

Love's Fool

Diamond Drake

For Marviel, Bria, and Kaila.
Thanks for your love and support of my dreams.

TITLES BY DIAMOND DRAKE

IMAGINED LOVE
FOR THE LOVE OF JADE
LOVE'S FOOL

Acknowledgments

To my husband of sixteen years, Marviel, thank you for your continued support of me and my dream to write emotional, dramatic stories. To Bria and Kaila, my beautiful daughters, thank you for your encouragement and spreading the word about my books. I truly appreciate that. To Marlena, thank you for your time and support. I appreciate it more than you know. And to all of my supporters, thank you so much.

CHAPTER ONE

Thursday, February 3, 2011

Madeline Stiles sat in The Oakland International Airport staring at her laptop trying desperately to ignore the useless chatter from her sister's bridesmaids. Christa Stiles had been friends with the four of them since high school and she loved them dearly. Madeline, however, couldn't stand them. She thought they were some of the most envious, untrustworthy women, none of whom deserved Christa's devotion--especially her best friend Reesa. Madeline wanted to reach across her seat and slap the taste out of the woman's mouth but she promised Christa that for the days leading up to her wedding, there would be no drama. She adored her older sister and would never do anything to ruin the most important time of her life. Even if it meant keeping her mouth shut while Reesa sat next to her complaining and acting as if the weekend was all about *her*.

"I still don't know why Christa chose black for our dresses. I know people think it's elegant but *I* think it's morbid. We gone look like we at a funeral," Reesa said, snapping her gum as she crossed her arms. "How long is this flight? And why we going to Memphis anyway? I thought the wedding was supposed to be in the bride's hometown not the groom's," she huffed. "Oh, so don't nobody hear me talking, huh? Whatever." Reesa rolled her eyes and continued to pop her gum.

Madeline grit her teeth and turned up the volume on her MP3 player. She tried to ignore Reesa but the woman irritated her, both by talking and popping that gum. It was as if she got joy out of making other people miserable and starting drama. Reesa knew very well why Christa's wedding was being held in Tennessee. She and her groom, Ellis Marshall, decided it was more sensible and economical to have their special day in his hometown instead of the Bay Area where they both lived. Ellis had twelve brothers and sisters as well as a host of family and friends that he wanted to attend the wedding. Madeline disagreed with her sister's decision to change the location and told Christa not to give up her dream of getting married in the Oakland Hills to accommodate people who weren't even supportive of her and Ellis's relationship. Though despite how Madeline felt, she didn't harp on it the way Reesa did. There was no point. Even if Christa regretted letting Ellis make so many major decisions while she made all the payments for their eighty-five thousand dollar event, it was too late now. They were minutes from boarding the plane to Memphis—to start Christa's and Ellis's wedding weekend.

"Hey," Reesa said, as she waved her hand in front of Madeline's face.

Madeline took a deep breath then removed the earphones from her MP3 player. "How can I help you?" she asked, coolly.

“We were all saying how beautiful Christa’s wedding is gonna be. Don’t you agree?”

Madeline didn’t hide her annoyance at being disturbed for such a ridiculous question. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to confirming our reservations for the rehearsal dinner tomorrow night. Some people sit around *talking* about how beautiful things will be and others of us do the work to make sure they are,” she rolled her eyes and replaced her earphones.

“Who does this bitch think she is?” Reesa snorted, as she looked at the other bridesmaids and back at Madeline. She couldn’t stand the woman and took every opportunity she could to get under her skin. “Ole ugly self,” Reesa mumbled then chuckled slightly to herself. Madeline was a lot of things but ugly wasn’t one of them.

The thirty-year-old Black woman was naturally pretty with toasted almond skin and chocolate brown, doe eyes. Madeline’s smile lit up her entire face and added innocence to her round cheeks and pouty mouth. She was beautiful.

One night after a few drinks Christa confessed to Reesa how much she wished she looked like Madeline. It was as if her sister got all of Rodney and Evelyn Stiles’ best features and Christa got all of their flaws. Her eyes and nose were too big and her lips too thin. She spent hours each day applying makeup and doing everything she could to make herself more attractive when all Madeline had to do was wake up and she looked stunning. Christa, who was most often described as cute, stood at five-feet, three inches and had to count every calorie to keep her size-eight figure from ballooning back to a size fourteen. Madeline, on the other hand, ate everything she saw but hadn’t added a pound to her five-foot eight, size six frame since eighth grade.

Christa hated herself for feeling jealous of her sister. It wasn’t Madeline’s fault that she was beautiful. And contrary to her behavior, she wasn’t really a stuck-up, self-absorbed bitch who only cared about her looks. Madeline was one of the most loving, generous people Christa knew and she often encouraged her baby sister to let go of hurts from the past and open her heart to people. Unfortunately, Madeline was much more comfortable hiding behind the stuck-up, self-absorbed bitch persona she’d made for herself.

“Look, hoe, you ain’t gotta be rude!” Reesa snapped. “I’m trying to . . .”

“Oh my god, Christa!” Madeline shrieked, as she tossed her laptop on the seat beside her and rushed to her sister who came stumbling out of the restroom.

Reesa and the other bridesmaids rushed behind Madeline to find out what happened. Christa was crying hysterically with her hand over her heart and she looked seconds away from collapsing.

“Christa, baby, what’s wrong?” Madeline cried, holding her sister close. “Christa Belle, please,” she said after a few minutes passed with no explanation.

“Ellis . . .” Christa gasped.

“Oh god, what happened to Ellis,” Reesa asked.

“He . . . he called . . . he called off the wedding,” Christa finally said between breaths. She was close to hyperventilating.

“*What?*” all the women shouted.

Christa relinquished her cell phone to Madeline who silently read Ellis’s text. *I COULD NEVER MARRY A WOMAN LIKE YOU!!!!*

“What the fuck happened?” Reesa demanded after she snatched the cell phone out of Madeline’s hand and read it aloud.

The other bridesmaids were crying and asking how Ellis could do something so cruel—and through a text message of all things. Madeline, with tears streaming down her face, stared into her sister’s eyes. They both knew exactly why Ellis called off the wedding. It was something they feared could happen if he ever learned the truth.

“Stiles women don’t get the fairytale,” Christa said to her sister when the other ladies went to gather their things. “We don’t get the happily ever after.”

Madeline went to get her laptop and purse after Christa asked to be alone for a while. Reesa had a fit about how much she hated men and that none of them were any good.

“You know what? I’m gonna call Ellis’s ass and give him a piece of my mind because this is some bullshit,” she snapped then grabbed her cell phone and dialed the number. Reesa left a message as she walked away from the rest of the women.

“Humph, that’s interesting,” Madeline frowned. “Do any of *you* know Ellis’s number by heart?” she asked then watched the expressions on their faces grow suspicious.

Two weeks later, on Valentine’s Day, Madeline decided to surprise Christa by cooking chicken Alfredo, which was her favorite guilty pleasure, and delivering it to her home along with four dozen roses in bright, beautiful colors. She knew her sister was heartbroken over Ellis but a few weeks of moping in bed was enough.

“Get your butt up,” Madeline scolded then snatched the covers Christa had tucked around her. “Get up and wash your ass, put on something cute, and come have dinner with the person who loves you most in the world.”

“Leave me alone, Madeline! I don’t wanna get up ever again!”

“Oh, you *getting* up,” she said before snatching Christa by the collar of her pajamas. Then she wrestled her into the bathroom and turned on the shower. “Now get in there! You got thirty minutes to meet me downstairs. I’m not playing, Christa Belle,” she said when her sister rolled her eyes. “Don’t let me have to come

back up here. Thirty minutes,” Madeline said again then slammed the bathroom door shut.

An hour later Christa came downstairs in a long, black and white caftan and the six-inch heels she never went anywhere without. Her face was fully made up and her black hair in a neat ponytail atop her head. She was about to fuss at Madeline for manhandling her out of bed but she smiled instead after spotting the beautifully decorated dining room table and all the lovely flowers she placed around the two-bed, two-bath Fremont, California home. Christa walked into the kitchen and wrapped her arms around her sister.

“Thank you, Mad. This is wonderful,” she said then began to cry. Memories of her and Ellis’s first Valentine’s Day flooded her mind and her heart ached.

“Umm uh, girl, no crying . . . not tonight. We’re gonna eat this whole pot of chicken Alfredo and the lemon cupcakes I made for you. And then we’re gonna laugh and watch movies and have a good time. That’s the deal,” she said, wiping tears from Christa’s face. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Christa smiled before taking a seat at her pub-style dining room table. Madeline always had a way of making things look elegant, even the dark brown, marble-top table and leather chairs she often encouraged Christa to upgrade. Madeline covered it with a beautiful gold table cloth and bought red, square plates and goblets to accentuate her red and gold design. “This is really beautiful, Mad. And just so you know, I’m keeping all of it,” Christa smiled.

Like she’d done every day for the past few weeks, Madeline filled her sister in on everything that was happening with work, Sidney Reid, and their mother’s baffling relationships with one loser after another. However, this time Christa actually responded and participated in the conversation.

“I don’t know what Mama be thinking,” she laughed after taking another sip of red wine. “I don’t know what you be thinking either. Why don’t you quit fighting it and gone and be with Sidney. He loves you, Mad, and I think y’all could be happy together. Quit running in and out of the man’s life and . . .”

“Anyway,” Madeline interrupted not wanting to hear another speech about Sidney. “You want a cupcake?”

“Uh uh, don’t *anyway* me. Sidney’s a good man who loves you for who you are. He’s successful, *very* attractive, and he’s devoted to you. He has to be to put up with the way you pop in and out of his life. Stop taking that man for granted, Madeline. I know how hard it is to find true, unconditional love and . . .”

“Look, bitch, I told you no crying tonight!” she shouted when her sister got choked up.

Christa burst out laughing like Madeline knew she would. Both of them went wild if someone else called them a bitch but for some reason it was hilarious when they said it to each other. It had been that way since they were teenagers.

“Ooh, thank goodness,” Madeline said when the doorbell rang.

“Who is that?” Christa barked.

“Don’t worry about it. Just grab your wine and come to the living room,” she directed, making her way to the front door. “Hey, heifers, what took y’all so long?” she smiled then allowed the group of women inside.

“What up, Christa Belle? You looking fly as usual,” Madeline’s best friend Tamia Mallory said. The two of them had been friends since junior high school. “How you doing, girl?”

“I’m hanging in there,” she said, embracing Tamia tightly. “And thank you for the phone calls and cards. I really appreciate it. I just wasn’t up for talking.”

“Girl, don’t even trip. I just wanted you to know I was thinking about you and that I was here if you needed me.”

Next to hug Christa was Madeline’s good friend Avis Hampton and her best friend Raye Ann Riley. Madeline, Avis, and Raye Ann were seated together at a women’s day event six years ago and they’d been friends ever since.

“You looking good, baby girl. And it looks like you dropped a few pounds too,” Avis commented, as she took a step back to inspect Christa more thoroughly. “Shoot, you probably need to get dumped more often.”

Raye Ann nudged Avis and Madeline looked close to slapping her. Avis was a cool person but she had the bad habit of speaking first and thinking later. And even though they knew she didn’t mean any harm, it seemed that a woman close to turning forty would be better able to control what came out of her mouth. Especially one who was constantly subjected to and hurt by the mean things other women said.

Avis, who was five-three and wore a size ten, had the same issues with weight control as Christa. She swore the pack of Newport cigarettes she smoked everyday somehow managed her weight. Though, her problem was more about *where* she gained the weight than anything. If Avis had a choice she’d pack the pounds on to her slender hips and flat behind. Instead, every ounce she gained went to her already protruding belly and made her large breasts even more pronounced. Men didn’t seem bothered by it but women were cruel in their taunts about her misshapen body. Avis already struggled with feeling attractive since pretty and cute weren’t words anyone ever used to describe her. Having body image issues as well only made her feel worse.

However, Avis wasn’t one to let people get the best of her and she did everything in her power to present herself well. Her makeup and long hair extensions were always flawless and she went religiously every two weeks to have her eyebrows and body waxed, fake eyelashes applied, hands and feet manicured, and her face treated with European facials. Avis spared no expense when it came to her clothes, shoes, and the intoxicating perfumes she wore—although the smell of

smoke often upstaged her exotic scents. And she had a certain charm that drew people to her. Other women may not have considered her pretty, but they couldn't take away the fact that Avis had style.

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry, Christa. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Avis said, feeling badly about the comment she made.

"Don't even worry about it, girl. Come on in and grab a seat. Y'all want some wine?" Christa asked, making her way towards the kitchen.

"Girl, please, you know it's all about that Alize Gold Passion," Raye Ann grinned, as she held up the two bottles they brought with them.

"Ghetto asses," Madeline laughed then took the bottles to the kitchen to fill Avis's and Raye Ann's glass. Everyone was surprised when Tamia asked for a glass too. Their nickname for her was Ms. High Society because she was bougie and acted as if certain things were beneath her—like sipping on a glass of Alize.

Tamia, a bi-racial thirty-year-old boutique owner, was caught up with name brands, status, and what people thought of her. It explained why she'd already started getting Botox injections, had her thin lips plumped, and gotten breast implants on two different occasions. Tamia was often teased for being a White girl with a Black girl's booty and she'd laugh and say it was the only thing she inherited from her mother. Everything else, including her attitude, she learned from her father. That night, however, Tamia wanted to relax and not worry about anything but having a good time and enjoying the only real friends she ever had.

It came as no surprise that Madeline invited her friends to come over instead of Christa's. And in all honesty, Christa was grateful for that. For years her sister and mother told her she needed to choose a better group of friends but she always defended her girls. Throughout the wedding planning and especially after Ellis broke things off, Christa realized her friendships weren't as strong as she always believed them to be. It was Madeline's friends who called and came by and offered support to her during the worst time of her life. Christa's so-called friends barely phoned and when they did, it was only to talk about what *they* were going through. Most hurtful, however, was the fact that Reesa hadn't called or come by once.

The women laughed and talked over drinks for a few hours, Christa being the loudest of them all. She was grateful for the company and the chance to feel normal again. Not that she was over Ellis, but for the first time since that day in the airport Christa believed she would be okay.

"Look, y'all my girls and everything but you gotta admit it's kinda sad that we spending Valentine's Day with a bunch of broads instead of being somewhere with a nice, stiff piece of man meat," thirty-six-year-old Raye Ann said to the amusement of the other women. "I'm serious. It's been almost six weeks since I

had some and a bitch is going *bonkers*! This chick hit on me in the club last week and I almost went home with that heifer!”

It wasn’t surprising to learn that a woman found Raye Ann attractive. Most people did as she was a very pretty, very petite Puerto Rican with flawless, caramel colored skin and the whitest, most perfect teeth. Raye Ann was extremely proud of her body and showed as much of it as possible wherever she went. She dressed professionally at the office where she worked as a business analyst, but Raye Ann always found a way to make her attire more provocative and sexier than anyone else’s. Though, there were two things she always wore, six-inch heels to give height to her barely five-foot frame and bejeweled chokers around her neck. She said they were her signature statement and she never went anywhere without them.

“Girl, stop lying!” Christa laughed. “You know you ain’t into chicks.”

“No, but at least *somebody* wanted to lick my pudding pop. She just woulda been disappointed as hell when her turn came around,” Raye Ann laughed.

“I don’t know if I could ever get *that* lonely,” Tamia stated, surprising everyone. She was normally tight-lipped when it came to her sex life and relationships. “I’m serious. I mean, I’ve heard people say that a woman can love you better because she knows what a woman wants but I’m sorry, there’s just some shit she can’t do. Men piss me off most of the time but I still love they asses. And I’d rather have a good stiff one from a stupid ass man than to be with some chick who can’t give me what I really need.”

“Which is what?” Christa asked.

“A good stiff one! Fuck a dildo!”

They all laughed before getting refills on their drinks.

“So what about you, Avis? Do you think you could ever be with a woman?” Tamia asked, taking another sip of Alize.

Before Avis had the chance to answer, the doorbell rang, surprising them all.

Madeline got up to answer it. “What are you doing here?” she frowned, instantly annoyed by Deidra’s presence. And the fact that she was smoking only made it worse. Though Madeline knew that unlike Avis and her chain smoking, Deidra only lit up when she was anxious or stressed.

“What you mean?” Deidra asked, as she blew smoke out of her mouth and stomped the bud of her cigarette. “You said everybody was getting together to help cheer Christa up. Me and Peter had dinner and then I came straight here.”

“Ugh, who invited that bitch?” Raye Ann snarled.

“Behave,” Christa whispered, playfully nudging her.

Deidra Walters-Banks was a forty-one year old married Black woman who prided herself on always looking professional. The tailored, red pantsuit and white silk blouse she wore was evidence of that. At six-foot-one and one hundred seventy pounds, she often looked imposing and her no-nonsense attitude was

intimidating to some. Always with a short, wrap hairstyle and lightly made up face, Deidra was quite cute and didn't look a day past thirty-five. She worked as a bank manager and had no sort of filter when it came to the things she said. In all honesty, Deidra voiced things most people thought but had the sense or decency not to say aloud. Opinionated and overbearing, she was often the last person any of the women wanted to see. That night was no exception.

"Hey, ladies, happy Valentine's Day," Deidra smiled, as she entered the spacious, plush living room carrying a dozen red roses. She popped a piece of mint gum into her mouth and rubbed a dab of hand sanitizer over her hands. "Here you go, Christa. I wanted you to know I've been praying for you, girl."

"Well, thank you, I need all the prayers I can get. And thanks for the flowers. They're beautiful," Christa said, kissing Deidra's cheek. "Come on in and get comfortable. Can I get you a drink? Alize seems to be the choice of the night."

"Girl, please," Deidra snorted, as if she'd been offended. "I guess I'll take some of the red wine if that's the best you have."

Raye Ann and Avis looked at each other and rolled their eyes. Deidra was always pretending to be something more than she was as if none of the women could see through her. She was a miserable, bitter woman and none of them understood why Madeline befriended her or kept bringing her around the rest of them.

"I'm surprised to see you, Deidra," Avis said. "You're the only one of us who has a husband so why wouldn't you be somewhere with him instead of a bunch of lonely chicks, you feel me?"

"Hell, he don't wanna be with her ass either," Raye Ann stated.

"You know what? Fuck you, Raye Ann!"

"No, fuck *you*, Deidra! You always talking shit when you ain't . . ."

"Hey, hey, come on, ladies, not tonight. This is supposed to be fun," Christa said, hoping to calm things down between the two women.

"It *was* fun until she showed up! There's never a problem until she comes around running her mouth," Raye Ann snapped. She was still upset from the last time they all got together. She poured her heart out and cried about the latest man to take her to bed then never call again.

"Damn, Raye, what kind of poisonous pussy you got? Everything be going fine and dandy until you fuck em and then dudes be out with the quickness!" Deidra had blurted. "What's wrong with your shit?"

Raye Ann was mortified. And it hadn't helped that everyone at the table laughed hysterically about it. She was too humiliated to lash out at Deidra that night, but she had every intention of making up for it and letting the woman know exactly what she thought of her.

“So anyway, Avis,” Tamia said, trying to salvage their good time, “you never did answer my question. Would you ever sleep with a woman?”

“I’ve definitely been curious about it but I don’t know if I could ever go through with it, you feel me?”

Madeline rolled her eyes. It irritated her to hear Avis say, “you feel me” after nearly every sentence she spoke. “Y’all need to stop, with your prudish asses! It’s really not that big of a deal,” Madeline interjected.

“And how do we know this? You’ve been with a woman?” Avis asked.

“Yeah, so?”

“I guess I missed this damn story. When did all this go down?”

“What difference does it make? People get all bent out of shape when sex is nothing but a physical act. If somebody puts their lips on your clit your body is gonna respond whether those lips belong to a male or a female. It’s really not a big deal at all.”

“Really?” Deidra frowned. “So you don’t think there’s any difference between being with a man or a woman?”

“I mean, aside from the obvious, no. Your body is merely responding to being stimulated. Y’all the ones who get all caught up with being in love and putting significance on whether a man can make you cum or not. He’s *supposed* to make you cum and it’s your fault if you let him get away with not doing it. I don’t play that shit. Ain’t nobody going nowhere until I get mine!” Madeline laughed.

“Well, not all of us got a sexy ass Black king like Sidney Reid to knock it out the park for us. Some dudes don’t last and once they get theirs, it’s a wrap, you feel me?” Avis said, to the nods of the other women.

Madeline rolled her eyes again. “And like I said, that’s *your* fault if you let it be a wrap. There are so many other things that can be done to make sure you’re satisfied. He can use his mouth, fingers, or even his elbows and knees for all I care. I’m not a selfish lover and I won’t tolerate a man who is. And neither should you.”

“Okay, next subject,” Christa announced, as the memories of making love with Ellis overpowered her mind. She never had any complaints in the bedroom and her body ached for him as well as her heart.

The other women felt bad for getting carried away talking about men and sex, not taking into account what Christa was going through. They were supposed to be there to help get her mind off Ellis, not remind her of him.

“Okay, ladies,” Madeline said, as she came out of the sundeck carrying a large, red gift bag. “I have a little something here. It’s my Valentine’s Day gift to you. A co-worker of mine started a new business making products that encourage women. She has t-shirts, aprons, and all kinds of things with uplifting, motivating slogans printed on them. Anyway, her latest theme is all about pink diamonds. So I got these,” Madeline smiled, as she pulled four shoeboxes out of her bag and

passed them out to Christa, Avis, Raye Ann, and Tamia. Also in the bag was a watch that Madeline bought for herself but decided to give to Deidra so she didn't feel excluded. "Go ahead, open them."

"Girl! These are smokin'!" Tamia shouted.

Christa, Avis, and Raye Ann agreed and the four of them put on the black patent leather, four-inch heels with their initials and the pink diamond emblem artistically placed on the toe of the shoe. Deidra opened her box and forced a smile when she saw the black watch with the pink diamond emblem on the face. It was obvious Madeline hadn't thought of her when she picked out the shoes for her sister and friends and Deidra was hurt.

"Oh, I'm gonna work these bad boys, baby," Raye Ann grinned, as she modeled through the living room as if it was a runway. "Thank you so much, Mad. I *love* them!" she said, embracing Madeline tightly.

The rest of them hugged and thanked Madeline for the lovely gift. Christa made a big deal about how beautiful the watch was and how she was going to order one hoping it would make Deidra feel better. Avis followed suit but Raye Ann took pleasure in rubbing Deidra's nose in the fact that she was the only one without a pair of shoes. All of them knew Madeline well enough to know she'd ordered a pair for herself too and assumed the remaining shoebox in the bag was hers. Madeline considered giving them to Deidra since they both wore a size nine but there was no way to explain the letter M being on the shoe of a woman's whose initials were D.W.B.

"Well, I've decided to have a fortieth birthday bash this summer," Avis announced, after everyone's drink was refilled. "I'm going all out so you know it's gonna be off the hook, you feel me? We all gone have the time of our lives," she grinned and held up her glass to toast.

The women held up their glasses in celebration. None of them had a clue that on July 30, 2011, the day of Avis's big party, all of their secrets would be revealed and their lives would never be the same.

It was nearly one o'clock in the morning when Madeline got up to walk Deidra to the door. Raye Ann, Avis, and Tamia all had too much to drink to drive home and planned to sleep at Christa's for the night. Even though Deidra drank a glass of wine, she hadn't been invited to stay.

"Ooh, I think I feel a little woozy," she said, blinking her eyes quickly.

"Well, why don't you call Peter to come get you if you don't think you can make the drive home," Madeline stated, making it clear to Deidra that she wouldn't be staying the night.

The two women stared at each other for a few moments before Deidra declared that she was okay to drive. She turned to leave but Madeline stopped her.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What?” Deidra frowned.

“Don’t play with me,” Madeline said, as she held out her hand.

“Oh, shoot, I almost forgot,” Deidra stated, reaching into her purse. “How much do I owe you?”

“Four hundred,” Madeline said dryly knowing full well Deidra knew how much she owed. Madeline took the money. “Don’t just pop up over here again.”

“But I thought . . .”

“If I don’t specifically ask you to come then that means don’t. And pick that nasty shit up,” Madeline said, pointing to the cigarette butt Deidra extinguished earlier. She closed the door in her face.

“So what’s up with you and Deidra?” Raye Ann asked, startling Madeline.

“Oh, nothing, she just owed me some money.”

“Umm huh, see I knew that bitch be frontin’. Why should the big bank executive with the college professor husband have to borrow money from us lowly people? Stankin’ ass bitch,” Raye Ann mumbled, as she made her way to the burgundy sectional sofa where Christa laid out a pillow and blanket for her. The whole time she wondered what was really going on with Madeline and Deidra. From the exchange Raye Ann witnessed she didn’t get the impression that Madeline liked the woman any more than she did.

“So did you have a good time?” Madeline asked, after plopping down on her sister’s queen-sized canopy bed. She suppressed the urge to tell Christa to brighten up her bedroom for the millionth time. The black furniture, drapes, rug, and comforter was depressing. Even the master bathroom was decorated in black and white. *I need to do a makeover in here*, Madeline thought, as she looked around the room with a disgusted look on her face.

Christa snapped her fingers to get Madeline’s attention. “Yes, I can honestly say I did have fun. I really needed this tonight. Thanks, Mad.”

“Well, it’s not over yet. Look what I got.”

Christa burst out laughing when she saw the DVD her sister held. “Where on earth did you even find that thing?”

“That’s the beauty of the world wide web. You can find just about anything. So are you sleepy or are you game to watch it now?”

“Yeah, let’s see what Mama’s been raving about all these years.”

Ever since she viewed the film at nineteen years old, Evelyn Stiles declared the 1950, *Born to Be Bad*, film as her all-time favorite classic movie. It made such an impression on her that thirteen years after seeing it for the first time, she named her first child after the main character Christabel Caine Carey.

“Why in the world would Mama name me after this character?” Christa asked of the manipulative, conniving Christabel. “Is this what she thinks of me?”

“Girl, quit tripping! You were a *baby* when Mama named you. Hell, if anybody grew up to be like Christabel it’s me,” Madeline laughed, nudging her sister’s arm. “Come on, Christa, don’t read too much into it. The truth of the matter is Mama loved this movie because *she*’s like Christabel. Aw, don’t look at me like that. You know it’s true. I love Mama to death but she’s shady sometimes and we both know it. But I’m sure dealing with a stupid motherfucka like Rodney Stiles can make you that way.”

“Don’t say that, Mad. Daddy’s a good man.”

“Bitch, check your motherboard because your information ain’t correct.”

“Shut up, stupid,” Christa laughed, playfully hitting her sister with a pillow.

“I’m serious, Christa. Rodney Stiles and good man don’t *ever* belong in the same sentence. It’s because of his ass we don’t know what a decent dude even looks like. We’ve never had an example of one.”

“I had one,” Christa said, sadly. Madeline rolled her eyes. “Don’t be like that, Mad. You know Ellis is a good man. I messed up by not telling him the truth in the first place.”

“Maybe so, Christa, but if Ellis meant all of his claims of unconditional, undying love then he would’ve had the decency to at least talk to you face to face. He would’ve attempted to understand and try to work things out. But nooo, his funky ass gone send a fuckin’ *text* message!”

“I think he just needs time to process everything.”

Madeline frowned at her sister. “*What?* Christa, please don’t tell me you’re sitting here waiting on Ellis to come running back to you.”

“What we had was real, true love, Mad. I can’t believe it’s over.”

“Oh, it’s over! Why don’t you ask . . .” Madeline stopped abruptly.

“Why don’t I do what?” Christa asked, with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh . . . uh, nothing, I’m just tired and emotional and I probably need . . .”

“Not gonna work, bitch! Tell me what I need to know.”

Madeline let out a long breath before gently grabbing her sister’s hands. “There’s a reason Reesa’s been M.I.A.” Christa thought her heart was going to beat out of her chest. “She’s taken it upon herself to help Ellis get over you.”

After Madeline dropped that bombshell, Christa’s sadness turned to rage. She was hell bent on getting revenge on both Reesa and Ellis and talked about all the horrible things she’d do to them if she could get away with it.

“Maybe I *am* like Christabel after all,” Christa said.

CHAPTER TWO

February 17th was Christa's thirty-third birthday and she, Madeline, Raye Ann, and Avis were all dressed to impress and ready to go out for a good time. Tamia promised to meet them later after she closed her boutique. Avis heard about a new club in San Francisco so they decided to go there after enjoying a nice dinner. They also reserved hotel rooms so they didn't have to drive home after their night of partying.

Not long after they arrived at the Cheesecake Factory, Tamia joined them with everything but her nipples hanging out of her blouse.

"Got milk?" Madeline teased her friend.

"Shut up, girl," Tamia laughed. "I paid a pretty penny for these things so *somebody* gone see em. If I'm lucky, I'll find somebody to play with them."

"I know that's right," Raye Ann said, giving her own implants a little shake before reaching across the table to high-five Tamia.

"I don't know which one of y'all is worst," Christa stated after they placed their drink orders. "Although I do have to say you're a bit more conservative than normal, Raye Ann. That can only mean one thing."

"She's got a man," they all said in unison.

Raye Ann admitted that she met someone but she wanted to see if it was going anywhere before she talked about him.

"Well, can we at least know his name?" Madeline prodded.

Raye Ann sat silently for a few moments as the women stared at her. "Mojo," she uttered.

Christa, Madeline, and Tamia burst out laughing.

"What is he, a stripper?" Christa asked then did a few body rolls in her seat.

"Don't stop get it, get it," Madeline sang as she bounced on her chair, drawing the attention of a group of young men at the table across from them.

"Raye, what is his real name? I am *not* about to be calling a grown man no damn Mojo, you feel me?"

"Umm uh, that's all you heifers get for now," Raye Ann smiled.

A few minutes later their drinks arrived and Madeline proposed a toast. The five of them raised their glasses. "To the sweetest, cutest, most amazing sister anyone could ever have. Happy birthday, Christa Belle. Here's to being bad tonight and having some *real* fun," Madeline said and let a devious little grin spread across her lips.

"Amen to that," Tamia said, as she clinked glasses with everyone.

The group of guys who'd been watching them raised their glasses in a toast too. They offered their assistance in helping the women be bad and have fun.

“No thanks. Y’all need to go through puberty before you can do anything with us,” Madeline said of the very youthful looking young men.

“Madeline!” Christa shrieked, nudging her sister’s arm.

“What? Look at them. The oldest one is about twelve years old,” she laughed loudly.

Some of the other diners looked at the group of guys and laughed as well. Embarrassed, the young men finished their beers and pretended Madeline and her friends didn’t exist.

The five of them continued to laugh over dinner, more drinks, and delicious cheesecake. Christa opened her gifts and thanked the ladies for making her feel so special. Everyone was having a good time but the women couldn’t help noticing that Avis checked her watch a lot. Raye Ann asked why she was in a hurry and Avis said she was just anxious to get to the club to dance.

“Give me this damn phone,” Madeline said, as she attempted to grab Tamia’s cell phone. “Who keeps texting you?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said, wrestling the phone from her friend.

“Umm huh, you met some man, didn’t you? Secretive ass,” Madeline teased. She knew why Tamia was so guarded when it came to the men she dated. After a good friend of theirs from high school got caught cheating with Tamia’s boyfriend, she never brought men around her friends again. Madeline tried not to take offense but it hurt her feelings to know that her best friend didn’t trust her enough to introduce the man in her life. “Let’s get out of here.”

Soon after, Tamia climbed into her red, 2010 Audi S4 and drove around to the other side of the parking lot to follow the group. The other women got into Madeline’s silver, 2011 Jeep Grand Cherokee. Every time Avis got into it she remembered that Christa purchased one in black not long after Madeline bought hers. Instead of the younger sister trying to be like the older one, it was the other way around. Raye Ann and Avis often joked that it was only a matter of time before Christa gave up her job raising money for the children’s ward of hospitals to join Madeline as a buyer for Bay Area clothing stores.

“What’s the address of the club?” Christa asked Avis, as she prepared to punch it into the GPS.

A few minutes later they were back on the highway heading to what Avis called the hottest new club in San Francisco—or so they thought. All of a sudden the GPS went silent and Madeline had no clue which way to go. Avis thought she’d written the directions down and rifled through her purse trying to find them. Raye Ann was the only one who found the situation amusing and the more turned around they got, the more she laughed. No doubt the two Long Island Iced Teas she consumed played a role in how silly she was acting and her need to tell them about each time her GPS malfunctioned. Though the women couldn’t help but

laugh when Raye Ann told them about the time she was trying to find Wal-Mart in a different city and the GPS directed her to someone's house.

After a few wrong turns and an illegal u-turn, Tamia called Madeline's phone. "What the hell are y'all doing?" she snapped.

Christa explained what happened and Tamia told them to pull over on the side of the road. She entered the address into her GPS and led the way.

"Calculating route."

"Oh *now* this bitch wanna talk!" Madeline said of the female GPS voice. "Shut up!" she shouted before shutting it off. Moments later they pulled into the nearly full parking lot of the chic nightclub.

"Forty-five dollars! *Each*?" Raye Ann snapped when the host told them the price of admission. "What kind of damn club is this?"

"You know what? You ladies are so beautiful that I think I'll let you in for half price. Or how about we just do twenty dollars each . . . and your phone number," he winked at Raye Ann.

"Now see that's more like it," she smiled and pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of her purse. She passed on giving him her number.

After they each paid and thanked the host, the ladies walked inside and Raye Ann and Tamia chest bumped each other with their implants. "I knew these puppies were good for something," Tamia laughed and snapped her fingers and rolled her hips to the loud music.

A woman on her cell phone walked by yelling at someone to get there before eleven o'clock or the twenty-dollar cover charge would increase to forty-five. Madeline and Christa looked at each other and burst out laughing. Then they all made their way through the crowd of two hundred or so partygoers to find a good seat. Tamia's eye was drawn to the lounge area all decked out in red; a red leather sectional, red tables and ottomans, and overhead lights that gave the entire area a red tint. It was in the perfect spot as well. The largest of the three bars was directly behind it and the smaller dance floor right in front of it. The lounge also offered the best view of the club.

"Ooh, let's sit here," Tamia said and was about to take a seat on the couch when one of the cocktail waitresses rushed over to inform the ladies they were in the VIP section and needed to leave--immediately.

"It figures Ms. High Society would gravitate to the baller's section," Madeline teased, hoping to calm the rage she knew was brewing inside of her best friend. Tamia was all about appearances and didn't take kindly to what she considered a low-class bitch talking down to her.

"Girl, shut up! You was just about to plant your ass over here too," Tamia said, even though her eyes were still on the cocktail waitress.

“Look, I didn’t wanna sit over here anyway. Come on y’all,” Avis said. It soon became clear why she was in such a rush to get to the club when she tugged at the high-waist tummy shaper she’d squeezed in to and made a beeline for a large booth across the room. Five men and two young women were having drinks and attempting a conversation over the music.

“Hey, baby,” Avis said, to a very sexy, light-skinned young man who was definitely surprised to see her.

“Hey, heyyy, you,” he said, scrambling to his feet. “What’s up? What you doing here?” he frowned, moving her further away from his friends.

“Uhm, excuse you! Why are you pushing me?”

“Oh, my bad,” he said, releasing Avis from his grasp. “What’s up?”

“Well, we’ve been seeing each other for a few months so I thought it was time that my friends met your friends,” she smiled, seemingly oblivious to how upset he was. “Come here, ladies. I want y’all to meet my little boo. This is Grant Fuller. Grant, these are my girls Raye Ann, Madeline, Christa, and Tamia.”

Madeline and Christa looked at each other as Tamia shifted her weight from one foot to the other. It was a tense and awkward moment that made them all feel uncomfortable. With the exception of Raye Ann, no one had heard a word about Grant Fuller, but even she wasn’t expecting Avis to ambush him like that.

“I feel a face crack moment coming on,” Raye Ann mumbled, as she tried to pull Avis away and spare her from embarrassment.

“So who are these handsome young men?” Avis asked, as she made her way back to the booth. When Grant didn’t say anything she introduced herself.

“Are you his mom?” one of the young women asked, innocently.

“Nah, I ain’t his damn . . .”

“Yo, girl, chill with that,” Grant said to the young woman.

“Hey Grant, guys, it was nice to meet you but we’re gonna head over to find some seats and . . .”

“Aw, nah, y’all ain’t gotta go nowhere. It’s plenty of room right here,” one of Grant’s friends said to Madeline. “They was just about to leave anyway.” The young women didn’t appreciate being dismissed and left in a huff. “See, it’s plenty of room,” he smiled, showing a mouth full of gold teeth.

After thirty minutes Madeline, Christa, Raye Ann, and Tamia decided they’d had enough. Grant’s friends were nice enough but extremely immature. However, it was watching Avis make a fool out of herself that the women could no longer take. If she wasn’t trying to sit in Grant’s lap then she was hanging all on him or turning his face to make him look at her whenever he spoke to someone else. Raye Ann tried to get Avis’s attention and let her know that the way she sat, trying to look sexy, was not working. In that position the tummy shaper she wore flattened the top of her stomach and repositioned the flab into a pudgy blob.

“Yo, don’t forget your friend,” Grant called when the four women headed to another part of the club.

“Excuse you,” Avis snarled.

“Look, I’ll holla at you later, a’ight? Right now I just wanna chill with my boys. So won’t you gone with your crew and we’ll hook up another time.”

Embarrassed, Avis pulled Grant out of earshot of the others and gave him a piece of her mind. She didn’t appreciate being dismissed or treated like one of the girls that were sitting with him earlier—ones she warned had better not return. Avis also let it be known that she’d withdraw her financial support if he didn’t change his attitude.

“Well, I can withdraw shit too,” Grant said, rubbing his hand across his crotch. Avis followed his hand with her eyes and a wicked smile spread across her lips. “Umm huh, look at you. You know you want it. So quit tripping, little mama, and go chill with your friends. We’ll hook up and then you can have all you want,” he smiled devilishly, touching his crotch again. Grant planted a quick kiss on her lips then watched Avis walk off with her friends.

“So that’s the little Muppet you been boning?” one of his friends asked. Grant gave him the finger and they all laughed. “To each his own, but my choice is *definitely* Madeline. Raye Ann’s next on the list.”

“Yeah, right, like your broke ass got a snowball’s chance in hell of getting a woman that fine! You better stick to them hood rats you be chasing and call it good. *Madeline*,” Grant snorted, not letting on to the fact that he felt exactly the same way. It was her face and scrumptious body he’d be thinking of the next time he climbed into Avis’s bed.

“You shouldn’t have done that . . . to none of us,” Raye Ann scolded Avis once they took their seats in the VIP section.

Tamia refused to let that cocktail waitress have the last word and she found out from one of the bartenders how to reserve the space. Even though her friends thought it was ridiculous to pay two-hundred dollars to sit on the red sofa for an hour, Tamia couldn’t rest until her behind was comfortably placed in the VIP area—where she belonged. And she made that waitress wait on all of them hand and foot.

“Why would you ambush the boy like that?” Raye Ann asked.

“I didn’t ambush him! He told me he and his boys were coming to this club and I thought I’d surprise him, that’s all.”

“Umm huh, and how old is the boy anyway?” Tamia asked.

“That *man* is twenty-seven years old.”

“And where did y’all meet?” Madeline asked, surprised that a hottie like Grant was interested in Avis.

“I helped him with his after school program and, oh shit, that didn’t come out right,” Avis stated when the women burst out laughing. “He runs the after school program at Mavis’s . . . oh never mind, bitches. Forget y’all,” she giggled. “Anyway, Grant’s really mature for his age. He’s got a good head on his shoulders. And he knows how to handle his business in the bedroom too, you feel me? I think we’ve got something really special.”

“Bitch, check your motherboard. That boy ain’t tripping off you.”

“Shut up, Madeline!” Avis snapped. “What would you know about it anyway? When has your man-hating ass ever been in love?”

In defense of her sister, Christa shared the story of Rory Michaels, Madeline’s first love. She was crazy in love with him throughout high school but he broke her heart and left wounds that still weren’t fully healed. Madeline didn’t like talking about Rory and the mere mention of his name put her in a sour mood. Tamia thumped Christa’s knee hoping she would take the hint and stop talking about Madeline’s love life. She stopped talking about Rory only to bring up Sidney Reid, the man who’d been in love with her sister for twelve years.

Alone in her spacious two-bedroom, two-bath house in Union City, Madeline couldn’t stop thinking about Rory. Thankfully Tamia changed the subject the night before, but it didn’t stop Madeline from reliving the heartache she endured from her high school sweetheart. Rory was a year older and the cutest thing she’d ever seen in her life. He was six-feet, five-inches with milk chocolate colored skin and the sexiest brown eyes. Rory was also Madeline’s first lover and she fell head over heels for him. No one could tell her they weren’t going to get married and live happily ever after. Rory, however, had different plans. As the captain of the basketball team he had girls chasing him all the time and he bedded as many of them as possible. Too many nights Madeline cried herself to sleep wondering why she wasn’t enough for Rory. Then, instead of leaving him alone, she transformed herself into a sex kitten that was willing to do *anything* to keep him—including inviting other girls to their bed or experiencing pain merely for his pleasure.

Madeline thought she was the belle of the ball when Rory came home from college to take her to the senior prom. She planned for it like it was her wedding day and made sure everything was perfect. All eyes were on the beautiful couple when Rory and Madeline glided across the dance floor and she couldn’t have been happier. It was the best night of her life, until Rory excused himself to the bathroom and stayed gone for over twenty minutes. Madeline went searching and found him in a dim hallway between another girl’s legs.

Completely humiliated and heartbroken, Madeline ran out of the school gymnasium and cried for the two blocks it took to get to Sidney’s house. He and

Christa were good friends throughout high school but it was no secret he'd always had a crush on Madeline. Without a word, Sidney took her into his arms and let her cry until she had no tears left. Afterwards he cleaned her mascara-streaked face and helped Madeline out of her prom dress. In nothing but her pink bra and panties, she wrapped herself in his arms again. He knew it was the wrong time, but he couldn't resist the urge to plant kisses on her shoulder, neck, cheek, and lips. "I love you," Sidney had whispered and made love to Madeline for the first time. What they shared was unlike anything he had ever experienced and he thought they'd always be in love.

For a few weeks after that night the two of them spent as much time together as possible. Sidney thought he finally had the relationship he'd always wanted with Madeline, but just as quickly as she walked into his world, she left it. After her graduation she told Sidney to forget about her and go on with his life. Then she left to spend the summer in Mississippi with Evelyn's parents and Sidney left and threw himself into his courses at California State University in Sacramento.

Twelve years later and Sidney was still involved in an on-again, off-again relationship with Madeline. His family urged him to leave her alone and move on with his life, but he couldn't. Sidney loved Madeline and still believed she would finally stop fighting what they had and marry him. Though, sometimes he did get fed up with the whole situation and got involved with other women. And just when he thought he could be serious about someone else, Madeline showed up and made him fall for her all over again. Sidney sincerely hoped she would come around soon. He was thirty-two years old and wanted to have children and build a life with a woman who wanted the same thing.

"You all right?" Christa asked after she entered Madeline's home and found her sulking in the bedroom. "Your butt better not be in here tripping off Rory. You've got a good man who loves you and wants to make you happy. Let go of all that old mess and live your life. Rory has."

"And how do we know that?" Madeline frowned.

"Okay, look, I wasn't going to say anything but me and Mama ran into Rory's mom in the mall and she showed us pictures of him, his wife, and their new baby girl. He's happy, Mad, and you need to leave all that junk in the past and be happy too."

Tears filled Madeline's eyes. For years she fantasized about the day Rory came crawling back begging for her forgiveness. She imagined him somewhere pining away for her, agonizing over how badly he treated her. Hearing that he was a happily married man and a new father killed any hope of him coming back. Sadness swept over Madeline and a headache quickly followed.

Later that afternoon, against her better judgment, Madeline searched for Rory on Facebook. Her heart sank when a profile picture appeared of him and his beautiful bride on their wedding day. And if that wasn't torturous enough, she hit the friend request button before she could stop herself. Madeline soon regretted doing so and was about to cancel the request when she realized he was online and had accepted her as a friend immediately. An instant message from Rory appeared on the bottom of her screen, *Yo Mad, I'm about to check out your page and see how sexy you still are*, it read.

Me too, she replied.

And like a fool, she went to his page and looked through every one of his albums. There were pictures of his wife getting ready on their wedding day, the shot of Rory with tears rolling down his face when he saw her for the first time, their first kiss, and first dance as husband and wife. Tears poured down Madeline's face as she wondered why that couldn't have been *her* and Rory like it was supposed to be. Though, for as heartbreaking as those pictures were, the ones of Rory and his wife welcoming their baby girl into the world were worst. She was so beautiful. And Madeline could see and feel how much Rory loved his daughter—making her tears fall harder and faster.

Madeline was about to log off when another instant message from Rory appeared on her screen. That time he provided his cell phone number and asked her to call since he wasn't much for typing. Obviously a glutton for punishment, she grabbed her cell phone and dialed the number. He answered on the first ring.

"Yo, Mad, what's good? How you been, girl?"

The sound of his silky, deep voice made Madeline's heart skip a beat and a smile spread across her lips. Her entire face lit up when he said he'd moved back to the area, to Milpitas, and asked to see her. Rory said he would be at work until six o'clock that evening if she wanted to stop by his shop. He and his best friend owned a successful garage where they repaired any and every kind of vehicle. That came as no surprise to Madeline. Rory was always good with his hands.

She rushed to her bedroom to change into a form-fitting black skirt that hugged her curves, a white blouse that showed just the right amount of cleavage, and a wide red belt that accentuated her small waist and complimented the red stilettos she slipped onto her feet. The unseasonably warm weather made it so she didn't need a coat. Madeline slicked her long, brown hair into a tight bun and put on a pair of silver hoop earrings. Rory always liked when she wore her hair back. "Your face is so beautiful. I wanna see it all," he used to say.

A few minutes later Madeline jumped into her jeep and made the twenty-minute drive to Rory's garage. She took one last look at herself in the rearview mirror and added a dab more of her burgundy lip gloss. Then she steadied her nerves and walked inside.

“Lord, have mercy, *Jesus!*” a man shouted when Madeline entered. She blushed. “I don’t know what you selling but I’ll buy it *all!*”

“Alright, Mr. Jenkins, calm down before you have a heart attack,” Rory teased, as he made his way towards Madeline. He looked amazing in a pair of jeans and a St. Louis Rams t-shirt. “Come here, girl . . . give me some love,” Rory smiled then embraced his former lover.

The smell of his cologne and the feel of his body next to hers made Madeline swoon. She almost didn’t let go when he pulled away.

“Damn, Mad, look at you! But I don’t know why I’m acting surprised. You were always beautiful,” he smiled and hugged her again. “It’s so good to see you.”

Madeline thought she would melt when Rory took her by the hand and introduced her to everyone in his shop. He asked if she was in a hurry because he wanted to talk to her. Madeline smiled when he put his hand on the small of her back and led her into his office. Within a few seconds that smile slid off her face and she felt as if she’d been hit in the gut.

“Hey, baby, I got someone I want you to meet,” Rory said, ushering Madeline in front of him. “This is my wife, Alyssa Michaels. Alyssa, baby, this is an old friend from school Madeline Stiles. And *this* little lady right here is my daughter Aurora,” he cooed, taking the seven-month-old out of his wife’s arms.

At that moment Madeline wished she could’ve dissolved into the floor. She was annoyed at the fact that Rory said Alyssa *Michaels* as if she didn’t know that. And Madeline resented him introducing her as an “old friend” when she was a hell of a lot more than that.

“It’s wonderful to meet you,” Alyssa said, genuinely. Then to Madeline’s surprise, the woman embraced her. “You’re so pretty. And where did you get those shoes, girl? Those are banging!”

“Look away, Alyssa, look away,” Rory teased. “I have to work overtime just to support her shoe habit, Mad. Ain’t that right, Aurora?” he smiled brightly, bouncing the baby in his arms.

The last thing Madeline desired was to be a part of the cutesy crap happening around her. All she wanted to do was run and get as far away from Rory and his perfect little life as she could. She was about to make an excuse to leave when someone called Rory and he placed Aurora in her arms before going to find out what was going on in the garage.

For some reason the baby laughed and the sound put a smile on Madeline’s face and broke her heart all at the same time. She held Aurora close and inhaled her sweet, baby scent while gently rubbing her curly mop of hair. Tears began to well in Madeline’s eyes so she gave Aurora to her mother, said a quick goodbye, and high-tailed it out of the office.

“Yo, Mad, where you going?” Rory called, jogging behind her. “I was hoping we could grab a cup of coffee or something. I need to talk to you,” he said, his sexy eyes sparkling.

Everything inside of Madeline told her to get in her truck and drive away, but as was often the case with stupidity, she agreed to join him. They made idle chitchat during the walk to the diner at the end of the block.

“So what did you wanna talk to me about?” Madeline asked, after they both received a cup of coffee.

Rory grabbed her hands from across the table and stared deep into her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Mad. How I did you back in the day was foul and I feel ashamed of myself for the way I acted. I used to blame it on being young but I know that’s no excuse. You were a good girl and didn’t deserve some knucklehead like me playing around with your heart. I hope you can forgive me, Mad, because I’m really sorry. I’ve got a daughter now and I’d beat the hell out of a dude if he treated her the way I treated you. I’m so sorry and I wish there was something I could do to make it up to you.”

That devil in Madeline, the one that wanted to prove she could have Rory if she wanted him . . . the one that wanted to feel like she mattered told him there *was* something he could do to make it up to her.

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?” he smiled, licking his lips seductively.

“Come take a ride with me and find out.”

Rory was silent for a few moments as he stared at her and kept smiling. “Yo, Mad, I’m flattered, right? I really am. But I’m doing my little family thing, you know? Alyssa’s a good woman and she deserves my respect and loyalty. Yo, Mad, where you going? Hey, don’t leave like . . .”

Completely and utterly humiliated, Madeline ran to her truck and took off not wanting to see Rory again in her life. Tears ran down her cheeks as she wondered why *she* hadn’t been worth his respect and loyalty. Why wasn’t she good enough to be his wife and the mother of his baby girl? “*Why!*” she screamed.

The thought of going home to an empty house was unbearable. And Madeline knew she couldn’t take the tongue lashing she would get from her sister and friends if she confessed what she’d just done. There was only one place Madeline could go and feel safe and not be judged. An hour later she arrived in Oakland and pulled in front of the law offices Sidney ran with his father and older brother.

“Why won’t you leave my brother alone?” Shelby Reid, Jr. asked when he spotted Madeline in the lobby waiting for the elevator. “He’s met someone and things are going well. So if you care about him, like you claim, then let him have a life with a woman who actually loves him. Think about Sid for once.”

Before Madeline could respond, the elevator doors opened and Sidney's clean-shaven, pretty boy face lit up when he saw her. Shelby, Jr. let out a long sigh knowing his brother was going to break Joanna's heart to go back to the woman who always broke his.

"Come here, baby," Sidney said, recognizing that Madeline was upset. She leaned into his sleek, six-foot, five-inch, muscular frame and he held her as she dissolved into tears. Madeline wrapped her arms around Sidney's neck and gently rubbed his dark brown hair that he kept cut close to his scalp. She knew that turned him on. And at that moment Madeline needed a man to desire her. She needed Sidney to want her more than anything.

The next morning Madeline awoke to Sidney's light brown eyes fixed on her as he smiled and gently rubbed her back. He was incredible the night before and made her forget all about the debacle with Rory—just as he'd done twelve years ago.

"So are you ready?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Hmm?" Madeline asked with a wicked little grin. She loved Sidney's smile, the way his lips curled up slightly and his eyes twinkled as if he had a secret. And the slight rasp in his voice turned her on. He was so sexy and her eyes traveled the length of his freshly showered body. "Ready for what?"

"To go pack up your stuff and move in with me? Are you ready to quit playing around and marry me?" he asked, planting a kiss on her hand.

Madeline pulled the sheet over her naked body as she turned over onto her back then sat up. She ran a hand through her wild hair and gave a self-conscious wipe to her mouth. "Do you think we can have breakfast before we get into all of that? I'm starving."

