

Tonya Lampley



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and
Sixty Degrees

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By
Tonya Lampley*



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ISBN: 978-1-60435-235-1

Cover Artist: Kato Rain

Editor: Ansley

Line Editor: WRFG

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Chapter One

The day had begun like any other day. Alex was jolted awake by her alarm clock. She intentionally kept the buzzer loud for fear that if she didn't, she might sleep right through it. Her caramel, French manicured hand, reached over and batted it quiet. She grabbed her silk floral robe from the foot of the bed where she had neatly laid it the night before and stepped into her slippers, which could always be found on the side of the bed, facing east. She headed for the bathroom and eased into the rhythm of her day.

At 6:15, she exited the shower, walked over to her closet and retrieved her new black suit; a purchase she had made just for today, and laid it on the bed. She eyed the suit, made of the finest wool crepe, knowing she had offered a king's ransom for it, but satisfied the payoff would be worth every penny spent.

As she moved about her bedroom, continuing to perform the customary tasks of her morning, she was struck by an odd feeling. She really couldn't describe it other than to say she didn't feel like herself. She briefly pondered the sensation, but when a logical reason failed to present itself, she continued with her morning routine. At 6:30, she styled her hair and applied her makeup. All neutral, of course. In her male-dominated field, she couldn't afford to not be taken seriously.

At 6:45, she sat at her kitchen table eating breakfast and studying the *Wall Street Journal*. Her entire morning had gone off without a hitch. She performed every task at the appropriate time, just as she had done every morning. Coincidentally, Alex's life had played out much like her morning routine. She craved structure and order. She demanded predictability. Without it, she was lost. It was the foundation of her very existence. And like an architect, she had successfully built a career on that foundation. She had painstakingly planned and executed every move that led her to today.

At 7:00, Alex grabbed her coat and briefcase and headed for the door. As she reached for the doorknob, she stopped in her tracks. She stood in the foyer momentarily, dropping her briefcase to the floor. The Italian marble tile intensified the sound. *There's that feeling again.* After a few seconds had passed, she shrugged it off as just being nervous over making the presentation to the board that morning. She had done it countless times, but, if she was successful today, she'd be one step closer to her coveted promotion, and to being one of the highest paid African American females in Chicago. That definitely raised the stakes a little. Or perhaps the feeling was related to the disagreement she had with her mother the previous night, which seemed to be happening more frequently since her father had passed. *Ahh, she thought. It's just nerves. Everything will be all right once*

I get this presentation over with. And she rushed out the door headed for one of the largest investment firms in the city.

When she arrived at work, she began to feel more like herself. With the exception of knocking over her morning coffee, the day had been unfolding quite like she had anticipated. She glanced at the clock--*thirty minutes until my presentation*--and wisely used the time to go over everything, making sure no detail was missed and her presentation was airtight. After a final check in the restroom mirror, she took the elevator upstairs, continuing to rehearse the presentation. She smiled on the inside, confident in her work and knowing her ideas would move the company in a new direction and remove all doubt as to whether she was the right candidate for the Executive Vice President position. *If I can pull this one off, I'll be promoted for sure.*

Arriving at the ninth floor, Alex walked into the executive boardroom and greeted all eight of the male members seated at the mahogany table with a nod. She walked over and closed the blinds to ensure all eyes would be focused on her and not peering out the window. She was well aware that being female, the words she delivered would have to be impressive. Everything was in order and she was ready to begin. She took a deep breath. And when she opened her mouth to speak, her train of thought was interrupted by a man entering the conference room. Alex paused and rolled her eyes, irritated by the interruption. But upon

taking a closer look at him, she was momentarily stunned. He was beautiful. Impeccably dressed and well groomed. His dark skin was flawless. *This brotha is definitely in the wrong meeting.* Trying not to stare, Alex greeted him with the intention of helping him find out where he was supposed to be. Perhaps he was a client or vendor. Whoever he was, she was eager to help him and send him on his way so that she could get back to business. But to her surprise, she heard the CEO eagerly address this refined and distinguished stranger. “Welcome Daniel. We saved you a seat.” *Hunh?* Alex thought. *Who in the world is this?* She wasn’t expecting a guest for her presentation, especially not one this attractive, and as her mind searched for a clue to his identity, the CEO walked over to her and a formal introduction was made.

“Alex, meet Daniel, our newest team member,” the CEO said.

Reeling, Alex fell back into her seat. With her heart pounding, she maintained a calm poised exterior and greeted him.

“Good Morning...is it Daniel?” She was so shaken by his intrusion she had barely heard his name.

“Yes,” he said, smiling. His voice was smooth and inviting.

“It’s good to meet you,” Alex responded, hiding her distraction. *Focus, girl.* *You can deal with this another time. Keep your eye on the prize.* She regained her composure. She didn’t have time to guess where he was from, what position he

was filling, or why. A more pressing matter was at hand--her promotion, and the culmination of everything she had worked so hard for. She distributed the handouts, blocking his presence at the table totally from her mind, opened the meeting and began her discussion.

Two hours later and after a sigh of relief that the presentation was over, Alex sat in her office. Determination and adrenaline had successfully carried her through the presentation and kept thoughts of Daniel from distracting her, but now the dust was settling. She was confident in the pitch she had made to the board but less confident in the fact that they hired someone without her knowledge or input. *No time to gloat. I need to figure out who this guy is and how he got here without my knowing it. I'm in line for one of the most important positions at this company and no one has even mentioned this guy to me. I hope it's not a bad sign. If I don't get that promotion after all my years of hard work and sacrifice, there's no telling what I might do.* Alex collected herself, allowing the voice of reason to speak louder than the panic-filled one she often heard. She had to strain to hear its whisper. *Relax, girl. Don't get paranoid. You know you've got this one in the bag. Everyone else knows it, too. People have been congratulating you already. There's nothing to worry about.* She recounted a few of her many successes; ones that reassured her, her position as Executive Vice President was guaranteed. She had been the company's top producer the last five years in a row, she had landed all the firm's major accounts, and she continued to bring in many of

Chicago's elite. And, most importantly, she had a keen understanding of the business. *Yeah, I got this.*

Alex's momentary sense of confidence was quickly overshadowed by the fact that in the corporate investment game the rules could change at any time, and often did. She was baffled that they would bring someone on board and not even tell her about it. She knew the old boys would definitely not take too kindly to being questioned by a female, especially an African American one. She had done it before and it hadn't gone well. That experience had schooled her in corporate politics and although she didn't like the rules of the game, she had learned to play it well. She needed to exercise caution. She dare not press the issue. Especially not at a crucial time like this. She would have to wait until they came to her with the disclosure or she would have to find out about him another way.

Alex picked up the phone and began tapping the receiver. *Who can I trust to give me the dish on what is going on?* Immediately, Wanda's name came to mind.

Wanda was the overly friendly account manager on the third floor. She knew something on just about everyone in the company and she was always willing to share what she knew with anyone who would listen. Alex reminded herself to be tactful. The company had a thriving rumor mill and Wanda was the key to its success. Everyone knew Wanda talked too much and the last thing Alex needed was for word to get out that she, soon-to-be member of the senior management

team, was inquiring about the new guy. Alex dialed Wanda's extension, quickly fabricating a story to lure Wanda into her office.

"Hey Wanda, it's Alex. I received an irate call from an account..." Knowing full well the call was bogus and that that client had moved to a competitor three months ago, their records just hadn't been updated yet, Alex felt the situation called for desperate measures and she poured it on thick. "Can you pull their file and bring it to my office? If you have any history on the account to share, that would be great also. Thanks."

A few minutes later, Wanda entered Alex's office. She was a heavy girl, but attractive, with a warm smile that everyone was drawn to. Alex figured it was her secret to getting everyone to open up to her and tell her their personal business. Alex remained on guard, knowing she couldn't let Wanda know her secret agenda. She invited Wanda to have a seat. And once she was seated, to Alex's disappointment, she began to ramble incessantly. Wanda went on and on about the weather, her cat, everything except the crucial piece of information Alex was seeking. Alex quietly and patiently engaged her, waiting for her to relax and let her guard down. Finally Wanda took a breath and Alex jumped in, pre-empting her next sentence.

"Wanda, I don't come down and visit with the other areas as much as I would like to. How are things? I wish I had more time to keep my finger on the

pulse of what's going on."

"I know, Ms. Monroe."

"Call me Alex."

"We can tell how busy you are and we are always hesitant to disturb you."

"I apologize if I seem unapproachable at times. It's not because I don't care about our team and what's going on, I just have to keep my focus on generating sales for the company."

"I know, Ms. Monroe."

"Anyway, what is going on out there? Anything new and exciting?"

Wanda's face lit up. She seemed to be flattered that Alex was invoking one of her best talents--the gift of telling it all. Alex responded by sitting up in her chair. She grew more intense by the second, eager to hear what Wanda would say next.

"Yes, lots of stuff is going on around here. We have four new, large accounts," Wanda replied.

"Yeah, I know about those, I mean what's going on out there on the floors?" Alex asked. The smile had left her voice but remained fraudulently planted on her face as she tried not to show her impatience.

"Well, Niece's pregnant and rumor has it that Ellis is looking for another job."

“Oh really,” Alex replied, raising her eyebrow.

“Please don’t tell him I told. Everyone tells me I can’t keep a secret.”

Alex shifted in her chair.

“Anything else going on with the staff or anything new going on with the company?”

“Ms. Monroe, you would know that before I would.”

“Again, please, call me Alex. Yeah, I guess you’re right, in a perfect world information should flow from the top down,” Alex replied sarcastically. “Well, if you hear anything, please feel free to stop by. Thanks for your time, Wanda. Please close the door on your way out.”

Wanda paused at the door.

“What about the account, Ms. Monroe? I’m sorry...Alex. It doesn’t make sense that they are calling. We haven’t had any activity from them in a while.”

“Yeah, I know. Don’t worry about it. It must be a mix-up on their end. I’ll take care of it. Don’t forget, call me if you hear anything.”

Alex was disappointed over the forty-five minutes of time she had wasted on Wanda and she was no more knowledgeable than she was that morning. *Who is this guy?* She eyed her clock and decided she had better call Laura to confirm lunch, as it was almost noon. She had known Laura since college, and she was always running late. After all these years, Alex was still irritated by it. *I don’t have time to*

play with her today. I need her to be on time so that I can be back here pronto and figure out what's going on. After she confirmed that Laura would be on time for lunch, she had a few minutes to kill before leaving so she decided to walk around the office and see if she could run into someone who might freely share what they knew about the morning's events. She walked into the ladies' room...no one.

She walked past the offices of senior management...no one. *Wow, God, you are really doing a number on me. I am totally in the dark on this one and you know how uncomfortable that makes me.* Alex reminded herself not to lose her focus.

Her therapist had continually instructed her not to let her need for control send her into panic mode when things weren't going as she predicted. It was a skill she had mostly managed, but there were those times, especially when she had so much at stake, that her thoughts played ping-pong in her mind. And now was one of those times.

Her whole life she had been uncomfortable in situations where she wasn't in control. In fact, she avoided these situations entirely, if possible. Which was why at thirty-six, beautiful and accomplished, she was still single. Her take on this, of course, was that there was not one good man in a city of five million people. But, everyone else knew the truth. She was afraid to try again. She had been in a relationship in the past. The entire time she was filled with reluctance. She didn't like the way it made her feel. The erratic emotions and the vulnerability frightened

her. Daily she felt as if she dangled from a high wire with no safety net underneath. She didn't like the person she was becoming, but she was in too deep to let go.

Finally she fought through all her insecurity and surrendered to love. And just when she had completely given herself to him, out of the blue and without warning, he moved on to someone else, shattering Alex's heart and leaving her scrambling to pick up the pieces and make sense of her life again.

It was a painful reminder to never allow herself to be in situations she couldn't control. She vowed she would never find herself in that position again and fortified her already tough exterior. It was almost impossible to crack now. So much so, that if Mr. Right showed up in a box with a ribbon and a note on her doorstep, in two days, he would pack, run, and curse the sender.

After an unsuccessful attempt to secure information regarding this gorgeous man who had entered the picture in a shroud of mystery, Alex dashed from the office to meet Laura for lunch at Cosmo. As usual, Laura was late. Under normal circumstances, Alex would have been seething. Her time was much too valuable to expend waiting. But she used the time to ponder what could possibly be going on at the office. She tried on different scenarios, attempting to find one that made sense.

They were taken to their table and once seated, Alex found it hard to focus

on Laura's babble about her latest guy and their physical experimentation. She was shuffling through possible scenarios at this point, like a deck of cards.

"He's my soulmate, you know?" Laura reminded Alex.

"Unhunh. You've said that before," Alex said, gazing blankly at the white tablecloth, her finger circling the lip of her empty wine glass. If she wasn't working, she would demand the waiter fill the glass and leave the bottle on the table.

"Girl, you haven't been listening to a word I've said." Laura was annoyed and concerned at the same time. "You've barely eaten your food. I thought you said you had to eat because you would be at the office until around eight tonight. That's a long time to go without eating. I know you want to lose weight, but give me a break."

"I'm sorry, I'm a bit distracted."

"It's just nerves, girl, you got the promotion. By the way, how'd your presentation go?"

"I nailed it."

"So what are you frettin' about?"

"Nothing." Alex looked up just in time to catch their passing waiter.

"Excuse me. Can you box this for me, please?" Alex handed him her plate. "Thank you."

“Are you sure you are okay?” Laura said, peering over the top of her glasses.

“Oh, girl, yeah. You know me. Nothing can get me down.”

“Did something happen at work? What’s the dish? How come you’re not sharing?”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine. Really.” Alex jumped up from the table and grabbed her shawl off the chair, tipping over her glass of water. She blotted it quickly and dropped her napkin to cover the spill. “Thanks for lunch, call me later.”

Chapter Two

After lunch, Alex returned to the office. She took the rear staircase, running up the six flights of stairs as she typically did at least once a day to keep everything tight. For her, it justified not going to the gym regularly. She absolutely dreaded it. At the top of the stairs, she dropped her keys. When she picked them up, she noticed she had broken a nail on her manicure that was less than three days old. *One more thing to add to my to do list, as if it isn't jam packed already. I'll stop by the salon on the way home. If I leave exactly at eight, I can get there before they close.*

The morning's events were starting to dissipate and her appetite was returning. As she turned to walk down the corridor, she was grateful that she had the leftovers from lunch at Cosmo. Steak with hollandaise sauce and garlic cheddar mashed potatoes. *I will heat this up and eat it before I leave the office tonight.* Normally she worked so late she found herself grabbing anything out of the refrigerator when she got home, just so that she could go to sleep without a growling stomach...Cheerios, peanut butter, whatever she could find. She was actually looking forward to her leftovers, as it was the closest thing to a real dinner she had had in several days. As she looked up, she saw Daniel coming toward her. Flustered, she was tempted to turn away initially, but at the last second, she

realized that she had been spotted.

“Alex?” he called. “Hey, I’ve been trying to talk to you all day. I got whisked away after the meeting. I’ve heard so many good things about you. We have something in common now.”

Alex gave him a puzzled look.

“The stairs.” Daniel laughed.

“Oh, yeah,” she responded nervously, tucking her hand behind her back to hide her spoiled manicure.

N-i-c-e. Alex sized him up as he moved toward her. *Well groomed, polished, suave.* She was struck by his beauty. He had smooth ebony skin, dark features, strong hands and a deep soothing voice. As she inconspicuously examined him, she could tell by the way his suit draped his body and lingered over every muscle he attended the gym regularly.

Judging by the glow of his skin, she concluded that he favored a healthy diet as well. As they talked, Alex began to feel extremely comfortable in his presence. She was held captive by his conversation. He seemed very well versed on a variety of subjects and Alex was intrigued. The conversation darted from politics to spirituality. It spanned art, cooking, and music. You name it and he seemed to know or have an opinion about it. There was a familiarity to him, like she had reconnected with someone she once knew very well. *He’s different. Smart, responsible.*

Not like most guys I meet--looking to get laid, nothing upstairs. They stood in the corridor sharing thoughts for a while, until Alex's stilettos started sending her little reminders that it was time for the conversation to conclude. Her back was also growing stiff from standing with perfect posture in an attempt to trick Daniel's eyes into believing that her stomach was flatter than it actually was.

"Wow, it's been great talking to you. I'd better be going," Alex stated, bringing the conversation to a close. *A few more seconds standing in these shoes and I'll be in tears.*

"Yeah, I'd better be going also," Daniel replied. "I definitely can't be late. I have a very special appointment this afternoon and I have to leave early. I have been anticipating this day all week. Well, I look forward to you showing me the ropes around the office."

"Welcome to Jacobson, Connor and Mack." Alex smiled warmly.

Figures, he's married. Probably a kid's birthday or something. It should be illegal for men not to wear a wedding band. I mean, it should be a jail-able offense!

Daniel grabbed her hand to thank her for the time they had shared and bid her adieu. As she walked down the hall to return to her office she smiled to herself thinking what a nice guy Daniel was. And how rare it was to meet a man like that these days. He really seemed to be the total package. She thought about the woman that was blessed to be married to him. It gave Alex hope that she too

would meet someone...someday, that would complete her.

Deep down she wanted to be married. She wanted to belong to someone, but the fear of being hurt and feeling that kind of pain again, had always stopped love dead in its tracks. Suddenly, the burning question returned. She remembered the mission. The one thing that she had been pursuing the entire day. Just then, she heard the door to the stairwell slam shut. She turned around, and he was gone.

How could I not ask him that? She began to reflect on the conversation, replaying the details over and over in an effort to piece together some clues. *Did he say who he reported to? What department? What his role will be?* She realized they had talked about so many interesting topics it actually never came up. *Oh well, I'll find out soon enough.*

Alex decided to put the issue out of her mind for the moment and she looked forward to her evening. *Maybe I'll leave a little early tonight and stop by the gym. It would be nice for once, to get home at a decent hour and enjoy a nice meal.* She thought about the steak. *I have been meaning to try that new vegetarian restaurant near the salon. I will stop by there on the way home. Maybe there will be something good on television.* She grabbed a granola bar from the vending machine, turned and trashed her calorie-filled leftover lunch, and returned to her office, still lifted from the encounter.

Chapter Three

Alex sat at her kitchen table and began opening her mail. She spotted an invitation and frowned with curiosity, wondering who might be sending it to her. She quickly broke the seal. The invitation read:

You're invited. Please share in our celebration of love as we pledge our lives to each other on June 22...

How sweet, Alex thought. I am glad to she is finally getting married. One more thing to add to my to do list....dress, flight...I really need a vacation. Maybe if I were dating, I would enjoy life a little more instead of working all the time. After opening her mail, Alex plopped down to watch a few minutes of CNN.

She felt proud of herself for sticking to her plans to work out and enjoyed her vegetarian meal from *Mandalas*. She found herself feeling hungry since everything she had eaten was made out of vegetables. Even the hamburger. She thought about the steak she had trashed earlier and for a second regretted it, but reminded herself that she could stand to lose a few pounds and committed to turning over a new leaf.

I'm sure I can get used to the taste of vegetarian cuisine...or lack thereof. Alex spent so

much of her time focusing on work and clients that it felt like a guilty pleasure to do something for herself. She was definitely enjoying the selfish moment she was having, even if she did feel a little indulgent.

As she lay on the pillow, preparing to review her current client cases, she decided against it. She just couldn't seem to focus. Her mind began to replay the events of the day and she thought of Daniel. *He was cool. Not bad looking either. I'm sure he's married and even if he wasn't, he'd be a distraction. Nothing will get in the way of my landing this promotion. Not even smooth black skin...and perfect white teeth. And abs. And pecs. And Prada.*

She laughed to herself, turned the light off and fell asleep.



The next morning, Alex rushed out the door to her commute. She dashed past the usual morning suspects and boarded the train. As the train made its way along, she stared intently out the window. She had lived in Chicago for several years now, and ridden this same train for three of them, and this was the first time she had noticed the sea of wildflowers along I-90. The yellow and fuchsia were so vivid. It was as if God had handcrafted and set each one of the flowers in the perfect place. And today, she found the people on the train uncharacteristically friendly as well. Instead of standoffishly drinking her coffee and reading the paper,

the usual morning's folly, Alex talked to a fellow passenger about the beauty of the flowers and was embarrassed to find out that they made their appearance every spring. She had never noticed them. He cautioned her to take time and smell the roses.

Suddenly, in the middle of her conversation, her mind drifted to Daniel. *This has gotta stop.* Alex grew stern in reminding herself that she had to stop thinking about him and keep her focus on the task at hand. She had worked too hard to let anything get in the way of obtaining this promotion. She felt that the position would be the culmination of all her hard work and sacrifice--the long hours, the lack of a social life, rarely dating, and no vacations. The list went on. She had given up a lot and wasn't about to let anyone stand in the way of her getting what she wanted.

For once and for all, put this out of your mind. Anyway, could you be desperate enough to get involved with a married man? You remember what happened to Michelle. That man's wife put her in the hospital. It's not worth it. And once you get this promotion, you will barely have time to breathe. Seeing someone will be out of the question.

As Alex sat quietly on the train, she noticed what was now that familiar feeling. She just couldn't seem to shake it. It began the previous morning and she thought it was just nervousness over her pitch to the board. But the feeling hadn't left her as she thought it would once she was over that hurdle. She didn't know

what to make of it. Here she was on the verge of having it all; a top position at a major firm in the city and of course, the compensation package that came along with it, but she still had a feeling of uneasiness and she didn't know why. The passenger to Alex's left was a woman that Alex had shared her morning with for the past few years and hadn't spoken to very much.

She was older. The years and personal trials had worn lines of experience deep into her face, which was crowned by a head of gray hair. There was a certain regality to her, like she had experienced a thing or two in life and had triumphed with her dignity intact. Alex contemplated for a moment. Being fiercely independent, she was hesitant to admit to someone that she didn't have it all together, all the time. Finally, her desperation overruled her reluctance and she turned to the woman and spoke.

"Have you ever had a time in your life when everything was going great but something inside you was telling you to proceed with caution--that danger could lie ahead?"

"Of course."

"What did you do?"

"It depends," the stranger of three years responded. "Sometimes that voice is there to warn you. It's telling you to slow down, take your time, be watchful. But sometimes, that voice is just plain old fear running amuck and wreaking havoc. It

serves no purpose at all. It'll force you to play it safe and in doing so, you miss out on something great. The trick is to know the difference. When you can decipher that and respond accordingly, the problem you're having will be solved. I will tell you though, there have been times in my life, when I have missed the mark."

Having shared her wisdom, the quiet stranger resumed reading her paper. Alex got the message. She would have to figure this one out on her own.

Arriving at her station, Alex exited the train, hurried down Michigan Avenue, and ran up the six flights of stairs to her office. She sat at her desk as she did most mornings to catch her breath. When she looked down she saw a card lying on her desk that she knew wasn't there the night before. Curious, she grabbed the card and opened it.

Beauty, intelligence, strength, wisdom, and grace.

This is the mark of a true woman.

You embody them all.

Daniel

What? Alex sat down in her chair, holding the note in confusion. Most men were intimidated by her strength and intelligence. These traits in the work world had been her greatest asset but when it came to men, Alex felt they were her worst

curse. More than one man had accused her of being too tough or too strong, or both. She smiled in amazement and appreciated the compliment the card offered.

For the first time, someone really got her. No threat, no agenda— just a true appreciation of all that she had to offer. She paused for a moment and drank it in.

Suddenly a sense of panic came over her as she thought about the implications of the note. Not only was he more than likely married, a catch like that could never be single for long, but it had come from someone who could potentially work for her. She could tell already that she had a strong attraction to Daniel. And his note spoke volumes to her. She read between the lines and could tell it was offering more than just friendly admiration. As her heart began to pound she thought, *Will I be strong enough to stop this? Could it be heading where I think it could? What if I can't resist?*

Alex stayed in her office the entire day and focused on work. She found safety there. It was one of the things in life that offered her complete control. She worked right through lunch and later into the evening. She hadn't seen Daniel the whole day, and began to wonder why. *Is he embarrassed about the note? Did he have second thoughts and I'm now being rejected? Why hasn't he even come by to see if I've read it?* Curiosity got the best of her. She deserved an explanation. She wandered out of her office. It was well into the evening and only a few faithful remained. She walked down the hall only to discover the lights were out in Daniel's office and the

door was closed.

“If you’re looking for Daniel, he wasn’t here today,” a voice said from a nearby cubicle.

“Oh, hey, William.” Alex recognized the voice and peered into his cramped, messy workspace. William was Wanda’s gossip buddy. Alex decided she must be tactful. “Yeah, I wanted to run something that came out of yesterday’s meeting past him. Being the new guy, I want to make sure he is kept in the loop,” Alex said, exhibiting a lack of concern so as not to tip William on to anything.

“He took a personal day today. Some family thing. He was planning a birthday party for his wife...Sheila, or something like that. He’ll be out the rest of the week. They must think pretty highly of him to hire him and let him take off so soon. I’ve never seen them roll out the red carpet for a new broker like this. Sounds like he’s got a little juice.”

Fuming, Alex returned to her office. In a few sentences, Alex had found out exactly what she wanted and more than she wanted to know. *How dare he entice me? How dare he attempt to seduce me into thinking that he was different? And to think I spent time musing about how different he was. Whatever! They’re all the same. All of ‘em!*

Her anger paid for thirty minutes extra on the treadmill at the gym that evening. After finishing her workout, she sped home, ate, refused phone calls, and went to bed.

Chapter Four

Alex was just about to exit the building and catch her train when she noticed Gordon Winston, one of Chicago's most successful businessmen, standing in the lobby, seemingly anxious. She made her way over to greet him as he stood in front of the revolving doors.

"Alex," he called, removing his hat. "I called up and they said you were on the way down."

"Hello Gordon. What a pleasant surprise. What brings you here?"

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure."

"Not here."

"Okay, would you like to go up to my office?"

"Yes, I think that would be more appropriate."

Alex remained polite but she was ticked off that she would be delayed and miss her train. *It never fails, when I try to have a little fun and do something for myself... Don't trip, Alex. You have gotten here by being responsive to all your clients. They are the reason you live in a fabulous house in the suburbs, drive a brand new Mercedes convertible, and have a love affair with Manolo. And most importantly, you're in line to be one of the highest paid professional*

black females in the city. A small inconvenience is a minor price to pay in exchange for the life you live. As they entered Alex's office, she gestured toward the chair positioned at her conference table, inviting Gordon to sit down. He declined her invitation.

"What's up, Gordon? How can I help you?"

"Ba-by."

"Yes, Mr. Winston," Alex replied, being purposefully formal.

"Something is wrong with my money. I have been going over my statements. Something's not right."

"Well, you know the market, it fluctuates. You have to focus on the long term. Our clients trust us to choose as best as we can but the risk is only reducible. We can't eliminate it altogether. Gordon, you've played this game long enough to know that."

"I have entrusted you with my money for quite some time, baby girl." Placing his hands on the desk, Gordon leaned in and glared at Alex. "I'm telling you, something is not right."

"Gordon, maybe I am misreading you but are you accusing me of something?"

"I don't know what's going on, baby girl."

“OK, calm down. I am sure there is an explanation. Let me come by your office; I’ll go over everything with you. I am sure there is something you are overlooking.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry, baby. You know I have always had a special place in my heart for you,” Gordon said, grabbing Alex by the hand.

“And every other single, black woman in Chicago,” Alex quipped. “Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Winston.”

“Touché.” Gordon laughed, grabbing his hat off Alex’s desk. “I will see you tomorrow.” He exited her office and Alex decided to wait until the coast was clear before she followed behind him since the whole moment had been quite uncomfortable. She stood at her office door until she heard the bell on the elevator ding, signaling its arrival and thankfully, the departure of Mr. Winston. She proceeded to the elevators praying he would have cleared the lobby before she got downstairs. *What the hell was that all about? I will go over his portfolio in the morning. What a day!*

Walking down Michigan Avenue to catch the train, Alex passed the Cartier store and again saw the watch she’d been eyeing for several months now. *When I get that promotion, it’s mine! Nobody does time like Cartier.* On the train, she relished the time she had to unwind from the day. *What was up with Gordon? I have never seen him like that. I will be furious if I find out he has fabricated this story in an attempt to bed me.*

Alex's cell phone began to ring and she dug down deep into her oversized bag to retrieve it.

"Hello," she said frantically, fearing she had missed the call, irritated at the impracticality of carrying a purse so large. "Yes Laura, I will be at Cosmo tonight. I had to go home and get my car. I am sure you will be too drunk to drive....to drive me anyway. I'm fond of living. I will be there before eight."

After changing out of her work clothes, Alex made her way to Cosmo to meet Laura. The weather was perfect so Alex decided to let the top down on her convertible. She took the scenic route down Lakeshore Drive. The beautiful expanse of turquoise always seemed to comfort her. With the top down, her hair pulled back and a peach neck scarf leaving a trail in the wind, she savored the moment. A perfect evening, a perfect view. *Life is good*, she thought.

At the restaurant, Alex valeted the car. Upon entering, she immediately spotted Laura and her new boyfriend. *You have got to be kidding me*. Laura's soul mate was thugged out. Gold chain, earring, low swung pants, the whole nine yards. He flashed Alex a coy grin and as he turned to wave at someone in the back of the restaurant she caught a glimpse of his six-pack through the red fishnet jersey he was wearing. The trail of muscles lead downwards as well as up. He reeked of sex appeal and in that moment, it all made sense to Alex why a nearly

forty year old woman couldn't get enough of him. *Now I get it. This is a mess. I dare not say anything about him, especially not in his presence. He looks as if he could be packing!*

Alex painted on a smile as Laura and Webster made their way over to greet her.

"Hey girl," Alex smiled. "And this must be Webster? Good to meet you." She extended her hand to shake his.

"We're in love," Laura gushed. Alex felt embarrassed for her. She was acting like a goofy teenager. All she needed was some braces and a big piece of pink bubble gum to wrap around them. Alex noticed his lack of input on the subject.

"Really," Alex said, a smile on her face that more closely resembled a grimace. With Alex there to babysit, Webster got up and left the table to go God knew where. Probably for a quickie in the back.

"I think I am going to marry him."

"What? Laura, you need to slow down. And where did he go anyway? To cop?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Alex's eyes trailed Webster to the back of the crowded club. Webster was the kind of man who could definitely find trouble on his way to pee. All she needed was some evidence, some chance to prove to Laura that he was no good. Her eyes followed as long as they could but she lost him in the crowd. As she

scanned the room to see where he went, her eyes locked with Daniel's as he stood on the other side of the room. He looked as if he was leaving.

This night is getting worse by the second. First this, now him. I can't deal with both him and Laura. Not tonight.

"Laura." Alex elevated her voice so she could be heard above the music, which seemed to be getting louder by the second. "You look as though you are having such a great time with Webster, I think I am going to go on home. I have an early morning," Alex said, mentally planning her discreet exit.

"But you just got here," Laura whined. "I know Webster doesn't exactly fit your high standards but I really like him. Besides, it's my birthday. I'm thirty-eight today. And I really want you to get to know Webster. Consider it your gift to me."

Alex's eyes rolled upwards. *Great. As if the spa package wasn't nice enough. If I had known this is what you wanted instead, I would have kept my money. How old is he, anyway?* Alex saw Daniel making his way over to the table out of the corner of her eye. She was hoping he would walk right past her and out the door but she was having no such luck. He stopped at her table.

"Laura, meet Daniel," Alex said, sensing his presence next to her. She couldn't look him in the face. She was still angry. Daniel shook Laura's hand.

“Can I talk to you?” Alex had an uneasy feeling. This was the second time she had heard this tonight--previously from Gordon and now from Daniel. “Not here,” Daniel added. “Can we get away for a minute?”



Here we go. Alex stared straight ahead, thinking long and hard. She had the feeling that if she left with him, she would be crossing the point of no return. *I have never had feelings this strong for someone I just met.* Why? She had an uneasiness about the whole situation, but the need to know was unquenchable in that moment and she felt as if the suspense would actually choke her. *Why?* She had to know. Even if it meant losing control. She quietly got up from the table, walked to the valet, and retrieved her car with Daniel following behind. And they left without saying a word.

After driving for several moments, Alex broke the silence. “Well, we know we can’t go to your place so where are we going?”

“Yeah, you’re right. It would probably not be a good idea. Why the silent treatment?”

Alex drove to the lake and parked the car, still refusing to talk. Part of it was anger about the note, part of it was eagerness to know why, and most of it was

fear. Her mind was reeling. She felt dizzy and there was a tightness in her chest. She questioned for a second whether she could be having a heart attack.

Finally she turned to him and spoke, “How dare you?”

“Hunh?” Daniel seemed taken off guard.

“How dare you?”

“Alex, I’m sorry,” Daniel said genuinely.

“Why would you intentionally deceive me?”



Daniel was quiet. He assumed she had heard the morning’s news. The board had asked him to assume the Executive Vice President’s position. The position everyone knew Alex was in line for. It wasn’t public knowledge yet but he figured she had found out through the office rumor mill. He was speechless. She had every right to be upset.

“Again, Alex, from the bottom of my heart. I am truly sorry.”

“...I mean writing that note to me,” Alex continued. “What would your wife think of you if she knew you wrote that note? All men are the same.” Alex shook her head in disgust.

“Hold on, wait a minute. My wife?” Daniel questioned. He was totally confused about the reason he had been apologizing. “Who told you I was married?”

“Well, you had those family engagements. And William said that...”

“William?”

“Are you telling me you’re not married?”

Daniel breathed a sigh of relief. He was smitten by Alex from the second he saw her his first day at work. He never believed in love at first sight, until he saw her. As she made her presentation to the board, he watched her every move, entranced by her beauty. He feared if Alex knew he had been given the job she was supposed to have, his chances with her might be over before he had a chance to make his move.

“No,” he continued to laugh. “I am not married. And I don’t know who William is. I certainly didn’t tell him I was married. Office gossip never ceases to amaze me.”

