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# Eve Vaughn



The Life and Loves of  
**April Johnson**

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# *Dedication*

To my group, thanks for all your support.

## Prologue

My first reaction was to throw the envelope in the garbage, but curiosity got the better of me. I opened it with an impending sense of doom. My eyes scanned the metallic engraved card inside.

*You are cordially invited to the tenth anniversary of the Class of 1994 Franklin High School Reunion. If you'd like to attend, RSVP Shelly Jenson.*

Damn.

Had it been ten years already? Where the heck did the time go? It seemed like yesterday when I'd walked the hallowed halls of Franklin High. I didn't have what anyone would classify as the typical high school experience, unless being the object of the head cheerleader's crazy obsession was normal.

So much had happened since then I wasn't sure I wanted to attend. To be honest, I could have cared less about the majority of my graduating class, but there were a few people I was curious about. How had Rick made out? He had been the shy nerd most people made fun of, but I was glad I got to know him.

I also wondered about the deranged Keely. Had they let her out of the mental ward? Hopefully she'd gotten over her propensity for running people over. Then there was Marcus. Lord have mercy, that man had

taken me through so many changes during our senior year. First he hated me, then he didn't, and then...things ended tragically.

I clutched the invitation close to my chest and closed my eyes. Should I go and face my demons or was it better to leave well enough alone? Whatever my decision, I had an odd feeling that it would affect me for the rest of my life.

## 1. *The Reunion*

As I stood outside the old gymnasium, I debated whether or not I could go through with this. I was so nervous I shook. I wondered who would be here and how they would look.

I had no reason to be nervous. After all, I'd done well for myself. I owned my own home, ran a successful catering business, had an active social life, and didn't want for anything. After ten years I should have been over the old hurts, but they came rearing back as I stood in the hallway of my old school.

Quickly, I dug into my purse and pulled out my compact. I dabbed the small droplets of sweat off my cocoa-brown skin. *Not bad.* I'd probably never win any beauty contests, but most people would have considered me attractive, with large, dark, thickly-lashed eyes, and full lips that would have made Angelina jealous. Sure, I could have stood to lose a few pounds, well more than a few, but I was no Jabba the Hut. If being short and pleasantly plump was the worst of my worries, then I guess I was doing okay in the grand scheme of things.

I'd taken special care with my appearance tonight, with my black Donna Karan suit that hugged my curves while hiding my faults, and strappy black Manolo Blahniks. I'd gone to the beautician to get my make-up and hair done, so I knew I looked my best. Feeling better after that quick inspection, I stuffed the compact into my purse.

A wave of nausea hit me, and for a minute, it felt as though I would throw up. After all these years, the gym still smelled the same—like dirty gym socks and sweaty nut sacks. You'd think the organizers of this event would have sprung for a nice hotel. What the hell did they do with my two hundred dollar registration fee? Other than a few streamers, balloons and a huge sign that read, *Welcome Class of 1994*, there was nothing really spectacular about the decorations. Perhaps the money all went to the catering.

I walked over to the reception table to sign in. Sitting at the table was a rotund blonde woman wearing way too much makeup. Her face was so round her eyes looked like beady little raisins. She reminded me of the movie *Big Trouble In Little China* when the guy blew up so much he exploded. Now, I'm not a small girl myself, but I can proudly say I haven't gained too much weight since I graduated high school. I think I looked the same, except now instead of the braids, I had thin dreadlocks halfway down my back, which I wore in a French twist for tonight's events.

I looked at the blonde, trying to figure out who she was. There was something familiar about her. "April, is that you?" The voice sounded familiar, but it was husky as though ravaged by years of smoking. My eyes drifted to her nametag.

No way. It couldn't be.

"Shelly?"

"Yes. How are you? You look great." She smiled at me.

I wished I could have said the same for her. Shelly Knight had been in the group I used to hang out with when I attended Franklin. She'd never been particularly friendly to me, merely tolerating my presence only because I was friends with the most popular girl in school. I



distinctly remembered her spreading some nasty rumors about me when I stopped hanging out with her crowd. I never really like her either.

She'd been the kind of person who thought she was entitled to everything because she was pretty and her family had a little money. Although Shelly and I weren't particular close, this was my ten-year reunion. People came here to make nice and pretend things were going swimmingly in their lives even if they weren't.

"Thanks, you look good too." I nearly choked on my words. I'm a terrible liar.

She beamed. "Really? You think so? I've been dieting like mad these past couple of months. I lost twenty pounds and I'm quite pleased with myself." She patted her coiffed hair.

God damn. How big was she before this? I gave her my politest smile. "Good for you."

"Yes. Roger seems to think so too. He's going to take me to Jamaica to celebrate. It will be great to get away from the kids for a little while."

"Roger? The kids?"

"Yes. We have three Yorkshire terriers. They're our children, and they love their mommy so much."

She could have at least lied and said she had some human children, then she'd have an excuse as to why she'd gained three hundred pounds.

"And who's Roger?"

"My husband of course, but you'll probably remember him because he was on the football team."

"Roger Jensen? You mean the two of you ended up getting married?" I remember they were voted cutest couple in the yearbook. They had been known for their volatile on and off relationship. Frankly, I was surprised they were still together, but I guess toxic people attract each other. I didn't have fond memories of Roger either.

“We got married as soon as we graduated college. It’s been bliss ever since.”

“That’s great. So do you plan on having children in the near future?” It wasn’t that I cared, but I thought polite conversation was in order.

Shelly made a face as though I’d suggested she eat a worm. “No way. Kids would cramp our style. We have our babies and that’s enough for us. Oh there’s Roger now. Come here, Roger, and say hello to April. You remember her don’t you, honey?”

I turned around to see a tall, thin, balding guy with thick glasses. This definitely looked like Roger, but different. He seemed—defeated. I soon found out why. “Hi April.” He held out his hand for me to shake, which I took.

“Hi Roger. I hope all is going well for you.”

I noticed he didn’t make eye contact with me. I wondered what was wrong. “Fine,” he mumbled.

“Roger, how many times have I told you? You have to speak up and stop slouching for Pete’s sake. That’s why you didn’t get that promotion, because you walk around like Lurch. Go get me some punch!”

Wow. I kind of felt sorry for old Roger. It seemed like when he got married, he not only lost his single status, he lost his balls.

“It doesn’t help when you’re always on my goddamn back,” he shot back.

“Uh, I think I see someone I need to talk to. Catch you two later.” I didn’t really see anyone, but I needed to get away from the Ike and Tina show. It kind of made me glad I wasn’t married.

“Don’t forget your nametag, hon.” Shelly stopped glaring at her husband long enough to smile at me.

I grabbed my nametag and hurried off. As I walked inside, I recognized a few people immediately, but there were some people who’d

changed so much I was stunned. The biggest surprise was Shawn Montrose, who was now Shawna Montrose.

Now I always thought I was pretty good at spotting a transsexual, but he looked like he'd been born a woman. We'd shared a couple classes together and were friendly. He'd been a quiet guy so it was hard to reconcile that a person I once thought was cute was now a woman.

"Hey girlfriend. You look absolutely fabulous." He—I mean she—embraced me in her strong arms.

"Hi. You have certainly—changed."

She smiled, tossing flame-red locks over her shoulder. "For the better. I had the final procedure done last month."

"You mean—"

"Yep. Snip. Snip."

"Yikes! Don't you miss it?"

"Does a cancer patient miss a tumor? I don't think so. This is who I am. I'm finally the same person on the outside as I have been on the inside."

What could I say to that? She was happy, so who was I to judge? "Good for you. So, what have you been up to these past ten years?"

"I've done some modeling. I'm getting married in the fall. Can you believe it? I met my fiancé online through a transgender support group. He's been great."

"A transgender support group? Does that mean your fiancé is also—"

"Yes, he was born with the same affliction as me, the wrong sex in a different body."

Whoa. My reunion was turning out to be an episode from the Jerry Springer Show. "Uh...is he here with you?"

"No. He's at home watching our children. They have the chicken pox."

"You have children?"

“Oh yeah. Bob was married and had children, before he finally admitted to himself who he actually was.”

“Her—I mean his husband didn’t object to him having the children?”

“No. His ex has moved on and started his own family. He doesn’t really have a lot to do with the children other than occasional birthday and holiday presents, which I think is sad, but we’re all happy. They don’t really remember their father anyway. Bob and I are all the mother and father they need anyway.

“Well, I’m glad to hear you’re happy.”

“Deliriously so. And you, missy? What have you been up to?”

“Oh about five-two,” I joked. “Seriously, I went to culinary school and received my Cordon Bleu certification. Then I took an apprenticeship under one of the top chefs in the country. Chef Jeffrey Devereaux, ever heard of him?”

Shawna’s eyes widened. “The Jeffery Devereaux? He’s only one of the best chefs on the planet. However did you land that gig, girlfriend?”

“Would you believe he was in the military with my mom and apparently they’re really good friends. She pulled some strings for me.”

“Wow. That’s pretty neat. What did you do after that?”

“After him, I took another apprenticeship in France. By the time my training was complete, I could pretty much pick where I wanted to work. I stayed in France for a while and actually planned on staying when I met a really nice guy from Sierra Leon. Pierre was a sweetie, but it didn’t work out.”

“Oh yummy. African men are delicious.”

I laughed. “You sound like you know.”

“Oh, I’ve done my share of exploring. Were you heartbroken when things ended?”

“A little, but the funny thing is, he wanted more than I could give him at the time. I was content with the way things were. He wanted a family. So I took a job in Italy where I met Paolo. He was also very nice but was a traditionalist and wanted me to quit my job and stay home to have his babies. I was only twenty-five at the time and wasn’t ready to take that leap, let alone give up my career for someone I wasn’t one hundred percent sure about.”

“You got around, didn’t you?” she teased.

“To be honest, not really. Other than those two men in the past ten years of my life, I haven’t been involved with anyone seriously. Maybe a couple dates here and there. I’ve just been so busy with my career. When I came back to the States, I took a few business classes and opened my own catering business in Manhattan. I’ve been doing that for the past three years now, and things are going wonderfully. Unfortunately, I haven’t had much time for a social life.”

“Oh, so you live in Manhattan? You must run into Marcus every now and then. No pun intended.”

Just the mention of the name made me freeze. The last time I saw Marcus Dawson was at graduation. He was wheeled across the stage because he’d been the victim of a car accident I still felt partly responsible for. I used to have a major crush on him, but he’d only had eyes for my friend Keely. He’d never been particularly nice to me, going as far as to humiliate me at a party.

To my surprise he came to my house and apologized, which led to us sleeping together. He’d been my first, and it could have been special, but he was still hung up on Keely. When the two of them started dating it nearly destroyed me. Little did I know that Keely’s motive in dating Marcus was to keep him away from me because she wanted me for

herself. When I turned her down, Keely ran Marcus over with her car. It was a big mess.

I wondered what happened to the two of them, but it wasn't something that had plagued my mind. "No. I haven't seen him since graduation to be honest."

"Oh. Well, surely you've heard about his wild success," Shawna probed.

"No. Not really. I've been out of the country off and on these past ten years, remember? I haven't kept up with anyone in school. Is he some big shot on Wall Street or something?"

"Uh, no. Marcus is an actor. He's become a huge Broadway hit, won a couple of Tonys, starred in a few movies, although he says he prefers the stage. Not only that, he's an artist, and a pretty good one I hear."

"Wow, sounds like he's been busy. It really was a shame that he lost his football scholarship because of his injuries. I'm glad he's found success." And I really meant that. It's funny I had never heard of him considering I'd lived in Manhattan for a few years. Granted, I didn't have much of a life outside of my job, and I hadn't had time to go to the theater. "I guess I'm the last person to ask about all the latest actors."

"Well, he does have a different stage name. He goes by Dawson Powers."

Hmm, now that name definitely sounded familiar. Perhaps I had heard of him, but didn't connect the name to the boy I once knew. "That's nice."

"I wonder if he'll be here. I doubt it though. He probably thinks he's too good to show up to our humble little reunion."

I shrugged, not caring one way or another whether Marcus showed up or not. He was a closed chapter in my life. Shawna and I talked for a

while before people started lining up for the buffet. The food wasn't bad, but it wasn't great either.

I sat at table full of people I'd once shared classes with. The funny thing is, they weren't the people I'd hung out with, having run with a more popular crowd. I realized that had I been closer to any of the people sitting at my table, I would have made lifelong friends. As it stood, the kids I had once run with were just like they were in high school and I couldn't for the life of me figure out what exactly I saw in them.

I glanced over to their table and I could see the plastic smiles on their faces. Some of them I'm sure had had some success in their lives, while others were just pasting on happy faces to make it seem like everything was okay.

I danced with a few of my classmates and I was having a great time jamming to the music that was popular when I was in high school. When Boys II Men's "It's So Hard To Say Goodbye To Yesterday" came on, Larry, a guy I'd had Physics with, asked me to dance. We exchanged pleasantries and talked about our lives, when someone tapped on him on the shoulder. "May I have this dance with the lady?"

I looked over Larry's shoulder to see who wanted to dance with me and my jaw dropped. I didn't know who he was, but my heart started to race like mad. He was the proverbial tall, dark and handsome. The mystery man looked as if he'd just stepped off the cover of *GQ* magazine with his fashionably short, moussed black hair, sky blue eyes, and a smile so big and white I couldn't look away from his finely chiseled face.

Larry looked to see if it was all right with me. I could only nod my head, not trusting myself to speak. Can you say hubba hubba? And he wanted to dance with little ol' me. Larry relinquished me to the mystery guy, who took me into his arms.

## 2. Rick no more

His body was solid. Even though he wore an obviously expensive suit, I could tell he worked out. When I say this guy was one of the best looking men I'd ever seen, I'm not exaggerating. I couldn't tear my eyes away from him even as our bodies swayed to the rhythm of the music.

"You look fantastic tonight, April." The dulcet tones of his deep voice finally broke me out of my trance. He probably thought I was an idiot for staring at him the way I was.

"Uh, you have an advantage over me. You know who I am, but I don't know who you are. Where's your nametag?"

"I thought I was wearing it. It must have fallen off. I think I should be a little hurt that you don't remember me, considering we danced to this song at the prom. Don't you remember when they started playing 'Funky Cold Medina' and I started doing the worm?"

I could feel my eyes bugging out of my head. It couldn't be. Could it? He smiled at me. That smile *was* familiar. Holy Cow. It was. "Rick?" My jaw dropped.

Rick Slick—yes, that's his name, it had been a big joke in high school—was no longer lanky and painfully thin. His pale, pimple-ridden skin was now replaced with a smooth, healthy tan and gone was his greasy shoulder length hair and the huge coke-bottle glasses that probably could have seen into the future. I couldn't believe I was staring at my prom date. He'd definitely come a long way.



I couldn't tear my eyes away from Rick as the scene from the day he'd asked me out played back in mind:

I originally had no plans to go to the prom at all because of the Marcus and Keely drama.

"He-he-hey, April." That was another thing about him. He had an awful stutter. People called him the Stuttering Ick behind his back. I felt a little sorry for him so I always made a point to speak to him.

"Hi Rick, how's it going?"

"F-f-f-fine. How are y-y-you?"

"I can't complain."

"You l-lo-look pretty today."

I knew I looked like shit, because I'd thrown on an old pair of jeans and a T-shirt and I was rocking a raggedy ponytail. But hey, a compliment was a compliment, and it did feel good to know someone thought I was cute even if it was Rick Slick. "That's pretty sweet of you to say. Thank you."

I noticed his hands were behind his back but I didn't realize he was actually holding something until he produced a red rose. "For y-you." He smiled at me then. Surprisingly, he had a nice smile. One could say he was almost cute when he smiled.

I took the flower tentatively. What was this all about? "It's lovely Rick, but what's the occasion?"

"I-I k-k-know someone l-like you already has a d-d-d-date, but just in case you don't, I w-was w-wondering if you would go to the prom w-w-w-w-w-with me." By the time he'd finished his sentence his face was bright red and I knew it had taken him a lot of effort to say it.

I was surprised he'd asked. I had never given him an indication I liked him beyond friendship. I had no plans on attending the prom, and if I went with Rick, I would probably end up the school's laughingstock,

but seeing the anxious gleam in his eyes, I didn't have the heart to turn him down. "Thank you for the invite, Rick. I would love to go to the prom with you."

The boy looked as if he was going to do a backflip. "R-really?"

"Yes really. I would be honored to be your date."

"G-gosh, y-you won't be sorry. I p-p-promise you a good time." He laid a big, fat, sloppy kiss on my cheek. I could have done without that kiss, but he seemed to be having a moment and I didn't want to take it from him.

"I'll hold you to that."

It turned out it was one of my better decisions to go to the prom with him that night. I had a blast, and what's more, I learned my saying yes had made a positive impact on him. Now, ten years later, he looked like a Greek god.

"I prefer Richard now, but yes, it's me in the flesh."

Talk about going from geek to chic. "Wow, you look great."

"Thank you. I guess I've surprised everyone tonight. You look just like I pictured you. Did you know you haven't been far from my mind these past ten years? I've thought about you—wondering what you were up to, wondering if you were married or in love. I saw no rings on your finger."

"No." I could feel myself blushing.

"I'm glad."

My face was on fire. I'm sure if my skin weren't so dark, I'd be beet red. Rick—I mean Richard looked so good. Who would have thought? A fleeting remembrance of a tall, pimply, awkward boy crossed my mind, and it was hard to reconcile this was the same person. "I know you claim to be Rick, but come on. You're pulling my leg."

Tall, dark, and drop dead gorgeous, he revealed large, even white teeth. "It's me alright. I know I look a lot different than I did in high

school, but I can assure you that it's me. I have the driver's license to prove it."

"I don't want to be rude, but did you get some work done?"

His eyes widened, the big smile never leaving his face. "Now why would you ask that?"

"You look so dramatically different."

"That's funny, because you look just as pretty as I remember."

My heart began to flutter a mile a minute. Not only was the new and improved Richard Slick handsome, he was also quite charming. "Now you're embarrassing me."

"It's only the truth, and no, I didn't have any work done other than laser eye surgery. My skin pretty much cleared up on its own around my second year of college, and I started a workout regime around that time as well. I've done a few amateur bodybuilding competitions."

"What can I say? You look...very...nice." I groaned inwardly. How lame did that sound? It was as if the guy had gone on *Extreme Makeover* or something and I was acting like an idiot.

"You have no idea how much it pleases me to know that you think I look...nice. I'm sorry that we lost touch after graduation, but I needed to get some things accomplished in my life before I could face you again. I'm also glad I can now hold a conversation with you without the stutters. It took me a while to fix that."

What in the world was he talking about? As cute as he was, the last thing I needed was for him to get creepy on me. "To face me again?"

Richard paused, looking hesitant for the first time since he'd approached me. "I'm sure you've always known that I had the biggest crush on you in high school. I see the uneasiness on your face, and I don't want to freak you out or anything, but I just want to thank you."

"Thank me? You have nothing to thank me for."

“You saved me, April. If it weren’t for you, I probably wouldn’t be standing here today.”

I remembered the gift his mother had given to me on prom night as a token of her appreciation for agreeing to be Richard’s date. It really wasn’t such a big deal to me. I had a great time at prom, except for the part where the head cheerleader sexually assaulted me.

I looked up into his sky blue eyes thinking I had to be in a dream, because there was absolutely no way this gorgeous man was holding me so intimately in his arms. “Richard, if you’re talking about the prom, I went with you because you’re a nice guy. It was not a big thing.”

“It was to me, besides, I’m not just talking about prom. Just hear me out. You did save my life. I know what my mother said to you that night, and at the time I was a little embarrassed so I never mentioned it, but the truth is, she was right.” He paused for a moment.

“Richard—” I tried to interrupt, not sure if I wanted to hear what he had to say next, but he held up his hand to stop me.

“I was suicidal. As you could tell, our school was full of cliques; you had to belong to one to be somebody. Of course everyone wanted to be in the ‘in crowd’—the cool kids, but if that couldn’t happen, they at least had friends of their own. I had no one.”

“Richard, you don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do. I’ve wanted to say this to you for a long time. It would mean a lot to me if I can finally get this off my chest.”

I simply nodded, my heart going out to the sad, lonely kid he’d once been.

“As I was saying, I didn’t have a single friend. People called me skezoid, loser, dweeb—you name it, I was probably called it. Do you know a teacher even called me a spaz once? Can you imagine how humiliating it was for me? I would go to the library during lunchtime just

so I wouldn't have to sit alone in the cafeteria, watching everyone avoid me.

"Oh, Richard." I touched his cheek in comfort before he continued.

"I was spat on, had food thrown at me, as though I had no feelings. It didn't matter that I was a good person, or I would have made someone a good friend. I was just the kid everyone picked on. At times I felt like crying. Once a bunch of the football players gave me an atomic wedgie. They drew blood, for God's sake. Imagine what it was like when I had to go home and face my dad to tell him what those bastards did to me." He paused as though the emotions were too strong for him to handle at the moment.

I had no idea how badly he'd suffered. I could feel tears forming in my eyes. I hurt for him. I used to be quite a talk show junky and my least favorite episodes were always the ones where the school nerd would confront their bullies years later. I always thought those people needed to get over it, but now, listening to Richard's story, hearing the raw pain and hurt in his voice tore at my heart. "Richard, I had no idea."

"Of course you didn't. No one knew. I was pretty good at hiding how I felt. But, there was one ray of sunshine in my life—you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Besides my parents, there wasn't anyone who treated me with a modicum of respect. Every day I would struggle to get out of bed, contemplating whether life was worth living, then I'd remember you. I would say to myself, 'I wonder what April will say to me today'. You always talked to me, and you didn't flinch away when I drew close. You treated me like a human being. I looked forward to my times at our lockers. Sometimes I would wait for you to come to your locker just to hear a friendly voice that day, even if I knew it meant I would be late for class. The week I asked you to the prom was the week a bunch of guys

threw me in the girls' bathroom and wouldn't let me out. I think that was the final straw. I started to fantasize about the gun hidden in my dad's desk. Not to use on others, but myself. I made the decision then, I would ask you to the prom. If you said yes, I had a reason to continue living, but if you said no..."

I gasped, my body shaking. The thought of having someone's life in my hands, even after the fact, was very unsettling. What if I had turned him, down? I closed my eyes, trying to block out the grim reality.

"I hope I haven't scared you."

"Well, you have to admit, I mean...Jesus, Richard. You would have killed yourself if I'd said no?"

"Probably. I was elated that you'd said yes to me, but I also realized I had a problem with depression. I confessed how I'd been feeling to my parents and things that were happening to me. I really wish I had told them sooner, because if I did, they probably would have found help for me right away, but still, you were the catalyst. You were my savior. I finished summa cum laude at Yale. I started my own software company. I made my first million at twenty-five and by next year, I'll be worth a lot more, but I never forgot your kindness to me. I owe my success to you."

What could I possibly say to that? "Richard...I...I didn't do a thing. It was all you."

"Maybe I did the work, but you set the wheels in motion. Sometimes, people don't realize how much of a difference they make in other people's lives, and it can be done in the smallest ways. Your just speaking to me every day at school kept me going. Your agreeing to go to the prom with me made me realize just how much I wanted to live. For what it's worth, thank you, April." He leaned over and planted a light kiss on my cheek.

I felt a tear slid down my face. When my hand shot up to wipe it away, Richard brushed my hand aside and ran his thumb against the

moisture. There went my heart again, hammering a tattoo in my breast. It seemed so loud to my ears, I was sure he heard it.

“I’m very happy about all of your success. No one deserves it more than you. I bet there’s a ton of woman knocking themselves over to get to you.” I smiled up at him, but for some reason, the thought of him with other women really bothered me. I had to be nuts considering I hadn’t seen this guy in ten years.

“I’m no virgin if that’s what you’re getting at, but in the back of my mind, I sometimes wonder how many of these women would want to be with me if I looked like the same kid I used to be. I wonder if they would want me if I didn’t possess a dime. Perhaps I’m being more cynical than I should, but when I think of every woman I’ve ever been with, I end up comparing them to you, and they all come up short.”

Well, I’ll be damned. After all this time, Richard still liked me. I didn’t know what to think about it. Who wouldn’t want some delicious hunk to crush on them, but did he like me for the right reasons or was I just some ideal he’d built up in his mind? Being placed on a pedestal only increased one’s chances of falling. “Richard, I’m not perfect.”

“I know, and I like you anyway. Look, how about you go have a seat and I’ll get you something to drink.”

I could only nod. What else was there to say? Before he turned to go to the refreshment stand, he gave me another kiss on the cheek. When he was gone, I brought my hand up to cover the spot he’d just kissed. Any minute now, I expected to wake up.

I wasn’t sure how long I had stood there, because the next thing I realized happening was a hush falling over the crowd. Had they been watching Rick and I dance? What was the deal? I soon found out why the chatter seemed to stop. Turning towards the door, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but it certainly wasn’t Keely and my twin.

When I say my twin, this woman could have been a dead ringer for me. She had the same even, dark-brown skin, short rounded figure, and the same bone structure. The woman had a huge belly, and I wasn't sure if she was pregnant or just a fat. My gaze shot to Keely, who hadn't aged a bit. Her long brown hair was now a chin length bob, but other than that, she looked almost the same as she did in high school. She wore a white linen suit and her make-up was flawlessly done, as though she'd just stepped straight off the catwalk. Keely West didn't look like she'd spent any time in a mental facility.

Considering how close we used to be at one point, I didn't know whether to go over to her or not. Something made me hesitate. Perhaps it was the timid-looking woman with her, who looked a lot like me. Creepy.

Keely seemed to be searching for someone, and I instinctively knew who that someone was. Me. I stood where I was, because I knew it would only be a matter of time before she spotted me, and I wanted to get this confrontation over as soon as possible.

As though she sensed me watching her, Keely turned my way. A wide smile spread across her face. She signed in, seeming to brush an annoyed Shelly off, and walked over my way. I didn't know what she would say to me. By now the talking had resumed. The novelty of her arrival had worn off.

"April, oh my God, look at you!" Keely exclaimed, engulfing me in a huge hug when she was close enough. I cautiously returned her embrace, a small smile on my face.

It was an awkward moment. This was, after all, the same girl who became my friend because she had a secret crush on me. The words, "no one will ever love you like I do", came to mind. And this was the very same person who mowed Marcus down when I rejected her.

"Hi, Keely. How are you?"



“I couldn’t be better actually. How are you?” So this was how she wanted to play it. Fine. I could act as though she didn’t once confess her undying love for me and then run someone over because I’d rejected her.

“I can’t complain. Life has been pretty good to me.”

“Me too. By the way, this is my wife, Anita.”

Wife? If I had been drinking anything, I would have choked on it. “Your wife?”

“Yes, we got married in Hawaii a few years ago. We’re expecting our first child at the end of the year.”

Wow.

“Congratulations. How exciting for you.” What the hell happened to Franklin High School’s class of 1994? Was there something in the damn cafeteria food? I shook hands with Anita. She had a wary look in her eyes when she took my hand. Did she notice the resemblance too?

“We’re pretty excited.” Keely turned to her wife, “Hon, why don’t you go find a place to sit down, I know your feet are probably killing you.”

“A little. Don’t be long, okay?” Anita shot me a look as if to say, “I’m watching you, bitch.” Keely was all hers.

“April, you look great.”

“So do you. You look like a model.”

“I am,” she laughed. “I do a lot of runway work in Europe and I’ve done some magazine work. No major covers yet, but I may have something in the works soon.”

“Are you happy?”

“With my job? It’s just a stepping-stone to what I really want to do. I make lots of money modeling, but I’m saving most of it so that I can open up a non-profit organization for gay teens looking for sanctuary when their families kick them out of the house.”

“Is that what happened to you?”

She grimaced. "Let's just say my parents and I don't see eye to eye on the subject. Although they never formally threw me out, it grew unbearable to live with them after a while, especially when they thought they could change me. The one time I took Anita to meet them, they were barely civil to either of us. It was the last time I saw them face to face."

"When was that?"

"About six years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. I feel free. I don't have to worry about living up to their impossible expectations of me anymore."

"I'm glad you're happy. How did you and Anita meet?"

A big grin spread across her face. "She's a make-up artist. We met in Milan. The funny thing is, she looks a lot like you."

I was hoping she wouldn't bring that up. "A little."

Keely reached out to touch my hand. "Don't worry. It's purely coincidental. I must have really worried you back in high school."

"You think?" I asked sarcastically.

"I'm really sorry for what I did. I was in a very bad place then. I think I always knew I was gay, but when I met you, well...you were my first real crush. I didn't know how to handle it. My biggest regret is what I did to Marcus."

"I hear he's doing rather well."

"Yes. I know he is. I saw him a few years back."

"Oh? How was he? What did you guys talk about?" For some reason the name still had the power to make me shiver at the slightest mention.

"Besides my profuse apology...he asked about you."

"You're pulling my leg right?"

"Why would I do that? It's the truth. Marcus asked about you."

"Shut. Up."

“As God as my witness. Why wouldn’t he ask about you? He really liked you back then.”

Now I knew she was pulling my leg. Marcus had only used me for sex. Like most teenage boys, he had let his little head take over the big one and I was the sucker who gave up the goods. I shuddered as I thought of the circumstances of my lost virginity. Not that it wasn’t good—it was very good actually, but it was the way he had treated me afterwards that ruined things. “No, Keely, it was you he liked. Whenever I was with him he would talk about you.”

Her lips twisted into a half smile. “That’s funny because when I was with him all he could talk about was you. Why do you think I was so irrationally jealous? I knew how you felt about him, and I figured it would only be a matter of time before he realized that he liked you, too. I had to keep you two away from each other.”

It made me a little uncomfortable to reminisce about the aftermath of my sexcapades with Marcus. “Do we really have to rehash this, Keely?”

“I think we need to. You haven’t let your guard down from the moment I walked into this gym—by the way, am I the only one who smells feet and ass?” She crinkled her nose briefly. “Let’s face it April, I was pretty fucked up back then and there’s really no skirting around the issue. I wanted to apologize for putting you in the position that I did when we were younger.” She reached out and took my hand in hers.

It took every ounce of my willpower not to snatch my hand out of her grasp. Why did everyone feel the need to unload their burdens on me tonight? Did I look like Dear Abby? “Keely, I would rather just forget about it.”

“I understand. I guess I would feel the same under the circumstances. But getting back to Marcus, when I saw him he wondered

if the two of us kept in contact and he genuinely seemed disappointed that we didn't."

I was finally able to extricate myself from her tight grip. It wasn't that I believed she'd attack me, the old closeness just wasn't there anymore, and it kind of made me sad. I smiled at her and attempted to make polite conversation, because I didn't really want to talk about Marcus either. That was another firmly closed chapter in my life. Besides, if he was as famous as Shawna claimed he was, then I doubted I would see him again anyway. "So, tell me about you and your wife. When is the baby due?"

A wide grin split her face. I didn't think it was possible for someone to show all of their teeth at once, but Keely was doing a good job of it. "We're due in about a month from today. The doctor didn't really want her to travel with it being so close to the due date, but Anita insisted, and I didn't have the heart to tell her no. I like having her around if the truth be told."

"So...uh...did you go to a sperm bank and do the turkey baster thing?"

"A turkey baster? Sorry to disappoint you, hon," she laughed at my ignorance, "but it was much more technologically advanced than that." She started to laugh so hard her entire body began to tremble. Her eyes wandered and then rested just beyond my shoulders. I turned to see who she was looking at only to see Anita sitting at a table shooting darts at me with her eyes.

Anita rubbed her huge belly, her lips poked mutinously out. "She's mine! She's mine," her entire body seemed to scream.

I sent her a silent message of my own. *Chill, bitch*. I guess I just had to put it down to pregnant woman hormones. Turning back to Keely, I asked, "You never did say. Did you go the sperm bank for a donor?"

“Hell no. And just get any kind of loser sperm? I wanted the baby to carry both of our blood. My brother donated the sperm.”

“Your brother? I thought you were an only child.”

“Yeah, for years, I thought so too. Apparently my parents had a baby in college and decided to give him up. Jake came looking for them a few years back, but being the parents of the year that they are, they didn’t want anything to do with him. I did though. I’m glad I got to know him, because we’ve become quite close. He donated the sperm so that Anita could get pregnant. The next time we have a baby, Anita’s brother will donate his sperm so that I can carry. Right now, because of my modeling I just can’t afford to gain a lot of weight, but maybe when our child starts school we’ll try again.”

She sounded so genuinely happy, and I was glad for her. It seemed she had finally discovered the real Keely West, and it suited her. “Good for you.”

“April, here’s your punch.” Richard walked over to me with a look of curiosity on his face before glancing at Keely.

I nearly dropped the glass when he handed it to me. Damn he looked good. I still couldn’t get over his stunning transformation. “Thank you, Richard.”

“Is this your date?” Keely looked him up and down. If she weren’t a lesbian, I’d swear she was checking him out.

“No, but I’d like to be,” Richard answered as he shot me a smile that made my knees all weak and quivery.

Keely’s eyes narrowed. “Did you go to Franklin?”

“Yes. We never hung out in the same circles though.”

“If you went to Franklin, then I would have at least seen you around.”

“You probably did. I’m Richard Slick.”

“Richard Slick...I didn’t know any...Rick? Get the fuck out of here! You’re not Rick Slick, are you?”

“That’s what my mom tells me,” he answered with a wry twist to his sensual lips.

“Oh my God. You look...wow. I have to tell you, whatever you did to yourself, it worked.”

“Thanks. You look very well yourself. I hope you don’t mind if I steal April, I’ve been dying to get her alone since I got here. You don’t mind, do you? Of course you don’t.” The next thing I knew, Richard was maneuvering me off the dance area.

### 3. Up Close and Personal

I followed because of the firm grip he had on my elbow and plus, I wanted to go with him. I giggled nervously. “That was a little rude.”

“I couldn’t help it. Is it a crime that I want you all to myself?” He winked and I grinned back at him like a love-struck idiot.

Richard led me past a gaping Shelly, out of the gym, down the long hall of the school, until we came to an open room. He pulled me inside and immediately shut the door behind us.

I hate the dark. The room was nearly black, and it was cold. “Could you please turn on the lights?”

“Are you scared?” I could hear the teasing in his tone.

“Yes. I am actually. Aren’t I a big baby?” I pouted.

“No. I think everyone is scared of something. If they tell you otherwise they’re full of shit.” He walked over to the light switch and flicked it on. The room was suddenly filled with florescent light. Richard stalked towards me, a cool, deliberate expression in his eyes, and my body trembled with anticipation for what was to come. Did he really mean to make a move on me in this classroom?

He pulled me against him, and I squawked. “What are you doing?”

“What I wanted to do on prom night, but didn’t have the nerve to do.”

When he lowered his head to mine, I turned away. As much as I wanted his kiss, we hadn’t seen each other in ten years. Besides the fact that he’d transformed into a major hunk and now ran a successful

business, I didn't know a thing about him. Call me a prude, but I needed a little time. It was really too bad my pussy didn't agree. It throbbed and burned for Richard's closeness.

"What's the matter, April? I thought...I'm sorry." He let out a quiet curse.

I wanted to wipe the uncertainty from his face and assure him that he wasn't the problem. "We only just met up again after many years have passed. I'm not going to lie and say I'm not attracted to you because I am. I really am, but let's slow down, okay?"

Richard hesitated for only the briefest of seconds. He raised his hand to caress my cheek. I moved my face against his calloused palm. This was the hand of a real man. I loved the way his touch felt against my skin. "You're right. I shouldn't have rushed you. I was just so happy to see you that I forgot myself."

I looked up at him, thinking I could get lost in those beautiful baby blue eyes of his. The room seemed to grow warmer but I started to shiver. Taking a look around, I remembered this class. "This was where we had physics."

A slow smile spread across his handsome face. "Yes. It's a coincidence that we ended up here because I was honestly just looking for a room so that we could be alone. Do you know, when the teacher assigned lab partners, I prayed he would pair us together, but of course you and Keely were inseparable then."

"Yes, I suppose we were. So...tell me. What makes you scared?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well a few minutes ago you said everyone was scared of something and if they tell you they aren't then they're full of it. So what makes you scared?"



“Well, a lot of things scare me actually. I’m scared of feeling the way that I did when I was in high school. I’m scared of waking up and being the person that I used to be. I’m scared of walking out of this room and never seeing you again.” The intensity of his stare seemed to delve into my very soul.

“Scared you won’t see me again?” My voice was little more than a whisper.

He stepped closer, his body mere inches from mine. If I didn’t move I feared I would jump on him or make a fool of myself somehow. It occurred to me that Richard was coming on a bit strong, but the electric current flowing between the two of us could not be denied.

“Yes. I only came to this reunion with the hopes of seeing you. Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t obsess over you for the past ten years, but like I said, you were on my mind. I didn’t really know how I would feel when I saw you again, but now that I do, I don’t want things to end tonight. I’d like to see you after the reunion.”

“But...I have a business in Manhattan. Where do you live?”

“I live in the suburbs of Philly. It’s an hour and a half drive to New York from where I live. That’s not very far at all, anyway, my business can be moved at any time.”

“I don’t want you to move your business because of me.”

“Don’t worry. I want to take things slow—get to know you again. I know I came on a little strong a few minutes ago, but being so close to you, inhaling the sweetness of your perfume, and hearing your soft voice wrecks havoc on my senses.” The back of his fingers grazed the side of my face. I closed my eyes, leaning into his touch. It felt so right.

“I’m not talking about something so drastic right away. I just want us to see each other. Maybe we can get away for the weekends.”

“That sounds great. Oh wait a minute, the weekends are the busiest time for me and my business.”

“We can work out the details later. The question remains, do you want to see me, too?”

“Yes.”

Richard smiled at me then. This time when he leaned over to kiss me I didn't pull back. His lips felt so warm and firm against mine. He cupped the back of my head, tilting it up towards his. “Open your mouth, sweetheart,” he muttered against my lips.

I opened my mouth slightly, allowing his tongue to slide in. He tasted so good—so hot. Richard's tongue explored the cavern of my mouth, taking his time tasting me. My body exploded with a burst of sizzling lust. I felt like I was on fire. My breasts tightened and my panties grew damp.

I wrapped my arms around him trying to get closer, if that was possible. Moaning against his mouth, I pressed my legs tightly together to temper some of the heat that seemed to be burning between them.

Richard lifted his head and looked at me, his light blue eyes blazing with lust and something else I couldn't quite put my finger on. Never in a million years would I have thought I'd be standing in the middle of my old physics class making out with a handsome millionaire, formally known as the geek Rick Slick. Any minute now someone would pinch me so I woke up.

“From the minute I saw you again, April, I knew it would end up this way.”

I grinned at him. “Oh yeah? And just how did you figure that, Mr. Smarty Pants?”

“Can you ask that, knowing how you feel now? I can feel your heat, April. Feel what you do to me.” He grabbed my hand and placed it

against his crotch. Holy crap, did he have a cucumber in his pants, because not only was he as hard as hell, he felt thick and long.

I looked down to see the outline of his straining cock against his tailored pants. My eyes widened in shock. When I looked up at him, Richard was grinning from ear to ear. “Did...did you stuff something down there?” I snatched my hand away when it moved. No. It was real.

What the fuck? Who would have thought he was packing like this? If the girls had known how blessed this man was back in our high school years, he probably would have been more popular.

“It’s all me. You seemed surprised.”

“Well, I...what can I say?”

“Tell me you want me.”

“Richard, you know I do, but we can’t do anything in here. Besides, I didn’t come to the reunion for this.”

“Neither did I, but what’s happening between us right now can’t be denied. Tell me you want me, April. I need to hear the words.” The earnest gleam in his eyes would not be denied.

“I want you.”

“Say, I want you, Richard.”

“I want you, Richard.”

“And you’re going to have me.” He swooped down and captured my lips with his...again.

His lips pressed themselves on mine. Richard lifted his head slightly and stroked my bottom lip in obvious inquiry, making my heart beat faster than ever, a pounding in my breast. His lips were warm and forceful, his tongue an intimate caress. I couldn’t remember ever wanting someone as much as I did Richard in that moment. It was almost hard to believe I was standing in the arms of the sexiest, most desirable men at the reunion.

I sighed, opening my mouth to receive him. A small moan escaped. His tongue swept in to taste me and I melted against him. I felt like a puddle in his arms. He tasted so good, so male. Richard captured my moan, his hands molding and caressing my ass in his large palms.

Heat coursed through my body while I squeezed myself against him, trying to get as close to Richard as I could. My pussy was on fire with need for him. I ripped my mouth away from his to catch my breath. "Richard," I groaned, my eyes were glazed and I could barely see straight.

"You look so beautiful. Don't pinch me because if this is a dream. I don't want to wake up."

"This isn't a dream. We're here together," I whispered.

"Then touch me. For God's sake, touch me." His voice was hoarse with apparent desire. It was a heady feeling knowing I had this effect on him.

My hands rose to run over the hard planes of his chest. He shivered beneath my touch, eyes closed. I could feel his muscles twitching beneath my fingers. Emboldened by his reaction to me, I pushed his jacket off his shoulders before loosening his tie. Richard's eyes shot open. "Oh April," he moaned.

I placed a finger over his lip to silence him. "Do you like this?" I then proceeded to undo his buttons.

"You know I do."

I spread his shirt apart to find a dark mat of hair covering his sinewy chest. The scent of his tantalizing cologne filled my nostrils. "You smell good. What are you wearing?"

"Fahrenheit."

"I like it," I said, leaning closer to place my lips against his chest, my tongue snaking out to sample his hot skin.

Richard cupped my head in his hands, holding it against his body. I ran my questing tongue across his chest, making a wet trail to his nipple. The texture of him under my mouth was doing things to my equilibrium.

If I had stopped to think about it, I don't think I would be here in the middle of a cold classroom making out with a guy I hadn't seen in years, but that's just it. I wasn't thinking. I was too caught up in the moment and the only thing that mattered was how good he smelled, tasted and felt—and how much I wanted him.

My lips closed over one pink nipple and sucked on it. Richard's hands tightened against my head. "April, April, April," he muttered. I licked and nibbled, teasing the taut little peak until it was a deep red. I then transferred my attention to his other nipple, giving it the same amount of attention. It was empowering to know I had such an effect on this gorgeous hunk. I loved it, but I wanted more. I wanted to savor all of him.

I released his puckered peak from my mouth before planting kisses against his chest down to the center of his belly. At this point, Richard was just a quivering mass of muscles; his only means of communication a series of moans.

I dropped to my knees, fumbling with his belt buckle. His hands came down over mine. I looked up at him to see why he was stalling me. "Oh God, April." He found his voice, which came out in a hoarse whisper.

I never knew a guy to turn down a little head. "What's wrong? I thought you wanted this."

"I do want this, but I don't want you to feel pressured into doing something you really don't want."

"Now is not the time to develop a conscience when I'm already on my knees. If I didn't want to do it, I wouldn't risk knee burn. Now just relax

and let me do my thing,” I pushed his hands away and undid his belt and pant’s button.

Richard stilled my hands once more. I looked up at him, uncertainty shone in his baby blues. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. Now shut up.” I lowered my head, fumbling with his pants and sliding them down his lean hips. His cock strained against his boxers, a blunt pink head peaking out the slit. Slowly, I grasped the undergarment and pulled it down.