"No, you're stalling," Sidney said, as he planted a kiss on her neck. "But I'll make you something special. After all that wild, freaky ass shit you was doing last night you probably do need some nourishment," he laughed.

"Shut up," Madeline giggled then she got up to shower and dress.

Over breakfast Sidney asked if she was ready to tell him what sent her into his arms. They'd been on this merry-go-round for years so there was no point in pretending. Madeline told him about Rory and how stupid she felt for looking him up in the first place. Sidney vowed she would be loved and treasured every day of their lives together if she were with him.

"Please, Madeline. Stay with me. You don't have to work anymore or worry about anything because I'll take care of everything you need. I love you."

Madeline opened her mouth to say something when her phone beeped letting her know she had a text message. *Maybe we should take that ride after all. Love, Rory.*

CHAPTER THREE

“Why in the hell would you even be considering meeting Rory?” Christa snapped. “Do you know how stupid you sound right now? You gone leave a man who loves you and wants to spend the rest of his life with you to be somebody’s jump off? This man is married with a child and . . .”

“Do you feel even a *little* hypocritical letting those words slip out of your mouth?” Madeline spat, as she hopped up from her sister’s couch. “You don’t have a problem sleeping with married men to get what you want so why are you jumping down my throat for doing the same?”

“Because there are consequences to pay when you do shit like that, Mad! You don’t come out of it unscathed and the damage it does to your self-worth and self-esteem isn’t worth it. Trust me, you don’t get away scot-free,” Christa cried, as she thought about losing Ellis. “You’re better than this, Madeline. And you deserve more than to be some dude’s toy to discard when he’s done playing with you. Rory’s not the one. He wasn’t before and he’s not now.” She pulled Madeline back down on the couch and held her. “Rory’s been back in your life for what, twenty-four hours? And look what he’s doing to you. I know this isn’t who you really are, Mad, so don’t let him turn you into something you hate, like he did before.”

Madeline cried hysterically and all she could do was hold on to her sister. “What’s wrong with me, Christa Belle? How come he couldn’t love *me*?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Madeline. Rory just isn’t the one who’s supposed to love you. That honor belongs to someone else,” she smiled.

“Oh, please,” Madeline rolled her eyes, knowing her sister was referring to Sidney. She reached over to grab a Kleenex from the side table and noticed luggage and taped boxes on Christa’s sun deck. “What’s with all the suitcases and stuff?” she pointed.

“Oh, uh, I wanted to talk to you about that. Please don’t get upset but . . .”

“You better not be about to say what I think you’re about to say.” Christa looked to the floor. “Christa Belle! Have you lost your mind?”

“Look, Madeline, he’s our father and he’s sick and needs somewhere to go.”

“Then let him go be with the nasty bitches he left us for! Let *them* take care of his ass! I can’t believe you’re letting him do this to you again,” Madeline said, shaking her head in disgust. “You need to take the advice you just gave me.”

“That’s not the same thing, Mad.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not. Daddy loves us and he’s been a good father.”

“Well, I guess you would think that because he’s always raving about *you*. ‘Christa’s so smart and generous’. ‘Christa makes the world a better place’.

‘Christa’s so special’. He’s always bragging on you but all he ever says about me is that I’m pretty, like I ain’t got shit else going for myself. But I bet that would change if I gave him money all the time and sang his praises like you do.”

“Don’t be like that, Mad. There are a lot of good things about Daddy. I mean, yes, he was a horrible husband but that’s between him and Mama. It doesn’t have anything to do with us. Mama’s poisoned you so much against him that you refuse to give him credit for the ways he did support us and the times he was there for me and *you*.”

“Look, Christa Belle, you can romanticize your relationship with Rodney all you want but I know who he is. He’s the dude who gambled and drank his paychecks away and left Mama to hustle and find ways to feed and clothe us. You criticize her for all the *uncles* we had growing up instead of thanking her for doing whatever she had to do to make sure we always had what we needed when the lying, cheating, manipulative bastard she married didn’t give a *fuck* and left her to struggle on her own! He’s the same man who not even a month ago threatened not to walk you down the aisle if you didn’t pay for his trifling ass hoe to fly to the wedding . . . as if you paying for *his* ticket, tux, and hotel wasn’t enough. And where has he been, Christa? Did he call *once* to see how you were after being devastated by the man you loved? Did he come by to check on you, cook for you, *hug* you, or any damn thing? No, of course he didn’t because he was too busy flying to Memphis, sleeping his ass in the luxurious hotel you provided for him, and trying to cash in on your misery!

“And now that he’s even more fucked up with Multiple Sclerosis he comes knocking on Mama’s door talking about how much he loves us and wants to be a family again,” Madeline snorted, still unable to believe the audacity of Rodney Stiles. “Fuck him! I’m glad Mama told his ass to go to hell and slammed the door in his face. But you went and fell for his bullshit once again like you don’t know he’s gonna break your heart. That’s what he always does, Christa. But don’t let him do it this time. Tell him to go live with the tramp he was willing to miss your wedding for. Let *her* pay for his healthcare and take him to the doctor and feed and clean him when he can no longer do it himself.”

“He’s our father, Madeline. He needs us and we should be there for him. Be the bigger person,” Christa encouraged. “I think if you open up your heart to Daddy it will help you love Sidney as much as he loves you.”

“Oh give me a damn break! One thing doesn’t have to do with the other.”

“I think it does. I believe the reason you can’t love Sid is . . .”

“I can’t love Sidney because he doesn’t really love *me*!”

“*What*? Of course he does, Madeline. He wants you more than anything.”

“No, he wants me because he can’t have me. It’s all about the hunt, Christa. I’m a challenge to Sidney and he likes to rise to it just to see if he can finally win.

But I bet if I actually married him it wouldn't be long before he grew tired of me and moved on to the next challenge."

"You can't really believe that, *do* you? After everything you've been through with Sid?"

"I don't know . . . look, whatever, Christa. You don't know Sidney like I do. Yes, he's a good man but he's not perfect the way everybody makes him out to be. His moody ass can get real dark sometimes to the point where I wonder if he's gonna drive off a cliff one day."

"Oh give him a break, Mad. Sidney has an extremely high pressured job that would drive anybody a little crazy. People are basically putting their lives in his hands when they hire him to take on their cases. A lawyer with a conscience is a hard thing to come by these days. Besides, there are so many other things he could be doing to relieve stress than expressing his feelings. Sid doesn't drink or smoke or do any of the things you might expect someone with his stress level to do."

"Yeah, he fucks women to relieve his stress. But whatever, Christa, this isn't about him. This is about you not letting Rodney take advantage of you again. You don't owe him anything and I don't think you should turn your life upside down for a man who didn't and wouldn't do the same."

"Can we just agree to disagree? I don't wanna fight with you, Mad. I love you and I want you to be okay. So please promise me you won't get involved with Rory."

"Well, like you said, let's agree to disagree."

In the two weeks that followed Christa moved Rodney into her home and even hired a nurse to care for him during the day and overnight whenever she had to travel for business. Madeline threw herself into work and travelled at least three times a week. She tried to escape her problems, but both Rory and Sidney sent text messages and e-mails begging to see her. Madeline ignored them at first but eventually she gave in and responded. It was something she would come to regret.

After a week of having his calls ignored Sidney left a final message informing Madeline that if she didn't contact him by the end of the day he never wanted to hear from her again. Refusing to respond to threats, she ignored that message as well. Soon after, she dialed Rory's cell phone. Three nights in a row Madeline carried on extremely inappropriate phone conversations with him and by the fourth night they agreed to meet. She reserved a hotel suite and spent a lot of time and money making it romantic. She wanted their night together to be something Rory would never forget so she bought sexy lingerie, ordered steak and lobster for their meal, and had special treats strewn around the room for them to enjoy. Sadly or thankfully—Madeline wasn't sure which—Rory never showed. All of her calls to his cell phone went directly to voicemail and when she checked her

emails, there was no message explaining his absence. Humiliated but determined to rid herself of Rory Michaels once and for all, Madeline deleted his email address and phone number. Then she logged on to Facebook to un-friend him and learned why she'd been stood up.

We're pregnant! read the caption under Rory's newest photo album. While Madeline sat alone in her hotel suite waiting for her lover's arrival, Rory and Alyssa celebrated their growing family with loved ones and friends. And as much as Madeline wanted to scream and cry and blame the world, she knew the only person at fault was her.

"It was *so* not worth it, Christa Belle," Madeline said aloud as she packed her things to leave. The last place she wanted to be was in that suite. It reeked of desperation and stupidity.

"Did you not understand my message?" Sidney glared, as he stood in the doorway blocking entry into his luxurious three-bedroom, two-bath home. Despite the drizzle and the fact that Madeline looked cold in her trench coat and four-inch heels, he refused to let her inside. "I'm not doing this with you again."

"Sid," Madeline purred, as she moved towards him.

"Don't Sid me . . . *stop*, Madeline, I'm not playing with you," he said when she ran her hand down his muscular chest, slowly batting her long eyelashes at him. "That shit ain't gonna work this time. Besides, I've got company coming so you need to go. Bye," he said, taking a step back.

"So you don't want me?" she whispered, completely unconcerned with whoever was coming to visit him. Madeline planted a kiss on his neck then untied the belt of her trench coat revealing a red, sheer bra and red sweetheart panties with diamond accents.

Sidney tried hard not to look but he couldn't help himself. Madeline's body was amazing and the diamond studded navel ring she wore turned him on. However, he couldn't keep letting her treat him the way she did. It was time to put an end to whatever it was they had, once and for all.

"Are you sure you don't want me? Because I want you *so* bad," she smiled devilishly before planting a soft kiss on his lips. "It's Maddie, baby. Nobody can do it like I can," Madeline whispered, gently stroking his genitals as she kissed his neck. "Let me in, Sid. Let me love you like only I can." She was about to kiss him again but he stopped her.

"Do you love me?" Sidney whispered, staring deep into her eyes.

"Yes," she panted. "Yes."

That time he let her kiss him as they made their way to his bedroom and out of sight of any of his neighbors who may have been watching. Sidney and Madeline knocked over lamps and chairs along the way as they tore at each other's

clothes. Their lovemaking was sensual, intense, and completely uninhibited. Nothing could stop them when they were in the throes of passion—not even Joanna’s incessant knocking and ringing of the doorbell.

After traveling four days that week for work, Madeline wanted to spend Saturday alone at home relaxing. The sound of Christa unlocking her front door made it obvious that wouldn’t be happening. Madeline loved her sister dearly but it aggravated her that Christa always dropped over unannounced and didn’t even bother to knock first. The key she was given was meant for emergencies but Christa didn’t seem to get it no matter how many times Madeline complained.

“Hey, girl, what you doing?” Christa asked, as she plopped on the king-sized bed beside her sister. She kissed her cheek then started rummaging through the mail Madeline planned to go through herself. “Ooh, what’s this?”

“It’s my DOT magazine.”

“Your what?” she asked, flipping through the pages.

Madeline snatched it out of her hand. “It’s DOT magazine . . . the one I told you about. Remember? I told you my girl Dorothy Enriquez started her own magazine and I asked you to go to her website to order a copy which you obviously didn’t do since you sitting here acting clueless. But it’s not too late. Go to my computer, look up www.dotmagazineonline.com and order your own.”

Christa rolled her eyes then got up and did as she was told. She was all for supporting women who worked hard to make their dreams a reality. Plus, she had to talk to Madeline and needed her in the best mood possible.

“Okay, I ordered it,” Christa stated after entering her credit card information. “Now can I talk to you about something?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“You know I love you, right?”

“Oh, lord, what do you want, Christa Belle?”

“Well, something’s been on my heart and I need to say it to you. It bothers me that you believe Sidney thinks of you as a challenge and that he’d abandon you if you ever really gave him your heart. I fear you’re gonna end up just like Mama. She had a wonderful man who sincerely loved and cared for her but she couldn’t let go of the past and it cost her future with an amazing man. And now she’s spewing out all this venom about how Mr. James did her wrong. But I don’t blame him for leaving her and finding someone who could accept and reciprocate his love. I’m glad he’s happy. And even though you and Mama think I’m wrong, I *am* going to his wedding and I’m gonna celebrate the love he and Ms. Charlotte have. I just hope I don’t have to do the same with Sidney.

“Life is short, Madeline, and even a man who loves you to death will eventually get tired of being unloved and move on. So don’t end up like Mama.

Stop being so scared of getting hurt that you won't open your heart and receive what could be the greatest love of your life."

"And you're sure that's Sidney?"

"You know I love him and I think y'all could really be happy together. But that's not for me to decide. I'm just saying if Sidney's who you want then give the relationship a *real* chance. On the other hand, if he's not who you see forever with then that's okay too. Just make a decision one way or the other, Mad. Sidney is a good man who genuinely loves you and he doesn't deserve the way you treat him. Give him a hundred percent or let him go so he can be happy with someone who will love him the way he deserves. Stop using him to make you feel better about yourself. That's wrong, Mad, and you'll pay for that."

Madeline didn't like hearing what Christa said but she knew her sister was right. She had to make a decision about Sidney one way or another.

On Friday, March 18th, Madeline drove to the Oakland Hills to confront Sidney. Every time she rode through his neighborhood her mood changed and she became almost child-like and dreamy. The tree-lined streets and big, beautiful homes made her think of family. Madeline imagined moms and dads around the dinner table with their children talking about the events of the day. A smile spread across her face when she actually saw a father nervously running behind his son riding his bike without training wheels for the first time. Suddenly, a sense of panic fell over Madeline. She was nervous and terrified that she was about to make the biggest mistake of her life.

She sat in the driveway staring at Sidney's house. It was a beautiful, brown brick, two-story home that looked perfect for a family. The big front yard, manicured hedges, and bright colored roses only added to its appeal. Out of the blue, Madeline recalled the time she helped Sidney pass out candy to costume-clad kids on Halloween. She stood in the doorway with her arm wrapped around him waving at the neighbors and playing the role of a happy wife. That was three years ago, the first time Sidney asked her to move in with him. They made wild, passionate love that night but Madeline left while he slept. Two months went by before he heard from her again, one of many times that she hurt him.

Madeline walked up the winding sidewalk and Sidney opened the door before she got to the porch. "Hi," she said, nervously shifting her weight from one leg to the other. She suddenly felt self-conscious in the mustard-colored, silk chiffon dress and four-inch heels she wore. *Why the hell did I put this on?*

"Hey. What's going on?" Sidney frowned, as he stared at her, confused.

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

“Yes, I’m ready to move in and build a life with you,” she said, placing her suitcases down beside her. Madeline had never felt more nervous than she did at that moment. “Sidney?” she called, unable to read his expression.

He walked down the three steps leading up to his front door and stood in front of her. A smile spread across his lips before he kissed Madeline with passion and excitement. They held hands as each grabbed a suitcase and walked inside the house. Madeline could only hope she was home and that come Halloween she’d actually be a wife and not just playing a role.

“I love you *so* much,” Sidney whispered, after they made love. “I can make you happy, Maddie. I promise.” He held her in his arms throughout the night not ever wanting to let go.

His father and brother were livid when Sidney called to inform them that he was taking a two-week vacation starting immediately. He didn’t care, though. All that mattered was being with Madeline.

The two of them took off for a romantic, fun-filled week in Jamaica and they laughed, drank, and made love like it was the last days of their lives. Sidney and Madeline spent the following week holed up in his home, oblivious to the rest of the world. When they weren’t tearing the house apart making love, they were talking into the wee hours of the night. Madeline learned a lot about Sidney and his hopes and dreams for the future. He talked a lot about having children and she knew in her heart he’d make a wonderful father.

“So?” he asked, sitting in the middle of his bed.

“I’m sorry, what?” Madeline asked, snapping back to attention.

“How many babies are we having?” Sidney smiled, as he fed her another chocolate covered strawberry. “I think three would be cool. Sidney, Jr., Sidney the third, and Sidney Yvette.”

“You must be crazy,” Madeline laughed. “If I ever had babies they would have their own names. I don’t like all that junior stuff. And I surely wouldn’t name a girl Yvette. I still wish Mama hadn’t given me that for a middle name.”

“I think it’s beautiful,” Sidney said, kissing chocolate from her lips. “And what do you mean *if* you ever had babies? Don’t you want kids?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if I’m the right type of person to be a mom. I would hate to screw up my kids. I mean, what kind of example would I be?”

“Stop it, Madeline. I hate when you say stuff like that,” Sidney snapped.

“Why do you love me, Sid? Why do you put up with me?”

“I put up with you because you’re everything I’ve ever wanted in a woman. I see all the things you try to hide, like how big your heart is. You love deep and hard. But you’ve been hurt so you throw up all these walls to keep people from seeing how tender and sensitive you really are. You intentionally do stuff to make others think one way of you when you’re totally the opposite. And you choose

things like your job, your anger, and this persona you've built for yourself to hide behind. But I see through it, Mad. I see *you*," he said, kissing her gently. "It's the little things that you do that stand out the most. Like how you'll send a card and a basketful of my favorite things just to brighten my day. Or how you go out of your way to cheer me up on my mother's birthday knowing how much I still miss her. Someone who's mean and cold like you pretend to be wouldn't even think to do stuff like that," Sidney smiled sweetly. I love you, Maddie, and I believe we could be happy together if you'd just trust me with your heart."

They made love again, slow and tender.

The next day, which was the last day of their vacation together, Sidney served Madeline breakfast in bed and told her he had a surprise. Before he told her what it was, however, he needed to have his mind put at ease. The two of them had a wonderful time together and he didn't want it to end. Yet, there seemed to be something missing. Even when Sidney and Madeline were as close as two people could be, he never felt like he had one hundred percent of her. And he wasn't sure if all of her was something he'd gain over time or if she would never allow him to have it.

"Madeline, do you love me?" Sidney asked.

"Yes."

"Then how come you never say it?"

"I just did."

"No, you always say yes when I ask you but I've never heard you say Sidney I love you," he stated. "*Can* you say it?"

"Yes."

They were both silent for a few moments. "Uhm, this would be a perfect opportunity," Sidney prodded.

"I love you, Sidney," Madeline giggled.

"Ooh, girl, why you always gotta be difficult? You got a brotha over here sweating," he smiled then planted a kiss on her neck. "Well, here's your surprise," Sidney said, removing a pair of tickets from an envelope. "It's that new play you were talking about. Tonight is the last performance and I thought we could grab a nice dinner and check it out. Since we have to return to the real world tomorrow I thought we could end our vacation with a bang . . . literally," he smiled, devilishly. He went to his closet and removed a stunning black dress and four-inch heels for her to wear. It complimented the black, tailored suit he purchased for the occasion.

Later that evening, after a delicious meal, Sidney escorted Madeline to their seats at the Paramount Theater in Oakland. The play began and it didn't take long for Madeline to realize it wasn't as great as she thought it would be.

"I'll be right back," Madeline whispered to Sidney then excused herself to the ladies' room. She stared at her reflection for a long while and had the

overwhelming need to cry. Madeline knew she should have been happy but she wasn't and couldn't figure out why. All at once it hit her like a ton of bricks. She loved Sidney dearly but she wasn't *in* love with him. That's what was missing during their two-week escapade. It's what prevented Madeline from wanting to marry and have babies with him.

Tears streamed down her face as she continued to stare at her reflection. The last thing Madeline wanted to do was hurt Sidney but she knew that's exactly what would happen. She had to let him go completely and it broke her heart to know what they shared for years was over. Madeline's tears came harder and faster as she wrapped her arms around herself and sobbed.

Ten minutes later, after she finally stopped crying, Madeline exited the ladies' room knowing she needed to tell Sidney the truth.

"Oh, excuse me," she said to the man she bumped into. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," he said, with a voice like Barry White. "I love having beautiful women run me down." They both laughed. "Ezra Prescott," he stated, extending his huge hand to her.

"Madeline Yvette Stiles," she said, wondering what on earth possessed her to say her middle name. She opened her mouth to correct herself and said exactly the same thing. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

"You realize this is a Blue Tooth, not a hearing aid, right? I heard you the first time," Ezra laughed, as he pointed to the phone attachment on his ear. He recognized that Madeline was nervous and found it adorable. He thought she was beautiful, like a real-life baby doll.

She blushed, hesitant to say anything else at the risk of making a fool out of herself. Madeline wasn't sure what was happening but she felt a magnetic pull to this stranger who probably should have frightened her. Ezra towered over her at six-foot, seven and nearly three hundred pounds. Though, he wasn't fat. It was all solid muscle and Madeline found herself turned on by him.

He had a full beard that made him look a little wild despite it being perfectly trimmed and groomed. Cute definitely wasn't a word Madeline would use to describe him. And if she had only seen Ezra and not been able to talk to him she probably would have thought he was mean and intimidating. His sense of humor and warm smile, however, made her feel comfortable and she was drawn to him. Most inviting was his soft, hazel/ brown eyes. There was tenderness in them, a vulnerability that made Madeline feel like she could trust him with anything. It was the strangest feeling, but she didn't want it to stop.

"So, does the fact that you're out here stalling for time mean you're not enjoying the play?"

"It's okay."

“Would it change your opinion at all if you knew this was one of my productions?” Ezra asked, with a devious little grin on his face.

“You didn’t let me finish. What I meant was it’s okay for me to say this is the best play I’ve ever seen!” They both laughed. “So is this really your play?”

“I’m just an investor. It’s my boy’s artistic expression and I promised I would support him. Don’t tell him, but I’ve never seen it all the way through.”

“It’ll be our secret,” Madeline smiled.

After fifteen minutes, Sidney got the sinking feeling Madeline wouldn’t return. And he didn’t understand it. No matter how hard he tried to love her over their two weeks together, something was always missing. Tears threatened to fall from Sidney’s eyes as he wondered why the woman he loved most in the world couldn’t love him back. What else could he have done? Then Sidney removed the ring box from his pocket and popped the lid open. He stared at the engagement ring, trying desperately to figure out what his next move should be when his phone beeped. Sidney read the text message and snapped the box shut. He wanted to hurl it across the theater. *I’m sorry, Sid. Goodbye*, it read.

Madeline felt like a world-class jerk for sending Sidney a text message, especially after all the horrible things she said about Ellis for doing the same to her sister. Sidney deserved *so* much more than that. She just couldn’t bear to face him. She couldn’t stand to see the hurt in his eyes knowing she was responsible. Madeline honestly wished she *was* in love with Sidney. He was an incredible man who would make some woman a wonderful husband. Sadly, it took the two weeks they spent together for Madeline to know with certainty she wasn’t that woman.

“So are you sure you don’t want to go talk to your friends? I can wait,” Ezra offered, after Madeline finished sending a text message.

“Oh, no, it’s okay. I’ll talk to them later,” she said, allowing him to escort her out of the theater. Madeline quickly wiped the tears that fell from her eyes hoping Sidney would find the woman he deserved and thereby be able to forgive her for breaking his heart.

“So where would you like to go, Baby Doll?” Ezra asked, opening the passenger door of his silver 2012 Rolls-Royce Phantom. “I’m your chauffeur for the night. Just name the place and I’ll see that you get there safe and sound.”

Ezra was surprised when she asked to go to the twenty-four-hour diner up the street as he pulled out of the V.I.P. parking lot. “Oh, look at this poor fella. He looks like he lost his best friend, his puppy, *and* his job!”

Madeline’s breath caught in her throat when she realized Ezra was talking about Sidney. He walked towards the V.I.P. parking lot looking devastated and lost. A part of her wanted to hop out of the car and run into his arms. However, she knew doing so would only prolong the inevitable. Instead, Madeline slid closer to

Ezra. Not that Sidney would be looking for her in a Phantom, but she couldn't bear the thought of hurting him more by seeing her with someone else. Madeline silently prayed for the stoplight to turn green so she could get as far away from her heartache as possible. And for a moment she thought it might be best to go home, eat a pint of ice cream, and mourn the loss of her involvement with Sidney. Yet, Madeline couldn't explain the feelings she had for Ezra and didn't want to blow the opportunity to find out why she was able to feel for him upon meeting what she had never felt for Sidney in a lifetime. Madeline never believed in love at first sight until she ran into Ezra. Now April 2, 2011 would forever be etched into her heart as the day she met her husband.

CHAPTER FOUR

Madeline ordered a slice of German chocolate cake and a glass of milk. While Ezra placed his order for a double-decker cheeseburger, she spotted Sidney's Jaguar stopped at the light outside of her window and nearly fell over in her seat to avoid being seen.

"Whoa, Baby Doll, you okay?"

"Uh, yeah, I thought I dropped my earring but it must have been something else. Sorry about that. I know I probably look crazy."

"You mean because you're *still* lying down in the booth? Yeah, I guess crazy is a good word," Ezra laughed, heartily.

Madeline laughed too then slowly sat up straight. Thankfully, Sidney had driven away and she breathed a sigh of relief. She and Ezra smiled at each other for a few moments before Madeline decided to ask what he did for a living that afforded him the ability to purchase a brand new Phantom and invest in productions at the Paramount Theater.

She learned that Ezra Prescott was a thirty-six-year old CEO of a very successful medical supplies company as well as an investor in several lucrative businesses involving creative arts and fashion. He was also a big believer in giving back to the community and did a lot of charitable works to help those who wanted to do better do so. Madeline could tell Ezra was used to the finer things in life but they weren't what mattered most to him. That honor belonged to his twelve-year-old daughter Aura Prescott. His eyes sparkled and a big smile spread across Ezra's face when he spoke of her. He pulled up a picture on his phone to show to Madeline.

Aura was striking. She was already five-foot, eight inches with a shapely body that seemed fit for a grown woman instead of a twelve-year old girl. She definitely had her father's warm eyes and his round, full face but that's where their similarities ended. Madeline assumed Aura's bronze-like skin tone and long, straight black hair came from her mother.

"You look like a man in love," Madeline smiled, as she handed Ezra his phone and noticed the sweet expression on his face.

"Yeah," he grinned. "Aura's my heart. I don't know that I had a real purpose in life until she came along. From the moment I first held her I wanted to be better. I wanted to be a man Aura could be proud to call her father. All I used to care about was making money. I worked nonstop and never had time for anything other than making my next dollar. But Aura taught me that life is about so much more. A child is completely unconcerned with what's in your bank account. They just want

you. It's the nights you read their favorite story before bed or the times you go camping or show up for their recitals that kids remember most.

"I had a good reminder of that about five years ago. I wanted to do something really big for Aura's birthday so I took her to Disney World. I got us first-class flights, paid a ridiculous amount for V.I.P. treatment so she didn't have to wait in line for rides or shows. I took her to the best restaurants and bought her all the things I thought would make any little girl go nuts. But do you know what Aura remembers most? To this day she still says the best part of that trip was playing with me in the pool and being cuddled up in the hotel room watching TV and eating stale popcorn we got from the gift shop. Can you believe that?" he said, shaking his head. "Aura's wonderful, though, and she taught me to take time to actually enjoy the life I've worked so hard to build."

"That is so sweet," Madeline said, with a twinge of sadness. She wished Rodney had been that type of father. Perhaps she would have turned out differently . . . better.

"Folks think we're crazy because it's nothing for Aura and me to take off in the middle of the night to drive for hours just to try a new restaurant we saw on a commercial."

"Are you serious?" Madeline giggled.

"Umm huh, we do stuff like that all the time. Aura's always down for an adventure. It drives her mother crazy because she likes to organize and plan every single thing but my baby girl will throw a few things in a bag and be ready to bounce. As a matter of fact, we just got back yesterday from one of our little excursions."

"I think that's really cool, Ezra. I wish more fathers were that way," she smiled.

"So what about you, Baby Doll. Tell me about yourself."

Madeline talked for nearly forty minutes answering all the questions he asked about her life. Then she managed to bring the conversation back around to Ezra and Aura's mother.

He and thirty-two-year old Prim Richardson met thirteen years ago at the home of a mutual friend. They hit it off immediately and spent the entire party talking and laughing with each other. They went to bed together that night and had a whirlwind romance that lasted four months. Within that time, Ezra saw the smart, confident woman he met at the party become insecure, jealous, and overly possessive. He couldn't deal with that and promptly ended the relationship. As Ezra left her apartment, Prim blurted out that she was pregnant. He went to her first doctor's appointment, not as the supportive father-to-be but as the suspicious man who didn't really believe she was expecting. His heart sank when the doctor informed them that she was indeed pregnant—seven weeks.

“Prim and her family definitely tried to pressure me into marrying her but I couldn’t do it. I think marriage is sacred and I could never promise to spend the rest of my life with someone I didn’t love,” Ezra stated. “Prim’s pregnancy was a rough time in both our lives but once Aura was born we both realized it wasn’t about us. We knew we had to figure out a way to get along for her sake. So we have joint custody and we’re equally involved in Aura’s life.”

“That’s admirable. Not everyone figures out how to make that type of situation work. My sister and I are grown women and our parents still fight about us like we’re kids. You would never know they’ve been divorced for over twenty years with how they act towards each other.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t lie. It’s not always easy. There have definitely been some bumps along the way.”

“Bumps?” Madeline asked with a raised eyebrow. The guilty expression on Ezra’s face made her curious to know what was really going on in his relationship with Prim.

“Wow, I can tell I’m not gonna be able to get away with anything with you, huh? It’s a little unnerving how you seem to see through me. I guess it’s a good thing that I can see through you too,” he smiled, popping a piece of mint gum into his mouth. Fresh breath and a clean mouth were a must for Ezra as was evident from his perfect, white teeth. “Well, the bump I was referring to took place about three weeks ago.” Ezra let out a deep breath. “It’s been close to a year since I had a serious relationship and I was lonely. Anyway, I dropped Aura off and she asked me to come to her room so she could show me something. I hung out with her until she went to sleep. When I was leaving, Prim came out of the kitchen wearing lingerie, carrying a plate with my favorite meal. I know I should’ve left and I actually headed for the door. But like I said, I was lonely,” he said, bowing his head. “I told myself that I would eat the dinner and leave but Prim had other plans. One thing led to another and we ended up on the couch . . . well, you know.

“It probably wouldn’t have been that big of a deal if we both were able to look at what happened as a one-time deal and move on, but Prim couldn’t. She took my weakness in that moment to mean more than it did. And I still feel bad about it because I know how she feels about me and I never should’ve let that happen no matter how lonely I was. We worked hard over the years to get our relationship in a cool place and that one night has messed it all up in my opinion. I hurt Prim and that’s not what I wanted. Regardless of what I might feel as far as being romantically involved with her, she truly is a wonderful mother and a good person. I have a lot of respect for Prim and I want her to be happy. But I feel like my lapse in judgment has done nothing but cause her pain.” The expression on Ezra’s face was heartbreaking. “What’s going through that pretty little head of yours?” he asked in response to the look on Madeline’s face.

She couldn't help but think about her foolish behavior involving Rory. "Sometimes we're responsible for our own heartache. When you go after someone you *know* you can't have you can't expect it to turn out well. But we women always think we can change a man's mind or make him be what we want him to be. It doesn't work, though."

"Sounds like you have some experience with that."

"Yeah, unfortunately, I do," Madeline admitted. Then to her surprise, she told Ezra all about Rory *and* Sidney. The only part she omitted was that she'd left him alone in the theater. Madeline didn't know if Ezra would be willing to overlook something as coldhearted as that.

Madeline and Ezra were definitely falling in love. For two weeks they spent as much time together as possible. If they weren't in each other's presence they were on the phone or sending instant messages on the computer. Aside from Christa, no one knew Madeline had stopped working. She said Ezra inspired her to be better and do more with her life and she was planning to go after one of her lifelong dreams.

If there was one thing Evelyn Stiles taught her daughters it was how to manage their money. Both Christa and Madeline had cash tucked away and the means to take care of themselves no matter what situation might arise. Madeline was confident she could support herself sufficiently while putting her new plan into action.

On Saturday, April 16th, Madeline drove to Danville to have dinner with Ezra at his home. Her jaw dropped when she pulled into his driveway. It was like a resort and she could only imagine how beautiful it was inside. Ezra opened the three-car garage for Madeline to park inside of it. She pulled in between his Phantom and Dodge Ram truck.

"I probably shouldn't park so close, huh? I wouldn't want our cars to get mixed up," Madeline laughed when he opened her door and held her hand as she climbed out of the jeep. She knew the only thing their vehicles had in common was the color. "This place is *amazing*, Ezra. Shoot, I feel underdressed."

"Cut that out, Baby Doll. You look incredible," he said, embracing her tightly. "I've never seen you in glasses before. You look adorable."

"I normally wear contacts because I'm blind as a bat without them. But I thought I'd give my poor eyeballs a rest and I put these on," she said, touching the frame of her, black, Prada glasses.

"You look good, Baby Doll. Umm huh, you look *real* good," Ezra groaned when Madeline walked out of the garage and gave him a good look at the way her jeans hugged her body. She blushed. "Come with me. I want to introduce you to

Apollo and Zeus,” he said, leading Madeline by the hand to the biggest backyard she’d ever seen.

“What is this, a *farm*?”

Ezra laughed and told her his land was one and a half acres which included a pasture, a barn-like structure where he kept all of his tools and lawn machinery, and an area to park his RV. There was a separate yard where the sixteen-foot by thirty-two-foot rectangle pool, barbecue pit, and covered patio area was located. It was a very inviting space that took a lot of planning and care to put together.

“From the time I was born until I graduated from high school we lived in an apartment. My brothers, sister, and I never knew what it was to have a backyard. We had to walk across town to play in the park and I always said when I had kids I would make sure they had plenty of space to roam and be free in their own yard.”

“Well, you’ve definitely done that. A person could get lost back here.”

Ezra smiled then asked Madeline if she was ready to meet his boys. When she said yes he whistled. “Apollo, Zeus, come here.”

Two, one-hundred-thirty-pound German Rottweilers appeared. After they sniffed Madeline sufficiently, they sat in front of her waiting to be greeted, she assumed. “Hey Apollo, hey Zeus,” she said, petting them both. “You are two of the biggest dogs I’ve ever seen, but you’re so cute,” she cooed.

Ezra was impressed by Madeline running around the yard with the dogs willing to get down and dirty. He thought she would put up a fuss when he suggested she wear an old pair of jeans and a shirt so they could play with the dogs before dinner. He’d had women pretend to enjoy things like that thinking he would marry them and give them access to his money. However, with Madeline, Ezra saw and felt genuineness and sincerity. The more time they spent together, the more he wanted her around. He was definitely falling in love and believed she was too.

After they cleaned up Ezra took Madeline on a tour of the rest of his home. He showed her the four bedrooms, four luxurious baths, loft, and home office. He also had a man cave in which he spent a great deal of time.

“Too bad you’re not a Packers fan,” Madeline teased, noticing all of the memorabilia. The walls were covered with framed jerseys and pictures of Green Bay Packer greats. Every place Madeline looked there was something with Packers emblazoned on it—blankets, throw rugs, lamps, bar stools, glasses, and encased helmets.

Facing the seventy-three-inch flat screen TV were four plush green leather recliners and a green leather sofa. A fully stocked bar, poker table, and pool table also filled the space. It was a cool combination of a sports bar and comfortable den.

Next on the tour was a beautiful, spacious kitchen and a grand dining room. Ezra and Madeline settled in the living room that was a very open space with a

fireplace, huge filled bookcases, and walls covered with art and photographs. Madeline gravitated towards the pictures and saw Ezra's life unfold in front of her. There were photos documenting every stage of his life growing up in Indiana with his family. Madeline laughed loudly when he identified his best friend Big Bo. She imagined him to be as large as Ezra but Bo was no bigger than Christa. The two of them definitely made an odd pairing but it was obvious Ezra loved his friend dearly.

Madeline enjoyed getting to know so much about him and took her time looking at each and every photograph. She smiled from ear to ear. It was a snapshot of Ezra, Aura, and Prim that wiped the smile from her face.

Madeline had never considered herself an envious person but a twinge of jealousy hit her when she saw the very beautiful, very sexy Prim Richardson. Although it was nothing she'd ever say aloud, Madeline got confidence from always being called out as the prettiest woman in her circle of friends. She even felt that way towards Christa. Seeing Prim made her feel like an ugly duckling.

Ezra explained the joke everyone made about Prim calling her Ms. Heinz 57 because her parents were a mixture of a lot of nationalities; Cherokee Indian, African-American, and Armenian to name a few. Whatever her heritage, Prim was shockingly beautiful to Madeline. She had the smoothest mocha-colored skin and long straight black hair that looked like silk. Though what Madeline found most intriguing about Prim were her amazing blue eyes. She compared them to a pure, beautiful blue ocean.

"Wow! She's *gorgeous*."

"*You're* gorgeous," Ezra said, as he stood behind Madeline and enveloped her in his arms, "and sexy and intelligent and wonderful."

"Does she still tempt you?" Madeline asked, hating how insecure she felt.

Ezra turned her around to face him. "*No*, Baby Doll. The only reason I allowed that slip up to happen was because I was lonely. I didn't have an amazingly beautiful woman who touches my heart and makes me smile every day. I do now," he smiled then planted a soft, sweet kiss on her lips.

Madeline always got butterflies when Ezra kissed her. She closed her eyes and felt as if she would float away.

Ezra placed his forehead against Madeline's and wrapped his arms around her waist. "I'm a loyal guy, Baby Doll. I don't cheat. I never have and I don't plan on starting now. When I'm with you, I'm with you . . . both feet in, wholeheartedly. Got it?"

"Yeah, I just worry that it might be tempting since you and I haven't . . ."

He gently stroked her cheek. "What we have is about a *lot* more than sex, Baby Doll. It's about being lucky enough to find that one person you can't imagine spending the rest of your life without," he smiled. "Now don't misconstrue what

I'm saying. I can't *wait* to be that close to you. I dream about it every day. But I know it'll happen at just the right moment and it will be beautiful and perfect, like you are."

Ezra kissed her in such a way that Madeline thought it might just be the right time. However, instead of leading her to his bedroom, he led her to the kitchen table where they laughed and talked over the tasty roasted chicken dinner he prepared.

"So you don't drink?" Madeline asked, after Ezra poured a glass of red wine for her and water for himself. The look on his face after he shook his head let her know there was a story there. "Can I ask why that is?"

"You can ask me anything, Baby Doll. I'll always be upfront with you. I just uhm . . . there's something I need to tell you, but I'm scared. I don't wanna lose you."

Madeline thought her heart was going to beat out of her chest. She hoped to God Ezra wasn't about to confess to being a raging alcoholic or married or that he'd been lying to her since they met. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves and then a sip of her wine.

"Well, remember when you asked how we chose Aura's name and I told you it was after someone I used to know?"

"Yeah?" she frowned, wondering what in the world that had to do with anything.

Ezra let out a deep breath before continuing. "Okay, well, that someone is Auran Brock. And Auran Brock is, uhm . . . is me."

"*What?*" Madeline shrieked, nearly dropping her glass of wine.

"My real name is Auran Brock," Ezra said then told her the whole story.

An honor roll student and exceptional football player, Auran Brock received a full scholarship to Indiana University in Bloomington. After high school graduation he and a few of his friends decided to hit several parties and celebrate the start of their adult lives. Auran, who had never been much of an alcohol drinker, had several drinks that night. He didn't think he was drunk but it was the only excuse he had for the choices he made that night.

"We were at our third party when the host announced that the liquor was running low. My best friend Warren Moody and I decided to make a beer run but we didn't realize until we were in line at the store that neither of us had any money. We laughed about it and I thought we were gonna put the beer back and go to a different party but the next thing I knew he had a gun pointed at the cashier!

"I knew I should've run but Warren was my boy and I didn't wanna be a punk so I stayed. And somewhere in my drunken mind I thought it would give me some kind of street credit," he said, doing air quotes, "if I did something as hardcore as that. But everything went wrong when Warren decided to take the

money as well as the beer. The next thing I knew, two gunshots were fired and the cashier went down. Thankfully he wasn't shot but just scared and trying to get out of the line of fire. That was too much for me so I dropped the two cases of beer I was holding and ran like hell. I heard police sirens blaring and I had no idea if Warren was still in the store or not. I just wanted to get home.

"I told my parents what happened and we made the spur of the moment decision for me to leave. I didn't know if there were cameras in the store or if someone had seen me or if Warren had gotten caught and given me up. One thing was for sure . . . my life was over. Everything I had worked for was gone, but to keep me out of jail my dad called his brother to come get me. Everybody scraped up whatever little money they had and then I hugged and kissed my family goodbye and left. I haven't been home since."

Madeline was floored. She never would have guessed that in a million years. "So you never saw your family again? No, wait, that can't be right because of all the pictures," she pointed towards the living room, remembering all of the current photos of Ezra with his family.

He explained that he didn't see or speak to any of his immediate family for almost two years after he left. They were afraid of the police putting taps on their phones or intercepting their mail to find out where Auran went. Though, aside from the university, neighbors, and friends, no one asked about Auran.

"After much hassle I finally made it to L.A. where my mother's brother lived. He had always been the criminal of the family so he was able to provide me with a new identity. And at the age of eighteen I became Ezra Prescott. I went to school, worked hard, and did everything in my power to get my life back on track.

"I was never a bad kid and I always contributed my stupidity that night to drinking. So that's why I haven't touched a drink since. And I know that might seem excessive since it happened nearly twenty years ago. But I never want to put myself in a situation where I'm altered and unable to think clearly."

"So what else?"

"What do you mean?" he frowned.

"Well, when you started this story you said you were scared of losing me so I'm wondering what else happened that would make you afraid of that."

"No, that's it. I think it's enough," Ezra chuckled. "I wanted you to know the truth before we go any further. I don't ever want to have secrets from you, Baby Doll. Aside from my parents, siblings, and the uncles who helped me, nobody knows about Auran Brock. I'm waiting until Aura's a little older before I tell her about it."

"So you never told Prim?"

"Oh hell no, I don't trust her like that. I wouldn't have put it past her to call the Indiana Police on me after we broke up. She's vindictive like . . . I'm sorry. I

shouldn't talk about her like that. No matter what she still is the mother of my child and I don't want to disrespect her. I'm sorry, that was wrong."

"You can say whatever you think and feel, Ezra. You're safe with me," Madeline said then got up from her seat to sit in his lap. "You're an amazing man and I'm so glad you nearly ran me down that night at the play. What were you doing hanging around the ladies' room anyway?" she teased before kissing him. "Hey, I wanted to ask you something. My girls are getting antsy about meeting the mystery man in my life. Are you up for that?"

"Yes, I would love to," Ezra said before resuming their kiss.

Over dessert the two of them talked more about Ezra's family. After he became successful with his business he convinced his parents to move to California. They wouldn't at first because they didn't want Ezra spending money on them. Once he sent them a picture of the new house he'd bought for them in Pleasanton, Michael and Mary were on the next flight. His brothers and sister soon followed and they all lived in various parts of California.

"So did you, oh I'm sorry, that's none of my business."

"You can ask me whatever you want, Baby Doll. I don't have anything to hide."

"Well, you talked about getting homes for your parents and siblings. I just wondered if you bought Prim's house too. But like I said, that's none of my business."

"No, I didn't buy her house. Prim's balling as the lead advertising executive of her company so she doesn't need my money . . . something she makes very clear. I did offer to buy it, though, because Aura lives there and I wanted to make sure she was someplace comfortable with a big yard. But Prim's not the kind of woman who tries to break me in child support payments. We both provide for Aura and it was just as important to her to have a wonderful home for our daughter as it was to me. I know Prim will always do what's best for Aura."

"And why did you two break up again because she sounds perfect for you."

Ezra let out a deep breath. Madeline was beginning to frustrate him. "We broke up because she isn't the one for me. I don't respond well to jealous, insecure women. I don't have the patience for that," he said, hoping Madeline understood what he was saying.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You won't have to worry about it again. I promise."

Friday, April 22nd, Christa, Raye Ann, and Deidra were at Tamia's townhouse helping her get everything ready for the party she planned. Though, what they were most excited about was finally meeting Ezra. Madeline was like a lovesick puppy since she met him and they were curious to see the man who managed to crack open her heart.

Avis called Raye Ann to say she'd be a little late. She was having more drama with her ex-husband DeMarco Hampton and their children Mavis and Sloane were upset because of it. Raye Ann often wondered why Avis put up with such nonsense from her ex. He was never going to change. DeMarco hadn't paid a dime in child support in over four years and Avis had to fight just to get him to spend a weekend with the kids. She'd been working extra shifts at the hospital where she worked as a registered nurse just to make ends meet. Her ex-husband didn't seem to care how expensive it was to raise a fifteen-year-old and a thirteen-year-old. According to Avis, DeMarco didn't seem to care about anything but himself.

"Well, Madeline isn't the only one in love," Raye Ann smiled, as she and the three women sat at the kitchen table having a drink.

"Ooh, so things are going well with you and, what's his name, Mojo?" Christa asked.

"Yeah, he's a good man. I think I might've found the one. Ooh, I've got some pictures. We spent this past weekend in San Francisco," she said before grabbing her purse and pulling out photos.

"He's *cute*," Tamia said, as she flipped through the pictures. "And he's tall too, huh?" she stated while passing the photographs to Deidra.

"Umm huh, girl, he is fine. And he's got some big ass feet too so that's definitely a good sign."

"Shut up, Deidra," Christa laughed, as she took the pictures out of her hand. Her laughter came to an abrupt halt when she got a look at Mojo. "I know him! His name is Terrence Gaines, right? Yeah, that's him. He's got a three-year-old little boy they call Chums and a WIFE named Tionda!"

It was obvious from the look on Raye Ann's face that that news wasn't a surprise. And she didn't seem sorry about it either. Tamia and Deidra were so focused on Raye Ann that it never occurred to them to ask how Christa knew so many intimate details about Terrence.

"You know, Raye Ann, you and I have had our beef from time to time but I thought you were better than this," Deidra stated with disdain. "I didn't know you had the morals of an alley cat. I thought fuckin' somebody else's husband was a line you wouldn't cross."

"Shut up, Deidra! You don't know shit about it so don't sit there judging me when you ain't no better! Yes, he's legally married but you don't know the situation. Why should someone have to wait until the divorce is final before they can move on with their life? Why should he have to stay with a nasty, bitter woman who won't even keep the house clean or . . .?"

"Don't you *dare* open your mouth about that woman! You sitting up here slandering her off some bullshit *he's* been telling you when the bottom line is she's

still his wife! You have no business and no right taking weekend trips and putting together photo albums with someone else's man!"

"Well, you know what? I don't give a damn what you think. So instead of sticking your nose all up in *my* business won't you deal with that mess of a marriage *you* got! Because truth be told, while you sitting here talking shit about me, Peter's probably laying between some other woman's legs talking shit about you! And who could blame him?" Raye Ann spat.

Christa and Tamia tried to calm things between the women just as Avis knocked on the door.

"But you know what, Raye Ann? I didn't go digging around in your life. *You* came in here flaunting your married boyfriend in everybody's face. So if you don't wanna hear people's opinion about the skank ass stuff you do with other women's husbands then keep that shit to yourself!"

"Whatever, Deidra," Raye Ann rolled her eyes. "Why are you taking this so personally? It's not like I'm doing something to *you*."

"I'll tell you why. It's because I know what it feels like to be at the house cooking and cleaning and washing a motherfucka's clothes while he's laying up with some other bitch telling her how horrible of a person you are and how he's planning to divorce you. Then he brings his sorry ass home acting like everything is cool and you don't have the first fuckin' clue what's going on. All the while some chick is out parading *your* man in front of her friends talking about you like a dog and blaming *you* for why he's not happy instead of realizing that the reason he's able to cheat is because there's always a stank ass bitch who's willing to cheat with him. And it's been my experience that a woman who'll do that to someone else will do it to me."

Avis walked inside and was instantly annoyed to find Raye Ann and Deidra arguing again. "Ugh, why don't both of y'all shut up!" she shouted when they tried telling her what they were fighting about. "I just finished having a knock-down, drag-out fight with DeMarco and I don't wanna hear this shit. I just wanna drink and have a good time and forget about my problems for a couple of hours, you feel me? So if y'all can't do that then leave," Avis snapped before making her way to the kitchen counter to fix herself a strong drink.

"Raye, don't leave," Tamia said, after the woman snatched her photo album and purse and headed for the door.

"Excuse me," Raye Ann said when she opened the door and found a group of people about to enter the townhouse.

Tamia greeted her guests, made introductions, and invited them to eat and drink. Then she went outside and knocked on the passenger door window of Raye Ann's 2009 Infiniti. When Tamia got inside the car Raye Ann leaned over to cry on her shoulder.

“I’m not a bad person, Tamia. I just wanna be happy,” she sobbed.

Inside, Deidra was crying to Christa in the upstairs bathroom. Even though it had been almost a year since Peter’s affair and it was nothing quite like the scenario she described to the women, Deidra hadn’t moved on from it. She hated the bitter, paranoid woman she allowed his affair to turn her into, but she wasn’t sure she could be anything else. Deidra’s fear was that she would truly forgive Peter and love him once more only for him to betray her again. Yet, she was aware that the angry, hateful way she treated him had all but guaranteed it. Deidra basically had two choices; she could forgive Peter and do what it took to rebuild their marriage or she could leave him and start a life on her own. Sadly, she hadn’t been able to decide which one was best.

“I understand you *so* much better now,” Christa said, as she embraced Deidra and let her cry.

Madeline and Ezra were laughing and singing along to the radio as he drove to the party, both excited for him to meet her girls. Neither of them had a clue the drama taking place at Tamia’s or that they were about to be thrust right in the middle of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tamia convinced Raye Ann to come back inside to enjoy the party. Christa talked Deidra into staying as well and both women agreed to stay away from each other. It was easy enough to do with nearly thirty people crowding Tamia's townhouse.

Avis, Deidra, and Christa were sitting at the kitchen table when Madeline and Ezra entered the party holding hands. The three women stared at Ezra with their mouths opened.

"Only *YOU* can prevent wildfires," Deidra laughed. Christa threw her head back and let out a roar of a laugh. Avis bent forward and nearly choked on her drink from laughing so hard. "Shoot, all his big ass needs is a ranger's hat and a shovel. You can't *tell* me that ain't Smokey the Bear!"

Madeline caught sight of her sister and friends laughing like idiots and she felt reluctant to even introduce them to Ezra. She knew them well enough to know they were laughing at him and it made her angry. The fact that Deidra was there at all had Madeline incensed. Thankfully, Tamia was gracious and welcoming and offered to get Ezra something to drink.

"You okay, Baby Doll?" he whispered, noticing the change in her attitude.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said, as Christa, Avis, and Deidra walked towards them. Madeline took a few deep breaths and hoped the women wouldn't embarrass her. "Ezra, this is my sister Christa and my friend Avis. And this is Deidra," she said, glaring at the woman.

"It's so nice to meet you, Ezra. We wondered who's been keeping our Madeline away from us," Deidra commented, as she shook his hand. "I've heard wonderful things about you, not from Madeline of course, since she never calls anymore. If Avis hadn't told me about the party tonight I wouldn't have had the honor of meeting you."

"It's nice meeting you too," Ezra said, even though he felt the tension between Deidra and Madeline.

"Come here, big teddy bear," Christa said, as she reached up to embrace him. He had to stoop in order to hug her. "I'm *so* glad to finally meet you. I've never seen my sister as happy as she's been since meeting you."

"Well, thank you, I'm glad to hear that. And the feeling is definitely mutual. Meeting Baby . . . Madeline has been one of the best things to happen to me," Ezra grinned, pulling her closer to him.

Avis shook Ezra's hand and so did Raye Ann when she joined their huddle. Then, after a bit more idle chitchat, the women pulled Madeline away.

“Make yourself at home, Ezra. We gotta go talk about you now,” Tamia smiled, before ushering the ladies upstairs to her bedroom.

He winked at Madeline letting her know he didn’t mind.

“So *that’s* who you left Sidney’s fine ass to be with?” Avis frowned, as she plopped down on Tamia’s queen-sized bed.

“Avis!” Christa snapped.

“What? You know y’all were thinking the same thing. They look like beauty and the beast!”

“Looks aren’t everything,” Raye Ann chimed in despite having the same thoughts as Avis. “Ezra obviously loves Madeline and I’m guessing she feels something similar, right, Mad? That’s what matters.”

