



**Penny  
Dawn**

**Wake-up Call**

## WAKE-UP CALL

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The room began to spin, but Bianca gripped the wall, gained her composure, and swallowed tears. She’d cry later. Alone. But she wouldn’t give either of them the satisfaction now. With shaky legs and a deep breath, she approached the tripod, assumed a position behind it, and cleared her throat.

Dick opened his eyes and horrific surprise crept into them when he saw her.

“Give me a little less bravado, Snow-bunny.” Much to Bianca’s surprise, she’d managed to speak clearly, without tremor. “We both know he’s not that good.”

After a startled dive for the duvet, her fiancé’s companion secured a white-blond lock with an emerald clip, and rewarded Bianca with a sly smile.

“Hey, princess.” Dick grinned and raked shaking fingers through his disheveled hair.

Bianca felt her eyes glaze over and time rewound to an era less inhibited. To Ethan and any number of blondes. If she closed her eyes and pretended, could she play Ethan’s game with another man, another blonde?

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*Measuring Up*

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# WAKE-UP CALL

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BY

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WAKE-UP CALL  
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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*For Chelsey, who has luxurious tresses.*

## CHAPTER 1

“I’m about to sell my soul.”

When Shontae Pepper heard those words, he nearly choked on his hot chocolate. He clattered his mug onto the knotty-pine bar at Maplehurst Lodge. Suddenly, he needed to sit down, but the bar was swarming, without a chair to spare. He instead leaned forearms first onto the bar and looked at the mysterious woman seated to his right. She’d confessed what might have been her deepest secret in a seductive tone. So sexy, yet sweet. And he didn’t usually go for white girls, but—wow! If her soul were for sale, maybe he’d find a price tag on the rest of her, too.

Straight, waist-long hair the color of dark autumn leaves—shades of burgundy, shades of auburn—shimmered in the dim light, and her cheeks emitted a rosy glow, as if she’d spent the entire day at the fireside, instead of braving the slopes. An ivory turtleneck sweater clung to her body, accentuating her narrow shoulders, thin arms, and

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round breasts. The crisp scent of a feminine perfume hung in the air around her. Eternity, was it?

But it wasn't the way she looked, or even the way she sounded—although her voice could probably drag an impotent man to full attention—that intrigued him. It was her poise. She struck him as a woman who carried herself with the confidence every woman should possess, but few had. In lieu of instant attraction—which to be fair, he felt that, too—admiration for her zapped him between the eyes. Selling her soul or not, this girl had it all together.

“I hope you're bringing in a good price,” he said in return.

Her eyes were the color of sapphires, but they didn't sparkle like gems when she regarded him. “A four-thousand square-foot house on the water, summers on Cape Cod, and this.” She held up her left hand, and the glare of a diamond ring the size and shape of a Victorian doorknob accosted him.

“Seems worth a soul, give or take.” He fought the urge to stroke her fingers and kiss her palm. Instead, he offered his hand. “Shontae Pepper.”

“Bianca.” After a quick glance at his hand, which she otherwise ignored, she turned back to her steaming mug and stirred its mocha-colored concoction. “Can I buy you a drink?”

“No, I'm set. But thanks.” He swirled the liquid in his own mug and, in order to avoid ogling her some more, watched a marshmallow melt into a creamy streamer. “Your name's Bianca, did you say?”

“Is that hot cocoa? Straight?” She placed her hand on his forearm, as if they'd known one another for years, and peered into his cup. “You live dangerously, I see.”

“The temperature's dropping fast, and last I checked, it was fourteen degrees out there. My car won't start, I'm told it could be hours before I'm rescued, and thanks to an expected ten inches of snow, I might not make it out at all tonight. I don't plan to be drunk if

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I'm sleeping on a cot."

She shuddered and, raising her drink to her lips, spoke into the mug. "I hate winter."

"You're at ski lodge, and you hate winter?"

She lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "I have my reasons for being here."

"And they might be?"

"Why are you here? The cocoa's not that great, and neither is this Midwestern excuse for a mountain." A cell phone jingled from inside a small, brown leather handbag atop the bar. She reached for the purse and rummaged for the phone. "Skiing down a landfill," she muttered. "That's all they're doing out there." She turned her back to him when she answered the phone. "Hi, Libby. So I've heard." She looked over her shoulder and studied him for a moment from beneath long, alluring eyelashes. "But ten inches or none, I'm not leaving until I see for sure."

While she hissed whispers over the phone, Shontae turned to observe dusk falling. It was just after five, and beyond the floodlights illuminating the ski hills, the sky looked like midnight. In the forefront of the scenery, large snowflakes wafted down, melting against the lodge windows. Hard to believe the gentle, heavy fluffs would soon grow into a fierce storm, and if he didn't escape this lodge soon, he'd be stuck, with no means to reach Midlane Country Club in time for his evening jazz gig.

He lived for playing the drums, which wasn't to say he didn't appreciate his day job. Counseling wayward teenagers at Daisy's Halfway House was an important, if not thankless, task, but jamming behind a drum set provided a rush he craved, a creative outlet for frustrations—and with disowned children to steer in the right direction alongside fellow counselor Faith Hennessy, frustrations were plentiful.

Faith, a beautiful woman with a heart of gold. He'd missed his chance with her due to his hesitation to cross the color barrier. She was now involved—in some mysterious definition of the word—with a

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former rock-and-roll musician who'd sailed the Great Lakes to reach her.

Shontae glanced in Bianca's direction. How far did men go to reach her?

"I don't care," she said. "I'm staying, if I have to stay all night. You'd understand if you'd approach a challenge of your own every now and then."

It sounded as if he'd have some company should the weather strand him, and he could imagine worse scenarios. Maybe a snowed-in evening would present an opportunity to weave a hand into the stranger's sleek hair, kiss her pouting, pink lips—or other parts of her. While the ring on her finger gave him reason to step aside, her confession compelled him to rescue her from the diamond prison perched on her hand.

But he doubted he'd know her long enough to try. Like her perfume, this woman reeked of sophistication, too rich for his blood. He couldn't imagine having anything in common with her beyond their current geography. She'd probably split the moment she learned he often filled in as a waiter to make the rent. And the last time he'd fallen for a white girl, he'd fallen on his ass.

The closest he'd come to intimacy with a woman of another race had been pressing Faith up against a wall during a thunderstorm, but the prospect of experiencing more with Bianca held immeasurable intrigue. The thought of parting pretty peach legs and opening the pink folds between them, sent a rush of energy straight to his cock. However, his desire to know a white woman went beyond the physical. He needed more than a mechanical fucking. He wanted to explore more than a body, to understand all aspects of her—first Faith, and now, unfathomably, Bianca.

*You're a glutton for punishment. Steer clear of this one, she's—*

"I'll check in later." The snap of Bianca's closing phone droned out

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the lecture in his head.

He turned away from the calming wonderland outside and faced what was sure to be a mountain of trouble disguised as a beautiful woman. “Something wrong?” He leaned against the bar.

“No.” But the flip of her hair over her shoulder told him otherwise. “People sell their souls for just about anything these days. Take you for instance. Normally, I wouldn’t be seen talking to you if my life depended on it, but—”

“Oh, the color issue.”

“It’s a color issue, I suppose.” She dragged a delicate finger over his knuckles and turned his hand over, palm up. “Your hands say it all. You’re blue-collar. A working man.”

The audacity. Maybe he did need a drink in order to put up with her. “I’m not what you think.”

She gripped his thumb with one hand and almost smiled as she threaded a path over the pads of his fingers. “These aren’t calluses?”

“Maybe they’re from my iron grip on the briefcase. You never know.”

“More like a grip on a barbell.”

“You are a snob, aren’t you?”

“No one’s forcing you to talk to me.”

Women only half as bold hadn’t retained his attention in the past, but her soft fingers stroked his hand with gentility, quite a difference from her fire-lashing tongue. The contrast confused him enough to keep him on his toes—and planted at the bar next to her.

“Oh!” She leapt off her barstool and wedged herself between his body and the bar.

He inhaled the scent of her perfume and momentarily allowed himself to gauge the comfort of her soft body against him. She was taller than he’d expected, about five-nine-plus-two, at least, for her high-heeled boots, which climbed higher and higher up her leg to the

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point it seemed indecent to continue following them—especially beneath the hem of her skirt. And her breasts felt firm against him. The work of one hell of an expensive bra? She shifted and her nipples grazed against his chest. *Maybe not.*

“It’s him.” With fisted hands buried in his thin sweater, she met his gaze for only a moment before turning her panic-stricken eyes toward the door.

“Who?” He looked over his shoulder.

“Don’t look.”

He didn’t know what he’d be looking for anyway.

“Hide me.”

The million reasons he ought to have walked away eluded him, and he found himself wrapping his arms around her.

“That son-of-a-bitch,” she whispered, her eyes following something over his shoulder. “That son-of-a-bitch!”

“What’s going on?”

“Follow him.” She shoved against his chest. “Go.”

“Who?”

“Him.” As she escaped his hold, she nodded toward a man who looked like he’d stepped off the cover of some preppy magazine. Light brown hair, chiseled features, layers of expensive clothing, and a laughing blonde on his arm.

“Go!” She nudged him again. “Don’t lose him. But don’t be obvious. What are you waiting for?”

Just when he was about to ask if she’d ever heard of asking nicely, she mouthed the word please. Her eyes beseeched enough for what she could not voice and, without another thought, he took the first step in an unfortunate crusade. Even as he walked past the floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace and disappeared into a dim hallway, he knew he shouldn’t have become involved in Bianca’s grim situation. Yet still, he kept a safe distance behind the attractive couple, who’d pressed the

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elevator button and were cuddled against the wall.

They assessed him when he stopped and waited for the elevator, too. He'd grown used to the practice during his boyhood, but it still bothered him. Did people eye everyone in the manner they did him? Because he was a tall, African American man, strangers looked at him as if he were about to steal their wallets, as if his color and size made him a menace to society. Faith had never treated him like that...and while Bianca had turned up her nose at him for other reasons, she hadn't been suspicious of him either.

He stared at the elevator doors and gritted his teeth until the tension in the air cleared. Once the couple deduced he wasn't packing heat, they didn't pay him any mind, oblivious to the fact his report to Bianca would cause worse damage than a stolen credit card ever could.

"I can't believe I have you for an entire night," the blonde said.

"Gonna make it worth my while?" Mr. GQ slipped a hand inside her coat and pulled her closer.

A bell sounded when the doors parted, welcoming them in. He stepped into the elevator first and tried not to watch the public display of affection ensuing along the way to the fourth floor. A dull ache settled in his chest. While he didn't know the beautiful woman in the lodge commons, he, being the bearer of indecent news, was about to scorn her all the same.

Connected like a pair of Siamese twins, the couple meandered four doors down and entered room four-o-six. None too soon, either, as clothing had already begun to fly.

\* \* \*

"Did anyone call for a tow?" a man with a dirty coat and even dirtier hands barked above the bustle of bar patrons and swore when no one answered him. "No one called for a tow? You got to be kidding—"

Bianca stirred a shot of whiskey into a mug of coffee and blocked out his rant. No matter how much time he'd wasted trekking out to the

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hill, she had her own problems to worry about and didn't have time for even a consoling glance in the tow-truck driver's direction. What lay ahead of her tonight would not be pretty, but it was child's play compared to what she'd endured eight years ago, the night Ethan had lost his will to live.

Although she rarely discussed her first fiancé—not with Libby, not with her four subsequent, would-be husbands—she never stopped thinking about the first man she'd loved. *Damn Richard Cusack and the bimbo on his arm.* The nerve of him, assuming he could fill Ethan's shoes and then bringing that snow-bunny to the very place Rich—or should she call him Dick?—had asked her to be his wife.

Dick's surprise proposal had had merit—nearly worth the three hours of practice hills, awkward falls, and nasty bruises she'd endured prior—and for a few months, Bianca had held onto a glimmer of hope for her future with this man, with his perfect combination of elegance and nastiness. The night he popped the question, he'd run a bath for her and ordered an exotic spread of fruit and cheeses for her to enjoy during the soak. Much to her surprise, he'd hidden a ring—a platinum setting with a huge diamond—in a glass of champagne. When she gasped at the sight of it, swimming in Dom, he'd prolonged the moment. "All in good time, princess. Enjoy your snack."

Because she would never dream of dipping her fingers into a flute bubbling with expensive champagne, and because she preferred to keep her composure at all costs, she'd sipped and nibbled until the bath water had cooled, all the while anticipating what his words might be when she finally spilled the ring onto the tray.

"The day I first saw you, I couldn't waste another moment of my life without speaking to you. And three months later, I know I'd be wasting my entire life without you in it." And then he'd screwed her senseless with the champagne bottle, promising all the while to watch her fuck another man someday—and caught the escapade on film. A

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documentary, he'd said, of the night she agreed to be his bride.

Not his wife, his bride. A month ago, she'd found his word choice thrilling, but she now recognized it as an inability to go the distance. They might have made it to the altar, but they probably would have fizzled soon after. In hindsight, she ought to have thanked her sister for reporting she'd seen Dick and Snow-bunny here at Maplehurst.

But Libby was another thorn in her side. No doubt, she'd enjoyed the dickens out of knowing Bianca had failed yet again in the romantic arena. And worse, she continued to call to witness her wallowing. Sure, Libby made it sound like she was concerned, but Bianca knew better. People derived pleasure from seeing others in pain. When Ethan died his rather eccentric death—in bed with Bianca and another woman—local media had hounded her for a statement, as if she were a famous actress experiencing a nasty fall-out with her Oscar-winning lover.

Reporters had heard Ethan had died of asphyxiation, and the testimony of ex-lovers had proven he'd been sexually quirky. But Bianca hadn't bared the raw details to the press then, just as she wouldn't indulge her sister now.

She wiped a tear from the corner of an eye and inhaled the scent of the Jack and coffee. *Don't let the bastards get you down. He's just a man. One among many. And she's just your kid sister. Cut her some slack. She'll fall on her face just like the rest of us eventually.*

A heavy sigh and the scent of hot cocoa begged her attention, and she turned toward the attractive black man with kind eyes, who'd suddenly reappeared at her side. He rubbed a hand over his shiny, shaven head.

"Well?" She abandoned the stir stick and met his gaze. "And sit down, will you? I'm getting a crick in my neck staring up at you all the time."

He leaned against the bar. "Is that the man you're selling your soul for?"

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“I didn’t ask for an exclusive interview, I asked you to follow him. Please, in the name of all that’s holy, tell me you didn’t lose him.”

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t lose him. They’re in room four-o-six.”

“Four-o-six?” Her heart pounded. Her numb-skull fiancé had booked the same suite in which he’d proposed to her for his adulterous weekend. “Are you sure?”

He nodded and licked his full lips. “I’m sorry.”

She straightened in her seat. “I’m wearing the ring and she isn’t. I’m fine.”

A large, warm hand covered one of hers, which made her feel small and protected—quite a rare occurrence. For one thing, most men didn’t top out much past her height when she was wearing heels, which was always. Yet this man towered over her, despite her wholly impractical, yet stylish, two-inch heeled, thigh-high boots. Was he six-three? Six-four, maybe? Most likely, he could serve and protect with the best of them.

But thanks to her mother’s revolving door of husbands, she’d long ago mastered the art of self-protection. Because her mother had been occupied with her own social calendar, Bianca hadn’t relied on anyone to make her feel safe. Rather, she became her own security system, and hopefully Libby’s, too. She’d made her own money at age fifteen, when she happened upon a catalogue modeling job, and she hadn’t needed help back then. But she needed it now, and this stranger caressed her hand as if blanketing her with protection. As if he really cared.