“But your family engagements? Who’s Sheila?”

“She’s my grandmother. She raised me. The only mother I really know. She turned ninety last week and I know she won’t be around much longer, so I showed her the best ninetieth birthday a woman could ever have. I threw her a weeklong party and took her for her first and only hot air balloon ride. I was even able to get

her on the Ferris wheel at Navy Pier. She joked and said if she didn't know better, she'd swear I was trying to do her in for the insurance money. Maybe you will meet her one day."

"Daniel, I should be the one apologizing. I should have asked instead of jumping to conclusions. I automatically assumed that you were like most men. Lying, deceiving, only after sex—"

Daniel scratched his head some more. "I'm far from that. I have the utmost respect for women. I pride myself on being honest and being a man of integrity." The secret he was carrying made him cringe when he said the words.

"But if you're not married, why did you agree with me when I stated we can't go to your place?"

"Well, I have been single for a while, and I am really attracted to you. I would not want to put you in a position where you felt uncomfortable. I have way too much respect for you to do that. So it wasn't just my place, I wouldn't have gone to yours either. It's just better that way...especially lately," Daniel mumbled under his breath as he scratched his head.

Alex and Daniel spent the evening talking. When the subject of work came up, Daniel casually shifted the conversation to a safer subject. . The moon set on the lake and Alex and Daniel talked way into the dawn. . Things were going to

get complicated over the next few weeks but it was a risk Daniel was willing to take.

Chapter Five

“Alex, where have you been? You are not going to believe this! Webster got arrested.”

“Oh, I believe it,” Alex said calmly, with a hint of sarcasm.

“I called you twenty times last night. Where were you?”

“Sleep.”

“Alone?”

“Of course alone.”

Laura didn't believe her. “Alex, what's the deal? You have been sneaking around, screening my calls. What's up with you? What's the big secret you're not telling me? Why the quick exit with Mr. Mysterious? Are you pregnant? Oh, forgive me, one would have to have sex to get pregnant.”

“Very funny, Laura. Not everyone lacks discretion when it comes to sex. Some people, believe it or not, understand sex is something beautiful that a man and a woman share. Not some animalistic rite to be performed just because you've found out someone's name.”

“Oh girl, grow up. Is that why you haven’t had sex? You’re saving yourself for that special someone? Gimme a break. You won’t let anyone get close enough to *become* special. They all run screeching from the building.”

“Anyway, did you call me to berate me about my love life? As if yours doesn’t have problems of its own, hence Webster’s arrest. Hint hint.”

“I need money for bail. I will have to trade a few shares. Can you take care of it for me?”

“Tell him to sell some of his bling.” Alex laughed.

“Goodbye, Alex.”

Alex laughed for a second after she hung up the phone. Then she realized the gravity of the situation. What did Laura see in this guy? A professional, attractive woman, just on the heels of forty, dating some irresponsible, hip-hop twenty-something year old. It just didn’t make sense. *I am going to have to have a talk with her. This is getting serious. She is totally out of control. I don’t even want to know the charge. Probably solicitation.* Curiosity got the best of Alex though, and fearing Laura’s fate, she called her back.

“What was the charge?”

“Child support.”

“Girl, please. I hope he’s worth it. Why is the bail so high?”

“He had a few outstanding warrants.”

“Goodbye, Laura,” Alex said curtly and hung up the phone. She thought the whole conversation was just ridiculous. *Here we are-- attractive, accomplished women...Alex shook her head in disbelief....unbelievable. I know Laura. I have known her since college. This guy is all wrong for her. Regrettably, with Laura, when her mind is made up, it's made up. I may have to just prepare to catch her and the chips when they fall. Hopefully, he will not have gotten all of her money by then.*

Alex had decided not to share anything about Daniel with Laura since she constantly nagged her about her relationships or lack thereof. *She'll harp on it. Constantly nag me about what to do and what not to do to keep from chasing him away and continually remind me of my past failed relationships and by the time she's done, I'll be so afraid, that just the sound of Daniel's name will cause me to feel faint. It's funny how she can see all the minor faults in everyone else's life but her big canyon-sized mistakes continue to fly right under the radar. It's better this way. I will tell her when the time comes. I'm not sure if it will even last. He may feel uncomfortable reporting to me. The male ego can be a formidable opponent. We'll just have to see how this thing plays out.*

Chapter Six

Alex agreed to meet Daniel at the coffee shop near the office. She got there early and grabbed a table near the window. They had been meeting there, after work, for several weeks and Alex was starting to notice she really enjoyed his company. What was she doing? There were so many things about this situation that made her uncomfortable. She was having difficulty resisting him; in spite of increased efforts, every time he asked her out, she agreed.

The fear of being hurt again, flashed like an incessant beacon in her mind, reminding her of the pain she experienced when Wendell was unfaithful to her and to top everything off, she and Daniel worked together. Her thoughts were beginning to overwhelm her. At times she wanted to make it clear to Daniel that they would never be more than friends. Other times, she felt the feelings she had for him would overtake her.

Alex saw Daniel's black Escalade pull into the parking lot. She watched him as he got out and put on his suit jacket. Alex secretly admired his taste in clothing. He was meticulous in the way he dressed but there was no touch of fussiness or trying too hard. He appeared to wear everything with ease and it magnified his quiet confidence. He waved to her as he passed the window on this way to the entrance. Alex waved back and smiled a half smile.

Daniel entered and walked over and joined her at the table. “Are you okay, Alex? You look as if something’s bothering you.”

“I’m okay.” Alex’s voice was weak. She placed her elbow on the table and rested her chin on her hand. “How was your day? I didn’t see you a whole lot.” A hint of Daniel’s after shave remained from the morning. Alex added that to the list of things that made him so hard to resist; he always smelled so good.

“My day was good. Something’s wrong. Please tell me what it is.”

Alex was hesitant. She didn’t exactly know how to proceed. She had no idea how this was going to turn out. “Nothing’s wrong. Really.” She shrugged it off.

“I bet a big piece of chocolate cake would cheer you up.” Daniel walked over to the counter and purchased a piece of chocolate turtle cake. He returned and placed the slice in front of her and handed her a fork. Alex snatched the fork from his hand and smiled. It appeared to be just what she needed at the moment. Sugar, carbs, chocolate and caffeine-a winning combination.

“Thanks Daniel. That was really nice of you.”

“Now tell me when I get to see you again.”



Daniel made sure that he had time reserved on Alex's calendar. It wasn't always easy. At times she seemed resistant but she always agreed. He knew she was uncomfortable dating someone she worked with but he continued to press on. A woman like Alex was hard to find. She was attractive, self-sufficient, smart--the kind of woman he had always dreamed he'd marry. Perhaps that's why he was still single. His grandmother teased him that his standards were too high but he was determined to find someone that possessed all his desired traits, and now that he had found her, he wouldn't let go without a fight. She seemed to be having difficulty making up her mind about him, but he, on the other hand, was completely convinced. No matter what the cost, she would be his.

He spent the rest of the evening listening to her talk and share stories about her life and past relationships. She shared with him that she had been hurt and that it was difficult to trust again. He would do everything he could to reassure her that he could be trusted. That he would never jeopardize the opportunity to make her happy if she gave it to him.

Chapter Seven

Alex sat in her office reviewing a customer's account. She was trying to determine if a more aggressive investment approach would help the client reach his goals faster and what the risks might be. She was good at her job. One of the best in the city. She kept a keen eye on the market daily and advised her clients accordingly. As she stared out the window, her mind drifted. She wondered if she had it to do all over again, would she have chosen the same career. She took great pride in helping people build their futures, but art was her first love. She never had the confidence that she could make the kind of money she wanted to make as an artist. Investing proved to be a safe alternative. A knock at the door stirred her from contemplation.

"Come in," Alex said. "The door is open."

Ross Connor, Alex's boss and the company president, walked in and sat in Alex's chair. "Good afternoon, Alex." Ross craned his neck to see Alex's clock on the bookshelf behind her.

"Has the board made their decision yet?" Alex asked, hoping Ross might leak an early clue.

Ross stared at the floor. "Not yet."

"What do you think their decision will be?"

“We’ll just have to see, Alex.” Ross shifted in his chair. “You know you are highly esteemed at this agency. A lot of our success can be directly attributed to you and the accounts you’ve brought us. Whatever happens, I want you to know that.”

Alex squinted at Ross. She was looking for evidence that might contradict what he was saying. “Do you know something, Ross?”

“Nah.” He stood up and smoothed his thick eyebrows. “It’s late.” Why don’t you shut down for the day? Enjoy your weekend in Detroit. Your cousin is getting married, right?”

“Right.”

“We’ll talk next week.”

Ross closed Alex’s door. She slowly spun her chair around and stared out the window. Lately, she felt that there was a change in the relationship she had with Ross. He had hired her ten years ago right out of college. They didn’t always see eye to eye on things but they always had a mutual respect for each other. Now, he seemed more distant. She had shared with him her thoughts on Daniel being hired without her knowledge and Ross reminded her, as he often did, that he called the shots, not her. She was used to that. But something was different between them. She couldn’t exactly put her finger on it but she was well aware that things weren’t the way they used to be. She felt guilty for hoping that he was

having personal problems. Perhaps he was ill. Anything other than her not getting that promotion.

Chapter Eight

Alex packed her car and prepared for the drive from Chicago to Detroit. She was amazed at how quickly time had flown by. Her cousin April's wedding was that weekend. Alex was looking forward to spending time at home with her family, even though she was prepared for some sort of drama. A disagreement that would escalate into a full fledged shouting match, sisters that would wind up not speaking for weeks, a DUI. Something. As she rolled down the driveway, she called her mother to let her know she was on the way.

"Mom? I will be there this afternoon."

"What time does your flight get in?"

"I'm driving. I waited too late to get a flight. I don't mind. It will give me a chance to clear my mind."

As she made her way onto I-90 she thought of how great it would be to see everyone. While she loved living in Chicago, she missed her family. And time spent at home, being surrounded by all of her family and friends, tended to remind her just how much. As she drove along the highway, her thoughts shifted to Daniel. They were quickly averted. It had been six weeks since they met and Daniel had made no secret of his desire to get to know her better. They had met for dinner or coffee several times and Alex thoroughly enjoyed spending time with

him. She preferred to keep things professional but she was struggling to deny her interest in him. Then her thoughts shifted to Gordon and how she would smooth things over with him, thus retaining one of the firm's most important clients. *I am not working at all this weekend. I am going to enjoy my family without even thinking of the office.* She popped in a jazz CD and settled in for the drive.

After several hours of driving, she made the familiar exit toward home. The local landmarks that Detroit was famous for forced her to recall images of her childhood. *Detroit will never change.* As she passed the Lions' stadium, she remembered Sunday games with her father. She thought about how proud he would be of her, his only child. *Daddy was such an amazing man. He wasn't rich, but he worked hard and did okay for a small town man from Mississippi with only a fourth grade education.* Alex could feel her eyes misting. *I miss you, Daddy.*

Upon her arrival, Alex called Michelle to tell her that she was in town.

"Michelle, it's Alex. You're not going to believe this."

"What?"

"I'm in town."

"You...are in Detroit? Somebody must have died."

"No, just the opposite, my cousin is getting married. I hope you can make time for me this weekend."

"Make time? Girl, you know I will open up my entire schedule for you."

“Well, I’m pulling in to Momma’s. I will call you later and we can arrange a time to get together.”

As Alex walked toward her mother’s front door, she was reminded of the hours that were passed away playing jacks on the front porch while waiting for her father to come home from work. She recalled the excitement she felt when she saw her father’s car pulling into the driveway. Sheer elation.

“Alex,” her mother said with a welcoming smile and endearing tone as she met her at the door.

“Hey, Momma.”

“It is so good to see you,” her mother replied, kissing Alex on the forehead. It was followed by a disapproving glare. “You’re awfully skinny. How much weight have you lost?”

“I’m alright, Momma,” Alex snapped, rolling her eyes. “I just got here and you are going to start in on me already.”

Alex barreled past her mother, stormed to her room and dropped her bags. Immediately, a convicting feeling came over her. Perhaps she had overreacted. Her life was growing more complicated by the second and she had been a little on edge. She knew her mother was really just concerned about her. She was from a different generation. She didn’t understand corporate rivalry, dating competition,

and the many biases of the world toward people that were thin, especially in a city like Chicago.

Alex was under constant pressure to look her best at all times. She took a deep breath and reflected for a moment. She thought about how blessed she was to still have her mother; after all, she had just recently lost her father. She was overcome with a sense of gratitude. Even if her mother did nag her on occasion, Alex knew she was still blessed to have her, and she vowed from that day forward, not to take it for granted. At the very least, she was appreciative that her slow migration down one size was beginning to show outwardly, even if her mother didn't like it. That was enough to change her mood. And although an apology was out of the question, Alex returned to the living room where her mom was sitting, with a change of heart. Her tone was softer and her shoulders were more relaxed.

“Alex, what did you bring to wear to the wedding?”

“I have a dress that I bought last year and haven't had a chance to wear it yet.”

“Do you mind taking me to the mall? I would like to get a new dress for the wedding.”

“Sure, and I will buy you a new dress, Momma. You keep your money. Momma, why don't you move to Chicago with me?”

“Why would I do that, baby? Everything I know is in Detroit. This is my home.”

“I’m there, Momma. I could help...” Alex hesitated. “It would be fun for us. We could hang out together, you could even move close to me.”

Alex could see that her mother was getting older. Since her last visit, her mom had changed so much. The laugh lines were converting into wrinkles. Her speech was a little slower and her gait more pronounced. *What if something happened to her? She lives alone. I’m all the way in Chicago.* Alex thought about her mother’s health and her finances as she was entering her golden years without her father, who had always taken care of everything. Her mother insisted she was okay but Alex was still worried about being so far away. *This is too much. I need a drink.* Alex quickly called Michelle before her thoughts got the best of her and confirmed that she would meet her at her apartment at eight. Alex and Michelle had planned to visit a hot new club that had just opened. Alex wondered just how hot it could be if it was in Detroit. Living in Chicago had caused her to raise her standards.

“Sorry for the interruption, Mom.”

“You just got here,” her mom reminded her.

“I know, Mom, I won’t be out late.”

“Where are you going?”

“A restaurant.”

“I hope you are not going to breeze in and out of town like you always do. I haven’t seen you in a while and I need to talk to you.”

“What is it?” Alex responded with concern. “Are you sick? Do you need money?”

“Calm down, no need for you to press the panic button just yet.”

“I just want to talk to you before you leave, that’s all.”

Later that afternoon, Alex took her mother to the mall as she had promised. They had visited just about every store in the mall to no avail. It appeared the perfect dress eluded them. Alex really wanted to buy her mother something special. It was her way of apologizing for being so disrespectful earlier. They decided to try one more store on the way to the parking lot.

“Try this one on, Mom.”

“That’s too expensive.”

“No, no it’s not. Please try it on.”

Alex’s mom came out of the dressing room and stood in front of the mirror. The dress’s deep lavender hue really complimented her mother’s hair, which in that moment, Alex noticed was now almost completely silver. The few black strands that remained appeared to be giving up the fight.

“You look beautiful,” Alex said.

“I haven’t had anyone tell me that since your father passed.”

“Mom, do you ever get lonely living by yourself? I mean, Daddy took care of everything.”

“No, the Lord is always with me. When I need comforting or feel lonely, I just turn to Him. I recommend you do the same.”

After spending the day shopping with her mother, Alex spent the evening at Michelle’s place. Michelle had moved up in the world due to the lucrative real estate industry and her business was thriving. She had purchased a fabulous three-story loft in downtown Detroit. *Who would have thought of a loft in Downtown Detroit? Maybe Detroit is changing.* Alex noticed that Michelle, who had been slender their entire lives surprisingly appeared about thirty pounds heavier than she was the last time Alex saw her and Alex dared not comment.

After all, it didn’t really matter. What was more important was the friendship that had lasted all these years. They decided to stay in, called Renee and Paulette from high school over and laughed way into the night. And while the topic of men came up frequently and violently, Alex listened to their stories, anguished with them, and cherished the fact that she had finally met one who was decidedly different. Perhaps her faith in men had been restored.

Chapter Nine

The trumpet sounded to announce the coming of the bride. Alex stood and stared at the sanctuary entrance with great anticipation. Her cousin April had been dating Rick for eight years and they were finally getting married. Alex pondered over whether or not the delayed proposal said anything about the relationship. Although she was excited for her closest cousin, she was also worried. If it took eight years to decide whether or not to get married, Alex thought it at least begged the question, what was the big hold up?

“Wow, she looks beautiful,” Alex said.

“Shhh!” her mother angrily replied. Alex cut her eyes. *I’ll soon be forty years old and she still treats me like I’m four.* As independent as Alex was, her mother had a way of making her feel like a child and Alex was not appreciative of that. Alex looked around to make sure no one noticed.

Hours later, and after a beautiful but long ceremony that included an almost endless supply of candles that had to be ceremoniously lit one by one, Alex and her mother arrived at the reception hall. It was a beautiful venue. Silver bows adorned everything. And the banquet table was flanked by the most incredible ice sculpture. But the talk of the night was the seven-tiered wedding cake made of

stacked, robin's egg blue, iced squares that resembled Tiffany boxes. Rick, the groom, seemed to have lots of single, attractive male friends who showed interest in Alex but she was pretty much unresponsive. She danced with some, obtained a few cell numbers but gave no commitment to call.

After fending off many suitors, she sat alone at a corner table, thankful to catch her breath and rest her feet from the spiked heels she was wearing. She watched as everyone enjoyed the moment. Alex was overjoyed to see all her family members interacting, sharing stories, telling lies, and of course, arguing. It was wonderful. You could almost touch the love in the room. She was glad to be home.

Suddenly, she noticed Christine across the room at the bar. Christine was the mother of Rick's son, Deondre. *What is she doing here? Surely Rick and April were smart enough not to invite her.* Alex couldn't help but notice how sad Christine looked. And even though Christine had caused so much drama for Rick and April, she couldn't help but feel sorry for her. *Nothing like baby momma drama to ruin a marriage. Now that Deondre is older, Christine can no longer use him to control Rick like she's done in the past. Maybe that was the reason for the delayed nuptials. April might be smarter than she looks.*

Alex's eyes rested on Christine like a hawk's. She watched her as she filled up at the bar. On her way back to her table, Christine staggered past Alex with a

drink in each hand, spilling most of their contents onto the floor, and it was obvious she had had several before she got there. As Alex watched Christine zig-zag to her table, she pitied her. *Why can't she just move on? How could she even show her face here and let everyone know she is the jilted woman? Still hanging on to one shred of hope that she can have him back. Women can be pathetic sometimes. Love can be pathetic.*

At the same time she was feeling sorry for Christine, she knew she couldn't let her ruin her closest cousin's wedding. *This could get ugly. If I ask her to leave, I am convinced she will get loud and embarrass us both. I paid too much for this dress to get into a scuffle with Christine. I will just keep an eye on her. Worst-case scenario, I'll have uncle Pete escort her out.*

As the evening progressed, Alex kept a faithful and watchful eye on Christine and the night would have concluded without an event until Christine decided to participate in the bouquet toss. She had had one too many. When the bouquet was tossed, Christine went all out. As she lunged forward, she crashed into Aunt Ellen and knocked her to the floor, displacing the white hat she was wearing and had bought specifically for the occasion.

With Aunt Ellen down and nothing to serve as a barrier, Christine continued her drunken, stumbling, forward motion and was on a collision course with the beautiful and stately Tiffany blue iced wedding cake sitting on the banquet table. She was dead on center. The crowd held their breath. After what

seemed to take forever, Christine and the cake hit the floor. She sat there, in a daze, her lap covered in Tiffany blue. Ignoring the unwelcome guest, everyone rushed past her to see if any of cake could be salvaged. The bottom three tiers were saved and a shaky Aunt Ellen was helped to her feet.

When April turned around and saw Christine sitting in the middle of her expensive Tiffany blue cake, her face turned red with anger. With her nostrils flaring and her eyes squinted, she immediately hiked up the billowy white layers of her dress, kicked off her shoes, and lunged at Christine. Alex grabbed her by the bustle of her dress and dragged her through a side door, praying the cool night air would calm her down. It took Alex almost a half hour to get April to stop threatening bodily harm to Christine. Luckily, by the time they came back inside, a tearful Christine had already been escorted from the building and placed into a cab.

The next morning, Alex was awakened by the sound of the telephone. She staggered out of the room and met her mom at the breakfast table. To her delight, her mom had fixed her favorite, blueberry pancakes, and Alex was reminded of how much she missed home. She would only have one slice of bacon, but the pancakes she would not refuse.

“I’m glad to see you’re eating. You’ve lost a few pounds since I saw you last. Remember, Alex, only a dog wants a bone.” Alex ignored her mother’s comments and continued to enjoy her breakfast.

As Alex was packing her car for her return trip to Chicago, her mom came out to keep her company.

“April was so beautiful. I think she and Rick will be okay. Who invited Christine to the wedding?”

“Knowing Christine, she invited herself,” Alex replied.

“How sad. And that cake was so good, too bad we could only have a sliver of what was left of it, thanks to Christine. She ended up making a fool of herself.”

“Men can do that to us sometimes, Momma.”

“Not you.” A silent moment followed. Alex’s mother knew just how far to go before the fury would be unleashed. “Before you go, I want to show you something.” Alex followed her mom to her bedroom. “Do you know what t this is?”

“Yes, it’s a portfolio statement. For who?”

“It was your father’s.”

“Daddy had stock?”

“Apparently so. I knew he had a pension plan. He had worked at that plant his entire life. He must have been buying additional shares. Look how much it’s worth.” Her mom chuckled.

“Oh my God, this is almost a million dollars.” Alex dropped her bag. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Chapter Ten

Alex arrived at her office, surprised to find an emergency meeting had been called. Everyone crowded into the ballroom on the upper floor. When a meeting was called in the ballroom, it was usually big news. The entire office was buzzing. It was a celebration of some sort. Champagne was offered and more than a few of Alex's co-workers were more than happy to toast if it meant a free glass. Alex stood in front of the room with senior management. *I have earned this place.* By standing next to the partners, she was sending a clear message to everyone that she would soon be a part of the senior leadership team. She had worked hard to get there and she was demanding their respect.

After an update was given regarding the rise in company earnings, the chairman shared the reason for the assembly.

"We have great news," the chairman announced. "We are so pleased to welcome Daniel McClellan as our new Executive Vice President. He will wear many hats, but his primary responsibility will be overall funds management and the ultimate solvency of this company." The entire room turned to look at Alex and judge her response. Everyone knew she was in line for the promotion and had assumed this meeting had been called to name her Executive Vice President. You could almost hear the whips in their necks as they turned to look at her. The room

fell silent. With every eye in the room on her, Alex remained poised, and smiled through an internal fit of rage. She raised her glass to Daniel and rendered an eloquent celebratory toast. The entire room followed her lead and raised their glasses, confused, nonetheless. Alex was so collected that the office thought she must have known and had given her blessing. The rumor mill grinded to a screeching halt.

For the rest of the meeting Alex tuned out. She was devastated. After everything she had done for the company, their success was largely due to her efforts and the clientele she had brought in and maintained. She was even more disappointed that they had even expanded the role and given Daniel additional responsibilities that the position didn't have when she was being considered. She felt as if the world had been snatched from underneath her.

Following the meeting, Alex walked over to Daniel, shook his hand and congratulated him without a hint of disappointment and returned to her office. Once there, her attempt to focus on work was futile. She was overwhelmed with a myriad of different emotions. Confusion, anger, self-doubt. She felt betrayed by everyone, especially Daniel. He knew she was being considered for the promotion. All those times they spent together talking, he never even mentioned it. Alex stayed in her office most of the day, staring out the window, trying to process

what had just occurred. How could someone she had feelings for be the cause of such pain? It just didn't seem right.

That afternoon, after meetings and endless congratulations, Daniel stopped by Alex's office.

"Do you have a minute?"

"Sure, why not?" There was no mistaking Alex's attitude. You could cut the tension with a knife.

Daniel slowly sat down in the chair opposite Alex's desk. "I'm sorry, Alex." Daniel shook his head as if could reject the entire situation.

"Why are you apologizing? The best man won. Business is business." Alex noticed that one of the treasured paintings that hung on her wall was crooked and she walked over to straighten it. "How long have you known?" she said in a weak voice.

"I've known for some time. They told me I couldn't discuss it with anyone until the formal announcement was made.

"Well you get an 'A-plus' for that one." Alex's tone was sarcastic. "I need to get back to work." She sat down at her desk, opened a file, and began reading it.

Daniel got up from his chair and walked toward the door. He stopped at the door and turned around as if he had something to say, but Alex was immersed in the document she was reading. He quietly exited.

A few moments later, Alex got up and charged over to Ross's office. She needed an explanation. She barged through the door.

"Calm down, Alex. I know it doesn't make sense to you, Alex, but the decision has been made. We've checked him out. He's good at what he does and comes with high recommendations."

Alex folded her arms and leaned in. "You could have told me Ross."

"I'm sorry, Alex."

"Yeah, it seems everyone is." Alex stormed out of Ross's office. Luckily for her, it was the end of the day. She fought tears on the train, went home, and cried for several hours. After Daniel's second attempt to reach her, she turned her phone off.

Chapter Eleven

Alex exited the train and walked up the stairs from the station. The day was overcast and it matched her mood. She sullenly walked up Michigan Avenue headed for her office. She passed by the Cartier store and noticed the watch sitting in the window. It was a painful reminder of yesterday's events. *This is some bull. I have worked so hard for this.* A part of her felt as though she were dreaming and would wake up at any second. Another part felt as if she would lose her mind.

The whole thing was surreal. She had worked so hard and for so long, *and for what? Life seems so unfair right now. And unfortunately, I have feelings for my betrayer. How did I get here? This is not the way this was supposed to work.*

Upon her arrival at work, she was met with a busy morning. *My phone is ringing off the hook. It will take me all day to return everyone's calls and investigate their issues. In fact, I am going to need help. I'll pull Wanda. She is probably the best Account Manager we have. She talks a lot but she has a reputation for getting the job done and responding well to the customers.* Alex pulled out her company phone list and called Wanda.

"Wanda, can you come up here for a minute?"

"Sure, Ms. Monroe. What did I do?"

“You haven’t done anything. I need your assistance today. Do you think you could help me?”

“Sure, I’ll be right up.”

Wanda arrived in the office and Alex briefed her. Wanda kept staring at Alex in a peculiar manner and finally Alex asked, “Are you okay?”

“Oh, I’m fine, why do you ask?”

“You keep glaring at me.”

“Oh, I am so sorry. I just keep thinking about the Vice President’s position and how you stepped aside so that Daniel could have the job.”

“Stepped aside,” Alex responded, in a tone that held subtle hints of anger, disappointment and plotted revenge.

“Yes, that was very big of you. I don’t know if I could have it accepted it the way you did. I’m awestruck.”

“It was more like pushed aside,” Alex mumbled under her breath. She gathered herself after a moment. She knew she it was the perfect opportunity to explain the corporate game and office politics to an up and rising star; one who reminded her of herself when she first came to the firm. She would never let her personal views triumph over her professionalism so she set them aside. *Being pissy isn’t going to help the situation.* “Wanda, I’ll be honest with you on two levels. The

first one being that I was not in on the search committee that brought Daniel here. In fact, I didn't even know anything about it."

"But, I'm confused," Wanda replied

"I wanted that promotion but unfortunately management felt that Daniel was the better candidate. I found out that Daniel got the job, along with everybody else.

"What?"

"I want you to know that I fully and completely stand by their position. After all, we all want what is best for the firm. Daniel comes with a very solid background and high recommendations. He was a strong contender. I accept defeat gracefully. Sometimes, life throws you a curve but you just have to get in there and start swinging. You can't let a setback keep you from your goals. I didn't get the promotion. The timing was off. When these things happen you evaluate and figure out your next move."

"Oh my God, I am so sorry."

"Don't be. It was unfortunate, but it happens. Pity never helps anyone. I will not let myself get caught in that trap. Does it suck? Yes. But I will get through this." *Maybe if I say this enough times, I'll start to believe it!* "Now, for the second level. You have such promise at this agency. You do a great job, and are willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. I see a lot of myself in you. You

have definitely got the mark of a star but your professionalism is not at the level it should be to make it in this business. You are known for talking. If you want to advance at this company, or anywhere else for that matter, it has to stop. You must remain professional at all times. You must earn the respect of your colleagues and leadership team and you can't do that by being labeled the office gossip."

"Thanks, Ms Monroe. I needed that."

Alex gave Wanda the project and they spent the next several minutes talking and sharing. Alex was more than eager to groom Wanda and prepare her for what lay ahead for her in such an aggressive, male-dominated industry. . As Alex freely gave advice, Wanda listened intently.

"Look around us, Wanda. What do you see?"

"Men. Everywhere."

"That's right. You are going to have to learn how to play their game. It takes wit, cunning, and craftiness to make it in this business. Let your intuition guide you. And above all, never let your emotions cloud your judgment."

Daniel entered the office with a determined look on his face. Alex reciprocated with a look that let him know she did not appreciate his interruption.

“Hello, Mr. McClellan.” Wanda leapt off her chair grabbing the displaced files that were on her lap. They now lay scattered on the floor. “I was just leaving.”

“You do not have to leave, Wanda. Yes, Daniel, what can I do for you?” Alex said in a purposeful tone.

“No, I think I am clear on the project, Ms. Monroe. If I have any further questions, I will contact you.”

As Wanda exited, Alex reminded her, “Remember your professionalism, Wanda.” It was a reminder to keep her mouth shut.



Upon Wanda’s return to her desk and as soon as her behind was planted firmly on the chair, William, knowing Wanda had just come from Alex’s office, came over to get the scoop.

“What’s the dish, girl?”

“Surprisingly,” Wanda hesitated, “there is none,” she replied, remaining as glib and monotone as she possibly could. And with a jerk of his neck, William returned to his cubicle and the whole issue was dropped.



Daniel sat in Alex's office making awkward small talk. Things were different between them. She seemed more distant and aloof than before. He had been making headway with her until the announcement was made about the position. It appeared he had suffered a setback. He needed to do something. They had to move past this. Daniel nervously invited Alex to lunch and she accepted.

After all, there was an elephant in the room and it was dropping peanuts everywhere. They needed closure to this situation immediately. Driving separately to thwart office gossip, Daniel met Alex at Cosmo for lunch. Once seated they quietly looked over their menus and gave their order to their waitress.

Daniel did not know what to say. He respected Alex. He didn't want to approach her with pity. After all, her efforts had taken the firm to the level of success that it had today. This was not the mark of a woman that could not handle a little disappointment. On the other hand, he didn't want to appear callous. Perhaps in not addressing the issue, she'd see him as insensitive.

He felt as though he couldn't win. He was confused. There was a heaviness in his gut and his thoughts were cloudy, which was not like him at all. He had always been so confident, so self-assured about everything in his life, until now.

As he sat staring at the glass of water he was holding in his hand, one thing was clear to him, and that was, he needed to tread lightly. He felt such a strong attraction to Alex. He was determined not to give up even though this issue

would more than likely make things even muddier. In hindsight, he regretted he had not rehearsed what he would say before he extended the lunch invitation. The silence between them was deafening. The food came and Alex broke the silence.

“Enough. Daniel, I want you to know that I don’t blame you. I was just so shocked by the whole thing and I know that you feel awkward about it. It’s over. I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Let’s just turn the page and move forward.”

“What are you doing later? Can I take you out?” Daniel sipped his water.

“Not that far forward.”

“You said you wanted to move on. So do I.” Daniel took a bite of salmon and popped it in his mouth.

“Daniel, I don’t know about that. This whole thing” Alex pointed back and forth between them. “I’m just not sure about it.”

“What do you mean not sure?”

“Not sure. I’m not sure if this is what I want.”

“Alex, I want you to know that I had no intention of hurting you. And I’m really sorry.”

“You said that already.”

“This whole thing has nothing to do with you. It is not a commentary on your performance or anything like that. It is just a really complicated matter...”

Alex felt insulted by his comment. *Isn't that just like a man? To assume that I cannot handle or understand something complicated. Check please!*

Daniel continued, "You said you wanted to move forward. That's what I'm doing."

Daniel reached across the table and grabbed Alex by the hand. "Do you forgive me?"

"I told you, I've moved on." She snapped and pulled her hand away.

Daniel motioned for the waiter. "I've got a feeling that in your mind you've moved on but your heart, which is what I'm after, is another story. You can give me the cold shoulder all you want. I'm not giving up on you, Alexis Monroe. I don't accept defeat that easily."

Chapter Twelve

Alex walked up the stairs to Dr. Bradford's office. Dr. Bradford was the therapist she had been seeing off and on since her father passed. Her weekly sessions had stretched to monthly, or as needed. And today, *as needed*, felt more like, *can't function*. Alex's head was spinning. She wanted that promotion so badly. It was as good as hers, and now, in the blink of an eye, it was gone. She understood that it wasn't Daniel's fault, but it still hurt and had he not come waltzing into her life and charming her with his good looks and debonair ways, she would still have her sanity. More importantly, she'd still have her coveted job!

Dr. Bradford opened the door and invited Alex in. Alex sat on the burgundy sofa.

"Good to see you, Alex. Catch me up on what's been going on since we last met."

"Well, where do I begin? The last time we met, I was anticipating the answer from the board as to whether I had gotten the Executive VP position. The one I had worked so hard for and deserved more than anyone else."

"Sure, we discussed it. It was pretty much in the bag, you felt."

"Well, the bag burst. I didn't get promoted. They gave the job to Daniel."

“Wait a minute —” Dr. Bradford scanned down her notes. “Isn’t that the guy you were seeing?”

“Yep.”

“I’m a little confused,” Dr. Bradford said apologetically.

