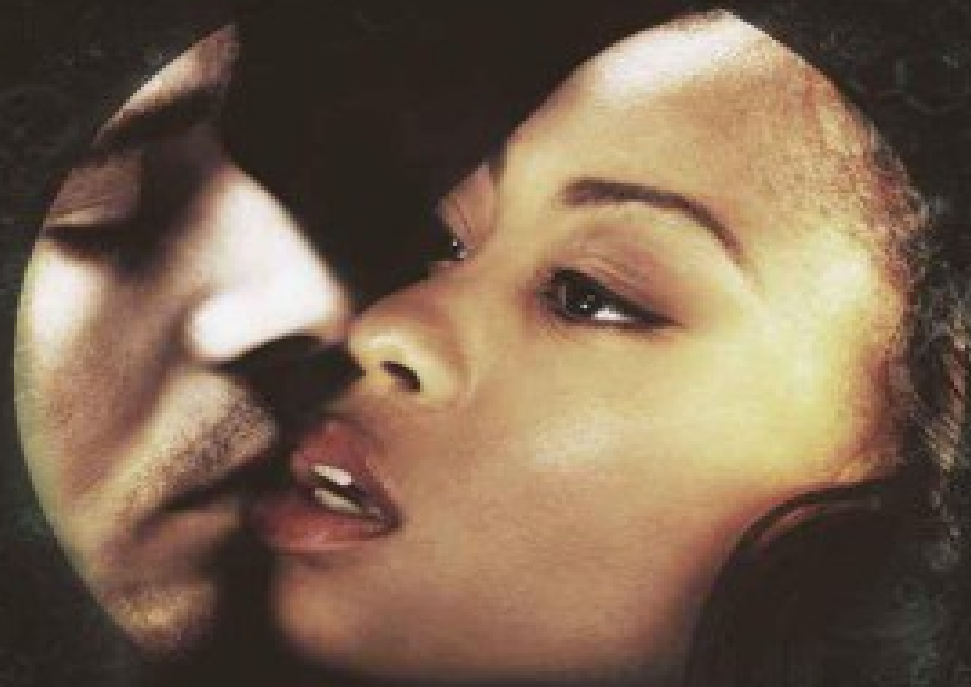


Amazon Erotica Bestselling Author

KENYA WRIGHT



What would
you do for
money?

An
ARRANGEMENT
OF *Love*

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Epilogue
Biography

An Arrangement of Love

Kenya Wright

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An Arrangement of Love
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Edited by Megan Martin Editing Services
Cover design by: Najla Qamber
Proofread by Joy Hunter Editing Services
Tested on and certified by Team Wright Beta Readers

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<http://www.KenyaWright.com>

To

My husband Jacob

Thanks for introducing me to the art of food.

Chapter 1

“How many sexual partners have you had in your life?” Mr. Stone browsed my college transcript and then flipped to my resume. “That’s including oral and anal.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. *Did I hear him correctly?* I’d been prepared to answer several questions for this job interview: What are your strengths and/or weaknesses? Are you okay with the straining time commitment of an executive assistant? Will you be comfortable being the only black person in an all-white corporation?

Time to brush up on sexual harassment laws for private companies. And do I really want a job where the boss wonders about my sex life? Dang it. But, do I even have other options?

Mr. Stone tossed my resume on the table and picked up a folder with my name on it. “Did you understand the question?”

“Yes.”

“How many men have entered you?” He opened the folder, turned a page, and then targeted me with green eyes that boasted amber hues around the irises. No blemishes, wrinkles, or splotches decorated his tan skin. Midnight-black waves framed his face. Interrupting my ogling, he said, “Do I need to draw diagrams or bring out visual aids, Ms. Montgomery?”

He’s gorgeous, but he’s an asshat.

“No.” I twisted my lucky copper ring on my pinky finger. “I’ve had two partners.”

“Only two?”

The redheaded woman next to him covered her mouth and snickered. The other panel members wore neutral masks on their faces—from the old graying men in designer suits to the stunning women coated in make-up and expensive perfume. Each person was the head of a multi-million dollar company Stone owned. All of them had been his or his father’s executive assistant. If I got the job, my future would be laid out with sparkling platinum bricks and a servant to guide me through my career, bearing wine and pricey caviar. *Just get through the interview, Jasmine. No rash decisions. No cursing him out and stomping out of the office. At least see where this goes.*

“Yes.” I twirled the ring. “I’ve only had two partners.”

“Any female partners?” He curled his lips at the edges. His cheeks quivered a little, as if he was holding in laughter. *Oh, you’re enjoying this, aren’t you?*

“No women,” I said.

Stone set the folder on his desk and knitted his fingers together. His hands screamed manicured—nails filed even, a gloss of clear polish, and no bordering cuticles or abrasions.

Those are billionaire hands. I’ll bet he has a servant who wipes his behind after he goes to the bathroom.

“Are you with the second partner?” he asked.

“I’m single.” I tapped my right foot. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of my face. I didn’t wipe it away, in fear that I would reveal shaking fingers.

“What happened with your last boyfriend?” Stone glanced at my shoes.

I hid the shoe with the scuffed tip behind my other leg. “I caught him cheating on me with my best friend.”

“Besides breaking up with him, what did you do when you found out?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you still friends with both the ex and best friend?” He leaned back in his chair.

“Yes.”

“Have they married?”

“Yes.” I stopped playing with my ring and shifted to twisting my index finger.

“Did you go to the wedding?”

“I was one of their bridesmaids.”

The redhead scribbled notes on her paper. Other panel members exchanged glances.

I’m so missing how this is related to the job?

“Why only two sexual partners?” Mr. Stone asked.

“Excuse me? What is the relevance of these—”

“You’re a pushover with no fashion sense and standard looks, but you have a nice body and an interesting pair of eyes. Are they hazel?”

“Yes.”

“I gathered from your background check that you grew up in a rough

neighborhood on the South End. It makes sense that you would've had sex with more than two men?"

Just go ahead and say it. "You have a stereotypical lower income background, drug addict black mother, unknown white father, most of your relatives are in prison or receiving government assistance. Why aren't you pregnant with your fifth kid, sitting on the couch, and scooping spoonfuls of lard into your mouth?"

An exasperated breath escaped my lips. *Relax. This is just a weird test. Worst case scenario is I don't get the job. Suck it up.* "I only had the opportunity to sleep with two guys."

"I don't believe that." He tapped the edge of his desk with his thumb. I'd noticed he did that a lot. *Is he nervous too? Doubt it.* Again, he tapped. "Come on. You've done a lot to get to this final phase. Don't bore me with half-thought-out answers."

I *had* done a lot. The hiring process incited exhaustion and manic hysteria. Stone required a recommendation from his employees to even be considered as an applicant. My friend's father, Benny Nix, was on the company's corporate legal staff and had been my recommender. Once I met that requirement, I underwent a knowledge examination, lie detector test, two sessions with a psychologist, and a medical physical that included a pap smear as well as drug and STD tests.

"Why only two lovers?" He repeated the question.

"I have five older brothers." *Who enjoy shooting people and think the county jail is their second home.* "No one wanted to deal with them. I remained a virgin until college, where I met my two ex-boyfriends."

"Abortions?"

I flinched as if he'd slapped me. "I've had one abortion."

"Why?"

"I'd just discovered my boyfriend cheated on me. I had no money. I was at Harvard on an academic scholarship—"

Mr. Stone raised his hand to stop me. I exhaled, but the guilt rose inside my core. I'd taken a life, due to inconvenience and my own stupidity from not taking my pills. The choice haunted me each time I thought about it. *God, will this interview ever end?*

He snapped his fingers. "Are you with us?"

"Yes." My voice screeched a little.

“What’s going on with your hair?”

Black kinky curls teased my shoulders. “I wear my hair natural. I don’t believe in damaging hair with unnecessary chemicals.”

He turned to the redhead. “What’s the African American actress’s name who just won an Emmy?”

“Sally Naysen.” She pulled out a thin silver phone. “Do you want me to make Ms. Montgomery a hair appointment?”

Excuse me?

“Yes. Make sure it’s one of my mother’s salons,” he said. “Have them do whatever that actress has done to her hair and have them fit her in for tonight.”

“Okay, Chase.” She stood up, typed on her phone’s screen, and marched away.

“Umm . . . the actress has a perm,” I muttered. “Perms are chemical hair products.”

Mr. Stone ignored me. “Congratulations. You’ve got the job.”

All the panel members rose from their chairs and left one by one. My stomach coiled with exhilaration and uncertainty. *Hair appointment? Tonight?*

I cleared my throat. “Thank you, Mr. Stone.”

“Call me Chase.”

“Thank you, Chase.” I formed my fingers into little fists and dug my nails into my palms. “I’m really happy to accept the job, but I’m wondering about the hair—”

“The woman who’s making your hair appointment is Lucy. She’ll also take you shopping tonight and will be training you for the next three months.” He rose and towered over me. “You’ll only deal with her or me. Don’t interact with other employees in the building. We’ve had some fatal outcomes with my past assistants. I don’t want those types of endings to be your fate.”

“What happened?”

The muscles in his jaw twitched. “Lucy will explain.”

Suspicious. I’ll ask her about it, when I tell her I’m not perming my hair!

“You’ll receive a low salary during your training.” He unbuttoned his jacket, took it off, and slung it over the back of his chair. “Around \$185, 000

for the first year.”

I choked on my saliva and coughed several times into my hands. *Fine. I'll perm my hair.*

“After three months, I'll decide if you remain my assistant or not.” He walked around his desk with fluid movements that emitted pure confidence. I rose and he halted three feet in front of me. A spicy cologne drifted from him and reminded me of the scent of new leather mixed with vanilla. *Goodness.* He was as tall as my brothers, and they were all over six feet. He extended his hand, wrapped satin fingers around mine, and encased my skin in heat.

“Spend time with your family and friends this weekend.” He tightened his grip. The added pressure didn't hurt, but I knew he had power in that hold. “When Monday morning arrives, you're mine. There are no sick days or time off unless I say so. Other than that, you sleep and eat when I do. You're issued an iPhone. You miss my call and you're fired. I don't care if it's 3:00 a.m., your mother is in the hospital, and you've just been attacked. I am your god.”

What? I gazed into his green eyes and waited for the punch line. An unnerving quiet thickened the space. He pulled me in closer until only two inches stood between us.

“Say it,” he said in a low voice. Shock coursed through my veins.

“What do you want me to say?” I shifted my focus to his broad shoulders. Since he'd taken his jacket off, I could now see the muscles in his arms stretching his white shirt.

Rich, young, sexy, and flawless skin. Nobody's that perfect. His penis must be an inch long.

“Look at me,” he said.

I swallowed and followed his order. Our eyes met. And there came a look from him that froze me in place, one that dizzied my brain and made me sway. It was like alcohol poisoning to the bloodstream, and I felt like a drunkard on his tenth shot, realizing it was too late for salvation and certain of keeling over to the ground.

What the hell am I getting myself into?

“Say I am your god.” No hint of humor skittered across his expression.

Any other time I would have laughed, but when it came to my financial situation, I held my mocking inside. Those four words, *you are my god*, guaranteed a six-figure salary—one I thought I wouldn't reach until my

fifteenth year of working. Here it was, my first official job out of college, and my salary exceeded my expectations. The things I could do with that amount danced in my head—pay school loans, get a new car, help my mom raise my nieces and nephews, finally present my other roommate/best friend the rent money I'd never been able to give her since we'd moved into our place a year ago.

I centered all of my attention on Chase and displayed what I hoped to be a self-assured smile. “You are my god.”

Chapter 2

They're all dead? That can't be a coincidence.

I stumbled toward my apartment door. My phone buzzed for the thirtieth time that night. My mom's name flashed on the phone's screen. I'd been too busy to answer it in the salon, clothing stores, or on the limo ride to my place where Lucy told me my duties. My head boomed in pain from worry, exhaustion, and insecurity. When I asked Lucy about Chase's prior assistants, she'd simply explained that the last three died: suicide with prescribed sleeping pills, accidentally electrocuted in a pool, and attacked leaving the office.

"We're calling you lucky number four," Lucy had admitted. "A lot of sick people are making bets on whether you'll make it. Just ignore that."

The hallway light blinked on and off. I dropped my shopping bags full of new work clothes. Samba music blasted from next door. For once, I wasn't upset the neighbors were having a party. *Tonight I'm celebrating too!* My phone buzzed again. I checked the screen. *Mom.*

She probably needs money.

With my brothers in jail, most of their kids stayed with my mom. The kids' mothers usually landed in jail for accessory to whatever crime my brothers committed. Therefore, Mom always needed money for medical bills, daycare, winter clothes, etc. *I'll send her some money tomorrow.* A grin spread across my face. This was the first time I could give her money and not experience a stomach ulcer. I tucked a huge binder under my left arm. Chase required so much from his assistant that Lucy was forced to compile a binder that listed my responsibilities, his likes/dislikes, and information on his fiancée, associates, and relatives. *I'm in over my head.*

Conferences, business meetings, test runs, and negotiations crowded his calendar. He had no day off, not even Sundays. And with each expected appearance of Chase, I was supposed to be next to him, taking notes, assessing the quality of business deals, reminding him of an event's significance, and carrying out his personal stuff—gifts for holidays/birthdays, booking travel arrangements, and anything else he thought of.

When do I sleep? I guess when you're making six figures, you can sleep when you die.

That bizarre news flickered in my head again. *All three of his assistants*

are dead. Crazy. Although the last assistant's death had been two years ago, unease still nipped at my thoughts. If Mom discovered this, she would forbid me to work there. Now that she was three years clean of drugs, she spent her days devouring religion and preaching to anyone who would listen.

"This is a sign from God that you shouldn't be working for those rich white people," she would probably say. "Work on filling your soul, instead of your bank account."

Meanwhile, you need me to send you money to fill your bank account.

I yanked my keys out of my favorite pocketbook. Sadly, Lucy told me I couldn't bring the purse back to the office because it might disgust Chase. Two-inch pieces of coconut shells covered it. A multi-colored yarn cord served as the strap. I'd explained to Lucy my style represented an eclectic flair for odd things.

"Oh, that's so cool," Lucy had replied. "But definitely don't return with the purse."

Shoes, suits, and accessories filled my shopping bags. Lucy had dragged me around Merrick Square and towed me into stores with flashy titles and clerks who greeted you at the door with glasses of champagne and wide smiles on their faces. For hours, I'd tried on clothes I would've never considered for myself—form-fitting pencil skirts, brightly colored blouses with ruffled collars and revealing cleavage lines, uncomfortable shoes that didn't possess a heel; instead, the back of the shoes arched upward into torturous slants that mimicked four inch heels and forced me to focus on every step. Each time a cashier reported the total, I'd cringed. The costs surpassed the value of my car. Yet, Lucy never flinched and just charged it to Stone Industries.

"Chase demands elegance," Lucy had explained when we entered Fantino Spa. "I'll walk you through your makeup. Take notes. Be aware of current trends. Fashion is important to him."

"Okay." I inhaled a floral perfume as we walked down a hot-pink passageway.

"When in doubt, just have a clerk from one of the shops we went to dress you."

"And what about hair styles?" I was still trying to get out of the perm.

"Each month, Chase emails Fantino what he wants your hair to look like. Get used to it. I'm actually a blonde. Chase decided to make me a redhead.

You'll have monthly salon visits unless you both are out of the country. By the way, is your passport current?"

"Yes." I trailed behind her and held in my irritation over Chase's control issues.

"Good. Always keep your passport, ID, credit cards, and a pair of clothes with you. Sometimes you'll have to hop on a plane with only ten minutes' notice." Lucy guided me down another pink passageway. "Sign all the documents I gave you. Especially the thirty page anti-disclosure agreement. You can't discuss anything about your job with anyone."

"Okay." *Apparently, you can't style yourself either!*

Lucy had scanned the area and leaned toward me. "You'll be monitored and watched."

Again, I waited for a punch line that never came. "O-kay."

She headed to a black door. "Fantino will wax you to Mr. Stone's requirements."

"Um . . . excuse me?" My heart banged at an increased rate. "I thought I was just getting my hair done. What will be waxed?"

Lucy chuckled. "Almost everything."

And Fantino had waxed everything. My skin ached. The person who invented waxing must've been beaten as a child, to the point that only a monstrous mental state remained. My eyebrows stung. *And I'm sure the tiny hairs between my buttocks were there for health reasons. They had to serve some sort of biological function.* I'd argued that point to him. But he'd just cackled like an evil sorcerer and yanked the hairs away.

I opened my front door. Marijuana smoke hit me first, then darkness. My roommate's boyfriend, Noc, claimed he was a spoken word artist, but he was actually just a skinny Puerto Rican guy who sold drugs and wrote lyrical rhymes that would cause Dr. Seuss to rise from his grave and slap him. Noc was probably visiting her since the place reeked of weed. I loved Vivian like my own sister, but I hated many of her life choices. Her drug usage was one of the big ones. Second was her choice in men.

I just hope they're not getting freaky on the couch again.

"Hello?" I entered the hallway. "Vivian, are you home?"

Giggling sounded from the living room. Huge hands grabbed my waist and lifted me high in the air. The lights rushed on.

My twin brother Troy hugged me to him. "Sis! I'm out!"

That's why Mom was calling me.

"Hey." I hugged him back. He gripped me hard with bulging muscles that almost squeezed the breath out of me.

"Good god. Did you do anything else besides work out in jail?" I asked.

"He's huge, right?" Vivian giggled and walked by us on bare feet. Her long blonde curls ended at her waist. "Dude, whose shopping bags are these?"

"Mine." I took in my bald-headed brother as he stood, smirking, in front of me. We both had the same hazel eyes and pointed nose, but that was where our resemblance ended. When we were kids I'd joked that he not only took up the whole womb with his huge frame, but he'd sucked up the entire gorgeous gene. When he smiled his cheeks lifted with perfection, full lips bloomed, and every woman within a ten foot radius drooled.

"I'm glad to see your face wasn't ruined," I said.

"Our brothers run one-fourth of Polemont Island. No one touched me the whole time I was in jail." He flashed flawless teeth and crossed tattooed arms over his bare chest. "You look good too, Sis."

"Well. I'm trying." I combed my fingers through the new silky strands Fantino had attached to my head. He'd permed, weaved, and curled me into some high-end woman I didn't recognize in the mirror. Almond-brown hair with honey-blonde highlights swung to my butt, announcing to the world there was no way I naturally grew this perfect hairdo. *Somewhere in India a poor bald-headed girl is missing her locks.* Even worse, the weave weighed my head down like a heavy helmet.

"Jazz, you look like a model chick." Troy beamed.

"Yeah." Vivian peeked into one of the bags still in the hallway. "When you left the house you had curls, an old black pantsuit, and the ugliest pocketbook created on earth. Oh wait, you're still holding that coconut contraption."

"My purse never did anything to you. Leave it alone." I clutched it to my chest. "Anyway. I got the job!"

"What?" Vivian's blue eyes brightened as she jumped up and down. "Stone freaking Industries?"

"Yes!" I screamed back and swayed, doing a victory dance we'd created back in high school when we were on the debate team. "Tell your father thanks."

Benny, Vivian's father, was out of town now, somewhere in Europe. When he returned, I would thank him face-to-face. I hadn't even known he'd recommended me for a job. One morning, a woman called and told me that Mr. Benny Nix referred me for the executive assistant position and to start the application process.

"In fact, I'll have to send him a bottle of scotch," I said. "Something really expensive."

"Dad will love that." Vivian did the dance with me and added some extra skips and steps. I laughed and copied her.

"You're both still my geeky little girls." Troy went to the hallway, swept the bags up with one hand, and carried them in. I followed Vivian into our tiny living room. She crashed on our green-and-yellow-polka-dot couch.

"This is huge. I get six figures! I had no idea." I paused as I spotted Troy's duffle bag slumped against the wall next to Vivian's TV. "Why is your bag here?"

He remained quiet and placed my shopping bags by the lime-green coffee table. Vivian had painted a landscape scene on top of the table full of lush grass, jagged brown cliffs, and vibrant violet flowers that sparkled in a shimmering sun. Currently smoking paper, a three-foot bong, and a bag of light green marijuana buds adorned the art work.

"I told him he could stay for a while." Vivian rested her feet on the table as Troy collapsed next to her.

"Was this before or after you both smoked a joint?" I asked, knowing that Troy would be on probation and drug use would be a major violation. *He's only been out of jail for a few hours and already he's breaking rules. My joyous night crashed back to my normal state of constant anxiety. I can't watch him go back to jail, and damn it, I'm so tired of dealing with this.*

"It's temporary, Sis." Troy displayed a gloomy expression. "It's not like I can go stay with Mom."

Nope. One day back in South End and he'd be in jail by the evening. Our older brothers hurt a lot of people in our neighborhood, from stealing, shooting relatives, or getting their loved ones incarcerated. Men trying to get a name for themselves would bother Troy just because our other brothers weren't around to protect him. Even worse, Troy would only be bored and discouraged. The whole area had a way of dragging the residences' spirits down and making them feel like there was no God or salvation, only

depression.

Not that where Vivian and I lived was high class. We stayed in a small town called Knightson, ten minutes outside of Oshane City. It was so small it only had two stop lights. Lots of hippies walked the streets, holding baskets of fresh fruit and radiating the scent of weed. The rest were middle class families who commuted to their jobs in the city. Knightson provided an easy and relaxed living compared to the fast-paced life of Oshane City. No one bothered anyone, and if they did it was to help in some way. The area claimed to have the best schools in the state and lowest crime rate in the country.

Living here would be better for him.

“Only temporary?” I asked.

He flashed that winning smile and nodded. “It was Vivian’s idea.”

Sure it was.

Ever since we were young, Troy had a way of getting Vivian to agree to anything. She used to do all of his homework in middle school, although she claimed it was tutoring. When he ran away from home, she hid him in her bedroom for a whole week and didn’t even tell me he was there. Four years ago, she’d even let him borrow her car. The same car that was impounded when he was caught inside of it with our brother, Neil, who happened to have several pounds of drugs in a duffle bag in the back seat. Troy told me he didn’t know about the drugs and that Neil had just asked for a ride. It was probably true. Neil tended to get people in trouble. That was the last time I’d seen Troy and Neil. I hated going to visit my brothers in jail. So I chose to write them constantly and send them packages instead.

“Having Troy here will be awesome.” Vivian clapped and rubbed her hands together.

I didn’t want to get Vivian in any trouble or take further advantage of her father’s hospitality. *They’ve already done enough for us.*

I looked at Vivian. “I’ll give you the rent I’ve owed you—”

“You don’t owe me any rent.” Vivian rolled her eyes.

“I haven’t paid any.”

“Neither have I. Dad does it.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, be quiet.” I placed my hands on my hips. “I’m paying Benny my year of rent and then I’m giving him a little extra for Troy to stay here.”

“I was thinking we don’t say anything about Troy staying here.” Vivian

winked.

“I agree,” Troy chimed in.

Of course you agree. Benny is going to kill us.

“Your father’s name is on the lease,” I said. “He should know who’s in here.”

“Yada, yada, yada.” Vivian twirled her fingers in the air. “You are such a tight butt.”

“I just don’t want to make Benny mad.”

“You can never make him mad. All he talks about is the Golden Jasmine.” Vivian laughed. “I’ll be the one who gets in trouble because it was my idea. Although I don’t remember when the idea came to me.”

“You suggested it after the second joint,” Troy said.

“Have you seen Mom yet?” I asked.

“Nah. You’re the first address I went to. Grandma picked me up and I gave her one of the envelopes your letters came in.”

“Will you be visiting Mom any time soon?”

“I doubt it.” He frowned, signaling for me to drop it. I bit my lip as I slung off my scuffed heels, which were another thing Lucy had ordered me to trash as soon as possible.

“Do you have a plan?” I sat on the floor since there were no more chairs. “You need a plan or you’ll be right back in jail.”

“Don’t start.” Troy sucked his teeth. “I’ve reread all of your letters three times. I’m not like Sherman, Neil, and them. I’m done with jail, man.”

A knock sounded from the front door.

“Troy being out here will be the thing that helps him stay out of prison. I believe in him.” Vivian jumped up and headed to the door. “Troy, tell Jasmine your good news.”

I raised my newly tweezed, plucked, and waxed eyebrows. “News?”

His lips remained in that tight-lipped frown. “It’s nothing big. You know Viv likes to make big things out of nothing.”

“He received his associates degree in general studies.” Vivian opened the door.

“What?” I threw my shoe at him. “You never wrote me that you were taking college courses. Awesome. And why didn’t you tell me you would be up for parole?”

“I didn’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“Well fine. You’re here now and I’m so freaking impressed,” I said.
“That’s so awesome. We have to celebrate tonight.”

Vivian rushed back in the living room with three large boxes stacked in her arms. She dropped them on the floor. “These have all of our names on them, even Troy’s.”

“What?” Troy and I said in unison.

“The delivery man said it was from Mr. Chase Stone.” She tore open one of the boxes. Confusion clogged my brain. *Even Troy’s name?* I yanked the top off another box. A black tuxedo lay inside.

A gold card with black lettering said, “Dear Mr. Troy Montgomery, please join Stone Industries in celebrating the grand opening of Pyramid.”

“How did he find out Troy would be here?” I tossed the card to my brother and wrenched open my box.

“This is shady.” Troy read the card and plopped it on the coffee table.
“Does this company work with the CIA or something?”

“No.” Vivian heaved out a ruffled silk-organza gown outlined in sea-green beads.

How did he know her favorite color was green?

She twirled around with the dress as if she was heading off to the prom.
“My dad has worked on Stone’s corporate legal staff for twenty years. The company mainly deals with the entertainment industry—record labels, video game systems, casinos, night clubs, and movie production. They’re invested in a lot of stuff, but nothing dealing with intelligence.”

“I was told I would be monitored, but I thought Lucy was over-exaggerating.” I fingered the strapless gown in my box. Copper satin cords embellished in sequins started at the top of the dress and ended at the waist. Bronze silk flowed from the center and formed a skirt that would probably end above my knees. *I can’t get used to people dressing me.*

A card larger than Vivian’s and Troy’s was attached to my box’s top corner. Black lettering said, “Be in the VIP section at eleven. C.S.”

I glanced at my watch. 10:00 p.m.

Goodness!

Chapter 3

A cool breeze blew through my hair as Vivian and I stood in line outside of Pyramid. We celebrity-watched while Troy parked my rusty car blocks away from the club. Although Oshane City boasted the highest amount of wealthy residents in any American city on the east coast, not many famous men and women lived here.

Where did all of these actors and entertainers come from? Did Chase invite them all?

People bumped into us while they struggled to get a good look at whatever big name person arrived. Cameras flashed each time an entertainer sauntered down the red carpet. A diverse array of elegant gowns draped all the women—from silk to taffeta, lace to crepe. Many men maintained the typical tuxedo look, while others flaunted bold colored jackets or crushed velvet vests with no shirt underneath. Music blared each time the club's double doors opened. So many sophisticated scents blended together. Sweet notes of rose mingled with the subtle bouquet of jasmine. The closer we moved to the club I caught whiffs of citrus perfumes and earthy colognes.

“Are you sure you're okay with Troy staying with us?” I asked Vivian.

“It was my idea. Remember?” Vivian held her hand up. “Stop worrying.”

“I'm not.”

“Sure you're not.” Vivian stuck her tongue out at me, which smudged some of her pink lipstick.

I wiped at the corner of her lips with my thumb. “You look lovely as usual.”

“Let's hope I meet an art gallery owner who is so captivated by my beauty he buys all of my paintings without looking at them.” She fluttered her eyelashes. “Then Dad won't complain so much.”

“Well, with my big paycheck we can tell Benny to stop paying the rent.” I clapped my hands. *Finally, I can stop being a charity case.*

“Let's wait for you to survive and not get murdered.”

My smile vanished. “Not funny.”

“You know, if I heard that three people in my position died a few years ago, I would've quit.”

“You can quit. You have an awesome dad who understands your creative dreams and will probably pay your bills until you’re thirty.” *Whereas I don’t know who the hell my dad is.* “And stop bringing those assistants’ deaths up. It scares me.”

“It should.” She leaned in and whispered, “Plus he’s probably bugging our apartment. Maybe he even has video cameras in the ceiling. I’m going to shower with a bathing suit.”

“Would you stop that?”

“Dude, Troy was only in the apartment for like two hours, but they had a tuxedo for him. Plus all of the measurements for our clothes were perfect.”

“We’ve discussed this already.” I tucked my hair behind my ear. “And we all equally agree this situation is odd.”

“And freaky.”

“Yes.”

She gazed off in another direction. “I’ll have to masturbate in pitch dark now.”

“Versus a fully lit room?” I grinned.

“Well . . . I light candles.”

I laughed. “Since you said it that way, I’ll have to immediately bring this to Chase’s attention. I can see it right now. I’ll say, ‘I think you’re bugging my home and placing video cameras in my ceiling. Could you stop? My roommate wants to make love to her vibrator in candlelight?’”

“Oh shush.” Vivian’s mouth opened. A shocked expression spread across her face as she looked behind me.

“What?” I asked.

“Jasmine Montgomery?” A deep voice sounded.

“Yes?” I glanced over my shoulder. A naked man wrapped in layers of gold-painted muscle stood behind me.

“Mr. Stone would like you to follow me,” the gold man said. “Someone else will escort the rest of your party.”

“He’s completely naked.” Vivian cupped her hand over her mouth and giggled.

“Yes. I noticed.” I checked my watch. It was now midnight. I wondered if Chase was pissed. We’d been waiting in line for over an hour so I had an excuse. *Maybe.*

“Go ahead.” Vivian waved me away. “He’s your boss and I doubt he’ll kill you in front of so many people.”

I showed my middle finger to her and walked off. Naked Gold Guy clasped my hand and guided me to the door. I wobbled a little in my six-inch heels, thankful I could use my nude Adonis’ strength to prevent me from tripping and falling. *I’ve never been escorted in public by a naked man. Is this the norm of working with Chase Stone?*

The double doors opened. An electronic drum boomed to a fast-paced rhythm. The sweet aroma of baked cakes saturated the massive space. Rays of amber light sprayed the dance floor. Bodies pumped, rocked, and gyrated into each other. Towers of cakes garnished plates on every table that bordered the dance floor. *I should have eaten before coming. Now all I want to do is eat cake.* Saliva filled my mouth. I could almost taste sugar on my tongue.

All of a sudden, horns sounded. Glass cages dropped from the ceiling. Nude women painted in gold and black glitter danced in each cage. The music sped up, banging against my eardrums.

We maneuvered through thick crowds of stylish people, traveled by champagne fountains, and even passed a rotating bar with bartenders pouring drinks to customers. We stopped at a glass elevator. My guide pressed the gold button that said two. The doors glowed up to a bright blue hue and slid open.

“This club is amazing.” I stepped in the elevator right behind him.

“Yep,” he agreed. “It’s definitely my top ten.”

“Top ten, huh? I would love to see that list. I’m not a big clubber, but I doubt I’ll ever forget this place.”

The elevator rose. Outside of its glass walls, glitter rained from the ceiling. The dancing crowd roared, lifted their hands, and jumped up and down with excitement.

“You like working here?” I sneaked a glance below his waist, unable to help myself. A gold-dipped erection greeted my eyes. I backed up. A noise between a shriek and school girl giggle escaped my lips.

Oh my god. His penis is painted. Well, of course, but, oh my god!

“Everything alright?” He smirked.

“Oh sure.” I planted my attention to the ceiling. “I-I’m cool.”

“You looked at my dick, didn’t you?”

Silence.

“It’s fine if you did,” he said.

“What gave it away?”

“You have this weird wide-smile–and-eyes-popped-open look.” He winked at me. “You’re also a really bad liar. Your whole face twitched when you said you were cool.”

“Many say my face twitches when I lie, which makes it hard for me when I don’t want to confess a hard truth to someone. But.” I held my finger up. “For some wacky reason I’m an excellent poker player.”

“I’d love to play a game with you one day.”

I looked into his eyes. “Bring it.”

“My name is Darryl.”

“Jasmine.” I tapped my chest. The elevator stopped on the second floor. The doors opened.

“This is VIP.” He led me out. “Perhaps we can add dinner to that game of poker?”

Another new world record. I’m being asked on a date by a naked gold man.

“Maybe.” I trailed behind him and checked out his nice behind. With each step, his muscled cheeks flexed. *Tonight’s a celebration. Relax and just go for it. I’m going to have fun.*

“You know what?” I said. “I definitely would love dinner before I whip you in poker.”

He let his head fall back as he laughed. “Then let’s get you to Mr. Stone first and then afterwards we’ll figure out the details.”

“Sounds good.”

VIP guests enjoyed a different experience than Pyramid’s first level. Chandeliers clutched lit candles and hung from high ceilings. Shadows danced on the walls. A balcony was on the side of the lounge and provided an excellent view of the first floor’s dance area. The music’s volume was low enough to hear but still maintain a decent conversation. Here, waiters ambled by, holding trays of finger foods. I studied the trays, spotting a hint of color and a whiff of promising aromas. Only about ten people lounged on white fur couches. Chase sat alone in the center of the room, watching me. His look caused me to stumble a little and made me feel like prey, for some reason.

Surely, this is what an antelope feels like whenever it’s within the distance of a lion.

Fear and this awkward need to impress him uncoiled inside of me. *Dang it.* It always came when I was near powerful people. I sighed. It took time to get rid of that reaction. For some reason, I just had to make an impact on the authoritative figure over me. In high school, I'd sucked up to teachers. In college, I completed extra assignments and presented unassigned essays to shocked professors. As long as I'd known Vivian's dad, I've followed him around, nodding and waiting patiently for his approval. In fact, I craved it from him.

Don't stress. There is no need to go crazy trying to impress him.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Darryl paused and prevented me from walking further by getting in front of me. "I guess I've had too many drinks, but I should have asked you something first. You actually work for the top guy, right?"

"Yes. Why?"

He tilted his head to the side. "I mean you work in his company with him, not like the other type of work."

"Huh?"

"You're not a hooker?"

I covered my face with my hands. "No. Oh my god, why did you think that?"

"I've been escorting hookers up here all night to other people. Sorry. You just had this professional air about you so I assumed you wouldn't be a hooker."

"Well thanks." I shook my head. "I guess."

"But then, the way Mr. Stone is looking at you, I figured maybe you're one of those high class hookers."

I twisted my lips to the side. "Your chances at a date with me are kind of dwindling down to no."

"Oh, no, wait." He waved his hands. "I mean. Never mind. Forget what I meant. Since you're not working for him in that capacity, I would love to get your number."

Now I'm not sure.

"I'll have to give you my number later," I said. "After I talk to my new boss. I'm already late."

"I'll be waiting." He inclined that rock-hard body my way and planted a succulent kiss on my cheek. *Wow. I am definitely giving him my number now.*

“Okay, I really have to go.” I moseyed on around him. Once we approached Chase, a glare corrupted that perfect face. I swallowed down a shiver.

“What was the kiss for?” Chase asked Darryl.

“I give them to all the ladies, sir.”

Chase sipped the sparkling clear liquid in his glass. “Next time make sure the woman is free to be kissed. This one isn’t.”

Excuse me?

“Yes, sir.” Darryl bowed, turned around, frowned at me, and left.

I doubt he wants my number anymore.

“Did you give him the erection?” Chase shifted his concentration to me.

“What?” I held my hands out to my sides. “No. He was hard before the elevator.”

“What happened on the elevator?” He set his glass on the table.

I started twisting my copper ring. “Nothing happened. He asked me for my number and I told him I would give it to him later.”

“I’d rather you not give out your number to anyone.”

“Of course.” I nodded. *Great way to start off a work situation, Jasmine.* “I usually don’t give out my number while I’m working. That will never happen again, Mr. Stone.”

“Chase.”

“Sorry.” I curtsied like an idiot. *Why did I do that?* “Sorry, Chase.”

“You look exquisite.” He gestured toward the chair next to him. “Please sit down. Your hair is beautiful.”

“Thank you.” *Of course he loves my hair.*

“When you’re with me, I want you to look this way.”

I averted my eyes to the balcony so he wouldn’t see the edge of annoyance in my face. *Who was he to say what and how I looked?* My salary popped back into my head. *For \$185,000, he could use me as a dress-up doll, determining my hair and clothes to his delight.*

“I’m a man who demands more from his assistants than he should. Are you okay with that?”

“For now I am.” The words blurted out of my mouth before I could edit them. A chuckle came from him. I relaxed my worry just a little. *At least he has a sense of humor.*

“Hmmm,” he murmured.

I directed my attention back to him. *Hmmm?*

He sported an amused expression. “I’ll only take it as far as you’ll let me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Meaning?”

“If you let me, I’d ruin you for any other man.” He adjusted his jacket with a swagger, reminiscent of the bad boys I steered clear from in South End.

I don’t think we’re talking about hair and clothes anymore.

He targeted me with those green eyes that shimmered in the dim club lighting. He licked his lips. The movement caught me off guard. Heat swirled in places it shouldn’t have, being that it was in reaction to my boss and not an eligible man.

He can’t mean this in a sexual way. Calm down.

“I think the music messed up what you’re trying to tell me.” I leaned in closer to him.

“It didn’t. You heard me.”

“I don’t think I did.”

“You did.”

I exhaled. “Can you please repeat yourself.”

“The next time I say that, your legs will be open in front of me.”

Alarmed, my jaw lost its control. My mouth opened. *He just came on to me, and with no restraint at all.* Lust glittered over his eyes as he planted his view on my cleavage and then allowed his concentration to linger to my thighs.

“Do you have anything to say, Ms. Montgomery?”

“I-I’m not interested. You’re my boss,” I pointed out. “You have a fiancée and—”

“I didn’t ask you to state my biography.” His aroused expression shifted to a scowl. “And my engagement with my fiancée is not what it seems.”

I shook my head. “I’ll be your assistant. Nothing else.”

“Sex with me is not the job,” he corrected. “But it’s definitely something I would like to explore with you.”

I breathed in and out. *Stand your ground. Make this clear from the beginning. And whatever you do, don’t piss yourself.* I swallowed a gulp of nervousness. “I’m so sorry, but it’s not going to happen.”

“Why not?” He motioned for a waiter.

“I’m not interested.”

“Yes you are.”

“I don’t have sex with my boss or even co-workers.”

The waiter appeared in front of us and offered me a glass of pink champagne.

“Thank you.” I took the glass with shaking fingers, waited for the guy to leave, and cleared my throat. “If you expect me to have sex with you, then I quit right now.”

“You can’t quit. You need this job as much as I need you to fill it.” He finished his glass. “More to the point, sex with you is not a necessity. It’s a personal desire.”

I turned away, scared to glance at him. It reminded me of those paranormal romances where if the heroine stared too long in the vampire’s eyes she would be captured against her will.

“I won’t require you to have sex with me,” he said.

I cringed at his crude response and swallowed my drink to have something to do besides grimace. The champagne slid down my throat and warmed my stomach. The thunderous booming from the music substituted further conversation.

I’ll have to deal with this mess for a month while I apply to other jobs. Six figures. Of course it’s too good to be true. He wants an executive assistant in the office and his bed.

Everything had a cost in the end. He’d seen my background, knew I was a nobody, and figured he could treat me any way he wanted. *Were my other classmates going through this?* I doubted it. They came from rich families and had their careers planned out well before they started high school. Most of their families owned successful businesses. The ones that didn’t possessed major contacts in politics or big industries. *Would Chase have tried this mess with a girl from a powerful family? No way.* I gripped my glass hard and hoped it wouldn’t shatter into pieces.

How dare he get my hopes up high and then shove them back down.

I’d dealt with his kind before. Ever since I was a kid, a weird man crept around, spied my defenseless situation, and tried to take advantage of me. But I always escaped them. *Survival of the fittest.* I had to be clear, maintain distance, and whatever happens, don’t tell Troy. My fingers shook. My eyes watered. Soon I would have to be excused so I could go in a stall to mope and

cry like a spineless creature.

“Jasmine?” the bastard said. And I immediately hated my name on his tongue.

What is he going to do now? Pull it out and ask me to touch it?

“I apologize for being so crass,” he finally said once the next song played.

“That’s okay,” I muttered. At least my resume was current. A few companies hadn’t called back. I could maybe contact them on Monday and see if they were still interested.

“Jasmine? Please look at me,” Chase said.

Sighing, I turned his way.

“I’m a man who’s used to immediately receiving things I desire from women as soon as I ask for it. You look upset and I didn’t want that to happen. Too many people say yes to me, so I’m a bit lazy when it comes to asking for something. I’m truly sorry. Do you forgive me?”

“Sure.” I turned back to the balcony.

“You’re lying.” He touched my arm. I moved it away.

“Jasmine, I usually don’t humble myself to say sorry to someone. Trust me when I say this. I won’t disrespect you again.”

Benny had told me I should apply to graduate school. *I’ll look at some programs tomorrow morning.* Anything was better than a spoiled rich boy who thought he could talk to me any way he pleased. *What was I supposed to do tonight? Melt in grateful appreciation that a man of his caliber wanted me, jump down on my knees, and give him a blow job?* I am your god, he’d said. *You are an asshole!* I’d had it right the first time.

“Are you planning on coming into work this Monday?” he asked. The word Monday sounded strained. I directed my attention to him. Tension etched the edge of his eyes. He tapped the arm of the chair over and over. *Definitely a nervous habit.*

“Are you planning on asking me to have sex with you again?” I chewed the inside of my cheek.

“I read your record. You have no tolerance for sexual harassment.”

But that isn’t a clear yes or no.

So he knew about my complaint against the Dean of Management Studies at Harvard. I’d gathered two other students who had also been sexually harassed by the dean. We were all poor girls on an academic scholarship who

worked as teaching assistants their senior years. The professor had a lot of notoriety and didn't want anyone discovering the complaints. So he ended up paying for the rest of my and the other girls' expenses. I still didn't want to take away the complaint, but the girls had peer-pressured me into dropping it. As far as I knew, the entire affair had been a huge secret. *Who did Chase talk to, in order to get all of that information?*

"If truth be told, I need you to be my assistant. Your resume, background, and personality are perfect for the job. You're different too. I like that a lot. You won't just take my crap. I somewhat like that too." He grabbed another glass from a waiter. "I need an assistant who can stand up for herself and get the job done."

Again, he tapped the chair with his finger. "Your background investigation surprised me. I learned that you volunteered in South End all the time, from assisting with the day care at a Baptist church to the Help Clean Up South End program. And anytime you worked summer jobs, you sent most of your money to your mom and the rest to your brothers in jail. How were you able to pay your own bills?"

"Benny Nix helped me when I really needed it."

"You give a lot to everyone around you and ask for nothing in return."

"Why does any of this matter to you?" I asked.

He grinned. "You make me feel selfish and lazy."

I threw him a skeptical look.

"I'm serious. Another reason why I wanted you around is because I think you can help me be a better person."

Yeah right.

"I'm truly sorry," he said. "Now tell me, Ms. Jasmine Montgomery. Have I groveled enough or should I get on my knees and recite a sonnet?"

A smile widened across my face.

"That look says you would like me on my knees." He gripped the chair. "What do you need me to do to make this right?"

He's sorry. I think. And remember the salary.

Sighing, I raised my glass in the air and clinked his. "To a professional working relationship."

I'll still apply to more jobs tomorrow.

"And to a new beginning," he added.

“Hello, Jasmine,” a woman said behind me. I turned around. A tall woman with long blonde hair and blue eyes smiled at me. A crimson dress formed around her perfect body. She extended her hand. “I’m Dawn Benson. Chase’s fiancée.”

This night just keeps getting better and better.

I stood up and shook her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You should put in a complaint about your yearbook pictures,” she said. “I expected a cutie, but you’re captivating.”

What does one say to that?

“Thank you...you’re also beautiful.” I tried to let go of her hand, but Dawn wouldn’t release it. Instead she gently squeezed my fingers. “Welcome to our family. I think you’re worthy. Do you?”

I paused for a minute and then responded, “Yes.”

She traced a circle on my hand with her thumb. “I’m truly excited.”

And you’re creeping me out.

“Dawn.” Chase rose and placed his arm around her shoulder. She released my hand. He flashed me a weak smile. “I’m sure Jasmine would love to go greet her friend and brother over there.”

I looked at where he was pointing. Vivian and Troy stepped off the elevator. “Oh yes. I would. If that’s okay.”

“Sure. I just wanted to see how the make-over turned out.” Chase allowed his eyes to travel down my body one last time and then said, “Consider yourself free for the rest of the evening. I will see you Monday morning, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Goodnight, Jasmine.” He grinned.

“Nice meeting you,” Dawn added.

“Also.” Chase touched my arm and I paused. “Tell your brother to come by human resources on Monday. I’ve heard it’s pretty difficult for an ex-con to get a job. However, my company always needs guards. Tell him he has a job with me if he wants it.”

Shocked, I nodded. “I really appreciate that. Thanks so much.”

“No problem,” he said. “When you join with me, you never have to worry about taking care of your family again.”

“Good. Because I definitely need the help.”

Chapter 4

“It’s about time.” I tapped Troy on his shoulder as we headed toward a small bar beyond the furry white couches and chairs. “I figured you both were lost.”

“It’s my first night out of jail. I had to drag Vivian on the dance floor.” Troy had taken off his tuxedo jacket and neck tie, probably before he’d parked the car. His white shirt was open and exposed some of his chest. “Vivian has some hot moves.”

She slid onto a gold leather barstool. “Your sister has been tutoring me in Dance 101.”

“Well that’s scary.” He shifted his face into a terrified look.

“Oh stop.” I hit his side. “I have skills now. I’ve learned some things since you’ve been gone.”

Gold glitter stuck to Vivian and Troy’s skin, making them sparkle in the amber light.

“I’ll believe that when I see it.” He nudged my back with his elbow.

A bartender placed napkins in front of us. “How can I help you?”

“By putting on some pants, man.” Troy twisted around and faced me. “I’ve seen enough butt naked men in jail. The last thing I want to see tonight is a naked man.”

“Sorry, you have to excuse my brother,” I told the bartender. “I’ll have a pinot noir.”

“I’ll have a rum and Coke.” Troy continued to keep his eyes on everything but the naked bartender in front of us.

“Nothing for me. I have to go to the bathroom.” Vivian jumped off her seat and strolled to the back.

Troy almost twisted his neck while he ogled Vivian’s behind. He whistled and then spotted my shocked expression. “What?”

“Vivian has a boyfriend.”

“Of course.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m just looking, no harm intended.”