His cock sprang free, making me gasp. Holy shit. I hadn’t been wrong. Richard was hung like a horse. Thick, long and hard, his dick jutted forward. I stared at it in amazement. It had to be at least ten and a half inches. I’d had a few lovers in the past few years, but his cock was by far the largest I had seen.

I reached out, running my finger along the velvety cap of his penis. I explored the contour of him, reveling in the sheer feel. I licked my suddenly dry lips and then opened my mouth over the tight erection.

Richard cried out, “That feels good.”

I didn’t think I would be able to get all of him into my mouth, but I tried, taking him deep inside, inch by delicious inch. My lips closed tightly around his cock and I slowly slid my head back until I reached the tip. Then I repeated the motion, sliding my mouth over his length, trying to get as close to the base as I could. Richard gently guided my head in this back and forth motion. His cock stretched my mouth with his girth. Good God, he was thick.

The musty male taste of him was not unpleasant. Actually, the uniqueness of his flavor was quite a turn on to me. My nipples pushed painfully against my dress, as though begging to break free. I was as horny as Richard obviously was. I’d learned over the years that it was

just as enjoyable to give pleasure as it was to receive it, and knowing how I affected him made me hotter than I could ever imagine.

His body shook and I could feel the dampening of my panties. I reached up to fondle his large, firm balls in my hands, rubbing my palms back and forth over the silky sac. “April, I don’t think I can take it much long. Dear Lord, what are you doing to me, woman.”

If I were capable, I would have smiled, but my mouth was full of his mouthwatering cock. I wrapped my free hand around the base of his penis, never letting go of his nuts and increasing the speed of my movements on his cock.

I felt his fingers digging into my hair and knew my hairstyle was probably ruined, but I didn’t care. The tighter his grip became, the faster and harder I sucked his cock. I could taste the bittersweet drops of precum on my tongue and knew that he was close to reaching his peak.

Just when I thought he would explode, he let go of my hair and pulled back, yanking himself from my mouth. His dick bobbed at the sudden movement. My head shot up. “Richard, why—” Before I could get the words out he bent down, shoved his hands under my arms and hauled me against him.

His mouth fastened on mine. His kiss was savage, hungry and needy. I threw my arms around his neck, pressing myself against him. One of his arms held me firmly against him while the other dipped down and hooked my thigh, lifting my dress over my hips as a result. Richard ground his cock against the juncture of my thighs. I felt his hardness forcefully rub against the material of my lacy panties.

Had I not been wearing any, I’m sure his cock would already be deep inside of me. He pressed and gyrated his hips, creating the mind-numbing friction of my panties rubbing against my blood-engorged clit. I

was on fire and the flames were threatening to consume me. Being held in his passionate embrace made me tremble and shake with ecstasy.

Richard nuzzled my neck with his face. I loved the way he felt against my skin. “Fuck me,” I heard myself beg.

As though they were the magic words, Richard dropped my thigh and pulled back. “No.”

I was so dizzy with desire that I didn’t think I’d heard him correctly. Surely he did not just tell me no after driving me to the brink of insanity. “Huh?”

“No, April. Not right now. Not like this.”

I reached out for him, trying to pull him back to me, but he only stepped away. What kind of game was he playing? “But you wanted me.”

“You’re damn right I did, and I still do, but I didn’t intend things to go this far so fast.”

My jaw dropped. I didn’t trust myself to speak as the reality of the situation hit me. I can’t believe I just blew him in the middle of my old physics classroom as though we were trying out for the lead roles in *Clinton-Lewinsky: The Movie*. I don’t think I had ever allowed myself to get this carried away before and I was mortified. I could feel my cheeks flaming as I began the task of adjusting my clothes and hair.

How could I have made such a fool of myself?

Maybe he caught on to some of the embarrassment I felt, because Richard grasped my chin between his fingers and tilted my head up so that I was looking at him. The desire in his eyes had not extinguished, so why the hell had he pulled away? “April, please try and understand. There’s nothing that I want more than to fuck you senseless, but just as you said, you don’t want to rush things, I want to make love to you first.”

I was confused “Isn’t that the same thing?”



“Definitely not. If we would have gone all the way in this classroom, that would have been fucking—just the two of us trying to satisfy our burning needs, but making love is totally different. It’s a fulfilling of not only bodily needs, but emotional ones as well.

“I’ve fucked many women before, but I have never made love to any of them. Our first time together, I want things to be perfect—champagne, soft music, a bed covered in rose petals. The whole nine yards.”

Tears clouded my eyes, and my heart swelled at the beauty of his words. No one had ever said anything quite so eloquent to me before. “Oh, Richard. Do you mean it?”

“Of course I do.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say that you will give us a chance.”

“This is happening so fast.” I tore my eyes away from him, sure if I continued to stare at his sculpted chest I would probably end up jumping his bones or something crazy like that.

“But you can’t deny how right this feels between us.”

No, I couldn’t. “I’m scared.”

“Why?”

I shrugged.

“Look, at me, April.”

Reluctantly my eyes locked with his. “Why you ask? Because you could break my heart.” A slow smile split his face. “I don’t see what’s so damn funny.”

“It’s funny because you could break my heart just as easily. Life is too short to worry about what could happen. What’s important is how we feel now. I didn’t know I would come to this reunion feeling the way that I do about you, but now that I know, I’m not willing to walk away from it.”

The intensity made me more aware of him than ever. There was no denying there was something happening between us but was it the beginning of love or was this just good, old-fashioned lust? It had been a while since I'd had a lover because I had concentrated on getting my business up and running, and now that it was running a bit more smoothly, maybe it was time for a little romance. Richard was gorgeous, rich, and obviously very in to me. What more could a girl want? Maybe I was crazy for even hesitating.

“Okay. I would like to give us a shot, too. I mean, if you'll have me.”

“You'd better believe it.” He leaned over, brushing his lips against my cheek before pulling away. I squelched the urge to pull him back into my arms. “As much as I would love to hold you some more, we have to get out of here before someone wanders by and catches us like this.”

I realized the wisdom of his words but I didn't want to leave. I sighed. “Do we have to?”

Richard laughed. He had a great laugh and I found myself falling for him just a little bit more. “Yes, we do, now move out of my way, woman, so I can fix my clothes. Goddamn, I thought I was going to finish in your mouth. Where the hell did you learn to do that?” A slight hint of jealousy entered his voice, making me smile.

“I haven't been completely innocent in the past ten years and neither have you.”

“Fair enough, but I hope I'm the only one you do that to from this point on,” he said, adjusting his clothes back into order.

“If you're nice to me,” I teased.

He winked at me. “I guess I will endeavor to be nice to you...very nice.”

I don't know what possessed me to say what I said next, but I couldn't help myself. “Richard?”

“Yes?”

“You’re huge. I mean, you’d make Tommy Lee look small.”

“I’m okay.”

“Just okay? You could hang someone with that thing.”

Richard chuckled. “Hardly.”

For some reason his modesty pleased me. Most men would have grabbed their balls and strutted like a rooster in a show of cockiness, but not Richard. There was a humbleness about him that I found touching. By now, he’d fixed his clothes, but all I could think of doing was unfixing them again.

“Shall we?” Richard held out his hand to me and I was giddy as I slid my hand into his and his strong fingers enclosed mine. I felt like a teenager all over again, and I wanted to sing.

He flipped the light switch off and led me out the door. As we walked down the hallway hand in hand, we noticed a large group gathered. “I wonder what’s going on,” I voiced out loud.

“I don’t know, but I see a person standing in the middle of the commotion. I wonder who it is.”

I wasn’t tall enough to see, but as we drew closer, I did see someone trying to push their way out of the crowd. “I’m sorry, folks, but I’m not here to give autographs, just to enjoy my high school reunion.” That voice was familiar, but deeper.

The way Richard stiffened next to me told me he’d recognized the voice too. I braced myself as a tall figure emerged from the crowd. My entire body tensed and I felt like I’d been transported back in time.

I didn’t think he would because of his apparent celebrity, but Marcus Dawson had decided to put in an appearance.

## 4. Remembering Marcus

I stood frozen to the spot as I stared at the boy—no, the man who'd taken my virginity. I knew then it was true what they said—no matter what happens in your life, you never forget that first one.

I remembered how it all happened like it was yesterday. A week after humiliating me at the party, he'd come by to apologize.

"Marcus! What are you doing here?" I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't seeing things.

He stood in the doorway with his hands stuffed into tight blue jeans, which showed off an impressive bulge between his legs. As usual, he wore his gold and blue letterman jacket. The plain black T-shirt he wore beneath it clung to his lean muscled chest. A stray lock of blond hair casually rested on his forehead, adding a boyish charm to his already devastating looks. The intensity of his gaze bored through me. I shivered in reaction.

Maybe I should have slammed the door in his face considering the awful things he'd said to me, but I was too stunned to do anything except stare dumbly.

He looked a bit apprehensive. "May I come in?"

His words jolted me out of my stupor. I straightened, placing my hands on my hips. "Is there a reason I should let you in my home? Shouldn't you be concerned that my loser taint doesn't rub off on you?"

Marcus had the good grace to look embarrassed. A faint hint of color rose in his cheeks. “Look, I won’t take up too much of your time, but I would rather not stand out here on your doorstep like this.”

“Why? Are you scared someone might come by and see you talking to me? That’s too bad. Look, just tell me what you want and leave me alone. Although, I can’t figure out for the life of me what we have to say to one another when you’ve already said plenty.”

He paused for a moment, looking like he was trying to figure out whether he should stick around or walk away before he said something else. “I’ve come to apologize.”

This was the last thing I expected. I was so surprised I took two steps back. He came through the door and closed it behind him.

Marcus was mere inches away from me, and I couldn’t help but smell the scent of his cologne. My raging teenage hormones started to get the better of me. I nearly forgot what he’d just said.

“April, did you hear what I said?”

I shook my head to clear it of my carnal thoughts.

“Uh, yeah. I heard you. I guess I was just surprised to hear you say it.” It suddenly occurred to me that he wasn’t here of his own volition. Maybe someone had put him up to this, and the last thing I wanted was an apology grudgingly given. “Did Keely put you up to this?”

Marcus looked surprised that I would ask him that. “No. Why would you think that?”

“Well, why else would you be here apologizing to a *nobody* like me, with the hopelessly out-of-style clothes?” I asked with more bitterness than I meant to convey.

“I came here because I wanted to, not because someone put me up to it.”

“Fine. Apologize and leave.”

He hesitated at the vehemence of my tone. “I didn’t think you were the kind to hold a grudge.”

“You don’t really know me at all. Do you think I should fall over your feet because the big man on campus, Marcus Dawson has condescended to apologize?”

“Well, I am sorry.”

“Okay. Thanks. Now you can go.” I crossed my arms over my chest. Who did he think he was? Did he think that his sorry apology would change things? Would it change the way I now looked at myself in the mirror, or the pity-filled glances of my classmates as I walked down the hall? Would it restore my already fragile self-esteem? It wouldn’t, but then again people like Marcus Dawson never thought about the consequences of their actions.

He gave me an incredulous look, seeming to think I should fall at his damn feet because he graced me with the honor of his apology. The way I felt in that moment, he could have taken his “I’m sorry” and shoved it right up his ass. “Is that it?”

“Is what it?” I wondered why he was still standing there.

“Well...I...I don’t know. I guess I thought—”

“Thought I would absolve you of your guilt? If it’s tearing you up inside, you have no one to blame but yourself.” I snorted in disgust. “When I first saw you I had the biggest crush on you, but you looked at me as though I were nothing but dirt under your shoes. I racked my brain trying to think of ways to get you to notice me. Even if you didn’t return my feelings, I would have settled for your friendship, yet you didn’t think I was even good enough to hang around with. That really hurt, you know.”

“April—” He started to talk. An uneasy look crossed his face, but I didn’t want to hear it.

“No. You’ve had your say. Now it’s my turn, and after what you did to me, if you’re really sorry you should have the decency to stand there and let me finish,” I yelled. I hadn’t meant to, but all the feelings I had bottled up came rushing out—the hurt, the heartache, and the embarrassment.

“My mother has been in the military all my life, so I haven’t been able to keep a friend for very long. I’ve never belonged to the ‘in crowd’ and I found it flattering when Keely befriended me. I knew most of you were only nice to me because of her, but just belonging to a group of friends, regardless of their true feelings was enough for me. Sounds pathetic, doesn’t it?”

Tears stung the back of my eyes as I held up my fingers, placing my thumb and index finger together to underline my point. “You made me feel about this small.”

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, and for the first time since he’d arrived it sounded sincere, but I didn’t care.

“Oh pul-leez. What difference does saying you’re sorry make now? I’m already the school joke. Now that you’ve gotten that off your chest, I hope you feel better.” I walked over to the door. “Goodbye.”

Marcus’s face was bright red and I knew what I said must have really gotten to him, but to my surprise, instead of leaving like I asked him to, he closed the door. “No dammit! I won’t leave. You’ve had your say, now let me have mine.”

I gasped at his audacity. “You’ve already had your say, Mr. Perfect!”

He stalked toward me, his closeness forcing me against the wall. He had me by a good six inches so he brought his head down until our noses nearly touched.

His body pressed against mine, and I could feel the outline of his cock through his tight jeans. “I’m tired of you saying that. My life isn’t perfect! Nowhere near it. Do you think I like what I’ve become? Do you

think I like being looked at as though I'm some big man on campus? Don't you think I realize how shallow my friends are and they'd drop me in a minute if my parents didn't have money, or if I didn't dress right or if I weren't captain of the football team? Do you think it's easy trying to live up to the impossible standards of my father who had a bad experience in high school and now he's living vicariously through me? You would think he'd love me just because I'm his son, but I have to have the best grades, the prettiest girlfriends, excel in every sport I play. How would you feel if you had to go through life not knowing who your real friends are and being something you're not? So don't stand there and pretend like you know me, because you don't know shit about me!"

I was completely shocked. I had not realized Marcus had it so rough. The "in crowd" were the kids everyone wanted to be or be seen with. From the outside looking in, they seemed to live a grand life, but hearing Marcus speak of it made me sad. "I didn't realize."

"No. You didn't." He let go off my arms. "Sorry about grabbing you like that."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. Look, I came over to apologize and I sincerely meant it. The minute those words came out of my mouth, I wished I could take them back. Whether you forgive me or not, my apology still stands."

That he revealed a side of himself he didn't show in school touched me, and I felt close to him. "Marcus, I..."

"What?"

"Nothing. Thanks for coming over. I accept your apology. It means a lot."

He smiled at me then, revealing strong, even white teeth. "Thank you, April. Perhaps we can call a truce?"

"Yes. I think we can."



He reached out his hand, but I ignored it. I don't know what compelled me to do so, but I threw my arms around him, giving him a hug. To my surprise, he returned it.

I don't know what the reason was, but we clung to each other for longer than I'm sure either of us meant to. The smell of his cologne was starting to get to me again, and when I felt him stroke my back, I stiffened. I lifted my head to meet his eyes. He looked down at me with an unfathomable expression in his eyes.

"Marcus?" I asked in confusion. The sudden sexual tension between us could be cut with a knife.

The next thing I knew, he lowered his head and crushed my lips with his.

I froze. This was something I'd fantasized about since the moment I laid eyes on him, but I couldn't believe he was holding and kissing me as though he couldn't get enough.

Marcus lifted his head to look down at me, never letting go of my trembling body. "Don't you like this? I thought you had a crush on me."

I tried to push him away, but he wouldn't budge. "I don't need a pity kiss."

"This just underlines the fact that you know absolutely nothing about me, because if you did, you'd know I don't do anything I don't want to do."

"And why would you want to kiss me after everything you've said?"

"I don't know. Damn, April, I just felt like kissing you, and I'd actually like to kiss you again, so how about shutting up and letting me?" He lowered his head again.

I stood still as his mouth moved over mine. It wasn't as though I'd never been kissed before, but the lazy fumbling of two experimenting adolescents didn't count. This was my first kiss of passion and I didn't

know how to handle it. "Let me taste you, April," he muttered, pushing me against the wall and grinding his cock against my thigh.

My lips parted slightly, just enough to let his tongue slide into my hesitant mouth. He tasted of mint, spices, and a flavor unique to him. I could feel my body softening against his. My nipples grew hard as rocks and I was sure they'd poke holes right through my robe.

My pussy clenched, responding to the new sensations coursing through my body. I'd fingered myself plenty of times before, but never had I felt this hot, needy feeling before. In that moment, I didn't know what Marcus's motives were for kissing me like this, but I didn't care.

All I wanted was for him to keep kissing me like this, but soon, even that wasn't enough. I wanted more. As if he'd read my mind, he lifted his head, a surprised expression in his eyes. "Whoa. I never thought..." He broke off and buried his face in my neck, trailing kisses over my heated flesh.

I reached up and threaded my fingers through his silky blond locks. His tongue grazed my throat. Moisture formed between my legs.

Damn I was horny.

Marcus's hand slid lower to squeeze my ample bottom, pulling me closer still. He squeezed and kneaded my ass in his palm as though it was a lump of clay and he was a sculptor. "Yes, Marcus. That feels so good," I moaned, leaning my head against the wall.

"Let's go up to your room," he muttered against my neck.

I opened my eyes to look at him, not believing what he was asking. I knew if we went up to my room what could happen. Did I dare take this irreversible step that would probably change both our lives forever? My head said no, but my pussy screamed yes.

"Well?" He lifted a dark blond brow, waiting for my answer.

My pussy won. “Okay.” I took his hand in mine. My dad wasn’t expected home for another couple hours anyway, and even if he was due home earlier, I wasn’t thinking straight at the moment. The only thought in my mind was letting Marcus have his way with me.

I led him up the stairs to my room, my breathing shallow with anticipation for what was soon to happen. “Nice room,” he casually commented and closed the door behind him.

“Thanks.” I gulped.

This was it.

I watched in fascination as he began to remove his letterman jacket and then his T-shirt. This was the first time I’d seen him without his shirt on and his torso was everything I’d imagined it would be. He was lean with a well-sculpted chest and ripped stomach. You could probably bounce a quarter off those tight abs. It was easy to see he was an athlete. My eyes widened as his hands unbuckled his belt and undid his pants.

Just when he was about to slide his jeans down his narrow hips, Marcus paused, and smiled. My heart skipped a beat. I’d seen that smile before, but it had never been for me. I blinked hard to make sure this wasn’t some dream I’d wake up from feeling unsatisfied.

“Aren’t you going to take off your robe?”

Heat flooded my cheeks. How dense could I have been? In my horniness I didn’t think about getting undressed in front of him. A wave of fear swept towards me. Marcus was used to dating thin, all-American girl types like Keely. What would he think when he saw me in all my chubby glory? “Can we turn the lights out?” I bit my bottom lip in my nervousness.

He looked puzzled. “Why?”

“Because...I...I just want to do this with the lights off.”

“Don’t you like what you see?”

“Very much, but I’m just afraid you won’t like what you see.” I’m sure if my skin were lighter, my face would be flame red.

“I don’t care about that. I’m here, aren’t I?” He shrugged.

“It doesn’t mean you won’t change your mind when you see me.”

“I’m not the shallow bastard you think I am. Come on, April, let me see you.” He took a step forward and I clutched my robe together as if my life depended on it.

“No.”

“Come on. We’ve come this far. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Don’t I?”

“Do you want me to go first? I will.” He removed his pants and then took off his boxers. “See? Now it’s your turn.”

My jaw dropped. I’d never seen a cock in person before. My cousin Jennifer and I had sneaked a *Playgirl* from my aunt’s bedroom once but it had not prepared me for this.

I suppose Marcus’ cock was average, just short of seven inches if I were guessing, but it was so thick. He stood there in all of his perfect, naked glory. Marcus was hot with clothes, but when he wasn’t wearing any, he looked like a fine work of art. I couldn’t believe such a perfect specimen of man-flesh was standing in my room, let alone a naked one.

I thought I’d faint that very moment, especially when he started walking towards me, his cock bobbing up and down with each step he took. “Now it’s your turn.”

I took a step back until the back of my legs hit my bed. “Umm, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.”

“April, stop playing games. Let me see you.” He stepped in front of me and grabbed the sides of my robe.

What was the point of fighting? He would take one look at my love handles and change his mind. I dropped my hands and closed my eyes, squeezing them tightly shut. I didn't want to see an expression of disgust on his face when I stood exposed before him.

I felt the cool air brush against my skin as Marcus parted my robe. His hands touched my shoulders and seconds later, I felt the robe falling off my body. I opened one of my eyes, to see what was going on.

To my surprise, there was no revulsion on his face. Could it be that he liked what he saw? Marcus reached out, cupping my breasts. His thumbs gently brushed my nipples, making the breath catch in my throat.

The heady sensation of Marcus's skin against mine was like nothing I'd ever experienced. The intimacy of his touch was deliciously wicked. "I don't know what you were so ashamed of. I love your big, beautiful breasts," he whispered as though he couldn't take his eyes off of them.

"Really?" I shivered at the newness of what I felt.

"Yes, really." He pushed me back on the bed before falling on top of me. His mouth descended on mine, and this time I was ready to receive his hungry kiss. My tongue darted out to meet his. I loved the taste of him, just as he seemed to enjoy me as well.

He lifted his head slightly to trace my lips with his tongue. I'd seen things like this in the movies, but never imagined it would happen to me. I moaned his name in delight. "Oh, Marcus. I love the way you kiss."

A slight smile touched his lips. "You're not so bad yourself." He planted kisses on my neck and face. My body began to shake and convulse in reaction. I didn't really know how to handle this fire burning within me, but I intended to try my damndest.

Marcus scooted down my body until he was eyes level with my breasts. Just the feel of his breath against my aroused nipples was enough to make me scream out his name. "Please, Marcus!"

He lifted his head. "Please what? Tell me what you want."

"I...I want you to suck my breasts."

I'd read a countless number of romance novels and the hero always sucked on the heroine's breasts. I never understood why until now. For the first time in my life, I'd feel a man's mouth on my nipples, and I wanted it badly. Very badly.

"I intend to. They look very suck-able. Believe it or not, I've imagined doing this for a while," he said, before bending down and taking a tight peak between his teeth.

Had I not been so damn hot, I think I would have asked him if I'd heard right. Surely he didn't say he imagined sucking on my breasts before, but the sexual hormones in my body had long since taken over my brain.

I arched my back, exposing my aching mounds to their fullest. His teeth nipped and nibbled at the taut peak, driving me out of my mind. I clutched his head to my breast when he began to suckle me.

The voracious, hungry motion of his mouth sent pulses of pleasure to my pussy, titillating every single nerve in my body. My head rolled back and forth on the bed in my frantic desire for more. Marcus turned his attention to the other breast, running his tongue along the side of it.

He teased and tortured me until I couldn't take anymore. "Please, fuck me," I begged. Never having gone this far before, I couldn't believe I was begging to be deflowered, but here I was laying naked beneath the most gorgeous boy in high school, begging him to fuck my brains out.

Marcus lifted his head. "Do you want it that bad?"

"Yes, please."

“Do you want me to eat your pussy?”

“No.” I still wasn’t comfortable enough with my body to let him to that to me.

“Are you sure? I could make you come.” To prove his point, his hand trailed down the length of my body until it rested on top of the tight curls between my thighs.

“I’m sure. I just want you to fuck me.”

“But I like eating pussy, April, I want to taste yours. You smell so nice and fresh. I want to bury my face between your chocolate thighs. I’d savor every drop of your sweet cream.”

He slid a finger inside of me and I thought I would pass out from the intensity of his invasion. As good as he made that sound, I still couldn’t let him do it. “No. Just fuck me, Marcus.”

“You’re so wet, April. Are you sure you don’t want me to?”

“Absolutely.”

“I never thought you were a spoilsport.” As he talked, Marcus fingered me, and I could barely concentrate on the conversation.

“I’m not a spoilsport. I just want you. Please Marcus. Don’t tease me.”

He actually looked disappointed at my refusal, but didn’t try to convince me again. Instead, he removed his finger from my pussy and I watched in fascination as he put it in his mouth. “Hmm, you’re delicious. Just like I thought you’d be.”

There was something very sensual about him tasting my juices. I was very tempted to let him eat me out, but I just couldn’t. I wished I weren’t such a chicken.

“Do you have anything?”

It took me a moment to figure out what he was talking about, but it finally came to me that he meant protection. Seeing as how I didn’t think

I would even have sex until my twenties, I wasn't prepared. I shook my head.

"No matter. I have a condom in my wallet." He got off the bed and walked over to where he'd dropped his letterman jacket.

"I suppose you're always prepared." An irrational jealousy washed over me as I thought of all the beautiful girls he'd probably slept with before me. It wasn't like I was his girlfriend any anything, but then again, jealousy isn't a rational emotion.

He must have heard the edge to my tone, because he gave me a funny look. "It's not what you think, April. They passed these out in health class. It's been there ever since."

This explanation calmed the beast within me. I watched in fascination as he skillfully slid the condom over his burgeoning cock. When his dick was properly covered, he walked to me and got back on the bed.

Marcus leaned over and kissed me again. I couldn't get enough of his kisses. I had the feeling he was trying to ease me into this, and I appreciated his consideration, especially as this was my first time.

He lifted his head, and I whimpered at the withdrawal of his mouth. Marcus stood on his knees in front of me before gently parting my thighs. "You look beautiful right now, April."

Me? Beautiful? Surely he couldn't have been talking about me. It wasn't like he had to compliment me, because I was already giving him some "no-strings-attached" ass.

"I don't need your pretty words, Marcus, just fuck me."

He paused for a moment before grabbing my thighs and pulling me closer to him until the tip of his cock rested against my damp cunt.

I braced myself for his entry, expecting pain. His cock thrust inside of me. It felt very tight and uncomfortable, but it didn't hurt like I thought it



would. He pushed deeper still, and this time it felt as though something had popped inside of me. It hurt a little, but the pain didn't last long enough to take away from the experience.

Marcus paused over me. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you not breathing?"

I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath. I giggled nervously. "This isn't as bad as I thought."

He wore an amused expression. "Not bad? I'm going to make this good for you." He started to move in and out of me. My body began to respond to the decadence of Marcus's cock, deliciously stretching me.

Had I known sex would feel this good, I think I would have had it a long time ago. I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his hips, thrusting my hips up to meet his.

"God, your pussy is tight. Damn," he said through gritted teeth.

"Marcus!" I screamed, his name over and over again. The sizzling heat generated by our bodies threatened to consume us both.

He lowered his head, nuzzling his face against my cheek. I instinctively tightened my pussy muscles around his cock, wanting him to enjoy this moment as much as I did.

"Damn, April. You have no idea what you're doing to me."

I had a pretty good idea, and it felt good to have this kind of power over a man for the first time in my life.

Marcus increased the pace, fucking me with the forcefulness of a possessed demon. Neither of us spoke anymore. Our bodies moved to the rhythm of our beating hearts.

It happened so suddenly—an explosion. I literally felt as though my body had exploded from all the pleasure he'd given me, and I knew I was experiencing my first orgasm.

I began to shake and twist uncontrollably beneath him. He gripped my thighs and fucked me even harder, heightening the sensation of my climax, until he too began to shudder. “Holy shit,” he moaned, before collapsing on top of me.

Our sweat-glistened bodies slid together as he pulled me against him. “That was wonderful.” He sounded surprised.

“Yes,” was all I could say. I could not believe I’d just fucked Marcus Dawson, the boy I’d lusted over for months.

“When I came over here...this wasn’t what I had in mind.” He looked at me with a concerned expression, his blond hair plastered to his forehead.

“I know. It just happened, but where do we go from here?” I wanted to know.

I never did get his answer because just then the doorbell rang. It was Keely, and that’s when the real drama started. By the end of her visit, I watched the two of them walk off, smiles on their faces, while my heart broke in two.

## 5. Dawson Powers

I couldn't move even if my life depended on it. I hadn't really given Marcus that much thought to be honest, but now he was here, I couldn't help but stare. From what I could tell, he had aged well, looking almost like I remembered.

He wore a cream suit, with a lemon-colored silk shirt unbuttoned at the top that almost reminded me of Don Johnson on *Miami Vice* in a way. His face did look a little older, slightly harder, but nothing drastically different. The only major difference in Marcus's appearance was his once short blond hair now flowed in luxurious waves past his shoulders.

I had never been a fan of men with long hair, except for him. As though he felt the weight of my stare, Marcus turned in my direction, a small smile on his still gorgeous face. When he spotted me however, that smile fell. His eyes locked with mine.

I tried to look away, but I couldn't. What was he thinking? Was he remembering the way we'd parted? Did he have any regrets? "April, let's go back inside the gym." Richard gently squeezed my arm to get my attention.

Finally, able to drag my eyes away from Marcus I looked up at Richard again. "Sure." I shrugged, allowing him to lead me back towards the gym.

Perhaps it had been a temporary aberration that made me stare at Marcus like an idiot, but for a moment there, I felt like I was back in high

school, seeing him again for the very first time, and remembering those old feelings. Thoughts of the cruel things he'd said and done to me didn't cross my mind. All I could think about was the fact that Marcus had been my first lover and how he'd made me feel in those moments he held me.

I suppose it no longer mattered considering I wanted to see where things would go with Richard. I looked up at the tall dark hunk at my side and realized how lucky I was that someone so wonderful wanted to be with me.

Just as we walked back into the gym, Bryan Adams' "Everything I Do I Do It For You" began to play. I loved this song when I was in high school and at the moment it just seemed appropriate. Richard must have read my mind because he shot me one of his thousand-watt smiles, and asked, "May I have this dance, my lady?"

I giggled. "Yes you may, kind sir." He lifted my hand to his mouth, grazing my knuckles with his lips. I felt a wave of heat flow through my body at his gentle kiss. I don't know what it was, but being with Richard just felt right.

He pulled me close to him, and I wrapped my arms around his neck before resting my head against his broad chest. His scent wreaked havoc on my equilibrium. Our bodies swayed to the rhythm of the music and I felt lost in the magic of his touch. I didn't want this dance to end, because that would mean I'd have to leave Richard's arms.

His hands stroked up and down my back as we danced. "April?"

I looked up at him. "Yes?"

"I know this might sound presumptuous of me, but I was hoping...no, never mind." He shook his head, apparently deciding not to tell me what ever it was he had planned on telling me.

"What is it?"

“It’s not important.”

“Richard, if it’s important to you, then it’s important to me.”

“You might not like what I have to say and I don’t want to ruin this already perfect night.”

“How could you ruin it?”

He took a deep breath, a look of uncertainty on his face. I reached up and caressed his cheek in reassurance. “I know we agreed to take things slow, but I want you so much that I don’t think I can hold out for very long. I want to make love to you soon—tonight. Come back to my hotel room.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted him too, but there were still some reservations because I hadn’t seen him in so long. On the other hand, my body was in flames, and the only one who could scratch this itch was Richard.

I’d played it safe most of my life, but why not throw caution to the wind, especially since I wanted him this much? There was nothing stopping me; we were both single consenting adults, and one taste of his delectable cock was not enough.

I felt shy in that moment, not quite meeting his eye. “Okay. I will go to your hotel with you tonight.”

“You will?” He seemed as surprised at my answer.

“As if you had any doubt.” I laughed nervously.

He took my chin between his fingers and tilted my head up so our eyes met. “Where you’re concerned, I don’t know what to expect.”

“But you know I want you like mad, or else I wouldn’t have...”

“I know, but part of the old me never went away.”

I furrowed my brow together in confusion. Surely he wasn’t telling me that he was insecure. “What are you talking about, Richard?”

“I still feel like that awkward schoolboy I used to be when I’m around you.”

“But there’s no need to be. You’re gorgeous. I find it hard to believe you lack confidence looking like that.”

“It’s the truth. Just because my outer appearance changed, it doesn’t mean that I’m not basically the same person on the inside. Yes, I have more confidence than I used to, but some old scars never completely healed, and frankly, I don’t know that I want them to. They made me the person I am today. You may think physical beauty makes someone happy, but it doesn’t always. Look at half the people here. A lot of them were beautiful and popular in high school. “

He definitely had a point with that one.

“Shelly, for instance,” he continued. “Anyone with eyes can see how unhappy she is in her marriage, and do you think she’s happy being trapped in that body? Look at Tim Darnell, over there, he’s a miserable alcoholic and it shows. He’s twenty-nine years old, but he looks forty-nine. I guess what I’m trying to say in my roundabout kind of way, is looks aren’t everything.”

“You’re right.” It pleased me to know he wasn’t hung up on his looks. That could have presented some problems in our newfound relationship. I wanted nothing more in that moment than to jump his bones. “Richard, I’m tired of talking, let’s go back to your hotel room,” I said boldly.

He raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure? Isn’t there anyone that you want to say goodbye to?” Richard glanced over to Keely’s direction. I looked over to see her and Anita talking to one another, their heads bowed together emphasizing the intimacy of the moment. They looked happy to be together.

I didn’t want to interrupt their private moment, and besides I didn’t know what I had left to say to her. I knew once I walked out of this

reunion I would probably never see her again, and I was okay with that. It wasn't because I no longer cared, but sometimes, life was like that. You could be as close as two peas in a pod with someone and then one day things change and you drift apart.

I would remember her fondly and think of the two of us at the best of times. Regardless of how we'd parted, Keely had at one point meant a great deal to me. "No. I don't think there's anyone here I need to talk to again, so let's get out of here." I slid my arm through his and we began to head out.

Fate wasn't ready for us to leave because just as we stepped out of the gymnasium door, someone grabbed my arm. "April, I hope you weren't planning to leave without saying goodbye."

Before I even turned around I knew who it was. I stole a quick glance at Richard in time to see the brief tightening of his lips. Reluctantly I turned around and had to crane my neck up to look at Marcus. God he was tall. Richard probably had him by an inch and a half, but to a shorty like me, everyone was tall.

"Hello, Marcus...or should I call you Dawson?" I asked politely.

"April." My name was no more than a whisper on his lips.

"Yes?" I shrugged, trying to project a nonchalance I didn't feel. Why did I suddenly feel like a moth attracted to a flame? I was with Richard. Who needed Marcus Dawson?

"You look fantastic tonight."

"Thank you. Uh, Marcus, you remember Richard, don't you? You two had a couple of classes together, I believe."

Marcus looked Richard up and down, as though sizing him up. Richard's arm tightened around my waist in a possessive gesture. I didn't mind because if he hadn't been holding me so tightly I just might have fainted right then and there.

Marcus looked away from Richard and then back to me. “I can’t really say that I do remember him. Richard...?”

“Richard Slick,” I answered.

Marcus rubbed his chin as though trying to place Richard. “Are you sure we had classes together?” He looked at Richard, almost seeming reluctant.

“Yes, we had a couple of classes together throughout high school, but I’m probably sure you’ll remember me as the kid you and your friends water-ballooned at the homecoming rally, or the one kid that was constantly thrown in the garbage can.” Richard said this without one trace of bitterness in his voice, yet I could tell this was something that bothered him.

Marcus had the good grace to look embarrassed and then recognition dawned on his chiseled features. “Rick?”

“In the flesh.”

“I was an asshole back then, wasn’t I?” A sheepish grin touched Marcus’s lips.

“Yes, you were,” Richard agreed.

“I apologize for my part in the things that happened to you. There’s no excuse other than I was a jerky kid, but even then sorry doesn’t begin to cover it. I’ve done a lot of growing up since then and I’m not proud of everything I did when I was younger.” Although he was speaking to Richard, Marcus’s eyes kept drifting to me, and I looked away uneasily.

I could tell Marcus’s apology had taken the wind out of Richard’s sails, and he looked as he was trying to figure out what to say next. To be honest an apology was the last thing I expected. “Well, I—don’t really know what to say...” Richard broke off.

“Whether, you accept my apology or not, it’s there for you to take whenever.” Marcus then turned to me, and my mouth went dry. Was my



heart supposed to pound like this? Was my pulse supposed to race? Only minutes before I was on the dance floor with Richard experiencing these exact feelings. What was wrong with me? It had to be the fact Richard was holding me so tight. Yes, that had to be it.

“So, April, do you have a minute that we can talk...alone.” Marcus shot Richard a meaningful look.

“Well, we were about to leave. Whatever it is you need to say, I’m sure you can say in front of Richard.” I said this knowing it would not be a good idea to be alone with Marcus in any capacity.

“Not what I wanted to say. You may be in a rush to get out of here, but can you spare me ten minutes of your time?”

“Five,” I shot back at him.

Marcus sighed. “Okay, five minutes it is, although I’m not sure if that will be sufficient for what I have to say.”

I turned to Richard, “You don’t mind, do you?” I hoped he would say yes, to give me an excuse to tell Marcus no.

Richard hesitated, his lips tightened. “No problem.”

“Are you sure?”

“He said he doesn’t mind. Come on, April.” Marcus took my other arm in his grasp, pulling me towards the door. Richard’s fingers bit into my waist before letting me go. If he minded so much, then why did he say yes? Maybe he was trying to be polite, but I wished he wasn’t.

I reluctantly followed Marcus until he stopped in front of a set of lockers. I noticed a slight limp as he walked and wondered if he still felt pain from his accident.

This had to be one of the most awkward moments of my life. All the old memories came flooding back and not all of them were bad. I leaned against the locker and shrugged. “So what did you want to talk to me about?”

“There’s something different about you.” His eyes swept slowly over me and I could feel the heat rising in my body. What the hell was wrong with me?

“We haven’t seen each other in ten years, it would stand to reason that I would change a little.”

“No, I’m not just talking about the physical, although I really like that too. I don’t know. You seem...more confident...sexier.”

My eyes narrowed. I didn’t want to hear his compliments, I wanted to go back to Richard...or did I? What kind of game was Marcus playing at? “Look, Marcus, Dawson, or whatever name you want to go by, as you saw, I was on the verge of leaving, so could you tell me what it is that you absolutely had to tell me about or else I’m leaving.”

“Marcus will do. Dawson is just a stage name. Did I tell you how great you looked tonight?”

That’s it. I didn’t need this shit. “Goodnight, Marcus.”

Just as I turned to leave, Marcus reached out and grabbed my arm. “Please wait.”

“What?”

“I brought you back here to apologize.”

“Oh yeah? Isn’t that something you could have done while I was standing there with Richard? You apologized to him easily enough, or weren’t you sincere?”

“I was very sincere. I don’t give my apologies without meaning them. I’m not proud of a lot of things I did back then, especially the way I treated you.”

“Okay, so tell me you’re sorry, and I can be on my way.” I needed to get away from him as fast as I could or I would end up making a fool of myself. Why was I reacting this way to him after all this time, especially after what happened with Richard earlier?

“I suppose I could have apologized in front of Richard, but the way you two looked, I didn’t think it was appropriate. Besides, what I have to say is for your ears only.”

“So tell me.”

“Did you know the real reason Keely ran over me?”

“She was a little unbalanced back then. It’s no big secret.”

“Well that too, but what set her off was at prom, I told her that I was in love with you.”

My jaw dropped. Could this night get any more complicated?

Did I just hear him correctly? “Um, would you care to repeat that? Surely you didn’t say what I think you did.”

“Yes. I did. I really did love you.”

“You did?”

“Yes.” Marcus took a step closer and I took two steps back. “You don’t have to be afraid of me.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Then why are you trembling?”

Was I? I looked down to see my hands shaking. The only time I ever got like that was when I was either extremely nervous or anxious over a big catering job. “It’s just chilly in here is all.” That excuse sounded lame even to me.

Marcus flashed me one of his oh-so-dazzling smiles that used to make my heart flutter like a southern belle’s eyelashes—and still did.

Damn. How could I react this way when Richard was waiting for me? This just wasn’t right.

“I can warm you.” Marcus walked closer, but again I stepped back, knowing that getting close to him wasn’t a good idea.

“Please, respect my space.”

He halted. “Is that what you really want?”

What kind of game was he playing? I mean did he think he could just walk back into my life, flash me his winning smile and I would fall at his feet? If that was so, he had another thing coming. As I mulled this over in my head some more, I grew angry. I didn't know what his motive was nor did I care. He was stirring shit up that didn't need to be stirred.

I folded my arms across my chest, glaring at him and pursing my lips.

"Don't look at me like that."

"How exactly am I looking at you?"

"Like you're pissed at me."

"Don't you think I have a right to be pissed at you? I don't know what you thought you'd accomplish by telling me this, but I'm not interested."

He closed his eyes briefly and sighed, raking his fingers through his glorious blond mane. "I didn't bring you back here to start an argument."

"Then why the hell did you bring me back here? If it was to tell me that you were in love with me back then, I'd rather you save your sorry lies for the next bimbo who cares." I turned to leave, but Marcus quickly moved in front of me, blocking my way. When I moved left so did he. When I moved right, he moved right. We went back and forth like a couple of ballroom dancers before I finally gave up.

"Move out of my way, asswad. I'm leaving," I said through clenched teeth at him, pushing at his hard chest. So what if my fingers lingered a little longer than they should have?

"Please hear me out, April. You gave me five minutes and they're not over yet."

"You know what? You're as big of an asshole now as you were in high school. No wonder Keely tried to run you over. You were playing games with her head. When you play with people's affections, bad things happen. And to think I actually felt sorry for you. Sheesh."

“Are you finished yet?”

“Yes, I’m finished so how about letting me by.”

“When I have my say.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake! Fine, have your say and then leave me the hell alone.”

“I didn’t realize you’d still be angry with me after all this time, but I guess I deserve it.”

“Damn right you do. You crushed me. How do you think I felt to know that while I was good enough to fuck, I wasn’t good enough to be your girlfriend? You thought so little of my feelings that you thought I would be happy to settle for the crumbs you were so magnanimously willing to throw my way, and then you had the nerve to continue dating my best friend. Were you playing me and Keely against each other? She told me that you would talk about me when you were with her.”

“No, dammit, I didn’t! Will you just shut up and listen?” Marcus grabbed me by the arms. I thought he was going to shake me when he suddenly let go. “I’m sorry.”

I rubbed my arms. It was a good thing I didn’t bruise easily. I took a deep breath, feeling weary. All I had to do was listen and when he was finished, I could walk out of his life and never see him again. “Okay. Just tell me what you have to and please make it quick, I don’t think I can take anymore drama tonight.” I leaned against the lockers.

His deep green eyes searched my face as though he was trying to read my expression, but I schooled my features into an impassive mask. “When I told Keely I was in love with you, I meant it. It happened on the night of prom, but let me first back up. The day I told you that I didn’t want a relationship with you, I realized right away what a big mess I’d made of things. I was confused. I’d liked Keely for a long time and suddenly she was paying attention to me, and jerky teenager that I was, I

lapped it up.” He paused. I wasn’t sure if it was for effect or not, but I refused to meet his eyes.

“But the thing is, the more time I spent with her, I realized it was just infatuation. I think I only liked her because of everything she represented. Keely was beautiful, and popular, and she was going places. She was the perfect accessory.”

“That sounds very yuppie America. Are we talking about a relationship or a merger here?” I couldn’t conceal the disgust in my voice.

“I know it sounds cold, but that’s how I saw things. Then you came into my life and changed the way I saw things. You were a genuinely nice person in a world of shitty people, and it scared the hell out of me, so then I lashed out at you at the party. Oh yes. I see the look of disbelief on your face and I was definitely aware of you as far as back then.”