“So you love him?” Deidra asked, skeptically. “You’ve known him for what, two, three weeks and now y’all in love?”

A silence fell over the room when Madeline looked at Deidra. Her eyes narrowed, her nostrils flared, and the slight up-turn of her lip looked evil. *Say one more thing and I’m a beat the shit out of you*, she thought, fully prepared to act on her silent threat. Madeline glared at Deidra for a few more moments and decided it was best to deal with her on a different occasion, preferably without witnesses. Her disrespectful sister and friends, however, she planned to address right then and there. Madeline knew Ezra wasn’t the most handsome man in the world but she resented them making it seem like he was the ugliest.

“Look, the bottom line is I’m with Ezra and I care about him. I’m just sorry I brought him here. I resent y’all laughing and making disrespectful comments about him as if the fucked up men you date are any better! But that’s my bad, I never should’ve brought him around y’all,” Madeline huffed, as she made her way to the bedroom door. “I sure as hell won’t make the same mistake twice.”

“My man ain’t fucked up, you feel me?”

“Shut up, Avis!” Tamia said, waving her hand at the woman. “Mad, wait.”

“Madeline, don’t go,” Christa said, blocking her sister’s exit. “You’re right and I’m sorry. Ezra seems like a wonderful man and I’m *so* happy for you.”

“Me too, girl,” Avis said, as she stood up to hug Madeline.

Raye Ann and Tamia followed suit but Deidra remained seated on the bed.

“I bet you can’t be in the missionary position with his big ass. He’ll suffocate you,” Raye Ann joked, hoping to break the tension in the room.

“I’m sure I’ll be just fine,” Madeline chuckled.

“So wait a minute, y’all haven’t slept together yet?” Avis asked.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but no.”

“So let me get this straight. You’re willing to sleep with another woman’s husband and you’ll bang a dude you don’t even love, but the man you head over

heels for . . . *him* you make wait,” Avis stated, shaking her head in confusion. “I don’t get you, Madeline. That’s backwards as hell, you feel me?”

“Well, it’s not for you to get. Ezra understands me and that’s all I care about,” Madeline sneered. “So if you’re done throwing my mistakes up in my face, I’m gonna go get my man and get the hell up outta here.”

“Come on, Mad, you know I didn’t mean . . .”

Madeline rolled her eyes then walked downstairs to get Ezra. She would never make the mistake of bringing him around them again.

“Damn it, Avis,” Tamia barked.

The other women expressed similar frustration before heading downstairs hoping to convince Madeline and Ezra to stay. There was no use. She grabbed her man and promptly left the premises. Though, Madeline did feel like a bit of a hypocrite. She offered her opinion about their men on plenty of occasions with no regard for their feelings. So what right did she have to be angry over them doing the same? She still was, though.

The following Sunday was Easter and Madeline hoped being introduced to Ezra’s family and friends would go better than it had introducing him to hers. He asked her to invite them all for Easter dinner but Madeline chose to only ask Christa and their mother Evelyn—something she would come to regret.

Madeline arrived at Ezra’s house at ten o’clock in the morning to help him get everything ready for their three o’clock meal. His parents, Michael and Mary Brock, had taken his brothers, sister, and daughter to church. Once Ezra told Madeline the story about his past, she later learned how he’d chosen his new name. His brothers’ names were Ezekiel, Ramone, and Preston and his sister’s nickname was Scotta. So he took the first part of each of their names and came up with Ezra Prescott for his new identity. It was his way of feeling like he still belonged to them even though he no longer carried the Brock name.

“So, Baby Doll, can I ask you something and you won’t get upset?”

“Sure, what’s up?” she asked, nervously.

“If it was just gonna be you and me at this dinner would you be wearing this?” Ezra asked, pointing at her sunshine-yellow skirt suit.

“Well, no, but I thought it was more appropriate.”

“To *who*?” he laughed. “I hope you don’t think you need to look this way because my mother will be here. Trust me when I tell you Mary Brock is *not* conservative . . . not even a little bit. But even if she was, I would never ask you to be anything other than yourself. I love it when you wear clothes that hug that little hourglass thang you got. It gets my imagination and some other stuff going,” Ezra smiled. “But this thing here is doing nothing for me. So I say we correct it.”

“Okay, well let me run home and . . .”

“Umm uh, not necessary,” Ezra said, grabbing his cell phone. “I got you, Baby Doll,” he smiled then kissed her lips. “Hey, Pam, it’s Ez. Hey, listen, I know this is last minute and I hate to put you out on Easter but I need you to bring me your hottest gear for my girl. Umm huh . . . yeah, a size six . . . oh yeah, that would be great . . . a size nine shoe.”

She tried protesting but Ezra held up his hand for her to stop and let him handle it. Madeline couldn’t pretend. She was impressed and never felt more loved and cherished.

“Alright, Pam, I’ll see you in a few hours. Thank you so much, I really appreciate this. I owe you one . . . oh, no need to thank me . . . okay, see you.” Ezra disconnected the call and planted another kiss on Madeline’s lips. “See, I told you I got you. I’ll always make sure you have what you need.”

Pam was one of the clothing designers who impressed Ezra tremendously with her talent and go-get-em attitude. For two years he’d been backing her clothing line and seeing great success in the way of profits. If anyone could design something magnificent that would compliment his beautiful woman, it was Pam.

“Now *that’s* what I’m talking about!” Ezra exclaimed when Madeline came sashaying through the living room like a runway model. “That’s what’s up.”

She felt positively radiant in the black poly chiffon, floor-length dress with a turquoise contrast lining. It was a strapless sweetheart with extensive beading on the bust line and side of the bodice. The dress also had a high left slit which gave glimpses of Madeline’s amazingly shaped legs when she walked. Pam brought a pair of the baddest black heels Madeline had ever seen and she felt like a queen walking in them. The look on Ezra’s face when he saw her, however, was what she loved most. He seemed so pleased, so excited, so in love.

“Come here, Baby Doll.” Ezra kissed Madeline with such passion and intensity that he came close to ripping off the beautiful dress so he could have her. “Woo, lord, I guess I should’ve been in church today! *Damn*,” he groaned, trying to calm himself. “Maybe you should put that matronly suit back on. I don’t know if I’ll be able to control myself looking at you in this. Umm,” Ezra moaned, kissing her again. The sound of his family entering the front door made the decision for him. He had no choice but to control himself. “*Damn it.*”

“Daddy!” Aura beamed, as she ran and jumped into her father’s arms. Then she whispered to him, “Promise not to make me go back to Grandma’s church. I didn’t think it was *ever* gonna end.”

Madeline smiled at the interaction between father and daughter. It was clear how much they loved each other but more, how much Aura trusted Ezra. She trusted him to catch her when she jumped and she trusted him to keep her secrets.

Tears sprang to Madeline's eyes as she was so happy Aura had that and so sad that she didn't.

"Well, Barbie Doll, I have someone really special I want you to meet," he said, holding Aura's hand and then grabbing Madeline's. "This beautiful woman right here is my girlfriend, Madeline. And this gorgeous, super smart, amazingly talented young lady . . ."

"Daddy, stop it," Aura blushed, playfully nudging Ezra.

He planted a tender kiss on her forehead. "This is my sweet baby girl, Aura."

The two of them felt an immediate connection to one another and Madeline embraced Aura as if she'd known her all of her life. "It's so wonderful to meet you," Madeline smiled, thinking Aura was even more stunning in person. "Your dad talks about you so much that I feel like I know you."

"Yeah, me too," the twelve-year-old smiled. "Every time he mentions your name he has that goofy grin on his face. Ugh, yeah, that one," she teased. "No, but for real, I think my dad has a crush on you."

Before Madeline had the chance to respond, Ezra's sixty-one-year old mother entered the room looking stylish and sexy. Ezra winked at Madeline and smiled. She understood what he meant by saying Mary Brock was anything but conservative. The black wraparound dress she wore exposed plenty of cleavage and hugged her round hips. She sparkled from head to toe with diamonds and her makeup was flawless. Mary Brock was hot and no one could tell her differently. Madeline was quite impressed with the pretty woman's style and vivaciousness.

"Now hold on just a *minute*! I didn't know we was holding auditions for America's Next Top Model up in here. Shoot, let me go change 'cause I ain't about to be outdone," Mary teased then embraced Madeline. "You looking fierce, baby girl. Umm *uh*, I love this," she said, taking another look at Madeline's dress and shoes. "I hope Prim eats her little heart out!"

"*Mama*," Ezra snapped, nodding his head towards Aura.

"Oh boy, please, Aura know I can't stand her mama. Granny keeps it real, ain't that right, baby?" Mary asked, as she made her way to the kitchen. "What's in here to eat? I'm starving."

"Well, that's my mama," Ezra said, shaking his head.

Madeline laughed then she, Ezra, and Aura walked out back to talk with the rest of the family. It still amazed her how much Ezra looked like his father. They were the same height and build, had the same warm eyes, and both wore a full beard. Michael Brock's was just a little gray. Their sense of humor and easy going attitudes were also the same.

It didn't take long for Madeline to realize that there was definitely an opposites-attract situation when it came to Michael and Mary Brock. Where she was loud and flamboyant he was quiet and laid back. The same was true of Ezra's

brothers and sisters-in-law as well as his sister and her boyfriend. Madeline began to wonder into which category she and Ezra fit. She thought they were similar in temperament but had that theory blown out of the water when her sister arrived and she lost her cool.

Because Christa was always late, Evelyn decided to drive her own car to Ezra's house. The very sensual, fifty-seven year old arrived in a short, off-white dress that hugged every curve on her five-foot, five-inch, one-hundred-thirty pound frame. Evelyn's recently dyed honey-blonde hair hung to her shoulders and complimented her gold-toned makeup. She and Mary became instant best friends and spent their time laughing and gossiping about any and every thing.

Madeline spent most of her time talking with and getting to know Aura. She truly was a sweet and loving child and *way* more confident than Madeline was at that age. Madeline attributed that to the role Ezra had always played in Aura's life. A father's love and support made all the difference.

"Hey, Baby Doll, I think your sister's here," Ezra called.

Madeline made her way to the front door and her head felt like it was going to explode when she saw Christa helping Rodney out of the jeep. Ramone saw that they were having trouble and he ran over to offer his assistance. Madeline stomped closely behind him growing more enraged with each step.

"Ooh, Mad, that dress is the bomb! Where did . . . what's wrong with you?" Christa asked, as Madeline snatched her by the arm and led her out of earshot of everyone else. "Ouch!"

"I'll never forgive you for this, Christa Belle! Why in the *fuck* would you bring him here?" she whispered, angrily.

"He's our father and it's Easter, Madeline. What was I supposed to do, just let him sit in the house by himself?"

"Well, if you were so concerned about him being alone then you should've stayed with him, not bring his ass here! I can't believe you," she snorted. "But I know why you did this. You're not fooling me."

"What are you talking about?" Christa frowned.

"You are so jealous and you're trying to mess up everything for me. You *know* Mama and Rodney can't be in the same room without some bullshit jumping off so why else would you bring him except to ruin this dinner," Madeline snapped, seconds away from tears. "I protected you from this type of shit when it came to Ellis but look what you do to me. You . . ."

"Is everything okay?" Ezra asked. He'd spotted Madeline and Christa through the window and knew something was wrong.

"No, it's not. Christa decided to bring Rodney here even though only she and Mama were invited to come. Now she needs to take him home."

"Stop being ridiculous, Madeline. I'm not driving all the way . . ."

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. There’s plenty of room and more than enough food. So come on in and let’s enjoy our time together. Don’t worry, Baby Doll,” Ezra said when Christa walked off ahead of them. “Everything will be fine. Come on,” he smiled then led her inside.

Everything definitely was not fine. The moment Evelyn spotted Rodney all hell broke loose. “What is that crippled mothafucka doing up in here?” came her immediate response to his presence. They were yelling and insulting each other like neither of them had a bit of sense. Though, before Madeline could nip that problem in the bud, another one walked through the front door. Her name was Prim Richardson.

Ezra told Madeline that Aura’s mother always joined them for holiday dinners but if she had a problem with it he would speak to Prim about making other arrangements. Not wanting to seem like the petty, insecure new girlfriend, Madeline told him there was no problem and that they would make it work. However, Prim standing there looking more beautiful in her simple, form-fitting skirt and blouse than Madeline ever could even in the spectacular gown she was wearing, made her reconsider.

“Who the hell is she?” Prim mumbled to herself.

“If I had to guess I’d say the future Mrs. Prescott,” Mary said, startling the woman. “I sure hope so. I’ve been waiting for my son to find a good woman.”

Prim glared at Mary wanting nothing more than to strangle her.

“I dare you,” Mary challenged, as if she could hear Prim’s thoughts. “All I need is a excuse to do what I been wanting to do since you slithered your way into my son’s life. I don’t even know why you here so you better watch yourself. Go sit down somewhere and act like you got some sense.”

Prim rolled her eyes after Mary turned her back. It was something she did a lot that afternoon watching Ezra fawn over Madeline like she was some sort of goddess. And it only got worse when his best friend Big Bo and his two sons arrived. Ezra couldn’t stop smiling as he bragged about Madeline like she was the only woman in the world. *Whatever*, Prim thought bitterly.

Everyone sat at the dining room table holding hands as Ezra began to bless the food. Rodney interrupted him to ask if he could give the blessing.

“It would be an honor to say grace at your lovely home, son. I don’t know how many more Easter Sunday’s the good lord gone bless me with and I . . .”

“Shut the fuck up, Rodney! Don’t nobody wanna hear you . . .”

“*Mama*,” Madeline mumbled, pinching her mother’s thigh under the table. “Don’t be disrespectful to Ezra and his family. His little girl is sitting right here,” she whispered, mortified by her mother’s behavior.

Evelyn quieted down and Mary squeezed her hand. Even though they’d only known each other for a few hours, Evelyn felt certain Mary was the only one who

truly understood what she was feeling. Every time Evelyn looked at the very dashing, very sexy fifty-nine-year old Rodney, she felt foolish for carrying on with him for so many years. She hated herself for accepting his lies, cheating, and verbal abuse. Though, what Evelyn hated most was that his smooth, dark chocolate skin and chiseled masculine features still turned her on despite what she went through with him. Rodney Stiles still had the ability to smile Evelyn out of her panties and her cash.

Ezra politely declined Rodney's request and said grace from the head of the table. All of the food was set in the middle of the long, dining room table for everyone to share family style. It almost looked like an assembly line the way bowls and platters were passed from one set of hands to the next.

"This is a beautiful home you have here, Ezra. What do you do for a living?" Rodney asked while Christa cut the turkey on his plate.

"Well thank you, Mr. Stiles. I appreciate that."

"Call me Rodney, son. There's no need in being so formal with your future father-in-law," he smiled. "I just hope when that time comes you'll show me the respect of asking for my daughter's hand."

"I'll definitely show you the respect you deserve, sir," Ezra stated.

Madeline drank from her glass of water to keep from saying what was really on her mind. Evelyn drank from her snifter of brandy for the same reason. Christa kept her head bowed because she could feel her sister's eyes burning through her. Prim couldn't wipe the grin off her face. She knew how much Ezra hated drama and figured he'd send Madeline packing by the end of the dinner.

A loud buzz filled the dining room as separate conversations took place at once. Michael Brock and his oldest son Ezekiel talked with Rodney about fishing while Mary and Evelyn laughed and talked about their favorite reality TV shows. Big Bo spent most of his time getting to know Christa. He found it endearing the way she assumed a motherly role towards his ten-year-old and seven-year-old sons. He also found her very attractive. His boys seemed to like her too which was more than Big Bo could say for the women he dated.

Prim was amused earlier but she didn't find anything funny about Aura being so cozy with Madeline. They were behaving like two giddy teenagers, giggling about everything and admiring each other's fingernail polish and earrings.

"Evelyn, can you pass me one of those dinner rolls?" Rodney asked. She glared at him before resuming her conversation with Mary. "Evelyn," he called even though Ezra's sister-in-law held up the basket of rolls for him to grab. "Is it that difficult for you to pass a dinner roll, Evelyn?"

She snatched one out of the basket and hurled it at Rodney. It missed so Mary grabbed one and threw it at him. Her aim was accurate and strong enough to knock Rodney's glasses off his face.

“Won’t you get one of them nasty bitches you like fuckin’ around with to pass you a goddamn dinner roll! You stupid motha . . .”

“*Mama!*” Madeline snapped. *Oh my god*, she thought and snatched her mother up from her seat. She looked at Christa and silently communicated that it was time for them to get the hell out of there.

“Now I *know* you got more sense than that,” Michael whispered to Mary. He wasn’t surprised by what she did but that didn’t stop him from being embarrassed by it.

Mary sucked her teeth and held her head high as if it was perfectly normal to slam someone in the face with a dinner roll. Michael could be embarrassed all he wanted. Mary knew that given the same situation she would’ve hit Rodney again.

Evelyn apologized to everyone but that wasn’t enough to calm her daughter. Madeline couldn’t escort her family out the door fast enough. They’d humiliated her beyond belief and she would definitely deal with Evelyn and Christa later—*definitely*.

“Oh, do you think I can get a plate packed up for me?” Rodney had the nerve to ask. “I guess not,” he snorted in response to the murderous look Madeline gave him.

As soon as the world’s worst dinner party ended, Madeline went to Ezra’s bedroom to change into a pair of Capri pants and a cute blouse she’d gotten from Pam’s collection. She sincerely hoped that ridiculous display from her family hadn’t made Ezra rethink their relationship. Tears threatened to spill from Madeline’s eyes when he knocked on the door.

“I’m so, *so* sorry, Ezra,” she cried. I never should’ve had my family . . .”

“Please don’t cry, Baby Doll. *I’m* the one who needs to apologize. I fully understand why you feel the way you do towards your father. I watched him throughout the day and I see how manipulative and underhanded he is. He definitely uses his illness to control your sister and I feel she got put into a really bad position,” he said. “The bottom line is I never should’ve allowed him to stay once you let me know you didn’t want him here. I’m sorry and I’ll never be that unsupportive again. Please forgive me.”

She smiled and hugged him tightly. Being so close to Ezra, being held by him was too much for Madeline and she wanted to get in to the huge, wooden four-poster canopy bed with him and have her way. With Aura and the rest of his family waiting to have dessert, she knew her desire to be with Ezra would have to wait. It didn’t mean Madeline couldn’t have fun with him, though.

He was in the kitchen talking with his mother when she walked in and grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl. With Mary’s back to her, Madeline ate the banana very slow and sensually. Ezra almost drooled.

“Hey, boy, I’m talking to you. Do you think you can go five minutes without your eyes on that woman?” Mary laughed then continued on with her story even though she was certain Madeline was doing something naughty behind her back.

Ezra didn’t have a clue what his mother said. He was completely engrossed in Madeline’s banana performance. Then he decided to show her that he could play too. “Hey, Mama,” he called as Mary made her way out of the kitchen, “didn’t you bring some fresh peaches from your tree?”

“You know I did, boy. They’re over there on the counter,” she pointed.

“Umm huh, I’m a get you,” Ezra moaned, taking a peach from the bag.

He rubbed it tenderly before placing it up to his nose. He inhaled deeply and moaned. Then, with his eyes locked on Madeline’s as he stood in front of her, Ezra devoured that peach. Madeline had never been more aroused. The slurping sounds he made nearly pushed her over the edge. And when Ezra let the juices run down his chin she felt her vaginal walls contract. With a loud sucking sound he removed the pit from his mouth and licked juice from his lips.

“I *love* peaches,” Ezra smiled then winked at her before going to the sink to clean his face.

Never once had a man been able to make Madeline climax without laying a finger on her. The fact that Ezra had, only made her want him more. “If you can set it off like that and you didn’t even touch me, I don’t know if I’ll be able to take it when you do. But I can’t wait to find out,” she said and kissed him.

Things got a bit intense between them before Ezra realized they had an audience. Prim caught the entire peach-eating demonstration and her body ached for him. Her heart broke remembering that it used to be *her* peach that he wanted.

Madeline and Ezra cleaned the kitchen before joining the rest of the family in the man cave. Aura beat her uncles mercilessly on the Wii bowling game. Then Madeline took over as the reigning champ of the boxing game. They spent a few hours together before everyone packed up to leave. After a bunch of hugs and kisses from everyone, Ezra and Madeline were finally alone. She grabbed his hand and cut off lights as she led him to the master bedroom.

“I’ll be right back,” Madeline said, leaving him on the bed while she went to the bathroom to freshen up. “Goddamn it!” she screamed.

“Baby Doll, you all right?”

“No!” she yelled. “Mother Nature is a cruel *bitch*! Fuck!”

“*Fuck*,” Ezra groaned under his breath, as he punched the air. “It’s okay, Baby Doll,” he reassured her, despite how incredibly disappointed and horny he was. All he wanted to do was be with her, please her, love her. “It’s okay.”

“Can you bring my purse, please? It’s in your closet under my matronly suit,” Madeline tried to laugh but she really wanted to scream. “Thanks,” she said then closed the door. Thankfully she remembered to put tampons in her purse even

though she wasn't expecting her period for another week. "Alright, I'ma about to hook you up," Madeline declared once she'd gotten herself straight. "There's no need in *both* of us being horny."

"That's not gonna work." Ezra enveloped her in his arms and kissed her cheek and neck. "I appreciate you being willing to hook a brotha up but I wanna be able to please you too, completely. I would never take and not give, Baby Doll. When we get it on and popping I don't want there to be *anything* getting in the way of all the plans I have for you." He smiled then kissed her gently. "I love you Madeline Yvette Stiles, Madeline Yvette Stiles."

She burst out laughing realizing he was teasing her from the night they'd met when she was so nervous she repeated herself. Ezra laughed too but he longed to hear those three little words and could tell Madeline struggled to say them.

"Hey, hey, I didn't say I love you to pressure you," he said, taking a seat on the bed. "If it's not what you feel then you don't have . . ."

"But I *do*, Ezra, I do," Madeline stated, as she sat beside him.

"Really?"

"Yes, I do. It's just that I'm not used to saying it. I can't even tell you the last time I said I love you to my mom or Christa. I *feel* it and I'll go out of my way to show it, but saying it is hard. We didn't grow up in a lovey-dovey household, as you witnessed during dinner, and I love you was rarely ever said. And to be honest I . . . well, you probably don't wanna hear that."

"I wanna hear everything. You can always talk to me, Baby Doll. I'm your buddy too, right?"

"Yeah," she smiled. "Well, what I was gonna say is that I've always been more comfortable using my sexuality to express myself. I had that taken away from me tonight and I'm frustrated in how to show you what I feel."

"All I need right now is to hear you say it. *Tell* me what you feel."

Madeline swallowed deeply. "I'm in love with you, Ezra. I've never felt like this before and I don't want it to end."

"And there's no reason it should," Ezra said, taking Madeline into his arms. They talked for hours cuddled in his bed until they both fell asleep.

Madeline's slumber was fitful, though, as her dreams haunted her. There *was* a reason their relationship could and most likely would end.

CHAPTER SIX

The next morning, after having breakfast together, Ezra left for his office in Pleasanton and Madeline headed straight to her mother's house in Fremont. She was glad to see Christa's jeep parked out front. That way she didn't have to repeat everything she planned to say to them.

The two of them apologized profusely to Madeline before she could get all the way inside the house. Evelyn and Christa talked over each other trying to explain and defend their actions.

"Stop, stop!" Madeline yelled. "Nothing you say will excuse what you did, Mama! Do you know how humiliating that was? I brought you to meet the man I love and you acted a complete damn fool in front of him and his family!"

"But Rodney . . ."

"It's not about him, Mama," she snapped. "You don't think I was pissed off when she came waltzing up in there with him?" Madeline asked, pointing at Christa. "I was mad as hell but I still feel like that was between *us*. Everybody didn't need to know how much we can't stand Rodney. And if you weren't so busy cussing and talking all crazy you would've realized that Ezra's family saw through Rodney. They would have sided with you but you acted so ridiculous that it made them as uncomfortable around you as they were around him," she exaggerated. "I hate to say this, but I regret inviting you to come . . . *both* of you."

"Look now, girl, you better remember who you talking to," Evelyn cautioned. "I'm not your child. I'm a grown ass woman and I'll be damned if I'm gone stand here and get chastised by the girl *I* raised! So you better check yourself. I don't care how old you get you'll always be my child and you better stay in a child's place. You hear me?"

"Whatever, Mama. I don't know why I even bothered coming over here," Madeline huffed, as she headed towards the front door. "You don't ever listen."

"What do you want from me, Madeline?"

"I want you to understand how I feel and give a damn that you humiliated me in front of someone special to me! I want you to be sorry for it instead of acting like it's everybody's fault but yours."

"I *am* sorry, girl," Evelyn shouted before she burst into tears. "I am."

Madeline and Christa were stunned. Evelyn wasn't much for showing emotions, aside from anger, so when she cried it was because something really hurt her. And behaving the way she had and knowing she hurt and humiliated her daughter was enough to break Evelyn down.

“I’m sorry, Maddie. I know I ruined the dinner and I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I still let your father get to me like that. I’m so embarrassed.” Evelyn embraced her daughter and apologized again.

Madeline was still mad but she appreciated her mother taking responsibility for once and acknowledging how she felt. She returned her mother’s embrace and promised to call her later. Soon after, Evelyn left for her job as a loan officer at Bank of America. Madeline was about to head home when Christa asked to speak to her.

“Listen, Mad, you were right. I *am* jealous of what you and Ezra have. He’s a good man and I can see how much he really loves you. But I swear to you I didn’t bring Daddy to the dinner to ruin what you have with Ezra. I would never try to hurt you like that,” Christa said, as tears began to fall down her cheek. “I just didn’t know what to do. Daddy was crying and talking about how nobody loves him and that he’d be better off dead. Then he accused me of being ashamed of him and his MS the reason I wasn’t gonna take him to Ezra’s house with me. I felt bad and guilty and overwhelmed.

“It’s expensive taking care of Daddy by myself. The nurse, doctor visits, medications, all of it. I’ve been working like crazy just to cover all the costs. And on top of that there have been a couple of break-ins around the neighborhood so I’m having a new security system installed to be sure Daddy’s safe when I’m not there,” Christa said, wiping tears from her face. “I’m so stressed, Madeline. I need help but you and Mama hate Daddy so that leaves the responsibility of his care on my shoulders. Yesterday I honestly just needed a break. I thought if he had somebody else to whine and complain to that I wouldn’t have to hear it for at least a few hours. I’m tired, Mad, and apparently stupid too for falling for all that junk Daddy said about wanting to make things right with you. It seems that all he wanted to do was mess with Mama and have her all upset.”

“Look, Christa, I feel bad that you feel bad but Mama and I aren’t making his care your responsibility. You’re choosing for it to be and I don’t think you should. But that’s your choice. So you can’t get mad at us for not paying for Rodney’s care. I told you from the get go I wouldn’t be contributing shit and the fact that you’re stressed out doesn’t change that. I’m sorry if that hurts your feelings but I’m just being honest with you. He’s a grown man who’s very capable of getting what he wants. So let him figure out where to live and how to get to the doctor and whatever else he needs. It’s funny how he’s only helpless when you’re around to do everything for him. But that’s on you, Christa. I can’t make you kick him to the curb just like you can’t make me accept him.”

“Well, I guess this is another one of those moments where we have to agree to disagree. But there is something else I need to talk to you about.”

“What’s that?”

“Have you told Ezra?”

Madeline rolled her eyes. “There’s nothing *to* tell. The past is called the past for a reason, Christa. What’s done is done.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too and then I got a text from the man I love telling me he could never marry a woman like me.”

“It’s not the same thing, Christa Belle . . . well, not exactly,” Madeline corrected when her sister looked at her like she was insane.

“Learn from my mistake, Mad. Please. Ezra trusted you with whatever his secrets are and you need to trust him with yours.”

Madeline knew Christa was right but she couldn’t do it. She *wouldn’t* do it. Madeline didn’t see any reason to risk her future by talking about things that happened in her past.

On Monday, May 2nd, Madeline spent the day preparing for a very special, romantic evening with Ezra. She couldn’t believe how nervous she felt as if it were their first date. Everything had to be perfect, from the food to the music to the outfit she was planning to wear. Madeline wanted to show Ezra what she felt for him in her heart. She loved him and sincerely hoped they had a long future together.

A few minutes before five o’clock that evening, Ezra rang the doorbell. He had a bouquet of colorful Gerbera daisies, Madeline’s favorites, and she smiled from ear to ear. It always amazed her how much he paid attention to details and remembered everything she said. Ezra always made her feel loved.

They hugged and kissed at the door before Madeline ushered him inside and offered him a seat on the couch. Ezra smiled as he took in the quaint living room space. The plush, sienna-colored sofa, loveseat, ottoman, and oversized chair looked comfortable and inviting. Everything about the room from the area rug and coffee table to the large entertainment unit and colorful wall masks represented a part of Madeline’s personality. Ezra was excited to see the rest of the house and didn’t understand her surprise at his request for a tour.

“It’s just with that fabulous estate you have I can’t imagine anything in my little house being of interest to you.”

“Baby Doll, why do you say things like that? This is your home. It represents you and I love you so of course I want to see everything in it. The same way you said my house told you a lot about me, yours does the same for you. Take for instance the fact that you have all of these beautiful pieces of art on the walls but not one photograph. And I know you love pictures and you’re a very sentimental person so I imagine they’re around here somewhere. But you not having them out for everyone to see means you’re private and only share those things with people who gain your trust.”

“Humph,” Madeline grunted, impressed with his observation. She never thought of it that way but hearing Ezra say it made sense to her. “So let me show you the rest of the house,” she smiled and led him upstairs to the bright, sunny guestroom. Then Madeline took him to her bedroom.

“Aha, see here are those pictures I was looking for,” Ezra smiled, as he walked over to her antique wooden dresser. It was covered with gold-framed photographs. “You’re such a beautiful woman, Baby Doll,” he said after looking at each of her pictures. Then Ezra took in the entire room.

All of the furniture in Madeline’s bedroom was antique wood. Her king-sized sleigh bed, the tall chest of drawers, the dresser with mirror, nightstands, and the base of her chaise lounge transported Ezra to another era. The color scheme of peach, cream, and gold gave the room a brightness and freshness that was inviting and calming. The same could be said of Madeline’s master bathroom.

“I feel at ease in here,” Ezra said, as he ran his hand along her peach comforter. “Do you know what I mean? It’s so serene and calming.”

“Thank you,” Madeline smiled, sweetly. “It wasn’t always this way, though. I used to have a TV in here and I brought my work and food and all kinds of junk with me. I couldn’t figure out why I had such a hard time sleeping until I watched this program and a psychologist said our bedrooms shouldn’t be filled with clutter and chaos. The bed isn’t for work or discussing problems or any of the things most people use it for. It’s only supposed to be for sleep and sex. Once I grasped that concept, my room became like a haven. So I’m happy it makes you feel peaceful. I’m hoping it’ll make you feel something else later on,” Madeline winked with a huge grin on her face. A smile spread across Ezra’s face as well. “So are you hungry? Dinner’s ready.”

Ezra said he was starving and Madeline led him downstairs to the dining area. Again, the furniture and decorations transported him to another place. Madeline described the beautifully decorated table as a rustic, Tuscan farmhouse style. Her Tuscan Sunflower dinner and dessert plates enhanced the dark wood of the table and chairs. The glasses, candles, and other little touches Madeline added gave everything a romantic look and feel.

“This is really lovely, Baby Doll. Thank you for welcoming me to your home,” he smiled and kissed her hand. “So what’s on the menu?”

“Well, for appetizers we have . . .”

“Ooh, appetizers, huh? Wow, that’s fancy. I’m excited.”

Madeline returned from the kitchen with two chilled martini glasses of the most delicious crab salad he’d ever tasted. Next on the menu were perfectly cooked and seasoned rib-eye steaks, creamy baked potatoes, and a deliciously spiced medley of garden vegetables.

“This was *phenomenal*, Baby Doll. And you really cooked all of this?”

“Yes,” she blushed.

“Umm huh, see you’ve been holding out on me. I had no idea you could do all of this. I’ve never heard you mention cooking as being something you enjoy. And you’re obvious incredibly skilled at it. So have you ever thought of making a career of it?”

Madeline didn’t answer right away. She was debating whether to share one of her dreams with him or not. It was something she hadn’t told anyone except Christa, but even she didn’t know Madeline was making plans to see it realized.

“What’s wrong?” Ezra asked, noticing her reluctance to speak.

“Uhm, it’s just that I’ve never shared this with anyone before and I wouldn’t want you to laugh. My dream probably sounds farfetched but it’s . . .”

“Now I know you know better than that, Madeline.”

Uh oh, she thought. The only time Ezra called her Madeline was when he introduced her or when she annoyed or upset him. “I’m sorry, you’re right. I’m kind of insecure about it, that’s all. But what I’ve dreamt about since I was like eighteen years old is opening my own bed and breakfast inn. It would be small . . . like five rooms, and I’d want to cater to couples on their honeymoon or celebrating their anniversary or just in love, you know? Each room would have a theme, all romantic, but different. I would want them to be really dreamy and inviting and blissful.”

Ezra put his elbows on the table and his face in his hands as he listened intently to Madeline. Her eyes danced when she spoke and she was so animated, talking with her hands and body. It was the first time he’d seen that kind of passion from her regarding a career. Ezra knew Madeline was envisioning the inn and the individual rooms as she described them to him and he saw pure joy on her face. It was exciting. It was sexy. And he wanted to see her dream come true.

“I’ve looked at different locations throughout the Bay Area but I picture the inn being in a place like Monterey or Carmel, close to the water, you know? I want the couples to be able to look out their windows and see something picturesque and awe inspired. And I want the inn to be secluded enough to feel private and intimate but also close enough to go to things like the farmer’s markets and festivals.

“I would hire a chef and staff and everything but at least one night during my guests’ stay I would want to cook the meal myself and actually sit and talk and get to know them a bit. I’d want to hear their love stories or about their wedding, how they met, all that sappy stuff. I guess more than anything I would like to have a small part in the happiest time of people’s lives,” Madeline said, wiping a tear from her eye. “I know that’s mushy, huh? Nobody would expect me of all people to even care about that kind of stuff. But I do. Oh, and I would make sure each of them left with one of these,” she said, removing the lid from one of her trays.

“These are my signature cupcakes. I can do all types of flavors but my favorites are

these triple chocolate ones here,” she pointed, “the strawberry passion, and the better-than-sex one which is basically a yellow cake with pineapples and cream cheese and stuff. Which one do you wanna try?”

“I wanna try them all but I’ll go with the better-than-sex one first.” Ezra took the fork Madeline gave him and he tasted several bites of each. He returned to his first choice and devoured it. “So how much do you need?”

“Hmm?” Madeline frowned.

“To get this inn off the ground . . . how much do you need? I can get some money men together to invest and you know I’m definitely in.”

A sweet smile spread across Madeline’s lips. “Aw, thank you, Big Bear. That’s so sweet. But this is one of those things I really wanna do on my own. I’ve got money saved and I . . .”

“Baby Doll, what do I look like investing in other people’s dreams and not supporting my own woman? I believe in you wholeheartedly, a hundred and ten percent. I saw the passion and the love you have for this inn in the way you told me about it. How could I not help you make your dream a reality? What?” Ezra asked, in response to the devilish little grin on Madeline’s face.

“I love you for that, baby. I really do. And I think,” she said, removing her dress, “it’s high time I showed you.”

He almost passed out when Madeline’s black dress hit the floor, revealing what seemed to be a mini dress except that it was sheer and displayed every part of her body perfectly. Ezra didn’t remember or care what they were discussing. The woman he loved was offering herself to him like a gift and he wanted to unwrap it, badly. Yet, something in her expression let Ezra know Madeline wasn’t just offering him her body. She was offering him her heart too. And he wanted that just as much.

Their kiss was feverish as they yanked and ripped at each other’s clothes. Ezra lifted Madeline and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her to her bedroom. Only they didn’t quite make it all the way up the stairs. He couldn’t wait another second to taste her so with one swoop Ezra lifted Madeline high on the wall until her legs rested comfortably on his shoulders.

“Don’t cum until I tell you to,” he smiled then put his peach-eating skills to excellent use.

That statement alone made Madeline want to explode but the feel of his lips on her made it damn near impossible not to climax. She begged him to let her give in to it and each time he said no and resumed his work, Madeline felt herself reaching a high that she never knew existed. Ezra was the man she’d been waiting for, in every way.

“Cum for me, Baby Doll,” he moaned and Madeline immediately released the most thunderous, the most explosive, phenomenal orgasm she ever had. “Now that’s what I’m talking . . .”

Madeline covered his mouth with hers and kissed him with a ferociousness she’d never experienced. She wanted to devour Ezra, inhale him and he gave her the opportunity to do so. With excitement and voracity she inflicted the same sweet torture that she endured—and then some.

Ezra and Madeline met their match in one another and they each pushed the other to new heights of pleasure. Needing permission to climax turned them both on beyond belief. It was something Ezra had never tried before or even heard of until he overheard one of his employees talking to his wife on the phone. He told her all the naughty things he was going to do to her and that she better not cum until he said so. It seemed weird at the time, kind of controlling, but it stuck with Ezra and felt natural to say to Madeline at that moment. The fact that she was receptive and fully participated made it all the better.

She was definitely very free and very open with her sexuality. Madeline was willing to experiment and she gave as much as she received. Ezra found it refreshing to be with a woman who wasn’t inhibited and was able to trust and completely give in to the moment. If it felt good she was willing to do it or have it done.

By the time they finally made it to her bed Ezra was fighting to hold on. He wanted to give in to the bliss that was certain to come once *he* did. With a condom securely in place, Madeline straddled Ezra then rode him until she was close to climaxing again herself. “Cum with me, Big Bear,” she whispered and felt him unload something so strong that she thought her head would blow off. Madeline didn’t care, though. Her own orgasm felt so good that it would have been worth it. She lost count of how many she had at that point and was amazed by the fact that her orgasms actually got stronger the more she had.

“This is the most amazing shit I’ve ever been through in my *life*,” Madeline panted, as she lay spent on top of Ezra. He engulfed her in his arms and she fell asleep in that position without a care in the world.

Three hours later, at around midnight, Madeline and Ezra awoke. They showered together and took pleasure in admiring and washing each other’s body.

“I was wondering where that was,” Ezra said when he came into the kitchen in just his pants and found Madeline making grilled cheese sandwiches in his dress shirt. “That’s sexy as hell,” he smiled, planting kisses on the nape of her neck. He wrapped his arms around Madeline’s waist and inhaled the scent of the Japanese cherry blossoms lotion she put on her skin. “*Hmm*,” Ezra moaned.

He let go of her long enough for them to eat the sandwiches and share a bowl of strawberries. They smiled at each other the entire time.

“You really surprised me tonight, Baby Doll.”

“Why? I told you I was a freak. I’m not afraid to try anything once and . . .”

“I don’t only mean that, although it *was* fuckin’ *amazing*!” Ezra exclaimed. “I’m sorry. I just don’t know how else to express myself when it comes to how extraordinary it was to be with you.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Ezra,” Madeline giggled. “Besides, you said much worse on the stairwell. And it turned me on like a light!” She laughed at seeing him look bashful.

“I guess outside of pillow talk I think a man should be respectful in the way he speaks to his woman. As crazy as my mother is, I’ve never heard my dad raise his voice or curse at her. Regardless of what might be going on in his mind he’s never disrespected her. I admire that and I’ve patterned my behavior to be the same. I’ll always give you the respect you deserve, Baby Doll.”

Madeline smiled as she made her way around the table to embrace him. Then she led him to the couch where they lay cuddled together watching TV. She felt so safe and protected with his massive arms wrapped around her.

“Goddamn it!” she yelled then jumped to her feet. “I told this girl about showing up uninvited!” Madeline snapped when she heard Christa’s key turning the lock of the front door. “Look, Christa Belle, you need to go . . . whoa, whoa, are you *drunk*?” she asked, noticing her sister’s unsteady stance.

“Happy birthday, Ellis!” Christa shouted then stumbled backwards as she raised her arms in a double-fisted toast. She laughed and soon after, cried. “I called to wish him a happy birthday and he sent a text telling me to go to hell! He’s the meanest texting-ess motherfucka, ain’t he?” Christa laughed. “So anyway, I went to have a drink or *two* in his honor.”

“And your ass was out there driving? What’s wrong with you? Get in here,” Madeline snapped, snatching her sister inside the house.

Christa leaned into Madeline and allowed her to lead the way. Then she stopped dead in her tracks. Her mouth fell open and she stared at Ezra with eyes as big as saucers. He grabbed the faux fur throw blanket from the couch and placed it across his shoulders and bare chest.

“Oh my god, you *really* love him, don’t you?” Christa cried.

“Okay, let’s get you upstairs so you can go to sleep and . . .”

“She loves you, Ezra,” Christa said, freeing herself from Madeline’s grasp to face him. “Mad, has never, ever brought a man to her house! You don’t understand, Ezra. This is like her sanctuary and she’s NEVER trusted a man to let him into it, not even Sidney!”

Oh god, shut up, Christa.

“Shiiit, she barely let her friends over here. This is *huge*!” Christa laughed. Then just as quickly, she started to cry. “You’re the man she was talking about

when we were little girls daydreaming about our perfect mate. Don't be like Ellis, okay? Don't leave her because . . ."

"Alright that's enough," Madeline said, snatching her sister towards the stairs. "I'll be right back, Ezra."

"I love you, Ezra! Be good to my sister or I'll kill you!" Christa cried, stumbling up the stairs. "This shirt you got on is *way* too big, Mad."

"Oh, geez, would you shut up!"

Madeline helped Christa get undressed and put her to bed in the guest bedroom. She kissed her cheek and rubbed her back until Christa fell asleep. Fifteen minutes later Madeline rejoined Ezra on the living room couch. He asked if Christa was okay and what she meant about Ellis sending mean text messages. Madeline told him the whole story.

"Aw man, that's *cold*. But I'm sure it was designed to be. What could be more hurtful than the person you love most not showing you enough respect to at least tell you something like that to your face?" Ezra said, shaking his head. "So what did Ellis mean by saying he could never marry a woman like her?"

"Hmm?" Madeline uttered. Her mind instantly flashed back to that night at the play when she sent Sidney a text message. "Oh, uh, we don't know," she lied. "Ellis never made any contact to explain."

"Wow," Ezra said. Then he enveloped Madeline in his arms. "So is what your sister said true? You've never invited a man to your house before?"

"No, I haven't." She had also never cooked for a man, shared her dreams or given her whole heart. "Christa was right. I *do* love you, Ezra . . . a lot."

"I love you too, Baby Doll . . . a *whole* lot," he said. Ezra lifted Madeline into his arms and carried her upstairs to her bedroom.

For as wild and carnal as their first experience had been, their second was sweet and gentle. Ezra took his time kissing and caressing every part of Madeline and showed her once again that an orgasm *was* different when you truly loved the man who gave it to you. He showed her the true meaning of intimacy and she fell deeper in love that night.

"I love you," Madeline whispered before falling asleep in his arms again.

The following Saturday Madeline received a call at four o'clock in the morning from Ezra inviting her to join him and Aura on one of their adventures. He told her to wear jeans, long sleeves, and tennis shoes she didn't mind getting dirty. Madeline took a quick shower, threw a few things in an overnight bag, and was ready to go when they arrived forty minutes later. She embraced Ezra and Aura tightly, so happy to be included in something they considered special and private.

“Sorry about the last-minute notice, Baby Doll, but when we woke up Aura asked if we could invite you. I tried to tell her you’re not cut out of this type of stuff . . . mining in caves, riding zip-lines, and eating at truck stops and stuff,” Ezra teased, as he pulled his Dodge Ram out of the driveway.

Madeline looked at him, at Aura in the backseat, and back at Ezra. “Uhm, excuse me but I’ll have you know you’re talking to a woman who’s gone skydiving on a dare, bungee jumping, *and* parasailing. You better check your motherboard, jack.”

“Check my motherboard . . . what?” Ezra frowned.

Aura burst out laughing and she and Madeline gave each other a high five. “That means get your information straight, Daddy,” Aura giggled. “You will be the one crying on the zip-line, not us.”

That time Madeline burst out laughing at the look on Ezra’s face. He seemed to be agreeing with Aura’s statement.

“So y’all ganging up on me, huh? Umm huh, I see how y’all do. That’s cool, though. We’ll see who’s crying and who’s not. The first one to shed tears buys dinner. Deal?”

“Deal,” Madeline said, slapping Ezra’s outstretched hand.

“Barbie Doll, you in?” he asked, looking at her through the rearview mirror.

“I can’t, Dad. You always said not to make a bet you can’t cover. I don’t have any money.”

Madeline’s heart melted and tears sprang to her eyes. Ezra seemed stunned but a huge smile spread across his face. He was touched to know his baby girl took to heart the things he told her, even in a playful situation like that one. While stopped at a red light he removed his wallet and took out three twenty-dollar bills.

“Here you go, Barbie Doll. Now you can cover the bet.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll use this to get my nails done because *I’m* not losing.”

Ezra looked at her and then Madeline. “Did I just get played?”

“I think you did,” Madeline laughed and gave Aura a wink.

An hour later Ezra pulled into a truck stop he said was famous for its flapjacks. The three of them enjoyed a delicious, hearty breakfast while they talked and laughed. Once they were back on the road, Madeline turned up the radio and they sang at the top of their lungs. Aura was tickled by the way Madeline danced in her seat and she did more laughing than singing. Ezra loved seeing the silly side of Madeline and how well she and Aura got along. They had a bond with each other that he knew was genuine and heartfelt and it made him love them both even more.

Two hours later Ezra announced that they had arrived at their destination. Madeline didn’t look all that excited. In fact, she looked petrified.

“You alright, Ms. Skydiver? You look a little nervous.”

Madeline swallowed deep and peered out of the window. “Yeah, I’m good,” she said, unconvincingly. “Where are we?”

“It’s called Cave and Mine Adventures. And don’t worry those howls you hear aren’t real. They’re just part of the experience. So you can pry your hands from the door handle, Baby Doll. You’re safe,” Ezra laughed before exiting the truck.

Aura hopped out then she and Ezra went to help Madeline out of the truck. She tried her best to put on a brave face but the cave didn’t look sturdy and she envisioned them walking through only to have it collapse on them. Screams drew Madeline’s attention upward and she caught sight of someone flying by on the zip-line. *Oh lord, what did I get myself into*, she thought as Ezra and Aura guided her forward.

“This is gonna be fun! I’m so glad you’re here, Maddie,” Aura beamed, giving Madeline’s hand a squeeze.

“Me too,” she smiled, brightly.

That day turned out to be one of the best of Madeline’s life. Despite her fear about the cave, it was a lot of fun walking through it. She especially loved the zip-line and rode it three times. Ezra lost the bet, although he claimed it was the wind hitting his eyes that made tears fall down his face and not that he was crying. Madeline and Aura knew it was the truth but they gave him a hard time anyway—something they did throughout their adventure together. Madeline loved every minute of it and considered their time together as when the three of them became a family.

From that point on they did everything together. Madeline cooked dinners, attended Aura’s soccer games, and helped her study for the tests that would determine her placement in eighth grade the following school year. To Prim’s displeasure the two of them were like best friends. Aura wanted to be just like Madeline and often returned home wearing her perfumed lotions and clothes.

“That’s *enough*,” Prim snapped when Aura went into another me-and-Madeline-story. “I’m tired of hearing about the great Madeline. Your daddy should have sense enough not to . . .”

“Aura, go get your stuff together, baby. Your dad’s on his way,” Prim’s older sister Prissy said. Aura ran upstairs to her room. “Now what’s your problem, Prim? You know I don’t play that daddy bashing in front of the kids and I thought you didn’t either. And what is all this about you not letting Aura spend Memorial Day weekend with Ezra? What’s going on?” she asked, suddenly able to see their resemblance. Prissy denied it for years but aside from being an inch taller at five-foot, seven and having blue eyes instead of dark brown ones, Prim really did look like her. “Humph,” she grunted, wondering why she hadn’t seen it before.

Aura came barreling down the stairs to open the door for her dad. Prissy hugged Ezra and talked with him for a few minutes. Aura hugged her mom and aunt goodbye before leaving with her dad.

“So back to you, miss. What’s going on?” Prissy asked, as she sat beside her sister on the couch.

For the last ten years Ezra, Prim, and Aura spent Memorial Day together. And Prim was certain Madeline was to blame for why that wasn’t the case this year. She looked at her sister then burst into tears. “Why does he love *her*?”

“Oh, baby, come here,” Prissy said, enveloping Prim in her arms. She rocked with her and said nothing while her sister sobbed.

When Prim finally stopped crying she expressed how hurt she was over Ezra getting so serious about Madeline so quickly. She admitted being jealous at the Easter dinner when Mary went on and on about him calling a fashion designer just so Madeline could choose what she wanted to wear. Prim especially hated watching Ezra be playful and sexy with the woman like he didn’t even care that she was there.

“I mean, how can he come over here and make love with me and then fall in love with somebody else a few days later? That’s *so* wrong.”

“Okay, let’s not get it twisted, Prim. Ezra didn’t come over here that night with flowers declaring his undying love for you. He came to drop off Aura and you lured him in with his favorite meal and lingerie that just happened to be under your robe,” Prissy said with a raised eyebrow. “You said Ezra tried to stop but you kept throwing your coochie at him until he gave in.”

“Ugh, shut up, Prissy! I don’t know why I be telling you all my damn business.”

“Because I’m your sister and your best friend and I love you. I’m always gonna keep it one hundred with you and as much as it might irritate you, you know you need that. So be honest with yourself and don’t try to flip things around. I know you’re still in love with Ezra. And I honestly don’t blame you. He’s a good man and an incredible father. But he’s not *your* man, Prim, and you need to accept that and move on with your life.

“Go on a date, meet some people, and enjoy yourself. But what you *not* gone do is resort to playing games by trying to keep Aura away from Ezra. He’s her father and she needs him as much as she needs you. Mama used to do that stupid shit and eventually Daddy got sick of it. Remember going through our teens, when we needed him the most, and not having him around because Mama stopped it? Remember how much we hated her for it?” Prissy asked, nudging her sister’s arm. “That’s why we vowed not to ever do that mess to our own kids because *that’s* who gets hurt. Mama was so focused on punishing Daddy for breaking her heart that she never thought about the damage it was doing to us not having him in our

lives. So don't you turn around and do that same shit, you hear me? Ezra doesn't deserve it and neither does Aura. Find another way to deal with your hurt over the fact that he's chosen someone else to love."

"I know you're right. It's just hard, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. But you need to find a way to move on. Don't be in here acting crazy like your mama."

"Girl, stop it," Prim laughed. "You know Mama ain't crazy."

"Prim, please. I love the woman but you and I both know she ain't playing with a full deck. Just look at the evidence. You know something's gotta be wrong with you if you really thought it was a good idea to name your children Prissy, Prim, and Proper! You know Mama jacked us up with these stupid ass names." They both laughed before embracing each other again. "You're gonna be all right, baby sis. I love you."

"I love you too, Prissy poodle."

"Ugh, quit calling me that mess!" Prissy fussed then grabbed her purse to leave. "And don't be sitting in this house moping. Get out and do something or at the very least go to a dating site and try to find you somebody."

Prim waved off the idea but after an hour of sitting on her couch obsessing about Madeline, she decided to give the whole online dating a try. What was the worst that could happen?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Even though it had been a few months since that night at the play, Sidney still missed Madeline terribly. He wouldn't admit it, especially not to his brothers, but he spent more and more time at home hoping she would come knocking on his door. Sidney checked her Facebook page daily yearning for something that would indicate she missed him just as much. It appeared as if Madeline hadn't even logged on, let alone confessed to the world any longing for him.

Unable to focus on his work, Sidney decided to get out of the office for a few hours. He wasn't hungry but stopped by Subway to force himself to eat since he skipped breakfast. Skipping meals had become a habit since Sidney lost Madeline and he didn't think it was that big of a deal until his expensive, tailored suits no longer fit the way they once did and his clients began asking if he was sick.