“Benny’s going to have a heart attack when he finds out you’re staying at our apartment. Don’t make things more complicated.”

“Girl, that’s Viv we’re talking about.” He snorted. “I’m just amazed at how great both of you look. I remember before I went in how you had those scarecrow bodies and huge glasses. When you laughed you would snort.”

“You’re quite the charmer.”

The bartender set our drinks in front of us. I dug into my purse. The bartender raised his hand to stop me. “That’s not necessary. Mr. Stone asked your bill be sent to his account.”

“Oh.” I glanced at Chase. He watched me from his side of the lounge. I mouthed *thanks*. He nodded and returned to talking to his fiancée.

“So that’s your boss?” Troy checked where I’d been looking.

“Yes.”

“I don’t like what’s in his eyes. They were all over you when Vivian and I entered the lounge.”

Ignoring Troy, I sipped the wine. The bitter liquid glided across my tongue with a smooth subtlety. *Good stuff*. Amber light flashed across Troy’s face as a new song played. This time the electronic bass thumped at a steadier pace. A woman sung in a reggae tone about love and heartbreak. I drank some more of my wine.

“He’s watching you now,” Troy announced. I choked and coughed a little.

“His eyes are shifty,” Troy said.

“What are you trying to imply?”

“There are old guys who sit in jail for years knowing they won’t ever get released. When new men come in the old guys watch them just like your boss is staring at you.”

“You’re insane.” I swallowed a gulp of wine.

“As soon as the new men are alone the old guys hold them down and rape them.”

Vivian returned. “What have I missed?”

I pointed to my brother. “According to Troy, my boss is going to attack and sodomize me.”

“Interesting.” She glanced Chase’s way. “He’s pretty hot.”

“He’s engaged and my boss,” I countered.

“Well, he’s staring at you like a guy does right before he walks over to a lady and asks her to dance,” she said.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “You both are over-exaggerating.”

“I’m serious.” Troy chugged his rum and Coke. “Just stay on guard with that guy and let me know if I need to take care of him.”

Hell no. I’d like you to stay out of jail this time.

“Okay.” I thought about what Chase said about my brother. “By the way, my boss offered you a guard job. He said you should go to human resources on Monday.”

“Why would he give me a job?” Troy set the glass on the bar. “Does he know I have a record?”

“Yes.”

“This guy is shady,” Troy said.

“Oh stop.” Vivian patted his back. “This is great news. Plus, my dad would have never recommended Jasmine if he thought Stone Industries was dangerous. Dad loves Jasmine like his own daughter.”

It was true. Benny had done more things for me than my own mom. *Things beyond the average person’s expectations.* He’d even hidden a murder for me years ago. Troy had killed one of Mom’s boyfriends when we were twelve. While she was passed out on the couch, the guy would corner me in the hallway after I took showers, tell me to open my towel, and be quiet or he would kill my mom. So I did it. By then my older brothers were incarcerated in the juvenile center. It was just Troy and me. I told Troy about the towel incidents and he immediately began sleeping under my bed, scared the guy would sneak in and try to rape me.

One night the guy tip-toed into my bedroom and lay on the bed alongside me. I pretended to sleep. He shook me, and without any hesitation, Troy stabbed a steak knife through his neck. *I remember the blood the most.* It sprayed my face and drenched my gown. Some nights, I still wake up screaming from a dream about drowning in blood.

I didn’t even try to wake up my mom. Nothing could get her up when she was high. Like always, I’d called Benny and told him everything. Benny ordered me to not call the cops. Next, he raced across town and showed up in our crappy projects in the middle of the night with four men.

My mom slept as they cleaned up all the blood in my bedroom, took the corpse away, and coached Troy and me on how to act and what to say if anyone asked questions. Benny held us the whole time. His huge arms wrapped around our small shivering bodies and never let us go, unless it was to wipe our tears.

The next week, a homeless guy discovered the body behind an old abandoned building several blocks from our projects. The cops never questioned Troy or me. No one discussed that night again. I don't think Vivian ever knew about that night. At times I wondered if I'd imagined it all. Everything had continued as if nothing ever happened. *But things had changed for Troy.*

He'd transformed overnight from a funny science geek to cutting school every day and hanging out with bullies. A year later, he was arrested for assault and thrown into the juvenile center. Once Benny heard Troy was arrested, Benny packed my bags and brought me to his home. He never even asked my mom if I could live with them. I stayed with Vivian's family all during high school. Mom never protested. Sadly, it took her a while to even notice I was gone.

Only God knows the type of person I would have been if Benny had never taken me out of South End.

All of my friends from the neighborhood embodied ghetto stereotypes. Half had been killed before the age of eighteen—from stray bullets to AIDs. All of them held criminal records and lived dark, depressing lives. *That could've been me.* Every day, I tried my best to pay Benny back for all his help. Vivian's mother was dying from cancer during high school, so I helped out with the household activities. Once her mother died, I just made maintaining their house my full time job.

"Jazz, are you okay?" Troy waved his hand in front of my face. "You want another drink?"

The club boomed around me. I blinked away the pain and depression that came with those memories.

"Yes. Make it a rum and Coke this time."

"Is this job worrying you?" he asked.

"No."

"Would you tell me if it did?"

"Yes."

"Damn, you're a bad liar." He laughed and ordered my drink. "Your face still gives it away."

Chapter 5

Oh god. Why me?

Chase stood in the middle of his office, half naked and spouting orders to Lucy and me. An orange towel was wrapped around Chase's waist. Beads of water from his shower decorated his chest. Every inch of him was sleek with coiled muscle. Not one mark or blemish existed anywhere on his tan skin. An impressive bulge pushed against the front of his towel and promised a hot night of wet orgasms. The space overflowed with the seductive scent of expensive soap and male. *He's not sexy. He's your boss. You don't want to slip your hands down his abs.* I attempted to focus on anything but him.

Chase stalked over to his desk, picked up both of the coffees I'd brought, and turned to me. "Jasmine, what's this?"

"Well, I thought I would give you a choice between your old coffee and one I believe you may like much better."

"Did you put my food likes and dislikes in the binder?" Chase asked Lucy as he took off the lid of the new coffee I bought him and sniffed it.

"Yes." Lucy scowled at me. "I typed in bold that you expect a large dark roast coffee and wheat bagel from Brew and Bake shop."

I'd gone down to Brew and Bake as they opened at 6:30, bought two pairs of coffee and bagel orders for him and me. One sip of the murky liquid almost made me vomit in my mouth. The bagels were stale and at least a day old. Even worse, the cashier totaled my order at thirty dollars. *Which proves a high price doesn't always mean better.* I raced to Mama Jane's Pit, grabbed two regular coffees and her best baked treats.

"So you give me two coffees just in case I want another choice?" Chase raised his eyebrows. "Even though Lucy's manual is adamant about my coffee preference."

"Yes," I whispered.

"I also explained several times that you hate straying from your usual routine," Lucy added. *Tattle teller.*

"So then you think my coffee choice wasn't appropriate?" He smirked. *Understatement. It tastes like the bottom of someone's shoe.*

"I just thought you might like the new one, but I promise not to change the order again, in the future," I said.

He took a sip of Mama Jane's coffee and closed his eyes. Half a minute passed and I teetered on the edge of nervousness.

"I should give you a raise." He drank some more. Both Lucy and I exhaled.

"What type of coffee is this?" he asked.

"A regular dark roast," I admitted. "But I think the problem with Brew and Bake is that they probably don't change their coffee beans or use a good quality water. Mama Jane takes on her coffee making as if it's a science."

"So Brew and Bake is a crappy coffee shop?" He picked up the brown bag with Mama Jane's image on the front, opened it, and looked inside.

"Yes. It's crap." I checked out his behind as he turned away and then cursed under my breath. *Do not look at the sexy boss in the towel.* Clearing her throat, Lucy turned her attention to her feet.

"You do realize my family owns Brew and Bake?" He dove his hand into the bag.

"N-no, I didn't realize that." *Moron. I'll be fired by the end of the week if I keep making these dumb mistakes.*

"What's this?" He pulled out a circular treat.

"It's a baguffin," I mumbled.

"What?" His lips curled at the edge.

"It's Mama Jane's top breakfast item, a combination bagel and muffin." I pointed to it. "This one is called Monkey Bread."

Lucy snorted.

His lips widened into a huge smile. "Am I to assume this is another alternative to my preferred wheat bagel?"

"Yes."

"Because you think the bagels are also crap?"

"Yes."

Might as well dig myself deeper into my already deep hole.

"I trust you." He bit into the baguffin, and then took another bite. I held my breath and waited for a response. He snatched up the Bake and Brew bag with the wheat bagel and tossed it in the trash.

Two scores for Jasmine.

"Stick with Mama Jane's for my coffee." He set the rest of the baguffin on his desk and headed to his office bathroom. Again, I peeked at his behind and

enjoyed the delicious movement of artistically carved muscle as it flexed under the towel.

Okay. That's absolutely the last peek.

"Find out how many calories are in the baguffin," he called out from the bathroom.

"450 calories, 15 grams of fat. Most of it is saturated fat," I replied.

"How do you know that?" He peered halfway out of the doorway. I swear it didn't look like he had his towel on. A dark patch of silky black hair began inches from his belly as he leaned out.

"Jasmine?" He laughed.

Oh my god! I snapped my concentration back to his face. *Awesome. I demand that he not sexually harass me and then ogle him on the first day of work.*

"How do you know the calories by heart?" he asked. "Excellent memory?"

"No. I count calories so I won't gain weight. I was a fat kid." I caught him licking his lips and he turned away. "I only eat half of the baguffin."

"Then let's split a baguffin each morning." He pierced me with those green eyes. A thrill bubbled in my chest. *Stop that.* He disappeared back into the bathroom. "Pick a new flavor each morning. Let's see if you can bring back some more of this excitement to my breakfast."

"Come on." Lucy seized my hand and led me out of the office. "I thought you messed up, but you did great. Good idea with the new choices. Bad idea, of course, with insulting Bag and Brew."

"Yes. That was rather embarrassing."

We walked down a path outlined by rows of desks. Lucy continued to hold my hand, which felt awkward. I kept my hand limp in her grip.

Employees filled each desk. Some studied their computer or files. Others rushed to switch off their Facebook and Twitter pages. Whispers lingered near areas with two or more people. They studied me and continued their hushed conversation. I didn't know if it was because I was the new girl or that I was the *black* new girl. I shook the thought away. *Stop that.* I had a tendency to be insecure when it came to race, always wondering if people were judging me based on bad stereotypes and if I was confirming those stereotypes.

"Ignore them." Lucy made a mocking face at one woman pointing at us. "Lots of gossip happens on this level. I've asked Chase to move to the

highest level where he can have an empty floor, but he refuses.”

“It sounds boring. He probably loves the noise and movement on this level.”

Lucy paused and gazed at me with a grin. “He actually said something like that. You’re perfect.”

Alrighty. She gets really excited about the simplest things.

Once we stepped on the elevator I had to ask, “So . . . does he always wear a towel to morning meetings?”

“Mostly. There’s a boxing gym on the third floor. He comes in early, punches things, then takes a shower in his office bathroom.”

Hopefully, I’ll start to find him unattractive when he’s half naked. Maybe like if a person eats lobster every day, and then after two months of nothing but lobster they crave a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

“Are you okay with Chase being in a towel?” she asked. “I could tell him to stop.”

“No way.” I gritted my teeth as the elevator doors opened to the fourth floor. The last thing I needed was for him to know I couldn’t deal with him half naked in front of me. “It’s perfectly okay.”

“It’s also a nice view.” Lucy walked off. We rounded a corner on the right. Two offices with all glass walls greeted us. Thick smoke drifted from one of them. The aroma held a pungent edge to it, but still I found it somewhat calming.

“What’s up with the smoke coming out of that office?” I pointed to it.

“Sorry. The smoky office is yours.” Lucy twisted her lips to the side. “I burned some sage in it to drive out evil spirits.”

I tapped my right foot. “So . . . are they all gone?”

“Well, I don’t know if any were really there, but just in case.”

“Do you usually burn sage for new assistants?”

“No. I didn’t for the others.” She directed her attention to her toes. “Maybe I should have.”

A few seconds of silence traveled between us. I decided to interrupt the unease. “I’m going to go in there and start cutting a hole in this stack of work.”

“Oh sure. Let me know if you need help.”

“I will.” Smiling, I entered my office and swatted the lingering cloud of

smoke away. *My office. I have an office I can call mine.* I would've screamed, but I feared Lucy would rush in wielding a sword of burning sage. Nevertheless, a girlish scream swirled in my core and begged to be released. I held it in and danced in my mind.

"Everything okay?" Lucy peeked in, startling me. "You're standing there wiggling your head."

"Oh. I do that sometimes. I'm fine." *Damn these glass walls.* "I'm just excited about having a new office."

"Well good. You'll let me know if anything is wrong, right? You can tell me anything. I'll help out with whatever is going on."

"Yes." *Goodness, she's really attentive.*

Lucy escaped into her office. My phone vibrated in my pocket. I set the files on my polished mahogany desk. A periwinkle and chocolate swivel chair rested behind it. *My office.* I beamed. My phone buzzed again. I yanked it out and checked it. Vivian had texted message.

Vivian: How's the job? Any murder suspects?

Me: Fine and not funny!

Vivian: Good.

Me: Boss gave orders in a towel!

Vivian: Hot?

Me: Scorching!

Vivian: But he didn't harass you again, right?

Me: Right.

Vivian: Troy's cooking shrimp and grits for dinner. He wants to know what time you'll be home.

The tower of files cast a shadow on my desk. During the morning meeting, Chase had ordered me to create PowerPoints of his investors' business proposals for next year. Each proposal required research on the idea—from defining the business to the possible revenue. Chase and I had started off badly with Saturday night's uncomfortable conversation. So far, he'd been good on his promise of not harassing me. I had to do my best to show him I was perfect for the job. Frowning, I typed into my phone.

Me: I won't be home for dinner. I want to make a good impression.

Vivian: Boo!

Chapter 6

The week blurred into consecutive busy days and sleepless nights filled with coffee and nonstop work. My neck and back ached from the bad posture I maintained from my swivel chair. I'd created short, but informative, PowerPoint presentations on all one hundred and twenty-five business proposals. My fingers were numb. My wrists stung. I'd been popping Ibuprofen pills every four hours just to keep my pace. In the end, all the required assignments were completed with perfection. Pride streamed through my system and charged up my adrenaline.

I knocked on Chase's door.

"Come on in, Jasmine." His voice held the deep tone that, in other situations, would have triggered my panties to moisten and body to shudder. *My boss is ugly.* I'd been saying that mantra each time I caught his seductive scent, every time he brushed his body against mine as he explained a specific detail I needed to address in the presentations, and even the morning sessions with him wet, dressed in a towel. *He's unattractive and looks like a troll.*

"How is your project going? Do you need more assistance?" He leaned back in his chair. His shirt was unbuttoned at the top and reminded me of the color of melted butter. A creamy white tie lounged on the edge of his desk. *My boss is not delicious.*

"Remember. You have a month to complete the project, so take your time." He typed something and then slid his laptop to the side.

"I'm already done." I suppressed my smile. *Look at me. I'm impressive! Aren't you glad you hired me?*

"I should've expected that." He knitted his fingers together. "You graduated top of your class. All your recommendations boasted of your hard work and dedication during internships."

I walked to his desk and placed the box of flash drives on it.

"Hold on to them." He held up his hand to stop me. "I want you to present ten of the best proposals to me."

"What?" I bit my lip.

"You've conducted exhaustive research on each proposal, correct?"

I nodded.

"Then you must have a top ten."

I scanned my tired brain. Several projects popped into my head. All ten had impressed me throughout my examination.

He focused his eyes on me. A hint of humor gleamed across them. “So, can you think of ten proposals you liked?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s discuss these projects over dinner.” He rose from his chair and grabbed his jacket. “I’ll bring my laptop?”

“Dinner?” I slid my thumb across the plastic edge of the box. “Tonight?”

My plan was to drop off the drives, race to my office filled with superiority, grab my belongings, and head home to sip a pre-celebration glass of champagne with Vivian and my brother. We were going to hang out at Drunken Lyrics, a café that held spoken word open mic and at midnight shifted to a stuffy reggae lounge. The only downer on the evening was that we had to listen to her boyfriend’s Noc’s poetry, but I decided I would be sloshed by then.

“Yes, dinner.” He strolled around his desk until he was in front of me, just like he’d done during my interview a week ago.

I am your god, he’d said. Well, I guess so.

“I can just show you the ten projects right now,” I offered. “It won’t take long.”

“I’m hungry.” He positioned himself on the edge of his desk. “Besides, we’ve both been busy this week. I would love to break bread and share a glass of wine with you.”

His words sounded innocent, but his gaze strayed to my breasts for a second.

I’d thought we’d taken care of his trying to come on to me.

“Just dinner?”

“That’s what I said.” He frowned.

“I had some plans tonight. Can I—”

“No.” Those green eyes targeted me.

“Okay,” I muttered with annoyance.

“You pick where we eat. It seems you have a knack for finding great eating spots.”

On Monday, he’d requested I be spontaneous with his lunch choices and ignore the places listed in the binder. Every day, I found a new food spot to

visit or meal for him to sample.

I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face. Pride rose in my heart. "So you enjoyed your lunch selections, too?"

"They were the highlight of my days."

We headed to the elevator. Outside his office, people hurried to gather their items. A few whispered and motioned our way. Each time I walked down this path, I tried to ignore the gossiping murmurs. Each moment seemed harder than the rest.

"What was your favorite lunch?" I asked.

"Hmmm." He pressed the down button. "Can I be brutally honest?"

"Definitely."

"I never thought I would get an erection from eating a chicken salad sandwich." Chase gestured for me to get in first when the doors opened. I laughed and then blushed at the realization of him having an erection while he ate that sandwich across from me.

"I'm sorry. Did I make you uncomfortable?" he asked.

"No." *God* yes. "And that wasn't just any chicken salad sandwich. That was chunks of honey roasted chicken combined with shredded smoked Gouda, sundried tomato aioli, candied walnuts, and sliced fresh grapes between two slabs of crusty French bread."

He flashed me a concerned look. "Did you memorize the menu description?"

"Would that be weird?" I raised my eyebrows as the elevator lowered.

"Yes. That would be unsettling."

"Then no."

He chuckled to himself. "Wait. Should I press your floor's button? Do you need to get your purse?"

"No."

"Where do you put your money and keys?"

"Here." I tapped my cleavage and then immediately regretted it.

I don't think you're supposed to fondle your breast in front of a new boss.

"Good place to put it." He stared at the area longer than he should have. Since I'd been ogling his behind every morning I pretended I didn't see.

"So what were your plans for tonight?" he asked.

"Just hanging out with my friends."

“Is there a new boyfriend in there somewhere?”

“No. I told you during the interview I was single.”

He placed his hands in his pockets. “You did, but there’s no denying a woman as enchanting as yourself would be able to nab a man in seconds.”

I snorted. It burst from my lips and bounced off the walls. “Sorry, but I’m no seductress.”

“Maybe not.” He tilted his head my way. “But you’re definitely more than I’d expected. You’ve definitely got my attention.”

I don’t want your attention. I swallowed. More than expected? Maybe next week I’ll ruin his lunch meals.

“So where are we going for dinner?” he asked. “Don’t spare the cost.”

“Really?” My discomfort vanished at the thought of food. The elevator halted. The doors slid open. Cool air breezed in from the lower garage.

“Give me your car keys. I’ll have Oscar drive your car to your apartment and we’ll take my limo to dinner.” Chase planted his hand on the middle of my back. An area I preferred only dates and lovers to touch.

“Okay.” I eased away from his sly fingers. My two keys and all of my credit cards lay on my right breast, underneath the top of my bra. I slipped my fingers in, pulled them out, twisted his way, and handed them to him.

“Do you ever lose your keys or money?” he asked.

“Never.”

A massive bald-headed black man stepped out of the shadows. I jumped. *Where did he come from?*

“Oscar, take Ms. Montgomery’s car to her home. Here you go.” Chase handed the keys to Oscar and placed his warm hand on the same, sensitive area of my back. “So where are we eating, Jasmine?”

“What type of food do you want?”

“It doesn’t matter. You pick. Like I said, don’t worry about the cost,” he added.

I smiled so hard my cheeks hurt. “Then I would love to go to Lan.”

Chapter 7

The Lan restaurant exemplified superior fine dining. Crimson circular lamps hung from high ceilings and bathed the space in a red glow. The place only had five tables because seating was exclusive. Not even Chase could get us reservations. Luckily, I'd called the sous-chef and asked if we could be fit in. I don't know how he did it, but he called me back and told us to come on over.

"How do you know the sous-chef again?" Chase slipped his soft fingers from the center of my back to my hip as the host guided us to our table.

"He and I grew up in South End together. His name is Gabe. He's really cool."

So many lovely scents hit me at once—melted sugar mixed with cream, the savory aroma of fresh herbs being cut for a meal, the smoky fragrance of meat as it hit the fire. I let my eyes explore the dishes on each table. *I'm in heaven.* Colorful ingredients adorned square porcelain plates. Each dish appeared like the portrait of a dedicated artist.

Saliva drowned my tongue. My stomach groaned in complaint. The urge to interrupt conversations and ask the people what they were eating surged in me, but I forced myself to walk forward as an exhilarating sensation flowed in my blood.

I'm finally going to eat here!

Although I grew up with Gabe, I would never allow him to sneak me in and serve me for free. If the restaurant manager caught us, Gabe would've been fired or at least had to pay for the meal himself. Entrees started at sixty dollars and rose to over a hundred. A person could reach a bill of three hundred dollars by ordering an appetizer and two meals. *I couldn't do that to Gabe.* Nevertheless, I dreamed of being able to eat here just once.

And here I am, at the Lan, with the richest man in the state at my side.

"So you're just friends?" Chase motioned for the host to leave and pulled out my chair for me.

"We're definitely friends. I've known Gabe for years." I sat down. "Thank you for pulling out my chair."

"You're welcome."

Paintings of women decorated in fur adorned the walls. Single page menus

lay in front of our chairs. Gabe approached us, dressed in a white chef's jacket with a red line in the center. The lamp's glow cast a red hue on his milk-chocolate skin.

Gabe rubbed his hands together as he stopped next to me. "I can't believe you're really here."

"Me neither." I giggled as if I'd been tipsy.

"Did you change your hair?" Something stirred in Gabe's eyes. Vivien always said he had a crush on me. I doubted it. She thought every guy liked me. Only I lived in reality.

I touched my now ridiculously long hair. "Yes. It's my new look."

"I love it. You look like a model."

No. I look like a Rapunzel rip-off.

Chase cleared his throat.

Oh god, I forgot.

"This is my boss, Mr. Chase Stone." I gestured to him. "We're here on business."

Although Chase left his computer in the limo.

"Well, not too much business I hope." Gabe flashed me shiny white teeth. Our high school senior class had awarded him *Best Smile*. He'd maintained that awesome feature through the years, but now muscles replaced bony shoulders and pure adult confidence saturated his young awkwardness.

I held my hand up in mock salute. "I promise to make sure we enjoy the meal."

"You'd better. And remember what I told you I would do if you ever came to the restaurant?" Gabe asked.

"What did you tell her?" Chase raised his dark eyebrows.

"He swore he would execute the perfect food experience for me," I said.

"Yes. I did." Gabe bowed. "All you have to say is chef's choice and I'll create a series of excellent dishes. My chef de cuisine gave me his approval when he realized you were coming. I've told him all about you of course."

I shook my head. "Not tonight. I'm sure that's expensive. I'll come back another time—"

"No." Chase waved my response away. "Give us the chef's choice. A white wine for me and your best red for Jasmine."

He knows I love red wine? Good guess.

“My pleasure.” Gabe bowed again and left.

“So he’s never asked you out?” Chase said, once we were alone.

“What? Gabe?” I scrunched my face in horror. “No way. We’re just really good friends from the neighborhood. We’ve managed to stay in contact because we both love food.”

“He likes you.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked as a waiter set two glasses of wine on the table.

“It’s obvious,” Chase said.

I sampled the wine and hummed a little. *This is Perfect.*

Chase appeared startled. “Did you just moan?”

I cringed. “No.”

“Yes, you did. I thought I was imagining you moaning during lunch today, but you moaned then too, right?”

“Nope.” I looked away.

His lips widened to a smile. “Your love of dining is pretty serious. Isn’t it?”

“I do tend to have orgasms in restaurants.” I covered my mouth with my hand. *What the hell, Jasmine?* Things were starting to get too comfortable. “I’m sorry. I mean—”

“Stop worrying about your behavior around me.” Chase sipped his wine. “Pretend I’m not your boss tonight.”

“But you are, and we do need to discuss the proposals.”

“Do you still truly believe it’s all business tonight?”

“What else would this be?” I switched my gaze from his eyes to the lit candle at the center of the table.

“This is me attempting to court you.” He set his glass down. My response was a nervous intake of breath.

Is he seriously going to come on to me like that?

Our waiter approached the table. “Chef Gabe prepared an amuse-bouche for your delight.”

He set down two plates. Each had a tiny square of toast with a slice of foie gras, sun dried tomato, and some type of oil drizzled on top.

“You know what amuse-bouche means?” I asked after the waiter left. It was my sad attempt at changing the subject, but I thought I spied interest in

Chase's eyes.

"No. What does it mean?"

"It means mouth amuser."

Chase directed his concentration to his plate. A grim expression spread across his face. "What's the brown stuff?"

"Foie gras," I said with surprise. "You've never heard of it?"

"I've seen a lot of this stuff at parties and events, but I never ate it." He turned the plate around and analyzed the amuse-bouche some more.

"Oh, just try it. It's usually duck or goose liver, except in order to get a high quality foie gras they force feed and fatten up the animal."

"That's horrible."

"Yes. It does suck for the goose and duck, but it's delicious."

He pushed his plate to me. "You can have mine."

"Absolutely not. Let's eat it together." I returned his plate to him and picked up my amuse-bouche. He followed.

"I'll count down and then you just sling it in your mouth." I thought I heard him whimper, but wasn't sure. "Okay. One. Two. Three."

He popped it into his mouth. Cheating, I kept mine on my plate and waited for his response, hoping he would love the foie gras as much as I did. He chewed with his eyes closed and his face crumpled into wrinkles like a little kid eating cold Brussels sprouts, but after a few seconds he began to nod. His eyes opened. His lips formed into a pleased grin. "You did it again, Jasmine. You've introduced another new tasty food to me this week. This is possibly the twelfth new thing I've enjoyed since you've been working for me."

"Great." I popped mine into my mouth and savored the rich, buttery texture. A tremor of pleasure rippled through my body. A tiny moan escaped my lips.

Chase clutched the edge of the table. His amused look shifted to a hungry one. "Do that again."

I finished chewing. "Do what?"

"I love that noise you made and that expression. I want to see it again."

I cleared my throat. "So, are you ready to discuss the proposals?"

"No." Chase leaned toward me and whispered, "I'm interested in pursuing something more with you."

"I'm interested in what your fiancée would say about that." I slumped back

in my chair. “If you keep this up I’ll sue you for harassment.”

He laughed and took a sip of his wine. “I own most of the judges in this county.”

“That doesn’t scare me.”

“I’m not trying to scare you. I’m trying to explain how suing me would be a waste of your time and money. Besides, maybe you should give me a chance and let me tell you my proposal.”

“I’m not interested.” I formed my lips into a straight line.

“Yes you are.”

“Goodnight.” I pushed my chair back and stood up. “You’re an asshole and I quit.”

His smile remained as he rose with me and seized my arm. Other customers in the restaurant looked our way.

“Let go of me,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Can you just answer a question for me, please?”

I gritted my teeth. “What?”

“If I was single and wasn’t your boss, would you date me?”

I yanked my arm away. He grabbed it again and then glided his hands slowly down to my wrist. The area tingled with awareness.

“Come on, Jasmine. Answer me,” he ordered. “Would you date me?”

I looked him up and down. “Of course. But, you *are* my boss and you’re *not* single.”

“So you are interested.” He smirked. “Good. Because I can compromise with you on the boss and single part.”

“How?”

“Please sit down.” He gestured toward my chair. “We have a nice meal on the way. I’m sure your friend Gabe would be disappointed.”

Our waiter approached us. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes.” I reluctantly returned to my chair. Chase followed. The waiter grabbed our empty plates, cleaned the table of any crumbs, and filled our glasses with water. The whole time Chase and I stared at each other.

Once the waiter left, I said, “I don’t appreciate you maneuvering your way into my Friday night and making up an assignment that I work on all week just so—”

“The job and assignment are real.”

“I don’t care if you own all the judges in the state. When you flirt with me, you’re playing with fire.”

“No, Jasmine.” He smirked. “You’re playing with fire, when you yell out empty threats. They don’t scare me. I just become more interested. No one would have the audacity to talk to me this way. I love it.”

I hesitated. “This is inappropriate and aggravating. Did you hire me for my ability to be your assistant or for the possibility of having sex with me?”

“Both,” he said with clear certainty.

Underneath the table, I twirled my copper ring until the skin itched. Here I assumed I’d impressed him with my intelligence and superb performance in school, when in the end my body got me the job. In Pyramid, I’d figured he just thought he could take advantage of me because I was poor and had no powerful support. When all along he’d planned this. “Before you become upset, let me explain.” Chase touched the crystal salt shaker next to him. He traced the edge with his thumb. “When I’m done, you don’t have to quit. We can return to working together and pretend like I never propositioned you. Additionally, you can decide to work in another company of mine, of your choosing, and receive the same salary.”

I struggled to maintain a neutral mask on my face. “Go ahead.”

“Do you remember me from Equinox’s Garden Party?”

“No.”

The party was at least three months ago. Vivian and I had gone with her dad. It was Benny’s attempt to have us network with rich people who had connections. Additionally, I believe he was hoping Vivian would meet a nice guy there. Benny hated Vivian’s choices in men as much as I did.

“At the party, I sat across from you,” Chase said.

“I didn’t realize that.”

“I know. You ignored me the whole time and disregarded all of my attempts at conversation. You pretty much giggled, pointed at the food, and whispered with your friend.”

“The food was garbage,” I confessed.

He rested his head in his hands and chuckled. “I also own Equinox, the company that catered the event.”

I shrugged. “The food sucked worse than Bag and Brew. The chicken was dry. Rice had no seasoning. Buns were as hard as bricks. The vegetables were cold and soggy—”

He laughed and shook his head.

“I was blown away that an expensive event like that would serve such bad food.”

“Promise me you’ll help me revamp all of my food businesses next month,” he said.

“If I’m still with you.” I stopped speaking when the waiter brought two small bowls.

“This is the soup course,” the waiter said. “Here we have ravioli filled with blood sausage and covered in a truffle butter sauce.”

“Thank you so much.” I yanked up the spoon the waiter placed next to the bowl.

Chase smiled. “Should I wait for you to taste that before hitting you with my offer?”

Probably. I’m sure I’ll lose my appetite.

“Yes.” I pierced the ravioli with the tip of my spoon. Red blood spilled from the pasta and merged with the butter sauce. I scooped up a small morsel and tasted it. So many sensual tasting experiences charged within my mouth at once—the truffles’ earthy flavor tickled my tongue, the succulent blood sausage nipped at my taste buds, and the thick texture of the pasta merged with the taunting cream.

“Lord have mercy, this is the best dish I’ve ever had in my life.” I groaned and noticed Chase hadn’t even lifted his spoon. “What do you think?”

“Blood sausage?” Chase studied his untouched bowl.

“Come on. You’re the wealthy one. Don’t tell me you’re closed-minded.”

“When it comes to food I stick with the normal meals.”

“What do you consider normal food?”

“Hamburgers, steak, pizza, chicken—”

“That’s unacceptable.” I stabbed another piece, put it on my spoon, and offered my portion to him. “Try it, please.”

“You’re serious?”

“Of course. Have I been wrong yet?”

“I doubt blood sausage will be a winner.”

I positioned my spoon half an inch from his mouth. “I’ve been dealing with your ridiculous come-on-too-strong flirting. Open your mouth and take it.”

“You’re definitely more than I’d expected,” he murmured and opened his mouth.

I fed him and couldn’t even deny the feeling that burst in my stomach. It was weird, as if I’d conquered someone, like I’d won a little battle or taken control. *Don’t be pathetic, Jasmine.* I shook the emotion away. “So? What do you think?”

He bobbed his head and continued to munch. “Damn good.”

“Gabe is an amazing chef. He never fails.” I returned to eating my own food.

“He’s cooked meals for you before?” Chase gripped his spoon so hard the skin on his knuckles turned a lighter shade.

What’s the big deal?

“Sometimes Gabe comes to my apartment and cooks for Vivian and me. He’s pretty busy here and works six days a week, but he still tries to visit us and cook at least twice a month.”

“Hmmm.” He tapped his finger against the spoon a few times. “Does he spend time with Vivian when he’s . . . visiting, or is he only around you?”

“I know what you’re insinuating. It’s not like that. It’s really a lot of fun when he drops by.”

“I bet,” he mumbled.

“He tells me to buy a secret ingredient. When he comes over I present it to him and he cooks me something fabulous, just like that food game show *Iron Chef*.”

Chase turned toward the kitchen and mumbled something under his breath.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.” But his face said he was pissed.

Or maybe I’m simply imagining that.

We ate in peace for a while. The whole time I waited on the edge of impatience for him to tell me what he had to say. Finally, when I couldn’t take anymore, I released a frustrated sigh. “So you saw me at the Garden Party when I was mocking your company’s horrible food. And?”

He wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin. I realized his bowl was now empty. He licked the spoon, and the way his tongue slid over the metal caused me to shiver.

Ignore that, Jasmine.

“I saw you across the table. Your laugh caught my attention. You sounded exciting.” He placed the napkin back on the table. “I asked you what college you went to. You said Harvard, twisted in your chair so you were facing your friend, and you basically spent the rest of the party talking to her.”

“Were you with Dawn?”

“Yes.”

“That’s probably why. I tend to ignore men who are obviously taken.” I motioned to his engagement ring. “When a guy speaks to me at a party, I always check his ring finger first. If I see a ring, I don’t even waste my time looking at the guy’s face.”

“Well, I didn’t enjoy being ignored by you. You seemed like a lot of fun. Your friend laughed every time you whispered to her. When Benny sat down by you, it was the first time I’d ever seen that man smile like that in my life, and I’ve known him since I was a kid.”

“That’s how he is around Vivian.”

“No. I’m talking about the happy stares he kept giving you. And again, you had him laughing and smiling just like your friend. I even smiled. You were intoxicating.”

“So you’re attracted to me due to my ability to make people laugh?” I tossed him a skeptical look.

“Fine. You caught me in a small lie. I’ll admit it.” He shrugged. “The first thing that attracted me was your breasts. Before you sat down, you leaned over to smell the rose centerpiece, and I got a generous view of your cleavage. Then you looked my way and trapped me with those hazel eyes. Next was the intoxicating personality.”

I stirred uncomfortably in my seat and averted my eyes. I wasn’t used to the brutally honest compliments. If, in fact, he was actually being honest. “So what happened next?”

“I turned to Dawn, pointed to you, and said, ‘I want her.’”

Chapter 8

Gabe chose that exact moment to arrive at our table.

“How am I doing so far?” Gabe asked.

I swallowed down Chase’s shocking news and glanced at Gabe. “Umm . . . you’ve surpassed my expectations.”

“Are you okay?” Gabe stepped closer to me.

“Yes!” I squeaked, grabbed my glass, and then took a gulp of water.

“Trust me. You’re doing awesome. Each course has blown my mind.”

Gabe tilted my way and whispered, “Any food orgasms?”

I blushed and could swear I heard a grumbling sound emit from Chase’s chest. “Yes. Two of them, to be exact.”

“Super.” Gabe displayed that award-winning smile again. “That’s all I thought about when I was preparing the dishes.”

Chase tapped his fingers hard against the table. My wine vibrated in the glass. The candle flickered with each beat.

“Well, Gabe. I’m excited to see the rest of your courses.” Chase said as he continued to beat out a weird rhythm on the table. “I’ll definitely be recommending you to my friends. However, I do need to finish this discussion with Jasmine.”

I glared at Chase.

“I understand, Mr. Stone. And I appreciate your recommendations.” Gabe bowed and excused himself.

“He’s in love with you.” Chase spit the words out as if they were disgusting.

“No he’s not. And if he was, then it would be none of your business.”

“How do you feel about him?” He started tapping again, to the point that it aggravated me. I almost asked him to stop.

“I consider him a good friend.”

“He’s trying to woo you through food. I’ll bet he thinks he’s a foie gras platter away from getting into your panties.”

“That’s much more effective than creating a fake job and—”

“The job is real.” He leaned his head to the side. “Do you find Gabe attractive?”

“What I feel for Gabe is none of your business. Why didn’t your fiancée slap you when you told her you wanted me?” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I don’t remember anyone being slapped at the garden party. I think I would have remembered that.”

Our waiter came over and poured me more wine. *Goodness. If there was ever a time I needed a glass of wine, it’s now.*

“Dawn understands me.” Chase watched the waiter leave with our bowls and spoons. “We have a special arrangement.”

“Arrangement?” I picked up the glass and drank the wine like it was water.

Is this really happening to me? I knew Dawn seemed weird at the time. Do they think I’m going to sleep with them both? I’m so not going to have sex with them.

“I love Dawn, but I’m not the type of man who wants to be in a monogamous relationship.”

“You and most guys.” I rolled my eyes.

“I love women—your bodies, your scents, the feel of your skin, the sound of your moans, and the luscious taste of all of you, each with your own distinct flavors.”

I gulped down more wine, unable to taste it anymore. Part of me filled with disgust at what Chase said. The other part steamed with lust, as I imagined his lips on my flesh tasting me. *Goodness. I need to have sex. Clearly, I’m too horny for my own good.*

“Do you really love her?” I asked.

“Dawn and I grew up together. Both of our mothers died around the same time, so we comforted each other. We’ve dated since middle school.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“What is love?”

“Oh god.” I hit my forehead. “I’m absolutely not going to have a philosophical debate with you.”

“We started the arrangement five years ago.”

The waiter arrived, which annoyed me to no end. He provided new cloth napkins and filled the water glasses again. With each task, I gritted my teeth and drowned in impatience. He began wiping crumbs away.

Oh god. The damn table is clean!

Once the waiter left, I turned to Chase. “What does this arrangement mean

and how am I involved?”

“Those are both long answers. Let me explain the entire situation.”

I blew out a long breath. He laughed.

“We started off with me just having casual sex with women on business trips or when I was out with close friends, but it didn’t work out.”

“How shocking.” My voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Dawn didn’t like the unpredictability of it, the possibility of pregnancies, or that I could catch something and give it to her.”

“Did you wear condoms?” I held out my hands.

“I don’t like them.”

“You’re selfish.”

He grinned. “Yes. I am.”

“How did you feel when she had sex with other men?”

He chuckled. “I thought we already established that I’m selfish.”

“You have to be kidding me. She can’t have sex with other men?”

“No.” He looked at me as if I was the crazy one.

“Whoa.” I covered my mouth. “You must be amazing in bed for someone to deal with this situation.”

“She never complains about the arrangement or my skills in bed.”

“I would.”

He licked his lips. “I doubt it.”

I rolled my eyes. “You sticking your penis in every female that moved didn’t work out, so what did you decide next?”

“Dawn wanted to meet the women and have them go through physical exams each month to make sure they didn’t have STDs.”

“That’s why I had to take an STD test and pap smear for the job?”

“Yes.”

Well, I’m glad I finally know the significance of those.

It had blown my freaking mind when they told me I needed them. I’d even wondered if my vagina was the one that would be interviewed during the final job process. It had been my own personal joke, but now I didn’t think that was funny anymore.

The waiter carried over two square porcelain plates. I recognized the meal as soon as I spotted the food. It was Gabe’s signature dish. My mouth watered. It was the same meal he’d prepared to get the job as sous-chef. It

was also what customers and food critics raved about on restaurant review sites.

“Ossobucco with truffle parmesan risotto.” The waiter placed both dishes in front of us and departed. It smelled amazing. I leaned in and let the savory steam drift up to my nostrils.

“Ossobucco?” Chase glanced at me.

I leaned my head to the side. “You’re a billionaire with access to any food you want. Promise me after tonight you’ll try at least one new food dish each week.”

“Promise me that you’ll share it with me.”

I waved away the reply. “Ossobucco is braised veal shank in a yummy tomato sauce. Gabe makes the best.”

“I’m sure Gabe does.” Chase twirled his hand and did a sarcastic wiggle of his head.

“Do you have a problem with Gabe?”

Chase targeted me with those green eyes. “He’d better hope I don’t.”

“Irrational jealousy and male bravado doesn’t score any points with me.”

“It does when I run the score system.” He dug in his fork, yanked out a big chunk of veal, and placed it in his mouth. I joined him in the feast as he took a bigger chunk. “Once again, Jasmine, you’ve turned me on to something new and delicious, but let me finish the story. Dawn found a woman named Wendy.”

“How did Dawn find her?” I mumbled between bites.

“Dawn also likes women. I allow her to have sex with them as long as it’s preapproved through me.”

“You’re such a giving man.”

“And you have a wicked tongue.” His eyes followed the spoon as it journeyed to my lips. “Hmmm. You’re not going to feed me this time? I enjoyed it when you fed me the last course.”

“I think you have enough women fulfilling your needs.”

“There’s always room for one more.”

“Said the gorged dragon that gobbled the princess.”

Coughing, he held his chest and laughed.

“You added Wendy to your weird relationship? And how did that work out?” I asked.

“All three of us have been together for five years.”

“I’m impressed.” I nodded. “I would have figured it wouldn’t last longer than a few months.”

“I take very good care of my women.”

“Like a pimp?” I finished my wine and waved at the waiter to bring me another. *At this rate, I will be so drunk Chase will need to carry me out of the restaurant.* My phone buzzed. I cursed under my breath, remembering that I didn’t tell Troy or Vivian I would be late. I pulled out my phone and checked the screen.

Vivian: Where are you?

Me: I’m still in the office, working. I’ll meet you at Drunken Lyrics in an hour.

Vivian: Cool. Troy and I will drink the champagne without you then. Btw, U suck.

I didn’t know why I lied to Vivian. I guess texting her that I was in the Lan with Chase would just cause her to rush down, look at us through the windows, and scream. Troy would also be annoyed and probably call to discuss more lessons on jail sodomy. Regardless, I decided to tell them about the dinner later, when I had time to think about it myself. I looked up and noticed Chase staring at me.

“Sorry. That was Vivian. Instead of dropping me at home, I would like you to take me to Drunken Lyrics.” I put my phone away as he nodded.

“Okay. Back to this arrangement. Am I to assume that you want me to join Wendy, Dawn, and you in an orgy?”

“No.” He chuckled a little and again gave me an expression that suggested I was the crazy person at the table.

“We don’t all have sex together. We have chosen days where I take each one out.” He set his fork down. “The chosen woman and I do something fun together, and at the end of the evening we make love. Dawn creates a schedule for all of our dates each month. She is very strict about everyone having a fair amount of time with me. Once she creates the schedule, she gives it to Lucy.”

Shocked, I asked, “Lucy knows?”

“Well yes. Lucy is a part of our arrangement...in her way.”

“What does that mean?” I scrunched up my face.

“You don’t need to know all of that unless you’re also with us.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Now who’s being closed-minded?” He lowered his lips into a frown. “Let’s finish our date and then you decide.”

“Our date?” I shook my head. *He’s crazy.* “Whatever. As far as this whole crazy situation goes, am I to understand that there was never a job?”

“The executive assistant position is a job, but I also use it to hire new women for my arrangement. I want someone who will accompany me on business trips and meet Dawn’s guidelines as well as my desires.”

“You have Lucy and like you said she’s a part of it.”

He waved my response away. “Lucy is complicated. We don’t have sex. Our relationship is something different.”

“What were all those interview questions about my sex life?”

“I already knew the answers. I just wanted to see if you were truthful and could deal with the pressure of me asking you something so personal in a room full of strangers. This relationship between the ladies and I only works because we’re patient and honest with each other.”

“And when you said ‘I am your god?’ What the hell was that supposed to mean?”

His lips curled into a smile. “That’s me seeing how much you would take.”

“Well, that’s a bad test. I’ll take a whole lot of crap from a boss who gives me six figures, but I won’t deal with a bunch of craziness from my boyfriend.”

“Your last boyfriend cheated on you. Instead of shunning him for the rest of his life, you were in his wedding.”

“My last boyfriend also farted all the time, was insensitive, and a horrible lover. When I caught him cheating it hurt, but I got over him in less than a month. When he married my friend, I had no ill will. In fact, I actually felt bad that he’s who she ended up with. She could’ve done better.”

“Like I said, you’re unexpected.” He sat back in his chair with a curious gaze. “What do you think about my arrangement?”

He didn’t want to know what I thought. If I truly told him my ideas about his relationship, we would be in this restaurant for weeks with me, using the few things I learned from my college psychology courses to analysis why the women would agree to something so unusual and why he possibly had severe commitment issues. The whole thing seemed so strange and sexist to me.

He can have sex with other women, but they had to sit there and be faithful

to him. *Insanity.*

I didn't have an exciting dating life. I hadn't spent time with any man besides Gabe since I broke up with my other boyfriend three years ago. There wasn't anybody out there who commanded my attention. Each time I met someone I gave them the V.I.B. test. Vivian coined the term for Vibrator, Ice cream, and Book test. Basically, if I would rather spend the night at home with my vibrator, a pint of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream, and a steamy romance novel, then he'd failed the V.I.B. test.

Could Chase pass the V.I.B. test?

I glanced at him as he sat in his seat, waiting on my answer and drumming his fingers on the table. *Of course, he would pass, if he was single.* He was the type of guy I didn't think I could get. Every part of him symbolized male perfection. He had the face and body women visualized when they touched themselves on the darkest and loneliest nights of their lives, the nights when they yearned for a dark gorgeous hero to soar down and save them. He was a billionaire, and by god, that was sexy in itself. I'd known poverty all my life. I'd been hustling, begging, and hoping for money since the first time the electricity shut off in our house due to my mom not paying the light bill.

He was also fun. In this week, I loved being around him. He'd taught me so much about business and just watching him work made me feel like I was learning valuable lessons. I got the feeling that whether he was rich or not, if I'd been with him, my life would improve just from his advice and support. He fascinated me. Even the arrangement was interesting.

