

Baes of
Juneteenth

An illustration of a man from the chest up, wearing a dark green suit jacket, a white scarf, and a black turtleneck. On the left lapel of his jacket is a circular gold badge with the text 'MR. BLACK' and a black bowtie icon. The background is dark grey with a grid pattern and the word 'JUNETEENTH' repeated vertically in a light grey font. The title 'Mr. Take Me as I am' is written in a large, white, cursive script across the center of the image.

Mr.
Take Me
as I am

USA Today Bestselling Author

Iris Bolling

MR. TAKE ME AS I AM

BAES OF JUNETEENTH



IRIS BOLLING



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FOREWORD

*The **Mr. Black** organization's motto is simple.
We like our culture **BLACK**.*

Our representatives are men who are:

- ***Bold** enough to stand up for the rights of others.*
- ***Loyal** to the rich history of our existence.*
- ***Ambitious** enough to seek answers to difficult situations.*
- ***Cool** enough to be respected and accepted by our youth.*
- ***King** of all domains within your reach.*

BAES OF JUNETEENTH

Series

Mr. Straight Up No Chaser

Sherelle Green

Mr. Right Now

Sheryl Lister

Mr. Down for Whatever

Elle Wright

Mr. Alpha Undone

Kelsey Green

Mr. Second Best

Angela Seals

Mr. Big Stuff

Aja

Mr. Play for Keeps

Kimmie Ferrell

MR. TAKE ME AS I AM

Iris Bolling

Mr. On Your Knees

A.C. Arthur

Mr. One and Only

Sharon C. Cooper

Mr. Tall, Dark & Unavailable

Tina Martin

MR. TAKE ME AS I AM

BAES OF JUNETEENTH



IRIS BOLLING

CHAPTER 1



“Let me have a shot of Uncle Nearest 1856 Premium.”

“Going top shelf I see,” the bartender replied as the smooth sounds of Neo Soul played in the background. “Must be a special night,” she said while stepping on a stool to reach the elegantly designed bottle.

“Not really. I have a blind date tonight,” Cameo Rawlings, CEO of Palmer Innovations said as he took a seat at the bar. He was now wondering why he’d allowed his friend to talk him into this. There were a hundred and one things he could be doing in the office. But his friend, Ebony, had been on him to meet this person since she moved over to city hall with their other childhood friend, LT Palmer, when he was elected Mayor of the City of Richmond.

When LT asked Cameo to become the Chief Executive Officer for his multi-million-dollar software company, his life was changed. The company became Cameo’s top priority. The trust LT bestowed on him was humbling to say the least. Once Cameo took over the position, it became his personal responsibility to ensure the company continued to grow under his leadership. There was no way he was going to disappoint his friend. They had literally come from nothing, together. Cameo Rawlings, Lawrence ‘LT’ Palmer, Raymond ‘Mint’ Mintus, and Ebony Sullivan all grew up in public housing. The four of them stayed clear of gangs by sticking together.

Cameo was always the cool one who got along with everyone. Mint was the muscle. If anyone so much as looked at them wrong, he would handle it. Ebony, well, along with brains, she was the girl with the body that every guy wanted, only she wasn’t having it. Their duty was to block any guy coming her way. Then—there was LT, the real brains of the group. Not only did he

keep them, including Mint, who was not the brightest bulb in the ceiling, straight in school, LT encouraged them all to go to college. Mint said that wasn't for him, however, Cameo, Ebony and LT, all went to college. During their sophomore year in college, a game LT created was sold to a tech company. LT took some of his proceeds from the sale to pay off Cameo's and Ebony's student loans. In addition, he paid for both of them to get their master's degrees. During that time, LT started his own software company, Palmer Innovations, then hired all of them, including Mint, to work for him. They were all in a good place until Mint acted out, causing LT to fire him. It was an ugly scene at the time, but they were all working through it.

Now, all of them were in their thirties. LT was now married to his beautiful wife, Sapphire, who they all called Phire. So now, Ebony had decided it was her job to find him a woman. Hence the reason he was sitting at a bar drinking.

"A blind date?" The bartender shrugged. "You're a good-looking guy. I can't imagine you have a hard time finding women. Unless you're a workaholic."

Cameo smiled as he picked up his drink. "My friend, who set this up, says I need some balance in my life."

"Balance is good," the bartender replied. "But you have to be ready to share your life with someone, you know what I mean."

"Oh, I know." Cameo nodded as the bartender went to help another customer.

Cameo checked his watch, then took a drink. He was giving this blind date one hour. After that, he was going back to the office to get a few reports completed before he headed home. He looked up just as the door to the bar opened. The atmosphere in the entire place seemed to shift. The music changed to *Closer* by Goapele. It was the perfect song for the vision, with a sleek body, adorned in a gold dress, walking in the room.

For the first time in his thirty-five years of life, Cameo's attention was completely captured by a woman. If she was his blind date, he was going to get on his knees and thank Ebony for the rest of his life. Every step she took caused his body to have a physical reaction. He reached down between his legs to grab his dick for a slight adjustment. The way she glanced around the room, with a small purse hanging elegantly at the elbow of her arm, and the ponytail swinging from one side to the other, caused his adjustment to be irrelevant. Nothing could stop the reaction he was having.

His heart skipped a beat when he realized she was indeed searching for him. As if in slow motion, their eyes met and held. Then she smiled. The glass slipped from his hand onto the bar. It was a good thing the lights were low, and the bartender was right there.

“Is that her?” she asked while wiping the spilled drink.

“I damn sure hope so,” Cameo replied without taking his eyes from the woman.

“Here.” The bartender placed another drink in his hand. “You’re going to need this.”

Cameo heard the chuckle in the bartender’s words, but all he could do was nod. He took a drink of his whiskey to calm down the rising pressure against his zipper. It did not help; the erection was growing just from watching her walk towards him.

She stopped in front of him. “I’m Syndia James. My friends call me Syn. I certainly hope you are Cameo Rawlings because the sight of you is making a particular area between my thighs a little wet.”

Cameo laughed as he took her hand in his. “Ebony said you were rather direct.”

Her touch sent alerts to his lower extremities. When she looked up from their touch, he knew she felt it too.

“You feel that—don’t you?” he nodded.

She exhaled. “My parents taught me not to waste time on small talk when you know.”

Still holding her hand in his, Cameo’s thumb rubbed across her smooth skin. He tilted his head a little to the side. “Know what?”

“When you know the sexual chemistry is right.”

Cameo held her gaze for a moment then brought her hand up to his lips. He placed a gentle kiss there, then slowly returned his gaze to hers. “It feels more sensual than sexual.”

“Is there a difference?”

“Yes,” he replied with a slight smirk as he held out the bar stool next to him for her to sit. As she did, he nodded to get the bartender’s attention. She walked over.

“I’ll have what he is having,” Syndia stated.

“It’s a little strong.” Cameo advised.

“I like strong,” Syndia responded as the bartender poured the drink. “The difference between sexual and sensual attraction?”

“Yes.” Cameo nodded. “Sexual is the physical reaction. When parts of your body come to attention as my lower extremities and your nipples have. The sensual attraction touches your mind as the senses are stroked.”

“Really?” She leaned a little closer as she picked up her drink.

“Yes, really,” Cameo continued. “While the physical will soon fade, or can be replaced by another, the mind will always remember how I made you feel. It enhances the physical.”

“How so?” The bartender was now leaning across the bar listening.

Cameo and Syn glanced at her.

“Oh.” She stood up and began wiping the bar. “Sorry about that. I’ll just move down this way.”

Cameo chuckled, then looked back at Syndia.

“I’m intrigued, Mr. Rawlings.” She smiled. “Please continue with your distinction.”

“Close your eyes and listen to the sound of my voice.”

She did as he instructed. “Clear everything else from your mind. What are your thoughts? Do you feel fear, excitement, or a certain calmness? I can tell you your voice makes my heart smile.” He ran a finger down her exposed arm. “Think about how my touch feels. Is it hard, is it gentle, is it annoying? I can tell you your skin is sending shock waves from the tips of my toes to the nerves flowing through my brain.” He moved closer. “Inhale deeply. Take in my scent. Is it repulsive, is it nice, or is it enticing? I can tell you your natural scent is light, sensual and hot.” He leaned closer to her ear. “It has me as hard as a rock at this moment.” Then he gently kissed her lips, parting them slightly. “How did that taste? Was it sweet, sour or did it make you crave more? I can tell you, the taste of your lips makes me hungry for more.” He sat back out of her space, to calm his nerves and to give her a moment to react. “Sexuality is the attraction to how a person looks. Sensuality is the attraction to what makes that person unique. The sensual enhances the sexual, don’t you think?”

He watched as she slowly opened her eyes. The wanting he witnessed there pleased him.

“Did you just make love to me on a bar stool?” She picked up her drink then swallowed it down. “Damn.”

Cameo chuckled. “Allow me to buy you another drink.”

“No, my brother, this drink is on me.” The bartender took a drink herself, then poured another for both of them. “I think I just came. God, I need a

man,” she said then walked away.

“I think you have an admirer,” Syndia said.

“Does that concern you?”

“Not at all. I can hold my own.”

“I’m sure you can.” He took a drink then sat back. “You are not what I expected.”

She smiled. “You are a little bit of a letdown.”

Cameo’s hand touched his chest, then he groaned. “Right in the heart.”

She laughed. “Ebony made me think I was meeting the next Idris. I would put you as more of a Boris Kojoe.”

Cameo thought for a minute, then shrugged. “I can take that, however, I prefer to just be who I am. Cameo.”

CHAPTER 2



Usually, Syndia would have a thousand and one questions of any man who she went out with. However, this man sitting next to her affected her in a way she could not explain. There was a synergy that hit her the minute she walked in the door. At first, she was a little thrown when he suggested they meet at the Omni Hotel. However, once she arrived, it made perfect sense. The location was right in the middle of both of their jobs. From his office, it was a ten-minute walk across the bridge or a quick five-minute drive. From her office at city hall, it was less than a ten-minute walk, or a quick trolley ride. Driving would be a ten-minute headache with traffic. She figured he picked the location because Palmer Innovations did a number of business meetings and seminars at the hotel. The city also used the location when meeting with out-of-state visitors.

Syndia had been there on many occasions and knew the place well. She distinctly remembered the last time a man asked her to meet at a hotel restaurant. The meal was delicious, drinks were on point, the company had a lot to be desired. To make matters worse, when the bill came, his credit card was declined, and she ended up paying the bill.

“You hit that drink like a pro.”

Her thoughts returned to the man sitting next to her. There was a quiet confidence surrounding him. But there was something else too. She sensed a vulnerability,

“Uncle Nearest has become one of my father’s favorites,” she replied. “Uncle Nearest was a Black man who taught Jack Daniels how to make whiskey. A sister learned of the history, then bought the land in Tennessee where Uncle Nearest taught Daniels how to distill. Started the business in

2016 and now she has one of the top, award-winning whiskeys, 3 years straight.”

“You know the history of Uncle Nearest.” Cameo chuckled.

“When something interests me, I have a tendency to try to find out all I can about it.” She shrugged. “You have to admit it is a pretty fascinating story.”

“Kudos to the sister who brought it to life and to you for spreading a piece of history that should be told.” He held up his glass to her. Syndia held hers up. They toasted then swallowed their drinks down.

“So, tell me. Why is a spirited, intelligent, beautiful woman like yourself still on the dating scene?”

There was a patent response for that question, but he threw in a curve ball. Most men asked, what was a beautiful woman like her doing single. That wasn't what Cameo asked. Usually, her beauty was the first thing mentioned. Yes, she was very attractive, there was no getting around that. Standing five feet six inches tall, weighing a slim 127 pounds with everything falling in just the right places, she was known to turn heads, just as she had when she walked into the bar. She had been dealing with that reaction from men since she was a freshman in high school. At the age of thirty, this was the first time a man, who was causing her inner lips to vibrate, spoke of her spirit, of her intelligence, and then her beauty. She had waited a lifetime for a man like him. He deserved more than the basic response.

“People look at me and think I have this great life because I live seemingly carefree, I dress stylishly and I'm pretty well off, financially. I work because I love this city. I have the skillset to help others see it the way that I do. I dress nicely because my job calls for me to represent the city. Yes, I have money. Well, my parents are well off and I'm their only child. Not many people take the time to look deeper, to see what Syndia James is all about.” She looked up at him, blushing as she covered her eyes. “I have no idea why I just said all of that.”

He pulled her hands from her eyes. All of the sensations she felt when his lips had gently touched hers returned. Her inner muscles contracted from his touch. Then he spoke.

“You wanted to be heard, not just seen.”

The sound of understanding in his voice caused her heart to flutter as if little butterflies were moving around inside of her. This man was making her feel and she liked it.

“You said what you felt.” He smiled. “I admire that quality. A lot of people would put up guards against people they don’t know. Not you. You show who you are. Your action sends a simple message.”

“What message is that?” Syndia asked just wanting to continue to hear his voice because she liked the sound of it.

“It says, take me as I am.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “That is actually my personal mantra. Take me as I am or don’t take me at all.”

He laughed. She decided then and there that her mission in life was to hear that sound every day.

“That’s funny. I say that to my kids all the time.”

She frowned. “Kids? You have kids?”

“No. I mentor high school students who work for the company.”

“You call them your kids. That’s special.” She was liking this man more and more.

“They are special.”

He was still holding her hand as they simply sat there staring at each other.

“A man could lose his composure staring into your eyes.”

Syndia replied, “Good, it’s only fair since I’m lost in yours.”

“Would you like to get out of here? Maybe take a walk on the canal?”

Syndia had been wondering how long it would take for him to ask that question. He surprised her once again. He didn’t ask if she wanted to go upstairs to a room. No, he asked if she wanted to walk on the canal.

“While that would be very romantic, I can think of a more productive use of our time.”

“I cannot think of anything more romantic than a few moments exploring that mind of yours.”

“You want to explore my mind?” Syndia could not believe what she was hearing. “There are a number of comfortable rooms upstairs.” She leaned closer to him. “Wouldn’t you rather visit one of them?”

“I know for a fact that there are,” he nodded. “And there is a possibility that we may end up there. However, before I make love to your body, I need to seduce your mind.”

“All of this foreplay isn’t necessary. I’m a sure thing. I haven’t been with a man yet who has not enjoyed every minute of our sexual encounter.”

“I have no doubt,” he smiled. “I have a feeling there is more to you than

what I am certain will be an enjoyable ride.”

“Alright, what do you have in mind?” His eyes had a glow, a radiance that mesmerized her. “Before we go, I’m going to kiss you.”

She watched as his lips formed into a smile making them more desirable than before.

“Allow me the pleasure,” he said as his lips lowered to hers.

The sensations from before returned with a vengeance.

Their lips met in a smooth, gentle kiss at first. Then, like before, his tongue parted her lips, but this time he did not pull back. No, this time his tongue merged with hers. Stroking all corners of her mouth, tantalizing all her senses, enticing every nerve in her body.

“My lord. I need a cold bucket of ice,” the bartender said as she fanned herself.

To Syndia’s dismay, he pulled away, then smiled down at her. A warmth spread through her that she had never experienced before. Not even with what’s his name who she was once engaged to. She placed her hand on his chest to balance herself.

“Yeah, y’all do need to get a room. I’m just saying,” the bartender chuckled.