After getting a foot-long club sandwich and a few bottles of water, Sidney drove to a local park to sit outside for a while. He stepped out of his Jaguar and removed his suit jacket before laying it across the front seat. Sidney grabbed his sandwich and water and was about to close the door when his heart felt like it dropped into his stomach. Just like something out of his dreams, Madeline sat on a park bench talking on her cell phone.

Sidney raised his sunglasses just to make sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. It was definitely her sitting there looking more beautiful and radiant than he'd ever seen her. Something was different about Madeline but he couldn't figure out what. Suddenly a smile spread across Sidney's lips as he hoped for the chance to find out.

He put the sandwich and water bottles back in the car and grabbed his suit jacket. Sidney was in the middle of putting it on when Madeline hung up the phone and stood. He was about to call her name when a young girl ran into her arms and squeezed her tight. Madeline seemed thrilled to see the girl and planted kisses on her cheeks. *Who is that*, Sidney wondered and then his heart felt like it momentarily stopped beating when Madeline reached up to kiss a big beast of a man. *What the fuck?*

Unable to move, Sidney stood watching the interaction between the three of them. Then it hit him what was so different about Madeline. She was in love. Love had caused her to look so beautiful and radiant. It was love for someone else which brought about a genuine happiness that showed all over her face.

Sidney's ego made him compare himself to the wildebeest that had his hands and lips on Madeline. She couldn't honestly have chosen *him*. And even though Sidney knew nothing about the man she was with, he believed he was superior in

looks, finances, and most definitely in his love for Madeline. Yet, the more he watched, the more his ego deflated. In all the years Sidney had known Madeline—loved her—he was never able to make her smile the way that man did. She had never reached for him or looked at him the way she did that man. Madeline had never loved him the way she clearly loved *that* man.

Whatever pain Sidney felt that night at the play was nothing in comparison to what he felt watching Madeline and what he'd describe as her family. She was genuinely happy and deep down that's all Sidney ever wanted her to be. It just tore him up inside that he wasn't the one to make her that way.

Sidney sat in the front seat of his car for over an hour, long after Madeline and her family went into the zoo. He cried briefly over the realization that she was never going to come knocking on his door again. What they shared was indeed over and he needed to move on with his life. "Goodbye, Madeline," he said then pulled out of the parking lot and headed back to his office.

A few days later, after several messages cursing her out for abandoning them, Madeline met up with her sister and friends. They agreed to meet at Raye Ann's two-bedroom apartment in Hayward for dinner and drinks. When Madeline arrived, Christa and Tamia were making a batch of margaritas. Thirty minutes later Raye Ann took a pan of homemade enchiladas out of the oven and announced that it was time to eat. Avis would just have to warm a plate whenever she decided to come.

Raye Ann would never admit it but the things Deidra said the night they all met Ezra really struck her. She didn't want to live her life as someone's mistress so she decided to end her relationship with Mojo. It was difficult, especially with his constant calls and texts begging to see her one more time. However, Raye Ann knew she would never have the love and respect she so desperately wanted as long as she stayed with Mojo or men like him.

"I'm seeing someone," she said over enchiladas and margaritas. "He's *single*," Raye Ann specified when the three women eyed her suspiciously. "I've actually known Keith for years. We ran into each other a few weeks ago, met up for drinks, and we've been seeing each other ever since. I like him a lot."

"I can tell," Madeline smiled. "You seem happy."

"I am," she grinned.

Christa was laughing and telling them about her drunken night on Ellis's birthday when Avis finally arrived. She was shouting at DeMarco on her cell phone.

"Look, I'm out right now so you can't bring them to the house! *One* day ain't gonna kill you, DeMarco, damn!" she shouted before disconnecting the call. "I can't believe this dude! Why should somebody have to beg you to spend time

with your own damn kids?" Avis broke down crying. "I've been working like a dog to pay for everything since he hasn't sent me a dime for them. Mavis's prom was last week and DeMarco went off on me about some shoes she wanted. Here's an idea . . . how about *you* buy the shoes, dead beat motherfucka! Ooh, I can't *stand* that bastard!" she shouted then began to cry again. "All I ever wanted was for Mavis and Sloane to have a dad like I did. He was a wonderful man and father and I could always count on him. That's what a daddy should be, not like the stupid idiot I married, you feel me?"

Raye Ann grabbed a napkin and gave it to Avis. She wiped her eyes then apologized for putting a damper on the night. Avis went to the bathroom and Raye Ann headed to the kitchen to fix her friend a drink.

"Uhm is it just me or did the last time Avis talked about her father she said he was a deadbeat like Rodney?" Tamia whispered.

Christa and Madeline looked at each other and then back at Tamia. They'd both been thinking the same thing. That wasn't the first time Avis said something on one occasion and then completely contradicted herself on the next.

"Hey, just a head's up," Raye Ann whispered when she poked her head into the bathroom. "You might wanna keep your stories straight," she cautioned Avis.

Prim decided to let Aura spend Memorial Day weekend with Ezra after all. He was on his way and she hoped they could talk for a few minutes. Prim was livid when she opened the door and found Madeline standing with him. That was the ultimate form of disrespect and she planned to tell Ezra how she felt about it.

"Maddie!" Aura screamed, squeezing Madeline tight.

"Oh, so I don't get no love, Barbie Doll?" Ezra teased before Aura threw her arms around his neck and jumped into his arms. "Ooh, girl, you getting too big. You almost broke your old man's back," he laughed.

"Your home is lovely," Madeline said, making her way through the living room of the spacious home despite not being invited. "I love your artwork."

"Thanks," Prim said through a forced smile.

"And I like your lingerie too," she said, staring Prim in her eyes.

"Oh, uh, this is just stuff I lounge around the house in. I wouldn't call it lingerie," she said of the black, silk robe and matching bra and panties she wore. "So anyway, what do y'all have planned for the weekend?"

"We've got lots planned. We're gonna have a ball, aren't we, Aura?" Madeline replied even though Prim wasn't speaking to her.

"Umm huh. I can't wait!"

Madeline took it upon herself to take a seat on Prim's couch and something caught her attention. She giggled. "Wow, Prim, I see you've got yourself a big ole bowl of peaches over there. I sure hope they don't go rotten with nobody here to

eat them,” she smirked. “I would take some off your hands but Ezra’s got all the peaches one man can eat at home. Besides, he doesn’t eat the ones anybody can get from the side of the road. They just aren’t good quality,” Madeline said with a hateful grin on her face. She wanted Prim to know her little plan to entice Ezra had failed miserably.

He understood what was happening between the two women and suggested to Madeline that they get going.

“I’m right behind you, babe. These roadside peaches are making me a little nauseated. See you, Prim. I hope you find *somebody* to eat them.”

“Well, I wouldn’t worry about it too much, Madeline. You’d be surprised who likes roadside peaches and that it wasn’t that long ago that he ate them.”

Ezra had run outside chasing Aura before that comment was made. The two of them were running around the front yard oblivious to Prim’s and Madeline’s growing hostility towards one another.

“Oh, Madeline, can I speak to you for a second?”

“Sure, what can I do for you?” she asked with a condescending smirk on her face.

“Well, what you can do is keep your legs closed this weekend while my daughter’s there to spend time with her father. It’s bad enough I have to explain why a woman who’s not Ezra’s wife is damn near living in his house. I’d hate for Aura to burst in on you and then come home asking me why you were on your knees. She’s still a little girl and doesn’t need to be exposed to all that. So for the next three days try to keep your hands and other stuff,” Prim said, pointing at Madeline’s crotch, “to yourself.”

Despite how enraged she was, Madeline let a smile spread across her face. “You know, Prim, every time I think you can’t get any stupider, you surprise me,” she snarled, as Ezra and Aura ran happily through the yard. “First of all, there will *never* come a day when you decide what I can and can’t do. I’ll fuck Ezra every hour of the day if I feel like it and there ain’t shit you can do about it. But contrary to what you may think, our relationship is built on much more than physical contact. We’re a family,” she said, knowing those words would hurt Prim.

“Secondly, I love Aura and I would never do *anything* to harm or upset her. My private life with Ezra is exactly that . . . private. And I do everything humanly possible to keep it that way. Perhaps you should’ve been more concerned about what your daughter’s exposed to when you threw your sour pussy on Ezra with her sleeping right upstairs.”

Humiliated didn’t even begin to describe what Prim felt. She couldn’t believe Ezra told Madeline about what happened between them and she felt like a fool—both for what she did that night and what she’d hoped to entice Ezra into doing again.

“So when your lonely ass is upstairs crying on your pillow in your cheap ass lingerie just know that at some point tonight Ezra’s head will be between my legs slurping up every drop of my sweet peach not giving a *damn* about yours.”

Tears threatened to spill from Prim’s eyes but she refused to give Madeline the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

“So if that’s all you had to say, I’m gonna go be with my family now. We’ve got big plans,” Madeline smiled sweetly, although she felt nothing but hatred for the woman standing before her. And she couldn’t help wondering how often Prim answered the door in lingerie and if three months ago was really the last time Ezra gave in to her.

Later that night, after Aura had gone to bed, Madeline joined Ezra in his bedroom. “So how often does your ex answer the door in her panties?”

“What are you talking about?” Ezra frowned.

“So now you’re playing crazy like you don’t know what lingerie looks like? You’re trying to tell me you have *no* idea what was under her silk robe even though you could see right through it?”

“What I’m trying to tell you is that I don’t care what was under it. And for the record, today was the first I’ve set foot inside Prim’s house since that night. After that slip up over *three months ago* I made arrangements for Aura to meet me at the door and then we leave. I promise you, Baby Doll, there’s absolutely *nothing* going on with Prim. I’ve told you before that I’m a loyal guy. That hasn’t changed. Besides, what kind of fool would I be to tell you what happened if I was still sleeping with her?” Ezra took Madeline’s face into his hands and kissed her gently. “You’re it for me, woman. Your peaches are the only ones I wanna eat,” he chuckled. “You know you was wrong for that, don’t you? I thought only men got into pissing contest with each other.” He kissed her again. “It was kind of sexy, though . . . you staking claim on your man.”

“Oh, yeah?” Madeline smiled, removing his shirt. “You wanna see something else sexy?”

“Umm huh,” Ezra moaned and let her finish undressing him.

After a fun-filled Memorial Day weekend with his two favorite girls, Ezra decided to do something special for Madeline. Pam brought over a whole new line of the most fabulous clothing Madeline had ever seen. She loved being able to wear the hottest fashions before the public had access to it. That night Ezra surprised her with a makeup artist and hair stylist as well. Madeline felt like a queen and walked with her arm linked between her man’s full of pride.

They talked all through a wonderful seafood dinner but Madeline got the impression something was bothering Ezra. He didn’t seem like himself. When she asked what was wrong the expression on his face seemed angry.

“Okay, look, I’m just gonna come out and say it,” he said then took a deep breath. “Well, no, let me give you this first.” Ezra slid an envelope across the table.

Madeline thought her heart was going to beat out of her chest. A million thoughts ran through her mind about what could possibly be inside that envelope and none of them were good. She wanted to say something but she didn’t know what. *Oh god*, she thought, swallowing hard. With a slight tremble in her hands Madeline opened the envelope. She frowned then looked up at Ezra who was smiling at her.

“I don’t take no for an answer.”

“What?” Madeline asked, looking at the three hundred fifty thousand dollar check in her hand.

“I’m not gonna support other people’s endeavors and not support my woman’s. You deserve that inn and I want to do everything in my power to see that you get it. I love you, Baby Doll, and I believe in your dream. Let me help you. Shoot, I’ve even come up with a few names for you to choose from. The Peach Tree is my favorite one,” he teased, laughing loudly.

Madeline felt overwhelmed and didn’t know what to say. Thank you seemed like such a measly response for something as incredible as what he’d done. Tears ran down her face as she stared at Ezra feeling so much love for him.

“Now don’t misunderstand me. I’m not just *giving* you three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It’s a business investment that I’m willing to make to see your dream realized. I had my lawyer draw up the paperwork and I want you to have yours look over it to make sure you’re cool with everything.”

Her mind instantly flashed to Sidney Reid. He’d been her lawyer whenever she needed one. “I’ll find one if you want but I don’t think it’s necessary. I trust you wholeheartedly.”

“I appreciate that and I love you for it. But when it comes to business you must always protect yourself, Baby Doll. I don’t care who you’re doing business with, always make sure you know exactly what’s what. So take this paperwork, have your lawyer look at it, and get back to me when you’re ready,” Ezra smiled. “So now that we’ve got the business part out of the way, what’s up with some pleasure?”

“You don’t *even* have to worry about that. I’m gonna make sure you . . .”

“Excuse me, miss, I don’t mean to intrude but you look really familiar. Your name wouldn’t happen to be Sweets, would it?” a very attractive man asked, as he stood in front of Madeline and Ezra’s booth.

“*Sweets?*” Madeline laughed. “No, I’m sorry. You’ve got me confused with someone else.”

“I apologize for the intrusion. You have a good evening, ma’am . . . sir.”

“Sweets, huh? That sounds like a stripper’s name,” Ezra laughed. “You don’t have a secret life, do you? I’m not gonna walk into a gentleman’s club and find you swirling around the pole, am I?”

“No, I promise you that’ll never happen. The only time I’ve ever been on a pole is when me and my girls decided to take a pole dancing class. It was hard as hell too. I have to give those ladies props for being able to do all of that, in stilettos, and make it look sexy and effortless. But you have nothing to worry about. I promise,” Madeline reassured him. “But what if I had stripped to put myself through college? Would that be a deal breaker for you?”

“You mean would I kick you to the curb? Nah, I wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t like it, but I wouldn’t fault you for something you did in the past. It definitely wouldn’t be something I would broadcast. In my business dealings I’m often put under a microscope so I do have a certain image to uphold. But I mean, as long as you weren’t in the back giving dudes happy endings, I’d get over it.”

Madeline continued to joke and laugh about it trying hard not to let on to the fact that she was scared to death. She knew that was her opportunity to be honest with Ezra but she couldn’t bring herself to say the words. Speaking hypothetically was one thing, speaking the truth was quite another.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Thursday, June 2, at a little after eight o'clock in the morning, Madeline arrived at the Oakland International Airport to pick up Christa. She'd been on a three-day business trip to Chicago and looked exhausted when she exited the plane. She also looked a lot thinner. The past few months at Weight Watchers had really paid off. The sisters hugged each other and Madeline complimented Christa, telling her how beautiful she looked as they made their way to the parking lot. Madeline hoped they could grab breakfast and hang out for a while since it had been nearly two weeks since they saw one another. However, she knew Christa was tired so she suggested they get together later.

"No, I wanna hang out with you, Mad. I miss you," Christa said while yawning.

"Yeah, right," Madeline giggled, as she made her way to the highway. "You can stop by the house once you've had a chance to sleep. I'll be home all day getting ready for my slumber party with Aura tomorrow night."

"Ooh, I wanna come," Christa whined. "Aura's such a cool little girl, isn't she? You would think for someone as pretty as she is she'd be stuck on herself but that girl doesn't have a pretentious bone in her body. Regardless of what you might think of Prim, you have to admit she's done a great job raising a sweet young lady."

"Yeah, she's a good mother, I'll give her that. But Ezra has played a *huge* role in Aura's life and helped shape her into who she is."

Christa smiled at the look on her sister's face. She was head over heels for that man and it seemed to make her glow from the inside out. It was wonderful to see Madeline in love, but it also hurt remembering that she once had that with Ellis. Christa missed him so much and still held out hope that he'd come back.

Thinking of her ex reminded Christa that she hadn't told Madeline about Reesa. She decided to approach the woman and find out why she betrayed their friendship by getting involved with Ellis. As expected, Reesa denied everything and gave some sorry excuse about Christa betraying their friendship as the reason she hadn't contacted her in months.

"Yeah, right, so that's why she was seen out with him on several occasions while you were in bed crying your eyes out. Reesa and her whole family are full of shit. Be glad you don't have to be bothered with them anymore." Madeline stated.

"Well, speaking of family," Christa said, instantly getting a stern look from her sister, "The reunion is next month and I've been getting calls for us . . ."

"Why do you do this, Christa?" she asked, shaking her head in disgust.

"Come on, Mad, they're our family and they love us . . ."

“No they *do not*! Paw Paw was the only one that ever gave a damn about us! And I don’t know how much more proof you need of that. What else do they have to do to you before you’ll finally have enough? Where’s your breaking point, Christa Belle, because I reached mine fifteen years ago when Rodney’s jealous ass sisters beat the shit out of Mama with those switches. You do remember that don’t you . . . sitting in the emergency room listening to her scream when they put antiseptic on the scrapes and scratches all over her face and neck . . . and both of us having to get stitches for jumping in and getting our asses beat too! And why did all of this ass beating go down? Because Auntie Ruby’s husband said Mama’s potato salad was the best and that envious bitch got her six sisters and they ambushed our mother! So are *these* the people you claim love us so much?”

“That was a long time ago, Madeline. Why are you and Mama so insistent on holding grudges? If I can forgive them then why can’t you?”

“Because they’re STILL THE SAME!” Madeline roared.

“Whoa, whoa, slow down, girl!” Christa yelled, gripping the door handle. The angrier Madeline became the faster she drove. “Don’t kill us, okay? Just forget I even brought it up. I’m going to the reunion and I was hoping you would go too so I didn’t have to be by myself, but that’s fine.”

“Yeah, it *is* fine,” Madeline rolled her eyes. “I hope you find what you looking for,” she said, shaking her head. They rode the rest of the way in silence.

Christa’s feelings were hurt that Madeline pulled up in front of her house instead of going to breakfast like they planned. Instead of protesting about it, however, she grabbed her bag from the backseat and slammed the door shut. One of the things Christa disliked most about Madeline was her inability to move on from a situation. When she got angry, everything shut down. Christa didn’t think their disagreement about the family reunion warranted them not being able to have breakfast and spend time together. Madeline obviously did.

“Well, thanks for picking me up,” Christa said, sarcastically. She started towards the front door but walked back to the driver’s side of the jeep to address her sister. “You know, Mad, I do understand how you feel. I just wish you tried to understand how I feel sometimes. I haven’t forgotten all the crap we’ve been through with the family. But the reason I decided to go to the reunion is because they asked me to come. Easter dinner was the last time I’ve been invited *anywhere*,” she said, trying to blink back tears. “I don’t have a man and a little girl who want me around or friends who call and come over. It’s just me, Mad, and I’m lonely,” Christa admitted.

Madeline reached out of the window to wipe tears from Christa’s face while wiping her own. “I’m sorry, Christa Belle. I’ve turned into that chick, huh . . . the one who falls in love and forgets about everybody else.” Madeline looked at her sister sadly. “I love you, though, and I’m sorry. I would love it if you joined Aura

and me tomorrow night. I'd also love it if you came over to hang out with me once you get some rest. You know how emotional your butt gets when you're sleepy," Madeline teased. She leaned out of the window to kiss Christa's cheek. "I'll definitely make more time to spend with you, okay? But Rodney's family aren't good people to be around, Christa Belle. They'll only hurt you like they always do and I don't want that to happen. Don't let them push you to that breaking point. Okay?"

"Okay," she said. Little did either of them know Christa was minutes away from being broken beyond repair.

Even though she was exhausted Christa couldn't stand the idea of her house being in disarray. So she changed from the business suit she'd been wearing into a pair of sweats and a t-shirt and decided to clean. She didn't understand why there was such a mess since she cleaned before she left and Rodney's nurse usually tidied the house. The kitchen garbage can was full with empty beer bottles and fast food containers. Something definitely wasn't right and Christa grew worried. Her concern turned to panic when the next door neighbor spotted her dumping the trash and told her about some suspicious activity at her house the night before.

Christa ran back inside. With all the reports of home invasions around the neighborhood she wanted to be sure nothing happened to her father. She tried reaching him on his cell phone but it went directly to voicemail. Then Christa remembered the security cameras that had finally been installed and took a seat on the couch to see if anything suspicious happened while she was gone.

"What the . . .!" Christa shrieked. She couldn't believe her eyes. "No, no, no. *Please* no," she mumbled, as tears fell down her cheeks.

As Christa watched the cameras' recordings she was bombarded by an onslaught of emotions. Complete and utter devastation was the first thing she felt and tears continued to pour down her face. Rodney Stiles was every bit the conniving, manipulative, opportunistic, liar that Evelyn and Madeline always said he was.

Christa watched the nurse help Rodney hobble inside only for him to walk normally once the door was closed. Over the three days she was gone the cameras caught several instances of her father being able to dance, cook, and even have sex with his nurse on the very couch where Christa sat. At that point the sadness she felt was replaced with full on rage.

All Christa could think about was everything she'd done, all the money she spent, and how she turned her life upside down to be there for a man who'd done nothing but use her. Evelyn's and Madeline's warnings played over and over in her mind and Christa believed she was on the brink of having a nervous breakdown. Her hands trembled so bad that she dropped the remote and it became difficult to catch her breath. Then, from some place deep inside of her, came ear-splitting

screams. Tears poured down Christa's cheeks as she screamed and screamed and *screamed*. She didn't think anything could hurt more than losing Ellis, but being betrayed by her own father was by far the worst pain she ever endured. Christa didn't understand how Rodney could do something like that to her—the person who loved and cared for him. The only person who loved and cared for him.

There were no words to describe how incredibly stupid Christa felt. Everyone in her life, even Ezra who'd only met Rodney once, tried to warn her but she refused to listen. Despite all the times she witnessed her father mistreat others, Christa never believed he would do it to her. *Stupid, fuckin' idiot*, she thought before racing upstairs to her bedroom.

Christa cleaned her face and stared at her reflection for a minute. She hated the weak, gullible person staring back at her and decided to do something about the situation instead of wallowing and feeling sorry for herself. Christa grabbed the phone to make a few calls, ones that should've been made months ago.

With her weekly need to travel for work, Christa needed help taking care of Rodney. So when he suggested she hire the nurse who helped him on several occasions, Christa was more than happy to do so. Adrienne Wallace was a very nice, professional, well-organized thirty-seven-year-old who Christa instantly liked and entrusted with her father. What she hadn't done was check any of the references Adrienne provided, until now.

Christa was horrified to learn that Adrienne *used* to be a registered nurse in South Carolina until her license was revoked for working under the influence and nearly costing a patient his life. After which, she managed to get hired at a nursing home in Oakland and as a private nurse for several patients throughout the Bay Area. Just as Christa had, the other employers trusted Adrienne and admired her skill and expertise when it came to patient care. She was like an angel to those who'd grown weary of the day-to-day responsibility of tending to their loved ones. Adrienne's concern for her patients seemed genuine and she was often a shoulder to cry on for overwhelmed family members whose lives had been turned upside down by being placed in the role of caregiver. It was no surprise that none of them had been concerned with checking references. Adrienne was their answered prayer.

The next call Christa made was to Member Services at Kaiser Medical Center. The secretary couldn't give any information pertaining to Rodney and directed Christa to the Kaiser website. As the primary for their insurance she had access to all of her father's doctor's visits and test results. Christa navigated through the system and used Rodney's e-mail address and medical record number to grant her permission to open his files.

"You have got to be fuckin' kidding me!" Christa shouted, unable to believe what she was reading. "You're a real piece of work Rodney Stiles."

He hadn't actually been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. The doctor believed Rodney was suffering from MS based on his symptoms and the fact that his father had and later died from it. After blood work and other testing it was determined that Rodney had a predisposition to the disease and could very well end up suffering from it. At present, however, he did not. The treatment he'd been receiving was for Fibromyalgia.

Christa researched the ailment to learn exactly what it was. She understood that the pain could be quite debilitating and that it affected so many other things like sleep and the ability to work and function. So she realized Rodney had a real issue, but it wasn't MS and from the recordings she watched, it wasn't nearly as bad as he pretended it to be. Christa also realized why Rodney chose MS as his disorder. She and Madeline absolutely adored his father, their Paw Paw, and it broke their hearts to watch him suffer through the disease. And even though they were teenagers when he died, Christa would never forget the agony her grandfather endured and she was willing to do anything to help her father not suffer that same fate. To learn he'd been playing her the whole time was more than she could stand.

With swift efficiency, Christa grabbed boxes from the sundeck and threw Rodney's belongings into them. She was almost finished when she heard Adrienne's car pull into the driveway. Christa ran downstairs to open the front door and both Rodney and Adrienne were shocked to see her. They weren't expecting her to return until the next day which was why the house hadn't been put back in order. It was obvious Christa was upset and they both assumed it was because of the condition in which they left her home.

Adrienne apologized profusely as she helped Rodney enter the house with the aid of his cane. She promised to clean up right away and that it would never happen again.

"Oh, there's no need to worry, *nurse*. I took care of it."

Rodney and Adrienne looked at each other then back at Christa wondering what was going on with her. She was clearly upset about something more than the house being dirty, so Adrienne decided to take Rodney to his room to rest and suggested Christa do the same.

"I'll do that, but for now I wanna show you something."

"Oh, Christa Belle, can it wait, honey? Daddy's really tuckered out."

"It'll only take a minute, Daddy. Please, have a seat," she said, patting the couch. Adrienne helped him hobble over and he sat beside Christa. "I wanna show y'all something *fascinating*."

Rodney's face turned a different shade and his mouth dropped open. Adrienne took one look at the television screen and high-tailed it out the front door.

“Isn’t this fascinating, Daddy? No?” she asked when he didn’t answer. “Well, *I* find it to be. I guess it’s a good thing I was rushing to make my flight and didn’t get the chance to tell you about these cameras being installed. I would’ve missed this whole show if I had, huh? Ooh, look, Daddy, this is my favorite part. I *love* how you’re up walking, dancing, and even carrying your lover over here to this couch. Thank God for Febreeze, right?” Christa asked, as she gestured towards the fabric freshener she used. “But that’s amazing how the MS just comes and goes, isn’t it?”

“Christa, baby, just let me explain. I never meant to . . . uh, I’m sorry I . . .”

“Yes?” Christa asked. “You seem to be having trouble speaking, Daddy. Has the MS caused your throat to constrict again like it did every time I asked you specific questions about your appointments? You know . . . the ones you never wanted me to go to because you didn’t want me to worry. You wanted to spare me from all the dirty details about how much damage the MS was doing to your body, remember? You didn’t wanna put me through what Paw Paw put me through. But I guess that’s the one benefit to all the money I paid for your care. I’ve got access to all the information I need.”

“Christa Belle, you gotta understand. Y’all were pushing me out of your life and I just wanted to be close to you and be a family and . . .”

Christa thought her head was going to explode from the rage building up inside of her. She couldn’t believe Rodney was actually sitting there making what he’d done her fault. She couldn’t believe he was still talking to her as if nothing had changed. She couldn’t believe she’d had the misfortune of having him for a father.

“Okay, look, I know I was wrong. I should’ve been upfront with you, alright? But the way I see it, this was the least you could do after all I’ve done for you. When your mama got pregnant I had to work a job I *hated* just to make sure you had diapers and milk! I got married when I didn’t want to and sacrificed my whole life to make . . .”

Something snapped inside of Christa and without thinking she punched Rodney in his mouth with all the strength she could muster. The impact caused both of his lips to burst and the sharpness of his teeth broke the skin on Christa’s knuckles. Rage and adrenaline prevented her from feeling the pain and she hit him again.

“What the fuck, Christa Belle!” Rodney yelled with blood dripping from his mouth. “Well, don’t just stand there! Get me a towel or something!”

“You must be the stupidest motherfucka alive if you really think I’m gonna *continue* to take care of you! Get out! NOW, Rodney,” she screamed and yanked him by the collar. “Get. The fuck. OUT!”

“What?” Rodney asked, seemingly shocked by her demand. “Where am I supposed to go, Christa? I don’t have anywhere to go . . . *please*, Christa Belle,” he called after her.

She ran upstairs to the guest room where he’d been staying and grabbed the largest of the four boxes she packed. Christa opened the front door and hurled it onto the lawn. She did the same for the remaining three boxes, ignoring Rodney’s pleas. The last one ripped apart and his clothes went flying in every direction.

“What are you *doing*?” Rodney asked when Christa grabbed his keys and wallet from the small table she kept at the front door. “Don’t take my money!”

“It’s actually *my* money and you owe me a lot more than this,” Christa said. She removed three hundred twelve dollars and stuffed it into the pocket of her sweatpants. Then she removed her house and car keys from his key ring and hurled the remaining ones onto the lawn with the rest of his things.

“Now, as I told you . . . get out!”

“I’m not going anywhere! I know the law and you can’t just throw me out like this, Christa Belle. I’ve got rights. You have to give me sufficient notice to vacate the premises, daughter. You can’t just toss me out. So I’m gonna be here at *least* another thirty days,” he informed her, dabbing at his lips with a kitchen towel. “Gone and call the police,” Rodney said when Christa grabbed her purse. He thought she was getting her cell phone but she grabbed her keys instead. “What are you doing?”

Christa walked over to her entertainment unit and grabbed a wooden box. She unlocked it and removed a Ruger 9mm pistol. It was something Ellis insisted she have and he’d taught her how to fire it. Her living alone worried him and he wanted to make sure she knew how to defend herself if need be.

“Consider this your sufficient notice,” Christa said, taking aim at her father. “You *will* be leaving my home today . . . either on your own accord or with my help. You decide.”

Rodney wanted to call her bluff but when he saw the look in Christa’s eyes he knew she wasn’t playing with him. His sweet, tenderhearted daughter had been pushed to the edge by his actions and he had no doubt she’d pull the trigger just for the relief of no longer having to deal with him.

Bruised and bloodied, Rodney ignored the urge to plead with Christa to let him stay and he walked out the front door. She slammed it shut behind him then went to make an icepack for her aching hand. It had begun to swell and Christa wondered if she needed to make a trip to the doctor. Fifteen minutes later, with her hand resembling a catcher’s mitt, there was no question. She called Kaiser’s Urgent Care department to set an appointment rather than going through the hassle of waiting in the emergency room and paying a hundred dollars more for a co-pay.

Through the bathroom window Christa heard Rodney phoning one person after another begging each of them to come for him. No one was interested, but Christa knew if her father got the chance to tell his sisters whatever version of the story he invented they might believe him and decide to act crazy. At the moment, however, they weren't willing to listen. It was only after Rodney's third call to Adrienne that she finally agreed to pick him up. And that was because he threatened to make an anonymous call to her employer. Adrienne couldn't afford to lose her job and they both knew it.

"Hey, Christa, did you get some . . . what happened to *you*?" Madeline asked, looking at her sister's bandaged hand.

"Well, I busted Rodney in his mouth and did a little damage to my hand. I even had to get a tetanus shot just to make sure I don't get infected from his nasty ass, lying mouth!"

"*What?*" Madeline shrieked. Her eyes widened and her heart beat wildly as she listened to every detail of what took place. Even she didn't think Rodney would stoop *that* low. "Why didn't you call me, Christa Belle? You shouldn't have gone through that by yourself? As a matter of fact," Madeline mumbled, as she grabbed her cell phone. "Let me call Ezra just in case Rodney tries to come back. We'll have something for his ignorant ass."

A few hours later Ezra arrived at Madeline's house with Big Bo and his dogs Apollo and Zeus. Big Bo was an avid gun collector and he'd put a handgun *and* a shotgun inside of Ezra's truck. They both hoped using firearms wouldn't be necessary but they were prepared to should the need arise.

After they all hugged and greeted each other, Madeline drove her sister's jeep and the guys followed them to Christa's house. Even though she hated what happened with Rodney, Christa was grateful and very happy to have Madeline, Ezra, Big Bo, and even the dogs in her home. She felt loved and that was what she needed most—to be loved.

Madeline made chicken Alfredo for dinner and her double fudge cupcakes for dessert. Ezra and Big Bo ate like it was the last meal they'd ever eat and that made her blush. The only thing that would've made the evening more perfect was if Aura had been there.

"So I say we get a game of spades going while we're on our stake out," Big Bo teased. "I call Christa Belle for my partner."

Madeline and Ezra looked at each other and smiled. Even with all the craziness that took place during Easter dinner, it was pretty obvious that Big Bo was interested in Christa. From the way she couldn't stop grinning, it seemed the feeling was mutual which surprised Madeline. From the time Christa was sixteen she'd always been attracted to the same type of man, at least six feet tall, muscular,

and handsome. Big Bo was the exact opposite. The thirty-seven year old was only an inch taller than Christa, he was thin, and handsome wasn't exactly a word anyone would use to describe him. Bo looked odd. And his oddity sort of made him cute, in a weird way. Madeline described him as a Charm's Blow Pop--big round head, and stick-like body. Christa thought that was mean but she laughed about it every time she saw him.

Big Bo's personality definitely made him more attractive. He was funny, witty, and very entertaining. Animated was the best way to describe his mannerism because he talked with his hands and had a dance to go with everything he said. It was nothing for him to burst out with a Michael Jackson move as his way of putting an exclamation mark at the end of his sentence. It was impossible not to laugh when Big Bo was around and both Madeline and Christa liked him very much.

Aside from him not being Christa's type, Madeline worried that the two of them becoming romantically involved could make things weird for her and Ezra. There was no way Madeline wouldn't be affected by things Christa shared about Big Bo and she imagined the same might be true for Ezra learning things about her sister. It could get messy, especially if one of their relationships didn't work out. Initially Madeline thought getting involved with Big Bo might help Christa get over Ellis. The more she thought about it, however, the more she felt it was probably best if the two of them left each other alone. Yet, the more Big Bo and Christa laughed and talked with one another the more likely it seemed that something was going to happen between them.

"Just be warned, Big Bo. Christa gets competitive and she'll turn on you if you lose," Madeline teased.

"Then we'll make the perfect team because I *always* play to win. So you and Ez might wanna get some towels to dry off because we're about to mop the floor with you!"

Ezra and Madeline laughed as they took their seats across from one another at the kitchen table. The four of them talked smack for hours and truly enjoyed each other's company.

"So, Christa, Baby Doll tells me you're a fund raiser for children's hospitals. I think that's wonderful. And you know I'm always looking for a good cause to support."

"Yeah, Madeline said you're very charitable."

There was an awkward silence. Ezra was waiting for Christa to tell him about her organization and try to convince him to contribute money to it. Then it occurred to him that she might feel weird since he was her sister's boyfriend. So Ezra explained that he was all for helping family hoping that would put Christa more at ease. Still she said nothing. And when he asked her specific questions, she

didn't seem as knowledgeable as he thought she should've been. Something was definitely off, but Ezra decided to change the subject. They continued to laugh and talk but he couldn't shake the feeling that Christa was hiding something.

It was almost one o'clock in the morning when Madeline announced that she was tired and ready to go to bed.

"Okay, well let me tuck my baby doll in and then I'll be back," Ezra said to Big Bo. The two of them decided to keep watch just in case Rodney and his family decided to come over in the middle of the night.

"Take your time, man," Big Bo chuckled. "I'll let you know if anything goes down. Besides, I was hoping to spend some time with this lovely young lady here," he smiled at Christa.

She blushed. "Good night, Mad and Ezra. We'll see y'all later." The two of them went upstairs to the guestroom. "So can I get you some coffee?" Christa asked Big Bo.

"Sure, I'd love some."

Christa and Bo spent the next three hours on her couch telling each other about themselves. They seemed to have a lot in common and grew more intrigued the more they talked. It was refreshing for Christa to have a man interested in her again. Big Bo made her feel desired, sexy, and vibrant. And as the hours ticked by he also made her feel horny.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when Christa and Bo awoke to the smell of frying bacon. They both fell asleep on the couch in the positions they were in while talking. Big Bo groaned and tried to stretch his neck but it hurt from being in such an awkward position. The same was true for Christa's back.

"Well, good morning," Madeline said from the kitchen. "Y'all had a long night, huh? That was so cute, y'all fell asleep holding hands. Awww. Are you hungry?"

Both Christa and Big Bo nodded, not wanting to offend the other with a whiff of morning breath. She gave him fresh towels and a toothbrush to clean up in the guest bathroom while she did the same in her room. Twenty minutes later the two of them joined Madeline and Ezra at the kitchen table. They ate and talked for a while before the men had to leave. Christa and Madeline hugged and kissed them both, genuinely grateful for their love and protection.

"That's a good man," Christa said once Ezra and Big Bo were gone.

"And which man would that be?" Madeline asked.

Christa just smiled as she made her way upstairs, her thoughts on Big Bo.

CHAPTER NINE

Friday, June 3rd, Avis checked her messages and was surprised to hear several from Deidra. She tried to sound casual but it was obvious Deidra was upset that Madeline hadn't returned any of her calls and didn't seem to want anything to do with her. Avis asked Madeline what was going on between them but the answer she gave was very vague. So Avis decided to return Deidra's call to see if she'd be more forthcoming. She wasn't.

"So do you think things are really that serious between Madeline and Ezra?"

"I guess you'll have to ask Mad," Avis said then changed the subject to her mess of a relationship with DeMarco. She talked for almost an hour straight sharing one horror story after another about the abuse she suffered at his hands and how hard it was to get away from him.

"Humph, I guess I must've misunderstood because I could've sworn you said you'd never been hit by a man and would never stand for it," Deidra stated.

"Hmm? Uhm . . . oh, girl, I was just embarrassed to admit the truth, that's all. I didn't want y'all to know how weak I was and how . . . oh, I gotta go," Avis said. Her guest had arrived. "I'll talk to you later, girl."

"Uh, okay well, I'm glad *I* didn't need to talk about anything."

"Okay then," she said then disconnected the call, either unaware of or unconcerned with Deidra's hurt feelings.

Avis gave her breasts a lift so they protruded even more out of the leopard print corset she squeezed herself in to. It was two sizes too small and nearly cut off her circulation but Avis didn't care. The plan was for her twenty-seven-year old lover to see it then rip it from her body.

"Hey, baby, I've . . ." Avis's breath caught in her throat. She sent Grant a text inviting him to her apartment and assumed he was the one knocking on her door. She did not expect to find Lee Stafford standing there.

"Aw looky, looky Daddy found a cookie," the sixty-three year old sang, admiring Avis's body. "You plump in all the right places, baby. Umm, won't you let Daddy get a little bite of that," Lee said, as he gripped Avis's enormous breasts.

Trying to keep the repulsion she felt from showing on her face proved difficult. Avis felt sick to her stomach as she stared at her unwanted visitor. There were traces of the attractive man Lee once was, but years of hard living had taken its toll. His five-foot, four-inch, one hundred ten pound frame looked feeble and gaunt because of his stooped shoulders and bird-like physique. And his dark skin looked and felt like leather. Years of smoking unfiltered cigarettes left his lips black and his eyes yellowed and jaundiced looking. The smell of smoke and gin

was ever present and Avis found herself holding her breath a lot when Lee was around. She couldn't stand him, but she loved his money. And Lee was nothing if not generous with his cash—for a price.

Avis met him a few years ago when he was hospitalized with pneumonia. During his two-week stay they talked often and he learned about her financial troubles. Avis broke down crying on the day Lee was discharged saying she received an eviction notice and didn't know how she was going to pay her rent.

"Oh, darling, I hate to see a pretty young thang like you struggling. How much you need?" Lee had asked and returned a few hours later with four hundred dollars. He handed it to her then quickly snatched it away. "Now what you gone do for me, darling?"

Desperately in need of the money, Avis agreed to have sex with Lee on two separate occasions. It wasn't supposed to go any further than that but the next time she found herself in a jam she called Lee. Then Avis started calling him when she wanted a new purse she couldn't afford or money to go on vacation. It got easier to endure having sex with him for a short while in order to get what she wanted. However since his wife died four months ago, Lee began dropping by unannounced expecting her to service him whenever he wanted. Avis couldn't stand it but if she wanted the money to plan her birthday party, she'd have to grin and bear it.

Avis lit a cigarette as she walked to the small kitchenette to make Lee a gin and tonic. She downed two shots of bourbon and was preparing another when he joined her.

"You know what I *really* want," Lee said, as he unzipped his pants and revealed his large penis. "Gone and get some of that right quick," he grinned from ear to ear displaying a mouth full of yellow, rotting teeth.

I know this motherfucka didn't even bother to wash his ass, she thought bitterly before taking another shot and dropping to her knees.

After getting off the phone with Avis, Deidra turned her attention to Peter. He'd been waiting nearly thirty minutes to speak to her and his annoyance was obvious. Peter had grown tired of the way his wife treated him. He knew he hurt Deidra and spent the last year doing everything he could to make it up to her, including leaving his position at a college fifteen minutes away from their home to take one almost an hour away so he would have no further contact with the colleague with whom he had the affair. Peter had gone to therapy, church, and every other place he thought would help him and Deidra put their marriage back together. And all he got from her was anger.

Deidra Walters and Peter Banks met at a house party in 1991, their senior year in college.

“Excuse me,” Peter had said, extending his hand to Deidra. “I figured I should come over here and introduce myself since you and I are gonna be married for the next sixty or seventy years,” he’d smiled.

“Is that so?” Deidra giggled.

They hit it off immediately even though everyone else viewed them as an unlikely couple. Deidra was always so militant and pro-Black that none of her friends would have ever imagined her being with a White man, and a short one at that. Peter was five-feet, eight-inches and a fit one hundred sixty pounds. Deidra was six-feet, one-inch in her bare feet but she rarely went anywhere without her four-inch heels so she towered over him. They were often teased for looking more like mother and son than boyfriend and girlfriend. Neither of them seemed to care, though. Peter and Deidra liked each other a lot and that was all that mattered.

There was never a question as to why Deidra liked him. Peter was a really cool, down-to-earth guy who described himself as a Black man trapped in a White man’s body. He’d grown up around Blacks so his mannerism, speaking pattern, and body gestures were like those of the people who influenced him most. If there were such a thing as sounding Black then Peter definitely did. Though, some people initially took offense to him thinking he was mimicking and making fun of them. It only took a few minutes of being around Peter to know he was just being himself. He genuinely liked the music, the food, and the swagger associated with Black culture, particularly the women. What he saw in Deidra? Now that was a question no one could answer.

Where Peter was laid back and easy going, Deidra was uptight and edgy. He was generous and thoughtful. She was brash and insensitive. And where Peter was affectionate and loving, Deidra was cold and stand-offish. Based on things such as those, no one thought the relationship would last more than a few weeks. So three years later they were not only shocked to find the two of them still together but that Peter proposed to Deidra in front of everyone on a group camping trip.

During the year leading up to their wedding many family members and friends commented on how different Deidra was and that true love had changed her. Peter disagreed. The loving, sweet, generous woman they were just beginning to recognize was the one he saw all along. It was her tumultuous home life as a child and painful relationships as a young adult that made Deidra put up walls for self-protection. Peter, however, always saw past them into her heart and who she really was deep down inside.

For sixteen of their twenty years together Peter and Deidra were genuinely happy. It was only in the last four that things took a turn for the worst. Their biggest problem was Deidra’s sudden obsession with work. Both she and Peter had always loved their jobs, he as a law professor and she as a bank manager. And their salaries afforded them a great life. They were able to buy a nice four-bedroom,

two-bath, and three-car garage home in Fremont. They took vacations every year, were active participants in the social scene, and had an overall wonderful life. Then all of a sudden that wasn't good enough for Deidra. Everything became about getting a bigger house or newer cars or taking the most expensive vacations. She became materialistic in a way Peter had never seen and didn't find attractive in the least bit.

Unable to afford the lifestyle she wanted, Deidra began investing in one get-rich-quick scheme after another. Everything was about money. Spending time with Peter was low on her list of priorities and he grew lonely and desperate for affection. It had been almost two months since he and Deidra made love when Jennifer invited him out for drinks. Peter knew he shouldn't have gone but the thought of spending another night alone didn't appeal to him. So he and his beautiful, twenty-eight year old colleague went for dinner and drinks at her apartment. They had sex that night.

Eaten up with guilt, Peter tried to break things off with Jennifer the next week at work. He was in the middle of telling her how sorry he was and what a huge mistake he made when she kissed him. Peter told her to stop but his body responded to her touch and they had sex on his desk. Afterwards he apologized again and told her their little fling was done. Peter still loved Deidra dearly and he didn't want to lose her.

Peter cried during the drive home, so ashamed of what he'd done. All he wanted to do was shower and go to bed until he could figure out how to handle the situation. Peter's heart nearly stopped when he opened the garage and found Deidra's car parked inside. The one time he didn't want her home, she was there. And as soon as Peter walked through the door she threw her arms around him and cried. He had no idea why she was crying but he held on to her and sobbed too.

Deidra was close to hysteria when she told Peter about the horrible car accident she witnessed. A woman lost her husband and the sound of her heartbreak was unbearable. It was enough to snap Deidra back to her senses and she realized she'd taken Peter for granted.

"I love you so much, baby, and I'm sorry I haven't been here for you like I should've," Deidra had said. She kissed Peter passionately and began undressing him when he told her he needed to take a shower. Deidra took a step back and stared at him momentarily. "Why would you need to take a shower, Peter? Since when does teaching class make you work up a sweat?" she'd asked, eying him suspiciously. "Why the fuck do you need to take a shower, Peter?" His answer broke their marriage beyond repair.

Peter couldn't believe he and Deidra were having yet another argument over something as simple as him asking her to dinner. He was tired of being punished.

There were no more ways Peter could apologize or prove to Deidra how sorry he was.

“What are you still so damn mad about, Deidra? I’ve bent over backwards and put up with all kinds of shit trying to make things right but all you ever are is angry! When are you gonna get tired of being mad?” Peter snapped.

“Well, you know what they say . . . behind every angry woman is a stupid ass man,” Deidra sneered.

“Is that what they say?” Peter glared at her. “Well, I’ll tell you what. From now on you don’t have to worry about me being behind you, in front of you, or anywhere around you. I’m done! As soon as humanly possible you’ll have your divorce and then you’ll be free to fuck the dude you been tipping with!”

“*What?*”

“Yeah, I know you think I’m stupid but I promise you I’m not. A man knows when his woman is fucking somebody else and you most certainly are. So don’t try to look shocked like you don’t have any idea what I’m talking about. I know you, Deidra, and I know you’re not getting all dolled up just to meet your friends. You’re not spending money like it’s going out of style so you can be around a bunch of women. You think you slick but I know you use Madeline and Christa ‘nem as a cover for what you really doing.”

“No, I’m not! I haven’t . . .”

“Save it, Deidra. It really doesn’t matter at this point. You’ve made it abundantly clear you don’t wanna be married to me and I’m not gonna waste another minute of my life trying to change your mind,” Peter stated, as he headed towards the front door.

“Peter, wait,” she said, reaching out to stop him from leaving. He turned to face her. “I swear to you I haven’t been with another man since I first met you. I thought about it as a way to pay you back but I didn’t because I still love you, Peter. I do. I just don’t know how to trust you again,” Deidra cried. “I never thought you would do this to me.”

Peter laid his head on her chest and wrapped his arms around her waist. Deidra wrapped her arms around his shoulders and they stood in the living room sobbing.

“I’m so sorry,” Peter cried. “I’m so, *so* sorry, baby. I never meant to hurt you and I’ll do anything to fix our marriage. I love you, Deidra.”

“I love you too.”

Peter reached up to kiss her lips and their desire for each other grew urgent. He unbuckled the belt around her waist and flung it across the room before tearing at the zipper on her skirt. Deidra unbuttoned his shirt, as they continued to kiss each other passionately. Before long they were naked and Peter backed her up to

the couch and fell on top of her. Everything was hot and steamy and then all at once, Deidra shut down.

“Open up for me, baby,” Peter whispered. “Please.” He was prepared and eager to taste her but Deidra wouldn’t part her legs. “What’s wrong?”

She covered her face with her hands trying to hide her tears and all the insecurities she felt. When Peter sat up on the couch she knew he was frustrated and probably feeling punished. Deidra wanted to tell him how his affair affected her but couldn’t find the words. She believed Peter had been with Jennifer because she was younger, smaller, and prettier. She was certain the woman didn’t have sagging skin on her neck, graying hair on her vagina, or drooping breasts that hung down to her navel. Deidra had all of those things despite all of the energy she put into keeping herself fit. There were some parts of aging that diet and exercise didn’t prevent.

After much coaxing, Peter was finally able to get Deidra to tell him why she was so upset. “Baby, are you serious? I told you before I ain’t tripping off *none* of that stuff. Look,” he said, opening his legs wide, “my shit’s gray too! It might not be as obvious next to my pale ass skin, but trust me, it’s gray,” Peter said, as he lifted his scrotum for her to get a good look. “And look at this old man shit here,” he said pointing at the gray hairs sticking out of his ear and nose. “I don’t know what kind of indestructible, Teflon type bullshit this is made out of but I’ve tried to shave em, tweeze em, and even burn em off and these hairs won’t go *anywhere*!”

Deidra laughed because she had gone to extremes such as those too. And she decided to share them. It felt good to be close to Peter again. She couldn’t recall the last time they laughed together and she realized how much she missed it. Her laughter grew to a roar when he pointed to his bald head.

“Remember that beautiful, silky black hair I used to have? I tell everyone else I went bald as a fashion statement but you know the truth. That stuff started thinning before I even turned thirty. And I refused to do that comb-over mess or walk around looking like Bozo, so I cut it off,” Peter laughed, rubbing his head. “What I’m trying to say is I don’t expect you to look like the twenty-one year old I met all those years ago. I don’t look the same so why would you? But I’m not tripping about the changes, Deidra. I loved your body twenty years ago and I love it now, just the way it is. All I’ve ever wanted is to grow old with you,” he smiled. “I still think you’re the finest brown sugar I’ve ever seen.

“What I did was a stupid, horrible mistake that had absolutely *nothing* to do with me not wanting or being attracted to you. I was lonely and I made a bad choice that I regret more than anything,” Peter said, his eyes filling with tears. “I’m sorry, Deidra. I’m sorrier than you’ll ever know.”

Deidra leaned over to kiss him. Then she led Peter to their bedroom where they made love for the first time in almost a year. It was passionate, fulfilling, and

everything Deidra needed and wanted. It was perfect. The only thing that could ruin their newfound happiness was if Peter found out the truth. Deidra *had* been sleeping with someone else just as he suspected.

CHAPTER TEN

Madeline had just come home from a meeting with her new lawyer when she heard a knock on the front door. She looked out of the peephole and was surprised to see Ezra. He wasn't supposed to be there with Aura for another four hours.

"Hey," she said, instantly realizing something was wrong. "Baby, are you okay? What's wrong?" Ezra stared at her with a scowl on his face but he didn't say a word. *Oh god, he knows*, Madeline panicked. "Ezra, baby . . ."

He walked past her inside the house then closed the door and pressed her against it. Even though he was still silent and scowling, Madeline saw a hint of playfulness in his eyes. She breathed a deep sigh of relief and decided to play along. With his big body only inches from hers she slowly unzipped her form-fitting denim dress, making sure his eyes followed.

"Tell me what's wrong, Big Bear," she purred, revealing her royal blue seamless panty and matching push-up bra.

"You got me turned the fuck out. That's what's wrong," Ezra said, as he watched Madeline's dress fall from her body. A huge smile spread across her face. "Oh, so you find that amusing? You think it's funny for me to be in a boardroom full of executives with a hard-on because I can't stop thinking about being inside of you? Hmm?" he groaned, watching as she unhooked and removed her bra. "Oh, god, I want you *so* bad."

"You can have me, baby. I'm all yours," she whispered, undoing his pants at lightning speed.

Ezra lifted Madeline, pushed her panty to the side, and entered her all within a matter of seconds. Grunts and groans filled the living room as they made love against the front door. It didn't take long for both of them to reach a thunderous climax and they leaned into each other, panting, until their heart rates returned to normal.

"Look what you do to me," Ezra whispered.

"Look what you do to *me*. I'm the one who's got splinters in my ass from getting buck wild up against this wooden door," Madeline laughed.

Ezra pulled her away from the door and gently stroked her back as she kept her legs wrapped tightly around him. It was only after Madeline reassured him she'd only been joking about the splinters that he put her down.

"That was *great*."

"Umm huh," Madeline moaned. Despite him having to get back to work, she kissed and fondled Ezra until the heat between them reignited.