But interesting from afar. I would've loved to read about this relationship or watch it on TV while snacking on a bowl of spicy buttered popcorn. *But participate? No way!*

"I'm sorry, but no, Chase. I can't do it."

He returned to finger tapping. The muscles in his jaw twitched.

"Is it because of the three girls who died?"

I tensed. "Were those girls a part of this arrangement?"

He averted his eyes and stuffed his mouth with food.

"Chase?"

He finished chewing. "Yes. All three had been involved with us."

And now they are dead.

"Am I in some sort of danger?" I pushed my plate away, no longer hungry.

"No. The last woman died two years ago. Since then I've doubled up on

security. Those deaths emotionally broke me and everyone else in the arrangement.” He frowned. “I’d been determined to never add another woman again.”

“Then why me?”

“I saw you at that party and everything shifted inside of me. After two years of mourning, depression, and regret, I heard your laugh and wanted to be able to laugh like that with you, to experience happiness again.”

“You have three women to make you laugh.”

“And still I want you.”

I sighed. “Back to these deaths. Do you think the women were killed by someone who—”

“Oh no. I don’t think they were killed. It’s just discovering that a man’s three ex-girlfriends died back to back would scare most, so I figured that was why you were hesitant.” His eyes widened as he shook his head, but for some reason I didn’t believe him.

Fear plopped to the pit of my stomach and then unfurled into a full blown anxiety attack. I hadn’t had an anxiety attack like this in a year. My throat tightened. Sweat appeared and dripped down my face. My heart banged in my ears. I scanned my eyes around the restaurant as if any of these customers sitting at the tables could be there to harm me. My body trembled. The waiter approached from behind me with a pitcher of water. I shrieked and jumped in my seat.

“Jasmine? Are you okay?” Chase reached for my hand. I shoved it away and rose.

“I have to go to the lady’s room.” I wiped some of the sweat away. My stomach twisted into an unsettling knot. *Focus on breathing. Count your breaths. You know what to do.* I sucked in a lot of air through my nose.

“Let me walk you.” Chase rose.

“No.” I hurried away, bumping into a woman as she left the bathroom.

They all died. A cold dread expanded across my skin. My fingers turned ice cold. I rubbed them together. *But who did it? Do they want to hurt me? Am I safe? Stay in the moment. Don’t think about it. Breathe.*

Chapter 9

I stood in the bathroom for fifteen minutes, meditating and calming myself down. When I walked out, Chase stood by the door. It took another five minutes to reassure him that I was okay and it was just one of many anxiety attacks I'd experienced in my life. They'd started the day after Troy killed my mother's boyfriend. Through the years, I'd learned to cope with them. Dinner continued in silence with a little casual talk tossed in. I think Chase figured I was too fragile for his arrangement and decided not to bring it up again.

Fine by me.

"I'll be dreaming about that chocolate lava cake all night," Chase said, interrupting the quiet in the limo.

"Yes, that qualifies as an orgasmic moment."

"So what's next for us?" Chase opened a glass panel on his right that housed a tiny bar. He poured me a glass of champagne. The bubbles skittered to the rim. "I still get to enjoy your company for the rest of the evening."

"I don't remember agreeing to that." I took the glass and sipped. The luscious liquid poured over my tongue. *God, he's spoiling me.*

"What were you going to do tonight?"

"Hang out with my brother, Vivian, and her boyfriend at Drunken Lyrics."

"Cool. I never heard of the place, but your taste in food is impeccable. I trust you."

"You're just going to invite yourself?"

"Of course." He poured himself a glass.

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Sue Lin owned Drunken Lyrics. She'd been a famous Asian poet who traveled all over the world. I owned all her spoken word CDs when I was in high school. I knew her popular poems by heart. So when she moved to Oshane City and opened her place I was her first customer. Once I met Sue I understood the full meaning of her place's name. She drank nonstop and always held a glass of wine, shot of liquor, or can of beer when I saw her. The nights began with her tipsy announcements on the microphone and continued with her drunken slurring by the end of the evening.

“Welcome to wonderland, baby!” Sue slurred and spilled some of her drink near my feet. “We’re all crazy here.”

“Thanks, Sue.” I waved at her as she headed off to the side of the building to smoke her cigarette. Chase placed his hand on my back. Warmth swelled where he touched me. I moved his hand away.

“I can’t touch you?” he asked.

“Not that area.”

“Why not?”

“It’s sensitive.”

“Hmm.” He gazed at the spot as if it possessed a special secret. “Can I hold your hand? It’s packed in there I don’t want to lose you.”

“Okay, but just until we’re inside.”

“I’ll try to remember that.” He chuckled and clasped his warm hand on mine. Satin skin wrapped around my fingers as he squeezed.

We entered. Soft green lights gave the place a soulful effect while the reggae band My Republic sung on stage. They were one of my favorite cover bands because they performed all of the popular reggae songs.

“She loves all men from Martin to Louie, as long as they buy her pearls and rubies,” the leader sang the lyrics to the song “Gold Digging Lady” by Red Lion. His long dreadlocks swayed back and forth over his shoulders. Sweat trickled down his dark face. *“She no care about heart break, cuts, and bruises, it’s all about money for her that’s what she chooses.”*

I bobbed my head to the beat as we squeezed through a crowd of grinding couples. Chase released my hand and placed it on my hip instead. My heartbeat increased, but I told myself it was the music and not that he was touching me. I balanced on my tippy toes and scanned the crowd for Vivian or Troy.

“Do you see them?” Chase’s lips brushed my ear. I shivered, inched away from him, and shook my head. He turned me around until I faced him. “Well, let’s dance a little and then when it slows down maybe we’ll see them.”

“A rich man can satisfy her needs. She’ll let him use her up. It’s all about greed.”

“Maybe we should just go in the bar,” I whispered in his ear.

He pulled me to him until my body pressed against his hard chest. *It’s been a long time since I’ve been in a man’s arms. And never a man like this.* He slipped his hands from my waist and rested them on my hips. “I’d rather

stay here.”

“The sex price is getting higher, houses and more money she require. But is she a prostitute or lover for hire. Diamonds and pearls she require.”

I used to love this song, but now I wasn't so sure. I stiffened under his arms. *What the hell am I doing in here with him?* Surely, this would not end with us shaking each other's hands and saying goodnight. He didn't seem like that type of man, the type to give up. He'd spent three months figuring out how to get me in his company and I'd easily walked into his trap like a mouse following the scent of cheese.

“Gold digging lady. She'll call you baby for the cash. Gold digging lady. She'll make you moan for the cash.”

“What's wrong? You stopped dancing.” With his hands, he guided my hips and helped them to sway, in perfect time to the song. “Is everything okay?”

I swallowed down my discomfort. “Yes.”

Our bodies were so close, every ridge of his layered muscle touched the front of my body. *He's so rock hard.* And I enjoyed each press of him into me, each rotation of his hips as he grinded into my center. The bundles of nerves between my thighs stirred. I bit my lip and was certain it would be swollen by the end of the night. One of his hands moved from my hip and nudged my arm.

“Relax.” He caressed the tip of my earlobe with his lips. “I told you I would take this as far as you let me.”

That's what I'm afraid of.

I edged back until there was space between us and placed my hands on his shoulders. “You're a good dancer.”

He twirled us around. “I wanted to be a ballet dancer when I was a kid, but my dad said only homosexuals love to dance.”

“That sucks. You would've been a grand Black Swan.” I giggled.

“If only my father wasn't a bigot.”

“That still doesn't explain your excellent dancing skills.”

“I take ballroom dancing with Wendy. It's usually what we do on our evenings together.”

“Interesting.” It was also just what I needed to return back to reality. I could never be with him and I needed to remember that as much as possible. The music's tempo slowed. The lights brightened around us.

“Thank you for coming to see My Republic!” The singer wiped his head with a towel. “We’ll be back in thirty minutes. Please welcome three aspiring poets: Magnetic, Liquid Dread, and Noc Santiago.”

Dang it. I thought we’d missed Noc’s performance. I hated listening to him. His poetry incited diarrhea symptoms.

Chase continued to hold me even though everyone was leaving the floor and no more music was playing. “Let’s get a drink. Maybe we’ll see your friend.”

“We need to get some water too.” My movements were getting that delayed reaction I got when approaching a tipsy state. Tension vanished from around my neck. Chase guided me through the departing dancers. When we arrived at the bar, he pulled me in front of him.

“Go ahead and ask for what you want, and order me a brandy on the rocks, please,” he said.

A brunette with a tube top that read Drunken Lyrics placed two napkins in front of us. “Hey Jasmine. What would you like?”

Chase seized the moment to press his body against my behind. Heat pooled between my thighs. I gripped the edge of the bar with my hands. “Um...water, pinot noir, and a brandy on the rocks.”

“Gotcha.” She rushed off.

Chase kissed the curve of my neck. I arched my back in response. Sparks of lust fluttered everywhere he touched.

“What are you doing?” I twisted around and moved his hands.

“What’s that fragrance you’re wearing?”

“Answer my question first.” I placed my hands on his chest so he wouldn’t come any closer.

“I was touching you.” He waved my hands away. “Now answer my question.”

“It’s just organic shea butter. I have dry skin so I have to put it all over me after I shower or wash my hands.”

“That’s why your skin is so soft?” He massaged the skin on my neck. I stifled a whimper. His fingers delivered hot sensations where they stroked. And instead of those sparks dying there, they traveled down my spine and expanded to other places that yearned to be touched.

I stepped to the side. “Don’t.”

“What can I do?”

“Nothing.”

“Now that’s unacceptable.” He pressed his lips to mine and slipped his tongue into my mouth. And against all common sense, I sucked on that tongue, loving its thickness as it slipped in and out. Groaning, he pulled me into him until there was nothing but the thin layers of our clothes between us. I sucked harder.

He pulled away, nibbled my bottom lip, and then backed up. “Our drinks are here.”

“What?” I struggled to catch my breath.

“Your wine is behind you.” He changed his view to my nipples as they stiffened.

“Umm . . . okay. I turned away, grabbed my glass, and gulped the wine.

“Kissing you was probably a bad idea.” He leaned into my behind again, but now his hardness pushed against my curves. “I want to make you moan.”

Danger. Danger. Get a hold of the situation, Jasmine.

“You made me moan when I ate that delicious food tonight.” I switched from drinking wine to gulping down water in a desperate attempt to end this craziness. “By the way, you’re pushing your erection into my behind.”

“Do you like that?”

“No.”

He nipped at my neck and moved to my side. “You’re a bad liar.”

“You’re awful at courting a woman.”

“How?” His eyebrows furrowed.

I wagged one finger at him. “You kissed me without my permission.”

“You liked it.”

“Not the point. You also rubbed your erection on me like a pervert.”

“I am a pervert.”

“A spoiled one.”

He swallowed some of his brandy. “I’d love to spoil you. I’d give you anything you desired. Join my arrangement and you would never have to worry. I would take care of you and your family. I’d get them out of South End, put your nieces and nephews in good schools.”

Take care of my family?

I looked away and shook my head. He really did study me hard. He knew I

was constantly giving money to my mother and that would be a weakness to use against me. Too bad it scared the hell out of me instead. He figured he could have anything he wanted, served to him exactly the way he desired. *He probably could, just not me.* My mother depended on men so much that when they did things like hurt my brothers or me, she looked the other way. I didn't work my butt off to get into Harvard and then deal with the weird stares from rich kids and all of those long hours of studying just so I could be a highly paid mistress.

"Like I said before, I'm not interested." I tucked my hair behind my ear. "Besides, I wouldn't do well in your harem. I feel like if you're sleeping with other women, then I should be able to be with other men."

He stepped closer to me. "I don't share."

"And I don't give to selfish people."

"Are you attracted to me?"

"Of course. I already told you I would date you," I said without hesitation, which signaled to me that I needed to slow down the drinking.

"If I didn't have this situation, would you have let me make love to you tonight?"

I averted my eyes. The light dimmed again as a poet walked on stage. It wasn't Noc. *Thank god. By the way, where are Vivian and Troy?* People applauded and hurried to surround the stage.

"Jasmine?" Chase kissed my cheek. "Answer me, please."

"Eventually I would have let my guard down and had sex with you." I gazed into his eyes.

He set his hands on my thighs. "I wish I could have you in my bed tonight."

"No."

"I'm starting to hate that word on your lips."

"Too bad. You'll be hearing me say it a lot."

He clasped his hands onto mine and pulled me away from the bar.

"Where are we going?" I asked as he dragged me toward the back. The audience applauded and cheered behind us. I couldn't make out what the poet was saying because my heart banged in my ears. Fear and anticipation pulsed within me.

"Chase?"

We stepped into the shadows of the club. He gently pushed me against the wall. "I've said all I can to have you agree to my offer."

"Then why are we—"

His lips smoothed against mine. He attacked my tongue with his and I loved it.

"Just let your guard down for a few minutes." He grabbed the end of my dress and yanked it up and over my behind. I gasped as he massaged my panties. My sex clenched in response. My nipples hardened. That scent of his surrounded me—new leather mixed with vanilla. *Fuck it.* I rubbed my fingers through his silky hair. Each time his tongue entered my mouth I sucked. And I was sure my panties were drenched from my arousal.

"I'd be the best you ever had." He slipped his hands around my side and dove them into my panties. "Because I'd do whatever you asked me to and more."

Hell yes. Touch me. I let my head fall back right as his fingers made contact with my throbbing bud.

"Damn it, Jasmine," Chase said. "You say I'm selfish and you stand next to me this wet, pretending like you don't want me."

"You're too complicated."

"Am I complicated now?" He tenderly clutched my clitoris between his fingers.

"No," I groaned and arched my hips into his hands.

He smiled. His fingers encircled my flesh, but made no further move. "What do you want?"

"Touch me." I closed my eyes.

"I'm already touching you, baby." His fingers added a tiny bit of pressure. "Tell me what else you want."

"Fuck me."

"I can't. It's against the rules. All I can do right now is touch you, no licking or anything else." He nipped at my chin and shoved a finger inside me. "Give my arrangement a try for a few weeks."

"No."

He shoved another finger inside me. His thumb rubbed up and down my clitoris as his fingers slid in and out of my wet tunnel. "Please."

"N-no." I rocked into his hands as the crowd applauded around us. I

doubted anyone saw us, but I also didn't care. I wanted him. Pleasure swelled and rose inside of me until I thought my whole body would explode. I struggled to hold in a moan as I ground into his hand. The whole area between my legs swelled and ached under his attention.

"Damn it," he groaned. "Try it for a week."

"I can't."

He pushed a third finger inside me. "You're seconds from coming all over my fingers and still you say no?"

I dug my nails into his shoulders as lusty pleasure filled me and captured all of my senses—his fingers pounding inside me, his scent enclosing me like a cocoon, and his voice smooth like silk. The mounting need rose, beat against my flesh, and then pushed me to climax.

"Chase!" I screamed. Music sounded right on time, a hard-hitting drum against a saxophone melody. The crowd clapped and chanted some lyrics with the spoken word artist on the stage. I ground into Chase's hands some more, squeezing my behind and showing no restraint.

"Yes, baby." Chase sped up his thumb's caresses. "Show me how much you like it."

The music's volume increased. An intense orgasm crashed into me with another flicker of his fingers. *Good god. He's too much to handle.* Never had anyone manipulated me this way and it scared the crap out of me. In college, men less than his worth had me doing their bidding. Chase could make me come with his fingers in a matter of seconds. After that thought, terror soared in me. I needed to stay away from Chase. Any more moments like this and I'd drown in his life, will, and desires. I would lose myself the whole time.

He targeted me with an intimidating gaze and removed his fingers with gentle ease. "I won't stop until you're under my roof in Willow Park and in my bed."

I opened my mouth, but didn't know what to say.

"Until that time no one will taste this but me." He sucked on the fingers he'd just had in me.

"W-we're not together." I shook my head.

"Your body says something else."

God. I'm so pathetic. What was I thinking? That I would let him finger me and then stand my ground as not being interested in him?

I yanked my panties up my shaking legs. "I . . . will be right back."

I pulled down my dress and fled, without waiting for his reply. Rounding the darkened corner, the bathroom doors showed up on my right. I raced past them and pushed through the back doors.

Oh God, what is he going to say when he realizes I'm not coming back?

Chapter 10

A pounding thumped over and over in my head. I popped two Advil and spent the rest of the morning drinking glasses of water to combat the dehydration from my hangover. The living room's darkness blanketed me. One of my favorite old films, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, played on the screen.

"Why is it so dark in here?" Vivian strolled out of her bedroom in black yoga pants and a white tank top. When she got to the blinds, she yanked them open. "That's better. It's such a lovely day today."

Sunlight streamed through and blinded me. I covered my face with a pillow. "I hate you."

"Are we going for a run today? I'm thinking at least five miles."

"Die," I said. "Die slow and in a river of blood and pain!"

"That sounds like a yes to me." She skipped into the kitchen. Banging sounded soon after. I shut my eyes as Vivian's loud kitchen musical began. The fridge slammed close. Dishes crashed to the counter. She stomped around, whistling some god-awful tune the whole time. Chopping came next and then the blender buzzed.

"Must you be so loud?" I yelled.

"It's twelve o'clock in the afternoon and perfectly normal to make noise at this time."

"Well, my roommate was up all night having noisy sex with her boyfriend ___"

Plates crashed to the floor. I opened my eyes. She peered out from the kitchen. Her blonde hair swung back and forth in the doorway. A pink tint shaded her whole face.

"You were here? You heard everything?" she asked.

"Of course I was here. I live here, you know."

"But I never heard you come in." She went back into the kitchen. "Oh god, I can't believe you heard that."

"What's the big deal?" I heard Noc and her all the time. Usually, pathetic groans from Noc drifted out of her room. Then the bed squeaked at a quick rhythm, and finally Noc's snoring filled the apartment soon after. Last night,

they had been adventurous. It was so noisy I finally resorted to plugging my ears with my headphones and listening to classical music until I fell asleep.

Vivian's bedroom door opened. My brother stepped out in only his boxer briefs. "Morning, Sis."

"Oh my god!" I buried my face in my pillow. "You both had sex? That was you and Vivian last night? Not Noc?"

Now I understood Vivian's crazy reaction. *I'm traumatized*. I'd heard it all, the entire procession of passion—her screams, his grunting, the bed's board slamming into the wall, and moaning from them both. *Eww*. And they never stopped. All night long it went on, over and over. *I'm going to throw up*. I'd been shocked because usually Vivian and Noc humped for a few minutes and then they both fell asleep.

The ridiculousness of this month will never cease.

"We didn't know you were here," Vivian called from the kitchen.

"Wait a minute, what about Noc?" I sat up on the couch. The sound of the blender's buzzing returned.

"What about Noc? Who even cares?" Troy slumped down next to me on the couch. "Why are you hung over, Jazz?"

"How did you know I was hung over?" I asked. Troy pointed to everything on the coffee table—potato chips, Advil, Diet Sprite, boxes of tissue, and a just-in-case-I-throw-up bucket. I punched Troy on the chest. "Why would you have sex with Vivian? It makes everything difficult."

"She's sexy and I hadn't been with a woman in four years." He rubbed his bald head. "What did you expect?"

"I figured you would find someone else to do that with." I dove my hand into the bag of chips, grabbed a handful, and stuffed myself. My mouth loaded with crispy and salty potato heaven. *What is it about potato chips that makes everything okay?* I looked down at the bag.

"You think sleeping with Viv was a bad idea?" Troy asked.

"Of course. Do you know how awkward it's going to be around the house now?" I placed my bag of chips on the side opposite him so he wouldn't take them from me. "Not to mention she's with somebody. A guy who visits our place all the freaking time."

"It'll be no big deal." Troy shrugged.

"Sure it won't," I muttered.

"What's wrong with you? It's not the end of the world." Troy took the

remote off my lap. “And what in god’s name are you watching, Sis? This movie looks stupid.”

“*Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is a classic.”

“*Wizard of Oz* is a classic, but it still sucks, Jazz.”

“What?” I tried to get the remote back. He moved it out of my reach and switched the channel to sports. I groaned with annoyance. “You have to be the only person in America to think the *Wizard of Oz* sucks.”

“More people hate it than you think.”

The blending stopped. Troy whispered in my ear. “She’s been acting weird all morning. She didn’t want me to cuddle with her.”

“Gee. I wonder if that has something to do with her having a boyfriend,” I muttered.

“I doubt it.” He slung his feet on the table. “She wasn’t thinking about him when I was stroking—”

“Don’t. I’m already sick.”

In the kitchen, the fridge slammed. Then water poured as the blender continued. Months ago, I’d bet Vivian fifty dollars she couldn’t be quiet in the apartment for an hour. I’d won in five minutes. It was just something in her personality that forced her to be noisy. She possessed a knack for touching things with as much racket as possible.

“I think she regrets what happened,” Troy whispered to me.

“Well, she sounded like she was enjoying herself, last night.” I scrunched my face in horror. “Eww, by the way. Thanks for that. I’ll be spending the rest of the month cleansing my mental rolodex of last night.”

“She hasn’t said more than two words since we woke up.”

A large part of me wanted to scream, “This is why you don’t sleep with your freaking best friend!” But, it wasn’t what he needed to hear. And who the hell was I to judge anyone after last night’s finger-and-escape debacle with Chase?

I rubbed my eyes and sighed. “Have you asked her if everything is okay?”

“No. I already know what’s wrong.”

“You do?”

He frowned. “I’m a black ex-convict with no real future.”

“Would you stop that? You have your whole life ahead of you. If anyone believes in you, it’s Vivian.”

Why hadn't I seen this coming? I always thought she had a crush on him, but she'd been denying it since we were kids. Even now, she had pictures of him in her top drawer. I'd found them last month when I was searching for her hidden Girl Scout cookie supply. She knew I had a serious addiction to Caramel Delights, so she buried them in secret spots in her room. Obviously, I never brought up the pictures, being that I was perusing her underwear drawer. Additionally, she always wrote him when he was in juvenile centers and later in jail. I'd figured she was just being nice, but I guess it was more than that.

"Yeah. Well, she's tripping about something." He switched through some channels when a commercial came on. "Maybe it's her dad. You and I know I'm a decent guy, but Benny won't think that if she told him we were together."

"Benny loves the hell out of you. Plus, she doesn't care about what her dad thinks. If she did, she wouldn't be with Noc." I slung my own feet on top of the table next to his. "By the way, Benny loves you but he's going to kill you if he ever finds out."

"Yeah." Somehow Troy discovered another sports channel and increased the TV's volume. "It's probably best she's acting weird. Nothing would've come out of it."

"Meanwhile, I've been mentally harmed in the process."

"Whatever. We thought you were still in the office working."

I thought about what I'd actually been doing and clamped my mouth shut. Vivian carried two huge glasses full of brown sludge out. A rotting scent drifted from them.

"No." I shook my head. "I'm hung over and tired. I'm not running today."

"Yes you are." She set the glass down in front of me and avoided looking Troy's way. *She is being weird.* I stared at the glass. It was her protein boost recipe. She blended two raw eggs, carrots, celery, collard greens, orange juice, honey, and soy milk together. The end result tasted exactly how one would think it would taste. *Disgusting!* My stomach rumbled with aversion. My phone buzzed.

Troy picked it up and checked the screen. "Who's Dawn?"

Oh goodness. What did Chase's fiancée want from me?

Troy showed me my phone and I pressed the button to see my message.

Dawn: Let's meet for lunch on Wednesday. You pick the place. My treat.

“Thanks. It’s not important. I’ll reply later.” I waved the phone away.

Troy put it back on the coffee table. My temples ached as I considered the many polite ways to say hell no to Dawn. There was no way I could meet her anywhere. Her fiancé’s fingers had done naughty things to me last night, things I could barely think about without shuddering. Even though he claimed they had an arrangement and it would be perfectly fine, I didn’t feel comfortable dealing with her. Lunch was out of the question.

“Who’s Dawn?” Vivian gulped her sludge. A brown liquid mustache covered the top of her lip. She wiped it away with the back of her hand.

“Dawn is Chase’s fiancée,” I mumbled.

Troy stared at the TV and didn’t look at Vivian. Meanwhile, Vivian only gazed my way as if no one else was in the room. “Why is she texting you?”

“I don’t know.”

Maybe Dawn wants to yell at me for what happened with Chase last night. Or maybe she wants to congratulate me and get a play-by-play account. Even worse, maybe she wants to finger me herself. Yikes! Who knows with those two weirdoes?

An arrangement of love. The very notion of having more than one committed relationship with more than two people and all of those rules boggled my brain. Only a rich person could truly get away with something so unusual, and only a spoiled narcissistic man could assume most women would participate in that foolishness.

I could never do it. Him and her are both nuts.

“Oh yeah, tell your boss thanks.” Troy set the remote control on the table, stood up, and stretched. “The guard job is real easy and pays a lot. I’ll be off your couch by next month.”

“I’m glad the job worked out. When did you start?” I asked.

“You’ve been so busy you hadn’t noticed, but I went down there Monday and started working Tuesday,” he said.

“That’s awesome.”

Too bad I may not have a job this week. Chase told me I could move into another company and still receive the same salary. I planned on taking him up on that offer, once I gathered up enough courage to face him on Monday. I twisted my copper ring. My heart sped up as I mulled over the various scenarios—sitting alone in his office to discuss my transfer, calling him on the phone, an email, or maybe I could somehow get Lucy to ask him to

transfer me. I shook my head.

God no. She's part of the whole freaking arrangement.

It was in that moment when I realized that everyone sat in silence. Vivian drank her sludge and studied the carpet as if she'd never seen it before. Troy continued to stand like an idiot as he watched the television.

"You both going on a run?" Troy said, finally disrupting the quiet.

"No." I lay back down on the couch.

"Yes." Vivian finished her crappy drink.

"I'm going to take a shower and go play some ball down at the college courts." Troy headed to the kitchen. I noticed Vivian checking out my brother's behind as he left.

"Eww." I lowered my lips into a frown.

She blushed. "Just be ready to run with me in ten minutes."

I dragged the blanket over my head and hoped that would make her leave me alone.

"Drink your protein shake, too. I took your advice and added some basil to it."

"I doubt basil will help," I barked back. "And if I remember correctly I said the only thing that could help your protein shake was pouring it down the drain."

"Really?"

"Yes. I said your spaghetti needed basil."

"Well regardless, drink and get dressed."

"I don't want to," I whined.

"Come on, Jasmine. You know how you get when you don't work out."

I exhaled. Last night's panic attack flashed into my head. I'd battled with depression and anxiety since I was young. Benny took me to lots of doctors. None of them worked. They too quickly prescribed drugs that weighed me down and kept my mind foggy. My last high school counselor was the one who'd helped me gain control of my attacks. She'd studied alternative medicine and ordered me to focus on eating nutritious meals, exercising daily, surrounding myself with positive things, and even simpler ideas like making sure I went outside and got at least three hours of Vitamin D from the sun. I'd been skeptical, but all of it helped.

And each day without the shackles of anxiety was a blessed day of

salvation. Once I entered college I started meditating and trying to keep my mind in the as much as possible, instead of entertaining sad thoughts of my past or worrying about my future. Any slip off my regimen shoved me right back into a depressing world where a dark cloud hovered over me and threatened to swallow me whole. Sleepless nights, unending tears, and the constant feeling of danger lurking around the corner would return. And with all that I had to deal with this upcoming week, the least I could do was take control of my emotions.

“Are you drinking that shake?” Vivian yelled like some hardcore boot camp sergeant.

“I hate you,” I grumbled.

Chapter 11

For the fifth time during the run, vomit threatened to rise in my throat. It singed my esophagus, but never revealed itself to the other runners in the park. Apparently, hangovers and exercise didn't complement each other. To make matters worse, Vivian decided to describe her hot and passionate evening with my brother throughout the whole run.

"Please stop saying that," I whined and held my stomach as we ran through Rower's Way.

"It was just so big," Vivian giggled. "And thick."

"Ick! I absolutely don't want to know that about my brother."

"We're both adults. You're just being a big baby."

"You're being insensitive to my stomach. You're an only child. You can't truly appreciate how horrific this is."

"Fine. I won't say anything else." She pouted. "Your best friend takes on the biggest penis of her life and you force her to keep her journey inside."

"Write it in your journal."

"I don't have one."

"Well, now's the time to get it."

"Party pooper."

I ignored her and focused on the run. A cool wind rushed by and chilled my sweaty skin. The leaves and branches on the trees swayed and bobbed. No clouds lurked anywhere. Just a clear blue sky hovered over us. Even better, guys in tight, colored body suits zoomed by on shiny bicycles. On my right, couples lounged together on benches or cuddled on blankets in the grass. Further ahead, a kite contest was happening. Crowds of parents helped their kids hold onto colorful kites that glittered in the sky. Everybody enjoyed themselves around me and I relished in their delight for life, drinking in as much as I could like an emotional vampire.

To keep me out of depression, I attempted to surround myself with as much positivity as possible and Rower's Way Park was one of the best places to do it. The area was massive and boasted a ten mile dirt path, big lake, baseball fields, doggy park, playground, obstacle course, and even a skateboard area. It was the type of park I wished I'd lived next to as a kid. The parks in South End only possessed broken playground equipment and

were full of loitering drug dealers or crazy bums that lay on park benches, fondling their groins.

“You’re getting faster,” Vivian said. “Soon I won’t be able to maintain my pace with you.”

“Stop trying to suck up. I’m not talking to you.” I returned my mind to my run.

Sweat drenched my neck and hair. My thighs, waist, and arms burned. I was addicted to that burning sensation. It made me feel powerful, as if I could conquer anything ahead of me. I inhaled the soothing fragrance of nature—freshly cut grass and blooming flowers.

“I’m glad I came out here,” I admitted.

“You always say that after we run for twenty minutes.”

“Even your nasty talk didn’t ruin it.” I wiped some of the sweat on my forehead as we rounded the pathway. “I can’t believe you hooked up.”

“I blame you.”

“Me?” I scrunched up my face in confusion.

“If you had come home like you were supposed to, then we wouldn’t have sat there smoking and drinking all the ‘Congratulations’ champagne we bought you.”

“Oh.” I rolled my eyes and laughed between panting. “Well, that makes perfect sense. I do apologize for forcing you to hump my innocent brother.”

“Innocent, my ass.”

“And now what will you do?” I darted to the side as two kids on bikes rushed by. Neither one of them were paying attention to where they were going.

“What do you mean what are we going to do?” Vivian slowed her pace until I got back on her side. “It’s not like anything will change.”

“It won’t?”

“No.” She turned to me. “You think it will?”

“Will it?”

An exasperated growl left her lips. “Stop answering my questions with questions.”

“You seem to have it all figured out.” I slammed my feet against the dirt path as we approached a small hill I’d coined The Mountain of Pain and Torture. “I assume lots will change. It’s already awkward being around both

of you.”

“It’s because we’ve seen each other naked. We’ll be fine by tonight.”

“Will you?”

“I swear if you do that again, I’m going to trip you.” She pointed at my feet.

I chuckled, but widened the distance between us as I trekked up the hill. She’d tripped me once when I mocked Noc’s poem he dedicated to her, called *Roses are Blonde*.

“Things will go right back to the way they were with Troy and me,” she declared.

“Okay. Nothing will be different,” I agreed. “You’ve just given each other earsplitting orgasms. Now Troy and you will return to normalcy.”

“Yep. Nothing will change. Troy is just having fun. He’ll be with someone else next week.”

“Will he?” I laughed and sped up so she couldn’t catch and trip me.

Dust rose behind me, or at least that’s what I liked to think when I raced at a fast speed. I approached the mid-point of the hill, the part where some days I quickened my pace like an Olympic runner and other days I collapsed to the ground, panting and whimpering at the pain in my chest. *What will it be today?* My stomach twisted, but this time no bile rose. *You can do it.* I switched into a sprinting mode and traveled up the hill faster than I’d ever done before. Conversation ceased between Vivian and I as we both mentally pushed ourselves to make it to the top without stopping. A rush of wind smashed against my skin. Pain ripped through my thighs. I tightened my hands into fists and concentrated on just the steps ahead of me. *Fuck me! Fuck me!* If I looked at the top I would collapse in defeat, so I focused on the ground in front of me. *You can do it!*

Once I approached the top of the hill, I screamed like a mad woman. Onlookers tossed me awkward stares. A few of them laughed. It was only a hill, after all, and not some huge hiking mountain. Panting, I placed my hands on my hips and marched around so my legs wouldn’t cramp. Vivian arrived minutes later and offered a weak hoot.

“It’s about time. I thought I was going to have to come down there and carry you up.” I bent over and stretched my legs. “You ran at the speed of a turtle.”

“It must have been all that huge cock last night.”

“Oh god. Stop!” I gripped my stomach. “You’re so cruel. I wish you had a brother so I could sleep with him and take out my revenge on you. I’ll have to find a hot cousin of yours.”

“Fat chance. All of my cousins are ugly.”

“We’ll see about that.” I lowered myself to the ground. The grass tickled my legs. “I’m going to your next family reunion.”

Bob Marley’s tune “Three Little Birds” filled the air. *Vivian’s phone*. She wrenched it out of her bra. Like me, she kept her belongings in a Ziploc bag and had stuffed it in her sports bra.

“Damn it. That’s Noc.” She stuffed the bag back into her bra. “Did he ask about me last night when you went to Drunken Lyrics?”

“Umm...no. I didn’t see him.” I avoided her weird expression and scooted away. Suddenly, I really needed to stretch my legs some more.

“Did he perform?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I went there, but I ended up leaving.”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “You’re acting real weird right now. What happened?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” I touched my toes and looked at my knees.

“Try me.”

“I went to the Lan—”

Vivian shrieked. “No way! That place is like a hundred dollars each dish. You can totally have a five hundred dollar bill at the end of the night. Was your sexy cooking hottie Gabe there?”

“Yes.” I sighed. “He cooked for us.”

“Us?” She raised her arms over her head.

“Chase and I.”

She ended her stretching as her mouth dropped open. “You’re right. I don’t believe you. Chase fucking Stone? No way.”

“That’s not even the craziest part of last night.”

“Chase Stone took you on a date?” She covered her cheeks with her hands. “What about his fiancée? Oh shit, is that’s why she texted you?”

“I have no idea why she texted me, and according to Chase they have an arrangement where he can have sex with other women. Three women, in fact.” I held up three fingers. “It’s like they’re all in a relationship together.”

“So they’re like the Amish but with no religion?”

I laughed. “I honestly don’t think Amish men do more than one wife. It’s another group.”

“Who cares?” She waved my comment away. “So he wants you to be his new wife?”

“Well, they’re not all married, but yeah. He wants me to join his harem.” I continued my stretching. I explained the whole conversation to Vivian, from him spotting me at the Garden Party to him opening the executive assistant position to lure me in.

“What did you say to him?” she asked. “Are you going to do it?”

“No! Of course not.” I held out my hands. “Wait a minute. You would say no, right?”

She tilted her head as if in thought. “If it was a regular Tom, Dick, or Larry from nowhere with no job, then I would say no. But this is a freaking billionaire. I would probably say maybe and try it.”

“Just because he’s rich?” I raised my eyebrows. “I don’t believe you.”

“It’s just like dating someone without a serious commitment.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“Not really. He doesn’t allow his women to date other men.”

“Oh, well, then he’s insane.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay.” She crossed her legs. “So after dinner what happened?”

“He brought me to Drunken Lyrics where Troy and you were not at, by the way.”

An old guy watched us while he walked his shaggy dog up the hill. A tiny bell rang around the dog’s neck as he wagged his tail. The man’s eyes lingered toward our cleavage. *At least pretend like you’re not looking.* I scowled at him. He looked away and rushed in the other direction.

“Pervert,” Vivian muttered once the guy and dog left. “So Chase dropped you off?”

“No, he came in with me. We danced. He bought drinks.”

“And?” She blew out air. “You’re killing me.”

I lay on my back and rolled over to my stomach to hide my face. “He finger-banged me in the back of the club.”

“What?! You’re joking, right?” She crawled over to me and shook my

arms. “A famous billionaire fingers you in a public and crowded club last night and you wait until *now* to tell me. So then what happened?”

“When I . . . climaxed I excused myself, ran out the back, took a cab home, and hid under my blankets the rest of the night.”

“You ran away?”

“Yes.” I peeked at her through my fingers. “What do you even say after a guy you don’t know that well fingers you? Thanks so much? Good job with your fingers?”

“Well, that’s better than escaping out the back.”

“And I figured I owed him.”

She giggled. “What exactly would you owe him?”

“I figured he would’ve expected a blow job or something. And if he could get me to open my legs and let him slide down my panties in a packed night club, I didn’t want to find out what I would do with him alone in his limo.”

“You ran away?” She shook her head.

“Stop saying that.”

“You’ll have to see him Monday and it’s going to be beyond uncomfortable for you.”

“Don’t remind me.” I rolled onto my back and gazed at the sky.

“Did he call you to find out what happened?”

“Yes. By the twentieth missed call I texted and told him I was fine and had to go home for a personal emergency.”

“What are you going to do?”

My phone blared with the default ring. I didn’t have any cool ringtones like Vivian. I pulled my Ziploc bag with my belongings out of my sports bra and moved my credit cards, ID, and keys out of the way. A strange number displayed on the screen. It wasn’t Chase or the number Dawn had texted from earlier.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hey Jasmine. It’s Lucy. I need you at Oshane City Airport in no later than three hours,” she said. “We’re going to India with Chase.”

“India?” Pounding appeared at my temples. My nerves flared on edge.

“Sorry about your weekend being cut short, but that’s how it is. Sadly, the entertainment business never takes off.”

And now I’m going to have to face Chase sooner than I thought.

Chapter 12

Lucy had said I could dress as comfortably as I wanted since it was a sixteen hour flight. Huge fuzzy purple slippers, with X's covering the front, clung to my feet. Headphones plugged my ears and blasted an eclectic play list of Radiohead, Mozart, Jay-Z, and Joni Mitchell. I covered my eyes with a satin blindfold and thanked god Chase hadn't arrived yet.

This way I can avoid him most of the trip.

Well, it wasn't a hundred percent guaranteed. We were traveling on his private jet. *And if one traveled, this was surely the way to do it.* I'd been unprepared for how vast and outfitted the jet was. When Lucy said jet, I assumed a small plane with a few seats. Instead of the typical tight rows of a commercial flight, Chase's jet's seats provided ample leg room and were placed across from each other on each side of the wall. If Chase needed to have a meeting, they could just set up a small conference table in the middle. Lucy had taken me on a tour, showing me the kitchen in the center of the plane equipped with a stunning stainless steel kitchen. Chase's personal chef was there chopping mushrooms and garlic. Further down stood a room with flat screen TVs, past that was Chase's private bathroom with a shower, and in the back of the jet were a master bedroom and a small guest bedroom.

"I'm completely dependent on you," Black Moon Goddess sang. *"To breath, to see, to see all of my dreams come true."*

The plane's floor vibrated. I sank deeply into my musical, blindfolded darkness and focused on Thom York's lyrics instead of my fears--a plane crash, an explosion, or the worst one of all—there's an engine malfunction, the plane drops from the sky and falls into the vast ocean with no land in sight. Even worse, none of the flotation seats work so we all drown while hungry sharks swim around us. My heart sped up as I felt the plane advance. *Everything will be okay. Just breathe.* I inhaled, exhaled, and counted each breath that left my lips. *One. Two.* A funny sensation coursed through my legs. *Three. Four.* The plane took off, rising into the air.

"I'm an animal locked in your cage ," Black Moon Goddess sang. *"The sensation that bubbles out before the rage."*

The sensation in my legs ceased. My ears popped a little. My heartbeat decreased to a steady pace.

“You are why I breathe. You are why I breathe.”

The fragrance of new leather mixed with vanilla filled the air. Even if I tried I couldn't forget that scent. *Chase's cologne.* I'd thought about it all last night as I replayed what he'd done with those magical fingers. His scent closed in and surrounded me. *Just breathe.* He had to be near me, if not right next to me.

“And I can't take another breath unless I'm here with you.”

His soft fingers rubbed against the inner area of my wrist, delivering a thrill that flowed through my chest and warmed my skin. He tapped my wrist to get my attention. *God. I thought I had time.* I bit my lip and removed my headphones, but kept my blindfold on like it was totally normal. *Coward.*

“Can we talk?” Chase's voice stirred the soft flesh between my thighs as if I was naked and laying in front of him with my legs open and he'd gently blew right on that spot. “Jasmine?”

“Yes, we can talk,” I muttered.

“Without the blindfold.”

Struggling not to whimper, I cleared my throat and removed my blindfold. Lucy slept in the seat across from us with hot-pink headphones in her ear. Earlier, she'd swallowed a Valium and explained that her fear of flying was way more extreme than mine so she chose to be in a deep comatose sleep during most of the flight. Chase's bodyguards and two lawyers lounged in chairs on the other side. They typed into their laptops and didn't look our way. Everyone had lowered their shades so the space possessed only the dim lighting from the computer screens.

“That's better. I love looking into your hazel eyes,” he said.

I rolled them. “What did you want to discuss?”

“Let's go in the back and talk about it.”

Red alert! His bedroom is in the back. No way.

A pained expression spread across his face. “Are you afraid of me?”

“What? No.”

“You look scared shitless right now.”

My mouth fell open. “I-I just don't want to go into your bedroom.”

His lips shifted to a smirk. “I planned on us talking in my personal lounge, not my bedroom. I'm not that extreme.”

“Okay.” I unbuckled and rose out of my seat. He clasped his fingers

around my hand. He wore a white linen shirt, blue jeans, and flip flops. I couldn't decide if he looked hotter this way or in a towel. *And surely a man with pretty toes couldn't be trusted.*

"I have a personal lounge in the back." He led me there and carried my book bag with him.

"I know. Lucy showed it to me."

"Did she show you the room with the spiked chains and wooden spanking paddles?"

"What?" I paused in the hallway. My fingers shook.

"It's a joke, Jasmine."

"Not funny," I mumbled.

A beige door appeared. He opened it. *We'll just talk. Stop being so scared.* We entered a small place that fit a black loveseat and carpet. A red coffee table rested in the middle of the floor. A massive flat screen TV hung on the wall. It was split into three different channels. One showed a soccer game. The other two played the news.

He sat my bag on the floor next to the couch and got in front of me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Why do you ask?" I noticed he maintained two feet of distance between us.

He put his hands into his jeans pockets. "You ran home last night without saying goodbye." He gestured for me to sit down. "Did I take things too far? Maybe push myself on you?"

"Yes and no." I averted my eyes. "I don't want to . . . do that again, so...let's just maintain some sort of professional environment."

"Can we be friends?"

"Yes."

"So everything is fine?" he asked. "I won't be seeing a resignation letter or transfer request on my desk?"

Now was the time to take my easy way out. *I could just say the words, right?* But, I was already nervous enough, so I wussed out. "No. Everything is fine."

"Will you hang in here with me during the flight?" he asked. "Solely as two friends sitting in a room looking at TV."

"Yes, but that's it. Nothing else."

“Of course not.”

“I don’t want to do anything but be friends.” I sat down. Soft leather surrounded me.

Those green eyes brightened as he smiled. “Feel free to listen to your music, read, or whatever you were going to do.”

He sat down next to me and pressed a button on his remote. The screen showing soccer widened until it filled the screen. He muted it and pressed another button. Music came through the speakers. It sounded familiar, but I couldn’t figure out who the singers were.

“Who’s this?” I dove into my book bag and yanked out a brown paper bag.

“That’s not funny?”

“What isn’t funny?” I raised my eyebrows.

“You really don’t know who this is?”

“No.” I shrugged.

“Okay. You have to get out of this room right now.” He pointed to the door with a grin. “How the hell do you not know who the Beatles are?”

“Oh. I’ve heard of them. I just never really listened to them.” I focused on some of the lyrics and nodded. “This sounds okay.”

He frowned at me. “Did you just say the Beatles sound okay?”

“They’re not mediocre.”

“Not mediocre, she says. I’m buying you their entire collection. Hand over your iPod.” He held out his hand. “Clearly you have not familiarized yourself with the greatest band that ever lived. No one should walk this earth without having at least one favorite Beatles song. I don’t think you can even enter the gates of heaven without having one.”

“Wow. I missed that section in the Bible.”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “It was either in the book of Paul or John.”

“Funny.” I shook my head. *Be careful.* I was beginning to enjoy his company too much. Even worse, I enjoyed the way he treated me, like a gentleman, but also his equal. And then I couldn’t forget those lips and fingers. *Perhaps this is why his harem agrees to his selfish desires.* He makes you fall for him first, and then hits you with the crazy reality.

“Give me your iPod,” he demanded.

“I’m not letting you buy me music.” I wrenched out my sandwich wrapped in wax paper. “You already pay my salary, but I do promise to buy a greatest

hits album and check it out.”

He gazed at my sandwich. “You do realize I have a chef on board. He would make you whatever you wanted.”

“He probably cooks crap.”

“Excuse me?” He laughed. “I currently have him bringing us the best steaks that money can buy, whereas you have a pitiful sandwich.”

“This isn’t just a sandwich. This is a flavorful masterpiece.” I broke it in half and offered it to him. Without hesitation, he took the piece and bit into it.

His eyes closed as he chewed. “I just got another erection. What is this?”

“Culatello, which is a higher quality of prosciutto—”

“Prosciutto?”

“Really really awesome ham. Anyway, Culatello is cured with great wine for like a year.” I ate some of my portion. “So this sandwich is Culatello, brie, herbed cream cheese, French bread, and truffles--which is insane. I mean seriously. Who would stick something as expensive as truffles in a sandwich but Gabe?”

“He made this?”

“Yeah. He happened to be in my area today—”

“Of course he happened to be there.” Chase rolled his eyes. “You live ten minutes outside the city. He lives downtown. That’s at least a thirty minute drive from his place to yours.”

I stiffened. “Why do you know where he lives?”

“I just happened to be in his area, I guess.” Chase leaned back and began tapping his finger on his thigh.

I formed my lips into an angry straight line. “Seriously, why do you know that?”

“I requested that Lucy gather information about him,” he said.

“Why?”

“He’s an outstanding chef. I want to form an advisory board in my revamping of food businesses.”

I gave him a skeptical look. He tossed back that confident smile as if to say *prove I’m full of shit*.

“Go ahead and finish your story,” he said.

“There is a fabulous farmer’s market on my block on Saturdays. It’s half of the reason I moved to that town, so that’s why he was there.” I finished my

sandwich. “Anyway, he saw I was packing to go on a business trip and decided to make me some food for the flight.”