Cameo glanced at the bartender as he reached for his wallet. “My bill.” He placed a black card on the counter, then placed a hundred-dollar bill as a tip next to his glass.

Syndia smiled as he held on to her hand. She really liked a generous man and wasn’t ready for their connection to break. She picked up her purse from the bar. “What’s your name?”

“Me?” the beaming bartender asked. “Karina. You, from the vibes I’m getting are a lucky lady.”

“Karina, you really should do a comedy act somewhere.” Syndia smiled.

“Keep me in mind if you ever need a little entertainment.”

“We’ll do that,” Cameo replied as he collected his card then guided Syndia towards the door.

CHAPTER 3



Hand in hand they walked the block from the hotel to the bridge that crossed the canal. Cameo listened as Syndia talked about her passion for bringing joy into people's lives as an event planner.

"No one needs moments of joy and laughter more than the residents of the city. I mean they take a lot of crap from surrounding counties. The city is full of crime. The city is dirty. The city is whatever else negative they can throw our way. But those counties would kill to get control of the city again. Thank goodness Mayor Palmer is a strong capable leader who is not going to line his pockets with bribes." She stopped herself then smiled at him. "I'm sorry. I get a little passionate about the city."

"You are a very passionate woman." Cameo replied. "Tell me about your childhood."

"My childhood?"

"Yes, did you have a favorite doll?" he asked.

"Did I?" her eyes lit up. "I had an entire village of dolls."

She began telling him about her dolls as they continued to walk along the canal. They sat on one of the benches and he pointed to his office that could be seen from there. He talked about his future and what he wanted to accomplish with the company. Then the question came up about marriage and children.

"I think it is important to know the person you could conceive a child with." Cameo explained. "So many people treat sex as a casual event. It is not, at least not to me. Every time you have intercourse there is a chance of a pregnancy occurring. And there is nothing casual about bringing a wanted or unwanted child into this world."

“This isn’t about foreplay for you, is it?” Syndia gazed into his eyes. “You want to know the kind of person I am before we have sex. Am I acceptable?”

Taking her hand, he kissed the back. “Listening to you talk about your childhood revealed your true self to me. I consider it an honor to get to know you intimately. May I?”

Syndia held his gaze for a long moment then stood. Once he joined her, the two walked back to the hotel hand in hand.

* * *

WHEN THEY REACHED THE HOTEL, Cameo looked into her eyes. “I’m not ready for us to part ways. The company has a room on the top floor we use for visitors. Will you join me for a night of sensual pleasure?”

Syndia smiled. “Hmm... that sounds deliciously sinful. Since my name is Syn, I’ll go with a yes on that Mr. Rawlings.”

Cameo smiled as they walked towards the elevator. He pushed the button and the door opened. “There is nothing sinful about you, Syndia.” They stepped onto the elevator.

Just as the doors were closing Syndia replied. “That’s what you are saying now. Wait until we get to the room.” She smiled as the elevator doors closed.

“Before we take this journey, I want you to know I am not a womanizer or a man who plays games. I did not meet you tonight thinking anything was going to happen.”

“Full disclosure.” She took a step closer to him, pushing his back against the elevator wall, then leaned her body into his. “I am a free spirit. When a man interests me sexually, I have no issue getting a taste.” She ran her hands over his chest, across his shoulders, pushing his suit jacket to the floor. She wrapped her arms around his neck, easing his face down until they were a breath away. “With that said, you are the only man who has ignited a fire in me in a very—very long time. Her lips captured his in a deep, tongue twisting, kiss.

Cameo heard her purse hit the floor. The urge he had been fighting from the moment she walked into the bar was back in full force. The need to taste her overruled his warnings to take it slow. His hand wrapped around her

waist switching their positions. Her back was against the elevator wall as his tongue traveled to her neck, across her shoulder, down to her breast. He could feel her nipples hardening through the material of her dress. His hands roamed over her waist down to the hem of her dress. The skin on her thighs was so smooth. He cupped her behind, as his lips returned to hers. The thong she wore gave him open access. Her heat was calling out to him, but in the back of his mind he knew they were in a public place.

“There are cameras in this elevator,” he groaned into her ear as his kisses returned to her neck.

“I don’t care,” she moaned. “I need to feel you inside of me now.”

Cameo released a low chuckle. “I can tap that urge.” He said as his hand moved to cover her center between her thighs. His finger slid into her wetness, initiating a gasp from her.

“Your finger is so thick and long,” she groaned.

“The better to please you my dear,” he chuckled as his thumb rubbed against her nub. She gasped again as he moved his finger in and out. “Your passion is flowing as freely as your spirit.” Cameo whispered between his kisses. He could hear her breathing rise. The ding of the elevator arriving at their destination vibrated in their ears. Not ready to break their connection, Cameo reached with his free hand to hit the stop button. The elevator jerked to a stop. His attention went back to pleasuring her. His lips moved from her neck to her lips. He inserted another finger into her hot, wet cunt. The rhythm of his kiss and the movement of his fingers inside of her worked in unison to bring her to an explosion. Her head fell back against the wall as her scream escaped. He did not withdraw his finger right away. He continued to circle inside of her, then slowly pulled out. He waited until she opened her passion filled eyes, then put his finger into his mouth licking her juices from it.

Syndia laughed out loud. “This is so unfair. We have to get to a room.”

His body leaned into her until their breathing eased up. He smoothed the hem of her dress down, then hit the release button on the elevator. Picking up his jacket and her purse, he took her hand just as the door opened “Let’s not waste any time.”

He guided her to the room, placed his hand on the keypad and the door to the room opened.

As the door closed behind them, his lips captured hers causing the heat in the room to intensify. His hands traveled across her shoulders, down her curvy body, then settled on her behind. His mouth went full throttle on hers,

as he pulled the v of her thighs to his hard penis. She released a moan that caused him to increase the kiss. Their bodies moved in rhythm with each other as if they had been together for years. His hands roamed down to the hem of her gold dress, pulling it up over her head, revealing a black lace bra and thong. He stood back accessing her from head to toe.

“You are indeed a goddess in human form.” Lifting her, he carried her to the bed.

Cameo stared down at her. When his eyes met hers, she was watching him with the same intensity. His mind was on all the ways he would make love to this woman. He removed his shirt and tie revealing his broad chest, the muscles of his arms and the ripples of his abs. Suddenly it dawned on him. He did not have any protection on him. The realization must have shown on his face.

“The mini bar has a supply.” She smiled.

He returned her smile, then walked over to the bar, retrieved several packages and dropped them on the bed next to her.

“Confident, are we?” Syndia chuckled as he dropped his pants, briefs and all.

The full sight of him caused Syndia’s mouth to water. She adjusted her position on the bed, removed her bra, then her thong as he covered himself. The intensity of his eyes on her body almost made her come again. This man made her wonder, yearn to know his thoughts, his wants, his desires. Her tongue glided slowly over her lips as he placed a knee on the bed. He spread her legs then covered her body with his. His penis, long, hard and thick, caused a pool of moisture to form between her legs in anticipation. Yet again, this man did something completely different.

He placed a trail of kisses between her breasts, down to her navel then he kissed the wetness between her thighs. His tongue licked the area causing her inner lips to vibrate. Her body lifted towards him beckoning him to taste her again. He did, this time lingering there with a sweet sucking kiss. Then he did something that surprised her even more. He placed her thighs over his shoulders and proceeded to consume every ounce of her wetness. Every time his tongue hit her nub her body jerked, her breath caught and finally an explosion of epic proportions ripped through her. He quickly covered her body, palmed her face then gave her the sweetest kiss. His eyes held hers as he pulled back slightly.

“Your taste, the very scent of you, drives me wild.”

Never breaking eye contact he positioned himself at the very core of her, then slowly entered. She gasped at the sensations inch after inch, after inch of him travelled deeper inside of her. The atmosphere in the room changed. It became more charged as they began moving in rhythm with each other. His long thick pulsating penis delivered stroke after stroke of pleasure to the point where she wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him deeper. Their bodies began moving faster. The scorching heat from the friction of their bodies caused her inner lips to pulsate uncontrollably. His hands wrapped around her waist, lifting her as he pumped vigorously. Their hearts pounding, muscles tightening, breathing accelerating, until they both gasped as their bodies reached an explosion that ripped through them.

The scent of their lovemaking filled the air when Cameo opened his eyes. He looked down into a passion-filled face. His heart smiled with the knowledge that he put that look on her face. Her eyes slowly opened. What he saw in her eyes gave him a sense of gratitude he had never experienced before.

“Damn!” was all he could say.

“I meet your damn and raise you a double damn.”

“Play *Say Yes* by Floetry,” Cameo commanded. The soulful sounds filled the air. “Shall we go for round two?”

Syndia ran her hands over his back then purred, “Finally, a man who understands me.” She rolled him over, then straddled him. “My turn.”

CHAPTER 4



It was close to four in the morning when Cameo and Syndia left the hotel room. Both were well satisfied but wanted more. Since they both had to be at work the next day, or in this case, a few hours, they decided to call it a night.

They walked hand in hand to the private elevator used only for visitors using the penthouse. They had spent the last six hours together making love. Neither of them wanted to let the blissful night come to an end. Their connection had been instantaneous, strong and sensuous.

“So, I am not the clingy type but tonight was...” she hesitated, “...crazy good. And I was wondering what’s next?” Syndia asked as the elevator doors closed.

“We covered a lot of body parts tonight. What is it that you would like for us to cover next?” Cameo smiled.

“A man’s fail safe is to answer a question with a question. I’m not going to let you get off that easy. So, let me be very clear. I would love to see you again.”

Cameo turned to face her taking both of her hands in his then pulled her close. He smiled down into her eyes. “I would really love to see you again.” He took a step closer, wrapped his arms around her waist, then kissed the tip of her nose. “I would really love to feel you again.” Then he lowered his lips to hers. “And I really would love to taste you again.” His lips captured hers.

Syndia’s legs felt like they were going to give out on her. God, she loved the way he kissed. The sweet leisurely way he took his time kissing her could be felt down to her toes. It wasn’t rushed, it wasn’t hurried, it was just amazing.

The elevator door opened with the two of them still in their embrace. It took them a moment to stop the kiss. Then they stepped off the elevator smiling.

“Have dinner with me tonight,” Cameo suggested.

“I have a better idea. Why don’t you come to my place. I would love to cook dinner for you,” Syndia replied as they stood in what seemed to be an empty lobby.

“Well...well...well. What do we have here.”

The two turned to see a man sitting in one of the chairs near the elevator.

“What in the hell are you doing here?” Syndia asked.

“Well, my darling, my plan was to make myself comfortable for the rest of the night. I didn't think that you would make it down before six in the morning.” He looked at his watch. “You must be slacking on your technique, or did you pick one who was not up for the task of an all nighter?”

A shocked Syndia glared at the man, then put her hands on her hips and spoke slower. “What in the hell are you doing here?”

“Looking for you. What else would I be doing in another hotel lobby this time of morning?” The man uncrossed his legs then stood. He walked towards Syndia.

Cameo stepped in front of her in a protective manner. “Back up, man. I don’t know who you are, but you need to step back.”

“Whoa, whoa.” The man held up his hands. “I'm not here to cause any problems or anything of that nature. I just wanted to have a moment to speak with my wife.”

“Your what?” Cameo snapped around to stare at Syndia, then he glanced back at the man.

“You wish,” Syndia hissed as she rolled her eyes. “What the hell, Dillon?”

“Come on, Syndia Sherrie. I’m not mad or anything. We agreed to the open marriage you wanted and everything. But you really should be honest with these men when you take them upstairs. By the way, which room did you use? Did you go for the king suite, or did you get him to go all the way for the penthouse?”

“Excuse you?” Cameo raised an eyebrow.

“You see, Syndia has a...how should I describe it...a need for luxury if you know what I mean. That sweet little ass only likes to be laid on the finest of thread counts. I mean, she knows this, and I take it, now you do too.

Syndia Sherrie is not a cheap lay.”

“Have you lost your damn mind?” Syndia huffed.

“Darling, you know, when you take these men up to the room, you have to be honest with them. You have to let them know what the situation is. If you don't, you're going to have moments like this. Come to think of it, you should have also contacted me. I was home worrying about you. You know, the normal things a husband worries about when his wife doesn't show up where she should be. The mind starts playing those 'what if' games. What if there was an accident, or a mugging. What if she is lying in a ditch somewhere. Since I know this is your favorite spot to bring your...shall I say...” — he looked Cameo up and down— “recent conquests, I thought I'd wait for you here.” He rubbed his hands together. “But now that I see you are safe and alive, I can rest easy.”

Syndia shook her head as she looked at Cameo. She chuckled. “He is not my husband. In fact, how in the hell did you know I was here? Are you following me? Did you put one of your men on me?”

“Well, it is your favorite spot. If I got paid for every night we spent here, I would be a wealthy man. Darling, come on, I know your routine. If you had just told me you had a mark tonight, I really wouldn't be here.” He looked at Cameo. “We have an understanding. We have an open marriage. And so she is yours for the night. I don't have a problem with the two of you being together or anything. It's just that, you know, she's my wife and I was concerned when I didn't hear from her, and she didn't come home.”

“Cameo, this is not my husband,” Syndia repeated. “I have no idea why he is here, and I don't care. Let's go.” She grabbed his hand.

Cameo eased his hand away. “But you do know him?”

“Yes,” Syndia replied to the hurt she saw in his eyes. “His name is Dillon Moore, we were engaged once, a long...long time ago. We were never married. We have not seen, gone out or even conversed with each other for years now. The only time I have put eyes on him was when we just happened to be at the same event.” She pleaded with Cameo to believe her. Then she turned to Dillon. “What in the hell is your problem?”

“I don't have a problem, darling. As I said, it's an open marriage. You know you can be with whoever it is that you want to be with.”

“What is your purpose of being here right now?” Syndia hissed. “What the hell is it that you think you're doing?” The pitch of her voice rose as she turned to see the look on his face. “Cameo...”

Cameo looked at the two of them inhaled with his hands up. "Hey. I don't know what's going on, but I don't want to come between husband and wife."

"He is not my husband," Syndia huffed. "What kind of damn sick joke are you playing here, Dillon? And I'm going to ask again, are you following me? Do you have one of your men on me?"

"No, darling, as I stated, I'm simply here out of concern for you." Dillon smirked.

"There are hundreds of hotels in this city. How did you know to come here?"

"Now, darling, that's not important. When you didn't call or leave me a message, I wasn't sure what was happening. I was concerned, that's all. But, hey, now that I see that you're okay," he looked at Cameo, "I take it you're going to make sure that she gets home safely?"

Syndia watched Cameo staring at Dillon then her, not sure who to believe. But there was no way he could think she would be with him like they were tonight, if she was married to someone else. No, he couldn't believe that of her. However, the look of confusion she saw in his eyes caused her to reach out. She took his hand. "Please don't believe him. I have no idea why he is playing this game."

"Hey, I'm just a man who cares about his wife." Dillon smirked.

"Shut up, Dillon," Syndia snapped.

Cameo pulled his hand from hers, then stepped back. "She's your wife. You see to it that she gets home." He glared at her.

Syndia couldn't believe what the hell was happening. It was so damn crazy she didn't even know what to say to him. "He's not my husband."

"But you do know him?" Cameo asked.

"Yes."