His thumb brushed against hers, and his fingers raked against her knuckles. Some men, like Ethan, were naturally good with their hands. This man—why couldn’t she remember his name?—was one of those men. The tension in her back and neck screamed for some attention. Suddenly, so did other parts of her, starting with those south of her

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navel and north of her boot tops. Sell her soul, indeed. In her present situation, she wanted nothing more than to be bad for a change, because being good hadn't done her any favors.

Ethan's death had taught her life was a game she could lose at any moment. Therefore, she'd played by the rules ever since. She arrived at work on time and paid her taxes. She never mixed cotton and cashmere, and she always held out for marriage proposals before going all the way. Unlike Libby, who'd casually bumped bodies on the first date—if a random meeting could be called a date—with the delectable neighbor. And now, while Libby and Jefferson cuddled back home, Dick was sticking it to some broad in the room where he'd proposed to Bianca.

Why couldn't all men be like Ethan? Straightforward and honest about his desires. "I've had my eye on a hot blonde. Five-seven and beautiful, and, baby, she's hot for you..." He'd had a fetish for natural blondes, liked to see light hair mix and entwine with her dark. Liked to watch their bodies work together, too, but she was always his focus in bed. Thirds were invited for her added pleasure, not his.

"Don't sell your soul for that ring," the black man said, lifting her from her reverie. "You're worth so much more."

His voice was deep and mesmerizing. Soothing, like a lullaby. Like his grasp on her hand, his bass-tone warmed her, made her feel special. His wide-set eyes were a chocolate pool of heaven. And with thoughts of Ethan surfacing—erotic, stimulating thoughts—she was ready to dive in and accept the comfort he offered.

His lips looked soft and succulent, as if they could tantalize any portion of skin they touched. Richard didn't have a mouth like that. Could she spend the rest of her life with bird-like pecks against her lips? This stranger most likely did not peck. His lips were the type to massage and compel—like Ethan's—and at the moment, she wanted them working her neck. Wet and precise.

She shook away her musings. Damn, he was good, seducing her

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when she was down and out, reminding her of her dead boyfriend! “You don’t know the half of it.” She blinked away from his entrancing gaze and pulled her hand out from under his. “And you sure as hell don’t know what I’m worth.” She swiveled off the barstool, draped her trench coat over her arm, and nodded toward her mug. “That’s a fresh Jack and coffee, so help yourself. I’d hate to see it go to waste.” With one last look over her shoulder, she said, “And if you don’t mind, save my seat.”

Let him believe she’d be back. The entire male race deserved to pay for Dick’s mistake. Beneath it all, they were all to blame. They all had dicks; they all could be Dicks. But now wasn’t the time to scowl—nor was any time the time. Frowning promoted wrinkles, and because she wasn’t getting any younger, Bianca avoided those at all costs.

She slinked out of the commons and approached the check-in desk in the adjacent lobby. Without hesitation, she drummed her fingernails on the rustic-looking counter top and said, “Richard’s going to shoot me, but I lost the room key again.”

A male employee stopped rifling through a stack of envelopes only long enough to acknowledge her, but then gave her a second look and held the glance. He’d recently come in from the slopes judging by his wind-burnt cheeks, the Oakley shades perched atop his head, and the snow melting off his—big surprise—multi-colored ski jacket and the fleece sweatshirt peeking out from beneath it. Which meant he was probably off-duty and looking for his weekly bread-and-butter. “I don’t work reservations, but Nance’ll be back in—”

Bianca put on her best pout and watched as the man zeroed in on her mouth. “It’s just that it’s our anniversary, and he’s on the chairlift, and I promised him a special night.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I was hoping for some time to prepare, and he’ll be in any minute, and—”

“Who did you say you were?”

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She flashed a smile and extended her left hand, diamond up. “I’m Richard Cusack’s fiancée. We’re staying in suite four-o-six. Again. Look it up, if you’d like.”

Four minutes later, she arrived at the door to the room she’d always remember—but now for all the wrong reasons. With a deep breath, she debated her options. Perhaps she ought to turn the other cheek. If she had the ring, the car, the house, and financial security, did it matter if Snow-bunny Barbie had Dick occasionally? On the other hand, the attractive black man she’d urged to do her investigating had a point. She deserved undivided attention—in and out of bed.

Okay, so she’d confront Dick. If she knew him well—and she did—he’d be recording the event, and he’d be too preoccupied with fucking at certain angles for the camera to notice she’d entered. Perhaps she’d spy for an opportune moment, when she could drop her clothes and steal back her man. Better yet, maybe she’d steal the woman and let Dick wallow in unfinished business across the room. She shuddered at that possibility. He’d enjoy it too much.

*Never again.* Ethan was gone, and that part of her had died along with him.

She put an ear to the door, but heard only muffled sounds. *Christ, Bianca, just open the damn door. You know what you’re going to find. May as well find it already.* An orchestra of oohs, ohs, and sexual yeses grew in crescendo as she opened the door.

When she sneaked through the suite—past the headless bearskin rug—and peeked into the bedroom, a graphic display of woman on top—backward—greeted her. His favorite position. With eyes closed, Snow-bunny threw her head back and bit her lip. Her small, round breasts jiggled with each thrust. Dick’s white-knuckled grip on her ass was sure to leave a mark, but none as permanent as the video-recording now in progress.

The room began to spin, but Bianca gripped the wall, gained her

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composure, and swallowed tears. She'd cry later. Alone. But she wouldn't give either of them the satisfaction now. With shaky legs and a deep breath, she approached the tripod, assumed a position behind it, and cleared her throat.

Dick opened his eyes and horrific surprise crept into them when he saw her.

"Give me a little less bravado, Snow-bunny." Much to Bianca's surprise, she'd managed to speak clearly, without tremor. "We both know he's not that good."

After a startled dive for the duvet, her fiancé's companion secured a white-blond lock with an emerald clip, and rewarded Bianca with a sly smile.

"Hey, princess." Dick grinned and raked shaking fingers through his disheveled hair.

Bianca felt her eyes glaze over and time rewound to an era less inhibited. To Ethan and any number of blondes. If she closed her eyes and pretended, could she play Ethan's game with another man, another blonde?

She shook off the momentary seduction of the memory and turned for the door. "You're sick." The camera cord caught on her boot heel, and her trench coat was flung against the tripod. Before she knew it, she was kissing the floor and the camera was tumbling down on top of her. Her own scream reverberated in her ears. "Sick son-of-a-bitch! You'll never be half the man he was!"

As she attempted to untangle the cord and recover her footing, her hair whipped in her face. She swept aside a few impeding strands, only to see Dick—still nude, hard as a rock, and sheathed in latex—on his haunches at her side. "Are you all right? I—"

She shoved his hands away. "Don't touch me."

But he grasped her by the elbow and pulled her to her feet.

The scent of cheap sex lingered in the air, and clothing lay in a

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rumped mess at the foot of a sin-wagon of a bed. Perched on all fours, Snow-bunny stared up at them with a bewildered expression. Her perfect, white rear pointed toward the ceiling, and her barely-A cups sported excited nubs. “Are you Bianca?”

Bianca smoothed the soft threads of her cashmere sweater and straightened the hem of her woolen miniskirt. “Don’t...touch...me.” She met her fiancé’s gaze, and slowly, his hand retreated.

“One last fling, princess.” He stood the camera upright. “That’s all it is.”

“For Christ’s sake.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder and glanced down at his exposed member, which twitched in excitement.

A feminine hand grasped hers. “He told me you were beautiful.” She smoothed hair from Bianca’s forehead. “He said maybe, if he could convince you...”

The soft touch, coupled with her sweet voice, filtered through Bianca’s veins like an aphrodisiac. She stared into emerald eyes. “Do I know you?”

“I’m sorry.” Snow-bunny’s blonde curls tousled when she shook her head. “I’ve tried, but he’s a hard habit to break, you know?”

The image of Ethan’s first blonde flitted around in her head. She’d worn a hair clip similar to the one this woman wore—golden to match her hair, donned with a line of faux emeralds. It had been years, but even the style was the same. Sides drawn up to the middle and secured in a flatter version of the sixties’ poof with the clip. Bianca felt warm everywhere, awakened from a deep sleep. “I know you.”

“I don’t think so.”

“New Year’s Eve. Ten years ago.”

“Impossible.” Another shake of her angelic head. “I was only fifteen.”

“Why are you doing this? We’re getting married.” She was asking Dick, but she couldn’t look away from the woman caressing her face.

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She imagined pink lips puckered over her own nipples, slender fingers sliding into her folds.

She felt the coat slide off her arms, heard Dick's muffled response, but didn't process his words.

Small breasts pressed against hers and thin arms surrounded her. "I'm sorry."

Bianca's entire body tingled, like a foot fallen asleep. She swept her cheek against the blonde's, then brushed her lips over a lobe. Dick was speaking in a garbled cloud a hundred miles away, and she was falling to the mattress—only it felt like ten, fifteen, twenty feet down. A swirling sensation stirred in her stomach when she parted her lips and welcomed the woman's tongue into her mouth.

*Heaven. Ethan.*

Feminine kisses trailed from her mouth to her neck, and delicate hands pushed her sweater up, over her breasts, only to make way for more intense kisses, in more intriguing places. A soft tongue bled wetness through her lace bra, fingers kneading her breasts. Bianca pinched her eyes closed. *Can't lose the dreamland. Can't lose Ethan.*

Kisses trailed from her breasts to her navel, and beneath her skirt, a masculine thumb pressed against her silk panties, drawing circles on her clit. One slender finger entered her and twirled against her moist walls. A creamy dollop rushed inside her. Two fingers. Three. And a slow, steady thumb rubbing externally.

Lips closed around the hard nub at the apex of her legs and a talented tongue laved her with patience. Three fingers tantalized her insides, stroking her into frenzy.

"Hmmm." The blonde hummed against her clit. Ethan always said that was a sign. She was enjoying giving as much as Bianca was, receiving. "Hmmm."

A squeeze high on her thigh, just above the top of a boot, enticed Bianca to shiver. So many pleasure centers, hit all at once. The fingers

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continued to work her. Internally, externally. “HmMMM.”

*Oh, Ethan.*

“HmMMMM.” A sharp suck on her clit.

*Oh, Ethan!*

Fingers deep and wet, and a tongue parting the skin, licking out her rawest emotion.

“Ethan!”

“HmMMM!”

Struggling to catch her breath, Bianca opened her eyes and focused on Dick, cock buried in Snow-bunny’s body.

“That’s it, baby,” Dick said through gritted teeth. “You shut her the fuck up so I can fuck you right.”

His was the hand on Bianca’s thigh. Not Ethan’s. She jerked away, startling the blonde away from her clit. This was not about her. Not the same as with Ethan. Not the same woman, not the same feeling. It was all about Dick, all about the blonde third. She scrambled off the bed and reached for her coat. Snow-bunny had eaten her into orgasm, while Dick rammed the blonde.

Bianca closed her eyes, but the truth didn’t fade when she opened them again. Her fiancé’s cock was buried in the blonde’s ass. What had she done? *Fool.*

“Let me taste her on you.” Dick collapsed atop Snow-bunny and, turning her head and holding her chin in his hand, licked her lips. “She tastes so fucking good. Bet you wish you tasted as classy as that, don’t you?”

The blonde tensed, but Bianca only headed toward the door, drawing in shuddering breaths.

“Fucking fool, princess,” Dick grumbled. Ram, ram, ram. He gripped the perfect ass with iron fingers, refusing to relent, although his target squirmed and pleaded for liberation.

“Wait.” Snow-bunny’s eyes pleaded.

## WAKE-UP CALL

“You threw this away,” Bianca whispered.

“Get off me!” Snow-bunny shrieked. “Wait! Bianca, wait.”

She raced out of the room. “I’m sorry,” she whispered as she ran down the hallway. “Ethan, I’m sorry.”

Her numb clit served as a tingling reminder of what she’d done. Through welling tears, she stared at her diamond. Could she sell her soul? Perhaps, by succumbing to Snow-bunny’s seduction, she’d just signed the papers.

Had she negotiated well? She loved the house. The Bentley was nice. What choice did she have, unless she wanted to wander back to the mildew-infested cottage in Channel Lake Village? Living with Libby, waiting for calls from her agent that never came. No one wanted a twenty-nine-year-old runway model, when eighteen-year-old children would strut for less and show a hell of a lot more. Life with Dick held no promise, no future, but nothing more magical awaited her.

Her first fiancé hadn’t owned a sock without a hole in it, and he would have loved her if she’d grown chunky, if she—like Libby—had found a few premature grays, and, yes, Ethan would have loved her even if she’d refused to indulge his ménage-a-trois fantasies. But it was because she’d loved him like no other that she’d done crazy things to blonde women on his request. She’d enjoyed it from the very first time, and he’d died watching it, air-planing he’d called it, cutting off his oxygen supply for added sexual stimulation. Now that he was gone, did it matter if she spent the rest of her life without a soul?

Some wives pretended to ignore their husbands’ infidelities. Dick’s adulterous actions hadn’t exactly come as a surprise, now she thought about it. He’d been living with someone when they met and she’d been the other woman. *What goes around comes around.* Was this her due penance for wrecking a home? For watching Ethan strangle himself with a belt?

She lifted her chin and boarded the elevator.

## WAKE-UP CALL

\* \* \*

“I’m calling to check the status of a tow.” With his cell phone at his ear, Shontae sipped his now-cold cocoa. “Maplehurst Lodge. What? When? But I’ve been here the entire—” He kneaded the bridge of his nose. What were the odds the tow truck would show in the five minutes he’d spent chasing Bianca’s unfaithful fiancé? “I’m sorry I missed him. Put me back on your list. Please. And, if you wouldn’t mind, give your driver my cell number this time. Thank you.”

He pocketed the phone. Maybe, with the upcoming storm, his gig would be cancelled, but suppose it wasn’t? He hardly had a prayer to make it to Midlane on time now, if at all. *Unless...* He looked to the abandoned cup of coffee to his right. Bianca had been gone a long time, but surely she wouldn’t stay at the lodge after she’d seen what she’d come to see. *Poor girl.* Maybe she’d give him a lift out of here. He’d done her a favor...she might return it. She was his last hope, aside from calling Faith, which he didn’t want to do for several reasons.

Just then he caught a wafting of Eternity, yet when he scanned the area for the beautiful Bianca, all he saw was a glimpse of a black patent leather boot halfway out the door. Still, in a room full of ski jackets—hell, any room, full of any people—she stood out. “Hey, wait!” He grabbed his coat and weaved through patrons toward her.

She didn’t stop, but he reached her soon after he exited the building. Her heels provided her with a disadvantage on the slippery terrain, and she was baby-stepping her way across the parking lot, gliding unpredictably when she hit an icy patch. He caught her under the arm and prevented her fall. “Whoa, careful.”

Her watery gaze met his. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t seem to be.”

“I will be.” She resisted his hold.

He didn’t let go but loosened his grip. “Can I walk you to your car?”

## WAKE-UP CALL

“It’s all the way across the lot. I’m sure I’ll make it on my own, and I’m sure you have other things to do.”

“Not really. My tow showed up when I was chasing Mr. GQ back there.”

“Oh, that was for you?”

“You saw him? And you didn’t ask him to wait? Oh, man, you’re killing me.”

“Yet you’re still here. Holding my elbow.” With lips pursed, she raised her brows. “Do you mind?”

“Yes, I do mind. I mind that you haven’t thanked me for doing your dirty work, I mind that I missed my one ticket out of here tonight, and I mind the man you agreed to marry is sleeping around. I don’t have the slightest idea why, but yes, I mind.”