“Get the hell out of here.”

“It’s the truth.”

I rolled my eyes. “Somehow I find your truths very hard to believe.”

“Fair enough, but whether you do or not, please let me finish. As I was saying, I was very much aware of you then, and I couldn’t figure out why. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but you weren’t my type. Oh, I thought you were pretty in the girl next door kind of way, but you weren’t what I would normally go for. After we...well, I couldn’t stop thinking about you, but I didn’t know how to handle all my new feelings so I said what I did in my car to push you away.”

I looked up at him for the first time in a few minutes. “You really hurt me, Marcus.”

“I know, but what you don’t realize is that I hurt myself in the process too, but by the time I realized that the two of us could have had something special, it was too late and I guess in a misguided way, I didn’t want to end up hurting Keely. I didn’t see any point in hurting two

people. Of course I didn't know at the time that her interest wasn't in me. At the prom, you looked so beautiful. I wanted to go over and tell you how much you meant to me, and beg your forgiveness. The problem was that you were having such a good time, I knew you were lost to me." He stopped and began pacing around in small circles.

"Would you stop doing that? You're making me nervous."

"Sorry. Where was I?"

"You were at the part where you saw me at the prom."

"Right. Well, anyway after the prom, and I didn't realize this until later, I kept asking Keely questions about whether you were serious with Rick or—"

"Richard."

"Huh?"

"He prefers to be called Richard now."

"Oh, okay. Uh... I asked Keely how serious you were with Richard. I think after a while my questions began to tick her off. She finally snapped and asked me how I felt about you, and that's when I told her that I loved you. Keely seemed okay with it actually. She was quiet up until I dropped her off. About an hour later, while I was preparing for bed, she called me and asked me to meet her outside in ten minutes. She said it was urgent."

I thought about his missing hour and the confrontation between Keely and I. "I think I can see where this is going." I winced, remembering how badly Marcus had been injured. It had cost him his football scholarship.

"When I stepped out of my house, her car was in the street. She honked and gestured me over to her. The minute my foot touched the curb—"

“Please. You don’t have to go into details. As sorry as I am about what happened, where is this leading, Marcus? Richard is waiting for me and your five minutes was up five minutes ago.”

“I’ll only take a few more minutes of your time, I promise.”

I sighed impatiently, glancing at my watch. “Okay. Shoot.”

“I never forgot you, April. I saw you in Paris you know.”

“You did?”

“I did a few plays in France. You worked in a little restaurant called *Le Maison Rogue*.”

“You did?” I asked again in disbelief.

“Yes. You were a chef there, and I saw you speaking to one of the patrons. I’m guessing they enjoyed their meals.”

“I haven’t been in France for some years now.”

“I know. It was six years ago when I saw you. I didn’t know whether to get your attention or not, but the moment passed when you were summoned back to the kitchen. I meant to seek you out later, but then I had an emergency at home I needed to attend to, so I got on a flight and came back to the States. By the time my affairs were settled, I flew back to France to find you, but you were gone, with no forwarding address.”

My hand flew to my mouth. What the hell?



## 6. The Confession

“I saw you again a few months ago in New York. You catered a party for a friend of mine. I arrived to the party just as you left. By the time I realized it was you, it was too late.”

“So now what?” I shrugged, hoping this wasn’t going where I thought it was.

“Now, I came here in hopes of seeing you.”

“Oh can the crap. I hear you’re a big star now. What would you want with me, when you can have your tall, skinny, Broadway starlets?”

“I’ve learned that looks aren’t always important. Besides, I don’t date actresses. They have way too many hang-ups.”

“Yeah, pull the other one.”

“April, I’m as serious as a heart attack. You were the one who got away, and not many days went by where I didn’t think of you. I used to wonder how my life would have turned out if I hadn’t been such a jerk back then.”

“Well, there’s no point in bringing up the shoulda coulda wouldas.”

“But there is. Can’t we go someplace? Maybe have a cup of coffee? I’m not declaring my undying devotion for you here, I just want to talk, and maybe see...I don’t know.”

“If I don’t know involves having sex, then go get your brown sugar elsewhere.”

“That comment was uncalled for. Race was never an issue with me.”

“Wasn’t it? Because I wasn’t the right complexion, I wasn’t good enough to be your girlfriend.”

“I never brought up race.”

“You didn’t have to, Marcus. I’m not stupid. Look, this conversation is pointless and about ten years too late. Can I go now?” *Before I burst into tears and make a fool of myself.* What the hell was going on? I felt like my favorite book heroine, Anita Blake in the Laurel K. Hamilton series—everybody wanted me. Maybe I should consider switching perfumes.

“Look, I’m not making excuses, but put yourself place in my shoes. I was raised to think in terms of status from the time I could walk. My old man ruled the house with an iron fist. My mom was smart and left him when I was young, it’s just too bad she didn’t take me with her, but she was in and out of mental hospitals for as long as I could remember. Nothing really made him proud except football or if I had a pretty girlfriend and lots of friends like he did in high school. You see my father was apparently some big deal when he went to high school, but when he graduated the real world wasn’t so kind, so he never really left those days in his mind. There’s nothing worse than a parent trying to live vicariously through their kid, except my father was ten times worse.” Marcus broke off as though the story was difficult for him to get through.

“You don’t have to tell me this.”

“I want to, if only to explain why I acted the way I did. Football wasn’t my passion though. Art was. I loved it. It was my outlet when Dad had too many scotch and waters. He told me art was for fags and no son of his would do anything so wussy. I tried my very best to please him, so I gave up my art.”

“Your father sounds out of touch.”

“He was.”

“Was?”

“He passed six years ago. His liver finally gave out on him. That was the emergency I told you about.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We’d been estranged by that time and we never particularly had the typical father-son relationship.”

Was I the only person on the planet who didn’t have a set of jackass parents? It sure did feel like it. This was definitely a side of Marcus I wasn’t ready to face, but I couldn’t help asking, “What happened after the accident? I’m sure your Dad didn’t take it well that you couldn’t play football anymore.”

“He was more devastated than I was, that’s for sure. I, on the other hand, felt free for the first time in my life. My father tried to push me into doing this dangerous rehabilitation program to get me back into football shape even when the doctors advised against it. When I refused, he basically had no more time for me. I decided to go to art school, but my father wouldn’t pay for a dime of it. I worked as a waiter to get myself through school.”

“How did you become an actor?”

“Quite by accident really. I was trying to make ends meet and one of my roommates did a little modeling and gave me the card of his agent. They liked me and a director thought I’d be perfect for one of his plays. Turns out I was a natural. My parts grew bigger, and the rest as they say is history. Art, of course, is still my first passion and several of my paintings have sold and I have several more in a various galleries. Eventually, that’s all I want to do.”

“That sounds nice, Marcus.” Shoot. How had he been able to penetrate my defenses?

That's when he moved in for the kill. "April, how serious are you about Richard?"

"Very serious," Richard answered from out of nowhere.

"Richard!" I jumped away from Marcus, feeling guilty even though I hadn't done a thing wrong. So engrossed in what was being said, I didn't hear him walk up on us.

His arm snaked around my waist and he pulled me against his muscular body. Heat coursed through my body. I felt like super ho. There I was talking to a guy I used to have a crush on, feeling those old stirrings, and here comes Richard, and I feel the exact same thing when he held me. What the hell was wrong with me?

Marcus's eyes narrowed, slightly darkening. "I believe I directed my question at April."

Oh dear Lord. I hoped to God they wouldn't start fighting in the middle of the hall. Hadn't I just told Richard I would try to see if a relationship with he and I would work? What kind of person would I be if I went back on my word just because Marcus stood there looking all fine?

Damn.

"And I answered it for you," Richard shot back.

"Well how about letting the lady answer for herself?" Marcus grimaced at Richard before looking at me again.

Richard gently turned me around, guiding me until I was facing him. I looked up into his blue eyes and felt lost, the pitter-pattering of my heart beating a tattoo against my chest. "April?" The uncertainty in his eyes tore at my heart. The way I felt as I looked into his gorgeous face, had to be more than just mere lust.

Right? Why had I been so sure less than an hour ago yet now I hesitated? Did that make me a bad person? "April?" he prompted again.

I turned my head to see Marcus staring at me, a hungry expression in his eyes. What game was he playing? The sob story he'd given made him a more sympathetic person in my eyes, but I still couldn't shake the feeling that he had some kind of ulterior motive. I couldn't figure out what he'd gain by starting a flirtation with me.

I turned back to Richard. He looked so sincere and his touch had felt so right. I knew then what my answer would be. "I would like to leave with you."

At first Richard looked at me with disbelief, as though he couldn't believe that I'd chosen him, and then a big smile spread across his face. He bent his head, before pressing a light kiss on my lips. "You won't regret it," he whispered.

I felt good about my decision in that moment. "Could you give Marcus and I a few more minutes? It won't take long." When he looked like he wanted to protest, I pressed a kiss against his jaw line. "I promise."

Richard looked at Marcus, his lips tightening. "I'll wait for you at the entrance."

"Okay."

I watched his retreating figure and didn't turn around until he was out of site. Marcus leaned against a locker, an unreadable expression in his jade colored eyes. Whatever he was thinking he didn't seem happy. "Let me explain."

He shrugged. "Is there really any need for an explanation? You choose Rick Slick over me."

"You make that sound like a bad thing."

"For me it is."

"Marcus, you couldn't have possibly been serious. Yes, the one time we got together in high school was great, but that was years ago. We're both at different points in our lives. You're some big star now, and I'm

trying make my business a success. Richard is real. I know his heart is in the right place and he's the kind of guy a girl can settle down with."

"And I'm not?"

"Maybe that came out the wrong way."

This time I could read Marcus's expression as clear as day. He was pissed. When he took a step forward I tried to move away from him, but I didn't move fast enough before he grabbed my arms. I braced myself because he looked like he wanted to shake me.

He didn't. Instead he just held me firmly in his tight grip "You're damn right it did. You're being a hypocrite, April."

"I'm being a hypocrite? What are you talking about and I would thank you to take your damn hands off of me."

Marcus released me with obvious reluctance. I rubbed where his fingers had bit into my skin.

"You're a hypocrite because you carried on when I basically said the same thing to you when we were in high school, although my excuse was that I was a teenaged idiot. What's your excuse?"

"It's hardly the same thing, Marcus."

"Isn't it?"

"No, it isn't and I don't even understand why you're doing this to me. Why are you bringing up all these old feelings and old hurts that I'd rather forget about?"

"Because I don't want you to forget about them. I want you to remember how good it was between us, and imagine how good it could be for us now."

"I find it hard to believe that a big shot like you can't get a piece of ass elsewhere."

"You're right if I wanted that I could get it, but I don't want a convenient lay. I want you."

I lifted my hands to cover my ears, but he grabbed them and wrenched them away. “Oh no, you don’t. You’re going to listen to me, damn you.”

“No, I won’t. Stop this, Marcus, it isn’t funny anymore.”

“It never was.”

“I chose Richard. Maybe you fancy yourself in love with me because I was the one girl who saw through you or I was the one who got away. Whatever your reasons I just don’t care.”

Marcus closed his eyes and sighed. When he looked at me again, a suspicious sheen of tears glistened in his eyes. He was an actor. Couldn’t actors cry on cue? “I’m not the same person I used to be.”

“And I’m not the girl I once was. I’m a woman who knows her own mind and I’ve made up mine. Richard is the one I want, and you’re going to have to accept that.”

“Because he’s the kind of guy a girl can settle down with while I’m not.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t,” I protested.

“But you sure as hell implied it.”

Why was I standing here talking in circles with Marcus when I could be with Richard? This night was becoming more draining by the minute and I didn’t think I could continue this verbal sparring match with him. I silently counted to ten to get myself under control again. “I’m sorry if you took it that way. I really do need to go. I’ve had a long night and I’d like to leave.”

“With Richard?”

“Yes, with Richard.”

“Fine. Go to him, but I should at least leave you with a parting gift.”

“What are you hmph—” I didn’t get all the words out before he grabbed me again, dragged me against him and captured my lips in an

aggressive, hungry kiss. The insistent probing of his tongue traced the seam of my lips, tasting and teasing them. I placed my hands against his chest to push him away, but the moment I made contact with his body, I found myself grabbing the lapels of his jacket and pulling him closer.

Marcus's arms tightened around me and I melted. A hot flash of desire flared throughout my entire being and I felt lost in the warmth of his arms. I didn't understand how I could react this way with Marcus when I'd felt the exact same way with Richard. Maybe I *was* a ho, but when his tongue forced its way into my mouth I didn't care.

He tasted of mint and some type of alcoholic beverage I couldn't quite place my fingers on, but I liked it. My tongue darted out, whirling and circling his in a syncopated dance of passion.

I pressed my breasts against his rock hard chest. They ached and throbbed for his touch and I wanted nothing more than to be ravished by this beautiful man. As if Marcus had read my mind, his hand slid up the side of my waist only stopping when one taut mound rested in his palm.

He gently squeezed, making me moan in his mouth. "Marcus."

"That's right, darling," he whispered, sounding satisfied with my response.

Marcus lifted his head, making me whimper at his withdrawal, only to bury his face in my neck. He nuzzled his face against my sensitive skin and I thought I'd spontaneously combust right then and there. My pussy was on fire and growing wetter by the minute.

God knows, I knew I was as wrong as a minister in a whorehouse, but I couldn't help myself. It was as though Marcus had cast some kind of sexual spell on me and I couldn't resist.

He palmed and squeezed my breast, tweaking the rock hard peak poking painfully through my bra and dress. "You feel so good, April."



You're just as I imagined you'd be." Marcus's warm breath against my skin wreaked havoc on my equilibrium. "Tell me that you want this."

"I want this," I groaned in response.

"Tell me that I'm the one you want."

"You're the one I want."

"Tell me that you don't want Richard."

At the mention of Richard's name, I came to my senses. It felt as though a bucket of cold water had been thrown over me. Oh dear Lord, what had I just done? I pushed against Marcus, but his grip on me was so tight he didn't budge.

"Let me go, Marcus."

"Hell no. Not after the way you responded to me. You wanted that as much as I did."

"Maybe so, but I'll put it down as temporary insanity."

"Like hell it was. You squirmed and moaned against my touch and I refuse to let you pretend otherwise."

"Well you'll just have to, because I want to leave and if you don't I swear I'll scream bloody murder."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

His nostrils briefly flared before his face relaxed into a smile. "Go ahead."

"Go ahead what?"

"Scream bloody murder. Let's see how fast it will take lover boy to come rushing over and what he'll think when he sees you in my arms."

Marcus had successfully called my bluff and I hated him for further complicating my once simple life. "You're a bastard. Do you know that?" I hissed.

"I've been called worse."

“I’m sure you have. Marcus, what do you have to gain by perpetrating this little charade of yours?”

“First of all, it’s not a charade and I would gain you.”

“What if I don’t want you to gain me?”

“It didn’t seem that way a few moments ago.”

“You forced yourself on me.”

“Hardly. When will you admit that Richard isn’t the one for you?”

“And when will you admit that he is?”

The muscles in his jaw clenched and unclenched. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, but it surprised me when Marcus released me. Although, I’d wanted him to let me go, when he finally did, I felt bereft. I slowly backed away from him, not trusting myself to speak.

“Go to your boyfriend, April, but I promise this isn’t the last you’ve seen of me.”

“Do yourself a favor and stay out of my life.”

When he didn’t reply, I turned, walking away on shaky legs. What had I just done? I rushed to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. My lipstick had been completely kissed off and I didn’t know if it was from Richard or Marcus. With unsteady hands, I touched up my make-up and hair.

## 7. The Choice

When I was satisfied with my appearance, I went to meet Richard. He was waiting at the entrance just as he said he would. “What took you so long?”

“I...I had to freshen up.”

“You already looked gorgeous.” He took my hand in his and led me outside. “Are you okay?”

For some reason, I just couldn’t stop shaking. My run-in with Marcus affected me more than I cared to admit. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Are you cold?”

“Maybe a little.”

He let go of my hand and shrugged out of his jacket before laying it over my shoulders. The scent of his cologne tinged my nostrils, giving me a feeling of safety. “Is that better?” Richard put his arm around my shoulders.

“Much, thank you.”

Again, I had the feeling rightness with him close to me. I wasn’t the love-the-one-you’re-with type of girl which is why I couldn’t understand how I could be so attracted and have feelings for two men at once. I was certain of one thing—I’d made my choice and wouldn’t go back on my word. Besides, I didn’t regret what I’d said to Marcus.

In a way it *was* reminiscent of what he’d said to me in high school about not being girlfriend material. Perhaps I could have worded it

better, but had I given in to whatever Marcus had in mind, he would only end up breaking my heart like he did ten years ago. Why he even decided to single me out after all this time was beyond me.

Perhaps he was telling me the truth about his feelings but I couldn't worry about that anymore.

"Where's your car?" Richard broke into my thoughts.

"We're almost there. It's the black Toyota Avalon."

"Okay, I see it. Mine is two cars over from yours. It's the blue Mercedes. I'll walk you over to yours and then you can follow me back to my hotel...that is, if you still want to go through with this?"

Did I? The Marcus incident had left me pretty shaken, but maybe being with Richard was what I needed to erase Marcus's image from my mind. "Yes, this is what I want."

Richard smiled at me, cupping my face in his hands. "Thank you." He bent his head and planted a gentle kiss on my lips.

I released an inward sigh of relief to feel my body responding to him as it had earlier. Marcus who? "Why are you thanking me?"

"Because I wasn't so sure you'd want to go through with this after you talked with Marcus."

"Why w-would y-you think that?" I stammered.

His eyes darkened. "I'm not a fool, April. When I walked up on the two of you, the tension was so thick you could have cut it with a knife. It wasn't hard to figure out there was something going on."

"Richard, let me explain, I—"

"No explanation needed. You're here with me now, and that speaks volumes. I may not look like that guy back in high school, but I still sometimes feel those old insecurities and seeing you with Marcus made me nervous."

I reached up to touch his cheek. “Oh Richard, you’re the one I want.” And at that moment I did. I silently vowed never to let my stupid hormones get in the way of something that could be very real.

“You have no idea how happy that makes me. Let’s go, because I want to make love to you so badly, I don’t think I can wait much longer.”

I smiled up at him. “Okay.”

He gave me one last long, lingering kiss before letting go. After escorting me to my car, he walked over to his.

As I got into my car, I had the distinct impression I was being watched. Sliding into the driver’s seat, I looked up to see Marcus standing several feet away.

I started my engine, praying Richard would hurry up and get in his car so that we could get the hell out of here. It came as such a relief to finally pull out of that parking lot. I threw one last look over my shoulders.

Marcus was still standing there.

I followed Richard’s Mercedes to his hotel. I wasn’t surprised he was staying at one of the nicest hotels in town. My heart beat so fast I could barely breathe. Had I made the right decision? Thoughts of Marcus standing in the parking lot watching me leave flooded my mind.

If he’d seen me in France like he’d claimed why didn’t he just approach me, whether I’d been with someone or not? He could have at least said hello. It was pretty darn inconvenient of him to put me in such a position, especially when I’d been so sure of my feelings for Richard.

Why did life always have to throw curve balls when you were on a hitting streak? The tension in my shoulders and neck made my muscles bunch up and by the time I got out of my vehicle and handed my keys to the valet, I had a throbbing headache.

Richard walked over to my car, a huge grin on his chiseled face. A stray strand of midnight hair fell over his forehead, giving him a boyish appeal that made me want to throw myself in his arms. I smiled back at him as best as I could. It wasn't his fault I was feeling this way.

He must have read something in my expression because he frowned. "Are you okay?" The look of concern on his face made me feel guiltier than ever.

I tried to be brush his comment off. "I'm fine."

A dark brow rose. "April, if we're going to have anything together, you need to be completely honest with me."

As much as I loathed telling him what happened between Marcus and me, he was absolutely right. How could I make love to him without the guilt tearing me apart? I'd been worrying myself sick over it all the way over to the hotel. "I think we should talk, but not here, okay?"

Richard's blue eyes surveyed my face as though searching for something. His mouth compressed to a thin line before he sighed. "Okay."

Perhaps he knew what I was going to tell him wouldn't be good, so it surprised me when he put his arm around my shoulders and led me into the hotel. We didn't speak as we got in the elevator or during the walk to his room. He didn't even speak when we walked into his luxurious suite.

Richard gestured for me to take a seat on the couch, which I did. I nervously watched him shrug out of his jacket and tie before flinging them on a nearby leather armchair. He walked over to the mini bar and took out two glasses. "What will you have?"

"Fruit juice please—that is if you have it. I don't think alcohol will do me any good right now."

He merely nodded.

I nervously twisted my hands in my lap and tried not to concentrate on the throbbing of my sore head. What would Richard say when I told him about Marcus and I, or the things I was feeling? Would he call me names? Would he yell? Somehow he didn't seem like the type to do that, but it had been ten years since we'd seen each other so things could have changed.

When he finished fixing the drinks, Richard walked over and handed me a glass of what looked like orange juice. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He took the seat opposite of me and I was little disappointed that he didn't choose to sit on the couch next to me.

I chewed on my bottom lip, trying to think of where I should begin. Taking a sip of my juice before speaking, I looked at Richard, trying to read his expression. His face was like a blank slate not giving anything away.

"So what is it that you wanted to tell me," he prompted, obviously tired of me stalling.

"I don't know where to begin."

"Try the beginning."

I briefly touched my head, the throbbing getting worse. "I...in the hallway back at the reunion. Marcus kissed me and...and I kissed him back." I quickly looked away when I broke that bit of news to him. I just couldn't bear it if I saw disgust on his face.

He surprised me when he asked, "Did you like it?"

I could only nod.

"How do you feel about him?"

"I don't know."

"How do you feel about me?"

I looked up at him then. To my shock, he didn't look angry at all, a little sad perhaps, but not angry. I knew then that I'd hurt him. It tore me apart to know I was responsible for making him feel this way.

"I really like you, Richard."

"But you like Marcus too, right?"

"I don't know what I feel for Marcus, but I'm certain about what I feel for you. I swear it wasn't something that I meant to happen. When I asked for a little privacy with Marcus in the hallway, I only intended to tell him to leave me alone, but one thing led to another and we ended up in each other's arms. I can't deny enjoying it, and I feel like an absolute shit right now, but I can't go into a relationship with this hanging over my head. It's too much for me to take, and you don't deserve this."

Richard lowered his lids and I couldn't read his expression anymore. I wish I knew what he was thinking. I fidgeted in my seat waiting for him to say something, when he didn't, I continued. "I can understand if you want me to leave. I think under the circumstances that it's only fair."

I set my drink on the coffee table and got to my feet. I must have stood too quickly because the blood went rushing to my head, and then everything went black.

My next conscious thought was of lying in a huge king-sized bed. The cool breeze of an air conditioner rolled over my heated skin like a gentle caress. Something wet rested on my forehead and it felt wonderful.

I looked up to see Richard leaning over me, rubbing a washcloth over my head—obviously that was the something wet I felt. "Are you okay?"

"What happened?"

"You passed out and scared the shit out of me. Don't ever do that to me again, or you'll get the paddling of your life."

"You're not..." I had to stop to run my tongue over my suddenly dry lips. "You're not mad at me?"



“I’m not mad, a little disappointed maybe, but I’m not mad. When you passed out, you scared me so badly, I knew that I didn’t want to lose you. Whatever this thing is you feel for Marcus, I’m going to have to deal with it, but the question remains. Do you still want to be with me? I may be willing to accept that you may or may not have feelings for Marcus, but I’m not going to share you, April. It’s either me or him.” He finished the last part of his sentence so fiercely that I shivered. It seemed the Alpha in Richard had reared its head, and I was seeing a side of him I didn’t know existed.

My body couldn’t help but to respond to the feral look in his eyes. It almost looked as though he were claiming me, and daring me to deny it. I had to admit that I liked it. My pussy began to throb. With his body so close to mine, I wished he would lean down and kiss me.

“Marcus who?” I whispered.

“Is this what you really want?”

“Yes. I really want to be with you. I know we can be happy together. What happened earlier tonight was just some aberration that’s not likely to repeat itself. I think a lot of my confusion stemmed from unresolved issues between Marcus and me.” In that moment, I absolutely believed it. What I felt for Richard was so real I could almost touch it. The look of total adoration and wonder in his gorgeous eyes touched my soul to its very depths.

“April, please tell me this isn’t a dream, because I don’t think I can let you go once you give yourself to me.”

“I don’t think I want you to let me go. Richard, please kiss me. I think I’ll die if you don’t. “

“I thought you’d never ask,” he whispered, leaning down and capturing my lips with his. He plucked the damp washcloth from my head and tossed it aside.

Surprisingly, my head didn't hurt quite as bad anymore. Now it was just a dull throb that was barely noticeable. I threw my arms around Richard's neck to pull him closer to me. He was so hot his skin seemed to be on fire beneath my fingers.

My nipples were tight and sensitive almost to the point of pain. I wanted him so badly, and for the life of me I couldn't figure out why I'd had doubts about being with him. It felt so good. So right. Richard thrust his tongue past my slightly parted lips, whirling it skillfully around mine. The gentle exploration of his mouth sent a pure bolt of ecstasy up my spine.

More than anything, I wanted to have the feel of his naked skin against mine. Swinging my body to get momentum, I rolled us over so I could be on top, our mouths never separating. My frantic hands went to his shirt, forcefully pulling it apart, unmindful of the material. I could hear the snapping of buttons flying in every direction.

Only then did I lift my head to see what I'd revealed. I licked my lips at the sight of the sinewy contours of his muscular chest. "You have a killer body," I whispered.

His now cobalt eyes looked cloudy and tinged with unadulterated desire. "Do you really like my body?" he asked in a husky reply.

"I love your body."

He was all ripples and hard planes. Richard's rock hard pecs were crowned with tight pink nipples that I couldn't help but bend over and lick. Richard shivered beneath my tongue and I felt drunk with power knowing I could make him react this way.

I dipped my head to his other nipple, giving it the same amount of attention—licking, swirling and sucking it. Richard's skin tasted fresh and clean with the hint of cologne. I planted kisses down the middle of his chest while I pushed his shirt from his shoulders.

“God, April, you have no idea what you’re doing to me,” he moaned.

A slight smile crossed my lips. I knew exactly what I was doing to him and it felt great.

I slid down the length of his body, undoing his pants and discarding them as quickly as possible. I stripped him until he lay naked and panting on the bed. My eyes strayed to his long, thick cock. It rested on his thigh looking so welcoming and suckable.

Remembering how it felt in my hands and between my lips, my mouth went dry. God, I wanted him. When I reached to take his rigid shaft in my hands, he sat up and gently pushed me away.

“What’s wrong, don’t you want me to...”

“You know I do, but since I allowed you to undress me, the least you can do is allow me to return the favor.”

Suddenly, I felt nervous again. I wasn’t a small woman, and there were many trouble spots. What would Richard think when he saw me naked? If he looked at me funny, I think I’d die from humiliation.

“Well, can we at least turn the lights off first?”

“No way. You got to see me and now I want to see you.” Already Richard’s hand was on the strap of my dress pulling it down. I flinched away. His forehead crinkled. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want you to see me naked.”

“That’s going to be a difficult feat if we’re going to make love.”

“We can do that just as easily with the lights off.” It was funny that I should be so self-conscious about him seeing me, considering I hadn’t felt this way since high school. The men I’d been with over the years seemed to have a preference for full-figured women. I looked great in my clothes, but in my mind, without them, I kind of resembled a black Pillsbury dough girl. With my luck he’d try to poke my belly button to make me giggle.

“Is there something you don’t want me to see, a scar or a tattoo maybe?”

“No. I just don’t want you to see my flab.”

“Your what?”

“I’m not comfortable with don’t want you looking at my saggy body. I don’t exactly have the body of Tyra Banks.”

To my surprise he started laughing as though I’d said the funniest thing he’d ever heard. I punched him in the shoulder.

“Ouch. What was that for?”

“For laughing at me.”

“Why shouldn’t I laugh at you? You’re being silly. If I really cared about that, I wouldn’t want to be with you. So what if you don’t have Tyra Banks’ body? You have April Johnson’s body, and I think she’s great.”

I felt like crying. No one had ever said anything so nice to me before. He didn’t try to feed me some line about me being hotter than a super model, or that he didn’t find other women beautiful. Richard liked me for me, warts and all.

He gently took my chin between his fingers and guided my head up so I was looking at him. “April, you should know by now, especially after my formative years, that I don’t judge a book by its cover. It’s the inside that counts, but I sure would like to see your outside if you let me.”

Richard leaned forward, placing a gentle kiss on my collarbone, setting my heart to an erratic flutter. I felt secure being here with him like this. He pushed the straps of my dress down and pushed down my strapless bra. My large breasts jiggled slightly when they were set free.

“Beautiful. How could you not think I’d enjoy your body? You have lovely breasts, so big and luscious, begging for my mouth,” he whispered,

never taking his eyes off of them. He cupped my sensitive breasts in his hands, running his thumbs over my hard, brown peaks.

Richard lowered his head, taking a nipple into his mouth, laving it with his tongue and suckling fiercely. I threw my head back and arched my back. With each tug, and lick, a burst of flame shot through me, doing things to my nervous system I didn't think was possible. I wanted more—much more.

My fingers tangled in his hair, holding his head against my chest. "Oh Richard, this feels so good," I moaned, never wanting this to stop when he transferred his attention to my other nipple.

I felt helpless against his tender assault. Richard shook his head free of my hands and pushed them above my head, indicating that he wanted me to keep them there. He dragged my dress down my hips, kissing a trail down each inch of skin he exposed. I was burning up. My pussy was so wet I couldn't stop squirming. It tingled like crazy and if I didn't get relief soon, I didn't know what I would do.

The way he worshiped and caressed my body, I felt like the most beautiful woman on the planet. He made short order of my panties, tossing them aside and pushing my thighs apart. Without much warning, he dove forward, burying his mouth between the folds of my pussy.

I screamed in pleasure and delight, bucking my hips to meet his ravenous tongue. I felt an explosion of unadulterated lust course through my body. He nibbled, sucked and lapped my clit like he couldn't get enough. Richard reduced me to a quivering bowl of jelly.

I was drowning in ecstasy and didn't want to be rescued. The decadent feelings coursing through me were almost more than I could handle. I writhed and moaned beneath the ministrations of his mouth, and just when I didn't think I could take anymore, he inserted two

fingers inside my damp channel. “Oh God, Richard!” I yelled in ecstasy. His mouth sucked on my swollen little button as his fingers fucked my wet hole.

“Don’t hold back, sweetheart,” he whispered against my cunt.

“I want to wait for you,” I groaned.

My response must have been a challenge to him, because his fingers and mouth began to do the most amazing things to my pussy. He inserted another finger into my channel while his tongue swirled around my clit like a cyclone. He hadn’t even penetrated me, and I exploded like an M-80 on the Fourth of July.

My climax was so powerful I felt it from the tips of my fingers to the tips of my toes. I began to shake and convulse uncontrollably and still he didn’t lift his head from my wet pussy.

I thought I’d die from all this pleasure. I grabbed his hair, trying to lift his head away, but he seemed determined to bring me to yet another orgasm. He wouldn’t budge, so all I could do was lay on the bed helplessly and thought that if I died, at least it would be with a smile on my face.

When he ran his tongue from my clit to the crack of my ass I lost it again. Who would have thought Richard was such a freak? By the time he was finished with me, I was a quivering mass of nerves.

Richard finally lifted his head with a wicked grin on his face. “Did you like it?”

“You’re such a punk. You know I did.” I spoke barely above a whisper, too weak to even speak properly.

“Good, because I have something else for you.” He reared himself on his knees and grabbed his cock. “Are you on the pill?”

“Yes, but if you don’t mind...”

A look of disappointment washed over his face. No guy liked using condoms but this was our first time together. It was better to be safe than sorry. I'm sure as our relationship progressed we'd have sex without them, but for now, that seemed a little too soon.

"I understand. I have some in my wallet, and I have a feeling we'll probably use them all up." He gave me a cocky grin.

I smiled back at him. Richard got off the bed and retrieved the condom from his wallet. I licked my lips as I watched him slide it over the purplish head of his cock and over the shaft. God, his cock was big. Maybe later, he would let me suck it again, to return the favor, but now I wanted it inside of me.

I held my arms out to him when he returned to the bed. I opened my legs wide as he fell on top of me and, in one smooth movement, slid into my waiting box. The feel of his large cock stretching my vaginal walls nearly gave me another orgasm.

Richard stilled himself, giving me time adjust to his size before moving. His consideration warmed my heart. As horny as I knew he was, he put my needs first. I loved him for that. I loved him? Where did that come from? This was still the beginning stages of our relationship and it was much too soon to even think about the "L" word.

I was just content to be with him for now. Richard slowly began to move within me, sliding his sweat-slicked body against mine. I was hot, but it was an internal heat that had me burning. I clenched my pussy muscles around his cock, squeezing him inside me.

Richard groaned, rolling his eyes in the back of his head. "Oh, God, April, that feels so damn good."

"You feel good inside me."

He grinned down at me. "It feels right, doesn't it?"

“Yes,” I whispered, pulling his head down. I wanted to feel his lips pressed against mine.

I could taste myself on his tongue. It wasn't an unpleasant taste. It kind of turned me on as I remembered how he'd attacked my pussy. Our tongues met and swirled around the other's, dancing in the heated rhythm of our passion.

I clung to him, sliding my hand up and down his wet, muscled back, pushing my hips up to meet his thrust for thrust.

Suddenly, something akin to a lightning bolt ripped inside of me, making me tense up. “Richard! Oh God!” I reached my peak yet again, but this time it was more explosive than ever.

Mere seconds later, Richard shuddered over me, signaling his own climax. He collapsed on top of me and I wrapped my arms around him. We panted for breath, reveling at the explosion of our coming together.

Good Lord, I didn't know it could be like that.

“Oh God, Richard...I...”

“Shh, you don't have to say it. I feel the same way.”

Laying there with him, holding him against me, I knew Richard was the one who I wanted to be with, but as I drifted to sleep a fleeting image of a green-eyed blond flitted through my subconscious.



## 8. Tug of War

I hummed to myself as I arranged fresh fruit around the strawberry crème cake I'd just created. I know create sounds a little pretentious, but when you've studied the culinary arts in Paris, London, and New York, you didn't merely bake, you gave birth to creations.

This was my livelihood and I loved it. AJ Catering Services Inc. was my baby and in the two years it had been open, it had grown past my wildest expectations. I now had four cooks and two pastry chefs working under me. I had a handful of other employees who helped run my business, and I felt truly blessed.

Life was good. My business was doing well, and I was well on my way to a secure future. I had lots of good friends, and I was totally deeply and madly in love. Every time I thought about Richard, I smiled. Just the thought of his tall, lithe body, his perfect white smile, and chiseled features made my heart beat erratically.

Sometimes it was hard to believe someone as gorgeous as him could want someone like me. It wasn't that I lacked self-confidence, but I was a realist. I knew I was pretty with my milk chocolate skin, dark brown eyes, and dimpled smile. I was curvy, but that was my problem. I was a little too curvy to the point of being what was termed pleasantly plump. I still knew how to work it though and besides, Richard seemed to like my body just fine.

He showed me in so many ways how much he desired me, with his eyes, hands, and mouth. My pussy grew moist at the directions of my carnal thoughts. I was excited because I would see him tonight.

I think I lucked out in the boyfriend department, because he was an excellent lover, a good listener, had a big, hard cock, and showered me with hugs and kisses whenever he saw me.

The only downside to our relationship was the distance. I lived in New York and he lived in Philadelphia. I managed to see him at least once a week, but with the way things were going with my business, it was getting harder and harder to find time to spend with him.

We'd been together for ten months now, and I knew we'd eventually have to address that issue when the time came. His business was a lot easier to uproot than mine, but I knew how men and their egos were. I wanted it to be something he would bring up. Richard had hinted at it before we'd started dating, but the subject was never brought up again.

I finished decorating my cake and pushed it to the side.

Done.

Now all the food was prepared for the party and all that was left was to serve it. A small waitstaff was already going back and forth in the kitchen to refill their trays with hors d'oeuvres that had been prepared earlier. A buzz of excitement shot through me.

This was my biggest party yet, and it was for one of the most well-known Broadway producers and directors in New York. Even with my busy schedule I'd managed to see a few Remington Stone productions. One of the best things about living in New York was the theatre. Whenever I had a free weekend, Richard and I would go to a show, and it was usually something directed by Mr. Stone.

How he'd heard about my company, I had not a clue, but that he did was a feather in my cap. I trusted my staff enough to handle some of the

jobs without me, if I had another event to take care of, but this was just too big a deal for me not to be involved.

The head waiter stood at my elbow waiting patiently for my instructions. “Okay, I think the first course can be served now. If you will go announce to the guests to be seated we can begin.”

I turned away and went off to inspect the lobster salads to make sure they were chilled just right. I knew the soup, a tomato and crab bisque, was fine. I’d tasted it myself. It was one of the hazards of the job and probably why I was still so round.

I don’t know why, but I suddenly had an odd premonition something would soon happen and I wasn’t exactly sure if I liked it. I busied myself as best as I could with the supervision of the kitchen staff and helping out with the arranging of the food on the plates and by the time the main course was served, the strange feeling had passed.

Perhaps it had been just one of those things, but when dessert was being served, the feeling returned. This time I felt like I was being watched. The cake had been presented and now, I was carefully cutting slices and placing them on boned china dessert plates.

I wiped the sweat from my brow. It was hot in the kitchen, but I didn’t mind, I lived for this. When the sensation of being watched didn’t go away, I looked up and stumbled backwards, slamming into the industrial stove. It’s a good thing it had been turned off or I would have caused myself serious injury.

“This time, I didn’t forget to come and say hello to you.” He wore that familiar cocky grin of his.

“Marcus! What are you doing here?”

He stepped forward and I slid away from the stove and behind a counter, trying to put as much distance between us as possible. Much to my dismay, I found him as attractive as ever, his corded body sheathed

in a black Armani suit, his dark blond hair pulled back into a ponytail that suited his face. “This is a cast party for the latest Broadway Hit, *His to Conquer*.”

The way he announced the name of the play seemed downright lewd. It almost sounded as though Marcus was sending a message and it made me shiver. Damn! Not again. *Please Lord, not again*. I’d heard of that play and wanted badly to see it. Actually Richard and I had plans to see it, but Marcus wasn’t supposed to be starring in it.

“You’re not in this play.”

“Oh yes, I am. Didn’t you hear?”

“Hear what?” I felt like the walls were closing in on me.

“Gary Peterson tore his Achilles tendon. He has to stay off his foot for several weeks, which means he’s out...and I’m in.”

My eyes widened. “But...how did you know I would be here in the kitchen?”

“Why do you think Remington’s people contacted your company when there are much bigger and more established caterers in New York, not saying that you didn’t do an excellent job tonight. The food was top notch and you’re probably going to get a lot more business because of this.”

“You...you were responsible for me getting this contract?”

“You can thank me later.” He shrugged, the arrogance in his tone made me want to punch him in the face. If I’d known that he had any part of this, I would have run and never looked back and damn the consequences. As well as things were going for my company, I knew I would eventually make it really big. His interference wasn’t appreciated, and it took some of the joy out of the entire job.

Here I thought this famous producer had heard of my company because someone had raved about my food, not because some actor I went to high school with wanted to get into my pants.

I am a one man woman, and the fact I had conflicting feelings for two different men just didn't sit well with me. I'm a person who usually knew her own mind, but to have feelings for two guys at once just didn't seem right. When I had told Marcus in no uncertain terms that I wanted to be with Richard, I didn't think I'd see him again. I thought it would be the right thing to do, but here he was in my life again, and my traitorous heart wouldn't stop beating fast.

I loved Richard, and that's what I had to keep telling myself.

I finally found my voice. "Marcus, I don't know what you think you're playing at, but I thought it was pretty clear when I last spoke to you. I'm with Richard now, and that's the way it's going to be."

He gave me a knowing look, a smile splitting his face. "Is that so?"

"Yes." I said a silent prayer in hopes that he would leave me alone.

"Um, April, do you want me to finish cutting the cake?" my assistant, Bea asked, her dark eyes darting between me and Marcus.

I forgot the kitchen wasn't empty. Marcus had such a presence about him it made me feel as though he and I were the only ones in the room. I sighed, turning to Bea. "Yes, could you please? I'd really appreciate it." I handed her the knife I still gripped tightly in my hand.

Before Bea left, she turned to Marcus, pushing a strand of glossy auburn hair from her face. "I really enjoyed you in your last movie, Mr. Powers. I was excited to hear that you would be taking over the lead role in *His To Conquer*," she gushed like a girl in the middle of her first club.

I wanted to karate chop her in the kidney. I thought Bea did a fine job, but her flightiness got on my nerves at times.

Marcus turned on the charm. "Why thank you very much. I'm glad you enjoyed it. I hope that you will get a chance to check out the play."

"Oh, I most definitely will. I can't believe I'm standing here talking to Dawson Powers!" she squealed. I'd forgotten he used a stage name, but

no matter what he called himself, he'd always be Marcus Dawson from high school, the first guy to break my heart.

I wanted to gag. She and I were going to have a little talk about professionalism later.

The two of them talked for a couple more minutes before I cleared my throat loudly. "Uh, if you don't mind, Bea, the guests are probably waiting for dessert."

She turned beet red. "I'm so sorry. Right away, April." Bea gave Marcus a sheepish grin before walking over to the cake.

I rolled my eyes and would have turned away, but Marcus grabbed my arm. "Where are you going?"

I shrugged his hand off. "If you haven't noticed, I have work to do."

"As far as I can tell, you have people here that can take care of things for you. Why don't you come out into the hall with me to talk for a few minutes?"

"Maybe because I don't want to talk to you?"

"I'm not going to give up," he said with a determination that shook me to my very being.

"I will not have this discussion with you here in front of all these people," I hissed, backing away from him.

"Then step out into the hall with me."

"I don't want to. Damn it, why can't you just take no for an answer?"

He lowered his voice and spoke only loud enough for me to hear it. "Because I won't accept any answer from you except yes. Do you want everyone in this kitchen to know about what happened between you and I?" he challenged.

I looked around us and saw a few workers who pretended to be intent on what they were doing, but I could tell they were trying to listen to what was being said. I closed my eyes and counted until I got to a point

where I didn't want to kick him in the nuts. "Fine, but I can only spare you a few minutes."

"That's all I require." He took my elbow and guided me out the kitchen through a back entrance and led me down a dark hall.

"You seem very familiar with this place," I observed.

"I should considering this is my house."

"Your house? But this is Mr. Remington's party!"

"So?"

"Mr. Remington didn't set this up, did he?"

Marcus paused, looking hesitant for the first time since his appearance in the kitchen. "If you would have known I was setting up this party, would you have catered it?"

I didn't answer because we both knew the answer to that question. Leaning against the wall, I felt tired all of a sudden.

"Say something," he prompted.

"What do you want me to say? Besides, you're the one who dragged me out here. Shouldn't you be the one doing the talking?"