“So am I. I meet this guy, he seems like a nice guy, I start to wonder if I can trust him, even potentially date him, and out of the blue, he snatches that position right out from under me. I’ve worked my tail off for that firm and they gave the job to him. He hadn’t even been there for a month. I’m done with him.”

“You sound as if he deliberately did that to hurt you. Nothing you have described would indicate that. Perhaps he was more qualified. Perhaps they just liked him better. It happens in life, Alex. It’s not always a personal crucifixion.”

“You’re taking his side, too.”

“Let’s be mature about this, Alex. A few months ago, you told me you met this guy. You were very attracted to him. He’s smart, sensitive, attentive; everything you would like in a mate. You enjoy spending time with him and that you might be falling for him. And today, you tell me that he gets a very good job, one he would have been a fool to turn down, and now you want to call it quits.”

Alex stared at the floor. “I’m so confused.”

“And being confused is okay. But don’t read more into the situation than there actually is. Put yourself in his position. What would you have done? You

have issues with trust and control, Alex. We've talked about this. When are you going to realize that everything doesn't always work according to the way you've planned them? And when they don't, adjust your plans and move forward. That's one of the secrets to a great life--being flexible."

Alex grabbed a tissue out of the box that sat on the table next to the sofa. "It's not fair, Dr. Bradford. It's not fair that they gave that job to him." She dabbed at a rogue tear that rolled down her cheek.

"What's this really about, Alex? I understand you being confused and disappointed. But search a little deeper and tell me what's really going on."

Alex sat there for several moments. She could hear every noise in the silent room. The gulping sound she made when she swallowed was the loudest. The pause was long as she considered what Dr. Bradford was asking. "I'm afraid of being hurt. There, I said it." Her tone was angry.

Dr. Bradford smiled at her progress.

Alex continued. "Ever since I was a little girl, I imagined I'd have this great life. I'd grow up and have a fabulous career, and make lots of money. I'd get married to the man of my dreams. I'd have children and my dad would take them fishing. And as of right now, I'm batting goose egg. My father was taken in his prime, men can't be trusted, and my company rewarded my years of hard work by

giving my promotion to someone else. Everything I tried to make happen has failed miserably.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. You have a good life, Alex. But it’s a life. It’s not a fairy tale. It is smart of you to have dreams and aspirations, and to put effort into bringing those things into fruition, but the release is just as important. Your attachment to the outcome is what causes you so much pain. Learn to let go. Step into your life and begin to live fully. No matter what the outcome.”

Alex stood up and grabbed her purse. “I have to go Dr. Bradford.” She placed her check on the table and walked out. She was ten minutes short of her hour-long session ending.

Chapter Thirteen

Daniel stood in the doorway to Alex's office, leaning against the jamb. Alex sat staring at her computer. She hesitated before acknowledging him. Since their lunch at Cosmo six weeks ago, Alex had decided to keep their relationship platonic. It was the easiest thing to do, even if it wasn't necessarily right. She thought about the last session she had with Dr. Bradford but every time she wanted to let herself go, she was overcome with a sense of insecurity and it caused her to pull back, to attempt to deny her feelings for Daniel. But he was persistent. In fact, he was wearing her down.

"Did you get the chocolates I left for you this morning?"

"Yes, I did. Thanks. That was very nice of you."

Daniel entered Alex's office and shut the door. He closed the blinds to the windows that flanked each side of her door. Alex could smell his cologne. Its faint scent always delighted her senses. He sat down in a navy pinstriped suit and shoes polished to a spit shine.

"What's it going to take?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do." Daniel reached across the desk and grabbed her hand. He stood up and walked around her desk still holding her delicate wrist. He pulled

her up from the chair and close to him. He placed his finger under her chin and looked into her eyes. “What’s it going to take?”

Alex’s heart raced. She was afraid he could hear it. She stared at the floor. Daniel grabbed her chin and gently raised it looking into her eyes, or more importantly making sure she could see into his.

“We’re at work. This is so inappropriate.” Alex’s voice was weak. It wasn’t often she got this close to a man and her body was responding. He felt so good.

“Tell me you’re not attracted to me.”

Alex knew the jig was up. In spite of all her efforts to be coy, it appeared he had seen right through her. She could feel his breath on her neck as he intertwined her fingers with his.

“We work together, Daniel. It’s too complicated.”

“You’re making this complicated. There is nothing in company policy that states we can’t go out together. Speaking of which... I’ve made dinner plans.”

Daniel was still holding Alex’s hand. He stared at her perfect manicure,

“You didn’t have my permission to do that.” Alex pulled her hand back.

“I’ll pick you up at eight o’clock Friday evening.” Daniel walked toward the door.

“Where are we going?”

“Navy Pier.” Daniel closed the door on his way out.

Alex flopped down on the chair. She could still feel the blood coursing through her veins. *Navy Pier*. Her secretary buzzed her, informing her that her three o'clock appointment was in the lobby. Alex told her to send him back. She pulled her compact from her purse, touched up her lipstick, and tried to shake off whatever Daniel had just done to her.

Chapter Fourteen

Laura paced back and forth across the room. Webster sat in the oversized leather chair staring at the floor. He appeared quite relaxed.

“How could you let this happen?” Laura screamed.

“I didn’t know it was stolen, Laura. He’s my cousin. I thought you would like it. You’ve always talked about how you wanted a flat screen television.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t want you to steal it! I have to go to court now. My job could be in jeopardy, and did it ever occur to you that I can buy my own daggone flat screen television? I make good money, Webster.”

“I didn’t steal it. My cousin gave it to me,” Webster said, without even shifting in the chair. “I know you can buy the things you want. You don’t have to keep throwing that up in my face. I wanted to get you something.”

“And you didn’t think to ask him where it came from?” Laura’s tone escalated.

“No.”

“Well, why not? People just don’t give people things like that without asking some questions.”

“He’s family.”

“So what?”

“So what? I trusted him. If Alex gave you a TV, would you question where it came from?”

“That’s different.”

“Why? Because she’s all educated?” Webster paused. He sat up in the chair. Now he was getting upset. He was angry at Laura’s obvious display of classism.

“You think you’re better than me, don’t you?” His back stiffened and his eyes squinted at Laura. Knowing her mouth would lie, he looked to her eyes to tell the truth. And they did not disappoint him. “You think that because you have a college education and I don’t, because your family comes from the suburbs and I’m from the tracks, that you are all high and mighty. Why are you even with me? A-a-h-h, I think I know. And that’s pretty shallow, don’t you think? You’re looking at me as if I’m the liar. Perhaps you need to take a look in the mirror and see who the liar really is.”

“There’s no way in hell you are going to try and make this about me. Nice try, Webster. Why don’t you just get out?”

Webster jumped from the chair, snatched his jacket off the sofa and walked out. He felt guilty about what had happened but Laura was overreacting. He was reminded of his initial reservations about getting involved with a suburban girl. *They’re just too different. Not to mention the age difference.* Where he came from, people got busted for receiving stolen goods all the time. It was no big deal. You made a

court appearance, no priors, case dismissed. “She’s acting as if she’ll receive the death penalty.” He stared at the pavement blocks that passed underneath his feet. “Where I’m from, your girl would be willing to take the rap if it would keep you out of trouble.” He was coming to the realization that it wasn’t going to work out between the two of them. Not because he didn’t love her, but because their different worlds had begun to collide. He was unapologetically from the mean streets of Chicago’s south side. *This is who I am. If she can’t get down with that. Too bad.*



Laura continued to pace back and forth long after Webster was gone. She needed a lawyer. Would she go to jail? Would it be in the newspaper? She began to panic and although she was hesitant to tell Alex, before she knew it, she had picked up the phone and dialed her number.

“Alex, I don’t need a lecture. I need your help.”

“Webster.”

“See, that’s why I was reluctant to call you.”

“What?” Alex responded, as if she had been wrongfully accused, but Laura had pegged her most accurately.

“I’m sorry. Is everything alright?”

“I’m in a bit of trouble and I need a lawyer.”



“What happened?”

“Webster’s cousin gave him a T.V. Next thing we know, cops are knocking on the door with a warrant. It was stolen. They came in, took the T.V. and Webster and I were arrested. We were charged and released this morning. How they knew he had it, I don’t know. It almost seems like his cousin set him up.

“Or Webster was in on it,” Alex added.

“It’s not the time for a lecture, Alex. I could be in serious trouble.”

“Okay, girl, stop panicking. Your record is clean. It was a total misunderstanding. They have to prove that you knew it was stolen, and you didn’t. I don’t think you have much to worry about.”

Laura’s tears began to cease. She sighed.

“Maybe you’re right. I know he was just trying to do something good for me.”

“I know, Laura,” Alex continued in a patronizing tone. “Let’s focus on how to get you out of this mess. Why don’t you call Blake?”

“I’m not calling Blake.”

“I’ll call him then,” Alex said. Blake was Laura’s ex- boyfriend who now worked for one of Chicago’s premier law firms and was doing quite well for himself.

“We ended on such a sour note. It was awful. I made a fool of myself.”

“Laura, snap out of it. Who cares? This is serious. If you don’t have the right representation, who knows what could happen? I don’t think it’s much to worry about, but at the same time, you want to make sure all your bases are covered. That’s what a smart woman would do. I am sure he has since moved on. He’s probably in a serious relationship by now anyway, if not married. Laura, be an adult about this. Do you want to pay Chicago attorney fees?”

“No.”

“Then I’m calling him.”



Alex accessed her rolodex and retrieved Blake’s number. It had been some time since they had spoken but she was able to keep up with him through newspaper articles and T.V. appearances. He was quickly becoming known for his expertise and acquittal record in difficult and high-powered cases. Alex called Blake and after a few minutes catching up through which she discovered that he had just gotten out of a relationship, she shared the reason for her call.

“Blake, it’s Laura. She’s in a little trouble and we did not know who to call.”

“What is she into this time?” They chuckled together. Laura was known for being headstrong and doing things her own way.

“She has to go to court for receiving stolen goods.”

“What? I haven’t seen or heard from her in a while. What has happened to her? Is she using?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. It’s a guy. Of course.”

“What do you mean, of course?”

“Well, nothing like a man to lead a woman down the wrong path, set her up for disappointment, cheat on her...shall I keep going?”

“You know, Alex, I was faithful to my girl for three years. She left me and to this day, I still don’t know the real reason why. After all those years, she claimed she needed space. I wonder what “space” looks like and where he works. Anyway, all I can say is that she lost a good thing and someone else will recognize me for the blessing I am.”

“Wow, that’s modesty.”

“Women can be something else!”

“So can men.”

“Women build walls around their heart and as soon as someone gets close, they begin to fortify the wall, making it impossible to have an intimate, connected

and truly spiritual relationship. They are always assuming the worse. It's as though they are just waiting for you to mess up. I think that is why many brothas become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In their minds, women are so convinced that the guy will do something wrong or that the relationship will go bad, that life sends them exactly what they wish for. And of course, they blame the whole thing on us."

Alex could feel her blood pressure rising. *How dare he?* Part of her knew there was some truth to what he had just said. But with everything she was dealing with, she wasn't ready to admit it. She thought better of responding in defense of women, her usual reaction, as she might piss Blake off. She resisted.

"Blake, will you help us?" Alex redirected the conversation.

"Sure, I'll help Laura, but she is going to have to call me. You can't mediate for her. I will need too many details."

"Okay. I'll have her call you today." Alex hung up the phone. She sounded confident but she knew getting Laura to call Blake would be not be easy. Laura could be so headstrong at times. Blake was the ideal person to get her out of this, partly because he was one of the best lawyers in town but more importantly, because he used to be crazy about her. *He may not even charge for his services. Let me call Laura and talk some sense into her. I can only assume that Webster has blown through her*

savings, with his gold diggin' behind. She needs to be reasonable; Blake could be her only chance.

Alex took a deep breath and called Laura back.

“Laura, I spoke to Blake and he is willing to take your case. He’s waiting for your call.”

“Please...I’m not calling him. This is embarrassing.”

“No need to be embarrassed. I have given him some neutral, preliminary details, and he knows it involves a guy. Laura, you’re just going to have to bite the bullet on this one...or go to jail.”

“I’d rather go to jail.”

“Now...you’re being ridiculous.” At this point Alex was exhausted. Laura could be draining at times. “Here’s the deal. I’ve done my part. The only other thing I can suggest is for you to call around and get some attorney fees.” Alex knew that would make her change her mind. “If you don’t find anyone that suits your budget, call Blake. Let me know what you decide.”



Laura hung up the phone seething. She had really gotten herself into a quandary this time. *Maybe I need to call this relationship off. He’s so fine, though. And I know he really cares about me. I have no idea what I am going to do. I don’t want to call Blake. He’s the last person I want to talk to. I can’t believe that cow called him anyway and told him my*

business. Laura sat for a while and gazed at the fire she had lit. Fall was still several weeks away but the night was uncharacteristically cool. She wondered where Webster had gone but she was so angry with him for putting her at risk, at the time she didn't care. *I hope he freezes to death.* Her thoughts drifted, *I wonder why Blake isn't married after all these years.*

Chapter Fifteen

“Laura, did you call him?”

“No, he didn’t come over to the apartment last night either. I wonder where he stayed last night. He was so angry with me.”

“I am talking about Blake. You know I could care less where Webster is.”

“No. And I thought you were done with it. I can handle myself.”

“No, you can’t. Laura, I am going to tell you the honest truth. We have been close so many years and I love you so much. But the truth is, you don’t want to listen to anybody. You can be so stubborn and headstrong. You don’t always make wise choices. You have to admit that you have been in some messes over the past years.”

“What does the past have to do with right now?” Laura responded in an offended tone.

“You tell me. Could it be that you never listen to the voice of reason? When people suggest one thing, you typically will do the opposite. That’s why you can’t call Blake now. We kept telling you that he was a good man, Laura. And that he was not cheating on you. But you were so convinced, with no evidence, after his

repeated pleas of innocence, that you barged in his house, accused his cousin of being his lover, and dragged her out of the bed. She was naked, for God's sake!"

"How was I to know she was housesitting? And who sleeps naked at their cousin's house? That's nasty."

"That's just it. You didn't know, and you did not take the time to investigate or gather real tangible evidence, which you would have never found. You act solely on what you think and feel at the moment. Blake was a good man, but he succumbed to your constant accusations of indiscretion. Everyone was telling you to let it go, but you would not listen. And now I'm telling you that you have one of Chicago's finest lawyers at your disposal, and he is willing to take time out of his busy schedule to handle your petty mishap. But you don't see it that way. I don't know how to help you.

"Don't. All you do is lecture me anyway. What's so perfect about your life? You spent years working toward a job that they gave to somebody else."

"Laura," Alex responded in a calm and cautious tone. "I am going to hang up before this conversation goes a little too far and both of us end up saying things we will regret. I will call you later on this evening." As Alex hung up the phone, she thought about one of her mom's most popular sayings--*the truth hurts*. Alex was hoping that since Laura lashed out at her, perhaps what she said struck a chord

somewhere deep within. She was hoping that finally, this time, enough would be enough and Laura might listen to her.



Laura hung up the phone, furious, hurt, and confused. She climbed into bed and just sat there. She felt so alone and so misunderstood. In frustration, she banged her head against the headboard so hard, a picture fell down from the wall, and the corner of it hit her on the side of her forehead. She reached up and could feel that the skin had been broken. That was all she could take.

She thrust her head into her pillow and began to wail. Never had she felt so stuck. It was almost like being a teenager again and having a crush on the guy you knew you could never *really* have. She had crossed the line. She had tasted the forbidden fruit that others were smart enough only to admire. And to her surprise and disappointment, the sting of the present moment felt strangely like being in love.

Tears of confusion and anger began to flow again. She hadn't heard from Webster and wondered where he was and why he hadn't called to apologize. She knew Webster was not the kind of man that had to spend the night alone. She regretted making him angry. Perhaps she had forced him into the arms of another. She picked up the phone and called Blake, just in case. It was her way of guarding

against being played. She feared that Webster may have gotten even with her the night before and she knew she'd never find out.

"Hello, Blake."

"Yes."

"It's Laura."

"Hey, Laura. Long time no hear. What has been going on in your life?"

"Cut the crap, Blake. I know Alex told you everything."

"You're awfully snippy for someone who needs my help. I have a break between appointments this afternoon at two-thirty. Can you come by and give me some more details? Downtown parking is expensive. Bring cash."

"I'll take a taxi in. And Blake," Laura hesitated, "thanks for your help. I really appreciate it."

"That's more like it," Blake added. They laughed together for a few moments and hung up.

Laura dashed out of the bed in order to get ready. Her work schedule was full for the day, but she felt this was more important. She made several calls, changed some appointments and committed to working that evening. As she jumped into the shower, she found herself strangely excited. She spent the next hour and a half getting dressed and making sure she looked perfect for Blake. She pulled out her red dress that was normally reserved for special occasions. It

hugged her curvy body, and plunged low at the bust line, but didn't reveal too much.

She felt as though she could conquer the world in that dress. After a quick once over she darted out the door and into a cab. As she got closer to Blake's office, surprisingly, she began to get more and more nervous. *What is up with this? Blake's nobody to be getting nervous about. That's for sure. He's probably fat.* As the cab pulled up in front of the building, to Laura's surprise, she found she was hugely mistaken.

Blake was absolutely gorgeous. Tall, with coffee colored skin and broad shoulders. He was always easy on the eyes but maturity had added an extra layer to his attractiveness. A two thousand dollar suit didn't hurt either. As the cab pulled up to the Sears tower, Blake opened the car door, and paid for the cab.

"I didn't know if you prepared for rain so I decided to meet you with the umbrella just in case you didn't have one, and I see you don't." He squeezed her close so that they both fit under the umbrella and escorted her to the door.

"You always did know how to treat a woman," Laura said slyly and with a flirtatious grin.

"Yeah, too bad you didn't appreciate it," Blake replied with a smile. His voice contained clues of bitterness. He quickly moved on. "I'm just glad you're

here now. And seeing your bare legs as you exited the cab is an image that will be seared in my mind for weeks.”

He opened the door and Laura walked through smiling. “I apologize for the security check. It’s routine,” Blake said as they entered the building.

“Oh, it’s no problem, I have been in the building before. I was prepared. I took anything circumspect out of my bag.”

They proceeded to the elevators and up to Blake’s office. Laura felt a surge of anxiety as the elevator sped up to the sixty-ninth floor. She wasn’t sure if it was from the height of the building or Blake. Perhaps it was both. She kept her composure. Upon entering his office, Blake pulled out a chair for Laura to sit down at his conference table and they continued in conversation.

Laura covertly made an extra effort to stay away from the window. It was enough to know she was on the sixty-ninth floor; she did not need to see the evidence. She secretly admired Blake as he stood in front of his window, undaunted by the height of his office. He was always so strong and so confident. She was certain that if this was her office, every morning upon arriving to work, when she sat in the chair, she’d pass out.

“Laura, it’s really good to see you. I don’t have a lot of time this afternoon so I will just get the facts of the case so that I can determine whether or not I can help you. Would it be okay if we went to dinner to continue the conversation?”

Damn, I wasn't prepared for this. I have too much going on right now. She was trying to sort through all of her feelings and she and Webster had so many issues that needed to be sorted out. *Additionally, I'm not trying to be part of Blake's harem.*

"I have to work tonight," she replied.

"What about tomorrow?" Blake fired back.

Laura hesitated. She knew she needed Blake's help and even though she wasn't in the mood for it, she decided to go anyway. "Okay, Blake, I'll meet you at Morton's for dinner."

"Great, now tell me why you need my help."

Laura cringed and began to tell her story while Blake took notes. She was uncomfortable telling the story. She felt that Blake would judge her or criticize her or ask her if she was out of her mind. He didn't. He remained professional, continued to take notes, and agreed to discuss the case further over dinner the next evening.

Chapter Sixteen

Navy Pier? How corny, Alex thought as she prepared for her date with Daniel. I guess I should wear jeans. What does one wear on a date to Navy Pier? Stilettos are probably out. When I said Daniel was different, I mean, he is different. Most men would take a woman out to dinner. I mean Chicago boasts some of the finest cuisine in the world and I'm going to have hot dogs and cotton candy for dinner. Alex looked at her caller ID and was happy to see that Laura was calling. They had ended their last conversation on a sour note. Alex was glad that their relationship hadn't suffered any permanent damage.

"Alex, you will be so proud of me. I bit the bullet and called Blake. We met at his office."

"Good. Can he help? Tell me about the meeting."

"Well, we met at his office. I wore the red dress."

"What? You wore that red dress to a meeting that was supposed to be strictly business? I am sure he saw right through that."

"There was really nothing to see through. I really wasn't trying to entice him at all."

"Right."

“No, really, I wasn’t. I just wanted to look good for him. I guess I got caught up in the whole ex-boyfriend thing and I am still so embarrassed by what I did, I wanted to look good in order to give him the impression I was doing well and had my act together. I didn’t want his pity. He says he can help and it should be a relatively easy case since I have a clean background and Webster doesn’t.”

“Great. What did he think about you and Webster?”

“To be honest with you, he didn’t say much about it and I was so glad. I really have feelings for Webster and I am so confused right now, which is why I really don’t want to go to dinner with Blake.”

“Wow. He asked you to dinner?” Alex responded, attempting to sound surprised.

“Yes. Why didn’t you tell me he was single?”

“You were adamant that you did not want to get involved with him. You didn’t even want to call him. I didn’t think it made a difference whether he was single or not. How’d he look?”

“He looked really good. Really, really good.” Alex and Laura broke out into laughter. It was a welcome break from the week’s stressful events. It now appeared there was light again at the end of the tunnel.

“You’ll be proud of me as well. I’m getting ready for my date with Daniel.”

“So you’ve finally stopped blaming him for your lost promotion?”

“The whole thing was just awkward. He seems like a really nice guy and boy, is he fine. I’m just nervous about it.”

“He’s not Wendell, Alex. Contrary to your belief, all men are not dogs. He seems like a really good guy.”

“I know.”

“So what’s your reservation?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe it’s the fact we work together.”

“Umhummm.” Laura’s tone was disbelieving. “I think you’re afraid of what might happen. Face it, Alex. That’s the way you live your life.”

“Cut me some slack. I’m trying to go with the flow. I am letting him take me out.”

Where to?”

Alex was hesitant. “Navy Pier.”

“Come again?”

“I know, girl. Can you believe it? I told you he was different.”

“Are you sure it’s not more like crazy?” They laughed together again.

“I haven’t been since we first moved here right out of college but I am trying to keep an open mind about it.”

“Yeah, take a Wet Nap,” Laura replied, and hung up.

When Daniel arrived for the date at Navy Pier, Alex found it odd that Daniel had dressed up, since she had decided to dress casually.

“Oh my God. I have on gym shoes and you have on a jacket. Did I miss something? You did say Navy Pier, right? Let me go change.”

“No, you’re fine. We don’t have time for you to change anyway.”

Alex and Daniel departed for the Pier. In the car, Alex thought about all the reasons why the date was wrong. She had been so unlucky in love that she was starting to lose hope. *As soon as I let my guard down, he’ll dump me. Or...I’ll end up making a fool of myself. Stop it!*

She decided that just for tonight, she would try not to let her fears ruin the evening. She would stay in this moment and enjoy this date, even if it was at Navy Pier. As they approached the end of the dock, they were greeted by a captain. *This is odd*, Alex thought. To her surprise, Daniel had booked a private dinner cruise on a small yacht for the two of them. When they left the dock, a jazz quartet entered the room and began to play and the waiter came out to explain that Daniel had ordered a meal especially prepared for her with some of her favorite foods. A full eight courses.

“I listened as you spoke about different foods,” Daniel said. “I paid attention to what you ordered at lunch or what you brought in. I hope you like it.”

Alex was impressed. Everything had been exquisitely prepared. And it appeared no calorie was spared. She was glad she had missed lunch earlier.

Under normal circumstances, eight courses would seem like a lot, but she was starving and looked forward to the meal. She would throw her calorie counter out the window, once again. As they sailed the lake, the boat ride seemed magical. Enjoying the most incredible food, they talked intimately and watched the sun set. *How romantic, she thought. He really does seem to be the total package.*

“Daniel, I have to confess that when you said you were taking me to Navy Pier I thought it was strange. It never occurred to me that you had a fantastic evening planned on the lake. I was thinking Ferris wheels and pinball.”

“Oh, the date’s not over yet.”

“Hunh?”

“We still have lots planned for the evening.”

As the boat docked, Alex wondered what he had in store for her next. She was somewhat embarrassed by the way she was dressed but figured he knew what he was doing and she would follow his lead. *I hope it’s not a play or something like that. I am really underdressed. We look oddly matched for the evening.*

“Daniel, where are we going next?”

“We are here already.”

“At the pier?”

“You guessed it. This is one of my favorite places to hang out. And I hope you are not going to ruin it for me by acting all stiff.”

“You actually want me to ride some of these rides?”

“Why not? Have you ever once in your life done something that did not seem to follow? Have you ever let your hair down and done something out of the ordinary just because at the moment it felt right?”

“No.” *And it’s a weave*, she continued in thought.

He approached the ticket window, purchased what seemed to be an endless supply of tickets, much to Alex’s chagrin, and the date continued. But after the first two or three rides, Alex discovered she was really having fun. She found herself laughing and having a good time. It was reminiscent of times she spent with her father. She was amazed at how ridiculously fun a pinball machine could be and how silly, but really good, a snow cone was. As she walked past a mirror in the fun house, she noticed that the snow cone had turned her lips blue.

“This is ridiculous. I look ridiculous,” she said.

“Are you having fun?”

“Unfortunately, yes. But I will be too embarrassed to tell anyone I know that I let my date see me with blue lips.”

“It will be our secret.” He smiled. “Looks good on you,” he said with a wink.

Daniel wanted to engage in just about every activity available at the pier, including playing video games, riding the Ferris wheel and sharing cotton candy. It was just like being a kid again and Alex lost herself in the excitement. It was one of the best and most memorable dates she had ever had. Alex knew this was totally out of character for her and she was also becoming aware of Daniel's power. He had come into her life just a short time ago, and changed everything she thought she knew about herself and her life. Although she enjoyed his company, she knew she was vulnerable in his presence. She felt panicked.

"Daniel?"

"Yes."

"It's getting late. We have a meeting in the morning."

"I knew you couldn't make it without mentioning work."

Alex was perturbed by the fact that she had been getting so many calls from her clients with complaints about the performance of their funds but Daniel had some unofficial rule that he didn't like talking about work on his off time. Allegedly, this was how he kept his personal and work lives in balance. And while she thought balance was a good idea, Alex hadn't mastered that yet.

"What do you think is going on with the portfolio?"

"Don't know and don't care."

"It's your job to care."

“Not tonight it’s not. It’s my job to show you a good time and return you home safely.” He retrieved his car from the valet and placed Alex in. He drove her to her house and walked her to her door. Alex invited him in but he refused. He kissed her long and passionately at the door and left for the evening. Alex was bewildered. She felt so consternated. Nothing about this was going the way she planned.

Chapter Seventeen

Alex was awakened the next morning with the thought of her mother. *Oh my God*, she thought. *What happened with the stock? In all the drama that has been going on over the past week with Laura and Daniel, I totally forgot about her.* Alex reached over and dialed her mother immediately.

“Mom.”

“Yeah, sweetheart.”

“Did you call the attorney I referred you to?”

“Oh, yes, Blake. He is such a nice man. He is available, you know.”

“Yes I know, Momma, but not for me.”

“Why not, you’re both single.”

“It’s a long story. What did he say?”

“Well, he stated that whenever I’m ready, he can start the paperwork that will allow me to collect on everything your father left for me. I just really haven’t wanted to deal with it. It makes everything so final.”

“I know, Mom, but it is time to move on.”

“I know.”

“How does it feel to have all that money? What will you do with it? Why don’t you move to Chicago?”

Alex missed her mother but was too grown up to admit it.

“Why don’t you move to Detroit?”

“Okay, Momma, you win. At least buy yourself something nice. A piece of jewelry, a new car, something.”

“I doubt my life will change much. I don’t need a lot of material things to make me happy. Your father built a great life for us. I was blessed to be married to him all those years. You know it is so like him, to do something sneaky and have it turn out to be so darn good. He’s gone, but he is still taking care of us. Ain’t that something?”

“You mean, you never knew that Daddy was purchasing stock?”

“Never.”

“Where did you think the money was going?”

“I never knew any money was missing. He took such great care of us. I trusted everything he did and every decision he made. He was just that kind of man. I hope one day you are blessed enough to find someone like that and experience love the way God intended. Someone you can trust wholeheartedly with your finances and security but most of all, your heart. I never so much as

even thought about being with another man. I loved him that much. And his love for me was equally as strong. I'm sad without him, Alex."

"I know, Mom." Alex thought about Daniel. *He seems so much the part. Like a real man. One that could be trusted, just like Daddy. But somewhere, my heart is telling me to proceed with caution. I don't know what to do.*

"Mom, I've met someone."

"What?" her mom exclaimed, with joy in her voice. "Tell me about him. Where did you meet? What does he do?"

"We met at work. He works at Jacobson. He's our Portfolio Manager. Well, he's Executive Vice President and that's one of his roles," Alex corrected herself.

"Is he handsome? Is he tall? Why are you being so tight lipped about him?"

"You know me, Mom, I have been so unlucky with men. I'm a little nervous."

"Don't be. To really experience love, Alex, you have to let yourself go. You have to be willing to go there. To give your entire self to another person. That takes guts. I've heard it said that it takes a weak person to fall in love, I say it takes a weak one not to. To willingly make yourself open, available, even vulnerable to another person, takes courage. Most people never fully surrender to it and they miss out on what me and your father had. If you are going to have peace, Alex, you

have got to learn to trust life. You cannot be in control of everything all the time. You're missing out on the best that life has to offer because you are always on guard focusing and preparing for what could go wrong. In the meantime, you're missing the beauty of the moment."

"But as soon as I let my guard down, something happens." Alex was reluctant to share the details of what had transpired at work with her mother. She had always been independent and prided herself on being able to handle things on her own. But lately, things were becoming so complex. She decided to let her mother in on it. Maybe she had some worthwhile advice. "I have worked my entire life to get to this point, Mom, only to find out that the company I'm working for didn't find me worthy of being a member of the senior leadership team. That really hurt."

"Oh, baby, I'm so sorry. I know how much you wanted that promotion."

"And to top it all off, the guy they gave it to is now my boss, and I went out on a date with him last night. "

"Oohh, that sounds complicated."

"You have no idea, Momma."

"Well, I do know that sometimes life throws you a curve. So what? He got your promotion."

"What do you mean, so what? That was a really big deal for me."

“I know, but will they ever need another Vice President or executive something or other? Is Jacobson, Connor and Mack the only company in the entire city that you could work for? Maybe there is a reason that you were not promoted at this moment. Did you ever consider that?”

“No, I didn’t. And now is as good a time as any to me.”

“Well, Alex, life had other plans. I wanted your father to live forever, but life said no. You are still the same person that helped build that company. Don’t start doubting who you are and what you’re capable of because things didn’t go exactly the way you anticipated. Your plans have been delayed, that’s all. There’s probably a good reason for this. Why don’t you come home this weekend? Maybe you and I can plan a trip together. Jamaica? Aruba? This time, the trip will be on me, compliments of your father. How does that sound?”

“You know, I think I will, Mom. I need to remove myself from this situation so I can think clearly. I could use a vacation as well. Things have been crazy in my life lately. I’ll drive in Friday evening. Maybe I’ll take a personal day and leave Friday morning. I’ll work out the details and call you later.”

Chapter Eighteen

Daniel walked the six block trek home from the office. His mind was consumed with thoughts of Alex. He had come to Jacobson seven months ago for a reason. He had planned to get in, do the job, and get out. He hadn't planned on meeting her. To say she was complicating things was an understatement.

She was beautiful, graceful, and more importantly, she was smart. In fact, too smart. She had questioned Daniel repeatedly about the performance issues with the fund and he had been evasive, coming up with one excuse after another. If he could just hold her off for another six months, the job would be finished and his life would return to normal. At least for a little while. And if he had his way, "normal" would include waking up to Alex every morning.

Alex and Daniel had survived her not getting the promotion. She appeared to be moving forward even though, at times, she could turn on a dime, and it seemed as though he was back to square one. Daniel wished she would stop punishing him. He felt terrible for taking that job from her but he needed it in order to have access to the company portfolio and to make transactions as Ross Connor requested. He couldn't tell her the real reason he was there; it would put her in a compromising position. Ross was growing more desperate by the second. Daniel had worked these cases before and toward the end, the suspect always

started to unravel. The benefit to that was that they started making careless mistakes. The downfall was that they were capable of anything in that manic state, including murder. He had to do whatever it took to keep Alex from finding out. It was the only way to guarantee her safety.

Daniel ran up the three flights of stairs to his loft. He hung up his jacket in the hall closet and went straight to the kitchen. He poured himself a glass of orange juice and moved over to the sofa. Lifting his feet up on the cocktail table, he leaned his head back and stared at the exposed brick ceiling. In deep thought, he mentally went over his to do list.

He needed to stall Alex; she was bent on finding out what was happening to the clients' money. He needed more evidence to get Ross convicted. He still had to set up the final piece of the sting while protecting his identity. Ross and his goons might try a hit. He couldn't be too careful. He would also have to explain to Alex that he wasn't exactly who he appeared to be and get her to marry him. He would need the skills of Houdini to get out of this one with all the pieces intact. But he was never one to shrink from a challenge, and having Alex was too important. He'd readjust his plans, execute them with perfection and claim his prize at the end.

Daniel heard his phone buzz in the kitchen. He had received a text message. He knocked back the rest of his juice and headed to the kitchen to retrieve it. He

thought it might be Alex saying goodnight. She had been in meetings all day and he was sure she was tired. When he opened his phone he saw the message was from Ross. It read:

I hear she is becoming a problem. I am expecting you to handle her.