When she blinked, a tear escaped and, stone-faced, she wiped it away. “Thank you. For following him.”

“You’re welcome. But now I’m in a situation, and I need you to return the favor. I need a ride to Midlane Country Club.”

“Are you high? I don’t know you. I don’t even remember your name.”

“It’s Shontae. Shontae Pepper.”

“Well, Shontae, I appreciate your help, but surely you don’t expect me to get in a car with someone who could mug me, rape me, or kill me for all I know.”

“Oh, I get it. The brawny black man—”

“I wouldn’t care if you were purple, for crying out loud. Or if you were a woman, for that matter. I don’t know you. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Dazed by her expert tongue-lashing—*was she as good with her tongue in other respects, too?*—he watched as she started through the parking lot. The heel of her boot again caught the icy patch. Instinctively, he reached for her arm and prevented another fall.

## WAKE-UP CALL

“Easy.”

She smoothed away a snowflake at her temple and zapped him with a dignified stare, in lieu of thanking him. Again. What was wrong with the woman that she couldn't bear to be polite? Did she feel she were entitled to the rescue?

“That's three you owe me now.”

She batted her lashes. Not in a coy manner, but conveying annoyance. He didn't blame her. What kind of a savior kept score? Hell, maybe he didn't want to save her at all.

“Send me a bill.” Secure with her balance now, she tightened her trench and took another step away.

For the life of him, he didn't know why, but he fell in stride beside her. He tried to tell himself he couldn't, in good conscience, let her brave the icy lot alone. Not in those impractical spike heels. He considered the possibility she may actually give him a ride to Midlane, if he was persistent about asking. But concentrating on any excuse to prolong their acquaintance proved a difficult task with those kickin' boots beckoning his attention.

“I can take it from here,” she said.

“I know you're capable, but—”

“Do you?” She looked up at him, out of the corners of her eyes.

“A woman who comes back from seeing what I'm pretty sure you saw? Without mascara running and a handful of hair? Hell, yes, I know you're capable.”

“It's waterproof.” She quickened her steps. “I planned ahead.”

“Speaking of plans, what are you doing tonight?” When she shot him with a piercing glare, he cupped her elbow. “It's just that I'd really appreciate a ride out to Midlane. I have a jazz gig and I'm already going to be—”

“Jazz.” She may as well have rolled her eyes as she spoke and approached a silver Bentley.

## WAKE-UP CALL

It figured she'd drive a car worth four times his yearly salary. Nice. Sophisticated. It suited her.

"You don't look like the jazz type."

He looked away from the car and refocused his attention on her. "You rely a lot on appearances, don't you? On what people look like?"

"I don't—society does. Like it or not." She opened the door and settled in. "I just admit it, that's all."

"Hey, here's a thought. How about getting to know me? See how close I come to hitting your marks."

With a shake of her head, her brow began to crinkle in a frown, but just as quickly the creases disappeared, as if she were afraid to let him see any emotion. "I can't help you."

"All right. Thanks anyway. Drive safely, all right?" The second he backed away, she slammed the car door. He was fairly certain she wouldn't have hesitated to close it on his arm, if he hadn't moved.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and turned back toward the lodge. Heavy, icy snowflakes pelted against his ski coat and raw wind bit his cheeks. If he wanted to risk missing the tow truck again, he might consider heading back out onto the slopes. Properly bundled and exerting his energy, he wouldn't feel as cold as he did now.

Talk about cold. The front Bianca had put up was as icy as the roads. Her fiancé had just turned her life on its nose and she hadn't shed a tear. Such composure. Maybe she'd have a good cry once she'd arrived home—or wherever it was she was going. He hoped so. Something told him she needed a good cleansing. He'd seen a thousand cases of stiff upper lips at Daisy's Halfway House, where he worked. His charges acted out instead of allowing themselves to feel vulnerable, and part of his job entailed teaching them to express what they felt. Given the chance, he'd work the vulnerability out of Bianca, too. In his wildest dreams, in more way than one.

On his way into the lodge, he collided with a disheveled blonde.

## WAKE-UP CALL

Their gazes met for only a split second before Bianca's fiancé shouldered past him. "Honey, wait. I can explain."

"You're in love with her!"

"No, I'm not. I'm not, honey, I—"

"You think she's better than me."

"No one's better."

"You said she was cold! I felt her, and she's not cold."

Shontae stiffened against the door to allow the couple to pass, curbing the urge to slide a foot in the cheater's path. There'd be certain symmetry in watching him fall on his face—and, Lord, he deserved it—but none of that was Shontae's business. Bianca had closed the book on his involvement the moment she'd closed her car door.

He sighed. *But you're going to be thinking about her for a long time.*

## CHAPTER 2

Bianca didn't cry when, moments before she put the car in gear, Dick chased Snow-bunny halfway across the parking lot. He hadn't followed Bianca out of the room, let alone out of the lodge, and that alone spoke volumes. Yet she didn't cry. Not even when her fiancé imprisoned the blonde against the car, and begged her forgiveness. He was wearing only jeans and his ski coat, open over his bare chest, which reminded her not only of the humiliating scene she'd interrupted in suite four-o-six, but of her own indiscretion by falling for the blonde's trick. Not to mention those involving the same man, the same camcorder, and the same sexual position. She shuddered when she realized she was probably as replaceable for Dick Cusack as a throw-away razor, and she'd tried to become everything he dreamed her to be.

What about her dreams? Not one of them involved him and an extra-curricular girl boarding themselves up in a stupid ski lodge for the weekend he was supposed to have spent in a board room in

## WAKE-UP CALL

Minneapolis. Never had she dreamt of his flying out of the lot in his souped-up SUV with Snow-bunny's head in his lap.

Bianca imagined her fiancé's hands stroking all that blonde hair. If that girl was what he wanted, why had he proposed marriage? A fine diamond ring—she was not giving this one back—perched on her hand. He'd have to crawl back to Channel Lake and reclaim it, and his car, with his tail between his legs. And he would someday. Between now and then, she had a decision to make. Surrender it all, or look the other way.

Could she erase from her mind the woman-on-top-turned-anal-threesome in four-o-six? Could she take herself off the market, when there were still good men out there? Men like Shontae Saltshaker-or-whatever-his-name-was would deliver bad news without enjoying it, guide her through ice and snow, and say things like "Drive safely," even though she'd been an absolute bitch. But were men like that worth working the two-line switchboard at Channel Lake Marina for the rest of her life? Catalogue shoots were fewer and farther between, and she knew she was past her prime.

Men didn't leave her for other women. Men didn't leave her, period. She would forgive this betrayal—somehow. Eventually, she might even forgive herself for betraying Ethan. Three cars ahead of her, an affair continued between her fiancé and a younger, perkier woman. She imagined Dick's consoling Snow-bunny, spinning some tale to keep her on board, perhaps for the entire length of his marriage. But Bianca could go back to him when he'd groveled enough. After all was said and done, there was no guarantee the next man wouldn't treat her worse, and in five years, she could leave with a handsome divorce settlement. She could beat him at his own game, and perhaps play a game of her own. Hell, she might take the blonde with her when she left.

She tapped her nails against the leather steering wheel as she inched

## WAKE-UP CALL

the car down Highway C. Snowflakes grew larger and hit the windshield with ferocity. There was some sort of hold-up ahead, and at this rate, she wouldn't be home before dark.

*Home.* Where was home? She'd been staying at Dick's place since their engagement, but she couldn't go there until he'd crawled back to her. Channel Lake was closer anyway, but the key to the cottage was on her other key ring, which meant—ugh—calling her gloating sister to unlock the door. She reached for her phone and dialed. "Hi, Libby."

"Go home. It's getting bad out there."

"I'm on my way, but...I'm not going back to Lake Forest." During a long pause, she imagined Libby's sneering at the thought of Bianca's misfortune, but when her sister spoke, she sounded...worried. Sincere, even.

"So what happened?"

"Exactly what you think happened." Visibility was dwindling fast, and she'd traveled less than a mile. "Listen, I don't have my keys, but I need to stay with you tonight. Can you find the time to pull yourself out of Jefferson's arms to walk across the street and unlock the door?"

"Of course, but—"

"Oh, jeez, what's going on up there? We're bumper-to-bumper, and I can't see a damn thing."

"I was just going to tell you to take the long way home. Terrible accident. It's all over the news. You could be there for hours."

"Great. Dick's three cars ahead of me, and I swear, her head is in his lap. I can't stare at that for hours."

"Dick? Whenever I'd call him that, you'd lecture me about how he's anything but. What happened to calling him Rich for the sake of good omens?"

"You were right, okay? Rich or not, the guy's a dick."

"I'm really sorry. I didn't want to be right about him."

Sure, she didn't. She was probably popping a champagne cork as

## WAKE-UP CALL

they spoke.

“Look on the bright side.” Libby sounded too cheerful. “At least you didn’t buy the centerpieces yet.”

“God, that’s another thing I have to do.”

“What? B, you’re not going to marry this guy.”

What difference did it make? Her soul had died the day she buried her soul mate. Might as well sell it to the highest bidder. “I should go back. We’re at a standstill, here. And I swear, her head is in his lap! I can’t watch this happen right under my nose.”

“Maplehurst is booked solid, that’s why Jefferson and I didn’t stay. You won’t get a room.”

“I’ll get a room. I have my ways.”

“Oh, yeah? What if there’s a woman working the reservations counter?”

“I’ll wait for her to take a break and then I’ll talk to a man. And if push comes to shove, I can go back to Dick’s room.”

“Just come home, Bianca. You shouldn’t be by yourself tonight.”

The memory of Shontae’s strong arms surrounding her filtered through her mind. For the moment she’d been in them back at the bar, she’d felt safe and warm. “I’ll be fine.”

\* \* \*

*Great.* Shontae’s name was at the bottom of yet another waiting list. This time, for a room at Maplehurst Lodge. The chances of a cancellation at this hour and with this weather were slim to nil, but he clung to the hope. Perhaps some guests had yet to arrive for their weekend ski excursions, and maybe the expected storm would deter them from making the trip. While he could imagine better places to spend the evening—or better company with whom to share his time—things could have been worse.

His piece-of-scrap-metal car could have marooned him, leaving him to freeze his ass off on the side of the road. Or, had he found a ride out

## WAKE-UP CALL

to Midlane, he could have been stranded at the country club with nothing to do but stare at the snow-covered golf course, as his gig had been officially cancelled five minutes ago. If he had to spend the night somewhere without a bed to lie on, Maplehurst was the place to do it.

Interrupting a span of cranberry-and-evergreen plaid wallpaper in the lobby, a stone chimney climbed toward the beamed cathedral ceiling. Shontae sank into a brown leather sofa opposite the hearth and soaked in the warmth of the flames.

What a long, arduous day. He'd arrived at the ski lodge at eight in the morning, with a clan of halfway house residents and a handful of counselors—including Ms. Faith Hennessy. Due to his evening gig, Shontae had driven separately and stayed on the hill after they'd headed back to Waukegan, which was just as well. His feet hurt and his back ached, but spending time with Faith often hurt worse.

“Still here?”

He looked away from the fire to a sight even more mesmerizing. Bianca stood before him, dusted with snow, her overcoat open revealing black patent leather-clad legs that went on forever, a knobby, woolen skirt the color of charcoal, and a sweater that should have been illegal.

The scent of Eternity drifted in the air along with her soothing voice. “Hi.”

“Car trouble?”

“It took me an hour to go seven miles and back.” She shrugged off her coat and sat on the opposite end of the sofa. “I thought I'd get a room, but—”

“They're booked.”

“Yes.” The firelight pronounced the red in her hair and the rosy glow in her cheeks. Her lips, slathered in coffee brown lipstick, parted as if she were about to speak, but she only shook her head and pulled a stray thread off her snug sweater. She was still wearing the ring.

## WAKE-UP CALL

“You all right?”

“I’m fine.” She shifted toward him. “Wishing I’d worn something else today, seeing as though I’ll be wearing it all night now, but when you walk in on your fiancé with another woman, looking good is prerequisite.”

Laughing was probably an inappropriate response, especially because it was the most she’d said to him at once, but he couldn’t stop his chuckling. “You’ve got that one covered.”

As she flipped her hair over her shoulder, a smile touched her lips, but she didn’t thank him for the compliment. Instead, she stared into the fireplace, a dreamy expression on her face. Suddenly, her voicing her gratitude became an unimportant detail, secondary to seeing her smile, which brought her to life, humanized her.

“It’s pretty bad out there,” she said. “They’re saying we’ll get those ten inches. Maybe more.”

“I want to take you to dinner.”

She snapped her attention back to him, her mouth hanging open a fraction.

His heart raced and he licked his lips, which were suddenly dry.

“I’m engaged.”

“That’s fine. It wouldn’t be a date.”

“No?”

“I don’t date white women.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.” He clasped his hands and rested an elbow on the arm of the sofa. “I’m uneasy around you.”

“A lot of men are uneasy around me.”

“I don’t mean you personally.”

“Of course not.”

“Are you hungry?”

She fiddled with the diamond ring. “I don’t have much of an

## WAKE-UP CALL

appetite, but I should probably eat something.”

“There’s a two-hour waiting list for a table, and my name’s on it. Maybe you’ll be hungry then.”

“Maybe.” She crossed and uncrossed her legs, the leather of the boots squeaking as one rubbed against the other.

“Want to take a walk?”

She pulled at her skirt as she shifted in the too-deep sofa. “What I want is to cozy up under soft blankets and watch a movie. I want comfortable pajamas, warm socks, and a man—for once—who knows how to treat a woman.”

“All that’s doable. It’s just the matter of finding the right pajamas and socks without holes in them.”

“What did you say?” She looked at him as if he’d unraveled an age-old mystery.

“Pajamas. Socks.”

“Without holes.”

“Pipe dreams, right?” He stood and offered his hand. “Come on. Let’s kill some time.”

She took his hand and raised an eyebrow as she stood. “So what does one do here to kill time, if she hates the climate?”

“Eat, drink, learn to like snow.” He shrugged after three shakes of her head. The feeling of her soft hand stayed imbedded in his palm for long moments after she’d released him. “How do you feel about pool?”

“I don’t play.”

“How about board games? Everyone plays board games, right? Monopoly’s probably spoken for, but we might be able to snag Old Maid.”

“Old Maid?”

“Sure. What do you say?”

“Cheap shot.” She crossed her arms over her breasts.

“Wasn’t aiming.”

## WAKE-UP CALL

“Still.”

“Something tells me you don’t scrub your own floors. Loser buys dinner.”

“I have a better idea. Let’s charge it to Dick’s room.” She lit up the room with only half a smile.

“May I carry your coat?”

She handed over the garment. But she didn’t thank him. He led her to a pine paneled room with floor-to-ceiling windows. The ski hill looked like an ivory mound against the navy sky. If the resort weren’t as crowded, the game room might have provided a romantic refuge in which they might have become acquainted...if they so chose.

But the game room boasted standing room only and pickings on the shelves were slim. “Risk?” he asked. “Boggle?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Do you honestly have the energy to think? I’d rather play a simple game.” She pulled Chutes-n-Ladders from the shelf. “This day’s been too long as it is.”

It was his turn to follow as she darted out of the room. If she hadn’t moved so quickly, he might have taken her in his arms, raked through her sure-to-be silky hair, and assured her with a cliché line like “Everything’s going to be all right. I won’t let him hurt you again.” The insane side of that thought was that he truly wanted to promise her happiness. A girl with a smile like hers ought to spend her life elated.