"See, this is the kind of behavior I'm talking about," he grinned before lowering Madeline to the couch where they made love again.

Madeline, Aura, Christa, and Tamia had a ball at the sleepover. They did each other's hair and makeup, ate way too much, danced, and talked about boys. Aura told the ladies a story about a boy named Ryan that put them all to shame.

He asked her to the last dance of seventh grade and agreed to meet after school so they could walk in together. Aura waited five minutes and when Ryan didn't show up, she went into the gymnasium and joined her friends. Every ten minutes or so she scanned the room looking for Ryan but he never showed. The next morning he sent Aura a text saying something came up. There was no explanation, no apology, no nothing. So when he plopped down beside her at the lunch table she told him to get lost.

Aura didn't care that he was the cutest, most popular eighth grader at her school. She only cared how he'd treated her. As far as she was concerned Ryan could have sent that text after school when she was standing around waiting for him. And Aura knew she deserved more than "something came up" for an explanation. Her friends thought she was silly for blowing the chance to be Ryan's girlfriend but Aura believed it was his loss.

"Now see, you know it's bad when the *baby* in the room got more sense than the grownups," Madeline said, shaking her head.

"I know, huh? And the sad part about it is that *I* would've given Ryan more chances to walk all over me just because he was cute and popular," Christa admitted. "I'm proud of you, Aura, for knowing you don't have to take that mess from *anybody*. Keep it up, baby girl. That attitude will serve you well as you grow up."

Aura grinned from ear to ear when Madeline, Christa, and Tamia gave her high fives and hugs for what she'd done with Ryan. They made her feel so smart and important and she loved being included in their grownup conversations. More than anything Aura loved the encouragement and respect the women gave her. It made her feel strong and empowered and she wanted to continue to make them proud of her, especially Madeline.

The next day Ezra arrived to get Aura and listened to her talk a mile a minute about how much fun she had. He was thrilled to see her and Madeline get along so well. The two of them were like best friends and Madeline was just as silly and giddy as Aura when they were together.

"Oh, are you coming to my birthday party, Maddie?" Aura asked, as she and her father were leaving. "I know you and my mom don't like each other but I still want you to come, okay? Please?"

Madeline felt about two inches tall. All of the biting comments and snide remarks between her and Prim hadn't been over Aura's head as she believed. The girl was very much aware of the tension between them and that made Madeline

feel bad. She needed to grow up and be a better example to Aura who clearly paid attention to everything she did and said.

“Of course I’ll be at your party, baby. I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Madeline said, after Ezra gave his consent through a nod of his head.

The two of them discussed having a private dinner with Aura the day before her party just as a way to avoid any unnecessary drama. Madeline and Prim couldn’t stand each other and Madeline didn’t want that to get in the way of Aura having the best day of her life. So she was resolved not to attend. However, Aura asking her to be there was something Madeline couldn’t refuse. She and Prim would just have to behave like adults for the birthday girl’s sake.

Madeline and Ezra made a date for Wednesday night before she hugged and kissed him and Aura goodbye. After getting her house tidied, Madeline searched the internet for advice on how to handle uncomfortable situations like the one she’d be facing in a few weeks. Unfortunately everything she read made her angry. Each site she visited basically suggested the ex-girlfriend could do or say whatever she wanted in her own home and the new girlfriend had to grin and bear it.

“Yeah, right,” Madeline mumbled, logging off her computer. For something like that to work she would have to be in much better control of her reactions. Unfortunately she wasn’t good at ignoring people who were being mean or rude to her. So if Prim said or did something crazy then Madeline would retaliate by saying or doing something crazier. Though, that was exactly the type of thing she needed to stop doing—for Aura’s sake.

Wednesday, June 8th turned out to be an extremely stressful day at the office for Ezra. So instead of cooking a romantic dinner at home, he asked Madeline to meet him at one of his favorite restaurants in Pleasanton close to where he worked. She immediately felt underdressed when she pulled into the parking lot and saw the intricate and ornate design of the building. The impeccably attired valet and wait staff only added to Madeline’s insecurity.

“Why didn’t you tell me this place was so fancy?” she whispered to Ezra as they waited to be seated. “I would’ve worn something a lot more elegant than this,” Madeline said of the black dress slacks and white, silk blouse she wore.

“You look absolutely stunning,” Ezra beamed before embracing her in a warm hug. “You’re the most elegant thing in here.”

The two of them talked about work throughout most of dinner, Ezra’s fight to keep one of his biggest clients from going to his competitor and Madeline’s search for the perfect location for her inn. He really enjoyed talking to her in such detail about his work. Madeline had a good head for business and always offered sound, thoughtful input. If she wasn’t so dedicated to her bed and breakfast Ezra would’ve offered her a position at his company.

Madeline recognized that he was becoming more stressed and decided to change the subject. She wanted Ezra to laugh and relax so she filled him in on the drama happening with her friends and their dating lives. He laughed a lot about that.

"I need your opinion about something," Ezra said after they ordered dessert. "I have this idea for Aura's birthday gift but I'm not sure if she's too young to really grasp what it means."

"What is it?" Madeline asked.

"I wanna get her a ring, sort of like a purity ring, I guess. But more than anything I want her to understand why I'm giving it to her. I envision myself telling Aura how beautiful and special she is and how she deserves the best this world has to offer, including the man she allows into her heart. Naturally I want him to be someone who truly loves and respects her but I want her to wait for the one who's willing to replace the ring I put on her finger and . . . Baby Doll, what's wrong?" Ezra asked when she burst into tears.

Madeline cried so hard she couldn't speak. Ezra moved to her side of the booth and took her into his arms. A few minutes passed before she was able to tell him what made her cry.

"I think the ring is a *wonderful* gift that Aura will treasure for the rest of her life," she said, wiping her face with a napkin.

The server returned with Tiramisu and a slice of German chocolate cake. He asked if everything was okay, alarmed by the way Madeline was crying.

"Everything's fine. I just happen to be sitting here with the world's most loving, most incredible man," she smiled sweetly and squeezed Ezra's hand.

"Aw, that's so sweet," the server said then left the two of them alone.

Ezra caressed Madeline's face and softly kissed her lips. "You alright, Baby Doll?" he asked, gently rubbing his thumb across her cheek.

"I'm really touched by what you're planning to do for Aura. And I wonder if you understand the impact that will have on her life. Having her father show her what she's worth . . ." Madeline trailed off, as more tears poured down her face. "You have no idea the type of heartache you're sparing her from. Aura won't be out there dating men old enough to be her father because she's searching for that type of love. She won't need to do things she doesn't wanna do to make a man stay with her. And she sure as hell won't need to use her looks to get what she wants from men because her father made her think that's all she's good for." Madeline choked on her sobs. "Aura's not even thirteen yet and she already knows she doesn't have to put up with shit from *any* boy no matter how cute or popular he is because her daddy taught her she's worth more than that."

Ezra's eyes filled with tears as he embraced Madeline and let her cry in his arms. Since he'd known her all she ever showed was her anger and hatred for her

father. Until that moment, Ezra hadn't realized just how much and how deeply Rodney had wounded her. He hadn't understood that so many of Madeline's experiences with men were directly related to the role Rodney Stiles played in her life. Ezra held her tight, wishing there was a way to remove all the pain she still carried in her heart.

He had the server put their uneaten dessert into a carry-out box, paid the bill, and had Madeline follow him home. Ezra was supposed to spend the night working, but tending to her was much more important to him. Without a word he led Madeline to his bedroom. Ezra quickly undressed himself then slowly removed her clothing as he kissed and caressed her.

"I love you *so* much, Baby Doll," he whispered, holding her close as they stood in front of his bed. "And I know I can't undo the past, but I'm hoping you'll let me love your hurt away. Let me make your heart whole again."

"*Please*," Madeline cried, surrendering her heart to him.

They lay together in Ezra's bed where he touched a part of her that she always kept hidden—that painful place of her heart where men like Rodney Stiles and Rory Michaels resided. It was something Madeline thought would always be a part of her life but that night Ezra showed her it didn't have to be. As they lay skin to skin, heartbeat to heartbeat, he encouraged her to release all of the pain, devastation, and betrayal she endured. Madeline let out a groan from somewhere deep inside of her and the tears continued to pour.

"It's okay, Baby Doll. I got you," Ezra cooed, as he rocked her in his arms. "Just let it all out, baby. I got you."

Madeline did just that. She cried for the better part of an hour, holding tightly to Ezra, trusting him in a way she'd never trusted a man. He wiped the last of her tears, kissed her forehead, and encouraged Madeline to sleep. She was surprised, expecting Ezra to want sex but he assured her it wasn't about that. Within minutes she drifted off into a deep, peaceful slumber.

It was nearly four o'clock in the morning when Madeline awoke. She smiled at the feel of Ezra's arms still securely wrapped around her. She kissed his neck and then his lips to rouse him.

"Be careful," Ezra mumbled in response to the sensual way she touched him. "You about to get something started."

Madeline smiled and put all of her time and energy into pleasuring him. She wanted to thank Ezra and show him how much she loved him for what he'd done. No one had ever looked past her anger to see the tremendous amount of hurt she harbored. Yet Ezra had not only seen it, but was willing to do whatever Madeline needed to finally be free of it. She didn't have to be pretty and perfect and well put together with him. Ezra saw her at the rawest, ugliest, messiest place she'd ever been emotionally and he loved her through it.

"I love you, Big Bear," Madeline said after collapsing on top of him.

"Umm uh, don't try to act all loving and sweet after that hurting you just put on me. You 'bout to get it," Ezra teased, as he rolled her over and inflicted the same sweet torture she inflicted upon him. "I love you too, Baby Doll," he said, as they lay spent and thoroughly satisfied.

Friday afternoon Ezra and Madeline had breakfast and then she joined him at the jeweler to help choose Aura's ring. Before they went inside he asked if she was okay. Madeline assured him she was fine and promised not to do any of the hysterical crying she'd done a few nights prior. Even though she was jealous that she hadn't experienced something so precious with Rodney, Madeline was thrilled that Aura got to with Ezra.

They took their time looking for the perfect ring and Madeline was shocked by the ones Ezra chose. They were either wildly inappropriate for a girl Aura's age or the ugliest things in the world.

"Big Bear, look at this thing," Madeline said, as she held up the gaudiest ring she'd ever seen. "You can't seriously be considering this."

"It is big, huh? And it's only going to look worst in a size twelve."

"A size *twelve*! Geez, Ezra, how big do you think Aura's fingers are? *You* probably wear a twelve but I'm guessing she's about a four. I'm a size six and her hands are a little smaller than mine."

"Sir, can you measure her finger so she'll see that there's no way she's a size six," Ezra said to the jeweler. "The lowest I'll go is a ten."

"I've been in this business a long time and I can look at her hand and see that she's definitely a size seven," the jeweler, Mr. Alvarez said.

"Excuse me, but I've been buying my own rings for years and I think I know what size I wear. Here, use those measuring rings so y'all both can see that I'm a size *six*," Madeline said, as she extended her left hand for Mr. Alvarez to measure her finger.

"Well, I'll be," he said, with a sheepish look. "She *is* a size six."

Ezra took the measuring rings and inspected them, still unwilling to admit he was wrong. Madeline laughed and shook her head at how prideful men were.

The two of them continued to look for Aura's ring and Madeline chose one she thought was really pretty. Mr. Alvarez removed it from the case and described it as a ten karat, white gold cluster ring with round brilliant cut diamonds. Madeline whistled when he quoted the sale price at seven hundred dollars. She was stunned when Ezra said he'd take it. She thought it was way too expensive for a thirteen-year old, especially one who constantly misplaced her things. Mary Brock often said her granddaughter would forget her head if it wasn't attached to her body. And there were plenty of instances that Madeline had to return Aura's things

after she left them at her place. Yet, those were jackets, books, and other impersonal things. Something as special as a ring from Ezra might be the one thing Aura never forgot. However, seven hundred dollars was still a bit steep in Madeline's opinion.

"What are you thinking, Baby Doll?" Ezra asked, noticing the conflicted look on her face.

"Oh, well, I don't know if it's really my place to say."

"Your *place*?" he frowned. "I'm asking you what you think, Madeline."

Uh oh. "Okay, okay, don't get irritated with me. I just think seven hundred dollars is a bit much. I wouldn't have even been looking at those rings if I knew they cost that much."

Ezra smiled and that confused Madeline. "Well, thank you. I'd like to know my woman wouldn't just sit by and let me make a mistake."

"So you're playing games with me now? *Testing* me?" she snapped.

"Oh, no, Baby . . ."

"So what would've happened if I hadn't said anything? That would've been like a strike against me or something? And how many of these strikes do I get before you decide you don't wanna be with me and . . ."

"Whoa, hold on," Ezra said, as he grabbed Madeline's hands. He planted kisses on them both. "I'm sorry, Baby Doll. I certainly didn't mean for things to go left like *that*. I'm sorry, okay? And you're right I shouldn't have been testing you. I wanna know that you'll always be straight up with me but I shouldn't have gone about it like that. I'm really sorry," he said, planting a soft kiss on her lips. "I'm sorry, okay? So can you relax this fighting stance you're in? You look seconds away from kicking me in my throat."

Madeline burst out laughing which was a huge relief to Ezra and Mr. Alvarez. The truth was Ezra had already chosen Aura's ring. He brought Madeline there to get her size and find out what type of rings she liked. He was planning to propose and wanted to make sure his future bride had exactly what she wanted. Initially Ezra thought of having Christa help him but he didn't think she could keep it a secret. So he brought the jeweler in on his scheme and was horrified by how close he came to ruining the whole thing.

Ezra pointed to the two-hundred dollar ring he'd already bought for Aura hoping Madeline liked it. She did and the jeweler went through the ruse of charging Ezra's credit card. The next part of the plan was for Ezra to step outside to take a business call while Madeline looked around the store. Mr. Alvarez was then supposed to show her earrings, necklaces, and rings, paying close attention to the ring she loved most. Ezra would return the next day to order it and go through with the rest of his plans to make his proposal perfect. Thankfully, everything went according to plan and Madeline unwittingly picked a beautiful ring. One with a

whopping price tag of twenty-five thousand, seven hundred thirty nine dollars. Mr. Alvarez, figuring Ezra would be a loyal customer, sold it to him for twenty thousand.

During the ride back to Ezra's house he received a call from Prim. She wanted to know if he could pick Aura up from school as opposed to coming by the house to get her later that evening. He told her it was no problem and that he would move some meetings around to make sure he was there on time. Curious, Ezra asked if everything was okay. The last time Prim asked him to get Aura from school was three years ago when she had a doctor's appointment that couldn't be rescheduled. Her pap-smear came back abnormal and they wanted to run more tests to make sure she didn't have cervical cancer. Thankfully, it was just a false reading.

"Yeah, everything's great," Prim stated. "Uhm, I actually have a date."

"Uh oh, check you out, Ms. Richardson," Ezra chuckled. "I'm happy for you, though. I hope you have a wonderful time and that he turns out to be someone special."

"Thanks, I hope so too . . . who are you talking to?" she asked when he repeated to someone that she had a date.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Madeline and I just came from getting Aura's gift and I told her the good news about your date. She said congratulations and good luck."

"Yeah okay, well I just wanted to see if you could get Aura. I'll have her overnight bag waiting in the office for her to get after school. Talk to you later. Bye," Prim said then hung up before Ezra could say anything else.

"Congratulations and good luck," she snorted.

Prim hoped Ezra would be jealous, but instead he seemed genuinely excited and couldn't wait to tell Madeline her personal business. It annoyed her that the woman was always around. Prim called her sister Prissy and they had a long discussion about it. They both were curious as to when Madeline went to work or if she had a job at all. That led to more speculation about her finances and the disturbing realization that Ezra may have been providing for her. Prim had a field day with that saying how she would never let a man take care of her because she worked hard and had her own. Prissy knew her sister well enough to know the idea of Ezra taking care of Madeline hurt her. Throughout their relationship he'd been very generous but it was always for Aura's benefit, not necessarily Prim's. Ezra bought gifts for her birthday and for Mother's Day but she never received any of the special, intimate ones a man gives the woman he loves—like the ones he couldn't stop giving to Madeline.

"Don't even worry about it, sis. Gone and get your hair and nails done and pick out a fabulous dress for your date this evening. This could be your chance at

real happiness so don't let Ezra and Madeline put a damper on it. Be excited for the possibilities, okay?"

"You're right," Prim smiled. "You're absolutely right."

By four o'clock that afternoon Prim was a nervous wreck. Suddenly, everything was wrong. She no longer liked the curls the stylist put in her silky, black hair and thought it would look better straight. Prim began to question whether the black dress she once thought was fabulous was too sexy and gave off the wrong impression. She complained and critiqued herself to the point of tears.

"Prim, stop. You look beautiful and Chase will be pinching himself wondering how he ever got so lucky," Prissy said, as she dabbed at her sister's tears. "Now get yourself together, okay? He'll be here any minute."

While Prim refreshed her makeup Prissy went downstairs to wait for the mystery man to arrive. She hadn't said so to Prim but she was really nervous about the date. It was Prissy's idea for her to look into online dating but she hadn't really expected Prim to meet someone that way. Prissy was scared to death that the incredibly handsome, successful man her sister had been communicating with for the past month wouldn't be the same person who showed up at her front door.

"Oh god," Prissy mumbled when a car pulled into the driveway. "Well, that's a good start. He's the same person from the picture. Prim!" she yelled, opening the front door. "Your date's here!" *Damn he's fine!*

"Why are you down here screaming like that? Move," Prim fussed, nudging her sister out of the way. "Well, hello there. It's nice to finally meet you," she smiled at the handsome man before her. "Did you find the house okay?"

"Woow! You look *amazing*." They stared at each other momentarily. "These are for you," he said then handed her a beautifully wrapped two-dozen bouquet of lilac roses.

"Thank you so much. These are beautiful," Prim smiled, as she accepted the flowers. She smelled them then blushed at the way he looked at her.

"Okay, I have to admit that I was a little nervous coming here. I kept thinking there was no way a woman could be as beautiful as the one in those pictures you sent. But I stand corrected. Those photos look like mug shots in comparison to how exquisite you are in person. You take my breath away, Blue."

Prissy frowned at first then she remembered Prim telling her that they called each other by their screen names. His was Chase the Dream so Prim called him Chase. And hers was Ocean Blue, because of the color of her eyes, and he called her Blue.

"Alright, I'm sold!" Prissy shouted. "He's tall, fine, and we know he ain't cheap since he was willing to shell out a few hundred dollars on your flowers."

Prim closed her eyes and shook her head, so embarrassed. She pulled Prissy into the doorway and linked their arms. “This loud woman here is my sister Prissy Anderson. Prissy this attractive young man is Sidney Reid.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

June 18th, Aura's thirteenth birthday, was a beautiful, sunny day. The weather in Fremont was perfect at seventy-eight degrees and Prim couldn't have been more excited. She wanted Aura's party to be wonderful and things were getting off to a great start. Prissy and their younger sister Proper owned a catering company and took on the responsibility of cooking all the food so Prim could enjoy every minute of the day with her daughter. She had a huge surprise for Aura and couldn't wait to see the look on her face. A very talented singing trio out of Oakland named Storm had grown quite popular throughout the Bay Area and was Aura's and her friends' favorite group. The fact that they were three of the cutest fourteen-year-old boys only increased their popularity with teenage girls. And Prim could only imagine how ecstatic Aura would be to have Storm serenade her.

Tears filled Prim's eyes when her baby girl came down the stairs. She couldn't believe it had already been thirteen years since that beautiful creature entered her life and showed her what it meant to truly love someone.

"Mom, you promised," Aura said, trying to keep her own tears from falling.

"I know, I know," Prim said, as she fanned her face.

She cried like Aura was in her wedding gown when they went to choose the perfect birthday dress; a yellow, strapless, beaded neckline with rouched bodice and A-line skirt cocktail dress. She looked so beautiful and grown up that Prim couldn't help herself. Seeing Aura with her hair in a messy prom updo, lip gloss, and the silver two-inch heels they chose only made Prim want to cry more.

"You're such a beautiful young lady and I'm *so* proud of you, Aura. I love you."

"I love you too, Mom, now please stop being all emotional, okay? This is a fun day, right?"

"Right," Prim said, wiping tears from her face. "It's gonna be a *great* day."

Soon after, Aura's best friends Alexa and Janie arrived. She wanted them to come early so they'd have time to hang out before everyone else arrived for the party. Prim didn't know why girls had to scream about everything but the earsplitting shrills started the moment the three of them got a look at each other. They were talking a mile a minute and screaming and giggling that it was hard to make out what either of them were saying. Aura was happy, though, and that's all that mattered to Prim.

She left the girls to their frantic conversation to get ready for the party. As Prim made her way upstairs to the bedroom, she heard her cell phone ringing. A smile spread across her face when she saw the name Chase flash across the screen.

"Hey, you."

“Oh, hey, what’s up? I didn’t expect you to answer. I figured you would be too busy putting all the finishing touches on your daughter’s party,” Sidney said. “I had planned to leave you a message letting you know I was thinking about you and that I hope everything turns out wonderful today.”

“Aw, thank you. That’s so thoughtful and sweet,” she blushed. “I’ve been thinking a lot about you too. I really did have a great time on our date. I’m hoping to have another one soon if that’s okay with you.”

“It’s more than okay. Just name the time and place.”

“Well, Aura will be with her dad next weekend so maybe we can do something then.”

“Wow, we’re making progress, huh? I’ve been upgraded from ‘my daughter’ to an actual name,” Sidney laughed. “That’s pretty . . . Aura.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to offend you. It’s just that being a single mom I have to be careful about . . .”

“I was only teasing, Blue. I totally understand your protectiveness over your daughter. I wouldn’t expect anything less. Things are going well between us but this is still very new and we need time to build and see where it’s going. Meeting Aura is a huge step, one that shouldn’t be taken too quickly.”

Every time Prim spoke to Sidney she grew fonder of him. “Thank you for saying that and for understanding. I wish Ezra had felt that way before he brought *Madeline* into our daughter’s life. Maybe then I wouldn’t have had to deal with her annoying phone calls asking if she and Christa can attend the party.”

Sidney’s stomach turned a flip. For weeks he listened to Prim complain about her ex’s new girlfriend and told her about the pain he suffered from his ex having no idea they’d been talking about the same person. *Oh my god*, Sidney thought. Every time he tried to get over Madeline she popped back into his life. Though, she never left his mind or heart.

“Sidney?”

“Hmm, oh I’m sorry, what’d you say?”

“I was asking if Friday night will work again or if you’d prefer Saturday night for our date.”

“Why not both?”

Prim grinned from ear to ear. “I don’t have a reason we can’t do both.”

She had to get off the phone to get ready and blew Sidney a kiss before saying goodbye. Prim couldn’t stop smiling and singing as she covered her body in scented, glittered lotion that made her skin sparkle. Then she stepped into her long, sequined strapped, royal blue, turquoise, and ivory print dress. It had crisscross straps that exposed her back and a fit that accentuated her shapely behind. The finishing touch was the turquoise sequins peep toe platform heels she put on. “Not bad, Ms. Richardson,” Prim said to herself, after taking a final look in the mirror.

Even without the sparkle of her outfit and skin Prim would have shined. She was falling in love and it showed all over her face. Sidney was everything she'd been looking for in a man and she couldn't wait to see what the future held for them. Sadly, while Prim's thoughts were of him, his were of Madeline.

Madeline and Christa became teary-eyed the moment they saw Aura. They embraced her, both cooing over how beautiful she looked. Ezra wasn't as thrilled by what he saw.

"Where is the rest of your dress?" he frowned.

"Oh, Daddy," Aura giggled, as she embraced him.

"Oh, Daddy nothing, I'm serious. Where is your mama?"

"Big Bear," Madeline cooed, as she gently rubbed Ezra's arm. She knew he was upset, not because Aura's dress was inappropriate, but because she was no longer his little girl. She was a lovely young lady. "Come here," Madeline said, leading Ezra out the front door. She caressed his face and planted a soft kiss on his lips. "She's growing up, Big Bear. Aura's not a baby anymore."

Ezra looked close to growling but Madeline knew he was fighting back tears. She found his reaction endearing and tears filled her eyes. Madeline couldn't imagine what Ezra would be like on Aura's wedding day if he was that emotional over her turning thirteen.

"Granny, Grandpa!" Aura shrieked before running out the door to embrace Ezra's parents.

"Who is this grown woman? What you do with my baby?" Michael Brock teased. He covered Aura's face with kisses then squeezed her tight.

"Alright now, girl, stop this growing up stuff. You making Granny seem old," Mary laughed, as she embraced her granddaughter. "You look *beautiful*, honey. Granny love you so much."

"I love you too," Aura beamed then linked her arms through her grandparents' and led them inside the house and to the back yard.

Madeline grabbed Ezra's hand and led him through the house. She smiled when they got to the backyard, impressed by the way Prim decorated it. The large yard was already beautifully landscaped but the yellow, lime green, and white hanging lanterns, balloons, and draping fabric only enhanced it. Prim had planned to use round tables but Aura wanted her seventy-five guests to be able to see each other so they used rectangular tables instead. They were arranged end-to-end around the pool with yellow table cloths and pretty vases filled with yellow and white roses and lime green accents. The pool was covered with floating candles and yellow rose petals.

Across the yard from where the guests sat was a table with the most outrageously gorgeous cake. It was three tiers with frosting in varying shades of

yellow and it was all about Aura. The cake had her name on it, thirteen for a cake topper, and absolutely everything she loved from a soccer ball to nail polish and shoes. It was spectacular and quite obvious Prim spared no expense when it came to her daughter's special day.

By five o'clock everyone was seated and enjoying a delicious dinner when Prim borrowed the D.J.'s microphone to make an announcement. She turned towards Aura who was seated between Prim's parents.

"Good evening, everyone. Thank you all so much for coming and celebrating my beautiful princess Aura. I can't believe it's been thirteen years but they've been the most delightful years of my life. You're such a sweet, kind, and generous young lady and I'm extremely proud to be your mom. So," Prim said, wiping tears from her face, "when it came to choosing the perfect gift to express how I feel about you, I didn't know what to get. That's why I brought these young men to help . . ."

Aura and her friends screamed at the top of their lungs when Storm came walking through the gate. The boys, all three standing just under six feet, were grinning from ear to ear as each of the teenage girls in attendance went nuts. Ezra had never seen his daughter go gaga over a boy and he didn't like it much.

"Mom, are you *serious*?" Aura screamed, nearly knocking Prim over as she hugged and kissed her. "Is Storm really here at my birthday party? Oh my god!"

Aura, Alexa, and Janie huddled together trying to keep each other from jumping out of their skin. They were close to passing out when the cutest boy from Storm took Aura's hand and the three of them sang happy birthday to her. Each of the boys gave her a hug and kiss on the cheek. That evoked more screams from all the girls and more smiles from Storm.

For the next thirty minutes the girls took pictures with the handsome trio and their excitement only intensified. For the last few shots Prim invited Ezra to pose with her, Aura, and Storm. Madeline encouraged him to smile instead of looking like he was going to kill the boys. As much as Ezra wanted to put the fear of God into Storm it was hard to keep a scowl on his face when Aura was so happy and excited. She was having the time of her life and he didn't want to ruin it by being overprotective and jealous. For twelve years he was the apple of her eye. Now, at thirteen, cute little boys had gained Aura's interest and Ezra didn't know how to handle it.

"Thank you so much, Mom. This is the best party ever!" Aura declared, as she hugged Prim and Ezra. "I love you guys."

"We love you too," her parents said.

The next thirty minutes were spent opening presents. Aura received everything from nail polish and eye shadow to gift cards and cash. Having Storm

sing while she opened her gifts only made them more fabulous. Aura was beyond excited and she didn't want the day to end.

Once she opened the last of her presents Ezra approached Aura and told her she had one more gift. Realizing something special was about to take place, everyone grew quiet and gave Ezra their undivided attention. He knelt in front of her and took his daughter's hands into his.

"June 18, 1998 at one o'clock in the morning was the first time I ever experienced love at first sight. It was the first time I saw your sweet little face and I knew you would have my heart forever."

Madeline and Christa grabbed each other's hand and Prim and her sisters did the same. Their eyes filled with tears at witnessing such a touching moment. Ezra shared more memories from his and Aura's life together and how much he loved her. Then he pulled the ring box from his pocket. She gasped when he opened it.

"You're a very special young lady, Aura, and I'm proud to be your father," Ezra said, as his eyes watered. "It was hard, but I realized today that you're no longer my little girl. You've grown into a very sweet, smart, kindhearted young lady and I love you dearly. No matter what, though, you'll always be *my* baby. Even when some knucklehead boy comes into your life asking for your heart," he said, cutting his eyes at the boys from Storm. The crowd laughed. "But here's what I never want you to forget, baby. You deserve the best this world has to offer and you never have to settle for less. You can be anything you wanna be. And the person who's lucky enough to win your heart will know that you are a precious gift who is worth waiting for. You deserve that and you never have to compromise." Ezra placed the ring on Aura's finger and kissed her hand. "I love you, Barbie Doll. You're one of the best things to ever happen to me."

"*Daddy*," Aura sobbed and threw her arms around him.

All of the women and a few of the men were crying too. Ezra's oldest brother stood and applauded and the rest of the guests followed suit. Alexa and Janie ran up to embrace Aura and the three of them cried in a huddle.

"Thank you, Ezra. That was beautiful," Prim cried, as she embraced him a little tighter than she should have.

Thankfully Ezra was pulled onto the dance floor by Aura, Alexa, and Janie before the look on Madeline's face turned any more deadly. Most of the guests joined in and the party was in full swing. They all took turns dancing with Aura and wishing her a happy birthday.

"Daddy, can I ask you something?" Aura asked, as she and Ezra slow danced for the last time that evening.

"Of course, baby," he smiled, twirling her around.

"How come Granny and Grandpa's last name is Brock and yours is Prescott?"

Oh shit, Ezra thought, completely caught off guard. He always planned to tell Aura the truth when she was older but he didn't expect her thirteenth birthday party to be the time or place. He stared into her curious eyes and decided to be honest with her. Ezra told everyone they'd be back momentarily and he and Aura took a walk around the block.

"And you never told Mom?" she asked, holding tightly to his hand.

"No."

"Because she would've told *everybody*, huh?" Aura giggled. "Mom can't keep a secret. I can, though," she smiled, squeezing Ezra's hand.

He smiled back at her. "I would never ask you to do that, Barbie Doll. I knew this day was coming. I thought you'd be a little older, but I knew when I told you I'd have to tell Prim too. So you don't have to keep my secrets, okay?"

"Well, I'm not gonna tell Mom. The fact that you were a bad kid is between you and me as far as I'm concerned," she teased.

"Oh *really*?" Ezra laughed, as he embraced his daughter. He let go of Aura and stared at her for a while. She wasn't a baby anymore but a beautiful young woman. "Thank you," he said, gently caressing her face. "I love you, Barbie Doll."

"I love you too. And I think you're the best dad in the world."

They returned to the party, hand in hand, both resolved to let Prim continue calling Michael and Mary Brock, Mr. and Mrs. Prescott.

It was almost midnight when Aura, her cousins, and her friends finally went to sleep. Prissy and Proper decided to sleep over at Prim's and the three of them sat in the living room sipping Merlot and talking about the party. More specifically, they talked about Madeline being at the party.

"You know, Prim, I've heard you talk a lot of smack about that woman but I actually found her to be a cool person," Proper stated.

"Oh you did, did you?" Prim snorted, instantly annoyed with her little sister.

"I have to agree," Prissy added. "When you first said she and Christa were coming I thought we were gonna have a problem, but the two of them jumped right in and helped us from beginning to end. Both of them served the food and cake, washed dishes, and helped us get everything cleaned and packed. Unlike your lazy, bougie ass friends they didn't come here expecting to be served. But more than that, I thought Madeline showed you a great deal of respect. She knew her place today and wasn't trying to be all up in the pictures or asserting herself in the middle of things. She fell back and let you and Ezra be in the spotlight with your baby and I thought that was decent of her."

"Humph. So y'all in love with her too, huh? I would think after all the fucked up stuff she's said to me that my own *sisters* would be on my side."

“Alright, pipe down with all the drama. It ain’t that serious,” Prissy said, as she took another sip of wine. “Besides, I think Madeline did what *any* woman in her situation would do. You were trying to fuck her man, Prim. Walking around in lingerie with peaches and shit all over the house and you didn’t think she was gonna get in your ass about it? I bet if Sidney’s ex did some bullshit like that you’d be ready to fight. So don’t sit here trying to play the victim when you know you were wrong.”

“Whatever,” Prim huffed and rolled her eyes. She changed the subject to Ezra’s gift and how sweet she thought it was.

Prissy and Proper looked at each other a few times as their sister gushed over Ezra. Prim was still in love with him and doing a pitiful job of hiding her feelings. They could only hope things progressed with Sidney so their sister would finally let go of the past and move on with her life.

The following Saturday night, after wasting their time and money on *Green Lantern* and over-priced movie theater food, Sidney and Prim went back to his house for drinks. They got comfortable on his plush living room carpet and talked for hours about work, relationships, growing up as the middle child, and other random topics. The two of them had a lot in common and their conversations were always easy and free flowing. Prim was definitely comfortable with Sidney. Perhaps a little too much in that she spent a lot of time talking about Ezra and by extension, Madeline.

“Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry, Sidney,” Prim said after sharing yet another Ezra story. “I keep breaking dating rule number one . . . don’t talk about your ex. I’m sorry. That’s so rude.”

“There’s no need for apologies. I like that you’re open with me. In a relationship I think a man and woman should be friends as well as lovers.”

“Lovers huh?” Prim smiled then took a sip of her drink. “So is that something you think about with me?”

“You aren’t seriously asking me that, are you?” Sidney frowned. “As sexy and alluring as you are? Shoot, I think about it all the time. As a matter of fact . . . well, I probably shouldn’t tell you this but last night I was tempted to ask you to show it to me,” he smiled, staring at her lap.”

“*Show* it to you? Why would you wanna *see* it?”

“Why wouldn’t I? What’s wrong with it?” Sidney frowned, responding to the disgusted look on Prim’s face.

“Nothing!” she laughed, playfully pushing his arm.

“Whew, you had me scared for a minute,” he laughed.

Prim laughed loudly. “It’s just that, well, it’s not exactly pretty . . . our genitals, I mean. I think it looks weird.”

“Yours or mine?” Sidney teased.

“*Everybody’s*,” she giggled.

“So what, you think it’s ugly?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

“So if I stood up right now and whipped out my package that’s what you’d be thinking? Look at that ugly shit.”

Prim burst out laughing. “No. But it’s not like you’d ever do it anyway.”

“Wow, that sounds like a dare, like you challenging my manhood,” Sidney said then downed the last of his Hennessey. He rose from the floor and placed his empty glass on the coffee table. “Well, it looks like I need to prove you wrong, little lady.”

“Are you serious? You’ll really get undressed to let me look at you?”

“Umm huh,” Sidney smiled and pulled his shirt over his head.

Ooh lord, Prim thought, excited by him. She watched intently as Sidney unbuckled his belt and slowly, seductively unfastened and removed his jeans. She frowned at him.

“What, it’s ugly?” he asked with a sheepish look on his face. Again Prim burst out laughing. “Yeah, see this isn’t the response I was going for. You were supposed to be beside yourself with lust and desire.” Sidney smiled and covered his bare crotch with his hands.

“Oh, I am. I’m hot like fire for you,” she admitted. “It’s just that you’re a bit more uh, *substantial* than I imagined.”

That time Sidney burst out laughing. “So what you saying, Blue? You thought it was gonna be ugly *and* little?” They both laughed as he put his boxers back on and sat on the floor beside Prim. “Well, I’m glad to disappoint you,” he smiled then caressed her face with both hands before kissing her with passion and intensity. “I can extinguish that fire for you if you like.”

“You can do anything you want,” Prim purred, completely aroused by his sensuous kiss. They smiled at each other as Sidney gazed into her deep blue eyes. “I’m down for whatever,” she said, allowing him to lead her to his bedroom.

It didn’t take long for Sidney to realize that Prim’s “I’m down for whatever” comment wasn’t accurate. In fact, it wasn’t true at all. She was as boring with sex as she was with food. At the dinner table Prim only ate meat and potatoes and in the bedroom she only laid on her back. To say Sidney was frustrated would have been putting it mildly. In the twenty minutes it took her to climax a few times, he’d grown quite annoyed. A big part of why Sidney chose to make love to Prim was to forget about Madeline, but all it had done was made him think about her more.

Aura was due back home at four o’clock Sunday afternoon so Prissy and Proper came over at noon to hear all the details of Prim’s dates with Sidney. She

grinned from ear to ear as she recounted their deep conversations and the quality time they spent together. Proper grew impatient and told her to get to the good part. Both sisters were dying to know if she slept with Sidney or not.

“None of your damn business,” Prim teased. “I’m just playing, girl, it was the bomb! I almost bust one off just from his kiss!” They all laughed. “Oh my god, that man is amazing. His hands and his . . . ooh, lord I’m getting chills just thinking about it. I’m definitely gonna put it on him next time.”

“What do you mean next time? What happened *this* time?” Prissy frowned.

“I let him take charge. I mean, I didn’t want him to think I was no hoe or nothing so I took it easy.”

“Oh lord, what you saying? Your crazy ass just laid there?” Proper shouted.

“See, I told y’all she getting more and more like Pearl.”

“Shut up, Prissy!” Prim laughed.

“I’m serious. That sounds *just* like some stupid shit Mama would do. And what was the point, Prim? I mean if you didn’t want Sidney to think you was a hoe you shouldn’t have slept with him. But since you *did* why would you lay there like a dead fish when we all know your ass is freaky? Hell that was your audition, your chance to prove that you the best bitch for the role. So if it really was as dry and dull as you described then you ain’t getting a call back. That part will go to some other chick that knows what to do with all that man.”

Prim threw herself back on the couch and covered her face with her hands. “Ugh, what the hell was I thinking?”

“I don’t know but you better come up with a way to fix it before he deletes all your contact information,” Proper teased.

“What should I say?”

“Just tell him the truth,” Prissy advised.

“Okay. Oh my god,” Prim groaned, as she got up to retrieve her cell phone. She called Sidney hoping to leave a message but he picked up on the third ring. “I swear I’m not that boring in bed,” Prim blurted.

Prissy shook her head at Proper. “I don’t know about your sister sometimes. I swear she ain’t got it all.”

“That’s *your* sister,” she teased.

Prim went upstairs to her bedroom and closed the door while she explained to Sidney what happened the night before. She asked for the chance to redeem herself and promised to make it worth his while. Sidney assured Prim that he didn’t think she was a “hoe” and that he’d love the opportunity to see what she was really like in bed.

Unfortunately their next encounter was just as disastrous. A few days after their conversation, Prim showed up unannounced at Sidney’s office for a mid-afternoon romp. He was excited, initially, but was quickly turned off by the fact

that Prim was trying too hard. It felt like she was mimicking things she'd seen and heard on a porno rather than being herself.

As Prim straddled Sidney while he sat behind his desk, it was very obvious he wasn't aroused. Humiliated, she burst into tears and hopped off him.

"Blue, wait," Sidney said, as he removed the condom from his flaccid penis and tossed it in the trash. He zipped his pants and grabbed Prim before she could get out the door. "Come here, baby."

"Please, just let me go. I feel so stupid right now I can't even look at you."

"I don't want you to feel stupid," Sidney said, gently caressing her face. "I'm happy you came here today to . . . look at me, Blue." Prim raised her head to look him in the eyes. "I love that you came here wanting to please me. I just didn't get the feeling it was really you. And that's who I want is you, the *real* you. Not the timid woman who was afraid to be herself out of fear of me having a negative opinion. And not this dominatrix character you think I want you to be," he said, wiping tears from her cheek. "I really like you, Blue, and I want nothing more than to remove this pressure you've put on yourself. What made the other night special was that it happened naturally. I was attracted to you, you were attracted to me and one thing led to another. That's how it should be, okay? We don't have to plan it or force it or even talk about it. Just let nature take its course." Sidney kissed Prim, gently at first, and then it grew more passionate. "See what I'm saying," he smiled, placing her hands on his swollen crotch.

"Umm huh," Prim moaned. She unwrapped a new condom and straddled him again. That time she rode him until they both exploded. And the only thing louder than her was the sound of Sidney's secretary informing him that his one o'clock appointment had arrived.

"Oh shit," Prim jumped, thinking the woman had entered the office.

Sidney laughed and assured her they were alone. "Don't worry. Nobody heard your loud enthusiasm but me," he laughed.

"Hey, I couldn't help myself. That shit felt good."

"Yes it did," Sidney agreed and kissed her lips. "You can be as loud as you want. It's good for the ego plus I happen to like that type of stuff. And I'm learning what Blue likes too," he smiled.

They both laughed. Then Sidney straightened his office, freshened the air, and dumped the trash while Prim cleaned up in his private bathroom. He used it next, kissed her goodbye, and welcomed his client. It was hard for Sidney to keep a straight face when his thoughts were on Prim and the amazing time they had in the very chair in which he sat.

Prim and Sidney both had plans for July 4th so they decided to spend time together on Sunday, the day before. He invited her to his house for dinner. Sidney

didn't like that Prim was so closed to trying new foods so he challenged her to taste one of his meals. If she didn't like it he'd have hotdogs on standby for her to eat. Prim was reluctant at first, but she agreed as long as he didn't make anything too outrageous.

"You look so cute," Prim smiled when Sidney opened the door wearing an apron and chef's hat. The smile on his face, however, made him look sexy as hell. The slight upturn of his lips and the way his eyes sparkled as if he knew something no one else did made her desperate to do whatever it took to find out what. *Calm down, Prim!* "Whatever you're cooking smells really good. I might actually eat it," she teased, resisting the urge to jump on him.

Sidney informed her that he made vegetable lasagna and promised it would be the best thing she ever tasted. Prim followed him to the kitchen and washed her hands at the sink before sitting at the table. The skeptical look on her face made him laugh as he removed his apron and hat.

"It may look a little weird but it's really tasty. I promise. So what can I get you to drink?"

"I'll have whatever you're having," she said, pointing to his drink on the counter.

"Oh, that's just lemonade."

"Then I'll have lemonade."

Sidney poured her a glass, placed the garlic bread on the table beside the lasagna and salad, and took a seat. "Just taste it. If you don't like it I have a whole pack of hotdogs in the fridge. You can eat as many as your little heart desires."

"Humph, that's actually not bad. It's not bad at all," Prim said, as she put a full piece on her plate. "So where did this love of cooking come from?"

Sidney took a bite of lasagna and bread, debating whether to get into the whole story or not. "Honestly, I started cooking out of necessity," he said, before taking a deep breath. "My mom died from breast cancer when I was fifteen and my dad was so heartbroken that he wouldn't eat." Prim put her hand over her heart and tears filled her eyes. "My father has always been a big man and it terrified me and my brothers to see him whittle away before our eyes like Mom did. I thought we were gonna lose him too and I needed to do something to keep that from happening."

Prim's bottom lip quivered and her eyes looked like two big puddles. "Oh, Sidney," she whimpered.

He took another bite of his food, trying not to respond to Prim's emotions. "So one day I got Mom's recipe box and I started cooking. The first meal I ever made completely on my own was her fried pork chops, rice, gravy, and biscuits. I thought back to all the times I sat in the kitchen watching her cook while I went on and on about whatever was happening in my little life. She always made me feel

like what I was saying was the most important thing in the world. My mom was great like that . . . always making everybody feel special and loved,” Sidney said, as his eyes brimmed with tears.

“But anyway,” he continued, “all the things she told me started coming back to my mind. Mom taught me how to season the flour before dredging the pork chops through it and how to time the rice and get the gravy just right. I remember crying like a baby when the aroma of that food brought my dad to the kitchen table. For the first time in months he ate. My brothers came too and we sat down and enjoyed a meal together. In a weird way it was like having a piece of Mom with us. And that’s how we healed. At first we cried a lot at the dinner table. It hurt not having her there. But over time we started to laugh at the crazy things she used to say or the facial expressions she made when something tickled her.

“Our anger at having someone as wonderful as her taken from us started to subside and we began to cherish the time we did get to have with her. I cooked her recipes almost every night for two years and I think it helped us all get through losing her. I still miss her, though. I think about her everyday wondering what she’d think of me . . . if she’d be proud of me, you know.”

Prim walked around to Sidney’s side of the table and wrapped her arms around his shoulders as she stood behind him. “I’m proud of you, Chase, and I can only imagine that the woman who carried you and loved you with all of her heart is proud of you too. You’re a wonderful man and I feel honored to know you,” she said, kissing his cheek as she rubbed the other side of his face.

Sidney pulled Prim around to sit in his lap. She wiped away his tears and he embraced her for a while. Then he caressed her face and pulled her in for a passionate kiss. Before long they were undressing each other and Prim led Sidney to his bedroom. Unlike the first time they’d been in his bed, she was very generous and giving of herself. Prim recognized that Sidney needed to be close to someone and be held and loved, so that’s what she did. And after they finished making love Sidney laid between her, silently holding on for dear life.

“I’m sorry I ruined dinner,” he finally said. “I should’ve known making my mom’s vegetable lasagna would make me emotional. I thought about her the whole time I cooked,” Sidney stated, still surprised he shared something so personal with Prim. He had never told anyone that story.

“You didn’t ruin anything, love. I thought dinner was perfect. And I feel honored that you opened up to me about something so close to your heart. Thank you for sharing yourself with me. Oh wait, that didn’t come out right. I didn’t mean sharing your body,” Prim explained when Sidney chuckled. He was still lying between her legs with his head on her bare breasts.

“So what you saying? You don’t like my body?” he teased.

“I’m *definitely* not saying that. I love your body and all the things you can do with it. I’m just grateful you were willing to share your heart too. That means a lot to me . . . more than you know.”

“I think I might know,” Sidney smiled. He had been more open with Prim than he’d been with anyone, including Madeline. And that made him wonder if he might finally be able to move on and truly give someone else his heart.

They made love again then Sidney warmed the food the two of them didn’t get to finish eating—for energy so they could make love again. It was a wonderful feeling for both of them to be falling in love.

CHAPTER TWELVE

On Friday, July 15th, after a night on the town, Prim decided to bring Sidney back to her house. During the ride she threatened to leave him on the side of the road if he didn't stop teasing her about not being able to dance. Sidney joked that it had to be the White girl in her that was responsible for the nightmare he'd been forced to witness on the dance floor.

"I don't know what you talking about. I was getting down out there!"

"Well, Blue, before we can get you the professional help you need you must first admit that you have a problem."

"Shut up," Prim laughed loudly, playfully pushing him on his chest.

From the moment they walked through the front door Sidney was taken by the amazing art Prim had throughout her house. Each piece; be it sculptures, ceramics, or wall art, represented a part of her heritage. A Native American drum was the first thing to draw Sidney's eye. Prim told him it was called a First Rain drum and had been passed down from her great-great grandparents. She also displayed a solid bronze sculpture named *Medicine Man* and hand-sculpted, Raven Black sun faces.

Sidney moved down the hallway to look at the silver and bronze coins Prim placed inside of a small, glass case. She said they represented the Armenian part of her heritage.

"My mom told me that throughout history Armenians were master metal workers and jewelers so I searched for these coins to show off the artistry and detail in them. I think they're beautiful."

"Yes, they are," Sidney said. He was intrigued by the different nationalities that made Prim who she was and he listened intently as she shared stories about her family. "Wow! That's powerful," he said of the large, framed painting entitled *Great Black Leaders* that dominated the living room wall. Sidney ran his hand over the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. as he silently identified such greats as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and many, many more. "I feel proud standing here looking at these historical, groundbreaking people. It's because of them that we have the lives we do. I'm grateful to them."

Prim smiled as she looked at the emotion in Sidney's face. She liked the fact that he was interested in her heritage and was able to connect so personally to the art in her home. It was refreshing.

Eventually Prim went to change into something more comfortable while Sidney got situated on the living room couch. He expected her to return in a sexy piece of lingerie or perhaps nothing at all. Instead she came downstairs with a fresh face, a ponytail, and a pair of boy shorts with a tank top.

“Damn, you look sexy,” he moaned, “probably the sexiest I’ve seen you.”

“Are you serious, Chase? So after all those hours I spent getting my hair done, putting on makeup, and squeezing into tight dresses, *this* is what you find sexy?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I like all that stuff too. It’s just that seeing you like this shows how truly beautiful you are, Blue. Some women look *whooped up* without all the glamour but you sparkle even more without it. I like that. I’m very attracted to it,” he smiled, flexing his eyebrows at her.

Prim smiled too before planting a soft kiss on his lips. “Maybe it’s that pre-menstrual glow you’re seeing.”

“And that’ll do it,” Sidney said, immediately turned off. “So what do you need, pickles and ice cream? Tissue for crying? What?”

“Well, I’m not pregnant *or* psychotic so there’s no need for dramatics. It’s just time for my monthly cycle . . . not a big deal. Uhm, I’m not a leper, you know,” Prim said in response to the way Sidney was leaning away from her. “What’s wrong with you?” she frowned, offended by the way he was acting.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude. It’s just that I had a very negative experience with that and, *ugh*,” he groaned. “Every time I think about a woman being on her period I get sick to my stomach.”

“Oookay, so are you gonna tell me what happened or you want me to guess,” Prim said, after a long silence.

“Well, I was in college and . . . oh my god I can’t believe I’m actually telling you this,” Sidney said. He took a deep breath. “Okay, so like I said I was in college and a group of us went out for drinks. By the end of the night my good friend Carolina and I got a bit cozy and decided to add a few benefits to our friendship. I’d had another episode with my ex and I was trying to get over her—again. Anyway, Carolina and I went back to her dorm, one thing led to another, and everything seemed cool. Then, at around two o’clock in the morning, I walked out of her room to go to the bathroom and a couple of girls started screaming at the top of their lungs. They were yelling and accusing me of *killing* Carolina. And why, you might ask. Well, I had blood smeared all over my face, hands, and on my t-shirt because she didn’t think it was worth mentioning that she was on her period! She let me . . . *ugh*,” he dry heaved. “That’s so fuckin’ gross!”

Prim gave Sidney a piece of gum from her purse to help get the nasty taste out of his mouth. “Are you okay?”

“No! For one thing I can’t believe I actually told you that mess. I *never* shared that with anyone and I had no intentions on doing so, *ever*. But worst of all is that it happened damn near fifteen years ago and it *still* makes me sick. I can’t believe somebody would do something like that. And when I asked Carolina why

she didn't tell me, her answer was that she forgot! How the . . . ugh, I'm sorry. I'm getting all worked and I shouldn't be. I apologize."

"I understand why you're upset about that. I just hope you don't think *I* would ever do something like that to you. That's the reason I told you about being pre-menstrual in the first place," Prim stated. "It just made me feel a certain kind of way for you to move away from me like I'm disgusting."

"I'm sorry. It's not you at all. Come here," Sidney said, taking her into his arms. He kissed her cheek and held her for a while. "I said I'm sorry. Why are you still looking at me like that?"

"I wanna ask you something."

"Okay."

"In that story you said you had another episode with your ex and you went with your friend to get over her."

"Yeah?"

"So is that what this is?" Prim asked, pointing to him and then herself. "Are you trying to get over, what's her name?"

"Uh, Yvette," Sidney replied. He knew how much Madeline hated her middle name and was fairly certain she hadn't mentioned it, least of all to Prim.

"So are you with me because you're trying to get over Yvette?"

"No. Are you with me because you're trying to get over Ezra?"

"Uhm, well, I started dating as a way to get over him but when you and I met I felt optimistic that I had found something special. I'm falling for you, Chase, and I don't wanna do that if all you're looking for is a distraction."

"You're not a distraction, Blue," Sidney said, tenderly removing a strand of hair from her face. "I think everything you said is true for me too. I did start dating as a way to get over Ma . . . my ex." Prim frowned, thinking he meant to say something else. "But when you and I met I believed it had potential to be something more. I'm falling for you too, Blue. You're a wonderful woman and I look forward to seeing where this can go. Life is too short to keep holding on to the past and I want to move forward, with you."