“Of course he did.” Chase continued to eat.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I already told you. He’s trying to cook his way into your panties.” Chase licked some of the cream cheese off his fingers. An image of what he could do with those fingers flashed in my head. I shuddered and struggled to concentrate on eating.

“No. He’s not,” I said.

“Yes he is, and with his food, Gabe actually has a chance.” He finished the sandwich and gazed at my bag. “What else did Lover Boy prepare for you?”

“None of your business.” I placed the bag behind me. “Go ahead and eat your expensive steaks.”

“No. I want what’s in your bag.”

“Why would you want my stuff when you already have your own?”

“Because you messed up and let me have a sample and now I can’t get that taste off my mind.” He slid his tongue across his bottom lip. It made me think he was talking about last night. “Please. I’d like to try some more.”

“No,” I said.

“Do you remember what happened the last time you kept telling me no?”

I stirred in my seat. My breasts suddenly seemed restricted in my bra. My pants became more of a barrier than a source of comfort.

This is going to be a long, long plane ride.

“Well, since you said please, here you go.” I swallowed and dragged the bag back around me.

He didn’t touch the bag. Instead, he kept his gaze on me. “You’re captivating.”

“You’re full of it.” I looked like I was getting ready to go to sleep. My hair was pulled back in a ponytail. I just wore a t-shirt, yoga pants, and slippers.

“Trust me. If I could, I would induct you into the Mile High Club.”

“How do you know I’m not already a member?”

“You wouldn’t allow it.” He winked. “It’s not proper behavior.”

“I’m a naughty girl when I’m in a relationship with someone I love and trust.”

He leaned in as if to kiss me. My heart stopped. I clutched the couch

pillows in terror, but I didn't move away. I couldn't, because in the end I craved his touch more than I had the courage to admit.

"I want to be that guy for you." He kissed me. And not just any kiss. He kissed me like he owned me, as if he'd bought me last night and my orgasm was the payment. His tongue didn't explore my mouth. It taunted me, gliding in and out between my lips in a rhythm that reminded me of hot sex. He shifted his hand to the back of my head and trapped me to him. My bag and its contents dropped to the floor as he groaned and closed the distance between us.

God. I don't want this to end.

I whimpered under his lips. My body waited impatiently for his hands to travel around my skin, his fingers to do naughty things to my flesh, and his cock, dear god I needed to see and feel it. My panties shifted to instantly wet. And between my legs was a searing hot heat that signaled I was ready for him.

"Jasmine," he whispered. "All last night I pictured your face right when you came. Did you think of me last night?"

"Yes." My smooth breathing transformed to panting as he nibbled the curve of my neck.

"Did you touch yourself when you thought of me?" he whispered.

"Yes. I thought about you all freaking night." I arched my back to him as his hands glided to my hips and then pushed up under my shirt.

"Will you give my arrangement a chance?"

Fuck. I closed my eyes and sighed. *Not again.*

"Please stop." I shoved him away with trembling fingers. "I already told you. I don't want any part of that crazy arrangement. In fact, I'm going back to sit in my seat." I rose. "Thanks, but I'll see you after the flight."

"Wait! I won't do that again." He stood with me. "Let's just hang out. I promise to be on my best behavior."

Yeah right. I can't even promise to be on my best behavior right now.

I raised my hands as if to say stop. "No. It's cool. I just want to chill in the front and read my book."

"You can read it here." He clenched and unclenched his hands. "Give me another chance to show you I can be a good boy."

"No. I would really feel better away from you right now."

“Why?” He closed the distance between us. Every cell in my body screamed for him to embrace me, pull me down to the couch, and fill me with the long length I imagined in my dreams last night. *Turn around, Jasmine. To have sex or not have sex? That is the question.* I gritted my teeth.

“What’s on your mind right now?” he asked. “Your face is making those delicious expressions. Ones I thought only my fingers could make.”

The room’s temperature increased around me.

I backed up and was sure I looked like an animal trainer who had just realized the hungry tiger’s cage was open. “So...I’ll be in front.”

“I want you in here with me.” He targeted me with those eyes. “Stop racing away. Just give in to me now, Jasmine. You know I’ll have you eventually and when I do, you’ll hate yourself for taking so long to let me fuck you.”

I mumbled something incoherent and hurried to the bathroom at the front of the plane. His laughter trailed behind me. Heat centered in my sex as his image drowned out my thoughts.

Chapter 13

When the plane flew in we'd passed mountaintop castles and forts that jutted up on top of cliffs. The view had snatched my breath from my body. I cursed myself for not bringing a camera. I'd never been anywhere overseas. When I applied for my passport it was for a road trip with Vivian to Toronto, Canada. She'd read some weed magazine that bragged about the country having the best marijuana in North America, so we planned a trip there on her erratic whim. And I'd made it a point for us to actually do other things in Toronto beside her smoke and me watch, which meant lots of eating and art gallery hopping.

"Wow." I gazed at Jaipur, which was the capital of Rajasthan, India. Bright colorful fabrics decorated the women and girls. Layers of color glowed in the sky—flaming orange, flamingo pink, and soothing sky blue. Vivian would have spent all day trying to paint just this sky. I wished she was here.

I stood on a corner directly outside of our hotel, waiting for Lucy to finish whatever she had to say to the receptionist. As soon as we landed, Lucy shadowed me the whole time. She'd followed me off the plane, helped me check-in, took me to my room, helped me unpack, and now insisted we explore the area together. The only reason I'd allowed her invasion of my privacy was because Chase gave me space each time he'd seen her near me. *And I definitely need to stay away from him.* Besides, Lucy was fun and enjoyable to be around. Whenever I needed/wanted a time-out during work I loafed around in her office and joked with her. I was confident we'd be close friends if I made it through the year.

"Okay. We're all set." Lucy rushed out, wearing huge cheetah print sunglasses. Even though she had dark red hair, for some reason she reminded me of Audrey Hepburn. "Are you ready?"

"Yep."

Hundreds of people with skin browner than mine crowded the streets. It was thrilling and amazing to see such a different group of people and way of life. *I hope I can ride a camel before I leave.* I'd spotted tons of them. The only time I'd ever seen one was in the zoo. It blew my mind to watch them stroll along with people. Even cattle filled the streets. Loads of people rode

bicycles, motorcycles, cars, and buses. Everything seemed so packed as people bumped into me and I edged around others.

And the whole place symbolized an odd make-up of things. On some streets dilapidated buildings, abandoned and carved out with a hollow emptiness, stood on our right. On our left, grand structures that looked like castles existed. Homes appeared to be thousands of years old as if each brick owned its own history. When we were on the plane, I'd noticed that desert spanned across certain areas. In other spots lay grassy landscape amid buildings.

We walked through a people-littered market, brainstorming what we should buy a twenty-one-year-old son of a wealthy Indian family. Apparently, his birthday was the reason Chase had flown us out here. Chase wanted to show public support to the family and further cement their business relationship, because the family invested large sums of money into Stone Industries' business ventures, especially the ones in India.

"I can't believe he waited to the last minute to assign the gift buying."

"Yeah," Lucy said with a strained smile.

"What's wrong?"

"Do you promise not to say anything to Chase?"

"Sure." I furrowed my eyebrows.

"I already bought the present for the birthday boy a month ago. It was delivered here last week." She displayed a weak smile. "Chase wasn't even going to come to the party. He really decided to leave this morning."

I struggled to calm down my anger. "Why are we here then?"

"He said you couldn't run from him in a foreign country."

"Awesome." My voice dripped with sarcasm.

We remained quiet for a while. *So again Chase has managed to wrangle my free time for his own desires. And what is his plan for this trip? Will he be keeping me in India until I say yes, or will we be flying off to Russia or Spain next?*

Lucy glanced at me. "I told him you would be pissed."

"I'm not."

"You look like you're going to kill him."

"Okay. I'm a little pissed."

"Think of it this way. You got a great trip to India."

I nodded. "Good point."

Lucy eased around a woman draped in bright orange and pink fabric. The woman carried a baby on her hip. I wiggled my fingers at him, and the little guy laughed.

I halted on the dusty road. "So what are we supposed to be doing now, if you already bought the present?"

She grinned and took my hand into hers. "We're supposed to be bonding."

I yanked my hand away. "Bonding? Is that what our psychotic lordship requested?"

"No. Actually our ladyship ordered me to bond with you. Dawn thought it was a good idea if I talked to you and answered any questions you might have about our living arrangement."

"And why did she think this was a good idea, again?"

"Chase didn't tell us what happened Friday night, but we figured things didn't work out because you didn't come to Willow Park and Chase was pretty angry." Lucy captured my hand again. "So Dawn and I are trying to do damage control."

This is weirder than I thought.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I told him I wasn't interested." I returned to walking and allowed her to hold my hand. For what reason she needed to hold it, I didn't know.

"You said no?" Lucy giggled really loud. "I'll bet he hated that. We barely ever tell him no. Then what happened?"

"Nothing."

"No way. Something happened. Chase doesn't just hear no and back away."

"Nothing happened that was a big deal," I lied.

"Oh, it had to be major. He stayed up in the batting cage all night hitting baseballs. Boom. Boom. One after another. My window is right over the batting cage so there was no way I got any sleep," Lucy said. "Dawn raced out there later and begged him to come inside. It must have been five in the morning when he finally did. Two hours later he announced that we were going to India."

I gave her a weird look. "You stay with him?"

"We all do. It's a huge property called Willow Park. A big mansion with

five individual apartments in it.”

Willow Park.

I remembered the name. When he had fingered me, he'd whispered that he wanted me under his roof in Willow Park and in his bed. Heat spread across my skin at the thought of that night, and it wasn't from the sun that beat down on us as we walked.

“I want to get those henna designs on my hands.” Lucy's eyes shone with excitement.

It was such an odd sight, being that she'd just confessed they all lived together.

This is too much to handle.

I'd witnessed some of the worst fights on South End that started with a female catching her boyfriend with another chick. Once two women had battled in the middle of the street for hours, scratching skin, yanking weaves, and screaming curses the entire time. And there in Willow Park, Chase lived happily with his three women.

Why does he even need a fourth? He's so freaking spoiled.

“Chase always runs off to the batting cage when he's seriously pissed. When he's full of rage he'll stay in there until the morning.”

She studied my face as we stopped at a street corner. “So? Tell me what made him so mad Friday night.”

“Nothing happened.”

“Was there any penetration?”

“No. Oh my god.” I covered my eyes. “There wasn't any penetration. And by the way, do you just chat about anything with anyone?”

“You're not anyone. You're Chase's possible girlfriend, which would make us sort of like sisters. You know, like members of a special club.”

The sisterhood of stupidity.

“You'll have to get used to my bluntness. Part of our success is staying truthful with each other.” She hooked her arm under mine. “No secrets. So no penetration, right?”

“None.”

“Good. He's not allowed,” she whispered. “He can kiss and touch you, but no licking or sex until you agree to join us.”

I cringed at her words and close proximity to me. “Why can't he have

sex?”

“Dawn’s number one rule. It keeps Chase from sleeping around,” Lucy said. “At least that’s what she thinks, but I happen to know Chases is too happy with this arrangement to break the rules or sleep with other women.”

“But he is sleeping around when he hooks up with Wendy.”

Horns beeped as two men on motorcycles rolled by. Lucy and I jumped out of the way. I seized the opportunity to get out of her hold.

“It’s okay for him to sleep with Wendy.” Lucy bumped my hip with hers. “So do you have any questions? You must have a bunch of them.”

“None. It doesn’t matter because—”

“Oh, quit being stubborn and open your mind. You’re driving Chase crazy and when he’s wacky we all have to deal with it. I would like things to return to normal.”

We entered a bigger market area. Tiny colorful corridors boasted piles of fresh fruit and vegetables plumper than I’d ever seen in an American supermarket. Tasty samples of exotic treats stuffed barrels, lounged on tables, and taunted me with their spicy scents.

Sacks rested on women’s heads as they headed off with determined but weary expressions. Vendors lined the streets. Scales propped on tables that held every bright shade of seasonings. I inhaled their fragrances, so many I couldn’t pinpoint one. Other sellers displayed pots, shelves, bowls, and additional items one would find in a household. Bags, shirts, and garments hung from wires and hovered over the market square.

People traveled in all directions. I found myself jumping out of the way as everyone journeyed to their destination. The stench of cattle became all-consuming the closer I came near them so I ventured off to the direction of the food. Lucy followed me. Music played all over—some sort of drumming under a hypnotic woman’s voice. I had no idea where it was blasting from, but I was exhilarated by it.

And the food, oh god, it was all over the place. Bowls of vegetables, pots of soups, containers of steaming rice. On one side, a man flipped circular shapes of meat over burning charcoals. On another side, a woman stirred some red and thick liquid concoction. My stomach growled in anticipation.

“I’m never leaving this place. I’m about to try everything that looks different. Starting . . . over . . . there.” I pointed to a woman mixing orange pieces of bread in a large pot of oil.

“It smells good,” Lucy admitted and took off her sunglasses.

“You can pretty much fry anything and it will taste good.” I headed over there. “When I was nine this bum sold my brother Troy and I fried squirrel legs for a dollar. They were wrapped in this dirty foil and smelled god-awful. My brother dared me to eat it.”

“Did you?”

“Oh goodness, of course. I ate anything back then on a dare--dirt, leaves, cat food. I can’t think of any dare I walked away from, even pigeon poop.”

Lucy’s eyes popped open. “This is possibly the most nauseating confession anyone has ever told me. So what did the squirrel leg taste like?”

“It tasted like chicken.”

“That’s horrific and yet interesting.”

“Do you ever wonder how we taste? I’ll bet an alien would come down and say we taste like chicken.”

She laughed. “I think that is probably a good time to change the subject. So why are you saying no to us?”

“You mean besides the obvious reasons?” I shook my head. “Like the fact that you can’t date other men, but he can date other women. I mean, that is seriously barbaric, sexist, and asshole.”

“I don’t think asshole is a word,” she pointed out.

“Well, it should be.” I shrugged. “There is also no future in this situation with Chase. I like to be in relationships that are heading towards something more. You know what I mean, right? Marriage, children, and the two of us old and rocking in a chair on the porch of our retirement home. There’s no way I’m raising children in a situation where I have scheduled evenings with their father. And what would our kids call you all anyway, aunts or harem mates?”

“Wow. You’ve really taken some time to think about this.”

It was all I’d thought about for the plane ride once I’d fled from his lounge. The very idea of me joining his arrangement was crazy. No matter how I looked at it, I just kept returning to how out-of-the-box it seemed to my ideas of love and commitment. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to stray away from my views just to spend time with one desirable man.

“Okay. I see your point on the kids argument,” Lucy said, “but you’re only twenty-two.”

“How old are you?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Twenty-eight.”

“You don’t want kids or marriage?”

“No way.” She waved her hands. “Never happening for me.”

“Why not?”

She placed her glasses back on her eyes and ignored my question. “So let’s grab these orange things.”

We waited in line beside a few people. I concentrated on the smells and guessed there could have been some honey in the sticky stuff the woman poured onto the dough once she fried it. Anticipation sped up my pulse.

“You do have several years before you would actually have kids, right?” Lucy turned to me.

I considered the question for a few minutes. “Probably. I wouldn’t want kids until I’m thirty. Hopefully I’m better at taking care of myself by then. I’ve heard the thirties are when you truly know yourself.”

“Goodie. I can’t wait for that to happen for me.” Lucy dove her hand into her purse. “Since you’re not about to rush off and have a litter of little Jasmynes, and Chase is pretty desperate right now, maybe you can compromise with him.”

“I doubt he’s desperate.” I replayed what he’d said on the plane, how being with him would happen eventually. *What an overconfident caveman.*

“He’s definitely desperate.” She held her free hand out. “Let’s not overlook that he flew us all to India just so he could talk you into being with him.”

I paused and pondered that fact. “Well, he’ll get the picture soon.”

“I’ve known him since I was five. He never gives up. Right now he’s playing fair, soon he’ll go overboard.”

“A trip to India isn’t overboard?”

“No. This is normal Chase.” She shook her head. “Just try to compromise with him. Think of all the things you want and don’t want in this situation and then sit him down to discuss it. He’ll work with you because he wants you that much.”

I rubbed my eyes. “I don’t know.”

“If he was a single guy would you have dated him?”

“Yeah,” I said as we advanced in the line.

“If you were both just dating he would probably be dating other women

anyway, right? Why not just try it out for a few weeks, and if you don't like it, then walk away."

"I'm not sure I could do that." I blew out a loud breath. It would be easy to spend time and date him. *But what if I fall for him?* It would be so hard to walk away. *This is such a hard decision.* Part of me thought the arrangement was abrasive. The other part enjoyed the fun moments I had with him and was interested in experiencing what it meant to date a gorgeous man of his prestige and wealth.

"Jasmine, just give him a few weeks."

"Well, maybe I'll do a trial period if he meets me with my own rules." And there would be a bunch of them. I had to try my best to guarantee I wasn't putting myself in a situation that would destroy me physically, emotionally, or even mentally. The last thing I needed was a stressful relationship that shoved me into depression.

"Yes!" Lucy did a fist pump into the air. "Oh yeah! We're sisters now. And did you see the dresses he bought for us to wear tonight? They're so gorgeous."

"No." I turned so she couldn't see me and rolled my eyes. *First rule: I date who I want. Second: no more dressing me.*

"So do you have any questions for me?" Lucy asked.

"What is your relationship with him? He told me you don't have sex."

"Nope. I'm not a sexual person. At least, not like what people conceive a sexual person to be."

"Huh?"

"I'm complicated. Basically I don't have sex at all. So what Chase and I have is mainly companionship. We're never intimate or touchy in any way." She tossed her red hair over her shoulder.

I cleared my throat. "Why aren't you intimate?"

She paused for a few seconds and looked away. "Some things happened to me when I was young. Not to darken our great day, but I'll just say that Chase saved me when we were young. I don't feel safe around any man but him."

"He saved you?"

"He stopped some bad things from continuing." A weak smile appeared on her face. "I don't have sex. I can't stand to be touched in an intimate way. When it's Chase's and my date night, we just do fun stuff."

My interest in the situation was so piqued I barely realized we had moved up in a line. “So, give me an example of what you do.”

“He’s a part of my chick-lit reading group. He comes to the meetings and discusses the required reading for the month.”

“Hilarious.” I covered my mouth with my hand. “Please snap a picture next time you do a meeting.”

“It’s rather adorable to watch him with his legs crossed on the carpet, eating little pink cookies and sipping raspberry tea as he breaks down the heroine’s motivations in a story.” She leaned my way and whispered, “But between you and me, I think he pays someone to read the books and type up answers to the discussion questions. Every time our group leader asks him a question he always just looks down at his sheet of answers and reads it out word for word.”

“Oh my god.” I grinned.

“But it’s the thought that counts, right?”

“Definitely.”

We made it to the head of the line. Lucy spoke in a foreign language to the woman. I was pretty impressed. The woman stopped stirring the fry oil, cupped two of the orange balls with a copper spoon, and dropped them in a paper bag. A sweet aroma drifted from the treats. It took all of my restraint not to wrench it away from Lucy’s hands. After Lucy paid her, we walked off.

“She said to wait a minute because they’re hot,” Lucy said.

“Did she say what they were?”

“Doughnuts.”

I sucked my teeth. “Cool, but I wanted to try something different.” I scanned the market, clasped her wrist, and dragged her to a new stand. “We need to find something freaky looking. Something with crazy eyes or a wild color.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” I scanned the area.

Lucy chuckled. “No wonder Chase is crazy about you. It’ll be a breath of fresh air having you at Willow Park. It gets real boring sometimes.”

“That’s shocking, but I must let you know something. Even if I do try this, I won’t be living with you.”

“Dawn won’t allow that.”

Then Dawn won’t like me. I’m not living in Chase’s harem dormitories. I could never invite Vivian, Benny, or Troy to my place. It would be so embarrassing.

“At least think about it,” Lucy offered.

“Sure,” I said. “On another topic, tell me about Dawn and Wendy.”

“Dawn is a stickler for rules. She goes insane about the scheduled times for our dates and she just created a sort of fine system for when we break any of the rules.”

“Fines?”

“Yeah. She takes money from the bank accounts Chase has for us and gives us a budget on our living expenses. Dawn’s an accountant for Baker & Smith. Her dad’s firm.” Lucy pulled out a doughnut and gave it to me. “She gets delirious with numbers, always counting the hours we’ve been on dates. Calculating how much we spend on the dates or when we’re by ourselves. Every detail is scrutinized. She logs everything.”

The warm, fried dough warmed my fingers. I tossed it in my mouth. Sweet honeyed bread captured my taste buds and heated my tongue. Its sugary perfume lingered in the air well after it slid down my throat.

“Perfect.” I licked my fingers. “The outside has a nice crisp, but the inside is warm and mushy. Very good blend of textures and packed with flavor. It goes on my top ten list for doughnuts.”

She smiled at me. “Are you a foodie?”

“Yeah.” I rubbed my hands together and searched the rest of the market with my eyes. “So Dawn is a sadistic rule maker. What else?”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. Dawn is sweet, but only if you follow the rules.”

“And Wendy?”

“Not much trouble when she’s sober, but toxic when she’s drunk.” Lucy popped her doughnut in her mouth. “I’ve gone to Chase and Dawn and told them I think she’s an alcoholic. We’ll probably do an intervention with her if things continue.”

“You’re being real truthful.”

“Dawn wanted you to be prepared and I really want you to join. Dawn and Wendy pretty much always hang out together,” Lucy said. “Sometimes they invite me to do things with them, but I always feel like a third wheel. They’re more like lovers than friends.”

“Awww.” I nodded my head.

This whole situation is mind-blowing!

“Well, we can hang together if I do this arrangement and if I don’t then we’re kicking it.” I spotted some dead animals hanging from a wire where a guy was throwing things onto a grill. “So is there any other stuff I should know?”

“We have monthly get-togethers, just us girls, where we eat, discuss any problems with Chase, and complain about things that didn’t work last month.”

“Is attendance required?” I sucked my teeth.

“Absolutely.”

I won’t be doing that either. I don’t want to join the Chase Hump Club. I only want to get to know him.

“Do we have to take notes and hug each other?” I joked. “And at the end of the meeting is there a club song and a statue of Chase where we get on our knees and kiss its toes?”

“Whoa.” She doubled over and laughed. “You and Dawn are really going to go at it. I’m pretty excited for you to meet.”

“Clearly Chase didn’t consider our personalities when he decided to go after me.”

“Nope. Oh yeah. We also have to go to an assigned therapist weekly and Dawn’s gynecologist monthly for checkups.”

“Not happening. I have my own therapist and gynecologist, thank you very much. Is it not enough that we’ll all be living together? If I do plan to live in Willow Park.”

Lucy shook her head.

“Hey, there’s some green stew thing over there. Let’s check that out.” I pointed that way.

“Okay,” Lucy said, but the expression on her face seemed concerned, as if we were heading toward poisonous slush. “Jasmine, the therapist and gynecologist are important. I don’t think you should fight that.”

“Well, I get the gynecologist, but why a therapist?”

Lucy remained silent and began to bite her thumbnail.

“What?” I nudged her with my hip.

“The therapist appointments started once Vickie committed suicide.”

I stopped walking. “Who’s Vickie?”

“She’s the first woman to hold your position.”

My position? They’re insane.

People marched by us. Someone chattered. Others carried kids or bags.

“Why did she kill herself?” I asked.

“I don’t want to talk about any of the three.”

“The three?” I quirked my eyebrows.

“That’s what we say instead of saying their names.” She headed off.

I hurried to get back to her side. “I would think knowing about them is significant to me being with you all. I mean, why did they—”

“No, Jasmine.” She combed her hair with her fingers. “The threes’ situation won’t happen to you.”

“But how do I know that?” I crossed my arms over my chest.

Lucy released an exasperated breath. “Vickie was bipolar and suicidal. We had no idea beforehand. Vickie never took the arrangement well.”

I don’t imagine so. How would I handle it?

I hugged myself. “And the other two?”

“I told you how they died.”

“But—”

“Please, Jasmine.” Lucy gazed at her feet. “Wendy and Dawn are close and always have been. When there is a new girl, I end up being her friend. We almost always become confidants. And when they die, they take a part of me with them.”

“I’m sorry.” I grabbed her hand and held it.

“Those three deaths seem weird, but trust me. It’s not some big murder conspiracy.” She looked at me. “Vickie had mental problems. A normal person, even a mentally stable person, would be stressed out if they were in this arrangement. It’s why we made you go through a mental evaluation.”

“True.” I wondered if they knew about my anxiety problems.

“Evelyn really drowned in the pool on our estates. She wasn’t electrocuted. What no one said in the papers is that she did lots of cocaine and other drugs.”

“So she really overdosed in the pool?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Yes, Yancy was the final girlfriend. She owed lots of money to some very vile people. She’d latched onto our arrangement for the money side.”

“How much money do we get?” I scrunched my face up in confusion.

“Way more than we ever need. Chase gives us an ample allowance, plus our own car, credit cards, an apartment in Willow Park, as well as anything else we want. Yancy was a gold digger. When it wasn’t her date night with Chase, she flew to Vegas and gambled. We think she owed people money and they killed her when Dawn cut off her allowance.”

“Why did Dawn cut her off in the first place?”

“I don’t know or care. Yancy was so nasty and mean to everyone. Even though we were close, she was always bullying me.” Lucy lifted her sunglasses and wiped a tear from her right eye. “Even Chase was tired of Yancy. He had planned on holding a secret meeting with Dawn, Wendy, and me to get our approval to end the relationship with her, but that evening someone attacked her.”

Too much of a coincidence.

A sliver of fear crept up my spine. My mind began to do all the things I’d been training it in the past years not to do—creating scenarios of my oncoming violent death and wondering about strangers lurking around me with knives ready to attack.

Breathe. Relax. Stay in the moment.

“Due to Evelyn and Yancy, you had to take the drug tests and credit check.” She looked at me. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m just a little freaked out by this news.”

“Well, don’t be. Due to the attack we all have bodyguards. You’ve had two guards since the week after Chase spotted you at Equinox’s Garden Party. I hired them.” She pointed to a large white guy in a red shirt across the street. He resembled a massive bodybuilder among all of the people walking by. I had no idea how I never noticed him before.

“I’ve never seen that guy.”

“They’re easier to spot in foreign countries.” She scanned the area. “I don’t see your other one, but he’s a big black guy. Really hot. Chase was actually worried about assigning him to you, so the guard is ordered to keep a good amount of distance away from you. But, most importantly, these deaths were all two years ago. Are you sure you’re okay?”

I inhaled and exhaled. “Yes. Let’s stop talking about this for a while and eat.”

“Sounds good to me.” She gave me a quick hug and walked off to where

the green stew was.

What am I getting myself involved with?

Chapter 14

Instead of the glamorous dress Chase picked out for me, I wore a gold pantsuit I'd brought with me. The pants' satin material clung to my hips and thighs. The top was similar to a corset, except instead of wrapping around my back it had straps that tied around my neck. I still looked sexy but on my own terms, not Chase's idea of beauty. And he needed to know that any further relationship with me would involve him respecting my desires and need for independence.

Four index cards rested in my hands. On them were well thought-out rules and limits that I would need respected before I even considered his arrangement. *And I can't believe I'm even considering it.*

A cool breeze blew through the curls that hung down from my updo. Chase has assigned a hairstylist for Lucy and I, as well as a makeup artist. He'd left letters in both of our rooms, requesting that we wait in front of his door so he could escort us to the party. In another symbol of asserting my independence, I went to the party without him, greeted the birthday boy, and now stood by the lavishly catered hor d'oeuvres table, sampling succulent treats.

He wants me outside his door panting happily like a little puppy waiting for her master to give her a walk. He can come to me when he wants to talk.

My thoughts remained confident, but my fingers shook. Uneasiness fluttered in my stomach. *Am I really going to try this? Is my logic even designed for this?* I'd assumed a woman who agreed to sharing her man was either a doormat, diva, or so confident in her awesomeness she never experienced insecurity or trust issues. And then it was just the ickiness of realizing your man kissed and had sex with other women, females I would see each day in some freaking skank dormitory.

Stop thinking about this. I don't even know what he's going to say about my limits. Focus on the party.

The family hosted their son's birthday party in a garden full of blooming flowers. Strings of tiny white lights dangled from trees and arched over the entire space like a glowing ceiling. The aroma of food mingled with exotic perfumes. People dressed in glimmering fabric. They danced, chatted with others, and overall enjoyed the party around me. Music soared in the air,

presenting an upbeat sound I'd never heard before. Earlier, a group of dancers had performed a whole Bollywood scene on the stage in front of us. Neither Chase nor Lucy had appeared yet. I'd forgotten to leave a note. Hopefully, they would leave without me.

I scanned the crowd and spotted Chase standing more than ten feet in front of me. He watched me with hungry eyes. I gulped in much needed air. Our eyes met. His face contained no expression, no clue of whether he was annoyed or intrigued by me disregarding his orders. People walked right in front of him, destroying my view. Once they strolled by, he'd disappeared.

Of course. Now he knows where I am and I feel like some defenseless, hunted animal while he's somewhere out there stalking me.

Sighing, I lifted my wine glass to my lips and feigned a bored look, but my eyes frantically searched everywhere—the crowded dance floor, the stage where the birthday boy's party lounged, and even the exiting area of the garden.

Chase placed his hand on my lower back. “On nights when I'm alone in my bed with just my thoughts, I'll be thinking of how you look tonight.”

I was glad I didn't jump, but my hands began to shake.

“You look divine. I'm glad you didn't wear the dress I picked.”

“Thank you.” The little confidence I had within me evaporated like smoke and I couldn't figure out why it left or how I was going to get it back.

“Lucy told me you talked, and you wanted to come to some sort of compromise on the arrangement,” he whispered in my ear. His breath tickled and delivered a tiny shiver across my skin.

I stifled a moan. “Yes. I'm willing to try this situation if we can come to an agreement with my own rules and limits.”

“So a negotiation?” His lips curled at the edges. “Now we're talking. This is something I can understand. Let's go somewhere we can hear each other better.”

With his hand still on my back, he guided me past several rose bushes. The music's volume decreased with each step until only the sounds of our footsteps on the stone walkway lingered. A gray wall with carved writing appeared next to a bench. A sparkling stream lay in front. The sky and its glittering stars reflected on the watery surface. The roses' perfume wrapped around me as I lowered onto the bench.

“Okay. Let's start.” Chase sat down beside me. He attempted to glance at

my index cards.

“Stop that.” I pressed the cards to my breasts. “Okay. The first thing is that if I’m joining this arrangement, I will date other men.”

“No.” He narrowed his eyes. “Next!”

I rose. “I won’t budge on that, Chase. It’s the worst and dumbest part of your harem.”

“It’s not a harem.” He touched my arm. “Please sit down.”

I returned to my position on the bench. “I *will* date other men.”

“No sex with them,” he said through clenched teeth.

“No.” I smiled. “Next?”

We stared each other down for several seconds. Neither of us seemed like we were willing to budge. Heels clicked on the stone path behind me.

“How is everything going?” Lucy’s cheerful voice sounded.

“He’s being an asshole.” I glared at Chase.

“She’s trying to get innocent men killed,” Chase countered.

“So it sounds like you both are being stubborn.” Lucy patted Chase’s shoulder. He scooted over and allowed her to sit between us.

“What’s the problem?” she asked.

“I want to date other men!” I crossed my arms over my chest. “And I won’t even consider this orgy fest without that.”

“You heard her.” Lucy turned to Chase. “If she’s going to try this then you can try her dating men for a few weeks.”

“And at the end of these weeks if I still don’t like it?” Chase leaned forward so I could see him.

“Then I walk away,” I replied.

He directed his gaze to the stream in front of us. “Can I approve of the men before you date them?”

“No. I doubt you’ll ever approve of anyone else.” I tapped my feet.

He groaned. I sucked my teeth. Lucy laughed.

“How about this?” Lucy clapped her hands together. “Chase approves the guys you have sex with. You have to realize that Stone Industries has many enemies. It’s protocol that anyone close to Chase’s friends or family gets investigated.”

“Will the guys know they’re being investigated?” I asked.

“They don’t have to.” Lucy shook her head.

“Guys? How many are we talking?” Chase’s voice held a dangerous edge.

“I’ve only slept with two men in my life.” I raised two fingers. “It’s not like I have a line of men waiting to spread my legs to.”

“You do. You just don’t realize it,” he muttered.

“Let’s stay focused.” Lucy clapped again. “So far the compromise is that Jasmine dates other men.”

“I have to be a part of any investigation of the men and approval,” I added. “Plus, Chase doesn’t get the final say on who I do or don’t have sex with.”

“They’ll need to be checked before any physical stuff happens,” Lucy said.

“Including kissing,” Chase added.

“Just sex, Chase.” Lucy grinned. “Dawn will want the guys to be tested for STD’s and—”

“That’s fine, but I’m using a condom regardless,” I interrupted. “Which brings me to my other rule. If Chase and I have sex it’s always going to be with a condom.”

“I don’t like them.” He stood up and started to pace.

“I told you I had to get an abortion once. It’s something I feel horrible about and I vowed to always wear a condom until I was having sex with my husband.”

Chase dove his hands into his pockets. “Can we revisit the condom discussion later? Perhaps find other alternatives.”

“Maybe. But it will have to be before we have sex. And I doubt I’ll use any other contraceptive.”

“Fine,” he mumbled. “Anything else?”

“I won’t be living at Willow Park and I’ll only try this for two weeks.”

“How are you meeting me halfway? You’ve only spouted out demands.” He tilted his head to the side. “What is up for negotiation?”

“Nothing.” I bit my bottom lip.

“Jasmine, that’s not fair,” Lucy said. “What can you renegotiate?”

I considered the question. All of the limits were pretty concrete for me. Chase walked over and knelt in front of me. “I want a three month trial period where you won’t run off like a crazy person.”

I sighed. “I can do three months.”

“You have a problem, you do everything to let me fix it.” He targeted me with his eyes.

“Okay.”

“You date a guy for two months at least before having sex with him.” Chase’s hands formed into a fist.

“Okay.” Two months wasn’t a big deal. I tended to wait that long to do anything intimate anyway. At least, that was before Chase and his fingers.

“Stay in Willow Park.” He held up his hands before I could say anything. “My estate is a huge mansion converted into five two-bedroom apartments. You’ll have your own living room, kitchen, bathroom, master bedroom, and guest suite. There’s a burglary alarm on your apartment with a locked entrance where only you will have the key and the security code.”

“We all live in our own apartments,” Lucy added. “They’re gorgeous, too.”

“Even I have my own apartment,” Chase said.

“I don’t know. I have my own place.” My teeth caught my bottom lip.

“Give me one month. I’ll pay your rent at the place you’re at now,” Chase said.

“A month is too much. One week.”

“Three weeks,” Chase countered.

“Only if it’s just one week of each of the three months. I’ll need a break. And seriously, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to live with everybody.”

Chase knitted his fingers together. “Okay. A week of each month and then we revisit this at the end of three months.”

“How far is Willow Park from the office?” I tucked curls behind my ear.

“It doesn’t matter. You’ll ride in my limo with Lucy and me.”

“No. That’s too much.” I shook my head. “I’ll already be living with you all. I’ll need a break some of the time, so I will drive myself.”

I raised one finger. “And no more dressing me. The hair weave goes, by the way. I’ll have that evil Fantino do something else.”

“Fine. I’ll take you anyway I can. I don’t care. The hair styling is just something I like to do for my women.”

I cringed at *my women*. In that moment, Chase snatched my cards from my hand, browsed through them, and laughed.

“I don’t have cameras and microphones in your apartment’s ceiling. So there’s no need to discuss any of these.”

“Then how did you know Troy was in my apartment the night you sent a

tuxedo for him?”

“I have security monitoring your house. They scanned his face and checked it within their records system. His uniform size is logged in the system, by the way.”

“Then end the monitoring.”

“No.” He pierced me with his eyes. “You mean too much to me. And since you insist on being out in Knightson, thirty long minutes away, I’ll be adding more security.”

He switched to another card. His lips widened to a huge smile. “Why can’t I give you an allowance?”

“I’d rather not be financially dependent on you. I’ll also be sending out my resume for other companies. I don’t like that you’re signing my checks.”

“Will you work for me until you find another job?”

I nodded.

“I agree to all of your rules on here. They’re minor limits to what I desire.” He flipped through the rest of the cards and then handed them back to me. “Okay. You’ll give me three months, part of it with you under my roof. No sex with anybody else until they’re investigated and no running off through back doors because you’re freaked out about something.”

I nodded. He’d agreed with more than I figured he would, but still my hands shook and my heartbeat increased.

“So are you officially my girlfriend?” He hit me with a look that drowned in fear and intensity. No confidence stirred in his eyes as he kneeled in front of me, waiting for my response.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“You’ll tell me if anything is wrong, right?” He stood up as I nodded. “Then let’s celebrate.”

He headed off and left me there, shocked.

“He took my limits well in the end.” I rose with Lucy.

She leaned my way and whispered, “He anticipated everything except the condoms and financial independence.”

I snapped my face to hers. “What?”

“He actually thought he could only get you to agree for a month and that you would never live with us.”

“He cheated.” I set my hands on my hips.

“Nope.” She wagged her finger. “Those were just lucky guesses. You know he negotiates for a living.”

“You still helped him.”

“Nope. I refereed.” She put her arm on my shoulder. We followed him as he headed for the party, snapping his freaking spoiled fingers. “You do know he’ll figure out a way to undermine any date you have?”

“Figures,” I muttered.

“And there’s no way he’ll let you work somewhere else. No one will hire you if he spreads the word to stay away from you.”

Chapter 15

My feet ached from dancing all night in six inch heelless shoes. Chase slung me over his shoulder as I sang the lyrics to Techno Heads' *Robotic Machine*.

"Trapped in a robot flying to the sky, baby!" I sang. "Giggling like a child and crying like a baby!"

Three dry Bombay Blue Sapphire martinis filled my stomach. The main reason I'd drank them was for the three gorgonzola-stuffed olives that came with each drink. My sight blurred. Dryness corroded my mouth and throat.

"She's drunk." Lucy laughed.

"Can you be any more obvious?" Chase laughed with her. "Baby, can you sing lower?"

"Me?" I asked as my arms swung back and forth on his back.

"Yes. You." He patted my behind as he carried me to the elevator.

"Well, you have so many babies. I didn't know which one of us you were referring to."

His shoulder stiffened. Lucy placed one finger on her lips to shush me.

"Sorry," I whispered back and then sang, "Hit the galaxy I'm so high, but I'm looking down to you."

Lucy covered her mouth and giggled into her hands.

"Well, at least you can carry a tune." Chase carried me off the elevator. "But you can't hold hard liquor."

"I can hold a lot, sexy man." I slapped his butt. "Now let me down. I can also walk."

He set me on my bare feet. Lucy handed me my shoes.

"Goodnight, my fellow sister in insanity, and goodnight, my love." I did a dramatic bow and tripped. Chase caught me before I stumbled forward.

"We're not saying goodbye. I want you in my room tonight." Lust gleamed across his eyes as his gaze traveled down my body.

"We can't have everything we want," I said. "Besides, I peeped at the hotel menu—"

"Yes she did." Lucy shook her head. "She must have sat there and read the menu for at least thirty minutes like it was a book."

“What did you see on the menu that you liked?” Chase smiled.

“Everything, but what really caught my eye was the lamb burger with goat cheese and truffle fries.” I shrugged. “It’s not an original dish, but when I did an online search many people said this hotel provided the best lamb burger in India.”

“That sounds good,” Chase said.

I stretched my arms and yawned. “My plan is to shed all of my clothes, eat, and pass out in my own hotel room.”

I walked around him.

“Then we’ll do that together.”

“Chase,” Lucy said. “That’s not really a part of the rules. None of us should be in the room together.”

“What?” I said.

“On everyone’s day we spend time together until ten at night and then we are supposed to go our separate ways to different bedrooms,” Lucy explained.

I giggled. “Alrighty. So goodnight, my lovely weird ones.”

He captured my waist and then glanced at Lucy. “Let’s break the rules this one time. We can all hang out in my room together.”

“But Chase ...” Lucy shook her head.

“Please, Lucy.” His eyes pleaded with her.

“Sure. This should be fun.” She shook her head. “But if Dawn finds out, you’d better take all of the blame.”

“I will, but since it’s your day she may not even ask,” Chase said.

I raised my eyebrows. “It’s Lucy’s day?”

“Yes. I kind of ruined it by taking you all to India.” He opened the door to his room.

My feet sank into plush carpet. The TV blared. The air conditioner hummed.

“You’re wasting energy, Chase. You should turn off the TV if you’re not watching it.” I collapsed on his king size bed and checked out his room. I’d thought mine was big. Chase’s room was three times my size, like he needed to run laps in it or have space to park his pet elephant. His suite had been designed with simplicity and taste in mind. Lush tan carpet with chocolate brown boxes lay under my feet. The soft fabric of the bed sheets smoothed against my skin. Polished gold lamps stuck on stark white walls and

illuminated the room in a tantalizing glow.

Lucy left through another door. "I'll order for us."

The bed shifted as Chase lay next to me.

I rolled over and gazed into those seducing eyes. "Hello, my green-eyed lover."

"Hello, my drunk new gorgeous girlfriend." He pressed his lips onto mine. His tongue explored my mouth. I moaned and grabbed his head. My fingers rustled his perfect waves. The bitter taste of liquor clung to his tongue.

"Are you okay with Lucy spending time with us?" He kissed my cheek.

"I'm actually interrupting your date."

"Don't worry about it."

"I can worry about it if I choose to." I stuck my tongue out. He trapped it with his mouth, inciting a fury of lust to swirl in my chest.

He released it and nibbled my bottom lip. "I love it when you go against my orders."

"Good. I'll be doing that more often."

My movements seemed delayed, but still I ran my hands down his hard chest and traced rugged layers of muscle on his waist. My sex clenched.

Damn. He's perfect. He has to have a small one. There is no way he's all perfect.

I giggled.

"What?" He lifted himself up and began untying the straps around my neck.

Air caressed the tips of my nipples once he yanked my shirt down and undid the bra's snap at the center of my chest.

"I'm thinking you have a small penis since you're so perfect." I grinned.

Heat flickered over his eyes. "Check and tell me."

He spread my legs apart and got between them, pressing his hardness into me. "Remember what I told you that night in Pyramid, that I'll ruin you for any other man?"

"Yes." Desire rose in me. "Show me, then." I lifted my hips and rubbed against his length.

"Tell me what you want." He buried his face between my breasts. His lips brushed against each peak. They hardened in response. My whole body heated.

A chair squeaked behind us. I turned toward the noise. Lucy lounged in a chair. A pen lay in her hand, an open book rested on her lap. She scribbled something and winked at me.

I cleared my throat, feeling exposed. Chase licked my right nipple. I nudged him. "Lucy is here."

"Yes. I know." He returned to the nipple. "Lucy, did the order go through okay?"

"Yes." Lucy's eyes centered on my bare chest. "Your nipples are huge, but pretty cute. The areolas are bigger than I thought they would be, too."

I shoved him away. "Let me up."

"Why?" He groaned.

I motioned to Lucy.

"I'm not bothered by this." She waved her hand. "I love to watch."

"We'd better be talking about TV or a movie, because no one is watching me have sex." I glanced at Lucy. "No offense, but that's just a bit too much."

"None taken," she said.

"Get up." I pinched Chase's stomach so he would get the picture.

"You don't feel comfortable with her looking at us?" Chase moved away.

"No." I sat up and covered my breasts.

"I won't touch you, but I will touch myself," Lucy assured me. "I don't like being intimate with anyone I don't know well."

Well, I find watching to be intimate, too.

"I promise I won't touch you," she said again.

"I know you won't." I rubbed my eyes, as if that could clear my head.

"Maybe we could try it a little." Chase attempted to move my arm.

"No." I smacked his hand away.

"We could order some wine with the food." He caressed my thigh. This time his fingers caused disgust to rise in my core.

Are you kidding me?

"I don't want wine." I scooted to the edge of his bed. "In fact, I'll eat in my room."

"Relax, Jasmine." He clasped his hand on my arm.

I sighed. "Let me go."

"Okay. Both of you calm down." Lucy got up and tossed her book and pen on the bed next to me. It was a crossword puzzle book.

Who the hell does a puzzle while they watch people have sex?

“Stay in here and eat with us.” She sat down next to me, closer than I wanted. I gritted my teeth. *Isn't our situation weird enough?*

“We're having a good time,” Chase said. “Let's just eat and relax. Nothing has to happen.”

“Nothing will happen.” I stood up.

Someone knocked at the door. I jumped up.

“You're not calming down, Jasmine.” Lucy chuckled and rushed to the door.

Chase's eyes traveled down my body, but it didn't turn me on. Instead, I felt naked, weak, and alone. If he didn't back off, I would have to punch him.

“Come back on the bed.” He patted the area where I'd been sitting.

“Hell no.” I hugged myself and headed away from him.

A savory aroma drifted my way. Lucy showed two men holding trays where to put our food. Red and white turbans propped on their heads. Matching jackets and pantsuits finished their outfits. I gazed at the open door, wanting to escape. Chase released an annoyed breath, rose, and went to the table where the tray was set. I followed. Dread coursed through my veins.

Why do I feel so bad, like I've done something wrong?

A ball of regret dropped to the pit of my stomach. I should've never agreed to this craziness. *This isn't my scene.*

“Come on. Sit down.” Lucy smiled and motioned for me to join them.

Chase snatched up the remote control and unmuted the TV. A sportscaster yelled out scores and imitated an animated response to a bad call. I ate my burger, even though I was no longer hungry. I needed to sober up. The food traveled down my throat. I noticed no taste nor reveled in the flavor or texture. I missed Vivian and Troy. I needed some familiarity around me, something that made me feel safe. It had been a long time since I'd sat in a room with two people and felt utterly alone.

This life isn't for me.

Chapter 16

After the lamb burgers, I passed out in my chair right at the table. When I woke up, I was lying in bed between two people. It took me several minutes to realize where I was. Someone's arm was hooked around my waist in a possessive manner. The owner of that arm's hard body was pressed into my back and behind. The scent of new leather mixed with vanilla drifted from their skin. *This must be Chase spooning me.* His chest vibrated against my back each time he snored. Lucy lay asleep in front of me. She'd placed a pillow between us. I wondered if she did that for herself or me.

Who moved me? And when did they do that?