They set up to play on the hearth in the main lobby, kneeling on an enormous black bearskin rug—sans head, of course. Whoever had decorated the ski resort must have contacted every hunter in the United States and Canada to amass the number of bearskin rugs on the premises.

“This should be you.” Bianca handed over a marker shaped like a white girl with a brunette ponytail and claimed a brown-toned boy as her own. “And this is me.”

“I think you’ve got it backward.”

## WAKE-UP CALL

“It’s good to be someone else.” She popped the plastic pointer into the spinner. “Even if it’s just for a little while.”

“I should warn you. I was pretty good at this game last time I played.”

She looked up at him through thick eyelashes. “So was I.”

“No, I mean I was really good. Not one of the kindergarteners could beat me when I taught at Saint Augustine.”

“You’re a kindergarten teacher?”

“I was for a few years. Now I’m a counselor for homeless teens.”

“I would’ve pegged you for...hmm”—she drummed her nails against the board and pursed her lips—“road construction.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“What’s harder? Kindergarteners or teens?”

“On a normal basis, kindergarteners are harder to control. But under the circumstances, the boys at Daisy’s Halfway House give me a run for my money.”

“Circumstances?”

“Ever hear of Daisy’s?”

When she shook her head and her auburn hair fell into her eyes, she draped the tendrils aside with a slender finger. Of course she hadn’t been acquainted with the halfway house. Women like her wouldn’t know of the world’s hardships—and that was just as well.

“It’s where wayward teens go, if they’re lucky, instead of going to jail. At the moment, Daisy’s has fourteen girls and twelve boys, six of whom are my responsibility.”

“Why on earth did you ever leave the kindergarteners?”

“Saint Augustine closed its doors when the donation pool dried up.”

“So why not teach at another school?”

“There’s reward in turning a kid around. Not financial, but emotional. It’s draining, but when you do it, it feels better than all the money in the world.”

## WAKE-UP CALL

“I doubt that very much.”

“Have you ever had all the money in the world?”

The stubborn tendril dropped into her line of sight again. Maintaining eye contact, she shook her head and her hair shimmied.

“Then how do you know it feels good at all?”

A slow smile spread across her face, and at last, those gems in her eyes began to sparkle.

\* \* \*

“Charge it to room four-o-six.” Bianca tucked Dick’s room key into the leather billfold and handed it to the waiter.

“What was that?” Shontae rubbed a hand over his closely-shaven head, as if smoothing hair that wasn’t there.

“What?”

“You really are killing me. All this time, you’ve had a room key? We’re waiting around for a cancellation, and there’s an empty room upstairs?”

“Not empty. Not entirely anyway.” Snow-bunny’s tiny, jiggling breasts flashed in her mind. “It’s tainted.”

“So is this whole place. Hell, for all we know, they could have had lunch right here at this table. But after braving that mess outside, it’s doubtful he’s coming back until tomorrow, and you’d rather wait it out here? In the lobby?”

She reached for her water glass and considered the possibility of spending a night in a room Dick had soiled with his infidelity. Funny she wasn’t concerned with being locked behind closed doors with Shontae. If someone happened to see them leaving together tomorrow morning, she’d look as guilty as her fiancé had racing through the parking lot half dressed. But she trusted Shontae. He was one of the good guys—a former kindergarten teacher, for God’s sake.

His tongue appeared on his succulent-looking lips. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

## WAKE-UP CALL

“It’s fine.”

He reached across the table and took her hand. “I’m sorry. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you.”

His fingers brushed against her palm in soothing strokes. Her heartbeat spiked. “It’s a suite. I suppose if we call housekeeping for new linens...”

“Bianca, I—”

“I’ll take the sofa. You can have the bed.”

“Hey, I’m the mooch, here, right? You don’t have to—”

“You’re too big to sleep on the sofa. If you need anything—  
toothbrush, hairbrush, pajamas—”

“Hairbrush? Yeah, I think I need a dozen.”

She looked to his bald head and laughed.

## CHAPTER 3

Shontae kept a worn, faded gym bag in his car, and every woman in his life chastised him for doing so. Faith wrinkled her nose at it, whenever they stood talking in front of his open trunk in the parking lot at Daisy's. His mother swore she'd taught him better. And his sister never shut up about how disgusting the thing looked. Now he was glad he neglected to haul his bag in for a washing more often because, in addition to bad-smelling clothes, he also had a shaving case full of toiletries.

He entered the dim, three-room suite and tossed the duffel on the floor. Bianca brushed past him with a handled shopping bag from the Maplehurst gift shop and headed toward the sliding glass door on the opposite side of the room. The lights illuminating the mountain in the distance blazed as white as the steadily-falling snow, giving the illusion of midday outside—and accentuating her every curve as she stood there.

## WAKE-UP CALL

She whisked the curtains closed. “When will they realize there’s a blizzard out there and close the hill for the night?”

“They live for nights like this.” And under other circumstances, he would’ve stayed on the slopes until the chairlift stopped running, but not tonight. Not when he’d been on the hill since eight in the morning with wards of the court who’d earned an outing for good behavior. And not when he’d happened upon a beauty with sad eyes, who desperately needed to smile.

When she turned back, he averted his eyes, pretending to study his surroundings—the double-access fireplace between the living room and the bedroom, yet another bearskin rug, the quilt hanging on the opposite wall. Man, he’d like to wrap their bodies in a shared blanket.

In his younger years, he’d believed whole-heartedly in the one-night-stand, but working with strung-out, sexually chaotic teens had taught him to value intimacy. The world dealt severe blows on its own. He wasn’t about to add to the injury by striking Bianca’s vulnerability tonight. Not only did she not need the extra hassle, he couldn’t afford to make any more memories with the girl when he’d most likely be the one wanting more at the end of it all.

And besides, he didn’t date white women.

She sat on an ottoman in front of the fireplace, and, with a sigh, she reached for a boot zipper high on her inner thigh.

*Do yourself a favor. Don’t watch this.* But he couldn’t take his eyes away from the sight of her red-nailed fingers disappearing beneath the hemline of her skirt.

With a slightly bent knee, she elevated her leg and unzipped, revealing a shapely stem clad in black nylon. How long was her inseam? He pictured the yardstick he often carried through the gymnasium and on the outdoor basketball courts at Daisy’s—he was all bark and no bite, but his charges didn’t have to know that—and mentally measured. Thirty-three inches at least.

## WAKE-UP CALL

She tossed aside the boot and reached for the zipper on the other. This time, when she raised her leg, he caught sight of a band of lace at her thigh. Thigh-high stockings, thigh-high boots. Heaven help him if he ever saw her in panties.

Images consumed him. Images of her black lingerie-clad body up against a wall, her skin an erotic shade of ivory against his brown flesh. He pictured his black hands cupping the snow-white mounds now hidden beneath ivory cashmere, imagined tonguing her pink nipples and probing the pink slit between her long, white legs with his blue-collar fingers. He wanted her to quiver with ecstasy. Not for his own pleasure—for hers. A woman looking the way she did deserved to feel good, too.

She rolled her shoulders and, with closed eyes, stretched her neck.

He pictured her stretching out atop a bed, and that's all it took to spring him to full capacity below the belt. "Listen, I'm going to hop in the—"

"I need a soak."

"—shower."

Her symphonic laugh filled the room like church bells on Sunday morning. "I guess we're both pretty worn out."

"You can go first." Thinking about her naked breasts covered in suds wouldn't do much to deter his condition, but—

"I'm sure you'll be faster. Go ahead."

"Thanks." After one last musing about her long legs around his waist, he turned toward the shower, the pain of arousal his only company.

\* \* \*

Bianca took an armload of fresh linens from the housekeeping staff and ventured into the suite's bedroom. Dick had done little more than stand the tripod and camera upright before he'd rushed out. The bed sheets remained rumped, and luggage for two still sat atop the rack on

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the far side of the room.

With a heavy heart, she looked around at the mess. As inconsistent as the man was about his women, he was certainly reliable in regards to his bad habits. Old faithful, right there. She kicked aside a pair of discarded sweat socks, knowing he'd stripped down with lightning speed, anxious to dive into the now-dirty bed and cheat on her. His T-shirt lay over a chair, and his sweater was a pile of wool on the floor across the room.

*Why? Why had he chosen this way?* She was a good, strong woman. A decent cook. Never faked a headache. Hell, she'd even tried skiing for the bastard. And sure, she'd aged since her first stroll down the catwalk, but she wasn't bad to look at, not by a long shot. What had she done to deserve his infidelity? Her bad-things account ought to have been paid in full when she lost Ethan, but she continued to become involved in impossible relationships, which only hurt her.

At first, she'd assumed her bad luck with men was some sort of curse bequeathed by Ethan. When engagement number two fell apart, she'd chalked it up to Ethan's anger with her moving on. She'd harbored insurmountable guilt moving forward with another man, to the extent of considering life in a convent. Enter fiancé number three at Saint Peter's Sunday service. Her love life had become a never-ceasing circle of high hopes followed by failure, then determination, high hopes, et cetera. This room, strewn with clothing and reeking of spoiled dreams, personified her repeated failures.

With a deep breath, she took a step toward the bed, ready to strip it of indecency and redress it for her evening guest, wanting him to feel at home. It was, after all, her fault he'd missed the tow truck. She stared at the twisted sheets on the bed and her stomach churned. She couldn't do it. Not yet.

She turned toward the door and bumped into Shontae, clad in a too-small Maplehurst robe, open over his broad, smooth chest. Hanging

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low on his hips—and exposing a smidgen of apparently the only hair on his body—were faded black sweatpants boasting the Chicago Bulls’ logo and the retired number twenty-three. *A Jordan fan. Well, that explained it.* She glanced at his bald head, glistening with drops of water. He’d probably shaved off his hair a decade ago, in tribute to the great Michael Jordan, like many Generation X basketball fans. Since Jordan had left Chicago ages ago, Shontae obviously knew the bald head looked good—make that great—on him.

“Hey.” He looked down at her.

“I was going to...” She shoved the linens into his arms. “But I can’t.”

“Didn’t expect you to.” As he shifted the bundle and took a step farther into the room, his body filled the doorway, and she couldn’t slip past him. She backed her way in, too, for lack of anywhere else to go.

He looked over her shoulder and hitched his chin at the tripod. “This guy a filmmaker?”

How embarrassing. This was her fiancé they were talking about, and she wasn’t ready for anyone, let alone her new acquaintance—if that’s what he was—to know of Dick’s sexual quirkiness. Or that she’d once obliged him in such a manner. Heat crawled up her neck and her throat went dry. As if Shontae could see into her memories, shame encompassed her. She swallowed hard and leaned against the wall to provide her trembling legs some relief. “He’s something of an amateur, I suppose.”

“Tell me you didn’t walk in on a scene.”

Although she’d very nearly seen the climax of said scene, she began to shake her head, reluctant to admit it.

He pressed his lips together, then slowly they rolled out to their natural fullness. “Don’t watch it.”

“The live version was enough, thank you very much, and I have no desire to know what preceded my entrance, I assure you.” Then again,

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it might have been nice to know which pieces of furniture she could touch without getting the willies—or crabs. Had the Snow-bunny-and-Dick Show begun against this very wall? Instantly, she jerked away from the wood paneling, just in case. *Yuck.*

“I, um...” His tongue darted over his bottom lip. “I started your bathwater.”

She snapped her gaze to his.

“I made a judgment call. You seem like the bubble-bath type, so—”

“Dick ran me a bath the night he proposed.”

“Guess you don’t want mountains of bubbles then, huh?” He cracked a smile. “I’m sorry, I thought you might need—”

“You didn’t know.”

“Well, you can rest easy.” He crossed the room and tossed the bundle of sheets atop Dick’s closed suitcase. “You’ll get nothing remotely close to a proposal out of me tonight, or nothing half as sophisticated either. Hell, you’re lucky I’m speaking outside of grunts at this hour.”

A giggle escaped her, and she covered her mouth.

“Glad my plight amuses you,” he said.

Did it? She had to hand it to the guy. He had a way of taking her mind off things, but had he actually...amused her? Was she...enjoying herself, despite the scene she’d stumbled across in this room?

“Go ahead.” Shontae thumbed toward the bathroom. “I’ll take care of all this.”

\* \* \*

She didn’t thank him. *Big surprise.*

When Bianca ducked out of the room, Shontae tried not to stare at her ass, but her walk commanded attention. She had a little wiggle in her hips, but she didn’t move in an obvious way. Rather, it was almost as if she’d honed the eye-catching sway like a craft, the way gymnasts made flipping through the air look easy.

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He turned toward the bed, ripped off the covers, and prayed for the strength not to look back at her. *Damn.*

“Damn.” She echoed his thoughts, and she had the sweetest-sounding voice, even if she was cursing. “Damn it!”

“Something wrong?” *Stupid question.* Everything in her world was wrong today. And if his gaze were fixed on her body, he wouldn’t know if he was coming or going either.

“No. Well, yes.”

The suspense overcame him and he turned to see her standing in the doorway, fiddling with the side zipper on her skirt. She tugged on the garment, dragging it a smidgen down the curve of her hip, and he caught a glimpse of black bikini panties—satin tie-sides. Ebony against her creamy flesh. *Oh, Moses.*

“Oh, there it is,” she said. A small, sweet noise—something between a groan and a sigh—escaped her. The fastener popped, displaying more of a hip he’d like to nibble, and more of panties he’d like to remove with his teeth. She disappeared behind the door before the urge to reach for her managed to overcome him. *But, God, to provoke sounds like that one all night long...*

He sank to the bare mattress and watched through the double-access fireplace until she disappeared into the bathroom. *Get a grip, man. Can’t have this one.* Rather, he shouldn’t. With a deep sigh, he flipped the switch on the radio-alarm clock and tuned it to a semi-static-free station. With this weather, he was lucky any waves at all reached Maplehurst Mountain.

Good drum beat. A streak of guitar. “At dawn’s first light, we made some noise, and now she’s set me free,” the singer crooned.

Faster than lightning, Shontae turned off the radio. He’d rather straighten the room in silence, torturing himself with the sounds of splashing bath water—and imagining the body submersed in it—than listen to that song. Faith’s musician wrote it two decades ago, and

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while it had sparked many a desire years before he met and lost Faith Hennessy, it was now little more than a reminder of whom he could not have. Faith and now, strangely, Bianca—with the perfect hips and the voice of a 1-900-SEX-GIRL.

*What a waste of a perfectly good sex song.* And what a shame he'd stumbled across a girl like this, with a voice like that, at a wholly inappropriate time in her life. He shrugged it off, telling himself it didn't matter anyway. Racial lines were nearly impossible to erase. Say they hit it off, say they crossed the line. Good for them, but the rest of America couldn't accept that yet. Best to hunker down for the night, make the best of things, and avoid the uphill battle.

First things first, he tucked the camcorder into the corner. For a moment, he considered peeking at the home video, to see for himself what kind of sex would rate above and beyond a life with Bianca. Ornerly as she'd been throughout the day, she was pleasant when relaxed. She might be lovely when loved properly. Giving. Thoughtful. And if she were his—such an impossible scenario—he couldn't imagine forsaking her for anything.

He turned toward the king-sized bed. Plenty of room on that mattress. They could share it without coming into any contact at all, if he controlled himself, and he managed six teenaged wards of the court with minds set for self-destruction on a daily basis. Control was one thing he most definitely possessed. Capable of commanding this bed—in more ways than one—he dressed it with new linens and heaped the soiled sheets outside the door, in the main corridor.