"Fair enough. Look, I honestly didn't know you and Richard were still together when I set this whole thing up."

"You're full of shit. Of course you knew he and I were together."

"Yes, at the time of the reunion, you left with him, but I didn't expect you to still be with him."

"You are such an arrogant son of a bitch. What makes you think I wouldn't be with Richard? Is it because you kissed me and thought I couldn't possibly choose anyone over you?"

He shook his head. "That's not it exactly, but you have to admit, the kiss we shared was special. It was more than just a passing thing and you know it. I know you felt what I did. After all these years you're still the only woman that has that affect on me."

“Tough titties. Do you know what happened after that kiss? Richard and I went back to his hotel room and then we made love. We fell asleep, woke up and did it again, and again.” I had the satisfaction of seeing Marcus’s face turn dark red.

“I see.”

“Do you? I don’t know how many times I can tell you before you get the picture.” When I looked into his eyes, I thought I read a flash of hurt, but maybe I had imagined it. Yes, of course I imagined it. Marcus was as deep as a kiddie pool.

“I guess the right thing to do would be to walk away, but if I must you at least owe me this.”

I knew he would kiss me before he bent his head, and damn me for doing nothing to stop him. Instead of the aggressive assault from months earlier, Marcus’s lips brushed against mine. His kiss was gentle and persuasive.

His tongue slid across the seam of my lips before thrusting past my teeth. Marcus tasted of the spices from my meal and champagne. I knew this was more wrong than Michael Jackson in charge of a Boy Scout jamboree, but I couldn’t help it. My body always seemed to be on auto-pilot whenever Marcus touched me.

He caressed the sides of my face with his thumbs and I could feel myself melting. My body was his to command. The kiss changed to something more fierce, more savage. Marcus’s tongue plundered my mouth, exploring and conquering and I was helpless to do anything about it.

It seemed like several minutes before he lifted his head. “Perhaps that will give you something to think about when you’re with Richard,” he said before walking away, leaving me in a daze.

*Oh my God, what did I just do?*



I lay in bed later that night wallowing in my misery, cursing myself for what I had done. I guess I would have been able to deal with the Marcus issue if Richard were with me, but when I'd come home to find my condo empty and him not in it I panicked. He had a key to my place to let himself in so I wasn't sure why he wasn't here. I recalled the odd phone conversation we had.

It had taken several rings for him to pick up. "Yes," he answered the phone a bit on the gruff side.

"Honey, it's me. Why aren't you here? I thought you were coming to see me tonight."

"What time is it?"

"It's nearly midnight. You said you'd be here by the time I got back from my engagement."

"Shit. I must have overslept. I'll come right away."

"No. It's too late for you to drive. Why don't you just get some sleep and drive up in the morning, or better yet, I can drive down there. I haven't been to your place in over a month. I think it would be a nice change of scenery."

"Uh...no. I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not?" I wondered what the big deal was. He'd always seemed happy when I visited before.

"Because it just wouldn't. Besides, I was hoping to take you shopping downtown. I'll buy you anything you want."

The prospect of shopping always made me perk up, but I couldn't shake the feeling Richard was hiding something from me. He'd never given me a reason not to trust him, so I just dismissed it as one of those things. "Okay, if that's what you want. I'll see you in the morning. What time should I expect you? I'll fix you breakfast."

“Waffles topped with strawberries?” I smiled at the eagerness in his voice. That was more like it.

“Whatever you want.”

“I like the sound of that. I should be there by ten.”

“Okay, go back to sleep.”

“Wait. I meant to ask, how did the party go tonight? Was it a big hit? Did you see Remington Stone? What was he like?”

“Yes, no, and no. I stayed in the kitchen the entire time.”

“I think it’s odd that the host of the party wouldn’t at least talk to the caterer at least once. Well, I hear showbiz types are eccentric. As long as he pays you, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“What’s wrong, babe? You sound upset about something?”

I debated on whether to tell Richard what had happened at the party. How would he react if he knew Marcus had firmly ingratiated himself into my life again? I didn’t want to lose Richard over something so stupid, but I also knew from experience that things had a way of coming out later if they weren’t nipped in the bud from the beginning.

“Well, actually the party wasn’t hosted by Remington Stone. It was hosted by Dawson Powers in honor of Mr. Stone.”

“Excuse me?” he asked as though he hadn’t heard me correctly even though he probably did.

“I said—”

“Yes, I know what you said. Dawson Power’s is Marcus’s stage name if I’m not mistaken.”

“You’re not mistaken.”

“And why did you tell me that Remington Stone was throwing this party? What’s going on, April?”

“You could at least give me the benefit of the doubt before you start jumping to conclusions. I didn’t know Marcus was hosting the party and if I did, I wouldn’t have taken the job.”

“So when did you find out?” I could hear the suspicion in his voice and couldn’t really blame him considering the long history between Marcus and I. Some foolish mistakes had been made and the incident at the reunion was still probably fresh in Richard’s mind.

“It was well into dessert when I realized that he was the owner of the house the party was in. I swear to you, I didn’t know. When he came into the kitchen is when I found out. I didn’t know that he was throwing the party because everything was arranged through his assistant who, by the way, misrepresented herself as someone who worked with Mr. Stone. Marcus probably put her up to it.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line and for a second I wondered if he was still there. “Richard? Please say something.” My heart pounded during that brief silence.

“You’ve never given me any reason not to trust you, and I appreciate you telling me about it. Just answer this one question for me. Did he try anything?”

My breath caught in my throat. Talk about getting to the heart of the matter. “Yes.”

“And how did you respond?”

“I thought you said one question,” I said trying to make a joke out of it.

Apparently Richard didn’t think it was funny because there was another long pause at the other end of the line. “April, I’m not in the mood for games.”

He had never spoken quite so sharply to me before and I knew he wasn't happy. Had I really screwed things up this time? I felt like Florida Evans. Damn. Damn. Damn.

"He kissed me, but I reminded him of my commitment to you, and I am committed to you, Richard. You know I love you with all my heart." I interjected as much humility in my voice as I could.

"Do you only love me when you're with me?"

"Richard, what are you saying? It wasn't like that. If I wanted to be with Marcus I would have been, but I chose you, because I love you."

His deep sigh filtered through the phone. "I'm sorry, April. I didn't mean to subject you to the Spanish Inquisition. I guess I've just had a lot on my mind lately."

"There's nothing to forgive. I think I would react the same way under the circumstances. You know I love you, right?"

"I do. And I love you too. More than you know. I can't wait to see you tomorrow, because I plan on making wild, passionate love to you."

"Oh really? That sounds promising. And what did I do to warrant that honor?"

"Just being you, babe. When I get there in the morning, wear something sexy. What about that little lavender number you know I like so much?"

The article of clothing in question was something so see-through that when I wore it, I might as well have been naked. Richard had gotten it for me on Valentine's Day and I nearly fell out of my chair when I opened that box. At first I felt self-conscious wearing it, but Richard soon assured me that he found me very desirable in it.

"Well if I have to wear that teddy then you have to do something for me."

"Oh? What's that?"

“You have to bring the handcuffs.” Throughout the course of our relationship, I had developed quite the fondness for being bound while Richard ravished me.

Neither one of us was into BDSM beyond light spankings and bondage, but we each loved exploring new sexual avenues. I had no complaints about Richard’s prowess in bed and I always did my best to make sure he was satisfied.

“I’ll be sure to bring them as long as the silk scarves are out.”

“I wouldn’t dream of having it any other way. Now you get some rest so you can get up bright and early to come visit me.”

“Yes, ma’am. I love you very much, April.”

“I love you too, Richard.”

We hung up after that and now I was laying in bed going over the conversation in my mind. The conversation ended on a good note but I started to wonder what he meant when he told me it wouldn’t be a good idea for me to come to his house. What exactly was he trying to hide? If we weren’t to keep secrets from each other, why did it seem like he’d shut down on me for a minute?

Maybe I was just being paranoid, because the whole Marcus thing had put my mind in a tizzy. Yes, that had to be it. I trusted Richard. He’d promised that he’d never hurt me and I believed him. If what I had with him wasn’t real then I don’t know what was.

The fact still remained; I had skipped telling the part where I’d responded to Marcus’s kiss. How was it that he could make me feel this way after all this time? Why did my body go up into flames when he touched me? I should have wanted no part of him and intellectually my mind didn’t but my body wasn’t co-operating.

I didn’t want to be a bimbo, but I sure felt like one. Then I redirected all my anger towards Marcus. How could he do this to me? Even if I did

respond to him, he should have been able to see I was in a committed relationship and respected that. It went back to high school.

Marcus was so used to getting his way that the word no probably wasn't in his vocabulary. The fact I'd said no to him had probably ruffled his over-sized ego. Well fuck him. I didn't need the aggravation and I swear if I ever saw him again, I would tell him exactly what I thought him.

This was my last thought before I finally drifted off to sleep.

## 9. The Beginning of the End

The next morning I woke up happier than I had been for a long time. Richard was coming. I showered, powdered and perfumed myself, taking extra-special care with my toiletry.

I began to cook breakfast, humming happily to myself. I couldn't wait to see Richard and I thought of all the things I wanted to do to him—like kissing him all over, brushing my tongue against every part of his body and loving him until he begged for mercy.

It surprised me when the doorbell rang so soon. I really wasn't expecting Richard for another hour. Why didn't he just use his key? I guess in my excitement I didn't stop to think about these things because I ran to the door, a huge grin on my face and my big ass practically hanging out of my teddy.

When I opened the door, I was so stunned to see who stood on the other end of the door I immediately closed it. Holy shit. What the hell was he doing coming to my home? How dare he!

I went to my room, ignoring the ring of the bell, and pulled on my old terry cloth robe and stormed back to the door fling it open in a burst of fury. "You have some goddamn nerve coming to my home. I told you I didn't want you and to leave me the hell alone. I'm with Richard and I never want to see your face again, and I swear if you bother me anymore, I will stick my foot so far up your ass that you'll be farting intestines."

Much to my surprise, Marcus threw his head back and laughed as though I'd just told the funniest joke he'd ever heard.

"Did you just hear me, you son of a bitch?"

"Farting intestines? I've never heard that expression before."

"Marcus, just go to hell." I was about to shut the door but he stuck his foot on the threshold, preventing the door from slamming. He also managed to hurt himself because I'd slammed the door into his foot with such a force that he howled. It served him right. Call me evil, but I didn't feel a bit sorry for him.

"That's what you get. You do realize that you're slowly creeping in to stalker territory."

"Damn it, woman, would you shut up for just a minute and at least let me tell you why I came over?"

"What possible reason do you have for coming over and how the hell did you find out where I lived anyway?"

"You left something at my place." Still hopping on one foot he pulled out a diamond stud. "Something this valuable I would have thought you'd missed."

"My earring!" I snatched it out of his hand. I hadn't realized I'd lost it. When I was taking them out last night I must have taken off one and forgot about the other, not realizing that one was missing. They had been a gift from Richard on my birthday. Each stud was a carat a piece and I'd never owned something so valuable in my life. When I wore them, I felt like a basketball player with my bling.

I would have definitely been upset when I discovered it missing. "Uh, thanks," I muttered, feeling bad that I'd just cursed him out, but then that feeling passed. "That still doesn't explain how you found my address."



“Did you know if you Googled someone’s name their address came up?”

I glared at him. “Well forget that you were ever here. While I appreciate you bringing back my earring I would thank you very much to stay out of my life.”

He frowned. “Understood, but I really think something is wrong with my foot.”

I placed my hands on my hips. “And that’s my problem because?”

“Because I don’t think I can make it back to my car. Could I at least come in for a minute to see the damage?” His eyes flashed pleadingly.

“Hell no. You can high tail your ass back to the hole you crawled out of and see to the damage yourself.”

Marcus sighed. “I didn’t realize you were such a hard woman.”

I glared up at him. “I’m what some people made me.” The way I said it made it very clear that the some people was him. He could kiss my ass for all I cared, but then my conscience got the better of me as I caught a glimpse of his pained expression. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and Marcus was slowly losing color.

I sighed, knowing I would regret this, but I couldn’t let him drive off if he was seriously injured. Even rabid dogs deserved mercy. “Lean on me.”

“Thank you, April. I promise I’ll be out of here before you know it.”

“I certainly hope so.”

Marcus draped his arm over my shoulder and I forced myself to remain passive, trying not to let his touch affect me, although I was failing miserably. Damn. *Concentrate girl. He means nothing to you*, I chanted to myself.

“You smell nice, but something is burning in here.”

“Oh shit! The waffles!” I hurriedly pushed him on the couch and rushed to the kitchen to see smoke coming out of the waffle iron. Damn that Marcus. Now I’d have to make fresh waffles for Richard’s arrival.

At the thought of Richard, I cleaned away the remnants of burnt waffles and rushed back to Marcus so I could get him out of my house as fast as I could. I didn’t need Richard finding him here, but when I returned to the living room, the sight of Marcus’s foot told me he wasn’t going anywhere, much to my horror.

It was red and swollen like the man’s foot from *Big Trouble in Little China*. Already it was beginning to turn purple. I wasn’t a medical professional, but it looked broken.

“Eww, your foot looks pretty nasty,” I couldn’t help saying.

“Well you slammed the door on it.”

“No one told you to put your foot in the door, asswad. If you’d have just sent my earring via mail none of this would have happened.”

“But then I wouldn’t have seen you again.”

“Can’t you see that I don’t want you here?”

“Are you really sure of that, April, or is that your misguided sense of loyalty to Richard talking?” he challenged.

“Yes, I’d be interesting in hearing the answer to that question as well.” Richard entered the living room as silent as a thief and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

My mouth fell open in shock. I’d done nothing wrong yet it felt as though my hand had been caught in the proverbial cookie jar. “Richard!” I stood, dropping Marcus’s swollen foot like a hot potato. It clunked to the ground and Marcus let out a resounding yelp.

“Son of a bitch!” he screamed, his face turning bright red as beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

“Oh, my God! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.” I brought the coffee table closer, threw one of the chair cushions on top and lifted his foot on it to rest. “There you go,” I said before turning back to Richard. He didn’t look happy, in fact he looked pissed.

Richard’s nostrils flared and I knew I was in deep shit. It would take a lot to placate him, especially when he already had suspicions concerning Marcus and I at the party the night before. “Am I interrupting something here?”

“Honey, before you get upset, could you please not jump to conclusions so that I can explain?”

“What’s there to explain? I find you in here alone with a man who you claim you have no feelings for,” he challenged.

I looked towards Marcus who didn’t look like he’d come to my defense anytime soon. If he weren’t gritting his teeth in obvious pain, I’d say he was enjoying this, the jackass.

“I thought we decided we would trust each other.”

“Okay, then start explaining. What’s he doing here?” Richard jerked his thumb towards Marcus, not bothering to look in that direction. The disgust was evident on his face.

I crossed my arms over my body, feeling a sudden chill. “He came over to drop off the earring that I didn’t realize I’d lost. It was the earrings that you gave me for my birthday.”

“Okay, then what is he still doing here and what the hell is wrong with his foot?” he asked in horror, finally looking at Marcus.

I turned around to see the foot more swollen than it was before. Eww.

“Why don’t you do the honors, Marcus?” I placed my hands on my hips and glared at him, daring him to tell Richard anything other than the truth. If he uttered one lie, I swear I’d go into angry black woman mode so fast his head would spin.

“I uh...well...” Marcus kept breaking off. The more he stammered the guiltier he sounded.

I glared at him. “Quit playing games and tell the truth!”

Marcus sighed, raking her fingers through his long, glorious locks. The schmo. “It’s what April said. I only came by to drop off the earring that she’d dropped at my place last night.”

He made it sound as if I hadn’t been over there for business. I wasn’t about to let him wreak my relationship. That was it, this man’s life was over. I could read the headlines now, *Crazed woman attacks Dawson Powers, killing him dead*. “Hold that thought, Marcus.” I stormed into the kitchen and grabbed the rolling pin before going back out to the living room. I held it over his foot. “Okay, now you can finish telling Richard what’s going on.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Marcus backed away, jarring his foot.

“This is insurance,” I simply answered waving it at him menacingly.

“For what?”

“It’s my bullshit detector. If you tell a lie, it hits you on your broken foot.”

His eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me, buddy.” I underlined the point by patting the rolling pin in my hand.

Marcus sighed, “Fine.” He turned to Richard, a pained expression on his face. I really wanted to strangle him at this point. “When April came to my house to cater the party, she didn’t know I was the one hosting the party. She lost her earring and I brought it over this morning in hopes that she would let me in. She didn’t. In fact when she tried to close the door on me, I put my foot in the threshold, and the door slammed on it. That’s the only reason why she let me in.”

Richard looked at me then, his face visibly relaxing. “Is that true, baby?”

I set the rolling pin down, walked over to him and threw my arms around him. “Yes. It’s true. I don’t know why you would doubt me. I would never jeopardize what we have.” And I wouldn’t. The realization hit me like two tons of bricks. Here I was in the same room with my old flame—well, fuck buddy—and the man who made my heart race whenever he was near. With Richard, I had stability and I knew he was just as madly in love with me as I was with him. With Marcus, it was just one of those things. Sure he could make me want him physically, but it was just that—physical. Anything I would have with Marcus wouldn’t come close to what I had with Richard.

I never felt happier than I did in that moment. Richard was the one I loved and the one I wanted to be with.

Richard pulled me into his arms and pressed his forehead against mine. “You have no idea how happy you’ve made me. I was so scared that—”

“Please don’t say it. You’ll never lose me.” I kissed him then, not caring that Marcus was watching us and in pain—the rat bastard.

Richard’s arms tightened around me and I could feel my body melt. He just had that touch that made me go up into flames no matter where I was. Our tongues met, twirling and licking the other. I dug my fingers through his silky dark locks feeling my nipples tighten as they pressed against the hard planes of his chest.

“Uh, guys, you’re not alone you know, and my foot still hurts. In case it’s escaped anyone’s notice it may be broken,” Marcus interrupted our intimate scene.

I reluctantly pulled away from Richard and glared at Marcus. “Don’t you dare act like this is my fault. You sit there and shut up until I finish talking to my man.”

His face lost all color. “Looked like it was more than just talking to me,” he muttered under his breath.

I turned back to Richard. “So much for our intimate breakfast. I think we should drive Marcus to the hospital.”

“Can’t he just take an ambulance?” Richard shot Marcus a look of pure loathing.

“That would be mean. Look, I’m going to go upstairs and change. It’s a ten minute drive from here to the hospital, and an ambulance would take longer to get here than if we drove him. We’ll drop him off and then come back and well...the rest of the day is up to you.” I winked at him.

Richard gave me one of his thousand-watt smiles. “I like the sound of that.”

“I think I want to gag,” Marcus muttered.

“Who asked you?” I snarled before turning back to my sweet Richard.

It felt good knowing where my heart belonged. Too bad it had taken me nearly losing him to realize it. Maybe deep down I was just a hooch who enjoyed sex, which could explain why I always reacted the way I did when I was with Marcus, but my heart belonged exclusively to Richard.

“Babe, please hurry, otherwise I’ll be forced to punch someone’s lights out.” Richard was usually so laid back and unflappable, but not where Marcus was concerned.

“Just try it, pretty boy,” Marcus piped in, not looking happy at all.

This was absolutely the last thing I needed.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, I’m going but promise me you two won’t come to blows while I’m out of the room.”

“I will.” Richard wore a contrite expression but I wasn’t completely sure of him.

I turned to Marcus.

“Whatever,” he muttered sullenly.

“I hope this teaches you not to put your foot in the doorway when someone’s trying to close it, you big dope,” I lectured Marcus. I know I was laying it on a little thicker than I needed to, sure that he was in enough pain, but I didn’t want Richard to have any doubt in his mind that I didn’t want Marcus.

Apparently Marcus had no doubt either because his face was now a bright red. It wasn’t that I wanted to rub my relationship with Richard in his face, but he was the reason why I was going through this crap anyway.

I sighed, giving him an apologetic smile. It wouldn’t hurt me to show some compassion. “I’ll just be a minute. Do you think you can hold on until I get back, or do you need some ice?”

Marcus’s head was lowered so I couldn’t read the expression in his eyes. “Sure, I’ll be okay.” For some reason I had the distinct feeling I’d hurt him more than physically.

Turning away from him, I walked to my room to change. I wouldn’t think about him, I promised myself. He wasn’t worthy of my attention after what he’d done. I hurriedly threw some jeans and a T-shirt on, and a pair of tennis shoes, before trudging back down stairs.

Marcus and Richard were glaring at each other and I think I’d entered the room just in time before they decided to kill each other. “Are you guys ready to go?” I tried to break tension that could be cut with a knife.

“Yes!” They practically shouted in unison.

Sheesh. It was a good thing I'd come back when I did otherwise these two would have been rumbling and that was the last thing I needed.

I walked over to Marcus and grabbed his hand. "I'm going to need you to lean on me. Do you think you'll be able to manage?"

"Yes, I think so," Marcus got up from his seat on one leg.

I stole a quick glance at Richard, whose lips were tightened to one thin line. I don't think I'd ever seen him like this before, but I realized his anger was no longer directed at me.

Marcus threw his arm around my shoulder, resting most of his weight on me. I nearly fell over. He was slender, but solid. "I'm going to need some help. Richard, why don't you get on the other side of Marcus and we can do this together."

My boyfriend looked like he wanted to argue, but walked over to us with obvious reluctance. I silently vowed I would make it up to him when were alone later. Marcus looked equally displeased about the prospect of receiving Richard's assistance.

We managed to get Hop-along-Cassidy into the backseat of my jeep and started off to the hospital. "What are you going to do about his car?" Richard asked along the way.

I hadn't thought about that. The huge cream Escalade would garner attention wherever it went, but parked in the driveway of my unassuming neighborhood, it would probably get people talking, especially when they found out who the vehicle belonged to. I kept forgetting Marcus was a celebrity now. I only hoped some nosey photographer didn't follow him here. I really didn't want to see my face splashed in some tabloid.

"I guess I could have my assistant come and get it. Or I could come pick it up later," Marcus sighed, raking his fingers through his hair.

"Are you sure you should be driving with a broken foot?"



“If I can’t, I’ll figure something out,” he snapped.

I bit my lip to stop my retort. He was probably in a lot of pain, and wasn’t too happy to be sitting in the backseat of my vehicle with Richard glaring at him through the rear view mirror.

For a ten-minute ride, it seemed an eternity. We managed to get Marcus out of the car and waited in the ER while he was attended to. It was noon before we left the hospital room. Marcus had called his assistant to come and get him, telling us we could go. When she arrived, a frazzled mess, we finally left.

Other than promising his car would be out of my driveway by the end of the weekend, Marcus didn’t say a word to us. It felt so final. I don’t know why it bothered me.

“What are you thinking?” Richard asked, as I kept my eyes glued on the road.

“Nothing.”

“You must be thinking about something, because you’re frowning,” he observed.

“I am?” What could I possibly say? I just had a bad feeling about Marcus. In hindsight, although I had every reason to be, I’d been pretty nasty to him.

Richard reached over and squeezed my hand in a reassuring gesture. “Tell me.”

“Only if you promise you won’t get upset if I tell you.”

He paused. “Would there be a reason for me to be upset?”

“I don’t think so. I just don’t want you to take it the wrong way.”

“Why would you think I would?”

“Well you were pretty pissed at me last night, and the scene you walked in on this morning didn’t exactly help.”

“No, it didn’t, but it’s my fault for not trusting you. I just...I don’t know. Sometimes I feel insecure.”

By now we’d pulled up to my driveway. I put the car in park and turned to him, unbuckling my seatbelt. “Why? You have nothing to be insecure about, I’m crazy about you.” I reached up to caress his cheek.

He smiled. “I know. But part of me still feels like that nerd I used to be.”

“I never thought you were a nerd.”

His lips slanted up with a cynical twist. “Now I know you’re lying.”

“Okay, maybe you were a little bit of a geek, but I always thought you were a nice person.”

“And I always thought you were a beautiful person.”

I smiled with pleasure, my heart doing somersaults. “You always know the right thing to say.”

“It’s not that hard considering who I’m with. Now tell me what it was that you were so nervous telling me about.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m just a little worried about Marcus.”

The smile left his face. “Why?”

“I feel so guilty about breaking his foot and I was so mean to him afterwards.”

“No one told him to put his foot in the door. What kind of bonehead move was that?”

“But his play! How will he be able to get around on the stage with a broken foot? I’ve probably cost him a lot of money.”

“No, he cost himself a lot of money. I wouldn’t worry about it, April. Yeah, it’s an unlucky break—no pun intended, but he had no business trying to force himself into your home.”

Richard had a point, but it didn’t lessen my guilt. “You don’t like Marcus very much, do you?”

“I wouldn’t like anyone who was trying to steal my woman.” He sighed. “Look, I wanted this to be special, but I can’t hold off any longer. I’m sorry this couldn’t be more romantic for you.”

Now it was my turn to frown. “What are you talking about, Richard?”

“I want us to talk our relationship to the next level. April, will you marry me?”



Maybe I should have waited to cool off before the one and a half hour drive to Richard’s house in Philly, but I wasn’t going to let him put me off another day. How could what I thought was such a perfect relationship go so wrong?

Suddenly a blue Mazda 6 sped down the turnpike and swerved into my lane, missing my bumper by mere inches. I was already pissed and the last thing I needed was some jerk-off teenager cutting me off. I pounded on my horn in a burst of fury. “Mother fucker!!” I screamed even though I knew the driver in front of me couldn’t hear what I was saying. A group of kids in the backseat turned around and shot me the middle finger.

That was it. Their young lives were over. Not knowing what had come over me, I sped up and rode their bumper for a good ten miles down the New Jersey Turnpike, honking my horn and flashing my headlights at them. While normally I think people who react that way are idiots, this incident was the straw that pushed me over the edge after an already shitty month.

The teenagers in the car must have gotten scared because they took the next exit. If you’ve ever been on the New Jersey Turnpike, you’d know that exits were few and far between. I seriously doubted that’s where they

wanted to go considering they had Delaware license plates. Coming to my senses, I pulled over to the side of the road, trying to gain my composure. That person just wasn't me. I couldn't believe I'd just done that.

My eyes shot to the huge rock on the ring finger of my left hand. It was three carats surrounded by baguettes in a simple platinum setting. The large diamond twinkled in the rays of the sun nearly blinding me. It was gorgeous. Richard certainly didn't spare any expense.

It was hard to believe how quickly things had quickly gone from good to bad between us in such a short period of time. I relived the events of the past few weeks.

After he'd proposed, I'd promptly accepted. I loved him and wanted to spend the rest of my life being Mrs. April Slick. He was my every dream come true. At the time of his proposal Richard explained he didn't have a ring because he wanted me to choose my own. That very same day, after I cooked up lunch and we made love, we drove down to jeweler's alley. I'd wanted something simple, but Richard wanted something large and showy because he said I deserved the best. We finally compromised on something that wasn't too flashy for me and big enough for him. I loved it, not because it was worth more than my car, but because it had been picked with love.

That was the last weekend I saw Richard.

The following week was a busy time for me. Because of Marcus's party, my business suddenly blew up. I hardly had time to breathe. For the next couple of weekends I worked and only had a chance to talk to Richard over the phone. Whenever I would bring the subject up of him moving in with me, he'd change it or grew distant. Finally, I was hardly ever able to get him on the phone.

I'd call his cell phone, his home, and his office, leaving several messages before he called me back, and when he did, Richard was

unusually short with me. I didn't know what to make of it. When I finally had a free weekend, I asked him if he could come see me, or I could go to him. He rudely told me he was busy.

Something was going on. How could he propose and tell me how much he loved me and then start treating me this way? Finally fed up with his puzzling behavior, I called and asked him what the problem was.

"Nothing. I don't know why you've been on my back lately, April, but like you, I've been very busy."

"There's really no need to get nasty with me. You've refused to see me this past month and every time I talk to you on the telephone, you have an attitude. What's your problem?"

"If that's the way you feel then why the hell are you calling me?"

I gasped. Had he lost his mind? "Richard, what's wrong with you? Whatever funk you're in you need to get out of it because I don't deserve to be talked to this way."

"You're the one who called me, and frankly I'm not in the mood to argue. I'm tired."

"You're always tired. It's Saturday and for once I have the afternoon free. If you won't talk to me I'll come down there and we'll have it out, because I'm not going to let you put me off anymore."

He sighed on the other end of the line. "I really wish you wouldn't."

"Tough. I'm on my way now, and I expect you to be there when I arrive."

"April, no—"

I hung up before he finished and stormed out to my jeep, ready for a confrontation. Whatever happened between Richard and me, I had to know. This was tearing me up inside.

After I regained my composure from the road rage incident, I got back on the highway, turning the radio on blast. Wouldn't you know it, the

song that played was old school New Edition when Ralph merely had chin pubes, “Is This the End?” Was that prophetic or what?

I flipped off the radio and drove the rest of the way in silence. As I made it into Philly, my heart began to pound. Would he even be there? Judging from the way he’d been acting the past month, I didn’t know what to expect of Richard.

I drove to the Society Hill section where Richard owned a modest home by this neighborhood’s standards, but it was still huge. Pulling up to his driveway, I breathed a sigh of relief to see his Mercedes and Range Rover, but there was another car I didn’t recognize, a Ford Explorer. It was an older model so I knew it couldn’t be Richard’s because he traded in his cars every year for the newer model.

He knew I was coming over so why was he entertaining a guest? Remembering my own words about not jumping to conclusions, I took a deep breath. I didn’t bother knocking because I had a key to the front door, but to my surprise it didn’t work.

Had he changed the locks on me? What the hell? Only then did I ring the doorbell. I must have stood there for several moments before the door was answered, but to my utter mortification, Richard wasn’t the one opening the door.

## 10. Heartbroken and Knocked Up

A tall slender redhead with flashing eyes, who looked liked she'd just stepped off the cover of Vogue, smiled down at me condescendingly. It didn't escape my notice that she was wrapped in a sheet with nothing underneath.

"Yes, can I help you?" she asked with a catlike purr.

Who the hell was this bitch and what was she doing in my man's house? "No, you most certainly can not. I would like to speak with Richard. Now." I placed my hands on my head and rolled my neck, ready to snatch this bitch bald.

The redhead smirked. "He's...indisposed right now. Why don't you come back later, dear."

She was about to close the door on me when I pushed her out of the way and stormed in.

"You can't—" She grabbed my arm and I punched her in the face, sending her flying backwards. Red dropped the sheet she held firmly around her body and tumbled to the floor in all her naked glory.

"You have two options, bitch. You can either stay the hell out of my way while I talk to Richard, or I can kick your ass, either way I'm going to talk to him."

She held the side of her face. "My toof!"

That's what she got. On a mission to confront my cheating ass fiancé, I stormed up the stairs only to be met at the top by an extremely pale

Richard. He had no color to his skin whatsoever and he looked as if he would pass out. The bastard was probably embarrassed at being caught out like this.

“April, I told you not to come.”

“How could you do this to me?” I screamed. To my dismay, tears poured from my eyes. “You cheating mother fucker! How could you?”

He stared at me, not saying a word, which only served to further infuriate me. I brought my hand back and slapped the shit out of him. Richard’s head snapped back at the sharp sting of my blow, but still, he remained silent.

“Say something, damn you! How could you do this to me? With this bimbo?”

“Hey, I’m no bimbo, you cow!” the redhead called from downstairs.

I turned around. “Bitch, you have ten seconds to clear out, or knocking your tooth out won’t be the only damage I do.”

I returned my attention back to Richard, who seemed to be wobbling on unsteady legs. The creep looked me right in the eyes, and said, “I don’t have time for this right now, April. As you can see I’m tired and I have company. Just go.”

How could he be so offhand about this? Wasn’t I the one he claimed to love? I could feel my heart ripping in two although I wasn’t quite sure what was worse, finding him with another woman or his nonchalant attitude.

“I’m not leaving without an explanation.”

“Don’t make me hurt you, April,” he begged, pleading note in his voice.

“Finding you with another woman, and you treating me like crap for the past month hasn’t hurt me? Why don’t you stop being a punk and



tell me what's going on? I see it for myself, but I want to hear you say the words!"

He shut his eyes and sighed as if to block me out, but I pushed him. Richard fell backwards. He grabbed my forearms and started to shake me. "Do you really want to know?"

"I think I deserve to know. How long has this been going on?"

"That's none of your damn business, and further more, nothing else I do is any of your business. I thought you were an intelligent woman, but obviously you haven't seemed to get the hints I've been dropping. I don't want you anymore."

My jaw dropped. Yes, I had demanded the truth, but did it have to cut so deeply? I tried to turn around from his verbal assault, my tears blinding me, but Richard's grip tightened. "Oh no, you don't. You wanted to hear, so you'd better brace yourself."

"I must admit, that I was fascinated with you, I even thought I loved you for a little while, but you just won't fit into my world. I'm rich, and successful, and can have any woman I want. I'm not the same loser I was in high school and I realized that I could do much better than you. I take the blame for letting things drag on this long, but you were such an easy lay. You can of course keep the ring, it was chump change to me."

The scene from *Waiting To Exhale* ran through my mind, where Angela Bassett threw her husband's clothes in his BMW and set it on fire. I always thought if a man did me wrong, that's exactly what I'd do, but this was real life. I felt as though he'd taken my heart and stomped it under his heel, and then pissed on it.

Numbness swept through my body, robbing me of speech as tears coursed down my cheeks. Damn this hurt. I stared back at the stony expression on his colorless face and knew he was dead serious.

"I see." I finally found my voice.

“I’m glad you do, so how about leaving?” A slight smirk twisted his lips.

“Of course. You can have your ring back though.” I fumbled to get it off of my finger and handed it to him.

Richard shrugged. “Keep it. It’s could probably fetch you a pretty penny at the pawn shop.”

I really wanted to slap him, but realized it was just a waste of time. “No. It has no value,” I said quietly.

“It’s worth a lot of money.”

“Monetarily it may be worth something, but to me it’s just a symbol of your betrayal. I thought this ring was given to me with love, and that meant more to me than any dollar amount. Now that I know you didn’t mean it, it’s worthless.” When he didn’t hold out his hand to take the ring back, I let it fall to the floor before hurrying down the stairs. I had to get out of his hateful house as fast as I could.

I didn’t look back as I shot to my jeep and zoomed off. I could have sworn I saw his figure in my rearview mirror, but my eyes were too clouded with tears. It was all a lie. He’d used me to fulfill some high school infatuation of his and I was a sucker for falling for it.

I don’t know how I made it back to my place, but I drove non-stop, my heart and my head hurting from pain. To my surprise, I pulled up to see a cream Escalade in my driveway. There was only person I knew who owned that car.

What the hell did Marcus want? Talk about lousy timing. I didn’t need anymore shit today. As I got out of my car, so did he. I walked to my door and turned around to watch his approach. He hobbled towards me, his foot and leg encased in a walking cast.

“Marcus, what do you want? I thought I’d already told you—”

“No, wait, hear me out. I only came over to apologize, and then I swear I’ll get out of your life. It’s been eating away at me since we last saw each other. I’ve behaved abominably and should have respected your relationship with Richard. I know better now, and I’m sorry.” He sounded so sincere, but at the sound of my ex’s name I burst into a fresh batch of noisy tears.

A look of alarm crossed his face and he gripped me by my shoulders. “April, what’s wrong? If I’d known my apology would upset you, I wouldn’t have come. I swear.”

“I-it-it’s not t-t-th-that. R-ich-Richard and I are through!” I sobbed.

“What?” he asked with disbelief.

“I-I found h-him w-with another woman, and he said he did-didn’t w-want me anymore.”

“That son of a bitch. I was so sure...I mean when I saw you two together, I thought it was the real thing,” Marcus sounded confused.

That statement certainly didn’t help. I cried harder. Marcus pulled me into his arms and I let my misery take over. I kept asking myself over and over again how could Richard do this to me and how could I have been such a chump.

I should have demanded he tell me what was going on when he’d made such a production about me coming to visit him that one time.

“Shh, it’s okay. It’s okay. I’m here now. He doesn’t deserve you,” Marcus soothed me, rocking me back and forth in his arms, and stroking my hair. Every now and then I could feel him drop a kiss on my head.

I’m not sure how long he held me like that, but when my tears subsided, I looked up into his piercing eyes and something came over me. “Marcus?”

“Yes?”

“Please kiss me.”

“April, you don’t know what you’re saying, and I’m not going to be used to soothe your battered ego.” Marcus shook his head.

I gasped, taking a step back. Was he now rejecting me too? I felt like utter shit. “I see. Well now that you’ve said your piece, I appreciate it, but as you can see I don’t really think I’d make good company right now.” I walked around him to get to my door and fumbled with the key, trying to get it into the lock, but my hand was shaking so badly I dropped it. “Damn!”

“Let me get that for you.” He bent down, and then smoothly sliding the key into the lock.

“Thank...thank you.”

“No problem. I meant what I said, you know. “

“And I meant what I said. It’s appreciated, now I’d like to be alone.”

“Do you think I’m going to walk away from you while you’re in this state? No way. Come on, let’s go inside and I’ll fix you a cup of tea.”

I rolled my eyes. “As if that would solve anything.”

“Maybe it won’t solve any of your relationship issues, but it may calm you down. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone cry like that before.”

“Well, you should have seen me after the party in high school when you decided to humiliate me.”

Marcus’s face turned bright red. Obviously he was still embarrassed about that incident of so long ago. Why did I even bring it up? “You see? I told you I wouldn’t be very good company right now.”

“I think I’ll be the judge of that. Come on, April. Let’s go inside and I’ll take care of everything.”

“Can you take care of my broken heart too?” I felt lower than I ever had before.

He brought his hand to my cheek and gently caressed it. "I wish I could. Now come on." Marcus put his arm around my shoulders and guided me into my house as tears trickled down my face.

How could Richard do this to me, and in such a hurtful way? Seeing him with that redheaded bimbo ripped my heart in two. Just when everything seemed to be going great in my life, something had to happen to shatter my happiness. Why was it that when I'd finally figured out who I truly loved, fate stepped in to make a fool of me.

"Don't cry, April. I can take anything except your tears. I swear if I see Richard again, I'm going to smash his face in."

"You needn't do it on my behalf. He's not worth it," I sobbed, taking a seat on my couch, my head dropping into my hands. I wouldn't wish this kind of pain on my worst enemy.

Marcus sat next to me and rocked me in his arms. He didn't speak or offer me trite words, but now I was glad for his presence. Who knew what I would have done if I'd come home to my empty house. I may have drunk myself into a stupor.

When I felt sufficiently cried out, I lifted my head. "Where's my damn tea?" I sniffed.

Marcus threw his head back and laughed. He had a great laugh. It was moments like these when I forgot how much trouble he caused me. "I see you're feeling a little better. Let me go get it for you."

"Do you need me to show you where everything is?"

"I can figure it out. Just relax" He dropped a light kiss on my forehead and it brought a smile to my face. My eyes were drawn to his butt as he walked towards my kitchen, his tight buns moving up and down with each step he took. Damn, why did he have to be so fine and why did things have to turn out this way? What would have happened if Marcus and I had ended up together at the end of our high school

reunion instead of Richard and me? Would I have ended up in this predicament?

I thought Richard was my knight in shining armor, but he'd turned out to be a frog. One thing came to mind though, why had he been so deliberately cruel? It just didn't seem like him.

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the couch to block out the light. "Oh Richard, why?" I whispered, wishing I could just wake up from this nightmare. The words "I can do better than you" ran through my mind over and over again, and there was something in the back of my mind that kept bugging me. It almost seemed as though he'd wanted me to find him with his bimbo. After all, he did know I was on my way over. But then again, he had changed the lock. Just thinking about it made me sick.

Literally.

I shot to my feet and raced to the bathroom, and threw up the contents of my breakfast. When my belly was empty, I dry heaved into the toilet. Suddenly I felt hands lifting my hair away from my face and felt grateful for their presence. As much as I didn't want anyone seeing me like this, it was comforting to have Marcus here with me.

I must have stayed over the toilet for at least an hour before the nausea passed. I don't think I'd thrown up like this since I was in elementary school. Praying to the porcelain gods wasn't how I'd envisioned spending my Saturday afternoon. Sobs racked my body and I rested my head on the rim of the toilet seat.

The flushing of the toilet broke me out of my misery. Marcus handed me some toast and a cup of lukewarm tea. I took a few bites of the toast and a couple sips of tea before pushing them aside.

Marcus then pulled me up and lifted me into his arms, my head leaning weakly into his chest. I didn't care where he was taking me.

Come to think about it, there wasn't much I really cared about in that moment.

He mounted the stairs with easy strides. Marcus was stronger than he looked, because I was no lightweight. I was too deep in my abyss of misery to think about it. I was surprised when he took put me on my feet in the upstairs bathroom.

"Have a seat on the toilet. I'm going to run you a bubble bath, so you can relax."

I was too numb to do anything but obey his command. I sat down on the closed toilet seat and bowed my head in despair, not really noting the sound of running water in the background. I could hear Marcus rummaging around my bathroom, but never lifted my head. I thought about Richard and that skinny bitch. Did she do the things that I did for him? Was she as good in bed? Did she scream out his name in the heat of passion? When they made love, did she rake her nails down his back like I did?

That rotten whore.

I wished I'd done more than just pop her in the damn mouth. I should have torn every strand of that flame red hair from her head. I bet it wasn't even natural. She was probably a dull brunette with mousy hair. But I couldn't lay all the blame at her feet. Richard was the one who'd betrayed me. He was the one who'd casually stomped on my heart. He'd lied to me, used me, and then discarded me.

Marcus grabbed my forearms and pulled me to my feet. When he began to unbutton my blouse I didn't even bat an eye. My clothes fell to the floor one article at a time, but still I didn't raise my head. Even when I felt his knuckles graze the tip of my breast, I remained still, barely registering his touch. He gently ordered me to step out of my jeans and panties, before he led me over to a tub full of inviting bubbles.

I slid into the water, its temperature slightly scorching my skin, but I welcomed its sting. It helped me know I was still alive, even though my soul felt dead.

Leaning my head back against the rim of the tub, I sunk further into the depths of the water until it came up to my chin. My house wasn't terribly large, but one of the reasons I'd chosen this place was for the tub. It was one of those old fashioned bathtubs that stood on legs, five inches off the ground. Two people could comfortably fit in it. I loved baths. Richard was a shower guy, so I never got a chance to take a bath with him.

I realized that Marcus was next to me, but it still didn't register until I felt him slide into the tub behind me. "Marcus, what are you doing?" I protested weakly.

"Relax, April, I'm still wearing my boxers." Marcus situated me between his muscular thighs. What did it matter? He'd seen me naked before. Sure it was over ten years ago, and I'd gained a few pounds, but I didn't care. He could have made love to me, for all the apathy I felt right then.

Marcus pulled me back against the hard wall of his chest and although it took me a few moments to relax, I did. He picked up a sponge and squeezed water over my shoulders. It felt so good, I closed my eyes. I could almost forget about my crummy day, but not quite. Just when I thought I had my emotions under control, I burst into a fresh batch of tears.

He cradled me against him until I finished. Then, Marcus took my shampoo and poured a generous dollop in my hair. His fingers massaging my scalp felt heavenly. If someone would have told me in high school that Marcus and I would end up in a tub together with him washing my hair, I would have laughed. If I weren't so depressed, maybe



I still would have, but I surrendered to the gentle ministrations of his magic fingers.