Daniel knew Ross was referring to Alex. Word must have gotten back to him that she had been snooping around and asking questions. Only Daniel and Ross had access to company funds so Daniel wasn't worried about the other employees telling her anything; they knew nothing. Daniel knew Ross was concerned that her snooping might lead to a leak to authorities. Daniel was more concerned about the strain it was putting on he and Alex's relationship.

Chapter Nineteen

As Alex dressed for work, she thought about the events that had transpired over the past few months. She had lost her promotion. She was fighting feelings for the man that it had been given to, and was losing the battle. One minute she was angry with him, the next she longed for him with a desperation she couldn't stand, especially physically. And he wasn't returning the interest.

He would only take her on dates where they were in public together and was reluctant to be alone with her for too long. On top of everything, she still seemed to know so little about him. It seemed too bizarre to comprehend. She didn't like the position he had placed her in; she had no idea where things were headed and she was again uncomfortable. In fact, today, she was downright annoyed. As she exited the door her cell phone rang. It was Daniel.

"Yes, Daniel."

"I wanted to invite you over to my apartment this evening. "

"I thought you said it wouldn't be a good idea for us to be alone. That you may do something you would regret. Do you really want to set yourself up like that?" Alex was being sarcastic.

“I can’t tell if you are making an honest point or if you are just being difficult, which is not entirely unusual for you. It seems every time we start moving forward, you push back and I’m not sure why. You say you have forgiven me. Have you? Really?”

“I said I have,” Alex said, but she wasn’t sure. The disappointment of her loss was still so raw.

“If we are going to date, we are just going to have to exercise good judgment and precaution. I am going to ask you to help keep me honest.”

“I don’t know if I can do that. While I respect it, it’s your rule, Daniel, not mine. That might be a lot to ask.”

“Okay, I’ll have to be strong enough for the both of us then. Just take a taxi from the office and I will drive you home later. I’ll make dinner. Did I tell you I was an excellent cook?”

“You are full of surprises, aren’t you?” Alex said sharply.

Daniel’s tone was impatient. “Alex, here’s the deal. I have apologized. I have been understanding. I have been regretful. I am asking you to make a decision right now. You know how strong my feelings are for you. You are either going to give me a chance or stop allowing me to waste my time. This decision is not very difficult. Although I’ll be disappointed if you decide that seeing me is not what you want, I will fully accept your decision and will stop any further advances. So

the ball is in your court. You have an invitation to dinner. If you show, I will be very pleased with that. If you don't, I will accept your message loud and clear and no offense will be taken. Hopefully, I will see you tonight."

As Daniel ended the call, Alex could feel her blood pressure rising. *How dare he? Waltz right into my life, steal my job, and turn my world upside down, and extend a casual invitation to dinner like nothing ever happened.* Alex was now in a quandary.

Somewhere deep inside she wanted to go. She wanted to know if Daniel could really be the real thing. At the same time, she was afraid. *What if he hurts me? I don't think I could handle it. It's not worth it.*

As Alex entered the office, she walked right past Daniel. Adding to her layer of stress was the fact that it was extremely difficult to be seeing someone outside of the office and to act as if that person was a casual acquaintance inside the office. She hung up her coat, grabbed her coffee and settled down for the morning's meeting. The only chair available at the conference table was right across from Daniel. While trying to pay attention to the discussion points of the meeting, she kept replaying the proposition she had been given. As he talked, she could feel the heat of her anger rising. She resented him for placing her in this position. She purposely avoided eye contact.

"Alex, have you been in communication with your customers?"

"Excuse me," she said innocently. She hadn't been paying attention.

“Your customers,” Mr. Conner said sternly, “what have you been telling them?”

“I comprised a communiqué basically educating them on hedge funds and how the market works, explaining that there is a certain amount of risk involved, stressing the importance of focusing on the long term, and telling them that I am always available to address their concerns. I handed over the project to Wanda in customer service. She is looking for opportunities to grow and learn more skills so I thought this would be a good project for her.”

“Good, how are the customers receiving it?” he said nervously.

“Fine. My customers trust me. You seem nervous. Is it about Wanda? I’m very confident in her ability to handle customers. It’s one of her strengths.”

“No, I’m not nervous; I just have a lot on my mind. Let’s finish up the agenda items.”

Alex returned to her thoughts and tuned out for the rest of the meeting. *I wonder what is going on with the fund. I keep looking at everything and it appears to be no cause for alarm. Something doesn’t seem right. I am wondering if the company is in some sort of financial trouble. Maybe that’s why I didn’t get the promotion. They knew I would command too high a salary. Maybe they got Daniel really cheap. People will do anything for a title these days. Well, shame on him, because I would have demanded that they pay me what I’m worth. If that is the case, they made the right decision in choosing him.*

Her eyes locked on Daniel's. The look on his face was telling her that the ball was in her court. Alex hated ultimatums. *I should not go just because he thinks he has the power to put me in a position to choose. I've got the one up here. He wants to date me.*

After the meeting, Alex returned to her office and tried to focus on her work. As the hours ticked away and the end of the day was ringing close, she knew she had to make a decision. *If I go, it's awkward. If I don't go, it's awkward. If I go, he wins. If I don't go, maybe I lose.* She called Laura, hoping she would help her decide.

"Laura, Daniel has given me an ultimatum."

"An ultimatum? Why?"

"I think he's frustrated because he wants to enter into a serious relationship with me, or at least explore the possibility and I'm fighting him. One minute, I think I am ready for it, and then the next, I get angry and afraid."

"What's to be angry and afraid about?"

"A: he took my job. And B..."

"Yes, but you act like he specifically came there to sweep that position out from under you," Laura interrupted. "You're being childish."

"Let's not go there."

"I'm sorry. But from the outside looking in it appears that you are your own worst enemy, Alex. He has not asked you to marry him. He just wants to get to

know you. What in the world is the big deal? Just go out with the man. It's been a while for you anyway."

"Whatever, Laura. How do our conversations always lead to sex? Your mind is always in the gutter. Speaking of which," Alex said, referring to the word gutter, "where's Webster?"

"He's here now. In fact, I have to go," she chuckled. Enjoy your date tonight."

Alex hung up the phone. *Maybe Laura is right. It's just dinner. Why am I fighting this so?* She packed up her things, ran down the stairs, and hailed a cab. *Here goes nothing.*

As the cab pulled up to Daniel's building she thought about how things could change after this night. She knew that despite all her efforts to appear to have only a casual interest in Daniel, being outside his place at that moment refuted everything. *Now he will know.* She felt uncomfortable exposing herself like that, like she was showing her hand even though she held a poker face. She ascended the stairs slowly and cautiously, thinking of a presentation strategy.

Should I act like I'm really interested? Should I apologize for the way I have been acting? She was afraid that if she gave him too much rope, he'd hang her with it. As she stood there at his door contemplating, he opened it.

“Alex,” he said with a smile. “I heard your heels coming up the stairs. I’m glad you came.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Come on in, dinner’s waiting.”

And in an instant, what she thought would be an awkward moment was gone. Alex thought of the advice she had been given by her mother and Laura, and she decided that she would just go with the moment and allow the night to unfold. She and Daniel laughed and joked way into the evening.

“Wow, you really are a good cook. Who knew?”

“I used to spend a lot of time with my grandmother in the kitchen. She was an awesome cook. Taught me everything I know about food *and* life, for that matter. Everything I am, I owe to her. She is responsible for the man I am today.”

As Alex sat there and talked with Daniel about his childhood and how he was raised, it made sense that he would have reverence for women. He shared with Alex how strong his grandmother was and how she had taught him to respect and cherish women for the gift that they are. She taught him to appreciate their strengths and to not be intimidated by them.

“You know, Alex...many men are afraid of women that are stronger and more intelligent. I welcome that. The Bible states that when a man and a woman are joined together, the two become one.” He clasped his hands together to

demonstrate. “Where I am weak, she is strong and vice versa. A woman of strength can only make me a better person and enhance my journey through life.”

Okay, God, is this a sick joke you’re playing on me? Can this guy really be this pure? Most men will dish out lines when they are trying to get you into bed. He’s definitely not trying to do that. Alex mentally scratched her head as Daniel spoke, not knowing what to think.

As the hours ticked away and the food was gone, the uncomfortable silence that they knew well fell over the room. It said, *we’ve eaten, we’ve talked, now what? Do we watch TV? Do we play cards?* An awkwardness consumed them and Alex could feel butterflies in her stomach. Just then, Daniel began clearing the table.

“Do you want me to help you with the dishes?”

“No, I can put them in the dishwasher later.”

“No really, I can help you clean up,” Alex insisted.

Maneuvering around Daniel’s small, loft kitchen, was challenging. They couldn’t help but experience tense moments as they repeatedly brushed past or reached across each other. It was like a game of Twister.

“This is a nice loft,” Alex stated, as she turned on the faucet and began to fill the sink with water.

“Yeah, the kitchen’s kind of small, but I really like the place.” As Alex stood at the sink washing the dishes, Daniel reached above her for the upper cabinet to

put away a plate he had just finished drying. Unaware of his presence behind her, Alex turned around suddenly, and to her surprise, she found herself face to face with Daniel with her back against the sink, in the small, cramped kitchen space.

“I told you it was cramped,” he said softly.

“Yeah,” Alex responded. She could feel Daniel’s breath on her face. He moved in slowly and began kissing her. On her lips, across her cheeks and down her neck. He slowly made his way up to her mouth. His lips were soft and his breath was sweet. When Alex detected the warmth of his lips on hers, she felt herself letting go. The fear melted away and she was finally enjoying the bliss of the moment. It felt so good.

Alex imagined herself ripping his clothes off as he kissed her. After a few moments, reality set in and in lieu of rising blood pressures, they decided to forgo the dishes, and retire to the living room to watch a movie. They sat on the couch, relaxed into the movie and not another reference was made to the moment. As Daniel placed his arm around her she thought, *I’m really attracted to him. This is going to be harder than I thought.*

Chapter Twenty

Laura fought through security and took the elevator to the sixty-ninth floor to meet Blake. It was the final meeting before her court appearance the following day. The secretary escorted Laura back to Blake's office but he had stepped out for a minute. While she waited, she scanned his office, looking for nothing and everything. He had a few pictures on the tall bookshelves that flanked his desk and she wondered if the little boy might be his son.

"Are you comfortable with what you are going to say to the judge," Blake said, startling Laura as she almost leaped out of her chair.

"Blake. You startled me. Yes, I went over it, I think I'm okay."

"Now is the time to ask questions if you're not. You've got court tomorrow. Here, sign these."

I have questions but not about court...who's the kid? "I think I'll be okay. There really isn't much to say, except I am dating a guy who unknowingly received stolen goods. I am totally innocent," Laura said reassuringly as she signed the forms Blake had given her.

"Yes, but there is protocol."

"I'll just follow your lead."

As she turned to exit the room, Blake continued, “Are you sure you are comfortable? Maybe we should rehearse.”

Confused, Laura responded, “Blake, you are making me nervous, I thought you said there is nothing to worry about and the case will be dismissed. Now you’re talking about rehearsing. What’s up?”

“I have to confess, I’m just enjoying your presence here. I didn’t mean to scare you; I’m just not ready for you to leave.” He hesitated before asking, “What do you see in this guy?”

“Here we go. I am so sick of everyone trying to dictate to me how I should live my life and who is good for me and who is not, by society’s standards. So what if he doesn’t have a college degree, and so what if he’s from the South Side? I love him. So there.”

“Laura, this is not about him being different, or being a laborer. Perhaps you have issues with that. I have respect for all persons, regardless of their background or occupation. This is about you being accused of a crime you didn’t commit by being in a relationship with this guy. This situation is a testament to his character. It is a man’s job to protect his woman, not place her in harm’s way. I would have the same opinion about this if he were the president of his own company.”

“He said it was a misunderstanding. Goodbye, Blake.”

Blake ran after her and grabbed her by the arm, evoking a disapproving glare from his receptionist. He hurried her back into his office and closed the door.

“Laura, I apologize. But seeing you again reminded me how much I used to care about you. I think there is a part of me that wonders if I gave up too soon. I really loved you, you know that, right?”

“Then why did you break up with me?”

“You know why. You didn’t trust me. I could not stand the constant scrutiny. It’s hard to have a relationship with someone who doesn’t believe in you. The questioning was driving me crazy. If I was away from you for one minute, I knew I would get the third degree. And when you had that incident with my cousin, my family was all over me, telling me I had to leave you alone, that you would turn into a stalker. I guess I caved in under the pressure. It was one of the worst periods of my life. I really did not want it to end.”

The whole time Blake was explaining, Laura was thinking in amazement, *really?* She had an entirely different picture of the situation. She felt that he ended the relationship because he really did not want to be with her anymore. She assumed there was someone else who had caught his eye and her attacking his cousin made it easier for him to leave. To now know that this wasn’t the case made her question whether or not they could have worked things out. Laura started for the door.

Blake jumped in front of her, blocking her exit.

“What are you doing?” she responded, annoyed.

“I just put that out there like that, and you are going to just leave? Without a response? Laura did not know what to think or how to respond. She had strong feelings for Webster and she felt as though she might even love him but to now know that Blake still had feelings for her was taking her down a path she wasn’t prepared for. After all, she thought she had closure with Blake. It appeared now that this situation was open. Wide open.

“Blake. I have to go. I have to get myself mentally prepared for court tomorrow.” *Thanks for blowing any chances of me doing that.*

“Why don’t you meet me here and we can go together?” Blake nudged.

“No, I can meet you there. Have a nice evening.”



Blake stood there staring at the floor lost in thought. *Wow, I don’t know where that came from. Why did I tell her that? I mean, she is in a relationship with someone. And it appears she really likes this guy. Whether he is bad for her or not, I don’t think she really cares. Far be it for me to try to save her from him. She’ll have to figure this one out on her own.* Subconsciously, he feared he might be outmatched. Webster really appeared to have Laura’s heart.



The next morning Laura appeared before the judge and as Blake had indicated, the charges were dismissed. Laura turned around to look for Webster but he wasn't there. In an elated moment, she grabbed Blake and hugged him instead.

"Congratulations," Blake said as he held her close. Almost as if he didn't want to let go.

"Thanks, Counselor. I don't know how I will ever repay you."

"Oh, I'll think of something," Blake responded, as they exited the courtroom.

After spending the morning with Blake, who was truly a man's man and knew how to treat a woman, Laura returned to her apartment and found Webster was laying on the couch. It was a startling contrast.

"How did it go with your big shot lawyer?"

"Funny, Webster. The charges were dismissed and if it wasn't for that big shot lawyer, I might have gone to jail."

"Girl, you weren't going to jail for that. I'm sure that's what he wanted you to believe, so that he would have an opportunity to feel like he was saving you. You would have gotten off even if you had represented yourself."

“Well, thank God I didn’t have to. And you weren’t concerned about it, you didn’t even show up.”

“Because I knew the charges would be dropped. I ain’t trying to set foot near no courtroom until I have to. You forget, I still have an arraignment.”

“No, I’m not like you. I didn’t forget.” Just then, Laura’s cell phone rang and Webster sat up on the couch.

“Who is that?”

“It’s Alex.”

“Why are you walking to the bedroom to talk?”

Laura continued toward the bedroom so that she could speak in private. Not to mention she was annoyed at Webster for not showing up in court to support her. After all, he was the reason for the whole mess. She was amazed at how cold that was and it was making Blake seem a little more appealing to her for the moment.

“What happened in court today? You are answering your phone, so you’re not in jail.”

“No, the charges were dismissed.”

“Awesome. I didn’t think you had a whole lot to worry about. The next time Webster hands you anything, even a flower, you’d better ask him where it came from.” Alex laughed and Laura joined her.

“Blake really dropped something on me.”

“What?”

“He pretty much let me know that he still had feelings for me and that he was broken up when the relationship ended. I had no idea.”

“What now?”

“Nothing. I’m seeing Webster. Maybe at another time, I might have considered it but I think that part of me might be closed for good.”

“Is that your final answer?” Alex joked.

“Yeah, I think so. Blake was a wonderful guy. But the past is the past,” Laura moaned with a chuckle. “He did look really good though.”

Alex laughed. “Well, I will be in Detroit this weekend hanging out with Mom.”

“Is Daniel going with you?”

“Is that a joke or are you serious?”

“I’m serious. ”

“ I am not ready to take him home yet. We’ll see what happens.”

“Well, drive safe.”

“Laura, if you need to talk over the weekend, just call me.”

“Okay,” Laura responded in a bewildered tone, as if to question why she would need someone to talk to. When she hung up the phone, she thought of

Blake for a second, then she jumped up and joined Webster in his usual position, on the couch.

Chapter Twenty One

As Alex packed her car, she was excited about going home. She was even more excited that she took the day off and would have an extra long weekend. *I don't know what is happening to me. I must be getting sentimental as I get older; I can't believe I am getting excited about going to Detroit.* She finished packing her car, jumped in and settled in for the drive. About forty-five minutes into her trip and at the start of side two of her favorite jazz CD, her phone rang.

“Hello, Daniel.”

“Alex, you weren't in your office today. I wanted to call to make sure everything was okay.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, in all my rushing around to prepare, I forgot to tell you I was going home this weekend.” In actuality, she didn't tell him because it felt too much like reporting in and she was ready for that yet.

“I am sure you could use the break, we all could. Work is getting a little bit hectic.”

“Daniel, what's going on with the portfolio? For some reason I have a feeling that there is something going on with the company. Does anything look off to you?”

“Not really. We have just had a bad run lately. I’ve seen this before. In time, the funds will normalize.”

“I understand that but it appears to be something else and I can’t place my finger on it. I am wondering if I should be worried about job security. If the company starts losing money, they’ll start cutting back and...”

“You know you are way too valuable to the company for your position to be eliminated. In every meeting I’m in, a reference is made to you and what you have done for Jacobson. Trust me, I’d go before you.”

Alex thought about what Daniel was saying. *Maybe he’s right. I have several years of experience with the company and I have a really tight relationship with Mr. Conner and the team. If something was going on, I’m sure they’d let me know.*

Alex and Daniel talked for some time on the phone and Alex appreciated the company while she was driving. The conversation bounced from work to a variety of subjects. The time passed quickly and Alex noticed she was just outside of Detroit. As the conversation ended, Alex’s tone turned serious.

“Daniel.”

“Yeah.”

“Are we dating? I mean, are we exclusive?” It had been so long since Alex had been in a serious relationship, she felt like a fish out of water and she was afraid to make an incorrect assumption.

Daniel responded, “In my mind we are. I want no one else but you. What would you like us to be?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere. I’m just glad you aren’t cursing me out every other day.” Alex laughed.

“I apologize for that. It’s just that when they announced you would be taking that position, I was devastated. And I know it wasn’t your fault but to find out along with everyone else was kind of cold.”

“Alex, I think they were just avoiding the issue. That’s the only reason they did not come to you first. They have a lot of respect for you.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t feel like it.”

“It’s almost like telling your child that his puppy’s been run over. You just aren’t jumping up and down to do it. I don’t agree with them not telling you beforehand, but I understand. I think they felt like they were letting you down.”

“Did they say why they did not choose me?”

“No, they gave me no explanation. And I don’t think they should have. It was an awkward position for me to be in. I think they knew it would have only made things worse to have the history and particulars. This was not about you. This was about me and the company. You cannot take it personally. And even

though it's not my fault, I will spend a thousand lifetimes trying to make it up to you if you'll let me."

Alex found an offer like that hard to refuse. "Okay, Daniel, when will you start?"

"Go away with me when you come back. Let's just pack our bags and fly outta' here."

"I guess I can, if I can find time in my schedule. I'm supposed to go to Jamaica with my mother in January..."

"Let me come with you. How about you go and spend the first few days with your mom, and I'll join you on the back end of the trip? That way I won't infringe on you and your mother's time together."

Alex was hesitant. *Meeting my mother? I don't know if I'm ready for this.* "I'll talk it over with her and let you know. If you see Wanda, tell her to call me if she runs into any problems. Some of my clients can be quite pushy."

"Will do. See ya' next week." Daniel ended the call.

As Alex pulled into her mom's driveway, her cell phone was ringing again. Initially she thought it was Daniel calling back with some mushy we're-newly-dating-and-I'll-miss-you comment, but she saw Laura's number on the caller ID.

Alex was glad Laura was calling as she wanted to tell her about how she had let her guard down with Daniel and things seemed to really be progressing. She thought about Daniel's proposition to meet her and her mother on the Jamaica trip. *I just told her I wasn't ready for him to meet Mom. I'd better not renege now. She'll never let me hear the end of it.*

"Hey, girl," Alex answered with a smile.

"Alex, I'm late."

"What do you mean late? As in your period?" Alex paused, "How late?"

"Well I don't keep a day to day tab on it and I've never been the most regular person but I am pretty late."

"As in months?"

"No, not months, but late."

"Oh girl, stop worrying. It's probably peri-menopause. Women our age often have changes in our hormone levels as we prepare for 'the big dance'.

"I hope you're right. I will be absolutely devastated. I just got to a point in my career where everything seems to be on point. If I'm pregnant now, I don't know what I'll do."

"Give yourself a few more days. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about.

As Alex hung up the phone, she knew Laura was pregnant. While she had attempted to comfort her, that voice inside, call it intuition or whatever, told her that Laura was indeed about to join the ranks of motherhood.

After all, it just made sense that the girl who went against the grain in every situation she was faced with and never listened to the voice of reason, would have this happen to her. *It's amazing it took this long.* And Webster being the father was textbook Laura. Alex was seething. *How could she put herself in a position where this could happen? I can't believe it.* As Alex entered her mom's house, it was obvious that something was wrong.

"What is it now?" her mom inquired. "Bring me up to speed on this week's drama in the life of the young and restless."

"It's not me this time, it's Laura. She thinks she pregnant. I'm just a little disappointed, that's all."

"You act as if it's happening to you. What are you upset about?"

"It's just that...for both of us, I just didn't think that life would work out this way. Me, not married at this age, not at the point I thought I would be in my career and now she is pregnant by this thug. It's just a little unsettling."

"Oh. You two have got miles to go yet. It's just the beginning and the best advice I can give is just to ride the waves. Come on in here," her mom said calmly. "I've made you something to eat."

Alex enjoyed a little comfort food and reluctantly began to give her mother more information about her relationship with Daniel. Her mom was intrigued with the quirky way Daniel had entered her life and pondered the significance of such an odd set of circumstances. She assured Alex that it was okay to let go and just see where things might end up. After all, she wanted some grandbabies. In wedlock, not out, of course.

“Mom, Daniel has asked me to stay a few extra days when we go to Jamaica and he’ll meet me there.”

“Sounds fine with me. When will I be able to meet him? That trip is a few months away. Why don’t you bring him home for the holidays? I would like to know the person you are seeing for a change.”

“We’ll see.”

“Alex, are you intimate with this man? I mean, the two of you alone in a romantic place like Jamaica?”

“M-o-m?” Alex felt four years old again.

Her mother just laughed and walked out of the kitchen. “Sex is a sacred thing, you know,” her mom yelled from the other room.

Alex picked up the phone and called Michelle. “Michelle, I think I can pry myself away from Mom this evening. Are you free?”

“Yes, I’m free. We never made it to that bar I told you about.”

“A downtown Detroit bar? Will I need a pistol?”

“Funny. It’s in a newly revitalized district downtown near my loft. You’ll be surprised when you see it.

“Okay, pick me up at seven and we can grab dinner first.”

“Bet.”

Alex spent all afternoon catching up with her mother and picking her brain about the situation with Daniel. She was looking for words that would support why she should be guarded and careful but her mom offered nothing. *Maybe I am overreacting.*



That evening, Michelle arrived to pick Alex up and when they arrived at the club. Sure enough, it was fabulous. It was more like a restaurant. It reminded Alex of Cosmo. Very chic. Tastefully decorated with lots of young and successful people. An attentive and very handsome waiter in a crisp tailored white suit promptly escorted them to a cozy corner table. Alex found the jazz quartet quite enjoyable as well as the appetizers. They were reminiscent of a five star restaurant. This place certainly didn’t feel like the Detroit Alex knew.

“Alex, I told you Detroit was changing. It’s not the same as it was when you left.”

“Yeah, I can see that. I’m not totally sold on it yet. It’s no Chicago, but it’s coming up. I’ll give you that.” Alex placed her fork on the table. She felt now was as good a time as any to break the news about Daniel to Michelle. She had purposely kept it from her due to her uncertainty about him and the fact that Michelle had been having difficulty meeting someone.

“Michelle, I’m seeing someone.”

“Wow, that’s great.” Michelle didn’t sound enthusiastic. “Why are you just now telling me about him? Give me all the details.”

“Well, he’s really nice,” Alex felt ridiculous as she described him.

“Handsome, tall, he works with me.”

“Oohh! An office romance. I’ve heard those can be deadly.” Alex started reeling for the moment. Michelle was validating all her insecurities and reinforcing one of the many reasons why Alex had been so cautious. She kept it together.

“I know. Can you believe I’m doing this? I mean... this is me we are talking about. I am definitely in uncharted territory.”

“Does he have a brother?” Michelle inquired. “I am getting so desperate for a man. Every time I see those online matchmaking commercials, I am tempted to jump on my computer, log onto the site, and enter my credit card number. It reeks of desperation.”

“Isn’t it funny, Michelle, how women can be over men? I mean, you and I both can take care of ourselves, but there’s that part of a women that is still seeking a prince.”

“Yeah, and all I have been getting is the frog.” Michelle began to share openly and freely that although she seemingly had the perfect life, it would be great to find someone special to share it with.

Alex sat there, listening to her pour her heart out for several moments. She nodded to give the appearance of being in agreement with Michelle, but letting her guard down with Daniel and really getting to know him, appeared to be re-shaping her view of men. After speaking for a while, during which she seemed not to take a breath, Michelle’s demeanor changed. She seemed despondent.

“This margarita is starting to kick in. Are you ready?”



Alex and Michelle left the club. Michelle was unusually quiet. She told Alex she was a little buzzed from the drink but assured her she could drive. In actuality, Michelle was sober. She had barely touched her margarita. She was quiet because she was overcome with a feeling of sadness and was facing the fact that she may never find anyone worthy to marry. Although she was happy for Alex, she was secretly jealous and sad for herself. Alex’s great news made her feel

as though she was being left behind in the pack of lonely, almost forty, unmarried women and she was scared. She dropped Alex off at her house and drove home. She went upstairs, grabbed a bottle of wine out of the cooler, popped the cork and began drinking right out of the bottle. A few moments later, she grabbed the half gallon of butter pecan ice cream out of the fridge and the biggest spoon she could find. An hour later, she lay passed out drunk on the sofa with the TV still on.

Chapter Twenty Two

“Good Morning, Mom!”

“You’re awfully cheerful for a change. Must be that new man you’re seeing.”

“I’m just glad to be home, that’s all. I miss you sometimes.”

“Come on and have a seat, breakfast is ready.”

“How does it feel to find out you are suddenly wealthy?”

“I keep telling you, I’m not thinking about that money. Blake said it would be a few months anyway. That was so nice of him to offer to help me. Are you sure you don’t have a history with him?”

“It’s not me. It’s Laura. I think she still has feelings for him, she just doesn’t realize it yet. You know Laura, she wouldn’t recognize the right thing to do if it jumped up and bit her in the nose.”

“You’d think she would have grown out of that by now.” Alex’s mom loaded her plate and placed it before her. She topped off her glass of juice. “What are we doing today?”

“Let’s go and start picking out some things that you would like to buy. Mom, you and Daddy denied yourselves all your life to take care of me and put me

through school. It's time to live a little. You have no excuse. You can't take it with you."

"Yeah, but I can leave it to you."

"Mom, that's silly, you know I can take care of myself. I make a decent living and my future is well thought out and planned for. You forget, that's what I do for a living. Enjoy that money. It would give honor to Daddy if you did."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"After I finish eating, and running around the block to shed these pancakes, let's go looking at cars. You've always talked about convertibles. Let's take one for a test drive. We can also stop by the travel agent's office and pick up some brochures of some of the places we might like to visit. I'm not taking no for an answer."

"You and that working out. You're a good size, Alex. I'm glad you put some of that weight back on. You looked terrible. Why do you feel you have to be skinny?"

"I'm not trying to be skinny, Mom."

"Whatever, Alex."

Alex finished her breakfast and decided that she would take an extended run. She needed the time to clear her mind. As she jogged she thought about her relationship with Daniel. *He seems like such a good person. Who knows where this could*

lead? Maybe one day I could settle down and have a family. Maybe I would work part-time. Let's not get crazy. She laughed. *Who would I be without work?*

After the first couple blocks, Alex noticed that she was extremely fatigued and she was both amazed and embarrassed. She continued to push herself. *I can at least make it to the park. This is ridiculous.* She continued to press on and as she entered the park she looked around for a water fountain. As she made her way over to it, she stopped short as she was overcome by a coughing fit from a lack of oxygen.

"Are you alright, sweetheart?" a guy asked from out of nowhere.

"Yes, I'm fine," Alex stated, trying not to make eye contact as she was embarrassed at her lack of lung capacity. The voice sounded very familiar and she looked up. "Russell? Is that you? You have got to be kidding me. It's Alex from high school." She threw out her arms to hug him.

"Hey girl, what's up? I didn't know you were still in Detroit."

"I'm not. I live in Chicago. I'm just here visiting my mom," she said, panting.

"Good ole Chi-town. Work takes me there quite a bit."

"Oh my God, you will have to look me up," Alex said, still catching her breath.

"You don't run much, do you?"

"You can tell, huh?" As they laughed Alex began coughing uncontrollably and was again embarrassed.

“You need a drink, baby.” That was Alex’s cue. She wanted to get away from him for just a second to pull herself together. Russell pointed to the water fountain across the path and Alex held up her finger, pleading with him to give her a second. She feared just opening her mouth would bring the fit back so she quietly exited his presence, filled up at the water fountain and returned a few moments later.

“Sorry about that.”

“You know, I’m a certified fitness trainer and running is not the easiest thing to take up when you begin working out.”

“Scary thing is, I’m not actually a beginner. I’ve worked out off and on for years. More off than on but I really should be in better shape.”

“The next time I’m in town, if your husband is comfortable, I can meet you at the gym and give you some pointers as to what you can do to increase your endurance and stamina. Doing so will also give you a little more energy to help you get through your workday as well. Speaking of which, what do you do?”

“I work long days,” Alex hesitated. She was again feeling the sting of not getting that promotion and surprised she was having such difficulty moving beyond it. “I work at an investment firm.” She was intentionally vague, hoping the questioning wouldn’t move beyond that point. “And I’m not married.”

“You aren’t married? I thought you would have hooked up with that guy with the huge gap in his teeth from high school. What’s his name?”

“I know you are not talking about Ronald. I don’t know where he is. He enlisted right after we graduated. I haven’t heard anything about him since.”

“You know he used to kiss and tell, right.” Alex’s eyes widened for a second. She wondered what lies he might have told Russell and God only knew who else. “I can’t believe someone hasn’t snatched you up. I mean, you’re a good catch. You’re behind is a little big but that’s nothing a treadmill won’t fix.”

“Shut up, Russell.” Alex laughed as she punched him in the arm. “I’d better be getting back. My mom is waiting for me.”

“How can I get in touch with you when I come to Chicago?”

“Just Google me, Alex Monroe, my company info will come up. We’ll do lunch when you come to town.”

“Yeah, and get you onto that treadmill.”

As Alex left the park, she thought to herself, *he was really stressing that I need to work out. Is my behind really getting that big? I hope he was just playing.* Just in case he wasn’t, Alex stepped up the pace of her walk and eased into a jog on her way back to her mother’s house. Upon her arrival, she jumped in the shower and changed her clothes. It appeared her mother had had a change of heart. She was now

excited about going car shopping and had been eagerly awaiting Alex's return. As Alex came out of her room putting on her sweater she apologized to her mother,

"Mom, sorry about the wait. When we get there, don't tell them you don't have the money yet."

"Do you think I'm stupid? They won't give us the time of day."

"Right."

"What took you so long at the park?"

"I ran into an old high school buddy. He and I used to be so close. It was great to see him. He's going to look me up the next time he comes to Chicago."

"What's Daniel going to say?"

"Nothing. I probably won't even tell him. He's just an old friend. That's all."

Chapter Twenty-three

Alex and her mother spent several hours looking for cars. It had been a while since her mother had a new car and her last car, her father had bought for her. And while her mother was excited about the idea of finally getting a convertible, she found herself suffering from an acute case of sticker shock.

“I still can’t see paying all this money for a car.”

“Mom, you can afford this now.”

“Yeah, but God does not want me to be wasteful.”

“Well, get a more modest car if that makes you more comfortable.”

“There’s so many to choose from.”

“Yeah, that’s the way the world is these days. It’s easy to get overwhelmed just by the number of choices there are. I didn’t mean for you to be overwhelmed. You have plenty of time to think about it.”

“I’ve seen just about one car too many. Let’s go to Carlson’s for lunch. We can talk about our vacation destination over a huge plate of ribs.”

Alex hadn’t visited her favorite rib shack in years. The sights, the sounds, and the smell took her way back. Entering the restaurant, Alex thought about Russell’s commentary on her behind and committed to herself that she would only

have a salad for lunch. Her mother, who had no desire to be toothpick thin, as she called it, and who was thankful that age and wisdom had moved her past the trivial concerns of youth, ordered the full spread.

Alex eyed the ribs arranged beautifully on the plate as she and her mother talked. Their aroma floated up and teased her nostrils. She could smell each of the spices that made the sauce a Detroit favorite. She downed several glasses of water, attempting to douse the temptation to pick up one of the ribs off her mother's plate. But before long, Alex had abandoned her salad and was enjoying her mother's lunch. As they ate, they discussed the advantages and disadvantages of vacationing in several places, even vacationing overseas. With all the turmoil the world was in, they returned to the original idea of sunny Jamaica.