An emerald hair comb glinted from the floor, just outside the door, and he bent to retrieve it. He didn't remember Bianca's wearing it earlier, but in the off-chance it had fallen out of her purse, he tossed it to the table and scanned the space for its companion. Finding nothing more, he shut out the rest of the resort when he closed the door to suite four-o-six.

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A contented sigh filtered from the bathroom. With a hand on the chain lock, about to slip it in, Shontae imagined what she might be doing to her body to evoke a sound like that. And then he conjured her sighing beneath him, those perfect breasts burning against his chest, those long, white legs cinching around his hips... *Stop, already!* He slid on the chain lock and clicked the deadbolt into place.

Life would have been easier had he accompanied Faith and the other counselor back to Daisy's with the kids. He tossed a pillow and blanket onto the sofa for Bianca, and began to build a fire. Radiating heat would warm cold bodies in the dead of night.

And, hell, something ought to warm her, seeing as he couldn't. Shontae drummed his fingers on his knees and looked through the double-access fireplace at the camera, now pushed aside in the bedroom. Had Bianca performed on camera for her future husband? She looked straight as an arrow, but he sensed passion bubbling beneath her surface. The kind of passion yet untapped, long dead. Apparent in her spitfire tongue, it was there, begging to be awakened. And, oh, to be the man to do it—and do it well.

She wasn't the type of woman to prop on all fours, although she certainly had an ass that begged to be squeezed. With a face as pretty as hers, he'd keep her nose-to-nose, and those long legs would keep things interesting—winding around his body, propping on his shoulders, locking around his waist. She was a missionary woman, a woman on top. A woman to kiss, open-eyed, without a blink.

But lips like that might force his eyes closed and inspire hazy daydreams. He might need a recording device more reliable than his memory. Did she kiss on film?

A crass thought, but he couldn't fight it. Blood rushed to his nether regions, along with an intense urge to stroke something wet and hot.

“Hi.”

Coupled with his on-coming erection, her voice spurred a warm

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sensation in the pit of his belly. Facing her most likely wasn't the thing to do to curb his growing interest, but the scent of Eternity required attention. He turned to see her bundled in a robe identical to the one he wore, and with hair spilling about her shoulders.

"Good bath?" He met her gaze, but she quickly looked away.

She tightened the sash at her waist and flipped her long, fluffy hair over a shoulder. "I was thinking."

He doubted she'd been thinking what he'd been thinking.

"I'm exhausted." She leaned against the arm of the sofa. "But I can't imagine I'll be sleeping any time soon."

*Me neither.* He nodded. "Rough day."

"Oh, to say the least." She flared her fingers and gave her nails a quick examination. "I'm going to order up a bottle of wine and a payer-view, but I don't know what you drink."

"What I drink?"

"Aside from hot chocolate and iced water."

"I don't drink regularly, but—"

"You don't drink?"

"Not regularly, but I could use a glass."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "A glass of what? Red? White?"

The lapel of the Maplehurst robe eased open, awarding him a hint of her cleavage. "Doesn't matter. I don't drink enough wine to know the difference."

"Would you rather I ordered you a beer? You deserve it after..." Her eyelashes fluttered over her big, blue irises. "After all you've done for me today."

"Least I could do."

"I doubt you had to do anything at all."

Was this the closest she'd come to a thank you? He shrugged. "Don't mention it."

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“So I’ll get you a beer? And what movie?”

On a normal basis, he’d be in the mood for something funny, something light after a long day, but tonight, he considered something horrific, something spine-chilling. *Something that’ll make you jump into my arms and huddle in my lap.* A thought more absurd than his inappropriate ones. “Whatever you want.”

\* \* \*

Tonight, she couldn’t handle a romantic comedy. The thought of all that sweet angst and happily-ever-after bullshit was enough to turn her stomach after the day she’d had. On the other hand, she’d been ready to crack most of the day, and a drama would probably push her over the edge. How awkward would it be to lose it in front of Shontae? She’d feel like an idiot, and he’d be counting the seconds until the phantom tow truck driver reappeared.

That left a political thriller or a cartoon flick. She rather liked the latter, although she’d been too busy growing up too fast to watch them as a child. Surely, she could feign concentrating on a film conveying Hollywood’s views of terrorism for a couple of hours. Since Ethan had died, had she really been interested in much of anything? Or anyone? No, and no one had called her on her simulated interest and fake desire. At first, she’d employed the tactics to keep her head above water. Eventually, it became a way of sleepwalking through life, forfeiting one nightmarish man for another—on her own terms.

But Dick’s indiscretion with Snow-bunny zinged like an early morning wake-up call before she was ready to rise, and the bricks she’d mortared upon Ethan’s death had begun to crumble. Vulnerability shot her between the eyes like an ice cream headache. She didn’t want to feel the pain of loss again. She didn’t want to feel, period.

She sipped her wine and joined Shontae on the sofa. When she pulled her feet up to the cushions, her toes brushed against his tight thigh. Intimate. And romantic, considering the glowing fireplace and

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their matching attire. She yanked the robe tighter around her—if he weren't leaning against her blanket, she'd cover herself—and focused on the television.

“Cold?” he asked.

“I'll be all right.”

Without so much as twisting his torso, he pulled the blanket from the back of the sofa and covered her without pressing his hands to her skin, without touching her at all. An agile man. *A gentleman.*

The blanket radiated with his body heat. She stole a glance at his bare chest. Brown, like creamy hot chocolate. For a fleeting moment, she imagined his pressing her against his warm torso.

Perhaps she ought to sell her soul for something worthy.

\* \* \*

Shontae awoke to the vibration of his cell phone. His eyes refused to open, leaving him to feel for the phone. He patted the bedside table. Notepad, pen... *Ouch!* Alarm clock. With teeth apparently. Cell. He flipped it open, bit back an obscenity—he'd really racked his finger—and grumbled a hello.

“This is Herb's Towing in Wilmot.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his eyes until they opened.

“We've been booked solid with...”

A soft whimper sounded in the distance. He pulled the phone away from his ear and listened hard. Nothing.

“...road conditions, so we probably won't make it back to the mountain until early tomorrow morning...”

*Wait.* There it was again. The sound of a desperate woman. While Herb's rambled a list of reasons for the delay, Shontae rolled out of bed and, on his knees, peered through the embers burning low in the fireplace at the living room.

Bianca's side of the suite was dim and still, save a nearly indiscernible movement beneath the blanket on the sofa. She was

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awake and...crying.

He'd begun to suspect she'd been born with a mysterious anti-emotional gene, but it turned out she'd been waiting—stoic—until she was alone to let loose. If that were the case, she'd stifled tears through Chutes and Ladders, dinner, and that terrible movie she'd selected—she'd probably figured big black men didn't watch anything without blood and weaponry—all because she'd wanted to grieve privately. She'd had ample time to weep during her bath, but when she'd emerged from the Jacuzzi, she'd looked no worse for the wear.

Ample time? No worse for the wear? Was there ample time to recover from catching a cheating lover in the flagrant act? And was there any way the woman could look sub-par? He doubted it, on both accounts.

With the phone held under his ear with his shoulder, he yanked on the string of his sweatpants, tightening them. After staring through the dying flames in the fireplace, his eyes had to readjust to the darkness of the bedroom, and he resorted to feeling around the floor for the supposedly-one-size-fits-all robe, which he didn't have a prayer of closing around his body.

"You're first on the list for the morning crew," Herb's was saying. "It shouldn't be any later than seven."

"That's fine." Shontae glanced at the clock. Just under five hours away. "Call when you're close." He terminated the call, yawned, and dropped the phone as he continued to search for the robe. Something hard and cold came into contact with his hand. A leg of the tripod.

One room away, Bianca drew in a shuddering breath, as if she were struggling to inhale at all. "Oh, God," she whispered.

He straightened upon hearing her voice and headed toward her, decency be damned. Like it or not, they were in this mess together, and he couldn't waste one second more searching for that robe, when she obviously needed a shoulder to cry on.

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Without a break in his stride, he made steady progress toward the sofa, where she trembled beneath the spare blankets, heels of her hands pressed to her eyes.

She breathed a word. Even, maybe?

“Bianca.” He touched her on the elbow.

After a small flinch, she peeled her hands from her eyes. In the darkness, he couldn’t see much beyond the glisten of tears on her cheeks, but he hadn’t come to look at her anyway. He scooped her up in his arms and took a step toward the bedroom.

Slowly, her arms encircled his neck, and as she rested her head on his shoulder, hot tears fell to his bare flesh.

A shiver darted up his spine, a trigger reaction to the scent of her perfume...not to mention her touch.

“I miss him,” she breathed into his ear.

The sensation traveled down his back to his middle, perking interest between his thighs. He closed his eyes and sighed.

“He’s not worth your time,” he whispered, gently placing her on the bed. “Or your tears.” He swept her hair from her forehead, fanning it over the pillow.

Her cool hands slid over his skin as he began to withdraw, and her diamond ring reflected what little light emanated from the fire. “Not him. Not who you think.”

“No man’s worth selling your soul.”

She gripped his shoulders. “One man’s worth the moon.” She dug her fingers against his well-defined shoulders and refused to release him. “Ethan.”

Who the hell was Ethan?

\* \* \*

“I’ll give you some space.” He tensed beneath her touch and resisted her hold. “You’ll be more comfortable here, and—”

“Don’t go.” Tears and darkness clouded her vision, but the firelight

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illuminated a profile of his hard body—a body capable of both hard work and comfort. “You make me feel beautiful.”

He bit his lip and pulled away another fraction.

“The way you look at me, the way you’ve helped me, the way—”

“You *are* beautiful.” His whisper was harsh. “Too beautiful to endure what he put you through today, not that anyone deserves something like—”

“Thank you.”

The moment the words passed through her lips, he gave in to her pull and allowed his torso to melt against hers. “No one deserves what he did to you today.”

She slid a hand down over a muscled arm and gripped his hand. His fingers curled around hers. Their gazes met. She figured she probably looked like hell warmed over, but he didn’t seem to notice.

With his free hand, he laced through her hair and drew her in closer. Was he going to kiss her? Her heart pounded, and butterflies kicked up dust in her gut.

His thick thumb traced her lower lip as his fingers kneaded her scalp. In his eyes, she recognized embers of desire, ready to ignite. He rested his forehead against hers. Their noses grazed against one another.

“Shontae.” His name sounded exotic, foreign, when spoken in her voice.

“Be kind to yourself. Let it go, if only for tonight.”

She shook her head, not knowing what to say, not knowing what to do. But wanting to be one of those girls—like Libby—who were unafraid of living in the moment, willing to surrender to the heat hanging between her body and Shontae’s. God, she needed it. She needed to unleash passions, to fuck out anger and humiliation without consequence in the morning, to feel depth and reciprocity. Hell, it would be enough to feel, period. “I don’t know how.”

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His thumb massaged up her cheek. “Ms. Bianca.” His lips brushed against hers when he spoke. She parted her lips, but his mouth bypassed hers, caressed its way up her cheek. He pressed a slow, powerful kiss on her forehead. “You’ll learn again.”

Secure in his strong embrace, she wrapped a leg around his, her body aching to feel his weight atop her, to feel his heavy sex parting her, sinking in. Her nipples hurt, eager to be wet with his tongue and stimulated by the flick of his fingertips.

But above all, she craved his awestruck stare. The way he looked at her while clothed was titillating in itself. She imagined he’d worship her nude body without laying a hand on her.

“Good night,” he whispered, positioning her prone against him and tightening his arms around her.

*Good night?* What the hell did that mean? Had she imagined the energy between them? Had their readiness been one-sided? She pressed into him one last time. His entire body was hard. Nothing make-believe about that.

He wanted her. He wasn’t going to take her, but he wanted her. Which only meant one thing.

She was alive.

## CHAPTER 4

“Who’s Ethan?”

Bianca rubbed an eye from the outside corner in—potential for fewer wrinkles that way—and blinked away sleep. “Huh?” Slowly, her companion came into focus.

Bare-chested, and with a healthy bulge in his sweats—was he naturally well-endowed below the belt, or had he awakened turned on?—Shontae lay atop the covers and stared at her, his handsome face propped in a large hand. Fuzzy memories emerged, somewhere between a dream and reality. Memories of bottled-up passion, of the physical crashing she’d yearned for in the middle of the night, floated to the surface of her mind and settled in places she wasn’t used to discussing with those closest to her, let alone a near-stranger she’d spent the night with.

He raised his chin. “Ethan.”

“He’s my...” She shouldn’t have mentioned him. What had she

## WAKE-UP CALL

been thinking? Ethan was private business. Her private business. “What time is it?”

“Six.”

“Six?” Dull pain nagged in her head. Tears and wine—a bad combination—equated to dehydration, which meant dry, flaking skin, which, when prolonged, led to premature aging. She massaged circles at her temples. “What’s it look like outside?”

“White, as far as the eye can see. Ten inches was a modest forecast.”

“Still snowing?”

“Flurries.” He glanced at her cleavage, but quickly met her gaze again.

Oops, was she showing a bit of skin? Not that it would matter. This guy seemed immune to her curves. He’d kissed her on the forehead, for crying out loud. She gave her robe a tug, yawned a cottony breath, and rolled onto her side, still facing him. “Are you always up this early?”

“Sure, during the week. At Maplehurst on a rare weekend off? Only when staff is pounding on the door with a prearranged breakfast delivery. I can’t believe you slept through it.”

A groan escaped her. “Let me guess. Custard-stuffed crepes topped with strawberries à la mode, side of crisp bacon, and mimosa.”

He grinned, displaying sparkling white teeth. “You got it.”

*How original of Dick.* “I’d have liked to give him more credit.”

“Some guys find something that works, and it’s all over but the shouting.”

“Is that right?” Her gaze wandered to the video camera. Had the triangular incident with her, Dick, and Snow-bunny been captured on film? *All over but the shouting.* “What works for you?”

“Don’t know.” He looked over his shoulder, presumably at the camera, as well. “Haven’t tried one of those yet.”

When their gazes met again, he wore half a smile

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“Just a mantra against dating white women?”

“You’re one to talk about color conflict. You’d rather stick it out with this jerk than give a blue-collar guy a chance. Let me guess. Ethan’s hands are callused, too.”

With another mention of the name, her stomach dropped, as if she were zooming down the steep end of a roller coaster hill. Fact was, she’d forgotten the texture of Ethan’s fingertips, the strength of his grasp. Minute details had faded into a hazy mist, where she remembered only the effect his hands had had on her, and not what had evoked the reaction in the first place.

If she wasn’t careful, if she didn’t concentrate on the images she’d managed to store in her brain, the day would come when she remembered nothing more than what he looked like in the photographs she’d stashed in a box beneath her bed. The thought was too much to bear, and before tears welled in her eyes, she stiffened. “Ethan’s dead.” The moment she uttered it, she bit her tongue. Saying it made it real. Nothing was as cruel as reality.

“I’m sorry.”

With a shrug, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and met with the warmth of a blazing, crackling fire. “That ice cream’s probably melting. And I don’t eat breakfast, but I like my mimosa chilled, if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll be sure it’s on ice.” His voice carried a whispered rasp on its wings, as if he were sorry he’d raised the subject of her dead fiancé.

*Well, good.*

A warm, brown hand grasped hers. His thumb trailed over the diamond. “Still gonna sell your soul?” His eyes burned, and the dent in his lower lip looked entirely too kissable, especially when his tongue dipped down to taste it.

When she locked her gaze on his mouth, her heart stopped. Everything was available for a price. A dinner at Maplehurst Grille and

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an evening with a stranger, a Bentley and a beach house... Even swap—her soul for a kiss.

