



The Price of Love

By

L.T. Rashard

## **The Price of Love**

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ISBN: 0-9773043-034-025  
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**L.T. Rashard**

DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I want to thank God for everything. To my husband. Thank you for being my hero and my support system. I want to give thanks to my girls, I love you. Ma, you're the best--I love you.

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### CHAPTER ONE

*She'd nailed it!* The very sought after MACA contract was hers. MACA, the innovator in customized automotive electronics, has now partnered with Constantine Inc., a computer marketing company who is now the largest suppliers of computerized merchandise. Nicholas and Adrian are going to be ecstatic! Nicholas was genius to insist that she was the perfect candidate to go after the account. The CEO of MACA, Antoine Mardrice, is young, ambitious, and African American, so Nicholas thought that someone like herself could get the account with no problem at all, and he was right. Of course, it had been difficult convincing Adrian that letting Nina flaunt her assets, while playing hardball with a young and virile stud like Antoine, was a good idea. He was part Greek, part Italian, one hundred percent alpha male and considered Nina his woman. Adrian had a conniption when she and Nicholas told him of their plans. He accused his father of trying to 'pimp' Nina out for business.

Nicholas believed that wasn't the case, he felt that Nina had the intelligence to handle the account, and it was time to train her on the executive side of things since she'll be taking over Adrian's job one of these days. He said that she needed to know how everything works. Besides, she had been the one to request the MACA account in the first place. Nicholas and Adrian went head to head until Nina explained to Adrian that she supported the decision and that Nicholas had given her an opportunity to spread her wings.

She knew that she was the best person to go after the account and it worked to their benefit. Nina was happy to have the opportunity to be flexible in the work place. She was head of the Administration Department, however, she wanted to be more of a decision maker in the company, an executive, and the only way to do that was to be diverse.

The ringing phone interrupted her thoughts. It was her mother.

"Hi, baby."

"Hi, mom, how are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine, everyone is doing well. How are things going with you and Adrian?"

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"Things are going pretty good. Thanks for asking."

"Are the two of you coming to Nana's birthday party?" Although her grandmother's birthday party was more than three months away, her mother, a stickler for details, wanted to ensure that every detail was in place so she was starting early.

"That's the plan. Do you need me to get anything?" Nina offered.

"No, sweetie, the money that you sent to help out with the party was enough. Shanna and Mark will be there, and so will Aunt Ida, but she's not sure if she'll be staying. What about you and Adrian? Will the two of you be staying at the house?" her mother questioned.

Nina automatically took offense to the question, but held her tongue.

It always amazed her that after two years of being together, her family, and his she suspected, was against their union. Growing up in a relatively sheltered religious background, Nina's parents were against her and Adrian living together and having sex before marriage. His family's reasoning for them not being together was different. She suspected that they didn't appreciate the color that she might bring into the family, although no one has ever dared to mention it to her directly. But every time they were around his mother, she was very stand offish and cold towards her.

"No, mom, we're going to drive back home and, if it gets too late to drive back, we'll stay in a hotel. I wouldn't want anyone catching cooties from Adrian and me not being married and living in sin." She said sarcastically. She was twenty-eight years old and her parents still thought of her as a baby. Sheesh!

"Hey, watch your tone, baby girl, you know if the two of you would only make this a blessed union instead of shacking up together, we would be happy for you to stay with us. But frankly, your father and I are not comfortable with the thought of you two sinning in our home."

"Mom, there's no way I would have sex in your house. You know that!"

"I thought I raised you better than to sleep with a man outside of marriage, but you did that."

"Mom!"

"We've raised you better than that!"

So the polite gloves were off, and she's going for the jugular, Nina thought.

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"And furthermore, I know that you want more security than just living together."

"Mom, you have to understand that our decision not to marry is for a valid reason."

"Which is?"

"We don't want to," Nina answered, a statement, which was not entirely true. She's wanted to marry Adrian since the day they'd met, but Adrian was not willing to risk the institute of marriage for a relationship that he anticipates will eventually end. Nina always secretly suspected that he was waiting for someone better to come along and that angered her. She realized that she needed to talk to someone about her fears regarding Adrian, and her mother was her closest confidant and adviser so she came clean with her feelings.

"You know what mom, you're right. You and I have been on opposite sides of the fence since this relationship started and I want to come clean. Yes, I want to get married, sometimes more than anything in this world. I want what you and dad have and Adrian is the man that I want it with. However, he's not ready yet, but I'll wait for him." She heard her mother exhale. "Not only because I've invested all this time in him and this relationship, but because I love him."

"Honey, I know that two years seem to be a long time to investment in a relationship, but it's not, and I'll tell you what, a marriage is a long and painful journey when both parties don't share the same feelings for one another. Don't look back and realize that you're too old to have children, and alone because you dedicated the best years of your life to a man who was only interested in you for however long it took for him to sow his oats." At Nina's silence, her mother continued. "And what if he leaves you and marries someone else? Have you considered that scenario?"

"Then that's a chance that I'm willing to take. It will hurt, but then I'll get over it. I just need to make sure that I've done everything in my power to make this relationship work."

She felt her mother's concern over the phone. She was expecting a lecture.

"Well, baby, it sounds as if you've made up your mind. But know that I will be here for you, no matter what." Nina was surprised at that response.

"I know, mom. And I love you"

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"I will always be here for you honey. And think more of yourself, darling. You deserve to be happy and in God's good grace. Pray for Adrian, he'll come around."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then God will send you someone who is perfect for you. So stop being afraid to step out on faith. If you'll pray about it, it will happen."

"I need to make him jealous, if he sees what he would be missing, he'll be more apt to marry me."

"You're talking crazy, what you need is some kind of change. How long do you expect to live like this?"

"Mom, I..."

"Stop making excuses! Adrian has everything he wants without needing to make a commitment to you. Stop selling yourself short. If you want that ring on your finger, you better make him work hard for you. Stop being an easy lay."

"Mom! Don't say that."

"Why not, it's the truth."

"Look, mom, I gotta go. I'll give you a call tomorrow. Love you and tell dad I said hello."

"Okay, honey, but you take heed of my advice. I haven't been married for thirty years without knowing a little something, something about men."

Nina blushed. The thought of her mother knowing anything about anyone in the biblical sense made her uncomfortable. "I know, and I'll let you know how everything goes."

"Okay, bye, baby." Her mother said, and they hung up with one another.

Nina jumped at the knock on the door, interrupting her train of thoughts.

"Come in."

*Lord keep me strong*, she prayed as Adrian walked in.

Six foot three, at two hundred and fifteen pounds of solid muscle, his body is fine, Nina thought. His short stylishly cut hair went perfect with his chiseled features. His ice blue eyes were a contrast to his olive coloring. They were piercing and knowing, yet beautiful and unique. And when he smiles, oh, she knew that the heavens sang. His teeth were straight and white, not mega watt white, but an honest "I visit my dentist every six months for a cleaning" white. He was the sexiest man alive, by

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far, hands down. She continued to gaze down at him. He wore an Armani suit and handmade leather shoes. He oozed sexuality. There was no damned way that she was leaving him. He is absolutely delectable. Her Nana called him "succulent." Her sister called him "just damned fine." And he was, every inch of him.

"My father called me into his office today." He said. His deep baritone voice made her hot and wet at the same time.

"And?"

"He said that it is time to delegate both title and duties as CEO to me." He smiled, but the way he said it lacked real emotion. It was as if he was delivering a message to be dictated by his secretary. She detested his calm demeanor under any circumstance. He was taught from birth to control his emotions in public. Actually, he didn't get excited about anything. Even his orgasms were controlled. He just gave a little grunt, closed his eyes, grabbed her hair and it was over.

She suddenly had the urge to just get up and give him a great big hug. He'd have a fit. But what the hell, you only live once. She got up, walked around her desk and went over to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. She tried to plant a kiss on his lips but he reached up and removed her arms from around his neck, then, grabbing hold of her wrist thrust her away from him.

"What and the hell are you doing?"

"I was... I just..." She said surprised.

"You know better than to do that! We're at work where it specifically talks about public displays of affection among employees." His reprimand startled her.

"Sorry, I just got excited," she said blushing. She was embarrassed by his reaction.

Adrian knew that he was acting like an asshole; He knew that she'd been feeling a little insecure and sensitive lately, so maybe he shouldn't have been so harsh with her, but she knew better.

"Well, you have to watch it, especially since I'm receiving this promotion," he said, lowering his voice.

"It's not like everyone doesn't know that were an item. So what's the big deal?" She sat back down in her seat and crossed her arms in front of her breast.

"I am to be respected. That's the big idea. What if someone had come in while you were all over me just then? What would they think?"



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Look, there is a time and place for everything, the office is not the place, and at work is not the time."

"Some people dream of doing it in the work place," she said.

He remembered catching his cousin Michael having sex with Angelina Costas on Michael's desk a few months back. It had made him very hot and horny. He went home and fucked Nina silly after that. And, although he had never told anyone about what he had witnessed, the thought of the two of them getting caught making love in the work place held no appeal to him.

"I'm not one of those people."

"Obviously not," she muttered under her breath, but opted to agree with him. "But, you're right. I just got beside myself. Trust me I won't make that mistake again."

He crossed to her and took her face in his hands "Don't be angry with me, *cara*, we will celebrate at home and you can be as affectionate as you want to be." She saw the hint of lust in his eyes. For a second she thought that he was going to kiss her, but he let her go and stood back.

"Hey, we got the MACA account! I was just about to come down to your office and let you know when you came in. Antoine's secretary called me and let me know that the documents were being sent via certified mail. I should have the paper work for you to sign by the end of the workday on Wednesday. It'll be back from legal by then."

"No need. I have both gift and paperwork in hand," Antoine said. He was standing in the threshold of her doorway holding flowers and documents. Adrian turned his head, sizing up Antoine. Today he wore a white tee shirt underneath a beige and white palm tree print silk short sleeve shirt that was open, denim Capri shorts, ankle socks, and tennis shoes. He wore his naturally curly hair in a short Caesar hairstyle. He looked more like a thug than a CEO. His watch, leather and diamonds, was expensive and completed the urban look.

"Adrian." He walked into the office and gave him a nod, then handed him the contracts. Turning to Nina, Antoine gave her the flowers and a beautiful smile. He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Nina blushed as Adrian's jaw tightened.

"I just wanted to personally congratulate you on your winning the MACA contract. I am really looking forward to working with you. I was hoping to steal you away for lunch if you had the time," he said to Nina.

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"We look forward to working with you also, Antoine. However, you've missed lunch by two hours, we've already eaten." Adrian told him with a warning tone in his voice. Antoine took the hint and backed off.

"I see. Well, if you have any questions, I am available to you day or evening. You have my number?" Nina nodded "Use it, for any reason." He told her, and turned away from her.

"Later, partner." He nodded at Adrian, and turned and left.

"Cocky bastard," Adrian said once Antoine left. "Now that he's gone, do you want to go to lunch?"

"No. It'll draw too much attention to the fact that we are dating and heaven forbid we should do that."

"What's your problem? You know what, never mind. I don't have time for this. Make sure legal gets this please." He dropped the envelope on her desk.

"I'm not your secretary."

"But it's your job."

"Whatever."

"Yeah, whatever," he repeated and he walked the door, closing it a little harder than necessary.

"He's the cocky bastard," Nina said out loud. "He has the nerve to get jealous when someone shows her a little attention, but he's not willing to." Nina shook her head.

\* \* \*

Adrian was tired of being challenged by others for Nina. He was a man and loved the attention of having a woman as beautiful as Nina to call his own, but he hated the competition and the challenge that came from every male who set eyes on her. They didn't just want to admire her; they wanted to conquer her. He even had to threaten members of his own family to back down. And now he had to deal with another admirer. This one could be real competition; he was nice looking, fit, the same ethnicity, and rich.

He knew that it was a bad idea for Nina to go after this contract. Antoine was too much of a threat. Every man was a threat when Nina was concerned. Hell, even his father was smitten with her.

Adrian loved her and didn't want to think about the time that was fast approaching when she decided to abandon the career of being his wife and mother to his children in favor of her flourishing business career. He shook off the sad feelings and walked back to his office.

CHAPTER TWO

Nina sat back in her chair willing the tears not to fall to any avail. Crying was something that had always been foreign to her, until recently. Now she was a basket case every time she and Adrian had a falling out. *God help me.* She prayed silently. Her phone rang again interrupting her thoughts. She picked it up on the third ring.

"Hello."

"I miss you." A deep velvety voice came through the phone sending a warm feeling through her body.

"Asmar," she said, it was almost a whisper.

If Adrian was the sexiest man alive, as she believed him to be, than Asmar is a photo finish second. He was dark as night and smooth-as-silk. His body was well carved and toned, or it had been the last time she'd seen him. He was just over six feet, not as tall as Adrian, but he still looked like a giant. Everything on Asmar was sculpted as if God himself was competing for perfection. It had been two years since she'd seen to him, but the atmosphere that was he created as he spoke was reminiscent of another time. It was a time when she was eighteen and found herself in love with a twenty-six year old man.

"You remembered me," He said in a deep silky voice. "Of course I do, so how may I help you? You sound upset. Is there trouble in paradise?"

"No trouble here," she lied. "To what do I owe this honor?" she asked disdainfully.

"Your grandmother's birthday is coming up and I know that you'll be there. So will I. I was calling to tell you so it wouldn't be a surprise."

"Why are you coming?" She asked defensively.

"One, because I was invited. And two, because I want to see you."

"Why do you want to see me?"

"I miss you. Is that a valid enough reason?"

"Well I don't miss you." Or at least she didn't until now.

Asmar was her first love and her former best friend. He was also the first and only man to have ever broken her heart.

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"Asmar, do you remember the last time that we were together?" She asked. "You remember how it ended; with you telling me that you got Alicia pregnant, and that the two of you were going to tie the knot?"

"Yea, I remember that."

"You broke my heart, and I broke a nail by slapping you." She continued. "To add insult to injury, the last time I caught a glimpse of you, you and your family were out and about. You acted as if you didn't even know I existed. Trust me when I say this, I do not want to see you."

"Not even to rub it in my face that I had made the biggest mistake in my life by letting you go?"

"Not even to gloat. I'm happy where I'm at, so stay away from me."

"Damn baby, what's with all the attitude? I'm not trying to steal you away from your man or anything, not unless you want to be stolen. By the way, how is Adonis?"

"If you're referring to Adrian, he's doing well. Really, why are you calling me? Don't you have a wife and child to give all this unwanted attention too?"

"A child-yes, a wife-no. Alicia and I split up a few months ago. I'm surprised that you haven't heard about it."

"Don't be since I don't concern myself with your business."

"Ouch! You've grown claws since I've last seen you. Out of curiosity, what else has grown?"

"My lack of patience for bullshit, now if you don't mind, I've gotta go. Good bye," She said and hung up the phone.

"It is really one of those days. I better get out of here before something else comes up. Good thing I brought my car today." She said to herself.

Usually she and Adrian car-pooled together, but this morning he had an early meeting with his father so she drove herself in. She was feeling nauseous so she decided to go home. She was trying to get over the last leg of the flu she had come down with last month. She cleared her desk and grabbed her purse, turned out the lights and closed her office door.

"Mrs. Gloria, I'm leaving. You may have the rest of the day off, too." She said to her secretary, which brought a smile to the older woman's face.

"Thank you, Miss Nina."

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"Oh, before I forget, here are the MACA contracts. Can you make sure that they make it to legal ASAP?"

"Sure, Miss Nina, I'll do that right now, are you feeling alright?" She asked. "You look pale." Nina closed her eyes and tried to will the nausea to recede, but it didn't work, she ran down the hall into the bathroom and vomited. She felt relieved afterwards and wondered if she should just stay.

"Nah, I'll just go, tell Adrian 'good bye' and go home. I probably needed more rest."

She walked down to Adrian's office, and the first thing that she noticed was that Adrian's secretary wasn't at her desk.

Good, she didn't like the heifer anyway. Summer gave Nina dirty looks every opportunity she could, and Nina knew that her relationship with Adrian was the reason why. Every woman she knew was either envious of her or proud of her for getting Adrian. She walked into Adrian's office and saw Summer hugging him.

"I'm going home," She said.

The look on Adrian's face was pure shock. Summer's expression on the other hand bore a Mona Lisa smile. *Bitch!*

Nina turned around and walked out of the office. Adrian ran after her. He grabbed her hand as she reached Summer's office.

"Look, I know it looks bad for me, but believe me when I say that she took me by surprise. One minute I was telling her about the promotion, and that she'll still be my secretary. The next minute, she was hugging me and you were walking in."

She tried to pull away from him, but his grip on her wrist was too strong.

"Don't touch me. You're a hypocrite, an asshole, and you make me sick."

"Nina please, I didn't know what she was going to do. Don't jump to conclusions, or make a scene. It's not worth it." He rubbed the inside of her wrist.

She looked away, not wanting to relinquish her anger just yet.

"Are you alright? You don't look that great."

"I have an upset stomach."

"Are you going to go to see your doctor?"

"No, I'm actually feeling better now, but I'm going home and going to bed." She told him and turned and walked away.

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Summer had disappeared down the hall, but he really hadn't noticed her exit. Adrian knew that Nina was angry; however, other things needed his attention before he would be able to smooth out her ruffled feathers. Work was the first thing on the agenda. He slammed the door to his office and started working on contracts. He was so deep into his work that he didn't hear Summer come into his office an hour later to say sorry. Still in a bad mood, he dismissed her by not even acknowledging that she was speaking to him, until she was done with her heart felt apology. After giving an "I accept your apology, don't let it happen again," reprimand, he nodded for her to leave. He worked at a relatively slow pace trying to delay going home as much as possible. Finally all his work was done and everyone else had gone home. He looked outside and noticed that darkness was starting to set in, so he got his things together, turned off the lights to his office and left.

On his way home, he passed up a flower shop. He had thought about buying her some flowers, but reconsidered it. He felt that it might pose as an admission of guilt and he had nothing to feel guilty about.

However, had the shoe been on the other foot, there's no question, he'd gone ballistic. Let him have caught Nina hugging on some other man right after she'd just read him the riot act on public displays of affection in the work place. He probably would have spanked her ass, and then canned it.

What was Summer thinking? Jumping on him like that after he'd told her about the job promotion. Maybe she did have a crush on him, like Nina accused her of having. A couple of months ago, he and Nina got into a disagreement when she accused Summer of wanting him. According to Nina, she got all "googlie" eyed at him and she was always trying to be overly friendly towards him. Nina wanted to know what was up with Summer always bringing him breakfast. He defended her by saying that she admired his dedication to his work and brought him breakfast because she was tired of hearing him complain that he's not eating right. He'd accused Nina of being jealous and said that Summer was just one of those 'chipper' type of people. Nina let the conversation go after that.

She was probably right; he'll have to be more careful concerning Summer in the future. He would be nothing but professional with her for now on.

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But damn, Nina is mad. She hadn't returned any of his phone calls all day. The flowers would be a good gesture; he had a better plan for damage control.

\* \* \*

Adrian pulled into his parking space and got out of his car and set the alarm. When he opened the door to his apartment, the pungent aroma of garlic and cheese hit him. Maybe now that she's had time to calm down, she realized that he really wasn't at fault. The flowers had fallen through; the shop was closed when he got there. He would have to resort to plan B-seduction.

He walked over to her, but she ignored his presence. Never being one to deny himself the feel of her, he reached out and firmly grabbed her mid section.

"Don't touch me," she told him. However he ignored her protest.

He moved her ponytail aside and lightly kissed the back of her neck. Adrian reached around her and turned off the pots. He untied her bikini top and fondled her breast. He trailed opened mouth kisses down the length of her back. Nina exhaled and closed her eyes as he caressed her body with his mouth. Stopping at the small of her back where his hands stroked up and down her thighs, he slowly caresses her feminine folds through the soft underwear. She spread her legs out to grant him more access to explore. Lifting up the short skirt, he tucked it into the waistband revealing her behind and the upper material of her thong. The string was between her cheeks. Kissing her nether cheeks, he played with the thatch of hair around her center.

"Hum," she purred. She felt herself starting to get wet and wanted more and deserved more. He fucked up and she truly intended to benefit from it. As if reading her mind, he removed her panties. She stepped out of them and resumed her position. He was on bended knees, facing her ass. He parted her cheeks and was about to commence to lick her crack when she stopped him.

"You will eat my pussy first." She said. He repositioned himself to where he was sitting on his bottom, his back to her bottom, as he backed his head in between her legs and then his body. When he was comfortably in between her legs and the stove, he snaked both arms around her thighs, as his hands inched up to her pussy lips and opened them. She moved in closer to him. Moving in closer to her clit and blew. He then licked around her labia before stimulating the hood. Her hands went to his hair as she

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pushed her pelvis closer to his mouth. He placed her left leg on his shoulder and continued to lick her pussy until she came. He then lowered her leg to the floor, and stood up facing her. He tried to kiss her but she turned her head to the side. He tried to grab her by the hair and force her to kiss him, she resisted him by turning her head in the opposite direction, so he pulled her close to him and kissed her neck.

He let her go and pulled down his pants and briefs. When he stood up, he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her closer to him. He cradled her bottom and the back of her thighs while she wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. She sat up, and impaled herself on his erect staff.

"Um."

"Uhhh," they moaned simultaneously. She was tight. He was her only lover, so her body was contoured for his large penis.

"Do you forgive me?" He whispered in her ear.

"No." She answered his question, as she started to ride him. After a few strokes he stepped out of his pants and briefs completely and moved them to the refrigerator where he leaned her up against it and thrust deeply into her.

"That feels good," she moaned.

It was a nice rhythm and he felt himself ready to come. He stopped, pulled out and repositioned them with his back against the refrigerator, and her ass on his erect cock. She bent over and touched the floor, while he ran his penis up and down her pussy before entering her. He grabbed her hips to steady them and started moving in and out of her. His pace started slow, then quickly picked up momentum. He thrust into her violently, causing her legs buckle as she came. He held her by the waist and continued to pump into her until he came. He closed his eyes and relished in the feel of his climax. When he was finished, he kissed her back and pulled out of her. He sat down on the chair, and pulled her down on his lap.

"So tell me why I'm not forgiven?"

"Because you're an asshole," she flat out told him.

"Today was just a misunderstanding. I put Summer in her place, so you don't have to get all hostile on me." She stuck her middle finger up at him, and he gave her a playful swat on the side of her butt. They got up, and she pulled her skirt down and her top up, while he pulled his briefs and pants back on. When he was finished dressing, he washed his hands



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in the kitchen sink, and went over to the pot and opened it. He dipped a spoon into the food to taste it. Fettuccine Alfredo. Roasted tomatoes.

"This is good," he complimented. He took a plate out of the cupboard and piled on a generous amount of pasta with sauce on it. He plopped a plump tomato on his plate, and asked Nina if there were any salad.

"In the frig.," she told him.

He looked into the refrigerator and spotted the salad, then piled some into his plate. She hadn't filed her plate yet, he noticed, but didn't bother to concern himself about why not.

"Are you still mad?" he asked.

"You can't possibly be that thick can you? Of course I'm mad," she stated hotly. "I walk into your office and your hugging that bitch right on the heels of giving me your holier than thou speech about ethics in the work place. However, if you need me to spell it out for you then fine. You are a piece of shit," she told him. He looked at her for a second as if she was crazy.

"Watch your tongue. I hate to hear a woman curse," he continued. "Anyway, is that all? I thought that you had a serious problem. I'm not proud of what happened by any means, but you're going to have to let that little incident go, or we're going to have a lot of problems."

"Actually, that's not just my problem. You are my problem. Or rather your aristocratic attitude is my problem."

"So, how are you going to 'solve' your problem?" he asked her.

"I haven't decided yet." This miffed him.

She went over to the sink and washed her hands, then grabbed a plate and started fixing herself a generous portion of food. After she was done making her plate she grabbed a bottle of water out of the refrigerator and sat down at the table. She closed her eyes, and bowed her head and prayed over the food before taking her first bite. Adrian was watching her. He knew that she was angry about the incident in the office, but it was more than that and she wasn't going to say. He suspected that it had something to do with her coming home early.

"What do you think your options are?" he asked her cautiously. He was watching her through narrowed eyes.

"I may move out of here, back into a place of my own." She looked up from her plate to see his eyes challenging hers. She added, "I could

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move back home." He knew this wasn't an option because she hated living under her parents' strict rules. So then he asked

"Or?"

"Or, we could go our separate ways. And you don't worry about where I go. And I won't worry about who you do or don't do."

He smiled at her statement before putting down his fork and wiping his mouth with a napkin. He focused his attention on her, trying to intimidate her with his stare. However, it didn't work.

"I can tell you right now that none of those choices are options."

"I am not a possession, or even your wife. I'm your partner, your girlfriend, a mistress of a sort, and I'll decide what's the best course of action for me and if I want out of this relationship," she argued. "You've lost your mind talking to me like that. You're name is Adrian Nicholas Constantine, and not Alessandro Julius James, and you are not my daddy."

He leaped to his feet, throwing down his napkin. His eyes were blazing with anger. He came over to her and held her chin so that he could look directly into her eyes. "Make no mistake, you are mine. A possession and, if you can stop acting like a child for more than ten minutes, maybe one day a wife. But you are mine, so don't ever make the mistake of thinking that you can leave me, because I will hunt you down and find you. Then you'll know why it's not smart to ever cross me. Is that understood?" He let loose her chin only to kiss her softly on the cheek.

"I'm not afraid of you, Adrian. Your threats are futile. When I decide to go, I will leave out the front door with you looking on," she said challengingly.

She got up walked passed him and out the kitchen

Nina went into the bedroom feeling mixed emotions. On one hand, she was angry at Adrian's actions today, she was especially angry at his inconsideration towards her feelings about the whole 'public displays of affection' situation. He thought that if he explained the situation and gave her a little dick, that it made everything okay, it didn't. But damned if his passionate show of emotion towards her leaving him wasn't a turn on. Adrian didn't do affection well. Theirs wasn't a relationship of 'I love you' and 'You mean the world to me', however, he had a way of making her feel loved and cherished. Also, Adrian was losing his reserve towards her, and it was reflecting in their lovemaking. It all started one night a few weeks past when he had came home from work late. He had been in-

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docking his cousin Michael, from Constantine International branch, and he came home hot and horny. She asked him what was up with him because he wanted her so urgently. He never answered her. He just made her feel. That night he took her in every way a woman can be taken by a man. And after that, sex with Adrian had been brutal, hot and quick. He bottomed out in her pussy, rutted in her ass, and he damned near choked her to death with his cock when she deep throatted him. She blamed Adrian's behavior on Michael's frequent flattery towards her. She figured that he was being territorial, and she was okay with it, because she wanted him to be as crazy and out of control in love with her as she was with him.

Without giving Adrian and their situation another thought, she grabbed her toiletries and headed for the bathroom. After taking a long hot shower, Nina exited the bathroom into the adjoining suite. Keeping the towel on her freshly washed head and body, she went over to the dresser and extracted her nightclothes and under wear. Standing in front of the vanity, she was oblivious to the fact that Adrian was watching her.

Observing her from the barely cracked door, Nina's reflection gave him an unobstructed view of the front of her body. He had just come to check on her when she shut off the water to the shower. He liked watching her like this, unaware of being observed, it allotted him the opportunity to admire her acting natural. It was like watching a striptease as the towel dropped, exposing the most beautiful body this side of heaven. Her face was model beautiful. Large almond shaped brown eyes, like the ones found on the animated cartoons. She had a long straight nose, with small heart shaped pouty lips; the kind that women paid a small fortune for. A long slim neck reminded him of a swan's neck. Her arms and shoulders were nicely sculpted. Her breast large and full, a little big for someone with her petite frame, but they were perfect, high, firm and supple, with light brown aureoles--just right for suckling. Her torso was long and slender. As if sensing his eyes on her, she completely dropped her towel and turned around, granting him a view of her backside in the mirror's reflection. Adrian sucked in a breath. Her long thin spine gave her the look of a dancer. Her ass was high, toned and round, and he loved it. She turned back around giving him another frontal view. She took off the towel that she had on her head, releasing yards of long wavy hair. He closed his eyes for a moment. He loves washing her

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hair, the way the soft waves form into ringlets at the end of her hair, the deep chocolate coloring, with caramel highlights turned him on.

Her movements brought him out of his trance. She bent over and started putting lotion on her legs. Adrian wet his lips. She started at the ankle massaging the lotion into her ankles, up her legs, knees, and finally her thighs. She did the same to her other leg, then she lotion the rest of her body, and, when she finished, she put on her nightdress. It was a sheer gold color which reached mid thigh, with a matching thong. It complimented her toffee complexion perfectly.

He saw the smile on her face, and he knew that she was going to use her sex as a weapon. Adrian left and went to the study. He had some documents that needed tending too the soonest; however, as soon as he was done with them, she's going to be his.

When Adrian climbed into bed that night, he was hesitant about waking her up. He usually didn't wake her for pleasure; however, tonight he wanted her with urgency.

She was laying down on her side of the bed with her back to him. He wrapped one arm around her mid section while he caressed her breast his other hand. He moved her hair to one side and started kissing her neck. "Wake up," he whispered in her ear. He turned her to face him.

"What's--" Her words were cut off by his kiss. He took her mouth greedily and she responded with as much urgency. He got on top of her and pinned her to the bed by using his arms on both sides of her head. He then started to kiss her again, slowly at first then more deeply. He paused for a moment, pulled away so that he could look down at her face.

She looked so innocent. Adrian was surprised when she smiled, flipped him over on his back, and straddled him. Innocent hell, she was the devil in the flesh, ready to claim his soul, and fool he was, he'd happily give it up. She started kissing him on the lips, and then moved down to his neck, licking and kissing his throat while her hand grabbed his shoulders. She kissed her way to his chest, licking his nipples and running her fingers through his chest hairs, down to his well-defined stomach muscles. She lingered at his naval for a moment before venturing lower; her right arm following the trail of kisses that she'd just made. She kissed the head of his cock then ran her tongue along the bulging vein of his shaft. She kissed back up to the head and took him into her mouth. When her mouth was full of him, she laved her tongue back and fourth. She slowly pulled away to the tip, and then swallowed him again. She

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sucked him off consuming his precum. She wrapped her fingers around his shaft and pulled him deeper into her mouth, licking the tip first then all of him. Her tongue massaged his muscle; she heard his intake of breath as she started taking him in her mouth deeply. In and out, back and fourth, she swallowed and released him making a rhythmic motion with the movements of her head, quickening up the pace as her mouth made love to his dick. He grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her head backwards so that she could face him.

"Stop," he told her. She gave him another innocent look, got up, took off her panties, and lowered herself on his large erection. Up and down she rode him, increasing the motion. He clutched her waist and thrust faster and harder, increasing the motion, until he exploded and filled her with his seed. She kissed him on the lips and lay back down in her spot once again turning her back towards him. She felt him playing with her hair, which was still damp from her bath.

"I need you, Nina." The words were so soft and strained that she could barely hear them.

"I know, Adrian," she told him. They laid in silence until they went to sleep.

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### CHAPTER THREE

When Nina got up the next morning, she was alone. She knew that Adrian would be gone; he had an early morning meeting with his father to discuss the turn over. She needed time away from him to think about the future. She felt as if this upcoming promotion would be the deciding fate of her relationship with Adrian. She got up and donned on her work out gear and headed to the local women's gym.

\* \* \*

At his family home Adrian sat at the breakfast table with his mother and father. He looked at them and noticed how incredibly handsome they both were. His mother, Nordic in features, was very petite. She stood about five foot three inches tall, and maybe weighed a hundred pounds. She had very blond hair, and blue eyes, the same eyes that Adrian inherited. His father on the other hand was an older version of Adrian. He was twenty pounds heavier than Adrian, and he had dark brown eyes. Adrian sat next to his father and across from his mother.

"Your cousin Stephanio will be here next month. Can he stay with you?" His mother asked.

"Why can't he stay here? There's ample room for him to roam about."

"He's here to see you."

"Then he should have called me instead of calling you. Besides, he's here on business."

"I am really in no mood to entertain. Can you do it or not?" His mother persisted.

"Yea, I can do it. I just need to run it by Nina. She shouldn't mind hosting for a few days."

His mother and father gave each other an uncertain look.

"Speaking of Nina, son, it's time that you start looking for someone more appropriate to stand by your side. Someone who is wife material."

"I'm not ready to get married right now, and what do you mean Nina is not wife material, dad."

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"People are more willing to do business with you when they know that you are a family man than if they knew that you were single," Nicholas said, bypassing his son's question.

"If that's what it'll take to control the business, than fine, I'll propose to Nina today, we can be wed by the end of the month. Satisfied?" His mother stood up glaring at him.

"No, I'm not satisfied!" She said furiously. "It's nonsense to even suggest marriage to a woman like that. Have you lost your mind?" Adrian was shocked by his mother's venomous words. He stood up, as did his father.

"A woman like Nina? Explain, mother, and I warn you to watch your words," he cautioned her.

"Nina will cause complications that we don't really need," she said.

"What your mother means is that Nina is a career minded individual, she's one of the best at her job. She's young and has a lot to contribute to this world. Asking Nina to give it up and 'play house' is selfish of you. End this affair and find someone more suitable to marry, like that Summer girl, or Gabrielle St. John."

Adrian could not believe what he was hearing. His parents had lost their minds.

"I can't believe that you've resorted to arranging my marriage for me. Hell no to both propositions." He turned to leave but his father grabbed his arm.

"Can you see Nina being happy raising children and keeping house for the rest of her life?" Nicholas asked.

"No, and she wouldn't have to, she'd be running Constantine Inc. along with me." Adrian told him.

"What our business needs is to have a solid structure. If you marry her and partner with her, what happens to the company if the two of you decided to divorce? She'd get a large chunk of it, which could possibly cripple it. It will definitely make it vulnerable. Think about what's at stake for everyone at Constantine Inc., not just about you." Nicholas pleaded.

Ann continued "And there's no way that I'd let that black whore of yours get her greedy little paws on our company. I have sacrificed more than you'll ever know to ensure your place. Your father has worked hard to build this corporation; I will not let you ruin it. Get rid of her! Those are the stipulations for control of Constantine Inc. You have until..." She looked at her watch and then back up to him "2:00 P.M. tomorrow."

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"I hate you sometimes."

"Remember that she's my wife. Don't make me forget that you're my beloved and only son." Nicholas let his face go. Adrian slapped his hand away. Nicholas turned towards his wife. "Ann, it's not necessary to talk to the boy like that. He'll make his own choice, and I'm sure he'll keep in mind that Constantine is a legacy that supersedes his own ambitions." Ann sat down.

Adrian looked at his father. "You need to control your wife." He looked at his mother. "Right now I hate you." He said and started to leave.

"That may be, but you have until 2:00 P.M. tomorrow agree to our terms or you can kiss your CEO job good bye. See if your woman is interested in you then." He slammed the door behind him when he walked out. Ann sat down in the chair and summoned the servant for a drink for herself and Nicholas. Nicholas stood up and walked over to the window.

"That was uncalled for Ann. Had you kept your mouth shut, he would have seen reason."

"It is the truth. He needs to know that I'm not going to see the hard labors that this family put in to make this business successful gone to hell because he can't keep his hands off the hired help!"

"Opposed to a gold digger? Do you dislike Nina so much because she's black, or because she's everything you wished that you could be?" Madge, the server, came back in with two martinis, so Ann held her answer. She sat in her seat with a stressed look on her face. When Madge left, Nicholas went back over to the table.

"She's everything a man could wish for in a woman Ann, leave the boy alone."

"Except she's the wrong color."

"I never knew that you hated black people so much, or is it just Nina? Does she bring out the inner bigot in you for any particular reason?"

"As a matter of fact, she does. She reminds me of a dirty, nasty, sneaky, conniving whore. You see, about thirty-three years ago a certain Constantine had an affair with a young black secretary that almost ruined my marriage and destroyed my life. It's like *deja vu* all over again, except now it's my son. Why can't you Constantine men stay away from black women?" Her remark silenced Nicholas. He would never have guessed



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that his affair with Lynn would come back to haunt him. He hadn't even known that she even knew about it.

"When did you find out about the affair?" Nicholas asked.

"When I stopped by your office to tell you that you missed hearing Adrian's heart beat for the first time. I went to your office after hours, and imagine the surprise I got when I saw you and her on your couch fucking like rabbits." Nicholas was stunned. Now it all made sense. Her aloofness. She had acted cold towards him after that day. Everyone thought it was prenatal blues, but now he knew that it was because she had caught him having an affair with his secretary when she was pregnant.

"I'm sorry. I can't even begin to comprehend the depth of misery I've caused you. I wished that you had confronted me so that we could work things out. I can't imagine how much you resent me." He sat in his chair and leaned forward trying to touch her. She moved away from his grasp.

"I got even, so don't worry about it." Her answer shocked him.

"You had an affair?" He accused. His face started to turn red.

"No. Why should I tarnish my reputation and defile my body to get back at you. Besides, I was afraid that you'd kill me if it ever got back to you that I cheated. What I did was pay your little tramp to leave you, and I tell you, she couldn't wait to take the money and run. She was looking for a way out of the situation that she was in once she found out that she was pregnant and couldn't guess who the daddy was."

"What? You mean to tell me that Lynn was pregnant and that I have a child somewhere out there?"

"No, I'm telling you that she was pregnant and got an abortion. I have to say, the bitch had balls coming to me." She continued. "She saw me that night, and she continued to fuck you like she owned you. And she did, for that moment in time." She saw the puzzled look in his face. "She came to me a month later claiming to be pregnant by you, and two hundred thousand dollars would take care of the abortion, and 'mental anguish' that she had to endure, and that she'd stay away from you forever." Nicholas shook his head, "And she kept her word and stayed away from you." He had been having an affair with Lynn for several months, when one day he came to the office to find her gone. She had given no forwarding address so he had no way of getting in contact with her, and deep inside, he was relieved that she'd ended things that way, the guilt of Ann being pregnant and having a mistress was weighing on him.

"And you know that how?"

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"Simple. Do you know that you're whereabouts have been accounted for, for the past thirty or so years? It's just been in the past few years that I've stopped using the private investigator's services. Ever since Adrian has been a permanent fixture at the office."

"I am truly dumbfounded. I had a child, and you and that bitch got rid of it. What gave either of you authority to make that decision without me?" he said angry.

Ann was angry at his obvious ungracious attitude towards her for taking care of what was a potentially disastrous threat to their family.

"Your little act of indiscretions almost cost us everything, and you have the audacity to voice your opinion about what I should have done. Fuck you. I was not about to let you destroy my life or the life of my unborn child's, and if you have a problem with what I did, than so what."

"I never realized that you hated me so much. You killed my child."

"Thank your lucky stars that I didn't kill you. Actually, she was the one who killed the child; I just gave her the means to do it. And before you start claiming the long lost embryo, she had several potentials for paternity." She continued. "Now back to the matter at hand. Adrian. Our son. I don't think that he'll give up his legacy to be with that woman, and make no mistake, I will not budge, if he chooses her, than you need to look for another successor."

"Adrian will not leave Nina for anything. I did as you bid, and tried to persuade him from a relationship with Nina. However, Ann, this bomb that you've just dropped on me, you will have to pay for it." Nicholas said, standing up to walk out of the dining room.

"Nicholas." Ann called to him.

"What."

"He'll take the job, with all its conditions."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he is after all your son, and you took the money." Ann raised her drink glass to him. Ann's father offered Nicholas Ann's hand in marriage as a business deal.

"And I've regretted everyday since." He walked out the door and it closed immediately after him.

Ann sat back in her chair to brood over what to do next. If Adrian refused to bend about this business/relationship deal, then she'll proposition Nina. Now to call Jim and find out what Ms. Lynn have been up to for the past thirty years.