"Is this some kind of game you two play on people? He just happened to be here in the lobby waiting for us to come down and then what...?" Cameo shook his head. "I'm not that guy. I'm not a person to deal with this kind of drama. I'm out."

He hesitated, staring at her with those beautiful eyes that had stared down at her lovingly not 5 minutes ago. Now, she could see the questions and hurt there. She turned to face Dillon. "Tell him the truth, damn it. Tell him we are not married."

"Oh, darling," Dillon started laughing. "That was actually fun." He reached out and grabbed her arm.

She punched him in the face, then kneed him in the balls. He bent over, grabbed between his legs, then squealed as he hit the floor. When Syndia turned Cameo was gone.

“No!” She ran to the door. Looking both ways, there was no sign of him. “No...” she cried out. “No,” was all she could say.

CHAPTER 5



One Month Later

“Cameo, a package arrived for you.” Katie, his executive assistant walked into his office. “It looks pretty interesting.”

Cameo looked up to see her place a black velvet box with gold trim around the edges on his desk. The top was engraved with the words **MR. BLACK** written across the center in gold. He opened the box.

Congratulations, Mr. Cameo Rawlings.

You have been selected for the prestigious honor of becoming Mr. Black for the City of Richmond, Virginia.

As you know, the Mr. Black organization’s motto is simple. We like our culture BLACK. Our representatives are men who are:

***B**old enough to stand up for the rights of others.*

***L**oyal to the rich history of our existence.*

***A**mbitious enough to seek answers to difficult situations.*

***C**ool enough to be respected and accepted by our youth.*

***K**ing of all domains within your reach.*

The organization’s investigation into your community engagement in the Blackwell area of Richmond, in addition to your philanthropic work with a variety of youth organizations within the city, are why you have been selected as Mr. Black.

If you choose to accept this honor, the term of Mr. Black runs for 4 years. The organization sponsors the community’s Juneteenth celebration. As the selected candidate for Mr. Black, your main responsibility will be to organize and host the annual Juneteenth celebration representing Black culture. The ceremony to announce you as our recipient will be held on...

“Wow,” Katie exclaimed from over his shoulder. “They could not have selected a better man to represent them.”

Cameo glanced over his shoulder at her. “Do you mind?”

Katie smiled as she walked back to the front of his desk. “Yes, I do mind. You have been working your ass off for the last year at Palmer Innovations since taking over for LT. You have given thousands of dollars to different youth organizations, not to mention the time you spend on the weekends with the kids at the center, or...”

“Are you finished?”

“No, I’m not finished,” she replied. “Or the number of teens you have hired here at the company to teach them coding and who knows what else. You are deserving of this, and it is about time someone says so.”

“I’m sure they meant for this to go to LT,” Cameo objected. “He is the mayor and the one who owns PI. They just put the wrong name on this. Send it over to Ebony at the Mayor’s office. She’ll know what to do with it.”

Katie stared at him in disbelief. “This has your name on it, not LT’s.”

“I’m sure that was meant for him.” Cameo continued working on his computer.

“Then how do you explain your name being on this and not his?”

He waved her off. “They saw the name as Chief Executive Officer and used that.”

“This organization is not that lame,” Katie replied.

“Hey, Mr. Cameo, congratulations!” Mac, one of the interns who had joined them after graduation from high school, burst through his office.

“Yes, you are now Mr. Black, representing the community.” Blayne, another intern, danced behind Mac.

“I knew they were going to select you.” Mac held out his hand to give Cameo a fist bump.

“What are you two talking about?” Cameo glanced up from his computer.

Mac and Blayne looked at each other then back at him.

“The black and gold envelope, that’s from the Mr. Black organization, right?” Mac asked.

“Yes, it is, but...” Cameo did not finish his statement.

“We put you in for it,” Mac said, excitedly. “And you won.”

“That organization is so cool, Mr. C. You are going to fit right in.” Blayne ran over and hugged him.

Cameo had to jump up from his seat to catch her as she ran into his arms.

A minute later Mac joined them.

“Hold up...hold up.” Cameo held both of them at arm’s length. “Talk slow and tell me what you know about all of this.”

“So, Mac asked me about his mother’s boyfriend,” Blayne began. “They met last year at the Juneteenth celebration.”

“Yeah, they been hanging ever since,” Mac added. “This was his last year representing this organization. He wanted to make a recommendation for his replacement.”

“So, I suggested you.” Blayne beamed. “I mean you know, you are Mr. Cool around here and you already work with the community on different things. So.....”

“I told my mom’s boyfriend about you,” Mac continued. “We submitted you as a candidate.”

“Are you sure you meant to submit me and not the mayor?” Cameo questioned.

“No.” Mac shook his head. “I mean Mr. LT is cool too, but you are the one working with us every day.”

“And now he’s married to Phire. He don’t need to be pushed out there to meet women,” Blayne explained. “Since Mac’s mom met her man at the Juneteenth celebration last year, maybe you will meet someone there too.”

“Are you playing matchmaker?” Cameo raised an eyebrow. “Do I look like I have trouble getting women?”

“No, I mean you are fine and all of that, but you are always working here,” Blayne stated. “You need to get out more.”

“And you know you are not going to hook up with anyone who works here. And you do need a woman, Mr. C., I mean I’m getting more than you, and that just shouldn’t be.”

“Excuse you?” Blayne turned on him.

“What?” Mac shrugged his shoulders.

“You telling my business?” Blayne hissed. “Or are you getting it somewhere else?”

“No, you know you are my girl,” Mac declared.

“I hope whatever you are doing, both of you are being safe.” Cameo glared at them. “It would be a waste of my time to tell you both you are a little young to be so serious with each other.”

“I’m eighteen,” Blayne replied.

“I’m about to turn nineteen,” Mac added. “Neither of us are ready for

children, so we protect each other.” He turned to Blayne. “And no, I’m not with no other girl. It’s hard enough keeping you straight.”

“Okay, you two, back to the Mr. Black submission. How many people were considered for this honor?”

“A lot.” Mac shrugged. “But the board voted, and you won.”

“And we are going to help you.” Blayne clapped. “So where do we start?”

“Right now, both of you are going back to your stations to finish out the day. Let me work on the Mr. Black responsibility.” Cameo pushed them towards the door.

“All right, but you know we can put together some really good sh.... stuff. That will blow away the city.”

“Yes, that is exactly what I am concerned about.” Cameo smiled. “Hey,” he stopped them. “That was a really nice thing to do for me.”

“You do really nice things for us all the time, Mr. C.” Blayne smiled. “This one is for you.”

Cameo watched as they left his office. The invitation to represent the city was meant for him. “Damn,” he said standing a little taller as he walked back to his desk. “Oh, Katie.” He jumped up and ran to the door.

Katie walked in before he reached the door. “Here you are. I already responded with your acceptance to represent the City of Richmond for the Mr. Black Organization.”

CHAPTER 6



"Cameo," LT spoke as he sat comfortably on the balcony with a drink in his hand, "I'm your friend, and I'm telling you I'm not sure how I would have reacted to that event had it been me. However, it's been a month since that happened. You should have called to check on her. At the very least, you should have taken one of the many calls from Syndia to allow her to explain. There may be a reasonable explanation why Moore acted out."

"In the moment, my temper was rising every time the man opened his mouth. It was crazy and to be honest, I did not know who to believe. This was a woman I had just met. Yes, we had one hell of a connection. But can you imagine having what I thought was a life changing moment one minute and in the very next discovering the woman might be married. Think about it. The one woman who had touched every imaginable bone in my body, my mind, my heart and then less than an hour later there's some man in the lobby claiming to be her husband. Yes, I had just met her, but again, I don't even know how to explain what I was feeling because I have never experienced anything like that before in my life." Cameo stood then walked over to the railing of his balcony, turning back to face LT. "Man, you know me. I'm pretty laid back and I have never had a problem getting women. I mean, I've had my share, but I tell you this one, man" —he shook his head— "this one touched me in a way I haven't been able to get past. I dream about it every freaking night. I don't know what the hell to do about it."

"Two things I'm going to say. First, yes, I do know what you are going through. You were there when I met Sapphire. You know what I went through. Trying to stay away from that woman was traumatizing." He chuckled. "I just could not stay away from her. At one time, there was a

chance that I was going to lose the election if I didn't stop seeing her. For the life of me, I could not let her go. Nothing I did could get her out of my system. So, I do understand. That's why I have to say this next thing to you. You know I love you like a brother. I would give you the shirt off my back in a snowstorm. Take what I am about to say to heart. When a woman touches you in the way you stated, you can't let her go. A man's pride can be like a drug. It affects you to a point where the things that you know are good for you mean nothing. Pride can make you walk away from the best things in life. It is difficult for a man to get over injured pride. But I want to point out one thing to you. Syndia James did not injure your pride. Dillon Moore was responsible for that. I don't know him personally, but as a City Councilman, he is an ass. He is not about his constituents, everything he does is about furthering his political aspirations. I don't know what the situation was in the past with him and Syndia, but I know for a fact she is not married. So that particular night, Moore played you, you fell for it and gave him exactly what he was seeking. He put a wedge between you and Syndia."

"Hell, I know that. The question that keeps me up at night is why. Think about it. How crazy can a person be to sit down in the lobby of a hotel, damn near all night to pull a crazy prank like that?" Cameo sat back at the table then stretched his legs out. "It's not just what happened that night. I don't do messy. If he was crazy enough to pull something like that, what else is he crazy enough to do? I have to wonder is this one woman worth me having to put up with the bull crap day in and day out?"

The sliding door opened. "Mint, I left the sauce on the table," Ebony Sullivan called behind her as she walked out on the balcony. "Grab it for me, will you."

Cameo stood taking the tray of ribs from her. He placed it on the table where the potato salad, and tossed salad already sat.

"I have it," Sapphire replied as she followed out the sliding door. "Mint is still scared to walk behind me."

LT laughed at his wife. "I can't imagine why?"

"I'd be scared of you too if you whipped my ass, then sent your brothers after me," Cameo chuckled.

"She did not send her brothers after me," Mint said as he walked out to join them. "And I'm not scared of her."

Sapphire stood. Mint moved to the other side of the table. "I'm going to get the wine," she said with a grin.

“We are all going to get along as we try to help Cameo work through this dilemma, he has gotten himself into,” Ebony stated.

“You mean the dilemma you got him into,” Mint retorted as he took a seat at the table.

“Sapphire, bring your pepper spray when you come.” Ebony smirked at Mint.

“Why you got to go tell her to do that?” Mint huffed as he looked towards the door.

They all laughed at his reaction.

“What’s your question?” Cameo asked.

“Have you been with another woman since that night?”

“You know I haven’t,” Cameo replied.

“Are you willing to go the rest of your life without having another woman?” Sapphire asked as she sat at the table.

“The thing is, I don't want another woman. I want her,” Cameo replied.

Ebony smiled. “I knew that was going to be your answer.”

“So did I,” LT laughed. “When Grant told me to consider stepping away from Sapphire until after the election was over, that was the same sentiment I had.”

“Thanks, baby.” Sapphire leaned over and kissed him. “It sounds as if there is no other woman for you, Cameo. It sounds like this Syndia is your Sapphire.”

Cameo sat back as his friends fixed their plates. “So how the hell do I fix this?”

“You bite the damn bullet and go get your woman. That's what the hell you do,” Mint replied. “You've been whining about this woman for the last month, man. Stop with the whining...man up. Admit you were wrong, kiss and make up. Don't let no pussy ass man punk you out like that.”

Cameo and LT looked at Mint, then at each other.

LT shrugged. “I wouldn't put it quite like that,” he chuckled. “But he does have a point.”

“I happen to know that she's not seeing anyone,” Ebony offered.

“I'm not as smooth when it comes to women as you are, LT. And I damn sure can't be as crude as Mint.”

“Thank goodness,” Sapphire laughed.

“Be still my heart,” Ebony joked. “Every time I hear Mint speak, I just can't contain my desire to have him.”

“Really?” Mint glanced at her.

“I was being sarcastic, Mint,” Ebony replied. “It seems to work for you.”

“Look, what works for LT or Mint will never work for you, Cameo,” Sapphire stated. “You are the cool one. In all the time I’ve known you, I haven’t seen you with any woman more than once.”

“There is a reason for that. I give a hundred and ten percent to the job. I can't see consciously letting that kind of drama into my life.”

“You don't have to be smooth like LT. That's his thing. You don't have to be down like me, that's my thing. You are Cameo. You're on that middle ground. You have been, ever since we were kids, man. Just be you. The least you can do is give this woman a chance to explain what all of that crazy shit was about. That’s what you did for me when I went bat shit crazy. That's all I got to say.”

“Give the man a bow.” Sapphire smiled. “This is one time I have to say I agree with Mint. Give the woman a chance to explain what the situation is with her and Moore. If it's something that you can deal with...deal with it. If you can't, the alternative is to walk away.”

“She has a point.” Ebony nodded. “But I have a feeling you can't walk away.”

“Hell, it's been a month and you ain't stopped talking about her for the last three hours since we been here.” Mint bit into his ribs. “Yeah, go get that honey and if you don’t do nothing else, get another taste to get it out your system. If it’s still good go for it, if not let that hoe go.”

“I need you to stop referring to her that way,” Cameo exhaled.

“You know, I don't mean it like a whore hoe, you know, I'm just referring to you know, a woman. Go get your hoe. Does that sound better?”

Sapphire and Ebony frowned at the man. Ebony took a roll and shoved it into Mint’s mouth. “No, it does not.”

Cameo laughed at his friends. It was good to have all of them together in this way. But for some reason he was still feeling like something was missing.

CHAPTER 7



“Syndia, I gave up my Saturday cookout with the family to hang out with my girl. For the last two hours the only thing you have talked about is Cameo Rawlings.”

“Untrue, we have talked about Shawn and BJ,” Syndia responded.

“Yes, you were kind enough to ask how they are doing.” Lexi laughed. “You and I have been through a lot since high school. But this is the first time you have been the one freaking out about something. Knowing it’s a man and I’m the person you chose to talk through it is an honor for me.”

“Well, you are the only one with a successful relationship that I know, other than my parents. And you know I can’t talk with them about this.”

“Why not? Your parents are very open about relationships and other things. My mother is the one we all have to be careful around,” Lexi laughed. “You know, it’s been a month since all of that happened, and you still haven’t explained to Cameo Rawlings why Dillon was pulling this craziness?”

“How in the hell am I supposed to explain it to Cameo when I don’t understand it myself?” Syndia cried out. “I mean Dillon and I were together back in college. We got engaged later, then broke up. In the last five years other than to insult me from time to time, the man hasn’t even spoken to me. Now that he is a Councilman, he thinks the door is open. No, you know I don’t go backwards. And for the life of me I cannot figure out why he was even at the hotel that night.” Syndia got up from the sofa where she was sitting then walked over to the island and poured another glass of wine. “I mean he sat down in the lobby while I was upstairs with another man. How crazy is that?”

“You never mentioned how he knew you were at that particular hotel?”

“I have no freakin’ idea. I mean, who does that?”

“Have you asked Dillon why?” Lexi asked.

“No.” She walked back over then slumped down on the sofa again. “If I’m anywhere near Dillon, I am going to shoot him.”

“Okay, I get that.” Lexi laughed. “You will go to jail. I’ll bring you cigarettes and put some money on your commissary account. Could it be that Dillon wants you back in his life? He may still be in love with you.”