“If you marry him”—the sultry rasp caressed her ears again—“you’re going to find a lifetime of what you found yesterday in this room.”

She felt her brow furrow, but despite the consequence of a wrinkle, she couldn’t fight it. “I suppose that’s my business, isn’t it?” She pulled her hand away and turned toward the bathroom.

“What if I want to make it mine?”

Her breath caught in her throat and she closed her fists tight, as she imagined Shontae’s bulk atop her and between her thighs. And with that mouth, not to mention the bulge in his pants, he might be an amazing lover. Just what she needed to surpass this unannounced bump in the road. Her heart, however, couldn’t belong to anyone but Ethan.

“You want to make my love life your business?” She looked over her shoulder in time to witness his tongue on his bottom lip again. “You want to fuck me? That’s one thing. You want to love me? That’s another, and it’s an unfair possibility.”

“I get it. The big black man wants to violate the pretty white girl and get the hell out of dodge before picking up the pieces.” He pulled a T-shirt over his head. “Sweetheart, I could’ve had you last night. You and I both felt it, both wanted it, but you know something? You sure as hell didn’t need it. Last night, I acted with your best interests in mind, and it’s time you did the same.”

She stared at him with arms akimbo, and a moment before disappearing behind the door, she shook her head. “You’ll never know for certain, but I promise you. There’s nothing you or I can do to compromise my worth. I’ve been through it all before.” A deep breath and a slow count to three calmed the urge to slam the door in his face. Instead, she closed it with an insignificant click.

\* \* \*

## WAKE-UP CALL

Shontae exhaled a long-held breath. The pulse in his groin didn't lie. Despite her rejection, he wanted her. Not because she was vulnerable and soft, with tempting, creamy white skin, but because it was his nature to steer wayward beings in the right direction, to point the way home.

*Screw that.* He was under no obligation to help anyone but the wards at Daisy's, and he'd grown weary with the prospect of saving Bianca. If she wanted to throw her life away on a cheating son of a bitch, it was her choice—just as choosing a has-been rock-n-roller had been Faith's. Damn it, did women ever make the right choices anymore?

He sat on the bed and was shoving his foot into a sock when he heard the creak of the main door. The chain lock clanged, signifying it had been stretched taut.

Bianca bounded in from the bathroom. "He's here!" she hissed, making her way toward the video camera.

"What?"

"Listen!" She popped open the cassette, pulled the tape from it, and shoved it into his duffel bag. "He wants this, and if I know him—"

"Bianca—"

She pulled her robe tighter, but the curve of a plump breast still peeked out. He forced himself to look away from the perfect mound and met her gaze.

"Are you going to help me or not?"

Hadn't he helped her enough? Before the thought materialized into a question, she snapped another order at him.

"Open the door. The sooner he has his things, the sooner he'll be gone."

"I don't think you want to be found like th—"

"Go!" She gave him a little shove. "And whatever you do, don't tell him you have the tape."

## WAKE-UP CALL

“I don’t want that tape.”

“You don’t have a choice. He can’t have it.”

“What do you care, if he has—”

“I’m on it, too, Einstein. Now go!”

“I’m done.” He grabbed his shoes, his coat, and his bag, and headed toward the door.

“You can’t leave me alone with him!” Her footsteps scurried behind him, through the living room.

When the door came into view, so did a male hand, unsuccessfully trying to yank the chain lock free from a position outside the door.

Bianca grabbed Shontae’s arm. “I can’t face him alone,” she whispered, her eyes pleading.

“I make it a habit never to look down the barrel of a smoking gun.”

“Look at you. Who in his right mind would mess with a man your size? I guarantee he won’t lay a hand on you, but you have to help me.”

He began to shake his head in protest.

“You want to make this your business?” Her hand slipped down his arm, and her fingers tightened around his. “Now’s your chance.”

What was it about this woman that kept him wavering like a kite in the wind?

“Help me.” Her pretty lips remained parted, tempting him to seal his mouth over hers.

He knew he’d regret it, but his shoulders fell in silent acquiescence. With his belongings in tow, he backed his way across the floor.

Bianca nodded an encouragement.

“Good morning.” He peered at her fiancé through the three-inch crevice.

Dick’s brow furrowed. “Who the hell are you?”

“Guest of the hotel.”

“This is my room.”

“Doesn’t seem to be.”

## WAKE-UP CALL

“My things are inside. Two suitcases, a camcorder.”

“Ah.” Shontae nodded. “I wondered about that.”

“Can I come in?”

“The lady isn’t dressed yet.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” Bianca chimed from behind him. “Let him in.”

With a set jaw, Shontae turned around. She answered what he’d hoped to be a sharp glare with a warm smile.

“It’s all right, Shontae. Let him in.”

“Bianca?” Dick shoved his face as far in the small opening as he could manage. “Princess, who the hell—”

“Step back, please.” Shontae closed the door, released the lock and, against his best judgment, opened the door to a fuming man.

Dick brushed past him, nudging him hard with his shoulder.

“Excuse me.” Shontae allowed the man to pass, then shifted the bag on his shoulder. “I suppose you’d rather be alone right now.”

“Princess? Who the hell is this guy?”

On any other day, under better circumstances, Shontae would have extended his hand and introduced himself, but this woman had worn him to the bones. Rode him hard, and not in the way that awarded him an orgasm for his efforts. He reached for the doorknob.

“Shontae, wait.”

A tingling sensation danced up his spine the moment her fingers settled on his elbow. The scent of Eternity drifted between them, and he locked his gaze on her deep blue eyes.

“Richard, get your things.”

“I think you have some explaining to do.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Shontae observed their visitor standing with feet shoulder-width apart and arms crossed over his chest.

“Funny.” Bianca turned for a moment and faced the human stone front. “I don’t feel much like talking to you. Get your things, Dick, and get out.”

## WAKE-UP CALL

“I think we—”

Her breasts heaved as she took a deep breath. “I have nothing to say to you now.”

Over the course of a few minutes, while Dick gathered his things, Shontae treated Bianca to an intense scrutiny. Before she realized he was staring, she stood her ground, seeming comfortable amid the sudden silence. When she caught his gaze, she raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

She was perhaps the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, even with mussed hair and cosmetic-free skin. “Why do you waste your time with makeup?”

She gave him a quick once-over, the way a woman of high couture looks at a janitor. “I beg your pardon?” Her words, disguised as polite, were the equivalent of “Do you fucking mind?”

“You don’t need it.”

“You don’t know what I need.” When she crossed her arms over her breasts, the lapels of the standard-issue Maplehurst robe parted, and in the moment she leaned forward, as if she were about to fill him in, he caught sight of a perfect, round nipple. A puffy areola, begging to be sucked.

He drew in a sharp breath.

“There was a tape in that recorder.” Dick stepped between them, obstructing the incredible view. He dropped the suitcases at Shontae’s feet, as if enlisting help in toting the luggage to the parking lot.

*Dream on.* Shontae had already taken care of more than enough of this man’s property.

“Well?”

Shontae met his gaze and found himself under the visual fire of a man at least five inches shorter.

“Where’s my tape?”

“Hey.” Shontae held up his hands. “This is none of my business.”

## WAKE-UP CALL

“I trust she filled you in.” Dick juttied his chin in Bianca’s direction. “The only thing better than fucking her brains out is reliving the moment over and over again. On widescreen with surround sound.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“I’m guessing you already know that. What kind of a man can snuggle up to that sweet piece of ass without dipping the line in the lake?”

Shontae kept an even keel, fighting the urge to flatten this asshole with one stomp. Even his boys at the halfway house knew better than to talk like that around a lady—at least with Shontae present.

“I’m going to save you a lot of time and trouble.” Dick tugged the zipper on his ski coat up a few inches. “She may look one-of-a-kind, but she’s bargain basement.”

The comment cut deep into Shontae’s gut. What a terrible thing to say about a pair of shoes, let alone a woman. But Bianca straightened, as if the words didn’t have a prayer of affecting her.

“I doubt you’ve seen enough to know the difference.” Shontae bit his bottom lip in a conscious decision to keep his cool.

“Feh.” With a shrug, Dick turned toward Bianca. “Princess? Call it an even swap—the tape for the ring.”

“I’m not your princess, I don’t have your tape, and I flushed the ring.”

*No.* But when Shontae looked, there was no ring on her finger.

Her hopefully-ex-fiancé chuckled. “Right. A woman like you flush a diamond? Come on. Where is it?”

“That depends on where the pipes lead.”

Dick reached for her, but Shontae stepped between them and placed a stiff hand on his rival’s shoulder. “Whoa. What do you think you’re—”

Dick’s teeth gnashed. “I’ll find that ring, if I have to frisk her.”

“If you’re asking for that ring, she’s no longer yours to touch. If she

## WAKE-UP CALL

said she flushed it, she flushed it.”

Dick backed off and pointed a finger at her. “This isn’t over.”

“Yes, it is,” Shontae said. “Go on now.”

Thirty seconds later, the dick slammed the door.

A heavy silence hung in the air, while Shontae and Bianca engaged in a staring contest. *Thank you.* He sent the words to her telepathically. *Thanks for helping me.* A fruitless effort.

She licked her lips.

God, she had to stop drawing attention to her mouth, or he’d find something to do with it.

“I’m sorry you had to listen to that,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

“I think you’re an amazing woman”—he looked to the floor, in order to avoid looking at other, more enticing things—“to stand your ground like that, when he—”

“Hardly.” Suddenly, she was close enough to touch, and fiddling with the sash on her robe. “What is it about white girls you don’t like?”

“I never said I didn’t like you.”

“We make you uneasy.”

Sweat broke between his shoulder blades, and although he thought to nod, he didn’t move a muscle. “Do I make you nervous?” he asked.

“No.”

He closed his eyes, unwilling to tempt himself with the glimpse of cleavage, the long legs climbing toward the great beyond. But the scent of her wafted and enticed on its own, and his eyes peeled open. Looking at her was a pleasure within itself, a reward he was impossible to deny.

“What about me is so damned unlovable?” she whispered. “What about me is so fucking replaceable?”

“Don’t listen to him. He’s not worth your soul. Or the rest of your life. And he doesn’t know what he’s throwing away.”

## WAKE-UP CALL

Small fists slammed into his chest. “I’m not talking about him. I’m talking about you. What makes you so immune to me? Is it the color of my skin?”

He grasped her wrists in a split second before she pummeled him again. “You’re beautiful.”

“That doesn’t seem to make a fucking difference.” Tears welled in her eyes, depicting years of anger and resentment. “The only thing that matters is how I feel, and at the moment, I feel the farthest thing from beautiful.”

He released her wrists and his head spun as she backed him against a wall. Her breasts crushed against his chest and the heat of her pussy burned against his thigh.

“A woman feels nothing, if she doesn’t feel beautiful.”

“You feel pretty good to me.”

She refused to break eye contact.

*Touch me.*

A slow, steady hand grazed up his hip, as if reading his thoughts.

“You don’t need this,” he whispered.

“Stop worrying about whether I need it, and give me what I want, what I deserve, what I’ve downright earned.”

*Oh, to sink into the beckoning crevice between her legs...* To fulfill a red-hot fantasy... He spun her around, pinned her against the wall. “No.” The throb in his groin wasn’t voting on the side of rational thought, but at least part of him was.

“Are you afraid he might be right?” The tears brightened her eyes to a blazing, sparkling navy. “That I’m not half the woman you imagine I might be?”

“Impossible,” he breathed. “You wouldn’t believe the effect you have on me.”

“I think I have a pretty good idea.” Her pelvis pressed against his hard groin, and her eyes widened with the contact.

## WAKE-UP CALL

With rampant breaths, he rested his forehead on hers. “I want to do what’s right for you.”

“Acknowledge me.” Her whisper turned into a feathery kiss, brushed against his lips. “That’s what I need. That’s what’s right.”

Powerless to deny her any longer, he parted his lips, welcoming her tongue when she slipped in to explore. Their kiss was slow, patient. Nothing like the heated melodrama that preceded it.

And feeling her mouth on his only confirmed his desire to feel it in other places. Fast.

He cupped her rear in a hand and pressed her tight to his torso.

“Ohhh.” The sound sent him reeling, but it was her legs locking around his waist that inspired the twitching of his cock at the valley between her thighs.

With his free hand, he shoved aside the robe, and pert nipples taunted him, rubbing through the thin material of his T-shirt.

As if she needed to feel skin-on-skin as imminently as he, she worked the shirt over his pecs. Full breasts melted against him.

She gasped. “Do you have anything?”

Of course he had something. He’d spent the previous day with Faith Hennessy, and he always traveled equipped to handle any surprise. Bianca wasn’t the surprise he’d had in mind, but damn! She was all he wanted now, and if those kickin’ breasts continued to swirl against him...well, suffice it to say, whether or not he’d come prepared wouldn’t be an issue, if Vesuvius erupted before the rumble.

“I’ll take care of it.” He tongued a lobe, and if her reaction to long licks in future, more private locations were half as sweet, it’d be more than a pleasure to please her. “But I’m going to take care of you first.”

In a few short strides, he deposited her in front of the fire on the bearskin rug, and swept open her robe. Her soft, yet firm flesh glowed against the hide.

She parted her legs and stroked her clit twice with her index finger,

## WAKE-UP CALL

as if to direct his attention, but he'd be hard-pressed to look at anything else. He'd never come as close to a pretty, pink slit like hers, never closed his mouth over a white breast.

"Ever been with a black man?"

"Almost married one."

When he leaned to her, she whisked the shirt from his body and made fast work of inching off his pants. His member sprang out, hard and ready, into her waiting hand. Milky white fingers contrasted against his brown shaft, and at first fondle, a drop of pre-ejaculation premiered at his tip.

\* \* \*

Shontae Pepper kissed like the very devil. Maybe she had sold her soul. To a big, black disciple with a cock thicker than any she'd ever had. Thicker even than Ethan's, judging by the feel of it. She'd take certain pleasure in attempting to deep-throat him—suddenly, she craved the taste of him—but at the moment, she concentrated on stroking him, attempting to gauge his length in her hand. She stole a glance at the hard weapon and gasped.

He took as much breast into his mouth as would fit. His fleshy lips melted against her skin, and his adept tongue traced circles around her nipples. A suck here, a nibble there, and every lick raised her internal thermometer, degree by burning degree.

Wet heat rushed between her legs, a culmination of anger and longing, and pure adrenaline. God, he was big—and she'd had big, but...how was she going to accommodate that thing? She'd have to be good and wet. Dripping. Drenched. And there were several ways to accomplish that, but, for her, the best way involved his tongue nestled deep inside her. She gave his shoulder a shove and encouraged him down. Despite her overt hint, however, it was obvious he'd take his time reaching his destination. His breath wisped against her belly, and his mouth left a fiery trail over her navel.

## WAKE-UP CALL

Two strong hands caressed over her privates and then parted her thighs even wider into a straddle. He pressed both thumbs into her cunt simultaneously, and he watched it all, hovering above her.

“Damn.” A concentrated frown wrinkled his brow. The heels of his hands dug against her inner thighs, opening her legs a smidgen wider.

He stroked her walls with his thumbs and entered her with both index fingers, as well. The fingers sought depths his thumbs couldn’t reach, and the recurrent massage of the shorter digits sated a need on their own. Two middle fingers plucked her clit, chalking it up to six fingers working to please her at once, but it wasn’t enough. Not by a long shot.

“Lick me.” The words escaped her, barely above a whisper.

His full lips formed a momentary pucker, but he continued to work her with his hands, stretching her with his thumbs, testing her.

“Lick me.” A bit louder that time, and with a hell of a lot more gravel.