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\* \* \*

Nina was sitting on the couch on the phone when Adrian came into the house. She looked cute with her pink, green, and yellow plaid top that was tied in the front. She wore pink Capri pants, and a pair of canvas sneakers. Pink lip-gloss on her lips, gold hoop earrings in her ear, and she wore her hair in a ponytail. She looked every bit of thirteen rather than twenty-eight. When she realized that he was home, she got off the phone with whomever she was conversing with. Nina sensed that something was wrong with him the moment he sat down next to her. He didn't physically touch her, so she maneuvered her body to straddle his. She put her arms around his neck and nestled her head underneath his chin.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

He sat there in silence for a minute before he answered her.

"Would you love me if I was suddenly broke?" he asked. He was stroking her back and hair. He stared into the fireplace as he spoke. She sat silently stunned at his question.

"Of course I would. Is your family broke? Is that why Nicholas wants you to take over the family business now, because it's bankrupt? If you want, I can find some money somewhere. We can do things exactly the way we want to. "

"That's not what's going on. I -" He put his head down.

"What? Is your family giving you shit about us?" She asked angry.

"That's an understatement." He replied.

"Then what is it?"

"My parents, mainly my mother, has threatened to cut me off completely from the family business if I don't break it off with you, and marry someone else."

Nina sat there stunned. "I don't know what to say. What are you going to do?" she asked. He hugged her close to him.

"I'm going to make love to you." He kissed her hungrily on the mouth. She pushed away from him. She got up and stood before him.

"I know that you have a big decision to make, but if you leave the company, we could start our own business. I have some money saved up, a lot of money saved up. I know that my parents wouldn't mind helping out, but you and I could do it." He smiled at her and lowered her onto the couch and stood up. He quickly undressed himself and then her.

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"I can't wait to be inside of you," he told her desperately as he positioned himself over her, ready to enter her wide spread legs.

"Testing the merchandise to make sure that it's worth a half-a-billion dollars?" she joked. He tensed for a moment.

"Something like that," he said and embedded himself into her.

Nina wrapped her legs around him tightly as he thrust forward.

"Give it to me," she begged him and he did. He pumped hard and fast, biting her bottom lip as he came.

"Damn baby, that was..." He took a deep breath and let it out.

"Excellent." He praised her, and gave her a peck on the lips and pulled out of her.

"What about me? Can I come too?"

"Sure." He knelt down on the floor beside her and started to fondle her breast. He pinched and caressed her nipples into pebbles before taking them into his mouth. She slid her hands to her pussy and with two fingers, she spread herself open wide. She penetrated herself, wetting them enough before running them over her clit.

"Harder," she begged him, as he sucked on her nipples. She rubbed her clit faster, occasionally dipping her fingers into her pussy to moisten them. She felt the adrenaline flowing through her body, her heart started to pound faster; and she felt the blood rushing to her head and her clit simultaneously, the rush of electricity run through her body as her orgasm hit, causing her body to convulse, spinning her mind into serenity.

When she calmed down, Adrian was looking at her brushing his fingertips lightly over her stomach. She closed her eyes for a moment. He was still looking at her when she opened her eyes.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said sadly.

"It's something. Don't shut me out, Adrian." She sat up off the couch.

"I'm going to miss you." He said.

"You don't mean that you're actually going to give into your parent's blackmail?" She shook her head in disbelief. "You're actually going to break up with me?"

"Yea. I guess I am."

"Shit." She closed her eyes. "I guess I can't compete with a half-a-billion dollars." She looked at him with a pleading look in her eyes. He reached out to grab her arm, but she pulled away. "Can't we make this

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work? You and I go into business together and become partners. We can start our own company... Please Adrian, don't do this to us," she pleaded.

"No. I can't pick you. It's not about the money, it's about my legacy, my future and my children's future, and the sacrifices made by those who came before me to ensure my future."

"Bullshit! You don't want to start over because the money and the power mean more to you than us! Well, fuck you and good riddance!" she yelled and stormed to the bedroom.

He was right behind her. She went over to the closet and extracted several large suitcases tossing them onto the bed, opening them; she started throwing clothing inside of them.

"You used me! You never intended to marry me, and the fool that I was, believed that you just needed time!" she shouted, never once deferring from her task.

"I never meant to hurt you. "

"Liar! Don't think for one minute that I believe that you're sorry for what you're doing. I hate you!" she screamed, moving over to the closet taking her clothes out and stuffing them into the cases.

Her words sent a pain so deep to his heart. It was as if she physically stuck a knife in his chest, after a moment, he went numb.

"Help me take this to my car," she ordered. He picked up a suitcase and carried it out to her car. Four trips later, she was ready to go.

"Will you be okay to drive?" Adrian asked when she was behind the wheel of her car. She wiped the tears from her eyes.

"I'm fine," she said and left. After she drove off he went into his apartment, walked into the bedroom and looked around. The place looked empty without her things, he thought. Feeling lonely, he laid down on the bed, which still smelled faintly of her scent, and cried.

\* \* \*

Nina drove around all day until she found herself on the beach in Destin. She decided that it was getting late and that she needed to sleep. She checked into one of the beachfront luxury hotels. In her room, Nina laid down the overnight bag that she chose to take with her for the evening, and picked up the phone to make a few calls. First was to Adrian to let him know that she was fine, and that she was staying in a hotel. The conversation was brief and to the point, then she hung up. She then called her mother, that wasn't so brief.

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"Mom, I need to talk to you," Nina said. She tried her best to disguise the pain in her voice, but she couldn't quite accomplish it.

"What's wrong, baby?" Charlotte asked.

"Adrian broke up with me today," She said, her voice shaking, "and I was wondering if I can come back home, not for long, just a few weeks so that I can regroup," she said, this time with false bravado. She felt shocked, hurt, confused and angry; however, she knew that if she relayed these feelings to her parents, they would come and get her and she wasn't ready to face them to do that right now.

"What happened, baby?" Charlotte asked with concern. She knew this day was coming, but she had hoped that she was wrong.

"It's a long story, but I just wanted to let you know that I'm at a hotel right now, I'm going to be here until tomorrow"

"Oh no you don't! You're not getting me off the phone this easily. I want details and I want them now."

"It's not much to tell," Nina started. "His family gave him an ultimatum: the company or me, he didn't pick me."

"They did what?" Charlotte exclaimed, and then she heard her daughter's soft sighing, and calmed down.

"He had to choose between the company and me, and he chose 'his legacy'." She said bitterly.

"Baby, I'm sorry that it had to happen this way. Where are you?" She asked.

"In Destin."

"Why don't you come home tonight? Dad and I will come and get you. Or we can stay with you if you'd like? We don't mind," she offered. Pensacola was less than an hour away from her, and no matter what the time was, her mother would come calling.

"No thanks, Mom, I'll be alright for now. I'm going to get a hot bath and just rest my eyes until morning. I really just want time to regroup. You know how to get in touch with me."

"I do, but I don't think that's a good idea. Let Dad and me come and get you."

"No, Mom, I just want to be alone tonight."

"Does Shanna know what happened?"

"No, not yet, but I'm sure that once Dad gets wind of what happened, she'll be ringing my phone."

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"You're right. They gossip like two old ladies. You better call her to let her know before he does." Where Nina was very close to her mother, Shanna and her father shared a bond that was extremely tight.

"I will as soon as I get a bath. Give dad my love, and I'll see you soon."

"Okay, sweetie. If you need me, call me, no matter what time it is okay. I love you."

"I love you too, Mom." She said, and hung up the phone.

\* \* \*

Early the next morning, Adrian pulled his Mercedes into the driveway, and entered the front door of his parent's grand home. Janice, the maid, was startled at his unannounced visit, but quickly recovered.

"Mr. Constantine, sir, excuse me, but you startled me; your father and mother are having coffee in the parlor, I shall announce you at once."

"No, I want to surprise them, but thanks all the same," he said and headed off to the parlor.

His parents were in a heated discussion when he arrived at the door. Rather than ease drop, he knocked on the door before entering. His mother sat at the massive oak desk, her eyes raged with anger, he noticed before she gained control of her emotions. His father was looking outside of the window with a dark drink in his hand.

"Is everything alright?" He asked

"Yes!"

"No!"

They said it simultaneously, then looked at each other and back to Adrian.

"Your father's indiscretions have had consequences." Ann told Adrian. He looked shocked, although their marriage was not ideal, but infidelity, that was a shocker. Good thing he wasn't a betting man because he'd never thought his father would cheat on his mother, not in a million years. However, he never thought that he could put a price on his and Nina's relationship either. Things were not going well.

"Your mother paid a former lover of mine to have an abortion, and guess what? She didn't. Nicole Davis was born December 25, 1970." His father said bitterly.

"Don't put this on me. You are the traitor to this family."

"Jesus, dad, that's two months to the day after my birthday. No wonder mother was furious. She really did have competition." He saw

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Nicholas blush, and drop his head for a moment then looked at Adrian. Adrian shook his head in disbelief. "Now, tell me what you know."

"I know that her mother, Lynn, died a few years ago, and that she owns her own convince store, where she employs her siblings."

"Are you sure that she's your daughter?" Adrian asked. Hell, could his day get any worst?

"No."

"Yes."

They said simultaneously again.

"Hey, this twin thing is getting weird." He looked at his father.

"Before you go claiming that this girl is your daughter, you better find out the truth. Get a DNA test done."

"I don't need one. I know in my heart that she's mine. I've seen her pictures and felt a connection."

"Connection my ass." Adrian said. "You need solid proof. Dad, how could you make a slip up like that?"

"I don't need proof, I have paternal intuition."

"The same paternal intuition that has failed you this long is not good enough for me to go by." Ann said. "I want proof and, Nicholas, if she's yours, you're going to have problems." She said and then looked at Adrian, totally dismissing Nicholas.

"Have you come to a decision about the company?" She asked impatiently.

Just like that, she was all business. He might have a sister out there, and Lord only knows how many other siblings, and her thoughts are about the well being of precious Constantine, Inc. Her priorities were grossly misplaced in his opinion. He turned to his father.

"Is she the only woman you've gotten pregnant, or are there more bastard children running around?" he asked acidly. "How could you do this to Mother? She had just gotten pregnant with me?" He shook his head.

"It's not worth you being angry with your father, son. We just have to ensure your future all the more. Are you with me?" She took his face in her hands, and turned him to look at her. It was their fist real alliance together.

"Yes, I am with you, mother. Nina left yesterday and she won't be back."

"And her job?"



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"Terminated. I'll give her a comfortable dowry to compensate for her loss." He stood straighter, stiffer as he said the words. His mother beamed and gave him a hug. His father grunted.

"I knew that you would come to your senses and make the right decision. I could always count on you to make the good choices."

"I'm sure that I haven't made the right decision, but that's neither here nor there."

His mother gave a startled gasp. "You'll feel comfortable with your decision soon enough. There are plenty of available women out there for you to marry, and Nina will bounce back in no time when you compensate her for her inconvenience." That statement infuriated Adrian.

"Never say her name again! I don't want to think about her 'bouncing back'," Adrian warned. Ann pulled the paperwork out of her draw and gave it to him.

"Let me call Henry over here," she said and left. Henry was the family's lawyer and had been so all of Adrian's life. He lived not too far from his parent's home and would be there in no time.

\* \* \*

Henry Wade was at the Constantine home in less than a half hour. The paperwork took another hour to sign. After spending two of the most dreadful hours with his parents in bitter silence, Adrian was ready to leave. His mother had just walked Henry out of the office when his father walked over to him put a stiff drink in his hand and spoke softly into his ear.

"Now that you've made your deal with the devil, don't expect to ever be happy." He toasted his glass to his son's and left the office. Adrian rubbed his index finger across his forehead and chuckled. He finished his drink and left.

Adrian spent the entire day trying to track down Nina. She wasn't home, and he knew that she wasn't one to bring others into her business, so she was alone. Hopefully she was alone. He dialed her cell phone and she picked up.

"Hello." She sounded all right.

"Hey, I need to see you. It's important."

"Can't you tell me over the phone?" she asked, clearly curious.

"No, this is too important to say over the phone. Tell me where you are and I'll come to you." She was silent for a second, and then she told him.

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"Do you want me to come over now?" he asked, excited by the thought of seeing her again. This was dangerous.

"No, tomorrow's a better day for me. Can I at least get a clue as to what you want to discuss?" He's changed his mind about the break-up, she hoped.

"No I can't," he said and hung up. He was going home to change, and go to her.

\* \* \*

When Adrian got home later that night, he made a beeline for the bedroom. It was hard to accept that Nina was really gone. He looked around the bedroom. She had removed most of her items with the exception of a few knick-knacks, and some miscellaneous clothing that he got out of the laundry and put into her drawer. Her drawer ... no longer her drawer, however, he couldn't bring himself to stop thinking of this place with everything in it as theirs. When he looked around, it was as if she was never there, everything in sight was his. And with that realization, he felt his heart get heavy. He walked out of the room and into the kitchen area and grabbed a bottle of Scotch and started to drink.

\* \* \*

In the house where Nina grew up and where her parents still resided, Charlotte looked over at her husband of almost thirty-one years. He was still fine. Actually, he was more handsome with age. He was lying down in the bed next to her reading the new handyman magazine. She had been reading a new romance suspense novel but she couldn't focus on the words, her thoughts were on Nina, even though they kept in constant contact with each other all day.

The last time that she had spoke to Nina, she had told her that she was going to go into work and type up her resume', she said that she'll be home by the end of the week. "I'm worried about Nina. I know that she says that she'll be home by the end of the week, but do you think that we should wait that long? Shouldn't we go and get her now? I hate the thought of my baby dealing with this mess alone."

"She needs to do this by herself, Charlotte," James told her. He put down his book and moved close to her. He kissed her shoulders up to her neck.

"Our Nina is a grown woman who would not appreciate our meddling, no matter how innocent it was intended. She knows that we are here if she needs us."

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"I know, but I still can't believe that he dumped her."

"For millions of dollars believe it. At least it wasn't for another woman. She'll get over him." He said and kissed her. He rolled on to her, pinning her to the pillows. "Now I on the other hand, need you, and badly." He kissed her deeply. She felt his cock against her hot twat beckoning to come in. She opened her legs wide to grant him easier access. He pulled away from her and started to undress himself. He took off his shirt revealing his muscular physique. Then, he took off his pajama bottoms displaying his long thick golden manhood. Charlotte got excited just watching him. When he was on his knees naked in front of her, he opened her legs wide and hiked up her nightdress. She helped him pull down her panties and she opened her legs wide. He looked at her hairy brown bush with the juicy pink center and almost came. He crouched down so that his face was in her pussy. He loved her scent so he took the pleasure of smelling her cunt before eating it. He rubbed his nose in her pussy's opening and the moist vaginal lips before he nose rubbed the vaginal hood and clit. Content that he was engrossed with her scent, he stuck out his tongue and started to lick her. When he was satisfied that her clitoris was saturated with his saliva, he began to suck on it.

"Oh God. Yes." Charlotte moaned. She long ago stopped being embarrassed by his little obsession with her feminine smell.

She grabbed his baldhead and sat up on her elbows so that she could watch him eat her pussy. Her neck fell back as he sucked harder. He moved to her folds and licked at them savoring in her juices. He thrust two fingers into her wet channel as he licked her pussy.

"Arr yes, you know how I like it. Faster!" She demanded and he obeyed. He plunged into her hard and fast until he felt her walls contract and gush her fluids around his fingers.

He got to his knees and opened her legs again wide. He settled himself between her thighs and thrust into her.

"Oh God you feel good." James said to her. He closed his eyes and began his moving in and out of her forming a rhythm that was as old as time. His fingers dug into her hips and she pulled him deeper into her. She grabbed his shoulders and bit her bottom lip as the first wave of ecstasy hit her body. He continued to pound her pussy with all that he had inside until he felt his blood rushing from his big head to his lower extremities, causing him to come hard. She came hard right after him. He shifted his weight to his arms and hung his head down and kissed her. He

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then pulled her nightgown back down when he pulled out of her. He lay next to her, exhausted and satisfied.

"That was great!" Charlotte praised him. She was turning over to turn off her light.

"I aim to please." He was already starting to drift off to sleep. Charlotte turned her back and closed her eyes ready to follow suit. Suddenly she felt James turn around and wrap his arms around her. Now everything was perfect.

\* \* \*

Nina was in the middle of getting undressed when her cell phone rung. She checked the caller ID on it before answering it. Asmar. What did he want?

She answered it.

"Hello" She said impatiently.

"Well hello to you too." He said smoothly. "How are you doing, beautiful?"

"None of your business and what do you want? Who gave you my number?"

"Stop being so defensive, baby girl. I just wanted to know how you were doing. Am I calling at a bad time?"

"Not really. I'm just having a bad day." She said apologetically. "Can you hold on a sec?" She said, he agreed and she finished undressing. She grabbed her phone and slipped into the heated bubble bath.

"I'm back." She said as she relaxed her head on the rim of the tub. "What were we talking about?"

"You were about to tell me about your day."

"I was?"

"Yes you were. No need to turn down a sympathetic ear." He suggested.

"Adrian broke up with me. However, I'm sure that you're aware of this by now."

"Whoa. He did what?"

"He. Broke. Up. With. Me." She said slowly and deliberately.

"Why?"

"His parents."

"His parents? Come again."

"His parents said that if he didn't break up with me, he could kiss the company good-bye. He chose to keep the company."

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"How much was the company worth?"

"Half-a-bill, at least. Why."

"Damn baby, that's a hard call. Women have been dumped for less. At least it wasn't because of another woman," he said and instantly regretted it.

"Yeah, like you left me for another woman," she said acidly.

"No, I left the relationship for a son. My son." He corrected.

"No you cheated on me for another woman which led to your son."

"I cheated because you weren't putting out." He said. "I'm just kidding. Honestly, I didn't see you like that. You were a good girl and my friend."

"I'm putting out now." Her comment shocked him. He didn't know how to approach her so he tried to deter the conversation from the direction in which it was heading.

"Anyway, I left our 'relationship' for my son."

"Well, that can be forgiven. I wouldn't have respected you if you would have handled the situation differently."

"You know with me there was no other options."

"Before you get the big head, I didn't appreciate you seeing other women while we were together.

"I'm sorry, but you were too young for me then, and I was bad news." He explained. "Back then I was getting locked up and you were always away at school."

"I know." She remembered that the majority of their six-year relationship consisted of her visiting him in prison and their writing letters to one another. He used to be a street pharmacist who wasn't very good at it because he was constantly getting caught. But now, he owned his own construction company and gave back to his community. He made a complete turn around of his life.

"So what happened between you and ol' girl?" Nina asked.

"She wanted to be with someone else."

"And you let her go, just that fast." Boy, men's attention span for women was short. Her mother was blessed to have her father.

"I can't very well make her stay. She and I were two ships heading in the opposite direction. We parted on mutual terms."

"So you guys are friends?"

"Hell no, but we're civil and pleasant to one another."

"Do you miss her?"

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"Everyday."

"Was she the one for you?"

"I believed that she was the one for me, at one time."

"With such strong feelings for her, why did you call me? Did you think that I would be the perfect rebound?" She accused.

"No, you aren't a rebound case." She could tell that he was smiling when he said it. "I was in your father's store last week when he invited me to your grandmother's party. Your sister was in there too, working. She got me alone and told me that I should call you to give you the 'heads up' if I was going to your grandmother's party. She told me that you and your man would be there so she didn't think me being there with you unaware was a good idea. I agreed and called you." He explained.

Good old Shanna using her common sense when it slipped her father's mind. She knew that James had a soft spot for Asmar. James had been instrumental in helping Asmar turn his life around. James was like a proud papa to him, therefore he wasn't thinking about how she would feel if Asmar came to the party.

"So what do you want from me, Asmar?"

"I want us to be close like we use to be; without the sexual tension. You don't know how much I miss you. You're a piece of my soul that I've been missing, and I want it back." His answer floored her. He was always honest with her, but she never expected him to feel the way he was about her.

"May I ask you a question? And I want your honest answer."

"Okay." He agreed, but he sounded a little weary.

"Did you ever love me? I know that you always said 'I love you' when I said it first to you, but did you ever love me?" She heard him give an uncomfortable laugh before he answered.

"I loved you from the moment that I laid eyes on you. You were what? Eighteen?"

"I sure was."

"You were wearing white cut off shorts and a pink tee shirt. You had long flowing wavy hair hanging down past your waist that demanded a man's touch. You were holding up a car wash sign for your church. Do you realize that you were the only female out there who didn't try getting my attention?" She remembered that he rolled up in a brand new Cadillac, piped out. He was absolutely beautiful, and every female

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there was trying to get his attention. She was way too shy to approach him.

"Is that what attracted you to me? I seemed uninterested? A challenge?" Nina asked.

"No. It was your beauty." He admitted.

"Oh."

"So what happened? You never really perused a relationship. I was obsessed with you."

"It was never just one reason. To start out with, you were so young and innocent. You had just turned eighteen, and I'm not into young girls like that."

"I was legal." She argued.

"Barely. Anyway," he continued, not wanting to argue the matter of age any longer. "I had too much respect for you and your pops to approach you. I knew that you were his little girl and that he wouldn't want a hoodlum like me courting one of them. Besides, I wanted to get myself together before I approached you with a commitment. I wanted to stop hustling. Besides, I wasn't capable of giving you what you wanted."

"But you gave it to Alicia. I don't see the difference."

"For one thing, if it wasn't for my son, I wouldn't have married Alicia. Also, Alicia is a 'round-a-way' girl, and she knew what was up. If I had gotten locked up, she knew how to take care of business. If I wanted other females, as long as I had a jimmy hat on, it was fine. Besides, she and I had a history together, going back since the third grade." He explained.

"Well, what's changed between the two of you? And why didn't you tell me all of this when we first met? It would have saved me a lot of heartache. And another thing, we were together as a couple for years, you still strayed. What kind of love is that? It doesn't make sense to me."

There was a brief silence then he spoke softly.

"I love you like an artisan loves a rare painting. You were something to be seen and admired, not touched or abused. I wanted you because you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I hold you on a pedestal as being a precious angel, however, I recognized that you deserved more." He paused and continued. "You deserve someone who can look past your beauty to the real you. Some one who wants to conquer your mind, and not just your body. The only real gift that I could give you is by letting you keep your innocence. That was one of the few good

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things that I had done with my life up until then. I will always regret not sampling some of your sweetness for myself, but I was never worthy of you." His confession floored her. She let him continue, hanging on to his every word. "Not touching you was the first unselfish act that I had ever made. You were the first person that I cared about more than my situation and myself. And the love that you showed me drove me mad crazy. I never had someone who believed in me like you and your family did. It has meant the world to me."

"You've had so much to give." She told him. "How could we not believe in you?"

"You really affected who I was inside. When I met you I found a new respect for women and eventually I realized that I was in love with your innocence, more so than I was in love with the real you." For some reason, she understood and accepted his answer. He continued, "I decided that you deserved someone who could see past your superficial assets and could love you for who you were and was going to be."

He opened up a floodgate of emotion that had her ready to cry. Someone who wanted the best for her putting aside his selfish pride, he wanted to preserve her future. Damn. She had spent so many years with her ego bruised, it was therapeutic to hear out his reasons for not getting involved with her, and it wasn't just because Alicia was the better woman.

Nina was grateful for his thoughtfulness. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Allowing me to be the best person that I could be without clouding my mind with sex. Question," she said.

"Go ahead."

"Adrian was my first and only lover, and knowing that, do you regret not having sex with me?"

"Whoa, baby girl, you have some questions for me tonight. But I'll answer what I can. The answer is yes and no."

"Stop being so complicated. Yes and no. Explain it to me."

"Okay. What I did was out of selfishness to you. However, I do occasionally think about how it could have been between us if we had taken that final step. But then I put that thought into the back of my head because I don't need that kind of aggravation, nor do I need to walk around with a bulge in my pants." They both laughed.

"Thanks again."

"For what?"



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"For giving me closure, for looking out for my best interest. For being a friend."

"It was my pleasure."

"I have one more question."

"Shoot."

"How did you feel about me and Adrian?"

"I really don't want to go there."

"Please. I'm asking you, and I want brutal honesty."

"I was shocked that you were dating him, but I know that you'd only date the best, no matter what creed, color or religion. I saw the two of you one day, at a restaurant and you two looked so happy together, and I decided that your happiness made me happy, so it was okay with me. I was married and had no right to really protest, but I didn't think that he was good enough for you."

"Not good enough for me. Why? Because he's white?" She felt her pulse starting to rise at the familiar criticism that went along with her dating outside her race.

"Because he was a man, because he was human. You can search the globe twice and you'll never find anyone good enough for you in my opinion." His confession brought a smile to her face.

"Awe, Asmar, that is such a sweet thing to say. Thank you." She said. Her phone beeped.

"Hold on a minute. I have another call."

"Listen, I'll call you back tomorrow, I have to be up early in the morning. But if you get lonely, give me a call, no matter the time."

"Okay, and thanks."

They hung up and she clicked over.

"What took you so long to answer your phone?" It was Adrian.

"I was talking. What do you want?"

"Whom were you talking to?"

"You remember my old friend Asmar. He called to see how I was doing." She told him truthfully.

"You two plan on picking back up where you left off? Couldn't wait to rebound could you?" He accused.

"Whatever, what do you want?"

"I was calling to see how you were doing, but I guess you're doing fine."

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"I sure am doing fine. Thanks for calling." She hung up. Immediately the phone rang again."

"Don't do that shit again. I realize that I'm the bad guy here, but don't do that again. Hear what I have to say."

"Are you going to tell me what you want to meet with me about?"

"No." He answered.

"Then what do you want?"

"I just wanted to hear your voice. Good night."

"Good night and please don't call me again." She told him and hung up the phone. A few minutes later, the phone rang again.

"Look, I'm sorry."

"For what, you're a half-a-billion dollars richer, no worries. And please don't call me again! This is very painful for me--"

"And it's not for me!" He shouted.

"Well hell, you're the one who wanted this. I did everything to keep you! You- I'm not going to get into this with you. Don't call me again!" She disconnected the line.

She washed herself off and got out of the bath water. She dressed in her nightclothes and plugged her phone into the charger. She turned off the lights and climbed into bed. A few minutes later the hotel phone rang, this time it was her sister Shanna.

"Hey."

"Hi, I take it you're part of the support unit." Nina said.

"Yea. Dad told me what happened. Are you okay?"

"I'm muddling through."

"I'm here if you need me."

"I'm okay. Thanks. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay too."

"Want to talk about it?" Nina asked.

"Not really." Shanna said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yea."

She didn't like Mark, her sister's husband. She thought that he was a little too possessive, and once, Nina sighted him at a restaurant with another woman. She told her sister and he explained the woman as a 'play cousin' of his. It seemed to satisfy her sister so she let it go.

"Has Asmar called you?" Shanna asked.

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"Yea, we had a great conversation, thanks for giving him my number."

"You're welcome. So, do you think that the two of you are going to get back together?"

"I don't know. I'm not feeling anyone except Adrian right now." She thought that she heard her sister exhale.

"Okay, but I'm going to go."

"I know, call you if I need you anything."

"You know it."

"I love you."

"I love you too. Night." They hung up.

Nina got out of bed, and got on her knees and said her prayers. After that was done, she got back into bed and fell soundly asleep.

\* \* \*

Nina couldn't stop pounding on Adrian's chest. She continued to pound until it was a steady beat to her ears, and the more that she beat, the louder the noise, the more he laughed at her, until she realized that she wasn't pounding his chest that she was not pounding, but instead, it was coming from some where else. A door. She sprang up from her sleep and got up to answer the door.

"What the hell?" She said, and then peeked out of the peephole. Adrian looked crazed. He also looked angry, and she wondered if she should open up the door. She decided to open it so that he didn't wake anyone else up with his excessive pounding.

"What are you doing here?" She asked when she opened the door. "And why are you pounding on the door like a mad man? Are you crazy?"

He pushed passed her into the room looking around for evidence of someone else. He searched the entire suite, under the bed, closets and the bathroom. He stood in the middle of the large room filling it with his presence. He had his index finger across his forehead and his other hand on his hip. He was agitated, but so was she.

"Why is it you are here, Adrian?" She asked. Her arms were folded across her breast. She was wearing red silk pajamas with her hair tied in a matching red and black scarf. No obvious signs of ravishing, he thought.

"Where is he?" Adrian asked. Nina looked at him as if he'd grown horns in his head.

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

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"Angus, Abdul, Andre? Whatever your ex's name is. Or you're newly reacquainted lover, is it?" She was speechless. "Or has he left already?"

"No one is here. No one has been here. And if Asmar had been here, it's none of your business anymore."

"You'll always be my business. How long have you been seeing him, Nina." She closed her eyes but she didn't answer him.

"Or has he always been around, lurking in the shadows waiting for an opportunity?" Adrian came close to her, so close that she could feel his breath on her face.

"You know that you sound crazy, and are you drunk?" She asked and walked over to the bed and sat on it. He came over and sat down facing her.

"I am going crazy." He admitted.

"Why?"

"I can't walk away from you, but I can't very well marry you either."

"Sounds like you are in a dilemma." She said sarcastically. "But I'll make this simple for you: I need and deserve more than being your whore. So no, I don't want to be involved with you."

"Nina, please. I just want time to sort out a way for us to be together."

"Adrian, you have something in your life that you love more than me. I will accept that, but respect that I refuse to come second to anything or anyone. Now this conversation is over."

"Damn it Nina, why do you have to be so difficult!" He bellowed.

"I'm not being difficult! All I want to do is pick up the pieces to my broken heart and move on--in peace. I deserve it."

"Nina, you're my lover, my partner."

"I was your mistress, now you want me to be your whore. "

"You were never my mistress, and you'll never be a whore. Please don't say that. All I'm asking for you to do is wait for me. I'll come up with a way for us to be together. Just go back to your parents' house and keep the pussy tight for me. I'll find a solution to our problem."

"You've lost your damned mind. You think that you can come here and offer me up some alternative to a relationship? I wasn't thrilled about the relationship before it came to an end, I sure as hell don't want the scraps that you're offering me now." She paused and looked into his

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stricken face before administering the final blow to his ego. "Now get the fuck out before I go postal." She walked to the door, opened it up and waited for him to leave. He stopped in front of her and reached out and held her chin in his hand, lifting it up to meet his gaze.

"You never deserved me." She told him looking right into his eyes. She saw the pain in them as she spoke the words.

"What I deserve and what I want are two different things and never shall the two meet, I guess. I'll keep in touch." He kissed her lightly on the lips. He reached into his shirt pocket and handed her an envelope.

"What's this?" She asked already opening it up.

"It's a check. Severances pay, you're fired." He said. She was hardly shocked at his announcement.

She looked at the check and gasped. Five million dollars! Hot damn, she just hit the lottery! But something in her felt cheap and then angry.

"Severance pays my ass! Do I look like I was born yesterday? This is hush money. You think that I'm going to try and sue you--probably on harassment charges. You're always looking out for your precious company, bastard."

"Stop assuming the worst. It's nothing like that." He denied.

"Then what is it? Money for sex?"

"No, no. It's the money that I thought you deserved. If we were married you would probably get half of everything, so I am giving you every thing that I am worth right now, to try and rectify the damage that I caused to you."

"Good thing that starting tomorrow--Nope, starting right now, your net worth is over a hundred times this amount." She said sarcastically.

"Do you want more?"

"You want to give me more?"

"No." He answered her honestly.

"No, I don't want anymore. The only thing that I wanted was you, but since that's not going to happen, this will suffice. Thank you." He bowed his head to her.

"I'm sorry."

"Oh well. You'll get over it, and starting tomorrow, so will I." She told him and closed the door. "Sleep well." She said when the door was firmly closed.

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Adrian was feeling hurt as well as rejected by Nina's closing remarks. He hoped that everything worked out between them because he couldn't imagine going through the rest of his life without her.

In her hotel room, Nina felt different. She allowed anger to consume her, figuring that there were certain times in a person's life where something so profound happens to them it changes the fabric of their being. It was at that moment when Nina closed the hotel door on Adrian, that she closed the door on love. Whether or not he'd admit it, he had put a price on their love, and she would never fore give him for that. This chapter of her life was over and it would serve her interest to best remember that. Adrian's fall from grace was more than she could handle, so she went to sleep and woke up into a new creature.

CHAPTER FOUR

Three months after Nina's break up with Adrian, was Nana's birthday party. Everyone in Nina's family had concerns about her behavior and new look. Gone was the waist length hair that was her signature pride and joy. In its place was a shoulder length, bone straight, razor cut, ultra chic bob. Random strands of blond high lights complimented the style. Her usually soft subtle make-up was changed for smoky eyes, glossy lips and blood red nails. What used to be her personal style of very modern preppy clothes and power suits has been replaced with leather, Lycra, silk, ultra-sheer tops and very mini skirts. Charlotte worried about Nina's transformation. Charlotte noticed that there was hardness to her daughter. In the past, Nina was always very reserved, but now that's changed to bitter and fierce. But damn if she didn't look good in the process. Charlotte shook her head. Beyond the model like figure, and the war paint exterior, there was a certain glow to Nina, one that only came with impending motherhood. And as if validating her suspicions, she had a dream about fish. Her family's equivalent to a pregnancy test. She had hoped that it would be Shanna, since she was the one that was married, but she seriously doubted it. In her gut instincts, she knew that it was Nina. She would talk to her later, after the party. She would first make sure Nina didn't leave early or discretely.

\* \* \*

Nina pretended that she was listening to the gentleman beside her as she spoke. Sean Pierre was his name. Handsome, light skinned, hair neatly trimmed low with waves, strong build, kind of short for her liking, but doable. He was her brother-in-law's brother, and an apparent attempt to try and match her up with someone. It wasn't working. She focused her attention on her mother, who was looking at her as if she was a culture sample under a microscope--she was scrutinizing her. Nina knew that her new wardrobe wouldn't sit well with her mother at first, but she was sure that by now Charlotte should be used to it. Today's outfit was a little over the top she had admit, but she was planning on going to the club after the party and her shiny latex jumpsuit with matching boots was perfect.

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Sean Pierre got her attention. "You know that I've liked you for some time now. I was wondering when we would get around to hooking up."

Giving him a false smile she said "Well, I'm not looking to 'hook up' with anyone right now. I'm taking things slow, you understand."

"I hear you and it's no pressure. But if you'd like to just hang out then give me a call." He said with a heavy Jamaican accent.

"Thank you. You've been really nice." She told him honestly. "Will you excuse me? I need to have a word with my mother." She said and headed towards her mother.

"May I have a word with you in private, mother?" Nina asked.

"Sure." Charlotte agreed and they went up stairs to the master bedroom.

"So what's up?" Nina asked.

"That's what I want to know."

"Why am I being inspected?"

"Because I'm wondering when you're going to tell me."

"Tell you what?" Nina asked, not having any idea about what her mother was talking about.

"When are you going to tell me that you're pregnant?"

"What!" Nina never expected her to say that. The woman was bonkers.

"You're pregnant."

"No I'm not. Not that it's any of your business, but Adrian is the last man that I've been with, and that's been over three months ago."

"Yes you are." She paused. "Look. I was there when you took your first step, when you had your first period. When you fell in love for the first time. I know that you gurgle when you sleep, and that when it's thundering and lightening you curl yourself up into a ball. I've known everything about you since the day that you were born. Including your hurts and fears, so trust me when I say that you're pregnant." Nina was astonished. She didn't know where her mother was getting this nonsense that she was spewing.

"Look mom, I'm not pregnant. I just had my period last month, but if it'll make you feel better I'll take a home pregnancy test." She said confident that her mother was wrong. "But you really should be having this conversation with Shanna. She's the one that's married and getting sex on a regular basis."



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"Yeah, but is it with her husband?" Her mother's answer surprised her. She thought that she was the only one who knew about Shanna and Asmar's rendezvous. And even her knowing happened by chance. Neither Asmar nor Shanna knew that she knew that they were screwing each other. She had just happened to have a late night sugar craving when she went down to her father's store. She saw Shanna's car parked at the store although it was closed. Deciding to scare the bejesus out of her sister, Nina snuck into the store. All the lights were out and everything was locked up. Nina moved towards the pantry where she saw Asmar hitting Shanna doggie style. Both were in the throws of passion neither one noticed her. She was shocked and dismayed. So she left as quietly as she came in. Neither Shanna nor Asmar were the wiser of her presence, and neither said anything to her about their affair, nor did she mention her discovery to anyone. But how did her mother know what was going on. As reading her mind, Charlotte said, "There is not much that escapes my gaze. I know that there is trouble in paradise I also know that your sister is not too bothered by the fact that her husband hardly comes home and that he spends a lot of time with his former girlfriend. She is also incredibly happy for a woman whose husband is cheating on her and she knows it. I also noticed that my husband is home a lot more since Shanna is always tending to the store... alone. Now that I have your attention, the million dollar question is: who is your sister sleeping with, if it's not her husband?" Nina was shocked, but she recovered.

"This is a very strong allegation that you're making, mother. You need to keep those kinds of suspicions to yourself."

"You know for sure don't you?" Her mother accused and Nina eyes strayed towards the ground, she bit her bottom lip nervously. "Who is it? How did you find out? I know that she wouldn't tell you something like that. Would she?" Denial was the best defense Nina reasoned. How the 'all knowing' witch knew everything, she didn't know, but Nina had never tattled on her sister in the past and she wouldn't she start now.

"Shanna hasn't told me anything outside of the fact that she's been working hard. She's going to own the store one day, and she wants to prove to daddy that she's ready to take over now. Besides, I am not interested in her personal business nor is she interested in mine, so I am not a reliable source to ask. What did dad have to say about your accusations?"

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"Your father told me to mind my business, but he doesn't understand how I feel. My girls are running a muck doing God knows what with whom. I am afraid for you girls. With the threat of AIDS and STD's I am very afraid for you." She knew that her dad would put her mom firmly in place.

"Mom, you raised us right. We'll make mistakes, and sometimes we'll do things that are embarrassing, but you know that your words are not far from our hearts. We'll be okay." Nina assured her. "Now, I need to be going, but don't worry about us, we'll be okay. And if I'm pregnant, I promise that you'll be the first to know, but don't hold your breath."

"No, if you're pregnant, the father should be the first to know."

"Okay. You'll be the second one to know."

"By the way, have you heard from Adrian?"

"Nope, and I'm not expecting to. I've changed my cell phone number. So, he doesn't know how to contact me, and I don't try to get in contact with him." She said as-a-matter-of-factly. Charlotte shook her head.

"I hope you know what you're doing, and that things work out to your advantage."

"I do and it will. But I gotta go. I'm going to kiss Nana before I leave."

"Hey, buying her a computer was nice, but did you really have to get her a motorcycle? That's dangerous for a seventy year old woman Nina, what were you thinking?" Charlotte asked her.

"Nana is seventy years young, and she's been practicing every week for the past two months with me. She's fine. Besides, we only practice in the desert." She knew that her grandmother always dreamed of owning a motorcycle ever since she had been twenty-five, so Nina got her one.

"Oh Nana will be alright. She even has an admirer."

"Still Nina, what if she hurts herself?" Charlotte asked.

"We're very careful and she's always protected. The bike has been rigged to go no faster than forty-five miles per hour."

"It's still unsafe."

"Mom, it is safe, and she's happy. But look, I need to go and I don't want to be late."

She kissed her mother then went downstairs and kissed her father, sister and Nana. She made sure to stay clear of Sean Pierre.

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Nina arrived at her friend's house fifteen minutes later. Gail opened the door up for her when she heard Nina pull up. She was dressed almost identical to Nina, except they had different hairstyles. Gail had her hair pulled up into a ponytail that hung to the middle of her back. An extension of course, but it looked nice. Gail locked her door and walked to the car. "Looking good girl." Nina told her when she got into the car.