“He was the one who left me. I did not break off the engagement. He did,” she huffed. “He wanted a political life and an event planner as a fiancée wasn’t impressive. According to him I should strive to be more in life. I told him he can take me as I am or don’t take me at all.”

“And he decided not to take you at all,” Lexi interjected. “I know the story well. I was there for the aftermath, remember.”

“Yes, I remember. That’s why I said if anyone should have been pissed it would be me. Not his dumb ass.”

“I agree.” Lexi exhaled. “From what I’ve seen of him, he is ineffective as a City Councilman and not that great of a man. It seems to me Dillon did you a favor. If he was crazy enough to pull off something like this, what else is he capable of?”

“After that night, I have no idea.” She turned to look at her friend. “Did you ever get the feeling that he was that off his rocker? I wish you could have seen him. He was performing as if he was really concerned for my safety. Hell, he almost had me convinced we were married.”

“What I keep trying to figure out is why now?” Lexi sighed. “I mean you guys have been apart for years. What would push him to do this now? Does he know Cameo Rawlings and feels threatened by him or did he just see you with the man and became jealous? I mean what caused him to act so foolishly?”

“It may be.” Syndia nodded. “I mean, I acted foolishly when I became overwhelmed with lust. Think about it. When Dillon and I broke up, I had my share of dates.”

Lexi laughed. “You had your share, my share and a few other shares.”

“Are you trying to insinuate I was whoring around?”

“No,” Lexi took Syndia’s hand in hers. “I’m only agreeing with the fact that you had your share of men after Dillon.”

Syndia glared at her friend for a long moment then continued. “Well, for at least two years before I met Cameo, I hadn’t been with any man. And you

know I am a sexually friendly person. I like having sex. But I was just tired of men wanting to be with me for my looks. Nobody was taking the time to make love to my mind. Cameo did—and I can't get past him.”

“I know, you've been talking about him for a month now.” Lexi smiled. “Tell me about him. Tell me what he did that was unforgettable.”

“Something happened that night, Lexi, that I have never experienced before. He made me feel. Not just his lovemaking, but with his words. You know, the way he listened. Cameo touched me in a way I can't shake and to be honest, I don't want to shake it.” She hesitated. “I want it to happen again and again and again.”

“That good, huh?”

“Girl.” Syndia rested her head on Lexi's shoulder then pulled her feet up. “When I tell you that that man did things to me that I can't even describe to you. He made me feel...he made me feel...”

“Loved,” Lexi filled in the word for her.

She looked up at her friend. “Yes,” she exhaled then looked down into her wine glass. “He made me feel like I was the only person in the world. Like a China doll that could crack in any minute.” She smiled. “He put those strong arms around me and held me tight. It made me feel safe, wanted and yes, loved.” She hesitated. “I want to feel that again.”

“You know, usually when you fall, you get right back up on that bicycle and take another ride. Have you taken another ride since him?”

“No. And I don't want to take another one. I want to get on that same ride and ride it for the rest of my life.”

“Well, my friend, here's what I'm going to say to you. Just like you told me when I met BJ - go get your man. Do whatever it is that you have to do to get him to listen. But go get your man.”

“That's just it I have been to his office. I have talked with Ebony to see if she can set something up.” She hesitated then sighed. “It seems like he put up a barrier where I am concerned. I don't know how to break through to him. The one time I reached him he was polite and sensitive, but he still cut me off. Do you know the last time a man cut me off?”

“Dillon?”

Syndia slowly glared up at her. “You had to remind me of that, didn't you? Besides, Dillon wasn't a man.” She sighed then rested her head on Lexi's shoulder again.

“Unlike Cameo Rawlings?”

Syndia smiled. "Yes. He is all man."

"Hmmm...You know we can always have him kidnapped and delivered here to your house. Put the two of y'all in the room together and throw away the key. Then you can have your way with the man."

"I wouldn't be opposed to that suggestion." Syndia smiled. "But I don't want to beg any man to see me. If Cameo really does not want to see me again, then so be it."

"If the chemistry between the two of you was the way that you described it, the forces of the universe will bring you two back together. I truly believe that. Look at what it did with BJ and me. You know I was not ready for that man to come into my life. But circumstances brought us together. If the chemistry is that strong you are not going to be able to deny it for long, and neither will he. Something is going to happen that will bring the two of you back together. Just don't let your temper get in the way when it does."

"I do not have a temper."

"What did you do to Dillon that night in the hotel lobby?"

"Oh, that...well maybe I had a little bit of a temper that night. But he deserved that and more. As for Cameo, I'm not going to beg. I'm done making the phone calls and showing up at his office. I'm just done."

"How good did you say it was?" Lexi smiled.

Syndia's head fell to the back of the sofa. "He was so damn good. I can feel him vibrating between my legs right now, just thinking about him."

Lexi laughed at her friend's dramatics. "Then you have two choices. You can go get you a 12-inch dildo and name it Cameo or you can go get the man himself."

"How did you know he had twelve inches?"

CHAPTER 8



“Good morning.” Grant Hutchinson, the Mayor’s Chief of Staff walked into the office. While they all worked in the same building, it was rare for the workers in her office to see executive staff from the mayor’s office in their little corner of the building. That wasn’t to say anything derogatory about the mayor or his staff. The simple truth was their jobs were very different. They ran the government, Syndia and her co-workers’ planned events.

Granted, the events that they planned were everything from everyday meetings to large formal gatherings. Syndia was one of four planners who worked under the supervision of Jane Rice. Jane enjoyed taking credit for each of the successful events their team had planned and implemented over the last five years. It was understood that any event that was planned and managed by the team was always presented under Jane’s name. The team would implement the project, however, it was Jane who received the recognition for the success. Jane’s mantra was simple: we are a team. Everything done for the city was labeled ‘The Planning Team led by Jane Rice’. No other name was ever mentioned. If any one of them suggested in the slightest way that the idea was presented by this person, or the setup was created by that person, you better believe you would pay the price. Either by denial of vacation time, or mandatory overtime, or the worst event projects. One way or another you would pay the price.

Syndia, who had no issue with voicing her opinion, had been on the receiving end of Jane’s wrath more than once. But the truth of the matter was, Jane could not produce the quality of events without her. There were times when Monday through Friday, 9-5 would be hell on wheels in Jane’s world.

While Syndia did not have an issue dealing with her, some of her co-workers did. Under normal circumstances, this would not really faze Syndia, however the mayor was creating a new department working independently of the planning department. The position would be charged with planning cultural events only. Its goal was to bring the different communities together to celebrate each of their diverse cultures. The mayor's initiative would bring communities together to share their history.

Syndia was the person who planted the idea, and she was excited that they were moving forward with it. She had written up a proposal to give to the old administration. For whatever reason, her mother told her to hold off on that. *Wait until you have someone who would be open to your ideas before presenting them*, she said. And as it turned out, her mother was right. One day over lunch she shared her ideas with her friend Ebony Sullivan, the executive assistant to the mayor. She loved the idea so much, she asked Syndia to give her a copy of the written proposal. To Syndia's surprise, the mayor loved it. Syndia was thankful that Ebony understood it was important that Jane never discover the idea came from her.

It was also Ebony's idea that she go out with Cameo and look how that turned out. Syndia shook her head. Why did that man keep creeping into her thoughts?

"Girl..., there is something to be said for having a young Black mayor. All his friends are fine."

Syndia looked at Angel as she leaned against her desk. "If you are referring to Grant Hutchinson, yes, he is fine. However, you do know he is married. In fact, he is very married with a child on the way."

"Hell, I don't wanna marry him, girl. I'm just happy to have some good eye candy to look at." Angel chuckled.

"And he is good eye candy." Barry, another co-worker, rolled his chair over to her desk. "He made me take a double look."

She watched the man who was talking to her boss. "He is worthy of a second look." Syndia nodded. But in her mind, she was comparing Grant Hutchinson to Cameo. They were both over 6 feet tall, weighing around 200 pounds, and had light brown skin. However, as fine as he was, Grant Hutchinson did not have those light brown piercing eyes that cut through her when she looked into them. Just the thought of the man had her crossing her legs.

"I wonder what that's all about?" Barry said as they all watched as Grant

walked into Jane's office then closed the door.

“Good question,” Angel responded. “I mean how often does someone from the mayor's office come down to talk to Jane.”

“Is there a major function or event coming up that we're not aware of?” Syndia asked.

“Well, you're the one with the connections to the mayor's office.” Angel glanced at her. “Did Miss Sullivan mention anything to you?”

“Or your parents?” Barry asked. “I mean they are close to the Hutchinson family.”

“No, nothing about any out of the normal activities around the city.”

“Nothing here, that I can see,” Barry said after checking the computer.

“Well, we're about to find out,” Angel said as they watched Jane stand up from her desk and walk out the door with Mr. Hutchinson.

“May I have everyone's attention please?” Jane spoke then waited until everyone had turned to look at them. “Mr. Hutchinson has an announcement he would like to make.”

“Thank you for allowing me a little of your time. After speaking with Jane, we decided to present an opportunity to each of you. The mayor received an interesting inquiry yesterday. As you all know, President Harrison...”

“The President of the United States?” Barry questioned.

“Yes, that's the one,” Mr. Hutchinson replied. “He is from Richmond. As you know, he is beginning his second term, which will be his last term in office. He therefore is in the beginning stages of selecting the location for his presidential library. Many presidents before him have chosen locations in their hometowns or close by. President Harrison wants his library to be built in the city of Richmond. In fact, he is insisting that it be in the city not one of the surrounding counties. You all are knowledgeable of the heartbeat of locations here. With that in mind, we would like to extend an opportunity for each one of you to present a location that you feel would be fitting for the presidential library. Keep in mind there has to be enough land around it to build something spectacular. I'm sure you all understand what a huge economic impact a facility of this nature could have on the city. The tourism alone will have an impact for generations to come. As an incentive, the mayor will reward the person who comes up with the selected location, the manager of cultural events position.”

Syndia sat up glancing around at the excitement on her coworkers' faces.

She clearly understood why. This was the opportunity of a lifetime. All of them were under the impression that the position would automatically go to Jane since she was their supervisor. From the look on Jane's face, Syndia was certain Jane had assumed the same thing. But this announcement opened it up to everyone. This gave everyone in the planning department an opportunity to move up.

Syndia knew what she was about to say was going to cost her dearly. However, she felt it had to be put out in the open. She knew her coworkers were going to love her for it, but Jane...not so much. But what the hell, it's not like Jane loved her now.

“Mr. Hutchinson, I have a question.” Syndia stood. “Here, in the planning department, we have kind of an unspoken rule that everything that any one of us does goes underneath the title of the planning department. If we do things that way for this project, how would it be determined whose location is selected?”

From the look on Mr. Hutchinson's face, it was clear he had no idea what she meant. “Each of you presents ideas to Jane all the time for different events you handle for the city, correct?”

“Yes, we do,” Syndia continued. “However, they are presented as a team project with Jane’s name on it. My question is how will it be determined which location is presented by who?”

“That is great teamwork.” He glanced at Jane, nodding his head. “However, in this instance, I think each one of you should present your idea for the location independently. Wouldn't you say so, Jane? That way your great team would be able to shine as a team and as individuals.”

The smile on Jane's face said it all to Syndia. It took all her will not to laugh.

“I think it's a great opportunity for each of them to show what they have. And I am certain members of our team are going to come up with some fantastic locations.”

“The mayor is certain as well.” Mr. Hutchinson agreed. “We would like to have the location decided before the Juneteenth event. The President would like to be able to make the announcement during the weekend celebration.”

“Wonderful,” Jane responded. “That gives you all a couple of months to find a perfect location.”

“Sounds good,” Mr. Hutchinson said as he clapped his hands. “Let's set

the deadline for May 1st for the final decision. Everyone will have the opportunity to present their ideas on that day.”

“We can make an event of it,” Angel suggested.

“Yes,” Barry jumped in. “Remember how we did science fairs in high school? We can do presentations for the mayor. Each of us presents our location and a design for the facility.”

“Yes,” Angel chimed in. “Each of us will have 15 minutes to sell the mayor on our idea.”

“Oh, I don't know about that,” Jane cautioned. “I think that would take up the mayor's time. I think the better plan would be to run the ideas by me and I will select the best...two. Then those two people will present for the mayor.”

“You know I think it would be better to allow each individual to present their own ideas directly to the mayor,” Mr. Hutchinson stated. “He is going to enjoy hearing from each of you. All right, are you guys all up to the challenge?”

“Yes, well...” Jane began but was cut off.

“Jane, that's really a compliment to your leadership. You have given us confidence to present in this manner. So, I'm excited about this,” Syndia stated.

“I think we should build a little excitement around the presentation,” Mr. Hutchinson suggested. “We may invite a member of the President's staff or family to attend the presentations as well. I'm going to discuss that with him. I will get back with you on the time and location for your presentations. Best of luck to each of you. Jane, thank you for allowing me to speak with your staff. I am sure every member of this team is going to shine.”

“It is my pleasure, Mr. Hutchinson. Thank you for the opportunity,” Jane replied.

They all watched as Mr. Hutchinson walked out of the door. Syndia braced herself. She knew what was coming.

“Syndia James, my office...now,” Jane demanded. She turned then stomped into her office without looking at any one of them.

“Girl, I'm glad you put that out there, but I would not want to be you right now,” Barry declared.

“You are going to be lucky if you have a job when you walk out of that office,” Angel added.

“No, Jane is not going to fire you right now,” Freda argued. “She is simply going to try to sabotage everything that you do. Watch your back.”

They all turned to stare at the one person in the office who never had much to say to anyone about anything unless it had to do with a project they were working on. Of all the people in the office, Freda had been there the longest and was probably the least competitive. But Syndia knew Freda was one of the best in the office at what she did. Hell, it was Freda who taught her to develop an effective timeline for an event. Her timelines were so detailed, she could time every meeting down to the minute. What Freda taught her propelled her success by years. It touched Syndia that Freda spoke out.

“Well, the way I see it, this gives each one of us an opportunity to go for that position,” Syndia stated. “I don't know how Jane really feels... well, yeah, we all know how she really feels.” They all laughed. “But we can't let that stop us. Bring your A game and don't share your thoughts with anyone. And for goodness' sake do not use the computers here to plan. Good luck to everybody.”

“Syndia...NOW!” Jane yelled out.

“Stand your ground,” Barry exhaled.

“Good luck to you.” Angel smiled.

“Remember who your mother is,” Freda said then turned back to her computer.

Syndia shrugged. “I'm going to be okay.” Then she walked into Jane's office.

“Close the door.”

Syndia did as instructed. She made a face at her co-workers then closed the door.

CHAPTER 9



“Was it your intent to make me look bad in front of the Mayor’s Chief of Staff?”

“What are you referring to?” Syndia asked.

“Oh, you know exactly what I’m talking about. Don’t play that little innocent role with me. It does not work for you, Syndia. You have been after my job since you got here.”

“I’m not after your job, Jane.”

“Hell, yes you are. You know the way that I run things here. When we put events together, everything is done as a team. It is not for individuals to get pats on their backs. That is how I run things in my shop. It is the number one rule.”