Careful not to wake them both, I slowly, inch by inch, slid his arm off me. I took even more time to climb out from under the covers. Neither of them stirred as I crawled out of bed. The air conditioner's chilly breeze froze my bare skin. Horror hit me.

I'm only wearing panties. Who undressed me?

I didn't like that I was naked. It made me wonder if they did something to me while I was unconscious. *Why would I even think something like that? Because they're both so weird. That's why.* Chase didn't respect my desire to not have sex in front of Lucy. Instead of understanding, he offered to get me drunk some more. And when that didn't work out, he pouted like a baby, grabbed the remote control, and ignored me while he stared at the sports channel. I'd drowned in confusion and insecurity. *And I'd only been his freaking girlfriend for three hours. Not a good sign.* This was just too much. I could have considered working in this arrangement with him, but only if it was based on respect and consideration for my feelings.

Am I being irrational?

I'd never dealt with weird situations like this before. With only two boyfriends my relationship experience verged on juvenile. My first boyfriend was a library nerd who'd broken up with me because his G.P.A. had dropped .2 points below what he needed for a scholarship requirement. In our year of dating, we had sex ten times. He was a nice guy, but he didn't have Chase's sexy looks, passion, and excitement. A thrilling evening for him was watching the SyFy channel with spicy buttered popcorn. I'd enjoyed those evenings, but once we broke up, it took me barely a week to forget about

him.

In fact, the popcorn is the best thing I took from that relationship.

My second boyfriend had been a popular jock. I was shocked that he even asked me out. Granted, he was drunk at a fraternity party when he fell on one knee and slurred his request, but I'd still been overjoyed that finally a cool guy had spotted me out of the crowd of hot women. Our two-year relationship embarrassed me anytime I replayed it in my head. He was a user. I did his homework, washed his clothes, cleaned his frat room, and worked his shifts in the cafeteria whenever he wanted to go out and party. It was like he'd sniffed out my lack of confidence and soared down to attack. Vivian hated him so much that the two of us could never do anything together. I made the mistake of introducing him to Benny one Thanksgiving. During dessert, my idiot ex ordered me to stop eating pie because he didn't want to date a fatty. Benny punched him in the eye.

To say things went downhill from there was an understatement. He demanded I stay away from Benny and Vivian, but that was the one thing I stood my ground on. We argued all the time after that. My old best friend, Yvonne, told me I was treating my boyfriend unfairly and that I should be happy to be with him because he was a major catch. On the other side of the opinion spectrum was Vivian. She thought his demands proved he was a controlling and emotionally abusive loser. She also confessed that she daydreamed about sticking his penis into a meat grinder. Regardless, when I'd gone by his room one afternoon to check on him since he'd missed class, I wasn't that shocked or stunned when I saw him receiving a blow job. What destroyed me was that it was my best friend Yvonne giving it.

Two years of my life and love down the drain.

I gazed at Chase and Lucy asleep on the bed. And here I stood in a situation that didn't even look good on paper. My gut yelled run, and I'd found out through the years that my instincts tended to be right. I'd made a huge mistake by stepping into Chase's insane world. *It's just not me.* I bet there were loads of people out in the world who wouldn't have minded Lucy watching them have sex, but I wasn't one of them. Chase had simply chosen the wrong girl.

No. I'm not mentally or emotionally designed for this.

I tiptoed across the room. The sunlight peeked between the curtains. *Where are my clothes?* Darkness blanketed the space so much I couldn't see

anything. I located a towel, wrapped it around me, and sped out of the room like my life depended on it.

Never again.

It took me fifteen minutes to pack my things. I slung them in bags without even folding them. Each minute, I glanced over my shoulder as if Chase or Lucy would storm in and try to keep me in the hotel. Thirty minutes later, I arrived at the airport and purchased a commercial flight back to the US. I'd spotted one of my guards rushing to buy tickets too and prayed he wouldn't wake up and alert Chase. For two hours I waited in the airport with nerves flickering on the borderline of hysteria. When the plane arrived, I boarded and thanked god. Hopefully, no hard feelings would come between us. Before I got on the flight, I even emailed him to make certain of no ill will.

Chase,

I'm sorry. I promised I wouldn't leave without telling you what was wrong, but I just figured you would talk me into staying. I don't want to be a part of your arrangement. Sorry I agreed. Neither of you did anything wrong. It's me, not you.

Jasmine :-)

He would be pissed, but he would get the message and move on.

M

Now back to normalcy.

Back in the U.S., I sighed in relief as I climbed the stairs to my apartment. Visions of a shower and my soft mattress danced in my head. It was five in the morning, and I just needed a snack and lots of sleep.

Just a simple normal . . . What the hell?

My brother stood naked in the hallway. He held a pillow to hide the one thing I absolutely did not ever desire to see most of all. He didn't even notice that I approached. He kept his ear to my door, listening to the yells and shouts drifting out of my apartment. Plates crashed from inside and then Vivian shrieked.

"What the hell?" I dropped my bags on the ground.

"You bastard!" Vivian screamed from inside the apartment. "You son of a bitch!"

"Oh god. You're here. Quick! Give me your keys." Troy raced to me with his hand out. "Hurry. Noc caught us hooking up—"

“How did he even get in?” I held my hand to my chest.

“He had a key.”

“What? When did he get a freaking key?”

“Viv hurried me outside so she could talk to him and then that motherfucker locked the door. They’ve been fighting ever since. He won’t let her open the door and—”

“What the hell?” My heartbeat increased.

“Keys, Jasmine!” He yanked up my bag. “Where are they?”

“I—”

“I swear I heard him hit her.” Troy’s chest rose and fell like he’d just been sprinting. “She’s been crying. I have to make sure he’s not hurting her!”

I rummaged through my bag at a panicked pace, knocking out its contents to the ground. Then I realized my keys were in my bra and dug them out.

“Here.” I tossed the keys to him. He dropped the pillow, which made me cringe as it fell to the floor and bounced. Completely naked, he ran to the door, slammed the keys into the lock, and wrenched the door open. It was in that moment it hit me that letting Troy in the apartment might not be a good idea.

“You’re dead, motherfucker!” Troy yelled.

Yes. Definitely a bad idea.

A boom sounded up ahead. I rushed in and spotted Vivian first. Swollen purplish skin surrounded her right eye. Blood dripped from her nose. Tears and snot covered her face as she waved her hands. “No. Troy!”

Noc’s earsplitting shrieks filled the air. I rounded the corner into the living room right as Troy charged him. Troy’s head slammed into Noc’s bony chest. Both guys crashed into the coffee table. Broken and splintered wood shot up. I rushed toward a screaming Vivian and hugged her. She looked like she was going to try to pull Troy back, but it would only get her hurt. I’d learned the hard way many times that once Troy began a fight it was impossible to stop him. And maybe I could have figured out a way to stop him--hitting him in the head with a pan had worked once. But another glance at Vivian’s face forced me to pause and root for Troy to kick Noc’s behind.

“Are you okay?” I held her to me with shaking arms. Grunts sounded from the floor as both men struggled to get on top of each other.

Vivian wiped her face with the back of her arm. “Y-you’ve got to stop Troy. He’ll get in trouble and—”

Troy flipped Noc over like he was a ragdoll. His biceps bulged and flexed with the move. It was over for Noc. Once Troy got on top, no one had a chance of survival, unless there was an extra weapon around.

“You like to hit women?” Troy’s fist collided with Noc’s jaw so fast it was a blur of movement and then a bang as the fist made contact. Soon after a crack sounded so loud, I flinched and Vivian jerked back in my arms. *Holy shit!* Noc’s eyes closed as he slumped back on the carpet. Blood spilled out of his mouth. He mumbled something.

“Hit me!” Troy reared back with a bloody fist and pounded on Noc’s face. “Hit me!”

“Troy, stop!” My whole body shook. Tears streamed down my face. I guided Vivian back and tightened my grip on her. She couldn’t go to Troy when he was like this. His mind drifted far away from us. I’d asked him once where he mentally went when he beat someone so badly in a fight. He’d confessed it was to our home in South End on those nights when he’d watched our mom be beat and hurt, and he’d simply stood back as a defenseless kid unable to do anything.

“Arberbanm,” Noc mumbled. More blood leaked out of his mouth and streamed from his eyes as he coughed and tried to wag his hands. Troy punched him again.

“No!” Vivian screamed.

“Troy, don’t do this. It’s over.” I closed my eyes and kept shaking my head.

“Oh my god! Troy! You’re going to kill him!” Vivian cried. “Please, don’t punch him anymore!”

The desire to run out of the apartment flowed within me, but I stayed there, unsure of what else to do. I couldn’t call the cops.

Footsteps stomped into the apartment. I opened my eyes. The bulky white bodyguard Lucy had pointed out in India rushed in. A black guy twice his size bolted in soon after. They both snatched up Troy by his arms and restrained him the best they could. Troy struggled and fought the two guards, but with them working together he was no match. One held his arms. The other captured his legs. Neither said anything as Troy cursed.

“Who are they?” Vivian covered her mouth.

“They’re my guards.” I stepped over to Noc and prayed with all my strength he was okay. I tapped his leg with my foot. “Noc? Are you okay?”

“Mommy?” Noc rolled over in his own blood. He wiggled his fingers a little. Heavy footsteps boomed behind me. *Now who is this?* I turned to see my worst nightmare come true.

“Everyone down, right now!” Cops pushed me out of the way with their guns aiming toward Troy and my guards. I dropped to the floor full of anxiety and grief. *Welcome home.*

Chapter 17

“Ma’am, if you don’t leave I will have you arrested myself,” the cop barked at me.

“But it was self-defense.” I hit the counter with my hand. “My brother was defending my roommate.”

“Next,” the cop said.

A long line of people stood behind me. The best thing about our apartment being located out of Oshane City was that our tiny town insisted on its independence. Knightson had its own small police department, a one-truck fire team, a one level hospital, and a whopping total of two traffic lights. People in Knightson relished in the small town feel and low crime rate. Fortunately for me, since Knightson police arrested Troy, Noc, and Vivian, all three remained behind bars in the same building. If we’d been in Oshane, I would have been forced to race all over the city to different jails so I could negotiate Troy and Vivian’s release as well as post for bail.

Not that I could get any of them out.

They’d arrested Troy and Noc for assault and battery. And Vivian for the five pounds of marijuana the cops discovered in her closet. I’d planned on cursing her out about the drugs as soon as Benny arrived and posted bail. I couldn’t believe she allowed Noc to keep drugs at our apartment or give him the keys to our place. Apparently, he’d come to pick up some of his stash when he found Troy and her having sex. The only reason the police didn’t arrest me was my airplane ticket proving I’d just gotten off a plane and my luggage bag was sprawled in the hallway. When they found the drugs, Vivian pointed to Noc. Being the outstanding guy Noc was, he pointed his fingers right back at Vivian and claimed the drugs were hers. And that’s what got Vivian arrested for possession of illegal narcotics.

“Step to the side.” The cop pointed at me. He munched on a baguffin I recognized as Mama Jane’s hot selling item, salty caramel pretzel. *I hope he chokes on it and dies.*

“And you come back up here again, I’m putting you in a holding cell,” he said as he chewed. Crumbs sprayed out the corners of his mouth.

Returning to the sitting area, I glanced at my watch. *Hurry, Benny.* When I called him, he’d yelled at me over the phone. He’d never met Noc, for

obvious reasons, and didn't even know Vivian had a boyfriend. Additionally, he chastised me for not notifying him of Troy's release.

I hope Vivian is alright in there. She's probably freaking out.

I'd been at the police station for three hours. Sunglasses shielded my red and puffy eyes. More tears streamed down my cheeks. We could maybe save Vivian, but not my brother. Troy had violated his probation by hitting Noc. Benny promised to do everything he could to keep Troy from returning to Oshane City jail. *Benny won't be able to do anything.* I clutched my fingers into a tight fist. *I should've never let Troy into the apartment.*

The door swung open. A chilly wind soared in. A black woman entered with two little kids holding her hand. Chase stepped in after her, dressed in a leather jacket, jeans, and a dark green shirt. I froze, unable to move or make a sound. Two men shorter and dressed in designer suits trailed behind him.

"Chase, what are you doing here?" I stood from my seat.

"Tell my lawyers what happened." Chase clamped his hand on mine. His thumb drew circles on my wrist.

"How did you know I was here?" I asked as he sat next to the seat I'd been in and motioned for me to sit.

"Your guards told me. Now tell my lawyers who was arrested and why." He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes with his free hand. "Be honest and don't leave out any details. They're here to help."

"Okay." I swallowed my fear and described the events from the moment I spotted my naked brother outside the apartment to the instant I began hassling the cops at the station. The shortest lawyer scribbled notes on a notepad. The other pulled out his phone, dialed a number, and went outside. Chase gripped my hand the whole time.

"Anything else?" they asked.

"No."

Chase's lawyer closed his notebook. "It shouldn't be a problem getting them to drop the assault and possession charges. Judge Ulson works this district. He's a friend. Although, the judge may have her do some sort of drug addiction program so no one gets suspicious."

"And her brother's probation violation?" Chase asked.

The lawyer rubbed the tips of his fingers together with his thumb. "Lots of money."

"Take care of it. I don't care about the cost." Chase rose and looked at me.

“We need to talk.”

“You can fix my brother’s violation?” My mouth dropped open.

“Of course.”

I shook my head. “What do I have to do for that? What—”

“Nothing. It sounded like this Noc deserved to get punched in his face. Who cares about him? Your brother shouldn’t suffer from something most men would have done.” Chase gestured for me to stand up. “Please, let’s talk.”

“Where?”

“In my limo.” He gently squeezed my hand.

“Benny is on the way. I should call him.”

The door flung open. Benny stormed in.

“Oh. There he is. I’ll be right back.” I tried to release Chase’s hand, but he tightened his grip.

“No. I’m tired of searching for you.” He guided me back to his side. “I want you next to me.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“You said that in India, but then you fled the damn country as soon as I fell asleep.” His eyebrows furrowed.

Benny approached us. Silver-white hair cropped close to his head made him look older than usual. He’d finally stopped dying his hair black after Vivian and I joked on him about the coloring. He formed his lips into a grim line and shifted his gaze to Chase’s hand around mine.

“I thought I told you to stay away from Jasmine,” Benny said. “Get your hands off her.”

What?

Chase stepped between Benny and me. “I thought I told you I don’t take orders from a two-bit gangster with a law degree.”

“Chase! Don’t say that about him.” I snatched my hand away and edged between them. “Benny, what do you mean you told him to stay away from me?”

No one said anything. They both towered over me at the same height with equally bulky frames. They almost resembled each other. Except where Chase possessed smooth skin on his face, Benny had wrinkles. Both men stared each other down. Hate and anger stifled the air and I didn’t know why.

Five men marched into the station and positioned themselves behind Benny. Two I recognized. The others didn't look familiar, but they damn sure gave the impression that they beat people for fun.

"Benny?" I said.

He turned to me.

"Chase's lawyers are getting Vivian and Troy released," I said.

"So you can call off your goons," Chase muttered.

"How much is that going to cost Jasmine?" Benny scowled back at Chase.

This has to end.

"It won't cost me anything," I said. "Now let's just wait for Vivian to get released."

I signaled to the counter where Chase's lawyer now stood, laughing with the cop who yelled at me earlier. Benny returned to glaring at Chase.

"At the Garden Party, I asked you to stay away from Jasmine." Benny moved around me so quickly I couldn't get back between them. "How did you get to her?"

Chase gestured to his two bodyguards. "Let's not make a scene."

I patted Benny's shoulder to get his attention. "I'm working as his assistant."

"The hell you are!" Benny's voice rose and caught the attention of others in the lobby. People near us turned our way.

"But you recommended me for the job." I held my hands out.

"Says who?" Benny asked.

Damn it.

"Lucy," I mumbled and then rolled my eyes at Chase. "She lied for you?"

"I couldn't think of any other way for you to start the job process. Benny was overseas for a few months working on the Anderson deal. It seemed like a good opportunity."

"Are you listening to this, Jasmine? Is this the kind of guy you want to be around?" Benny asked.

I combed my fingers through my hair.

"I expect this from Vivian, but not you." Benny tapped a finger against his head. "You think things through. You're careful who you date and spend time with a man first before giving him your heart. Right now I'm disappointed in you, Jasmine."

I flinched like he'd slapped me and averted my gaze to hide the shame that had spread across my face. "We're not really dating. It's complicated."

Benny grabbed my chin and guided my view back to him. "I was the one who researched the legality of this *assistant job*, and I was the one who dealt with the other girls' death certificates and funeral arrangements."

"That's enough." Chase's voice resembled a lion's roar. A shiver of fear crept up my spine. I shuddered and hugged myself.

"Are you sure we want to start the accusation and blame game right now?" Chase stomped around me. "I know about other certificates you've dealt with."

Benny grinned. *Not a good sign.* I knew that expression well from living with Vivian and him during my high school years. It was the get-the-hell-out-of-my-way grin. The one he displayed when he broke Vivian's high school boyfriend's legs with a bat after he discovered the boy in her bedroom.

"Okay, please, both of you stop." I waved my hands from side to side. Chase's guards positioned themselves in a way that forced Benny and his companions to step back. Both of Chase's lawyers arrived.

"Bail has been posted," one of the lawyers said. "They'll be out in less than twenty minutes. Out processing has already begun."

"And her brother's probation?" Chase asked. I held my breath.

"Charges against him are dropped and the cops won't pursue it."

"Thank you so much." I blew out a relieved breath. "And thanks, Chase, for everything."

Benny continued to grin at Chase. "Stay away from her."

"Benny, please stop," I whispered and walked closer to him. "I can take care of myself."

"You're too good for him," Benny said. "This guy will eat you up and spit you out without losing any sleep at night."

"I'm a big girl. I'll be okay." I hugged him. Benny embraced me as I balanced on my tippy toes.

"Do you understand what he expects from you?" Benny replied.

"It's not what you're thinking. I decided not to do that. We're just friends." I cringed, not wanting to discuss the arrangement with Benny, a man I considered my father.

"If something happens, you call me," Benny said through clenched teeth.

“I don’t care where you are, I’ll come.”

“I know.” I gave him a weak smile. “I’m okay. It’s going to be all right, but right now Vivian needs you, so stop worrying about me.”

Chase touched the center of my back with his hand. “Let’s go, Jasmine.”

“Go?” Benny glanced at me.

“We’re just going to talk.” I released Benny from my hug. “I’ll be right back.”

I headed to the front door.

Benny yanked Chase’s arm. Chase’s guards charged for Benny. Chase held up his hand to stop them.

“Jasmine is not like the others,” Benny growled.

“No, she’s not,” Chase agreed.

“You do anything to break her heart or hurt her in any way, and I’ll gut you myself.” Benny leaned in. “And no one will find your body.”

“Don’t worry,” Chase said. “I’m well aware of how good you are at hiding bodies.”

My mouth dropped open.

“Good. Then make sure you don’t forget.” Benny shoved Chase’s arm.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, as long as you don’t forget about the other things I know,” Chase said.

“Well, we both have our secrets, don’t we, boy.” Benny stomped away.

I shivered at their words as I headed out the door.

Chapter 18

So much rage boiled inside me I almost kneed Chase in the crotch. *Breathe, Jasmine. I don't need to go to jail too.* Before we arrived at the limo, I turned around and jabbed Chase's chest with my finger. "That's the last time you threaten Benny."

"Is it?" Chase stared down at my finger.

"Stop using that night against him." I jabbed him again.

He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side. "What night?"

"Damn you." I paced in front of him. "The night he helped Troy and me with my mother's boyfriend."

The night Troy killed him.

"Benny did that to protect us," I said.

"I don't know what you're referring to." Chase ended my pacing by placing his arm in front of me. "Benny and I have a serious history that goes back to when I was a kid. He's known my dad since they were in high school."

"So then what secrets are you talking about?" I crossed my arms around my chest.

"They're our secrets."

"They don't deal with Troy or me?"

"You should ask him that question." Chase rubbed his eyes again. In that moment, I realized bags rested under his eyelids. His usual air of confidence didn't radiate from him. He seemed weary and exhausted.

"What's happened? You look stressed out." I asked.

"I am stressed. My girlfriend fled from a foreign country and only left an email, which is the last thing I would check when I'm frantically screaming her name and racing around a hotel hung over and half naked." He targeted me with angry green eyes. "And although there was a smiley face on this email, I did not appreciate its message, or the fact that when I returned to the States, my girlfriend was sitting in a police station, crying."

I clutched the end of my shirt and twisted it. "So did you eventually find your girlfriend?"

"Not funny."

“You read the email.” I shrugged. “I’m not your girlfriend anymore.”

“You promised we would discuss the problems.”

“Yes, but—”

He closed the distance between us. “What made you run from me?”

“I didn’t like the Lucy watching part.”

“It won’t happen again and she’ll never accompany us on our dates. The India trip was a special one.”

I backed up. “You tried to push me into letting her watch us.”

“For one stupid second that I now regret. And let’s not forget I was drunk, too.” He glared at me and pulled me to him.

“You were angry. You jumped off the bed and turned on the TV like a spoiled brat,” I said as his arms wrapped around my waist.

“I was frustrated I couldn’t put my cock inside of you,” he whispered in my ear. “Especially when I’d just had your nipples in my mouth. I’ve been wanting to be inside you since the first time I saw you. Give me a tiny break.”

I blushed and looked away. “I’m not made for this situation.”

“Some can argue no one is, but I’ll do anything to make this work.” He guided my face to him. “I’m so sorry, Jasmine. Please believe me. I’ll do whatever you need and only treat you with the utmost respect.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Please.” He closed his eyes. His voice sounded lower than a whisper. “I don’t run after women or beg them to be with me. Yet here I am pleading with you.”

“What about the other three girls? You didn’t have to beg them?”

He opened his eyes. “They joined willingly. They saw the money, trips, and all the other things I could provide and joined the arrangement. What do you see?”

“The possibility of getting my heart broken,” I muttered. “Losing myself in your desires and forgetting my own needs and wants.”

“I won’t let any of those things happen.”

A sad laugh escaped my lips. “You can’t control everything.”

“The hell I can’t.”

“Chase, you can’t.”

“Give me one month with all your rules.” He squeezed my waist with his

hands. “If at the end of the month you still say no, then I’ll leave you alone. You can transfer to any of my other companies or leave with severance pay.”

I sighed.

“Please.” He lowered himself down to his knees and put his hands together like he was praying. “Please.”

A woman running with her dog ogled the scene. Another group of people leaving their cars pointed and mumbled to each other. Chase’s guards approached us and stirred behind him, probably unsure of what to do next. He remained kneeling on the ground. Wind rushed through his hair, leaving his usually perfect midnight waves in disarray. His cologne floated my way and against all rationality I breathed him in and reveled in his smell.

“Get up, Chase.”

“Give me one month?”

I thought about how horrible I’d been feeling before Chase arrived at the police station and how he simply swooped in and saved the day. *He said he was drunk that night, but should I excuse him?* I twisted my lucky copper ring. Benny had bought it for me the day he picked me up from my house and decided I would move in with him and Vivian. I remember that moment like it had just happened. I was so nervous that living with Vivian and Benny would be a bad decision and a tiny bit suspicious of why Benny would want to take care of me in the first place.

But it all worked out in the end. All of my nervousness was for nothing. Could loving Chase have the same outcome? Will I laugh at myself a year later in his arrangement, thinking it was dumb to hesitate? Maybe.

“Okay,” I said. “One month.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.” I sighed.

“And you’ll let me fix any problem?”

“Yes. Now get up.”

Chase jumped back to his feet. “We have to celebrate. Too much has happened. Let’s go off somewhere and just spend some time getting to know each other.”

I gazed at the police station. “What do you mean?”

“I have a great idea for a trip.” He moved toward the limo door and opened it for me. “When I learned your name three months ago I searched you on the Internet.”

I reluctantly climbed into the limo. Benny expected my return, but I couldn't go back in the police station as Chase's girlfriend when I'd already claimed we weren't going to be together.

"I found your Twitter name and started following you."

"Oh god." I hid my face with my hands. "Have you been following me the whole time?"

"Yes. And you're hilarious. I loved the tweet about my fingers." He shut the door behind him. "But last month you tweeted your bucket list."

"Okay?" *Where is this going?*

"I wrote them down, but my favorite one besides 'hump Tom Cruise's leg' was when you said you wanted to bike around Paris, sampling food in gourmet specialty shops."

"So?" Anticipation fluttered in my stomach.

"Let's go to Paris, baby."

I screamed.

Chapter 19

For the fiftieth time, Chase replayed the last ten seconds of the Beatles' *Strawberry Fields Forever*. I laughed and wrapped myself in a huge red cashmere blanket. The soft fabric caressed my skin like a devoted lover. I'd refused to unfold my body from the blanket since I first discovered it.

"Did you catch that?" Chase asked.

"No." Grinning, I rolled my eyes. "Okay. Play the song just one more time."

"Pay attention." He pouted and replayed the last vocals again.

The bed vibrated from the plane's engine, which Chase claimed was under his small bedroom. After two bottles of wine, we'd debated the impossibility of the engine's location for an hour. Unfortunately, the pilot confirmed Chase's claims, but I bet the poor guy was too scared to go against him.

"Can you hear it?" Chase paused the song.

I shrugged. "I can barely make it out and only because you told me John Lennon is saying 'Cranberry sauce.' However, I can see why people thought it was 'I buried Paul.'"

"Well, when people heard it, there were all these rumors that Paul McCartney was dead."

"You act like you were alive then." I stretched my legs and bent my toes as I made myself more comfortable on his bed.

"I wish." He set the stereo's remote down on the tiny nightstand next to us. "The music from the '60s and '70s beats anything that's been released nowadays."

"Oh God." I hid under the blanket. "You're one of those clowns who think old music is better than new."

"It is. Name something that's better than what I've played for you tonight."

"Lady GaGa." I giggled.

"This is your second warning. No more disrespecting my music." He snatched the blanket away and attacked me with kisses on my lips, face, and neck. His hands gripped my hips, but didn't stray to other places. When he ended the delicious torture, my panties were wet, nipples hard, and lust curled

in places, hoping he would kiss them there, too. The blanket fell away from my body and landed behind me. I stared back at him with hooded eyes and hunger swirling through my chest.

“Hmmm. Don’t look at me like that.” He climbed off me, wearing no shirt. His arm muscles bulged with the movement. A nice-sized erection pressed outward against his black jogging pants.

“We don’t have to do your whole *wait to have sex* challenge.” Dressed in only Chase’s t-shirt and my panties, I lifted my shirt a little and exposed my bare legs. He shifted his view to my thighs.

“No. I want to show you that this arrangement will be more than sex.”

“I think waiting the whole month is a bit crazy.” I spread my legs open. His t-shirt rose more and revealed a pair of pink panties to him.

“Damn. Maybe we’ll just wait a week or two.” Licking his lips, Chase gripped his erection with a shaking hand and edged away. My sex clenched and I wished I could touch him there, but he’d been moving my hands away all night, each time I tried to sneak a feel.

“Or we can make love now and then wait a week or two.” I wagged my eyebrows at him.

“You just drank a bottle of wine. You’ll wake up tomorrow pissed at me.”

I considered what he said. “I doubt it.”

“We should get some rest.” He switched off the light. “Once the plane drops in Paris, I’ve got a feeling you’ll keep me up the whole time we’re there and drag me around the city, visiting shops and eating weird food.”

“It won’t be weird.”

“You said you wanted to try head cheese.” He scrunched his nose up as if he’d smelled something rank.

“I bet it’s not as bad as it sounds.”

I’d explained that head cheese was not cheese at all, but sort of a meat jelly that was made from the boiling parts of a calf or pig’s head. His face had actually turned red from the details. Telling him that the brain, eyes, and ears were not boiled with the head to make the cheese did not soothe his fears at all.

“I’m not eating it,” he declared.

“You promised.”

He groaned. “Whatever. Let’s go to sleep. You’ve kept us up long

enough.”

“Nope. It’s your fault we’re still up.” I pinched his stomach when he pulled me into his arms.

“You told me to tell you about the Beatles,” he said.

“I figured their history would be boring enough to put me to sleep.” I laughed.

“Careful. I’ll throw you out of this plane if you keep that up.”

“Your fandom is extreme,” I said.

“Okay.” He sat up and grabbed his iPod. The screen illuminated the room. “I’m sure you’re Beatles out by now. Would you like to hear something else?”

“Definitely.”

“In my argument of old is better, I will play the oldest song I own.” He laughed and browsed through his playlist for a few minutes.

Finally he stopped on something, placed the iPod on his nightstand, and returned next to me. I laid my head on his chest. Warmth radiated from his satin skin. His scent covered me like an expensive sheet and I sank into it, feeling at home for the first time since I’d met him. A new song played.

“What instrument is that?” I’d learned he had an ear for picking out instruments after only hearing a few notes.

“Acoustic guitar.” His body stiffened.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing.” He stroked my arm with his fingers.

“Tomorrow. Will you be there, with that sweet smile on your face and those flowers in your hair,” the guy sang. *“Or is this just only for tonight, will things change once we turn on the light? Tomorrow.”*

“Who is this?” I asked.

“This is Banyan Prodd,” Chase said.

“I’ve definitely heard this song before. I just didn’t know who sang it.” I closed my eyes and yawned. Chase brushed my hair away from my shoulders and massaged the back of my neck with gentle circles. I loved the way he touched me. Each finger delivered its own glint of delight into my body. I could tell that he was familiar with the intricate details of how to please a woman. He understood how to keep a lover satisfied and her mind constantly on him, whether he was around her or not. His skill alarmed and intrigued

me.

“I used to yearn for tomorrow, never thinking of the now. But here you are and now I can’t seem to think how, I ever craved tomorrow.”

“I love this,” I whispered.

“My mother did, too. She used to play it over and over. I could hear it drifting from her bedroom on Sunday mornings. She would sing it too. God, she had a beautiful voice.”

I opened my eyes and gazed up at him. A dim light from the doorway cast a glow on his sculpted face.

“Sometimes I would wake up, quietly tiptoe to her open door, and sit down next to it, holding Mr. Talbot and listening to her sing.”

“And who is Mr. Talbot?” I smiled.

“A very smart teddy bear.” He moved his hand from my neck and pressed the button to start the song over. Something about the way he described his mother caused me to wonder if she was still alive.

Didn’t Lucy say that she died?

“How did your mother pass away?” I asked.

“She was killed when I was a kid.” He offered nothing else, and I didn’t feel comfortable pushing the topic any further. He chuckled. “I can’t believe I forgot how much she loved that song. Tonight, I play it and all of a sudden that memory hit me as soon as Paul started singing.”

“Well, it sounds like a great memory. I can’t imagine you as a child.”

“I was an angel.”

“Oh goodness.”

He pressed another button and then wrapped his arms around me. The song played for a third time.

“You should put the song on repeat,” I offered and shut my eyes. “It’s so mellow. I may fall asleep to it.”

“Sounds good to me.” A beep came. The song restarted.

I smoothed my body into his and hoped he would never release me. With his embrace, I felt safe and cared for. *Isn’t that all I really wanted in a relationship or marriage? To be protected and loved.* The guitar’s notes flowed through the room and soothed my spirits. I became intoxicated just from the moment. His scent gave me an emotional buzz and I drowned in the silk of his flesh, the luxurious wine coating my tongue, and the harmony of

the lyrics. It was so weird that a song about a man being afraid to get his heart broken had given me hope for my relationship with Chase, and breathed renewed life into my doubtful mind.

“This moment is perfect,” Chase said, as if he could read my thoughts. “I could die right now and have no regrets.”

Shock filled me. I had no reply, but I understood how he felt and agreed.

“Goodnight, Jasmine.”

The plane rocked us as we lay together, connected into one. I struggled to stay awake and take pleasure in each second, but after a while exhaustion stole me away and my dreams shifted into romantic scenes of Chase making love to me in a cool lavender river as the moonlight shone on our wet skin.

Chapter 20

No longer on the plane, I woke up to luxury. *This is what Cinderella must have felt like the morning after her wedding.* I sat up in the middle of the softest bed in the history of mankind. Even my behind purred with pleasure. Pillows surrounded my body. Several feet in front of me, a sort of study done in dark red and walnut stood before me. On one side was a white loveseat. A rich walnut coffee table was in the middle next to two white chairs. A chandelier of crystals shaped as tear-dropped candles hovered over the scene.

Holy cow! Where am I?

In my part of the room, where I lay in bed, beige walls were done in some decadent print I couldn't name. Even the bed's headboard boasted a silky fabric and was bordered with a gold carving that extended two feet high. Silver lamps decorated the wall. If I had mimicked this exact design it would have been a gaudy mess, but in this hotel room it spoke of great wealth and sophistication.

"Chase?" I searched the space with my eyes, but was pretty certain I was alone. No noise sounded from the bathroom. The lights had been switched to dim as if he hadn't wanted to disturb me while he left. I slid off the bed and decided to check out the room some more. Each step to the bathroom was a sensual experience for my bare feet. The carpet's fabric slipped against my skin. I gasped when I entered the bathroom.

This is unreal. I should take a picture of this!

Gold faucets jutted from a massive marble tub. Pink towels hung on the rack. Their embroidered lettering said, "Ritz Paris."

Well. This is not the Motel 6.

"Oh my God." I almost swooned. "We're at the Ritz in Paris!"

When did we land? How did he get me in here without waking me up? And where the hell is he now?

Shrieking, I raced out of the bathroom, then down a few steps, past another room with a glass display full of an elegant outfit, rushed to the front door, and opened it.

A woman in a black maid's uniform with a crisp white collar and apron stood outside. "Can I help you?"

A thick accent clung to each word. *She's French!* I shrieked with glee. The maid jerked back.

"Oh. I'm sorry." I scanned the immaculate hall and turned around. On my door, gold cursive lettering stated, "Suite Coco Chanel."

"Oh my God!" I jumped up and down, slamming the door and running back into my room.

I'm taking pictures of everything. Vivian won't believe this.

Vivian was a huge fan of fashion designers and considered fashion a type of art to be treasured and drooled over. I spotted small steps to a windowed door, opened it, and stepped onto a small balcony. A gentle breeze tickled my cheeks. *Good God!* In awe, I drank in Paris. We were in the center of everything. A massive public square was laid out in front of me, one I'd seen in movies and TV shows about Paris, but couldn't remember the name of. Stone buildings outlined a huge statue that stood in the center. Cars drove by the statue. People walked all over. *French people!* I waved at everyone like a crazy woman, but no one waved back.

"Jasmine!" Chase yelled.

I left the balcony and skipped to where I thought his voice came from. It took a few minutes to maneuver my way around the massive space. Once I found him, I spotted two servants following him. Several bags filled their arms. A buffet of yummy aromas drifted from those bags. Chase was dressed in charcoal gray pants and a white shirt.

"Good morning." His lips twisted into a sort of half-smile. He reminded me of a mischievous kid on a cartoon, just caught doing something he shouldn't have been doing.

"Good morning." I battled with myself not to display a giddy grin, but it burst on my face anyway. *God, I must look like a little kid.* I giggled. "This is...I can't believe you did this. The Chanel suite? Are you serious? When you said we were going to Paris, I thought it would be a decent hotel, but not this."

"Are you happy?"

"Yes." A giddy laugh burst from my lips.

"Any regrets?"

"No." My cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

He stepped toward me. "Then give me three months instead of one."

Damn. He's good.

“I’ll think about it.”

“What’s to think about?” He flashed a wicked grin.

“Chase,” I whispered. The servants pulled out all types of food and placed them on plates. Most of the items I didn’t even recognize, besides some of the breads and cheeses.

“What’s this?” I went closer to the table.

“Breakfast.” He clasped his hand in mine and towed me away from the table and closer to him. “Answer my question. What do you have to think about?”

I sighed.

“Give me three months.” Those green eyes focused on me. A relentless man showed behind them.

“This isn’t fair, asking me to give you more time right when I wake up in freaking Paris.”

“Life isn’t fair.” He tapped his thumb against the inside of my palm. “Please.”

“Three months with the same rules?”

“Of course.”

I bit my lip. “Fine.”

“Then let’s make it six months.”

I hit him in the stomach with the back of my hand. He laughed and drew me in for a kiss. *God, even his tongue tastes so good.* I explored his mouth. He pulled away and sucked on my bottom lip. It felt so good. I moaned. The sound of a door closing came from farther away.

I left his lips. No one was in the suite but us and a table stacked with food. “All this is our breakfast?”

“I couldn’t decide what you would want. I asked around for the best breakfast in Paris, which sparked a serious argument between the connoisseur and receptionist.” Chase backed away from me and kicked off his sneakers. “Seriously, I thought the connoisseur was going to smack her when the receptionist disagreed about who baked the best bread.”

My stomach growled.

“So I settled on both of their top three favorite breakfast spots.” He guided me over and pulled out a chair for me. “Let’s eat, baby. Maybe you can tell me what the hell we’re eating once you try it.”

“I’m excited.”

“Well, I’m nervous.” He frowned and stared at the table. “I swear I heard one of them used the French word for ‘tongue’.”

“Whoa. I hope there’s tongue on here.” I pumped my fist in the air. “I love beef tongue. When executed well, of course.”

“Of course.” He frowned.

“Stop it.” I unfolded a cloth napkin and set it on my lap. “Oh, what’s the name of the place outside the balcony?”

“Place Vendôme.”

I repeated him.

“Why?” he asked.

“I just don’t want to forget any of this.”

“If you do, we’ll come back.” He shrugged. “Here’s your phone, by the way.” He handed it to me. “It kept ringing and buzzing. I couldn’t figure out how to turn it off so I took it with me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Yeah right.”

“What?”

“You didn’t rummage through it, checking out all of my hot lovers’ voicemail messages?” I slid my fingers across the screen to check my missed calls. “Your fiancée called me ten times, Lucy five, and a number I don’t recognize also called. Should I assume it’s Wendy?”

“Yes.” He chewed on a piece of bread. A dark expression shadowed his face. “You like the suite?”

“It’s awesome. How much is it a night?”

“Seven thousand Euros.”

“Whoa. That’s several house payments.” I shook my head and checked my emails. “Are we going to discuss why your women are calling me or are we going to pretend like it’s not happening?”

“I’d rather deal with that when we return to the States.”

I opened an email from Dawn.

Jasmine,

While I welcome you to our unique family, you must be aware of the schedule and rules. Your hysteria and family problems have caused Chase to ignore the schedule. He has missed all of our days...

I stopped reading and forwarded the email to him. “Dawn is upset about

the schedule.”

He knitted his fingers together. “She expressed that to me on the phone this morning.”

I bet she did.

“Who’s days have you missed?” I asked.

“Let’s eat.” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“Answer me, please.”

“The night we went to the Lan was Wendy’s evening. The India trip were Lucy’s and Dawn’s. Today it starts back over, so I will be missing two more dates for each of them.”

“When is my day?”

“Dawn would like you on the fourth day since you have the least seniority.”

“Seniority?” I rolled my eyes. *They’ve made a business operation out of love.*

“I want to enjoy Paris right now, not talk about this. I told Dawn I’ll make up the days when I return.”

“So I won’t spend time with you for at least a week?”

“Possibly.” He wrestled his thumb with his other one. “Which is why we should enjoy the time we have now.”

I tapped my feet and checked more emails. Before Chase’s plane had taken off, I’d sent an email to everyone letting them know I would be in Paris for a few days and not to worry. Apparently, Gabe had responded later with a list of restaurants I might like.

“Cool.” I smiled. “Gabe sent a bunch of restaurants. He placed the Michelin Star restaurants at the top.”

“Does he know you’re with me?”

“Of course not.” I browsed the rest of my emails.

“Why didn’t you tell him?”

“What do I say? I’m going on a trip with my boss who I’m now dating and by the way he has a fiancée and two other girlfriends?”

“He should know you’re taken.”

“I’m not officially taken. I can date other men. Remember?”

I opened my last unread email. The sender was labeled Anonymous.

Jasmine,

Stick to our rules and you won't get hurt.

Sincerely,

Highly Upset

“Someone is threatening me.” I showed him the email. All the food on the table, with its enticing smells and beautiful colors, could no longer hold my attention. Anger instead of fear pulsed in my veins.

If you're going to threaten me at least do it without hiding behind an anonymous email.

Chase snatched my phone and read it. A feral noise erupted from his throat as he shot up. His chair fell back to the floor. He wrenched out his phone and pressed a button.

“You threaten her through an email?” Chase roared and stomped out of the room. “I don't care!”

I stood up and followed him. “Who is that?”

Ignoring me, he went into the bathroom and shut the door. The lock clicked.

“Then who did?” he asked. I twisted the doorknob to make sure it was actually locked. It didn't turn.

“Stay on topic!” he yelled. I jumped back at the volume of his voice. Something slammed as if he'd hit it. “Then I'll never come back with this behavior.”

I banged on the door. “Chase?”

“I'm not acting different,” he said.

Minutes passed. He shouted out sentences I didn't get the context of. Then finally silence came. The door clicked. Chase walked out.

“What's going on?” I asked.

He didn't look at me as he stomped into the room. His voice was thick with rage and concern. “I'm adding two extra guards to you, but everything is okay.”

“Who was that?”

“No one.” He put his phone in his back pocket and returned to the table. “Don't think about this again. It was someone's anger, not a serious threat.”

“Then why two more guards?”

“I like to have you protected.”

“But you also think I'm in danger and that the email was a serious threat.”

“No.”

“You’re full of it.” I placed my hands on my hips. “Chase, I’m not going to—”

He got up from his seat, rushed to me, and grabbed my arms. “You run, and I’ll—”

“I’m not running.” I tried to shove him away. He captured my lips and dipped his tongue in my mouth. I twisted my face away from him.

“Do you think I can’t protect you?” He nibbled the curve of my neck.

“I shouldn’t need you to protect me.”

“You don’t.”

“Then why more guards?”

He blew out an exasperated breath. “Look. Three girls have died before. It’s a sad fact that I’m not comfortable with. Any little thing, whether it’s a big or small threat, I’m going to take seriously.”

I formed my lips into a grim line. “So you think I’m in some sort of danger because of the schedule?”

“No. I think one of them is mad that you messed up their dates. They want to scare you, but just in case I’m wrong, you’ll have four guards just for my and your sanity.”

Tension hardened around my shoulders. “Who did you just call?”

He averted his eyes. “Dawn. She was the most upset by the trip and all the running after you.”

“You think she emailed me that?”

“She tends to do irrational things when she feels our relationship is threatened.”

Your relationship?

A tiny pang of jealousy hit me.

“She thinks I’m falling for you too quickly and that I’m treating you differently,” he admitted.

Are you?

The words clung to the tip of my tongue, but I kept them in my mouth.

He rubbed his forehead. “We should cut the three-day trip I had planned to two days.”

I forced myself not to frown or pout. “So we’ll leave tomorrow night?”

He nodded.

I struggled with relaxing and not lingering too long on any of my anxious thoughts—the threatening email, Dawn’s hold on Chase, how he felt about me, or what his shortening of the trip truly meant.

“Jasmine, are you okay?”

I have four guards monitoring my every move. Relax.

“Yes. Let’s enjoy this while we can.” I slipped out of his arms. Several emotions bundled together and dropped to the pit of my gut—jealousy, annoyance, and anxiety for the days to come. I shoved them to the back of my mind and promised myself to not think about them again.

Chapter 21

To my dismay, the hours in Paris raced by. Each instance I collected a mind-blowing memory. Celebrities lounged in the Ritz lobby and strolled the hallways. Holding in shrieks and screams, I warded with myself to not ask for autographs. Besides, Chase always remained next to me in a composed and cheery mood. If he didn't seem star-struck, I wouldn't either.

Throughout the day, we rode bikes all over the city and visited shops, sampling food to my heart's content. Chase had to drag me out of a cheese shop where I'd attempted to taste every item in the place. Next was a store dedicated to varieties of honey products, from lavender honey nougats to a spicy honey mustard that scorched my tongue. In pastry shops, I gorged on macarons sandwiched with a sweet ganache or butter creams that came in many flavors—rose petal, vanilla, salted caramel, and pistachio. But my true undoing was when we arrived at Dubernet Foie Gras and I spotted several types of foie gras stacked from floor to ceiling, pates in combinations I'd never imagined, and sausages that beckoned me to come and try them. Chase had literally slung me over his shoulder and carried me out after god-only-knows how long we'd been in there.

By mid-day, food packed my stomach until I feared I would burst and Chase yawned with each pedaling of his bike. So I dragged him back to the hotel room to take a nap and promised I would remain with my guard at all times while I explored the city.

Alone with my guards, I visited the Louvre Museum, but only stayed for an hour because I wanted to surprise Chase and bought him a special surprise to get him in the mood. *There's no way we're not having sex tonight.* With only one night in Paris, I decided I might as well enjoy myself to the fullest.

Later that night, the limo stopped in front of a restaurant Chase had found. He kissed me on my cheek and then squeezed my hand. "Can I see your dress now?"

"No." I wore a gray coat that fell to my knees. The material was thin so I wouldn't get hot, but long enough to shield my surprise. "You're so impatient."

He touched my coat's bottom edge. "Although this is a nice coat, I need to see what's under it."

“Are you worried I’m dressed unfashionably?” I let the chauffeur help me out of the car.

“No.” Chase climbed out after me and pulled me into him so his body pressed against my back. “I love the way clothes fit your body and rather enjoy drooling over the swell of your breasts when they peek out of your low-cut tops.”

“You’ll get to see what’s under it later.”

“How much later?”

“We’ll see.”

He grumbled. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing special.”

“I don’t believe you. How can anything not be special when you’re wearing it?” He smirked.

“Welcome, madam and monsieur.” The host held the door open for us. “Madam, may I take your coat?”

“No thank you,” I said.

“Let him take it.” Smiling, Chase crossed his arms over his chest.

“No thank you.” I frowned and Chase chuckled to himself.

“I’ll be just a moment.” The host ventured off.

“So you plan on wearing that coat all through dinner?” Chase asked.

“Goodness, surprising you must be hard to do. You’re so curious and controlling.” I turned and checked to see if anyone was around us. “Do you want to see now, impatient man?” I undid my belt.

“Yes,” he said, his voice thick with anticipation.

I pulled the coat apart enough for him to get a peek. The sheer black bra and panty set I wore left little to the imagination. A satin garter belt hugged my waist. Stockings rose up to my thighs and were bordered with lace. Chase’s name was written on the front of the belt in white gems.

“Satisfied?” I closed the jacket.

Chase stood in a frozen position. He still kept his gaze on my body, even though my coat was shut tight.