At last, he looked away from the scene between her legs, and their gazes met. He licked his lips.

“Please.” Involuntarily, her hips writhed. “I need it.”

Maintaining eye contact, he dived down, and without removing his hands from their present positions, he treated her to a long, slow lick around the hard nub in the center of her sexual universe. Up one side, and down the other, all the while jabbing and caressing her with six fingers.

“Ohhhh.” Her hands landed on his closely-shaven head, and she ground her pelvis up toward his mouth.

His lips closed around her clitoris, and his tongue flicked against it like rain spattering against a window pane. Quick. Precise. Plentiful.

The four fingers buried inside her stretched in opposite directions, opening her up. As he sucked her nub through his teeth, his soft tongue flattened against her slit, then screwed its way in, too.

## WAKE-UP CALL

She refused to look away from his eyes, which penetrated her, too.

He nuzzled his nose into her clipped and maintained nest of pubic hair, while his tongue caressed her internally. He sucked hard, licked with languid strokes, and squinted up at her with devilish determination.

Dewy perspiration covered her body and, while she wanted to reach orgasm without losing the staring contest, her eyes eventually closed, and Ethan materialized in her mind, as he always did, during moments of ecstasy.

Shontae worked her below, while Ethan, lying beside her, cupped her breasts and rubbed her nipples into hard, tingling points.

“I want to double fuck you.” In the archives of her memory, Ethan’s voice was soft and husky. Masculine. In charge. “Look at the dick on that guy. I’d like to see something that long and thick buried deep in you.”

Always, after lewd confessions, he’d kissed her sweetly, and this fantasy was no different. A deep, meaningful meeting of tongues and lips, kisses like those added dimension to the unbelievable sex.

“Maybe I’ll watch him do you for a while. You on top, with these beautiful breasts spinning tassels, like those trashy broads at the border strip joints. Remember that blonde we picked up there?” He traced her lips with his tongue. “And when I can’t take it anymore, I’ll get you from behind, take your amazing ass, inch by stubborn inch, until you’re so full with dual erection you might as well scream. Four hands fighting for your tits. Two mouths licking you, two hard cocks screwing into this perfect body.”

Ethan faded when she forced her eyes open and she engaged Shontae’s stare.

His tongue darted in and out of her slick vagina, and his eyes burned with intensity.

She tightened her thighs around his smooth head and bucked

## WAKE-UP CALL

against his mouth. Fervor exploded deep within her, and she answered his efforts with a gushing cream.

Patiently, he lapped. The pressure of his upper lip tantalized her clit.

Finger by finger, he withdrew from her body, and left her panting on the bearskin. She stared at his defined rear as he walked toward the pile of his things on the floor and bent to unzip his duffel bag.

She sat up and ran a hand through her hair. He'd certainly taken more than the edge off...he'd sated her plenty. A fire still smoldered beneath her surface, yet it was laced with apprehension. She looked to her left hand and caressed the spot where her engagement ring—and the four rings preceding it—used to sit. She'd never indulged in a man in the physical sense without a diamond perched there.

By now, the strawberries à la mode were sure to be a soupy concoction, but still edible. Perhaps she could persuade him to wait. Just for an hour or two, until she had time to decide, time to process what she'd started. No doubt, they were good together. The way he'd navigated her body...as if he'd had an owner's manual and memorized it at first sight. But she hardly knew him. They'd just met. She twisted toward the table, adorned with silver trays.

"I don't think so." A strong arm restrained her and pulled her back in front of the fireplace. This time, he yanked the robe from her shoulders and nestled her beneath his hard body. Comfortable. Exciting. Decision made. Just like that.

A flyaway hair whipped into her line of sight, and she brushed it aside, only to find herself entranced with his piercing brown-eyed stare. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Where do you think you're going?" His breath carried a wafting of her musky scent.

"I'm hungry." Even as she said the words, meaning to delay him, she stroked his length. He was sporting a condom, and it took everything she had not to steal a glimpse of him.

## WAKE-UP CALL

“I just ate like a king. Doesn’t mean I’m full yet.”

Thank God, and God help her, she wanted him to want her infinitely. No guarantee she would want him beyond today, but to be in the forefront of a man’s mind... She’d spent the better part of her life to achieve obsession status, and for all she was worth, she preferred to believe every ex-fiancé masturbated with her in mind. She knew they didn’t, and she knew Shontae wouldn’t. But nevertheless, she wanted him to spend years thinking about her.

The incredible bulk between his legs waited, hard and heavy against her. He may as well enter her with his fist, as soon as his penis, for the size of it. *Like Ethan.*

A rush of sexual energy surged with the memory of making love with her soul mate. No one—no matter how large—would fill his shoes. “You fill me,” she whispered. “So well.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” He opened his palm to reveal a small bottle of liquid lubricant, which he opened over her breasts. A few drops to each nipple, and a few more on her clit—as if she weren’t wet enough. The lube warmed against her breasts when his chest rubbed against hers. He shimmied his way between her thighs, his erection massaging the liquid over her nether privates, sparking a glorious heat.

“Ohhhh.” His sheathed erection rubbed against her clit, evoking a yearning deep inside. She wrapped her arms and legs around his strong, smooth body, and reveled in the security of his embrace. More than sexual, the urgent desire stimulated her every nerve, opening not only her body, but her mind to the possibility she might linger in someone’s memory the way Ethan lived in hers. “My compliments.”

With a hint of a smile, he lowered his mouth to hers.

Amid a deep kiss, she lifted her hips.

In one slow, steady plunge, he joined his body with hers. She tensed when he’d filled her to the brim, stretched her to the maximum. He bit

## WAKE-UP CALL

his hip and nudged for the last inch, striking her with a quick, dull pain, which subsided as soon as it debuted. He was in.

He shifted left and right, kneading his hips into her pelvis, finding comfort. “Yes.” He withdrew with closed eyes. Every dip into her caused his buttocks to flex and tense beneath her hands, and his technique could only be described as thorough. Every outstroke ended just shy of the tip, rewarding her with the pleasure of every inch with every push, over and over again.

“I want you to come again,” he whispered against her mouth.

She allowed her eyes to close, falling under the hypnosis of his lovemaking, concentrating on the in-and-out. His chest created friction with her nipples, and his lips massaged hers into submission.

“Come on, baby.” In her mind, Shontae’s words became Ethan’s.

She tightened her arms around him, digging into his flawless brown skin with long nails.

His strokes became hurried and hard, but not once did he shorten his stride. All the way out, then—slam—all the way in. He tangled his hands in her hair and licked her lips and groaned.

Tears of pleasure sprouted. While sex with Dick had been dirty, never had it been this primal, this fulfilling, this...thick.

\* \* \*

She was coming again, and it took all the willpower he had not blow a gasket. He braced himself with his hands planted astride her head and lifted up to watch her in action.

Her nails dug into his ass, and her brow creased with pleasure. Full breasts jiggled with every thrust, and her cunt contracted around him in tiny spasms, preceding a gush of warm cream, which surrounded his member like a hot spring. Oh, he loved a gusher.

One last entrance and he leaned forward for it, unfolding her peachy labia with the head of his black cock, striking against her raw clit as he stroked down and in, met with a second spurt of her fluid. His own

## WAKE-UP CALL

heartbeat—or was that hers?—became a clamor in his ears, as he filled the condom with his release.

One of her hands trailed up his spine and pulled his body to hers. Breathing in time with her, he nuzzled her neck.

He'd finally done it. He'd finally connected with a white woman. And it was sweeter than he'd imagined it would be.

"This isn't like me," she whispered. "I don't do this—"

"Neither do I." He pumped inside her mid-deflation and brought up a hand to fondle a breast. "But I'm not regretting it...and I'm not done with you yet."

He rolled her over, positioning her on top. The sticky wetness of her thighs—the product of her delicious gushes—rubbed against his hips. He fought her attempt to climb off him, holding her fast with a grip on her waist.

She pursed her lips and batted her lashes in superior fashion. "We don't know each other. We shouldn't have—"

"Best mistake I ever made."

"So now you've fucked a white girl, and now I've given Dick a taste of his own medicine." She nodded toward the table for two and pried at his fingers. "That ice cream's surely melted by now, and unless you like soggy crepes—"

"Bianca."

She sighed and met his gaze. "What?"

"I'm not done with you."

"Yes," she said, slithering off his lap. "You are."

## CHAPTER 5

Six days later, Shontae dropped his keys on his kitchen counter and stared out the window. A few inches of the snow from last week's blizzard had melted and frozen over again, and although his car had been to the shop and back, it was win, lose, or draw as to whether it would start every morning. Today, the answer was lose. All whinny and no turning over meant relying on Faith for a ride to work.

Faith and Bianca—two white women plus one black man equaled zero.

He'd given Bianca his number—she'd refused to reciprocate—and she'd flat-out told him she'd never call. He hadn't seen her since she'd slipped on the engagement ring she hadn't flushed down the toilet. She'd rushed out of suite four-o-six at Maplehurst Lodge before he'd managed to finish dressing, and he didn't have a clue where to find her.

He didn't know her last name, he didn't know where—or if—she worked. All he had to commemorate their unbelievable times together

## WAKE-UP CALL

was a mental image of bliss. Oh, and the video recording she'd stashed in his bag. Temptation had called his name countless times, but he couldn't bring himself to watch it.

Memories consumed him, drowning the tension in his shoulders. Her long, smooth legs locked around him, his dark skin piercing her ivory cocotte... Every nerve sang with the thought of feeling her again. He closed his eyes and savored the reminiscence of the half hour he'd spent stroking her.

A horn beeped, interrupting his reverie. *Time to go to work.* He grabbed his yardstick and his duffel bag and turned toward the door.

"Hey." Faith smiled from behind the wheel, and he did his best to reciprocate.

"Hi, gorgeous." He slumped into the tiny car, his knees lodged against the glove box. "Thanks for the ride."

"No problem." She licked her lips. "But if you don't snap out of this funk, I'll kick you to the highway before we get to Daisie's."

"I'm not in a funk."

With a heavy sigh, Faith shrugged and put the car in gear. "You're grumpy, reserved. Your boys—hell, even my girls—have noticed."

"I'm not grumpy. Not reserved either."

"Preoccupied then."

He'd give her that one.

"Ooh, pay dirt." Her eyes brightened with a smile. "With what?"

"A videotape." The moment the words escaped his lips, he cringed. "Forget about it."

"Not a chance." She grinned. "What videotape?"

"I told you about the woman I met at Maplehurst."

"The one with the cheating fiancé. Yeah."

"She had me smuggle a video out of there." He stared out the window at the frozen terrain. "And she's on it. Doing...things."

"What, do you mean having sex?" Faith glanced at him.

## WAKE-UP CALL

“Hey, I didn’t have anything to do with it.” Shontae held his palms up in defensive mode. “She shoved it in my bag so her fiancé wouldn’t find it, and she left in such a hurry she forgot to take it out.”

“Maybe she wants you to watch it.” Faith shrugged. “Maybe you should.”

His stomach tightened. “Are we really going to do this, Faith?”

“What?”

“Are we honestly going to have a locker room discussion about a random woman I met last week?”

“I don’t know about locker room, but—”

“Forget I said anything.”

“Why? We’re friends, right?”

Once upon a time, they’d both hoped to be more than friends. But then Mr. Sex Toy Musician materialized and everything changed. He looked at her for a long moment. “Friends. Yeah.”

“Look, you want a woman’s point of view? You seem to have a pretty intense crush on this girl, and that’s more than I can say for the way you felt about me.”

*If she only knew.* Not that it mattered anymore.

“Women like to know you’re putting forth some effort, and speaking as someone who’s been on the receiving end, your efforts could use a little pumping up.”

He’d pumped Bianca just fine. Couldn’t stop thinking about it.

“Passiveness is your M.O.” Faith tapped her fingers against the wheel. “You sit back and wait, Shontae. It’s what you do. But get over it. Women want to see you work for them. She’s waiting for you to track her down.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Start with what you know and build on it.”

He didn’t know much more than her future husband’s name—and he preferred to forget that.

## WAKE-UP CALL

“Watch the tape,” Faith continued. “Maybe she left you a clue.”

“I don’t know.” He turned the radio on, in order to end the discussion. *Great. Retro hour.* A Blue Silver top ten hit with Faith’s musician at the bongos. Promptly, he turned it off.

“Hey!” Faith reached for the knob, but Shontae blocked her.

“Bianca’s mysterious, but I don’t think she had time enough to plant clues.”

Faith surrendered the battle for radio control. “Bianca? Her name’s Bianca?”

“Yeah.” He switched the station.

“Seriously?”

He chuckled. “Believe me, it suits her.”

“You could’ve told me that days ago.”

“I didn’t think it mattered.”

“It matters, all right, with a name like that. There could be more than one, of course, but I think I know where to find her.” Faith switched the radio back to Blue Silver. “She’s white.”

“Yes.”

\* \* \*

Bianca pinned her hair back, using the emerald clip she’d acquired at Maplehurst. Once, it had belonged to Snow-bunny, and the emeralds were real. She had a hunch Dick had purchased it for the other woman, whose name she now knew, but preferred not to use. She’d used plenty else, however.

For example, she’d employed Dick’s charge card to the point of abuse that afternoon, purchasing a slew of bikini bathing suits for the upcoming season—she traversed the chain-o-lakes only a few times per summer, but she’d been wearing the same suit for far too long—and a month’s worth of lingerie.

Tonight she wore nothing more than a floor-length, black silk negligee she’d acquired for a ghastly two hundred dollars. Matching

## WAKE-UP CALL

panties were included in the set, but tonight, they were unnecessary. He'd been ogling the nightgown since she'd laid it out on the bed. He'd even stroked it, which was just as well. He'd be stroking little more than himself for a while.

His hand grazed across her backside. "She's here."

"Remember"—Bianca straightened the ring on her finger and stared into the mirror, meeting her fiancé's glance in the reflection—"you don't touch her. I understand she needs something out of this, too. But you don't touch her."

He opened his mouth to protest.

She silenced him before he spoke. "I'll take care of her. If you're in a body, you're in mine. Got it?"

A smile crept onto his face. "What do you mean if?" He dared to press against her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder. One hand slithered around to cup a breast.

She batted his hand away. "I might not let you play at all."

"I've been playing with her since long before I met you, princess. I'm the reason she's here, and if you don't think—"

"Well, she's the reason you'll suffer. You don't touch her."

\* \* \*

*Small world.* Bianca's sister, Libby, cut Faith's hair. Shontae would know within an hour where to find the auburn-haired beauty, but he wouldn't go to her without the certainty she'd want to see him. He couldn't be as pushy as Faith had suggested, tracking her down, invading her life.

Or could he? Such sure-fire attraction and undeniable detonation in the bedroom deserved a chance to erupt. He turned over the recently rewound videotape in his hand and sighed. What secrets were hidden in this recording? What kind of life would this woman settle for, and with what kind of man?

Without another thought, he shoved the tape into the VCR and

## WAKE-UP CALL

pushed Play.

“Smile for the camera.” He recognized Dick’s voice, as well as the blonde, who appeared on the screen, looking both naïve and seductive at the same time in a sheer blouse, open over a braless torso and unbuttoned jeans.

She rolled onto her back and stretched her arms over her head. “Do you do this with your fiancée?”

“When she allows it.”

Shontae hit the fast forward button and watched two bodies get it on at warp speed. Man on top. Man behind. Man behind with woman on top. Waste of time, unless he wanted a cheap thrill inspired by even cheaper porn.