“Yes, I do understand that, and I think it’s wonderful. But the team cannot be the cultural events manager. That can only be one person. So in order for everyone to have a fair shot at it, they will have to present their ideas independently. You are always telling us how great our ideas are. We have done wonderful things for the city under your leadership. I don’t know exactly where the manager of cultural events is going to fall in, but I would think that that person would be reporting to you. Right?” Syndia said, knowing that if the plan she wrote was followed that position would be reporting directly to the mayor’s office. He or she would act independently of the planning department. In fact, that position would be working with a team of citizens and business leaders within the city to ensure that cultural events incorporate all cultures.

“No, that is not right. And that is a perfect example of why not everyone can be in a leadership position,” Jane snarked. “You have to understand how

city government works in order to head up a department such as manager of cultural events. You have to know what toes not to step on or who to include on the planning board.”

“You’re talking about greasing palms, Jane. The city doesn’t work that way anymore. This new administration is not about pleasing the old regime of the city. It’s about being inclusive of all.”

“See,” Jane chuckled in a mocking way. “That is one of the reasons why you are where you are, and I am where I am.”

Syndia wanted to say, ‘no you are where you are because you slept with half of the last administration.’ Or City Council male members anyway. Well, maybe she slept with the female members too. Syndia didn't know, but she knew that the way that Jane got her position was the old way the previous administration handled promotions.

“This is going to be an independent position reporting directly to the mayor's office. None of you are ready for that.”

“Oh, Jane, I disagree. I think that any one of the members of our team will be able to rise to the occasion,” Syndia replied.

“Well, we shall see.”

“Yes, I guess we will,” Syndia replied. “Is there anything else?”

“Just know I'm going to be watching every move you make during this process.”

“Okay,” Syndia replied as she started to walk out the door, but then she stopped to look at Jane. “I do a pretty good job for you. For the last five years I've done some really great events. And I think you know that other members out there have done some great events, too. We have made this department look very good. I think it would be a really good reflection on you when each one of us stands up there and presents our ideas to the mayor and his staff. For that reason alone, I am certain you want all of us to do well with this assignment. If you do anything to interfere with any of their chances, I will make sure the mayor and his Chief of Staff know everything I know about you and the old administration.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know enough to guarantee you don’t get the cultural manager position in addition to you losing this one,” Syndia warned.

“Syndia, I noticed you did not include yourself in that so called threat. Maybe you should have. I may participate in this little competition myself.”

“Ha, I’m worried about one of them beating me out. You...” she laughed.

“Without us pushing ideas your way, you are not a concern for any of us.”
She then turned and walked out of the door.

CHAPTER 10



Cameo walked into the room Ebony had sent him to. He wasn't sure what type of reception he would get from Syndia, but there was no turning back. The open room was small. It had four desks with a little walking space between each. There was a wall with metal file cabinets against it. Each desk seemed to have a creative personalization on it. How in the hell could anyone be creative in this space, he thought.

"May I help you with something?"

Cameo looked into the face of a clean shaved man, with a bald head and a flair for the dramatics.

"I'm looking for Jane Rice."

The man pointed to a small office in the back. "She's right there."

Cameo nodded. "Thank you, my brotha."

"Anytime," the man replied as he walked back to the office. He lightly knocked on the door. "Good afternoon, Ms. Rice?"

Cameo watched as the woman looked up. She stood then adjusted her dress.

"Yes, and you are?"

"Cameo Rawlings. I am the CEO of Palmer Innovations. May I have a moment of your time?"

"Of course, please have a seat." She pointed to a chair beside the door.

Cameo waited until she sat back behind her desk then took a seat. "Thank you for taking the time to speak with me."

"How may I help you?" She smiled.

"I was recently given the honor of representing the Mr. Black Organization for the city of Richmond. My term will last four years."

“Congratulations. I had the pleasure of working with the previous representative on a number of events.”

“Then you are aware of the tasks I have before me. This is new for me. I’m an executive at a tech company. I have never coordinated as much as a birthday party before.” He laughed. “I want to represent this organization in the best light possible. I’m going to need assistance from your office. My first task is to begin the planning for the Juneteenth celebration for the city. I was hoping to acquire some assistance from one of your employees to help guide me through the planning and implementation of the celebration. Mayor Palmer indicated you are the person I would need to speak with.”

“Mr. Rawlings, we currently have a number of projects in the works. With your predecessor, in the first year, the need was much greater than the last year. What is your expectation for your first year? How much assistance will you need? Do you need a part time person, or will you need someone full time assisting you with the planning, the designing, for the first year?”

Cameo smiled. “I’m afraid I’m going to need quite a bit of assistance.”

“I do have a person I think will be perfect for your project. She’s a very capable young woman and I’m certain she will make that Juneteenth event come alive.”

“Actually, Ms. Rice, I have someone in mind.”

“You do? Who?”

“Syndia James.”

The woman was silent for a moment. He wasn’t certain she was going to respond. But after a moment he could see her eyes light up. Then she sat forward.

“Then we are on one accord for she is the very person I had in mind.”

He watched as she glanced out the door.

“She is away from her desk at the moment. That gives us a little time to discuss your needs. From past experience, this first year for you is critical. I will be able to clear Ms. James’ calendar for a month or two to ensure she is available for you.”

There was something about her response that made Cameo think his request was playing right into the woman’s hands. But he did not know how.

“That would be quite helpful.”

“I think this will be beneficial to both of us, Mr. Rawlings. Syndia is very creative in handling spectacular events. There she is now. Give me a minute to speak with her and I will be right back.”

Cameo watched as the woman walked out. He did not turn to look out the door. The moment he'd dreaded since making this decision was here. He sat there wondering what Syndia's reaction would be.

Syndia walked back into the room with Angel, both had drinks in their hands from lunch. They were immediately met at the door by Barry.

"Man alert. No let me change that." Barry chuckled. "Fine ass man alert." Syndia laughed. "What are you talking about?"

"Who is that in Jane's office?" Angel asked as she placed her drink on the desk.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Barry whispered in a low voice. "I don't know who he is, but he is fiiinneee."

"Why is he here?" Syndia asked.

"No idea and does it matter?" Barry asked. "I'm telling you when you see the man you will understand why it is not important. Just the man's presence is enough to make you want to holler."

Freda walked over to Syndia's desk. "I don't know about all the hollering stuff, but the man is fine. And your name was mentioned."

Syndia frowned. "My name?"

Freda nodded. Then walked away as Jane approached them.

"Syndia, I have a project for you." Jane stopped in front of her desk then looked down at her. "A new Mr. Black has been selected. Clear your calendar. You're going to be working with him on a number of projects over the next four years starting with the Juneteenth project."

"Are you serious? I worked on those projects when I first started here. Why am I being assigned to projects of this nature?"

"Are you saying that these projects, these cultural events that you claim you want to represent, are beneath you?"

"No, what I'm saying is that Mr. Black projects are usually short run jobs that could be handled by anyone," Syndia replied.

"Good. Your name is now anyone. You should come and meet the new representative for Mr. Black. His name is Cameo Rawlings. I expect you to give him your all."

Syndia jumped up from her chair. "Did you say Cameo Rawlings?" she squealed as Jane was walking away.

"Yes," Jane said, looking back over her shoulder. "Do you know him?"

"This project is going to be better off in the hands of someone else. Give it to Barry. Barry can work it. It's just not the type of thing that I do anymore,"

Syndia suggested as she backed away.

“I’ll do it.” Barry rushed over. “I’ll be happy to work with Mr. Black.”

“No,” Jane replied as she glared at Syndia.

“You work for me. You will do this job and you will represent the city well. You are going to assist Mr. Rawlings in putting on the best damn Juneteenth event that the city has ever had. I expect you to clear your calendar of everything else and put one hundred percent of your concentration on Mr. Rawlings. Now come into my office so you can meet him.”

Syndia stood there, frozen where she stood. What the hell was she supposed to do, she thought as she looked around nervously.

“Syndia, this is a ploy.” Freda came to stand next to her. “Look. Of all the people in this office, you are the one that Jane fears the most. No one in this office can top you. If you really want that cultural manager position, do exactly what she stated. Make that Juneteenth event the best the city has seen in years. Oh, and just in case you don’t know, Cameo Rawlings is Mayor Palmer’s best friend.”

“I LOVE this mayor and all his friends.” Angel smiled.

“Yeah, they are all easy on the eyes,” Barry stated. “Unlike the old cronies from the last administration.”

“Ms. James,” Jane called out. “We are waiting.”

Syndia inhaled. “Oh God, oh God, oh God oh God.” She chanted with each step towards the office. “Please calm my nerves...please calm my nerves...please calm my nerves.” When she reached the door, he stood. The area between her thighs began to moisten as she watched him unfolding to his full 6 feet 3-inch height. All the essence of Cameo stood in front of her. The moment their eyes met those sensations from that night that they spent together filled her. The anger and disappointment she felt that night were overtaken by the sheer joy of seeing him again. How should she approach this? She wondered. But just as he had that night, he smoothly took the lead.

“Ms. James.” He extended his hand. “It is indeed a pleasure to see you again.”

Syndia could not take her eyes from him as he stood there with his hand extended.

“Syndia,” Jane called out.

Hearing the censorship in Jane’s voice, Syndia took a deep breath then placed her hand in his. The touch immediately sent waves of memories

throughout her body from that night. The night that changed her life. Every nerve in every corner of, and yes, in the crevice at the v of her thighs, was vibrating from his touch.

“It is nice to see you again as well.”

“You two know each other?” Jane questioned.

“Know each other, no, not really,” Cameo replied. “Though we have met.”

“Yes, we have.” Syndia exhaled.

“Then the two of you working together should be no problem.” Jane beamed. “Mr. Rawlings, I have cleared Syndia’s calendar for the next oh, shall we say six weeks? That should give you plenty of time to layout plans for the next two years. Syndia, why don’t you take Mr. Rawlings to the conference room to get started on possible meeting dates.”

“Meeting dates?” Syndia questioned.

“Yes,” Jane replied. “Set up a calendar of dates that the two of you can meet to start discussing the different projects and what will be needed.”

Syndia was having a difficult time concentrating on what Jane was saying. Then she pulled her hand from his. “No...no...no dates. We don’t need to have dates.”

“Yes, you do,” Jane hissed.

“The last thing I want to do is force you to do anything you are uncomfortable doing,” Cameo stated. “Why don’t we let Ms. James have a day or two to consider the benefits of working with me on this project.” He reached into his suit jacket, pulled out a card then gave it to Syndia. “All I ask is that you take a day to consider working with me.” He turned to Jane, then extended his hand. “Thank you for your time, Ms. Rice.”

Syndia watched as he turned then walked out of the office. She let him walk away from her before. Was she going to let him do it again?

Yes, one side of her brain said. He dissed you, girl. Totally dissed you without giving you a chance to explain.

Yes, he did. However, what would you have done, the other side of her brain railed. If a woman had come out of the woodworks talking about, she was his wife. You would have kicked him in the balls.

Maybe, the other side of her brain started yelling....

“Wait,” Syndia called out. When he turned back to her, the look in his eyes beckoned her. She walked over to him. “The least I can do is hear you out.”

“Which was the chance I did not give you,” he replied.

Syndia exhaled as they held each other’s eyes. A few moments passed by. “Congratulations on the selection of holding the title of Mr. Black.”

“Thank you. Will you help me?”

She hesitated, but not because of his question. It was those damn eyes of his, that touch and oh, for some reason today, his scent was calling out to her.

“Yes, she will,” Freda replied.

All eyes turned to her. That gave Syndia the time she needed to get her senses under control.

“She’s right,” Syndia agreed. “Of course, I will help you. Why don’t I come to your office tomorrow. We’ll start the preliminary planning.”

“Thank you.” He smiled. “I will see you tomorrow.” He turned then walked out of the office.

His smile made her damn toes curl inside her shoes. She stood in the middle of the floor for a long time after he left. When she turned, all eyes were on her. “Well, that was interesting.”

“Oh no, girlfriend, you got to give more than that,” Barry chuckled.

“I could feel the heat from those stares all the way up my thighs,” Angel laughed. “So, what gives? Who is he and what is he to you?”

Syndia cleared her throat as she walked over to her desk. “He is the new Mr. Black representative.”

“And?” Angel questioned.

“And nothing,” Syndia replied as she turned to her computer. “Nothing, he needs help with planning events.”

“Yeah right, all you are going to do is help him with the planning?” Barry chuckled.

Angel joined in. “All that eye gazing says a lot more.”

“It’s called chemistry,” Freda said as she tapped Syndia on the shoulder. “Here is the preliminary planner that was done for the previous representative. All you have to do is put your own touch to it. Jane did not do you any favor here, Syndia. Keep in mind this is her way of taking your concentration from the cultural manager position.”

Syndia nodded. “Don’t you want to keep this for yourself? I mean you are trying for the position too...right?”

“No, I figure when you get the position you will need an assistant to help you organize the department. I figure I can work for you.”

“What if me or Barry gets the position?” Angel asked.

“No. I can’t work for either one of you,” Freda said then walked back to her desk.

Syndia did all she could not to laugh at the expressions on her co-workers’ faces. She turned back to her computer wondering how she was going to handle working with the man who generated so much heat that her inner lips vibrated.

CHAPTER 11



Cameo couldn't seem to get his concentration together. He looked at the new game program that was presented to him by one of the new developers and it seemed interesting. But he wasn't giving it his full attention. Sleep had evaded him all throughout the night. Thoughts of Syndia coming to see him had not only his mind whirling, but his body reacting to the possibility of being near her again. By the third shower of the night, he gave up. There was no need to try to sleep. The woman with the light brown eyes would continue to haunt him.

He pushed his chair away from the desk and then stood to look out the bank of windows in his office. The view of the bridge that crossed the James River leading to the city always brought a sense of calm to him. It was turning into a beautiful day. The sun was shining brightly. His only wish was that the beauty of the day was an indication of the upcoming visit. He was anxious...very anxious to see Syndia again.

His mind wandered to the day before. Damn, if she didn't look good in that beautiful green dress that stopped right above her knees. He longed to touch those silky long legs of hers. The knock on his door interrupted his thoughts as Katie walked in.

"You are in the office early this morning, even for you. It's barely 7 AM. Is there something wrong? Is there a problem I need to be aware of?"

"No. Everything is fine. I thought I would get an early start on the proposed project that Mac submitted yesterday."

Katie nodded. "He did seem a little excited about it. As do you. Do you want to share what has you all wound up this morning?"

"I'm cool," Cameo answered as he sat behind his desk.

“Cool? That is not how I see you this morning.” She smiled as she placed a report on his desk. “I was surprised to receive a call from Syndia James requesting to be put on your calendar.”

“She did?” Cameo looked up. “What time did she give for the meeting?”

“So, you were expecting her call?” Katie raised an eyebrow at him.

“Yes.” Cameo hesitated for a moment. “I took your advice. I made a trip to her office to request her help with the Mr. Black projects.”

Katie smiled. “I always knew you were a smart man. I assumed you wanted to see her as soon as possible. I put her on the calendar for 8 this morning. That will give you time for your Zoom meeting with the East Coast regime of the Mr. Black organization. You will be on the call with Mr. McCullough, of Pittsburgh and Mr. Reed of Washington.”

“Thank you, Katie,” Cameo replied as he wrapped up the report he was reading.

“Do you need anything before the meeting?”

“No. It's a meet and greet for the eastern region representatives. It shouldn't be too intense.” Cameo replied.

“Try to stay on time. You are meeting with Ms. James in an hour.” Katie replied as she closed the office door.