"I thought you said we would go to the travel agent's office."

"That was just to get brochures to figure out where we'd go. Now that we know, I can just book it online when we firm up the date."

"Oohh! You kids today. With all your choices and your online this and that. No wonder you all are half-crazy. It's just too much for one person to handle. Too many choices, too much technology, too much of everything."

"I guess we're just used to it, Mom."

"Well, just because you're used to it don't make it good."

Alex spent the rest of the evening talking with her mom. She was starting to enjoy her visits home. Normally, she buzzed in and out of town with a huge chip on her shoulder. Here lately, she was beginning to linger and really cherish the time she spent at home. Tomorrow she would be back to the grind. Back to the hustle and bustle of the Chicago streets and stress of work. The only thing positive about that was seeing Daniel.



The next morning, on her Sunday drive back to Chicago, Alex called Daniel and told him the good news—that he had been given her mom’s permission to join them on their trip to Jamaica.

“Daniel, Mom has given her blessing for you to come to Jamaica with us.”

“That’s great. Are you sure she doesn’t mind?”

“No, she wants to meet you, she asked me to bring you home for the holidays.”

“I agree with her. I should go home with you for the holidays.”

“We’ll see.”

“Can I see you tonight?” Daniel inquired.

“Your place or mine?” Alex replied.

“Yours. You always come to my place. I like seeing how you rich suburbanites live.”

“Very funny. You make as much money as I do.”

“You don’t know that.”

“How can you be in this game, at your level, and not have amassed the salary that comes along with it? I’m not stupid.”

“Hey, for all you know, I could have an illegitimate child somewhere that I send all my money to.”

Alex was silent. *There it is.*

After a few moments Daniel beckoned, “Hello...Alex... You know I was just kidding. There are no babies, no wives, nothing. I promise.”

“You scared me for a minute.”

“Because you’re assuming I’m like everybody else. You’re going to curse the whole thing before it gets started good. You’re just waiting for something to go wrong, aren’t you?”

“No, it’s just that us girls have been duped for so long by men, it’s hard to believe that there’s one out there that could be different. If he is out there, what are the odds that I would find him?”

“Well you did. Aren’t you lucky?”

Alex smiled. “Speaking of which, I need to call Laura.”

“That’s an odd transition, what about that made you think of her?”

“Well, she’s going through a rough patch with men right now. I think in some twisted way, she doesn’t feel worthy of being loved, so she’s settling.

“You mean Webster?”

“I don’t think he is the one for her. He’s too selfish to love anyone but himself.” Alex shifted the focus to dinner. “What time will you come this evening?”



Alex quickly ended the call so that she could call Laura to check on her. She wondered how things had progressed over the weekend and wanted to know if anything had been confirmed with the pregnancy scare. When Laura answered, Alex could tell she was sleeping. Laura tried to talk through her grogginess but Alex insisted she go back to sleep and promised she’d call her later. *Sleeping in the middle of the day? This doesn’t sound good.*

As Alex finished her last leg of the trip, she was excited about her impending date with Daniel. As plans for the evening’s preparation ran through her mind, she thought, *What should I wear? I don’t want to seem too forward but I would like to look nice for him. I don’t want to be like Laura when she wore that red dress to see Blake—it’s too obvious, not my style. But I do want to look nice. Hmmm. White pantsuit. Got it!*

As Alex entered the house through the garage, she welcomed the smell of her home. Her home decor was sophisticated but with a relaxed feel that always made her and her guests feel welcome. It was her haven from all the craziness in the world. A space she had designed specifically to suit her and catered to all her tastes. Whenever she was away, she missed it.

She walked into her all white living room, went over to the stereo, and popped in a jazz CD. As she looked at the clock, she noticed she had just enough time to unpack, make dinner and start getting dressed for her date without rushing. She placed a bottle of wine in the cooler and started the preliminary preparations for the pasta she would serve for dinner. *A nice quiet evening with Daniel. I hope he doesn't think I am suggesting anything with the oysters. People say they're an aphrodisiac. Although if I am really honest with myself, I wouldn't be upset if he did think I was suggesting something and he responded.*

Alex's thoughts scrambled. Nothing was black and white when it came to Daniel and she preferred things to be black and white. She wasn't sure what happened in his life that made him commit to a vow of celibacy. It was frustrating to say the least. On the other hand, she was relieved. She could be confident that he was totally interested in her. The relationship wasn't about what she could give him. She hated that he was celibate and appreciated it, all at the same time..

Alex shook her head in disbelief and confusion as she laid the white

pantsuit that fit her in all the right places on the bed. She stopped in front of the mirror to admire herself. *I don't know what Russell is talking about. Most black men like big behinds. He's right though; I could be more diligent about going to the gym. I have gained a few pounds.*

She decided to wear her hair down for a change. Full, with lots of bounce and curl. *Men like romantic hair. Wearing my hair in bun is a little stiff, so is the nude lipstick.* After her makeup was perfect, she slipped into the pantsuit and topped everything off with a pair of spiked heels. *I clean up pretty good. He won't know what hit him.*

As Alex was lighting the candles, the doorbell rang. Alex opened the door. She could tell Daniel was taken off guard when he saw her.

"Wow, you really look great. I don't think I've ever seen you in that color lipstick."

"Come on in."

"This is a really nice place you have here. Jacobson has been good to you," Daniel said as they walked to the living room.

"Really good, but I've worked hard for everything I have and I've been diligent with my money over the years." Alex took his coat and laid it on the sofa.

"Who's your interior designer?" Daniel said, following her into the kitchen.

"I did everything myself. Even picked out all the tiles you see here in the kitchen."

“It looks like a professional did it.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. I’m really proud of it. It’s given me an opportunity to expend all the creative energy I have. I minored in Art in college.” As Daniel followed Alex through the house, Alex could tell he was checking out every inch of her. Especially her behind. It was apparent he was making every effort to not be noticed looking, but it wasn’t working. Alex was onto him. As he continued to follow her through the house, she found his awkwardness amusing and began to chuckle.

“Are you okay?” she inquired.

“You caught me, hunh?”

“Yes, but it’s okay.”

“It’s just that you really look nice tonight. I don’t think I have ever seen you like this.”

“Oh, with my hair down? Alex said, pointing to it. “It’s just easier to pull it back in the mornings...”

“No, there’s something else about you tonight. And whatever it is, I am even more attracted to it.”

Take that, Russell. Some men still appreciate a woman’s curves.

Alex did not know how to respond. *Let’s go to my room?* “Dinner should be just about ready,” she decided was a more tasteful reply. “Let’s go down and eat.”

In the kitchen, Daniel removed the wine from the cooler and popped the cork. As they dined, they talked about various subjects, which was one of the things she admired most about Daniel. She always seemed to get lost in his conversation. No subject was off limits.

“Daniel, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but why are you not interested in physical intimacy?” Shocked, Daniel spit his wine across the table and quickly apologized. Mortified by the red stain left on the white tablecloth, he began quickly blotting the table with his napkin and gathering himself. He quickly responded,

“Who said I have no interest? Trust me, I’m just as red blooded a male as you would ever want to meet.”

“I don’t want you to think I am being forward but I have been curious as to what happened to you that turned you off. I’m just curious, that’s all.” At this point, Alex was taking a cheap shot out of frustration.

“You appear to be suggesting something.”

“No, really, it is just a little odd.”

“What’s odd about it?”

“Now, you’re getting defensive,” Alex said, annoyed.

“No. Maybe you’re getting defensive because, again, you’re looking for a way to sabotage us and you can’t find one.”

There was a loud silence as they chewed the oysters. Alex was disappointed that they were a little tough and realized that maybe she had cooked them too long, or perhaps not quite enough. She wasn't sure.

"Come here." Daniel broke the silence and motioned across the table to her. As Alex moved toward him, he sat her on his lap and grabbed her hand. "Here is the story. I value women."

"And..."

"And, that's it."

"You said there was a story. That's not much of a story."

"In my past, like many men, I have been a guy that valued woman for what they could offer me. Even then though, I knew it was wrong. My grandmother had taught me better, and night after night, woman after woman, empty encounters and meaningless sex finally caught up to me. I realized that those encounters were not only meaningless but they devalued the woman, and me, for that matter. Sex is an intimate thing between a man and a woman. It is to be shared in the confines of a sacred relationship as an expression of love and commitment..."

Alex stared at the floor thinking, *Yeah, I know, yada yada yada, you sound like my mother.*

“I went through a rite of purity,” Daniel continued interrupting her thoughts, “took an AIDS test and that was the end of that part of my life. I need to know, Alex, that you can respect my decision.” Alex was both amazed and confused. It seemed as though if she was going to be in this relationship with him, she was going to have to put up with it, whether she liked it or not. *He is just full of ultimatums.*

Alex was well aware of Daniel’s strength. She admired it. But at times like this when he laid down the law, she wanted to rebel. She had to confess to herself that although she really wanted to look nice for Daniel, part of the reason for the extra fuss she made over getting dressed, letting down her hair, the white pantsuit, stilettos, had all been orchestrated to see if she could get him to bend. She just received the message loud and clear--it wasn’t going to work. She was angry, but on a much deeper level, she was relieved. *He really likes me for me. Now there’s no guessing.*

“I’m okay with it. It’s just that I keep waiting,” *or should I say wanting*, she thought, “for you to make an advance toward me, like most guys do.”

“Well, you are going to find that I’m not like most other guys. I keep trying to prove it to you, and at the same time, you’re trying to disprove it.”

“I guess all the bad apples have programmed me to think the worst. I keep waiting for the hammer to fall.”

He lifted her leg and pulled off her shoe.

“Why don’t you go change into something more comfortable? I brought movies with me. They’re PG-13. I’m no dummy.”

Alex laughed as she left the kitchen to change, and she knew Daniel admired the view on her way out.

Chapter Twenty- four

As Alex left for work the next morning, it crossed her mind that she forgot to call Laura the night before. She quickly accessed the speed dial function on her cell phone.

“Hello.”

“Are you up?”

“Not yet.”

“Wow, you are so blessed to be able to telecommute.”

“Are you working today?” Alex asked, trying to subtly probe her current state of mind.

“I don’t think so,” Laura responded, in a way that suggested more than what her words were saying.

“Do you need me to come over? I am on my way to catch the train to work; I can turn around and be there in ten minutes.”

“Could you?” Laura asked. “If it’s not too much trouble...”

“I’ll be right there.”

As Alex rushed over to Laura’s, she knew her worst fears were being confirmed. *Laura is pregnant. I cannot believe this.* She paused to collect herself before

entering the building. As soon as she walked through the door, Laura burst out of the bathroom in tears.

“What’s the matter, baby?” Alex took extra care to be supportive. She could tell how disappointed Laura was.

“I’m pregnant.”

Alex sighed. “Are we happy or not happy?”

“We’re not happy. In fact, we’re devastated.”

“Is Webster happy?”

“He doesn’t know yet.”

“Why not? You’re not thinking of doing anything silly, are you?”

After a long hesitation, Laura responded, “This changes everything. My career, my relationship with Webster, my lifestyle. Everything. I can’t be pregnant now. And at my age?”

“So what, you’ll adapt.” Alex was tender but firm. “Your plans have been altered, not derailed. Women have babies every day, and lives go on, jobs continue, etcetera. It’s shocking but it is not the end of the world.”

“Yeah, but the timing is awful. Webster is between jobs right now...”

“He seems to have a little difficulty with work, hunh?”

Laura was too distraught to defend him. “I just don’t know what I am going to do!”

“You’ll have the baby and I’ll be the godmother,” Alex responded in a much-needed reassuring tone. “It will be great, you’ll see. Webster will find a job... Life will go on.”

Laura placed her head in Alex’s lap and continued to cry. It was obvious that Laura was mentally distraught so Alex called the office and told them she would be late getting in.

Laura tried to talk between her sobs. “I don’t want to be an unwed mother.”

With her face hidden from Laura’s view, Alex grimaced as she formed her mouth to say the words, in a soothing voice, “So, you and Webster will get married.” It almost made her sick to say it.

“I don’t know if he will marry me.”

Trust me, that’s a good thing. Alex instead replied, “Maybe you should talk to him about it. The good thing is that you make a decent living and although your lifestyle might change a little, you’ll be able to manage on your own.”

“But I don’t want to. It’s really hard to raise a child alone. Not to mention the psychological damage that happens to a child when one parent is absent.”

“Well, you’ll have some things to talk over with Webster. Do you even want to marry him?”

“I don’t know. I really care about him. I know you don’t approve but he really is a nice guy, and I know he loves me. He’s not the typical male, but he’s

good in his own way. And underneath all the bling, and the street talk, is a genuineness that I can't explain."

"Yeah, but genuineness doesn't pay rent or pick up kids from daycare."

"He's changing, you'll see. I've noticed a difference in him."

"Well, make sure that he's changing himself and that it's not you trying to do the changing, because you can't. I don't care how hard you try. Only Webster can change Webster. Why would you want to be in a relationship with someone you had to change anyway? We're not talking about a pair of panties. We're talking about a person you are going to spend the rest of your life with. Someone you will raise children with, and grow old together with. It behooves us to choose wisely."

After a long hesitation and apparent contemplation about what Alex was saying, Laura said in a quiet voice, "What if there is no one else out there for me?"

"There is. If you're patient, you'll find him. Contrary to popular opinion, there are some good men out there."

"Umh," Laura groaned in disbelief. "You and Daniel must really be getting along."

"Just make sure Webster's worthy of everything that you have to offer. Make sure you are not settling for less than you deserve. Perhaps he is the one for you. Perhaps he will make a great father. Only you can answer that. But I would

caution you to pay attention to the hesitation in your voice. If there is doubt creeping in, it's probably for a reason. Ignore it now, and you'll pay later."

Just then, Laura and Alex's conversation was interrupted by the sound of keys in the lock on the door. Webster opened the door and stood there momentarily.

"What's going on?" Webster said, trying not to show concern. "Is she alright?" he inquired of Alex as he closed the door and immediately walked over and started opening the blinds to the living room window.

"Yes, she's fine. I think you two need to talk. Laura, I will call you later," Alex said, getting up off the couch.

"Webster, I'm pregnant!" Laura screamed, as she sat up. Laying with her head on Alex's lap had caused her hair to be smashed on one side. Her hairdo was lopsided. Her eyes were blood red. She looked a mess.

"What? Oh no. You're joking, right?"

Alex, who was now on the other side of the room, began frantically digging through her purse, looking for her keys in her oversized bag, but could not find them. In that moment she realized that in buying that bag, she sacrificed practicality for style. It wasn't a fair trade. She could never retrieve anything from it in a reasonable amount of time.

"See, Alex. I told you he would not marry me," Laura said.

“What the hell are you talking to Alex about me for?” Webster shot back immediately. Alex was growing more nervous by the second. She visually scanned the room, looking for her keys.

“Hey ya’ll, I think this is a private matter. I really need to get going,” Alex said, making it clear she would prefer they waited until she found her keys and left to continue the conversation.

“No, Alex, I want you here. I’m sure he’ll get mad and run like he always does,” Laura said angrily. And sure enough, Webster let out a string of expletives; a few Alex questioned whether she had ever heard before, and slammed the door on his way out.

An awkward silence filled the room and Laura wiped the tears from her face that was now red hot with anger. “I don’t know if I’m more mad at him or at myself. Why did I ever think this could work? I told you he would not marry me.” Laura said with disappointment, handing Alex her keys.

They had been sitting next to her the whole time. Alex snatched the keys from Laura’s hand. This time she held onto them for fear of the bag swallowing them again. “Well, if you knew that, why the whole outburst? That scared the crap out of me. I thought he might pull out his gat and do us both in.”

“Nah, he’s too much of a coward for that. He runs whenever things get tough. I knew he would respond that way. He’s afraid. Punk.”

“Laura, I think this situation is very telling. The fact that you knew he would not marry you speaks louder than his running out. Maybe you need to just make up your mind that you are in this thing alone and find the strength to move forward.”

“But I don’t want to do it alone.”

“Sometimes life is such that you don’t have a choice.”

Alex knelt down where Laura was sitting on the couch, kissed her on the forehead and left for work. As she drove to the office, she thought about Webster’s response and was fearful that Laura, in spite of everything that transpired, would cave in to the fear of being without a man, and try to make it work with Webster.

Alex’s biggest concern was that they would marry, and after a few years, his true character would surface, and they would end up divorced down the road. They’d have finances to consider among other things at that point, and who knew, there could even be more children by then. *I hope she comes to her senses before it’s too late, she thought. I know many a woman who didn’t wisely choose a mate and as years went on they were forced to stay for various reasons, and they ended up paying the ultimate price for a costly mistake. It’s easier not to enter in than it is to get out.*

Chapter Twenty Five

As Alex made her way into the office, she could feel something in the air. She had an uneasy feeling about something. *Is it Daniel? Experience has taught me that if something looks too good to be true, it usually is.* After grabbing a cup of coffee, she sat down to review the agenda for the day. Her secretary entered.

“Gordon has called for you several times. He still has questions about his portfolio.”

“I’ll deal with Gordon later. Thanks, Lelah.” Alex called Wanda immediately.

“Wanda, when you get a chance over the next couple days, I would like to start you on another project. I want us to start taking a look at the performance history of the portfolio. I know this is not my department, but I need to find a better explanation to give my clients than the one we’re being provided. I think we’re missing something and it’s time I took matters into my own hands.”

“Okay, I will clear sometime over the next few days,” Wanda replied.
“About how long do you think it will take?”

“A few hours should do. I don’t think it’s that big of a deal.”

Alex ended that call and dialed Daniel's extension. She was determined to try to find a better answer to give her clients. Something just did not feel right. *Maybe Daniel doesn't know what he's doing. He's been here for several months and we're still having the same issues.*

"Daniel, are you sure that the fund is operating normally? I keep getting calls from some of my clients, Gordon in particular, because he tends to watch his statements more closely. I feel bad that I cannot offer them some sort of explanation. What's going on?"

"I keep telling you that there is nothing to worry about," Daniel snapped. "We made some investments here lately that are just going to take a while to start producing. Clients always complain when the funds are slow. They'll be satisfied shortly when they start reaping the benefits."

Alex was insistent. "I've worked for this firm for a long time and I haven't seen a time where I've received this many concerned calls. How many years have you done this kind of work?"

"Oh, now you're questioning me. You know what? Let's not go there. The market is what it is. Give it time. You'll see."

"But Daniel..."

"Let it go, Alex." Daniel slammed down the phone.

Alex looked at the receiver with disbelief. Daniel's reaction caused Alex to be even more concerned. She was growing suspicious. She had a feeling that something was still amiss, despite Daniel's reassuring tone. *He's too calm, and he won't even entertain me questioning him. Is this an ego thing?* As she contemplated what could be happening, she was interrupted by her phone.

"Hello?"

"Alex, it's Russell. I'm in town this week and since your behind needs a little work, I wanted to extend my services to you free of charge," he said jokingly. "What gym do you go to?"

"Actually, I work out at home now. I just recently completed my home gym.

"Do you have the right equipment...cardiovascular?"

"Yep."

"Abs?"

"Yep."

"Chest, legs and arms?"

"Yep."

"It's not that cheap infomercial stuff, is it?" Russell responded, laughing.

"No, it's gym quality equipment. I decided to buy it so that I no longer have an excuse not to work out."

"Well, you'll have to pick me up; I don't know a thing about the suburbs."

“Where are you staying?”

“Pick me up at The Intercontinental around six.”

Alex was excited about Russell being in town. She was excited about catching up with him but she was more excited about him giving her some tips to improve her workout. When it came to exercising, Alex was always looking for ways to obtain the maximum benefits with the least amount of effort. She was grateful there was tension between she and Daniel from earlier in the day, so the whole evening was working out. She wouldn't have to explain.



Russell was waiting when Alex pulled up in front of the hotel. He threw his bag in the backseat of her car.

“Nice car.”

“Thanks. How's the hotel?”

“It's awesome. I always stay there when I come here. So you live in the 'burbs?”

“Yes, it will take us a few minutes to get there. Should we eat first?”

“No, if you have some fruit or nuts, that would be best.”

“How about wine and cheese?” Alex said, laughing, knowing that her refrigerator was almost empty. “I’ve never been the healthiest eater. My schedule precludes that.”

“We’ll see when we get there. I’m sure we can pull something together that will provide enough energy to get through the workout.”

When Alex and Russell arrived at Alex’s house, Russell was impressed by her abode.

“Wow, girl, somebody or something is treating you really good.”

“There’s a guest bedroom down the hall and to your left. You can change there. The equipment is in the basement.”

As Russell went to the back to change, Alex pulled out some fruit, cheese and a jar of peanut butter. *This is all I’ve got. I wonder if Daniel is going to call me.*

Probably not, he knows I’m upset with him. Just then, the phone rang. Alex was hoping it wasn’t him.

“Alex.”

“Hey, Mom. You won’t believe who’s here. Russell, an old friend from high school.”

“Oh, from here in Detroit?”

“Yes, he’s here on business.”

“That’s nice, sweetheart. Where’s Daniel?”

“I’m not sure. He’ll probably call later.”

“Does he know that Russell is at your house?”

“Oh Mom, it’s nothing like that. Trust me, this one is totally innocent.”

“It might be...but will it look like it?”

“Gotta go, Mom, I’ll call you later.” When Alex hung up the phone, she thought for a second. *Maybe she’s right. I should have thought this through a little more. But I need the free training. Daniel’s mad anyway and he’d never drive out this far without checking to see if I was home first...*

“Is this all you’ve got?” Russell asked, looking at the fruit that Alex had placed on a china platter as he entered the kitchen.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“It’s not the worst thing in the world. It’s always a good idea to eat a little protein with carbohydrates before a strenuous workout.”

Strenuous? “The equipment is in the basement. I’ll join you in just a second.”

Alex put on a tank and red warm up pants and descended the stairs to the basement. Russell spent the first few minutes explaining the equipment to her and how to properly use it. Alex was extremely grateful for that. Having just ordered the equipment, and hating to read manuals, Alex was almost clueless as to how to use some of it. After a warm up in which Russell told Alex it was

important to “break a sweat,” he placed her on the machines. She was already exhausted before the weight training had even begun.

Several minutes into the session, Russell removed his shirt and only biker shorts and gym shoes remained. His skin was ebony smooth and his physique was such that you could make an argument that he had been chiseled from stone instead of hailing from his mother’s womb. Years of training had resulted in sheer muscular perfection. *Who would have thought that goofy old Russell from high school would have had all this under those clothes?*

Alex tried to concentrate on what he was showing her but Russell, standing there shirtless, was making it difficult. Nearly impossible. His chest glistened from the odorless sweat he was producing. It created the softest sheen on his skin and caused the baby fine hair on his chest to curl up into the tiniest, perfect little circles. They reminded Alex of halos.

As he demonstrated how she could best strengthen her arms, she behaved as if she was intently focusing so she could learn the proper form, but she was really admiring the soundness of his bicep. *Stop*, she thought. *What am I doing?* She was in a committed relationship. Albeit one without physical intimacy, but committed nonetheless. She immediately came to her senses and began to tune in to what Russell was telling her. They spent the next hour or so perfecting her form. Alex was taking notes.

“Wow, Russell, this does seem like a faster way to get results. I’ll try it for the next couple weeks and I’ll call you and let you know how I’m doing. We’d better be going, it’s getting late.”

After the workout, Alex drove Russell back downtown to Russell’s hotel.

“Alex.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m starving. Do you mind if we stop and grab a sandwich or something? I really don’t want to eat alone.”

“Sure, I know a great place right around the corner from your hotel.”

Alex took Russell to one of her favorite cafés. The quaint place was almost empty and they had their pick of tables, covered in red and white checkered tablecloths to choose from. They chose the largest table in the center of the café and welcomed the room to spread out.

After Alex led Russell through the menu and suggested some of her favorite dishes, they sat sharing stories and reminiscing about past times in high school. Crushes, fights, teachers. The time seemed to fly by. Alex hadn’t heard from Daniel so she lingered over dinner and coffee with Russell. Daniel had been working late for the past several days on an important project and Alex knew he was more than likely working late again. Truth be told, she was perturbed that he

refused to discuss it with her, so she intentionally refrained from calling him and was enjoying her time with Russell. It was her way of paying him back.



Daniel hailed a cab from the office that night, as it was too cold to walk home. Riding in the cab, he thought about Alex and the harsh words they had spoken earlier. He was disappointed about it and sure that she would not let the matter go. He had no explanation he could give her and was beginning to feel burdened by her constant questioning.

Troubled by his thoughts, as the cab turned the corner Daniel gazed out the window. As he did so, he focused right in on Alex, sitting at the table in the center of the café, with some guy, laughing with her head back, looking like she was having a good time.

Daniel immediately tapped the cab driver on the shoulder and commanded him to stop. He jumped out of the car and ran over to the window. He stood there eyeing Alex, obviously enjoying the conversation with this unidentified man. He was overcome with emotions. Anger at the top of the list.

He stood there in the cold, and watched unnoticed for a few moments as his breath steamed up the glass. *She looks a little too comfortable with this guy. She knows him really well. I can't believe this. She's playing me.* He wasn't sure what to do. In a

moment of indecision and protest, before he knew it, he had lunged through the door and confronted both she and the man at the table.

“Hey Daniel, this is Russell,” Alex said startled. “My trainer. I mean I went to high school with him and he worked me out. I mean, he showed me some tips on how to make the most of my workout.” Alex was obviously so nervous she jumbled her words. Daniel wasn’t completely convinced and became aggressive. Russell stood up from the table and removed his jacket. He apparently wanted to show Daniel what he was up against. Daniel eyed Russell’s muscles and thought about what they meant, but he was undaunted and willing to risk everything for Alex. Even a beat-down.

“Daniel, cut it out,” Alex said, grabbing him by sleeve of his jacket. “I told you I went to high school with him. There is nothing going on. You’re embarrassing me.”

Russell apologized and reassured Daniel there was nothing going on. He extended an offer for Daniel to join them, attempting to calm him down and hoping he wouldn’t accept. “Pull up a chair, man. Grab a cup of coffee and join us.”

But Daniel accepted the invitation. He spent several awkward minutes listening to Alex and Russell talk about old times. He ordered a cup of coffee and sat there until he reached his comfort level. After he finished his coffee, he kissed Alex on the head, gave Russell a serious look and took off.



“Russell, I apologize for that,” Alex said as sincerely as she could sound.

“That’s okay. It just means he really likes you, that’s all. Trust me, that’s a good thing.”

After the incident, Alex and Russell settled the bill and left the café. Alex immediately called Daniel. She was perturbed by Daniel’s behavior.

“You looked foolish.”

“You looked guilty.”

They broke out into laughter but then Alex turned serious. “You trust me, don’t you? We can’t have a relationship if we can’t trust each other.”

“I’m sorry I lost my head. I do trust you. And I hope you are not angry with me. The thought of losing you to someone else made me a little crazy.

“Ya’ think?”

“Again, I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me. That’s really not like me at all.”

“Well, have a good night. I’m going home and going to bed. I’ve had too much excitement for one day.”

Chapter Twenty Six

Alex sat in her office staring out of the window, watching the snow fall. She could hear the wind violently rustling against the window. She thought back to the moment she met Daniel, how he came barreling into the conference room that spring morning. He took her off guard and it seemed that from that moment, her life was changed. Most of it was good. She liked the fact that Daniel was relaxed and exuded a quiet confidence. His presence was calming and she was learning a lot from him about keeping things in perspective. He was also teaching her to be more open minded.

All those things she appreciated about him. At the same time, while she thought Daniel was an amazing man, she still felt there was no need to rush into things. She had spent the past several months trying to get to know him better but there was still so much about him she didn't know. She knew certain particulars like where he grew up, what his family was like, his college days, but something about him still seemed so mysterious. And if he didn't want to talk about something, he wouldn't. Period. He wasn't nasty about it, but he sent a clear message he didn't appreciate the invasion.

In the beginning, she found it attractive. It was one of the things she found most desirable about him, but now she found the mystique a little scary. She felt as though she only knew a part of him. That he was reserving the rest of himself. It was very confusing for her, since at the same time, he treated her like royalty. If she had to make a list of everything she wanted in a man, Daniel would receive the highest marks. So why this constant nagging feeling of doubt?

Alex spun her chair around and heard her stomach growl. Her busy morning had burned up her bagel and coffee and she needed a snack to hold her over until lunch. She headed for the break room. She sneaked past Daniel's office. He had been pressuring Alex to let him go home with her for the holidays but she refused. She was becoming annoyed that he wouldn't let the matter go.

Alex entered the break room. She needed a quick burst of energy. She spotted cookies on the table. That would do the trick nicely. Her attempt to sneak past Daniel's office was unsuccessful. He saw her pass by and followed her into the break room.

"Alex, this is ridiculous," Daniel said as he leaned against the break room wall. The lines in his forehead were deep and pronounced.

"What?" Alex asked innocently as she filled her plate with holiday cookies a co-worker had brought in.

“I am going to meet your mother sooner or later. You’ve met my grandmother. Why are you being so difficult about it? Are you ashamed of me?”

“You know it’s not that.”

“Well, what is it then?”

In actuality, Alex wasn’t sure. At least it was nothing she could exactly place her finger on. Somewhere inside she felt there was still the possibility of being hurt. She just wasn’t ready to let go yet.

“Do we have to talk about this at work? Besides, you wouldn’t leave your grandmother home alone on Christmas, would you?”

Wanda entered the break room wearing a Santa hat that was too large. The furry white part drooped down over her left eye. Alex deemed it unprofessional but refrained from commenting about it. Even as her mentor, she had learned to choose her battles.

When Wanda entered, Daniel and Alex instantly stopped talking and stood on opposite sides of the room, interpreting each other’s glances. Alex’s said a clear, *I am not going to talk about this here* and Daniel’s read, *you’re being ridiculous*. Wanda, seeming not to pay them any attention, filled up her plate with goodies and headed for the door.

As she walked out, while nibbling a cookie, she said, “Everyone knows you’re dating, you know. The jig is up. And this time, no one heard a thing from me.”

Alex and Daniel glanced at each other and burst into laughter. They had tried so hard to keep everything professional while at the office. They were both amused and relieved that their secret was out.

“Daniel, I told you to be cool around the office,” Alex admonished him with a whisper.

Alex knew full well who was responsible for their secret leaking out. She was able to maintain a steely exterior in his presence. She always kept their public interaction strictly professional.



Daniel conversely, found it more difficult to maintain that steely exterior. He felt as though Alex had touched a part of him that he never knew existed. Now that he knew, he would never be the same. Anyone paying attention would know that he had feelings for Alex. He didn’t even have to say a word.

Alex returned to her office leaving Daniel in the break room. He didn’t regret one minute of the effort he had put forth to win her over. Admittedly, she could be frustrating, and downright aggravatingly stubborn, but still well worth

it. A smile spread across his lips as he thought of her. The way she laughed, how angry she got when she didn't get her way. Every inch of her delighted him. A few weeks from now, he would be finished with the job he had come to Jacobson's to do.

The time was growing near. Daniel began to focus on the gravity of the situation. He had set up the meeting where the payoffs would take place. He, along with Ross and his accomplices would be arrested at the scene, ensuring Daniel's identity would be protected to the very end. It wasn't uncommon in these cases to try to have the witness executed before they could testify at trial. The final steps had to be executed with exact precision. Soon, he'd arrange the set-up, Ross and his accomplices would be arrested, he'd close the case and marry Alex. Picture perfect. Now, if only everything would work out exactly as he planned.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Daniel had been unsuccessful in getting Alex to let him go home with her to meet her mother. Alex insisted that the time was not right and that the two would meet on their trip. He had continually applied pressure but Alex resisted.

He finally gave up trying and she went home for the holidays, alone. He missed her immensely while she was gone and couldn't wait for her to return. He arrived at her house a few minutes after she got home. They took a stroll to a park near Alex's house.

It was a cold January day and Alex was bundled up in her white ski jacket with matching pink hat and scarf. She had missed Daniel too, while she was away. They strolled hand in hand, admiring the beauty of the snow-covered trees. When Alex looked up at Daniel, he had that playful look in his eye. *No*, Alex thought. *You wouldn't*. He reached down and scooped up a huge mound of snow and began packing it in his hands.

"What are you going to do with that?" Alex asked.

"I've got a really good idea," Daniel said, as he repeatedly tossed the perfectly round mound in the air and caught it with his left hand. Alex reached down as quickly as she could and scooped up some snow, patted it and flung it at Daniel,

hitting him right in the mouth. She turned and started running down the snow-covered hill.

Daniel brushed the snow from his face and mouth smiling at Alex's trailing, impish giggle. She had nailed him pretty good. All of a sudden, a big black dog ran passed him. Alex, who was almost at the foot of the hill, upon turning around to see if Daniel was chasing her, was horrified to see the dog coming right after her.

She tried to run faster down the hill but the heavy snow impeded her progress. Daniel called out to her, telling her to stop running but his command seemed illogical. That dog was coming right for her. She lost her footing on the steep hill and began rolling forward. When she came to a stop, the dog jumped on her, repeatedly biting at her, removing her hat, and yanking on her hair. She was terrified. Daniel and the dog's owner had started down the hill. When they caught up to her, she was beyond pissed off.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Are you okay?" the dog's owner said.

"I think he bit me," Alex said while Daniel helped her to her feet.

"Where do you think he bit you?" Daniel interjected. His face and voice showed great concern.

"In the ass!" Alex shouted. Her tone was nasty.

"Bite?" the gentleman responded. "I've had him for seven years, he's never bitten anyone. He just wanted to play with you."

“Play?” Her tone accused the man of being delusional. She wasn’t hiding the fact that she was angry. She continued to dust the snow off her jeans, picked up her hat and placed it on her head after she checked to make sure her weave was still intact.

