I was a kid. To one day, take my place and lead this business into the future. This company was founded by my great grandfather, and it started off as just a small diner. Now, we have over 200 restaurants around the world and 20 just in New York City.

The future for Diamond Holdings is brighter than ever and I have all of you to thank for that. You all have supported our chains for many years, and we promise to continue to uphold the highest standard of quality and integrity to ensure that your trust in us continue to grow. We are nothing without you,” he said, and everyone went wild.

He let them cheer for a few seconds before continuing. “As your new CEO, I have already started working on ways to improve your dining experiences started with our newest location right here in Times Square. Our restaurant The Diamond Hall will be co-owned and overseen by the best chef this country has ever seen. My lovely wife, Jasmine Hall. Honey, please stand so everyone can see just how stunning you are,” he said. I stood up and he put his hand out for me to join him on stage. I walked over to Alex, and he held my hand. While holding my right hand, he got down on one knee.

“Jasmine, if it weren’t for you, my life would be meaningless, and my career would be in pieces. You have been here for me through it all and I realize that I have not returned that favor. You deserve to be loved, you deserve to be treasured, you deserve to be a real wife,” he said.

Everyone in the audience seemed shocked and confused by his statements.

“Jasmine, today, we are supposed to divorce. I am asking you to stay and be my wife. I promise you I will do all those things the priest told me to do the day we stood there and took those fake vows. The vows were fake, but my love has been

consistent since the day I kissed you on that swing set,” he said.

“Actually, I kissed you because you were scared but go on,” I said.

Everyone laughed as they watched Alex propose to me.

“Stay married to me, Jasmine, please be my wife,” he said.

“Yes, I’ll be your wife. For real this time,” I said.

He got up and started hugging me.

“Under one condition,” I said.

“Anything,” he said.

I want to have another wedding. The last one was rushed and crazy, I want to do it right this time, I said.

“That’s it? Just say when,” he said.

“How about on Valentine’s Day?”

“Valentine’s Day sounds perfect,” he said as he kissed me. Everyone cheered and took photos.

After the very public proposal, I went to see Alex so we could talk without all the hype.

“I’m glad you finally came to your senses,” I joked.

“Me too,” he laughed.

“I’m happy to stay married because I do love you and we are having a child together but I’m not so sure about the business arrangement. I’m thinking about just starting with a brand-new restaurant. The greatest challenge was finding enough money for everything. I was pre-approved for \$150,000 but that was just enough to get the inside done and get the equipment I needed. Cori said she is willing to invest in either buying the building or a lot I can build on. The arrangement I had with you was great but after everything I just don’t feel good about it,” I said.

“Baby, I was hoping that we could work there together and leave it behind as a legacy for our little junior. Something

separate from the Diamond brand just like you're saying," he said.

"I hear you but I'm not sure. I just don't want something to go astray, and I end up getting screwed at the end of it all," I said.

"I'll tell you what, give it a shot. Let's try this restaurant together and the one with the company so we have two going. If you don't like it, you can just buy yourself a building or a lot or whatever and start over that way," he said.

"Oh sure, I'll just go into my bank account and get the \$600,000 that I have and buy millions worth in real estate," I said.

"Jazzy, what are you talking about \$600,000. Did you ever bother looking at the folder I gave you with our banking information?" he asked.

"No, because we talked about those accounts when you were asking for recommendations on investments. I gave you my recommendations, so I did not see the point in going over the statements," I said.

"I know our marriage was allegedly fake, but do you recall signing a prenuptial agreement when we got married?" he asked.

"No."

"Right. So, half of everything that I have belongs to you," he said.

"Why would you do that?" I asked him.

"Because I love you. My mom thought she had it all taken care of but like you said, if anything went astray, I wanted you to come out on top," he said.

At that moment I felt like orphan Annie when she went to visit daddy Warbucks. I just wanted to sing out, "I know I'm gonna like it here!"

"So, it's settled, we try this and if for some reason you want to try something different, you have about 2 billion

dollars at your disposal. That's not even including my secret Swiss bank account," he said smiling.

"If it's a secret, should you be telling me about it?" I asked.

"No more secrets remember?" Then he put his arms around me and kissed me.

"I love you, Jasmine Hall."

"I love you, Alexander Diamond."

It was decided. Mr. and Mrs. Diamond was officially a real thing.

Six months later, I gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. I wanted to name him Jordan, but Alex wanted a junior. We could not decide on which one to keep so we flipped a coin and Alex won. I found out a week after that he bought a double-headed coin, that trickster was willing to do anything to get a junior.

Before bringing baby Alex home, we redecorated and babyproofed our house so that it felt more like home. No more black furniture. We went with white, blue, and orange to give the house a more vibrant appearance. My room was restored to a guestroom, and we made a nursery for baby Alex in a room that was connected to the master bedroom which Alex used as an office.

We also redecorated his room so that it was suitable for all three of us. Alex Jr had his own room, but he seldom slept in it.

As I was having the kitchen remodeled, Alex thought it would be easier if I just chose another house for our family, but I kept declining his offer.

"Are you sure you don't just want to buy a new house?" he asked.

"Now why would I want to do that when redecorating this one is so much fun?" I asked.

After settling down with our new baby, we went to work on planning our wedding. This time, without the help of

Alex's mother. She was only trying to protect him from the incident with Cori's parents, but she was overbearing. Now that all of that was out of the shadows, we were free to live and love our way.

Then on Valentine's Day, I woke up early to give my husband a little striptease. We started our morning with a morning quickie which we had become experts at since bringing our little man home.

He gave me a kiss for Valentine's Day, a kiss for our anniversary, and a beautiful replacement engagement ring to match the band he was getting ready to give me during our second wedding ceremony.

The wedding officiant went through the process of a vowel renewal since we were still married. He said all the same things but this time, they meant a lot more because we knew that this was the beginning of something real.

"Congratulations on your vowel renewal, you may now kiss the bride."

"I love you, Jasmine Hall."

"I love you, Alexander Diamond."

Then he grabbed me and kissed me unapologetically. We were officially, still married.

After the reception of my real dream wedding, we went straight to his private jet to celebrate our overdue honeymoon on a private island.

I was surrounded by scenic views of the ocean, lush green landscapes, and my husband's hardcore body. We spent an entire week lost in each other only coming out of it to check on our son.

Too bad what happened on the island did not stay on the island. Three months later, we learned that Jordan would be joining the family after all.

Our love was unplanned, unorganized, and abnormal since the day I laid eyes on Alex, but our strange relationship manifested into the happiest happily ever after there ever was.

THE END

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YOU HAVE A MATCH, A ROMANTIC COMEDY

It all started with an Uber...

**Online dating seemed like a great idea. Until I skipped the
“Add Photo” section, and so did my nemesis, the
infuriating John Brooks.**

A rich, older doctor, with a profile screaming hot AF? Yes,
please!

I'm turning 30, single, and NOT loving it. I wanted to go
online, find my match, get married, and have a few kiddos. It
was the perfect plan.

Until I discovered that my “perfect match” was the infuriating
Dr. John Brooks. He had been nothing but a pain in my lower
back since I mistook his car for my Uber.

Our relationship was a perfect “hate” one, and we were both
ok with that. It appeared the app was broken... or so I thought.

After hours of “No, you hang up” syndrome, it was clear
something was brewing underneath.

Until I was ambushed by his ex-wife who was not ready to let
him go.

Cupid must have quite the sense of humor.

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