"You too." Gail complimented back and they hugged each other.

"How are you holding up?" Gail asked.

"I'm okay. I've been keeping myself busy trying to get Mom and Dad's business to expand

"I saw their commercial, it was great. You know Alessandro Julius James, is one sexy man. Hook me up. I'll be a good step mom to you." Gail joked.

"Only one problem... He's madly in love with his wife."

"Oh damn. I guess I'm out of luck."

Gail was silent for a moment, and then spoke. "I've always wondered about something."

"What's that?"

"Everyone calls your father by his last name. Why? When he and I get married, I'm calling him Alessandro. Or AJ."

Nina rolled her eyes at her friend's fantasy about her father. "He was in the Army when he was sixteen, where they called him James, it just stuck."

"Oh. Anyway, your mom is blessed. I want to marry a man just like your father."

"There's no one like my dad."

"Then I won't ever get married."

"Don't say that, you've got Eric. He's good to you. You two will get married and have lots of babies." Nina said. Gail stopped laughing.

"Girl, you don't have to pussyfoot with words around me. I don't mind you talking about Eric." She noticed that her friend cringed.

"What's going on?"

"I really don't want to talk about me and Eric right now. Things have gotten... complicated between us over the past twenty four hours."

"Alright, if you don't want to talk about it, I won't force the issue, but I have to admit, you've sparked my interest." Nina left the subject alone knowing that her friend would tell her in her own time. They sat in

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silence for the entire ride to the club, each woman thinking about her own relationship problems.

\* \* \*

"Are you going to spend the whole evening sulking?" Stephanio asked Adrian. His cousin had been moody since he'd arrived, and he was ready to leave. His aunt had mentioned that he had recently broken up with his long time girlfriend. Judging by the depressed state that his cousin was in, and the shrine of pictures of the brown beauty, it was she who dumped him and not the other way around.

Although he wasn't the type to get attached to women for very long, he had to admit that it would probably depress him if a woman who looked like Nina left him.

"I'm not sulking. I have a headache, I'm tired, and I have a busy week ahead of me; so forgive me for not playing host. I'd suggest that you call Angelo and Martin, they like to hang out, and they have the time." Angelo and Martin were their younger cousins.

"Hang out where? The sixteen and older clubs? Never mind. I'll pass."

"They're twenty-one now, and know every strip bar and happening club on the Gulf Coast." Adrian told him.

Stephanio figuring that he couldn't spend one more minute with his pathetic cousin, gave in.

"Alright, give me their number and I'll give them a call. They're bound to be better company than you are."

"Yeah, you do that. I'm going to bed." Adrian grabbed his beer and headed for his bedroom.

"What else is new." He heard Stephanio mumbled and he picked up the phone and started making plans with Martin and Angelo. A few minutes later Adrian heard his cousin in the bathroom getting ready. Within an hour, Stephanio was gone and he was alone again. "Thank God for small miracles." He said to himself and started to drift back off to sleep.

The ringing of the phone woke Adrian up immediately after he'd closed his eyes.

"Hello." He said agitated.

"Hi, how are you doing?" Summer asked. He recognized the voice immediately and sat up in bed.

"Is there something wrong?"

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"No, No. Nothing is wrong. This is a social call. Um, I'm going on a whim, but I wanted to know if you're attracted to me? Because I'm attracted to you." She said nervously. Adrian was stunned at her admission, but he was also flattered. Summer was a nice woman, beautiful in a stereotypical blond bombshell sense. She was coming after him, so why not entertain what she had to offer." In the back of his mind he knew that this was a bad idea, but at this point he didn't care.

"This is quite a surprise, Summer."

"Is it? I thought that I've made my feelings clear on a number of occasions, Adrian. Maybe you weren't paying attention." She said flirtatiously.

"Seeing that I was already in another relationship, no, I wasn't aware that you had feelings for me." He was starting to get angry at the fact that she was not remorseful of her crush on him while he was in relationship with Nina.

"So what gave you so much courage to approach me now? And risking getting canned, I may ask." There was silence for a moment but he could hear her breath.

"I figured that you were worth the risk." She admitted.

Besides work, nothing really mattered anymore, and although it wasn't a good idea to date another co-worker, especially in his position, he decided to throw caution to the wind. He should have been concerned about being accused of harassment, but she called him, so he could hardly be accused of harassment. She's beautiful, aggressive and available. He was going for it.

And if things didn't work out, he'd transfer her or settle with her. He needed to move on, and with his present schedule, the only place that he was going to find a woman was at work. Nina wasn't coming back, so why keep crying over spilt milk. It was time that he moved on.

"Would you like company tonight?" She asked.

"No, but how about dinner tomorrow?" He told her.

"Where at?"

"The Oyster Royal."

"That'll be fine. You won't regret it."

"Summer, before you go, we need to discuss some ground rules if we're going to be together."

"I understand. A man in your position probably needs someone who is in the background, not trying to upstage you." He knew that she

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was referring to Nina's high power position with the company. It was also rumored that it was because of her high power and ambitious nature that she was 'let go.' He didn't know who started the rumor, nor did he care. He chose to neither to confirm nor deny any of the rumors.

He did feel bad that Nina's reputation was being besmirched. What hardly any one knew was that it was her relentless competitive streak that attracted him to her. He loved her innovative ideas and dedication to the job, which made her virtually irreplaceable.

"Adrian. Adrian, are you still there?" Summer asked interrupting his thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm still here. What were you saying?"

"I was asking you what time would you be picking me up?"

"How about seven?"

"Seven's fine. Do you have my address?"

"No." He answered and she gave him her address then they said good night and hung up.

After he hung up the phone with her he laid back down feeling neither relieved nor happy in his decision. She'll be my transition girl if nothing else comes out of this. He rationalized and went to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

The club was full, but then it was always full on Friday's. Gail and Nina took seats in a booth and ordered two fruity drinks; Nina's was non-alcoholic since she was driving.

"So, you want to talk about it?" Nina asked Gail. She sensed that was ready to get whatever it was that was bothering her, off her chest.

"I don't know where to start."

"Let me guess, he's married." Nina guessed. It was the same story as old as time. A married man seeks comfort in a single young woman and forgets to mention the little woman at home. Gail started to cry after that. Nina wished that she wouldn't do this in public. It was embarrassing. Hell, she was only with Eric for three months, she'll get over him.

"No, that's not it."

"Did he leave you for another woman?"

"No, it's not that." She waved her hands to stop Nina from guessing.

"No, the problem with our relationship is Eric is Erica. He is a she!" she wailed.

"Get the fuck outta here. You're lying." Nina was shocked. She didn't know what else to say.

"What do you mean that he is a she? Did he-she-have a sex change?"

"No sex change."

"Well how and the hell didn't you know? I thought that you two had sex already, and according to you the shit was all that."

"She used a strap on."

"I still don't understand. It would be obvious when you were naked."

"She never got naked. It was always me. She would just whip it out and we'd go at it!"

"Well how did you find out about it this time?"

Gail blushed. "We've been together for some time, so I thought that I would hook him up a bit with a little head. He was always adamant

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about me not giving him head, so I was curious after that. We always used condoms, so I was suspicious about him not wanting a blow job." She paused then continued. "I tried to convince him that no matter what his dick looked like, I'd work with it, it had always done right by me, or so I thought." She took another frustrated pause.

"He was still adamant about not getting head, he said that his ultimate pleasure was pleasuring me or some bullshit like that, so I agreed with him for that moment. I waited for him to go to sleep. I unzipped his pants thinking that I'd give him a surprise. I'm the one who got surprised. His dick was fake."

"This is some Jerry Springer shit girl, no lie. So what else happened?" Nina asked mesmerized by her friends' story.

"He woke up shocked, then tried to explain. I made him pull up his shirt, girl, he had his tits bound."

"So what happened after that?"

"She wanted to be a man, so I kicked her ass like she was a man."

"Damn. I thought I had it bad."

"But that's not the end of it. I think that I'm in love with him. Her." She said in despair.

"Are you willing to be in a lesbian relationship?" Nina asked her.

"Hell no! I am strictly dickly." She exclaimed. "I'm just mad that the best relationship that I've ever had happens to be with another woman. I feel as if I was violated."

"I'm sorry, but I can't offer you a smidgen of advice on your problem. I feel violated for you, just by hearing what you've been through. But, girl, I have to ask, weren't there any signs to let you know that he was in fact a she?" She looked at Nina as if she'd lost her mind.

"You've met her. She was all male, except that she was real neat."

"What about her friends and family? Did you get to know any of them? Did they try to warn you at all?"

"I never got to meet any of her family. She said that she'd severed all ties with them when she got out of jail."

"Jesus, Gail, this is getting crazier by the second. She was in jail before!"

"She said that it was for accessory to a robbery. She told me that she saw a friend at the corner store and that this friend asked her for a ride to her cousins' house. She agreed and gave the guy a ride and was picked



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up by the police. They claimed that she was the get away driver. She did two years in the State Pen.

"If you ask me, that sounds like BS, but I can't judge. I wasn't there." Nina told her, then looked at her friend and shook her head. Two drinks were sent over to their table. The waitress pointed in the direction of a group of guys who all held up their glasses.

They held up their glasses to toast the gentlemen who brought the beverages, then sat them back down on the table. Nina asked the waitress to bring the drinks back to the gentlemen with the message of thanks, but no thanks."

"They won't be slipping me a Mickey." Nina said after the drinks were delivered back to the bar where the men were still watching them.

"I know, huh. All I need now is to wake up with some stranger's dick in my mouth."

"Okay, here come two of them. I guess the two bravest". Gail said before the men reached the table.

"Good evening ladies. My name is Malik and this my friend Joseph." Malik was nice looking although he looked out dated with his Versace silk shirt, with bold print. His hair was in a wavy ponytail that reached his shoulders. His brown sugar complexion was smooth; he had a wide nose and full lips. His eyes were large and round, but all in all he was a nice looking man. His friend on the other hand wasn't so lucky. A flashback to the '80's, he was reminiscent of Al B. Sure and Christopher Williams, just not as lucky in the looks department. His goatee had hair bumps; He was light skinned, with a small nose, beady shifty looking eyes and small thin lips. His face shape was elfin, and his ears were too large. His clothes were okay, if you liked men in fishnet muscle shirts. His jeans fit nice on him. His only saving grace was his tight body. However, no matter what they wore she wasn't interested and not just because they looked a mess. Neither men were her type.

She and Gail shook their hands. Malik was looking at Gail as if he wanted to eat her up. Joseph was looking at Nina the same way. She looked past them to where the other crewmembers were. They looked as if they were studying their leaders for tonight's lessons, *acceptance or rejection*. Nina smiled at her thoughts. This was an age twenty-five and up club; however these men were obviously not use to dealing with a sister who was over the age of twenty or not silly. But she'll play nice, for now.

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"Hi Malik. I'm Nina and this is my friend Gail. What can we do for you?" She asked breaking the ice. Gail, who was off in la la land was ignoring them completely. Malik smiled and licked his lips.

"Is that an open invitation?" He asked smiling, thinking that she was falling for his bullshit. He was obviously pleased with that lame come on because he then smiled and that's when she saw it: The bottom row of his mouth was full of metal. Silver with diamond chips.

Gail and Nina looked at each other at the same time noticing the monstrosity that he called a mouth.

"No. That question wasn't an invitation. I just wanted to know what it was that you and your friend wanted before we sent you on your way." Not to be deterred from their mission, Malik answered "A dance for starters."

"For starters?"

"We also wanted to know if you two had a man?"

"Or a woman." Gail said. She and Nina looked at each other and busted out laughing.

"Oh it's like that?" Joseph asked. "Can we get in on a little girl on girl action too? I've always dreamed of a manage-jay." He said. His eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Menage-a-trois." She corrected. "But sorry, it's not that type of party. My friend here was just kidding. As a matter of fact, we are both taken. But thanks just the same." Nina said dismissively. They either chose not to get the hint or just plain ignored them because Malik sat down beside Gail, who looked at Nina as if to ask for help.

"So why didn't you ladies enjoy the drinks that we bought you?"

"Well for starters, we can buy our own drinks." Nina told them and as if to prove her point she raised her glass to her mouth, that's when they noticed her watch. Platinum and diamonds, it took the men by surprise.

"Besides in this day and age, it's not safe to accept drinks from really anyone."

"Bling, Bling, you have so much ice on your arm you're can freeze Florida. Did your man buy you that watch?" Malik asked. Joseph took her hand that the watch was on and admired it openly.

"Yeah, my ex brought this for me for my last birthday. And these diamonds, by the way are all conflict free diamonds." Nina said proudly.

"Hell, this watch is the price of a house!"

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"Your head has got to be priceless for him to give you something like this."

"Yeah, she must know all kinds of tricks to get hooked up like this." He looked at Gail and asked what did her man got her for her birthday."

"A great big old house and a sports car." Gail answered. It wasn't a total lie since her divorce from her NBA superstar husband became final on her 30th birthday.

"However, we do work for a living, thank you very much." Gail answered.

"Oh, you two are independent women." Malik held up his hands mockingly.

"Very independent." Nina said.

"Okay, baby, I hear that, but can't we still have this dance?" Joseph asked.

"Sorry, we're spoken for, and this is a girl's night out. But thanks anyway."

"Sure you don't want anymore company?" Malik asked.

"No we don't, and will you excuse us, the rest of our entourage is here." Gail said had spotted Lisa and Tamara coming into the club. She raised her hand in the air to signal them to come over. Joseph and Malik both sat up and moved to the side. They whistled when Lisa and Tamara came over wearing similar leather outfits as Gail and Nina. Lisa had on high-heeled open toe sandals with silver spiked heel.

"Damn baby you have sexy toes--suckable." Joseph said to Lisa. She gave him a fake smile and sat down next to Gail. Tamara sat down next to Nina.

"Well, we'll leave you to do your thing. My offer still stands if you, or any of you lovely ladies want to dance, or do anything else, just holla." Malik stated and he and Joseph walked back to the bar where their friends were.

"What was that?" Tamara asked, obviously not impressed with the men either.

"Whatever it was, I'm glad we missed it." Lisa said giving Tamara a high five.

"So what's going on with you, Miss Thing? We miss you at the office." Tamara said. She worked in the sales department of Constantine Inc. Although she was only twenty-two years old, she was smart,

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beautiful, and successful. Last year she was voted as one of the Gulf Coast successful 40 under 40. Her only downfall was the fact that she was an insatiable gossip, however, tonight Nina will capitalize on that fault by having her spill the beans on what was going on at Constantine Inc.

"Nothing much is going on, I'm just chillin'"

"Um hum. So are you going to give us the low down on what happened between you and Adrian? I know it's not because of Summer, although she's on the prowl." That bit of information got Nina's attention.

"What about Summer?"

"Girl, you should see her now. She is wearing skirts so short they barely cover up anything. Her tank tops are too small and she's sporting high heels. She looks like a street walker instead of a secretary but I have to say, she's on a mission." Tamara stated.

Inside Nina was fuming. "Well, she can have him." Her blood was boiling with anger. She knew that Summer had been after Adrian since she'd come to work for him. That wasn't the problem, because most women with eyes have a crush on him, but Summer was competition.

*No don't go there*, she scolded herself, *I want more than what he has to offer*. She still didn't know why she continued to care. Old habits were hard to break, she figured.

"So are you going to give us the 4-1-1? Or do we have to guess?" Tamara asked.

"We just decided that our futures were headed in different directions. I wanted more than he was willing to give." She still didn't know why she continued to protect him from her friends. She should rat on his ass and let everyone at the office know how much of a prick he really is. But no, her heart wasn't into it, nor would her pride allow her to admit that she was dumped.

"Well, I don't know if he wants her or not, but he's been very cranky lately. His temper has been flaring and not just with personnel. He and his father got into a heated argument the other day. I thought that security was going to be called." Tamara informed them.

*Interesting*, Nina thought, *very interesting*. Just then, her two-way pager went off. It was Asmar.

*Ur phone has no signal*, he texted.

*At club w/girls*, she typed back.

*Holla at u tomorrow*

*K, we'll do lunch*

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*Rather do breakfast*

*Pancake Shack*

*I'll think about*

*Think hard, wanna talk.*

*K, tomorrow. Call you when I get up.* She ended the message.

"Who was that?" Lisa asked.

"Oh, my friend Asmar. He wants to meet with me tomorrow."

Good, Adrian will get this tidbit of information by Tuesday.

"Are the two of you back together?" Gail asked. She knew about Nina's relationship with Asmar.

"Not the way that you may think. He and I are really good friends."

"Is he cute?" Tamara asked.

"Yes!" Both Nina and Gail answered. Nina went into her handbag and pulled out her wallet. She had a recent picture of them together. She passed the photo around the table.

"There's no way I could be just friends with a single, heterosexual man that damn fine," Lisa replied giving both Gail and Tamara a high five.

"You know that he's divorced now, you can go for it." Gail told her as she looked at the picture.

"I think she's holding out on us. I think that she's already went for it," Tamara said.

Nina took the picture back and studied it. It was taken last week at the mall when she and Asmar had gone to the movies. It was one of those cheap pictures that you get from the camera booth in the mall for a buck. In the picture, she was sitting on Asmar's lap with the two of them sticking out their tongues. There was another picture that featured the two of them holding up gang signs. They had one with their noses pressed together, and one with their tongues hanging out of the sides of their mouths like panting dogs, and the last one was with his arms around her mid-section. That picture made them look like two lovers in love, but they weren't. They were just two friends who loved each other, and when the moment hit, like the pictures, they were in love with the idea of being in love with each other.

"Nope, I like him as a friend with no strings attached. He's like a breath of fresh air to have around and I don't want to jeopardize that, not for something as trivial as sex."

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"You're better than me, because if I could, I would," Lisa said, and got agreements all around.

Nina put the pictures back into her purse.

"You're going to tell me that this lovely specimen is not the reason that you left Adrian?" Tamara eyed her suspiciously.

"I promise you, he's not the reason why I left Adrian. Asmar and I are friends; we'll always be friends and nothing more. We'll never be lovers."

"He's beautiful. And you did this man before Adrian?" Lisa asked.

"No, he and I dated for some years before Adrian, but we never go intimate."

"He has AIDS," Lisa accused.

"Not that I know of," Nina told hers.

"He has some kind of STD?" she argued again.

"No. I was just too young to do anything more than just make out with him."

Tamara was skeptical. "There's no way that I could have a platonic relationship with this man. No way on Earth. He would be in my bed that same night."

"You're such a whore," Lisa teased her. "But seriously, can you hook a sister up?" "I can pass on your number, with a brief description of you. But let me warn you, he has a child and an ex."

Lisa had questions that she had wanted answered. "Are they still fucking?"

"I don't think so."

She was pleased at Nina's answer. "Good."

"One thing. I think that he's seeing someone. He hasn't told me himself, but I am almost sure that he is."

"And the plot thickens." Gail said.

"Hey, if you want him for yourself, then fine, I'll back off. You don't have to lie." Lisa said.

"No, I don't lie. It's just that I know what he did and with whom, and I am waiting for him to disclose that information. He may just think that it's none of my business. But whatever the reason he's not talking about it, and neither am I."

"I hear you. And I respect that you don't want to put that man's business out there like that." Gail respected her friend much more for not spilling the beans about what was going on in Asmar's life.

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"So, what did his ex wife do to mess things up with him?" Lisa asked. She was truly interested.

"Or what did he do." Tamara said looking at Nina with suspicion.

"I can't tell you what happened between he and his wife, that's for him to relay."

"So anyway," Tamara interrupted. "You wouldn't be angry if he and I hooked up?"

"No girl. Whenever he does hook up with someone, she'll have to accept our friendship, and I'll have to respect his relationship. I'll miss him dearly, although I'll be happy for him." She said honestly.

"Speaking of fine, look at what's just come into the club." Everyone looked over by the door where Tamara's eyes were transfixed on the new arrivals.

"Damn," Nina cursed. If it weren't for bad luck, she wouldn't have any at all

Angelo and Martin, Adrian's first cousins, had come into the club. Another man, who upon first glance could be mistaken for Adrian, accompanied them. As if summoning their energies, they all looked her way and spotted her. Their expressions were stunned. She gave them a false smile and waved. Her first instinct was to go over to the bar where the group of men still stood scoping them out. But that could be a potentially hostile situation. Her other option was staying at the table, but that ran the risk of letting what went down between her and Adrian get out and that was even more dangerous, so she proceeded to the bar. "Ladies, let me get you all a refill." No one complained or questioned her motives. She modified her first plan and moved to the corner of the bar that wasn't particularly occupied. She ordered a round of drinks for her friends, and a soda for herself. She was paying for her drinks when Martin came behind her and whispered in her ear.

"Well, well, well, unlike my cousin, who is sitting home licking his wounds, you seem to have recovered quickly from this break up."

"You came out virtually unscathed." Angelo said, he was on the other side of her, and the other man was directly behind her. The bar was to her back. She was completely surrounded.

"I almost didn't recognize you with your sexy get up and your new hair cut." Angelo said twisting a strand of hair through his fingers. "Just when I thought that you couldn't get any finer, you take me by surprise." Nina turned around and faced them.

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Smiling she said, "Well, if it isn't Chaos and Discord. Isn't it past your bedtime?" The unknown gentleman laughed and she turned to face him. "And who are you? No, let me guess... you're just desperate?" He raised his eyebrow in inquiry. "You have to be desperate to be hanging out with these two Lilliputian post adolescent punks."

"Still a bitch, huh."

"Watch it." Stephanio warned Angelo. Nina walked past them and Stephanio grabbed her arm.

"My name is Stephanio. You must be the lovely Nina that I have heard so much about. It is my pleasure to finally meet you." He said with an accent so deep, it made Nina wet. He kissed her hand, and she exhaled.

"My, my, a man under the age of thirty-five with decorum, in your family is hard to come by. It's nice to meet you too, Stephanio. I know that you've probably heard a lot about me. Only some of it's true." She winked at him. "But I've heard nothing but good things about you." He was looking into her eyes, and she was looking back into his beautiful brown eyes. No sparks. Damn, he was so handsome, and his body was ripped with muscles.. A little larger and broader than Adrian's, but nice all the same she assessed. He also had a nice smile and his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

"May I walk you to your seat?" He asked. He learned from his cousins on the way to the club that it was in fact Adrian who had broken up with Nina; their Aunt Ann insisted that they ended their relationship because she was prejudice. What a shame, especially for Adrian.

"No thanks, I can manage just fine." She paid for her drinks, gathered the tray and went over to where her friends were. As she walked towards them, she felt Adrian's cousins staring at her, so she put a little twist in her walk.

"Who was that?" Lisa asked.

"Your soon to be new boss Stephanio Constantine."

Lisa's eyes got big with recognition. "They are really becoming a family owned and operated business."

Nina rolled her eyes and bitterly sucked her teeth. "That's the plan. They want to keep it family owned and operated."

"Nina, I think that you're in trouble because their pulling out their phones, trying to call the big man himself I gather."

Nina watched Martin and Angelo dial then shake their heads and put their phones back in their pockets when they realized that there was



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no signal. "Stupid boys." She laughed and waved at them. Stephanio held up his glass to her and she returned the salute.

"I'm ready to go home," Nina announced. She knew that if they got in touch with Adrian, he'd be up there within the hour, she wasn't in the mood for any of his shit.

"Too late, they're coming over." Gail said just before they made it to the table.

"Would you care to dance?" Stephanio asked Nina. She thought about rejecting him for a second, but the expression on his face was one of mischief, so she made the choice to dance with him. He had a question or a statement to make and he was going to make it. He was going to let her pick the location.

"Sure." She got up and he took her hand and escorted her out to the dance floor. The DJ was playing a Jamaican rap song with a slow beat, so she wasn't quite sure what to expect from him. She decided to shock him by dancing slow and seductively, frequently grinding her hips against his and turning around and backing her rear against his groin. He shocked her when he turned out to be a good dancer, holding her hips in place and grinding her from whatever angle she was in. His dick was also erect. She felt its hardness every time she moved her body up against his. After the song had finished, he pulled her over to a private corner.

"May I kiss you?" he asked.

"Hell no," She replied. "It's not that type of party."

"I see. Is it because I'm Adrian's cousin?"

"Among other reasons."

"Like what?"

"First and foremost, you're Adrian's cousin. I don't get down like that. I don't keep it in the family."

"Okay. Are there any other reasons?" he asked.

"I'm not looking for anyone to kiss or do anything else with. And I'm not attracted to you. Do you need anymore reasons?" She asked sarcastically. What was his problem? Asking her for a kiss. As if.

"No, you've made your point. But I don't know if I would have given you up for all that money." He got really close to her. "No wonder he is at home depressed. I would be too if the shoe was on the other foot."

"Thanks for boosting my ego, but I really need to be getting over there to my friends, and you need to get back to chaperoning." She smiled when she heard his rich hardy laugh. When she got back to her table,

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everyone was gone. Gail and Tamara were dancing with Martin and Angelo, and Lisa was dancing with a stranger. She sat down, and Stephanio sat across from her where Gail had been sitting. She sipped on her soda. He was staring at her mouth; the feeling was making her feel uncomfortable.

"Will you stop looking at me like that," she said. He smiled and looked into her eyes.

"I can't. You have the prettiest lips that I've ever seen. I want to kiss them."

"And if you do, the thought of what Adrian will do to you should make you not want to come anywhere near my mouth, or any other part of my body." She said honestly.

"And what would you do if I decided to take that chance and kiss you anyway?"

"I'd smack your face. And if you haven't noticed, this is a black club. All I have to do is yell. You'll be lucky to get out of here in one piece." He chuckled at her.

"You haven't asked me how my cousin is doing without you."

"It's none of my concern how he's doing."

"Of course it is. You loved him didn't you?"

"My feelings for him are neither here, nor there now. We're no longer together. He made that choice, so I'll leave him to deal with it alone."

"But you never know what fate might have in mind."

"I make my own fate. And just for the record, I wouldn't have Adrian back even if he begged me. He's made his choice and he'll have to live with it."

"And so will you. You'll always have to live with the fact that you and he will never be together again." His words were almost her undoing, but after a second, she hardened her heart to them. Adrian did this to them, not her. They were just angry that she wasn't completely destroyed by the break up.

"Not that it's any of your business, because it's not, but I didn't break up with Adrian. He broke up with me, citing that I'm the wrong candidate for the job of being his wife, right before he fired me. And when you report back to him, let him know that I'm not waiting by the phone for him to call or come over. I've moved on and so should he."

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"Boy, the two of you are just alike--bull headed, but I think that you are the one for him, and for that, I will not seduce you."

"Will the Constantine arrogance never to end? Just for the record, there is no force on earth that would make me willing sleep with you. Unless you rape and drug me."

"That sounds like a challenge. And for the record, I've never forced a woman in into having sex with me. Besides you, I find that most women are more than willing to occupy my bed. Even the Uni types."

"Uni?"

"Homosexuals. Lesbians."

"Oh, thanks for the clarification. But no doubt that you can get a woman, however, you won't be getting me. I've been there and done that. When I do get into another relationship, I just want an average Joe."

"You lie. You will never be satisfied with an average man. You can't go to ordinary when you've had extraordinary."

"You are arrogant, Mr. Man." Nina said.

"No I am telling the truth. Constantine men are extraordinary lovers, it is in our genes."

Nina had no doubt, because if nothing else, Adrian could fuck. And from the gossip in the office, so could Angelo and Martin.

The song had ended and her friends, along with Martin and Angelo, arrived back to the table. Stephanio got up and her friends slid back into their seats. Stephanio took her hands and kissed them.

"It was nice meeting you, Nina. Please don't be a stranger, I am here for two more weeks and it would be my pleasure to see you again."

"I'll keep that in mind, but I caution you not to hold your breath." He laughed at her comment, and she smiled at him.

"I'll be sure to let Adrian know that we've ran into you." Angelo said to Nina.

"I'm sure you will." Nina said sarcastically.

"Good night ladies." Stephanio said and they left.

"That is one fine family." Tamara said when they were out of earshot.

"Yes it is." Gail agreed.

"Well ladies, I'm ready to go before it starts to get crazy up in here." Nina said. She knew that it was a possibility that Adrian might come down there once he got wind that she was at the club. He was jealous like that, and she wasn't in the mood for any more drama tonight.

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"I'm ready to go too. I'm not impressed by the selection of men here tonight." Lisa said.

"Same time next week?" Nina asked.

"Sure. And the clothes theme will be: legs, legs and more legs."

Gail told them.

Nina dropped Gail off at her house and she thanked her for not spilling the beans about what had went down between her and Eric. Nina assured her that if anyone knew, it wasn't she who had said anything. After that, Nina stopped at an open all night super market. She picked up some miscellaneous items and a home pregnancy test. *Charlotte is going to pay me back for this*; she thought when she saw the price. She had two barely-there periods, lasting one day each, and one period missing in action. Thoughts of her irregular cycles were haunting her like the ghost of period past. *Thanks a lot mom.*

Nina went home and read the instructions on the box. She'll wait until morning like the instructions suggested. After putting the other groceries away, she showered and went to bed.

CHAPTER SIX

It was half past noon when Nina woke up the following morning. Sleeping late had been a habit for her since leaving Constantine Inc. She got out of bed and walked to the bathroom. The pregnancy test sat on her sink as a reminder of her promise to her mother.

Ten minutes later, Nina continued to stare at the little stick. She couldn't believe it. She was pregnant. She kept looking at the box making sure that a blue line meant she was pregnant. Yes, it definitely meant that she was, the stick changed immediately, so there were no if's, ands, or butts about it. She needed to make an appointment with her doctor immediately. She called them and explained the situation. Damn, now things were going to get complicated.

\* \* \*

Adrian wasn't in the mood for his cousin's humor. It was brought to his attention that they had run into Nina last night and Stephanio was apparently smitten with her. He hadn't stopped talking about how beautiful she is, and about how he didn't think that he could be strong enough to take the money.

Adrian respected Stephanio, but he was on the verge of bludgeoning him to death right now, and the fact that Martin and Angelo was instigating wasn't helping matters at all.

"She had on the tightest leather cat suit, and man, when we danced, her body fit mine like a glove. I didn't have to bend down or anything; she was just the right height. And when she turned around and gave me a view of her ass, man I got so hard I could barely walk."

"Get out!" Adrian yelled. He was sitting in his chair trying to hold on to what little patience he had.

"Hey Adrian, what's your problem? I thought you'd be interested in what was going on with your ex in the club," Stephanio said innocently.

"Man, you should have seen the way he was grinding up on her." Martin provoked.

"He was spanking her ass and everything right there on the dance floor. Stephanio was like fuck a bed, he had your girl right there on the

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dance floor." Martin teased. He and Angelo mimicked the racy dance moves that Stephanio and Nina was doing last night, not noticing that Adrian's furious expression as he looked at Stephanio.

Stephanio smiled. "What?" he asked innocently.

"You danced like that with my Nina?"

"Something like that. They're too far apart to really capture the essence of our intricate movements."

"And she let you dance like that with her?" Adrian cursed in Italian, then in English. Stephanio was enjoying himself.

"It was a dance, nothing else. What's the problem? We didn't do anything there that I wouldn't have done in your face, so calm down," he told Adrian. He looked at his younger cousins and said "and you two stop provoking him." He turned back to Adrian. "Now, you should be angry at the fact that I did ask her for a kiss."

"Oohh."

"Ouch," Marin and Angelo said simultaneously when Adrian's fist landed on Stephanio's face. Stephanio didn't have time to react when the punch came. He just remembered falling backwards in pain.

He sat up and felt the blood run down his nose to his lip and onto his shirt. Shit, this shirt cost a fortune; Adrian was definitely paying for a new one.

"Don't ever go near her again or I'll kill you." Martin and Angelo grabbed Adrian before he could do anymore damage to Stephanio, who started to clean the blood from his nose and mouth with his shirt.

After a few minutes, Adrian calmed down. He didn't know that his jealousy ran so deep. He extended his hand out to Stephanio.

"Man, I'm sorry."

"I deserved it. I know how you feel about her and, I have to admit, she is really something special. Last night talking to her, I understand why she means so much to you. She is beautiful and not just on the outside. Despite everything that you've put her through, she would not exact revenge on you. She wasn't going to let me kiss her. I have to be honest with you when I say that I really did want to kiss her. I like her, a lot, and if she was willing, cousin or not, I'd of had her."

Stephanio's confession did nothing to ease Adrian's mind, but he understood his cousin's dilemma, because he was in a quandary of his own over the same woman. The loss of Nina was driving him crazy and

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he had to find some way to get her back, even if it meant losing everything.

"I'm about to go. I told your dad that I would meet him this afternoon," Stephanio said.

"He is bound and determined to get me to America. The opportunities are great here."

"But I love my country."

"America is your country, you were born here."

"Italy is my country. I was just born here."

"Home is where you make it, and moving to America will make you a very happy man with a lot of homes."

"I'll think about it. I need to change before I go. You owe me another shirt."

"Your favorite boxer will make his premier as a Heavy Weight, tonight. Will you be back here for the fight?" Adrian asked Stephanio, trying to extend an olive branch to his cousin.

"I'm not sure. I met this girl at the club last night and she said that she wanted to see me again. So I'll be giving her a call. Hopefully, you won't see me tonight." Adrian was relieved that his cousin had so graciously moved on to greener pastures and left Nina alone.

"Are you sure that you're okay to drive?"

"Yeah I'm fine, you hit like a girl."

"A manly girl, because you were knocked out." Angelo taunted.

"I need to go into the bathroom and clean myself up. Shit, I think I'm going to have a bruise." Adrian patted him on the back. His doorbell rang and he went to go answer it.

He was surprised that it was Nina. His heart raced. She looked great although her hair was cut significantly shorter. She had on a magenta color tee shirt that was tight around the bust area, and showed off her mid drift, with metallic-pearl letters that read: UNKEPT. She had on large silver hoop earrings, hip hugging jeans and magenta faux-suede high-heeled boots. She looked cute in her little get up. She held a large leather black bag at her side. It had been almost three months since he'd seen her but he had no idea how much he missed her until now. So much has changed about her he realized. Not just the obvious things like her hair cut, which was very drastic in his book, but also the new vibes that were emanating from her. She always had an air of sophistication about her, but now it transcended into a sort of posh existence despite her

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youthful outfit. He wasn't certain, but she seemed much colder, and he wasn't sure that he liked it. She also looked pale and he wondered if that was it. She might be sick.

"Hello." He said.

"I was wondering if I could come in? I need to talk to you."

"Sure." He stepped aside and she walked past him.

She noticed that Angelo and Martin were there and her initial thought was to turn around and leave, but it was too late, they had already spotted her.

"The prodigal lover has returned." Martin said snidely.

"And how would you know anything about a lover--prodigal or otherwise?"

"I know a lot more than you think. I could probably show you a few tricks."

"The only trick you two can show her is how to disappear." Adrian said. When Martin walked past her, she stopped him and whispered in his ear.

"I doubt that you could teach me anything. I can still smell Enfamil on your breath, young buck."

"It's breast milk. The woman I was with last night was lactating." He whispered back to her. He had stunned her, and he took the opportunity to finish shocking her. "I am not as young as you think, and I am a Constantine, and you know first hand what we are capable of in bed."

Nina quickly recovered and said "I don't work with one's potential when it comes down to sex, I go for performance only. Besides, the gene pool is known to miss certain individuals. For instance, you haven't made it to six feet yet, when everyone else in your family has, maybe in a few years you'll catch up. And when you're all grown up, we can have this conversation again." She gave him the once over and then said "Nope. Never in a million years."

"Martin, Angelo, out of here before you end up like Stephanio." He grabbed Nina's hand. "Follow me." He led her to his bedroom.

Nina noticed that nothing had changed in the room, except her presence. The immaculate cream and gold room was as she'd left it. Even the pictures of them together were still up. Those made her feel good.

She stood by the door as if debating on whether or not to leave. He went over by her and stood in front of her.



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"So how have you been?"

"Pretty good, and you?"

"I'm making it." He wanted to add 'barely'.

"My cousins informed me that you and Stephanio had a great time last night. Are you now in the habit of whoring on the dance floor?" The direct assault took her off guard for a second.

"Don't go there. I know that you're not pleased at what you've heard so I'll disregard your comment and chalk it up to you being bitter about the break-up."

"You're damned right I'm bitter about the break-up. And to make matters worst, you make out with my cousin! You could have gotten him killed."

"I hadn't done anything wrong, and neither has he so chill out. Besides, whom I'm doing is none of your business. You don't have the privilege of knowing any longer."

He was angry. He grabbed her hand and walked her over to the bed. He sat down; she stood up in front of him. Even in that position she was barely taller than him. Their child is going to be huge, she thought.

"Look, I didn't come here to argue with you." She paused. "I just came here to tell you that I'm pregnant." Okay, she said it. She watched as shock washed over his face, then anger set in.

"Who's the father?"

"You are of course. I wouldn't be here informing you if you weren't." She said offensively and touched her mid drift in a protective gesture.

"You're a real piece of work. We haven't had sex in about what ... three months, and you expect me to believe that I got you pregnant. Come again."

Nina could imagine that his blood was boiling because he stared turning red. She reached into her bag and handed him a piece of paper from the clinic. He read it.

"You're fourteen weeks!" he said in shock.

Nina watched as the color in his face faded. She thought that he was going to pass out, but he recovered quickly. He looked at her body intensely. He was surprised because she was still real thin. Her stomach was flat, but her breast did look a bit fuller. Fourteen weeks. This was his baby no doubt. A wave of relief went through his body as joy settled in.

"We'll be married immediately." He said calmly.

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"What?" She asked not believing what she had just heard.

"We'll be married immediately. I don't want to procrastinate any longer. You are already far along. There will be talk that I can not help." He said, his accent was really heavy.

"Hold on there, chief." She waved her hands in an emergency stop gesture. "I didn't agree to marry you. I'm not sure about anything, except the fact that I don't want to be involved with you again."

"What do you mean that you don't want to be involved with me? I'm the father of your child, you'll always be involved with me." He continued. "Besides, it wasn't so long ago that you wanted nothing more." So he knew how she felt about wanting to be married to him and he said nothing. Her mother had been right and that angered her even more.

"Well that was then, things has changed. As a matter of fact, you're the one changed them. I'm not here to debate with you or to get back with you. I just wanted you to know that I am carrying our child. You need to understand that I have made a life for myself without you, and I will continue to be independent. I've moved on and I suggest that you do the same."

Her statement hurt him to his soul and it was then that he saw what was different about her. She was no longer the shy, sweet young woman he once loved. This Nina was angry and bitter. He had only himself to blame for this change. He had to get through to her; he had so much riding on it.

"I see. Are you dating anyone right now?" He asked.

"I'm seeing several people. Why?" Her mother, father, sister, Nana, Asmar and her girlfriends were all constituted as seeing people, she reasoned. So technically it wasn't a lie.

"Are you sleeping with any of them?" He asked angrily.

"That's none of your business."

"This paper says it is, damn it." He pointed his finger into the paper. "Now answer the question. Are you fucking anyone?"

"No, you are the only person I've ever slept with." He let out the breath he had been holding.

"Are you sleeping with anyone?" She asked.

"Not since you." He said. She looked into the bag again and handed him the pictures from her ultrasound. She sat at the end of the bed beside him as he took his first look at his child.

"She's beautiful." He said as he traced his hand over the picture.

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"You can't tell what it looks like, how do you know that it's a girl?" She asked.

"I don't know how I know, I just do." He said sincerely. He touched her stomach. She smiled. He undid the button on her jeans to give him greater access to her mid section.