“How does that feel?” he whispered against my ear, his warm breath caressing my skin.

“It feels wonderful,” I sighed. “Why are you being so nice to me, Marcus?”

“Because you can use a friend, and I think you need this.”

I couldn't argue with that. Wallowing alone in my misery would have sucked. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” I really believed he meant that.

Marcus rinsed my hair and then rubbed more shampoo in, repeating the cycle once again. When he finished washing my hair, he took the sponge and poured body wash over it before rubbing it against my breasts. I knew he was only doing this to be nice, but I felt my nipples tighten and my pussy tingle.

I wasn't supposed to feel like this from someone else so soon, not after I'd just been kicked in the heart, but as he rubbed the wet sponge over my body I grew warm. He trailed it over my arms to the center of my chest and then dragged it down my belly.

I gasped when the sponge went lower. “Open your legs,” came his soft command.

As though they had a mind of their own, my legs spread apart, and when the sponge touched the swollen lips of my labia, I moaned. “Marcus...”

“Shh. I won't do anything you don't want me to.”

There was no way I was going to tell him to stop. I needed this badly. I wanted to feel good. I felt like Halle Berry in *Monster's Ball* when she asked Billy Bob to make her feel good. I never did get how she could go from hysteric crying to shagging him rotten in the most perverted way—

until now. I wanted to feel Marcus's touch. I needed to know there was more in the world than just this aching pain gnawing at my soul.

I lifted my hips against his hands as he increased the pressure of the sponge against my wet slit. "Please," I moaned.

After a while he gave up the pretense of washing me and let two fingers slide inside of me. I rested my head against his shoulder. His free hand reached around to cup my breast, his finger and thumb rolling one taut nipple. I could feel his cock pressing against my body and knew that he wanted me too.

"God, I didn't mean for this to happen," he groaned, pressing a hot kiss against my neck.

"Don't you dare stop."

His fingers worked in and out of me slowly at first, my hips moving in time with his thrusts. Then he picked up the pace in frenzied motions. I never knew how hot it was to be finger fucked this way, and he was slowly driving me to a blissful peak.

When his thumb brushed my clit, I exploded. My body shook uncontrollably. "Yes. Oh, God yes," I cried.

Kissing my shoulder, he inhaled my scent. "Let's get you out of this tub." Marcus stood, pulling me with him. He stepped out of the tub first and grabbed a towel to wrap around my body before lifting me out of the water.

Marcus walked to my bedroom where he placed me on the bed. I watched him with bated breath, wondering what he would do next. I thought he'd remove his wet boxers, but instead he asked me where I kept my nightgowns.

"The top drawer on the right," I answered automatically. "What...what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to dress you."

“Don’t you want to...” I looked at him imploringly.

“I want to. I really want to, but I’d be one sorry son of a bitch if I took advantage of you in this state. Besides, I went too far in the tub.”

“But I wanted you to.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t think you’re up to making those types of decisions right now.” He walked over to my dresser and pulled out my nightgown and picked up a bottle of cocoa butter lotion.

When he returned, he took the towel and dried my body and my hair. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead and I knew he was struggling if the bulge against his boxers was any indication. He rubbed lotion into my body almost in a surgical approach. Marcus was trying to be noble and while I appreciated it, I was still horny.

I pouted when he dressed me in my nightgown and then tucked me under the covers. I thought he’d leave me alone then, but to my surprise he slid into the bed next to me and pulled me into his arms. Maybe I was more exhausted than I thought because a few minutes later, I was fast asleep.

I don’t know what time I woke up, but it was dark, and I was so nauseous, I knew I had to make it to the bathroom quick or puke all over my sheets. Racing to the bathroom, I just made it to the toilet in time to unload the little bit of food still left in my belly.

I stayed over the toilet dry heaving and crying. This experience was taking a toll on me that I didn’t like, taxing my body to the limit.

When I finally stood up, I was surprised to see Marcus in the doorway, a strange look on his face. “April, when was your last period?”

I gasped. I hoped he wasn’t implying what I thought he was and then I thought about it. It had been a few months. With my hectic schedule, something like this hadn’t crossed my mind. Shit.

“No. No. No. I...I can’t be pregnant. Not now.” I walked on unsteady legs towards Marcus, and passed out.



I was knocked up. How could I have allowed this to happen? Richard and I had never used condoms, because we’d both been tested and had clean bills of health, but I was on the pill and very diligent in taking it every day. It stunned me when my blood test revealed I was indeed pregnant, thirteen weeks to be exact.

I thought back to two months ago when my pregnancy had been confirmed. The doctor explained to me that sometimes when a person got sick, it counteracted the affects of the pill, rendering it useless. I did remember having a really nasty cold around the time of conception. Damn. My horniness had outweighed my illness and now I was paying for it. Here I was pregnant and single.

My parents weren’t too happy to hear I was pregnant without the benefit of marriage, but they came around rather quickly. My mother was constantly calling to make sure I was taking care of myself, threatening to come up and take care of me. As much as I loved my mom, she could drive the most patient of people crazy.

Fortunately, my business was coming along better than ever and at least I wouldn’t be hurting for money. There were many single mothers in worse positions than me. I owned my own home, a car, had a successful career. I’d make it. What I hadn’t counted on was the huge support Marcus would turn out to be.

Marcus was the one to take me to the doctor and he was the one who would come to visit me when I wasn’t working. He turned out to be a good friend and it surprised me, how close we were becoming. He’d made

it clear to me, however, that he wanted to be more than friends. There was just too much water under the bridge for that thought, and the night he took care of me was just one of those things. I still couldn't bring myself to think of him in a romantic way, mainly because my heart still ached for Richard.

## 11. The Truth is Revealed

There were many nights I'd wake up, crying, not just for myself, but for the baby. My child would grow up without their father. I'd tried doing the right thing, by telling Richard about the baby, but not only had he changed his telephone numbers, the emails I sent kept getting bounced back to me. I gave up when a letter I'd mailed came back reading, *Return to Sender*. The message was clear, he didn't want to have anything to do with me. Then so be it.

Yet it hurt so much, I could barely stand it. I thought back on it, and it was hard to believe it was over because I was sure Richard had loved me. I was so depressed, the only thing that really kept my mind off of Richard's betrayal was work and Marcus's visits. He was away in Toronto now, filming a movie and I kind of missed his regular check-up visits to me.

I rubbed my sore back. Only five months pregnant and I was already swollen like a balloon. Damn if I weren't having triplets. I didn't care what the doctor said. I felt like a whale. One thing was certain, no matter how many kids were inside of me, I was going to demand an epidural. I'd leave the natural childbirth to all the new wave nuts out there.

Thankfully I didn't have a catering job tonight, because I was exhausted. More and more I was beginning to rely on my employees because doing all the cooking and setting up wore me out more than I cared to admit. I contemplated letting my workers handle the catering

side of the business while I opened a restaurant. I had enough capital now, but then again, that would be a lot of hard work. It wouldn't be something I could do until my baby was born.

As I settled down with the latest Terry McMillan novel, my cell phone rang. "Damn," I muttered, rolling off my bed to get it from my dresser.

"Hello?"

"Is this April Johnson?"

"I should hope so since I'm answering her phone." I glanced at my watch. It was seven-thirty and I was in no mood to argue with a telemarketer. "Look, whatever it is you're selling I'm not interested, and I would like for you to place me on your do not call list."

"Umm, I'm not a telemarketer. Actually, my name is Grace Peterson. You don't know me. Well, actually we met once under not so great circumstances."

Who was this nut? "Could you please get to the point, because I'm three seconds away from hanging up? One, two—"

"Wait! Please don't hang up. I'm calling you about Richard."

That caught my attention. Now that I listened closely the voice sounded familiar. "Whatever you have to say about Richard, I'm not interested."

The woman on the other line snorted. "Yes, that's what your boyfriend said, but if you would just think about it, if you have a heart, you'd hear me out."

My boyfriend? If I had a heart? Now my hackles were up. Who the hell was this bitch calling my phone talking utter nonsense? And why in the world would this mystery woman think I'd be interested in discussing Richard after he'd ripped my heart out and tore it into little pieces. "Like I said, this is something I don't want to talk about...Grace, is that what you said your name was?"

“You’re a heartless bitch, and Richard is much better off without you. I hope you choke on your self-righteousness,” she sneered and then I heard a loud click in my ear.

What the hell was that about? She was speaking in riddles as if I was supposed to know what the hell she was talking about. I looked at the caller ID on my phone but it came up unlisted. Well, whoever that Grace person was she had better be glad the conversation had been over the phone, because I just may have backhanded her to El Segundo.

One thing I learned about being pregnant was that my emotions went from one extreme to the next. One minute I could feel pretty good and then I’d get so weepy I couldn’t stand myself. I’d cry for hours at a time and not know why.

The phone rang again. This time I was ready for battle. “Look, bitch, if you ever call my damn phone again—”

“April.”

It definitely wasn’t that Grace person. “Oh my God. Marcus, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to yell at you like that.”

“Who did you think I was?”

“Oh, that’s not important,” I changed the subject, not wanting to dwell on something that had left a bad taste in my mouth. “How’s the filming coming along? I bet it’s nice up there. What’s it like working with Stella Simpson?”

“What do you think it’s like? She’s a blonde piece of fluff. I think there are rocks with higher IQs than her.”

I laughed. “You’re so full of it. I bet you tapped that ass a couple times. Go ahead and admit it. She’s on the cover of every magazine. She’s Hollywood’s new it girl.”

There was silence on the other end of the line and for a moment I thought I’d lost the connection. “Marcus, are you there?”



A deep sigh on the other end followed. "I wish you wouldn't say things like that, April."

Now I was confused. Why had he gotten so serious all of a sudden? Maybe what he had for Stella was serious. "I didn't mean to offend you. If you have something going on with her, I didn't mean to disrespect your relationship like that."

"Will you just quit it? There's nothing going on between Stella and me. If truth be known, I think she's foul, and beneath all that hair and make-up she looks like a crack whore."

"Ouch. That's pretty harsh. You'd better be careful, hon, you never know who's listening."

"I'm in the house the studio rented for me. *Alone.*"

I'm not really sure why he'd put so much emphasize on that last word, but maybe he was cranky because he wasn't getting any play in Canada. "Well, have you met any other nice ladies up there? I'm sure there are a bunch of locals who'd love to spend some time with Dawson Powers."

"Just stop it, goddamit!" he yelled.

I had to hold the phone away from my ear. I, in my highly emotional pregnant state, burst into tears. "If you're going to be nasty then I'm ending this conversation. Talk to you later. Not!" My thumb mashed the end button.

What the hell was the matter with him? I decided to turn my cell phone off because I didn't think I could take another call. I cried for a few minutes before grabbing a couple tissues and blowing my nose.

When I got myself under control, my cordless phone rang. I waddled over to the nightstand where my phone rested, and the caller ID read Out of the Area. I really didn't feel like answering it, but something told me that I should.

“Hello?”

“I’m so sorry. I was an asshole to yell at you like that. Forgive me?”

“Marcus, you have a lot of damn nerve. I was only asking you a simple question. There was no need for you to bite my head off like that.”

“You’re right. I had a stressful day, but had no right to take it out on you. Stella thinks she’s God’s gift and has decided to make me her next target, but the one woman I want only wants to be my friend and keeps throwing other women in my face.”

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. “Please not this again, Marcus. Things have been going great with us these past couple months. You’ve been a great friend to me in my ordeal and I appreciate all you’ve done. I don’t want to ruin that, okay?”

“You know I want more.”

“And you know I’m not ready for anything romantic. I’ve only recently broken up from a serious relationship and if you haven’t noticed, I pregnant.”

“I’ll take care of you and the baby.”

“I’d rather not have this conversation right now, Marcus.”

“Then when? I miss you so much. I’ve been thinking. We can get married, and I’ll raise the baby as my own. I promise to protect you from the press so that you and the baby can lead normal lives...well as normal as possible.”

He couldn’t be serious. This was definitely the last thing I needed to here. “Is pot legal in Canada because you must be smoking something. If you can’t be a friend to me then it’s probably best if you just stayed out of my life.”

“Don’t say that. Fine, we’ll play things your way, but I won’t give up on you.”

“You just see me as the one who got away.”

“Maybe at one point I did, but it’s so much more than that now.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, but it wasn’t something I was up to discussing right now. “If you say so,” I sighed, knowing there was no use arguing with him. I was starting to find this conversation draining.

“I do.” A brief silence fell, before he initiated conversation again. “April, who was it that called you before I did? You sounded really upset.”

“It was nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“You can’t tell me not to worry about it because I am worried about it. You’re a pregnant woman by yourself. Was it a prank caller?”

I realized he wasn’t going to let it go. “It was some woman named Grace. She said she wanted to talk to me about Richard.”

“What?” He sounded dazed.

“She said she wanted—”

“I heard you, but what did you say? Did you believe her? I wouldn’t listen to her if I were you. She’s a troublemaker.”

“What? You sound like you know her.” I laughed.

“I don’t know her. I meant she sounds like a troublemaker. Why else would she call you about Richard after what he did to you? If I were you, I could never forgive that betrayal.”

“You almost sound as if you were the wronged party.”

“Well it bothers me what he did to you. Look, if that woman calls again, do yourself a favor and hang up.”

“I intend to. Don’t worry about me. You sound like an overprotective mother hen, Marcus.”

“I’m very protective of you.”

“That’s sweet of you to say, but I’m getting rather tired right now. I’d planned to do some light reading tonight, but now all I feel like doing is sleeping. Baby is making me very sleepy.”

“I wish I was there to tuck you in.”

I rolled my eyes. “Marcus, don’t start.”

“What?” he asked, feigning innocence.

“You know what. I’m really tired, so I will talk to you later?”

“Definitely. Don’t forget that I’ll be in town next week for the Tony Awards. I’ll stop by next Tuesday if that’s okay with you.”

“That sounds great. I’ll cook you something.”

“I won’t have you tiring yourself out. I’ll bring take out. How about Tai?”

“Hmm, no, I’ve been craving Mexican a lot lately.”

“Then Mexican it is. It’s a date.”

“A platonic date. Good night, Marcus.” I hung up. He was just too much. If I would have stopped to think about the things he’d just said, I may have asked him what he’d meant by them, but I was too tired to analyze our conversation properly. The moment my head hit the pillows, I fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

Tuesday rolled around without incident. I’d had a doctor’s appointment and had a sonogram taken. My baby was growing like a weed. When I saw it moving around and listened to its heartbeat, I realized just how much I wanted and already loved this new life growing inside of me.

Sure it would grow up without a father, but many kids did and turned out okay. I still had my father, and a handful of uncles and male cousins. I also had Marcus’s friendship so there’d be plenty of male influences on its life. Richard who?

I glanced at my watch. Marcus should be here anytime now. He’d called over an hour ago to tell me that he was going to pick up the food and come right over. My doorbell rang.

Right on time. I was hungry like a hostage. When I made it to the door, however, there was a surprise on the other end that made me nearly fall over.

“What the hell are you doing here? How did you find out where I lived?” I demanded. It was the redhead I’d caught with Richard. What right did this skank have to come to my home? If she’d come to gloat, I was going to kick her ass.

Her eyes widened when she took in my pronounced stomach. Her face lost all color. “You’re...you’re pregnant.”

“No shit, Sherlock. What do you want?”

“My name is Grace Peterson, and you and I are going to have a talk whether you want to or not!”

This was Grace Peterson? Why in the world was she here and why was she looking at me as if I was the one who’d done her wrong? This bitch had a lot of damn nerve, especially when she crossed her arms over those huge, probably synthetic boobs, and pursed her lips. “Is the baby Richard’s?”

I gasped. This woman had balls of steel, and they were huge. I placed my hands on ample hips. “And even if it is any of your goddamn business, what’s it to you?”

“If the baby is Richard’s then he needs to be told.”

“Look, whatever your reason for coming here is, I’m going to give you five seconds to get out of my face otherwise I won’t be held responsible for what I’ll do.”

She snorted with a laugh. “You wouldn’t dare. I’m a black belt in Tai Kwan Do, I wouldn’t try anything if I were you, sister.”

“I’m not your sister, so don’t get it twisted. I don’t care what the hell you know. I don’t know karate, but I know crazy, and I’ll tell you what,

crazy wins every time.” I’m sure James Brown’s ears were burning wherever he was.

“Lucky for you you’re pregnant.”

“Oh, so was it lucky when I knocked you in the mouth? Unless you want some more where that came from I suggest you leave. I’m expecting company any minute now and I’m not particularly interested in what you have to say.”

“I’m not leaving until I’ve said my piece so you can either let me in, or I will force my way in.” Grace advanced until she was only inches away. She had to be at least six feet tall because I had to lift my head to look at her.

My fists balled to the side, ready to swing. I was not about to be threatened in my own home. I’m not usually a violent person, but the flashback of her standing in nothing but a sheet in Richard’s home hit me like a mack truck. The pain came rushing back, and I wanted to lash out. And I did. I reared my fist back and swung.

As if she were a ninja, she caught my fist and pushed my arm away. The move caught me off-guard, which sent me reeling backwards. I crashed to the floor, landing square on my big behind. Did she just attack me? I was so stunned I just sat there, mouth wide open.

“Oh my God, Oh, my God, I didn’t mean it. I swear I didn’t mean it.” Grace came rushing to my side.

I protectively wrapped my arm around the mound of my stomach. As a faint fluttering rippled against my belly, I knew my baby was okay.

“What the hell is going on here?” Marcus came out of nowhere, storming into my home like a knight in the crusades, carrying two brown paper sacks which I could only assume was our dinner.

“It was an accident!” Grace held her hand out to me as though she wanted to help me up. At that moment I would rather have kissed a

cobra dead in the mouth. I turned away from her and looked up at Marcus.

“Could you help me up? This person was just leaving.”

Marcus wasted no time putting the bags on the floor and walking to my side. He pulled me up with one strong tug, enveloping me in the warmth of his arms.

“Did she do this to you, April?”

“I...” Well, I did swing at her first and she’d only been trying to defend herself, but I wasn’t in the mood to be charitable. This bitch stole the man I had planned on spending the rest of my life with and yes, it wasn’t right what I said next, but I said it anyway. “Yes. She knocked me down to the ground. I was so scared, Marcus and I’m so glad you came.” I threw my arms around him and buried my face in his chest.

“Shh, it’s okay. I’m here now. Should I call the police?” He stroked my hair, rocking me in his arms. I turned my head to throw her a sly smile. Her jaw dropped.

“You little liar. I did no such thing!” she stormed.

“I don’t know why you would attack a pregnant woman. I mean, I was only trying to get you to leave after all the mental anguish you’ve caused,” I whined playing it to the hilt. I was definitely sending her a message and it said, “Don’t fuck with April Johnson”.

“I’ll call the police,” Marcus assured, letting me go.

Grace screamed in obvious frustration and I had to bite my lip to keep myself from laughing out loud. The look on her face was absolutely priceless. Did I feel any sympathy? If I did, it was swiftly knocked away. Would I have let Marcus actually call the police and have the redheaded harlot carted off to jail? Probably not, but it was fun watching her squirm. Of course it didn’t assuage the pain burning in my heart as I thought of what she and Richard had done.

“Fine! I’m leaving, but know this; I’ll make sure that Richard doesn’t leave you one red cent, you heartless bitch. He loved you so much that he was willing to sacrifice his last days without you, to spare you the pain. I hope you can sleep at night for what you’ve done.” Grace turned to leave.

My heart stopped. Richard had made sacrifices for me? She made absolutely no sense, but I had to find out what the heck she was talking about, but just as I was about to speak, Marcus cut in. “Who are you, lady?”

Grace turned around, her near magenta hair swung over her shoulder and she glared in his direction. “Don’t pretend that you don’t know who I am. We spoke at length. I’m very good with voices.”

I looked up at Marcus, who’d gone pale as a sheet. What was going on here? They’d talked before?

“Marcus, what’s she talking about?”

Grace’s cold blue eyes zeroed in on my face. “Didn’t he tell you about our little talk a few weeks ago? Surely you must have discussed it.”

“Grace...” Marcus whispered. It became apparent to me that he knew who this was.

I suddenly smelled a rat. A six-foot-three, blond rat. “What’s going on here?” I demanded.

“You really don’t know, do you?” Grace asked in amazement before turning her gaze back to Marcus. “You didn’t tell her. You said you would talk to her.”

I turned back to Marcus. “I think I’m owed an explanation. What’s she talking about?”

“April, let me deal with this woman. She’s obviously here trying to cause trouble.” He pulled me back against him, but I twisted away.



“No. I want to know what’s going on so one of you had better start talking right now.” I stomped my foot with impatience.

Marcus hung his head, not meeting my eye. That’s when I knew he’d done something he shouldn’t have. My heart sped up. What could this woman possibly tell me about Richard? Was something wrong with him? An image of his pale features crossed my mind. It finally dawned on me that there’d been something wrong with his appearance at our last meeting.

Grace gave me a long, hard look, staring at me as if she were searching for something. Seeming satisfied, she nodded her head. “You really didn’t know,” she said more to herself than to me.

“I guess not. Would you please tell me why you’ve come?” I felt tired all of a sudden and wondered if I’d be able to take her news.

“I think you should have a seat for what I’m about to tell you.” Then Grace turned to Marcus. “As for you, I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

I walked over to my loveseat on wobbly legs and flopped down, leaving Marcus where he stood. I had a feeling I wouldn’t like him very much after I heard what Grace had to say.

The redhead followed and took the chair opposite to me. With hands folded in my lap and head down, I braced myself, waiting. The baby began to move, but the kicks were ignored. I had to concentrate on what was going on now.

“What you thought you saw was just a set up. There has never been anything between Richard and I. Actually, we’re first cousins. I dropped by for a surprise visit. You see, I wanted to see how he was doing. He told me that you didn’t know about his condition and—”

Cousins? Condition? If they were cousins then why did they pretend that something had happened between the two of them? I had to interrupt then. “What condition?”

“I’m getting to that. Just let me finish.”

I nodded in silent content.

She tossed a long, dark red strand of hair over her shoulders. I could have sworn I spied the sheen of tears in her eyes. “Three years ago, Richard was diagnosed with melanoma, probably from the years of sun beds and tanning for his body building competitions. It was treated and he’s been in remission all this time. We didn’t think it would come back...

“But it did, but this time, it spread to his organs. The doctors...they don’t believe he’ll pull through. He’s going to have to have surgery in a few days to remove some of the cancer, but really it’s only going to keep him alive maybe for a year at the most. Richard didn’t want you to know so when you called that day, he came up with the plan.” She paused to wipe a tear away.

“Sorry about the cow comment. I guess I didn’t take into account that I would be punched in the mouth. I honestly didn’t want to go along with it, but he’s my cousin, and...forgive me but I went along with it.” Grace burst into noisy tears.

I sat in my chair, stunned. Any minute now, I’d wake up and this would all be an unpleasant nightmare. It just had to be. Still there were some things that didn’t quite click that I had to know.

“Why did he change the lock on his house and why didn’t he want me to come visit him whenever I wanted to visit him?”

Grace sniffed, wiping away tears. “He...he’d planned on selling his house to move to New York and wanted to surprise you. He didn’t want you to see the ‘For Sale’ sign on his lawn. Of course, when he found out,

things changed. I believe he changed his locks after he had to remove his home from the market.”

Surprisingly, I was calm about this news. Maybe I was still hoping that this was just a dream. “How does Marcus fit into all this?”

“Your boyfriend? You certainly didn’t wait very long after Richard broke things off with you. I wonder from your reaction if you even care.”

I didn’t bother dignifying her last statement with a response. “Marcus is not my boyfriend. He’s just been a good friend to me since the break up.”

“Yes, but your *friend* failed to tell you that I called. I actually spoke to him at length when I was trying to get a hold of you. The only reason why I told him was because he wouldn’t put you on the phone. I didn’t know he’d keep it to himself.”

I frowned. “When was this?”

“Exactly a month ago. When I didn’t hear from you again, I assumed that you didn’t care. But Richard has made a turn for the worse and I thought maybe if he saw you, he’d fight harder to stay alive. I didn’t do it for you. I did it for him.”

I desperately tried to remember when Marcus would have had access to my phone when I wasn’t around. “Did you call my cell phone or my home number?”

“I called them both. Each time, he answered.” She pointed a finger to a now red-faced Marcus. He looked at me imploringly, as though begging for my forgiveness, and then I knew everything Grace said was true. It suddenly came to me that Marcus had been in my house alone, when I’d gone to the grocery store to get a few items for a dinner I’d planned for the two of us.

I distinctly remembered now that I’d left my cell phone at home, because I’d wanted to call him and ask what kind of wine he wanted with

is dinner, but my phone hadn't been with me. When I came back from the store, I could tell something was bothering Marcus, but he wouldn't say what. Know I knew what that *what* was. I felt sick to my stomach, and baby's kicks seemed sharper, but I forced myself to ignore them.

Wobbling to my feet, I walked over to Marcus and stood directly in front of him. By his body language, I knew he realized he was caught, but I wanted him to say the words. Needed to hear them. "Why?" I asked, clutching my stomach. My baby must have been as distressed as I was because the kicks were starting to hurt.

"I'm sorry, April," he whispered.

"I don't need your damn apology! Why did you do it? Why would you keep this from me? Do you hate losing so much that you'd keep Richard and I apart even when you know he's dying? The father of my baby? What would you have done if I had fallen for your bullshit? Would you have discarded me when I was no longer a challenge?"

When he didn't answer me, I smacked him against the face. My hand left a white impression on his cheek. He didn't flinch, taking my blow as atonement.

"Why?" I demanded, slapping his other cheek when he didn't answer fast enough.

"If I said I really do truly love you, would you believe me?" A tear escaped the corner of his eye, but I didn't give a shit. Out of all the things he could have done to me, this was the lowest.

"You goddamn liar! If you loved me, you would have told me the truth. You were only thinking yourself! I hate you!" I began to pummel him, releasing all the pent up rage I felt since Richard's deception. I wasn't just lashing out at Marcus for keeping something so big from me, but at Grace who participated in Richard's hoax. And then for Richard,

who didn't trust in my love enough to tell me about his condition. All these months I could have been by his side, supporting and loving him.

I smacked Marcus with all my might while hysterical sobs tore from my throat. Tears and snot ran down my face, and I know I probably looked like a monster, but I didn't care. All while I was hitting him, Marcus stood there and took it, which only pissed me of more.

When Grace tried to pull me away, I fought her too. I was a wild woman. Only when a sharp pain ripped through my abdominal area did I stop. Then another followed, knocking me the ground. It hurt like hell. Marcus and Grace stood over me with panic stricken faces while I clutched my stomach.

Darkness clouded my eyes, and my last conscious thought was that I was going to lose my baby.

## 12. Reunited

I held my hands tightly in my lap, listening to Grace's chatter. She wasn't really saying anything profound, but I knew she was only talking to keep my spirits up. Against doctor's orders I was traveling more than I should have been. According to him, I wasn't allowed to ride in a car for more than a half hour because I was supposed to be on bedrest.

I placed my hand protectively over my stomach, thankful my baby still thrived. I'd come so close to losing it. I knew I was a fool even now for taking such a risky trip, but I had to see Richard. I wouldn't let him go on another day thinking I hated him, although I planned on giving him a piece of my mind.

It was still shocking to learn of his illness. I didn't want to accept it, and in a way, I was still hoping against hope there was some way he could be saved. I thought about that fateful night when I found out the truth and the mad rush to the hospital afterwards.

I vaguely remembered zoning in and out of the ambulance, with one strong hand holding mine. When I woke up, my first thought had been of my child. To my relief I was informed my baby would pull through only if the rest of my pregnancy was stress free and that I was put on immediate bedrest.

That meant I'd have to either put my catering services on hold for a while or let my employees handle it. I knew I was getting quite a reputation around town and many of my clients requested me personally

so it put me in a hard spot. In the end, I chose to let my employees handle the smaller jobs and the bigger ones I turned away.

I knew it would probably cost me business, but making sure my baby was healthy was my number one priority. It surprised me that Grace stayed with me through the duration of my hospital stay, because I didn't want to call my parents. They would have worried over me so much, I'd have been more stressed.

Marcus had even put in an appearance. Actually, I think he may have followed the ambulance to the hospital. By the time I was coherent enough to deal with his presence, I didn't have the strength to yell or be angry with him anymore. What was done was done. I still found it galling that he would selfishly keep the information about Richard to himself, but it taught me a huge lesson. I could never trust him again.

I was cordial to him, but I think he knew from my coolness that our friendship was terminated. I didn't know why he did it, and frankly I didn't care. What did matter was I had to see Richard as soon as possible.

I stayed in the hospital for three days before I was cleared for release. Grace picked me up and took me home. I actually liked her. She wasn't so bad at all, and it was obvious she cared an awful lot about Richard.

Now here we were, headed to see Richard, and he wasn't even expecting me. Boy would he be surprised, especially when he saw my stomach. I wondered how I would react, seeing him so sick. I tried not to think about the fact that he was dying. My brain just would not wrap itself around that concept. I guess, I thought maybe my love could somehow save him.

I know that sounds silly, but I didn't even want to consider the alternative. I couldn't lose him. I just couldn't.

"April, we're here," Grace's voice sliced through my silent musings.

I was so deep in thought I didn't realize she'd pulled up in front of Richard's house and we'd been stopped for a couple minutes. "Oh," I said lamely.

"Are you ready for this?"

I took a deep breath. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"I...I have to warn you, April, he doesn't look like he did when you last saw him. He's very pale and has lost a lot of weight."

I turned to look at her. "Do you think his appearance matters to me?"

"Of course not. I wasn't trying to imply that it was. I just thought you should know so it wouldn't be such a shock."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you like that. I just feel so helpless. Is there nothing that can be done for him?"

Grace shook her head, her lips twisted with bitterness.

"I see, well let's go."

"No, wait. Let me help you out of the car."

"I'm pregnant, not an invalid," I snorted, opening the car door and swinging my legs to the ground.

"I know that, but you know just as well as I that the doctor gave you strict orders to take it easy. As a matter of fact, I feel guilty as hell bringing you down here like this when you should be in bed."

"Don't blame yourself, because if you wouldn't have brought me here, I would have found another way." I carefully got out of the car.

To my annoyance, Grace took my arm and led me to the door as if she were a Girl Scout helping a little old lady across the street. She produced a key to the front door and unlocked it.

My heart sped up when I walked inside the house and she led me upstairs to Richard's room. "Will you be okay?" she whispered again.

"Yes, will you stop asking me that?"

"Grace, is that you?" Richard called from the other side of the door.



“Yes, it’s me, are you decent?”

“Sure, come on in.”

She opened the door and I followed her on unsteady legs. Richard saw his cousin first and gave her a weak smile, but when he saw me, his eyes widened. Once the shock left his face, he barked. “What the hell is she doing here?”

I could only stare because in those months since I’d last seen him, Richard lost a lot of weight, and he was so pale, he looked like a shadow of his former self. Dark circles ringed his eyes, and I wanted to cry, but I put on a brave face.

“Don’t pretend anymore, Richard. I know,” I said stepping forward, letting him get a good look at my pronounced belly.

“What the... Holy shit. You’re pregnant!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, it would appear so. Why, Richard? Why didn’t you tell me?” I stepped closer, my hand resting on my belly.

“Grace, how could you do this to me? I told you not to tell her.” He shot an accusing stare at his cousin.

“Richard, stop being a jackass and talk to the woman. She’s obviously still crazy for you, and she’s having a baby. Just talk to her. I’ll be downstairs if either one of you needs me.” She shot him a smug smile and gave me a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder before leaving us alone.

Richard looked at me mutinously, his arms crossing. “She shouldn’t have told you.”

I could see this wasn’t going to be easy. For whatever reason, Richard was going to play the martyr role to the hilt. I walked over to his bed and plopped down. My feet were starting to hurt. “You’re right, she shouldn’t have told me. You should have told me.”

“April, don’t make this harder than it has to be,” he groaned.

I wasn't about to put up with his woe is me attitude. I bit my tongue to stop what I really wanted to say, but instead said, "I'm pregnant, Richard. Or haven't you noticed?"

He closed his eyes and lay back against his pillow. "Why are you telling me? You can't expect me to believe it's mine."

I gasped. How could he say something so nasty? About to lash out, I stopped myself. He wanted me to be angry with him, so I could walk out of his life again. I was mad alright, but not for what he wanted me to be. I took a deep breath and silently counted to ten. He was not going to run me off this time. Not when there was so much at stake. "Richard, I think you know this baby is yours."

"Do I? You were awful close to Marcus before we broke up. How do I know it's not his brat?"

"Because you know I'm not the kind of person who would try to pawn another man's child on you. Because I love you too damn much. I know what you're trying to do, Richard, and it's not going to work. Say what you want to, but I'm not going to go away—not this time."

He groaned in frustration. "Why the hell couldn't you stay away like you were supposed to? Can't you see that I'm no use to you? I don't have much more time. After a while, I'll be hospitalized, and then what? I can't even make love to you like a man should be able to."

"You selfish beast! It's all about you, isn't it? Well what about me? You made promises to me, and if you think I'm going to allow you to shirk those promises then you have another think coming to you, buddy. I still want to marry you. Our baby needs its father!"

Richard lifted his head to glare. "And just how long do you think I'll be around to be the baby's father? I could be dead by the end of the year, maybe sooner."

The painful reminder tore through my heart. Life was so unfair. Why did this have to happen to Richard? But I knew I had to stay strong for him. I knew any emotional outburst I made from this point on could work against me. I took another deep breath. “Richard, I love you. I think I have from the moment I saw you again at the reunion. I love making love with you, but if we can’t do that anymore, it’s not important. You’re important to me.”

“I don’t need you to sacrifice yourself for me. You’re young, healthy and can find someone who can take care of you and the baby.”

“And do you think I needed your sacrifice? Don’t you think I could have handled the truth? Why didn’t you tell me? When I think about all this wasted time and all the pain and hurt you’ve needlessly caused both of us, I could just kill you.”

He laughed humorously. “Give it some time. The cancer will save you the trouble.”

I gasped at his matter-of-factness. “Is...is...there nothing that can be done?”

“It’s spread to my organs. Once it gets to this point, I’m pretty much living on borrowed time. Is that what you really want, April?”

“What I’ve always wanted was you,” I said quietly, trying to fight the tears back.

“You deserve to be with someone who can give you the things that I no longer can.”

“Richard, can you answer one question for me?”

He sighed with a shrug. “What?”

“Do you still love me?”

“What?” he asked as though he hadn’t heard me correctly, but I know that he did. But I repeated myself anyway.

“Do you still love me? Be honest. I think I’m owed that.”

“I have no right to love you anymore.” Tears sprang from his eyes, and my heart contracted. This was almost too painful to deal with, but I wasn’t just fighting for myself. I was fighting for my baby.

“I didn’t asked if you thought you had the right to love me or not. I asked if you still loved me, because I love you. I never stopped, even when I thought you and Grace were having an affair—even when you said those horrible things to me. I didn’t even stop loving you when I lay awake at night crying over you and what we’d shared. If that couldn’t make me stop loving you, do you think your illness would?” I vowed I wouldn’t burst into tears, but I couldn’t help myself. Sobs raked my body. Richard scooted closer and threw his arms around me and we both cried together. We clung to each other, crying for the time we’d lost, and for the shattered dreams.

“I’m so sorry, baby. I’m sorry. I do love you, April, more than you could ever know.” He cried against my hair.

“I should kick your ass for doing this to us,” I sniffed.

“I thought I was doing the right thing by you.”

I looked up at him, his eyes were blood shot from crying. “The best thing for me would have been staying with you. I love you, Richard, and I’m going to have my wedding, do you hear me? I’m not going to let you off so easily.”

“You...you’ll stay with me?” His voice was full of wonder.

“I said I would. I don’t know why you thought I wouldn’t be able to handle it. You really ought to be ashamed of yourself for doing this to me. I’m furious with you for not trusting in my love for you, I—”

“It wasn’t that I didn’t trust in your love. I knew you loved me, but I couldn’t do this to you. I don’t know how much longer I have and I didn’t want to put you through this ordeal.”

“Who’s to say that you will die? Maybe there’s a chance.”

He shook his head with a weak smile. “No. I’ve seen several specialists. I’m sorry, baby.”

“But...”

“I’m dying, April. It’s not a matter of saving me at this point, it’s a matter of how long. I will promise you this, however, I’m going to hang in there to hold my child.”

“You’d better. Now, let’s talk about those wedding plans.” I smiled, trying to lighten up the conversation although my heart was breaking in two.

He cupped my face in his hands and gave me a long deep kiss. “You’re amazing, April, and I just want you to know how much I love you, and I never stopped. Will you forgive me for what I’ve done?”

“Of course I do, but if you ever think about doing something like that again, you’re in big trouble.”

He rested his head against mine. “I wish that there was more that I could give you right now.”

I placed his hand on my stomach. “You’ve already given me more than I could ever hope for. I love you so much. We may be on borrowed time right now, but we’re going to make the most of it.”

“You’re an amazing woman, April Marie Johnson.”

“And you’re an amazing man, Richard Lawrence Slick.” He kissed me on the lips and suddenly pulled back.

“What’s wrong?”

“I think the baby kicked.”

I laughed. “He knows his daddy.”

“Do you think it will be a boy?”

“I don’t mind one way or the other, but I can’t keep calling the baby an it.”

“You have a point. You’ve made me very happy. I thought...I thought I’d be alone when it happened.”

“Richard, you’ll never be alone again,” I promised.

It was a promise I kept. I had my things moved to his place so I could stay with him. Richard had his surgery to remove parts of his cancerous organs. Because of my order of bedrest, I stayed in the hospital bed next to his while he recovered.

We were married three weeks later at the Justice of the Peace, with both sets of parents in attendance.

It was rather ironic, because Richard was the sick one, but he was the one who ended up taking care of me. He made sure I was fed and stayed off my feet. He bought tons of presents for me and the baby. Even though we could no longer be intimate like we used to, holding each other at night was enough. Every day we had with each other was a gift.

Richard James—after my dad—Slick made his debut in the world three months later. He was huge—nine pounds and six ounces. We both cried when he was born. The baby was gorgeous with a head full of black curls and his father’s eyes.

It seemed that Richard was thriving. We lived like a normal family. He insisted on doing his part for Richie—what we decided to call the baby for short—changing diapers and staying up late with him. Anyone could see how much Richard loved his son. Sometimes, when Richard wasn’t near me, I’d go into the bathroom and ball my eyes out. I wouldn’t let him see me cry.

The time finally came when Richard needed to be hospitalized. He underwent aggressive chemotherapy to prolong his life. When he lost his hair, I shaved mine off too. I brought Richie by the hospital every day to see him.

We lost him on a Saturday.

The doctors called me in on Friday night and it was up to me to alert the family. By the time he slipped away from us, Grace was there, his parents had come just in time, and my parents were there for support. I was glad I'd brought Richie so Richard could see him one last time.

I didn't cry that day, nor did I cry while I made funeral arrangements. I had the baby to consider and I had to figure out what I was going to do with my life now.

I'd neglected my business in the past months and knew I'd basically have to start over again. Even during the funeral I didn't shed a tear, and I couldn't figure out why. I loved him so much, but I couldn't cry. Everyone said how brave I was. I didn't feel brave at all.

All I could think about was that now I was alone again. After I placed a rose on Richard's coffin before it was lowered to the ground, something made me look up.

I noticed a tall figure standing on the other side of the cemetery. A tall, blond figure. Could it be? No, it couldn't. I looked away, to talk to the pastor.

When I looked up again, the figure was gone.

Later that night when Richie was asleep in his crib, and I started going through sympathy cards, one in particular caught my eye. I don't know what it was about this card, because there was nothing spectacular about it, but it just did.

I cautiously opened it and gasped when I read what was inside.

*My Darling April, I'm sure you're surprised to be receiving a card from me. If you're reading this, I am dead. In my last days, I knew my time was limited, so I instructed Grace to mail this to you only when I'd gone. I want you to know that you and Richie and have given me the best days of my*

*life. Without the love of you two, I don't think I would have been able to hold on for as long as I did.*

*There is something I must confess to you. I didn't want to bring the subject up because I knew it would upset you. Shortly after I was admitted to the hospital, I received a visit from Marcus. What he did to us was inexcusable, but I admired him for coming to apologize to me. It meant a lot to me, believe it or not, and it assured me of something. I think what really bothered me so much about him before was that I thought you were just a game to him.*

*A man in love knows how to recognize another man in love. He really had feelings for you, April. I know he's not a name that you like hearing these days, but I thought you should know. Whatever path you choose, I want you to be happy. I don't want you to grieve me for the rest of your life. You're young, beautiful, and you deserve to be happy. If that happiness comes in the form of someone else, then you have my blessing. Just know that I've never left you, because I'll be watching you and Richie from up above.*

*See you in the next lifetime. With Love always, Richard.*

I finally cried.



## 13. *New Beginnings*

If it weren't for Richie, I think I'd be dead now. It felt like a part of me had died with Richard anyway. Without my son, I would have curled up in a ball in a dark room somewhere and just waited to join the love of my life. But because I had this beautiful baby boy, I forced myself to get up every morning, feed, change and play with him.

I know I probably sound like one of those disgustingly gloating new mothers, but I honestly believed I had the best baby in the whole world. Not only did he sleep through the night almost from the beginning, he never cried unless he needed to be fed or changed. Even then he didn't make much noise. He had such a sunny disposition, and wherever I took him people always stopped to tell me what a gorgeous child I had.

He *was* gorgeous, with his head of curly black hair, chubby cheeks and big blue eyes. He was Richard all over. He wasn't particularly dark either. If anyone were to see him alone, they'd probably assume he was of Latino descent. The only thing that really marked him as mine was the dark birthmark on his right hip shaped like a star. For some reason, members on my mom's side of the family bore this mark. My birthmark was on my right shoulder.

I don't care if Richie would have come out of me looking Chinese, or dark as tar, he was mine and I loved him more than my own life. He was my reason for living, and I think through him, Richard lived on.

The days after Richard's death turned into weeks, and the weeks soon turned into months. Before I knew it, four months passed. Richie was six months old, babbling and drooling incessantly. He was making rocking motions on his hands and knees and any day now, I knew he'd crawl. He always seemed to have a smile on his face. I loved his little baby laugh, his little baby scent, his ten perfect little fingers and ten perfect little toes.

Yes, I was definitely one of those doting mothers.

After Richard's death, I put my business on hold, deciding to concentrate on my son. Richard had left me a very wealthy widow to the tune of millions. I knew he'd been wealthy and that his business had been doing well, but I didn't know he was doing that well. I think I nearly fell out of my chair when his lawyer informed me how much he was worth.

He must have set his will up shortly before he passed because he left a healthy trust fund for his son to be overseen by me, until Richie's twenty-first birthday. Though I'd been comfortable before when my catering business had been at its peak, I never expected to ever have this much money in my lifetime. Mind you, I wasn't Bill Gates or Oprah rich, but I was rich enough to never have to work again if I didn't want to, especially if I invested wisely.