Cameo used the remote to turn on the monitor on the wall. He clicked the link that was sent to him for the meeting. To his surprise one of the members was on. “Mr. Reed. How are you this fine day?”

“Doing well,” Nathaniel Reed from Washington, D.C. replied. “And call me Nathaniel. I'm old, but not that old.”

“I consider it an honor,” Cameo replied.

“Hey, gentlemen,” Raymond McCullough joined in. “My apologies for running a bit late. I was distracted with other matters.”

“Lemme guess, your new assistant?” Nathaniel chuckled.

Raymond gave Nathaniel a look that said “not now” before addressing Cameo. “Is it okay if I call you Cameo? I think we can drop the formalities for a moment for this meeting.”

Cameo nodded in agreement. Part of the reason he joined Mr. Black was to embrace a brotherhood with men that looked like him. To have a moment in his day where he didn't have to be Mr. Rawlings was a relief. “Yeah, man.”

Raymond smiled. “Cool. Nathaniel and I have known each other for a couple of years after meeting at a Mr. Black convention back in 2021. This is my third year as Mr. Black and each year I'm excited to get to meet brothas

from other chapters. We are always in great company in this organization.”

“Yes, we are,” Nathaniel agreed. “This is my second year in the organization.”

“So I say all that to say, we are familiar with each other and text often, so he knows I'm in the middle of ... let's call it a crisis.”

“Anything I might be able to help with?” Cameo asked with a concerned look.

“Unless you possess a manual that holds all the secrets related to women, I doubt you'll be able to help. His crisis is woman related.”

Raymond rolled his eyes. “I'm going to handle my problem. Don't worry. Let's talk business before we scare off Cameo.”

“I don't scare easily,” Cameo added. “Besides, I have a little situation of my own to deal with.”

They all laughed and only quieted when Nathaniel picked up his vibrating phone before shaking his head and placing the phone back down beside him.

“On a serious note, it's an honor to speak with you both today.”

“The honor is all mine, gentlemen,” Cameo replied. “As so elegantly spoken by Raymond, I second that we could not be in better company. Here in Richmond, I am in the process of putting our plans together for a weekend-long Juneteenth celebration. This is a new area for me, but I must say I am impressed with the information each of you sent regarding your events.”

Nathaniel's cell phone sounded again. Cameo watched as he checked the phone, ignored it, then spoke. “The organization provided the basic guidelines.”

“Yes, with the opportunity for each of us to personalize our plans to fit our location,” Raymond added. Nathaniel's phone sounded again. “Do you need to step away to handle that call? It may be important.”

“Nah, I'm good,” Nathaniel replied, glancing at his phone with a smile. “I won't lie and say it's not important because it is. However, lessons have to be taught. Anyway, did the information we sent give you any ideas on the direction you want to take for Richmond?”

Cameo nodded. “It did. I will be meeting with an event planner after this call.”

“Sounds good,” Nathaniel responded. “Is it a woman you're working with?”

Movement on Raymond's end captured the attention of the men and they all watched as a tall brown-skinned woman walked to a credenza behind

Raymond's desk, seemingly unaware that she could be seen on camera.

Cameo and Nathaniel watched as Raymond's eyes followed the woman who appeared to be putting some files away. Her figure was shapely in her simple black dress that hugged her curves. So shapely that when she bent over to organize the stack of files in the cabinet behind him, she offered the men a plump heart-shaped view of her bottom.

Raymond turned back to the camera while clearing his throat. When he loosened his tie, it was clear the man was tortured, but when he noticed Cameo and Nathaniel watching “his crisis” with intent, he glared. Both men grinned and went back on topic as Raymond's assistant exited as quietly as she entered.

“It is a woman,” Cameo chuckled. “Is there a reason you asked that question?”

It took a moment for Raymond's attention to come back to them. “It makes the event prep easier on the eyes. You know what I mean,” he smiled.

“Like your current “crisis?” Nathaniel asked Raymond with a knowing smirk. He turned his attention to Cameo. “Just make sure whomever you hire is vetted. There are a lot of people who are always looking to make a name for themselves, and with an organization as big and well-known as Mr. Black, you never know.” Nathaniel groaned as his phone vibrated against his desk. He lifted it to look, and his eyes widened.

Raymond sat up, his attention back on the meeting as he glanced at Cameo. He tilted his head. “Man... you know we can reschedule. This doesn't seem like a good time for you.”

“That wouldn't be an issue on my end.” Cameo nodded in agreement. “Handle your business. We can talk later.”

Nathaniel cleared his throat, replacing his phone back on his desk. “I told y'all, I'm good,” he said around a long gulp of water. “Back to the matter at hand, I think it's important for the East Coast Kings to demonstrate exactly what we are; men with the assets, brain power, and charisma to represent the Mr. Black organization. It's our duty to ensure the citizens of our cities are exposed to our rich culture, and our responsibility to fill the minds of our youth with the truth about their history, while ensuring they each take pride in who we are as a people.”

Raymond nodded. “You're right.”

“I agree,” Cameo added. But his curiosity about Nathaniel's situation was getting the best of him. Not to mention the women who appeared in

Raymond's office. It seem both of them were in a similar situation as he. Syndia was due at his office in less than an hour. Maybe, talking through things with Nathaniel will give him some insight into how to handle Syndia when she arrives. "To accomplish that, we need events that will bring our youth and elders together. After all, the wisdom we need to share is with our senior citizens. In fact, it seems you could use a little of that wisdom in this moment. Do you want to talk about this situation that has your phone blowing up?"

"Yeah, let's since you were all too happy to bring up my crisis earlier." Raymond chuckled. "I'm curious as hell to know who this woman is that has you so stressed you left her out of your texts."

"Who mentioned it being a woman?"

Raymond gave Nathaniel a look that said he couldn't believe he'd asked that question.

Cameo laughed at Raymond's expression. "Look, I don't have a lot of experience with relationships, but hey, we're here if you need to talk."

"True," Raymond added. "You already know what I'm going to tell you. Better you get it out than to let it consume you."

Nathaniel hesitated. "Aren't we supposed to be discussing business?"

"This call can be about what it needs to be about, which is you at this moment. Either way, whatever is spoken here will remain here. Speak as freely as you need to," Cameo replied.

"Just know you can either hash it out here or it'll end up in group chat, and we'll tell you the same thing there. Seriously though, man, what's up? We're here if you need to vent." Raymond leaned back in his chair, intent on listening.

"Exactly, it is our duty to stand by our brothas during times such as these," Cameo leaned back in his seat ready to listen. "So, tell us. What is the woman's name?"

"How about this? If I'm going to tell y'all about Stephanie, y'all can tell me about--," Nathaniel let the statement trail off.

"Tracey," Raymond grumbled. "And you've seen enough of my crisis already."

Cameo hesitated, then he spoke her name, "Syndia."

Stroking his beard, Nathaniel nodded. "Since Cameo is the newest to the Mr. Black Organization, it's only fitting he goes first."

Cameo sat up. "Have you ever met a woman who makes you lose all

sense of time. That one woman who makes you question what planet you are on only to discover she may be married to a total ass?” he sat back. “Well... that’s my situation.”

For the next hour the three men sat back listening and offering advice. Neither had a problem with the meeting taking a turn. It was another example of the Mr. Black Organization giving them a valuable resource, the bonding of three strong Black men who now referred to themselves as the triple threat of the East Coast Kings.

Cameo disconnected the call. Talking about Syndia settled his nerves some. Sitting back in his chair, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath and when he opened them Syndia James was standing in the doorway of his office, wearing a light blue dress. The three-inch heels made her legs look like they went on forever. If it was her intent to capture him completely, she’d succeeded. The advice given by Raymond and Nathaniel filled him with the courage to do what he needed to do. He stood, staring at her.

“I’ll just close the door,” Katie said.

“Thank you, Katie,” Cameo said as he attempted to gather his senses. He slowly walked from behind his desk.

“Do you feel it?” Syndia asked. “Just like that night and yesterday, it’s there.”

“I do,” Cameo confirmed as he took a step forward. “Unlike the last time, I suggest we not act on it. If you accept my apology, this time, we are going to get to know each other before we act on this chemistry we share.”

Syndia took a step forward. “You mentioned an apology.”

He took another step forward. “I should have given you an opportunity to explain the situation. I’m going to be straight with you here. I had just spent an exceptionally sensuous evening with a remarkable woman. In my mind I was seeing more of those evenings with you and I together. Ending the evening with a man waiting down in the lobby, claiming to be your husband, well, that threw me.”

“That would have thrown anyone; it threw me, too.” Syndia took a step closer. “I am so sorry he did that. I still cannot explain why. And I can honestly say I still want to kick his ass for ruining what I also thought could have been the beginning of many sexually charged evenings spent together with you.”

Cameo stepped close enough to look down into those wonderful light brown eyes of hers. Reflecting back to him were visions of the two of them

together. "Please accept my apology for walking away from you that night. Because of my actions, we wasted a month of sensuously-sexually charged nights we could have spent together." He took her hand in his. "I am asking for an opportunity to get to know you better. Just know, I'm a flawed man. All I can ask is that you take me as I am."

She smiled as her fingers wrapped around his. "Apology accepted...only if you're willing to take me as I am. With all my baggage, my crazy ways, and outspoken opinions. Because I'm flawed, too. We all are. The wonder of love is accepting people as they are and loving them anyway."

Cameo smiled down at her. "I could not have said it better myself. I accept." He leaned down with the intent to gently kiss her, however, when their lips touched, her tongue slid across his causing alerts to rush through his already aroused body. They would never make it through the planning session if he did not stop the assault. He slowly ended the kiss, then took a slight step back.

"All right." He used his finger to move a strand of hair that was over her eyes. "We're going to do this a little better than we did the last time. Cameo placed his hand on the small of her back. "Why don't we place your things on the table while we talk."

"All right," Syndia placed her purse on the table and sat in the chair in front of his desk. He took the seat behind his desk. "Syndia is an unusual name. Who knew your uniqueness at birth?"

She laughed. "My father. His name is Sidney James, after the actor Sidney Poitier. And my mother's name is India. She was named after the place where she was conceived."

"The two names together formed the name Syndia." Cameo smiled. "The name is as beautiful and unique as you are. Now, tell me about Dillon Moore and if I need to kick his ass to keep him away from you."

Syndia chuckled. "What do you want to know?"

"Who is he and what is he to you?"

CHAPTER 12



“Councilman Dillon Moore,” Syndia began. “He was someone I dated during college. We were young and thought we would be together forever. When we returned home, he decided he wanted to get into politics. Not because he believed in any particular cause. No, he thought it would make him powerful. It never occurred to him that people need a reason to vote for a politician. When he began to share some of his views, they conflicted with most of mine. Unfortunately for him, I was never one to hold my tongue. When I disagreed with him, it did not matter if we were in public or alone. His adviser felt my opinionated boldness, as they called it, would interfere with him being elected. So, he called off the engagement until after the election. I countered with calling it quits permanently.”

“You did not love him enough to wait for him to establish himself in his political career?”

Syndia shrugged. “I guess not. As it turned out I did not respect or like his views or him very much. Dillon is the type of man who would say what is needed to win the room, not what he actually believes.”

“Are there any residual feelings for Mr. Moore?”

“Not on my end,” Syndia replied. “I cannot speak for him.”

Cameo nodded.

“What about you?” Syndia asked as she adjusted her position in the chair. “There has to be a woman or two in your past.”

“There were some, here and there, but no one special. I was busy trying to keep my scholarship during college and helping with Palmer Innovations after. I did not have time for a steady girl.”

“But you had your share?”

“I did, until about a month ago, when I met you.” Cameo gazed into her eyes. “Now, I can’t seem to concentrate on anything or anyone except you.”

She held his gaze for a long moment, then asked, “Are you trying to make my panties wet, Mr. Take Me As I Am?”

Cameo smiled. “It would only be fair since you had me rising to the occasion since the moment you walked in the door.”

Syndia laughed aloud. “I love a man who speaks his mind. I am going to have fun with you.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Cameo chuckled then sat forward. “However, business before pleasure.”

Syndia nodded, then reached for her tablet. “I worked on a few preliminary plans for the year.” She tapped the tablet, pulled up a chart then set it up on the desk for him to see. She walked to stand behind him as she spoke. “In the past the Mr. Black representative has handled four events for the city: Juneteenth, Martin Luther King Birthday, Black History Month and the annual Small Black Business Fair. I do not know if you are aware, but Palmer Innovations has sponsored the fair for the last five years. Now that you are CEO, I assume that will continue.”

“Yes, it is a project we are committed to for the long run. As long as PI still has a pulse, we will sponsor the fair.”

Syndia nodded. “Good to know. Now, the first event is the Juneteenth Celebration. Our first task is to determine where the event will take place. In the past, the weekend event has been housed at Brown’s Island. There have been some issues with that location. With a new representative, it may be a good time to look at other locations.”

“I’m happy you said that.” Cameo turned to face her. She was so close he could feel her breathing. Cameo swallowed then continued. “I happen to agree, and I have a location in mind.”

Syndia smiled. “You do? Where?”

“It doesn’t have a name. At least I don’t think it does, but it is located in the city near Main Street Station. It’s going to take some imagination, but with its connection to Shockoe Bottom I think it could work.”

She took a step back. “I’m not familiar with any event space in that area unless you are referring to the station.” Syndia frowned. “Trying to do an event inside would cost thousands of dollars.”

“No, not inside” He stood. “Let me show you.” Placing his hand on the small of her back, he could feel the heat of her skin, through the material of

the dress as he walked her over to the window. To concentrate on what he needed to say, he dropped his hand then pointed. “See the area to the left of the station? That area is a significant part of our history. I believe with your magic touch we could make that a viable location for the celebration. There are two significant communities within walking distance, not to mention the exit for the highway run right into the area. Then there is the train station access. The existing businesses in the area can benefit from the festival and vice versa. Each evening when the festival winds down the people will flow into those businesses. It’s a win - win for both.”

Syndia glanced at him. The way she was looking at him was tempting. He was about to pull her into his arms until she spoke.

“The Slave Auction Site.” She nodded. “The history could easily be incorporated with the celebration. There’s a sign there that says, ‘*Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.*’ I think the quote was by Paul Boese.”

“That could be a theme for this year.” Cameo shrugged. “With so many people attempting to erase our history, holding the celebration here will remind residence to embrace our history.”

Syndia gasped at his words. “I need to see that area. Can we go there... like now?”

Cameo checked his watch. “Sure, I have time. Let’s walk over.”

“Walk across the bridge in these heels? I don’t think so.” Syndia frowned.

Cameo laughed at the expression on her face as she picked up her purse. “I will drive,” he said as he opened the door. “We wouldn’t want to scuff up the shoes.”

“No, we do not.” Syndia nodded in agreement. “These shoes are the cornerstone to making my legs look good.”

“And they do look good,” Cameo replied as they walked past Katie’s desk.

“I will cancel your afternoon appointments,” Katie said.

Cameo glanced back at her over his shoulders. “Thank you, Katie.”

“You’re welcome. Enjoy the rest of your morning.”

* * *

IT TOOK them longer to find parking than it did to drive to the location. Once

they reached the area, Syndia was beaming from ear to ear.

“This would be a perfect location for the presidential library. Imagine this area with green lawns from here to under the bridge, all the way over to the riverbank. There could be walkways and benches for people to sit. Oh” —she turned excited— “over there, closer to the underpass, could be the area to hold events. There could be concerts, speakers, book readings, marching bands...I can see everything happening here.”