“Chase?” I smirked. He raised his arm and gestured for a waiter to come over.

A tall man with blond curls rushed our way. “Monsieur?”

Leaning over to the waiter, Chase whispered something in the man’s ear,

dove his hand in his own jacket, and pulled out a thick clip of money. Chase must have handed him at least five hundred dollars.

A red tint spread across the waiter's face, but he took the stash anyway. "This way, sir."

"Come on." Chase clamped his hand on mine and towed me in the waiter's direction.

It was hard to keep up with his pace. I cursed myself for wearing the god awful six-inch heels I had on. *Sure they look sexy, but who in their right mind could wear these torturous things all the time?* "Chase, where are we going?"

He glanced over his shoulder at me. His eyes strayed down to my coat.

"Are you going to answer me?" I asked. "Or just stare?"

He grunted and turned back around.

O-Kay.

We arrived in a dark hallway with velvet maroon walls and black carpet. The waiter opened the women's bathroom and motioned for two ladies to leave immediately. With shocked expressions, they scurried away. I peered inside. It was a posh and luxurious powder room done in shades of cream. White velvet chairs were in front of a long vanity that extended over half the room. The wall behind the counter was also all mirrors. White carpet covered the floor. Paintings of nude women draped in colorful fabric decorated the walls. A door was in the corner. I figured it led to the stalls and sinks.

"Here you go, monsieur." The waiter positioned himself by the door. "I'll remain outside until you are . . . done."

Oh God. I walked past him and tried not to show the waiter how embarrassed I was.

"You've lost your mind," I said in a low voice.

"Who could blame me when you have nothing but sexy lingerie on for dinner?" Chase tugged me further inside. The waiter closed the door. A click sounded as Chase locked it. "You're lucky I didn't know that was what you had on in the limo. Now you'll pay for that."

I giggled. "Will I now?"

"I'm going to take you right here in this restaurant and I won't hold back. I won't stop until you're moaning so loud the chefs in the kitchen have hard-ons."

"I doubt that's possible." I leaned my weight on one foot.

“Take off the coat.” Chase undid his shirt. His voice sounded hoarse.

I smiled. “And if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll fuck you in that coat.” He took off his shirt. “I was prepared to stay with my challenge and not touch you. I wanted to show you how much of a gentleman I am.”

“So now what are you going to show me?” My coat slipped off my body with ease and dropped to the carpet. He charged my way and caught me by my waist. His soft fingers stroked my skin. My heart beat fast, like I was sprinting. Anticipation coursed through my bloodstream. I rose up to my toes and kissed his yummy lips. *God, he’s so hot.* He picked me up and I straddled his waist with my legs. Hunger saturated every pore of my body.

“You look so damn sexy I thought my cock was going to burst through my pants.” He squeezed the softness of my ass and carried me to the counter. “I was afraid to talk or move too much.”

Chase laid me on the counter. The cool surface pressed against my back as he gazed down at me. And there was a lusty yearning that surfaced in his eyes and blew me away. He looked hungry and wild, so unlike the confident and controlled man I was used to seeing. My nipples perked from his attention. I bit my lip as he ran his fingers from my shoulders, over the peaks of my breasts and stiff points, and then paused at my garter belt, where his name adorned it.

“I love this.” He bent over and kissed my stomach, clasping his hands to my panties. The material tore apart as he ripped it away. Cool air brushed the area between my thighs. He spread my legs apart and a tiny whimper left his lips. “I want my name on your panties next time.”

“You’ll have to earn it,” I said.

“I will.” Getting on his knees, he buried his face between my legs. His wet, thick tongue started at my behind and did a long, seductive lick to my clitoris. And he took his time, too, inch by inch, drinking me up, lathering me in moist caresses and greedy little pecks with his mouth in areas that had never known contact with tender lips. I gasped. My legs shook. My clit swelled in delight.

“Oh, Chase.” I purred each time that magical tongue lapped at my bud like it was covered in honey. When I could take no more, both of his hands reached my folds and spread them apart.

“All those months, I’ve waited just to taste you.” His fingers entered me.. I

felt pressure along my opening as he widened it some more. His lips went to my entrance. He blew. *Fuck*. Warmth traveled down my slick tunnel. My walls shuddered in satisfaction. I curled my toes. *Oh yes*. He blew again and then shoved his tongue inside of me.

Mumbling incoherent words, I rocked into him. He slipped his hands under my behind and squeezed hard.

“Please,” I moaned so loud I was sure the restaurant heard me. Like a mad woman I ground into his face, rubbing my clit on his soft skin, loving his tongue as it licked and pushed inside of me, and relishing Chase’s feast of me.

A spark of an orgasm appeared in my core and began to grow like a ball getting bigger and bigger, until I thought I would detonate. And then Chase stopped. My body trembled like a drug addict anticipating her next fix. He rose and licked his lips.

“No. Don’t stop.” My heartbeat thumped at an erratic pace in my ears. My breathing was fast and came out in shallow pants.

“You want my mouth back there?” Chase’s lips curled into a huge smile.

“Yes.”

“What about my cock?”

“Hell yes!”

He undid his jeans. They fell down his muscular legs. His erection pushed against the material of his boxer briefs. I moistened some more and knew I was dripping with need.

“Hurry up,” I whined.

“And do what, baby?” He pulled his cock out. I sat up, wetting my lips with my tongue. His length was longer and wider than I was used to. *Good God. It’s definitely longer than the inch I’d joked about with him days ago*. I couldn’t wait for him to put it inside of me.

“Take off your bra.” He stroked himself, letting his big hands slide up to the tip, rub around it, and then glide back down his length. He groaned. I reached my hands out to touch it, and he stepped back. “You heard me, baby.”

A whine escaped my lips. I hurried and peeled off my bra. My breasts spilled out of the material, swollen and heavy with aching tips. Unable to help myself, I brushed my fingers against my nipples’ points and shuddered.

“You’re every man’s dream. Beautiful face, tiny waist, huge tits, hips and

an ass that could make a priest reconsider his calling.”

He came to me.

I held out my hands to stop him. “Oh shit. Wait.”

“What do you mean wait?” he asked through clenched teeth.

“Get the condoms out of my coat’s pocket.”

He muttered something under his breath, but hurried over to get it.

“Maybe we can try sex without a condom this time,” he said as he brought them over.

“No.” I seized them, tore one open, and helped him put it on. “No condoms, no sex.”

“Then condoms it is.” He picked me up. His biceps bulged with the movement. I straddled his waist with my legs. His hands formed around my behind and cupped it. My arms balanced on his huge shoulders. I moved to take off my heels and stockings.

“Dear God, keep those on.” His voice sounded with a hint of madness, as if he would crack into insanity within seconds. We kissed, stabbing each other with our tongues, exploring one another’s mouths, and taking turns sucking on each other’s lips.

I leaned back. “Stop teasing me.”

His teeth caught his bottom lip. “Tell me what you want.”

“You inside of me.”

“Hard?”

“Yes.” I panted and rubbed my breasts against his chiseled pecs.

He stared into my eyes with heavy lids. “And how do you want it, slow or fast?”

“Any way, damn it!”

He teased the tip of his cock against my moist folds. “Say please, my love.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes.

“Please,” I whispered.

He thrust hard into me. I screamed in pleasure. My tunnel stretched beyond comprehension and formed around him. He pierced me like a man on the edge of insanity and my body was the only thing that could give him peace.

“Fuck! You feel so good.” Gripping my hips, he rocked into me and lifted

me up and down on him as if I was weightless.

“Never. Felt. Like. This.” He sped up and wound his hips into me, placing perfect pressure on my clit.

“Oh baby,” I cried. “Oh please.”

“You’ll give this to only me. You hear me?” He targeted me with wild eyes and thrust harder. Pleasure smashed into my body with each plunge of his cock. I could no longer hold myself up. My legs slipped. I thought I would fall, but he grabbed them and held me to him.

“Turn around,” he said. “Look at how fucking sexy you are.”

I glanced over my shoulder. The mirrored wall reflected the hottest scene I’d ever witnessed, something that could rival any porn. My brown skin complimented his white. His cock glistened with me as it slid in and out to a tempo that only Chase could hear. His hands clamped possessively onto my ass. They looked like pillows of flesh between his fingers.

“You’re a fucking goddess,” he panted. “And belong to only me.”

I returned my view to him. Intense waves, delicious and all consuming, burst from my sex. I focused on his eyes and drowned in him—his scent, the satin texture of his skin, the hard push of his muscular chest as it smoothed against my bare breasts.

Oh my God. I can’t get enough. I’ll take him any way I can have him. It was such a sad realization, one that would probably force me in future days to balance on the tip of logic and madness. Because he’ll never just be mine. But I’ll always be his.

He sucked on my neck and I hugged him, hiding my face in his shoulder so that he couldn’t see the tears that spilled out of my eyes. *I have to share him.* What he whispered to me could be in another’s ear next week. And yet, when his fingers slipped along my back I still moaned in pure delight.

“Jasmine,” he cried. “Oh god, Jasmine.”

And I took joy in my name on his lips. He pushed me back until I faced him and concentrated on me as he fucked me harder. And when I shifted to his gaze, all I could see was his love and desire as it rained down on me.

Or is this what I want to see?

“I love you,” he said.

And with just those three words, an explosion of sexual bliss erupted inside my body, so overwhelming that my senses shattered into nothingness. I feared I would never be whole again. I screamed. With each thrust, he broke

me into pieces. With each kiss, he reshaped me into something more. I floated on an intense orgasm and mumbled his name over and over until my throat burned and my tongue swelled. When it ended, I crumbled within his arms.

“God, I love hearing you moan my name.” He held me up and changed his strokes to a slower pace. Another spark of lust emerged between my legs as another orgasm began. *Holy shit.* I stared at him with an open mouth and quivering lips.

He’s right. He’s ruined me for any other man.

“Chase,” I cried and sank into a body-shattering orgasm.

“Forever,” he whispered with clear certainty, like he’d held a serious dialogue in his head and had concluded with that answer. He wiped my tears away with his hand. “I’ll never hurt you or ever let you go.”

My body shuddered under his arms.

“I’m about to come.” He quickened his strokes to a thundering pace.

“Yes, baby.”

“My god!” he groaned and buried his face into my neck as he slammed into me with deranged power.

“Now say my name.” I licked my lips.

“Jasmine!” He swayed as he came. “Jasmine!”

And I loved it and savored every moan that ripped from his throat. I held onto him until he slowed to a halt, but remained inside of me. Shaking his head, he lowered us to the carpet. His legs quaked under me as I balanced on his thighs.

“Damn it.” He turned away from me and rubbed his face.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I still couldn’t see him. “What’s wrong?”

When he finally looked up at me, water glazed over his eyes. A tear trailed down his face. “I underestimated what you would do to me.”

Chapter 22

Like pathetic cowards, neither one of us brought up why the other had cried. We didn't discuss the words we'd said during sex. We simply cleaned each other in the bathroom, strolled into the dining area, and feasted on a skillfully executed meal. Afterwards, we cuddled up together in a dimly lit booth, where we fed each other with our fingers, licking sauce off the tips with our tongues. The waiter that had stood outside the powder room while we made love was the same who served us. The whole time, he blushed and placed our plates on the table with shaking hands. At the end of the night, Chase left the poor guy a four figure tip.

Back in the Chanel Suite, we made love again on the balcony above Paris. I wore a white robe to conceal his strokes as I moaned into the cool night air, certain Parisians enjoying a midnight stroll could hear us down below. And when we slept, skin to skin in the dark, our arms and legs tangled and looped together, the song "Tomorrow" played in the background, and my dreams remained on him.

Now we headed to Willow Park. He'd gotten me to come straight home with him after our trip. I promised I would do one week with him and then go back to my apartment. Deep down inside I didn't want to say goodbye to him just yet. I needed to be around him for a few more days.

Gray clouds swollen with upcoming rain hovered over Oshane City. A somber mood lingered inside the limo. We'd barely talked since the plane arrived at the airport.

Chase sighed and squeezed my hand. "So you'll finally get to see where I live."

"Yep." I looked out the window as we passed a stone wall that rose four feet high. A gold plate had engraved letters that said, "Willow Park." A manicured yard expanded out for miles. The limo continued down a black paved road. A mansion straight out of *Forbes Magazine* appeared at the top of a hill. My mouth dropped open. *This is huge.* Gray bricks made up the massive foundation. I tried to count all of the windows to guess the amount of rooms, but gave up at ten. Three women stood in front as the limo approached. *How did they know we were on our way?* I recognized Lucy and Dawn and assumed the other was Wendy. She had long Brunette hair that fell

past her shoulders and a petite body with small breasts and slim hips. She lifted a wine glass to her lips and took a small sip.

“You’ll tell me if anything is wrong?” Chase asked for the tenth time since we’d been in the limo.

“I will.” I twisted the copper ring on my finger.

Am I really doing this?

Chase touched my chin and guided my face to his. “Please don’t leave without letting me solve whatever is wrong. Please.”

“I won’t.”

“I want this to work out.”

“I know.” I bit my lip. *I don’t know if I can do this.* “But if it doesn’t work out we can always remain friends.”

“We’re well past being friends and I won’t accept defeat when it comes to you,” he said. “Something goes wrong, you tell me and I’ll fix it. Period.”

The limo parked. Dawn opened the door before Chase could touch the handle.

“Welcome back.” She frowned.

Chase sighed and stepped out. He helped me up, which was good because my nerves bounced around in my stomach like a jackhammer.

“We’re going to show Jasmine around now,” Dawn said. “But I do want to talk to you later, Chase.”

“I’m showing her around,” he said.

“Since when?” Wendy raised her eyebrows. “We always show them.”

Them? It makes me sound like a visitor or guest.

“Since now, Wendy.” Chase tightened his grip on my hand. “I would like to ease Jasmine into our life.”

“Surely a trip to Paris did that,” Wendy said, quickly moving her hand. Some of the liquid spilled over the rim of her glass and dropped onto the pavement.

“That’s enough,” Chase said.

“Oh is it?” Wendy placed her hand on her hips.

Well, this is already starting off badly.

I leaned against the limo’s side. Lucy flashed me a weak smile.

“Let’s just stick to tradition everybody.” Dawn walked my way and held out her hand. “Jasmine, welcome to our family.”

“Thank you.” I released Chase’s hand and shook hers.

“The Chanel Suite?” Wendy yelled. “You lying bastard.”

She flung the glass at him. Chase and I ducked. The glass shattered against the limo. I jerked back so I wouldn’t get cut.

Lucy grabbed Wendy’s arms. “Calm down.”

“Son of a bitch,” Wendy spat the words out. “You said you couldn’t take me there because it cost too much and was a waste of money!”

“I’d already taken you to several places that year,” he barked back. “Jesus, Wendy! You almost hurt us. Calm down.”

“Wendy, come on. You can talk about this later.” Lucy dragged Wendy back.

“So then are you going to take me to Paris?” Wendy stumbled back. “Because that’s not fair! I wanted—”

“We’ll talk about this later.” Chase frowned. “Go with Lucy. I’ll come to your apartment soon.”

“When?” Wendy placed her hands on her hips.

“In an hour.”

“No, I don’t think so. We’ll be talking in an hour.” Dawn got in front of him.

This is too much drama. I edged away to where the chauffeur was taking out my luggage. *Maybe I could convince him to put my suitcase back in and take me home without anybody noticing.*

“When are you going to talk to me?” Wendy whined.

“I’ll talk to you in two hours, Wendy,” Chase said.

“And you’d better have an explanation for the trip!” Wendy stumbled up the pathway to the house.

“I can’t believe you checked where I took Jasmine and then told Wendy.” Chase glared at Dawn. “What happened to your rule about not checking what I do for each of you on your date nights?”

Dawn pointed at him. “You’ve been breaking the rules for the past two weeks. So I figured I would do it, too.”

Lucy walked over to me and whispered, “I’m so sorry about India.”

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s okay.”

Chase and Dawn began to argue, but I couldn’t make out the words. They both yelled over each other. My nerves fluttered with unease. I hated being

around fights. I'd been around enough of them during my childhood. Mom always fought with whatever guy she'd been dating. At times they fought all night and none of us could get any sleep. Even worse, our neighbors in South End always dragged their arguments outside of their houses so everyone could see.

"Come on." Lucy hooked her arm around mine. "Let's go. Once they get started they won't stop."

"You showed Wendy the credit card bill intentionally!" Chase roared. "I try to come here and start us off on the right foot and you're instigating chaos."

"She had a right to know what was going on during her day." Dawn backed up. Her eyes filled with rage.

"It was your damn rule to begin with—"

"Well, you're breaking the rules. Why can't I?" Dawn hit her chest.

"Not that again!" Chase stormed off.

"You never do this!" Dawn cried and ran after him. "Never! I told you—"

"Yes! Yes!" Chase raised his hands in the air.

I swallowed. *I won't make it past a week in this place. I should just turn around right now.*

"Don't worry about your bags." Lucy tugged my hand. "The chauffer will take them up to your apartment. We each have our own servants. You'll meet her in the morning."

"Maybe I can move in tomorrow."

"No. Then Chase will do something else crazy that will piss all of us off." Lucy guided me to the house. I tried my best to not watch Chase and Dawn's arguing as they screamed and walked off in another direction.

"Don't worry. They'll do that for an hour or so." Lucy shrugged. "There's a garden around back, near the batting cage. They usually argue there."

Poor flowers.

"Why do they argue in the garden?"

"When Chase gets really mad he likes to go to the batting cage and hit balls, but Dawn always stops him from going in so they yell in the garden."

"O-Kay." I chewed the inside of my cheek.

We stepped into the house. A large foyer greeted me, with a huge staircase in front. Mailboxes with labels numbered one through five were on my left.

“So do you know much about the founder of Oshane City?” Lucy asked. I shook my head.

“Well, old man Oshane used to own this property and live here. He was really paranoid that somebody was trying to kill him so he had five apartments built into his mansion.” Lucy moved to the double doors on the right side of the staircase and opened them. “This leads to the living room and dining area. It’s where Chase and Dawn entertain people.”

“Just Chase and Dawn?” I peered in.

“Yeah. If we want to entertain guests, Dawn prefers we do it in our apartment or somewhere else.”

The living room was as big as the apartment I shared with Vivian and decorated in cream and silver. I was about to enter the area and drink in the elegance until I spotted the oil painting over the fireplace. It was of Chase and Dawn embracing and gazing into each other’s eyes. They looked younger, as if the portrait had been painted several years ago. My stomach burned with envy. I hugged myself and rushed away.

“You want to see the dining room?” Lucy smiled.

“No,” I muttered. “It doesn’t seem like I’ll be down here much anyway.”

“Yeah. When Chase and Dawn’s friends come over they usually hold their dinner parties here.” Lucy gestured for me to climb the stairs. “There are also guest rooms for their friends on the first level. If people stay, Wendy and I usually just go on a trip or something.”

So they hide you. Of course. What did I think would happen?

“So if his parents come over or anything?” I asked.

“Well, Chase’s mother was killed when he was seven, but when his dad or other family visits Wendy and I stay away.” Lucy glanced over her shoulder. “That’s the same with Dawn’s family.”

“So what happens when our family comes to visit?”

Lucy gave me a weird smile. “They wouldn’t come here. Dawn prefers for us to entertain them somewhere else. Chase goes with us wherever the meeting spot is.”

“So basically we’re glorified mistresses?”

Lucy paused at the top of the stairs. “You have to understand how hard this is for Dawn. Chase and her have been together since they were fourteen. I’ve been close with Chase forever and the few times he wanted to break up he just couldn’t do it. He loves her so much.”

I drowned in jealousy. Pain sliced through my heart like a sharp knife in the hands of a serial killer. *Of course he loves her.* My blood rushed. My hands shook. I focused on breathing as I hoped I wouldn't get an anxiety attack.

"Are you okay?" Lucy asked.

"Yes." *He loves her. I knew that. Calm down.* Yet, the pain in my chest remained.

"All of our apartments are on this floor." Lucy wrapped her arm around my waist. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I nodded.

A long hallway with silver walls and carpet stood before me. Two white doors were on the right with a black number in the center. On the left were another pair of white doors with black numbers.

"Mayor Oshane was so afraid someone would sneak in and kill him that he had these apartments built. Each day between Monday and Friday he slept in a different apartment," Lucy said.

"What did he do on the weekends?"

"He left the country." She pointed to the first door. "Dawn's apartment is number one. Wendy is door two. I'm three and you're four."

I raised my eyebrows. "Where's Chase's apartment?"

"On the third floor. His door has a number five on it."

I groaned and rubbed my eyes. I didn't like how things were set up and could imagine Chase sitting up in his apartment like some king elevated over his females as we hung out in our apartment like good girls, waiting for him to attend to us.

Oh my god! What am I doing?

"You look like you're going to vomit." Lucy released me. Concern etched her face. She pressed a red button on the wall.

"Yes," a woman's voice sounded from a speaker next to the buzzer.

"I need Mabel to give Jasmine her key. I also need some Pepto and something for an upset stomach."

"Yes, ma'am," the woman replied.

"I'm okay," I said.

"No. You're not."

I combed my fingers through my hair. *Am I just a number four?* "Why the

numbers? Did Chase decide this?”

“No. Dawn thought it would be fun to have everyone numbered in the order they came into the relationship.”

“It sounds like she wants everyone to know their rank.”

Lucy averted her eyes. “Well that too, but not in a mean way. Dawn isn’t catty.”

A black woman scurried up the stairs with a key.

“This is Mabel.” Lucy pointed to the black woman. “She’s your assigned maid.”

Mabel smiled and handed me a solid black key. On the top of the key, white gems formed a four. I gazed back at Mabel. Her gray hair was tied into a bun on top of her head. She had eyes like my grandma, dark brown with a liquid effect.

“Are all the maids black?” I blurted out.

Lucy’s mouth dropped open. “Y-yes.”

Mabel’s smile remained. She took my hand and gently squeezed it. “So how do you feel now?”

“Worse.” Rage coursed through my veins. My heart beat so fast I thought I would collapse. *Why am I so mad? Why do I care if the maid is black or...* Tears spilled from my eyes. Mabel hurried and opened my door. I wiped the tears away, tried to get a hold of myself, and stepped into the living room. My body froze once I spotted the furniture.

Holy shit. He must’ve hacked into my computer somehow.

Last month, during my job search phase, I would play online to pass the time while I waited for callbacks or email responses from interviews. I’d spent many hours on an online game called “House Design” where the person could create and plan a make believe place to live in. Standing in the apartment Chase provided for me, my living room captured my online game’s design to every small detail.

“How did he get into my computer?” I asked.

“Someone did it for him. It was during the process of learning about you,” Lucy said.

A shaggy plum carpet rested on the floor. A chocolate brown couch and loveseat surrounded a black coffee table which was done up in four inch cubes that jugged in and out in an elaborate design. An oil painting of my favorite fantasy characters hung on the wall above my couch. I knew before I

checked that a flat screen TV was on the wall across from the couch. Framed photos of my mom, nieces, brothers, Benny, and Vivian all sat on a shelf. On the other shelf were loads of candles.

Goodness. He even figured out I have an addiction to scented candles.

“Where did the photos come from?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” Lucy shrugged. “Chase works with a team to put our apartments together. My place was different. We designed it together.”

“Why?” I watched Mabel go into an all-white kitchen. Pictures of sunflowers hung everywhere. A huge amber vase full of sunflowers stood on the counter by the sink.

He even learned my favorite flower.

“I think there’s medicine in this cabinet.” Mabel opened it.

“Well, decorating my place was different because of my past. Some of the tiniest reminders of my life can take me to a...place I don’t want to go,” Lucy admitted. “So he wanted to make sure nothing freaked me out.”

“You and Chase have been close for a long time?” I stood in the middle of this apartment, not ready to sit down or move in too much. The experience was too unsettling. I felt like my private life had been invaded. Sure Chase’s intentions were good, maybe, but it was too much for me.

“Our fathers were friends,” Lucy mumbled. “But I don’t want to talk about that.”

I faced her. “Okay.”

Lucy stared at the floor.

“You said Chase’s mother was killed. How?”

“No one knows.” Lucy’s fingers shook. “Chase found her.”

“Oh my god.” I covered my mouth. “So—”

“I don’t want to talk about any of this.” Lucy lifted her head. “Today is already a bit depressing with everyone fighting and being pissed. We can talk about it another day.”

“I could only find Tylenol,” Mabel called out from the kitchen. “There’s ginger ale in the fridge. That could help.”

I waved her away. “No thanks. I think I’d rather have a drink.”

“There’s no liquor in here,” Mabel said.

“Wendy has some,” Lucy offered.

“No.” I scanned the room, ready to escape it. “I think I’m going to head

off to a bar. I'll probably grab something to eat there, too. You want to come?"

"Definitely!" Lucy clapped. "Sounds like a girls' night."

Yippee! Now I can't escape Lucy either. Oh well, might as well start a party.

"Mabel?" I glanced over my shoulder. "You want to come? Food and drinks on me."

She exchanged glances with Lucy and said, "No, ma'am. I'll be here until you return."

"Take the night off." I rushed out of the apartment.

"A-alright," Mabel said.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Vivian's number.

"Hello, stranger," she said after the third ring.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Laying in bubbly bath water with your hot brother." She laughed. Troy's chuckles drifted from the phone.

"Ick. I hate you." I headed to the stairs.

"I'll ask Wendy if she wants to come!" Lucy speed-walked in the other direction.

Oh great. Now the wineglass-throwing girlfriend can join us, too.

"What's up, Jasmine? How was France? Or are you still there?" Vivian asked.

"I'm back in Oshane. I'm staying with Chase," I muttered.

"And his girlfriends?" Her voice went up an octave and I heard a splash.

I groaned.

"What?" I heard my brother say.

"I need a drink. Do you feel like meeting me downtown?" I asked. "I need to be around you for an hour and see if my head is clear."

"You sound weird," Vivian said.

"I feel weird."

"Okay. Let's meet at Juniors."

"Sounds good, but just you. I can't tell you what I want to say if Troy is around. He'll just kidnap and lock me somewhere far away from Chase."

"Whereas I would just do that to Chase." Vivian giggled. "I still have my meat grinder, you know."

Lucy and Wendy stepped into the hallway.

“Not funny, Vivian.” I headed down the stairs. “Oh yeah. I’ll be bringing two of Chase’s girlfriends.”

“Oh goodie.” Vivian chuckled. “I can’t wait to meet them.”

Chapter 23

“We’re just dedicated to Chase.” Wendy stirred her pink iced drink with a straw. The waiter had told us it was called a *Pinky Panty Pull-down*. “I know it’s difficult to understand, but he’s a man of many needs.”

“Whoa.” Vivian kept her head propped in her hands and elbows on the table as she gaped at Wendy. “It’s like he brainwashed you with his penis.”

Lucy choked on her diet soda and fidgeted in her chair.

I nudged Vivian with my elbow. “Sorry, Wendy. Vivian really means this is difficult for her to understand, so—”

“No. I meant brainwashing.” Vivian shook her head. “Or maybe he indoctrinated you into a sort of cult-like relationship.”

“No, he didn’t brainwash me. Maybe you’re just closed-minded.” Wendy sipped her drink. “I’m sure you’ve shared many a man in your lifetime, you just didn’t know it.”

“This is true, but that form of sharing was called cheating,” Vivian replied. “And when I caught them cheating, I jabbed an inanimate object into their groin. What do you do when Chase sleeps around?”

“He doesn’t.” Wendy rolled her eyes. “We’ve all agreed to this.”

“Let’s talk about something else.” I waved my hand between them. As soon as we’d met at Junior’s, Vivian had assaulted Wendy and Lucy with questions.

“So you don’t care about him having sex with Dawn or Jasmine?” Vivian smirked.

“No. This way I’m never lied to or cheated on. Everything is out in the open.” Wendy displayed a confident smile. “I don’t have to be insecure like most women who are in monogamous relationships, going crazy wondering if their man is sleeping around.”

“Not all women think like that,” I chimed in.

And weren’t you screaming at Chase about taking me to Paris earlier?

“Every woman in a monogamous relationship gets that feeling.” Wendy leaned back in her chair. “Whether it’s for a quick second or not. Maybe she’s spotted a weird number on her husband’s phone, but then realizes it’s something else. Maybe there’s a sad woman out there right now that’s sitting

on her couch, crying in her hands, and wondering where her boyfriend is.”

“Maybe.” Vivian shrugged. “So you feel great because you know Chase is probably fucking the brains out of Dawn right now?”

I flinched.

He probably was having sex with her.

“No worries, right?” Vivian asked Wendy.

“None at all.” Wendy winked and gulped down some of her drink.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I interrupted. “New topic or I’m leaving.”

“Fine.” Vivian slid her wine over to her.

“This is a nice little place.” Lucy leaned my way and whispered, “It has a lot of character.”

Well, that was one way to look at it.

Sex toys decorated the bar—glow-in-the-dark dildos jutted out of the walls, every kind of blow-up doll from male to female dangled from the ceiling, plastic vaginas with velvet vibrating cores adorned each table like a centerpiece. The wallpaper was artistic nude pictures of men and women. On every table a stack of condoms stood between bottles of ketchup and mustard like packets of sugar.

“Junior’s décor is grotesque to say the least.” I grinned. “But it has the best bar food in Oshane City.”

For an appetizer, I’d ordered Juni bites, gouda-stuffed dates wrapped in bacon. Everyone instantly devoured them until I feared I wouldn’t get any more. An empty tray lay atop our table’s plastic vagina. Out of twenty, I’d only had two. *Greedy bitches*. I’d just ordered a pistachio-crust oyster Po’Boy with garlic mayonnaise and a side of parmesan French fries. *I swear to god they’d better not touch my entrée.*

“What do you think I should order?” Lucy asked.

“The gnocchi is pretty good.” I gulped some of my rum and Coke. Tonight was the moment I would get as drunk as possible. Tomorrow I could reevaluate what the hell I had signed up for. But tonight I needed a liquored distraction from Chase’s brothel system and the ache inside me that wished he would be in my bed when I returned to the apartment.

How pathetic I must be.

“I can’t believe you’re going to do this.” Vivian tilted her head my way. “This is so insane. I mean seriously, it’s something that I would do, not you.”

“You just said an hour ago that it might not be a big deal to try it.” I hit her arm.

“That was before I talked to Miss Delusional over there,” Vivian muttered, but I was sure Wendy and Lucy had heard her. “Just promise me you won’t act like that. Try it for a while, for fun, but continue to date other guys.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” I finished my drink and signaled the waiter to bring me another. All of the service staff were dressed like dominatrixes—black seductive bodysuits with revealing openings draped their bodies, as well as nylon rope and tiny little spanking paddles hooked to their belts.

“Are you going to live with him and them the whole time, though?” Vivian gestured to Wendy.

“I don’t think so,” I admitted. “I promised him a week this month. I’m pretty sure I’ll bail after the end.”

“Why?” Wendy raised her eyebrows. Interest glossed her brown eyes. “The apartment is basically paid for and all yours. What’s the big deal?”

“It would never feel like home. I can’t bring my family there.”

“Dramatic, aren’t we?” Wendy tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Chase would fly your family anywhere you wanted. Last Thanksgiving Chase, my family, and I celebrated in Hawaii.”

A ping of jealousy collided with the envy that already moved within me. Vivian looked at my expression and frowned.

“Bringing dates back there would be weird,” I said.

“Dates?” Wendy drew back in horror. “You think you’re going to date other guys?”

“That’s what I agreed to with Chase.” I smiled, knowing I had the upper hand.

“Well, Dawn won’t like it.”

“I can’t wait to meet this Dawn.” Vivian grinned.

Never happening.

“So how do you do the holidays?” I turned to Lucy so the conversation could go to something else.

“It’s a lottery system. We all throw our keys in a bucket, shake it, and Chase pulls one out.” Lucy glanced at one of the pictures of a naked man lounging on a velvet chair, his eyes intent on the viewer.

“Wow. A lottery system? That’s romantic. And do Chase’s parents know

about all of you?” Vivian asked.

“No.” Wendy shook her head. “His mom is dead. His dad probably wouldn’t care. There’s gossip in New York that Chase’s dad has women all over the state and babies with them all. Some of the kids are school-aged. But Chase still doesn’t want his dad to know.”

“Like father like son.” Vivian smirked.

“Chase is nothing like his father.” Lucy’s fingers formed into shivering fists. “He’s a very cruel man and has no respect for anyone else, especially women. I’m not upset I can’t sit at a dinner table with him, pretending like I’m happy he’s there.”

“And Dawn’s family is a bunch of stuffy mannequins.” Wendy yanked out a pack of cigarettes. “Her mother has a nasal voice and she’s always looking at me like I’m an infection.”

“Of course she looks at you that way, you’re sleeping with her daughter’s fiancé,” Vivian blurted out.

I nudged her again.

“What? It’s the truth. Her mother probably senses the obvious, that her daughter is engaged to a selfish egomaniac.” Vivian finished her wine. “The more I learn the more I’m leaning toward the side of run as fast as you can.”

I sighed. “Vivian. Stop.”

“You’re going to have to tell Troy eventually.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I grabbed the new rum and Coke the waiter carried over to me, along with my food. “I agreed to try this for three months. But I can barely deal with a few hours at Willow Park.”

“I was like that my first week.” Wendy touched my hand. It seemed weird to have her console me. Wendy patted my arm. “I got used to it after a month or so.”

Vivian sucked her teeth. “I don’t know if it’s a good situation if you have to get used to something that hurts you.”

“Who says I’m hurting?” I asked.

“Every time they talk about doing something with Mr. Glorious you cringe.” Vivian grabbed one of my parmesan French fries. “You’re drinking in the middle of the week and you’re not even a big drinker. It’s kind of obvious, Jasmine.”

“I just have a lot to think about with this situation.” I nabbed one of the oysters. “He hasn’t hurt me.”

“Yet,” Vivian added.

“Yet.” I stuffed my mouth with food.

“Plus, Dad hates him. He’s called every day asking if you’ve come back from France,” Vivian said. “Your mom called me, too.”

Shit. I hit my head. “I haven’t talked to Mom in weeks, she doesn’t even know where Troy is living or that I’m working.”

“I’ve tried to get your brother to see her, but he refuses.” Vivian took another fry.

I slapped her hand. “Leave my food alone. Yours is coming.”

“Stingy.” She stuck her tongue out.

“I’m already sharing my man, don’t make me share my food.” I opened my mouth in shock and then laughed.

“You’re losing it.” Vivian frowned and quickly grabbed another fry.

“No. I think I’m drunk, actually.” I slid my plate away from her. Lucy and Wendy began to chat amongst themselves as the waiter brought the rest of everyone’s order.

“Did you tell your dad you’ve taken my brother’s innocence?” I bit into my sandwich. I’d never told Benny the true details of that night. I’d explained that Troy and I arrived at the apartment and found Noc fighting with Vivian.

“No.” Vivian twisted her lips to the side as the waiter came by and set her personal pizza on the table. “Troy thinks I’m ashamed of him. He just doesn’t get that my dad will kick his ass.”

“He knows. He just doesn’t care.”

“By the way, I asked him not to get an apartment and move in with us.” Vivian smiled.

“That is such a bad idea,” I said between bites. “You just started having sex.”

“We’re doing more than having sex.” Her eyes shifted to a starry-eyed look. “He told me he’s been in love with me since we were kids.”

What? I scrunched my face up in confusion and thought about past years. *Did it ever seem like Troy was in love with Vivian? Maybe.* He did always tag along when I said I was going to meet her. He never cared about any of my other friends. Plus, when he ran away, it was her bedroom he hid in. Maybe that was when his crush had started.

“Well, still be careful,” I warned.

“Oh yeah, you should really be worried about me instead of thinking how crazy it is you’re moving into Chase’s coochie sweat shop.”

“Must you be so crude?”

“How do I describe that situation and not be crude?” she asked. “And news flash, we’re dining at a restaurant full of lit-up dildos. I don’t think there’s a crude barometer around here.”

“Just eat your stupid pizza.” I licked the garlic mayonnaise off my finger. “This sandwich is heaven. The oysters have a great crisp. The breading gives it a sweet flavor. The bun is toasted just right.”

I gave a thumbs up to the chef as he peeked over the service counter to see my reaction.

“Is it orgasmic, Ms. Montgomery?” Vivian raised her eyebrows.

“Orgasmic.” I swiped up more mayo with my finger.

“Speaking of orgasms,” Vivian wagged her eyebrows. “Your brother is a beast.”

“I’m eating over here.”

“Two orgasms with each session. And his tongue—”

“You’re going to rot in hell for what you’re doing to me.”

She cackled like the witch she was and whispered in my ear, “Did you hook up with your rich and narcissistic lover in Paris?”

My body trembled. My mind filled with those precious moments—Chase moving slowly inside of me, his hands ravishing every inch, and the way he licked my clit and sucked hungrily on my nipples. My teeth caught my bottom lip as I groaned.

“That’s a yes if I ever did see one.” Vivian’s eyes widened. “You look like you’re going to come right now.”

“Oh shush.” I covered my face and tilted close to her ear. “He’s so good. The best I’ve ever had, and we did it everywhere. In a high-end restaurant, on our balcony, in the hotel, Jacuzzi, and all over his plane on the way back. God. He knew what to touch and how much to touch it.”

“He should.” Vivian gestured to Wendy and Lucy. “He’s had plenty of practice.”

“Oh god.” I placed my head on the table and hid my face. “You’re right. What am I doing?”

“Oh, Jasmine. Wait. I’m sorry.” Vivian rubbed my back. “I was just joking

. . . kind of.”

“But it’s true.” I cringed.

“Everything okay?” Lucy asked.

“Yeah.” I sat up and blew out a long breath. “Let’s order more drinks.”

“Come home tonight.” Vivian laid her head on my shoulder. “If you’re going to do this with him, at least make sure you’re in a safe and comfortable living space.”

“Nah. I’ll give the apartment a few more days. I promised him. Plus, Troy and you are just going to have sex loud enough to shake the walls!”

She laughed. “Will you call Troy and me to get you when you’ve had enough of this craziness?”

“Of course.”

“Will you call my dad and tell him you’re okay? I’ve never seen him so freaked out.” She lifted her head. “He keeps bringing up those dead girls.”

I closed my eyes. *Great. Another thing to stress over.*

“You see those two bulky guys near the door?” I pointed.

“Yep.”

“Those are my new guards. And the big black guy at the bar is the one who stopped Troy from killing Noc.”

Vivian pouted. “That sucks. I thought those guys were so into us, the way they’ve been staring. I just knew they would be buying us drinks. So it looks like Chase is making sure you’re protected?”

“Yep.”

“And who’s going to protect you from him?” she asked.

“I was counting on you to stab him in his crotch with a paintbrush.”

A huge smile spread across her face. “I’m looking forward to that moment. Please, don’t make me wait too long.”

Four guys strolled over to our table from another side of the room. They had a college boy look—fit bodies, young faces, crude sayings on their t-shirts, and eyes that undressed all of us at the table.

“We were wondering if we could hang out with you beautiful ladies,” the tallest one said. His pale blue eyes traveled to me. I sipped more of my drink. Vivian and I exchanged glances.

“Chase is probably having make-up sex with his fiancée right now,” Vivian said in my ear. That realization crushed me. She bumped my shoulder

with hers. “Remember. You can date people, too.”

“Sure,” I said to the guys. “Sit down.”

Lucy appeared worried, whereas Wendy scooted an empty chair next to her and beckoned one of them to sit down.

Chapter 24

My feet ached. My ankles were swollen. I held my shoes in my hands as we departed from the limo. I couldn't wait to get out of there. Lucy had thrown up all over herself. A rank odor permeated the limo. Green liquid drenched her side and the vehicle's seats and floor.

"I'm s-so sorry," Lucy cried as the chauffeur carried her to the mansion's entrance. Her red hair stuck to half of her face. Her lipstick was smeared across her cheeks and chin.

"Just drink lots of salt water and call in sick tomorrow so you can rest." I tiptoed behind them. The cool grass tickled my feet. "In fact, don't worry about calling. I'll tell Chase."

"You really know how to party," Wendy slurred behind me. "I haven't danced that much in years."

"Then we should do this every week." I yawned and paused so she could catch up with me. "Once a week we'll go out and party."

"And we'll make sure Lucy doesn't drink too much." Wendy stumbled and fell face-first onto the ground. "Or me either."

I scrunched my face up in horror and sprinted her way.

Grass and dirt stuck to her forehead. She rolled over and cackled. The noise rose in the air and spread across the front of the estate. I was sure we'd woken up Chase and Dawn. As soon as the thought charged to my brain, an ache slammed against my stomach. *Chase and Dawn*. I'd been forcing myself to not think about them or what they were doing while we danced at the bar.

Was he cuddling with her and whispering how this night was so perfect, like he'd told me on the plane? Had they made love? Did he already forget about the nights we'd shared in Paris?

"What's wrong?" Wendy stopped laughing. "Are you alright?"

I nodded and extended my hand to her. "This is just weird for me. Usually after a fun night I call my boyfriend and talk for a while about our day, but that's not really an option in this situation."

Wendy frowned. "No. We're not supposed to contact or spend time with him on other women's nights. It protects us all."

"I can see that."

“And to make sure no one’s feelings are hurt, Chase never spends the night.”

I wrinkled my forehead. “Oh really?”

“Yes. Even when Chase and I travel, he’ll get his own room so at the end of the night we’ve respected the rules.”

“Of course. That’s what we did.” I turned away so she couldn’t see the lie on my face.

Would our trips be different? No cuddling ever? That might be a deal breaker. I laughed. *Of all the things for me to put my foot down on, cuddling seemed a bit trivial.*

Wendy gave me an odd look. “What?”

“Nothing.”

A black woman with long brown hair ran out from the front door. “Ms. Wendy, are you okay?”

“Oh Zola, I need you.” Wendy spread her arms so Zola could help her up.

Again, the unsettling agitation that all of Chase’s maids were black hit me.

It shouldn’t even matter. What is wrong with me tonight? Maybe they remind me of Grandma.

My grandma had worked as a maid all of her life, until her back’s throbbing wouldn’t disappear from pain killers and her employer forced her to retire. She’d spent her days on her knees scrubbing and cleaning a rich family’s house, just to come home to an alcoholic jobless husband who beat her and five hungry kids who needed to eat, do homework, and prepare for the next day. My drunken grandfather died long before I was born. Now, Grandma lived in a small retirement home with her boyfriend, a cook for the family she used to work for.

And every time I visited her, we strolled around the retirement community, hand in hand, greeting all her friends, “Here’s my granddaughter. She went to Harvard, you know. Won’t be any toilet cleaning in her future. She’ll pay someone to do that.”

She might be right, but I don’t think being a rich man’s fourth girlfriend is what she meant.

Wendy leaned on Zola as they headed up the pathway. I trailed behind them. White light bathed the staircase. Two other black maids walked by me while they walked down the stairs. They smiled at me, and I cringed a little inside, somewhat embarrassed for them to see me here. *What would*

Grandma say if she was a maid here? Would she feel bad for the black girl or think the arrangement was not at all unusual?

We reached the stairs with no further vomiting or stumbling.

“Goodnight, Wendy.” I watched her amble toward her apartment. The door with the huge number one opened. Dawn stepped out in a pink robe and ostrich-feathered heel slippers. An old episode of *Desperate Housewives* flashed in my head.

Whoa. I didn't know people actually wore slippers with heels.

“Jasmine, I’m thrilled you spent time with Wendy and Lucy.” Dawn displayed a warm grin. Make-up coated her face. Even her blonde hair maintained a stylish curl. She exuded a flawless beauty. I was dropping lower into a crater of insecurity with each second that I glanced at her.

“Yeah. We had fun.” I fingered the diamond-studded number four on my key.

“I’m excited you’re giving us a chance.” She moved in closer. Her perfume swirled around me. It was something intoxicating and flowery—the scent of fresh roses mingled with violets. Like Chase, no blemishes or imperfections marked her skin.

I'm so out of his league. Why the hell would he even need other women when he has her?

“We started off rocky.” Dawn tossed her blonde curls over her slim shoulders. “And I blame Chase for that. He disrespected our nights and it just made me so frustrated I sent that mean message to you without a second thought. I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s forgiven.”

She extended her hand to me. “So let’s start over.”

We shook.

“Are you okay with the new schedule?” She squeezed my hand a little. “It may seem unfair at first, but I’m trying to give everyone their date nights back that were lost during Chase’s pursuit of you.”

“Um...what do you mean? What about the schedule?” I tugged my hand back.

“Your date night doesn’t start until two weeks. Didn’t you see the schedule? I had Mable place it in your apartment.”

Are you kidding me?

“Oh. So I don’t spend time with him at all?”

“Well, you’ll see him at work. Perhaps you can go to lunch or do breakfast during that time.” She pulled out a tiny phone and handed it to me. It was white with a black four on it.

Oh God. Will this number always follow me around? Do we get freaking t-shirts and hats too?

“This is your new phone. It has an app for our schedule.” She pressed the screen and an image of her smiling face materialized with the words *Calendar* under her face. *Shoot me in the head now, please.* “All of our websites and contacts are on the phone, too.”

“Websites?”

“Wendy and Lucy didn’t tell you?”

“No. I guess not.”

“I run an alternative lifestyle blog. It’s a way for us to connect with others in our situation.” She smiled with pride. “It’s really fun exchanging stories and learning from other women all around the globe. Feel free to post something whenever you want. Just send it to me first for approval.”

“Umm...I’ll think about it.”

“Now, you need to remember that your therapist appointment is the last Thursday of every month. And please feel free to tell her anything.” She held her hand up to stop me as I began to talk. “Lucy said you wanted to use your own, but that’s just not possible. I mean, heavens, this situation can’t be made public to anyone. It would destroy Chase and me.”

I tensed. “You mean all of us, right? It’s not just you and Chase in this situation and surely you two aren’t the most significant. I’m not excited about any of my family or friends discovering this, either.”

“Oh gracious, of course you’re important.” She seemed far too cheery. “But, Chase and I have huge public reputations—”

“I’ll use my own therapist and gynecologist.” I stepped around her. “I’ll see them every month like you want, but I won’t have you or Chase telling me who I seek counsel from or choose to have examine my own body.”

“Jasmine, you have to understand that Chase and I are providing you with a great life.”

Now I really understand when people say, “My pimp hand is getting itchy.”

I turned to stare at her for a minute. Rage rose in me to the point where I

had to run out of the hallway or I might consider slapping her. In the end, it wasn't her who pissed me off. It was the constant *Chase and I* that kept escaping those full and perfect lips.