He looked into her eyes to see if it was okay to proceed, she smiled at him. Right there, he saw the tiniest evidence of a bulge, so small that it wasn't noticeable, except by someone who knew every inch of her body. The knowledge that she was pregnant with his child, along with their deep-rooted chemistry, had him wanting her badly. He hoped that she welcomed his advances.

He kissed her stomach. He planted small kisses on her entire belly, and then it escalated to running his tongue along her abdomen. He lifted her shirt up and over her head to expose her satin bra, barely large enough to hold its contents. He undid the clasp in the front releasing her breast from its confines. He kissed and massaged on each breast, taking one dark nipple into his mouth while kneading the other one. She stood back up in front of him to let him work his magic.

"Hey I'm leaving." Stephanio said. He walked into the bedroom and stood frozen for a moment.

Nina closed her eyes and prayed that the ground opened up and sucked her in. She thanked the good Lord that her back obstructed Stephanio's view of her front half. On instinct, she turned her head around and faced a disheveled Stephanio.

"Get out!" Adrian yelled. Stephanio recovered quickly and hurriedly left the room, closing the door behind him.

"His timing sucks."

Nina was embarrassed at being caught in such a compromising position. She tried to step away from Adrian, but he grabbed hold of her waist and held her close.

"What happened to him?"

Adrian took a moment to answer. He was resting his head on her bosom. "We had a fight."

"It wasn't much of a fight. What happened?"

"I found out what the two of you were up to last night. He knows better, even if you do not."

"Damn it, Adrian, nothing happened last night except we danced and talked about you. He was trying to plead your sorry case and you,

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being ungrateful and jealous, kicked his ass. You ought to be ashamed of yourself." She said and pushed him away from her. She got up and pulled her bra and shirt back on.

"Was his valiant effort before or after he tried to kiss you?" Adrian asked, unmoved by her attempt to defend his cousin. She blushed, obviously shocked that Stephanio revealed that much information to his cousin.

"He was probably jesting. Besides, it's your fault. Had you not treated me like eye candy, he would not have felt the need to sample my goods. You had no right putting your hands on him." She walked away from him and went out of the room.

"Stephanio." She yelled for him.

"Yes." He answered. She found him in the living room putting on his jacket. He was worst off than she thought. His nose was red and swollen, and remnants of blood were still evident. She heard Adrian come up behind her. She turned around and punched him in the stomach then she slapped him on the face. Stephanio laughed, obviously amused by her feistiness. He had never seen any woman stand up so boldly to Adrian, with the exception of Adrian's mother. Adrian was baffled at first. He stuck his tongue out and tasted the blood on his lip.

"How could you do that to him? He's your family!" She yelled at him. She went over to Stephanio to inspect his injuries. Stephanio watched as Adrian's anger consumed him.

"You're going to pay for that." He went over and grabbed Nina by her waist. He moved so fast that she was hoisted over his shoulder, cave man fashion, before she could comprehend what was going on.

"Let go of off her, Adrian!" Stephanio demanded.

Adrian stopped and turned around.

"All of this is your fault!" Adrian yelled. "I suggest that you take your things and leave before I finish what I started." Nina was pounding his back with her fists, but it had little or no effect on him. He took her to the bedroom and deposited her on the bed, Stephanio was right behind him. When Adrian turned around to confront him, he punched Adrian in the face. Adrian fell back on the bed barely missing Nina by mere inches. Rage blazing, Adrian rushed Stephanio into the wall out in the hallway. Nina watched in horror at the slugfest in front of her.

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"Adrian, stop!" She yelled. Adrian had bested Stephanio and was pounding him. Nina jumped on Adrian's back to stop the assault on Stephanio.

"Please stop, Adrian." She cried. He must have heard her cry because he stopped hitting Stephanio. When Adrian moved away from his cousin, he was breathing hard. He was barely aware that Nina had climbed off of his back and was tending to Stephanio, who was hunched over with his back up against the wall.

"You hit like a girl." Stephanio taunted.

"Stop aggravating him." Nina ordered. She was surprised at his humor since he was all bloodied up and holding his side. She looked at Adrian with loathing.

"Get a towel." She demanded. Adrian looked at her in disgust.

His injuries may have been minor, but she should be tending to him. His lip was bloody. But no, she wasn't concerned with that. He started to suspect if something else did happen between the two of them.

"Adrian, get a towel now!"

"Get it yourself," he barked back.

Nina was stunned at his reply and got up and went to get the towels herself. Adrian stood over Stephanio.

"What exactly did the two of you do last night?" Adrian asked Stephanio. Stephanio got up and hobbled over to the living room area. He was looking up, holding his nose.

"I already told you. But what do you think that we did?"

"Don't act coy with me, or I'll finish the job." Adrian stated.

"Stop it both of you. Stephanio and I danced last night, and after that, we sat down and talked. That's it! Now stop acting crazy." Nina told Adrian. She moved over to where Stephanio was sitting and started cleaning his wounds. She had retrieved the first aid kit from the bathroom and was applying ointment to his wounds.

Stephanio looked too pampered for his comfort. Adrian thought. He grabbed Nina's hand.

"He can take care of that himself. You and I have some unfinished business to resolve back in the bedroom."

"Get your hands off of her!" Stephanio demanded. He had stood up and Nina noted the effort it took for him to stand.

"You have a death wish don't you." Adrian said.

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"I won't let you hurt her. We didn't do anything last night except dance and talk. I wouldn't have minded more, but that's irrelevant." His admission did nothing to admonish Adrian's anger.

"You think that I would put my hands on her to harm her? You think that I would hurt a woman? Especially one who is carrying my baby?" He asked desperately. Stephanio looked from Adrian to Nina surprised at first then delighted.

"She's pregnant? Congratulations!" He said in Italian, and then hugged his cousin and Nina. The exchange of affection between the two men pleased Nina.

"We were about to celebrate when you interrupted us." Adrian said, which caused Nina to blush. "I also asked her to marry me, so you can understand my anger."

"No harm done. I am happy for the two of you." He looked at Nina and smiled.

"I knew last night that you were good for my cousin. It is about time he settled down with you. I was just trying to make him realize what he was missing out on."

"So this was all a plan?" Adrian said unconvinced.

"From the moment I saw you in the night club, Nina. But I need to go to the hospital, Adrian broke a few ribs." Stephanio said. Nina thought that he was jesting but quickly realized that he was not when he winced in pain.

"I'll drive you." Nina volunteered.

"We'll all go." Adrian insisted. He and Nina helped Stephanio into Adrian's SUV and drove to the hospital.

\* \* \*

When they arrived at the hospital, the emergency room was packed. They had to wait almost two hours before Stephanio was seen, and another three hours before he was released. Adrian and Nina waited patiently discussing the events of the day and the pregnancy.

"I'm ready to go." Stephanio announced as he entered the waiting room in a wheel chair, being pushed by a female nurse who looked just too willing to be at his service. They were relieved to see him. Nina went over to him and gave him a hug. Adrian was going to take the back of the wheel chair when his phone rang.

"Hello"

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"Hi Adrian, this is Summer. I was wondering if everything is okay, you're running late."

Shit, he had forgotten about his date with her tonight.

"Um yeah, I'm at the hospital right now, I'll call you back." He hung up the phone.

"Ready to go?" He asked them.

"The doctor is writing out my prescription, I'll need to pick it up at the pharmacy when he's done with it."

"I'll get it." Nina volunteered.

"No, I'll do it. You've spent enough time in this place, and in your condition, you don't need to catch anything."

"No, I'll be fine, you go and help Stephanio into the car, he looks tired. Meet me around the front entrance." She said and went to nurses' station and asked for Stephanio's prescription. She was pointed in the direction of the doctor that took care of Stephanio.

"Hi, I'm here to pick up Stephanio Constantine's prescription."

The doctor looked up from his task and looked directly into her eyes after giving her a brief inspection. He was interested in her, she could tell this by his demeanor.

"Hi, I'm doctor Thomas, and you must be the reason why Mr. Constantine is here." He flashed her a brilliant smile as he stood up and extended his hand for her to shake, which she did. He was a nice looking man. He was just about six feet tall, honey kissed tanned skin, blond hair, blue eyes, nice smile, too nice, actually. He looked more like a toothpaste model than a doctor.

"Something like that." She responded noticing that he was inspecting her real close.

"What are you looking for doctor?" She inquired.

"I just wanted to make sure that you were all intact." He flirted.

"And" She challenged.

"I'd love to further investigate. For evidence of trauma; however, from your current appearance, everything seems to be perfectly in it's place."

"That won't be necessary doctor, I was neither hurt nor attacked in the brawl. Besides, what makes you so sure that I was the cause of Mr. Constantine's injuries?"

"The fact that he wasn't drunk." He said a matter of fact.

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"Oh I see, it's either he's drunk or it's because of a woman that a man gets beat up?"

"Or he's been robbed and assaulted, in which case I've already asked him, he only laughed and said that he wasn't robbed, or drunk. He also didn't wish to press charges against his assailant. So my guess is he was fighting for his lady. And low and behold, you appear." He smiled. "So that brings me to my next question."

"Which is?"

"Does your shirt tell the truth? Are you: unkept? And if so, is it possible for me to keep you?"

"I doubt it, but thank you for the compliment, I think. I'll be needing that prescription now." She held her hand out as he put the paper into her palm, only to immediately retract it back. He wrote on it and placed it back into her palm.

"My number is in there in case you need to call me. For anything, night or day."

"Thank you doctor, I'll keep that in mind, maybe you'll be on call the next time my boyfriend decides that he wants to rough house it with the next man who asks me for a kiss." Doctor Thomas swallowed hard. She added. "And doc that was his favorite cousin that you've just treated. Imagine what he'd do to a total stranger." She said and headed out of the door to the pharmacy area.

Adrian was finishing up his call with Summer when Nina got into the front seat of his SUV. He had apologized to Summer for not being able to meet with her tonight, and explained that he had to take his cousin to the emergency room and probably needed to sit with him all night. She sounded disappointed, but took the news well. He should have told her the real reason behind his cancellation, but he didn't want to do that on the phone, and especially not today. He'd deal with Summer another time.

They rode home in silence. Adrian drove, trying not to concentrate on the headache that was growing rapidly into a migraine. Stephanio fell asleep soon after taking his medication. And Nina sat in her seat next to Adrian thinking about the day's events. The phone rang and both she and Adrian reached for their phones.

"It's me." She said and answered.

"Hey baby, what are you doing?" It was Asmar. She gave a sly look over at Adrian to see his expression; it hadn't changed, thank God.

"I'm on the road, what's up?"



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"I have tickets to the Poetry Lounge, and I was wondering if you wanted to go? I can pick you up at your house by nine." He offered.

"I can't tonight. I'm not at home."

"Got a date?" He asked, but she lost her signal before she could answer him.

"Who was that?" Adrian asked.

"None of your business." She answered. She saw how that just pushed his buttons by the way his jaws were clinched together and how he gripped the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles turned white. He wanted to push the subject, but thought better of it. With the exception of Stephanio's snoring, the rest of the car ride back to Adrian's apartment was silent.

Both Nina and Adrian tensed up when they pulled into Adrian's parking space. They both recognized the little red Miata that belonged to Summer.

"What is she doing here?" Nina asked, Adrian didn't answer her, but instead got out of the car. He tried hard to suppress his anger when he approached Summer. Nina was following close behind him.

"What are you doing here?" He asked.

"I just thought that I'd surprise you."

"Well. Surprise, surprise." Nina said. She had come up to stand close to Adrian.

"I need the keys to the house so that I can help Stephanio get in." She told him. He gave her the key and turned back to Summer.

"I wish you wouldn't have come over unannounced." Summer looked hurt at his statement. She had her arms folded in front of her.

"I'm sure. Do you want me to leave?" She asked. Nina had come out of the house and was back over by the SUV trying to wake up Stephanio.

"Adrian, I could use your help here." She yelled out to him. He nodded to Nina, and turned to Summer and told her "One minute." He went over and grabbed his cousin by the arms and lifted him up onto his shoulders and carried him into the house. Nina was right behind him.

"I'll attend to him, you take care of your guest." Nina told him.

"He needs to get out of these clothes, I better take care of him."

"There's nothing on him that I haven't seen before."

"I'll do it myself!" They heard the front door open and close.

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"Fine, I'll just wait out there with your friend." Nina said defiantly, and walked out of the room. Adrian realized his mistake and hoped that he wouldn't need to make another trip to the emergency room again tonight.

"Would you like something to drink?" Nina asked Summer who was standing in the living room when Nina entered. She gave Nina a dismissive glance before answering a curt "No thank you." Nina just shook her head and headed into the kitchen where she fixed herself a diet soda. Summer followed her in there.

"So, it's back on with the two of you." She accused.

"I suggest that you direct all of your questions towards Adrian. You wouldn't like anything that I would have to say to you." Nina sipped her soda.

"Well, I asked you," Summer said boldly.

"Bitch please." Nina started then paused as if thinking about it for a moment. "As I said before, I suggest that you ask Adrian. It is his business, and I don't want to be responsible for office gossip. It would be best for you to get the information from him, you know the old heard it from the horses mouth thing."

"I really feel sorry for you, coming back to grovel after he dumped you, then canned your ass, all in the same day from what I hear. But hey, I don't blame you from trying to give it one last try. He is quite a catch.

"The circumstance surrounding our break-up is none of your business Summer. Leave now because you've overstepped your boundaries." Adrian had entered the kitchen just in time to hear Summer's questions about he and Nina getting back together. He heard Nina's response, and all the bitter banter that spewed out of Summer's mouth after that. She looked somewhat stunned at his arrival, then embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, I guess I let jealousy get the best of me." She admitted.

He held the door open for her to walk through. When they reached the front door he told her: "It's not a good idea for us to see each other outside of the office." He told her firmly.

"I see." Summer answered defeated. "I guess I got the answer to my question that I asked back there. But why her? I would be everything that you wanted." She wrapped her arms around his neck and tried to kiss him, he stopped her before her lips could connect with his. Nina had walked in on them. She cleared her throat and both Adrian and Summer looked into her direction.

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Damn, he thought. He turned to Summer and told her that he'll see her on Monday. She smiled at Adrian and walked out of the door into her car. Adrian closed the door before Nina could escape.

"It's not what you're thinking."

"Like hell it's not."

"She wanted to give me a goodbye" kiss, and I was stopping her.

"You don't have to explain anything to me, it's been over between us for sometime now and were both seeing other people. Although it is disconcerting seeing you two so cozy together, it is, in fact, none of my business what you do, or with whom you're doing it with." She said.

He looked at her angrily before grabbing her hand and dragging her to his bedroom where he deposited her roughly on to the bed.

"I'm not going to tolerate too many barbaric tactics, so get your anger under control." She told him. He pushed her back down when she tried to sit up.

"You've pushed me too far Nina, you're not going anywhere." He began to undress.

*Be careful of what you wish for, or you might just get it*, Nina thought to herself. She had spent the last two years wishing for some sort of response from Adrian, and when he finally gives it to her, it's in droves.

"You've really lost your mind. It's getting late, and I have to go. I have an hour plus drive back to my mother's house and I'm really tired."

"All the more reason that you should stay put. You left some personal items here when you left, some underwear, night clothes, a few toiletries and what nots."

"How did I leave all that stuff?"

"Laundry."

"Well answer me this, did I leave a toothbrush?"

"No worries, I have a spare."

"I guess that's settled then."

He pointed his finger over to the dresser, and she went over and opened it. Lingerie. Not just any kind of lingerie, but the good stuff. The ultra sheer, ultra skimpy, the come and get me kind. There was no way in hell she was putting that on. She did retrieve some sheer thongs that went with the white lace nighty. She looked back at what he was doing. She was shocked to find out that he had stripped down to his boxers, and was in the process of removing them. *Lord, help me to resist temptation* she prayed silently. His body is beautiful, and he knew it. Their eyes connected and

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he came over to and kissed her passionately. There was no mistaking his intentions tonight. He wanted sex, three long months worth of sex. And he was going to get it from her.

He came over to her and leaned down to kiss her. His tongue caressed the inside of her mouth; taking control of her mouth, he laved her tongue with his, sucking on the thick flesh until she tried jerking it back, then he let it go. He continued his exploration of her mouth with his tongue caressing the roof of her oral cavity. She swore that he even tried to lick her uvula.

His hands were caressing her butt cheeks, as his kiss intensified. He pulled back and looked down at her. Both their breathing was heavy, but he then nipped at her swollen bottom lip before tracing open mouth kisses to the base of her neck. Nina threw her head back to grant him better access to her throat. He was kissing and sucking on her making her cream. She felt his arousal press against her womanhood and she knew that he was just as excited as she was. He let his hands move to the front of her tee shirt where he caressed her breast. He continued to bite and nibble on her neck while making her nipples get pebble hard and then rolling it between his index finger and thumb causing her to moan out in pleasure and pain.

Her shirt came off with a breeze at his hands. He moved her onto the bed where he continued to place passion marks on her neck and chest. Moving his tongue down her neck and chest, he traveled down to her light caramel breast and popped a large brown nipple into his mouth. He licked, and sucked on each plump ripe flesh. Nina stroked his hair, and enjoyed the feeling that he was giving her.

"Oh baby, please don't stop." She begged him. He answered her by taking both breast into his large hands and sucking on both nipples.

"Oh. God. Please." Nina gasped and came as Adrian hungrily feasted on her nipples.

"You *are* a kept woman. You are my woman. Do you understand?" Adrian said in her ear when he released her nipples.

"No, I'm not!" She denied. She pulled away from his caress; he let her move out of his grip. Rolling away from him, she got off of the bed. She stood over him looking at him.

"Nina, you and I are getting married here pretty soon, believe it or not, you are a kept woman."

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"I haven't agreed to marry you, and if I do decide that it's in my best interest to marry you, things are going to change around here. We need to get these changes understood right here, quick and in a hurry." She leaned over and grabbed her shirt and put it back on. "First thing you need to know is that I am only marrying you for this child's sake, and for no other reason. Therefore, I am not a kept woman."

"If you say so," Adrian said, lying on the bed looking up at her with a bored expression on his face. She wanted him and he knew that. So it was enough for now. He'll let her vent.

"I do say so, and I don't plan to change my life because we're married. I'm an independent woman now, and I plan to stay that way. Also, I've purchased a house and I plan to live there, so if we are to co-habitate, you will have to move in with me."

"And where is your home?"

"About thirty minutes from here."

"Why not get a house together closer to my job so that way I won't have to commute far."

"You must be mistaken. I don't give a damn about your job or your commute. As far as I'm concerned, you and it can go to hell. It's either my way, or you can stay here, and I'll live there. No compromising."

"What else do you want from me?"

"I expect you to be faithful for the duration of our union whether you live here or there. I will not tolerate infidelity of any sort. I will allow you your husbandly rights as long as you don't try and take advantage of it. Are these conditions acceptable?"

"Yes." He hissed.

"Good. I'm sure that you can get your family lawyer to draft up this agreement." She said sarcastically.

"I realize that I have some making up to do where you are concerned. But I will not live separate for any reason. Also, this is a real marriage, not just one of convince. Once we say our I do's, it's forever. Death is the only way out of this relationship."

"Whatever."

"Also, I hurt you and I want a chance to make it up to you." His announcement intrigued her.

"I'll allow you to try and ease the pain that you've caused me, but there is no guarantee that I will forgive you. You hurt me, Adrian. You broke my heart and I will never forget the pain that I had to live with

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because of you. You've changed me and the way that I feel about you. I'm not sure if I'm willing to trust you with my heart again."

"My heart was broken too. I made a mistake, will you spend your life making me regret it?"

"I don't know. You made a colossal mistake that affected me, and I don't think that you can even fathom what you did to me mentally and emotionally. You left me a mess, all I wanted to do was die. Then something in me did die, because I couldn't spend the rest of my life wondering if I could get past one more moment without you. I had to live, so like the phoenix, I emerged from my ashes. I am a sort of a different species. So don't try and tell me what to do. Don't be surprised if this shit doesn't work. Don't expect me to give you a break or us a chance. I will be sabotaging your efforts every step of the way. You will get no sympathy from me."

"We have a chance to be together now. I made a mistake, why punish us until doomsday for it?" He asked and she folded her hands and shook her head. She didn't bother to answer him.

"I'll take you anyway I can get you. When did you become such a drama queen?" He asked. She rolled her eyes, but he continued. "You want to make things difficult, then that's on you. I've already apologized."

"You can apologize all day and twice on Sunday, it won't change the fact that you betrayed me. And now you want me back and you're trying to set down the law. I don't think so. You ruined me. I loved you religiously and you took my love and me for granted. I won't allow you to take me back to where I use to be. I almost died behind loving you! Do you understand that? All of my dreams died three months ago when you walked out of that hotel room, and now you want me back?"

"I..."

"It's too late, I've grown up and my needs are different." She interrupted him.

He was stunned by her admission. He didn't know how bad he had hurt her, or how deeply she loved him. He wasn't sure how this relationship could be repaired or if it even could be repaired, and that scared him. This new Nina was complicated, and he would have to get to know her, or at least try to resurrect the old Nina. The old Nina wanted a partnership, this new Nina wanted to consume. She wanted revenge for getting her heart ripped out. He would give her anything that she wanted. For now, and that included control. For now.

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"Where are you going?" He asked.

"Home."

"Please stay. Just for tonight, I won't try to make love to you, but I do want to hold you. I want to keep you close to me." He beseeched.

"Just for tonight. And we both wear boxers and tee shirts." She said. He smiled and complied. He went over to his draw and pulled out a sleeveless tee shirt that would cover most of her down to her thigh. She went and grabbed a quick shower and got dressed in the bathroom. He used the other bathroom to wash himself up; he was lying in bed by the time she came out of his bathroom. She lay down beside him and he held her close to him in a spoon position.

"Thank you." He said.

"For what?"

"For giving me back my life."

"You're welcome." She told him, and drifted to sleep.

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### CHAPTER SEVEN

The look on Ann's face was priceless to Nina. She looks animated, her eyes were large, her mouth wide opened, and she was actually turning lobster red. It took everything in Nina's power not to laugh. Adrian stood next to Nina and held her by the waist. He kissed her neck in an affectionate way. He then placed a hand over her flat midsection.

"That is simply impossible, you haven't seen her in over three months." She looked at Adrian and said, "this is the oldest trick in the book and I am not going to let you fall for it." She accused. "I don't have to listen to this. Adrian, you know the terms of the contract, and I will uphold you to it." Ann held her head up in a defiant manner.

Adrian let go of Nina and went over to come face to face with his mother. His father sensing his rage went over to stand next to Ann. He had been silent since Adrian and Nina arrived at the house. He knew that it was going to be explosive.

"If you try and take the company from me now, I will happily resign." He stated. Nina walked up and stood by Adrian's side.

"I will hit the company with a racial discrimination suit, a wrongful termination suit, and a bunch of other law suits. By the time I'm finished with the company, it'll be mine."

"And I will back up all of her allegations."

"This is not a trick, Ann. I am fourteen weeks pregnant. I have a picture of the baby." She reached into her bag and handed Ann the ultrasound pictures of the baby and the paper work confirming her pregnancy. Ann sat down and looked at the pictures and then at Nina. After examining the evidence, in which the estimated date supported Nina's statement, Ann looked more closely at Nina.

"You don't look pregnant." She handed the pictures over to Nicholas, who glanced at the image. He then gave Nina and Adrian a hug.

*He's a lot more accepting than Ann is, Nina thought.*

Ann looked as if she needed medical attention. She went from having a red face to a sickly pale hue in just a few minutes.



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Nina wanted to go over to the woman and give her a hug, Ann needed some sort of human interaction and it was obvious that her men folk weren't going to provide her with it. However, Nina couldn't bring herself to take the few steps to do it. She didn't want to touch the woman, much less give her a hug.

*'Not very Christ like of me.'* Nina thought.

"Help your mother" Nina said to Adrian who was talking to his father.

He didn't move to help Ann, but instead looked at Nina and said, "It's time to go. I have a lot of packing to do."

"I'm not sure of what to say at this moment." Ann started. "If the evidence holds up to be true, you are the mother of my grandchild, the heir to Constantine's fortune, and I have to re-evaluate this whole situation." She looked at Adrian. "I know that I haven't always been the ideal mother, however, I love you, and family means everything to me. I will agree to all of your terms, but don't be naive, get a prenuptial agreement. I don't like this one bit." She said honestly.

"What I do, I do for the Union..." Nina whispered under her breath. Adrian heard her and smiled. He kissed his mother on the cheek.

"I am not expecting an overnight change, but I do expect for you to respect Nina as my wife and the soon to be mother of my child." Ann agreed and Adrian and Nina said their goodbyes then they left.

"Where to now?" Adrian asked when they were in the car.

"I want to go and see my parents together. I'm not sure of how my father is going to take the news of my pregnancy. You know how he is."

"Even after you tell him that we're getting married?"

"Yeah, even then. I want you to ask for my father's permission for my hand in marriage." She was a little embarrassed by her request, but knew that she could not get married without her father's blessings. Living in sin is one thing, marriage is something else.

"Sure, no problem." He said. He took one hand off of the steering wheel and took her hand in his. He held it up to his mouth and kissed it, not taking his eyes off of the road.

Nina was touched by his gesture and wanted to return the sentiment, but she didn't. It was safer to stay her distance from an emotional connection with him. She didn't want to get her hopes up just in case it didn't work out.

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*Remember what he did to you*, she reminded herself. She wanted to keep that bitterness of his betrayal fresh inside of her, but it was hard.

"What are we doing here?" She asked when she realized that they had pulled up into Gregory's jewelry store. Pensacola's equivalent to Tiffany's.

"Isn't it obvious?" Adrian got out of the car, and went over to the passenger side, opened up the door for her and helped her out.

When they were inside, Gregory himself went over to help them.

"How are you two doing?" He asked. Shaking Adrian's hand, and embracing Nina into a hardy hug, he then kissed her on the cheeks.

"We're doing well." Adrian answered.

"What can I get for the two of you today?"

"An engagement ring and wedding band set. And Greg, we'll need the back room." Greg smiled, his eyes lighting up with pleasure. Adrian was planning to spend some serious money. Gregory signaled his assistant to come over there with them.

"I'll need some champagne and caviar. Bring it to the back room."

Nina had never been to the back room before and wondered what all of the fuss was about.

"So you two are finally tying the knot." He was pleased for them. They had been customers of his for some time, purchasing birthday gifts and special occasion jewelry. They always spent good money, especially on his one-of-a-kind commission pieces, like the watch Nina was wearing. The Constantine's were one of his most extravagant customers. Adrian's younger cousins love to spend a fortune on chunky jewelry. His parents were even better customers; they always request a unique piece that challenged him as a artist. Along with their requests, they require the rarest and most precious gems. Yes, this family has been his bread and butter, so he was going to make sure that they were taken care of. They had the money to shop anywhere, he was honored that they came to him for such an important piece.

"Yeah, she's finally decided to make an honest man out of me." Adrian said.

She watched as Gregory's gray eyes lit up.

"Did you have a certain gem in mind? You know that we can customize your band if you don't see anything that interests you."

"I'm sure that we'll find something, but thank you for being so accommodating." Nina said.

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Adrian looked at Nina then told Gregory that he wanted diamonds.

"Do you have a particular style in mind? What about the metal?"

"Pear shaped and platinum. With matching bands." Nina wanted to make sure that she got her say in.

Gregory went to one of the vaults and extracted a draw. The velvet box held about a dozen or so platinum pear shaped rings. He then went to the vault and pulled out two more draws that were underneath the first one. These contained the matching wedding bands.

"Wow." Was all Nina could say.

These diamonds didn't look like the ones on display out in the show room. These were absolutely magnificent.

Adrian picked out the biggest diamond in the bunch. It had to be at least six karats with another karat or so in clusters surrounding the center diamond. He wasn't into rings, but like any man, he assumed that the bigger the diamond, the better.

*I know that he's not thinking that I would actually wear that monstrosity,* Nina thought. She had her eye on the pear shaped diamond behind the Hummer of a ring that Adrian had picked out. She picked up the delicate ring and showed it to Adrian.

"You like that one?" He asked.

"I love it." She tried it on and it was a perfect fit.

Adrian inspected the ring. It was a pink pear shaped one-karat diamond ring, set in a platinum band. It was delicate and beautiful, just like her. He wasn't surprised that she chose simplicity over flashy and with pink being her favorite color, this ring was just perfect. And it looked beautiful on her hand.

"Amazing. It's a perfect fit." Gregory observed.

"Just like us." Adrian said. He wrapped his arms around Nina's waist and was pleased that she didn't push him away.

Gregory pulled out the matching band set. It was a plain band for her, his wedding band had a half-karat diamond embedded in it. Adrian's band needed resizing and Gregory scheduled for them to pick up the wedding bands that following week.

He then had his assistant take the ring to be boxed. He handed the champagne and caviar to Adrian and Nina. Adrian accepted Nina declined, opting for the expensive bottle water that was on the tray.

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"To a great future." Gregory toasted them. The celebration was short lived when his assistant immediately came back with the ring in a box. They paid for the jewelry and left the store.

It was another twenty minutes before they made it to Nina's parents house.

Her mother greeted them with hugs and kisses; she had told them that James was out tending to the store, as she led them into the house. Adrian hadn't realized how much he'd missed the family unit until now. If he were honest with himself, he'd realize that deep inside he felt a little resentful of what Nina and her family had.

He stepped back to admire his future mother-in-law. A beautiful woman by anyone's standard, she was a dead ringer for Irene Cara with her caramel complexion, large brown eyes, a small button nose and pouty lips. She had a youthful figure, and a lean, but curvaceous body. Her skin was clean and clear without make up. A glow radiated from her. Although she had a few laugh lines around her eyes, she was wrinkle free. She could easily pass for thirty something. No one would ever guess that she was close to fifty, with two adult daughters. Nina had great genes.

Her father was a nice looking man. He was about Adrian's own height, but he had a more muscular build. He was light skinned; almost Adrian's coloring, except he had a more honey hue. He wore a bald head, but his golden brown goatee, hinted that he was a blond. His Italian, and African American heritage was apparent in his features. He looked young, but wise.

A very smart man with a commanding presence, he succeeded in being the only man to have ever intimidated Adrian--and it had nothing to do with the fact that he'd informed Adrian that there was a shotgun and a shovel in the back yard in case he hurt Nina, which left Adrian wondering if that warning is still in effect. Her family was close, her parents just teenagers when they had Nina and a year later her sister Shanna. The girls saw first hand the struggles that their parents survived trying to make a better life for them. The children witness the rise from low income housing to the exclusive neighborhood that they lived in now. He admired their hard work and dedication, as well as the intelligence that was evident through out the entire family. Brilliant with numbers, Charlotte does the family's book keeping. Angelina Costas from accounting could not stop singing her praise when she tipped her off about some new government tax cuts that ended up saving the company

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thousands of dollars last year. She's also a resourceful person, responsible for attaining small business and forgiveness loans, and government grants, which allowed them the money to build their business from the ground up. Nina learned a lot from her mother in the business aspect. James and Shanna shared a love for mechanics and economics. Adrian had been present when they would sit for hours and discuss politics and economics. Shanna had been an economics teacher at the community college until recently, now she worked full time at the store preparing to take over the business. This family was great, and he couldn't wait to be apart of it.

"So, what brings the two of you around here--together?" Charlotte asked, guiding them inside the house.

"Mom, have a seat."

"If you mean to tell me that you are pregnant and that the two of you are going to get married, I knew the moment you pulled up here together. Am I right?" Nina and Adrian looked at each other and then back at her.

"You're right, again." Nina confessed. Charlotte held out her arms to embrace Nina in a hug.

"I'm happy for you, if this is what you want." Charlotte said.

"I'm getting used to the idea." Nina answered honestly. Charlotte looked at Adrian. "And how are you taking the news?"

"I'm happy excited and a little anxious." He said.

"So what are your plans concerning Nina and the baby?"

"Yes, what are your plans concerning my little girl and what is this about a baby?" James had come into the house. He didn't look particularly happy to see Adrian, who stood up and shook his hand. There was a brief greeting. The room was silent for a moment. Charlotte went over to stand next to James.

"Honey, what are you doing home?" She asked nervously.

"Shanna gave me a call, said that she wanted to come in today and work." He didn't elaborate any further; his eyes were on Adrian.

"I want to speak with Adrian alone please." James said. Nina rolled her eyes, and gave her father a kiss on the cheek before following her mother into the kitchen.

James didn't wait long before he directed his gaze at Adrian.

"Have a seat." It was a declarative invitation. Adrian took his seat and James sat in the chair facing Adrian.

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"I want you to know that as a father, I would love nothing more than to kick your ass. However, Nina brought all this onto herself." His words shocked Adrian, this was the first time that he'd heard James use profanity and the fact that he pointed the finger at Nina left him dumbfounded.

"When Nina told me that she had got involved with someone at work, I told her that I didn't think it was a good idea--it creates a bad atmosphere if it doesn't work out." He continued. "When she told me that she was dating her boss's son and the heir to the company, I told her that that was career suicide." He shifted his upper body forward, leaning on his elbow, looking Adrian right square in the eyes as he did so.

"When she told me that she was giving up her apartment and all her things to move in with you, I told her that she was out of her mind."

"But you know what she told me?" James asked Adrian, who shook his head no.

"She told me that she loved you and that you were worth everything she had. That she gave her heart to you, and that everything else was secondary, including her job, and her pride."

"Then you broke up with her and, to add insult to injury, you paid her off. I can tell you that I'm not happy. For months, I had to watch my baby girl hold her head up in defiance because you shamed her. She gambled and lost. And although I told her so warned her against getting involved with you, she didn't listen to me. What you did to her doesn't make it any easier on me to see her hurting. And now she's pregnant. All I want to know is: what are you going to do?"

Damn. Adrian felt like a first-class jerk and a few other four-letter words.

"I'm here to ask you for her hand in marriage?" Adrian stood up and held out the jewelry box. James sat back in his chair and examined the ring. It was beautiful, he must admit, but a fancy ring doesn't equal happiness. He wanted it to work out between the two of them for Nina's sake. He knew that his daughter would be content with being by herself then to be with anyone else, however, that's not what he wanted for her. Adrian was all she wanted, and he hoped that her feelings for him were reciprocated.

"And for the record, sir, one of the reasons why I chose the money over Nina was because she was threatening to leave me the night before we separated. Lately she just seemed so unhappy, I didn't know why, but

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the night before the break-up, she was contemplating leaving me. Looking back now, it was probably her hormones talking. And the desire to get married." Adrian admitted

James gave him back the ring, and sat back in his seat.

"Very impressive ring." Adrian took the ring back and placed it into his pocket.

"Thank you."

"Do you love her?"

"Very much, sir." James stood up and Adrian did too.

"Then, welcome to the family." He said, and they shook hands. He then gave him a friendly embrace.

"This is a good sign." Nina said, as she and Charlotte rejoined them in the den. James and Adrian smiled at the ladies, they continued to stand until the drinks and shortbread cookies were placed on the end table and the women had sat down.

"Shanna will be here for dinner. Mark had to work so she'll be alone." Charlotte informed them. She and Nina had called her when they were preparing the snacks. There was something going down, Shanna seemed too antsy. But then again, she was boning Asmar, and keeping it a secret, or at least she thought that she was keeping it a secret, must be weighing on her conscience. Her mother, picking up on her intuition says: "I think your sister and Mark are having problems. Your sister is always at the store, and she seems very distant. Has she said anything to you?" She asked Nina.

Nina didn't want to answer dishonestly. "Not anything specific; however, I have noticed the atmosphere is tense when the two of them are around."

"I hope that everything is alright between them. I'll have your father talk to your sister." They both knew that James and Shanna were very close and that she would more than likely ask his advice on personal matters before talking to either one of them.

## The Price of Love

### CHAPTER EIGHT

The ride home from Nina's family home was long and silent. Nina was worried about her sister, and the affects that this affair was having on her. She didn't seem to be enjoying herself the way Nina thought that she should be. I guess it doesn't pay to cheat, even with a stud like Asmar. What if Asmar didn't know how to use his equipment? God bless him that would be a shame. Although she never got to sample any of his charms personally, she's seen his dick and he was huge. *Thou shalt not covet my sister's love interest. Even if he was mine first*, Nina chanted silently to herself. Besides she had to concentrate on her sister's needs, she seemed distracted at dinner. Shanna had gone through the proper formalities, congratulating her and Adrian on their recent engagement, she had asked Nina to call her later. But despite that, she was aloof. Eventually, the truth will come out.

Nina's cell phone rang interrupting her thoughts. It was Asmar.

"Hey beautiful."

"How are you doing?" She glanced over at Adrian, hoping that he hadn't heard the endearment, but by the tense look on his face, she could tell that he had.

"What are you plans for tonight?" Asmar was asking.

"Adrian and I just finished dinner at my parent's house. He and I got engaged today."

There was silence for a second before he said "Well, congratulations. I wish you the best." She felt guilty for giving him the news like this.

"Thank you, I truly appreciate your being here for me." She saw Adrian's jaw line tighten up; she knew that she had to end this call.

"It was no problem, princess. But look, can we have lunch sometime next week? I have something that I want to tell you."

"Have you met someone?" She asked, knowing the answer. She knew that Asmar's divorce was hard on him and that the situation with her sister was very complicated.



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"Yea, but I already knew her. She's someone that came from out of nowhere. But I'm really into her. I want to tell you all about it, how about we have lunch on Tuesday? I'll buy."

"Okay, Tuesday, at Quints. The one across the street by the mall."

"What time?"

"What time is good for you, I don't work, I have nothing but time on my hands." She said sarcastically.

"How about twelve-thirty?" He asked.

"Twelve-thirty is fine with me." She confirmed, they said good-bye and she hung up her phone.

"I refuse to be disrespected by you anymore, *cara*. I want you to stop seeing him, for good."

"I don't want to get into it with you over this. But you have no right to demand that I stop seeing a close friend of mine. I won't do it for you, Adrian, I won't push everyone away for the sake of having a relationship with you." She stated. "Not this time."

"What do you mean, not this time?"

"When we got together, I stopped almost all contact with everyone. You're too demanding and intense. We're selfish were others are concerned and I refuse to behave like that any longer. I want friends, whether they were male or female, and there's nothing that you can say or do that can change my mind." Coming to a complete stop in front of the apartment, he turned to her.

"I never expected for you to drop everyone for me, and if that's what you did, then I am truly sorry. However, I do have my reservations about you seeing your ex-boyfriend. The two of you have a history together and if you can't give him up for me that shows that he means more to you than this relationship. I know if something was to happen between the two of us, he's going to be the next man in line for you."

"I don't want to fight with you Adrian. We'll work this out, but I need to get into the house, my bladder can't hold anything." She rushed out of the car before he could go around and open the door for her.

He was waiting for her outside the bathroom door when she opened it.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"I just had to pee like a Russian racehorse," she answered.

"If you lie down, I'll rub your feet for you," he offered.

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"Thanks. They've been swollen since this morning." They went into the Living room where she laid down on the couch and he sat down on the opposite end of it. She took off her boots and socks and placed her feet down on his lap. He knead her feet and she relaxed as he massaged her left foot then her right one. The rhythmic motion of his hand rubbing against her skin made her feel calm from toe to head. She sat back enjoying the caresses that he was giving her, she felt a tingle in the core of her belly as he tasted each individual digit.