“Here’s my business card. I can assure you, he’s had all of his shots and I will pay for any of your medical expenses,” the man said, obviously apologetic. Alex continued to dust the snow from her clothes. She wouldn’t even look at the man. Daniel stepped in and grabbed the man’s card and told him that they would be in touch.

“Again, ma’am. I’m really sorry.”

“You need to keep him on a leash.” Alex rolled her eyes and walked away. Daniel continued talking to the man, shook his hand and jogged to catch up with Alex, who was on her way home.



When they reached the house, Alex ran to the bathroom and slammed the door. Daniel sat on the sofa. He didn’t think it was much to worry about. She didn’t have any puncture marks or tears on her jeans but he dared not say it. She was really freaked out. He knew it was just adrenaline and embarrassment kicking in, making the situation seem worse than it really was. After the fact, he actually

found it kind of comical but he knew she wouldn't appreciate his laughter. Alex stormed out of the bathroom with her jeans unzipped and resting gently on her hips.

"I can't see it," she said. "It's down too far." She was obviously still mad.

"Turn around," he soothed her. "Let me take a look." Daniel could see the lace of her delicate pink panties against the backdrop of her creamy caramel skin. He could feel his heart rate increase.

"Do you mind?" he carefully asked. He knew he would have to slide her jeans down to see if and where she had been bitten.

"No. Go ahead." Daniel knew he was entering dangerous territory. He slid her jeans down slowly and tentatively. He appreciated the fullness of her body. Sitting on the couch, he was face to face with the small of her back. He leaned forward and kissed her there. Again, and again as he slid her jeans down to get a better look. He wanted Alex so badly. In fact, he craved her. He stood up behind her, his voice almost panting and said, "The skin is barely broken."

"What?" Alex whispered. Her voice was slow and breathy. "The skin is barely broken. Go get some alcohol. You don't need a bandage." Alex stormed from Daniel's presence, went to her room and slammed the door again.

After a few moments, Daniel walked to her room and gingerly tapped at the door. His knock was unanswered. He slid the door open and Alex was lying on

her side, her back to the door. He sat on the edge of the bed. He knew the reason for her anger but he was committed to himself, to her, and to his vow. That was just the way it had to be.

Chapter Twenty Eight

“Hello.” Alex answered the phone in a sleepy voice. She was just waking up.

“What time does your flight leave?” Daniel asked.

“Seven-thirty. Yours?”

“Nine-twenty. I’m nervous about meeting your mother.”

“Don’t be. She is really a nice person and she knows how I feel about you.”

“What should I call her?”

“Trust me, you’re making way too big of a deal out of this. She’s not formal like that. Relax. I can’t wait for you two to meet. I guess this makes it official now that you are meeting my mother.”

“Official?” Daniel was amazed. At times they seemed to be on different planes, especially about the relationship. Daniel was moving full steam ahead. Alex was still proceeding with caution.

“We’ve been seeing each other for months now, Alex. I thought we’d moved way beyond it just now being official. I really should have met her before now anyway, but you were acting so gun shy. I have to go all the way to Jamaica to meet your mother. It’s disrespectful. She probably thinks I am classless.”

“Quite the contrary. She knows me and knows how cautious I am in a relationship. She knows the delay in you meeting her is more about me than it is about you.”

“Well, I still feel bad about it. I just should have met her before now. Do you think she’ll mind not spending time with you alone? I mean, that was the original plan; that I would join you two later.”

“Nah, I’ve been going home quite a bit since my father passed. I’m sure she’s okay. If not, she would have let me know. She typically doesn’t hold her tongue with me. I’d better be getting ready. Call me as soon as you arrive.”



After a smooth flight and lots of napping and catching up, Alex and her mother arrived in sunny Jamaica. Alex could feel the tension leaving her body as soon as she departed the plane. The sounds, the smells, the warmth of the sun on her skin. This was long overdue for her. She had never taken the time to savor life. Her primary focus had been on work and “making it.” *What was it all for? The only thing that matters right now is this sun on my skin and spending time with two people I care about very much.* As she boarded the shuttle to the hotel, she realized she had so much to be grateful for.

After a brief and scenic route to the hotel, Alex and her mom checked in. “I can’t wait to meet Daniel. The one who finally got you to open up and surrender to love.” Her mom chuckled.

“I don’t know if I would go that far,” Alex responded with pride.

“Oh, Alex, please. It is obvious how you feel about him. Why is your guard still up? He’s a better man than me. I would have given up on you by now. You make everything so difficult.”

“He knows I care for him, Mother. He understands me. I’m just not gushy like that, that’s all. I care about him, a lot. He’s not like anyone I’ve ever met before. In fact, in a lot of ways he’s perfect...if that’s humanly possible.”

“Do you love him?”

“Wow. I’m surprised it took you this long to pry.”

“Answer my question, Alexis. Do you love him?”

“Yes, Mother.” Alex grinned. “I guess I do.”

“Wonderful. I cannot wait to meet this man. He must be something special. Let’s place our bags in the room, freshen up and go down to the lobby. I want to see him as soon as he arrives.”

Alex and her mother descended to the lobby and ordered a bite to eat. The pina coladas were perfect and both Alex and her mother were cautious not to have too many pending Daniel’s arrival. They talked about marriage, her father, and life

in general. They were like two girlfriends having a chat that was long overdue.

Her mom began sharing intimate details regarding her own marriage, things Alex never knew, in hopes that Alex could learn what it really took to make a marriage work. Alex, for the first time in a while, found herself feeling calm and at ease, and she was relieved to be away from the office.

“This trip was an excellent idea,” her mom said, gazing out the wall of windows at the beautiful scenery, captivated by the breathtaking views. “We’ve both been through a lot lately. I think this trip is just what we needed to shed some of the excess baggage we’ve been carrying around.” “Alex,” her mother said, nodding toward the door. “It would take a lot of man to subdue my daughter, this has got to be him.”

Alex turned around to see Daniel exiting a taxi. He grabbed his bag from the backseat and tipped the driver. Excited, Alex jumped up and walked over to greet him as he walked through the lobby doors.

“How was your flight?”

“Bumpy.”

“Really? Ours was uneventful. Mom, this is Daniel. Daniel, meet my mother.”

“Hello, Mrs. Monroe.”

“Oh, please call me Susan. I’m old enough as it is. Having a grown man call me Mrs. just reminds me of how old I really am. Susan. I insist.”

“If you ladies don’t mind, I’d like to go up to my room for a bit. Can I join you two momentarily?”

“Sure. I guess that will be okay. Mom and I will finish up here and do a little shopping. Take your time and get settled in. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’ll catch up to you two later.”

Alex was a little confused about Daniel’s behavior. She could tell something was on his mind and wondered what it could be. While she was momentarily pondering the issue, she failed to realize her mom was settling the bill.

“Mom, I am not going to let you pay for my meal. I have had two pina coladas.”

“Daniel sure is, as we used to say... easy on the eyes.” Susan continued paying.

“He seemed a bit preoccupied. I wonder what’s wrong with him.”

“Maybe he wasn’t feeling well or something,” Alex’s mom reassured her. “Sometimes men can act funny. They aren’t ones to run around blabbing about everything that’s wrong with them. Let it go,” she commanded.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. I came here to have a good time. I can’t worry about what is eating him. Let’s go check out those shops we saw down the road.”

Alex and her mom walked down the street to enjoy duty free shopping. When Alex's mom insisted on paying for everything, it suddenly dawned on her.

"You got the settlement check, didn't you?"

Alex's mom threw her head back with laughter. "I was wondering when you would figure it out."

"You know, Mom, I got so caught up in my own issues, I forgot to even ask you how things were proceeding."

"Blake handled everything. He very carefully explained all the papers I received and where to sign everything, and one day he called, and told me that the check was waiting at the bank.

"Oh my God. I will have to call him to thank him. It totally slipped my mind with everything I have going on at work."

"I know Alex, trust me, I am used to it by now."

Ouch, Alex thought, that stung. Have I been placing work before everything else in my life? Have I not been there for the people that I care about the most because of work? Have I really become that person? And what did I get for it?

"Momma, I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I'm sorry I have put my career on such a high pedestal. I wouldn't ever want you to think I wasn't there for you."

“You still took care of me, Alex. You are the one who told me about Blake. I was in the best of care at all times. You did that...You know all this stuff is duty free, right?” Alex’s mother quickly tried to change the subject before the mood turned somber. After all, they were in Jamaica trying to shed sorrows, not wallow in them.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“What happened to you yesterday? Was it something I said?” Alex said jokingly, having roused Daniel from his bed. He stood in his hotel room door wearing only black gym shorts and the hair on his chest. He was still half asleep. He scratched his head, trying to orient himself.

“No, I was a little tired from the trip.”

“I called you last night and knocked. Where were you?”

“I fell right to sleep. Didn’t even hear the phone ringing.”

“Well considering your vow, I don’t have to worry about you being with a pretty little island girl now, do I?”

“No you don’t. And I am assuming that was a joke and not a dig.”

“No. That was a dig.” They both laughed.

“What’s your mother’s room number? After I’m dressed, I want to go and personally apologize to her. I hope she didn’t find me rude.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Alex shook her head. She felt that Daniel was making a mountain out of a molehill.

“Seriously. I feel like I need to apologize. It would make me feel better.”

“Alright, if you insist. But she is going to think you’re crazy.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Four thirteen. Right next door to me.”

“I’ll meet you in the lobby for breakfast at ten.”



Daniel closed the door and began getting dressed. He walked down the hallway to Susan’s room. He was nervous the entire way. He softly knocked on the door. A small part of him was hoping she wouldn’t answer, even though he knew this was something he couldn’t put off any longer.

“Yes.”

“Mrs.—Susan, it’s Daniel.”

“Just a minute.”

Susan answered the door in a pink bathrobe and bare feet. Daniel tried to play it cool but he was embarrassed by her lack of clothing. It made him feel as though he was intruding on her privacy.

“I’m sorry. I can come back when you’re dressed.” Daniel looked at the floor. He felt that looking at her would be disrespectful. “We’re meeting in the lobby for breakfast at ten o’ clock. I’d love for you to join us,” he continued awkwardly, still gazing at the floor.

“Oh, child, it’s just a bathrobe. Come on in.” Susan grabbed him by the arm.
“If you are not uncomfortable, I’m not.”

Actually, I am, Daniel thought as he entered her room. Once he was inside, he began explaining the reason for his visit. “I wanted to come down and personally apologize for last night. I really wanted to give you and Alex time to hang out together. I didn’t want to infringe upon things. I appreciate you even agreeing to let me vacation with you.”

“Well, I’m thinking you’ll be part of the family soon.” Daniel was relieved. “Alex really cares for you. The reason I know is that in spite of everything that happened, she still wants to be with you. I know Alex and how important her career is to her. And for you to thwart her path to success and have her still want to be with you speaks volumes to me. She must have strong feelings for you.”

“I really did not want to hurt her. It just happened that way and I am glad she forgave me. She deserved that promotion.”

“You know, it’s the tough things that happen to a man and a woman that tend to unite them the most.”

“Susan, speaking of uniting a man and a woman... I love Alex more than anything and I know we haven’t been dating long by today’s standards but the first time I laid eyes on her, I knew she was the one for me. The one I’d been

waiting for all my life. The one I had been saving myself for. She's been a tough one to crack..."

"I'm sure she has. I know my daughter," Susan mused.

"But I never gave up on her," Daniel continued. He was too nervous to stop his train of thought. "I spent a lot of time praying and thinking last night and there's no doubt that I want her to be my wife. My only hesitation is..."

"Wow, you're right, by today's standards, it has been a relatively short time. But I know that love doesn't always pay attention to the clock. Sometimes it's quick, and sometimes it's slow in coming; arriving in its own due season."

"Susan, I love her and I have wanted her since the first time I saw her in her office my first day at Jacobson's. Before she even knew that I existed, I had seen her and knew that she was the one for me."

"Well, I admire your conviction. You would have to really care for her. She's not exactly the easiest person to pursue. She can be stubborn and single-minded at times."

"I want to ask her if she would consider giving me the privilege of being her husband. I apologize for springing this on you on your vacation but I did not know when I would see you again. I asked Alex several times to allow me to accompany her to Detroit, but she was so guarded about letting me meet you."

“That’s Alex. She can be so odd at times. I’ll say this...I really believe that you love her. And from everything she has told me about you, I think you are a good man, Daniel. She’s shy about admitting it, but I can tell she loves you as well. Who am I to stand in the way of love? If you are asking me for my blessing, you have it. Just be careful with her, Daniel, she’s all I’ve got.”

As Daniel exited his hopefully, future mother in law’s room, he breathed a sigh of relief, hoping that the hardest part was over. The conversation he just had with Susan seemed like a blur. He stood in the hallway to catch his breath and let it all sink in. *Is this really happening? Am I really about to do this? I don’t know what I’ll do if she says no.* He looked down the hallway and saw Alex approaching, just returning from a morning run.

“Hey,” she greeted him. Let me change real quick and I’ll meet you for breakfast. What did Mom say?”

“About what?”

“About you retiring early last night? Are you alright?”

“Oh, she was fine with it. She’s pretty cool. I think she and I will get along just great,” he said joyously.

The conversation was interrupted by Daniel’s cell phone. He quickly scrambled to pull it out of his pocket, assuming it was the office. He was relieved to see it was his grandmother since several days had passed since they had spoken.

“Hello, baby. Did you do it yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“How are you?” Daniel asked his grandmother.

“Don’t change the subject, Daniel. You are not going to chicken out, are you?” She chuckled.

“No, I’ve got it covered. Okay?” Daniel struggled to respond to his grandmother’s request for a status update. With Alex standing in his presence he did not want to give away his intent. He was trying to be evasive but his grandmother was being insistent. She was concerned for him because everything was happening so quickly. She had never seen Daniel this nervous about anything in his entire life. Alex could obviously tell that he was being evasive and she decided to give him some privacy. As she entered her hotel room, she whispered to Daniel, “Meet you downstairs.” Relieved, Daniel started down the hall and began to explain to his grandmother that he was waiting for the right time and would call her as soon as he knew Alex’s response.



As Alex entered her room, she again wondered what was up. She wondered who Daniel was speaking to and why all the code language. *There are times when I am so sure about him and then there are times when he seems covered in a shroud of mystery. I am*

so afraid to let my guard down. What if this ends up being a mistake? I really care about him, but men have this uncanny ability to yank the rug out from underneath you just when you least expect it. He won't even talk to me about what is going on at work. I know how men can be when they think a woman is questioning their ability, but he is just too secretive about things. Maybe that phone call was related.

Just then her mother knocked on the door and Alex let her in.

"You're not dressed yet? Daniel is probably wondering where we are. He seems like such a good man, Alex. Attractive, and a gentleman. Men like that are hard to come by these days." Alex had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"I know, Momma, but sometimes, I feel this hesitation. I'm not sure why."

Susan was silent for a moment. With a squint, she focused her eyes on Alex. "Well, you will figure everything out. Make sure it is not fear. You have typically been distrusting of men, Alex. Make sure you aren't painting Daniel with the same broad stroke you have painted every other man with. Let him stand on his own merits. I will meet you downstairs. Don't keep the man waiting."

Alex closed the door and sat on the bed. *Is this fear or intuition? Well, no sense trying to figure it out now, I'm late for breakfast.* Alex showered and changed, then met Daniel and her mom in the lobby. They were already seated when she joined them. An awkward silence filled the air.

Susan was silent, afraid that she might let the cat out of the bag or worse, that Alex would decline Daniel's proposal, which would place a damper on the remaining few days. Alex was silent, wondering what all the mystery surrounding Daniel was about. Daniel was silent because he had the jitters and was not sure what Alex's response to his marriage proposal would be. Luckily, their outgoing waiter, with a huge Jamaican grin and an even bigger Jamaican accent, tried to liven their mood,

"Are you guys on vacation or going to a funeral? You've hardly spoken a word since you been at 'da table. What's the matter, mon?"

They laughed.

"I guess we have been kind of quiet?" Alex responded.

"This is the land of sunshine and fun," the waiter continued with his thick accent. There was a melody to his words as he spoke. "If Jamaica can't cheer you up, no'ting can. Tell you what. The hotel is hosting a private beach party tonight. I'll ask the hotel manager if we have any tickets left. Maybe that will cheer you up." The waiter left momentarily and returned with three tickets for the hotel beach party.

"You're in luck. The manager had extra tickets. I'll see you there."

Chapter Thirty

Laura turned sideways and looked in the mirror. *“I’m starting to show big time. I need maternity clothes or at least bigger ones that fit. Who is calling me this time of day?*

Everyone knows I’m working.

“Hello.”

“Laura?”

She recognized the voice. “Blake? I’m surprised to hear from you. It’s not regarding the case, is it?”

“Girl, that case has been over. I got you off, remember?”

“I know but when I heard your voice, I thought maybe the judge found some evidence or something else came up. I’ve never been in trouble like that before. That really scared me.”

“No, it’s not about the case. I was just thinking about you and I felt compelled to call you and see how you are doing. I wanted to call before now but I was hesitant. You have been on my mind a lot lately and I wanted to make sure you were okay. I just wanted to know how you were doing, that’s all. Nothing else.”

“That was very sweet of you. I’m doing okay. Work is going well, finally. They made some changes but I get to keep my home office, so I am really pleased about that. How about you?”

“I’m doing great. I just made partner at my firm, which is not as exciting as being able to work from home, but hey, what can you do?” They laughed in spite of the lingering question of Webster. Laura hated the thought of having to explain that it was over. And the reason she got jilted was just too embarrassing to tell anyone, especially Blake. Eating crow had always left a bad taste in her mouth. Blake had been right about Webster and Laura regretted not listening to him. She knew eventually she would have to answer the question.

“Laura, remember after the case you asked how you could ever repay me for getting you out of trouble?”

Laura was silent, wondering what favor he was going to try to call in.

“I would like you to go to dinner with me tonight as repayment.”

“That’s all? You’re pretty easy.”

“That’s it. Just dinner. Laura, I’m sorry, I need to take this call. I am going to transfer you to my assistant and she will schedule you, if that’s okay.”

“Sure, that’s fine.”

“Hold on, please.”

As Laura was being transferred she thought, *Wow, I'm being scheduled. It must be nice. In the real world, we schedule our own plans for dinner.*

"Laura? Hi, this is Marilyn, Mr. Spencer's assistant; let me know some times that work for you and I can put you on his calendar for this evening. I also need your address; he is sending a car for you."

As Laura hung up the phone a sense of panic begin to come over her. *I hate eating crow! Blake was right about Webster. Not only was he right but I ended up paying a price for not listening to everyone. Here I am pregnant, out of wedlock. When Blake sees me, he is going to freak. I've gained several pounds and my nose is spreading across my face.*

She found that she just could not focus on work, so she knocked off early and headed to the mall to in search of the perfect slimming outfit. Something that could make pregnant look sexy. It was no easy feat. She tried on outfit after outfit, and while she found something that looked halfway decent, it was a maternity outfit nonetheless and as she drove home from the mall, she began to cry. *What am I going to do with a baby? What am I going to say to Blake? I should just cancel dinner. I don't want him to know what a huge mistake I've made.*

Later that evening, peering through the blinds, Laura saw the limo pull up at her condo. "Wow, Blake always did know how to make a woman feel special. Maybe I can just enjoy a night out on the town and forget about this pregnancy."

As Laura exited the house, Blake got out, ran around the car and opened the door for her. She was slow getting in.

“It’s great to see you, Laura. Is everything going okay with you?” Blake said, probing.

“Oh, yes, everything is fine. Where are we going for dinner?”

“It’s a surprise.”

The driver pulled up in front of Blake’s home. Blake got out of the car, and came around to open Laura’s door. He gave instructions to the driver and suggested Laura continue toward the house. Laura entered the gate and slowly walked up the cobblestone pathway to his front door.

There was a bitter chill in the air and she could hear her heels click against the cobblestone with each step. She was surprised to see how well Blake was doing. She felt even worse that here she was, almost forty, knocked up, and still making the same mistakes she made when she was younger. She was disappointed in herself.

As she stood there, waiting for Blake to open the door, she was jolted out of thought by the baby, kicking her for the first time. Hard. It took her breath away. Up until now, there had only been a butterfly sensation that felt more like gas than a baby. In that moment, the pregnancy became real. She resolved it was time to

grow up. It was time to find the strength and maturity to begin creating a life for herself and for her new child.

When Blake caught up to her at the door, Laura was more than a little shook up.

“I’m sorry it took me so long. Are you okay?” His voice was breathy from the short jog. He flipped through his key ring looking for the one that would unlock the front door.

“I’m okay. I just got lost in thought for a moment. Nice house.”

“C’mon on in,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. “It’s freezing out here.”

Blake’s house was incredible. As Laura walked through the huge mahogany doors, she felt as though she was stepping into a fairy tale. A huge chandelier and marble floors adorned the grand entry flanked by a turned, white staircase. Straight ahead, Laura could see the back of the house, which was almost entirely made of windows and just beyond those windows laid Lake Michigan.

It was breathtaking. Blake took her coat and escorted her to the dining room where dinner for two was served, overlooking the lake. It reminded Laura of a scene out of a movie. She felt nervous about being at his place. With all the luxury, she felt like a fish out of water. She was even more nervous about the impending question and subsequent discussion of where Webster was. It

distracted her most of the evening. She found it odd that Blake had not made mention of it. *Since I agreed to come to dinner with him, he's probably figured out that Webster and I are not together anymore. I still can't believe he hasn't mentioned it.*

"You live here alone."

"Yep. Just me."

"Wow, don't you think this is a lot of space?"

"I don't plan on being alone forever." Blake changed the subject.

"How's Alex?"

"She's fine. She's in Jamaica with her mom and her new boyfriend, Daniel."

"That sounds serious. When you vacation with family that typically means things are really progressing."

"Yes, but you know Alex."

"Yeah, I do."

Laura and Blake continued in conversation for several hours. She learned so much about the past. She discovered she had been entirely wrong about him and about their relationship, and why it ended. Laura felt increasingly guilty and she could tell by Blake's hints that he was interested in trying again.

"Blake, I have something to tell you."

"What? That you're pregnant." He popped a piece of steak in his mouth and chewed it.

Laura was shocked. She thought she had done a great job selecting an outfit that would camouflage everything. Not so.

“You can tell?”

“Yeah, I’ve always been a huge fan of your anatomy. A study if you will. I could tell things were a little off.” Laura found the compliment in his statement and was flattered.

“Off is not the word. I am getting depressed about the changes my body is making. It is nearly impossible to find stylish clothes to rock when you’re in this condition. And my nose is spreading across my face.”

“And Webster? Let me guess. Nowhere to be found?”

Laura felt her temper begin to rise. *Okay, he was right. He doesn’t have to rub it in.* She refrained from lashing out. After all, the night was going well and it was good spending time with him.

“You’re right. He wasn’t man enough to handle it, so he split. I’m better off.”

“Yeah, I think so too.” And not another word was mentioned about Webster for the rest of the evening. Laura was relieved that they had had *the* conversation and grateful that she had overestimated its difficulty. Blake didn’t seem to mind her being pregnant and upon taking her home, as she clumsily exited the limo, he asked if he could see her again.

Chapter Thirty One

“Mom, are you ready for the party?”

“I feel so out of place. I haven’t been to a party in years. And I don’t think I have ever been to a party without your father. I won’t know how to act.”

“Mom, it’s just a beach party. It will be casual. You’ll see, there’s nothing to worry about. Just don’t get drunk and embarrass me.”

“I will need something to calm my nerves, drunk I just might be. Is Daniel ready?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go knock on his door.”



When Daniel exited the room and saw Alex in her bathing suit, he tried to play it cool. “You look nice tonight. I really like that flower in your hair. Turquoise really looks good on you.” As they walked down the hall to the elevator, with Susan and Alex walking ahead, Daniel was able to get a glimpse of Alex’s bikini through her sheer cover-up. She filled everything out just perfectly. As he watched her walk, he grew more and more eager to make her his wife.

The trio walked out the back of the hotel lobby to join the party. They found a table, sat down and began to share, laugh, people watch, and of course, enjoy the delicious tropical libations. Susan's margarita appeared to be loosening her up.

"I'm going to get some more hors d'oeuvres, anybody want anything? Or should I say, Daniel, I know you want something else, Alex."

"Yeah, that's one of the things I like about her, she's not shy about eating."

"Oh, hush up, the two of you. You know I am self-conscious about my weight."

As Susan left the table, Daniel turned to reassure Alex that she was the perfect size.

"Alex, please stop being so self-conscious about your weight. I have told you time and time again that you look beautiful. You exercise and take care of yourself. As the song says, *I love you just the way you are*. The waif thing is played. A man wants something he can hold onto. You've got everything just the way I like it." Alex smiled as she blushed. "And you look exceptionally beautiful tonight."

"I wonder if that could be the bathing suit. What do you think?" Alex asked Daniel, evoking a chuckle. They sat and shared idle conversation for some time when Alex noticed her mother had been gone for a while. She stood up from

the table and looked around to see if she could spot her. She finally located her, sitting at a table across the courtyard with some strange man.

“Ooh, she must have had one drink too many. I hope that man’s wife doesn’t come back to the table. I’m going to go get her.” Daniel grabbed Alex by the arm.

“Leave her alone. She looks as though she is enjoying his company. Look at her. Does she look like she needs rescuing? And don’t you think that if that man had a wife, he would have told her by now?”



When Susan had left Alex and Daniel to grab more food, she ran into a gentleman who asked her where she was from. It just so happened that he was from a town in Canada, not too far from Detroit. He was a widow as well and had come to Jamaica for some rest and relaxation, and to get a break from his stressful import business. He invited Susan to join him as he had come to the party alone.



As Daniel eyed Susan and the gentleman from his table, he was glad that she was occupied. He figured that now was the perfect time to talk to Alex and get this thing off his chest.

“Alex, let’s take a walk.” Daniel grabbed Alex by the hand and they walked several yards down the beach and leaned against the rocks. The evening was

absolutely perfect. The sunset, the breeze, the temperature. Daniel couldn't have asked God for a more perfect setting.

"Alex, you and I have been dating for a while now and you know how I feel about you. Ever since I saw you in your office my first day on the job, I knew you were the one for me."

"Daniel, that sounds sweet and all, but your memory fails you. You and I first saw each other in the conference room. It was the morning I was making my pitch to the board in effort to seal my promotion. Right when I was getting ready to begin, you walked in. That's a day I'll never forget..."

"I had seen you before that," Daniel interrupted. "I saw you that morning sitting in your office before you even went to the conference room. I stood there and watched you in silence, as you read your notes. You never noticed me. I remember thinking to myself how magnificent you were. I was immediately overwhelmed with feelings for you. It was very strange for me, but in that moment, I knew you and I would be together. I have never questioned it from that day. Well, with the exception of the times you made me really, really mad. But even then, my head may have questioned it, but my heart never did."

"I really care about you too, Daniel."

"Will you be my wife?"

"Sure, one day."

“I’m not talking about one day. I’m talking about now.” Daniel pulled out the ring he had been carrying around in his pocket and kneeled down in the sand on one knee, grabbing Alex by the hand.

“You mean, here, right now, on the beach?” Alex started frantically looking around as if she expected others to join them.

“No, silly. This ring means we are getting engaged and if you say yes, we will start planning the wedding when we get back.”

“I don’t know, Daniel, this is all moving so fast.” The pace of her words quickened. “I mean, what are we doing? We’ve never even talked about this. I need to sort through things.”

As Alex spoke, her face looked as if she had seen a ghost. She backed away from Daniel in shock and confusion. Daniel remained silent, disappointed at her response. He could see Alex’s eyes welling up with tears. She quickly turned and ran toward the hotel. He knew she didn’t want him to see her cry so he didn’t try to stop her.

As she ran away, a breeze caught her silk turquoise sarong, pulling it from around her waist and lifting it in the air. Daniel reached up, grabbed it, and upon pulling it down, he pressed it to his chest. He felt as though his heart had been completely torn from his body. He could smell Alex’s scent on the sarong and all he could think about was holding her. As he watched her walk away, a voice

inside told him to let her go. And in an instant, a beautiful, perfectly planned moment had come to an end.



Susan, who was sitting with the Canadian gentleman and having way more fun than she anticipated, looked up from her margarita just in the nick of time, and saw Alex hurrying down the beach, back to the hotel. She started looking around for Daniel and when she spotted him, he was walking down the beach in the opposite direction. *Uh oh*, Susan thought. *This can't be good*. She tried to appear interested in her newly found friend's conversation, but she knew she needed to find a way to excuse herself so that she could tend to Alex.

"Excuse me, Gene," Susan said, peering over her glasses. "I don't mean to be rude, but that half naked girl that just ran though here in her bathing suit was my daughter and I see her fiancé--well, I don't know if he is or not--walking in the opposite direction down the beach. I am enjoying your company immensely but I probably should go check on her. Do you mind?"

"No, I have kids of my own. I understand. Can I see you again before you leave the day after tomorrow?"

"I'll call your room and leave word for you."

As Susan quickly made her way over to Alex at the elevator, she thought about how forward she was being. *Must be the margaritas.* She caught up to Alex, who was feverishly pressing the elevator call button.

“Where’s your wrap? Did you and Daniel have a fight?”

“The wind blew it off. I feel like an idiot standing here half naked.”

“Would you like to talk about what happened?”

“Not really,” Alex said in her usual guarded manner.

“Come on up to my room, it might do you some good to talk things through.” Alex and Susan went into Susan’s hotel room and shut the door. As Alex told the story, Susan dare not let on that she had prior knowledge of Daniel’s impending proposal. She knew Alex would be furious for keeping it from her. All of a sudden, they heard someone talking in the hallway.



“Shh!” Alex said, waving her hands at her mother, imploring her to stop talking. “I think it’s Daniel.”

Daniel was outside of Alex’s hotel room, not realizing she was actually in Susan’s room next door. He pleaded with her to open up and talk to him. As he spoke to the door, he told her that it was never his intention to make her feel pressured and maybe she was right, they should wait a little while longer. Alex

stood there listening to him as he poured his heart out to a vacant hotel room door. She couldn't take it any longer and feeling sorry for him, she opened her mom's room door. Susan was standing right behind her. Daniel was taken aback, realizing that he had just made his plea to any empty room.

"I'm sorry. I assumed you were in your room," he said, when Alex came out, still wearing her bathing suit. Susan smiled with approval as she closed the door. He grabbed Alex in the most sensitive and loving embrace and kissed her passionately. That one kiss said so much to her. She looked at him, in a black running suit, with the hair on his chest just peeking ever so slightly beyond his jacket zipper and thought, *I must be crazy. He is really a catch. He is the man of most women's dreams. Michelle would commit murder to just meet a man like this and he has just asked me to be his wife!*

"Alex?"

She raised her eyebrows indicating she was receptive to his conversation. "Let's just put this whole thing on the shelf. When we get back, we'll take it off the shelf and address it then, if you're ready. Tonight, let's just walk the beach and enjoy each other and the beauty of this place."

"I need to change first."

"Yeah, I think so. Although I'm not complaining." Alex went in her room and shut the door and Daniel waited in the hallway.



Susan had been listening inside the door and was glad that they were seemingly okay. When the coast was clear, she decided to go back to the party and see if she could find Gene and pick up where she left off.

Chapter Thirty Two

“Since we leave tomorrow, I have something great planned for us to do today,” Daniel told Alex as they exited the hotel lobby.

“What?”

“Promise me you will keep an open mind. In fact, I’m not going to tell you until we get there.”

“Skydiving? You know I’m not jumping out of any planes or anything like that.”

“No, it’s not skydiving. You’ll see.”

Alex knew he was right and that she needed to keep an open mind. She just didn’t like not being in control of things. In a lot of ways, she was that same little girl from Detroit that always kept her room excruciatingly neat. Always put her toys back in the same place she retrieved them from. Had color coordinated notebooks, one for every subject. And had placed her slippers on the side of the bed, facing east every night, and lay her robe at her feet.

She always took great effort to make sure her life was predictable. She calculated every move, anticipating the unexpected, so it no longer would be. She thought of how it would be just like Daniel to try to get her to jump out of a plane

or do something that made her totally uncomfortable. He was always lecturing her about her need to loosen up and he was very comfortable with the unknown. He loved living in the thrill of the moment.

“Daniel, you may as well tell me where we are going so I don’t get an attitude. By the way, you are so hush hush about our destination, I know it is something crazy.”

Daniel smiled at Alex as he hailed a taxi.

“What’s the smile for?” Alex snapped.

“Nothing. Just pondering my brilliance.”

Alex stared out the taxi window as they neared the beach and as she admired the beauty of the ocean. She could see the vivid colors of the parasails against the blue backdrop of the sky. The scene was picture perfect.

“Beautiful,” she said. And then it dawned on her. “Crap! Parasailing?”

“I thought you just said it was beautiful,” Daniel teased.

“Yeah, when somebody else is doing it. Daniel, please. You know I am not about to do that.” Alex looked up at the sky.

“Alex, this is a perfect opportunity for you to push past your fears. Isn’t that what they tell you to do, feel the fear and do it anyway? You’ve always met challenges head on. Why should this one be any different?”

No, he is not trying to play a mind game with me. Pushing through a challenge is one thing. Risking my life is something totally different. “Okay Daniel, I will make a deal with you. If I agree to do this, you will agree to opening up more and talking to me about the portfolio issues at work.”

“Alex, that’s not fair. You know the policy is such that I can only discuss things with certain members of the senior management team.”

“Which I should be a part of.”

“Yes, I’m not disputing that.” Daniel remained cautious. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Don’t you trust me? I mean, you have asked me to marry you. You should feel like you’re able to trust that anything you share with me in confidentiality will be kept that way. If you can’t trust your wife, who can you trust?”



Daniel could feel sweat popping up on his brow. He looked in the rearview mirror. The cab driver stared back at him. Daniel could tell by the look on his face, he too, was becoming unnerved by Alex’s escalating tone. He tried to calm her down.