He wasn’t going to learn anything about Bianca this way. So, her fiancé cheated with a presumably younger woman, who didn’t have one-tenth of the body Bianca did. So Bianca had bad taste in men. That revelation didn’t solve any great mysteries—he’d learned that at Maplehurst.

A moment before he moved his thumb to the Stop button, the event on the bed took a turn. Shontae played the recording in real-time.

“Are you Bianca?” the blonde woman on the television asked.

Shontae’s heart ached with longing and compassion. Misunderstood, unloved Bianca deserved so much more. At once, he knew he’d take Faith’s advice. He’d pry his way into Bianca’s world, even if it meant cramping her style. He had to try. She ought to be revered...and through a twist of fate, she’d chosen him to perform the task.

On the television, the blonde comforted her, and Bianca succumbed. His jaw dropped.

Shontae put up a blinder to Dick’s stroking it in the lower corner of the screen and focused on the parting of Bianca’s shiny, thigh-high boots. *Great boots*. He’d like to feel them against his hips, locked

## WAKE-UP CALL

around his waist. Next time, he'd tell her to leave the boots on. Just imagining it, a murmur escaped him. The catch of Bianca's breath, the heaving of her breasts as she neared orgasm...it was too much to watch idly from a chair across the room.

The ache of desire brought Shontae to rock-hard status. He unbuttoned and sprang forth from his boxers.

Woman on woman. Everyone assumed all men got off on two chicks together, but Shontae wasn't particular about scenarios. He loved watching women amidst pleasure, be there one or two or three. Period. Which was why he'd loved his time with Bianca. She was so fucking good at enjoying herself. On tape, she seemed nearly disengaged, as if everything happening around her—Dick's infidelity, the woman between her legs—was secondary to her primal satisfaction.

Bianca whimpered on-screen and parted her legs a little farther. Shontae's hand went directly to his shaft. He beat himself in long, fast strokes, zeroed in on her face and, consumed with the memory of her passion on the bearskin rug, he rubbed more precisely. The calluses on his palm—the very same for which Bianca had judged him—stimulated the tender tissue on the underside of his tip.

Bianca hadn't been shy about reaching for him. She knew her way around a man's body, and damn, she could take it all in. He had no doubt she'd accommodated men much larger than he, and he was quite nicely put together. Her wet, hot insides had formed around his cock and tightened as if she weren't letting go anytime soon. *God, a woman who knew how to use what her Maker had given her...*

“Ohhh.”

He'd closed his eyes, but when he heard that guttural sound, he snapped them open. He concentrated on the on-screen climax and the echoes of the passion he'd experienced days ago. His balls tensed with the combination of the memory and visual and manual stimulation. He was going to come—again—with her.

## WAKE-UP CALL

\* \* \*

Snow-bunny's body fit against Bianca's like a satin sheet. Something about a woman's touch had made her quiver in Ethan's company. They'd invited several women—all blonde—to join them behind closed doors, and every experience had provided a unique release. Although she'd designed this particular coupling for something much more vengeful than for pleasure, being in a woman's arms again comforted her, as if her first love were still leaning over her, watching her climb her way into ecstasy.

Small breasts played with hers through the thin material of the nightie and, where the garment had pulled away from her thigh, the tickle of a trimmed, blonde bush entertained her. But more than that, perhaps, was Dick's station at the foot of the bed.

Thus far, he'd behaved himself, hadn't touched more than Bianca's foot. And while she didn't mind it so much, he released it of his own volition—before she demanded it.

The tongue against her neck, the slender fingers plucking at her nipples, and occasionally her clit...

She closed her eyes, invoking Ethan into the game.

A huge, brown cock materialized in her make-believe world. Too large to be Ethan's and not brown enough, but she imagined it probing her all the same, alongside two petite, lily-white fingers.

"Let's have a little more fun," Snow-bunny crooned.

Within moments, a soft tongue brushed over Bianca's clit, enhancing the imaginary pulse of cock buried in her depths, and Snow-bunny rested in a sixty-nine atop her. Firm thighs framed her face, and while Bianca tasted the peach, Ethan groaned in her fantasy.

The mattress dipped and Bianca opened her eyes to find her fiancé behind the blonde, his hard, white cock wrapped in a red condom, ready to center itself in Snow-bunny's body. Dick's erection pressed against the skin between anus and vagina, and with a strong hand, he

## *WAKE-UP CALL*

shoved Bianca's head against the bed. "Can't help it."

"You can't," Bianca breathed, staring up at her fiancé's set jaw.

But Dick didn't regard her at all. "Up or down, I can't decide. Up, and you continue to be chewed on. Down, and I'll—"

"Get off me!" Bianca wriggled out from under Snow-bunny, and by the time she gained her freedom, her two bed partners were joined, ass to pelvis.

Dick had chosen. And he hadn't chosen her.

In tears, she escaped the bed and allowed them to have their way. Under no scrutiny from the other two, she gathered her new purchases and slipped out of the lingerie. She threw on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt and neglected to zip either until she was out of the room.

She tore the ring off her finger and heard it clank across the hardwood floor. She didn't care where it landed, and while she knew crying would result in puffy eyes and dark circles, she didn't care about that either.

It was over. Everything was over. She was no longer beautiful—way past her prime. Photographers didn't want to work with her, men didn't worship her. And feeding his sexual necessities, Dick had failed her.

## CHAPTER 6

From her station against the counter, Bianca stirred sugar substitute into decaffeinated tea and refused to look up from her mug. She hated this cottage. She hated Channel Lake. She hated how Libby was living it up with the hunky ex-soldier across the street, when she hadn't had satisfying sex since she'd lost her mind last month. But what a way to lose it—with Shontae Pepper on a bearskin rug. A warm sensation shimmied through her veins and touched her intimate places, but she shook it off. "Give it up, Libby. He isn't my type."

"Because your type seems to be working wonders for your engagement quota this decade?" Her sister placed a plate of toast and a jar of jam on the table. Within moments, Sergeant Jefferson Muldoon would come in out of the snow and join them for Libby's "prized" breakfast. She couldn't make anything more than toast, but Jefferson always raved about it. "If anyone needs a new type," Libby said, "it's you."

## WAKE-UP CALL

Bianca wrapped her arms around her body. “I tried a new type.”  
“When? When Ethan died?”

Bianca’s gaze darted to Libby’s. “It’s none of your business. You’ll never know how it feels to be loved like that, and—”

“We’re not talking about me.”

“You have to feed him more than toast.” Bianca opened the refrigerator door. “How does Jefferson like his eggs?”

“I don’t know. Any way. All ways. He isn’t particular.”

“Obviously.”

“Why do you do that?” Libby’s voice was low, cool.

“What?” Bianca placed the carton of eggs onto the counter and crouched for a frying pan. When she met her sister’s glance, Libby shook her head.

“You aren’t happy unless you’re putting someone else down, are you?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“I hate it when you’re unhappy because you turn your claws on me, and you’re always unhappy. You’ve been unhappy since Ethan died.”

“Are you high? That’s ludicrous.”

“Your soul mate is dead. Your career is over. Doesn’t mean your life is. Get happy, B. Crotchety with crows’ feet is no way to live.”

“Make your own damn eggs for your own damn man.” Bianca shattered an egg into the pan and disappeared into her tiny room in the cottage.

*How ridiculous!* She’d spent the greater part of her pre-adult life—when Mom was out chasing potential husbands—making Libby feel secure. She’d never “turned her claws” on her sister! The accusation proved nothing more than Libby’s immaturity. Bianca had coddled her too much, had never given her sister a chance to see how grueling romance could be. It wasn’t Bianca’s fault Libby didn’t have esteem or strength enough to turn the other cheek when someone had a bad day.

## WAKE-UP CALL

Comforting Bianca, in lieu of accusing her, was something that had never occurred to Libby. *Selfish, immature brat.*

Bianca reached under the bed for a box of memories and plopped down on the same bed she'd shared with Ethan. Concentrating, she closed her eyes and held the box to her heart. She could no longer remember his scent. His eyes—sometimes a brilliant memory—were often difficult to recollect, too. Stingingly vivid, however, was his touch, his ability to manipulate her body.

She knew she had to forget that, too, but without greener grass to graze, the task seemed insurmountable. There could be no doubting she'd tried—and she'd come close with four subsequent fiancés.

“Bianca?” Libby rapped on the door. “Are you all right?”

Rolling onto her side, she spilled the contents of the box onto the mattress and selected a handful of pictures.

Ethan. Her and Ethan. Ethan and Libby. Ethan, Ethan, Ethan.

“After breakfast, we're going to hit the lake for some ice skating,” Libby said.

Movie ticket stubs, poems, a sock with a hole in the toe. A hint of a smile overcame her. He'd been a simple man with an erotic mind—an intriguing juxtaposition no man had come close to matching.

“Listen, you should come.”

*And play third wheel? No thanks.*

“Bundle up and meet us there, all right? When you've calmed down a little?”

*Bundle up, right.* There weren't enough clothes in Alaska to keep someone warm today.

“You can use my old skates. I'll bring them in from the garage.”

*Don't bother.*

“Want anything to eat? Jefferson's cooking.”

Her stomach grumbled, but she didn't eat breakfast on the off-chance her agent would call with a gig.

## WAKE-UP CALL

“He makes a great zucchini omelet.”

The door opened.

Bianca turned to see Libby, in jeans and a heavy brown sweater, leaning against the doorframe. Had she lost weight? “No, thanks, Libby.”

Her sister crossed her arms over her chest, and rubbed her arms to ward off the draft through the old cottage windows. “I love you.”

With her sister’s rare declaration, fresh tears brimmed on Bianca’s lashes. “I love you, too.”

“I want you to be happy again. Not with a man—with yourself.”

Bianca looked to the photograph in her hand. Ethan smiled up at her, as if he wished the same. “I will be, Libby. I—”

“Think about what I said, all right? This guy...what’s his name—Sean? Shane?”

“Shontae. His name’s Shontae.”

“Shontae, right. He’d like to find you, according to my client, and I’m honoring your request in not telling him where to look.”

“Good. We’re not right together.”

“I’m not saying you should marry the guy. Get to know him without trying to score the ring for a change. Find out who you are again.”

Since when was Libby so wise?

“Don’t sell your soul for another diamond—you’re worth more.” Libby pivoted away.

“Um...”

Her sister looked over her shoulder and raised an eyebrow.

“So Jefferson’s a pretty good cook?” Bianca wiped away a tear.

“Better than me.”

“Can he work with egg whites alone, or do I have to eat the yolks, too?”

“I’m sure we can work out the details.” She nodded toward the kitchen. “Come on.”

## WAKE-UP CALL

“Libby?”

“Yeah?”

“You look thin today.”

Libby’s red-gold curls bounced against her shoulders with a minute shake of her head.

“I don’t mean that like you look fat every other day. I mean, you look good. Pretty. That sweater’s a good color for you. A good fit, too.”

Libby smiled.

\* \* \*

In the lot at Daisy’s Halfway House, Shontae scraped the last of the ice off his windshield and ducked into his car. *Please start, please.* Bitter cold today, and he had a grueling Saturday to look forward to. Dozens of cabin-fevered wards of the court begged for liberation from the old prison, but none would be rewarded until the temperature rose a few degrees. Antsy charges made for a day of discipline—not too different from teaching kindergarteners now he thought about it.

He huffed a hot breath into his hands and turned the key in the ignition.

Nothing. Not even a sputter. “Come on.”

He tried again to no avail. “Damn it!” He’d have to call for a tow. Faith was busy today with Mr. Sex Toy Musician, and—

A white-mittened hand tapped on the window, demanding his attention. He turned to see a beautiful woman bundled in a long, red trench coat and a white beret. The tassels of a fluffy white-and-red-striped scarf billowed in the breeze, along with her auburn hair. *Bianca.*

This was no happy coincidence. She wouldn’t have been there if not to find him, but—

She smiled, and a rush of desire and hope fluttered in his veins. “Car trouble?”

He nodded and reached for the door handle. Once standing on the frozen asphalt next to her, the urge to wrap his arms around her

## WAKE-UP CALL

encompassed him, along with the scent of Eternity.

“Hi.” She swiped a flyaway from a pink, wind-bitten cheek.

“Hi.”

On tiptoes, she brushed a warm kiss over his cheek. “Long time, no contact.”

In more ways than one. And, God help him, she was wearing the boots. “Can I help you with something? Are you—”

“Seems as if you’re the one who needs some help.” She nodded toward an old, black Jeep Cherokee. “Come in out of the cold, while you call for a tow.”

He followed her. “What happened to the Bentley?”

“This is more practical in this weather. Four-wheel drive.”

“Nice.”

“Not really. But it gets me from point A to point B.”

“Speaking of point B...” He reached in front of her and opened the driver side door. Heat radiated out at him. “You’re here.”

“Yes.” She climbed in, smiling. “Is that a problem?”

“No.” The walk around the car could have been a mile long for how long it seemed to take to reach the passenger side.

“Here.” She extended a steaming, Styrofoam cup as he slid onto the cloth seat. “I took the liberty of bringing you a hot cocoa.”

“Thanks.”

“How’ve you been?”

“Can’t complain.” He sipped the hot liquid. “You?”

“Actually, I’ve been...I don’t know...doing some soul searching, I suppose.” She removed her mittens and placed them on the dashboard.

No diamond ring glared at him. He smiled. “You haven’t called.”

Her rosy lips parted into a grin. “I told you I wouldn’t.”

“That you did.”

“I wasn’t ready.”

“You’re ready now?”

## *WAKE-UP CALL*

“I don’t know.” She pulled the hat from her head.

He smoothed a disheveled lock and brushed the back of his finger against her cheek.

With closed eyes, she emitted a sweet groan.

“Bianca.”

Her eyes peeled open, engaging his stare. She licked her lips, bringing back the memory of deep, emotional kisses.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, stroking her cheek once again.

She leaned into his hand and caressed his fingers. Her eyes ignited like a sapphire flame, ensnaring him.

“You deserve to feel beautiful.” He closed his fingers around her hand. “Always.”

“Thank you.”

## PENNY DAWN

All right, so who among us doesn't have a few demons to exorcise?

Penny Dawn began her writing career at the tender age of seven, before she realized it's impossible to be All Good, All the Time...at least in the religious sense (grinning like a Cheshire.) Romantic stories with passionate twists have since become this Good Girl's forte...and she unleashes her demons on paper, over and over and over again.

Penny Dawn holds a B. A. in history and English from Northern Illinois University and an M. A. in Creative Writing from Seton Hill University, whose alumnae include spicy novelists Jacki King, Shannon Hollis, Suzanne Forster, Dana Marton, and others. When she isn't writing, Penny enjoys tap, ballet, and jazz dance, photography, physical fitness, and renovating her 1906 Victorian Lady with her husband and two daughters.

Drop by her website [www.pennydawn.com](http://www.pennydawn.com) to discuss all things decadent.

\* \* \*

***Don't miss Sound Off, by Penny Dawn,  
available at [AmberHeat.com](http://AmberHeat.com)!***

*Ten years ago, Dale carried Mya across the threshold of an enormous hundred-year-old home. Together, they'd planned to restore it to its original glory. But a decade later, the house is still in disrepair, it's*

*swallowing their hard-earned paychecks, and it's driving a wedge between them.*

*Side jobs are necessary to make ends meet, but as they keep Dale away from home, Mya feels as neglected as their house. When she learns he's been providing his services pro bono for the congressman's wife, Mya considers leveling the score...with a hunky handyman across the street.*

*Funny how the things that draw people together often tear them apart. Does any love remain between Dale and Mya? Or is their marriage about to buckle like their dining room ceiling?*

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