Prim accepted Sidney's hug and kiss wanting nothing more than to trust him. Though, she couldn't get rid of the feeling in her gut that she shouldn't.

It was Thursday, July 21st and Madeline made plans for her, Ezra, and Aura to spend the day together. Unfortunately, Ezra needed to go in to work and had to cancel. It was something he did quite a bit and Madeline felt frustrated. For the past month Ezra had extravagant gifts delivered to her home every week as his way of apologizing for not being able to spend time with her. And not only was it affecting their relationship but Madeline hadn't spent much time with Aura either. Ezra encouraged Madeline to get Aura herself seemingly unaware of the problems

that would cause. She and Prim called a truce, of sorts, but they weren't friends by a long shot. So Madeline was certain she would never allow her to take Aura on her own.

"All she can do is say no, Mad. Just call and see," Christa urged, as she rifled through her sister's refrigerator.

"Alright," Madeline sighed. She sent Ezra a text asking for Prim's phone number and waited for his reply. She repeatedly turned the phone over in her hands and paced the living room floor. Madeline's heart beat wildly and her stomach quivered as she silently debated whether to call or not. Just when she'd decide not to as a way of avoiding drama with Prim, she'd think of Aura and how much she wanted to spend time with her. A few minutes later Ezra sent the phone number and Madeline dialed it. *Quit acting scared of this bitch!*

"Actually, that would be great! I've got something I need to do and my mom and sisters can't keep Aura until later this evening. So what time will you be here?"

"Oh, uhm, I can come now if that's okay. I'll be there in like ten minutes."

"Okay, thanks . . . Auuuraaa," Prim called, as she disconnected the line.

"Wow, this dude Chase must be putting it on her," Madeline chuckled.

"Prim was almost *nice* to me."

Christa laughed then out of nowhere she remembered Sidney telling her that his mom used to call him Chase when he was little. From the time he could walk he constantly chased birds, dogs, and his older brother.

"Christa Belle, are you listening to me?" Madeline snapped.

"I'm sorry, what?" she asked, deciding it was best not to mention her memory of Sidney.

Madeline and Christa picked up Aura then went to Apple Bee's for lunch. They laughed and talked for nearly two hours before going to the movies. On their way to the theater the three of them were snapping to the music when Christa burst out laughing.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" Madeline frowned. Christa pointed to the billboard on their right. "Stupid," Madeline mumbled and rolled her eyes. She tried not to laugh but the billboard of Smokey the Bear tickled her too. Even though she got mad at her friends after introducing them to Ezra, Madeline had to admit Deidra's comparison was dead-on.

Aura laughed from the backseat saying she texted Janie and Alexa a picture of the billboard. Madeline gave Christa a panicked look. She knew how sensitive Ezra was about the way he looked and the last thing she wanted was for Aura to tell him they'd been making fun of him.

"*Stupid*," Madeline mumbled again and poked her sister in the arm.

After the movie the three of them decided to go to the mall. Madeline remembered that she had a pair of shoes she needed to return and swung by her house to get them. Aura and Christa came inside to use the bathroom and their good time came to a screeching halt. Madeline got a chance to see first-hand that Aura wasn't the perfect little angel she made her out to be.

Aura said that Ezra planned to take her to get her ears pierced but since he wasn't able to go he gave Madeline permission to do it.

"Oh really, Aura, and when did he tell you that?"

"Earlier today he sent me a text message saying it was okay."

"Let me see it," Madeline demanded.

"Oh, uh, I think I deleted it."

"No problem, I'll just call Ezra right now and . . ."

"Never mind," Aura panicked, "we can do it later."

"Why, Aura? I mean, we'll be right there in the mall. And since your dad said it's okay I'm sure there won't be a problem when I call and ask him, right? *Right?*" Madeline barked. "Oh no, don't you start crying now. You stood there and told me a bold-faced lie so your tears don't mean anything to me! Why would you do that, Aura? I thought you and I were cool."

"We are, Maddie. I'm sorry," she sobbed.

"Apparently we're not because you don't care that your mom and dad would've gone off on *me* if I had believed you and took you to get your ears pierced! How could you do that to me?"

"Okay, okay calm down, Madeline," Christa said, as she led her sister upstairs. "Let me talk to you for a minute."

"I don't wanna talk right now," Madeline said once they were in her bedroom.

Christa closed the door. "Good, so shut up and listen! You don't have to be yelling at the girl like that. She made a mistake."

"That wasn't a *mistake*! She lied to my face and didn't care what would've happened to me if I had taken her to get holes in her ears!"

"She's a kid, Madeline, but you're expecting her to think and reason like an adult. Of course she didn't think about what would happen to you. Aura wants her ears pierced and she tried to get you to do what her parents probably won't let her do. And it was totally wrong for her to try to manipulate you but there's a better way to handle it. Talk to her about it. Don't go off the deep end because Aura isn't the perfect little girl you put up on a pedestal."

"I don't expect her to be perfect. I just didn't think she would lie to me."

"Oh please, Madeline. She's thirteen. Don't you remember being that age? Remember how many times we got our asses beat for lying and trying to be slick? Well, Aura's no different. So you need to take this opportunity to teach her. Take

your emotions out of it and tell her about that time you forged Mom's name on a consent form to get *your* ears pierced, remember?"

"Oh shut up, Christa Belle."

"*You* shut up and go downstairs and deal with this situation like a grownup."

"I'll go down there in a little while."

"No, go now! You can't shut down and not talk to her for a week like you do me. She's a little girl who needs to know you still love her even though she did something wrong. So get your ass downstairs and talk to her. And straighten your face up! I expect the kid in the house to be pouting but you damn near thirty-one."

Madeline rolled her eyes at Christa then made her way downstairs. Aura sat on the couch crying, terrified that Madeline wouldn't forgive her and that she'd tell Ezra.

"I'm sorry, Maddie," Aura cried, throwing her arms around Madeline. "I promise I won't lie to you again."

"Aura, baby, calm down, okay?" she said to the trembling child in her arms. "It's not the end of the world. We all make mistakes."

Madeline led Aura back to the couch where they sat together, hand in hand, and talked about trust. Aura admitted that she didn't want to wait another year to get her ears pierced when Alexa and Janie had gotten theirs done already. She felt that Prim and Ezra still thought of her as a baby and were being unreasonable by saying she had to be fourteen to get her ears pierced.

"I understand how you feel, Aura, and if you had been upfront with me I could've talked to Ezra and tried to convince him to let you do it earlier. I would've been on your side. But when you lie and try to manipulate me it makes me feel like I can't trust you. I don't like feeling like that. I love you, Aura, and I don't wanna wonder if you're telling me the truth or not."

"I'm sorry, Maddie. I promise I won't do it again. *Please*, forgive me."

"I do. Now stop crying, okay? This will stay between us," Madeline said, realizing Aura was still so upset because she was afraid of Ezra being told about the situation. "Come to think of it, I'll make a deal with you. I won't tell your dad about this if you won't tell him about the billboard. Deal?"

Aura agreed and thanked Madeline profusely as she hugged her tight. Christa was proud of her sister and she hugged her too when Aura went to clean her face. Soon after, they were on their way to the mall laughing as though nothing happened. Madeline was thankful Christa pushed her to do the right thing. She could have easily ruined her relationship with Aura by expecting her to be perfect and punishing her because she wasn't. The situation also made Madeline realize she'd have to grow up a lot if she wanted to be a mom to Aura or children of her own.

Sidney lay across from Prim in awe. She'd called him back saying she could come over for lunch after all and showed up on his doorstep in a tight mini dress that she encouraged him to rip off her. He obliged and they went at each other like two athletes competing against one another.

"Damnnn, Blue," Sidney smiled. "You let your freak flag fly *high* today, didn't you? That was hot," he said, kissing her lips. "I'll have to work from home more often if your visits are like *that*. How long will this vacation of yours last?"

Prim laughed. "I go back to work on Monday. But Aura will be with her dad all next month. They always go off on adventures together during her last month of summer vacation. So my evenings will be free," she smiled before kissing him again and heading for the shower. It suddenly dawned on her that she hadn't brought a change of clothes. Having Sidney rip her dress apart was an impromptu decision that left Prim with nothing to wear home. Wrapped in one of his plush towels, she explained her current predicament.

"No worries, just look in my top drawer," Sidney pointed. "My t-shirts and shorts are in there. A few of them have drawstrings that you can pull to fit you."

Sidney went to the bathroom to shower and Prim used a little of his deodorant. She had been so focused on making love that she hadn't thought to bring a change of clothes or toiletries.

"Idiot," she mumbled then wrapped a towel around her wet hair. Prim opened the top left drawer of Sidney's dresser and quickly realized it was the wrong one. She was about to close it when a ring box caught her attention. "Oh my god," she whispered, placing a hand over her mouth. Prim knew she shouldn't have opened it but nosiness got the better of her. A loud gasp escaped her mouth when she got a look at the most beautiful ring she'd ever seen. It was a vintage 1950 diamond Navette ring with blue sapphires in 14-carat white gold.

Tears filled Prim's eyes and her heart skipped a beat. *He wants to marry me*, she thought, smiling. The water stopped in the shower and she almost dropped the ring out of panic. Prim hurried to put the box back in the drawer and opened the one on the right to grab a t-shirt and a pair of shorts.

"Oh good, you found what you needed," Sidney said, when he entered the bedroom and found her in his oversized shirt and shorts.

"Umm huh," Prim uttered, as she bent over to dry her hair and hide her tears.

He was talking but she didn't hear a word he said. All Prim could think about was that beautiful blue ring and how amazing it felt to know someone actually wanted to marry her.

"Are you still thinking?" Sidney asked.

"Hmm? About what?"

"I asked what you want to eat."

"I'm sorry. I didn't hear you. Uh, I'll eat whatever you eat."

“Oh really?” he smiled, thankful she was willing to eat something other than a hotdog or burger. Sidney reheated a plate of the chicken enchiladas he made the night before and sat at the kitchen table across from Prim. “Do you want more kids, Blue?”

She wasn’t expecting that question. “Oh, uhm, yeah, I do. I used to think about it all the time when Aura was little. I wanted her to have a sibling to grow up with. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I actually considered having another child with Ezra even though we weren’t together. Of course he didn’t know anything about that. But the idea of having another kid by a different man was unappealing to me, especially one that wasn’t my husband. I just can’t have another baby out of wedlock. I’m too old to make the same mistake, you know?”

“Yeah, I know what you mean?” Sidney said, taking a bite of food. “So if you were to get married you’d want to have kids right away?”

“Well, I’m thirty-three so if I’m gonna have them I probably need to go ahead and get it done. The older women get, the more risks there are when it comes to having babies. If I’m not pregnant by thirty-five then it’s a wrap.”

“You’d rather have a hotdog, huh?” Sidney asked, as he watched Prim push food around her plate. “I’ll put one on for you.”

Prim told Sidney he didn’t have to and that she’d get something later. He wouldn’t hear of it and got up to put a hotdog in water. While they waited, Prim asked if he wanted children. At first she was happy to hear him talk about having babies but the more she listened, the more it became clear that Sidney wanted kids of his own, not stepchildren. Then Prim began to wonder if that was the reason he wasn’t in a rush to meet Aura.

“What’s wrong?” Sidney asked, noticing the frown on Prim’s face.

“It sounds like you only want kids of your own . . . like you don’t want to be bothered with someone else’s child. I guess that’s why you never *once* asked about meeting Aura.”

“What?” he snapped. “So what are you saying, Blue? You really think I’m the kind of man who would get involved with a single mom and not accept her child?” Sidney frowned and tossed his fork onto his plate. “Wow,” he said, pushing his chair away from the table. “Your hotdog will be ready soon. You can help yourself,” he snorted, making his way out of the kitchen.

“Chase, please don’t walk away. *Sidney!*” Prim shouted when he kept walking. “We’re both adults so we should be able to talk through a problem. I get that you’re upset with me but will you put yourself in my shoes and consider how it sounded to hear you talk about the children you want to have with no mention of the child I’ve already got.” Sidney came back into the kitchen and took his seat. “I can’t read your mind, Chase, all I can do is go by what you say and do. I’m sorry

for accusing you of not wanting to meet Aura. That was wrong. I just didn't know how else to interpret what you said."

"I definitely didn't mean it that way, but I can imagine how it came across to you. I apologize. I would never want you to think Aura isn't important. I think about her a lot, wondering if she'll like me or if she'll be willing to accept someone other than her father. But I don't talk about it because I don't wanna make you feel pressured. I think it's for you to decide when the two of us meet, not me. I do *want* to meet Aura. To be honest, I think we can only go so far in our relationship until I meet her. She's such a major part of your life that I don't think we could really move forward into a serious relationship without knowing how the three of us work together."

"And is moving forward something you still want to do?" Prim asked, as she reached across the table to touch his hand. "I know you're mad at me."

"I'm not mad. I was just really disappointed that you could think so little of me. That hurt my heart."

"Well, just to clear the air, I think the *world* of you, Chase," she said, making her way around the table. Prim straddled him and put her hand over his heart. "You're everything I've ever wanted in a man. I love you," she said, kissing him sweetly.

Their kiss grew feverish and they made love right there at the kitchen table. The only thing hotter than the two of them was the burning pot on the stovetop.

"Oh *shit*," Sidney shouted, before jumping up to remove the pot.

Thirty minutes later he walked Prim to her car and kissed her goodbye. She rode home with a smile on her face, happy that the two of them were able to talk through their issues and get resolved. And she was optimistic about the future and believed it was time for Sidney and Aura to meet. Prim thought that was the only thing standing in the way of her having that beautiful blue ring placed on her finger and hearing Sidney say he loved her too. She had no idea that the diamond she was desperate for him to give to her was the one he had planned to propose to Madeline with on the night of the play.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was Saturday, July 30th, the day of Avis's fortieth birthday party and she ran around like a chicken with its head cut off. Her phone rang constantly with questions about the time and location of the party despite the invitations she mailed and the online reminders she sent. Avis tried to hide her annoyance at the interruptions as she didn't want to discourage anyone from coming and bringing a fabulous gift. The only reason she invited the majority of her two-hundred guests was because of the extravagant presents she expected to receive from them. It was the only explanation Avis had for why she chose to invite Sidney to the same party Madeline would be attending.

"Where have you been?" Avis snapped when Grant finally arrived at her apartment.

"Look, don't start, alright? I'm here now, so quit tripping before I leave. I don't feel like going to this party anyway so I would suggest you change . . ."

"Okay, okay, Grant, let it go," Avis snapped, as she sent out text message reminders about the party. She was so distracted by the bickering between her and Grant that she accidentally sent the text to Lee instead of Lea as she intended. It would undoubtedly come as a shock to Lee to learn Avis was having a lavish birthday party when he'd given her the money to take a girls-only trip to Aruba.

Madeline was furious when Ezra called a few hours before the party asking her to pick him up. She thought it was ridiculous to drive out to Danville when Avis's party was less than ten minutes away at the Union City Crowne Plaza. More than anything Madeline was sick of being inconvenienced because of Ezra's work. Lately all she heard from him was, "I'm sorry", "just a few more minutes", and "I promise I'll make it up to you". Madeline honestly didn't know how much more she could take.

Tired of arguing about it, she agreed to pick up Ezra with the condition that once they arrived at the hotel all business calls stopped. He agreed before telling Madeline he loved her and rushing off the phone.

"Whatever," she huffed then called Christa. "Hey, I just wanted to let you know there's been a change of plans. I have to drive *all* the way out to get Ezra now so you and Big Bo can go ahead without us. Okay, call me when you get this message. Bye."

Forty-five minutes later Madeline was dressed in the gifts Ezra sent to her the day before. She was tempted to wear something else out of spite but she loved the royal blue dress he chose for her. It was knee-length with a single beaded sleeve embellished with stunning sequins. To accompany it, Ezra bought a royal

blue cocktail ring, a round diamond and sapphire necklace in 10-carat white gold, and a pair of 5" heels called luxury royal blue crystal. She sparkled from head to toe. He even chose Madeline's underwear saying it would turn him on to know what she was wearing underneath. So she put on the black, satin corset and panty knowing Ezra would be thinking about it all night.

Despite having been angry about driving out to Danville, Madeline couldn't wipe the grin from her face. She felt so sexy and hoped Ezra wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her once he got a look. Madeline frowned when she pulled up to his house and saw several vehicles in his driveway. One of them she recognized as Big Bo's and wondered what he was doing there if Ezra was as busy with work as he claimed.

Even more confusing was the aisle of red rose petals leading up to the front door. "What is going on?" Madeline mumbled, as she reached to ring the bell. Ezra opened the door before she could do so. "Big Bear, what's going on?"

Standing in a tailored black suit, white silk shirt, and black and royal blue tie, Ezra smiled at Madeline before planting a kiss on her hand. "I love you, Baby Doll," he said, opening the door so she could see inside.

Tears instantly fell down her cheeks as she finally understood what was happening. "Big Bear," Madeline cooed and placed her hands up to her face. Three violinists, all dressed in black tuxedos, began to play the most romantic sounding music she ever heard.

"Come on in," Ezra said, ushering her inside.

"Oh my god, this is *so* beautiful! I can't believe you did all of this," she said of the candlelit living room draped with white satin fabric and red roses to create a canopy effect. It was like something out of a dream. More tears fell when Aura came into the room carrying several bouquets of gerbera daisies.

"Hi, Maddie!" she beamed.

"Hi, Sweetheart," Madeline cried, accepting the flowers and Aura's kiss on the cheek. "Thank you."

Next to enter the room, carrying more flowers, was Christa and Evelyn. Madeline was nearly hyperventilating by that point. Christa started crying too which only made things worse. She and Evelyn embraced Madeline and told her how beautiful she looked and how happy they were for her.

Ezra's entire family and Big Bo entered the living room next but Mary was the only one who hugged and kissed Madeline. She was supposed to wait until Ezra proposed before she said anything but Mary did what she wanted. Michael had to grab her and bring her back to where everyone else stood so his son could propose to the woman he loved.

The violinists stopped playing and the room was quiet except for Madeline's sniffles. Aura took the flowers back and gave her a few Kleenex. Then Ezra led

Madeline to a high-back chair that looked fit for royalty. He'd positioned it under the satin canopy and had all of their family surround them. She took her seat and Ezra knelt in front of her. He hoped to get through the proposal without getting choked up but as he looked into Madeline's beautiful face, he felt the emotions welling up inside of him.

"Well, everybody knows the story of how I was minding my own business when you came barreling out of the bathroom and knocked me down to the floor." Madeline laughed and shook her head. Each time he told the story of how they met it got more dramatic. "But what they may not know is that I fell hopelessly in love at that exact moment. I knew in an instant that I had met the woman I'd been searching for my whole life. I knew with certainty from our first conversation that you'd be mine forever. I love you, Baby Doll."

"I love you too," she smiled and gently rubbed his beard.

"Okay, well that's all I wanted to tell you."

Madeline playfully hit him on the shoulder and Mary yelled for him to quit acting stupid. They all laughed. Then Ezra got on with the business of proposing. He motioned for Aura to join him and she knelt beside him in front of Madeline. Together they said, "Madeline Yvette Stiles. Madeline Yvette Stiles, will you marry us?"

She laughed knowing Ezra would never let her forget how ridiculous she sounded the night they met. "OH MY GOD!" she screamed when he opened the box to reveal the 3-carat, Marquis cut diamond ring. She instantly recognized it as the one she tried on at the jewelers when they went to get Aura's ring. The one that was almost twenty-six thousand dollars.

"Uhm, did she answer us?" Ezra asked, as he and Aura looked at each other.

"Yes! Yes, I'll marry you! YES!" Madeline screamed, as she hugged and kissed them both. "Oh my GOD!" she jumped and screamed.

"Be still, Baby Doll, so I can put it on you," Ezra laughed.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Madeline trembled, barely able to contain herself while he put the ring on her finger. As soon as he slid it on she started jumping and screaming again.

"Ooh, *lord*, this is the most violent acceptance in the history of proposing," Ezra teased, as Madeline pulled, hugged, kissed, and snatched on him. She was so excited she didn't know what to do with herself. "I would've put on some pads and shin guards if I knew all of this was coming!"

Everybody laughed and Madeline finally calmed down enough to wrap her arms around him and really kiss him.

"Uhm, Mad, we're still here, honey," Christa said, as her sister looked close to ripping Ezra's suit off right then and there.

Madeline finally let go of him. “I’m getting married!” she screamed then went around the room giving hugs and kisses and showing her ring. Never in a million years did she expect to receive something so grand. At the jeweler that afternoon Madeline tried on some of the most expensive jewelry just to see what it felt like, not that she ever thought she’d actually own any of it. All she could say was, “oh my god” every time she looked at her ring.

Once they finished with the congratulatory toasts of champagne, well wishes, and picture taking everyone cleared out so Ezra and Madeline could have some time alone. It was then that she learned he hadn’t blown her off for work, but to plan the proposal.

“Oh, Big Bear, are you serious? And to think, I was *so* mad at you,” she laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Yeah, I know, but I did it this way so you wouldn’t get suspicious. I wanted you to be surprised.”

“Well, it worked because I didn’t have a clue,” she smiled then kissed him again. “So are you ready?” Ezra nodded and the two of them headed in different directions. “Where are *you* going?” Madeline asked.

“Uh, to the party . . . where are you going?”

“To show you my corset,” she grinned, deviously.

A huge smile spread across Ezra’s face. “I can’t *wait* to see it, Baby Doll. But I wanted to show off my fiancée tonight—dance, have a few drinks, celebrate, you know. And then I’m gonna bring you back here and tear that corset off you.”

“Ooh, I like the sound of that,” Madeline groaned. “Okay let’s go. The sooner we get there the sooner we can leave and get to the corset ripping.”

They were heading out when Ezra stopped suddenly. “On second thought,” he whispered, before kissing her passionately. Within a matter of seconds they were making love pressed against the front door. And soon after they were in the Phantom heading to the Crowne Plaza.

In just a few hours Madeline would regret her decision to leave Ezra’s house that night. If she hadn’t perhaps her life wouldn’t have been ruined. Maybe she wouldn’t have lost everything that ever mattered to her.

Back in Fremont, Prim was being scolded over the phone by Prissy for always letting her feelings about Madeline get in the way of what was important. Ezra coming to get Aura freed Prim up to be with Sidney but instead of getting dolled up for him, she was obsessing over where Madeline got money to start an inn. She overheard Aura talking about it with her friends and casually mentioned it to Ezra. When he confirmed that Madeline was considering the idea, Prim could barely hide her anger. Without a job to speak of, Ezra had to be funding Madeline’s little project.

“So what!” Prissy snapped. “Why are you all up in their business? You’ve got a daughter and your own man to tend to. Quit wasting time worrying about what Madeline’s doing because I’m sure she ain’t thinking about you. As Tamar Braxton would say, ‘Get your life!’”

“Shut up, Prissy,” Prim chuckled. “And contrary to what you may think it *is* my business to know who’s around my daughter possibly influencing her. I’ve worked too hard to instill the value of hard work and education into Aura for Madeline to saunter into her life and teach her that it’s better to live off a man!”

“But that’s your assumption that she’s living off Ezra. Madeline took care of herself before she met him so who’s to say she stopped.”

“I don’t know, Prissy, but something’s just not adding up.”

“Then Google the bitch and find out!”

“*Google?* Girl, please, she ain’t that big of a deal.”

“Apparently she is the reason you’re sitting up talking about her again instead of getting ready to meet your man. Why don’t you put that mess to rest and move on with your life, Prim. It’s too short to waste it on nonsense. Look, I gotta go, baby sis. Mr. Anderson’s giving me that face.”

“Umm huh and we know that ain’t the only thing he’s gonna give you,” Prim giggled. “Enjoy your getaway, baby. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Prim hung up the phone and was about to head up to her bedroom when her laptop on the dining room table caught her attention. *Just leave it alone*, she thought, but her feet kept moving towards the computer. Within a few moments Prim typed in Madeline Stiles and was surprised by the number of options that appeared on her screen. “Whatever,” she mumbled.

Ten minutes of clicking on one entry after another showed Prim nothing but that there were plenty of women named Madeline Stiles in the world. She clicked on one more but it took a long time to upload so she decided to leave it and went upstairs to get ready. Prim had no idea that the information that would finally show up on her screen would tell her everything she needed to know about Madeline Yvette Stiles.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Earlier that afternoon Deidra went shopping for a new dress to wear to Avis's party. Peter had chosen a dark blue suit with tan accents and she wanted to wear a similar color scheme. Things were going well between them and she was excited to go out as a couple for a night on the town. Perhaps seeing Deidra and Peter happy together would put an end to Avis's and Raye Ann's smart remarks about their marriage.

After an hour Deidra finally decided on a dark blue, strapless cocktail dress with a tan bow and flowing sash. It was a bit plain but she thought it could be spruced up with a nice piece of jewelry and a fierce pair of stilettos. On her way to the register, however, another gown caught her eye.

"Would you like to try it on, ma'am?" the saleswoman asked.

"I probably shouldn't. I honestly don't even know why I like it," Deidra admitted. "It looks like someone took a white satin gown and threw blue and fuchsia paint in the middle of it! But it's fabulous, though."

"Let me get it for you. A size ten, right?"

Deidra put on the long, strapless gown and fell in love. It hugged her body perfectly and she felt sensual in it. She walked out of the fitting room to get a better look in the big mirrors when the saleswoman said she liked that dress better than the one Deidra originally planned to get.

"I bet you do. That other dress is three hundred dollars and this one is *eight*. Your commission goes up considerably if I get this one, doesn't it?" she rolled her eyes and went back to admiring herself in the mirror.

The saleswoman wanted to tell Deidra that she really thought the dress looked beautiful on her but decided against it. Ten minutes later Deidra walked out of the fitting room and told the woman to put that plain-Jane dress back because she'd be taking the fabulous one. Peter would just have to understand.

Peter had just gotten out of the shower when he heard the doorbell ring. He threw on a robe and ran to answer it. Every instinct he had warned him not to open the door. He ignored them all.

"Hey, Mr. Banks. I was wondering if you had a few minutes. I *really* need your help," Morgan Gentry said.

She was the beautiful nineteen-year-old neighbor whose idea of an outfit was shorts that fit more like panties and a tank top that barely covered her ample breasts. Her flawless skin was the color of peanut butter and it looked just as smooth and creamy. Peter had to force himself to look up from her long, shapely legs into her pretty brown eyes.

“What can I do for you, Morgan?”

“You told me once that if I needed help with my college courses to let you know. Well, I’m in desperate need of help with geometry,” she said, pointing to the text book in her hand. “I don’t understand any of it and I have a test on Monday that I’m gonna flunk if I . . .”

“Morgan, Morgan,” he interrupted, “what I *said* was if you needed help to give me some notice and I would help you find a tutor. I don’t teach geometry and I’d have to contact someone at the school to find you a . . .”

“*Please*, Mr. Banks. I don’t have that kind of time. I really need help. And I know you don’t teach geometry but you’re *so* smart and I know you can help me grab the basics so I can pass my class. *Please*, Mr. Banks,” she began to cry.

Peter reluctantly agreed to help and invited her into his home. He offered Morgan a seat at the kitchen table and went to his bedroom to get dressed. He was startled when she walked into his room.

“What the hell are you doing?” Peter shouted.

“Oh, I was just coming in here to see if there was anything I could help *you* with,” she smiled, moving towards him. “I’ve had a crush on you since I was fifteen years old, Mr. Banks. And I see you looking at me all the time so I know you like me too. I thought maybe we could do something about that.”

“Look, little girl, you need to get out of here! Hey, stop! Put that back on,” Peter snapped when Morgan pulled the tank top over her head, exposing her perfect breasts. *Oh shit*, he thought not knowing what to do. Peter wanted her to leave his house but he knew better than to touch her in any way. “Get the fuck out of here, Morgan! I’m not playing with you,” he screamed when she smiled at him. “Alright that’s enough,” he shouted and snatched her by the arm before she could remove her shorts. Peter led her out of his bedroom and nearly peed himself when Deidra walked through the front door. *Oh fuck me!* “Baby, I can explain. I *swear* it’s not what you think. She came in here and . . . Deidra, baby, wait!”

There were no words to describe the level of rage Deidra felt. All she could hear was her mother’s voice telling her what a fool she was for taking Peter back. “If he cheated once, he’ll cheat again! You mark my words.” Tears stung Deidra’s eyes but she refused to let them fall. She wasn’t going to waste an ounce of emotion on a cheating bastard like Peter Banks.

“Deidra, please, just listen to me. I know it looked bad but I *promise* you nothing happened.” Peter explained everything through the locked bedroom door hoping his wife would at least be willing to talk to him. A few minutes later she opened the door carrying a packed bag.

“Baby, wait, where are you going? Please don’t leave. I promised you I would never hurt you like that again and I swear I haven’t. I’m begging you to trust me, baby. Deidra . . .”

She walked by him and out the front door. Peter ran after her, pleading for her to stay and talk. Deidra peeled out of the driveway.

“Yeah, I bet this won’t be funny when I tell your mama what you did!” Peter yelled at Morgan who sat on her porch, amused by the situation. “You’re gonna regret this, little girl. I *promise* you that!” he screamed then slammed his front door shut.

Deidra turned off her phone and drove around aimlessly for thirty minutes before pulling into a shopping complex in Union City. She parked outside of Starbucks and sat silently in her car for a while. Then she decided to go inside for her favorite drink, a Java chip frappuccino. As she sat, sipping her drink, someone in line caught her attention.

“Uhm, do I know you?” the man asked in response to Deidra staring at him with a snarl on her face.

“No, but I know *you*,” she snapped.

He picked up his order then walked towards Deidra’s table. “Oookay, and I did I do something to you the reason you’re looking at me all stank?”

“That’s the face I give all punk ass men who don’t take care of their kids.”

“*Excuse* me,” he barked.

“Yeah, I know the whole story about you abandoning Avis and the kids. She said you haven’t paid a dime in child support since y’all divorced four years ago. And then you don’t even wanna see the kids!”

“I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“Deidra.”

“Well, Deidra, you look old enough to know that there are always two sides to a story. Only a *fool* makes judgments or opens her mouth without hearing them both. Now if you’ll excuse me,” he stated and headed for the door.

Deidra wanted to snap at him but she knew he was right. “DeMarco, wait,” she said, following him outside. “What’s your side of the story?”

DeMarco stared at Deidra momentarily trying to decide if he wanted to waste his time talking to her or not. He motioned for her to take a seat at one of the patio tables for no other reason than to clear his name. “Well, first of all,” he said, taking a seat across from her, “Avis and I didn’t get divorced because we were never married.”

“*What?*” she shrieked.

“I couldn’t have married her even if I wanted to because, as I came to learn, she was still legally married to Mavis’s father.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold the hell up! Mavis isn’t *your* daughter?”

“Biologically, no, but I’ve loved her like my own since she was three months old,” DeMarco smiled at the thought of his teenage girl. “When I met Avis she was claiming to be a single mother who’d taken her baby and run from Georgia

to get away from her abusive ex-boyfriend. Years later I learned that she had Malan arrested on some trumped up domestic abuse charges, cleaned out his bank account, and came out here to California looking for a sucker to take care of her. That would be me,” he said, disgusted. “Anyway, I took Avis and the baby in and within a year she got pregnant with Sloane. For a few years we were happy and everything seemed cool. Then little by little I came to realize that Avis is a pathological liar! None of what she told me about Malan was true. He was actually a decent guy who had the misfortune of getting involved with her. Avis ruined the man’s life then didn’t even shed a tear when he died in a motorcycle accident. All she cares about is herself and she’ll lie, cheat, and steal to get what she wants no matter who it hurts.”

Each story was worse than the last as Deidra sat dumbfounded listening to DeMarco’s every word. She learned that Avis wasn’t a registered nurse as she claimed but a nurse’s assistant who lived in a cramped one-bedroom apartment. The pictures she showed of her new, plush home were actually pictures she and her kids had taken inside of a model home. Avis told them they were playing dress up and she packed things like bathrobes, hair rollers, and several changes of clothes to make it appear as if they’d taken random shots of each other in the home where they lived.

“Just think about it, Deidra. With as much of a showboat as Avis is do you *really* think she’d be living in a beautiful home and not make sure each one of y’all saw it? She’s all about putting on airs and making it seem like she is and has more than she does. I can only imagine the excuses she came up with for why no one could see this alleged house in anything other than pictures.”

Suddenly Deidra remembered something about the pipes being busted the reason Avis had to cancel her housewarming party the first time. The next time it was some sort of emergency with the kids. And there was always some excuse for why no one could ever drop by or even pick Avis up if they were all going out together. Deidra hadn’t thought much of it since she didn’t spend nearly as much time with the other women as Avis did. She just assumed everyone else saw the house and the brand new car and all the magnificent gifts Avis supposedly received from the wealthy men she dated, including Grant.

Most disturbing, however, was learning that it was Avis, not DeMarco, who hadn’t paid child support in over four years. She was the one who hadn’t seen the kids in months or bought Mavis’s prom shoes or any of the things she blamed on him. Avis was the dead-beat parent who only thought about herself and she lied and manipulated her friends into believing otherwise.

Deidra apologized to DeMarco for the way she approached him and they shook hands before he left Starbucks. With what took place with Peter, Deidra wasn’t sure if she’d be up to going to the party. After talking with DeMarco,

however, there was no other place she'd rather be. Deidra couldn't wait to confront Avis. Thankful that she packed her fabulous dress, she headed to her brother's house to get ready for the party. Deidra decided not to be miserable by herself.

After the proposal, Evelyn and Christa climbed into Big Bo's truck. He'd volunteered to pick them both up so Madeline wouldn't recognize their cars. Truth be told, he just wanted more time with Christa. The two of them had been talking and spending quite a bit of time together. Big Bo even invited her over for dinner with him and his sons.

"So why are you so quiet?" Big Bo asked, after they dropped off Evelyn and headed towards the Crowne Plaza. "What's wrong?"

"Uhm, nothing," Christa said, unconvincingly.

"Come on now, Christa Belle. It's obvious something's bothering you so talk to me, girl. Did your sister getting engaged upset you?"

"Oh *no*, I'm *so* happy for Madeline and Ezra. I think they'll be really happy together."

"I know you're happy for Mad. I guess what I'm asking is if her getting engaged upset you because of the memories of *you* getting engaged and planning a wedding."

"No, it wasn't that. I, uhm . . . you know, Bo, I think it's probably best to talk about this at another time."

"I disagree with you on that one. Why go into the party with a heavy heart? It'll only keep you from enjoying yourself and . . ."

"Fine, fine . . . the reason I'm upset *does* have to do with me being dumped before my wedding. But it's not because my sister got engaged. It's because Ellis showed up on my doorstep today asking for another chance!"

"Oh," Big Bo uttered. "And what did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him anything. I was rushing to get ready and I knew you and Mama would be at my place at any moment. I couldn't deal with it so I told Ellis I'd talk to him later."

"Humph."

"Oh god, see that's why I didn't wanna say anything. Now you're upset and it's gonna ruin the night."

"Why would I be upset, Christa Belle?" Big Bo asked, as he made a u-turn at the light. "What man doesn't want the women he's interested in to meet up with her tall, handsome, ex?"

"Where are you going?" she frowned.

"I'm gonna drop you off at home so you can get your car. That way you can drive yourself to the party or wherever else you might need to go."

“Now you acting just like Madeline!” Christa snorted, rolling her eyes. “That’s all I need is another person who can’t talk through shit when he gets upset! I *told* you this wasn’t a good time to talk about it but you kept pushing the issue. And now you wanna punish me for being honest!”

“I’m not punishing you, Christa Belle. I just don’t wanna be with someone who feels the need to talk to the man who, according to *you*, devastated and humiliated you. But I guess you got your wish, right? For months you dreamt of him coming back on bended knee, begging for another chance. Who am I to stand in the way?” After a few minutes of driving in silence he pulled into her driveway.

“Bo.”

“Have a good evening.”

“Really, Bo? After all the time we’ve spent together is it that easy for you to toss me to the side?”

“That seems like a question *I* should be asking. But do your thing, Christa. Good luck, alright? I hope y’all will be happy.”

“Stop it, Bo! Ellis and I are not getting back together. I just need to talk to him and . . .”

“For *what*?” Big Bo snapped.

“*Closure!*” she snapped back. “I *loved* him, Bo, and I was planning to spend the rest of my life with him. But the moment he found out something he didn’t like about me, he bounced. And he didn’t even have the decency to tell me to my face. He sent me a fuckin’ text message! So I’m sorry if me needing to talk to Ellis upsets you, but this isn’t about you, Bo. It’s about me finally having the opportunity to vent my anger and hurt to the person who caused it. But you know what? I’m glad this happened. At least now I know that when things get tough you’ll leave me too,” Christa said, opening the door to his truck. “Have a good evening,” she sneered.

Big Bo grabbed Christa’s arm to prevent her from getting out of the truck. He apologized and admitted to being insecure and jealous. He didn’t think that given the choice between him and Ellis that he stood a chance. Big Bo apologized again then leaned over to kiss Christa. She stopped him.

“The biggest mistake I made with Ellis was not telling him the truth about me. I don’t wanna make that mistake again,” Christa said before divulging the secret that had cost her the man she loved most. Big Bo’s mouth dropped open and he stared at her in disbelief. “Well, like I said, have a good evening.” She climbed out of his truck and got into her own vehicle and drove away.

Fifteen minutes later Christa asked the lady at the front desk where Avis Hampton’s party was being held. She directed her to the Crystal Ballroom , just down the hall.

"Name please," a woman sitting at a table in front of the ballroom doors rudely bellowed.

"Christa Stiles."

"It says here you have a plus one. Is anyone joining you?"

"Uh, no he's . . ."

"Right here," Big Bo said, as he jogged towards Christa. "I got a little turned around but I found my way back. There's no place in the world I'd rather be," he said, looking at her lovingly.

"Y'all can go in. You're at table six," the woman said, as she motioned towards two men serving as ushers. They opened the doors for Big Bo and Christa to enter and the music from the DJ's booth hit them like a blast.

"Wow, I feel like I'm at a wedding reception. It's beautiful."

"How can you tell? It's dark as hell in here! I guess we gone go blind *and* deaf tonight," Big Bo complained. Christa nudged him and laughed. "I'm serious, girl. What's the point in having all these chandeliers if you just gone keep em on dim?"

"It's supposed to be romantic," Christa smiled and led him inside.

"All this loud ass music kills the chances of that."

"Well, let's just try to make the most of it, okay?" she asked and led him to table six.

Once they were seated, Christa took in the ambience. Avis definitely went all out to impress her two hundred guests. There were twenty round tables of ten decorated with white table cloths, silver chargers, white plates, and turquoise napkins for a pop of color. The centerpieces were tall, glass vases filled with white ostrich feathers. Lit candles encircled the vases and the blue up-lighting and penlights gave everything a soft glow. Truffles placed inside of small turquoise boxes with white bows on top were in front of every plate. And off in its own corner was the gaudiest cake ever made. The term "less is more" was something Avis might have considered when it came to decorating her birthday cake. Having penlights shining directly on it only made it look worse.

Servers circled the large room with trays of champagne and appetizers to cater to the hundred or so guests already in attendance. Christa and Big Bo grabbed a flute and sampled each of the three appetizers. They were delicious and the two of them got second helpings of all three.

"You're pretty popular, aren't you?" Big Bo asked when another group of people came to their table to greet Christa.

She was surprised by how many people she knew. Christa and Avis didn't exactly run in the same circles so she didn't expect to be familiar with so many of the guests. There were a lot of wealthy people in the room, ones she didn't realize

Avis knew. Though the more Christa thought about it, Avis had a knack for ingratiating herself in groups where she didn't necessarily belong.

"Where's your plus one?" Tamia smirked when Deidra sashayed up to the guest sign-in table alone.

"Where's *yours*?" she rolled her eyes.

It was obvious Deidra had enjoyed a few cocktails before arriving to the party. And Tamia understood that to mean one thing—she'd be even more of a bitch than usual. Finding out they'd both been seated at table fourteen meant Tamia would get to witness it firsthand.

"Well, come on, damn it. I guess we stuck together," she said, linking her arm through Deidra's. "And where you get this dress? It's kind of fly."

"Yours too," Deidra said of the gold, skintight, spaghetti-strap dress Tamia squeezed herself into. Her implants were prominently displayed, as usual, and her perfect butt accentuated. She dyed her hair blonde and had her lips filled in a bit more. Deidra thought Tamia looked like a blow-up doll by the mouth but no one could tell the woman she wasn't drop dead gorgeous.

The two of them made their way through the loud, darkened room to table fourteen. Six other women were already seated there so Tamia hugged the two she knew and introduced herself to the others. She introduced Deidra as well and they all complimented her on the beautiful gown she wore.

"Oh, thank you. I'm *so* glad I didn't get that other one to match my cheating ass husband! Ooh, can I get one of those?" Deidra asked the server with the tray of champagne. She thanked him and took her seat, oblivious to the openmouthed stares of the other women. Deidra downed her drink in a few gulps.

Tamia leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Uh, I thought you and Peter were starting over. I thought you had forgiven him."

"I did!" Deidra yelled, including the entire table in the conversation. "He had just finished fucking the neighbor when I got home from shopping today. So that's what happened to my plus one."

Several of the women gasped and Tamia squeezed Deidra's hand as a way of comforting her. "I'm sorry, Deidra. Really, I am."

"Well, you know what? I say fuck him!" one of the other women chimed in. She motioned for the server with the tray of champagne. "Fuck his cheating ass! We gone drink and have a great time and just maybe we'll find you a good piece of ass to help you out that fabulous dress tonight!"

Each of the women took a flute from the server and held it up in a toast. They clinked glasses and downed the contents.

"Keep em coming, honey," another of the women said to the server.

After hours of debating whether he should go or not, Sidney finally decided to get dressed and head to the party. He didn't care much for Avis but he knew Madeline would be there and he needed to see her. He had to talk to her. It was time for him to be honest with her and himself. What Sidney didn't realize was that Prim was planning to surprise him at the party she'd declined a few weeks back when childcare was an issue. Asking Mary to keep Aura for the weekend freed Prim to enjoy a night out with the man she loved. And she was so excited to do so that she left the house without looking at her laptop again.

Tamia spotted Ezra and Madeline when they entered the ballroom and she excused herself from the table to greet them. She jumped and screamed when Madeline showed her ring and said she and Ezra were engaged. Tamia hugged and congratulated them both then she and Madeline went back to acting like giddy little girls. Ezra joined Christa and Big Bo at their table.

"Ooh, Mad, remember when we used to put them towels on our heads like a veil and used balled up socks as our bouquet?" They both laughed. "Well now it's about to happen for real, girl. You getting *married*!" Tamia shouted, as her eyes filled with tears. "I'm *so* happy for you, Madeline. Ezra's a wonderful man and I know he'll be good to you. You deserve to be happy, girl," she said, embracing her friend. They both were crying by then.

"So this means you have to stay, Tamia. You can't move to Tennessee right now. You have to help me plan this wedding, girl."

Tamia wanted to tell her best friend something but she walked Madeline to her table instead and hugged Christa and Big Bo. She complained about not being seated at the table with them and didn't understand why Avis put her with Deidra.

"*Deidra!*" Madeline frowned. "Why the hell is she even here?"

"What's the deal with this chick, Baby Doll? You always get so upset whenever someone mentions her. I thought she was your friend."

Tamia and Christa stared at Madeline waiting on an answer as well. She was grateful when an announcement was made for everyone to take their seats. The guest of honor was due to arrive soon.

As Tamia made her way back to her seat, a couple joined the table. They were about to introduce themselves when Deidra interrupted to ask Tamia what was going on with Madeline.

"So she's actually gonna *marry* Smokey the Bear? After what? Three or four months? She don't even know that dude!" Deidra slurred.

"Well, when you find the one you're meant to be with it doesn't take long to figure that out," Tamia stated. The couple who joined them smiled at each other and he kissed her hand. "Why can't you just be happy for them instead of hating?"

“Whatever,” Deidra grumbled. She grabbed her phone to send a text message before focusing her attention on the couple across from her, particularly the man.

“Can I help you?” he asked when she kept staring at him.

“You look so familiar. I know I’ve seen you somewhere before. I never forget a face.” Before Deidra figured out where she’d seen him, the lights were turned on and the sound of blaring trumpets filled the room announcing the birthday girl’s arrival. “Oh, give me a damn break,” Deidra huffed, rolling her eyes. She took another swig of the Jack Daniels she ordered.

Avis’s attempt at walking slow and sexy drew giggles from the crowd. She didn’t seem to notice, though. No one could’ve convinced her she wasn’t the finest woman in the world with the sexiest, most desirable man on her arm. Not one woman would disagree as far as Grant was concerned. He looked delectable in a charcoal gray Armani suit that Avis bought for him with Lee’s money. It was tailored perfectly to fit his tall, sleek, athletic body. The diamond stud in his ear and Rolex watch on his wrist were gifts from Avis as well. They were his incentive for being her escort for the evening.

Grant was definitely a pretty-boy and quite a few of the women eyed him seductively, scheming on ways to get into his pants. He too was scoping the crowd looking for the woman he’d be sharing a bed with that night. When his eyes found Madeline, a smile spread across his face.

“What is that bullshit she got on?” Deidra asked, drawing laughter from the people at her table and those close enough to hear her inquiry. It was clear that she wasn’t the only one who thought Avis looked ridiculous. “Lord have mercy,” she grunted, taking another swig of her drink. “Avis is normally really sharp. I wonder why she picked her birthday party to have a fashion faux pas.”

Avis wore a silver fit and flare gown with a side draped bodice and a large satin sash. The asymmetrical skirt featured a cascade of big, basket-weave organza roses. Most of the women thought the dress would’ve been ugly on anyone but it was especially so on someone as short and misshapen as Avis.

The lights were dimmed again and the wait staff began serving dinner. There was steak, chicken, and salmon from which to choose. Everyone at table fourteen laughed when they all chose steak. Then Tamia made a joke about the Apple iPhone being popular since she, Deidra, and one of the other women had the same one. More than anything her comments were a way of releasing the nervous energy she felt from having spotted Sidney and his date. Tamia had the sinking feeling his presence was going to cause a problem.

“Oooh, I remember you now,” Deidra shouted, startling everyone at their table. “It’s been driving me nuts since y’all sat down. You that nigga Mojo . . . the

one that was fucking around with Raye Ann! Yeah, I *knew* I'd seen your face somewhere!"

He choked on his drink. "Uh, nah, you got me confused, miss. My name is Terrence and I'm a happily married man. This is my wife Tionda. I have no idea who this, uh, what'd you say, Raye Ann? I have no idea who that is so I suggest you get your facts straight before you start spewing out garbage like that," he huffed. "Baby, let's go. I ain't got time for no shit like this . . . people flying off at the mouth with a bunch of nonsense. Let's go," Terrence said, as he stood and reached out for his wife's hand.

"Take a seat, MOJO," Tionda said, as she took a bite of her steak. "You might wanna eat up because I've got a feeling this'll be the last decent meal you get to eat. You won't be able to afford much once I get done with you," she smiled, taking a bite of the delicious mashed potatoes. "Sit down, baby. Let's hear what, oh I'm sorry, what's your name again?"

"Deidra."

"Let's hear what Deidra has to say. I'm betting it's gonna be fascinating."

Deidra told Tionda about the pictures Raye Ann showed them of her and Mojo during a weekend getaway to San Francisco. When Tionda asked Tamia if she'd seen the pictures too her response was that she didn't want to get involved. She said being in the middle of someone else's drama was the last thing she wanted and Tamia encouraged Deidra to shut up. The other women, however, were completely engrossed as if they were watching an episode of *Love and Hip Hop*.

"I'm telling you, baby, they've got me confused with some other dude. I mean think about it, Tionda. When would I have had time to do any of this shit they talking about when you and I are always together?"

"Oh, no, we're not *always* together, MOJO. There have been plenty of times where your time was unaccounted for. Take, for example, the time you supposedly went to a basketball game but couldn't recall any details about it like who won or who even played," Tionda said then took a forkful of garden salad and shoved it in her mouth. She took her time chewing. "Then there's the time you were out with your boys but strangely enough none of them remembered going. And now that I think about it, that weekend I went on my business trip you always answered your cell phone but never the house phone. I guess you weren't there after all, huh?"

"Look, baby, can we talk about this later? This isn't the time or the place."

"This is the perfect time and place, *Mojo*," Tionda smiled wickedly, as she continued to eat her meal. "I told you before we even got married that there are two things I will not tolerate, a liar and a cheat. You, my dear, are guilty of both. And you'll be punished severely for it. So I hope it was good. I hope it was worth everything you've got because that's exactly what it's gonna cost you."

“I haven’t been with *anybody*, baby, I swear! How you just gone believe some strangers over your own man?” Terrence snapped. He, like Tionda, took Tamia’s response of not wanting to get involved as being a yes to having seen the pictures.

“Unlike you, they don’t have a reason to lie. Besides, *Mojo*, you ain’t as slick as you think,” she winked, taking another bite of the delicious steak.

It was then that Terrence realized his wife had been aware of his affair all along. It explained why Tionda was so insistent on coming to Avis’s birthday party even though she wasn’t really a friend of theirs. Terrence glared at Deidra as he tried desperately to figure out where he went wrong to make his wife suspicious or why in the hell Raye Ann showed pictures of him to her friends.

The truth was Tionda knew nothing about Raye Ann. The woman she was after, the one Terrence took to a hotel on several occasions and foolishly used his credit card, was Madeline Stiles.

“Ooh, there she is now,” Deidra pointed towards the entrance, thankful they’d brightened the ballroom a bit. “Ooh, it looks like she upgraded,” she said, referring to the incredibly handsome, dark chocolate man on Raye Ann’s arm.

Terrence used one of the cloth napkins to wipe sweat from his forehead.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Hey birthday girl! Ooh, let me see your dress and . . .”

Avis’s smile dropped when she turned to face Raye Ann.

“What’s up, A. How you doing? Happy birthday,” her cousin Keith said, as he embraced her. “You did it up big, didn’t you?” he marveled, looking around the room.

Grant took that opportunity to pry himself out of the grip Avis maintained on him from the moment they entered the party. There were a few women he needed to meet and that was probably the only free moment he would have.

“What the hell is going on here?” Avis asked. “I *know* y’all not dating,” she said, scowling at her best friend.

“And so what if we are?” Keith snapped. He was confused by his cousin’s reaction and annoyed at the same time. “I’m a grown man and I can see who I want. What you tripping for anyway?”

“Why don’t you ask Raye Ann why I’m tripping,” Avis said, glaring at her friend. “Go ahead . . . tell him what I’m upset about.”

“Don’t do this, Avis.”

Keith stared at both of them trying to understand what was happening.

“Oh, consider it done!”

“Avis . . .”

“Now look, I kept my mouth shut all these years and I never said a word to the girls or anybody. But this is my *family*, Raye Ann, you feel me?”

She snarled at Avis. “Don’t forget you got secrets too,” Raye Ann threatened.

“Then I guess we gone be some secret revealing bitches up in here tonight because I’m not letting my cousin go out like that. Keith’s gonna know the truth before he leaves either because you told him or because I did, you feel me?”

“I don’t care which one of y’all tells me! What’s up?” Keith asked.

“Maybe we should go outside,” Raye Ann said, as she tried to pull him back towards the entrance of the ballroom.

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” he said, snatching away from her. “Just tell me what’s up.” Keith and Raye Ann moved over near the cake table, out of earshot of the other guests.

Prim was enjoying her chicken dinner when she heard a familiar laugh. She looked around the room and spotted Ezra. “That’s my ex and his girlfriend. What in the world are *they* doing here?” she asked.

“Uh, Blue, I need to tell you . . .”

“Well, if you talking ‘bout that blue fox over there then you better read the paper and stay current, baby. Mr. Money Bags put a ring on it tonight, darling,” Avis’s hairstylist said, in his usual theatrical way. “Now I know my jewels, baby, so trust and believe that big, brown bear dropped thirty thousand large on the sparkler that bitch flaunting. But I ain’t mad at her, honey. Bitch you betta work,” he laughed, high-fiving his companion.