“I thought we agreed to place that on the shelf. That’s a little manipulative, don’t you think?” Daniel said with disappointment as he paid the cab driver and exited the cab.

“I’m sorry. That was harsh. But I meant what I said. If you want me to trust you, you have to trust me and know that I would never betray your trust in me. You are so evasive about work; it makes me wonder what else you could keep from me.”

“Let’s just parasail, Alex.” Daniel was growing annoyed.



Alex stood there and watched for a few moments. She wondered how sick a person really had to be to want to be flying through the air like a bird. Internally, she agreed that Daniel was right, it was time to face her fears, but she needed a moment to collect herself. After several minutes of watching, wondering, and praying had gone by, she rationalized that this one parasailing event would not be the end of her life and she decided to go for it.

She walked the plank and saddled up. After a novice take-off, she was up in the air and found herself feeling relaxed and as light as a feather. The sights were incredible. She was hooked. And although the ride didn’t last long, once on the ground, she felt exhilarated. Daniel could obviously tell by the look on her face

that she was pleased with his choice of activities. He made her feel that no apology was necessary for the way that she responded earlier. After they took a second parasail, they decided to break for lunch.



At the hotel, Susan and Gene were cozying up nicely. After all, she left tomorrow and although he wasn't that far away in Canada, they did not know if they would see each other again, or maybe they were ensuring that they would. They spent the entire afternoon together, saw some sights and stopped by a neighborhood cafe to taste some of the many native delicacies, including the jerk chicken, which the locals boasted was some of the hottest on the island. They were right. When Susan bit into the chicken, her blood pressure immediately began to rise. Beads of sweat appeared on her face.

"Are you all right?" Gene asked, but Susan couldn't answer.

Her mouth was on fire. The chicken was so hot, she was afraid it could cause irreparable damage to her mouth. She looked wistfully at her empty water glass. She eyed Gene's next. He had a few pitiful half-melted cubes remaining. She grabbed his glass and tossed them back. It didn't work. She looked around for something to drink quickly and when nothing was spotted, she made the mistake of chasing the jerk chicken down with some of the island's highly

acclaimed Jamaican rum, which she grabbed without permission off the tray of a passing barmaid. It was the nearest thing she could find. Her mouth and throat burned in agony and her face was so hot, she thought she might have to have Gene call for the paramedics.

As she choked, which she thought would be to death, the restaurant patrons looked on and smiled. Gene, afraid for Susan, scurried to the bar and retrieved a tall glass of water. As Susan downed it without a breath, one of the Rasta men raised his glass to her. "Bread, mamma, bread," he laughed in thick accent as he threw a couple of pieces in a basket and brought it over to the table. "Welcome to Jamaica." It was over an hour before she finally cooled down.

After several hours had gone by and more cocktails in the hotel lobby, Susan thought it wise to catch up with Alex and if nothing else, discuss departure plans for the next day. She felt guilty about spending so much time away from Alex and Daniel while enjoying her newfound friend's company. She didn't know exactly what to say to Alex. Her husband had passed away a little over two years ago, but for some reason, although she was enjoying herself, a small part of her felt as if she was doing something wrong.

"Would you excuse me for a minute, Gene? I need to call my daughter."

"Sure, take your time."

Susan sneaked into a hallway by the ladies' room to call Alex, whom she hadn't seen or spoken to all day. She wasn't sure how Alex was going to respond. It has only been a short time since her father had passed away.

"Alex. Hey, are you and Daniel enjoying yourselves? I wanted to give you two sometime alone together."

"We had a blast, but not as much fun as you. I knocked this morning and you weren't there. You stayed out all night. He must be pretty good company."

"What do you take me for? We got up early and went to breakfast. I slept in my own room, thank you."

"Wow, you're defensive. I'm just really glad to see you having a good time. I'm glad you met someone. You'll have to tell me all about him on the flight back tomorrow. Where does he live?"

"In Canada, about an hour and a half away. Not too far."

"Since when are you going to drive an hour and a half away?"

"I'm not. He is." They laughed and Alex suggested that she enjoy the rest of the evening and they would talk later that night to go over the departure details.



The next morning they departed Jamaica and on the return flight Susan shared all the details about her newfound friend. Alex was delighted for her

mother and tried to listen attentively although she could feel butterflies in her stomach. Once she returned to Chicago, she knew she would have to face Daniel and his dangling proposal. The honeymoon was over; she would soon have to face the music.

Chapter Thirty Three

“How was your trip?”

“Trip was fine.” Alex lay back on the burgundy leather chaise, staring at the ceiling of her therapist’s office. In that moment, she noticed for the first time, the oak-coffered ceiling was painted a lighter shade of green than the walls.

“You seem a bit distracted today. Like you don’t want to be here. Perhaps you should have rescheduled,” Alex’s therapist said, obviously trying to get to root cause of Alex’s lack of willingness to share what she was feeling. Alex had been silent, lying on the chaise for several minutes. “You know, this process doesn’t work if I do all the talking.” Alex was still silent.

The confusion in her mind was overwhelming. She had that familiar feeling again. The feeling that she couldn’t stand. It tormented her. The one she had years ago when she had given all of her heart and soul to Wendell. The feeling of fear. The anxiety. The what if? She was somewhat irritated with her therapist.

She had been having periodic visits for some time, but was dissatisfied with her progress. She wondered if she had received a good enough return on her investment. Was her inability to get a handle on her control issues a refusal to

grow on her part, or was it the ineptitude of her therapist? Perhaps she hadn't been given the right tools to handle this situation.

"I just don't understand what is wrong with me."

"Continue."

"Why am I so afraid of him? What makes it so hard for me to give in and trust?"

"Well," her therapist said. "Our past wounds have a way of shaping our future behavior. The question is, what will you do now? Will you allow your need for control and security continue to cost you the things you say you want?"

"But what if..."

"There will always be a what if, Alex. In every situation, every scenario, there will be a what if..."

"He proposed."

"He proposed? Wow. How do you feel about that?"

"I'm not sure. I'm flattered, I guess. I really do love him. He's a good person. And I know he cares deeply for me."

"You haven't given me a reason for your reluctance. Are you just not ready to be married?"

"No, I'm ready. I'll be forty soon."

"What's the worst thing that could happen if you let yourself go?"

The chime sounded on the antique grandfather clock, letting Alex know that was the end of her session. She was a little irritated when she heard the sound. Her thoughts were starting to gel and she felt the session was just starting to be helpful. She had wasted the majority of her time being silent, in protest. Of what, she wasn't sure.

She was upset about the situation she found herself in and today she needed someone to blame. Why not the therapist? Seemed as good a person as anyone. But she realized that in acting immaturely, she had only hurt herself. She still had to pay for a full session of which she only talked for a few minutes. As she walked out of the building, she continued to ponder the question the therapist had proposed. *What is the worst thing that could happen if I let myself go? The way my luck's been running? Everything.*

Chapter Thirty Four

Alex sat at her desk, shuffling through the stack of pink message slips.

There were quite a few.

“How was your trip, Alex?” Wanda said as she entered Alex’s office and sat in her chair.

“Oh, we had a blast, Wanda. How did everything go here at the office?”

“It was crazy. My accounts were calling left and right complaining about their losses. Did Daniel have anything to say about it on the trip?”

“No, he says he has everything under control. These are tough times for the market. We just have to keep apologizing and explaining. You and I have looked at things. I don’t see where there’s anything to be concerned about. These are trying times for all of us. We’ll just have to present a united front to the customers and ride out this wave.”

“Or do you mean drown? These people are going to rip me a new one if we don’t come up with an explanation soon.” The receptionist buzzed back to Alex’s office.

“Ms. Monroe, Gordon is on line two.”

“Speaking of which, girl, I need to take this. I have been avoiding him for some time. I have got to tell him something. I will catch up with you later. Keep me updated.”

As Wanda left, Alex took a deep breath, smiled and picked up the receiver.

“Gor-don,” she said, sounding as warm and as friendly as she possibly could.

“It’s over, Alex.”

“What’s over, Gordon?”

“I have run out of patience. I have asked you repeatedly to tell me why my funds are performing so dismally and why I have lost so much money and you can’t explain it. I think you’re in on it.”

“There’s nothing to be in on, Gordon. We have had this conversation repeatedly.”

“Yeah, well, I’m through talking. From now on, you can talk to my attorney.”

Gordon slammed the phone down in Alex’s ear. She jumped from her chair and immediately stormed toward Daniel’s office. She was reluctant to accuse him of anything but she had been in this business long enough to know when things weren’t right. *In this high yielding money game, anybody could be corrupted. Even a man seemingly as perfect as Daniel.* Her head was spinning. Walking down the hall, she became overwhelmed with ambiguity and confusion. *Surely, not the man that has just*

asked me to marry him... no... there has to be another explanation. She barged into Daniel's office without knocking.

"Daniel, Gordon just called."

"Unh hunh," Daniel said, refusing to look up from his computer.

"He is calling his attorney."

"To do what? Sue because a fund that he chose is performing below average at this time? Welcome to funds management."

"Daniel, this is bigger than that. Our clients are losing tons of money here. And it is happening so rapidly. If they go to the SEC, we could be investigated." Alex looked in Daniel's eyes to gauge his response and to look for hints of dishonesty. As always, he was calm and collected.

"Have a seat." Daniel got up, closed his office door and sat on his desk in front of Alex, grabbing her hand. "What could I say to you that would give you more of a comfort level?"

"The truth."

"You and I have talked about this until we are blue in the face."

"No, Daniel, we haven't talked about it at all."

"Well then, you've come to me about it until we are blue in the face. Could it be that I'm not talking about it because I don't have anything to say? The

situation is what it is, Alex. What about my marriage proposal? Can we talk about that? That's a more palatable subject."

In your opinion, Alex thought to herself.

"Mrs. Alexis McClellan," Daniel continued. "It has a nice ring, doesn't it?"

It was obvious that Daniel was attempting to change the subject. Alex felt so stuck. On one hand, she knew that Daniel could not be capable of doing anything dishonest but she was still hearing a voice that was telling her something was awry. *Could Daniel be involved in this? Maybe he wasn't as experienced as they thought he was. Maybe he just doesn't know what he is doing and is going to run the place into the ground.*

"Alex, you haven't answered me yet and I am waiting."

"You told me to take my time."

"Yes, but I really didn't mean it. I don't want you to feel pressured, Alex, but you saying yes would make me the happiest man alive. It's as though everything I have ever done in my entire life has led me to this moment. At the same time, I want what is best for you; I would love to be put out of my misery. Just knowing that we can start making plans would be enough to pacify me. Will you be my wife?" Daniel pulled out the ring he had apparently been carrying since he left for Jamaica.

Alex felt her heart start to pound. *Is this man about to make a fool of me? I love him, he's perfect, but for some reason, I'm not sure. Why? What if I let my guard down and he hurts me?*

"Please tell me what is on your mind, Alex. What is your hesitation?"

"Daniel, I love you. I think you know that. It's just that..."

"Alex, you cannot control every single thing at every single moment in your life. You continually attempt to guard yourself against the what if. *What if he hurts me? What if he's not telling the truth? What if...* Give it up, Alex. Life just doesn't work that way. Having control is an illusion. Yes, you plan, yes, you calculate the risks but after you've done that, you hold your nose and jump in. And I can guarantee that if you would just allow yourself the luxury of getting in the flow of life, you'll see that contrary to your beliefs, your life won't fall apart. Life is sweet, Alex, but only if you are willing to taste it."

Alex thought about what Daniel was saying. *Maybe he's right. I need to let go and trust a little more.* She thought about the limited conversation she had had with her therapist the preceding day. She despised being thought of as a control freak even though she knew it was true. *I can be spontaneous. I can taste life.* Alex responded quickly in effort to prove Daniel and everyone else wrong about her; including herself.

“Okay, Daniel, I accept your proposal.” She held out her hand and Daniel placed the ring on her finger.

“You sound like we are putting together a business deal. What am I going to do with you?”

“I don’t want a large fussy wedding. Just close family and friends. I’ll ask around and start interviewing wedding planners.” Alex walked toward the door. She looked at the ring on her finger and a smile crept across her lips.

She turned and looked at Daniel. “It’s beautiful by the way,” she said in soft voice, admiring her ring as she exited. When she got back to her office, she sat in her chair for a moment to collect her thoughts. She realized that Daniel had once again evaded her questions about the portfolio issues, and although she was still a little confused about what had just transpired, she found herself excited. *I might as well start telling everyone.* She picked up the phone and hit the speed dial.

“Laura, you are not going to believe this. I am getting married.”

“Wow, that must have been some trip. Why didn’t you call me?”

“It’s a long story, but Daniel has proposed and I accepted, so it’s official. Will you help me with the wedding plans, as you are able, up until the baby comes? How are you feeling anyway? You’re getting pretty close.”

“Oh, girl, enough about me and this baby drama.” Laura’s voice was groggy. “You’ll have to tell me all about it. Why don’t you come by this evening?”

“I’ll bring food. What are you craving today?”

“Sardine sandwich. With Mayonnaise.”

“Oh God,” Alex groaned. She felt nauseous. “I’ll eat before I come.”

Alex left work early and after stopping for a quick bite, she drove to Laura’s with sardines and mayo in hand. It had been a while since Alex had seen her and she had grown. She was definitely good and pregnant.

“Tell me about the proposal. Wow, proposing in Jamaica. Now that’s romantic.”

“Yeah,” Alex said, biting her lip. “I wasn’t exactly a picture from a movie scene.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, when he initially proposed, it was a beautiful night on the beach. I mean, it was picture perfect. But I was so taken off guard, I ended up running away, half naked in my bikini, through a beach party and the hotel lobby. I was mortified. I didn’t accept his proposal until today in the office.”

“Ooh! Well, he gets points for being romantic. You on the other hand, I’m not so sure. Let me see it.”

Alex lifted her hand.

“Oh my God! Girl, that thing is beautiful and huge. He must make a lot of money to afford a ring like that.”

“Yeah, he does alright. I just hope he doesn’t have a little game on the side, if you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t. If you don’t trust him, Alex, you don’t want to marry him.”

“I trust him. I do. Really.”

Laura was not convinced. “I have some news for you as well.”

Alex braced herself. She was preparing for the news that Webster had come back into the picture. *Let me put on this fake smile and act as if I am happy for her.*

“I have been seeing Blake.”

“Get out. Are you serious?” Alex was overjoyed. Blake was a rare find. Especially in a place like Chicago. If there was one good man in the city of Chicago, in Alex’s opinion, it was Blake. And if there were only two, she prayed the second one was Daniel.

“Yeah, he called and I went to his place for dinner. He lives in a huge house on the lake. I could see myself living there. We’ve been rekindling ever since.”

“What did he say about you being pregnant?” Alex’s nose wrinkled as she watched Laura eating the mayonnaise-covered sardines out of the can. The stench filled the room.

“You know, the cool thing was, he didn’t say anything. He didn’t condemn me or make me feel worse than I already do. He just embraced me and he appears to be embracing the baby as well.”

“How about you. Are you adjusting?”

“Yeah, now that the shock is wearing off. No sense in being upset about it. Like it or not, this baby will be here shortly. I hate the circumstances that he’s arriving under. I wish I were married to the man of my dreams with the whole picket fence and everything. I grew up without my father. I know the damage it can do. Who knows, maybe Blake will offer him the stability that a child needs growing up.”

“Wow, things are really changing for both of us. I mean, you with a baby, and me getting married. It’s about time we grew up.”

Alex and Laura laughed together through an awkward moment. Deep down Alex was aware of the turning point in both their lives and knew that they were both heading in different directions.

“I have to go, girl. I need to call a few wedding planners. . I also need to tell my mother.

“Good luck.”

Oh, she’ll be fine. I think she accepted Daniel’s proposal before I did.”

Chapter Thirty Five

When Alex got home, she started calling wedding planners. The first two she called, she left messages. The last one she called had lots of wonderful ideas for a small but tasteful wedding. As Alex spoke to her she could feel the excitement starting to build. She told Alex she had just received a call from someone who had called her wedding off, and Alex could take her slot for the following evening or wait for several weeks as she was booked solid. Alex took the appointment. She retired to her bed early with cheese and crackers and began flipping through bridal magazines. Daniel called her to say goodnight.

“Baby.”

“I’m glad you called, Daniel. I have an appointment set up tomorrow with a wedding planner right after work. We can ride together.”

“Do we have to do it tomorrow?”

“Yes. This is the only break she has in her schedule for weeks. It was due to a cancellation and she comes highly recommended. We have to go tomorrow.

What do you have going on anyway?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“If you were sure, what would it be?”

Daniel seemed to grow increasingly uncomfortable with the questioning again. Alex could pick up on the evasiveness and that familiar feeling she had been having lately was returning. It was reminiscent of the way she felt in Jamaica.

“Daniel, I’m asking you right now, once and for all to come clean. What are you up to? No games, Daniel. I want the truth.”

“Good night, Alex. I will go with you to the wedding planner tomorrow. This conversation is over. Sleep tight, okay?”



As Daniel hung up the phone, he knew he would not be able to make the meeting with the wedding planner. He had just set up the final phase of the sting. The success of the operation hinged on his presence there. He was nervous about not accompanying Alex to the wedding planner. She was already suspicious, Daniel reflected. *Most women do all this by themselves or with their girlfriends. Why does she want me to be involved?* He was already anxious about the following day and Alex was complicating things. He had gone over everything repeatedly. He rehearsed what he would say and what he would do in preparation for his clandestine meeting the following evening. He tossed and turned all night, weighed down with the uncertainty of the next day’s events.

The next morning as Daniel entered the office late, he popped his head into Alex's office.

"You look real bad," Alex commented. "What happened?"

"I didn't sleep well."

"After we go to the wedding planner you can go home and take a nap."

She is really not going to let me out of this.

"Well, I was thinking maybe I could just go home right after work and take a nap."

"No. I thought about what you said yesterday about me being such a control freak. Well, I'm practicing giving up control."

"You had to start today? I'm really tired."

"It won't take long. We are just going to see if there is good chemistry between us and to view samples of her work. What did you have to do after work, anyway?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it."

Daniel's cell phone rang and he scrambled for it. He turned to exit Alex's presence and began walking toward his office. It was obvious he wanted privacy.



Alex jumped up and ran over to her door, trying to hear as much of the conversation as she could. She could pick up the words *tonight* and *meeting* and *as scheduled*. In that moment she knew something was up. Every suspicion she had was being confirmed. *He's keeping something from me and before I say I do, I have got to know what it is.*

Alex went about her workday performing the usual apologies to all the irate customers. She had gone from being an Investment Manager, being at the top of her game, and well respected by her clients, to being a Complaint Manager.

The past several weeks, it was as though she worked in a call center. She spent her days fielding one angry call after the next, offering little explanation along with her apologies. She had begun to look forward to the end of her workday. She buzzed Daniel.

"Our meeting is at five. We can take my car."

"Alex, I am not going to be able to make it," Daniel responded nervously. "Something has come up and I can't get out of it."

"What, Daniel? Is it work?"

"Actually it is. I need to meet with someone."

"Daniel. Are you seeing someone else?"

“Is that what you are thinking? Of course not. You are the one I have waited for all my life. Why would I ask you to marry me if I was seeing someone else? I could have just had you both.” He laughed.

“Daniel. There is nothing funny about this. You have been very secretive about everything...”



“Wouldn’t it make sense for me to have my cake and eat it too? Why buy the cow when the milk’s free?”

Alex was silent. She was trying to fathom what could be going on.

“Daniel, are you going with me to the planner or aren’t you?”

“I told you. I can’t make it tonight. You can reschedule and I’ll be more than happy to attend, Alex. I’m sorry. You should have checked with me first,” he said sternly.

“Okay. Fine. I hope your meeting goes well,” she said angrily.

“Yeah, me too.”

As Alex hung up the phone she thought that some investigative work was in order. *He’s foul and I know it. I need proof to keep me from making the biggest mistake of my life.* Alex called Wanda since Wanda’s cubicle was near the main entrance.

“Wanda, I need you to do me a huge favor. I am planning a surprise for Daniel this evening.”

“Oh, is it his birthday?”

“No, he’s just been so sweet to me lately. I just want to let him know I appreciate him for the man he is. Can you secretly call me when you see him leave for the evening?”

“Sure, Alex. No problem. That’s really sweet.” About twenty-five minutes later, Wanda called.

“The coast is clear. He just left the building and I know he’s gone for the night because he had on that fabulous camel hair coat. You two have a wonderful evening.”

“Oh, we will,” Alex said sheepishly. “Thanks for helping me with this.”

“You bet.”

Alex grabbed her coat and ran down the back stairs. She cracked the door just enough to peek out and spotted Daniel in the garage with his trunk popped. *That’s odd. Why would he put his briefcase in the backseat and grab another one out of his trunk? I’ve never seen that briefcase before. What in the world is going on?*

Alex discreetly got into her car and began to follow Daniel as he left the parking garage. She stayed several cars behind for a while until they arrived at a very upscale area in Chicago. *Wow. A lot of CEOs and high-powered people live here. He’s*

never mentioned that he knew anyone that was rolling like this. Alex turned off the lights to her car and stopped several houses back. Daniel walked up to the door and was greeted by a gentleman and led into the house. Two additional cars pulled up a few moments later. “That’s Ross Connor,” she whispered to herself. *Why is he meeting with Ross and why didn’t he want to tell me that? I know he doesn’t think I’m still upset over not getting the promotion?*

Evening was now upon them and Daniel had entered the house. Alex continued to look on in amazement. After a few moments, she decided to drive down a few houses with the lights out so that she could have a better view into the house through the huge picture window without being noticed. As she looked in the window, she could see several gentlemen standing around intently discussing something. Daniel placed the briefcase on the table and opened it.

Alex’s heart sank. Her worst nightmare was coming true. She couldn’t tell exactly what was in the briefcase but judging by the demeanor of everyone in the room, she could tell there was something shady going on and she assumed it was a bribe. *I knew something wasn’t right. They must be embezzling money from our clients through some sort of cover-up. Wanda and I reviewed the reports and everything looked okay. They must be doctoring the books. What a nightmare.*

All of a sudden, Alex looked up and three additional cars sped down the street toward her. She thought one might actually run into her car as it parked on

the lawn right in front of her. The other two cars parked closely behind. *What?* Her heart was pounding so hard, she could hear it.

As the gentlemen ran toward the door, knocked and were promptly let in, Alex thought it might be a good time for her to leave, but no matter how she tried, she just couldn't tear herself away. She had to know what was going on. It was now dark and she could see clearly into the house. As she looked through the window, she could tell heated words were being exchanged.

Suddenly one of the gentlemen pulled out a badge, bent Daniel over the sofa and cuffed him. Ross and the other two gentlemen were taken into custody as well. Alex was frozen. She was muddled in disbelief. She sat there, tears rolling down her face. Just then, the front door of the house opened and Daniel and Mr. Conner were escorted out. As they were exiting the house, to her astonishment, they walked right towards her.

In that moment, she realized she had stayed a second too long and was afraid she would be spotted. She slid down behind the steering wheel and peered over the dashboard. As Daniel was being placed in the unmarked car, he looked over and saw her Mercedes convertible. Daniel stared at the car, frowning and shaking his

head in disbelief. Ross saw Alex too and looked at Daniel. He shrugged his shoulders. The detective figured it out. There was another unexpected person on the scene. He placed Daniel in the backseat of the car, walked over to Alex's car,

pressed his badge against the window and demanded she get out of her car.



“Ah,” the detective said. You work there, too. I recognize you from the surveillance pictures.”

Alex tried to explain to no avail. She could feel the warmth of her tears as they rolled down her cold cheeks. She was read her rights, cuffed and placed in a separate car where she sat, now externally feeling the heat of her rage. She had chest pains just thinking that she was actually on her way to jail.

It was a cold dark wintry night, and as Alex stared out the windshield of the car, trying to wrap her brain around what had just happened. She could see Daniel looking back at her out of the rearview window of the car driving in front of them. *How did I get here?* She pondered. She knew at that moment, her life would never be the same.

Chapter Thirty Six

Accompanied by escorts in blue, Alex took the ride downtown to the police station, which seemed to take forever. She was calm, surprisingly, and glad they had decided handcuffs were not necessary in her case, as she was being quite cooperative.

With each mile they drove, she traced back over the past several months remembering, what now were clues that something about Daniel seemed kind of mysterious. Being hired without her knowledge and never talking about his past positions. No friends. The only family he talked about was his grandmother, who Alex had seen a couple times. She was just as tight lipped as he was. It was all starting to add up. She was so disappointed in herself for ignoring the voices that had been telling her along the way to be careful.

Her heart was filled with sorrow as she walked through the doors of the police station. She saw the back of Ross's head as he was being led away in handcuffs. Through the flurry of activity, she spotted Daniel's camel hair coat across the room. His back was towards her.

Words could not express the emotions she was feeling. As Alex was being led over to the fingerprinting station, Daniel had been handcuffed and was being

escorted from processing to his holding cell by a police officer. Alex couldn't help but glance in his direction. As he entered the corridor, he turned around and caught her staring at him. Walking backwards down the hall, he mouthed the words *I'm sorry*. Alex turned and looked away.

After Alex was fingerprinted, she was escorted to her holding cell. Upon entering the hallway, the stench of alcohol, cigarettes, urine, and regret filled the air. It made her nauseous. The officer chuckled as he placed her in the cell and locked the door. It was obvious that she was totally out of her element and that she would find her cellmates interesting company. Alex looked through the bars and watched the officer as he disappeared down the hall. *I'm dreaming*, she thought. But things were becoming all too real. She could feel several sets of eyes on her back. Slowly and cautiously, she turned around and was greeted by seven of the scariest women she had ever seen. Now she was convinced she was dreaming and was sure she would be awakened by her alarm clock at any second. She was hesitant to speak.

"So what's a girl like you doing in a dump like this?" someone commented. Alex wasn't amused by the cliché. She looked up and an unusually tall, thin, jet-black, transvestite in a copper wig motioning for her to come over and sit next to him on a cot. Alex moved toward him, panicked on the inside, calm on the outside. She reached up and quickly raked her hair back and began to braid it in

effort to dilute some to her sex appeal. The women looked rough and Alex assumed more than a couple of them preferred same sex relations. As Alex walked over to the cot to sit down, she said, "I'm innocent."

"Of course you are, girl, we all are." They began to laugh hysterically and high five each other.

"No, I mean really, I'm innocent."

"Okay Well what did you a-lleg-ed-ly do, then? Tell Peaches all about it." In the nervous attempt to pull her hair back, Alex had missed a huge lock that dangled from her forehead. Peaches reached over and brushed it out of her face. Alex cringed as he gently touched her on the cheek. "Don't worry, baby, Peaches don't want nothin' you got." The gang chuckled.

"I'm really not clear what the charge is. I got here by..." Alex hesitated.

"By what, girl? What did you do?" Peaches urged. The curiosity seemed to be killing him. It was obvious that nothing about Alex said *criminal*, so Peaches knew there had to be a story.

"A guy got me here," Alex mumbled. She was embarrassed to say it. She almost choked on the words.

Another cellmate exclaimed, "We can all attest to that. Tell us something we don't know about." The group began to laugh again.

"See this black eye. I got this because of a man," someone shouted.

Then another woman named Brenda chimed in with the thickest of country drawls, “I lost all my kids because of a man. Yeah, he strung me out, only to get himself clean, marry a new wife, get a great job and move to the suburbs with my kids. Now I can’t even see ‘em.”

One by one, they began to share stories about past relationships and how they had been treated badly by men. It reinforced Alex’s original creed that she had to be tough in order to not let a man take advantage of her.

She realized that Daniel had gotten her to compromise her beliefs and let her guard down and she had paid a huge price for it. Here she was in jail. She saw herself in each of the stories that the women told.

There were similarities in her relationship with Daniel, or in other past relationships. Perhaps it wasn’t necessarily her story she was hearing, but Laura’s or Michelle’s. The bottom line was that they all had been played. As she listened to each of the women’s stories, she realized it didn’t matter what race or economic status, love hurt and it treated everybody the same. And through a barrage of tattoos and needle marks she realized that the human experience was just that. It was human.

Alex felt consoled in her moment of desperation by the most unlikely of company and it was comforting to know that she was not by herself. Others had made mistakes, all in the name of love. She thought about how she was more like

these women than unlike them, and even though they looked different, smelled different, and came from very different backgrounds, she realized that they were all the same. It was a pivotal moment for Alex. She stepped down off her high horse, never to be mounted again.

After all the sharing and pity partying, Alex came to her senses and realized she needed a plan to get her out of the mess Daniel had gotten her in. *I can't call Momma. She'll panic. I don't want to call Laura because knowing I could go to jail for embezzlement might throw her into labor! It's ironic that, normally, at a time like this the first person I would call would be Daniel.*

She stayed up all night contemplating what kind of scheme Daniel must have had going on and how she might prove her innocence, even though she obviously had been seen with Daniel on several occasions and they had pictures to prove it. She was afraid telling them, "I was a fool for love," wouldn't be enough to keep her out of jail. *I will have to call Blake. Now I understand how Laura was feeling when she was reluctant to call him after that fiasco with Webster. It is embarrassing to know that a man has made a fool of you.*

Alex was jarred out of contemplation by the jingling keys of an officer standing at the bars and unlocking the cell.

"Hey, Princess! You're free." It was obvious who he was referring to as *Princess* and Alex's cellmates weren't stirred.

“Who got me out?” Alex asked.

“No idea, ma’am,” the officer said as he opened the cell door. “Have a nice day.”

Alex left the station and was greeted by daybreak. She took the braid out of her hair and hailed a cab. *I’ll locate my car later. Right now I need a shower, some food and a good cry. I hope that bastard rots!*

Chapter Thirty Seven

“Hello, Mom. I think I’m coming home for the weekend. I will be there this afternoon.”

“Great. I can take you by the house. Gene is also coming into town. It will give you time to get to know him better and tell me what you think about him.

Alex ended the call thinking that she really did not feel like being bothered with anyone. She just needed a comfortable place to lick her wounds and get her mind together but she could tell by the sound of her mother’s voice that her meeting Gene was important. She quickly called Michelle in order to have a way out of spending an entire weekend talking with Mr. Gene.

“Michelle, it’s Alex.”

“Hey, girl.”

“I’ll be in town this weekend.”

“Oh great. This is the weekend of the grand opening of my new office downtown. I’m glad you’ll be here to celebrate with me.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Alex said, trying not to show her disappointment. She was really looking forward to a quiet, contemplative weekend but it was becoming clear to her that that would be out of the question.

“Wait until you see the place. It’s fabulous,” Michelle said excitedly.

Alex hung up the phone and prepared for the ride home to Detroit. She decided to pack a few extra clothes and she could feel in her bones, this would be the first of several trips over the next few months. She really needed the comfort and support of her mother and friends to get her through this. Laura was preparing for the arrival of her new son, and Alex was intentionally avoiding burdening her with her problems at such a celebratory time in her life. *The trip home will do you good. All the activity will take your mind off things.*

Upon her arrival in Detroit, Alex was overcome by her mother’s excitement. She was buying a new home in Grosse Pointe, a ritzy lakeside suburb. It was a new chapter in her mother’s life. Alex sat in her room and reflected on the fact that she had spent her entire life coming home to that house and had a lifetime of treasures there. She was sad to be leaving behind all her childhood memories, but at the same time, she was glad that her mom was finally moving on.

“Alex.” Her mom burst in the room. “Let’s go see the house. I want your opinion.” Gene followed closely behind her.

“Okay.”

“Why don’t you girls go ahead?” Gene said.

“Are you sure?” Alex asked, relieved.

“I’m sure,” he said with a warm smile.

Alex felt guilty. Mr. Gene seemed like a really nice man but Alex just wasn't in the mood to talk and especially not to someone she hardly knew. She felt as if her space was being invaded. Mr. Gene was astute enough to pick up on the vibe, which prompted his decision to let them go alone.

As they were driving to look at the house Susan wanted to buy, Alex began apologizing.

"Mom, I apologize. I'm not in the best mood. I hope Mr. Gene doesn't think it's him. He seems really nice."

"Unh, hunh, turn right, here."

"Daniel and I have ended our relationship."

"What? Stop the car," Susan demanded. Alex pulled the car over and parked.

"I mean it, Mom. It's over." Alex went on to explain the details of what had transpired over the past several days though a faucet of tears. "The worst part is the betrayal, Momma."

"Alex. Are you sure that he was doing something, criminal? You haven't even talked to him. You should give him a chance to explain before you cut him off for good."

"No. My mind is made up. There is nothing he could say to me now."

Susan shook her head rapidly. “I would have never guessed Daniel was capable of anything like this. There has got to be more to this story, Alex.”

Moments later they pulled up in front of a gorgeous, pristine white colonial.

“Wow, Mom, this is nice,” Alex said, drying her tears with a tissue. “It is pretty big for just you.”

“Maybe it won’t be just me forever. The best part about the house is that it is in walking distance to the lake. As soon as the weather breaks, I can get busy working on losing a few of these extra pounds I’ve gained since your father passed. It’s getting easier, but I still miss him, you know?”

“I know.”

Alex and Susan drove back to the house. After a quiet and somber evening spent in her room, Alex went to the mall the next morning to prepare for Michelle’s grand opening. She got a new outfit, got her hair done, and a fresh manicure. Usually, a day of pampering and a new outfit was almost as effective as a visit to her therapist’s office.

But today it wasn’t working. As the hour drew near, Alex dreaded the thought of having to go out in the cold, dressed up but she had no other choice. She knew she had to support Michelle who had worked so hard for this moment. It also beat sitting up under her mother and Mr. Gene for the evening. As Alex prepared to leave, she could hear the sound of keys.

“Mr. Gene, you’re leaving also?”

“Yes, I have a pretty long drive back and I don’t want to leave too late. I’m not as young as I used to be and neither are my eyes. It’s not safe to make a drive like that when you’re tired.”