Adrian wasn't sure if Nina was asleep or just relaxed when he finished her foot massage, but he was going to take her to the bedroom because she needed rest. His throbbing erection would have to be satisfied with a cold shower. He bent over and lifted her into his arms as if she weighted nothing. Leaning in to kiss her lips, she wrapped her arms around his neck. When he reached the bedroom, he laid her down but she wouldn't let go of his neck, he lay down beside her. She touched his face softly with her hands, as if memorizing every detail, showing special detail to his lips, which she outlined it with the tip of her index finger. He lightly pressed a kiss to it, prompting her to look into his eyes. Nina replaced her finger with her mouth, finally closing her eyes and falling captive to the sensation of passion that was consuming her. Adrian repositioned the both of them so that he was sitting underneath her and they were face to face with their arms wrapped around each other. The kiss deepened, each tongue laving the other, searching, finding, and caressing. Her hands cupped his head, while her fingers ran through his scalp ensuring that they were as close as possible. His hands were wrapped around her torso, stroking her back.

"I want to make love to you." He whispered in her ear. The heat from his breathe on her skin was euphoric, and when he kissed her neck, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation.

"Please." Was all that she said, as she lifted up her arms for him to rid her of her shirt. He planted kisses along her shoulder blades. With one hand on the middle of her back, he kept her secure as his other hand caressed her left breast and his mouth caressed the right one. He could feel her nipples come to life beneath her bra.

He laid her down on her back and trailed wet kisses from her chest to her naval and lower. He removed the rest of her clothes and then his. He rejoined her on the bed lying down beside her.

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"Believe it or not, I'm a little nervous. It's been a while for me, you know." She told him, as he looked at her. He rolled her on her back and positioned himself over her. She opened her thighs and spread her legs to welcome him. He fit nicely in between her thighs and she vowed to herself to keep him there for a long while.

Adrian tried to concentrate on the task at hand. He didn't want to debate words with her or hear any sort of flattery she had to say when all logic and reason pointed to the fact that she had slept with this Asmar character.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture her the way she was before everything happened, but when he opened his eyes, reality hit him. This new, and in his opinion unimproved, Nina was staring at him. The hair cut, dark make up, and wanton expression was his new reality. He never realized how he took her innocence for granted, the way she used to look adoring at him when they made love, now she looked as if she just wanted a straight fuck so that she could get it over with. He felt his erection start to shrivel, so he hurried up and entered her.

"Is everything okay?" She asked.

"Yeah, I'm having a hard time focusing." He told her truthfully.

"Do you want me to ride you?" Her question got his juices flowing to the right direction. "There we go."

She wrapped her legs around him, and he turned over on to his back taking her with him to reverse their positions. He was steadily growing inside of her soaking wet tight pussy. *'This must be Heaven.'* She looked good and felt great, and knowing that his child was growing inside her heightened her appeal.

He grabbed her hips firmly and guided her up and down his growing shaft, thrusting his hips forward to meet her. She set the tempo, and he followed. She extended her left arm to touch his chest, and threw her head back in ecstasy.

"Oh Adrian, what are you doing to me?" Nina moaned.

"I'm giving it to you." He thrust his hips upwards. "You like it." He pounded harder. Gripping her tiny waist with his hands so tight, it was sure to leave bruises.

"Yes. Please. Don't stop. Fucking me." She panted. Adrian stopped thrusting and turned her over in one quick motion. Nina was once again on her back with Adrian above her. He grabbed a pillow and positioned it under her hips as he continued to pump deeply into her hot wet cavity.

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The sound of his balls hitting her ass serenaded her ears, the scent of sex were an aphrodisiac. Their bodies were on fire from the adrenalin that was pumping.

"Whose pussy is this?" Adrian questioned as he pumped into her viciously. Nina wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck to hold on.

"Yours!"

He pumped into her as if his very life depended on this orgasm. "Whose!"

"Yours!"

"Then come for me, baby." He told her and she did instantly. Her body violently convulsed causing him to momentarily pause. He immediately started to pump again, and her inner walls contracted around his stiff cock causing his balls to tighten up as he slammed into her. She felt the sweat drip from his forehead to her bottom lip. She licked his salty wet dew; the taste combined with the pounding of her pussy instinctively drew her to bite him on the neck. He immediately came so violently that he landed on top of her.

\* \* \*

*Adrian wasn't the only one that Nina made come apart.* Stephanio thought as he ducked out of sight. He couldn't help but be curious when he'd come in and heard his cousin in the bedroom making love with the door open. He was too shocked to move when he witnessed Nina taking his cousin for the ride of his life.

She was beautiful in the mist of her passion. He had ducked behind the door and imagined that it was he she was riding. That it was his hands gently rubbing up and down her long toned back, then settling roughly around her tiny waist. He fantasized that it was his dick that was pounding her pussy with urgency. He wanted it to be his seed to fill her womb.

He stood behind the door and unfastened his pants, taking out his dick and pumping it hard as he snuck peeks of Adrian and Nina making love. He had braced his left palm on the wall as he pumped faster and faster. Feeling the rush of electricity flow through him, he knew that he was close to coming. When she bit into Adrian, he could almost feel the bite, making him come as well. He grabbed the hem of his shirt to capture his come. He bit into his index finger to keep silent. Looking back again, he was sure that they were finished, but he was wrong. They had started

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back up again. Oh man; her moans were the sexiest sounds that he's ever heard. He almost lost control again. He had to go. After a few seconds, he was able enough to walk back into the kitchen area where he cleaned himself as best he could and tucked in his shirt. He could still hear her moaning and begging for Adrian to give it to her. He wished that he never saw them, because desiring Nina was a luxury that he could not afford. And she was quickly becoming his obsession. He would pack up and leave, just as soon as he could get to his room.

"Are you alright?" Adrian asked Nina. She had just finished coming and burst out in tears. He came up from in between her legs and positioned himself over her. Her face was red and she was balling. She nodded her head frantically, and then wiped her eyes. He lay down beside her and looked at her.

"I'm okay." She paused. "It's been a while since we've made love, and I'm a bit emotional. My body has missed you," she admitted.

"My body missed yours too."

"Is there someone in here?" Nina asked, and sat up bringing the covers up her body to her chest.

She heard something in the kitchen, maybe the refrigerator door closing.

"Shit. It's probably my cousin. I'll be right back." He got up and grabbed his boxers and went to the kitchen. Stephanio was in the refrigerator when Adrian came up behind him.

"Hey what's up?" Adrian asked.

"Nothing, I just thought that I'd come here and eat, pack, and head to the airport." I'm making a sandwich. Want one?"

"Nah, I'm okay. Why are you leaving so soon?"

"My work here is done for now, plus you and your lady have a lot of making up to do, and from the sound of it, you'll need more than one day."

"I take it you heard Nina and me in the bedroom."

"Unavoidable, the two of you were pretty loud." He said with a lopsided smile. He went back to making his sandwich.

"Is everything okay?" Nina questioned. She came into the kitchen wearing Adrian's robe, which was way too long for her, but the open V neckline was seductive no less. Stephanio shook his head to try and focus on anything but her and the pornographic image that she seems to project into his mind every time that she's around him.

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Adrian caught his cousin's reaction and tried his best to dismiss it.

"How are you feeling today?" Nina asked Stephanio.

"I am doing much better. I met a girl at the club the other night that tried very hard to nurse me back to health. I think she broke me worst." He and Nina both laughed. Adrian wondered if his cousin was talking about his Nina.

"Go and get some clothes on and I'll fix you something to eat."

Adrian told Nina. She dismissed the urge to curse his ass out right in front of his cousin for trying to boss her around. She'll address that issue with him again later. She'll do as told. For now.

"I'll talk to you later, Stephanio."

"Alright Nina, take it easy." He said and kissed her on the cheek. She turned around and headed towards the bedroom.

"I envy you." Stephanio told Adrian when Nina was out of earshot.

"I am a very lucky man." Adrian stated proudly.

"No, you are a blessed man." Stephanio looked him in the eye and told him truthfully.

"Yes. I am very blessed." Adrian answered him and went over to the kitchen island and started fixing him and Nina something to eat.

Nina was in the bedroom getting dressed when Adrian walked in with a tray of fresh fruits, turkey and cheese sandwiches, soup and juice. Nina was surprised as well as pleased.

"All of this is for me?" She asked.

"No, I have a sandwich in there too." He sat the tray down on the end of the table. Walking over to the fireplace, he lit it up laying the comforter in front of the fireplace and sitting the food in the middle of the blanket. She smiled at his in home picnic. This was the first time that he's ever done anything remotely romantic. They never even made love in front of the fireplace in his room. Her heart started to melt, but she suppressed the desire to go over and wrap her arms around him in a big hug for his effort. She did, however, go over and sat down on the end of the blanket and said her grace and ate.

"How is it?" Adrian asked. He was disappointed that she didn't seem more appreciative towards his romantic efforts. Maybe this pregnancy thing killed her manners? He didn't know how long he'd be able to tolerate her ungrateful behavior before something was said.

"Pretty good. Thanks."

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And that's it. She wasn't going to converse with him, tell him how well he had done, or that she appreciates his efforts to try and make her happy! She hadn't said a word to him. So in addition to being host, cook, and manservant, he also had to be the one to initiate the conversation!

"So, when can I move in with you?" He asked

"Whenever. I'm not on any particular time schedule." She answered nonchalantly.

"I'll start packing tonight." That caused her to choke on her juice.

Good. Adrian thought she deserved it for brushing off his attempts at being romantic. He reached over and patted her on the back.

"I'm okay. It just went down the wrong way. Did I hear you correctly? You want to start moving in tonight? What about the lease on this apartment?" She coughed.

"I'll pay up on it, my cousins can stay here for all I care."

"You should keep it. Just in case." She added.

"Just in case what? You kick me out?"

"Yeah."

"You don't have to worry about that, I'm not going anywhere."

"If you say so."

"I do say so." He told her.

"So, when do you want to get married? What day?" Adrian asked.

Nina finished swallowing her food. She figured that she could pull a wedding off in just over a month's time if she hustled.

"How about the first week of March."

"That's fine with me. Let me know how much you need for everything and I'll pay for it." How ironic those words he said seemed to ring true. He was paying for it, choosing the company over Nina was the biggest mistake of his life at the time, and he was certainly paying for it.

"Thank you, but I'm sure that my parents are already a step ahead of us, and my dad will insist on flipping the bill for it. You just make sure that you show up."

"I wouldn't miss our wedding for all the world. I still love you and this is something that should have happened a long time ago."

"Oh well, no use crying over spilled milk. We're getting married now, and that's all that matters."

"Yeah, that's all that matters. Do you have any names in mind?" he asked, wanting to change to a safer subject.

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"Junior if it's a boy. Adriana Nicole, if it's a girl." The fact that she had wanted to name the child after him pleased him. "Thank you. I feel honored." He leaned in to kiss her softly on the lips.

"You have a beautiful name. It's sexy, and the only reason that I started dating you." She joked.

"And here I thought it was because your boyfriend already had a girlfriend. Or rather a wife." He said seriously.

"Go to hell, Adrian."

"It's the truth. And I was just kidding, so quit the theatrics."

"You're right. The only reason I ever talked to you was because I was feeling sorry for myself and angry at the world. I realize now that if I had waited, Asmar and I would be together right now."

She really knew how to push his buttons. He had never hit a woman in his life, but right now, he sure wanted to. He decided to fight back with words.

"And if you were the right color, we would be married right now."

"You bastard--"

"Yeah, I sure am, so let me finish. If you were still with Asmar, you'd probably still be a virgin. You were with him for years before you met me and he never touched you. And even now, with him being divorced and you being single, he didn't want you. He talks about being with someone else. He doesn't want you like that, never has, and he never will. He's probably gay."

"No he's not! The woman that he's in love with is not quite available, yet." She defended.

"And you know this how? Never mind, I don't want to know. But he's probably figured out how desperate you are to be with him and decided not to risk it in case you turned out to be psychotic which is exactly the way you act towards him. Word of advice, that's a real turn off to men. So let me advise you in this, get some pride and leave him alone. I know that you're meeting him sometime next week, thank him for me, for doing the noble thing and not taking advantage of your crazy ass when you are always throwing your pussy at him. He's a good man for not taking advantage of your stupidity. Hell, I'm really grateful that he didn't want you, or you'd really be wondering who's your baby's daddy. Now get the fuck out my house!"

He had shocked her with his outburst. She stood there flabbergasted. He told her off and then kicked her out.



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*Move. Do something. Just don't stand there like a dummy with your mouth open.* Then she did do something. She started to cry. She cried hysterically and he felt bad for pushing her buttons like that, but she had started it and he was tired of her diva attitude. She needed to be taken down a peg.

"Nina-" he started, but she interrupted him.

"Fuck you."

All sympathy was gone. "You know the way out." Adrian told her, and walked passed her out to the living room where Stephanio was sitting.

"Is something wrong?" Stephanio asked. Adrian and Nina really were in love. They were making love one minute and fighting the next minute.

"She's crazy. I'll be right back. Do you want a beer?" Adrian asked.

"Nah man, I'm cool."

Adrian went into the kitchen and grabbed himself a beer. Nina walked past Stephanio upset. She was heading out the front door. Stephanio was concerned, so he called after her.

"Hey Nina. Where are you going sweetheart?" He asked when he finally caught up with her by the front door.

"I can't walk as fast as you can, so you're going to have to wait for me." She slowed down and they walked outside together.

"What's going on with you two?" He asked

"Your cousin is an asshole and I hate him." She sniffed, trying hard to fight the tears that were threatening to spill again. Stephanio gently grabbed her elbow and guided her down to sit on the one step.

"Baby, you knew that the first time you met him." He smiled at her and she smiled back. "Yeah, everyone knows how you avoided him like the plague when he first started to pursue you. How you use to show him up and try to embarrass him at every opportunity that became available. You were legendary in showing him out at work. He really had to step up his game at work because you made it apparent that you were after his job no matter who he was. He told me that you were out to replace him."

"I was very ambitious."

"And that's one of the reasons why he loves you. Adrian also told me that you were the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on, and that he was in love with you the first time he saw you." Nina blushed and he wiped her tears away with his thumb finger.

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"Adrian also said that you are the smartest woman that he's ever met, and that he was going to marry you one day." This news surprised her. She didn't believe him.

"You're just trying to make me feel better. Adrian loves himself and himself only."

"That's not true. He loves you."

"But when he had me, he put a monetary on our relationship. I was nothing more than an object to Adrian. A token girlfriend."

"That's not true. I know for a fact that he loves you. But you are sometimes intimidating to him. He doesn't think that you need him, and that is a frightening thought since he needs you so much. To him you are like his albatross, you are here as his blessing, and if he harms you in anyway, he'll die. He knows that you make him whole, but he's not sure that the feelings are reciprocated. He can't live without you, so he doesn't understand how you can live so easily without him. Do you understand now?" She didn't look convinced at his declaration.

"I'm serious, Nina. I know that he feels as if you loved him with all of his faults. We know that he's anal about almost everything. We know that he's not always the nicest of persons at times, and that once his buttons are pushed, there's not backing down. And despite that, you still accepted him. Don't use character flaws, the ones that you use to love so much back then, as the excuse behind your giving up on him now. You two love each other, and you have to find your way past your hurt. He will always love you. And you have the ability to control him like no one I've ever met, and I suspect that it's the same way with you. He chose the company on paper, but not in his heart. You can't continue to make him pay for that. It'll ruin you and him. And the *bambina*.

"You think it's a girl too?"

"Of course."

Nina listened as he spoke his wisdom. She admired the way he handled the situation, and she was grateful for his words, which comforted her, and she appreciated him for that.

"You're quickly becoming my favorite Constantine." She joked with him. She didn't know how much he wished that statement were true. Her cell phone rung, and she answered it.

"Hello."

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"Hey." It was her sister. "You didn't return my call, so I thought I'd catch you at church, but you weren't there this morning. I was wondering if you had a minute?"

"Sure I have a minute. Let me say goodbye to someone and I'm all yours."

"Okay"

"My sister is on the phone and I'm about to go. Thanks for everything, Stephanio. I hope to see you again soon." She hugged him and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"You will." He tried to get up, but she shooed him back down. She knew that he was still too tender to get up for no reason. She walked to her car and got in without saying anything to Adrian.

"Hey sis, I'm back." She told Shanna. She started the car, but didn't move.

Missing the name of the individual who had called her, Adrian had heard most of the conversation said between his cousin and her. He had watched behind the door as his cousin comforted her. Stephanio was falling in love with her. He was confident in his assumption, but he also knew that his cousin would never act upon those feelings. He was appreciative to his cousin for his loyalty, especially when talking to her. He wasn't in the mood to deal with her shitty mood swings. He didn't know what he was going to do now. Part of him was hoping that she reconsiders his proposal; this time he wouldn't oppose it. She was now in her car on the phone, probably talking to pretty boy. This made him angrier.

Damn that Asmar! Why was it so hard for her to give him up? And how long has she been seeing him? He wanted answers and he wanted them now.

\*\*\*

"What's that noise?" Shanna asked. Adrian was knocking on the window of the car. Nina ignored him and kept talking to her sister.

"Adrian. We had an argument. Hold on a minute." She told Shanna and rolled the window down.

"What?" she asked.

"I need a number so I can contact you."

"I'll call you when I get home."

"Whom are you talking to?" He asked and she rolled up her window and ignored him. Adrian stood with one hand on his hip and the

## The Price of Love

other on the top of the car. He was getting angrier by the minute. He knocked on the window again. She lowered the window down a few inches.

"Not now, Adrian. I'm not in the mood to deal with you, and I'm sure that none of this arguing is good for the baby."

"You're right. I'm sorry. Don't forget to call me when you get home; we need to talk about us." He told her and stood back so that she could back away.

*Sucker*, she said to herself, as she looked in the mirror and backed out of the parking space. When she had successfully backed up she put the tiny cell phone to her ear.

"Hey, what are you doing tonight?" Shanna asked.

"Nothing. I'm just going to chill out. Probably go by the video store, get some take out and call it a night."

"Do you mind if I come over?"

"You know that you're welcome anytime, and I really am looking forward to having company tonight." She lied. She would rather be home alone so that she can eat, sleep and cry her eyes out. Not necessarily in that order. "What movie should I pick up for you? I'm getting Love and Basketball, and Set It Off."

"No, I'm fine with your choices, I'll probably watch a Lifetime movie."

*The network for bitter bitches*, Nina thought. She always said that she would never be one of them women who sat home watching Lifetime movies because her man couldn't get his shit right. No, she was watching two movies about betrayal, and heartbreak. I may be a scorned woman, but at least I'm not watching a Lifetime movie.

CHAPTER NINE

Nina wiped her eyes as she watched the credits roll up on the television screen.

"He was a mean S.O.B., and he deserved everything that he had coming to him."

"He sure did, and I'm glad she got away with it, he had put her through so much." Shanna agreed. "And I am surprised that you sat down and watched it. I know how much you loathe these Lifetime movies. I hate to say I told you so, but I did tell you not to knock it until you tried it. And here you are crying and stuff."

"It's my hormones. I cry at the drop of a dime."

"Yeah, I bet. Before the pregnancy, nothing made you cry, now, I say boo and here comes the water works."

"Hey, I'm not that bad." Nina denied.

"You're not? How about the night Mark and I got into that altercation? You cried like a baby saying that love should conquer all, and that I deserved to be loved."

Yeah, Nina remembered that night, but there was more to that, she was also crying for her sister. She knew that Shanna was in a marriage that she didn't want to be in, while sleeping with a man who would offer her the world if she'd just asked. She felt empathy for her sister, but she would keep that information to herself.

"Okay, point taken... Now that we're decked to the nines in our jammies, and the ice cream and potato chipped are out, tell me what's going on with you." Nina encouraged.

"I'm having an affair." Shanna blurted out. She closed her eyes and waited for the reprimand, but it never came. She opened up one eye and then the other. She was astounded that her sister wasn't shocked by her admission.

"You're not shocked? Do I look like I've been having an affair?" She asked desperately. If Nina suspected her having an affair, maybe it was written all over her face, like her mother had accused.

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"Okay. You're cheating on your philandering, cheating, verbally abusive husband. No, I'm not shocked." She paused and smile held a bit of mischief. "But do you know what would shock me?" Nina asked and Shanna shook her head numbly.

"It would shock me if you were having hot steamy sex with Asmar in the store's pantry. That would shock me." Nina laughed as her sister's eyes turned as large as saucers.

"Did he tell you that? He promised he wouldn't say a word. I wasn't sure how you felt about him. I mean, we never meant for things to go so far, you know, but one thing led to another. Do you hate me?" She asked holding her head down.

"Hate you? For what? My best friend and my sister hooking up? I am so happy for you." She hugged Shanna. "I hated keeping this secret. No, Asmar didn't tell me, I caught you two in the act one night. You guys were going at it like dogs in heat, and you were panting like a twenty-mile jogger on his nineteenth mile marker." Shanna smiled, her fair skin turning beet red.

"I wasn't panting that loud." She denied.

"Give it to me. Oh Asmar. Yes. Yes. Give it too me." Nina repeated, making fun of Shanna.

"I was not doing all of that... I don't think."

"I was like, I know they are not in the corner humpin' and humping good. I didn't think that he was like that, and I damn sure didn't think that you had it in you... but then again, you are my sister, and a James. Good fucking is our legacy," Nina joked.

"You don't mind? I wasn't sure of how you'd feel. I've felt wretched going behind your back like that."

"Asmar and I are just friends. We will always be 'just friends.'"

"And are you okay with that? I remember when you had us all convinced that the two of you were going to be married. And since you've been separated from Adrian, I was convinced that you'd be my competition. I came here tonight to tell you that I was having an affair with Asmar, and that you needed to halt entertaining any feelings that you may have for him, because although it isn't fair to either one of you, I can't give him up."

"Well, I'm glad I beat you to the punch. I already knew, and although my relationship with Asmar is odd, I assure you, I am not after him for myself. I love him; I'm not in love with him. He is the best. I am

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very happy for the two of you, although I am sad that his and my relationship has to change some now that the two of you are out of the closet so to say."

"Your relationship with him doesn't have to change. I'll understand."

"Honey, never offer another woman equal time share with your man, for any reason. No, I will respect your position as his woman and step back. I would rather share what he and I have with you, than keep it as is."

"Thank you Nina, you're the best." Shanna hugged Nina tightly. She felt as if a ton of bricks had been lifted off of her shoulders.

"Besides, I couldn't compete with 'Oh yea, daddy. Just like that.'" Nina teased. Shanna hit Nina with a pillow, and Nina hit her back. They were in the midst of an all out pillow fight when the doorbell rang. It was Asmar. He came in and gave Nina a kiss on her cheek. He went over and gave Shanna a kiss on the cheek and a hug, sans passion.

"That's all the lovin' you got for your woman?" Nina asked. She saw realization hit Asmar. He looked at Shanna.

"She saw us."

"And you're okay with that?" Asmar asked.

"Why shouldn't I be? I am actually happy for you two. I love you both so much. I am happy that you both are finding love... wherever you can find it."

"So how long have you known?"

"For a while. But what are the two of you going to do about this?" Nina asked seriously.

"I've already asked Mark for a divorce. Needless to say, he was pissed. He said that he would see me dead first."

"Do you believe him?"

"No. He has a temper, but murder is not like him."

"You need to take that threat serious."

"No more serious than Adrian saying that death was the only way out of a marriage." Shanna rebutted.

"That's different. He was saying that marriage was forever, that he wasn't going to grant me a divorce under any circumstance. It didn't mean that he would kill me."

"Well, I'll just have to tread lightly."

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"I can take care of Mark." Asmar said. He was trying hard to hold onto his anger. He loved Shanna, and the fact that her asshole of a husband was threatening her pissed him off.

"And then what? You go to jail. His family targets my family and me? Violence is not the answer. This is my problem, I will work my way out of this."

"This is our problem, and I'll help." Asmar stated.

"I agree," Nina said, then she gasped. "I have an idea." She smiled.

"What?" Shanna asked.

"How about you proceed with your plans of divorce. Lay low until the divorce is final, then you can resume your life."

"And where would I go? He'll find me if I get any real estate in my name or any of our names. Besides, everyone in Pensacola knows us it wouldn't work. And before you suggest it, this will be the first place that he would look."

"I wasn't going to suggest that. I was thinking that if you lived in Adrian's apartment while he stays here, you'd be free to roam about. No one knows you this far from Pensacola, and he doesn't know where Adrian lives. Besides, Adrian lives in a gated community. It's the perfect solution to this problem." Shanna didn't look convinced, so Nina added "Then that'll free up time for you and Asmar to be together without being discovered."

"But would Adrian go for it? I mean he kicked you out of his house after he cursed you out. Do you even want to get involved with him again?"

"He cursed you out?"

"And made her cry, then he kicked her out, knowing that this is an emotional time for her." Shanna told him.

"That's too much information. I do not want to know anything about a woman's cycle."

"What are you talking about? Nina's not on her period."

"What are you talking about?" He asked. Shanna realized that Asmar didn't know about Nina's condition.

"I'm pregnant. Very pregnant." Nina told him. He looked shocked, and then smiled.

"Congratulations. It is congratulations, right? You're pregnant? By whom?"



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"Yes, congrats are in order. Yes, I am pregnant. By Adrian, who else."

"But when?"

"Over three months ago."

"But you can't tell."

"Thank God for small miracles." He gave her a hug.

"Well I'll be damned. This is a night of secrets revealed."

"Look, I need to call Adrian. You two discuss the details." Nina went over to her phone and pressed in Adrian's number.

"Hello." Adrian answered on the third ring.

"Hi, I just wanted to let you know that I've made it home safely."

"You're just getting in?"

"No, my sister came around and we started to talk, and I forgot to call. Listen, do you mind if I come over? I need to talk with you."

"Where are you at?"

"My house, why?"

"I want to come to you."

"I have company."

"So. If you want to talk with me, I want to come over to your house, now either give me the address, or good night."

"And you claim that I'm being dramatic." Nina gave him her address and he realized that they weren't far at all. "And Adrian, bring a change of clothes." She said and hung up. Walking back into the living room, she told Shanna and Asmar of her plan. "You are such a schemer. You're going to seduce him into saying yes, aren't you?" Shanna accused. Nina smiled coyly.

"No. Yes. I'm going to talk with him."

"Do you think that it's a good idea for me to be here when he arrives?" Asmar asked. Although he wasn't afraid of Adrian, he was a man and knew that respect was important. He and Adrian needed to start mending fences if they were to one day be family. Adrian needed to realize that there was nothing going on between him and Nina.

"Don't worry about it I'll explain everything to him." Nina said.

"Whatever you think is best. So what's the plan?"

"Tonight, we get to know each other." Nina smiled. Asmar and Shanna had concerned looks on their faces. Nina telephone rang.

"Hello."

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"Hey Nina, is Shanna over there." Mark asked. His rich Jamaican accent was easily to recognize.

"Hold on a minute."

"It's Mark. Do you want to speak with him?" Nina asked Shanna.

"Yeah, I guess I had better." She said and reached for the phone.

"Hello." She answered.

"When are you coming home?" He asked.

"I'm not. I've decided to stay the night here, and at some time I plan on getting my things. I can't deal with you anymore. I want a divorce. You are welcome to have the house, your women, and whatever else it'll take to get you out of my life. I'll be the one to start from scratch. Just stay away from me. I hate you." Asmar and Nina looked at Shanna stunned.

"She must be desperate to leave this marriage if she's volunteering to leave with out anything." Nina whispered to Asmar.

"I not be wanting to do that, girl," Mark said. "You know how I feel about you. I told you before that them other girls don't mean a thing to me, so stop all of this nonsense and come home."

"Fuck you, Mark, I'm not coming back to you. You're nasty, I've seen some of your whore's and if I were you, I wouldn't have touched them with someone else's dick. After seeing the trash you've been sticking your dipstick into, you won't be fucking me. Ever!"

"Now wait a minute--" Mark started, but she interrupted.

"I don't love you anymore, I want out of this marriage. You can either grant me a divorce, or I'm going to force you into giving me one, now you decide."

"Bitch, who do you think you're talkin' too? I'll come over there right now and kill your ass. Don't provoke me now. Come home so we can work this out."

"You're crazy and if you come anywhere near here, I'll call the cops. I swear." Shanna said. She hung up the phone. She was very upset by his threat. Although he had never hit her, she knew that he was a very dangerous man.

"He says that he's going to come over and kill me." Shanna said when she turned and faced her audience of Asmar and Nina. She sat on Asmar's lap.

"I want you to move in with me." Asmar said. He was getting tired of Mark threatening Shanna, while he sat back and did nothing. He was a

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man, and she was his woman. Kind of. "I'm going to take care of him myself. He has no right threatening you."

"But he doesn't need to know, or even suspect, that something is going on between us. I'll handle him. Tomorrow I'll go and get a restraining order against him."

"If Adrian doesn't agree to our little plan, then I'll get the apartment in my name. He'll never suspect that." Asmar uttered. They planned Shanna's escape from Mark for the next hour.

The doorbell rang, and Nina stood up and answered it. Adrian was standing looking around the threshold area at her Japanese inspired garden. She had miniature waterfall, with bonsai plants, and a lot of foliage. Lights illuminated the plants. It was beautiful.

Nina opened the door in her pink flannel pajamas. Her hair was oddly wrapped around her head.

"New do?" He asked. He walked past her into the house. It was a beautiful open plan ranch style home. He was about to compliment her on her decorating schemes, when he noticed that she had visitors, especially one in particular.

"What is he doing here?" Adrian asked. Nina had come up beside him.

"He's visiting." Nina said.

"Call me when he's gone." Adrian said, and was about to leave, when the sight of Nina's sister sitting on Asmar's lap finally registered. He turned around and asked. "And what is your sister doing on his lap."

"None of your business," Nina said.

"What does it look like?" Asmar replied.

"Oh damn," Shanna responded.

They answered at the same time.

"This is rich. And you invited me over here for what Nina? An orgy?" Adrian sounded disgusted. He wasn't sure of what was going on, but he didn't like it. "And where is your husband?"

"I want to speak to you privately, please. You guys know how to make yourselves comfortable. See you later." She said then led a stunned Adrian into the bedroom.

"What's going on?" Adrian asked. Her bedroom silenced him. It was a remarkable retreat. She had a four-postured ebony colored, Portuguese style bed. It was raised high off of the floor, and had taupe colored Egyptian cotton sheets. There was an ebony chest at the foot of the

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bed. Her walls were tan with a few nice art pieces. There was a large marble fireplace at the opposite end of the bed. A candle stand with large marble taupe candles was in the center of the fireplace. Various plants were strategically placed around the room, giving it an exotic feel. Everything was chic; from the high vaulted ceilings with the Greco/Roman medallion in the center of it, to her shiny hardwood floors with lights that illuminated from it, he was impressed. "Um, come over here and sit down. She led him to the right hand side of the room where he hadn't even noticed the French doors that led to the back yard, or the chaises lounge that was next to it. He sat down and she sat next to him.

"This is a nice set up that you have here."

"Thanks. You made it all possible."

"Then I want to be apart of it."

"Alright. You can move in."

"Just like that? I'm not buying it."

"Yes, just like that. I realize that I provoked you into cursing me out, and although you were wrong for what you said and the way that you treated me, I was wrong for starting it." Adrian could not believe his good fortune, however, he could not shake the feeling of being used. And why was Asmar here, with her sister no less. Was she covering for her sister, or was her sister covering for her. He would keep up his guard.

"So what's going on with Asmar and Shanna?"

"They're together."

"What about Shanna's Mark? Or has she divorced him in the past few hours?"

"No. Shanna and Mark are having some problems, and she's filing for divorce. Them two getting together is just one of those things that just sometimes happen."

"Damn, is he the family go to guy when shit isn't working out in you'll relationships."

"It's not like that. They have a real relationship. Asmar and I never got past the crush stage." Although relieved at her admission, he was still disappointed in both Nina and Shanna. Asmar was doing what any man in his shoes would do.

"This is messed up, but it's not my business; however, I can't live here if they'll be rendezvousing here." He said.

*Good. Thought Nina, this allotted her the perfect opportunity to introduce her plan.*

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"I agree with you one hundred percent. Actually, they've just told me about their affair not too long ago, although I have known for sometime." He looked bewildered. "I caught them in the act."

"Anyway, I thought that if you moved in here, maybe Shanna could use your apartment. Mark has threatened to kill her, and he has no idea that she's cheating on him."

"This is none of my business, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't involve me."

"So you're telling me no when I ask you for a personal favor to me."

"I'm telling you hell no because I don't want to get involved. How are you going to ask me to support their relationship like that? Disrespect her husband by letting those two use my apartment as a love shack. You're out of your mind."

"Shanna's husband has threatened to kill her. I'm asking you to save her life."

"Tell her to call the police."

"Then what? She gets a restraining order? Maybe that piece of paper can protect her when he's assaulting her." Nina fussed. "Never mind, she can stay here. But I have a question to ask you."

"What."

"What happens when he finds her here and wants to kill her? What do you think he'll do to me?"

"I'll kill anyone who would even think about hurting you. You have made your point. I will move in here immediately."

"That is all I ask. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Adrian said. He stood up and started undressing. Nina went out to the living room to tell Shanna and Asmar the good news."

"Hey, we're going to head back to my place." Asmar said.

"No. Adrian has agreed to let you stay in his apartment. Besides, what if Mark calls again, he'll get suspicious if you're not here. And if he happens to show up, you can use the extra room as a decoy." Nina said, referring to her third bedroom. She didn't want her sister taking unnecessary risks. "If you're sure that you don't mind. I really don't want to put you on the spot." Shanna said.

"No worries. You can make us all breakfast in the morning." Nina shot back at her sister as she headed back into the bedroom.

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"Finally, we'll be able to make love all night long without worries." Asmar said as he held Shanna in his arms.

"I know, and I appreciate everything that Nina and Adrian are doing for us, but I hate getting them involved in our business."

"It's temporary, until this business with your husband is resolved, this is the only way that we can be together."

"It's not right though. I hate sneaking around and lying. That's not me."

"I know, baby, I know." Asmar said. He then let her go and went to turn off all of the lights.

"Let us make love tonight."

"But tomorrow we go our separate ways until I resolve my business."

"If that's the way you want it. I'll respect your decision." Asmar agreed. Shanna walked him into the bedroom that Nina called The Seven Veils. They were decorated in various shades of purples, gold, reds, and blue. The focal point was the genie bottle shaped chandelier that had yards of satin fabric of multiple shades of color coming from it to cover the ceiling, and walls. The entire room floor was a bed, with vibrant pillows strategically placed to give off an exotic ancient Persian look. There were several antique dresser pieces that were in the shape of a genie bottle. Scones on the wall that varied in the colors primarily lighted the room: red, blue, gold and purple, and some scented candles. The room also had a walk in closet and adjoining bathroom that was decorated crimson and gold.

"This room is amazing." Asmar said.

"I know. She spent a lot of money in this room. This is real gold leaf trim." She pointed to a dresser.

He wasn't interested in the room. He wanted her. "Shanna, I love you."

"Make love to me, Asmar." She requested, and he did.

CHAPTER TEN

"Tonight's topic of discussion is, top five picks for husbands and why did you pick him." Lisa said. Tonight rendezvous was at the Atlantis, a bar and grill located on the docks.

"My list starts with, but not limited to, Denzel Washington, Tom Hanks, Bill Gates, Bill Cosby, and Jet Li." Gail said. Everyone looked at her stumped.

"Those are all real men. I would feel secure with them." It was obvious that she wasn't over being duped by Eric--a. Since her discovery of his secret, she had seen him only once. He explained to her that he considered himself a transgender, and that he didn't consider himself a lesbian, but rather a heterosexual male with female organs. He also went on to take responsibility for his transgressions, he then asked her to marry him. She told him that she was a heterosexual female and could not entertain lesbian thoughts. That she wasn't attracted to another woman and to her, that's what he, is. She decided that it was time to start dating again and the next time she was approached by a nice looking man, she would take him up on his offer.

"Okay Angelina, it's your turn." Lisa said. Angelina was starting to get into the groove of going out with the girls. Growing up with a very close family, that happened to be very large, she wasn't use to having outsiders as friends. Going out with 'the girls', was a change for her. And it was turning out to be a good change. When Nina first asked her to accompany them on their Friday night soirée's, her first instinct was to decline, but there was such a kinship there that she and Nina shared that superseded the obvious, smart, beautiful, successful, rich women of color. Angelina found out that they both survived being victims of Constantine men. For Nina, her upcoming nuptials are a silver lining to her hardship. From what she gathered Adrian was doing right by Nina. They were going to be married next week, and their baby was due around the fourth of July. Things were looking good for Nina indeed. Angelina on the other hand was in a mess. She had an Arabian prince obsessed with her-a married Arabian prince. She had someone stalking her, and had no idea

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who he was, or how dangerous he is. And to make matters worst, the man that she adored, the one that she gave her heart to, is emotionally unavailable.

"The perfect men for me would be, Jesus Christ, Paul of Tarsus, Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Prince Charming."

"That was an eclectic group of individuals. Why them?"

"Because they dedicated their lives to the servitude of others. They knew about responsibility."

"You would also spend a lot of time alone. They're servants of the people." Nina informed her.

"True, but at least I know where I stand in terms of commitment. They wouldn't just come in the house one day and say 'Honey I'm home. By the way, I'm packing my things because my ex wife is pregnant and the child might be mine. Thanks for the ride. I will exit smartly to my left.'" Everyone sat there stunned. They weren't use to Angelina discussing herself so openly. She was usually so calm and collected that no one realized that she in fact had any problems. Her life seemed perfect.

"Well I for one would pick, Adrian, Asmar, Stephanio, Michael, and Nicholas." Nina said.

"They're all Constantine's, except for Asmar. What gives?" Tamara asked.

"I know all of them, and they know me. I wouldn't have to start from scratch. I like familiarity."

"Makes sense. Okay, Tamara, it's your turn." They turned to see the young woman.

"I'm going to keep it real. I would take: Jay Z, Bill Gates, that Sheik who just married that American sister, Bari something is his name, his whoring brother who keeps cheating on his Ethiopian wife for that bony supermodel, and the founder of Oracle."

"Money." They all said.

"Yep. I would happily exchange romance for finance any day of the week, if the price was right."

"Oh, how youth speaketh." Gail mocked in a Shakespearian voice.

"His name is Sheik Bari al Naiyyir, of Bakntiyar; his brother's name is Khaliq. His mistress is said to be Katrina Stavienpov, the model." Angelina left out that according to Sheik Khaliq, he was her number one fan.



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"And you know this... how?" Gail asked, all interested in what she had to say.

"It just so happens that I know Katrina, Bari, and Khaliq. I've met Bari's wife Nideriah only once. No one has met Khaliq's wife Rashida, but from what I've heard, she is beautiful. She's very ethnic looking." She was surprised that she had given up so much information, although everything that she had mentioned could easily be verified by using Google.

"I keep forgetting that you hob knob with the rich and that you're famous." Lisa said.

"Modeling my father's fashion hardly qualifies as famous. Hardly anyone can afford his stuff anyway, so I am not easily recognized." Angelina defended. She wasn't comfortable with her success as a model and always tried to down play it.

"Anyway, so you know the 4-1-1 on whether or not the Sheik is banging the model." Gail asked, her reporter instinct coming to the surface.

"I've never seen them doing anything except hold hands. From what I understand, the Sheik's marriage is an arranged one. Katrina knew the prince way before he was expected to wed." She felt a need to defend her friend. She knew that Katrina was having a hard time accepting the fact that Khaliq was married. She really liked him.

"Anyway, whose turn is it?" Nina asked. She saw the alarm go up in Angelina's expression. She didn't want to put her on the spot knowing her situation, and how much courage it took Angelina to open up to others.

"It's my turn." Lisa said. "My top five picks are: Trech, from Naughty by Nature, Tupac, Tony Montana, Al Capone and John Gotti."

"Thugs." Gail said.

"You really like living on the edge." Nina said.

"So you would pick a thug to live the rest of your life with. Unbelievable." Gail said, disappointed at her answer.