“The presidential library?” Cameo frowned in confusion. “I was thinking of using this location for the Juneteenth celebration this year.”

“We can do both,” Syndia suggested. “The rich history that goes along this whole area could be enhanced by placing the presidential library here. Just imagine all of the things that were done and said about the area.” She whirled around. “I can see it all. The setting up of stages.” She took his hand as she pointed. “We could have at least three or four stages here. On one stage we could have a set up for children. Historians telling them the history of our ancestors.” She pulled him along. “Then we can have another stage over here with displays of artwork and crafts from our culture. And then over on another stage it could be the sounds of our culture. We could bring in musical guests. Oh, imagine vendors lined up with people going from station to station. And the food stands.” She ran over to another area. “I can see this entire area lined up with plenty of different foods to taste. Close your eyes and you can smell the aroma in the air.” She ran over to him, threw her arms around his neck. “I think this is a perfect location for Juneteenth and the presidential library.” She kissed him. “You are good for me, Cameo Rawlings. I think I’m going to keep you.”

She then jumped back excitedly looking over the area. She stopped when she spotted a building at the back end of the property. “Hmm, that building would have to go but I don't know if we could do that by the Juneteenth celebration.”

Cameo walked over to where she stood. “That building is the heart of why I want the celebration here.”

“Why? Does that building mean something to you?” Syndia asked.

His hesitation caused her to move closer to him. She wasn’t sure why, but she had a feeling that he was about to give her a part of him.

“I’ve never talked about my past with people,” Cameo began. “LT, Ebony and Mint know because we all grew up together. But that building was a safe haven for me as a child. My home life wasn’t like yours, with two

parents and a home. I was an only child to my mother. She was into drugs and ended up in prison. I was raised by Aunt Lulu. She was my mother's youngest sister. She took me in when my mother was incarcerated. Aunt Lulu was young and didn't really like the idea of having to take care of a child she had no part in conceiving. When I was small it wasn't so bad. But I grew a lot when I hit high school. If Aunt Lulu had a man over, which was damn near every night, I had to find somewhere else to sleep. She didn't want the men to feel intimidated by me or think that I was her man. For a while, I would break into an empty apartment to sleep. If nothing was vacant, I would walk across the bridge to that building, find a corner and sleep there." Cameo exhaled as he stared at the empty building with broken windows. "There were others there who did not have a place to sleep, just like me." He shook his head then looked at her. "It is why I appreciate all the blessings I have in my life. I know what it was like to have nothing, not even parents. I learned early not to take anything for granted."

Syndia walked over, took his hand in hers then entwined their fingers. "You have me now," she said, then exhaled. "Tell me more about your childhood."

Cameo looked down at their joined hands. "I've opened up more to you about my childhood than I have with anyone."

She rubbed his arm. "I want to hear more."

Hand in hand they walked the grounds. He shared more of his childhood, him taking over the helm of Palmer Innovations. How he valued the friendship between him and LT. The trust between the two, and the honor of the Mr. Black distinction because it reflected who he was as a man. After talking with Raymond and Nathaniel, he wanted to live up to their expectations as well as the children who nominated him.

The more Syndia listened to him talk the more she realized he was a caring thoughtful man. It wasn't by chance that she met him at this time in her life. She would not have known what to do with him. Now, she did. This man was someone she could fall in love with. What in the hell was she going to do about that? Then she thought, why did she have to do anything about it at all? Why not just let life happen?

As they walked back towards the car Syndia smiled. "You know, the more I think about it, I am sure this is the perfect location for the Juneteenth celebration, and the presidential library."

"Do you think you can convince the city administrators of that?"

“I honestly believe that we can. All we have to do is find out who owns this property,” Syndia replied as she looked over the land again.

“I already know who owns it,” Cameo replied.

“You do? Who?” Syndia asked.

“I do,” Cameo replied. “I purchased it with the first bonus I received from Palmer Innovations.”

“You own this land?” Syndia asked surprised.

“From the train station over to the highway,” he nodded. “All the land that is adjacent to the city property.”

“Oh, my goodness...” she beamed in astonishment. “Are you willing to lease it for the presidential library?”

“It’s possible.” Cameo gazed into her eyes. “What do I get in return?”

Syndia walked seductively towards him then stopped and met his gaze. “A grateful city and President.”

“Good answer.” He kissed her gently on the lips. “One condition.”

“Name it.”

“You must incorporate the building into the design for the library.”

Syndia glanced at the building, scrunched her eyes, then smiled. “Done.” She kissed him again, then grabbed his hand pulling him along. “Come on. We have to talk to my friend Lexi.”

“Who is Lexi and why do we have to talk to her?” Cameo hurried towards the car with her.

“She works for Davenport Estates. They are developers. I am sure Xavier Davenport can capture my ideas in a design and he is the only one who could work magic on that building,” she replied as they reached the car. He held the door open for her. “On the way I’ll tell you about the presidential library project and why you...and your kisses, have made my day.”

CHAPTER 13



On presentation day Syndia walked into the office beaming with excitement. “Today is the day, people. Is everyone ready?”

“Somebody had a good weekend,” Barry teased. “You got the ‘I been hit several times’ look on your face.”

“It’s not just about sex, you know...or maybe you don’t.” Syndia teased... “You’re going to experience what I’ve been feeling for the last month one day.”

“If that means I’ll be walking around all day every day with the silly grin you’ve been sporting, count me out.” Barry replied.

“I’ll take it.” Angel shrugged. “Does Cameo have a brother?”

“No, he’s an only child,” Syndia replied as she took a seat at her desk. “Now, is your project ready?” she asked Angel.

“Yes, and I’m excited to present it,” Angel replied. “Did you hear the President, or the First Lady might join in with the voting?”

“No, really?” Syndia frowned. “Ebony did not mention it to me.”

“When was the last time you had lunch with her?” Barry asked. “Lately, you have been missing in action.”

“So, you took up the slack?”

“Why not, Ebony is pretty funny when you get to know her.”

“I’ve been telling you guys that for over a year now,” Syndia reminded them. “How about you? Are you ready to present?”

“Yes, I am. And my new friend Ebony has been giving me pointers here and there,” Barry replied. “What about you?”

“I’m ready.” Syndia nodded. “I really want to win, but I don’t have any problems losing out to one of you.”

“You know there is a last-minute name added to the competition.” Freda slid her chair over to Syndia’s desk.

“Really?” Syndia raised an eyebrow.

Barry and Angel walked over to see the piece of paper Freda was showing Syndia.

“You’re kidding?” Syndia responded.

“The heifer,” Barry exclaimed.

“Have any of you shared your thoughts with her?” Angel asked. “I haven’t seen her with an original idea since....”

“Has she ever had an original idea?” Barry questioned.

“Well, it seems she may have one now,” Freda replied.

“If she does, it’s okay,” Syndia replied. “As Cameo says, there’s a win-win for everyone. If Jane gets the position that means one of us will get promoted into her position. As a group we will not have to deal with her anymore. If one of us gets the position, then one of us will be out of her line of fire. Don’t let her entry stress you. Give your presentation all the energy you have, don’t waste time worrying about what anyone else is going to present.”

“You’re right,” Barry stated. “The council meeting starts at 6 p.m. We have an hour to set up before then. Anybody need any help?”

“I’m leaving early to pick mine up from home,” Angel said. “I will see you guys at the presentation.”

“No, I’m good,” Syndia added. “Cameo is bringing mine over.”

Syndia was excited. She had no doubt that she had the perfect location for the presidential library, and her presentation was stellar. Her presentation included everything that could be done at this presidential library site. She even broke down the transportation system and how easy it would be to access the presidential library. Syndia even did a layout on the potential tourism attraction that this facility could be for them. There was only one issue that she could think of that may cause a problem. Since Cameo only owned a portion of the area needed, the City Council would have to vote on the location. “Listen, whatever you guys do, each one of you make sure you take a moment at the end of your presentation and thank Chief of Staff Hutchinson and the Mayor for giving us this opportunity. If the President or First Lady are present, include them as well.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought about that,” Angel said as she wrote.

“I need to add that to my notes, too.” Barry started typing.

Syndia smiled at Freda, as she shook her head.

* * *

AT 6 P.M. Syndia was full of enthusiasm. By 8 p.m. she was sitting at Police Headquarters waiting for the secured lockup door to open wondering how in the hell did things go so wrong?

The room used for council meetings was packed. Every one of the council members were present, as was the mayor and his staff. They were all excited that President Jeffrey Harrison and his wife, Tracy were both there for the presentation.

First up was Angel, who presented an area that was on the far west end of the city, and it was a good presentation. As Syndia had advised, Angel did remember to thank everyone in the room. In fact, she thanked some people that weren't in the room. It was clear Angel was very proud of her presentation, and so was Syndia. Both she and Barry cheered when Angel wrapped up. Next up was Barry. His presentation gave them the location which included parts of Brown's Island. Of course, Barry always had a flair for the dramatic and he performed his presentation with gusto. Everyone was entertained by it. Syndia could not have been prouder of him. She clapped enthusiastically for both her coworkers.

It was her turn. She stood, but so did Jane.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hutchinson. I have a prior commitment I could not get out of. I was wondering if I can present next, if it is all right with Ms. James," Jane requested.

"I believe Ms. James is next on the list." Mr. Hutchinson stated as he glanced at his list. He then looked up. "Ms. James?"

Syndia glanced around the room, then looked at Cameo, who was sitting next to her. He shrugged. "No, I have no problem with that," she replied then sat back down.

When Jane reached the desk where the computer monitor was set up, she placed her drive into the laptop then turned it on.

Syndia almost fell out of her chair as the cover of Jane's power point presentation appeared. In fact, she jumped up. Cameo caught her hand then gently pulled her back down. Jane had *her* location. Syndia couldn't believe it. She glanced at Cameo in shocked disbelief. As pictures from the site

moved across the computer screen Syndia sunk lower and lower into her chair. She could not believe that Jane had selected the same location.

Cameo whispered in her ear. “Her presentation is nowhere on the scale of yours. No matter how hard they try or how conniving they are, no one can tell your story the way you can. It is your location, your ideas. Give your presentation your way with passion behind this project. You know why it's important. And you have something that she doesn't.”

Syndia looked at him with tears in her eyes. “What?”

“Look over your shoulder at your parents.”

She did as he requested. The pride in her parents' eyes filled her. She smiled then waved at them.

“Now look at your friend Lexi, and Xavier Davenport sitting next to her.”

She did.

“Now look at me,” Cameo directed. “We all believe in you. Not one of us has any doubt about your ability to bring this project home.” He kissed her, then whispered, “I promise to give you a little extra tongue tonight to celebrate.”

She burst into laughter just as Jane was completing her presentation.

“Sorry,” Syndia cleared her throat as Jane gave her an evil look.

When her name was called, Syndia walked up to the podium, cleared her throat then spoke. “Well, it seems that great minds think alike. The location that I have selected is the area near Main Street Station that you just saw.”

“Then there is no need for us to go over the same information,” Dillon interrupted. “I move that we start the selection phase.”

“No,” FLOTUS spoke up. “I would like to see all of the presentations. Wouldn't you, Jeffrey?”

“Yes, I agree.” He smiled at his wife. “Please, Ms. James, continue with your presentation.”

Syndia almost missed the President's words while she was staring at Dillon. Then she took in the look he shared with Jane. She didn't know how but she knew Dillon had given her location to Jane. The question was how.

“Thank you, Mr. President, First Lady Harrison.” She smiled. “My colleague presented her thoughts of the area. Allow me to show you a different vision. A vision with passion and a love for our city, in a way that will honor our President.” With that she unveiled the built to scale model of the entire area of the site. “While this is a physical model of the area, I would like to direct your attention to the screen.”

On the screen was a virtual mini movie showing Syndia's avatar arriving in front of the building. The avatar walked down the sidewalk describing all of the areas outside the building. She gave ideas of different events that could take place in each location. She even had a train to stop overhead to show people getting off the train and walking down the steps into the library. The avatar held the door open then walked inside. They walked from room to room displaying different items and events from the Harrison Presidency. The presentation was spectacular. People in the audience could be heard reacting to the presentation. At the end, the audience stood and applauded.

After the presentations were over, Mayor Palmer stood and offered a few words, then introduced President Harrison. He thanked all of the presenters for their hard work and thought put into their locations. He would discuss each project with the Mayor before making his decision.

* * *

THE RECEPTION afterwards had a number of people, including the President and his wife, taking a closer look at the model.

Freda approached her first. "You know they planned that, right?"

"I know." Syndia nodded. "I just don't know how she knew my location."

"Councilman Moore called her several times in the last week," Freda said. "I did not know why, until now."

"Thank you, Freda, and I'm sorry." Syndia exhaled. "I really would have liked to have you working with me."

"Don't count yourself out," Freda replied. "That was a hell of a presentation."

"Syndia, look." Barry rushed over and pointed.

Syndia looked in the direction he pointed to see President Harrison, Mayor Palmer, Xavier Davenport and Cameo standing near the model talking.

"I think it's a sign." Angel smiled. "They liked what they saw."

"Excuse me."

They all turned to see the First Lady standing behind them.

"Ms. James, may I have a moment?" Tracy asked.

"Yes...yes, of course." Syndia almost bowed but caught herself. "I am such a huge fan. Please forgive my awkwardness."

“You are fine. I wanted to say this to you. Jeffrey and I saw exactly what transpired here tonight. I simply wanted you to know that what is meant for you is for you. No one can take it away.” She smiled. “Good luck to you.”

“Thank you,” Syndia said as she watched the First Lady walk over to her husband, then leave the room.

“What did she say?” Barry and Angel ran over the minute the door closed.

“Basically, the same thing Cameo said to me.” Syndia smiled. “Where is he anyway?”

“Syndia,” Jane called out. “Nice presentation. But you know since I presented first, the project will probably be offered to me.” She smirked. “I tried to tell you that higher positions need to have connections.”

“You are probably right, but out of curiosity, how did you know about the site?”

“I guess there is no harm in telling you. Councilman Moore suggested the site to me. I took a look at it, and I said, this could work. A few hours later I came up with my presentation. I tried to tell you, connections, girl, connections.” She snapped her fingers then walked away.

CHAPTER 14



Syndia stared as her boss walked out the door. “This time I am going to kill him.” She looked around the almost empty room until she saw who she was looking for. Only a few of the council members and the mayor’s staff remained. It was easy to spot the weasel.

Syndia stomped directly to the object of her anger. This was one time she did not care who heard or saw what she was about to do. She got right in Dillon’s face. “You have been following me.”

He smirked. “I don't have time to follow you around. I'm a Councilman. I'm looking out for the residents of the city.”

“How did you know that was the location that I was working on?” Syndia hissed.

“I have connections,” he replied then leaned closer. “Lower your voice. People are watching.”

“Do you think I give a damn? Really? That is what you are concerned with, people watching? You tried to ruin my career tonight. Do you really think I give a damn about what people see or hear?”

“All you had to do was just give me a chance. Just a chance to make things right with us,” he grumbled in a harsh whisper then glanced around. “But no, you decided to give it up to somebody from the projects.” He chuckled as he took a drink, looking to see if anyone had heard him. “Your standards are lower than I thought. You have him over there talking with your parents like this is a permanent thing or something.”