Neither Sidney nor Prim could hide the hurt they both felt. They couldn’t believe Ezra and Madeline were actually getting married. The two of them hadn’t even known each other six months. How could they possibly be considering marriage?

“Shit, maybe I need to go hanging around the Paramount Theater and snatch me a Mr. Money Bags like she did.”

“What?” Sidney snapped, as he turned towards the stylist, his eyes blazing.

“Oh yes, Mr. Wonderful,” he smiled seductively at Sidney, “story has it Ms. Thang over there was out with somebody else when she met Mr. Money Bags. Guess it worked out for her, huh?”

The stylist and his friends continued their chatter, oblivious to the rage mounting inside of Sidney. He wanted to kick the table over. His temples throbbed as he clenched and unclenched his fists. Every time he thought Madeline couldn’t hurt or disrespect him any more she always did. Sidney clenched his teeth so hard he could have broken his jaw. It was only after he managed to calm himself that he looked Prim in her face. All the love and warmth he normally saw in her beautiful, blue eyes was replaced with cold, hard hatred. And Sidney knew there was nothing he could say that would undo the betrayal he was certain she felt.

Prim just stared at Sidney. “Yvette, huh?” she sneered, contemplating knocking him upside his head with the centerpiece. “I guess you had a good laugh at my expense, listening to me go on and on about Madeline.”

“Blue . . .” he called when she stood up to leave. Before Sidney finished his sentence, however, the D.J. stopped the music to make an announcement. A loud voice drew everyone’s attention. No one noticed Prim hurrying out of the ballroom or that Sidney left soon after.

“So you a fuckin’ MAN!”

“No, Keith, wait let me explain. I . . .”

Loud murmurs and gasps filled the room.

“What did he just say?” Deidra asked. “Was he talking to *Raye Ann*?”

“Nah, he can’t be because I’ve been all up in that and I *know* she ain’t . . .” Terrence cringed at his own stupidity. For thirty minutes he’d tried desperately to convince his wife that he didn’t know Raye Ann, let alone slept with her.

“Like I said, eat up, *Mojo*,” Tionda sneered.

Humiliated and distraught, Raye Ann raced behind Keith as he made his way out of the party. She tried to explain but he told her to get away from him before he did something he might regret. The only thing that kept him from wrapping his hands around her choker-clad throat was the fact that they hadn't had sex. Knowing that they kissed and fondled each other was enough to sicken him and Keith put one hand on his stomach and one over his mouth fearing he might throw up.

"Well, this wouldn't be an Avis party without some drama, right?" the D.J. said, trying desperately to refocus the crowd's attention onto the birthday girl. He put on an up tempo song and encouraged people to get on the dance floor.

"Get off me, Avis, damn!" Grant snapped, as he snatched his arm away from her. He was tired of her hanging on to him and acting like he couldn't take a breath without her.

"Where are you going?"

"To take a piss! That's allowed, right?"

"Yeah, come on," Avis said, linking her arm through his.

"Are you for real? You *can't* be that insecure," Grant said, as he shook his head in disbelief.

"You'd be surprised at what I can be," she snarled then flashed a phony smile to a group of guests walking by them. "We had an understanding about the way this night is supposed to go and you grinning up in other bitches' faces is *not* part of it. So I suggest you keep your mothafuckin' ass right here by my side like I told you to or you're gonna have a whole heap of trouble on your hands. You feel me?" Again Avis flashed a phony smile towards her guests. Then she straightened Grant's tie and ran her hands down the front of his suit jacket. "So do we still need to go to the bathroom?"

"Nah, I'll hold it for later," he sneered, remembering the time Avis asked him to pee on her during one of their sexcapades, as she called it. That wasn't something Grant had ever done before or even enjoyed, but it demonstrated the level of disrespect and disgust he felt towards her to even be able to do it. He had grown to hate Avis and wanted nothing more than to be free of her. Though contrary to what his friends believed, Grant didn't continue in the relationship because of the things she bought for him. Yes, they were nice things that he couldn't afford to get for himself, but the truth was Avis remembered one of his drunken confessions and threatened to ruin his life with it.

When Grant was nineteen years old he got involved with a sixteen-year-old girl. Once her father got wind of it he had him arrested on statutory rape charges even though the girl's mother knew and approved of their relationship. For almost a year Grant's life was a living hell. However, he got through it and went on to graduate from college. His passion had always been to work with kids so Grant

started an after-school program designed to help them with homework as well as give them the opportunity to socialize and be exposed to things they may not have been otherwise; like cooking and art classes, karate, journalism, and fashion design to name a few. For the past four years Grant worked hard to offer the program in every school of the district where he lived. At present he had the after-school program up and running at more than half of them. The improvement in the students' academic and social skills spoke for itself and Grant worked to find staff and instructors for the other half of schools who desperately wanted his program. Grant's fear was that if anyone got wind of his past all of his hard work and everything he was trying to accomplish would end. No one would care about the details. He'd only be viewed as a sexual predator and would be accused of things he never even thought about let alone was guilty of doing. One phone call from Avis could take away the only thing that mattered to him. And considering what she just did to her best friend, Grant knew Avis would have no qualms about ruining his life if he didn't do what she wanted.

"Ah, come on baby, I don't wanna fight with you. Let's have a good time, okay?" Avis kissed Grant's cheek before leading him to the dance floor.

Raye Ann ran to the other side of the hotel and locked herself in a bathroom stall and sobbed. She couldn't believe Avis forced her to tell Keith something so personal in such a public place. He didn't deserve to find out that way. Though, the more Raye Ann thought about it the more she knew it wouldn't have mattered when or where she told him. The outcome would always be the same—Keith being repulsed by her and walking out of her life. Raye Ann balled up on the bathroom floor believing that nothing on it was filthier than she felt at that moment.

Born as Ray Riley, he grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio with an older brother and sister. Their mother, Ann Riley, died of ovarian cancer when Ray was five years old and their father Donald Palmer left them to be raised by their maternal grandmother after the funeral. He'd pop up every few years but each visit grew more tumultuous. Even from as early as three there was something noticeably different about Ray. He'd always looked like a girl but soon began acting like one in the feminine way he walked and spoke. Donald hated it and often chastised and punished Ray for not being masculine like his brother. He blamed Ray for Ann's death. He believed whatever caused his son to be a freak had made her sick. Donald's last visit was on Halloween when Ray was twelve years old. He came downstairs dressed like a woman complete with makeup, nail polish, and high heels. He looked absolutely beautiful and his father beat him within an inch of his life. Ray spent two weeks in the hospital and Donald was sentenced to six years in prison. They never saw or spoke to each other again.

The rest of Ray's family tolerated him as long as he reserved his flamboyancy for inside the house. In junior high, when he started wearing bras stuffed with tissue and openly showed interest in boys, they wanted very little to do with him. And at eighteen, when Ray expressed his intentions to live as a woman, they disowned him altogether.

After a year of working hard as a janitor and saving everything he made, Ray left for San Francisco and joined a community of people just like him. There he was loved, supported, and encouraged to be the person he really wanted to be. He lived as a woman from the moment he stepped off the bus and never looked back. Raye Ann Riley was who he always believed he was supposed to be.

There were definitely a lot of rough periods in Raye Ann's life as not everyone was so accepting of her, particularly the men who had no idea she was still biologically a man. Donald Palmer wasn't the only person to put her in the hospital. And it was because of incidents such as those that Raye Ann made the decision not to be romantically involved with anyone until her gender reassignment surgery was complete. It didn't quite work out that way, however. She met and fell in love with a man everyone called Whistle. He accepted her for who she was and loved her dearly. Whistle was there through all of the hormone treatments, surgeries, and therapy sessions. He took care of her and always promised to be by her side. That's why Raye Ann was devastated when, three months after her gender reassignment surgery, Whistle told her he was leaving. It didn't bother him for her to look like a woman as long as she still had the male genitalia to please him. When that was no longer the case, he didn't want the relationship.

Brokenhearted, Raye Ann decided to move to Hayward and start her life anew. Her new friends, colleagues, and boyfriends only knew her as Raye Ann the beautiful, spicy Puerto Rican woman. It was only after a bad infection landed her in the hospital that Raye Ann decided to confide in one of her friends—Avis Hampton. They grew even closer and she always encouraged Raye Ann to let the past be the past and live her life as the woman she always believed she was. Avis's opinion about no one having to know about Ray Riley had obviously changed.

"Get up off this dirty ass floor!"

"Oh, god, leave me alone Deidra," Raye Ann shrieked. "I can't handle your shit right now! Just leave me alone . . . *please*."

"Look, I know we've had our gripes with each other from time to time but Avis just told me what happened and I think what she did was fucked up. So why should you go cowering off and let that lying ass bitch get away with it? Go back in there with your head held high and . . ."

“I am *not* going back in there! Are you crazy? I was humiliated. And nobody’s gonna care to hear the whole story they’ll just laugh and point and I don’t wanna be a spectacle.”

“Really, Raye Ann, so that’s why you in here laying on this nasty ass floor because you don’t wanna be a spectacle?” Deidra asked, as she peered under the stall. “Now get up and gone back in there. Didn’t nobody believe your beautiful ass was no damn man! Plus Mojo vouched for you by letting everybody know he’s been all up in it . . . stupid mothafucka gone say that shit in front of his wife after denying even knowing you. So fuck all that stuff from the past. You used to be a dude but *now* you’re a woman and a fly ass one at that. Shit, you look more feminine than me so quit trippin’ and show Avis she didn’t get the better of you.”

Raye Ann never would have thought Deidra, of all people, would be the person to encourage her, but she did. “You’re right, girl. Thank you,” she said and began cleaning her face. “Well, Avis said we were gonna be some secret revealing bitches tonight so I guess I better hold up to my end of the deal. There’s some shit she doesn’t think I know and she’s gonna regret . . . what’s wrong with you?” Raye Ann asked when Deidra burst out laughing.

“Now I understand why you got so upset when I asked what was wrong with your pussy. That shit’s been manufactured,” she laughed loudly.

“Whatever, bitch,” Raye Ann rolled her eyes. “I should’ve known our little cuddly moment wouldn’t last long. Move,” she said, pushing past Deidra.

Raye Ann actually found Deidra’s comment funny and she chuckled once her back was turned. She made her way through the maze of hallways to get back to the party and was presented with an opportunity to repay Avis. Lee was at the guest sign-in table demanding to be let inside.

“What you mean I can’t go inside. I’m paying for this motha . . .”

“He’s with me,” Raye Ann said. “I’ve got a plus one,” she smiled, linking her arm through Lee’s. The fact that he showed up in a paint-splattered coverall with worn work boots made it even better as far as Raye Ann was concerned. “Shall we?” she asked then escorted Lee into the party for the first of many surprises for the birthday girl.

“I’m sorry, Baby Doll. I know I said no more business tonight but I *really* need to take this,” Ezra said when he received an emergency text from his team. He gave her a peck on the lips then headed out of the party.

Madeline went to the restroom to touch up her makeup and her heartbeat quickened when she exited the ladies’ room and saw Sidney standing in the hallway. The look on his face broke her heart. He still looked so hurt, so lost.

“Can I talk to you for a minute? Just for a minute,” Sidney said when Madeline looked around, he assumed, trying to spot Ezra.

Against her better judgment, she followed him into a nearby conference room. Sidney was so focused on Madeline that he didn't notice Prim walking back into the hotel. She hadn't liked his answer when she asked if he loved her and pulled out of the parking lot without another word. At the stoplight, however, Prim wondered if perhaps she was being unfair when they'd only known each other for a short time like Sidney pointed out. During their misunderstanding about Aura, Prim called him out for being childish when he wanted to walk away instead of resolving their issues. Not wanting to be a hypocrite, she went back to the Crowne Plaza to at least hear what he had to say. Prim was heartbroken to see Sidney with Madeline. It was obvious how much he still loved her.

Sidney closed the door and grabbed Madeline's hand before she could get too far away from him. "I miss you *so* much, Maddie. I've been waiting on you for months. When are you coming back to me?"

She took a step back and looked to the floor. "I'm so sorry, Sid. I swear I never meant to hurt you," Madeline said, fighting back tears. "But I'm not coming back. I'm sorry."

Sidney moved close enough for her to feel his heartbeat. Madeline also felt his eyes on her but she kept staring at the floor. He lifted her chin, forcing her to look him in the eyes. Tears fell down her cheeks.

"Why isn't my love enough?" he asked, with a pained expression on his face.

"I don't know," she said simply, tears continuing to stream down her face. Madeline wanted to leave, but she owed Sidney the one thing he obviously still needed—closure.

They stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity. Then he leaned in to kiss her and she moved back to prevent him from doing so.

"Sid, please . . . don't."

"Don't what, Madeline? Don't complicate your life by telling you how I feel? Don't fight for the woman I love? Is that it? Well, fuck that! And fuck him! *I'm* the one who loves you, Madeline . . . just the way you are. You never had to change or hide anything to be with me. But that mothafuckin' grizzly bear got you jumping through hoops! And now you're talking about *marrying* him?"

"Look, I need to go. I'm not gonna let you disrespect Ezra like . . ."

"Humph, are you serious? What would *you* know about respect? The woman who left me sitting in a goddamn theater to go fuck somebody else!"

Madeline was stunned. She had no idea he knew she'd met Ezra the night of the play. "It wasn't like that, Sid," she cried.

"Oh no? Then tell me what it was like, Madeline," he said, moving closer to her. "How could you spend two weeks with me, in my bed and then just *leave* me with a stupid text message? How could you not contact me to explain or say

something?” Sidney’s emotions got the better of him and his eyes filled with tears. “Why don’t you want me, Maddie? Why don’t you love *me*?”

They both were crying by that point. It broke Madeline’s heart to know she was responsible for causing Sidney such pain. He was a wonderful man and she hated not being able to love him the way he deserved.

Madeline wrapped her arms around him and he held tightly to her. “I’m so sorry, Sid,” she whispered. “I wish I could say something to make this right, but I can’t.” She let go of Sidney and looked him in the eyes. “I really wanted to love you the way you loved me but . . .”

“I *still* love you, Madeline. And I believe with all my heart we can have an amazing life together if you’d give me your heart. Just try, Maddie.”

“I *did* try, Sid!” she snapped. The brokenhearted look on Sidney’s face made Madeline soften her tone. “I really did. I wanted it to work between us. That’s why I was there with you. But I can’t force my heart to do something it’s not meant to do. If I could then you and I would be together,” she said, gently stroking his cheek. “I’m sorry I couldn’t love you the way you deserve.”

“But you love *him*?” Sidney snorted.

“Yes . . . I really do, Sid.”

A range of emotions pulsed through Sidney as he stared into her eyes; rage, sadness, hurt, and love to name a few. “So what am I supposed to do, Madeline? While the *only* woman I’ve ever loved goes off and lives her life with someone else, what do *I* do?”

“I’m hoping you’ll open your heart to the woman . . .” Madeline trailed off when the door opened. “What the hell are *you* doing here?”

Sidney turned around and his heart seized when he saw Prim standing there. “Shit. Blue, wait,” he called when she turned to leave.

“*Blue*? What’s going on?” Madeline frowned. “How do you know her?”

“We’ve been dating.”

Prim whipped around to respond to Sidney’s statement. “No, *I*’ve been dating! You’ve been using me to keep tabs on the only woman you ever loved! It explains why you were always *so* willing to listen to stories about my ex and what was happening in his life. Stupid me thought you were being supportive letting me cry on your shoulder but I was providing you with all the information you needed, huh?” Prim snapped. “That’s a real fucked up thing to do to somebody, Sidney. I thought you were better than that,” she said with a look of disgust. “But at least now I know who that engagement ring was for. I was actually a big enough fool to think it was for me. Why else would you have a blue ring if not to give it to the woman you affectionately refer to as that. I get it now, though. It’s the favorite color of the only woman you’ve ever loved,” Prim said, motioning towards Madeline’s blue dress. Without another word she headed out to the parking lot. Her

heart broke a little more with each step as it became abundantly clear Sidney wasn't coming after her. Prim sobbed when she got behind the wheel of her car. She couldn't believe that out of *all* the men in the world she'd fallen for the two who loved Madeline Stiles.

It only made Madeline sadder to know that Sidney actually bought her a ring to propose. She felt a tremble in her stomach and knew sobs were moments from erupting. "I gotta go," she said then planted a soft kiss on Sidney's lips. "I do love and care for you, Sid, and I sincerely hope you find the love you deserve." She gently wiped her lipstick from his mouth. "Goodbye, Sid."

Madeline hurried out of the conference room and back to the ladies' room. She stared at her reflection as tears poured down her face leaving streaks in her makeup. "Ugh," Madeline grunted, snatching paper towels from the dispenser. This was supposed to be the happiest night of her life. The man she loved asked to spend the rest of his life with her, but Madeline was heartbroken for hurting Sidney yet again. "What's the point?" she mumbled, balling the paper towels into a wad and throwing it at her reflection. Loud sobs followed.

Sidney stayed in the conference room for a while pacing the floor. "Ugh, what the hell did I do?" he mumbled, slowly rubbing his hands down his face. Despite having hurt Prim, Sidney grabbed his cell phone from the inside of his suit jacket to call her. He walked out of the conference room and froze when he spotted Ezra coming back inside the hotel. *Change of plans*, he thought before heading in the grizzly bear's direction.

A small group of partygoers spotted Raye Ann walking with the paint splattered old man and they followed them to witness the drama they were certain would ensue. Avis was on the dance floor with Grant when Raye Ann tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey, best friend. Look who I found," she smiled.

Oh shit! Avis felt close to peeing on herself! "Hey, uh, Lee . . . did you get something to eat? Come on let me get you a drink."

"So you really think you gone play this one off, huh?" Raye Ann laughed. "Well, it ain't gonna work this time, sweetheart. Uh, Grant, this is Lee . . . the man Avis fucks for the money that bought that new suit, and the earring, and the watch, and all the other little things she buys you. And Lee, this is Grant . . . the man she *tricks* into fucking her by making him believe she's gonna tell a secret that she don't even remember. Trust me, Grant, Avis don't remember *shit* from that night except that you said something about something that you did. So you don't have to grin and bear it no more because we all know a man as fine as you don't wanna fuck this short, stumpy, roly-poly bitch with the big, drum gut and rotten pussy! Or

should I say an *infected*, rotten pussy?" Raye Ann sneered and watched the color drain from Avis's face.

"Please, Raye Ann, I'm begging you. Don't do this."

"Oh, you mean like I begged you not to put me on blast with Keith?"

"I'm sorry, okay? I made a mistake but you don't have to . . ."

"Well, at least you did give me the opportunity to tell Keith myself. But since you such a lying little bitch, I can't trust you to tell the truth. So I'll do the honors." Raye Ann took a deep breath then yelled at the top of her lungs, "THIS BITCH GOT HERPES!"

"Oh *shit*!" Deidra laughed.

Even though Raye Ann screamed, the music was so loud that only the people standing closest to her heard what she said. Everyone was aware that something was going on but they were either too far away or too drunk to know what. Unfortunately it was the most intoxicated guests that repeated what they thought they heard. By the time word spread around the room the information changed drastically. It was one of the worst versions of the game telephone ever played.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, that bitch got a Hermes for her birthday!" Avis's stylist answered his companion.

"Ooh, I wonder what color it is. You know them damn bags are *expensive*."

While most of the guests may not have known what Raye Ann said, Lee and Grant heard her as clear as a bell. Grant went ballistic. A few men had to restrain him to keep him from knocking Avis's head off her shoulders.

"You *nasty* bitch! I oughtta stomp a hole in your ass!" Grant yelled, as the men wrestled him out of the ballroom. "Ooooh, if you gave me that shit I *promise* you it's gone be a done deal for you, bitch! You better pray those fuckin' condoms worked 'cause . . . *oooh*!" he groaned. Grant cursed and screamed all the way to the parking lot. Security stayed with him until one of his friends came to pick him up. He was warned not to return.

In the midst of all the chaos Lee snuck out through the back. Before leaving, however, he whispered to Avis that he'd see her real soon. She was too busy trying to keep Raye Ann from leaving to pay attention to anything Lee had to say. Avis wanted to know how Raye Ann found out about her disease since she never told anyone. Despite Avis's demands for an answer, Raye Ann decided to leave the party without sharing that she'd seen medications commonly used to treat Herpes in Avis's medicine cabinet. She laughed at the temper tantrum her former friend threw, stomping and crying like a two-year-old.

"Happy birthday, bitch. You feel me?" Raye Ann chuckled then she gave Deidra a high five and left the party with her head held high.

Avis, on the other hand, could barely stand up straight she was so devastated. Enough people heard the truth that all she wanted to do was run as far away from the Crowne Plaza as humanly possible. Yet the idea of leaving her presents behind was unthinkable. So, as she'd grown accustomed to doing, Avis went into action to convince people they hadn't actually heard what they thought they heard. "Of course not," she responded to a guest asking if what Raye Ann said was true. "She just spreading lies like haters do, you feel me?"

"Hey, congratulations, I hear you getting married."

"Oh, thanks," Ezra smiled, shaking hands. "Thanks a lot."

"I guess you know they're gonna be a bunch of men mad at *you*."

"Excuse me?" Ezra frowned.

"Yeah, you know . . . since you taking Odyssey's best girl off the market. I can't blame you, though. She *is* amazing! I could barely afford her, though."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"What you mean? You're with Madeline Stiles, right . . . well, Sweets from Odyssey? I'm certain I saw her in there. Aw, shit, you didn't know? Sorry, man, I just assumed that's how y'all hooked up. A big baller like you would've been right up her alley . . . one of the few who can actually afford her. Well good luck and congratulations again."

Deidra went back to her table and filled everyone in on what took place on the dance floor. Tamia choked on her drink, unable to believe Avis actually had Herpes and never told the men with whom she was having sex. They were all laughing and talking about it when all of a sudden something Peter said popped into Deidra's mind.

"Why would she be afraid of him telling her mama?"

"What?" Tamia frowned. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Oh, shit, maybe he *was* telling the truth," Deidra said, reaching for her phone. It began to ring and startled her. "Wait, this ain't my . . . whoa, wait a second," she frowned at Tamia. "Why in the fuck is Ellis texting *you*?"

Tamia's eyes grew wide as saucers when she realized they'd accidentally swapped phones. She was tempted to make up an excuse then decided against it. "You know what? Fuck it . . . I'm tired of hiding anyway. Ellis is calling me because he's my man, the one I'm leaving town to be with. The one I plan to marry in a few months. I met him first but Christa's hooker ass jumped in and took him. So I took him back!" she snapped.

The truth was Tamia met Ellis at Jamba Juice and gave him her phone number after a brief conversation while waiting in line. A few days after that encounter he met Christa and the two fell hard for each other. Almost six months

later, at one of Christa's dinner parties, Tamia saw Ellis again and was heartbroken that he didn't even remember her. She blamed Christa and secretly held a grudge against her. Tamia told Madeline that Reesa was involved with Ellis when *she* was the one who'd been sleeping with him.

"That's some low down shit," Deidra said, shaking her head in disgust.

"No, what's low down is for somebody to be running a high-priced escort service and not bother to mention to the man who loves you that you not only run it but you're also an escort!"

"What does Madeline have to do with any of this?" Deidra asked, absentmindedly revealing the woman's secret.

Tionda's ears perked up at the sound of Madeline's name. She wanted to hear all the details. Terrence sat beside her constantly dabbing sweat from his brow even though the ballroom was air-conditioned.

"I'm not talking about Madeline! *Christa's* the one who owns and operates Odyssey! She's the one this fool was with," Tamia stated, pointing to Mojo.

Tionda was dumbfounded. After following her husband's paper trail and spending hours researching his activities, she came across the website for Odyssey. At the time she only knew the last name of the woman Terrence was seeing. Giving the choice between the Stiles sisters, she automatically assumed it was Madeline. "*What?*" Tionda shrieked. "*That's* the bitch you paid to be with? Oh my god, Terrence, are you *serious?*"

"And what the fuck is that supposed to mean? It was fine when you thought his ass was with Madeline but you're appalled now that you know it was Christa?" Deidra snapped. "What, you think you better than her or something? Well, let me be the first to point out that you're not. Your man had you for free and he *paid* to be with . . ."

Tionda burst into tears before she got up and ran out of the ballroom. Terrence ran behind her. The other women, who'd had more than a few drinks, watched intently as though they were viewing a live taping of *The Young and the Restless*.

"Just shut up, Deidra! You've caused enough trouble tonight," Tamia snapped. "Why don't you call Peter or a cab and get the hell out of here!"

"Oh really? Well maybe we can share one since you gone be too distraught to drive. It seems as if *your* man wants Christa too! Stupid ass bitch," Deidra shouted, tossing the phone at Tamia.

Her heart beat wildly as she fumbled with the phone. Tamia nearly collapsed when she read Ellis's text. *I'm sorry T. I can't be with you when my heart still belongs to Christa. It was fun. I wish you all the best. Ellis.*

"Stupid ass bitch," Deidra said again when Tamia got up from the table with tears streaming down her face and made her way out of the ballroom. *This was one*

fucked up ass party, Deidra thought, not acknowledging how much of the drama she instigated.

Madeline grew concerned that Ezra had been gone so long. She walked out of the ballroom to look down the hallway for him. Realizing he could be anywhere she decided to text him. She was reaching inside her clutch for the phone when Deidra walked out of the ballroom doors.

“*Hey, bride-to-be,*” she shouted. She definitely had more than her share of drinks. “Congratulations. I hear you and Smokey the Bear getting married,” Deidra laughed loudly. “Sorry, sorry,” she said when Madeline frowned at her. Deidra reached inside her purse for her cigarettes and lighter. “So is he okay now?”

“What are you talking about, Deidra?”

“Well, I saw Smokey talking to Sidney and he . . .”

“Talking to *Sidney*?” Madeline shrieked, staring wide-eyed at Deidra.

“Yeah, I saw them talking and then Ezra looked *really* mad. I don’t know what Sidney said but . . .”

Madeline took off running down the hallway towards the front entrance. She considered asking the man from valet parking if he’d brought out a silver Phantom but thought it made more sense to call Ezra. Madeline walked back inside as she grabbed her phone and noticed two missed text messages. One was from Sidney and one was from Ezra. A sense of panic fell over her as she read Sidney’s text first. *I wish you the best. I hope you get everything you deserve. Love, Sid.*

Madeline opened the one from Ezra and her breath caught in her throat. *I would NEVER marry a woman like you! Don’t ever contact me or Aura again!* Her hands trembled so bad that she dropped the phone then fell to her knees beside it. Several employees ran towards Madeline but she waved them away. She didn’t want to be touched. Every part of her hurt and she could do nothing but sob. Madeline knew Ezra sent that text message to devastate her. When they talked about Christa and Ellis he admitted that the only way a man could do something so cold and cruel was if he really hated the woman and never wanted to see her face again.

Five minutes elapsed before she felt able to stand. A vaguely familiar looking man asked Madeline if she was okay and helped her to her feet.

“Can I call someone for you?” he asked.

Madeline shook her head no then turned her back to him and sent Christa a text. She forwarded the one Ezra sent and told her to come out to the hallway. A few minutes later, after she told Big Bo to go find his best friend, Christa came barreling out of the party with tears streaming down her face. Madeline dissolved into her arms as members of the Crowne Plaza staff and several guests looked on with curiosity.

“Christa . . . Christa Belle . . . what am I . . . I gonna do?” she said, between sobs. “I *love* him!”

“I know,” Christa said, holding tightly to her sister. “I know.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Over a week went by and Ezra still refused to speak to Madeline. The night of the party he gave Big Bo the spare key to her jeep and had him drop it off at her house. Christa drove him back to Ezra's house and the two of them tried to talk to him but he wouldn't open the door.

Madeline decided to go by his house again on the off chance he was there and willing to talk. He was home but not at all interested in seeing her. Madeline beat on the door and rang the doorbell incessantly. After ten minutes of ignoring her, Ezra got fed up and snatched the door open.

"Get the hell off my property!" he screamed and was about to slam the door when Madeline jumped in the way.

"Ezra, *please* . . . please, baby, just let me talk to you. I can explain . . ."

He pushed her out of the way and slammed the door shut. To his surprise she cried and screamed at the top of her lungs. He flung the door open. "Madeline! *Madeline*, shut the fuck up! What's wrong with you? Hey, shut the hell up . . . *stop!*" Ezra screamed, as he snatched her inside the house. The last thing he needed was for one of his neighbors to call the police. He scowled at Madeline waiting for her to say something. "Well? You did all that idiotic shit to get in here so what do you want? Oh, wait let me guess, you're here for your money, right?" Ezra asked, as he removed his wallet from his back pocket. "So how much more do I owe you?" he said then threw a hundred dollar bill at her. "I already gave three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. And then there's that twenty-thousand dollar ring you got on your finger." Ezra threw another hundred dollar bill at her and then another. "Oh, but I forgot you're high-end so that's probably not enough, huh?" he sneered, continuing to fling money at her. "But I can't lie, you deserve it. You *are* the best fuck I ever had! I guess those were tricks of the trade, huh? So here . . . take it all," Ezra shouted, as he threw the money faster and more furiously.

The pain and humiliation Madeline felt from having the man she loved throw money at her like a cheap whore was insurmountable. Every part of her hurt as tears poured down her face and her chest heaved from crying so hard. The hate and repulsion in Ezra's eyes was unbearable. There was no trace of the love he once had for her and Madeline felt as though she'd die without it.

"Big Bear, I'm so . . . so-so sor-ry," she said between breaths. Madeline's sobs brought her to the point of hyperventilating. "I never meant . . ."

"Don't call me that!" Ezra roared. "I'm not your big bear, your lover, your friend, or *anything*! I'm just the sucker who got played and fell in love with a fuckin' hooker!"

"Ezra, please don't say that. I didn't play you. I *love* you," she sobbed.

“So were you working that night at the play? Was I the mark? Was bumping into me part of the charade . . . make me think it was all a big coincidence?”

“*NO*, Ezra!” Madeline screamed. She was horrified he would even think such a thing. “I would never do something like that. I’m not a con artist!”

“Oh, I beg to differ. You conned the *shit* out of me. Got me investing in your business, proposing, and thinking we were actually gonna spend forever together. You played your role very well. I should’ve known something was up when you chose to be with a monster like me over that pretty motherfucka you couldn’t stop messing with! So yeah, you conned me good because I really believed you loved me.”

“I *do* love you, Ezra . . . like I’ve never loved another man in my life! And I can’t believe it’s over. I won’t accept that. What we have is worth fighting for and I’ll fight tooth and nail to . . .”

“So when were you gonna tell me?” he asked, ignoring her outcry. “At the engagement party? On our honeymoon? First anniversary? *When?*” Ezra bellowed, causing her to jump.

Madeline wiped tears from her face as she stared at him momentarily. “I wasn’t ever gonna tell you.”

“*Wow!* So you were just gone play me for the rest of our lives then, huh?” He stared at her for a few moments. “Well thanks for your honesty. It’s nice to know the woman I loved enough to propose to didn’t think I had a right to know she fucks men for money.”

“It was a part of my past, Ezra. I never worked again after we met. You made me want to change and be a different person . . . a better one.” Madeline stated then told him everything about her involvement with Odyssey.

She explained that in her three years of being in the business she only had ten clients. They were extremely wealthy men, all out of state, who paid a great deal for her company. Madeline also explained that her encounters didn’t always involve sex, but when they did, she was insistent upon being safe. Nothing entered her mouth or body that wasn’t covered with a condom. Dental dam was a must any and every time a man wanted to indulge in oral sex with her.

Ezra couldn’t believe Madeline actually stood in front of him going on and on about how safe she’d been with the men who paid her for sex. She talked as if her explanations would somehow fix things between them. And she obviously mistook his silence for interest when in truth, Ezra was just too stunned to speak. His curiosity piqued, however, when Madeline spoke about the weeks leading up to them meeting. Once again he was stunned.

“So if I’m to believe you . . . which I don’t, by the way,” Ezra snarled. “I’m supposed to accept that you flew off to Texas, fucked some millionaire for money, came home and decided to give your relationship with Sidney a chance, fucked

him for two weeks including the night we met, and then I made *such* an impression that you wanted to change your life. You were sooo taken with me that you decided right then and there to quit the business and give it all up for love. Is that what you want me to believe?”

“Yes,” Madeline uttered, as more tears streamed down her face. “It’s the truth, Ezra. I changed because of you—*for* you. I love you and Aura and . . .”

“Why would you do that, Madeline? You’re an intelligent woman who could’ve done anything . . . *anything* you wanted. Why would you sell yourself?”

Madeline stared at Ezra while she wiped tears from her face. “I wish I had a deep, moving story to tell you, but the truth is I did it for the money,” she said, matter of fact. It never occurred to Madeline that her decision may have been influenced by watching her parents sleep with various people for money and material gain. “What took me a month to make on my day job I made in a weekend at Odyssey. So I applied all of that business savvy you say I have and built my own empire.”

“And you really thought you could keep something like this a secret? Or was the plan to get your hooks so deep in me that it somehow wouldn’t matter?”

“I didn’t tell you because I knew you wouldn’t give us a chance. I didn’t think you would let me love you and show you who I really am inside. I knew you would judge me and make everything about this *one* thing I did before I even knew you. I knew you would reject me and make it seem like what we have doesn’t matter.”

“You’re still trying to play me, huh?” Ezra asked, shaking his head. “But you know what? It’s not gonna work this time, Madeline, because I had those same fears and concerns with telling you about my past but I told you anyway. I loved and respected you enough to make sure you knew exactly who you were involved with but you didn’t show me that same courtesy. ”

“It’s not the same, Ezra. You and I both know you wouldn’t have continued in our relationship if I told you the truth. I mean look at you now. You’re not even willing to *try* to work things out with me.”

“Well, I’m glad you think you know what I would or wouldn’t do in a situation when *I* don’t even know,” Ezra huffed. “I can’t honestly say what I would’ve done if you had told me. Maybe I would’ve broken things off. Or maybe I would’ve been willing to sit down and talk it through. I don’t know. But what I *do* know is that I could’ve only respected you for being a woman and telling me yourself instead of letting me find out the way I did.”

“I’m so sorry, Ezra. I just didn’t wanna lose you and what we . . .”

“This isn’t just about *you*, Madeline!” he roared. “I didn’t wanna lose you either but I still told you the truth! I mean damn, are you really that self-centered that you can’t see outside of your own little world? You can’t imagine what it must

feel like to have proudly introduced the woman you love to your business partners, associates, and colleagues and now have to wonder how many of them paid to fuck your woman! Huh, Sweets?”

“Ezra, I didn’t. I swear I never . . .”

“But more importantly, did you know Prim is petitioning for sole custody of Aura? Do you even fuckin’ care? Does it matter at all that because of you I’m gonna lose my baby and . . .” Ezra choked up. He turned away from Madeline so she wouldn’t see him cry. There was no hiding it, though. His shoulders hunched in and his body jerked violently.

His tears sent Madeline into a crying fit and she could barely breathe. She knew how hopelessly in love Ezra was with Aura and the fact that something she had done threatened their special relationship made Madeline want to die. Knowing she hurt Ezra so deeply was unbearable and her sobs were louder than his. All she wanted to do was take him into her arms and promise everything would be okay. Madeline thought if she could just touch Ezra and remind him of what the two of them shared they’d find a way to get through the devastation she caused.

“Don’t,” Ezra said, pushing her hands away. “There’s nothing you could ever do or say to fix this. Prim deemed me unfit as a father. She can’t understand how a man could be powerful enough to manage millions of dollars and employ hundreds of people but then be too fuckin’ *stupid* to know who he brought to his bed and invited into his daughter’s life!”

“I’m so sorry, Ezra,” Madeline sobbed. “I love you and Aura more than anything and I would never . . .”

“Just shut up and get out, Madeline! Take the money you’ve earned,” he said, pointing to the hundred dollar bills littering his living room floor, “and get the fuck out! Don’t ever come here again! Don’t call, don’t text, don’t do nothing, you hear me? You’ve cost me enough.”

“Ezra, *PLEASE!* Please don’t toss me away,” Madeline screamed, wrapping her arms around him.

“I told you don’t touch me! Get off me, Madeline!”

“Ezra, baby, please! I love you! *Please* . . .”

“Get OFF me!” he roared and flung her onto the couch.

Madeline did everything in her power to convince him to give their relationship a chance. She cried, begged, and even fell on her knees pleading for his love. “You and Aura are the only things that matter in this world to me. I love you both *so* much, Ezra. Please forgive me and let us be a family. *Please.*”

After twenty minutes of her pleas he stared at Madeline for a while then helped her up to her feet. He continued to look down at her and his eyes filled with tears. “Do you really love me, Baby Doll? I mean *really* love me?”

Her heart filled with hope. “I do, Ezra. I’ve never loved anyone as much as I love you and I’ll do *anything* to fight for what we have. I’ll take the humiliation and punishment or whatever you dole out. You mean everything to me. I love you, Ezra,” she said, wiping the one tear that rolled down his cheek.

“Prove it.” A sad smile spread across Madeline’s face as she stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. “Leave,” he uttered seconds before her lips touched his. Even if Ezra had shot her it wouldn’t have hurt as much as that one word had. “Keep the money. Keep the ring. Just don’t come here again. If there’s any part of you that really does love me then leave and let me fight for my daughter.”

In that moment, with her heart broken into a million pieces, Madeline understood what it meant to truly love someone. Ezra touched her soul in a way no one else had or could. Yet to prove how deeply and sincerely she loved him, Madeline had to sacrifice her one chance at true happiness so that he didn’t lose the only person who mattered to him.

Madeline took one last look at Ezra before heading towards the door. Unable to watch her leave, he turned his back. He didn’t see her kiss Aura’s picture or place her ring on the fireplace mantle.

Once she was back in her vehicle Madeline threw herself across the steering wheel and broke down sobbing. A life without Ezra and Aura in it hardly seemed worth living. She truly loved them both and she hated herself for hurting them. “You stupid bitch!” she yelled, remembering the times Christa tried to convince her to tell Ezra the truth. All Madeline wanted to do was go home, crawl into bed, and never get up again. However, she knew there was something she needed to do. So she wiped her face with Kleenex from her purse and backed out of the driveway.

“What the hell are *you* doing here?”

“I need to talk to you. No wait, Prim, *please*,” Madeline pled, preventing her from closing the door. “It’ll only take a minute. Please.”

Prim rolled her eyes, pulled the strap of her purse on her shoulder, and folded her arms across her chest. “You’ve got a minute.”

Madeline took a step forward but quickly realized Prim wasn’t going to let her inside the house. “Look, Prim, I know you and I have had our moments and we’ve both said some messed up shit to each other. But I’m here to *beg* you not to go through with this petition for sole custody. Ezra would die if . . .”

“Humph. Even at the risk of losing his daughter he still can’t stop fuckin’ with you, huh? Wow! Well, you know what? Y’all can go right ahead with whatever it is y’all do. *I’ll* protect my baby and make sure she’s not . . .”

“Ezra told me about the custody thing before he threw me out of his life. He doesn’t want anything to do with me,” Madeline said, as she fought back tears.

“Ezra didn’t know about me, Prim. And I never had any intentions of telling him because you and I both know he never would’ve allowed me in his life and most *definitely* not Aura’s. He loves that girl with every ounce of his being and he won’t survive without her.” Tears streamed down her face. “I know you despise me and I don’t blame you. But I’m begging you not to punish Ezra and Aura for something I did. *Please*, Prim,” she sobbed. “I love them *so* much and I couldn’t take it if Aura lost her father because of me.” Madeline began sobbing uncontrollably.

“I’m sorry,” she said, once she was able to compose herself. “Just think about it this way. Little girls who don’t have men like Ezra for a father grow up to be women like me, Prim. I *never* wanted that for Aura. And I know you don’t either. So again, I’m begging you not to take her away from him. Ezra’s setting the standard for the type of man she’ll invite into her life. He’s showing Aura her worth so she never has to settle for less than she deserves. Don’t deprive her of that blessing because of me. *Please*.” Madeline stared at Prim waiting on some sort of response.

“You got a lotta nerve, you know that? A stank ass prostitute thinking she got the right to tell me what’s best for *my* daughter,” Prim sneered. “Well, you don’t have that right. I carried that child and I’ve been raising her for thirteen years without any help from you. So don’t you worry about Aura, okay? She was fine before you came into the picture and she’ll be just fine now that you’re out of it. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got more important things to do. I’m assuming there won’t be any more of these little visits of yours, right?” Prim rolled her eyes before slamming the door in Madeline’s face. “Bitch,” she mumbled.

Madeline pulled out of the driveway with the intention of going home to pack. She needed to get away to figure out what to do with her life. However, there was one more stop she needed to make.

Prim grabbed the cordless phone off the charger then plopped down on the couch. She let out a deep breath before dialing Ezra’s cell phone. It went directly to voicemail and she left a message asking him to call her. What she didn’t realize was that he’d already received a message from her. When Madeline showed up at Prim’s door she was on her way out to run errands. With her purse on her shoulder she leaned against the door frame, accidentally pressing buttons on her cell phone. The whole conversation between Prim and Madeline was recorded on Ezra’s phone.

After Madeline left, Ezra slumped on the couch and cried over what he’d lost. He really had loved her and a part of him still did. Though, what hurt most was the idea of having his daughter taken from him. Ezra understood Prim’s feelings but he resented her nonetheless. She, out of all people, should’ve known he never would have brought Madeline into Aura’s life if he knew the truth. The

more Ezra thought about it, however, the more enraged he became. Even if he had known about Madeline what right did Prim have to take his daughter away from him? Aura was as much his as she was hers and he would fight Prim tooth and nail for her if she went through with her pursuit for sole custody.

Ezra's phone rang and when he saw it was Prim he shut it off. From that point on their lawyers would do the talking. He was tired of letting her get away with playing games. Any time he did something Prim didn't like she threatened to take Aura away from him. It was time for her to learn the hard way what he was capable of when it came to his baby.

A couple of hours went by before Ezra decided to get up from the couch. He had enough of moping and feeling sorry for himself. It was time to pick up the pieces and move on with his life. Ezra assumed Prim's phone calls were in regard to papers the lawyer sent expressing his intent to file for sole custody of Aura. He hoped she felt the same fear and pain she inflicted on him by making threats to take his daughter. Never in a million years would Ezra keep Aura from her mother, but he was willing to torture Prim with the idea of losing her so she'd think twice before making those types of threats. He wanted her to know, in no uncertain terms, that when it came to who had the most power she was nowhere in his league.

A knock on the door snapped Ezra out of his vengeful daydream. He really didn't feel like being bothered but he heard Big Bo calling his name and knew he wouldn't leave until they spoke. So Ezra went to open the door and that's when he noticed Madeline's ring. His stomach tightened and his heart literally hurt.

"Hey, man, you alright? You're not returning calls so I had to come over here and check on you," Big Bo said, as he followed Ezra. "Oh, what's all this? You've been in here making it rain?" he asked, motioning towards the money strewn on the living room floor.

"Oh, Madeline stopped by a few hours ago."

"Ooookay," Big Bo frowned. "So you were in here throwing money at her?"

"Yeah," Ezra said, embarrassed. Then he told his friend everything that happened between the two of them.

"Wow! That's a lot to handle, Ez. So y'all gone look into some type of counseling or something?"

Someone could have knocked Ezra over with a feather he was so stunned. "I don't know what you been smoking but it's got to be some *powerful* shit to make you say something stupid like that!"

"Come on now, Ez, I've seen you and your baby doll together and I couldn't imagine someone throwing away a chance at real happiness for something that could be worked through. And I'm not saying it would be easy," Big Bo said when

Ezra looked close to hurling him across the room. "I just think with a little help and some time y'all could work it out."

"Yeah, well, you keep on thinking that, okay?" he said, dismissively.

"So let me ask you this, Ez . . ."

"Let it go, Bo. I don't wanna get lectured on forgiveness right now."

"I'm not lecturing you, man, I just wanna ask a question." Ezra nodded for him to continue. "Would you have the same issues if your baby doll had regular relationships with ten men that she also slept with?"

"Come on, Bo, you know that's not the same thing."

"Isn't it? I mean, I'm not condoning prostitution but Madeline wasn't out walking the streets picking up random men. She had an exclusive clientele where the same men used her. And no disrespect but you've slept with women, including the one you have a baby by, that's slept with *way* more than ten men and it didn't seem to bother you. So why is your baby doll suddenly unlovable because she got paid handsomely to do it?"

"The bottom line is I never had any intentions on marrying those women you referred to and I don't want to share my home and my bed with a prostitute! It *is* different, Bo, no matter how you try to spin it. And you can sit here and try to make me feel like I'm wrong but I bet you haven't been calling Christa. You were feeling her, right? Then you found out the truth and it changed things, didn't it? Didn't it?" Ezra snapped. "Yeah, I know it did so don't tell me what I should be able to do when you can't do it either."

"Well, there are two things wrong with what you just said. First, I *have* talked to Christa, quite a bit actually because I don't think you just toss aside a good person because they've done something you don't agree with. True, I was upset when she first told me but who am I to pass judgment on her," Big Bo stated. "Second, and most importantly, Christa and I don't have what you and Madeline have. You *love* that woman and she loves you just the same. I've known you a long time, Ez, and I've never once seen you be what you are with her. She brings out the best in you."

"Yeah, well, Madeline gets paid to perform. For all I know this whole thing was an act."

"You know that's not true, Ez."

"How do I know?" Ezra yelled. "How do I know she wasn't following some damn script?"

"For what reason, Ezra? What could she possibly have to gain from stringing you along? I mean let's be real, Madeline doesn't need your money and we both know it. So why would she build a life with you and Aura . . . cooking meals and helping with homework and *all* the other things she did if it weren't for love? Madeline loves you and Aura and you love her too. So why not find a way to move

on and be happy instead of punishing her *and* yourself? Look how long it took and how many women you went through to find her. Are you really just gone throw that away?" Big Bo frowned. "Nobody's perfect, Ez. We've all done shit we regret. You know that better than anybody. Don't forget, you've got secrets too."

"Not from her I don't."

"What, you told her . . . *everything*?"

"As it pertains to me, yes . . . so don't get all worked up, *Warren Moody*. Your secret's safe."

When sharing his past with Madeline the only part Ezra omitted was that his best friend made the trip from Indiana with him and later changed his name to Bo Freeman. Unlike Ezra, Bo lost all contact with his family and completely disassociated himself from the past. He made a new life, had a few children, and became a youth pastor helping underprivileged kids make something of their lives. As far as Bo was concerned, Warren Moody never existed.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Ezra asked.

"I'm trying to figure out how you can stand there trying to convince me Madeline isn't the one for you. Come on, Ez. You don't even trust the mother of your child with the truth about your past but you loved and trusted your baby doll enough to share everything, even at the risk of losing her, after only a few months."

"That's exactly right. I loved her enough to bare my soul and reveal my secrets but she didn't trust or respect me enough to do the same!"

"Ez . . ."

"But what neither of you seem to get is that right now it's not about any of that mess. I gotta fight Prim to keep my daughter because I didn't have enough sense to find out who the fuck I was bringing into my bed! So excuse me if I don't wanna hear no bullshit about being in love and all that other nonsense. All I care about is Aura and I'm gonna do everything in my power to make sure I don't lose *her*! Fuck Madeline!"

Big Bo knew it was time to let the matter drop. Ezra was still very angry and hurt so it wasn't a good idea to keep pushing him. With a little time, hopefully, he would find a way to forgive Madeline and go on with the life they planned. What the two of them had was genuine and true and Big Bo didn't believe for a second it was over. However it would take a bit of coaxing for Ezra to come to that same realization.

Madeline was just about to pull away from Sidney's house after waiting for nearly forty-five minutes when he pulled into the driveway beside her. He was stunned to see her and had barely put the car in park before he jumped out.

"Hey, Maddie, what are you . . ."

She greeted him with a vicious slap across his face. “Are you happy now, you punk ass bitch! The *only* man I’ve ever loved doesn’t want shit to do with me because you ran and told him about Odyssey,” Madeline spat. She scowled at Sidney for a few moments. “I knew you never really loved me. You just wanted to win. And you couldn’t take it that *Ezra* won my heart and soul so you destroyed our relationship. Ooh, I *hate* you, Sidney,” Madeline groaned, tempted to slap him again. “I hope one of those criminals you defend walks into the office and blows your fuckin’ skull apart, you son of a bitch!” she yelled before storming off and tearing out of his driveway.

Sidney stood there unable to believe what just happened. Once again he thought Madeline couldn’t hurt him any worse, and once again she proved him wrong. It broke his heart for her to think he’d do something like that to her. True, Sidney wanted to confront Ezra but it never crossed his mind to tell him about Odyssey. He loved Madeline way too much to hurt her like that. He’d planned to fight for her that night. Sidney wanted to beat the hell out of the grizzly bear. He wanted to tell Ezra to find someone else because Madeline belonged with *him*. He didn’t, though. Even with all the emotions he felt, Sidney thought about Madeline’s happiness above his own and he walked right past Ezra without saying a word.

Four days later, on Saturday, August 13th, Madeline decided to take a break from packing to get coffee from Starbucks. She’d been working around the clock to get all of her things boxed, covered, and put into storage. The quicker she got her house packed up and sold, the quicker she could leave for Monterey and focus her energy on the inn. Having that to work on was the only thing keeping Madeline sane. It gave her something to do other than thinking about Ezra and Aura all day, crying her eyes out.

A few days after the party Madeline received an incomplete text from Aura. She was expressing her love and how much she missed them being together when it ended abruptly. Madeline assumed either Prim or Ezra caught Aura writing the text and she pushed send before one of her parents deleted it. Reading it made Madeline smile and cry. She wanted to reply, at the very least, to say goodbye but she didn’t want to ignore Ezra’s wishes or disrespect him any more than she already had. She could only hope Aura knew how much she loved her and that she would miss her terribly.

Madeline pulled in front of Starbucks and immediately spotted Deidra sitting at one of the patio tables. Any other day she would have left to avoid seeing the woman but Deidra’s companion made Madeline hop out of her vehicle to find out what the hell was going on. She had the overwhelming feeling she’d made a horrible mistake.

“So why are you still refusing to be with Peter, Deidra? You said yourself you don’t believe anything happened between him and the girl so what’s the problem?”

“Why would he let a beautiful, scantily clad girl in the house if he didn’t *want* something to happen? Plus, I’ve seen the way Peter drools when he sees Morgan. He wanted her and . . .”

Madeline stomped up to the table surprising both Deidra and her companion.

“I’m gonna ask you two questions and all I want is the truth. Don’t bullshit me, Deidra,” Madeline stated. “Who is this?”

“My brother Jesse.”

“And why the *fuck* was he at Avis’s party helping me up after I got Ezra’s text?” she asked. Seeing the two of them together made Madeline realize why Jesse looked familiar to her that night. He and Deidra resembled each other.

“Uh, I think I’ll leave you two to talk,” Jesse said, excusing himself. He didn’t want any part of what was about to happen, but the evil look his sister gave him let Jesse know he wasn’t out of danger. He was never supposed to approach Madeline the night of the party.

“Take a seat,” Deidra offered. “Come on, Madeline, sit down. There’s no reason to cause a scene.”

Madeline reluctantly sat across from Deidra. She glared at the woman with a horrible sinking feeling in her stomach. “Why was he there?”

“I asked him to come.”

“Don’t make me flip this fuckin’ table over on you, Deidra! I’m not gonna sit here and keep asking you question after question.”

“Okay, okay, I called Jesse to come because I, uh . . .” she swallowed hard.

“Oh my *god*,” Madeline cried and threw her hands up to her face. “Sidney didn’t tell Ezra, did he? *Did* he?” she screamed.

“No. I had Jesse tell him,” Deidra admitted, wiping tears from her face.

Madeline was sobbing by that point. All she could think about was the hateful way she treated Sidney when he hadn’t done anything wrong. She should have known he wouldn’t hurt her like that and yet she’d taken the word of a woman she couldn’t stand instead of trusting the man who’d always loved her. At the very least Sidney deserved the benefit of the doubt.