"Girl, yeah. Thugs are real. I'm not talking about the hoodlums pushing rocks for a couple of dollars. I'm talking about the ones on top of their games, who have earned their peers' respect. They challenge the establishment while making up a few rules of their own along the way. I love bad boys."

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"Well, I can't hate. Now--" Gail had started, but she stopped talking when she noticed that Angelina was speaking Spanish rapidly to the men over at the next table. She sounded angry.

"Hey what's going on?" Nina asked. She didn't know a lot of Spanish, but the words that was coming out of Angelina's mouth she recognized as cowards, bastards, and, she wasn't sure, but did she questioned his sexuality? Angelina turned around to her friends.

"These assholes were listening to our conversations and commenting on us in Spanish. They didn't even have the balls to say it in English." She turned and gave them a dirty look. "They said that we're money hungry and lazy and want men to take care of us, and that's why we'll never catch a man. That women of color weren't good for anything except fucking." The men at the table who made the comments were now trying to apologize.

"I am sorry for what was said. We didn't mean it. We were a little offended by what you women were saying about the men. There is no excuse for what was said but we are sorry."

"No, there is no excuse for what you said, and the only thing that I think you regret about the situation is getting caught. I believe that you meant every word that you said, be a man and own up to it." Angelina argued. "As a matter of fact, just leave us alone." She said a few more choice cuss words in Spanish and the man and his two friends turned red and sat back down at their table.

"Wow. That was intense." Tamara said.

"I hate it when people think that it is okay to judge others by their skin color. They had no idea that I speak Spanish and that I have Latin blood flowing inside of my veins. So it's okay for him to just say anything that he wants to with out recourse."

"I know that's right. Adrian taught me Italian and when I'm around his snotty cousins, I have to put up with their sexist remarks. At first I was embarrassed, but then I started to tell their asses off. But knowing a foreign language is always a plus."

"I agree," Tamara said.

"Hell, I have a hard enough time trying to learn English properly. I want to master English before I dabble into any other languages." Lisa said. "But, what were we talking about?"

"Men that we'd love to wed," Nina answered

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"How about a new one. What about most embarrassing moments?" Lisa suggested.

"Only if you lead by example." Nina challenged.

"Okay I'll go first. You know that I've had a hard time with my relationship with Dek."

"Yeah, we've been telling you to get rid of that loser for three months now." Gail said.

"Longer than that," said Tamara. They all agreed.

"Well, I told you that I finally broke it off with him, right."

"Yeah, and now what? You guys are back together again?" Tamara asked.

"No. I told you that it was over. I didn't tell you why." Lisa said.

"Okay then, go on."

Lisa covered her mouth and coughed. She was trying to hold in a laugh. "Well, after the last fight we had, I hooked up with him for a little TLC." The women rolled their eyes, but she kept on. "I had him strip for me, and everything was going well. His body was banging and what not. He got down to his underwear and did a little gig. He put his ass in my face when he pulled down his underwear. I was like '*his ass stinks*.' I didn't say it out loud, but that's what I was thinking. Girl, when he crawled into my bed... he had tissue still stuck in the crack of his ass. After I saw that, he had to go, and I haven't seen him since." The women all laughed until tears rolled down their cheeks, and they were holding their sides.

"I can't beat that. I feel embarrassed for him." Angelina said.

"Ilk. That was nasty." Tamara said through hysterics. "It took a shitty ass for you to get rid of him. Now I've heard it all."

"Okay, who's next"? Lisa said.

"I'll go." Nina volunteered. "Well, a couple of months ago I got a yeast infection."

"Yuck. You can keep this story to yourself." Gail said.

"No, I want to hear this." Lisa interrupted. She was anxious to hear Nina's story.

Nina continued. "I've never had one before, so when I got one, I didn't know what was happening, I just assumed that since I itched down there, that I maybe had ingrown hair bumps. So, what I decided to do to remedy this little problem is to take some rubbing alcohol."

"Oh no." The women groaned.

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"Yes, I took some rubbing alcohol and poured it down my vagina. Girl, my pussy was on fire."

"Fire." The other women sang.

"Girl, you know better than that." Gail said. "Any sign that points to an irregular coochie means go directly to the doctors."

"I don't know what I was thinking. It was a good idea at the time."

"Well, I hope you've learned your lesson." Tamara said.

"Yes I did. Douche, dicks and Doctors are the only things to go up there. Now it's your turn." She told Tamara.

"Okay. I have to say that my most embarrassing moment came during oral sex. I was getting served when all of a sudden, I queefed right in his mouth."

"What's a queef?" Nina asked.

"A pussy fart." Lisa answered.

"Yuck, that's nasty." Lisa voiced negatively.

"And embarrassing. You could have kept that story to yourself."

"No she couldn't. That was embarrassing so she had to tell." said Angelina.

"Alright Angelina, it's your turn." Nina agreed.

"Okay. Let me see. Oh, I was with someone sexually and he was pleasuring me Orally. When my phone rang. It was my sister Estella. She left a message telling me that I should be with this individual sexually. He heard the message. I was so embarrassed."

"Boring. I know that you can do better than that." Tamara challenged. The others agreed.

"I fell on the catwalk, fashion week in New York in front of the whole world." She offered.

"And so has every other model. We need more."

Angelina rolled her eyes. "You chica's are greedy."

"Okay, one day last month while rushing to get to my hair appointment, I went to exit off of the freeway when this beat up car cut me off. I had to hit my breaks to slow down, so as the driver passed me, I flicked the man the bird. Let me tell you, I got up close to his car to give it to him and I liked to have died when I saw his face... It was Father Logan from my church."

"He didn't recognize you did he?" Nina asked.

"You know he did, and to make matters worst, Sunday's message was on the consequence of rage."

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"Now that is embarrassing." They all laughed.

"Yes it was. But I have to call you out Lisa. Your embarrassing moment involved someone else's embarrassment, not your own. We want a story about you."

"But I was embarrassed... for him."

"She's right. It has to be about you." Gail said, Nina agreed.

"Hey. What about you Gail? You haven't shared a story with us." Tamara informed. "You have to tell us something."

Nina was still the only one who was aware of Gail's situation with Eric. She was wondering if she was going to bring that up, and if so, how would everyone take it. That incident wasn't exactly funny.

"Well. I have a story, but please never repeat, or ridicule me about it. I'm still haunted by what happened to me. Promise." She asked.

"Promise." They agreed.

"Alright." She paused. "Here we go. One night I was on my way home from the club with this fine ass Mandingo. I was looking tight. I mean I had on my fuck me leather outfit, and my fuck me leather high-heeled boots, looking like a dominatrix. I had the tah tah's out, the whips and chains were in the car, just in case I wanted some roadside service, which I did. But we didn't have any condoms, so I agreed to go into the Mart. Girl, I walked in there with my head up high cause I know that I look good. A group of teenyboppers were eying me and whistling as I went by, but I kept my head in the air. I had one mission in mind... fucking." She paused for a moment, shivered then continued. "Anyhow. I had my hair in a long ponytail that came down my back. It was one of those clip on pieces right. So when the guy said. *Damn baby why it gotta be all like that.* I just tilted my head up further and walked on. I didn't see the ice in the middle of the floor. I slipped on the ice and fell backwards. My hairpiece flew off of my head and landed right in the front of this old white couple's buggy. The old lady grabbed her husband's arm in fright yelling *what the hell is that?*"

The women fell out in bellowing laughter.

"So what did you do?" Angelina asked captivated by the story.

"I did the only thing I could do... I kindly went over in front of the buggy and picked up my hair, and clipped it back onto my head. I went and got the condoms and left. The sad part about it was, at the time, my hair was like three inches long, so I had to gel it and spritz it up into the

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ponytail, which looked like a Smurf's tail. The guys that caused this mess were rolling on the floor laughing at me."

"Oh... my... god. I cannot take anymore. No more embarrassing stories," Tamara said with a shaky voice.

"Yeah, we need to be talking wedding talk." Angelina was relieved to quickly change the subject. Her most embarrassing moment was when she fell in love with a jerk who played her like a guitar string, then left her for another instrument. She just didn't want anyone to know.

"All that is needed is a final fitting. And I can't thank you enough for getting your sister to do the dress. It is beautiful. Better than I imagined it could be. "

"No, you did her a favor. That dress earned her a heap of publicity and it's duplicate is on all of the magazine covers. She can't wait to take over my father's business."

"She does great work."

"I know. I'm so proud of her. So we're all set, right?"

"Right."

"It's getting late, I need to be going. Night." Angelina said. She was tired and had to catch a flight to Japan for a fashion show the following morning, she would be back before Nina's wedding. This was going to be a long week.

"Me too. I know Adrian will be looking for me to come home soon. He's been harassing me about staying out late citing that it's not good for the baby. I just think that he's a worrywart, so I better be going too. I'll see you all next week." Nina said.

"Okay."

"Night."

\* \* \*

"So, are you ready for the big day," Asmar asked. He and Adrian got into a Saturday routine of watching the afternoon sports and talking about Nina and Shanna. Adrian was learning a lot about the black woman, and Asmar was able to get a lot off of his chest regarding him and Shanna.

"About as ready as the last time that we've talked about this."

"You know that you don't know all the words to the song. You better learn them. You gotta represent for the men when you do this." Asmar said. They were planning a surprise for Nina at the wedding reception.

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"Okay. And I have a small surprise for you."

"What's that?" Asmar asked.

"You my man will be sharing a limo with Shanna." He knew that Asmar would be excited.

"Thanks man. I really appreciate it."

"No problem."

\* \* \*

The wedding went off without a hitch. Nina's mother cried during the entire ceremony. Ann, on the other hand, looked as if she was suffering from constipation. Both fathers seemed to be getting along with each other very well. And if there were any questions before that Asmar and Shanna were in love with each other, than it was gravely evident now. Shanna kept looking over at him and he hadn't taken his eyes off of her.

"What's going on with those two?" Charlotte asked Nina.

"Ma. Not today." Nina told her. The toast interrupted them.

Stephanio was the first to give a toast to the couple. He made everyone laugh. James gave a heartfelt toast that made everyone cry. When the salutes were finished, Adrian got up and spoke.

"I want to thank Nina today for making all of my dreams come true." He turned and faced her bending on one knee he said, "I love you more than words can ever say. More than you will ever know. And for that, I prepared this." He signaled to the band. The music to Prince's 'Adore' came on, and right there, in front of two hundred guests, Adrian sang to Nina.

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### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nina knew that her sister was going through a hard time with her self-imposed ban on Asmar, and Asmar looked even more pathetic than she did. So it was with great joy that Shanna's divorce became final the same week that Nina had celebrated her twenty-ninth birthday, which happened to be a week before her due date and the fourth of July. James and Charlotte took the divorce well, however, they took Shanna's admission to having an affair with Asmar, very hard. They cried and scolded her on how wrong it was to cheat, no matter what her husband had done, she was suppose to stay faithful to her vowels until death due them apart, or until a divorce had been granted. Nina felt sorry for Shanna, especially since hers and Adrian's relationship was going so well. They had been married since the first week of March, and Nina had never been so happy in her life, yet her feelings of euphoria were over shadowed by her sister's unhappiness. She tried to convince Shanna to go out with her and the girls on Friday's, but she was always unsuccessful. She felt more comfortable spending her spare time at the store, or working on her ideas for the store.

Nina stopped going out to the club about two months back when she started showing, but she was convinced that that was her downfall because soon after that, she gained twenty pounds, all in her belly area. Nina complained everyday about her enlarged figure, while Adrian seemed to relish in her anguish. It seemed that the bigger she got, the more attracted to her he was. She jokingly threatened to file a restraining order against him if he didn't stop coming home from work three times a day wanting sex any way that he could get it. And God bless him for that, because she was horny all of the time. Adrian always made her feel good, and she regretted the problems that they had over the company. He was proving to be the man that she always wanted him to be, however, she did feel a little envious of the fact that everyone was working while she stayed at home. So tonight while Adrian was in Italy attending to business, she and her girlfriends were going out to dinner. Tonight she would prove to the world that a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy, carrying



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around a ten-pound baby could be sexy too. She inspected her reflection in the mirror. 'Not bad.' She thought. She wore a black miniskirt with a brown, cream, and black spaghetti strap doll baby dress that was almost as long as her mini skirt. She wore her favorite pair of shoes by her favorite designer, A. Costas, compliments of his daughter, Angelina. They were black leather high-heeled sandals that strapped up to her calves, making her legs and feet look sexy. Her hair, which had started to grow back really fast, went past her shoulders; it was parted down the front and bone straight.

"My name is Pocahontas," she said to her reflection. She wore chandelier earrings and a thin choker necklace that extended to her mid section. Her make up was flawless; she opted for the bronze look, with a subtle gold lip-gloss. She had to admit to herself that she looked great.

The doorbell rang and she went to answer it.

"Looking good girl." Angelina complimented her.

"Thank you, thank you. You look good too." She meant it. Nina couldn't help feel like a beached whale next to Angelina and her svelte figure. Tonight she wore skintight pants that looked as if they were painted on. Her off the shoulder, spaghetti strap white shirt was as flimsy as tissue paper, but was nice. It fit like water flowing on her body. She wore large diamond earrings, a diamond bangle bracelet and a canary yellow diamond ring that was huge. Her hair was in spiral curls around her face. She applied minimal makeup to her skin, charcoal eyes and her ruby red lips.

"Are you ready to go, *chica*?"

"Yes, I'm ready." They left to go out to dinner.

\*\*\*

Adrian lay down in the bed in Northern Italy, breathing in the fresh air thinking of his pregnant wife. He was tired and wanted to get back home to Nina. He missed her and wanted to make love to her. He wanted to talk to her and be with her, and if it were possible, he'd probably crawl up inside of her. He had a hard time keeping his hands off of her since she's been with child, but it was more than that, he found a connection between them that is stronger post marriage than it was when they were dating. He wasn't sure if the pregnancy had anything to do with it, but he was incredibly attracted to her. All he had to do was wait a few more hours and he would be with her again. His cell phone rang. It was his mother.

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"Hello."

"Adrian. How are you doing?"

"I'm well. I can't wait to get home."

"Yes, you need to soon. Nina should be having the baby any day now, right?"

"Yes, she's due next week, but she called me to tell me that they may induce labor early since the baby is so big. Already about ten pounds."

"That's great son. But what I was wondering is if you can do me a favor and speak with your father for me. Ever since he found out that that child was not his, he's been on a mission to find out who her father really is. I mean, it really is none of his business, and he needs to feel blessed that he dodged that bullet." Ann said annoyingly. She didn't understand why Nicholas was so obsessed with this woman's life. She wasn't of his flesh. Maybe he hadn't gotten over her mother. Was Ann competing with a ghost? She wondered.

Adrian sighed. He knew that his parents were going through a tough time since Nicholas found out that the daughter he briefly thought was his wasn't. Adrian could almost relate to his longing but couldn't quite empathize. He still felt that his father was a selfish bastard who let his dick cloud his good judgment, causing his mother a life of misery.

"Don't worry mom, I'll have another talk with him." The last talk that he and Nicholas had over his attention to his ex mistress's daughter, almost had them two coming to blows. Nicholas wanted to act like the Good Samaritan, but the woman didn't want anything to do with him, she even accused him of being a pervert after Nicholas kept bothering her. She threatened him, which fascinated Nicholas even more. Crazy.

Adrian watched as the sun faded into oblivion. He wished that he could share this time with Nina. She would have loved the natural beauty of his grandfather's country. She would have loved to go skiing in the Alps, which were just north of them. Or have loved to have gone crazy with shopping when she found out that France was to the west of them, and Rome were to the south of them. He never really thought about why he had never brought her here, but that was a mistake that he was quickly going to remedy once she had this baby.

\* \* \*

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Can you put the cookies on the shelf for me, sweetie." James asked Shanna. He was talking with a customer that he hadn't seen in a long time, as he bagged up his groceries.

"I tell ya, there's nothing like almost dying to help you give up dem there pork." Mr. Johnson was saying. He had just got out of the hospital from a heart attack last month. "I said to God. I said 'God. If you let me live, I'll never eat another piece of pork again.'" He laughed. "And I mean it too. And that damned Betsy, she made pork chops my first night home. I had her make me some broiled chicken. I'm too young to die, and I'd just become a granddaddy to Earl's baby girl. So I gotta watch what I eat now."

"Hold up a minute. I have something for you." James said, and went down the magazine isle. He picked up a Health magazine and a healthy living cookbook. He gave it to Mr. Johnson.

"Now you read this magazine. It'll help you on your road to recovery. And give this cookbook to Betsy. We can't have her derail your progress. We want you around for a long time. And come in each month and help yourself to a new copy. As a matter of fact, each time a new one comes in, I'll have it behind the counter waiting for you."

"You know that I can't take this."

"Why not? You've been a good friend and a great customer for almost twenty years. Let me return the favor." James said, and the man thanked him and left.

"Shanna." He called out to her. "Every time one of these magazines comes in, I want you to reserve one for Mr. Johnson, for free. Also, he is to get one of these cook books free too. Got that?" James asked.

"Yes, dad. You know that you're a big teddy bear." She went up to him and gave him a hug. Nina, who had been stocking the cigarettes, had came over and joined in on the hugs. She was glad that things were getting back to normal between her parents and Shanna, especially between her father and Shanna. They heard the bell sound as the door opened. It was Asmar. Oh damn, Nina thought.

"Hey there Mr. James. Nina." Asmar quickly greeted. He turned to Shanna and asked "May I speak to you for a minute?"

"Um. Yeah. Let's talk in the back." She pulled his arm and took him to the back of the store.

Nina then turned to her father "You're taking this pretty well." Nina told James.

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"She's a grown woman. I respect her decisions on who she dates. I'm just happy that she's officially divorced. That way it's not sin in God's eyes." James said.

"Damn. Here comes Mark." Nina said. He was coming through the door just as Asmar and Shanna was coming from the back, holding hands.

"Leave Nina. And call the cops. Mark looks crazy."

"But--"

"Now!" He yelled and Nina rushed passed Mark out the door to her car.

"What do we have here? I wondered why my lovely wife wants to divorce me and now me knows why." Mark chanted. He was slowly dancing towards Shanna and Asmar. Asmar placed Shanna behind him. James went behind the counter of the store and brought out his bat. For the first time in over ten years, he regretted not having his gun.

"Leave my store now." James said. He came up behind Mark with his bat in his hand. "It's over, now go."

Mark glared at Asmar, and then turned to face James. "A whore of a daughter you raise is it not." He brushed passed James, who swung a left hook landing squarely on Mark's right jaw. Mark stumbled backwards a few steps then regained his balance and stood up straight. Walking over to the door he opened it and stepped outside. Reaching inside the waistband of his jeans, he pulled out his gun that had been hidden. Holding the door open, he walked back inside, and opened fire, hitting James twice in the chest. James fell back into the isle shelf before hitting the floor. Blood spattered everywhere. Mark then turned the gun towards the storage area where Shanna and Asmar were standing in horror. Fright or flight instinct kicking in, they turned to run into the storage area. Asmar, in his haste to shield Shanna, was hit in the back. He shoved her into the storage room as he fell to the ground. A bullet hit Shanna in the back of her left shoulder as she stumbled inside the storage room, locking the door behind her.

"Come on out here you bitch. I told you that death was the only way out of this relationship." Mark yelled.

"Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God." Shanna chanted while sitting behind the storage room door. "Please God let Pop and Asmar be okay." She prayed.

Back in her car, Nina saw Mark pull his gun out and heard the gunshots. She immediately dialed 9-1-1. The operator answered at the

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time she heard the second round of gunshots. "Please. He's shooting. Oh my God!" She yelled hysterically. She got out of the car and was running for the store when a contraction hit her hard, stopping her dead in her tracks. She couldn't go in there; her baby will be in danger.

9-1-1 was still on the line telling me what to do. Nina heard the operator's voice and put the phone back up to her ear. The operator got her location and all the information that she could gather.

"Please hurry." She begged the operator. "I can't see anything." She cried.

"I've dispatched the police to your area and they should be coming any moment." The operator assured her. His smooth voice helped her calm down.

\* \* \*

"You know that this is all your fault." Mark said calmly. "You didn't have to divorce me. We could have worked through this. I love you. And what do you do, you go and fuck around on me. With this piece of shit." He leaned over and hit Asmar over the head with the butt of the gun. "It didn't have to be this way. I know that I was wrong for cheating, but it's your fault. You act so proper, with your high-strung ways. I did what I was supposed to do. I kept you in fucking furs, and expensive clothes and shoes. I gave you that nice house next to your mother and father. I worked my ass off getting you things and this is how you repay me!" He bellowed. "I know that I was fucking other women. Hell, I needed to. You weren't going to fuck me the way that I needed to be fucked. And I told you before, they were just pussy. I love you." He whined and banged the gun against the door. "You mean the world to me. And you go and ruin it with this mother fucker here." He kicked Asmar in his side. Asmar lay silent. A moment later, he heard sirens.

"You hear that. It's the police. You think I'll let them take me!" He raged. "I will kill all their asses, and yours too, you bitch, now let me in!" He was kicking the door in. "Stupid." Kick. "Bitch." Kick. "I will kill you." His last kick was successful and the door came down. Just then the police came in through the front door.

"Freeze." The officers yelled. Mark rushed into the storage room taking a hit to the back. He grabbed Shanna using her as a shield. She saw Asmar lying on the floor in a pool of blood. She tried to bend down to him, but Mark had her in a choke hold. "I got you." He sang.

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"Put down your weapon." The cops ordered, but Mark was not complying. He positioned himself against the wall in the storage closet with Shanna shielding him. They heard the other cops break through the back door. As the police got closer to the storage closet, Mark loosened his hold on Shanna's neck. "Get down on your knees bitch." He ordered and she complied. "You don't even deserve to die." He told her, right before he turned the gun on himself and opened his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Shanna heard the screams surrounding her, but she didn't budge. The body of her ex-husband fell on top of her trapping her, she was powerless to move. She felt herself being dragged away from the scene, but she couldn't get her mind and body on the same page. Asmar and Pop are dead, she kept saying to herself. Then after a few moments, she remembered seeing what had happened to Mark, and she started to scream. The officers had taken her out of the store using the back entrance, which allowed her to walk past Asmar's unconscious body, while catching a glimpse at her now deceased father's body.

Nina was spared the scene. She was being tended to the paramedic who insisted that she go to the hospital.

"I need to see my family." She argued.

"Please ma'am, you'll get more information at the hospital. We need to check you out." The paramedic pleaded. Nina had no time to argue before a thunderous pain hit her. She was having another contraction, the third one in the past fifteen minutes. The medics took advantage of her weakness and strapped her onto the gurney and hoisted her into the ambulance, but not before she saw them gurney her father into the other ambulance.

\* \* \*

Adrian's plane had just landed and was walking through the terminal when he saw his mother and father. The look on their face was sheer anxiety, and he wondered what was going on. Ann ran up to him and hugged him.

"Nina's in labor." Ann blurted out. Nicholas walked up to him and hugged him.

"Hurry up and get your luggage. I'll go and get the car." He said.

"What's going on?" Adrian asked. He knew that something wasn't right. His parents should be a bit more excited.

"I'll tell you in the car." She said.

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"No, you'll tell me now. Is Nina and the baby okay?" He questioned. His heart rate was speeding up. "Let's go." He grabbed Ann's hand and started walking.

"No. It'll take your father a few minutes to get the car. Calm down and get your luggage. The hospital is only three minutes away from here, so we'll make it there in time for your child's birth." Ann assured him.

"Okay." He said and grabbed his luggage and left. Two minutes later, Nicholas brought the car around the main entrance and Adrian and Ann got in. He drove rapidly away from the Pensacola's regional airport.

"So what's going on?"

"Nina's in labor. Her blood pressure is sky high so they're preparing her for delivery. She also told me that her father has been shot by her sister's husband." Ann told her.

"Is her father dead?" He asked

"I'm not sure. She just said to get a hold of you because the baby was coming. Your father and I were already at the airport waiting for your plane to land." Adrian had made plans for his parents to pick him up at the airport so that they could meet Nina's parents before the due date as a way to extend an olive branch for the problems that they had caused in the past. They thought it was best to do it before Nina went into labor. Just in case they needed to clear the air.

"Was Nina hurt? What about her sister?"

"I'm not sure. Nina was crying when she called. Said that she was in labor, and that Mark, her sister's ex-husband, shot her father and some Arab guy. Then she said that she had to go. She had already dilated four centimeters." They reached the hospital in just a few minutes. They were directed to the maternity ward.

Adrian heard Nina crying when he arrived. The nurse took his name and ushered him and his parents to the prep area. Nina was hooked up to different machines and monitors. She turned her head towards him. He went over and sat down beside her and held her. His parents gave them their privacy and stepped out of the room.

"He's gone Adrian. My daddy's gone." She cried into his shirt. She let go of his shirt and lay back down. The pain evident was in her face.

"Okay breath, sweetheart." He coached. "Calm down." He rubbed her hair back. "Where's your mother?" Adrian asked.

"She came up here to check up on me and then she left." Nina cried out again.

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"Did she tell you that your father was dead?"

"No, I saw him. I saw when him as he came out of the store. He looked dead when they put him in the ambulance." She cried.

"Were you hurt? Is the baby okay?" He asked.

"I'm fine. I'm in labor though. She's coming tonight."

"Is there anything wrong with the baby?"

"Not yet, but my blood pressure is really high."

"I'm going to get mom and dad to come in and sit with you. I'll come back and check up on you when I find out what's going on. Okay."

"Don't leave me. I'm scared." She grabbed a hold of his shirt.

"It'll be alright, baby. I'll only be gone for a few minutes." He let her go and went out to the waiting area to talk to his parents.

"Wait here until I come back. I'm going to see what's going on with the rest of her family." Adrian told his parents.

"Okay, you do that, but don't be gone long." His father told him. He didn't want Adrian to miss the birth of his first-born.

"Ann." Nicholas approached his wife. He took her hands in his and looked her in the eyes. "That young girl in there needs us. She is our family and she may have lost half of her family in just a blink of an eye. I want to be here for her, for our son, and our grandchild. Can I count on you to stand with me?"

"You know that you can. No matter what has happened, I will always stand behind you."

"I love you, Ann. I am sorry for the jerk that I've been, and I will try to be a better man to you. I know that I don't deserve your forgiveness, but if you find it in your heart to forgive me, I'll make you proud of me. You won't regret it."

"And your obsession with Lynn's daughter?"

"It's history. I felt guilty and angry with myself for what I did to you. I may not have shown it over the last few years, but do I love you. I love you more than anything else." They heard Nina cry out and looked towards the door.

"We better get in there." Ann said. They walked hand and hand to the room. "I love you too." She whispered into his ear when they reached Nina's bed.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Adrian found Charlotte in the room with Shanna, holding her hand and trying to comfort her as her medication took affect over her body. They were preparing her for surgery, but they needed a sedative to calm her nerves. Adrian walked over to Charlotte, she let go of Shanna's hand and stood up and hugged Adrian.

"James is gone," she cried into his chest. He held her tightly.

"Oh dear God. I am so sorry to hear that." He allowed her cry on him.

"How are Nina and the baby doing?" Charlotte asked when she finished crying. The medical staff had come in to take Shanna into surgery. Charlotte kissed her on the forehead before they took her away. "I'll most likely be in labor and delivery when they are finished. Is there anyway that I can be notified when she's out of surgery?" Charlotte asked the nurse.

"Yes ma'am. I can call the nurse's station in the maternity ward when she's out of surgery if you'd like." The sympathetic blond offered.

"That would be fine, thank you." Charlotte agreed and Adrian escorted her to the maternity ward.

"We should tell Nina that James is in surgery. She doesn't need the stress of knowing that he's gone. Adrian, I can't believe that my James is gone." Charlotte cried again. He was relieved that she had at least formulated a plan as to how to deal with Nina. He just hoped that Nina would fall for it. They reached the maternity room floor and were told that Nina had been moved to the birthing room, she was seven centimeters dilated. Nicholas and Ann were holding Nina's hands as she was in the middle of having a contraction. Adrian went over to where his father was and took her hand from him. Charlotte did the same with Ann. She took Ann's hand in her other hand. "I'm Charlotte James, Nina's mother." Ann squeezed her hand. She caught the subtle look in Charlotte and nod of the head towards Nina. She didn't want Nina to know anything upsetting.

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"I'm Ann Constantine. Adrian's mother." She introduced herself and sat down in the chair.

"How is daddy doing? I want him here," Nina cried.

"He's in surgery," Charlotte lied. She didn't break a tear. Adrian admired her, he knew how much pain that she was concealing, and the courageous effort it was taking for her to not break down.

"Is Shanna okay?" Nina asked.

"She's in surgery too. They have to remove a bullet from her shoulder. But she'll be okay." Charlotte answered. Her stance faltered for a brief moment, then she regained her composure.

"What about Asmar? Is he alright?" She asked. This was the first time that Adrian had heard about anything happening to Asmar.

"He's also in surgery. He was shot in the back and he suffered some head injury, but he'll most likely make it." Charlotte assured her.

"Did they get him? Did they get Mark?" Nina asked. Another contraction hit her hard, she started panting. "Their two minutes apart." Ann told them. She went out to get the nurse. The nurse came in and checked the fetal monitors, then checked Nina.

"Let me go get the doc." The nurse said. "I think its show-time."

"Here she comes." Adrian said. He looked at his father: "Has either of you called my cousins?" Adrian asked.

"Everyone knows. It'll be a while before they get here from Destin." Nicholas said.

"I think that we should hold off on company. With everything that has happened today, it'll probably be best if we give Nina and her family some time alone. If they want to see the baby after she's born, then that's fine. However, I don't want Nina bothered." He ordered.

"I'll call them immediately." But before he could grab for the hospital phone, Nina was having another contraction.

"Ow! God I want to push." Nina screamed, then groaned and panted.

"Have they given her an epidural?" Adrian asked.

"No, she was already too far gone when she came in. Her labor has gone very fast." Charlotte let them know. When they arrived the nurses said that she was too far along to get anything stronger than a pain reliever.

The nurse came back soon after Nina's declaration. The doctor came in followed by the staff. She had a long needle that she used to burst

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Nina's water. Ten minutes later, Adrianna Nicole Constantine entered the world weighing a whopping eleven pounds and twelve ounces.

"She's big." Charlotte said.

"Huge." Ann agreed.

"Congratulations son" Nicholas patted Adrian on the back.

"You've done well."

"Look at all that jet black hair." Ann cooed.

"She is beautiful isn't she, ma. I can't wait for daddy and Shanna to see her. They are going to spoil her rotten." Nina said, so absorbed in her new special delivery that she hadn't noticed her mother's tears.

"Excuse me, Mrs. James, your daughter is out of surgery." The nurse came into the room.

"I'll be back as soon as I can." Charlotte kissed Nina and left.

"We need to take her now, mom." The orderly said to Nina. He took baby Adrianna away to get cleaned up and her blood work done.

"Mom. Dad. I need to speak with Nina alone for a few. Will you please excuse us?"

"Sure son. We'll be stalking the nursery until you're finished." Ann told him. Nicholas and Ann kissed Nina and Adrian before they left out of the room.

"I know. He's dead." Nina said.

"Yes, he's gone. Your father's gone, baby." Adrian hugged Nina.

"And how is everyone else doing? For real this time."

"Just as your mother said, with the exception of your father. My mother mentioned that an Arab guy was shot?" Adrian asked.

"No. I don't know anything about an Arab man getting shot." She said then realized that they had made a mistake. "They must think that Asmar is the Arab guy. I told them that Asmar got shot. They probably assumed that he was Arab."

"Um. Is Mark really gone?" She asked.

"Yes. From what I gather, he turned the gun on himself."

"I hate him. I'm sorry, but I hate him."

"I know. I know."

Nina and Adrian talked about the events that had gone on that day in the store. Later on that day, the police came in and finished taking her statement and then left. Nina and Adrian continued to talk when the nurse's interrupted them to by bringing Adrianna back into the room. Ann and Nicholas were fast on their heels.

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Nicholas was a proud Grandpapa. "Wow. She's beautiful." He noticed that Ann was doting on her granddaughter, who for some reason seemed to calm the savage beast in her. This relationship between Ann and Adrianna is going to be interesting. He was anxious to see how it develops.

"Mom, we know that your milk hasn't come in; however, if you can try to get her to feed she'll get full off of your colostrums. If for some reason that doesn't work, we have bottles that she can use." She turned to Adrian and said "Dad, we have some paper work for you to fill out." Adrian nodded and she gave him the clipboard with the paperwork.

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Nina was only able to visit her sister twice in the five days that Shanna was in the hospital. However, she did call every day and talk with Shanna, who seemed to be harboring a lot of guilt. She assured her sister that this wasn't her fault, and that Mark had been planning to kill her since she'd left him. He even said so. And after a while of talking, she started to feel as if Shanna was coming around.

\* \* \*

Two weeks after his death, Alessandro Julius James was laid to rest. Hundreds of people attended the funeral. Charlotte and her daughters were a rock. They helped Nana who was having a hard time. She was sitting with Ida, who was also belting out a lot of tears. Adrian went over to sit with them for a moment. Adrian held Nana's hand and stroked her silver hair.

"It will be okay." He assured her in Italian.

"This is not natural. He is supposed to bury me, not the other way round. Why?" She cried.

"It's okay."

"Is there anything that I can get you, Sophia?" Charlotte asked. She knew that Sophia was taking James' death hard, and she felt for the woman.

"No, *bambina*. You sit and grieve. You have been a great wife to my Alessandro for thirty years. I know for a fact that he's loved you for everyday of that time. You sit. You have served this family since you and Alessandro created it. Now today, you let everyone serve you." Sophia advised her. Adrian moved out of the seat that he'd occupied and let Charlotte sit down. He then went over to sit by Nina, Shanna, his mother and father. Ann was holding Adrianna, who had been drawing a crowd

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all day. His mother had been a God send these past two weeks. She and Nicholas stayed in Pensacola and often watched Adrianna, allowing Nina to tend to other family matters.

Nicholas and Ann absorbed the compliments their granddaughter was rightfully getting. Even in the mist of sadness, Adrianna was such a joy.

"Nina, Little Momma needs to be fed." Ann told Nina. She had picked up on the nickname that Nina had insisted on calling Adrianna. Nina took her from Ann and went upstairs to her old bedroom. She lay on her side and nursed Adrianna. Adrian came up and rubbed her back. Nina looked at him from over her shoulder.

"She's a greedy little goblin." Adrian said.

"Yes she is."

Looking over Nina's shoulder he spoke to his daughter who was quietly suckling her mother's nipple.

"Be gentle with that, little girl, because in six months, it's mine again." Nina laughed and rubbed the hair away from Adrianna's face.

"She takes after you." Nina said. Adrianna had jet-black hair, white skin, and they later found out, blue eyes. Nina thought that she would at least have some black features, but she didn't, making her wonder if it was because of her daughter's physical traits that she couldn't quite connect with her. She was a mother, and mothers were supposed to have some sort of emotions towards their children, but she couldn't bring herself to feel any joy towards Adrianna.

"She has her mother's beauty." Adrian assured her. He was concerned for Nina's lack maternal instinct towards Adrianna. Ann confided to Adrian that she suspected that Nina was suffering from depression, and that he should watch her carefully. She also scolded him for planning on going back to work next week. He felt as if he'd spent enough time away from work.

"Mom is so courageous." Nina told Adrian.

"Yes, she is. All of you are." He agreed.

"I'm not. Right now I just want to die." She confessed. She was tired of crying, and knew that her family needed her to be strong, but inside she was a mess. "I'm tired."

"Then go to sleep. I'll wake you up when it's time to go."

"No, I don't want to leave mommy. Can we stay another week?" She asked.

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"Whatever you want." Adrian agreed. He removed Adrianna from Nina's nipple once they both were asleep.

\* \* \*

Charlotte told Nina and Adrian that although she appreciated their company, it was now time that she grieved alone. Shanna went home a week after the funeral, but not before there was an argument between her and Charlotte. Asmar had called from the hospital to send his condolences and to thank everyone for the flowers. Charlotte gave a cold reception to his call. She asked Shanna if she was still going to see that boy, Shanna didn't feel as if Asmar warranted that kind of hostility, he hadn't done anything wrong, but in fact may have saved her life. Charlotte let Shanna know that she felt as if some of the blame rested on hers and Asmar's shoulder. Adrian, Nina, and Ida who were the only witnesses to Charlotte's statement were shocked.

"That's not true, ma." Nina defended. "Mark had been threatening Shanna for months, that's the why I convinced her to move into Adrian's apartment. Shanna and Asmar hadn't seen each other since my wedding, and she hadn't been with him for months before that. Mark was oblivious to Shanna and Asmar's relationship until he walked in the store that day. He was going there to kill her because the divorce was finalized, so you got your information wrong." Nina retorted. Shanna had already left and did not hear her sister defend her. Charlotte broke down and cried.

"I'm sorry." She cried.

"Let Shanna know how sorry you are. She didn't deserve to be brow beaten for something that wasn't her fault. She doesn't need to live with that kind of guilt." Nina told her mother. Charlotte picked up the phone and called Shanna.

Shanna didn't answer because she was on her way to the hospital to see Asmar. She wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone from her family. Her mother had just confirmed her worst nightmare since her father died- everyone blamed her. Well, maybe not Nina, but her mother sure did.

*That motherfucker kills my father, tries to kill me and Asmar, and I get the blame,* she thought.

Her phone rang and she started to answer it, but saw that it was her mother's phone number. She didn't want to talk to her right now, so she kept driving.

"Nina call your sister, she won't answer her phone." Charlotte pleaded.

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"I don't blame her ma. Just give her a few hours to calm down, and maybe she'll be apt to speaking with you. But I have to say, calling her out like that was wrong. How do you think she feels?"

"I know, but I'm so angry. I've lost my husband, and she's working on a new relationship. It just doesn't seem right," Charlotte countered honestly.

"She deserves to have happiness. Mark was abusive and controlling towards her. She didn't want to tell you and dad because she didn't want you all to be disappointed in her. Mark had already been cheating on her with some girl he had just paid to have an abortion. She only found out when the girl came to Shanna's house to confront her about the affair. Shanna said that she didn't want to believe it until the girl dropped the bomb that she had Chlamydia, and that Shanna should get herself checked out, which she did. She had the STD, and after that, she left Mark. She didn't want to keep taking risks with her life; especially after knowing what Mark was doing out there. She always assumed that he would exercise caution when having sex outside of the marriage. That incident confirmed that he wasn't." Nina admitted. She didn't feel comfortable telling out her sister's business, but Charlotte needed to be put in her place. "Shanna had to endure getting an HIV test and having to check for other STD's. It was stressful waiting for the results, so her wanting to get on with her life was well deserved. The fact that it was Asmar was a plus. I personally can vouch for his character, and if dad were here, he'd tell you the same thing too."

"You're right, and I hope that your sister can forgive me. I have made a grave mistake towards her, and for that I am sorry. Right now I just want to be alone. You and your husband go back home, I'll be fine." She insisted. "I need sometime to sort things out, and to grieve. I also want to make things right with your sister."

"Okay, mom, we'll be packed and get ready to go with in an hour."

"Let me hold my grandbaby before you go. I'll hold her while you and Adrian get everything together." She took Adrianna into her arms. "I tell you, she sure takes after your side of the family. If I wasn't there to witness the birth, I'd swear that you spit her out, Adrian."

"I was hoping that she looked just like her beautiful mother, but no one's that beautiful." Adrian complimented.

"Ooh, stop it, you're making me blush."

"It's the truth."

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"Flattery will get you every where," Nina whispered into his ear.

"Hey, you still have four weeks before any you two can do any hanky panky." Charlotte reminded them.

Adrian kissed Nina, and they went upstairs to pack their things. When they finished, they gave Charlotte and Ida a hug and kiss and they left.