The money really didn't matter that much to me. I would have given it all away to have Richard back with me. There wasn't a day when I didn't miss him. I missed his smile, his sense of humor, the way he made love to me, and the way he'd wrap his arms around me. He made me feel special. He'd been my light and inspiration.

It broke my heart to think of Richie growing up without knowing what a wonderful person his father was. When he was older, I'd make sure he knew. Richard was the kind of man who touched people

wherever he went. It wasn't just my loss; it was also the world's. There were people whose light burned out sooner than it should have, and I believe my husband was one of them. That song "Only The Good Die Young" wasn't kidding.

At night Richard would visit me in my dreams and I'd wake up with a smile on my face. When I realized it was a dream, however, I'd cry. But never in front of my baby. I had to be strong for him.

I imagined living in the lap of luxury off the money left to me. It would just be Richie and I traveling the world, but I wasn't an idle person. I had to do something with my time. I realized now would probably be the perfect time to realize my dream of opening my own restaurant. I had the capital and the drive.

With my mind firmly made up, I decided to sell my houses in New York and Philly and start a new life for me and my baby. I don't know why I wanted to move to California, and Los Angeles of all places, but if there was anything exactly opposite of New York, it was L.A.

It was as good a place as any to build a life and open a restaurant, besides, it wasn't as though I wouldn't know anyone when I went over there. Grace would be there. It was funny how life had turned out. She and I had become good friends and drew closer after Richard's death. She called me nearly every night to check up on me.

She worked for a PR firm and did quite well for herself. She offered me the use of her home, until I found a place of my own, and as she had the space, it was something I mulled over for a while.

Of course when I finally made my decision my parents weren't too happy. My mom had thrown a fit. "What? You're going to where?"

I rolled my eyes heavenward and knew I was in for a battle. "I'm moving to Los Angeles, Mom. Please don't try to talk me out of it because I've already made up my mind."

“But what about the baby?” she’d shrieked.

“What do you mean? He’s coming with me of course.”

“But L.A. is no place to raise a child, you have gang wars and smog, and think of all the traffic.”

“Mom, I lived outside of Manhattan, the same arguments could apply.”

“But at least we were in driving distance. I can’t believe you’d drag my grandbaby across the country. We’d never get to see him, or you for that matter.” Mom burst into loud tears.

It had taken over an hour to calm my mother down, and even then my father had to intervene. “Viola, we can hop on an airplane and visit, and I’m sure April will visit us too.”

Good old Dad. I could always count on him to be the voice of reason. Once I got past the mother ordeal, I pretty much went through the same thing with Richard’s parents. His mother had taken it especially hard, even going as far as to say that I was trying to keep them away from Richie.

I adored Richard’s family, but even Susan Slick’s tears couldn’t deter me from my goal. After assuring that I’d send pictures every month and visit regularly, she calmed down.

I was sad to leave behind all that I knew and loved, but this was for the best. I truly believed the only way I could heal after losing Richard was making a fresh start in a new location with my son.

Things went by pretty quickly. The houses sold surprisingly fast and for more than I asked, thanks to the seller’s market. I had everything packed and ready to go within a couple weeks of sales, and had already contacted a real estate agent about the purchase of a home and a site to open up my restaurant.

I was excited for the first time in months.



L.A. was not really what I expected. For some reason, I thought it would be a little more glamorous with a star on every corner. My moving guy did kind of look like Harrison Ford, albeit a broke one, but it was the closest I'd gotten to a star.

Grace offered to take me around, but she was a busy woman and I didn't want to impose. I had my car shipped over so after a week there, I decided to familiarize myself with the city. I thought New York was a traffic nightmare, but L.A. made it look like nothing. Sure, there were a lot of bad New York drivers, but they had nothing over L.A. drivers, and hand to God, I had to pull off Interstate 5 because of a high speed police chase.

What a welcome to the city. Luckily, Richie sat in the back strapped into his car seat, playing with his toes obliviously. It was then I decided I'd had enough exploring for that day and decided to stop to get something to eat.

We found a little diner off the interstate in a small neighborhood I wasn't familiar with, but it seemed safe enough. Once I got my baby settled down next to me, I ordered my food. It had been a trying day and I was starving. I pulled out a small bottle of juice for Richie and handed it to him. He wasn't quite seven months yet, but he was already holding his own bottle.

He slurped greedily at the nipple and I giggled at how he devoured the juice. "You little pig," I teased. He grinned as though he understood me, never letting the bottle fall out of his mouth.

"Excuse me, miss."

I turned around and expected to see my waiter, but instead, it was one of the most gorgeous men I'd ever seen. When I say gorgeous, I mean he was make-you-want-to-thank-his-mama hot. It wasn't as though I was in the market for a relationship so soon after Richard's death, but I could still appreciate a good-looking man when I saw him.

This man was tall, but not overly so, standing about six feet, give or take an inch. His features were so well defined they looked as if they'd been sculpted by a master artist. Clear hazel eyes stared from a smooth bronzed face. His full lips were curled into a smile, revealing strong looking white teeth. He had long, black hair pulled back into a ponytail. Judging from the sharpness of his features and the texture of his hair, it was obvious he had mixed ancestry.

This was the kind of man who'd make a gal want to have his baby.

"Ma'am?"

His inquiry broke me out of my trance. I must have been staring and I felt like an idiot. I can't remember the last time I'd reacted this way to a man before. "Uh, yes, what can I do you for? I mean what can I do for you?" I shook my head, realizing how idiotic I probably sounded. Dummy, I silently chastised myself.

His smile widened. "I couldn't help notice when you walked in, but I was wondering, if that's your child?"

Okay, Mr. Good-looking had just went down a notch in my book. Just because my baby was considerably lighter than me, with blue eyes, didn't mean I'd kidnapped him. I can't believe the ignorance of some people. I'd been asked that question several times when I was out with Richie.

"Whether he is or not isn't any of your business."

The mystery man blushed. "I meant no offense. I just wanted to say that he's a beautiful little boy.

Oh brother. That comment wasn't any better. Was he one of those sickos who liked little kids? I pulled Richie closer to me and gave the man a "watch it motherfucker" look. Richie squawked in protest at being held so tightly, but I didn't release my hold on him. "Uh, thanks," I said, making it clear that he wasn't welcomed at my table.

"I think you have the wrong impression. My name is Decker Robinson." He said it as if that was supposed to mean something to me.

"So?"

He seemed disappointed that I didn't jump up and down with glee for him. "I suppose you haven't heard of me then."

"Should I have?"

"Well, my last two movies won awards at several film festivals including the ones in Toronto and Cannes."

"Wanna cookie?"

He shook his head in apparent frustration. "May I sit down?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

Richie made his displeasure more apparent when he started to cry. I immediately went into mommy mode and lifted him into my arms. "Mommy's sorry. Shh, don't cry, baby." I rocked him until he calmed down.

I looked up to see Decker staring at us with an interested look in his eyes, but the look wasn't directed at me, it was directed towards Richie. To my annoyance he sat down across from me.

"I didn't say you could sit down."

"Please hear me out. This isn't what you think."

"Oh yeah? If you're such a mind reader then tell me what I'm thinking."

“I believe you think I’m some kind of weirdo with an unhealthy interest in your son, and while I’m interested, it’s not for reasons that you think.”

“Oh? Why are you interested in my son?”

“I think he’s what I’ve been looking for. He’s got the look and I couldn’t help but notice how well behaved he seems.”

This jackass had five seconds to either leave my table or clarify himself, otherwise I was going to go upside his head, the perv. “That still doesn’t explain anything.”

“I’ve been given a large budget to direct a movie about the gritty life of an undercover cop who’s a recovering alcoholic on the road to redemption after losing his family. He meets and falls in love with a woman who has a son, but past mistakes come back to haunt him. Now someone wants him dead and kidnaps the woman and her baby. I think your son looks a lot like the actress starring in the role as the lead woman.”

He wanted Richie to be in a movie? Was he kidding? My baby could be a star? Every mother dreamed of their children doing something special, but this was so out of the blue. “Are you yanking my chain? Wait a minute. Am I on Candid Camera?”

“Not at all.”

“Why haven’t I heard of you?”

“I’m known in Hollywood, but I haven’t had my big break out film yet. I think *Road to Redemption*, that’s the name of the movie by the way, will be the movie that makes me a household name.”

“Don’t you have auditions or something like that?”

“We’ve had auditions for the past month, but everyone in the cast has to be just right. Time is of the essence. The producers are forcing me to choose someone soon because time is money, but I don’t want to



compromise the integrity of the movie by casting someone who I don't think will fit in the film."

"How is it that a big time director is hanging out in a diner?"

"Directors have to eat too."

"Who's the actress in the movie?" If this was for real, it sounded really exciting.

"Effie Rodriguez."

"Oh my God, I've heard of her. She was in *Hurting for Love*. I love her." I could see why he would think that Richie kind of looked like her. They had about the same skin tone though my son was a little darker. She had big blue eyes as well.

He smiled then, obviously realizing he was getting through to me. "Yes, she's an up and coming actress. If I play my cards right, this role will earn her an Oscar."

"That's pretty ambitious of you. So who's playing the role of the cop?"

"A hot new actor who has Hollywood buzzing. Actually, he did a lot of Broadway stuff before he started his film career. Dawson Powers. Ever heard of him?"

Fate was a son of a bitch.

## 14. *When Fate Steps In*

“I really don’t know what to tell you. This is your decision to make,” Grace said over coffee later that night. So much for the voice of reason. I was hoping that she’d give me a resounding hell no and that way I could push Decker’s offer from my mind.

“I can’t believe you’re sitting there so calmly telling me that it’s my decisions. I thought you’d be all piss and vinegar,” I eyed her critically.

“And why should I? Do you think I should be mad because of what Marcus did to you and Richard? The truth is, that will always bug the hell out of me, but we both know Richard wouldn’t have wanted us to live our lives full of hate. Besides...I...” she broke off, her green eyes darting nervously away from mine.

I knew she was hiding something from me, and considering the last year of my life, I hated secrets. “Grace, what aren’t you telling me?”

“It’s nothing.” She quickly brought the coffee to her lips, probably using it as an excuse not to answer me. I crossed my arms over my chest and gave her my “I could wait all day” look.

“Grace, neither one of us is leaving this table until you tell me what this nothing is.”

She sighed in apparent defeat. “Fine. The truth is I was there the day when Marcus came to the hospital to apologize to Richard. I told him to get the hell out of Richard’s hospital room. He didn’t leave, though.

Marcus stayed until he did what he went there for. He also apologized to me, as well.”

I don’t know what I’d been expecting to hear, but it certainly wasn’t that. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“I don’t know. I know what Richard’s letter said, but I didn’t think you’d particularly care that I was there or not.”

“Why wouldn’t I care? What happened? I mean Richard’s letter said that he apologized, but do you agree with him? Was Marcus sincere?” I shouldn’t have cared as much as I did, but I couldn’t help it.

Grace cleared her throat, eyes downcast. “I think he was. That was the confusing part. I’d been so prepared to see the cocky son of a bitch I’d talked to on the phone, but he was like...”

“Like what?”

“Very contrite. I don’t really know how to describe it other than the fact that he really looked like hell, as if this issue had been keeping him up for weeks.”

I shrugged with a nonchalance I didn’t feel. “So what? He’s an actor. I’m sure he could turn it on and off if he really wanted to.”

“I don’t think so. I thought he would lose it when we rode in the ambulance with you.”

I paused. “When he what? What are you talking about?”

She took a deep breath, her eyes locking with mine, and I felt like her mother confessor for some reason. “The day I came to your house in New York to confront you about Richard, and you passed out, Marcus rode in the ambulance with you. He held your hand the entire way to the hospital and at times, he looked like he’d cry. I think I knew then that he really cared about you.”

“But where was he when I came to? I thought he’d stayed behind.” I felt confused. This wasn’t information I’d been prepared to hear.

“I ran him off. I...I was so angry about what he’d done, and in my twisted way I blamed him for your being rushed to the hospital and for the possibility of your losing the baby. I said some pretty horrible things to him, and after a while, he left. But not before he relayed a message, which I never told you.”

I was almost too scared to ask, but I had to. “What was the message?”

“He told me to tell you that if you ever need him for anything at all, he’d be there for you.”

What could I say to that? As far as I was concerned I’d moved on with my life and he was just another chapter I’d closed. Why did Grace have to tell this to me now when I was just beginning to pick up the pieces in my life again?

“He was there?” I asked dumbly.

“Yes. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. I guess I’m no better than him, considering I kept that information from you.”

My mind tried to process what this could mean. If Marcus did have real feelings for me, then where did that leave us? Could it mean that our friendship hadn’t been a lie after all? The last time I remembered seeing him was in the hospital, and to be honest, I never thought I’d see him again.

“April, please say something. Scream at me. Yell at me. Do what ever, but say something. This silence is killing me.”

I looked at her. “What do you want me to say?”

She sighed. “Tell me I’m a piece of shit. Tell me I’m a horrible person. Anything is better than the silence.”

I rolled my eyes at her dramatic words. The one thing I’d learned about Grace in the short time I’d known her was she had a flare for the

dramatic. “Grace, I don’t think you’re a piece of shit or that you’re a horrible person.”

She smiled, giving me a hopeful look. “Then you’re not mad at me?”

“What’s to be mad about? What you told me wouldn’t have made much difference to what happened. I would have chosen Richard regardless. I don’t regret anything I’ve done. Marcus was a complication in my life that I probably didn’t need at the time anyway. You probably did the best thing.”

She breathed a sigh of obvious relief. “Oh, thank you. I thought for sure you’d hate me for keeping that from you. I guess in a way, I was being selfish.”

“How so?”

“Because at the time I didn’t really know what your feelings were for Marcus, but with him out of the equation, you’d surely go back to Richard.”

I rolled my eyes at her reasoning. “I would have gone back to Richard anyway. It doesn’t matter what Marcus said.”

“Well it’s not like I knew that. When I’d talked to him on the phone, he’d intimated that you two were more than friends.”

“Hardly,” I snorted

“I know that now, but at the time I didn’t. What was I supposed to do? He stood in the way of my cousin’s happiness and, forgive me, but I had to make a choice between him and Richard, so you know who I chose.”

“That’s understandable. Look, you have nothing to be upset about, Grace. I think if our roles were reversed, I’d have done the exact same thing.”

“Thank you, April.”

“There’s nothing to thank me for.”

“So.” Grace ran her finger around the rim of her coffee mug in a casual gesture, before continuing. “Are you going to let Richie be in that movie? I mean this is a great opportunity for him, and Decker Robinson is an up and coming director in Hollywood.”

“How do you know so much about him?”

“I do own a television, you know. Anyway, I think it may be a wonderful opportunity. You can put aside some money for Richie’s college fund.”

“Uh, your cousin left me a very wealthy woman. My son’s college fund is taken care of.”

“Well duh, but you know how the saying goes, you can never be too rich or too thin.”

“Grace, I’m happy with what we have. I’d trade all this money away if I could have Richard back with me.”

“I didn’t mean to imply—”

“I know.”

“Are your real reservations about this whole thing because of Marcus?”

I mulled it over in my mind before answering. Was that where my reluctance came from? I honestly didn’t think so. So why did my pulse race when I thought of seeing Marcus again. “I don’t know. Richie is so young and I’m not really interested in him having all that exposure. I think this is decision that he should make on his own, and as he’s too young to do so, I’ll have to say no.”

Grace shrugged. “It’s your decision.” Thankfully, she changed the topic after that.



I walked into the diner, where I was supposed to meet Decker. When I'd called his number on the card he'd left me after my meeting, he didn't take my news too well. Usually, I'm very assertive, but Decker had a way of wearing you down. He wouldn't take no for an answer and asked if I could meet him for lunch.

He'd suggested a nice swanky place on Rodeo drive, and although the thought of lunching on the popular strip was appealing, I wanted to meet on neutral territory. I suggested we meet at the same diner we'd first seen each other.

Decker was waiting for me. He stood with a huge smile on his bronze face when he saw me approach. "April, I'm glad you could make it. Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"I can't stay here for long. I left my son with his cousin, and I don't want to keep her waiting for very long," I sat down. I didn't want to give him the impression I planned on sticking around longer than I needed to. I trusted Grace with Richie because I knew how much she loved him, but she'd done so much for me, I felt bad asking her for favors sometimes.

"That's fine. Our other lunch companion should be here shortly."

"Other lunch companion? I understood it would be just you and I meeting. Who else is coming? Well, actually it doesn't matter. This is just a courtesy appearance on my part because I already told you I wasn't interested in putting my son in front of the cameras."

"Decker, what made you choose this little hole in the wall place?" A familiar deep voice asked from behind me. I didn't have to turn around to see who it was. I knew we'd meet again. It almost seemed inevitable. There were just certain people in your life you're just destined to meet over and over again and it seemed like Marcus was my certain someone.

Decker grinned at the new arrival, who walked up behind me. "Dawson. Thanks for joining us."

Marcus walked around the table until he was in my line of vision before taking the empty seat next to Decker. His eyes didn't quite meet mine, but I realized his awareness of me. Call it intuition, but I just knew. When he sat down was the first time he looked my way. There was a faint smile on his face, but a wary look in his eyes. I wondered what he was thinking.

"Hello, Marcus," I greeted.

"April." He nodded. Our eyes locked.

"Do you two know each other?" Decker asked.

I broke eye contact to look at the director. "Yes. Uh, we...uh...we went to high school together."

Decker smiled. "What a small world. I just may get what I want after all. You didn't say you knew April when I mentioned this meeting to you." He eyed Marcus curiously.

Marcus looked sheepish. "Well, when you mentioned the woman you met in the diner, I had to come and see for myself to see if this was the same April." He turned to me. "Don't be mad at Decker, I asked to come along. I told him that maybe I could convince you to change your mind about letting your baby appear in the movie."

"I'm not angry at Decker...or you," I answered.

Marcus's eyes widened. He seemed surprised at my response. "You're not angry?"

I shrugged? "Should I be?" What was the point of getting upset? I'd already determined that I'd never be rid of Marcus.

"I just thought..." he broke off.

"You just thought what?" I prompted when he didn't finish.

"I just thought you'd still be mad after what happened."

"I was a little ticked off, but Richard wouldn't have wanted me to carry around unnecessary anger."



“I was there, you know,” he said quietly.

I knew what he was referring to immediately. “Yes, I believe I did see you there, but I wasn’t sure until now. “

“I’m truly sorry for what happened.”

I had a feeling he was apologizing for more than just Richard’s death. I never really dwelled on what would happen if Marcus and I would meet again, but I didn’t quite picture it like this.

“You two seem to know each other beyond high school.” Decker laughed.

“We do actually,” Marcus admitted.

Decker looked at us with a shrewd expression on his face. “Is there a story here that I should know about?”

“Nothing I want to talk about. Look, I’m going to make this short and sweet for you both, but I’ve already made my decision about my son. I think he’s way too young to be in a movie, besides, I want him to be a kid for as long as possible. I don’t want him to turn out like the *Different Strokes* crew, or that redhead freak from the *Partridge Family*. What was his name? Danny something...”

“Danny Bonaduce?” Decker offered.

“Oh, yeah. I caught his reality show a couple times and I honestly wished I hadn’t. I want none of that for my baby, thank you very much.”

Decker sighed patiently like he was dealing with a child. “I understand your concerns, but there are just as many child stars who have made good: Jodi Foster, Diane Lane, Ron Howard, and Drew Barrymore.”

“Uh, wasn’t Drew Barrymore an alcoholic at twelve? No thanks.” I didn’t want to back down from this.

“If she doesn’t want to do it, Decker, I’m sure you can find someone else. I mean a lot of babies look alike,” Marcus spoke up.

I smiled at him gratefully. “Thank you, Marcus.” Decker looked perturbed, but I didn’t care.

“Don’t turn me down out of hand. Look, what if I took you for a tour around the studio and you can see how things are. You’d always be allowed nearby in case he needs you.”

The thought of touring a real movie studio did sound like fun, but I just couldn’t see why he couldn’t get another child for the part. “That sounds lovely, but—”

He stopped me by grabbing my hand. “April, I’m not a man who takes no for an answer, and I usually get what I want.” The way he looked at me said that he wanted something more from me than he’d originally let on. I didn’t know what to say. “I uh—”

“April, can I talk to you for a minute, alone?” Marcus got up and taking my elbow before I had a chance to answer.

He ushered me away from the table to an abandoned booth. “What was that all about?” I asked the minute we sat down.

Marcus looked me dead in the eye. “I don’t want you getting any romantic ideas about Decker Robinson.”

I gasped at his nerve. Not that I was interested in Decker like that anyway, but how dare Marcus think he could dictate my life.

“You’ve got a huge set, buddy, if you think you can tell me what to do.”

“Oh, but I can. As tacky as it may sound, now that Richard is gone, do you think I’d let you get involved with some other guy?”

*Why me?*

Balls.

Marcus had huge set of balls the likes of nothing I’d seen before. Was he serious? Did he honestly think he would accomplish anything by

making this ridiculous declaration? “Marcus, have you been performing the stunts in your movies?”

His brows joined. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m saying that you must be doing your own stunts, because I think you’ve bumped your head one too many times. Are you nuts? What makes you think you can walk into my life yet again and make such a ridiculous statement? Just because I said I wasn’t mad for what you’ve done, I still haven’t forgotten. Do you know I can relate most of the tragic events in my life to you?”

“April, I—”

“April, nothing. For that short time when Richard and I were apart, you were my friend or at least, I’d like to think you were. Can you just let me have those fond memories and not try to change them? It’s bad enough that you’re here at all. The reason I came to California in the first place was to start a new life for me and my son, meaning I wanted to start fresh. No memories of old hurts, no reminders of the past, and definitely no you.”

His eyes were suddenly glints of green fury. “So basically you’re running away? Didn’t anyone ever tell you running away won’t solve your problems?”

“Oh, so now you have a psychology degree? Well excuse me Dr. Dawson, but when I want you to analyze my life, I’ll ask. I’m so out of here. Have a nice life.” When I moved to get up, he grabbed my wrist, keeping me at the table.

“No. You’re not going anywhere. Not yet anyway.”

“Let go of me. We have nothing more to say to each other.”

“I think we have plenty to say to each other. Why do you think it is that you’re trying so hard to forget me? Is it possible that you’re not as indifferent to me as you’d like to pretend?”

I tried to shake my wrist free, but his grip tightened. “Let me go, dammit! Not only are you crazy, you have the biggest ego of anyone I’ve ever met. Richard is barely cold in his grave, yet you would dare question my feelings for him?”

He shook his head. “I’m not questioning your feelings for him. I’m questioning your feelings for me.”

“What feelings for you? Anything I may have remotely felt for you was killed by your deceit. Marcus, please let go of my arm, otherwise, I’ll have to scream this place down.”

“April, if you would hear me out, for just ten minutes, I won’t bother you again.”

Something told me he wouldn’t let up unless I agreed. I rolled my eyes before plopping back down in my seat. “Is that a promise?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Talk.”

“Can I have a few more minutes?”

I glared at him. He had a lot of nerve. Why was I always so surprised when he made audacious statements like that? “Now you’re pushing it.”

He sighed. “Okay. Look, in no way, shape, or form would I ever try to marginalize what you felt for your hu—Richard.” He broke off as if the words were difficult for him to form. “Look, I truly sympathize with you and what you’ve been through, but I’ve never kept my feelings for you a secret.”

“Marcus, please don’t.” I didn’t want to hear this. I couldn’t let him pull me back into his drama-laden world.

“You said I could have my five minutes, so hear me out, okay?”

I sighed, not quite meeting his eyes. “Say what you need to say, but it doesn’t mean I’m going to like it.”

“I didn’t think you would, but I appreciate your listening.”

I shrugged, glancing at my nails as though they were the most interesting things I'd ever seen.

"April, you may not believe it, but I really did fall in love with you. All that I told you at the reunion is true, but I left something out. In the beginning, it was like you said. My ego couldn't stand the fact that a woman who I could have gotten so easily before when we'd first met was rejecting me. I know that sounds egotistical, and I have no excuses for it. I think there was a part of me that always cared about you, even in high school but I was too big of a jerk then to admit it."

I looked up at him and damn if I didn't see sincerity within the depths of his eyes. "Marcus, I don't know why you're telling me this."

"I'm telling you this because it's a long time coming. This is something I should have told you back in high school, back at the reunion, back when you were temporarily split from Richard, but something always held me back."

"What?"

"Not getting what I want."

I pursed my lips. Was he retarded? How many times did I have to tell him that I didn't want him in my life anymore before he finally got it? Did I have to literally beat him in the head with a brick? Although the thought was rather appealing. "Not getting what you want? Do you mean getting in my drawers again? If your thoughts are heading in that direction then you can just forget it."

"No. That's not what I was talking about. Would you let me finish talking before you interrupt again? I guess I'm explaining it badly, but in my mind I knew that if I told you how I felt, then for the first time I'd have to face up to the possibility of rejection. I might actually have to deal with someone telling me no, and I didn't like it. I rationalized by

saying that as long as I kept the truth from you then maybe I'd eventually get what I wanted."

He paused for a moment and I waited for him to finish, literally biting my tongue to keep myself from speaking. I didn't know where he was going with this and I wasn't sure if I really wanted to, but I didn't want to wonder about the what-ifs in life.

"When I really got to know you is when I realized my feelings were indeed real. It scared me, because you weren't exactly my type. While I thought you were cute, in my twisted mind, a guy like me wasn't supposed to notice a girl like you. My dad was slightly racist and getting involved with a black girl would have been another reason for him to get on my case. I was a piece of chicken shit coward for even letting that enter into the equation, because I missed out on an opportunity to possibly have a great relationship with you. Those hurtful things I said to you at Keely's party still haunt me to this day."

He'd told me most of this at the reunion, so what he was trying to get at now I wasn't sure. "Why are you telling me this now? It can't help anything when there's so much water under the bridge."

"Because it needs to be said. I'm going to keep saying them until you believe me. I truly do love you, April. There have been other women in my life, but I always end up comparing them to you—your smile, the way your eyes crinkle at the corners when you laugh, and the way you look at me when we're talking as though we're the only two people in a crowded room. Hell, it's been over ten years since we made love that one time, and I still haven't found a woman who excites me sexually the way you did."

"Marcus, we didn't make love—we fucked."

"April, don't cheapen it by saying that."

"But that's what it was? It was a pity fuck, wasn't it? You wanted to see what it was like to screw the chubby chick."

“It wasn’t like that at all and I wish you’d stop putting yourself down like that. Yes, the surface mattered to me before, but not so much now, and I do find you attractive. Very attractive. When I look back on my shallow years, I hate myself.”

“And I hated you too. I hated you for making me feel less than nothing, and I hated you for trying to come between me and Richard, and keeping us apart when he needed me. I know I said I wasn’t angry, but when I think about it, I wonder how you slept at night knowing what you’d done?”

“It wasn’t easy, April, but as selfish as it sounded, it wasn’t about what you wanted, it was about what I wanted, and when you broke up with Richard, it gave me a chance to finally get you at last. I’m not saying that it’s right, but I justified it by saying that the spark was still there. Despite what you say, when I kissed you at the party you catered for me, you responded to me. I could feel it in your body. I could see it in your eyes. Call me conceited if you like, but I think you did have feelings for me too.”

“Stop it, Marcus, this conversation is getting ridiculous, I was with Richard. I chose him at the reunion and I chose him after that party you tricked me into catering for you.”

“I know, because it wasn’t our time then. I truly believe that there is such a thing as soul mates, and you’re mine.”

I didn’t want to hear this. Why was he making me so unsure of myself all over again? “Well obviously you’re not *my* soul mate because Richard was mine.”

He sighed as though he were running out of patience, which was fine with me, because maybe it was finally getting through his thick skull—his thick, gorgeous blond skull. Dammit. Where did that thought come from? “Don’t you think it’s quite possible there is more than one soul

mate out there for some people? If you think about it, there are billions of people in the world.”

“So why don’t you find one of your other soul mates and bother them?”

“Because you’re the one who consumes my thoughts morning, noon, and night.”

“Don’t do this to me, Marcus. Richard has only been gone a short time, and I don’t know if you and I can ever have anything. I would always remember what you did and I believe that will come between us.”

With downcast eyes, he nodded. “I understand. I didn’t really want to put you on the spot actually.”

“Then what was the point of this conversation?”

“Just to tell you how I felt. I was hoping...I was hoping that if nothing else you’d consider being my friend again.”

Was he for real? “So you can eventually get into my pants?”

“Will you stop it? This isn’t about sex for me, and as conceited as you may think it sounds, I can get sex whenever and wherever I wanted. If all I wanted was sex, I wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you now.”

“I don’t know, Marcus. You’re an enigma I haven’t managed to solve yet. Haven’t you figured out yet that true love is unselfish? Richard knew what true love was. As misguided as he was for lying to me about having an affair that never existed, he did it out of love. He didn’t want to see me suffer even when he knew his last days were upon him. You, on the other hand, it’s always been about you, and that’s unnerving. You walk back into my life after nearly a year and you have the nerve to tell me not to get involved with other men? That’s not love.”

“I realized that when I saw Richard in the hospital. I knew that if I truly loved you, I had to let you go. Even though I do strongly feel that you’re my soul mate, if you and I are truly meant to be together, you’re



going to have to be the one to come to me. You're going to have to want it, too."

This statement certainly took the wind out of my sails, but it didn't stop me from adding, "I'll never return your love."

He gave me a knowing smile, which bugged the hell out of me, but his next word was surprising. "Okay."

Just like that? So anti-climatic? Why did I feel a sudden wave of regret? Or was it? Whatever it was that I'd just felt, I immediately pushed it back. This wouldn't do at all. What could I say to that? I racked my brain to come up with a witty rejoinder. "If you're willing to leave me alone, then why did you tell me that you didn't want to see me with other men?" I wanted to know.

"That didn't really come out the right way. I said what was on my mind, instead of what I wanted to say. I freely admit that I've been selfish for most of my life, and I'm still working on being a better me."

"So what did you mean exactly?"

"If you're going to get involved with anyone...just be careful. Decker's a charming guy, but he's trouble."

I started to laugh. "Says the pot about the kettle."

He grabbed my wrist from across the table. "I'm serious, April. I noticed the way he was looking at you, and I just want you to be careful. He's not the one woman type."

"Not that I plan on becoming involved with anyone, but when I need love advice, you'd be the last person I ask."

He nodded his head decisively. "Understood, but heed my warning anyway. I know you may have reservations about me, but if you ever need anything, and I mean it, anything at all, would you consider giving me a call?"

I sighed. Dare I let him into my life again, even for the littlest thing?

He must have read the uncertainty in my face. “You don’t have to say anything now, but take my phone numbers and if you use them that would be great, but if you don’t...I’ll understand.”

Was this truly the new and improved Marcus Dawson or was he just trying to run another scam on me? What harm would it do if I took his phone number, especially if it served to get him off my back?

I nodded in acquiesce, and he shot me one of his killer smiles that used to drive me crazy. I wasn’t completely unmoved by it now either.

While he wrote his contact numbers on the back of a paper napkin, my cell phone rang. No one had this number except for Grace. I hoped everything was okay at home. “Hi Grace, what’s up?”

“Richie! Oh, my God, the baby!” Grace screamed on the other end hysterically and I knew something was wrong. This had to be a mother’s worse nightmare.

The fact she was in extreme panic mode put me in extreme panic mode. “What’s wrong with him?”

“I called 911. They’re on their way,” she sobbed.

Tears sprang to my eyes. What was wrong with my baby? “Grace, what’s wrong with Richie?” I practically screamed into the phone.

“He’s stopped breathing!”

## 15. Confusion Sets In

I don't know how it happened, but I found myself bundled up in Marcus's Mercedes SUV. Discerning the situation, he'd grabbed me and hustled me past a stunned Decker. I think the director may have wanted to follow us to find out what was going on, but we didn't give him time to.

"It will be okay, April," Marcus assured me, driving like a bat out of hell. I sobbed in the passenger seat only speaking long enough to give him directions to Grace's. This couldn't be happening to me, it just couldn't. Richie was all I had left in this world that had any meaning. He was a living legacy to what Richard and I had shared.

I couldn't believe the Lord would be so cruel to snatch my darling little boy away from me. Several things ran through my mind as I thought why he'd just stop breathing. Wasn't he past the SIDS stage? Sometimes at night, I'd go into his room and sit for hours just listening to him breathe, making sure everything was okay.

I loved that little boy so much, words couldn't adequately describe those feelings. If he died, I think I would too. My life would have no meaning without his smiling face to greet me in the mornings.

We were halfway to Grace's house when my cell phone rang. I knew it was Grace again, but I was too scared to answer it in case it was bad news. I knew answering that call was important, but I couldn't do it. I didn't want to hear that my baby was dead, and I hadn't been there with him when it happened.

“Aren’t you going to answer the phone?”

I shook my head, clutching the phone in my hand with a death grip.

“It could be news about your son. You have to answer it.”

“I can’t. I just can’t do it.” I sobbed even harder, feeling like a big scaredy cat.

With a sharp turn of the wheel, he pulled over to the side of the road, and put the car in park. He then turned to me and grabbed the phone out of my hand, answering it. “Hello?” Pause. “This is Marcus. April is a bit out of it right now and having difficulty talking.” Another pause followed. “I’d put her on the phone if I thought she’d talk to you. Look, she’s sitting here with me right now and we’re on the way to the house so whatever it is that you need to tell me, I’ll relay it to her.”

I watched him with bated breath looking for signals, wondering if he’d be giving me bad news at the end of the telephone conversation. “Okay, gotcha. We’ll be over there right away.” He clicked the end button on my phone and handed it to me.

“Richie is on his way to the hospital in an ambulance. The paramedics were able to get him breathing again, thank God. They think it may be something as simple as an allergic reaction, but won’t know for sure until a doctor looks at him.”

I let out the breath, I’d been holding. “Oh, God, I don’t know what to say. I thought...I thought it would be bad news.”

“I know, hon. Considering what you’ve been through it’s understandable, but let’s get to the hospital. I think the ambulance should be there by the time we arrive. “

I nodded, feeling only slightly better. He said it could be just an allergic reaction, but it could also be something else. I just hoped it wasn’t the something else.

“Are you going to be okay?” Concern was evident in his clear gaze.

“I think so; just get me to the hospital. I need to be with my son right now.”

Marcus looked like he would say something, but changed his mind. He nodded and put the car in gear. We drove the rest of the way to the hospital in silence. It felt kind of weird being here with him like this, but I was glad to have another person’s presence. I doubt I would have been able to handle this ordeal on my own.

When we got to the hospital, Marcus dropped me off in front of the ER, while he went to look for somewhere to park. So frazzled was my state of mind, I didn’t question why he was sticking around now that I was here. The minute I got to the ER, a tearful Grace rushed over to me. Her eyes were blotchy and red from crying. “April, I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault. I’ll understand if you completely hate me.”

I walked into her embrace and we held each other tight. “Why would you say it’s your fault?”

“Because when I was feeding him, I gave him a little taste of peanut butter. I was eating peanut butter crackers, and I just put a dab of it in his mouth. I’m so sorry.”

It took me a moment to process what she’d just told me. “Have the doctors said that’s what it was for sure? An allergic reaction?”

“They think so. They’re running tests on him now. I believe you can go in there. The doctor is waiting to talk to you.”

She led me to the ER room, where Richie lay on the bed, looking drugged. His entire body was covered in hives. My poor baby, I reached out to pick him up, but the doctor, an older gentleman with iron gray hair and bushy brows, took my arm. “He’ll be okay. I need to talk to you.”

“Why does he look so out of it? He’s not making a sound.”

“I administered a light sedative, nothing too strong, but he’ll be a little lethargic for the next few hours.”

“He’s not going to die, is he?” I asked with worry.

The doctor shook his head. “I should hope not. He’s a trooper. We’re running some tests to confirm my suspicions, but from what I’ve already observed, I can say with a ninety percent certainty that it was an allergic reaction. And according to your friend out there, she thinks it may have been the peanut butter she fed him. Peanuts are among the most common things to be allergic to. If my suspicions are confirmed and I think they will be, you’ll need to be careful about the things he’s fed. Your son had a severe reaction and it was a good thing your babysitter had the wherewithal to dial 911, otherwise he may not have pulled through.”

I suddenly felt weak, not thinking my legs would be able to support me much longer, especially when I thought of how close I’d come to losing him. “What do I need to look out for?”

“Well of course peanut butter is a no-no and peanuts. You’ll need to avoid feeding him anything with peanuts in it or anything cooked in peanut oil. I have a pamphlet of things you need to look out for.”

“Doctor, I don’t know how to thank you. When can I hold him? I need to hold him.”

“As soon as we finish our tests, but I’d like to keep him here overnight for observation.”

“Overnight, but...”

“Mrs. Slick, your son has suffered a traumatic experience for one so young. I’d feel a lot better if we kept him here for the night. We’ll set him up in the nursery and you’re welcome to stay overnight with him. We can give you a room to stay in.”

“Yes, of course. I can’t leave him, but can I at least talk to him? I know he’ll feel better when he hears my voice.”

The doctor looked like he wanted to say no, but he must have sensed my desperation and nodded. “But only for a few minutes, then we’ll have to finish the tests we want to run on him.”

“I understand.” I didn’t wait for him to reply before rushing to where my son was. He lay in what looked like a giant incubator. He looked so weak and helpless. I wanted to lift him up and hold him, if just to let him know that I was there, and how much I loved him. “Richie, Mommy’s here.”

And damned if he didn’t turn his little head toward me, blue eyes peeking from slit lids. He gurgled weakly, lifting his hand in a starfish salute.

“Hi, baby. I love you so much, honey. I want you to get well soon, so we can go home.”

He gurgled again, and my heart did a flip. I never thought it was possible to love someone as much as I loved my son. They say when you gave birth to your child it was instant love. I didn’t think that was particularly true because there were a lot of bad parents out there who neglected their children for one reason or another, but I did feel instant love for my son. Just imagine a little being growing beneath your heart for nine months and then coming into the world naked and helpless, depending on you to take care of you, trusting you to protect them.

I would walk through fire for Richie, kill for him, and die for him. Nothing seemed more important to me at that moment than him. I stood there for several minutes just talking to him and he seemed responsive to me. I think he could feel my love and it helped him get stronger.

With a heavy heart I left him again when the doctor gently reminded me that he needed to run more tests. If they were sure of what it was, then I wasn’t sure why they had to run more tests, but I suppose in this litigious society they would rather be safe than sorry.

When I walked into the lobby, Marcus was standing there, an anxious expression on his face. “Where’s Grace?”

“She went to the cafeteria to get a cup of coffee. The poor woman was beside herself. I think she blames herself for what happened.”

I sighed. Grace couldn’t have known this would happen even if giving a seven-month-old peanut butter wasn’t a good idea. “It’s not her fault. It’s no one’s fault.

He gave me a funny look. “Not even my fault?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, in the diner you said that you can attribute all the bad things that have ever happened in your life to me. I’m sure this latest incident has only strengthened that opinion.”

“Oh that. Look, I’m really sorry about that. Sometime my mouth gets ahead of my brain.”

“But if you weren’t thinking it, you wouldn’t have said it.”

He truly sounded hurt. I didn’t mean to do that to him. I really didn’t, but Marcus just seemed to be destined to be someone who wouldn’t go away. Sometimes when he was around, I was glad of his company like now, and then there were times when I wanted to punch him in the face, like when he pulled that stunt with Richard.

Were the things he told me in the diner just a crock of shit? I didn’t know, but for some reason, his words frightened me. What if I could love more than one man? Were the confusing feelings I had experienced, because deep down I cared for Marcus too? I truly didn’t know, but I didn’t think I could afford the luxury of his friendship, not so soon after losing Richard. First of all, in my mind it would have been disrespectful to my husband’s memory to even contemplate a relationship with another man so soon, let alone one with Marcus. No. I just couldn’t allow him into my life one more time.



“I’m really sorry I said that. Look, I really appreciate you bringing me here. Please send my apologies to Decker.”

“Just like that, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“Meaning thanks for the ride now get out of my life.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Of course you did. What else could you have meant by it? But hey, I understand. I wasn’t just giving you lip service at the diner, if you truly don’t want me in your life then I won’t bother you again.”

“Please try to understand, Marcus, I just can’t handle the kind of relationship you want from me.”

“I’m not asking for a relationship. I just want to be your friend.”

“Yes, my friend for now with hopes that there will be more in the future.”

“I’ve made no secret of that, but like I said, if that isn’t what you want then fine. April, no matter what your feelings for me are, you’ll always be here,” he said, placing his hand over his heart. He walked closer until I could practically feel him breathing down on me.

I stood completely still when he grasped my chin between his fingers, tilting it up to meet his descending lips. His kiss was gentle and brief, yet it filled me with a delightful wave of desire.

He lifted his head and stepped away from me before I could respond. “Take care of yourself, April, and remember, if you need me, I’m just a phone call away.”

When he turned away to leave, instinctively I knew that if he did, he would walk out of my life for good. For some reason, I couldn’t let that happen. Call me crazy, but something compelled me to call him back. Maybe I was a glutton for punishment, but I couldn’t help myself. “Marcus, wait.”

I walked right into his waiting arms. Our lips met in a hungry, explorative kiss. His fingers dug into my short curls. His tongue pushed past my lips, seeking and tasting me. I felt as though I'd melt right then and there. I wrapped my arms tightly around him, pressing my body against his.

It had been a long time since I'd felt real passion. The last time I'd made love was nearly a year ago because Richard and I hadn't been able to make love because of his condition. I felt as if my body was awakening out of a deep sleep. My pussy tingled with awareness.

I couldn't believe how badly I wanted this, and right in the middle of a hospital lobby. Suddenly I heard a clicking sound, which broke me out of this sexual trance I was in. I looked over to see someone snapping pictures of Marcus and me.

"Shit, goddamn paparazzi," he muttered, letting me go. He ran to the cameraman, who by now was running out for his very life.

Oh my goodness, what had I just done? My son was in the hospital, and I had just kissed a man I swore I'd never have anything to do with again, and to top it off, I had a feeling my face was about to be in the tabloids.



"Mom, I swear I didn't run off to California to take up with Marcus, it just happened," I said for the fifth time.

"Well it certainly looks like it, April. Richard hasn't been dead for a year yet but your face is all over the tabloids like some cheap starlet. I was just on the phone with a very hysterical Susan, who's not very happy that you've taken up with someone so soon after her son passed away."

Shortly after Richard and I were married, my parents and Richard's parents had become close friends. I loved the Slicks to death, but Susan could be a bit high strung at times. I could just imagine how that conversation had gone between her and my mother.

Just as I suspected, the picture of Marcus and I kissing in the hospital was in every major tabloid and some legitimate papers as well. He was, after all, one of Hollywood's most eligible bachelors. To my surprise, not only did they publish the picture from the hospital, but there were pictures of Marcus and me in New York. When the hell were those pictures taken and why were they suddenly popping up now?

The worse part was that some nosy reporter had dug up some things about my life. They talked about the relationships I'd had in Europe, and my brief friendship with Marcus, even going as far as speculating on the paternity of my son.