“Well, Mom, I won’t be out long. If you’re still up, we’ll talk some more when I get back.”

Alex made the drive downtown following Michelle’s directions. *It should be easy to find since it’s just around the corner from Michelle’s loft.* As Alex pulled up, she was relieved there was parking right across from Michelle’s new building. *If this had been Chicago, forget it.* As she entered the building, she was greeted by Michelle.

“This is a very nice place, girl.” Alex said, looking around and admiring the gleaming hardwood floors.

“I’m glad you like it. I own the whole building. The tenants cover my expenses, which is why I was able to do such a great job renovating the entire lower level for my office. I am hiring employees as we speak. Life is good. How are things going with you?”

“Well...I’ll let you go and mingle with your guests,” Alex said, avoiding the subject.

“And future clients,” Michelle laughed. “That’s the reason for the whole shindig.”

“Well you go, girl. I’ll catch up with you later.”

As Michelle strutted off, Alex spotted Russell across the room at the bar, looking as handsome as ever. It would make sense he was there since they all went to high school together. She approached him from behind.

“Russell. The last time I saw you, you were about to beat up my boyfriend.”

Russell turned around with a surprised look on his face. . He gave Alex a tender embrace.

“No, I think it was more like your boyfriend was about to beat me down. It is great to see you. I see you’ve been keeping up with what I taught you. You look great. I haven’t had to go to Chicago for a while but I will definitely email you the next time I’m coming. I would stay at your place but I’m afraid of Daniel.”

Alex’s eyes trailed off.

“There is still a Daniel, right?”

“No, we broke up.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

As Alex braced herself, preparing to answer the uncomfortable questions regarding what happened, a man’s voice cried out from across the room near the door.

“Hey Russ. I’m out, man!”

Alex, babe, that’s my ride, I have to go. How long are you in town for?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“All right, have a safe trip back. It was good to see you.” Russell hugged Alex and left the slightest scent of his cologne on her cheek and dashed out the door. Alex found a chair in a dimly lit corner and sat alone. It was entertaining to watch Michelle as she worked the crowd. Alex was impressed. There were businessmen and professionals of all sorts in attendance and Michelle was flirting with them all. After a few moments, Alex realized she just wasn’t in the mood. She walked over to Michelle, kissed her on the cheek and said goodnight.

“Alex, you just got here. Was it something I said?”

“Very funny. I’m just tired. That’s all. Everything was great. I’ll call you tomorrow. We’ll catch up then.”



Alex awoke the next morning, and her mother greeted her with her favorite pancakes from scratch, and she ate until she was full. *Carbs can be a great pacifier when you’re stressed.* If Russell could see me now, she thought as she stuffed both cheeks full.

“Are you going in to work tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I called in on Thursday and they already knew about what had happened and told me to take a few days off, which is why I decided to come home.”

“Where is Daniel?”

“I don’t care. He’s probably still rotting in jail.”

“Someone’s probably bailed him out by now, don’t you think?”

“Who? He has no real family, except his grandmother. She doesn’t have that kind of money. Her health has been failing lately anyway. He was pretty much a loner.”

“Oooh, Alex. You’re not even going to bail the man out of jail?”

“Please. He’s a criminal. That chapter is closed. It’s time for me to put my life back together and get my career back on track. I need to refocus.”

Alex packed her car and decided to leave a few of her clothes behind. She wasn’t sure why, but she knew she’d be back soon. As she made the drive home she called to check her messages and was relieved but surprised that Daniel had not tried to call her. *Good, he is going to make this easy. He probably can’t face me after everything he’s done. I hope he is riddled with guilt and embarrassed.*

As she arrived at the house, upon pulling into her driveway, she noticed a courier envelope had been left at her front door. As she grabbed the envelope off the door, she was reluctant to open it. *It’s probably Daniel’s apology letter.* As she pulled the letter out of the package she saw that it was on Jacobsen, Connor and Mack letterhead. It read:

Dear Alexis Monroe:

Please accept this letter as advisement that you have been temporarily suspended from your job responsibilities with Jacobson, Connor and Mack pending further investigation. If you have questions regarding this letter, please call ...

Alex shut the door and sat on her sofa in disbelief and total silence. She had no clue as to what her next move would or should be. She was totally and completely numb. After a few moments, a flood of tears rushed forth. She had reached her limit and began to sob deeply. Her crying was interrupted by her cell phone.. She wiped her eyes and pulled the phone out of her coat pocket. She was glad to see it was her mother.

“Momma,” Alex said through the tears. “You are not going to believe this. I’ve been suspended from work and I haven’t even done anything. I’m devastated.” Alex’s voice sank. “How could he do this to me?”

“Baby, I’m so sorry,” her mom attempted to console her. “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Now you have a little free time to clear your mind and sort this thing out.”

“I’ve put in so many years at that company. How could they even dream that I would have been involved?”

“Don’t go down that road, Alex. Some things in life just happen. It’s wasted energy to keep wondering what happened and why. It did. Why don’t you come home and spend some time with me? You can help me get settled into the new house.”

“Okay, Momma, I’m on the way.”

“Girl, you can’t just turn around and drive four hours back to Detroit. Get some sleep, pack. Come tomorrow or in a few days. I’ll be worried sick about you on that road again tonight.”

“No, I really want to just get out of here. I’ll be alright.” It became clear to Alex why she had packed extra clothes and felt the urge to leave them at her mother’s house. She was thankful and jumped in her car and made the trek all the way back to Detroit. When she got there, she entered the house, said goodnight to her mother who was in the kitchen reading the newspaper, apparently awaiting her safe arrival, and went straight to bed.

Chapter Thirty Eight

The next morning Alex was awakened by her mother, who was packing boxes in preparation for the big move. With each box, Alex's mother reminisced about the past and what a great life she had with Alex's father. She felt as though they were just entering their prime when he passed away. She was reflecting on the capriciousness of life when Alex staggered into the kitchen, still half asleep.

"I'm glad you're here. I could really use your help packing. There's so much junk in that basement. I have held on to things way too long. It's time to start letting go. Look over in the corner. There's some of your old artwork. You were a very talented artist. Do you ever paint?"

"No, I may sketch something on a notepad every now and then if I'm on hold too long or something like that, but that's about it." Alex walked over to look at some of the paintings. She thought about how cathartic it was to paint and how she used to get lost in a project for hours.

"Your easel and paints are still downstairs," her mom said. "I'm sure the paints are no longer any good. Why don't you pick up some more while you're here? It'll do you good. Would you paint me something for the new house?"

Susan could tell that Alex could really use some cheering up. She knew how much

Alex used to love painting and she was subtly trying to coax her into doing something that would be good for her.

“An offer like that I can’t refuse,” Alex responded excitedly. “I would love to do that for you. It will have to dry a bit before we will be able hang it.”

“That’s fine. I ain’t got nothing but time. And now, so do you.”



Alex and her mother spent the morning packing boxes and reminiscing. It was very cleansing to go through some of the things and put the memories to rest. Alex kept a few reminders of her father and her childhood but for the most part, both she and her mom were ready to move forward in life. They rummaged through, sorted, organized, and placed a plethora of the past on the curb for the trash man.

Later that afternoon, Alex met Michelle for lunch and began bringing her up to speed on the horror of all horrors--she had been duped by a man. Alex relayed all the ugly details about how the perfect man had turned out to be the worst.

Michelle couldn’t believe it. Daniel had seemed to be the perfect man. And while Michelle felt sorry that Daniel had hurt Alex, she was relieved. She hated

being alone at her age. And now that it was Alex also, it reassured Michelle that it wasn't her. That she wasn't one of those women who just couldn't keep a man.

"You know, Alex, it's interesting. You can have romance and a good relationship, or you can have a career. I've acquiesced to it. You just can't have both. I've chosen my career so that translates into the fact that I may never find love."

"Michelle, I don't want to believe that."

"Face it, Alex, you've dated so many frogs. So have I. Daniel was just the culmination of it all. The prince ain't coming. Think back. It's always been this way."

"Yeah, Michelle, but I've had my own issues as well. I just need to be more careful, that's all. I also need to learn to let go and stop trying to control everything. One thing this situation, as well as my father's death, has taught me is that I never had control. I spent a lot of time and energy trying to protect myself from disaster and look what happened. I finally get what everybody has been telling me. Control is an illusion. All we can do is live in the moment and face whatever life hands us next. Daniel was a mistake, but it's time to pick up the pieces and move on. I'm not giving up on love."

"Yeah, well, good luck."

After lunch, Alex decided to go to the art supply store so that she could get some art supplies in order to start working on the painting her mother had commissioned. She browsed through the different types of mediums available trying to reacquaint herself. It had been so long since she painted she was a little nervous and was hoping it would be like riding a bicycle; once you learn, you never forget.

As she made her way to the front of the store to pay, she saw Russell coming through the door. . Alex wasn't looking to enter into another relationship right away, but she admitted she enjoyed hanging out with Russell. Maybe a few nights out on the town with him could help her get her mind off the debacle Daniel had made of her life. She was hoping that her makeup was holding up. She fluffed her hair.

"Russell," Alex called. He looked around aimlessly. "Over here," Alex said, waving her hand.

"I thought you were only in town for the weekend," Russell said.

"It's a long story. What are you doing in here? I don't remember you being creative at all."

"You've got that right. I couldn't paint if it meant my life. I'm just here picking up some things. I remember that you were a fabulous artist. I can still

remember some of your paintings. You must still paint. Are you into the art scene?”

“I have just decided to pick it back up again.”

“We are holding a wine tasting downtown at Crème tomorrow night. It’s an art gallery...” *Here it comes. He is going to ask me to come as his date*, Alex thought. She grew excited as Russell continued.

“There will be lots of artists there, showcasing their stuff. It will help you get back in the swing of things. Here’s the address.” Russell scratched it on the back of one of his business cards. “When you arrive, ask for me or my girlfriend, Tammy.”

Your girlfriend? Alex smiled graciously. “Sure, I think I will come. Maybe I will be inspired by some of the other artists’ work.

“See you tomorrow.”

Alex returned to her mother’s house and began to do some practice painting. She found it awkward at first and she couldn’t get the strokes exactly like she wanted but for the most part, it was just like riding a bicycle. It was starting to come back to her. By midnight, she had completed three practice paintings that didn’t look bad in her opinion. It felt as though she had found a long lost friend. The best part was, she was so immersed in her painting, she literally forgot about

everything that had transpired over the past few weeks. She retired with her mind focused on what she would create for her mother to compliment her new home.

The following evening, Alex arrived at Crème solo. It was intimidating to walk into a room of people that she didn't know, especially artists. But she walked around and got lost in the paintings. Russell walked up to her with Tammy on his arm.

"Alex, I'm glad you came. This is Tammy, my girlfriend. She works here. I told her that you were an incredible artist..."

"I used to be."

"And that you might want to talk to her or some of the artists about the various paintings," Russell continued, ignoring her modesty.

"I appreciate that, Russell," Alex responded with gratitude, even though she wasn't sure if she would take him up on the offer.

"Well, make yourself at home," Tammy chimed in. If you have any questions about any of the paintings, let me know. The artist is probably here."

Oh well, Alex thought. So much for Russell. He looks happy. After a healthy dose of hors d'oeuvres and a few glasses of wine, Alex decided she would head back to her mother's house. She was surprised at how much fun she had and how great it felt to be around art again. It had been such a long time. On the way back to her mother's house, something came over her. She thought about how much she

missed home and how close she and her mother had grown since her father had passed away. *It's settled. I'm moving back. I am going to make a fresh start.*

As she entered her mom's house she was excited to tell her mother about her decision. She found her in the kitchen sitting at the table.

"You? Moving back to Detroit?" Susan looked up from her newspaper.
"That must be the wine I smell talking."

"No, Mom, I mean it. Detroit is changing. It's not the same as it was when I grew up. There's a lot more going on here now. I have friends here. You're here. It just makes sense to do this right now."

"What about your job?"

"It doesn't matter. For all I know, they are going to terminate me, anyway. Even if they don't, I don't think I want to work there anymore. After all my blood, sweat, and tears, and as hard as I've worked to help build the company, this is the thanks I get. They show me how much they appreciated it by questioning my loyalty. Fortunately, I have done pretty well for myself. I will be all right financially for a while. I can take my time. I have options."

"Well sleep on it. If that's your decision, you know I would be overjoyed but I don't want you to do anything in a rush or for the wrong reasons. Make sure you think it through, baby, that's all." Susan stood up and turned off the light and she and Alex went to their rooms for the night.



Alex spent the next several weeks in Detroit ironing out the details and preparing for her move from Chicago back home. Susan insisted Alex stay with her upon her arrival as she had more than enough space for the two of them. Initially Alex resisted, but later agreed and Susan was overjoyed.

Among Alex's many talents was interior decorating. She could pull together a room and pick the perfect accessories almost as good as a trained professional. Susan had lucked out and planned to make the most of Alex's talent while she stayed with her. Over the next several weeks, she kept Alex so busy she hardly had time to think about everything that had happened to her. The time seemed to fly by. After a frenzy of activity preparing for her move and working with her mother to decorate the new house, Alex decided it was time to return home and prepare for her major transition.

As she was driving home from Detroit, her mind was busy thinking of all the things she needed to do. The major task would be putting the house on the market. She was saddened about leaving her house, as she had spent so much time getting it exactly the way she wanted it. Michelle reassured her that it should sell quickly with all the work she had done to it. Alex was comforted by that. She was trying to think of all the loose ends she had to tie up. As she reached down to

place a different CD in the player, she noticed her ring. She knew that that was an issue that definitely needed to be addressed.

Knowing he had spent quite a bit, she didn't feel comfortable keeping the ring and really wanted to return it. She felt it was the right thing to do.

Unfortunately, she did not want to see or talk to Daniel again. To ensure that she would not have to listen to sob stories and apologies as Daniel called her begging from the penitentiary, she had changed her home phone number and cell number so he had no way of contacting her. Deep down though, there was a part of her that at least wondered what happened to him. Did someone post bail? Was he still in jail? Had he been calling her?

Upon her arrival in Chicago, she hurriedly began finishing up plans to move back to Detroit. She immediately called a real estate agent and her house was placed on the market. She decided she would not stay in town until it sold. She was ready to sever the ties she had there and make a clean start.

She spent the next few weeks saying goodbye to friends and acquaintances and helping Laura put the final touches on the room for the baby, who was scheduled to arrive at any moment. The morning of the day before she was scheduled to leave, she received a call from her real estate agent informing her that she got her asking price for the house, which was substantially more than what she paid for it. *Everything is working out. I haven't heard from work regarding their*

“investigation”, so I will just move forward. After she finished that thought, the doorbell rang. It was a delivery of a certified letter. Alex signed and thanked the gentleman.

What is it now? My day is going quite well and I hope this isn't something that is going to ruin it. She opened the envelope and discovered that she had been subpoenaed to court to testify in the case pending against Jacobsen, Connor and Mack. *Please God, tell me this isn't happening. I am ready to close the chapter on the whole thing. Well, on the bright side, at least I'm being called to testify against him and not for myself. Thank God, the charges against me were dropped. I need to call Blake.*

Alex grabbed her cell phone and searched for Blake's number in her directory.

“Blake? You're not going to believe this but now I am in need of your services. I was initially wrongfully accused of being involved in some criminal activity that someone at my company committed.”

“Yeah, I was reading about what happened in the paper and Laura was filling in the details.”

“They originally thought I was an accomplice but I was cleared. Today, I received a letter subpoenaing me to court to testify. I have no idea what to do next.”

“Don’t worry, I can coach you through it. I’m on my way over to Laura’s. She is starting to feel something happening so I am going to just sit with her.”

“I could have gone over and sat with her. I know how busy you are. ”

“No, I want to be there. I don’t mind at all. I am hoping this is it. She has been real crabby lately,” he chuckled. “I don’t mind though. Even though she is crabby, I am still crazy about her. Hey, I hear you are moving back to Detroit. Laura is just sick about it.”

“I know. It’s not that far away. I will see her often enough. Thanks Blake for the assistance. Call me one night this week when you have a free moment, and I will catch you up on everything.

Alex hung up the phone ecstatic that Blake had forgiven Laura and they were reunited. She always knew they were meant to be together.

Chapter Thirty Nine

Daniel slowly made the turn onto Alex's street. He had so many butterflies in his stomach, he was certain that when he opened his mouth, one would fly out. He had rehearsed over and over what he would say to her. What words could he use to express how sorry he was? Could words even be enough?

He pulled into the driveway and was horrified to see a realtor's sign that had the word *Sold* plastered across it in big red letters. He jumped out of the car and ran up to the porch, frantically ringing the doorbell and looking into all the windows. The only thing he saw was Alex's beautiful ebony hardwood floors. Seeing all the rooms empty, his heart sank into desperation. He quickly ran to the rear of the house and looked in the windows. Nothing. He noticed a lady next door planting bulbs in her garden.

"She's gone. Left this morning," the lady said, rather nonchalantly.

"Do you know where she moved to?" Daniel said in exasperation.

"Not sure really, she just said she was leaving town to get a fresh start and that she was leaving the past and everything in it behind her."

Daniel returned to his car and sat there to let it all sink in. He had wanted to give Alex a cooling off period. Not to mention, he wasn't sure how to explain

everything that had happened. Maybe she never wanted to see him again. So he waited. Perhaps, too long. *Maybe I should just give up. She obviously doesn't want me anymore. I can't believe this whole thing blew up in my face. I was so convinced I had everything under control.* After a few moments of feeling defeated, Daniel realized he loved her too much not to put up a fight. *I at least want to explain everything that happened and apologize. I hope she will give me the opportunity.* He grabbed his cell phone and called Detroit 411.

“Hello. Yes, I am looking for a listing for Susan Monroe.”

“One moment please, I'll connect you.”

Daniel thought perhaps Alex had moved back home to Detroit. *Where else could she have gone? I hope she hasn't taken a job in another city.* After a few rings, the line was answered.

“Hello Susan...” Daniel was hoping she could tell him where Alex was.

“We're sorry, the number you are trying to reach has been disconnected or is no longer in service,” the recording played. Initially Daniel panicked, wondering if he would ever see or talk to Alex again. Then his mode turned to one of determination and urgency. *I'll find her. Even if I have to go to Detroit. I'll find her.* He decided to go by Laura's house to see if Laura would provide any information but Laura wasn't home.



As Alex was making her way back to Detroit, the baby was making its way into Laura and Blake's life.

"Hello Alex. The baby is on its way. I've heard people say labor is painful but I was not prepared for it. If I had known it was this painful, I would have never had sex. I mean ever."

"I'm turning around right now, Laura," Alex said insistently.

"No, Blake is here. We'll be just fine. I just wanted to let you know that the baby is on the way. Pray for me girl. Pray for me," Laura winced in pain. "I have to go. Webster just walked in."

"You called Webster?"

"Yes, I thought it was the right thing to do."

"Is Blake there?"

"Yes."

"That's going to be interesting. Please call me later and let me know how you and the baby are doing. I don't care how late it is. Promise."

"Yeah. I will."

Alex hung up the phone feeling guilty that she had left Laura behind. She and Laura had been together since college and Alex wondered if their friendship

would survive the chasm that would now be between them. *I hope I have made the right decision. I will miss my life in Chicago. Daniel has really flipped my world upside down. It's too late to turn back now.*



As Webster entered the hospital room, Blake, who was sitting beside Laura, stood up, sending a clear message to Webster that he was entering marked territory. Blake and Webster stared at each other intently. The tension was building in the room.

After a few moments of awkward silence, fearing a standoff, Laura screamed and sat up in the bed, fathoming a fake, monster labor pain. It worked. No man can stand to see a woman in distress. Both Webster and Blake took their attention off each other and placed it fully on her. She breathed a sigh of relief and prepared for her next, real wave of pain. Blake, being such a man of character, excused himself to give Webster and Laura a moment to talk.

“I’m surprised you showed up.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what I mean. I am surprised you are here.”

“Who is the stiff guy in the suit? That tie looks like it could strangle him at any moment.”

“I’m dating him.”

“What? That punk. Geek. Nerd. It must be the money.”

“Actually it’s not. He’s a real man, Webster. He loves me and he is willing to love your child.”

“No, I don’t think so. This is my baby. I don’t need no other man trying to be a father to it. I’m the father.”

“Well, you may as well get used to Blake. He will definitely be a part of this baby’s life.”

Webster grew threatening. He grabbed Laura’s wrist that was taped from the IV and leaned in. They were now nose to nose. His eyes squinted.

“You heard what I said, Laura.”

“Webster, you sound like a fool. Here you come from out of nowhere and demand that I stop seeing the best thing that has ever happened to me. I can tell you right now that ain’t going to happen. Here’s the deal. I called you because it was the right thing to do. Your options are... take me, Blake and the baby, or go on about your business. The choice is yours.”

Webster stood in silence for a few moments with a steely look in his eyes.

“I’m not sharing you or my child.”

“Those are your options.”

Webster looked around the room, mulled it over and apparently decided that he could not have Laura dictate to him how things would work out.

“Okay,” he said smugly. “You’ve made your decision.”

Just then, Blake entered the room carrying a blue bucket of ice he had retrieved for Laura. And as Webster disappeared through the door, he intentionally bumped Blake’s shoulder on the way out, jarring him and knocking several cubes of ice to the floor.

“What was that about?” Blake inquired.

“Nothing. I think that’s the last we’ll see of him.”

“That’s a good thing.”



After a few weeks had gone by and Alex and her mother had settled into the new house, Alex’s court date was just a few days away. Although she was excited about returning to Chicago and seeing Laura and the baby, she was not excited about making the court appearance and having to say things that might send someone to jail. She was also not excited about seeing Daniel. *It will give me a chance to return his ring. Just get it over with, girl.* Although she was still furious with Daniel over what had happened, she still wondered where he was and what his involvement was in the matter.

Upon her arrival at Laura's, Alex was overjoyed to see the baby, who unfortunately looked a lot like Webster. Not that Webster was bad looking. In fact, just the opposite. Webster was very attractive. Alex just thought about how hard it was to look at the baby and not see Webster. And Webster was someone that everyone was trying to forget.

“Laura, he looks just like Webster.”

“Yeah, I know. I think one of the things that made it easy for Webster to walk out of the hospital room that day was because he couldn't live with the idea that maybe it was Blake's baby. If only he had stuck around long enough to see him. We're better off though. Blake will be the only father he knows.”



The morning she was scheduled to testify, Alex awoke with her stomach in knots. She wasn't on trial, but she was nervous about what she might say and how it would affect people that she knew. She drove into town and met Blake at the courthouse. She and Blake stood outside the courtroom doors. She needed a minute to collect herself. In just a few moments, she would be seeing Daniel for the first time since her life had turned upside down.

As they entered, she looked over and saw Daniel sitting at one of the tables in front of the courtroom. She was filled with mixed emotions. She was angry on

one level, but on another level, she was glad he was okay and as usual, he looked quite well. Her eyes welled up with tears. Daniel looked back at her. She could tell by the look in his eyes he was remorseful.

Alex was led to the front of the courtroom where she took the stand and was sworn in. The prosecuting attorney asked her several questions about her role at the company and the events that had transpired over the past several months. She answered honestly and briefly and was dismissed. As she walked down the aisle to exit the courtroom, she removed the ring from her finger and placed it on the table in front of Daniel as she passed him. She left Chicago, feeling relieved that that entire chapter of her life was now closed.

Chapter Forty

Alex settled into Detroit relatively quickly over the next several months. After all, Detroit was home. She was painting again and had acquainted herself with the art scene, and had found her place amongst the artists. She had several paintings on exhibit at Crème and had already sold two. She was amazed at how different her life was. She was much more relaxed and optimistic.

Alex had come to the realization that through all of the pain, she had experienced an awakening. It was like she had been born again. And while the entire process had been agonizing, she was grateful for it. She understood it was absolutely necessary to force her to move in a new direction.

Her life was entirely different and far more gratifying than the one she knew before. She loved painting and being around all the artists. She loved living in Detroit and being close to her friends and family.

Alex had finally let go of the animosity toward Daniel and realized that he had done her a huge favor. He had forced her to rediscover herself and the life she was meant to live. She had let go of all the pain of the past and had no regrets—surprisingly, even toward Jacobsen, Connor and Mack. She had received a phone call from the board. They had resumed regular operations. And while they

couldn't give her any details regarding what had transpired since the case against Ross Conner was still pending, they asked her if she would be willing to return to Chicago as Ross Connor's replacement and run the company.

The position came with a full partnership. Alex felt vindicated but she politely declined the offer. Deep down she knew something better was in store for her. She was delighted to hear that Wanda had assumed her old position. *She'll be great in that role. I'm glad to see she's moving up.*

One morning, Alex was delivering an abstract painting she had just finished to Crème to be placed on exhibit. The sun shone brightly and the air was crisp. Alex could tell that winter was just around the corner. Normally, when fall came, she felt as though she was going into hibernation. But now, she felt as though she was coming alive. Exhilarated. She stood at the rear of her car in the gallery parking lot. Before she popped the trunk, she inhaled deeply. The cool air felt cleansing. She exhaled forcefully, leaving a cloud of smoke in the air.

She took one final glance at her painting and was pleased with her work. As she walked toward the back entrance to the gallery, she saw Marti and Jack, the owners of the gallery, packing their car outside. Marti and Jack had owned the gallery for several years and Alex was so appreciative that they took a chance on her, being that she was an unknown artist, and allowed her to showcase some of her work in their gallery.

“Alex, you’re not going to believe this,” Marti buzzed. He was pale, short and round, and full of energy. “We’re moving to Fiji.” Marti and Jack had vacationed there every year and had fallen in love with the island. “We’re selling the gallery. Isn’t that fabulous?”

Immediately a vision for the gallery popped into Alex’s mind and without hesitation, she agreed to buy the gallery on the spot

Once the transfer of ownership was complete, Alex immediately started bringing her plans for the new Crème to fruition. She envisioned it being a place where she would not only sell her own art, and the work of other artists, but she would also use her design skills to customize art for homeowners, just as she had for her mother.

After several months of hard work and thanks to Michelle’s connections in town, the gallery was a huge success. In addition to Crème being known as one of the premier art houses, it was also quickly becoming known as “the spot” in town.

The historical building was beautiful. With its loft-like feel and with exposed brick everywhere, it became the venue of choice for parties hosted by professional athletes, entertainers, and the who’s who of Detroit. Alex’s paintings were also in demand by chic, high-end clientele. Not only was she having fun and doing work she loved, she was turning a huge profit. *Finally, I have arrived. I spent my whole life chasing the American dream instead of chasing my own. I love the life I live now. I*

wouldn't trade it for anything. All those years of scratching my way up the corporate ladder. For what? I made a lot of money, but I never felt at peace. I always had this nagging feeling that there was more to life. Like I should be doing something else. I am blessed to have finally found it.

One night during one of her now, weekly-catered events held at Crème, Alex left the gallery and went upstairs to her office to work on some paperwork and to take a much-needed break. With all the recent publicity she was receiving, she had consistently been working twelve hour days. As she entered her office, she dimmed the lights. Sitting in her chair, she placed her feet up on her desk, leaned back, and closed her eyes, taking a moment to catch her breath. There was a knock at the door.

“Yes. What is it?” she said, eyes still closed. There was no response. “Can’t it wait?” she snapped, assuming it was a member of her staff. “I just need a moment to catch my breath.” Still no response. Alex heard the door creak open as the person entered uninvited. She grew nervous as she was the only one upstairs and something about the moment felt ominous. She pulled her feet down from the desk, sat up in the chair and slowly opened her eyes. She was frozen. Speechless. She couldn’t move her mouth to say anything. Standing right before her was Daniel McClellan.

“Alex, just wait a minute. Just give me a moment,” he said as he closed her door and stood there with his hands held in front of him as if he might need

protection. “I have been waiting for this moment for almost a year now. When you changed all your numbers, I got the message loud and clear that it was over. I wanted to give you some time to cool off but when I came to the house, you had packed up and gone. I know you never wanted to see or speak to me again, and I wanted to respect that, but I couldn’t rest until I had the opportunity to at least explain what happened and why, and to let you know that I never meant for anything to happen to you. Please give me a moment to say what I have to say and then, I will leave.”

“What is there to say, Daniel?” You deceived me. I trusted you were one person and you were entirely different and I ended up losing everything because of it.”

“Alex, I know you aren’t going to believe me but I couldn’t tell you. I’m a cop. Well, a federal agent actually. I was working undercover. Ross Connor was embezzling money. He was fixing the books and depositing money in an offshore account. The SEC called us in to investigate because they started receiving complaints. Being totally unaware of who I was, Connor hired me because I gave him the impression that he could lure me in on the scam. He knew if he gave you the position, you would have figured everything out, so he gave the job to me, out of nowhere, with no real track record. He never really questioned where I came from or did any detailed investigation into my background. That’s why you were

unaware that I was even being brought on board. He knew you would question it. After a short time, he started opening up and telling me everything. How he was transferring the funds, how he was keeping it a secret. Everything. What you saw that night was a federal bust.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Alex, if I had really been involved, do you think I would be standing before you? No, I’d be in jail.” Daniel pulled out his badge and tossed it on her desk. “I am an agent. You can call and ask the bureau if you like. Connor was involved with some seriously heavy hitters. I could not risk anything happening to you or my cover. Towards the end, he was starting to unravel and getting pretty desperate. He was capable of doing anything. It could have ended very badly. It was best that you didn’t know.”

Alex picked up Daniel’s badge, studied it, and threw it back down on the desk.

“You got me thrown in jail, Daniel. I ended up losing my job.”

“Wait a minute. I got you thrown in jail? Who decided to take it upon themselves and follow me? You got yourself thrown in jail, trying to play private eye. And not a very good one, I might add.” Recalling the absurdity of that entire night, and specifically Peaches, Alex flashed that crooked smile that Daniel was

always so crazy about. He could tell he wasn't forgiven but he was relieved to see that she was loosening up.

"You weren't supposed to be there. It confused everything. I was up all that night explaining why you were there and making calls to get you released," he reassured her, answering one of the questions that had plagued her all this time.

"I should have been released, Daniel, I hadn't done anything wrong. Don't act as if you were doing me a favor." Alex rolled her eyes. "How did you find me?"

"Well, initially, right after the bust, I was involved with wrapping up the details on the case, including explaining to the board how and why you got arrested, and that you were totally innocent. You would not believe the amount of paperwork and interviews that are involved in closing out a case. Then, after that, my grandmother passed away and I had to deal with that. It seemed as though I was caught in a whirlwind of activity for a period of time. But after the dust settled, I had a lot more time on my hands. I would come to Detroit off and on and just watch you. I'd see you run in the neighborhood or coming in and out of the house and I'd just sit and watch you.

"You watched me?"

"Yes, I know it's creepy but it's a cop thing. I didn't know if you were living with someone or if you had married someone else and to be honest, I was afraid to approach you. Realizing that your involvement with me had taken you through so

much and caused you to lose so much, I honestly didn't know what to say. You were reluctant to get involved with me because you were afraid you would get hurt. You trusted me, Alex, and although I didn't mean to do it, hurt you is exactly what I did. When I saw the look on your face in the courtroom that day and when you gave me back the ring, I knew you never wanted to see me again. I was afraid 'I'm sorry' wouldn't have been enough. But I was continually haunted by the idea of you not knowing the truth. I wanted you to know that I am the man I said I was. I know how it must have looked seeing me get arrested like that. They did that to protect my identity. They didn't want my cover to be blown. We figured by the time Ross Conner and his boys figured out who the mole was, they'd be in custody. It was an extra security measure. ”

“I'm sorry to hear about your grandmother,” Alex's voice softened. “How did you figure out where I lived?”

“I went by Laura's a few times but couldn't catch her. I left several notes on her door but she never responded.”

“Yeah, she moved right after the baby was born. She and Blake getting married next month.”

“After several months of wondering where you were and what you must be thinking of me, I couldn't take it anymore. I conned someone at the bureau into doing a search for me. They gave me your address and told me that you had

purchased this gallery. I know it was wrong, Alex, but I was so sorry and I cared too much for you to leave things that way. Yesterday, I finally saw Susan getting in her car in the garage. Once I saw her, I figured you were probably not living with anyone, and I decided to take my chances and show up. So, here I am. Waiting for you to throw me out.”

Alex walked over to her office door and opened it. The music from downstairs that was previously muffled by the closed door was now clear and inviting.

“Make yourself at home, Daniel, and enjoy the party. I’ll be down in a few minutes.”



Alex shut the door and closed her eyes. So many emotions began to surface. Anger, confusion, relief. Tears began streaming down her face once again. She stood there for a few minutes to take everything in. *It wasn’t all bad. Had it not been for him, I would have never been able to live the life I live now. He was the catalyst that sparked an unusual chain of events that led me to a perfect place.* She was overcome with a sense of gratitude. She stood tall, and walked over to the mirror. She fixed her makeup and tousled her hair. She stared at her image for a few moments to let it all sink in.

Then, she opened the door, took a deep breath, descended the stairs, and joined Daniel at the party.

The End

Author Bio

Tonya currently resides in Ohio with her husband. After graduating from college, she pursued a career in the corporate arena, working in the areas of sales and marketing, account management, employee benefits and recruiting. After many years of feeling the call that there was more to life and that she had more to contribute, she left her corporate career to do work that she found rewarding and enjoyable. She began a second career as a life and career coach, working with others, helping them to set and achieve life- changing goals.

As she continued on her own path to fulfillment, a personal crisis led her to discover a natural talent and love for writing. She plans to continue to write stories of people that are on their own journey. They are shaped by the circumstances they face, they learn the hard lessons, grow from their experiences, and emerge in the end fuller, wiser, and stronger than they were before. She hopes everyone who reads her stories will be blessed by the characters, and maybe see a little bit of themselves and their own journey in the process.