"I'm done discussing the therapist and gynecologist," I said.

"Excuse me?" she hissed.

"I'll follow your schedule and rules, but there will be some limits."

"Well, then we need to talk to Chase because it's intolerable for you to think you can just waltz in here establishing your own limits."

I pointed to her. "You're insane if you think I'll just do whatever you say! I'm a grown woman—"

"I didn't say you—"

"I'm not some glorified mistress that you order around!" My voice rose higher than I intended. *Oh my god. I have to get it together.* I twisted around. "And you can tell Chase! I don't give a fuck!"

"Jasmine, wait." Dawn hurried my way as I stopped. "Maybe you need some time before we discuss this any further. And...I can always have your therapist and doctor checked out."

I formed my hands into fists and dug my fingernails into my skin. "Okay."

She placed her hand on my shoulder. "If we all want to survive this...whatever this is, we have to treat each other with respect and dignity as well as follow the rules. I am willing to meet you halfway with certain things."

"Fine. As long as you understand that I do have limits and my own personal needs."

"You're not a glorified mistress." Dawn's cheeks tinted red.

I sure do feel that way.

"Thank you."

She removed her hand and put them both into her robe's pockets.

"However, I am worried that Chase is allowing you to date and have sex with other men. He informed me of this tonight."

I crossed my arms around my chest. "Did he explain that the men will be investigated and tested before I begin a sexual relationship with them?"

"Yes, but that doesn't stop me from thinking your dating will complicate things."

"I'm not going to sit in my damn apartment like a good little girl waiting

as Chase tramps around with you all.”

“Jasmine?”

“I’m drunk and annoyed.” I stormed off. “Let’s just talk about this tomorrow.”

“Maybe we can do lunch?”

Maybe after you go do yourself with a broomstick.

“Fine.” I rushed with unlocking my apartment door, opened it, and hurried in without hearing her reply. *I’ve lost my mind. I’m here less than twenty-four hours and not one moment have I felt like this is a great idea.* I leaned on the door and rubbed my face, as if that would help me discover some hidden answer to what I should do next. I’d promised Chase three months, but was now thinking I would only do a week. *Maybe once I’m back in my own apartment it will be better? Then I don’t have to see his women all the time.* Just like that time in India, I drowned in a sensation of being alone. I scanned my empty apartment. Although huge and crowded with expensive furniture, it didn’t embody me. It only represented what Chase thought I was. My phone buzzed. I checked the screen.

Vivian: Did you arrive home safely?

Me: Yes. I’ve returned to my pimp’s castle.

Vivian: Stop that. Maybe I was too hard on you. I’m sorry.

Me: Am I being stupid for trying this?

Several seconds passed before she replied. I tapped my foot. My nerves flared on edge as if her answer would decide the next days of my life. *It probably would.* I craved an opinion from someone who knew me and my limits better than I knew myself.

Vivian: You’re being stupid only if you think so.

Me: Wtf? That’s not an answer!

Vivian: Just try it, I guess, until you don’t like it anymore.

Me: And if I get hurt?

Vivian: Then I get to shank him!

Suddenly, I didn’t feel by myself anymore.

Vivian: Goodnight. Your brother’s big cock is calling.

Me: I’ve now written you out of my will!

Chapter 25

After the altercation with Dawn in the hallway and the moment of doubt inside my new place, I needed to relax and lighten my mood. I took a long hot shower, brushed my teeth, lit all of the sea breeze candles I could find, placed them around my bed, and filled the air with Sapphire's song "Make Believe Lover." I collapsed onto the bed and climbed under the covers in new silk pajamas I assumed Chase had bought me. They'd been folded on my bed. My name was embroidered on the pockets and since it didn't have a big four on it, I figured Dawn had no control over the purchase.

Sapphire's soulful voice mingled with the smooth notes of the guitar and piano. *Who needs Chase when I have my own imaginary man?* Immediately, I journeyed to that beach with my daydreamed lover, breathing in the fresh air of the sea—so sweet, but utterly calming. I imagined his strong arms covering my body instead of the blankets, that it was soft sand under my body instead of the bed, his succulent taste on my tongue instead of stale rum.

"Make believe lover, lounging on the beach, drinking in my love," Sapphire sang. *"He comes when you need him the most and showers down his love."*

"Are you asleep?" Chase asked behind me.

I screamed and jumped out of bed, dragging blankets to the other side of the room with me.

"Baby? It's me." Chase waved his hands.

"How the hell did you get in? I locked the door, right?" My heart raced. I held my hand to my chest and waited for my heartbeat to calm down. "I put the bar up on the door, too. I know I did. I always—"

"You probably did lock the front door. I got in here another way. The original house owner was a bit paranoid so there are secret escape routes all over the property. I came here from a crooked stairwell that links my closet to yours." Chase's eyes traveled around the room and gazed at the lit candles. "This is magical. You must have twenty candles in here. But you can't go to sleep like this. A fire could start."

"What are you doing here?"

Chase's gaze shifted to me. He opened his mouth and then closed it. The

candlelight flickered off his face, drawing my attention to those luscious lips and piercing eyes. He wore no shirt, just black pajama pants that hung low and exposed those curves of taut abdominal muscle I'd enjoyed trailing my tongue along when we were in Paris. My heartbeat increased, but this time it wasn't due to fright.

"His heart is under steel locks and unbreakable bars, but once you find the key he'll always be yours."

"Are you going to answer me?" I lifted the blanket so I wouldn't trip over it as I returned to bed.

"Truthfully, I don't know why I'm here." Chase averted his eyes and blew out air. "I guess I just wanted to see you and make sure you were doing okay. That this situation isn't overwhelming for you."

"I'm fine."

"You're lying."

My mouth dropped open, but no words came out.

"Make believe lover, he'll take you to butterfly gardens and worlds with no wars. He'll guide you along a path of rainbows and help you fly toward the stars."

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

What could you do? Stay with me, like this is just a regular relationship, like it's only me and you, not three other women vying for your attention and love. But then it would just be one night, and tomorrow night I'd have to adjust to this crazy place all over again.

He moved around the bed and headed toward me.

"No. I'm fine," I said.

He paused.

"Plus, you being here is against Dawn's rules." I playfully wagged my index finger at him, slung my blankets on the bed, and climbed back on it. "You know you can't stay."

"Damn the rules." He plopped on the bed next to me. I blocked his hands as he attempted to embrace me.

"What's wrong?" he whispered. "What's bothering you?"

"Seriously." I covered his mouth with my hand. "I'm okay."

He hovered over me. "I watched you from my window while you stumbled out of the limo. You seemed different. I know your laugh and it

wasn't the same sound from when you laughed a few nights ago. At first, I wasn't going to come, but..."

"But what?"

He said nothing else. A sinking feeling hit me. Insecurity drifted my way and replaced the little peace I'd been feeling. I bit my bottom lip. "Will I be the only room you visit tonight?"

"Of course." He shifted to his side and lay next to me. "Jasmine, I swear I never do this. Dates are done by ten at night and I'm back in my apartment minutes later. I don't do secret visits at any time. Especially on others' date nights."

"Then why are you doing this now?" For some reason, I was afraid of the answer. Nothing but bad thoughts jumbled my head.

Did he think he could just slip in, have sex with me, and slip out undetected? Would that be wrong or right?

He sighed and slid his fingers from my chin and down the curve of my neck.

I gently pushed him away. "Haven't you already had sex with Dawn tonight?"

He groaned, but remained where he was. "Yes. We had a date. No. We did not have sex, and for your information, I'm not here for that."

I centered my attention on the ceiling so he couldn't see the doubt swimming in my eyes. "You should leave. Later, I'll just wonder on one of my nights if you're going to do this with someone else."

"I won't."

"You don't know that," I mumbled.

"Please look at me. I won't be doing secret visits for anybody." He targeted me with those green eyes. My whole spirit floated his way like a traitor, leaving me to fend for myself.

"In his eyes are wishes, and in his lips are kisses, that will last well past when you've woken up."

"Am I just a new toy to you?" I asked.

"Hell no. I've had many toys." He shook his head. "What's going on between us is different."

"No. It's not." I closed my eyes.

"Why does it feel different to me?" He leaned in. His soft lips smoothed

against mine. It felt so good to have him near me. His leather and vanilla scent wrapped around me, trapping me to him. *This is why I haven't walked away.* Inhaling him, I relished in the press of his body. When his tongue entered my mouth, I groaned and collapsed into the mattress. He pulled back.

A hungry look replaced his usual expression, and I feared he would swallow me whole. "All night, even on my date with Dawn, I thought of you and our trip. I couldn't get your scent out of my head or the way you moaned."

"Don't say that," I muttered.

"For the first time in five years, this arrangement is...difficult."

My body tensed. *But what did that mean for us? How did that relate to me?* I turned my head away from him. The satin pillow flattened against my cheek. Part of me craved an answer. The rest was too scared to hear it. Most likely nothing would change.

"He flies down to you, his wings flowing in the wind. He captures you with firm arms and soft skin."

"Don't make me leave." He decorated the side of my face with tender kisses. "I'm not asking for us to have sex. I just want to be next to you."

"For a few minutes?"

This is probably a horrible idea.

"I'll stay as long as you'll let me." His voice caressed the loneliness deep inside my heart. In that undisclosed place where no one but only intimate lovers were acquainted with.

"Fine. Just for tonight." I turned over, put my back to him, and switched the song to repeat. He pulled me closer to his body. His hardness molded onto the curve of my behind. Warmth pooled between my thighs. I heard an intake of breath as he smelled my hair and then brushed his nose against the back of my neck. I trembled in his arms, but he made no further move and stayed true to his promise of not coming to my room for sex. We remained on the bed, draped in each other's arms and legs, silent, with only the lyrical stream of the song to serve as our conversation.

"I love you, Jasmine."

And as usual, I offered him no reply, not ready to gift him with that final confession when I'd already presented him with my heart and body.

"And all the time you play among flowers and rise within the sky, He sees what's in your heart and he never wonders why."

Chapter 26

Sunlight seeped into my bedroom. I woke up to Chase's kisses on my skin, as delicate as if someone slid a feather against my arm. A sigh escaped his lips as he slipped his hand along the outline of my hips. Sometime during the night, he'd blown out all the candles and switched my music from Sapphire to the Beatles. Their voices lifted in flawless melody.

"I didn't give you permission to change my music," I mumbled. "You've lost serious cool points."

He gripped my pajama pants with his hands. "Do I at least get points for not taking your clothes off in the middle of the night?"

"No." I rubbed my behind against his erection as it pressed hard into me.

He groaned and edged away. "You're making it tough to get out of bed."

"Do we even have to go to work? You're the boss and I can make it worth your while."

"No, seductress. I've messed around enough with you these past days. I'll bet there's a pile of contracts on my desk." He rolled out of bed. "Not to mention the fact that I haven't worked out in days."

I twisted around to watch him. His waves were ruffled into a funny mess. He dove his hands into his pants and adjusted his erection so it wasn't pushing out and stretching the silk.

He's so sexy.

He raised his arms over his head and stretched. "All that French food and eating out with you is going to fatten me up. I have to figure out how I'm going to squeeze in two workouts today."

I rubbed my eyes with my hands. "I'll probably run around your estates this morning and then—"

"No. Come with me to the gym."

"To box?" I grinned. "I'm a pretty pitiful fighter. My brothers always handled my battles."

"And now I'll fight your battles." He smirked. "You can run at my gym. I think there's a treadmill in there. If not, I'll make sure a top-of-the-line treadmill is in there by the time we arrive at the gym."

"Maybe."

He paused and tossed me a weird grin. “I love how you think my orders are suggestions.”

“I worry that you think your delusions of grandeur are reality.”

My phone rang before he could throw back a reply. He raised his eyebrows as I answered it.

“Hello?”

“Jasmine, it’s about time you answer your phone,” Mom said. “I haven’t heard from you in two weeks. Anything could have happened. That white girl said—”

“Vivian. Her name is Vivian, Mom.” I rolled my eyes. As long as I’d been friends with Vivian, my mom called her *that white girl*. Thankfully, she referred to Benny by his actual name so I only had to reprimand her for one person.

“Whatever. That white girl said you went to Paris.”

“I did.” Tension swelled in my shoulders. I got out of bed. “Mom, it’s early.”

“Well, while you were in Paris living the good life, your family was in South End with no electricity. They cut our power off. And it’s cold at night. Tee-Tee couldn’t even do her homework by candlelight. You know Sherman Jr. has asthma and we need the nebulizer to give him his treatments.”

“How much is the electric bill, Mom?”

“Three hundred and fifty dollars and there’s a fifty dollar late fee each week it’s off. They won’t take any checks or credit cards.”

I shut my eyes and chewed the inside of my cheek. *You would think she never knew the electric bill was coming. Every month we go through the same thing.* “How long has it been off?”

“Two weeks.”

Fuck. So an extra hundred bucks.

“Just as long as I’ve been calling and calling you,” she said. “Every day, not one time did you call me back.”

“I’m sorry. I was busy.”

“Obviously.”

Chase touched my arm. I opened my eyes.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

I covered the mouthpiece of the phone. “Yes. I’m sorry. I’ll just meet you

at work later.”

I'd have to borrow more money from Vivian. The last thing I needed was Chase handing me money when he was already signing my paychecks and paying my rent. I didn't want him to have any more power over me. *When do I get paid anyway? I'll have to ask Lucy and figure out a good time to get down to the utilities company to pay the bill. What time did it close again, four or five?* Last month, I'd rushed down there right when they closed. They'd refused to take my cash and so my nieces and nephews lived in the dark another night.

Fuck.

Two weeks they've moved around in a cold and dark apartment in South End. Guilt coursed through my veins. Here I was, traveling the world, staying in a room in Paris that was worth over seven thousand a night, and living in a mansion, while my family was barely getting by.

Mom continued to rant. Chase remained standing in front of me. I stepped around him. He blocked me, wrapped his arm around my waist, and whispered in my ear. “How much do you need?”

“...you left South End and I understand why,” Mom continued. “But you can't forget your family and where you came from. God gifts you with blessings so you can give back to those who need it, not so—”

“Mom, hold on.” I muted the phone and looked at Chase. “I'd rather not start borrowing money from you. I have this taken care of.”

The muscle in his jaw twitched. “So where would you get it?”

“Benny or Vivian.”

He laughed. “Don't you think that's a bit silly when your boyfriend is a billionaire?”

“You can pay me my salary when I earn it, but when it comes to my family, it's my responsibility.”

He released me and headed to the nightstand. “That's ridiculous. I'll send Xavier over to your mother's house and give her some money. How much does she need?”

It would be that simple. *I could just tell him the amount and she'd have it there in no time, but then how long would that continue?* Once my mother spotted a man showing up at her door in a limo with a stack of cash in his hand, my phone would never stop ringing. Even worse, it would get to the point where I depended on Chase to support my family and me. I'd witnessed

men use the hell out of my mother and hurt my brothers and me. The entire time she allowed it just because she didn't think she could financially survive without them.

"No. I can take care of it." I walked to the bathroom to try to finish my phone call in private.

He seized my arm. "Why? Explain to me why I can't simply give it to her."

Mom and him are driving me crazy this morning!

"I don't like to depend on other people to help me with my mom."

"Too bad," he said through clenched teeth. "I'd rather not have my woman race around town trying to gather a few hundred dollars that I could give her in seconds."

"Why are you annoyed?"

"You look stressed out and I don't like it." He tapped my phone. "How much?"

"It'll probably be around five hundred or so."

"I have that in my wallet. Ridiculous." He stomped off. "I can't believe you would rather ask someone else for a few hundred when I have it."

"If you give it to me, then I want you to take this amount out of my check on payday," I said. "And I always go pay the bill myself so don't worry about Xavier doing it."

"You're not going to South End." His eyebrows furrowed.

"Yes I am. Stop worrying. I have four gorilla guards who monitor my movements." I hung up on my mom. She'd just go on and on about what I didn't do and how I hadn't been there for her. I slid my pajama top off without unbuttoning it. "Besides, I have to go down to the utility company. The bill is in my and her name so he couldn't do it."

Chase's eyes followed my movement and directed his attention to my nipples as they hardened from the cool morning air. "Why can't your mother just pay the bill herself?"

"She's raising my nieces and nephews. One of my nephews is four years old and he's disabled. My youngest niece just turned two. It's difficult for Mom to run errands with them by herself, especially when she will have to wait in a long line to pay a bill."

"Put your gym clothes on. Xavier can handle it. They'll take my money for the bill and if there's a problem I'll shut the whole company down." He

began typing on his phone. “Okay. I gave Xavier the orders. That’s done. I’m running up to put my clothes on.”

I stood there, frozen in place. “Did you not hear the part about how I solely am responsible for my family? I’m serious. I don’t want you interfering or thinking you can...”

“What? Just say it.” He stalked my way and positioned himself right in front of me.

“I’m not a charity case.”

“No. You’re not.”

I bit my bottom lip.

“You were smiling and laughing until you answered the phone.” He placed his hands on my waist and drew me into him. “As soon as your mother started talking, your face held this sad look, and all over pocket change.”

“It’s not pocket change to me.”

“It will be after a few months.” He landed a kiss on my forehead. “How many kids is she taking care of?”

I gazed up at him, full of embarrassment. “Seven.”

“How many bedrooms do they live in?”

“A two-bedroom apartment. It’s in Zenfield projects.”

“We’ll have to move them out of there, then.” He patted my shoulder and walked off.

“What?”

He headed to my closet door. “You heard me. And don’t start with that ‘I’m so independent’ mess. It should be illegal for that many people to live in so small a space. And I don’t ever want you going into South End by yourself.”

He opened my closet.

“Wait.” I hurried his way. “We’re not moving anybody anywhere until I know for sure I’m going to be with you.”

He stopped walking, rested his hand on the doorway, and tapped the polished wood with his finger. “You still have doubts?”

“Of course.” I held my hands up to my sides. “We’ve barely been together for a week. I’m still not adjusted to this lifestyle. Now we have to wait two weeks for our first date, so it will take a while.”

“Two weeks?” He turned around and scrunched his face up in confusion.

“What do you mean by two weeks?”

“Dawn changed the schedule so the others can get their date nights back, so our first date isn’t until the end of two weeks.”

“Changed the schedule? The hell she did!” Chase roared and pushed the back wall of my closet. A dark stairwell emerged. He flipped a light switch and rushed upstairs. “I’ll be right back. Get dressed. I’ll meet you in front of the house to go to the gym.”

“But...”

Chapter 27

We never made it to the gym. Chase and Dawn argued for two hours in her apartment, the hallway outside my door, the front of the house, and then finally in the garden. I watched them from my living room window. Lucy stumbled outside, completely hung over and pissed. She tried to referee, but they ignored her. Eventually, she collapsed on the ground and simply laid in the grass, holding her forehead. Wendy strolled out with a glass of wine in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. By the second hour I was dressed in a business suit. I saw no resolution coming and called a cab to take me to the office.

Chase was correct about a pile of work being on his desk. It was a tower of contracts, status reports, new business proposals, and invitations to events. They covered the whole surface. I did my best to organize everything and take care of the ones I'd been authorized to handle. A few times I called Lucy to make sure everything was okay. She would give me the okay on everything. On the last call, she told me Dawn had called an emergency counseling session for everyone at 1 p.m. with their therapist and I was expected to be there. I never showed up. For one, I wasn't one of the crazy people arguing all morning. Second, who the hell was she to demand I be anywhere? Instead, I concentrated on Chase's work pile and caught him up enough where he wouldn't be too overwhelmed once he came into the office the next day.

By the afternoon, I'd had many aggravated text messages from Dawn that I promptly deleted. Mom also sent lots of texts, thanking me for the huge sum of money that was delivered to her apartment and informing me the power was back on. Apparently, Chase had ignored my wishes and ordered Xavier to give them ten thousand dollars. I wasn't sure if I should be overjoyed, worried, or pissed.

Night came with a shower of cold rain and a blackened sky with no stars or fluffy clouds to hover over the land. I arrived back at Willow Park wet, tired, and exhausted. I honestly couldn't wait to get home. A hot bathtub full of bubbles floated in my head. I gazed at the huge mansion when I stepped out of the cab and ran down the pathway, keeping my hands over my head. Raindrops battered my skin and soaked my clothes. I slipped a few times on

the stairs and cursed my high heels. Yet, somehow I made it to the front door without falling.

The door opened before I could touch the knob. A surprised Chase stood in the doorway dressed in a designer suit. His waves were smoothed back. A different cologne drifted from him. It smelled woodsy and of the earth, but still it captured me and I swayed like a bumbling idiot.

He seized my arm before I could stumble back. “Are you okay?”

“Of course.” I got a hold of myself, balanced on my toes, and embraced him. His body stiffened, but when I pressed my lips to his, he groaned into my mouth and stabbed me with his tongue. Shivers of need spasmed within me. I wanted him inside of me right there, in the doorway, or even in the rain. His hands tightened around my arms as he pressed me into him.

“Are you fucking serious?” Wendy said, racing down the stairwell.

I quickly pulled away from him. A turquoise satin gown draped her slim body. Her brunette curls were swept up into a delicate bun.

Oh my god. Of course. It’s her date night.

I climbed out of Chase’s grip. His eyes remained on me. Lust pooled within them. He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, Wendy. That was...a mistake on my part.”

I cringed. “Plus, I didn’t see you there.”

“It shouldn’t matter if you see me or not.” Wendy stomped our way. “It’s my day. Nothing should be happening on *my* day. We discussed this in the counseling session today that *you* chose not to attend.”

I held my hands in front of me. “Look, I’m slowly understanding this whole situation so give me a break.”

“The Chanel Suite was your break.” She pouted and hooked her arm around Chase. She leaned her body into him and it took everything inside of me to not scream out, “Get off my man!”

“Dear God, Wendy. I told you you can go to Paris whenever you want.” Chase guided me inside with his free hand.

“Oh sure.” Wendy clapped her hands with a hurt look. “You told me I could go anytime by myself, not with you. I want to go with you.”

“I’ve been away from the office too long. I can’t take a vacation for a while.” He sighed and turned to me. “How was work, by the way?”

I forced my attention away from Wendy’s arm as it decorated him. “Fine. I got you caught up for a few days.”

“Really?” His eyes widened with shock. “As I always say, you’re more than what I expected.”

“Now the suit I bought you is wet from that hug.” She touched the front of his jacket.

“It’s fine.” He continued to gaze at me.

For some reason I felt as if I was being examined under a microscope. I had a dire need to leave Wendy and Chase alone.

“Well, you two have a good night.” I edged away and bumped into the wall. *God. I must look like an idiot.*

The front door opened wider. Chase’s chauffeur entered with a huge umbrella.

“Are we going, or are you just going to stare longingly at her all night?” Wendy glared at Chase.

“That’s quite enough, Wendy,” Chase said. “Goodnight, Jasmine.”

I leaned against the wall and waved. They got under the umbrella. It was a tight fit considering how big Chase’s shoulders were. He placed his hand at the center of Wendy’s back and I flinched as if he’d slapped me. *Relax, Jasmine. Surely it’s normal for men to touch that spot. Right?* They walked off, and my mind yelled to just go up the staircase, but my heart said, “Follow Chase and Wendy and watch them get into the limo.” It was like a rope was attached to my hips and led me along on their journey. I tiptoed their way. They exchanged murmurs, and in my mind I imagined he was whispering poetic I-love-yous into her ear. Their bodies closed the little distance between them and they melded their sides together as they strolled to the car. *Just like intimate lovers would.* I stood in the doorway, and right as the chauffeur opened the limo door Wendy turned to Chase and kissed his lips.

No.

He kissed her back, drinking her in and sucking on her bottom lip, just like he’d done to me many times. I gasped. And something deep inside of me broke and shattered into tiny sharp pieces. I sank low. The sensation of falling apart poured over me. *He kissed her right after he just kissed me!* Tears stung my eyes, but didn’t spill over. *What did I think? That I was special? That I was his girl?* I wanted to collapse right there on the doorstep and give up, just let the rain slam down on me. I dug my nails into my palms, unable to look away or escape.

They stopped kissing. Giggling like a school girl, Wendy climbed inside.

Chase got ready to get in after her, paused, and slowly turned around. His mouth dropped open.

“Jasmine?” I heard him say my name over the rain.

“Bastard.” I backed up and slammed the door. *Am I overreacting, or do I have every right to be pissed? Because right now I’m motherfucking pissed!* I breathed in and out at a fast pace and rushed up the stairs. The front door’s knob jiggled as someone opened it. *Shit.*

“Jasmine?” Chase yelled, right as I rounded the corner on the second level. *I can’t talk to him right now. I may slap or gut him. I need to think.*

Stomping sounded behind me from the stairs. I quickly shoved my keys into my apartment’s door, opened it, and hurried in. The door banged close. The lock clicked when I turned it.

“Wait, Jasmine,” Chase called back. “Can we talk about this?”

“Just go on your date!” I yelled and stormed off toward the kitchen. Silence came next. I didn’t know if he was outside the door or if he’d just returned to Wendy. Tears finally fell down my face and I wiped them away, pissed at myself for even crying. *What did I expect?*

My phone buzzed.

Vivian: We’re bored. Do you want to do something?

I rubbed my eyes. Wendy and Chase kissing flashed in my head again.

Me: Party at my place. Bring lots of wine.

Chapter 28

When Vivian said *we*, I'd assumed she met just her and Troy. Shock stretched all over my face when Gabe stepped in behind them carrying grocery bags.

"This place is huge." Gabe landed a peck on my cheek and entered my apartment. "Vivian told me you're staying here every now and then when your boss needs you."

I exchanged an awkward glance with Vivian. "Yep."

"What's up with the two ladies in the hallway?" Gabe asked as he carried the bags into the kitchen. *He must be talking about Dawn and Lucy.* They must've been taken aback when my maid showed Troy, Vivian, and Gabe inside.

"They're on his staff too," I said. *If I end up staying here I'm going to have to think up a better lie for my guests. But then that's a big if, for me staying here.*

"I drove your car over by the way, while Troy rode in mine." Vivian gave me a half hug.

"Thanks. I'll need it."

Troy sighed and headed to the shelf with the family pictures. "I haven't seen these photos in years. I have to get some of these."

"Get your own." I stuck my tongue out at him and turned to Vivian. "Where's the wine?"

"You're drinking way more than usual." She handed me a big bottle of pinot noir. "How are things going in Harem Land?"

"Not so well." I moved her way and whispered, "I saw him kiss Wendy an hour ago."

"And?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"You knew he would kiss them."

"Yeah, but it still hurt."

"I'm so sorry." She hugged me. "So are you coming home?"

"Maybe. I was going to talk to him first. You think that is a good idea?"

"Definitely. At least tell him how you feel. But frankly, Jasmine, if you can't deal with him kissing another woman then you may want to get out of

this situation while you can.” She squeezed me and let me go.

“Good point,” I said while she walked over to Troy as he continued to gaze at our family pictures. I studied the wine bottle and grimaced. “A twisted cap? Seriously? Where did you do buy this from, 7-Eleven?”

Gabe peeked his head out of the kitchen. “Don’t stress. I brought the good stuff.”

“This is why I love you, Gabe.”

Vivian began to play around with my stereo, pressing buttons and twisting controls. Music blared as I entered the kitchen and then the volume lowered until only the smooth sound of Billie Holiday flowed throughout the place. Vivian was just like Chase, she loved old music and preferred it to new releases.

Gabe moved fast in the small amount of time he’d been in the kitchen. Pots full of yummy smelling liquid simmered. Steam rose from each one and carried a joyous aroma of promise to my nose.

“Holy shit! What are you cooking?” I inched over to the stove.

“Don’t even think about sneaking a taste.” Gabe snatched up a wooden spoon, stirred, set it down in a tiny bowl, and rushed to the counter to begin chopping herbs.

“I can chop for you.”

“It’ll take you an hour to do it.” He wiggled his eyebrows and laughed.

“You just hate people being in the kitchen with you. Admit it.” I stuck my finger in one of the pots. The liquid burned the tip of my finger. I screeched and shook it.

“That’s possibly the hundredth time I’ve seen you do that.” Gabe chuckled. “And it’s still funny each time. At some point in your life you’re going to have to come to grips with the fact that a boiling pot of liquid will burn you if you stick your greedy little finger in it.”

“What are you cooking?” I whined.

“It’s a surprise.” He paused from chopping, opened up a bottle of wine near him, poured two glasses, and handed me one.

“You only do surprises on special days. What’s up?”

“You looked pretty sad when I walked in.” He turned my way. “I figured I would soothe your soul with food.”

I ignored the comment. “Well then, if I guess what you’re making will you

tell me if I'm right?"

He sipped some of his wine and nodded.

Reddish meat sat in a Ziploc bag inside a bowl. It had to be pork. Gabe took extra-special care handling chicken and pork in order to not spread bacteria. If it was steak, he would have left it out in the open on a plate. Tomatoes, garlic, onions, and peppers piled together in a bowl. *Maybe it's some sort of stew or sauce.* The peppers were green and around four inches long. *A spicy sauce, since he's using poblanos.* He edged to the right a little as if he was concealing something. I went to his area and nudged him to the side. A stack of chocolate lay on a plate. A bowl of brown sugar stood behind it.

"Mole!" I shrieked.

Although Gabe had been trained for years in classic French cuisine, he had a fascination with Mexican food. He'd dreamed of opening a high-end Mexican restaurant one day and always talked about how he would elevate the style of cooking until people preferred Mexican meals over French. I'd laughed, until he cooked me a mole dish. The savory sauce slid across my tongue and caressed me with the slightest hint of chocolate. I fell in love instantly.

"You're right."

I reached for some of the chocolate behind him. He blocked my hand. "Jasmine, what's going on with you and this Mr. Stone?"

I recoiled. "Nothing. Why would you ask?"

"You and I have been friends for a long time, so you lying to me is pretty impossible. Plus, I watched you both in Lan last week. The guy was seriously into you." He placed his glass of wine down, took mine too, and set it on the counter. "And what's up with you living here?"

I opened my mouth and then closed it.

"And what about those two other women in the hallway? They're just as beautiful as you. That can't be a coincidence."

I released an exasperated breath. "I'm embarrassed to talk about this with you."

"Don't be." He held his hand up in front of him. "You know I won't judge you."

"I may test that loyalty tonight." I chuckled, but his face remained serious.

"I cook, you talk, and by the time we're done let's hope you're in a better

mood.”

“You promise you won’t tell anyone?” I twisted my ring on my finger.

“I would never tell anybody.”

And so for the next hour, I confessed everything to Gabe—the arrangement, my fears, what I’d witnessed already, and how it hurt me.

“So what do you think?” I asked as I leaned back on the counter behind me.

“Wow. This is a hard one.” He held a spoon full of sauce, blew on it, and then positioned it an inch in front of my lips. “Try it and let me know what you think.”

I sampled some. The delicious sauce awakened my taste buds. I gave Gabe a thumbs up.

“Well, you have two options,” he said. “One, you can end it now before you get hurt anymore. Two, you stay in this situation, but do things that won’t harm you.”

I wrinkled my forehead. “Like what?”

“Stay at your place. It sounds like you aren’t comfortable in this mansion, so why even force yourself to be here?” He dropped the spoon I’d used in the sink. “And if you can date other people, then do that. It would probably keep your mind off what he’s doing.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged.

“You should really think about dating other men.” He placed the lid on the pot and faced me, holding a tiny bowl of melted chocolate. “You could start with me.”

“Excuse me?”

He came close to me until only the bowl was between us. “I’ve been taking it slow with you because I thought that’s what you liked, but damn girl, it’s been close to five years and this guy swoops in and grabs you within days.”

I dipped my finger into the chocolate and tasted it. “I don’t know, Gabe. I’ve thought about you and I getting together, but could never really see it working out.”

“Why not?” His eyes followed my chocolate dipped finger as I sucked on it. “Aren’t you attracted to me?”

Was I? Whenever I thought about Gabe coming to visit me I got really

excited, but I never knew if that was due to him making great food or if it was having a gorgeous man in my kitchen.

He was definitely handsome. Vivian had coined him the Sexy Cook. And all the food magazines raved about his looks as well as his cooking.

“I think I’m attracted to you.” I offered him a weak smile.

He sighed. “I’ll take whatever I can get at this point.”

I gathered a little bit of chocolate sauce on my index finger.

“Can I take you out on a date?” he asked. “No pressure or strings attached. If there’s no sparks between us then we’re back to foodie partners-in-crime.”

That doesn’t sound too bad. What do I have to lose?

“Deal.” I licked my finger. The warm chocolate slid onto my tongue with ease. “This is so good. Did you put something extra into this chocolate?”

“I used Venezuelan cocoa to make it. It’s supposed to be the best cocoa in the world.”

“So it’s expensive?”

“Yep. I put most of my paycheck in it, to get it for you tonight.” He moved in closer to me, and this time I concentrated on seeing him as more than a friend. I drank in his soft chocolate skin, his full lips, the sweet aroma of brown sugar on his fingers, and the chiseled definition of his shoulders under his thin shirt. He didn’t have Chase’s muscular build, but Gabe still had a nice body, one that any woman would love to caress.

“Thank you. I’m flattered you went through the trouble just to make this for me. Have you tasted it yet?” I grinned.

“Only a little bit.” He licked his lips. “The first time I saw you, I thought you were the most beautiful girl in South End.”

“No you didn’t.” I blushed.

“You asked me what I was eating. I couldn’t even speak. I just handed you my oatmeal cookie like an idiot.” Moving in closer, he put his hands on each side of the counter behind me. The space heated up around me.

“That oatmeal cookie the first thing I ever ate that you’d made.”

He laughed. “I never told you the truth?”

“What?”

“My NaNa had really baked those cookies, but you came back the next day for more so I begged her to help me learn how to make them.” His thighs rubbed against mine. If I wasn’t holding the bowl of chocolate between us,

his whole body would have been on mine. “Nevertheless, you’re the reason I enjoy cooking. My love for you and food have been the only constants in my life. The second batch of cookies were my first time being in the kitchen.”

I parted my lips, but couldn’t think of anything to say.

“So promise me that you’ll actually give me a chance. I’m not smooth or rich like your Mr. Stone, but I’ll cook your panties off if you let me.”

I chuckled, thinking of how Chase had proclaimed Gabe was doing just that.

“You think I’m funny?” He licked those lips again, and I stirred. *Maybe there is something between us.*

“Okay. I’ll give you a chance.” I dipped my finger into the bowl, gathered chocolate, and lifted my finger to his lips. Warm chocolate dripped from my finger into the bowl. Gabe’s eyes remained on me as he leaned in and sucked on my finger. The wet suctioning of his mouth and his intense gaze on me made me squeeze my thighs together to calm down.

The kitchen door slammed open. Chase stormed through. *What the fuck?* I hurried and put the bowl on the counter. Chase charged for Gabe. I got between them. Gabe moved me out of the way with his arm. I stumbled into the sink. The edge hit my side. Pain bit at my hip. Chase swung. Gabe ducked and slammed into Chase’s center like he used to tackle quarterbacks when we were in high school.

“No!” I screamed.

Both guys crashed into the swinging kitchen door and dropped to the floor. Gabe grunted as Chase punched him in the chin. I heard a crack. They tumbled in the hallway and rolled out into the living room, knocking over a shelf as they fought. My candles fell and smashed into the ground. Glass burst. Scented wax broke into pieces all over the carpet.

“Troy!” *Where the hell is Troy?* “Chase! Gabe! Stop!”

“Let us in!” Dawn knocked on my door.

The security bar was still on it, which meant Chase had used his secret route through my closet. I ran to the door and unlocked it. The women rushed in, along with my bodyguards and theirs. It was a madhouse. It took at least six guards to break Chase and Gabe up. Plus, Dawn and Wendy kept getting in the way, but somehow the guards completely separated the men.

“Oh my god, Chase.” Lucy gasped next to me.

A knot the size of a softball swelled on Chase’s forehead. Blood dripped

out of his nose while Gabe looked three times worse. Clearly, Chase had fighting skills since he boxed almost every morning, but Gabe had definitely held his own. Any guy growing up in South End was well versed in hand-to-hand combat, because a boy who loved cooking and wearing an apron in the hood was labeled gay and picked on more than most. Gabe had fought and won so much that eventually he'd earned many gangsters' respect.

Chase raised his head and targeted Gabe with his eyes. "Get. Out. Now. I see you near Jasmine again and I'll ruin your fucking life."

I couldn't believe this was happening. "No. You won't." I scowled at him. "He's my friend. You don't even think about threatening him."

Apparently my opinion didn't hold a candle to Chase's demands because the guards guided Gabe out of Apartment four.

"I'm so sorry." I ran to Gabe, who had his hands held behind his back.

He shook his head and tried to get out of the guards' hold. "No. Don't worry about it."

"Be careful with him!" I yelled at the guards. "He can walk by himself."

They released him, but got in his way when he tried to re-enter my apartment. Gabe cursed under his breath and wiped some of the blood off his face. "Don't worry about me. I'll call you tonight."

I bobbed my head up and down. He seemed like he was embarrassed as he hurried down the stairs. I marched back into my apartment pissed.

How dare Chase hit my friend! Who the hell did he think he was? He was just on a date with Wendy!

"Get out! All of you get out now!" I yelled.

"We need to talk," Dawn said. "This is exactly why I didn't want you dating—"

"Dawn, I am so warning you. If you don't get out of my apartment you'll be as bloody as Chase. I swear to god!" I headed her way.

She stepped back. "Fine, but we'll discuss this tomorrow."

It was in that moment when Troy stumbled out of my guest room buttoning his jeans. I frowned at him. "You might as well go back to what you were doing."

"What?" He held his hands up and paused when he glanced at Chase's bloody face, as well as the guards and women in my apartment. "What the fuck happened?"

Dawn led Wendy and a gaping Lucy out of my apartment. The guards left with them. Chase remained. He tore open his buttoned shirt. Buttons flew everywhere and fell on my carpet. He balled up the shirt and began wiping his face.

“Troy, I need to talk to Chase. Can you give me some time?” I asked.

“Yell for me if you need me,” he said.

Chase glared at me and leaned on the edge of my couch.

“I will.”

Chapter 29

“You have some nerve hitting Gabe,” I screamed.

Chase wiped the blood off his face with his shirt. A few rips showed in his suit pants. He stretched his face and cracked his neck. “Your finger was in his mouth.”

“I’m dating him now.” I placed my hands on my hips. “So get used to it.”

“Get used to it?” He slung his bloody shirt on my couch and stalked toward me with the fluid movements of a predator. A wild expression set on his face. I had to force myself to not run away screaming. In fact, if Troy hadn’t been in the other room I probably would have raced away. Chase paused an inch in front of me. “Get used to it? You sure about that?”

“Yes.” I stared at his huge bare chest instead of his eyes and formed my hands into tight little fists. “We had an agreement. I date who I want and if you don’t like it, then I walk away.”

“I’m sorry, but walking away from me is no longer an option!” he yelled.

I backed up into the wall. Movement came from the guest room. Then the door clicked. I figured Vivian was forcing Troy to stay in the room and not run out and attack Chase. If she was, then I was glad. I doubted Chase would get my brother out of jail if Troy beat him to a pulp.

“Can I confess something to you?” He tilted his head to the side. Anger glazed his eyes.

“Go ahead.” I swallowed.

“When I first saw you I thought you were from a high society family, and later I discovered you came from poverty.” He rubbed his face. “I was sad for you, but excited that I could be the man to spoil and provide you with things you’d never dreamed of.”

“Where are you going with this?” I didn’t want him straying away from the real problem--him assaulting my friend for absolutely no reason.

“I was supposed to give you firsts. I was supposed to change your idea about love and relationships.” He touched his chest. “But from the very first moment in Pyramid you changed the damn game.” He closed the distance between us. “You had me groveling. Then every day since you’ve been opening my mind to new experiences and feelings. You’ve been fun and exciting to be around.”

“What does this have to do with you hitting Gabe?”

“Everything,” he snarled.

“Then get to it.” I was getting frustrated and didn’t care if he knew it.

“Dawn, Wendy, and even Lucy at times have come to me crying and distraught about our situation. I’d do my best to console them and say they would get used to it, but I never truly understood how they felt.” His breath brushed against my forehead right before he kissed it. Energy pulsed where his lips touched my skin. I edged to the side. He moved with me.

I placed my hands against his warm chest. “Back up a little.”

“No.” He leaned down and gave me a quick kiss. “I cut my date short with Wendy tonight. You want to know why?”

“No.” I was lying. I was dying to know.

“All I could see was that look on your face after I kissed her. It scared the shit out of me. There was so much pain and heartbreak on your face. I wanted to hurt myself. I couldn’t eat during dinner. Mentally I wasn’t even there with her. All I kept thinking was, ‘Jasmine is gone and I won’t be able to get her back this time.’”

“I planned to talk to you about ending it today.”

“No.” He buried his head into my neck. “You have to know I won’t let you go.”

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall, breathing him in. “That’s not really your choice to make.”

“Where would you hide? Really think about that.” His hands slipped under my shirt. He traced lines into my skin. My blood rushed. Again, energy pulsed everywhere his fingers made contact.

“When I go to sleep at night, Jasmine, you’re strolling through my dreams in the most amazing fantasy worlds and I swear to God I can feel, smell, and taste you like you’re really there. And when I wake up in the morning and you’re in my arms, I thank God over and over for blessing me with you. Do you really think I would just let that go?”

I sighed. “You punched Gabe for no reason.”

“I hit him because that expression on your face was only for me.” He pressed his chest into my breasts. My nipples hardened under him. “What were you thinking about when your finger was in his mouth?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Answer me! Damn it.”

I remained silent, but opened my eyes and gazed at him. I shouldn't have. Raw emotion coated his expression. He looked scared and hurt.

“Don't yell at me,” I whispered.

He let out a long breath.

“I'm sorry I punched him. It was wrong.” He guided my hands from his chest to his shoulders. He lifted me up and I straddled him with my legs. His hardness pushed between my thighs. I moistened instantly and rubbed a tiny bit against him before I forced myself to stop. He groaned. “I won't do it again.”

“How do I know that?”

“Because I'm falling in love with you and I'm too goddamn scared to do anything to lose you.”

I hugged him hard and laid my head on his shoulder. “But in the end, you will still kiss Wendy again, and Dawn too. And my heart will break each time. And I will no longer be that fun woman who's opening your mind and exciting to be around. I'll be a resentful bitch who'll only want to cut your balls off.”

I climbed off him. He tried to stop me, but I shoved him away. “I'm sorry, but the only time it really works for us is when it's only us. And you can't give me that.”

“I'll try.” He seized my arm, pulled me to him, and captured my mouth.

“No,” I murmured, but my body burst with anticipation.

“I love you.” His tongue pierced my lips. He cupped my behind and lifted me, rushing us over to my couch, ripping my shirt with no restraint, and yanking down my bra like a mad man. “Forever. How can I get that with you?”

“You know how.”

He consumed me—his teeth tenderly nibbling my skin and grazing my nipples. His hands dove into my pants. Those satin fingers teased my flesh and engulfed my aching bud with heat and pleasure. His scent rushed all over me as he toyed with it. I moaned and drowned in him, sucking on his lips and knowing he had me.

“Give me some time.” He shoved two fingers inside of me and I cried out in pleasure. “Another week or month.”

I unbuckled his pants, grabbed his cock, and slipped my hands up and

down its length. He looked so damn sexy, hungry, and coiled in taut, ridged muscle. I needed to feel him one last time and didn't care if it was a good idea or not.

"Fuck." He gritted his teeth. "Answer me."

"Just make love to me right now."

He flipped me onto the couch so I was lying down. The soft leather smoothed against my back. I rushed to pull off my pants.

Someone banged on my front door.

"Chase!" Dawn yelled. "We need to talk right now."

Closing his eyes and frowning, he hovered over me with his cock pointing my way.

Just the reality check I needed.

"Just go to her." I turned over to reach for my pants. "This would have been a mistake anyway."

"How's that?" He pulled his erection back into his pants. I bit my lip and sat up as I began to dress myself. My shirt was torn at the top, but I could still cover myself enough.

"Chase, are you coming out here or do I need to come in?" Dawn asked.

What the hell?

"She has a key to my apartment?" I glared at him.

He shook his head. "If she did, I didn't know."

"Why do you even have a freaking security system on my apartment if you're sneaking in through the closet and she has a damn key for the front? You both take the concept of control freaks to the next level." I slipped on my pants and stood up.

"I'm coming, Dawn," he yelled back. "I'll talk to you in your apartment."

"Hurry up," she said through the door.

He rubbed the temples on his forehead.

Dressed, I got up. He grabbed my arm. "What do you mean this would've been a mistake anyway?"

He tightened his grip.

"Let me go, please," I said.

My guest room door opened.

"Are you decent?" Troy called out.

Oh goodness.

Mortified, I covered my face with my hands. “I forgot you were in there.”

Troy and Vivian stepped out with rumpled clothes. Vivian’s blonde hair was in disarray. Some of it twirled on top of her head. The rest stuck out on the sides.

Releasing my arm, Chase turned their way and glanced at them as they held hands. Horror creased over his face. “Are...you dating?”

“Yes.” Vivian smirked. “If that’s okay with you, Mr. Stone. Jasmine, we’re going to go unless you want us to stay. Do you?”

“No. I’ll call you later.” I headed over to the door and opened it for them.

“You are...dating?” Chase continued to sit on my couch as if someone had scared the crap out of him.

“Yes. Why?” I asked.

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“What’s up with him?” Troy asked.

“I don’t know. We’ll talk later.” I wanted to say at home, but I didn’t want to startle Chase. The sad truth was I didn’t think I could walk away from him if he stood right in front of me, so I planned on sneaking away while he argued with Dawn.

Speaking of Dawn.

She stepped into my apartment as Vivian and Troy walked out. “Is he still in here?”

I motioned behind me.

“You need me to stay?” Vivian asked one more time and scowled at Dawn.

“Nope. I’m fine.”

She combed her fingers through her hair and trailed behind Troy.

“You’re disrupting this house,” Dawn said.

I figured she was talking to Chase, but instead, she targeted me with her blue eyes.

“Dawn, I’ll talk to you in your apartment.” Chase got up and headed my way. “Jasmine and I have to talk now.”

“No. We don’t.” I shook my head.

“Trust me. I have to tell you something,” he said.

“Whatever you have to tell her can wait until after we talk.” Dawn jumped between us. “Right now, we need to discuss why you think you can just piss

on all the rules we've established over five years."