\* \* \*

"Knock. Knock." Shanna said as she went into Asmar's room. His ex-wife and son were also visiting him. She was taken aback at first, but then she quickly recovered.

"Hey, baby, come in." He said, and she walked over to the bed and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "How long will your arm be in that thing?" He asked. Her arm was in a sling and she still wore a bandage around her breast area.

"For a couple of months," she told him. "Listen, I'll come back if you'd like." She offered, noticing that Alicia was giving her dirty looks, and his son seemed a little uneasy. "No, I've been waiting for you to come and see me. Here, let me introduce you. Alicia, this is my fiancée, Shanna. Shanna, this is Alicia. And this right here is my son, Jamal." He introduced. Shanna went over to the end of the bed and extended her hand to Alicia first, and then Jamal.

"You're a handsome dude. How old are you Jamal?" Shanna asked.

"I'm six. Are you going to be my girlfriend?" They all laughed.

"She's my girlfriend." Asmar told Jamal.

"Awe man. You're too old for her dad." Jamal groaned.

"No I'm not. She's the perfect age for me." He declared.

"If you say so, she's going to wear you out." The little boy said and shocked Shanna.

"Watch your mouth." Alicia said.

"Okay mom. Hey, do you have a sister?" Jamal asked.

"Yes."

"Is she as pretty as you?" He asked.

"Yes, and she's also married."

"Aw man. I want a girlfriend."

"You need to be worried about starting first grade." Alicia said.

"Hey Mal." Asmar called his son by the nickname that he'd given him when he was first born.



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"Yeah, dad?" Jamal walked to the top of the bed. He spoke to his father face to face.

"Listen. I need you to do me a favor, okay buddy." He asked.

"Okay dad, what is it."

"I'm going to be in and out of the hospital for the next few weeks going to therapy and what not. I need you to call up Shanna every now and then to make sure that she's all right. Also, I'll need you to make sure that you take extra special care in making sure that you listen to your momma carefully. I need to know that you'll do that for me, okay?"

"Sure dad. I can do that."

"Be respectful to your mom and listen to her, okay."

"Okay."

"Now give your old dad a kiss." Jamal leaned over the rail and kissed his father. He then went over and sat on the edge of the bed and resumed watching television. His favorite show was on.

"Alicia, can you come here a minute." He asked. She walked over to the top of his bed.

"You don't mind him calling Shanna sometime do you? I really want them to establish some sort of bond before she and I get married."

"I'm cool with that, as long as she doesn't mind." She looked over at Shanna who nodded.

"It's fine. I don't mind him calling, or coming around anytime you want." Shanna offered.

"You baby-sit?" She questioned.

"I don't see why not, although I've never babysat before, I'm sure it couldn't be that hard." Shanna answered truthfully. Alicia's face lit up.

Looking at Shanna he asked, "Can you make sure that Alicia gets her support check?" She smiled and nodded to him. "I'll turn over all of my finances to you. I have an allotment to Alicia for her support checks, however, she and I split Jamal's miscellaneous expenses like school clothes, and sports." She saw the smug look on Alicia's face.

"Okay. I'll do that for you." She agreed, making a mental note to get a receipt for every dime that went into the woman's hand. Shanna couldn't wait to go through his finances to see how much this woman was getting for support. She knew that Asmar had Jamal three days out of the week, so how much more did he compensate for the other four nights that he wasn't there.

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"Okay, Bug," Alicia said using Asmar's street name. "Jamal and I will be going."

"You take care, and come and see me soon." He told his son who gave him a hug. Jamal started to cry.

"What's wrong little man?" Asmar asked.

"I'm afraid that you won't come home."

"Awe son, I'm going to be home, soon. I just need to recover and then I'll be home to kick your butt in flag football." Asmar assured him.

"You can't kick my butt. I'll kick your butt." Jamal rebutted.

"We'll see. So go home and practice, because I won't be taking it easy on you okay."

Jamal gave his father a hug and kiss. "Okay. I love you daddy."

"I love you too, son." He told him.

"I'll see you around pretty lady." Jamal said to Shanna.

"I'm looking forward to it. It was nice meeting you." She said to Jamal then turned to Alicia "It was nice meeting you too."

"Thank you. It was nice meeting you also. And for the record, you are as pretty as Asmar has been bragging about." Alicia told her.

"Thank you, you're beautiful yourself." Summer meant what she said. Alicia was pretty. She was a medium brown color with shoulder length black hair. She was on the petite side. There wasn't anything spectacular about her, but she was comely.

"Hey, baby, can you do me a favor and give that teddy bear over there to Jamal." Asmar pointed his head in the direction of the television. There was a plant that her mother had bought with a get well soon teddy bear on it. She went over and got the bear and gave it to Jamal. "Here, give this to your little sister, and tell her that I said hi." Asmar told his son.

"She'll love this, dad."

"Where is Selina anyway?" He asked Alicia. He noticed that she blushed slightly.

"She's with her father. I need to be getting her anyway. Tank is going out of town tomorrow, so he asked me to pick her up by four." She looked down at her watch. "And it's three-thirty. It was nice meeting you, Shanna. I'll see you tomorrow." She told Asmar. Then she and Jamal left.

Shanna went over and gave Asmar a passionate kiss on his lips.

"Now that's a kiss." He commented.

"She's nice." Shanna said.

"Yeah, she's a good girl."

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"And your son is not only handsome; he is also charming, and funny."

"Just like his dad."

"Yeah, a chip off the old block." She teased.

"So how are you doing, baby." He asked. He saw the sadness in her eyes when she came in. That's the main reason why he was so anxious for Alicia to go home.

"I'm alright. I can't complain."

"Yes you can. Now tell me what's wrong." He demanded.

"My mother holds me responsible for my father's death." She confessed.

"What?" Asmar tried to sit up, but couldn't. He mashed the button on the side of the bed and reclined into an upright position, looking directly at Shanna."

"She said that it was my fault that Pop is dead."

"She's lost her mind. I can't believe that she flipped the script and blamed you. I'll talk to her and straighten this out. Don't worry about it, mommy." Shanna laid her head in his chest and cried. Asmar wished that he could put his arms around her, but his injuries made it impossible.

After a few minutes of crying, she sniffed and sat down beside his bed. She stayed with him all night. She went and got some clothes and checked herself into a hotel and bought some new clothes. She settled her affairs with Mark's family, who tried hard to stick her with the house payment since his insurance wouldn't pay up for suicide. She told his mother to come up with the payment since she and his other family members were staying there. They were also heated that Mark had never changed his will and in not doing so, she became his benefactor. Although Mark was not filthy rich, he had money. He had a savings account, a money market account, CD's and all types of other liquid assets, all totaling over three hundred thousand dollars. His family was anxious to get their hands on the money and was angry that she was entitled to it. After learning that they didn't have a legal leg to stand on, they resorted to harassing her.

Shanna called around and sought out legal advice from a few lawyers, then she went to her minister and sought out spiritual counseling. The healing process had started for her. After careful consideration, she decided to pay off the house that Mark's family was staying in with the money that she inherited from Mark's death. She

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handed over the left over money, which totaled sixty thousand dollars to a women's shelter, because she'd be damned if his family were getting anything more from her. And when she told his mother what she had done, the woman looked horrified.

"Now how we supposed to live? We can't afford to pay the taxes each year." She told Shanna.

"That's not my problem. I gave you the house, now sell it." Shanna told her.

"But that's me son's house. That's all I have left of him."

"Sell the house or keep it. That is your choice. But don't bother me again for any reason." Shanna warned her. Mable looked angry with Shanna, as did her daughters, Olivia and Judy, but there wasn't anything that they could do especially in the lawyers office, where they had agreed to meet Shanna.

"You're a bitch and you'll get your comeuppance, I'll make sure to dat," Olivia threatened.

"That is a threat to Ms. James?" the lawyer accused. He turned to the stenographer and asked her if she recorded the incident. "Yes sir," She replied and read back what was said. The women looked livid.

"Ms. James, I would consider pursuing a restraining order against her for threatening you.

"I'll think about it." She considered and then looked back at the three women. "Your son made my life hell, so don't get it in your heads that I owe you anything, because I don't. If you want to blame someone, blame Mark. He's the one who killed my father for no reason, and shot Asmar and me for no reason. He and I were divorced.

Olivia was angry. "That's right, why should you be entitled to his money? You two were divorced."

"He was the one who didn't bother changing his will, or naming one of you as a benefactor. When I left him last year, I didn't lead him on, or go back and fourth with him. I moved on, and he should have too. So if you think for one minute that I'll let you get away with harassing me, you are sadly mistaken. I will not let you victimize me. Your worthless son has already done enough of that for a lifetime. And Olivia if you want a piece of me, then bring it on, because I won't run, and I definitely won't hide. And if you want a piece of this, I dare you to come and get it." Shanna threatened back. She saw the look of fear in the women's eyes. They didn't know that Shanna had it in her to be ruthless. They always assumed that

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she and her sister were timid little rich girls who were defenseless, but no, this one had bite. She had a furious look in her eyes that made the other women rethink their position. The lawyer himself had become weary of Shanna.

"That'll be all," Mable said. She made up her mind to sell the house. She could get a lot of money for it anyway. There was something in Shanna's eyes that warned her that she meant everything that she'd said.

"That'll be wise." The lawyer agreed. And with that, everything was settled between Mark's family and Shanna.

A month after their meeting at the lawyer's office, Mark's house was sold, and Shanna never heard from his family again.

Charlotte called her everyday. She explained that she spoke in anger, and that she loved Shanna very much. She even welcomed Asmar to supper if Shanna would come. Each time Shanna declined the invitation, opting to cut her losses. She opened the store back up in early October, and hired someone to operate the front of the store, while she managed. Since she was having a hard time being in the store because of the memories that it caused, she had decided to renovate it.

When Asmar got out of the hospital, they got a condo together. He stopped asking her to marry him, deciding that when she's ready, she'll let him know. She asked him about his huge child support payment to his ex wife, plus the additional expenses that he covered for Jamal's personal upkeep. He told her that it was none of her business, and that his support for his son wasn't up for discussion. That it was between him and Alicia. She let it go, realizing that he was right. There was a price to pay for being involved with a man who had an ex-wife and child. After that, there were no problems between them. He went back to work, while she ran the store and its restorations. Charlotte often came down to the store to see her and the progress that she was making with it. She would give daily reports on how Nina's progress, which usually wasn't positive. Nina was suffering from a severe case of Postpartum Depression, and needed around the clock care. Charlotte and Ann took turns watching Nina when Adrian was at work, to make sure that she didn't do anything drastic, and to try and figure out how to help her cope better. Shanna visited Nina once a month and called to check on her progress weekly, she couldn't cope with anymore contact than that. She didn't know how to deal with her sister being sick, so she chooses not to deal with it at all. Betting that everything

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would be all right for their family in the long run, she was praying on it and she had faith that God was still in the prayer answering business.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Dude, this house is a mess. What gives?" Martin asked when he and Adrian stepped into his house. There was laundry on the couch, and dishes in the sink, and the garbage can hadn't been dumped. By the looks of things, neither his mother nor Charlotte made it to help Nina out today. Something had to be done about this depression thing. Nina hardly gets out of bed if she doesn't have to, and that included taking showers, and caring for Adrianna. Yes, she did feed her and occasionally bath her, but she had been more than comfortable leaving those chores to his mother and Charlotte, who didn't seem to mind picking up Nina's slack. They each rallied to her defense when he confronted Nina on the subject of her neglect, citing that it was depression, but if you asked him, she was lazy and feeling sorry for her self. If she really wanted to help herself, she would take the medicine the doctor prescribed to her, and get better. Nina and her problem were weighing down on his nerves. He hated to be an asshole, but she hadn't convinced him that she was sick. She just seemed lazy and uninspired to him.

"No one has come out to help Nina with the chores." Adrian explained.

"You should hire a maid to help her."

"She's home all day, why can't she do the damned house work? What else is there for her to do?"

"Take care of your daughter." Nina answered. She heard Adrian come home and decided to get up and try to connect with him since she knew that her depression was taking its toll on him. She had heard what was said and got angry by Adrian's response.

"You're not even doing that." He argued.

"Fuck you." She countered.

"I wish you would. Maybe then you can say that you did something."

Nina turned around and went back into the bedroom and slammed the door.

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"Hey man, that was way cold. You didn't have to talk to her like that. It's not her fault that she's sick." Martin said.

"Sick where? She would rather stay in bed all day and cry then to face the world. Her father's been dead for almost four months now, she needs to pick herself up by the bootstraps and move on. She has a child and a husband who need her."

"And she needs you. Man, you spend on average fourteen hours a day at work, five to six days a week. You are out of the country once a month. A duty in which you can appoint to any number of people at the office, but you choose to do so yourself, which makes me wonder, what are you doing? Or rather, who are you doing?" Martin whispered. "And if I feel this way, I can't imagine how she feels. On top of that, she can't help her depression; it's a chemical imbalance. She doesn't understand the way she feels." Martin saw that Adrian wasn't getting it, so he had to illustrate it for him. "Okay, imagine being awake, but in a constant state of dreaming. Imagine that you are a patron looking at your life through a window. Then imagine that something is controlling your emotions and that they have it set on none. You want to feel and do things like everyone else, but you just can't. There is an invisible barrier preventing you from connecting with yourself emotionally. Imagine that you are looking at your life and the lives of others through a window, and that everything is messed up, and there is nothing that you can do about it, because of that barrier. That is what it's like to have depression. This is what Nina is going through." Martin told him.

"And how do you know this?" Adrian asked.

"I have a psychology degree, dunce."

"You're kidding me."

"No. I do. I study human behavior.

Why do you think I love provoking Nina so much."

"I don't know, I never thought about it."

"Because she's always been so complex."

"Who Nina?"

"Yeah. She's an enigma to me."

"How so?"

"For starters, she was with you for so long without a commitment, when it was obvious that she wanted one and you didn't. Why would a woman want a man who only wanted her for the here and now?" He paused then continued. "I mean it's not like she was lacking in any



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department, and it could be just plain old L.O.V.E., but never having experienced it myself, I can only speculate on its effect on others. She gained nothing from the relationship except you, who is emotionally unavailable for the most part. You seem to withdraw out of the emotional bank when she's not kissing your ass, depositing a real bad attitude. In turn bringing out the worst in you. I've witnessed her change, and I have to say that it's the first time that she's reached out to you emotionally, begging for your help and the only thing that she's gotten in return is: *you'll be alright, help yourself by taking your medicine*, speech Am I right?" Martin asked.

He was dead on, forcing Adrian to wonder if the marriage could be salvaged now. He felt awful for what he had done to her.

Nina sat in the rocking chair by the bed looking at the television, but not really watching it. She was embarrassed by what Adrian had said, and felt bad about it. She wished that she could get up and move around like she use to, but she didn't have the energy to. The feelings of inadequacy washed over her, as she wished that she could feel something besides emptiness for her only child. She wished that she had the energy and the desire to please her husband in everyway that a wife was supposed to please her husband. She felt herself sinking into an empty abyss that kept getting deeper and deeper. She was so far gone; she didn't think that she could find her way back.

She didn't even care if she did.

\* \* \*

"You know that you're going to push my son away from you." Ann said. She was feeding Adrianna at Nina's house, in her back yard. Everything was looking better since Adrian hired some help. A landscaper, a cook and a cleaning lady made a big difference to the overall appearance of the house. Nina was still battling depression and in Ann's opinion, she was losing. The medication prescription that the doctor gave Nina still sat in the outgoing mail pile. She didn't understand why Nina's family was so against her taking the medication. Hell, it helped Ann get through a tough time in her life, and she really believed that Nina needed the barbiturates. Charlotte can light all the candles and hang all of the Rosaries that she wanted, but Nina needed drugs, and Charlotte is crazy if she thinks that she is going to sit there and let Nina die of depression. She was going to take matters into her own hands.

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"What do you mean?" Nina asked. She was sitting out in the sun fantasizing about hers and Adrian's wedding.

"I mean that you are a mess and you can't continue on like this." She picked up Adrianna and placed her into her mother's arms. Nina felt anxious about holding the baby. She felt like she was having a panic attack, and that she was overwhelmed. She really wanted Ann to hold Adrianna. Ann was so good with her. Nina found herself intimidated by her six-month-old daughter.

"Hold her and you are going to play with her." Ann demanded. She went inside the house and grabbed a blanket out of the linen closet. She went back outside to where Nina was holding the baby. Spreading the blanket on the grass, she took Adrianna away from Nina and laid her down on the grass. Adrianna immediately turned over and started to combat crawl.

"Now get down on the ground and play with her, and while you do that, I'll talk to you."

"But I really don't want to get down on the grass and play."

"Too bad, missy. You are going to regain your life back and I am going to help you."

"You can't help me!" Nina shouted. "No one can!" She then cried. It was her first emotional break down she had in months. Ann went over to her and rubbed the top of her hair with her hand. She pulled Nina up and helped her to the ground, she couldn't have guessed how frail and bony the young woman was, especially since she was wearing sweat pants.

"I am going to help you, but you must promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"You must try to help yourself." Ann insisted.

"I'll try."

"Now, how do you feel about medication?"

"I don't like taking them."

"Do you think that you can kick your depression with out medicine?"

"I think so. I want to."

"Okay then. I won't push meds, if you agree to counseling. You have your choice: Spiritual, hospital setting, or a life coach. I'll pay for it, I insist."

"No, I couldn't do that. I'll just talk to my pastor and see if he offers pastoral counseling for depression."

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"Okay, but I want to go with you."

"I don't see why not. I can probably use the support." Ann squeezed her hand. Nina smiled at her and she smiled back. Adrianna cooed and they looked at her.

"She is so special." Ann said.

"I know. In my heart I know." Nina confessed. "Hey, Ann, you mentioned the other week that you suffered from depression, I was wondering how you got over it? What did you use for treatment besides meds?"

"Well, I used the antidepressants for a number of years, however, back then not much was known about my condition, so I went to a mental hospital for a stint, where I received electroshock treatment." Ann had a sad distant look on her eyes. "But when Nicholas found out, he rescued me." She reminisced. "He rescued me, and from that day on, I was healed."

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Shanna was closing up the store when Mr. Johnson stepped inside. "I just need to get a few things honey, do you mind?" He asked. This was the first time that Shanna had seen him since her father's funeral, when he wished them his condolences.

"Of course not, Mr. Johnson. Take your time." She urged. 'Don't forget the magazine and book.' She thought she'd heard her father's voice speaking to her. She smiled and went over and collected the magazine and cookbook that was the latest editions. She then finished closing up the store and went over to the check out. He was ready for her to ring him up a moment later.

"That'll be fifteen dollars and forty-three cents." She charged. She then placed the magazine and book items into his bag.

"But I didn't pay--" He started, but she shushed him.

"It was one of my father's last wish for you to have this. I will honor that agreement." She smiled and leaned over so that he could kiss her cheek.

"You know that I see him in you." Mr. Johnson said truthfully.

"Thank you Mr. Johnson. He was a great man."

"That he was. Now let me go before the Mrs. sends out an A.P.B. on me." He grabbed his bags and left. She finished locking up the store and was turning out the lights when she heard a knock on the front door window. It was dark out, so she grabbed her purse; it held her newly

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acquired Glock. She went to the door and noticed that it was Sean Pierre, Mark's brother. What could he want?

"Come on and open the door, girl. I need to talk to you."

"What do you want?"

"A chance. You're a good girl and you should have a good guy. I'll treat you right." He said through the glass.

"No thank you. I am seeing someone right now, and he and I are real happy. Thank you for the offer, but goodnight." Walking away from the door, she went to the back of the store and used its exit. Her car was parked back there. She paused before getting into the car until she heard the back door click. Driving off, she made it home in record time. She was listening to Nina Simone when the front door opened. It was Asmar, and he was dirty and smelled of fire and metals.

"You didn't leave out of here looking like this." She told him as she walked up to him and put her arms around his neck.

"My welder had to take off today. His wife went into labor early, so I took over for him."

"Good for him. And how did it feel getting your hands dirty?" She asked. He nuzzled his nose to hers, and then kissed the tip of it.

"It felt good. I love getting my hands dirty." He smiled.

"Go and wash up and I'll let you get dirty... real dirty." Shanna said in a seductive voice. Asmar gave her a smoldering look before he started taking off all of his clothes. He let them fall onto the floor where they had landed. Shanna looked at his amazing body and smiled. It was sexual chocolate all over. His stomach was ripped, as was his chest. His face was perfect and his shiny baldhead... was sexy. Oh Lord. Her pussy was getting hot just looking at him.

"Hurry up and shower baby."

"I'll be out in a minute." He walked butt naked into the bedroom. Shanna decided to join him in the shower because she didn't want to wait for him. Pulling off her clothes in record time, she went to join him in the bathroom, but stopped. She watched him through the glass shower doors. He wasn't into really hot showers, so there was hardly any steam obstructing her view of him. She watched him as he washed his rock hard body. She smiled as he washed his upper body. He was so cute. She salivated as she watched him wash his firm torso. She gushed as she watched him clean his shaft, making it elongate as he washed it. She blushed as he washed his ass, cleaning the outer cheeks and then the

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crevices. He was so thorough in his cleaning, she might even toss his salad tonight, yes, she was in that type of mood. He rinsed off and then turned off the water. The water was still dripping in his face, so he had his eyes closed. He reached for the towel and dried his face. When his eyes opened, he noticed that Shanna was watching him. He finished drying his upper body and wrapped the towel around his waist and held his arms out wide. "What's up?"

"Turn around." Shanna ordered. He had learned a long time ago to just do what she says when she's in her freaky dominating mood. He would be the one who benefited the most if he cooperated fully. Turned around he put his hand on the shower door. Shanna walked over to him slowly and ran her fingers over his muscular back, stopping at the scar that he'd gotten the night that he was shot. It was a constant reminder of his sacrifice that he made on her behalf and she loved him. She kissed his still damp back as she wrapped her arms around his waist. She untied the towel and let it fall to the ground. Asmar shifted slightly, and placed both his hands on the door of the shower. Shanna fondled his cock, running her hand up and down his shaft, loving the growth and girth that was expanding as she stroked. She kissed his back then bent down on her knees so that she could get up close and personal with his cheeks, spraying feathery kisses on his chocolate bottom and stroked his cock gently, before placing her hands at the crack of his ass and widening his butt cheeks. He clinched his cheeks together, catching her fingers in his crack. She removed one hand and slapped his ass hard enough so that it would sting before placing it back into his ass and widening him again.

"Don't move a muscle. Your ass is mine." She commanded. He relaxed his cheek muscles and she spread them. She closed her eyes and darted her tongue out moving her face forward until it came face to cheek with his ass. She immediately smelled the fresh scent of soap and skin. Not bad. She encountered some hair, but it didn't deter her from her goal. The little puckered hole. When she made contact with the sensitive flesh, she flattened her tongue and licked up and down his hole. She darted her tongue out and invaded his tight basement, tongue fucking him as she occasionally slapped his cheeks.

Asmar grabbed his cock in his hand and jacked off as Shanna blew his mind by blowing his ass. Who knew that getting your back door invaded with a tongue could be so exhilarating? He felt both violated and inflamed.

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"I'm about to come." He huffed. Shanna pulled her face out of his ass and stood up.

"You won't come until I tell you to come. Do you understand me." She demanded. "Or else you get no pussy tonight. Now take me to the bed and fuck me."

"Yes ma'am." He answered. He turned around and lifted her into his arms. He grabbed the lubricant on his way out of the bathroom and carried her to the bed where he laid her down. Shanna spread her legs out wide to accommodate him. Asmar looked down to admire his beauty. Her skin was pale, her nipples rosy. She was so fair to his dark skin. A ying to his yang, and he felt blessed having her as his. He kneeled in between her legs and bent down to kiss her breast. He kissed around the dusky aureole, making her nipples elongated. He licked on the pebble hard nipple then softly nibbled on it. His right hand went down to her hairless pussy where he inserted his fingers into her hot loving chamber. He then inserted another long digit, moving his fingers in and out of her, drawing pleasure as he did so. Releasing the nipple that he was sucking on and paid homage to the other nipple. His fingers were soaking wet with her juices by the time he'd worked his way to her clit. He opened his mouth and tenderly consumed the delicate piece of flesh into his mouth. Shanna grabbed his baldhead and folded her legs because she was feeling the affects that he was sending through out her body. And when he removed his fingers and replaced them with his hot wet tongue, she was in heaven. She gyrated her hips and met him thrust for thrust as he fucked her with his tongue. She climaxed hard, but he kept licking her. His hands were scratching the inside of her inner thigh, keeping her body sensitive. When did he get control?

When he was content with his performance, he raised up over her. He placed the head of his dark dick into her creamy pink pussy. She hissed as he slowly fed her the first few inches of his snake. "Please." She begged.

"Please what?" Asmar demanded.

"Please give it too me." He fed her a few more inches then slowly withdrew then slowly and methodically he pushed back into her. Giving her just a few inches at a time.

"Who do you want to give it to you?" He asked. While withdrawing and then sliding a little more dick back into her.

"You Asmar. I want your dick. Please give it to me." She begged.

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"Then take it. It's yours." He plunged into her seating himself as far as he could go. He pumped into her hard and fast. Shanna held onto the headboard to keep from being jerked around as he mounted her with a fierceness that was barbaric. And she loved every minute of it. She came quickly, but was still horny. She was disappointed when he pulled out. He leaned over her; sweat was dripping from his body.

"Turn around." He ordered. He moved from between her legs to give her room to maneuver. She turned around and got down on all fours, loving it every time he took her doggie style. Folding her arms and dipping her back, she laid her head in her arms and awaited the blissful sensation of him entering her. He didn't make her wait long, as soon as she was in position, he parted her ass cheeks and entered her pussy. He grabbed her hips and stroked in and out of her until he was ready to spill his seed... almost. He pulled out of her pussy and placed the head of his large cock between her ass cheeks. He took his hands and spread them open.

"Asmar, you gotta use something." Shanna warned. She realized what he was about to do and knew that a dick that large in her tight ass would not make for a pleasant surprise.

"Shh." He told her. He picked up the bottle that he had laid down on the bed when he deposited her on it. He repositioned himself behind her, and opened up her butt cheeks. He liberally oiled her hole then inserted two well-oiled fingers in her cavity. She tensed and he removed his fingers.

"Are you okay?" He asked rubbing his cock around her hole.

"I'm okay. Just nervous." She admitted. He smiled then stuck the head of his cock into her ass. It immediately closed up around him. Shanna gasped.

"Tell me when, and I'll give you more, alright."

"Okay." She agreed, and after a moment she said, "Give me more." He spread her butt cheeks as wide as they could go with his hands then he pushed forward.

"Ow." She bellowed. "You're hurting me. It burns."

"It'll be okay." He said calmly. He was half way in, just a little further and he would be in the promise land. He felt her relax her grip on his dick and he thrust forward, plowing deep into her until he was totally sheathed. Shanna gripped the pillows again, trying to adjust to the pain. Why in the hell would anyone let someone do this to them more than once

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was beyond her. This is her first and last time getting stuck up the ass. In the mist of her frustrations and discomfort, something amazing happened. Asmar moved and the pain lightened up. It was uncomfortable having her ass filled with cock, but she was starting to accommodate to his size. His hands abandoned her butt cheeks and grabbed hold of her hips. He slowly pumped in and out of her. The more he pumped, the better she felt, until she was thrusting her hips backwards trying to get more friction between them. Asmar smacked her on the ass as he thrust forward.

"Now who's the man." He demanded bulldozing into her.

He fucked her hard while smacking her round ass.

"Your are." She answered. The faster and harder he thrust into her, the more pleasure she got. When her climax came again, it was violent. She shook and would have fell forward if it wasn't for Asmar, who grabbed hold of her shoulders and fucked her in a frenzy until he emptied his seed into her.

"Ooh shit, baby. Don't move." He cried out as he gripped her shoulders tight. When he was done coming, he lay on her back. She felt the sweat from his head trickle down her back. He then kissed her and slowly pulled out of her now aching ass, he got up off of her and lay down beside her, rolling her on her side so that he could spoon with her.

"My ass hurts." She whined. He bent down and kissed butt.

"Is it better now?" He asked when he came back up.

"No. But it's a start." She told him and rolled out of bed to the shower.

*That is one hell of a woman,* Asmar thought. And he was glad that she was all his. Finally.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Adrian saw the silver Porsche pulled up next to him. He was curious as to who could it be. His wondering halted when the car door opened and a long creamy leg extended. How long did those legs go? He was pleased to find a very short flowing skirt attached to the long legs. Whoever it was reached into the car and pulled out a pair of high-heeled sandals. Interesting. Adrian could only tell that she was blond and very thin. She finished putting on her shoes and stood up out of the car.

'Damn she's beautiful.' His dick immediately sprang to life. She had: blond hair, blue eyes, and baby soft skin. She was hot. No. She was glamorous.

"Hi there. Sorry I'm late." He heard Angelina call out. He turned to see her coming out of the door walking over to his conquest. He shook his head, not liking where his head was going. He was married to Nina; he shouldn't be lusting after strange women. The brief wave of guilt did not stop him from hurrying out of his car so that he could be properly introduced. He intercepted Angelina before she reached her guest.

"Hello Angelina. I was wondering if you've seen Michael today? I know that he wanted to talk to you since he's been in town, but it seems as if he can never catch you." He knew that Angelina was giving his cousin a hard time about their relationship, or lack there of, but he wasn't going to let this opportunity to meet this beautiful specimen pass him by; turning to the woman in question and asked: "Do I know you?"

"I'm Katrina Stavienpov." She said arrogantly. "And you are?" She asked clearly interested in him.

"This is my friend's husband, and my boss, Adrian Constantine. Adrian, this is Katrina." She introduced, making sure to specify husband. At that moment, she lost all respect for Adrian. She knew that he and Nina were going through something, but she didn't think that he was the type of man who would disrespect Nina like that. She was going to have a talk with him when she got a chance.

"Are you ready to go?" She asked Katrina.

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"Sure." She told Angelina, never taking her eyes off of Adrian. "I hope to see you around." She told him flirtatiously. This burned Angelina up. She made a mental note to warn her friend to stay away from him, but she knew that it would be a waste of time, because whatever man Katrina wants, that's the man she's going to get. Married or not.

Adrian walked into the house on cloud nine. He had thoughts about Katrina all day, and was wonderfully surprised when at five o'clock she called him. She formally introduced herself and asked him out for lunch, using the excuse that she wanted to pick his brain over some business ventures that she's considering. He accepted the offer and they made plans to have an intimate lunch at the hotel she was staying at on the beach. He knew that it was wrong, but hell, he hadn't had any sex in months, and when Nina did ration it out, it wasn't passionate at all. It was a physical release for him and a wifely duty for her.

He was relieved to come into the house and there were no guests. He had grown accustomed to having either his mother or Charlotte here when he came home. The music playing in the kitchen was a pleasant surprise, so was the smell of marinara as its pungent aroma filled his nostrils. Wondering if he had his Nina back, he walked into the kitchen and was amazed. Nina was dressed. Not in baggy sweats, her choice attire for the past nine months, but in a pair of cut off jean shorts and a tee shirt. She wore socks, and her hair was relaxed straight down past her shoulders. She turned around and he saw that she had on a little make up and wore earrings. *She looks great.* She has lost a ton of weight since she's had the baby, and with it she lost her figure, but her face still looked pretty. He got excited.

"Daddy." Adrianna said, pulling his attention to her.

Nina had her in a swing near the table. She was dressed similar to Nina. Her hair was in two straight black ponytails that extended to her shoulders. She was eating cheerios. Her blue eyes lit up when he walked towards her.

"How is daddy's little girl doing?" He asked and kissed her on the nose. He turned around and walked over to Nina. He kissed her on the lips.

"How are you doing today, honey?"

"I'm feeling pretty good." She answered honestly. Yesterday at therapy she had a major break through. She realized that it was okay for her to be excited about her child even though her father's death will be

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marked on the same day of Adrianna's birthday. Her therapist explained that it represents the ying and yang of life, that as one life is ended, another begins, and that she shouldn't feel guilt trying to reach out and connect with her child. Nina felt so relieved. Those words of wisdom were the lifeline that she needed to get out of the darkness that had consumed her.

The very first thing she did after her session was over with Doctor Paige was get her a burger. Although she generally wasn't a red meat eater, she felt the need to eat. After a quick stop at Sonics, she, Ann and baby Adrianna went on a shopping spree. She shut down a few stores and went bananas. She was positive that baby Adrianna was going to be the best-dressed baby on the Gulf Coast.

She also enrolled in a Baby and Me class at the local gym, which she went to this morning and had a ball. Feeling as if she'd awaken out of a bad dream, she now had a new lease on life. Looking at Adrian and felt confused. She loved her husband and appreciated the fact that he stayed with her, but she was pissed off at the way he dealt with her depression issue. The road to her recovery has been long, but yesterday's session had a pivotal break through. She actually connected with her emotions. She wanted to share her break through with Adrian, but yet again, he was at work. Realizing that's what she could count on him to do: Work out his problems with work. She reevaluated they're relationship. Since pawning her off on both of their mothers, he took to working sixteen hours a day coming home exhausted to deal with her. He normally would checked on Adrianna, took a shower and go to bed. He was up and gone by the time Nina awoke the next morning. His weekends were spent watching the game at his cousin's house if he wasn't working. The fact that he always took Adrianna with him only proved that he wanted to get away from her. But tonight was different, she felt angry and ready for action.

"We need to talk."

"Okay." She motioned for him to sit down.

"Have you eaten?" She asked.

"Yes. I ate earlier today."

"How was work today?"

"It was alright. Guess who I heard from?"

"Who?"

"Summer."

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"Why was she calling you?" Nina asked defensively. Summer had left the company and went to work for MACA just days after the incident at Adrian's house.

"She's doing well. She's getting married and wanted to send us an invite. I told her that it would be fine."

"I'll be sick on that day." Nina said and Adrian laughed.

"So what do you want to talk about?" She sat down at the table across from him.

"This isn't working out for me." There, she said it.

"What's not working out for you?" He asked calmly. His heart was racing and his stomach was getting knots in it.

"This marriage thing. I really don't think that were compatible. We can hardly stand each other, or say a word to one another. You would rather work yourself into an early grave than to be home with me. I can't make heads or tails of anything. I just think that we need a break from one another." She told him.

"You know what? If you want your space, then I'll let you have it. I'm tired of going through shit with you anyway, when all that you think about is yourself. Hell, you don't give me credit for a damned thing. I helped and supported you the best way I knew how when you first got sick, but nothing that I tried seemed to help; it just made you fall deeper into depression. How do you think I felt reaching out to the unreachable? I was hurting too, and no one seemed to care. So rather than leave you, I worked. I did what I knew how to do and what I knew would produce results. So fuck you and your self righteous psycho babble." He argued.

"I tell you what, you and your therapist can both go to hell. You awaken after a year long walking coma, thinking that you can dictate the way things should have been... You. You know what? There are no words for you, lady. I'll be happy to get my shit and go." He snarled at her.

Adrianna sensing the hostility in the room started to cry, both he and Nina went over to coddle her. Nina reached her first; lifting the top off of the high chair she undid the fastenings on the seat. She then lifted Adrianna up and held her, rubbing her back to comfort her.

Adrian came in closer and put his hand on the small of Nina's back as he hugged both of them to him. He kissed his daughter on her forehead. His eyes glistened with tears that threatened to spill. His heart started to hurt, but he knew that he could no longer stay here. He and

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Nina had simply grown apart, and that the only way they might have a hope in hell is to maybe spend some time apart.

\* \* \*

Adrian moved in at his parent's house. Both he and Nina worked out a schedule where they shared custody of Adrianna almost equally. He was bitter at first about the break up, but then he started to get back into the swing of things. Dating Katrina was probably the main reason for his quick recovery over the separation from Nina. He did shadow her every now and then to see what she was up too, which consisted of her mostly going out with her friends. Other times, she went to visit her mother and sister in Pensacola. Asmar confirmed to him that she was doing well. He wasn't sure if he should pursue the marriage or not. He hated being stuck in limbo, but there wasn't anything that he could do. The ball was totally in her court.

"What are you thinking about?" Katrina asked. They lay naked in her bed.

"Nothing much. Just the future." He responded. He was going to hate hurting her, but the moment Nina asked him back, Katrina was history. Until then, he would enjoy her precious body and all of her sweet charms.

"I love you." She admitted. It was the fourth time that she'd told him so. He wished that she didn't, it made him feel uncomfortable and guilty. It validated the fact that he was cheating on his wife.

He stroked the blond strands of hair on her head. "You're special." He told her.

"What do you think about marriage?" She asked.

"What about it?"

"What about you and me getting married as soon as your divorce is final." She said.

"What divorce?" he asked.

"The one your wife filed for the other day." She saw the questioning in his eyes. "You did not know that your wife filed for divorce?" she asked. He was jumping out of bed and getting dressed.

"How and the hell did you find out if I didn't know?" he asked.

"Angelina told me. She blamed me for ruining your marriage, asking me if I was happy that Nina decided to file for divorce. She had the nerve to call me a 'home wrecker.' Hey, where are you going?" she asked. He was already dressed and looking for his keys.

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"I'll be back later," he told her, grabbing his keys he left.

He drove the twenty minutes to Nina's house. He banged on the door.

Nina had just gotten dressed when she heard the banging at the door. Adrianna was in Pensacola at her mother's house, and she was on her way to get her. Nina had gone out last night with the girls. Her mother had business to take care of up here and picked Adrianna up. Nina was planning to work the store today and discuss some business opportunities with Shanna today, so she wasn't expecting company.

"Open up the damned door, Nina, I know you're in there." She heard Adrian's angry voice through the door. He pounded again.

"Damn it, he must've been served." She panicked. She decided to just nip it in the bud and face him. She opened the door and immediately regretted it. He was pissed. Adrian pushed past Nina and walked through the door.

He had started out both hurt and angry, the longer he brewed over the situation, the angrier he got, until he reached the house, tried to open the door with his key only to realized that the damned locks had been changed! All he wanted to do now was ring her pretty little neck.

"Katrina tells me that you've made plans to divorce me." He said slowly. He paced the floor while she stood with her hand still holding the door open. "Now imagine my shock when I find out, through the grapevine, no less, that my dear wife wants to divorce me." He hissed the word divorce.

"I want to explain--" She started.

"Oh, you're going to explain, and I advise that you close the door, because I am not going anywhere my dear."

Nina closed the door and walked into the living room. She sat down while Adrian stood over her.

"I cannot believe you. I hear through my girlfriend of all people that we're getting a divorce. I mean, it's not like you don't know how to get in contact with me, because you do. You have my address, phone number, e mail address, social security number, and place of work!" he yelled. "So why is it that I hear from someone else about your divorce plans?" He put his hands on his hips.

"It was sudden. I just went into the lawyer's office by chance, and decided to file for a divorce while I was there. I didn't see any need to

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stretch out the inevitable. You are seeing someone and from what my sources tell me, it's serious. I want to move on with my life, so I thought it was the best solution all around." She tried to reason it out. He wasn't going for it.

"I'm not giving you a divorce."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I don't want one. I meant it. We're going to be married forever; together or apart. I am not giving you a divorce. As a matter of fact, I've spent enough time away from you; it's time for me to move back home. It seems as if you've lost your mind since I've moved out." He began removing his clothes. "Where's our daughter?" He continued to remove his clothes.

"She's at my mother's house. What are you doing?" she asked.

"I need a shower, and I plan to spend the entire day with my wife, and my daughter, at our home. He was naked standing in front of her. She licked her lips, it had been so long since she's had him, she just wanted a little bit. She looked into his eyes as he stared down at her.