“Why would you do this to me?” Madeline cried.

“You know why.”

“No! I don’t!”

“I did it because I love you, Madeline. You barely even know Ezra and you were talking about marrying him? And then that thing with Sidney . . . well, I thought you were confused. I thought if you just gave us a chance you could see that we belong together.”

Madeline was so stunned she couldn't speak. She stared at Deidra with her mouth opened and eyes wide. It took a moment for her brain to process what she heard.

"We could be happy, Madeline."

"What in the fuck are you talking about? What *we*? There is no *we*, Deidra!"

"What do you mean? What about all the times we spent together?"

"You *paid* me for it, Deidra!" Madeline snapped, drawing the attention of people walking through the shopping complex. "You hired me to be with you, remember? It was merely a business transaction."

After Deidra learned of Peter's infidelity all she thought about was revenge. She wanted to hurt him as much as he'd hurt her and she started frequenting bars in an attempt to pick up someone to have a fling. Deidra could never bring herself to do it, though. She realized, after a few weeks of going to bars, that she didn't just want sex. She wanted someone to care for her, to hold her and take the time to know her. So she began visiting dating websites. It didn't take long for Deidra to realize that wasn't what she wanted either. Her next idea was to hire someone to be what she wanted them to be.

Deidra visited several sites catering to women looking for men to fulfill their fantasies. Though the more she searched, the more her desire to be with a woman again resurfaced. No one, not even Peter, knew she'd been involved in a two-year relationship with a lady named Linda. It ended because of Deidra's unwillingness to go public. She didn't think of herself as gay and didn't want to be viewed as such. Any time the two of them were out together Deidra made a point of making sure everyone around them knew they were just friends.

Linda tolerated it for so long because she knew Deidra struggled with the idea of being in love with a woman. Over time, however, she grew tired of feeling like her back alley secret and demanded acknowledgment of their relationship to their families and friends. When Deidra refused to give her that, Linda left. A year later Deidra met Peter and they fell hard for each other. And even though she loved him dearly, there were things she shared with Linda that he just couldn't give her. Deidra didn't think she'd ever have it again, until she met Madeline.

She pulled up Odyssey's website and was instantly drawn to her. Deidra was hesitant to contact Madeline since her bio said nothing about being interested in women. Though the more she read about her, the more intrigued she became and decided to send an e-mail explaining what she wanted. Deidra figured the worst Madeline could do was say no or ignore her request altogether. When she responded and asked to meet, Deidra was thrilled. The two of them met for dinner a few days later and they hit it off. Madeline presented her with what she called the friend-experience agreement and Deidra happily accepted.

For two hundred dollars an hour Madeline would meet her for dinners, go to movies, go shopping, and do the types of things friends did. Sex was extra and after one time of being intimate with Madeline, Deidra couldn't get enough of her. She gladly paid the five-hundred dollars plus the cost of a luxury hotel to have a few uninterrupted hours with Madeline.

Because she was still living with Peter and didn't want anyone thinking she was lesbian, it was important to Deidra that things with Madeline looked normal, like two girlfriends hanging out. So for an extra fee, Madeline allowed the woman limited inclusion with her personal friends. And the first few outings went well. However, it didn't take long for Madeline to realize she had made a huge mistake. Deidra no longer played the role of a friend. She seemed to forget that she was paying Madeline and started behaving like they were in a real relationship. Once Madeline discovered that Deidra exchanged phone numbers with Avis and Raye Ann, she knew it was time to pull the plug on the friend agreement. She went against her better judgment and broke her number one rule—don't take on local clients. She let her empathy for what Deidra was going through with Peter cloud her judgment.

Over what was meant to be their last dinner together, Madeline told Deidra she'd had a good time getting to know her but that she thought it was best to end their involvement with one another. Deidra asked what she did wrong and even offered to pay more. Madeline declined and left the restaurant never expecting to hear from her again. And for a week or so she didn't. Then Deidra sent a text asking how she was doing. Madeline made the mistake of telling her she was fine and a group of them were getting together to help Christa feel better. She had no idea Deidra was going to show up at her sister's house. The only reason Madeline didn't make a scene or tell the rest of them not to accept calls from Deidra was because she didn't want to explain their relationship. No one knew about them and she wanted to keep it that way.

Perhaps if Madeline had been upfront with her sister and friends she could have stopped Deidra's intrusions upon her life. Though even with all they'd gone through, Madeline never once considered that Deidra was in love with her. Surely not to the point she would sabotage her relationships with Ezra and Sidney. If she hated her before it was nothing compared to what Madeline felt as she sat across from Deidra wanting only to rip off her face.

"Madeline, I don't believe it was just about the money. The tender way you were with me. The way you loved me . . ."

"I *didn't* love you, Deidra! That's what I'm trying to get your stupid ass to understand! It was about the money and *only* about the money," Madeline snapped. "The only person I love is Ezra and you ruined that because of some stupid fantasy

you created. And I promise you will pay for it,” she said, before picking up Deidra’s frappuccino and throwing it in her face. “I *promise!*”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sunday morning Madeline awoke early after a restless night. She showered and dressed in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. She brushed her hair into a ponytail, put on her glasses, and dabbed a clear gloss across her lips. Madeline quickly ate a bowl of cereal then hopped into her truck heading for the Oakland Hills. She was heartbroken over the way she treated Sidney and needed to see him. There was a strong possibility he wouldn't want to see or speak to her but she had to try. Madeline needed him to know how sorry she was and how badly she wished she could take back the horrible things she said.

The dreamy feeling she normally had driving through Sidney's neighborhood was marred by the ugly memory of her last visit. "Sidney!" Madeline yelled when she turned onto his street and spotted him jogging away from his house. Sidney didn't respond and she realized he was listening to music from his MP3 player. Madeline honked and scared him senseless when she rode up on the curb beside him.

"What the . . ." he stumbled just as his eyes locked on hers. Sidney stopped momentarily then began running again.

"Sidney, please! I'm so sorry!" Madeline shouted, as she hopped out of her vehicle and ran behind him. "Sidney!" She stopped and began to cry when he kept running. Madeline watched him until he was completely out of sight. She climbed behind the wheel but instead of going home, she parked in Sidney's driveway and sat on his porch. He had to come home eventually and she planned to wait as long as necessary.

Ten then twenty then fifty minutes went by before Sidney rounded the corner and jogged up to his front steps. His plan was to walk by Madeline as if she weren't there but she blocked his entrance to the door. He stood on the bottom step looking at her with a blank expression, completely devoid of emotion. The bill of his baseball cap shielded his eyes and prevented Madeline from seeing the pain in them.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I swear I didn't mean it. I know you didn't do what I accused you of and I'm ashamed of myself for even thinking you would." Madeline explained what happened, apologizing profusely as he continued to stare at her, his expression unchanged. "Please say something, Sid."

"What do you want me to say, Madeline?"

"Say anything. Tell me what you're feeling."

"I'm not feeling anything." They stared at each other again. "Well if that's all, I need to shower so I can meet Blue," he lied, both about meeting Prim and about feeling nothing. The very sight of Madeline broke his heart.

“Are you serious about her? Have you . . .?”

“So that’s what we’re doing now, Madeline? Swapping stories about our love lives like old friends? You want me to tell you how good it is with Blue and what we do . . .”

“No! No, I just wanted to know if you’re happy,” she said, doing a pitiful job of hiding her jealousy. The idea of Prim having Sidney pissed Madeline off. Though, the more she thought about it, she realized her reaction would be the same no matter who Sidney loved. Madeline liked being the only one who had his heart. And as she looked at the sweat glistening on his muscular arms exposed through his black tank top and the way his black compression shorts hugged every inch of his strong thighs and manliness, Madeline realized she liked being the only one he gave his body to as well.

“Yeah, I’m happy, so can you move now?” Sidney asked, as he removed his baseball cap and wiped his head. “I really need to go.”

Again they stared at each other. Sidney didn’t know how long he could maintain his stoic disposition, though. Madeline, in the jeans he loved to see her wear with a bare face and ponytail, looked beautiful to him. Even though she hurt him worse than anyone else in his life, he still loved her. He still wanted her.

“I really do love and care about you, Sid. You were always someone I trusted. I mean, you were the only one I told about my job and . . .”

“Don’t try to play me, Madeline. You got busted with an undercover cop and needed a lawyer. *That’s* how I found out about Odyssey. So don’t try to make it seem like anything else. If it weren’t for that I would never have known.”

“So what, you think you’re the only lawyer I could’ve called? I mean let’s be real about it. In that humiliating situation I should’ve called anybody *but* you. But I did call you, Sid, because I trust you. I always have.”

“Not always,” Sidney huffed, remembering the hateful things Madeline said to him when she thought he revealed her secret to Ezra. “You didn’t trust me when it mattered.”

Madeline looked down as tears formed in her eyes. Then she reached out to hug him but he moved away from her. “Okay, well I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am—for everything.” Sidney walked by her to unlock his front door. “And I also wanted to tell you goodbye. I’m leaving.”

He turned to face her. “What do you mean leaving . . . to go where?”

“I need to start over someplace new. So good luck with Prim. I hope the two of you will be happy. And be good to Aura because she’s a really special girl.” Madeline headed for her truck wiping her tears.

Don’t do it, Sid. Let her go. Just let her go. Please just let her go! Sidney walked inside his house and closed the door. He quickly opened it again. “Maddie,” he called and walked back down the steps.

Ezra and Aura had just gotten home from one of their adventures and they both were exhausted. Aura texted her friends about the great time she had as she made her way to her bedroom. Ezra plopped down on the couch to check his cell phone messages. The recorded voice let him know he had eight new messages. The last one, however, made his heart seize in his chest. It was the conversation between his exes where Madeline begged Prim not to take his daughter away from him. Ezra's eyes filled with tears as he replayed the message.

"You okay, Dad?" Aura asked, startling him.

"Yeah, Barbie Doll, I'm good. What's up?"

"Granny sent a text saying she's on her way. She wants to talk to you."

"Oh great," Ezra grumbled. He wasn't in the mood for the lecture he knew was coming.

"I'll get it," Aura said when the doorbell rang.

Damn, Ezra thought, believing he'd have a few minutes before the onslaught began. He stood to hug his mother after she finished squeezing her granddaughter. "Hey, Mama, what's going on?" Ezra asked, as he reclaimed his seat on the couch.

"Oh nothing much. I came here to talk to you for a minute. You been acting a fool for too long and you need Mama to kick you in the ass and get you back on track. Gone to your room, baby, Granny got some things to say to your daddy that you don't need to hear." She kissed Aura and sent her out of the living room before taking a seat in the plush chair across from her son.

"Stay out of it, Mama. It's complicated and you don't know . . ."

"Shut up, boy, ain't shit complicated! Madeline made the choice to use her body to make money and she chose to stop when she met you. But now you in here trippin' because you just like every other man that want a perfect, virgin bride after you been out fuckin' around with the very woman you now despise," Mary snapped. "But I'm gonna let you in on a little secret. We've *all* prostituted ourselves in some way. Ain't a woman alive who hasn't fucked a dude she didn't want to in exchange for *something*. And not a man who hasn't paid in one form or another to get a woman to do what he want. Madeline just had sense enough to get paid out the wazoo for it.

"So why don't you climb down off that high horse you done mounted yourself on and realize that you have the perfect woman. Is she a perfect person? No, of course not, but Madeline's the perfect woman for *you*. So who the hell do you think you are to be standing in judgment of somebody? Maybe you need reminding that you've done some real fucked up stuff . . . some that you don't think I know about. But I do know and I never stopped loving you. I accept that you not perfect and that I'm not gone always agree with your decisions."

“This is different, Mama. I bet if you found out Daddy was a gigolo and never told you . . .”

“You don’t know *what* I know about Michael Brock! And it ain’t your business. I love him anyway despite the fucked up stuff he do. And he would say the same thing about me,” she said, noticing the stunned look on Ezra’s face. “Just because you find the person you wanna spend your life with don’t mean they ain’t gone never hurt you. In fact, they the ones who do it the most. So if you looking for somebody who never hurts or disappoints you then you gone die a lonely man, Auran.”

“Okay, Mama, can we just drop it? You said what happens between you and Dad isn’t my business and what happened between me and Madeline isn’t yours. So please, let it go.”

“*Boy!*” Mary shouted, as she jumped up from her seat and moved towards him. I carried you for nine months and pushed you out my . . .”

“Alright, alright, Mama!” Ezra shouted, hating the vulgar way his mother spoke. He got up from the couch and stood in front of her. “I get that you gave birth to me and you think everything I do is your business but it’s not. I’m a grown man and I make my own decisions—even the ones you don’t agree with.”

“Humph. I never pegged you for a liar.”

“A *liar?*” he frowned. “What did I lie about, Mama?”

“You told that girl you loved her unconditionally but that was a lie. Your love comes with strings. As long as she perfect and fit the image *you* want then she can be loved. Ain’t no consideration for the fact that Madeline did what she had to do in a male-dominated world that only . . .”

“Don’t give me that shit! Ooh, I’m sorry I didn’t mean to cuss at you, Mama, but I don’t wanna hear about Madeline being *forced* to do what she did. She’s an extremely intelligent, college-educated woman who could’ve done anything she wanted and she chose to screw men for money! Madeline wasn’t some destitute, impoverished woman with no options. She had a lucrative career as a buyer for stores throughout the Bay Area so there’s no excuse for what she did!”

“Who said anything about an excuse? The *reality* is that the same man who paid her salary as a buyer would’ve paid three times as much for her company! Rich, powerful men want a beautiful woman on they arm who can talk intelligently about business and politics, listen to them whine and complain about they life, and then fuck they brains out all without the benefit of a relationship. They pay crazy cash for that experience and that’s what Madeline gave them. So my question to you is why is she beneath you now because she got paid for what most women do for next to nothing? Some of them same ones *you* was out fuckin’ around with.”

Ezra was beyond frustrated with his mother. “Look, I hear you, Mama, I do. But the bottom line is I can’t get over it. I’m sorry if that changes your opinion of

me but I can't pretend like everything's okay. I'll never forget that Madeline did this and then kept it from me. I just can't get over it."

"Then you don't deserve her," Mary snapped, snatching her purse to leave.

He was dumbfounded. "Uhm, Mama? I think in this type of situation you're supposed to be on *my* side."

"I *am* on your side, boy! That's why I'm here trying to stop you from making the biggest mistake of your life! Madeline loves you in a way a mother wants her child to be loved. That's not easy to come by and I think you being foolish to toss it away. I went to talk to Madeline before she leaves and . . ."

"What do you mean *leaves*? Where's she going?"

"Humph. Why do you care?" Mary opened the front door. "Bye."

Ezra sat back on the couch and closed his eyes. Aura quietly closed the door to her bedroom after having it cracked wide enough to finally learn why Madeline was no longer a part of their lives.

On Tuesday, August 30th, Christa set up a going-away-dinner for Madeline. Evelyn and Raye Ann came over to Christa's house and the four of them ate, gossiped, laughed, and eventually cried. None of them understood why she had to move two hours away in order to start the inn.

"You ain't gotta go running off trying to hide from Ezra. You didn't do nothing wrong, baby, so why you turning your life upside down to avoid seeing him? He the ignorant fucker too stupid to know what he had! Let *him* sell his house and move away from everybody that love him," Evelyn said, as she fought back tears. "Don't let him run you away from your home."

"This isn't about him, Mama. This is my chance to do something I've *always* dreamed of doing and I'm gonna take it. So be happy for me, okay? In a few months you'll be able to bring your flavor-of-the-month to the most romantic little inn you've ever seen."

"Girl, shut your mouth," Evelyn laughed at the reference to her boyfriends. "Ain't nothing wrong with a little boy toy . . . or two."

"Well, speaking of boy toys," Raye Ann interjected, "it seems that Avis's did a number on her. She spent the night in the hospital!"

"*What?*" Christa shrieked. "Grant beat her up?"

"Oh no, I guess I should've said *old man* toy. *Lee* was the one who beat her ass! Rumor has it he caught her walking through the hospital parking lot after she got off work, beat the shit out of her, and dumped her at the front door. I saw her coming out of Walgreens a couple of days ago looking like a squirrel with a mouthful of nuts! It seemed as if Lee limited his assault to her face."

"That's terrible," Christa said, shaking her head.

“Yeah, it is but you can’t do horrible things to people and think nothing’s gonna happen to you. I mean, I don’t think anybody has the right to put their hands on another person. I told y’all what I went through with my father and men like him so I feel bad for Avis in that regard. I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy. But then there’s another part of me that’s glad she didn’t get away with what she’s done. Avis is a really nasty person and you’d be shocked at the kind of crap she did to people. I guess the stupid part about it is that after all the stuff I’ve seen and heard her do I never thought she would hurt me. It’s funny the stuff you can make yourself believe.”

Even though she was still mad at Avis for inviting Sidney to the party, Madeline decided to send her some flowers. “Have you heard anything from Keith?” Madeline asked, delicately.

“Yeah, actually I did. He called a few days after the party and the first thing he wanted to know was if I still have a penis.”

“Do you?” Evelyn asked.

“Mama,” Christa snapped, nudging her mother’s arm. She’d already told Evelyn about Raye Ann so she didn’t know why there was a need for questions, especially those kinds.

“It’s okay, Christa, I don’t mind talking about it. No, Ma’am, I no longer have a penis. I had it surgically made into a vagina.”

“Well how they do that?” Evelyn asked and began her onslaught of personal questions. Madeline and Christa listened intently as they were just as curious.

Raye Ann was answering Christa’s question about whether she could experience orgasms or not when Madeline’s cell phone beeped. She retrieved it from her purse and saw that she had a text message from Tamia. For weeks Madeline tried to reach her best friend with no success. It was unusual for Tamia to be unresponsive and Madeline went by her townhouse several times and called repeatedly. She was relieved to finally spot Tamia coming out of her boutique and know she was physically okay but hurt that her oldest friend didn’t seem to care about what was happening in her life.

I need to tell you something. Can you talk? Tamia’s text message read. Madeline excused herself and went to Christa’s bedroom. She closed the door and dialed Tamia’s number.

“Wait, what? Say that again,” Madeline gasped, unable to believe what she just heard. There was no way Tamia admitted to being with Ellis. Madeline had to have misunderstood.

“I’m sorry, Mad,” Tamia cried. Then, as if she hadn’t just confessed to betraying their friendship, Tamia sobbed about how much she loved Ellis and couldn’t believe he dumped her to reconcile with Christa.

Madeline hung up on Tamia and called her sister upstairs.

“What’s wrong with you?” Christa asked of the deep frown on Madeline’s face.

“Are you back with Ellis?”

“What? Who told you that?”

“The woman he’s been boning!”

“You talked to *Reesa*?” Christa scowled.

“Ellis never fucked Reesa. It was *Tamia*!”

“*What*?”

“Yeah, apparently that’s who she was moving to be with until he sent her a *text* message saying he was getting back together with *you*! So once again, are you back with Ellis?”

“No.”

“Not yet?” Madeline asked, noticing the guilty look on Christa’s face.

“GIRLS!” Evelyn yelled from downstairs. “Y’all being real rude!”

“We’ll be down in a . . .”

“Coming, Ma,” Christa said and fled from the bedroom.

For the next hour Madeline stared at Christa, anxious for her mother and Raye Ann to leave so they could finish their conversation. She barely heard Raye Ann when she finished telling them about Keith. He said he loved her but could never get over the fact that she used to be a man. So he wished her well and told Raye Ann goodbye. And with that, she was back to the drawing board in the love department.

Evelyn hugged and kissed her daughters and told Madeline she’d be over in the morning to see her off. Raye Ann hugged them all and wished Madeline happiness and success with her new business and home.

“So what’s up with you and Ellis?” Madeline grilled as soon as Christa closed the front door. “Are y’all back together?”

“No.”

“But you fuckin’ him aren’t you?”

“Goddamn it YES!” Christa shouted. “Shoot me, okay, but I wanted some *good* sex! You out of all people should understand that. I’m guessing that’s why it took you so long to come back from Sidney’s house the other day, right?”

“What? *No*, I didn’t sleep with him!”

“Yeah right, tell that to someone who doesn’t know y’all. When have the two of you *ever* been able to resist each other? Plus this is what y’all do, right? Some dude dogs you out and Sidney hurts whatever woman is in his life to fix it for you. This is classic Mad and Sid.”

“You know what? *Fuck* you, Christa Belle! I don’t give a shit what you think. I told you I didn’t sleep with him but I guess you think I’m a liar.”

“No, you’re just great at keeping secrets . . . huh, *Deidra*?”

“So that’s what this is about? I didn’t tell you about Deidra so you didn’t tell me about Ellis? Are you really that fuckin’ childish, Christa?”

“It ain’t got shit to do with being childish! It’s about you bringing that woman around here for months and never once telling me she was a client! I get why you didn’t tell the other women but I’m your sister and at that time your boss! The one you’re supposedly *so* close to but you couldn’t confide in me about it.”

“And you know why, Christa Belle? Because you can’t keep your fuckin’ mouth shut, that’s why! You always so quick to volunteer *my* information but somehow you manage to keep your shit under lock and key!”

“What are you talking about? I never told anybody stuff about you.”

“Really, Christa? So who sat at the table and told Avis and Raye Ann about Rory? I sure as hell didn’t because I didn’t *want* them to know about him. Or who told Mama about *me* working at Odyssey but failed to mention that she runs the whole fuckin’ thing? I had to tell her, remember, because I couldn’t understand why she was only fussing at me and wasn’t saying shit to you. So don’t tell me you never told anybody stuff about me because that’s a lie. And I know if I had told you about Deidra that Raye Ann, Avis, and Tamia would’ve all known about it too.”

“Wow. I didn’t realize you hated me so much and . . .”

“Get the fuck outta here with that!” Madeline screamed. “Don’t try to manipulate me with that bullshit. Be a woman and own up to what you’ve done.”

“Or maybe I’ll just do what you do and shut down,” Christa said, making her way up the stairs.

“Yeah, you do that,” Madeline snorted then slammed the front door shut behind her. She was stomping towards her vehicle when Evelyn pulled into the driveway. She forgot her cell phone on Christa’s couch. “Nothing, Mama,” Madeline snapped when Evelyn asked what was wrong. She jumped into her truck and sped off.

“Christa Belle, what the hell is going on with y’all?”

Christa cried as she relayed what took place between her and Madeline. She became enraged when Evelyn suggested she call her sister to make things right. “I’m tired of always being the one running after her. If she wants to fix things then have her call *me*!”

Evelyn gave Christa a tongue lashing about how she and Madeline were all each other had and they should never turn their backs on one another. Nothing was worth losing their relationship. And after twenty minutes of fussing at her oldest daughter, Evelyn drove ten minutes to do the same with her youngest.

“I don’t wanna talk to her now, Mama. We’ll talk in a few days,” Madeline whined.

“See, that’s your problem, little girl. You take too much for granted. Tomorrow ain’t promised to you. Anyone of us can be gone in a blink of an eye. So quit thinking you gone have tomorrow to make amends with your sister. You might not,” Evelyn stated before leaving Madeline’s house.

Madeline went back to packing the last of her things. The moving company she hired would be there at eight o’clock in the morning and she wanted everything packed and ready to load. “Damn it, Mama,” Madeline groaned before grabbing her keys. She drove back to Christa’s house, used her key to get inside, and went upstairs to her sister’s bedroom. She removed her shoes and climbed into bed with Christa. They stared at each other, silently letting tears run down their cheeks.

“I love you, Christa Belle, and I’m sorry,” Madeline said, as she wiped her sister’s tears.

“I love you too. And I’m so sorry, Mad. I *do* talk too damn much. But I never meant it maliciously. When Avis called you a man-hater who’d never been in love I told her about Rory as proof that you *had* been in love before. I didn’t think about the fact that I was revealing a secret. And when Mama said . . .”

“It’s okay, Christa Belle. I know you didn’t mean any harm. To be honest, the reason I didn’t tell you about Deidra is because I’m ashamed. I don’t even really know why I agreed to be with her. Contrary to all the shit I talk about it not being a big deal, I don’t actually enjoy being with women. I cried my eyes out the first time Rory brought another girl to the bed. But I did it because I wanted to make him happy. When it came to Deidra, though . . . I don’t know. It started off with me wanting to help. She was devastated by Peter and I guess I wanted to help her feel better. I would listen to her talk, hold her when she cried, and when she needed sex I used toys to get her off and let her do stuff to me but it was never anything intimate on my end.

“Deidra was obviously a little more than a client the reason I let her into my personal life. And I *still* don’t know why the hell I did that. For a minute I actually questioned whether I was gay or not. But I like dick *way* too much for that to be true,” Madeline laughed. Christa cracked up too. “Anyway, whatever it was that caused me to make stupid decisions with Deidra ended quickly and I just wanted her out of my life. I never considered that she had real feelings for me or that I had played with her heart. I did the same thing with Sidney’s heart so I guess I deserve what’s happening to me. You can’t dog people out and then expect to ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after.”

Christa moved closer to Madeline and held her while she cried. “It’s gonna be all right, Mad. I promise it won’t hurt forever.” Christa went to the bathroom to get tissues then the two of them sat Indian style in the middle of her bed.

“Well, since we’re doing confessions, I might as well admit one more thing. I *wanted* to sleep with Sidney. I went there hoping he would make me feel better

like he's always done. And he looked so damn sexy in his workout clothes with sweat glistening on his body. *God!*" Madeline moaned, remembering how good he looked. "But I messed that up. I slipped too far into friendship mode and gave him more information than he wanted. It doesn't take much to turn Sid off and the things I said did the trick. He couldn't get back inside the house fast enough," she said then repeated everything she said to Sidney.

"Madeline!"

"I know, I know, too much information, right?"

"Oh my god!" They stared at each other momentarily.

"What?" Madeline frowned.

"You didn't wanna sleep with Sidney."

"Yes I *did*."

"You said yourself he gets turned off easily so why would you tell him something like that if you really wanted him to take you to bed. You're still in love with Ezra," Christa said, as she held her sister's hands. "This isn't a situation like Rory's where Sidney could make everything okay. You love and miss Ezra and Aura. Nobody, not even Sid, can fill that void."

"Well, I guess my subconscious kicked in and started blurting out shit because I swear I went there wanting some comfort."

"I wish my damn subconscious had kicked in before I let Ellis back in my bed. He just looked so good and I needed somebody who knew what the fuck he was doing after that nightmare with Bo."

"Was it that bad?" Madeline asked with her nose upturned as if something stunk. "What was wrong with him?"

"What *wasn't* wrong with him?" Christa snorted. "First of all we went from having a nice, romantic moment to being in the WWF! His little ass was snatching and flinging on me like it was a wrestling match." Madeline fell back on the bed laughing loudly. "I finally got him to calm down and be a *little* more gentle but as soon as he got in there he started talking shit. 'Ooh yeah, baby, you feel all that. I'm all up in your guts. You like that, don't you? Umm huh, I know you like it. I'm beating that pussy up ain't I? Yeah, now you see why they call me Big Bo . . .'"

"Oh my god," Madeline gasped, trying to catch her breath from laughing so hard. "Christa, stop," she choked when Christa mimicked the way Bo humped his butt with his hand on his hip.

"The worst part about it is that he had slipped out and all that time he spent talking about being up in my guts he was actually rubbing up against my thighs and the mattress!" Madeline thought she was going to pee on herself. "Apparently he doesn't even know what pussy feels like so I wanted to scream for him to shut the fuck up when he kept talking about how good it was and that I better not cum. Yeah, no problem there, sport!"

“Woo, lord,” Madeline grunted, wiping tears from her face. She hadn’t laughed that hard in weeks. “That’s crazy, Christa.”

“No, what’s crazy is that I told Bo I have kidney stones as my excuse for why I can’t do it again.” They both fell over on the bed laughing hard. Christa finally composed herself enough to talk. “Anyway, can you see now why I was in desperate need of some good loving when Ellis’s cute ass showed up on my doorstep?”

“Yeah, I can see that now,” Madeline giggled.

“Seriously, though, I hadn’t planned on sleeping with Ellis. My talk with him was supposed to be about closure. I asked him about Reesa and he denied ever being with her. Of course that would’ve been an excellent time to say oh no, Christa it wasn’t *your* best friend that I was boning it was your sister’s friend who spent the night at your house and ate your food and hung around you like nothing was going on. But he left that part out. Instead Ellis told me how beautiful I am and how he misses me and wishes he had never run out on me. He begged for another chance and promised he’d always be there for me. Then he did that shit he knows I love. He pulled on my earlobes and kissed my cheeks.”

“Ugh, what kind of bullshit is that?” Madeline teased.

“Girl, shut up, that junk is erotic to me. And it worked like a charm. Next thing I knew I was ripping off a couple of orgasms. Being back with a man who knows me like that was comforting, you know?”

“Oh yeah, I know.”

“The weird part was that I wanted him to leave after I was satisfied. I didn’t wanna talk or cuddle or do any of the things we used to do. Ellis was definitely surprised but he went along with it. Before he left he asked if we could get together the following night. I agreed and when he came back he seemed shocked. Ellis expected the candlelight dinner, warm bath, and massage that I used to do to get us in the mood. I didn’t care anything about that stuff, though. I just wanted him to hit that thang for me and get the hell on. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“You don’t love him like that anymore.”

“That’s the thing, though, Mad. I’m not sure if I *ever* really loved him. I thought I did and after he left me I didn’t think I could survive without him. But once I put all my emotions aside and really looked at my relationship with Ellis, I realized it wasn’t built on true love. I idolized him because deep down I could never fully accept that a man as attractive as Ellis really wanted me. It was different from the fantasy world I created with Odyssey. I sold myself to rich, attractive men to make myself feel beautiful and desired. But with Ellis it was real. He really loved me and wanted *me*. Even still, I existed in our relationship believing that he elevated me. I somehow had more worth because Ellis wanted

me. People responded to me differently when I walked into a room on his arm. I *had* to be special to pull someone like him.

“So because of that I never paid much attention to how controlling and self-centered Ellis is. He was always so sweet about it, you know? ‘Oh, Christa baby, I was hoping to see you in that black dress I bought you. You know how much it turns me on.’ And then I’d go running my butt upstairs to change instead of wearing what the hell I had on. But the best one was, ‘Ooh, Christa baby, you look *so* sexy when you eat salad. I get more and more turned on with each bite.’ So what would happen? I’d order a garden salad instead of the damn chicken Alfredo I really wanted. It never dawned on me that Ellis was *really* telling me not to get fat! And there were countless times when he planned for me to attend seminars and meetings with him without ever asking if I had plans. I rescheduled and rearranged things so I could be a constant support for him. At the time I thought Ellis loved me so much that he always wanted me with him. But it was always about him. And I was happy to oblige because I didn’t wanna lose the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“I’m sorry Christa Belle.” Madeline reached over to touch her sister’s hand. “I wish we didn’t let men do this type of shit to us. We accept so much from them but once they don’t like stuff about us, they just leave. No conversation, no let’s work it out, no nothing.”

“Yeah, and I think that’s why I felt some sort of obligation to Bo. Even though he was upset when I told him about Odyssey, he didn’t leave me. He was willing to stay and work things out with me.”

“But you don’t love him. Even before that ridiculous sexual experience, you didn’t love him, did you?”

“No. I think he’s a really good guy and I *love* his boys but I don’t see spending forever with him. I know I need to be straight up, but I don’t wanna hurt him. Bo’s been a really good friend to me,” Christa sighed. “So what about you? Are you gonna try talking to Ezra again?”

“No, I think it’s best to leave well enough alone.”

“But . . .”

“It’s for the best, Christa Belle. Besides, I understand why Ezra feels the way he does. I had the chance to tell him the truth and I didn’t take it because I knew how he felt. I knew he wouldn’t accept me so I tried to keep it hidden. And yes, I wish he was willing to work things out but I’m not mad at him because he’s not. I think it’s best for everybody if we go our separate ways. So don’t try to fix stuff, okay? Just leave it alone.”

Madeline and Christa laid back on the bed facing one another. It seemed that, despite their best efforts, the Stiles women would never have a happy ending.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tuesday, September 6th, the day after Labor Day, Prim was late getting to her office. Aura forgot her binder and notebooks so Prim had to return home to get them. She was annoyed by it, especially since she told Aura to put everything in her backpack the night before in order to be ready for the first day of school. *Ugh, you're too old for this*, Prim thought but didn't say to avoid the tears that usually came when she fussed at her daughter.

"Oooh, thank you," Prim smiled, as she accepted the piping hot cup of coffee from her assistant and good friend Lena. "I need this."

"Yeah, well you better slurp it down fast because your nine o'clock is waiting in your office."

"Wouldn't you know it? The day I arrive fifteen minutes late, my client arrives fifteen minutes early. Did you offer her coffee or tea?" Lena nodded as she took the cup out of Prim's hands and ushered her towards her office. "Good morning, Jessica, I'm sorry I'm . . ." Prim stopped dead in her tracks and all the oxygen seemed to leave the bright, open room.

"Good morning, Blue."

Prim's heart raced as she stared at Sidney. He looked delicious sitting on her Mocha-colored leather couch in a tailored, chocolate brown suit with a burnt orange shirt and accents. And the smell of his cologne made her swoon. The sunlight pouring through the large windows made his light, brown eyes sparkle. *Damn he's sexy!* Prim tried to keep her composure as she walked across the room but her knees felt wobbly. She placed her briefcase and purse atop the mocha-colored L-Desk and accidentally knocked over a framed picture of Aura. *Calm down, Prim.* She took a deep breath and looked around the office as if she was seeing it for the first time.

Prim's office was on the tenth floor of the Fremont advertising agency and she decorated the large, open space so that it appeared as three rooms in one—an executive office, a conference room, and a living room.

"Oh *shit*," Prim exclaimed when she pushed her high-back leather chair too far and hit the mocha-colored hatch behind her. "Why are you here, Sidney?" she asked, walking back towards the living room section of her office.

"I had no choice. You won't return my calls or e-mails and you wouldn't open the door when I came to your house."

"Yeah, well I'm sure you're not used to women ignoring you but that means I don't wanna see you. So if you'll excuse me, I have a nine o'clock appointment," she said, moving towards the door.

“With Jessica McAvoy? Yeah, that would be me,” Sidney smiled and his eyes had that I’ve-got-a-secret look that turned Prim on. If she wasn’t so angry at him she would have kissed him. “I didn’t know what else to do, Blue. I just wanna talk to you.” Sidney rose from the couch and closed the space between them.

“About what?”

“About what happened between us,” Sidney said, as he moved closer to her. Prim began to sweat and she removed the jacket of her navy blue pantsuit. “I know I broke your heart and I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Yeah well, you did so can we just leave it at . . .”

“I’m sorry, Blue,” he whispered, standing directly in front of her. Prim thought she would melt when Sidney gently stroked her cheek. “Look at me.”

Ooh lord, Prim shivered, remembering the last time Sidney told her to look at him he was making her cum! “Please, Chase, don’t do this,” she said and went back to her desk to get away from him. She draped her jacket on the back of her chair, took a seat, and grabbed a tissue.

“I know that based off the things I did and said it seemed like I chose Madeline over you but that’s not true. Yes, I did think I was still in love with her. But here’s the thing, Blue. I never shared myself with her the way I do with you. All those talks we had . . . me telling you about my mom and my experiences from college and whatnot, I never did that with *anybody*. But it’s easy with you, Blue. I trust you with my secrets and my dreams . . . my heart.”

Prim used the tissues to wipe tears from her face. “I wish I could say the same, Sidney, but I can’t.”

“And I know that’s my fault. That’s why I’m willing to start from scratch. If you wanna go back to e-mailing and talking on the phone until you trust me again, I’ll do that. I’m willing to do whatever you need me to do. I just want the chance to see where this can go. Just you and me this time. No Madeline, no Ezra, just us.”

Prim stared at him for a few moments. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“If Madeline wasn’t in love with someone else, would you be here right now asking for a chance with me?”

“It’s *because* she’s in love with someone else that I’m finally able to see she’s not the one for me. I mean think about it. Can’t you say the same for Ezra? Would you have been willing to give your heart to someone else if he hadn’t?”

She thought about it and realized what Sidney said was true. “Did you try to convince *her* to be with you?”

“The night of the party, yes. It had more to do with pride, though. Hearing that she left me at the play to be with him sent me into a rage. I felt like a fool for sitting in there with an engagement ring ready to propose to a woman who would do that to me. At the party my ego was at stake and I wanted her to choose me and

make what happened that night at the play a mistake. And I know that probably doesn't make any sense. But it was a mixture of emotions, misplaced anger and resentment, and not wanting to lose that led to that display at the party.

"But once it was all said and done I had to ask myself what would've happened if Madeline *had* come back to me. Where would we have gone from there without trust, respect, and genuine love?" Sidney asked, as he took a seat across from Prim. "I do feel all of those things. Just not for Madeline. I feel that way about you, Blue. I wanna be with *you*."

"So is there anything else I need to know?" Prim asked, folding her arms across her chest.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just curious if you had to sleep with Madeline to get all this clarity."

"No."

"No you didn't sleep with her?"

"No, I didn't sleep with her." Sidney said, silently pleading with Prim not to ask if he'd wanted to sleep with her. He couldn't say no to that question. "All I'm asking for is a chance, Blue. I miss you."

"Okay, well can I call you later? My day is really booked up and I need to get to work," Prim said, trying desperately to suppress the emotions building inside of her. The look on Sidney's face made her want to cry more.

"Okay," Sidney said, as he stood up and moved towards the door. "Just think about what I said, alright?"

Prim nodded and he left her office. Lena immediately came rushing in and stomped right up to her friend. She snatched Prim out of her chair.

"Get your ass up and go talk to him! That man came here and put his heart on the line for you. Yeah, he made some mistakes but so did you. Now get out there! Oh, don't act brand new," Lena said when Prim frowned at her, "you know I was at my desk listening. I got the new girl stalling at the elevator to keep him from getting away. Go!"

Prim wanted to run but she decided not to draw attention to herself and did a brisk walk instead. "Mr. Reid. I was wondering if you could step back into my office for a moment. There's some additional information I need to discuss with you." Her heart raced when he smiled at her. Sidney followed Prim and as soon as the door closed she fell into his arms. "I miss you too."

They held tightly to each other, neither wanting to let go. And there, in the middle of Prim's office, the two of them decided to give their relationship a second chance, sincerely hoping they found the love for which they'd both been searching.

September and October were two of the most grueling months of Madeline's life. Getting her bed and breakfast up and running was definitely a lot more work

than she had anticipated—and a lot more stress. Everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. Madeline made it through the frustration and expense of having old water pipes replaced only to have a major electrical problem that cost more money and delayed the date of her grand opening.

Finding suitable staff members was just as taxing. Each of the three chefs decided to make their own menus instead of doing what was asked of them. And although Madeline acknowledged their food was tasty, she didn't appreciate having her directions ignored. If they were insubordinate during the hiring process she could only imagine what they'd be like if either of them actually had the job. So that left Madeline having to fill the role of chef.

She thought housekeeping would be easy enough to find but that proved difficult as well. Madeline was more interested in building a family type atmosphere where the people she hired would be around for years. Unfortunately, the only ones applying for housekeeping were college students looking for part-time, temporary work. The idea of having to replace her staff every few months or so gave Madeline a headache. Until the right people came along she was stuck filling the position of housekeeper as well as chef and manager.

"Ms. Stiles," one of the contractors called.

"Ugh," Madeline mumbled as she stomped up the stairs. Mr. Jones and his crew were on her last nerve. "What's wrong now?" she asked, making her annoyance obvious.

Mr. Jones made a pitiful attempt at hiding his annoyance with Madeline. He thought she was unnecessarily stubborn and too much of a perfectionist. "Ms. Stiles, I think it would be wise for you to put the claw-foot tub in each of the bathrooms because . . ."

"Mr. Jones!" she snapped. "I've told you more times than I should have to that I don't *want* claw-foot tubs in each bathroom! I don't care that you think they're easier to install or more economical or that 'a tub is a tub'," Madeline stated, making him aware that she overheard comments he made to his staff. "So I suggest if you want to continue working here that you limit your opinions to the job you've actually been hired to do. Are we clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a plastered smile on his face.

Madeline rolled her eyes before stomping back downstairs to finish the many tasks she still needed to complete. Contrary to what Mr. Jones thought, Madeline wasn't difficult just for the sake of being difficult. The inn was her dream come true and she wanted it to be perfect. He didn't understand that for Madeline it was all about the atmosphere and ambience. She had a different name for each room; Enchanted, Passion, Cherish, Adventure, and her favorite, Lover's Kiss, and each was supposed to provide a different experience. She didn't want anything in the rooms to be the same, not even the tubs.

Towards the end of October Madeline was completely overwhelmed and realized she needed help. She asked her mom and Christa to come to support her through the last stages of getting her business going. Both of them were more than happy to come and felt excited that Madeline included them and actually asked for their help.

Since Christa decided to shut down Odyssey, her schedule was a lot more open. She still worked for the fundraising committee but that was only part-time and she needed something else to do. Christa hoped she could help her sister on a more permanent basis—as in moving to Monterey to help her run the inn.

“Oh my god,” Evelyn gasped, as Christa pulled into the wraparound driveway of Madeline’s inn. The first thing to grab her attention was the big, beautiful wooden sign posted in the middle of the lush green lawn. *Welcome to the Peach Tree Inn*. Evelyn and Christa were already impressed and they hadn’t even gone inside. Both of them were filled with a sense of pride at what Madeline was able to accomplish.

Evelyn and Christa screamed when they walked through the door of the beautiful, cottage-like inn. The place was described as a brick, two-story French Country house but it looked like something straight out of a fairytale. Christa said the house, along with the surrounding trees and sparkling pond out back, reminded her of a beautiful painting. It brought about a sense of peace just looking at it.

“This is amazing, Mad. I’m *so* proud of you,” Christa said, as she embraced her sister. “So what do you need us for because it looks like everything’s done.”

“You haven’t seen the rooms yet,” Madeline said, frustrated.

“Well, if *this* room is any indication then I know they’re gonna be fabulous. This is so inviting,” Evelyn remarked, as she walked into the spacious, high-ceiling living room.

She ran her hands across the mantle of the brick fireplace, smiling as she took in the rest of the room. The truffle sofa and loveseat were dark brown with espresso-colored upholstery. The accompanying plush pillows had a design in the colors of the sofa with a hint of gold as did the large area rug. Madeline used gold frames for the artwork to compliment the champagne-colored walls. And everything from the throw pillows and drapes to the lamps and candles were in gold tones to give the room a soft glow. The wooden coffee table and end tables gave the space a homey touch and made it look lived-in and accessible.

Christa’s eye was drawn to the dining room area that was off to the right of the inn’s entranceway. She walked up the two steps and marveled at what Madeline had done. Unlike the wooden floor in the living room, the dining area was carpeted with a tan, gold, and olive green design. It complimented the large, wooden and glass dining table and china cabinet. The golden drapes and crystal chandelier gave the room an elegant look that impressed Christa tremendously. She

saw the way the house looked when Madeline first bought it and to see that her sister transformed it into something so regal looking was nothing short of miraculous in Christa's opinion.

"Wooow, Mad, this is fantastic! I could live here!"

Oh no, Madeline thought. The last thing she wanted was for Christa to move to Monterey. She loved her sister dearly, but this was her dream and she wanted to live it on her own. That was the reason Madeline had been reluctant to ask Christa for help. She didn't want her to get any ideas about them running the inn together.

"Okay, ladies, let me show you the two rooms that are finished and then you can look at the sketches for the other three," Madeline said as she led them down the hallway.

Evelyn and Christa admired the romantic photographs Madeline hung along the hallway. They were framed snapshots, some black-and-white, of couples in love. Some were of brides and grooms, some of more mature couples, and the others were of couples being playful with one another—a man giving his woman a piggy back ride, a couple wetting each other with water hoses, and a lady leading her man into a room with a Do Not Disturb sign on the doorknob. That one was the ladies' favorite.

"Oooh, wow," Evelyn hummed when Madeline led her into the room named Passion.

"I wanted this one to be exotic and sexy so when you walk in you just wanna rip your clothes off and go for gold," Madeline said of the space she decorated in black and red. Everything about it screamed sex from the satin sheets and drapery to the x-rated movie collection housed in the entertainment unit with the thirty-two-inch flat-screen TV, DVD player, and stereo to mask the noises she hoped would come from the Passion room.

"Well, you definitely accomplished that," Christa said, fanning herself. "I'm about ready to start swinging off this sturdy looking poster bed you got here. Man, this thing is huge! Ooh, and I love these silk sheets. I can imagine rubbing my body all over . . ."

"Tone it down, chick, your mama's standing right here."

"Shit, I'm thinking the same thing," Evelyn laughed, as she ran her hands across the red, satin sheets. "I *knew* I should've brought Cedric with me. We could've tested it out for you."

"Who is Cedric . . . never mind," Madeline said. "Come on out of here before I have to douse y'all with cold water." She smiled, loving that they had that type of reaction to Passion.

Next Madeline took them across the hall to the room called Adventure. There she had a king-sized sleigh bed and a thick, plush area rug just in case the adventure ended up on the floor. There was a mini fridge to be stocked with water

and energy snacks or anything else the couple desired to keep them in the mood. In the bathroom was what Evelyn said resembled a hot tub and she fantasized aloud about all the things she could do in it. Madeline shook her head knowing it was pointless to say anything.

“Well, like I said the other three aren’t complete yet and . . .”

“Oh, girl, show it to us anyway,” Evelyn stated.

Madeline led them upstairs to the room she called Cherish. She envisioned a couple celebrating their anniversary when she designed the room. Everything was bright and sunny and looked more like the bedroom a couple would have in their home. It was the only room that had a dresser with the mirror attached, a drawer chest, and a nightstand. Madeline imagined the couple using the Cherish room would have kids that they weren’t often without and would probably be more interested in a comfortable night’s sleep than being wild and insatiable. It wasn’t that she didn’t expect them to get it on, however. Quite the contrary. She just envisioned their lovemaking being slow and tender as they cherished one another and everything they’d built together.

Enchanted was the next room on the tour. That one was a mixture of the other three in that it was sexy, comfortable, and had plenty of room to be adventurous. Even still, Madeline thought of it as the most romantic of them all. It was the one room that didn’t have his-and-her sinks in the bathroom because she wanted to encourage more closeness with that couple. She wanted the claw-foot tub to encourage them to bathe together and relax with one another. Madeline envisioned intimacy when she designed the Enchanted room.

Last on the tour was Madeline’s favorite room, Lover’s Kiss. It was the biggest of the five and the one she put the most energy into. The couple she had in mind while designing Lover’s Kiss was a mature one who’d been together twenty years or so and were still very much in love. Madeline envisioned them in the room together but doing their own thing—him watching ESPN and her right beside him doing a puzzle or reading a novel by her favorite author. The Lover’s Kiss couple knew each other intimately and didn’t need to be all over each other to show their love. So Madeline made that room the most comfortable. It had a mansion-size bed and forty-inch flat-screen and all the comforts of home.

She cried after doing the sketch of Lover’s Kiss because it was the only room where she couldn’t imagine herself. Madeline no longer believed she would get married and live happily with someone. She couldn’t picture herself on the porch swing growing old with the love of her life. Madeline no longer believed in love for herself, but she was more than happy to nurture it in others. And The Peach Tree Inn would give her the opportunity to do so.

Later that evening, over a wonderful salmon dinner cooked by Madeline, Christa decided to ask her sister about them running the inn together.

"No," Madeline said and took another bite of her fish.

"Well damn, you not gone think about it for a minute at least? I mean come on, Mad, you know we work well together. And you know you're gonna need help especially with the . . ."

"Christa Belle, please. Running this bed and breakfast is *my* dream, not yours. From as far back as I can remember your dream was to have your own shoe store. That's all you ever talked about."

"Yeah, that is true," Evelyn seconded, as she devoured her meal.

"So why not take this time to go after what *you* want instead of trying to live somebody else's dream. I love you, big sis, and I'm thankful you came to help me get this inn up and running. But this is my journey to go on. Go find yours, okay?" Madeline smiled, as she touched Christa's hand. "This place isn't finished yet and I have no idea if it's gonna be a flop or a success. But I feel *so* proud of myself that I went for it. And I want you to experience that too. So do your thing, Christa Belle. You've learned and studied the ins and outs of the shoe business for years. So go for it. No regrets in life, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," Christa smiled. She knew Madeline was right. She didn't really want to run a bed and breakfast. She wanted to make fabulous shoes. And her little sister gave her the courage and the kick in the pants she needed to reach for her own dreams.

Sunday, November 20th, the week before the grand opening, everything had finally fallen into place. Madeline found a wonderful chef and housekeeping staff and the last three rooms were complete. Tears filled Madeline's eyes as she looked around and took in the warm colors, the art, and everything she accomplished in the past few months. A huge smile spread across her face when she realized they had a full house for next week's big debut.

Madeline went to the kitchen to take inventory on the items they still needed, completely unaware that a guest had pulled into the driveway. Ezra grinned from ear to ear when he saw The Peach Tree Inn sign. He said it as a joke the first night he and Madeline made love and it touched his heart that she actually used it as the name of her business. The view was breathtaking and he felt a sense of pride knowing she did it all on her own. Madeline never cashed the check he gave her.

Ezra walked through the front door and saw Madeline hanging a sign for the inn's hours. "Baby Doll," he called, hoping to surprise her. However, he was the one who got the shock of his life. "*Baby Doll*," he gasped, pointing at her pregnant belly.

She was almost five months along. And it was her pregnancy that made Christa encourage her to talk to Ezra and Sidney decide to let her go once and for all. There were a lot of things he could overlook, but Madeline carrying the grizzly bear's baby wasn't one of them.

Madeline stood frozen staring at Ezra. For a moment she actually thought she was hallucinating. She blinked a few times expecting him to disappear. He didn't, though. It was really him walking towards her, smiling at her the way he used to. Ezra placed both hands on Madeline's belly and the baby gravitated to him. Wherever he moved, the baby followed.

"That's *amazing*," Ezra smiled with a fascinated look on his face.

Madeline wanted to smile but she didn't know if she should. She wanted to know if Christa was behind Ezra's visit but quickly dismissed the idea. Her sister couldn't keep a secret so if she had spoken with Ezra, Madeline would've heard about it. "What are you doing here, Ezra?"

"I came to book a room."

"What?"

"I heard about the beautiful owner of this establishment and I want to sit down over dinner and tell her my love story. I want to tell her how I fell hopelessly in love with this woman who wasn't watching where she was going and gave me a concussion when she knocked me down to the floor," Ezra smiled. Madeline didn't. "I need her to know how *worthless* my life is without her. Nothing's been right since I stupidly pushed her away and I need to tell her how sorry I am. I need her to know how she haunted my dreams and how I could feel her deep inside of me," he said, his eyes glistening with tears. Ezra touched her belly again and the baby moved towards his hands. Tears fell down his cheeks.

"I love the owner of The Peach Tree and I miss her terribly," he said, wiping tears from his face. "So do you think that's a story she'd be interested in hearing?" Madeline nodded as tears ran down her face. "Baby Doll," Ezra cooed, taking her face into his hands. He kissed her tenderly. "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry," he whispered before kissing her again.

Madeline felt like she was floating. Kissing Ezra always gave her butterflies. "Ooh, calm down, little one," she said, gently rubbing her belly. "I guess I need to relax. I'm getting the baby all riled up."

Ezra asked if it was a boy or girl but Madeline didn't know. She wanted her childbirth experience to be the way it was before ultrasounds and all the fancy equipment that took pictures of the baby before it was born. She wanted the excitement of having the doctor announce the baby's sex after delivery. Madeline shared with Ezra the names she chose—Auran, if it was a boy and Aria, if it was a girl. He beamed as more tears filled his eyes. Then Ezra put his forehead against Madeline's and his hands on her belly.

“So does The Peach Tree have any vacancies?”

“Umm huh,” she smiled. “Which room do you want?”

“The honeymoon suite,” Ezra said, removing her ring from his pocket.

Madeline smiled and thought that maybe, *just* maybe a Stiles woman would have her happy ending after all.