“It is.” Syndia smirked. He looked as if he was ready to strike her. She balled her fists at her side ready.

“You refuse me to go out with a dumb fuck from the projects,” he hissed.

“I’m from the projects, too, Councilman Moore. Am I considered a dumb fuck too?”

They both turned to see LT and his wife, Sapphire standing behind them.

“Mr. Mayor.” Dillon’s expression changed with a snap of his head. He beamed with his hand extended.

“Show more teeth why don’t you. At least Cameo is a man, he’s not an ass kisser like you.” Syndia walked off.

Cameo, who was standing with her parents, grabbed her hand as she tried to walk by him. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t right now.” Syndia threw her hands up. “He was the one who told Jane about the location. He has been following me or has someone doing it for him. That’s how he knew where we were the first night we met. And I am almost certain he still has someone watching me.”

“Following you?” her father asked. “Let me get my hands on that mother...”

“No,” Cameo stopped him. “Your daughter is now my responsibility. I will handle Councilman Moore.”

Syndia saw the look in Cameo’s eyes. “Wait, Cameo. It’s not important.” She exhaled as she held onto his hand.

Cameo kissed her temple, then removed her hand from his. He looked at her father. “Keep her with you.”

“No, Cameo,” Syndia called out to him as her father held her back.

“Let the man do what needs to be done,” her mother said.

Cameo walked up as LT was speaking with Dillon.

“Did you know Cameo and I grew up together. In fact,” LT continued, “he is my best friend. My respect for him goes beyond friendship. I made him the CEO of my company because I also respect him as a man.”

“It was commendable of you to give someone like him an opportunity to better himself,” Dillon replied.

“I did not give him anything. He is in that position because he is the best qualified. On the other hand, Councilman, you are not qualified to wipe dog shit from Cameo’s shoe.”

Dillon’s anger was about to boil over as the mayor turned to walk away from him. He reached out grabbing the Mayor’s arm. “Personally, Mr. Mayor, I don’t think you really want to alienate me on such a trivial matter as Syndia James. You need my vote on the site for the presidential library in addition to several other initiatives.” He smirked. “You may have made it

good with your tech company, but you are still from the projects. While I'm from the higher echelon of the city. You need me and my influence. So, if I were you, I would think twice on where I put my alliances." He took a step closer. "And while we are in public it may behoove you to watch how you speak to me."

LT looked down at the hand he had placed on his shoulder.

Dillon took a step back. "It doesn't matter what title you have, you are and will always be beneath me and it is time for you to understand that fact."

Cameo appeared next to LT. "Everything okay over here?"

"I think the councilman has had a little too much to drink," Sapphire declared.

"My alcohol consumption is not your concern, Mrs. Palmer," Dillon slurred as he turned to Cameo. "Tell me, how do you like having my sloppy seconds?"

"Excuse me?" Cameo then asked. "Who are you?"

"Umm," Ebony interceded as she walked between the two men. "This is Councilman Moore." She smiled at Dillon. "Let me take that drink, sir."

"I don't need you to take anything." He pushed her out of his way then got up in Cameo's face.

"This is about to get ugly." Sapphire shook her head.

"You know damn well who I am." Dillon smirked as he took a step closer and whispered in Cameo's ear, "I'm the one who taught Syndia how to suck a good dick." He stepped back, patted Cameo on the back then chuckled. "You can thank me later."

"No...no..no..." LT reached out to Cameo trying to intervene, but he was too late.

Cameo reached over, grabbed Dillon's neck from behind, took the glass from his hand, then proceeded to shove it down his throat. When that did not work, Cameo dropped the glass to the floor then punched Dillon three times in the mouth before Grant and Xavier pulled him away.

Syndia ran over to put her arms around Cameo's waist. "Oh my god...oh my god, are you all right?"

Several people helped Dillon up as he began with his threats. "I will sue you and your company for this insult."

LT pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and held it out. "Wipe the blood from your mouth, Councilman."

"What I witnessed was self-defense." Sapphire shrugged.

“Fact.” Ebony nodded. “You can’t put your hand on someone and not expect retaliation.”

“I’m good,” Cameo inhaled as he put his hands around Syndia. “I promise you I’m good.”

Sheriff deputies walked in.

“I want him arrested,” Dillon hissed through a bloody mouth and a few broken teeth.

Cameo placed his hands behind his back as he glared at Dillon. “The most important quality any man has is to know who he is and to stay true to himself. I am from the projects and proud of it. Can you say you are proud of who you have become?”

“I’m pressing charges. That’s who I am,” Dillon yelled. “Then I’m going to sue you and just to be the ass you claim me to be,” he said to Syndia who had joined Cameo, “I will be contacting the Mr. Black organization. Expect them to rescind your selection.”

“Is that what you think is important in this moment?” Cameo asked. “My reputation is not in question here. You, however, as a representative of the people need to explain why you were having your ex-girlfriend followed around the city. Could that be an abuse of power? Councilman Moore, I do believe your priorities are misplaced.”

“Take him out of here,” Dillon yelled. “I don’t need the likes of you lecturing me.”

“And the stupidity continues.” LT exhaled. “No handcuffs. Detain Mr. Rawlings until I arrive.”

“Detain! I want him arrested!” Dillon demanded.

“Oh, shut up before I knock out your other teeth,” Syndia declared as she followed Cameo and the Sheriff deputies out of the room.

CHAPTER 15



Cameo walked down the hallway towards the door. He was being released on his own recognizance thanks to LT. For the time it took him to be processed, thinking about how he'd behaved caused him to take a look at himself. Here he was telling his kids not to react with your fists or guns; react with your mind. He also let down LT. This was bound to be in the news that the CEO of the Mayor's company attacked a councilman. How was he going to explain himself to Syndia? He very well may have cost her the vote needed to get the presidential library built. Her design was brilliant. She deserved to have that position. And what about the Mr. Black organization? He shook his head as he pushed the door open. How was he going to face people now?

"Took you long enough." Syndia smiled as she walked into his arms when he walked out the door.

"Wait until Al and Tucker hear about this," LT laughed.

Cameo gave him a fist bump. "Man, I'm sorry. I did not mean to embarrass you this way."

"Nothing to apologize for," LT replied. "No charges are being filed. Councilman Dillon is being handled. Oh, and in case he follows up on the threat to contact the Mr. Black organization, President Harrison made a call. I'm certain that will withstand anything Moore has to say."

"Handled? How?" Cameo asked.

"We agreed to not press charges against him for putting his hands on you and Ebony," Sapphire announced. "We also agreed to not investigate his actions regarding Syndia. I found the tracker he had on Syndia's car and the man he hired to follow her."

"A tracker?" Cameo exclaimed.

“I knew he had to be following me. There is no way he just happened to be at the hotel. That’s not even his vibe,” Syndia added. “Do you think it would be possible for us to end a date without the fear of Dillon showing up?”

Cameo shook his head in disbelief. “What about Jane Rice?” He asked. “How are you going to handle her?”

“She will be disciplined accordingly,” LT replied. “I don't think you're going to have to worry about her or Moore.”

“Not anytime soon.” Sapphire held out her phone. “The Councilman has a public relations nightmare that is going to keep him busy for a while.”

“As for his reputation, well...he is going to have to deal with the fallout from tonight,” LT stated.

“What are you talking about?” Cameo asked.

Sapphire hit the play button on the phone. A clip from a social media site played. The clip showed a fist punching Dillon’s face continuously, with his head bouncing back and forth. The commentary was hilarious. They all burst into laughter. Cameo turned to Syndia. “Well, he wanted to go viral.”

“Be careful what you ask for,” Syndia laughed as they walked out of the building hand in hand.

CHAPTER 16



O *ne Month Later*

On a beautiful Sunday afternoon, the final stage was set on the grounds of the site near Main Street Station. The participants of the closing ceremony for the Juneteenth event were taking their seats. Secret Service agents were at the corner of the stage due to the presence of President Harrison and the First Lady. The area from Main Street over to Broad Street was packed with people filled with excitement at the expected announcement.

“It is an honor to be on this stage with so many dignitaries. Mr. Mayor and the First Lady of Richmond, Mr. President and the First Lady of the United States, and the woman who outshines them all in my eyes, my first lady, the beautiful Syndia James.” Cameo smiled at Syndia who was sitting behind him along with the others. “I’m only going to take one moment to thank The Mr. Black organization, for giving me the opportunity to be filled with pride, and all of you for attending this weekend long celebration. It has been a weekend filled with food, music, history, a true celebration of our culture. Did you enjoy the weekend?” The crowd cheered and clapped. As they settled down, Cameo continued. “That is what Juneteenth is supposed to be about, a celebration of culture. A celebration of the freedom of our people. On this spot where at one time our ancestors were sold, today we stand here to celebrate our freedom and show all the pride we have in who we are. We have a lot to be proud of. Our rich history has been on display throughout the weekend. And there is one theme that keeps running through my mind from one vendor that I visited to the next, from one dance performance, I watched, to the next, from one storyteller I listened to the next, there was one simple theme. It was this. Take me as I am, because we are proud of the people we

are,” Cameo said from the podium. “We do not have to change who we are to succeed in this world. We accept you and all we ask in return is that you accept us as we are. The most important quality of any man is to know who you are, accept who you are and stay true to self. Thank you for the honor of hosting this Juneteenth Celebration and now I will turn the mic over to our Mayor, The Honorable Mayor LT Palmer.”

Cameo shook LT’s hand as he stepped up to the mic.

“Thank you, Cameo, for putting on one hell of a celebration.” The crowd cheered. LT. “I don’t mind being outshined by the lovely Ms. James, however, I take exception to anyone outshining my wife, my better half, Sapphire, for she is the fire under my feet.” The crowd laughed and cheered at his words. LT smiled at the crowd. “This is simply inspiring.” Mayor Palmer spoke from the podium. “Combining the past of this area with the future during the Juneteenth celebration was ingenious. I cannot think of a more rewarding way to show how far we have come as a people than to stand on sacred ground. A place where we, because of the color of our skin, were sold as a commodity. I have to laugh because those who sold us did not really know our worth. Look at all we have accomplished since 1865. As we stand here today, we know our ancestors may have been the ones suffering back then, but look around, we are still standing, strong, beautiful and free. And let’s be very clear...We are not finished yet.” The crowd cheered. “With that said, it is with great honor and respect that I introduce a man who is no stranger to us, in fact he is an intricate part of our Richmond, family, the President of the United States, Jeffrey, “JD” Harrison.”

Music began playing through the speakers as the crowd erupted in cheers and applause. Cameo and Syndia, stepped off the stage and walked over to the huge red ribbon that was tied to one column near the entrance to the train station, along the back of the stage, to the old building that still stood on the grounds. A shovel, with a red ribbon tied around it, was next to a huge pair of scissors with the same dressing.

“Can you believe this is happening?” Syndia beamed up at Cameo.

“With you involved, yes, I believe you can do just about anything you set your mind to,” Cameo kissed the tip of her nose.

“I don’t think I will ever do anything to beat this feeling I’m having right now,” she replied.

“Oh, I can think of a thing or two,” Cameo replied.

“Really? What?” Syndia asked.

“Shh...the President is speaking,” Cameo replied.

President Harrison stood. “I'm going to keep this short and sweet. My wife is the one who outshines them all, Mr. Rawlings,” JD laughed. “She is the original beauty and the love of my life.” The crowd laughed. “I want to thank Mayor Palmer, Cameo Rawlings, Syndia James, and the city of Richmond for being my home and allowing me to place my presidential library next to this historical landmark. As you all know, I was born and raised here in Richmond. Every day, my parents instilled in me the importance of knowing who I am, where I came from, and being accepted for who I am. The city has always kept me grounded and always accepted me back home. I want to carry forth that message that Cameo Rawlings gave. And encourage our youth to understand you are unique. You do not have to change for anyone. So, when people come up to you suggesting you need to conform to their way of thinking or doing things. I want you to look them in the eyes and say, take me as I am. Then shake their hand and let them know, I take you as you are. We can stand here together, accepting each other on this beautiful celebration for Juneteenth and say this simple phrase, we the people of this country are free.” The crowd cheered. “Now, I say let's cut this ribbon and get this party started.”

The crowd gathered around watching as the President and all the other dignitaries, cut the ribbon and dug the first hole to combine the past with the future.

EPILOGUE



“The Juneteenth weekend was a huge success for the city.” Syndia kissed the crook of Cameo’s neck as the two lay naked, entwined in each other’s arms. Her head rested on his chest, as his hand rubbed lazily over her back.

“It was a memorable event. People are already talking about next year’s celebration,” Cameo replied. “The Mr. Black Organization was very pleased with the outcome. I sent a text to Raymond and Nathaniel, thanking them for their input. We are going to try to get together before the next event.”

“Sounds like you guys make a good team as the East Coast Kings.”

“A triple threat,” Cameo smiled as he kissed her temple.

“This experience has been good for you and me. I’m going to head up the presidential library project. You got rave reviews for your first Mr. Black event. And we get to spend a glorious week together, without interruption.”

“Yes,” Cameo smiled then thought as she talked. He had something to say and wasn’t sure if she was ready to hear it. He loved the way she looked at things. The way she took the area he treasured, that looked like an eyesore to others and made it beautiful. Not just for the Juneteenth celebration, but the future as well. He loved the way she accepted him.

“Oh, with all the excitement, I forgot to tell you, we are keeping the building.”

Cameo frowned. “What building?”

“Your building. The one at the site.” her finger circled his nipple.

“What?” He looked down at her somewhat surprised.

“I suggested to the President’s team that they incorporate the history of the building into the design. Your building is going to remain a part of

history.”

Cameo rolled her over then gazed into her eyes. “You got the president to agree with that. Why? It could have jeopardized the whole idea.”

Syndia smiled up at him. “The first night we were together you hesitated about making love to me. It did not make sense that night, but once you told me about your childhood I understood. You do not want a repeat of your childhood for your children. You want them to know they are loved and wanted. That building, in your mind, was a place for the unwanted. I need you to know that the building and you are very much wanted and needed in my life.”

Her words touched him to the core. For the first time in his life, his heart was full, no, more than full—he was happy.

“Play number one,” he commanded.

Syndia smiled. “I get number one on your play list?”

He leaned over and kissed her as *The Point of it All* by Anthony Hamilton began to play. “I have to say something, and I hope you are ready to hear it. I love you.”

His words came out just as the lyrics of the song played. “You get me,” Syndia replied. “You accept me just as I am, and I love you too.”

Cameo covered her body with his, then gently entered her. She moaned at his fulfillment, then wrapped her arms around him as he whispered, “The point of it all is that I love you.”

THANK YOU.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Iris Bolling is a USA Today bestselling and award-winning author of romance and romantic suspense. The Heart Series, The Gems & Gents series, and the Brooks Family Values Series, all were honored with a variety of accolades.

She was the executive producer and screenwriter for the indie film projects The Heart seasons 1 & 2 in addition to the full-length movie, Deadly Sexy, based on the writings of the award-winning writing icon Beverly Jenkins. In addition, Iris believes in giving back. Her projects provide jobs and internships for those who don't usually get the opportunity to work behind the scenes in technical roles.

With the recent implementation of her G.I.Y. workshops, Iris shares her experience, knowledge, and talents with others to assist them along the way. Encouraging everyone to simply BELIEVE!

Iris currently lives in Richmond, Virginia where she is working on her next book, movie project, and/or workshop.

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