"You want some?" He asked, stroking his cock. She licked her lips, and then turned her head to the side. She didn't answer. She didn't need to; he already knew the answer.

"Well you can't have any. Not until I say that you can have some." He told her smugly and turned walking to the bathroom where he showered.

Nina sat, dumbfounded, on her couch. She could not believe what had just happened. He must have lost his mind if he thought that he could just come back home. Not when she had to hear about his little indiscretions via a tabloid magazine and Friday night gossip with the girls. Hell no, he's not welcomed home. She was going to move on just like he had. He had a lot of nerve expecting her to stay put. Her name's not Kizzy, and he sure enough was not her master. She got up and finished getting dressed. When she was finished, she looked in the mirror and admired her reflection.

She didn't have her shape back yet, but at least she didn't look like a starved crack addict, like she did just a few months back.

Adrian whistled, and she turned around to face him and stopped. He was naked as the day he was born, and sporting an erection. He walked over to where she was, looking down at her.

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"Now you can have some." He told her. She closed her eyes trying to delete the sexy picture he was conjuring up in her mind. It didn't work. She was horny for him. Stepping back, she removed her blazer and let it fall to the floor.

She unfastened her bra, exposing her large breast that she was sure could no longer pass the pencil test. He didn't seem to mind her large slightly drooping breast, so she continued undressing. Stepping out of her shoes and kicking them to the side of the bed, she unfastened the zipper of her pants and stepped out of them. She stood naked in her lacy lavender briefs waiting for his response. Nothing was said. She knew that he was studying her new figure. Her ribs showed and she no longer had curves. She was lanky with big breast, but when she looked into his eyes, she saw lust and love. He didn't care what she looked like. Whether she was potbelly with child, or skinny and sagging. He still wanted her, knowing that was a boost to her ego. She pulled down her panties and stepped out of them. She had let her pussy hair grow in, so this was his first time seeing it on her in a while. He licked his lips, and reached for her. She walked into his arms and he held her close kissing her lips as he lifted her into his arms. He backed into the bed and then laid down bringing her down on top of him.

"Sit on my face." He told her and she obeyed. She inched up to his face; he grabbed her hips and positioned her pussy over his mouth. She spread her folds with her fingers as she lowered her self onto his mouth. He stuck out his tongue and inserted it into her hot cavity. She rubbed her clit as he penetrated her box with his tongue. He had his hands on her tiny waist bobbing her up and down on his tongue until she came. She moaned as he fed off of her pussy juices.

"Ride me, baby." he said hoarsely.

Nina obliged as she moved back down and positioned her pussy over his cock then stopped. "I want it in my mouth."

"Then put it in your mouth." He told her. She moved down the length of his body until her lips reached his cock. She wet the head first, taking the smooth thick, pink skin into her mouth and sucking on it. She slowly moved her mouth over his shaft, taking in every inch of him until her mouth was stretched as far as it could go. She sucked on him until her cheeks caved in, relishing in the sounds that he was moaning. He wrapped his hands tightly around her hair, enjoying the feelings that she invoked in him.



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*God I love her.*

There was no feeling in the world like this. She was sucking on him making slurping sounds every time her mouth released his cock. It was driving him crazy and he was about to come.

Nina released his cock a final time, convinced that he was almost to the point of orgasm. She then climbed on top him and inserted his dick firmly into her pussy. He hissed as Nina rode him good and hard, rocking back and forth, savoring the feel of him inside her, as if she had nowhere else to go and that nothing else mattered. Adrian held onto her hips and thrust forward. She was blowing his mind especially when she scratched her nails against his nipples and ran her hand through her hair. It nearly stopped his heart from beating. She picked up the pace causing a rush to his libido. He was so close, he could feel it, but he wouldn't go, not without her. She rode him faster picking up the pace until she came. He pumped feverishly inside her, but it was the scratching of his chest that sent him into oblivion. She leaned over and rested her head on him. They fell asleep that way until well into the evening when she heard her phone ring.

"Hello." Her voice was groggy. Adrian cleared his throat and she realized that he was lying up under her. She eased over onto the bed. He turned on his side and wrapped his leg around her and started to snore in her ears.

"Nina. Is everything alright?" Charlotte asked.

She had fallen asleep and forgot to pick up Adrianna. "Hey, ma. I was sleep. I'll be on my way." She told her.

"Don't bother, she can stay with me tonight, I don't mind. Are you okay? Is there a man in your bed?" Charlotte asked. Nina didn't know how to respond, so she told her mother the truth.

"That's Adrian, he came over today. He found out that I was filing for divorce, so he came over here for a confrontation." She told her mother honestly.

"And the two of you landed up in bed together." She laughed. "I always knew that boy was smart."

"Really. Well, it doesn't change anything. I'm still pursuing the divorce."

"Does he know that?" Charlotte asked.

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"He should. Just because we sleep together doesn't warrant a commitment. I think that he'll start to come around and see things my way."

"I doubt it. That boy loves you and you love him. He'll never let you go."

"Yes he will ma. He has another girlfriend already lined up."

"And? That means what to you?"

"That means that he and I are over with. Done. Kaput. See you later. Peace. Bye." Nina yelped as the phone was taken out of her hand. Adrian put the phone to his ear.

"I have no intentions of divorcing your daughter. She'll have to divorce me, and I will fight it every step of the way. I love her, despite fact that she drives me crazy. To be honest, I spend half the time debating on whether I want to kiss her or spank her. But you have my word that I will never ever hurt her." Adrian promised.

"You better not. I'll go and let you handle your business. Don't worry about Adrianna, she's with Granny tonight."

"Thank you."

"No problem." Charlotte said and hung up the phone. Adrian handed Nina the phone. She hung it up and glared at him. He snuggled closer to her.

"Now. Where were we, Mrs. Constantine?" He asked and climbed on top of her and made love to her again.

They fell asleep again in each other's arms when he heard his cell phone go off in the living room. He eased himself away from her body and went to answer it. His phone displayed a missed call. He looked at the number and immediately recognized it as Katrina's. Damn. He picked up the phone and called her back.

"Where are you?" She demanded.

"I'm with Nina right now. Can I give you a call in the morning?"

"That's fine. I have to fly to New York tomorrow anyway. Have you talked to her about us being together? My marriage proposal still stands. I want you even if she doesn't," Katrina told him. "And remember that I have a hot juicy pussy waiting for you."

"I know that, and I appreciate it."

"And I love you, Mr. Adrian Constantine. I would love to carry your name, even if she doesn't."

"You're very special, Katrina."

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"And don't you for get it." She said and then hung up. He closed his eyes and smiled. Why couldn't he be in love with Katrina? She would be perfect for him instead of the migraine named Nina. He opened his eyes and there she was. Watching him, scowling.

"Who was that?" She asked. Her arms were folded over her chest. She had put on a tee shirt.

"Katrina."

"And she's special to you?" Nina had now included toe tapping to her stance.

"She is special. A real good girl." He told her honestly.

"Then go back to your good girl. I'm done with you." She told him and headed for the bedroom. He was fast on her heels.

"It's not over yet, princess. You have me for the entire night, and any other night that you want me." He climbed back into bed with her.

"Don't fool yourself. I slept with you because it was convenient not because I want you back."

"Shut up Nina. I'm tired of hearing your smack. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Give it a break and go to sleep. We'll have round two tomorrow." He turned his back to her and closed his eyes.

"Go to hell."

"I'm already there." He answered.

"Bastard." She turned her back to him and they eventually fell asleep in that position.

## The Price of Love

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It had been several months since Nina had filed for divorce. She had withdrawn her decree once, wondering if she was making the right decision. Then she saw pictures of Adrian and Katrina on a Caribbean island, living it up. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. She went back and submitted her petition for divorce. This time she would see it through.

She met with a lot of resistance when it came down to the divorce. Adrian wanted to be difficult. He bitched about the divorce settlement, saying that she was entitled to more than the pre-nup stated since no one bothered to factor in the price of gas, or the cost of daycare since she was returning to work. He also petitioned for joint custody with him being the primary custodial parent, having Adrianna four times a week, plus every other weekend. Of course he wanted Nina to have Adrianna Friday, Saturday and Sunday, while he had her the rest of the week. It was beginning to be a nasty divorce, however, they always seemed to come together for Adrianna's sake. They managed to be together just the three of them for every holiday, but they had decided to combine the two families, both her and his, for Adrianna's sake, and have Christmas dinner. Both Charlotte and Ann had become friends over the past year, so it wasn't surprising that Ann invited Charlotte and that she had accepted. Shanna was spending Christmas with Asmar. They were going to invite his family over to celebrate. Alicia, her daughter and Jamal were invited.

Adrian picked Nina and Adrianna up at four. It was the first time that they had seen each other in months. He looked great. He was wearing a dress shirt with some jeans and a leather jacket. His hair was styled giving him a youthful look. He was tanned, although it was the dead of winter. Probably from spending so much time in the island, Nina thought jealously.

"Is Katrina going to be there?" She had found out earlier this week that Katrina and Adrian were going to tie the knot. Nina had been furious, but she kept that to herself.

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"No, she went to visit her family. Are you ready to go?" He was so formal, so cool. He hadn't even looked at her with anything more than a passing glance, and she knew that she looked good. She has been putting on weight; she's been going to the gym, and watching what she ate. Tonight she had on a rust colored form-fitting sweater with tight jeans on. But it was her thigh high, four inch heeled boots that were the main attraction. Her hair was showered with ringlets spiraling around her face. She had on deep color make up. She looked good and she knew it.

"I'm ready to go. Adrianna is on the couch sleeping." She told him and he walked over to the couch and picked her up.

"She looks like an angel." Smiling, he kissed her on her rosy chubby cheeks.

"This is a beautiful dress."

"Our mothers had it made." Nina told him. Ann and Charlotte designed this elaborate gown and had it made for Adrianna. It was silk and lace. The red wine and cream color dress complimented her pale skin and contrasting black hair and blue eyes. She looked like a doll. Nina had her hair done in tiny Shirley temple curls with decorative barrettes.

"She was going to be the bell of the ball tonight." Nina smiled.

"Let's get going." He looked back at her; all emotions were void from his face. She grabbed Adrianna's bag and they left.

Adrian hoped that he'd make it back to his parent's house in one piece. He had a hard time focusing on anything but Nina. She looked great. He was trying to give her the space that she needed to do what ever it was that she needed to do, but he was a man, and having her this close after not seeing her in months was reeking havoc on his libido. He wanted Nina, and he wanted her bad. He realized that she was always going to be his weakness, that's why he made a valiant effort to move on with his life. He even managed to let Katrina coax him into an engagement. But he couldn't stop loving Nina. He often wondered if he was living with depression. Existing instead of living. Living without her was proving to be very difficult, but he couldn't live with her, she didn't want him anymore.

They reached Adrian's parents house in less than thirty minutes. It was decorated both on the outside and inside. The transformation was awe-inspiring.

Nicholas and Ann were the first to greet them. Nicholas took Adrianna from Adrian as they got out of the car.

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"How is Grandpappa's baby girl doing? Are you okay?" He asked giving her a kiss. She started to cry and Ann took her away.

"Grandma. Sheepy." Adrianna said rubbing her eyes.

"You can't go to sleep. I have something special planned for my girl." Ann told her.

Ann's face was lighting up. Oh boy, Nina thought.

"Let's go take a pony ride."

"Not in that dress." Nina objected.

"She's going to have her pictures taken on the pony." Ann responded.

"She'll be alright. Grandpa and Grandma will be there with her. Mommy and Daddy, too if you like. The photographer will be here until nine, so she'll be taking pictures the whole night." Nicholas explained. Nina felt more at ease.

"Follow me, the adults are in the living room." Nicholas guided them. He opened the double doors and the room was filled with guests.

"Well if it isn't Bobby and Whitney. About time you two arrived." Angelo sneered. A few people snickered, but no one laughed. A very large woman with shockingly blond hair against her tanned skin started to fuss none too subtly at Angelo. He turned red and told her that he was just kidding around.

Nina spotted Stephanio and went over to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek and a hug.

"Long time no see. You can do better than that. Give me a kiss on the lips."

"Not if you don't want to lose them." Adrian said coming up behind Nina.

"Still jealous. I just want one little peck. On the lips." Stephanio chided.

"And I want one on the lips too." Michael added.

Nina bent over and gave Stephanio a quick peck on the lips. She gave one to Michael too.

"Thank you, Nina. I've been touched by an angel." said Stephanio. "Now I can die a happy man."

"Try kissing her again and I'll make sure your prayers are answered." Adrian warned.

"Do you hear something?" Nina asked ignoring Adrian.

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"No, I don't think I hear anything." Stephanio mimicked, and they laughed.

"Let me take your coat." Adrian offered, and he helped her out of it. He also took her purse. He went over to his father who was surrounded by a crowd of people and took Adrianna's cape. Everyone cooed over her outfit. Rather than hang their things up in the coat closet, he took their things up stairs to the room that he was occupying since he and Nina split up. He was hoping that he could lure her up to his room for a little action. He sat her coat and purse down on the edge of the bed. Her purse fell down and some of its contents spilled out. He was stuffing the junk back into her purse when he noticed a picture. He pulled it out and his heart fell to the floor. It was a picture of Nina and Asmar hugged up together in a photo booth. It made him see red!

That lying bitch had been with him the whole time. They were probably just pulling the wool over his eyes the way they had thought that they were pulling the wool over Mark's eyes. He finished putting her belongings back into her purse, locked the door to the room and went down stairs, furious at what he had just discovered.

"What did you do to him?" Charlotte asked Nina. "He looks as if he's waiting for everyone to leave so that he can put his hands around your neck." She observed. Nina looked over at Adrian and realized that her mother was dead on. If looks could kill, she most definitely would be dead.

"What?" She mouth across the table. She noticed that when he came down from hanging up their coats he was in one hell of a bad mood. She decided to ignore him, she hadn't done anything to him, and she no longer had to deal with his temperaments.

He didn't even smile when they took their pictures with her and Adrianna. He just stood there like a GQ model.

She looked over at him. His eyes were glowing at her. The muscle in his jaw began to tick. Michael leaned over and said something to him, but he never took his eyes off of her. He did, however unball his fist. That was a relief. Nina decided to ignore him and enjoy what she could of the celebrations.

Nina's nerves were bad by the time midnight rolled around. Charlotte had gone back to her house. She was going to be staying with her until after New Years.

Nina stopped Michael on his way out.

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"Hey Michael, do you mind giving me a ride home?" She asked.

"Sure. Just let me let Adrian know what I'm doing. I wouldn't want him wondering where you'd gone."

"Or who you went with." Adrian walked up behind them. "I'll take my wife home. Thank you for watching out for her."

"No problem Adrian. I'll see you tomorrow." He shook his cousin's hand. Then he turned and kissed Nina on the cheek and left.

"Where are my things?" She demanded.

"Up in my room." He tugged on her shirt. "Let's go and get them." She walked up the stairs behind him, and into his room where she saw her coat and purse on the end of the bed, her pursed looked as if it were rummaged through.

"Who the hell had been in my purse?"

"It fell on the floor and all of your shit fell out. I picked it back up and shoved your things back in it."

"So what did you see in my purse that pissed you off?" She asked. "Or was it the peck from your cousins that has your blood boiling?"

"No dear wife. It's the fact that once again you've played me for a fool, that has me livid."

"Speak English please, because I'm completely lost in your utter bullshit. And although I don't care how you feel about me, I do hate being accused of something that I didn't do. Now talk!"

He went over and grabbed the purse out of her hand. He rummaged through it until he came up with the damning photo. He shoved it in her face.

"How long have the two of you been lovers, and I want the truth this time. I know that he's not fucking your sister, but you. Mark got it wrong. I was the one being played for a fool." His allegations floored her.

"You are way out in left field buddy. And though it's none of your business, this photo was taken just weeks after you dumped me, and just months after Asmar's divorce became final. He was depressed because he had gotten involved with Shanna, who wasn't sure how she felt at the time, and I was just starting to pick up the pieces of my life again. We went to the mall and took some photos after we came back from the movies. This is how they turned out. I was sad, and he was sad. He loved Shanna, and I loved you. Neither of us wanted to confess to the other one about how much we hurt, but each one knowing the other's pain. He and I



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have never slept together. Don't try to sabotage their relationship just because ours is all fucked up." She shook her head.

"I'm going to say goodnight to Adrianna, and I want to go home."

"I thought you'd stay the night. It is Christmas." He felt awkward and embarrassed. "I'm sorry for accusing you of cheating on me. When I saw those pictures, I convinced myself that there was a logical explanation for the failure of our marriage."

"There is a logical explanation... you." She continued her assault. "You have been toxic to this relationship and to me. When I wanted you, you betrayed me. When I needed you, you turned your back on me, and when I put defenses up around my heart against you, you rip it out and smashed it. I can't be around you because you are poison to me. A lethal dose of poison." The tears ran down her face. She felt tired, and she just wanted to go home.

"When did I rip your heart out? Is it about the money thing, I told you a hundred thousand times that I was sorry, that I regretted the decision immediately. What else do you want me to do? I can't go back and change what I did."

"You ripped my heart out when you betrayed me. You ripped my heart out when I needed you and you weren't there for me. You ripped my heart out by taking another woman to bed, when you said that you would always belong to me. You ripped my heart out by caring about her the way you use to care about me. You ripped my heart out by getting engaged to her." She cried. He held her in his chest. "Now you know. Can I go home now?" She pleaded.

"Please, stay with me tonight."

"Only if I can have my own room." He started to protest at her request, but then decided against it.

"If that's what will make you happy. All I want to do is make you happy Nina."

"You can sleep in this room, I'll go else where." He told her. He turned to walk away when she reached for his wrist.

"Just for tonight. Will you hold me?" She asked.

"Yeah, baby, I'll hold you."

They undressed and once again she was faced with the dilemma of no pajamas. He gave her one of his large shirts to sleep in. She looked around his room and smiled. He still had all of their pictures up that they had taken together.

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"They're a beautiful couple aren't they?" He asked.

"Yeah. They are." She agreed. He cut off the lights and they lay down on their backs facing the ceiling.

"I wish we could get it together long enough to make it work between us." Adrian said.

"So do I." She turned on her side and went to sleep.

"I will never love her as much as I love you." He whispered in her ear.

\* \* \*

"Asmar and I set a date to get married!" Shanna told Nina. Nina screamed and hugged her sister, and then she hugged Asmar.

"It's about you two made it official." She teased. She was happy for them. "You're not pregnant are you?"

"No, I'm not pregnant. I just want a legal union with the man that I love. In the sight of God." She explained.

"Now you sound like Charlotte." Nina told her. "And have you told her yet?"

Shanna face looked pained. "Yeah, she was the first one we told. She was polite about it. She congratulated us and wished us the best."

"But she wasn't ready to throw an engagement party." Nina guessed.

"Right. I guess she still blames us for father's death." Shanna said sadly.

"No, I know for a fact that, that's not it. She doesn't blame either you or Asmar for Mark's tirade. I think that she is just sad because to her it seems as if the world is still moving on and she's stuck on the day that daddy died. While we've been able to muddle through our grief, and get back on track. She has yet to put her feet forward to move." Nina told them. They thought on it and agreed that Nina was right in her assessment.

"And how are you doing with the divorce?"

"Adrian still refusing to sign the papers?"

"Yeah, he is." Nina looked at Asmar. "Hey, what's up with your boy? Why won't he sign the papers? He should be planning for his wedding soon." Nina asked bitterly. Asmar laughed and shook his head.

"You two are made for one another. He says that he's too busy to look over the papers, and that when he gets time, he'll take them over to his lawyers office."

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"Maybe if he'll stop gallivanting around in the Keys or Saint Tropez, he'll have time to sign the damned papers!" Nina argued.

"Hey, I'm just relaying to you what he said to me when I asked him about the divorce." Asmar and Adrian were back to spending a lot of time together, especially since Asmar was constructing a new addition to Adrian's parents' home. Shanna said that they were now joined at the hip.

They both turned when they heard the door chime. The last person she'd ever expected to see walk in.

"Well if it isn't Doctor Thomas. Are you here to make a house call? Or rather stores call?"

Although he wasn't in his doctor's garb, she still recognized him from the night he gave her Stephanio's prescription, and his phone number.

"Well if it isn't the sweet temptation." He flashed her bright smile. "You've been keeping out of trouble?"

"Pretty much. So what brings you down here?"

"Conference over at the hospital. I'm on a break as a matter of fact. I was coming in here to get one of them Italian Icee that I've been hearing such great things about. And then I bumped into you. This must be my lucky day." He flirted. "You work here?" He asked.

"I'm just helping out. My sister here owns the store. Shanna, this is Doctor Christopher Thomas. Dr. Thomas, this is my sister Shanna and her fiancée', Asmar." He shook their hands.

"So where is your boyfriend? I wouldn't want him getting the wrong idea and putting me in the hospital." He joked, but she noticed that his eyes shifted around.

"Unfortunately, we're no longer together." She told him..

"Depends on whose fortune it is darlin'." He winked at her.

"He's charming." Shanna cooed. Asmar rolled his eyes.

"What flavor icy can I get you, Doc?" Nina asked.

"I'll let you choose. I like all flavors." He said smoothly. She winked at him and left to retrieve it.

Nina came back with an icy that had several different flavors: Blueberry, cherry, grape, and banana.

He looked vexed.

"The colors blend together to make your tongue brown. It's also very sweet and juicy." She winked at him. He smiled at her and pulled out his card and gave it to her.

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"Here's my number. You can reach me anytime, day or night." He went to give her a bill, but she declined the bill. "This one is on the house." She told him. He licked the icy seductively.

"Thank you for the treat." He said opening the door to leave.

"Have a nice day."

"I will now that I've seen you." He left smiling as he licked the sweet icee.

"No, he didn't." Shanna laughed.

"Yes, he did." Asmar joked. He took the business card that Shanna was fanning. "I know that you don't plan to call this clown?" He asked.

"I might." Nina answered. "I might."

\* \* \*

"Whatever you're planning to win Nina back, you better do it soon. Some doctor guy is trying hard to push up on her, and she wasn't saying 'no'." Asmar told Adrian that following Sunday. They were watching the basketball game on television.

"To win her back, I'm going to have to reassert myself. I need a new game plan, and this time I'll win; I am willing to do whatever it is that I have to do to win her back.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nina watched Ann as she held Adrianna in her arms. The three of them had just gotten out of the pool and now sat at the table under the umbrella blocking out the sun. So much had changed in the past two years since she had issued Adrian his ultimatum, mainly their relationship. They were good friends.

Ann had helped her get through the most difficult time in her life, and she would always be grateful to her for that.

"Where's Daddy?" Adrianna asked, her wide blue eyes looking around for her father.

"He's not here right now honey, but Momma is here." Nina told her daughter. Ann pulled Adrianna's floppy hat lower into her face. She started to rub sunscreen on her skin, applying the smooth cream to every part of her skin exposed by the two-piece bathing suit her granddaughter was wearing. When she was done, she applied it to herself and offered the bottle to Nina.

"So, when is Adrian coming back?" Nina asked. In the eight months since their separation, she hardly had seen him. She knew that he spent most of his free time gallivanting around the globe with his supermodel girlfriend--fiancée. She still couldn't believe that he was engaged, or that he hadn't signed their divorce papers.

*But that was just like Adrian to start one chapter of his life before he closed the door on the previous one.*

She frowned looking at the yellow envelope, which held Adrian's copy of the divorce papers that he was suppose to sign. He was refusing to sign them, for what, God only knows.

Ann noticed her looking at the envelope.

"You are bound and determined to hand my son over to that woman aren't you?"

"He's getting what he wants." She didn't want to mention that Ann would finally get the daughter-in-law that she's always dreamed of. Being catty to her no longer held the appeal like it use to. She appreciated the

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efforts and courage that it had taken Ann to change her views and accept Nina into the family.

"He is not getting what he wants, but you were not without fault." Ann started and then explained. "You have to preserve the family unit, for her." She looked at Adrianna and smiled. "Marriage is a lot of work and a lot of compromise. You have to manipulate the situation to benefit everyone because family is all that matters in the end."

"You sound like my Nana."

"Then she is a smart woman. Give Adrian another chance. He did not hit you, or abuse you in any way, so stay. Mold him to the man that you want him to be. Do it for this here little one." She kissed her granddaughter on the cheek.

"Adrian and I make each other crazy. We can't seem to get it together."

"Because the two of you are in love, and you have passion. Take your time you two are still newlyweds. Marriage takes time."

"But we've been together for five years now."

"But you've only been married for two years and have been separated for almost half of that time. You two give up too easily."

"Ann, we lived together for two years before getting married, I don't understand your logic."

"My logic is that as a girlfriend, you expected certain treatment, you tolerated certain things. As a wife, the ball game is different. You no longer want to be treated like a girlfriend; you want equal treatment across the board. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"So your role as a wife is different from your role as a girlfriend, and you haven't given this 'wife' role much effort. You're still operating on 'girlfriend' mode when you're the wife. Of course you're not happy. Not to mention the fact that now you're a mother... Another role you have to take on." What she said started to make sense so Nina listened.

"I get the feeling that you have never forgiven Adrian for choosing his legacy over you, and that in it's self is your contribution to the downfall of your marriage. You can forgive me, Nicholas, and everyone else, but you won't forgive the one man that you love, and who loves you. That my dear is insanity."

"But what about Adrian? Is he without fault?" She asked offensively.

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"We both know that when it comes to relationships, my son is a bafoon. He sometimes has problems showing his true feelings, especially when he shuts down. He is hardheaded, arrogant, and bossy. I know this because he gets it from me, but it's not like he's changed. He has been consistent in being an asshole, but it made no difference to you when you were dating so why should it make a difference now?" They both laughed at Ann's comment.

"Despite all his faults, you stayed with him then, and that's what you need to do now. Stand by him and keep him from making a bad mistake that will affect all of you." She pointed to Nina and Adrianna "This is your duty."

"I feel like I'm in the mob."

"You are, and this is the family." They laughed. Then they stopped when the gate opened and Adrian and his new girlfriend came walking through. Adrian was in black swimming trunks with a towel around his neck, and nothing else. Katrina, his new woman, looked stunning as well. She was about six feet tall, mostly legs, skinny as a rail, wearing a bikini. She looked great. Then again, looking great was to be expected of a runway model. Her face was nice, but it was the way that she carried herself that oozed sexuality. She had short blond hair that was stylishly cut. She was professionally tanned and her orange two-piece bathing suit was nice. She and Adrian made an absolutely striking couple. Nina stood up when they came over. Adrian looked surprised to see her, but then she saw the hint of pleasure and passion in his eyes, as he looked her up and down.

"Hi there Adrian. Katrina."

"Hello. It's a surprise to see you here." He pulled out a lawn chair for Katrina, and she sat down. He signaled to Nina to do the same but she declined. She held up the papers and the smile left his face.

"In a minute." He said bitterly. "I want to hold my girl." He said and grabbed Adrianna, who yelped.

"Daddy. I love jou." He hugged her and snuggled her into his chest.

"She is absolutely darling." Katrina said.

"Would you like to hold her?" Nina asked. Everyone was stunned, but quickly recovered.

"She's probably too heavy for you to hold." Adrian said. He wasn't sure why he didn't want Katrina to hold his daughter, but he didn't.

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"That's nonsense Adrian. Let her hold the baby, she's going to be her step-momma soon so it's best that she starts getting use to her now." Nina argued and smiled at the woman who smiled back in appreciation. Reluctantly, Adrian gave Adrianna over to Katrina who grabbed her and started placing kisses on her cheek.

"Purrdy." Adrianna said, and Katrina face lit up.

"Good girl." Nina praised.

"Hi." Katrina said.

"Hi. I love jou." Adrianna responded, melting everyone's heart.

"1,2,3." Adrianna held out her chubby fingers.

"She is really smart and friendly. God, she's beautiful. She is going to be a heart breaker and soon." Katrina said.

"Just like her momma." Adrian said, causing everyone to go silent. Katrina was the first to break the awkward silence.

"You are gorgeous, have you ever modeled?" She asked Nina.

"No. I've never thought about it. But thanks for the compliment."

"Thank your parents, for your great genes. And this little beauty is going to be a force to be reckoned with. Look at all that silky jet black hair and blue eyes." Katrina doted.

"Thank you. I hate to sound biased, but I agree with you one hundred percent." The women laughed.

"So what brings my lovely ex to be here? I wasn't suppose to have Adrianna this weekend was I?" He panicked. "If so, I'm sorry. I thought I had the days straight." She waved her hands in front of her to stop him.

"No. No. I have a date tonight and Ann was kind enough to agree to watch Adrianna."

"Et tu Brutus?" He looked at his mother. "So who are you dating now that your main man is banging your sister?"

"Stop being such so crass." Ann scolded him.

"I'm going out with Dr. Thomas, you remember him, he's the doctor who patched Stephanio back together when you beat the hell out him." She reminded him.

"Will you excuse me while I speak to Nina privately." Adrian asked Katrina, he was already pulling out Nina's chair, getting up she grabbed the envelope and tucked it under her arm. He frowned.

Adrian led Nina to the locker room and locked the door behind them.



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"So what's up?" He asked checking out her behind as she walked to the center of the locker room. Through the mirrors, she caught him starring at her and she turned around.

"I want to know why you keep sending these papers back to me unsigned?"

"I think that would be obvious."

"No, it's not obvious."

"Okay, I'll tell you in lay men's terms... I don't want a divorce and since I don't want a divorce, why should I sign divorce papers?"

"Because you're engaged, because you're in love with someone else, because we agreed to go our separate ways, because I need closure!"

"I'm not engaged to Katrina, she's engaged to me. The only woman I love besides my daughter, mother and grandmother is you. You wanted to go our separate ways; I just gave you what you wanted because I was sick of hearing you complain. And I don't give a damn about your closure."

She was speechless.

"I'm confused. You told me that you were engaged. I read it in the papers."

"I told you that Katrina said that she thought that it was a good idea for her and I to get married after our divorce, and that I agreed with her since I never had any plans of divorcing you. The next thing I know, she's sporting a diamond engagement ring and telling everyone that we were getting married. I just went along with it until you come to your senses. You're my first and last wife." He smiled and came up to her and kissed her hard on the lips. She tried to struggle out of his grip but she was unsuccessful and after a few seconds, she started to enjoy the feelings that he was invoking in her so she started to kiss him back. She opened her mouth to welcome his tongue, while he grabbed two handful of her ass and grinded his erection on to her. She hugged him close to her and kissed him back with as much gusto as he gave to her. When Adrian ended the kiss, he saw the passion in her eyes. "I'm not going to stop." He warned her.

"I don't want you to." She admitted breathing heavy.

He untied her bikini top and her large full bosoms fell out. He licked his lips and started tweaking the nipple with his fingers. She threw her head back and he kissed her neck with open mouth kisses and sucks leaving passion marks there as he moved around her skin. He moved

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lower to her breast and took one large nipple in his mouth and began to suck. Nina moaned and ran her hands through his hair loving the pleasure that he was giving her. He brought his mouth up to her ears and started to lick on it. She nibbled on her bottom lip while he nibbled on her ear.

"I want to eat you." He whispered in her ear. She closed her eyes, and shook her head in agreement. Smiling, he stepped back. She finished taking off her bikini top and started unbuttoning her jean knickers. He was out of his swimming trunks and helping her pull her jeans off.

"Damn you look good." He complimented when she was down to her bikini bottoms. They were string with wood beads on the sides. Her long caramel legs looked good against the black bottoms. His dick became as hard as petrified wood.

"Take them off." He ordered hoarsely. She pulled the string on each side and spread her legs allowing the thin piece of material to fall to the floor. He took the towel from around his neck and laid it on the bench. She lay down on the bench and allowed her legs to fall on each side of the bench exposing her pussy. Brown and hairless on the outer lips and pink in the middle, she reminded him of his favorite candy; he could hardly wait to eat. He kneeled on her left side and opened up her folds.

His tongue lapped at her lips making them wet and juicy before he sucked on her bud.

"Oh baby." Nina moaned. He was doing a job on her pussy and she loved it. She grabbed his hair and lifted her hips to grind on his tongue. He finally stuck his tongue into her hot box and she went berserk. His tongue went in and out of her, his hands opening her folds wide to gain more access, as his tongue pumped mercilessly into her, and she came violently. He didn't stop; he just slurped up her juices and started over again licking her labia folds. One more orgasm and she was spent. She grabbed his hair and yanked his head back.

"No more." He smiled and stepped back. He got up and helped her up. He turned her around and leaned her back up against the locker. He lifted her and she impaled herself down on his cock and wrapped her legs around his waist. He grabbed her ass cheeks and began to pump roughly into her. He would only slow down to lean her back against the locker so that he could suck on her tits. Nina closed her eyes in ecstasy as she felt her body go warm all over, then wave after wave of orgasm rushed

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through her body. Moments later she felt Adrian contract inside her, his skin became covered in goose bumps and then he came hard.

She was up against the lockers with him between her legs when they came down off their euphoria.

"Just give me a few hours to break it off with Katrina and pack, and I'll be back home." He told her breathlessly.

"What are you talking about? I'm not inviting you back home." She argued.

"If I wasn't welcomed back home you shouldn't have fucked me."

"Look, I don't want to deal with this now. I have to get ready for my date." She moved down off of him but he still held her against the locker with his body. He moved in close to her ear and whispered in it.

"While your out with you doctor friend, have him give you a pregnancy test because I've just spilled my seed all in you... and honey, we both know that I ain't shooting blanks." He licked the side of her neck and walked away. He went over to the floor where his swimsuit was and pulled on his trunks, she hurriedly put on her bikini. He admired how good she looked in the suit and couldn't wait to sample her charms again. He grabbed the envelope with the divorce papers and headed out of the locker room, she was right behind him. She kept straight towards the gate; he headed for the pool with the envelope in hand. He opened up the envelope and took out the papers.

"Hey Nina." He called to her when she reached the gate.

"Here's my answer to your request for a divorce." He tossed the papers into the pool and jumped in afterwards. He started doing laps ignoring the stunned looks on everyone's face. Katrina looking embarrassed closed her eyes and shook her head. Ann took Adrianna from Katrina and excused herself and went into the house. Nina slammed the gate as she left.

\* \* \*

"I have done nothing to you to warrant that type of disrespect." Katrina complained to Adrian. He was picking the papers out of the water. His anger had simmered down and he started to feel guilty for the way he's been treating Katrina.

"I apologize." He told her and turned and took her hands in his and said "It's not working out between us and I shouldn't have involved you in my mess."

## The Price of Love

"No you shouldn't have. It's over and don't call me again." She told him and left after that. Adrian finished picking up the papers out of the pool and tossed them into the burn bag in side of the house. He found Ann in Adrianna's room. She was in the rocking chair watching her granddaughter sleep.

"I take it you have a few choice words for me too," he said.

"Yes I do." She said. He came to sit on the floor beside her.

"I hate the way you treat women."

"Mom, I'm not perfect, but I don't mistreat women."

"You do. You want to control everything and everyone. I know this because it's a trait that you've inherited from me." She smiled at him and rubbed his head. He held his head down enjoying the feeling of being close to his mother.

"I know."

"If you want to have a chance with Nina, you're going to have to share your control, in every aspect." He nodded in agreement.

"You're going to have to realize that marriage is equal partnership. Nina has had a hard time these past few years; she needs to be taken care of. I would recommend that you make her full partner in marriage, business, and the bedroom. That's the only way to get your wife back." She told him. He stood up and hugged her and kissed her on the cheek.

"You are a wonderful woman." He said.

"Yeah. Being a grandmother has made me soft. Now go to your woman."

"Thank you." He told her and went to his room to get dressed.

\* \* \*

Adrian waited in his car outside of the home that he once shared with Nina. He had been sitting there for almost three hours, and was giving up hope that she was coming back home tonight when all of a sudden, her car pulled up in the garage. He got out of the car and ran up to the driver's side of the window. She jumped, startled when she saw him, and then she opened the door. When she was out, he closed it for her.

"Can we talk?" He asked. She looked pretty with her long layered white skirt and white tee shirt, and her sandals "You look beautiful." He complimented her.

"Thank you. What do you want?"

"I want to apologize to you. I've been selfish and arrogant in almost every step of our relationship. I realize that I took you for granted. If you'll

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forgive me, I'll make you happy. All I want is another chance to make you happy." He held out his hand to her. She took it and he engulfed her in a hug.

"Will you marry me?"

"Again?" She was shocked. That was the last thing she thought he'd say.

"I promise that I'll include you in every aspect of life." He promised.

"You better had."

"Is that a 'yes'?"

"Yes."

He hugged her. He was joyful of her answer. He was sure that she would turn him down.

Going out with Dr. Thomas helped Nina realize that she didn't want to be with anyone else. She loved Adrian and that he loved her too. She was overjoyed that he had asked her to marry him, again.

"And I have a gift for you."

"What?"

"Full partnership at Constantine Inc. You are now co-owner of the company, if you want." She sat up on her arms, excited.

"You mean it?"

"I'll have it drawn up legally. How does that sound?"

"It sounds as if you want to declare war with Ann."

"Not at all, she is the one who suggested it. She was instrumental in showing me the errors of my ways." Nina would have to thank Ann. Nina realized that Ann was becoming a real Godsend.

"So what about you and Katrina?" She asked.

"Katrina and I have broken up. She was incredibly understanding."

"Will you miss her?"

"Not the way you think. Katrina was fun. She and I were good friends. I'll miss her like I miss my cousins when they go back home to Italy. I didn't love her." Nina felt better about that and she hugged Adrian. He hugged her back, and then lifted her up in his arms and carried her inside the house to her bedroom. Adrian slowly removed her blouse and skirt. She kicked off her shoes and stood before him braless with panties. "I love you more than you'll ever know. More than all the grains of sands that cover the Earth. I have learned the price of love."

"Which is?"

## The Price of Love

"That I can't put a price on love."

Adrian took off his clothes and stood before her naked. She met his gaze and walked over to him, she placed his hand in hers. They walked over to the bed where he kissed her lips softly before they climbed into the bed and laid down facing each other. He leaned in close to her and kissed her lips. Soft lips touched hers, and she closed her eye to the warm feelings of love that he was igniting inside her. His hands touched her face as he deepened the kiss. She opened her mouth to allow him entrance inside. She hugged him to her closely, as he deepened the kiss. When breathing became critical, he kissed down to her neck to her breasts where he cupped both mounds in his hands, held them together, and sucked on the nipple.

"Oh Adrian..."

Staying focused on the nipples, he laved each dark nipple with his tongue, then sucked on it, alternating between sucking and licking.

Adrian moved Nina's leg around his hip as he moved in close to her. Letting go of her nipples, Adrian allotted Nina the room needed to lay flat on her back. He snuggled in between her parted legs and slowly entered her. Her slick folds engulfed him as he pushed further into her. Seated to the hilt in her loving cove, he opened his eyes and she was staring at him. "I love you baby." He pushed his hips forward enjoying the feeling of being inside of her. She reached up and hugged his neck, and wrapped her legs around his waist as he rode them to a soul shattering paradise.

Adrian opened his eyes and saw the tears roll down Nina's face although she looked happy.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm great. I feel like this is a dream, and I don't want to wake up."

"This isn't a dream. I'm really here for you baby, and I am not going anywhere. I will spend my life making you happy."

"I love you, Mrs. Constantine."

"I love you too, Mr. Constantine."

"Forever." They said in unison.

THE END

**L.T. Rashard**

**AUTHOR BIO**

L.T. Rashard was born in Jersey City, NJ where a large portion of her family still resides. She traveled with her family, but has spent a majority of her time living in Alamogordo, NM. She now lives in Florida with her husband and three children, pursuing a degree in Psychology. She like to hear from readers: [leaa4u@yahoo.com](mailto:leaa4u@yahoo.com)