That was low. I admit I used to read tabloids and even believed some of the crap written. My reason had been, where there's smoke there's fire. I wish I didn't have to go through this to realize that theory wasn't true.

Anyone who looked at my son could see he was the spitting image of his father. I didn't need reporters camped out in front of my residence, and I certainly didn't need my mother-in-law's hysterics, or my mother's disbelief.

"Mom, you're just going to have to trust me. You raised me to tell the truth and I have far too much respect for you to sit here and lie."

A heavy sigh splintered through the phone. "I know, baby, but you have to admit that it did look a little suspect seeing you with this man, especially since you two have a history together."

"Past history."

"So there's no feelings involved on either side? That kiss looked a little more than one of friendship."

My mother knew a little bit about my history with Marcus, but I hadn't told her everything. "He claims he has feelings for me, but with his track record, one can never be sure."

"And what is his track record?"

"It's a long story, Mom. I don't know if I have the energy to get into it all."

"I think I have the right to know, especially when I have reporters calling this house trying to find out information about you. Your father and I try not to pry in your life, but you know just as well as I do how unfair it was of you to take off to the other side of the country with our only grandchild like that with no real explanation. It was apparent to us you were running away from something. Is Marcus that something?"

I closed my eyes, briefly counting to ten. I didn't move to California to run away. Or did I? I did at least owe my mother some sort of explanation. "Well, I hope you have some time because this may take a while."

"I'm not going anywhere."

I leaned back on the couch, throwing one arm over my eyes to shut out the light. Taking a deep breath, I told her everything, starting from when I attended Franklin, and then the reunion, and the uncertainty over Richard and Marcus. I even told her how close I'd come to losing Richie and that Marcus had ridden in the ambulance with me. The story ended with Marcus coming back into my life and trying to stake a claim. "So, that's it in a nutshell: my history with Marcus. He's like a gnat at a picnic. He won't leave me alone."

Silence greeted me on the other end of the line. "Mom, are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here," her voice sounded strangely off.

"Say something."

“I...I’m not really sure what to say. That’s an awful lot to take in. I know you went to school with Marcus, but I didn’t realize all this happened. I thought we were closer than that.”

Lord, have mercy. Was my mother about to act like the injured party here? “Mom, we are close.”

“Obviously not as close as I thought if you’re keeping something like this from me. It almost makes me wonder if those tabloids aren’t far off the mark.”

I gasped at her insinuation. Being my mother was the only thing that saved her from being hung up on. “I didn’t deserve that, Mom, and you know it.”

For a minute I didn’t think she’d respond, but she finally did after a long sigh. “You’re right. You didn’t deserve that and I’m sorry. I just can’t help being a little sad—”

“But—”

“No. Let me finish. I have to stop thinking of you as my little girl. You’re a grown woman with a beautiful child of your own. You’ve done some amazing things in your life and I’m very proud of you. I think about how you used to be excited about telling me everything going on in your life, but that time has passed. I knew it was bound to happen one day, but I guess I’ve been in denial until now. You have no idea how much I miss you, baby.”

Tears sprang to my eyes. It was touching to hear these words from my mother because I really needed them right now. It felt like it was me against the world and I was losing. “I love you too, Mom.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t take my question the wrong way, but I need to know for my own peace of mind. Did you love Richard? I mean really love him?”

“Mom, you know I did.”

“That’s what your mouth is saying, but don’t you think in some way your being with him was clouded by this whole Marcus affair?”

Was it? No it couldn’t be. I loved Richard, with all my heart. When he died, I wanted to die with him. I squeezed my eyes tight and remembered how he’d made me feel, the way his kisses tasted, and how my pulse would race whenever he’d been near me. I could honestly say that I truly loved him.

“Yes, Mom, I loved Richard very much.”

My mother sighed in what sounded like relief. “I’m glad, baby. He was a good man. And I know he thought the world of you.”

Talking about Richard still made me sad when I thought of not being with him again, or how he’d miss seeing Richie grow up, but I no longer went into depression mode whenever his name was mentioned. Maybe this was the first sign of healing. Lord knows, I’d spent enough tear-filled nights over him. “He was a very special man,” I replied quietly.

“Yes. He was. Can I ask you another question?”

“Sure.”

“How do you feel about Marcus?”

I laughed humorlessly. “Mom, why would you ask that question? I feel nothing for Marcus.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

“Oh, come on. This conversation is getting ridiculous.” I snorted.

“I don’t think so. Whenever you mention Marcus’s name, there’s always something behind it. I won’t think less of you if you have feelings for him too.”

“I don’t have feeling for him!” I yelled into the receiver.

“Watch your tone, young lady.”

I was thirty years old and still my mom could be me in check with the blink of an eye. “But Mom, I can’t have feelings for him. I loved Richard.”

“But that doesn’t mean you don’t have feelings for Marcus too.”

“That stuff only happens in the movies.”

“I don’t think so. As it so happens, you were one plane ride away from being April Bordeaux.”

“What?”

“Your father wasn’t the only love of my life, you know. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t regret a single minute of being with him, but shortly before I met your father, I was dating someone else. Jason Bordeaux was so beautiful. He had the most dreamy gray eyes and all this curly red hair. I loved running my fingers through it.”

“Gray eyes? Red hair? A white guy? I didn’t know you were down with the swirl, Mom.” I laughed.

“I wasn’t. He was a brotha, just a very light one. That was the problem.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Honey, you know just as well as I do that prejudice can sometimes come from within one’s own race. I met Jason in college. He came from a prominent Creole family in New Orleans. Just about every single member in his family could pass; even him, except for when he stayed out in the sun a little too long. Anyway, the two of us fell madly in love. Things were wonderful until he took me home to meet his family.”

“They didn’t like you? I find that hard to believe. Everyone likes you, Mom.”

Mom chuckled. “Thanks, baby. It wasn’t a matter of whether they liked me, the fact is; I didn’t fit their ideal of who Jason should be with. My pedigree wasn’t grand, but I suppose that would have been forgiven if

I weren't dark-skinned. You know how a lot of older southern blacks are. They're color struck and Jason's family was no different."

It saddened me to hear my mother had experienced this. I'd been discriminated against before, but never by another black person. "Were they really nasty to you?"

"Not outright, but I could tell they weren't happy with me, although his grandmother did keep going on about having nappy-headed babies. Besides, they had a candidate in mind for Jason already, a neighbor who he'd grown up with. Bessy Mae Dubois was her name. She had the look and the right background. It hurt to be disliked over something I had no control over, but I knew as long as I had his love we could make it through anything."

"So what happened?"

"I'd be lying to you if I said it didn't put a strain on the relationship. Jason was very unhappy because he loved his family a lot, and he loved me just as much. It tore me apart to see him like that. Well, I got tired of seeing him so unhappy so I told him to start dating Bessy Mae to see if there was a chance for them."

"Why would you do something dumb like that?"

"Because I needed him to be sure that if it came down to a decision between me and his family, that he'd make the right one."

"What did Jason think about this?"

"He hated the idea, but eventually gave in when he realized I wouldn't change my mind. Anyway, I enlisted in the military because at the time, I really wasn't sure where my life was headed and there was a huge drive at the time to recruit more women. During my travels I met your father. I think it was love at first sight."

"So you didn't really love Jason?"

"Oh, I still loved Jason, but I loved your father too."



“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Why doesn’t it? The world isn’t so black and white, baby. I think it’s possible to love more than one person. How do you think people are able to remarry after their first spouse dies? Do you think the second spouse is loved any less?”

“Of course not.”

“Then there you go. Honey, you’re still young and I know you have set ideals about what love is. Sometimes we only meet that one person to spend the rest of our lives with, but out of the billions of people on Earth, surely there’s more than one person out there meant for us. You and I just happened to meet two of our special someones in our lifetime.”

That was almost exactly what Marcus had said. Was it possible I did have feelings for him that I’ve been suppressing all this time? At the thought of his kiss, a shiver ran down my spine. Not wanting to analyze my situation further, I asked, “So what happened to Jason? You obviously ended up with Daddy.”

“Oh, well, after I met your father, I knew I loved him, but I wanted to be fair to Jason and see what he’d decided to do about his family situation. I planned on flying to New Orleans to see him, but at the airport, your father caught up with me before I got on the plane. He said he wouldn’t let me go and that was that.”

“Way to go, Dad! Well I can’t say I’m sorry you didn’t end up with the other guy. What happened to him?”

“He ended up marrying Bessy Mae.”

“So he did love her.”

“Not really. Once I was out of the picture he thought it would be easy to do what his family wanted him to do. Turns out, he couldn’t stand the woman. They were divorced within a year of marrying. Ironically he ended up re-marrying a woman from Sudan a few years later. Your father

and I were invited to the wedding. She was gorgeous with the most beautiful onyx skin and brilliant white smile. You should have seen the tight faces of his family. I loved it! He's happy now. Very happy."

"Guess he had a taste for dark chocolate." I giggled.

"I guess he did, but the point of my story is that things happen for a reason. Everything isn't so cut and dry and isn't going to happen the way you want them to. It's quite possible that Marcus keeps popping in and out of your life, because he's meant to be in it."

"Or he's a stalker." I snorted. "Whichever the reason, every time he comes around, something bad happens. Why should I welcome this jinx into my life?"

"So you honestly have no feelings for him?"

"No. Yes. I mean...I don't know what I mean. What should I do, Mom? He wants to be in my life again, and I don't know what to tell him."

"Tell him yes. Sooner or later you'll have to face the truth. Just like Jason needed to know how he felt about Bessy Mae, you need to know how you feel about Marcus, or you'll be living the rest of your life wondering what if."

"Do you ever wonder what would have become of your life had you chose Jason?"

"Sometimes, but I wouldn't be human if I didn't. But you know what? I think my life turned out exactly as it was meant to be. Baby, don't live your life with regrets. You owe it to yourself to know for sure how you really feel."

Even though I knew Mom was probably right, the thought of contacting Marcus filled me with dread.



“Are you sure you don’t want me here for moral support? I’ll kick his ass if he gets out of line. I’ve been taking cardio kickboxing lately and I think I can take him,” Grace offered.

“As tempting as that sounds, I couldn’t ask you to cancel your date for me. Besides, haven’t you wanted to get with Jesse since you first laid eyes on him?” I asked with a laugh. I stole a quick glance at Richie who was bouncing up and down in his walker. He seemed fascinated with the latest Baby Einstein DVD I’d popped in. I knew he’d be amused for the next hour.

Grace tossed the heavy curtain of red hair behind her shoulder. “This is true, but for you, I’d cancel the date even though I was planning on giving him some tonight.”

I giggled. “On the first date?”

“Why not? I planned on giving him some ass eventually, so why not tonight?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of the expression of not buying the cow if the milk is free?”

She shrugged one elegant, silk clad shoulder. “This guy can have as much milk as he wants.”

I shook my head with a chuckle. I loved her to death, but I wished she were a little more careful with the choices she made concerning men. Things were still working out with our living arrangement, but I knew it would soon be time to move. I’d been in California for nearly three months now and was no closer to finding a home than I was when I’d first moved here. I didn’t know why, but everything the real estate agent showed me was either way too big for just my son and me, or just not right.

I definitely didn’t want to get to the point where we overstayed our welcome although I knew Grace would never say so. She was like a

dotting older sister. We enjoyed each other's company and she adored Richie.

"Well, just be careful that Mr. Happy is wearing a rubber."

"Don't worry about me, I'm always protected. Anyway, I'll just be a phone call away if Marcus gets out of hand. Do you think it's safe for the baby to be here when he comes over?"

"Marcus wouldn't hurt Richie. If I thought that, I wouldn't have invited him over."

Grace took a seat next to me on the couch and put a thin arm around my shoulders, her little black dress riding up her hips. "Babe, whatever happens, just know that I'm here to talk about it."

"Thanks. You're a good friend," I said, and I meant it. I don't know what I would have done if I didn't have Grace in my life right now. It was as if Richard had sent me a guardian angel in disguise of his cousin. She motivated me, listened to me cry, and supported me through a tough time in my life. I don't know if I had ever truly had a friend like her before, one who didn't want anything in return.

"Okay, if you don't need anything, I'm going to head out. I'm supposed to meet Jesse at this new restaurant on Rodeo."

I thought it was a little shady that Jesse wasn't coming to the house to pick her up, but it was none of my business. There was nothing I could tell her except to be careful. I only hoped this Jesse guy didn't turn out to be as big a jerk as the last guy she dated.

I pinned a smile on my face with a nod. "Have fun."

Richie turned his head as if he understood Grace was on the way out the door. He smiled and gurgled at her. Grace walked over to him and planted red lips on his forehead. "Oops, let me get that mark off his head."

"No, don't worry about it. You go on. See you when you get back."

“Thanks, darling. Don’t wait up though, because if the evening goes as planned, you won’t see me until morning.” She giggled before exiting, leaving behind the heavy scent of Chanel Number 5.

Fortunately I had a box of baby wipes handy. A mom with an infant couldn’t go anywhere without them. I took one out of the container and walked over to Richie, who was still bouncing up and down with a look of glee in his blue eyes. He turned his head and waved at me. “Mamamama,” he babbled incoherently, although I liked to think he was trying to say Mama. He was only ten month old so there’d be plenty of time for him to start talking.

I wiped the lipstick print off his forehead and kissed his cheek. My heart swelled with love for this little person who stared back at me so trustingly. Every day he was getting bigger and looking more and more like his father. And every day I loved him more than the day before.

He placed a hand on the side of my face and giggled. I hoped I was doing the right thing by inviting Marcus over here to talk.

After the conversation with my mother I thought a lot about what she said. Maybe it was possible that I had some residual feelings for Marcus, but I’d never admitted to them being more than just a crush at best. Of course there’d been the brief period where Richard and I were broken up when I thought there could be something between us, but I’d been so mixed up then, I didn’t know whether I was coming or going.

Instead of contacting Marcus right away as my mother had suggested, I gave it some time. I focused all my energy into starting my restaurant. I found the perfect spot in a trendy place in L.A. I didn’t plan on having a gimmick, or outrageous prices, just really good food. Obtaining a liquor license, filling out the proper paperwork and getting the place inspected was time consuming.

I was currently going through the interview process to find the perfect staff. The last thing I wanted was bunch of wanna-be actors calling out sick if they got a call to do a toothpaste commercial.

My restaurant could only keep me so busy though. At night, I'd think of Marcus and what I'd say to him if I finally did break down and call his cell phone.

Right after the hospital incident, I tried to pretend he didn't exist. We didn't part on good terms. I still shook when I remembered what happened after he came back from chasing that photographer.

"Damn, the little fucker got away," he'd said, storming back into the hospital lobby, practically breathing fire. I'd never seen him so angry before, but I was too preoccupied at the thought of our picture being in some sleazy rag.

"You couldn't catch him?" I asked in a panic. "I don't want to be tabloid fodder."

"Do you think I want to? The little shit had someone waiting outside for him with his car running. They got some nice pictures of me beating on the window."

I slapped my hand against my forehead. "Great. This is the last thing I needed."

"It'll be okay. We'll get through this."

"Maybe you'll get through this, because you're used to publicity, but I don't want this kind of attention. I have my son to think about and my family. Oh God."

He walked over to where I stood and put his arms around me. "We'll get through this together."

I planted my hand against his broad chest. "Oh, hell no." I pushed him away, putting as much space between the two of us as I could get.

“This is what got us in trouble in the first place. You’re a jinx, Marcus. I just wish you’d stay out of my life.”

I couldn’t tell what he was thinking at that moment. It was as if his face were made of stone, he was so still, but for some reason, I could tell that I’d hurt him. That bothered me. I felt guilty as hell, but instead of being ashamed of myself, I got angry with him, for making me experience these feelings. “Don’t look at me like that Marcus. I didn’t ask you to bring me here anyway. I didn’t ask you to keep popping up in my life either.”

“How else would you have gotten here in one piece? You were too much of a wreck to drive here yourself.”

He was absolutely right, but I wasn’t in the mood to be fair. “So what? I could have called a cab, that way I wouldn’t have to be annoyed by you right now.”

“Is that what you really think, April?”

I shrugged. “You’d think someone like you would have moved on with his life by now, but you keep haunting me like a ghost, and I’m tired of it. Shoo, fly, don’t bother me.”

“April, I know you’re stressed right now and you don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Don’t try to analyze my feelings. It’s not appreciated, and I wish you’d get it through your thick skull that your constant appearances in my life aren’t welcome.”

His face lost all color. “I see.”

“Do you really? Because it doesn’t seem to have sunk in yet.” I knew I was laying it on thick, but it was as if a demon was riding me. “And while you’re at it, tell that director friend of yours that I’m not interested in his offer. If my son wants to be an actor one day, it will be his decision.”

“April—”

“Good day, Marcus.”

“Please just listen to—”

“I said good day,” I snapped, turning my back on him.

I couldn't see his face, but I heard him sigh. There was so much sadness in that little sound that it nearly compelled me to turn around and apologize, but I didn't. Confusion seared through me. I couldn't figure out why I felt this pang of regret. I didn't know why I cared so much. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

With my back turned to him, I didn't see him move, so when his hands gripped my shoulders, I yelped in surprise. Trying to tear myself away from his hold, I squirmed and wiggled, but his grip merely tightened.

Marcus leaned forward until I felt his warm breath against my ear. “You can fight me all you want, but it won't change how I feel about you.”

I poked my bottom lip out mutinously, not giving an inch. My traitorous body however, grew warm. My pussy grew warm with need. What was it about this man that could make me forget all reason? I didn't want to feel this way about him. Hadn't he caused me enough trouble as it was?

“Please don't,” I pleaded. Was that my voice? That high pitched whining? I sounded pathetic to my own ears, so I could imagine what it must have sounded like to him.

“I know Richard was special to you, and I've learned to accept that, but can't you accept that maybe, just maybe, we might have something special too?”

“We could never have what Richard and I had. You're not even fit to mention his name,” I hissed, renewing my efforts to escape his grasp. This only resulted in him pulling me roughly against him. My back stiffened. “Let go of me.”



His fingers dug into my shoulders until I gasped. “Not until you admit that there’s something between us.”

“Never.”

Marcus brushed his lips against the shell of my ear, making me shiver with an irresolute yearning. My mind said no, but my body screamed yes. The tight peaks of my nipples pressed against my blouse, aching for the feel of his palms against them.

“I can feel your heat. Your mouth may say one thing, babe, but your body will always give you away. Fine. You don’t have to say a thing because we both know the truth.” He kissed me on the cheek, and I fought to remain still.

“I see that now isn’t the right time for this, and maybe it won’t be for a long time to come, but I’m willing to wait. Just remember what I said. If you need anything at all, I’m here.” He gave me another kiss on the cheek before releasing his hold on me. I didn’t have to see him leave to know that he was gone. I just knew.

## 16. *I Love Him...I Love Him Not*

That had been three months ago and I hadn't heard from him since. Not even a week had passed since Richie had come home from the hospital before the picture of Marcus and I kissing was published. That was when all hell broke loose. I couldn't go anywhere without someone trying to photograph me and ask questions.

There were times when I couldn't take Richie outside for a stroll because of some nosey reporter or photographer waiting in the bushes to ambush me. Whoever coined the term "stalkerazzi" wasn't kidding. They were everywhere. They made me realize I had made the right decision for my son. There was no way I was going to expose him to that. Crawling out of bed every morning was hard enough without some asswad trying to take your picture.

Marcus's movie had started filming and I began to hear more about him and his co-star Effie Rodriguez. The starlet had a reputation for falling for her leading men. Maybe she and Marcus would hit it off and he'd stay out of my life, but even when the thought crossed my mind, it depressed me.

Why was I letting this affect me more than I should have? It drove me so crazy I finally broke down and called him. I didn't know what to expect when I called his cell phone, but instead of getting him on the line, I got his voice mail. It took me nearly a minute to figure out whether I wanted

to leave him a message or not, so by the time I built up my courage, the phone cut off on me.

I dialed his number again, this time leaving a message. Within ten minutes, he called me back. It had been an awkward conversation. He seemed cautious and a bit wary, but agreed to come see me.

Just then the bell rang, breaking me out of my reverie. It was Marcus. I looked at Richie for encouragement. “Well he’s here, kiddo. Should I let him in?”

He grinned and whacked me in the eyes. “Ouch, you evil little monkey!”

This must have amused him, because he burst into a fit of giggles. “No hitting Mommy.”

“Mamamama,” he babbled with a smile, deep dimples popping out. This kid could charm the rattle off a snake.

“Your cuteness isn’t always going to get you out of scrapes,” I mock scolded him as I stood. He gave me a large smile, showing every single one of his teeth. God, I loved that little boy.

I took a deep breath before walking towards the door. I felt more nervous than a prostitute in church. Marcus stood on the other side of the door looking finer than I’d ever seen him. His arms were full with multi-colored roses.

“Marcus, you shouldn’t have...” The determined look on his face halted my speech.

Before I could utter a protest, he tossed the flowers to the ground, and pulled me in his arms. The heated pressure of his lips against mine stole my breath away.

There’s nothing to describe my reaction to him except to say I melted. My body awakened. It had been so long since I’d been touched like this,

felt like this. Moisture formed at the junction of my thighs and my nipples tightened against the coarse material of my lace bra.

I pressed my body against his, feeling the hardness of his erection pressing against my thigh. I was transported back in time, when we were back in high school, but before all the drama, when nothing else stood between us. If I only pretended, I could easily imagine it had always been like this. My body was on fire for his.

I let him take charge of the kiss, that way I could later say he made me do it, although the two of us knew I was a willing participant. He grabbed a fistful of my short locks and yanked my head back. I gasped more from surprise than pain. Taking advantage of my parted lips, Marcus slipped his tongue into my mouth.

My tongue tentatively pushed forward, meeting his, circling and entwining, moving in a seductive dance with his to the beat of our hearts. The kiss was hungry, aggressive, and passionate. It was everything I'd missed and dreamed of for so long. He ground the lower half of his body against mine, making me wetter with each passing second.

I couldn't believe how horny he'd gotten me in such a short period of time. My fingers dug through his silky blond hair, holding his head closer to me. He tasted so raw, so male, and I loved it. The scent of Christian Dior wafted to my nostrils, titillating my senses.

Fire. I was on fire for this man and had I stopped to think of what I was doing in the doorway, I'd have been appalled, but standing here like this in his arms felt so right. There wasn't a damn thing I could do about this tender assault except total surrender.

"Mamamama," Richie babbled loud enough to break me from the sexual trance.

I lifted my head, appalled at what I'd just done, with my son so close. Marcus's face turned beet red. "Please believe that I didn't mean for that to happen, but when I saw you—"

"Say no more, Marcus. It shouldn't have happened," I said, adjusting my clothing.

"You're right. It shouldn't have happened with your son here, but you and I both know it was going to happen sooner or later."

"Marcus, I'm not trying to hear this right now."

He lifted one dark blond brow, arms folding over his massive chest. Had he been working out? My mouth began to water. *Get a hold of yourself, girlfriend*, I scolded myself. Now was not the time to start drooling over him like an idiot, especially when my son was calling for me, and all the unresolved issues that stood between us.

"Then why did you invite me over?"

"To talk. Just to talk, nothing else. My son is here for God's sake. You didn't think I would do something with him watching us, did you? I may be a lot of things, but I'm not a bad mother."

"I didn't accuse you of being one. Stop being so damn touchy. Are you going to invite me all the way in or not?"

"Yes, of course, come in."

He bent down to scoop up all the flowers he'd tossed aside, and then handed them to me. "I'm sorry for grabbing you like that. I won't offer you any more excuses because you obviously don't want to hear them. I'd meant to give you these when you opened the door."

I took the heavily scented bundle he'd offered. "Thank you. They're very beautiful. You didn't have to bring me flowers you know."

"I know I didn't have to, but I wanted to."

I felt shy all of a sudden and I didn't know why. This was just Marcus. The same Marcus who'd made me cry in high school. The same

guy who'd tried to disrupt my life more than once and who'd also tried to keep Richard and me apart, but he was also the same man who made my panties wet and my pulse race. And the same man who confused me with emotions I had no business feeling.

"I'll go put these in some water. My son is in his walker watching Baby Einstein so you won't be bothered by him."

"He won't be a bother at all. I like kids."

"You don't have to tell me that to impress me."

"I didn't say it to impress you. I really do like children. I hope to have some of my own one day." The way he looked at me when he said that was almost as if he was saying he wanted me to have his babies. The thought wasn't completely unwelcome, but I wasn't about to say so.

I turned around abruptly, not wanting him to read my facial expression in case I gave something away. Assuring myself that Richie was okay, I headed to the kitchen to put the roses in the vases. Just what he was trying to prove by bringing all this, I didn't know, but it was rather sweet. A brief smile touched my lips. It was hard to believe Marcus and I were together like this after all this time. So much had happened in our lives in the past thirteen years, the successes, the tragedies, and the feelings.

I only hoped by the end of the night I knew what I wanted to do with my life, because whatever I decided, it would not only affect me, but my son as well. I didn't waste much time putting the flowers in a vase filled with water, because I didn't want to leave Richie alone with Marcus for too long. It wasn't that I thought Marcus would do anything bad to my son, but I was wary of leaving Richie alone with anyone he didn't know.

I paused when I came upon the sight that greeted me in the living room. I backed up slightly so Marcus wouldn't notice me. He had taken Richie out of his walker and was holding him. The two of them looked at

each other as if they were trying to reach an understanding. My son didn't cry around strangers so it didn't surprise me that he didn't mind Marcus holding him. What did amaze me was to see Richie with such a solemn expression on his little face. He nodded at nearly everything Marcus was telling him and it was the most incredible thing I'd ever seen.

"I'm hoping to convince your mother how I feel about her. I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, kid, but I must have done something right to know someone as wonderful as her," Marcus said to Richie.

I covered my mouth to mask the gasp that nearly escaped my lips. I'd learned that an eavesdropper never heard anything good about themselves, but I couldn't help listening.

"Do yourself a favor, kid, and don't make the mistakes I did. When you find that special someone, tell her how you feel and don't let her go. I should have told your mother how I felt when I had a chance, but I was too big of a jerk to realize what I could have had with her. You could have been my son you know." He paused and gave Richie a kiss on the forehead.

My son cooed at him and grabbed a hunk of his hair. Marcus laughed. "Easy, little man, if I go bald one day, I don't want it to be now." He gently detangled Richie's hand from his hair. This interaction yanked at my heartstrings. Marcus really was good with children. Who'd have thought?

I was about to make my presence known when Marcus began to speak again. I felt like such a rat for listening in on something he obviously didn't intend for me to hear, but I couldn't walk away if I wanted to.

“I love her, little man, but I’ve done a lousy job of proving it. I wish you could talk and tell me what the key to winning your mother’s heart because it’s been driving me crazy.”

“Mamamama,” Richie babbled and then smiled, obviously proud that he could contribute to the conversation. As though sensing my presence, he turned his head towards me, causing Marcus to look in my direction.

Busted.

I pretended like I was just walking back into the room. “I just put the roses in some water. Um, would you like something to drink? We have bottled water, cranberry juice and orange soda,” I said nervously.

Marcus gave me a long, assessing look before he answered. “I don’t want anything, thanks. I hope you don’t mind that I took him out of his walker. He was bouncing up and down, and I thought he wanted to get out.”

“He always does that, but it’s okay that you took him out. I gave him his bath earlier so all I have to do is change him and give him his bottle so he can go to bed. Do you mind waiting while I do that? I actually didn’t expect you to be here so early.”

He grinned sheepishly. “I’m sorry. I know I should have called ahead to tell you I’d be a little early.

“No big deal. Let me take care of the rug rat and I’ll be with you shortly.” Richie held up his arms to me when I reached down to pick him up. “Oh boy, you’re getting heavy. You’d better start walking soon or Mommy’s going to hurt her back.”

“Mamamama,” he mumbled, leaning his head against my chest. I knew he was getting tired because he wasn’t squirming around like he usually did. “I won’t be long,” I said to Marcus before going upstairs.

I took my time getting Richie ready for bed, trying to delay my confrontation with Marcus for as long as I possibly could. That kiss had



knocked my socks off, but was physical attraction enough? Could I get past all the things that stood between us? It was hard to reconcile that Marcus actually loved me. I was sure he wasn't aware that I'd been listening. He may have been a good actor, but no one could fake the sincerity of the words he'd spoken to my son.

When I put Richie in his crib, his eyes began to droop. The poor thing had been out with me all day and was pooped. I looked over his crib and blew him a kiss. "Night night, Richard James. Mommy loves you." I called him Richard James every night before he went to sleep, because it reminded me of his father, and by saying his full name it was almost like Richard was there with us. I know it sounded silly, but it was comforting and I didn't want my son to ever forget he had a father who'd loved him very much.

When I went back into the living room, Marcus was waiting for me. He'd loosened his button-up shirt and his shoes were haphazardly lying on the floor. "Uh, why don't you make yourself at home?" I said sarcastically.

He stood. For some reason he looked nervous and that wasn't an emotion I associated with him. Cocky, yes, but never nervous. I sat down on the La-Z-Boy cattycorner to the couch. "Are you sure you don't want anything to drink?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks. I had dinner before I came over."

"Oh? Who with?" I couldn't help but ask. It was certainly none of my business, but I just couldn't stop from asking. Call me a glutton for punishment, but I needed to know.

"I had dinner with Effie."

"Oh. So...so I guess the two of you are getting serious then."

His brows furrowed together when he looked at me as though I had two heads. "What are you talking about?"

“Aren’t you two Hollywood’s new golden couple?”

“What made you think that?”

“It’s all over the paper, the two of you kissing and carrying on.”

A slow smile spread across his chiseled face. “Are you jealous?”

“Hell no!”

“You said that awful quick.”

“So what? I’m just being decisive, and would you please stop hovering over me like that? I wish you’d sit down.”

His grin widened. “I’ll sit down if you sit next to me.”

“No.”

“Why not? Are you scared?”

“I’m not scared of anything.”

“Only of your feelings for me.”

This conversation was getting ridiculous. “I don’t have any feelings for you.”

He walked over to my chair standing directly in front of me, an amused expression on his face. “Liar.” He held out his hand to me.

“I am not scared.” I enunciated every word like I was back in grammar school.

“Prove it. Come seat next to me.”

“I don’t have to prove a thing to you, and there’s nothing wrong with a little self preservation. You can hardly blame me if I don’t want to be mauled by you again.

“You wanted that kiss as much as I did. I’ll admit I took you off-guard, but you certainly weren’t protesting. Why not be honest with yourself and admit that you care a little about me?”

“Lust doesn’t translate to love.”

“But didn’t you invite me over to find out exactly how you felt for me? That’s not going to happen if you keep playing this game of make

believe.” This time when he held out his hand to me, I took it. I wasn’t a coward, and I couldn’t go on pretending I didn’t feel a little something to him.

“I...I don’t want to have sex, I just want to talk, okay.”

He smiled. “How about a little necking?”

“Marcus, this isn’t funny. I’m very serious.”

“Okay.” Before I realized what he was up to he plopped down on the couch, forcing me to go with him. I fell over his lap in a disheveled heap. When I tried scrambling to my feet, he pulled me down on his lap. “Now talk.”

“Marcus, this isn’t funny. Let me up this instant.”

“You wanted to talk, so talk.”

“Not like this,” I found it difficult to breathe. He smelled so good, felt so good, his scent was driving me wild, and I already knew how he tasted. Out of all the people in the world, why did it have to be him made me feel this way? Was it love? I don’t know. My feelings for him were different than what I felt for Richard, but they weren’t any less intense.

That was the confusing part about the whole thing.

“Why not, April?”

“Because when you hold me like this, I can’t think. I knew it would be this way if you came over here, that’s why...” I couldn’t tell him what was really on my mind, but I should have known he wouldn’t let it go.

“That’s why what?”

I took a deep breath. I’d come this far, so why not get everything off my chest. “That’s why it took me so long to call you. I feel something for you, but I’m not sure what, and these feelings that I feel, I don’t want to feel.”

He nodded in apparent understanding. “Now was that so difficult to admit?”

“A little.”

He smiled. “That’s all I needed to hear, but now that I know, I think we shouldn’t see each other.”

Was this some kind of joke? Did he get me to admit how I felt just so he could tell me, thanks but no thanks? My face grew hot with embarrassment. I pushed against his chest, feeling my chest tightening. “Let me up,” I hissed when his arms tightened around me.

“No. I think you misunderstood what I meant.”

“I’m not stupid. I know exactly what you meant. If this was your way of getting back at me then you’ve won. Congratulations. Just know that I never want to see your crummy face again.”

“April, would you at least listen to me?”

I was past the point of being hurt now. I was pissed. “What can you possibly say after wringing that confession out of me, just to say you don’t think we should see each other again? It’s that actress, isn’t it? You really are seeing her, aren’t you? Oh, let me guess, she’s your perfect mate, but you want me to be your on the side girl, just like you wanted me to be in high school.”

He let me go, practically pushing me off his lap. I nearly fell when he stood up abruptly. “This is exactly why I said what I did. You may have feelings for me, but you don’t completely trust me. I love you, April, and I’ve figured that no matter what I do or say to convince you of my sincerity, you won’t believe me. You’re going to have to come to that conclusion yourself.”

My eyes narrowed. What was he getting at? “I don’t follow you.”

He sighed, raking his fingers through his hair. “When you called me, I thought you’d come around, but I can see that hasn’t happened. First of all, you know just as well as I do that the tabloids lie, as demonstrated by the way they handled our kiss in the hospital. Second, most of those

pictures taken of Effie and I were scenes from the movie we're filming, and finally, the only reason I agreed to come over was because I thought you finally knew your own mind. I've played the waiting game with you this long, so I can wait longer, but the next time around, you're going to have to be the one to come to me. We can't build on what we have until you can not only admit how you feel to me, but yourself as well."

"What do you want from me?" I whispered, on the cusp of complete understanding and total confusion.

"I think I was quite clear on what I wanted. Maybe it wasn't a good time to come back into your life just yet. I think you need to give yourself a chance to properly grieve for Richard, and then and only then, when you feel you're ready to come to me, I'll be waiting."

I crossed my arms over my breasts. "That's mighty presumptuous of you."

"I've learned a lot about matters of the heart, even if you haven't. Until you can get over the past and open your heart to me completely, we have nothing."

"What if I can't ever trust you? What if this is just a physical thing that fizzles out after we've been together for a couple months."

"That's a chance we'll both have to take. You could just as easily break my heart, you know. My heart has already been broken over you before, but I'm not going to let it stand in the way of something that was meant to be."

I turned my back to him, trying to get my thoughts in order. He was throwing phases at me like some lovesick poet and I didn't know how to handle it. It was too much, too soon. "See what kind of havoc you always manage create in my life? I was doing fine without you. I thought, with this move..."

“That you could run away from your problems without facing them?” He huffed. “Yes, I know what you were thinking.”

I turned on him feeling angrier than ever. “And who the hell are you to tell me what I’m thinking? So I admitted to feeling something for you. It’s just physical, it’s not love. I could never love someone as self-centered and egotistical as you. For all I care, you can go off with your actress friend and do whatever. Just stay out of my life, Marcus Dawson!” I screamed at him.

The crying of my son pierced the air. “Now see what you’ve made me do?” I hissed.

Marcus’s nostrils flared, and lips thinned to one angry line. “I’ll leave if that’s what you want, but even if I’m not physically in it, I’ll never be out of your life until you admit how you feel.”

“Besides lust I feel nothing. Now, I’m going upstairs to tend to my son. I hope you’ll be gone when I come back downstairs.”

When I turned to leave, he grabbed my arm. “I meant what I said. You’re going to have to come to me the next time.”

“That’s never going to happen,” I said defiantly.

“Never say never, sweetheart.” He grabbed my shoulders and gave me a long, hard, smoldering kiss. Just as I was about to lean into him, he let go, a triumphant gleam in his eyes. “Go to your son. I’ll see myself out.”

I watched him slide his shoes back on and walk out the house and out of my life. Was this the end? It had to be. We had no future together. Yes, there was a physical attraction, and I did care about him a little, but I still couldn’t trust him.

Richie’s cries brought me back to reality. I raced up the stairs to his room. He was sitting up in his crib, rubbing his eyes with chubby little fists, crying in apparent frustration. My yelling must have frightened him awake.

“Don’t cry, baby, Mama’s here.” I leaned over, lifted him up and carried him to the rocking chair in the corner of the room.

My presence seemed to calm him, and he stopped crying almost instantly. I rubbed his back while rocking him to sleep. I didn’t speak, because he knew night-night meant quiet time.

He gurgled and cooed, lazily playing with a button on my shirt before nodding off again. I desperately tried to forget about Marcus and what had just happened. I couldn’t let him into my life, I just couldn’t. That would be asking way more than I could give and I just couldn’t do it.

I’d have to forget about him and that was that.

## 17. *Advice From Above*

The next few months saw a lot of changes in my life. I finally found a nice home in a nice section of Long Beach with a huge backyard for Richie to play in. He was delighted with the swing set and sandbox I set up for him. The only problem I had was making sure he didn't eat the sand.

We celebrated his first birthday, and he was walking and running almost faster than I could keep up with him. He was definitely a handful. I had to hire a part-time nanny for when I had to work at the new restaurant I'd opened.

Lena, the woman I'd hired, was a retired schoolteacher who was great with my son. He loved her and it was obvious she loved him. It had taken me a while to find the right candidate to fill this position because Richie was my most precious commodity. Grace and I still remained close friends and met for lunch as often as our busy schedules would allow.

I spent my mornings with Richie before heading off to work. I'd hired two other chefs and a manager so things could run smoothly in my absence. Hiring people I could trust had been the toughest part of opening up Richard's Place, but I knew if I had good people on my team, my business would thrive.

After the restaurant opened, business was slow in the beginning, but word of mouth spread for the excellent food and cozy atmosphere. I didn't have a splashy grand opening, or celebrity endorsements, but



things were going well. I think one of the keys to the restaurant's success was that everyone got the celebrity treatment.

I did get a few celebrities who came to dine, but they were treated like everyone else. Some were a little miffed, but they all left satisfied after partaking in what my chefs and I had to offer, plus the excellent service. To my surprise Richard's Place was one of L.A.'s newest hotspots. Even with all my success and my time spent with Richie, there was still a void inside of me. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop thinking of Marcus.

Everywhere I turned, I saw his face on television, on the side of a bus, and in magazines. I'd heard on one of those entertainment shows that the work on his latest film was finished, and word had it things were steaming up with him and Effie. She used to be one of my favorite Hollywood starlets, but now I couldn't stand seeing her picture without wanting to punch her.

It shouldn't have killed me to see them together, looking so happy and beautiful, but it did. There was no way I was going to crawl back to him begging for a chance, especially after all this time when I still hadn't figured out exactly what I wanted from him. I hated people who couldn't make up their mind yet here I was wishy-washy and indecisive. I prayed on this issue, talked it over with my mom, and even talked to Grace about it, but still I couldn't get figure out what I wanted.

The anniversary of Richard's death snuck up on me like a thief in the night. I didn't even realize what day it was until I'd gotten a call from Susan asking me if I needed someone to talk to. I'd told her I would be okay and that I appreciated her call. I went through that entire day as if nothing heavy was on my mind, played with my son, had lunch with Grace, went to my restaurant, came back home to play with Richie and put him to bed before going back to my restaurant.

By the time I got home again, I was so exhausted I couldn't think straight, but I tossed and turned, unable to go to sleep. I tried closing my eyes, but that didn't work. I fixed myself some chamomile tea, but all that did was make me pee. It was nearly dawn before I shut my eyes, but my peace was short-lived when I heard a voice whisper my name.

"April."

My eyes shot open. The voice sounded so familiar, but it couldn't be who I thought it was.

"April," the voice said again.

I willed myself to open my eyes, afraid of what I'd see. "Richard," I said calmly, considering he'd been dead for a year. He stood there looking like he had when he was at his healthiest, so beautiful and full of life. The serene expression in his deep blue eyes had a calming affect on me.

I sat up. "What are you doing here? How are you here? You're..."

"Dead? We don't like to use the 'd' word where I've been. Let's just say my spirit has gone to the next level." He chuckled.

I scrambled out of bed to hug him, tears filling my eyes. Wrapping my arms around him, I buried my face in his chest, smelling a hint of the cologne he used to wear. It felt so good when he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me closer. "I miss you so much, Richard." I began to sob.

"Shh, it's okay, baby. I know. I've missed you too."

"You should see Richie. He looks just like you. You'd be so proud of him. He's smart and friendly. Everyone loves him."

"I know. I've been watching you two, and I am proud. Very proud. I couldn't ask for a better son."

I looked up at him then and touched his smooth cheek. I never wanted this moment to end, but something felt different. My love for him

was still there, but it had changed somehow. It seemed so surreal now. “I love you so much, Richard. I wish you didn’t leave me.”

“I know, hon, and that’s what I’ve come back here for.”

I sniffed. “You mean...you’re coming back to me? But how?”

He smiled faintly. “No, I didn’t mean permanently. I’m just here to talk to you. Why don’t you have a seat?”

“Can’t I just hold you a little longer?” I begged.

“If that’s what you want.” He smoothed my hair with the flat of his hand.

“I wish you hadn’t left me. I need you.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice, honey; anyway you haven’t needed me for the past year. You’ve done fine on your own, and I’m very proud of you as well. You’ve had many challenges and you’ve faced them. I knew you had it in you.”

“But I’ve been so lonely without you,” I sighed.

“April, you know how much I love you, right?”

I looked up searching his face. “Of course, Richard. I always knew.”

“Good. Then know that what I say next is out of love. It’s time for you to get on with your life.”

Why would he say this to me? “You want me to forget about you?”

“No, I’m not saying that you have to forget about me, but I do think it’s time that you stop living in the past. Sweetheart, I’m gone and I’m not coming back except in your memories and in here,” he said, pointing to the spot over my heart. “I’m honored that you feel that being with someone else would tarnish what we had, but it won’t. Just because you love someone else, doesn’t mean that you loved me any less.”

It suddenly dawned on me exactly what he was talking about. “Not Marcus. I don’t love him. I can’t love him!” I shook my head from side to side ferociously.

He grasped my chin in his fingers so our eyes could meet. “Sweetie, it’s time to stop lying to yourself. You’ve always loved him, even when you were with me you loved him. I knew this and accepted it, because I knew you loved me, too.”

“But how is it possible that I loved you both? Why was I so sure that you were the one?” I challenged.

“Because you wanted me to be the one. Marcus had hurt you before and you weren’t ready to take that next step with him. I guess in a way, I kind of took advantage of that.”

“No, don’t say that. You didn’t take advantage of me.”

“Maybe not in the traditional sense, but in a way I did. I think sometimes things really happen for a reason. I lived on Earth to help create life with you, but I think Marcus is the one who’ll be by your side for the rest of your life.”

“But...can we really get past all the old hurts?”

“Only if you learn to trust. I know you can do it, sweetie. There’s a lot of love in your heart if you’d only just let things happen. I’ve been watching him too, April, and he’s not the same jerky boy he used to be. Give him a chance.”

I wanted to deny it, but couldn’t. I loved Marcus and always had. “But I didn’t love you any less, I swear, Richard.”

“I know you didn’t. Your love for me was as genuine as your love is for him, except with me, we didn’t have so much drama between us. It was easier for you to allow yourself the luxury of our love.”