I eased away from them.

Chase's eyes followed me. "We need to change the rules."

"Excuse me?" Dawn said.

"Jasmine." Chase rushed to me and whispered in my ear, "This conversation with Dawn won't take too long. Go up to my apartment through the pathway and wait in my living room. I have to show you something."

"What?" I asked.

"Just listen to me," Chase muttered.

"What are you whispering about?" Dawn's voice screeched. Her eyes watered. Her hand touched her chest. "Chase?"

Tears spilled from her eyes and streamed over her cheeks. Something bit at my own chest. In that moment, my aggravation for her vanished. Desperation was etched all over her face, from her trembling lips to her pleading eyes. She'd known him a lot longer than I had. If I was consumed by him in a few weeks then she'd been utterly devoured. *If I stay, this is my future. I'll be standing in the living room of girl number eight or ten, full of desperation and grief, clinging to the rule system just so my heart wouldn't continue to break over and over again.* Yesterday, I'd envied Dawn, but now my own heart broke for her, because she was stuck here, when I still had enough mental power to flee.

"Go talk to Dawn, please." I backed away from him. "Now."

He nodded his head. "Okay, but meet me there."

"Sure."

I doubt it. Hopefully, I'll be in my car by the time you go to your apartment.

Dawn wiped her face and walked out.

He rubbed by me and whispered, "Remember. My living room, not my office. I'll hurry back."

"Okay."

Chapter 30

I can't recall why I figured going upstairs was a good idea. Maybe I believed the big answer for why I was so gullible resided up there. Perhaps some symbol for Chase's true intention was there—a shrine to me, a sign declaring he no longer wanted to live every man's dream of having women attend to his needs because now, he had me, and I was all he'd ever want. Even better, a heart-breaker elixir, not an actual tube full of potion but some item where I would be so overblown with disgust it would give me that extra push I needed to gather my senses.

Regardless, I was unprepared for what I found.

I entered a small room with three other doors. Each door had a number I assumed related to the other women's apartments, since the door I left wore a four. When I moved further in, hanging clothes, shelves of folded sweaters, and hooks decorated with shoes appeared.

This has to be his closet.

The space stretched to the length of half my bedroom. Clothes, accessories, and shoes crowded the place. He could've clothed a small town with everything in it. I stepped out into his bedroom. A huge picture of the Beatles walking in a line across a street hung above his bed. The words *Abbey Road* read under it. Black and white piano key carpet decorated the floor. Red paint coated the walls. A simple white blanketed bed stood in the middle next to white nightstands. Framed photos of Dawn, Wendy, Lucy, and me stood on his right nightstand. On the left was an old black and white picture of a gorgeous woman who had to be his mother. They both had those midnight black hair, high cheek bones, and piercing green eyes.

I left the room and walked down a white hallway. At the end, I spotted an opening for the living room. Curiosity nipped at my legs as I turned to another door instead and opened it. It was an empty room with just a made bed and nothing else. I closed it and went to the door right next to it.

His office.

There was a huge desk, a shelf behind it stacked with binders, and small flat TV screens bordering the room. My body stiffened. *No wonder he asked me not to go in his office.* On the right screen, Chase and Dawn argued. Screen two displayed Wendy in her bedroom touching herself and gazing

directly at the camera.

“Come to me, Chase. Break the rules for once,” Wendy said. “Did I do something wrong tonight? What made you sneak into her apartment?”

Wendy knew he had a camera in her bedroom. I wish someone had told me. I would've had them removed if I could.

Screen three showed Lucy sleeping on her living room floor on piles of multicolored pillows. Screen four displayed my kitchen, with the pots still simmering.

He'd been watching Gabe and me in the kitchen? For how long?

Four joysticks stuck out the bottom of each screen. I walked over to screen two and moved it. The view switched to Wendy's empty living room. *Thank god. I can't deal with Wendy begging for Chase right now.* I moved to Dawn's screen where they argued and pressed the up arrow button. The volume increased.

“Get rid of her,” Dawn cried. Drool dripped from the corners of her lips. Snot streamed down one nostril. Make-up smudged her eyes.

“I can't.” Chase tried to hug her. She shoved him away.

“Is it not enough you have the others?” She collapsed on her floral print couch. “I'm only one woman. I only have one mind and you're twisting it into nothing. I don't even recognize myself in the mirror anymore. My thoughts are dark and I'm always angry.”

“Dawn, please.” He took one step to her. “I'm so sorry.”

“Then get rid of her!”

I jumped at her scream and from the raw pain in her pleading voice. My body trembled under her tone. She wanted me gone. *No problem. I'm out of here anyway.* I turned my back to the screens, ready to leave, when my name in black letters caught my eye. It was on a big yellow binder.

“Tell me why you can't?” Dawn asked.

I glanced over my shoulder and watched them on the screen.

“I don't want to get rid of her.” Chase sat on the coffee table in front of her and slumped over like a defeated man. “You're right, I am acting differently. She's...different.” He sounded as if he couldn't find the right words.

“Chase, you've broken too many rules. You know what happens.” Dawn rocked back and forth, more tears spilled down her face.

“I didn't break them, not intentionally.”

“Will you let her go?” Dawn asked.

I froze, waiting for his reply.

“No. I won’t.” His voice sounded low. “Not even if she begs me to.”

That’s my cue to leave.

Still, the binder piqued my interest. I decided to get a quick look and maybe take it home with me. Moving quickly, I went to the binder, picked it up, and opened it. My baby pictures and birth certificate stuck to the first page. I twisted around and placed it on my desk, making sure I had a good view of Chase. If he left Dawn’s room, I’d figure out which way he was going and run off the other way.

“How did you even get in her apartment tonight?” Dawn asked. “I thought you told us the secret passageways were closed off when Yancy died.”

“I lied.”

“So you snuck off to see her like some bumbling adulterer.” Dawn shot up. “And instead of your perfect little black princess waiting for you, she’s being a whore with some other guy.”

“Be careful.” He rose. Part of his lip lifted in a sneer. She got in front of him.

“Or what?” She slapped him across the face.

I flinched from the impact. It was so uncomfortable to witness this, both of them at their worst and me being the cause of so much pain. I looked back down and almost turned the page. I didn’t. My name was on the birth certificate.

Jasmine Bernice Nix.

What the fuck? I had my mom’s last name, Montgomery. Nix was Vivian and Benny’s last name. I swallowed and traced my finger to the father’s name. Benny Cedric Nix.

This can’t be right.

The birth certificate I had in my records left the father’s name blank. It was one of those embarrassing and painful reminders that my dad didn’t care enough about Troy and me to stick around. *Benny is our dad?* The room swirled around me. My mind seemed disconnected to my body. My brain scrambled into mush.

And Chase knew the whole time. Why didn’t he say anything? Why would he keep this a secret?

I thought back to that day outside the police station. Benny had talked about dealing with the girls' death certificates. Chase had countered that Benny had dealt with other certificates. *Chase had been hinting at Benny messing with my birth certificate?* I scanned the rest of the binder, just in case more secrets lay in the pages. There were old photos of my mom and Benny in a bar on the next page. She'd been a go-go dancer at the Kitty Kat Club. It was the one thing my aunt would remind me about all the time.

"You stick to them grades, girl. Your mama dropped out of high school and used to dance naked for all them white people downtown, getting all used up."

I realized Dawn's screen turned quiet and glanced up. Chase held Dawn as she cried in his arms.

"Please. Please," she mumbled in a soft voice.

"I can't get rid of her," he whispered. "I just can't."

I left the binder where it was. There was no need to take any proof. Even if Benny or Mom denied it, I knew all I needed to know. And it all made sense. This was why he was always there when I needed him. And to think, all those years I felt like a charity case and he'd been doing what he was supposed to.

Now it all makes sense.

I never understood why Troy and I went to nice private schools when our brothers went to the crappy local ones. Once when I'd asked, Mom told me she'd applied for a low income scholarship and was only able to get it for Troy and me, but not for our older brothers. Now I doubted it. Especially since we were enrolled in the same schools that Vivian went to. It was how we'd all met. *And Benny was always there.* I couldn't remember when he wasn't taking us home from school or picking us up. I'd known Vivian since kindergarten. He'd been carpooling us ever since, from the ghetto to suburbia. We barely saw Vivian's mom. She'd been in and out of the hospital ever since she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Benny is my dad. Troy and Vivian's faces entered my mind. *Oh god. Oh my god! How do I tell them? Should I tell them? Yes. God! What am I thinking? I have to.*

This was why Chase stared at Troy and Vivian's hand holding in horror. He knew.

"I'll walk away if she stays." Dawn climbed out of his arms. "Wendy and Lucy will probably come too. Then what will you do? How will your dick

feel about that?”

Chase just stood there, gazing at her.

“I told you we didn’t need another. Every time there’s a fourth girl it causes problems.” She marched off to a tiny bar near her TV and poured clear liquid into a crystal glass. “You and Lucy mourned their deaths. I didn’t.”

“I’m tired of this conversation.”

“You should be, because all three of their deaths are on you.” Dawn pointed at him. Some of the liquid spilled from her glass.

“I deal with my guilt over their deaths. I don’t need you to help me with that.”

“Yes you do, because there will be a fourth death.” She gulped some of her drink. The hairs on the back of my neck rose as she laughed. “Oh, it’s coming.”

“Is it?” He put his hands into his pockets and formed his lips into an angry line.

“She’ll reject you. She’ll have that guy’s big dick in her mouth by the end of the week.”

The muscles in his jaw twitched.

“What happened with her would’ve never happened with me. You know that. I’ve been loyal to you.” Tears fell from her eyes as she took another sip.

“I know you have.”

“Where was Jasmine when I was washing Yancy’s blood off your body?” she yelled.

Blood? Oh God. My own blood raced. My heart pounded in my chest.

“Be quiet,” Chase said through clenched teeth.

“Let her hear me.” Dawn laughed. “Let Ms. Special Pussy find out how long her list of responsibilities is when it comes to you.”

My phone rang in my pocket. I jumped back and bumped into the shelf. A cardboard box caught my eyes. Video tapes and manila envelopes filled it. Names were written on the envelopes in black marker—Vicki, Evelyn, and Yancy. I grabbed Yancy’s envelope as the phone rang again.

“Hello?”

“Just checking to make sure everything is okay,” Vivian said on the other line.

I looked up at the screen. Chase and Dawn still stood in her apartment,

arguing.

“It’s bad.” My chest swelled with a burning pain. A numbness filled my trembling fingers as I forced them to open the envelope.

“What’s bad? What do you mean? Troy, turn around. What’s going on, Jasmine?” Vivian asked.

“I can’t tell you over the phone.” I didn’t even know if I could tell them face-to-face. *How do I say it? Vivian, Troy, guess what. We’re all siblings.*

“Should we come back? In fact, don’t answer. We’re not even that far away and your voice sounds shaky,” Vivian said. “Jasmine?”

“Yes.” I pulled out the first picture. A dead woman with gashes on her chest and neck looked back at me with vacant eyes. Bile rose in my throat. Inside my head, I screamed over and over. “Yes. Please hurry back. I’m scared.”

“Scared of what?”

I shoved the photo back in the envelope and glanced up at the screens. Lucy continued to sleep on the floor. Wendy’s screen showed her in her living room, drinking wine as she watched TV. Dawn and Chase were still in the apartment standing there in silence. Chase poured himself a glass of whisky while Dawn scowled at him with red, puffy eyes.

Beads of sweat formed on my forehead.

“Jasmine?” Vivian asked.

“How far are you?”

“Barely, a minute or so,” she said. “We ended up staying in front of the mansion and getting it on in the car—”

“Oh god.” I clutched my stomach.

“What? Are you okay?” Vivian’s voice sounded on the verge of hysteria. “Say something.”

“Don’t do anything else, okay? No touching or anything. Just hurry up.”

“What?”

I rubbed my face. “Trust me.”

“Alrighty,” Vivian said. “I can see the house up ahead. We should be at your door in less than two minutes.”

“Okay.” I hung up and scanned the rest of the envelope, trying my best not to look at any other pictures. White sheets of folded paper lay between the photos. I yanked them out and unfolded them. They were copies of email

messages between Dawn and Yancy. I browsed the first two. Yancy had gone to a publisher with a book proposal about her life in Chase's arrangement. *She must've never had to sign an anti-disclosure agreement.* Dawn had been pissed.

"And now you're just going to leave me?" On the screen, Dawn displayed a wicked grin. "Are you going back to finish fucking her in your apartment? I heard you tell her to meet you there."

"It's not what you think."

"Yes it is." Dawn sniffled. "Do you even care that I'll be here crying while you do her?"

"I'll return to finish our conversation." Chase combed his fingers through his waves. "I just have to talk to her about something."

"Sure you do." Dawn crossed her arms and hugged herself.

He muttered something under his breath and headed for the door.

Fuck.

I threw everything down on his desk and hurried back to the closet. There was no way I would sit in his apartment by myself. I sprinted down the steps and slammed the wall closed.

There's no lock. He can just come in as he pleases. Did he do that with the other girls? Or did one of these women use the secret passages? I'm not going to stand around here to find out.

I darted into the kitchen. A burnt smell corroded the air. Thick gray smoke rose from most of the pots. Waving the smoke away, I covered my nose with my arm and turned off the stove. *Where's the knife drawer?* Like a crazy woman, I slung open drawers until I spotted a huge steak knife. I wasn't sure I even needed one, but I figured it wouldn't hurt.

Did he make it to his apartment yet? If he did, he's probably looking at me now on his screen.

Shivers of fear crept up my spine. I tried not to look up, pretended like I didn't know cameras were in there, and rushed out of the kitchen.

Why am I even pretending? I'm sure he'll notice the freaking knife in my hand and be alarmed.

I rushed out of the kitchen and bumped into Chase.

Chapter 31

Chase stood there, towering over me. Wrinkles creased his forehead as he stared. “What’s wrong, baby?”

My lips quivered. Sweat trickled down the side of my face. I opened my mouth. The sound of my heart banged against my eardrums in a staccato rhythm.

“Why do you have a knife?” he asked.

“I just do.” My voice screeched.

He stayed where he was. I feared he would charge at me and snatch away the knife. He raised his eyebrows as I pointed the sharp tip at him.

“Did you go upstairs?” he asked.

“Back up!” I gripped the handle hard. It dug into my skin.

“Why are you afraid of me?” He backed up.

Glass crashed downstairs. The house alarm blared, ringing in my ears.

“What the hell is going on tonight? Stay here.” Chase covered his ears with his hand, ran to my door, and rushed to open it. I trailed behind him, hoping it was Troy and Vivian that had triggered the alarm. When we arrived in the hallway, Chase held his arm in front to guard me. Doors opened in the hallway. Dawn, Wendy, and Lucy peeked out from each one.

My brother’s huge frame thundered up the stairs.

“Where is he?” Troy yelled.

“It’s just my brother.” I ducked under Chase’s arm. “You can all go back inside.”

“Why’s he here?” Chase raised his eyebrows.

“What the fuck did you do to my sister?” Troy stomped Chase’s way.

I got in between, waving my knife at Troy. “Nothing. Everything is okay.”

“Then why do you have a knife?” Troy pushed me out of the way and advanced toward Chase. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing.” Chase turned to me. “What’s going on, Jasmine? Did someone threaten you?”

“No. Troy, let’s go.” I grabbed his arm and yanked him back an inch.

Troy dragged me back with no problem. His eyes targeted Chase. “I find out you hurt her and I’m coming for you.”

Several bodyguards stomped upstairs. *Where the hell were they when Troy broke in?* One of the guards held a towel to his nose. Blood streamed through the cloth. Purplish, swelled skin decorated his eyes. *Oh. Troy got one.*

Chase shifted his view to me. “Jasmine, wait. Are you leaving?”

“Yes.” I tugged at Troy’s arm. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Troy twisted around. I sighed. But, instead of running downstairs with me, he snatched the knife out of my hand. “Why does she have a knife?”

“Ask her,” Chase said through clenched teeth.

Everyone turned to me. The guards paused on the stairs. Dawn and the others moved in closer. I considered lying, but Chase would know what I’d seen as soon as he went back to his apartment and Troy would simply recognize I wasn’t telling the truth.

I gulped down some of my fear. “I heard his fiancée saying she had to wash a dead girl’s blood off him. So I’m just being cautious. He didn’t touch me.”

“Let’s discuss this upstairs in my apartment.” Chase held his hand out to me.

“That’s not necessary. I’m going home.” I shook my head and went down one step. “Please come on, Troy.”

“Jasmine,” Chase pleaded.

“Back up, man.” Troy gripped the knife like he’d been wielding one since he was young. Mainly because he had.

“You should put the knife down so we can talk this through,” Chase said to Troy, but his eyes stayed on me. “You go to jail tonight and I won’t be bailing you out.”

“My sister is everything to me.” Troy got down on the step with me and held my hand. “I won’t hesitate to go back to jail for her.”

“Chase, stay there. Please.” Regardless, Troy would kill him and he’d be back in jail.

“Let’s go, Troy.” I lowered down another one and pulled his arm. “Please.”

“Jasmine? Can we talk about this?” Chase asked again as Troy reluctantly followed me downstairs. We had to squeeze between the guards at the bottom, but we made it to the first floor.

“No, we can’t,” I said. “I’m sorry, but I can’t be a part of this. It’s too

crazy for me.”

It took three of the longest minutes of my life for Troy and I to finally leave the house. No one moved. They all watched us. Each step, my legs wobbled and hands moistened with sweat. Once outside, I noticed Vivian was a few feet in front of the door with the car running like she was the getaway driver. And just like in the movies, as soon as we jumped inside, she sped off.

I'll figure out how to get my car later.

I slid into the backseat. Chase positioned himself in the doorway. His silhouette cast a huge menacing shadow over the pathway. I rested my chin on the seat as I gazed out of the back window. The image of that huge house and him decreased with each turn of the long driveway.

What had I been thinking? Why did I even try to live there?

Chase was why. He'd set the trap with the job, hooked me with the high-end dining and trips, and then reeled me into his outrageous world.

Was it just that? Or was it more? God, it felt like more to me.

He'd confessed to Dawn that I was different. *But for how long? A year, or a couple of months?* Then girl number five would be moving into the house, or even worse, I'd be dead. I didn't know how, but the fourth girl never survived and I wasn't willing to hang around and find out why.

I love you, Jasmine.

He'd said that a lot in these past days, from when we made love in Paris to cuddling in my bed. *How could he love me and not tell me about Benny?* He knew Benny was my dad and never said anything.

Oh my god.

I glanced at my brother and Vivian.

Troy held her free hand as she drove. “Are you okay, sis?”

“Yes.” I twisted my lucky copper ring. “Umm . . . I have some really, really bad news and I don't know how to say it.”

“Worse than you running with a knife from a rich white guy?” Troy smirked.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Worse than that. Unfortunately, it affects all three of us.”

“Then maybe we should wait until we get home.” Vivian gave me a weak smile in the rearview mirror. “You know I can't drive well with bad news.”

“Okay.”

Troy kissed her cheek. “I love you, Viv. You looked so cute as watch-out today.”

“You see how sappy your brother is?” she laughed.

“Yeah.” I slumped into the seat. “I see.”

Chapter 32

Benny, my father, sat on the green park bench and tossed breadcrumbs on the stone pathway. Pigeons flew down to the pebbled path. A breeze blew through his silvery gray hair. A black designer suit draped him. All my life I wished I had a dad like Benny—strong, kind, powerful, someone who cared.

He's my dad.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. Last Saturday, Vivian and I took the weave out. My hair now hung a little past my shoulders in a pattern of lovely waves.

“Thank you for coming.” Benny kept his attention on the flock of birds.

“You made it worth my while.” I slumped down next to him and crossed my legs.

“You look nice.” Benny turned to me. “You have a date?”

“Yep.” I smoothed the soft material of my black dress with my hands. I wore silver shoes and jewelry.

“With who?” Benny asked.

“Gabe.” I shrugged. “He was promoted to executive chef and asked me out to celebrate.”

“Finally.” Benny handed me the brown paper bag with bread in it. “It only took him six or so years.”

I dug my hand in the bag, grabbed a handful of bread, and threw it on the ground. Birds swarmed my way.

“I watched all of you grow up,” Benny said. “All Gabe did was try to get your attention any way he could.”

I handed the bag back to Benny.

He waved it away. “Keep it.”

“Okay.” I gathered more crumbs and tossed them out.

“Where is he taking you?”

“Well, it will be at the Lan where he works. The whole restaurant is closed. The owner let him have the kitchen and one waiter to serve us.”

“Are you excited?” Benny smiled.

“Yes. The food will be amazing.” I winked at him.

“And the man?”

“He’s growing on me.” I blushed.

“After six years, he still has no chance.” Benny laughed. “Women.” I nudged his side. “Hey. I like Gabe. He’s really nice and sweet.”

“Poor guy has no chance.”

Two women ran by, chatting with each other. It reminded me of Vivian and myself. We hadn’t run in weeks, no matter how many times I tried to drag her out of bed. She’d stayed in her room all day and night for two weeks. Sometimes I laid next to her, spooning ice cream into our mouths and forcing her to watch old black and white movies with me. This week I focused strictly on Humphrey Bogart films.

“And has Chase stopped trying to contact you?” Benny asked.

“He sits outside of my apartment in his limo all night. I think he sleeps there because he’s still parked there when I wake up.” I pulled a big chunk of bread out and threw it to a tiny bird, hoping she would get it before the other pigeons realized it was there. “I think he wiped his behind with my restraining order, though.”

“Would you like me to handle it?” He placed a folded newspaper on his lap.

“You’ve already done enough by assigning me two guards.”

“When you’re ready let me know. I’ll do whatever it takes to get rid of him.” Darkness shaded his eyes.

That’s what I’m afraid of.

“No, Benny. He’ll give up eventually.” I shook my head. “And since we’re on the subject of Chase, you said you would tell me what you had on him if I met with you, so here I am.”

He rubbed his eyes and looked tired. Vivian refused to speak to him. She hung up when he called and cringed when I brought up his name. We didn’t even discuss that we were sisters. That and Troy’s name were one of the many things I didn’t bring up in order to ensure Vivian would not run into her room and cry for the rest of the night.

Troy still worked at Stone Industries as a security guard. It made sense. No one else would hire him with his record and Chase doubled his salary the day after I left. I didn’t know why, but many reasons passed through my head—maybe he increased the salary to keep Troy quiet about the arrangement, or perhaps he was trying to get to me through my brother.

Chase had definitely won my mother over. She called me daily, begging me to talk to him. He'd moved her, my nieces, and nephews out of South End and into a five bedroom home in Knightson. All of the kids now went to one of the top private schools in the state and a nurse visited my mother three times a week to help with my disabled nephew. I had to admit that when I found out, a large bundle of worry rose off my back. I'd felt light on my feet for most of the day, but then reality hit.

If I continue to not speak to him, how long would he pay for the house and private school tuitions?

"How's Vivian?" Benny asked.

"She's still depressed, but she's finally getting up and taking showers now, to the joy of my nose." I forced a grin. "I think it will take her some time."

"And have you heard from Troy?"

"I talk to him every day. He rented a studio apartment a few blocks from us." Troy confessed to me one night in a drunken stupor that he moved so close so he could see Vivian whenever she left the house. *Too bad she never left the damn house.* Troy spent his days working and his evening in strip clubs drinking away his sorrows and depressing the poor dancers with his sad story about Vivian and him. I'd joined him in a club once. The owner had kicked us out for bringing down the mood.

"And have you found a new job yet?" Benny asked.

"No. As soon as I say my name, the person on the other end either hangs up or a guard escorts me out of the building. No one will deal with me."

"Then Chase spread the word to not hire you."

"I guess."

"How are you paying the bills?"

I bit my lip. "Chase is paying all of our bills. Even my student loans are all paid off."

"Jasmine—"

"Don't start, Benny. It's not like I have much of a choice right now. My bill collectors and even my landlord are too happy to take his money when it's sent their way, no matter how many times I tell them not to accept it." I held up my hand. "And stop stalling. You called me and said you had some information on Chase. What is it?"

"You're impatient. I haven't seen you since you cursed me out at my house. I'd like to spend time with...my daughter."

How long have I dreamed of someone saying that to me?

“I have a date.”

“Okay.” Benny opened the newspaper. “I’m really sorry, Jasmine. I wanted to tell you I was your father so many times.”

“You’ve already said that and I accepted your apology.”

“I cared for your mother, but I couldn’t leave my wife, not while she was dying.” He formed his right hand into a fist. “And then when she passed away, all of you were in your teens, and your mother wasn’t the same.”

“You already told me this.” I gazed at a squirrel that raced up a tree. “I don’t hate you. I just wish things had been done differently. I needed a father, Benny. I needed to know that someone loved me. When you helped I always felt like I owed you, as if I was never going to pay up my debt to you.”

Sorrow seized me like it had been taking a hold of my heart each day. I cried a lot at night and felt stupid for each tear. How pitiful was I to weep for the little girl who always wanted a dad, or shed tears for the shattered new love that Troy and Vivian had? And even my feelings for Chase brought a shower of tears and lightning-fast pain to my chest.

I told no one, but I thought of him almost every minute. Tender moments we shared played in my head like a depressing movie. On and on I reminisced about Paris and all our times together. I smelled his scent on my skin no matter how many times I scrubbed it—new leather mixed with vanilla.

Like an idiot, I repeated his voicemail messages again and again, drowning in his luscious baritone. He begged me to come back to him. He pleaded that he’d take me any way I would come. But with shaking fingers, I ignored his messages and stayed away. And in the late hours of the night, when Vivian slept and Chase hung outside my window in his limo, I imagined him moving inside of me and my fingers mimicked his strokes. I moaned into my pillow and came so hard my body rocked. But then the hunger for him returned, and the hollowness appeared as if he had gutted me from within.

“Jasmine?” Benny covered my hand with his and squeezed. “Are you okay? Where did you go?”

“Somewhere I shouldn’t be,” I murmured.

Benny opened another newspaper on his side. A thin, black folder lay inside.

“These are just copies, not the originals.” Benny gave it to me. “Each time

the three girls died, Chase was with them. Vicki took sleeping pills in the bathroom after having sex with him, returned to him in bed, and laid down. She never woke up. When we reported the death, we told the police she was alone.”

He patted the folder. “Put this information somewhere safe.”

I grabbed the folder and shoved it in my new bag. Chase had delivered it. A big bag with coconut pieces sewed on the fabric. No one knew it was from him. I cleared my throat. “What about the second woman?”

“Someone poured chemicals into a pool while Evelyn was swimming. It burnt her skin and lungs,” Benny said. “Again, Chase was sleeping in her apartment at Willow Park.”

I wonder if this is why they stopped him from sleeping in the girls’ bedrooms at night, or if he’d ended it himself.

“And the third girl?”

“Yancy, the last one, was attacked leaving Stone Industries. Chase was in the limo waiting for her to show up. At least, that was what he said.” Benny shrugged.

“I overheard Dawn say she washed Yancy’s blood from his body.”

“I figured he was around, but he’s always denied it.”

I focused on Benny. “Do you think he killed them?”

“I’m familiar with killers. I can see them a mile away. It’s always in their eyes and the way they carry themselves.” His lips straightened into a line. “It takes one to know one.”

I averted my eyes and stirred a little in my seat. Benny was a lawyer, but he was something else, too. Thugs followed him around. Things disappeared when they caused Troy, Vivian, or me any harm. In fact, no one had seen Noc since he’d been released from jail. Missing pictures were posted outside of Drunken Lyrics asking people to call the police if they knew of Noc’s whereabouts.

“So?” I said. “Do you think Chase killed them?”

He grunted with disdain. “I doubt it.”

“That’s not a definite answer.”

“It doesn’t matter. Stay away from him. It shouldn’t matter whether he’s a killer or not.”

I leaned against the bench. “I will stay away, but I would like to know.”

“Focus on Gabe or any other good guy. You’re beautiful, smart, and an amazing woman,” Benny said. “I knew when Chase spotted you at the Garden Party he wouldn’t let go. How could he? You can offer more to him than those pathetic airheads he has at his estate.”

“Whatever,” I murmured. “They’re beautiful women. They just fell in love with the wrong guy.”

He shook his head. “Karma is a serious thing. My biggest payback in life is that I was blessed with two amazing daughters who would fall for guys like me.”

My phone rang. I checked the screen. It was Chase calling at his usual time, hoping I would pick up.

One day he won’t call. How will I feel about that?

“I have to go.” I used the opportunity to leave. “I’ll see you again. Soon.”

“Will you talk to Vivian and Troy for me, please?”

“Yes.” I’d tried and failed to the point where I didn’t see why it was a good idea for them to communicate anymore. Troy and Vivian didn’t talk to each other either. I could tell they both loved one another, but it embarrassed them too much.

I rose. “I’ll call you tomorrow, Benny.”

“Good. I’ll be happy to hear from you.” His face seemed pained. When I’d called two weeks ago and told him I knew he was my dad, he’d sighed. And when I told him Troy and Vivian had fallen in love, he cried so loud I held the phone to my chest.

“Goodnight, Benny. Take care of yourself.”

“I will.” He got up and hugged me. His big arms wrapped and tightened around me. “I love you and I’m so sorry, Jasmine. So very sorry.”

I nodded my head and left, knowing all he wanted to hear was me say I loved him back. But I wasn’t ready yet. And feared I never would be.

Chapter 33

A clear night sky hung over Oshane City. Stars glittered. The moon glowed. My heels clicked on the sidewalk as I headed toward Gabe. He leaned against the door of Lan. To my surprise, he wore jeans, sneakers, and an Oshane Timberwolves t-shirt. Savory scents drifted to me. My stomach swung to overdrive as I anticipated the dishes to come.

I gazed down at my tight dress. “I guess I’m overdressed, huh?”

“Never.” He let his eyes travel from my head down to my toes, drinking me in. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you.” I crossed my hands behind my back and twisted a little from side to side. “So, are you ready to go inside and eat or have our plans changed?”

He backed away from the glass door. “This is bittersweet.”

“What is?” I glanced over my shoulder at my guards as they surrounded us. “I’m sorry, but could you give us some room?”

The big muscled guys bowed their bald heads and stepped back several feet, enough that they could charge at anyone attacking me, but far enough where they wouldn’t hear what we were talking about.

“Jasmine, first I want to tell you I’m sorry,” Gabe said.

I scrunched my face up in confusion. “For what?”

“Just promise me you won’t be mad and you’ll try to understand why I’m doing this.”

“I can’t promise you that if I don’t know what it is.” I placed my hands on my hips. “But I’ll try my best.”

He formed his lips into a grim line and nodded. “Chase came to the Lan last week and offered me a deal.”

I froze in my spot. My breath caught in my throat. “What was the deal?” Gabe kicked at a rock on the ground.

“Gabe? Just tell me.” I was starting to get worried.

“He bought the restaurant.” Gabe directed his attention back to me. “He offered to sign over ownership to me if I could get you to do two things.”

I formed my hands into fists and gritted my teeth.

“He wanted you inside of the Lan for dinner and by yourself, no guards,”

Gabe said. “And he wanted you to agree to stay in there with him for at least thirty minutes so he could talk to you. Tonight.”

I shifted my view to the street as cars sped by and couples strolled hand-in-hand along the sidewalk. “That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“And then you’ll own the Lan?”

“Yes. I had a lawyer look over the whole contract and he couldn’t find any holes or deception in it.”

At least not the deception in regard to lying to me.

I closed my eyes, hoping it would be enough to calm me down. Gabe could have told me this last week. He’d talked to me over the phone every other night and never mentioned this. I felt stupid, dressing up for him and in the end he’d swindled me into a date with Chase. Nevertheless, my heart pumped with fear and eagerness at the thought of being alone with Chase, and I hated myself for it.

When will I get over him?

“Please say something,” Gabe said. “If you want to slap me, I’ll let you.”

I opened my eyes and shook my head. “I wish you had just told me this when you found out.”

“I wasn’t sure if you would understand.”

“That’s bullshit.” I rolled my eyes. “If anybody understood why you would do this it would be me. Just like you, I’m supporting my family. I get that you dream of moving your parents out of South End, and that owning the restaurant would help you do it.”

Gabe’s mother and father were good people with bad luck. They’d had him in high school, married, and dropped out to work. Over the years, more births filled their house. Gabe had three sisters and one brother. His parents worked hard, sometimes two jobs each at a time. Going to Gabe’s place was like stepping into warm world of love. They hugged nonstop, always had cheery smiles, greeted me at the door with refreshments, and always inquired about my life. Eventually, Gabe’s dad was injured during a factory job. A hung-over forklift driver ran into him. He’d lost his leg and had been in a wheelchair ever since.

“I went to my parents about Chase’s offer,” Gabe said. “They both told me not to do it. That I’d lose you and in the end you were worth more than anything the restaurant and its profits could give me. My mom’s pissed at me

right now.”

I smiled. “Should I tell her not to worry?”

“Only if it’s true.” He gazed at me with sad eyes.

“It’s true.” I went to him and clasped my hand into his. “You’ve been my friend and spoiled me with gourmet food for years. I’m just mad you didn’t tell me.”

“Would you have still come?”

I stared at the ground. “I’m not sure. Good point.”

“Fuck. You don’t have to do this.” He guided me away from the door, but I stopped him.

“He’s not going to end this unless I talk to him. The more I avoid him, the more I think he’ll figure out ways to get to me.” I shrugged. “It’s time to yank my big girl undies up and deal with him.”

No more running into my apartment before he gets out of the limo and avoiding his phone calls or emails.

The last few times he’d texted me I replied that the next time I would talk to him it would be in hell while it was raining flowers. He’d replied with, *That’s all?*

“Do I still have a chance for a future date or am I pushing my luck?” Gabe asked.

“Let’s discuss that after my thirty minutes with Chase. Then I’ll know what type of punishment you should receive.” I playfully wagged my finger at him. The grim frown remained on his face. I sighed and hugged him.

“Gabe, don’t worry about it. I’m actually happy I could do this for you. Your own restaurant. Wow! You used to sit on the phone with me for hours telling me how it would look and what you would serve.”

“Like I said, this is bittersweet.” He tightened his embrace.

“How about this. I demand you name the restaurant after me and provide at least one of my favorite dishes on the menu.”

“Done. Your name is already a part of the restaurant.” He pointed to the sign as I pulled away. “For some reason, Chase changed it to this.”

“What?” I glanced up at the top of the building and, sure enough, there were huge silver letters that said, *Jasmine’s Hell*. I laughed.

Chapter 34

The acoustic guitar melody to the song “Tomorrow” greeted my ears. Darkness bathed most of the restaurant, except for one table all the way in the back where a single crimson lamp hovered over it. A waiter stood by the table with his hands clamped to the side and a wide smile on his face.

He named the restaurant Jasmine’s Hell.

I’d told Chase I would talk to him in hell while it was raining flowers.

I guess I should watch what I say to him from now on.

A light shower of rose petals floated down from the ceiling. It resembled those first few moments when the arrival of snow signaled winter. Slowly, inch by inch, so many different rose petals drifted along—scarlet red, pale yellow, blushing pink, and pure white. Their silky textures slipped past my skin, tickling my cheeks and settling on my shoulders. A flowery perfume flooded the area. I breathed it in and it felt like I had dived into a pool of blossoms right on the edge of spring.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Chase stepped out of the shadows near the table. “It took ten florists, two carpenters, and one brilliant mechanical engineer to do it.”

I paused. Only four feet lay between us. It was the closest we’d been in two weeks. A rousing energy bridged from me to him and thickened the air. I wanted to run to him, touch his skin, rip off those buttons on his dark blue shirt, and explore what lay underneath the black pants he wore. Petals rested on his midnight waves. It was all I could do not to run my fingers through his hair and rustle the flowers away.

This is exactly why I avoided Chase. Two weeks, and I still can’t be alone with him in a room.

“You’re stunning,” he whispered while the waiter bowed and disappeared into the shadows.

My flesh trembled as his gaze started at my eyes and gradually journeyed down the length of my body. Wherever he looked, my blood reacted, soaring to those areas and pulsing within me. He moved a foot closer to me. Startled, I stiffened. My breathing increased.

I turned away. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Do what?” His voice sounded strained.

“Be alone with you.”

He touched the bare skin of my arm with his fingertips. Those feathery strokes triggered a soothing pleasure that swam within me. I continued to look in another direction, as if not gazing into his eyes would protect me. The situation was too overwhelming for my mind, emotions, and body. It was what my mother must’ve felt like when she sat in a room full of drinking people, trying her best not to salivate as wine was being poured or reach out for a glass and end her years of sobriety. I’d been so proud of myself. Two whole weeks I’d stayed away from him. But one minute next to him and I was ready to throw that all away for just one kiss.

“I only want these last minutes with you.” He glided his fingers from my shoulders down to the inner area of my palm. “And then I will finally leave you alone.”

I snapped my face to him.

“I won’t interfere with your job hunting. No more phone calls. No more sleeping outside of your apartment, hoping that one day you would come out and let me beg my way back into your life.” He moved his hands to my hair and ran his fingers through my tresses. His voice was low and only a whisper of the dominance he used to have could be heard. Now it passed through his lips with humility and an unassuming edge, like he was thinking through each word before he said it.

“Why would you leave me alone now?” I’d known one day he would give up. I’d been ready for it, hoping for that moment. And now that it arrived, my heart swelled with a scorching pain I feared would burn through me.

He edged away, avoided staring into my eyes, went to a chair, and pulled it out for me. “You’re even more enchanting when you’re yourself and not when I dress and style you. How stupid I’ve been.”

I stayed frozen in my place. “That’s not an answer.”

Still more petals floated down, almost obscuring my view of him, but I saw him close his eyes and heard a frustrated breath leave his lips.

“Why does it matter to you, Jasmine? You came here tonight for Gabe, dressed sexy and smelling good. And I don’t blame you. He’s what I can’t be. He’s the exact man you should give your heart to.” He tapped the edge of the chair with his fingers. “But right now, I have less than thirty minutes to pretend like you came here for me, so I’d rather talk about something else.”

I wish he wouldn’t talk like this. Why do I feel so bad?

I sighed.

“Come here, please,” he said and again it sounded so low and foreign to what I was accustomed to.

“I won’t see you anymore?” My own voice squeaked at the end of the sentence.

Isn’t this what I wanted? For him to give me space so I could get over him?

“Every night I look at your window. The light goes on and off, on and off. The few times I see your silhouette I go mad with insanity and lust.” He combed his fingers through his hair. The petals on top of his head fell to the floor. “You ask me if you’ll see me again like I’m the one who holds that answer.”

He headed my way in slow steps, as if trying not to frighten me. “Do I have a chance?”

“I don’t know.”

“No. You don’t get to bow out with that answer tonight.” He paused right in front of me. “Do I have a chance? Because if I do then tell me and I’ll be outside your apartment tonight and every other night until you’re ready to come outside and see me. But if I don’t, not even a tiny bit, then let me know so I can crawl away with the little dignity I have left.”

My lips quivered. It all came down to this moment. Desire and fear merged and twirled into a ball inside my chest. All the days and nights we’d spent together raced through my mind. The things I’d felt for him had never left me. They’d never given me any peace or fled my body. They simply remained inside my heart as if they’d been waiting the whole time for this moment to arrive so they could spill out and saturate my thoughts.

“God help me,” Chase said. “Do I have a chance?”

I bit my lip. “If...”

“If what?” He frantically searched my face, clasped his hands onto my waist, and tugged me to him, pressing his hard body against mine.

“Nothing...never mind. I just can’t do the arrangement.”

He scrunched his face up in confusion. “I’ve been outside of your apartment every night and all night for the past two weeks. Do you really think I’m still in that arrangement?”

“You’re not?”

“No.”

“What happened?”

“You happened.” He captured my lips and groaned as he seized my tongue. *God. I missed this so much. I missed him.* He cupped my behind with his hands. “I’m in love with you.”

He spread kisses on my cheeks, my chin, the curve of my neck, and the swell of my breasts. He covered me in his lips’ caresses until I stepped back, unable to take any more.

“No. Stay next to me.” He slid his hands around my hips and guided me back to him. “I want our bodies attached to each other for at least a week.”

I put my hands on his chest and gently pushed him away. “But Chase, we still should talk. There’s a lot we still have to figure out.”

“Does it have to be now?” He buried his face in my cleavage, dipping his tongue between the folds of my breasts and wrenching down my dress until only my strapless bra showed. My nipples hardened with excitement. How many nights had I dreamed about my nipples between his lips and his mouth gently tugging until I cried with desire?

Damn you, Chase.

“There’s plenty of time to talk later. Now I need to be deep inside of you until we both forget there was ever a time of separation.” He wrenched my bra down. Flower petals slipped past my aching nipples. I shivered with hot lust.

Our kisses transformed to caresses. Our clothes left our bodies within seconds and between panting. We made love, in the dimly lit space of Jasmine’s Hell. Flowers showered us as he tortured me with his hardness, taunting my moist body that was so wet from his tongue and my pleasure. Each time an orgasm burst between my thighs another stirred to take its place. I drowned in him. He greedily devoured me, gulping me down, and swallowing me whole, until we fused into one being. And when we were done, we lay on the petal-drenched ground, exhausted. Flowers surrounded the whole space and blanketed us with perfumed softness.

The food was forgotten. The poor waiter and chef probably hid in the kitchen, waiting for us to put our clothes back on. But I didn’t care, and was sure Chase didn’t either, as he laid his head on my chest and traced lovely circles on the bare area below my belly button.

“I love you, Jasmine,” he whispered over and over until his voice began to sound hoarse. “I’ll always love you.”

Pressure rose in my chest. *I love you too, Chase.* Those words coated my tongue and begged to be released, but something drummed at the back of my head. A tiny little thought that wouldn't stay still. Agitated, the thought stirred and fussed, shifting from side to side, nudging the logical part of my brain and rousing other thoughts in my mind. For the past five years he'd been involved with at least three women at a time. They attended to his needs and spoiled him rotten. He'd made love to them as he pleased, treated, and dressed them however he desired. But now all of a sudden he'd said he wasn't in the arrangement anymore?

What did that mean for us? Where was our future? Would he need a new arrangement?

"I love you, Jasmine," he whispered.

But will that love be enough?

Epilogue

I watched Chase and Jasmine from my darkened corner of the restaurant. *I am a spectator of love, nothing more.* I'd followed him here, and realized what he was up to immediately. I'd followed them both here before.

I should have killed her then, but I'd been hopeful, too full of optimism.

"I'm so sorry," he'd told us. "I'll provide for all of you for two more years so you can find employment and living arrangements."

You expect us to leave Willow Park in two years? Well, I'm done giving you what you want.

He'd quantified five years of tears, heartbreaking compromise, and lonely nights of depression into a lump sum that he'd dropped into each of our accounts. He thought money could solve it. *But you forgot that I don't need your money. I need you.*

He kissed Jasmine again. My stomach twisted into tough knots. "I love you," he murmured into her ear.

I felt like I was standing in quicksand, sinking down to meet my death. This life had been as rewarding as the hard liquor that coated my tongue. *What else did I have left?* He took it all with him—my love, my sanity, my dignity, and even my will to wake up each morning. He snatched my soul away and squeezed it. He cut me into nothing. He skinned me until I was only the bare bones of the woman I used to know.

And when he was finished, he offered a pathetic apology, a slap in the face of pity money to help him sleep at night, and a sort of regretful smile that made me weak just to see it.

Because was it really all your fault?

I studied Jasmine's face as she stared at the flower petals dropping down around her. She had barely given our arrangement a try and didn't want to share.

Of course not! None of us do. But we did. That's the point, Chase. You of all people should know that.

We'd stepped outside our own desires and gathered together. We sacrificed, united, and became something greater. It was bigger than any tragic love story. It rivaled any marriage or bond between just two people. We exemplified what it meant to truly surrender yourself to love, to move,

bend, and intertwine for the needs of others.

“Goodbye,” Chase had said. “Okay?”

I remembered that his fingers shook as he retreated across the front lawn of Willow Park. The wind blew through his hair. Those green eyes landed on each of our faces. That little question shone over those betraying eyes. The question I knew nagged at him when I’d killed Vicki. After each death, he’d assaulted us with insinuations and was soothed by our seemingly honest responses.

But I understood you best of all, Chase.

“Will there be any problems?” he’d asked.

The others had exchanged weird glances with me, unsure of what he truly meant, but I knew. That wasn’t the question he wondered. Oh no.

Will this one be killed too? That’s what you wanted to know, right Chase?

“I love you, Jasmine,” he whispered again. Tears burned my eyes. My knees buckled and I collapsed to the rose-petaled ground as they began to make love again.

Will she die?

Yes, Chase.

With that satisfying thought, I wiped away my tears and stood up. I edged out of the room and tip-toed down the hallway through the back doors.

And she’ll die with no mercy because you gave me none.

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Go on the website and join the New Release email list to discover when the sequel *A Test of Love* come out.

Biography

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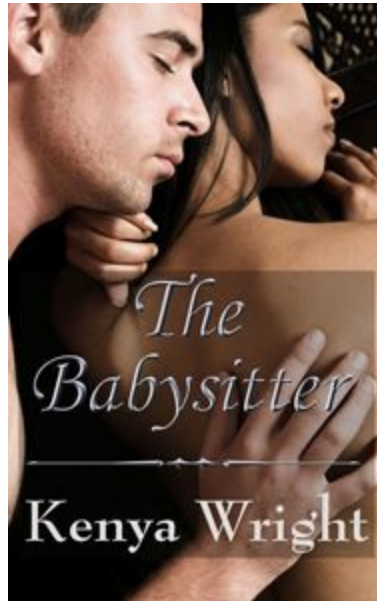
Kenya Wright always knew she would be famous since the ripe old age of six when she sang the Michael Jackson thriller song in her bathroom mirror. She's tried her hand at many things from enlisting in the Navy for six years as a Persian-Farsi linguist to being a nude model at an art university.

However, writing has been the only constant love in her life. Will she succeed? Of course.

For she has been coined The Urban Fantasy Queen, the Super Iconic Writer of this Age, The Lyrical Genius of Our Generation. Granted, these are all terms coined by her, within the private walls of her bathroom as she still sings the Michael Jackson thriller song.

Kenya Wright currently resides in Miami with her three amazing, overactive children, a supportive, gorgeous husband, and three cool black cats that refuse to stop sleeping on Kenya's head at night.

Books by Kenya Wright



The Babysitter

The Amazon New Adult and College bestseller and Erotic Fiction bestseller



Theirs To Play

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The Muse

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