“So you think I should take a chance on Marcus?”

He smiled and grazed my cheek with the back of his knuckles. “I can’t tell you what to do with the rest of your life, but I will say that whatever you decide, I only want you to be happy. I love you and always will, but life is for the living, honey, and you have to live it to the fullest.”

I clutched him tighter, never wanting to let go. I closed my eyes and then felt the tender touch of his lips on top of my head. I don't know how long we held each other, but when I opened my eyes, I was laying in bed clutching my pillow tightly against me.

It had all been a dream.

But why did the faint smell of his cologne linger on my pillow and why did I suddenly feel so at peace? There could only have been two explanations. It was a beautiful dream, or Richard had really been here.

I hoped it was the latter.



It took me three weeks from my "talk" with Richard before I finally screwed up the courage to call Marcus. By now the papers were speculating whether he and Effie would tie the knot by the end of the year. If I was too late then so be it. I would at least get a chance to tell him how I felt.

I left work early that night, leaving the running of the restaurant in the capable hands of my manager. When I arrived at my house I sent Lena home and played with Richie until he got tired. I took a shower after I put him down for the night and then got the sudden inspiration to clean my house.

I knew these were stall tactics, but I had to talk myself up to doing it. When I finished scrubbing my two and a half baths until they shined, I decided it was time. It was nearly ten o' clock so I figured he would still be up. I only hoped wherever Marcus was that he had his cell phone on.

The first time I dialed his number I lost my courage and immediately hung up. I took several deep breaths before making another attempt. The

second time I dialed, the phone was answered almost immediately—but not by Marcus.

“Dawson’s phone,” the sultry voice answered. It was obviously someone in the industry since she was using his screen name. And the voice sounded awful familiar. In fact, I would bet my left tit it was Effie Rodriguez. The unmistakable Bronx accent was somewhere between Jennifer Lopez and Rosie Perez.

Why was she answering his cell phone? My first instinct was to hang up, but that would have been immature. “May I speak to Dawson please?” My voice shook and I silently cursed myself.

“Who is this?” she demanded.

“I’m a friend of his. May I speak to him please?” I hated I had to ask again, but I didn’t feel I needed to explain anything to this woman, which was obviously what she was fishing for.

She laughed almost like the Wicked Witch of the West. “Well, I very well can’t hand him the phone if he doesn’t know who this is.”

“This is his phone, isn’t it?”

“Look, I don’t have time for this, you can either tell me who you are, or I can hang up,” she said sounding perturbed. “Hold on a minute.” I heard muffled conversation in the background. “I don’t know who it is, but she won’t tell me who it is.” There was a brief pause. “No, the caller ID on your phone says private number.” Another pause. “Okay, I’ll try to find out,” she said, before coming back on the phone. “Are you going to tell me who this is or what?”

Maybe she felt she had the right to answer his phone like this, but something in me didn’t want to tell her who I was. Maybe my cowardice had kicked in, but I didn’t have the energy to play phone games with her, nor did I think I could take hearing Marcus tell me that he’d stopped loving me. “Never mind.” I hung up.

I was too late and only had myself to blame. Maybe Marcus had found another soul mate in Effie. The mature thing would have been to wish him all the happiness in the world, but the juvenile feeling of wanting to see that relationship crash and burn was way too strong.

I wiped a tear away with a furious swipe of my fist. I didn't want to cry about it, but the tears were getting harder to fight with each passing second. The next thing I knew, I found myself curled into a ball, sobbing. I felt like a big tittie baby, but couldn't help this overwhelming hurt coursing through me.

I cried until I gave myself a headache. The last thing I remembered after that was thinking I would eventually have to get off the floor. That didn't happen because I woke up with not only a splitting headache, but a back, neck and shoulder ache as well.

I vowed to myself, that those would be the last tears I would allow myself over this situation.



All hell broke loose the following week. One of my chefs had an emergency appendectomy, one of my servers was on vacation and another server decided to transfer to a different college and quit. To top it off, Lena's daughter had gone into labor a month earlier than expected so she had to take off, leaving me with no one to watch Richie.

Not only did I have to hustle at the restaurant to make up for the short staff, I had to take Richie with me. It wasn't practical, but I didn't have much choice. Call me anal, but I couldn't see myself putting him in regular daycare. They all seemed so impersonal.

I set his up traveling playpen with a handful of toys in the kitchen so I could keep an eye on him. My staff adored him, and at any given time,

someone was playing with him. He ate all the attention up. I was lucky in having such a friendly baby who liked everyone and could also amuse himself, otherwise, I'd be sunk.

Saturday night was the busiest and I'd been in the kitchen for most of the day cooking my ass off and every so often I'd take Richie to my office to feed, change, or put him down for a nap. I'd just finished feeding him and then putting him to sleep, when there was a knock on my office.

I got off the couch and opened the door, not wanting to make too much noise, which would wake my son. Stewart, the restaurant manager stood on the other side looking frantic. This surprised me, because he was usually unflappable. I'd never seen him like this before.

"What's the matter, Stew?"

"It's a big mess out there," he began frantically.

I placed my finger over his lips. "Shh, we have to be quiet, because Richie's sleeping. Come in and tell me what the matter is."

He stepped into my office, closing the door behind him. "We're having a problem with a couple of customers. A gentleman is demanding to see the owner of the place."

I frowned. We so rarely had unsatisfied customers and when we did, Stewart was always able to deal with the situations beautifully. "And this was something you couldn't handle?"

"To be honest, I didn't think there was anything to handle. The gentleman kept asking for you and said he wouldn't leave until he spoke to you. It's really crowded out there and others are waiting for his table, so...if you could just come out for a few minutes, I'd be happy to keep an eye on Richie for you if you'd like."

"Did this gentleman give a name by any chance?"

"He didn't but he looks really familiar. He might be a celebrity because I noticed a couple people going over to his table to talk to him



and his companion. You know I don't really watch a lot of television or have time to go to the movies, so I have no clue who he is."

It suddenly occurred to me that it could be Marcus. My heart began to race. "What did this man look like?"

"He was tall and blond. I guess most women would find him good looking." Stewart shrugged as though he didn't have much time for this.

"Did he have green eyes?" I asked breathlessly.

"Umm, I wasn't looking that closely at him, but if you'd like me to go out there and find out, I could."

When he turned to go, I grabbed his arm. "No! Uh, I'll go out there."

"Do you need me to watch Richie for you while you inspect this mystery patron?"

"No, that won't be necessary. He's sleeping, so he'll be okay. Why don't you go make sure everything is okay in the kitchen?"

"Sure thing, boss." He gave me a mock salute and clicked his heels. I rolled my eyes. Stewart was a character, but I still liked him. He was an excellent manager, the customers liked him, and he was reliable. I couldn't ask for anyone better.

I rushed to the mirror to look in the mirror. Since I'd been in the kitchen all day, I was wearing jeans and an old T-shirt. My short curls were plastered to my head from all the sweating I'd done throughout the day. My face was bare of make-up. I hadn't expected to meet any customers that day and I looked a mess. Why did he have to come when I looked like a bag lady off the street?

I retrieved my purse and pulled out my comb and raked it through my hair. Then I applied a coat of lip-gloss. Marcus didn't have to see me looking like a total slob. As I walked out to the dining area, my heart pounded a mile a minute. I didn't know what to expect. What could be his purpose of coming here? Did he want to rub his new relationship in

my face? If he did, I guess I kind of deserved it for being such an idiot, but I wasn't going to let him see that it hurt me.

I saw him the moment I entered the dining area. He was wearing a dark suit without a tie, his shirt opened at the top two buttons. His hair looked to be in a casual disarray that suited him. He looked so good, and my pulse raced like crazy. He must have sensed me moving forward, because he lifted his head, fixing that intense gaze on me.

I froze on the spot. My legs wouldn't move even if I wanted them to. I knew I looked like an idiot standing there, but my body wouldn't cooperate with my brain. His face remained passive, eyes unwavering. Other than Richard, Marcus was the only man who had this affect on me. I felt like a schoolgirl all over again.

Only when he leaned over to listen to what his dinner companion was saying did I break from my trance. It was Effie. I should have known. A lump formed in my throat. I thought I could handle seeing the two of them together, but I couldn't. I was on the verge of turning around and not looking back, but something stopped me.

No. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten to me. I pinned a smile on my face and lifted my chin before walking over to his table as if I didn't have a care in the world. "You wanted to speak to the owner, sir?" I asked, looking him dead in the eyes.

Marcus's eyes widened, as if he were surprised by my greeting. Beyond that, his face still gave nothing away. "Sir? Come on, April, surely we're past that."

"I trust that everything here is to your liking." I allowed myself the luxury of looking at his companion. She was beautiful, dressed in a white strapless dress, of some designer I probably couldn't pronounce. She wore a faint smile on her glossy, plum-painted lips. How could I possibly

compete with the likes of her? No matter, I had my game face on, and I wouldn't allow their obvious closeness ruffle me.

Marcus raised his wine glass to me. "The food is wonderful, just as I expected it to be, but then again, you're a culinary genius. I actually asked to see you so that we could compliment you on a superb evening. April, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. This is Effie. Effie, this is April, the woman I was telling you about."

He'd told her about me? What was he playing at?

Effie's smile widened. "It was nice to finally meet you, April. This is a nice place you have here. Marcus tells me you're an East Coast girl like myself? I love L.A., but I'm a New York girl at heart. What brought you over here?" I didn't miss the way her hand gripped Marcus's.

Marcus tilted his head "Yes, I never did figure that out myself."

I wanted to wring his neck. Why was he doing this to me? "I...I was just looking to start over after my husband passed away. I thought this was as good a place as any."

"I'm sorry to hear about your husband. How long has it been?" She genuinely sounded sympathetic, which somehow made it harder. If she were a total bitch it would be easier to hate her, but I couldn't. She was nice. Dammit.

"It's been a year, actually. Things were hard at first, but I'm carrying on like he wanted me to. I have my son to take care of so that helps."

"Oh, how old is he?"

Why was she asking me all these questions? It was getting harder to answer them with each passing second because of Marcus's intense gaze focused on me. "He's just over a year."

"I love children. I hope to have a large family." I didn't miss the sly look she gave to Marcus when she said it. I wanted to throw up. Any

minute now, I was going to do or say something to embarrass myself if I stood there any longer.

I avoided all eye contact with Marcus, focusing all my attention on Effie—gorgeous, gracious, sweet Effie. “That’s great. Umm, if there’s not a problem here, I really have to go. I brought my son to the restaurant with me because we have a staff shortage and my nanny had an emergency, so I have to get him home.”

Effie smiled. “Oooh, your son is here? I know you don’t know me, but can I see him?”

Was she trying to twist the knife in me or what? “He’s sleeping so I don’t think that would be a good idea. Another time maybe?” *Yeah right, bitch.*

She pouted. “That’s too bad, but I wouldn’t want you to wake him up on my account.”

Effie had a way of saying things that made you feel guilty even if you knew you had absolutely nothing to be guilty about. I felt like an asshole. “Well, uh, if you two are headed out, so am I. If you want to see him before we leave I guess you could, but don’t be disappointed if he doesn’t wake up. He sleeps like the dead.”

The actress’s large blue eyes lit up. “Oh goodie.” She turned to Marcus, whose gaze was still firmly glued to my face. I didn’t have to look his way to know it either. “You don’t mind do you, darling?”

“Not at all, babe,” he murmured, before taking a sip of his wine.

Their words of endearment cut me like a knife. I couldn’t stand it any longer. I averted my gaze before either one of them could see the tears forming in my eyes. “Um, if you’ll both excuse me, there’s something I have to take care of. I should be out in the parking lot in fifteen minutes, if you’d still like to see the baby, Ms. Rodriguez.”

She waved her hand in the air dismissively, her diamonds gleaming against the light. “Oh, pooh. Call me Effie.”

I nodded, scurrying away before either of them could say a word. I felt like such a fool.

## 18. *Second Chance At Love*

I let out a huge sigh of relief to get away from the two of them, practically flying through the swinging doors of the kitchen. The steam coming from the pots masked my tears, which I hastily wiped away. Marcus and Effie had looked so beautiful together, just like a perfect power couple should. I don't think I'd ached like this since I first lost Richard.

It certainly felt like Marcus was lost to me. I'd just have to learn to live without him and that was that. Maybe in time I'd get another chance at love, although I highly doubted it.

I spotted Stewart talking to one of the servers and walked over to him. "Hey, Stew, I think I'm going to head out for the night. The crowd is dying down and I really need to get Richie home.

"Sure, no problem, hon. Are you okay, you don't look so hot." Leave it to Stew to get straight to the point.

"Oh, I think it's just been a long day and it's starting to catch up with me."

"It's no wonder. You were here before everyone else, and you've not only been cooking and prepping the food, you've been watching your son. I'd be pooped too. You do so much. Maybe it's time for you to hire a couple of assistant managers so you can spend more time with Richie. You'll end up running yourself ragged if you don't consider hiring more help.

I sighed. He had a point. I was probably more hands-on with my restaurant than most owners but I wasn't scared of hard work. The mention of my son did give me something to think about. I didn't want to miss out on all the important things in his life. "You're right, Stew. Do you think you could get call the papers and put a want ad out? That is if you don't mind."

"Not at all. That's what I'm here for. Now get out of here, and give the little guy a hug for me."

"Will do." We hugged, and I felt much better. My staff was more than just my employees. They were like a family. When I got to my office, Richie was still sleeping soundly, just as I knew he would be. I was fortunate to have a kid who valued sleep as much as I did.

I put his jacket on and packed up his travel bag before I remembered leaving the traveling playpen in the kitchen. "Shoot."

To my surprise, Marcus stood on the other side of my office door when I opened it. "Marcus!"

A brooding expression crossed his face. "Were you planning to duck out without saying goodbye? It's been well over fifteen minutes you know."

"If you haven't noticed, I have to get my son together, and I left something of his in the kitchen. I don't know why you came tonight, but whatever game you're trying to play, I'm not interested."

"I think we're both beyond the playing games stage, don't you think? Go get whatever it is you left in the kitchen. I'll keep an eye on Richie."

"That won't be necessary. He's sleeping, so as long as I leave my office door closed he'll be fine."

"This isn't up for debate."

I just couldn't figure out what he was trying to pull. Wasn't the reason he'd brought Effie here in the first place to show me how he'd

moved on with his life? Why was he here now, tormenting me? With each passing second, I grew more aware of his body heat, his scent and how it made me feel. “What are you doing here?”

He leaned forward, stopping just shy of my lips. “I think you know. Go get your things, April. I’m taking you home.”

Who the hell did he think he was? Did he think he could just order me around like this after flaunting his girlfriend in my face. I was just about to tell him exactly where to go, when he gave me a light kiss. My knees went weak.

“Go get your things,” he said gently, pulling me out of my office and nudging me forward. I walked towards the kitchen in a daze and got Richie’s playpen, which one of the staff had thoughtfully folded up and rested in one of the corners of the room. When I made it back to my office, Marcus had Richie’s travel bag slung over his shoulder, and Richie snuggly resting in his arms.

“What are you doing? Put him down.”

“No,” he said simply. “Get your purse. We’re getting out of here. Effie is waiting outside for us.”

The mention of Effie’s name set me into motion. I had to get outside or else I’d punch him. I probably would have if he hadn’t been holding Richie. I grabbed my purse and waited for him to follow me out before locking the door. I couldn’t remember being this ticked in a long time.

He followed me out to the parking lot and I led him to my Ford Explorer. “Give me my baby, so I can get him in his car seat.” I held out my hands to him.

“Why don’t you unlock your door first, it would probably be easier for you,” he suggested. What he said made total sense, but my nose was already out of joint. I glared at him but did as he said begrudgingly.

“Now may I have my child please?”



A gleam of amusement entered his eyes. "Yes, you certainly may. Let me go get Effie. She really did want to see him."

"Well hurry up, I don't have all night."

He handed Richie over, and when my arms were full, he brushed his lips against mine. "Don't worry, it won't take long, because the rest of the night belongs to us."

I released a stunned gasp. What did he mean by that? Without giving me a chance to reply, he walked off. If I let him, he'd have me twisted all in knots and I wasn't sure I could take much more of this cat and mouse chase. I quickly secured Richie in his car seat. He didn't even flinch.

"Ooooh, he's sooo cute." Effie's voice cooed from behind me. My thoughts were getting more violent by the second. Images of me karate chopping her in the throat filled my head. But I could hardly do that, more's the pity. Making an effort to smile, I turned around to face them.

"Yes, I think so," I tried to sound as natural as possible. I moved aside so that the actress could get a better view of him.

"He's so incredibly darling. It's a shame he's not awake. And look at all that fabulously curly hair." She reached out and touched his cheek, which I wasn't too happy about.

To my annoyance, Richie's eyes flew open. Even though he was good with strangers, he was cranky if he was awakened too soon. His eyes narrowed to blue slits as he stared at the cause of his slumber being disturbed, scrunched up his little face and let out a wail that a deaf person could probably hear.

"Oh no. I'm sorry, April, I didn't mean to make him cry."

"It's okay. He just gets a little cranky if he doesn't get his sleep," I said, brushing past her and unfastening his seat belt. I picked him up. He was usually a deep sleeper but all the moving around probably

disturbed him. Normally I would have been pissed, but I couldn't help feeling a childish wave of triumph that Richie had ruffled her feathers.

As I rocked him back and forth in my arms, he calmed down. He crammed his fist in his mouth and sniffed. "Shh, it's okay, Mommy's here."

Effie and Marcus waited while I soothed my son back to sleep. I wished they would both go away because it was a little disconcerting with them standing around. When I felt he was calm enough for me to put him back in his car seat I did.

"I'm truly sorry about that, April. He's a beautiful baby. I hope to have some of my own one day, but of course, my only hope would be adoption. I can't have children of my own," Effie said with a forlorn note in her voice.

What could I say to that? The mean part of me wanted to rejoice that she would never carry Marcus's child, but the mother in me felt her pain. There was no greater miracle than creating life and giving birth. The special bond between mother and child was like no other. How could I hate someone who couldn't experience this wonder of life? "I'm sorry to hear that." It sounded so trite, but what else could I say?

She smiled. "I've grown used to the idea, but its okay. As soon as I finish my next two movies, Angie and I will start looking into adoption. We may do the Brangelina thing and adopt children from all over the world. We'll have our own little rainbow coalition," she giggled.

Angie? Who the hell was Angie? Marcus chose that moment to cut in. "Effie, could you drive my Mercedes back to my place? I'm going home with April," He tossed her the keys.

"Sure thing, sweetie." Effie turned to me. "It was very nice meeting you, April. I hope to see more of you and your darling boy soon. Toodles, kiddies, and don't do anything I wouldn't do." She chuckled before

sauntering off. She looked like Jessica Rabbit from behind. Most women would have killed for a body like that. The bitch.

I was too stunned to protest when Marcus hustled me to my car, took the keys from my nerveless fingers and swung his powerful body into the driver's seat. It took me a moment to finally find my voice. "What the hell are you doing? What gives you the right to just take over like this?"

"I have the right of a man in love, so how about keeping your voice down before your son wakes up again."

My mouth fell open indignantly. I had a few choice words in my mind, but none of them were fit to say with a small child around, even if he was sleeping. I glared at Marcus, crossing my arms over my chest. I'd never been more confused in my life. Was he telling me he was in love with Effie or me?

"So are you going to tell me where you live or do we sit here all night?"

"Marcus, you have a lot of nerve."

"Why? Because I'm going to do what I should have last week when you called me?"

My eyes widened. "You knew I called?"

"I didn't recognize your number on the caller ID, but when Effie told me a woman called who wouldn't leave her name, I suspected it was you, or at least, I'd hoped it was you. Now that I know it was...well surely you know what that means, doesn't it?"

"No. I don't understand what any of this means. What about your little girlfriend? How could you just come to my restaurant and flaunt her in my face like that?"

Marcus's nostrils flared. If he could breathe fire, I think he would have. "First of all, shut up. Second..." He reached over, practically pulling me into his lap and captured my lips in a breathtaking kiss. It was raw,

angry, passionate and...hot. "God, you're sweet," he muttered against my lips.

"Don't talk, just kiss me," I groaned into his mouth, impatient that he'd broken the contact, though briefly.

No matter the circumstances, he always managed to render me weak with just a touch. His fingers dug into my hair, gently yanking my head back. My lips parted under the marauding assault of his tongue. Tight nipples pressed against my T-shirt, aching for the feel of his palms.

He must have read my mind, because one strong hand cupped my aching mound and squeezed. It felt so good, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. My pussy clenched with need for him. I tingled all over and the fire inside of me burned so hot, I just knew I'd combust if we kept things going like this.

As he deepened his kiss, the hand that had been caressing my breast drifted lower until it rested on my thigh. Marcus fumbled with the button of my jeans. I lifted my hips slightly to make it easier for him, anxious to feel his probing fingers between my legs.

He pulled away, abruptly. "Damn."

"What?" I asked feeling dazed.

"I'm not going to make love to you in the front seat of your car with your son in the backseat. We're going to make love tonight, make no mistake about it, but not like this." He pressed one last urgent kiss on my lips before pulling back again. "Give me the directions to your house."

I must have been on autopilot, because I reeled off the information without a word of protest. We drove to my house in silence. My mind tried to comprehend what had just happened and exactly what was Marcus's true relationship with Effie. If it had been my man, especially one as fine as Marcus, I wouldn't have let him go off with another woman.

“Nice place you have here,” Marcus complimented when we walked into my house.

“Thanks. Um, let me get Richie settled down and I’ll be down with you.”

“Sure. Do you have anything to drink?”

“Just the non-alcoholic stuff, soda, fruit juice and water.”

“That’s fine with me.”

Richie was getting heavy so I shifted his weight to my other hip. “Make yourself at home then.”

“Do you need any help with him?” he offered.

“No thanks.” I fled, needing to clear my head. I hurried up the stairs and put Richie in his pajamas. I normally gave him a bath before he went to bed, but I didn’t have the heart to wake him. When I finally had him down, I walked to my bathroom and splashed some cold water on my face.

Staring back at me was a woman who’d come full circle in her life. It was hard to believe she was once a young girl full of hopes and dreams, most of which she’d fulfilled. She’d seen the world, been hurt, experienced true love and dealt with great loss. This woman had been knocked down, but she always managed to get back up. She was strong—a fighter who’d faced many obstacles and still stood tall. That person in the mirror was me, and if I could accomplish all the things I’d done thus far, this should be a piece of cake. Whatever the outcome of the night, I’d stay strong.

I walked down the stairs and joined Marcus in the living room. He stood when I entered the room and held his hand out to me, which I took. “You look lovely tonight.”

I laughed nervously. “You say that as if you mean it.”

“I do.”

“I look a mess. My hair looks like a bird’s nest, I’m not wearing any make-up, and my clothes look like they’ve been slept in.”

“Yet, I’ve never since such a beautiful sight.”

“Marcus—”

He placed his finger over my lips, silencing me. “I think I owe you an explanation about Effie—about everything actually. Sit with me.” He guided me to the couch with him.

“An explanation would be nice. You two have been tabloid fodder for the past few months, and then the two of you come into my restaurant looking like the golden couple all the papers say you are.”

“The papers lie. I know this may sound incredibly cliché, but Effie and I are just friends. You see, we sort of bonded when filming began, but it’s strictly platonic despite what the reports said. As a matter of fact the two of us aren’t even remotely sexually interested in each other.”

I snorted in disbelief. “I’ve seen pictures of the two of you. It looked like there was a lot of chemistry to me.

“Babe, we’re both actors. That stuff can be faked if necessary.”

“Say what? I don’t understand. Why would you two want to fake anything?”

“We both had our own agendas. Like I said, we’d become really close, almost like brother and sister. Effie has a secret that she doesn’t want let out yet. You know how the stalkerazzi is, they’ll clamp down on you like a bunch of piranha and won’t let go.”

“What’s her secret? Oh, wait, you don’t have to tell me. It’s none of my business.”

“It’s okay. She’s given me her permission to tell you. Effie is gay. I think she even mentioned her girlfriend Angie.”

“Effie Rodriguez is a lesbian? Shut...up!”

“I’m serious.”

Were Marcus and I the last two straight people on Earth? Wow, this shocked the hell out of me. I wouldn't have been more surprised if he'd told me the sky was falling. "But I still don't understand, why would she want to hide the fact that she's a lesbian? Isn't that the big Hollywood thing now? Isn't Ellen one of the most powerful women in television?"

"The key word is television. She's a talk show host and a damn funny lady, but she's not a leading lady. Could you imagine what would happen to Effie's career if it were leaked that she's having an affair with a make-up artist. Look at what happened to Anne Heche. Sure she got a lot of press when she came out of the closet per se, but have you seen her in any leading lady roles since?"

To be honest, I couldn't recall seeing her in anything since. At least nothing noteworthy. Maybe there really was something to this. It was sad she felt the need to hide who she truly was in order to get decent work. "I didn't realize. I suppose Angie is her..."

"Her partner? Yes. Actually, they've been using my place as a meeting place. Angie is at my house now, waiting for Effie."

"Wow, is there a lot of this going on in Hollywood?"

"People in the closet? Unfortunately yes. I know it seems like it's become an accepted thing, but it isn't really. Effie eventually plans on coming out, but right now she doesn't think her career isn't at a place where she feels comfortable enough doing so."

I nodded. That made sense, and it certainly explained why Effie didn't seem jealous when Marcus and I went off together. "You said you were covering for each other. What were you getting out of this charade?"

A sheepish look flittered briefly across his face. "Well, uh, I was hoping it would spur you into action. I figured if I could make you jealous, you might come to me. I'm a rat, aren't I?"

Placing hands hips, I glared at him. "You're damn right you are. How could you do that to me, Marcus Dawson?"

"Baby, I was so desperate, I would have flown to the moon had I thought it would impress you. For a while, I was about to give up, thinking you didn't want me after all, but after that call, I had no doubt in my mind of your feelings."

"Why was Effie answering your phone?"

"Some nosy reporter somehow got my cell phone number and kept calling me, but I didn't want to deactivate it because that was the number I'd given you. I didn't want to miss your call. Effie just happened to be next to it when it rang so I asked her to answer it for me. Your call gave me hope, so I waited for you to call me back. When I realized you weren't going to, I decided to take matters into my own hands."

"I called you last week. You grew impatient after a week?"

"Even a minute without you is too long. April, you're just going to have to face facts, we belong together. We've belonged together since high school, but I was too big of an idiot to see it then. I've made some mistakes in my life, but the biggest was letting you get away, and I don't intend for that to happen again."

For once, I was speechless. What could I say to his eloquent speech? I thought my heart would explode with love for him. It finally felt right, and happiness was too trite a word to describe the emotions flowing through me at that moment.

He laughed, sounding nervous. "Aren't you going to say something?"

"How do I know you're not just faking with me too? You are an actor, after all."

Marcus smiled knowingly. "Do you honestly think anyone could fake what goes on between us?"

I shook my head numbly.



“Put me out of my misery, April. Tell me what I want to hear.”

“I...I love you too. But where do you see this headed...us, I mean?”

He gathered me in his arms, and rested his chin on the top of my head. “I want the whole nine yards—a wedding as big as you’d like, a honeymoon, and to have children.”

“Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack. We can even take Richie on the honeymoon with us if you’d like.”

I laughed, shaking my head. This was all happening so fast, seeming so surreal. “Hold up, Romeo. First of all, you didn’t even ask me to marry you.”

Marcus’s lips grazed my forehead. “An oversight on my part.” He fixed his hypnotic gaze on me. “April, I love you very much. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, be the positive male role model that Richie needs, have babies with you, and grow old with you. Will you marry me?”

A more eloquent proposal had never been said. Unshed tears blinded me, clogging my throat and making it impossible for me to speak. I threw my arms around his neck and pressed my face in his broad chest. Maybe I was a being a big baby, but I couldn’t help myself. Since Richard died, I never thought I’d be this happy again.

“Is that a yes?”

I raised my head and gave him a kiss on the chin. “Yes, of course. I would love to be your wife, although I don’t need a big fancy wedding. I just need you. Maybe we could have something small and intimate with just the people we care about.”

“I like the sound of that.” His arms tightened around me, nearly stealing my breath away, but I didn’t mind one bit. “I was thinking though, if we want to do the family thing, I don’t want to be an absentee father. I want to enjoy every aspect of their lives. I can’t do that if I’m

bouncing from location to location. I've signed a five picture deal with DreamWorks which I'm obligated to finish, but after that I think I'm going to put my film career on hold for a while."

I gasped. "Are you serious? Do you mean you're willing to give up your film career for me? I can't let you do that."

"Don't get me wrong, I enjoy acting, but I feel that I've accomplished what I wanted to. Fame comes with its perks, but along with it you lose your privacy. Your life is no longer your own. I think I'd like to get into the behind the scenes action, like producing, or script writing. I can work on my art in my spare time. I really miss it, but the acting thing kind of pushed it to the backburner. There are so many possibilities to explore."

"But what if the right role comes along that you just can't turn down?"

"Then we'll discuss it if that ever happens."

"That sounds fair. And just as you've decided to slow things down, I will too. I'm relinquishing some of my responsibilities to the capable hands of my staff. I want to spend more time with Richie...and now with you."

Marcus ran his knuckles over my cheek, leaving a trail of warmth. "Well, I guess there's only one thing left for us to do."

"And what's that?"

"Well, I did say we'd make love tonight and I'm a man of my word."

I giggled, feeling like I was eighteen again. "Well, I definitely don't want you to go back on your word."

"Where's your bedroom?"

"It's upstairs—the second door to the ri—whoa!" He scooped me up in his arms as if he was Rhett Butler and I was Scarlet. "Hey, put me down! I'm too heavy."

“Really? I can’t tell.” He strode purposely towards the stairs. I realized there was no point in arguing so I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on tightly. Marcus practically kicked the door in when he made it to my bedroom, and then placed me on my feet.

Before I could even say a word, he pulled me to him and touched his lips to mine. Judging from his urgency downstairs, I thought the kiss would be wild and aggressive. Instead, it was gentle and sweet. I was melting against the tenderness of his lips moving so gently against me.

Marcus cupped my face between his large palms. His tongue traced the seam of my mouth, tasting and exploring me as though I was a very tasty treat, and I felt like it. My lips parted under the questing tongue. My own tongue shot out, meeting and entwining with his. He tasted so damn good. It was the kind of kiss you never wanted to end, the kind that took your breath away—a kiss of true love.

I held him to me as tightly as I could, pressing my breasts against him. God, I was hot. The heady sensation of his hands roaming over my back and ass was driving me nuts. My fingers dug through his blond locks forcing my tongue deeper into his mouth. I knew in that moment I was meant to be with him like this.

He nudged me backwards until my calves touched the bed. “I want to see you naked now,” Marcus muttered against my mouth.

“Mmm, do you think you’re ready for all this bootyliciousness?” I joked. I knew I was chubby, but I’d gotten to the point in my life where I was comfortable in my skin, and Marcus made me feel so secure in his love in that moment that I had no hang-ups.

“I’ve been ready for a long time, baby.” He pushed me down on the bed before covering me with his body. His mouth grazed my throat, nibbling and sucking on it.

“Oh, Marcus, that feels wonderful,” I moaned. My panties were soaked at this point, my pussy throbbing. It needed his cock and nothing else would do.

I grabbed fistfuls of his shirt, reveling in the fiery pulses flickering through my body, filling me with carnal gratification I thought I’d never experience again. When he lightly bit into my neck, I gasped—but more from pleasure than pain. “You’re kinky tonight,” I teased.

“You bring out the animal in me. Now how about we get you out of these clothes?” He pulled back, sitting up. I lifted my arms so he could pull the T-shirt over my head. I may not have been particularly embarrassed about my body, but I was about the undergarments I wore. They were clean, but had I known I was getting some tonight, I probably would have worn my lacy Victoria’s Secret undies, but instead I was wearing the serviceable Wal-Mart brand. It would have been okay—for someone’s grandma.

“If you laugh at my underwear I swear I’ll deck you.”

A chuckle escaped Marcus’s throat before he covered his mouth. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t laughing at your underwear. I think they’re quite adorable.” His eyes sparkled with lust and love. I knew I was being silly. Unable to hold back my own merriment, I laughed.

“I’m wearing granny panties.”

His wonderful smile widened. “Well, I think I can fix that for you.” And with that he worked on the button and zipper of my jeans and commenced to strip me naked, first disposing of my jeans, then my panties. To my surprise, instead of unfastening my bra clasp, he grabbed the front and ripped it apart. “Now you don’t have to worry about this problem ever again. I actually prefer you without underwear.”

I trembled as he stood and began to undress. I made a move to get up, eager to feel his muscles under my fingertips, but he halted me with

his intense stare. “No, because if you touch me, I’m going to lose it, and I want this to be slow and easy.”

I pouted. “I don’t mind if it’s rushed.” I knew I probably sounded like an anxious slut, but this is what that man did to me.

“Well I do mind, I want to make our first time together count.”

“This isn’t our first time.”

“Maybe not the first time we fucked, but this will be the first time we’ve made love.” He unbuttoned his shirt to reveal toned pectorals and washboard abs. His body would have put David to shame. I couldn’t wait to run my palms over those ridges and hollows.

When he pulled his pants and boxers off, my breath caught in my throat. Magnificent. No other word could have described the sight of the beautiful Adonis in front of me. His cock jutted forward, thick and impossibly hard. I want to touch it, take it into my mouth, and pussy. I wanted him.

Badly.

I wiggled my finger at him, scooting further up the bed. Marcus crawled on the bed with a determined look in his eyes. A primitive feeling washed through me. I felt the need to be claimed and taken by this man and nothing else would do. He pushed my legs apart, nestling between them.

I squirmed beneath him, impatient to be joined with him. His dick rested at the seat of my ass, and if he moved a few inches more, he’d be inside of me. He didn’t, though, and filled me with such yearning I could hardly stand it. The weight of his body resting on me felt so wonderful, it was like heaven

Marcus captured my mouth in a hungry, arduous kiss, creating a nerve jolting sensation within. When he cupped my breasts in his palms,

gently rubbing thumbs over taut nipples, I thought I'd lose my mind. "Oh, God, yes," I whimpered with delight against his lips.

He lifted his head. "Do you like that, baby?"

It took everything in me to answer him because it was hard to talk when my body was filled with so many titillating sensations. "You know I do."

Marcus pinched my nipples, the pressure only increasing my pleasure. "How about this?"

"I love it," I moaned.

Then he slid down my body before kissing each tight tip lovingly. "And this."

"More."

He did it again. "You have beautiful breasts, April, big, beautiful, chocolate breasts and they're all mine," he growled, before sucking a pointed nipple into his mouth. It was a little rough, his teeth grazing against it every now and then, but I didn't mind.

I stroked the back of his head and neck with tentative fingers. I almost felt like I was in a wonderful dream and any minute now I'd wake up and find out I was alone again.

Marcus transferred his attention to my other nipple, sucking and nipping at it with the same ferocity as he had with the other one. I couldn't get enough of it. I wiggled and writhed, unable to keep still. "You're going to be the death of me," I groaned.

He lifted his head, grinning at me. "It's the good kind of death though. I'm far from finished you know. There's more I'm going to do to you, like this." Marcus kissed me between the valley of my breasts. I shook every time his lips touched my heated skin. Marcus planted a trail of kisses down my body.

"I want you inside of me now!"

He chuckled, obviously not feeling very sympathetic to my need “I can’t make love to you properly without tasting you first. Surely you won’t deny a starving man sustenance.” When put like that it definitely gave me pause to think. On one hand, I couldn’t wait to feel his cock driving inside of me, but the need to have his mouth on my wet cunt was too much of a temptation to resist.

I threw my arms back in surrender. “Okay. Do what you will to me,” I said with mock impatience. His throaty laugh resonated throughout the room. I loved that sound.

“I promise I’ll make it worth your while, baby.”

And that’s exactly what he did. Marcus parted my damp folds with his fingers, touching them with a reverence that touched my heart. He pressed long, deep kisses against my clit. Bucking my hips against his face, I begged him for more. “Please don’t tease me, eat it,” I moaned.

“With pleasure.” He licked me all over, leaving no part of my cunt unexplored. He even licked the tight ring of my anus before his tongue plunged into my damp channel, prodding and fucking me. I lifted my hips, mashing my pussy against his face.

“Marcus!”

A burst of sensation slammed through my body. Just when I didn’t think I could take anymore, he wrapped his lips around my clit and sucked it voraciously. It had been a very long time since I’d been this turned on. Marcus devoured my highly-sensitized pussy as though relishing every second he stayed between my quivering thighs. I could barely think straight from what he was doing to me.

He licked and laved my clit with his tongue until I begged for mercy. “Marcus, I can’t take any more, I feel like I’m dying,” I moaned, feeling pleasure overload. When he ignored me, I pushed at his shoulders, but that only made him clamp down on my clit. I stopped then. Why was I

fighting this? I wanted him just as badly as he obviously wanted me. My fingers dug into his flesh, nearly breaking skin as I surrendered to the torrent of sensations swirling within me. .

Marcus seemed to be in no hurry to finish, and I didn't mind one bit. When my climax came, it seemed as if the Earth had tilted on its axis. The room was spinning, but I was lying still.

Only when my body was under control once again did he lift his head and slide his body up against mine, the friction of his cock rubbing against my thigh creating an erotic charge. I pulled him to me as his mouth descended. Our mouths melded into one savage kiss, our tongues dueling for supremacy over the other, intensifying our mutual passions. His fingers dug into my hair, holding my head still as he demonstrated his sexual dominance over me. I was utterly lost.

I tore my mouth away from his, to catch my breath. "I want to return the favor."

He smiled. "And you certainly may, but later. Right now, I need to be inside of you."

I wouldn't be deterred. I desperately wanted to taste him. "You don't get to have all the fun."

I got to knees and pushed him back on the bed.

"April, you don't have to do this," he moaned weakly. He could protest all he wanted, but I knew he wanted it. His cock was rock hard. Running my fingers over his chest, I planted kisses on his heated skin, my tongue capturing the musky male taste of him. I slid down the length of his body until I reached his throbbing erection.

Marcus rolled his head back and forth, releasing guttural moan. "God, yes."

Giggling, I grasped his dick in my fist. "I notice you're not protesting now."



“Oh, I want it alright,” he groaned.

“And I want to make it happen for you. Just lie back and enjoy the ride.” I brushed my lips against the mushroom-shaped head, savoring the velvet-like texture. I licked the murky drop of precome that rested on the tip. “Mmm.”

“You’re going to be the death of me, woman.”

“But surely it will be a pleasant one.”

“Oh yeah.”

Slowly, I took him into my mouth, sucking in inch by delicious inch of his hard, thick cock. God, it was magnificent. I slid my lips up and down his length and cupped his balls, testing their weight in my hand. His fingers dug through my hair, guiding my head along his shaft. Knowing how much he enjoyed this filled me with a sense of empowerment.

I sucked, licked, and teased his cock until he roared, “That’s it. I need you now.”

Gripping me by shoulders, he pulled me off of him and flipped me over. I pouted. “I wasn’t finished.”

“Oh yes you are. Your mouth on me feels good, but I want some of that tight, juicy pussy.” His eyes never leaving mine, he nudged my thighs further apart with his knee before positioning his cock at my entrance. “Are you ready?”

I pushed my hips forward, practically taking his dick inside of me. “What do you think?” I asked with a big smile on my face.

“I love you,” he groaned, sinking deeper into me, his cock sliding so far inside my channel, I didn’t know where I ended and he began. I encircled him in my arms, holding him close as he adjusted himself to a comfortable position.

“I love you too, Marcus, no matter what. I can’t wait for us to begin our life together.”

His lips kissed my eyelids closed. “My life began when you told me you love me.”

My eyes sprang open with tears. That was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard. “What a nice thing to say.”

“It comes from the heart, April.”

The best part of the whole thing was I trusted in his love and being able to trust him was freeing.

His arms went around me, and we held each other tightly as he began to move. We didn’t make a sound as our bodies melded in a sexual dance older than time itself. I lifted my hips with tiny pulses, meeting his cock thrust for thrust.

Our eyes locked. We didn’t speak. Words weren’t needed because our eyes said it all. I loved this man in a way I didn’t think possible. He was a part of me now. We were one and I loved him.

Our sweat-slicked bodies moved together harmoniously until the deliciously wanton sensation slowly spread throughout every single nerve ending in my body. I was filled with an ungovernable passion I could no longer hold in, and this time when I reached my peak, it was much more intense, because Marcus reached his at the same time, shooting his seed inside my thirsty pussy.

“Oh God, April!” he cried out.

I was too weak to do anything except moan. Marcus’s head fell against my shoulder, his breathing as ragged as mine. We remained wrapped in each other’s arms until we both drifted off to sleep.



Sometime in the middle of the night, something woke me up. It was Richie. Marcus had by now rolled over and I was cradled securely in his arms. I lifted my head up to look at the clock. It was four in the morning. Richie usually slept through the night so the mother in me immediately suspected something was wrong.

I untangled myself from Marcus's arms, wiggling off the bed so as not to disturb him. Throwing on my robe, I raced to the nursery. Richie was sitting up in his crib, gnawing on his fist. Poor thing was getting his molars and they bothered him from time to time.

He smiled when saw me approach, giving me a toothy grin. "Mama."

It was the first time he'd said it right. I lifted him out of his crib. "That's right. Mommy's here. You're such a smart little boy." I checked his diaper, which turned out to be damp, so I changed it. Then I rubbed a little ointment on his gums and sat in the rocking chair with him. When he was smaller, I used to rock him to sleep every night. Richie liked it and so did I. It gave us a chance to bond.

I hummed as he rested his head against my chest. I could tell he'd fall asleep any minute. I felt like I was being watched so when I looked towards the door, I wasn't surprised to see Marcus standing there with only his pants on.

His shirtless chest made my pulse race. "Is he sleeping?" Marcus walked into the room.

I looked down, and sure enough Richie was out like a light. "Yep, he's out for the night—again." Making sure not to make any sudden moves, I got up and placed him in his crib.

"I love you, Richard James," I whispered.

Marcus came behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. "Richard would have been proud of his son. He was a good man and I'm honored to have known him."

It warmed my heart to hear Marcus speak so fondly of Richard. “Yes, he was. He made it possible for us to be together.”

“How?”

I smiled to myself. “I’ll have to tell you about it one day.” I turned around in his arms. “Right now there’s something else I’d much rather do.”

Marcus wiggled his eyebrows at me. “Make love?”

“Well there’s always that, but I was thinking about that tub of Ben and Jerry’s Chunky Monkey downstairs with our names on it.”

He laughed. “Well, I can’t say no to that.”

Putting my arm around his waist, I gave a backwards glance to my son and had to blink. Maybe I’d imagined it, but I could have sworn I’d just seen an apparition standing over Richie’s crib.

Then I smiled. Whether I imagined it or not, with Marcus and Richie by my side, and my guardian angel watching over us, I knew we’d be okay.

It was time for a new chapter in my life.

Eve Vaughn

To learn more about Eve Vaughn, please visit [www.evevaughn.com](http://www.evevaughn.com).  
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